

The Sons of Phil: Rothian self-satire and self-incrimination in Shalom Auslander's 'Foreskin's Lament' and Gary Shteyngart's 'Little Failure'

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New Voices in Jewish-American Literature

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NEW VOICES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

The Sons of Phil: Rothian Self-Satire and Self-Incrimination in Shalom Auslander's *Foreskin's Lament* and Gary Shteyngart's *Little Failure*

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Shalom Auslander and Gary Shteyngart are two of the most prominent new voices to have emerged in Jewish-American fiction in the 21st century. In addition to their fiction, they have both published memoirs—Auslander's *Foreskin's Lament* (2007) and Shteyngart's *Little Failure* (2014)—that follow the narrative trajectory of Bildungsromane and are, as their titles suggest, characterised by a self-satirising, self-incriminating comedy. In this article, I will argue that this comedy emerges from an intertextual dialogue with the work of Philip Roth, so that we might call Shteyngart and Auslander—adapting the 'Sons of Ben' label given to a generation of Caroline authors who regarded themselves as disciples of the Renaissance poet and playwright Ben Jonson—'sons of Phil'. Tracing the affinities between the work of the two writers and that of Roth, I argue that their 'works of semi-autobiography' cannot be accommodated in the redemptive, ethical model of Jewish fiction that has been proposed by a number of recent critics, but rather are animated by the paradoxically self-fulfilling and self-abasing impulse identified by Shteyngart: 'I write because there is nothing as joyful as writing, even when the writing is twisted and full of hate, the self-hate that makes writing not only possible but necessary' (Shteyngart, 2014: 148).

[S]pare me the subject of the Jewish family and its travails [. . .] Has it not been done—and done? . . . For me the books count . . . where the writer incriminates himself.

(Roth, 1985a: 138–9)

Portnoy's Complaint gave readers . . . a voice that cannot mock others without first mocking itself.

(Avishai, 2012: 14)

Shalom Auslander and Gary Shteyngart are two of the most prominent of the new voices to have emerged in Jewish-American fiction in the 21st century. Born at the start of the 1970s, both authors grew up as outsiders twice over, members of small communities with their own distinctive set of values and mores—what Shteyngart calls a 'shadow society' (2014: 182)—from which they were themselves estranged: Auslander in the Hasidic Orthodox Jewish enclave of Monsey in Rockland County, New York; Shteyngart (after leaving Russia at age seven) in a Russian-Jewish immigrant family who regarded his adopted homeland with a mixture of awe and disdain ('as a country [we thought of the United States] . . . as magical but . . . [its] population did not strike us as being especially clever' [35]). This sense of inhabiting a precarious world—of being isolated, alienated figures within subcultures that were themselves alien to and isolated from the larger national culture—is central to their writing. Both endured troubled teenage years involving substance abuse and both credit a sustained period of psychoanalysis for saving them from (self)-destruction.¹ The similarities between them go beyond their biographies. They have both published works of fiction that draw heavily from their own lives: Shteyngart himself claims to have been 'shocked', upon rereading them, 'by the overlaps between fiction and reality' (318) in his novels *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002), *Absurdistan* (2006), and *Super Sad Love Story* (2010), while Auslander's short story collection

¹ In an interview, Auslander claims to have 'faced a simple choice: either write or commit suicide' (Caesar, 2012: 10) and credits his psychoanalyst with giving him the advice to 'put something down on paper' (Caesar, 2012: 10). In *Little Failure*, Shteyngart says, simply, '[i]t saved my life. What more can I add to that?' (312).

Beware of God (2005) and novel *Hope: A Tragedy* (2013) clearly echo many of the details of the author's biography, as documented in interviews and in his life writing. Finally, they have both published memoirs—Auslander's *Foreskin's Lament* (2007) and Shteyngart's *Little Failure* (2014)—that follow the narrative trajectory of Bildungsromane and which are, as their titles suggest, characterised by a self-satirising, self-incriminating comedy.² Ignominy, humiliation, abjection, shame, disgrace, and guilt are their keynotes. In this article, I will argue that this comedy emerges in part from an intertextual dialogue with the work of Philip Roth, so that we might call Shteyngart and Auslander—adapting the 'Sons of Ben' label given to a generation of Caroline authors who regarded themselves as disciples of the Renaissance poet and playwright Ben Jonson—'sons of Phil'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Auslander and Shteyngart demonstrate a profound ambivalence towards their illustrious precursors in the canon of Jewish-American fiction. In interviews, Auslander has repeatedly played down the notion that he is following in the footsteps of other Jewish-American authors and has specifically denied being indebted to Roth.³ Although his first novel, *Hope*, shares with Roth's *The Ghost Writer* (1979) the conceit of imagining an Anne Frank who had secretly survived the war, Auslander claimed in interviews not to have read Roth's book. Yet there are two explicit references to Roth in the book, firstly in the following exchange between the sister of Solomon Kugel, the novel's protagonist, and his wife:

You know who I saw the other day? Hannah said to Bree, and, not waiting for an answer, continued: Philip Roth . . .

² To acknowledge this ironic distance between the real-life authors and their autobiographical selves, as well as to recognise the fact that the protagonists of life-writing are always artificial constructions—even, or perhaps particularly, when they purport to present 'authentic' versions of their subjects—I will refer to the authors by their surnames and to the protagonists of *Little Failure* and *Foreskin's Lament* as Gary and Shalom, respectively.

³ In a feature on Auslander, Ed Caesar reports that 'Despite his similarities to Philip Roth, Auslander says he did not read much Jewish fiction [in his] . . . introduction to fiction' and that '[h]e continues to read very few of his Jewish contemporaries' (Caesar, 2012: 10). In the same piece, however, Auslander mentions a short story by the American Jewish contemporary of Roth, Leonard Michaels ('I would have saved them if I could'), as an example of his discovery of 'writing that changed his life' (Caesar, 2012: 10).

