

“OH, TO BE A CENTER FIELDER”:
BASEBALL AND JEWISH IDENTITY IN *PORTNOY’S COMPLAINT* AND *THE
COUNTERLIFE*

By

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To my husband

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Although Philip Roth discusses baseball repeatedly in his novels and autobiographical works, comparatively little criticism considers the meanings of the sport in his writing. A recent surge in interest in the subject of Jews and baseball throws this lack of criticism into sharp relief, creating the perfect conditions for a renewed discussion of America’s pastime in Roth’s novels, particularly those in which baseball is connected to Jewish identity. In two of Roth’s novels, baseball is linked specifically to Jewish identity—*Portnoy’s Complaint* and *The Counterlife*. Reading these two novels together both reveals a pattern in which Roth uses baseball to mitigate conflict and allows for a closer examination of the sport’s significance to the recurring theme of American-Jewish identity in his work. In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, baseball emerges as a tool Portnoy uses for mitigating his conflict in identity—a setting in which he can escape the causes of the discord, an environment in which his identity is certain, and a potential site for reconciling the warring aspects of his nature. In *The Counterlife*, Roth links baseball to the coming of the Messiah, proposing the potential of America’s national pastime to be a unifying secular church for Israel. Comparing the use of baseball in

these two novels reveals that the sport is repeatedly associated with both mitigating conflict and growing up American. It is my contention that this kind of reading—following a symbol used across Roth’s novels to look for repeated meaning—is one way of identifying Roth’s perspective, or figuring out the kind of autobiographical writer he is.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: BASEBALL AND PHILIP ROTH

Baseball is important to Philip Roth—important both to his life as a child growing up in Newark in the '30s and '40s and to his writing, much of which includes discussions of and references to baseball. Unsurprisingly, the novel most often referenced to establish Roth as a baseball author—in the league of fellow American-Jewish authors Bernard Malamud, Mark Harris, and Eric Roth Greenberg—is *The Great American Novel* (Riess 57), Roth's satirical history of a fictional baseball league that is involved in a communist plot to destroy America. Although none of Roth's other novels takes up baseball as a primary subject, several depend on its symbolic use. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Alexander Portnoy describes a childhood and adolescent love of baseball that sounds very close to Roth's own love of the sport as described in *The Facts*. *The Counterlife* features Jimmy Ben-Joseph, an American-born Israeli who wants to bring baseball to Israel. Seymour "Swede" Levov, the main character in *American Pastoral*, is a legendary athlete who turns down an opportunity to play professional baseball in order to take over his father's business. These uses of baseball, coupled with the real-life love of baseball portrayed in Roth's autobiographical works, *The Facts*, *Patrimony*, and the short essay "My Baseball Years," constitute a pattern that establishes baseball as an important subject in Roth's oeuvre.

Despite Roth's repeated usage of baseball, there is comparatively little criticism that considers the meanings of the sport in Roth's writing. There are only a few notable exceptions. In "Six-Pointed Diamond: Baseball and American Jews" (1981), Walter Harrison briefly examines the connection between American-Jewish identity and baseball in works by Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud. Additionally, any discussion of

The Great American Novel must of course consider baseball to some extent, but Ben Siegel's (1976) examination of Roth's satirical use of baseball as a "compelling metaphor for American political life and . . . social ideals" (178) constitutes a rare analysis of the novel by itself. Sustained analyses of baseball in *American Pastoral* are also rare. Although the symbolic and allegorical functions of the Swede's athletic prowess—including his talent for baseball, his best sport—are frequently noted (see Gary Johnson 2004 and Derek Parker Royal 2005, for example), the significance of baseball in the novel has not been thoroughly examined.

A recent surge in interest in the subject of Jews and baseball throws this lack of sustained critical discussion of the sport in Roth's works into sharp relief. In his foreword to *Jews and Baseball: Volume 1, Entering the American Mainstream, 1871-1948* (2007), Martin Abramowitz, "America's custodian of Jewish baseball memory," claims that the last ten years "have seen an unprecedented flowering of interest in Jews in baseball" (1), citing a sharp increase in book publications, websites, and fan paraphernalia, as well as the Hall of Fame's two-day commemoration of "American Jews in America's Game" (1). Abramowitz attributes the recent surge in interest to multiple factors, including a "new respect for ethnicity and origins in American society" (1) and the ease of finding and communicating with like-minded fans via the internet. Most importantly, however, Abramowitz credits the increased interest to a historical and cultural "connection between Jews and baseball" (2). According to Abramowitz, baseball was synonymous with America between the 1870s and the late 1940s, and American Jews of that era established themselves as Americans by "playing America's game" (1). Burton and Benita Boxerman, coauthors of *Jews and Baseball*, share Abramowitz's

perspective, attributing the “love affair between baseball and American Jews” to baseball’s status as an acceptable route to American acculturation (3). Since the release of the Boxermans’ book, the first documentary film on the subject, *Jews and Baseball: An American Love Story*, has also been released. Thus the historical and cultural connection between Jews and baseball has lately engendered a boom in interest on the subject.

