PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO JEWISH SELF IN ROTH'S FICTIONALITY: A CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF SUBJECTIVITY

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Abstract. This article proposes a critical self-diagnosing survey as an alternative psychological act of self-disclosure in Roth's fictionality. In deconstructing the proteic concept of Jewish identity, Roth's self-reflection permeates the narrative by infinite voices forging subjectivity to play a central role in Roth's fiction, bearing multifaceted, polyphonic determinations: racial, ethnical, and sexual. Roth mirrors an integrated, restored self which is not only reflected by the cultural and social discourses but also socially constructed by signifying American practices. The psychological (i.e. psychodynamic, functional, developmental) as well as discursive approaches of the self – in Roth's fictionality – reflect Roth's guilt and frustration (self-criticism/censoring) with his sub-cultural position between mainstream experience and his Jewish-American transgressive self where the feeling of alienation still remains as a psychological residue. This article tackles the idea that the Jewish self does not function only within an imagined psychological ground, but also within an extended cinematic framework (philosophical, moral and sociological) – that challenge our expectations regarding the alternative physical and meta-fictional worlds Roth creates within it.

Keywords: Subjectivity, Philip Roth, Jewish identity, deconstructive narrative therapy, self-reflexivity

Introduction

Philip Roth's most remarkable fictional trait resides in his constant liability to exploring and portraying the inevitably subjective, fallacious, self-justifying plight. Such a deconstructive attempt involves examining the most hidden background of the human psyche, exposing the most unpleasant realities about the authentic stimulus in support to the sublime self-narratives. In his realist and postmodern novels, Roth deals with two entirely dialogical approaches to the self, in spite of their variety. In his psychological experiments, the self is subjected to unconventional transformations whose only aim is to unbalance the reader, generating a feeling of confusion despite the evident lack of a narrative logical core. During his postmodernist focus on subjectivity, a substantial depiction of Roth's polyphonic strategy in dealing with self-disclosure is exposed in his novel *Deception*. At a certain point in the novel, the protagonist Philip Roth, who is an acclaimed writer, mysteriously mirroring the author himself, meets another Philip Roth who apparently introduces himself as the 'real' Philip Roth, thus confusing both the 'real' Philip Roth and the reader. The consequence is a mild confusion between the 'real' and 'non-real' meant by the author's self-reflexive[1] effect of focusing the reader's attention to the essence of the fictional world as a subjective construct, as an *ad infinitum* fractalic reflection of the act of writing itself. Roth's aim is to deal with the issues of inter-subjectivity, exploring the psychological foundations of his characters' behavior as well as the mystery of the human plight by using the interior monologue and psychological realism.

The aim of this article is to evidence that Roth's fiction emphasis focus on the inter-subjective response as the vital condition for subjectivity itself. By disclosing the strategies Roth employs in forging his characters' subjectivity, we argue that Roth's supporting goal is to place the inter-human

[1] Following the idea of the psychoanalytic-literary partnership, "subjectivity, then, implies both a condition and a process, inasmuch as one becomes a subject, or is subjectified." (Luke Johnson, *Literary Subjectivity: A Lacanian Approach to Authoriality*, PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2013, p.9), https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/24203/2/02whole.pdf, Accessed on May 28th, 2017.

in-between the existence of human subjectivity and self. For our field of investigation we chose three novels that will be subjected to analysis: *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Human Stain*, and *American Pastoral*.

In focusing on Roth's fictionality, we will first provide a brief outline of Roth's attitude to the self and fluidity of subjectivity, as well as a critical overview of the literary, psychological and philosophical influences on Roth's subjectivity. Secondly, we will deal with various theories on subjectivity at the intersection of epistemology, philosophy of mind and philosophy of language starting with those emphasizing the flexibility of the self as an ongoing process as conveyed by Donald Davidson in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective: Philosophical Essays*; Martin Buber's philosophical treatise, *I and Thou*, and Tzvetan Todorov's essay *Human and Interhuman.*

