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ARTICLE

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A Meeting and an Interview*

Interview conducted by Elèna Mortara

A sunny winter day in New York, December 21, 2017. Shining sun, clear blue sky, and a pleasantly whipping wind: I'm walking in the Upper West Side of Manhattan towards my appointment with Philip Roth. Two months have passed since the publication in Italy of the first volume of Philip Roth's fiction in the most prestigious Italian literary series, *Meridiani Mondadori* (the Italian equivalent of the *Library of America* edition in the U.S.A. and *La Pléiade* by Gallimard in France): a leather-bound critical edition of about two thousand pages, including eight of his novels, 1959-1986, edited by me. And now I am on my way to meet with him in his apartment. At the entrance of the elegant multi-floor building close to the American Museum of Natural History and Central Park where he lives, there are some comfortable condominium armchairs, but I don't need to wait because the doorman immediately calls upstairs and announces my arrival. Up on the twelfth floor, near the threshold, just outside his open door, there is Philip Roth, welcoming me. When I enter, I am flooded with the light of the bright and spacious living room, with large balcony-windows over the opposite wall open to the sight of the city. Roth is wearing a slate-blue shirt and brown wool trousers. We sit in this light-flooded space, with a low table filled with books next to us, and start our conversation.

It's a friendly conversation, moving from memories of his experience in Rome as a young man to family recollections, from his encounters with other writers to reflections on his books. There are moments of great laughter and sometimes surprising discoveries to be made in this conversation. Roth is not

only welcoming, but also looks in great shape. "I'm happy," he admits with all simplicity, when I ask him how he feels, now that he has just published a new splendid collection of essays (*Why Write?*, 2017) in the United States, while simultaneously in Europe the two most important literary series in Italy and France have independently started the publication of their prestigious critical collections of most of his fiction in their Pantheons, beginning, by some mysterious coincidence, at exactly the same time: October 2017. There appears to be an amazing simultaneous celebration, a sort of double Nobel Prize in Literature being awarded to Roth by these two European countries. Yet this is a thought I keep to myself, preferring not to touch on this awkward subject. I ask him why he requested Gallimard to revise their previous French translations of his books, while he insisted on keeping the existing Italian translations in our Mondadori edition. It's because the Italian translations were already good, he explains to me, while all his friends in France had told him that the French ones were not so good. We then start talking about his still probably most famous novel, the one that revolutionized American literature and his career, *Portnoy's Complaint*, in whose title the word "complaint" creates all sorts of problems for translators in all languages. "*Lamento*," he suddenly remarks, pronouncing the Italian word with a surprisingly good accent, "is not perfect," and he begins to explain the reasons for his perplexity. I wish to remember his precise words on such an important subject, so that's when I decide, with his agreement, to start recording our conversation.

Elèna Mortara: We were talking about the word *Complaint* in the title of your *Portnoy's Complaint*, which in Italian is translated as *Lamento di Portnoy*. What can you say about the meanings of that key-word?

Philip Roth: When I wrote "*Complaint*," what I was thinking of were two things. One is *a lover's complaint*, which is a phrase that you can use for certain English seventeenth-century poetry: a lover addresses his complaint to his beloved, who doesn't love him back in return. And secondly, as *an illness*: *complaint*. In the beginning of the book I have a definition of the illness. So, in the beginning of the book what do they do in the Italian edition when they have that definition, they don't say "*lamento*," do they?

EM: No. Do you remember the word you use at the beginning in that definition of the illness? You don't repeat "complaint," you use another word, which is "*disorder*." In the Italian translation they say "*disturbo*," which corresponds to the word you also use. So it means a kind of illness, which can also be psychological, of course.

PR: Good. That's ok.

EM: But it is impossible to find one word that has all these meanings that you have in the English word "complaint." So what I remarked in my introduction somewhere, or in my commentary on *Portnoy's Complaint*, is that in *all* languages you have a different translation, which only covers one part of the meaning. And you are stressing the poetic meaning of the word "complaint" . . .

PR: I'm stressing both.

EM: There is also another meaning, which is not poetic but judicial.

PR: Oh yes, you file a complaint, with the court.

EM: When you are referring to the poetic connotation of this word, who are you thinking of? Who was the beloved? Please explain what you meant!

PR: In *Portnoy's Complaint*, the beloved is his mother! Yah, it's a kind of love poem! But it also means "to complain" in the obvious sense. He complains all the time.

EM: Yes, but the fact that this is a love poem has never been said or written before! I think that's wonderful!

KAFKA

EM: Now, I would like to start the more formal part of our conversation with this question: Why did you decide to have "'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting'; or, Looking at Kafka" as the first piece of your new wonderful collection, *Why Write?*

PR: Because I like it so much! It was a gift to me. I was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1970s, early '70s, I was teaching a course on Kafka and I had this wonderful class, they were so smart. And so I was going to write this biographical piece about Kafka for the class. And then, while I was writing it, I just got this idea for Kafka as my Hebrew school teacher. Because I went to Hebrew school after school, it was after school. I hated it.

