

Philip Roth's Experimental Ethics

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In his 1963 essay "Writing About Jews" (later collected in *Reading Myself and Others*) Philip Roth suggests that fiction has the capacity to enact an "expansion of moral consciousness", and this is of "considerable value to a man and society" (151). When confronted with the fictionalized lives of others, he explains, one is inclined to judge actions in ways that are often unavailable in everyday life:

One of the greatneses of the art [of fiction] is that it allows both the writer and the reader to respond to experience in ways that are not always available in day-to-day conduct; or, if they are available, they are not possible, or manageable, or legal, or advisable, or even necessary to the business of living. We may not even know we have such a range of feelings until we have come into contact with the work of fiction (*Reading Myself and Others* 151).

Here, he gives the example of the experience of an adulterous man. "Some people", Roth suggests, may experience this man "as a cheat and nothing else" but the man "usually experiences himself as something more" (151). Fiction, Roth continues, can bring about an understanding of this "something more", prompting individuals to move beyond a day-to-day morality in which it is enough to say that "we disapprove of the act and are disappointed in the man" (151). The point is not "that either reader or writer no longer brings any judgement to bear on human action. Rather, we judge at a different level of our being, for not only are we judging with the aid of new feelings but without the necessity of having to act upon judgement" (151). Roth's statement here is illustrative of what I want to call his "experimental ethics", and I am using this term in two senses. Roth's writing, I wish to argue in this article, performs experiments on ethics – it is concerned with finding new ways of bringing "judgement to bear on human action". But it also subjects itself to experimental ethics. By this I mean that Roth's experiments are heavily concerned with self-interrogation and justification.

It is also my contention that Roth's experimental ethics were forged through his engagement with psychology. The link between Roth and psychology is frequently drawn. Paul Mosher and Jeffrey Berman, for instance, note Roth's "attunement to the unconscious" and suggest that he is "perhaps the country's leading psychological novelist" (82). For "psychological", here, one might well substitute "psychoanalytic" as Berman and Mosher clearly have in mind Freudian psychology. And with good reason. Roth is known to have undergone analysis with Hans Kleinschmidt from 1962 to 1967 (Roth Pierpoint 49) and has himself suggested that this experience had a large effect on his work:

If I hadn't been analyzed I wouldn't have written *Portnoy's Complaint* as I wrote it, or *My Life as a Man* [1974] as I wrote it, nor would *The Breast* [1972] resemble itself. Nor would I resemble myself. The experience of psychoanalysis was probably more useful to me as a writer than as a neurotic, although there may be a false distinction there. (qtd. in Searles 170)

There is no doubt, then, that Roth used psychoanalysis in his writing but this article will not confine itself to the question of Roth's engagement with Freud and his followers. The emphasis on Freudian psychology in Mosher and Berman's discussion reflects a wider trend in the reception of Roth's work. Roth's writing has often been read in relation to Freud and other psychoanalytic writers, with little attention being paid to his engagement with more laboratory-based forms of psychology, a pattern of scholarship that is by no means atypical for a literary writer. Judith Ryan writes: "when we think of the relation between psychology and literature most of us think of Freudian psychology or one of its more recent modifications, such as that of [Jacques] Lacan" (1). On a similar note, Rick Rylance observes: "for many cultural historians and literary critics, psychoanalysis has long been considered the branch of psychology most suited to humanistic enquiry" (8). However, as books such as Ryan's and Rylance's exemplify, the relationship between literature and other branches of psychology has received more attention from the 1990s onwards. This is particularly true in the case of nineteenth-century literature, with studies by Sally Shuttleworth and Gregory Tate doing much to show the degree to which prominent poets and novelists of the period engaged with a range of emergent psychological theories. Some critics have also looked to the way in which twentieth-century authors, such as Katherine Mansfield and Samuel Beckett, have engaged with non-Freudian forms of psychology (see Kimber, Martin and Hanson; Breuer; Barry, Maude and Salisbury; Powell). In what follows, I want to extend this line of research by exploring the link between Roth's ethical concerns and those of mid-to-late twentieth-century experimental psychology and psychotherapy.

I will begin by outlining the changes in psychological ethics that came about in the aftermath of the Second World War. In that period, the rise of social psychology in Europe and America meant that psychologists were increasingly experimenting on the ethical capacities of the human subject. At the same time stringent regulations were put in place which meant that psychologists had to modify their own practice to accord with a specific brand of utilitarian ethics. This context, I will argue, was important in the development of Roth's writing. Through a reading of the little-known, short play "The National Pastime" (1965), I will suggest that Roth was thinking about the ethics of psychological experimentation from an early point in his literary career. Then, focusing on three works from Roth's middle period – *My Life as a Man*, *Deception* (1990) and *Patrimony* (1991) – I will advance the argument that Roth's concern with the ethics of his own practice was informed by his (involuntary) participation in psychoanalytic research. From there I will look further forward to the novel *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), frequently considered Roth's masterpiece. In this work, Roth's engagement with psychology can be seen in the way in which the novel experiments on the ethical responses of its reader while reflecting on the ethics of aesthetic experimentation.

