

'Jade Idols' and 'Ruined Cities of Trivia:' History and Fiction in DeLillo's *Libra*

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Nicholas Branch ... is a retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency, hired on contract to write the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy. Six point nine seconds of heat and light... Let's devote our lives to understanding this moment... We will build theories that gleam like jade idols... The documents are stacked everywhere... It is all one thing, a mined city of trivia where real people feel pain. This is the Joycean Book of America, remember—the novel in which nothing is left out.

Graham Swift's narrator in *Waterland* obviously calls attention to a widespread delusion when he affirms that we expect history to be "the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears in the dark." Julian Barnes, making much the same point, has one of his narrators echo:

History isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us,... a pattern,... a tapestry, ... connections.... We make up a story to cover the facts we don't know or can't accept.... Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history.¹

To be sure, these could hardly be called pioneering insights. The works of Wittgenstein, Derrida and Foucault, to name but a few, have demolished the foundations on which monumental historiography can be erected. As a consequence, the status of historiography has been reduced to that of a more or less arbitrary chronicle, and its claims to an

¹ *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (London: Picador, 1990), p. 242

unmediated access to the real denounced as exorbitant. Contemporary American writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, John Barth, and, more recently, Don DeLillo, have been quick to use the loss of faith in narrative history as a background against which they foreground their own concerns with the forms of fiction. This, however, does not mean that History has lost all of its power of attraction. Indeed, the historical material incorporated into some contemporary novels may well be more alluring to many readers than the fictional apparatus that encompasses the said material. *Libra* is a case in point: while admitting that he "drew from the historical record," DeLillo insists that "*Libra* is just a novel." Which is not likely to make the waters between the fictional world and the real one less treacherous to the aforementioned readers.

As suggested by the *Waterland* quotation, "we" tend to rely on the continuity of historical narrative and expect elucidation of all dark areas. One of the issues addressed by DeLillo in *Libra* is precisely: What do we do when History does not provide an Explanation? What do we do when History does not dispel our fears, but on the contrary produces them?

Kennedy's assassination is a permanent grief for many Americans. A work of fiction ... may be one way for people to soften the edges of their dissatisfaction with the past. Maybe there's a sense in which fiction can rescue history from its confusions.²

By history, DeLillo means the facts as they were collected and reported in the 26 volumes of the Warren Report—not to speak of the FBI report which is almost as long.

Libra presents itself as a kaleidoscopic narrative, with discontinuities that place the reader in front of a fragmentary and disjointed world, giving him the impression that the text is chaotic. At least at the beginning. Gradually the reader becomes aware of the rigorous composition, of echoes, similarities and symmetries, structures of order emerging from chaos. Such structures being inherent in fiction, fiction writing can also be defined as a set of strategies meant to turn chaos and randomness into order. To transform data into a narrative is to impose some kind of order: truly chaotic fiction then, is a contradiction in terms. But *Libra* is also a metafictional novel programmed to erase the very world it constructs. For, if fiction is to contest power, as DeLillo says it should, it

2 Don DeLillo, in a radio interview (1989)

must, in the present case, have the marks of its artificiality inscribed within its own textual borders. Which is a way of reminding us that interpretation of meaning cannot dispense with a reflection on the meaning of interpretation. Like all important novels, *Libra* is also a lesson in reading.

The novel is composed of two series of alternating chapters that actually constitute two narratives:

—The chapters with names of places as titles deal with the last ten years of Lee Harvey Oswald.

—The chapters with dates as titles, covering 7 months, from April 1963 to November 1963, narrate the story of the conspiracy against Kennedy.

The chapters constituting both narratives alternate, but as the span covered is totally different, the chronology is constantly disrupted. The apparent complexity of the text is increased by the fact that the two narratives are not homogeneous: the chapters are divided into sections that correspond to sub-narratives.

In the "places chapters," some sections deal with Oswald's life, while others are dedicated to Oswald's mother's monologue. In the same way, the "dates chapters" are divided into sections that deal with the conspiracy and sections dedicated to Nicholas Branch, the "historian." These narratives within the narrative are one of the formal keys to the book.

