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PHILIP ROTH AND THE FICTIONALIZATION OF THE SELF

The article focuses on Roth’s artistic strategies in the fictionalization of the self by exploring the author’s aesthetic and ethical vantage points in constructing his characters. With his very first short stories, Roth has declared his firm resolution to depict Jewish characters in less than a favorable light, thus incurring upon himself the wrath of the Jewish community. After winning his independence from ethnic and religious allegiances, Roth constructs the equally important framework of artistic conventions, which he deploys in building his fictional selves. These include the following: well-pronounced autobiographical elements; pitting the self in conflict with itself along the axis law vs. libido, restraint vs. letting go, nausea vs. appetite and last but not least, the experience of being a man in the particularity of the modern age.

Keywords: Philip Roth, self, fictionalization, strategy

Norman Podhoretz claims that “Philip Roth’s success is the result of more than only his remarkable talent” (Podhoretz 2000: 26). Unlike Henry Roth (no kinship with Philip Roth), who made his debut within a literary culture that had no interest in Jews or regarded them as an unfit subject for American culture, Philip Roth “exploded into a culture in which there had developed a new receptivity about Jews” (Podhoretz 2000: 27). There were, however, two conditions attached to this receptivity. The first one was “the work in question to be sufficiently intimate with the still exotic American-Jewish experience to render it convincingly” (Podhoretz 2000: 27). The second one was “the author to be sufficiently distanced from this experience to write about it with a critical eye” (Podhoretz 2000: 27). In Podhoretz’ view, Roth passed the test with flying colors.

Perhaps, the distance from the Jewish-American experience, which Podhoretz notes, is the reason why from the very beginning of his literary career, Philip Roth has been at the center of a maelstrom of criticism, both literary and ethical. Oftentimes, his short stories and novels have been judged not for their literary merits, but rather, for being Jewish, or anti-Jewish. Finding himself at loggerheads with his Jewish critics exerted a sobering effect upon Roth. He realized that admiration for him was going to be less than unanimous, and that his way of taking himself seriously was “more at odds than I could ever have imagined with what others believed seriousness to be“ (Roth quoted in Searles 1992: 66). He became aware of:

> ….enormous differences in sensibility between my Jewish adversaries and myself- a good deal of the disagreement, I realized, had to do with somewhat antithetical systems of aversion and tolerance, particularly with respect to subjects that are conventionally described as “distasteful” (Roth quoted in Searles 1992: 66).

Philip Roth admits that one of his greatest dilemmas as a writer is to find the balance between what he calls "these seemingly inimical realms of experience that I am strongly attached to by temperament and by training – the aggressive, the crude, and the obscene, at one extreme, and something a good deal more more-subtle and, in every sense, refined, at the other" (Roth quoted in Searles 1992: 68). The tendency to lean to one of these two extremes, however, is not a distinguishing feature of Roth alone. Philip Rahv elaborates on that phenomenon in American letters in a short essay from 1939, in which he describes two disparate types of writers. Employing an analogy from American history, the author sets apart the 'paleface' writers from the 'redskin' novelists. In *Image and Idea: Twenty Essays on Literary Themes,* Rahv writes that "the paleface continually hankers after religious norms, tending toward a refined estrangement from reality… At his highest level the paleface moves in an exquisite moral atmosphere, at his lowest, he is genteel, snobbish, and pedantic" (Rahv 1957: 67). Among the most prominent members of the "paleface" school in American letters, Rahv includes Henry James and T. S. Eliot. At the other end of the literary spectrum, the redskins, he places the names of Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. The "redskins" have the following characteristics:

> …reactions are primarily emotional, spontaneous, and lacking in personal culture…In giving expression to the vitality and to the aspirations of the people, the redskin is at his best; but at his worst he is a vulgar anti-intellectual, combining aggression with conformity, reverting to the crudest form of frontier psychology (Rahv 1957: 69).

