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Bloom's Modern Critical Views

PHILIP ROTH

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FRANK KELLETER

Portrait of the Sexist as a Dying Man: Death, Ideology, and the Erotic in Philip Roth's Sabbath's Theater

The Dancer and the Dance

In his short prose piece *Über das Marionettentheater*, Heinrich von Kleist (or H.v.K., as the narrator calls himself) describes his meeting with Herr C., a celebrated opera dancer. The conversation between writer and dancer centers around K.'s unconcealed astonishment over C.'s equally unconcealed admiration for the marionette theater. What baffles K. most of all is that C.'s fondness for the puppet dance cannot be reduced to a personal infatuation with plebeian entertainment. No Romantic love of "primitive" vitality, no weakness for "authentic" folk art, impels C.'s surprising aesthetic judgment. On the contrary, his reasoning is self-assertively elitist. Asked by K. how a distinguished dancer could possibly find anything redeeming in this rather vulgar art form, C. replies that not only does he regard wooden puppets as equal competitors, but that their movements on stage show indeed more "grace" *(Grazie)* than any real dancer could ever hope to achieve (Kleist 336). Marionettes, he says, are *superior* practitioners of the art of dance.

Obviously, C.'s enthusiasm for *inanimate* dancers is anything but an idiosyncrasy; it seeks to prove a philosophical point. In the artistic superiority of mechanical toys, C. finds exemplified an essential truth of human art, if not human existence. The advantage that marionettes enjoy over live

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dancers, he claims, resides exactly in their ambiguous ontological status as inanimate yet seemingly living artifacts. Puppets, in other words, inhabit a state of existence distressingly suspended between being and nonbeing: they ape life, but not as the living do when they attempt to transcend their finitude by staging a meaningful existence. According to C., the imitation of life to be witnessed in the marionette theater works its charm precisely because it is untainted by an otherwise unavoidable sense of mortality and thus proves itself free from the painful constraints of human self-consciousness. It should be noted that *Über das Marionettentheater* here anticipates Yeats's poem "Among School Children," where we can read that dancer and dance are destined to remain separate entities as long as "beauty" is "born out of its own despair" (245). Similarly, C. perplexes K. with the claim that marionettes are better dancers because, as he puts it, they show no "inhibition" *(Ziererei)*. Since their movements are not governed by the need of reflection—since "knowledge" *(Erkenntnis)* has no part in their physicality—they lack shame (Kleist 339).

The concepts of *knowledge* and *shame* are rich in implication. Most importantly, this specific terminology serves to establish a link between C.'s aesthetic theory on the one hand and biblical mythology on the other. In fact, when K. fails to follow C.'s line of argument, he is reprimanded by the dancer for not having read, or at least taken into account, the third chapter of Genesis—the story of human-kind's expulsion from paradise. At this point of Kleist's narrative it finally becomes apparent that Herr C. has been talking myth all along. For according to Genesis, the feeling of shame, so detrimental to physical grace, results from nothing else than the human will to (self) knowledge. Having tasted the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve become aware that human life is an inescapably physical affair; their sinful entrance into the world of blood, sweat, and tears opens their eyes to their being-in-the-body. True, in our post-Freudian age it has become something of a commonplace to read biblical mythology as psychological revelation, but most Romantic myth-critiques openly invite such a reading. According to Kleist, then, the human fall from grace is indeed not only accompanied by the birth of "desire" (the wish to regain, mostly by the possession or creation of an external object, what has been lost or is perceived to be lacking), but also inaugurates the painful certainty that *the body of desire*, no matter whether we view it as subject or object, is finite (and the desirous search for physical transcendence, therefore, infinite). So when Herr C. states that the mechanical dance is more harmonious, more balanced, and, in all its aspects, more graceful than any merely human motion, what he really means to say is that a marionette performance offers a strikingly persuasive *re-presentation* of the garden of

biblical myth, an artistic creation which, although it is "born out of its own despair," nevertheless seems to be animated by a strangely carefree execution, an ease of movement that all but succeeds in hiding its mortal origin.

Shame and its lack are the main themes also of Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater*. Reading Roth's novel, one frequently wonders whether its protagonist, Mickey Sabbath, a retired puppeteer, would not find something congenial in Kleist's belief that shamelessness supplies the secret *telos* of all artistic creation. At the same time, Sabbath's understanding of what it means to be "shameless" could not be more different from C.'s idealistic faith in an artistic mechanics able to transcend—or at least render invisible—the physical limitations of human sense-making. At one point, Sabbath seems directly to confront Kleist's Romantic idealism; here is Roth's hero musing on the difference between puppets and marionettes:

> Puppets can fly, levitate, twirl, but only people and marionettes are confined to running and walking. That's why marionettes always bored him: all that walking they were always doing up and down the tiny stage, as though, in addition to being the subject of every marionette show, walking were the major theme of life. And those strings—too visible, too many, too blatantly metaphorical. And always slavishly imitating human theater. Whereas puppets ... shoving your hand up a puppet and hiding your face behind a screen! Nothing like it in the animal kingdom! All the way back to Petrushka, anything goes, the crazier and uglier the better. Sabbath's cannibal puppet that won first prize from the maestro in Rome. Eating his enemies on the stage. Tearing them apart and talking about them all the while they were chewed and swallowed. The mistake is ever to think that to act and to speak is the natural domain of anyone other than a puppet. (244)

Clearly, Sabbath is not looking for "grace." Using his artistic performances mainly as an occasion for personal, indeed sexual, gratification, Roth's protagonist cannot be expected to muster much admiration for the labored metaphorical machinery of the marionette theater. (Sabbath is once arrested during a "finger" performance for undoing the blouse and bra of a college student in the audience.) Recognizing that aesthetic beauty will never be able to hide or sublimate its unsightly roots in physical desire, Sabbath decides to embrace what he calls "the nasty side of existence"—"the crazier and uglier the better" (247). And with Sabbath, as the reader quickly learns, this is not an empty promise.

It must be admitted that Roth's equation of artistic creation and carnal desire, along with the discernment that both share a common source in the thought of physical death, is anything but original. The recognition of a close complicity between Eros and Thanatos is probably as old as literature itself. Nevertheless, it is a topos that stubbornly refuses to become clichéd. Sabbath's particular version, while in opposition to Kleist's quasi-Kantian thanatology, is obviously indebted to the Marquis de Sade's *philosophie dans le boudoir*, whose subversive call has been answered in our century by writers as diverse as Guillaume Apollinaire, Henry Miller, Roland Barthes, and Gilles Deleuze. In contemporary American literature, the Sadean theme has received probably its most sophisticated treatment (*cum* critique) in the work of John Updike. Especially noteworthy in this context is the novel *Couples* (1968)—another explicit variation on the third chapter of Genesis—which paints the death-enchanted eroticism of Sade's supposedly antibourgeois bedroom philosophy as some sort of postidealistic consumerism, smugly transgressive on the surface, but truly in full accordance with the moral values of a capitalist marketplace economy. Since the couples of Tarbox are destined to live in a cultural landscape devoid of "genuine" religious systems of transcendence, Updike claims, Thanatos-driven repetition compulsion is all that's left to them sexually. The "woe that is in marriage" is countered here by a neurotic promiscuity that all too frequently exposes itself as a mirror image of the very deadness it wishes to escape. Updike's couples go about their carnal salvation religiously, it is true, but their religiosity, Updike wants us to believe, is an inauthentic one.

By contrast, Philip Roth's heroes—with the exception of Lucy Nelson (in *When She Was Good*) an all-male set of dedicated heterosexuals—can detect nothing inauthentic about the religious pursuit of promiscuity. In this, they are refreshingly free from Updike's didacticism. At the same time, it cannot be denied that their ostentatious libertinism tends to become rather tiresome after a while. The profligate adventures of Alexander Portnoy, Peter Tarnopol, David Kepesh, and Nathan Zuckerman are saved from the notorious monotony of Sadean eroticism only by Roth's self-irony and his apparently limitless inventiveness in matters sexual, his "deep resources of obscenity," as Frank Kermode puts it (20). But if sixty-four-year-old Mickey Sabbath strikes a different key in the old pornographic song, this is not only because Sabbath is by far the most outrageously offensive member of the group, but also because with him, Roth's never uncritical representation of holy Eros reaches an altogether new level of reflection, which sets his novel alongside Updike's *Couples* as one of this century's most extraordinary works on the rather ordinary topic of sex and death. In this essay, I want to delineate

the most prominent thanatological themes of *Sabbath's Theater*. The dialectical tension between a sexually defined understanding of death on the one hand and the thanatological production of ideological violence on the other will be my main concern.

Another Life

Sabbath's unabashed sensuality owes much of its appeal to one of modernity's most deeply ingrained cultural assumptions: the belief that bourgeois society is founded on the repression of instinctual urges and that therefore any sexual act, even if domesticated in the service of familial and hence societal continuity, carries with it a forceful reminder of our forgotten animal past. Thus accompanied by radically antisocial promises, the act of sex indeed seems to imply an ultimate *transgression*—a violent thrust beyond the bounds of social organization into a realm of existence that not only emancipates the sexual body from societal constraints but actually endangers all ideological and institutional securities on which the health and continuity of bourgeois society is said to depend. It is probably not too much of a generalization to say that this discourse of repression and liberation (which emerged in the eighteenth century as both a consequence and a critique of the Enlightenment's sweeping redefinition of the concept of "nature") in one form or another still dominates our contemporary representation of sexuality and, indeed, much of the contemporary experience of sex. According to Michel Foucault, if the identification of physical desire with subversion has proven a historically successful one, this is "owing no doubt to how easy it is to uphold" (5). An inevitable sense of gratification—a "speaker's benefit"—seems involved in defining the relationship between sexuality and social organization in terms of repression:

> we [find] it difficult to speak on the subject without striking a different pose: we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making. Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse on sexual oppression. Some of the ancient functions of prophecy are reactivated therein. (7)

Nothing less than a "longing for the garden of earthly delights" (7) can thus be traced behind the Sadean ethos of erotic transgression. It should be noted that neither Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater* nor Updike's *Couples* seems averse to such salvational desires. In fact, both texts explicitly concern themselves with the question of regaining paradisiacal "grace"—an endeavor which in both cases is defined in terms of a rejection of bourgeois orthodoxies (mainly the doctrines of knowledge, reflection, and self-consciousness). In this respect, a chaste text like *Über das Marionettentheater* stages no less of a transgressive scene than a skeptical one like *Couples*—or Sabbath's scandalous "Indecent Theater." If there is a contention between Kleist's and Roth's apotheosis of shamelessness, or Roth's and Updike's affirmation of human sexuality, it concerns the question of *which* breaking of the taboo, *which* liberation from bourgeois consciousness can be called authentic. To put it differently, the texts named above do not argue about the question of whether "transgression" can be seen as a liberating principle or not, but rather about the question of what specific "transgression" is required if the transgressive act is not to reproduce the order of things it has set out to disrupt.

