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The sobering: delusions of authenticity and relaity in Philip Roth

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Citation

Chouraqi, F. (2020). The sobering: delusions of authenticity and relaity in Philip Roth. *Odradek: Studies In Philosophy Of Literature, Aesthetics And New Media Theories*, 6(2), 37-62. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247570>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



DRADEK

Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics,
and New Media Theories

Vol. VI Num. 2 2020

ISSN 2465-1060
[online]

Self-Deception in Literature

Edited by
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ODRADEK. Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics, and New Media Theories.
ISSN 2465-1060 [online]

Edited by Università di Pisa



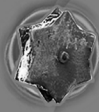
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Layout editor: Stella Ammaturo, Marta Vero

Issue Editor: Zeynep Talay Turner



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The Sobering: Delusions of Authenticity and Reality in Philip Roth

Frank Chouraqui

Abstract

This article argues that a common trope in Philip Roth's fictions is focused on a process of sobering, which involves the challenges of overcoming delusions of authenticity. These delusions come in two forms, either self-identity or self-imitation. In both cases, this leads to existential aporias. The healthy response according to Roth is to overcome the common presupposition shared by these two failed approaches to the self. It is a matter of overcoming realism about the self and about the world. This overcoming takes the form of engagement with fiction, both as an author, as a character and as a person. As a result, the central delusion that motivates the trajectory of Roth's characters could be understood as a form of self-deception, since it involves the literary self misconstruing itself as an object to be satisfied, attained and fulfilled.

*Dass man wird, was man ist, setzt voraus, dass man nicht im Entferntesten
ahnt, was man ist-*

Friedrich Nietzsche

I

Philip Roth's literature is about life, and life, according to Roth, is a sobering experience. The character called Philip Roth in *Operation Shylock* (1993) is seeking to sober up from delusions about self-ownership; *My Life as A Man's* (1970) Tarnopol seeks to liberate himself from delusions about manhood, or about whether it should or shouldn't make demands upon him, Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* (2000) comes to a similar sobering up from the delusion that he could escape his race; Seymour Levov, "the Swede" of *American Pastoral* (1997) is confronted with the necessity to shed delusions about the American dream, his place in it, and about fatherhood, while the *Plot Against America* (2004) chronicles an entire society trying to navigate the line between paranoid delusions and delusions of appeasement and *Our Gang* (1971), which is a satire – i.e.: a work that chronicles the absurdity of a certain life – *a contrario* shows Nixon as the epitome of the character that refuses to sober up, that not even death can stun out of his self-important torpor. This places Roth in a long and distinguished literary tradition that goes from the *Odyssey* to Chrétien de Troyes, to Balzac, Dickens and Flaubert. In fact, this

reflection, omnipresent in Roth's writings has been picked up by Roth scholars since the 1990's. At the same time, such accounts seem to fail to take seriously that the result of Roth's pursuit of an account of sobering leads into instabilities that are, I argue, Roth's very point and, they argue, the demise of the project. In short, such readers regard the fact that no stable sense of self or reality remains available once the sobering has been achieved as an anomaly, the downfall of Roth's project¹. They should regard it as its achievement.

But all these different forms of sobering visible in Roth's fictions, alongside their elective affinities with many corners of world literature run the risk of rendering the concept too broad to retain any meaning at all. What does sobering thus mean? We must make our way through a number of evocations summoned by the theme of sobering up in order to clarify in what sense Sobering can represent a guiding motif in Roth's writing. First, intoxication. Although Roth is keenly aware of an American literary context in which alcoholism is the writer's drug of choice like alcohol is their character's drug of choice, and although Roth repeatedly brushes against chemical intoxication (not least in the *Anatomy Lesson* and *Shylock*); reducing sobriety to the opposite of ebriety and ebriety to the consumption of chemicals would miss the literary point of intoxication (in both Roth and others), namely, that it stands for a certain form of life and an experience which is only instrumentally related to chemicals.

¹ See for example Royal (2000).

