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Brauner, D. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2817-7847>
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QUEERING PHILIP ROTH: HOMOSOCIAL DISCOURSE IN “AN ACTOR’S LIFE FOR ME, *LETTING GO*, *SABBATH’S THEATER* AND THE “AMERICAN TRILOGY”¹

DAVID BRAUNER

As the editors of *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (2003) point out, “modern Jewish and homosexual identities [have] emerged as traces of each other”, perhaps most conspicuously and tragically in “the ways that Jews ... were powerfully associated with the abjected homosexual” in Nazi propaganda (1, 2). Sander Gilman, among others, has documented the long history of the feminization of the Jewish male – what Adam Seth Rosen calls “the age-old stereotype of the nonmasculine Jew” (58) - in particular the perpetuation of the myth of the menstruating Jewish male, culminating in the proliferation of nineteenth-century (pseudo-)scientific discourse (Gilman 74-76); Daniel Boyarin has argued that “the effeminization of Jewish masculinity” was the product not just of anti-Semitism but also of a desire among Jewish communities to promote a model of “Jewish self-affirmation” based on a “rabbinic masculinity” that valorized Talmudic scholarship rather than physical prowess (Boyarin et al, 2); Jonathan Freedman has used what he calls “the contiguity between the Jew and the queer” as the basis for a model of cultural production that he calls “queer diasporism” (44, 42); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out both the analogies between the “epistemology of the closet”, as it applies to gays and Jews, and the limitations of such analogies (2008: 75-82). In this context, one might reasonably expect to find, in the work of a writer as interested in Jewish masculinity as Philip Roth, material that, in the broadest, contemporary theoretical currency of the term, could be termed “queer”. Yet Roth has no entry in the index of *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* and is in fact only mentioned once, in passing, in the four hundred pages of the volume (7). Moreover, in the entire body of Roth criticism (by now consisting of fifty-odd books and hundreds of articles and book

chapters) there is virtually no discussion of queerness. A number of critics, such as Remi Astruc, Mark Fulk, Alex Hobbs, Monica Hogan, Velichka Ivanova, Maggie McKinley, Sally Robinson and Debra Shostak, have discussed Roth's representation of masculinity, in somatic, socio-cultural and psychoanalytical terms, and many other critics have engaged more generally with the sexual politics of his work. Yet such discussions tend to be sited within a heteronormative frame of reference.

There are three exceptions. In an unpublished essay on male intimacy in *I Married A Communist* and *The Human Stain*, Michael Kalisch argues that "the place of same-sex intimacy in Roth's career-long exploration of male sexual identity has been overlooked", although his discussion of this intimacy is framed more in terms of classical traditions of male friendship than queer theory (Kalisch unpublished). Neil Davison and Warren Hoffman go further in their readings of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Davison represents the "homosocial environment" of Portnoy's father's generation of Jews as an idealized, deroticized space in which "unself-conscious masculinity" is allowed free reign - a space that Portnoy, as a cripplingly self-conscious second-generation American Jew, cannot inhabit (187).² For the most part, however, the focus is on Roth's (re)negotiations of what Davison calls "the Jewish-gender-Zionist complex" through the figure of the "feminized Jew" (163) - a figure who is "passive and neurotic, but not homosexual *per se*" (181-2) - and his theoretical framework is drawn from postcolonial studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis rather than queer theory. In contrast, Hoffman's claims that "Portnoy's attempts to pass as a butch American man ... ultimately read as hysterical", and that "one of the most heterosexual characters of all Jewish American literature is actually inherently queer" (Hoffman 17) situate his work squarely in the field of queer theory.

Perhaps Roth's popular reputation as an aggressively heterosexual, libidinous, masculinist, in some versions sexist or even misogynist author, has determined the

parameters of critical discourse. Perhaps his review of Edward Albee's play *Tiny Alice* (1965), in which he excoriated the playwright's "ghastly pansy rhetoric and repartee," and lamented his failure to present "the homosexual hero ... as a homosexual, not disguised", has deflected attention from any hint of queerness, disguised or otherwise, in his own work ("The Play that Dare not Speak its Name").³ Perhaps there has simply been an assumption that, since Roth himself is, according to the Canadian-born gay novelist David Plante, "a man completely devoid of femininity, of sexual ambiguity" (Plante 1984), sexuality in his fiction will be similarly unequivocal.⁴ Certainly, male sexuality in Roth tends to be associated with promiscuous, priapic adulterers whose perversity, polymorphous though it is, is restricted to heterosexual or onanistic activities: from Alex Portnoy's masturbation with a piece of liver, to Mickey Sabbath's urination over Drenka's grave, to David Kepesh's licking of Consuela's menstrual blood, to Simon Axler's threesome, Roth's oeuvre is full of sexual experimentation, which, however, never extends to male homosexual activity.

Yet this is also an author whose corpus includes a novella in which a man turns into a massive mammary gland (Kepesh in *The Breast* (1972)), a novel in which a man tries on his wife's underwear (Peter Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man* (1974)), a novel in which a man imbibes another man's sperm (Sabbath in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995)) and a whole series of novels whose male protagonists suffer from temporary or permanent impotence: Alexander Portnoy and Kepesh at the end of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and *The Professor of Desire* (1977), respectively; Henry Zuckerman at the start, and Nathan Zuckerman later on, in *The Counterlife* (1986); and Nathan Zuckerman again in *Exit Ghost* (2007) and throughout the "American Trilogy". when Nathan finds himself left permanently impotent after prostate surgery.⁵ These instances of emasculation and phallic failure are hardly consistent with the notion that Roth's men are "ordinary", "testosterone-driven ... red-blooded American men". Instead, they offer evidence of a persistent queerness, in the sense defined by Warren

Hoffman, after David Boyarin: “not as an indication of a necessarily homosexual or gay subject position but as a marker of any sexual practice that ‘puts into question any praxis, theoretical or practical, of “the natural” in sexuality’” (Hoffman 5).

In the remainder of this essay, I will identify a strain of what, adapting Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s formulation, I will call homosocial discourse, running through Roth’s fiction. Whereas Sedgwick uses the term homosocial desire as “a strategy for making generalizations about, and marking historical differences in, the *structure* of men’s relations with other men” (1992: 2), my focus will be on the various ways in which what Sedgwick calls the “potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (1992: 1) is invoked by, and embedded in, the rhetoric of Roth’s fiction. Through a detailed analysis of homosocial discourse across a range of texts spanning most of Roth’s career, I will argue that his oeuvre looks radically different if reconsidered with a queer sensibility and sensitivity. It is not my intention, as Roth himself apparently warned David Plante not to, to make the kind of “obvious comparisons between queers and Jews”, which he deems “spurious”⁶ (Plante 2015: 140), nor to expose Roth as a repressed homosexual and/or as homophobic, nor to rehabilitate his reputation for objectifying women by demonstrating that he also objectifies men. Rather, I want to suggest that Roth’s representation of male sexuality is more complex, ambiguous and ambivalent than has been generally recognized, and that it reinforces Sedgwick’s argument that male sexuality is not adequately described in terms of a dichotomy between homosexual and heterosexual but rather exists on a continuum that encompasses a range of desires. Rather than an unreconstructed, fixed version of heteronormative masculinity, what emerges from a queer reading of Roth’s fiction is a fluid, plastic male sexuality that is characterized, as Sedgwick puts it in *Tendencies* (1993), by an “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” (1993: 8).

