Letting Go: The Curious Case of Philip Roth's Mature Immaturity

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Abstract. In his work, Philip Roth sets forth the idea that the Self's subjectivity is possible only within the domain of the interhuman, or in other words, in interaction with other subjects. Every time his characters adopt the stance of radical and programmatic individuality, which inevitably entails isolation of the Self, Roth subjects the respective characters to scathing criticism. The self instinctively adopts defensive strategies to forestall the multitude of threats that could compromise its integrity. In Roth's take on it, however, when this becomes the dominant modus operandi in social interaction, the self relinquishes its individuality and status of a subject and personality and turns into an object, a victim to illusory threats. Besides, the Self perceiving itself as an object usually perceives other individuals as objects to be manipulated and used in the project of radical individuality whose aim is to ensure the Self's integrity. Eventually, the project fails and the drive to manipulate is exposed as egregious folly in a world where nothing is within the individual's control. Within such an ontological reality, the only viable strategy is for the Self to lower its guard and dive into the vortex of social interaction and the domain of the interhuman. In Roth's view, this is the only road to attaining subjectivity.

Keywords: the Self, subjectivity, individuality, control

Иван Димитров. СВАЛЯНЕТО НА ЗАЩИТИТЕ: ЛЮБОПИТНИЯТ КАЗУС С МЪДРАТА НЕПРИНУДЕНОСТ НА ФИЛИП РОТ

Резюме. В творчеството си Филип Рот развива тезата, че Азът може да притежава субективност само чрез взаимодействие с други личности. Всеки път, когато неговите персонажи възприемат позата на радикална и програмна индивидуалност, която неизменно изисква изолация на Аза, Рот подлага съответните персонажи на безмилостна критика. Азът инстинктивно възприема отбранителна стратегия, за да

се предпази от многобройните заплахи, които биха могли да нарушат и застрашат неговия интегритет. Това е естествен инстинкт за самосъхранение. Според Рот, когато този инстинкт за самосъхранение се превърне във водещ лайтмотив в социалното общуване, Азът абдикира от своята индивидуалност и статут на субект и личност и се превръща в обект, предмет на, в повечето случаи илюзорни заплахи. Освен това този самовъзприемащ се като обект Аз неотменно възприема и останалите индивиди като обекти или предмети, които той манипулира и използва, за да постигне проекта от радикална индивидуалност, гарантиращ запазване цялостността на Аза. В крайна сметка усилията за самоизолация се провалят, а стремежът към контрол е изобличен като суета на суетите в един свят, в който нищо не е под контрола на индивида. В такава онтологична реалност единствената жизнеутвърждаваща житейска стратегия е Азът да свали защитите и да се потопи безусловно в рисковете на социума. Според Рот това е единственият начин Азът да постигне пълноценна субективност.

Ключови думи: Азът, субективност, индивидуалност, контрол

Philip Roth's legacy (he passed away in May 2018) has been largely underappreciated. Throughout his literary career, he strove to attain the truth about the human predicament. Though strictly secular in his concerns and methods of investigation, Roth professes a message which in its essence is inherently spiritual, an injunction which he chose for his first full-length novel: *Letting Go.* A careful analysis of his oeuvre reveals what Roth admonished his readers to let go of: life's defenses. The self naturally erects around itself a panoply of strategic defenses whose aim is to further the programmatic individualistic project. Roth proves, however, that these strategies are counterproductive: instead of furthering the development of the self, they block its growth and potential, rendering the self a mere shadow of what it could be. When deployed, the self's defenses turn it into an *object*, rather than the yearned-for *subject*. This paper will review four novels of Philip Roth. Two theoretical approaches will be employed in the analysis- Martin Buber's *I and Thou* and Tzvetan Todorov's *Human and Interhuman*.

Martin Buber's *I and Thou* is a philosophical-religious treatise expounding the proposition of two general attitudes that the subject can engage with others:

> To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks. The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words. The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou***.** The other primary word is the combination *I-It*; wherein, without a change in the primary, one of the words *She* and *He* can replace *It*. Hence the *I* of man is twofold. For the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It* (Buber 3).

From the very beginning of his treatise, Buber outlines the two types of relations man can enter into. They are intrinsically different and in hierarchical relation to each other:

> Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations. Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence. Primary words are spoken from the being. If *Thou* is said, the *I* of the combination *I-Thou* is said along with it. If *It* is said, the *I* of the combination *I-It* is said along with it. The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being. The primary word *I-It* can never be spoken with the whole being (Buber 3).

In Buber's view, the I can only be defined in terms of an Other; the I, or the subject, cannot exist independently, but only in relation. The second point he makes is that the *I-Thou* relation is of higher order than the *I-It* relation. It is important to elucidate the meaning Buber invests in the words *Thou* and *It*. When he writes of the *I-Thou* relation, he means Subject-Subject relation. Respectively, the *I-It* relation stands for Subject-Object relation. The former type of relation is one of equality, the latter develops along the axis of exploitation, or experience, as Buber writes. As already noted, the author puts forward his thesis in a series of reflections, outlining the qualitative differences between the two types of relations. In fact, Buber employs the term relation only to the *I-Thou* type:

> The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some *thing* for their object… When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no *thing*; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation. (4)…As experience, the world belongs to the primary word *I-It*. The primary word I-Thou establishes the world of relation (6).

Buber outlines temporal distinction between the two types of engagement with the world:

> The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou*, that is, the *I* faced by no *Thou*, but surrounded by a multitude of "contents", has no present, only the past. Put in another way, in so far as man rests satisfied with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no present content. He has nothing but objects. But objects subsist in time that has been. True beings are lived in the present, the life of objects is in the past (13).

