

**Beyond a Misogynist's Aesthetic:
Rereading the Fiction of Philip Roth and
Martin Amis**

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To my parents, for all the usual—but remarkable — reasons.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

Abstract

This dissertation offers rereadings of works by two of the most controversial and influential living writers: Martin Amis and Philip Roth. These writers are often accused of amorality, or even immorality, and this thesis deals with the controversies these authors have incited with specific focus on their alleged misogyny. Chapter One defines exactly why Amis and Roth are genuine problems for readers. However, I argue that simply condemning these writers also disables a reader's ability to see just how invested they are in issues of pressing importance to contemporary society. Chapters Two, Three, and Four examine specific novels by these authors in the light of theories significant both to their work as well as popular and academic culture. Chapter Two looks at how both Amis and Roth explore their separate theories about ideology, and especially the idea of 'goodness', in *Other People: A Mystery Story* and *When She Was Good*. Chapter Three takes as its subject trauma, history and narrative, illustrating how they relate to *Time's Arrow* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Finally, Chapter Four engages with masculinity theory, demonstrating Roth's and Amis's interest in the subject as exemplified in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *London Fields*. This thesis seeks to illustrate that Amis's and Roth's intellectual engagement with the issues underlying these current theories defies those critics who argue that they are amoral, immoral, or engaged entirely with their own solipsistic philosophies.

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Introduction

The *Chicago Tribune's* 'Tempo' section from June 1, 2006, confronts its reader with a large picture of an unsmiling Philip Roth staring directly into the camera. He looks troubled, despite the brilliant sunshine in which he is lounging. Underneath this picture is an outsized headline—the largest on the page—that reads 'Philip Roth Hates Women.' Julia Keller, the *Tribune's* 'cultural critic,' opens this article with the words, 'He's the best novelist in America. I hope he never writes another word.'¹ Keller's reason for writing this statement introduces the central theme of this thesis. She writes of her position:

A paradox, yes, but one born of baffled sadness. Philip Roth [. . .] breaks my heart nearly every time he lifts his pen. Not because he's a bad writer—he's a provocative and prolific genius—but because he's a great writer with a large and terrible flaw: His women have no souls.²

These damning accusations—that Roth 'hates' women and that his misogyny is represented by his female characters' having 'no souls'—resound throughout both the academic and journalistic criticism of Philip Roth and his fiction. And yet, as Keller recognizes, her position is paradoxical in that she also recognizes Roth as a 'genius' whose works are 'provocative.'³ In other words, Keller calls Roth a misogynist while she admits that there is something about his narrative voice that would seem to pre-empt or question her accusation of misogyny. Martin Amis often faces a similar set of criticisms regarding his relationship to women, as demonstrated by Bette Pesetsky's 1990 review of Amis's *London Fields*. Pesetsky writes that the novel's female protagonist, 'is a problem' because 'she makes us yield to a sneaking

¹ Julia Keller, 'Philip Roth Hate's Women' *Chicago Tribune* June 1, 2006, section five, page 1.

² Keller 1.

³ In another example, underneath another picture of Roth on p. 7, Keller writes 'Because Philip Roth's work illuminates, the fact that he gives short shrift to half the human race is crushingly sad.'

suspicion that a misogynist lingers here somewhere. She is not truly satisfying as character or caricature. She seems to be another of Mr. Amis's plastic women.'⁴

Because of her perceived problems with Amis's characterization of a woman in one of his novels, Pesetsky calls Amis a 'misogynist.' To call a man a misogynist is to suggest that he denounces, as R. Howard Bloch defines *misogyny*, 'the essential[ly] evil nature of woman.'⁵ To believe that women are 'essentially evil' is quite different than creating an artistic image of 'plastic' women. Pesetsky's use of such a harsh accusation as 'misogynist' does not seem to be supported by the relatively mild example for why she comes to her conclusion, and her language in accusing Amis also suggests the vulnerability of her position. Her 'sneaking suspicion' that Amis is a misogynist is a very timid way to level such a severe allegation. As we can see from these examples, and as I will explore in greater detail, the word *misogyny* is used to represent an often undefined set of negative attitudes that men might harbour towards women.

These examples of 'typical' criticism taken from popular journalism point to what is the central theme of my thesis: that Martin Amis and Philip Roth represent, using Pesetsky's term, a 'problem' for readers. As I will show, both writers have found themselves interpreted through their characters and the situations the authors create in their novels. In other words, they are accused of sympathizing with their most violent or offensive male characters or of creating scenarios depicting violence against women out of their own personal desires or fantasies. That said, both Roth and Amis *have* repeatedly engaged in disturbing images of self-destructive women. One of Amis's protagonists is a woman who instigates her own murder, a 'Murderess,'

⁴ Bette Pesetsky, 'Lust Among the Ruins,' *New York Times* March 4, 1990, late ed.: section 7; page 1, column 1.

⁵ R. Howard Bloch, 'Medieval Misogyny', *Representations*, No. 20, Special Issue: Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy. (Autumn, 1987) 2.

and another of his female characters is a woman so determined to kill herself that she shoots herself in the head three times. Roth's character Lucy Nelson dramatically self-destructs, freezing to death after running away from her family out of both madness and spite. In another of Roth's novels, the protagonist is haunted by the suicide of his first wife, whom he disparaged and dominated, even as his treatment of his second wife aggravates her descent into despair, alcoholism, and repeated attempts at suicide. Furthermore, Roth and Amis appear to focus not only on images of self-destructive women but also on the cruelty, subjugation, or humiliation of sexual relations between men and women. Among a plethora of possible examples, Roth's depiction of a young man sodomizing a teenaged girl under her parents' pool table while, upstairs, her mother describes their shopping trip vies for the reader's disgust with Roth's detailed description of Mickey Sabbath urinating on his lover, Drenka. For Amis's part, he refers to a character's violent history of rape as merely 'a particular difficulty with girls.'⁶

Violent or sexually predatory characters like Keith Talent (*London Fields*) or Alexander Portnoy (*Portnoy's Complaint*) are often read as fictional representations of the real interests and fantasies of Martin Amis and Philip Roth. At the publication of Amis's novel *Success*, Jay Parini wrote in a review that 'Misanthropy becomes misogyny in *Success*, another novel on the theme of sexual obsession. The novel's two narrators, Gregory Riding and Terry Service, hate women almost as much as they hate themselves, though it remains unclear where Mr. Amis stands on all this.'⁷ Here, Parini identifies two of Amis's characters as misogynists and then suggests that Amis might very well share their prejudice. Parini's example for why he makes such an accusation is, as will be seen, a familiar one: he believes that the way Amis presents

⁶ Martin Amis, *London Fields* (1989; London: Vintage, 1991) 168.

⁷ Jay Parini, 'Men Who Hate Women,' *The New York Times*, Sept. 6, 1987, late ed.: Section 7; Page 8, Column 1.

characters such as Gregory is suspicious because of the amount of detail that Amis uses to describe their imaginative worlds.⁸ A similar suggestion was often made in regards to Keith Talent, one of Amis's most violently misogynistic characters. Despite Keith's penchant for sexual violence, both Bette Pesetsky and Christina Konig cite Keith as the most well-developed character in *London Fields*, with Pesetsky calling him, 'Mr. Amis's best creation in the book' and Konig calling him a character of 'alarming vitality'.⁹ That Amis writes of openly misogynistic characters such as John Self (*Money*), Keith Talent (*London Fields*), and Little Keith (*Dead Babies*) with such unsettling accuracy and, some would argue, excessive detail suggests to critics such as Parini that Amis's interest in these male characters reflects Amis's own *identification* with them. The association of Philip Roth with his character Alexander Portnoy illustrates the public's predilection for identifying an author with his worst creation even more dramatically. As shall be clarified later, Portnoy's confessions are so extreme in their nature as to be almost unbelievable. But because his excesses are so revolting they appear to have struck readers as all the more likely to be 'true,' not in the sense of being more plausible in terms of narrative and characterization but in the sense that Roth must have experienced for himself all the acts that Portnoy describes. In an interview, Roth discusses what it was like to have *Portnoy's Complaint* read because people thought it was 'Roth "spilling his guts out"'.¹⁰ He complains of people's reactions:

I felt myself locked, suddenly, into this image of me as a sexual beast. I ran into that response frequently on the streets of Manhattan. People stepped right up to tell me what they thought of a monster like myself. I distinctly noticed

⁸ Parini 8.

⁹ Pesetsky 1.

Christina Konig 'Death by Request,' *The Guardian*, Sept. 21, 1989, *Guardian Unlimited*, June 6, 2007 <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction>.

¹⁰ Ronald Hayman, 'Philip Roth: Should Sane Women Shy Away From Him At Parties,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1981; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 117.

women shying away from me at parties—the sane women shying away, the less sane edging close. Men I'd known as decent, hardworking fathers confessed all kinds of horrendous things to me over lunch.'¹¹

That Amis and Roth are 'read' autobiographically, or that they are conflated with their characters, draws attention to a problem common to fiction. The fact that the reputations of certain authors obfuscate other readings of their work, however, is magnified in the case of Martin Amis and Philip Roth, providing a singular chance to explore the conjunction of celebrity and authorship.¹²

What is unique about both Amis's and Roth's particular brand of celebrity is that it consists of as much *infamy* as it does fame. They are not just 'celebrities,' they are, in many ways, *celebrity misogynists*. Some critics would suggest that they are as famous for hating women, along with other prejudices, as they are writing novels. But what critics mean when they use the word *misogynist* needs to be thought through, as the definition of *misogynist* in academic parlance and in popular culture is vague and oftentimes illimitable. The problem with defining *misogyny* becomes clear in the examples I have already given. As Pesetsky seems to define it, a *misogynist* is someone who sees women as 'plastic', or as malleable, shapeless and interchangeable. And yet Keller claims that men who hate women cannot invest them with souls, a definition similar to Bloch's in which misogynists see women's nature as fundamentally evil. Defining women as malleable is certainly far less nefarious than defining them as fundamentally evil, and yet both definitions are used for *misogynist*. *Misogyny* seems to address a continuum of negative feelings towards women, from defining a misogynist as someone who does not really like women all that much to someone who hates them enough to consider them inhuman, and therefore not

¹¹ Hayman 117.

¹² Joe Moran's book *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (London: Pluto Press, 2000) —which features a chapter on Philip Roth—explores the relationship between celebrity and authorship in depth.

deserving of basic human rights. To add to the fray, feminist and legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon writes that ‘the mainspring of sex inequality is misogyny and the mainspring of misogyny is sexual sadism.’¹³ MacKinnon, here, makes misogyny as much about how men treat women as how they perceive them, adding a sexual element that focuses on the sadistically sexualized treatment of women by men. But Andrea Dworkin--whose *Pornography* is one of the most famous accounts of sexual sadism and to whom MacKinnon dedicates the book in which she defines misogyny using sexual sadism as an element—never uses the word *misogyny*, instead preferring the term ‘male-supremacist ideology.’¹⁴ In Dworkin’s novel the word *misogyny* is conspicuous by its absence, and I would argue that Dworkin avoids the word because *misogyny* has lost much of its power through vague and excessive usage. Indeed, the *Random House Webster’s Dictionary* simply defines *misogyny* as ‘hatred, dislike, or mistrust of women’.¹⁵ Misogyny, in these examples, is obviously a broad concept, applicable to a variety of situations from ‘mere’ chauvinism to sexual brutality and even murder. So what does it really mean to call Roth or Amis a misogynist? What critics refer to when they call Roth or Amis a misogynist is, generally, their depiction of women as self-destructive *or* their depiction of male characters who view women as sexual objects rather than independent subjects invested with their own worth and purpose. Alleging that neither Amis nor Roth can understand or appreciate women, critics believe that this lack translates into an inability to write women; that their female characters lack definition and artistry symbolizes Amis’s and Roth’s distaste for the subject. And yet, as I have already iterated, something about these two authors makes critics wary of pronouncing judgment even as they do so: they call Roth ‘a

¹³ Katherine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard UP, 1987) 5.

¹⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women’s Press Ltd, 1981) 13.

¹⁵ ‘Misogyny’, *Random-House Webster’s Dictionary*, 2nd ed, 1230.

genius' even as they excoriate him as a woman-hater, and they undermine their otherwise-damning accusation of Amis as a misogynist by using insipid or weak language. What this thesis attempts to think through is this paradoxical and, often, unfruitful critical relationship by asking what does it really mean to call Roth or Amis a misogynist and how else can Roth and Amis be read.

By wondering about whether writers such as Roth are 'misogynists' or 'geniuses,' Keller pinpoints an important debate located within the 'typical' criticism of the work of Amis and Roth. Keller invokes a set of familiar and yet still-resistant questions about what kind of writer is a 'good' writer. Can a writer be a 'genius' and a misogynist (or a racist, or an anti-Semite) at the same time? And if a writer *is* a 'genius,' does that mean that he cannot be a misogynist? These dilemmas are at the heart of many critics' attacks on, and defences of, Amis and Roth. Those who approve of Roth and Amis dismiss those critics who call them, amongst other things, misogynists by citing their narrative voice. As argued by critics such as Harold Bloom and James Diedrick, both writers use irony and humour in such a way as to make blanket accusations of misogyny problematical.¹⁶ And yet this aesthetic or stylistic argument is similarly dismissed by those who maintain that no amount of humour, stylistic virtuosity, or postmodern irony can mask the pernicious effects of prejudice on their novels. It is here that I want to set myself apart from the 'debate' over Roth and Amis. It is my assertion that far too much time is spent arguing against or defending Roth and Amis in terms of their female characters. The former side of the debate assumes that Roth and Amis are interested in establishing or exploring stable or essential images of women, while the latter claims that such accusations are

¹⁶ See Harold Bloom's introduction to *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 1-6.

Also see James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 2nd ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 28-56.

simply inapplicable to writers of such stature and talent as Roth and Amis. These are both assumptions with which I disagree. While I have no doubt that neither talent nor fame can insulate a writer from his worst prejudices, I do not believe that Roth and Amis are in any way interested in presenting to the world their idea of what it is to be a woman. Instead, I want to focus my research on a set of themes that represent these authors' real interests: themes that either transcend gender *or* focus on negative images of masculinity and men. These themes are clearly discernable in both writers' work from the beginning of their careers, and yet these themes have often been ignored in favour of readings that focus on the alleged politics and prejudices of their authors. Indeed, I believe that an argument about whether or not it matters if Roth and Amis hate women is beside the point, but not because such debates are unimportant or irrelevant. Rather, I argue that both Amis and Roth are clearly fascinated by understanding a set of thematic issues that would certainly complicate and even preclude critics' allegations of misogyny. One of the most obvious of these concerns is with the masculine subject. Both writers attempt to understand and articulate how the masculine subject is formed, be it by society, culture and history, or by individual choice. This focus on masculinity also translates into an interest in how masculinity imagines itself through a necessarily dichotomized feminine 'other'. Another clear thematic interest that both Roth and Amis share is an interest in history, trauma, and narrative. Their fiction has focused upon some of the most traumatizing events of recent history, and they have both tried to imagine the limits and possibilities of narrating such events. Another locus of these authors' attention is ideology: both writers are fascinated by what it means to be 'good' and how ideology functions in the lives of individuals.

This thesis examines some of Amis's and Roth's most important and controversial novels in the light of the themes articulated above. While much critical attention has been spent either condemning or justifying these novels, as well as their writers, I want to focus my attention on particular rereadings. Although this thesis is certainly not meant as a 'defence' of Amis or Roth, it does attempt to engage with and re-interpret those aspects of their work that are the most controversial. And so Chapter One explores more fully the 'problem' that Roth and Amis represent. In Chapter One I take advantage of the plethora of journalism written about the two authors, as well as the work of academic critics, in order to isolate themes common to both types of criticism. What I discover in the case of both novelists is a tendency to read their fiction 'autobiographically,' with the critic often beginning from the cynical position of 'knowing' who Roth or Amis 'really is.' In other words, the celebrity caricature of both Philip Roth and Martin Amis seems to define how certain critics read their novels. But what makes this so interesting is how some critics turn such autobiographical readings around and actually define and advertise their *own* politics through their readings of Roth and Amis. And yet another major theme of this chapter is that Roth and Amis are, genuinely, problematic writers: that they do, indeed, seem preoccupied with images of self-destroying women and that they focus on unequal, humiliating and 'deviant' sexual pairings. However, rather than using these assertions as 'facts' proving the misogyny of Amis or Roth, I introduce my intention to think through these images and present alternative readings for some of these author's most controversial novels.

Chapter Two takes as its thematic subject the concept of ideology, and how 'goodness' is represented in Amis's novel *Other People: A Mystery Story* and Roth's novel *When She Was Good*. Both novels were relatively early works, and both focus

on self-destructive female protagonists. In *When She Was Good*, Roth creates a young woman so full of rage with her family and society, which she believes to be corrupt and barbarous, that she will do anything to defy them and to be 'good.' However, her definition of 'goodness' is entirely reactive and self-destructive, and her violent attempts at changing those around her result in her ultimate defeat and death. *Other People* recounts the life-and-death story of Amy Hide, missing and presumed murdered, and the amnesiac Mary Lamb, who may actually be the resurrected Amy Hide. While Amy Hide relished hurting others, Mary Lamb tries her best to be 'good,' and yet she proves to be as destructive, to herself and to others, as her sadistic alter-ego. While many critics saw in these novels early evidence that Roth and Amis are intent on vilifying women, I argue that both books actually reveal these writers' interest in how ideology functions for the individual – whether man or woman – in society. To support this assertion, I will turn to Friedrich Nietzsche's work on *ressentiment* and Gilles Deleuze's concept of the micropolitical. These philosophies help to contextualize the radical nature of the individual's relationship to ideology as understood by Roth and Amis.

In Chapter Three, I turn my attention to trauma, history, and narrative. I have found Cathy Caruth's and Shoshanna Felman's seminal texts defining both trauma and testimony invaluable, along with the definition of history and historiography mapped out by Dominick LaCapra. The work of Ruth Leys has also proved particularly useful with her helpful insights into the problems with common conceptions of trauma. These works have all helped me to understand both the possibilities and the limits of trauma theory and to apply the theory to Amis's novel *Time's Arrow* and Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theater*. Both novels deal with World War Two and the traumatized subject, but both novels also problematize theories of

trauma, narrative and history by making their protagonists both the victims *and* the perpetrators of trauma. *Time's Arrow* tells the story of a Nazi doctor guilty of committing mass murder at Auschwitz, but this story is told backwards. Through Amis's reversal of the narrative, the atrocities committed by the doctor at Auschwitz become miraculous acts of regeneration, while the 'good' acts of surgeons in hospitals become such gross mistreatments as inserting tumours into patients or unstitching healing wounds. This temporal reversal destabilizes the conventional 'traumatic' narrative, calling attention to the fundamentally enigmatic experience of the Holocaust as both a historical moment and a symbolic construct. *Sabbath's Theater* is similarly destabilizing in that its protagonist is both a victim of trauma as well as a perpetrator of traumatizing acts, and the latter seems to be inextricable from the former. But *Sabbath's Theater* is most interested in the narrative function of testimony, and Sabbath *is*, first and foremost, a storyteller. For all of Mickey's verbal and sexual excesses, exploring the limits and the potential of testimonial narrative is at the heart of this novel.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I turn to the most obvious theme that links Roth and Amis: masculinity and the masculine subject. Much attention has been paid by feminists and feminist critics to the alleged weaknesses of Roth's and Amis's female characters, as outlined in Chapter One. One line of feminist attack is the claim that Roth and Amis are not interested in the female subject and that this lack of interest stems from their lack of respect for women and female subjectivity.¹⁷ In this Chapter I turn such criticism on its head by asking—if Roth and Amis really are not interested in women—then what do they have to say about men? Therefore, instead of relying on oft-used feminist critiques of their fiction, I have turned to theories of masculinity.

¹⁷ For an excellent example of this type of argument, see the concluding paragraph of Mary Allen's chapter on Roth, from *A Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976) 96.

In particular I have found the work of masculinity theorists such as Michael Kimmel and R. W. Connell helpful for their definitions of masculinity and masculinity theory, as well as for the spirited debate between such theorists as to the possibilities as well as the problems inherent in common theories of masculinity. I have also found feminists critics of masculinity particularly interesting, especially the work of Judith Kegan Gardiner, for both their careful consideration of and their scepticism towards certain important aspects of masculinity theory. By turning my attention to Amis's and Roth's representation of the masculine subject, I reveal that they are far more interested in the flaws and dangerous proclivities of masculinity than they are disseminators of an allegedly misogynistic imaginary. In Amis's novel *London Fields*, one of his most controversial, I argue that his presentation of a self-destroying female stereotype is just that: that Nicola Six *is* everything feminist critics accuse her of being. Nicola is, indeed, a dead and deathly caricature of femininity. Crucially, however, the 'point' of the novel is *not* Nicola Six but the three men who interact with her and insist on seeing her as real. As such, the novel is not about exploring feminine subjectivity, but about a particularly pernicious type of masculinity that imagines itself through dead and deathly images of femininity. Similarly, *Portnoy's Complaint* is also not about the real women in Portnoy's life but about Portnoy's destructive 'relationship' with a wholly imaginary feminine stereotype. Indeed, Portnoy is trapped between two wholly unworkable and extreme fantasies of masculinity promulgated in American society, and the novel explores the consequences of his inability to live up to either expectation.

In this thesis I have chosen to grapple with some of the most controversial novels written by Martin Amis and Philip Roth. Without exception, each of these novels has been accused of either propagating misogynistic images of women or

indulging in the fantasies of violent masculine imaginaries. While the readings I offer are certainly not the only ones available, they are meant to offer an alternative to those formulaic critiques that insist on reading the fiction of Amis and Roth as the works of committed misogynists. My readings also focus on what I believe is a central trope for both writers: that of the gendered subject in general. Indeed, in my final analysis, Roth and Amis are far more interested in understanding the compulsions and anxieties that foment misogyny in the masculine subject than they are in denigrating femininity.

Survey of Recent Academic Criticism

In the case of Martin Amis, there are five books, all relatively current, that comprise the published body of academic monographs. Three are introductory texts that are part of larger series. James Diedrick's *Understanding Martin Amis* is in its second edition and is the most comprehensive study of Amis available. Diedrick served as the webmaster of the Martin Amis Web for years, and is probably the foremost critic of Amis's fiction.¹⁸ While Diedrick's *Understanding Martin Amis* is typical of its genre in that its main focus is on introducing Amis's major works alongside of a discussion of the criticism, both academic and popular, that is available; his own understanding of Amis stands out in two specific veins of criticism. Firstly, Diedrick argues for an increasing conservatism in Amis's novelistic world view that in some ways parallels but in other ways contradicts the political trajectory of Amis's father. In this way, Diedrick challenges the popular journalistic view of Amis and his father that continually invokes their alleged dependence on one another without really engaging critically with this theme. Secondly, Diedrick focuses on what he considers to be Amis's foremost impulses in his fiction: the first being a

¹⁸ Diedrick even helped Amis to compile and edit Amis's non-fiction collection of essays and criticism, *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000*.

journalistic and satirical, or a 'State of the Nation' impulse, and the second being a Nabokovian aesthetic comprising a love of experimental narrative and word-play. Diedrick's importance for Amis-studies cannot be underestimated, and he is universally quoted by other academics writing on Amis.

The other two introductory texts are by Nicolas Tredell, *The Fiction of Martin Amis*, and Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, *Martin Amis: The Essential Guide*. The latter is really a work for book clubs or for individuals approaching Amis's fiction for the first time. The nature of this book reiterates my thesis's exploration of how Amis's fiction stands at a crossroads of academic and popular interest. On the one hand, the topics and themes that Reynolds and Noakes introduces are distinctly academic: one bullet-pointed list of themes includes 'narrative structure,' 'time and memory,' 'naming,' 'the idea of the author,' 'fictionality,' and 'postmodernism'.¹⁹ On the other hand, the introduction delves deeply into popular culture's reception of Amis, focusing on book reviews rather than more academic criticism. And alongside the very academic themes discussed are discussions of the 'problems' Amis raises for reviewers and popular journalists, such as his depiction of women. Similarly, Tredell's book, which is a compilation of criticism, emphasizes the conjunction of academic and journalistic criticism in Amis studies. A typical chapter, in this case on *Dead Babies*, includes 'Insightful reviews by John Mellors, Elaine Feinstein and Peter Ackroyd; Richard Brown on the novel's trio of Americans; Neil Powell on its literary allusions and grotesque characters; James Diedrick's informed assessment of *Dead Babies* as a satire.'²⁰ These various introductory texts influenced my thesis in that they continually reminded me of how much 'Martin

¹⁹ Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, *Martin Amis: The Essential Guide*, Vintage Living Texts: Contemporary Literature in Close Up (London: Vintage, 2003) 67.

²⁰ Nicolas Tredell, Ed., *The Fiction of Martin Amis: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, Icon Readers Guide (Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 2000) 3.

Amis,' the literary celebrity, is as much a product of a popular, journalistic imagination as he the product of considered academic study of his written work.

Gavin Keulks, who took over the management of The Martin Amis Web from Diedrick in recent years, has produced two important texts of Amis criticism. One is an edited compilation, *Martin Amis: Postmodernism and Beyond*, that features most of the major players in Amis criticism, including James Diedrick and Brian Finney, who has published important journal articles on Amis's fiction. The nature of this edited compilation is highly academic and covers Amis's fiction from the earliest novels to the latest as well as Amis's own journalism. For the purposes of my own research, Susan Brook's essay 'The Female Form, Sublimation, and Nicola Six' was especially interesting, as was Philip Tew's 'Martin Amis and Late-twentieth-century Working-class Masculinity: *Money* and *London Fields*.' Both of these essays resemble my own attempts to re-read Amis's texts by focusing on their critiques of contemporary gendered subjects, something often ignored by reviewers who see Amis's satirical portrayals of gender as representative of his reputed misogyny. Another interesting facet of this collection is just how international it is; the academics involved come not only from across Britain and North America but from the Netherlands, Hungary, and France. This geographical spread implies Amis's importance to contemporary literature in general, and not just to the English-speaking world.

Keulks's other major book is incredibly important to Amis criticism in that it is the most sustained engagement with the relationship between Kingsley and Martin Amis. Entitled *Father and Son: Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, and the British Novel Since 1950*, Keulks directly confronts not only the impact the two Amises had on one other but also the media obsession with a relationship that they take for granted at the

same time that they do not really attempt to understand it. Keulks's basic premise is that the interests of both Amises often mirror each other, but reveal interesting tensions and displacements as much as similarities. The book is laid out by first giving a broad, stereotypical and largely recycled introduction to the anecdotal Amises; the media figures who made headlines for their snipes and japes at one another's politics and writing styles. But this is where the stereotypes end, and the rest of the book is a carefully considered study of exactly where the Amises agreed and disagreed and, more importantly, not only why they did so but how these views either reflected or influenced their imaginative vision of the world. In order to achieve his objective, Keulks begins by discussing the Amises 'artistic allegiances,' both American and English.²¹ Keulks intention is to illustrate the divides between Kingsley's and Martin's artistic visions, as well as to show how father and son influenced each other's interests, both positive and negative. One of the American writers discussed is Philip Roth, who, unlike Bellow or Nabokov, functioned more as a competitor for Martin Amis than a mentor, as had the other two. Keulks describes Amis's uneasy fascination with 'Roth's stylistic strengths with his structural difficulties', something that Amis struggled with in his own fiction.²² Keulks then looks at the intersection of particular themes in both Amises works: for example, satire in Kingsley's *Ending Up* and Martin's *Dead Babies* or comedy in Kingsley's *Lucky Jim* and Martin's *The Rachel Papers*. The purpose of these various discussions is to prove that in some ways the media portrayal of the Amises as important to one another's literary careers is absolutely undeniable, and yet to simply take for granted a relationship made up of such complexity is to ignore or deny a profoundly

²¹ Gavin Keulks, *Father & Son: Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis and the British Novel since 1950* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) vi.

²² Keulks 59.

complicated, paradoxical, and fruitful line of critical enquiry for those genuinely interested in either Amis's fiction.

Of final interest to this work is John A. Dern's *Martians, Monsters And Madonna: Fiction And Form in the World of Martin Amis*. As Dern's title suggests, his study delves into the aesthetics of Amis's fiction. Dern argues Amis's position as a postmodernist, citing Amis's experimental narrative forms, his unreliable narrators, and his apocalyptic vision as evidence for his thesis. His study involves nearly every major Amis novel, but he is particularly persuasive in his discussion of *London Fields*, a chapter that I found helpful for my own work. In this chapter, Dern traces the history of unreliable narrators, and offers a convincing argument for Nicola's positioning as a symbol of Amis's emphasis upon *style* as 'more important than story, plot, or character development'.²³ But Dern argues that this emphasis on style, however, represents a critique on Amis's part of the postmodern condition as much as it represents Amis's own artistic motto. In other words, Dern highlights the curious conjunction of critique and approbation that complicates so many of Amis's thematic approaches.

The works discussed above represents the major body of Amis criticism, but two other critics stand out in their engagement with Amis. The first is Brian Finney, mentioned above, who has published two important articles on Amis. Finney, like Dern, writes on Amis as a postmodernist, as well as Amis's position amongst contemporary English writers. The other is James Wood, who straddles the divide between popular and academic criticism with his book reviews and larger studies published in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Review of Books* as well as in his book-length studies *The Broken Estate* and *The Irresponsible Self*:

²³ John A. Dern, *Martians, Monsters & Madonna: Fiction & Form in the World of Martin Amis* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000) 47.

On Laughter and the Novel. Wood's works were of major importance to my work on Amis, partly because of how they are, like Amis's work itself, a curious combination of popular and academic. Highly readable, Wood's work is as literary as it is scholarly, and he writes about both Amis and Roth with particular verve and insight. His reviews, in particular those anthologised in *The Broken Estate*, were particularly interesting to me in that Wood always avoids engaging with the novels he reviews as if they were just the next stage of development for the author in question. Rather, Wood looks upon the novels he reviews with fresh eyes, seeing them for their own merits before trying to 'place' them in the author's *oeuvre*. This clarity and lack of agenda is no small feat when dealing with the likes of Martin Amis or Philip Roth, who are as infamous as they are famous.

The body of academic work available for Philip Roth is larger than that of Amis, reflecting Roth's longer career as well as the prestige of the awards and honours he has received. For the purposes of this introductory survey, I will only discuss those books that are of particular relevance to this thesis. Two of the most obvious books to be mentioned are Hermione Lee's short study and Harold Bloom's anthology, both entitled *Philip Roth*. Although Lee's book was published in 1982, and therefore predates the publication of some of the texts discussed in this thesis, the importance of her work to the study of Philip Roth cannot be underestimated. Her status as a well-known and well-respected female critic combined with the fact that she defends Roth as 'one of the most significant and remarkable of contemporary writers: bold, cunning, humane, ambitious, versatile and wise' make her an important figure of support for Roth.²⁴ Her insightful and lively book engages with Roth as a figure of both critical delight and revulsion and an author 'received as both a

²⁴ Hermione Lee, *Philip Roth*, Contemporary Writers (London: Methuan & Co. Ltd., 1982) 11.

“popular” and as a “highbrow” writer.’²⁵ Lee’s insight into how these apparently contradictory critical impulses function in Roth’s fiction as an aspect of his imaginative and aesthetic vision was of great importance to my own research. For example, she talks about how Roth ‘repeatedly describes his subject as being individuals struggling to get through and beyond the boundaries that seem to be set down for them.’²⁶ The themes of transgression that Lee traces in Roth’s fiction have not only inspired my own criticisms, but have also clearly influenced many of Roth’s other critics, especially Ross Posnock’s recent study. Roth’s art of transgression is also a theme engaged with by many of the critics in Bloom’s anthology.

As in the case of Lee, the significance of Harold Bloom’s support of Roth cannot be underestimated. As one of the premier names in American academia, Bloom’s inclusion of Roth in his ‘Bloom’s Modern Critical Views’ implies Roth’s canonical status.²⁷ As do so many Roth-related books, Bloom’s introduction presents Roth as a figure of controversy; in this case Bloom addresses the charge that Roth is an anti-Semitic or self-hating Jew. And, like Lee, Roth uses his introduction to present his own defence of Roth, closing his introduction by stating ‘Roth has earned a permanent place in American literature by a comic genius that need never be doubted again’.²⁸ In the rest of the anthology, Bloom seems to have organized his choices around this central theme of Roth as a transgressive or disruptive force in American letters and what this theme actually suggests about Roth’s artistic imagination. Most notably, Robert M. Greenberg’s essay ‘Transgression in the Fiction of Philip Roth’ engages with the question of how Roth’s ‘intergenerational

²⁵ Lee 82.

²⁶ Lee 19.

²⁷ Bloom’s anthology, published in 2003, anticipates the Library of America’s publication of Roth’s entire body of work. This ultimate act of canonization has only been given to two other writers during their own lifetime: Saul Bellow and Eudora Welty.

²⁸ Harold Bloom, introduction, *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom’s Modern Critical Views (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 6.

interpretation of the cultural origin of transgression in Roth's fiction illuminates the details of many of his narratives'.²⁹ Another important essay in this collection, in terms of this thesis, was Frank Kelleter's 'Portrait of the Sexist as a Dying Man: Death, Ideology, and the Erotic in Philip Roth's *Sabbath Theater*'. Kelleter's discussion of Sabbath as 'the subversive libertine' influenced my own discussion of Sabbath's Dionysian or Sadean impulses.³⁰

As mentioned above, Ross Posnock's *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*, deserves special mention in connection with a discussion of transgression in Roth's literature. In *Rude Truth*, Posnock explores how 'the anti-nice, the rude, is synonymous with a vitality won from socializing forces bent on exacting obedience, restraint repression—basic constituents of mature adulthood.'³¹ Although this book was not available in time for me to include in my own study, Posnock reiterates many of the connections I have made in this thesis, especially the connections between Roth and Nietzsche's philosophies. Similarly, Elaine B. Safer's *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, also published in 2006, investigates the role of transgression, especially the roles of humour and mockery, in Roth's fiction. What both of these books contribute to situating my thesis within a larger body of academic criticism devoted to Roth is that they, too, offer rereadings of those aspects of Roth's fiction that are sometimes read as 'just' offensive. Both of these books admit that, of course, Roth's fiction *is* offensive, but they, as I do here, also ask what being offensive might *mean* in terms of Roth's understanding of the human condition.

²⁹ Robert M. Greenberg, 'Transgression in the Fiction of Philip Roth,' *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 81.

³⁰ Frank Kelleter, 'Portrait of the Sexist as a Dying Man: Death, Ideology, and the Erotic in Philip Roth's *Sabbath Theater*', *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 187.

³¹ Ross Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2006).

The final three books to be discussed are written by three people of particular significance within Roth studies. The first, Mark Shechner, is both an academic and book reviewer, and his collection of essays and reviews, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*, includes both academic essays and book reviews written over the course of Shechner's, and Roth's, career. In this study, Shechner reprints a selection of contemporaneous essays and reviews but follows them up with 'Second Thoughts' sections that address either new thoughts he has had on the novels discussed or quibbles with the arguments he made in the past. As the title of this book suggests, Shechner also engages with the theme of transgression in Roth, and he also offers 'rereadings' of Roth's fiction.³² What makes this book of special interest for me was the struggle outlined in these reviews, and their answering "Second Thoughts", between an academic who really appreciates Roth's aestheticism and his narrative power and a reviewer who might love the vitality and humour of Roth's novels but is genuinely disturbed by some of Roth's depictions of racism, sexism, and apparent anti-Semitism. In other words, Shechner reiterates my thesis's underlying implication that Roth's ubiquitous and loaded reputation influences even the most academic discussions of his work, even if, in the case of Bloom, it is addressed in order to be dismissed.

The second writer, Debra Shostak, is another prominent Roth scholar. Shostak begins her book, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives*, by discussing Roth's 1994 *New York Times Book Review* piece entitled "Juice or Gravy?". These choices, offered by a Sicilian cafeteria worker, represent for Roth the joy of choosing between oppositions. Meanwhile, what Shostak implies—and what her own work both advertently and inadvertently represents—is that engaging with Roth's work means

³² In Shechner's case, however, his title's use of 'rereading' also refers to his rereadings of his own work as much as rereading Roth's.

first choosing a version of 'Philip Roth'. For just as Roth's fiction deals with the countertexts and counterlives of Shostak's title, Roth criticism inevitably involves the debate about who Roth *really* is: the self-hating, anti-Semitic misogynist bent on reproducing pornography and giving offence, or the serious-minded and aesthetically gifted ethicist determined to confront his own, and the world's, sins. Shostak summarizes the dilemma for readers and critics of Roth's fiction in very effective terms: 'does a reader have a moral imperative to reject the home truths he is revealing about our unseemly solipsism, or is it simply easier to reject Roth for stating them?'.³³ Indeed, this dilemma underpins Shostak's book. She takes those most pernicious aspects of Roth's works—his betrayal of the contract between readers and authors that stipulates authors must tell their readers whether they are reading fact or fiction, his insistence on writing about sex in a way that is both disturbingly frank and symbolically surreal, his unsympathetic portrayals of both Jews and women, and his constant baiting of those critics who insist on his misogyny or his identity as a self-hating Jew—and argues outward, depicting Roth as an author driven by the tensions his fictions create.

For the purposes of this thesis, what I found most helpful was Shostak's examination of how these tensions can be traced back to Roth's thematic obsession with identifying, assessing, and questioning the myths and ideologies of selfhood that underpin various identities. Her organization, by theme rather than chronology, illustrates her theory that Roth's novels "'converse" with one another'.³⁴ For example, chapter one deals with male embodiment and the self, chapter two discusses much the same issue but with the added dimension of Jewish American identity connected to the male body and chapter three investigates the complexities of theories

³³ Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth-Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2004) 61.

³⁴ Shostak *vii*.

of Jewish selfhood. Under these thematic categories of the male self, the Jewish-male self, and the Jewish self, Shostak divides and discusses such diverse novels as *The Breast*, *American Pastoral*, and *Operation Shylock*. Meanwhile, Shostak is careful to remind readers that these categories are, to a certain extent, subjective choices: that most of these novels could be discussed under any of the thematic categories and that other themes exist that are not discussed here. For me, Shostak's engagement with Roth as a controversial figure and her clear understanding of the themes that unite Roth's fiction and his imaginative worlds was of signature importance to my own work.

Finally, any survey of recent and relevant Roth criticism must include a discussion of Derek Parker Royal's *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*. Royal is the founder and President of the Philip Roth Society as well as the executive editor of its journal, *Philip Roth Studies*. He has written many articles about Roth, and his collection *New Perspectives* includes essays by many of the influential names in Roth studies. Three essays included were of special interest to my thesis, the first being Julie Husband's 'Female Hysteria and Sisterhood in *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good*'. Husband is one of the few academics to engage with *When She Was Good*, a novel that is often dismissed by critics as an aberration in Roth's *oeuvre* in that it is Roth's only entirely 'gentile' book as well as the most Jamesian of his novels. While I disagree with the fundamental premise of Husband's essay, that Roth ignores the possibility of a feminist 'sisterhood' for his female characters, her unique reading of the text does offer many useful insights into this much under-valued novel. The second essay to inspire my own thinking was David Brauner's "'Getting in Your Retaliation First": Narrative Strategies in *Portnoy's Complaint*'. Brauner aggressively confronts the popular reading of *Portnoy's*

Complaint that conflated Roth with his protagonist, and explores how this novel revolutionized Jewish-American fiction as well as American fiction, in general. Finally, Ranen Omer-Sherman's "'A Little Stranger in the House': Madness and Identity in *Sabbath's Theater*" concentrated on *Sabbath's Theater* as a Jewish reverie on being an exile in America. While this reading is not at all my own, reading this work clarified for me how Roth's novels offer so many multiple layers of meaning, quilted one on top of the other. It was this essay that helped me understand my own intentions to 'reread' Roth's novels, not because I thought that I had the 'only' or the 'true' reading but because the whole point of Roth's style and artistic vision is to fracture ideas and themes into a multiplicity of meaning. And this is exactly what this collection does; it offers rereadings upon rereadings, defying that journalistic urge to summarize Roth or Roth's novels into attention-grabbing headlines that ignore the intricacies of his fiction.

Chapter One

Literature isn't a moral beauty contest.

-Philip Roth, in an interview with Hermione Lee (1984)

Sexism is like racism: we all feel such impulses. Our parents feel them more strongly than we feel them. Our children, we hope, will feel them less strongly than we feel them. People don't change, or improve much, but they do evolve.

-Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché* (1991)

Literature is a particularly effective medium for misogyny because it can be dealt with subtly, even subconsciously, since outright statements of misogyny are generally unacceptable.

-Mary Allen, *A Necessary Blankness* (1976)

The novels of Martin Amis and Philip Roth could stand as the *locus classicus* of the way that a certain section of modern culture wants to think through its gender politics. As male novelists who often use figures of self-destroying women in their fiction, they have been accused of having a problem with women. In the case of Martin Amis, this 'woman problem' is best exemplified by the 1989 Booker prize controversy surrounding *London Fields* and its self-murdering female protagonist, Nicola Six.³⁵ Not only was *London Fields* not short listed for the award, but *The New Statesman* reported that 'Maggie Gee and Helen McNeil, the two female judges, were fiercely anti-Amis, accusing him of misogyny.'³⁶ The *Times Literary Supplement* reported that Gee not only made 'a strong, formal, purely "literary" case against *London Fields*,' but that she also, 'wonders whether debate over the very notion of extra-literariness has not gone to sleep in Britain, and concedes that matters discounted by most of the critical establishment – sexual politics, for one, and untutored, or anti-tutorial, gut reactions, for another – have an inevitable place in

³⁵ In *London Fields*, Nicola Six 'knows' that she will be murdered, and the novel charts her relationships with the three men she has chosen as pawns in her quest for death.

³⁶ Martin Goff, "Playing Silly Bookers," *The New Statesman* 23 Oct. 1998, *The Martin Amis Web*, ed. James Diedrick, June 10, 2007 <http://www.martinamisweb.com/pre_2006/lfboker.htm>.

judgements in taste.³⁷ Gee defends herself by arguing a 'purely literary case' against *London Fields*, but then immediately implies that actually some sort of 'gut reaction' against Amis's depiction of women was also intrinsic to her judgment of his novel.

Meanwhile, Gee and McNeil were not the only critics to denounce *London Fields* as a misogynistic text. Of the novel's main female character, book reviewer Bette Pesetsky writes: 'Nicola is a problem [. . .] she makes us yield to a sneaking suspicion that a misogynist lingers here somewhere [. . .] She seems to be *another* of Mr. Amis's plastic women.'³⁸ Pesetsky claims that Nicola Six is representative of a problematic type of woman often found in Amis's fiction. In turn, she implies some sort of creative obsession on Amis's part with misogynistic images and representation of women.

Philip Roth has also been the target of critics who have railed against his depiction of self-destructive women. In 1976, Vivian Gornick famously published an article in the *Village Voice* entitled, 'Why Do These Men Hate Women?' with pictures resembling mug shots of Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer and Henry Miller printed underneath the headline.³⁹ Five years later, in 1981, Ronald Hayman asked a similar question in his own headline, 'Philip Roth: Should Sane Women Shy Away From Him At Parties?'.⁴⁰ As recently as June of 2006, the first

³⁷ 'Liber Number Two,' *Times Literary Supplement* Dec. 15-21, *The Martin Amis Web*, ed. James Diedrick, June 10, 2007 <http://www.martinamisweb.com/pre_2006/lfbooker.htm>.

³⁸ Bette Pesetsky, 'Lust Among the Ruins,' rev. of *London Fields*, by Martin Amis, 4 March 1990, late ed. – Final Section 7: pg 1, col 1; Book Review Desk.

³⁹ In his May 1997 article on Salon.com, D.T. Max discusses Vivian Gornick's article 'Why Do These Men Hate Women?' (1975) published in the *Village Voice*. This sensational article castigating Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer and Henry Miller was a tremendous popular success, and Gornick recalls Susan Glassman, Bellow's ex-wife, going out of her way to shake Gornick's hand. However, Max quotes Gornick as saying that today 'she would not bother. "At the time they were in the cat-bird seat. They were the enemy. Now their readership is limited to the Jewish Community Center".' This caustic dismissal of four of America's literary giants seems especially absurd considering that *American Pastoral*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998, was published in 1997.

⁴⁰ Ronald Hayman, 'Philip Roth: Should Sane Women Shy Away Form Him At Parties,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1981; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 113.

page of the *Chicago Tribune's* 'Tempo' section featured a picture of Roth, with the words 'Philip Roth Hates Women' as the headline.⁴¹ What is significant about these headlines is that they do not involve Roth's work, they involve Roth himself. These writers accuse Roth, not a specific character from his fiction, of hating women. Their evidence in supporting these claims, however, is in the actions and thoughts of characters such as Alexander Portnoy and Mickey Sabbath. That Roth and Amis are perceived as having a woman problem is obvious, and yet the question of whether or not they deserve such a label and how such labels affect readings of their work remains to be considered.

What links Roth and Amis—two authors who many would imagine have little in common albeit misogyny—is that they share the mutual problem that they are interpreted through the choices and actions of their characters. Far from being a new subject of concern, issues regarding the role of the author were addressed in the 1940s and 1950s, most famously in *The Intentional Fallacy*. In this well-known essay, William K. Wimsatt Junior and Monroe C. Beardsley contest the common assumption that 'In order to judge the poet's performance, we must know *what he intended*.'⁴² Rather than understanding literature by relying upon the stated intentions of an author, Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that:

The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge.⁴³

⁴¹ Julia Keller, 'Philip Roth Hate's Women*': (*Is that True? And Does it Matter?), *Chicago Tribune* (Tempo, Section Five, Thurs., June 1, 2006) 1,7.

⁴² William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy,' *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001) 1375.

⁴³ Wimsatt and Beardsley 1376.

In this conception of literature, the writer ceases to exert control over a work when it becomes public. At publication, literature becomes open to all of the various interpretations that the public—with all their varieties of experience—might perceive in its pages, making it unnecessary for a reader to know what an author may have intended.⁴⁴ Equally, this means that a reader should not look to identify an author through his or her work: ‘We ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker*’.⁴⁵ To attribute the ‘intentions’ of a character to the author is to engage in ‘author psychology,’ a ‘personal’ form of study not to be confused with ‘poetic’ studies.⁴⁶ In other words, ‘author psychology,’ or biography, is a form of historical study rather than literary criticism.

Despite Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s admonitions against ‘reading’ an author through his or her text, Amis and Roth are constantly being portrayed as sympathetic to their most despicable male characters. To help explain why situations like this occur, Wayne C. Booth argues that falling into the intentional fallacy is both hard to avoid and not entirely specious. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth explains that no matter how much a writer wants to remain objective towards his subject and his characters, ‘his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner—and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values. Our reactions to his various commitments, secret or overt, will help to determine our response to his work.’⁴⁷ In other words, fallacy or not, a reader *will* read the author into the text. Booth also argues that as the author writes ‘he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal, “man in general” but an implied version of “himself”

⁴⁴ Wimsatt and Beardsley compare a poem to ‘a pudding or machine. One demands that it work.’ (1375).

⁴⁵ Wimsatt and Beardsley 1376.

⁴⁶ Wimsatt and Beardsley 1381.

⁴⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983: London: Penguin, 1991) 71.

that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works.'⁴⁸ Booth's theory of an 'implied author' mitigates the intentional fallacy by arguing a 'middle position' between the 'technical irrelevance' of an author claiming absolute objectivity and the 'harmful error' of thinking that a given text is made up entirely of a writer's 'immediate problems and desires.'⁴⁹ Booth's theory about the 'implied author' takes on special significance in regards to this thesis when one considers both Roth's and Amis's relationship with their various critics. For Booth's theory means not only that *readers* infer an 'implied author' from their readings of a text but also that *writers* can play with their audience by toying with their own implied image. In further chapters this thesis will discuss how Roth and Amis engage with their own stereotypes by seeming to create characters that they know *must* anger certain critics. In turn, this reveals how such pre-conceptions bind the reader: both by defining their interpretations and obscuring alternative readings.

Intentional fallacy or not, there does appear to be a surfeit of textual evidence to support those critics who accuse Roth and Amis of misogyny. Take, for example, this passage from Amis's *London Fields*:

The peculiar difficulty with girls experienced by God, Shakespeare, and Keith was this difficulty: they raped them. Or they used to. They had all been on the same rehab courses and buddy programmes; they had mastered some jargon and tinkertoy psychology; and they didn't do it any longer. They could control their aggression. But the main reason they didn't do it any longer was that rape, in judicial terms (and in Keith's words), was no fucking joke: you just couldn't ever come out a winner, not with this DNA nonsense. The great days were gone. Shakespeare and God had both spent a long time in prison for it, and Keith nearly had. Of his two court appearances on rape charges, the first had been more or less okay ("Why, Jacqui, why?" Keith had hollered woundedly from the dock). But the second case was *very frightening*. In the end the girl dropped the charges, thank heaven, after Keith sold his motor and gave three and a half thousand quid to her dad. Of course, Keith's rapes were to be viewed quite distinctly from those numerous occasions when, in his youth, he had been obliged to slap into line various cockteasers and icebergs

⁴⁸ Booth 71.

⁴⁹ Booth 75.

(and lesbians and godbotherers). Rape was different. Rape was much more like all the other occasions (not so numerous, if you kept Kath out of it) when he had candidly used main force to achieve intercourse and the woman, for one reason or another, hadn't reported him.⁵⁰

An autobiographical reading of this passage might suggest that Amis genuinely mourns the passing of the 'great days' before DNA evidence helped to convict rapists. Such a superficial reading would also highlight his use of 'godbotherer' and 'lesbian' as synonymous, as well as his use of such vulgar and offensive terms as 'cockteasers' and 'icebergs.' There is a hint of heresy with the use of a character named God being convicted of rape, as well as the worrying conclusion that Amis seems to mock attempts at rehabilitating sexual offenders. And the aforementioned passage is only one of numerous eminently quotable passages from *London Fields*'s that seem to support a common reading that Amis has a problem with women.

Much of Roth's fiction shares a similar capacity to offend, as exemplified by this episode from *Sabbath's Theater*:

Maestro, what would *you* do? To peer down at her head cradled in your lap, your cock encircled by her foaming lips, and to watch her blowing you in tears, to patiently lather that undissipated face with that sticky confection of spit, semen and tears, a delicate meringue icing her freckles—could life bestow any more wonderful last thing?⁵¹

It would be difficult to defend such a scene against the charge of misogyny, especially in light of Andrea Dworkin's claim that the mixture of tears and sex in pornography signifies that, 'force is required to conquer modesty'.⁵² The fact that Kathy's crying inflames Sabbath's desire should give the reader pause, as should the nature of Sabbath's fantasy. Furthermore, the use of descriptions such as Kathy's 'undissipated face' and her freckles calls attention to Kathy's youth, the age difference between her and Sabbath, and thus the disparity in social-position between

⁵⁰ Martin Amis, *London Fields* (1989; London: Vintage, 1991) 168.

⁵¹ Philip Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* (London: Vintage, 1996) 236.

⁵² Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1981) 148.

the two. Kathy is a young student; Sabbath is her aged teacher, and Sabbath seems to *enjoy* the inequality between the two. For these and other reasons Mickey Sabbath is a deeply controversial figure, and critics such as Michiko Kakutani read him as the product of a misogynistic imagination.

The passages quoted here are only an initial introduction to the problems that Martin Amis and Philip Roth represent, and in this chapter I will examine in greater detail those aspects of their fiction that incite the anger of critics quick to accuse them of misogyny. I will also examine the words of the critics themselves, in order to establish both their motivations and justifications for making such aggressive claims. In other words, I hope to establish the ideological presuppositions of these critics, so as to understand why Amis and Roth have been so thoroughly demonized in both popular and academic circles. For I believe that this process of demonization—really a process of selective misrepresentation—speaks volumes about how certain critics read, about canon formation, about what counts as ‘good’ or ‘proper’ literature, and about the presumed ideological relationship between literature and politics.

To say that Amis and Roth are misread is not to say that their fiction is straightforward or unproblematic. Both authors attempt, after all, to engage with themes and ideas of great historical and ethical weight: they are both ‘state of the nation’ novelists, writers who appear to strive towards the goal of writing the great American, or British, novel. And yet a significant percentage of their readership claims they are limited by their disdain for women and that rather than being universal they are only capable of speaking to and for the male half of their society. In this sense there certainly *is* a problem intrinsic to their fiction. However, I will argue that to read Amis and Roth *as* misogynists is to endorse a type of reading that capitulates to a popular stereotype of who these writers ‘are’. It is my purpose in this thesis to

advocate a very different style of criticism—one that responds to that which is politically encoded in the novels of Roth and Amis—while alternatively exploring that which is politically encoded in their critics' accusations. But first, in order to understand what Roth and Amis are attempting to think through in their fiction, we must engage with their fiercest critics.

The Problem of Martin Amis

Many of the ways in which Amis is read are symptomatic of what can be called 'The Problem of Martin Amis.' Amis constitutes a problem on many different levels, not least of which is the common perception that he is sexist. For many critics, this seems to be an issue involving authorship, or the relationship between the public persona of an author and how he or she is read by critics. Part of Amis's difficulty has been that from the very beginning, readers have believed they know the 'truth' about Martin Amis, and that part of that 'truth' involves a marked hostility towards women. Since the publication of his first book, Martin Amis has had to contend with 'Martin Amis,' his media doppelganger. As Carlin Romano comments, '[c]elebrities such as Amis deserve at least two reference-book entries: "author" and "media image".'⁵³ The 'media image' Amis is certainly charismatic but, just as often, controversial. In revealing his own reactions to Amis, John Walsh reflects the media's early engagement with the Amis-effect:

We read everything he wrote – a review in *The Observer*, a science-fiction fantasy in *Mayfair*, even a one-off poem in the *TLS*. He was sooooo cool. He turned up on TV, confident, perma-smoking, talking in that curiously slouchy, mid-Atlantic drawl. Women claimed to reach spontaneous orgasm just by gazing at his sulky expression, his voluptuous mouth. Thank God (we said) he's so short, or he'd be unbearable.⁵⁴

⁵³ Carlin Romano, 'Trials of a Literary Legatee: Martin Amis, Author, on Martin Amis, Image' *Knight Tidder/Tribune News Service* May 17, 1995, Jan. 4, 2006, <http://www.highbeam.com>.

⁵⁴ John Walsh "Twilight of the Idol?", *Independent* Aug. 15 2003: 2-3.

From early in his career, Amis drew intense media attention. He was attractive, articulate, and seemed, as George Szamuely summarizes, to be 'the embodiment of the times he is living in.'⁵⁵ This charm and ability to attract attention, especially female attention, may be why some critics are so eager to malign Amis. Szamuely does call Amis 'enviably successful' and finds suspect his ability to 'regularly impres[s] the gushing young females sent out to write profiles of him.'⁵⁶ However, despite Szamuely's depiction of Amis as a Svengali of female journalists, Amis has not been able to avoid controversy, both in his professional and personal life. Tabloid-style attacks reached their pinnacle in 1995, when Amis published *The Information*, a novel that revels in the sordid side of both writing and publishing, at the same time that he famously dumped his long time agent, Pat Kavanagh, for the influential American agent, Andrew 'The Jackal' Wylie.⁵⁷ The switch earned Amis an enormous advance, but at the cost of his relationship with both Kavanagh and her husband, Julian Barnes. Around this time he also divorced his first wife and married his second, an American heiress. Much was also written about his costly dental surgery that many journalists depicted, incorrectly, as merely cosmetic. The media staged these events, including the dentistry, as Amis betraying his British roots; as such, the attacks could not have been more personal.⁵⁸ Even John Walsh lost faith:

Everything he did was suddenly wrong. He'd had it his own way too long. He'd been too brilliant, too effing smart. He'd bitched about England and

⁵⁵ George Szamuely, *National Review* May 28, 1990, Jan. 4, 2006 <http://www.highbeam.com>.

