

Philip Roth's Epistemology

This essay begins with a long citation from Proust, and I ask the reader to trust my judgment in using it. It involves Jupien, a minor character in the novel, and Françoise, who cooks for the narrator's family:

When Françoise, in the evening, was nice to me, and asked my permission to sit in my room, it seemed that her face became transparent and that I could see the kindness and honesty that lay beneath. But Jupien, who had lapses into indiscretion of which I learned only later, revealed afterward that she had told him that I was not worth the price of a rope to hang me, and that I had tried to do to her every conceivable harm. These words of Jupien set up at once before my eyes, in new and strange colours, a print of my relations with Françoise so different from the one which I often took pleasure in contemplating and in which, without the least shadow of doubt, Françoise adored me and lost no opportunity of singing my praises, that I realized that it is not only the physical world that differs from the aspect in which we see it; that all reality is perhaps equally dissimilar from what we believe ourselves to be directly perceiving and which we compose with the aid of ideas that do not reveal themselves but are none the less efficacious, just as the trees, the sun and the sky would not be the same as what we see if they were apprehended by creatures having eyes differently constituted from ours....However that might be, the sudden glimpse that Jupien afforded me of the real world appalled me. And yet it concerned only Françoise, about whom I cared little. Was it the same with all one's social relations? And into what depths of despair might this not some day plunge me, if it were the same with love? That was the future's secret....And thus it was she who first gave me the idea that a person does not, as I had imagined, stand motionless and clear before our eyes with his merits, his defects, his plans, his intentions with regard to ourselves (like a garden at which we gaze through a railing with all its borders spread out before us) but is a shadow which we can never penetrate, of which there can be no such thing as direct knowledge, with respect to which we form countless beliefs, based on words and sometimes actions, neither of which can give us anything but inadequate and as it proves contradictory information—a shadow behind which we can alternately imagine, with equal justification, that there burns the flame of hatred and of love.

I remembered this passage while rereading Philip Roth's novels from the 1990's—*Sabbath's Theater*, *American Pastoral*, and *The Human Stain*. I noticed just how explicitly and often he emphasizes the same point, and perhaps goes even further. All three novels include displays of duplicity and misunderstanding, whatever other story-telling features they have. In *Human Stain*, Coleman Silk, the central figure, begins an affair with Faunia Farley, a divorced

mother of two small children who have died because of her negligence; she was entertaining herself sexually when they burned to death in a preventable fire. Their father, Les Farley, is a deranged Vietnam veteran, and at the end of the story murders both Faunia and Coleman, whom he had been stalking after the two had begun an affair. Impoverished, claiming to be illiterate, Faunia had worked on and around the New England college campus of Athena for years, but not until Coleman resigns from the faculty after a contrived allegation of racism does he take any notice of her, when he observes her cleaning up the town's small post office as one of her part-time jobs.

Their affair plays a critical role in Coleman's life. It allows him to purge himself of the intense rage provoked by the treachery of the college. The administration wrecked his career and his colleagues abandoned him. His wife was felled by a stroke that may have been brought on by her husband's prolonged struggle with Athena. But the affair with Faunia offers perfect fodder for the proponents of political correctness, and well after he has left the college, one enemy at the school decides she is not through with him. Delphine Roux, a dean at the college, half Coleman's age and unable to find a suitable man to relieve her loneliness and erotic privation at the small New England village, contrives an anonymous, one-sentence poison pen letter: "Everyone knows you're sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age."

Oddly enough, in a book rife with deceptions and the spiteful attribution of inaccurate motives, this one is transparently clear. The juvenile note is Delphine's only means of establishing contact with the kind of man she really wants—virile if not young, cultivated, and easily free of the cant of political correctness. (And perhaps of competing with Faunia.) The narrator of the novel, Nathan Zuckerman, who has befriended Coleman, accepts his claim that the note was penned by Delphine, and the assumption is later confirmed by a handwriting expert.

A great many pages later, Zuckerman comes across Coleman and Faunia at a Tanglewood Concert, at a point where their brief friendship, to Zuckerman's regret, has ended. His mind turning to Delphine's puerile note, he angrily tells the reader "*Nobody* knows, Professor Roux. 'Everybody knows' is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience, and it's the solemnity and the sense of authority that people have in voicing the cliché that's so insufferable. What we know is that . . . nobody knows anything. You *can't* know anything. The things you *know* you don't know. Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowledge."

