

Bailey on Roth

It isn't possible to write about Blake Bailey's biography of Philip Roth without mentioning the scandal that has overtaken the biographer. The book was published by W.W. Norton on April 6 and attracted a great deal of publicity. The biography itself was widely and, for the most part, favorably reviewed. Bailey gave a number of interviews and appeared in a detailed profile in *The New York Times Magazine*.

I cannot say that I share in this enthusiasm. A great deal of careful research has gone into the text, and it has considerably expanded my knowledge of Philip Roth. But the writing is often poor, mechanical, and rushed. It falls far short of the standard set by other biographies I have read in recent years, including Zachary Leader's two-volume study of Saul Bellow and Patrick French's splendid work on V.S. Naipaul. Benjamin Taylor, a friend of Roth's, said the author was persuaded to work with Bailey on the grounds of his superb biography of John Cheever. I can understand Roth's reaction. Bailey's *Cheever: A Life* sets a standard of excellence for all biographers. It is inexplicable that he fell so far short of it in his study of Roth.

But the virtues and deficits of the book have been overshadowed by other events. Two weeks after Norton published the book, disaster struck the biographer. On April 21, *The New York Times* published an article on its website claiming that Bailey accused of raping two women, the first in 2003, the second in 2015. He was also said to have employed questionable methods when he taught at a middle school in New Orleans in the 1990s. According to a former student interviewed by *The Times*, Bailey fostered an atmosphere of "dirty jokes and permissiveness" while encouraging students to write about what *The Times* called "romantic attachments."

Bailey has denied the accusations. That did little to check a punishing reaction. Norton suspended its marketing campaign and shipments of the book to retailers. The Story Factory, a literary agency that represented Bailey, announced that it had dropped the author. Several days later, Norton went further and said it had taken the book “out of print,” along with Bailey’s memoir *The Splendid Things We Planned: A Family Portrait*. The publisher added that it was releasing rights to both books back to the author. On May 17, according to *The Times*, Skyhorse Publishing had acquired rights to the Roth biography and planned to bring out a paperback edition in June.

I can understand Norton’s reaction even if I consider it premature. *The Times* says that Valentine Rice contacted Julia Reidhead, president of Norton, anonymously in 2018 and accused Bailey of raping her three years before. Reidhead did not respond to the note, but forwarded it to Bailey. A week later, Bailey wrote Rice directly, saying “I can assure you I have never had non-consensual sex of any kind, with anybody, ever, and if it comes to a point I shall vigorously defend my reputation and livelihood. Meanwhile, I appeal to your decency: I have a wife and young daughter who adore and depend on me, and such a rumor, even untrue, would destroy them.” At the same time that she wrote Reidhead, Rice repeated the allegation in an email to *The Times*. But she refused to discuss the matter when a reporter followed up with an interview request. Eve Peyton, a second accuser, received an email from Bailey in the summer of 2020, “in which,” according to *The Times*, “he alluded to ‘the awfulness on that night 17 years ago’ and said he was suffering from mental illness at the time.”

The information published by *The Times* is certainly worth considering. I wouldn't say that it's incriminating. This is what Alexandra Alter and Rachel Abrams, *The Times* reporters who wrote the story, had to say:

The discussions about Bailey's behavior toward his former students began to build in a private Facebook group and later spilled into public as several women left comments accusing Mr. Bailey of grooming his female middle school students on a site operated by the blogger Ed Champion, which highlighted Mr. Roth's misogynistic views.

In the same story, they cite these remarks by one Mary Karr:

The writer Mary Karr, in a tweet, remarked that she had just participated in an event with Mr. Bailey to discuss the Roth biography. "I wake to find Bailey credibly accused by three of his former eighth-grade students of grooming them for sex when they turned eighteen," she said. "I support any brave young woman speaking out."

But exactly who decided that Philip Roth was "misogynistic"? Have the reporters investigated these claims—or simply put into circulation old material they have read or heard from others? If it's their own opinion, who cares? They're reporters, not critics or scholars. Have they read Bailey's biography—or even Roth's novels? On the strength of what evidence does Mary Karr decide that former middle school students have "credibly accused" Bailey of improper conduct? *The Times* doesn't say. Did she interview them? Probe for motives? Weigh alternative evidence or possible conclusions? Has she been following the online discussions for months or years—or at all? Can she even confirm the identity of these women? The internet is notorious for putting false claims into circulation. Some of these claims against Bailey were made on FaceBook—which the press has attacked for years as a source of poisonous misinformation.

Say what you like about Philip Roth—that he was vengeful, duplicitous, hopelessly in thrall to his sexual wants; avaricious for information about people that he could use for his novels; and indifferent to their reactions to appearing in them. Sometimes he was eager to embarrass them. This is what I learned from the Bailey biography. What it proves is that Roth was not a model citizen or always charming—which is true for most of us.