This recent fascination with Jews and baseball—coupled with the lack of criticism concerning the national pastime in Roth’s works—creates the perfect conditions for a renewed discussion of the sport in Roth’s novels, particularly those in which baseball is connected to Jewish identity. Although both *The Great American Novel* and *American Pastoral* (and, to a lesser extent, *Our Gang*) feature baseball, it is used in these works primarily as a vehicle for representing, parodying, and/or satirizing American society and ideology. Baseball is, as Siegel notes, “an obvious symbol of modern American life” (174), and it functions as such in these works—in *The Great American Novel* as a vehicle for a “savage . . . parody . . . of the nation’s social institutions” (177) and the mythologies surrounding them, and in *American Pastoral* as an element of complete American acculturation as embodied by the mythologized “Swede”, 1940s Newark’s answer to the all-American boy. In two of Roth’s novels, however, baseball is linked specifically to Jewish identity—*Portnoy’s Complaint* and *The Counterlife*.

The similarities between these two novels may be less immediately apparent than their differences. One is the fictional representation of a psychoanalytic treatment in which Alexander Portnoy expatiates on the conflict between his sexual desire and his desire to please his family; the other is a postmodern experiment in narrative and

authorship combining various conflicting accounts of events in the lives of two brothers, Nathan and Henry Zuckerman. These differences notwithstanding, *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Counterlife* share both baseball and a depiction of conflict concerning identity—specifically, Jewish identity. Trouble arises for Portnoy because of the opposition between his need to live up to his American-Jewish parents' wishes for him—a happy domestic life with a Jewish wife in the suburbs—and his wild desire for sexual encounters with *shiksas*—the more degraded, the better. His inability to resolve this conflict results in a state of identity confusion in which neither moral behavior nor sexual indulgence yields gratification. In *The Counterlife*, the conflict is in the religiously and politically fragmented national identity of Israel as represented in the chapter “Judea,” in which baseball is suggested as a tool for building national unity.

Unlike in *The Great American Novel*, baseball is peripheral both in *Portnoy's Complaint* and (even more so) in *The Counterlife*; a hurried reader may miss its presence completely. My purpose, therefore, is not to overemphasize an ostensibly minor element in the novels, but to use baseball both as an interpretive key to unlock less apparent meanings in each of the works and as a link to connect the two in order to reveal Roth's repeated representation of baseball as a means of moderating conflict. Although passing allusions to baseball occur throughout *Portnoy's Complaint*, scenes that feature baseball more extensively invariably serve to mitigate the conflict between Portnoy's warring identities as good Jewish son and *shiksa*-obsessed sex-addict. Similarly, baseball is offered in *The Counterlife* as an instrument for mitigating the conflict between the incompatible religious and political identities of the citizens of Israel. The absence of the sport throughout the rest of the novel calls attention to its use

in one scene, in which Jimmy Ben-Joseph, an American-born Israeli who has recently made aliyah (immigrated to Israel for the religious purpose of returning to the holy land) and Nathan Zuckerman, a secularized American-Jewish writer, discuss their mutual love of the sport. The passage ends with an explicit linking of baseball to Judaism. After miming an outfielder's pursuit of a long fly ball, Jimmy "catches" the ball just shy of the "outfield wall"—tellingly represented by the Wailing Wall, one of the most holy sites in the Jewish faith—and exclaims, "The Jerusalem Giants win the pennant! Messiah is on his way!" (94).

Using baseball as a link to read this scene from *The Counterlife* in conjunction with the discussion of baseball in the "In Exile" chapter of *Portnoy's Complaint* reveals several significant similarities. Both sections of their respective works involve a Jewish character experiencing a conflict in identity, a trip to Israel (where Portnoy is headed when he begins reminiscing about the Sunday morning baseball games played by the men in his neighborhood), a linking of baseball to American-Jewish identity, and an idealization of baseball as the vehicle to an idyllic existence—for Portnoy, a happy domestic life in Newark, and for Jimmy Ben-Joseph, the coming of the Messiah. Thus reading these two works together both reveals a pattern in which Roth uses baseball to mitigate conflict and allows for a closer examination of the significance of baseball to the recurring theme of American-Jewish identity in Roth's work.

CHAPTER 2
“WHAT MAKES MEN OF US BOYS”: BASEBALL AND AMERICAN-JEWISH
MASCULINITY IN *PORTNOY’S COMPLAINT*

In 1974, Philip Roth wrote a short essay in response to the oft-repeated question of how he came to write *Portnoy’s Complaint*. In this piece, Roth introduces two archetypal figures for understanding the character of Alexander Portnoy—the “Jewboy,” which signifies “aggression, appetite, and marginality,” and the “nice Jewish boy,” which denotes “repression, respectability, and social acceptance” (*Reading* 31). Using these terms, the central dilemma of *Portnoy’s Complaint*—the opposition between Portnoy’s wild desire for sex and his need to live up to his parents’ expectations—can be understood as an internal conflict between the Jewboy and the nice Jewish boy.

