

Hector Mann and Henry Roth: Portraits of Invisible Men in Paul Auster's *The Book of Illusions*

Lene Schøtt-Kristensen

University of Roskilde

From the very beginning, it seems, I was looking for my father, looking frantically for anyone who resembled him.

– Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*

As suggested by Pascal Bruckner, "*The Invention of Solitude* is both the *ars poetica* and the seminal work of Paul Auster. To understand him we must start here; all his books lead us back to this one" (27). *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) consists of two parts, "Portrait of an Invisible Man" and "The Book of Memory." In "Portrait of an Invisible Man," Auster attempts to write a portrait of his recently deceased father, a man who was

devoid of passion, either for a thing, a person, or an idea, incapable or unwilling to reveal himself under any circumstances, he had managed to keep himself at a distance from life, to avoid immersion in the quick of things. He ate, he went to work, he had friends, he played tennis, and yet for all that he was not there. In the deepest, most unalterable sense, he was an invisible man. Invisible to others, and most likely invisible to himself as well. (7)

Auster discovers a man with a traumatic past. His father came from a Jewish Austro-Hungarian immigrant family marked by a secret crime. In 1919, Paul Auster's paternal grandfather, Harry Auster, was shot by his own wife, Anna, the murder apparently a desperate wife's revenge on an abusive and unfaithful husband. In the trial that followed, Anna Auster

managed to win the jury's sympathy and she was eventually acquitted, whereupon she and her five sons left the scene of the crime to start a new life. For most of his childhood Auster's father and his family lived a nomadic life, always on the run from the past and from poverty. He grew up to become a hard worker; dreaming of becoming a millionaire, he turned "bargain shopping" into a way of life (53). "Having been without money as a child, and therefore vulnerable to the whims of the world, the idea of wealth became synonymous for him with the idea of escape: from harm, from suffering, from being a victim" (53). Paul Auster learns that as a young man his father was the victim of anti-Semitism; at the age of eighteen he was hired as an assistant in Thomas Edison's laboratory but "(only to have the job taken away from him the next day because Edison learned he was a Jew)" (52). The son makes an attempt to understand his father but in the end the various facts that he uncovers have the effect of confusing him rather than helping him piece together a coherent picture of him:

The rampant, totally mystifying force of contradiction. I understand now that each fact is nullified by the next fact, that each thought engenders an equal and opposite thought. Impossible to say anything without reservation: he was good, or he was bad; he was this, or he was that. All of them are true. At times I have the feeling that I am writing about three or four different men, each one distinct, each one a contradiction of all the others. Fragments. (61)

Auster must conclude that his task is impossible:

Slowly, I am coming to understand the absurdity of the task I have set for myself. ... Never before have I been so aware of the rift between thinking and writing. For the past few days, in fact, I have begun to feel that the story I am trying to tell is somehow incompatible with language, that the degree to which it resists language is an exact measure of how closely I have come to saying something important, and that when the moment arrives for me to say the one truly important thing (assuming it exists), I will not be able to say it. There has been a wound, and I realize now that it is very deep. Instead of healing me as I thought it would, the act of writing has kept this wound open. (32)

It is not only that his own father was a particularly elusive person; Auster's realization that his task is impossible has to do with his fundamental belief in "the impossibility of fully grasping another human being, understanding somebody else" (qtd. in Springer 88).¹ – The task of

1. Springer 88, note 30. Interview with Melvyn Bragg.

trying to understand another person is inextricably linked to the task of understanding oneself: Because, as the narrator puts it in *Ghosts*, “No one can cross the boundary into another – for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself” (247). Moreover, as is also suggested by the quotation above, Auster basically suspects language as a means of representation; in a sense all stories resist language, the rift between thinking and writing, or the gap between the signified and the signifier can never be healed satisfactorily.²

But Auster does not give up. Realizing that his search for his father is also a search for himself, he employs a new technique in “The Book of Memory.” As suggested by Alan Bilton, Auster’s “shift from first to third person narration in the book is thus an attempt to gain some sense of objectivity and critical distance, to sneak up [sic] himself, as it were; to treat ‘Paul Auster’ as a fictional character” (83). In Auster’s own words, “He speaks of himself as another in order to tell the story of himself” and “He must make himself absent in order to find himself there” (*The Invention of Solitude* 154). Moreover, we need illusions in order to grasp the real, as is also suggested by Auster in “The Book of Memory”: “if a child is not allowed to enter the imaginary, he will never come to grips with the real” (154).

Auster’s novel *The Book of Illusions* deals with many aspects of illusion, it is, among other things, concerned with the illusion making of film, with film as a medium. David Zimmer, the narrator and protagonist, is a professor of comparative literature, for whom movies had never been particularly important:

Too much was given, I felt, not enough was left to the viewer’s imagination, and the paradox was that the closer movies came to simulating reality, the worse they failed at representing the world – which is in us as much as it is around us. ... The addition of sound and color had created the illusion of a third dimension, but at the same time it had robbed the images of their purity. (14)

However, once he has seen Hector Mann’s silent movies from the 1920s, movies become very important to Zimmer. Having lost his wife and two sons in an air plane crash in 1985, the sorrow-stricken Zimmer is like a

2. The yearning for a perfect transparent language – “a straightforward union between the thing described and the words used to do so” – is a theme in much of Auster’s work, most clearly expressed and embodied by Peter Stillman and his project in *City of Glass* – a mad project which reflects a “pre-Structuralist ignorance” (Alan Bilton 58).

living dead himself. But accidentally seeing a clip from Mann's films makes him laugh, brings him back to life, and he decides to write a book about the filmmaker, who mysteriously vanished from the face of the earth in 1929. The book is published and a few years later Zimmer receives a letter from Mann's wife, Frieda, informing him that Mann is still alive and that he has a small production of feature films. She invites Zimmer to come and see Mann and his films, letting him know that her husband, who is almost ninety, is seriously ill and that his will dictates that the films be destroyed within twenty-four hours of his death. Zimmer does not know what to believe. And it is only when Alma Grund, who is like a daughter to Hector and Frieda and who is writing Mann's biography, arrives, that he is persuaded to go to Mann's ranch in New Mexico to see for himself. It is through Alma that Mann's secret past is revealed to Zimmer. It turns out that Mann has been in hiding all of his adult life because of a murder he was indirectly involved in as a young man. Mann betrayed Brigid O'Fallon, his girl friend for many years, by becoming engaged to Dolores Saint John, a young actress. Brigid, who was pregnant with Hector's child, was shot by Dolores in an act of self-defence, and after the murder Mann helped Dolores get rid of the body, whereupon the two split up, Mann to disappear from the world, disguising himself, moving around, running for his life. Yet Mann also spent his life doing penance for the murder. This penance involved a vow never to make films again. However, many years later, once Hector's son, by Frieda, died, he broke down. And in order to bring him back to life his wife talked him into giving up his penitential vow – on one condition: Mann agreed to make films again but only for himself; no one was to see the films and they were to be destroyed after his death.