⁵⁶ Szamuely.

⁵⁷ For a tabloid journalist's take on Martin Amis and 'The Jackal', see Geoffrey Levy, 'Is Martin Amis Turning Into His Father?', *Daily Mail 24 Hours a Day*, Sept. 27, 2006, June 12, 2007, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk>>. This article also discusses Amis's divorce, and insinuates that Amis is as bad a son as he is husband and father. In fact, it stands out as an example of 'typical' Amis related journalism.

⁵⁸ In *Experience*, Amis comments upon this subject himself:

I would be coming at [Delilah] partly as a mediated being, mediated by myself – and others: Delilah would presumably be aware that I had abandoned my sons to go and live with an heiress in New York, the better to squander my advances on a Liberace smile . . . (278).

praised America. He was a faithless, money spinning, kids-abandoning nonce and everyone hated themselves for salaaming before him for so long.⁵⁹

A typical Amis-related headline of the time reads 'Amis, author with £20,000 teeth, has £106 wedding'.⁶⁰ Amis, the media caricature, is all teeth and wallet; cutting away friends and family in pursuit of ever-higher advances.

Contributing to his media image of undeserved wealth is the fact that Martin Amis is the son of a well known and equally controversial writer. The celebrity figure of his father, Kingsley Amis, has had a powerful and, often, negative influence on the media's reception of his son. Indeed, I believe that the way critics read the son has often been prescribed by the way many believe they should respond to the father. Take, for instance, Grace Glueck's contemporaneous review of Martin Amis's *The Rachel Papers* that begins by informing the reader of Amis's parentage:

Just 20 years after *Lucky Jim*, Kingsley Amis's famously funny novel about life at a minor British university, his 24 year-old-son Martin has made so bold as to produce a novel himself; though—to say it right off—not really one to give a novelist father the sweats. (It seems quite in the order of things that the jacket bears a blurb from Auberon Waugh hailing Amis *filis* as a 'new novelist of intelligence, with and an apparently reckless honesty . . . a formidable and exceptional talent.' Is there a club for novelists' novelist sons?)⁶¹

The gossipy, contemptuous, and bizarrely proprietary language of Glueck's 1974 reading of 'Amis *filis*' debut novel characterizes the sort of personal criticism that has dogged Martin Amis throughout his career. In this reviewer's estimation, Amis's publishing a novel at so young an age is an act of audacity, not least because of the relatively late start of his father's own career. This suggestion coupled with the proprietary nature of Glueck's language suggests Kingsley's identity as some sort of British institution – something the literary community must both protect and police.

⁵⁹ Walsh.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Nicolas Tredell, *The Fiction of Martin Amis* (Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 2000) 10.

⁶¹ Grace Glueck, 'The Rachel Papers: Not the Son of *Lucky Jim*,' *The New York Times* May 26, 1974, Oct. 21, 2006 <http://nytimes.com>.

As the son of a British institution, Martin Amis can expect the same treatment. Furthermore, by identifying Amis *père* as a British institution Glueck insinuates a more nefarious reason for Martin Amis's success at publishing than straightforward literary precociousness. The idea of a club for 'novelists' novelists sons' insinuates that these sons of the literati owe more to their fathers' hard won successes than from any real work on their own part. This reading is echoed by a warning from Charles Michner, who writes, '[being] Kingsley Amis's son [is] a boon to the Amis bashers. The idea that 'success' is something inherited and not earned abounds in [Britain,] this green and not always pleasant land'.⁶² In this reading, Martin Amis has not earned his ability to publish novels: he was born with a silver publishing contract in his mouth.⁶³

At times, there seems to be a tacit quota for how often this sort of derisive gesture towards the possible influences of paternity must appear in any criticism of Amis's work. For example, in his review of Amis's third novel, Jay Parini begins by first telling us who Martin Amis is – 'The son of Kingsley Amis' – while admitting 'how he must hate to hear reviewers say this.'⁶⁴ By his third novel, Martin Amis probably would find it strange that the details of his parentage might still be a revelation. This review, however, was not written upon the British release of *Success* in 1978 but upon its American release in 1987. By then, Martin Amis had published his fifth novel, *Money*, and become an international bestseller. And yet reviewers still had to tell their readers, in 1987, about 'revelations' from 1974.

⁶² Quoted in Tredell, 8.

⁶³ Famously, *The New Statesman* hosted a competition for the most oxymoronic book title in which one of the winners was *My Struggle*, by Martin Amis. See John A. Dern, *Martians, Monsters & Madonna: Fiction & Form in the World of Martin Amis* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc; 2000) 150.

⁶⁴ Jay Parini, 'Men Who Hate Women,' *The New York Times*, Sept. 6, 1987, late ed.: Section 7; Page 8, Column 1.

Sometimes the exploration of this apparently determining link between father and son takes a more high-brow form, as exemplified by Harold Bloom's theory of the 'anxiety of influence.'⁶⁵ As James Diedrick explains, Bloom 'places the Oedipal struggle between literary "fathers" and "sons" at the symbolic center of all relations between writers, texts, and their predecessors.'⁶⁶ Read in this manner, Martin Amis often finds himself in the unenviable position of not only having to battle the entire canon of white-western-male literature—all 'potentially castrating father figures'—but also enduring the 'literal dimension' of having a ready-made Laius in his immediate family.⁶⁷ In the interest of critical expedience, such a 'symbolic conflict [. . .] even comes complete with primal scenes of rivalry in which texts substitute for other extensions of the male self.'⁶⁸ As Diedrick suggests, Amis has been forcibly inserted into a pre-written drama in which he and his father must time-and-again attack each other's literary 'extensions.' Most discussions of Martin Amis seem required to include such 'facts' as '[Kingsley Amis] finds his son's novels largely unreadable' or that 'Amis's father publicly reported that he cannot finish his son's novels' or Martin Amis's own often told story of how '[he] can point out the exact place where [Kingsley] stopped and sent the book [*Money*] twirling through the air.'⁶⁹ But notwithstanding journalists' constant reiteration of this theme of conflict between literary father and literary son, only a few critics have attempted any sort of in-depth

⁶⁵ In *Fathers and Sons*, Gavin Keulks dismisses Bloom's theory as a viable model for the relationship between Kingsley and Martin Amis, writing 'In contrast to Harold Bloom's celebrated theory of influence, therefore, the Amises' literary competitions were never hidden nor repressed; nor did they silence either author or force him to evade his rival's achievements' (230).

⁶⁶ James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 2nd ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 12.

⁶⁷ Diedrick 12.

⁶⁸ Diedrick 12.

⁶⁹ Dern, 150; Diedrick, 154; Stout.

exploration of either the meaning or the effects of this conflict within the works of Martin Amis.⁷⁰

While Amis's obsession with male power and influence is, on the one hand, weirdly exaggerated – as can be seen in the journalistic obsession with his roots and images of him as the son of a famous father – there is, on the other hand, a refusal to confront these issues on a literary or thematic level. Many critics seem to displace what is in fact a key literary and cultural theme within Amis's works into a type of 'tell all' celebrity. Martin Amis's memoir *Experience* can be read as his own attempt to think through this very subject, opening as it does with a discussion of fame as a 'worthless commodity' that will 'earn you a [. . .] noticeable amount of hostile curiosity.'⁷¹ Yet even before he wrote *Experience*, Amis placed within his fiction clues as to how he envisions his own relationship to his father's work. It is a relationship that is revealing in its understanding of Kingsley Amis's gender politics, while also a firm rebuttal to those critics who would assume that the son shares the father's philosophies of life. Martin Amis seems to be directly addressing his father when he wrote the previously quoted passage about Keith Talent's 'difficulty with girls': 'The peculiar difficulty with girls experienced by God, Shakespeare, and Keith was this difficulty: they raped them.'⁷² In 1988, Kingsley Amis published a book called *Difficulties With Girls*, a sequel to *Take A Girl Like You*, published in 1960.⁷³ In *Difficulties*, the protagonist, Patrick Standish, has this problem: 'Whenever he found himself among women in any numbers it was as if something came over him.'⁷⁴

⁷⁰ This comment does not mean to denigrate the books that have been written, such as those by Keulk and Diedrick, that deal extensively with the subject of the relationship between Kingsley and Martin Amis. Rather, this comment addresses itself more to those critics and journalists for whom discussion of the subject is both apparently ubiquitous while remaining absolutely superficial.

⁷¹ Martin Amis, *Experience* (1998; New York: Vintage International, 2001) 5.

⁷² Amis, *London Fields* 168.

⁷³ *London Fields* was published in 1989.

⁷⁴ Kingsley Amis, *Difficulties with Girls* (1988; London, Penguin; 1989) 10.

This lack of control means that Patrick finds it difficult not to sexualize his relationships with the women he meets, despite his marriage to the very beautiful Jenny Bunn.

It is in the earlier novel, *Take A Girl Like You*, that Jenny and Patrick meet, and in which another of Patrick's difficulties with girls comes to light. In *Take A Girl Like You*, the idealistic young Jenny wants to preserve her virginity until her wedding night. She and Patrick date, but he cannot endure sexual abstinence and continually pressures Jenny to rethink her moral stance. Jenny manages to thwart Patrick's attempts at seduction until, at a party at their friend Julian's, she has too much to drink, and is put to bed by her friends. She passes out until she realizes that:

... Patrick was with her. He had been there for some minutes or hours when she first realized he was, and again was in bed with her without seeming to have got there. What he did was off by itself and nothing to do with her. All the same, she wanted him to stop, but her movements were all the wrong ones for that and he was kissing her too much for her to try to tell him. She thought he would stop anyway as soon as he realized how much off on his own he was. But he did not, and did not stop, so she put her arms around him and tried to be with him, only there was no way of doing it and nothing to feel. Then there was another interval, after which he told her he loved her and would never leave her now.⁷⁵

The word *rape* is never used in this novel, but Julian's reaction to Patrick immediately after his encounter with Jenny informs us that Patrick's act was far from ambiguous.

Julian berates Patrick for Jenny being so drunk, saying that he did not act in 'fairness.'⁷⁶ Despite Patrick's actions, however, Jenny later accepts his apology, and *Difficulties With Girls* begins eight years after their marriage.⁷⁷

Throughout both novels, Amis *père* presents Jenny as constantly on the defensive against men. Because of her beauty, she is never safe from unwanted advances. Indeed, either book could serve as a wrestling manual with their depictions

⁷⁵ Kingsley Amis, *Take a Girl Like You* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1960) 306.

⁷⁶ K. Amis, *Take a Girl Like You* 306-307.

⁷⁷ In fact, Patrick only marries Jenny because she is pregnant, although she later miscarries. See *Difficulties with Girls* p.61.

of Jenny outmaneuvering aggressive hands and lips. And so, Patrick's difficulties with girls are presented as *all* men's difficulties with girls: none of them can control themselves around a beautiful woman. There is a constant subtext of physical and sexual violence in Jenny's relationships with men and yet she seems to accept this disturbing situation as normal. For his part, Kingsley Amis does not excuse this behavior, but neither does he condemn it. His implication seems to be that aggressively sexual behavior is natural for men, and that women should make the best of their situation. At the end of *Take A Girl Like You*, the last lines have Jenny expressing regret over her lost innocence, while Patrick, whose own behavior has been monstrous even by his standards, simply answers that 'with a girl like you . . . It was inevitable.'⁷⁸ The problem of gender relations in these books is fairly obvious: in both *Take a Girl Like You* and *Difficulties with Girls*, the role of men as sexually aggressive towards women is taken for granted.

By incorporating into his own fiction the exact same language his father uses—indeed the very title of one of his father's novels—Martin Amis does seem to want his reader to associate father and son. And yet this characterization is not a declaration of solidarity: after all, he uses his father's title as a designation for rape. Rather than extolling Patrick Standish as the 'normal' man that Kingsley Amis seems to intend his character to be, Martin Amis connects him and his actions with *Keith Talent*: a sexually abusive and predatory misogynist who regularly commits the act of rape. Indeed, Keith Talent seems to be a direct challenge to his father's conception of gender relations. But why would Martin Amis issue such a challenge, considering his perceived notions about women? Here we come to the second level at which Martin Amis constitutes a critical problem, and the problem at the heart of this thesis: Amis's

⁷⁸ K. Amis, *Take a Girl Like You* 320.

perceived woman problem. Critics love to cite all the various ways in which Martin and Kingsley Amis differ, but chauvinism is one topic upon which some critics insist father and son agree wholeheartedly.

In order for this perception to be viable, critics have continually to invoke the intentional fallacy.⁷⁹ Critics who believe they 'know' who Martin Amis is might therefore believe that they 'know' what Martin Amis intends his books to mean. In other words, in order to keep a fixed or judgmental view of Amis's work in view, they forge a link between author and character in which the character reveals the author's thoughts and intentions. This link enables the sort of bald statement that Bette Pesetsky's accusation of misogyny represents: Amis creates misogynists such as Keith because Amis must be a misogynist. Pesetsky's statement, however, is actually a peculiar combination of condemnation and equivocation. To call someone a misogynist is to suggest that he exculpates such violence as spousal abuse and rape: a very damning statement. And yet the nervousness of Pesetsky's language – with its 'sneaking suspicion' and 'lingers here somewhere' – suggests anxiety about this narrative perspective. If Pesetsky really believes Amis to be a misogynist, she would just say so. Instead, there is something in Amis's style – in his irony, or his point of view, or his use of perspective – that complicates this picture. And so critics damn him with the title of *misogynist* while simultaneously admitting their discomfort with this stance: Gee by arguing her 'purely "literary" case' and Pesetsky through her use of equivocal language. Such language in Amis's detractors points out just how elusive and enigmatic Amis's narrative style is. It is my intention in this thesis to explore the nature of this enigmatic narrative style, for it is my belief that this

⁷⁹ See William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley's 'The Intentional Fallacy.'

elusiveness is not due to misogyny or 'bad' thinking, but to an imaginative vision of the world that is unique to both Amis and Roth.

Another reason that critics have been predisposed to seeing Martin Amis as a misogynist may simply be their aforementioned conflation of the son with the father. For often Amis is not only depicted as inheriting his father's fame but also accused of having inherited his father's well-documented prejudices. By the end of his life, the once liberal Kingsley Amis, *The Angry Young Man*, had become infamously conservative. In *Experience*, Martin Amis writes, 'Edward Upward said that he felt the aging process to work in him when he experienced "little failures of tolerance."' Well, Kingsley was never much of a tolerance cultivator; and his failures were big failures.⁸⁰ Martin Amis freely explores such 'failures of tolerance' in *Experience*. For example, he includes the following exchange that occurred shortly after Kingsley Amis's famously chauvinistic novel *Stanley and the Women* was published in 1984:

-I've [K.A.] finally worked out why I don't like Americans.
I [M.A.] waited
-Because everyone there is either a Jew or a hick.⁸¹

Experience provides Martin Amis's reactions to Kingsley's various prejudices, especially his reaction to Kingsley's misogyny. After telling the reader about how Kingsley 'started to liken women to the USSR (department of propaganda)' and 'started referring to the opposite sex as "females",' Martin Amis discloses his critical perception of how this sort of sexist attitude inhibited his father's work: 'I always thought it was suicide: artistic suicide. He didn't kill the world. He just killed half of it.'⁸² Here we have the curious situation of an author capable of elucidating why misogyny cannot form a basis for a viable definition of art but who is often labeled a misogynist himself.

⁸⁰ M. Amis, *Experience* 91.

⁸¹ M. Amis, *Experience* 93.

⁸² M. Amis, *Experience* 310.

One explanation for this paradox may be that critics who choose to review Martin Amis's works do so *because* they have already made their own political decision about what 'Martin Amis' must represent. In other words, certain critics sense an opportunity to clarify their own politics through engaging with Amis's fiction. Adams Mars-Jones unintentionally admits to this sort of position when he writes in a review of *The Information* that '[t]his reviewer, being homosexual, has a sentimental respect for the Other Persuasion [. . .].'⁸³ Here Mars-Jones admits to what David Simpson and Andrew Sullivan have called reading 'azza' subject position.⁸⁴ Sullivan explains his having given 'azzas' that name after a book tour, during which members of the audience would ask questions inevitably began with 'As a': as in, 'azza Latino transsexual,' or 'azza working-class Scottish socialist.'⁸⁵ In Sullivan's definition, 'Azzas believe that all reason gives way at the stoplight of personal experience. They hold that argument is never anything more than the rationalization of personal experience, and that the most marginal of personal experiences is always the most authentic.'⁸⁶ Simpson calls 'azza' simply 'a way of establishing one's credentials as authoritatively and efficiently as possible.'⁸⁷ The further implication of this theory is that the reading of a particular text is not only informed by the reader's personal politics, but actually *advertises* their politics. Using Mars-Jones's words as an example, he begins with the dubious assumption that Martin Amis cannot possibly have any respect, sentimental or otherwise, for women. Therefore, 'azza' homosexual male, Mars-Jones must *automatically* reject what he perceives as Amis's inherent –

⁸³ Adam Mars-Jones, 'Looking on the Blight Side', *Times Literary Supplement* March 24, 1995: 19.

⁸⁴ David Simpson, *Situatedness: Or, Why We Keep Saying Where We're Coming From* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2002) 41-47.

Andrew Sullivan, 'London Diarist: Do I Have To?', *The New Republic* Nov. 20, 1995: 50.

⁸⁵ Sullivan 50.

⁸⁶ Sullivan 50.

⁸⁷ Simpson 41.

and possibly inherited – misogyny. In this way, Mars-Jones defines *himself* through his reading of Amis while simultaneously advertising his own ideological allegiance through his position on what he perceives to be Martin Amis's world view. At best reading 'azza' allows for the exploration of how disenfranchised, minority perspectives can challenge those of the canonized majority, as in the case of Kate Millet's groundbreaking *Sexual Politics*. At worst such readings become a sort of critical onanism in which critics automatically 'know' what they are going to argue, they argue through stereotypes, and they take pleasure in the process.

Martin Amis talks about a similar style of reading to reading 'azza' in his forward to *The War Against Cliché*:

The reviewer calmly tolerates the arrival of the new novel or slim volume, defensively settles into it, and then sees which way it rubs him up. The right way or the wrong way. The results of this contact will form the data of the review, without any reference to the thing behind.⁸⁸

The idea that a reader waits to see how a novel 'rubs him up' is complicated by Amis's further assertion that these reactions are determined more by who the reader is than what they are reading. Readers approach fiction with pre-established judgements or feelings that, as Amis explains, 'are seldom unadulterated; they are admixtures of herd opinions and social anxieties, vanities, touchinesses, and everything else that makes up a self.'⁸⁹ Amis may, inadvertently or not, have helped to explain why there seems to be such critical investment in trying to maintain ideologically narrow readings of his own novels. In their reading of his fiction, critics are saying as much, if not more, about their own feelings and literary protocols as about the books they are discussing.

⁸⁸ Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000* (2001; London: Vintage, 2002) *xiii*.

⁸⁹ M. Amis, *The War Against Cliché* *xiii*.

The ideological presuppositions of critics frequently emerge in their readings of Amis's fiction. Critics often propose readings of Amis's novels that are based on their own presuppositions of who 'Martin Amis' is and what he represents. Sometimes Amis is depicted as representing inheritance—not of talent, but of publishing contracts as well as his father's sexism—and he is often represented as amoral, or even *immoral*. Specifically, he has been associated with misogyny, and it appears as if certain critics seek to establish their *own* relationship to issues of gender through their reading of Amis's fiction. Using Simpson's and Sullivan's term, they read 'azza' person who wants to establish their politics as *contrary* to those of Martin Amis. The problem with such a reading is that it is based on a series of assumptions made on the part of the critic and often based on a popular media caricature of Amis. As such, some critics ignore readings that might contradict their feelings about Amis in favour of well-established readings that always look for, and must inevitably find, evidence of Amis's alleged 'woman problem.' In other words, critics expect certain things from Amis's fiction that prove their perception of Amis's world view, and they read his novels accordingly. As such, Martin Amis's purported 'problem' with women can actually be better understood as some critics' problems with their own presuppositions about Martin Amis himself.

Martin Amis's fraught relationship with both the media and his readership has been well documented in both popular journalism and academic criticism. And yet, Amis's battles with the press and with those critics who insist on reading him in a certain way seem dwarfed by the controversies that surround Philip Roth's work. This is not to say that Roth's battles are more significant or representative than Amis's: both authors share a similarly problematic relationship with their popular media representation as well as their perceived political beliefs. But Roth's

relationship with his critics concentrates those ideas and controversies that are at the heart of this thesis in a way that demands close inspection. The most instructive of these long term battles has been Roth's relationship with the literary journal *Commentary*, and especially with the *Commentary* writers Irving Howe and Norman Podhoretz.

The Problem of Philip Roth

Philip Roth is one of America's most successful, as well as one of its most vilified, authors. On the one hand, many of his books are bestsellers, enjoying great critical acclaim. He has won every major American literary prize, including the Pulitzer, and there has been speculation about his possible position on the Nobel Prize short list.⁹⁰ On the other hand, he has repeatedly been charged with misogyny, anti-Semitism, and of being a self-hating Jew. Crucially, debates about Roth and his controversial novels are not limited to academia. While there has been an increase in academic publications concerning Roth's work, throughout his career he has found himself discussed not only in literary journals, but in synagogues, magazines, newspapers, and even gossip columns.⁹¹ In other words, he has been very much the literary celebrity, discussed across the cultural and social spectrum.

Both Roth's celebrity and his position as a divisive and controversial writer place him at the centre of a cultural and critical debate involving perceptions about the roles of authors and readers, about the politics of writing, and about the public perception of what can, and cannot, be written. But despite the wide range of Roth criticism, certain clear lines of critical opinion can be identified. We might begin by noting three well established ways of reading his work. The first way of reading

⁹⁰ Derek Parker Royal, 'Introduction; or "Now Vee May Perhaps to Begin. Yes?"', *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, ed. Royal, Derek Parker (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005) 2.

⁹¹ Royal 2.

Philip Roth begins with the perception that Roth is a deeply misunderstood writer. This reading argues that those who condemn Roth of misogyny or anti-Semitism fail to read him properly and to register his profound moral engagement with questions of identity, the self, ideology, and history. Such readers often dismiss the arguments of the second and third group; sometimes under the pretence that Roth's skill as a novelist must preclude accusations of 'bad' politics. The second way of reading Roth includes those lay readers, journalists, and academics who favour autobiographical and highly politicized readings of Roth's fiction. These readers argue that there are certain things that, as a man and as a Jew, he simply cannot say. This group often accuses him of being misogynistic, racist, anti-Semitic, and generally offensive. Finally, there are those critics—such as Irving Howe and Norman Podhoretz—who make very sophisticated cases against Roth that, I would argue, actually disguise arguments as subjective and ideological as those of the second group. The disparities between these three ways of reading Roth reveal questions of readership and authorship, and all three depend on particular critical investments involving perceptions not only of Roth as a man as well as a writer but of a particular critic's perception of him or herself. In other words, many readings and misreadings of Roth's works are based on particular critical investments that both establish a certain image of Roth in the public imagination and also endeavour to create a certain moral image of criticism itself.

From the beginning of his career, a considerable number of readers—including well known writers and critics—have recognized Roth as a major talent. His first collection, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*—parts of which were first published in the *Paris Review*, the *New Yorker* and *Commentary*—received positive reviews from established writers such as Saul Bellow, and famous critics

such as Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin.⁹² Within a year of publishing *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth was awarded the National Book Award, the Jewish Book Council's Daroff Award, the *Paris Review's* Aga Khan Award, a Guggenheim, and a National Institute of Arts and Letters award.⁹³ To this date, he has won not only the aforementioned Pulitzer Prize but also two National Book Critics Circle Awards, another National Book Award, two PEN/Faulkner Awards, as well as numerous other medals and honours, including a National Medal of Arts.⁹⁴ He has also continued to receive attention in the form of book reviews and academic criticism from some of the most famous and well-respected figures in the literary community.

Two such figures are Hermione Lee and Harold Bloom. Hermione Lee depicts Roth as a writer concerned with issues of morality, ethics, identity and the self. Partly, according to Lee, these concerns are related to the particular set of events lived through by Roth's generation, in which the relative innocence, patriotism, and promise of the 1940's was challenged by the nightmares of Vietnam and Korea, the farce and hypocrisy of Watergate, the transgressive exhilaration of the sexual revolution, and the profound changes wrought by the civil and women's rights movements. Lee believes that one of Roth's strengths has been his conceptualization of what he has called this 'demythologizing era.'⁹⁵

Roth's fiction made 'unexpurgated' use of post-Korean America's most painful concerns. Psychoanalysis, alienation, erotic fixations, pornography, urban violence, strains on the family, divorce, anxiety about eastern Europe, alarm at the implications of Zionism for twentieth-century Jewish history,

⁹² Howard Junker, 'Will This Finally Be Philip Roth's Year,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1969; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 21.

⁹³ Junker 21.

⁹⁴ Royal 2.

⁹⁵ Roth himself discusses this idea of 'demythologizing' in his interview-with-himself entitled 'Reading Myself,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1973; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 72-73.

dismay at the ineffectuality of liberalism, and national political guilt and disillusion, were appropriated by Roth [. . .] as raw material.⁹⁶

Roth grapples with these themes throughout his career, and Harold Bloom believes that this preoccupation indicates Roth's profound engagement with 'moral prophecy,' with the fact that 'he continues to be outraged by the outrageous—in societies, others and himself.'⁹⁷ At the same time, Bloom believes that what keeps this ethical outrage interesting to an audience, rather than intimidating or condescending, is its conveyance 'by the highest humour now being written.'⁹⁸ This combination of an intense engagement with prescient themes, high moral seriousness, and audacious humour leads Bloom to conclude that, 'Roth has earned a permanent place in American literature by a comic genius that need never be doubted again, wherever it chooses to take him next.'⁹⁹ Lee shares this approval, claiming that 'Roth's stylistic and emotional range, and his commitment to the real world he lives in, makes him [. . .] one of the most significant and remarkable of contemporary writers: bold, cunning, humane, ambitious, versatile and wise.'¹⁰⁰ That Roth has received the critical attention of such well-known academics as Bloom and Lee helps to establish his significance to contemporary American literature.

While Bloom and Lee agree that Roth is an adroit stylist and humorist, both also believe that these skills are inevitably used to serve Roth's ethical and moral preoccupations. In their view, it is not his often obscene and transgressive humour, nor is it his style or aesthetics that dominates his writing. Rather, as John N. McDaniel asserts, 'we can best assess Roth's artistry by viewing him, rather broadly,

⁹⁶ Hermione Lee, *Philip Roth*, Contemporary Writers (London: Methuan & Co. Ltd., 1982) 10.

⁹⁷ Harold Bloom, introduction, *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 2.

⁹⁸ Bloom 2.

⁹⁹ Bloom 6.

¹⁰⁰ Lee 10-11.

as a writer whose artistic intentions are “moral,” whose method is realistic, and whose subject is the self in society.’¹⁰¹ Roth’s humour, even at its most obscene, and his style, even at its most frenetic, can both be attributed to what McDaniel calls, ‘Roth’s assault on the American experience –his exploration of moral fantasy, his concern for moral consciousness, his willingness to confront the grander social and political phenomena of our time [. . .].’¹⁰² According to critics such as Bloom, Lee, and McDaniel, Roth is an explicitly moral writer who engages with a specifically American experience: with both the events and ideologies of American life. In this first dominant perspective on reading Roth, critics understand him to be both a brilliant stylist and a comic genius. They also believe him to be profoundly engaged with questions of morality and ethics, despite his controversial approach to many of the issues raised in his fiction. This first group of critics does not imagine Roth to be either amoral or immoral but fascinated by how morality functions in the daily lives of ordinary Americans. As such, they give short shrift to those critics and readers who feel that any exploration of ethics or morals on Roth’s part is overwhelmed by the vulgar and offensive nature of his fiction.

Whilst many readers and critics have followed Roth’s career with delight and approbation, very often he has found himself at the centre of heated controversy. A small but vociferous group of critics have taken umbrage with various aspects of his fiction throughout his career. The types of charges levelled against him range from the spiteful to the profoundly damning. A typical example of the former is Stanley Edgar Hyman’s 1964 essay, ‘A Novelist of Great Promise.’ Although Hyman does praise Roth, he also warns of the damage being done by ‘gushy reviewing,’ believing that ‘the minor result of the shower of praise and coin that Roth received was to make

¹⁰¹ John N. McDaniel, ‘Distinctive Features of Roth’s Artistic Vision’ *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom’s Modern Critical Views (1973; Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 43-44.

¹⁰² McDaniel 52.

him arrogant.'¹⁰³ This appraisal of Roth as arrogant is a telling one. The idea that Philip Roth is somehow *determined* to transgress 'normal' boundaries of religion, community, sexuality and family, or that he is *determined to offend*, seems to inform those readings, or misreadings, of Roth's second group of critics. These readers often attack Roth under one of two auspices: they see Roth as a misogynist or Roth as an anti-Semitic, self-hating Jew.¹⁰⁴ In one sense, this reading can be seen as an inversion of reading 'azza' that was discussed in my preceding section. Here we see critics demand Roth *writes* 'azza,' asking whether, 'azza' Jew and 'azza' man there are things he simply should not say.

It is not only journalists who question Roth's feelings about women in newspapers and magazines; many academic critics who focus on Roth's fiction make equally negative assertions. Patricia Meyer Spacks believes that Roth's work in the 1970's exhibits, 'little awareness of women's status as full-fledged human beings, with possible purposes unrelated to men,' and Mary Allen, writing in 1976, believes that Roth 'projects his enormous rage and disappointment with womankind . . . as a man who rails at the world because he has never found in it a woman who is both strong and good.'¹⁰⁵ Both of these statements are equally damning. The first claims that Roth does not recognize women's very humanity. The second asserts that Roth finds women weak and evil and is, therefore, filled with rage and disappointment at the *entire* female sex. These critics find in Roth's fictional work what they consider to be proof of Roth's misogyny.

¹⁰³ Stanley Edgar Hymen, 'A Novelist of Great Promise,' *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (1964; Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 7,8.

¹⁰⁴ Sometimes, however, these worlds unite, such as in the title of a May 2000 article from the *Jewish Exponent*, entitled 'Down with Philip Roth! Jewish Mothers—In All Their Variety—Celebrate Their Triumphs,' by Robert Leiter.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Shostak, 271 n.5.

But why do critics find such fault with Roth's portrayals of women? Both Allen and Spacks discern an issue with his characterization of women, believing that he cannot, or will not, depict a fully rounded or morally decent female character. In other words, they invoke the intentional fallacy by asserting that the images of women presented in Roth's fiction somehow represent the feelings of the author for actual women. If one does take for granted this connection between image and creator, then a reader can easily find support for the accusation of misogyny in male characters such as Alexander Portnoy, from *Portnoy's Complaint*, who gives his girlfriends such contemptuous monikers as 'the Monkey,' 'the Pumpkin,' and 'the Pilgrim.' Roth himself admits that the literary shenanigans of Portnoy helped to create the derogatory public image that journalists such as Gornick and Hayman refer to when they call him a woman-hater or ask whether women dare confront him at parties. In an interview with Joyce Carol Oates, Roth says that his public reputation is, 'a concoction spawned by *Portnoy's Complaint* and compounded largely out of the fantasies that book gave rise to because of its "confessional" strategy, and also because of its financial success.'¹⁰⁶ Roth implies that there is a body of readers who, perhaps partly out of jealousy over his successes, insist that he *is* Portnoy, displacing all of Portnoy's dysfunctions onto the shoulders of Philip Roth. This second strain of criticism reads Roth's fiction autobiographically, judging Roth the author in light of the perceived values of his subject.

Another aspect of certain novels, especially *Portnoy's Complaint* and the later novel *Sabbath's Theater*, which leads some readers to label Roth a misogynist is Roth's use of obscene, even pornographic, language. In their reviews of the novel, Sanford Pinsker and Daniel Schifrin both imply that *Sabbath's Theater* is

¹⁰⁶ Philip Roth, in an interview with Joyce Carol Oates, 'A Conversation with Philip Roth,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1974; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 89.

pornographic. Although his review is mostly positive, Pinsker wonders, 'how do the graphic descriptions of women seduced into frenzies of sexual heat by Sabbath's smooth talk differ substantially from the steamy fare one might encounter in *Hustler* or *Penthouse*?'¹⁰⁷ Schifrin warns that Sabbath's, 'sexual immodesty has hardly been seen outside the letters column in *Penthouse* magazine.'¹⁰⁸ To call a novel pornographic is to suggest it may not be art, the assumption being that art and pornography are mutually exclusive. Much of the feminist discourse surrounding pornography, however, would claim that it is not only mutually exclusive to art but *always* exploitive of women. As Andrea Dworkin writes, 'We will know when we are free when the pornography no longer exists. As long as it does exist, we must understand that we are the women in it: used by the same power, subject to the same valuation, as the vile whores who beg for more.'¹⁰⁹ According to Dworkin, pornography subjugates all women by insinuating to men that any female body can be used – and wants to be used – in the same way as the body of the woman in the pornographic film or picture. Any man who produces, disseminates, or enjoys pornography exploits women, and they do so out of fear and hatred of women. In this analysis, if Roth were pandering a literary form of pornography, then he must be the woman-hater of Gornick's imagination.

Critics such as Keller or Spacks who see in Roth a misogynist often do so for one of the three reasons above. Some read Roth's fiction as autobiographical, believing that the most pernicious or outrageous beliefs and actions carried out by his fictional characters are really *his* beliefs and *his* actions. Other critics perceive his female characters to be less realized than their male counterparts. Finally, Roth's

¹⁰⁷ Sanford Pinsker, 'Still (Sex) Crazy After All These Years: Philip Roth's Newest,' *Jewish Exponent* Sept. 8, 1995, Feb. 2, 2006 <http://www.highbeam.com>.

¹⁰⁸ Daniel Schifrin, 'The Louse That Roth Built,' *The Jewish Week* Nov. 11, 1995, Feb. 2, 2006 <http://www.highbeam.com>.

¹⁰⁹ Dworkin 224.

work often contains obscene language and pornographic situations. As Sanford Pinsker laments, '[Roth's] writing was dirty, a word that was troubling enough in English and even more so when uttered in Yiddish: *schmutzik*.'¹¹⁰ Such *schmutzik* coupled with a feminist discourse that states all pornography must be based on male domination of the female body damns Roth as a misogynist. However, that Roth does recreate apparently pornographic images, while fully aware that he *is* often called a misogynist, suggests that Roth wants to *encourage* those readers who might be predisposed to accuse him of misogyny. Roth appears to delight in taunting his critics, in purposefully exacerbating those aspects of his work that they find most offensive.

Despite the sincerity of those who charge him with misogyny, Roth himself has not taken the attacks too personally. When asked by Alan Finkelkraut how *My Life as a Man* was received by America's 'women's lib,' Roth answers that the novel was 'the most damaging evidence brought against me.'¹¹¹ The reason being, according to his own estimation:

Because in 1974 the world had just recently discovered that women were good and only good, persecuted and only persecuted, exploited and only exploited, and I had depicted a woman who was not good, who persecuted others, and who exploited others—and that spoiled everything . . . to depict such a woman was contrary to the new ethics and to the revolution that espoused them. It was antirevolutionary. It was on the wrong side of the cause. It was taboo.¹¹²

Roth's definition of feminism, and the reason he gives why some feminists took umbrage with his writing, is actually more interesting than a mere dismissal of the women's rights movement. Certainly this statement could be read as a condescending refusal to take the issues surrounding feminism seriously, and as such it could support the idea that Roth *is* a misogynist. Yet I would argue that, far from being a

¹¹⁰ Pinsker.

¹¹¹ Alan Finkelkraut, 'The Ghosts of Roth,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1981; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 122.

¹¹² Roth, in an interview with Finkelkraut, 122.

denigration of women's rights or proving some vengeful and vicious hatred for women, these statements by Roth reveal his irritation with any ideological stance that demands the right to circumscribe, censure, or silence an individual. In fact, Roth's attack on censoring ideologies can actually be interpreted as consonant with the very sort of ethical stance upon which the feminist movement is based. Both feminists and Philip Roth demand an individual's right to define him or herself, rather than be defined by social pressures.¹¹³ Indeed, this thesis will argue that Philip Roth and feminism have some things in common: they both argue vehemently for the individual's right to attempt self-definition; they both explore how the varieties of cultural, historical, and political experience impinge upon the formation of a self; and they are both very interested in the role of sex and gender in defining the self. All of these are themes that dominate Roth's writing, and his interest in such issues stands in stark opposition to those who accuse him of a misogynist ideology.

Besides feminists who disliked Roth's characterization of women, Roth's fiction also offended a certain segment of the Jewish community. Unlike the accusations of feminists, the charges that angry Jewish readers levelled against him were perceptibly harder for Roth, being Jewish, to dismiss. Indeed, exploring the impact such criticisms had on his writing became its own theme in his fiction. Attacks by Jewish readers began early on, with the publication of the individual stories that would later be published together as *Goodbye, Columbus*. In *The Facts*, Roth writes that most of these stories, 'though they may have attracted a little more than ordinary reader interest, had caused no furor among Jews, appearing as they did in the *Paris Review*, a young literary quarterly then with only a tiny circulation, and in

¹¹³ This is not, however, to suggest that Roth believes such self-definition is easy or even possible.

Commentary, the monthly [. . .] published by the American Jewish Committee.¹¹⁴

This benign reaction changed, however, with his publication of the short story 'Defender of the Faith,' a story about a Jewish private, Sheldon Grossbart, in basic training during World War Two and his superior officer, Sergeant Nathan Marx, who is also Jewish. The story is told from the first person perspective of Sergeant Marx, an honourable man and dutiful soldier just returned from Germany and now teaching basic training stateside.¹¹⁵ Marx is approached by Grossbart who automatically assumes an attitude of familiarity with his superior officer because of their shared heritage. To Marx's disgust, Grossbart continually asks for special favours, including a pass to leave the base to spend a Jewish holiday with his aunt, only to return to base bringing Marx a gift of eggrolls from a Chinese restaurant and claiming to have misread the invitation and gotten the dates mixed up. Finally, Marx learns that Grossbart, who continually hints that he would appreciate Marx's help in keeping him out of the Pacific where his unit is bound after basic training, has managed to find a Corporal named Shulman to dupe into sending him, alone of his unit, to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Marx is so appalled by Grossbart's use of his religious and cultural heritage as a form of emotional blackmail that he makes sure Grossbart is reassigned back to the Pacific with the rest of his unit.

The depiction of a conniving, cringing Jewish character, Grossbart, offended Jewish readers, despite the fact that the hero of the story, the honourable and brave soldier Marx, is also Jewish. But Roth claims that it was not really the story itself that offended Jewish readers but where it was published. He argues that, 'Defender of the Faith' would have 'been certified as permissible Jewish discourse by appearing in

¹¹⁴ Philip Roth, *The Facts* (1988; New York: Vintage Books, 1997) 116.

¹¹⁵ Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959; New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 161.

Commentary.¹¹⁶ However, by publishing the story in the *New Yorker* with its genteel readership, he opened himself to the accusation of having ‘divulged Jewish secrets and vulgarly falsified Jewish lives.’¹¹⁷ Public reaction was furious. According to Irving Howe, angry rabbis ‘made a virtual career out of attacking his work.’¹¹⁸ In *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth quotes from a rabbi’s letter written directly to him: ‘You have earned the gratitude [. . .] of all who sustain their anti-Semitism on such conceptions of Jews as ultimately led to the murder of six million in our time.’¹¹⁹ Another eminent rabbi, writing in protest to the Anti-Defamation League of the B’nai Brith, demanded to know ‘What is being done to silence this man? Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him. . .’¹²⁰ Lay readers also found in Roth’s work justification for anti-Semitism, and Roth claims to have received ‘a number [of letters] written by Jews accusing me of being anti-Semitic and “self-hating”.’¹²¹ One such reader wrote that, ‘you have done as much harm as all the organized anti-Semitic organizations have done to make people believe that all Jews are cheats, liars, connivers.’¹²² Ironically, the exposure given to what would otherwise have been just another short story published by a relatively unknown writer was amplified by those very rabbis and Jewish organizations who most wanted the story to disappear. And so, when *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* was finally published, it received much more attention than most first books. The public debate over the

¹¹⁶ Roth, *The Facts* 116.

¹¹⁷ Roth, *The Facts* 116,

¹¹⁸ Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983) 259.

¹¹⁹ As quoted by Philip Roth, *Reading Myself, and Others* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001) 205.

¹²⁰ As quoted by Roth, *Reading Myself*, 204. In an interview with Ian Hamilton, Roth claims that his decision to have Nathan Zuckerman silenced by breaking his jaw at the end of *The Anatomy Lesson* was done for this rabbi (*Conversations with Philip Roth*, 195).

¹²¹ As quoted by Roth, *Reading Myself* 193.

¹²² As quoted by Roth, *Reading Myself* 203.

stories that would later comprise the novel acted as free publicity, helping *Goodbye, Columbus* to win its variety of accolades and increasing its potential readership.

What differentiates these charges of anti-Semitism or self-hatred from the charges of misogyny against Roth is that Roth admits to having taken these critics very seriously indeed. In his interview with Finkelkraut, Roth says of his Jewish critics, 'it isn't difficult to understand their concern. In fact, it's the *ease* with which one understands it that presents a problem of conflicting loyalties.'¹²³ He explains:

[. . .] Jews who register strong objections to what they see as damaging fictional portrayals of Jews are not necessarily philistine or paranoid. If their nerve endings are frayed it is not without justification. They don't want books that will give comfort to anti-Semites or confirm anti-Semitic stereotypes. They don't want books that will wound the feelings of Jews already victimized, if not by anti-Semitic persecution in one form or another, by the distaste for Jews still endemic in pockets of our society. [. . .] In the aftermath of the horrors that have befallen millions of Jews in this century, it isn't difficult to understand their concern.¹²⁴

Roth admits not only to understanding the concerns of his fellow Jews but also concedes to their having good reason to fear the kind of fiction that they accuse him of writing. The fact that he engages with controversial subjects anyway only complicates the question of why Roth insists upon exploring the subject matter that he does.

This question has certainly not been lost on Roth, who has fictionalized this very debate in such books as *The Ghost Writer* and *The Anatomy Lesson* as well as non-fiction forums such as *The Facts*, 'Writing About Jews,' and 'Imagining Jews.' As Roth puts the matter in an interview with Hermione Lee, '[t]he difficulties of telling a Jewish story—How should it be told? In what tone? To whom should it be told? To what end? Should it be told at all?—was finally to become *The Ghost*

¹²³ Roth, in an interview with Finkelkraut, 129.

¹²⁴ Roth, in an interview with Finkelkraut, 129.

Writer's theme.¹²⁵ These questions are exactly what those Jewish critics of 'Defender of the Faith' had asked Roth. In response, Roth appropriates their questions, making the questions—rather than the answers—the subject of a novel. And therefore *The Ghost Writer* becomes a story about a Jewish writer imagining all the problems contingent to telling Jewish stories, a lateral approach to the very subject with which his critics demand he engage with.

In interviews and essays Roth often discusses the strangely fruitful relationship between his fiction and its worst critics. Roth credits his critics' hostile reactions with shaping the course of his writing, saying, 'I have no idea how my career would have gone if this stuff hadn't kicked it off.'¹²⁶ Roth even attributes such criticism with having been the catalyst for his creation of Alexander's Portnoy, his most controversial character to date. According to Roth, Portnoy was actually inspired by 'the censorious small-mindedness and shame-ridden xenophobia that I ran into from the official Jews who wanted me to shut up.'¹²⁷ Indeed, Roth claims that *Portnoy's Complaint* was written partly out of frustration with a Jewish audience who refused to see in him anything other than the writer of his very first short stories. 'They wouldn't let up, no matter what I wrote. So I thought finally, "Well, you want it, I'll give it to you."' And out came Portnoy, apertures spurting.'¹²⁸ Needless to say, Roth's critics did not accept their role in the creation of the novel, and the controversy created by *Portnoy's Complaint* would dwarf that of *Goodbye, Columbus*, with the associate editor of *Commentary* denouncing Roth's 'fanaticism in the hatred of all

¹²⁵ Roth, in an interview with Hermione Lee, 'The Art of Fiction LXXXIV: Philip Roth,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1984; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 183.

¹²⁶ Roth, in an interview with Clive Sinclair, 'Doctor or Pornographer? Clive Sinclair Talks to Philip Roth about His New Book,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1984; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 188.

¹²⁷ Roth, in an interview with Lee, 176.

¹²⁸ Roth, in an interview with Ian Hamilton, 'A Confusion of Realms,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1985; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 196.

things Jewish' and former supporters, such as Irving Howe, turning on Roth with vicious public condemnations.¹²⁹

Philip Roth was attacked by not only Jewish readers for his creation of Alexander Portnoy but also by feminist readers who found Portnoy's callous use of women to be proof of Roth's own feelings towards the female sex. That both Jewish and feminist readers would be angry seems obvious considering such outbursts from Portnoy as, 'YOU FUCKING JEWISH MOTHERS ARE JUST TOO FUCKING MUCH TO BEAR!'¹³⁰ Portnoy testifies to what he 'knows' is wrong with him: he thinks his illness can be blamed on overbearing Jewish mothers, constipated Jewish fathers, and a world filled with *shiksese* who have the audacity to '*all have cunts!* Right under their dresses! Cunts—for fucking!'¹³¹ Many readers misread Portnoy as thinly veiled autobiography, and Roth became, in his own words, 'locked, suddenly, into this image of a sexual beast.'¹³² To his critics, he became a self-imposed anti-Semitic stereotype—the "Jewfreak", refusing, complaining, neurotic, seasick, outraged and outrageous'—and the feminist nightmare of the unrepentant misogynist.¹³³ However, such critics are guilty not only of misreading Roth's fiction but also of demanding a type of self-censorship from their authors. In other words, they demand that Roth, as a man and as a Jew, *not say certain things*. Roth addresses this idea of self-censorship through his dismissal of it: 'I am not interested in writing about what people *should* do for the good of the human race and pretending that's what they *do* do, but writing about what they do indeed do, lacking the programmatic efficiency of the infallible theorists.'¹³⁴ In many ways creating Portnoy is a direct

¹²⁹ As quoted by Roth, *Reading Myself*, 277.

¹³⁰ Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967; London: Vintage, 1999) 121.

¹³¹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 102.

¹³² Roth, in an interview with Hayman, 117.

¹³³ Lee 27.

¹³⁴ Roth, in an interview with Lee, 175.

attack against such 'infallible theorists,' as Portnoy represents those individuals and ideas that exist despite public disapproval and attempted censure.

This second group of critics, those critics who find in Roth a misogynist or an anti-Semitic Jew, base their readings on what are actually *mis*-readings of his work. They insist on reading Roth autobiographically and seek to define the parameters of what is acceptable for him to write. That Roth write 'for the good of the human race' is exactly what these critics ask him to do. Yet by publicly declaring themselves 'against' Philip Roth—by denouncing him in synagogue, by writing a letter to the *New Yorker*, or by attacking him in an academic journal—critics were also taking the opportunity to advertise their own political beliefs. In other words, if Roth is at the centre of an important cultural and critical debate involving the purpose of art and the role of the reader in contemporary society, then, through him, critics have the opportunity to declare their own position in this debate. As Mark Shechner writes:

In the conflict between Roth and the numerous voices of Jewish disapproval, a conflict that goes back to 1959 and the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, the critics are out of touch. And I don't mean out of touch with the new age, but with the spirit of fiction itself, with the normal uses of the imagination in literature. For their quarrel with Roth is not properly over literature or any aspects thereof but over touchy matters of culture: over who gets to speak for the Jews and what messages are considered safe to deliver.¹³⁵

This passage can also be applied to some feminist critics who use Roth to debate how women can and cannot be discussed in literature and who has the right to make those decisions. There is an implication here that critics or readers are somehow responsible for *policing* literature: for defining what is written and how subjects are presented. If a writer does not comply, the punishment, as Roth's case illustrates, is to be publicly denounced and threatened. And the rabbi's threat that Roth continually

¹³⁵ Mark Shechner, 'Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth,' (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) 31.

refers to in interviews—that ‘Medieval Jews would know what to do with him’—seems far more disturbing in light of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie.

The third group of critics to be discussed are similar to the second in that they, too, find much to criticize in Roth’s work and public persona. What makes them different, however, is their self-conscious affiliation with culture and art. These critics—here exemplified by Irving Howe and Norman Podhoretz—claim to base their arguments against Roth on their experience as academics, as men of culture, or men of letters. They are sophisticated critics who make it abundantly clear that they should not be confused with those politicized readers that make up the second group—those feminists, rabbis, or Jewish organizations—that base their judgements on gut reactions or tribal loyalties. I would argue, however, that the opinions of Howe and Podhoretz are as absolutely subjective as the second group. Indeed, it is in the disjunction between how critics like Howe and Podhoretz perceive themselves and what their arguments actually reveal that helps to establish Roth’s position in the centre of a cultural and critical debate about the role of literature in contemporary society. What makes Irving Howe’s and Norman Podhoretz’s critique of Roth so important is the question of *why* they attribute to Roth the philosophies that they do and *how* they define themselves against these philosophies. In fact, their understanding of Philip Roth represents an attempt not only to think through but also to advertise their *own* specific moral vision regarding the purposes behind both reading and writing.

Both Irving Howe and Norman Podhoretz were supporters of Roth’s earliest fiction. Upon the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, Howe wrote in the *New Republic* that, ‘What many writers spend a lifetime searching for—a unique voice, a secure rhythm, a distinctive subject—seem to have come to Philip Roth totally and

immediately.¹³⁶ Podhoretz also found Roth's earliest short stories appealing and even claims to have been the first to recognize Roth's potential: 'Unless my memory is playing tricks on me—and if so, I have no doubt that someone, though not, if I know anything about him, Roth himself, will correct me—it was I who “discovered” him as a writer of fiction.'¹³⁷ However, by the time that *Portnoy's Complaint* was published, both Howe and Podhoretz found it necessary not only to reappraise their position on Roth's writings but to reconsider their endorsement of Roth as a man. This led Howe to publish 'Philip Roth, Reconsidered,' a vicious attack on Roth's writings as well as Howe's perception of Roth's ethics. For his part, Podhoretz wrote a short piece called 'Laureate of the New Class' as a sort of introduction to 'Philip Roth Reconsidered,' which he begins by stating, 'Except for a detail or two I agree with everything Irving Howe says about Philip Roth.'¹³⁸ What is interesting about these changes of opinion is that they seem rooted in a larger philosophical sea change affecting both critics later in life. Indeed, Philip Roth seems to have found himself in the unenviable position of representing the earlier political philosophies of two literary and social critics who had undergone dramatic political conversions. As a symbol of their former philosophical naïveté, Roth—the man, and not just the writer—became the ritual sacrifice to be publicly condemned so that Howe and Podhoretz could expiate their former ideological sins.

Both Howe and Podhoretz began life as left-wing liberals. According to Alan Wald, the younger Howe was a committed Trotskyist, 'full of fiery rhetoric and eager for militant action not so different from some of the most extreme (but nonterrorist)

¹³⁶ As quoted by Stanley Edgar Hymen, 'A Novelist of Great Promise,' *Philip Roth*, Harold Bloom, ed., Bloom's Modern Critical Views (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 7.

¹³⁷ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth,' *Commentary* (Oct. 1998) 25.

¹³⁸ Norman Podhoretz, 'Laureate of the New Class,' *Commentary*, Vol. 54 no. 6 (Dec. 1972):

elements of the New Left of the 1960's.¹³⁹ But all of this changed when Howe turned against the New Left of the 1960s and early 1970s, 'caricaturing its aims and activities, and even flirted briefly with the incipient neoconservatives and their campaign against *The New York Review of Books*.'¹⁴⁰ A similar process of political conversion took place in Norman Podhoretz. *The New York Times* calls him 'an outspoken champion of the political left who went on to become one of its leading scourges.'¹⁴¹ Like Howe, Podhoretz was horrified by the radical and sometimes violent tendencies of the New Left. He has written that, 'I've turned against almost everything I was saying between 1958 and 1968, and in a sense I regret having contributed to what seems to me today a dangerous and destructive cultural, political wave—a kind of plague'.¹⁴² Both Howe and Podhoretz moved from positions on the left to the right—the very far right in the case of Podhoretz—and both cite their reason for doing so as the occasional terrorist activities of the New Left. Podhoretz hints at why this political transition made them so disagreeable towards Roth in his discussion of the New Left 'plague': 'To the extent that I helped spread that plague, I regret it. My defense of myself is that I then devoted all my energies and all my resources and whatever talents I had, not only to undoing that damage, but trying to build something healthier.'¹⁴³ It is here, in Podhoretz's expressed wish to redress his past ideological oversights, that he reveals the real motivation behind both his and Howe's attacks on Roth.

What is striking about Howe and Podhoretz's condemnations of Roth is how *personal* they are: both in the sense that they attack Roth, personally, and not just his

¹³⁹ Alan Wald, from *The New York Intellectuals* May 31, 2007, Oct. 17, 2006
<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/wald-on-howe.html>

¹⁴⁰ Wald.

¹⁴¹ Dierdre Carmody, 'Critic of the Left Ready to Step Aside', *The New York Times* January 19, 1995, late ed.: 22.

¹⁴² Norman Podhoretz, in an interview with Dierdre Carmody 22.

¹⁴³ Podhoretz, in an interview with Carmody.

fiction, but that they are also about Howe and Podhoretz's own personal involvement with Roth and his fiction. Both begin by talking about their early support for, and encouragement of, Roth; and both talk about their falling out with Roth in terms of their recognition that Roth represents a new cultural milieu that they cannot abide. Howe launches two forms of attack on Philip Roth. The first is a purely 'literary' attack, which upon closer examination reveals what is really a very personal attack characterizing Roth as arrogant, immature, and culturally void. The second is a 'defence' of Roth against charges of anti-Semitism that actually establishes Roth as an anti-Semitic author. Both attacks against Roth also involve Howe establishing himself as Roth's ethical, cultural, and critical foil. Where Howe depicts Roth as arrogant, he implies his own humility in the face of great art; where he depicts Roth as ethically challenged, Howe implies his authority on ethics in literature; where Roth is culturally void, Howe is an arbiter of high culture. Similarly, Podhoretz also sets his own position in society against that of Roth, believing that Roth represents a 'New Class' of readers. He writes:

Philip Roth owes his centrality to the fact that he so perfectly embodies the ethos of a group which began coming to consciousness of itself as a distinctive social class around the time Roth first appeared on the scene and which has become numerous enough and powerful enough in recent years to move from the margins of our culture into the very mainstream of our political life. The New Class, in short, now constitutes a mass audience in its own right and Roth is the New-Class writer par excellence. No wonder he is such a success.¹⁴⁴

The language of this passage reveals Podhoretz's contempt for this New Class, the name of which raises the spectre of aristocracy, inherited cultural supremacy, and class warfare. Indeed, as Mark Shechner argues, Podhoretz reveals a great deal of discomfort that stems from a conservative sense of class consciousness. Shechner writes, 'The New Class. So, this is war. This is *Kulturkampf*. You can smell the

¹⁴⁴ Podhoretz, 'Laureate of the New Class' 7.

cordite right through the page and hear the click of heels on pavement. Fathers on patrol!’¹⁴⁵ Both Howe and Podhoretz base their arguments on cultural—even class—divisions and attempt to establish Roth on one side of the divide with themselves on the other.