The Disillusionment of Subjectivity

On one hand, what become significant to Philip Roth's work are Davidson's and Buber's contributions to the psychological theories on subjectivity and expression of the structural duality of the self, which is one of Roth's main topics to be analyzed. While Buber states that subjectivity relies upon the Other, Davidson voices the transgressively contingent quest for freedom of every person who chose the way of self-engagement with that Other, thus establishing a world of meaninglessness, or meaningfulness. However, the price to be paid, is the sense of all-pervading meaninglessness, because man has surrounded himself by mere objects, not realizing that these objects are of his own making; man is oblivious of the fact that he is the author of his own world. This is where Buber's most important contribution to the theorization of subjectivity comes: the implied free will in the world we create for ourselves. We have the freedom of choice to create for ourselves a world of objects (*I-It* mode of engagement) to be used and manipulated.

On the other hand, Todorov reverses Bakhtin's ideas on subjectivity. Bakhtin's first claim was that a writer finds itself in an unbalanced relation to the fictional characters in a novel, arguing that "life finds its meaning, and thereby becomes a possible ingredient for aesthetic construction, only if it is seen from the outside, as a whole: it has to be entirely encompassed within someone else's horizon (Todorov, 1987: 74)". Being influenced by Dostoevsky's work, Bakthin overthrows his outlook on the relationship between author and characters. As a consequence, Bakthin labels his foundational 'monological' (absolute) pattern, while acclaiming Dostoevsky's 'dialogical' relationship to his characters. Thus stated, Bakhtin's dialogism declines the author's dominance/authority over the protagonist and these two types of consciousness have perfectly equal rights: "To use Buber's terms, Dostoevsky is the first to see the author-character relationship as belonging to the "I-Thou" (and not the "I-It") type (Todorov, 1987: 76)". Therefore, with the new autonomy that each character yields, it should not be implied that the author's role has become passive: characters are no longer objects ("it") exactly because the author himself wants them not to be so. It should be seriously avoided to regard him as an agent whose position has been faded away, but quite in the contrary, it should be underscored by keeping in mind that the character is enjoying his freedom thanks to author's artistic architecture. The latter agent, the protagonist, in his new light of existence, is no longer the holder of the author's consciousness, but a character who yields the conscious of his own self. In conventional literature, the author is the one whose transcendental voice integrates the values, ideologies, and desires of the characters with those of his own. In this way, characters could only exist if they could be linked to the author and as such, they would have no subjectivity of their own.

Bakhtin believes that because of the dialogic nature of polyphonic novels each character is to recognize the autonomy of the other characters. Hence, characters gain such subjectivity that each one "speaks his or her own truth" in a dialogic atmosphere through which no truth is going to gain ascendency over the other. In this new light of characterization, fictive avatars are no longer the finished entities, are no longer agents who existed merely to transmit their author's ideology, and are no longer objects, but rather, independent subjects who are capable of yielding their own *self-conscious* and *self-determinant* voices. Their voices are orchestrated with the same level that the author's voice does. So, when polyphonic novels embrace autonomous characters, then, various ideologies converse with each other. An important point about polyphonic novels is that in the verbal

exchange of ideologies no one is to surpass the other, even the author's. In consequence, author's voice loses its domination and its power of intercession.

Clearly enough, Dostoevsky underscored several consciousnesses at once and on the same level, and yet, introduced them from a stance of substantial authority, holding some truth, or unreal reporting the author's artistic subjectivity. Todorov's endowment consists in detecting and expressing that truth, by admitting that this plurality of consciousnesses requires rejecting the idea of a single truth. Davidson's initial thesis is that languages are *intrinsically* public objects: "Language is in its nature… intersubjective" (Davidson, 2001: 219) As Davidson also posed it: "The theory of truth we must presume lies in available facts about how speakers use the language." (Davidson, 2001: 182) After recognizing and validating the subjectivity of the characters, their consciousnesses gain paramount of significance. Like language, human consciousness is stratified and in the dialogue of the novel each interacts with the other. Hence, one's consciousness becomes a pastiche of many consciousnesses. Language, as a product of this consciousness thus becomes stratified, so one's use of language cannot be a pure production of his mind. This threat on truth and self-consciousness brought about a feeling of uncertainty, indeterminacy, fragmentation, and decanonization.

