CHAPTER 5

Planetary Circles: Philip Roth, Emerson, Kundera

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Early on conventional wisdom cast Philip Roth in "the role of the rebellious Jewish son" and junior partner, born in Newark in 1933, of the firm Salinger, Bellow, Mailer, and Malamud.[1] While this grouping is more than the "journalistic cliché almost wholly devoid of content" as Roth described and dismissed it in 1981,[2] it has by now outlived its initial usefulness. For one thing, Roth's near half-century career of remarkable, indeed relentless, productivity—since 1959 twenty-two works of fiction and five of non-fiction—has left such early and parochial rubrics in the dustbin of literary history. And he has gone far from home (if only to return to Newark in *The Plot against America*, which seven-year-old Philip Roth narrates). For thirteen years Roth lived in London half the year; for five years in the seventies he was a regular visitor to Prague, where he "took a little crash course in political repression," became close with several writers, including Milan Kundera and Vaclav Havel, and was pivotal in publishing the English translations of some of the leading works of modern Eastern European literature (RMO, 140). Roth's own books have a large international audience (they have been translated into over thirty languages, and in fall 2004 two were best-sellers in France). All of these experiences, including his permanent return to the United States in 1989, which renewed his sense of the country and became a catalyst for his American trilogy (1997–2000), have significantly enlarged and deepened his art.

Roth's cosmopolitanism has created a body of work that is best understood in an international context—American, European, and Eastern European. This essay uses literary criticism to treat Roth in effect as a test case for seeing what happens when a familiar author's familiar moorings—national, ethnic, regional—are replaced by overlapping frames of reference that together form new configurations of intellectual history. What threads together my multiple contexts is the subject of immaturity. A fertile homegrown resistance to the renunciations required of adulthood began to appear in the American renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century as part of Romanticism's critique of Enlightenment scientism and rationalism, a critique that also informs modernist European and Eastern European novelists and thinkers. Emerson is the key figure (followed by Whitman and Melville) in revising the dominant models

of rationality and maturity bequeathed by the Enlightenment. And Roth, I will argue, discerns that his antinomian predecessors' dismantling of rationalist, disciplinary models of knowledge, of success, and of selfhood is a countercultural endowment that he is free to use for his own purposes. Indeed, the title of his first novel, *Letting Go*, can be read as a neat summary of what the countermodel proposes as the goal of the dismantling—a relaxing of the constricted psyche.

It is not accidental that the Czech and Polish authors who are among those Roth most admires—Milan Kundera, Vaclav Havel, Witold Gombrowicz, and Bruno Schulz—are powerful theorists of immaturity. They fashion it, each in their own way, as a dissident stance against the coerced conformity of various modes of totalitarian oppression. Immaturity, then, is always already political for the Eastern Europeans I will discuss, as is true as well of the predecessor I most consistently invoke—Emerson. Initially this may be puzzling, for Emerson is conventionally regarded as the faintly embarrassing guardian of our most cherished American *isms*: optimism, exceptionalism, individualism, ahistoricism. But reading Emerson through Roth brings "Experience" and "Circles" center stage, brings forward the speaker of inadmissible, uncensored truth whom Nietzsche revered. Of Emerson, Nietzsche said: he contains "so many 'possibilities' that even virtue achieves esprit in his writings."[3] While the Emerson to be found here is a prophet of possibility, this is admittedly not the whole of Emerson—missing, for instance, are the metaphysician and transcendentalist. The Emerson who connects with Nietzsche and Roth thrives on the antagonistic energy released when one "abstain[s] from dogmatism and recognize[s] all the opposite negations, between which, as walls," one's "being is swung."[4] Two of the great enemies of ideology and of bourgeois pieties, Emerson and Nietzsche share with Roth a love of agonistic combat and of "speak[ing] the rude truth in all ways" (RWE, 262).

The "Nietzschean" Emerson I will be highlighting in my reading of Roth is an Emerson I have severed from his U.S. anchorage and set in "the world republic of letters" or "world literary space" that is "actual, albeit unseen," to borrow the phrases of Pascale Casanova.[5] This relocation or deracination is an act of appropriation, a word particularly congenial in this case, for in "Quotation and Originality" Emerson admiringly quotes the greatest cosmopolitan of the era and foremost proponent of world literature: "Goethe frankly said, 'what would remain to me if this art of appropriation were derogatory to genius. . . . My work is an aggregation of beings taken from the whole of Nature it bears the name of Goethe.'"[6] We can understand acts of appropriation as allied to what Emerson calls the ceaseless "generation of circles" that forms the propulsive momentum and growth of nature, civilizations, and the individual, all testifying to the "truth" that "around every circle another can be drawn" (RWE, 403). To practice the "art of appropriation" is to treat Emerson not as a static touchstone for the ages, nor as only embedded in his historical

moment, but as a fluid, metamorphic, living presence, one who can also serve as an emblem of my methodology: to regard regional or national points of origin (a Concord, a Newark, a United States) as simply the first circle around which a series of larger circles are drawn, spiraling out to encompass that republic of culture found on no map save the one drawn by literature.