Indeed, subjectivity is only possible in the dynamics of the *I-Thou* relation. In Buber's take, subjectivity is established not merely in relation to an Other; the es-

tablishment of subjectivity necessitates an *I-Thou* relation, whereas the *I-It* relation produces only individuality:

> The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different word from the *I* of the primary word *I-It*. The *I* of the primary word *I-It* makes its appearance as individuality and becomes conscious of itself as subject (of experiencing and using). The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* makes its appearance as person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity. Individuality makes its appearance by being differentiated from other individualities. A person makes his appearance by entering into relation with other persons. The one is the spiritual form of natural detachment, the other is the spiritual form of natural solidarity of connection (62).

With this important distinction, Buber gives his contribution to the theorization of subjectivity by narrowing down its province within the *I-Thou* relation. Furthermore, according to Buber, love can only arise in the context of *I-Thou* relation: "Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its "content", its object; but love is *between I* and *Thou*. Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*" (14–15). Buber discerns a tragic pattern to the human existence because every *Thou* is inevitably fated to become an *It*:

> But this is the exalted melancholy of our fate, that every *Thou* in our world must become an *It*. It does not matter how exclusively present the *Thou* was in the direct relation. As soon as the relation has been worked out or has been permeated with a means, the *Thou* becomes an object among objects- perhaps the chief, but still one of them, fixed in its size and its limits…Every *Thou* in the world is by its nature fated to become a thing, or continually to re-enter into the condition of things (17).

After investigating the two modes of engagement with the world, in the third part of the book, Buber outlines the religious implications from the predominantly *I-It* mode of engagement of modern man with the world, which results in existential crisis. However, we will not concern ourselves with the religious aspect of the issue. What is relevant to Philip Roth's work is Buber's contribution to the psychological theories on subjectivity and articulation of the fundamental duality of the self, which is one of Roth's overarching themes. It is reified into manifestation in two alternative modes of engagement with the world. The first mode of engagement is what Buber calls experience (*I-It*). In it man collects data, analyzes it, classifies it, and theorizes about it. The object of experience (the It) is viewed as a thing to be utilized, a thing to be known or put to some purpose. In experience we see our object as a collection of qualities and quantities, as a particular point in space and time. There is a necessary distance between the experiencing *I* and the experienced

It: the one is subject, and the other object. In the second mode of engagement, which he calls encounter (*I-Thou*):

> we enter into a relationship with the object encountered, we participate in something with that object, and both the I and the You are transformed by the relation between them. The You we encounter is encountered in its entirety, not as a sum of its qualities. The You is not encountered as a point in space and time, but, instead, it is encountered as if it were the entire universe, or rather, as if the entire universe somehow existed through the You. We can enter into encounter with any of the objects that we experience; with inanimate objects, with animals, and with man. With man the phenomena of encounter is best described as love"(30).

The difficulty in engaging in an *I-Thou* relation, according to Buber, lies in the fact that it shatters our sense of security:

> The world of *It* is set in the context of space and time. The world of *Thou* is not set in the context of either of these. The particular *Thou*, after the relational event has run its course, ***is bound*** to become an *It*. The particular *It*, by entering the relational event, ***may*** become a *Thou*. These are the two basic privileges of the world of It. They move man to look on the world of *It* as the world in which he has to live, as the world, indeed, which offers him all manner of incitements and excitements, activity and knowledge. In this chronicle of solid benefits, the moments of the *Thou* appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security- in short, uncanny moments we can well dispense with. For since we are bound to leave them and go back to the "world", why not remain in it? Why not call to order what is over against us, and send it packing into the realm of objects? Why, if we find ourselves on occasion with no choice but to say *Thou* to father, wife, or comrade, not say Thou and mean *It*? To utter the sound *Thou* with the vocal organs is by no means the same as saying the uncanny primary word; more, it is harmless to whisper with the soul an amorous *Thou*, as long as nothing else in a serious way is meant but *experience* and *make use of* (Buber 33–34).

Buber traces the sense of angst of modern times back to man's inclination to engage with the world and fellow human being in the *I-It* mode. Thus, other human beings become objects to be used and manipulated for convenience' sake. The price to be paid, however is the sense of all-pervading meaninglessness, because man has surrounded himself by mere objects, not realizing that these objects are of his own making; man is oblivious of the fact that he is the author of his own world. This is where Buber's most important contribution to the theorization of subjectiv-

ity comes: the implied free will in the world we create for ourselves. We have the freedom of choice to create for ourselves a world of objects (*I-It* mode of engagement); objects to be used and manipulated. Conversely, we may choose to enter in relation with the world by relating to subjects, instead of using objects, and in the process, as Buber says:

> Through the *Thou* a man becomes a *I*. That which confronts him comes and disappears, relational events condense, then are scattered, and in the change consciousness of the unchanging partner, of the *I*, grows clear, and each time stronger (Buber 28).

While Buber concurs with other theorists that subjectivity is not an island in itself and its formation is reliant upon the Other, Buber articulates the freedom of every person to choose the mode of engagement of the self with that Other. It is contingent upon that choice that man creates a world of meaninglessness, or meaningfulness.

2. In his essay "Human and Interhuman", Tzvetan Todorov lays out the thesis that in his investigation of Dostoevsky's work:

> Mikhail Bakhtin has discovered a special feature of Dostoevsky, but he is mistaken about its proper designation. Dostoevsky is exceptional in that he represents several consciousnesses simultaneously and on the same level, each one as convincing as the next; but as novelist he nonetheless maintains a faith in the truth as the ultimate horizon. Without being embodied in character (men are not Christ), the absolute may still serve as the governing idea for the quest in which all mankind shares (Todorov 81).

Todorov traces a remarkable reversal in Bakhtin's ideas on the subject. Bakhtin's initial stance was that a writer needs to be in an asymmetrical relation of exteriority and superiority to the fictional characters in a novel. The argument behind such statement is that "life finds its meaning, and thereby becomes a possible ingredient for aesthetic construction, only if it is seen from the outside, as a whole: it has to be entirely encompassed within someone else's horizon (Todorov 74)". Bakhtin calls such a position the writer's exotopy. Todorov comments on Bakhtin's initial stand by comparing the artist to God:

> Such a demand for a higher exotopy is perfectly "classical": God does exist and stays where he belongs; the creator is not mistaken for his creatures; the hierarchy of consciousness in unshakable; the author's transcendence allows us to assess his characters with confidence (Todorov 75).