Howe sets this tone of cultural division early in ‘Philip Roth, Reconsidered,’ when he warns that ‘[a]t least for a moment or two, until the next fashion appears, we are in the presence not only of an interesting writer, but also a cultural “case”.’¹⁴⁶ The disdainful tone Howe uses when he describes his belief that Roth is merely another ‘cultural case’—a fashion soon to be eclipsed by the next celebrity writer—also reveals Howe’s perception of himself as someone who is *not* interested in, or appreciative of, popular culture. Howe is of the *other* culture, an enduring ‘High’ culture that only recognizes ‘serious’ art. Later in his essay, Howe reiterates his opinion of Roth’s relationship to America, Judaism, and popular culture. As Howe has already belittled Roth for being a cultural ‘case,’ and a mere literary trend, it comes as no surprise when Howe introduces his theory that Roth comes of a ‘thin personal culture.’¹⁴⁷ First Howe alleges that Roth ‘is one of the first American-Jewish writers who finds that it [the tradition of Jewish self-criticism and satire] yields him no sustenance.’ Next, in an imaginative leap that seems to accuse Roth of abandoning his entire Jewish culture and heritage along with any associative literary traditions, Howe adds this ‘deficiency [. . .] need not be a fatal one for a Jewish writer, provided he can find sustenance elsewhere, in other cultures, other traditions.’¹⁴⁸ Howe implies that Roth has abandoned his Jewish culture with its Jewish literary traditions. In Howe’s estimation, the obvious substitute of American culture and its literary

¹⁴⁵ Shechner 33.

¹⁴⁶ Howe, ‘Philip Roth Reconsidered’ 69.

¹⁴⁷ Howe, ‘Philip Roth Reconsidered’ 73.

¹⁴⁸ Howe, ‘Philip Roth Reconsidered’ 73.

traditions has, however, eluded Roth. Howe writes that, 'his relation to the mainstream of American culture, in its great sweep of democratic idealism and romanticism, is decidedly meagre.'¹⁴⁹ All Roth has, instead, are the 'frayed remnants of cultural modernism, once revolutionary in significance but now reduced to little more than the commonplace "shock" of middlebrow culture.'¹⁵⁰ The larger implication of this assertion is that—while Roth does not understand Jewish literary culture or tradition; while Roth does not understand the 'great sweep' of American 'democratic idealism and romanticism'; while Roth is cursed with a 'thin personal culture'—Irving Howe can understand and appreciate all of these things. While Roth panders to 'middlebrow culture,' Howe concerns himself with higher matters—his own personal culture is anything but thin, his culture decidedly high brow.

Like Howe, Podhoretz also draws a division between the New Class and a more sophisticated and reserved culture. In 'The Adventure of Philip Roth,' Podhoretz writes of Roth that:

he was simply incapable of achieving mastery over the outrage, hatred, grief, and love that drove him to write. By nature he was too judgmental and too passionately tendentious to transcend such motives and feelings. What he wanted to do as a writer, what he needed to do as a writer, was to take stock of the world in which he lived and give it the business, as only someone with so wicked a pen and so unforgiving a mind as his could do.¹⁵¹

This perception of Roth as weak in the face of his emotions, as spoiling to exact revenge on his enemies and heap abuse upon those he deems to be his inferiors seems ironic given the vituperative nature of Howe's and Podhoretz's own essays on Roth. Indeed, what should strike a reader of these essays is the extent to which those motivations that Podhoretz claims to be Roth's apparently match Howe's and Podhoretz's own motivations for attacking Philip Roth. 'To take stock of the world'

¹⁴⁹ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 73.

¹⁵⁰ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 73.

¹⁵¹ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 30.

and 'give it the business,' is exactly what Podhoretz proceeds to do with Roth and the type of reader and thinker that Podhoretz believes Roth to represent. Podhoretz revisits his comments from 'Laureate of the New Class':

Roth was their 'laureate' in the sense that everything he wrote served to reinforce their standard ideas and attitudes, to offer documentary evidence for their taken-for-granted view that America was a country dominated by vulgarians, materialists, bores, and criminal political leaders. In doing so, Roth was inviting his readers to join with him in snobbishly and self-righteously celebrating their joint superiority to everyone else around them. [. . .] Without going so far as the New Left or the counterculture, he nevertheless, and in his own unique style, experienced and gave voice to a hostility as great as theirs to middle-class America and what later came to be called "family values."¹⁵²

Here Podhoretz takes stock of his world: a world he sees as permeated by the influence of the New Class, the counterculture, and the New Left. This influence hates middle-class America and 'family values.' They are snobs; they are self-righteous; they celebrate their superiority, and Roth is their poet laureate. Podhoretz then gives Roth 'the business.' He says that upon rereading *Portnoy's Complaint* he found the book 'very tiny,' and only allowed himself to read Roth's other books once and no more. He was 'repelled' by one novel, 'disgusted' by another, and 'bored' by others, including *Sabbath's Theater*.¹⁵³

Howe's own attacks on Roth also reveal a strong desire to wound. He berates Roth for lacking a 'passion for moral scrutiny,' and for being 'a writer who has denied himself, programmatically, the vision of major possibilities.'¹⁵⁴ Howe implies that Roth, with his limited spiritual and cultural resources, can only contemplate the most superficial aspects of reality and that he lacks the desire to look at the world from any sort of moral standpoint. Howe restates this idea more dramatically later, when he states that a 'vital culture'—as opposed to Roth's own 'thin personal culture'—'can

¹⁵² Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 32.

¹⁵³ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 33.

¹⁵⁴ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 69.

yield a writer those details of manners, customs, and morals which give the illusion of reality back to his work.¹⁵⁵ While Howe appears to be commenting on a writer's ability to create realistic characters and situations, his implication is actually that having a 'vital culture' is what gives a writer not only the *details* of manners, customs and morals but his or her *own* manners, customs and morals. In other words, Roth's lack of culture is responsible for his lack of manners, disrespect for customs, and his *immorality*. That Howe can judge Roth so harshly on matters of morality implies his own perceived status as a moral arbiter: as a literary critic who looks for what he perceives to be 'moral issues' in the fiction—and the authors—that he reads.

Howe and Podhoretz reaffirm their accusations of insensitivity and depravity by accusing Roth of being an anti-Semitic Jew. Howe launches a 'defence' of Roth against charges of anti-Semitism that actually establishes Roth *as* anti-Semitic. Near the end of his essay, Howe says that '*Portnoy's Complaint* is not, as enraged critics have charged, an anti-Semitic book.'¹⁵⁶ What makes this defence of Roth sound strange to a reader is that the preceding pages of the essay seem to make a strong case that Roth certainly acts and thinks like an anti-Semite. Howe begins by attempting to establish a biographical link between the character of Alexander Portnoy and that of the 'real' Philip Roth. Howe first makes this connection *before* he tells us that he does not find *Portnoy's Complaint* to be an anti-Semitic novel. He writes:

The psychic afflictions of his character Roth would surely want to pass up, but who can doubt that Portnoy's cry from the heart—enough of Jewish guilt, enough of the burdens of history, enough of inhibition and repression, it is time to 'let go' and soar to the horizons of pleasure—speaks in some sense for Roth?¹⁵⁷

In this passage Howe directly associates Portnoy with Roth by stating that Portnoy's complaint must actually be Roth's complaint: that Portnoy speaks for Roth. Howe

¹⁵⁵ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 73.

¹⁵⁶ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 76.

¹⁵⁷ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 75.

again implies that all of these furious denunciations of Jews and their Jewish feelings are really Roth's when Howe writes that Portnoy's wish that the super-ego 'were a Jewish invention,' 'helps explain, I think, *what Roth's true feelings about, or relation to, Jewishness are* [ital. mine].'¹⁵⁸ Howe again associates Portnoy with Roth, implying that Portnoy's complaints reveal Roth's true feelings about Jewishness. When, in the next few sentences, Howe says that *Portnoy's Complaint* is not an anti-Semitic book, the reader is left to wonder *why* Howe would make such an assertion. Indeed, immediately after his assertion that the book is not anti-Semitic, Howe adds that 'it contains plenty of contempt for Jewish life,' blatantly contradicting his defence of Roth.¹⁵⁹ He then adds that, 'Roth does not write out of *traditional* Jewish self-hatred [ital. mine],' a statement that leads the reader to wonder if Roth instead writes out of some sort of *non-traditional* Jewish self-hatred.¹⁶⁰ Rather than defending Roth against charges of Jewish self-hatred, Howe actually encourages this most insidious of condemnations.

Finally, if there is any doubt of Howe's real intentions as to his appraisal of Roth, as a man and as a Jew, the next section of his essay accuses Roth of supplying fodder for the anti-Semitic hordes. Howe says that, 'After the Second World War, as a consequence of certain unpleasantnesses that occurred during the war, a wave of philo-Semitism swept through our culture.'¹⁶¹ However, Howe believes that, for many, this affection for Jews was entirely feigned. What a relief to anti-Semites, then, that Philip Roth wrote *Portnoy's Complaint*:

[. . .] for it signalled an end to philo-Semitism in American culture, one no longer had to listen to all that talk about Jewish morality, Jewish endurance, Jewish wisdom, Jewish families. Here was Philip Roth himself, a write who

¹⁵⁸ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 76.

¹⁵⁹ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 76.

¹⁶⁰ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 76.

¹⁶¹ Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 76.

even seemed to know Yiddish, confirming what had always been suspected about those immigrant Jews but had recently not been tactful to say.¹⁶²

It is clearly Howe's belief that Roth is guilty of supplying anti-Semites with proof that their hatred of Jews is justified. It is no great leap to state that Howe implies that Philip Roth, a Jewish writer and Jewish son, *actually justifies* that decimation of European Jewry – that 'certain unpleasantness' – that is known as the Holocaust. This implication of Holocaust justification—an ultimate act of anti-Semitism—is why Howe feels the need to condemn Roth so publicly and so harshly. Not only because of his own disgust at what he perceives to be Roth's politics but because, as someone who had once publicly supported Roth, Howe needs to re-establish his own political stance through his relation to Roth. In other words, 'Philip Roth, Reconsidered' attempts to confirm Irving Howe as—ethically and politically—the *opposite* of Philip Roth.

Podhoretz embarks on a similar process of proving Roth's anti-Semitism in 'The Adventure of Philip Roth,' but he takes his accusations against Roth as a self-hating Jew a step further by linking his recognition of Roth's anti-Semitism with his own political conversion to neo-conservatism. Podhoretz makes much about why Roth's fiction initially appealed to him. He says he believed Roth to be 'a real find,' and 'extraordinarily accomplished': 'demonstrat[ing] that no one, not even [Saul] Bellow himself, had so perfectly pitched an ear for the speech of the first two generations of Jews who had come to America from Eastern Europe, or so keen an eye for the details of the life they lived, or so alert a perception of the quirks and contours of their psychological makeup.'¹⁶³ As much as Roth's keen eyes and perfectly pitched ears make him a good story teller, however, they also helped to

¹⁶² Howe, 'Philip Roth Reconsidered' 76.

¹⁶³ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 27.

complicate the origins of these same stories. Critics wondered were they fact or fiction? What made this question so important to readers was the nature of the stories themselves. Roth's stories were sharp, critical, and distanced, very different from the sort of fiction that Saul Bellow complained was for and by those 'who feel that the business of a Jewish writer in America is to write public-relations releases, to publicize everything that is nice in the Jewish community and suppress the rest, loyally.'¹⁶⁴ Podhoretz's reaction to this criticism in relation to Roth forms the crux of his own adventure with Philip Roth, in which Podhoretz reveals more about his own political leanings than he does about the fiction in question.

After agreeing with Bellow's criticism of the 'philistinism of Jewish readers who regarded it as the duty of Jewish writers to portray their people only, or at least largely, in the most sympathetic and favourable terms,' Podhoretz reiterates, 'But, as I say, I have always had trouble with Roth'.¹⁶⁵ One aspect of this trouble stems from Roth's insistence on asserting that serious art was not to be judged by the ideological criteria of some of his Jewish readers. Podhoretz claims that such an assertion was redundant because 'in the 50's, the piety towards serious literature [. . .] was so great that making such an argument seemed entirely unnecessary.'¹⁶⁶ Therefore Podhoretz depicts Roth as trampling over his already-disadvantaged critics, a sign of gratuitous aggression on Roth's part, and equates Roth's published responses to his Jewish critics with 'mugging cripples.'¹⁶⁷ He writes, 'I do not mean to insinuate that these Jews were "cripples," but only that their arguments were so weak and out of touch with contemporary critical dogma that exposing and ridiculing them, as Roth was so easily able to do, bore a certain resemblance to the mugging by the strong of the weak

¹⁶⁴ Saul Bellow, as quoted by Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 27.

¹⁶⁵ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 28.

¹⁶⁶ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 28.

¹⁶⁷ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 28.

and defenceless.¹⁶⁸ Podhoretz makes a number of assumptions in these statements. By calling Roth's Jewish detractors 'weak,' 'defenseless,' and 'cripples,' he intimates that their insults could have no impact on Roth. And yet Roth's own life-long dialogue with these critics demonstrates that they not only enraged him but challenged and inspired him as well. In turn, Podhoretz assumes that Roth's only purpose in engaging with these critics was that Roth sensed how easy such targets really were, asserting a lack of sophistication on the part of these Jewish readers. The irony here is that the contempt Podhoretz credits Roth with actually seems to be Podhoretz's own. After all, Roth's own numerous responses to these reader's complaints represent an engagement with his Jewish detractors not as the 'cripples' of Podhoretz's estimation but as adversaries to be taken seriously.

Despite comparing offended Jewish readers to 'cripples,' Podhoretz admits that, 'I had an uneasy (if largely hidden, as much from myself as others) sympathy for the Jewish nervousness over Roth's work; and over the years this feeling of sympathy grew deeper.'¹⁶⁹ Podhoretz claims that his inability to acknowledge his sympathy for 'Jewish nervousness' over Roth's work was enforced by the 1950's American cult of 'serious literature.' This understanding of 'serious literature' was the ideological opposite of the way the older generation of Jews read and understood literature. In Podhoretz's view, 'reinforcing and exacerbating their Jewish defensiveness and sensitivity was an old-fashioned moralistic conception of literature (a conception, by the way, that had been good enough for some very great literary critics like Dr. Johnson and Matthew Arnold, and to which Roth might have paid a bit more respect on that account alone).' In other words, Roth's Jewish critics were not really unsophisticated readers; they were reading from an older but entirely viable and

¹⁶⁸ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 28.

¹⁶⁹ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 28.

legitimate critical perspective that says literature should perform some sort of moral function. Here Podhoretz sets two different ways of reading against one another, and these two ways of reading are representative of the cultures by which they are engaged. On the one hand, Roth represents 'a cult of serious literature' that bases its judgments on aesthetic criteria alone. This 'cult' is exactly what its name implies—it is new, popular, and *dangerous*. On the other hand, there is a much older and more traditional way of reading that is represented not only by Roth's Jewish critics but also by canonized authorities such as Dr. Johnson. This is a *moral* tradition that sidelines aesthetics. Podhoretz represents himself as having been unwillingly indoctrinated into the former, popular 'cult' of fiction, until he eventually accepts his doubts and comes to embrace the latter, 'moralistic' way of reading fiction.

Podhoretz attempts to prove not only that Roth's Jewish critics read him in an entirely legitimate way but also implies that America's idea of 'serious literature' included far more nefarious demands that inevitably made Jewish authors such as Roth—and even Bellow—into unwitting anti-Semites. Roth's incredible popularity, according to Podhoretz, 'was based on more than his remarkable talent.'¹⁷⁰ Roth was also lucky in that he came along at a point in history when American readers were willing, even eager, to embrace Jewish subjects. But while Jewish writers such as Saul Bellow had blazed a trail for the next generation, Podhoretz claims that there were 'implicit conditions attached to this receptivity.'¹⁷¹ One was an authentically intimate portrayal of a Jewish subject still considered exotic by mainstream America, 'but the author also had to be sufficiently distanced from this experience to write about it with a critical if not a jaundiced eye.'¹⁷² In other words, mainstream America did not want to read a story written by a Jew that was uncritical about Jewish subjects.

¹⁷⁰ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 27.

¹⁷¹ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 27.

¹⁷² Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 27.

Podhoretz implies that non-Jewish American readers wanted Jewish subjects 'revealed' to be the stereotypes that (inherently anti-Semitic) gentiles wanted them to be. According to Podhoretz, 'This test Roth passed with flying colors from the word go.'¹⁷³ In Podhoretz's estimation, Roth's creation of characters such as the Patimkins and the Portnoys may have owed their existence to their author being part of a chapter in history in which Jews could write about Jewish subjects and still be published and read, but he ignored the fact that he was pandering images that *must be anti-Semitic* in order to be published and read by gentiles. And so, no wonder many of Roth's Jewish readership were nervous: 'To them it seemed that with the Gentile anti-Semites finally forced to bite their tongues, a smart Jewish boy with a big dirty mouth had come along to take their place.'¹⁷⁴ Podhoretz claims that the demands of 'serious literature' meant that Roth had to write critically—even unsympathetically—about a people who had so recently witnessed the horrors of systematic genocide and to recycle the anti-Jewish stereotypes that had been used by the perpetrators of that very crime.

Howe and Podhoretz accuse Roth of being the type of man, reader, writer, and even Jew that they are vehemently *not*. To them, Roth represents all the ills of the new century, the New Class, and the new brands of literature being disseminated by a mindless and immoral popular culture dominated by the New Left. He represents self-hating Jews, anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism, radical groups that support terrorists, and readers and writers who believe aesthetics to be more important than morality. In response, Howe and Podhoretz set their own ideologies, culture, and beliefs about literature *against* what they claim Roth believes. The irony of this situation is the fact that Roth never actually espoused any of the philosophies that they attribute to him. As Mark Shechner writes:

¹⁷³ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 27.

¹⁷⁴ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth' 29.

Since atmospherics, vast tremblings in the *Zeitgeist*, were at issue, it did not matter that Roth himself was by no stretch of the imagination either a New Leftist or a counterculture groupie, as Mailer tried to be. He was always, as he remains, a dissenting and distraught son of the secular, bookish, Europeanized, diasporic Jewish culture that created him and that Howe spoke for.¹⁷⁵

Shechner argues that Howe's accusations against Roth as a 'cultural case' and Podhoretz's equating of Roth with the New Class, the New Left and the counterculture were really based on their own fear of the changing *Zeitgeist*, displaced onto the shoulders of Philip Roth. In his discussion of *American Pastoral*, Podhoretz explicitly uses his relationship to Roth to announce his own political leanings: he is a Neoconservative and, as such, he defines himself against his own definition of Roth as a liberal.¹⁷⁶ Howe does something less overtly political, but similar. That Podhoretz found in Howe's dissection of Roth impetus for his own essay, 'Laureate of the New Class,' is no accident. Howe's distaste for the culture of which he believes Roth is a 'case' is evident, and this distaste stems from the values he believes this culture espouses.

In reading the essays of Howe and Podhoretz, one realizes that there is an ideological force to these readings. The question then becomes: what do Howe and Podheretz derive from their positions? I argue that what their style of criticism tries to accomplish is to use Philip Roth as a way to establish their own authenticity. Indeed, their essays reveal a type of literary criticism that is underpinned by its relentless moralizing. At the heart of their arguments is the idea that what is wrong with Roth's fiction is that it is not morally redemptive. They imply that Roth is an *immoralist*: that there is something morally degenerate about his fiction. This interest

¹⁷⁵ Shechner 50.

¹⁷⁶ In 'The Adventures of Philip Roth', Podhoretz writes that upon finishing *American Pastoral*: 'I myself, and many other people too, detected in this book a born again Philip Roth whose entire outlook on the world had been inverted.' Podhoretz claims that *American Pastoral* caused him to wonder if, perhaps, Roth's long overdue political conversion was finally at hand. He claims that 'Inevitably a question arose and hung in the air, tantalizingly for some and ominously for others: had Philip Roth turned into a neoconservative?' (34).

in morality is proven by the singular instance when Howe does praise Roth, for his short story 'Defender of the Faith.' In his discussion of this story, Howe often repeats the word 'moral' in his praise. He calls the story, 'serious in its larger moral implications.'¹⁷⁷ He says 'the power of this story derives from presenting a moral entanglement.'¹⁷⁸ He writes that 'the story does not allow any blunt distribution of moral sympathies' but also believes that Roth has not written anything else 'approaching it in compositional rigor and moral seriousness.'¹⁷⁹ Howe repeatedly claims that Roth's fiction—and fiction in general—must include 'justice and largesse' in its 'imaginative treatment' of its subject; that fiction should strive to be 'objective'; that fiction should be 'precise' and 'scrupulous' in its 'use of social evidence.'¹⁸⁰ And yet what really seems to please Howe, the word he repeatedly uses in the rare case in which he praises Roth's fiction, is 'moral.' When Howe finds within Roth's fiction what he believes to be 'moral' is when Howe finds a Roth story worthy of admiration.

Critics such as Howe and Podhoretz attempt to benefit from writing essays like 'Philip Roth, Reconsidered' and 'The Adventure of Philip Roth,' despite their claims that they are objective in their criticism and that they believe the purpose of literature is to capture reality objectively. In fact, what their essays betray is their contempt for writing that does not uphold the morals, the politics, and the ideologies that *they* hold dear. Howe finds *Portnoy's Complaint* objectionable because he sees it as Roth's validation of the 1960s counterculture Howe despises whilst Podhoretz believes *I Married A Communist* espouses values opposite to his own self-proclaimed position as a neoconservative. Both critics demonstrate their politics—and through their politics, their values—through their reading of Roth. While Howe and

¹⁷⁷ Howe 72.

¹⁷⁸ Howe 72.

¹⁷⁹ Howe 72, 73.

¹⁸⁰ Howe 71, 70.

Podhoretz pretend their arguments are objective, their arguments are actually fiercely partisan and ideological: they believe that literature should be an expression of a view that they have defined and approved. In other words, although they attempt to convince the reader of their broad-mindedness, they are really demonstrating extraordinary narrow-mindedness and this is reflected in their interpretations of Roth's work. For Howe and Podhoretz ignore the rich thematic tapestry on offer in Roth's novels in favour of merely condemning him as being his most caricatured media-image.

Re-reading Philip Roth and Martin Amis

Rather than limiting myself to readings of Martin Amis's and Philip Roth's fiction that takes into account only those images of self destructive women, images of violent masculinity, or images of violence against women that admittedly feature prominently in their fiction, I will ask *what else* these images might mean. For I believe it is necessary to go beyond a standard 'images of women' reading that labels these authors as having imaginations dominated by their problem with women. Such a reading assumes that Amis and Roth are interested in creating 'realistic' or 'symbolic' representations of women and that as such these images represent their authors' philosophies of and feelings towards women. It is this assumption I question, arguing that the fiction of Amis and Roth is not 'about' women at all. In turn, this thesis will offer alternative readings that explore in what else these writers are interested, paying particular attention to how such important themes as trauma, masculinity, and ideology are explored through certain novels. In this vein, my next chapter will explore how issues of micropolitics, ideology, and affect are encoded in some of Roth's and Amis's most maligned and controversial works.

Chapter Two

My work does not offer answers.

-Philip Roth, from an interview with Martha McGregor (1960)

And suddenly she realized: books *were* about the living world, the world of power, boredom and desire, the burning world. These books were just more candid about it than the others; but they all fawned and fed on the buyable present. What had she felt before? She felt that books were about the ideal world, where nothing was ideal but everything had ideality and the chance of moral spaciousness. And it wasn't so. She ran her eyes along the shelves with mordant pride. Books weren't special. Books were just like everything else.

-Martin Amis, *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981)

[M]an will wish *Nothingness* rather than not wish *at all*.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, from *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887)

Chapter one of this thesis concludes with the assertion that issues of micropolitics, ideology, and affect are helpful contexts for discussing the works of Amis and Roth. It is my intention to illustrate how Roth and Amis redefine, or refine, theories about ideology in order to explore how ideology functions for the individual. These are authors whose fame, or infamy, seems to rest on their creation of outrageously self-obsessed masculine subjects. And yet, as this chapter will explore, their fiction actually reveals a deep commitment to the question of how individuals live with and through ideology, as well as what it means to be 'good'. This claim will be developed in the context of Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment*, as well as Gilles Deleuze's concept of the micropolitical. By exploring the role of affect and the will to power in *ressentiment* and the micropolitical, new avenues for understanding texts such as Roth's *When She Was Good* and Amis's *Other People: A Mystery Story* will begin to emerge. But first the connection between ideology and the individual

must be clarified, in order to understand the very specific ways that Roth and Amis imagine people 'do ideology.'¹⁸¹

Ideology and the Individual

This chapter proposes that Martin Amis's *Other People: A Mystery Story* and Philip Roth's *When She Was Good* are linked in that both works present ideology as a form of affect. To understand this proposition better, I have found helpful the work of sociologists Gary Alan Fine and Kent Sandstrom, who write that they want to study 'how individuals and groups do ideology.'¹⁸² Working from a post-Marxist understanding of ideology as something in which the subject naturalizes the political and collaborates in his or own construction as ideological subject, Fine and Sandstrom see a 'need to connect ideology more directly to action and meaning, or to examine how people use and present ideologies as they pursue their everyday interests.'¹⁸³ The kernel of the idea that grew into this chapter comes from Fine's and Sandstrom's suggestion that, at some unconscious level, people attempt to *use* ideology to further their own interests. In order to clarify this idea, more has to be said about the conjunction of ideology and power. Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment*, combined with Deleuze's understanding of the micropolitical, offers insight into this understanding of ideology that is crucial to the fiction of Martin Amis and Philip Roth.

Nietzsche and Ressentiment

An understanding of Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment* helps to contextualize how ideology is conceived of by both Martin Amis and Philip Roth. Although

¹⁸¹ Gary Alan Fine and Kent Sandstrom, 'Ideology in Action: A Pragmatic Approach to a Contested Concept', *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Mar., 1993) 25.

¹⁸² Fine and Sandstrom 25.

¹⁸³ Fine and Sandstrom 21.

Nietzsche's definition of *ressentiment* places its genesis in ancient times, Saul Newman warns that 'Ressentiment is diagnosed by Nietzsche as our modern condition.'¹⁸⁴ *Ressentiment* is especially important because of its connection with morality.¹⁸⁵ Nietzsche claims that what modern man conceives of as 'morality' is really the effect of *ressentiment*, a theory that radically redefines 'morality,' challenging all preconceived notions about morality's relationship with the individual and society. As Bernard Reginster writes, '[Nietzsche] unequivocally maintains that the three central phenomena that constitute, in his view, modern morality—the distinction between good and evil, the feeling of moral guilt, and the ascetic ideal—all have their origin in *ressentiment*.'¹⁸⁶ What makes Nietzsche's theories regarding these aspects of morality so revolutionary is that Nietzsche identifies *ressentiment*, and therefore morality itself, as 'an assertion of will to power.'¹⁸⁷ In associating morality with the will to power, 'Nietzsche challenges some of our most deeply held beliefs about what is valuable.'¹⁸⁸

According to Nietzsche, the origins of *ressentiment* lie in the weaker individual's revolt against the aristocratic values of the master class. This revolt reveals 'the origin of the antithesis of good and bad' and the genealogy of our moral ideas.¹⁸⁹ This weaker individual is not Nietzsche's 'slave,' rather he is one of 'two subgroups' that 'compete for political superiority, namely the "knights" and the

¹⁸⁴ Saul Newman, 'Anarchism and the Politics of Ressentiment,' *Theory and Event*, 4:3 (2000) Project Muse, University of Edinburgh Library, Nov. 21, 2006, <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

¹⁸⁵ Bernard Reginster, 'Nietzsche on *Ressentiment* and Valuation', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 45, No.2. (June 1997) 282.

¹⁸⁶ Reginster 282.

¹⁸⁷ William Mackintire Salter, 'Nietzsche's Moral Aim and Will to Power,' *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (April 1915) 382.

¹⁸⁸ Reginster 283.

¹⁸⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Trans. Horace B. Samuel, T.N.R. Rogers, ed., Dover Thrift Editions (Mineola, NY:Dover Publications, Inc., 2003) 11.

“priests”.¹⁹⁰ Although both groups have been raised as rulers, the priests feel impotent in comparison with the physical glory and the effortless dominance of the knights.¹⁹¹ It is this feeling of *impotence* that makes the priest so dangerous. Nietzsche writes, ‘Yet the priests are, as is notorious, *the worst enemies*—why? Because they are the weakest. Their weakness causes their hate to expand into a monstrous and sinister shape, a shape which is most crafty and most poisonous.’¹⁹² Despite feeling impotent, however, the priest never loses his desire for power, as Nietzsche warns, ‘These weaklings!—they also, forsooth, wish to be strong some time; there is no doubt about it, some time *their* kingdom also must come—“the kingdom of God” is their name for it, as has been mentioned:—they are so meek in everything!’.¹⁹³ And so the priest remains aware that power is not within his grasp, and yet he cannot renounce his desire for that which he cannot have. This situation leads the priest to perform what Reginster calls ‘*ressentiment* revaluation.’¹⁹⁴ The priest sublimates his desire for power so entirely that he ‘fails to recognize that his devaluation of power is still motivated by his repressed but enduring desire for it.’¹⁹⁵

The priest’s sublimation of his true desires creates a condition of perpetual self-deception and misery. In Nietzsche’s own words:

“They are miserable, there is no doubt about it, all these whisperers and counterfeiters in the corners, although they try to get warm by crouching close to each other, but they tell me that their misery is a favour and distinction given to them by God, just as one beats the dogs one likes best; that perhaps

¹⁹⁰ Reginster 285. Later in this essay, Reginster clarifies why he discusses *ressentiment* in terms of the priest, when Nietzsche himself uses both ‘priest’ and ‘slave’ to designate *ressentiment*. Reginster argues that *ressentiment* is a slave revolt in that it favors the slave by negating noble values, but that this revolt is *led* by the priests. (289)

¹⁹¹ Crucially, according to Reginster, ‘the salience of *physical strength* is a purely contingent aspect of Nietzsche’s example. The weakness of the priests creates their feeling of impotence only because they hold it responsible for the loss of their political supremacy. [. . .] But there is no reason to think that, in different circumstances, the feeling of impotence would not be created by intellectual, rather than physical, weakness.’ (286)

¹⁹² Nietzsche 16.

¹⁹³ Nietzsche 28.

¹⁹⁴ Reginster 287.

¹⁹⁵ Reginster 291.

this misery is also a preparation, a probation, a training; that perhaps it is still more something which will one day be compensated and paid back with a tremendous interest in gold, nay in happiness. This they call 'Blessedness.'"¹⁹⁶

As Reginster explains, the priest finds himself caught in a position of perpetual unhappiness through this act of self-deception: 'he refuses either to give up his desire for [power] or to accept his inability to acquire [power].'¹⁹⁷ And so he expresses his belief in ideals or values that are antithetical to his *real* values and desires.¹⁹⁸ This creates an apparently 'new' set of values that, on closer inspection, actually reveal themselves to be a *negation* of the sublimated values that the priest really admires. These 'new' values are of special interest to this thesis.

Nietzsche's theory on the genealogy of *ressentiment* is edifying, but what is most important is how morality and ideology function within his theory of *ressentiment*. As Nietzsche explains in *The Genealogy of Morals*:

The revolt of the slaves in morals begins in the very principle of *resentment* becoming creative and giving birth to values—a resentment experienced by creatures who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, are forced to find their compensation in an imaginary revenge. While every aristocratic morality springs from a triumphant affirmation of its own demands, the slave morality says "no" from the very outset to what is "outside itself," "different from itself," and "not itself": and this "no" is its creative deed.¹⁹⁹

This quotation reveals two crucial aspects of Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment*: that it is *reactive*, and that *ressentiment becomes creative and gives birth to values*.

Thomas J. Brobjer argues that in Nietzsche's estimation, 'Moral principles, even relativistic moral principles, assume or presuppose moral opposites, presuppose good and evil things, thoughts and deeds. Nietzsche, however, rejects the belief in moral

¹⁹⁶ Nietzsche 27.

¹⁹⁷ Reginster 292.

¹⁹⁸ Reginster 292-293.

¹⁹⁹ Nietzsche 19.

opposites.²⁰⁰ *Ressentiment* offers a glimpse into *why* moral principles dichotomize the world and what the individual ‘gets’ from this dualistic vision of morality. According to the theory of *ressentiment*, negative emotions such as rage, fear, jealousy, and insecurity actually *create* values. In this philosophy, morals and ethics are revealed to have their basis in subjective and personal feelings and judgments rather than objective and universal perceptions of experience. It is the priest’s *feeling* of impotence and the anger and frustration this causes that causes him to *revalue* the world, sublimating his real passion for its opposite. And so he reacts against the values of the knight—values such as pride, strength and resolve—by claiming to espouse opposite values such as humility, equality and forgiveness. These reactions *against* a particular perception or viewpoint are then re-interpreted as the impersonal origin of values: ‘*Ressentiment* describes the movement in which this reactive and resentful denial of higher life begins to *create* its own moral system and vision of the world.’²⁰¹ A reaction *against* a particular mode of life becomes the origin and basis of individual and collective ideologies. Paradoxically this primary act of negation becomes the ‘positive’ principle at the very heart of a particular vision of life. Eventually this reactive stance establishes itself as the ‘universal’ interpretation of the moral groundings of life.

Nietzsche argues that reactive values conceal a will to power. *Ressentiment* inscribes moral judgment at the very heart of life and underscores the ascendancy of purely reactive values:

[. . .] the conspiracy of the sufferers against the sound and the victorious; here is the sight of the victorious *hated*. And what lying so as not to acknowledge this hate as hate! What a show of big words and attitudes, what an art of “righteous” calumiation! [. . .] What do they really want? At any rate to

²⁰⁰ Thomas J. Brobjer, ‘Nietzsche’s Affirmative Morality: An Ethics of Virtue’, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 26 (2003) 64.

²⁰¹ Lee Spinks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 97.

represent righteousness, love, wisdom, superiority, that is the ambition of these “lowest ones,” these sick ones! And how clever does such an ambition make them! You cannot, in fact, but admire the counterfeiter dexterity with which the stamp of virtue, even the ring, the golden ring of virtue, is here imitated. They have taken a lease of virtue absolutely for themselves, have these weakest and wretched invalids, there is no doubt of it; “We alone are the good, the righteous,” so do they speak, “we alone are the *homines bonae voluntatis*.”²⁰²

By advertising their values as ‘truth’—as righteous, good and just—proponents of *ressentiment* not only bring their own imaginative world into focus but also *elevate themselves and their values above their enemies*. In other words, a system of values that enshrines a violent recoil from life claims instead to find its roots in *universal values* such as love, goodness and selflessness. So, the priest seeks power through being ‘good,’ even while he claims that the quest for power is immoral.

Crucially, this claim to superior morality also allows the “man or woman of *ressentiment*” to malign their enemies as corrupt, evil and dishonest. Nietzsche writes:

The ascetic ideal has an aim—this goal is, putting it generally, that all the other interests of human life should, measured by its standard, appear petty and narrow; it explains epochs, nations, men, in reference to this one end; it forbids any other interpretation, any other end; it repudiates, denies, affirms, confirms, only in the sense of its own interpretation [. . .].²⁰³

The implication here is that this ‘lease of virtue’ can become a lease of violence. As William Mackintire Salter warns, ‘It is the people with “absolute truth” who burn Jews and heretics and good books, and root out entire higher cultures, as in Peru and Mexico—fanatical love of power leading them on.’²⁰⁴ The ultimate irony of this situation, however, is that just as the man or woman of *ressentiment* may bring unhappiness unto others, he or she is doomed to be unhappy as well. Reginster warns that because *ressentiment* is caused by a person’s self-deception, “The man of

²⁰² Nietzsche 88.

²⁰³ Nietzsche 107.

²⁰⁴ Salter 374.

ressentiment” is thus left pathetically hanging between the impossibility to enjoy the satisfaction of desires he does not really have, and the impossibility to enjoy the satisfaction of desires he has but cannot embrace.²⁰⁵ So if the priest does succeed in convincing people that they are all equal, he cannot actually rejoice in his triumph. For what he really wants is to exert *power* over his flock. As Reginster writes, ‘In the last analysis, *ressentiment* revaluation is predicated upon the unacknowledged hope that turning away from the frustrated desires, and pursuing the very opposite values, somehow will at last bring about the satisfaction of those desires’.²⁰⁶ However, Nietzsche warns, the desire for revenge at the heart of the man or resentment knows no bounds and must ultimately end in a perpetual state of unhappiness for both ‘the man of resentment’ and his object of revenge:

They are all men of resentment, are these physiological distortions and worm-riddled objects, a whole quivering kingdom of burrowing revenge, indefatigable and insatiable in its outbursts against the happy, and equally so in disguises for revenge, in pretexts for revenge: when will they really reach their final, fondest, most sublime triumph in revenge? At that time, doubtless, when they succeed in pushing their own misery, in fact, all misery, *into the consciousness* of the happy; so that the latter begin one day to be ashamed of their happiness, and perchance say to themselves when they meet, “It is a shame to be happy; *there is too much misery!*” . . . [sic]²⁰⁷

As Salter cautions, *ressentiment* revaluation inevitably brings misery both to the men and women of *ressentiment* and also to those who fall on the wrong side of their dichotomized world view.

Deleuze and the Micropolitical

The philosophical theories of Gilles Deleuze owe a tremendous debt to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Deleuze’s own body of work illustrates his interest in Nietzsche. Deleuze wrote two books on Nietzsche—*Nietzsche and*

²⁰⁵ Reginster 303.

²⁰⁶ Reginster 293.

²⁰⁷ Nietzsche 89.

Philosophy (1962) and *Nietzsche* (1965)—and he edited volumes for the Gallimard publication of Nietzsche's works.²⁰⁸ According to Petra Perry, many of Deleuze's theories 'were explicitly linked to and fortified by reference to Nietzsche', and Deleuze has been credited 'with a privileged role as a primary instigator of a new reading of Nietzsche'.²⁰⁹ Although Deleuze does not entirely agree with Nietzsche's negative depiction of the will to power, many of Deleuze's ideas about how ideology functions in the life of the individual illustrate a clear connection to aspects of Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment*.²¹⁰ Deleuze is especially interested in Nietzsche's conception of the world 'in terms of chaotic and free-roaming fluxes.'²¹¹ These notions of change and flux are important to Deleuze's conception of ideology in that they inform how he defines *concepts*. Deleuze's definition of *concept* is set against his definition of *opinion*, and these two ideas are critical to an understanding of how he imagines individuals conceive of their personal ideologies. Finally, the role of affect and the micropolitical are essential to understanding Deleuze's theories of opinion, concept, and ideology.

At the heart of Deleuze's philosophy is his redefinition of the word *problem*. Rather than something negative, Deleuze saw developing problems as the power of all life: 'Life poses problems – not just to thinking beings, but to all life. Organisms, cells, machines and sound waves are all responses to the complications or "problematizing" force of life.'²¹² On a material level, for example, the 'problem' of birds needing to swim was answered by webbed feet; or the 'problem' of dust is answered by the invention of the vacuum. But this definition of problem also has

²⁰⁸ Petra Perry, 'Deleuze's Nietzsche', *boundary 2*, Vol. 2, No.1 (Spring, 1993) 178.

²⁰⁹ Perry 175.

²¹⁰ As Perry writes, Deleuze imagines that the will to power can be 'affirmative and liberating.' (188)

²¹¹ Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 18.

²¹² Colebrook 1.

philosophical connotations. Deleuze's understanding of problems ties in with his understanding of 'concept': 'All concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges.'²¹³ Citing Nietzsche's influence, Claire Colebrook argues that in Deleuze's philosophy, 'Philosophical concepts are not amenable to dictionary style definitions, for their power lies in being open and expansive. For this reason we have to understand them through the new connections that they make.'²¹⁴ Rather than being standardized definitions that seek to define how people live and why, philosophical concepts should help people to understand the problems that they encounter in everyday life. This is not a reductive mode of thought: it should not seek to categorize, define, or deaden life and thoughts about life. Rather, 'There is no concept with only one component. Even the first concept, the one with which a philosophy "begins," has several components, because it is not obvious that philosophy must have a beginning, and if it does determine one, it must combine it with a point of view or a ground.'²¹⁵ As Colebrook writes, 'A concept, for Deleuze, is just this power to move beyond what we know and experience to think how experience might be extended.'²¹⁶

For Deleuze, a concept is an active, engaged, *thinking* approach to life. Set against this definition of concept, is Deleuze's definition of *opinion*. In contrast, 'opinion is the rule of the correspondence of one to the other; *it is a function or a proposition whose arguments are perceptions and affections*, and in this sense it is a function of the lived.'²¹⁷ Crucially, opinion is also tied in with affect:

²¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchill (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 16.

²¹⁴ Colebrook 17.

²¹⁵ Deleuze & Guattari 15.

²¹⁶ Colebrook 17.

²¹⁷ Deleuze & Guattari 144.

For example, we grasp a perceptual quality common to cats or dogs and a certain feeling that makes us like or hate one or the other: for a group of objects we can extract many diverse qualities and form many groups of quite different, attractive, or repulsive, subjects (the “society” of those who like cats or detest them), so that opinions are essentially the object of a struggle or an exchange.²¹⁸

As Colebrook points out, Deleuze’s views on opinion have implications for the way we think about our world with its homogenizing capitalist prejudices.²¹⁹ But this reactive, affect-based definition of opinion, or *doxa*, bears implications for how we ‘do ideology.’ Deleuze uses the example of cheese:

Doxa is a type of proposition that arises in the following way: in a given perceptive-affective lived situation (for example, some cheese brought to the dinner table), someone extracts a pure quality from it (for example, a foul smell); but, at the same time as he abstracts the quality, he identifies himself with a generic subject experiencing a common affection (the society of those who detest cheese—competing as such with those who love it, usually on the basis of another quality).²²⁰

In reducing, or ignoring, other peoples’ different ways of being in the world—in denying the complexities of existence—I am making my own desires and pleasures both ‘normal’ and ‘good.’ If I enjoy cheese, then, in Deleuze’s example, ‘it is the enemies of cheese who stink.’²²¹ In other words, what I find desirable, or what I think is pleasurable, becomes not my own subjective experience of the world but what I consider to be the objective qualifiers for universal values.

Where purely personal, subjective responses become enshrined as ‘values’ is where Deleuze believes opinion goes wrong: ‘Opinion not only assumes a present and shared world; it also assumes a common sense whereby thinking takes the same “upright” form distributed among rational perceivers.’²²² In other words, my opinion assumes that I am a normal, average person, and therefore what I feel is right or

²¹⁸ Deleuze & Guattari 144.

²¹⁹ Colebrook 16.

²²⁰ Deleuze & Guattari 145.

²²¹ Deleuze & Guattari 145.

²²² Colebrook 24.

wrong must be what *everybody* feels is right and wrong. Deleuze explains that, 'It gives to the recognition of truth an extension and criteria that are naturally those of an "orthodoxy": a true opinion will be the one that coincides with that of the group to which one belongs by expressing it.'²²³ The further implication is that if we *all* feel something is right or wrong, it must *be* right or wrong: 'opinion triumphs when the quality chosen ceases to be the condition of a group's constitution but is now only the image or "badge" of the constituted group that itself determines the perceptive and affective model, the quality and affection, that each must acquire.'²²⁴ But opinion is not only reductive; it also allows me to condemn that which I do not understand or enjoy. This means that what we *feel* becomes what we think the world means, and this has overtly political repercussions. Indeed, according to Deleuze, '[opinion] abstracts an abstract quality from perception and a general power from affection: in this sense all opinion is already political.'²²⁵ Deleuze warns, 'That is why so many discussions can be expressed in this way: "as a man, I consider all women to be unfaithful"; "as a woman, I think men are liars."²²⁶ For Deleuze, our prejudices, or the things that we believe to be evil, immoral or perverse, are really just our fears or our disgusts disguised as concepts. To reiterate his examples, rather than a woman acknowledge that she has made bad choices in regards to her boyfriends, she labels all men 'liars'. Or, rather than a man admit that he dated the wrong woman, he labels all women 'unfaithful'. To combat the reductive and generalizing responses to the world that are inherent in opinion and 'common sense', Deleuze, according to Colebrook, argues that 'we need to look at how we compose our perceptions of the world, the force of those perceptions (affect) and how we create decisions, judgements and

²²³ Deleuze & Guattari 146.

²²⁴ Deleuze & Guattari 146.

²²⁵ Deleuze & Guattari 145.

²²⁶ Deleuze & Guattari 145.

concepts.²²⁷ Deleuze's concept of ideology and micropolitics helps to effectuate such an understanding.

Deleuze defines ideology in the narrow sense, understanding it as something that 'explains how individuals act against their interests.'²²⁸ In opposition to ideology, Deleuze offers his own version of a transcendental method of critique. However, Deleuze's transcendental method is very similar to how I argue Amis and Roth understand ideology. The connection here is the onus that Deleuze places on showing 'how persons and interests are produced from the chaotic flows of desire.'²²⁹ Claire Colebrook does an admirable job of summarizing Deleuze's complicated views on micropolitics, which 'shows how the extended and individual categories of persons, classes or interests are "coded" from affects.'²³⁰ Colebrook gives the example of bourgeois marriage that 'far from being the effect of our desire appears as a law that ought to govern our desire.'²³¹ In other words, because I want access to a sexual partner I get married, even though I depict marriage as something that governs desire by making it legal and moral. The transcendental method that examines our values and morals micropolitically illustrates how 'desire is not *repressed* by politics so much as it is *coded*.'²³² In this sense, understanding how desire operates can be a liberating experience in that Deleuze believes that 'Desire itself is power, a power to become and produce images.'²³³ Deleuze imagines that we can '*become other*' through our ability to produce images, and thus free ourselves from our own limiting subjectivity. He writes, 'becoming is an extreme contiguity within a coupling of two sensations without resemblance or, on the contrary, in the distance of a light that

²²⁷ Colebrook 27.

²²⁸ Colebrook 92.

²²⁹ Colebrook 92.

²³⁰ Colebrook 92-93.

²³¹ Colebrook 93.

²³² Colebrook 93.

²³³ Colebrook 94.

captures both of them in a single reflection.²³⁴ As Colebrook warns, however, ‘Desire also has the power to produce images that enslave it: images of a moral “man” obeying his social duty.’²³⁵ This image of a moral man obeying his duty recalls Nietzsche’s man of resentment: a subject bound by an adherence to ‘values’ he or she secretly despises in order to cultivate social standing in the community.

What makes this discussion about ideology important to this thesis is the way in which both Martin Amis and Philip Roth depict how people come to make the political and ideological choices that they do. Rather than being amoral or immoral authors, as critics often contend, both Amis and Roth are interested in how ethics and values actually *come into being*. Amis and Roth differ from each other in their narrative approach, and they are both interested in different aspects of the same set of questions. And yet this thesis will argue that they are also both fundamentally *moral* writers in that Martin Amis and Philip Roth seek to understand what living a ‘moral’ life—or at least attempting to live one—actually means. To this end, two fictions—one by each author—will be examined. Both texts are about being ‘good’, and both ask questions about the ideological foundation of ‘goodness’ itself. Martin Amis is particularly interested in micropolitics, or the affective responses that encode our politics. In *Other People: A Mystery Story*, Amis creates a world in which Deleuze’s warning that desire can enslave is the only reality for the average man, and the proliferation and power of popular culture seems to undercut any attempt at Deleuze’s transcendental critique. Roth, on the other hand, revels in *ressentiment*. His early work *When She Was Good* is a novel that imagines what we do to ourselves in our desire to be ‘good’ and what being ‘good’ really means.

²³⁴ Deleuze & Guatarri 173.

²³⁵ Colebrook 94.

A Micropolitical Approach to Amis's *Other People*

Chapter one of *Other People: A Mystery Story* begins with the first sensations of an unnamed woman who is full of relief that '[t]ime—it's starting again.'²³⁶ There is a stranger with her, who asks her how she is, tells her he is leaving her, and finally admonishes her to 'be good.' She opens her eyes to find herself alone and lying in what appears to be a hospital. But the woman herself has no idea that she is in a hospital, as she is suffering from some sort of total amnesia.²³⁷ She fails to remember not only anything about herself but also the world she lives in. In the toilet, the function of which she 'cannot connect with herself,' she attempts to understand her situation.²³⁸ Trying to remember things leads nowhere: 'Her mind went on for ever but contained nothing, like a dead sky.'²³⁹ The only thing that she recognizes is her own fear, and she is overwhelmed by the sensation of 'such unanimity of threat, such imminence of harm.'²⁴⁰ When she finally musters the courage to leave the hospital and enter the world, her sensation of being under threat proves accurate. She wanders around the city of London as ignorant and innocent as a newborn, except she is a fully grown and very attractive young woman.

Alone, scantily dressed, and still unable to remember or recognize anything, she stumbles around London until she encounters a groups of tramps, one of whom is singing the nursery rhyme, 'Mary Had a Little Lamb.'²⁴¹ Inspired by the song, she takes the name Mary Lamb. But the reader is soon introduced to the idea that this sweet and innocent amnesiac might very well be Amy Hide, a morally unscrupulous woman who is missing and presumed murdered. This story, however, is far more

²³⁶ Amis 13.

²³⁷ Amis 14.

²³⁸ Amis 14.

²³⁹ Amis 15.

²⁴⁰ Amis 15.

²⁴¹ Amis 23.

complex than simply a story about memory loss. The novel intimates that Amy *was* murdered; this is the story of her afterlife and her chance at redemption. Prince, the policeman who watches over Amy, seems to be none other than the narrator, her murderer, and perhaps even the Prince of Darkness himself. At the end of the novel, Mary/Amy willingly returns to Prince to be murdered again, in order to replay her hand at life.

The novel, in a way that recalls Amis's earlier novel *Success*, charts Mary Lamb's rise up the social ladder as well as her progression from innocent victim to corrupt victimizer as she recognizes her power to 'make feel bad (sic)' and reclaims her identity as Amy Hide.²⁴² When innocent, Mary is the object of other people's desire. As such she is a victim; but she also *causes* a fair amount of chaos and misery. Mary is raped, viciously, soon after emerging from the hospital, after being pimped out by a young woman who claims to be a friend. But Mary's innocence and inability to understand the complex emotional world simmering around her also means that she can be cruel. As Blake Morrison writes, 'Breakage is a dominant motif in the novel and wherever Mary goes she leaves a trail of destruction behind her: broken backs, broken jaws, broken noses, broken necks, broken spirits, broken hearts.'²⁴³ Despite her desire to be good, Mary cannot understand the emotions she incites or encourages, and she can never really understand the pain she brings to others. After she tells Alan—the nervous, insecure and frantically balding young man who worships her—that she wants to end their sexual relationship, he hangs himself. She recognizes that she has had a part to play in his death, and in her statement to the police she writes, 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. I'll try not to do it again.'²⁴⁴ But she cannot imagine

²⁴² Amis 116.

²⁴³ Blake Morrison, 'In the Astronomical Present,' *Times Literary Supplement* 4066 (March 6, 1981) 247.

²⁴⁴ Amis 168.

what her role in Alan's suicide could actually be and still wonders if he did really kill himself because of his hair loss, as his suicide note claims.²⁴⁵ Mary's relationship to her world is, in many ways, sub-human or animal-like; she reacts only to comforts, or distractions, or distastes. For example, she enjoys sitting on her friend Russ's lap because he holds her securely, whereas sitting on Alan's lap is uncomfortable because of his meager frame.²⁴⁶ She remains wholly unaware, however, of the intricacies of human emotion, or how painful feelings such as desire and jealousy can be. And so she sits on Russ's lap *in front of* Alan, registering her own unease with the situation, but ignoring it because she misreads the tension and thinks that 'the boys seemed to enjoy it.'²⁴⁷

James Diedrick believes that Mary is curiously *affectless*: that she neither understands, nor is affected by, emotion. This can be juxtaposed against what the reader knows about Amy Hide, who is depicted as a young woman who takes pleasure in hurting her family, her friends, and herself. Amy's sado-masochistic tendencies reveal her own disengagement with the world around her and her own best interests: she does not care for others or for herself. Diedrick's understanding of Mary/Amy's affective estrangement is interesting in that it not only explains why such estrangement happens but also illustrates the effects of such an estrangement in terms of world view:

On one level, Mary/Amy's estrangement is a metaphor for that of Amis's generation. A kind of emotional and moral 'downward mobility' affects even the most privileged members of the twenty-something generation here. Like Mary/Amy, they seem to have lost touch with the past; their responses are likewise stunted. The narrator even compiles a new, secularized list of the seven deadly sins to apply to this generation: 'venality, paranoia, insecurity, excess, carnality, contempt, boredom.'²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Amis 167, 168.

²⁴⁶ Amis 132.

²⁴⁷ Amis 132.

²⁴⁸ James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 2nd ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 66.

The original seven deadly sins—avarice, envy, pride, gluttony, lust, anger, and sloth—are really the desires or emotions that *motivate* sin.²⁴⁹ But Amis's list of the seven deadly sins, as revised for the 20th century, consists of the *responses*—both physical and ideological—that the original seven deadly sins create.²⁵⁰ Out of envy the subject becomes paranoid of the enemies he or she creates in others; because one is angry, he looks to others to fuel your contempt; and because one is lazy she depicts the world as essentially boring. According to Amis, something about the 20th century has redefined the seven deadly sins not as the vices that are the root cause of certain self-destructive behaviors but as the affective responses that create people's ideological world views. One thing that this shift in moral perspective does is upset the notion of responsibility implied by the original seven deadly sins. Pride, gluttony, and lust are all things that the individual must learn to control and, ideally, expunge so that he or she can live a 'good' life. But how can 'contempt' or 'paranoia' be controlled if the emotions underpinning such reactions, such as envy and anger, are not understood? But while I agree with Diedrick that Mary and Amy are representative of an 'emotional and moral "downward mobility",' I would argue that this is not because they are *affectless*.

Rather, I would argue that Mary and the original Amy Hide are *all* affective response. Granted, both are estranged from understanding the more complex or nuanced aspects of emotional responses, but they absolutely understand affect. Mary and Amy live in a world of opinion and *doxa*: they live in a world of simplified affective responses that jump directly to the level of concept, but this does not mean that they are affectless. Rather, they are *ruled* by their affections, which can be seen

²⁴⁹ Amis 195.

²⁵⁰ Amis 195.

in Mary's relationship with Jamie, a wealthy young man who supports a variety of ex-girlfriends with his inheritance. Initially, Mary, Jamie, and his exes all live together peacefully enough, partly because Jamie has declared himself 'out of it.'²⁵¹ He wants nothing more to do with sex or relationships. He tells Mary, 'I'm not in that line any more. I'm not in futures any more. I'm not up to you heavy dames. I'm just wide open. You'll chomp me up and poop me out before I know it.'²⁵² Jamie blames his lack of sexual interest on two things. He fears the vulnerability that is entailed by emotional intimacy, but he also depicts sex and love as a fundamentally *creative* act—a 'futures' act—that he is incapable of taking part in anymore. This sterile and deadened view of the world supports Diedrick's claim that Mary/Amy's world is one of 'emotional and moral "downward mobility".'²⁵³ But unfortunately for Jamie, Mary has finally, and for the first time in the novel, come to *want* something:

Mary sat naked on the edge of the bed. She was crying again. No more of this, she thought. She couldn't go on being alone. It wasn't just *Jamie*—she knew what was wrong with *Jamie*. But only he could stop the rawness and the rending, the needing, the tearing eagerness. And everyone needed someone to make them feel halfway whole.²⁵⁴

Out of a combination of loneliness and desire, Mary, for the first time in the novel, decides that she needs something: Jamie. Her newfound need implies that Mary is changing; either she is changing back into Amy Hide or becoming something else entirely.

Mary's newfound desire is a turning point in the novel. Jamie remains oblivious to her advances, entrenched in his position as 'out of it.' The only time he really pays attention to her is when she is upset, or crying, a trick she learns from watching a baby named Carlos that lives in the house: 'Crying was a good idea, as

²⁵¹ Amis 190.

²⁵² Amis 190.

²⁵³ Diedrick 66.

²⁵⁴ Amis 180.

