

## *My Roth*

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THE DEATH OF Philip Roth moves me. I suspect many other Jewish men (or male intellectuals?) of a certain age are also feeling moved by their memories of feeling moved by Roth's work, but I should speak only for myself. His literary art played a profound role in my coming of age in the late sixties and early seventies, specifically in facing my ambivalence about growing up male, middle class, and Jewish, in engaging what maturity—and what identification as Jewish but atheist in a Christian culture—had to or could mean. His books were for me an ally against all the parental (and internalized) pressures to conform, to achieve, to be good, and therefore also a voice contesting my earnest self-righteousness as a budding antiwar activist and leftist. My Roth, joined with my Nietzsche, moved me to question the “good and evil” in my overdetermined inclination toward simplistic moralism; they helped me see the smugness in my ready judgments about the self-deception, cowardice, or bad faith of others; they were my way to try to be more honest about how I really felt, compared to how I wished to be and be seen. They were relentless warrior allies opposing self-deception, Hallmark sentimentality, formulaic thinking. Nietzsche and Roth became like my wingmen, complicating my blooming Marxism; maybe I should say they formed one wing of my intellectual and political subjectivity, while Marx and Gramsci formed the other, together in tension enabling my line of flight. Graduate school gave me Freud, Norman O. Brown, and the feminist critic Dorothy Dinnerstein, as well as immersion in the American canon, which surrounded and complicated my Roth and my Nietzsche. But Roth was a key voice in what I have come to call my “groucho marxism,” which aspires to hold together forms of perception and registers of feeling whose separation is so costly, both to oneself and to others.

I think about Roth in terms of Nietzsche's necessary tension between Dionysian energies and Apollonian forms. On the one hand,

he depicted energies that seem at once so intimate and yet so impersonal, so urgent and yet also so indifferent to our intentions and rules, not only carnal but excessive, psychically charged drives that Roth called our “human stain.” And then, on the other hand, he both depicted and enacted the meaning making and form giving by which we fashion identities, conceive narratives, conjure boundaries, and imagine justice. In a voice both comic and dark, Roth narrated tragedies in which life exposes our misrecognitions and disavowals as it undoes the fictions we have lived by. He rejected moralizing, in politics or art, as a bad form of fiction, but he did so in novels that dramatized moral conflict over our drives. He opened a scary fictional space in which life and art undermined each other, even as each was given its due. His funny, extravagant, and psychologically acute language is a triumph of the vernacular, the only redemption his art offers.

There is no ignoring Roth’s implicit politics, or the sexual politics of his male characters, including his alter-ego narrator, Nathan Zuckerman. On the one hand, Roth’s novels seemed to dramatize a jaundiced view of sixties radicalism and of feminism, as if both were simply symptoms of the self-righteous moralism he hated—and lampooned in his takedowns of Zionist fanaticism. On the other hand, his male characters (and narrator voices) always betrayed my feminist standards of reciprocity; if they seemed admirable to me because they did not give way on their desire, they were driven by narcissism toward endless sexual conquest, toward psychodramas of use and disappointment; his men were ultimately desperate, pathetic, and unsatisfied. But my approval or disapproval of his male characters always seemed, and still does, beside the point. Did his characters enact what we now call a toxic masculinity? Roth is perhaps its greatest analyst, and dramatist. Did he have to “know” it from the inside to portray it so viscerally and vividly? Of course! (Wasn’t Melville as much Ahab as Ishmael?) At issue is not my approval, or even my “liking,” of his characters, as if the criteria are whether they meet my moral or political standards of properly democratic conduct. At issue, at least for me, are the realities or truths made visible by and in the fiction, and so by and through the spectacularly outrageous voices and voicing of

his writing. Still, by this standard, his women are not vividly alive, as could also be said for Melville, Twain, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, DeLillo, and I could extend this list. What does this mean for our judgment of their fictions?

Roth was perhaps the greatest dramatist of what he called the “ecstasies of sanctimony” that periodically consume American political life. Maybe it is no surprise if his body of work and legacy are consumed or at least devalued by another such episode, reducing his work to a symptom of phallic power or male id run amok. It would be a great shame if this happens. It seems especially crucial now, in the face of Trump’s transgressions, to remember the wayward desires, the rage and willful narcissism, and the self-deception—the human stain—in all of us, and so also to remember our investment in making fictions that disavow this darkness, in making or finding enemies who embody it for us. In the context of grappling with the complex weaving of sex, aggression, and status in ordinary life and politics, it is surely necessary to oppose the stratified inequalities and violence that embody race and gender, but therefore also important to remember the truths, at once empowering and humbling, that Roth (and Nietzsche) dramatize.