An interest in the “potential unbrokenness ... between homosocial and homosexual” has been evident in Roth’s work from the outset. Consider the first appearance, in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), the novella that made Roth’s name, of the brother of Brenda, the lover of the hero-narrator, Neil Klugman: “And suddenly, like a crew-cut Proteus rising from the sea, Ron Patimkin emerged from the lower depths we’d just inhabited and his immensity was before us” (13). That Ron’s “immensity” both intimidates and excites Neil is implied in a later scene when Ron gives Neil a vigorous handshake (“He pumped me”) and then sits on Neil’s bed while he unpacks, “rubbing his forearm and grinning”, Neil “thoroughly unsettled by the silence” that falls (45). Later the same evening, Neil furtively observes his prospective brother-in-law “stretched out, colossal, on his bed” (46). The accumulation here of terms that connote phallic stimulation and tumescence (“pumped”, “rubbing”, “stretched out”), anticipate Nathan Zuckerman’s descriptions of the protagonists of the “American Trilogy”, in which celebration of male virility is imbricated with a queer eroticism, as I will suggest later.

Whereas homosocial discourse in *Goodbye, Columbus* is confined to such fleeting moments, Roth’s second book, *Letting Go* (1962), is structured around a textbook example of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls triangulation.⁷ The novel focuses on the relationship between Gabe Wallach, a wealthy single young man making his way in academia, and a young couple, Paul and Libby Herz, who are struggling financially (having been disowned by their respective families for marrying against their wishes). Although they are contemporaries, colleagues, and fellow Jews, Gabe and Paul are temperamentally and experientially poles apart. While Gabe drifts aimlessly and carelessly through life (he boasts at one point of having “not planned anything for five years”), Paul is prematurely middle-aged, weighed down by his wife’s chronic ill-health and depression, and by his own struggle to become a writer (168).

Academic allies (Gabe encourages his Head of Department to hire Paul and sympathises with his humanist approach to teaching), the two men are also amorous rivals. Ostensibly, this rivalry stems from an attraction between Paul's Gentile wife, Libby, and Gabe, which is never consummated but always palpable. However, it is clear from the outset that Libby, in spite of being one of Roth's most fully realized female characters, is, in terms of the sexual dynamics of the novel, more of a conduit for the tensions between the two men than an object of desire, or desiring subject, in her own right. Gabe has no sooner met Paul and Libby than he is imagining himself in Paul's predicament (his Jewish parents having disowned him as a result of his marriage to a Gentile) in terms that suggest both (sexual) sympathy and competitiveness: "I began to wonder ... how I would perform if I were Paul Herz" (124).

The first crisis of the novel occurs when Gabe visits the Herzes to reclaim a Henry James novel that he has leant Paul, forgetting that in its leaves is a letter from Gabe's mother to her son. As soon as Gabe arrives, Paul abruptly departs, with the words "Libby's in the bedroom" (50). Bewildered and angered by Paul's behaviour, Gabe initially "want[s] to shout for him to come back ... to *demand* a reason for his leaving" (50) but reluctantly agrees to keep the bed-bound Libby company for a while. She proceeds to confide all her troubles to him: her undiagnosed illness; her unsuccessful attempts, through conversion to Judaism, to be accepted by Paul's family; her miscarriage; and finally, the fact that she and Paul are not having sex ("I just want him to sleep with me!" (56)). This last revelation seems to confirm that Paul's decision to leave Gabe alone with Libby constitutes a tacit invitation to Gabe to sleep with his wife: to perform the conjugal act that he himself has decided to refrain from. At one point, the two do kiss and briefly embrace, but things go no further, Gabe finding himself "visited with a mess of emotions, no one of which I could clearly identify ... much strong feeling, no particular object" (57). Later, one feeling emerges from this confusion: a

sense of shame for “having turned out to be just as unreliable as Paul Herz had given us the opportunity to be” (58). On his way home, Gabe sees Paul “trudging home through the snow” and feels “moved to pull the car over and confess to him that I had held his wife” - an urge that he resists (58).

This episode leaves a number of questions unanswered: did Paul really intend to act as a pander?; why did Gabe decide, against his better judgement, to stay?; and why, having begun to initiate a physical intimacy with Libby, does he suddenly withdraw? The first of these questions is answered in the affirmative later in a section of the novel given over to entries from Paul’s journal, when he berates himself for “*Urging on another to fuck my wife ... Fuck my Libby. Take Libby. Take Libby away.*” (154). Yet the implication of this entry - namely, that he colluded in Gabe and Libby’s (unfulfilled) infidelity because he wanted Gabe to run off with her - is complicated by another confession, which accompanies it: namely, that he has committed adultery with Marge Howells, Gabe’s ex-girlfriend, and moreover that “*Her calling Wallach names perked me up!*” (154). The implication here - that it is Marge’s invocation of Gabe that arouses Paul - also sheds light on the second and third questions left hanging above. If Gabe’s desire for Libby is fundamentally a desire for intimacy, by proxy, with her husband - an inverted reflection of Paul’s motivation for having intercourse with Marge - then it explains both why he is tempted to sleep with her (to sleep with the woman who sleeps with her husband is, at one remove, to sleep with him) and why in the end he does not do so (since Libby turns out not to be having sexual relations with Paul, she does not offer the vicarious entry to her husband that Gabe seeks).

If this seems to be an overdetermined reading of the situation, consider Gabe’s fantasy of “kissing ... all the women who had ever entered Paul Herz’s life” (188), his conviction that “There must be some weakness in men (in Paul and myself, I later thought) that Libby wormed her way into”, and the (self-)disgust that this arouses in him: “I turned

slightly at that moment myself, and was repelled by that sex toward which at bottom I have a considerable attachment” (179). Here, the parenthetical refinement of “men” into “Paul and myself”, the choice of the verb “turned”, and the awkward archaic diction of “was repelled by that sex toward which at bottom I have a considerable attachment”, all work together to suggest a (repressed) revelation about Gabe’s sexuality. This suggestion is reinforced by increasingly conspicuous references to Gabe’s desire for physical intimacy with Paul:

“Snowflakes fell onto Paul’s thinning hair, and I had the urge - the kind of silly urge one can easily give into - to brush them loose” (237); “I don’t think it would have shocked either of us then if we had embraced. It was the kind of emotional moment that one knows is being shared.” (241).⁸ Although the qualification that Gabe attaches to his desire to touch Paul’s head (“the kind of silly urge one can easily give into”) seeks to minimize its significance, while the clarification that follows his description of the charged moment between the men (“the kind of emotional moment that one knows is being shared”) heightens it, they both universalize (through the use of the impersonal subject “one”), what are actually peculiarly personal feelings. Through these rhetorical strategies Gabe is able to equivocate about his true feelings, to avoid disentangling the thread of homoeroticism from the “mess of emotions” in which he and the Herzes find themselves enmeshed. In this light, Gabe’s observation that, when Paul announces that he and Libby have decided to adopt a baby, “he looked very fatigued with me, as though it was we two who had been living together for years” (294), is pointed and poignant.