In Roth's view, the weakening of the social and class constraints in the wake of the Second World War, as well as the cultural exchanges thus encouraged, has produced a new breed of writer, a writer that reconciles the ethical and aesthetic strivings of the paleface and the redskin. For Roth, this new "redface" sensibility entails "…a feeling of being fundamentally ill at ease in, and at odds with, both worlds…alert to the inextinguishable number of intriguing postures that the awkward may assume in public, and the strange means that the uneasy come upon to express themselves" (Roth quoted in Searles 1992: 69).

In his self-proclaimed capacity of a 'redface', Philip Roth has been oftentimes criticized by Jewish-Americans for his damaging fictional portrayals of Jews. The publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, in particular, was followed by indignant outcries from the Jewish community, comparing the novel to anti-Semitic propaganda. Roth's response to the charges leveled against him was that his job in a work of fiction was "not to offer consolation to Jewish sufferers or to mount an attack upon their persecutors or to make the Jewish case to the undecided" (Roth quoted in Finkielkraut 1992: 129). In the essay *Writing About Jews,* Roth lays out his position on the thorny issue of ethnic allegiance to the Jewish-American community. Roth's falling out with the Jewish community did not start with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969, but as early as 1959 when his first volume of collected stories appeared under the title *Goodbye, Columbus*. The criticism he received, however, was not on the literary and artistic merits of his stories. Instead, he was criticized for not being ethnically correct. Roth writes:

> Among the letters I receive from readers, there have been a number written by Jews accusing me of being anti-Semitic and "self-hating", or, at least, tasteless;

> they argue or imply that the sufferings of the Jews throughout history, culminating in the murder of six million by the Nazis, have made certain criticisms of the Jewish life insulting and trivial. Furthermore, it is charged that such criticism as I make of Jews-or apparent criticism- is taken by anti-Semites as justification of their attitudes (Roth 1975: 149–150).

One of the stories in *Goodbye Columbus*, which provoked much indignation among Jewish readers, was *Epstein*. Epstein is a sixty-year old Jewish man who commits adultery. What was unacceptable to these readers was the fact that it was a Jew who was portrayed as cheating. Roth gives a several-point vindication of his artistic choices, which can be considered to be an expression of his artistic creed throughout his work, setting out to remove parochialism from the realm of art. The first point Roth makes is that what draws most readers to literature is all that is beyond simple moral categorizing:

> It is not my purpose in writing the story of an adulterous man to make it clear how right we all are if we disapprove of the act and are disappointed in the man. Fiction is not written to affirm the principles and beliefs that everybody seems to hold, nor does it seek to guarantee the appropriateness of our feelings (Roth 1975: 151).

A New York rabbi, David Seligson, went so far as to accuse Roth of narrow-mindedness on account of the fictional representation of “a Jewish adulterer and a host of other lopsided schizophrenic personalities” (Quoted in Roth 1975: 153). To correct this regrettable oversight, Seligson admonished Roth to “know his own people and tradition“ and called for “a balanced portrayal of Jews as we know them” (Roth 1975: 155). Roth’s response to the rabbi’s call for ‘balance’ is scathing and up to the point in a mock-letter to several of literature’s greats:

> “Dear Fyodor Dostoevsky- All the students in our school, and most of the teachers feel that you have been unfair to us. Do you call Raskolnikov a balanced portrayal of students as we know them? Of Russian students? Of poor students? What about those of us who have never murdered anyone, who do our schoolwork every night?“ “Dear Mark Twain-None of the slaves on our plantation has ever run away. But what will our owner think when he reads of Nigger Jim?” “Dear Vladimir Nabokov-the girls in our class…” and so on. What fiction does and what the rabbi would like it to do are two entirely different things. The concerns of fiction are not those of a statistician- or of a public relations firm. (Roth 1975: 156)

With this mock-letter to various writers, Roth exposes the absurdity of expecting literature to promote any type of ideology- political, religious, ethnic etc. Promoting ideology reduces fiction to a manifesto and throws the respective literary work out of the realm of art. Thus, Philip Roth’s allegiance is not to the Jewish community, or any other ethnic group for that matter, but to the particularity of the human predicament in the here and now. As he says in respect to Epstein:

> If the adulterous man is a Jew, then I am revealing the condition of an adulterous man who is a Jew. Why tell that story? Because I seem to be interested in how- and why and when – a man acts counter to what he considers to be his “best self”, or what others assume it to be, or would like it to be (Roth 1975: 152).