Carlos knew: it always got you what you wanted.²⁵⁵ She calls her newfound ability—crying to get attention—the ‘power to make feel bad.’²⁵⁶ The irony of this situation is that because making Jamie feel bad brings Mary attention and, therefore, makes Mary feel good, Mary does not equate ‘the power to make feel bad’ with *being* bad. In fact, she is quite proud of her accomplishment:

Mary made Jamie feel bad by feeling bad herself. She concentrated on this feeling and it struck her with its purity. After a few days it seemed obvious, just, even admirable. God, Mary feels bad. Do you see how bad she’s feeling? Mary condensed the world and its present into a settled haze above her head. She glowed with it, her new power. It was true, it was true; how could something be as intense as this and be false?²⁵⁷

What stands out in this passage is how Mary’s response to her desire for Jamie evolves and how emotional blackmail becomes for her an ‘admirable’ act of ‘purity.’ Because she feels good when she receives Jamie’s attention—when he enquires why she looks so miserable or anxiously watches her glower—feeling bad becomes something *good*. And because ‘the power to make feel bad’ breaks down Jamie’s resistance so that he makes love to her, her manipulative act proves itself to *be* ‘good’ in the sense it gives her what she wants. When Prince phones her again, she claims—for the first time in the novel—to be *happy*.²⁵⁸ That Prince, who knows Mary better than she knows herself, promptly responds to this by saying, ‘You sound terrible,’ is telling.²⁵⁹ Although Mary has achieved her goal of bedding Jamie, the irony is that she has to be unhappy for him to pay attention to her. And Mary, in the ‘gothic parody of romantic intimacy’ that is her relationship with Jamie, continues to torture him more and more effectively—and all because, in her mind, ‘They were so

²⁵⁵ Amis 193.

²⁵⁶ Amis 188.

²⁵⁷ Amis 189.

²⁵⁸ Amis 194.

²⁵⁹ Amis 194.

close.²⁶⁰ This nightmarish ‘relationship’ continues until Jamie finally snaps—and goes into a psychiatric hospital—and Mary’s cruelty and madness rejoin the two opposites of her personality into one, and she re-becomes Amy Hide. Or does she?

At the end of Part Two, Mary Lamb and Amy Hide definitely reunite: ‘She had found her again. She was herself at last.’²⁶¹ But the chapter immediately following these words opens with the supposedly anarchical Amy Hide burning rubbish in her garden and making small talk with her elderly neighbors, for whom she often runs errands and visits for tea and cakes. We learn that this Amy Hide now lives with Prince but sleeps in a separate bedroom. She enjoys housekeeping, she makes omelettes for supper, she reads, and she listens to the radio with Prince. This description certainly does not match up to the description of the pre-Mary Lamb Amy Hide: the woman who ‘did terrible things’ to herself, to her family, and to anyone else who loved her.²⁶² That the new Amy is, indeed, a different Amy is hinted at by both Prince and Amy herself. When she tells Prince that she used to date someone on the television, he responds by saying ‘Boy, I bet old Amy made short work of him.’²⁶³ Note that he just says ‘old Amy,’ not *the* old Amy. ‘Old Amy’ is talked about, here, as a separate subject rather than a former incarnation of the Amy currently sitting at Prince’s side. She reiterates this difference when she recalls that ‘He [Michael Shane] told me that after Amy he thought he was going queer’ rather than ‘After me he thought he was going queer.’²⁶⁴ This new Amy Hide does not seem to identify, in any way, with the Amy Hide the reader was introduced to in the first two sections of the book. In fact, Mary Lamb—who despite wanting to be good brought disaster to those who cared for her—actually seems like a *better* person after ‘becoming’ her nemesis:

²⁶⁰ Diedrick 67; Amis 198.

²⁶¹ Amis 200.

²⁶² Amis 145.

²⁶³ Amis 208.

²⁶⁴ Amis 208.

the reportedly terrifying and corrupt Amy Hide. At the very end of the novel, when Amy returns to her murderer in order to complete the cycle initiated at the beginning of the novel, he asks 'Is it really you?'²⁶⁵ The answer seems to be no: this Amy Hide does not appear to be anything like the dangerously self-destructive siren described earlier in the novel. And yet she succumbs to her fate and is either murdered or resuscitated—the wording is ambiguous—to reawaken as a young girl, still protected by her mother and father, and as yet unknown to the man who would become her demon-lover.²⁶⁶

The ending of the novel is as ambiguous as the beginning. What are we to make of Mary's life, such as it is? In his review of the novel, Evan Hunter implies that Amis's intention in *Other People* was to create 'an obscure book,' and warns that 'Mr. Amis would seem far too young to have acquired such a dismal view of the world.'²⁶⁷ These criticisms—that the book is 'obscure' and 'dismal'—are echoed by others. As Diedrick writes, 'Her [Mary/Amy's] progressively disillusioning encounters with the world and with other people seem designed to justify the narrator's nihilistic commentary, which itself seems to derive from some unspecified sense of diminishment and loss.'²⁶⁸ It would be easy to read the novel as nihilistic: Mary's is a world devoid of joy or connection in which acts of kindness are repaid with acts of violence. But Diedrick points to another aspect of the novel that is instrumental in my reading of *Other People* as a text that engages with ideology, affect and ethics. He writes:

Or perhaps [Amis] is posing one last challenge to the reader, this one calling for a rejection of the dualism that initially seems to organize the novel. Throughout *Other People*, Amis has challenged the epistemological

²⁶⁵ Amis 222.

²⁶⁶ Amis 222-224.

²⁶⁷ Evan Hunter 'Mary Lamb and Mr. Wrong,' *The New York Times* July 26, 1981, Dec. 4, 2006, www.nytimes.com.

²⁶⁸ Diedrick 70.

dichotomies that structure conventional wisdom, including such distinctions as male/female, good/evil, even life/death.²⁶⁹

Other People does indeed organize itself by dichotomies, the most obvious being Mary Lamb and Amy Hide. In turn, these two characters *should* represent opposite sides of a binary system. Mary is 'good,': she is innocent, even-tempered, asexual, gentle and kind. Amy is 'bad,': she is depicted as having been cruel, corrupt, voraciously sexual, and defiant. But I would argue that the ultimate challenge that Amis makes to epistemological dichotomies is at the end of the novel, when Mary and Amy finally merge.

The first two parts of the novel insist that Mary is 'good,' and that Amy was 'bad,' and the point of the novel seems to be Mary's resistance to Amy: Mary must not fall back into her old behavior and return to being Amy Hide. And so she tries to do as Prince tells her; she genuinely tries to be good. But it is much more than an ironic device that in trying to be good, Mary inevitably brings suffering. There is something about the way Mary imagines 'goodness,' or what she thinks being 'good' is, that fails her. In trying to be 'bad,' in behaving selfishly and by courting danger, Amy Hide had hurt her loved ones and herself. And yet in trying to be good, Mary Lamb *also* hurts herself and those around her. This could be construed as nihilism: as Amis seeing no space for goodness in the world. Or it can be conceived of as Amis's commentary on what it means to be 'good.' For Mary reveals herself to be *the mirror image* of Amy Hide in that both of them confuse *being* good with *feeling* good, and neither of them can realize the impact they have on others because neither of them can *imagine* otherness. It is only when both extreme characters merge, that a new Amy Hide comes into being. This Amy Hide, as opposed to either Mary or her earlier incarnation, not only *feels* but *imagines*.

²⁶⁹ Diedrick 71.

After catching Prince unawares playing at being an orchestra conductor, Amy and Prince share a moment of quiet togetherness in which Amy realizes that 'he is in awe of me too.'²⁷⁰ Later, alone in bed, Amy:

[. . .] could see the moon, perched alone on the very tip of the night. The silvered tinge against the navy-blue sky contained tiny particles of rose among its inaudible storms of light. If tenderness had a colour, then that was the colour of tenderness. With her cheek on the pillow, Amy's thoughts began to loosen. She felt a gentle impatience for each successive moment, not the tearing eagerness but the half-anxious certainty of a mother at the school gates, waiting for her child to emerge from the crowd. She felt that Prince was watching her. She felt what it was like to be young. She felt that the moon and her own prayers and thoughts were living things that shared her room and carefully presided over the contours of her sleep. She wasn't sure whether this was love. She thought that everyone's heart must hurt slightly when they began to feel right about themselves.²⁷¹

The last line of this passage, in which Amy thinks about 'everyone', is the first instance in the novel in which Mary or Amy actually attempt to apply their own lived experience to those of others, thus attempting to imagine what it might be like to be another person. Indeed, a lack of imagination on the part of Mary has hitherto been one of her most prominent features. For example, earlier in the novel Mary tries to learn to masturbate, but fails because she cannot *imagine* pleasure. Her only sexual experience up to that point has been terrible, and Mary rationalizes her inability to achieve orgasm by dismissing it as 'a memory game.'²⁷² But as her pamphlets such as *Female Erotic Fantasies* imply, her inability to masturbate has as much to do with her lack of imagination as her bad memories. Mary cannot fantasize or imagine; she can only process her own lived experience. Presumably the earlier incarnation of Amy Hide must have been much the same. Her cruelty to those who loved her, especially her parents and sister, speak of a lack of empathy that borders on the pathological. But the new Amy Hide—the amalgamation of Mary/Amy—imagines otherness. She

²⁷⁰ Amis 209.

²⁷¹ Amis 210.

²⁷² Amis 76.

begins to think about 'everyone' and attempts to understand her own experiences in terms of a universal experience.

Imagining Amy Hide as a challenge to epistemological dichotomies offers an entirely new and different understanding of the novel to that which says it is nihilistic. Mary and Amy are not really opposites; indeed, they are very much the same in the sense that neither of them attempt to access the imaginative lives of others. Both women can pursue only their own pleasure, while remaining incapable of understanding the consequences to themselves and others. Similarly, both order their world by how it makes them feel. Mary wants to be good, but what is 'good' is what gets her what she wants; even if it requires making herself and others feel bad. Likewise Amy, in her original incarnation, felt good making herself and others feel bad. There is really no difference, despite Mary's claims to the contrary, between Mary and Amy. Mary might lack the ability to understand or conceptualize her own desires and emotions, but in her relationship with Jamie she proves herself to be as desirous of power as Amy, and her torturing Jamie clearly recalls Amy tormenting Michael Shane.²⁷³

Because Mary/Amy cannot *imagine* otherness, she can no more understand herself than she can other people. Mary and Amy are trapped in their own opinions, or *doxa*: they live in what Colebrook calls 'a direct link between affect and concept, between what we see and what we say, or between the sensible and the intelligible.'²⁷⁴ In a crucial scene, Mary wonders whether or not *all women* are divided because *she* feels divided.²⁷⁵ She cannot move beyond *her* experience of the world as that of a woman who feels like two people. So she cannot question whether or not *all people* feel divided sometimes or what such feelings might mean. She can only assume that

²⁷³ Amis 146-147.

²⁷⁴ Colebrook 24.

²⁷⁵ Amis 80.

because she is a woman, and she feels divided, all women are, quite literally, two women.²⁷⁶ It is only when Mary and Amy—as the two opposites of a mirror image—combine that Amy Hide can emerge as a whole person: a person who can imagine *other people*. In this reading, the title of the novel is actually a subtle challenge to Jean Paul Sartre's assertion that 'hell is—other people!'.²⁷⁷ Mary and Amy made their own and other people's lives hell because they could not understand otherness and because they asserted themselves *over* other people. In this sense 'other people' are hell because we have *made* them 'other,' and in doing so we have forced upon them the negative axis of the binary divide. 'Other people' are 'hell' when, like Amy, we need others to be weak in order to be strong, or, like Mary, we need others to feel bad so that we feel good.

As the new Amy Hide, Amy begins to see other people not just as a dichotomized 'other' to battle with; instead, she begins to conceptualize how other people live and feel. This affects my reading of the end of the novel. *Other People* ends ambiguously, with Amy Hide returning to her murderer and being 'reborn' as the girl she was before she turned bad. But the epilogue returns to the demon-lover narrator that haunts Amy's life and the novel. He is watching the sixteen year old Amy leave her house and is planning their first encounter. He claims that 'I won't do anything to her unless she *asks* for it', but he admits that 'I'm not in control any more, not this time.'²⁷⁸ In a nihilistic reading of the novel, this admission can be read as the reader's clue that this is but the beginning of *another* cycle of death and rebirth for Mary/Amy. But Amis himself has said that he 'wanted to suggest on top of everything else that she would in fact get it right this time.'²⁷⁹ In the reading in which

²⁷⁶ Amis 80.

²⁷⁷ Jean Paul Sartre, as quoted by Diedrick, 58.

²⁷⁸ Amis 224.

²⁷⁹ Amis, as quoted in Diedrick 66.

Amy Hide has learned how to *conceptualize* in an open, Deleuzian sense—rather than living in a world of *doxa* or opinion—this alternative and happier reading makes sense. Because she can imagine otherness, the new Amy will not feel compelled to react *against* everything as the earlier Amy was. Indeed, if she can imagine difference as a Deleuzian problem that opens up new ways of understanding existence, she can be open to other people and the helpful challenges they represent.

Understanding *Other People* from a Deleuzian sense offers an entirely different set of readings of the novel and its characters. Deleuze's concepts of difference and becoming makes Mary/Amy into a caricature of stagnant opinion rather than a nihilistic vision of a world in which goodness has no place. It is only when Amy Hide learns to see difference not as something to homogenize or destroy but as a Deleuzian problem to explore and with which to engage that she can truly be reborn. As such, this rebirth signifies hope, and a chance at a life in which she will avoid the traps of opinion and purely affective responses to life that made her so unpleasant and self-destructive.

Philip Roth's *Woman of Ressentiment* in *When She Was Good*

When She Was Good was published in 1967, two years before Portnoy's *Complaint* and five years before Irving Howe's and Norman Podhoretz's attacks on Roth in *Commentary*. *When She Was Good*, then, precedes Howe's critical intervention, which actually restates in quite simplistic terms elements of the relationship between morality and life that has been the subject of Roth's fiction almost from its inception. This fascinating novel, however, has been granted very little critical notice, and what little attention it has received has often been dismissive. Many critics see the novel as Roth's literary vengeance against his ex-wife Margaret

and have allowed this autobiographical interpretation to cloud their criticism.²⁸⁰ In my reading *When She Was Good* represents Roth's first sustained attempt to imagine the pre-ideological development of moral ideas. To establish this reading, I want to explore how Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment* can be employed to unlock some of the novel's key themes.

When She Was Good is the story of Lucy Nelson, a young woman born and raised in Liberty Center, a small Midwestern town. The novel begins, however, with her grandfather's story. All of his life Willard Nelson desired, 'Not to be rich, not to be famous, not to be mighty, not even to be happy, but to be civilized—that was the dream of his life.'²⁸¹ This dream of civility is a reaction against the brutal poverty of his family. Willard's most important childhood experience was 'the time a full-blooded Chippewa squaw came to the cabin with a root for his sister to chew when Ginny [the sister] was incandescent with scarlet fever.'²⁸² This experience of childhood illness exposes Willard to the cruelty of the universe: he 'never forgot the brutality of that occurrence, which for him lay in the fact that nothing was to be done, for all that what was happening was happening to a one-year-old child.'²⁸³ Ginny's fever also reinforces Willard's experience of human brutality. After refusing to help his sister, his father tells his son 'let her be' as Willard tries to feed the Squaw's medicine to his baby sister.²⁸⁴ For Willard, these experiences combine to give him, 'at seven, his first terrifying inkling that there were in the universe forces even more immune to his charm, even more remote from his desires, even more estranged from human need and feeling, than his own father.'²⁸⁵ In his youthful imagination, the idea

²⁸⁰ For examples, see Shostak, p. 115.

²⁸¹ Philip Roth, *When She Was Good* (1967; New York: Vintage Int., 1995) 3.

²⁸² Roth, *When She Was Good* 3.

²⁸³ Roth, *When She Was Good* 4.

²⁸⁴ Roth, *When She Was Good* 5.

²⁸⁵ Roth, *When She Was Good* 5.

of civility—living the sort of ‘civilized’ life that he sees as the opposite of his family’s existence—acts as a buffer between the individual and the omnipresent threat of brutality and suffering.

Willard’s sister does not die of her disease, but the fever leaves her mentally retarded. Willard has finally escaped, ‘to the town of Liberty Center,’ the last stop on his ‘journey out into the civilized world,’ but when his mother dies and his father puts Ginny into care, Willard retrieves her and takes her to his home.²⁸⁶ For Willard, Liberty Center represents the opposite of his experience with his family, Ginny, and her illness:

If ever there was a place where life could be less bleak and harsh and cruel than the life he had known as a boy, if ever there was a place where a man did not have to live like a brute, where he did not have to be reminded at every turn that something in the world either did not like mankind, or did not even know of its existence, it was here, Liberty Center! Oh, sweet name! At least for him, for he was indeed free at last of that terrible tyranny of cruel men and cruel nature.²⁸⁷

Willard cares for his sister, his wife and his daughter in what he believes to be this safe haven of civilization. And yet the reader soon learns that Liberty Center, despite its promises, has failed to protect all of Willard’s family. For early in the novel Willard is found sitting ‘one afternoon in November,’ ‘before the graves of his sister Ginny and his granddaughter Lucy’.²⁸⁸ This is where the story switches its focus from Willard to Lucy and where the tragedy of *When She Was Good* begins to unfold.

Our introduction to Lucy is framed by her relationship with her brain-damaged Aunt Ginny. It is after Ginny’s rescue from the institution that Willard’s daughter Myra, her husband Whitey, and their daughter Lucy come to live in Willard’s house. Willard dwells fondly upon his memories of his ‘tiny, spirited, golden-haired’ granddaughter ‘learning to care for herself’ and trying ‘to pass what she knew on to

²⁸⁶ Roth, *When She Was Good* 5.

²⁸⁷ Roth, *When She Was Good* 6.

²⁸⁸ Roth, *When She Was Good* 7.

her Aunt Ginny.²⁸⁹ Ginny follows Lucy everywhere, and Willard finds this ‘a strangely beautiful scene, but a melancholy one, too, for it was proof not only of their love for each other, but of the fact that in Ginny’s brain so many things were melted together that in real life are separate and distinct.’²⁹⁰ Ginny’s inability to understand herself as separate from Lucy becomes a serious problem after Lucy begins school. Ginny stands ‘outside the classroom all day long, singing out in her flat foghorn of a voice, “*Loo-cy . . . Loo-cy . . .*”.’²⁹¹ Ginny’s inability to recognize the distinct subjectivity of others introduces a central theme of the novel. Ginny becomes such a hindrance to Lucy’s schooling that Willard is forced to put Ginny back into an institution where she soon dies. ‘And why? Because she could not understand the most basic fact of human life, the fact that I am me and you are you.’²⁹² As the novel progresses, Ginny’s inability to respect difference—to allow other individuals the freedom to be themselves without forcing her own will and desires upon them—begins to influence Lucy’s attitude with ultimately tragic consequences.

Despite her apparently happy childhood, Lucy’s adolescence is dominated by her hatred for her father and her contempt for her family. Whitey, her father, is an out-of-work alcoholic, unable to support his wife and child. Her long-suffering mother, Myra, cannot renounce her love for her husband, despite his flaws. Meanwhile, Lucy believes her grandfather’s generosity towards his son-in-law allows her father to maintain his fecklessness and immaturity, and she sees in Willard’s desire for ‘civility’ only emotional weakness and an inability to confront reality ‘like a man.’ When Lucy is fifteen, her father comes home drunk and sees Myra soaking her feet. Whitey interprets this as an insult to his pride, as Myra has to work hard

²⁸⁹ Roth, *When She Was Good* 10.

²⁹⁰ Roth, *When She Was Good* 10.

²⁹¹ Roth, *When She Was Good* 11.

²⁹² Roth, *When She Was Good* 11.

because of his own inability to hold down a job, and verbally assaults his wife, tearing the window shade off the wall and upending her footbath onto the rug. Lucy, alone with her cowering mother and raging father, calls the police and her father goes to jail. Her grandfather, concerned about his daughter's having caused such an upset to his 'civilized' world, asks her why she called the police, rather than calling him. Their conversation emphasizes the growing disparity between their views of the world:

"I wanted him to *stop!*"

"But calling the jail, Lucy—"

"I called for somebody to make him stop!"

"But why didn't you call *me*? I want you to answer that question."

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because you can't."

"I *what*?"

"Well," she said, backing away, "you don't . . ."

[. . .]

"We are civilized people in this house and there are some things we do not do, and that is number one. We are not riffraff, and you remember that. We are able to settle our own arguments, and conduct our own affairs, and we don't require the police to do it for us. I happen to be the assistant post-master of this town, young lady, in case you've forgotten. I happen to be a member in good standing of this community—and so are you."

"And what about my father? Is he in good standing too, whatever that *means*?"²⁹³

For Willard, the appearance of respectability and civilized behaviour is what is important, but Lucy questions her grandfather's emphasis on appearance. She does not want her grandfather to *appear* civilized; she wants him to assert his authority over her father, to have the power to 'make him stop.' In other words, she wants her family to *be* good, not merely to maintain "good standing."

Calling the police becomes, for Lucy, the defining act of her childhood. In her own imagination, and in the imagination of many of the town, she has become the girl who had her own father arrested. After this confrontation with her father's vice and

²⁹³ Roth, *When She Was Good* 22-23.

with her grandfather's forgiving philosophy, Lucy becomes increasingly obsessed with her own virtue. She sees herself as morally superior to both her family and the small town she comes from. This sense of superiority is vague but indomitable. As she thinks of her friend, Ellie Sowerby, 'she was Ellie's superior in every way imaginable, except for looks, which she didn't care that much about; and money, which meant nothing; and clothes; and boys.'²⁹⁴ Her conception of herself as morally superior seems to rest on those aspects of her life that are not composed of stereotypically womanly virtues. She claims not to admire beauty, cultivation, or the ability to attract the opposite sex, and the implication is that her vague notions of superiority are based on some inner quality of virtue. This implication is supported by her early flirtation with Catholicism, especially with the Saint Teresa of Lisieux, a figure of suffering and uncompromising virtue. But this Saint is also a *silent* sufferer, and to act in her image would require Lucy 'to appear serene, and always courteous, and to let no word of complaint escape her, to exercise charity in secret, and to make self-denial the rule of life.'²⁹⁵ This way of being in the world is actually similar to that of Lucy's forgiving and selfless mother, Myra, and forbearance also underlies the code of conduct that her grandfather espouses. And so, Lucy's fealty to a Saint Teresa style of suffering ends on the night that her father overturns her mother's foot bath onto the rug. At that point the forceful declaration of her own superior virtue—and the inferiority of everyone else in her life—becomes Lucy's exclusive mantra.

In fact, Lucy's new conception of goodness is based on virtues that are absolutely in opposition to those of Saint Teresa, as Julie Husband explains:

Though her entire family is opposed to Lucy's confrontational form of power, she is increasingly convinced of not just the effectiveness but the virtue of her behaviour. She will not lie or compromise to protect others. Lucy understands

²⁹⁴ Roth, *When She Was Good* 73.

²⁹⁵ Roth, *When She Was Good* 80.

her ability to see the worst in people as a virtue. Unlike her grandfather and mother, she will not look the other way or make excuses for destructive actions. However, Lucy's cynicism makes it impossible to have charity toward others.²⁹⁶

Lucy sees her father as nothing but a drunk, her grandfather and mother as morally feckless, and the rest of her small town as complacent in its opinion of itself. This perspective is not only uncharitable but also treacherous. Lucy's monomania means that she often makes mistakes about other people, and, more dangerously, about herself. For example, the father of her friend Ellie is a war hero, a successful businessman and the richest man in Liberty Center, but he is also vulgar and sexually predatory. Lucy finds him a mystery, which she blames on Mr. Sowerby's paradoxical character. However, the real reason she finds Mr. Sowerby—or Uncle Julian—difficult to judge is that while she finds him vulgar and offensive, he also flatters her, and he does so in ways that she cannot acknowledge. Lucy believes herself to be a young woman who does not care about money, social status or looks. And yet in her interactions with Uncle Julian, who calls her 'Blondie' and 'cutie pie,' flirts with her publicly, and invites her to parties at his expensive home, she reveals a weakness for his flattery that contradicts her ideas about herself. Her enjoyment in Julian's attention reveals that she does want to be considered attractive, that she does want social approval, and that she would like to be seen as socially superior despite her contrary declarations. Self-deception is evident in Lucy's assertions that she does not care what others think of her or her status within the community when she so obviously does. And so, Lucy's dishonesty with herself calls the accuracy of her perspective into question.

²⁹⁶ Julie Husband, 'Female Hysteria and Sisterhood in *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good*,' *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, ed. Royal, Derek Parker (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005) 36.

The Sowerby family becomes even more important to Lucy's story after she begins dating and finally marries their young nephew, Roy Bassert. Her relationship with Roy is another example of how inaccurate and biased Lucy's perspectives really are, despite her belief in her own superior moral judgment. As Husband suggests, Lucy's attraction for Roy is based partially on her incorrect belief that he is the opposite of her father:

Roy has served in the military; her father had a medical waiver. Roy is looking for a girl with a 'brain in her head,' not one with 'thin little wrists and ankles' [like her mother]. Roy is addicted to Hydrox cookies instead of whiskey. Yet he is as self-deceiving as her father—and as Lucy.²⁹⁷

Lucy and Roy begin to date, and, despite her ambivalence about him and her distrust of his intentions, they begin a sexual relationship. Predictably, she becomes pregnant, and she and Roy are married. Her marriage to Roy renders the fundamental flaws within Lucy's worldview more pronounced. Within the intimacy of marriage, her inability to compromise, her steely determination to tell 'the truth,' and her refusal to see her own flaws become increasingly destructive. Still enraged at her father, and determined not to 'repeat her mother's life,' she attempts to force Roy to become the strong patriarch that she believes her father and grandfather should be.

Lucy's attempts to mould Roy take the form of constant reproach. She mocks his ambitions to start his own photography studio but continually criticizes him for not bringing home enough money. When he tells their young son stories of his time in the army, she resents his harmless exaggerations, made for the benefit of the child's amusement, as outright lies. After a terrible argument and a brief separation, during which time Roy's Uncle Julian supplies him with a lawyer and advises a legal separation, Lucy forbids him to have any contact with this side of his family. Even Roy's Hydrox cookies become a symbol to her of his immaturity and helplessness.

²⁹⁷ Husband 36.

Her constant assaults on Roy become so pronounced that their young son Edward is depicted as fleeing continuously from the dinner table, the scene of her most cruelly barbed insults. A typical response from Lucy to Roy's employment woes consists of her throwing down her napkin and yelling, 'Must you whine! Must you complain! Must you be a baby in front of your own child!'²⁹⁸ As Husband suggests, Lucy's irrational demands on Roy leave him with no options:

If Roy obeys her, he is weak. If he doesn't, he has fallen under the influence of others, especially his confrontational Uncle Julian, and is again weak. If he defends himself, he is attacking her and is therefore a brute. If he doesn't defend himself, he is guilty of being unmanly. For Lucy, being a man is being a brute, so Roy has no positive identity to embrace.²⁹⁹

Lucy wants Roy to be the responsible father figure that Whitey failed to be, and yet any attempt at decision-making on Roy's part, such as moving them in with his parents for a summer to save money, lead inevitably to fierce marital disputes in which Lucy depicts Roy as attempting to manipulate or oppress her.

Lucy will do anything to win an argument, including using her own child as emotional leverage or informing Roy of his uncle's infidelities. And yet, she depicts Roy's concessions to her not as conciliatory gestures to keep his wife happy and sane but as signs of his inherent weakness:

She saw him pretending now nearly all the time, so as to avoid the clashes that had taken place almost weekly after the first six months of the marriage. Every time he opened his mouth she could hear that he did not mean a single word, but was trying only to disarm her by saying what he thought she wanted him to say. He would do anything now to avoid a battle, anything but really change. [. . .] She could not stand the pretense; so she tried with all her might to believe that it was not pretense, that he actually believed what he was saying, and found she could not stand that either.³⁰⁰

In Lucy's view of the world, Roy's attempts to please her are proof of his dishonesty and his weakness. She is disgusted by the compromises he makes for her happiness,

²⁹⁸ Roth, *When She Was Good* 212.

²⁹⁹ Husband 39.

³⁰⁰ Roth, *When She Was Good* 216, 218.

finding them evidence of his lack of masculine strength. And yet she perceives any man who crosses her as a brutal tyrant. Up until her marriage to Roy, Lucy has been portrayed as much as a victim as an aggressor. But by this point in the novel her sense of moral superiority has exiled her from readerly sympathy. When the novel's final tragic confrontations occur, the reader knows that Lucy is beyond redemption.

In a crucial development, Lucy discovers that her father is in a Florida prison for stealing from an employer. She also discovers that her mother has been in contact with her father for the years he has been missing. Myra has even broken off an engagement with a successful local business man who promised to be the, 'stern, serious, strong and prudent' father Lucy had always wanted.³⁰¹ Lucy is so enraged by this news that she conflates her feelings for her father and mother with her feelings for Roy. When Roy comes to pick her up from her family home, her thoughts reveal her confusion, 'Mom was what he [Roy] called Lucy's mother. *Mom!* That weak, stupid blind . . . It was the police who had put him there. It was he himself who put him there!'³⁰² In Lucy's mind, her feelings for her husband become confused with her feelings for her father, and she punishes Roy in Whitey's stead. On the drive home, she begins screaming. Roy tries to comfort her, but she continues screaming, to the evident distress of Edward. Upon their arrival home, Roy does his best both to comfort Lucy and to remind her that their young son is present. But Lucy has lost all control and lashes out at her husband with all the years of anger and resentment built up against her father:

"You worm! Don't you have any guts at all? Can't you stand on your own two feet, *ever?* You sponge! You leech! You weak, hopeless, spineless, coward! You'll never change—you don't even *want* to change! You don't even know what I *mean* by change! You stand there with your dumb mouth open! Because you have no backbone! None!" She grabbed the other

³⁰¹ Roth, *When She Was Good* 225.

³⁰² Roth, *When She Was Good* 259.

cushion from behind her and heaved it toward his head. "Since the day we met!"

He batted down the cushion with his hands. "Look, now, look – Eddie is right be—"

She charged off the sofa. "And no courage!" She cried. "And no determination! And no will of your own! If I didn't tell you what to do, if I were to turn my back – if I didn't every single day of this rotten life . . . Oh, you're not a man, and you never will be, and you don't even *care!*" She was trying to hammer at his chest; first he pushed her hands down, then he protected himself with his forearms and elbows; then he just moved back, a step at a time.

"Lucy, come on, now, please. We're not alone—"

But she pursued him. "You're nothing! Less than nothing! Worse than nothing!"

He grabbed her two fists. "Lucy. Get control. Stop, please."

"Get your hands off of me, Roy! Release me, Roy! Don't you dare try to use your strength against me! Don't you dare attempt violence!"³⁰³

The reader knows that it is not Roy, but her father, whom Lucy believes to be a 'leech,' a 'sponge,' and whom she curses for his inability to change. For Lucy, however, her relationships with men have been defined by her mistrust of and aversion to her father. Lucy's definition of masculinity, therefore, is entirely unrealistic and unworkable: to be a "man" in Lucy's eyes would require Roy to be more forceful; but to be more forceful would be to be construed by Lucy as a violently constraining gesture. As such, Lucy exhibits a clear preoccupation with power: she reacts with fury whenever anyone tries to exert power over her, and yet she claims to *want* to have power taken away from her by her husband becoming the strong patriarch she claims to admire. This contradictory obsession with her husband's power—or lack thereof—implies her own desire for strength, respect, and control.

Just how far Lucy's rage has infected her perception of reality becomes obvious in her further confrontation with Roy's Uncle Julian. After her violent outburst over Whitey's letters, Roy waits until Lucy is asleep and then escapes with

³⁰³ Roth, *When She Was Good* 262.

Edward back to the Sowerby's and the protection of Uncle Julian—the one character in the novel who is able to stand up to Lucy's onslaughts. When Lucy arrives at the Sowerby home, she tries to appeal to Uncle Julian by talking to him of Roy's 'duty,' her own 'rights' as a mother, and her own responsibility to see that her son 'is not misused by all the beasts in this filthy world'.³⁰⁴ Julian responds by calling Lucy 'a real saint,' a designation she accepts, until he amends his comment with, 'that's all you are, you know. A little ball-breaker of a bitch. That's the saint you are, kiddo—Saint Ball Breaker.'³⁰⁵ Confronted with Julian's wrath, Lucy loses all composure, tells Julian's family about his affairs with his employees, verbally attacks her former friend Ellie, and finally charges up the stairs, only to hit Roy hard enough to draw blood. All of this again takes place in front of her horrified young son, who shrieks in terror at the sight of his mother. Meanwhile, this final confrontation is given a shadowy and hallucinatory quality by Lucy's ambiguous vision of her father.

When she presses the doorbell at the Sowerby house and again right before she strikes Roy and collapses, she sees, 'her father sitting in a cell in the Florida State Prison. He is sitting on a three-legged stool wearing a striped uniform. There is a number on his chest. His mouth is open and on his teeth, in lipstick, is written INNOCENT.'³⁰⁶ This vision is open to several interpretations. One way of understanding this image would be to suggest that some part of Lucy's brain recognizes her irrationality concerning her father and is warning her that if, indeed, her father *is* innocent of her worst accusations, then her entire way of seeing and being in the world needs drastic revision. Another provocative reading, however, could assert that this image of her father is Lucy's interpretation of her situation with the Sowerby's. Being written in lipstick on his teeth, the credibility of 'innocent'

³⁰⁴ Roth, *When She Was Good* 276, 274, 276

³⁰⁵ Roth, *When She Was Good* 276, 277.

³⁰⁶ Roth, *When She Was Good* 270.

seems suspect. Just as Hester Prynne's scarlet letter "A" is meant to represent her adultery, Whitey's 'innocent' could represent Lucy's long held belief that her father's real problem is his inability to accept responsibility for his actions, and on his insistence on continually pleading his innocence. And so 'innocent' is written on his teeth in lipstick to symbolize his most destructive delusion, especially in relation to the women he has wronged in his life. In turn, Lucy may apply this vision to the Sowerby's, who she imagines will also be incapable, like her father, of admitting either their own mistakes or Lucy's 'genuine' innocence and 'obvious' virtue.

Whatever the purpose of this vision, the reader knows that Lucy has doomed herself by attacking Roy so violently in front of his family and their son. This entire scene begs the question of whether Lucy was doomed from the beginning of the novel or whether her fate was open. Hermione Lee has called the novel, 'doggedly naturalistic,' and Husband believes that Lucy fits June Howard's definition of a 'naturalist brute,' a figure described as a 'menacing and vulnerable Other incapable of acting as a self-conscious, purposeful agent.'³⁰⁷ In *The Facts*, Roth himself defines Lucy's predicament in decidedly naturalistic terms:

Lucy's hideous death at the end of *When She Was Good* was neither wishful thinking nor authorial retribution. I simply didn't see how the disintegration of someone so relentlessly exercised over the most fundamental human claims, so enemy-ridden, and unforgivingly defiant, could lead, in that little town, to anything other than the madhouse or the grave.³⁰⁸

Rather than the madhouse, Lucy's final rampage ends with her grave placed, as the reader knows from the first few pages of the novel, next to that of her Aunt Ginny's. After her violent outburst at the Sowerby's, Lucy's grandfather brings her home and tries to convince her that she needs medical care. Enraged that her family believes her to be having a mental breakdown, Lucy flees into the freezing winter. She dies of

³⁰⁷ Lee 63; June Howard, as quoted by Husband, 39.

³⁰⁸ Roth, *The Facts* 146.

exposure in the cold weather, seeing enemies everywhere, and clutching a recent letter from her father to her mother. In the letter Whitey begs Myra's forgiveness and declares his love and faithfulness—while also hinting that he needs a sponsor and a job to be released from prison. In other words, Lucy dies defeated. In fact, the novel begins with Lucy already defeated, a clear novelistic decision on Roth's part. The novel begins after Lucy's death, with Willard picking Whitey up from the train station, after he has sponsored his son-in-law and found him a job. Myra will take him back; Whitey will again live in the house Lucy grew up in and believed she had exorcised her father from forever; and Lucy will lie silently in her grave next to her Aunt Ginny, the other person in the novel who suffered because 'she could not understand the most basic fact of human life, the fact that I am me and you are you.' Lucy's inability to let people make their own decisions and their own mistakes, to forgive people their human frailties, and to acknowledge her own shortcomings is what makes her so destructive and also so brittle in her own weakness.

It is noticeable that very little critical attention has been paid to *When She Was Good* in the context of Roth's work as a whole. Indeed, many critics believe the novel to be inferior to his later work, and Husband cites this as the reason the novel 'garnered comparatively little attention'.³⁰⁹ Howe believes that both *When She Was Good* and the earlier novel *Letting Go*, 'add slight luster to his [Roth's] reputation,' and Lee has called it 'the most uncharacteristic and uninspired of his books'.³¹⁰ Other critics found in Lucy Nelson and *When She Was Good* proof of Roth's "woman problem".³¹¹ Much has been written, including by Roth himself, about his spectacularly unsuccessful marriage to Margaret Martinson Williams and the

³⁰⁹ Husband 25.

³¹⁰ Howe 73-74, Lee 63.

³¹¹ For a good example, see Mary Allen, *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

inspiration found in this marriage for *When She Was Good*. Roth presents this connection between the facts of his relationship and his narrative fiction as his way of purging his life of Margaret's influence:

Eventually the book became for me a time machine through which to look backward and discover the origins of that deranged hypermorality to whose demands I had proved so hopelessly accessible in my early twenties. I was trying to come to some understanding of this destructive force, but separate from my own ordeal, to exorcise her power over me by taking it back to its local origins and tracing in detail the formative history of injury and disappointment right on down to its grisly consequences [. . .].³¹²

Although Roth acknowledges his ex-wife's role in motivating his writing of *When She Was Good*, the novel is not, he claims, intended as an act of personal vindication. He wanted, instead, to separate his own 'ordeal' from his fiction in order to explore the larger issue—the idea of 'hypermorality' as a 'destructive force'—that he believed underpinned his wife's behaviour.

Needless to say, many readers doubt Roth's claim of impersonality and see in the character of Lucy Nelson a very personal act of emotional revenge. Julie Husband believes that both Margaret and Lucy, 'are depicted as women singularly lacking in self-awareness and overwhelmed by anger, resentment, and desperation.'³¹³ Even Theodore Solotaroff, normally a staunch supporter of Roth, admits that, 'as much as I liked *When She Was Good*, it was further evidence that he was locked into this preoccupation with female power which was carrying his fiction into strange and relatively arid terrain.'³¹⁴ The perception that Roth's rage with his ex-wife, who died in a car crash in 1968, infuses his depiction of Lucy and other female characters has had a baleful effect upon readings of the novel. While Roth readily admits that the facts of his life inspired the events in his fiction, his version of events makes this process one of transmutation rather than transcription. According to Roth, he may use

³¹² Roth, *The Facts* 145.

³¹³ Husband 35.

³¹⁴ Solotaroff 34.

events from his life, but they are not simply reproduced in their original form. They are fictionalized, and this process allows him to explore themes and ideas, and to explore the nature of perceived reality, in a way that a straightforward memoir would disallow. There are many critics and reviewers, however, who question this distinction between biography and fiction, believing instead in the popular media perception of Roth as self-obsessed and, as Podhoretz accuses, eager 'to take stock of the world [. . .] and give it the business.'³¹⁵ While it cannot be denied that autobiography figures heavily in Roth's work, and it may be true that his use of autobiography may or may not reveal aspects of his personality that he would like to remain hidden, to seek in his work *only* autobiography or proof of his less wholesome predilections denies more profitable avenues of interpretation. In the case of *When She Was Good*, a reader who insists on seeing only "proof" of Roth's hatred of women or sees in Lucy only a shade of Margaret Williams will miss what is in fact the first appearance of a set of important and prescient ethical questions that Roth's work will continue to explore throughout his career.

Although Julie Husband's account of Roth contains many interesting observations, it also illustrates the limitations of reading Roth's fiction as if it were autobiography. In Husband's reading of the novel, *When She Was Good* represents 'a sustained, if ambivalent, engagement with the emerging women's rights movement of the 1960's, the "second wave feminism" that began with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).'³¹⁶ This reading has its virtues, but it cannot *entirely* explain Roth's interest in writing *When She Was Good*. In fact, Husband's assessment of *When She Was Good*, as opposed to

³¹⁵ Podhoretz, 'The Adventures of Philip Roth,' 30.

³¹⁶ Husband 26.

that of *Letting Go*, places far too strong an emphasis on Roth's autobiography, in particular his marriage to Margaret Williams.

Central to Husband's argument is the claim that *When She Was Good* and *Letting Go* 'offer an intriguing view of Roth's struggle with second-wave feminism,' and that they 'develop forceful critiques of patriarchy that should delight feminist readers.'³¹⁷ These novels fail to placate, however, because 'even as his heroines overturn abusive, manipulative, or weak fathers and husbands they emerge so damaged, so filled with angst, self-disgust, rage, and bitterness that they are even more crippled than the patriarchs they have defeated.'³¹⁸ Husband specifically cites *When She Was Good* as being the worse of the two, claiming that "in the later novel the narrator leads the reader to feel relief in the humiliating and improbable demise of Roth's rebellious heroine. If patriarchy is bad, matriarchy would be far worse, the novel suggests."³¹⁹ In Husband's reading, Roth's novels do depict female characters frustrated at the subservient and uninspiring roles offered to them under a patriarchal system. But neither does his fiction offer any alternatives to this frustration and in their bitterness at their situation Roth's female characters become as destructive as the system they oppose.

The major problem with Husband's analysis of *When She Was Good* is that she reads Lucy autobiographically, finding in her "a striking likeness to Roth's first wife".³²⁰ Husband focuses on her perception that Roth conflates Margaret and Lucy: "If Martha [from *Letting Go*] rises above her harrowing origins, neither Margaret nor Lucy Nelson, a character created after Roth's bitter separation from Margaret, do. Both are depicted as women singularly lacking in self-awareness and overwhelmed by

³¹⁷ Husband 26.

³¹⁸ Husband 26.

³¹⁹ Husband 26.

³²⁰ Husband 35.

anger, resentment, and desperation”³²¹ Husband also believes that Lucy’s ‘fate is anything but inevitable’ and implies that her destruction is really a product of Roth’s rage at his ex-wife. Eventually, Husband comes to the conclusion that *When She Was Good* “reinforces an antifeminist message.”³²² She bases this conclusion upon her assessment of Lucy’s extreme nature: “Certainly, paranoid characters like Lucy can exist, but introducing Lucy at the moment that second-wave feminism emerged pitted Roth against early feminists.”³²³ She also blames the novel’s “anti-feminism” on Roth’s inability to imagine a positive outcome for women who spurn the roles defined for them by patriarchy: “Roth’s female characters seem trapped and accept undesirable compromises, in part, because Roth does not imagine the possibilities for female alliances they themselves would likely have imagined.”³²⁴ In Husband’s reading, Lucy’s extreme behaviour and her inability to see women as allies rather than enemies are not, as Roth suggests, legitimate characteristics of a certain “type” that he wants to explore through his fiction. Rather they are proof of Roth’s anti-feminism and the personal rage with one woman, his ex-wife, that has coloured his conception of all women.

In many ways, this essay is an excellent example of the third type of typical Roth criticism that I discussed earlier. Husband claims to be re-examining two novels that have been unfairly dismissed by critics. Her readings of the novels rely, however, on the “facts” of Roth’s biography to reveal the psychology of Lucy’s author. In other words, she reads *When She Was Good* as if it were the sort of confessional *Portnoy’s Complaint* was rumoured to be. Interestingly, Husband quotes from *The Facts*, the same work in which Roth explains in great detail his ex-wife’s

³²¹ Husband 35.

³²² Husband 40.

³²³ Husband 40.

³²⁴ Husband 40.

connection to *When She Was Good* without including any of this material in her discussion. Instead, she uses only a description that Roth gives of Margaret. She points out the similarity of this description to Lucy's character in order to support her claim that Lucy *is* Margaret. This move, for a reader unfamiliar with *The Facts*, suggests that Roth himself was unaware of any association between the two women whilst he actually explores the connection between the novel and his marriage in considerable depth.

Besides reading *When She Was Good* as a psychological study of Roth, Husband's relationship to second-wave feminism also seems to be at stake in her essay. She states that Roth's creation of a character like Lucy in this charged social atmosphere 'pitted' him 'against early feminists,' with the implication that this was Roth's explicit intention. Husband also seems to assume that because Roth hated his wife, he must have hated feminism as well. Whilst Roth has often expressed derision for *aspects* of the feminist movement, Husband's insistence on linking the novel's argument and presentation of character to his former domestic unhappiness implies that Roth hates feminism because he does not like women. Meanwhile, this reading ignores what Roth has *actually* written and said about feminism. As quoted earlier, Roth has often stated that it is not the idea of equal rights for women with which he disagrees. Instead, he resists any system of belief that would demand women—or men, or Jews, or Americans—think and act in a prescribed way. When questioned by Hermione Lee about "the feminist attack on you," Roth counters by stating that Lucy has nothing to do with feminism:

When She Was Good is not serving the cause—that's true. The anger of this young woman isn't presented to be endorsed with a hearty "Right on!" that will move the populace to action. The nature of the anger is examined, as is the depth of the wound. So are the consequences of the anger, for Lucy as for everyone. I hate to have to be the one to say it, but the portrait isn't without its

poignancy. I don't mean by poignancy what the compassionate book reviewers call "compassion." I mean you see the suffering that real rage is.³²⁵

Roth resists a reading of the novel that would demand that it serve a cause or endorse an explicitly feminist message. And while he readily admits that he does not present Lucy's anger as a feminist attack on patriarchy, he believes that this decision is entirely beside the point. For him the novel is not about feminist anger, or even women's anger, but about the *idea* of anger itself: an anger that rages so fiercely that it consumes its own vessel. Were one still to read the novel autobiographically, of course, this would mean that *When She Was Good* could in fact be read as Roth's recognition of his ex-wife as the ultimate *victim* of her own rage.

Instead of locating my reading of *When She Was Good* within the narrow confines of Rothian psychodrama, I want to suggest that the novel represents his first sustained attempt to explore the pre-reflective and pre-ideological origins of our moral identities and beliefs. Roth's interest in these questions becomes clearer if we approach his work from the perspective of Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment*. By seeing Lucy as a victim of her own *ressentiment*, the broader question of *why* Lucy is so obsessed with 'goodness' and what 'goodness' means in the novel becomes central to the thematic structure of *When She Was Good*. The questions of how to live well and how to be a 'good' person are at the heart of all moral and ethical inquiries, and yet Roth presents us with a character whose very attempts at living well and being good inevitably make her behave like a monster. Roth suggests that part of Lucy's problem is her purely *reactive* approach to her attempts at goodness. Lucy is singularly unable to create a vision of a 'good' life in her own terms. She cannot imagine *how* a life different from her parents and grandparents would appear; she just knows her life must oppose theirs. Debra Shostak sees this as Lucy's role as the

³²⁵ Roth, in an interview with Lee 173.

apogee of the novel's motif of self-invention. Shostak writes, Lucy's 'self-righteousness is in effect a mask for her blindness to the implications of her ill-fated attempts at self-construction.'³²⁶ Just as her grandfather Willard attempted to re-invent himself as 'civilized,' Lucy has tried to re-invent herself as 'good.' Unlike Willard, however, who has a clear vision of what a 'civilized' life looks like, Lucy cannot envision a 'good' life and can only react against the lives of those she scorns.

The actual result of Lucy's reactive sense of goodness is that—just as Willard's determination to be 'civilized' makes him too forgiving of his son-in-law's vices—Lucy's determination to be good leaves her absolutely *unforgiving* of others. She cannot forgive their flaws, nor excuse their weakness. To combat the same contingency of life that sent her grandfather searching for 'civilization,' Lucy erects her own moral system. This moral system does not allow or excuse any failure; it demands perfection. When she imagines her fellow humanity, she thinks, 'Oh, why can't people be good? Inside they are only bones and strings and blood, kidneys and brains and glands and teeth and arteries and veins. Why, why can't they just be good?'³²⁷ Lucy's problem is revealed to be, to a certain extent, that of her Aunt Ginny's. She can no more imagine the world from another's point of view than could her aunt. Lucy cannot really believe that Roy might love an uncle that she feels betrayed her, or that Ellie might love a friend whose lifestyle is the polar opposite to Lucy's, or that Myra might genuinely love the father Lucy hates. Rather than imagining these people as having made choices, she imagines them as victims of the power and vice of others. Roy is overwhelmed by his Uncle, Ellie's superficiality makes her vulnerable to her friend, and Myra is simply too stupid and weak to see how corrupt Whitey really is.

³²⁶ Shostak 114.

³²⁷ Roth, *When She Was Good* 286.

Because she cannot conceive of genuine difference and, instead, associates anyone different from her with weakness and corruption, Lucy believes herself to be 'good.' She elevates her own moral system over that of others, and she feels that she is entitled to confront and disparage anyone who falls short of her expectations. During her flirtation with Catholicism, Lucy has a conversation with Father Damrosch in which she tells him 'everything' about her family life. His response to Lucy, that the 'world is imperfect' and that 'we are sinners' prompts her to wonder 'when will the world be not evil?'³²⁸ His answer that this world will not be perfect, that one must wait for the next life in heaven, does not satisfy her. Lucy's impatience with this life and her inability to conceive of the afterlife as an acceptable exchange presage her later attempts to make the world over in her own image. In her own skewed logic, people are all the same, they should be good, she is good, and so it is her duty to help make others good as well. For Lucy, this 'logic' is tied up with the idea of expectations. Because she faults her grandfather and mother for not *expecting* more from Whitey, she will now *expect* more from the rest of society. And rather than allow others to judge her as she believes they have in the past, she will be the one to sit in judgment over those she knows to be unworthy.

When She Was Good charts Lucy's course from innocent child, to innocent victim, to enraged young woman, and finally to self-destructive Fury. In other words, it charts the genealogy of Lucy's moral vision of life. While, on the one hand, much of Lucy's life—and death—seems fated, it is my assertion that those who read the novel as simply naturalistic miss a major factor in Roth's depiction of Lucy. Although Lucy imagines her life as having been ruined by her family and blames everyone else in the novel rather than herself, Roth points to another factor in Lucy's

³²⁸ Roth, *When She Was Good* 289.

life and death. For Lucy is defined less by her family and her society than by her *rage*. On the one hand, she is a victim of her towering anger, but, on the other hand, she also cultivates it. Her anger becomes tied up with her sense of virtue; her self-righteousness is as much fuelled by rage as by any conscious ideology. In fact, Roth implies that her rage *is* her only ideology. Because of her anger, she imagines she is virtuous; because of her hatred, she imagines she is superior; because of her spite, she imagines she is good. Lucy never defines *why* she is better than her peers, she just knows she is. But Roth implies that all Lucy really 'knows' are her feelings. She knows she hates her small town and her family, and so she defines herself and her beliefs strictly in opposition to them. Lucy's interactions with the world have a decidedly 'moral' inflection, but her morality finds its origins in an impotent and reactive rage against social circumstance.

Besides exploring the micropolitical and pre-ideological basis of Lucy's worldview, *When She Was Good* raises another theme that will continually reappear in Roth's later novels. Whilst some of Lucy's anger seems natural given her dysfunctional family, the problem remains of why Lucy chooses self-destruction over forgiveness. There are moments in the novel when Lucy acknowledges that she should, genuinely, 'be good:' when she should be more forgiving towards Roy and more comfortable in her world. When Lucy first learns she is pregnant and is desperate not to have to marry Roy, she flees back to Liberty Center and her family home. Her father comes to speak to her about organizing an abortion, which she desperately wants, and for the first time since childhood she allows herself to see him as a capable and caring individual. She imagines their renewed relationship and thinks, 'Could that be? At long last, those terrible days of hatred and solitude, over? To think she could begin again to talk to her family, to tell them about all the things

she was studying, to show them the books she used in her courses, to show them her papers.³²⁹ This paragraph illustrates Lucy's colossal loneliness, but it also illustrates that Lucy is capable of imagining a relationship with her father. She can envision how she could be closer to her family, and she can even imagine the benefit that such a relationship would bring. However, before any such reconciliation can be brought about, Lucy discovers that her father knows of the abortionist because her mother has had one. Her rage at her father reasserts itself and she tells her mother that Whitey victimizes Myra, and then calls her father 'the town drunk.'³³⁰ Lucy, in other words, would choose anger at her father over happiness, rage at her past over the chance for a more peaceful future. She would also rather force Roy to marry her and have his baby, than to make any choice similar to one her mother had made.

In my reading, Lucy's 'fate' is as much of her own making as it is the natural outcome of her situation. Whilst some of her anger is depicted as deserved, her destruction at the end of the novel seems to be as much by choice as by decree in that she has chosen to live a life that is purely reactive, a life dictated by her anger. The question of the novel then becomes *why* choose death over compromise? Why must Lucy choose to assert her ideological view of the world as evil and herself as virtuous over the chance to live a happier, more contented life? The reader has seen that Lucy is not, of course, actually better than any other character. Her sense of virtue is based not on genuine goodness but on a rage so powerful that she must define herself against the community and family at which she is so angry. This perverse attempt at self-definition means that, ironically, she is actually defined by those she hates the most. Among many examples, her insistence that she is not her mother means she has the baby she does not want and marries the man she wants even less. Her insistence

³²⁹ Roth, *When She Was Good* 180.

³³⁰ Roth, *When She Was Good* 183.

that she will not accept the help of her father means that she gives up her dream of a college education. Even her looks seem to be defined by others: she will not be seen to care about herself the way other girls—girls like Ellie Sowerby—do. Lucy's insistence on being different means that she cannot make any of her decisions for herself; she must simply react against Liberty Center and her family. And meanwhile she tells herself that this contrariness is actually spiritual enlightenment; that she is not just being defiant, but virtuous.

By reading Lucy in the light of Nietzsche's ideas on *ressentiment*, the question of why Lucy would choose a destructive reactive life over a more constructive active life becomes easier to answer. *When She Was Good* is not about women or feminism but about *goodness*—about what being good *really* means. In the same vein as Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, it satirically plays with the genre of the 'good life,' questioning what underpins people's ideas about goodness and finding unexpected ulterior motives. In other words, *When She Was Good* is a text that deliberately draws upon and reconfigures certain classical philosophical tropes about what sort of life should be lived to live well. Early in the novel, while Willard sits in the cold and waits for Whitey's train to arrive, he thinks about all that he has survived. He wonders why he does not just give up, whether he should fake senility in order finally to rest and stop having to worry about everything. He resists this temptation, thinking, "But Why? Why should I be senile? Why be off my head when that is not the case!" He jumped to his feet. "Why be getting pneumonia and worrying myself sick – when all I did was good!"³³¹ Here Willard's conception of goodness is revealed to be the same as his conception of civility: both goodness and civility should *protect* a person from a brutal world. Willard believes that sacrifice and

³³¹ Roth, *When She Was Good* 38.

conformity to the community means living well, means being good, and yet his thoughts reveal that this is actually part of a *bargain* he believes he can strike with the cosmos. If he is good, he will be rewarded. In other words, Willard's belief that the good deeds of good people are rewarded with a good life is really a form of self-preservation rather than genuine altruism. But Lucy represents a far more extreme moral vision of life, one that is purely reactive and that revels in its will to power.