Thus Sabbath's sexual escapades ultimately try to answer the same question that animates Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater* and Updike's *Couples* (or, for that matter, the third chapter of Genesis). It is the question of how to lead what Sabbath himself calls "a real human life" (247): a life unaffected by the deadening impact of its coming end, a life worthy of its name because it presents the opposite of—indeed an opposition to—certain death. This search for another (rather than simply a longer or easier or happier) life is obviously impelled by what Henry David Thoreau once called the fear of "liv[ing] what [is] not life," the fear of living death. ("I wished to live deliberately," Thoreau writes in *Walden*, "and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" [61].) The only difference between Thoreau's emphatic self-relocation and Sabbath's attempt to become a "real-lifer" (Roth 142) is that the first project of redemption seeks to save the mortal body by isolating it from company and sending it into "the woods," while Roth's protagonist chooses to go out and explore "the worldwide world of whoredom" (81). As far as Sabbath is concerned, unbounded (and literally "extroverted") phallic energy comes to stand for authentic being itself: "Nothing more faithful in all of life than the lurid cravings of the morning hard-on," he enthuses. "No deceit in it. No simulation. All hail to that driving force! Human living with a capital *L*!" (154).

To put it at its simplest, what distinguishes Roth's celebration of carnality from Kleist's Romantic aesthetics or Updike's critique of Sadean

eroticism is the particular version of spiritual transcendence proposed. While Kleist and Updike proclaim the return to animalistic shamelessness impossible, Sabbath is not so sure if the whole atavistic venture might not be worth a try. Finding Roseanna, his second wife, in bed with another woman, he takes spontaneous pleasure in impersonating (in a terrifyingly realistic manner) a male gorilla: roaring, grunting, beating his chest, and smashing the bedroom window while the women inside are screaming in fright, Sabbath seems to have come into his masculine own. It may appear strange to find the same character, in another situation, wondering in all sincerity if he should not be seen as a "holy man," performing "saintly" acts (141). But upon closer view, Sabbath's wish for beastly reversion is not contradicted by his self-understanding as a figure of almost angelic innocence. In fact, a project of personal salvation very much comparable to C.'s ethos of artistic refinement is at stake in Sabbath's "Indecent Theater." With only a tinge of self-irony, Roth's protagonist characterizes himself as "The Monk of Fucking. The Evangelist of Fornication. *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*":

> You must devote yourself to fucking the way a monk devotes himself to God. Most men have to fit fucking in around the edges of what they define as more pressing concerns: the pursuit of money, power, politics, fashion, Christ knows what it might be—skiing. But Sabbath had simplified his life and fit the other concerns in around fucking. (60)

So if salvation really is the gist of the matter, the difference between Sabbath's concrete pornutopia and other visions of immortality—including the various ideological stratagems with which bourgeois society tries to convince itself of its own "perenniality"—may not be as big as it first appears.[1] This much seems clear: subversive eroticism, once it is understood as a *sacred* pursuit, inevitably takes on the shape of a demanding work ethic. In that sense, it's precisely not the "animal within" that keeps Sabbath going, but an uncompromising economy of desire. At no point, then, is Roth's protagonist actually able to claim to have regained touch with some lost inner "nature": rather than having turned himself into "[t]he largest and heaviest of the primates" (441), he *enacts* the angry male gorilla in front of (and for the sake of) a scared public. In this respect, Sabbath probably wouldn't debate Kleist's point that no human body will ever be able to reproduce the instinctual grace of motion to be found in wild beasts—or, to put it differently, that instinctual grace can only be *re*produced, can be approached aesthetically but never experienced ontologically.

In his more clear-sighted moments, Roth's libertine is fully aware that his libidinous rages are not performed primarily for the sake of unselfconscious animal pleasure but that, to speak with Georges Bataille, "religion is the driving force behind the breaking of the taboo" (69). In fact, the ontological fissure between human and animal sexuality reveals itself no less emphatically in Sabbath's atavistic ecstasies than in the much-maligned "routines of marriage" (Roth 12). What distinguishes the coupling of animals from the coupling of human beings is, after all, the former act's utter nonsubjectivity, its mute haphazardness. Even the most violent coitus is free from obscenity (and can accordingly be shown on television) as long as it remains indifferent to its own significance. It takes the insertion of a human body to turn animal sexuality into a noteworthy perversion. Seen by itself, however, "nothing resembling a question takes shape within it" (Bataille 29). By contrast, Sabbath's sacred raptures are all governed by the question of self-conscious mortality, and his uplifting "morning hard-on," far from hailing the advent of a more authentic life, unwittingly comes to resemble a marionette, suspended on invisible strings. (In the beginning of their affair, Sabbath amuses Roseanna by "lipsticking a beard and cap onto the head of his prick and using his hard-on for a puppet" [437].) As much as Sabbath would like to deny it, there *is* deceit and simulation in the supposed authenticity of phallic rising: his animalistic spectacles spring from human origins.

Satanic Subversions

If Sabbath truly realizes that the carnal feast paradoxically serves to pose a transcendental question and nevertheless shows himself unwilling to denounce his erotic atavism as mediated and hence inauthentic, this is mainly because sexual transgression has been understood as a means to an end all along. Roth's hero refuses to abandon his search for *physical* salvation in favor of an outspokenly *spiritual* project of transcendence (which would be the solution proposed by Updike's *Couples*) because the posing of a question presents the very purpose of his subversive stagings. In that sense, Sabbath is much less concerned with his own sexual satisfaction than with the attempt to prove other people's existence unsatisfactory. Instead of embarking on a quest that will provide his personal state of being with meaningful answers, the puppeteer seeks to put in question everybody else's way of being in the world. Sabbath's lust for affronting people is truly unlimited; he constantly finds himself subject to "the simple pleasure, which went way back, of

making people uncomfortable, comfortable people especially" (141). Thus his evaluation of the act of sex is not only different from Updike's, it presents an altogether new definition of the goal and meaning of holy eroticism. By describing his "talent" as that "of a saboteur for subversion, even the talent of a lunatic—or a simulated lunatic—to overawe and horrify ordinary people" (151), Sabbath implicitly seems to admit that the chief aim of his transgressive acts lies not in reestablishing a long-lost state of freedom but in unsettling the present order of things—without, of course, ever coming close to actually transcending it. And while this sort of shock effect is merely incidental to, say, Freddy Thorne's rituals of sexual group-building, Sabbath's decidedly individualistic impersonation of "the largest and heaviest of the primates" appears to be absolutely pointless as long as there are no women around whom he can scare by smashing their windows.

What Roth seems to suggest here is that the ecstatic body inevitably finds itself in need of an audience to act out its liberation from societal repressions. So when Sabbath pronounces his wish to live "a real full life such as would leave an ordinary person exhausted" (330), the emphasis is indeed on the latter part of the phrase. Faced with the absence of reliable systems of other-worldly or noncorporeal salvation, the imperative longing for an *extra*ordinary existence necessarily turns malign: "I am disorder," Roth's hero proudly pronounces (203), staking his claim for a way of being present in the world that leaves nothing untried to prove everyday life, and those who live it, disastrously wrong. If there is no hope for *another* life, Sabbath seems to say, there is always the possibility of a *counterlife*: a negation of everything he cannot bring himself to either affirm or flee. In fact, when Sabbath visits Roseanna in the psychiatric hospital where she tries to recover from their ruinous marriage and years of alcoholism, he is only too willing to play the part staked out for him by her therapists—the diabolic part of phallic victimizer: "Everything you have heard about me is true," he introduces himself to Roseanna's fellow patients. "Everything is destroyed and I destroyed it" (256). Such declarations indicate that Sabbath, whose name nicely combines the idea of spiritual meditation with suggestions of a privileged distance from the capitalist workweek, indeed identifies himself with the disruptive driving force conjured up in Sadean visions of scandalous transgression. At the same time, however, the positive prophetic appeal underlying any such discourse of "repression" seems strangely diminished in Roth's pornutopia. While the salacity of much of Sabbath's sexual activity cannot be denied, most of his erotic adventures seem to aspire less toward joyous physical contentment than toward a rather nervous proclamation of what he calls "the satanic side of sex" (20). With no emancipatory utopia to

rely on, the sexual self-liberator thus turns himself into the Mephistophelean *Geist der stets verneint* (the "Spirit of perpetual Negation," as which the devil characterizes himself in Goethe's *Faust* [47]), promoting a liberation that is by definition always only negative.