What is also clear to me is his power of vaticination. *The Plot Against America* seems like a forecast of a Trump presidency. *Nemesis* might be seen as a frightening description of Covid-19. *I Married a Communist* is about the damage wreaked by McCarthy in the 1950s, transposed to the age of sexual accusation. And here is a passage near the end of *The Human Stain*. For context, it concerns the false rumors about the death of Coleman Silk, a retired professor of classics at Athena, a small New England college. The car crash that caused his death is attributed to reckless sexual conduct with a young woman who was in his car; in fact, the woman's former husband drove Silk off the road. This is what the narrator of the novel, Nathan Zuckerman, has to say about the matter:

The Devil of the Little Place—the gossip, the jealousy, the acrimony, the boredom, the lies. No, the provincial poisons do not help. People are bored here, they are envious, their life is as it is and as it will be, and so, with-out seriously questioning the story, they repeat it—on the phone, in the street, in the cafeteria, in the classroom. They repeat it at home to their husbands and wives. . . .All I knew for sure is that the germs of malice were unleashed, and where Coleman's conduct was concerned, there was no absurdity out of which someone was going to try to make indignant sense—and what was there to contain the epidemic's spreading? It was there. The pathogens were out there.

There is much that can be said in favor of the new Blake Bailey biography of Philip Roth, but editorial perfection isn't one of them. Certainly the volume falls far short of the standard Bailey attained with his book on John Cheever, which was published in 2009 and will doubtless remain the standard life for many years to come. Well-written, fair minded, and fully researched, the Cheever volume remains one of the best studies available of a post-war American writer.

I doubt that many will say that about *Philip Roth: The Biography*. It is a far less successful text about a more important writer. Bailey's writing is often so flat and inappropriately casual that a reader stares at passages that are hard to credit. Unlike the Cheever biography, where the chronology is always clear, the sequence of events in *Philip Roth* is often confusing. I found myself frequently going back and forth in the electronic version of the text to determine what year I was in when I read of a fresh crisis in his life, whether medical, artistic, or matrimonial. The book's value rests in the amount of research that fills in the limited biographical material that Claudia Roth Pierpont supplied in her study *Philip Roth: The Writer and His Books*. Pierpont's study emphasizes the novels without disregarding entirely the factual background of the author's life. The book, which draws on frequent discussions with Roth, is better than Bailey's, even if the focus is different. Unlike the tightly organized Cheever study, the Philip Roth biography consists of lumps of information pitched at the reader because Bailey has acquired them. The research is impressive, but the presentation is loose.

How puzzling that the author who wrote *Cheever: A Life* could produce so many sloppy and crude sentences. Some examples: Tracking down the details of the sex life of a woman he is having an affair with, Roth learns—in Bailey's words--of "a wealthy businessman whom she

blew in [a] limousine.” On a summer outing on Long Island, Bailey reports that Roth and an early lover detach themselves from other revelers “and screw in the dunes and harvest mussels.” A constant source of tension between Roth and his second wife, Claire Bloom, was his taste for the privacy and solitude of his home in rural Connecticut, which the city-loving Bloom found “a serious bummer.” In describing his negotiations with the publisher Roger Strauss, the latter is said to have “covered his ass” with a “low-ball advance.” Francine du Plessix Gray, a writer and Connecticut neighbor whom Roth detested, produced a biography of Colet that depicts Flaubert (in Bailey’s words) as “a chauvinist pig.” Long-time rival (and sometimes friend) John Updike is called “goyish,” and the Yiddish expressions that recur throughout the book seem slangy and inappropriate.

Did not the editor of the text—if there was one—tell the author that in formal writing he should not use the abbreviation “re”? That may be appropriate for a business memo or email but not for the text of a biography. In a note to a friend, Roth commented on the impact of *The Anatomy Lesson*, a volume of the Zuckerman trilogy: “Much boom lowering,” he wrote [Bailey’s words] to a friend re *The Anatomy Lesson*.” “‘Well, I hope it was fiction,’ wrote Claire [Bloom] re *Deception*.” And so on, for eleven times according to the word counter in my electronic version of the text.

Consider this paragraph, which describes Roth’s conversion from a typewriter to a computer while composing *Sabbath’s Theater*:

While writing *Sabbath*, Roth modified his work routine with two crucial acquisitions: a stand-up desk, which spared his back a little, and behooved him to walk around a little when he got stuck, and a word processor, which he found wonderfully conducive to revision “and a bit more company than the typewriter”—which is not to say that he was tempted by the nascent internet. Almost ten years would pass before Roth bought a second computer for that purpose (and even longer before he bothered with email), and

for the rest of his life he did more of his actual writing on the first, a Dell 466/L, with a quaintly miniscule 8 megabytes of RAM.

Now I would agree that details of this sort are of interest. But clumsier writing would be hard to imagine. That “behooved” is improperly used; the word seldom appears in anything but the present tense; “allowed” would have been a better choice. And what exactly is the antecedent of that “first” near the end of the paragraph? “Actual writing” in the same sentence refers to what, exactly? The composition of novels, perhaps, as opposed to correspondence? Readers will have to guess. It would have been sufficient to say that Roth wrote on an early Dell computer with limited memory, which identifies another weakness of the text—Bailey’s propensity to offer inessential information. Does the reader need to know, for example, that Roth learned how cows are milked in modern dairy farms by visiting one on June 27, 1998? Or that a visitor to his Connecticut home—perhaps Bailey himself-- stayed in a spare bedroom with two twin beds? If you care to know which of the discs in Roth’s spinal column needed repairing—L5-S1—Bailey is the man to consult.