We must rather ask ourselves what activates such a motif as literary: how is it amenable to deploy the potential of the literary medium? Secondly, addiction, of course: the collapsing of the distinction between will and suffering, freedom and fatality. With it, the weakening of the sense of self, the re-opening up of identification, which becomes polymorphous and promiscuous: all fantasy of the self and any prosthetic can count as the true self, just like, in addiction, all artificial extension of the self can be incorporated as self (again, in the *Anatomy Lesson* and *Shylock*). Here, a sense of sobering less dependent on intoxication becomes more visible: sobering up is the other side of the coin of drunkenness, but being sober, as it is said of clothes, language and sober accounts, relates rather to factuality, realism, not as the result of ebriety, but as a certain form of life as such. The Sobering Roth is interested in is the process through which one becomes sober in this sense. This is not a process that begins in intoxication, but one that begins in fantasy. Not one where fantasy is the result of intoxication, but one in which intoxication is one's response to fantasy: to sober up is to no longer believe one's own fantasies, and as we shall see, this includes fantasies of sobriety, the ultimate ebriation.

Although the claim that we should see Roth's fictions as focused on chronicling the process of sobering (in the sense just sketched out) is too broad to prove, it is not too broad to be of some use. The rest of this paper will be interested in working out what these fantasies are and how the process that moves from the one to the other can be regarded as

a process of sobering. What we already know is this: such delusions are self-delusions. The Sobering, the process of becoming a sober person, is the process of no longer being self-deluded. In this paper, I use this hypothesis for guidance to investigate the role of self-deception in the literary logic of sobering at work in a group of Roth's fictions. The books I shall discuss are the ones mentioned above, as well as two non-fiction books, *The Facts* (1988) and *Shop Talk* (2001). It is up to the reader to decide whether this group of texts is representative of Roth's oeuvre in general, and of course, only this decision can verify my broad claim about life as sobering. A more specific claim I shall make relates to self-deception and it uses this general pathos of sobering for context. In Roth's fictions, and through them, we see a three-step process. First, is self-deception, which a first kind of sobering replaces with realism. Second, this realism leads to a critique of truth itself as fantasy. Finally, the last option left open which evades the delusions contained in the belief in lies and the belief in truth, is the embracing of ungrounded fiction, which contains the essence of Roth's' unorthodox brand of restless wisdom. As I shall try to show, this sobering, should be understood not only as a move away from delusion, but also a move away from self-deception: that is first and foremost the process that escapes *one basic self-deception*, namely, the belief that our creations are discoveries. For the wisdom of fiction lies in the recognition that life as fiction is the result of an act of creation on the part of the subject. Any delusional belief in objective truth therefore, should be traced back to the forgetting that

the life we're living is not independent from us, but rather is our creation.

On the basis of a reading of these texts (or some specific passages or specific strategies that appear in them), this paper has two aims: the first is to explore the relations between the nature of fiction, the nature of life as sobering, and the notion of self-deception. The second is to argue for the view that this triangular nexus is the centre of Roth's literary concerns. The paper is structured around the three-step sobering process described above. It begins with an analysis of the delusion of authenticity (i.e.: the belief that self-identity is attainable and desirable²), with a focus on the failures of this delusion and its devastating aftermath (II), before examining the way Roth consistently presents the recourse to fiction as redemptive of self-delusion (III). I then conclude that Roth's texts are best viewed as stagings of the inescapability of fiction, and therefore of the impossibility to arbitrate the competition of reality and fiction in terms of derivation of the one from the other.

II

Life is a sobering experience, what does this mean? In the broadest sense, I use this expression to suggest that life should count as a slow process towards realism: i.e.: the recognition of the

² See Gutkin (2019).

immoveable structures of reality. But this begs many questions, in particular, do we define life experience as a move towards acknowledging reality or do we define reality as whatever life-experience moves us closer to? Roth is precisely not a metaphysical thinker. This is what he spends all his considerable strength not being. Attributing to him any notion of life as a process towards knowledge of any ultimate reality would be the only thing more preposterous than believing in such reality in the first place. We see also therefore how this notion of sobering should be regarded as a certain attitude towards self-deception. Sobering means removing illusions. It also means becoming one(fictional)self. This places the focus on self-deception, which has to do with both illusions and self-identity. As we shall discuss below, self-deception (like all reflective phenomena and their attending concepts) refers to a paradox whereby identity and difference coincide: self-deception is other-deception of the self.

