

*A bit of Jewish-American mischief:
fictional metabiography in Alan Lelchuk's
Ziff: A Life? and Philip Roth's Exit Ghost*

Article

Accepted Version

Brauner, D. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2817-7847>
(2021) A bit of Jewish-American mischief: fictional
metabiography in Alan Lelchuk's Ziff: A Life? and Philip Roth's
Exit Ghost. *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, 166 (1).
pp. 46-61. ISSN 0397-7870 doi:
<https://doi.org/10.3917/rfea.166.0046> Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/92980/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3917/rfea.166.0046>

Publisher: Belin

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

A Bit of Jewish-American Mischief:

Fictional Metabiography in Alan Lelchuk's *Ziff: A Life?* and Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*

Résumé

*L'écrivain juif américain Alan Lelchuk a joué un rôle important dans la carrière et la vie de Philip Roth dans les années soixante-dix, bien que les ambiguïtés de leur relation littéraire et personnelle n'aient que peu attiré l'attention de la critique. On s'efforcera de combler cette lacune en abordant le roman de Lelchuk *Ziff: A Life?* et plus brièvement *Exit Ghost* de Roth comme des métabiographies fictionnelles qui s'inspirent de cette relation pour aborder sur un mode ironique de plus larges questions éthiques et esthétiques.*

Mots-clés:

*Philip Roth
Alan Lelchuk
Ziff: A Life?
Exit Ghost
metabiography
autofiction*

Alan Lelchuk, a fellow American Jewish novelist, was an important figure in Philip Roth's life and career in the early 1970s, but the relationship – literary and extra-literary – between the two men has largely been overlooked. This essay aims to address this gap in scholarship and to focus in particular on the ways in which Lelchuk's novel *Ziff: A Life?* and (more briefly) Roth's *Exit Ghost* might be read as fictional metabiographies that draw on that relationship in order to explore larger ethical and aesthetic questions.

In an interview with Joyce Carol Oates in 1974, reprinted in the first edition of *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), in response to Oates's (rather odd) query as to whether “less-established writers [have] tried to use you, to manipulate you into endorsing their work” (101), Roth took the opportunity to address his relationship with Lelchuk, and to explain how he had come to publish a mini-essay on his debut novel, *American Mischief* (1973), prior to its publication.

In 1972, *Esquire* [...] asked four “older writers” [...] each to write a brief essay about a writer under thirty-five he admired [...] I chose Alan Lelchuk. I'd met him when we were both guests [...] at Yaddo, and afterwards had read in manuscript his novel

American Mischief, which I admired considerably. I restricted myself to a somewhat close analysis of the book, which, though it hardly consisted of unqualified praise, nonetheless caused some consternation [...]. One prominent newspaper reviewer wrote [...] that “you would have to understand the Byzantine politics of the New York literary world” to be able to figure out why I had written my fifteen-hundred-word essay, which led the reviewer to describe me as “a blurb writer”. That I might simply have enjoyed a new writer’s novel, and [...] taken *Esquire*’s invitation as an occasion to talk about his work, never occurred to him. (102)

Although Roth prefaces this account by rejecting the idea that he had compromised his integrity, or had been compromised, by the machinations of “less-established” writers, the detail with which Roth recalls the piece by the “prominent newspaper reviewer,” combined with the defensive, high-handed tone of his response to it, suggests that the piece may have struck a nerve. On the other hand, Roth’s insistence that his discussion of *American Mischief* “hardly consisted of unqualified praise” is, if anything, an understatement. Roth does indeed provide an arresting endorsement of the novel, which was used as a blurb by its publishers: “No novelist has written with such knowledge and eloquence of the consequences of carnal passion in Massachusetts since *The Scarlet Letter*” (196). For the most part, however, Roth’s praise is hedged about by caveats. Roth admires the audacity of *American Mischief* but characterises it as “quirky, daring, wrong-headed, but *perhaps* inspired,” the italicised qualification, in tandem with the adjective “wrong-headed,” cancelling out the admiration implicit in the first two words of the phrase (200). He also makes a number of unflattering comments that seem *ad hominem*, noting for example that Lelchuk “possesses a mean, prickly [*sic*] streak that at times leads him to be contemptuous in excess of the evidence” (196). Finally, Roth’s compliments are largely confined to what he calls the “remarkable” first half of the novel (196, 198), while he complains that elsewhere “the prose is undistinguished, and the human side of it all is somewhat strained and transparent” (198). Even his final verdict is equivocal:

What is so engaging to me about Lelchuk is that in the midst of his very first book he is already impatient with himself, already so arrogant about what he does well as to be exuberantly hacking and tearing away at himself [...] trying to see what else he can do. I don’t doubt that he’ll find out, though the battlefield be strewn with chunks of his own rough hide. (200)

In his “Afterword” to the 2013 Library of American Fiction edition of *American Mischief*, Lelchuk recalls with apparent equanimity Roth’s judgement that the “first part [of the novel] was more successful than the second, in literary terms”, conceding that he “may

have been right”, while also pointing out that “a critic as astute as Philip Rahv thought the second section [...] the more valuable” (506). At the time of Roth’s essay, however, Lelchuk would indeed have needed the thick skin with which Roth metaphorically endows him not to feel sensitive to the older writer’s ambivalence. As if being accused of arrogance and of having “a mean streak”¹ was not enough, the implication of this passage seems to be that there is something self-destructive about Lelchuk’s talent. This sense of a career that might as easily founder as prosper proved to be prophetic.