Mann's movies represent something different to Zimmer because they are silent. Silent movies

had understood the language they were speaking. They had invented a syntax of the eye, a grammar of pure kinesis, and except for the costumes and the cars and the quaint furniture in the background, none of it could possibly grow old. ... we no longer had to pretend that we were looking at the real world. The flat screen was the world, and it existed in two dimensions. The third dimension was in our head. (15)

In silent movies, the images are "relieved" of "the burden of representation" (15). In other words, silent movies do not pretend to represent the world, they are aware of the fact that they are illusions, aware of the fact

that the third dimension is in our head. And therefore they do not fail at representing the world; paradoxically, they do, in fact, get closer to a truthful representation. The theme of the third dimension which is in our head runs through the novel, here developed by Claire, a character in one of Mann's unknown feature films, who is quoting Kant: "... *things which we see are not by themselves what we see ... so that, if we drop our subject or the subjective form of our senses, all qualities, all relations of objects in space and time, nay space and time themselves, would vanish*" (264).

Auster's interest in the concept of the third dimension in the viewer's or the reader's head corresponds to his wish to write "writerly" books, in Roland Barthes' sense of that term: "The one thing I try to do in all my books is to leave enough room in the prose for the reader to inhabit it. Because I finally believe it's the reader who writes the book and not the writer" (*The Red Notebook* 111). Thus *The Book of Illusions*, like most of Auster's work, and like silent movies, we might add, invites the reader to write on, as it were. But not without some guidance; like the rest of Auster's work *The Book of Illusions* leads us back to *The Invention of Solitude*. In fact, *The Book of Illusions* can be read as yet another attempt to portray the elusive father figure. David Zimmer is engaged in a quest similar to Paul Auster's in *The Invention of Solitude*: here is yet another son figure in search of yet another invisible father figure, in the shape of Hector Mann. Auster takes up the impossible task one more time. But having learnt from his experience with "The Portrait of an Invisible Man," he does not attempt to write either autobiography or the biography of his father, rather, he makes himself absent just as he makes his father absent. Treating him in the guise, or guises, of Hector Mann, he may be able to sneak up on his own father – we may speculate.

There are several parallels between the lives of Auster's real father and the fictional Hector Mann. Both are children of Jewish immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian empire, part of the so-called New Immigration, which brought more than two million East European Jews to America at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Both share a past in which anti-Semitic incidents occurred: Auster's father lost his job because he was Jewish, Mann's father was nearly beaten to death by an anti-Semitic mob in Buenos Aires (in 1919, the year in which Auster's grandfather was killed). Both appear as hard-working immigrants in the American jungle. Both are burdened by a crime of the past;

where Auster's father grew up with the traumatizing knowledge that his mother had killed his father, Mann also lives with a murder on his conscience in the sense that he helped his fiancée get rid of Brigid's body and in the sense that he indirectly caused her death. Both men lived for longer periods of time on the run, escaping from the crimes of the past. Both Auster's father and Mann are described as elusive and invisible, impossible to grasp. Zimmer gives this description of the character Mann plays in his own films:

Unpredictable in his behaviour, full of contradictory impulses and desires, Hector's character is too complexly delineated for us to feel altogether comfortable in his presence. He is not a type or familiar stock figure, and for every one of his actions that makes sense to us there is another one that confounds us and throws us off balance. (35)

In the last film Mann made before he disappeared, a film aptly entitled *Mr. Nobody*, Hector, in fact, becomes invisible to the world.

But what is even more important to my concerns in this essay, it appears that yet another invisible man is being portrayed in *The Book of Illusions*. There appears to be more to the third dimension; in the author's head, certainly in this reader's head – and in Steven Kellman's head. Kellman, who is writing a biography of the American Jewish writer Henry Roth (1906-1995), reviewed Auster's novel in the *Forward*, and made the following claim: "Though Auster makes no explicit reference to him, another American Jewish novelist, Henry Roth, offers instructive parallels to the story told in *The Book of Illusions*."³ The Henry Roth parallel is, indeed, instructive – so instructive that it should be examined in more detail. Knowing that Auster, in his own words, was looking for his father from the very beginning of his life – "looking frantically for anyone who resembled him" (*The Invention of Solitude* 21) – we may speculate that he found someone who resembled him in Roth. Auster's father, of course, is not mentioned in the novel, nor is Roth. But on the basis of the brief introduction to Auster's poetics above, we may speculate that Auster is trying to "sneak up on" his father by treating him in the guise of a fictional character, Hector Mann – and by subtly invoking the real Henry Roth, a man who appears to have some resemblance to

3. I am indebted to Jules Chametzky for calling my attention to Steven Kellman's review. The parallel between Hector Mann and Henry Roth did, however, strike me before reading the review.

Auster's own father. Thus it seems that we have several invisible men in *The Book of Illusions*, all of whom to some extent appear as each other's doppelgänger. As is often the case in Auster's work, the characters mirror and double each other in complex ways.⁴

Interestingly, Zimmer tells us in addition to the book on Mann, he is the author of two other books: "The second one, *The Road to Abyssinia*, was a book about writers who had given up writing, a meditation on silence. Rimbaud, Dashiell Hammett, Laura Riding, J.D. Salinger, and others – poets and novelists of uncommon brilliance who, for one reason or another, had stopped" (14). Henry Roth would certainly be a worthy candidate for Zimmer's book. For readers familiar with his spectacular career, it is impossible not to think that he is one of the authors included in the category "and others."⁵ As most readers will undoubtedly know, Henry Roth is the author of the classic *Call It Sleep* from 1934, which he began writing in the late 1920s, as a protégé of the poet and literature professor at New York University Eda Lou Walton. After the publication of his first novel Roth would more or less disappear from the literary scene, not to return until 1994 with his second book *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, a four-volume novel, which reads as a form of negation of, or counterart to, *Call It Sleep*.⁶

But Auster, following his own paradoxical poetics, makes sure to make Roth absent – in order to find him there. He avoids referring to Roth, avoids making an explicit reference to him – in order to make him present. In the following I will examine what could be called yet another third dimension of the novel, the parallel between Hector Mann and Henry Roth.

4. Zimmer himself also doubles Mann, who again doubles the French author Chateaubriand, whose monumental work Zimmer is translating. See Carsten Springer 109 ff. for the motif of the doppelgänger in Auster's work.