This is not nit-picking. Weak sentences and casual terms that we use in conversations (but not in formal text) are bound to show up in a 900-page biography. But examples of poor taste and awkward writing recur throughout the book. The Latin expression “et al.,” to choose another example, is used for bibliographies and legal documents; it should not be used to refer casually to unnamed persons in a list of names in running text. (For a class he taught at the University of Chicago in the late 1950s, “Roth conscientiously prepared twenty-five pages replete with the wisdom of Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Henry James, et al. . . .”) Committed to the elastic use of Latinisms, Bailey extends it to lists of novels: “Roth would later attribute his Dodgers baseball fandom to the influence of John R. Tunis’s baseball novels (*The Kid from Tompkinsville et al.*).”

My impression is that Bailey quickly wrote a manuscript that received minimal editing. The document was then rushed into production to exploit public interest in a classic American author. The planned publication of two other biographies that are due out this year may have played a role in the haste with which the book was produced. In any case, it should have been far better than it is.

Roth enjoyed such a long life and received so much attention that the general outline of his career will be familiar to many readers—the Jewish family in which he was raised in working class Newark; his undergraduate years at Bucknell College in Pennsylvania; later graduate work at the University of Chicago. A year or so in the U.S. Army and the accident that produced a serious back injury; it would plague him for the rest of his life. After his early discharge—owing to the injury—he returned to the University of Chicago to teach and write. There he met the recently hired Richard Stern, who encouraged Roth to use the materials of his youth in Newark to produce *Goodbye, Columbus*—which, when combined with a set of short stories, brought Roth the the National Book Award in 1960; he was the youngest-ever writer to receive it. (Stern is referred to throughout the text as “Dick Stern,” as though he and Bailey had a life-long friendship.)

Roth returned to New York and followed up with *Letting Go*, a sprawling novel set in Chicago that drew on his friendship with Ted Solotaroff and his relations with Maggie Martinson, the woman who would become his first wife. *When She Was Good* was published in 1967 and depicts the sad, abbreviated life of Lucy Nelson, one of the few important gentile characters to appear in his fiction. Then came the book with which he’ll be forever identified, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, the source of his wealth, obloquy, and renown. In an essay that he wrote in

2000 for *The New Yorker*, Roth described a transformation or transition point in the career of Saul Bellow that applies equally well to himself. “The transformation of the novelist who published *Dangling Man* in 1944 and *The Victim* in 1947 into the novelist who published *The Adventures of Augie March* in ’53 is revolutionary.”

How can a reader resist making the equivalent point about Roth? His books before *Portnoy* were somber efforts about people leading somber lives. But at some moment in the mid-sixties, Roth decided to break free of these restrictions and try a completely different style and subject matter. Most readers know that the novel takes the form of a psychiatric monologue of a Jewish patient who chafes at restrictions imposed by his religion, chiefly in matters of sex. In the most-quoted line in the novel, Alexander Portnoy declares to his psychiatrist that “I am marked like a road map from head to toe with my repressions. You can travel the length and breadth of my body over superhighways of shame.” And on page 274, the last of the novel, Portnoy’s German Jewish analyst is given his only line: “Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?” Perhaps the least obscene remark in the book.

Alexander Portnoy “is obscene because he wants to be saved,” Roth told an interviewer after the book was published. “The investigation of this passion, and of the combat that it precipitates with his conscience, is what’s at the center of the novel.” And the text offers more than sexual fantasy and masturbation; it is wonderfully comic as well. In that same interview, Roth lamented that the novels he had written early in his career were “as gloomy as the gloomiest” of the texts of Kafka, Dostoyevsky, and Thomas Mann. “I was looking for a way to get in touch with another side of my talent. . . I was aching to write something freewheeling and funny.”

Goodbye, Columbus and the stories published along with it offered an unflattering image of American Jews. Readers at home with Leon Uris and Herman Wouk were bound to be offended by this fresh rendering of the descendants of Jewish immigrants now at home in the suburbs, with four-door cars, television sets, country clubs, and amply stocked refrigerators. The American Jewish establishment—rabbis, of course, but also boards of synagogues and groups encouraging not just American support for Israel but strong feelings of American Jews for the Jewish state--was venomous in its response. Israel and the Star of David on the Israeli flag were after all only twelve years old in 1960. Europe had yet to expel the moral odium of Germany's camps. In retrospect, a hostile response seems inevitable. "What is being done to silence this man?" asked Emmanuel Rackman, a prominent rabbi in New York who at the time was president of the Rabbinical Council of America. "Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him."

Roth was stunned and hurt by the reaction, but he would not back down. *Goodbye, Columbus* and the short stories included in the volume inaugurated Roth's career as something of a professional provocateur. As Bailey writes, "Roth had decided (for the first but hardly the last time) that *schmutz* [dirtiness], the franker and dirtier the better, was the funniest and truest way to account for certain basic human failings. . . ."