These concepts emerge in the novel as two competing routes to becoming a man. Portnoy identifies the Jewboy’s path to manhood as “being bad”: “To be bad—and to enjoy it! That is what makes men of us boys” (124). On the other hand, the nice Jewish boy enters adulthood by leading the idyllic life Portnoy’s parents imagine for him. This specifically American-Jewish lifestyle is represented in the novel by “the men” who play baseball in his neighborhood, and whose masculinity Portnoy emphasizes: they are “not boys, you see, but men” (241). Because Portnoy’s consciousness contains both of these oppositional masculinities—both the desires of the Jewboy and the inhibitions of the nice Jewish boy—he lives in a state of discord in which neither sexual indulgence nor moral behavior yields gratification. In this context, baseball emerges as a tool for mitigating his conflict in identity—a setting in which he can escape the causes of the discord, an environment in which his identity is certain, and a potential site for reconciling the warring aspects of his nature.

Although passing references to baseball are prevalent throughout *Portnoy's Complaint*, the game plays a central role in four particular scenes. These are, in the order in which they appear in the novel: when Portnoy's father reveals his incompetence at baseball, when Portnoy escapes his mother's hospital room to play center field for the Seabees, when Portnoy ejaculates into his mitt at the Empire Burlesque House, and when Portnoy reminisces about the pick-up baseball games played by neighborhood Jewish men during his childhood. Because *Portnoy's Complaint* is written in what Roth identifies as a "blocks of consciousness" style, in which pieces of the narrative are "held together by association rather than chronology" (*Reading* 13), the strategic placement of these discussions of baseball as oases amid scenes of conflict reveals the central role played by baseball in Portnoy's attempts to alleviate his internal discord.

Neighborhood baseball games provide relief from identity conflict because, like the bathhouse to which Portnoy's father takes him, the field is a "place without *goyim* and women" (49), which allows Portnoy to escape the challenges to American-Jewish masculinity these two groups pose. The absence of *goyim* allows Portnoy to forget what he perceives to be his father's ineptitude at baseball and failure to achieve financially and educationally, domains that become conflated during Portnoy's discussion of his "history of disenchantment" (9) with his father. After lamenting his father's inability to move his bowels, his lack of education, and his lack of professional success, Portnoy relates the story of his eighth birthday, during which he discovers that his father cannot hit a baseball and even fails to hold the bat properly. Thus all of Portnoy's father's failures culminate in and can be symbolized by his inability to play baseball. Yet the marking of the Sunday morning men's games as specifically Jewish events, and the

subsequent absence of the competing masculinity of the *goyim*, gives Portnoy's father an insider's perspective on the players and allows him to participate by sharing amusing stories of them as children (243). Thus even Portnoy's father, "pregnable . . . as his masculinity was in the world of *goyim*" (42), is able to participate in this specifically American-Jewish arena of masculinity, despite a decided lack of talent for baseball.

Like the exclusion of the *goyim*, the exclusion of women from the games also provides comfort to Portnoy. The longest discussion of baseball, the passage in which Portnoy longs only to be center fielder, occurs as a direct result of visiting his mother in the hospital after her emergency hysterectomy. During his visit, Portnoy is horrified by his mother as if the removal of the womb where he was "conceived and carried" (68) has broken his bond to her. Not without guilt, Portnoy describes his feelings towards his mother's body after the operation: "Now that she is hollowed out, I cannot even look her in the eye! And have avoided doing so ever since!" (68). It is not only her body that repulses him, however, but also her immense love and self-sacrifice *for him*. As Portnoy notes, and as is demonstrated by her insistence that he drink her ginger ale, she "*will* give me the food out of her mouth, that's a proven fact!" (68), yet he is unable to sit with her at the hospital for more than a couple of minutes. His escape to the baseball field marks a flight from what is to Portnoy overbearing love and sacrifice, debilitating because he is unable to pay it back through respect for his parents' wishes, piety, and tribal loyalty. Thus the exclusion of women, specifically the "kind and understanding" (68) self-sacrificing Jewish mothers, from the neighborhood baseball games gives Portnoy respite from the unpayable debt he owes above all to his mother and the accompanying guilt for not meeting his parents' expectations.

Portnoy also values baseball because adopting the character of a player temporarily provides him with an unequivocal identity. In the game, there is no place for uncertainty. Indeed, he adores baseball, despite his mediocre talent, because as a child he “knew exactly, and down to the smallest particular, how a center fielder should conduct himself” (72). Thus the *performance* of baseball, with rules and customs that dictate every movement, allows Portnoy to avoid internal discord. If “Portnoy’s Complaint” is as Spielvogel, his analyst, describes, “a disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings” (i), then baseball can be seen as therapy for the exhausted ego that cannot reconcile the conflicting positions of the super ego and the id, the nice Jewish boy and the Jewboy.