It is in the context of this homosocial dynamic that Gabe’s final, desperate intervention in the lives of the Herzes needs to be seen. Exasperated by the persistent prevarications of Harry Bigoness (the man who turns out to be the husband of the woman who had given her baby to the Herzes, leading them to believe that she was a single mother), Gabe kidnaps the child and takes her to see Bigoness, hoping that encountering her in the

flesh will convince him to sign the adoption papers: “Bigoness would have to see the child ... to stop bargaining over it” (598). In the event, however, Bigoness continues to stonewall until finally Gabe collapses in a heap, succumbing to what appears to be a nervous breakdown. The novel ends with a letter (addressed from London) that Gabe writes to Libby Herz - a belated reply to an invitation to her daughter’s first birthday party - in which he explains that he “*thought at the time that [he] was sacrificing [him]self*” (628). He doesn’t clarify this statement, instead referring enigmatically to the “*broken explanations [he] offered to others in the days that followed*” before he breaks off, writing “*I find I cannot finish this sentence*” (628). However, I take it to mean that Gabe’s actions, though ostensibly aimed at securing Rachel legally for the Herzes, were also taken in the knowledge that (whatever the outcome) his rash risking of their baby’s future would put him beyond the pale, as far as the Herzes were concerned. In this way, he is finally able to “let go” of his intense involvement with Paul, as much as with Libby, alienating himself from them morally, just as he removes himself physically from their orbit through his self-imposed exile in Europe (he mentions in passing in the letter that he is about to set off for Italy). However, the fact that this letting go is expressed, rhetorically, through Gabe’s retreat into abstraction and his inability or unwillingness to “finish” his final sentence suggests that the homosocial tensions that have animated the novel remain unresolved.

Apart from *Letting Go*, the most striking manifestation of homosocial discourse in Roth’s early work occurs in a now largely forgotten story called “An Actor’s Life for Me”, first published in 1964 in *Playboy* and collected in an anthology of stories from the magazine published thirty years later.⁹ The story focuses on the relationship of a young, childless married couple, Walter and Juliet Appel, living in New York in “one dark room over the truck traffic on Hudson Street” and struggling to come to terms with the fact that their dreams - of becoming, respectively, a playwright and an actress - are unlikely to be realized (120-

141, 122). Although things improve for the couple materially when Walter gets a job “in the business end of the theater” (123) and they move from the “squalid room” to “a good-sized apartment in a brownstone on the Upper West Side” (123), they discover that they have “fallen out of love” (124). Their marriage fluctuates, Walter having two affairs, Juliet taking up a job and beginning a one-act play, but the real crisis of the story revolves around a man in the apartment opposite to theirs who, Walter believes, has been exposing himself to his wife.

The story begins with Walter noticing, through the “the window facing onto the rear of the Appel apartment”, a “naked man strolling back and forth” (121). At first Walter tries to ignore the man, reasoning that “in a city like New York you were bound to catch glimpses through the window” but then he convinces himself that “the fellow had been exhibiting himself; his intent was made very clear by the very way in which he moved his limbs, so slowly, so languorously ... ” (122). Since this passage is focalized through Walter, the way in which this sentence trails off, finishing with an ellipsis, represents a form of self-censorship. The answers to the implicit questions raised here - why does Walter not complete his thought? what is it that he does not want explicitly to acknowledge? - seem at first to lie in sexual jealousy, specifically Walter’s fear that Juliet is responding in some way to the man’s advances from behind the door to her study, where she is supposedly working on her play.

However, the structure of the story - which moves from this opening episode back in time to trace the troubled trajectory of the Appels’ marriage, before returning to the naked man at the close - suggests that there is more going on. In particular, the explicit question framed by Roth’s narrator - “Why should they be indifferent to one another in their bed?” - in the context of a marriage which “in all ways but [this] ... seemed to be what it was before” (124) hints at something beyond a conventional waning of desire over time, what Walter thinks of as “the diminishing of passion that must one day come to every last husband and

every last wife” (127). As soon as the narrative returns to the present, it also returns to the question of the naked man:

Neither the evening that Walter had seen the man across the courtyard, nor the morning after, did he speak of it to Juliet. Nor did she say anything to him. In a way, that was why he said nothing to her ... (131)

As before, the ellipsis (an uncharacteristic device for Roth), together with the qualification “In a way”, suggests that Walter’s reluctance to speak to Juliet about the man derives not just from a fear of confronting her with his suspicions but also from the feelings that the man’s display has aroused in him. After several nights pass without any repeat performance, Walter and Juliet have a row, which ends with Juliet rushing off to her study and locking the door. Walter initially chases after her but then stops at the rear window, parting the curtains, “all his fury turn[ing] to suspicion of himself”. “These past nights, had he not been giving himself some secret pleasure by peeking, imagining ... ?” (136).

Once again, the ellipsis both draws attention to and conceals the tendency of Walter’s thoughts and once again Walter watches the man, noting all the details of his body:

He was settled back in a chair, his legs crossed at the ankles, and his head tipped back, showing the length of his pale throat. He was pretending to be watching TV. In the nude. Very slowly and deliberately, in a way that looked to Walter to be wholly salacious, he was smoking a cigarette. (137)

This time, what Walter sees precipitates a breakdown of sorts: he begins to cry, tears off all his clothes and “leaning upon the sill, present[s] himself there, in his socks and watch” while saying to himself “*OK - I am naked! In the light! In the window! I am doing this!*” (137).

The story ends with the Appels relocating to the Bahamas and Walter steeling himself to perform his marital duties: “To assert once again what he was ... he mounted Juliet ... and ... proceeded to reproduce himself” (141). If the use of “mounted” and the reference to

reproduction suggest that Walter is acting here in accordance with an instinctive, primal, biological imperative, the paradoxical phrase “assert once again what he was” hints at the persistence of a psychological conflict in Walter and at a different kind of acting – a performance designed to convince himself of his identity as a red-blooded heterosexual male of the species.¹⁰ Although Walter concedes that the naked man’s behavior may well have been entirely innocent, he decides he “could not have remained in the apartment” because of his earlier “performance”: “He would have to remember it, even while forgetting it” (141). This paradoxical phrase (with its sexual pun on “member”) sums up the thrust of “An Actor’s Life for Me”: it is a story that relies for its power on a homosocial discourse which is, at the same time, always repressed, always partially hidden behind ellipses.