Social Benefits and Ethical Questions

Hanging over all biomedical and scientific experimentation in the mid-to-late late twentieth century was one particular series of events. In the 1940s, as the scale of Nazi atrocities was uncovered at the Nuremberg trials, the so-called "Doctor's Trial" (1946-7) brought to light the appalling practices of human experimentation carried out by the Nazi regime. The decisions of the Nuremberg court not only prompted the executions of those found to have been responsible for this programme of research but also triggered the establishment of various codes of ethics for future biomedical and behavioural experimentation. The Nuremberg Code of 1947 "was drafted as a set of standards for judging physicians and scientists who had conducted biomedical experiments on concentration camp prisoners" and the Helsinki Declaration (1964) did

much to solidify the relevance of these standards to future practice (Sales and Folkman 197). More specifically related to psychology, the American Psychological Association published a code of ethics "for the conduct of social and behavioural research" in 1973 (195). The United States federal government formalized these principles in 1974 with the National Research Act, which established a commission for the protection of human subjects (195). All of these developments were brought together in the Belmont Report (1979), conducted by the U.S. government's Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which outlined an official set of principles and guidelines for anyone conducting research with human subjects. The report begins with direct reference to the cultural climate, which prompted it:

Scientific research has produced substantial social benefits. It has also posed some troubling ethical questions. Public attention was drawn to these questions by reported abuses of human subjects in biomedical experiments, especially during the Second World War. (197)

Scientific research, here, is noted for its productivity. Research is not deemed an end in itself but a process which should bring benefits to society. Because it is not considered a good in its own right, research must justify itself through what it produces. Thus it will inevitably pose "ethical questions", as a decision will always have to be made as to whether what it produces is beneficial. This definition of research is distinguished from therapy, which, for the report, is "designed solely to enhance the well-being of an individual patient" (197). Therapy is defined by its good intention towards an individual and its success or failure can be defined by its effect on the individual patient's well-being. Thus if therapy is successful it invariably brings about "well-being". If therapy can succeed, it should be done. The success of research, on the other hand, does not necessarily bring about well-being. Instead, the researcher "sets forth an objective and a set of procedures designed to reach that objective"; their ultimate aim being to "develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" (198). But this objective is not, in itself, deemed enough to make research worthwhile. For the authors, research should not only outline a reachable objective, but also make a convincing argument that this objective is socially beneficial:

In the case of scientific research in general, members of the larger society are obliged to recognize the longer term benefits and risks that may result from the improvement of knowledge and from the development of novel medical, psychotherapeutic and social procedures. (200)

Thus, the advancement of knowledge is not, in itself, seen to justify experimentation with human subjects. If the knowledge one can acquire by research has greater potential to be harmful than good for society then one should not set about attempting to acquire it.

Alongside the imperative for research to bring about social benefits, the report emphasizes respect for the autonomy of human subjects. The report advances the "basic ethical" principle that human subjects are acknowledged as autonomous people, "capable of deliberation about personal goals and of acting under the direction of such deliberation" (198). It is recognized that "not every human being is capable of self-determination" and that such people sometimes "need extensive protection", in which case their autonomy might be justifiably compromised. This leads to the question of informed consent. When participating in research, it is judged that, though it is desirable

for subjects to be informed of what they are doing and why, there are cases in which the subject's awareness would damage the research. In these cases, the harm done to the subject is to be weighed against the benefits of research to society (198). Thus, the report does put some limits on the importance of autonomy. On the whole, though, the principle of autonomy is deemed the best method of ensuring against repetitions of the abuse of human subjects during the Second World War.

The 1960s and 1970s were not only a time in which psychological experimentation became more stringently-regulated; the period also saw many psychological experiments on the human capacity (or incapacity) for ethical decision making. The most famous of these studies are undoubtedly Stanley Milgram's "Obedience to Authority" research and Philip Zimbardo's "Stanford Prison Experiment". In Milgram's experiment, a group of participants volunteered to take part in what they thought was a study of memory. They were asked to play the role of Teacher, asking a Learner questions and administering increasingly severe shocks of 15 to 450 volts when given incorrect responses. What they were not told was that the Learner was a confederate and the shocks were not real. Milgram was not interested in memory but in the severity of the shock that the participants would be willing to give if prompted. It was found that the participants were willing to give very severe (and even potentially fatal) shocks, with 65% of participants going up to the full 450 volts (Milgram 373-5). Around a decade later, Zimbardo carried out his Stanford Prison Experiment which cast participants as "prisoners" or "guards" and placed them in a mock prison that had been set up in the Stanford Psychology Department. Zimbardo observed the behaviour of the participants when placed in these roles and his findings were disturbing. Within six days, the experiment had to be stopped due to the level of abuse that the "guards" were inflicting on the "prisoners" (Haney, Banks and Zimbardo 1-17).

It is frequently argued that the results of these experiments had a major influence on academic and popular conceptions of the human capacity for ethical decision-making. As Alexander Haslam and Stephen Reicher put it, the findings have "shaped popular understanding, such that 'everyone knows' that people inevitably succumb to the demands of authority, however immoral the consequences" (1). Again the legacy of the Second World War played a major role here. Milgram, in fact, directly addresses the "inhumane policies" of the Second World War in the introduction to his study (371). More specifically, Milgram's experiment was staged around a year after the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann and the experiment is frequently placed alongside Hannah Arendt's influential observations about Eichmann when reporting on the trial. Haslam and Reicher suggest that "much of the power of Milgram and Zimbardo's research derives from the fact that it appears to give "empirical substance" to Arendt's claim that evil is banal and "our desire to be good subjects is stronger than our desire to be subjects who do good" (2). For their own part, Haslam and Reicher voice a heavy degree of scepticism about the conclusions that have derived from the work of Milgram and Zimbardo. My interest here, however, is not with the results of these experiments and what they show about the ethical capacities of humanity. Rather, I want to point out that, in the post-war period, psychology became increasingly concerned with both the ethics of human behaviour and the ethics of its own practice. It is my argument that Roth's literary writing from the 1960s onwards would do something comparable.