EM: I remember what you have written about that!

PR: I mean I'm glad I did it, but . . . and what I knew of it! And the teachers, some of them, were refugees. That's where I got the idea, because we had these refugees, these tormented poor guys, you know. All of us Jewish boys were perfect in regular school and mischievous in Hebrew school.

EM: In the Preface of *Why Write?*, when you talk about this story you call it a "hybrid essay story." So isn't it also a way of starting your collection of essays by reminding us that you are a fiction writer, stressing the hybrid quality of this text?

PR: Yes, and the book ends in that way too. The last piece ends with that long piece from *Sabbath's Theater*.

EM: That's right, so you created a frame.

PR: That's right.

EM: To remind readers that you are, yes, writing essays, I must say wonderful essays, but at the same time you are a fiction writer. I felt this way. Do you agree?

PR: Yes, I do.

EM: And at the same time you are stressing the importance that Kafka has had for you. I don't know if you want to say something about this.

PR: Well, I only really studied, I read Kafka in my twenties, I did not know what it was, really. But then in my thirties, I began to read Kafka again and I got it, I understood it, I felt the force of it, and the majesty of it, really. And so I began to teach Kafka, and then I got so close to it in teaching Kafka. And then I went to Prague, actually the first time just as a kind of pilgrim, you know. Subsequently I met all these Czech writers. But I went there at the beginning just to see Kafka's city . . . My book *The Professor of Desire* has a nice scene, where someone is introduced to Kafka's prostitute. Do you remember that?

EM: Yes, of course!

PR: That's a very nice scene! She says, as I remember, she says: "You never hit me. Why don't Jewish boys ever hit me?"

EM: But, as a writer, in what way did Kafka influence you, or impress you?

PR: Well, the obsessiveness, the obsessiveness. The working of a situation in every aspect, turning a situation over and over and over. The comedy too. And then the dramatization of ultimate frustration, the dramatization of ultimate entrapment. That all spoke to me at that point. So I don't write like Kafka, of course . . . And the mind that comes through, the mind behind it. It's so interesting, his mind is hidden, the mind is hidden, but it's there.

EM: And it comes out in his journals, I love his journals.

PR: Yes, his journals are wonderful.

FAMILY ASSOCIATION

EM: I remember that in that essay-story about Kafka at a certain point you speak about a family association of two hundred people. Is this something that comes from reality, from your real experience?

PR: (*Rising*): You can get up? I'll show you a picture.

EM: (*Rising too*): Yah, let me see . . . O-Oh, wonderful! Oh, well, really . . . !

PR: (*Showing a photograph that was hanging on the wall—with about 150 people sitting at long tables in an elegant dining room*): Let me see if I can find my family. Oh, there is my mother! This is my mother. And where is my father? . . . Here he is!

EM: Oh. Can I take a picture of this?

PR: Yes, of course!

EM: And this was not all family . . .

PR: Yes, all family! Family on my paternal grandmother's side.

EM: Oh, that's incredible!

PR: Yes, this was very common in America, in the 1920s. The Jewish families, they had a right to leave between 1880 and 1900. And the first generation struggled, but their children, who had a step up, who were more middle class, formed these family associations. They were very common among Jews. They were kind of welfare societies, they would loan money for burials, if someone was sick, they had a scholarship fund for kids going to college, who didn't happen to have money. And then there was great family feeling among them. I, as a little child, I loved going; when I was a little one, I loved going. I think by the time this one was taken, I was too sophisticated!

EM: This picture was taken in 1949.

PR: 1949. I would have been sixteen. I was too old.

EM: That was the age of rebellion, the beginning of the age of rebellion.

PR: Yes . . .

EM: And they were all related, you mean . . . !?

PR: They were all related, on my paternal grandmother's side. It's really my grandmother's mother's family: some matriarchy. I think my grandmother should be in there, let me see if I can find her. She would be at the head of the table, yah . . . There she is! There she is, little grandma!

EM: (*Moved*): The one you would go and see . . .

PR: That's my father's mother, and we would go see them every Sunday morning, in Newark, in a poor section, . . . she lived in a poor section of Newark.

EM: Yes, the one where your father grew up?

PR: Yes, where my father grew up. So every Sunday morning we went there, and every Sunday afternoon we went to my mother's mother. Our grandfathers had died: one before I was born, after whom I was named, and one when I was about seven years old, whom I have only the dimmest memory of. But the grandmothers I had a strong connection to. But they spoke only Yiddish.

EM: Both of them?

PR: Well, my mother's mother spoke some English. My father's mother spoke very little English. She'd been busy at home having babies, she didn't get out into the world, you know. Yes, but, you know, the intensity of the feeling was magnified by not being able to communicate. You burst in to say something. Yes, I loved them both, yah.

EM: And I think, if I remember correctly, that to go to your grandmothers' homes you had to cross a cemetery . . .

PR: That's right!

EM: This may have had some influence, because of the many cemetery scenes in your fiction!