The first impression is one, I said, of fragmentation, dispersal and disconnectedness, but gradually the two narratives converge as Oswald joins the conspiracy, to finally fuse together in Dallas on 22 November, so that the chaos is gradually organised into order, complexity reduced to simplicity. Such a movement from chaos to order (or vice versa) is obviously germane to the metaphor of the forking paths in the famous story by Borges. Two alternatives being offered at each forking, the proliferation of bifurcations constitutes a labyrinth. No one will find amazing that a character, aptly named Branch, refers to the Dallas tragedy as "a maze of events," or "the Dallas labyrinth."

The metaphor of the forking paths particularly applies to Oswald. The titles of the chapters narrating his story sum up his drifting life—geographically and existentially—a life made of unpredictable and paradoxical moves. At 15 he discovers Marxist writings and is fascinated by the notion of class-struggle, but at 18 he joins the Marines and he is sent to Japan. Dishonourably discharged, he defects to the Soviet Union. After a

suicide attempt in Moscow, he is sent to Minsk where he works in a factory. Disillusioned, he goes back to America with his Russian wife and their daughter. He joins a leftist organisation supporting Cuba, and finally, stumbling across a conspiracy hatched by former CIA officials, gets involved in the assassination of JFK.

The erratic pattern of his life changes once he has joined the conspiracy. The process of multiplication of forkings is reversed, as the conspiracy narrows down the number of possibilities. This is confirmed by the titles of the chapters: as opposed to the places that betray Oswald's aimlessness, the dates, following the chronological order, introduce linearity and finality. In other words, the syntagmatic axis of the dates vectorizes the logic of the continuous, promises a teleological development and the reassurance of closure, while the paradigmatic axis of the places conveys the logic of the discrete, of repetition, of non-linearity. The geographical paradigm also invites us to see topography as one of the tropological matrices of the text. Mapping the physical universe is an avenue of approach to the internal geography of Oswald's frustrations and desires. The first chapter—in many respects an icon of his life—symbolically shows him riding the subway to the ends of New York City, under a tremendous illusion of power and freedom, but actually trapped within the network of the tracks, and sealed off from the world in a system which he himself recognizes as "on the edge of no-control."

A pathetic dead loss, Oswald is also, in his own way, an actor as shown by the famous photograph that represents him dressed in black, with his rifle in one hand and two left-wing magazines (*The Militant* and *The Worker*) in the other, staging himself- the "poor man's James Dean." The picture shows that, like Coover's Nixon in *The Public Burning*, Oswald's actions may be ultimately governed by symbols more deeply ingrained than social and political conditions—symbols vehicled by the movies and TV. What the photograph shows is not a political activist, but an actor playing the role of an activist. Paraphrasing Coover's Nixon, Oswald could say: "I am making history not for myself, but for an audience." Identifying himself with Trotsky and Castro, Oswald is convinced that there is a place for him in History, but it is History seen through spectacles fashioned by Hollywood. (The John Wayne episode is particularly revealing). One can't be surprised to see this actor in search of a role join the first plot that passes by, since a plot is essentially the imposition of a design:

A conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme.... All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act.³

Oswald's amorphous existence is absorbed into a structure that shapes it by giving him a purpose. His destiny follows that of the plot, from chaos to order. DeLillo's idea is to conceive a conspiracy that succeeds "due mainly to chance." Conspiracy and chance. Plot and randomness. Order and chaos.

It is too easy to invent the grand masterful scheme that explains everything, dispels shadows and mysteries, reinforces the comforting logic of causality. DeLillo knows better; he imagines a mock conspiracy which degenerates into a real one. The plan originally devised by Everett is complex, non-linear, chaotic. A former official of the CIA, Everett believes that what he calls "an electrifying event" is needed to change JFK's too lenient policy on the Cuban issue. This event could be an attempt on the President's life, but Everett insists: "We don't hit the President ... We want a spectacular miss." But enough traces and clues would be left, leading to a gunman obviously sent by Castro, which would force JFK to retaliate. Everett only needs the dupe who will play the role of the gunman. By chance Oswald crosses the path of the plotters.