There is no evidence that Roth encountered the research of Milgram and Zimbardo, though given the fame that these experiments acquired it is quite possible that he knew of them. What does seem clear, though, is that Roth's interest was piqued by some of the practices of post-war social psychology. Evidence of this can be found

in a short play that was published a couple of years after Milgram's experiment: "The National Pastime". Originally published in the men's magazine *Cavalier*, the play may be read as a straightforward satire of suburban America's attitude towards sex, but it also addresses a question of scientific ethics.¹ As the play is not well known, I will give a short summary of its events. In a suburban American living room, Al, a "strong-minded husband", turns on the television to find that every channel shows the same thing: a man and a woman having sex to the accompaniment of Rahmaninoff's "Piano Concerto No 2" (16). Horrified by this, he tries to keep his son Gregory, who has been waiting for a baseball game to begin on the television, from coming into the living room to see it. Eventually, Al turns the television off and tells Gregory the baseball game has been cancelled because of rain. Gregory does not believe this and there follows a dispute in which the son frequently questions his father's authority. Eventually, the mother, Isabel, intervenes. She is afraid that the horror Al is showing at the televised sex will make Gregory frightened "about you-know-what" and opts to explain carefully to her son that "two people are having intercourse on television" (54). At this point, a "nice young couple from next door" appear at the door and explain that their television is showing the same images (54). The group speculate on the reasons for this and decide to continue watching in the hope that all will be explained (54-5).

After the intercourse of the on-screen couple has reached its conclusion, this anticipated explanation arrives. A voice emerges from the television set and a "distinguished-looking man" with a moustache and a deep voice appears (56). He explains that the television-viewing public have just been given a "front-row seat at a history-making scientific experiment" (56). A research project named Penetrator, the scientist claims, has discovered that if "trillions of microscopic dots" are presented at an appropriate frequency "then a vast storehouse" of sequential images will be placed at the disposal of each and every television viewer (56). "In simple lay terms", the man continues:

Every single TV program is built right into your set. The dots are there and so are the sound waves too; the rest is up you. Or actually up to your deepest subliminal or subconscious TV wants, which will unscramble the dots in such a way as to place upon them a meaningful pattern of thirty minutes' duration to suit your own tastes at the moment. What you most want, when you most want it. (56)

The scientific experiment has revealed the secret, inner desires of individuals and this has been carried out in the public interest. The scientific innovation:

serves the democratic dream, we think, by penetrating beyond fad and fashion, beyond what the sponsors believe the public wants, and what those rating systems believe they may be willing to watch – penetrates right down through the dangerous layers of me-tooism and conformity to the true and genuine television needs of every man, woman and child in this land. (56)

Science, it seems, is working to help individuals get what they want from television, and what they want is sex and classical music.

Given the playful tone of the play, it would be easy to overlook the extent to which Roth is engaging with scientific psychology in "The National Pastime". The engagement, though, is an important one. The Penetrator experiment is obviously slightly far-fetched but it does recall a number of developments in twentieth-century

psychology. In the description of television viewers unscrambling dots "in such a way as to place upon them a meaningful pattern", Roth seems to draw on Gestalt psychology's idea of figure-ground organization. And the idea that viewers will "unscramble" the dots according to their "deepest subliminal or subconscious" desires might bring to mind certain projective psychological techniques, such as the Rorschach Inkblot Test. But more important than the question of the particular branch of science that is being represented is that of what to make of science's intervening in the lives of unsuspecting individuals – of television viewers being made, without their knowledge, the subjects of a "history-making scientific experiment". Here the concerns of "The National Pastime" can be seen to mirror those that would be outlined later in the Belmont Report. First, the experiment sits uncomfortably with the report's emphasis on the autonomy of human subjects. Obviously, the television viewers have not given informed consent. When participating in the experiment, they are not told what is happening and why but instead are forced to speculate continuously. Perhaps more significantly, the experiment itself seems to undermine the idea of the autonomous human subject. It does not construct the television viewer as someone who is "capable of deliberation" about what they watch "and of acting under the direction of such deliberation". Rather science is working to tell viewers what they want and give it to them without the necessity for deliberation. This marginalization of deliberative thought invites a comparison between the Penetrator experiment and the famous experiments of social psychology, particularly those of Milgram. One of the key things to note about the Milgram experiment is the use that it made of time pressure. Subjects were not given a large amount of time to think about whether or not to deliver the shocks but were asked to make quick decisions. In her discussion of Milgram's method, Laura Salisbury notes: "if the subject attempts to evade the experiment, to pull back in critical reflection and gain thinking time, the experimenter offers stock and rapid-fire responses to prompt him into continuing" (Salisbury 52). Both Roth's fictional Penetrator experiment and the real-life experiment carried out by Milgram draw conclusions about humans based on the actions they perform when they are not given time to deliberate. Roth's play, then, foregrounds a tension between the ethical guidelines that would come to govern psychological experimentation and the models of human subjectivity that were at work in much psychological experimentation.

In spite of this, one might still be able to reconcile the Penetrator experiment with the utilitarian ethical principles of the Belmont Report on the grounds that the disregarding of human autonomy is carried out in the service of the "democratic dream". The experiment could improve people's lives to the point that it justifies potential violations of privacy and autonomy. This, though, is not the story Roth tells. Rather than being pleased to know that their "true and genuine television needs" have been satisfied, the characters of the play fall into an argument. Ignoring the fact that he has seen the same thing, Al berates his "rot-ridden" son and the couple next door for what they have seen, and the play concludes with him throwing the television set out of the window (56). Though some of the other characters are less hostile, and speak of the experiment as an "exciting advancement", Penetrator ultimately produces anger and social conflict (56). There is, then, a degree to which Roth's play might be read as a critique of large-scale, well-intentioned scientific research. It seems sceptical of a practice which seeks to penetrate the lives of individuals in order to tell them who they are and what they want. As well as betraying a degree of anxiety about the role of science in society, however, the next section will suggest that Roth's representation of science in "The National Pastime" anticipates his later exploration of the ethics of fiction.