Lelchuk has continued to publish novels after *American Mischief* but with diminishing returns, or at least with decreasing critical attention. On the rare occasions when his books have been reviewed, his early association with Roth has cast a long shadow over his work, as for example in Robert Towers’s review of Lelchuk’s third novel, *Shrinking* (1978), in which Towers uses the more famous author as a stick with which to beat his former protégé: “The theme [of the novel], which concerns the incompatibility of extreme sexual experience and calm domestic love, happens to be precisely the one explored recently by Philip Roth in “The Professor of Desire,” but Roth’s wit and narrative crispness are notably absent from “Shrinking”” (Towers). Not only has Lelchuk largely disappeared from the landscape of contemporary American fiction (there is no mention of him in the major studies in the field published this century), he doesn’t even appear in the index of *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (2013), Claudia Roth Pierpont’s biographical account of Roth’s career.

Yet Lelchuk is probably the most prominent figure in *Reading Myself and Others* after Roth himself, and Saul Bellow (to whom the volume of essays is dedicated and whose work is discussed in two of its essays: “Writing American Fiction” and “Imagining Jews”). In addition to Roth’s piece on *American Mischief*, Lelchuk is also Roth’s interlocutor in two of the interviews collected in *Reading Myself and Others*: “On *Our Gang*” and “On *The Breast*”. In the first of these, Lelchuk’s role is to provide prompts that enable Roth to mount a pre-emptive defence of the book. Although structured as an interview, it is actually an apologia for the novel, as Roth makes clear in a footnote. He explains that the piece “grew out of a lengthy conversation I had with a Random House executive who [...] objected to the book principally on grounds of taste,” adding that as “there would doubtless be other readers who would share the publisher’s point of view, I asked Alan Lelchuk [...] if he would help me to reconstruct and extend my thoughts on *Our Gang*, so that they might appear in print in this form” (43).

¹ Roth may have had in mind the most notorious incident in the book, in which the leader of a student insurgency fires a fatal bullet up the anus of Norman Mailer.

This strategy of anticipating and pre-empting potential criticism of his work is one that Roth used throughout his career, but the inclusion of this note sets it out explicitly and suggests that Roth wanted to make a clear distinction between the status of this interview and others in *Reading Myself and Others*. The fact that Lelchuk was Roth's go-to man for this task suggests a degree of mutual trust while at the same time underlining the inequality of their friendship. The interview that immediately succeeds this one in *Reading Myself and Others* was also conducted by Lelchuk, but in this case he seems to have been granted a greater degree of autonomy. This is evident in the greater length of the questions, and the fact that many of them seem to reflect Lelchuk's own interests and agenda rather than Roth's. At times Roth demurs from Lelchuk's assertions – for example, when the former prefaces a question by referring to “the elegiac tone” of *The Breast*, Roth begins his answer “I’m not sure I’d call the tone elegiac” – and at one point he reproves Lelchuk for “sniffing after a polemical objective that isn’t there” (73, 71). Did this slight testiness on Roth's part anticipate, or perhaps precipitate, a cooling in relations between the men? (It was, after all, published in the same year as Roth's piece on *American Mischief*, which, as we have seen, took away with one hand what it gave with the other.) If so, then it might not be coincidental that for the next piece in *Reading Myself and Others* – “On *The Great American Novel*” – Roth decided to interview himself, rather than employing Lelchuk in the way that he had for *Our Gang*. At any rate, the only reference to Lelchuk in Roth's work after 1972 comes in the form of the remarks that I quoted at the start of this essay, in his interview with Oates.

The relationship between Roth and Lelchuk has been largely overlooked² by Roth scholars, but it is implicitly revisited in the latter's seventh novel, *Ziff: A Life?* (2003), in which the eponymous character is closely based on Roth. Lelchuk is neither the first nor the last author to represent a fictionalised version of Roth. The eminent American novelist Jack in Janet Hobhouse's novel *The Furies* (1992) is widely acknowledged to have been based on Roth, as is Ezra Blazer in Lisa Halliday's *Asymmetry* (2018)³. Fictional versions of Roth have also

² The exception to this is Iris Nicole Johnson's review essay, “Public Exposure: Lelchuk's *American Mischief* and *Ziff: A Life?*”.