Bakthin reverses his ideas on the relationship between author and characters after coming under the influence of Dostoevsky's work. As a result of this, Bakthin brands his initial model monologism, while praising Dostoevsky's relationship to his characters as dialogism. Whereas earlier he demanded asymmetry between character and author, with the latter necessarily superior to the former, Bakhtin now never tires of repeating: "In Dostoevsky's work a hero appears whose voice is constructed exactly like the voice of the author himself in a novel of the usual type… What the author used to do is now done by the hero" (quoted in Todorov 75). This shift in Bakhtin's view is evinced in his essay "Discourse in the Novel", where he claims that the novel "makes of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it, the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose" (Holquist 264). Bakhtin goes on contending that "diversity of voices and heteroglossia enter the novel and organize themselves within it into a structured artistic system. This constitutes the distinguishing feature of the novel as a genre" (Holquist 300).

Thus postulated, Bakhtin's dialogism rejects the author's superiority over the protagonist and the two consciousnesses have perfectly equal rights. "To use Buber's terms (as Bakhtin does), Dostoevsky is the first to see the author-character relationship as belonging to the I-Thou (and not the I-It) type" (Todorov 76). It seems that the relationship between Dostoevsky and his protagonists is of complete equality. Todorov, however, counters Bakhtin's claim by quoting Dostoevsky's commentary on a play by a popular author:

> The author took too much liking to his character, and not even once does he look upon Ivan from above. It would seem to us that it is insufficient to set forth correctly all given qualities of a person; one has resolutely to illume him with one's artistic vision. A genuine artist, under no circumstances, should remain on one level with the person portrayed by him, confining himself to mere realistic truth. The impression will carry no truth (quoted in Todorov 80).

Todorov infers that Dostoevsky is "not just one voice among others within his novel, he is the unique creator, privileged and radically different from all his characters, since each of them after all has a single voice, whereas Dostoevsky is the creator of this plurality" (Todorov 80). Indeed, over the course of his career, Bakhtin comes to recognize the radical difference between the author and his characters, as evinced from his words: "The author can never become one of the constituent elements of his work, can never become an image or be part of the object" (quoted in Todorov 81).

Apparently, Dostoevsky represented several consciousnesses simultaneously and on the same level, and yet, represented them from a position of higher authority, possessing some truth, or ideal informing the author's artistic sensibility.

Todorov's contribution lies in identifying and articulating that truth. He asks the question if it is not possible to recognize that the plurality of consciousnesses does not require giving up the idea of a single truth. Referring to Dostoevsky's admission that he was not a 'psychologist', but a 'realist in the higher sense', Todorov concludes:

> This means that Dostoevsky is not satisfied to express an inner truth, but that he describes human beings who exist outside himself, and that these individuals cannot be reduced to a single consciousness (his own): human beings are different, which implies that they are necessarily several; human multiplicity is the truth of the very being of humanity. This is the underlying cause of Dostoevsky's attraction for Bakhtin. If we now attempt to grasp in a single glance the whole of Bakhtin's intellectual itinerary, we note that its unity is achieved in the conviction… according to which the *interhuman is constitutive of the human*. This would be in effect the most general expression of a thought that can by no means be reduced to the individualist ideology, and for which Bakhtin never stopped seeking what may now appear to us to be something like different languages intended to express a single thought (Todorov 82).

Todorov also draws attention to the fact that Bakhtin considered Dostoevsky to be situated at "the antipodes of the culture of the fundamental and definitive solitude, of the idea of the self-sufficient being" (83). Bakhtin clarifies Dostoevsky's philosophy in the representation of his characters as follows:

> "Superman" exists- but not in the Nietzschean sense of being superior; I am superman for the other, as she/he is for me: my external position (exotopy) gives me the privilege of seeing him or her whole. At the same time, I can act as if others did not exist: knowing that the other can see me radically determines my condition. (Wo)man's social nature grounds her/his morality: not in pity, or in the abstraction of universality, but in recognition of the constitutive nature of the interhuman… And one can imagine a transgredience that could not be mistaken for superiority pure and simple, that would not lead me to transform the other into an object: that is what one encounters in acts of love, confession, pardon, or active listening (Todorov 84).

In order to highlight Bakhtin's, or rather Dostoevsky's originality and radical break with previous concepts of selfhood and subjectivity, Todorov compares Bakhtin's model with Rousseau's positing of the subject as an independent entity, fully constituted and complete in itself; an entity to be compared with an other, "whereas, for Bakhtin, the other participates in the very constitution of the self" (85).

As Tzvetan Todorov reveals, Dostoevsky' artistic sensibility in the representation of his fictional characters can be described in terms of the interhuman. No human being is an island, and subjectivity is the function of engagement with an other/another human being in an I-Thou mode of relationship, as Martin Buber theorized. The interhuman is constitutive of human subjectivity and Dostoevsky depicts a multitude of fictional characters on the same plane, without privileging one at the expense of others. However, Dostoevsky does write from a position of exteriority: not superiority, but rather, a position of transcendence, allowing the author to illuminate his characters with the light of the Ultimate truth. As Todorov points out, Bakhtin was a believer and declares that what Christ is for human beings, Dostoevsky is for his characters. As Todorov proves, Dostoevsky's morality is grounded in the Christian truth.