The complexity of the plan lies in the fact that it deflects from the natural, logical course of such a conspiracy: the aim of a murder attempt is to eliminate, not to spare the target. The elaborateness of Everett's scheme forces him to devise a labyrinthine structure:

The gunman would vanish in a maze of false names, swarming life, lingering mystery.... Everett wanted mazes that extended to infinity.⁴

But as it moves from theory to practice, the operation passes into the hands of T.J. Mackey who finds the plan "too twisty and deep." So he decides to eliminate the complexities, to restore the natural simplicity of such a plot: to hit the target. What should have been a mere simulacrum becomes the real thing. Everett realises that he has lost control of his plan when it is too late but very early he is aware that it is in the nature

3 Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 440.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

of his scheme to tend to order, like a chaotic system organising itself, pulled by some strange attractor.

Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of armed men.... He had a foreboding that the plot would move to a limit, develop a logical end.⁵

Both kinds of plots tend to the reduction of possibilities, selection, connection, and teleological development.

The polysemy of the word plot suggests metafictional implications which are largely subordinated to the presence and function of Nicholas Branch. A senior analyst called out of retirement by the CIA to write the secret history of the assassination, Branch has been reading and collecting material for 15 years when the novel opens.

Nicholas Branch sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams.... This is the room of growing old.⁶

His language is thick with terms such as "the fact-rubble of investigations," "the Dallas labyrinth," "the chaos of events," "the blur and the inconsistencies." He lives and works in a "museum of contradictory facts":

Oswald's eyes are gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right-handed, he is left-handed. He drives a car, he does not ... Oswald even looks like different people from one photograph to the next ... In [a] photo he sits in profile with a group of fellow Marines. They all look like Oswald. Branch thinks they look more like Oswald than the figure in profile, officially identified as him.⁷

After 15 years of reading, Branch has come not only to question the relevance of facts, but to deny the possibility of authenticating them. Thus he verifies Coover's statement in *The Universal Baseball Association*: "History : in the end you can never prove a thing." 25 years after the event, documents keep coming in, Branch has to face the fact that it is impossible to get a fixed image of the past. The past is forever changing. So he takes notes. After 15 years of notes, Branch thinks it is premature

5 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 300.

to start writing. He realizes that in order to transform this "ruined city of trivia" into history, he would have to select, synthesize the heterogeneous, connect discrete facts, interpret, impose a design, in other words construct a fiction. Any theory on the assassination can only be "a jade idol." To accept it would be, in John Barth's words in *Letters*, "an act of faith, a provisional suspension of disbelief."

At the beginning of the book, Oswald and his mother are seen watching TV. The TV set is equipped with a tinted filter to give the illusion that it is a color image:

The top third of the screen was permanently blue, the middle third was pink, the band across the bottom was a wavy green ... blue heads spoke to them from the TV screen.⁸

That the filter is an allusion to Oswald's warped perception of reality makes little doubt, but it is also the sign of a double distortion of the real (the filter distorts an already mediated real), and as such, can be read as a comical echo of Branch's situation and of his epistemological function.

In the world of *Libra*, Branch is a pure creation. We do not know anything about him, he has no life outside his working room; his only contact with the world is the Curator who sends him the documents. Contrary to most fictional historians, he is no detective. He reads what he receives, in other words what he reads is already mediated, screened. In spite of the mass of documents he receives, and though he is not particularly prone to paranoia Branch ends by suspecting that the CIA does not give him everything:

There are worrisome omissions, occasional gaps in the record. Of course Branch understands that the Agency is a closed system.... But why are they withholding material from him? There's something they aren't telling him... What are they holding back? How much more is there? Branch wonders if there is some limit inherent in the yielding of information gathered in secret.⁹

Since he only exists through his function, and since his function exclusively depends on the Curator, we are entitled to regard him as the creature of the Curator. Curator—Creator: the phonetic vicinity is really tantalizing, and only confirms the suspicion that we are the creatures of those who inform us. Besides, as the narrative is largely patterned by

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 442

recursive structures and infinite regress ("There's a world inside the world" Oswald repeats), we are not told where the Curator gets his documents from, and we may assume that he is not given everything either. The source is constantly receding, there is no traceable origin.