Really? said Bree. Does he live in Brooklyn?

Of course, said Hannah. Philip Roth? . . .

I thought he was dead, said Bree. (Auslander, 2012: 133)

Later, after Bree moves out of the family farmhouse in whose attic the irascible, embittered old woman claiming to be Anne turns out to be hiding, writing a novel, Kugel, ringing up his sister, is told by Bree's maid that she has gone out:

She went to hear man [sic] reading . . .

She went to a reading, said Kugel.

Yes, yes, a reading. A famous man.

Philip Roth?

I don't know.

It wasn't Philip Roth?

I don't know. (328)

These sly, comic allusions to Roth's fame and longevity (he does not live in Brooklyn and is not dead) may or may not constitute an implicit acknowledgement of the influence of *The Ghost Writer* on *Hope*, but taken together with the fact that the name of Auslander's novel is also the name of the wife of the fictional novelist, E.I. Lonoff, in Roth's novel, they certainly suggest that Auslander had Roth on his mind when writing the book. This is equally true of *Foreskin's Lament*, which recalls Roth's most (in)famous novel, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), both in the format of its title and in its numerous comical references to onanism. It also contains the following passage, in which Shalom prefaces his reflections on his compulsive voyeurism (he makes daily visits to peep shows as a teenager) by attempting to pre-empt any comparisons with Roth:

This isn't some Philip Roth sexual-obsession-as-a-reflection-of-man's-fear-of-death disgusting. This is not my physical being yearning for some higher illumination. There is no greater existential message within my degeneracy. This is not *Sabbath's Theater*; it is Shalom's Buddy Booth. I'm gross. I'm icky. I'm wicked. (Auslander, 2007b: 110)

Like the mentions of Roth in *Hope*, this functions as both a disclaimer of any affinity and as evidence for it: it's not just that the emphatic nature of his insistence on the discrepancies between himself and Roth invites the speculation that he may be protesting too much, it's that the terms in which he proclaims these differences reveal a familiarity not just with the older writer's reputation in general terms but more specifically with his comic masterpiece, *Sabbath's Theater*, whose protagonist is indeed 'gross . . . icky . . . wicked' and haunted by (his own and others') mortality.

Shteyngart has been less guarded in acknowledging his debt to, and admiration for, Roth. In an interview with Mark Oppenheimer, he names him as one of his favourite writers (Oppenheimer, 2006). In another interview, Troy Patterson relays an anecdote in which Shteyngart reports that 'he was introduced to Philip Roth, who was, though polite, not necessarily interested in what Shteyngart had to say . . . but in Gary's date, which Gary chalks up to Roth being Roth: "That's the guy I love"' (Patterson, 2014). However, if Auslander's denials of Roth's influence might seem a little disingenuous, or even defensive, Shteyngart's declaration of affection is qualified by a certain irreverence, an irony that manifests itself both as self-deprecation (in one sense he is the butt of the joke here, Roth's indifference to him a humbling reminder of Shteyngart's relatively lesser literary status) and as satire at Roth's expense (it is not just his lofty literary reputation that is alluded to here, but also the less flattering popular image of him as a womaniser). Shteyngart's response to Roth's retirement was similarly mischievous in tone, mixing satire and self-satire: 'On the one hand, it's sad. On the other hand, when you're done, you're done! There's an old Russian saying *zdelal delo, gul'ai smelo*. Roughly, "You've finished your task, now you may frolic with ease". What good fortune to be done with one's life burden!' (Temple, 2012). Here Shteyngart invokes another popular stereotype of Roth—as the self-punishing perfectionist, for whom writing is, as he told Charles McGrath, a daily agony, a source of 'frustration' and 'humiliation' (McGrath, 2012)—as a way of registering envy of the exalted status of the older writer (Shteyngart would like to share his 'good fortune' but does not have the privilege of doing so) while at the same time gently mocking Roth's self-dramatising tendencies (as suggested by the portentousness of the phrase

'life's burden' and the exclamation mark that follows it). But of course, Shteyngart also parodies himself—as the purveyor of a folksy Russian proverbial wisdom—a strategy that Sasha Senderovich calls 'self-orientalisation' and which is also employed by a number of his fictional characters.⁴

There are also clear parallels between the criticism that Shteyngart has received from some fellow Russian-Jewish American contemporaries and the hostile reception that Roth encountered early in his career from many Jewish-American readers and critics. 42 years after Irving Howe's infamous essay 'Philip Roth Considered' (whose urbane title disguised what was essentially a character assassination) appeared in the pages of *Commentary*, the same journal published 'The Hollowing out of Gary Shteyngart', a review by Marat Grinberg of *Little Failure* that, as its title implied, amounted to an *ad hominem* attack on its author. Although it was published three years after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, Howe's essay was, in part, a belated review of Roth's fourth book, alleging that the novel betrayed Roth's 'thin personal culture' and exposed him to charges of self-hatred (Howe maintains, delicately, that it 'is not . . . an anti-Semitic book, though it contains plenty of contempt for Jewish life' [Howe, 1972]). Conversely, Grinberg's essay, although ostensibly a review of Shteyngart's fourth book, is also a reconsideration of Shteyngart's whole career, which he presents as an ironic fulfilment of 'the infamous Soviet project of hollowing out Jewishness' (Grinberg, 2014: 71). Just as Howe accuses Roth of misrepresenting Jewish family life, relying on 'vulgar' comedy—'lampoons', 'caricatures', and 'skits'—that confirms 'what had always been suspected about those immigrant Jews but had recently not been tactful to say' (Howe, 1972), so Grinberg indignantly points out that 'not all Russian-Jewish families function as his [Gary's] does, with parents who hate each other, whose speech consists largely of profanities, and who emotionally smother their children' (Grinberg, 2014: 70). It is no coincidence that Grinberg seems as incapable of distinguishing between Shteyngart and his protagonist as Howe was of detecting any ironic distance between Roth and Portnoy (Howe lamented the 'spilling-out of the narrator' in the novel 'which it becomes hard to suppose is not also the spilling-out of the author' [Howe, 1972]).