Experimentation and the Right to Privacy

Earlier, I suggested that Roth addresses ethical questions in his writing and scrutinizes the ethics of his writing, but perhaps one needs to be more specific here. With exactly what ethical problems does Roth concern himself? In the remainder of this article I will consider three ethical concerns in particular: those of the individual's right to privacy, autonomy and informed consent. Roth has so far been seen to address these questions in his representation of the scientific experiment in "The National Pastime". Looking to the 1970s and beyond, though, the ethical concerns are increasingly applied to Roth's own writerly practice. This exploration of the ethics of writing is still carried out through an engagement with psychology and particularly psychoanalytic research. In the works of this period, Roth frequently brings into comparison the ethical situations of the analyst and the novelist, a comparison that is made most explicitly in *My Life as a Man*. Here, the novel's narrator, a writer named Peter Tarnopol, finds an article written by his analyst (Dr. Spielvogel) that seems to be based on the contents of their analytic sessions. When Tarnopol asks Spielvogel why he did not ask his permission to publish the article, the analyst responds: "Do you ask permission of the people you write about?" (*My Life as a Man* 250). To this Tarnopol asserts: "I am not a psychoanalyst! The comparison won't work. I write fiction" (250). The writer of fiction, it seems, is free of the ethical constraints which bind the writer of a psychoanalytic research paper:

You [Dr. Spielvogel] are bound by ethical considerations that happen not to be the ones that apply to my profession. Nobody comes to me with confidences the way they do to you, and if they tell me stories it's not so that I can cure what ails them. It's in the nature of being a novelist to make private life public – that's a part of what a novelist is up to. But certainly is not what I thought *you* were up to when I came here. I thought your job was to treat me. (251; emphasis in original)

With Tarnopol's statement that the analyst's job is to "treat", Roth is again anticipating principles that would later be laid out in the Belmont Report. As noted earlier, the report attempted to distinguish more clearly between therapy and research and there are biographical reasons to suggest that Roth might have been interested in this distinction. The encounter between Spielvogel and Tarnopol was based on an incident in Roth's own life. It has been widely reported that Roth's relationship with his own analyst, Hans Kleinschmidt was strained after the latter wrote him up in an article entitled "The Angry Act", which was published in the psychoanalytic journal *American Imago* (Roth Pierpoint 50-1). Such a biographical detail might lead to the belief that Roth's sympathies in *My Life as a Man* lie purely with the novelist, Tarnopol. I am not sure this is the case. Roth seems much more able than Tarnopol to see the analyst's point of view. In addition to treating Tarnopol, Dr. Spielvogel sees it as his responsibility to share his psychoanalytic findings with others in the scientific community. He tells Roth's protagonist: "Mr Tarnopol, 'this thing here' is a scientific paper. None of us could write such papers, none of us could share our findings with one another if we had to rely upon the permission or approval of our patients in order to publish" (251). In Spielvogel's, (slightly cavalier) view, the risk of breaching the privacy of his patients, and causing them harm, is acceptable because it is in the name of scientific advancement. This justification "won't wash" for Tarnopol – and neither is it likely to for many readers (151). However, in having Spielvogel offer this explanation, I suggest

that Roth is opening up an ethical question about literature: how far does the pursuit of an aesthetic end justify violations of the privacy of specific individuals?

As critics such as Debra Shostak have pointed out, Roth's writing frequently fringes on the autobiographical. At the very least, in Shostak's words, Roth makes "capital out of his readers' inclinations toward biographical interpretations" (158). This aspect of Roth's work means that his writing has been seen to put on display not only the private lives of fictional characters, but also those of the author, his family and acquaintances. This has raised some ethical questions. As Leland de la Durantaye has put it, Roth might, at times, be seen to violate the privacy of others by "telling either a privileged truth, or a falsehood that is likely to be taken as truth which is likely to cause harm to another" (326). Roth has, to some extent, recognized this ethical difficulty. When asked, in a 1986 interview, whether his friends and relatives ever felt as though their privacy was likely to be violated by his writing, Roth responded: "I would if I were in their position. I certainly wouldn't want to be living with a loudmouthed novelist, and I sympathize with those who do" (qtd. in Searles 200). Roth's attitude to this, however, seems to echo that of Dr. Spielvogel. He may sympathize with those whose privacy is violated but feels this violation is acceptable in the name of fiction. It should be stressed, however, that Roth's fiction after *My Life as a Man* does interrogate its own tendency to violate the privacy of others. This interrogation is carried out most fully from the late 1980s when Roth published a series of books which seem to incorporate elements of autobiography: *The Facts* (1989), *Deception*, *Patrimony* and *Operation Shylock* (1993). These works have frequently been read as postmodern explorations of identity, or written off as testaments to Roth's solipsism – and there are good reasons for these interpretations – but there are also grounds for reading them as ethical experiments. Here, my reading follows David Gooblar who sees this series of publications as evidence of Roth's "renewed concern with the responsibilities of writing about others, and with the differing, often conflicting claims that aesthetics and ethics can exert upon the writer" (35). What I would add to Gooblar's argument is the contention that these explorations of writerly ethics are mediated by Roth's concern with the distinction, explored in *My Life as a Man*, between therapy and research. This is most apparent in *Deception* and *Patrimony*.