In addition to providing Portnoy with a fixed identity, baseball offers the promise of an inner consciousness that agrees with the external influences on his life. After describing his complete knowledge of and comfort in the role of a center fielder, Portnoy claims that “there are people who feel in life the ease, the self-assurance, the simple and essential affiliation with what is going on that I used to feel as the center fielder for the Seabees” (72). Because Portnoy desperately wishes to be one of these people, the role of the center fielder symbolizes for him a sense of belonging in life—a symmetry between one’s circumstances and one’s identity and a congruence between others’ expectations and one’s personal desires in life. Found in the middle of a passage that describes Portnoy’s fight with his father on Rosh Hashanah and his mother’s hysterectomy, Portnoy’s lament, “Oh, to be a center fielder, a center fielder—and nothing more” (72), constitutes a sorrowful and futile wish to return to simpler times,

before there was conflict between others' expectations and his own attitudes and desires.

Portnoy loves center field in particular because it offers him solitude, insight, and control—all qualities he lacks with regard to his family and home life. Portnoy describes the position: “Center field is like some observation post, a kind of control tower, where you are able to see everything and everyone, to understand what’s happening the instant it happens” (69). Thus center field allows Portnoy to interpret the entire game in real time. Furthermore, everything that occurs is clear and intelligible, a comforting quality for the adult Portnoy, who experiences even his own consciousness as incoherent. He continues, describing the pursuit of a long fly ball: “‘It’s mine,’ you call, ‘it’s mine,’ and then after it you go. For in center field, if you can get it, it *is* yours. Oh, how unlike my home it is to be in center field, where no one will appropriate unto himself anything that I say is *mine!*” (69, emphasis in original). Thus center field, not insignificantly the position farthest from home in baseball, comforts Portnoy because it provides him with a measure of control over boundaries between himself and his family that he lacks in his home.

Baseball emerges as a symbol of American-Jewish masculinity in the scene in which Portnoy ejaculates into his baseball mitt at the Empire Burlesque house. After leaving his house on a Sunday morning, ostensibly to watch “the men” play baseball, Portnoy slips onto a bus and heads to a burlesque show in downtown Newark. While deciding whether or not to go in, Portnoy weighs his achievements, skipping “two grades of grammar school” (130) and launching a protest against the D.A.R. as an eighth-grade student, against his erotic desire, which urges him to “imagin[e] a full and

wonderful life of utter degradation” (131) with the “biggest whore” (131) in the Empire Burlesque house. The juxtaposition of these conflicting identities—that of the nice Jewish boy who will grow to be a successful American-Jewish family man, represented in the scene by Portnoy’s baseball mitt, and that of the sex-addicted Jewboy, willing to risk total humiliation, not to mention “the syph” (128), for the opportunity to see female genitalia—reflects what Portnoy sees as the two divergent ways of becoming a man. The triumph of Portnoy’s erotic desire and the shame and depression he feels afterward foreshadow the ultimate failure of baseball as a mechanism to unify his identity.

Baseball as an escape from identity conflict and baseball as a symbol of American-Jewish masculinity and converge in the final chapter, “In Exile,” during which Portnoy travels to Israel to flee a relationship with the Monkey that has ended with her threatening to throw herself off a hotel balcony in Athens over a threesome with a Roman whore in which Portnoy had earlier “forced” (249) her to participate. This escape is marked by Portnoy’s recurring desire to live two conflicting lives—a guilt-free and respectable life as a American-Jewish husband and father, honoring his parents and tribe while pursuing justice for the disenfranchised, and a guilt-laden wild and adventurous life spent in the pursuit of “sensational sex” (248). While in flight to Israel, contemplating a return to Greece, Portnoy again experiences baseball as an escape from his conflicted consciousness, this time in the form of a “memory of Sunday morning softball games in Newark” (244). Fond images of the working-class men of his childhood neighborhood “ridiculing,” “joking,” “acting-up,” and “pretending,” all just to have to have a good time playing, evoke in Portnoy a memory of himself at nine running out one Sunday morning to watch the game. Portnoy’s recollection of shouting to his

mother that he's going "to watch the men" (244) brings him to tears just as the airplane touches down in Tel Aviv, signifying a metaphorical return to his working-class American-Jewish values and upbringing simultaneous with his literal return to the Jewish holy land.

These twin returns further complicate Portnoy's already confused existence by adding another dimension to his identity conflict—the issue of Jewish authenticity. As his plane lands in Israel, it is Portnoy's memory of "the men" and the uniquely American-Jewish lifestyle they represent that inspires his emotion—not the arrival in Israel. Although his fellow passengers speculate that he is a pious Jew happy to arrive in the holy land, his true homecoming is the return to the dream of an idyllic future in Newark. Portnoy explains, "I love those men! I want to *be* one of those men" (245), one of those men who return from playing ball on Sundays to a happy home with a loving American-Jewish wife and children, one of those men whose lives have meaning and purpose beyond the self. In an attempt to find such meaning in Israel, Portnoy embarks on an educational tour of the country in order "to convert [himself] . . . into a man once again" (252); however, he is overwhelmed by the fact that "in this country, everybody is Jewish" (253).