⁴ See Senderovich (2015: passim).

Just as *Foreskin's Lament* did, *Little Failure* elicits particular comparisons with *Portnoy's Complaint*, as Shteyngart's fellow Jewish-American novelist and contemporary, Adam Gopnik, observed when he provided the following blurb for the book: 'Portnoy meets Chekhov meets Shteyngart!' (Shteyngart, 2014). There is ostensibly something peculiar, if not perverse, in framing *Little Failure*, a memoir published in 2014 by a 43-year-old real-life Russian-born Jewish-American author, in terms of an encounter between that author, another Russian author born in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the 33-year-old fictional creation of a novel published by an American-born Jewish novelist who turned 81 in 2014. Yet, as Gal Beckerman points out, there are formal echoes of Roth's novel in Shteyngart's memoir: 'The tone [of *Little Failure*] is psychoanalytical and the memoir is written from the couch in the present tense of an analysis session . . . [so that] it's impossible not to feel a looming Alexander Portnoy' (Beckerman, 2014). On the other hand, as Beckerman goes on to observe, this debt remains implicit: Roth is conspicuous by his absence from the pages of *Little Failure*, an 'unmentioned influence' (Beckerman, 2014). Again, there is a certain ambivalence at work here. Shteyngart has made no secret of his regard for *Portnoy's Complaint*: in a Barnes & Noble author profile, he names it in a list of his 10 favourite novels and it was also featured in a course entitled 'The Hysterical Male', which Shteyngart has taught at Columbia (Anon, 2013). Yet its presence—and *Little Failure's* intertextual dialogue with Roth more generally—has to be inferred in *Little Failure*: for example, from the Portnoy-like, paranoid, comical, capitalised (as in Roth's novel) fantasies of having his transgressions exposed in lurid headlines ('FIRST SOVIET CHILD CHOKES ON CAPITALIST PIZZA' [Shteyngart, 2014: 105])⁵; and from Gary's anecdote about his circle of Jewish friends' assessment of the heroines of Victorian fiction, their verdict on Lucie Manette from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) ('She's beautiful, petite, and Victorian, what more do you want?' [200]) echoing Roth's account in *The Facts* of the way his Jewish friends at graduate school in Chicago referred to Isabel Archer, the protagonist of Henry James' *The Portrait of*

⁵ See, for example, Roth (2005a: 158, 240).

a Lady (1881), as a 'shiksa' (Roth, 2007: 114).⁶ The most arch allusion to Roth comes when Gary cites the older writer's alma mater as a marker of mediocrity: 'What does it mean for an immigrant child of the top rank to go to Bucknell University? . . . It means I have failed my parents. I have failed myself. We may as well have never come here' (Shteyngart, 2014: 219). Again, the irony here is aimed both at Roth himself (the famous author is cut down to size by the reminder that he attended a college that would have been spurned by immigrant children 'of the top rank') and at the rigid notions of status and social stratification (implicitly attributed to Gary and his family) that produce such snobbery, whose absurdity is exposed by the hyperbole of Gary's assertion that, had he attended Bucknell, it would have rendered his family's relocation to the United States pointless.

Apart from their titles, the clearest point of comparison between *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Foreskin's Lament* is the prominence in both of masturbation. Whereas Alexander Portnoy's compulsive onanism is presented, in Freudian terms, as an act of sublimated aggression against the taboos of his family (he uses both his sister's brassiere and the liver that is destined for the dinner table as masturbatory aids), in *Foreskin's Lament* it is one of the young Shalom's main modes of transgression against the religious strictures with which he is inculcated. Early on in the book, there is a detailed description of the punishments with which Shalom and his fellow young Hasidic males are threatened if they should disobey the biblical injunction against the spilling of one's seed on barren ground:

[T]he angels would take me to a huge house of worship, filled with hundreds of thousands of Jews, praying and studying, Jews that would have been born if I hadn't killed them, wasted them, mopped them up with a dirty sock during the hideous failure of my despicable life (there are roughly 50 million sperms in every ejaculate; that's about nine holocausts in every wank. I was just hitting puberty when they told me this, or puberty was just hitting

⁶ There is also an echo here of Woody Allen's short story 'The Kugelmass Episode' (another text which alludes to *Portnoy's Complaint*), in which the eponymous protagonist begins an affair with the protagonist of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

me, and I was committing genocide, on average, three or four times a day).
(Auslander, 2007b: 6)

Here, as elsewhere, Shalom compounds his initial transgression through the terms in which he couches it. In comparing his protagonist's harmless acts of self-abuse with the enormity of the Holocaust, Auslander risks being accused of bad taste, but of course he takes this risk in order to expose the grotesque absurdity of such a juxtaposition—to satirise the callous insensitivity with which the religious authorities repeatedly invoke the murder of the six million in order to shame Shalom's generation into submission. His description of Shalom's first masturbatory experience again exploits the comic incongruity between his onanism and the fate of European Jewry:

I looked down at the seed I had spilled on my belly and wanted to cry . . .
From their perch on the wall outside the bedroom doorway, my fading
black-and-white ancestors frowned down on me, disgusted and disappointed.
—*Is this*, they grumbled—*what we died in the Holocaust for?* (105)