His detractors were hardly appeased by the serial publication ten years later of *Portnoy's Complaint*. But by then Roth had developed a habit of disregarding public reaction to his work and ignored the outrage, perhaps even relished it. Reviewers became weary with the slender volumes that came out after *Portnoy* that introduced them to the writer Nathan Zuckerman, who appears in *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, and *The Counterlife*. The character seemed a bit too close to the author producing the texts, and the ordeal of a writer

coping with orthopedic troubles and hostile critics—self-reflexivity, in other words--seemed unduly emphasized and at excessive length. Surely there were other subjects to cover. . . ? Roth responded by writing a long novel, *Operation Shylock* (1991), where an author living in Connecticut named Philip Roth travels to Israel to challenge an impostor in Jerusalem claiming to be *the* Philip Roth; the latter advocates the return of Israelis to Europe. Roth (the author of the book) told reporters that he had been on a secret mission for Israeli security and could not resist describing it in a novel. Since he'd been faulted for writing autobiographical books for so many years, he added, perhaps it was time to drop the disguise and confess. Maybe a few readers believed him; critics felt he had set up too many funhouse mirrors.

There is an answer in *The Human Stain* to the strength of this self-assertion.

Roth describes the experience of Coleman Silk, a light-skinned black man who decided in his twenties to pass himself off as a Jewish academic. Breaking cleanly from his family and race, Coleman knows, will powerfully offend any who learn of it. “But to dare to be nothing more than correct had never been his aim,” Roth writes. “The objective was for his fate to be determined not by the ignorant, hate-filled intentions of a hostile world but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by his own resolve. Why accept life on any other terms?” This sounds like the credo of Roth himself. He disregarded the sharp objections of readers and critics throughout his career--Jewish readers in the first phase; those who objected to self-referential fiction in the middle years; and feminists in nearly every phase, but especially in novels like *Deception*, *Sabbath's Theater*, and *The Dying Animal*.

Roth's last years (to return to Bailey) were darkened by the publication in 1996 of *Leaving The Doll's House*, Claire Bloom's memoir of their marriage, his second, her third. They met in 1975 and soon began their affair; by 1977 Roth was spending six months of the year in

London, where Bloom found acting assignments, and the other half in the U.S., in either New York or at his home in rural Connecticut. Somewhat perversely, they decided in 1990 to marry anyway. “Not all the omens were encouraging,” writes Claudia Roth Pierpont. “It was Bloom who proposed marriage, and it took [Roth] three weeks to respond.”

Roth had good reasons to hesitate. His first marriage to Maggie Martinson had famously been a debacle. In 1983, several years into his relations with Bloom, he had begun an affair with a married neighbor in London, who appears under the name of Maria in *The Counterlife*. He was also maintaining a long-standing rapturous affair with a physical therapist in Connecticut he originally saw for treatment; she became the model for Drenka in *Sabbath's Theater*. But the major factor checking his enthusiasm for marriage was Anna Steiger, Bloom's daughter from her first marriage, to Rod Steiger, with whom Roth had fraught relations. (It's worth noting how close his relations were with Maggie Martinson's two children from her first marriage. Roth was a devoted stepfather, and in the “Acknowledgements” section of the book, Bailey writes that “The children of Roth's first wife. . .had little desire to visit the desolation of their childhoods, but obliged me anyway out of love and gratitude for the man who, both agree, saved their lives.”)

Roth had other reasons besides. He had been suffering from cascading bodily troubles since he received a diagnosis of coronary artery disease in 1982, and he was beginning to doubt Claire's willingness to support him as he aged. The heart trouble was a genetic inheritance from his mother's side of the family. He wasn't entirely surprised by the diagnosis, but had hoped to avoid cardiac trouble until his sixties. He was 49 at the time of the diagnosis. Years later he told Bailey that he believed that the strain of living with his daughter-in-law in London contributed to the onset of the disease. In the fall of 1986, things worsened considerably. An incident in a swimming pool damaged a knee and decades-long trouble with his back presented itself again,

often leaving him immobilized by pain. Over the years he found himself consuming a growing number of drugs to manage his orthopedic injuries, his cardiac complaints, his depression, anxiety, and insomnia. These included Klonopin, Robaxin, beta-blockers, Prozac, lithium, Valium, Ambien, Vicodin, Voltaren, and—most serious of all—Halcion. (The last of which led to a near-complete breakdown in 1987, described in detail in *Operation Shylock*).

Intensifying pain in his right knee and a misdiagnosis led to a botched surgical procedure in 1987 that left him in even greater pain, and Roth did not find Bloom overly sympathetic. “My career is over with,” Bailey quotes her as crying out. “I’ll have to spend the rest of my life caring for you.” Roth’s claim is that whenever his health broke down, Bloom was indifferent or considered the matter in terms of her own welfare. Bailey’s account appears to support this, and then some: Herman Roth, the author’s father, struggled with brain cancer in 1989, and the ordeal elicited a similar reaction from Bloom. (Roth used this several years later for the novel *Everyman*.)

So throughout the 1980s, Roth felt dwindling confidence in a mate on whom he knew he would have to rely more heavily as he aged. But for all his toughness and durability, he feared (in his words) “being in the world alone.”