I just mentioned that the problems involved in self-deception are related to the mutual exclusion and mutual dependency of the notions of identity and difference: to deceive oneself is problematic because deception suggests that there is a deceived who is epistemically different from the deceiver (the deceiver knows more than the deceived), and objectively identical with them (they are one and the same person). In short, it suggests either a division (be it between the self as epistemic and the self as person, or between two aspects of the self) or that the alternative between knowledge and delusion is

not as categorical as we might think: one person might be deluded and cognizant about one and the same thing at the same time. Roth addresses both scenarios. The first organizes his staging of self-deception as relations with a double who is different enough to be repudiated in the process of sobering, yet identical enough to be indistinguishable before that process acquires traction. The second is related to Roth's dramatizing of activities surrounding fiction (including writing of course, but also storytelling, fantasizing, reminiscing and reading) as problematizing the categorical distinction between truth and falsity.

The theme of the double is recurrent in Roth's fictions and it serves two purposes. The first is to dramatize self-confrontation (and sometimes dramatize this dramatization towards deniability³), and the second is to insist on the fact that we are doublable entities, and to exploit the resources this offers to the novelist. To the first category belong the constant strategy of blurring the lines between narrator, author and protagonist, which leads publishers and critiques (and even Roth himself) to talk of "Zuckerman books," "Kepesh books," "Tarnopol books" and "Roth books," either making Zuckerman, Kepesh and Tarnopol authors alongside Roth, or making Roth a protagonist-narrator like Zuckerman, Kepesh and Tarnopol and thereby suggesting that Roth the narrator-protagonist isn't Roth the author: i.e. that Roth is his own double. This leads to an endless gallery of mirrors in cases such

³ See for example Roth (1993), p. 377.

as *Operation Shylock* (a “Roth book”) where Philip Roth, the narrator and protagonist (who either is identical with or has the same name as Philip Roth the author) happens to run into another Philip Roth who has usurped his reputation for his own ends. There is, it seems, Roth relies on a certain distinction between who we are and who we are being, who we are offers a wide number of possibilities which we take up or give up; but nonetheless remain open, to be taken up by another, another who, thereby, counts as another ourselves. We shall see that fiction is the act of making such choices.

Doubles are a necessary fictional strategy in order to set up self-deception in non-paradoxical ways: *Operation Shylock* is motivated by curiosity about oneself via curiosity about one’s double. That is to say, it is structured by the epistemic discrepancy between one double and the other: Philip Roth gets enmeshed in all his adventures because he wants to find out who his double is, what his double knows and thinks, and ultimately, who is the double of whom. What makes the two doubles different it seems, is precisely their different epistemic positions, just like in self-deception, where one differs from themselves insofar as one’s epistemic state is superior to the other. Secondly, as *Shylock* shows it well, the result is a certain confusion that threatens to collapse on either side: either into believing that the other is other, or into believing that the other is the same. Two kinds of self-deception. In the process, their encounters all revolve around forcing the other to see what they see, to see eye to eye. In other words, the double is a) the

structure that enables self-deception: there is a part of me that hides something to another part of me, b) the self-deception itself: that either there is another that it befalls me to be, or that there is a self that it befalls me to be; and c) the solution to the self-deception: it is the double as other who catches you by your collar to shake you out of your self-delusions about the double as same. This use of the double as alien enough to be a sobering experience should send us towards another, less explicit figure of the double, which is also recurring in Roth's books: that of the brother.

Roth comes quite close to an explicit account of the brother as the double in several instances. His brother Sandy appears in many of his novels, almost never in the same room as the author/narrator/protagonist whose brother he is, and most prominently at the end of *American Pastoral*, where over the phone, he delivers the discourse of the principle of reality (similar to the one delivered by another brother, Morris, in *Life as A Man*⁴) to a Swede in need of direction in his attempts to navigate the straits between unrealistic hope and unrealistic cynicism. There, as in other places, Sandy is heard saying to the Swede what the Swede already knows. There is only a fine line between this phone conversation and the inner stream of consciousness of the Swede (this is confirmed, again, with reference to Morris, whose point of view becomes Roth's own⁵; and in the fantasy that only his brother, Sandy, can

⁴ Roth (1974), p. 119, p. 123 and p. 160.