Deception takes the form of a writer's notebook. The writer in question is named Philip and his biography shares many details with that of the historical individual Philip Roth. The notebook consists of dialogues between Philip and a series of individuals who come to visit him in his London studio. Most of these individuals are women and by far the most space is devoted to conversations between Philip and an unnamed British woman with whom he is having a meandering affair. It is in these conversations that the novel performs its experiment into humanity's capacity for ethical decision making. This experiment focuses on the human activity with which Roth was concerned in "Writing About Jews", namely adultery. However, where Roth's earlier article argued that fiction gives new insights into the experience of the adulterous man, *Deception* is concerned with the experience of an adulterous woman who is aware that her husband is also adulterous. A large proportion of the early part of the book presents this woman reasoning about the rights and wrongs of this situation. In an early passage, for example, the woman suggests that it would be selfish of her to ask her husband to give up his girlfriend. When Philip questions the logic and rectitude of this perspective, she responds:

A point of view that is reasonable and right doesn't come naturally. That was my first response. But it is what I think . . . I can see that I've behaved very

stupidly with my husband, but maybe it's because I don't know what I've done wrong. He has had to put up with years of me being terrible depressed and lonely. I don't think it was entirely surprising – I was alone and he was away so much and working so hard. I didn't have other affairs, because I always thought he was vulnerable and had to be protected. (*Deception* 17; ellipsis in original)

Roth, here, is performing the kind of ethical experimentation that he outlines in "Writing About Jews". He is inviting readers to consider how the adulterer experiences his or herself and, in doing so, given the chance to obtain new insight into the process by which humans make ethical decisions. The passage stages the woman's thought process as she moves from considering her "first response" on learning of her husband's adultery to justifying her husband's action through the adoption of an ethical position that takes into account what she has (unknowingly) "done wrong" to him. This, I would suggest, is what Roth means when he states that fiction has the capacity to enact an "expansion of moral consciousness" (*Reading Myself and Others* 151).

Alongside Roth's experiment on the human's ethical capacity runs a critique of the ethics of his own writerly practice, and this critique is framed by the research-therapy distinction. Though the conversations between Philip and his visitors are ostensibly personal there are frequent suggestions that the visitors need therapy and are indirectly obtaining it from Philip. Early in the novel, for instance, the British woman asks Philip if he "thinks it would help to see a psychiatrist" (22). This question foregrounds the degree to which many of the pair's conversations resemble psychoanalytic sessions where the British woman plays the role of analysand – talking about "what's going on in my head" – and Philip plays analyst – listening and asking further questions (18). A few pages later, the question of therapy emerges again when Philip's Czechoslovakian visitor speaks of a past need to "go to the Sigmund Freud doctor" (31). The identification between Philip and the psychotherapist becomes even more overt when another visitor comments on Philip's fondness for the stories of "soulful" women: "You like it best when they are in post-traumatic shock trying to recover their lives. . . . You like it best when these soulful women can't actually tell their own tales but struggle for access to their story" (89). The speaker raises a point that has hitherto been lurking beneath the novel's surface: Philip's visitors seem to be looking for (and perhaps getting) some kind of therapy from their conversations, but Philip has taken down these conversations for the purposes of research – he is trying to make a novel out of them. This recalls the conversation between Tarnopol and Spielvogel in *My Life as a Man*. Tarnopol stated that "nobody comes to me with confidences the way they do to you, and if they tell me stories it's not so that I can cure what ails them" (*My Life as a Man* 51). Is this true of Philip? Roth is blurring the distinction between novelist and therapist and, in doing so, scrutinizing the idea that the writer of fiction is free of the ethical considerations that bind those in the psychiatric profession.

The novel's concern with the ethics of fiction becomes more apparent in the two conversations that bring the novel to a close. The first of these is a conversation between Philip and his wife who, having just stumbled upon the notebook, is more than a little perturbed. At this point the question of privacy becomes a major concern in the novel. Rather unsurprisingly, Philip's wife draws the conclusion that the notebook is a record of an affair, something which Philip denies – claiming that the conversations are the product of his imagination. It is then that attention turns to the question of whether Philip is going to "publish that notebook" (182). Philip suggests that he has thought of

publishing it but is, as yet, unsure of "what it is I've got. A portrait of what?" (183). To this, his wife responds that "what you've got is a portrait of adulterous love" (183). She then urges Philip to remove his name from the notebook on the grounds that including it will "humiliate" her (184). Here the Philip of *Deception* states that novelists cannot concern themselves with privacy: "Look, I cannot and do not live in the world of discretion, not as a writer anyway. I would prefer to, I assure you – it would make life easier. But discretion is, unfortunately, not for novelists" (184). Finally, as his wife continues to make the case for discretion, Philip asserts that he will write and publish whatever he wishes and storms out. The right of the novelist to breach privacy is defended but the defence is not particularly convincing: it seems to amount to the contention that the novelist has the right to humiliate others because he is a novelist and he wants to.

In the novel's final conversation, however, Philip seems to soften his stance on the question of whether discretion should be a consideration for the writer. The interlocutor is again the British woman and the conversation comes many years later, after Philip has published a book based on their earlier conversations. The woman speaks of some anger at Philip having taken down everything she said, comparing herself to "those native people who don't want their photos taken; it takes something away from their souls" (196). She feels that Philip has exposed her and thinks about the book as a "betrayal" (200). This term seems to strike Philip and what follows is an intriguing ethical defence of his practice:

'Betrayal is an overpowering charge, don't you think? There was no contract drawn up stating that in matters pertaining to you I would foreswear my profession. I am a thief and a thief is not to be trusted.'