³ Both women had affairs with the real-life Roth. In the case of Halliday, she acknowledged this in interviews to promote her novel. In the case of Hobhouse, her connection with Roth only emerged after the posthumous publication of *The Furies*, but the resemblances between Roth and Jack -- a “great man” (203) and “brilliant mimic” (198) whose “stature in American letters” (197) is founded on a ferociously disciplined work regime (“eight hours and two pages a day”) and stylistic virtuosity (“feliculously wrought sentence[s]”) -- are numerous and unmistakable (200, 197).

appeared under his own name in recent stories by Roth scholars Timothy Parrish and Steven Sampson⁴, and in a number of other novels, most notably David Baddiel's *The Death of Eli Gold* (2011), in which he makes a cameo appearance under his own name but also seems to be one of the figures on whom the fictional American-Jewish novelist Gold himself is based.⁵ He has even been ventriloquised in the lyrics of a song by Amy Rigby, "Philip Roth to R. Zimmerman," which takes the form of an imaginary email sent by the man perennially tipped but ultimately overlooked for the Nobel Prize for Literature to its surprise recipient.⁶

If *Ziff: A Novel?* belongs in this canon, however, it might also be situated in the context of a group of works which might be called metabiographies. Although this term has been used in the context of life-writing studies and feminist studies to describe "experimental feminist biographies and novels that mimic the biographical quest,"⁷ I am using it more narrowly, as a descriptor for books that are accounts of the writing (frustrated in one sense or another) of biographies of famous novelists: works such as Mark Harris's *Saul Bellow, Drumlin Woodchuck* (1980)⁸, Ian Hamilton's *In Search of JD Salinger* (1988) and Nicholson Baker's idiosyncratic account of his obsession with John Updike, *U and I: A True Story* (1991). Like these metabiographies, *Ziff: A Life?* blurs the boundaries between biography and autobiography, and its focus is on the relationship between the author/narrator and his subject, rather than on the subject himself, but of course it differs from them in the sense that it is a *fictional* metabiography.

The plot of *Ziff: A Life?* is relatively simple. Danny Levitan, the author of a sexually explicit novel (not unlike *American Mischief*) that had excited some controversy in the 1970s,

⁴ See Parrish, "The Plot Against Philip Roth", and Sampson, "Did Roth Come?" (the latter is the author's translation into English of the first chapter of his French novel, *Moi, Philip Roth* (2018)).

⁵ In a scathing review of the novel, Steven Poole claimed that "Eli Gold is obviously meant to be a version of Philip Roth" (Poole), but in fact many of the details of Gold's fictional biography and bibliography have more in common with Saul Bellow, and there are also some aspects of Baddiel's portrait that are reminiscent of Norman Mailer, in addition to Gold's Rothian characteristics.

⁶ In the song, Roth asks Zimmerman (Bob Dylan's birth name) to "spare a thought for the man who labors on the page", contrasting his daily struggle "alone with the pen" with Dylan's familiarity with "the stage" and "the spotlight" (Rigby).

⁷ See, for example, Elizabeth Reimer's PhD thesis, "Reconceiving the feminist biographical subject: A study in metabiography" (2003).

⁸ Bellow has inspired other works that might be included in this category, notably Ruth Miller's unauthorised biography *Saul Bellow: A Biography of the Imagination* (1991) and Harriet Wasserman's memoir *Handsome Is* (1997).

but now a largely “forgotten” figure, is in the midst of “writing yet another novel that only a select few read anymore” (6), when he is commissioned to write a biography of Arthur Ziff, “a grand celebrity who was also a serious writer,” whose “books about himself, through ingenious disguises and deliberately slippery masks, had created an aura of mystery about his true self and real adventures” (4). Initially ambivalent, Levitan defiantly resolves to proceed when it becomes clear that Ziff is determined to use all means at his disposal (friendly persuasion, intimidation, bribery, blackmail, legal action) to dissuade him from embarking on the project. Eventually, when the book is published, it is greeted with near-universal hostility by reviewers and critics but, conversely, is cited by the Nobel Committee in their decision to award the Prize for Literature to Ziff, because of Levitan’s argument that Ziff, the “bad boy of American Lit.,” is also “the moral man of European letters” (184). Levitan’s great discovery is that Ziff is a secret philanthropist, privately funding Holocaust-related research and providing financial aid to students, researchers and others through a charitable organisation based in Hungary. Levitan ends the book half-convinced that Ziff has fabricated the evidence of these projects and manipulated him into writing the book -- knowing that he was “not going to win the Prize for his wild eroticism” alone but would be helped by “a high-level biography” (387) -- and half-resigned to playing the part of a “big-bellied, short-legged practical Sancho Panza to his [Ziff’s] long, lean, idealist don” (388).

Thematically and structurally, however, *Ziff* is a complex novel, one that interrogates the terms “true” and “real” in the context of a sustained intertextual dialogue with Roth, who has consistently destabilized these concepts in his own work. The novel begins with a series of paratexts: a table of contents; “A Brief Word,” in which Levitan explains that he has, with “some reluctance,” “decided ‘to publish here a brief private correspondence ... between the subject of this biography and the writer’”(n.p.), followed by the exchange of letters; and finally an epigraph from Hermione Lee’s biography of Virginia Woolf in which Lee cites Woolf advising biographers to “*print fully, completely, accurately, the known facts without comment; Then ... write the life as fiction*” (n.p.).