A long silence followed the publication of this story and when it was finally broken, by the appearance of “Whacking Off”, a story that was later to become a chapter in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, it was immediately evident that Roth had become a very different writer, a writer who revelled in excess and the explicit exploration of male sexuality. As Portnoy himself puts it: “I have a life *without* latent content” (234, emphasis in original). In keeping with this new candor, homosocial discourse in *Portnoy’s Complaint* is more conspicuous, if also less pervasive, than it was in *Letting Go* and “An Actor’s Life for Me”. There is, for example, an extended conceit in which Alex imagines himself on board a “troop ship” with a crew of “fellow wailers, melancholics and wise guys” whom he addresses as “my Jewish men friends! My dirty-mouthed guilt-ridden brethren! My sweethearts! My mates!” (110), Roth playing on the multiple meanings of “mate” (“friend”, “shipmate”, “lover”), with the last of these being privileged by virtue of its apposition with ‘sweethearts’. There is also a moment when Alex imagines a scenario – a counterlife - in which he might have turned out gay:

The mystery really is ... that I’m not like all the nice young men I see strolling hand in hand in Bloomingdale’s on Saturday mornings ... I close my eyes and it’s not so

awfully hard – I see myself sharing a house at Ocean Beach with somebody in make-up named Sheldon ... There he is, Ma, your little gentleman, kissing someone named Sheldon on the lips! (116)

The reference to homosexuality here is explicit and comical: Alex's imagined partner is a stereotypically camp figure invoked to illustrate the path that Alex believes he might have followed had he repressed all his aggression, a path that he claims would have been, for his parents, worse than finding him hanged, like the nice Jewish boy next door, Ronald Nimkin.¹¹ Generally, however, queerness in post-Portnoy Roth tends, with the notable exceptions of Louis Jelinek in *The Professor of Desire* (1977), Bertram Flusser in *Indignation* (2008) and Leo Glucksman in *I Married A Communist* (1998), to whom I shall return later, to be implicit and to manifest itself in the representation of hyper-masculine Jewish men who are far removed both from Sheldon, the Jewish queen, and from the rabbinically studious model of the feminized Jewish male, exemplified by Ronald. I want to devote most of the remainder of this essay to exploring the manifestation of this subtler, but insistent, form of homosocial discourse in the "American Trilogy", but before that I will look briefly at the novel that immediately preceded the trilogy: *Sabbath's Theater*.

Like Portnoy, the Roth protagonist with whom he has most often been compared, Mickey Sabbath, the anti-hero of *Sabbath's Theater*, has achieved critical notoriety for his omnivorous concupiscence. Sabbath's delight in slaying the sexual shibboleths of genteel middle-class America often seems like an amplified echo of Portnoy's own taboo-breaking: whereas Portnoy uses his sister's underwear as a masturbatory aid, Sabbath uses the knickers of the daughter of his old friend, Norman Cowan; where Portnoy enlists the services of an Italian prostitute in order to engineer a threesome with himself and Mary Jane Reed, Sabbath encourages his lover, Drenka Balich, to play the role of a prostitute (giving her five hundred dollars for her trouble) in a threesome with himself and a young bisexual German woman,

Christa; while Portnoy bullies Sarah Maulsby into performing fellatio, Sabbath engages in sado-masochistic sex with his first wife, Nikki Kantarakis. Yet the sexagenarian Sabbath is a much more radical sexual adventurer than his young precursor, and his sexuality is much more ambiguous than has been recognized by critics of the novel, as the passage describing his first encounter with Christa implies.

Driving home one night, Sabbath notices a hitchhiker at the side of the road wearing a tuxedo and decides to stop, since “[i]t was impossible to leave standing all alone on the side of the road with her thumb lifted a young blond girl in a tuxedo who looked like a young blond boy in a tuxedo” (53). That Christa’s androgynous appearance signifies not just her own fluid sexuality, but Sabbath’s, becomes clear later on in the novel, when the narrator observes, of Sabbath’s second wife, Roseanna, that her gay hairdresser, Hal, “had cut her hair so short that ... Sabbath intermittently kept imagining his be-denimed wife as one of Hal’s pretty young homosexual friends from college” (83). He goes on to point out that, with her “flat-chested and tall” physique and her “striding gait”, Roseanna had always “emanated ... a tomboyish aura” (83), in this respect resembling Sabbath’s first wife, who is tall and thin, with “breasts so small that you could cup them in your hand the way you hold a ladybug to prevent its flying away” (130).

If Sabbath’s attraction to these women suggests a predilection for epicene women that might in turn hint at a repressed homosexuality, then the love of his life, Drenka, would seem to confound such a theory: she is, after all, a short, plump woman, with large breasts. However, Sabbath’s infatuation with Drenka is incited, at least in part, by her promiscuity, or more precisely, by the way in which she shares with him intimate details of her affairs with other men. Sabbath enjoys watching Drenka flirt with other men and enjoys even more hearing salacious details of her sexual encounters with them. So for example, when Drenka describes the appearance of the penis of one of her lovers, Lewis, Sabbath instructs her to

“trace[...] its outline on a piece of paper”, a piece of paper that he carefully files away together with “dirty pictures” of Drenka herself (70). And when she talks to Sabbath about her sex with Lewis, “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” (70-71). As an apparent afterthought, the narrator then adds: “He used to solicit this kind of talk from her, and she obeyed. Exciting to them both” (71). Exciting to both it may be, but it is clearly Sabbath who initiates Drenka’s confessions, and who coaxes her into divulging increasingly intimate details, details that often focus on the phallus.

In this context, it perhaps ought not to be as surprising as the narrator apparently finds it (“[t]hen he did something strange, strange even for a man like him”) that Sabbath ends up licking Lewis’s sperm from his fingers after he has masturbated (like Sabbath himself) at Drenka’s graveside (78). The narrator’s interjection here, like the earlier explanation of Sabbath’s appetite for Drenka’s sexual confessions, while ostensibly registering the extent to which Sabbath’s desires are aberrant, paradoxically draws attention to a characteristic aspect of Sabbath’s personality - one that is most conspicuous in Sabbath’s interest in the sexuality of Drenka’s husband, Matija.