He backed into the marriage with equal parts of enthusiasm and doubt. “Perhaps the crucial element in Roth’s decision,” writes Bailey, “was the hope that Anna ‘would be out of his hair for good.’ If he married Bloom, his thinking went, she’d feel more secure about staying in the States while her adult daughter pursued a singing career abroad.” Also, his second major heart procedure, quintuple bypass surgery performed in 1989, was a complete success. He felt rejuvenated and able to tackle any challenge.

But the decision to formally wed in 1990 was nevertheless ill-conceived, by both parties. Bloom had her own reasons for doubting the decision—it would be her third marriage—but pressed for one anyway. She had well-founded suspicions that Roth was seeing women outside of their relations. She was also clearly concerned about Roth’s health and likely longevity. Dividing life between the U.S. and London was beginning to pall for Roth, and the time spent in rural Connecticut was becoming a lonely, isolating experience for Bloom. And she was of course amply aware of the antipathy between her daughter and Roth. Accounts differ on the details, but Bloom at one point asked Anna to leave her home in London and move into her dormitory at a London music college as an alternative. In her memoir, she bitterly regrets having done this and faults Roth for poisoning her relations with the girl. Roth for his part claims the move was short-lived and that she was soon back in the family home. But he certainly didn’t help his case by making a sexual bid for a friend of Anna’s, who briefly stayed at their home in London when Roth was living there by himself.

These problems proved insurmountable. At Roth’s instigation they separated in 1993 and were divorced in 1995. My abbreviated account of their disharmony omits details of how Roth agonized over the decision to end the marriage, an experience that brought him close to suicide. Creating a new life for himself without the support of a mate as he entered his sixties seemed unbearable. He wanted to exit the marriage but had what Bailey calls “a constant, uncontrollable terror of being alone.” He was hospitalized twice in the summer of 1993 at Silver Hill, a psychiatric facility in New Canaan, Connecticut where he could share in the communal misery of other residents. Bernard Avishai, a friend of Roth’s who visited him at Silver Hill, reported to Bailey how soothing the novelist found the regular visits of the nurse checking on his welfare—

when she knocked on the door to inquire about his comfort, he felt authentically cared for. This is not how he felt when he was married.

But the final separation and divorce negotiations did not spell the end of his difficulties with Claire Bloom. She published *Leaving the Doll's House* in 1996, after the divorce, and Roth never recovered from the experience. Publicity surrounding the book began building in the summer of 1996, and it threw the novelist into a panic when he learned of it through newspaper accounts. Bloom offered the public a very unflattering picture of Roth, and he was concerned about its effect on his reputation. The episode seems remote today, because Roth has been canonized in a complete set of the Library of America. Claire Bloom's picture of him and their marriage is a matter of interest only to professional students of Roth. But we need to remember that in the mid-nineties he was still an embattled figure—his texts had been offending readers and influential critics for nearly forty years. He was mortified at the thought of enemies having fresh material to use against him. His first reaction was to flee his New York City apartment for Spring Lake on the Jersey Shore, the scene of childhood memories and the cemetery where his parents are buried. (He visited the grounds yearly on their wedding anniversary.) In a bed and breakfast, Roth lay in bed repeating to himself over and over, "They can't touch you, they can't touch you." He claimed to Bailey that he "centered himself after a day or so," but on his return to Manhattan, he packed up his things and fled to his home in Connecticut. He stayed there for months.

In New York, a well-contrived marketing campaign got underway to promote *Leaving the Doll's House*. *Vanity Fair*, an inexhaustible source of celebrity articles, acquired serial rights to the memoir, which was brought out by Little, Brown. Publishers placed restrictions on what Bloom could say about her story before it reached the public. Incidents from the book while still

in production nevertheless circulated among people in the world of publishing, who seemed to find in the stories the worst they had ever heard (or wanted to believe) about Philip Roth. When the reviews came out, Bailey writes, “Roth was hurt by an apparent universal willingness to accept Bloom’s account at face value.”

She presented a number of claims he considered falsehoods, including the argument that their prenuptial agreement left her nearly destitute. According to Bailey, her assets were far more ample than those she reports in the memoir. Nor does she mention modifications of the prenuptial agreement that enlarged the sum Roth extended her after the separation. During the early years of the marriage, Roth gave her gifts of cash, some quite large, to stabilize her finances. He also set up a \$400,000 trust fund that guaranteed her an annual payment of \$28,500.

He considered a lawsuit when the book appeared, but was dissuaded by friends from pursuing one. It would have consumed far too much energy for a writer who had other projects before him. But if Claire Bloom’s goal was devastating revenge for real or imagined wrongs, she succeeded more than she could have hoped for.