The Branch sections being contiguous with the conspiracy sections within the same chapters, the elderly man's frustration and the contaminating power of his skepticism counterbalance, even outweigh the aesthetic satisfaction offered by the plot (a plot defined as "the perfect working of a scheme"). Again and again we are reminded that what we are reading in the conspiracy sections is exactly the kind of narrative that Branch, the scruple-ridden historian, refuses to write.

The symmetries and the contrived patterning of the narrative can be seen as a flaunting of artifice: the book comprises 24 chapters and Oswald dies at the age of 24. The chapter entitled 22 November (numerically written 11/22) is the 22nd chapter of the book and also the 11th of the second part. To highlight the fact that 22 November can be written 11/22, DeLillo has Branch point to it precisely when he receives documents indicating that Oswald had a double.

The mathematical construction of the book is further inscribed in the way the chapters are distributed: the dates, forming a horizontal axis, and the places, forming a vertical one, obviously evoke coordinates—which invites us to understand the word "plot" as "the location of a point on a map by means of coordinates." Dallas on 22 November, then, is the point of convergence where the three meanings of the word plot intersect.

Borges maintains that "reality likes symmetries." For DeLillo symmetries and coincidences serve a double purpose: they give the fiction an air of reality (it is too extravagant to be invented) and they foreground its arbitrariness. Everett, a former CIA official, now a teacher in a small college, realizes that its full name is College of Industrial Arts: CIA. Oswald feels bound to J. F. Kennedy by a series of coincidental links:

Coincidence. Lee was always reading two or three books, like Kennedy. Did military service in the Pacific, like Kennedy. Poor handwriting, terrible speller, like Kennedy. Wives pregnant at the same time. Brothers named Robert.¹⁰

10 *Ibid.*, p. 336.

Following Aristotle's advice, DeLillo uses coincidences for their aesthetic qualities; they too can be read as a reduction of chaos: creating links, they reverse the movement of bifurcation, and negate randomness. But since they give form to events, they are also another way of speaking of conspiracy ("There's a grand psychic conspiracy at work in what we call coincidence").

Branch knows that coincidences lead to superstition, that they make us believe in astrology and numerology. Since nothing can be more disquieting than pure randomness, we are ready to inject any kind of order into our world.

Branch has become wary of cases of cheap coincidence. He's beginning to think someone is trying to sway him toward superstition.... Can't a man die without the ensuing ritual of a search for patterns and links? The Curator sends a four-hundred page study of the similarities between Kennedy's death and Lincoln's.¹¹

The last sentence is all the more significant as it comes as an echo of one of those hermeneutic metaphors that characterize DeLillo's writing:

(Banister to his secretary)

"I want you to start a file before you leave the office. Fair Play for Cuba. Give it a nice pink cover."

"What do I put in the file?"

"Once you start a file, it's just a matter of time before the material comes pouring in ... Every bit and piece and whisper in the world that doesn't have a life until someone comes along to collect it. It's all been waiting just for you."¹²

Seemingly abandoned to randomness, the world is amorphous, but precisely because it is amorphous, it will take the shape of any mould. It will pour into any file. What DeLillo is telling us is that, given the right circumstances and confronted with harrowing mysteries, most of us are ready to accept the most extravagant connections, revere the "jade idol": believe, for instance, that Oswald took part in the plot against Kennedy just because he was a Libra. Nonsensical explanations are better than no explanations at all, and there will always be facts to corroborate any design.

The sad truth about coincidences is that they are prone to ancillary relationships with causality. Oswald is fascinated by the links between

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

JFK and himself, but he does not try to figure out the number of people with whom he shares the same characteristics. In the same way, Branch puzzles over the violent death of numerous people who were linked in one way or another to the assassination. It is true that once we have noted the coincidence, we can't help establishing a causal link. The connection with a powerful event such as the assassination obliterates all other possible connections. Yet, most of the people who died in the years following the assassination were Cuban refugees involved in clan struggle, mobsters, prostitutes, etc.—people exposed to violence. Those deaths may be linked to various factors and do not prove the existence of a conspiracy. (But then, they do not prove the contrary either.)

