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Philip Roth--Countertexts, Counterlives (review)

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Philip Roth—*Countertexts, Counterlives*, by Debra Shostak. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004. 332 pp. \$39.95.

As it becomes more unarguable that Philip Roth is a great writer, not merely a great Jewish American writer, more and more sophisticated critical appraisals of his work appear. Taking her cue from Roth's novel *The Counterlife*, Debra Shostak has organized her lively and compelling study of Roth's large body of work through the exploration of oppositions. Early in his career in *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth himself noted "the self-conscious and deliberate zigzag that my own career has taken, each book veering sharply away from the one before." And since that comment was made in an interview Roth conducted with himself, it is certainly fitting to look at his work as a decades-long conversation among many voices in his head. Within each novel characters counter each other, voice opposing positions, verbally duel. Who can forget the furious antagonism and bracing attack and counterattack about Judaism and Israel between the humane dove Shuki and embattled hawk Mordecai Lippman in *The Counterlife*? The oppositions exist on all levels in Roth's work, including within one character, particularly Nathan Zuckerman.

Shrewdly calling Roth's work "dialogical," Shostak explores Roth's entire oeuvre except *The Plot Against America*, which appeared too recently. But since Shostak considers Roth's work as a series of "what if" questions, the recent novel fits her analysis perfectly since it is a new kind of what if: what if in 1940 the antisemitic Charles Lindbergh had been elected president, not FDR? Which is to say, the new novel poses a counterhistorical what if, a new Rothian what if—but another what if. Shostak argues that the protagonist in one novel is often the opposite of the protagonist in Roth's previous novel. For example, the wildly transgressive, raging Mickey Sabbath of *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) is followed by the accommodating, moral, America-loving Swede Levov in *American Pastoral* (1997) who in turn is countered by the political radical Ira Ringold who sees only America's injustices and failure to live up to its ideals in *I Married a Communist* the very next year. Shostak quotes the supremely self-conscious author himself who observed, "My impulse is to problematize material. . . . I like when it's opposed by something else, by another point of view."

Shostak resisted the predictable plan of tracing the counterlives/countertexts in Roth's work in chronological order. Instead, as she notes in her introduction, in her six chapters she explores "concerns that all speak to the production and meaning of subjectivity: masculinity, embodiment, and male sexuality; Jewish American identity; the American subject's relationship to contemporary American history; and storytelling as a mode of action combining invention and pseudo-autobiography" (p. 14). This thematic arrangement

has generally positive results, and most of her arguments are subtle and provocative. Occasionally, however, the fact that much of the book originated in a series of separate articles gives rise to repetition and this reader's desire for a single work to be analyzed completely rather than piecemeal. And I wonder why Roth's published works are listed chronologically in Shostak's Works Cited when they are not treated chronologically in her book itself.

Nonetheless, Shostak's basic approach to Roth's work through counterlives/countertexts offers considerable insight and compelling arguments. Moreover, her use of the almost untapped archives of the Philip Roth Collection at the Library of Congress provides additional insight into Roth's work through his drafts and comments on his own work. The archives themselves are, as Shostak so ably argues, yet another countertext.

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Confrontations/Accommodations: German-Jewish Literary and Cultural Relations from Heine to Wassermann, edited by Mark H. Gelber. *Conditio Judaica*, vol. 46. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2004. 288 pp. €66.00.

The essays collected in this volume honor Jeffrey L. Sammons on the occasion of his retirement from Yale University. The Leavenworth Professor in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures since 1979 and a faculty member at Yale since 1964, Sammons has written widely and wisely on topics dealing primarily with German literature of the nineteenth century, although he has also contributed a volume on the seventeenth-century mystic writer Angelus Silesius, essays on various authors from the eighteenth century, and a monograph on literary sociology. The focus in his scholarship has not been exclusively German-Jewish authors, but his extensive preoccupation with one of the greatest Jewish authors in the German canon, Heinrich Heine, justifies a *Festschrift* devoted to the "confrontations and accommodations" of Jews in Germany.

Appropriately the first eight of the fourteen essays deal with Heine or events and authors contemporary with Heine. In the opening essay on Lessing and Heine, Jocelyn Kolb takes exception to the recent trend in Heine scholarship that explores the writer's Jewish identity, directing our attention instead to the "figurative" sense in which Heine identified with his Jewish heritage, one that entails wit and critique, and that places Heine in the proximity of both Nathan, Lessing's exemplary Jewish hero, and Nathan's creator. Dealing with