The satanic theme looms large in *Sabbath's Theater*. Roth's hero may have something of a holy man in him, but unlike Updike's Piet Hanema, who is also forced to live in a demythologized world, Sabbath chooses to confront this state of perpetual nonredemption by playing "[t]he inverted saint whose message is desecration" (347). And Sabbath does live up to the part: sporting an absurd white beard, he may remind us of the Old Testament God but actually prefers to be seen as "Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan" (53). With a quite similar intention, the cover illustration of Roth's novel congenially reproduces Otto Dix's 1925 painting *Sailor and Girl*, which shows a diabolically grinning, bearded man hovering over the gray flesh of what appears to be a prostitute in her later years. The background is ablaze with red heat, shedding an infernal light on the sailor's face and chest. It is easy to recognize a younger version of Mickey Sabbath in this rendition of "the satanic side of sex."[2]

But even if transcendental desire does become synonymous with the violation, both psychological and physical, of other people, it cannot be denied that the violence resulting from Sabbath's satanic impersonations seems rather hopeless. Pitting himself against the rest of society, the diabolic libertine from the beginning on is victim as much as he is victimizer. In fact, Sabbath never stands a chance to win his antirepressive fight against ordinary existence. This becomes obvious when he loses his job as instructor of a university puppet workshop after having seduced one of his students (viciously named Kathy Goolsbee). The charge of sexual harassment serves Sabbath as a welcome opportunity to stylize himself as an antibourgeois martyr. Immediately he inscribes his petty telephone sex affair into the larger context of an almost Manichaean history of erotic rebellion and "antiphallic" oppression:

> not even Sabbath understood how he could lose his job at a liberal arts college for teaching a twenty-year-old to talk dirty twenty-five years after Pauline Réage, fifty-five years after Henry Miller, sixty years after D. H. Lawrence, eighty years after James Joyce, two hundred years after John Cleland, three hundred years after John Wilmot, second earl of Rochester—not to mention four hundred after Rabelais, two thousand after Ovid, and twenty-two hundred after Aristophanes. (218–19)

Roth's protagonist calls upon an illustrious line of predecessors in his fight against the new puritanism of the 1990s. Obviously, the "politically correct" climate of contemporary American culture is not perceived as one in which Sabbath's ethos of sexual self-liberation is able to flourish. I shall come back to this point. For the time being, let it suffice to note that Sabbath's violence seems to hinge on the assumption that the breaking of societal taboos is basically a matter of self-defense. The victimizer's feeling of victimization becomes ever more apparent as the novel progresses. Not surprisingly, it is Sabbath's Jewishness that plays a particularly important role in this context. Roth arranges his cast of characters in such a way that his "inverted evangelist"—"black" Sabbath, so to speak—finds himself surrounded by a whole group of "white" antagonists named after the apostles and saints of the respectable goy world: There is *Matthew*, the cop (the son of Sabbath's mistress Drenka—a man who almost kills Sabbath after finding his mother's sex diaries); there is *Christa*, the young German (in the beginning one of Sabbath's discoveries, who then turns against him and sleeps with his wife); there is *Nikoleta*, his first wife (who one day simply "disappears," leaving Sabbath desolate and guilt-ridden); there is *Roseanna*, his second wife (whom Sabbath leaves because he fears she will castrate him); there is *Norman*, his reputable lawyer-friend (the sorry embodiment of middle-class complacency); and there is Norman's ex-partner *Lincoln* (who, like Nikki, "disappears" one day, committing suicide). Given such a congregation of characters, one cannot blame Sabbath for occasionally thinking himself at the center of an anti-Semitic conspiracy. In any case, his hatred for bourgeois propriety and his lust for desecration clearly arise from a feeling of being threatened. In order to fully comprehend the quality of Roth's thanatological critique, one should therefore keep in mind that it is paranoia—and not desire—that acts as the driving force behind Sabbath's ethos of erotic subversion. There is one exception, though. Among the dramatis personae that make up Sabbath's "Indecent Theater," one person can be found with whom the protagonist feels genuinely at home: Drenka Balich, his Croatian mistress. And it is with Drenka that all his troubles start, because Drenka, though arguably the most important character in the novel besides Sabbath himself, is dead of cancer at the end of the first chapter.

Cancer

Ever since William Bradford complained about Thomas Morton's neglect of his own mortality, American puritanism has been able to enlist a most potent

ally in its fight against the "Lords of Misrule."[3] And indeed, death itself may be the strictest puritan of all, effecting a purification from carnal desires beyond repair. Sabbath faces the same dilemma: as long as there's a mortal puppeteer hiding behind the immortal ecstasy, the dancer and his phallic Maypole dance will not be able to merge in a timeless moment of complete self-presence. Which doesn't mean that the transgressive stagings of people like Herr C. or Freddy Thorne may not prove skillful enough to produce an almost complete forgetfulness of their thanatological origins (which, of course, was their aim all along). Herr C. seems to be almost arrogantly confident that shameless innocence can be recovered by means of artistic machinery, and Updike's libertine regards "dying" as a sexual metaphor at best. For Roth's hero, however, the presence of death in his vitalist adventures is not so easy to ignore. Sabbath's age alone—he is sixty-four, "with probably no more than another few years of semi-dependable potency still his"—ensures that the puritanical memento mori will haunt all his defiant phallic revolts. Described on the very first page of the novel as a man "at the approach of the end of everything" (3), Sabbath can be seen as Roth's portrait of the sexist as a dying man. Having reached an age where "[n]othing unforeseen that happens is likely ever again to be going to be good" (305), the diabolical naysayer—by now an almost stereotypical character in American fiction—is reduced to a sorry loser frantically searching for a last "chance for the old juicy way of life to make one big, last thumping stand against the inescapable rectitude, not to mention the boredom, of death" (324). And the closer to death Sabbath feels he gets, the more hopeless, compulsory, and outrageous his faked ecstasies become, until the reproach of frustrated satisfaction is the only prospect that still gives meaning and shape to his life: "dusk is descending, and sex, our greatest luxury, is racing away at tremendous speed, *everything* is racing off at a tremendous speed and you wonder at your folly in having ever turned down a single squalid fuck" (306).

Immodesty and insatiability, those blissful privileges of the Sadean libertine, have turned into a lethal trap here. This is the price the mortal self has to pay for its sexual transgressions in Roth's novel. The more ardently Sabbath tries to get away from living what is not life, loving what is not love, the plainer it becomes that all his liberations paradoxically originate in the source of their own impossibility—not only in the thought but in the imperative certainty of death. Thus when Sabbath exclaims, "For a pure sense of being tumultuously alive, you can't beat the nasty side of existence. I may not have been a matinee idol, but say what you will about me, it's been

a real human life!" (247), this is certainly true, but in American literature there probably never was a life so much weighed down by the knowledge of its impending end as Mickey Sabbath's.

In the beginning of the novel, however, it still looks as if Sadean ecstasy might be able to effect a viable deliverance from living death. Together with Drenka—if not thanks to Drenka and her "immoderate inclination[s]" (9)—Sabbath seems capable of actually realizing his satanic pornutopia. Their common life is an extraordinary one in the truest sense of the word, mainly because Sabbath rather naturally positions himself in the role of a sexualized Henry Higgins, instructing and molding a no less natural, no less sexualized Eliza Doolittle. Drenka, he says, is his "link with another world, she and her great taste for the impermissible. As a teacher of estrangement from the ordinary, he had never trained a more gifted pupil" (27). In many ways, then, Drenka is less Sabbath's lover than his female alter ego. Already in the first chapter of the novel, we are told: "Inside this woman was someone who thought like a man. And the man she thought like was Sabbath." Drenka considers herself, as she puts it in her endearingly incorrect English, Sabbath's "sidekicker" (9). So if Drenka, as a character, comes dangerously close to being the perfect embodiment of a man's wet dream, this has also to do with the fact that she actively strives to be a mirror male, or rather mirror Sabbath. Consider, for example, the following scene:

> When she was alive, nothing excited or entertained him more than hearing, detail by detail, the stories of her second life....
>
> The boldness with which she went after [other men]! The ardor and skill with which she aroused them! The delight she found in watching them jerk off! And the pleasure she then took in telling all she'd learned about lust and what it is for men .... "What I enjoyed was to see how they were by themselves. That I could be the observer there, and to see how they played with their dick and how it was formed, the shape of it, and when it became hard, and also the way they held their hand—it turned me on. Everybody jerks their dick differently. And when they abandon themselves into it, when they allow themselves to abandon themselves, this is very exciting. And to see them come that way.... well, to see the particularity of it and, as I say, to see when they get so hot they can't stop themselves in spite of being shy, that's very exciting. That's what I like best—watching them lose control." (34, 35–36)

This is a masculine, if not a male, voice. The whole emphasis on voyeuristic observation with the consonant pleasure in taxonomy, the faithful recording of genital "particularities" such as size, color, angle—all this, together with Drenka's surprisingly frequent use of the verb "to fuck" in the active voice, seems to reflect Sabbath's much more than Drenka's erotic penchants. It doesn't come as a surprise, therefore, when we are told that "Sabbath frequently had to slow her down while she was telling him her stories, had to remind her that nothing was too trivial to recount, no detail too minute to bring to his attention. He used to solicit this kind of talk from her, and she obeyed. Exciting to them both. His genital mate. His greatest pupil" (70–71). Apparently, Sabbath wishes to create a female version of himself, an object of desire narcissistically mirroring his own desire for self-possession. In this, Sabbath reveals himself as a typical Roth character: an *artist* who, like so many other protagonists of the same author, regards his profession essentially as a synthesis of creation and manipulation. These two aspects of the artistic urge, however, find their common source in the recognition of spiritual depletion. (Art understood as a perverse passion for manipulation that is ultimately born out of the painful absence of believable schemes of religious transcendence is the theme also of *The Counterlife*.) From this perspective, Roth's protagonist has a lot in common with Updike's Freddy Thorne. As his name seems to suggest, Sabbath the artist gets active on the day God rests. Molding people in his own image, literally turning them into "his creatures," the puppeteer is driven by nothing less than a will to divine power. Consequently, his manipulations are expressive both of the decline of traditional systems of salvation and of the anarchic freedom with which the God-artist now seeks to fill the resulting spiritual void.[4]

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to read Sabbath's attempts "to make Drenka a decent narrator of her adventures" (71) as simply an example of narcissistic power exerted on a passive victim. The problem of objectification (that is, the problem of ideological violence resulting from the subject's desire for self-transcendence) presents itself as a more complex one in Roth's novel. For while Drenka acts as her language master's congenial creature, she is at the same time and quite surprisingly gaining in autonomy. This is what distinguishes her from Eliza Doolittle: her submission to artistic (implicitly male) domination is as playful and, at times, perverse as Sabbath's own manipulative genius for "guile, artifice, and the unreal" (147). In fact, Drenka is able to shape Sabbath's language and imagination in much the same way as he contrives to chisel hers. A puppet playing for her puppet master, she nonetheless manages to stake out a highly self-centered identity. She does so, however, not by way of "resistance" but, to the contrary, by

contributing to the artistic game—and it is not at all to the puppeteer's dismay that his "creature" offers linguistic invention and originality: "[Drenka] was weakest at retaining idiomatic English but managed, right up to her death, to display a knack for turning the clichéd phrase, proverb, or platitude into an objet trouvé so entirely her own that Sabbath wouldn't have dreamed of intervening—indeed, some (such as 'it takes two to tangle') he wound up adopting" (71).