In the face of this "authentic" Jewish identity, as embodied by the Israeli Lieutenant and Naomi, both of Portnoy's competing identities fail. Not only does Jewboy Portnoy fail to achieve an erection when attempting to have sex with each of the women, his nice Jewish boy efforts to embody the family man are farcical. Within minutes of meeting Naomi, a twenty-one year-old native-born Israeli woman who lives in a dangerous settlement near the Syrian border, and is shockingly similar to Portnoy's

mother in “coloring, size, even temperament” (259), Portnoy contemplates staying in Israel and marrying her. Despite Naomi’s obvious distaste for him, as demonstrated by her extensive lectures on the evils of American society and her vehement condemnation of Diaspora Jews, Portnoy first declares his love for her and then assails her with unwanted sexual advances.

This scene culminates in the frustration of both the nice Jewish boy and the Jewboy, as Naomi rejects his romantic proposals, and his sexual advances end in detumescence. Naomi’s subsequent advice to Portnoy to “go home,” which Portnoy interprets as going “back into the exile” (269), illuminates the central tension in the chapter—Portnoy is in exile in Israel, not America, as the chapter’s title demonstrates, yet the Jewish faith and the Zionist movement characterize America as exile. Thus Portnoy is alienated both from Israel and the “authentic” Jewish identity represented by its citizens and from America and the American-Jewish experience. In response to Naomi’s claim of Jewish authenticity and contempt for Diaspora Jews, Portnoy simultaneously defends his own American-Jewish upbringing and acknowledges his alienation from the idyllic American-Jewish experience symbolized by “the men” playing baseball: “Yes, I am a patriot too, you, only in another place! (Where I *also* don’t feel at home!)” (271). Thus even center field, with its distance from home, and Sunday morning baseball games, with their promise of a “simple and satisfying” (246) American-Jewish existence, cannot reconcile the opposing forces in Portnoy’s identity.

Analyzing the use of baseball in key scenes in *Portnoy’s Complaint* reveals the role the sport performs in Portnoy’s psychic life. In his childhood, baseball functions as a setting in which he can escape the discord caused by the conflicting demands of his

family, his community, and his emerging sexuality. During adolescence, baseball provides an environment in which his identity is certain—a temporary escape from the war between the Jewboy and the nice Jewish boy. As an adult, Portnoy returns to the image of baseball as a potential site for reconciling the warring aspects of his nature, despite the fact that he has already seemingly chosen a life of pleasure-seeking. Taken in conjunction, these scenes reveal that Roth uses baseball in *Portnoy's Complaint* as a tool to mitigate identity conflict. In order to establish a pattern in Roth's usage of baseball, I now turn to the role of the national pastime in *The Counterlife*, where Roth again links issues of impotence, Jewish authenticity, and American-Jewish identity to baseball.

CHAPTER 3
“HOW CAN THERE BE JEWS WITHOUT BASEBALL?”: BASEBALL AS SECULAR
RELIGION IN *THE COUNTERLIFE*

In *The Counterlife*, Roth revisits the topics of American-Jewish identity, Jewish authenticity, and impotence previously presented in the final chapter of *Portnoy's Complaint*, again linking them to baseball in “Judea.” In this chapter, Henry has immigrated to Israel, abandoning his wife, children, and successful dental practice, in search of a more meaningful life after having had dangerous and unnecessary surgery to restore his sexual potency so that he could continue afternoon encounters with his dental assistant. The similarities between Portnoy and Henry in these chapters are striking. Like Portnoy, Henry faces a conflict in identity that pits his sexual desires against his conscience. Like Portnoy, Henry flees to escape the responsibilities and limitations of domestic life (hypothetical in Portnoy's case). Like Portnoy, Henry seeks a larger meaning for his life in Israel. Indeed, Henry actually takes the step that Portnoy only contemplates—immigration to Israel to lead a “grueling and gratifying ethical life” (*Portnoy* 269).

In a sense, “Judea” fleshes out the themes introduced in “In Exile” through the character of Henry, who lives the lives Portnoy only ponders as alternatives to his own—that of the secular Jewish family man and that of the politically and religiously zealous Israeli immigrant; however, “Judea” raises the stakes by pitting these identities against each other, juxtaposing conflicting characters—Zuckerman and Henry, Shuki and Lippman. Consequently, in *The Counterlife*, baseball serves as a tool not for mitigating inner discord, but for mediating interpersonal conflict. While in *Portnoy's Complaint*, baseball symbolizes an idyllic American-Jewish existence with the potential

for unifying Portnoy's conflicted identity, in *The Counterlife*, baseball represents a mechanism for uniting the religiously and politically divided nation of Israel.

