Psychoanalysis may be passing from the scene of American intellectual life as a reliable index to human behavior, but not before making a permanent contribution to our common understanding of how fiction is to be read. Among the ideas to survive the demise of the system are ambivalence, overdetermination and the belief that all expressions of human desire save the most basic and biological express a collision, rather than a harmony, of motives. Certainly, without such concepts at hand we are disarmed before anything as complex as contemporary literature, and without doubt we are disarmed before a writer as nimble and as mercurial as Philip Roth, who has made of ambivalence not only an art but a theory of art, producing out of his arguments with himself a literature as richly conceived and intricately designed as any in America. No longer “case histories,” however, as they once seemed to be, his books have lately evolved into theaters of uncertainty in which characters perform dramatic charades of ambivalence that in the past might have been interpreted as “acting out.” The Counterlife (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987) is the most recent and most impressive of Roth’s late theatrical novels, all the more impressive, I’d like to say, for possessing at once a theatrical lightness and a historical gravity. An elegant novel, it performs an elaborate counterpoint between the inertia of history and the agility of the imagination, and would appear to be evidence, if such were needed, that it is possible for a novel to contradict itself repeatedly and turn out all the more convincing for its contradictions.

The Counterlife is latest of the Zuckerman books, a series that now includes four novels, two stories – “useful fictions” embedded in My Life as a Man – and one novella, The Prague Orgy, an appendix to the collected Zuckerman tales, Zuckerman Bound. It is not, however, a unified story but a story cycle featuring Nathan Zuckerman, his brother Henry, Henry’s wife Carol, and the usual troupe of delectable shiksas, all different and all named Maria. A tale told
in five movements, *The Counterlife* more closely resembles *Gulliver's Travels* than a conventional novel, though the five acts rather than four voyages may be Roth's way of hinting that Shakespeare, not Swift, is its patron saint. (Or is it the five books of Moses that we are expected to recognize?) If the Zuckerman books up until now are the Zuckerman variations, this one by itself is the Zuckerman fugue: a Grosse Fugue to round out Roth's late quartets.

The movements are "Basel," "Judea," "Aloft," "Gloucershire," and "Christendom," which form something of a circuit, insofar as the end of "Christendom" represents no particular resolution of the problems posed in "Basel." Each "voyage" (by plane, of course) is a restatement in different terms of the book's central problem: what is a Jew and how is he (and it is always he) to live? Setting the variations into motion is "Basel," the account of Nathan Zuckerman's brother Henry, a New Jersey dentist whose exhausted marriage has driven him into a couple of affairs, the first being with Maria from Basel. Though Henry and Maria are in love, their mutual marriages eventually win out, and in time Maria returns to husband, to Basel, and to oblivion. Ten years later, Henry develops an attachment to his dental assistant, Wendy, who treats him to regular after-hoursfellatio, until Henry begins taking a medicine (a "beta blocker") for his heart condition, a side effect of which is the inhibition of potency. In despair over his inability to gratify Wendy's "oral hangup," he opts for by-pass surgery and dies on the operating table. The chapter ends after the funeral, with Nathan pondering his notes on his brother's affairs and his own guilt for failing to dissuade Henry from the operation.

The import of the book's title becomes at the start of "Judea," where Henry, fabricating a counter-life for himself, turns out to be alive and in flight from dentistry and domesticity for Israel and a militant Zionist kibbutz on the West Bank. This counter-Henry, now calling himself Hanoch, packs a revolver and sits at the feet of one Mordecai Lippman, an apocalyptic Zionist and pioneer of the settlement movement in Judea and Samaria. It is to this settlement, Agor, that Nathan goes to visit Henry, only to find himself under siege from Henry's colleagues for his "Diaspora abnormality" – four Gentile wives – and for his failure to make his own *aliyah*. Despite this, or maybe because of it, Nathan comes to appreciate, without ever falling under, the spell of Lippman, whose apocalyptic scenarios are charged with the elements of powerful, if primitive, art. Among his prophecies is one of a coming pogrom in America