Sanford Pinsker claims that with *Goodbye Columbus*, Roth not only won the National Book Award, but also changed the very ground rules by which one wrote about American-Jewish life: “If an older generation of Jewish-American writers had insisted, in Bernard Malamud’s phrase that “All men are Jews!”, Roth’s vision was the converse – all Jews were also men“ (Pinsker 1975: 4). Milovitz echoes Pinsker when he notes that “Roth individualizes men rather than grouping and universalizing them, each facing his own barriers and responding according to his own strengths and limitations” (Milovitz 2000: 12). Timothy Parrish writes in “Roth and Ethnic Identity” that Roth “imagines Jews specific to their situations as Americans. Ironically, this also means that Roth has rejected many of the elements of identity that have historically made one ‘Jewish’” (Parrish 2007: 130). Similarly, Aharon Appelfeld describes Roth’s Jewish characters as:

> …descendants of the Eastern European Jewish tribe who in the beginning of the century were threatened by evil forces , both from within and without, that dispersed them to the four corners of the world. Some came to America… Roth’s Jews are Jews without Judaism… Roth’s works have no Talmud, no Jewish philosophy, no mysticism, no religion. (Appelfeld 1988: 12)

That is not to say that Roth’s ethnic background has had no impact on his moral and artistic sensibility. He is considered to be one of the ‘big three’ in the Jewish-American letters alongside Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow. Yet, as Hermione Lee aptly notes in *Philip Roth*, he has started “later than the novelists he has been grouped with, and has from the start been an uncomfortable and discomforting part of the tradition” (Lee 1982: 25). As Roth himself writes in *Reading Myself and Others*, he has “always wanted to alter a system of responses to Jewish fiction” (Roth 1975: 157). This shift in the perception and representation of Jewish ethnicity is evinced by Roth when he says:

> The Jewish quality of books like mine doesn’t really reside in their subject matter. Talking about Jewishness hardly interests me at all. It’s a kind of sensibility if anything: the nervousness, the excitability, the arguing, the dramatizing, the indignation, the obsessiveness, the touchiness, the play-acting, above all, the talking. It isn’t what it’s talking about that makes a book Jewish – it’s that the book won’t shut up. The book won’t leave you alone. Won’t let up. Gets too close… (Roth quoted in Milbauer 1988: 24).

Harold Bloom concurs that the best approach to Roth’s ‘signature’ is to contrast him to the other Jewish-American writers. Bloom remarks on “the perceptible shift toward victimization, absurdity, and satire in Roth’s presentation of character” (Bloom 2003: 43). He resorts to Helen Weinberg’s distinction between the victim-hero and the activist-hero. Whereas Weinberg sees a movement in Jewish-American letters towards an activist hero, Bloom suggests that to claim this in Roth’s case is “to fly in the teeth of Roth’s own statements and of his emphatic if not total shift toward victimization and absurdity in his fiction“ (Bloom 2003: 43).