Baseball appears only once in *The Counterlife*, in a scene in "Judea" during which the narrator of the chapter, writer Nathan Zuckerman, visits the Wailing Wall, one of the most holy sites in the Jewish faith. During this scene, the religious and the secular merge as Jimmy Ben-Joseph transforms the Wailing Wall into the outfield wall of Jerusalem Giants Stadium by miming the pursuit of a long fly ball, "catching" it just shy of the worshipers gathered at that "most hallowed of all Jewish places" (*Counterlife* 84). With Jimmy's exclamation "The Jerusalem Giants win the pennant! Messiah is on his way!" (94), baseball becomes the key to bringing about the "World to Come," the messianic age in Judaism, which will be "characterized by the peaceful co-existence of all people" (Rich "Mashiach" par. 14). By linking baseball to the coming of the Messiah through Jimmy, Roth calls attention to the potential of America's national pastime to be a unifying secular church for Israel, whose national unity is fractured by political discord and the diverse backgrounds of its citizens.

For the purposes of focusing on baseball, I consider only the version of events presented in "Judea" and concentrate specifically on the ramifications of the scene at the Wailing Wall. Although the character Jimmy Ben-Joseph reappears in "Aloft," the nature of novel, which consists of five chapters presenting various conflicting accounts of the characters, means that there is no guarantee of symbolic unity or coherence across the chapters. Debra Shostak describes the novel's structure: "'Nathan,' the characteristic narrative voice, imagines a scenario, fleshes it out into fully realized episodes, and then drops or reverses it" (198), so that things that happen to Henry in

one chapter, such as the impotence induced by his heart medication, happen to Nathan in another, or are completely eliminated from the subsequent narrative. Thus the novel amounts to “a series of propositions, hypothetically limitless and bound to no standard of coherence” (Shostak 198). Therefore, just as the Henry of “Basel” is not the Henry of “Judea”—as demonstrated by the fact that he dies in “Basel” only to reappear alive and well as a totally changed man in “Judea”—the Jimmy of “Judea” is not necessarily the Jimmy of “Aloft.” Thus I read these iterations of the character as distinct personages within each chapter, concentrating here on Jimmy the baseball fan of “Judea.”

As represented in “Judea,” Israel’s population is fractured by racial, ethnic, and religious differences that give rise to dislike and distrust among the various groups. Although almost all Israelis are Jewish, there are various types of Judaism with divergent religious customs and ethnic backgrounds. The primary division is between Ashkenazi Jews—“descendants of Jews from France, Germany, and/or Eastern Europe”—and Sephardic Jews—“descendants of Jews from Spain, Portugal, North Africa and the Middle East”—though Sephardic Jews are “often subdivided into Sephardim (from Spain and Portugal) and Mizrachim (from the Northern Africa and the Middle East)” (Rich “Ashkenazi” par. 1). Differences in language, race, ethnicity, and religious customs engender discord between these groups, which Zuckerman witnesses when his old friend, Shuki, is called an “Ashkenazi donkey” (78) by a presumably Sephardic Jew. Such a comment is tantamount to an ethnic slur; however, ethnic conflict is not the largest divider of the population. After this incident, Shuki explains that sick, illiterate Ethiopian Jews who “technologically . . . live in the thirteenth century” (78)

are also immigrating to Israel, along with Oriental and Russian Jews, thus creating a nation of people with little in common except their religion.

Furthermore, the nation is divided both politically, over settlements on the West Bank and relations with the Arabs, and religiously, with secularization pitted against orthodoxy. These divisions are reflected in the characters of Shuki Elchanan and Mordecai Lippman. At one end of the political spectrum, Shuki is a secular, liberal Israeli intellectual who lives in Tel Aviv, works as a journalist and professor, and travels and teaches abroad often. At the other end, Mordecai Lippman is the zealous leader of Agor, a religious settlement on the West Bank. He believes that Israel should take all of Judea from the Arabs by force without giving a thought to the Arabs' rights or the rest of the world's opinion. These vastly different characters demonstrate the range of political ideals and religious practices of people who are both Jewish and Israeli, further demonstrating that Judaism alone cannot identify or unite Israel.

During Zuckerman's visit to the Wailing Wall, a possible mechanism for unifying Israel is identified by Jimmy Ben-Joseph, a young American man who has recently immigrated to Israel, and who claims to be Zuckerman's "biggest admirer in the world" (91). During their conversation, Jimmy explains to Zuckerman why he is a fan of his writing: "Because of the way you write about baseball! Because of all you feel about baseball! That's the thing that's missing here. How can there be Jews without baseball? . . . Not until there is baseball in Israel will the Messiah come!" (93-94). This passage generates several questions essential to understanding its meaning: What is the feeling about baseball to which Jimmy refers? Why is this feeling essential to Jews? And just how is baseball related to the coming of the Messiah?