Sabbath’s Theater begins with Drenka giving Sabbath an ultimatum - to remain faithful to her or lose her - that bewilders him, because it seems to contravene all their principles of sexual freedom. At the end of the chapter Drenka explains that her change of heart has been brought about by the fact that she has been diagnosed with cancer, but just before that revelation, when Sabbath is still filled with righteous indignation, he agrees to “give up all other women” on the condition that she “suck off your husband twice a week”, imploring her to “think of how it will excite *me*” (32). It should by now be apparent that Sabbath’s preoccupation with Drenka’s intimacy with her male lovers is a way of experiencing a vicarious intimacy with them himself; he both identifies with them, in his

position as a fellow lover of Drenka, and with Drenka herself (“I am Drenka!”, he chants, while lapping up Lewis’s ejaculate), as the lover *of* them (78). In fact, Sabbath explicitly expresses his attraction to Drenka’s husband in his description of him at the start of the novel:

“Matija is big, powerful, virile ... Every old dame in the country is in love with him ... His looks turn them on ... I’ve seen him churning out the dinners, grilling those kebabs in his sopping T-shirt. All agleam with grease, he turns *me* on.” (4)

A habitual reader of Roth, or one familiar with his reputation as I described it at the start of this piece, might assume that Sabbath is being facetious here. However, in the light of the evidence of Sabbath’s ambiguous sexuality that accumulates as the novel proceeds (reinforced by the recurrence of the italicised “*me*”), it seems more like a (perhaps unwitting) confession of bisexuality, just as, later in the novel, his (equally unwitting) caressing of Norman Cowan’s foot with his own (he believes he is playing footsie with Norman’s wife, Michelle) takes on the quality of an ironic Freudian misstep. At any rate, Sabbath’s homoerotic tribute to the hyper-masculinity of Matija Balich anticipates the encomiums Nathan Zuckerman bestows on the protagonists of the “American Trilogy”.

These protagonists – Seymour “the Swede” Levov, Ira “Iron Rinn” Ringold and Coleman “Silky” Silk – are all alpha males: Seymour and Coleman are both exceptional athletes, the former excelling at basketball, baseball and American football, the latter briefly becoming a professional boxer; Ira’s physical prowess manifests itself in fistfights outside the ring, in one of which, as a teenager, he murders an Italian boy who had taunted him with anti-Semitic remarks. Their physical appearances are repeatedly eulogized in the novels. Paying tribute to the “splendid-looking”, “glamorous campus athletic star” Seymour Levov in his halcyon high-school days, Nathan refers to his “brilliant blue gaze”, his “great looks”, and his body, which is both “marvelous” and “wonderful” (23, 191, 207, 83, 20, 29). As a young man he is “sensationally handsome” (191), an “earthy human specimen, the very image of

unrestricted virility” (318); and even as an old man “close to seventy”, he is “still terrifically handsome” (15), possessing a “beautifully aging paragon’s face” (37). This insistent emphasis on Seymour’s physical attributes is striking, since Roth is not habitually given to detailed physical description of his characters. These eulogies might, in themselves, seem more symptomatic of what Nathan calls the “asexual lovemaking” with which the Weequahic Jews pay tribute to their “household Apollo” (5), than evidence of any erotic interest. However, when Nathan describes the cheerleaders’ “enthusiasm for his perfection” expressing itself in a chant whose “tempo accelerated with each repetition until, at the peak of frenzied adoration, an explosion of skirt-billowing cartwheels was ecstatically discharged ... for love of ... the wonderful Swede”, the sexual nature of their worship is unmistakable, the rhythmic crescendo of their performance clearly mirroring the build-up to and eventual climax of intercourse, and the phrase “ecstatically discharged” suggesting ejaculation (4-5). This eroticization of the Swede is given a decidedly homoerotic inflection when Nathan compares him to “Michelangelo’s David” (30), a quintessentially queer icon, not simply by virtue of its celebration of the male form by a reputedly homosexual artist, but because its subject enjoyed a homosocial, if not homosexual, relationship with Jonathan, as related in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹² This inflection is also clearly audible in the description of Seymour’s physique as a marine on his first leave, when he goes on a pilgrimage with his father and brother to FDR’s grave.

Fresh from boot camp ... hardened and richly tanned from training through the hottest months on a parade ground ... he stood silent, proudly wearing his new summer uniform, the shirt starched, the khaki pants sleekly pocketless over the rear and perfectly pressed, the tie pulled taut, cap centered on his close-shaven head, black leather dress shoes spit-shined, agleam, and the belt – the belt that made him feel most like a marine, that tightly woven khaki fabric belt with the metal buckle – girdling a

waist that had seen him through some ten thousand sit-ups as a raw Parris Island recruit. (208)

From the “hardened” and “tanned” body, to the shaven head, to the focus on his waist and rear, to the cumulative sexual charge accrued by the words “taut”, “pressed”, “sleekly”, and “spit-shined, a gleam” (this last word echoing Sabbath’s description of Matija), the Seymour of this passage conforms in almost every detail to the popular image of the fit queer sailor: the Swede is viewed here with a homoerotic gaze.

This gaze is also turned, at moments in *I Married A Communist* and *The Human Stain*, on Ira Ringold and Coleman Silk, respectively. Early in the former novel, Nathan recalls a summer afternoon spent, as an adolescent boy, in the company of the Ringold brothers:

As if it weren’t disorienting enough to see Mr Ringold ... without a shirt and tie – without even an undershirt – Iron Rinn wasn’t wearing any more than a prizefighter. Shorts, sneakers, that was it – all but naked, not only the biggest man I’d ever seen up close but the most famous. (18)

Nathan’s awe at the exposed torso of Iron Rinn and his brother, his favourite high-school teacher, might be attributed to the hero-worship of a star-struck boy, were it not for the fact that he has already confessed to being susceptible to “the power of a male high school teacher like Murray Ringold” “in the sexual sense” (2)¹³, and were it not for the similarities between this episode and one near the beginning of *The Human Stain*, when the sexagenarian Zuckerman admires Coleman Silk’s physique:

He was still without a T-shirt ... I couldn’t but help take note of ... this exhibition of his body’s sun-tanned surface. On display were the shoulders, arms and chest of a smallish man still trim and attractive ... (21)

In both cases, Nathan is unsettled by his proximity to older men who, he feels, are putting “on display” their “attractive”, “all but naked” bodies. What is revealing here is not so much his admiration of the Ringolds and Coleman *per se*, but the fact that he conceives of their casual state of (un)dress as an “exhibition” that compels his attention (“I couldn’t help but take note”). Indeed, his intense consciousness of their bodies only increases as these scenes develop. In the presence of the Ringold brothers, Nathan finds himself “beginning to perspire profusely”, not just “from ... the excitement of meeting Iron Rinn” but as the result of “sitting between two shirtless brothers well over six feet tall, two big, natural men exuding the sort of forceful, intelligent manliness to which I aspired” (27). That the manliness of Ira and Murray is something that Nathan desires, as well as aspires to, is suggested by the abiding power for him of the image of these “big, natural men”, their big naturalness and natural bigness exposed.