Roth returns to this theme near the end of the novel, when falsehoods begin piling up that bury the truth of what happened to Coleman and Faunia. They died in a car accident, but not because the ex-professor was sexually enjoying his lover while driving the car, the version of events put into circulation by college instructors and other residents of Athena. Rather, Faunia's former husband forced them off the road and into a ravine. Not even the police, who know the rumor is false, bother to investigate the matter; they claim, inaccurately, that Coleman took the curve at a dangerous speed. ("For all that the world is full of people who go around believing they've got you or your neighbor figured out," says Zuckerman to the reader, "there really is no bottom to what is not known. The truth about us is endless. As are the lies.") Zuckerman has a prolonged conversation with Coleman's sister Earnestine, whom he meets at the end of the novel when she comes to Athena to attend the funeral. She discloses the biggest secret of all—that Coleman, who throughout his life had passed himself off as a Jew, was a light-skinned black man. Casting off his original family in smalltown New Jersey, he begins to conceal his race; not even his wife or children knew of his racial origins. "One's truth is known to no one," the narrator muses, "and frequently, as in Delphine's very own case, to oneself least of all."

Delphine Roux, Coleman's nemesis, imagines that she has hidden her identity as the sender of the poison pen letter that opens the novel; she has not. She also imagines that Coleman is attracted to her, which is too marginally the case to figure in the story; whatever interest he may have taken in her is never very serious and is largely confined to professional matters. An even bigger mystery? Faunia's diary, which the Filipino aide to Faunia's father discovers when going through her possessions. It proves that young woman's claim to illiteracy was false. And the aide, who considers it a compilation of scandalous details, intends to destroy the document, even though it might contain evidence (as Zuckerman argues) implicating Les Farley in the murder of the couple. (Curious sidebar: Both Mickey Sabbath and Drenka Balich in *Sabbath's Theater* maintain documentary records of their sexual activities as well.) Enraged at Zuckerman, the aide loses self-control long enough to let slip another detail of Faunia's life that Coleman had never known—she had given birth at age 16 and placed the child with an orphanage. Zuckerman begins the inevitable train of speculation: Was claiming illiteracy a source of power? Or did it instead "spotlight the barbaric self befitting the world"? "Not rejecting learning as a stifling form of barbarity but trumping learning by a knowledge that is stronger and prior," the narrator guesses. "She has nothing against reading per se—it's that pretending not to be able to feels right to her. It spices things up."

Faunia's father is a mystery too. He is known to the reader only as a philandering spouse who supposedly wrecked his marriage and showed no interest in his daughter after he and her mother had divorced—but is that true? Zuckerman tells us that after the marriage broke up, Faunia's mother married a wealthy older man who molested her beautiful daughter. A therapist hired to treat the disturbed daughter decides that the claims of abuse that Faunia presents are fictitious. Roth resurrects familiar criticism of therapists treating children ensnared in sharp

disputes with parents or step-parents: The father, not the daughter, is paying for the treatment, and obtains from the therapist a finding that protects his point of view (and legal safety) while assuring (for the therapist) the prompt payment of the monthly fee. If Faunia's father was so indifferent to his family, why does he bother to attend the funeral at the end of the tale? And show such interest in preserving the deceased young woman's diary? Might it not contain entries hostile to *him*? We have after all only the narrator's word for the claim of adultery. But at this point the father is greatly aged and reduced to a wheelchair and dominated by the tough, diminutive Filipino woman who is determined to keep the diary away from her elderly charge. She assumes the same proprietary control over the ashes of the cremated Faunia.

Few people in the novel are interested in ascertaining the truth of the story of Faunia and Coleman, other than the narrator-novelist, and most are willing (if not eager) to believe the worst. And it is not simply the false story of the way the two protagonists died that gains credibility in the town—all of Delphine Roux's little schemes, partly pathetic, partly scurrilous, gain credence as well. "The Devil of the Little Place," concludes the narrator, in a central comment near the end that explains how so many rumors and lies acquire the authority of truth among supposedly educated people.

[T]he 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, without 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."