3. If taken at face value, *Portnoy's Complaint* is a novel about an incorrigible libertine, railing against the world's hostility towards his inalienable right to enjoy life without the obstruction of guilt. Portnoy rails against his parents, against his self-perceived ethnic sense of marginality. In other words, the novel could be interpreted as nothing but a programmatic manifesto in the cause of unbridled hedonism. Roth emphatically dismisses such superficial analysis. The emphasis of the novel is on the level of the inter-human: the protagonist's failure to overcome his self-perception as an object, who has to live up to the expectations of his parents, his Jewish community etc. As long as Alexander Portnoy perceives of himself as the helpless victim of external forces, as an 'object', he inevitably operates from the sensibility of one. Subsequently, Alexander transfers his self-objectification onto the women in his life, treating them as objects, too. His pattern of relationships conforms to what Martin Buber theorizes as the *I-It* mode of engagement, which is that of usage. Portnoy is unable to break free from the vicious cycle of self-hate; he is unable to enter in a relationship of the *I-Thou* type, a relationship of love. An example of Portnoy's objectification of women is the following admission of the protagonist: "What I'm saying, Doctor, is that I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds – as though through fucking I will discover America. *Conquer* America- maybe that's more like it" (440). His Jewishness is the source of his self-perceived inferiority and the white Anglo-Saxon protestant girls are the enemy-oppressor with whom Alexander Portnoy settles scores with. Greenberg claims that "Alex displays a strategy of penetrating WASP culture by taking their daughters as girlfriends and thereby gaining a window on the WASP worldview and family life. Sexual penetration becomes cultural penetration" (Greenberg 94).

The author's skeptical attitude towards Alexander is evinced in the fact that Philip Roth gives equal voice to characters laying bare the protagonist-narrator's moral deficiencies. Perhaps the strongest criticism is leveled by a Jewish girl, Naomi, Alex picks up in Israel in a desperate bid to overcome his obsessions. Naomi

highlights the pathetic paradox in Portnoy: he yearns to be a man, yet, his whining and his endless rationalizations and excuses for his weakness is essentially antithetical to manhood:

> The way you disapprove of your life! Why do you do that? It is of no value for a man to disapprove of his life the way that you do. You seem to take special pleasure, some pride, in making yourself the butt of your peculiar sense of humor…everything you say is somehow always twisted, some way or another, to come out 'funny'…In some little way or other, everything is ironical, or self-deprecating (450).

The narrator himself admits defeat at the end of his extended monologue to Dr. Spielvogel. Portnoy's failure resides in his inability to reconcile the warring impulses within, resulting in his inability to overcome his objectification of himself, as well as of everybody else. According to Martin Buber, subjectivity can only exist within the realm of the *I-Thou* relationship, which respectively can be maintained only between two subjects. Portnoy acts from the mental attitude of an object relating to other objects. Predictably, his subjectivity remains stunted; psychologically, he remains a teenager in an adult body; a teenager clamoring for pleasure, yet dreading responsibility. Alexander Portnoy ends his monologue on the same note he starts it, earning the novel the status of failed initiation. At the beginning of his monologue he is an object; at its end, he has not made any progress – he is still the object clamoring for subjectivity.

4. Coleman Silk differs significantly from Alexander Portnoy on several points. He does not rail against his parents' educational methods and has no gripes concerning his childhood. Yet, similarly to Portnoy, fear of being ethnically inferior becomes the driving force of his quest for singularity. After being summarily deserted by his beloved Steena on account of his Afro-American origins, Coleman experiences the trauma of being objectified, of being diminished to and identified by only one of his characteristics, an invisible one, at that. Until the shock of being deserted, Coleman engaged with Steena in an *I-Thou* type of relationship. Following that, Coleman makes the conscious choice of engaging with people only in an *I-It* type of relationship. His rationale is that if people are inclined to judge him and objectify him, he is free to treat others as objects, too, in the pursuit of his dream of being free from the tyranny of the collective *we*. Yet, the paradox of Coleman's quest for individual freedom is summed up in his mother's words, which are perhaps the harshest criticism in the novel: "You are white as snow and you think like a slave" (36).

Coleman becomes entrapped in the same type of attitude, which Alexander Portnoy possesses. Paradoxically, Coleman operates from the position of an object, striving for the privileges of free subjectivity. He is shocked to realize that he mar-

ried his wife solely on account of her curly hair, casting her in the role of an object, objectifying her, contributing to his project of individuality. Once started, Coleman must subject his entire life to that project. He cannot afford to let his guard down. The cost of re-inventing his life is the burden of defusing every probing question that could possibly expose the truth of his blackness. All this comes at a price, and at one point, Coleman seems to be so tired of paying it that he entertains the idea of disclosing his secret to his wife Iris. Eventually, he resists the temptation and is amazed at his folly:

> Suddenly to have begun to think the way a fool thinks: suddenly to think the best of everything and everyone, to shed entirely one's mistrust, one's caution, one's self-mistrust, to think that all one's difficulties have come to an end…to surrender the diligence, the discipline, the taking the measure of every last situation…As though the battle that is each person's singular battle could be somehow abjured, as though voluntarily one could pick up and leave off being one's self, the characteristic, the immutable self in whose behalf the battle is undertaken in the first place (45).

But then, one casual joke puts an end to his project of radical individuality. Until Faunia appears in his life, an unlikely teacher to Dean Coleman Silk, teaching him to let go of his guard, and anyway, there is nothing left to be guarded of his project. Faunia teaches Coleman to relinquish the grip of his objectified/objectifying mindset and engage with her in a transformative-redemptive *I-Thou* type of relationship. Coleman embraces the chance and reclaims his long-lost subjectivity, free from conformity to external forces, free from being forced into objecthood, free to be a subject. Coleman Silk attains the deliverance which Alexander Portnoy begs for from Dr. Spielvogel, but is never granted. With the help of Faunia Farley, Coleman lets go of the imprisoning project of individuality, reclaiming his subjectivity; his self is free from the bonds of objecthood, free to be a subject in its own right. Thus, *The Human Stain* unquestionably earns the status of an initiation story, albeit a late one with Coleman's self-perception following the trajectory of subject-object-subject.