Like the eulogies to the Swede’s virility that punctuate *American Pastoral*, lyrical tributes to the assets of the Ringolds are something of a leitmotif in *I Married A Communist*. Early on in the novel, Nathan confesses that “All the while I was listening to Murray ... I had a picture in my mind of Murray’s unclothed upper torso, still blessed ... with all the signs of youth and strength” (16); later, he describes how the nights he spends as a young man with Ira in his shack “aroused exalted patriotic cravings”, “passions that had been kindled in [him] as a boy” but that are reignited by the act of “feeding the roaring flames in the fireplace”, while Ira saunters around, “wearing short pants and a washed-out olive T-shirt from his army days – looking like ... the Great American Scoutmaster, the big natural guy who is adored by the boys” (189). The erotic connotations of the diction here (“aroused”, “cravings”, “passions”) and the homoerotic undertones of the characterisation of Ira as the “big, natural” (that phrase again) scoutmaster “adored by the boys” are clear enough. Nonetheless, the activity that the men actually engage in during what Nathan refers to as “those nights at the

shack” – animated political discussion – can hardly be said necessarily to imply sexual intimacy. The same cannot be said, however, for the dancing that Nathan engages in with Coleman on the night, on his porch, when he encounters him sans T-shirt.

Just as Nathan constantly reiterates the physical attractiveness of the Swede, so too he alludes repeatedly to Coleman’s looks, describing him as “a charming and seductive boy” (25) and “a neat, attractive package of a man even ... [in old] age” (15). When Coleman asks him to dance, Nathan’s initial response is to think “What the hell ... we’ll both be dead soon enough”, to “g[i]ve him my hand and let him place his arm around my back and push me dreamily around that old bluestone floor” (26) and to quip: “I hope nobody from the volunteer fire department drives by” (26), an acknowledgement of the queer appearance of their situation.¹⁴ Yet as the dance continues Nathan’s tone shifts:

On we danced. There was nothing overtly carnal in it, but because Coleman was wearing only his denim shorts and my hand rested easily on his warm back ... it wasn’t entirely a mocking act. There was a semi-serious sincerity in his guiding me about on the stone floor, not to mention a thoughtless delight in just being alive ... the kind of delight you take as a child when you first learn to play a tune with a comb and toilet paper. (26)

The very terms in which Nathan couches his claim that the dance is not sexual – “There was nothing *overtly* carnal in it” – of course implies that there is something covertly carnal going on; conversely, his confession that the act was “not entirely mocking” and “semi-serious” suggests, in its studied qualification and understatement, that Nathan is in fact profoundly moved by the experience.¹⁵ This suggestion is reinforced by Nathan’s discovery, when he returns home later that evening, that he had been “so engaged by Coleman ... that I’d failed to monitor myself” (36), with “the result that urine had seeped through to my khaki trousers” (35). As I’ve argued elsewhere, there is an implicit analogy between this kind of incontinence

and the sexual incontinence of which Bill Clinton, and Coleman himself, is accused in the pages of the novel. To put it more explicitly, Nathan's urinary emission stands, symbolically, for the sexual ejaculation that he is no longer capable of having; the urine stains on his trousers are the counterpart to the infamous semen stains on Monica Lewinsky's blue dress – evidence of his having been aroused by the dance with Coleman in a way that is clearly as carnal as it gets for the post-operative Zuckerman, the comparison of his experience to that of an innocent child notwithstanding.

This reading of the dance is strengthened by Nathan's enduring fascination in *The Human Stain* with Coleman's sexual prowess. After hearing for the first time about Coleman's Viagra-fuelled adventures with Faunia, Nathan is so agitated that he cannot sleep: "Well into the morning I lay awake, powerless as a lunatic to control my thinking ... I lay awake not even trying to prevent myself from mentally reconstructing the 'transgressive audacity' Coleman was refusing to relinquish" (37). Later in the novel, he compulsively replays in his mind the episode in which he watches Coleman become sexually aroused by Faunia's tending of the Organic Livestock cows:

Night after night, I could not sleep because I couldn't stop ... observing this scene ... It was something, I suppose, like watching Aschenbach feverishly watching Tadzio – his sexual longing brought to a boil by the anguishing fact of mortality. (51)

Zuckerman's choice of analogy is, if taken in isolation, rather mystifying, since Aschenbach is a middle-aged man fantasizing about a young boy, while Coleman is an old man lusting after a middle-aged woman. Yet when read in the context of the larger homosocial discourse that I have been delineating, this apparently incongruous literary allusion makes sense as a confirmation of the homoerotic element of voyeurism here – namely, Nathan's rapt observation of Coleman's rapturous response to Faunia. That the allusion to *Death in Venice* is no absent-minded aberration is made clear when Nathan

returns to Mann's novella later in the novel, referring to Coleman's passion for Faunia, as "what Mann, writing of Aschenbach, called 'the late adventure of the feelings'" (64).

Although Nathan is comparing Aschenbach with Coleman, it is the disguised affinity between himself and Aschenbach (both suffering from a repressed infatuation with an eminently unsuitable, male object of desire) that explains why he has Mann on his mind. In a novel in which so many characters are in one closet or another (Coleman hiding his identity as a black man, Faunia feigning illiteracy, Delphine Roux denying, not least to herself, her sexual attraction to Coleman, as well as her humanist responses to literature), it is entirely appropriate that Nathan should locate himself in the linguistic space occupied by those men whose own ambiguous sexuality remains unarticulated.

For most of the "American Trilogy", then, the currents of homosocial discourse remain submerged; naturalized as symptomatic of the feelings of "a hero-worshipping kid ... [for] the virtuousness of his hero" (*American Pastoral*, 213), or legitimized by Nathan's apparently ingenuous confession that he was "a sucker for manly intimacy" (*I Married A Communist*, 233). However, there are two scenes in which it rises to the surface. The first occurs early in *American Pastoral*, when Nathan, in the middle of an excruciating dinner with the sexagenarian Seymour, "suddenly ask[s]" "Is Jerry gay?" (31). Jerry is Seymour's younger brother, with whom Nathan had been best friends back in high school, but Nathan's motivation for asking about his sexuality initially seems obscure, not least to himself: "Maybe I ... had asked the question out of mischief, to alleviate the boredom" (31), he offers, rather tentatively. However, he then goes on to tell the story of Jerry's humiliating, disastrous courtship of a girl, before observing that he "was one of only three boys who didn't show up at the senior prom. The other two were what we identified as 'sissies'" (34). Finally, he concludes that "that was why I now asked the Swede a question I would never have dreamed of asking in 1949, when I had no clear idea what a homosexual was and couldn't imagine that

anybody I knew could be one” (34), before explaining to the Swede himself that “When you wrote me about your father, and the shocks he’d suffered, it occurred to me that maybe Jerry had been the shock. Your old man wouldn’t have been any better than mine at coming to grips with a queer son” (35). Although Nathan attempts to contextualise his abrupt inquiry about Jerry’s sexuality, the proliferation of explanations - linked by a series of associations that is not always clear - highlights the unease that Nathan’s own question arouses in him, so that his avowal that he “had no clear idea what a homosexual was” begins to seem like protesting too much, an impression reinforced by his implicit identification with Jerry when he tells the Swede that “Your old man wouldn’t have been any better than mine at coming to grips with a queer son”.