This sort of linguistic autonomy may seem harmless enough, but Drenka's amusing malapropisms can indeed be taken as indication of a *mutual* narcissism and hence a *mutual* exertion of power underlying Sabbath and Drenka's pornutopian game playing. It seems significant in this context that the novel begins with Drenka's imperative demand that her lover have no goddess beside her. So from the very first sentence of the novel, it is obvious that Sabbath and Drenka's relationship is governed by the need to force permanence upon transient matter(s). Both Sabbath and Drenka wish to create in the other an object to be possessed—and both seem to gain something of an "identity" from their mutual give and take. Nothing less than the promise of sameness over time—the promise, in other words, of a home—can thus be traced behind their desire to construct a sexual alter ego. And while for Sabbath this death-defying home is to be found in the possibility of play-acting, in the seemingly endless yet basically monothematic flux of invented roles and shameless farces (Drenka will play the innocent Yugoslavian teenager to his dirty old man, or the Don Giovanna to his Falstaff), for Drenka it is, ironically, Sabbath's "Americanness" that gives rise to her urge to transform a lover into a fetish of liberation. As Drenka tells Sabbath: "[T]o be accepted by you, the American boyfriend ... it made me less fearful about not understanding, not going to school here.... But having the American boyfriend and seeing the love from your eyes, it's all all right" (418). One feels reminded of the earlier novel *Deception*, where Roth presents the act of "talking about it" as a multilayered and inevitably reciprocal striving for self-transcendence. The same problem can be found in *Sabbath's Theater*: as Drenka and Sabbath are spellbound by each other's stories about liberating sexual encounters (the only difference being "that hers were about people who were real" [26]), they both try to envision, even to enact, a narcissistic counterlife, a pornutopian "beyond" in a beyondless world.[5]

The originality of Philip Roth's reflection on thanatological objectification thus resides in his novel's resistance to the Manichaean explanations of traditional victim-perpetrator schemes. Thanatological despair regardless of gender seems to be at the core of Sabbath and Drenka's

violent (and violently gendered) self-projections: the puppeteer may turn Drenka into a narcissistic counterimage of himself, thereby staking his claim to act as a surrogate divinity, but Drenka herself makes love "as though she [were] wrestling with Destiny, or God, or Death" (168). This, of course, is a fight that cannot be won, by either a male or a female objectifier. But when thirty turbulent pages into the novel Drenka dies of cancer, we are in for a shock which is usually spared us in erotic literature. Because in *Sabbath's Theater*, the love object's death does not serve as perverse sexual kick, nor does the woman's corpse suffer that notorious postmortal aestheticizing which once prompted Edgar Allan Poe to pronounce "the death ... of a beautiful woman ... the most poetical topic in the world" (19), and which makes so many male fictions about female deaths so unpleasant to digest. This is not to say, however, that Sabbath wouldn't try to transform Drenka's grave into an erotic fetish. In fact, *Sabbath's Theater* can boast some of the most memorable and outrageous necrophilic passages ever written. The rite of mourning that most naturally suggests itself to Sabbath after Drenka's death is masturbation. As the bereaved lover himself puts it, he tries to find consolation "by scattering his seed across Drenka's oblong patch of Mother Earth" (68). His wish is "To drill a hole in her grave! To drive through the coffin's lid to Drenka's mouth!" (444). Although Sabbath knows the futility of this attempt at revivification ("But he might as well try, by peeing, to activate a turbine—he could never again reach her in any way"), he frequently comes very close to realizing his necrophilic fantasy. But even though Sabbath leaves nothing unattempted to perpetuate his defunct affair by means of kinky fetishization, in the end he experiences the disappearance of his sexual alter ego as nothing less than a mirror-death, as a scandalous blow to his narcissism from which he will never recover. After the demise of his "genital mate," this male lover stumbles through life in a state of perpetual nervous breakdown, again and again restaging his own fall from grace.

If the above interpretation is valid, Roth's novel can be read as the story of a man who aspired to be godlike but only came to be increasingly mortal (if such a thing is possible—but as there is a death-in-life it may be said without too much reliance on metaphor that Sabbath dies many deaths in the course of his subversive liberations). Having found a "link with another world" (27), a liberation from the commonplace, Sabbath soon falls victim to the most commonplace truth of all: he has to learn that even the most extraordinary people die of ordinary causes. The liberating goddess he teaches Drenka to turn herself into is subject to a disease no less common than cancer. A banal death resides in the ecstatic body.

Ghosts

As the death of his sexual double makes Sabbath realize his own mortality—or rather the ordinary transience of his extraordinary ecstasies—he begins to suffer what he calls a "pure" and "monstrous" pain (403). It is important to note that this pain does not stem merely from the recognition of his own finitude but also, if not mainly, from a feeling of bereavement. In fact, Drenka's death marks only the beginning of Sabbath's confrontation with the proverbial "ghosts of the past." The departure of his female other sends him on a trip into the realm of the dead, a veritable journey into hell (which the satanic rebel suddenly does not consider all that alluring a place anymore). It is a frightful odyssey that Sabbath has to take himself upon, a voyage back to his collected losses: to Nikki, for example, his first wife, who simply "disappeared" one day (maybe because of Sabbath's affair with Roseanna, but more probably because her masochistic attachment to an unfeeling husband had exceeded the bounds of what is bearable). After years of frantic searching for Nikki, Sabbath, to shock his friends, makes up the story that he killed her—which he very well may have done, in a metaphorical way, forcing her to become his "puppet partner" (96). Then there is Lincoln, Sabbath's friend from New York, who commits suicide shortly after Drenka's death. And there is Sabbath's brother Morty, shot down as a bomber pilot over Japan in World War II (an event responsible for Sabbath's angry racist invectives).[6] Most importantly, however, there is Sabbath's mother, from whom "[h]e inherited his own ability never to get over anything" (195). It is from her, too, that Sabbath learns what it means to be dead while still alive. The loss of her son Morty transforms Yetta Sabbath from a vivacious young woman into a sorrowful recluse who refuses to live in the real world and communicate with its inhabitants. Having died long before her actual end, she converses with spirits only, so that when Sabbath visits her in the nursing home, she doesn't recognize him, the living son, preferring the company of his dead brother. Sabbath wonders why she "had never gone ahead to take her life" after that crippling loss, "but then, for fifty years after losing Morty, she had no life to take" (81).

Obviously, Sabbath's "monstrous pain" should not be confused with a simple fear of death. When Sabbath, like so many other death-plagued characters in American literature, finds himself unable to sleep at night, it is not only the knowledge of his own finitude that keeps him awake but also a visitation by ghosts. And yet the pain of bereavement is also a selfish one, resulting from a blow to subjective narcissism. In abstract terms, the narcissistic subject perceives the loss of other people as an insult to its own

sovereignty. The survivor feels stripped of his or her rightful belongings, dispossessed of the objects that were meant to guarantee his or her perpetuity. Understood in this way, death can be seen as a medium of power that radically inverts the hierarchy of any given victim-perpetrator constellation. This, by the way, is what makes it possible for a person to threaten suicide with the intention of emotional blackmail (as is done by Roseanna's father). Nikki's "disappearance," too, can be interpreted as the only gesture of empowerment that is left to her—a self-withdrawal that not only effects a deliverance from an unbearable life but also acts as a means of victimizing the victimizer. In a way, even Sabbath's project of satanic subversion presents such a desperate attempt to turn a loser into a winner. By playing the oppressed liberator and the *advocatus diaboli*, Sabbath is basically doing what Nikki did: he is trying to "disappear," trying to establish an outsider's mocking position that allows him to shut himself off from other people in order not to be hurt by their violence, not to be infected by their pain. According to Roth, then, not only is there death in the body of resistance, but the very resistance meant to defy external authority originates in the subject's mortal limitations, its narcissistic impotence.

In his portrayal of the survivor as both master and mastered, Roth proves indeed more discerning than most contemporary theorists (or, for that matter, novelists) who have written on the nexus of death and eroticism. While postmodern thanatology tends to view the figure of the survivor as a proud and unequivocally gendered repressor, *Sabbath's Theater* calls attention to the dialectics of resistance and submission that underlies any subject's desire for mastery.[7] The tension between Sabbath's self-understanding as a manipulative artist and his inability to control his memories of the dead is of particular interest in this context. It seems noteworthy, for example, that Sabbath can't write off the apparition of his mother's ghost as a delusion. To the contrary, the visitation proves to be "unbearable" precisely because it confronts the subject with a reality that resists all attempts at fictionalization. So "real," in fact, is his mother's ghost that Sabbath comes "dangerously close to believing that she was not a hallucination." Here are his thoughts on the topic: "if he was hallucinating, then easily enough he could hallucinate speech for her, enlarge her reality with a voice of the kind with which he used to enliven his puppets" (51).