5. Similarly to Coleman Silk, Seymour Levov's appearance allows him to embark on a project of radical individuality. Being the object of the Jewish community's collective admiration, Seymour Levov unwittingly internalizes the objectification, setting out on building his life programmatically. In the pursuit of his pastoral-idyllic project, Levov treats his wife and daughter as mere adjuncts to his dream, as objects contributing to the glamour of his vision. Seymour unwittingly admits it in a conversation with his brother Jerry after the utopian narrative had begun to unravel:

„What did you think was going to happen? You sound surprised. Of course she got raped. Either get off your ass and do something or she‘s going to get raped for a third time. Do you love her or don‘t you love her?“ „How can you ask that?“ „You force me to.“ „Please, not now, don‘t tear me down, don‘t undermine me. I love my daughter. I never loved anything more in the world.“ „As a thing.“ „What? What is that?“ „As a thing—you loved her as a fucking thing. The way you love your wife. (124)

Even Dawn passes judgment on her husband for harboring childish, pastoral illusions that cannot withstand the test of time. Hospitalized in a psychiatric institution, Dawn, together with her daughter, is just another victim to Levov's dream:

How have I wound up here? You, that's how! You wouldn't leave me alone. Had to have me. Had to marry me. I just wanted to become a teacher…I never wanted to be Miss America. I never wanted to marry anyone. But you wouldn't let me out of your sight…You wouldn't leave me be. You were like some kid! You had to make me into a princess. Well, look where I had wound up! In a madhouse! Your princess is in a madhouse (102)!

Dawn holds Seymour accountable for treating her as an object, disregarding her own plans about the future. The accusation is implied in "You had to make me into a princess". In his insightful analysis of the novel, Gentry sees symbolic connection between Seymour's glove-manufacturing company, Newark *Maid*, and Seymour's attitude towards his wife and daughter:

The name of the glove company is symbolic: Newark *Maid*. The glove is a girl, a maid to be molded by the glovemaker into the lady he wants her to be. Swede expects his wife, Dawn, as well as his daughter and probably all women, like his gloves, to be the perfect products of his own manufacturing process (Gentry 165).

Contrary to Dawn's charges, Levov does not think of himself in terms of being a naïve dreamer, but sees himself as a person firmly grounded in reality, "in a rage to be mature" (110). But the authorial irony seeps through the words of the narrator in the very next sentence when Seymour's maturity is described with a metaphor implying hopeless innocence and ignorance of life's realities as "looking ahead into responsible manhood with the longing of a kid gazing into a candy-store window" (110).

Seymour Levov represents what Philip Roth calls 'immature maturity', denoting his character's inability to let go of life's defenses. Instead, Levov's dream is one of purity, putting emphasis on order and structure, ignoring life's inherent unpredictability. However, in Roth's take on it, the unforeseen cannot be ignored and

always insinuates itself into the cozy narratives of his characters', wreaking havoc to order and structure. Roth passes judgment on Levov's resistance to change by means of giving equal voice to his critics in the novel.

With his daughter a murderer on the run, and his wife cheating on him, Levov becomes aware of 'the unforeseen forces out there', yet, he is incapable of removing his allegiance to the utopia of purity and order. Despite the collapse of his idyllic project, Levov re-marries, 'his second shot at convention', as Zuckerman puts it. This is where the authorial critique is most-scathing. Levov's collapsed project of purity resembles that of Coleman Silk. Unlike Coleman, however, Seymour is too fettered to the self-narrative of purity he has spun. He is unable to let go of his project of self-mastery; unwilling to let go of the drive to control; unable of giving up his instrumental stance on himself and his closest people. Essentially, Seymour Levov cannot stop viewing himself and others as objects to be programmatically manipulated and controlled, engaging with everyone in an *I-It* type of relationship. Where Coleman Silk succeeds, Seymour Levov fails. Levov is unwittingly turned into an object by the objectifying adulation of his community, and he transposes the same objectifying attitude to others as well. Diagrammatically, Levov's development can be represented as a straight line: he starts an 'object' and dies an 'object'. In Roth's oeuvre, failure to develop subjectivity is the gravest sin of all. Seymour Levov's failure determines the novel's status as failed initiation.

6. *The Dying Animal* features a protagonist who is an evolved version of Alexander Portnoy: he has reconciled the warring impulses within by completely removing the hectoring voice of his superego, giving free rein to his raging id. In his own version of individualist project, David Kepesh is the consummate narcissist whose only goal is the attainment of sexual pleasure. Essential to his project is the concomitant objectification of women, which entails the protagonist's taking precautions against the slightest sign of emotional attachment. The objectifying attitude is evident in the following confession of the protagonist:

> Now, I'm very vulnerable to female beauty, as you know. Everybody's defenseless against something, and that's it for me. I see it and it blinds me to everything else. They come to my first class, and I know almost immediately which is the girl for me. There is a Mark Twain story in which he runs from a bull, and the bull looks up to him when he's hiding in a tree, and the bull thinks, „You are my meat, sir." Well, that „sir" is transformed into „young lady" when I see them in class (3).

Hence, Kepesh' ethical system hinges on the policy of emotional detachment and non-commitment. His unapologetic hedonism and misogynist attitude has led critics to accuse Philip Roth of propagating his own misogynistic attitude by means of this and other novels depicting similar male characters. Roth has consistently refuted such claims, pointing out his credo that art is not the means to further any

cause. If art is used to this or that end, it becomes ideological propaganda and loses its status as art.

The fact that the novel is not a programmatic call to arms on the part of the author is evinced by the fact that Roth gives once again, as in the other three novels reviewed here, equal voice to characters who denounce Kepesh' philosophical and ethical short-sightedness. Intellectual arguments, however, are incapable of breaching the erudite armor of Prof. Kepesh. George O'Hearn is the fellow–conspirator who helps Kepesh rationalize his being correct in extricating himself from the clutches of emotional attachment. In his analysis of Kepesh' predicament, George articulates the doctrine of the self-sufficient and separate individual as theorized by the Enlightenment's philosophers' great belief in the power of reason:

> He said, „You'll always be powerless with this girl. You'll never be in charge. There's something there," George told me, „that makes you crazy and always will. If you don't cut the connection for good, in the end that something will destroy you. You're no longer merely answering a natural need with her. This is the pathology in its purest form. Look," he told me, „see it as a critic, see it from a professional point of view. You violated the law of aesthetic distance. You sentimentalized the aesthetic experience with this girl—you personalized it, you sentimentalized it, and you lost the sense of separation essential to your enjoyment…I'm against it because it's falling in love. The only obsession everyone wants: ‚love.' People think that in falling in love they make themselves whole? The Platonic union of souls? I think otherwise. I think you're whole before you begin. And the love fractures you. You're whole, and then you're cracked open. She was a foreign body introduced into your wholeness. And for a year and a half you struggled to incorporate it. But you'll never be whole until you expel it. You either get rid of it or incorporate it through self-distortion. And that's what you did and what drove you mad" (35).