Because none of Roth's four Zuckerman books published before *The Counterlife* provides a fictional sample of Zuckerman's writing about baseball or indicates his feelings concerning the sport, I turn to Roth's own writing to understand the feeling about baseball summoned by Jimmy. Such a move is appropriate not only because of the biographical overlap between Roth and Zuckerman—they are both American-Jewish writers born in 1933 in Newark—but also, and more significantly, because of the overlap between their publications. Descriptions of Zuckerman's novel *Carnovsky* immediately recall *Portnoy's Complaint* in both subject matter and reception, a comparison Roth himself employs. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Roth explains his response to the success of *Portnoy's Complaint*: "I . . . holed up at Yaddo, the writer's colony, for three months. Precisely what Zuckerman should have done after *Carnovsky*. . . . He would have enjoyed Yaddo" (*Reading* 135). Here Roth equates himself and Zuckerman, *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Carnovsky*, and his and Zuckerman's experiences after publishing their respective works, thereby suggesting that Roth's and Zuckerman's literary careers are closely aligned. Thus without taking a position on the broader question of the autobiographical nature of Roth's work, I propose to take Roth's own published sentiments concerning the national pastime as representative of Zuckerman's, and use them to interpret Jimmy's comments.

In "My Baseball Years," a short autobiographical essay written in 1973, Roth describes the "love affair" he had with baseball "between the ages of nine and thirteen" (*Reading* 219). For Roth, baseball was not simply an enjoyable pastime—as he notes, "fun was secondary"—but a way of being and becoming an American: "For someone whose roots in America were strong but only inches deep . . . baseball was a kind of

secular church that reached into every class and region of the nation and bound millions upon millions of us together” (220). Although Roth points out that growing up during World War II made his generation one of the most ardently patriotic in American history, he connects baseball to patriotism “at its best” (220): “It seems to me that through baseball I was put in touch with a more humane and tender brand of patriotism, lyrical rather than martial or righteous in spirit, and without the reek of saintly zeal” (221).

Here Roth identifies two elements of his experience of baseball that would be useful to Israel as portrayed in *The Counterlife*—baseball as a unifying “secular church” and baseball as a form of patriotism. Although a unifying secular church may at first seem redundant to Israel, where almost everyone is Jewish, the wide range of religious beliefs held by those who identify themselves as such demonstrates that Israel is no more religiously unified than the United States. The need for a better brand of patriotism is more obvious, especially when considering the violent and ideological militancy of Lippman, who describes those who would negotiate with the Arabs as follows: “They are embarrassed by the necessities of survival in a jungle. This is a jungle with wolves all around! We have weak people here, soft people here, who like to call their cowardice Jewish morality . . . and it will lead to their destruction” (116). Lippman goes on to say that such “Jewish morality” will lead to a second Holocaust for which weak Jews will be responsible. Though Lippman would certainly characterize his remarks as patriotic, they recall what Roth describes as the “martial,” “righteous,” and zealous types of national fervor. Furthermore, his ideas are politically alienating to secular Israelis such as Shuki, thus necessitating an alternative form of patriotism for uniting the country.

Jimmy's remarks nominate sport, specifically baseball, for the role of a unifying element because, like politics and religion, it engenders "common concerns, loyalties, rituals, enthusiasms, and antagonisms" (*Reading* 220) in disparate groups of people. Furthermore, sport does so without the associated consequences, as A. Bartlett Giamatti discusses: "While it mimics religion's ritual and induces its fanaticism and sensation, sport cares not at all for religion's moral strictures or political power or endless promises. Sport cares not for religion's *consequences*" (37, emphasis in original). In other words, sport induces a religious feeling of devotion to a team and belonging to a community without the cosmic repercussions (such as entrance into heaven, the coming of the Messiah, etc.) that cause religious views to be so divisive. Thus the virtue of sport lies in its ability to unite a diverse group of people around a common goal that is important to all, but whose success or failure makes no lasting difference—a particularly powerful quality in a politically and religiously divided nation.

Baseball in particular is distinctly aligned with Jewish history and theology because of its lack of violence and its narrative of homecoming. Roth notes in *The Facts*, of himself and his fellow American-Jewish boys growing up in the 1930s and 1940s: "Our remotely recent old-county Jewish origins may well have been a source of our especially intense devotion to a sport that, unlike boxing or even football, had nothing to do with the menace of brute force unleashed against flesh and bones" (32-33). As Roth points out, the nonviolence of baseball may recommend it over other sports to a people still haunted by the spectres of pogroms and the Holocaust. Furthermore, baseball's narrative of homecoming echoes the story of the Jews return to the holy land, as Giamatti's comparison of baseball to "the literary mode called Romance" demonstrates:

“It is . . . the story of going home after having left home, the story of how difficult it is to find the origins one so deeply needs to find” (90). He continues, “All literary romance . . . is about rejoining—rejoining a beloved, rejoining parent to child, rejoining a land to its rightful owner or ruler. Romance is about putting things aright after some tragedy has put them asunder” (92). Giamatti’s analogy tells the story of baseball, in which a batter embarks from home plate on a dangerous journey full of twists and turns and obstacles to advancement in the hope of accomplishing the ultimate goal of returning home, but it also tells the story of the Jews: exiled from their homeland by the Romans, they wandered in dangerous lands for centuries, experiencing the ultimate tragedy of the Holocaust, in the hope of one day returning to Israel.