PR: I hated passing that cemetery, it scared me, you know. And during the war, when gas was rationed, so we only had so much gas for the car a week, my father needed the car for work, so on the Sundays we would walk. So we had to walk past the cemetery. It was bad enough to drive past the cemetery. Yes, you remember that cemetery! I do have a lot of cemetery scenes.

EM: And so, is that something that was in the background of your mind, when that came up later in your fiction?

PR: No, it wasn't. I don't know how that happened. I think it happened when I began to go to funerals all the time. I guess when I turned… my mid-sixties. My friends who were fifteen years older than I was, or twenty, began to die, I began to go to funerals all the time, you know.

FIRST DEDICATION AND NEIGHBORHOOD

EM: I have noticed that your first dedication in your first book, *Goodbye, Columbus*, is to your mother and father, which is something that critics have not noticed so much, particularly at the beginning of your career, when they started criticizing your approach. They didn't realize the importance of that dedication. In your introduction to your book of essays you quote and emphasize the sentence by Edna O'Brien, "The defining influences on him are his parents." I have noticed the importance of this influence and of the dedication. I wonder if you agree.

PR: You know, my parents, they were very important to me, because they were so good and raised my brother and me with such warmth and love. But also the community where I grew up, that neighborhood, was a big neighborhood, Jewish neighborhood, was like a larger parent. Because they were all Jews, there were a few Gentile families, but not very many. I guess I was speaking to one of my old high-school friends on the phone, he lives in Florida, and we speak once in a while, and he said to me about Weequahic, our neighborhood: "It was so safe," he said, "we felt so safe." And we really felt so safe.

EM: In dangerous times, it was safe.

PR: During the war, America wasn't in danger, but we had absorbed the war, and it was so safe. And also we knew about antisemitism, because in the thirties the United States was a very antisemitic country, very much so, in the twenties and thirties in America. And then of course we knew about Hitler. So we knew that there were places where we were despised. Yet in this place we were loved, there was a kind of communal love. So it was a very special place, a very special place.

EM: In one of your essays, you speak about yourself at a certain point as a "schmaltz man," I love that self-definition of yours. You say, "in matters Goldenian, I am a schmaltz man myself."

PR: Yes, that's Harry Golden, who was full of schmaltz, you know. I was being sarcastic.

EM: Sarcastic? So this leads me to a series of questions. First of all . . . I feel that for you Jewishness has been very important, not Judaism as a system of thought, as a religion, but Jewishness, the experience of being a Jew.

PR: Yes, ethnic Judaism we might say. Sure, because I was always aware of myself as a Jew, though I was never observant. I was bar-mitzvahed, that was the last time I went to a synagogue. The historical predicament of Jews became clear to me very early. So I always was aware of it. As far as the choices of my people in my books, I wrote about them because I knew about them. I was interested in Jews, I was interested in these people I knew, they were Jews, you know. And after my first book, after *Goodbye, Columbus*, except for *Portnoy's Complaint*, if you take out *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, the whole importance of Jewishness diminishes. It's nowhere in my trilogy, *American Pastoral*. He is Jewish, but . . .

EM: Well, I would say that there are other books where it is extremely important. One is *The Counterlife*.

PR: Oh yes, yes. That's about Israel.

EM: Then *The Plot Against America*.

PR: Oh yes, you are right! But from a different perspective than in the first, than in *Portnoy's Complaint* and in *Goodbye, Columbus*. It becomes historicized and politicized, in *The Plot Against America.*

EM: And in *The Counterlife* you show the debate.

PR: Yes.

EM: And then there is of course *Operation Shylock*. There are many books, where you still . . .

PR: I can't get out from under it!

ZUCKERMAN'S NAME AND BEGINNING OF THE SERIES

EM: No, you can't! Anyhow, talking about you as a *schmaltz* man in a sardonic way, this leads me to the question about Zuckerman: the choice of this name. How did you decide about this name, which you first introduced in *My Life as a Man*?

PR: Yes, that was a false end there. To begin with, I didn't dream I was going to write nine books. It just seemed like I was going to write *The Ghost Writer*.

EM: Oh, really? When you started, you only thought you would write *The Ghost Writer*?

PR: Well, that's complicated. When I started, I wrote a big book, a first draft, very rough: what became the first four books, *The Ghost Writer* down to *The Prague Orgy*. That was all one book. In fact, the focus was on Prague, and always the contrast backward. And it was very bad, and I thought: you're trying to do too much, take it apart. So it is correct to say I was going to write only one book. But I didn't think it was going to be a useful character forever. And the name, it was a name that was known in my neighborhood. Yes, Zuckerman. I went to school with a boy named Leo Zuckerman. He felt very amused (if he is still alive . . .). It was not an uncommon Jewish name. But I don't like the common, I always try to find some name that isn't common, a Jewish name that is not common.