But how could he ever hope to enliven something dead? The difference between a dead and an inanimate object is, after all, that a dead object was once alive. In that sense, to speak of "objectivity" when referring to a corpse must be considered a euphemism. The dead, unlike marionettes, defy artistic mastery: the problem with ghosts, as Sabbath makes clear, is exactly that they

are not puppets. Little wonder, then, that the dead, like any "reality" in the emphatic sense of the term, insist on reappearing. They refuse to leave the subject precisely because they can no longer be turned into subjective possessions (as was possible when they were persons). And what cannot be subjectively possessed in turn possesses the subject. In this respect, Sabbath's dead mother does "indeed exist unmastered and independent of his imagination" (111).

It has become something of a clichéd gesture in contemporary critical discourse to attend to the ideological violence accompanying any form of aesthetic representation, especially if the represented object is not allowed to answer its own objectification (as is true, above all, of the dead). Roth's achievement in this context consists in alerting us to the fact that a (most frequently gendered) culture of aesthetic survival is always also a culture of self-conscious (and hence ultimately transgendered) failure. Thus not only Sabbath's but also his mother's, Nikki's, and Roseanna's dead reveal themselves as failing gods—fetishes of home, liberation, and perenniality that now haunt the subject for no other reason than that they were unable to live up to their promises.[8]

This emphasis on the survivor's painful dependence on what he or she thought could be possessed like an object also throws a new light on the problem of necrophilia. If we follow *Sabbath's Theater*, to love the dead more than the living seems to be the price to be paid for loving the living as if they were dead objects. Conventionally, necrophilia is interpreted as either an "unhealthy" act of mourning or the ultimate expression of a need for mastery and appropriation. In both cases, it is considered a perversion, a scandalous violation of established social or moral decorum. By contrast, Roth's novel seems to suggest that the boundary line between a sane and an insane form of mourning, or between a respectable and a sick attempt at fetishization, is not easily drawn. Two points are worth noting in this context. First, Sabbath's necrophilic urges and practices are far from exceptional. In fact, after Drenka's death, desecration seems to turn into the favorite nocturnal activity in Madamaska Falls—at least as far as the male inhabitants of Sabbath's aptly named hometown are concerned. Night after night, Sabbath hides out in the cemetery and witnesses a series of lovers grotesquely "worshipping" at the grave of their sexual goddess. Once or twice, he is even overcome by absurd fits of postmortal jealousy (an emotion he was unacquainted with before) and, like any good husband and master, feels pressed to assault his "rivals." But such necrophilic despair is not restricted to men alone: in one of the most powerful scenes of the book, Sabbath remembers how Nikki refused to surrender her mother's corpse for

interment. At the time, Sabbath regarded his wife's "unconstrained intimacy with her mother's corpse," her "obliviousness to the raw physical facts," as simply an expression of madness: "the vigil she had initiated over the body," he says, "had exceeded my sense not of what was seemly but of what was sane" (108). In retrospect, however, the puppeteer comes to see the resemblance between Nikki's "three days of fondling the corpse" (136) and his own nightly excursions to Drenka's grave. Recognizing that his own "life with the dead" has, by now, "put those antics of Nikki's to shame," Sabbath interprets the perverse behavior of his first wife from a new perspective: "To think how repelled I was by her—as though it were Nikki and not Death who had overstepped the limits" (121).[9]

The second point to be noted about Roth's reassessment of necrophilia is that the "insanity" of this kind of mourning is revealed as the outcome of a historical development which deprives the bereft subject of more and more avowedly "sane" alternatives to cope with his or her suffering. Nikki is truly left *alone* with her mother's dead body—"with no church, no clan to help her through, not even a simple folk formality around which her response to a dear one's death could mercifully cohere" (110). The "solitude of the dying" of which Norbert Elias has written is thus shown to be accompanied by a solitude of the survivor. In a post-theistic culture, Roth suggests, the individual *mastery* of (anticipated or experienced) loss becomes by far the most pressing concern for the subject. It can be seen as a major accomplishment of Roth's novel that it acknowledges both the necessity and the necessary failure of such masterful fetishizations. As far as Mickey Sabbath is concerned, the "need of a substitute for everything disappearing" (17) finally reveals itself as "the need ... for a clarifying narrative" (38)—or, in one word, the need for *remembrance*. Just as his grandfather "had laid tefillin every morning and thought of God," so Sabbath now "[winds] Morty's watch every morning and [thinks] of Morty" (147). The refusal to forget the dead, the insistence on remembering, seems to act as the last religious rite in a disenchanted world, the only "sane" alternative to necrophilic masturbation. One feels reminded of *Patrimony*, Philip Roth's moving account of his father's dying, which closes with the sentence, "You must not forget anything" (238). Similarly, toward the end of his odyssey, Sabbath decides to look up the last remaining survivor of his family, one-hundred-year-old Cousin Fish, and tries to get him to utter, almost by way of incantation, the names of the dead: "To hear him say, 'Mickey. Morty. Yetta. Sam,' to hear him say, 'I was there. I swear I remember. We all were alive'" (387).

But nothing is settled with that. Sabbath would not be Sabbath if he were able to find peace in any ordinary rite of mourning. Halfway through

his "sane" interview with Cousin Fish, the puppeteer inside him reasserts itself and thinks it would be "fun" to watch the decrepit, almost blind man prepare his dinner and then, "when [Cousin Fish] turned around, take the lamb chop and quickly eat it" (401). Instead, Sabbath steals a box marked "Morty's Things." What he finds in this box—old letters, photos, an American flag, and other traces of a past once alive—literally makes him lose his mind:

> There was nothing before in Sabbath's life like this carton, nothing approached it, even going through all of Nikki's gypsy clothes after there was no more Nikki. Awful as that closet was, by comparison with this box it was nothing. The pure, monstrous purity of the suffering was new to him, made any and all suffering he'd known previously seem like an imitation of suffering. This was the passionate, the violent stuff, the worst, invented to torment one species alone, the remembering animal, the animal with the long memory. (403)

For Sabbath, there can be no "sane" mourning. Remembrance presents both the salvation and the curse of the survivor. Morty's yarmulke on his head, wrapped in the American flag, he returns to his lover's grave and, while urinating on it, is arrested by Drenka's son Matthew, who nearly kills Sabbath when he is told that the threefold desecration he has just witnessed is actually "a religious act" (446). If the monstrous obscenity of death makes it impossible for Sabbath to choose between proper and improper forms of mourning, decent and indecent ways of remembering the dead, neither can there be any moral or intellectual restrictions that would hold in check the insolence of his violent masteries of loss.

Ideology

Ironically, the intent behind Sabbath's final travesty of mourning rites cannot be located in his desire to call into question the sacred norms of middle-class propriety. For once, Roth's protagonist is not play-acting for a shocked audience; for once he is not trying to impersonate "[t]he inverted saint whose message is desecration" (347). In that sense, Sabbath is completely serious when he calls his grotesque show a "religious rite." All too gladly would he like to be able to integrate his pain within a meaningful ritual, no matter how similar to "ordinary" people that would make him. (The fact that his attempt

at self-healing goes so badly wrong, being completely out of touch with established notions of health, simply reveals how precarious those notions are to begin with.) Thus despite his lust for satanic negation, Sabbath shows himself unable *not to try* to find a "positive" home for himself. This is why his unlikely combination of Sadean, American, and Jewish ideological gestures ultimately demonstrates the inevitability of thanatological fetishization. But does this mean that any thanatological fetish has to be a violently intolerant one?

The need for an objective, integrative myth, Roth insinuates, is born out of the knowledge of subjective finitude. In every loss, anticipated or experienced, there lies the origin of a home, an ideology, a rhetoric of salvation and belonging. But homes must be defended, precisely because they will always turn out to be only preliminary—and the more preliminary they are felt to be, the more dogged the attempt to force permanence upon them. A belief in perenniality and transcendence, often dearly earned, must by definition be absolute. A *violent* fetish thus would be one that truly has forgotten its origin, one that is so unsuccessful in coping with the thought and fact of transience that it must behave as though it actually had succeeded in locating a presence without end. The root of ideological violence, understood in this manner, seems to lie in the denial of thanatological failure. In a way, this axiom can be seen as the secret leitmotif of *Sabbath's Theater*, underlying all the violent clashes of opposing systems of secular belief in the novel.

The case of Matthew, Drenka's son, is instructive here. Matthew can be taken as a perfect illustration of the repressiveness of a found identity. His job as a state trooper gives him an almost metaphysical pleasure; we are told that he finds "an enormous manly satisfaction" in wearing his leather outfit and "driving by at night and checking [the town] out, checking out the banks, checking out the bars, watching the people leaving the bars to see how bad off they were" (10–11). Sabbath frequently wonders, "Why *had* the boy become a cop?" (18). Matthew's choice of profession certainly has to do with a paradoxical desire to simultaneously spite and please his father, a Croatian exile who has been trying ("all too successfully," Sabbath says) to make "a real American out of his son" (24). But there's more to it. Matthew's feelings about his job seem to indicate that the "manly satisfaction" of being a state trooper derives, abstractly put, from the opportunity offered the self to *master* its environs (surveying the natural landscape and the public spaces, seeing "how bad off" other people are). Indeed, Matthew's machismo, like many an ideological ism, essentially presents a fantasy of immortality: "he was so pumped up, felt so invincible, he believed he could stop bullets with

his teeth" (11). Tellingly, Matthew shows himself unable to believe that the cause of his mother's dying is, in fact, death. The imperial self simply cannot accept that something has happened which lies outside its control: "It was as though his mother had died not of a terrible disease but from an act of violence perpetrated by a psychopath he would go out and find and quietly take in" (65).