If one is left here with a sense of having had a tantalizing glimpse of the tip of an iceberg, then it emerges with extraordinary clarity in an episode in *I Married A Communist*. It is the climax (and abrupt ending) of Nathan’s relationship with the man who supplants both Murray Ringold, as his favourite teacher, and Ira Ringold, as his mentor. Unlike the Ringolds, who are married and middle-aged, Leo Glucksman is a single, young, gay man, a charismatic college lecturer. Nathan soon falls under his sway and becomes his protégé; Leo takes him every Friday night to a concert, after which they repair to his tiny room, where they drink tea and discuss high culture. Sitting “on the edge of the narrow unmade bed ... only two feet away” from his intense tutor, Nathan “felt like a girl, or what I imagined a girl felt like when she wound up with an intimidating boy who too obviously liked her breasts” (220). Although Leo tells his student “Don’t worry, I’m not going to touch you” (220), it is clear that his feelings for Nathan go beyond the pedagogical:

Every Friday night, in Leo’s room, the spell was cast. All the passion in Leo that was not sexual (and a lot that was but had to be suppressed) he brought to bear on every

idea that I had ... Leo went at me on those Friday nights as though I were the last student left on earth. (222)

Like his equivocation about the carnality of his dance with Coleman, the formulation Nathan uses here to describe the nature of Leo's passion (containing everything that was "not sexual", but also "a lot that was") only serves to amplify the homoerotic charge of the situation.

The crisis in their relationship comes, predictably, when Leo finds himself unable to suppress the sexual nature of his interest in Nathan. The catalyst for this is Nathan's visit to Ira's old mentor – the man who converted him to the Communist cause – Johnny O'Day. In fact the relationship between Ira and O'Day is itself couched in terms that contribute to the homosocial discourse that runs through *I Married A Communist*.

When Ira came out of the army in 1945, he ... shared a room with the closest buddy he'd made in the service, a Communist steelworker, Johnny O'Day. They'd been solidier stevedores together ... because of Ira's strength on the job, O'Day had nicknamed his friend "Iron Man Ira". In the evenings, O'Day had taught the Iron Man how to read a book and write a letter and gave him an education in Marxism. (35)

This friendship anticipates both Nathan's relationship with Ira (when Nathan spends time with Ira in his shack – which has been self-consciously modelled on O'Day's Spartan room – Ira indoctrinates him, in much the same way as O'Day had him) and with Leo (who teaches him about Kierkegaard, Aristotle, Dostoyevsky, Conrad and – tellingly – Thomas Mann and Andre Gide). Moreover, it is his friendship with O'Day that ends Ira's interest in women, at least temporarily: "It took O'Day," Nathan informs us, "to undo the all-round aphrodisiac that was Donna Jones", Ira's first love, whom he had been determined to marry (69).

Moreover, when Ira believes that he is going to become a father, he hopes for a boy whom he is "dying to name ... Johnny O'Day Ringold" (72), suggesting that even after he does get

married (to Eve Frame) his bond with O'Day remains the strongest of his life. There are no references to O'Day's sexual orientation, but he is "unmarried" (35), ostensibly because he disapproves of the institution on ideological grounds, and Nathan's description of the effect he has on him certainly suggests a sexual subtext to their relationship. All O'Day has to do, in fact, is to utter his name – "Nathan' spoken in the very voice that had raised gooseflesh on my arms by saying *It's coming, it's coming – I assure you it's coming*" (231) – to rouse the young man to a state of high excitement. Although O'Day is of course referring here to the revolution, the repetition of the phrase "it's coming" and the fact that it is placed in italics, together with the "raised gooseflesh" on Nathan, is in itself suggestive. It becomes all the more so when Nathan observes: "Oh yes, you feel the pull with a man like O'Day. Johnny O'Day doesn't take you fifty percent of the way ... He takes you all the way" (235).

Certainly, Leo's reaction, when Nathan confides to him that he has decided to abandon his studies in order to join O'Day's crusade, leaves no room for ambiguity about what he believes has transpired: "'You shit! You whore! Go! Get out of here! You two-faced little cocktease whore!'" (239). Although Nathan expresses bewilderment at his teacher's fury, the way in which he does so implicitly concedes that Leo's jealousy may not be entirely misplaced: "All I'd done", protests Nathan, "was to tell him I was contemplating living alongside a forty-eight-year-old Communist steelworker who ... looked a little like an aging Montgomery Clift" (239). In comparing O'Day to Clift, one of the most infamously closeted homosexual heartthrobs in the history of Hollywood, Nathan situates his relationship with him in a queer context.

At one point in *American Pastoral*, Nathan ponders the question of why he is so obsessed with the Swede: "Why the appetite to *know* this guy? ... Why clutch at him? What's the matter with you?" (39). Later in the novel, he provides an implicit answer: "He'd invoked in me, when I was a boy ... the strongest fantasy I had of being someone else." It is perhaps

Nathan's vocation as a writer – his compulsion to try, metaphorically, to penetrate Seymour (and Ira and Coleman), to take possession of them, to *know* them imaginatively – that entails a fantasy of physical intimacy with them, a desire (albeit disguised) for carnal knowledge. It is the tension between the expression and repression of this desire that lends the trilogy much of its propulsive force.

In his memoir *Worlds Apart* (2015) David Plante tells an anecdote about how, when accompanying Roth on a trip to Jerusalem, on the first morning of their stay, when he emerged from his bedroom in their shared guest house, Roth told him: "I heard you last night ... shoving furniture against the door so I wouldn't be able to come in" (Plante 2015: 89). Plante comments "Never before have I felt so accepted for my homosexuality by a heterosexual" (89). Roth's teasing representation of himself as a queer sexual predator might indeed be seen as a well-judged defusion of any potential tension between the men regarding Plante's sexual orientation and the fact that he has been invited to be Roth's companion in Israel in the stead of Roth's partner of the time, Claire Bloom.¹⁶ Equally, it might be adduced as evidence not of how sensitive he is to Plante's sensibilities (of how comfortable he is with his friend's sexuality), but rather as a sign of sensitivity in the sense of exacerbated awareness (an uncomfortable self-consciousness). Both kinds of sensitivity are visible in his fiction and the tension between them produces an energy that ripples through Roth's rhetoric, a current that charges and discharges itself in his prose and that can illuminate, and be illuminated by, a process that we might call "queering".