In the world in which Shalom grows up, every deviation from the law as defined by the Hasidic authorities constitutes not only a violation of faith but a posthumous victory for Hitler. In particular, to assimilate is to be complicit with the project of Nazi genocide: if you rode in a car on Sabbath 'you were . . . finishing off what Hitler had started' (132); if you '[a]ttempt to dwell in their [the Gentiles'] midst—wear their clothes, go to their malls, ogle their older sisters—bam, Holocaust' (139). Imagining how his mother would react if he confessed to her that he had been eating non-kosher food, Shalom concludes that: 'She would go Holocaust. Do you know how many Jews died at the hands of Nazis so you can keep kosher? Hitler would be mentioned. I would be worse than him' (169). To supplement this diet of guilt and recrimination—which echoes the claims made by Ronit Lippman, the wife of the militant demagogue Mordecai Lippman in Roth's *The Counterlife* (1987), that 'assimilation and intermarriage . . . in America . . . are bringing about a second Holocaust',

so that '[w]hat Hitler couldn't achieve with Auschwitz, American Jews are doing to themselves in the bedroom' (Roth, 1988: 107)—Shalom and his classmates are fed graphic images of the death camps, taken from newsreel footage:

On the stage at the front of the room, Israeli flags stood on either side of a large movie screen. On the screen was a joyous little girl who was dead. Her name was Anne Frank. We spent the morning watching terrifying movies and graphic newsreel footage . . . In one scene, a Nazi soldier was using a bulldozer to lift bodies into a waiting dump truck. As the bucket scooped and lifted, one of the bodies at the top of pile [sic] rolled down the side. Her arms seemed to wave as she rolled; her head, like a heavy burden, fell, landed in a broken heap. Between her legs, a dark nest of pubic hair came into view . . . It was the first naked Jewish girl I had ever seen. I was eleven. She was dead. It was Holocaust Remembrance Day. (113)

Just as Shalom associates his early autoerotic adventures with the genocide, so here his exposure to the horrors of the camps is, uncomfortably, accompanied by his exposure to the female genital region. The dark irony of Shalom acquiring his first knowledge of female biology in the context of the death camps is reinforced by the implicit association between Anne Frank and the anonymous Jewish girl whose pubic hair he notices. This association is set up initially by the echoing of the description of Anne Frank at the start of the passage—'a joyous little girl who was dead'—with the description of the camp victim as a 'Jewish girl' who 'was dead'. It is then reinforced by the implicit allusion to Roth's *The Ghost Writer*, in which Roth's protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, responds to Judge Wapter's injunction to go to see the popular stage adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (which he hopes will inspire a sense of tribal loyalty in Zuckerman) by reimagining the dead little Jewish girl as a sexually desirable young woman. This passage also has a particular resonance if read in the context of Auslander's oeuvre. It anticipates his first novel, *Hope*, in which he too constructs an alternative historical fate for Anne—in this case representing her

as an embittered old woman who haunts the life of his hapless protagonist Solomon Kugel, to whom, at one point, she sardonically announces: 'I'm the dead girl. I'm Miss Holocaust, 1945 . . . I'm the Jewish Jesus' (Auslander, 2012: 312). However, it also recalls one of the short stories in his first book, *Beware of God*, 'Holocaust Tips for Children', in which Anne Frank is a presiding spirit, and which begins with the following unattributed note:

[Parents: Next Tuesday we will be commemorating Holocaust Remembrance Day with an all-day program of films and lectures for students in grades 4–8, much of which will be graphic and potentially disturbing. Please sign and return this permission slip so that your child may attend. Thank you].
(Auslander, 2007a: 55)

The irony of asking parents to grant permission for their children to be exposed to 'graphic and . . . disturbing imagery' (to which Auslander returns in *Foreskin's Lament* when Shalom observes dryly that obtaining permission 'was never a problem for me. My mother lived for death' [242]) is heightened during the remainder of the story, as the narrating consciousness of the young boy envisages the Nazi genocide being reenacted on American soil: 'They'll probably make New York City into a ghetto, like the Warsaw Ghetto' (Auslander, 2007a: 71–2). Once again, this recalls Roth, in this case the novel that was published a year before *Beware of God*, *The Plot Against America* (2004), in which a Fascist state is established and anti-Semitic legislation passed under a Lindbergh-led Republican regime in a counter-historical 1940s United States. It also anticipates the episode in *Little Failure*, in which Shteyngart recalls how '[e]very Holocaust Remembrance Day, we were led into the school auditorium to watch hours and hours of newsreel footage so graphic that we needed special permission forms signed by our parents' (242).

Whereas in Auslander the Holocaust is invariably invoked as a warning of the fate that awaits Jews who assimilate, and at the same time as a form of moral blackmail to keep potential dissidents in line, in Shteyngart it is mobilised as part of a pseudo-patriotic, nationalistic agenda:

Back at SSSQ, the bodies have been piling up for years. Auschwitz, Birkenau, Treblinka. We have special presentations in the gym, a protective fortress of prayer books around us, the American flag on one side of the stage, the Israeli flag on the other, and between them the slaughter of our innocents. As I watch the ovens open and the skeletons crumble, I become angry at the Germans and also at the Arabs, who are the same thing as the Nazis, Jew-killers, fucking murderers, they took our land or something, I hate them. (186)

Satirising both the cynical exploitation of the Holocaust for spurious political ends and his own susceptibility to this propaganda, this passage again recalls episodes from Roth's oeuvre. The ahistorical elision of Germans and Arabs recalls the rhetoric employed by Mordecai Lippman, the militant Zionist settler and Holocaust survivor, who warns of a second Holocaust in the Middle East ('Three million the Arabs think they can kill' [Roth, 1988: 129]), while the appropriation of the Holocaust as an implicit justification for the demonization of 'Arabs' recalls the risqué joke in Roth's *Operation Shylock*: 'FOR THE SMOKE SCREEN THAT HIDES EVERYTHING, SMOKE HOLOCAUST' (Roth, 1993: 296). Shteyngart exposes the absurdity of the claim that Arabs 'are the same thing as Nazis' through the historical confusion and linguistic imprecision of his younger self's subsequent attempt to provide a rationale for his hatred ('they took our land or something'). The references to the 'bodies . . . piling up' at his school and to the 'protective fortress of prayer books' compound the ironies of the passage, the former emphasising the geographical and temporal dislocation between the actual bodies of the victims of the Holocaust and the metaphorical pile of bodies with which the privileged pupils of the Solomon Schechter School of Queens are confronted, the latter functioning as an implicit reminder of the fact that religious faith offered no protection for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