Roth achieved, not exactly revenge, but his version of the marriage in *I Married a Communist*, a novel he published in 1998. Bill Clinton’s ordeal with prosecutors pursuing details of the Monica Lewinsky scandal was underway, and I think it was one of his lawyers who coined the phrase “sexual McCarthyism.” Roth identified with the president’s troubles and scribbled some notes pertaining to it:

Sexual hysteria

turning men into contrite boys

Hysterical fear of the dick

the Great Purity Binge

My subject from the beginning

The Pure vs. the Impure

Roth dramatized the subject by creating a marriage set in the 1950s between the working class figure Ira Ringold and Eve Frame, a movie star with a daughter, Sylphid, from a previous marriage. In long monologues delivered by Murray Ringold, Ira's brother, Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator, learns details of the unhappy triangle of Eve, Ira, and Sylphid. Set in the 1950s, the marriage ends in a blaze of celebrity gossip; Roth's description of this mirrors what he must have experienced himself. Eve publishes a memoir—*I Married a Communist*--which Roth employs for the title of his novel, making the identification with McCarthyism complete. Eve's memoir is ghost written by another writer, an enemy of Ira's, and Roth is convinced that Bloom's memoir was ghost written by Francine du Plessix Gray, a neighbor in Connecticut he'd come to detest.

“Once the human tragedy has been completed,” says Murray, Ira's brother, “it gets turned over to the journalists to banalize into entertainment. . . .I think of the McCarthy era as inaugurating the postwar triumph of gossip as the unifying credo of the world's oldest democratic republic. In *Gossip We Trust*.” *I Married A Communist*, however, is clearly not as successful as *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, the other parts of “the American trilogy.” The novel has its moments, but what the author chiefly creates is an unflattering description of Claire Bloom and her daughter and a picture of a publicity machine that consumes everyone who touches it.

But Roth wanted more than a novel to defend himself. He also sought out a biographer who would offer the public a version of his life and marriages that approximated his own. So in late 1996, he asked the University of Connecticut scholar Ross Miller to begin work on an authorized biography. Miller agreed, but undertook the research with so little interest that he was

dropped from the project; eventually Bailey got the job. But even before Roth agreed (in 2012) to work with Bailey, he prepared a nearly 300-page manuscript called *Notes for My Biographer*, which challenged the claims Bloom brought against him in her memoir. His agent found him a publisher, but friends considered the manuscript hectoring and obsessive and persuaded him to abandon it.

Several of his novels have drawn attacks from feminist critics, but the two that appear to stand out are *Sabbath's Theater* and *The Dying Animal*. Abrasive, provocative, death-haunted, and sex-obsessed, Mickey Sabbath, the protagonist, is meant to repel. But experienced readers of fiction know that authors hide behind their characters, and know that it's best not to infer very much about the author from the figures in a novel. Sometimes the claims of an author need to be discounted as well. Bailey writes that in one interview Roth declared that Sabbath "was the nearest I've come to drawing a realistic self-portrait." But this can only be true in a very limited sense. Sabbath is nasty, bright, witty, tough, provocative, and fearless, and has wasted much of his life in marginal work, as a maritime sailor, a puppeteer, occasional teacher, and layabout. He loathes American life, loathes the mere idea of working, cashing checks, keeping a bank account, and so forth.

This doesn't sound like Philip Roth at all. He wrote 31 books and taught at important universities, including Chicago, Penn, and Princeton. On the other hand, Roth's sexual appetite seems almost as obsessive as Sabbath's, and he eagerly sought out sexual opportunities. Bailey identifies the incident with Anna's friend—he employs the pseudonym Felicity—as evidence that Roth may indeed be equivalent to his most famous creation. I write "perhaps" because there are the usual conflicting accounts of the episode. Roth may indeed (as she insists) have gone out of his way to offend the woman when she rebuffed him. Bailey notes that Roth wasn't likely to

“add insult to injury” by pressing matters. But he adds that Roth, like Sabbath, “wanted to affront and affront and affront until there was no one left on earth unaffronted.”

“You have to be awfully naive,” he told *The Paris Review*, in a mid-career interview, “not to understand that a writer is a performer who puts on the act he does best—not the least when he puts on the mask of first-person singular. That may be the best mask of all for a second self.” And in the same interview: “Making fake biography,” he says, “false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life *is* my life.”

True, Roth could under some circumstances double down in his efforts to offend. Consider all of the unflattering images of Jews he drew between *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy*. But *The Dying Animal*, the brief novel or novella that he produced in 2001, seems to capture Roth’s experience more fully than *Sabbath’s Theater*. David Kepesh, the narrator, first appears in *The Breast* (from 1972), a so-so parody of Kafka that Roth produced after the tidal wave of interest elicited by *Portnoy*. He next shows up in the moderately interesting *The Professor of Desire* (1977) and is seen for the last time in *The Dying Animal*. The three characters named Kepesh have only the name in common and are unrelated in the way Nathan Zuckerman is in the myriad books he appears in. But neither Kepesh nor Zuckerman is Roth, even if some of the latter’s orthopedic troubles and artistic difficulties overlap with those that Roth experienced.

Roth goes on in the interview to compare the disguises writers create with the activities of adulterous husbands and wives. “It’s amazing what lies people can sustain behind the mask of their real faces. Think of the art of the adulterer: under tremendous pressure and against enormous odds, ordinary husbands and wives, who would freeze with self-consciousness up on a stage, yet in the theater of the home, alone before the audience of the betrayed spouse, they act

out roles of innocence and fidelity with flawless dramatic skill. Great, great performances, conceived with genius down to the smallest particulars, impeccably meticulous naturalistic acting, and done by rank amateurs.”