In 1979 a House select committee determined there was nothing statistically abnormal about the death rate among those who were connected in some way to the events of November 22. Branch accepts this as an actuarial fact. He is writing a history, not a study of the ways people succumb to paranoia.¹³

"It is we," William James once remarked, "who project order into the world by selecting objects and tracing relations. We carve out order by leaving the disorderly parts out."

It is exactly what we do when we transform coincidences into causality. As it is in the nature of numbers to produce remarkable patterns (Kennedy was killed on 22 November, but many other days in the year produce the same numerical pairs: 2 January, 4 February, 6 March), it is in the nature of reality to produce such accidental links.

To supply the missing motivation is, in a way, to be engaged in the production of narrative—either as a writer or as a reader. Understandably then, the figures of the writer and of the reader are to be found, multiply inscribed in the text. Such inscriptions serve purposes that are obviously thematic and metafictional but they are also related to the question of form: the presence of writers and readers within the narrative contributes to the making of a world of Chinese boxes, with recursive structures, infinite regress and icons.

Unable to give direction to his life, let alone to control his destiny, Oswald desperately attempts to give form to his present by writing his "Historic Diary." But, relying on language to organise the chaos of experience, Oswald can only fail since he does not master the medium:

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Always the pain, the chaos of composition. He could not find order in the field of little symbols.... A word is also the picture of a word.... The language tricked him with its inconsistencies. He watched sentences deteriorate, powerless to make them right. The nature of things was to be elusive. Things slipped through his perceptions.¹⁴

If our consciousness is structured by the alphabet, Oswald's dyslexia distorts his perception of the real. But his confused prose (broken syntax, incorrect spelling...) is also an epistemological metaphor of the textual nature of every historical event, a sign of what DeLillo calls our "uncertain grip on the world."

As Oswald's perception of the real is reflected in the chaotic prose of his *Historic Diary*, his fragmented self is reflected in his use of false names. Actually Oswald does not simply borrow names, he constructs them. Thus, O.H. Lee is a backward reading of Lee H. Oswald, while the more famous Hidell is the product of a verbal game that erases his own name, Lee:

Take the double-e from Lee.
Hide the double-l in Hidell.
Hidell means hide the L."¹⁵

Oswald plays with the letters of his name as with alphabet blocks. This is not only meant to point to the difficulty of knowing who Oswald really was; it also aims at reminding us—as Joyce does in *Finnegans Wake* with the name of Anna Livia (DeLillo's constant references to Joyce are not coincidental)—that a name is a sequence of letters, and as such, lends itself to unlimited manipulation. The Oswald of *Libra* is made of letters, he is text.

The polysemy of the word plot allows a reciprocal semantic contamination: while the narrative plot is said to move toward death, the conspiracy is referred to in terms of fiction writing, with Everett as the writer who invents Oswald:

Win Everett was at work devising a general shape, a life. He would script a gunman.... Mackey would find a model for the character Everett was in the process of creating.... They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame to extend theirfiction into the world.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50 (*my* emphasis).

The narrative, in other words, precedes the conspiracy. Fiction shapes reality and history. But then, the plot as originally conceived *is* a fiction. They only want to simulate a murder attempt. In spite of his lucidity ("He worried about the deathward logic of his plan"), Everett is surprised to find that the character he has devised exists in the real world, and he succumbs to the illusion of the Author-God who thinks he can control his creation. The writer-conspirator makes history with techniques borrowed from fiction, and he fails because his fiction is too complex for the reader he has chosen: Mackey. As a reader of Everett's "text," Mackey refuses to play the game and, in order to simplify what he reads, *literalizes* what Everett meant to be *metaphorical* :

Mackey insisted on a clear and simple *reading*. You can't surrender your rage and shame to these endless complications.¹⁷

On the other hand, Branch stands out as the perfect antithesis of both Everett and Mackey. Contrary to the latter, he refuses to simplify his reading of the "real" as represented in the documents ("Branch must study everything. He is in too deep to be selective."). Contrary to Everett, he refuses to write and play God. He knows that what "they" want is a mimetic, authoritative account that would reflect the facts faithfully.