5. Another obvious candidate for Zimmer's book is Ralph Ellison, who only published one novel in his lifetime, *Invisible Man*, from 1952. His second novel, *Juneteenth*, which he did not live to complete, was published posthumously in 1999.

6. In a sense Roth had several comebacks, the first of which was when *Call It Sleep* was rediscovered as an undeservedly neglected masterpiece and published in a paperback edition in 1964. After *Call It Sleep*, Roth published some short stories and sketches, all of which are collected in *Shifting Landscape* from 1987, and he began writing again for himself in the late 1950s; however, his real comeback is in 1994 with the first volume of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park*. Roth's remarkable career and life is sketched in several literary articles. See e.g. Mario Materassi, "Shifting Urbanscape: Roth's 'Private' New York." Wirth-Nesher 29-59.

Henry Roth is present in the novel because he is absent. However, Auster has provided his readers with some clues that point in his direction; there are just enough factual parallels between the lives of Mann and Roth in the novel to make the reader wonder, as does the very first sentence of *The Book of Illusions*: Auster opens with Zimmer's voice reporting that "Everyone thought he was dead. When my book about his films was published in 1988, Hector Mann had not been heard from in almost sixty years" (1). And so it was with Roth, who went sixty years between his first and his second novel. Mann abjured his art for a very different kind of life; for a longer period of time the one-time film maker spent his life planting trees in the New Mexican desert, and Zimmer is puzzled: "That's the last thing I would have expected from him. Hector Mann, horticulturalist" (204). Similarly, readers who had tried to keep track of Roth, would be puzzled to learn that, once he was rediscovered as the author of *Call It Sleep*, he was no longer a writer, but a water fowl farmer in Maine. Roth and Mann are both artists who tried to give up their art by taking up very different lives, artists who went into exile, running away from their previous identities as artists. Mann made a pact with himself, promising that he would never make films again; Roth, some time in the 1940s, ritualistically burned most of his manuscripts and journals, ostensibly relinquishing all ties with his past as a writer. Both of them failed to go through with their project of silence; it is true of both them that once these recluses were rediscovered by the world, they turned out to have a considerable amount of secret work in stock. While Mann had made a pact with himself to make films that no one would see, Roth was apparently also writing to himself; his original plan was to have *Mercy* published after his death but he changed his mind when his wife died and lived to see the publication of the first two volumes of *Mercy*; volumes three and four were published posthumously. When Mann disappeared there were rumours that he had joined the Communist Party; Roth did, in fact, join the Party as he was finishing *Call It Sleep* and this political affiliation and belief may help explain his silence, may help explain *his* disappearance from the world of art. In Zimmer's eyes, Mann is "a notable latecomer who might have gone on to achieve important work if his career hadn't ended so abruptly" (12). Similarly, Roth seems to have experienced himself as a latecomer to the Modernism of the 1920s: "My novel was a kind of carry-over, was conditioned by a pre-

vious apolitical, a-economic (if not anti-), semimystical decade espousing art for its own fair sake. It appeared belatedly ..." (*Shifting Landscape* 47).⁷ Moreover, as is also pointed out by Kellman, both Roth and Mann spent their last decades in New Mexico. After Roth's *Call It Sleep* had been rediscovered, the author, in 1968, received the D. H. Lawrence Fellowship, which included a summer at Frieda Lawrence's ranch in New Mexico and after that summer he and his wife decided to settle in New Mexico. Mann ends up in New Mexico because of another Frieda, the woman who becomes his wife. Both Mann and Roth were Jewish, born to immigrant parents from the province of Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Both were close to ninety when they died. In *The Book of Illusions*, the character who comes closest to revealing Mann's connection to Bridget O'Fallon and thus the crime of his past, is a private investigator by the name of Stegman; the fictional character and alter ego who reveals Roth's crimes of the past for him in *Mercy* is called Stigman.⁸

As suggested by Kellman, *The Book of Illusions* is "an accessible if elusive parable about the nexus of art, love, guilt and chance," and it is an "inquest into the moral responsibilities of art." Mann is burdened by guilt because of the murder of Bridget; after this deed, he devotes his whole life to doing penance:

A man who had done what he had done deserved to be punished. If the world wouldn't do it for him, then he would have to do it himself. ... The object, Alma said, was to squirm under the stringencies he had imposed upon himself, to make himself as uncomfortable as possible. ... His penance was a continual work in progress, and the punishments he meted out to himself changed according to what he felt were his greatest deficiencies at any given moment. ... [He was] struggling to school himself in the finer points of self-abnegation. (146)

7. Roth's experience – and his own understanding of it – resembles that of the New York intellectuals, a group of artists and intellectuals he never really belonged to. In the words of Irving Howe, "The New York intellectuals came toward the end of the modernist experience, just as they came at what may yet have to be judged the end of the radical experience, and they certainly came at the end of the immigrant Jewish experience. One quick way of describing their situation, a cause of both their feverish brilliance and recurrent instability, is to say that *they came late*" (*World of Our Fathers* 602).

8. *Mercy* is a portrait of the artist as a young man. In this, his second novel, Roth wants to tell the truth about his childhood and adolescence – through the character Ira Stigman, who appears both as a young and an old man. Old Stigman is the author's alter ego of the present and the character who is the author of that part of the narrative which takes place in his own childhood and youth.

As part of his self-punishment Mann goes to live with the O'Fallons, Brigid's father and sister: "their faces would be in his mind whenever he thought about the harm he had done to them. He deserved to suffer that much, he felt. He had an obligation to make them real, to make them as real in his memory as Brigid herself" (148). And: "If they found out who he was, he thought, then so be it" (149). Mann is playing with the risk of being found out. His writings in his journal suggest a religious drive, a yearning for forgiveness and redemption through suffering: "*If I mean to save my life, then I have to come within an inch of destroying it*" (154).