Now here, I’m afraid, Roth *is* describing himself. He was a shameless adulterer, in both of his marriages. And—this is the connection with *The Dying Animal*—he paid a high price for it, as men and women often do who go down this path. Lying becomes an intrinsic part of the author’s life, and lying is a moral stain. There are many things to admire in Roth’s life, including the stamina required for his ceaseless output, the immense work that went into shaping and reshaping each book, an artistic talent that required arduous effort to develop in the face of severe medical disorders. But there is a certain moral squalor that attends the pretense and lying that affected his sex life, and it is curious that so far as I know his female detractors don’t seem to mention this when they label him a misogynist.

And then there are great personal risks. “I know that every mistake a man can make has a sexual accelerator,” remarks Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of *The Human Stain*, when he establishes a friendship with Coleman Silk. Because of prostate cancer, which has rendered him incontinent and impotent, Nathan is free himself of the erotic struggles that affect everyone else, but Coleman unexpectedly is not. Even less so is Kepesh, to return to *The Dying Animal*. Like Nathan—but unlike Coleman—Kepesh well understands the dangers that Nathan reports in his narrative. “A man wouldn’t have two-thirds of the problems he has if he didn’t venture off to get fucked,” the aging Kepesh notes in his book-long monologue. “It’s sex that disorders our normally ordered lives.”

And what disorders Kepesh’s life, undermining his stability and self-esteem, is his infatuation with the beautiful young Consuela. She is the daughter of Cuban immigrants who

attends a university class he is teaching and begins an affair with the much older instructor. Like many older men seeing a much younger woman, he becomes obsessive and deeply fearful that she'll be drawn away by men closer to her age who may lack his cultural prestige as a critic with a television show but are certainly younger and more attractive. The danger of this destabilizes Kepesh, and Roth is very aware of this, because he had identical experiences in the fifteen years or so that followed the dissolution of his marriage to Claire Bloom.

“It shouldn't come as a surprise by now,” says Claudia Roth Pierpont, on page 251 of her study, “that the most famous Jewish writer of our time is a devoted pagan.” I suppose that's true. Roth was a convinced atheist. But was he also aware of the cost of paganism and the likely effect of pursuing younger women for the promise of sex? “What is rather unusual about [*The Dying Animal*],” wrote David Lodge in his review of the novella, “is the way it challenges the reader at every point to define and defend his own ethical position toward the issues raised by the story. It is a small, disturbing masterpiece.” Exactly. Female critics and other readers offended by Kepesh's determination to have affairs with younger women, chiefly former students, overlook the price the narrator pays for this single-minded commitment.

Bailey documents in detail the challenges Roth underwent in the final years, as he pursued young women who offered him sex, companionship, and the erotic prestige of being seen in public with a beautiful thirty-year old. The women would stay with him for a spell, partly because of the glamour of the New York celebrity scene, partly to benefit from the largesse of a rich older man. Roth was a generous person, and freely wrote five-figure checks for friends who needed money. But it is difficult to distinguish between generosity and bribery when it comes to the women he courted. One woman he had an affair with began visiting another man in Europe, news that filled Roth with dismay. Shortly after disclosing this to him, she learned from a

Massachusetts law firm that “an anonymous benefactor wanted to pay her a monthly stipend of two thousand dollars provided that she agree to remain in New York and not get married.” With the appropriate quotient of self-respect, the woman declined the offer, readily identifying its source. Another young woman—the model for the lover of the actor Simon Axler in *The Humbling*—enjoyed more ample largesse. Roth gave her first a check for \$10,000, a second for \$100,000, and later a two-year-old Volvo. This was followed by the predictable visits to chic apparel shops in New York and the inevitable hair stylist. He hoped to marry one of these women and even visited a fertility specialist to see if he could safely father a child. But the consultation proved pointless. His intended wasn’t interested.

All of this is routine May-December material. Other stories Bailey tells seem to me simply degrading. A woman with youthful illiteracy that he began seeing in the post-Bloom years was fond of the word “awesome.” Roth felt obliged to instruct her on usage. “The Sistine Chapel is ‘awesome’ in all its splendor,” he told her one evening when they were dining out, “but this meal is not ‘awesome.’” On another occasion—same woman—he began a discussion of politics and mentioned the word “fascism.” The woman lowered her voice quietly and allowed shyly that she didn’t know the meaning of the word. Roth had to explain it to her, and also World War II, a subject she knew nothing about. (She thought it was a movie, perhaps. . .) The experience left him feeling intensely lonely, for obvious reasons. On another occasion he was visiting a woman in Hyannis Port—the one who led him to visit a fertility specialist--whom he was planning to take to dinner. But another eruption of severe back pain left him prostrate on the floor of his room, trying not to cry out. “Not even the Vicodin helped,” he lamented to Bailey. “This was the last thing I wanted her to see.”