Even before the novel proper has started, then, a tangled web of allusions has been woven. The citation from Lee’s biography of Woolf has multiple resonances for those familiar with Roth’s work. As well as being a renowned biographer (in addition to her work on Woolf, she has published acclaimed lives of Willa Cather and Edith Wharton), she also wrote one of the first and best books on Roth. Following the publication of that book, Lee became a good friend of Roth’s, conducting a number of interviews with him and being inducted into the select group of readers to whom Roth would send manuscripts of new work (in other words, fulfilling

many of the roles that Lechuk himself performed earlier in Roth's career).⁹ In addition to Lee's connection with Roth, the citation of Woolf on biography also recalls Joyce Carol Oates's interview with Roth, where he quotes approvingly Woolf's suggestion, from her essay "Reviewing", that "book journalism ought to be abolished" in favour of a process by which authors and serious critics of their choosing would "consult" on a new book in private (103-104).

The use of an exchange of letters, concerning the aesthetic and ethical legitimacy of the (auto)biography of an author, to frame the narrative recalls the letter from Roth to Nathan Zuckerman and the response from Zuckerman that bookend *The Facts* (1988), a parallel strengthened by Lechuk's use of three further paratexts at the end of the book.¹⁰ Furthermore, the status of the letters at the start of the book raises vexing questions about the relationship between *Ziff: A Life?*, the novel that exists in what Roth has called the "unwritten world", and *Ziff: A Life*, the fictional biography that exists only in the "written world" of the novel.¹¹ The title of the note that introduces the letters ("A Brief Word") is followed by the line: "from *Ziff: A Life*, a biography by Daniel Levitan", which, as well as recalling the prefatory paratext from Roth's novella *The Prague Orgy* (1985), "from Zuckerman's notebooks" (n.p.) begs the question of how, if at all, the biography from which these paratexts have been taken, differs from the novel whose title is identical to it, except for the addition of a question mark. Although the main part of the novel is given over to an account of the portion of Levitan's life spent writing *Ziff's* life, the novel contains numerous excerpts from the biography itself, as well as (sometimes lengthy) quotations from *Ziff's* novels and other texts-within-texts, such as submissions to the Wallenberg Institute, an institution supposedly funded by *Ziff* as a repository of untold stories connected to the Holocaust.

⁹ Of this circle of pre-publication readers, Pierpont writes that Roth "has relied on this practice since the beginning, with his Chicago friends Ted Solotaroff and Richard Stern; the writers Alison Lurie, Joel Conarroe, Hermione Lee, and Judith Thurman are among those he enlisted later on" (146). The absence of Lechuk from this list is conspicuous.

¹⁰ These consist of an "Annotated bibliography of the works of Arthur Ziff from *Ziff: A Life* (2002) by Daniel Levitan," a "Deposition," purporting to be a transcript of an interrogation of Levitan by lawyers acting for *Ziff*, and "A Final Letter" in which *Ziff* throws a bone to his biographer, suggesting that he "think[s] of contributing an essay now and then to the Travel Section of the *Sunday Times*," where the "features editor happens to be a friend of mine" (409), the offer of patronage implicitly reinforcing Levitan's inferior status.

¹¹ Roth borrows the terms from Paul Goodman, in the context of a prefatory "Author's Note" in *Reading Myself and Others* (xi).

The content of the letters further complicates the relationship between the written and unwritten worlds. Levitan's letter invites Ziff to write "a personal note" at the beginning of the biography, in which he can "lay out [his] thoughts on the whole matter, and speak frankly" (n.p.), but Ziff declines, warning that if Levitan proceeds with publication "the blood spilled and bones broken on the literary battlefields will be yours" and suggesting that he "simply call it a novel and go scot-free" (n.p.) The metaphor of physical injury on the "literary battlefield" here recalls Roth's prophecy, at the end of his essay on *American Mischief*, that the "battlefield [will] be strewn with chunks of his [Lechuk's] own rough hide", although the injuries that Roth foresaw were self-inflicted, whereas those that Ziff warns Levitan of are implicitly ones that he (Ziff) himself will visit on his former friend. Through the very act of publishing this exchange (without Ziff's permission), Levitan himself is of course striking a blow in this conflict. He is also paradoxically "lay[ing] out" Ziff's views on his biography at the same time as highlighting Ziff's refusal to lay out his views. Finally, by citing Ziff's advice to "call it a novel" at the beginning of the novel about the writing of the biography, Levitan is further blurring the boundaries between *Ziff: A Life* the biography and *Ziff: A Life?* the novel.