Mann's penance does not stop here. The next stage in his self-imposed suffering is his vow never to work in films again. Abstaining from filmmaking is apparently the severest kind of punishment Mann could think of meting out for himself; the promise reflects an understanding of filmmaking as a temptation he must resist for Brigid's sake. Hector, of course, could not quite stay away from filmmaking. But once he returned to the world of art, he made the pact which would preserve his intention of self-punishment: the films were not to be seen by anyone. He would not allow himself the vain pleasure of an audience. Moreover, at least the one film, *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, that Zimmer managed to see before Mann's work went up in smoke, is an allegory about Mann's guilt: "Martin burned his story in order to rescue Claire from the dead, but it was also Hector rescuing Brigid O'Fallon, also Hector burning his own movies..." (272). Zimmer understands that

the films, then, were a form of penance, an acknowledgment that his role in the accidental murder of Brigid O'Fallon was a sin that could never be pardoned. I am a ridiculous man. God has played many jokes on me. One form of punishment had given way to another, and in the tangled, self-torturing logic of his decision, Hector had continued to pay off his debts to a God he refused to believe in. (278)

Mann's role in the murder of Brigid may have been "accidental"; but the murder must be understood symbolically, as Mann sacrificing Brigid, and selling his soul to filmmaking, to art, in the shape of Dolores. As suggested by *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, Mann was obsessed with the idea of rescuing Brigid by burning his movies, with the idea that he could undo the damage he had done by sacrificing his art. This belief implies a nearly superstitious belief in the power of art, a belief which naturally adds to the burden of being an artist.

In *Oracle Night* (2004), Auster's latest novel, the narrator and protagonist Sidney Orr ponders a story told to him by an old friend: A French writer wrote a poem about the drowning death of a young child; two months after its publication, his own daughter drowned:

Lost in the throes of grief, he persuaded himself that the words he'd written about an imaginary drowning had caused a real drowning, that a fictional tragedy had provoked a real tragedy in the real world. As a consequence, this immensely gifted writer, this man who had been born to write books, vowed never to write again. Words could kill, he discovered. Words could alter reality, and therefore they were too dangerous to be entrusted to a man who loved them above all else. (220-21)

Orr, who at first dismissed his friend's story as "the darkness of primitive, magical thinking" (221), ends up respecting the writer's silence: "Did the unfortunate French writer kill his child with his poem – or did his words merely predict her death? I don't know. What I do know is that I would no longer argue against his decision today. I respect the silence he imposed upon himself, and I understand the revulsion he must have felt whenever he thought of writing again" (222). The parallel with Mann is obvious. In a fashion typical of Auster, who does not hesitate to employ ghost story elements, the story reflects a belief in the "omnipotence of thoughts," that is, the belief that one's thinking can affect and alter the world, a belief which is, of course, explored by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*. Mann and Roth do, in fact, appear as artists who share this belief. The tale in *Oracle Night* pushes to its extremes the theme of the moral responsibility of the artist. Summing up with Alan Bilton, it seems that in Auster's universe "writing is always at the expense of somebody's life"; an "obsessive sense of guilt and responsibility [is] central to Auster's art" (77).

A similar and equally obsessive sense of guilt and responsibility can be found in Henry Roth. Elsewhere I have speculated in more detail about the possible reasons for Roth's silence, arguing that it appears to be a writer's block, which can be understood in Freudian terms as a symbolic castration anxiety.⁹ Roth, in *Shifting Landscape* and elsewhere, writes of the *dybbuk* which would come to haunt him when he attempted to write;

9. See my Ph.D. dissertation, "The *Leydn* Jar: A Study of Henry Roth," and the forthcoming "Writing and Parricide in Henry Roth's 'The Final Dwarf'" in *The Journal of the Short Story in English*.

he seems to have suffered from regular anxiety attacks in connection with his desire to write.¹⁰ Thus it seems that Roth's decision to give up his art was not made as deliberately and consciously as Mann's was. Yet, one may speculate, with Freud, that Roth's silence was rooted in an inhibition which served the purpose of self-punishment. Here is Freud in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*: "The ego is not allowed to carry on those activities, because they would bring success and gain, and these are things which the severe super-ego has forbidden. So the ego gives them up, too *in order to avoid coming into conflict with the super-ego*" (240-41).

For Roth, the world of art in general and of modernism in particular, seems to have represented a realm of transgression. Apparently he always felt like a usurper, an artist in borrowed feathers, who would one day be "found out," as is also suggested by Werner Sollors' reading of "Itinerant Ithacan," an exercise which led to *Mercy*: Roth's "focus on dress style, almost a masquerade, and privilege seems connected to a sense of guilt, be it social, personal, or artistic, requiring retribution" (159).¹¹ Moreover, Roth seems to have suffered from a sense of political guilt. As a member of the Communist Party he felt a compulsion to write "proletarian" literature, but he could not live up to "the Party's demand that you write as a social realist and that you write objectively and that you write about the revolution and so forth." And: "Since it was the last thing I could really do, it had the effect of making me overly conscious about myself as a writer" (*Shifting Landscape* 46). The author experienced his conflicting wishes as directly guilt-inducing: "What guilt that dichotomy could engender! A Party stalwart in letter, a satyr in proclivity. The proclivity condemned as degenerate" (*Shifting Landscape* 169-70).

In *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, Richard Pells suggests that

10. See for example *Shifting Landscape* 77.

11. Roth humorously expressed this fear of being "found out" in the acceptance speech he gave upon receiving the Nonino International Prize, an Italian literary award: "I cannot persuade myself that the person standing before you is really worthy of the honors you are paying him. To say it differently, I cannot believe that I, I am the one who is the recipient of this honor; I cannot believe that some mistake hasn't been made – in short, I am the eternal plebeian. I am here; you are here. It is all very real. But it is also a great mistake. I just hope you don't recognize your mistake before I am safely out of this gathering, before I have received my prize, and before I am out of Italy and on the way to the United States – ..." ("The Eternal Plebeian and Other Matters" [1987]. *Shifting Landscape* 298).

the function of revolutionary art was perhaps primarily to “serve as a ceremonial catharsis for a middle-class audience unable to participate directly in the daily struggles of the workers” and that the “obsession with proletarian culture might be in reality a device by which bourgeois intellectuals discharged their feeling of guilt and achieved a vicarious sense of militancy” (180). Who can say if Pells’ thesis is generally applicable. However, it does seem to cut to the psychological core of Roth’s attraction to Communism. Prone to the general guilt which Pells defines, Roth’s specific artistic career made fertile soil for an even more acute personal guilt complex. Basically transforming himself from proletarian slum kid to sheltered bourgeois artist overnight, Roth’s identity as a writer was always tenuous. Mothering him, teaching him, and supporting him financially during the worst years of the Depression, Eda Lou Walton set up an ivory tower for her young protégé. And ever since he completed his first novel, Roth guiltily attempted to leave that tower of privilege. Roth’s “counterlives,” his various odd jobs in Boston, and his life in rural Maine also smack of a penitential need to immerse himself in the proletarian experience and in the experience of poverty, a self-willed poverty worse than the one he knew in his childhood. Like Hector Mann, Roth seems to have been good at meting out punishments for himself, continually “schooling himself in the finer points of self-abnegation.”