Jimmy Stewart redux! A Jewish version of *Vertigo*, with the Brooklyn Bridge substituting for the Golden Gate! When these woman lose interest and break off the affair, the pain—like Kepesh’s in the novella—can be savage. “After Roth’s affair with Brigit ended”—this was the woman he was visiting in Hyannis Port—“his friends feared for his life,” writes Bailey. While on a stroll in Manhattan with David Plante, a friend who taught at Columbia, Roth believed that he spotted the woman’s childhood home and began walking into traffic “in a trance.” Plante yanked him back to the curb and saved his life. Friends, according to Bailey, “began to take turns sleeping over at his apartment in what amounted to a suicide watch.” “For the rest of his life,” Bailey concludes, “Roth would often imagine that a woman on the street was Brigit and quicken his steps to make sure.”

The final years were often filled with acute loneliness, both in his Connecticut home and in his New York apartment. He was struggling with the anxiety that he’d end up as immobilized and stricken as his older brother Sandy was at the end of his life. (He died in 2009, and suffered from heart trouble, severe scoliosis, and cancer.) But Sandy at least had a spouse to take care of him. Roth had to rely on his friends, and he was fortunate in having a loyal circle willing to help.

It should be clear that I am not faulting Roth for pursuing women less than half his age. Moral judgment is irrelevant. I am sure that he understood the danger that men like Kepesh are risking, and that *The Dying Animal* is hardly a “road map,” as they say nowadays, for ageing men who hope to exploit wealth, prestige, and access to young women (via universities) to help them cope with the winter of life. The story Roth tells in the novella hews close to the facts Bailey offers in the latter chapters of his biography.

And the damage hardly went one way. The model for Drenka in *Sabbath’s Theater* was a physical therapist for whom Bailey adopts the pseudonym Inga Larsen. In the novel, Drenka is

an immigrant from Croatia; Inga was a married immigrant from Norway. She and Roth met in the late 1970s when she was hired as a physical therapist, and they stayed together for nearly 18 years. But when Inga left what Bailey calls a moribund marriage, Roth began to lose interest in her. No longer a “transgressive” adulteress, she was just another ageing woman with whom Roth had spent nearly two decades. She and her husband had been frequent guests at Roth’s Connecticut home, and the husband had also picked Roth up and driven him home when he was discharged from one of his stays at Silver Hill Hospital, the psychiatric facility. I am sure this added a piquant edge to Roth’s enjoyment of his wife. Inga had a suicidal breakdown after Roth made it clear in early 1995 that their sexual relations had ended and that matters would be one of casual friendship. She was placed in a psychiatric facility and penned a violently bitter note cataloguing the salient points of Roth’s physical decline. It is difficult to resist concluding, however, that she was hoist by her own petard. What her former husband thought when he discovered the facts is not difficult to imagine. But Roth himself was about to undergo a dozen years of romantic battering, and if Inga or her former husband wanted revenge, they certainly got it.

“Time passes,” Kepesh dolefully tells the reader. “Time passes. I have new girlfriends. I have student girlfriends. Old girlfriends turn up from as long as twenty or thirty years back. . . .The ones still on their own call me to complain about their dates. Dating is hateful, relationships are impossible, sex is a hazard.” And Kepesh goes on to mention the expensive matchmaking services and the unsuitable men these women find. “Who are the new people when you *do* meet them,” one embattled woman asks. “They’re the same old people in masks. There’s nothing new about them at all. They’re just *people*.” And what happens to these women—as well as the men they chose not to marry? Many of them must end up alone.

Near the middle of *The Human Stain*, Swede Levov comes upon the dog and cat shelter where his demented daughter is working, “a decrepit brick building next to an empty lot.” As the Swede takes in the scene, his eyes fall on a rusted fire escape that looks like any added weight would bring it crashing down—“a fire escape,” Roth writes, “whose function was not to save lives in the event of a fire but to uselessly hang there testifying to the immense loneliness inherent to living.” A few sentences later, thinking of her daughter’s attachment to the anti-war movement in the 1960s, Levov remarks to himself, “Put your money on it, bet on it, worship it—bow down in submission not to Karl Marx, my stuttering, angry, idiot child, not to Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-tung—bow down to the great god Loneliness!”

I doubt that Bailey’s biography is the one that Roth would have wanted. The book is poorly written, and there are many details of his sex life that I believe Roth would have regretted seeing in print. Before he was rejected as Roth’s biographer, Ross Miller went over with his subject the topics he needed to cover. Bailey writes: “As for the ticklish subject of his sex life: Roth suggested (another word belonging in quotes) that Miller steer clear of the whole Inga Larsen can of worms.” But the woman was central to Roth’s life and was the longest-lasting erotic attachment that he had. Omitting her was an absurd request, and Bailey had a brief dispute with Roth over whether she would even be allowed a pseudonym in the book. (Roth wanted her formally identified, so she could be held accountable for her remarks. Bailey promised her anonymity, and he kept his pledge.) For many other details, the biographer interviewed the women with whom Roth shared a bed, and the reader is given an extensive catalogue of that part of his life. We readers can thank Bailey for the amount of his research, though I doubt that Roth would.

© 2021 David Cohen