The novel repeatedly returns to the question of how it is related to the biography without ever definitively clarifying it. While he works on the book in the written world, the writing of Ziff's biography is indistinguishable from Levitan's autobiography: it takes over his "real life," rendering everything else appear "illusory" (331). But it also overlaps with the novel that exists in the unwritten world, "*Ziff: A Life* [...] becoming *Ziff: A Life?*" because of the "mysterious and elusive" nature of "the facts of my subject" (147). This conflation of novel and biography is reinforced by the allusion to Roth's own memoir, *The Facts*, whose subtitle, "A Novelist's Autobiography", alerts its readers to the slippage between fiction and non-fiction of any portrait of the artist, whether it is labelled as a novel, or an autobiography, or something else.

For Ziff, Levitan's book is a novel masquerading as a biography: Ziff insists that Levitan has simply failed to differentiate between two discrete forms, telling his biographer that he has written "a very clever novel [...] and called it 'a biography'": that he "*thought* [he was] writing fact, when [he was] making things up" (376). However, Levitan believes that his own status as a novelist, his shared history with Ziff, and above all the protean nature of his subject, means that "a serious biography would [...] have to be something like a novel" (47). Levitan begins by "pursuing the authentic Ziff" (242) but ultimately comes to the conclusion that this is a chimera, because Ziff "has debunked the myth of the self, derided the whole notion of what it means to be authentic" (333), instead "forg[ing] [...] an anti-identity," "a system of multiple selves" (333).

However, Levitan finds himself resorting to fiction not just out of necessity – because of the impossibility of pinning down a definitive version of the slippery postmodernist Ziff – but out of inclination. Early on in the novel, for example, Levitan recalls an episode in which he and Ziff, during the period when they were becoming fast friends at the same artists’ retreat (Yaddo) where Roth and Lechuk bonded, pretend to be movie producers and invite a waitress to “audition” for them. When she strips and teases Ziff, he abruptly dismisses her, “a mix of fear and growing anxiety tightening his face,” later telling Levitan that, if they “don’t get killed or beaten up, [they]’ll be held up, blackmailed, sued” (34). This account of initial sexual audacity followed by a rapid retreat corresponds closely to the behaviour of Jack in *The Furies*, who is at first entranced by the “recklessness” (201) of the narrator and the “games and play” (202) in which the lovers engage, before taking fright, rejecting intimacy in the form of “rock-hard withdrawal” (206). It also recalls Henry Zuckerman’s allegation in *The Counterlife* (1986) that his brother Nathan had spent his life “constructing fantasies” (233) of “irresponsible exaggeration” (226) in order to exert control over “what, in real life, he was too fearful to confront” (233), a theory more sympathetically applied to Roth himself by his friend, the poet and critic Al Alvarez, who speculates that “maybe Roth needs to live cautiously in order to take great risks in his work” (32).¹²

Levitan’s problem, as he sees it, is that no one “was going to believe that ... Arthur Ziff, that fearless sexual trailblazer of the American novel, had acted with such fear and timidity in his life” (37). His solution is to “*to invent something [...] to buy credibility with the reader*” (37, italics in original). This strategy recalls many moments from Roth’s work, from Maria’s complaint (as ventriloquized by Nathan Zuckerman) in *The Counterlife* that Zuckerman has introduced strife into their relationship in the novel because the idea of “Maria and Nathan alone and quiet with their happy family in a settled life” is “insufficiently INTERESTING” (321-22, caps in original), to Zuckerman conversely lamenting, in the letter to his creator that closes *The Facts*, that the Roth of that text is “the least completely rendered of all your protagonists” (162), whose life is so anodyne that Zuckerman himself “do[es]n’t believe it” (181).¹³

¹² According to Pierpont, Roth’s inspiration in this respect was Flaubert, whose recommendation to be “regular and orderly in your life [...] so that you may be violent and original in your work” he found “on an index card thumb-tacked to the wall behind [William] Styron’s desk” (42) on a visit to the home of his fellow novelist.

¹³ In the main body of *The Facts*, Roth refers to the episode in *My Life as a Man* (1974) in which Peter Tarnopol is tricked into marrying Maureen Johnson as “one of the few occasions when I haven’t spontaneously set out to improve on actuality in the interest of being more interesting” (107).

At the same time as Levitan draws attention to the fictionalized nature of biography, Lelchuk repeatedly invites readers familiar with Roth's life and work to read *Ziff: A Life?* as a *roman à clef*. The first excerpt from the work-in-progress biography provides a brief sketch of Ziff's early years:

A prodigy at twenty-five, he won a National Book Award with his first novel [...] with the famous fierce stare and dark, curly hair, he was quick-witted and conversation-charming; his work was known early on for its hard, stylish prose and for its tough, trenchant observations about Jews, class, and women ... (25)

Roth was twenty-six rather than twenty-five when he won the National Book Award for his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus and Other Stories* (1959), which was a collection of stories rather than a novel, but in all other respects the cap fits. The annotated bibliography of Ziff's work that is the first item in the "Appendix" at the end of the novel comprises some items that clearly correspond to works by Roth and some that don't. However, it includes *Countermemoir*, a "hide-and-seek fictional narrative, detailed at length with hard facts, about the so-called realistic life of the novelist," which sounds like a composite of *The Counterlife* and *The Facts* but also might serve as a description of *Ziff: A Life?* itself. In between these two overviews of Ziff's career there are numerous references to characters and events clearly drawn from the unwritten world.