American Pastoral, that immensely sad novel was published in 1997, a few years before *The Human Stain*, calls for a different kind of storytelling. As in so many of the later and middle novels, Zuckerman is brought into service as a narrator, and Roth presses even more forcefully

the theme of unknowability. Zuckerman tries to unravel (and in the process invents) the life of Swede Levov. The Swede is his childhood idol from Newark, the high school student who excelled at every sport, the towering neighborhood star with athleticism and good looks, "the embodiment of the strength, the emboldened valor that would prevail to return our high school's servicemen home unscathed from Midway, Salerno, Cherbourg, the Solomons, the Aleutians, Tarawa. . . ." After this introduction to Zuckerman's childhood, the novel moves ahead forty years to an unexpected encounter between the Swede and the narrator at a New York Mets baseball game in 1985; Roth is often exact with his dates in these late stories. Nothing comes of this scene, but ten years later, in the spring of 1995, Zuckerman receives a letter from the Swede. A few years older than Zuckerman, he appeals to the novelist for a meeting at a Manhattan restaurant. He wants Zuckerman's help in preparing a brief biography of his late father, a commemorative document to be privately printed. The project never comes to fruition, and over dinner, the Swede stupefies Zuckerman with stories of his second marriage, three children, and life in Puerto Rico, where he manages the family glove factory that had formerly been in Newark. That is the last time the Swede and Zuckerman meet. There is no discussion at all of what proves to be the central drama of the novel—Levov's first marriage and the disturbed daughter it produced.

Attending a high school class reunion a few months later, in the fall of 1995, Zuckerman runs into a classmate, Jerry Levov, the successful but loutish younger brother of the Swede. He shocks the narrator by informing him that his older brother has just died of cancer. This is what has brought the younger brother to the class reunion, which is almost an afterthought: He has come to New Jersey from his cardiology practice in Miami to attend the Swede's funeral. (How many character in these late Roth novels come down with cancer!) Jerry Levov offers an

abbreviated description of the Swede's first marriage that the latter had omitted entirely from their dinner at the restaurant, the story of the adulterous first wife and the disturbed daughter who became an anti-war radical in the late 1960s, setting off bombs throughout the country that killed four people.

This begins the novel proper, when the novelist reports what the Swede had kept entirely to himself during their dinner--his first marriage to Dawn, Miss New Jersey of 1949, and the horror of their daughter, Merry. And it is shortly after meeting the younger brother that the novelist begins to understand (or imagine) what he now believes the Swede had really hoped to communicate at the dinner—not the banal story of his life in Puerto Rico but the one about his struggle with the depraved daughter, his marriage to Dawn, the adultery that ended the marriage, and all the revelations that came to him in one day. Recalling his meeting with the Swede, whom he imagined to be gifted in his way but shallow and uninteresting, Zuckerman muses on how little he knew and the scale of his misunderstanding. "You get [people] wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you get them all wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion empty of all perception, an astonishing farce of misperception." At the high school reunion, Jerry Levov, the surgeon, remarks to the novelist that "the operating room turns you into somebody who's never wrong." Zuckerman answers, "Writing turns you into somebody who's always wrong. The illusion that you may get it right someday is the perversity that draws you on. What else could?" A moment later in the exchange, Zuckerman regrets "The picture we have of one another. Layers and layers of misunderstanding. The picture we have of ourselves. Useless. Presumptuous." In other words, communication among people is nearly impossible, a claim that some would argue is

contradicted by the composition of the novels themselves—they *must* communicate *something*. But I suppose Roth would answer that his novels are themselves misunderstood.