⁵ See *ibidem*, p. 165,

save him from his chemically-induced madness⁶). In *Shylock*, brothers are each other's "flesh" and thus, can have no debt towards one another⁷, and *The Facts*, duly subtitled: *A Novelist's Autobiography* (a move repeating the doubling out of the novelist), i.e.: a book about Philip Roth, is dedicated to "my brother at 60" as if the brother with whom he "had shared the same bedroom since earliest childhood"⁸ in real life, should be understood as the keeper of the facts about Philip Roth himself.

Brothers and doubles testify to the porosity of the self, the reflexivity of consciousness and our social and familial embeddedness. They also stand as reminders of the constant danger of alienation, of self-deception and self-betrayal. They are therefore experienced as anxiety or as Roth says, they embody our own "fear of mentally coming apart"⁹, an anxiety that needs to be resolved. This is chronicled in *Shylock* in particular as the conflict between an instinct of integration and an instinct of disintegration, the first expressing itself as a firm refusal to question one's identity and the other as a firm commitment to firm commitment to being curious about oneself. The book opens with an episode of near-psychotic breakdown (or "me-itis"¹⁰), of "depersonalization and derealization"¹¹ making Roth "no longer a card-carrying member of the everyday world"¹².

6 See Roth (1993), p. 21.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 267.

8 Roth (1988), p. 37.

9 Roth (1993), p. 29.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 55.

11 *Ibidem*, p. 29.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 24.

But the crucial moment in the narrative is Philip Roth's decision, avowedly foolish, to pursue the quest of Philip Roth (the double) rather than accepting the fact that Philip Roth is in no need of self-seeking: he has himself. Just like Halcion was the wrong medication, one that destroyed his sense of self and of the world, so too is the self-seeking the wrong solution to the problem of depersonalization. It is not finding out *about* oneself that will resolve self-alienation, for this can only bring knowledge, not the promised authenticity. Yet, Roth points out, by seeking to find himself by confronting his imposter, Roth has *de facto* capitulated. He goes from the pointed question he addresses to himself "where's Philip?"¹³ asked from the depths of breakdown, to the forfeiting of his own self. "You're not yourself tonight," says Claire, "Don't have to be, got someone else to do it for me"¹⁴. The breakdown has reached its victory by replacing being with doing: to be Philip Roth is to do Philip Roth, and from now on, all one can do is imitate the being they believe themselves to be.

Here lies the organic connection between *Operation Shylock* and *My Life as a Man*. Both are an exploration of the self-parody that ensues from a weak sense of self, and the absurd belief that the self is to be earned, found, understood and acted out. The title of *My life as A Man* says it clearly enough: this was all an experiment in being what one took oneself to be. In a formulation that could have fitted in *Shylock* just as well, Tarnopol declares there: "I was fooled

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

by appearances, largely my own”¹⁵. The deception at work here is deception of the self about the self, leading to alienation from desires: because I thought of myself now as a member of the intellectual elite, I also expect that Maureen was the kind of woman a man like me would desire. He desires her “against my inclination but in accordance to my principles”¹⁶. The quest for the self, the quest for authenticity can only lead to inauthenticity and alienation. Inauthenticity because “To stifle the sense that I was living someone else’s life is beyond me”¹⁷ and alienation because the longed-for self-identity only opens up to more divisions: “Amazing, that something as tiny as the self should contain contending sub selves etc. Even more amazing, that an educated man might be seeking self-integration”¹⁸. Tarnopol thinks he must act like a man because he is a man, this makes him a man some of the time, a “child” most of the time¹⁹, and a wreck all of the time, because it makes him “the authority as well as the escapee”²⁰, a man at war with himself. This attempt at realism about the self is collapsing in spectacular ways in *My Life as a Man*, which chronicles the impasses of “living-as,” that is to say, the impasses of the objectivist fantasy that leads one to follow a fictional self.

The man Tarnopol aims to be is an imaginary caricature taken to be his only chance at being real.

15 Roth (1974), p. 173.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 128.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 84.