Ziff's rueful reflection that he entered into his ill-fated first marriage naively "thinking it was the mature thing to do" (190) echoes Roth's account of his own first marriage to Margaret Martinson in *The Facts*, where he writes of the conviction that by taking responsibility for Martinson he was establishing his credentials as "at last a man" (86). Similarly, Ziff's second marriage to, and subsequent acrimonious divorce from, a famous actress, "a trim brunette, with sensual mouth and almond-shaped eyes," parallels Roth's relationship with Claire Bloom, although in Lelchuk's novel the actress is French rather than English (51).¹⁴ Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Ziff's romantic life that Levitan discovers is that he had a secret affair with a woman whom another of his former lovers refers to as "Miss *Shiksa* USA" (264) and whom Levitan himself identifies as G. Kelly, "the chief handmaiden of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

¹⁴ She also gives Levitan a journal purporting to document Ziff's treatment of her, just as the third, and longest, section of Bloom's *Leaving a Doll's House* consists of a series of entries from a journal that Bloom kept during the breakdown of her marriage to Roth.

America” (287), “albeit Irish Catholic” herself (287, 286). This is clearly a reference to Jacqueline Kennedy, with whom, it emerged years after the publication of *Ziff*, Roth had indeed had a brief dalliance in 1964 (see Pierpont 45). There are also passing references to a college friend named Teddy Feuerstone (Theodore Solotaroff) (189); a “fiery New Zealand novelist [...] Frizzy haired, ruddy-faced” named Jenny O. (Janet Frame) whom Ziff and Levitan befriend at Yaddo (246); an eminent Jewish novelist and critic, “a kind of Dr. Johnson via Gershom Scholem” (369), Naomi Krasno (Cynthia Ozick); a “celebrated magazine editor and self-appointed Jewish pope” (13), Lou Roderowitz (Norman Podhoretz); an unnamed mutual friend of Levitan and Ziff, a Holocaust survivor and novelist “who, some fifty years ago, was a young boy wandering alone in dark forests” (223) (Aharon Appelfeld); and Irving Rose (Irving Howe), who accuses Ziff of being “the number one defiler of our traditions, customs, and beliefs, an aberrant descendant of the great Jewish writers of this century” (25).

Other authors from the unwritten world are given their own names in the novel. At one point, Levitan reminds Ziff of Herbert Gold, another American Jewish novelist who, not unlike Lelchuk, enjoyed a brief moment in the critical sun (his fiction receiving endorsements from the likes of Saul Bellow) before falling into obscurity. Ziff’s response – “Old Herb Gold. Years ago [...] he went out of his way to snub me. Poor devil, he never came back up, did he?” (90) – serves as an implicit warning to Levitan of the fate of those who cross him, but it also piques the curiosity of those familiar with the references to Gold in Roth’s work. Gold appears twice in Roth: in an early essay, “The Kind of Person I Am,” Roth offers a satirical riposte to an essay of Gold’s entitled “This Age of Happy Problems,”¹⁵ and in “Writing American Fiction” he compares a passage from Gold’s novel *Therefore Be Bold* (1960) unfavourably with one from Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (1957), concluding that Gold’s prose is affected and showy, drawing attention to itself clumsily: “Look at me, I’m writing” (130). Roth himself is also mentioned once in *Ziff: A Life?* in a list of “the major Jewish writers of the past several decades,” alongside Bellow, Malamud and Ziff, as one of the four “Marx Brothers” of the literary trade, a bon mot that Levitan attributes to Bellow (255).¹⁶ If the mention of Roth alongside Ziff here is designed (perhaps for legal reasons) to preserve plausible deniability, it seems rather half-hearted. If, on the contrary, it is supposed to reinforce the identification of

¹⁵ See Hayes 30.

¹⁶ Bellow’s actual phrase -- used satirically to debunk the idea that the work of Roth, Malamud and himself constituted an American Jewish school of fiction -- was “the Hart, Schaffner and Marx of American letters..”

the two, then it is a rather heavy-handed nudge, as is the use of a homophone for the author's name towards the end of the novel, when Levitan describes Ziff's "gathering wrath" after Levitan tells him that he has seen the manuscript of an unpublished novel of his (which he has), as well as all his letters (which he hasn't) (381).