EM: I feel, maybe because of the importance of this character, that there is more in this name. And you explain the fact of using a name with some sweetness in it in *The Ghost Writer*, when you introduce an explanation for Amy Bellette's sweet name: she explains why she has chosen to hide under a sweet name. And I thought this was a way for you as the author to reflect on the choice of having this sweet name for Zuckerman, which is related to sugar (*Zucker*).

PR: Yes, of course.

EM: And at the same time — I don't know if you can agree with these series of explanations I'm giving to myself — when there is sweetness, and at the same time, Zuck . . . , "ck," the same sound of "Eric Duncan" (*Roth laughing loudly!*), so there is the conflict between the sweetness of the meaning and the hard quality of the "k." So I felt that you sort of fell in love with this name. I don't know if it was something subconscious, that you didn't so much think about.

PR: I don't think that it was totally conscious. I did know a man named Sugar, of course, because I went to college with a guy named Sugarman, a fellow named Nate Sugarman. And I thought of his name, using his name, I now remember. But that was too obvious.

EM: So that was a name with the English word "*Sugar*," not "*Zucker*."

PR: Yah, his name was Sugarman. And I thought of using his name. And I thought: it's too much on the nose.

EM: So you chose the Yiddish version of the name.

PR: Yah.

ITALY, THE WAR, ITALIAN WRITERS AND ENCOUNTERS

EM: Now, I would like you to talk about Italy, your Italian experience, actually your many Italian experiences, since you have had several, and the way Italy is present in your books.

PR: Is Italy present in my books?

EM: Yes, that's something that has never been noticed, I think.

PR: I don't even notice it! Can you tell me in which books?

EM: Well, in *Portnoy's Complaint*, there are the Via Veneto scenes . . .

PR: Oh, yes.

EM: In *The Ghost Writer*, there are Siena and—

PR: Florence . . .

EM: . . . and Florence, which are there as dream places for Amy Bellette, who would like to escape with Lonoff. So Italy is associated with fun, allurement, and with dream, as a place of beauty, on the one hand. On the other hand, you mention Italy a lot in *Sabbath's Theater* . . .

PR: Oh yes, Sabbath goes to puppets' school!

EM: He goes to puppets' school there. And I noticed a difference in this novel, because you seem to know about the war, the experience of the war in Italy. It's no longer only the place of tourism, of dreams, of rather artificial references, which are more common among writers when speaking about this country, but, maybe because of your experience at the end of the fifties when you came to Italy, you seem to know that in Italy there had been a war. And Sabbath mentions the war in Italian, he uses the Italian word for "war," *"guerra,"* saying "*La guerra*" ("The war"), you put it there in the text. So I was wondering if you can say something more.

PR: You know, I made up that whole scene, the puppeteer, the puppet master, and the school, it's complete invention. I just thought Italy would be a good place for it, it was a kind of spontaneous selection. And I liked the puppet

teacher, who says to him . . . he has a girl-friend who is 15-years-old, isn't that what he says to him?

EM: Yes, at a certain point he even says 13 or 12.

PR: "But I have known her since she was 12."

EM: Yes! So, what about your Italian experiences?

PR: Well, it's over fifty, sixty years ago, a little less than sixty years ago.

EM: That was first in 1958, when you won the Aga Kahn prize for fiction.

PR: Yes, that was the first time I went to Europe. The first time I went to Europe I was in Paris, and then I hitchhiked down to Florence. And I just did the things that a young fellow—I was twenty-five—a young fellow would do. I saw everything, you know, studiously saw everything. But that's what made me want to go back in 1959, that I wanted to see more of Italy. You know, at that time in America it was no longer Paris that was the place to go to. Rome was the place to go to.

EM: Why?

PR: I don't know, it had a certain glamour in the late fifties. And I knew some . . . my friend William Styron and his wife were there. I didn't know them until I went to Rome, there they were. . . Oh, I think I did know them! They stayed there for part of our time. Well, my life in Rome. We first went to Florence for a month. We stayed in a *pensione* near the Uffizi, I don't remember the name of the street, and for a month we stayed there. I would write during the mornings, and then the afternoons go out and walk around, I might be visiting Siena and so on. And then, going down to Rome, I don't remember how we got the apartment, we did. I loved the via Giulia, right outside the door, I loved living around the corner of that street. And we could see the river from our apartment, at the corner, you know. Though I was married, very unhappily (*laughing*), and my wife and I had arguments. We were both young, we had terrible arguments, even the Italians had never seen anything like it! Yes, yes, they came out on the landing and listened to the screaming that was going on upstairs!

EM: My mother always told us about when she came to Italy from Vienna, on the train there was a family and she was afraid something terrible was happening, because they were shouting and she didn't understand Italian at that time. But then she realized that it was just normal conversation! Do you know that my mother would speak Latin to the porter?

PR: Oh really?

EM: She would say: "*Impedimenta ante portas*" ("The luggage at the gates"), using her Latin from the ancient Roman warning against Hannibal ("*Hannibal ante portas*") in Cicero and Titus Livy; that was funny. Anyhow, coming back to you . . .