In his dialogical exploration to subjectivity, alluding to Dostoevsky's confession that he was not a 'psychologist', but a 'realist in the higher sense', Todorov brings about:

"This means that Dostoevsky is not satisfied to express an inner truth, but that he describes human beings who exist outside himself, and that these individuals cannot be reduced to a single consciousness (his own): human beings are different, which implies that they are necessarily several; human multiplicity is the truth of the very being of humanity. This is the underlying cause of Dostoevsky's attraction for Bakhtin. If we now attempt to grasp in a single glance the whole of Bakhtin's intellectual itinerary, we note that its unity is achieved in the conviction… according to which the *interhuman is constitutive of the human*. This would be in effect the most general expression of a thought that can by no means be reduced to the individualist ideology, and for which Bakhtin never stopped seeking what may now appear to us to be something like different languages intended to express a single thought." (Todorov, 1987: 82)

Subjectivity, as the function of the inter-human relation, is thus constantly forged and shaped. So as to capture Bakhtin's, or rather Dostoevsky's exhaustive gap on preliminary concepts of selfhood and subjectivity, Todorov moves on and juxtaposes Bakhtin's pattern with Rousseau's view of the subject as an autonomous object, to be compared with an 'Other', "whereas, for Bakhtin, the other participates in the very constitution of the self (Todorov, 1987:85)". Language has an inter-subjective quiddity that precedes one's subjectivity. So, subjectivity takes shape through language and because language is a social phenomenon, one's subjectivity is not to be purely dependent on one's own. From this viewpoint, the radical individuality of "I" is not self-sufficient because this "I" that is speaking, speaks a plurality of languages. Bakhtin's studies on literature thus aims to examine to what extent literary texts embrace this inter-subjectivity. In this new sense of language, the Rothian fictionality tends to embrace the stratification and the dynamic quality of language.

In Todorov's terms, Dostoevsky' portrayal of his fictional characters without privileging one at the expense of others can be outlined in terms of the inter-human subjectivity as the committed function of plight with an Other/another human being framed by an *I-Thou* (Subject-to-Subject) relationship, as Martin Buber theorized in his cinematic representation of subjectivity.

Jewish Self in Roth's Fictionality

In Buber's terms subjectivity is possible to be established only in the dynamics of the *I-Thou* relation, while individuality occurs within the *I-It* ('experience') relation only:

"The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different word from the *I* of the primary word *I It*. The *I* of the primary word *I-It* makes its appearance as individuality and becomes conscious of itself as subject (of experiencing and using). The *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* makes its appearance as person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity." (Buber, 1958: 62)

It is typical for Rothian fiction to advance individual matters of civil liberty, ethnic identity, as well as the concept of (Jewish) self. In this way, he investigates Jewish American identity[2]. To him, it is important to ask what it takes to be a Jew in a society that is mostly comprised of non-Jews? His novels expatiate upon this interrogation but never brings an answer or solution as if he wants to say that the discrimination fallen on Jews is an ongoing process. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, the promiscuous and sex-obsessed protagonist, Alexander Portnoy is unambiguously and compulsively driven to an extended confession on the couch of a psychiatrist, Dr. Spielvogel. Despite his efforts to self-development, Portnoy unveils his male subjectivity defeat at the end of his extended monologue to Dr. Spielvogel. Having a Jewish[3]-American origin, Portnoy grows up with the anxieties and complaints of his parents against the socially-dominant class of non-Jews, unconsciously assimilating his parents' self-perception of being the objects of oppression and discriminations as ideological effects of the Jewish minority. Throughout the novel, Portnoy engages in struggling against that mentality of victimhood, and rebels against his parents, against social norms and conventions of a multicultural American society, against his self-perceived ethnic sense of marginality[4]. Therefore, the focus here is on the level of the *inter-human*: the protagonist's failure to overcome his self-objectifying perception as well as the objectifying of everybody else, or his impotence to accept his own conflicting impulses. Consequently, Alexander Portnoy shifts his self-perception as an 'object'/victim who has to live up according to his parents' expectations, his Jewish community or ethnic standards etc. onto the women in his life, using them as objects, in his turn. He acts from the cognitive attitude of an object relating to other objects. The pattern of his relationships overlaps to what Martin Buber secondly proposed as the *I-It* (Subject-'Object' of experience) pattern of self-commitment[5]. Portnoy cannot escape from the corrupted pattern of self-hate failing to commit to an *I-Thou* romantic relationship. Roth's skeptical attitude towards Portnoy is equally exhibited in the fact that he also voices his characters' moral imperfections.