The juxtaposition of the Nazi death camps ('Auschwitz, Birkenau, Treblinka'), invoked here as metonyms for the Holocaust itself, with the American and Israeli flags, also functions as a symbolic reference to the personal history of Shteyngart and the other Russian Jews who emigrated to the United States in the 1970s and 80s. Arguably, the zeal with which many Jewish-American organisations campaigned

on behalf of the Soviet Jews was, at least in part, an attempt to compensate retrospectively for the failure of many such organisations to co-ordinate actions to save European Jews during the Second World War.⁷ As Gary himself drily observes: '[t]he American Jews, guilty over their inaction during the Holocaust, have been exceedingly kind to their Soviet brethren' (88). Yet, as Sasha Senderovich points out, 'American Jews mostly did not campaign for the right of Soviet Jews to resettle in America, but for their right to emigrate to Israel' (Senderovich, 2015: 94), so that the status of Shteyngart's generation of Russian-American Jews is hedged around with ambiguity. Are they political refugees, religious refuseniks, economic migrants, or a combination of all of these? Moreover, the prominent presence of the Israeli flags at both Gary's and Shalom's school during Holocaust Remembrance Day screenings is a reminder that the equation of the plight of the Soviet Jews with that of the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe was, as the Mossad agent in Shteyngart's second novel *Absurdistan* highlights, a matter of political expediency, a 'useful . . . narrative to the Israeli state apparatus in the Soviet period', as well as to the United States during the Cold War (Senderovich, 2015: 99). Gary's awareness that his family's presence in America might be indirectly attributed to the Holocaust heightens the irony of his being forced, year after year, to watch 'the slaughter of our innocents', as does the use of the first-person plural possessive and the use of a phrase that usually refers to Herod's infanticide in the New Testament.

In their satirical treatment of Jewish-American attitudes towards the Holocaust, Shteyngart and Auslander have more in common with Philip Roth—who enraged some Jewish readers with Portnoy's rhetorical invitation to the Jewish elders of his community to 'stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass' (Roth, 2005a: 76)—than with their immediate predecessors, the 'third generation' of Jewish-American authors who emerged in the last two decades of the twentieth century,

⁷ A. J. Sherman, in his review of David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945* (1984), provides a pithy summary of these failures: 'For its part, the American Jewish community, still extremely wary of encouraging widespread anti-Semitic and anti-alien feeling, was ambivalent and timorous in lobbying for rescue efforts and was moreover torn by bitter feuding, principally between Zionists and non-Zionists' (Sherman, 1984).

or with their contemporaries who have, more often than not, treated the subject of the Holocaust gravely, if not didactically.⁸ However, Auslander's and Shteyngart's affinity with Roth, and with each other, is perhaps most pronounced in the ways in which they represent writing itself as a form of self-satire and self-incrimination. These terms—which are of course interrelated—invoke but also implicitly question or even negate the notion of the self; it is on this highly contested ground that Auslander's and Shteyngart's life-writing (and perhaps all life-writing) situates itself. Both *Little Failure* and *Foreskin's Lament* foreground the problematic nature of the identity of their protagonists, who each share their authors' names but are of course as much rhetorical performances as are their fictional protagonists. In this sense, too, these works recall the series of books—some presented as fiction and some as non-fiction—authored by Roth which feature (fictionalised) autobiographical avatars named 'Philip Roth' and subtitles that further problematise the distinction between what Roth (after Paul Goodman) has called the 'written and unwritten worlds' (Roth, 1985b: ix): *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988), *Deception: A Novel* (1990), *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991), *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993), and *The Plot Against America* (2004).

At no point in his memoir does Shalom Auslander ever explicitly remark on the improbably allegorical nature of his name (Shalom means 'peace' in Hebrew and Auslander means 'foreigner' in German), but he does provide an implicit explanation of the title of the book:

I was beginning to feel a bit like a foreskin myself . . .

A lot like a foreskin. Cut off from my past, uncertain of my future, bloodied, beaten, tossed away. I wondered if there was a place where the foreskins could go, a place where they could live together, peacefully, loved, wanted, a nation of the foreskins, by the foreskins, for the foreskins. (Auslander, 2007b: 153)

⁸ There are of course some notable exceptions, such as Thane Rosenbaum's *Second Hand Smoke* (1999) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002).

Characteristically comical and grotesquely surreal, Shalom's vision of himself as a discarded, mutilated foreskin is also a profoundly self-abjecting one that signifies on many levels. It contains allusions to both of his actual names (the foreskin is represented as the quintessential foreigner, cut off from his past and uncertain of his future, but with the hope of finding a utopian community of fellow foreskins who might live together in peace) and also, again, to Philip Roth, for if *Foreskin's Lament* recalls *Portnoy's Complaint*, the image of the self as a foreskin recalls Roth's *The Breast*, whose protagonist wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a mammoth mammary gland.⁹ And of course, the passage finishes with a parody of one of the most famous lines from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Finally, by identifying himself with, and as, a foreskin—the part of the penis that is traditionally removed from male Jewish babies during the ritual act of circumcision—Shalom reinforces his radical alienation from the religious tradition into which he was born. This sense of dislocation, of (self-)exile, is also addressed in a striking episode earlier in the book, when Shalom presents himself as a sort of changeling:

[M]y mother has a son named Shalom that she loves dearly, but he isn't me, or more accurately, I'm not him. He is married with many children, and he lives next door to her, in a proper *Yiddishe* community . . . She has been the victim of some cosmic bait-and-switch, and she has spent the years since I have dared to become myself looking for the receipt. (74–5)

On the one hand, this passage is self-incriminating—Shalom has failed to be the son that his mother wished for—but on the other hand, the phrase 'dared to become myself' suggests that it is his mother's version of Shalom that is inauthentic, her sense of victimhood undercut by the bathetic image of her searching in vain for the 'receipt' that will validate her fantasy.