American Pastoral concludes by going back 22 years, "the summer of the Watergate hearings," which would be 1973. The class reunion, the ostensible "beginning" of the novel, remember, is in the fall of 1995. (This final section of the book, nearly 150 pages long, includes much historical matter concerning the Swede's family that could have been dropped almost anywhere in the story.) The Swede is to learn by the end of (Roth's) novel what Zuckerman (the ostensible novelist) already knows: What Swede Levov had taken to be firm knowledge of family and friends is no more than a solipsistic invention that is completely upended at a ghastly dinner party. He has just seen his daughter for the first time in five years. She has admitted to bombing a post office in suburban New Jersey, confirming suspicions that had lingered for years. After a prolonged journey across the U.S., where she lived in communes that sheltered her, often traveling alone, with no more than a few dollars, she was raped, twice. She is working now for a pittance at an animal hospital and living in a squalid rooming house in a dangerous slum. There can have been few depictions of Skid Row as disturbing as this one. The young woman who killed four people with planted bombs has now become a member of the Jains, the pacifist sect of Hinduism so extreme that its members wear a veil lest they accidentally consume or injure flying insects. But the Swede's lengthy effort to persuade Merry to abandon her atrocious dwelling place proves fruitless. So does the appeal for help in a telephone call to his brother Jerry (living in Florida) later in the day. The younger brother, envious during his childhood years of the older one, dismisses his problems with brutal brevity, half understanding and half misunderstanding them. What he most enjoys is expressing his contempt for his brother's decency when the latter is most desperate for his help. "All his life, thinks the Swede, waiting to lay into me with these

terrible things." That section of the story breaks off into part three of the novel—that dinner party with his first wife Dawn and others, the "summer of the Watergate hearings," which itself is broken up into long excursions into the past of other characters in the story.

Worse yet, the Swede discovers at the party that his wife is conducting an affair. It is with an architect the couple has hired to design their new home; the Swede now assumes that she plans to leave him and move into the new home with the architect himself, who intends to leave his wife, a pitiful alcoholic. Both the architect and his wife are guests at the dinner. Also attending are a speech therapist, who treated the daughter for a stutter, and her husband, a physician. The Swede learned just hours before from his daughter that five years before—immediately after the bombing—that the couple had sheltered her in their home for three full days, when her parents and the F.B.I were frantically trying to find her. The Swede himself was a brief participant in this dark spectacle of reciprocal duplicity; years before, when Merry disappeared, he had had an affair with the speech therapist, Sheila, and wondered afterward whether he should confess the matter to her husband. Another married couple is visiting along with the parents from Florida. This would be a childhood friend from Newark (who teaches law at Columbia University) and his wife, a specialist in literature, whose abrasiveness and sour aggressiveness mystifies Levov as well, but in a slightly different way: Why would his thoughtful, kindly friend marry such an unattractive and disagreeable creature?

"What kind of mask is everyone wearing?" the Swede asks himself over dinner. "I thought these people were on my side. But the mask is all that's on my side—that's it." The novel ends violently but inconclusively, when the architect's drunken wife stabs the Swede's father with a fork, narrowly missing his eye. And here the novel ends, with an attempt at blinding the old-fashioned father, an action rich in symbolic suggestion.

The unknowability of others and the limits of self-interpretation reflects much of the thinking that came out of Central Europe at the turn of the last century. People are locked into their own reality (Nietzsche) and fail to understand even themselves (Freud). In modern literature, the experience is anatomized quite fully by Proust, which is why my essay began with a citation from his novel. And this kind of thinking informs Roth's effort to compose a story about a novelist (Zuckerman) conceiving a "realistic chronicle" that becomes the story that he (Zuckerman) writes because the Swede found himself unable to open up to him at the restaurant. Apparently, *someone* has to tell the story, and who better than a published novelist? And it may as well be in the form of a novel, too, rather than an attempted factual rendering, which would have become a falsification of an unknowable reality that is unavailable to anyone, because we are always "getting it wrong," whether the subject is others or ourselves. Little difference, in other words, between a memoir and a novel, though whether this is Zuckerman's conviction or Roth's is unclear; I assume Zuckerman is speaking for Roth. "After I had written about his brother," Zuckerman tells the reader, when his "novel" about the Swede is finished, which happens at the beginning of Roth's, "I had the amateur's impulse to send Jerry a copy of the manuscript to ask what he thought. It was an impulse I quashed: I hadn't been publishing and writing for nearly forty years not to know by now to quash it." Zuckerman knows perfectly well that his version of the story would be faulted endlessly by the surviving brother and that seeking approval for an accurate rendering is a fatuous hope. So the novel Roth has written and published—*American Pastoral*—in a way becomes a novel about writing novels and biographies.