If *Mercy* can be taken to be a confession of his own sins, Roth was also burdened by sexual guilt. Nearly all of his work revolves around an incestuous Oedipal drama; mother and son incest is vaguely insinuated in *Call It Sleep* – and in *Mercy* – but in *Mercy*, Roth more than insinuates a sexual relationship between sister and brother. Ira’s confession of his sexual relationship with his sister, a relationship which began when Ira was twelve, his sister Minnie ten, and which went on for several years, is the central confession of *Mercy*. The incest motif also becomes the author’s metaphor for the education of the artist; young Ira is the artist unbound, the artist who refuses to respect civilization’s taboos and the rights of the father. Because of his sexual transgressions Ira possesses secret knowledge. In an early draft to *Mercy*, Roth puts it like this: “If he [Ira] was going to show Larry [another would-be poet] the way to that deeper, terrible, awful, goddamn thing that you could become: I lay my sister. You wanna lay her? That’s the price. You wanna be a writer, a

poet?"¹² Roth's guilt may be compared to Mann's in the sense that he also saw his art as being at the expense of another person, namely his sister's. *Mercy* is a confession, an attempt to tell the truth about the author's life, an attempt to revoke the lies he felt he had told with *Call It Sleep*, in which there is no sister at all. In a published letter to Materassi, Roth defined his intention with *Mercy* as a wish to "portray the evolution of the insufferably self-centered, immature, in many ways parasitic and contemptible autodidactic literary youth into approximate adulthood" (*Shifting Landscape* 260).¹³ The monumental novel is a work of self-exposure and self-debasement. Like Mann's secret work, Roth's work is a form of penance, the author's attempt to pay off his debt. Roth once confessed that "I often said to myself while I was writing the novel [*Call It Sleep*] that some day I'd pay for it, and of course I did...!" (Freedman 154). He seems to have paid with his silence – and once he returned with *Mercy* he also paid through self-exposure and self-debasement.

Kellman suggests that "one might wonder about the Jewishness of Hector Mann, aka Herman Loessing (sic), aka Chaim Mandelbaum – a Zelig-like chameleon who endures by adapting his identity to the shifting landscape of exile." Indeed, it seems remarkable that Zimmer, or Auster, does not make more of Mann's Jewishness than he does; the question of his Jewish identity is a bit of a riddle. And it is particularly with a view to Mann's Jewishness that the Roth parallel may turn out to be instructive. By looking at Roth's "Jewish story," we may be able to get an idea of another story which is conspicuously close to being absent from *The Book of Illusions*. And this is yet another story about guilt and penance, and a story which may mirror and double the stories of Hector Mann and Auster's father.

As pointed out by Materassi, Roth's story is "the anguished one of a man who, throughout his life, has contradicted each of his previously held positions and beliefs" (Wirth-Nesher 1997: 30). This is particularly true about his position regarding Judaism. In 1963, in a piece called "The Meaning of Galut in America Today," Roth defined Judaism as being "an

12. Quoted from Lene Schøtt-Kristensen, "The *Leydn* Jar: A Study of Henry Roth" 267. The passage can be found in The Henry Roth Papers at the American Jewish Historical Society, New York: *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, vol. III, Box 1, Folder 1 (unedited, early draft), 1995, P-694/3rd Accretion. Henry Roth Papers. AJHS.

13. Letter to Materassi from 1981.

inescapable element unfortunately, instead of a freely accepted one” in his sons’ culture – and thus in his own. And he went on to formulate what Leslie Fiedler later called Roth’s “assimilationist ‘final solution’” (Wirth-Nesher 1997: 18): “I can only say, again, that I feel that to the great boons Jews have already conferred upon humanity, Jews in America might add this last greatest one: of orienting themselves toward ceasing to be Jews” (*Shifting Landscape* 114). But later in the same decade, Roth would feel a need to find his “way into something related to Judaism. It’s like a blind force looking for an outlet” (*Shifting Landscape* 152). This force found its outlet; Roth appears as reborn after Israel’s miraculous victory in the 1967 Six-day War. Israel became his new home, “a place in the world and an origin” (*Shifting Landscape* 174).¹⁴ And: “Significant for me is that after this vast detour, the once-Orthodox Jewish boy has returned to his own Jewishness. I have reattached myself to part of what I had rejected in 1914” (175).

Roth seems to have nourished a profound ambivalence about his Jewish identity. For the greater part of his life the author appears to have lived with his Jewishness as a heavy burden, as suggested by the following passage from *Mercy*:

... the Bar Mitzvah brought the realization that he was only a Jew because he had to be a Jew; he hated being a Jew; he didn’t want to be one, saw no virtue in being one, and realized he was caught, imprisoned in an identity from which there was no chance of his ever freeing himself. ... He loathed the ceremony; he loathed himself in it. (*A Star Shines* 161)

Modernism became Roth’s chance of freeing himself from his Jewish identity. As suggested by Marcus Klein, Eda Lou Walton, Roth’s literary mentor, bread giver, lover, and surrogate mother, was Roth’s “particular visa to the New World” (192). This visa did, in fact, allow him entry into several new worlds; into the world of America, the world of the Gentile, and the world of art. Although he did not associate with this group of younger Jewish intellectuals, Roth in many ways fits Irving Howe’s characterization of the New York intellectuals:

They come at a moment in the development of immigrant Jewish culture when there is a strong drive not only to break out of the ghetto but also to leave behind the bonds of

14. David Bronsen. “A Conversation with Henry Roth.” 1969. Interview reprinted in Roth’s *Shifting Landscape*.

Jewishness entirely. Earlier generations had known such feelings, and through many works of fiction, especially those by Henry Roth, Michael Gold, and Daniel Fuchs, one can return to the classic pattern of a fierce attachment to the provincialism of origins as it becomes entangled with a fierce eagerness to plunge into the Gentile world of success, manners, freedom. (240-1)

Although *Call It Sleep* in many ways is embedded in Judaism, it reads as an expression of these very desires, desires which are expressed powerfully by the protagonist David Schearl's self-invention, his fantasy that "I'm somebody else – else – ELSE! Dot's who I am!" (371) – namely the son of Gentiles. David's wishful thinking, an enactment of the fantasy that Freud and Otto Rank called "the neurotic's family romance,"¹⁵ which he reveals in the *cheder*, is a key scene in the novel. It can be understood as a symbolic parricide, an act which is repeated in the climactic electrocution scene, in which the artist appears to be born. In this scene it is "as if David dies out of his immigrant life and is born into the world of English literacy and culture, the world of Henry Roth's literary identity, but at the cost of killing both the father and the mother," as suggested by Hana Wirth-Nesher ("Between Mother Tongue..." 485).¹⁶ Indeed, the novel as a whole reads as an act of symbolic parricide, as an act of apostasy, and as yet another illustration of the belief that art is always at the expense of someone else's life, here the life of the Jewish father.