The question begged by the passage is how and when Shalom does 'become himself'. The paradoxical answer, of course, is when he discovers literature and decides to

⁹ Kafka's story, 'The Metamorphosis', lies behind both books, of course—an influence that Auslander has readily acknowledged in interviews (see Schulman [2011] for example).

become a writer: paradoxical, because writers—particularly writers of fiction—express themselves through impersonating others. As Philip Roth put it, when asked about his identity: ‘it’s largely through art that I have a chance of being taken to the heart at least of my own life . . . I am nothing like so sharply delineated as a character in a book’ (Finkelkraut, 1992: 130). Initially, Shalom claims he ‘didn’t have much interest in being a writer’ but, recognising that his life was largely made up of ‘fictions that covered up some humiliating nonfictions: an obsession with pornography, compulsive stealing, violating Sabbath, eating meat together with milk, walking without a yarmulke’ and that his ‘whole world depended on making my stories believable’, he ‘figured I might as well get a few pointers from the professionals’ (177–78). In the pages that follow, Shalom repeatedly calls attention to the fictional strategies he is deploying in the writing of his memoir: ‘this is what writers called “characterization”’ (179); ‘[t]his is what writers called “a hook”’ (179); ‘this is what writers called “the dreaded second act”’ (183); ‘this is what writers called a “homage”’ (183); ‘[t]his is what storytellers call “the complication”’ (189), ‘[t]his is what writers called “irony”’ (192). He also confides his anxiety that ‘God will punish me somehow. For talking, for spilling the beans, for disrespecting my parents, for pride, for arrogance’ (197–98), explaining that his discovery of his vocation has not cured him of his fear of divine persecution: ‘I just can’t seem to get this Character out of my head. I’ve tried to reframe Him, to rewrite Him . . . but none of it *helps*’ (199, emphasis in original). But of course, in referring to God as a ‘Character’, Auslander has indeed rewritten him—he has incorporated him into his narrative and appropriated his role by passing judgment on himself. In incriminating himself for ‘spilling the beans’, he has called himself to account preemptively, but he has also, once again, implicitly invoked the spectre of Roth—who was indicted in some quarters for spilling the beans, or, as Jerome Chanes puts it, for ‘washing the dirty laundry of American Jews in public’ (Chanes, 2012)—whose protagonists, as I have pointed out elsewhere, are constantly being put on trial, metaphorically if not literally.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Brauner (1996: *passim*) and (2007: 21–45).

Like *Foreskin's Lament*, the very title of *Little Failure* initiates a process of self-satire and self-incrimination that culminates in, but at the same time is complicated by, Gary's discovery of his vocation as a writer. After the family's relocation to the United States, his mother 'develop[s] an interesting fusion of English and Russian and . . . work[s] out the term *Failurchka*, or Little Failure' (4), which becomes her preferred name for Gary. The fact that Shteyngart had already incorporated the phrase into his first book, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (it is used of Vladimir, the protagonist of the novel, whom Gary describes as 'a kind of me', by *his* mother [281]) before adopting it as the title of his memoir suggests an internalisation of his mother's judgement of him. The invocation of this self-abasing caricature of himself as a hapless loser is partly ironic; the critical and commercial success of both books implicitly disproves the label, but at the same time feeds into his sense of himself as absurd and abject. Again, there is an echo here of *Portnoy's Complaint*, in which the protagonist's self-image, as the 'son in the Jewish joke' (Roth, 2005a: 111), is shaped by his mother's infantilising treatment of him, particularly her derisive response to his request for a bathing suit with a jockstrap in it: 'For your little thing?' (51). Gary's sense of himself as abject neither begins nor ends with his mother's mocking moniker for him. His early childhood is punctuated by a series of demeaning nicknames bestowed upon him by his father, referring either to his asthma or to his facial characteristics: 'Snotty', 'Weakling', 'Jew-nose', 'big lips', and 'Yid-face' (171), although he also has a more affectionate name for him—'Igoryochek', a diminutive version of his 'pre-Gary Russian name, Igor' (9). These insults are succeeded by 'eight years of being [made to feel] subhuman at Hebrew School', where Gary is called, variously, the 'Red Nerd', the 'Red Gerbil', and 'Gary Gnu the Third'. Gary is of course complicit in his own humiliation here, not simply by virtue of reproducing this series of ignominious names but also through the self-objectifying tone (using the pronoun 'it' to refer to himself) with which he represents his alienation in these different incarnations: 'And so the Red Nerd finds itself doubly handicapped, living in a world where it speaks neither the actual language, English, nor the second and almost as important language, television' (138). This implicit acquiescence—or even collusion—in his self-abjection is made explicit by the fact that the last of these nicknames—Gary Gnu the

Third—is self-inflicted. Yet at the same time, this self-denomination is an attempt on the part of the young Gary to take control of this narrative of abuse through an act of self-satire that subtly shifts the way in which he is perceived by his peers—from the hostile Cold War connotations of the ‘Red’ prefix to the suffix ‘the Third’, which parodies the upper-class American patriarchal tradition of sons being named after their fathers. It also marks the advent of Gary’s identity as a writer: Gary Gnu the Third is the author of the ‘Gnorah’—a satirical version of the Torah ‘directed at the entirety of the SSSQ religious experience’ and in particular ‘the ornery rabbi who claims the Jews brought on the Holocaust by their overconsumption of delicious pork products’ (159)—and of the science-fiction pastiche ‘Planet of the Yids’. Aware that his role as the class clown and satirical scribe (which brings with it neither respect nor affection but at least a ‘newfound lesser brand of hate’), Gary resolves to ‘write something every day, lest I fall out of favor again and be restored to Red Gerbil status’ (151).