The second feature in Roth’s fictionalization of the self is the strongly-pronounced autobiographical element. Roth is often held to account for the fact that his protagonists are thinly-disguised versions of himself. In an interview given to Hermione Lee in 1984, he explains the rationale behind his artistic approach as: “Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life…To go around in disguise. To act a character“ (Roth quoted in Searles 1992: 167). Shechner confirms this view when he writes that Roth’s fictions are “fables of identity, variations upon the theme of the self designed to heighten and refine essential elements, highlight basic terms of being, and dramatize recurrent conflicts” (Shechner 2003: 43). Siegel points out the fact that all writing that passes for fiction contains a good deal of history and that writers draw upon their lives for inspiration. He illustrates his point with three contemporary Jewish American writers: Saul Bellow, E. L. Doctorow and Philip Roth, who like to tease their readers by presenting protagonists strongly resembling themselves in terms of time and place, age and circumstance. In his words, these writers underscore “the play between fact and fiction, the real and imaginative, history and literature” (Siegel 2005: 17). Another critic, Rogoff, writes:

> Philip Roth’s work in its simultaneous pursuit of honesty and deception has played with the tantalizing correspondences between fiction and life. But unlike most recent writers who have done so, Roth has pursued the life-and-death, death-in-life questions of fiction and fact (Rogoff 2009: 98).

In Roth’s own words: “I think the autobiographical connection in fiction is looser than it appears, even in mine… The level of invention rises and sinks in each paragraph” (Roth quoted Siegel 2005: 22). As Roth himself said in one of his interviews: “You should read my books as fiction, demanding the pleasures that fiction can yield” (Roth quoted in Siegel 2005: 24). Concerning the charges leveled against Roth of being narcissistic and investing too much of his biography in his works, Shostak comes to his rescue by stating that Roth “is not obsessed with himself so much as willing to cannibalize his perceptions of himself in order to explore the way selves work in the world. His primary concern with how consciousness seeks to make sense of that process is the motive for his narratives” (Shostak 2011: 10).

Philip Roth’s first full-length novel’s title is *Letting Go*. It will not be far off the mark, however, if we say that the art of letting go is one of the overarching themes that span his prolific writing career. According to Tanner, letting go is the central metaphor in mid-twentieth century American literature. The dilemma that Tanner perceives in the fictional protagonists of many American writers is between “the dread of utter formlessness” and “an imprisoning deathly constriction” (Tanner 1971: 67). Roth himself recognizes this dilemma in the fictional characters he creates by referring to it as “sheer playfulness and deadly seriousness” (Roth 1975: 139), which is the third major element in Roth’s artistic method in the fictionalization of the self.

Hermione Lee points out that this duality in Roth’s artistic sensibility and fictions finds its expression in his protagonists’ “internal conflict between law and libido, restraint and letting go, nausea and appetite“ (Lee 1982: 18). Roth provides an example of this conflict in Alexander Portnoy where he creates a character trying desperately to accommodate the demands of two inimical selves: “the measured self” and “the insatiable self”; “the accommodating self and the ravenous self” (Roth

1975: 64). From psychological point of view, this conflict is between the craving id and the restraining influence of the superego with its set of rules and regulations. In Roth's view, this battle comes down to the question of who shall have influence over one's life. In *Reading Myself and Others*, the author detects a pattern in three of his novels:

> I can think of these characters – Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy, and David Kepesh as three stages of a single explosive projectile that is fired in the barrier that forms one boundary of the individual's identity and experience: that barrier of personal inhibition, ethical conviction, and plain old monumental fear beyond which lies the moral and psychological unknown. (Roth 1975: 78)

In *Philip Roth*, Lee draws parallels between Roth's protagonists' thirst for freedom and Melville's Ahab – "that most blocked and ravenous of all American heroes" (Lee 1982: 20):

> How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me…Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me… Who's over me? Truth has no confines[1]" (Lee 1982: 21).