According to Martin Buber's pattern of subjectivity, the performative self can only manifest within the *I-Thou* ('encounter') relationship. Psychologically predictable, Portnoy's subjectivity is hindered; in his complaint for pleasure, he remains a young boy in a mature body, being terrified by assuming responsibility. At the beginning of his monologue he is an 'object' of experience viewed as a thing to be used and manipulated for benefit' sake or directed to a purpose; at its end he has not made any progress still being the object complaining for subjectivity.

In *The Human Stain*, deconstructing subjectivity brings into question the absolute concepts of self, class, and racial identity by highlighting the image of men and women driven by anxiety in the multicultural America, and focusing on the proteic and fluid Jewish identity construction and difference by negotiating the self-distortions in perceiving the voices of minorities (the Others). This performative construction of identity in Roth's fiction authorizes the self with the open-endedness of self-invention and reflexivity.

[2] In this respect, Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky argues that: "Jews in America have the opportunity to create themselves as Jews, first by acknowledging the presence of Jews in history (...), and then by expressing their freedom through the reinvention or reconfiguration of Jewishness" (Rubin-Dorsky, 2003: 227). Concurrently, this radical metamorphosis of subjectivity becomes an intrinsic part of the Jewish identity which persuades Roth to remain loyal to his Jewishness.

[3] The focus here is put on his Jewish subjectivity in order to fulfill his self-invention.

[4] While dealing with the discrepancy between Jewish and non-Jewish it is widely acknowledged that, the Jewish-American immigrants were trying to replant themselves in the new residences by en-housing, assimilating, and rebuilding their selves. An important point that merits to be emphasized here is that this process of assimilation brings forward problems of social and personal consciousness: it is typical of diasporas to keep their collective traits when they are convened in their own community, but since maintenance of identity in foreign communities does not make sense, diasporas would have less insistence in executing their collective traits there. Accordingly, diasporas have to create a new identity, one that would make them more similar to the majorities. It means that in order to stop the progress of the deepening rift within human being and originality, diasporas reframe a new identity. Roth is well conversant with the fact that a complete assimilation with the adopted land is almost impossible and at its best, diasporas could only be peripheral members of the majorities. This justifies the senses of unbelongingness and double consciousness that Rothian characters suffer from.

[5] It must be argued here that the second point he states in outlining the qualitative differences as well as the temporal distinction between these two types of engagement with the world within his philosophical treatise is that the *I-Thou* relation is placed at a higher level than the *I-It* relation.

The tragic difference in *The Human Stain* is circumscribed to the characters' will whose identity is carried out by self-invention[6], an identity that refuses to be socially constructed[7]. Tormented by political correctness and hate, Roth's protagonist, Coleman Brutus Silk, is an African-American becoming a Jewish-American respected professor and sometimes dean of faculty at Athena College in western Massachusetts. However, even if his white skin allows him to pass as a 'white Jew'[8], he is yet incapable to completely cast out his ethnic behavior of relating to the world. In exploring the "singularity" that has "been his inmost ego-driven ambition" (Roth, 2001: 131) while constantly manipulating the reality by his self-fashioning from African-American to Jewish-American, Coleman makes use of his white skin during a critical historical moment and thus pushes his obsessive needs to achieving the ideological construct of the American Dream[9]. He falls in love with Steena while their mutual committing relationship reaches a point where Coleman starts making plans for their future marriage and decides to introduce her to his family. Failing to overcome her racial prejudice regarding his racial background, Steena declares him her disagreement: "I can't do it! (Roth, 2001: 32)" and leaves him without any other explanation. It is with her that Coleman adhere to Buber's *I-Thou* engagement connection. After being traumatically objectified/victimized and abandoned by his beloved, Coleman decides to separate from his family and to pass as white. He astonishingly grasps that he married his wife only for her curly hair, treating his wife also as an object to be used to achieve his ecstatic ideal of high-ranking social prestige and impossibility to racial difference. In criticizing Coleman's subjective instrumental attitude to the self, Roth employs the words of the protagonist's mother: "You are white as snow, yet, you think like a slave (Roth, 2001: 48)" to emphasize the major difference in his subjective radicalization.