If this early foray into fiction provides some respite from his sense of abasement, it also intensifies his sense of personal dislocation: ‘To my parents . . . I am Igor Semyonovich Shteyngart . . . To the American teachers at SSSQ, I am Gary Shteyngart . . . To the Hebrew teachers at SSSQ I am Yitzhak Ben Shimon . . . And to the children . . . I am Gary Gnu the Third’ (144). This confusion over his identity is further amplified when, as an undergraduate, his ‘endless alcoholic and narcotic exploits’ result in yet another nickname—‘Scary Gary’ (251)—and reaches its apogee when, during the writing of *Little Failure*, he discovers that ‘Shteyngart is not our name at all’, but rather the consequence of ‘[a] slip of the pen in some Soviet official’s hand, a drunk notary, a semiliterate commissar’ and that his real family name is Steinhorn. This prompts an existential crisis of sorts: ‘If neither Gary nor Shteyngart is truly my name, then what the hell am I doing calling myself Gary Shteyngart? Is every single cell in my body a historical lie?’ (113–14). If in one respect Shteyngart’s sense of self is destabilised through this proliferation of actual names (Russian, English, Hebrew), nicknames, aliases, alter egos, and personas, in another they provide the perfect preparation for his profession. If, as Roth’s perennial protagonist Nathan Zuckerman suggests, the novelist’s identity is a series of ‘improvisations on a self’ (Roth, 1990: 94), then

Shteyngart's various aliases can be seen as rehearsals for his fictional performances. Seen in this light, the central problem of *Little Failure* is not that it exposes the amorphous nature of Shteyngart's identity, but rather that it attempts to focus on the man behind the curtain.

Roth himself dramatised the problems of a novelist attempting to remove his fictional masks to reveal a notionally real person underneath in his ambiguously titled memoir *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*. *The Facts* is bookended by two letters: the first, preceding the main narrative, is from Roth to his fictional creation, Nathan Zuckerman, expressing his misgivings about the book and asking Zuckerman's advice; the second, a much longer letter which finishes *The Facts*, is Zuckerman's reply to his author, in which he advises him against publishing, on the grounds that: 'You, Roth, are the least completely rendered of all your protagonists', and that he cannot afford to 'disown' Zuckerman (Roth, 2007: 162, 168). Shteyngart employed a similar technique when, as part of the publicity for *Absurdistan*, he published a damning review of the novel in the guise of one of its characters, Jerry Shteynfarb (a self-aggrandising, opportunistic author whose role as a parodic version of his creator is signalled by his name and the title of his first novel *The Russian Arriviste's Handjob*, a comic mangling of *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*). Shteynfarb complains that '*Absurdistan's* most odious creation is a certain fellow novelist whom Shteyngart describes as "an upper-middle-class phony who came to the United States as a kid and is now playing the professional immigrant game"' (Shteynfarb, 2006). When Shteyngart was asked in an interview with *Forward Magazine* if he intended Shteynfarb to be 'your Nathan Zuckerman', he seemed tacitly to accept the analogy, observing that 'he's a good way of keeping things in perspective. And yes, he will be back, quite possibly in the next novel' (Oppenheimer, 2006). In *Little Failure*, however, the self-satirical portrait of the artist is not projected through Shteynfarb but rather internalised.

Instead of parodying his first novel by attributing a vulgarised version of it to an alter ego, in *Little Failure*, Shteyngart's autobiographical persona describes *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* as 'an unfaithful record of twenty-seven years of my

life . . . a very long document in which a troubled young man talks to himself . . . a collection of increasingly desperate jokes' (318). Instead of 'keeping [his] ego in check' (Oppenheimer, 2006) in the form of an exaggerated, distorted caricature of himself, in *Little Failure* Shteyngart satirises himself directly, representing himself as an author, or rather a performer, who relies on a formulaic shtick: 'Something, something, Max Weber, something, something, Protestant joke, something, something, Brezhnev reference. Those who have come across my first novel will know exactly the song I am singing' (262). Moreover, Shteyngart incriminates himself not just in aesthetic terms but also on ethical grounds. Indeed, the two are implicitly connected in the judgment of himself delivered late in the book: 'I am a bad writer . . . I am a bad son' (313).

At one point in his memoir of his father, *Patrimony*, Philip Roth recounts a dream in which his dead father reproaches him for doing 'the wrong thing' by not burying him in a suit. Roth interprets the dream as an allusion to 'this book, which, in keeping with the unseemliness of my profession, I had been writing all the while he was ill and dying' (Roth, 1991: 237). The 'unseemliness' of Shteyngart's profession—and in particular the unscrupulous use he makes of his own family in it—is something to which he returns repeatedly in *Little Failure*. Just as in *Patrimony* Roth's persona breaks his promise to his father that he would not include certain details of his illness in the book, in *Little Failure* Gary reports himself acceding to his father's request that he should not 'mention the names of my relatives in the book you're writing' (29), before apparently doing so.¹¹ The echo of Rothian strategies of self-incrimination is amplified by the fact that Gary's father accompanies his plea for discretion with the repeated imperative—'Just don't write like a self-hating Jew' (29–30; 32–33)—that recalls the accusations of self-hatred which Roth defended