'Not even by his moll?'

'However visible you may be feeling, you weren't identified in that book or made overly identifiable.' (201)

Philip is attempting to justify his practice in two ways here. First, by suggesting that the woman gave a kind of informed consent. Second by asserting that he, as a writer, showed some discretion. In terms of informed consent, his view is that the woman knew he was a novelist and thus, as it was never agreed otherwise, must have been aware that their exchanges were always likely to make their way into his writing. The point seems to be that, if you are looking for a private relationship or some kind of therapy, it is unwise to go to a novelist. This point seems in line with that which Philip made to his wife in the previous conversation, but the next goes in a slightly different direction. In stating that the woman was not "made overly identifiable" in the book, Philip implies that he consciously held back from making the woman identifiable to a degree that she would have been completely exposed – he did write with her right to privacy in mind, to some extent. On balance, as Gooblar suggests, Philip's statements ultimately affirm the writer's right to "expose real people" (44), but this view does not go uncontested.² Roth is scrutinizing the ethics of a writing that records things that are said in private, often by vulnerable people, and brings them into the public sphere.

Though Roth is using his own first name in *Deception* (as well as some elements of his biography), the work still defines itself as fiction – it was given the sub-title "A Novel". In *Patrimony*, by contrast, Roth gives a non-fictional account of his father, Herman's illness and eventual death from a brain tumour; the subtitle here is "A True Story". *Patrimony* sees Roth describe his experience as, in Martin Halliwell's words, a "primary caregiver" (104) and discussions of the book frequently focus on a description

of one particular act of care performed by Roth. Towards the end of the book, Roth finds Herman standing naked in the bathroom having just experienced a bout of incontinence. "The shit", Roth recalls, "was everywhere, smeared underfoot on the bathmat, running over the toilet bowl edge and, at the foot of the bowl in a pile on the floor" (*Patrimony* 120). The description is very graphic and one immediately wonders about Roth's motive for writing about it in such a way, particularly when, having cleaned everything up, Roth promises his father that he "won't tell anyone" what has just happened (121). As in *Deception*, the writer seems to be exposing real-life people without their consent. This time, however, the person is completely identifiable (albeit deceased). Gooblar succinctly outlines the question that emerges from the passage: "on what grounds can this exposure – this betrayal – be justified?" (37). There are numerous ways in which one might respond to this question. Gooblar suggests that the scene's inclusion is justified by its centrality to the point that Roth is trying to make in the work: namely that being able to clean up one's father's shit when he is no longer able is the best that can be hoped for in the way of patrimony. In this way, Gooblar concludes, it is "narrative meaning that Roth trades his father's privacy for" (34).

The point here seems to be that Roth's violation of Herman's privacy is justified because it is done in the name of a kind of ethical experimentation. Roth is using the scene to further an exploration of the ethics of filial duty. An individual is being exposed without giving consent but the exposure is carried out in the pursuit of knowledge or understanding. It is hard to deny that this utilitarian line of thought is at work in *Patrimony*. What I would question, though, is whether the work accepts it wholeheartedly. Roth scrutinizes the book's own ethical justification, and does so, once more, with reference to the psychiatric profession. Shortly before the clean-up scene, there is a peculiar episode in which Roth describes taking a taxi to the hospital where his father is due to undergo surgery. The taxi driver strikes up a (fairly unsavoury) conversation and eventually guesses that Roth is a psychiatrist, to which Roth responds, for reasons unspecified, "That's right" (107-8). Roth, then, begins to play the role of psychiatrist: "I found myself studying him as though I were indeed a professional whose interest exceeded that of an ordinary transient passenger's" (108-9). The irony here, of course, is that Roth is such a professional: a writer whose work draws heavily on his own interactions with others. There is a sense that Roth is allowing the taxi driver to think he is a psychiatrist in order to draw confidences from him which will eventually end up in a book. Here it is worth reflecting, once more, on Tarnopol's statement to his analyst that "nobody comes to me with confidences the way they do to you". The taxi driver ultimately reveals intimate details about himself, including that he once knocked his father's teeth out, and Roth seems to revel in the role of medical professional: "I was a good psychiatrist and gave him the only advice I thought he could actually follow. Keep punchin', I told him" (111). By placing this scene in close proximity to the one in which he acts as a carer to his dying father, Roth can be seen to ask an ethical question. At what point is it acceptable to use those looking for treatment and care as means to a scientific or aesthetic end? This question is crucial to this period of Roth's career.

Sabbath's Theater and the Ethics of Aesthetic Experimentation

In *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth continues to explore the ethical questions that were raised in *My Life as a Man*, *Deception* and *Patrimony*. The novel, however, sees Roth move away from the explicitly autobiographical territory of the earlier works. This means that the ethical concerns about representing the lives of others in fiction recede slightly; they are replaced by a renewed concern with the way in which aesthetic experiments interact

with their audience. In this discussion of the novel, I want to look, first, at the ethical questions that surround the dramatic experimentation performed by the novel's protagonist, Mickey Sabbath, and, second, at the ethics of Roth's own novelistic experiments. It will be my suggestion that Roth reflects on the ethics of his earlier aesthetic experiments through Sabbath, but ultimately uses the novel to perform a different kind of experiment on human ethics, one that is more concerned with readerly behaviour.