Thus both Roth’s belief in baseball as a nationally unifying force and baseball’s distinct alignment with Jewish history and theology suggest that Jimmy’s assertion that Israel needs baseball should not be brushed off as the half-baked thoughts of “a manicky kid far away from home” (*Counterlife* 92). For as Roth notes in *The Facts*—echoing his original characterization of baseball as a “secular church” in “My Baseball Years” (*Reading* 220)—while he was growing up, baseball had the power to bestow “membership in a great secular nationalistic church from which nobody had ever seemed to suggest that Jews should be excluded” (32). Thus according to Roth, the national pastime had the power to bring together the disparate populations of a divided nation. As demonstrated in *The Counterlife*, just such a national pastime may be needed to unite the politically, religiously, and culturally fragmented nation of Israel. And perhaps Jimmy is right—such a unifying sport may even be necessary to create a people worthy of the Messiah, or alternatively, to bring paradise to earth.

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION: ROTH'S PERSONAL PASSION FOR BASEBALL

In the letter Roth writes to the Zuckerman as preface to his autobiography, *The Facts*, he wonders why he, as a novelist, would write such a work: "Why? To prove that there is a significant gap between the autobiographical writer that I am thought to be and the autobiographical writer that I am?" (3). He goes on to say that "thoughtful readers, if they were interested enough to care, could have figured as much for themselves" (3-4). Although these comments may be taken as a defensive response to the assumption that Roth's characters are merely confessional mouthpieces, they may also be read as a kind of challenge to the "thoughtful readers" to figure out what kind of autobiographical writer Roth is. Here I have isolated and traced Roth's use of baseball, a relatively minor element, across two of his novels in order to reveal that the sport is repeatedly associated with mitigating crises. It is my contention that this kind of reading—following a symbol used across Roth's novels to look for repeated meaning—is one way of identifying Roth's perspective, or figuring out the kind of autobiographical writer he is.

This thesis is supported by the fact that Roth's own feelings about baseball as expressed in *Patrimony*, the autobiographical work that tells the story of his father's fatal illness and eventual death, echo the sentiments about the sport found in his fiction. In *Patrimony*, Roth's description of himself making use of baseball as an escape from the stress of his father's illness recalls his characters' employment of the sport as a means of both avoiding and negotiating conflict and crisis: "That night I managed to watch the Mets game with some pleasure, concentrating, like any ordinary run-of-the-mill escapist on Darling's three-hitter and McReynold's home run rather than on my father and the

tumor” (136). Thus Roth’s attitude toward baseball as suggested by similar representations of the sport repeated in his fiction is confirmed in his autobiographical works.

That Roth’s own perspective can be found in his fiction is further proven by the overwhelming similarity of his representation of baseball in *Portnoy’s Complaint* to that in *The Facts*, in which he describes himself as a child hanging out on “Sunday mornings, watching with amusement as the local fathers—the plumbers, the electricians, the produce merchants—kibitzed their way through their weekly softball game” (29). This narration of Roth’s historical experience certainly recalls the description of “the men” from *Portnoy’s Complaint*, in which the “plumber,” the “butcher,” the “grocer,” and other neighborhood men spent their Sunday mornings “kibitzing” through “a round of seven-inning softball games” (241-242). However, it is not simply the event of Sunday morning softball that is alike in the two accounts, but also the emotions surrounding the games. Roth continues in *The Facts*: “If ever I had been called on to express my love for my neighborhood in a single reverential act, I couldn’t have done better than to get down on my hands and knees and kiss the ground behind home plate” (29). Although Portnoy’s love for his neighborhood is expressed with tears over the memory of “the men,” the reverential emotion communicated is the same.

But I believe that Roth’s perspective could be inferred—without having such handy corroborating evidence as *The Facts*—by comparing the representation of baseball in *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *The Counterlife*. Roth’s repeated use of baseball as an avenue to alleviating conflict and as a symbol of the best parts of growing up American suggests that he may thereby be representing his own feelings about the game;

however, more specific evidence can be found in the commonalities in the descriptions of playing baseball in each of the novels. Both novels represent a center fielder, in particular, experiencing ecstatic joy in chasing long fly balls and making difficult catches, robbing batters of home runs. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Portnoy describes making a catch: "Back I go, 'I got it, I got it—' back easily and gracefully toward that wire fenceand then that delicious Di Maggio sensation of grabbing it like something heaven-sent over one shoulder . . . Or running! turning! leaping! like little Al Gionfriddo" (70), the player who stole what would have been a game-winning home run from DiMaggio in game six of the 1947 World Series. Jimmy's pursuit of the fly ball at the Wailing Wall sounds quite similar—he pursues the ball, running backward first, "then turning to his right," and then leaps, "sailing recklessly into the air, his long left arm extended high across his body," catching the ball and thus winning the pennant for the Jerusalem Giants. The repetition of such feelings of elation in playing baseball indicates that Roth may be representing his own love of the sport in these scenes. And although such a claim cannot be corroborated on the basis of his extant autobiographical works, I would bet that Roth was once a center fielder himself.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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