Roth learned two different lessons from his modernist masters, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, but both of them point to Roth's desire to escape from his Jewish identity. From Joyce he learnt that one could turn junk into art, that one could transform the environment into something else, an insight which must have been welcome to a kid who had grown up in the slums of Brownsville, the Lower East Side, and Harlem, respectively: "First, was the *Ulysses* and it really opened my eyes to the fact that the material for literature was all around you. ... That life was a junkyard, that your environment was a junkheap, and you just picked up the pieces of junk. That language and art was the way you transmuted it" (Lyons "Interview" 53).

15. See for instance Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Interpretation of Mythology*. Transl. Dr. F. Robbins and Dr. Smith Ely Jelliffe (New York: Robert Brunner, 1957).

16. Both Wirth-Nesher and Sollors read the novel in terms of the "neurotic's family romance" but only Sollors uses the term. See his "'A world somewhere, somewhere else.' Language, Nostalgic Mourning, and Urban Immigrant Family Romance in *Call It Sleep*."

Similarly Eliot promised escape. As suggested by the following passage from *Mercy*, Roth seems to have believed that by siding with Eliot's anti-Semitism, he could somehow distance himself from his own Jewishness:

Ira was all too conscious of the recurring Jew-mockery in a number of the poems ... He was all too conscious of the poet's anti-Jew bias, but he accepted it, shared it, even approved of these thoughts – ... their contemptuous attributions didn't apply to him, for the simple reason that Ira *appreciated* them ... That excluded him from Eliot's gibes, as it did all other Jews who possessed taste fine enough ... people like Larry, sophisticated Jews, the assimilated, the deracinated: Jews like himself. (*From Bondage* 138-9)

Undoubtedly as an influence of his Marxist conviction, Roth even reproduced some anti-Semitic stereotypes himself, most notably cultivating the image of the Jew as obsessed with money. His unpublished *Maine Sampler* includes this horrific anti-Semitic passage: "The city of New York has finally decided to allocate a million buck [sic] for the extermination of the rat population in Harlem and elsewhere ... Congratulations, City of New York! Who was the rat I seen in your house the other day? That was no rat, that was my landlord – the majority of whom are Jewish ... "(Qtd. Schøtt-Kristensen 300).¹⁷ Ethnic self-hatred is a controversial subject. Nevertheless, there is no getting round the complex of self-hatred when it comes to *Henry Roth*; his life and work unwittingly reflects his internalization of anti-Semitic attitudes and values.

Modernism generally turned out to be a dead end for Roth. Much of *Mercy* is, in fact, taken up with old Stigman's quarrel with Joyce. Roth apparently came to feel that the "Joycean allure of sordidness" represented a form of sterile aestheticism, and a lie of art (*A Star Shines* 157). Moreover, Stigman reproaches Joyce for his self-imposed exile from his people: "I too used my folk as mere counters in nugatory design ..." (*From Bondage* 68). Roth's reproach against Joyce sounds very much like self-reproach, and, simultaneously, self-congratulation, because Roth eventually found his people; he, or rather his narrator, responded to the "need to bring to an end the self-imposed exile within himself, come to grips with the new reality of belonging, of identifying and reuniting with his people, Israel" (*A Diving Rock* 115). Writing about *Philip Roth's*

17. "maine.27," Box 23, folder 9, *Maine Sampler*: n.d. "maine.9-maine.27, n.d.," p. 129, Henry Roth Papers. AJHS.

Zuckerman, Stephen Wade outlines a predicament very similar to that of Henry Roth: "The Zuckerman of *The Counterlife* has learned about the previously hidden attributes of 'his' people by going outside to view from exile, like so many writers before; in the end the act of writing (in the fully committed sense) is an assertion of exile" (117).

Henry Roth was not merely uncomfortable with this commitment to exile. Writing about "his own people" made him feel guilty. At one point Stigman's guilt takes this drastic form, a form of guilt one may assume is shared by Roth:

... in the confusion and alarm in his soul, he feared he was laying a basis for a new Final Solution. Look at the scum these Jews are. Why should they not be annihilated? How else could he say it? It was in the old sense, in the Biblical sense, that they suffered – because they had sinned, because he had sinned. He had been guilty of abomination" (From *Bondage* 116)

Summing up we may conclude that writing for Roth entailed guilt in different shapes and forms, and at different levels. Adding to his sense of political and sexual guilt, ethnic guilt appears to me to be the most important factor illuminating Roth's tormented life and art. The author came to see his own writing as transgressive, as entailing apostasy and betrayal. He understood his art as being at the expense of his entire background, at the expense of Judaism. In *Mercy*, Roth makes an attempt to analyze and understand his Jewish identity, but as Mary Gordon pointed out in her review of the second volume of *Mercy*, he only "circles around the topic of Jewish self-hatred"; his "Jewishness is a knot which he needs yet to untie."

Interestingly, the same Mary Gordon is the author of *The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for Her Father* (1996), a book which resembles Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* in that it is a daughter's attempt to portray her father, yet another invisible man, or a shadow man. Attempting to find out who he was, she uncovers unpleasant secrets. Born in 1899 into a Jewish immigrant family who came to America in the great wave of the New Immigration, David Gordon converted from Judaism to Catholicism in the 1930s. He turned to the political right, went as far as to become a Francoist and a Coughlinite. Like Auster, Gordon realizes that she must turn her father into a fictional character because "I could never know him except as an invention of my own mind and heart" (xxii). Moreover, she tries to piece her father together of different men with

some resemblance to him. And one of the men she chooses is Henry Roth. Because in the middle of her search for her father he breaks his sixty-year silence: “[A]nd I read his new books and I know that I am hearing the curses, the insults, the castigations and self-castigations that my father heard. And I can hardly bear it” (183). Gordon’s book is “also a book about America.” Her father

lived the dark side of the American immigrant’s story, the one that isn’t usually told: He was a Jew in a time of pervasive anti-Semitism. He was a young man at a time when it seemed endlessly possible for young men to make and remake themselves. When the fire that fed the melting pot burned at a very high flame. When the pressure to pick up the dominant tone of the American tuning fork was both great and unquestioned. I have always liked to think of my father as absolutely unique, but this is another idea I’ve had to give up. He was a man of his place and time. (xxiii)

I do not quite agree with Gordon that the dark side of the immigrant’s story is not usually told; it has been told in the novels by American Jewish writers from the very beginning – is, indeed, the story which is told in the first great American Jewish novel, Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). But the author’s attempt to understand her father as a “man of his place and time” is interesting and instructive; in *The Shadow Man* she tries to do what Auster does not really do with his father, and what Roth does not really do with himself. Thus her shadow man becomes a representative man – and a man who resembles Henry Roth, and thus, in turn, possibly Hector Mann – and Auster’s father.