PR: I know I was writing *Letting Go*, that's what I was doing. And I think I somehow wound up getting a studio, up at the American Academy: Janiculum, is that what it's called? Somebody had a studio and I began to use it. So I drove, I'd go up every morning. Yes, I had bought a little car, I think I drove. And I just remember, only one of the people I knew intimately was Italian. She was Anthony Burgess's wife, named Liana, Liana Burgess. Oh, excuse me. She was married first to my friend in Rome, an American black who fought with the black brigade in the American army in Italy, and after he was discharged, he took his discharge in Italy, he stayed there.

EM: And what's his name?

PR: Ben Johnson, his name was.

EM: Maybe that's how you knew about the war, I mean the war in Italy.

PR: No, I knew about the war in Italy from being a kid, when I was a kid. As a child, I was obsessed with World War II. My father talked about it, he brought the paper home every night. I would read the paper about World War II. I would worry about World War II. And I knew what happened, I knew the names of Anzio, I knew where the Americans had landed, I knew about the invasion of Sicily, I knew it all since I was a kid. So Ben introduced me to Italian literature.

EM: Oh!

PR: Because he was a translator. And so I began to read Carlo Levi, Moravia, Silone, not Primo Levi. And . . . Natalia Ginzburg, and the guy who wrote *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* . . . ? Yes, Bassani, Giorgio Bassani. And so I began to read all these books.

EM: And did you meet any of them?

PR: I only met Moravia. He couldn't have cared less, I mean, he was very pompous. No, I didn't meet . . . I was nobody. You know, I was just an American "*kind*" there, I'd published one book. *Goodbye, Columbus* had been

published before I went, but it had got very little attention. Only while I was *in* Italy it won the National Book Award, and I had to come back to America for a few days. But prior to that I was just somebody else who had written. No Italian journalist paid attention. It's just the way I was. So I had no Italian friendships. I remember the camaraderie, all these expatriates. There was a restaurant nearby, a little *trattoria*, and we went there practically every night, as did other friends, so we'd always be six or eight of us having dinner . . . Americans in Rome and English, Americans and English and Irish, yah. They were all writers.

EM: Did you ever meet Paolo Milano, who was a friend of Saul Bellow's and a critic? He was also a friend of mine.

PR: I think I met Paolo Milano in New York once, after, years after. I know he was Saul's friend, he cared about him.

EM: Yes, *The Victim* is . . .

PR: . . . dedicated to him, yah . . . No, I was just another obscure person.

EM: There are two Italian persons you met. I don't know if you remember the first one, whom you met at *Esquire,* when your first book had just been published, in 1959: Marisa Bulgheroni. You had just one brief meeting, I guess. She wrote an essay recollecting this meeting with you . . .

PR: Is that right!? What did she say!?

EM: She wrote very positively about the sense of, let's say, self-importance that she felt in you. I'm sorry that I don't have the text with me: it's in a new book of recollections of hers, *Chiamatemi Ismaele* (*Call Me Ishmael*), published in Italy in 2013. In 1959 she came to the States to write about contemporary American literature and, while she was ready to leave, someone told you that there was this Italian journalist. And so you had a meeting at *Esquire*, which she had not written about in her first book in the fifties, and she has recollected now in her new book. It's a wonderful essay about the meeting, where she describes you physically and writes about the impression she had, a very positive one.

PR: I would love to see it. Can you send me a copy of it? And I'll have my friend who speaks Italian . . .

EM: Of course, with great pleasure. Marisa Bulgheroni was one of my teachers at the University, and she was, and still is—for she is luckily still alive—a

fascinating person. My main professor in American Studies at the University of Milan was Agostino Lombardo, a great professor, who had studied with Mario Praz, and became one of the main founders of American Studies in Italy after World War II, when the study of American literature was institutionalized for the first time in Italy. He was a wonderful teacher. And Marisa Bulgheroni also was very influential with us. So this is one Italian person you met in the States.

PR: And who is the other person I met?

EM: And then the second one is one of the interviewers that you have also kept in your new collection. It's Walter Mauro, remember?

PR: I don't remember. He is the first interviewer, one of the first, but I don't remember him.

EM: Reading Myself and Others begins with that interview. In fact, I wonder whether it was not a real meeting, but maybe a written exchange.

PR: It reads like a written exchange.

EM: I had this feeling, because, you know, I have what can be called the Italian "original," the book where he and his wife collected a series of interviews, which were about power, how writers dealt with power.

PR: Yes, that's what he was interested in.

EM: And he wanted to know from you how you had suffered from your parents! He didn't get the answer he wanted . . . ! And so, since in most of the other interviews he describes the place of the meeting, while there is no description of this kind as an introduction in your interview and he does not say *where* you met, so I felt that perhaps it was not a real meeting.

PR: I vaguely remember that we had a meeting, would have been here in America. And do you know him?