18 Roth (1993), p. 152.

19 Roth (1974), p. 74, p. 75, p. 79.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 85.

But Tarnopol, a man apprentice, is also a writer apprentice, and the author he uses as his model is Flaubert²¹. The figure of Flaubert, which recurs in both *The Facts* and *My Life as a Man* as the epitome of the writer, puts into play a number of dimensions all connected to Roth's trajectory towards the understanding that realism is a fraud. Flaubert is known as the godfather of realist writing, for the "pitiless"²² and "detached irony"²³ that flows from this stance, namely, contempt for dreamy unrealism as it is satirized in *Madame Bovary* in particular. In *the Facts*, Roth's courtship with the woman who will become his nemesis is sealed by his "enlightening her about the sensuous accuracy of *Madame Bovary*"²⁴ (92). But here is Maureen's cruel response, as read in her diary in *Life as a Man*: "if it weren't for me, he'd still be hiding behind his Flaubert and wouldn't know what real life was like if he fell over it."²⁵ Tarnopol himself confirms: "I'll try a character like Henry Miller, or someone out-and-out bilious like Celine for my hero instead of Gustave Flaubert – and won't be such an Olympian writer as it was my ambition to be back in the day when nothing called personal experience stood between me and personal detachment"²⁶. For, as he now says, it was wrong to believe that objectivity had to be the opposite of "the low road of candour (and anger and so forth)," for,

21 Roth (1988), p.157..

22 *Ibidem*, p. 107.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 157.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 92.

25 Roth (1974), p. 310. See also Roth (1993), p. 370.

26 Roth (1974), p. 229.

as it becomes increasingly clear, there is a conflict between real-life and objectivity. And real-life is on the side of the “low road of candour”, that is to say, life as it is lived and felt, and objectivity is a Flaubertian high “perch”²⁷ which under the guise of an unblinking gaze, refuses life as it is. The result is nothing short of an ontological opposition, a conflict between whether objectivism, which presumes that life is something that *is* (and therefore can be accurately described objectively) or candour which takes it that life is something that *lives* (and therefore can only be exemplified, illustrated, *lived*).

In the very passages in which Flaubert irrupts in the courtship between Roth and Josie, the defeat of objectivism is shown to collapse into just more fiction: “I was wooing her, I was wowing her, I was spiritedly charming her – motivated by an egoistic young lover’s predilection for intimacy and sincerity, I was telling her who I thought I was and what I believed had formed, but I was also engaged by a compelling form of narrative responsory”²⁸. The rest of the complex that animates *My Life as a Man-The Facts-Operation Shylock*, chronicles the hangover and withdrawal symptoms that result from this ontological shift. It becomes a story of healing as sobering, with the latter book explicitly being “about someone who is recovering”²⁹. This healing is of course a return from the two to the one, a self-unification, but it has only been made possible by the

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

²⁸ Roth (1988), p. 93.

²⁹ Roth (1993), p. 394.

renouncing of the double, not its integration; and this renouncing, in turn, relies on the discovery that one doesn't have anyone to be, and therefore that the double can be no model³⁰. The healing hangs on the question of whether you seek truth or give up on truth (without engaging in lies, since lies obey the regime of truth): Pipik is the Roth that hasn't healed but continued being the Tarnopol from *My Life as a Man*, while the "true" Roth is the one who moves away from it. Tarnopol (and later Pipik) believes in essence, Roth the healed doesn't³¹.

III

The solution to this tension between our unavoidable belief in the opposition of fact and fiction and our insurmountable experience of their collusion, is to no longer yield to the self-delusion according to which fiction and facts stand opposed to each other³². This opposition may take one of two forms: either it is the illusion that there is truth under fiction, or that there is none³³. Yet, Roth goes further: many of his fictions chronicle the failure to achieve this overcoming in either of its two forms. The alternative, in those novels that collapse into

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 225.

³² Roth (1988), p. 166.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 191.

failure, is death³⁴, “perpetual fear”³⁵ or distantiation³⁶. In those novels, the fatal dualism remains, “it seems either that literature too strongly influences my ideas about life, or that I am able to make no connection at all between its wisdom and my existence”³⁷.