"Depending on the force" of the individual, one's life is more or less "a self-evolving circle, which . . . rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end" (RWE, 404). More than any American novelist in recent decades, Roth has answered Emerson's audacious imperative. Thus the responsible critic must be flexible enough to enter the circle and absorb its energy even as a new one is being formed. But until recently critics have tended to confine both writers to circles the latter drew early in their careers. Recall Roth the perennial bad boy, Roth the master of schtick-driven plots and satiric chronicler of Jewish American suburbia. Among Emerson's familiar circles consider: cultural nationalist cheerleading for "young America," dissenting minister leaving his Unitarian pulpit, inwardly migrating to preach the "infinitude of the private man." But, like Roth, Emerson had not stopped evolving and instead suited action to his word—that "there is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us" (405). The partisan of "young America" drew a new circle, eclipsing national boundary, and became, in his unquenchable curiosity about natural science, literature, and religion, a student of and participant in world culture; the man of the closed study became, in the 1850s, an influential figure on the antislavery platform.

Also pertinent here is Henry James, for Roth a crucial predecessor whom he appropriated as early as graduate school. Without using the word *appropriation* James makes vivid the spirit of its practice when he says in the 1870s, "to be an American is a great preparation for culture. . . . [W]e can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and . . . claim our property wherever we find it."[7] No wonder writers marginalized by class, ethnicity, or race were often drawn to the freewheeling picking and choosing of cultural property. Such freedom allows one to bypass the sacrificial ordeal of assimilation by rewriting it as appropriation. Thereby banished is the whole melodrama of assimilation, which requires the outsider to cast off old (ethnic) ways for new and submit to a culture assumed to possess a stable, homogenous identity; this sacrificial process affirms a hierarchy of insider/outsider, native/alien grounded in blood and origin.

In contrast, all that appropriation requires is a good library. In his fond recollections of the near magical power of transport he found in the city public library—where "property [was] held in common for the common good"—Roth joins Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison in recognizing that civic institution as nothing less than the essential power station for the individual's "generation of circles" that spiral out to form what Du Bois famously called "the kingdom of culture." Above the "veil," uncharted on any map, where neither the color

line nor national boundary obtains, the kingdom is where "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not," as Du Bois memorably put it in 1903.[8]

The practice of appropriation, the act of drawing a new circle, is insouciant regarding claims of ownership and identity and forms the basis of a cosmopolitan relation to culture. Its practice liberates culture goods from the proprietary grip of a single group; possessiveness—of the dismal and familiar "jazz is a black thing, Shakespeare a white" sort—is set aside for sampling, fixity for mobility. Cosmopolites refuse to know their place. The appropriation model combats a reductive tendency—promulgated by anthropology, embedded in separatist multiculturalism, and deeply influential upon literary study—of regarding cultures as self-contained systems, discrete bounded groups—monads, in short. An antiproprietary view assails this notion of "culture" conceived as a fixed entity possessed of "the qualities of an internally homogenous and externally distinctive and bounded object." This view, in the words of the anthropologist Eric Wolf at the start of his famous book *Europe and the People without History*, propagates a "false model of reality," one that conceives "the world as a global pool hall in which the entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls."[9] Wolf's effort is to recover what the "global pool hall" obstructs—the fact that cultural groups are incessantly forming and reforming in mutually constitutive interchange with each other. This "energizing spirit" helps generate the evolving circles drawn by my authors and inspires my own drawing of spiraling circles between America and Eastern Europe, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, affiliations that together form a new "world literary space."

Because it imputes literary agency to authors as readers and writers, the art of appropriation, the claiming of cultural property, and the drawing of circles can also help rethink the relation of author and historical context. Recall that the most prestigious understanding of context of the last quarter century, New Historicism, under the formative influence of Foucault's antihumanism and his notion of the death of the author, assimilates author to context, the former the creature of the latter. Under the weight of context, the possibility of authorial agency is severely limited, indeed becomes an oxymoron; and equally confined is the critic's agency, his or her freedom to draw circles of relation that are not anchored to historical circumstance. A vivid sense of this constricted view of how author and context relate is evident in the most famous critical judgment against Roth, not one by a New Historicist but by an earlier critic who shares their rigid construction of that relation. In "Philip Roth Reconsidered" (1972), Irving Howe declared that the novelist wrote out of a "thin personal culture" which evidently occurs when an author "comes at the end of a tradition which can no longer nourish his imagination or [when] he has, through an act of fiat, chosen to tear himself away from that tradition." This is a "severe predicament," declares Howe, and forces the writer (Roth is his example) into "self-consciousness, improvisation, and false starts; but if he is

genuinely serious, he will try, like a farmer determined to get what he can from poor soil, to make a usable theme of his dilemmas."[10] The stoic farmer he salutes as a model of heroic perseverance not only exposes Howe's organicism but his determinism—one is stuck with the soil one has. Absent is any notion of imaginative autonomy that might liberate one from "poor soil" or "thin culture." The present essay aims to restore a measure of aesthetic autonomy and imaginative energy to writers and critics by redescribing context as significantly more fluid and plastic than is usually assumed. And in making the drawing of circles one of the metaphors for this fluidity I have appropriated Emerson, another writer for whom Howe had small regard. In his small book on that author, Howe arrests him in the first circle of caricature, reading Emerson as a hapless romantic individualist soon dwarfed by modernity.[11]