It is only after he meets Consuela Castillo that Kepesh' narcissistic shell begins to crumble slowly, but inexorably. The novella's narrator-protagonist depicts the psychological tug-of-war between his accustomed egocentric, insular individuality and the drive 'not to be free', to relate to another human being in more than the *I-It* type of relationship. Consuela is in hospital after undergoing cancer surgery. David Kepesh' fear of losing Consuela, tricks him into confusing reality with the process of his anguished mind, giving rise to an interior dialogue. At first, it appears that Kepesh is having a conversation with some unidentified interlocutor. But, as this dialogue proceeds, the reader becomes conscious of the absence of such interlocutor. Resembling the modernist technique of the interior monologue, Philip Roth choreographs a peculiar type of interior dialogue, evidence of the narrator's hectic state of mind and near insanity. It appears that Kepesh is arguing with …David Kepesh. The final lines of the novella remove any doubt as to that:

…Look, there‘s no time, I must run!
„Don‘t.“
What?
„Don‘t go.“
But I must. Someone has to be with her.
„She‘ll find someone.“
She‘s in terror. I‘m going.
„Think about it. Think. Because if you go, you‘re finished“ (55).

Kepesh is torn between his egotistic self and the self who does not want to be free. It is an epic drama on the small stage of one human being, recalling Huck Finn having to make up his mind whether to betray Jim, or to help him. Huck Finn is torn between his education, telling him that helping runaway slaves is the shortest cut to going to hell, on the one hand, and on the other, his own conscience, urging him to help his friend. Huck's choice is to go to hell rather than betraying Jim. That moment of unadulterated moral choice earns *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the status of initiation story.

Tantalizingly, Philip Roth leaves the reader in the lurch by not revealing unambiguously which part of the narrator's self prevails. In that sense, the novella is open-ended. It is true that Kepesh' narcissistic self has the final word, literally, admonishing his foolish and foolhardy counterpart against the danger inherent in his going to Consuela in the hospital. Yet, the very fact that Prof. David Kepesh, the self-professed roué at the beginning of the novella and philosopher of hedonistic isolationism is holding such a debate with himself is indicative of the protagonist's moving away from his rationalist individualist project, towards what Martin Buber describes as the *I-Thou* type of relationship. Therefore, it can be argued that *The Dying Animal* can be described as an initiation story, albeit a late one. David Kepesh undergoes a significant shift in his perception of his relation to others, and in particular, to women. In his concern and anguish over the pain of another human being, in his concern for Consuela when she is no longer a sexual object to him, Kepesh is finally capable of seeing her as a subject, as a human being with her own subjectivity. In the final pages of the novel, Kepesh realizes that Consuela is more than the sum total of her physical attributes which drew him to her in the first place. In this, the narrator's own subjectivity gains new depth, confirming Martin Buber's theorization that in the *I-Thou* type of relationship, the two subjects undergo a change.

Eventually, Kepesh yields, but not to the sexual impulse, as he describes his vulnerability at the beginning of the novel, but to the yearning to care and relate to Consuela in more than sexual terms; Kepesh yields to the yearning he ridicules halfway through the novella. At the moment of crucial choice, when he has to decide whether to go or not to go, whether to be or not to be, Kepesh resembles Huck

Finn's dilemma whether to help Jim or hand him over to the law. It must be admitted that Kepesh' position is pathetic as compared to Huck's in that Huck faces and resolves that moral dilemma at a much younger age than Kepesh; besides, Huck's choice is unequivocal, whereas Roth leaves the reader's curiosity and thirst for resolution unsatisfied. Maybe Kepesh goes to Consuela, or perhaps he heeds the admonition and does not. Yet, the very fact that David Kepesh becomes aware of the existence of the needs and pain of another human being and is capable to relate to Consuela's anguish is a marked development compared to his initial calculated and programmatic individualist insularity. In that, the novel does conform to the pattern of the initiation novel.

Conclusion

In the four novels reviewed in this paper, Philip Roth treats the issue of who must have authority over one's life. In the four novels, the protagonists have opted for the individualist project, taking full control over their destiny, taking an instrumental stance to their self and subjectivity. Essentially, the four protagonists are on a quest of purity, of ethical and moral absolutism, giving preference to one of the two "D"s in Roth's oeuvre: dignity vs. desire. In *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Dying Animal*, Alexander Portnoy and David Kepesh are on a quest of unbridled hedonism, representing moral absolutism of the Dionysian type. Conversely, in *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, Seymour Levov and Coleman Silk set out in the opposite direction, choosing dignity and the Apollonian as their moral beacon. Strangely enough, they are all subjected to the authorial critique in taking an instrumental stance to their subjectivity.

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, the ironic treatment of Portnoy's insistent clamoring for unbridled sexual gratification refutes the claims of some critics that the novel purveys misogynistic attitudes. On the contrary, the author employs the psychoanalytic monologue to explore a type of masculine subjectivity, which exists in the real, non-fictional world. The graphic details of the narrator's confessions came as a shock to the prejudiced minds of some critics. The issue of prejudice and hypocritical prudishness has already been treated in this paper. Is there some underlying message in *Portnoy's Complaint*, besides the authorial intention to shock the public and gain notoriety? Can we identify some higher truth and message informing Philip Roth's novel?