The theme of the unknowable is extended (or repeated) in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), which recounts the problematic love affair between Mickey Sabbath and Drenka Balich. Zuckerman, the pervading presence of the other two novels, is absent from this one, produced in the style of American realism that recounts the emotional breakdown of the lead character and his unrelenting quest for sexual adventure and stimulation of all kinds. I have already written about the story in a previous essay; I wish only to highlight the principal elements of duplicity or ignorance or blindness that reflect the incomplete understanding of one character by another. Undoubtedly the most salient appears at the end of the novel, when Sabbath is informed of the diary—another of Roth's unexpected diaries--that Drenka left undestroyed at her death. Much like Charles Bovary discovering his wife's love letters after her suicide, Drenka's widowed husband and her son come into the document after the funeral. Drenka had suffered a prolonged cancer death and presumably intended her family to discover the diary after her death. The slightly dumpy, middle-aged innkeeper's wife, the picture of domestic normalcy and routine, recorded all of her sexual activities with men as well as at least one woman, penning a time bomb that would expose her father and son to a host of scandalizing details. Sabbath is urinating over Drenka's grave when he learns of this. The son, a cop, has been checking the graveyard; the lovers Drenka left behind have been visiting it like a shrine, masturbating over her plot or, in Sabbath's case, urinating. It is a ritual for them all, a perverse method of rendering homage and resurrecting memories of sexual adventure. (The cop, by the way, is one of the investigators Zuckerman talks to about the car accident in *The Human Stain*. Both novels take place in or near the fictional New England villages of Athena and Madamaska Falls.) Drenka's son, of course, sees these graveside activities as acts of desecration. As he gives full vent to his distress,

restraining himself from giving Sabbath a beating, Sabbath can only wonder: Had she written the diary in English or Serbo-Croatian?

Out of pride or incredulity? To trace the course of her daring or of her depravity? Why hadn't she warned him in the hospital that there was this diary? Too sick by then to think of it? Had leaving it to be found been inadvertent, an oversight, or the boldest thing she had ever done? I did it! I did it! This was who was living under all those nice clothes—and not one of you ever knew!

The questions probably belong as much to the author as to his character. I have tried to show how much doubt has been thrown on assumptions of knowability, and there is at least one other element perplexing Sabbath that emerges earlier in the novel: How a tape recording of one of his conversations with a student wound up in the hands of the dean at the local college where he had been teaching. His incentive to work at the school was to find young women amenable to sexual relations and titillating phone calls. Both student and teacher have tape recorded their conversations, not telling the other, of course, and young woman's copy is reproduced in the novel as an extended footnote. The question for Sabbath is how Kathy Goolsbee, the student, "a large, graceless girl, ill-educated, coarse, and incoherent in the preferred style of the late-twentieth-century undergraduate," managed to leave her recording in a library bathroom. It later finds its way into the hands of a dean at the school. Was it deliberate, as Sabbath suspects? Or simply an act of carelessness, as the student insists? It is hard to say, but the results are the same—Sabbath loses his job and is publicly humiliated--and Roth briefly speaks directly to the reader, saying "So little in life is knowable, Reader—don't be hard on Sabbath if he gets things wrong. Or if Kathy gets things wrong."

I cannot conclude these remarks on the three novels of the 1990s without adding a word about the nature of Roth's story-telling. *American Pastoral* and *Sabbath's Theater* in particular follow no discernible chronology; Roth simply delineates highly detailed stories in a direction

that is not remotely chronological. Pages of material could be removed from where Roth has inserted them and be placed elsewhere in the text, with no apparent gain or loss in the presentation. This is hardly a defect; it only means that the detail and complexity of the novels precludes ready comprehension of the texts. They become a puzzle palace, similar to *Ulysses*, where the reader has to decide if the text warrants the effort required for a fuller understanding. *Sabbath's Theater* can range very freely over decades in time, and at my first reading I was often lost as to where I was in the story; and the voluminous details means that every time I return to the books I gain bits of information that had slipped past me during earlier readings. Maybe Roth considers this effectively mimetic. Life is rarely experienced as a one-thing-after-another sort of experience. Most events drop out of our memory. Many people can reconstruct a rough "narrative" sequence of years and decades, but few see it as a coherent or meaningful flow of life. That may be the correlative of unknowability. Just as we never—according to Roth—understand ourselves or others, so life is a viscous flow that simply terminates with death.

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