This is Levitan's final gambit in the struggle for authorial supremacy that is at the centre of *Ziff: A Life?*. From the start of the novel, Levitan characterises Ziff as "a master strategist of his books and career" (25), echoing Claire Bloom's characterisation of her ex-husband as a "Machiavellian strategist" (247), but not until the end of the novel does it occur to him that all Ziff's apparent attempts to foil him, as well as the discoveries that he thinks he has made about his life, might have been part of a grand plan: "Did he [Ziff] get [...] the right man, to write his biography, someone who knew him [...] could appreciate his work, and put the finishing touches to the Complete Ziff?" (387). This question is left unanswered, but what is clear is that in foregrounding this struggle between competing author figures to control the narrative of their own and each other's lives, *Ziff: A Life?* not only recalls a number of previous Roth novels, notably *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *The Counterlife* (1986) and *Operation Shylock* (1993), but anticipates one of his later novels, *Exit Ghost* (2007).¹⁷

Exit Ghost is a sequel to *The Ghost Writer*, revisiting the events of that novel in the context of the mental and physical deterioration of Zuckerman and Amy Bellette and their struggle to protect the reputation of E.I. Lonoff, the literary hero of the former and lover of the latter, in opposition to the attempts of a young writer, Richard Kliman, to publish a biography of Lonoff that he claims will disclose a scandalous secret. At the time of its publication, *Exit Ghost* also seemed to many commentators to reflect the souring of Roth's relationship with the man who had been commissioned to write his authorised biography, Ross Miller. This theory

¹⁷ There are clear allusions to both novels in *Ziff: A Life?*. Levitan quotes the same famous "madness of art" passage from Henry James's story "The Middle Years" that is discussed at length in *The Ghost Writer*: just as Zuckerman discovers it on Lonoff's desk in Roth's novel, so Levitan finds it 'hung over Arthur Ziff's desk' in Lechuk's (84). Levitan also comments that Ziff's activities in Hungary (which echo Roth's in Czechoslovakia) combine "philanthropic idealism" with "higher education" (328), the latter phrase recalling the title of Zuckerman's early short story that causes the rupture with his father in *The Ghost Writer*. The title of Roth's novel itself is referenced when Ziff jokes that Levitan should write his Nobel acceptance speech and Levitan responds: "Your ghostwriter, huh?" (382). At one point, Ziff teases an interviewer with the possibility that he might be "a part-time Mossad agent" (278), a claim that the protagonist of *Operation Shylock* also makes. Finally, when Ziff is thanking Levitan for having boosted his case for the Nobel Prize, he tells him that "[w]ithout the corroborating evidence of the life [...] as you told it [...] it's just another novel by me, another made-up story by Moïshe Pipik-Ziff" (377, italics in original), a reference to the nickname that the protagonist of *Operation Shylock* gives to his impersonator and (through the hyphen linking this nickname to Ziff's own) to the confusion of identity between them.

is implicit in a piece on the relationship between biographers and their living subjects published in the same year as Roth's novel, in which Rachel Donadio cites Roth complaining that Miller was "going to make up a story about me", adding that "the best biographies are only two-thirds correct, and there's nothing much you can do about it" (Donadio) and it seemed to be strengthened retrospectively by the comments of Blake Bailey, who was appointed in Miller's place in 2012, that Miller and Roth had fallen out "pretty badly" (Bonanos).¹⁸ Yet the antagonism between Zuckerman and Kliman is also powerfully reminiscent of that between Ziff and Levitan. Zuckerman's vow to "do everything [he] can to sabotage [Kliman] you" (*Exit Ghost* 103) is more forthright than Ziff's threatening insinuations: "You're climbing up the wrong tree [...] maybe a dangerous one for you to be climbing," he tells Levitan early on, before warning him in a letter that "*Choosing to write or not write this book may be the most important decision of your late writing life*" (45, 65, italics in original). However, Zuckerman's conviction that "[a]ny biographical treatment would be largely imaginary" (*Exit Ghost* 45) and that "[a]ny biography he writes will be the resentment of an inferior person writ large" (177) closely echo those of Ziff, who repeatedly warns Levitan that any biography he writes will be a product of his imagination and will be poisoned by his "envy" (92) and "resentment" (371). Just as Ziff decides to launch a pre-emptive strike against Levitan by publishing a story, "Survival of the Fittest", whose protagonist, Lussiter, is a washed-up writer who avoids "book reviews, literary magazines, cultural sections in the Sunday newspapers, anything that might stir in him the embers of his buried past, when his name existed and he *counted* in those journals" (252-3), so Zuckerman resolves to "write the biography" of Kliman's own biography (200) by insisting that Lonoff's unfinished novel about an incestuous affair between siblings is based on a similar episode in the life of Nathaniel Hawthorne rather than having any autobiographical source (199). Finally, the defence that Kliman mounts – "I'm trying to do no more nor less than what you did" (44), he tells Zuckerman – is very similar to the line that Levitan takes: "it was Ziff himself who had taught me to use everything at my disposal" (9).

¹⁸ It should be noted, however, that in his article "A Tale of Two Roths: Philip and Henry", Steven G. Kellman has made a strong case that Richard Kliman, the would-be biographer of E.I. Lonoff in *Exit Ghost*, is based on Kellman himself.