Through the character of Lucy, Roth takes his exploration of goodness a step further. Her definition of virtue is one that makes her *superior* to her perceived enemies; in the otherwise powerless hands of a lower-middle class young girl, virtue becomes a powerful weapon. Through his exploration of Lucy's belligerent version of virtue, Roth establishes the undertone of violence in any ideology that defines itself as good by defining itself *against* an 'other.' Lucy's is an image of goodness that wants others to have to bow down to it and seeks to punish those who do not capitulate. Lucy's moral vision promises her the ability to impose herself upon her world: not only to combat the chaos that disturbs her but to grant her the authority and pleasure of being a 'good person.' *And so she absolutely invests herself in her own moral self-image.* She becomes 'good,' and this gives her a sense of power over those who threaten or challenge her. Through this absolute division of good and evil, through dividing the world in this binary way, she can elevate her own view of the world and she can denigrate others. She feels it is within her rights to demand other people witness her goodness and acknowledge her superiority. And if they fail to do so, then they *deserve* her punishment. Lucy feels justified even while committing her most heinous acts. Julian's family deserves to hear about his infidelities because he has worked against her; Roy deserves to be attacked because he has betrayed her; her mother deserves to hear Lucy's venomous form of 'truth' because Myra insists upon

being weak where Lucy is strong. Unfortunately, Willard and Lucy can attempt to impose a moral view of the world on life, but life does not have to accept it. When the contingency of existence reasserts itself, binary ideologies must inevitably collapse. In other words, subjecting life to a relentless moral reading subdues both empathy and creativity, and Roth's novel asks to what type of life does this lead. In Willard's case there remains the niggling doubt that life has not upheld its share of the bargain; in Lucy's case, it leads to her destruction.

Lucy, like Nietzsche's ascetic, is full of hate, and in her lust for revenge against the world she allows her rage to consume her. Nietzsche's description of Schopenhauer, to him a most hated example of asceticism, could be used to describe Lucy. He writes that Schopenhauer:

[. . .] needed enemies to keep him in a good humour; that he loved grim, bitter, blackish-green words; that he raged for the sake of raging, out of passion; that he would have grown ill, would have become a pessimist [. . .] without his enemies [. . .] but his enemies held him fast, his enemies always enticed him back again to his existence, his wrath was just as theirs was to the ancient Cynics, his balm, his recreation, his recompense his *remedium* against disgust, his *happiness*.³³²

This describes Lucy's own reactive ideology that, rather than freeing her from her hated family, makes her absolutely *dependent* upon them. She *needs* her enemies to function, she *defines* herself through that which she despises. And as such she is paralyzed, forever attached to that which she hates. Like Willard, she lives a life according to pre-established generic rules and conventions but, unlike Willard, her only rule is to work *against* Liberty Center and her family. Furthermore, *When She Was Good* implicates goodness as being an ideological home for violence. To Lucy, being 'good' means having the right, the responsibility even, to impose herself on others. There is a link here between morality and violent coercion. After all, if I

³³² Nietzsche 75.

know what is 'good' and you refuse to obey me, then I have the right to treat you as a criminal. In *When She Was Good*, Roth begins to trace a genealogy of morality that will run through many of his novels, and he begins to understand the desire to be 'good' as a desire for supremacy that can have explosive consequences.

When She Was Good raises many of the themes that will continue to preoccupy Roth's fiction. Rather than an anti-feminist portrayal of a woman who destroys herself as part of a misogynistic fantasy on Roth's part, *When She Was Good* can be read as the moment Roth rounds on his own critics. If they will insist he is immoral, then he will make the nature of morality the focus of his barbed intelligence. Rather than an author who revels in immorality, as Howe accuses him of being, Roth actually questions how our ideas about morality come into being. He is as interested in the pre-ideological as the ideological, in asking how we come to see the world as we do. Lucy Nelson also raises another question that vexes Roth and his fiction, and that is the question of why people will destroy themselves and others rather than compromise their ideals, no matter how radical, untested, or untenable they prove to be.

Conclusion

Although *Other People* and *When She Was Good* are very different novels, Amis and Roth share an interest in how ideology shapes the individual's understanding of the world. Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment* and Deleuze's theories about the micropolitical open up new avenues of understanding ideology, as well as the novels in question. What makes this interest in ideology ironic is that both Amis and Roth are so often considered immoral and apolitical writers. And yet this chapter has examined how two of their most misunderstood and maligned texts actually embed within their narratives explorations of how individuals 'do ideology'

in their societies, as well as what it means to be 'good.' In fact, these authors are anything but apolitical, as they investigate the *pre-political* forms of ideology that shape the individual's understanding of his or her world. The next chapter in this thesis will look at an even more overtly political theme within these author's writings. It will explore how Amis and Roth narrate history, trauma, and testimony, focusing on Amis's novel *Time's Arrow* and Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theater*.

Chapter Three

“This is human life. There is a great hurt that everyone has to endure.”

-Philip Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* (1995)

You have to harden your heart to pain and suffering. And quick. Like right away at the very latest.

-Martin Amis, *Times Arrow* (1991)

To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.

-Theodor Adorno, ‘After Auschwitz’ (1949)

In recent years, “Trauma” has become a key trope across the academic spectrum. From psychology to the social sciences and from history to literature, the task of trying to understand the relationship between trauma and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries involves many different fields within the humanities. One critic, commenting on the prevalence of trauma-based literature writes, ‘As even the slightest perusal of current literary and cultural criticism will indicate, the concepts of mourning and trauma have gained a wide currency.’³³³ The field of literary criticism has been especially affected by the concept of trauma:

It is common to find readings of key modern and postmodern texts that attempt to interpret characters as ‘post-traumatic’ or even suggest that entire texts be read as ‘traumatized.’ Trauma, in other words, has become a key trope in contemporary culture, a hermeneutical tool by which literary (and other) texts are deciphered.³³⁴

The pervasiveness of trauma theory cannot be denied, and yet many aspects of trauma theory are paradoxical, especially when incorporated into literary criticism. Indeed, significant questions trouble the conjunction of trauma theory and literature. The fact that ‘trauma’ has become a prevalent theoretical concern and paradigm across the intellectual spectrum does not mean that the concept’s core meaning has been clarified. Ruth Leys addresses this problem in her introduction to the genealogy of

³³³ Jonathan Boulter, ‘Does Mourning Require a Subject? Samuel Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*,’ *MFS* Vol. 50, num. 2 (Summer 2004) 332.

³³⁴ Boulter 332.

trauma. She begins by describing two contemporaneous uses of the word ‘trauma’ that occurred in the media in the ‘same spring of 1998.’³³⁵ One use of the word ‘traumatized’ described the condition of Ugandan girls ‘who had been abducted by a guerrilla group [. . .] in order to serve as “wives” and fighters in its war against the Ugandan army.’³³⁶ As part of their initiation into the group, the girls had been forced to hack to death another young woman who had been caught trying to escape.³³⁷ Meanwhile, in the United States, lawyers for Paula Jones were asserting ‘on the basis of expert testimony that, as a result of the trauma of her alleged sexual harassment by President Clinton, Jones now suffered from post-traumatic stress with long-term symptoms of anxiety, intrusive thoughts and memories, and sexual aversion.’³³⁸ As Leys concludes, the disparity between these two ‘traumatic’ situations reveals both the generality and the potential elusiveness of the meaning of trauma itself.

In order fully to explore the meaning and scope of the idea of ‘trauma,’ this chapter will examine common definitions of the term, as well as raise some of the problems inherent in applying trauma theory to literature. I will begin by looking at some of the seminal texts of trauma theory, focusing on critics such as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Shoshana Felman. I will also consider various questions raised by critics such as Ruth Leys that complicate the relationship between literature and trauma theory. As a possible response to these questions, I will then offer a reflection upon Jacques Derrida’s essay *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, a text that suggests ways of understanding trauma and testimony that rethinks the relationship between truth, testimony, and fiction. Finally this chapter will turn to the fiction of Philip Roth and Martin Amis in order to explore how two contemporary writers have

³³⁵ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) 1.

³³⁶ Leys 1.

³³⁷ Leys 1.

³³⁸ Leys 2.

attempted to negotiate the difficult relationship between trauma, history and narrative. In *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth's traumatized protagonist both represents and problematizes the relationship between lived experience, narrative, and history. In very different ways, Martin Amis's *Times Arrow* uses an extremely complicated and experimental narrative device in order to reconceive the trauma of the Holocaust through the eyes of one of its Nazi perpetrators. Both of these authors are fascinated by questions of history, and the moral and ethical implications of trauma on both the individual and his or her society. However, these authors are anything but formulaic in their approach to trauma, and their fictions both refine and upset common theories about trauma and its effects. But in order to understand the nature of their interpretation of trauma, it is first necessary to develop our understanding of the relationship between trauma, rhetoric, and literature.

Trauma: A Critical Overview

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D. begin their groundbreaking work on trauma with a series of rhetorical questions:

As readers, we are witnesses precisely to these questions we do not own and do not yet understand, but which summon and beseech us from within the literary texts. What is the relation between literature and testimony, between the writer and the witness? What is the relation between the act of witnessing and testifying, and the acts of writing and of reading, particularly in our era? What is, furthermore, this book will ask, the relation between narrative and history, between art and memory, between speech and survival?³³⁹

These questions dominate contemporary studies of trauma, and they also suggest the complexity of the problem of defining the concept, particularly in its relation to literature. The works of Felman, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra—three seminal figures in trauma theory—all attempt to answer the questions formulated by

³³⁹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992) xiii.

Felman and Laub.³⁴⁰ All three also trace their research back to Sigmund Freud. As Leys explains, Freud was one of a group of turn-of-the-century figures who used the word trauma 'to describe the wounding of the *mind* brought about by sudden, unexpected, emotional shock. The emphasis began to fall on the hysterical shattering of the personality, consequent on a situation of extreme terror or fright.'³⁴¹ As Freud often uses examples from literature to represent various aspects of his definition of trauma, his writings are of special interest for literary critics interested in trauma theory.

In her reading of Freud, Cathy Caruth points out that although the etymology of the word *trauma* points to a physical wounding, 'the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind.'³⁴² Such mental wounds resist the straightforward healing processes of physical damage:

The wound in the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [. . .] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.³⁴³

For Freud, the traumatic experience haunts its victim. The psychological wound cannot heal; instead, it torments the bearer through the experience of obsessive memory and compulsive grief: 'the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his will.'³⁴⁴

Fundamental to this conception of trauma are the oft-repeated words *unknown* and

³⁴⁰ Jonathan Boulter writes in a footnote that 'Certain texts have become "classics" of trauma theory: Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* and LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* are critical touchstones' (346). He goes on to list Felman as another 'crucial resource' (346).

³⁴¹ Leys 4.

³⁴² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1996) 3.

³⁴³ Caruth 3-4.

³⁴⁴ Caruth 2.

unknowing. What makes psychic trauma more dangerous and challenging than a physical injury is its enigmatic nature:

[. . .] trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. The truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.³⁴⁵

Physical wounds such as broken bones or contusions are usually obvious and, therefore, relatively straightforward to identify and, if possible, to heal. But Caruth's definition of a *traumatic* wound is far more ambiguous and, as such, more threatening, in some ways, than a physical hurt. Caruth believes that the fundamental nature of trauma is enigmatic: it 'cries out' and yet, unlike a fracture or cut, it can neither be seen nor understood. Trauma, in Caruth's definition, is in possession of 'a reality or truth' at the same time that it cannot fully explain or make explicit exactly what that truth is or what reality the trauma voices. It is important that Caruth makes an apparently contradictory connection between the unknown and the truth because, in her estimation, trauma tells us something that we cannot or do not wish to confront. Trauma attempts to reveal truths that we have either suppressed or of which we are not fully cognizant. More controversially, Caruth implies that this relationship between trauma and the unknown reflects something that is fundamentally enigmatic in ourselves and our language. In other words, those aspects of trauma that are resistant to comprehension actually represent something resistant about *all* human experience and its expression through speech or writing. As such, the mysterious nature of trauma raises 'a central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of crisis.'³⁴⁶ There is something

³⁴⁵ Caruth 4.

³⁴⁶ Caruth 5.

incomprehensible involved in trauma, in tragedy, and in loss that belies expression: we cannot explain why we are haunted by our memories because we cannot fully understand what those memories mean. In her explanation of trauma, Caruth introduces many of the key themes that both sustain and complicate her theory. Her definition of trauma as a form of haunting—in that it is both repetitive and enigmatic—is echoed by many other trauma theorists. And yet, in her apparent desire to define trauma as *universal*—as something that can be experienced by people other than the individual victim—Caruth’s theories create as many problems as they address.

The inability of the subject of trauma fully to comprehend his or her own experience places inevitable constraints upon the possibility of traumatic narrative. The Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has said that, ‘If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony. We have all been witnesses and we feel we have to bear testimony for the future.’³⁴⁷ Developing this theme, Felman suggests that we live in an ‘*Age of Testimony*: an age, whose writing task (and reading task) is to confront the horror of its own destructiveness, to attest to the unthinkable disaster of culture’s breakdown, and to attempt to assimilate the massive trauma, and the cataclysmic shift in being that resulted with some reworked frame of culture or within some revolutionized order of consciousness.’³⁴⁸ Both popular and academic culture scrutinizes natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis, and entire television channels are dedicated to historical events such as the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Holocaust, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Also evident is a more open attitude towards and a greater understanding of personal traumas such as rape,

³⁴⁷ Elie Wiesel, as quoted by Felman, 113-114.

³⁴⁸ Felman 114.

incest, and other types of sexual abuse. This curiosity in traumatic narratives means that traumatic testimonials—both real and fictional—can appear ubiquitous.³⁴⁹

Despite this apparent ubiquity, however, the act of testifying to one's trauma is not as straightforward as it may appear.

Felman identifies two major factors that may inhibit or put into question the integrity of testimonial statements. To start with, she asserts the solitary status of the witness to traumatic events. Felman writes:

Since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony, the burden of the witness—in spite of his or her alignment with other witnesses—is a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden. 'No one bears witness for the witness,' writes the poet Paul Celan. To bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude.³⁵⁰

In response to Celan's remarks—the truth of which Felman takes for granted—Felman argues that the act of testifying marks one as unique, as someone who has been forced to carry a special burden that is exclusively his or her own. No one else can fully understand what the victim has suffered; and, therefore, no one else can speak in his or her name. By testifying as a victim, the subject articulates the

³⁴⁹ See James Berger, 'Trauma and Literary Theory,' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997) 571-572.

Berger writes about the prevalence of traumatic narrations in popular culture in the United States:

First we can look at a popular culture and mass media obsessed by repetitions of violent disasters: at the successions of *Die Hards*, *Terminators*, and *Robocops*, as well as *Nightmares on Elm Street*, disease and epidemic films, and now the return of the 'classic' disaster films of twisters and turbulence and the repeated sequences of mini-apocalypses within each film; at 'real life' cop shows; and at the news itself, that never exhausted source of pure horror. [. . .] We can look next at the preoccupation with family dysfunctions—child abuse, incest, spousal abuse—in the media, most strikingly on the talk show circuit. [. . .] Along with the interest in family breakdown and violence comes the interest in the enigmatic figure of the survivor, the one who has passed through the catastrophe and can tell us what it is like. [. . .] Over the past fifteen years, there has been an enormous growth in the interest in eyewitness accounts and testimonies of all kinds: by victims of child abuse, Holocaust survivors, survivors of near-death experiences, and so on. [. . .] Finally, most generally and perhaps most obviously, the late twentieth century is a time marked, indeed, defined, by historical catastrophe. World wars, local wars, civil wars, ideological wars, ethnic wars, the two atomic bomb attacks, the cold war, genocides, famines, epidemics, and lesser turmoils of all kinds—these events, and the visual representations of these events, have in large part shaped contemporary American modes of viewing the world.

³⁵⁰ Felman 3.

singularity of his or her situation and embarks on a journey that must be his or hers alone. Felman believes that the testifier takes on a 'radical human condition of exposure and vulnerability.'³⁵¹ But Felman appears to undermine her own assertions by claiming that a person also comes to represent *other* victims by engaging with his or her identity as a victim through testifying. Felman writes, 'And yet, the appointment to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* other and *to* others.'³⁵² By testifying as a victim, a person signals his or her inimitability and embarks on a journey that must be a solitary one, but, paradoxically, he or she also engages not only with his or her audience but also with other victims of similar crimes or situations. In other words, Felman claims that testifying alienates the individual victim, and yet she contradictorily and controversially assumes that, by testifying, a person can become representative of their specific type of victimization, or that a single victim can speak for many in a way that implicates the witness in his or her testimony.

Like Caruth, Felman also believes that the excessive and unknown nature of trauma often belies narration. Testifying witnesses not only risk marking themselves out as different but also find articulating their experience difficult. Felman writes:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.³⁵³

Just as Caruth referred to trauma as unknowable or unavailable to consciousness, Felman refers to the traumatic experience as 'overwhelming.' Trauma overwhelms both the subject's consciousness—impinging on memory—as well as the subject's language. In other words, even if an experience *could* be understood, it would still

³⁵¹ Felman 5.

³⁵² Felman 3.

³⁵³ Felman 5.

believe verbal expression. However, Felman does offer a solution, of sorts, to this dilemma:

[. . .] Freud makes a scientific statement of his discovery that there *is* in effect such a thing as an *unconscious testimony*, and that this unconscious, unintended, unintentional testimony has, as such, an incomparable heuristic and investigative value. Psychoanalysis, in this way, profoundly rethinks and radically renews the very concept of the testimony, by submitting, and by recognizing for the first time in the history of culture, that one does not have to *possess* or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker.³⁵⁴

In other words, a person testifying about a traumatic experience does not need to know or understand the truth in order to express the truth of their experience. Felman even implies that by not consciously knowing the truth, the subject's testimony has a greater fidelity to the truth in so far as his or her subconscious can reveal more about the nature and the effects of the traumatic experience than the conscious mind. This focus on the unconscious and indefinable aspects of our experience raises a problem inherent to Felman's and Caruth's work: the problematic status of the 'history' that their analyses seek to explore.

LaCapra: History and Testimony

Like many other writers on trauma, Caruth and Felman focus their attention upon determinate historical events, such as the Holocaust. By doing so, these writers appear to assume that witnesses or victims of traumatic historical events have special access to the truth about a particular historical moment. Yet, they also insist that the nature of trauma is fundamentally mysterious and enigmatic. In effect, their theories suggest a contradictory relationship between trauma, testimony, and historical consciousness. As LaCapra writes, 'It is noteworthy that, although Caruth's subtitle

³⁵⁴ Felman 15.

refers to history, she approaches history only through the medium of theory and literature, thus not including historiography itself and the contributions or the resistances it might pose to her analysis in both intellectual and institutional terms.³⁵⁵ LaCapra continues by arguing that although Caruth claims a continuing interest in history and the nature of historical experience, the very nature of historiography makes it resilient to the definition of trauma theory that Caruth espouses. In his own work, LaCapra reveals why writing history is so difficult by identifying ‘two approaches to historiography,’ and he raises a series of problems regarding the narration of historical trauma that Caruth avoids.³⁵⁶

LaCapra begins by identifying ‘a documentary or self-sufficient research model’ of historiography.³⁵⁷ In this model, the historian looks for factual evidence, such as primary, archival documents that are then analyzed in order to put ‘forth testable hypotheses’.³⁵⁸ Here, the stylistic features of historical writing are ‘subordinated to content in the form of facts, their narration, or their analysis. [. . .] In other words, writing is a medium for expressing a content, and its ideal goal is to be transparent to content or an open window on the past.’³⁵⁹ This documentary or research model of historiography, LaCapra claims, radically puts into question the possibility of any relationship between literature, traumatic testimony, and historiography. Because of the emphasis that this model places on archival or documentary evidence, the traumatized testimony of a single person who may or may not remember ‘the facts’ accurately may well be relegated to a footnote—that shadowy place where ‘the limit of history and the beginning of fiction is probably

³⁵⁵ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001) 183.

³⁵⁶ LaCapra 1.

³⁵⁷ LaCapra 1.

³⁵⁸ LaCapra 2-3.

³⁵⁹ LaCapra 3.

reached'.³⁶⁰ There is, however, a second approach to historiography that LaCapra labels 'radical constructivism.' Radical constructivist historians, LaCapra continues, 'accept the distinction between historical and fictional statements on the level of reference to events,' but they also 'question it on structural levels.'³⁶¹ Prominent reconstructionists such as Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit argue that no matter how unbiased and impersonal historicists' vision of history may claim to be, their vision is 'so stained by one set of projective factors or another that, at least on a structural level, it reflects back only the historian's own distorted image.'³⁶² To claim that documentary approaches to history are still inflected by a historian's own personal perspective is a very contentious claim. This position implies that history can never be *objectively* true, and this problem of what defines the truth is really at the heart of both of the approaches to history that LaCapra identifies. Those who agree with the first approach to history as well as those who consider themselves radical constructivists both claim to have a more complete understanding of the truth. For the former, the truth is that which can be documented. For the latter, the truth is a much more fluid concept that includes the perspectives of witnesses, be they fallible or not. LaCapra identifies the tension between the two approaches as involving the subtle difference between 'right things' and 'true things':

In other words, saying the right things may not be limited to but does constitutively require saying true things on the levels of both statements referring to events and broader narrative, interpretive, or explanatory endeavours. How to adjudicate truth claims may differ in significant ways with respect to events and to broader endeavours (such as interpretations or readings of the past), but truth claims are at issue on both levels.

LaCapra suggests that understanding the full scope—or the 'right things'—of a historical event may necessitate more than just the facts—or the 'true' things.

³⁶⁰ LaCapra 7.

³⁶¹ LaCapra 8.

³⁶² LaCapra 8.

LaCapra uses Toni Morrison's novels as an illustration of how fiction can grant a reader powerful 'insight into phenomena such as slavery [. . .] which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods.'³⁶³ *Telling* someone the 'true' facts and figures of slavery's barbarity may not be as effective in depicting the horrors of slavery as *showing* the cruelty and inhumanity through an imaginative narrative account written from the perspective of a slave. Whilst this example uses a work that is explicitly fictional, even eyewitness testimony can reveal the tensions between what is 'right' and what is 'true.'

Later in his book, LaCapra quotes Dori Laub's interview of a survivor of Auschwitz narrating her eyewitness account of the Auschwitz uprising. The survivor was interviewed as part of the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, for which Laub was an interviewer, and the tape was subsequently viewed at a conference by an audience culled from various academic pursuits.³⁶⁴ In the interview, the woman speaks of the moment when she saw the four chimneys at Auschwitz exploding and how her overwhelming emotion was disbelief. For the prisoner at that moment, seeing those most obvious symbols of Nazi oppression and genocide explode 'was unbelievable.'³⁶⁵ The responses to this woman's emotionally vivid testimony gathered from the audience and recounted by Laub are telling. An historian in the audience declared that the woman's testimony was factually incorrect, given that only one of the four chimneys at Auschwitz was destroyed in the uprising. Disturbed by this factual error, he concluded that the veridical status of her entire narrative was questionable. However, the psychoanalyst—Laub himself—had a radically different point of view. He argued that the point of the survivor's testimony had been missed by the historian's singular emphasis upon factual details; rather than testifying to the

³⁶³ LaCapra 13.

³⁶⁴ LaCapra 87.

³⁶⁵ LaCapra 87.

number of chimneys that were destroyed upon a particular day, the woman was *actually* testifying to ‘something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence.’³⁶⁶ What is at stake in this exchange is the fundamental status of what is ‘true’ and what is ‘right’ in their relation to traumatic experience. To the historian, giving an accurate account of documented events is to tell the truth, and telling the truth is the most important part of writing history. But the psychoanalyst argues that the *meaning* of the event harbours another kind of truth, and that although the woman is factually incorrect, her account of being in Auschwitz tells of an entire reality that supersedes those facts that the psychoanalyst implies are mere details. Laub obviously has no difficulty in dismissing the qualms of the historian when confronted with an eyewitness who incorrectly remembers the details of a certain historical event. And yet it is important that Laub is *not* himself a historian. That LaCapra gives this exchange as an example of the tension between ‘types’ of historiography is telling, and seems to imply that although there are some historians who are willing to explore more than just ‘the truth’, it often remains the province of other disciplines—such as literature or psychoanalysis—to explore what is ‘right’.

What is at stake for LaCapra, Caruth, and Felman, amongst others, is whether or not it is possible to write about trauma in a way that simultaneously heeds the demands of subjective experience while also attempting to keep faith with historical fact. This problematic has obvious implications for literature, especially when literature takes as its subject traumatic experiences that are as much historical events as they are personal. LaCapra continually refers to the case of Benjamin

³⁶⁶ Dori Laub, as quoted by LaCapra, 88.

Wilkomirski's book *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* which was originally believed to have been 'the memoir of a child survivor in a concentration camp.'³⁶⁷ The book received literary prizes as well as the acclaim of other survivors.³⁶⁸ It was soon revealed, however, that Wilkomirski had almost certainly not been in a concentration camp.³⁶⁹ Readers felt betrayed by Wilkomirski, who, for his part, refused to admit whether or not the contents of the book were 'real' or fictional.³⁷⁰ For LaCapra, Wilkomirski's case not only exemplifies the sort of truth-claims that complicate the writing of historical trauma; it also represents the constitutive—but potentially dangerous—role of empathy and experience in both history and trauma studies.

LaCapra's own definition of history seems to be a hybrid of the two models he elaborates at the beginning of his book:

I would begin by noting that the position I defend puts forth a conception of history as tensely involving both an objective (not objectivist) reconstruction of the past and a dialogic exchange with it and other inquirers into it wherein knowledge involves not only the processing of information but also affect, empathy, and questions of value.³⁷¹

LaCapra postulates that this 'third position' differs from the first two approaches insofar as 'it involves a critical and self-critical component that resists closure.'³⁷²

LaCapra believes that extreme historical situations must inevitably include such subjective elements as excess, experience, empathy, and identification, and his definition gives LaCapra space to explore all these problematic aspects of the conjunction of history and literature that the first two models either ignore or assume. Such concepts as experience, empathy, and identification are especially important to

³⁶⁷ LaCapra 32.

³⁶⁸ LaCapra 33.

³⁶⁹ LaCapra 32.

³⁷⁰ LaCapra 34.

³⁷¹ LaCapra 35.

³⁷² LaCapra 35.

this thesis, in that these concepts help to define the reasons for and problems with fictionalizing trauma. The idea that someone ‘knows’ more about a situation through experiencing it is illustrated by the case of Wilkomirski’s ‘memoir.’ People assumed that his experience as a survivor was what made it possible for him to write such a powerful and realistic narrative, but when they discovered that he was probably not a child survivor, the story that had once seemed ‘true’ became ‘false.’ As LaCapra explains, Wilkomirski’s case illustrates how ‘one has a series of interrelated problems involving the question of experience’ that all seem to point back—again—to the truth claims of the individual witness, victim, or historian.³⁷³

LaCapra does not believe, however, that the role of experience is insuperable. Instead, he concludes his section on experience ‘by contending that the problem of experience should lead to the role of empathy in historical understanding.’³⁷⁴ Empathy, while it should not be conflated with objectifying or identifying with a historical event, offers a way to understand historical traumas:

As a counterforce to [the] numbing [effect of objectification], empathy may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective, dimension of the experience of others. Empathy may also be seen as counteracting victimization, including self-victimization. It involves affectivity as a crucial aspect of understanding in the historian or other observer or analyst. [. . .] Empathy in this sense is a form of virtual, not vicarious, experience related to what Kaja Silverman has termed *heteropathic identification*, in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one’s own.³⁷⁵

The sort of empathy that LaCapra describes is in no way a pathological form of identification, in which a person really does think he or she is the other.³⁷⁶ Rather, empathy allows for an affective relationship between both ‘the observed and the

³⁷³ LaCapra 37.

³⁷⁴ LaCapra 37-38.

³⁷⁵ LaCapra 40.

³⁷⁶ LaCapra writes, ‘But objectivity should not be identified with objectivism or exclusive identification that denies or forecloses empathy, just as empathy should not be conflated with unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage’ (40).

observer.³⁷⁷ This understanding of an affective relationship between the victim and witness sanctions the existence of emotional responses in the historian faced with highly emotional and tragic situations or testimonies. But it also implies the possibility of a relationship between fiction and history. After all, if a person can empathize with a victim or with a historical period, then certainly he or she can write about it. In this sense, Wilkomirski's 'memoir' can still be accepted as a powerful portrayal of surviving a horrendous, nearly impossible situation, even if it is based on imagination rather than experience.

Meditating upon the crucial role empathy might play in our understanding of history, LaCapra extends the possibility that literature might offer a valuable space in which to explore the experience of trauma:

Still, historiography is subject to constraints different from those of literature, or at least of fiction, despite the important features these modes of discourse share (notably with respect to narrative procedures). The counterpart is that at least certain forms of literature or art, as well as the type of discourse or theory which emulates its object, may provide a more expansive space (in psychoanalytic terms, a *relatively* safe haven) for exploring modalities of responding to trauma, including the role of affect and the tendency to repeat traumatic events. At times art departs from the ordinary reality to produce surrealistic situations or radically playful openings that seem to be sublimely irrelevant to ordinary reality but may uncannily provide indirect commentary or insight into that reality.³⁷⁸

Here LaCapra echoes Caruth in his belief that one crucial function of art is to enable us to experience previously unknowable and seemingly unreal aspects of traumatic discourse. As Caruth puts the matter, 'If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing.'³⁷⁹ At the point where traumatic experience exceeds our limits of comprehension, art offers a way of expressing the 'unreality' of this traumatic event. Literature, in this sense, can help to

³⁷⁷ LaCapra 41.

³⁷⁸ LaCapra 186.

³⁷⁹ Caruth 3.

represent otherwise unspeakable situations. According to LaCapra, art's ability to express unreal events occurs because art allows for an imaginative process of empathy in which the witnesses to trauma, through experiencing the testimony of survivors, can attempt to understand a victim's experience. He writes that, 'empathy is a counterforce to victimization, and—without giving empathy an exclusive or primordial position—one may argue that its role is important both in historical understanding and in the ethics of everyday life.'³⁸⁰ The imaginative process LaCapra describes helps both victim and witness to resist the reifying process of victimization with the transformative experience of empathy: the victimized other 'becomes' oneself, at least to the extent that I can imagine 'it could happen to me.' This, again, is not the sort of 'unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage' to which LaCapra objects.³⁸¹ Rather, empathy helps to erase 'the binary logic of identity and difference' that distinguishes the victim from the witness.³⁸²

LaCapra insists that his definition of empathy should not be interpreted as encouraging total identification with victims or situations. But Ruth Leys worries that definitions of trauma have become so elastic as to risk meaninglessness as well as to encourage identification, a situation she appears to blame literary critics such as Caruth for creating. Leys is at odds with many aspects of Caruth's theories, but she is especially concerned with what she sees as a tendency of many contemporary theories of trauma to conflate the victim of, and the witness to, traumatic experience. She writes:

Inherent in Caruth's theory of trauma is the belief that the trauma experienced by one person can be passed to others. The basic model for that transmission is the face-to-face encounter between a victim, who enacts or performs his or

³⁸⁰ LaCapra 219.

³⁸¹ LaCapra 40.

³⁸² LaCapra 219.

her traumatic experience, and a witness who listens and is in turn contaminated by the catastrophe.³⁸³

Leys employment of the word 'contaminated' is crucial here. She does not believe that the process of 'performing' trauma for the benefit of a witness has any practical or ethical utility. Instead, the result of such a process is 'that individuals or groups who never experienced the trauma directly themselves are imagined as "inheriting" the traumatic memories of those who died long ago.'³⁸⁴ In this scenario, witnesses vicariously assume the position of the victim, even if they are themselves historically distant from the actual event. Leys fears that encouraging witnesses to believe they have 'inherited' trauma makes an event that is both individually experienced and historically specific representative of a general sense of victimization. To demonstrate this, she uses an example from Felman regarding cultural narratives of the sexual victimization of women to illustrate how such 'inheritance' narratives make the individual victim representative of all women's suffering in a purportedly misogynistic society.³⁸⁵ This general sense of victimization strips the event of any historical specificity or meaning, while it also assumes that the witness to an event suffers as much as the actual victim. This type of thinking cannot do justice to either the complexities or the specificities of the historical event, and—more problematically—it also assumes the rationale of the attacker or oppressor. Such thinking 'explains' the Nazi or the rapist as an anti-Semite or a misogynist, a rationalization that ignores the complicated social, cultural, and psychological processes that contribute to prejudices such as misogyny and anti-Semitism. Taking this logic a step further, such labels could actually *exculpate* perpetrators by turning them into the *victim* of whatever prejudice they have absorbed from their culture.

³⁸³ Leys 284.

³⁸⁴ Leys 284.

³⁸⁵ See Leys, 284.

Thus LaCapra claims that in the controversial book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen comes close to justifying the crimes of Nazi war criminals by means of his emphasis upon “the ubiquity of eliminationist anti-Semitism in Germany”.³⁸⁶ Because Goldhagen believes so firmly that *only* Germany—by being Germany—was capable of prosecuting the Holocaust, we are confronted with the proposition that eliminationist anti-Semitism ‘refers to a generations-old phenomena of German culture which created a direct path to the Holocaust.’³⁸⁷ The guiding thread of such a narrative would be that Germans *had* to do what they did because they were fated to do so by a strain of culturally engineered anti-Semitism that was as irrefutable as destiny. In effect, LaCapra implies that Goldhagen undermines the title of his own book by presenting Germans as *fated* or *destined*, rather than willing, executioners.

Leys identifies the same blurring of boundaries between victims, witnesses, and perpetrators in Caruth’s work. Caruth begins *Unclaimed Experience* with her own reading of a case developed by Freud: the story of Tancred and Clorinda from Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*.³⁸⁸ In the story:

Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders’ army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved again.³⁸⁹

Caruth uses this story to illustrate how ‘the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will.’³⁹⁰ The problem with Caruth’s reading, according to Leys, is that the *real*

³⁸⁶ LaCapra 114-115.

³⁸⁷ LaCapra 115.

³⁸⁸ Caruth 2.

³⁸⁹ Freud, as quoted by Caruth, 2.

³⁹⁰ Caruth 2.

victim of this story is Clorinda, not Tancred. It is *Clorinda* who is twice assaulted: once in the duel and once after her spirit has been encased in the tree. And yet it is *Tancred*, the perpetrator of the crime, who becomes—at least in Caruth’s reading of Freud—the repository of the *trauma* that this incident engenders.³⁹¹ This conflation of Tancred and Clorinda signals what Leys believes is Caruth’s ‘primary commitment to making victimhood unlocatable in any particular person or place, thereby permitting it to migrate or spread contagiously to others.’³⁹² Leys reasons that Caruth needs to maintain this ‘contagious’ definition of trauma in order effectively to apply trauma theory to literature, claiming that ‘the primary importance of the contagion is that it allows her to imagine how the reader might be implicated in the trauma of others’.³⁹³ As Leys argues, however, there are victims of trauma and then again there are witnesses to trauma; worryingly, Caruth fuses the two. Even more ominously, Caruth also erases the distinction between victim and perpetrator by representing Tancred as the story’s traumatic victim. Leys explains:

But her discussion of Tasso’s epic has even more chilling implications. For if, according to her analysis, the murderer Tancred can become the victim of the trauma and the voice of Clorinda’s testimony to *his* wound, then Caruth’s logic would turn other perpetrators into victims too—for example, it would turn the executioners of the Jews into victims and the “cries” of the Jews into testimony to the trauma suffered by the Nazis.³⁹⁴

Clearly Caruth never intended to identify the Nazis as victims of trauma; Leys uses this example to illustrate the ‘the sloppiness’ of Caruth’s theoretical arguments.³⁹⁵ More important to my argument, however, is Leys’s insistence that definitions of trauma have become so elastic that trauma may become meaningless as a concept. To

³⁹¹ Leys 296.

³⁹² Leys 296.

³⁹³ Leys 296. See also LaCapra 182-183. LaCapra suggests that Caruth places special emphasis on those aspects of Freud’s theories which are the most easily applied to literature, while ignoring aspects of his theories that might question her position.

³⁹⁴ Leys 297.

³⁹⁵ Leys 305.

put the matter plainly: If both Paula Jones and Ugandan victims of rape and genocide are equally to be thought to be victims of trauma, what force and specificity does the concept of trauma really contain?

Derrida: Fiction and Testimony

Notwithstanding Leys's reservations, the intertwining of traumatic experience and the nature of testimony is a recurrent motif in contemporary literary and cultural theory. In his essay *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Jacques Derrida reflects at length upon this relationship. *Demeure* takes as its inspiration a short story entitled *The Instant of My Death* by Maurice Blanchot. The story recounts the near-execution of a French resistance fighter by a troop of traitorous Russian soldiers fighting for the Nazis. At the last second, after the man has accepted that he is about to die, the lieutenant is distracted by an explosion and one of the soldiers lets the man escape. The narrator intimates that the man lived for the rest of his life as one who thought himself to be already dead. Blanchot finds a provoking and perturbing sentence to express his narrator's seemingly paradoxical condition: 'As if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him.'³⁹⁶ What fascinates Derrida about this story is that Blanchot writes it as a literary fiction. The narrator, the 'I' in the story, refers to the man facing execution as someone he 'remembers.'³⁹⁷ However, the tale Blanchot narrates is really his own. Derrida quotes a personal letter from Blanchot in which he recounts the story of his own near execution at the hands of the Nazis, and Derrida warns us 'He [Blanchot] is telling the story, and it happened.'³⁹⁸ What interests Derrida about the relationship between the story and the

³⁹⁶ Maurice Blanchot, 'The Instant of My Death,' *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000) 9.

³⁹⁷ Blanchot 3.

³⁹⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Demeure: Fiction and Testimony,' *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000) 52.

letter is the fact that the letter is not supposed to be fiction; the letter is a testimonial to an actual event. And yet, 'it says the same thing' as the story; 'It testifies to the reality of the event that seems to form the referent of this literary narrative entitled *The Instant of My Death* and published as literary fiction.'³⁹⁹ This central paradox upon which the essay turns—how the same truth can be represented in both a testimonial letter and in a piece of fiction—impels Derrida to probe the strange and enigmatic relationship between fiction, testimony, and truth telling.

Derrida's pivotal conviction is that because the ability to testify requires in the first place a singular act of witness, there can be no exterior or objective proof of the traumatic experience that has been endured. As he remarks, 'I can only testify, in the strict sense of the word, from the instant when no one can, in my place, testify to what I do.'⁴⁰⁰ Because testimony involves the singular experience of an individual witness, who 'must be irreplaceably alone,' according to Derrida, 'testimony always goes hand in hand with at least the *possibility* of fiction, perjury and lie.'⁴⁰¹ This apparently contradictory relationship between testimony and fiction operates on a number of levels. Most obviously, some victims are the only ones—besides the perpetrator—'involved' in a particular crime. In the absence of physical evidence, there can be no absolute guarantee as to the honesty or dishonesty of their testimony. On a more complicated level, a person testifying might fervently believe that he or she is telling the truth, and yet they might actually lie. Such was the case of the Auschwitz survivor who 'saw' all four chimneys blow up during the Auschwitz uprising. But it is from problems of testimony like this that Derrida extracts a more general principle: that the act of testifying carries within it the possibility of dissimulation only helps to expose the irreducible relationship between fiction and testimony.

³⁹⁹ Derrida 52.

⁴⁰⁰ Derrida 30.

⁴⁰¹ Derrida 27.

At the root of the relationship between fiction and testimony lies what Derrida calls 'a question today of lies and truth'.⁴⁰² In order to look at this question more closely, Derrida appeals to the sphere of law:

In our European juridical tradition, testimony should remain unrelated to literature and especially, in literature, to what presents itself as fiction, simulation, or simulacra, which is not all literature. When a testifying witness, whether or not he is explicitly under oath, without being able or obligated to prove anything, appeals to the faith of the other by engaging himself to tell the truth—no judge will accept that he should shirk his responsibility ironically by declaring or insinuating: what I am telling you here retains the status of a literary fiction. And yet, if the testimonial is by law irreducible to the fiction, there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra dissimulation, lie, and perjury—that is to say, the possibility of literature, of the innocent or perverse literature that innocently plays at perverting all of these distinctions.⁴⁰³

According to Derrida, the law assumes that the relationship between truth and testimonial is a straightforward one. And yet—as the Auschwitz survivor's mistaken but meaningful testimony represents—the boundaries between truth and fiction are actually difficult to define. For his part, Derrida argues that it is impossible absolutely to distinguish between fiction and testimony. Returning to the testimony of the Auschwitz survivor, it is clear that in any objective sense her memory of four exploding chimneys is, in fact, a fiction. However, as Dori Laub has argued, it is a fiction that actually reveals something fundamental to the woman's historical experience that is as 'truthful' as the accepted historical record of that day's events. The word *fiction*, as this example suggests, can paradoxically testify to a form of truth. Blanchot helped to illuminate the suggestive possibilities of this paradox by using both a fictional narrative and a non-fiction epistle to tell the same story in two very different ways. Blanchot, one can assume, found both forms of testimonial—a

⁴⁰² Derrida 16.

⁴⁰³ Derrida 29.

'true' letter and a 'fictional' short story—not only adequate but also necessary as means to speak of his traumatic experience.

Fiction, for Derrida, is not only an appropriate form in which to express the existential truth of testimonial statements but also an imaginative resolution of the inherent contradictions of testimony itself. As Blanchot's title—'The Instant of My Death'—implies, the testimonial of survivors often means that they are testifying to an experience that they cannot actually have had.⁴⁰⁴ As such, Blanchot's carefully chosen title points to an essential link between fiction, testimony and truth:

What runs through this testimony of fiction is thus the singular concept of an 'unexperienced experience.' Nothing seems more absurd to common sense, in effect, than an unexperienced experience. But whoever does not try to think and read the part of fiction and thus of literature that is ushered in by such a phrase in even the most authentic testimony will not have begun to read or hear Blanchot.⁴⁰⁵

According to Derrida's critique of Blanchot's 'testimony of fiction,' Blanchot's desire to testify to an event that never actually happened reveals the irreducible relationship between history and fiction. More than this, it illuminates the way imaginative writing exposes the buried kernel of 'truth' in testimonial experience otherwise left uncovered by 'historical' retrospection. It is for this reason Derrida believes that Blanchot employs the resources and strategies of literary fiction to undermine the referential status of 'historical' memory. Blanchot's refusal to 'sign' his story, Derrida suggests, underscores his belief that 'Literature serves as real testimony.'⁴⁰⁶ Blanchot understands that because the nature of testimony is everything Derrida discusses—it is a secret, it cannot be proven, it often involves the 'miraculous' or the

⁴⁰⁴ Derrida 45.

⁴⁰⁵ Derrida 47.

⁴⁰⁶ Derrida 71.

'extraordinary'—that the only person finally responsible for defining what is true and what is real is the reader or witness.⁴⁰⁷

Derrida also argues that Blanchot's fictional recreation of his potentially tragic war time history significantly broadens the range of its implication. Because testimony harbours an inexpressible secret or enigma at its core, the reader has a crucial role in determining the meaning of the experience it records. For as Derrida explains:

[. . .] we can only judge it to be readable, if it is, insofar as a reader can understand it, even if no such thing has ever "really" happened to *him*, to the reader. We can speak, we can read this because this experience, in the singularity of its secret, as 'experience of the unexperienced,' beyond the distinction between the real and the phantasmatic, remains universal and exemplary.⁴⁰⁸

Derrida's phrase 'we can only judge it to be readable, if it is' rather curtly summarizes the role of the writer in making his or her work not only 'readable' but also 'universal' and 'exemplary.' It is the writer's responsibility, as well as the mark of his or her talent, to make a story *mean* something for those who never experienced anything similar. The writer is also responsible for making his or her story an *example* of something larger, in imbuing a story with meaning beyond its own specificities. Derrida uses the example of Dostoyevsky's own near-execution to reinforce his point: 'Dostoyevsky would have described the *same* survival, and he would have done it altogether otherwise. He would have written, he will have written, another, very different text. Dostoyevsky is another story entirely.'⁴⁰⁹ Dostoyevsky and Blanchot endured the same terrible experience: they were both upon the point of execution; they both had to confront the fact that they were about to die; and they were both released at the very last moment. Yet the fact that they endured

⁴⁰⁷ For testimony's connection to the miraculous see Derrida, p. 75.

⁴⁰⁸ Derrida 93.

⁴⁰⁹ Derrida 93.

almost identical experiences does not mean that they will tell similar stories.

According to Derrida, narrating an experience so that a reader genuinely understands it requires more than merely reproducing the facts in chronological order. Otherwise, both Blanchot and Dostoyevsky would naturally recreate similar narratives to describe their similar experiences. Their differing narratives illustrate how fiction, when written well, can be more accessible to a reader than bare facts. *Demeure* attests to the processes by which writers—even of fiction—become the clearest voices for testifying to experiences, even those that are actually ‘unexperienced.’

These reflections upon Derrida and Blanchot have sought to elucidate some of the key complexities of testimonial statements. Several of the issues identified resonate at the heart of Martin Amis’s and Philip Roth’s fiction. To begin with, *Time’s Arrow* and *Sabbath’s Theater* are both novels that are animated by the nature of testimonial statements and are linked by a shared preoccupation with what LaCapra calls the tension between ‘right things’ and ‘true things.’ Both writers are interested in if, and how, fiction can get to the kernel of truth about a historical event, and both writers use extremely non-traditional—even controversial—forms of narration to explore this problem. Finally, both Amis and Roth attempt to come to terms with those discomfiting aspects of trauma theory—such as identification and the role of the perpetrator—that seem to resist straightforward analysis by even the most adept theorists. The remainder of this chapter will establish a connection between recent theoretical reflections upon traumatic experience and Amis’s and Roth’s writing in order to examine the ways in which their work explores some of the most controversial and compelling questions raised by trauma theory.

Approaching Auschwitz: Amis and *Time's Arrow*

Martin Amis's novel, *Time's Arrow*, fictionally reworks many of the problems inherent to trauma theory. The novel takes as its subject the major traumatic event of the twentieth century: the Holocaust. But unlike many more conventional Holocaust narratives the protagonist is a Nazi doctor complicit in a series of war crimes, including personally fitting the Zyklon B pellets used to gas the victims of Auschwitz.⁴¹⁰ The novel also defies convention in its narrative structure by pointing time's arrow backwards. The life story of Odilo Unverdorben is being narrated by his unspoiled soul or conscience, who witnesses the entirety of Odilo's life beginning at the moment of his 'birth' from a heart attack as an elderly man living in America, to his 'death'—really the moment of his conception—when his father 'will come in and kill me with his body.'⁴¹¹ As this example suggests, time and causality run backwards throughout the course of the novel. Although the narrator learns to 'translate' the reversed text of the novel so that all of its narrative terms run forward in time, the few sections of dialogue in which Odilo appears run in reverse order.⁴¹² This reversal of temporality and causality is not confined to narrative and speech. All human bodily functions also run backwards in times. Thus people ingest their nourishment from the toilet every morning, regurgitate it as food that they un-cook and un-prepare in order for it to be packaged and put back into the refrigerator or cupboard, where it sits until it is returned to the supermarket for money. In both literal and symbolic terms, the toilet becomes the focus of this world's economy, where faeces becomes a vitally important natural resource. To speak in the novel's own terms, without shit, there

⁴¹⁰ Please note that although I will mainly use the protagonist's original German name, Odilo Unverdorben, in my discussion of the novel, Odilo is also known of in the book as Tod Friendly, John Young, and Hamilton de Souza.

⁴¹¹ Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow* (1991; London: Vintage, 2003)172.

⁴¹² The first bits of spoken dialogue represented for the reader are given as 'Dug. Dug' and 'Oo y'rrah?' (14). The narrator translates this as 'Good. Good' and 'How are you?' (14). The first example of a conversation in reverse occurs on p. 21.

would be no life, an axiom dramatized most powerfully in the story of Odilo's activities at Auschwitz.

At the beginning of the novel, Odilo is living under the pseudonym of Dr. Tod T. Friendly, a convivial elderly gentleman who spends his days puttering in his garden and tousling the hair of neighbourhood children.⁴¹³ There are dark intimations, however, threatening what appears to be a peaceful existence. Although the narrator lacks direct access to Tod's thoughts, he is at the same time 'awash in his emotions,' and senses a perpetual undercurrent of 'fear and shame' in his every thought and action.⁴¹⁴ Meanwhile, a mysterious figure looms over Tod's dreams: 'a male shape, with an entirely unmanageable aura, containing such things as beauty, terror, love, filth, and above all power. This male shape or essence seemed to be wearing a white coat (a medic's stark white smock). And black boots. And a certain kind of smile.'⁴¹⁵ Both Odilo and the narrator are obviously disturbed by these dreams, and the night remains a time of anxiety for them both, but in other ways their shared life continues to improve. As we now begin to expect from the novel's reversal of cause and effect, Tod gets increasingly younger and stronger as his 'life' progresses, and all of the aches and pains of old age steadily decrease. As he grows younger, Tod also gains a romantic life, but the novel's dispersals and displacements of narrative order mean that his love affairs begin with arguments, culminate in lovemaking, and end with tentative greetings. Similarly, when Tod begins his career as a doctor, the reversal of time means that in the narrator's eyes doctors make happy and healthy patients sick and miserable through their ministrations.

Odilo's life as Tod Friendly ends with a panicky train ride to New York City, in which he repeats the name 'Tod Friendly' over and over again. As this scene

⁴¹³ Amis 14.

⁴¹⁴ Amis 15.

⁴¹⁵ Amis 12.

unfolds, the narrator is 'filled with dread' because he senses that he is getting closer to Tod's terrible secret; 'I will know the nature of the offence; he thinks to himself, 'already I know this.'⁴¹⁶ But what he finds in New York is not a revealed secret but a new life as John Young, a wealthy and important surgeon who carries on innumerable affairs with his nurses and patients. He continues growing younger, healthier and ever more attractive, while the earth heals itself from the ravages of time and the deprivations of mankind.⁴¹⁷ And yet despite his increasing youth and health, the narrator remains unhappy with Odilo and disconnected from the body in which he lives. He falls into a sort of slumber, and many years of Odilo's life pass by without the narrator's awareness. But upon awakening again, the sense of unease and impending doom on the part of the narrator increases as the narration of the significant events of Odilo's life quickens in pace. Young leaves America for Europe in 1948, landing in Portugal, where he lives as a wealthy gold merchant. But soon he is again travelling, this time uncomfortably and in great haste. First he visits the Vatican, where he purchases from a Catholic priest his true name: Odilo Unverdorben. From there his hectic trip continues until, after alternately travelling and hiding, he arrives at Auschwitz.

Odilo's activities at Auschwitz, and the narrator's interpretation of them, inaugurate the moment when the novel stops being an imaginative and playful exercise in a life lived backwards and becomes increasingly disturbing and controversial. To the narrator's tremendous joy and admiration, Odilo and his fellow Nazis use all of the shit that is available at Auschwitz—or 'Anus Mundi' as it is called by the guards—to create a race.⁴¹⁸ The narrator, who for the first time in the book identifies himself with Odilo, exults: 'Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race.

⁴¹⁶ Amis 72-73.

⁴¹⁷ Amis 100.

⁴¹⁸ Amis 133.

To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire.⁴¹⁹ Corpses are shovelled from the ground or assembled from ash and air in ovens, taken to the ‘Sprinkleroom,’ gassed to life, and then given personal effects—everything from clothes that fit amazingly well to gold teeth and glasses.⁴²⁰ The gold is generously donated by the doctors and guards themselves; the narrator is particularly proud that Odilo bestows his own carefully amassed hoard upon the assembled Jews.⁴²¹ Finally, the Jews are taken by freight car to stations where the Nazi guards enact more miracles by parsing together ‘familial unions and arranged marriages’ that appear absolutely natural.⁴²² These new units are then dispersed to ghettos, where the Jews are allowed to recover from their experiences before they re-enter German society. This moment of reintegration is a climactic moment for the narrator: ‘this was our mission after all,’ he reflects ‘to make Germany whole. To heal her wounds, and make her whole’.⁴²³ With the restored image of a unified pre-war Germany, Odilo and his Nazi brothers bring their turbulent journey to a triumphant conclusion.

But the novel does not end with the narrator’s climactic victory. From this point, Odilo loses his ability to perform the ‘miracles’ of creation that he conducted at Auschwitz. Now his miraculous resurrection of seemingly dead matter brings to life a series of physically deformed or mentally disturbed individuals. At this point, the narrator once again announces his renewed separation from Odilo:

Fully alone.

I who have no name and no body – I have slipped out from under him and am now scattered above like flakes of ash-blond human hair. No longer can I bear with the ruined god, betrayed and beaten by his own magic. Calling on powers best left unsummoned, he took human beings apart – and then he

⁴¹⁹ Amis 128.

⁴²⁰ Amis 129.

⁴²¹ Amis 130.

⁴²² Amis 131.

⁴²³ Amis 149.

put them back together again. For a while it worked (there was redemption); and while it worked he and I were one, on the banks of the Vistula. He put *us* back together. But of course you shouldn't be doing any of this kind of thing with human beings. . . The party is over. [. . .] I'll always be here. But he's on his own.⁴²⁴

The narrator remains in this disappointed and disrupted state for the rest of Odilo's story. He watches detachedly as Odilo gets married, then gets engaged, courts his girlfriend, and finally loses her forever with an introduction. He accompanies Odilo coolly through medical school, on camping trips with youth organizations, and then through the vicissitudes of childhood. Finally he is with Odilo in the womb, in the moments before he is 'murdered' through his conception. The only satisfaction he derives from these pre-Auschwitz years comes from seeing the 'brisk assimilation' of 'his' Jews 'and the others I made' into German society.⁴²⁵ Ultimately Odilo dies a calm and untroubled death, free from the terrible nightmares that plagued his very first moments. But it is here, at the moment of Odilo's 'death' that the narrator experiences the epiphany that gives the novel its title:

When Odilo closes his eyes I see an arrow fly – but wrongly. Point-first. Oh no, but then . . . We're away once more, over the field. Odilo Unverdorben and his eager heart. And I within, who came at the wrong time – either too soon, or after it was all too late.⁴²⁶

These closing lines imply that much like Amy Hide in *Other People*, Odilo Unverdorben will be forced to live his life again. But time's arrow will run forward this time, and the narrator realizes the horror that this point-first narration implies.

In writing such an audaciously experimental novel about a subject as morally and politically charged as the Holocaust, Amis was aware that he was taking enormous risks with his readership. As he remarked in an interview:

I felt I was in a forest of taboos throughout writing this book. This is the most difficult and sensitive subject ever, I think, but I do believe, as a writer, that

⁴²⁴ Amis 156.

⁴²⁵ Amis 163, 171.

⁴²⁶ Amis 173.

there are no No Entry signs. People say, legitimately in a way, what am I as an Aryan doing with this subject? But I'm writing not about the Jews, I'm writing about the perpetrators and they are my brothers, if you like. I feel a kind of responsibility in my Aryaness for what happened. That is my racial link with these events, not with the sufferers but with the perpetrators.⁴²⁷

In this interview Amis anticipates a myriad of potential criticisms of the book. One class of criticism begins from the recognition that he can have had no first hand experience of the holocaust. After all, he is not Jewish; he never survived a concentration camp, and he was born four years *after* the end of World War II. The palpable unease that Amis experienced in response to this charge is evident in the series of interviews, like the one above, which he gave upon the novel's publication. James Wood captures something of Amis's unease in his observation of the fact that the novel 'has an afterword which reads like a massing of Jewish friends on his behalf'. Woods believes that this 'massing' reveals that 'Amis is a little nervous, perhaps a little defensive' about the entire subject.⁴²⁸ But Amis had good reason to feel trepidation about engaging with such a difficult subject. It is a commonplace from Theodor Adorno's famous remarks about the relationship between art and Auschwitz that the Holocaust is an intensely problematic subject for literature. In David H. Hirsch's words:

The futility of all attempts at representation was encapsulated in Theodor Adorno's famous dictum (which he later recanted), that it is not possible to write poetry after Auschwitz. [. . .] Basically, Adorno raises the issue that any literary representation of Nazi atrocities would aestheticize, and thus make acceptable, the horrors and cruelty.⁴²⁹

The issues Hirsch raises are significant and have had a continuing afterlife in post-war cultural criticism. We can think about these issues in the following ways. On the one hand, the Holocaust 'represents' an absolutely inhuman event that seems to go beyond

⁴²⁷ Martin Amis, in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel (1996), reprinted by Nicolas Tredell.