As noted above, *The Book of Illusions* does not explore Mann’s Jewishness. We learn that Mann always downplayed his foreignness; like another Gatsby figure he told lies about his past and his parents – in some interviews they were German, in others Polish – and it is actually Zimmer himself who begins to speculate that Mann was probably Jewish, a fact which is established by Alma. But even though Zimmer discovered this secret about Mann, he does not go so far in his speculations as to see its possible significance as a factor explaining Mann’s character: “It wasn’t a crime to be a Jew in Hollywood back then. It was merely something that one chose not to talk about. ... Being Jewish might have been a burden to Hector. He might have suffered from it, and he might have been ashamed of it, but it was difficult for me to imagine that he had been killed for it” (86). Might it be that Zimmer’s weak admission that “Being Jewish might have been a burden to Hector” should be given more

weight? Is this Auster's way of inviting the reader to inhabit his text? Is his barely mentioning Mann's Jewishness yet another example of the poetics dictating that one should make absent that which one really wants to talk about, to make present?

In "Portrait of an Invisible Man," Auster takes a comparable approach to his father's Jewishness. He appears to be making light of the anti-Semitic Edison, who fired Auster's father because he was a Jew.¹⁸ The horrendous fact – which in my reading of Auster's father goes a long way towards explaining his character – is included as a piece of parenthetical information: "(only to have the job taken away from him the next day because Edison learned he was a Jew)." In view of Auster's poetics – the idea of making absent that which should be present – such a parenthetical aside appears particularly significant. Perhaps this little parenthesis which speaks of anti-Semitism offers a significant clue to the stories of both Auster's father and Hector Mann. As Zimmer notes, it wasn't a crime to be a Jew in Hollywood. True enough. "From its origins Hollywood has been stamped with a Jewish identity," but as Stephen Whitfield argues, "nobody else was supposed to know about it" (151). As shown by Whitfield, Jewish filmmakers in Hollywood in the 1920s were eager to present Jews as "merely Americans and nothing else"; Jewishness was generally suppressed or disguised (151). The 1920s was a time of notable anti-Semitism. It is in this decade that America begins to put restrictions and quotas on certain groups of unwanted immigrants, among them East European Jews; it is in this decade that Henry Ford – a great admirer of Edison – publishes *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*; and it is in this decade that several Ivy League schools introduce Jewish quotas.

Placing Hector Mann in his time and place, the 1920s and Hollywood, we may see a representative man emerging from *The Book of Illusions*. It may be that Mann's story is also the story of the Jew who sells his Jewish birthright for a mess of pottage, the story of the immigrant who sells his

18. In "The Book of Memory" there are some contradictory details about A's Jewish childhood. We learn that the family celebrated Passover – but also that "Baseball had somehow become entangled in his [A's] mind with the religious experience" (117). Surprisingly, we also learn that A goes to Hebrew school and that he refused to sing Christmas carols at school because he was Jewish (168). These facts suggest that the family took pride in their Jewish identity – and certainly that they did not try to conceal it. The point I am trying to make, however, is that in "Portrait of an Invisible Man" Auster does not explore his father's Jewishness. Nor does he explore the subject of anti-Semitism.

Jewish soul in order to win America. As Arthur Hertzberg puts it, "Those [Jews] who ventured out farthest from the immigrant ghetto, to Hollywood or into the boxing ring, had to invent a new persona for themselves. There were no models in the Jewish past for the behavior of fighters, gangsters, or movie moguls" (198). Mann, who was born Chaim Mandelbaum, of course reinvented himself several times. And he ventured far by becoming engaged to Dolores, the actress, who is described in terms reminiscent of the traditional *shikse* figure: "To be perfectly honest, she seemed to be a bit on the dull side, of no more than average intelligence, but there was a feral quality to her, an animal energy coursing along her skin and radiating from her gestures that made it impossible for him to stop looking at her" (131). Hector explains to Brigid that the marriage "probably won't last more than a year or two. But I have to go through with it. I have to have her, and once I do, everything else will take care of itself" (134). Dolores is a kind of bitch goddess, a prize, a *shikse*. To win her is to win social and sexual power and status on American terms. Interestingly enough, Mann's films also evoke the *shlemiel* figure; in some of his films he plays "a man with an inexhaustible talent for running into bad luck" and a man of "steadfastness" and "spiritual calm" (33).

Mann made his movies in the 1920s, Auster's father lost his job some time in the late 1920s, and Roth began writing *Call It Sleep* in the late 1920s. All three men can be seen as representative Jews, men who came of age in a time of widespread anti-Semitism, and men who, in Howe's words, were eager to "plunge into the Gentile world of success, manners, freedom" (*Selected Writings* 241). The need to suppress his Jewish identity seems to be a factor which could go a long way towards explaining the coldness and determination of Auster's father as he appears in "Portrait of an Invisible Man"; after he had been fired, he "never worked for anyone but himself" (52). Similarly, his dream of getting rich reflects his need for protection: "the idea of wealth became synonymous for him with the idea of escape: from harm, from suffering, from being a victim" (53).¹⁹ The story of Auster's father and of Hector Mann may also be the

19. Interestingly, Auster's father's complex relationship with money resembles the one Henry Roth identifies in his father – and thus in himself – as can be seen in *Mercy* and in several stories, most notably in "Final Dwarf", which is included in *Shifting Landscape*. Auster writes about his father and money in "Portrait of an Invisible Man": "He did not want to spend it, he wanted to have it, to know that it was there." And "At times, his reluctance to spend money was so great it almost resembled a disease" (53).

story of the costs of success and assimilation, a story which is often told in American Jewish literature.²⁰

As suggested by Kellman, Mann is a Zelig-like chameleon, who survives by adapting to his various environments. The chameleon-like quality of Mann may be understood not only as a survival strategy but also as a symptom of a fundamental homelessness – a theme which has always fascinated Auster, and which he links to the theme of Jewishness: “I have always been fascinated by homelessness on all levels. This has to do with my being Jewish. Homelessness, this state of being excluded, always was a fundamental part of Jewish life ... It is obvious that [the wish to belong] ... only becomes relevant when you feel that there is no place where you belong” (Qtd. Springer 38).²¹ The *topos* of the wandering Jew seems to epitomize Auster’s understanding of Jewish identity. In *The Book of Illusions* – and in *The Invention of Solitude* – the image of the chameleon-like wandering Jew appears to be related to the metaphor of invisibility. It makes sense to speculate that Mann and Auster’s father are at least partly invisible because they are Jewish, or invisible because of their own problematic relationship with their elusive and stigmatized Jewish identity. In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), invisibility is a trope for blackness. The invisible man is invisible to others because he is black and because they are blinded by racism. Ellison is also a likely candidate for Zimmer’s book about brilliant writers who stopped writing, which is to say that *Invisible Man* is also a likely intertext to *The Book of Illusions*. Which again corroborates the idea that the trope of invisibility is related to the theme of ethnic identity, in this case Jewish identity. By the same token, invisibility is also a trope for homelessness in terms of ethnicity.