The next novel reviewed here is *The Human Stain*. Although published in 2000, it is treated here before *American Pastoral* (1997) for thematic considerations. In *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk chooses dignity to desire, voluntarily circumscribing his subjectivity, living a life of deceit and circumspection. The authorial skepticism towards such an individualist project is voiced through several of the characters and the narrator Zuckerman, weaving the story of Silk after his demise. Is there a higher position than mere artistic truth from where the author passes judgment

on his protagonist? Eventually, Coleman is helped out of his individualist project of purity by Faunia Farley's wisdom, who teaches him to let go of his desire to control. Faunia is aware of the essential unpredictability of life and helps Coleman recognize the folly of his instrumental stance on subjectivity in the face of life's unpredictability.

American Pastoral resembles *The Human Stain* in its representation of another utopian dreamer disregarding the unforeseen. Seymour Levov's dream of seamless fusion into the WASP establishment is another quest for purity on a par with Coleman's individualist project. Inevitably, the protagonist is on the receiving end of some harsh criticism from other characters in the novel. The target of that criticism is Seymour's moral rigidity and clinging to his pre-conceived notions of order and stability. Unlike Coleman Silk's redemption by Faunia, Seymour remains in the thrall of his self-narrative of post-ethnic utopia. Once again, Roth criticizes his protagonist's inability to release his grip on the drive to control.

The Dying Animal presents another character spinning out a self-narrative of purity and control. To sustain his lifestyle of sexual gratification, David Kepesh must keep the lid on his capacity for love. He marshals his erudition in the cause of rationalizing the superiority of retaining his status of unaffiliated insularity. Again, the protagonist's intellectual dismissal of the capacity for affection is lambasted by the author's strategy of giving equal voice to other characters. Eventually, Kepesh' radical insularity is breached; the castle has been infiltrated by the insidious foe. Kepesh, against his better judgment, lets go of the obsessive drive to control.

What is to be made of the authorial attitude in these four novels? Thematically, they can be grouped in twos. In two of the novels, Roth portrays characters on a quest for pleasure; the other two novels present characters on a quest for order and structure. Yet, they all are on the receiving end of the author's criticism. At face value, Philip Roth's ethical and moral stance seems contradictory. Is he propagating his own views by representing two roués in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Dying Animal*? But, such an inference is refuted by the implied author's skepticism and irony in these two novels. The other two novels reviewed here, feature protagonists who have chosen dignity as their moral beacon. And yet, they are also on the receiving end of the authorial skepticism towards their individualistic projects. What is the unifying thread in these four thematically diverging and disparate novels, if any?

The clue to the answer of that question can be given if Buber' theorization of the two types of engagement with the world are applied to Roth's novels. The one common feature of the four protagonists is that their individualistic projects inevitably lead them to view and treat other people as objects furthering the attainment of their exalted Valhalla/Eden/Utopia etc. Inevitably, the four protagonist end up engaging, wittingly or unwittingly, in what Martin Buber defines as the *I-It* type of relation. In fact, to remind, Buber does not call it relation, but rather, experience, or usage, because that type of engagement entails the manipulation and exploitation

of others; treating others as objects/tools on the way to the 'higher' goal one has set. This is exactly what the four protagonists are doing, at one point, or another. And this is exactly when and why Philip Roth deploys his irony and skepticism, criticizing and passing judgment on his characters for their inability to 'let go' of their ego-driven quest towards individuality.

Conversely, when his protagonists manage to extricate themselves from the clutches of radical individualism, when they find a way to enter into an *I-Thou* type of relationship, the narrator's and the implied author's irony, skepticism and critique let up. The pattern observed in the four novels reviewed in this dissertation is the following: when the protagonist strikes out on his individualist project, this inevitably entails shutting himself off from others, building walls around oneself, and ultimately, engaging with others only in the *I-It* type of relationship. Two of the four protagonists, Coleman Silk and David Kepesh, manage to burst through the cocoon of radical individuality they have spun for themselves. They realize the self-defeating nature of their respective utopian projects of purity. The projects of all of the four protagonists entail, in one form or another, the self-imposition of restriction in relating to the world and others in the name of gaining freedom from the circumscription of conventions and norms. In effect, the four protagonists willingly trade their inner freedom for the freedom of being free from social conventions. These four protagonists are oblivious to the fact that instead of taking authority over the self, they are willingly relinquishing it to external forces, which deceptively, grant them freedom in one sense, at the steep price of curtailing their mode of engagement with others. In fact, the dynamic of their behavior resembles Althusser's subjectivity model of being hailed into this or that subject position by external factors, whether they are persons or ISAs, as Althusser calls them. It is at this point that Philip Roth's underlying message of his exploration of the self and subjectivity becomes most profound. Although he has never professed his devoutness, Philip Roth's message carries distinctly religious, and in particular Christian, echoes. Different versions of the Bible present this rhetorical question in different versions: "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9:25). This dissertation does not claim that Philip Roth is a Christian, or even a religious person who propagates religious doctrine. Roth's artistic interest is entirely secular and humanistic in its placement of emphasis on the human being only. Yet, parallels with the secularized interpretation of this question are inevitable. As already stated, one of the overarching concerns of Roth, which he explores repeatedly in his works is who has authority over the self. Roth's answer is unequivocal enough: you must have authority over the self. On the surface, the four protagonists in the four novels reviewed here, are in control of their lives and take an instrumental attitude to their subjectivity. Yet, as Roth and this paper reveal, each of the protagonists becomes the unwitting object/victim of outside forces over which he does not have control. Whenever one or another of Roth's protagonists

attempts to gain freedom by running away from what he perceives as a threat, he operates form the consciousness of an object. This results in the paradox of having the subjectivity of an object. In effect restricting his choices and actual freedom; relinquishing control over his self to some external agent, force etc. Roth's message resonates with what Martha Nussbaum describes, in an interview published in Bill Moyers' book *A World of Ideas* as the dilemma of the human predicament:

> To be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame. That says something very important about the human condition of the ethical life: that it is based on a trust in the uncertain and on a willingness to be exposed; it's based on being more like a plant than like a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from its fragility…
> Being a human means accepting promises from other people and trusting that other people will be good to you. When that is too much to bear, it is always possible to retreat into the thought, "I'll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for my own anger, and I just won't be a member of society anymore." That really means, "I won't be a human being anymore."
> You see people doing that today where they feel that society has let them down, and they can't ask anything of it, and they can't put their hopes on anything outside themselves. You see them actually retreating to a life in which they think only of their own satisfaction, and maybe the satisfaction of their revenge against society. But the life that no longer trusts another human being and no longer forms ties to the political community is not a human life any longer (Nussbaum 234).