Basically, during his search for self-invention[10], he pursues an idealistic, racial equality, unconsciously relinquishing his authentic freedom. After he strategically negotiates his self as a life project by acting according to the subjectivity of an object/victim[11], Coleman starts treating the others as objects to be used and manipulated to support his project of self-sufficiency, while engaging with his wife and children in Buber's *I-It* type of relation. However, failing to acknowledge his fear-driven behavior, Coleman becomes in fact the only supporter of his self-contradictory lies and self-deception while pursuing the external trappings of success. For example, when he is charged with making use of racist remarks against two of his students, Coleman paradoxically cannot explain the absurdity of that accusation by disclosing the fact that he is an African-American. Although he loses all he had striven for so far, his job and his colleagues' support as well as his wife due to her terrible shock she suffered from that charge, he cannot jeopardize his life's project. Therefore, he starts meeting Faunia Farley, a thirty-four-year-old janitorial help at the Athena College who doubles up as a cleaning woman in the local post office. During his identity crisis, Coleman starts his self-recovering together with Faunia in his attempt to retrieve what he had lost forty years ago: his capacity to see another human being as a subject. At the end of the novel, once he does not condition himself as an object Coleman restores his subjectivity in an act of engaging with another individual in the initial *I-Thou* relational mode. Intrinsically, the novel can be justifiably considered as a paradigmatic shift in Rothian fictional discourses negotiating identity, thus transcending the conventional narrative and articulating a constant critique of white racism unwaveringly anchored in ethnicity.

Another Rothian character who becomes the 'object'/victim of the radical individuality is embodied by the post-Jewish-American, Seymour Levov (or Swede), the protagonist of the *American Pastoral*.

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[6] According to Steven Kellman, "Silk's life converges and collides with others who also believe in self-begetting." (Kellman, 2001: 429)

[7] Professor Amy Hungerford's lecture on *Philip Roth, The Human Stain*, (cont.) [April 9, 2008], delivered at Yale University, http://oyc.yale.edu/transcript/498/engl-291, Open Yale Courses 2017, Accessed on June 1st, 2017.

[8] More details on the "white Jewish" question posed in *The Human Stain* can be found in Helene Meyers' essay on 'Identity Crisis', *Washington Independent Review of Books*, March 10, 2017, http://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/features/identity-crisis, Accessed on June 1st, 2017.

[9] See Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004, p.154.

[10] Dean Franco offers a linear perspective on this issue: "Coleman's whiteness and Jewishness are established by the erasure of his blackness – an identity itself contingent, the being of which is a being-under-erasure." (Dean, 2004: 91)

[11] Ironically, Roth's protagonist becomes "a victim of his own self-inventions" as Timothy Parrish argues (Parrish, 2004: 435)

In adopting the pastoral life standards of the WASP establishment members, he benefits from his Nordic appearance, likewise Coleman Silk.[12] His paradoxical dream[13] resides in his belief that the organic articulation of individuality is perfectly integrated/disguised into the American society/mainstream, without any ethnic residues[14]: "to respect everything one is supposed to respect; to protest nothing; never to be inconvenienced by self-trust; never to be enmeshed in obsession, to be tortured by incapacity, poisoned by resentment, driven by anger" (Roth, 1997: 28-29). The ethnic anxiety is alleviated when Roth adds that "the post-immigrant generation of Newak's Jews had regrouped into a community that took its inspiration more from the mainstream of American life than the polish shtetl" (Roth, 1997: 10). Being absorbed by his enthusiastic dream of American perfection, he unconsciously declines the fact that his wife and daughter are mere agents used for his pre-fabricated male self-fulfillment within the superficial American-Jewish assimilation[15].