As has been suggested, Roth ends up a penitent Jewish son. In *Mercy*, the author expresses his desire to repossess the Jewish heritage he discarded as a young man. Old Stigman yearns for “the once resonant Lower East Side world, holistic, Jewish, with its *cheder*, reverence, fear of God”

20. In classic stories such as Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day* (1956), Philip Roth’s *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) and Bernard Malamud’s *The Assistant* (1957), the dream of success is rejected for ethical reasons and because the heroes refuse to pay the price of sacrificing their identity as Jews. See e.g. Paul Levine, “Recent Jewish-American Fiction: From Exodus to Genesis,” in ed. Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro. *Contemporary American Fiction* (London: 1987), 73, for this reading of the three classics.

21. Interview with Alf van der Hagen.

(*From Bondage* 19-20). The Lower East Side of his childhood becomes his Paradise Lost. But the Lower East Side no longer exists, perhaps it never did exist as the paradisaical haven Stigman imagines it to have been. Roth's story is fundamentally a story of homelessness and yearning for home. Ruth Wisse compares Roth's yearning to Isaac Rosenfeld's idea of Jewish yearning, suggesting that *Mercy* is the

classic of repossession, but repossession of a culture from which he has grown apart. After a lifetime of disaffection, Roth has no Jewish subjects to draw upon other than his youth before he became a modernist and the Israel he loves but does not know. His Jewish passion resembles Isaac Rosenfeld's idea of yearning, for by the time he is aroused to the task, he is too isolated from his fellow Jews to do more than *long* to protect the people he has rejoined. (289)

In Wisse's words, Rosenfeld's Jewish yearning is a yearning for yearning: "The Diaspora Jew's yearning has gone on for so long that it has become the substance of his being, the archetypal form of his relation to the world. According to this theory, the Jew preserves his longing for Jerusalem as its own object: he wants less to satisfy his desire than to keep the sense of incompleteness alive" (272). For Roth, the desire to keep the sense of incompleteness alive appears inextricably linked with his penitential need. The Jewish outsider who is yearning for America is often portrayed as the unrequited lover who woos the unattainable *shikse*; in *Mercy*, Roth appears as the penitent and unworthy Jewish son who is wooing his own unattainable Jewish past. He is exiled from his own Jewishness.

Interestingly, Derek Rubin in a reading of Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* titled "The Hunger Must Be Preserved at All Cost," identifies exactly the same kind of Rosenfeldian yearning or hunger in Auster's work. According to Rubin the driving force behind Auster's writing is exactly a yearning or a hunger; in *The Invention of Solitude* it is the author's yearning for the father which is the driving force. The book grows out of a "sense of dissatisfaction, or deprivation, which gives rise to a yearning for fulfillment" (63). But, Rubin asks, "in what way can this yearning be said to be so strong that Auster strives to preserve it as much as he does to relieve it?" (63). As Rubin points out, the very title "Portrait of an Invisible Man" "reflects both Auster's yearning for fulfillment and his denial of its possibility as a means of preserving it. Within the narrative itself he states explicitly that his desire to know his father cannot be

satisfied" (64). Auster is trapped between his realization that his task is impossible and his fear of the moment when he will have to stop writing because "No matter how useless these words might seem to be, they have nevertheless stood between me and a silence that continues to terrify me. When I step into this silence, it will mean that my father has vanished forever" (*Invention of Solitude* 65). "Thus," Rubin writes,

because of his need both to satisfy his hunger and to preserve it, Auster finds himself caught between his inability to assuage his pain through writing about his father and his fear of the pain of losing him when he stops writing about him. Hunger, both as the source of yearning and as its object, is clearly – to use Rosenfeld's phrase again – the prime source of all value in "Portrait of an Invisible Man" (66).

For Roth as well as for Mann the world of art is taboo, it represents a forbidden world of temptation and transgression. Therefore there is a certain paradox in the fact that both artists eventually seek redemption through art. As Gordon notes about the paradoxical nature of *Mercy*: "Mr. Roth can't be a modernist master because he has not felt redeemed by the creation of beauty. He insists on another kind of redemption: the redemption of confession, of exposure, of a relentless insistence on his own defilement. But this can only take place through writing ..."

The fourth volume of *Mercy, Requiem For Harlem*, opens with an epigram rendering a few lines of Talmudic wisdom: "Without Haste, Without Rest./Not thine the labour to complete,/And yet thou art not free to cease!" Roth's tribute to Jewish learning could be understood as his acceptance of the artist's limitations. But the Talmudic saying is also echoed in old Stigman's words: "since you've chosen this mode of oblation, chosen to live, to scribe, then there's no undoing the done. There's only the outwearing it, the outwearying it, the attenuating of remorse, and guilt" (*Diving Rock* 143). And this quotation points back to the paradox defined above, which, in turn, leads us back to Rosenfeld's hunger, which, again, leads us back to Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*, the author's *ars poetica*. In *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster expresses his ambivalence about writing, realizing that writing keeps the wound open. Similarly, Roth keeps his wound open by writing about his sins of the past. Whereas Auster is fuelled by his yearning for his father, Roth is fuelled by his yearning for the Lower East Side of his orthodox childhood. Both are exilics yearning for an unattainable home.

Roth seems to believe that his artistic aspirations, which in complex

ways were tied to his assimilationist yearning, were at the expense of his Jewish identity and his Jewish home; he sacrificed or betrayed Judaism in order to become a modernist artist. And his art banned him into exile and homelessness. For Auster, the intellectual Jew, who is born an outsider, is predestined to play the artist's role (Springer 58); the homeless Jew embodies the artist's futile quest. Whereas Auster's understanding of this fundamental homelessness is embodied in and expressed by his poetics, and reflected in nearly all of his novels, Roth's art and life embodies this homelessness in a more literal sense. In *The Book of Illusions*, Auster's Jewish poetics of homelessness is incarnated in the implied story of Henry Roth; in the portrait of an invisible man, who is present because of his conspicuous absence.

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