Just as many critics once asked, why would a democrat or a leftist read Nietzsche? it seems important to answer that question about Roth. My answer, at least, concerns how his work opens to view what he called “the indigenous American Berserk” as it illuminates dimensions of life that our realism or progressive narrative cannot access, including the necessities and dangers of fiction making, the attraction of identity and moralism, the endlessly inventive disavowals by which we live, and the ways life defeats every moral scheme, projected identity, or political project. In our American context, Roth seems especially important, and important now. I think the Left fails in the United States for the same reason that people on the Left devalue Roth. When I think about our self-defeating impasse, here it is. How so? Because people like Melville and Roth, also Fitzgerald, Twain, and Faulkner, got *inside* the individualism of the culture, the investment in self-determination and self-making, and also got inside the will to conformity and moralism—two sides of the Lockean-Puritan

subjectivity Melville considered monomaniacal and pervasive. They entered the amoral wildness of a culture defined by self-invention and frontiers, as Melville captured in his confidence man. There is a deep connection between the writer of fictions and the type of Elmer Gantry, P. T. Barnum, and Donald Trump. The extravagant fictions, the amoral narcissism that denies the authority of reality and blatantly uses others, are terrifying to behold, but these seem inseparably bound up with our capacity for freedom and creativity, often demonized in the view of moralists as irresponsible, if not downright wicked. As colleagues in the humanities and on the academic Left increasingly demonize “sovereignty” as inherently pathological, and offer instead “tragic” invocations of nonsovereignty as a condition all people “must” accept, they actually echo the “lessons” of Roth’s fictions, but in the form of a scolding bad conscience, smug in its protective knowingness. So long as the Left does not take seriously (rather than avoid or denounce) the animating energies of so many in this country—and across lines of class, race, and gender—we will fail.

I am defending Roth because, like our other great novelists, he inhabited and dramatized the dream of self-determination and self-invention in all its creative and self-defeating vicissitudes; by creating fictions whereby we can see and feel it, suffer and witness it, we undergo an entanglement that is the only way change can happen. To put this differently, so long as the Left takes the side of the superego, we will fail in a culture committed to a dream of personal freedom, not of social justice, or of social justice only as a means of emancipating personal freedom for all. Roth is a great analyst and critic of this mode of individuation, but he always writes on behalf of our creative freedom even as he dramatizes its often horrific costs. In this sense I read his work as an ally for those of us who would shift the affective, or I should say psychic, alliance of the Left. His texts do not endorse the id against the superego, but dramatize the conflict for the sake of feeling rather than avoiding it. The politics of his work ultimately rest not in identifying with or as the male characters, but in experiencing and acknowledging the conflicts between desire and norm that they undergo and are usually defeated by. In these senses the texts

open a space for an “I” that credits its inescapable entanglement with the opaque energies animating us, and so its vexed interdependence with others. But his texts are not normalizing or prescriptive; that is what is liberating, and I would say democratic, about them. If Roth’s experiment seems too bound by the gendered (and often, but not only, Jewish) terms in which many Cold War–era writers and critics dramatized the problem of desire and freedom, is it too great a stretch to cast Sarah Silverman and Amy Schumer, among others, as a successor generation reworking that legacy?

Let me try to clarify, then, what I mean by aligning left politics with desire. If we say desire, we also must ask whose desire, desire in what form, and for whom or what?—and these political questions take us beyond Roth’s work. He worked only in the key of male desire, and only in the register of desire, rarely in the register of love. It is as if, in a Puritan culture that radically separated desire and love, he took sides, as if love was only the emasculating voice of kinship, tribe, and women. My New Left and feminist legacy says that desire and love need to be joined to make reciprocal bonds with others that do not sacrifice or renounce our sexuality or aliveness. If the challenge is to (re)unite our passionate being and our bonds and projects with others, then Roth could not rise to it. Maybe it is more generous to say that for him the task was tracing desire and its shipwrecks, not visualizing its redemption. Still, such dramas remain a part of repair. But maybe this very “failure” on Roth’s part is also his great triumph, the great (and psychoanalytic) truth his texts dramatize, that our desire does not “fit” into the world and relationships, that desire makes us unfit for sociality, however powerfully compelling our longing for attachment. Not only male desire. Human desire.