⁴²⁸ James Wood, 'Portrait: The Literary Lip of Ladbroke Grove,' *The Guardian* Sept. 7, 1991, Feb. 12, 2007 <http://www.martinamisweb.com/reviews_files/Wood_LitLip_Amis.doc>.

⁴²⁹ David H. Hirsch, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz* (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 1991) 158.

the limits of empathy or explication. But on the other hand, 'the Holocaust' is one of the most overdetermined events of modern history: an experience that is continually relayed and reconfigured by films, books, documentaries and public memorials and acts of consecration. So diffuse is the implication of the term 'the Holocaust' that it has come to mean both the physical act of racial extermination and the cultural and ideological preconditions that produce the event it seeks to memorialize. As Naomi Mandel observes:

[. . .] Auschwitz has come to represent the Holocaust for contemporary imagination. When we say 'Auschwitz' we do not mean the concentration camp in occupied Poland, or we do not mean merely that; we also refer to the vast network of bureaucracy, regional and personal politics, personal and impersonal betrayals and hatreds, German nationalist and racist presumptions that found expression in National Socialism and a leader in Hitler, the scapegoat mentality and delusional ideology produced by a centuries-old anti-Semitism—in short the immense, cumulative, complex, profound, prosaic, stunning, and disturbingly banal process that produced what is known as the Holocaust.⁴³⁰

The continuous historical representation of an 'unrepresentable' historical event has another important consequence for contemporary reflection. Although as Mandel points out, the experience of the Holocaust is at one level 'unspeakable, unthinkable, inconceivable, incomprehensible, and challenging', the Holocaust is always already determined in the public imagination by a specific array of texts and images.⁴³¹ In order to be faithful to the 'unrepresentable' experience of the Holocaust the writer of fiction must somehow rupture or break with the historical 'real'; but in order to be faithful to the testimonial experience encoded in 'the Holocaust' she must also respect the authenticating statements of the survivors themselves. The writer must recreate aspects of the experience of the Holocaust without aestheticizing the experience that it

⁴³⁰ Naomi Mandel, 'Rethinking "After Auschwitz": Against a Rhetoric of the Unspeakable in Holocaust Writing,' *boundary 2* (28:2, 2001) 203-4

⁴³¹ Mandel 204.

seeks to reproduce. These demands, and the tensions they engender, are at the heart of *Time's Arrow*.

Representations of Holocaust history are also vulnerable to other objections. The very question of why did the Holocaust 'occur' risks eliding inquiry with justification, in Andrew S. Gross and Michael J. Hoffman words:

In well-known statements, such figures as Elie Wiesel and Claude Lanzmann have announced that the mere question of 'why the Holocaust' is somehow obscene, because it suggests that some justification may actually exist for the Shoah. A 'why' implies a 'because,' according to this argument, and 'because' suggests the Nazis might have sufficient reasons, or the Jews might have given them sufficient cause, for creating ghettos and death camps.⁴³²

An understanding of these moral complexities is crucial to a reading of *Time's Arrow*. So much is apparent from the ostensible subject of Amis's fiction, as the novel is narrated by the soul or conscience of a Nazi war criminal. The moral recoil provoked in the reader at the prospect of such a compromised narrator is greatly accentuated by the novel's inverse narrative logic which colludes with Amis's narrator to produce an image of an Auschwitz that is progressively cleansed of corruption as its narrative 'unfolds.' In other words, this choice of experimental narrative very obviously runs the risk of being read as a justification for the Holocaust. How Amis eludes this problem, and why he chose to take such a risk in the first place, suggests a relationship between fiction and history that attempts to make possible an understanding of the apparently inexplicable.

The character of Odilo Unverdorben, Amis's Nazi doctor, is the locus of many of his displacements of our historical understanding. It is worth noting that Nazi doctors have always been of particular fascination to historians of the Holocaust, and Amis credits Robert Jay Lifton's book *The Nazi Doctors* as the inspiration for *Time's*

⁴³² Andrew S. Gross and Michael J. Hoffman, 'Memory, Authority, and Identity: Holocaust Studies in Light of the Wilkomirski Debate,' *Biography* 27.1 (Winter 2004) 25-26.

Arrow.⁴³³ The very idea of a Nazi doctor is, of course, a moral contradiction in terms. *Time's Arrow* sharpens the terms of this contradiction by scrupulously imagining elements of Unverdorben's ethical imagination. At the beginning of the novel we see him paying fastidious medical attention to the sick and elderly in America yet in Auschwitz he is subsequently responsible for the gassing of roomfuls of innocent victims. As Unverdorben 'ministers' to his 'patients' the reader is gradually exposed to the character of his macabre 'scientific' experiments:

As to the so-called 'experimental' operations of 'Uncle Pepi' [a character based on Joseph Mengele]: *he* had a success rate that approached – and quite possibly attained – 100 per cent. A shockingly inflamed eyeball at once rectified by a single injection. Innumerable ovaries and testes seamlessly grafted into place. Women went out of that lab looking twenty years younger. [. . .] 'Uncle Pepi' never left any scars.⁴³⁴

Odilo illustrates the ultimate paradox that is the Nazi doctor: someone who has sworn an oath to do no harm becomes not only a mass murderer but a sadistic torturer.⁴³⁵ But this sort of schism in the Nazi doctor represented by Odilo's two apparently contradictory lives—one as a healer and one as a killer—represents documented characteristics of the Nazi doctor.

To murder in the name of a perverse idea of 'life' places an enormous strain upon the ethical subjectivity of the Nazi doctor. In his analysis of this tortured and torturing figure, Lifton has drawn attention to the psychological 'doubling' and 'psychic numbing' to which he is prone:

'Psychic numbing' is a form of dissociation characterized by the diminished capacity or inclination to feel, and usually includes separation of thought from feeling. 'Doubling' carries the dissociative process still further with the formation of a functional second self, related to but more or less autonomous from the prior self.⁴³⁶

⁴³³ Amis tells James Wood 'When I read Robert Jay Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors*, I knew that my subject had arrived.'

⁴³⁴ Amis 143.

⁴³⁵ Amis recounts the Hippocratic Oath on p. 32.

⁴³⁶ Robert J. Lifton and Eric Markusen, *The Genocidal Mentality: Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat* (New York: Basic Books, 1990) 13.

These features of psychological doubling and psychic numbing are evident in Amis's representation of Odilo Unverdorben. Yet they are not the only reason Unverdorben's psychological motivations remain opaque. Amis's decision to narrate the novel in reverse crucially obfuscates our understanding of motivation, causality, and consequence. But this obfuscation is ultimately intended as a perverse kind of illumination because it is precisely by reversing the temporal logic of twentieth century history that the novel seeks to reveal the self-deluding 'utopian qualities' of Nazi historical self representations. James Wood has helpfully elucidated some of the moral complexities of the 'backward world' of *Time's Arrow*:

There is something wistful, wildly naïve about this backward world, in which Nazis help poor Jews on to their feet and out of the gas chambers into innocent air. When Amis's benign Nazi looks at his prospering Jews and asks, 'Our perpetual purpose? To dream a race,' he means the Jews, not the Aryans. [. . .] By reversing the narrative Amis not only moves us with a vision of what might have been in some benign world, but hints also at the very moral delusion of the Nazis. Did not these evil men believe precisely that they were doing good, dreaming a race, turning back history and time? The Nazis first attempted to turn the Holocaust into a Utopian narrative, not Amis.⁴³⁷

Amis's disorientating narrative device does more, however, than draw attention to the perversely 'utopian' quality of Nazi ideology and self representation. Denied the security of the accepted image of Holocaust history, the reader is forced to make sense of its atrocious materials in all of their horror and immediacy. As Donald E. Morse points out:

By so involving the reader Amis insures that far from aestheticizing the atrocities or providing aesthetic pleasure from the misery and pain of the victims as Adorno feared, this process renders them part of the reader's immediate experience since in re-reversing time as read the reader must impel time forward towards the full banality of its horror, for all the potentialities

⁴³⁷ James Wood, 'Slouching Towards Auschwitz to be Born Again,' *The Guardian* September 19, 1991, Sept. 19 2007,
<http://www.martinamisweb.com/reviews_files/Wood_slouchAuschTA91.doc>.

which become possibilities, only one will be actualized. Thus historical reality is brought back to consciousness through imagination.⁴³⁸

If Odilo Unverdorben's 'progression' from benevolence to malevolence enacts the ethical corruption at the heart of the image of the Nazi doctor, he also personifies the truth of Hannah Arendt's insight into 'the banality of evil.'

Following his crushing disappointment at having to leave the 'great work' at Auschwitz behind, the narrator belatedly realizes that 'Odilo is, it turns out, innocent, emotional, popular, and stupid.'⁴³⁹ Now he finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile his memories of their 'triumphs' at Auschwitz with Odilo's unexceptional pre-war incarnation:

I've come to the conclusion that Odilo Unverdorben, as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, once under the cover of numbers. He could never be an exception; he is dependent on the health of his society, needing the sandy smiles of Rolf and Rudolph, of Rüdiger, of Reinhard.⁴⁴⁰

The narrator's description of Odilo here bears an uncanny likeness to Arendt's picture of Eichmann, a connection made more explicit when it is revealed that Odilo was born in Solingen, 'the birthplace of Adolf Eichmann.'⁴⁴¹ Indeed, the narrator's growing disenchantment with Odilo echoes the opinions of Eichmann's judges at his war crimes trial in Jerusalem, as Arendt recounts:

the judges did not believe him, because they were too good, and perhaps also too conscious of the very foundations of the profession, to admit that an average, 'normal' person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁸ Donald E. Morse, 'Overcoming Time: "The Present of Things Past" in History and Fiction,' *The Fiction of Martin Amis: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, Ed. Nicolas Tredell (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000) 133.

⁴³⁹ Amis 157.

⁴⁴⁰ Amis 165.

⁴⁴¹ Amis 170.

⁴⁴² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1965) 26.

The perplexity of Eichmann's judges prefigures the question rising to the lips of Amis's narrator: how can such 'exceptional actions' have been committed by such an unexceptional personality.

Arendt's remarks about the Eichmann trial also illuminate the key role of euphemism in Nazi descriptions of concentration camp life. She is particularly astringent upon Nazi use of *Sprachregelung* or the 'language rule' that 'meant what in ordinary language would be a lie.'⁴⁴³ Arendt's account is rich in examples of the Nazi's use of these innocuous terms to deflect attention from the killing machines at the heart of concentration camp existence. In a similar vein, the narrator of *Time's Arrow* highlights these 'language rules' when he gives what he describes 'revealing examples of camp argot': 'The main Ovenroom is called *Heavenblock*,' he tells us, and, 'its main approach road *Heavenstreet*. Chamber and Sprinklerroom are known, most mordantly, as *the central hospital*.'⁴⁴⁴ The net effect of this language system according to Arendt, 'was not to keep these people ignorant of what they were doing, but to prevent them from equating it with their old "normal" knowledge of murder and lies.'⁴⁴⁵ Arendt's conclusion is that Nazis such as Odilo did have a clear knowledge of what was, in fact, right and wrong; they knew the difference between good and evil. And yet they were able to separate what they knew from what they did.

Arendt links the Nazi's manipulation of these bloodless 'language rules' to their capacity for moral self-deception. As she remarks of Eichmann:

The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely to think from the standpoint of someone else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all

⁴⁴³ Arendt 85.

⁴⁴⁴ Amis 133.

⁴⁴⁵ Arendt 86.

safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.⁴⁴⁶

Arendt's description of Eichmann has an uncanny resemblance to Amis's narrator's description of Tod Friendly's 'feeling tone' or 'sensing mechanism':

Tod has a sensing mechanism which guides his responses to all identifiable subspecies. His feeling tone jolts into specialized attitudes and readinesses: one for Hispanics, one for Asians, one for Arabs, one for Amerindians, one for blacks, one for Jews. And he has a secondary repertoire of alerted hostility towards pimps, hookers, junkies, the insane, the clubfooted, the hare-lipped, the homosexual male, and the very old. [. . .] The way Tod feels about men, about women, about children: there is confusion.⁴⁴⁷

Here the temporal reversal of Amis's narrative pays dividends: far from providing evidence of Tod's homosexuality, the rather curious conclusion drawn by the narrator who has yet to encounter the grim history of Nazi concentration camp rule, each of these 'subspecies' glossed in this list were in fact victims of Nazi barbarity. And yet Tod Friendly's 'confusions', it should be noted, are not limited to the groups of people listed here: he is incapable of recognizing alterity in general. As the last line of the passage suggests, Odilo is confused about *everyone*. Neil Easterbrook writes that 'While he [Odilo] has no difficulty recognizing human agency, the essence of human subjectivity eludes both Tod and the narrator.'⁴⁴⁸ But while this inability to recognize 'the other,' as such, helps to explain Odilo's inhuman violence and amoral sensibility, it leaves open the question of how he was able to return to a relatively normal life after the end of World War Two.

A common theme of Arendt's and Amis's work is the attempt to think the very limit of human motivation and action. The terrifying paradox that underpins both Amis's and Arendt's depiction of particular Nazis is Arendt's famed premise about

⁴⁴⁶ Arendt 49.

⁴⁴⁷ Amis 49-50.

⁴⁴⁸ Neil Easterbrook, "'I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time": Narrative Reversal in Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*' *The Fiction of Martin Amis: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, Ed. Nicolas Tredell (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000) 137.

'the banality of evil.' We see shadows of Odilo in the anecdotes that Arendt tells about Eichmann, such as how he called *Lolita* 'Quite an unwholesome book.'⁴⁴⁹ How can a man sensitive to what is 'wholesome' participate in the horrors of Auschwitz? Much like Odilo's own narrator, for whom Odilo's thoughts remain a mystery despite their intimate proximity, Arendt constantly refers to the fact that Eichmann's judges and the members of the court's audience could not *understand* Eichmann as they simply 'did not believe him.' His very being illustrated a disparity between word and deed, and the more that was revealed about him the less he made sense. The obscurity of Eichmann, as a subject, is mirrored in the backwards narrative of Odilo Unverdorben's life. Odilo remains a mystery to his narrator, and yet crucial aspects of his character are revealed in his memories and dreams. Like Eichmann, Odilo must remain a mystery, but the way that Amis depicts his relationship to memory and identity calls into question those aspects of trauma theory that, as Leys warns, threaten the division between perpetrators and victims.

In many ways Odilo Unverdorben and his narrator represent a text-book case of a traumatized victim. Odilo is haunted by nightmares, and this haunting has physical manifestations: for example, at the end of his life, Odilo cannot abide the sight of himself in a mirror.⁴⁵⁰ The narrator fears for Odilo, who lives in a constant state of anxiety, stress, and fear of persecution. But the terrible irony of the situation is that the monstrous and terrifying figure that haunts Odilo's dreams is none other than Odilo himself. The white medic's coat and the black Nazi boots are Odilo's, and he is not the *victim* of trauma but the *perpetrator*. As such, his apparent haunting is not the trauma of the victim but 'the guilt and the tyranny of memory.'⁴⁵¹ Wood writes that 'The backwards momentum of the Nazi's life, narrated by a soul who

⁴⁴⁹ Arendt 49.

⁴⁵⁰ Amis 17.

⁴⁵¹ Wood, 'Slouching Towards Auschwitz to be Born Again'.

knows what has already happened, is not unlike the way in which a guilty man (say a Nazi war criminal) goes back, again and again, over past crimes. Memory, especially guilty memory, forces us to live our lives backwards.⁴⁵² Here Wood suggests that *all* memory is not traumatic memory and that sometimes a man like Odilo is haunted because he deserves to be haunted. In turn, such a suggestion questions Caruth's reading of Freud's argument about Tancred and Clorinda. Just because Tancred is cursed by memories of his murder of Clorinda does not mean that he should be seen as a *victim* of trauma. In other words, Amis appears to question those aspects of the definition of trauma theory that appear to collapse the divide between victim and perpetrator.

Amis's backwards narration not only defies any definition of trauma that would appear to make the perpetrator into a victim but also suggests that there is something fundamentally dangerous about Odilo Unverdorben. Reconsider the narrator's rejection of Odilo after Auschwitz:

No longer can I bear with the ruined god, betrayed and beaten by his own magic. Calling on powers best left unsummoned, he took human beings apart – and then he put them back together again. For a while it worked (there was redemption); and while it worked he and I were one, on the banks of the Vistula. He put *us* back together. But of course you shouldn't be doing any of this kind of thing with human beings. . .⁴⁵³

Here the narrator admits that the Holocaust is a 'project' that should never have happened. But the narrator is thinking this only because he is angry and resentful that the 'magic' had to end. He remains unaware of the *real* atrocities that occurred and still thinks of Auschwitz as a site of miracles. Odilo's soul still believes he was the sort of god that populated the Nazi's racist ideology, 'which led all too many of the German people to believe they were a superrace and the SS to believe they were

⁴⁵² Wood, 'Slouching Towards Auschwitz to be Born Again'.

⁴⁵³ Amis 156.

gods'.⁴⁵⁴ In fact, Odilo himself reveals an adherence to Nazi ideology that is almost superficial. Until the end of his natural days, Odilo continues to read about Atlantis and Nordic superraces in American tabloids, and, unlike the narrator, he is obviously an ardent racist and anti-Semite.⁴⁵⁵ He is a man well-versed in hate. But it is the *narrator* who truly understands the grand narrative of the Nazi cause. *He* understands the Nazi delusion that they were 'dreaming a race,' and that they are 'making Germany whole.' Indeed, the narrator who—like many of Amis's narrators—had seemed to be a moral compass turns out to be as dangerous and untrustworthy as Odilo himself.⁴⁵⁶

Neil Easterbrook concludes that much of the ethical force of *Time's Arrow* lies in the way in which it helps compel its readers towards reflection on the human capacity for moral forgetfulness. '[H]owever banal evil may really be,' he suggests, 'the most trivial individual, innocent and aimless, perhaps even like ourselves, may one day *quietly dedicate* himself to genocide.'⁴⁵⁷ Like Morse, Easterbrook claims that Amis employs the technique of narrative reversal to encourage his reader to engage in acts of moral self-reflection. Such moral self-reflection goes considerably beyond critique by asking each of us as readers to put ourselves in the place of the perpetrators of inhuman violence and callousness. If we take this a step further and self-consciously reflect upon not only Odilo's monstrous acts but also the narrator's genuine belief that a man like Odilo could 'dream a race,' then what we have is an indictment not only of a specific ideology—National Socialism—but also of *any ideology that would disallow empathy and encourage seeing subjects of human life as*

⁴⁵⁴ Hirsch 152-153.

⁴⁵⁵ Amis 20.

⁴⁵⁶ All three books by Amis discussed in this thesis have unreliable narrators revealed to be perpetrators of awful crimes: Prince, the murderer-narrator in *Other People*, Samson, also a murderer-narrator in *London Fields*, and the unnamed narrator of *Time's Arrow*, the soul of a genocidal Nazi doctor.

⁴⁵⁷ Easterbrook 140.

objects. Amis detects evidence of this capacity for inhuman objectification in those places where Odilo's empathy should reside; it is partly, of course, the presumptive 'humanism' of Odilo's soul's declaration that 'the Jews are my children' that allows Odilo to butcher them.⁴⁵⁸ This is where Amis's backwards narration succeeds in giving *Time's Arrow* its grotesque magnetism. He wants, as Easterbrook suggests, for us to reflect on what might make people commit such evil deeds. And he also wants us to follow the maxim 'never forget.' But by inscribing these notions into the fabric of such a difficult and unconventional narrative, Amis suggests that the Holocaust, and especially the subject of its perpetrators, is actually *resistant* to narration, and especially to the straightforward narration of typical historiography. He also suggests that maintaining a sense of the uncanny, indefinable, and resolutely evil nature of the Holocaust should not be sacrificed to the project of remembrance. The excess, the obscurity, and the monstrosity of the Holocaust must be remembered and re-invoked along with the facts; otherwise the Holocaust risks becoming just another historical event.

Perpetrating Victimization: Roth and *Sabbath's Theater*

The protagonist of Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* has suggestive affinities with many of those aspects of trauma theory outlined by Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. As a boy, Mickey Sabbath's loving family was destroyed by the horrific death of his older brother, Morty, in World War Two. After this loss, his once happy and energetic mother descended into a depressive state in which she remained until her death. The novel focuses on how these traumatic events haunt the adult Sabbath, affecting every aspect of his life. Throughout the novel, he fantasizes about his mother, imagining lengthy conversations with her ghost. Sabbath also repetitively

⁴⁵⁸ Amis 160.

analyzes the historical facts and events surrounding his brother's death. Sabbath cannot stop thinking about both losses, although these memories are unwilled and uncontrollable. Sabbath's childhood losses correspond to Caruth's definition of trauma as 'experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known' and 'therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.'⁴⁵⁹ On one level, Roth seems to have created in Mickey Sabbath a textbook definition of a victim of trauma.

However, the difficulty with reading Sabbath as a traumatized victim is that Roth portrays Sabbath to be as much a perpetrator as a victim of trauma. This choice of characterization reveals a striking contrast between *Time's Arrow* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Whilst *Time's Arrow* has as its protagonist a Nazi doctor made *good* through Amis's backwards narration, *Sabbath's Theater* presents the reader with a protagonist who is both a tragic victim and also a particularly offensive human being. In other words, these two novelists are interested in protagonists that complicate the definitions of victim and perpetrator, and yet they utilize completely different narrative strategies to do so. In *Time's Arrow*, the narrating soul of the murderous Nazi doctor genuinely wants to do good, but it is the genuinely traumatized Sabbath's self-stated goal 'to affront and affront and affront till there was no one on earth unaffronted.'⁴⁶⁰ The question then becomes why Roth would choose such an alienating and objectionable protagonist to represent victimization, as Sabbath's ability 'to affront' is unquestionable.

In order to give a sense of the outrageousness of Sabbath's conduct, a few textual details are required. The novel begins by introducing Sabbath's married lover Drenka, a woman with whom, through the course of the novel, he engages in such

⁴⁵⁹ Caruth 3-4.

⁴⁶⁰ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater*, 198.

'aberrant' sexual behaviours as sodomy, golden showers, and a ménage a trois with another woman. Many of these scenes are reproduced for the reader in lingering detail, including the contents of a tape that Sabbath mentions he and Drenka enjoy listening to whilst masturbating. The tape is actually of Sabbath being secretly recorded by a twenty-year-old college student named Kathy Goolsbee. Because of his arthritic, deformed fingers, the once great puppeteer Sabbath has had to become a teacher at the local college, where he spends much of his time trying to seduce his students. Kathy is his latest conquest with whom he engages in phone sex when she calls to tell him she will be late with a project. He records their session to add to his taped collection but is unaware that Kathy also makes a recording that finds its way to both the college administration as well as a women's rights group. The college dismisses Sabbath from his position, and the women's rights group makes the tape available as an example of sexual harassment to anyone who calls an 800 number.⁴⁶¹ While this incident makes him a pariah in his town, ends his teaching career, and causes his alcoholic wife to attempt suicide, Sabbath continues to see himself as the real victim. It was 'losing those girls that killed him, a dozen of them a year, none over twenty-one, and always at least one' for him to seduce.⁴⁶² Despite his sense of victimization at 'losing those girls,' Sabbath still enjoys calling the 800 number, and he and Drenka often listen to Kathy's tape from motel telephones. Mickey's treatment of his lovers as well as his blasé attitude towards social norms undercuts his identity as a victim of trauma.

The fact that Mickey also mistreats his wives further complicates his identity as a victim of trauma by actually implicating Sabbath in traumatizing acts. He

⁴⁶¹ The organization names itself SABBATH--women against Sexual Abuse, Belittlement, Battering and Telephone Harassment—and even takes the telephone number 1(800)722-2284, or 1(800)SABBATH (214). 800 numbers are toll free in the United States.

⁴⁶² Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 210.

dominates his first wife, thinking of her as 'Nikki his instrument, his implement, the self-immolating register of his ready-made world.'⁴⁶³ Nikki eventually disappears from home and the horizon of Sabbath's known world, and she is widely assumed to be a suicide. Despite his guilt at Nikki's disappearance and his fear that his mistreatment of her contributed to her breakdown, Sabbath still ridicules and torments his second wife, Roseanna. During an argument in which she accuses him of intimidating her, he shouts, 'I do *everything* to intimidate you, Rosie!'⁴⁶⁴ The most obvious forms of intimidation involve mocking the language Roseanna has learned at Alcoholics Anonymous, as well as taunting her with his knowledge that her father killed himself when she was a child after she had left him to live with her mother. A particularly unpleasant scene occurs when he visits Roseanna in the hospital after she learns of his affair with Kathy and attempts suicide. In her room, Sabbath finds a letter she has written to her father, explaining how his suicide has affected her life. Sabbath writes a rejoinder from the father in hell in which Roseanna's father accuses her of ruining *his* life and portrays her own breakdown as her punishment for betraying their sacred bond.⁴⁶⁵ As if to underscore Sabbath's identity as victimizer rather than victim, his visit to Roseanna culminates in his attempt to bribe a young recovering alcoholic, whose wrists are only recently healed from her own attempted suicide, with a quart of vodka for sexual favours.⁴⁶⁶

Although Sabbath's sexual proclivities and excesses mean that much of his attention is given to women, he does not reserve his unpleasantness for women alone. When his friend Norman finally ejects Sabbath from his home — where Sabbath has been staying after he leaves Roseanna — for finding a pair of his daughter Debbie's

⁴⁶³ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 201.

⁴⁶⁴ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 95.

⁴⁶⁵ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 271.

⁴⁶⁶ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 291-292.

underpants in Sabbath's coat pocket, Sabbath's rhetorical attempts at exculpation include a lengthy tirade against the Japanese. This scene is not the first in the novel in which he abuses the Japanese who shot down his beloved brother Morty in World War; in one scene he reflects 'How come nobody hates Tojo anymore?'⁴⁶⁷ Besides the Japanese, Catholics also incite his rage, as well as his fellow Jews: 'Just read the Bible, it's all there, the backsliding, idolatrous, butchering Jews and the schizophrenia of these ancient gods.'⁴⁶⁸ Sabbath also refers to blacks as 'moolies,' and says that he cannot be a pimp as 'The black guys have the market cornered.'⁴⁶⁹ With his vivid pornographic imagination, his contempt for social proprieties, his racism, and his sexism, Roth appears to have created in Sabbath a character that is as much a perpetrator of trauma as a victim.

Doubtless because of Sabbath's excesses, some critics were unable to recognize in Sabbath anything but the perpetrator of traumatic acts. Many critics who disliked the novel insist upon identifying Mickey Sabbath with Philip Roth, believing the former to be a fictional representative of the latter's tastes and appetites. A persistent theme in criticism of the novel is a concern with Roth's—not Sabbath's—representation of women. In 'Philip Roth Hates Women,' for example, Julia Keller finds in Roth's portrayal of Drenka and Roseanna strong support for her assertion that the author himself has a problem with women. She claims that women in Roth's novels 'don't seem to exist at all, independent of men. Roth leaves them be. That is, he leaves them to be meaningless.'⁴⁷⁰ Other critics question the aesthetic and political purpose of Sabbath's social and erotic transgressions. Ruth Wisse observes that although the book is both funny and desperate, its fundamental weakness is that its

⁴⁶⁷ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 246.

⁴⁶⁸ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 278.

⁴⁶⁹ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 354, 160.

⁴⁷⁰ Keller 7.

fictional weight “depends on the possibility of outrage. Who is left today to be outraged? In the America of O.J. Simpson, who can object to Philip Roth?”⁴⁷¹ Wisse warns that ‘Kafka’s hunger artist is dying to be part of the colourful scene beyond his cage. Roth’s goes on snatching peanuts from a crowd that is still amused enough to watch him suffer, but whose moral attention he cannot command.’⁴⁷² But notwithstanding Wisse’s insistence that Americans are too jaded to be outraged, Michiko Kakutani’s review clearly exhibits a sense of moral indignation. She calls the novel, ‘sour instead of manic, nasty instead of funny, lugubrious instead of liberating.’⁴⁷³ She believes, furthermore that ‘the reader is hard pressed to tolerate, much less sympathize with Sabbath’ as he is a ‘loathsome narcissist.’⁴⁷⁴ Indeed, she wonders at the ‘reader who manages to finish this distasteful and disingenuous book.’⁴⁷⁵ Kakutani particularly objects to Sabbath’s treatment of Roseanna, the fact that he ‘pays tribute to Drenka, the lust of his life, by urinating on her grave’, and those passages where he ‘repeatedly denounces the Japanese’.⁴⁷⁶ Even some supporters of Roth found Sabbath’s racially motivated hatred insupportable. Mark Shechner writes that he can understand Kakutani’s offence at Sabbath’s portrayal of the Japanese

Having lived in Japan and having many Japanese friends, I could have done without that; it transforms Sabbath from someone who is merely Rabelasian, devious, lecherous, larcenous, lying, untrustworthy, and desperate—all of which fall under my umbrella of tolerance—into something a tad more loathsome than that.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷¹ Ruth R. Wisse, rev. of *Sabbath’s Theater*, by Philip Roth, *Commentary* Dec. 1995: 64.

⁴⁷² Wisse.

⁴⁷³ Michiko Kakutani, ‘Mickey Sabbath, You’re No Portnoy.’ *The New York Times on the Web* Aug. 22, 1995, Aug. 8, 2006 www.nytimes.com.

⁴⁷⁴ Kakutani.

⁴⁷⁵ Kakutani.

⁴⁷⁶ Kakutani.

⁴⁷⁷ Shechner 151.

As these citations demonstrate, many readers not only disliked the novel; they found it morally reprehensible.

But although several critics reviled *Sabbath's Theater* in the strongest terms, others championed the novel on account of its stylistic virtuosity. For Alan Cooper, the novel is 'filled with passages so beautifully composed, so able to fuse idea with apt emotion, that one emerges aware of having been in the hands of a master writer.'⁴⁷⁸ Echoing this judgement William H. Prichard observes that, 'Mr. Roth's genius for juxtaposing impressions, feelings and names that usually don't belong together continually enlivens the narrative. His extraordinarily active style revels in the play of words'.⁴⁷⁹ James Wood was one of the novel's most eloquent defenders, calling the novel, 'extraordinary' and of 'great power'.⁴⁸⁰ Wood believes the 'women with whom [Sabbath] engages . . . are solidly realized. They are not just clouds of male desire.'⁴⁸¹ He even refutes claims that the sexual acts and attitudes it depicts are vulgar, arguing instead that the novel's presentation of sex has, 'at least a personal inflection, and a metaphysical dignity.'⁴⁸² Developing his theme in more general terms, Wood acknowledges that 'Sabbath's grossness, his racist rants, will doubtless provoke the usual imprecations; but it should be clear that the novel's offense is not political, it is metaphysical. Sabbath's offenses are against life. They have not worked if they do not disgust.'⁴⁸³ In Wood's reading of *Sabbath's Theater*, the novel is clearly meant to offend but not in the way that readers like Keller and Kakutani suggest. Instead, the disgust the novel provokes in its readers is part of its grand

⁴⁷⁸ Alan Cooper, 'Roth Celebrates Sabbath: Keeping the Faith in Erotic Redemption' *Forward* Sept. 1, 1995, Feb. 2, 2006 www.highbeam.com.

⁴⁷⁹ William H. Prichard, 'Roth Unbound,' *The New York Times on the Web*, Sept. 10 1995, Aug. 8, 2006 www.nytimes.com.

⁴⁸⁰ James Wood, rev. of *Sabbath's Theater*, by Philip Roth, *The New Republic* Oct. 23, 1995, Feb. 2, 2006 www.highbeam.com.

⁴⁸¹ Wood.

⁴⁸² Wood.

⁴⁸³ Wood.

scheme: a great assault on life that should not be overshadowed by the 'usual imprecations' of overly sensitive readers. Wood was not the only reader to greet *Sabbath's Theater* in such celebratory terms; the novel won the 1995 National Book Award. It has also received considerable academic attention, appearing in many works of literary criticism, anthologies, and academic journals in which the novel is read very differently—from an exploration of Jewish identity to homage for the masculine body.⁴⁸⁴ *Sabbath's Theater* sharply divided its readership, defining its position as one of Roth's most controversial novels.

Despite the obviously offensive nature of its protagonist, a reading of *Sabbath's Theater* as simply a vulgar and offensive book is undermined by the epic proportions of Mickey Sabbath's grief. As one astute critic writes, '*Sabbath's Theater* is a book about loss. It's about how people are deformed by early traumas, and how they deform themselves in an attempt to heal those early wounds.'⁴⁸⁵ The first loss to leave an indelible mark on Sabbath's character is the death of his older brother, Morty. After Drenka, Morty is one of the first characters introduced to the reader, and the aching nostalgia of his description stands in sharp contrast to the contrapuntal narrative of Sabbath's and Drenka's sexual mischief. The detail with which Morty is described hints at an altogether different aspect of Sabbath's character than his public persona of Sadean satyr:

Morty had bad skin and wasn't particularly handsome, he wasn't great in school—a B-C student in everything but shop and gym—he had never had much success with girls, and yet everybody knew that with his physical strength and his strong character he would be able to take care of himself, whatever difficulties life presented. He played clarinet in a dance band in high school. He was a track star. A terrific swimmer. He helped his father with

⁴⁸⁴ Ranen Omer-Sherman writes about the themes of madness and identity in the novel, specifically Jewish and American identities. Debra Shostak writes about the body, specifically the male, Jewish, and dying body. Finally Frank Kelleter writes about *Sabbath's Theater* and 'Death, Ideology, and the Erotic.'

⁴⁸⁵ Daniel Schifrin, 'The Louse That Roth Built.' *The Jewish Week*. Nov. 10, 1995. www.highbeam.com. Feb. 2, 2006.

the business. He helped his mother in the house. He was great with his hand, but then, they all were: the delicacy of his powerful father candling the eggs, the fastidious dexterity of his mother ordering the house—the Sabbath digital artfulness that Mickey, too, would one day exhibit to the world. All their freedom was in their hands. Morty could repair plumbing, electrical appliances, anything. Give it to Morty, his mother used to say, Morty'll fix it. And she did not exaggerate when she said that he was the kindest older brother in the world.⁴⁸⁶

This passage begins with a series of common enough observations regarding Morty's skin and his comportment. These anecdotes are then steadily developed, fleshing out Morty's character. We learn of his prowess at track, the dutiful help he gave his mother and father, and the fact that he was a great swimmer. And then Mickey is overwhelmed by waves of memories concerning that special physical dexterity that bound together the Sabbath family: his father candling eggs, his mother's housekeeping, his own puppetry and Morty's own symbolic capacity for repairing things. And then the wave retreats, leaving the wistful nostalgia of his mother's belief that Morty can fix everything, and the sad assurance that he really had been the best older brother a boy could have. This overpowering nostalgia and sense of loss is then followed without a moment's hesitation by the rest of Morty's story: 'He enlisted in the Army Air Corps at eighteen, a kid just out of Asbury High, rather than wait to be drafted. He went in at eighteen and he was dead at twenty. Shot down over the Philippines December 12, 1944.'⁴⁸⁷ Mickey's anecdotes about his family are more than the meanderings of an elderly mind. In an essay about the obituaries in the *New York Times* for the victims of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, Nancy K. Miller describes the power of the anecdotes given about the victims by friends and family:

Like the snapshot, the anecdote, through the brevity of its narrative, catches life in its everyday dimensions. In this particular context, moreover, again like

⁴⁸⁶ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 15.

⁴⁸⁷ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 15.

the snapshot, the anecdote's appeal resides in its ability to carry both life and death, present and past. What once *was* but recalled to memory somehow *still is*.⁴⁸⁸

Roth's anecdotal portrayal of Morty is an indication of how Sabbath's thoughts are dominated by the half-life of his brother in his memories. Although he feels Morty's loss every day of his life, Mickey still constantly addresses him and thinks about him as if, using Miller's term, he 'still is'. Morty haunts Sabbath; he lives in Sabbath's memory throughout the novel even as the reader is told of his death before the end of the first short chapter.

Morty's death precipitates the loss of another of Sabbath's loved ones—his gentle mother. We are introduced to her by way of 'Drenka's uberous breasts,' the suckling of which causes Sabbath to be pierced 'by the sharpest of longings for his late little mother.'⁴⁸⁹ Despite the circumstances of her introduction, the description of Sabbath's mother is of a conventionally virtuous home maker. We are told of 'the alacrity with which she had prepared each spring for Passover,' and of how she 'darted to and fro' performing her chores, all the while 'trilling and twittering a series of notes as liquidly bright as a cardinal's song'.⁴⁹⁰ Mickey's childhood memories of his mother always involve activity. She was ceaselessly, 'Folding things, straightening things, arranging things, stacking things, packing things, sorting things, opening things, separating things, bundling things—her agile fingers never stopped nor did the whistling ever cease'.⁴⁹¹ All of this activity is appreciated by her loving sons and husband, who 'proudly proclaimed to his customers that his wife had eyes in the back of her head and two pairs of hands'.⁴⁹² But the personality of his mother

⁴⁸⁸ Nancy K. Miller, "'Portraits of Grief': Telling Details and the Testimony of Trauma', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14:3, 115.

⁴⁸⁹ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 13.

⁴⁹⁰ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 14.

⁴⁹¹ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 14.

⁴⁹² Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 14.

changes radically with the death of her eldest son: 'For nearly a year Sabbath's mother wouldn't get out of bed. Couldn't. Never again was she spoken of as a woman with eyes in the back of her head.'⁴⁹³ First her behaviour towards her home changes: no more baking, no more cleaning, no more whistling. And then she begins to go to the beach to talk to Morty, and then she begins to talk to Morty everywhere, and 'as the decades passed, she talked to him more rather than less'.⁴⁹⁴ Eventually, she ceases to recognize her younger son, dying in her nineties in a nursing home, still engrossed in her life long conversation with long dead Morty.

The third posthumous character to be introduced is Sabbath's first wife, Nikki, an actress of great beauty and questionable mental stability who mysteriously disappears while he is, of course, having sex with another woman. It is the sheer enigma of Nikki's disappearance that causes Sabbath the most pain. Although he tells his friend that he stopped reading the papers when he 'found that every day there was another story about the miracle of Japan', Sabbath actually cannot abide newspapers because he is condemned obsessively to search in their pages for news of Nikki's whereabouts.⁴⁹⁵ He cannot escape the memory of her disappearance; the fact that she simply ceased to be haunts his every waking thought: 'If there wasn't a body to bury physically, he could not bury her mentally. Although since moving to Madamaska falls he'd never told anybody, even Drenka, about the wife who disappeared, the fact was that Nikki wouldn't die until he did.'⁴⁹⁶ Sabbath's sense of guilt at his first wife's disappearance is a palpable fact. Despite the fact that the reader is well aware that he could not have committed the crime, Sabbath repeatedly tells others that he murdered Nikki, even explaining how he disposed of the body and why he was able to escape

⁴⁹³ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 15.

⁴⁹⁴ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 15.

⁴⁹⁵ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 325, 126.

⁴⁹⁶ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 127.

detection.⁴⁹⁷ Nikki's disappearance has had a powerful effect on Sabbath's life, for her disappearance epitomises his general sense of bereavement. Remembering his mother's grief, Sabbath thinks, '[a]ll her life she waited not only for Morty but for the explanation from Morty: why?'⁴⁹⁸ The insupportable knowledge that he will never really know what happened to Nikki, that someone can simply vanish, corresponds to his mother's desire to know *why* Morty had to die. Indeed, his mother's questions haunt Sabbath, 'Why? Why? If only someone will explain to us *why*, maybe we could accept it. Why did you die? Where did you go?'⁴⁹⁹ Nikki's disappearance, because of its mystery, represents the stark enigma of death for Sabbath.

The final character to be presented to us on the first page of the novel, only to die by the final page of the last chapter, is Drenka herself. After Sabbath's lifetime of loss, it is Drenka's death that precipitates the breakdown that *Sabbath's Theater* records. Despite Drenka's respectable appearance as the village innkeeper's hardworking and efficient wife, she lives a secret life: 'Inside this woman was someone who thought like a man. And the man she thought like was Sabbath. She was, as she put it, his sidekicker.'⁵⁰⁰ Sabbath prides himself as being her 'most patient of instructors,' indoctrinating her into a life of sexual lasciviousness, but it remains unclear how much he really moulds her.⁵⁰¹ He is certainly her most consistent lover, but she seems to have never had any trouble, either before or since meeting him, in finding other men with whom to entertain herself.⁵⁰² The sexual compatibility of Sabbath and Drenka is clear and explicitly described, but there is more to their relationship than a mutual physical voracity. The vocabulary with

⁴⁹⁷ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 242-243.

⁴⁹⁸ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 135.

⁴⁹⁹ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 135.

⁵⁰⁰ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 9.

⁵⁰¹ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 9.

⁵⁰² Drenka's sexual life, pre-Sabbath, was already hedonistic. See pp. 77-78.

which Sabbath describes Drenka reveals his admiration for her character and temperament: he refers to her as a “warrior” who could ‘do anything,’ even ‘challenge his audacity with hers.’⁵⁰³ Meanwhile Drenka sees Sabbath not only as a lover but as her connection to America, a role that he embraces. At the motels where they meet to make love, he sings while they dance to recordings of the jazz artists Morty introduced him to as a child.⁵⁰⁴ Mickey also teaches her Morty’s opinions about various artists and songs that Mickey still remembers in obsessive detail.⁵⁰⁵ In these and other ways, Mickey narrates for Drenka his own American childhood.⁵⁰⁶ And so the double outsider, the artist and the Jew Mickey Sabbath, becomes, for Drenka, the embodiment of America. As she lies dying of cancer, she tells him, ‘Then to be able to dance with you and hear you sing the music. I suddenly step that close to it. To America. I was dancing with America.’⁵⁰⁷ The love that Sabbath has for Drenka is palpable in his descriptions of her, and yet this sexual and spiritual partner, the first woman that he has ever met who challenges him and maintains his interest, is another character dead at the end of the first chapter.

Trauma is *Sabbath’s Theater’s* leitmotif, and the novel appears at times to be a catalogue of characters mutilated by fear, grief, and loss. Roseanna is haunted by her father’s suicides as well as the terrible letter in which he blames her for his own actions. Nikki’s childhood was dominated by the dissolution of her parents’ marriage which resulted in her being overprotected by her mother upon whom she was far too dependent. When her mother dies suddenly in her forties, Nikki is shattered and unable to recover. Roseanna, Nikki, and Sabbath himself are also all characters who sublimate their emotions into self-destructive behaviour. Nikki quite literally

⁵⁰³ Roth, *Sabbath’s Theater* 65.

⁵⁰⁴ Roth, *Sabbath’s Theater* 226-227.

⁵⁰⁵ Roth, *Sabbath’s Theater* 228.

⁵⁰⁶ Roth, *Sabbath’s Theater* 227.

⁵⁰⁷ Roth, *Sabbath’s Theater* 419.

disappears, Roseanna attempts to disappear into a bottle, and Sabbath tries to forget himself in his sexual exploits with women. The irony is that Sabbath seems to remember his mother and brother *most* when he is with Drenka. And yet Sabbath repeatedly rejects any connection between behaviour and personal history. He insists on seeing himself as an absolutely sovereign subject, whose path in life has been unaffected by his own personal traumas. Confronted with Roseanna's Alcoholics Anonymous maxim, 'You're as sick as your secrets,' Sabbath erupts, "'Wrong [. . .] you're as adventurous as your secrets, as abhorrent as your secrets, as lonely as your secrets, as alluring as your secrets, as courageous as your secrets, as vacuous as your secrets, as lost as your secrets, you are as human as—'".⁵⁰⁸ Sabbath rejects the idea that he or anyone else is not exactly what they make of themselves. Near the beginning of the novel, the narrator begins to wonder what would have happened had Morty survived the war but stops, thinking 'No, Sabbath could only have wound up Sabbath, begging for what he was begging, bound to what he was bound, saying what he did not wish to stop himself from saying.'⁵⁰⁹ But despite such protestations, it is clear that Sabbath's own life has been to a considerable extent determined by Morty's death. If Morty had lived, Mickey's family life would not have deteriorated, and he would not have needed to escape by joining the Merchant Marines. Without being a Merchant Marine, he would probably never have discovered puppetry; without puppetry, he may never have met Nikki; without Nikki he may never have left New York to escape her ghost, and so on.⁵¹⁰ Although Sabbath vociferously claims to have lived an independent life of his own making, Roth undermines this assertion by making the reader aware of how many of Sabbath's 'choices' were actually instances

⁵⁰⁸ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 88.

⁵⁰⁹ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 31.

⁵¹⁰ See p. 81, for Sabbath's 'Romance Run' see p. 153, for his time in Rome see 233-235, and for his puppetry, see 122-124.

of Mickey attempting to escape painful realities . In other words, Roth explicitly creates in *Sabbath* a subject defined, in many ways, by his traumatic history.

In *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth's representation of trauma both illustrates and undermines a number of modern ideas about the ways in which trauma functions in the life of the individual victim. On the one hand, Mickey is clearly a traumatized subject. The repetitive and obsessive way he thinks about his brother's death and his sense of being haunted by his mother's ghost have a clear coincidence with contemporary theoretical reflection upon traumatic subjectivity. That Mickey does not understand his trauma is indicated by his constant surprise at his own depth of emotion as well as the fact that he cannot tell for himself whether his dramatic real-life performances are genuine or not. And yet Mickey sees himself as anything but a subjectivity defined by victimization or loss. In fact, Mickey claims to embrace the chaos that underlies existence. He attempts to define himself in Sadean terms as a devotee of 'the satanic side of sex'. His sensibility also has a Nietzschean tinge, and he is working on a 'five-minute puppet adaptation of the hopelessly insane Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*.'⁵¹¹ Indeed, he embraces the Nietzschean role of Dionysus, which Raymond Geuss describes as, 'the drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess.'⁵¹² Mickey believes that gesturing towards nihilism symbolizes his independent and anarchic spirit, forgetting that the role of Dionysian or Sadean anti-hero is also entirely scripted. In the scene in which Norman confronts Sabbath over his daughter's stolen underpants, Sabbath declares, 'I am flowing swiftly along the curbs of life, I am merely debris, in possession of nothing to interfere with an objective

⁵¹¹ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 194.

⁵¹² Raymond Geuss, 'Introduction,' *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge; Cambridge UP, 1999) xi.

reading of the shit.⁵¹³ This pronouncement reveals the fundamentally paradoxical nature of his self-conception and self-representation. On the one hand, he claims that he has actively embraced a view of life that allows him to understand objectively 'the shit' that makes up everyday existence. This image enables him to portray himself as active and fully in control of his existence: he flows through life by removing any obstructions that might slow him down. On the other hand, Sabbath also identifies himself as debris caught in a stream that runs outside of his control. Sabbath is attempting to define his own desire to live as a Dionysean or Sadean phallic anti-hero against Norman's self-consciously 'normal' existence. But even Mickey's most outrageous assertions reveal a grain of insecurity about his ability to create and control his own destiny in a world he recognizes as both hostile and capricious.

Mickey's divided nature and contradictory understanding of his own existence alerts us to a fascinating and under-explored aspect of the novel: the fact that divisiveness is actually the structure of the novel. For every thought Mickey thinks, there is a counter-thought offered; for every action, a counter-action. For every moment of outlandish, predatory, or destructive behaviour on Sabbath's part, there is a moment of compassion, honesty, or insight. And meanwhile Mickey remains a mystery, especially to himself. For example, before he attempts to bribe the young woman at Roseanna's clinic with alcohol for sex, Mickey's thoughts paradoxically reveal his respect for her as well as providing a generous insight into the nature of her condition: 'Her laugh was very sly now, a delightful surprise. A delightful person, suffused by a light soulfulness that wasn't at all juvenile, however juvenile she happened to look. An adventurous mind with an intuitive treasure that her suffering

⁵¹³ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 347.

hadn't shut down'.⁵¹⁴ Comparing such insights with his audacious behaviour suggests that Mickey is not wicked *or* good; instead he is simultaneously wicked *and* good. Everything Sabbath says or does is both endorsed and undermined. He is a sexual and moral terrorist, but also a version of Socrates; both a hopelessly clichéd libertine and a self-questioning thinker whose very existence forces others to confront their own assumptions. The point of the novel, it gradually emerges, is not to arrive at the 'right' conclusion about it or its view of the world; the point is to submit yourself to this rigorous course of self-testing that we see enacted before us in the character of Mickey Sabbath. The rigorously bifurcated structure of the novel—in which everything that Mickey stands for is refuted and everything that he ridicules is later defended—is therefore crucial to Roth's embodiment and projection of Sabbath's own divided and self-questioning nature.

The irony of this situation is that even as the novel's structure undermines any transparently moralistic interpretations, its protagonist seems to demand the reader's moral judgment. That is, Roth forcibly confronts us with certain elements that seem to *require* either censure or approval. On the one hand, the reader is confronted with Mickey's poetic nostalgia as well as his intense love for Drenka and his family. On the other hand, one cannot help but feel adverse to Mickey's racism and cringe at some of his more outrageous sexual antics. Indeed, the novel makes the reader *want* to sympathize or judge; to either venerate Mickey or to stand above him in contempt. The structure of the book, however, ironically undermines either of these two affective stances. After all, the full spectrum of Mickey's outrageous actions and opinions cannot be fully embraced. And yet, simply to judge him is to sanction a moralizing attitude that renounces both empathy and forgiveness, a position that Roth

⁵¹⁴ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 290.

depicts in characters such as Lucy Nelson as a formula for misery.⁵¹⁵ What makes Mickey's divided and divisive nature of interest to this thesis is his affinity for some aspects of trauma theory, combined with those aspects of his character that seem to disallow any identification of Sabbath as a victim. The divisive method that Roth uses to portray Sabbath as well as Sabbath's relationship to trauma as a theory both upholds as well as undermines the traditional definitions of trauma, but to what purpose?

One of the main elements of trauma theory that *Sabbath Theater* calls into question is the notion that mourning allows trauma to be 'worked through'. Jonathan Boulter writes:

Trauma, as Freud indicates, is a complex, doubly-inflected condition: it is both event/cause and reaction/effect. Trauma, in other words, must involve some kind of reaction to the event. In my reading of trauma, this reaction/effect is what I will here call the work of mourning. In Freudian terms, this reaction is the effort to work through the shock (usually by putting the event into narrative form) in order to work back, to return, as it were *nostalgically*, to the originary scene of trauma. Working through, as a process of mourning, is predicated on collapsing the curious temporality of trauma—which places the subject essentially in two 'times'—and reintegrating the subject.⁵¹⁶

In Boulter's view, the subject splits at the moment of the traumatic events. Part of the subject remains trapped in the moment of trauma, while another part of the subject appears to move forward in time. The purpose of mourning, then, is to help the subject retell his or her story in order to return the subject back to the originary moment of traumatic schism. In other words, trauma transforms itself through mourning because narrative extends the possibility of nostalgia and a retrospective working through of the original traumatic experience. Thus, Boulter depicts

⁵¹⁵ In fact, the character of Roseanna's father, much like that of Lucy Nelson, seems driven by rage to self destruction out of a similar lack of understanding or empathy as well as the inability to forgive.

⁵¹⁶ Boulter 335.

mourning as the process through 'which loss is overcome.'⁵¹⁷ Sabbath, in one sense, can be interpreted as corresponding to Boulter's theory of mourning. As a subject he is utterly split between two 'times' so that he cannot help but think of his mother even whilst entertaining himself with Drenka's breasts. Sabbath also lives nostalgically. He lives for his memories, re-narrating them over and over in his own head, and for anyone else that will listen. And so, dancing with Drenka in the motel he repeats to her Morty's words while they move to Morty's music. Yet this process of seemingly perpetual mourning that Sabbath enacts every day has clearly brought him no closer to 'reintegrating' himself as a subject. Sabbath's almost incessant mourning has not brought him peace.

Instead, Sabbath's mourning, nostalgia, and repetitive narration of his losses have become a type of traumatic onanism rather than a way to 'work through' the damage done to him as a subject. Sabbath resists 'reintegration' as defined by Boulter and, instead, reflects Dominic Rainsford's warning that 'for the testifier, his or her trauma may constitute the world.'⁵¹⁸ Indeed, *Sabbath's Theater* often seems to be precisely this: the stage upon which Sabbath reconstitutes his trauma in compulsive detail. Mickey Sabbath is obsessed not only with the traumatic facts of his life but also with circulating the facts of that life by telling stories to anyone willing to listen to them. In fact, he goes so far as to narrate events and memories that other people would want to ignore or deny. One could argue that such repetitive narration is Sabbath's attempt to 'work through' his trauma; that he wants to find the story that will finally account for his losses. In this reading of the novel, Sabbath's attempts to turn his life into a narrative and transform it through art and through story would allow him to bring his world into emotional coherence. He responds to his trauma not

⁵¹⁷ Boulter 336.

⁵¹⁸ Dominic Rainsford, 'Numbering Pain: Testimony, Quantification, and Need', *Discourse*, 21.1&2 (Winter and Spring 2004) 21.

just by attempting to lose himself in continual sexual activity but also by obsessively telling his own story to himself and to others. And yet these narratives fail in that they do not offer him the chance to understand the past nor gain a measure of control over his relentless grief.

There exists a clear connection trauma and narrative in the novel, but not simply in the therapeutic sense that Boulter suggests. Rather than a way of overcoming his grief and loss, Mickey's desire to tell stories seems to spring as much from an artistic impulse to *create* as from any kind of therapeutic urge. Storytelling is an important trope within the novel, and even Sabbath, the great storyteller and puppet master, is surprised at how other people envision their own lives. Thus when Sabbath comes across Roseanna's letter to her father and the accompanying therapeutic journal in which she is supposed to record her thoughts on the underlying causes of her illness, Sabbath is surprised to find nothing at all about him. He thinks to himself, 'He had his story; this was Roseanna's, the official in-the-beginning story, when and where the betrayal that is life was launched.'⁵¹⁹ In *his* narrative of their life together, *he* is to blame for Roseanna's problems, as he informs her friends at the clinic when he introduces himself: 'I am Mickey Sabbath. Everything you have heard about me is true. Everything is destroyed and I destroyed it.'⁵²⁰ Imagine his surprise when he realizes that, in Roseanna's narration of her life, everything began and ended with the suicide of her overbearing father. In *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth implies that the story a person chooses to represent his life is just that: one choice amongst many possibilities. As Schifrin perceptively remarks, the novel, 'on top of everything, is also a meditation on the irrelevancy of narrative. Sabbath believes, as much as he

⁵¹⁹ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 263.

⁵²⁰ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 256.

believes in anything, that there is no one story to a human life.'⁵²¹ In my reading of Sabbath, Schifrin's claim that 'there is no one story to a human life' suggests a possible motivation for Sabbath's erratic behaviour. Sabbath is, after all, a puppet master, famous for using his own once dexterous hands as his puppets.⁵²² If Sabbath can conceive of his own hands as puppets, what is to stop him from using his whole body as a puppet and his own life as a stage in which he enacts various ways of being? After all, Sabbath loves to treat the world as a set of props for his various dramatic and philosophical performances. Even the contents of the breakfast prepared for him by Norman, which includes eight jars of exotic preserves, inspires a riff on the meaninglessness of bourgeois comforts.⁵²³

The idea that Sabbath uses his own life to enact a perpetual performance is supported by one of the climactic scenes of the novel in which a passer-by, assuming Sabbath's dishevelled appearance means that he is a beggar, throws money into his coffee cup. As a result, Sabbath is inspired to become an impromptu street performer, reciting *King Lear* on the New York subway. But even this spontaneous act of performance is imbricated with Sabbath's memories, and it is difficult to determine whether the emotions invoked by *King Lear* inspire these memories or whether Sabbath is *using* his own memories to inspire his performance of *King Lear*. First he remembers everything about the affair with Kathy and all of the fallout from this affair. During this lengthy portrayal of performance and memory, Sabbath acts out Lear's rage even as he is filled with rage at Kathy and his former employers. When his memories give way to the narration of his experiences whilst visiting Roseanna in the hospital after her breakdown, he is simultaneously performing Lear's own turn to madness. And when the novel depicts Sabbath reciting Lear's final scenes with

⁵²¹ Shchifrin.