In a conversation with his brother Jerry, after his teenage daughter Meredith[16] (seen as a radical Jew) turned into a terrorist, by performing the shocking act of blowing up the local post office and killing a passer-by, while participating in a anti-Vietnam War protest – as an act to remind her father "of Jewish tradition of self-purification" and " in order to seek her own sense of self" (Gao, 2013: 316) – Seymour realizes that he is the one who turned his daughter into a victim – seen also as a 'product' of Seymour's glorious American Dream pastoral life vision – by loving her as a *thing*, as an 'object' to benefit from in order to advance his biased notions of authority and self-recognition. By suppressing her Jewishness, Marry's bombing "could also be regarded as the clash between American ideal and Jewish tradition" (Gao, 2013: 316) In contrast to Coleman, who succeeds in learning the lesson of his life project's disintegration, Seymour fails in reaching a self-understanding all along the novel. He also fails to perceive that his daughter's radical speech and loss of belonging come out from her search for self-identity. His first reaction to the dissolution of his idealistic dream is to remarry. Seymour finally adheres to his need to control, both his life, and the others' lives, engaging in Buber's *subject-to-object* type of relation. By deconstructing the stereotyped Jewish-American identity by the disillusionment of Seymour's American Dream, Roth claims for a Jewish introspection into the assimilationist act to secure the self-consistent progression of Jewishness under the American multicultural background.

Conclusion

By enforcing Buber's, Davidson's and Todorov's perspectives on subjectivity to the already discussed novels, we may conclude that Roth's concepts self-(exposure) and subjectivity result in the

[12] "Out of misinterpretation of American dream, the Swede falls into two pitfalls. One is the historical disparity which prevents the Swede to merge into American mainstream; another is the Swede's effacement of his Jewish subjectivity in order to fulfill his self-transformation." (Gao, 2013: 314)

[13] As Gao puts it in his article: "The Swede's disregard of his Jewish subjectivity is also exhibited in his blind conformity to American ideology. He subjugates himself to his father's authority by acting as a civilize son; he accedes to his wife Dawn's luxurious demand by acting as understanding husband; and he tolerates his daughter Merry radical speech by acting as the liberal-minded father. In a self-restraint to be modest , to smooth everything over, to compromise, to keep decorum, never to break the code, never to hurt somebody's feelings, the Swede practices American altruism by offering not only everything he could afford materially but his real self. Misguided by American altruism, he feels complacent about conforming to other's expectation without realizing that he is captivated by other people's mind power. Besides this, what the Swede surrenders is also his thinking power. When he misplaced conformity with altruism and misinterprets decency with unconditional tolerance, there's no more Swede left, only the passive entity who is "an instrument of history". With a false assumption of American dream, the Swede finds that his life is a false image of everything." (Gao, 2013: 315)

[14] An extended survey on his ethnic backgrounds and contradictory nature of American Jewishness, "The American Jewishness in Philip Roth's Fiction – The Thematic Study of *American Pastoral*" by Ting Gao in *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 313-317, February 2013, doi:10.4304/tpls.3.2.313-317, can be found at http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/tpls/vol03/02/13.pdf, Accessed on May 28, 2017.

[15] The Jewish social assimilation is an inchoate process. The unity of American and Jewish identity is a pastiche-like coalescence that subjects Jews to a hollowed self: it makes Jews ask themselves their identity, home, and race while showing a strong tendency for resisting against assimilation into the zeitgeist of the mainstream because they are austere in keeping their ethos. Roth well knows that through the process of assimilation, each immigrant achieves his own new identity in accordance with the consciousness that is particular for each individual. As a whole, the Rothian characters are dissimilar on the ground that each reacts uniquely and differently within the milieu (foreign countries) they are residing in, according to the Jewish-American personality spectrum that is located between assimilation and a complete identification with Jewishness.

[16] As Mark Shechner suggests: "she is her father's unconscious; she is the return of the repressed" (Parrish, 2007: 147)

authority and responsibility over one's self as a defense mechanism of engaging with Others in what Martin Buber designates the *subject-to-subject* relation as the exclusively realistic and conventionally 'mature' cinematic representation of subjectivity for Roth's protagonists.

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