The parallels between Nussbaum and Buber are evident. In these four novels, Philip Roth depicts characters who are in defense mode, operating from the subjectivity of objects. Respectively, they perceive others as objects, too, entering in the *I-It* type of engagement with others, thus incurring upon themselves the irony and criticism of the author who employs several stylistic techniques to pass judgment on them. What is the ethical vantage point from which the author passes judgment on his protagonists who are unable to change themselves and who are unable to engage in a *I-Thou* type of relationship?

Roth's relation to his protagonists is actually very similar to the relationship of Dostoevsky with his characters. As already discussed, Todorov notes the particular attitude of Dostoevsky to his fictional heroes. On the one hand, as Bakhtin correctly points out, Dostoevsky provides equal representation and voice to all of his characters, establishing the dialogic character of his fiction. On the other hand, however, Dostoevsky retains his right to write from a position of exteriority, allowing him to illuminate his characters from position of the Ultimate truth. As Tzvetan

Todorov reveals, Dostoevsky's artistic sensibility in the representation of his fictional characters can be described in terms of the interhuman. No human being is an island, and subjectivity is the function of engagement with others/another human being in *I-Thou* mode of relationship, as Martin Buber theorized. The interhuman is constitutive of human subjectivity and Dostoevsky depicts a multitude of fictional characters on the same plane, without privileging one at the expense of others. However, Dostoevsky does write from a position of exteriority: not superiority, but rather, a position of transcendence, allowing the author to illuminate his characters with the light of the Ultimate truth. Todorov points out that Bakhtin was a believer and declares that what Christ is for human beings, Dostoevsky is for his characters. As Todorov proves, Dostoevsky's morality is grounded in the Christian truth.

As already noted, Philip Roth is not religious and his novels do not carry any significant religious message. His work, however, possesses remarkable similarity to Dostoevsky in its ethical grounding in the interhuman as the Ultimate truth from whose vantage point Roth sets out to forge his fictional selves. From the very beginning of his literary career, Roth has been interested in the human being in relation to society. As already discussed, Roth distances himself from the aesthetic and ethical sensibility invested in Henderson (*Henderson the Rain King*, Saul Bellow) who at the end of the book finds happiness running around in circles in the unpeopled vastness of the Arctic. On the contrary, Philip Roth consistently pits his characters against the challenges pertaining to the social milieu. He creates his fictional personages from the higher truth of the interhuman as the indispensable pre-condition for the development of subjectivity in the first place. Whenever his characters set out on an individual quest for purity, which invariably entails self-isolation and spurning of the interhuman, the author unfurls his scathing critique at the folly of such individualistic projects. As Nussbaum notes, "the life that no longer trusts another human being…is no longer a human life". The same holds true in relation to Philip Roth's ethical and aesthetic truth when he creates his fictional selves.

Unlike Dostoevsky's, Roth's work will disappoint the religious seeker, but it is richly-rewarding in its profoundly humanistic message in placing centre-stage the struggling human being with all of his/her foibles and imperfections. Philip Roth does allow equal voice to all of his characters; in that, his style is definitely dialogic. However, similarly to Dostoevsky, the author's voice is not at the same level as that of his characters. The author occupies a position of exteriority, investing his novels with the humanist message of the interhuman as the secularized version of Dostoevsky's Ultimate truth. In the four novels reviewed here, the protagonists are judged by the implied author on the ground of whether they succeed or fail in letting go of their defensive objecthood/objectivity, in the guise of utopian project of insularity, and moving on to establishing full-fledged subjectivity by means of entering into the realm of the interhuman, engaging with the world and other subjects in the *I-Thou* type of relation. In Roth's take, subjectivity is not the ready and

complete entity of Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes and Rousseau posited. Such a stance usually results in utopian projects of insular nature and relinquishing of authority and responsibility over one's self. This is how Roth's concept of immature maturity is rendered clear: treating yourself as a project and, inevitably as an object is, paradoxically, tantamount to giving up authority over the self; conversely, letting go of one's defenses and engaging with others in what Martin Buber calls the *I-Thou* type of relation is the only viable and 'mature' subject position for human beings. This is how Roth re-interprets the notion of conventional maturity. Whereas conventional maturity implies rigidity, Roth's take on maturity implies fluidity and the breaking down of the walls of the 'walled city of convention' guarding the individualist and, according to the author, utopian projects of his protagonists. The title of Roth's first full-length novel, *Letting Go*, comes to symbolize the overarching theme of all of Roth's work. The paradox is that only in letting go can the human being come into full charge of the self and subjectivity. Anything else, Roth seems to imply is a perversion with tragic consequences, as he reveals unequivocally.

In his novels belonging to the realistic school, where the issue of human subjectivity is treated in earnest and not merely as the play of surfaces, as he does in the postmodern experiments, Roth professes the belief that subjectivity is the function of the domain of the interhuman, where subjectivity is constantly forged and molded in the fiery furnaces of social interaction and where the self has much less control over the outcome of that process. Thus, the conventional notion of maturity is being radically transformed into the very opposite of its traditional meaning. Paradoxically and counter-intuitively, Roth professes letting go of one's defenses and programmatic individualistic projects of radical self-making since only through the relinquishing of one's drive to control the self can attain subjectivity and its true potential as an individual personality. In Roth's artistic universe, radical autonomy is hell, and heaven is accessible only through the domain of the interpersonal. Roth's underlying message in his work in placing the struggling human being center-stage reflects literature's position into the wider realm of disciplines called the humanities.

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