¹¹ His ostensible refusal to censor details of his family history is in contrast to his—apparent—scrupulosity when it comes to revealing the names of other real-life figures, whose names he often claims to have altered: 'There's curly-haired, skinny Alana (not her real name), whose Fifth Avenue apartment and permissive parents I will soon appropriate for my first novel' (239); 'His name is Paulie.* . . *No it's not' (240); 'She is a tiny, book-addicted Jewish girl . . . Her name is Nadine (it's not)' (244); 'Enter Maya (name changed)' (285); 'Her name is Pamela Sanders* . . . *Not her name. Not her name at all' (295).

himself against in his non-fiction and dramatised in his fiction, most notably in *The Ghost Writer*, in which Zuckerman publishes a story based on a family feud, ignoring his father's warnings that Gentiles will interpret it as being about '[k]ikes and their love of money', leaving him convinced that 'all of Jewry' has been 'disgraced' by his son's 'betrayal' (Roth, 2005b: 94, 96). The similarities between Gary's exposure of his father—and his implicit indictment of himself for that exposure—and the 'betrayals' of fathers by sons in Roth is also reinforced by Gary's citation, later in *Little Failure*, of a statement by the Polish author Czeslaw Milosz ('When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished' [321])—an aphorism that Roth himself has quoted on a number of occasions.¹²

By incorporating his parents' misgivings about *Little Failure* (Gary reports that his mother is 'anxious about the memoir I am writing' and that his father asks about its publication date in the form of a mordant joke: 'Tell us, how many more months do we have to live?' [65]) but at the same time representing them unsparingly in the book, Gary prioritises his aesthetic responsibilities as a writer over his ethical responsibilities as a son. Towards the end of *Little Failure*, Gary recalls an incident in which his parents are interviewed and subsequently lampooned as a consequence of the autobiographical nature of his fiction, and he explicitly tries to put himself imaginatively in their place:

A Jewish newspaper has sent a reporter to meet my parents in their natural habitat and in her subsequent article has suggested that my parents somewhat resemble the hero's parents in my novel [. . .] I've published a book that mocks . . . a set of parents that are not entirely dissimilar from my own. What does that feel like for them? What does it feel like to pick up a book, or an article in a Jewish newspaper, and not fully understand the subtlety, the irony, the satire of the world depicted therein? What does it feel like to be unable to respond in the language with which that mockery is issued? (319–21)

¹² Most recently, in the documentary *Philip Roth: Unmasked*.

Yet the very terms in which Gary extends his sympathy paradoxically compound the crime for which he is ostensibly expressing guilt. The reference to the 'natural habitat' of his parents (as though Gary were an anthropologist discussing an exotic tribe) establishes an ironic distance between himself and his parents, a distance that is increased by the series of rhetorical questions that follow (questions that emphasise the limitations of their linguistic facilities and, by implication, the superiority of his own). This irony is hardly unconscious, however: Shteyngart's *modus operandi* is to incriminate himself, even—or especially—when he appears to be attempting to reconcile himself with (a version of) himself.

In the only essay to date on *Little Failure*, Enikő Maior claims that '[b]y the end of the novel [sic] Shteyngart has reached the final destination of each immigrant of accepting and liking himself as an American of Russian-Jewish origins' (Maior, 2015: 130). It seems to me, however, that Shteyngart remains as estranged from himself as ever by the end of the book. It is true that the book ends on what appears to be a note of reconciliation, as Gary reads the Kaddish (the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead) for his paternal grandfather, at the request of his father. *Little Failure* finishes with the words 'Let us say, Amen', rendered in Hebrew, a phonetic transliteration of Hebrew, English, and Russian, followed by a photograph, at the bottom of the page, of a couple whom we assume to be Shteyngart's parents. And yet the potential sentimentality of this scene is undermined (as it is in a similar scene that ends Zadie Smith's novel *The Autograph Man* [2002]) by the fact that the protagonist does not understand the words of the prayer ('I chant the gibberish backwards and forwards'), and by the fact that he and his father have been unable to locate his grandfather's grave ('We haven't found my grandfather's name, Isaac, amidst the acres of marble covered with Ivans and Nikolais and Alexanders') (349). For a book that revolves around the protagonist's inability to locate a stable sense of identity for himself, this is an appropriate, but hardly optimistic, ending.

Maior's redemptive reading of *Little Failure* can be seen as part of a trend in recent criticism of contemporary Jewish-American fiction to accommodate it in an ethical framework. In her essay 'Jewish "Diasporic Humor" and Contemporary

Jewish-American Identity', Roberta Rosenberg argues that since Jewish-Americans are '[n]o longer "underdogs" living in a segregated and openly anti-Semitic society', they are developing 'a new form of humor that reflect[s] an outer-directed, more collaborative, and less defensive and self-protecting world view' (Rosenberg, 2015: 113). She goes on to claim that a new generation of Jewish authors 'question traditional icons of Jewish identity . . . like religious "chosenness" or Israel or the Holocaust—in favor of a diasporic sensibility predicated on connection and a shared humanity with others: accommodation, trust, and interdependence' (Rosenberg, 2015: 116). The first half of this statement certainly applies to the work of Shteyngart and Auslander, but to attempt to recuperate their radically subversive (and at times dystopian) narratives—to see their writing as contributing to some sort of humanitarian project—would be fundamentally distorting. It is clear that Auslander and Shteyngart—or at least their autobiographical personae—perceive themselves very much as 'underdogs', and that their humour is directed primarily at themselves. Their brand of self-satirical, self-incriminating comedy owes more to Philip Roth than to more recent role models of Jewish-American fiction, and their 'works of semi-autobiography' (Friedman, 2004: 77) are animated not by ethical concerns but by the paradoxically self-fulfilling and self-abasing impulse identified by Shteyngart: 'I write because there is nothing as joyful as writing, even when the writing is twisted and full of hate, the self-hate that makes writing not only possible but necessary' (148).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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