It is not surprising that Sabbath, "the county's leading sex offender" (296), finds himself in diametrical opposition to Matthew's rather bourgeois chauvinism. And yet Sabbath's genius for aesthetic manipulation follows the same desire that can also be traced behind Matthew's masculine play-acting: both forms of self-invention intend to control the uncontrollable, and both inevitably seek to exert power on any object that resists the subject's will to sovereignty. "I have more power than the president," Matthew says, because "I can take people's rights away. Their rights of freedom" (66). For the same reason, Sabbath turns to art. In fact, the puppeteer's language at times sounds like an unintentional caricature of exactly that sort of hard-boiled fiction on which Matthew models his whole identity.[10]

But Sabbath shares his need for control not only with Matthew. Drenka herself, his most reliable ally against the strictures of modern puritanism, turns against him as soon as she is diagnosed with cancer. Anticipating her death, she comes to embrace the monogamous impulse toward appropriation and permanence. Her ultimatum—"Either I am your woman, your *only* woman, or this all *has* to be over!" (17)—is nothing but an expression of possessiveness, a claim to ownership. And it is understood as such by Sabbath: in a perverse turn of events, he suddenly finds himself the objectified victim in their game of narcissistic mirror projections. "Are you going to administer an oath?" he asks her angrily. "What are the words to the oath? Please list all the things that I am not allowed to do" (22). In the same conversation, after having cleverly remarked that Drenka implausibly asks for "monogamy outside marriage and adultery inside marriage" (19), he gives the following speech: "As a self-imposed challenge, repressive puritanism is fine with me, but it is Titoism, Drenka, *inhuman Titoism*, when it seeks to impose its norms on others by self-righteously suppressing the satanic side of sex" (20).

This comparison between sexual and social forms of repression is revealing, because it unwittingly endows Sabbath's own personal advocacy of physical lust with a public, indeed metaphysical, concern. If there is a parallel between private and political totalitarianism, there must also be a parallel between psychological and ideological creeds of liberation. Both, in fact, have to be seen as thanatological projects of salvation and are, as such,

equally subject to the charge of violent repressiveness. That is why Sabbath, when confronted with Drenka's demand, finds himself "fighting for his life" (27). This fight, however, is not at all about the securement of maximum sexual pleasure but is fought in defense of an ideological fetish ("the sacrament of infidelity," as he himself calls it [31]). One shouldn't forget that in terms of sexual enjoyment, Sabbath has nothing to lose by giving in to Drenka's wish: he is de facto already "faithful" to her, being "quite unalluring" to other women, "absurdly bearded" as he is, "and obstinately peculiar and overweight and aging in every obvious way" (26). His satanic battle for "freedom" thus shows all the marks of an ideological contest—a fight not between autonomous individualism and repressive totalitarianism, but a fight in which one form of repressive totalitarianism struggles with another, quite comparable, one.[11]

According to Roth's novel, then, mutual victimization is inherent in any contest of thanatological systems of salvation. One person's home acts as another person's prison, no matter whether we are faced with theological, psychological, or political places of belonging. Drenka, for instance, describes her escape from Yugoslavia to the United States in terms of a liberating move, but even this liberation claims its victims. By leaving behind her Communist parents, both geographically and ideologically, Drenka puts in question their very sense of belonging and finally forces a terminal disease upon them: "Drenka shamed her parents by fleeing to this imperialist country, broke their hearts, and they too died, both of cancer, not long after her defection" (7). Not only by its exclusion of others, however, is victimization a necessary element of ideological leaps of faith (group cohesion being one of the principal aims of ideology), but also as far as the effect of any such "homecoming" on the self is concerned. If we follow Roth's argument, *self*-victimization in the form of self-punishment, self-denial, or active masochism is an inevitable result of the subject's submission to schemes of its own empowerment. Thus character after character in *Sabbath's Theater* "escapes" from one repressive home into the next. Both Nikki and Roseanna enter into unhappy marriages just because they want to liberate themselves from their domineering fathers. Roseanna's second escape is into unfreedom as well: leaving Sabbath, she finds consolation and a new model for identity in the jargon of affection and understanding taught in self-help groups such as AA and Courage to Heal. And Drenka's parents, we hear, loved Comrade Tito just as much and in the same way as, before Communism, they loved the king: both leaders supplied them with a rhetoric of belonging, whose truth they defended at all costs against both outer and inner resistances.

So while it can be said that every newfound home is established with the intention to put a ghost to rest, in the end these ideological homes inevitably haunt the self with new apparitions of unfreedom. The only character in the book who steadfastly refuses to accept a given identity for himself is Mickey Sabbath. Not group cohesion, not even self-cohesion, is his aim, but ecstatic self-loss. As we have seen, however, this transgressive project cannot possibly be realized. No matter how hard he tries to "disappear," Sabbath remains "self-haunted while barely what you would call a self" (198). As a result, his anti-ideological maneuvers necessarily take place on the very battlefield he wishes to escape from. Taking this thought as my cue, I want to concentrate, in the last section of this essay, on the central ideological contest presented in *Sabbath's Theater*, the one that will probably provoke the most critical commentary on Roth's novel in coming years: Sabbath's attacks on feminism.

Masculinism/Feminism

While it is true that ideologies are generally characterized by their attempt to bring about group cohesion, it is not possible to reverse this argument and regard a person's lack of social ties as a proof or measure of his or her independence in matters of weltanschauung. Sabbath's radically asocial way of life obviously doesn't guarantee his freedom from ideological biases. Rather than following a behavioral code of his own making, the subversive libertine, as I have pointed out, remains dependent on the anticipated reactions of his audience. Sabbath's religious pursuit of ecstasy is not, therefore, as original or immediate an undertaking as he would like it to be. More correctly, it presents, in the words of René Girard, "a desire *according to Another*" (4), a desire mediated by external agencies.[12] I want to extend Girard's thought and argue that the protagonist of Roth's novel takes his desire not only from "another," thereby rendering it an ideological desire, but that Sabbath's ideology of desire is modeled on its very *other*—its self-constructed ideological antagonist and counterpart. To put it differently, if Sabbath truly presents a sexual Don Quixote, desiring by the book, then the pattern for his phallic eroticism is drawn from no source other than feminism—or rather, from what Sabbath regards to be the feminist "book." The puppeteer's satanic desire is mediated by the very enemy of that desire.

This may appear at first to be an absurd argument, because Sabbath can be seen as the male misogynist *par excellence*. His militant sexism will be found intolerably offensive by many readers (or at least as irritating as Alex

Portnoy's neurotic egomania; in fact, Sabbath in many ways looks like an older version of Portnoy—the paranoid masturbator as dirty old man). It seems clear that Sabbath's longing for the opposite sex does not spring from a love for women, but rather from a passion for appropriation that in more than one instance goes hand in hand with pure hatred. Not surprisingly, therefore, Sabbath's sexual cravings are oftentimes combined with fantasies of murder. When he meets Christa, the young German who will become first Drenka's and then Roseanna's lesbian lover (the first upon Sabbath's own suggestion, the latter to his dismay), he feels like taking her "up to Battle Mountain and strangl[ing] her to death" (56). After Kathy Goolsbee, his student in the university puppet workshop, charges him with sexual harassment, he again plans "to take [her] to the top of Battle Mountain and strangle her" (229). One shouldn't expect such a man to exhibit much fondness for the idea of female emancipation. What is troubling, though, is how difficult it sometimes seems to distinguish between Sabbath's and Roth's attitudes toward feminism. One scene in particular is interesting in this context. Visiting his friend Norman Cowan in New York, Sabbath spends the night in the bedroom of Norman's absent teenage daughter Deborah. True to style, he loses no time in searching her room for dirty pictures.[13] The way that Deborah's room is described, however, seems to cast a light on the author's own ideological prejudices, for Roth viciously places the novels of "K. Chopin, T. Morrison, A. Tan, V. Woolf" (153) on the adolescent girl's bookshelf, along with teddy bears and "childhood favorites" such as *The Yearling* and Andersen's *Fairy Tales*. But then, Roth's quarrel seems to be less with those books than with what they represent when collected in such a canonical fashion as the freshman's only literary possessions. So one should take note of what Sabbath actually hits upon while searching for polaroids hidden in "the daughter's floral underpants" (338). Looking for something completely different, he finds cant: among Deborah's papers, there are some notes she took in a literature class on W. B. Yeats's poem "Meru": "Class criticized poem for its lack of a woman's perspective. Note unconscious gender privileging—*his* terror, *his* glory, *his* (phallic) monuments" (165).

These words present an irritating discovery not only for the male voyeur but for the male mourner as well—and they reveal the true source of Roth's critique of feminism. What is objectionable here, according to Roth, is not Deborah's exclusive reading of female novelists, but a Manichaean rhetoric of repression and liberation that behaves as if male artists were dealing with death exclusively by way of unbewildered "phallic" conquest. Reading only the masterful violence that must attend any thanatological effort to make sense and not the mortal pain that no authoritarian

representation will ever be able to exorcise, feminist thanatology indeed seems to take "male" subjectivity at its word, claiming the *success* of a mastery that the conquering subject frequently enough cannot bring himself to believe in. The result, in Roth's novel at least, is a self-righteous rhetoric of victimization that paradoxically reproduces the very mentality of inquisitional censure that it seeks to counter. This, I think, is how we are meant to understand Sabbath's complaints about "fictionalizing" biographies (193) and the reflexive finding of a criminal father behind every suffering daughter.[14]

Upon closer inspection, therefore, it turns out that Sabbath is much more an anti-ideologue than a misogynist. In fact, his disquieting murder fantasies are not restricted to women but can involve anyone talking a jargon of salvation. This trait is consistent with Sabbath's claim to act as the master of unmaking. Identifying with the Spirit of Negation himself, Sabbath feels a destructive rage at the sight of any found home, no matter whether it goes by the name of feminism, patriotism, or middle-class propriety. In that sense, it is not a particular gender but rather a particular kind of rhetoric that the puppeteer is disgusted by. It is "that language which they all used" that makes him "want to cut their heads off" (213). He asks Roseanna, whom he calls "the Twelve-Step Wife" (435), "is the only way to get off the booze to learn how to talk like a second grader?" (88). "My wife ... goes to AA to learn how to forget to speak English" (326), Sabbath complains, and confesses: "What he loathed the way good people loathe *fuck* was *sharing*. He didn't own a gun, even out on the lonely hill where they lived, because he didn't want a gun in a house with a wife who spoke daily of 'sharing'" (85).