The discourse in terms of barriers, inhibition, and the metaphor of crashing through the wall is a function of Kafka's influence. Roth is fascinated with Kafka's characters who are lost in a seemingly inescapable labyrinth. In Kafka's *The Trial*, the protagonist K. is appealing to the priest in the pulpit to reveal to him how to escape the authority of the court, the court, which is keeping K. in no-man's land of obscure charges and imputed guilt for some indefinite transgression. In Roth's interpretation, however, "the court is of one's own devising" (Roth 1975: 80). If that be the case, Kafka's protagonists are afflicted with some kind of self-imprisonment syndrome. It is this particular type of psychological turmoil and suffering that Philip Roth depicts in his work. As Roth describes it, the predicament of most of his characters can be diagnosed as "deeply vexing sense of characterological enslavement" (Roth 1975: 98). Baumgarten opines that characters "in all of Roth's tales suffer from unnamed afflictions against which they struggle. Their desperation grows as they find themselves, despite strenuous efforts, unable to channel their dissatisfaction and change their situations" (Baumgarten 1990: 11). Judith Jones also remarks on the universal struggle for self-knowledge in Roth's characters:

> This dual necessity of coming to terms with the self in the process of resisting what others perceive one to be is central in Roth's fiction. Each time a character resists definition by what is external to him, he is forced to deal with his own sense of himself. Consequently, resistance to the control of the family or the society and their delineation of the boundaries for the individual always involves self-examination on the part of the individual (Jones 1981: 11).

Jones, however, perceives the real challenge facing these characters to be not merely in the throwing off of another's authority, but in the "following necessity to deal with the real ME that emerges out of their refusal to be bound by other's conceptions" (Jones 1981: 12). Roth's commitment to the ethical and moral plane of modern existence is confirmed by Jones when she points out that,

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[1] Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick.* Ch. 36.

> …throughout his fiction, Roth is preoccupied with the moral imperatives that a person imposes on himself… In the absence of heroes of epic proportion, he draws protagonists characteristically modern in the sense that their battleground is the self, and their struggles are with the forces that shape, and attempt to impose limitations upon that identity (Jones 1981: 37).

In one of his interviews[2], Roth has admitted that "the lives of men has been my subject; the circus of being a man… and the ringleader is the phallus". In her essay "Roth and Gender", Shostak identifies the driving engine of many of Roth's novels to be "the myth of male inviolability, and in particular the exposing of that myth". Indeed, apart from his first novel, *When She Was Good*, all of Roth's fictional characters have been men and as Shostak remarks that his "concern with the question of gender has been almost wholly confined to the trials of manhood" (Shostak 2007: 111), which is the fourth element in Roth's artistic strategy. Shostak quotes Brittan's hydraulic model of masculinity: "A man is only a man in so far as he is capable of using his penis as an instrument of power" (Brittan 1989: 4). She goes on saying that:

> Thus it is that Roth's interest in the lives of twentieth century American men has often taken shape in narratives of heterosexual pursuit. He has been fearless in challenging readers to look upon raw male desires. Roth has seemed not just to risk but even to welcome censure; at times he has written male characters as if simply to learn what they will do and whether there are no reasons *not* to despise them. His attention to the insatiable, transgressive, and often stultified appetites of men has laid him open to charges of misogyny (Shostak 2007: 112).

Roth may be vindicated by what Peter Schwenger calls *masculine mode* of writing. Anette Kolodny was the first to coin the term when she deliberated on the existence of a *feminine mode* of writing. A feminine mode presupposes the existence of its counterpart. Schwenger argues that:

> The most obvious point of difference is that the men's movement lacks the concrete rallying point of economic discrimination: it must necessarily address itself to the subtler psychological dynamics of the male role. It is here that literature, for several reasons, is liable to be called upon: literature provides experiences which, though artificial, may be the common property of millions; it contains insights which, though unsystematized, are still valid; it provides words for perceptions which, until named, may not even be recognized (Schwenger 1079: 622).

According to Schwenger, we should limit the masculine mode only to writers who "rather than neutralize, contradict, or simply ignore their male sexuality, take it as their explicit subject. In this way, we may consider with more certainty and subtlety the relation of this conscious preoccupation and the words used to describe it“ (Schwenger 1972: 622). Philip Roth fully meets this requirement and repeatedly pits his male characters against the exigencies of masculinity.

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[2] "Philip Roth", documentary for French television series *Writers of the Century* (1997).

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