There appears at first to be a fundamental difference between what is at stake in the two novels, since Zuckerman, as he sees it, is fighting to protect another author's legacy, whereas Ziff is trying to retain control over his own reputation. However, this distinction is complicated, if indeed it does not collapse altogether, towards the end of *Exit Ghost*, when Zuckerman decides that Lonoff is Kliman's "literary steppingstone to me" (275), so that what had seemed to be a disproportionately hostile attitude towards the tyro biographer retrospectively appears as a manifestation of what the narrator of *The Furies* calls the "self-protective centre" (205) of the Rothian Jack.

Writing to Paul Auster, J.M. Coetzee remarks, of *Exit Ghost*, that "it includes an entirely unmotivated diatribe on trends in so-called cultural journalism put in the mouth of Roth's character Lonoff" (172). In fact, the "diatribe" takes the form of a letter by Amy Bellette that she claims was "dictated" to her by the ghost of Lonoff, and in any case we need to be wary of identifying Lonoff with Roth, notwithstanding Claire Bloom's claim that "the writer on whom the portrait [of Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*] was most clearly modelled was, of course, [Roth] himself" (183). We also need to be careful not to replicate the kind of "impoverished" reductive biographical reading that Auster describes (echoing Roth), in his response to Coetzee, in which "[e]very novel is turned into a hidden autobiography" (175). Yet in *Ziff: A Life?* and *Exit Ghost* we have two novels that implicitly encourage biographical readings while explicitly warning against the pitfalls of such readings, two fictional metabiographies that are enriched, rather than impoverished, by being placed in a dialogue with each other, and with the life and work of their respective authors.

WORKS CITED

ALVAREZ, Al. *Risky Business: People, Pastimes, Poker and Books*. London: Bloomsbury, 2008 (f.p. 2007).

AUSTER, Paul & J.M. Coetzee. *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011*. London: Vintage, 2014 (f.p. 2013).

BADDIEL, David. *The Death of Eli Gold*. London: Fourth Estate, 2011.

BLOOM, Claire. *Leaving a Doll's House*. London: Virago, 1996.

BONANOS, Christopher. "Philip Roth's Biographer Has a Hair-raising Claire Bloom Story to Share." *Vulture* 29 May, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/philip-roth-biographer-has-a-hair-raising-claire-bloom-story.html>. Accessed 22 January 2020.

DONADIO, Rachel. "Bio Engineering." *New York Times* Nov 4, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/04/books/review/Donadio-t.html>. Accessed 24 January 2020.

HAYES, Patrick. *Philip Roth: Fiction and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
Hobhouse, Janet. *The Furies*. London: Bloomsbury, 1992.

JOHNSON, Iris Nicole. "Public Exposure: Lelchuk's *American Mischief* and *Ziff: A Life?*." *Philip Roth Studies* 2:1, 2006. 57-64.

KELLMAN, Steven G. "A Tale of Two Roths: Philip and Henry.", *Philip Roth Studies* 11.2 (Fall 2015). 31-38.

LELCHUK, Alan. *American Mischief*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.

———. *Ziff: A Life?*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003.

PARRISH, Timothy. "The Plot Against Philip Roth." *Philip Roth Studies* 13.2. 95-120.

POOLE, Steven. "The Death of Eli Gold by David Baddiel – review.", *The Guardian* 5 March, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/05/death-eli-gold-david-baddiel-review>. Accessed 4 February 2020.

REMICK, David. "Philip Roth Says Enough." *New Yorker* 9 Nov 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/philip-roth-says-enough>. Accessed 2 February, 2020.

REIMER, Elizabeth. "Reconceiving the feminist biographical subject: A study in metabiography." PhD thesis, University of Toronto, <https://search-proquest-com.idpproxy.reading.ac.uk/docview/305262415/previewPDF/4307D68A2DB433CPQ/1?acountid=13460>. Accessed 4 February, 2020.

RIGBY, Amy. 2018. "Philip Roth to R. Zimmerman.", <https://genius.com/Amy-rigby-from-philip-roth-to-r-zimmerman-lyrics>. Accessed 21 January, 2020.

ROTH, Philip. *Reading Myself and Others*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1975.

———. *The Prague Orgy*. London: Vintage, 1995 (f.p. 1985).

———. *The Counterlife*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988 (f.p.1986).

———. *The Facts*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989 (f.p. 1988).

———. "A Bit of Jewish Mischief." *New York Times* 7 March, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/07/books/a-bit-of-jewish-mischief.html>. Accessed 25 January, 2020.

———. *Exit Ghost*. London: Vintage, 2008 (f.p.2007).

SAMPSON, Steven. "Did Roth Come?". *Philip Roth Studies* 14.2, 2-15.

TOWERS, Robert. “Nervous Breakdowns” (review of Alan Lelchuk, *Shrinking*). *New York Times* 21 May 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/05/21/archives/nervous-breakdowns.html>. Accessed 26 January, 2020.