EM: Well, I met him once. He was a very important cultural journalist, and I met him not many years ago, in 2011, when I gave a talk at the Dante Alighieri Institute in Rome about Dante in the United States, and he was the chairperson of that talk. And so I met him, after reading him many times, and of course after knowing the interview that he had with you, which was an interview that you seemed to consider important, for you placed it at the beginning of your first collection.

PR: Well, I think in *Reading Myself and Others* it was chronological.

EM: No, it was not. You put it at the beginning without its being the first one, not at all. Because it was an interview of the Seventies, and of course you had other interviews before. No, it was not chronological. It's like with the Kafka. You decided that it was important.

PR: I have another old friend who is Italian, who lived in London and she became a friend of mine in London, it's Gaia Servadio. And we're dear friends. But I know her from living in London.

EM: And of course the other Italian person you met is Primo Levi.

PR: Yes, I met Primo, yah.

EM: I was moved by what you also say in your new introduction, when you talk about the dramatic effect of the news of his suicide on you, the inability to understand.

PR: I remember the day, because I was devastated like many people and I went to see Gaia, and I spent part of the day with Gaia, because she was devastated as well. Primo wasn't that well-known then, in England.

EM: In England and in the United States, because of course he was well-known in Italy.

PR: Oh yes. So that was . . . We had a wonderful meeting, and then . . .

EM: You know, my father also went to see him not long before that time and asked for a text of his about the Jewish cemetery in Venice. At that time my father, who was born in Venice, was the President of a Committee for the Jewish historical center of Venice; so he asked him for a preface to a volume on the ancient cemetery of the Jewish community of Venice. And Primo Levi wrote this preface. But the volume with this "Premessa" ("Premise"), written in November 1985, which appears in the first of the two volumes on the Jewish Cemetery of Venice (*La comunità ebraica di Venezia e il suo antico cimitero*, 2 vols., edited by Aldo Luzzatto, Milano: Il Polifilo 2000), was published only in 2000, when Primo Levi was no longer alive, and neither was my father. After that visit in Turin my father told me—I don't know if you had the same feeling when you went to Primo Levi's home—he told me he felt a somber atmosphere, with so many women of the family around who looked very aged, old.

PR: There was his old mother.

EM: There was his mother, there were other old people around, and he felt an atmosphere of somberness. I don't know if you did.

PR: Well, I knew that the mother was a tremendous burden for him, because she wouldn't let anybody else touch her but Primo: feed her, bedpan her . . . But Primo and I hit it off, we hit it off. And so we had lots of light-hearted conversations . . . What's the name of that essay about the Venice cemetery? We can see there, I have a big black and white book of Primo Levi's works there on the table, right on the table there, right there. That's a collection.

EM: This one? *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, edited by Anne Goldstein and published in 2015. So then I will check inside.

PR: Check the name, I'll probably find it there.

BOOK JACKETS AND THE JEWISH CENTURY

EM: Yes, I will see if it's there. But now, could you tell me something about the covers of your books?

PR: Mostly I have used a wonderful designer, who is a friend, named Milton Glaser. He is a great graphic designer, and he designed many of the jackets, the late jackets.

EM: At the beginning, you started with that cover by your brother for your first book, *Goodbye, Columbus*. I don't know if you remember, when the short novel came out in *The Paris Review*, there was an illustration.

PR: Yes, I remember that one.

EM: It was about the black boy.

PR: Oh, is that right?

EM: Yes, it's a wonderful illustration.

PR: Yes, I don't know who did it . . . Let's turn some light on. Today is the shortest day of the year. Yes, December 21st.

EM: We are meeting on the shortest day of the year! . . . Oh, I see a book here, *The Jewish Century* by Yuri Slezkine.

PR: This is a fascinating book! I've just finished it. (*Handing it over.*) It's a brilliant book. He's brilliant, this fellow.

EM: Thank you. Oh, with Chagall on the cover . . . The titles of the chapters are great. "The Jews and Other Nomads," "Swann's Nose." . . .

PR: "Swann's Nose" is good, yes.

EM: "Babel's First Love," "The Jews and Three Promised Lands." Very interesting.

PR: Yes, Promised Lands were Soviet Russia, Palestine, and New York.

EM: That's wonderful, I see how you underline!

PR: Well, I was fascinated reading this book. He's quite brilliant, this guy. He teaches at the University of California, Berkeley. He has just written a new book, it's called *The House of Government*, about the Russian Revolution, about twelve families who had an apartment in a house, and what happened to each family during the Revolution and after. So I want to get hold of that. But this is wonderful.

EM: You know, this cover with Chagall reminds me of Benjamin Harshav, who wrote two wonderful books on Chagall and Yiddish culture. There was a panel on him at the conference of the Association for Jewish Studies in Washington a few days ago, where there was also a panel on my book *Writing for Justice*. I'm reminded of Harshav by this cover of *The Jewish Century*. So, talking about covers and illustrations, you probably have *The Paris Review* issue.

PR: Yes, I think I have it in the country.