What this leaves us with therefore is a choice between two forms of deception: one that is subjected to the regime of truth and remains committed to the opposition of truth and falsity; and another, which rejects truth and falsity equally. I take it this is the same tension that Posnock identifies at the heart of the purist impulse to criticise purism³⁸. This is the step many Roth readers³⁹ refuse to make: recognizing that the first alternative falls under the blows of the critique of the second (which they acknowledge). On the basis of the parallel between self-deception and the wrong choice of literary model; on the basis of the understanding of self-deception as the conflict between facts and fiction as spelled out in *The Facts*, one should not be surprised if this solution was none other than literature itself. In order to find such resolution, we need to look to the conclusion to *The Facts*, at Roth’s backward glance over *My Life as a Man*. There it is finally a matter of “[reflecting] on the relationship between what happens in a life and what

34 See Roth (1974), Roth (2009), Roth (1971). In Roth (1988), the author himself ponders this: “I was transfixed by the uncanny overlapping of the book’s [When she was Good] ending with the actual event” (p. 149).

35 See Roth (2004).

36 See Roth (1997) and Roth (1993), p. 215.

37 Roth (1974), p. 86.

38 See Posnock (2001) and Posnock (2008), pp. 50 ff.

39 Posnock himself, and Aarons (2013).

happens when you write about it”⁴⁰. In other words, it is this relation between fact and fiction which is called literature, and it is the space of the resolution of the self-delusion of authenticity. “And no, the distortion called fidelity, Roth writes to himself, is not your *métier* – you are simply too real to outface full disclosure. It’s through dissimulation that you find your freedom from the falsifying requisites of ‘candour’”⁴¹. If the conclusion of *Shylock* takes the form of a long and eloquent rant about the immoral character of all words as distortive of true facts, under the guise of a theological discussion of *Iashon Hara*, a Talmudic concept that identifies speaking and gossip or speaking-ill; one can only conclude, against Rabbinical instincts, that the practice of language is the chance of redemption and healing for those who are convalescing from the illusion of realism⁴². Thus, we’ve seen Roth’s characters, himself and his personae, being thrown around between the Charybdis of alienation and the Scylla of authenticity. In the first, the self deceives himself into believing he is another. In the second, he deceives himself into believing he is not. We can now see that this self-deception about the self is also the result of an illusion about existence as a whole: it is the

40 Roth (1974), p. 164.

41 Roth (1988), p. 184.

42 In Roth *et al.* (2001), pp. 94-95, Roth asks Kundera about the laugh of the devil because god’s work makes no sense and the laugh of the angels because there is meaning everywhere. Kundera responds: “Human life is bound by two chasms, fanaticism on the one side and absolute skepticism on the other.” (94-95) and “The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question... people nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, ... so that the voice of novel can hardly be heard” (p. 100).

belief in objective truth in general that compels Roth's characters to seek the truth. This allows us to now consider that these two forms of self-deception have a common root which must be torn away. To Roth, as we saw, this common root is the belief in the opposition of truth and fiction. The tearing away, consequently involves the experience of the unity of truth and fiction. This is not an appeal to fiction if by this one was to mean the yielding to illusion, rather, it is a superior form of realism, one that recognizes reality for what it is: meaning. For "narrative is the form this knowledge takes"⁴³. Since the self-delusion complex described so far relies on the unity of self-delusion about oneself and self-delusion about reality, it is no surprise that Roth's thinking about fiction as reality leads him into a narrativist notion of the self and of the world at once. At a more personal level, it also means that to the author, fiction-writing is the healing of self-delusion⁴⁴.

But what is fiction then, or what does the unity of reality and fiction, reality as fiction, look like? For Roth, it looks of course, like reality. That is to say, it is the world we live in. Simply put, the long healing process we've described so far has yielded the insight that the world we call reality is made of meanings, not of objects or facts. The world in which fiction and reality are two names for the same thing can only be a world of meaning. This is not surprising, for in meaning, retrieving (recognition) and creating (interpretation) are one. The role

⁴³ Roth (1988), p. 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 162.

of fiction therefore, is to stand at the crossroads between the fantasy of objectivity and the fantasy of subjectivity, where they merge, which is where reality lies: “to make the objective subjective and the subjective objective, which is after all, no more than what writers are paid to do”⁴⁵. Finding this place, where “the relationship between what happens in a life and what happens when you write about it”⁴⁶ is consumed, is precisely the opposite of the illusory belief in the opposition of reality and fiction. Roth calls that illusion paranoid, because it is constantly and fruitlessly looking for new facts, it obsessively gnaws at its lack of knowledge, and because it harbours an experience of passivity and powerlessness: the world is as it is, and my only access to control consists in finding out what it’s made of. For, as Roth himself contends, fiction, because it merges the subjective and the objective, merges passivity and activity too, it stands, between “Halcion” (an external chemical influence before which the subject is passive) and “dream” (an active construction)⁴⁷. Between these two pathologies, we find literature: “the inexhaustible access to falsification that fortifies paranoid rage has nothing in common with the illusion that lifts a book free of the ground”⁴⁸. On the contrary, the fictional existence is not paranoid because it takes responsibility for its own agency, for its own complicity with the making of the world of meaning, which Roth himself declares is “the