No one would deny that the Dallas mystery feeds not on a blackout of information, but on a wealth of data—an overload, in systems terms, resulting in what Jean Beaudrillard called "The implosion of meaning." The rate of information becomes too high for the receiver to process. Branch is collector and processor, rather than creator—and a collector with a sorting problem (just like DeLillo's reader). He rejects the implied univocality which would force him to choose—to follow one path in the maze, turn right or left at each branching. Though he never leaves his room, he has embarked on an epistemological quest similar in many ways to Oedipa's in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Trapped in what he calls "the Dallas labyrinth," he experiences the same feeling of disorientation as Pynchon's heroine when she becomes aware of her predicament:

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 71 (my emphasis)

[I]t was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above.¹⁸

(The metaphor of the computer seems to be particularly relevant since Branch, as we have seen, is a data processor, and his room is consistently described as a memory.)

Like Oedipa, Branch is "waiting for a symmetry of choices to break down." Like Oedipa, he could say that "excluded middles ... are bad shit."

What he has learned in the 15 years of his labour, is that binary constraints do not apply:

Oswald *is and is not* Oswald.

He *is and he is not* one of the conspirators.

Kennedy is at once the victim of a *conspiracy* and of *coincidences*.

There is a plot inside the plot ...

If such a thing as truth exists, it will not be defined in terms of zeroes and ones. Simplification is rejected because to simplify is to obfuscate; it shuts the door to the possibility of ever understanding. While Branch allegorically stands for DeLillo's "ideal" reader—reader of texts and of the real, Oswald emblematically represents the mystery of the world. The fictional labyrinth, it is true, may be both fascinating and dangerous, since it can work as a challenge to understand the world, or as a dissuasion from understanding it and, consequently, a masked invitation to accept it as it is. But, *Libra* tells us, what makes the difference is not the labyrinth itself; it is our attitude as readers in front of the complexity of the "text" with which we have to struggle:

Branch has no choice but to study this material. There are important things he has yet to learn.... He reads into the night. He sleeps in the armchair. There are times when he thinks he can't go on. He feels disheartened.... But he persists, he works on, he jots his notes. He knows he can't get out. The case will haunt him to the end....

It is essential to master the data.¹⁹

18 Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 125.

19 *Libra*, pp. 442, 445.

Sour Grapes of Roth

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No matter what judgment literary history eventually makes of Henry Roth, it is certain that he will have earned a large footnote therein as the author who overcame a sixty-year writer's block. By now the story is well-enough known: in 1934, while living with lover, muse, mentor and patroness Ida Lou Walton, Roth published his first novel, *Call It Sleep*. He then contracted for a second novel which was never delivered. During the struggle with the second novel, Roth apparently became torn between his artistic instincts and the social realist dogma of the Communist Party to which he adhered at the time. To further complicate—or simplify—matters, in 1938 he met Muriel Parker, the love of his life, and severed relations with Walton. He remained with Parker, whom he amply describes as his salvation, until her death in 1990. In the meanwhile, the paperback reprinting of *Call It Sleep* in 1964 triggered a revival of his literary reputation, eventually leading him to the publication of a collection of essays and excerpts, some new some old, as *Shifting Landscapes* in 1987. Finally, then, in 1994 he released *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park*, the first of six volumes of his fictionalized memoir *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, followed in 1995 by the second volume, *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*.

In its form, *Mercy of a Rude Stream* is something of a Modernist work, harkening back to the time of Roth's literary apprenticeship. First of all, the very form of the thinly disguised, formally fictional autobiography was in fact a staple of modernism.¹ Second, Roth's technique of alternating his narration with present-time interventions and metacom-

1 See, for example, Ralph Nader's concept of the *similar* novel in "Defoe, Richardson, Joyce, and the Concept of Form in the Novel." In *Autobiography, Biography, and the Novel*, with William Matthews (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973).

mentary on the part of the virtual author is characteristically Modernist as well. Thus, Roth resumes his career not far from where he left it. As T.S. Eliot defined the literary esthetic of the Modernist era, it was above all characterized by consciousness of the tradition, of the author's knowingly bringing to bear the history of literature as an evolving practice, and inserting him or herself into a lineage. A part of this process is the necessity for the modern artist to define herself in terms of those predecessors chosen and those rejected. For the second Modernist generation—those being published in the Thirties, essentially though including authors from John Dos Passos through Malcolm Lowry—a great deal of the choice was made by circumstance, in the person of James Joyce. For a writer of this generation to ignore Joyce would be to remove oneself from the state of the art of prose narrative. As a young writer of his generation, Henry Roth was well-schooled in the state of that art when he wrote his masterful *Call It Sleep*.