Any discussion of the ethics of *Sabbath's Theater* has to begin with the attitudes of the novel's protagonist. In Mickey Sabbath, Roth presents a character that makes it his vocation to challenge ethical norms. As David Brauner puts it, "Sabbath's compulsive taboo-breaking is the expression of a credo of antagonism, his immorality an article of (bad) faith" (124). In this way, Sabbath is a vehicle through which the reader is invited to question what human behaviour is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable. Roth provoked this question through a presentation of Sabbath's everyday life but also his work as an "artist". So much becomes apparent when Sabbath is arrested and put on trial for an act carried out as a street performer on Broadway in the 1950s. In this period, Sabbath gave shows using his fingers as puppets. During the show, he would pick a girl out of the audience and begin talking to her through the medium of his fingers: "asking if the girl had ever dated a finger, if her family approved of fingers if she herself could find a finger desirable, if she could imagine herself living happily with only a finger" (*Sabbath's Theater* 122-3). It is noted that some of the girls are "mildly hypnotized" by this process and the performance takes advantage of this state. As the fingers of the one hand carry on questioning her, the other hand "stealthily" begins "to unbutton or unzip" the girl's "outer garment" (123). The arrest occurs when Sabbath's stealth hand is able to go as far as to expose the breast of one participant, Helen. At first, the police officer objects to the show on the grounds that there are children around but he then moves to the question of whether the girl has consented to the exposure (312-3). Helen, herself, states that she has "permitted him to do it", to which the officer responds: "Permitted? You were hypnotized. This guy hypnotized you. You didn't know he was doing it to you" (313). Helen suggests that she is an autonomous agent who has made a deliberate decision to partake in the performance, but the police officer holds that she did not know what he was doing and so could not have given informed consent. Street entertainment, here, is subjected to the same questions of autonomy and informed consent that have been seen in the context of scientific experimentation.

On one level, here, the reader is asked to judge Sabbath's actions as a man. Are his actions justifiable and how might they be defended? For his part, Sabbath at first suggests to the officer that his performance is "a new art form", implying that his supposed disrespect for a human's autonomy is defensible in the name of artistic progress. This defence is also used in the courtroom. When Sabbath goes on trial for his transgression, a professor is called by Sabbath's lawyer to argue that "street art is a valid form of art" (319). At this point, however, Sabbath is reluctant to advance the argument that his actions have been done for the greater good of artistic progress. He suggests that the professors are "full of shit": "Shakespeare was a great street artist. Proust was a great street artist. And so on. He was going to compare me to Swift. The professors are always schlepping in Swift to defend some farshtunkeneh nobody" (319). There is the sense that art is being invoked as a flimsy excuse for Sabbath's purposeful transgression. Sabbath seems very reluctant to engage in the utilitarian discourse that would work to portray his antagonistic actions in a positive light. He is not concerned with justifying his artistic practices; he just does them. In this way, he might be seen as

taking to extremes the Philip of *Deception*'s antagonistic defence of writer's rights. The difference being that where Philip affirms his right to write about anything he wishes, Sabbath is concerned with his right to do anything he wishes. Both Philip and Sabbath seem to voice a defence of the individual's right to act unethically that does not depend on the argument that these actions are done for a greater good.

Part of the impermissibility of Sabbath's street art, then, lies in the way in which it undermines human autonomy. However, another problem resides in the fact that this undermining occurs in a very public space, a street on Broadway. As in *Deception* and *Patrimony*, Roth is interrogating the artist's right to violate privacy. Again Roth's artist is carrying out an act of exposure but, where the Philips of earlier works exposed private aspects of human lives, Sabbath's street performance exposes private parts of bodies. Roth, thus, continues to explore the tension between the rights of artists and those that participate in the production of art. Through Sabbath, though, he also raises the question of the distinction between different art forms. Sabbath's ethically dubious street performance is juxtaposed against Roth's own novelistic experimentation and this juxtaposition highlights the degree to which Roth's own experimentation privileges the privacy and autonomy of its audience. A key example of this can be found early in the second part of the novel where Roth presents a kind of multi-tasking experiment on the page. The main body of the text, here, tells a fairly straightforward (if slightly troubling) story. Sabbath has lost an academic post because of the emergence of a tape documenting his phone-sex with a student. This tape, Sabbath remembers, was condemned as "the most blatantly vile example of the exploitation, humiliation, and sexual defilement of a college student by her professor in the history of this academic community" (214). The text deals with the distressing aftermath of this event. Sabbath is driving with the student in question, Kathy Goolsbee, in the passenger seat. She is weeping at what has occurred: "her whole body shaking immersed in pain, as though he were lowering her alive into her grave" (216). But as its consequences play out in prose on the top half of the page, the "uncensored transcription" of the phone-sex covers the bottom half as a footnote (215). Given the incapacity – of mind and eye – to attend to both the main narrative and the footnoted conversation simultaneously, a choice is presented as to how one goes about reading the passage. David Brauner notes that it:

poses a number of dilemmas, aesthetic and ethical, for the reader. Do you continue with the main narrative and double back to read the conversation later (implicitly prioritising the authoritative narrative voice and resisting the temptation to read the more salacious material below the dividing line)? Do you read the conversation first (implicating yourself as a voyeuristic witness of the intercourse between Goolsbee and Sabbath – and in a pornographic transaction between reader and author – and relegating the narrative voice to a subsidiary role)? Or do you try to read the two texts in tandem (maximising the possibilities for confusion but averting the need for backtracking and avoiding the choice of which text to follow first)? (126)

In a sense, the passage can be seen as an experiment into readerly attention. Roth presents his audience with two channels of stimuli and each reader is likely to attend to them in different ways. Theoretically, one could even use eye-tracking technology to monitor the way in which different readers go about extracting the information. However, as Brauner makes clear, the passage goes beyond the question of process. It does not merely ask how readers extract information but also what this process says

about their character. What kind of person are you, it seems to ask – and the answer depends on the way one negotiates the problems posed by the text.