45 Roth (1993), 246.

46 Roth (1988), p. 164.

47 Roth (1993), p. 34.

48 *Ibidem*, p. 374; see also p. 36.

pathology of the species"⁴⁹: What are we to do with such pathology? Not, like the young Tarnopol, fall for the illusion that interpretations aim at the truth, for this, precisely, will lead to madness⁵⁰ but rather, come to define ourselves as those that interpret, that is to say, come to embrace the fact that our world of meaning is not supported by anything but itself. This is why the manly life that was sought all along is now found in renouncing it: for it is, literally, manliness as virtue, that comes through when a man takes responsibility for the fact that his life is self-justifying. The facts, really, are only interpretations that misinterpret themselves as their opposite. The deepest structure of objectivism seems to coincide exactly with the structure of self-deception. Fiction, which consists in interpretations that are cognizant of their nature, remains one step closer to the truth, it is, compared to the facts, one illusion short: "Why is it, writes Roth, that when they talk about the facts they feel that they're on more solid ground than when they talk about the fictions?"⁵¹. This belief is the ultimate delusion and this delusion is self-delusion, because it is the subjective belief that the subject is an object, and the act of deluding oneself into believing our own interpretations to be what they're not, facts. The rebellion against the figure of Flaubert is therefore now complete.

49 Roth (1988), p. 57.

50 See Roth (1974), pp. 56-57.

51 Roth (1988), p. 166.

IV

I have tried to trace a certain movement that animates Roth's writing (as well as the trajectories of some of his characters and personae) as structured by a gradual process of sobering before self-deceptions. It is time to review what is at stake.

First, as regards our understanding of Roth himself, I suggested that the place of self-deception, which is prominent in any kind of literature, be it only because literature must always distance itself from self-deception and therefore constantly reflect upon it, is approached by Roth through the figure of the double. Secondly, one could speculate, on the basis of my account so far, that we should consider the triad *My Life as a Man-The Facts-Operation Shylock* as an organic whole unified by the question of self-deception. This is a triad that dramatises the defeat that awaits those who commit to naïve realism, either by taking fiction to be true (as Tarnopol takes the moral fiction about manhood to be true) or by taking reality to be real (as Roth does in *The Facts*, only to discover that his non-fictional autobiography is nothing but another fiction). Like Goblar⁵² and Shostak⁵³, Kjerkegaard, in examining more or less the same group of novels, come to the conclusion that "fictionality can function as a highly developed communicative resource which both the author and the reader can explore *together*"⁵⁴. He is right,

⁵² See Goblar (2001), p. 51.

⁵³ See Shostak (2000), p. 38.

⁵⁴ Kjerkegaard (2016), p. 143.

but vague. This togetherness will remain vague or misleading if we remain stuck in an epistemic model. This exploration is not about finding out about a third entity which, by some magic, both the author and the reader would be interested about at the same time. It is no longer about the failure to achieve truth, a fact well-known. It is not even any longer about how the nature of fiction is to testify to this impossibility. It is about how fiction is life, and as such, the seeking for truth is the ultimate fantasy, the one that is to be rooted out. Literature is not *about* life, but *is* life itself, and any honest – that is to say, sober – realism will be fictionalism. Thirdly, Roth offers insights on self-deception as a general phenomenon: first, it relies on the fiction of the self, i.e., the fiction that there is such a thing as the self, either one to be re-joined, one to be discovered, or one to be acted out. The second is that this fiction of the self, because it places too high a demand on self-identity, tends to define everything (except for its fantasized self-identical self) as *other*, resulting into delusions of doubles, alter-egos, brothers etc. In short Roth teaches us that self-deception is the psychological disorder that accompanies the philosophical pathology commonly known as realism, and authenticity.

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