At one level, then, Sabbath's fierce attacks on feminism are nothing but a special case of his general attack on the "order" that people make out of "chaos" (242). This becomes obvious when, in a central scene of the novel, Sabbath runs into his younger doppelgänger Donald, a warden in Usher Psychiatric Hospital (who "vaguely resembled the Sabbath of some thirty years ago"). Donald gives the following lecture on feminism:

> Ideological idiots! ... The third great ideological failure of the twentieth century. The same stuff. Fascism. Communism. Feminism. All designed to turn one group of people against another group of people. The good Aryans against the bad others who oppress them. The good poor against the bad rich who oppress them. The good women against the bad men who oppress them. The holder of the ideology is pure and good and clean and the other is wicked. But do you know who is wicked? Whoever imagines himself to be pure is wicked! ...

> ... Ideological tyranny. It's the disease of the century. The ideology *institutionalizes* the pathology. In twenty years there will be a new ideology. (274–75)

One would expect Sabbath to fully embrace Donald's views. It is telling, however, that the two men do not get along at all. Even Donald, the dedicated antifeminist, is disgusted by the way Sabbath treats his wife, while Sabbath finds himself defending lesbian marriages when he hears that Donald's ex-wife was married to her girlfriend by a rabbi (an event which probably triggered Donald's "insights"). Clearly, it is the impassioned smugness of Donald's beliefs—an "order" born out of emotional "chaos"—that prompts Sabbath's objection. But things are more complex. Sabbath is not just trying to reinstate disorder in its rightful position in life when he speaks up for adultery and lesbian marriages. The way in which he is confronted, in this scene, with a mirror version of himself and deeply dislikes what he sees seems to indicate a fundamental inconclusiveness in his attitude toward what he regards as feminist jargon.

The question is, how is Sabbath's paranoia different from the feminist attempt to counter suffering with ideological "order"? We already noted that Sabbath cannot claim to be the agent of his own desire—that his destructive urges remain dependent on what they feel repelled by. At one point, Sabbath himself draws attention to this dialectic and admits that his job is to play the role of the *monstre sacré* for his middle-class friends, impersonating "their real-lifer":

> Showed 'em I'd escaped the bourgeois trammels. Educated bourgeoisie like to admire someone who's escaped the bourgeois trammels—reminds them of their college ideals .... I was their noble savage for a week.... Dissenter. Maverick. Menace to society. Great. (331)

Apparently it doesn't matter whether "the joy of the job of being their savage" (247) is felt in front of a bourgeois or a feminist audience (two groups which, according to Sabbath, share most of their ideals and values anyway). So the puppeteer shows himself more than willing to play the objectifying male oppressor, in a way controlling death by impersonating it. Phallic masculinism as represented in Roth's novel must therefore be understood as a sort of mirror feminism: by confirming alleged feminist prejudices, Sabbath manages to establish for himself a male identity *ex negativo*. Thus mirroring himself in the gaze of his other, he becomes what could be termed a

feminists' dream man. The fundamental problem with such a gender identity is, of course, that it presents an *imaginary* form of selfhood—an identity that reflects not an autonomous desire, but a fictional persona trying to live up to extraneous expectations. Yet "it takes two to tangle," as Drenka says. If Sabbath's phallic identity reveals itself as mediated, the same has to be said of the feminist conception of gender difference that underlies this fictional self-construction. According to *Sabbath's Theater*, the mutual mirroring of masculinism and feminism could not be such a successful one (with each party projecting its perfect antagonist) if the process were not absolutely reciprocal. In other words, feminist constructions of the male are, in Roth's opinion, as spellbound by the image of an all-powerful counterpart as Sabbath's masculinism is determined by the desire to correspond to that negative fetish. "What is the overpowering symbolism of the penis for you people?" Sabbath asks Roseanna. "Keep this up and you'll make Freud look good" (182). Turning himself into the very phallus worshipped by Roseanna and her therapists as if it were a satanic totem, Sabbath all too willingly seizes upon the longed-for opportunity to attain the status of a (negative) deity. Feminism thus seems to present an answer to all his spiritual dilemmas: here, at least, the male subject's claim to divine self-transcendence will be taken seriously.

Nowhere does the correspondence between a feminist and a masculinist rhetoric of salvation become more obvious than in the highly absurd episode of Sabbath's dismissal from the university. His student Kathy Goolsbee calls him late at night and a sexually explicit conversation ensues. This talk, for some reason taped by Kathy, is made public by an "ad hoc committee" called "Women Against Sexual Abuse, Belittlement, Battering, and Telephone Harassment"—or, in short, SABBATH. (In the novel, the conversation that costs Sabbath his job is reproduced in a footnote, typographically arranged in such a way that it becomes extremely hard to tell the words of the alleged victimizer from the language of the supposedly manipulated victim.) Of all his doubles, none as perfectly reflects Sabbath's ideological violence as this partisan feminist group. "Your people have on tape my voice giving reality to all the worst things they want the world to know about men," Sabbath accuses Kathy (235–36). But the phallus invented by feminism is turned into a reality by Sabbath in much the same way as his phallic fictions provoke the inquisitional reactions of SABBATH. The conclusion that Roth's novel draws from this situation of reciprocal enthrallment is a bleak one: while Sabbath and Drenka's narcissistic pornutopia still seemed to promise a possible equilibrium in the male and female subject's desire to find thanatological *Aufhebung* in their respective

counterpart, the necessary failure of any such fetishization of transient objects transforms the interaction of mortal selves, seeking salvation in each other, into an endless chain reaction of mutual violence.

The problem with such a representation of masculinist feminism and feminist masculinism (a narcissistic mirroring gone wrong) lies in the implication that the only possible feminist critique of factual gender oppression consists in the establishment of an essentialist ideology. Reading *Sabbath's Theater*, one could indeed get the impression that feminist theory never got past a fixation on "phallogocentrism."[15] But it must also be admitted that the novel itself calls attention to this problem when, at one point, Norman Cowan appropriately characterizes Sabbath's mirror feminism, as well as his mirror puritanism, as "[t]he discredited male polemic's last gasp." Calling Sabbath a "fifties antique," he remarks, "Linda Lovelace is already light-years behind us, but you persist in quarreling with society as though Eisenhower is president!" (347). And yet for Sabbath there is nothing to be gained from such a historical perspective. In the end, no intellectual insight will point a way out of a *circulus vitiosus* in which masculinism and feminism act as mutual mirrors of hate. Roth's protagonist frequently wonders what makes these violent homes so attractive, so inescapable. Why do people imprison themselves in marriages, jargons, ideologies? The only answer that makes sense to him points to the monstrous solitude imposed on the self by the certainty of death: "Somebody there while you wait for the biopsy report to come back from the lab.... And the dread of no one at home. All these rooms at night and no one else home" (346).

Thus, on rare occasions, Sabbath seems to notice the resemblance between other people's thanatological homes and his own subversive pursuit of ecstasy. After one of their sexual extravaganzas, he confesses to Drenka: "Because of you I'm not entirely horrible to Roseanna. I admire Roseanna, she's a real soldier, trooping off to AA every night—those meetings are for her what this is for us, a whole other life to make home endurable" (24). Elsewhere he admits that Roseanna must have "located there, in that language they spoke, in those words she embraced without a shadow of irony, criticism, or even, perhaps, full understanding, a wisdom for herself" (97–98)—a wisdom that may not have Sabbath's "skepticism and sardonic wit" (98) but nevertheless shows "nobility" and "a certain heroism" (288). As noted above, the way Roth surrounds his protagonist with unloved mirror images indeed leaves no doubt about the essential similarity that exists between the puppeteer and those people whom he would like to consider his puppets. In this sense, Roseanna is haunted by her father's suicide in much

the same manner as Sabbath is haunted by his mother's refusal to communicate with her living son. Nor is there a real difference between Roseanna's alcoholism and Sabbath's eroticism: "One of them is driven to drink and one of them is driven to Drenka" (98).[16]

But apart from these short glimpses of understanding, Sabbath never manages to shake off his self-righteous belief in the *extra*ordinary nature of his subversions. He simply remains unable to regard other people's world-constructions as legitimate. This, of course, is what most emphatically connects him with "other people." In his attacks on ideological smugness, Sabbath is therefore both right and wrong. When he finds the deeply moving letters that Roseanna has written to her dead father as an exercise in self-healing, he is not above composing an answer, signing it "Your Father in Hell" (272). Impersonating the victimizer, he counters his wife's attempt to find an "objectified" explanation for her suffering:

> You judge me entirely by your pain, you judge me entirely by your holy feelings. But why don't you judge me for a change by *my* pain, by *my* holy feelings? How you cling to your grievance! As though in a world of persecution you alone have a grievance. (272)

These sentences are remarkable because they not only name but also embody the fundamental problem that can be found at the core of every single ideological contest in Roth's novel. Sabbath's fictional letter must, of course, be seen as the textbook example of a performative contradiction: to blame another person for clinging to her own feelings and exclusively privileging her own pain presents a speech-act that exactly repeats the gesture it finds fault with. By asking Roseanna to put *his* pain and *his* grievance at the center of her concerns, Sabbath (or her dead father whom he wishes to help to a voice) proves just as self-centered as he accuses his wife of being. In the end, then, there is no alternative to negative, narcissistic self-projection. "Despite all my many troubles," Sabbath proudly pronounces, "I continue to know what matters in life: profound hatred. One of the few remaining things I take seriously" (325–26). Sabbath, we are told, "did not care to make people suffer beyond the point that he wanted them to suffer; he certainly didn't want to make them suffer any more than made him happy" (171).