⁵²² See *Sabbath's Theater*, pp. 121-124.

⁵²³ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 158.

Cordelia, the grief of this scene reflects Sabbath's enduring his own memories of Nikki's disappearance, as well as the deaths of Drenka, his mother, and finally Morty. This important scene depicts Mickey as performing the story of his own life through his performance of *King Lear*. And yet whether or not his own life is an inspiration for his performance or the play inspires his memories of his life is ambiguous. In fact, Sabbath here appears to use his traumatic history as much to his own advantage as he is influenced or determined by the affects of that trauma. The darker implications of this are revealed when Mickey, while reading Roseanna's journal, thinks, 'What a bother we are to one another—while actually nonexistent to one another'.⁵²⁴ This statement reveals Mickey's surprise that Roseanna uses her father, and not Mickey, as the centrepiece of the backstory for her performance of the character Roseanna. The chilling subtext of this reading is that Mickey sees everyone—including his 'beloved' family—as props in Sabbath's theatre.

Indeed, *Sabbath's Theater* seems, albeit inadvertently, to echo Ruth Leys's misgivings about contemporary trauma theory. Sabbath had read in Roseanna's journal hints that her father forced himself on her sexually, to which Madeline—the girl he tries to bribe with vodka—responds, 'They all say that. The simplest story about yourself that explains everything—it's the house speciality. These people read more complicated stories in the newspaper every day, and then they're handed this version of their lives. [. . .] The answer to every question is either Prozac or incest.'⁵²⁵ In other words, all that the hospital is interested in is 'curing' trauma either by medicating the subject or giving them a false narrative of blame and forgiveness with which to 'work through' their pain. But in Madeline's view, this false narrative is entirely unnecessary: 'there's something about your wife that, in its own way, has a

⁵²⁴ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 263.

⁵²⁵ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 287.

certain heroism. The way she stood up to an excruciating detox. There's a kind of deliberateness to her that I sure don't have: running around here collecting the shards of her past, struggling with her father's letters [. . .] she did suffer a great blow and [. . .] she earned her pain, that's all. She came by her pain honestly.'⁵²⁶ Madeline suggests that the pain of trauma and the damage that trauma does should not be made 'easy', should not be simplified, by the kind of narratives or pharmaceuticals that the clinic dispenses. Rather, it is the *struggle* that Roseanna embarks upon, the terrible ordeal that is dealing with her father's letters and his terrible recriminations, that makes her not only heroic but *worthy* of her pain.

For all of its complexity and interpretative richness, it is difficult to deny that *Sabbath's Theater* is a novel hollowed out by trauma and continually preoccupied with attempts to fashion a life out of the pain of traumatic experience. Sabbath's confusion over his own existence is revealed when he passes out after being confronted by Norman, who presents Sabbath not only with Debbie's underpants but also with the cup Sabbath used to collect money from his street performance:

The fainting was a little like the begging, however, neither wholly rooted in necessity nor entirely entertaining. At the thought of all that the cup had destroyed, two broad black strokes did indeed crisscross his mind from one edge of the canvas to the other—yet there was also in him the *wish* to faint. There was craft in Sabbath's passing out. The tyranny of fainting did not escape him. That was the last observation integrated into his cynicism before he hit the floor.⁵²⁷

What any reading of Sabbath should disclose is that frequently even Sabbath does not understand the reasons for his actions and attitudes. That he is the victim of traumatic experience is undeniable, yet the precise effect that this experience has had upon him remains unknown and unknowable. Trauma, in this novel, is depicted as resistant to understanding or 'working through'. Even for Roseanna, who is eager to be given a

⁵²⁶ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 288.

⁵²⁷ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 349.

single cohesive story that defines what happened to her and how it has affected her, the *real* story of her life is both less complicated and more difficult than the one fashioned for her by others.

While driving to Norman's, Sabbath talks to the ghost of his mother, 'recounting to her what had happened before this had happened.'⁵²⁸ He warns her that, '[t]hat's all you could know, though if what you think happened happens to not ever match up with what somebody else thinks happened, how could you say you know even that? Everybody got everything wrong.'⁵²⁹ This theme of getting life wrong will be played out to even greater effect in Roth's following novel, *American Pastoral*, in which the narrator Zuckerman claims that 'The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living'.⁵³⁰ Mickey Sabbath is someone whom the reader *must* 'get wrong': there is no 'right' way to read a character so complex and contradictory in his thoughts and actions. In this sense, the existence of a character like Sabbath appears to contradict Caruth's assertions that trauma could, and should, be appropriated by others. Leys says of Caruth:

[. . .] I am unsympathetic to the way in which she tends to dilute and generalize the notion of trauma: in her account the experience (or nonexperience) of trauma is characterized as something that can be shared by victims and nonvictims alike, and the unbearable sufferings of the survivor as a pathos that can and must be appropriated by others.⁵³¹

In *Sabbath's Theater*, the reader is confronted with a densely populated portrait of Mickey's grief and suffering. The reader is constantly teased with images and suggestions that imply that he or she is close to really *understanding* Mickey Sabbath. And yet every time the reader is confronted with such an image or suggestion, Mickey

⁵²⁸ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 109.

⁵²⁹ Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* 109.

⁵³⁰ Roth, *American Pastoral* (London; Vintage, 1998) 35.

⁵³¹ Leys 305.

commits an outrage that eradicates any understanding or sympathy for him as a traumatized victim. Like Leys, Roth suggests that no matter how much we want to understand or empathise with victims of trauma, we cannot ever really appreciate, let alone appropriate, their suffering. Even, however, if we know we are doomed constantly to 'get people wrong', it may well be the case, as Nathan Zuckerman believes, that 'It's getting them wrong that is living'⁵³² Indeed, the novel suggests that one of Mickey's great faults is that he is so determined to live a certain life that he often cannot see other people's choices as anything but stupid or self-indulgent. Indeed, the times that Mickey seems the most likeable, the most humane, are those rare moments when he is as willing to listen as he is to talk: when he listens to Madeline disagree with him about Roseanna or listens to Norman's opinions about Mickey's life or listens to the voices of his dead. In the end, *Sabbath's Theater* suggests that the only way we are to be less hopelessly wrong about ourselves and the lives of others is simply to listen to other people. Their stories may not bring us truth or happiness, but at least we might feel less alone.

Conclusion

In *Sabbath's Theater* and *Time's Arrow*, Roth and Amis explore the potential as well as the problems of narrating testimony, trauma and history. *Sabbath's Theater* problematizes any clear identification of Mickey as a traumatized subject by making him as much a perpetrator of trauma as a victim. Similarly, *Time's Arrow* focuses on a subject traumatized not because he is a victim of violence but because he was involved in executing one of the greatest crimes in history. Both writers suggest that trauma is far more complicated than its current popular usage would suggest, while at the same time their obvious fascination with the subject suggests its importance. One

⁵³² Roth, *American Pastoral*, 35.

aspect of trauma theory with which they seem most intrigued is how traumatic experience collides with the subject's formation of identity. Is the subject created by trauma or does, as the case of Mickey Sabbath suggest, the traumatized subject enact his or her trauma on his or her own terms? These questions are clearly related to my final chapter's exploration of how themes and theories regarding masculinity and the masculine subject dominate Roth's and Amis's artistic vision. Instead of reiterating oft-used feminist critiques of Roth and Amis, I have decided to approach their work using masculinity theory, as I will explain in more detail. My next, and last, chapter will introduce some of the most important elements of masculinity theory, as well as distinguish some of the problems or possible limitations of masculinity theory as discussed by those critical of certain aspects of masculinity studies, especially in the common discourse that masculinity is somehow 'in crisis.' I will then turn to two of the most controversial novels by Amis and Roth, *London Fields* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, to examine how they treat the masculine subject as well as the subject of masculinity. It is here, where Roth and Amis take on the gender that they are so often accused of championing at the expense of femininity, that they prove to be anything but misogynists. For their criticisms of masculinity, and especially of the formation of the masculine subject, are far more aggressive, damning and cynical than anything they have ever written about women.

Chapter Four

Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me *whole*!

-Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967)

Men were so *simple*. But what did that do to the thoughts of women, to the thoughts of women like Nicola Six?

-Martin Amis, *London Fields* (1989; 1991)

Masculinity [. . .] does not exist in isolation from femininity – it will always be an expression of the current image that men have of themselves in relation to women.

-Arthur Brittan, 'Masculinities and Masculinism' (2001)

Rather like trauma theory, the study of men and masculinity has become a subject of increasing academic interest in recent years. One critic, playfully acknowledging the growth of masculinity studies, has called the field 'Academic Viagra'.⁵³³ Writing in 2001, another critic cites the fact that in the past decade alone there have been 'over 500 books published, the introduction of two specialist journals, and a proliferation of websites all providing a particular slant on the condition of men at the turn of the millennium' as key evidence to support the claim that '[d]uring the last two decades research into men and masculinities has emerged as one of the growth areas of sociological inquiry.'⁵³⁴ Although, as Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett assert in their reader on masculinity, the study of masculinity is a key constituent of modern sociological thought, its import is not restricted to the field of sociology. A glance at some important recent titles in literary studies like *Posting the Male: Masculinities in Post-war and Contemporary British Literature* (2003) and *Wounded Hearts: Masculinity, Law, and Literature in American Culture* (2006) suggests that the subject (and the problem) of masculinity has a genuinely

⁵³³ Bryce Traister, 'Academic Viagra: the Rise of American Masculinity Studies,' *American Quarterly* 52.2 (2000): 274.

⁵³⁴ Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett, 'The Sociology of Masculinity,' *The Masculinities Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (2001; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) 1.

interdisciplinary status. In this chapter, I will present a brief summary of the history of masculinity studies that highlights moments of important coincidence between this emerging discipline and modern literary studies. This summary will also seek to establish genealogical aspects of the “crisis in masculinity” that resonates within contemporary cultural debate. It will then explore aspects of both this crisis and the wider debate that it has engendered, in the fiction of Martin Amis and Philip Roth. The choice of the work of Roth and Amis for this purpose might appear both provocative and counter-intuitive given that both these writers have been accused of adumbrating sexist and misogynistic attitudes throughout their literary careers. But as a careful reading of continuingly controversial novels like *Portnoy's Complaint* and *London Fields* will show, these texts contain subtle and rebarbative critiques of the implicit violence of aspects of the normative constitution of masculine subjectivity, as well as the unequal power relationship such subjectivity demands between modern men and women.

Masculinity Studies: An Overview

The emergence of masculinity studies is inextricably bound up with the rise of modern feminism and contemporary women's studies. As observed by critics, ‘The upheaval in sexual politics of the last twenty years has mainly been discussed as a change in the social position of women. Yet change in one term of a relationship signals change in the other.’⁵³⁵ By compelling women simultaneously to rethink their relationships with men and the very idea of what it means to *be* a man or woman, feminism confronted them with both a political and philosophical demand. Indeed, a lateral effect of feminism's conflict with patriarchy was that women began to scrutinize men and masculinity in much the same way they did their own roles in

⁵³⁵ Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, ‘Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity’, *Theory and Society*, Vol.14, No. 5. (Sept., 1985): 551.

society. Thus, one of the direct consequences of feminist thinking and action has been “to expose and highlight the power, position, and practices of men.”⁵³⁶ Yet despite ostensible critical agreement that there exists a profound relationship between feminism and masculinity studies, the relationship between these disciplines is neither simple nor straightforward. In fact, the precise influence and political consequences of feminism’s influence upon masculinity studies remains a hotly debated topic. In this section I will, therefore, undertake to review the history of masculinity studies, outline some of its central topics of interest, and explore several points of concern raised by those critical of some its main points of emphasis.

Although most overviews of the history of masculinity studies begin with the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s, some critics conferred a considerably longer intellectual prehistory upon the subject.⁵³⁷ At the University of Chicago in the 1920s, sociologists began to use the term ‘marginal man’ to ‘refer to the ways in which groups such as Jewish and Black people experienced the conflict of living in two cultures.’⁵³⁸ This term is striking in its use of the male pronoun to describe both the men and women of a particular minority group. As their use of ‘man’ suggests, these sociologists did not feel the need to differentiate between the experiences of men and women of the same ethnicity or race. Scenarios like these illuminate one critic’s assertion that ‘[a]s the dominant sex in patriarchal culture, and historically the dominant practitioners of history, men as a group have not proved especially curious about men as a sex.’⁵³⁹ In other words, although men often wrote and thought about themselves as the main protagonists of world history and culture, they rarely thought

⁵³⁶ Whitehead and Barrett 3.

⁵³⁷ Carrigan, et al. 551.

⁵³⁸ Carrigan, et al. 554.

⁵³⁹ Judith A. Allen, ‘Men Interminably in Crisis? Historians on Masculinity, Sexual Boundaries, and Manhood,’ *Radical History Review* 82 (2002): 191.

self-consciously about themselves 'as men'.⁵⁴⁰ It was not until the latter half of the century and the rise of 'the problem of women' that the idea – and the problem - of differentiated sex roles became common parlance in American intellectual circles.⁵⁴¹ But as Tim Carrigan and others argue, these new theories as yet contained 'little sense of a power relation between men and women; and the argument embedded the issue of sex and gender firmly in the context of the family.'⁵⁴² Implicit in views like these is the conviction that prior to the emergence of the second-wave feminism of the 1970s, sociologists took sex roles as 'a taken-for-granted fact.'⁵⁴³ Although sex role theory was "nominally about both sexes," the conventional pattern had been "an almost exclusive concentration on women's roles, ignoring their relation to men's roles and to larger societal structures."⁵⁴⁴ Whilst this 'version of the role framework' went largely uncontested during the politically and socially conservative America of the 1950s, with its 'lack of any direct political challenge from women', everything changed with the rise of radical new types of feminism that demanded not only equal rights, but also new ways of understanding and theorizing both women and femininity.⁵⁴⁵

First-wave feminism challenged male dominance by demanding women's equal access to social and political rights already enjoyed by men, but second-wave feminism declared that 'ideas and representations were as significant to questions of oppression as were the liberal demands for education, pay and property.'⁵⁴⁶ Second-wave feminism demands that gender *differences* must also be taken into account,

⁵⁴⁰ Allen 192.

⁵⁴¹ Carrigan et al. 553, 554.

⁵⁴² Carrigan, et al. 554.

⁵⁴³ Carrigan, et al. 555.

⁵⁴⁴ Carrigan, et al. 559.

⁵⁴⁵ Carrigan, et al. 556.

⁵⁴⁶ Claire Colebrook, *Gender* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 81.

which had a profound impact on feminism's political goals. Rather than concentrating on those rights already accorded to men, second-wave feminists sought *new* rights tailored to their sex's individual needs. These new rights included greater political and legal control over their own reproductive, physical, and sexual autonomy. And so, second-wave feminism strove to enact legislation that would protect women from forms of oppression and victimization directly associated with their own particular sex. The fact that such legislation often focused on the physical, political and juridical coercion enacted on women by men underscored the insistence of many second-wave feminists that 'masculinity as such had been constructed through power and violence, and that femininity had been oppressed through a history of uninterrupted patriarchal domination.'⁵⁴⁷ While this view cleared a path for a second-wave feminist agenda designed to emancipate women from various abusive practices and structures such as pornography, the nuclear family, and rape, it also brought one version of patriarchal masculinity into sharp critical relief.⁵⁴⁸

Third-wave feminism rejected the philosophical platforms of both first and second-wave feminism, arguing against both the Enlightenment principles of 'a sexless reason or humanity' and the second-wave insistence on sexual difference.⁵⁴⁹ Instead, as Claire Colebrook explains, they raised the possibility 'of thinking beyond identity, gender and distinct kinds.'⁵⁵⁰ Colebrook continues:

On this picture, feminism would no longer be the affirmation of women, women's issues or women's identity, but would, in its criticism of conventional maleness, identity and power, take the criticism of essentialism to include all supposed naturalness, distinct kinds or stable norms.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁷ Colebrook 82.

⁵⁴⁸ Colebrook 82.

⁵⁴⁹ Colebrook 82.

⁵⁵⁰ Colebrook 85.

⁵⁵¹ Colebrook 85.

The 'criticism of essentialism' alluded to here is of considerable significance for this thesis. If for some feminists the primary purpose of such critique was to demonstrate the historically determined and necessarily performative origins of all our assumptions about gender, this speculation was also accompanied by a new focus on the ideological nature of masculinity⁵⁵² As Bryce Traister points out, this development has had significant repercussions for areas like literary criticism:

Since the appearance of [Elaine] Showalter's paradigm-establishing essay ['Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1985)], a two-pronged feminist literary criticism has developed into a more generalist movement of 'gender studies,' [and] [w]ith the rise of gender studies there has emerged a new focus on the construction of masculinity as a gender.⁵⁵³

The arguments of third-wave feminist literary critics that gender is a construct and not a biological determinant are an important aspect of contemporary feminist thought. As Traister warns, however, there are some that fear that a generalized 'gender studies' as well as the ever-advancing vanguard of masculinity studies threaten to shoulder aside feminism and women's studies as topics of interest within both academic and popular culture.

Despite the much discussed rise of masculinity studies in academia, a striking element revealed by much of the available literature is just how much discord and disagreement exists within the field. As Arthur Brittan reminds us, 'This assumption – that we can know and describe men in terms of some discoverable dimension – is problematic because it suggests that masculinity is timeless and universal.'⁵⁵⁴ In other words, propounding a particular definition of masculinity inevitably requires basing it upon a normative definition of masculinity. And yet, as critics argue, the type of man

⁵⁵² See Colebrook, pp. 145-191, for an in-depth analysis of the contributions of theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Elizabeth Grosz, Joan Copjec, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on this subject.

⁵⁵³Traister 274.

⁵⁵⁴ Arthur Brittan, 'Masculinities and Masculinism', *The Masculinities Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (2001; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) 51.

to inspire much of masculinity theory is often discovered to be white, heterosexual, and Western.⁵⁵⁵ Masculinity studies are, therefore often limited to discourse on a very specific model of masculinity that cannot transcend its own self-imposed limits of race, sexual-orientation, and culture. In turn, this points to what is a fundamental problem at the heart of masculinity studies. The problem is a straightforward one of definition: what exactly do critics mean by masculinity, let alone 'man'? But while the problem may be straightforward, its solution certainly is not, and how critics formulate their approach to a definition of masculinity reveals quite a few complementary problems involving the relationship of masculinity studies to both feminism and the politics of power.

Recent critical attempts to provide a normative definition of masculinity have been riven by a number of tensions and disagreements. For Whitehead and Barrett, the term 'masculinities' connotes 'those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine.'⁵⁵⁶ Arthur Brittan, however, offers a more evasive and tentative definition of the term in his statement that '[m]asculinity refers to those aspects of men's behaviour that fluctuates over time.'" Instead of presenting a definition of masculinity per se, Brittan concentrates his efforts on defining what he calls *masculinism*, arguing that '[t]hose people who speak of masculinity as an essence, as an inborn characteristic, are confusing masculinity with masculinism, the masculine ideology.'⁵⁵⁷ Ultimately, for Brittan, masculinism is that ideology that "justifies and naturalizes male domination."⁵⁵⁸ John MacInnes, however, makes no distinction between masculinity and masculinism, suggesting

⁵⁵⁵ See Allen for her views on this, 202-203.

⁵⁵⁶ Whitehead and Barrett 15-16.

⁵⁵⁷ Brittan 53.

⁵⁵⁸ Brittan 53.

instead that 'Masculinity can be seen as an ideology produced by men as a result of the threat posed to the survival of the patriarchal sexual division of labour by the rise of modernity.'⁵⁵⁹ Meanwhile, writers like Michael Kimmel and R.W. Connell present a diffuse multiplicity of interpretations of the term. In Kimmel's words:

Our culture's definition of masculinity is thus several stories at once. It is about the individual man's quest to accumulate those cultural symbols that denote manhood, signs that he has in fact achieved it. It is about those standards being used against women to prevent their inclusion in public life and their consignment to a devalued private sphere. It is about the differential access that different types of men have to those cultural resources that confer manhood and about how each of these groups then develop their own modifications to preserve and claim their manhood. It is about the power of these definitions themselves to serve to maintain the real-life power that men have over women and that some men have over other men.⁵⁶⁰

Writing in a similar vein, Connell suggests that '[r]ather than attempting to define masculinity as an object (a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm), we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives.'⁵⁶¹ Although these authors would not claim that their individual definitions are in any way comprehensive, the differences between these definitions suggest some interesting implications for both masculinity studies and feminism.

What these various definitions of masculinity reveal is, first of all, an uncomfortable relationship to both women and feminism. There is an anxious undercurrent to these definitions as to whether masculinity can be defined only through a dichotomized relationship with a feminine 'other.' Such a definition would mean that masculinity has no essential essence, except in the sense that it must *always*

⁵⁵⁹ John MacInnes, 'The Crisis of Masculinity and the Politics of Identity,' *The Masculinities Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (2001; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) 311.

⁵⁶⁰ Michael S. Kimmel, 'Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,' *The Masculinities Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (2001; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) 272.

⁵⁶¹ R. W. Connell, 'The Social Organization of Masculinity,' *The Masculinities Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (2001; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004) 33.

be in opposition to women and femininity. While this definition might seem to depict masculinity as relative, it actually implies that masculinity is both stagnant and rigid through its insistence on maintaining a reactive stance that denies creativity.

Secondly, these definitions reveal an uneasy relationship between masculinity and power. When Brittan attempts to separate a definition of masculinity as what men do from a definition of masculinism as what men in power do to those beneath them, he reveals a widespread discomfort with a tendency in masculinity studies to focus on what is sometimes defined as hegemonic masculinity. Critics define hegemonic masculinity as, 'a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance.'⁵⁶² While some theorists are careful to define hegemonic masculinity as one specific type of masculinity, McInnes's definition suggests that hegemonic masculinity serves for some theorists as a definition of masculinity in general. To be specific, just as theorists of masculinity are uneasy with masculinity's relationship to women and feminism, they are equally uncomfortable with the apparent inescapability of defining masculinity through its relationship to power. Their discomfort stems from the fact that critics are well aware that this 'culturally exalted form of masculinity, the hegemonic model so to speak, may only correspond to the actual characters of a small number of men.'⁵⁶³ In other words, just as feminism has been accused of focusing on the plight of middle-class white women at the expense of women of a different class, colour or sexual orientation, so has masculinity studies been accused of focusing on white Western middle-class heterosexuals. Finally, what should have become apparent in this discussion of masculinity is that so much of this discourse contains a sense of anxiety or impending

⁵⁶² Carrigan, et al. 592.

⁵⁶³ Carrigan, et al. 592.

doom regarding masculinity and its viability. It is this nervousness that translates into what many theorists interpret as masculinity studies' grand theme: 'The Crisis of Masculinity.'

Warnings that masculinity is in crisis are now a recurrent theme in Western cultural discourse. As MacInnes reminds us, 'It has become something of a cliché to argue that it is now "a bad time to be a man".'⁵⁶⁴ Whitehead and Barrett reaffirm this view, writing that '[t]he male crisis, or "crisis of masculinity" thesis, has assumed, for many, almost the status of a defining characteristic of Western societies at the turn of the millennium.'⁵⁶⁵ Those who argue that masculinity is in crisis believe that in the past fifty years, formerly appropriate 'displays of manhood' have become 'socially stigmatized.'⁵⁶⁶ These critics contend that men can no longer rely on public displays of aggression, dominance, and emotional repression in order to 'perform and validate their masculinity'.⁵⁶⁷ Although there is no clear critical consensus about the primary reasons for this reevaluation of masculinity, three factors recur in discussions of the area:

They assume that men are being reduced to this confused, dysfunctional and insecure state through a combination of, firstly, rampant, soulless consumerism; secondly, women's (feminism's) successful assault on male bastions of privilege; and thirdly, more widespread social and cultural disapproval of traditional displays of masculinity.⁵⁶⁸

As Whitehead and Barrett discuss, these social markers all suggest that culpability for the 'crisis of masculinity' lies with feminism and the women's rights movements in that these markers try to explain—or, some would argue, excuse—'many men's apparent inability to accommodate women's new found confidence.'⁵⁶⁹ Whitehead

⁵⁶⁴ MacInnes 313.

⁵⁶⁵ Whitehead and Barrett 6.

⁵⁶⁶ Whitehead and Barrett 6.

⁵⁶⁷ Whitehead and Barrett 6.

⁵⁶⁸ Whitehead and Barrett 6.

⁵⁶⁹ Whitehead and Barrett 6.

and Barrett, along with other critics, suggest that the attention masculinity studies has brought to both men and masculinity is not necessarily a positive development, albeit for different reasons. Indeed, some of the most prominent discourses within masculinity studies, especially that masculinity is in 'crisis', can reiterate a set of beliefs that cater to anti-feminist, even misogynistic, beliefs.

Connell writes that 'to say masculinity has become "problematic" is not necessarily to say gender relations are changing for the better. It is, rather, to say that cultural turbulence around themes of masculinity has grown.'⁵⁷⁰ In other words, Connell reminds us that theories about men and masculinity do not necessarily contain an explicitly progressive or feminist agenda, suggesting that the ways that people interpret or appropriate the idea that masculinity is in crisis can differ greatly. As Rachel Adams explains, there are those who see masculinity studies as conducive to the improvement of gender relations as well as an incentive for both interest in and development of feminist academic inquiry:

The scholarship on masculinity has expanded the terrain of gender and sexuality, bringing fresh insights to familiar texts and revealing the category of straight white manhood to be something like the Wizard of Oz, a tenuous, vulnerable figure hiding behind a screen of smoke and mirrors. Men across the disciplines have been interrogating their own masculinities; interpreting their relationships with their fathers, brothers, and male friends; confessing their feelings of alienation and weakness; and sometimes productively translating those personal revelations into renewed commitments to the analysis of gender and sexuality. At its best, this work brings new vitality to feminist questions and suggests crucial points of contact between feminism and queer theory.⁵⁷¹

There is also evidence, however, of considerable scholarly unease about the nature and trajectory of this new discipline. Some of this unease surfaces in the second half of Adams's argument:

⁵⁷⁰ R. W. Connell, 'The Big Picture: Masculinities in Recent World History', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Special Issue: Masculinities (Oct., 1993): 597.

⁵⁷¹ Rachel Adams, 'Masculinity Without Men', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6:3 (2000): 467.

Yet the sheer amount of ink spilled over this topic might give us reason to wonder why men—admittedly, now appropriately situated and theorized—have once again become the focus of analytic attention. Too often the study of masculinity seems to come at the expense of the study of women, with the unfortunate implication that questions about women have become uninteresting or are so familiar that they no longer need to be asked. Moreover, when focused on the burdens of gender and the fragility of bonds between men, this scholarship tends to ignore the persistent links among masculinity, patriarchal power, and privilege.⁵⁷²

A number of points of interest arise in Adams's conclusion. Some critics see the rapid growth of masculinity studies as a type of patriarchal backlash against feminism. Connell, one of the founders of contemporary masculinity studies, dramatically restates this position in an interview on the subject. The interview is notable for his claim that 'because [masculinity studies'] niche was created by women's studies,' some feminist or women's studies scholars feel that critics like him have an attitude of "'Thanks for bringing this to our attention, ladies, but we'll take it over now.'"⁵⁷³ In this view of masculinity studies, men and male academics have used the 'turn to gender' to reinscribe the priority of masculinity at the heart of modern intellectual culture.

Furthermore, Adams suggests that many critics fear that promoting the idea that 'masculinity is in crisis' belies the fact that men are still often in positions of power and privilege and that they often abuse that power and privilege. Anthony McMahon warns that '[i]nstead of wondering whether they should change their behaviour, men "wrestle with the meaning of masculinity.'"⁵⁷⁴ In other words, both masculinity studies and the so-called 'crisis of masculinity' can be taken to imply that

⁵⁷² Adams 467-468.

⁵⁷³ Michael Kimmel & William O'Barr, 'Interview with Michael Kimmel', *Advertising and Society Review* (2003) ***

⁵⁷⁴ Anthony McMahon, 'Male Readings of Feminist Theory: The Psychologization of Sexual Politics in Masculinity Literature,' *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, Special Issue: Masculinities (Oct. 1993): 690-691.

'[d]omination is an aspect of masculinity, rather than something men simply do.'⁵⁷⁵

This over-simplification suggests that men misbehave because their masculinity made them do it. McMahon implies that displays of violent or aggressive masculinity may genuinely be expressions of masculinity in crisis, but this does not excuse such behaviour nor does it explain the long history of male violence and aggression. As Whitehead and Barrett dryly conclude:

Of course, behind the hard veneer of the male 'Nazi', paramilitary, or militiaman, there usually lies a fragile identity and an equally fragile confidence, but nevertheless, the actual performance of such radical masculine expression results in damage to all who come into contact with it. In this respect, while such men may be in some form of emotional or existential crisis, there is little new about this.⁵⁷⁶

In other words, Whitehead and Barrett warn that those who argue that aggressive or violent behaviour in men is the fault of some new crisis of masculinity will have to ignore the fact that such behaviour has always existed. This means that either men have always been in crisis or, as McMahon argues, men need to keep as critical an eye on their own behaviour as they do theories about masculinity.

Adams's summary of the current stalemate between masculinity studies and feminism also raises some important issues for feminism itself. Judith Kegan Gardiner addresses these questions directly in her review of six texts of masculinity and gender subtitled 'Consensus and Concerns for Feminist Classrooms'.⁵⁷⁷ As her title suggests, Gardiner is principally interested in 'how these texts advance or modify feminist interdisciplinary scholarship and agendas for social change'.⁵⁷⁸ Her first impression is that there exists a 'considerable consistency' in all of the texts reviewed,

⁵⁷⁵ McMahon 691.

⁵⁷⁶ Whitehead and Barrett 7

⁵⁷⁷ Judith Kegan Gardiner has since published an in-depth study on the topic of feminism and masculinity studies in the form of an anthology she edited entitled *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

⁵⁷⁸ Gardiner 146.

'which demonstrates a new consensus in gender studies based on feminist thought.'⁵⁷⁹

All of the texts agree 'that gender is a hierarchical relationship that involves male dominance and female subordination.'⁵⁸⁰ They also concur that 'gender is a process, project, or set of relationships rather than a thing in itself.'⁵⁸¹ But despite this apparent critical consensus, Gardiner warns that significant differences still remain between the Women's Studies, masculinity, and gender texts. In her own words:

Masculinity is seen as compensatory, defensive, and needing explanation and modification, while femininity is virtually uninterrogated, apparently assumed to result uneventfully from daughters identifications with their mothers and women's adaptations to male dominance. There also seems to be an assumption that feminists have been describing the problems of women for thirty years; now is the time to focus more on men and masculinity and on global economic and political forces.⁵⁸²

Yet despite having faithfully recounted recurrent feminist concern that masculinity studies has begun to supplant feminism as a topic of critical interest and debate, Gardiner suggests that this state of affairs might be as much the fault of contemporary feminism as it is the responsibility of masculinity studies:

I have noted here the very different investments that men, including masculinity scholars, appear to have in preserving masculinity as some intelligible and coherent grounding of identity in comparison to the scepticism and distance shown by feminists toward femininity. Thus, a paradoxical finding from looking at the masculinity-focused texts is that it may be time for feminists to return to theorizing femininity.⁵⁸³

While men have actively embraced theorizing masculinity, according to Gardiner, women have been quick to dismiss any theorizing about femininity under the assumption that 'femininity' is always a negative construct and should be abandoned. In her view the 'very absence of a "crisis of femininity" in contemporary U.S. culture, compared to the anxiety, excitement, and increasing scholarship around

⁵⁷⁹ Gardiner 148.

⁵⁸⁰ Gardiner 148.

⁵⁸¹ Gardiner 148.

⁵⁸² Gardiner 153.

⁵⁸³ Gardiner 156.

“masculinity,” may in fact indicate some of the limits of “gender” as a general category for feminist theory, scholarship, and political mobilization.⁵⁸⁴ What is required, she argues, are new ways of reinvigorating contemporary feminism and women’s studies. One way to begin this task might be to cultivate a renewed interest in femininity by means of a new field of ‘femininity studies.’

In this section, I have sought to define contemporary masculinity studies as well as to delineate some of the problems inherent to the discipline. But now I will turn to the fiction of Martin Amis and Philip Roth in order to explore how these two writers have engaged with and challenged many prominent theories regarding masculinity. While I argue that *London Fields* and *Portnoy’s Complaint* engage critically with images of hegemonic masculinity, both novels are also often used as ‘evidence’ of their authors’ prejudices against women, as illustrated in Chapter One of this thesis. *London Fields* (1989) focuses upon Nicola, a woman determined to organize her own murder and the three men whom she manipulates to kill her. Nicola’s self-murdering character made the *London Fields* one of Amis’s most controversial books, and many critics were happy to use the novel and its protagonist, Nicola Six, as proof of Amis’s misogyny. I argue, however, that rather than lasciviously recirculating lifeless stereotypes of self-destructive women, Amis actually defines a series of conflicts and problems regarding men and masculinity. Written much earlier, Roth’s novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1967) can be read as a precursor to contemporary masculinity studies. This audacious novel takes for its eponymous subject a young man named Alexander Portnoy, whose quest to define himself as an independent, self-made man clashes with his inability to define himself except through his deviant and exploitative sexual relationships with women.

⁵⁸⁴ Gardiner 156.

Corrupted Material: Nicola Six and *London Fields*

Set at the turn of the millennium, Martin Amis's *London Fields* tells the story of a woman, Nicola Six, who foresees and organizes her own murder. In order to fulfil her objective, she courts the attention of three men, one of whom she knows will become her murderer. There is working-class Londoner Keith Talent, upper-class Englishman Guy Clinch, and the Jewish-American intellectual Samson Young who presents himself to the reader as the ideal of a 'reliable' narrator.⁵⁸⁵ All three men are in the same pub when Nicola enters, and all three are instantly drawn to her, albeit for different reasons. Keith sees a possible sexual conquest, Guy perceives a beautiful and fragile woman in need of protection, and Samson recognizes in Nicola the possibility of a good protagonist for the novel he so desperately wants to write. In fact, *London Fields* is Samson's 'novel': his version of the events as he either witnessed them or as told to him by Nicola. While Samson, however, initially believes that he is firmly in control as the narrator of events, it is soon revealed that throughout the novel Nicola is really the one in 'the driver's seat,' and that Samson has been as much of a pawn in her deadly game as Keith or Guy.⁵⁸⁶ The figure of a self-murdering female character has proved consistently controversial for Amis's critics. As one reviewer writes, 'Nicola is a problem [. . .] she makes us yield to a sneaking suspicion that a misogynist lingers here somewhere [. . .] She seems to be *another* of Mr. Amis's plastic women.'⁵⁸⁷ The debate about Amis's portrayal of Nicola Six has become symptomatic of his perceived "woman problem." This issue came to a head during the judging of the 1989 Booker prize, when two female judges,

⁵⁸⁵ Throughout *London Fields* Samson asserts that this is a 'true story' (1, 240), that 'this is actually happening' (10) and that he is incapable of writing anything else because he 'just can't *make anything up*' (25). Because of this inability to create fiction, Samson assures us that he is 'a reliable narrator' (78).

⁵⁸⁶ I here make reference to Muriel Spark's, *The Driver's Seat*, a novel that is also about a self-murdering woman. Reading this novel helped me focus my understanding of *London Fields*.

⁵⁸⁷ Bette Pesetsky, "Lust Among the Ruins," rev. of *London Fields*, by Martin Amis, 4 March 1990, late ed. – Final Section 7: pg 1, col 1; Book Review Desk.

Maggie Gee and Helen McNeil, refused to shortlist *London Fields* and accused Amis of misogyny in quite public terms.⁵⁸⁸ Dispiriting and overly familiar as this type of media controversy might be, it does grant insight into what people are prepared to read and to tolerate. And when confronted with the pornographically hackneyed aspects of Nicola coupled with her genuinely disturbing objective to be beaten to death, it seems obvious that readers would be offended by this particular characterization of corrupt and self-destroying femininity.

The issues surrounding the critical reception of *London Fields* are of signal importance to this thesis. Although their significance will emerge in various ways during what follows, I should state at the outset my conviction that the views of Gee and McNeil represent a profound misreading of Amis's work. I do agree that *London Fields* is fraught with problematic images of self-destroying women, and that the novel gleefully depicts the pleasure that those images seem to generate. However, I believe that far from indulging or blandly circulating these negative images of femininity, Amis's fiction seeks to reproduce the way that a certain *masculine* self-image constitutes itself through its relationship with a necessarily corrupted femininity. Indeed, I will argue that *London Fields* uses the lifeless body of a pornographic cliché – the character of Nicola Six - to rebuke the male propensity to give imaginative life to the dead and second-hand material of which pornography is composed. More disturbingly, *London Fields* contains a warning that perhaps this masculine obsession with reanimating the dead women of pornographic cliché is continuous with real-life violence against living women. Read in these terms, Amis's circulation of a series of pornographic clichés do not constitute a failure of novelistic imagination; instead, they are crucial to both his aesthetic and ethical project. In fact,

⁵⁸⁸ Martin Goff, "Playing Silly Bookers," *The New Statesman* 23 Oct. 1998, June 10, 2007 <http://www.martinamisweb.com/pre_2006/lfb Booker.htm>.

Amis suggests that men often indulge themselves in an artificial 'discourse' with the lifeless images of women that pornography circulates, making genuine communication with living women threatening to a masculine self-image based on a largely fantasized and malleable female foil.

Any reading of *London Fields* needs to begin by considering why Nicola Six remains such a disturbing and controversial character. Preliminary reasons why Amis's reader might find herself recoiling from this initially glamorous but increasingly sinister 'murderer' are not difficult to deduce. It is revealed that, as a child, Nicola 'propels a playmate over a cliff' to her death.⁵⁸⁹ This cruelty carries on into adulthood. Her beauty equips her with 'the power of inspiring love,' but something in her very nature makes her 'receive this love and send it back in opposite form, not just cancelled but murdered.'⁵⁹⁰ The idea of cancelled and murdered love resonates throughout Nicola's entire life; it recurs whenever one looks at "the human wreckage she left in her slipstream, the nervous collapses, the shattered careers, the suicide bids, the blighted marriages (and rottener divorces)'.⁵⁹¹ Nicola's philosophies, such as they are, are as decadent and disturbing as her prevailing mode of social relation; her conversation and thought appear to be dominated by pornographic conceits involving 'tight bright white underwear' and a predilection for anal sex.⁵⁹² Despite the veneer of intellectual sophistication provided by her books on astronomy and popular physics, these subjects actually symbolize her penchant for sodomy, which she considers the great 'twentieth century theme.'⁵⁹³ Nicola's taste for sodomy embodies her anti-fertility; she imagines herself as a black hole, marked only by 'the

⁵⁸⁹ Martin Amis, *London Fields* (1989; Vintage International: New York, 1991) 16.

⁵⁹⁰ Amis 21.

⁵⁹¹ Amis 17.

⁵⁹² Amis 71.

⁵⁹³ Amis 131.

scar tissue of her seven abortions.⁵⁹⁴ Finally, Nicola's favourite fantasy involves not only public sex with the Devil, but also 'the act of doubledarkness' with God himself.

⁵⁹⁵ Even Nicola's mother recognizes her child's mouth as 'a whore's mouth . . . like the mouth of the clowngirl in pornography.'⁵⁹⁶ Sexually predatory, murderous, blasphemous, and with a face even her mother cannot love, it is obvious that Nicola Six represents an extremely problematic and offensive female protagonist.

However, the perception that the character of Nicola Six is a genuinely disturbing and decadent figure does not begin to answer the question of how we should *read* her. Indeed, contemporary critics have been far too eager to pass over the disturbing and *genuinely* problematic depths of the novel in order to indulge themselves in simplistic moral condemnation of what they presume to be a reactionary masculine fantasy: the pornographically degraded, abused and self-abusing figure of Nicola Six. Such responses have proved wholly inadequate to grasp the aesthetic and ethical problem the novel actually poses: why is this degraded figure simultaneously presented as alluring and seductive? At the same time, the moral fervour of the critical denunciation of Amis and his female creation seems curiously excessive if *all* she represents is a degraded masculine fantasy. After all, no one seems to feel it necessary to argue that *Mein Kampf* is anti-Semitic; if the character of Nicola is so easily reducible to a misogynist masculine fantasy, why has it proved necessary to condemn her over and over again? The persistence of this critical controversy – a controversy that helps to shape the reception of Amis's fiction to this day – suggests that his portrayal of Nicola Six retains an uncanny force that has the capacity to provoke unpalatable and perplexing questions about the relationship between the masculine imaginary, gender stereotypes and modern social relations.

⁵⁹⁴ Amis 192.

⁵⁹⁵ Amis 121-122.

⁵⁹⁶ Amis 18.

Such questions cannot be exhausted by the weary moral realism that inflects most readings of Amis's work. These readings, even when couched in forms of literary sympathy, generally assume an all too familiar form. Thus they begin from the observation that *London Fields* must be a version of the 'State of the Nation' novel keen to present a satirical overview of life in modern Britain. Reading the novel in such a way makes Nicola a source of critical anxiety and dissatisfaction. For example, one critic claims that Amis makes various 'attempts to establish [Nicola] as a real person,' but that she 'remains an automaton.'⁵⁹⁷ The implication of this statement is that Amis fails with Nicola Six, and that, in this instance, he is a 'bad' writer. On another level, some critics warn that perhaps Nicola Six is less the product of a 'bad' writer as she is the product of a 'bad' man's imagination. Warming to this theme, Graham Fuller sees in Nicola evidence that 'Amis himself is unable to resist Nicola's pornographic promise or the lascivious lexicon of sexism—which alone should offend many women readers'⁵⁹⁸ Such criticism takes for granted the idea that Nicola is supposed to be realistic, and never stops to consider that Amis may have intended Nicola to be the cliché they fear she is. Nor does such criticism stop to ponder what such a fascination with cliché might mean in the broader scope of the novel.

The crucial, and crucially still unacknowledged, aspect of these predominantly moralistic readings of the novel is that Amis's own fiction continually pre-empts the terms of this critical debate. Thus the recurrent claim that the novel is flawed because Amis cannot create a vital and emotionally plausible female character is ironically undermined by the character of Samson, who can be read as Amis's own parody of his popular critical caricature. An industrious but merely mediocre journalist and

⁵⁹⁷ Christina König, "Death By Request," *The Guardian* 21 Sept. 1989.

⁵⁹⁸ Graham Fuller, quoted in James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 2nd ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 156.

memoirist, Samson has never been able to create anything vibrant, original, or lasting; all he can do is reiterate other people's judgments and opinions. And so he can mimic the job culture of characters such as Keith but he is incapable of engaging with it critically or of creating it outright. What is interesting about this portrayal of Samson is that some critics imply that Amis suffers from a similar inability to create. For example, James Wood complains of Amis that 'The language wants to be sophisticated and it is certainly knowing; but Amis is not transforming anything here. These people exist in the catalogue, already indexed and adjectivally tagged.'⁵⁹⁹ Wood's complaint is thus that Amis is only capable of manipulating a series of already established stereotypes, appropriating them uncritically and unquestioningly for his own use while he adds nothing to their literary suggestiveness or potency. Through Samson, our 'reliable' narrator incapable of invention, Amis satirizes one of his own caricatured media portrayals.

Another scene in which Amis appears to pre-empt his critics is that in which Samson addresses Nicola, saying 'I'm worried they're going to say you're a male fantasy figure.'⁶⁰⁰ Nicola's response to his concern takes two forms. The first has her respond 'I am a male fantasy figure. I've been one for fifteen years. It really takes it out of a girl.'⁶⁰¹ This is exactly the sort of satirical but also dehumanized response that we come to expect from Nicola. The second part of her response, however, in which she articulates exactly which type of male fantasy figure she is, reveals another possibility available to readers of *Nicola Six*, one usually overlooked in favour of condemning her. Nicola rejects such titles as Sack Artist, Mata Hari, and Femme

⁵⁹⁹ James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Random House, 1999) 195.

⁶⁰⁰ Amis 260.

⁶⁰¹ Amis 260.

Fatale in favour of *Murderee*.⁶⁰² Nicola explicitly identifies herself as a murdered body. As such, the central question of the novel cannot be why does Nicola have to die, but why does anyone insist she was ever alive? This question takes me to the heart of my argument: that Nicola may be a pornographic stereotype but the type of pornography she represents is not that of mere sexual intercourse. Her irreality is not accidental nor is it the fault of Amis's 'woman problem.' Indeed, this thesis recognizes that Nicola is not supposed to be 'real' nor 'alive' but that she is a corpse upon which sexual desire in the form of violence is enacted. Through such a reading, perhaps we can account for the banality of much of the criticism levelled at Nicola. Such criticism appears unable to deal with the unsettling force of Amis's novel which suggests that a certain murderous and life-denying version of masculinity in fact depends upon reducing the "feminine" to a series of lifeless and self-abnegating images. In order fully to examine these questions, we need to confront the fact that *London Fields* does not merely present us with degraded images of women to be consumed and enjoyed; instead, it offers us a vision of the ways in which a pernicious and reactionary vision of femininity is constructed from certain forms of masculine desire. In this sense, the principal theme of the novel is not the pornographic relay of degraded images of a lifeless and self-destructive femininity; it asks us, rather, to consider the ways the three male protagonists fashion their own subjectivity by remaking Nicola Six in their own degraded image.

These broad observations may be supported and developed by means of an analysis of Keith Talent, through whom Amis presents a vision of a masculine subject whose self-image is composed almost entirely through his investment in pornographically degraded images of the feminine. *London Fields* is replete with

⁶⁰² Amis 260.

examples of Keith's violent renunciation or reconstruction of the image of the feminine – almost his every waking moment is consumed by his preparation or perpetration of an appalling misogynist act. The violence of his pornographic imaginary emerges forcefully from the way he watches television:

Every evening he taped six hours of TV and then screened them on his return from the Black Cross, the Golgotha, Trish Shirt's or whatever. [. . .] What he was after were images of sex, violence, and sometimes money. Keith watched his six hours' worth at high speed. Often it was all over in twenty minutes. Had to keep your wits about you. He could spot a pinup on a garage wall in Superfastforward. Then Rewind, SloMo, Freeze Frame. A young dancer slowly disrobing before a mirror; an old cop getting it in the chest with both barrels; an American house. Best were the scenes that combined all three motifs. An oil baron roughing up a callgirl in a prestige hotel, for instance, or the repeated coshing of a pretty bank teller. [. . .] The female body got chopped up by Keith twenty times a night: what astronomies of breast and belly, of shank and haunch . . . Now the great thumb moved from Fast Forward to Rewind to Play, and Keith sat back to savour the pre-credit sequence of a serial-murder movie. Bird running through park at night. Psycho hot on her heels.⁶⁰³

These violent images, strung together like comic strips randomly cut up and reassembled, powerfully illustrate how Keith's obsession with images of violence translates itself into the affect of social authority. Power is everywhere in this passage: Keith's power over his remote control, the serial killer's power over his victims, the power of the oil barons over the earth's resources. Furthermore, power is connected in this passage with violence against women. Indeed, Keith's favourite television viewing constantly reaffirms the message that men in control demonstrate their power through violence against women and that weak men can achieve some form of power through violence against women.

Meanwhile, Keith's actions prove that his sexual sadism is not relegated to his fantasy life, as is evident from a more in-depth discussion of Keith's 'peculiar difficulty with girls':

⁶⁰³ Amis 164-165.

The peculiar difficulty with girls experienced by God, Shakespeare, and Keith was this difficulty: they raped them. Or they used to. They had all been on the same rehab courses and buddy programmes; they had mastered some jargon and tinkertoy psychology; and they didn't do it any longer. They could control their aggression. But the main reason they didn't do it any longer was that rape, in judicial terms (and in Keith's words), was no fucking joke: you just couldn't ever come out a winner, not with this DNA nonsense. The great days were gone. Shakespeare and God had both spent a long time in prison for it, and Keith nearly had. Of his two court appearances on rape charges, the first had been more or less okay ("Why, Jacqui, why?" Keith had hollered woundedly from the dock). But the second case was *very frightening*. In the end the girl dropped the charges, thank heaven, after Keith sold his motor and gave three and a half thousand quid to her dad. Of course, Keith's rapes were to be viewed quite distinctly from those numerous occasions when, in his youth, he had been obliged to slap into line various cockteasers and icebergs (and lesbians and godbotherers). Rape was different. Rape was much more like all the other occasions (not so numerous, if you kept Kath out of it) when he had candidly used main force to achieve intercourse and the woman, for one reason or another, hadn't reported him.⁶⁰⁴

From this passage we learn that Keith has a violent history of rape. His own personal definition of 'rape,' however, namely main force, carefully excludes what is also legally considered a form of sexual assault, namely coercive force, which Keith dismisses as simply 'slap[ping] into line' women who resist his advances. In other words, Keith's 'difficulty' with women translates into what is actually a predisposition to violent sexual assault. In the world of *London Fields* there is a direct connection between Keith's voyeuristic enjoyment of violent images and his enactment of violence upon women in real life. This barrage of exploitative imagery seems to augment Keith's failure to imagine women as anything other than erotic fodder for his own fantasies. Throughout the novel, Keith's ability to recognize the humanity of various female characters is constantly undermined. He pays a mother for sex with her very under-age daughter, while still insisting he treats the teen-aged Debbiee 'special'; he beats his wife, knowing her frustration results in her 'takeing it

⁶⁰⁴ Amis 168.

out on the Baby [sic]'; he declares his willingness to murder Nicola for wrecking a darts tournament.⁶⁰⁵

Amis not only suggests that Keith is emboldened and encouraged by an exploitative masculine culture that feasts on disembodied images of violence against women but also questions the sort of therapeutic methods used to try to stem Keith's violence in the real world. Amis's use of terms such as 'jargon and tinkertoy psychology' for Keith's 'therapy,' for example, both complicates the relationship between Keith's acts of rape and his perception of the judgment and punishment of rape as a crime. In the same way, the idea that Keith has 'mastered' rehabilitation's buzzwords of 'Regard, Respect, Restraint' is very important to the novel.⁶⁰⁶ In those scenes in which Keith and his pub cronies whisper to themselves of their 'regard, respect, restraint,' Amis illustrates how a sentiment or judgment expected to be external to the character and delivered as a pronouncement of his punishment has now actually been internalized by that very character as a way of constituting his own sense of himself. Indeed, Keith and his friends use these words as a way of actually discussing how sexually attractive they find various women, and how virile was their response to this sexual attraction. What Amis implies is that the judgment that Keith, as a rapist, lacks qualities such as regard for women's feelings, respect for women's bodies and the ability to restrain his own violent desires has ceased to function as the condemnation it should be. This judgment has become, instead, a meaningless mantra used as a form of pub braggadocio amongst Keith and his fellow rapists. In consequence, the only real threat to Keith's enjoyment of his 'peculiar difficulty' is the fact that DNA evidence has made rape 'no fucking joke.'⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁵ For Keith and Debbie, see *London Fields* p. 51. For Keith's journal confession, see p. 370. Finally, for Keith's proclamation of his intention to kill Nicola, see p. 462.

⁶⁰⁶ Martin Amis 169.

⁶⁰⁷ Martin Amis 168.

At the same time, the idea that Keith's 'peculiar difficulty with girls' is indicative of a much wider social problem involving reactionary and unexamined attitudes towards sexual violence against women is reinforced by the aforementioned connection between this phrase from *London Fields* and the title of one of Kingsley Amis's novels, *Difficulties With Girls*. Indeed, in key sections of his novel, Martin Amis appears to be directly engaging with the gender politics of his father and his father's generation. Thus Martin Amis not only connects Kingsley's euphemism 'difficulties with girls' to rape but also suggests that, for much of society, little has changed since his father's generation. Laws may make rape illegal but not until scientific advances such as DNA did the accusation of rape really become substantive. Indeed, Amis suggests that all the workshops about 'Respect, Regard, Restraint' forced upon Keith and his ilk actually make matters worse because they give them the tools to impersonate feeling human beings. What this really means is that Keith's 'rehabilitation' has enabled him to *internalize* a feminist critique of violent masculine subjectivity that is supposed to mark him out as problematic. Disturbingly, this means that it is useless to apply the language of moral criticism to a character like Keith because Keith has already internalized such criticism in order to act badly. There can be no distancing effect of moral judgment because the Keiths of this world have already consumed a daily dose of Jerry Springer and Trisha, and are able to parrot the morally concerned rhetoric of this television patois. In fact, one of the few connective tissues remaining in this otherwise violently fragmented society is a shared vocabulary gleaned from the moral instruction of television talk shows and therapeutic group meetings. Keith, however, has no actual connection with this material: he does not think about it, he merely regurgitates it. This is the reason that despite his 'rehabilitation', Keith, far from understanding why rape is wrong, mourns

the loss of 'the good old days' when acts of rape were more difficult to prove. Amis creates in Keith Talent a disturbing vision of a masculine subject who actually uses his knowledge of a feminist-inspired discourse regarding women's rights as well as a popular rhetoric of morality to facilitate and excuse his violently chauvinistic behaviour.

Although Keith offers the most lurid example of a misogynistic masculinity, it is certainly not the case that he is the only male character under indictment in this novel. Nicola's socially diverse choices for her three possible murderers are telling, as are her different approaches to each man. Indeed, one of the fascinating aspects of the novel is the way Amis's satirical vision embraces a number of different social classes and cultural types. Besides Keith, both Guy, the titled upper-class Englishman, and Samson, the Jewish-American intellectual, are enthralled by the pornographic cliché they know as Nicola Six, and both prove alarmingly well disposed toward her violent demise. Despite his wealth, education, and social class, Guy proves to be the most gullible of the three. For lowest-class Keith, Nicola makes home-made pornographic movies and promises both money and darts fame. But for Guy's benefit, Nicola switches tactics, presenting herself as intellectual, yet naïve; damaged, yet virginal to the point of never having been kissed. She claims both gypsy and Jewish blood, tapping into the stock fantasy that Philip Roth calls 'The Gentile dream of the melon-breasted Jewess.'⁶⁰⁸ Nicola also tells Guy a tale of being raised in an orphanage where she befriended a Cambodian girl, whose fate had her 'farmed out to a pitiless Iraqi'.⁶⁰⁹ There was sexual abuse, a child, and she 'was then repatriated, never to return.'⁶¹⁰ Nicola calls the mother and child Enola Gay, and Little Boy.⁶¹¹ These

⁶⁰⁸ Philip Roth, *The Ghostwriter* (1979; New York: Vintage Int., 1995) 52.

⁶⁰⁹ Amis 124.

⁶¹⁰ Amis 124.

⁶¹¹ Amis 124.

names ring no alarm bells for Oxford educated Guy, who apparently never studied current history. However, neither does Guy notice anything wrong with a letter he finds written by Nicola to Professors Barnes and Noble.⁶¹² All Guy does see in Nicola is an 'anachronism;' to him she is 'a museum piece, time orphaned.'⁶¹³ Meanwhile, his wife, Hope, is certainly not an anachronism; she is 'intelligent, efficient [and] brightly American.'⁶¹⁴ Despite its chivalric facade, Guy's perception of Nicola is as dead as that of Keith's; she is a museum exhibit: a mummy, a stuffed bird. Guy, furthermore, imagines Nicola as representing a woman in need while wealthy, efficient Hope needs no one. Guy's desire for Nicola might be based on an old-fashioned, 'gentleman's' fantasy, but when her deception is revealed, it is the hitherto foppish Guy who drives Keith 'into the ground like a tentpeg' in order to be the one to murder Nicola.⁶¹⁵ Guy's fantasies of Nicola may appear more palatable than Keith's, but, in reality, they are based on images equally lifeless and self-denying and inspire an equally violent response.