EM: I may send you the illustration. Because it's a surprise, nobody thinks that character has been given such importance in the publication of the review. It suggests a new way of reading the story, without focusing on the two lovers, but on the boy. But I have noticed that, after that first cover by your brother, at a certain point you seem to prefer covers without illustrations.

PR: That is because I found the illustrations they selected so banal. But then I found photography, when years went by, and we did have photography on the cover. And then Milton Glaser and I were living in a town called Woodstock, up in New York, and Milton was living there. He did one cover, I think maybe *The Counterlife* was the first cover he did. And then he did practically all, right down till the end.

CHANGE IN THE LIST OF TITLES AND THE COUNTERLIFE

EM: What can you tell me about the big change you introduced in the year 2000, when at the beginning of your books, just before the title page, you began listing all your titles no longer chronologically but in groups of books? When and why did you start thinking that *that* was a new way of presenting your works?

PR: Was that in the year 2000?

EM: In the year 2000 for the first time, with *The Human Stain*.

PR: I think I wanted to draw readers' attention to the fact that some of these books belong together, they weren't just a long list of books. In fact, they began to see Zuckerman as a character because I had put all those books together. And Kepesh as a character, I think I'd written two or three of the Kepesh books by then. And then these Roth books. So it seemed to me a good idea. I think it's been effective actually, I think it focused people, inasmuch as you can focus them.

EM: You know, I'm very proud of the fact that in our *Meridiani Mondadori* edition, in the bibliography, I was able to have both lists, the chronological list of titles *and* this list of titles by groups.

PR: Oh good. Does that book have *all* the titles of *all* books?

EM: Yes. And I think that's something that is very important, because in the Italian Einaudi editions you wouldn't see the list of titles you started in the year 2000, but only a chronological list. So for the first time, and this is something that also *La Pléiade* does not have, I think, we have the lists of titles written in both ways, chronologically and by groups of books. Concerning your new collection *Why Write?,* I noticed that there you have kept all the interviews in the *Shop Talk* and not all of the texts in the other collection, *Reading Myself and Others.*

PR: Well, the writers I wrote about in *Reading Myself and Others* are obscurer. And I left out anything that was topical, too topical, into the sixties and seventies. And also, I didn't like some of them, you know. And also I redid some of those essays too, I mean I changed the wording in some of them. I didn't change the arguments. It's just editing. I wasn't such a good writer, you know.

EM: There is an interview with yourself that you did on *The Great American Novel*. I remember there was a sentence that I wanted to know more about, but you have omitted that text.

PR: Yes, because nobody has read that book!

EM: The first volume of the *Meridiani Mondadori* includes eight of your novels written between 1959 and 1986, arriving at *The Counterlife*. I personally find this novel extremely important from all points of view: for the debate, for the structure . . .

PR: It's a good book. Something shifted, my works changed. That's the kind of pivot on which you change, because I got the idea of complexity and amplification. And in the earlier novels, except for *Letting Go*, which was a young creation, but in the early ones I was very . . . condensing. And then with *The Counterlife* I opened up and allowed the complexity in. And it changed everything that came after, till the last. The last four books became rather simple again.

EM: With *The Counterlife* you explored the possibility of creating alternative stories, showing how reality can take different turns.

PR: As it does!

EM: Yes, as it does! Depending on our choices as well, but . . .

PR: . . . but sometimes not!

GOODBYE, COLUMBUS, PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT, *AND AN "ATLANTIC FIRST"*

EM: I finally have a few specific questions. One is about *Goodbye, Columbus*. I was wondering whether the title *Goodbye, Columbus*, in part referring to Columbus, Ohio, was also in honor of your editor Starbuck, who was born there: George Starbuck. You didn't know, maybe. He was born in Columbus, Ohio! Was the coincidence just by chance?

PR: He never told me! No, I thought it was something amusing about people standing on the shore, saying to Columbus who had discovered America, "Goodbye," "Goodbye, Columbus." You know, Christopher Columbus went on a great journey, and so does my young hero. *Goodbye, Columbus* comes from that song, the college song, but I imagined that it had to do with Columbus, Christopher Columbus.

EM: The song . . . ?

PR: There's a college where the brother goes. It isn't a song, it's someone narrating.

EM: Exactly. Yes, of course, there is that wonderful, very imperial voice, describing the end of college life and the beginning of a new life, so in a way it's saying good-bye to one's life as a young person and beginning the life as an adult. And, of course, at the same time it's creating a parallel with the American experience of arriving at a New World . . .

PR: Yes, of discovering America!

EM: When did you precisely start writing *Goodbye, Columbus*? I have seen different dates mentioned concerning when you started writing this text, which of course you began under the impulse of your friend Stern's advice. Did you start in 1957 or in 1958? In a letter to your editor Starbuck, which I was able to read in an essay by a scholar, you told him that you had just started writing it in March 1958. But somewhere else I read that you wrote it immediately after your friend's advice in 1957. Do you remember when you started really?

PR: Let me think. I started in '58, March '58?