So offensive are Sabbath's chauvinism, egomania, and self-pity that the narrator feels he has to utter a plea for understanding on behalf of his

protagonist (with whom he almost seems to merge on other occasions): "Not too hard on Sabbath, Reader." Extenuating circumstances are quoted: "the turbulent inner talkathon," "the super-abundance of self-subversion," "the years of reading about death," and "the bitter experience of tribulation, loss, hardship, and grief" (230–31). But if it is actually possible to feel sympathy for Sabbath, it is less because of the extraordinary scope of his suffering than because of its sheer banality. At bottom, Sabbath's theatrical pathos is all too human; his pain stems mainly from the very absence of eccentric and singular explanations.[17] The result of Sabbath's frightful odyssey, the reward of his journey into the land of the dead, his season in hell, is not transcendent wisdom but a knowledge that is at best clichéd. "This is human life," the ghost of his mother tells him. "There is a great hurt that everyone has to endure" (143). Sabbath's thanatological narrative is filled with such topoi, and his "pain" is ultimately the pain of having nothing but platitudes at hand to explain a "life" that can never be sure if it deserves its name. Despite his constant striving for exceptionality, banalities are the only things that make sense:

> There's nothing that keeps its promise.
>
> (1)
>
> That's what it comes down to...: folks disappearin' left and right.
>
> (147)
>
> If only things had been different, everything would be otherwise.
>
> (162)
>
> Nobody beloved gets out alive.
>
> (364)

This is what remains of excess, of ecstasy, of the extraordinary life: ordinary home truths, painful commonplaces, no truth but in clichés. The accomplishment of the novel lies in Roth's having endowed these empty topoi with recognizable meaning, in his having bestowed an unexpected significance on trite banalities. Like Drenka with her malapropisms, *Sabbath's Theater* manages to turn "the clichéd phrase, proverb, or platitude" into an *objet trouvé* so original that it strikes us with the authenticity of an immediate insight. This may be what sets art apart from jargon.

Notes

1. "Perenniality" is an expression used by Tony Tanner to characterize the myth of generational continuity on which the institution of the bourgeois family is founded (16). In this context, it seems remarkable that Sabbath, despite a lifelong indulgence in "hell-bent-for-disaster erotomania" (156) has no children. Indeed, Sabbath is openly disgusted by the reproductive aspect of sexuality. For the libertine to father a child would apparently mean "a squandering of living energy" (Bataille 61)—a relinquishment of individual presence for the benefit of a doubtful genealogical permanence.

2. It should be observed that Roth has a lot of fun with puns on "fire" in his novel, as when he describes Sabbath taking "anti-inflammatory pills" to fight his arthritis. Especially remarkable in this respect is Sabbath's conversation with Matija, the husband of his deceased Croatian mistress, Drenka. The whole exchange, taking place shortly after Drenka's funeral, can be read as one extended and hilarious double-entendre on the theme of "flames," "fire," and "burning"—with Sabbath perversely delighting in his superior linguistic competence.

3. See Bradford 206.

4. It seems noteworthy that Sabbath's choice of profession is motivated by pragmatic as much as by sensual criteria. Starting out as a theater director, Sabbath soon turns to puppets because he finds them easier to control than human actors. Unlike actors, puppets do not resist his impulse toward creatorship. Which is not to say that Sabbath wouldn't take pleasure in treating real persons precisely as if they were inanimate objects. He is enchanted by Roseanna's face because it gives "the fairy-tale illusion of a puppet infused with life" (83). Sabbath's perverse lust for turning people into puppets is maybe most hilariously expressed when Drenka hands him a speech by her hardly literate husband to proofread. Sabbath rewrites the text, exchanging correct idiomatic expressions for incorrect ones, thus producing a truly comic document which the unwitting Mr. Balich reads monotonously to a highly embarrassed audience. Sabbath attends the occasion with a feeling of artistic triumph.

5. See, for example, the following passage: "The one-time puppet master of the Indecent Theater of Manhattan made more than merely tolerable for her the routines of marriage that previously had almost killed her—now she cherished those deadly routines for the counterweight they provided her recklessness" (12). Later we are told, "Each of their marriages cried out for a countermarriage in which the adulterers attack their feelings of captivity" (27).

6. "When I hear the word *Japan*, I reach for my thermonuclear device," he is fond of saying (325).

7. See, for example, Elisabeth Bronfen's characterization of what she calls a male culture of "survival" in *Over Her Dead Body*. A detailed critique of postmodern thanatology can be found in the third chapter of Kelleter (124–55).

8. Accordingly, Sabbath's choice of profession is not only expressive of his lust for control (as I claimed above), but must also be understood as a defensive gesture. Sabbath admits that an important reason why he prefers puppets to human actors is that "no one had to worry that a puppet would disappear, as Nikki had, right off the face of the earth" (21). Sabbath's sentiment seems to tie in once more with Kleist's argument in *Über das Marionettentheater*. Since puppets or marionettes do not have a

life of their own, they are free from the limitations of a self-conscious (that is, mortal) existence. Being inanimate, they cannot die and hence—in C.'s terms—prove more "graceful" than living dancers. Another way of putting this would be to say that marionettes never experienced a fall from grace. Or as Sabbath paradoxically remarks, "If Nikki had been a puppet, she might still be alive" (245).

9. The obscenity of death itself—and not of the survivor's reaction—is furthermore emphasized when the embalmer, who has finally been admitted to the room, approaches the corpse of Nikki's mother as if about to perform an illicit act. When the embalmer closes the windows and pulls the curtains in order to make sure that the neighbors will not watch the scene, Sabbath feels "alarmed about leaving this attractive forty-five-year-old woman alone with him, dead though she was" (115).

10. Sabbath's narrative is full of rather embarrassing examples of masculinist prose. The passage "His aims were clear. His dick was hard" (60) can be quoted as a typical specimen.

11. Since it is the ideological argument and not the fear of missing out on sexual satisfaction that plays the major part in Sabbath's initial refusal to comply with Drenka's wish, Sabbath has to resort to a metaphysical rationalization when he finally decides to give in. By convincing himself that "the final kick" for the libertine "[is] to be faithful," he finds a way of accepting monogamy while still upholding his ideology of transgressive ecstasy. In return he demands from Drenka, as a "sacrifice," that she have oral sex with her husband twice a week: "The most promiscuous thing you have ever done. Sucking off your husband to please your lover" (32).

12. If, as Tony Tanner claims, "the achievement of great novels" lies in revealing "the presence and operation of the mediator and its 'privileged role ... in the genesis of desire'" (90), then *Sabbath's Theater* must be considered one of the greatest novels written in recent years. Judged by Tanner's definition, Sabbath would, in fact, be a typical protagonist of the genre, for he could be compared to those bourgeois characters who "do not realize or wish to confront the fact that their desires are internally mediated, and [who] subscribe to 'the lie of spontaneous desire'" (90).

13. This scene invites comparison with Nicholson Baker's novel *The Fermata*. It should be noted, for example, that unlike Arno Stine's desire to project himself into a female room, Sabbath's voyeurism lacks the wish for *unperceived* spectatorship. While Stine makes a point of always respectfully cleaning up after himself, Sabbath takes much delight in leaving his mark—in more than one sense—on Deborah's belongings. Where Baker's hero is on a curious search for an elusive subjectivity, Roth's protagonist seems mainly interested in the appropriation and defacement of objects.

14. In the mental clinic where Roseanna is hospitalized, Sabbath meets a woman who tells him: "In Courage to Heal they've been trying for three weeks to get me to turn in my dad. The answer to every question is either Prozac or incest." Being a victim of male repression thus functions as "The simplest story about yourself that explains everything—it's the house specialty" (287). Roseanna, too, comes to the conclusion that all her emotional problems can be traced back to the traumatic experience of sexual abuse. It remains obscure, however, whether she invents that story (in order to cope with her father's suicide) or whether she really is the victim of parental rape. The meaning of the clinic episode in *Sabbath's Theater* is furthermore complicated by various intertextual references to Edgar Allan Poe (Roseanna is hospitalized in "Roderick House," which is part of "Usher Psychiatric Hospital"; the clinic itself is referred to as "a massive Gothic mansion that had fallen into ruin after the death of the childless owners" [254]; finally, the woman who tells Sabbath about her experiences in Courage to Heal is called Madeline).

15. In his essay "Imagining the Erotic," Philip Roth speaks of "the Feminist Right" that is bound to level the charge of "sexism" at any male author who tries to "demonstrat[e] in his fiction that there are indeed women in America as broken and resentful as the women in America are coming to proclaim themselves to be" (176). Roth's terminology seems deliberately obscure here. If this statement is meant to point out a tendency toward ideological polarization in a particular strand of feminist theory, there still remains the question of why such dualistic thinking should be linked to right-wing politics. Apart from the fact that the political right hardly has a monopoly on ideological zealotry, the term "Feminist Right" seems to be purposefully forgetful of the *chronology* that led up to the formation of this particularism. In other words, if a certain spectrum of feminist discourse shows itself open to "reactionary" solutions, this may have to do with the fact that feminism, even today, is necessarily forced to be a *reaction* to an existing system of socioeconomic sexual discrimination. In that sense, the negative narcissistic mirroring of masculinism and feminism is not an "absolutely reciprocal" one but reflects a specific genealogy of ideological violence.

16. A similar comparison could be made with regard to Nikki, a dedicated actor. In the same way that Sabbath prefers puppets to real actors, Nikki prefers her existence on stage to everyday life (where she literally comes apart as a personality). In both cases, aesthetic mastery has to be understood as a defensive gesture, unsuccessfully trying to ward off the more than simply objective "reality" of death. (When Nikki's mother dies and Nikki keeps pretending that she is still alive, it is Sabbath, of all people, who has to remind her, "Your mother is not a doll to play with ..., you are not *on* the stage. This is no act" [121].)

17. See Sabbath pondering the photograph of the man who may have ruined Roseanna's life: "He studied the father's photo, looking in vain for a visible sign of the damage done him and the damage he'd done. In the lips she hated he could see nothing extraordinary" (270).

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