Earlier I suggested that Roth's "immaturity" draws on his American predecessors, especially Emerson. Emerson, in turn, derives his notion of immaturity from an engagement with Kant and, more immediately, with Coleridge. The widening circle of these entanglements comprises Emerson's complex relation to the Enlightenment's twin pillars, maturity and reason. This matter is worth sketching because from Emerson's renovation of both terms emerged a new way to think about immaturity. In 1784 Kant published his famous "motto" for the Enlightenment—"have the courage to use your *own* understanding!" Only by thinking for himself does man emerge from his "self-incurred immaturity" (the gender exclusiveness of this will soon concern us).[12] And "it is so easy to be immature," remarks Kant; all one need do is rely on the panoply of authorities that surround one—starting with the books one reads. But maturity requires, says Kant, that one always "look within oneself . . . for the supreme touchstone of truth."[13] This reverence for the spiritual sanctity of the individual's inwardness and his access to intuitive truth untethered to empirical evidence is one reason Kantian idealism was welcomed in 1830s New England intellectual culture, inspiring the Transcendentalism of Emerson and his circle. Kantianism was also a philosophical ground of Romanticism, that other liberating European thought intoxicating American intellectuals at the time. Both movements accorded the mind's shaping powers of perception an unprecedented dignity, a respect for inwardness that developed out of an earlier foundational tenet of Enlightenment, Descartes's cogito—"I think therefore I am"—and its bracketing of custom and tradition. Descartes "is a founder of modern individualism, because his theory throws the individual thinker back on his own responsibility"[14]

In the 1830s Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a key mediator of Romantic and Kantian thought to New England, and he borrowed his crucial distinction—between Reason and Understanding—from Kant. "I think it a philosophy itself," an excited Emerson said of this distinction, for it furnished an alternative to what was stultifying in Descartes—his deadening reduction of reason to mathematical certainty and calculation, a reduction that entailed the stark

divorce of reason from emotions. In light of Coleridge's Kantian terms, this impoverishing dimension of the Enlightenment legacy could be averted. Now Cartesian reason was resituated as closer to Understanding, which Emerson in an 1834 letter characterized as a "wrinkled calculator" who "toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues," and relies on the "expedient" and "customary." In contrast, Reason (capitalized to distinguish it from earlier uses), according to an enthusiastic Emerson in the same letter, "is the highest faculty of the soul—what we mean often by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision. . . . The thoughts of youth & 'first thoughts' are the revelations of Reason." And poetry is one of the things that resides in the province of Reason.[15]

Most striking for my purposes is Emerson's paradoxical formulation that Reason "never *reasons*" for it embodies the impatience of youth, what in "Self-Reliance" he extols as the "nonchalance" of a boy—"independent, irresponsible"—who "cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests" (RWE, 261). "Whim" is the brusque boy's angle of vision, his zigzagging moodiness in tune with nature's incessant, incorrigible movements. Emerson's audacious reversal of Enlightenment reason and maturity also feeds on the anarchy and spontaneity latent and untapped in Kant's demand to shed reliance on authority and to think for oneself. Emersonian anti-Enlightenment Reason forms the basis of the vision of exhilarating, defiant immaturity that Emerson calls self-reliance. His undoing and remaking of reason and maturity can be regarded as a model for what Emerson means by abstaining from dogmatism so to recognize "all the opposite negations." For the self, as if an extension of nature, is riven by volatility and ambivalence; and Emerson invites us to stay attuned to this by inhabiting contradiction and perversity. Both will, in his word, give "edge" to one's feelings: "your goodness must have some edge to it—else it is none. The doctrine of hatred must be preached as the counteraction of the doctrine of love when that pules and whines" (RWE, 262).

Reason "never *reasons*" and maturity is never mature: in this essay, maturity suffers a reversal analogous to Cartesian rationalism when exposed to Emersonian Reason. The premise of Kant's notion of Enlightenment, maturity is emptied of its project of mastery and remade in effect as immaturity, disrespectful of dogma, authority, bounded form, all that insulates one from a more open, less censored engagement with and in the moment. Rather than goal centered, immaturity is ludic, seeking not to dominate but to mime or to enter the turbulent flow of what Emerson calls "counteraction" and Roth will call "counterlife," rhythms that prosper in the refractory domain of the aesthetic, if we allow that term to include ways of being in the world.

Roth's fertile immaturity has sustained a career nearing a half-century, encompassing by 2006 a corpus of twenty-seven books. Even more remarkable is that the preponderance of major works, by my estimate, leans toward the later decades. Before looking at one of his major late works, *The Human Stain*