If queer theory has had little to say about Roth until now, Roth has not been silent on queer theory. There is a moment in *Letting Go* when Libby Herz reacts indignantly to the psychoanalytic literary theories of her husband's fellow faculty member, Victor Honingfeld: "He's *not* a homosexual writer. How can you say that! ... Oh listen to him. All that has to happen is Tom Sawyer shakes Huck Finn's hand, and Mark Twain is a queer!" (292). At

first glance this looks very much like a sideswipe at one of the foundational texts of queer theory: Leslie Fiedler's essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!", first published in *Partisan Review* in 1948. But of course Fiedler argues that there is a homoerotic bond between Huck and Jim, not Huck and Tom, and never suggests that Twain himself was a homosexual, so it may well be Honingfeld's crudely reductive misrepresentation of Fiedler, or Libby's crude misunderstanding of Honingfeld, that is the object of Roth's satire. At any rate, in the light of this cautionary illustration of the ease with which arguments about homosocial discourse can be misconstrued, I would like to be absolutely clear: I am not claiming that Nathan Zuckerman is a homosexual writer, let alone that Philip Roth is "a queer" in the narrow sense that Libby uses the term. I am suggesting, however, that there is a strong thread of homosocial discourse running through and inflecting Roth's *oeuvre*, that the series of intimate relationships with other men that many of Roth's protagonists form are conspicuously couched in this discourse, and that a recognition of this ought to reconfigure our sense of the sexual politics of Roth's career as a whole. In particular, I hope that other Roth scholars might explore further the territory staked out by this essay, enabled by an awareness that masculinity in his work is too fluid and dynamic to be accommodated by the conventional binaries of heterosexual and homosexual, feminized Jew and hyper-masculine Gentile, the "ordinary sexual man" and the transgressively desiring male subject.

The University of Reading

NOTES

¹ I wish here to acknowledge the two anonymous readers of the original version of this essay whose comments and suggestions were invaluable.

² With the exception of Davison and Maggie McKinley, both of whom devote the final chapters of their monographs to novels by Roth, and both of whom cite Michael Kimmel's contention that "homophobia ... is the animating condition of the dominant definition of

masculinity in America [...] a defensive effort to prevent being emasculated” (Kimmel 119) as foundational to their approaches, his work has gone largely unremarked by those scholars working in the field of what is variously called Men’s Studies or Masculinity Studies.

³ From Vivian Gornick’s denunciation of his “hatred” of women (Gornick) to Paul Steinberg’s celebration of “his focus on the male libido and the testosterone-driven lust of red-blooded American men” (Steinberg), there has been general consensus that, as Robert McCrum puts it, Roth’s “lifelong subject” has been “the adventures of the ordinary sexual (American) man” (McCrum). For “red-blooded” and “ordinary”, read “heterosexual”.

⁴ I am grateful to Dan O’Brien for reminding me of this.

⁵ There are also a striking number of instances of emasculating disabilities and disorders suffered by Roth’s male characters: Novotny’s mysterious malady in “Novotny’s Pain” (1962), Herbie Bratasky’s “damaged eardrum” (Roth 4) in *The Professor of Desire*, Zuckerman’s chronic back trouble in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), Alvin Roth’s amputated leg in *The Plot Against America* (2004), Simon Axler’s “perennial spinal pain” and “dead leg” (13, 54) in *The Humbling* (2009) and Bucky Cantor’s congenitally weak eyes and polio-damaged legs in *Nemesis* (2010).

⁶ This implied equivalence does occur, however, in Roth’s final novel, *Nemesis*, when the narrator relates that its protagonist, Bucky Cantor, is determined, in his capacity as “summertime playground director” at the predominantly Jewish Chancellor Avenue School, to “teach these kids ... never to allow themselves to be ... defamed as Jewish weaklings and sissies” (Roth 2010: 27, 28).

⁷ Sedgwick’s use of this term is a refinement of Claude Levi-Strauss’s theory that men often use women as “‘the conduit of a relationship’ in which the true *partner* is a man” and Rene Girard’s contention that “the bond between [male] rivals in an erotic triangle [...] is stronger

[....] than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved” (Levi-Strauss and Girard qtd in Sedgwick 1992: 26, 21).

⁸ There is an echo of these moments in *The Ghost Writer* (1979), when Nathan Zuckerman has a sudden urge to kiss E.I. Lonoff, an “amorous impulse” he claims “happens to men more often than is reported” and that is “even stronger” than the desires which led him to seduce a number of his girlfriend’s female friends (Roth 1989: 54-55).

⁹ The story was omitted from the supposedly comprehensive bibliography of Roth’s work included in Hermione Lee’s 1982 monograph and there is no discussion of it, as far as I am aware, in any published criticism on Roth.

¹⁰ There is an echo here of the description in *Letting Go* of Paul Herz’s occasional, joyless couplings with Libby: “It was not so much an act of defiance ... as of conviction: I am a man yet. But afterwards it was not usually that of which he was convinced [...] ” (409)

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of the ways in which Roth uses the suicide of Ronald Nimkin to question implicitly Alex’s own sexuality, via an allusion to Freud’s essay on Leonardo, see Brauner 2000: 77-79.

¹² David tells Jonathan that his “love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Samuel 1:26) and elsewhere that love is described in language that, in the Authorised Version, is certainly imbued with homoerotic undertones: “they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded” (1 Samuel 20:41).

¹³ Several months after I had written this section of the essay, *The New York Times* published a eulogy that Roth had delivered at the funeral of Bob Lowenstein, in which Roth reveals that Lowenstein was “the model” for Murray Ringold. At the start of the eulogy, Roth describes how, forty years after he had graduated from the school at which Lowenstein had taught him, the two men had renewed their acquaintance: “In the spirit of Bob Lowenstein, I will put the

matter in plain language, directly as I can: I believe we fell in love with each other” (“In Memory of a Friend, Teacher and Mentor”).

¹⁴ As the online Urban Dictionary explains: “Volunteer Firefighters are ... commonly ... associated with gay sexuality”.

¹⁵ The passage is tellingly reminiscent of his description of another sort of sexual taboo being broken in *American Pastoral*, when Seymour’s passionate kiss with his daughter Merry is said to bear “no resemblance to anything serious” and to be the result of an intimacy “not in any way to be taken seriously, to be much concerned with, to be given an excessive significance, something utterly uncarnal” (91) – the tautologies and emphatic denials giving the impression of protesting too much.

¹⁸ This episode is given additional resonance by a punning joke that Roth makes when he and Plante are taking leave of Bloom. Plante recounts that “she [Bloom] ... shouted out to us in the taxi, ‘What a pair of comedians’” and Roth “shouted back at her ... ‘So which one of us is the straight man?’” (Plante 2015: 87). In a later conversation, Roth tells Plante how he invited a woman to stay the night in a guest room at his house “with a lock to lock herself in (‘The way David used to lock his door against me when we were sharing a house in Jerusalem,’ Philip said he told her)” (159).

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