EM: Well, that's what you wrote in your letter, maybe it was just a letter to an editor, saying: Oh look, I have a story that I have just started . . .

PR: If I started in March '58 and it was published in February '59, it was too soon. I probably started in '57.

EM: And then in 1958, when they insisted that they wanted a novel and not the short stories, you said: Oh, I have a story which I have just started. Instead you had it already, probably.

PR: That's right, probably.

EM: There is a question I have about *Portnoy's Complaint*. When you started publishing the first chapter in the magazine, did you already know that you were writing the whole novel?

PR: No. The first part appeared in *Esquire*. It was called "A Jewish Patient Begins His Analysis." And, no, I had no idea. And then I just thought: go on, just keep going. And I wrote it and published it, I had never done that before, or since. Wrote it and published it, and it began to get a lot of attention . . . I don't like the end of that book. It lacks the texture of the earlier stuff: the stuff about the family, the stuff about Newark, the stuff about sex, has texture. The

last section in Israel is thin, it's very thin, and forced, I think. I didn't know enough, you know. I think I'd been, yes, I'd been to Israel in '62 for a month, but I was inventing a hollow place. I don't like the ending of that book.

EM: Maybe the whole chapter is a bit weak. But the conclusion, the last paragraphs are good. There is the explosion, Portnoy's voice, his "howl" . . .

PR: Right. But the scene with the Israeli soldier is not good.

EM: Anyhow the novel grew little by little, by publishing it in magazines. In a way, like nineteenth-century writers, like Dickens, who were publishing by installments, while writing.

PR: Yes, I'd never done that before or since.

EM: But publishing in magazines a book that would come out as a novel in book form is something that you have done very frequently.

PR: Yes, but I am not alone in that. It's done by many American writers. I think I have published in *The Atlantic*, and in *The New Yorker*, and in *The New American Review*. That was a wonderful magazine.

EM: Yes, it was wonderful. Its format . . .

PR: It was the '60s. The sixties were just so full of life and audacity, you know.

EM: By the way, since you mentioned *The Atlantic*. I remember that at a certain point in your novel *The Anatomy Lesson* Zuckerman is proud of having published a story in *The Atlantic* as a young man, an "Atlantic First." I think that was a column.

PR: That's right, it used to be. *The Atlantic* used to pick an unknown writer and publish it, I think you got paid a little more, it was called an "Atlantic First."

EM: So that's what you meant by saying "an 'Atlantic First,'" referring to the fact of having published there.

PR: Yes! You know these books too well!

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It is moving for me who was there to listen again to Roth's voice, enjoying the marvel of the almost three hours I spent with him in intense, exciting conversation. I hope the transcript of the central part of this meeting conveys

something of that experience—the wealth of information, the insights about his life, and his perceptions about his work—though what is lost in a transcript is the soft, suave tone of his voice, the frequent moments of laughter that punctuated our talk, and his relaxed physical presence, while sitting in his leather chair, or standing to take a photo from the wall or a book from a stack on the table. Nor can I, for lack of space, report here all the other recollections I have of our conversation, which actually continued on other matters of common interest on that long, memorable winter afternoon. Not many days after our meeting, the *New York Times* of January 16, 2018, published an interview with him by Charles McGrath, which had actually taken place, as specified at the start of the article, a few weeks before our meeting. In a passage of that interview there is a remark Roth made on the *Meridiani Mondadori* volume I edited, which conveys his "humbling sense of wonder and satisfaction" with the publication of that volume (the episode is also reported in the Fall 2018 issue of *The Philip Roth Society Newsletter*, from which the previously quoted words are taken):

> *"Just look at this," he said to me last month, holding up the ornately bound Mondadori volume, as thick as a Bible and comprising titles like "Lamento di Portnoy" and "Zuckerman Scatenato." "Who reads books like this?"*

I had a copy of that volume with me when we met that December day, and he inscribed his dedication on it, written in strong black characters, which reads: "*To Elèna Mortara, in gratitude for this splendid volume, Philip Roth, 2017*": a wonderful, generous gift to me, and one more testimony of his appreciation and satisfaction. I am relieved when I think that he was able to see his entrance into the major literary cathedrals, or temples, of Italian and French book culture, and that he seemed to enjoy that literary recognition coming from across the ocean.

At the end of that day, sometime after sunset, while I was leaving, Roth showed me the satirical drawings hanging next to the front door at the entrance of his apartment. They were the famous drawings by Philip Guston inspired by his novel *The Breast*: his grotesquely self-ironical version of Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*, telling of professor David Kepesh, who, obsessed by sex, finds himself "inexplicably" transformed into a gigantic breast. With a tone between seriousness and playfulness he remarked, with some pride: "With this novel, I anticipated the transgender culture!" He knew he had been revolutionary and not always understood. Upon my leaving, we hugged each other, next to the door. In parting from him—he who still looked so tall and straight and was so kindly warm to me—I thought that ours was a friendly and promising goodbye, *un arrivederci*, as we say in Italian; instead, it was a final adieu, *un addio*.

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