Ultimately, however, Guy does not claim his right to kill Nicola. Samson, dying of what he calls a radiogenic synergism, convinces Guy to trade his act of revenge for the chance to return to his family.⁶¹⁶ Earlier in the novel it is revealed that, because of his swiftly progressing degenerative disease, Samson's suicide, like Nicola's murder, is inevitable.⁶¹⁷ To 'save' Guy, Samson takes his place in what becomes a sort of ritual act of expiation, purging the world of Nicola's presence. Belatedly, Samson realizes that it was he, not Keith, whom Nicola recognizes at the beginning of the novel as her murderer. She knew that Guy, because of his upper-

⁶¹² Amis 162.

⁶¹³ Amis 154.

⁶¹⁴ Amis 27.

⁶¹⁵ Amis 464.

⁶¹⁶ Amis 161.

⁶¹⁷ Amis 349.

class background, would be able to dominate Keith but that Samson would take Guy's place, because he 'wasn't quite unregenerate.'⁶¹⁸ It might seem strange that murdering a woman would be depicted as an act of regeneration, but it might make more sense given the other imagery associated with Samson's choice and act. Samson, indeed, recognizes his victim as 'Necropolitan Nicola.'⁶¹⁹ She is a zombie: a corpse reanimated but certainly not living. She also 'made it easier' for Samson to murder her by repeating 'I'm so cold' over and over. Even before her death, Nicola bears a cadaver's chill. This is the point of the novel: that Nicola does not die, she was never alive. What makes Samson's and Nicola's relationship so eerie, however, is, on the one hand, his apparent ability to see her as dead and, on the other hand, the fact that regardless of this knowledge he wants to kiss her, see her naked, and finally, he sodomizes her.⁶²⁰ All of this despite Samson telling Nicola, early in the game, 'I'm immune [. . .] The bedroom voodoo, the Free Spirit nihilistic heroine bit, the sex-actress bit – it just doesn't get to me.'⁶²¹ Indeed, Samson has resisted the charms of other women in the book, such as the beautiful and voluptuous Lizzyboo, because he claims that his sickness has made him impotent. And yet such is Nicola's power over him that despite his terrible illness and alleged impotence he is able to perform sexually for her. Samson claims to be able to recognize and withstand the degraded pornographic images that Nicola presents to the world. However, he finds himself incapable of actually resisting these images while also being the most aware, of all the male characters, that her sexually stereotyped image is projected upon the lifeless canvas of a corpse.

⁶¹⁸ Amis 466.

⁶¹⁹ Amis 467.

⁶²⁰ Amis 185, 284, 391.

⁶²¹ Amis 119.

It is in these areas that Amis's writing begins to develop a genuinely subversive and uncanny power. It does so because he is able to establish a connection between the pornographic male imaginary and a form of necrophiliacal desire: the need to turn live women into dead images while reanimating dead women into living images. This recognition is of crucial significance because it enables us to see that when critics seize upon Amis's creation of Nicola Six as simultaneously unrealistic and misogynistic they fail to see that *this is the very point of Amis's writing*.⁶²² Seen in these terms, Nicola is less a "character," realistic or otherwise, than an ossified representation of certain aspects of the pornographic male imaginary – she is, in fact, an always already posthumous and endlessly circulating and reanimated version of dead human material: a material that encodes a frozen and paralyzed form of modern social relations. *London Fields* is not, then, a novel "about" a self-murdering woman. Instead, it takes for its subject the obsession with stereotypes of corrupt or degenerate femininity by which modern masculinity constitutes its own moral self-image. The character of Nicola Six is constructed entirely from stereotypes; her life, such as it is, reflects the male need to reanimate or give imaginative expression to this corrupt material. What is truly pornographic about *London Fields* as a novel is not, then, Nicola Six's propensity for sodomy or her debased view of the world; rather, it is the fact that Samson, Guy, and Keith all insist upon giving imaginative life to the cliché she represents.

What really interests Amis, and what should interest critics, is not how debased and clichéd a character is Nicola Six but the criticism of contemporary masculinity that Amis introduces through her. Despite many critics' perception of

⁶²² I would like to thank Judy Bunch for pointing out that the idea that Nicola is not a real person but just another stereotype is supported by her last name, Six. She is just another version of an already-existing model, as in the science-fiction television show *Battlestar Gallactica*. In this show, the human-shaped Cylons (robots) are all known by their model numbers and the sex-bot Cylon model is known as number Six.

him as a misogynist, Amis's disagreements with his father's chauvinistic prejudices towards women are well documented, and he has actually gone so far as to label himself a feminist.⁶²³ In many ways, *London Fields* can be read as an illustration of how and why hegemonic masculinity is such a dangerous and debilitating factor in Western society. Amis reiterates critics' assertion that, '[i]t would hardly be exaggeration to say that hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic so far as it embodies a successful strategy in relation to women.'⁶²⁴ By focusing on the three male characters *through* Nicola, Amis implies that these three men need women like Nicola in order to exist. They need a feminine 'other' not only to attempt to dominate or control but actually to define themselves against. Hence Nicola's chameleon-like qualities: she is a virgin for Guy, a succubus for Keith, and an aloof intellectual for Samson. Indeed, considering that all we know of Nicola is through Samson, for whom Nicola has provided her 'diaries', we must be cynical as to whether or not he can actually have revealed anything about her 'true' character at all. The fact that we know nothing about Nicola *except* through a male cipher emphasizes the idea that Nicola cannot really exist: throughout the novel she is only the projected image of the various male protagonists' needs and desires.

In this sense, Amis does far more than just reiterate received ideas about a masculinity that is supposedly 'in crisis.' Instead, he offers elements of a radical critique of the development and reproduction of some of the foundational assumptions of normative heterosexuality in modern liberal Western society. In his scathing critique of many aspects of contemporary masculinity theory, Anthony McMahon explains what he calls 'the "negative" nature of male identity':

⁶²³ See Keulks 179.

⁶²⁴ Carrigan, et al. 592.

[. . .] whereby boys, in the absence of concrete male models, are supposed to construct their identities through a rejection of everything feminine. This kind of analysis leads some to argue that 'masculinity is the weaker of the gender constructs' and that as a result men encounter 'unique problems' of identity, and suffer from 'emotional shallowness.' Such accounts, implicitly or explicitly, construct a female 'other' who is not emotionally damaged: her relational potential is intact, her emotional needs are acknowledged.⁶²⁵

McMahon proposes that there is a subtext within contemporary masculinity studies that encourages the masculine subject to create a feminine other against which to define himself as a man. Amis suggests a critical affinity with this theory in his creation of Nicola Six. Nicola represents a female 'other' against which the male characters define themselves, but *first they create her in order to do so*. Guy already has an energetic and confident wife against which he could define himself, but he rejects Hope in favour of the weak and victimized virgin that he is so absurdly eager to see in Nicola. Keith is married to a wife he dominates and abuses, but he too seeks out Nicola's representation of his 'ideal' woman: a pornographic doll who comports herself like a moll in a gangster film. Even Samson, the writer, pushes away the 'real' women in his life but falls prey to the perfect narrative device, the Murderee, that will give him the novel he so desperately desires. That all of these types of women are models of victimization is not an accident, for what Amis alludes to is Whitehead's and Barrett's chilling conclusion that 'anti-femininity lies at the heart of masculinity.'⁶²⁶ And so Amis's overarching theme in *London Fields* is not one of misogyny or chauvinism. Rather, he warns that masculinity is not automatically defined by a pre-existing and coherent feminine 'other,' but that men actively pursue their own desired self-image through largely imaginary images of femininity that enable them to indulge their own fantasies of power and control at the expense of women and femininity. It is, in this context, a considerable irony that so much

⁶²⁵ McMahon 688.

⁶²⁶ Whitehead and Barrett 23.

contemporary liberal and feminist literary criticism takes for its subject a text like *London's Fields* whose critique of modern social relations chimes so profoundly with its own underlying principles.

Masculinity in Confession: *Portnoy's Complaint*

Lying on his psychoanalyst's couch, Alexander Portnoy begins to tell of the triumvirate that dominated his childhood: his overbearing Jewish mother, his constipated Jewish father, and the *goyische* world that they held before him as representative of all that was wicked, polluted, and *free*. In a continuous and slightly hysterical monologue, he confesses to his mother-obsessed childhood, his masturbation-obsessed adolescence, and to the sins of his adult life. At 33 years of age, he is in public a defender of the poor and the voiceless, while privately he lives a shame-filled, lascivious existence *shtupping* as many *shiksas* as he can lay his hands on.⁶²⁷ Roth claims that he wrote Portnoy partly out of revenge, that he was tired of being accused of making both his Jewish and female readers nervous with his representations of his co-religionists and women. And so he created Portnoy, with his 'apertures spurting' torrents of obscene language and sexual content.⁶²⁸ When asked whether Jews would be offended by his characterization of Portnoy, Roth wryly replied, 'I think there will even be Gentiles who will be offended by this book.'⁶²⁹ As suggested, Roth knew how controversial *Portnoy's Complaint* would be, and yet even he admits to being surprised at its notoriety and how much its publication affected his private life. In an interview he makes reference to how, seemingly overnight, he

⁶²⁷ Different sources spell the word *shikse* differently. In Roth, it is spelled as it is here, but in much of the commentary it appears as *shiksa*.

⁶²⁸ Philip Roth, in an interview with Ian Hamilton, 'A Confusion of Realms,' *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1985; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 196.

⁶²⁹ Philip Roth, in an interview with George Plimpton, 'Philip Roth's Exact Intent', *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1969; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 38.

became a celebrity and as such a 'brand name,' as in, 'Ivory is the soap that floats; Rice Krispies the breakfast cereal that goes snap-crackle-pop; Philip Roth the Jew who masturbates with a piece of liver.'⁶³⁰ *Portnoy's Complaint* became a *succès de scandale*, bringing Roth attention not only from the synagogues and academic circles that Roth expected but from the world of popular culture as well.

One reason for the novel's infamy is its use of vulgar language as well as explicit sexual content. As a critic explains:

Although its treatment of sexuality and use of obscenity might seem unexceptional and unexceptionable to a twenty-first century readership accustomed to erotic imagery in advertising, on television, and in the cinema (as well as in fiction and fine art), its candid, detailed discussion of onanism was revolutionary in the late sixties, and its language was sufficiently explicit to ensure that it was banned from many public libraries in the United States.⁶³¹

Certainly David Brauner is right to remind us just how shocking *Portnoy's Complaint* would have been at the time of its publication, yet even today there is very little in the novel that could be considered 'unexceptionable.' Take the case of Portnoy's language, which is far more than merely 'explicit.' Portnoy uses language to disarm those around him, and his wit and intellect lend his verbal attacks brutal force. Even without obscenities his language can be vicious, as is exemplified by this scene in which he addresses his hospitalized mother's respect for their rabbi who took the time to visit her before surgery:

Mother, Rabbi Warshaw is a fat, pompous, impatient fraud, with an absolutely grotesque superiority complex, a character out of Dickens is what he is, someone who if you stood next to him on the bus and didn't know he was so revered, you would say, 'That man stinks to high heaven of cigarettes,' and that is *all* you would say.⁶³²

⁶³⁰ Philip Roth, in an interview with Alan Finkelkraut, 'The Ghosts of Roth', *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Seales, Literary Conversations Series (1981; Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992) 120.

⁶³¹ David Brauner, "'Getting in Your Retaliation First": Narrative Strategies in *Portnoy's Complaint*', *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, ed. Derek Parker Royal (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005) 44-45.

⁶³² Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967; London: Vintage, 1999) 73.

Secondly, Roth's description of onanism is more than just candid or precise. It is also wildly, exceptionably inventive, even by today's standards. Roth's aforementioned comment about being 'the Jew who masturbates with liver' refers to a scene from the novel in which Portnoy masturbates with a liver bought by his mother. He confesses, 'I had [the liver] in the privacy of my own home, rolled round my cock in the bathroom at three-thirty—and then had [it] again on the end of a fork, at five-thirty, along with the other members of that poor innocent family of mine.'⁶³³ Even the most jaded of contemporary readers will balk at a character who admits that 'I fucked my own family's dinner.'⁶³⁴ Finally, there is the broader question of sex and sexual relationships. It is not just what Portnoy does, although he certainly intends to shock with his confessed activities, but it is *why* he says he does it. The most controversial and much-discussed example of Portnoy's ability to offend not only the prurient but also women and fellow Jews is his explanation for why he has such varied sex with so many *shiksas*. Thinking aloud for his psychoanalyst, he ponders his relationship with a girl he calls 'The Pilgrim', an upper-class Protestant girl of New England extraction whose upbringing of boarding schools, equestrian sports, and debutante society all represent the east coast establishment. He finally comes to the conclusion 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.'⁶³⁵ By declaring that he *uses* genteel women to 'conquer' whatever aspect of American culture that they represent—in this case, WASP culture—Portnoy marks himself as a problem for most readers, and especially for both Jewish and female readers.

⁶³³ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 134.

⁶³⁴ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 134.

⁶³⁵ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 235.

It is in these scenes in which Portnoy explains his need to define himself against the identity of a feminine 'other' that the real power and controversy of the book comes into focus. For rather than merely introducing a series of shocking images and opinions, Roth is identifying a fundamental problem with masculine identify-formation, at the same time that he anticipates and challenges the notion that masculinity is in crisis. While many critics believe the novel to be proof of Roth's hatred of women and evidence of his own misogynistic imagination, I argue that *Portnoy's Complaint* warns against the dangers of the masculine subject defining itself through a necessarily dehumanized feminine 'other.' Furthermore, rather than indulging in any so-called Jewish anti-Semitism, Roth slyly uses his own experience as an ethnic minority self-defined by its otherness to suggest that American men in general are encouraged to define themselves through a dichotomized relationship with the rest of the world. And it is the very fact that Portnoy cannot *see* any other reality than his own that is Roth's final damnation of Portnoy's deluded and narcissistic masculinity.

To begin with, the idea of what 'type' of author Philip Roth is must be examined. Is he a Jewish writer, a Jewish-American writer, or an American writer? Although this question may appear at first glance to be either explanatory or beside the point, it actually dominates much of the extant criticism concerning Philip Roth and his work. As can be seen from Roth's battles with *Commentary*, Irving Howe, and Norman Podhoretz, many of Roth's fiercest critics have been fellow Jews who not only assume Roth's identity to be that of a Jewish writer but base their criticism on their belief that, as a Jew, he should be more sympathetic towards his Jewish subjects. Even in academia, as Debra Shostak describes, much of the existing work on Roth takes as its position the idea that '[a]lthough "the Jew" is only one of his

concerns—as a subject that recurs in a variety of positions—it is a fundamental feature of his take on the world.⁶³⁶ While the influence of Judaism and Jewish culture on Roth's writing as well as his worldview is important and undeniable, Roth is also a deeply *American* writer. In fact, Roth self-consciously explores that version of American identity that is 'the Ethnic Minority,' and theorizes how being part of an ethnic minority in America is actually *in itself* a fundamentally American experience. In other words, whilst Roth is certainly, in many ways, a Jewish writer, he understands that his ethnic and religious minority status actually makes him *more*, rather than *less*, American. He develops this position in an interview:

My point is that my America in no way resembles the France or the England I would have grown up in as a Jewish child. It was not a matter of a few of us and all of them. What I saw was a few of *everyone*. Rather than growing up intimidated by the monolithic majority—or in defiance or in awe of it—I grew up feeling a part of the majority composed of the competing minorities, no one of which impressed me as being in a more enviable social or cultural position than our own.⁶³⁷

In his own words, Roth acknowledges his Jewish upbringing as one that was actually very American, and, as one critic points out, a Roth hero can never 'forget that he is both Jewish *and* American' [emphasis mine].⁶³⁸ This is not to say that Roth is unaware of anti-Semitism or the experiences of other Jews in other countries. In the same interview, he remarks that he is very much aware of the 'tragic dimension of Jewish life in Europe,' explaining that it was in the discrepancies between his own experience of life in America versus what he knows about life for Jews elsewhere that he 'found the terrain' for *Portnoy's Complaint*.⁶³⁹

⁶³⁶ Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2004) 11.

⁶³⁷ Roth, in an interview with Finkelkraut, 127.

⁶³⁸ Frederic Cople Jaher, 'The Quest for the Ultimate Shiska', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (Winter, 1983): 528.

⁶³⁹ Roth, in an interview with Finkelkraut, 127.

The idea of finding discrepancies between different people's lived experiences is of utmost importance to *Portnoy's Complaint*, and it introduces a second and more significant reason than the fact of its vulgarity to explain why the novel so thoroughly captured the public imagination. In focusing on a male protagonist who does, genuinely, want to be a *good* man—both in the sense of being moral and in the sense of being a thoroughly masculine subject—but whose desire to be good clashes with both his sexual desires and his overt attempts to define himself through a sexualized and debased feminine 'other,' Roth anticipated those anxieties that would later be diagnosed as a 'crisis of masculinity.' Consequently, in 1967, Roth presciently created a figure who embodied aspects of masculine anxiety and turmoil years before they would coalesce into the "'men's movement' of the 1970s".⁶⁴⁰ Portnoy's own tumultuous masculinity is evident in his divided life. On the one hand, Portnoy's adult life, at least as it is lived in public, appears to be successful and disciplined. Having made a promising start as a civil rights lawyer by winning high profile cases while still in his twenties, Portnoy has been made the Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunity for the City of New York.⁶⁴¹ Previously he had worked as counsel in a House Sub-Committee of the United States Congress, and he is a regular fixture at parties at Gracie Mansion, home to the Mayor of New York City.⁶⁴² Upwardly mobile in career terms, he is also portrayed as a figure of august moral rectitude – at least in public. Thus, he is currently 'conducting an investigation of unlawful discriminatory practices in the building trades of New York' that involves him in the fight against '*racial discrimination*'.⁶⁴³ And if his career success was not enough, he is accompanied at openings, parties and to restaurants by a bevy of

⁶⁴⁰ Carrigan, et al. 578.

⁶⁴¹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 110.

⁶⁴² Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 110, 213.

⁶⁴³ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 110.

beautiful women. On the social surface, at the very least, Alexander Portnoy appears to have it all.

But hidden underneath his successful exterior, Portnoy's life conceals a dark secret. First, he feels anything but successful, a fact he blames on his parents. Early in the novel a hysterical Portnoy exclaims, 'Good Christ, a Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year-old-boy, and will remain a fifteen-year old boy till *they die!*'⁶⁴⁴ He feels he is trapped in the role of 'the smothered son in the Jewish joke' similar to the joke that he often repeats in which the Jewish mother runs down the beach crying for help, shouting 'my son *the doctor* is drowning! [emphasis mine]'.⁶⁴⁵ Although both of his parents are central to the book, it is this stereotyped character of the Jewish mother who really draws the ire of both academic critics as well as Portnoy himself. For it is his mother who *really* dominates: she dominates his childhood, she dominates his father, and she dominates her household. So tyrannical is his mother's presence that Portnoy feels he lives in a Panopticon of his mother's design, having, as a child, internalized the paranoid delusion that she can see his every move and hear his every thought whatever his wishes. Meanwhile, she keeps her children under surveillance in order to ensure that she has succeeded in passing on what she believes are good Jewish values such as cleanliness, family affiliation, and a good appetite—but only for the sort of wholesome, kosher food cooked by a Jewish wife and mother. The punishment for challenging these values is to be locked out of the house or, in extreme cases such as the refusal to eat, his mother will 'pull a knife on her own son'.⁶⁴⁶ Standing above him with a bread knife while he fearfully gulps down his dinner, she asks him the questions that will haunt him for the rest of his life. She demands to know how he wants to be perceived as an adult: as 'weak or strong, a

⁶⁴⁴ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 111.

⁶⁴⁵ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 111.

⁶⁴⁶ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 16.

success or a failure, a man or a mouse?’⁶⁴⁷ But having reached adulthood, Portnoy cannot reconcile the image of the boy with a knife-wielding mother hovering above him with the image of a strong and successful man.

Against this domestic background, Portnoy blames his family, and especially his mother, for unsettling his ideas of what manhood should be and making it difficult for him to become an integrated masculine subject. He also blames them for forcing upon him an entirely schismatic view of the world. For one of the definitive lessons his mother teaches him is the allegedly essential differences between Jews and Gentiles. Typically, even this lesson is connected to food:

Self-control, sobriety, sanctions—this is the key to a human life, saith all those endless dietary laws. Let the *goyim* sink their teeth into whatever lowly creature crawls and grunts across the face of the dirty earth, we will not contaminate our humanity thus. Let *them* (if you know who I mean) gorge themselves upon anything and everything that moves, no matter how odious and abject the animal, no matter how grotesque or *shmutzig* or dumb the creature in question happens to be. Let them eat eels and frogs and pigs and crabs and lobsters; let them eat vulture, let them eat ape-meat and skunk if they like—a diet of abominable creatures well befits a breed of man-kind so hopelessly shallow and empty-headed as to drink, to divorce, and to fight with their fists.⁶⁴⁸

According to Portnoy’s vexed recollection, his childish worldview was subjected to an artificial distinction between *us* and *them*: the clean, good, and deserving Jews versus the filthy, brutish, and absolutely undeserving gentiles. He claims bitterly that ‘the very first distinction’ he learned from his parents ‘was not night and day, or hot and cold, but *goyische* and Jewish!’⁶⁴⁹ On the one hand, as critics point out, this division is to a certain extent an inevitable outgrowth of Judaism’s complex set of dietary laws:

The Jewish world is defined and controlled by dietary laws which stipulate what can be eaten and what cannot be eaten and to some extent how food is to be eaten. Consumption of the wrong food threatens ill-health. [. . .] Contrasted

⁶⁴⁷ Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* 16.

⁶⁴⁸ Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* 81.

⁶⁴⁹ Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* 75.

to Jewish cleanliness and order, forbidden and therefore polluting food and disorder are *chazerai*; they partake of the realm of the Goyim. In other words, there is a direct symbolic association amongst non-Jewish customs, forbidden food, disorder, filth, pollution and ill-health.⁶⁵⁰

Breaking bread with strange gentiles is depicted as not only physically hazardous but also unsafe in the sense that contact with outsiders threatens to divide and pollute the community. On the other hand, maintaining the separate society that this division requires means that the next generation can have no experience of the world outside of the community, producing 'a trained incompetence towards it, comprised of a physical, emotional and social incapacity.'⁶⁵¹ Besides making children ignorant of the outside world, maintaining this division has another effect, and that is the mythologizing of the goyische universe. In fact many of Portnoy's neurotic obsessions can be traced back to his ignorance regarding the ordinary lives of gentile Americans. As one critic advises, had the Portnoys stayed in the integrated Jersey City, and not moved to the almost exclusively Jewish Weequahic, then 'the mystery and allure of the gentile/American world might have been early dispelled and Portnoy's attraction to it, based as it is on myth and fantasy, might have been modified by reality.'⁶⁵² Because she tried to instil a division between her son and the world of the *goyim*, Portnoy believes that his mother is actually responsible for his most unhealthy and shameful secret: his childhood obsession with gentiles that has transformed into his compulsive desire for sex with *shiksés*.

Portnoy's obsession with sex begins as an adolescent during a period of his life that he subtitled 'Whacking Off.'⁶⁵³ While his early childhood is defined by his desire to please his parents, he soon desires only to please himself. He admits to

⁶⁵⁰ Alan Segal, 'Portnoy's Complaint and the Sociology of Literature,' *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Sep. 1971): 263.

⁶⁵¹ Segal 264.

⁶⁵² Barry Gross, 'Seduction of the Innocent: Portnoy's Complaint and Popular Culture,' *MELUS*, Vol. 8, No. 4, The Ethnic American Dream (Winter 1981): 81.

⁶⁵³ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 17.

spending 'half my waking life [. . .] locked behind the bathroom door, firing my wad' not only into the toilet bowl or the laundry hamper, but even into his own mouth, 'to take that sticky sauce of buttermilk and Clorox on my own tongue and teeth'.⁶⁵⁴

Portnoy shamefully admits to being so out of control that he could not 'cut down to one hand-job a day'; soon he finds himself masturbating 'before,' 'after,' even '[d]uring meals'.⁶⁵⁵ Claiming at one point to have been 'stricken with diarrhea', he rushes from the dinner table, locks himself in the bathroom, slips over his head 'a pair of underpants [. . .] stolen from [his] sister's dresser', and attempts to prove his position as 'the Raskalnikov of jerking off—the sticky evidence is everywhere!'.⁶⁵⁶

Portnoy blames his excessive onanism on the association of his mother's well-laden dinner table with his understanding of her as a tyrant threatening him with castration by bread knife if he dare not eat her food. He underscores the justice of this interpretation by depicting her hovering outside the bathroom door and demanding 'I want to see what you've done in there.'⁶⁵⁷ His obsession with masturbating coupled with his family's strict adherence to purity and hygiene means that he lives in the shadow of perpetual shame, and he is stricken with irrational fears as a boy. Finding a hitherto unnoticed freckle on his penis, he is convinced he has developed cancer as a punishment for his relentless onanism.⁶⁵⁸ Portnoy fears that his shame over his sexual desires coupled with his deep-rooted longing to be both good and pure by his mother's standards means that he can never be a 'real' man. In an oft-quoted tirade he angrily denounces his family and their beliefs:

It's a family joke that when I was a tiny child I turned from the window out of which I was watching a snowstorm, and hopefully asked, 'Momma, do we believe in winter?' Do you get what I'm *saying*? I was raised by Hottentots

⁶⁵⁴ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 18.

⁶⁵⁵ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 19.

⁶⁵⁶ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 19-20.

⁶⁵⁷ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 22.

⁶⁵⁸ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 19.

and Zulus! I couldn't even contemplate drinking a glass of milk with my salami sandwich without giving serious offense to God Almighty. Imagine then what my conscience gave me for all that jerking off! The guilt, the fears—the terror bred into my bones! What in their world was not charged with danger, dripping with germs, fraught with peril? Oh, where was the gusto, where was the boldness and courage? Who filled these parents of mine with such a fearful sense of life?⁶⁵⁹

Portnoy fears that his parents' vision of life, with what he perceives as its lack of appreciation for pleasure or courage or masculine vitality, has feminized him. One of Portnoy's major complaints is his belief that his disaffection from traditional masculine values as a boy means that as a man he must somehow be found wanting, and it is following this angry repudiation of his parents' attitudes and values that Portnoy asks his analysis to 'bless me with manhood', and to 'make me whole.'⁶⁶⁰ Through the process of psychoanalysis, Portnoy hopes to shed the fixations on caution and cleanliness that he believes his parents bred in him and embrace a more active and aggressive set of masculine traits.

Portnoy's infamous obsession with sex and *shiksese* is partly a response to this desperate desire to prove his masculine worth. His obsession with gentile women begins early in life, and he contrasts his intense interest for *shiksese* with his irritation for just about everyone else.⁶⁶¹ Usually he glowers at the manifold 'idiocy' of both the Jews and the *goyim*, yet amongst the 'kerchiefs and caps' of ice-skating gentile girls he is unaccountably 'ecstatic.'⁶⁶² It is not just 'the way they look, the way they move and laugh and speak' that arrests his attention; he becomes fascinated with 'the lives they must lead behind those *goyische* curtains.'⁶⁶³ Curtains in this novel bear a heavy symbolic weight: the frills and flounces that adorn gentile windows are contrasted with the cold practicality of his mother's coveted and much-loved

⁶⁵⁹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 34-35.

⁶⁶⁰ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 35.

⁶⁶¹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 144.

⁶⁶² Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 144.

⁶⁶³ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 145.

'aluminum "Venetians"'.⁶⁶⁴ For Sophie Portnoy frilly curtains symbolise the gentile obsession with mere decoration rather than the substantive values embodied in familial fidelity and religious devotion. Yet for her son these luxurious adornments gesture towards a world of *goyische* hedonism in which gentiles have seemingly unlimited access to the types of pleasure from which Jewish tribal loyalty and purity laws have excluded him. The slats of his mother's Venetian blinds appear to him as horizontal prison bars through which he peers at a fantastic world of inaccessible sensual delight. Everything changes, however, in the moment when his future brother-in-law, Morty, orders him a lobster in a New York City restaurant.⁶⁶⁵ Where once he felt like a prisoner, now he feels free, and "maybe the lobster," he reflects, "is what did it".⁶⁶⁶ Portnoy theorizes that Morty proved the taboo against eating lobster to be 'so easily and simply broken,' thus teaching him the lesson 'that to break the law, all you have to do is—just go ahead and break it!'.⁶⁶⁷ And that night, to celebrate his newly wrought independence and to cement its connection to pleasure, breaking taboos, and gentile women, he masturbates on the train next to a sleeping gentile girl 'in the seat beside me, whose tartan skirt folds I had begun to press up against with the corduroy of my trouser legs'.⁶⁶⁸ For Portnoy, as this passage attests, both independence and pleasure are inextricably linked to a cultural fantasy: the image of the beautiful *shikse* within whose affections he can finally enter the mythological realm of a *goyische* utopia free of restrictions.

Besides his mother, the reader is specifically introduced to four other women who dominate Alexander's imagination: the first three are, ostensibly, real, while the last is openly a fantasy. The first of the figures is the Pumpkin, Kay Campbell,

⁶⁶⁴ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 148.

⁶⁶⁵ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 79.

⁶⁶⁶ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 79.

⁶⁶⁷ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 79.

⁶⁶⁸ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 79.

Portnoy's girlfriend at his decidedly *goyische* college of Antioch.⁶⁶⁹ The Pumpkin stands out in Portnoy's catalogue of gentile ladies simply because she seems to be the most solidly realized of the four. A sturdy girl from the mid-west, Portnoy calls her the Pumpkin not only because of her 'pigmentation' and 'the size of her can' but also because she was 'hard as a gourd on matters of moral principle'.⁶⁷⁰ Alone amidst his bevy of beauties, Kay Campbell is distinguishable because she is the only woman he admits to envying, in her case for her moral stubbornness.⁶⁷¹ To say this is not to say that the Pumpkin does not also accrue her share of ridicule; Portnoy's recollections of his visit to her house—his first to an entirely gentile domain—begin in admiration and end in his poking fun at the banal breakfast patter of her family.⁶⁷² But his real vituperation is saved for the other two examples of Portnoy's real-life lovers: the Pilgrim and the Monkey. The "Pilgrim" is in actuality Sarah Abbott Maulsby of 'New Canaan, Foxcroft, and Vassar'.⁶⁷³ Whereas Kay Campbell was middle-class and mid-western, the Pilgrim is precisely what her aristocratic soubriquet suggests: a young woman who can probably trace her lineage back to the Mayflower. She is a member of the invisible but powerful American aristocracy, and she bears all of the accompanying traits and gifts of that privileged caste. In his relationship with Sarah Abbott Maulsby, or the Pilgrim, Portnoy seems to have reacted to her aristocratic lineage by attempting to use her as a portal through which to enter high society. But Portnoy takes his claim that he uses the Pilgrim to 'stick it up their [WASP American] backgrounds,' a step further by also associating her with his father's employer, Mr. Lindabury.⁶⁷⁴ This association is important to Portnoy and crucial to the novel. His

⁶⁶⁹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 215.

⁶⁷⁰ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 216.

⁶⁷¹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 216.

⁶⁷² Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 219-226.

⁶⁷³ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 232.

⁶⁷⁴ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 235.

father works for an insurance company who will not promote a Jew to manager and he, therefore, spends his life scraping by, beset by perpetual bouts of constipation that represent his stifled existence. And so Portnoy divulges that 'Sally Maulsby was just something nice a son once did for his dad. A little vengeance on Mr. Lindabury for all those nights and Sundays Jack Portnoy spent collecting down in the colored district. A little bonus from Boston and Northeastern, for all those years of service, and exploitation.'⁶⁷⁵ In his convoluted verbal testimony Portnoy confesses to self-consciously using Sally Maulsby not only to 'stick [his] dick' up her background, but also to exploit her in the way that he feels his father was exploited by the social class she represents. In these regards, the Pilgrim appears to have no real existence for Portnoy besides his fantasized image of her as representative of a certain American class.

On the opposite side of the social divide from the Pilgrim is the Monkey, so-named for a sexual exploit she performed with a banana.⁶⁷⁶ While the Pilgrim hails from the highest American social class, the Monkey comes from the lowest stratum of the working classes. She is practically illiterate, culturally crass, and pornographically sexualized throughout the novel. In one episode she cries out to Portnoy, 'Oh, sweetheart, darling [. . .] pick a hole, any hole, I'm yours!'⁶⁷⁷ While Portnoy professes delight in his new girlfriend's lack of inhibitions, his thoughts on the matter reveal a dark undercurrent:

What strength she has stored in that slender frame—the glorious acrobatics she can perform while dangling from the end of my dork! You'd think she'd snap a vertebra, hanging half her torso backward over the side of the bed—in ecstasy! Yi! Thank God for that gym class she goes to! What screwing I am getting! What a deal! And yet it turns out that she is also a human being—yes, she gives every indication that this may be so! *A human being! Who can be loved!*

⁶⁷⁵ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 240-241.

⁶⁷⁶ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 106.

⁶⁷⁷ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 196.

But by me?⁶⁷⁸

The sad fact that Portnoy doubts he can love this girl who so desperately wants to marry him is overshadowed by the horrifying fact that he seems to be surprised at her very humanity. He exhibits neither compassion nor respect for the Monkey. And yet this lack of respect should not be unexpected, considering what we know of his feelings for the Pilgrim. After all, Portnoy uses Sally Maulsby to humiliate and dominate the upper-class establishment that discriminates against Jews by barring them access to opportunity. But whereas Mr. Lindabury and his ilk may hide their anti-Semitism behind a corporate structure, the Monkey represents exactly the kind of coarse, uneducated, drunk and violent goyishe world that Portnoy's mother warned him about and that scarred her ancestors' lives in Eastern Europe. By sexually humiliating the Monkey and the Pilgrim, Portnoy attempts to strip two of his childhood nemeses of their power: the spectre of the privileged gentile who represents the powers that be as well as the openly and violently anti-Semitic underclass. These women are the two most obvious examples in the novel of Portnoy's utilization of female figures to dominate aspects of the larger world that he both fears and hates.

There is, however, a final feminine figure who recurs throughout *Portnoy's Complaint* but unlike the Pilgrim and the Monkey she receives very little critical attention. This figure is Thereal McCoy, Portnoy's wholly imaginary feminine alter-ego. When Portnoy was young, he imagined Thereal as the paragon of his ice-skating companions:

In her blue parka and her red earmuffs and her big white mittens—Miss America, on blades! With her mistletoe and her plum pudding (whatever that may be), and her one-family house with a banister and a staircase, and parents who are tranquil and patient and *dignified*, and also a brother Billy who knows

⁶⁷⁸ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 194.

how to take motors apart and says 'Much obliged,' and isn't afraid of anything physical [. . .].⁶⁷⁹

Thereal originally represents the sort of wholesome, mild-mannered American existence that Portnoy feels is this opposite of his own insular, argumentative and ritual-obsessed home-life. But with the onset of puberty, she evolves into Portnoy's ultimate *shikse* sex-goddess:

She pushes Drake's Daredevil Cupcakes (chocolate with a white creamy center) down over my cock and then eats them off of me, flake by flake. She pours maple syrup out of the Log Cabin can and then licks it from my tender balls until they're clean again as a little baby boy's. Her favourite line of English prose is a masterpiece: 'Fuck my pussy, Fuckface, till I faint.' When I fart in the bathtub, she kneels naked on the tile floor, leans all the way over, and kisses the bubbles. She sits on my cock while I take a shit, plunging into my mouth a nipple the size of a tollhouse cookie, and all the while whispering every filthy word she knows viciously into my ear.⁶⁸⁰

Thereal functions for Portnoy as the representation of a number of his obsessional fantasies. Most obviously, this catalogue of food and defecation related sexual depravity continues Portnoy's connection of *chazerai* and gentile America with pleasure and sexual gratification but also dirt and corruption. Moreover, while Thereal may be Portnoy's fantasy figure of smut personified—filthy, corrupt, and corrupting—she is also, like Portnoy's girlfriends, inextricably tied to a version of America. This identification is underscored by her litany of brand-named sexual props: Tollhouse cookies, Log Cabin Syrup, and Drake's Daredevil Cupcakes. Just like the Pilgrim, the Pumpkin, and the Monkey, Thereal McCoy symbolizes an aspect of American life, in this case that of conspicuous consumption and materialism. Her caricatured sexuality also makes her an excellent example of Portnoy's misogynistic imagination. But what is most interesting about this figure is that Thereal is explicitly

⁶⁷⁹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 151.

⁶⁸⁰ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 131.

a fantasy, and yet she seems to play as important a role in Portnoy's understanding of his emotional and psychological development as the real women in his life.

Along with Thereal McCoy, Portnoy's other great fantasy counterpart, Seymour Schmuck, deserves critical attention. Portnoy introduces Seymour as a caricatured amalgamation of all the 'perfect' Jewish sons that his mother is constantly telling him about, presumably as proof of his own filial failings:

[. . .] Seymour is now the biggest brain surgeon in the entire Western Hemisphere. He owns six different split-level ranch-type houses made all of fieldstone in Livingston, and belongs to the boards of eleven synagogues, all brand new and designed by Marc Kugel, and last year with his wife and his two little daughters, who are so beautiful that they are already under contract to Metro, and so brilliant that they should be in college—he took them all to Europe for an eighty-million-dollar tour of seven-thousand countries, some of them you never even heard of, that they made them just to honor Seymour, and on top of that, he's so important, Seymour, that in every single city in Europe that they visited he was asked by the mayor himself to stop and do an impossible operation on a brain in hospitals that they also built for him right on the spot, and—listen to this—where they pumped into the operating room during the operation the theme song from *Exodus* so everybody should know what religion he is—and that's how big your friend Seymour is today! *And how happy he makes his parents!*⁶⁸¹

To Portnoy, Seymour represents the sort of man that he feels has been made into a mouse by the expectations of family and religious community. He may be wealthy and successful, but he has lived his life only to make *others* happy. He lacks the vitality and wilfulness that Portnoy associates with the non-Jewish man, and, instead, exemplifies only the obedience and passivity of the infantile Jewish son. Seymour Schmuck is further evidence of Portnoy's belief that to be a Jewish son means to be a boy for the majority of one's life. Just as Thereal McCoy represents Portnoy's most chauvinistic fantasies, many readers perceive Seymour Schmuck as evidence of Portnoy's latent anti-Semitism. In a similar vein, Portnoy's indulgences with gentile women are often depicted as proof that he is a self-hating Jew. An all-too-familiar

⁶⁸¹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 99-100.

reading of the book represents Portnoy's 'shiksa fantasies' as his 'insurrections against his parents and Judaism' as well as 'his own divided personality'.⁶⁸² According to Frederic Cople Jaher, this reading focuses on Portnoy's belief that '[t]he well-behaved achiever', such as Seymour Schmuck, 'should be rewarded with the girl-next-door in an upper-class WASP neighbourhood, but the shameful prisoner of lust,' such as Alexander Portnoy, 'deserves (and craves) the shiksa whore.'⁶⁸³ In this reading, Portnoy's exploitation of his gentile women represents a fantasy of revenge against his Jewish family and their Jewish traditions. While this reading of Alexander Portnoy is certainly accurate, it also indicates the common perception that it is not Alexander Portnoy, but Philip Roth, who sought to use this novel as his revenge against the Judaism he resents. It is my contention, however, that *Portnoy's Complaint* is not about being Jewish but about *being a man*. While Portnoy blames his inability to be a man specifically on his Jewish upbringing, Roth undermines an entirely 'Jewish' reading of the book through the curiously American characterization of Seymour Schmuck.

That Seymour Schmuck is more than just a jibe against Jewish masculinity can be discerned from his description. Excepting the theme song from *Exodus*, Seymour Schmuck is as much a fantasy version of the *American Dream* as he is the self-regarding pseudo-lament of a Jewish mother.⁶⁸⁴ Schmuck is a man who has 'made it' not in the sense of spiritual enlightenment or religious observance but in the sense of physical prosperity and material success. Whilst he is obviously well educated, a good father, and involved in the community, all representative of so-called 'good Jewish values', these aspects of his life are actually used to prove his success, rather

⁶⁸² Jaher 540.

⁶⁸³ Jaher 540.

⁶⁸⁴ And although the subject of *Exodus* is explicitly Jewish, it was also a big-budget, successful Hollywood film that did well at the Oscars. As such, it too is as much a symbol of worldly success as it is 'Jewish'.

than his integrity. After all, his education is evidenced by his success in the very lucrative career of surgeon, a career that allows him to travel Europe exhibiting his skill. His strengths as a father are substantiated by the beauty and brains of his daughters, whom his money clothes and educates to the highest degree. Even his participation in religion and community, as represented by his work in various synagogues, is overshadowed by both the number of synagogues involved as well the fact that they are 'all brand new and all designed by Marc Kugel'. Indeed, the words that dominate Seymour's descriptions are various adjectives for 'new' as well as the figures for the amounts of money he is either paid or spends. Seymour Schmuck is a success because of his new-world material success, rather than old-world spiritual enlightenment. There is also an evident banality evinced by the imagination that would invent Seymour Schmuck: he does not own mansions or estates, but 'split-level ranch-type houses'. While this could be Portnoy's jibe at what he imagines is his parent's own lack of imagination, the figure of Seymour Schmuck actually echoes Portnoy's admiring description of the Pumpkin's modest but all-American success of a father, who is a 'real estate broker and an alderman of the Davenport town council'.⁶⁸⁵ For 'All-American Success' is exactly what Seymour Schmuck is: he is economically well-off, has standing in his community, and, above all, is someone whom others look up to *as a man*. Indeed, in many ways, Seymour Schmuck is really just a grossly exaggerated caricature of those very-same values that Portnoy holds up to his parents as proof of his own maturity and achievement. He attempts to force his parents to treat him as an adult by reminding them of his success as a lawyer, his friendship with important figures such as the mayor of New York City, and his ethical credentials: he works for congress and he fights racism. He wants them to see

⁶⁸⁵ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 221.

him as an important man who holds a deserved position of respect in his society. And yet these same traits are those of Seymour Schmuck, whom he associates not with manliness, but with being 'good'. They are the opposite of those values he yearns for when he cries out to his father, asking him where is his 'gusto', 'boldness' and 'sense of life'.⁶⁸⁶

Rather than locating Portnoy's complaint in the 'real' relationships he has with the 'real' characters in the book, I locate the heart of his conflict in his fantasy realm where it inheres between his two creations of Seymour Schmuck and Thereal McCoy. These two characters represent the rifts in Portnoy's philosophies, as well as the illogical nature of his desires. Indeed, far from identifying with or justifying Portnoy and his various obsessions, Roth carefully and relentlessly undermines his protagonist's assumptions through Portnoy's relationship to the two opposing fantasies represented by Seymour and Thereal. Although Alexander certainly cannot see it, Roth elliptically suggests that Sophie Portnoy's definition of a 'good' son and man is, for the most part, a very *American* definition of masculinity based upon 'respectable' virtues such as material success, familial devotion, and community standing. In this sense Seymour Schmuck could easily exchange places with the Pumpkin's utterly Midwestern father, that humble example of virtue, affection and material achievement. But what of Thereal McCoy? Reflecting upon the role of popular culture in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Barry Gross argues that Portnoy's connection to popular culture, especially through radio and cinema, not only defines his unrealistic vision of gentiles and America, but also explicitly connects the gentile world *with* America: 'all American is "Goy!"'.⁶⁸⁷ While I disagree with this last aspect of Gross's reading, his argument that Portnoy is heavily influenced by the radio

⁶⁸⁶ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 35.

⁶⁸⁷ Gross 83.

and cinema of his childhood lends an interesting interpretation to the end of the novel.⁶⁸⁸ In this last, hyperbolic display, Portnoy acts out a favourite cinematic stereotype. He plays the part of a criminal on the lam involved in a shoot out with the police, during which he cries out 'But at least while I lived, I lived big!' before letting out a barbaric yawp and engaging with the police in a suicidal gun battle.⁶⁸⁹ Opposed to the Seymour Schmuck version of respectable masculinity there is the version of masculinity represented by the sort of man who 'lives big'; the sort of man who sports women like Thereal McCoy draped over his arm. This man is no one's son, father, or husband; he is entirely his own, answering only to himself. When Portnoy fantasizes about being the outsider—the gangster who yells 'Up society's ass, Copper!'—he fantasizes about being that alternative version of masculinity that exhibits 'gusto,' 'boldness,' and 'courage' rather than restraint and obedience.⁶⁹⁰

In these and other ways Portnoy's Jewish-American upbringing and the conflicts that Portnoy believes it engenders actually disclose a very American crisis of masculinity. As Peter Schwenger warns, '[t]he very stability of the social context, which seems so opposed to the male destructive element, ensures its continuation: for it is in social expectations that the male mythology has its origins.'⁶⁹¹ In the novel, society's competing but equally prevalent definitions of masculinity are, on the one hand, that of the Seymour Schmuck, with his excessive material success, upward mobility, and social respectability. But on the other hand, there lurks that destructive but bold figure of domination, vitality and aggression who pursues his pleasure with

⁶⁸⁸ Indeed, the example given from the novel of a film character—the gangster, or mafia figure—is anything *but* 'all American' and, in fact, better suits Roth's definition of American as one of 'competing minorities'.

⁶⁸⁹ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 274.

⁶⁹⁰ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 274.

⁶⁹¹ Peter Schwenger, 'The Masculine Mode,' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Summer 1979): 633.

gusto and lets women know that 'I am the man around here, and I call the shots!'.⁶⁹² There is the doctor-son, who gives his mother something to brag about even as he drowns, and there is the 'Mad Dog' mobster with his 'guns blazing' who may die young but courageously 'lived big.'⁶⁹³ The fact that these oft-recycled characters present neither imaginative nor plausible images of vital and productive life does not occur to Portnoy. Incredibly, for a man who claims to have been raised with binary oppositions such as Jew versus Gentile, he fails to understand these two 'choices' of doctor or Mad Dog are, in reality, the negative images of one another. They represent two extremes of the masculine American imaginary: Johnny Appleseed opposed to Al Capone, moll in tow. In this sense, what his mother really wanted, albeit in her own Jewish terms, was, like most American mothers, to have a son that took part in the American dream of material success and upward social mobility. But for every story told or movie made about wholesome Americans benefiting from manners and morals, there exists an alternative vision of sex, violence and *independence*.

That Portnoy cannot decide between a version of masculinity as Seymour Schmuck or the version with Thereal McCoy draped over his arm is not the fault of his Jewishness or his Jewish parents. Rather, it implicates a divided and materialistic American society that is on the verge of a major 'crisis of masculinity,' increasingly stricken by changing sex roles challenged by economical and social upheaval. A further implication, however, is that this upheaval may not be a bad thing. As Schwenger admonishes, '[I]ike war, masculinity may be nourished by society until it has grown to a point where it turns to destroy that which brought it into being.'⁶⁹⁴ *Portnoy's Complaint* does illustrate a man right on that threshold of self-destruction, the victim of a society guilty of cultivating a set of dangerously unrealistic and

⁶⁹² Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 88.

⁶⁹³ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 274.

⁶⁹⁴ Schwenger 633.

extreme masculine stereotypes. And yet, that Portnoy has sought out Dr. Spielvogel for help with his condition is heartening, for it proves that he knows something is wrong and acknowledges that it is something wrong with *him*. Dr. Spielvogel's response is also encouraging. After patiently enduring Portnoy's 274 page tirade without comment, the novel closes with what Portnoy understands to be the punch line of his life story: 'So [*said the doctor*]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?'⁶⁹⁵ This last comment is obviously a humorous dig at Portnoy, who thinks that, with the conclusion of his rant, the doctor will cure him and send him on his way, not announce that they can only now commence with his treatment. But this is also Roth's concluding indictment of Portnoy's obviously biased "confession"—his final reminder that Portnoy is a patient, in need of care, and not to be trusted—as well as an indication that there is yet hope for Portnoy's recovery. The very nature of Portnoy's narrative—the confessions of a hysteric on the couch of his psychoanalyst—as well as the response of his doctor—who indicates that Portnoy's own self-diagnoses are flawed and that his 'confession' is only the beginning of his treatment—undercuts assertions that Roth wants us to applaud or empathize with Portnoy. For Portnoy may, indeed, be a victim, but Roth is careful to expose Portnoy as someone who needs to rethink his conception of masculinity, as well as to expose the real culprit. Rather than his Jewish heritage, or the machinations of women, Portnoy is the victim of the unworkable demands of an American culture that mythologizes unrealistic and imprudent models of masculinity.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have defended my assertion that critics are wrong when they represent Roth or Amis as having an unhealthy or obsessive fixation on dead and

⁶⁹⁵ Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* 274.

deadly images of women, and suggested that their real interest is with men and masculinity. Both Roth and Amis, if they are 'obsessed' with anything, are fascinated by how the masculine subject is formed. Both seem concerned by a masculine propensity to imagine itself through a necessarily dehumanized feminine 'other,' and both, to a certain extent, appear to agree with an academic and popular discourse that positions masculinity as 'in crisis.' Their fiction, however, clearly illustrates limits on 'the crisis of masculinity'. Male characters such as Keith Talent and Alexander Portnoy may genuinely be 'in crisis', but both Roth and Amis depict the ultimate victims of this 'crisis' to be the women in their characters' lives. In other words, these novels are not apologies for men nor are they excuses for violence against women. They are, as critics are often happy to point out, about misogynists; but not in the way such criticism suggest. Rather, as my thesis argues, Roth and Amis are fascinated by what makes a man what he is: be he Nazi, misogynist, or good friend and neighbour.

Conclusion

This thesis concludes where it began, with the questions posed by Julia Keller in her article about Philip Roth. Keller titles her article 'Philip Roth Hates Women', an absolutely unequivocal statement accusing Roth of misogyny. And yet her subtitle to the article is, 'Is this true and does it matter?'.⁶⁹⁶ Keller answers the first question with a resounding 'Yes.' She has no doubt that Roth *does* hate women and that this hatred is writ large across the pages of his novels. But her second question, in which she asks 'does it matter' if Roth is a misogynist, represents the typical approach to Roth and Amis found in both academic criticism and popular journalism. While this question might appear provocatively and rhetorically to accuse a man of hating women and then glibly to ask whether or not hating women 'matters,' she complicates any straightforward answer by immediately referring to Roth as a 'genius.' By raising the issues of 'genius' and prejudice in the same characterization of an artist, Keller calls attention to a complicated set of problems haunting literary criticism. Can a writer be a racist, or an anti-Semite, or a misogynist and still be a 'genius'? Should not being a 'genius' preclude any adherence to such obviously illogical prejudices as hating someone based on their gender, ethnicity, religion, or colour? And yet, within academia, we canonize writers such as Ezra Pound despite his infamously racist and anti-Semitic attitudes.

As my thesis has argued, it is impossible to answer these questions without first addressing the specific criticisms levelled against Roth and Amis and examining the forms of fiction Roth and Amis are writing. While countless pages have been filled with accusations against and defences of both writers, it is the fundamental

⁶⁹⁶ Julia Keller, 'Philip Roth Hate's Women' *Chicago Tribune* June 1, 2006, section five, page 1.

premise of this thesis that all of these critiques and justifications are beside the point. For it is my contention that those who read Roth or Amis 'as' misogynists do so out of profound misreadings of both writers' novels. Such misreadings are often based on a fantasized interaction on the part of the critic between him or herself and the caricatured media ghoul that represents Roth or Amis in popular journalism. Who would not want to publicly divorce themselves from the much-publicized lecherous lunatic that is Roth *qua* Portnoy or the nepotistic aspiring yob that is Amis *qua* Keith Talent? And yet these caricatures are just that, crassly drawn portraits of Roth and Amis that have little to do with the fiction they actually write.

The reason that I assert that this thesis is not a 'defence' of Roth and Amis is that I believe they do not need it. It is not that they are 'easy' or 'nice' writers, their books *are* challenging and they *do* present the reader with repugnant images and philosophies. But these images and beliefs are not presented to serve some misogynistic agenda on Roth's or Amis's part but because they are representative of the sorts of belief systems in which Amis and Roth are actually interested. Both writers want to understand why people, and especially men, do what they do and *believe* what they do. In other words, they are not just happy with diagnosing social ills; they do not merely reproduce 'problems'. A good example of this is Amis's Keith Talent. Keith is a rapist and wife-beater and yet these horrifying realities are presented elliptically, almost as footnotes to his character. Amis is not interested in parading before the reader another example of a wife-beating sexual brute. Rather, Amis is interested in assessing the limits of cultural norms and questioning forms of social acceptability. The difference between these two ideas is that the former, in which Keith is merely paraded before the reader as an example of how not to behave, would depict Keith as a model of a 'bad' masculine subject which must be labelled

and shamed. Such a depiction would suggest that Keith is at fault for his behaviour and is, therefore, in control of his character and that he is capable of change. But the latter idea is far more unnerving in that Amis suggests, through Keith, a whole range of influences upon men and the masculine subject that preclude change or even self-understanding. In other words, Amis and Roth are interested less in what men do than in why they do it.

Critics of both authors, however, will attempt to undermine this sort of assertion by claiming that any thematic exploration of 'why men do what they do' is undercut by both writers' focus on corrupt and corrupting images of women, of violence against women, and the depiction of the pleasure that the degradation of women brings to certain of their male characters. In other words, some would argue that even if Roth and Amis are genuinely interested in formulating a critique of violent masculine subjectivity, it does not matter if, in doing so, they give imaginative life to exactly the sort of violent masculine fantasies they claim to be criticizing. I would argue, however, that such an assertion assumes that the particular nature of fantasies or philosophies is inconsequential, and that it is only the effect of images or philosophies that matter. Roth and Amis understand that it is not only what people do but also the particularities of a character's self-representation as well as their internal life that matters. Support of this lies in their discussion of trauma, World War Two, and the Holocaust. No one would argue with the fact that Nazis were anti-Semitic and yet 'knowing' this is not enough. The real fascination, as *Time's Arrow* reiterates, lies in *why* men like Odilo Unverdorben came to believe what they did and how otherwise average people were able to commit such horrendous atrocities. *Time's Arrow* also recalls the reader's attention to the fact that violence has, quite simply, already been done. There is no act of brutality, sadism, or savagery that has

not already been enacted to its fullest extent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. And so, when Philip Roth depicts Mickey Sabbath attempting to bribe a drunk with vodka for sexual favours Roth is not falsifying human nature in order to fulfil some personal fantasy of perversion. Set, as Mickey's childhood is, against the backdrop of World War Two, his personal history suggests that while he may act monstrously, any wicked act that he commits is insignificant compared to the barbarity of the world in which he was raised.

In other words, those critics who would ask Amis and Roth to tone down their criticisms for fear that their detailed depictions of violent ideologies might inspire violence are deceiving themselves; such violence is already omnipresent. Roth and Amis, furthermore, do not merely recreate the mindlessly repetitive violence of a video game or horror film; they actually depict less of what characters such as Portnoy, Sabbath, Keith Talent, or Odilo Unverdorben *do* as what they *think*. The reader knows that Portnoy sodomizes his girlfriends, that Keith Talent beats his wife, that Sabbath urinates on his lovers, and that Odilo commits genocide, but these details *as images or fantasies* are peripheral to what these details mean in the greater context of the individual character's ideological approach to life and of the character's wider social *zeitgeist*. And this brings me to the final claim of my thesis: that Amis's and Roth's fiction explores some of the most pressing issues relevant to contemporary society. Both writers seek to articulate how the masculine subject is formed, and this focus on masculinity encompasses an interest in how masculinity imagines itself through a necessarily dichotomized feminine 'other'. Roth and Amis also share an interest in history, trauma, and narrative, subjects that the war in Iraq and the effects of terrorism have made as current and crucial as they ever have been. Finally, their interest in ideology, especially in a world rife with religious fundamentalism and

radical political ideologies, means that their fiction will continue to be prescient and most certainly controversial. It is my hope that this thesis will encourage readers of Philip Roth and Martin Amis to move away from reading them 'as' misogynists, and to focus on the real issues at stake in their fiction. To do otherwise would be to waste the prodigious talent and intellect of two of the West's most startling and subversive writers.

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