Roth's literary experiment in *Sabbath's Theater*, then, uses formal innovation in order to interrogate its audience's desires and capacity for ethical decision making. But it does so in a way that is quite different from something like the Penetrator experiment that is described in "The National Pastime" or Milgram's experiments on obedience. This, I want to suggest, has much to do with the privacy and autonomy that is afforded by the novel form, in comparison with other forms of media. The televisual audience that are presented in "The National Pastime", for instance, process the material that is presented to them within a social – if not exactly public – environment where they can be (and are) judged by neighbours and family. Al berates other members of the audience for the way in which they unscramble the dots that are on the television screen. In *Sabbath's Theater* the reader may, in Brauner's words, "implicate" their self "as a voyeuristic witness" but this can remain a private judgment. Of course, all this changes if one attempts to observe the reader (via, for instance, interview, FMRI or eye-tracking technology) but I would argue that the idea of an unobserved reader was central to Roth's fiction. Here, one might return to "Writing About Jews" and Roth's idea that fiction is valuable because it allows readers to "respond to experience in ways that are not always available in day-to-day conduct". If readers know their reading is potentially being observed and judged, fiction's potential to enable, what Roth calls, the "expansion of moral consciousness" is severely compromised. Roth's literary experiment, then, seems to depend on readerly privacy.

Beyond privacy, there is also a question of autonomy. The Penetrator experiment seems to assume that "the true and genuine television needs" of the individual are determined by their initial responses to the given stimuli – and it is acknowledged that this response is determined by "subliminal or subconscious" wants. The "true and genuine" response of the subject is not the one that is produced after they have had chance to deliberate on the ethical and aesthetic consequences of what they do. This contrasts with the novelistic experiment of *Sabbath's Theater*. Here a lack of temporal pressure means that the reader has a chance to deliberate on the dilemmas posed by the text, and their initial response is not necessarily authoritative. Obviously, the reader of *Sabbath's Theater* is still subject to unconscious processes, and may negotiate the text in a particular way without having deliberated about it. But Roth's use of the novel form definitely creates a space in which an audience can be more reflective about the way in which they consume the given stimuli.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to make three points: one specifically about the way in which Roth's writing is perceived, and two more general points concerning the relationship between scientific and aesthetic experimentation. With regards to perceptions of Roth, it is useful to consider how the above readings of Roth's ethical experimentation compare with other recent critical interpretations. In his 2014 study of Roth, Patrick Hayes notes that "one of the reasons Roth is such an interesting writer today is because of the robust challenge his work offers" to the "seemingly sensible" view that literature should serve a well-defined ethical purpose (1-2). Here Hayes can cite quotations by Roth himself which dismiss the idea that literature is a "moral beauty contest" (qtd. in Lee 276). This argument is hard to dispute; Roth undoubtedly bristled at the idea that literary writing should devote itself to the furtherance of any set of moral ideals. What I would say, however, is that Roth's writing emerges at a point in history when cultural production, be it aesthetic or scientific, is pressured to adhere to a

particular set of humanistic, utilitarian principles. As is shown by the views of characters such as Sabbath, Roth's writing undoubtedly has the capacity to think beyond these principles. But I would argue that his work is still constantly negotiating them.

In terms of the relationship between aesthetic and scientific experimentation, this article has identified points of contact, but also a major point of distinction. Roth's writing, I have suggested, is comparable with contemporaneous psychological experimentation insofar as it is interested in exploring the human capacity for ethical decision making. It is also comparable with twentieth-century science in the degree to which it reflects on the ethics of its own practice. However, Roth's writing is distinguished from psychological experimentation by the fact that it does not seek to observe its audience in order to make generalizations about the human condition. Observing the responses of readers to the literary experiment that I have described in *Sabbath's Theater*, for instance, might well produce new insights into how readers attend to salacious material, but this does not seem to be the point of Roth's work. Rather, Roth seems to have been drawn to fiction because of the way in which it allows readers to reflect privately on their own responses. This opens up a set of questions which I believe are crucial to future comparisons of literary and psychological experimentation. Is it possible to conceive of a literary work that does have the observation of its audience built into it? Can one imagine a literary writer who aims at observing their audience in the pursuit of scientific knowledge? Or, is the idea of an unobserved audience a crucial part of what makes a literary experiment literary? Finally, if one takes the view that the observation of an audience could conceivably become part of literary practice, what are the ethical implications of this? Would there be a need for a system that protects the audience? In earlier periods, the idea that a literary audience might need protection has frequently been conceived in terms of obscene content and censorship – the idea, particularly prominent in the earlier part of the twentieth century, that “literary obscenity could corrupt the minds of the young and impressionable”, and therefore should be policed (Potter 1). By conceptualizing his acquaintances and literary audience as research participants and experimental subjects, Roth's writing presents a different set of ethical questions. Works like “The National Pastime”, *Deception* and *Sabbath's Theater*, begin to think about the right to privacy of those that participate in aesthetic work and how the ethics of scientific research might apply to the aesthetic experiment.

Notes

1. See Witcombe for a discussion of “The National Pastime” that places the work within the context of Roth's career.
2. Gooblar also points out that earlier versions of *Deception* bring the question of writerly ethics to the forefront, as they present “a more conflicted protagonist” (44)

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