While *Call It Sleep* gives evidence of a masterful assimilation of techniques that can easily be called Joycean, the works of his second career are marked by an increasingly vituperative—and unfortunately not entirely rational—indictment of Joyce for a variety of failings, including the nefarious influence that led to Roth's silence and nearly ruined his life, to hear him tell it. Let us begin our investigation of the charges with a look at the Joycean influence in the earlier novel.

The question of community and social identity is at the heart of *Call It Sleep*, and it was also the decisive factor in his career, which he abandoned, as he later explained, out of a sense of loss of communal identity. Whereas early in *Shifting Landscapes* he seems to attribute the dissolution of his identification with the Lower East Side's Jewish community to a free choice made under the influence of his party affiliation, he later settles on two unrelated targets of blame for this decisive loss of community: his family's move from the neighborhood when he was nine years old, and—unlikely though it may seem by comparison—James Joyce, or at least a James Joyce of Roth's creation, as we shall see. The impact of *Ulysses* on Roth's work, as elsewhere, is not hard to spot and has been frequently noted; a more pervasive influence, however, can be traced to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. *Ulysses*'s influence on *Call It Sleep* is found in techniques of voicing and representing the unconscious and depicting wide-angle urban activity. Roth does not employ grids or subtexts, nor does he make much use of literary allu-

sion (except for the climactic use of Isaiah 6), at least in part because his tight focalization on the six-year-old protagonist would not facilitate the insertion of such references. The novel is organized in the manner of *A Portrait*, around symbolic motifs and recurrent imagery, and has certain thematic features in common with Stephen Dedalus's story.

Although *Call It Sleep* represents a much shorter time than *A Portrait*—something over one year in the main action—it is a spiritual biography of no less depth, and greater dramatic intensity. Each of the works portrays a conjunction of familial, social, religious, and sexual tensions as a spiritual crisis whose resolution is marked by the boy's synthesis and mastery of the symbols that have shaped the story. It makes little difference that David Schearl's characterization will not formally support a hypothetical identification with the authorial voice, as does Stephen's, for the novel's culmination clearly locates the genesis of the work's governing images in the protagonist's consciousness. Thus *Call It Sleep*, like *A Portrait*, is a story of psychological coming-of-age in which the protagonist attains an integral and stable self-definition when he becomes the fashioner of his own images.

Perhaps Roth's greatest achievement in *Call It Sleep* is his mastery of sustained focalization from the young boy's point of view, a focus that is abandoned only in the last section, first to travel across town with the rabbi, then, after a passage of conventional omniscient narration, to broaden into the focus on the night voices of the neighborhood before finally rejoining David's awareness. Like *A Portrait*, *Call It Sleep* makes use of consonant narration, the blending of narrative and figural voices in the idiom of the character, as well as quoted monologue without quotes, in the manner of *Ulysses*. In *A Portrait* the mimetic use of the character's language in narration is most evident in the first pages' baby talk. As the character matures, so does the narrative voice, reflecting first his romanticism, then his detached intellectuality, and finally merging into his voice, which becomes the narration in the final pages as the first-person diary entries. In *A Portrait* Joyce's credo of artistic transformation takes priority over the more psychically realistic representation of experience found in *Ulysses*. Roth seeds his narration with thoughts and exclamations that convey sensation or perception as if they were inner articulations. Joyce frequently uses this technique in *Ulysses*, for example when Bloom looks inside his hat and the quoted monologue says "White slip of paper," as if he said those words to him-

self, whereas it is more plausible as the transcription of a visual perception.

To illustrate the difference I am describing between *A Portrait* and *Call It Sleep*, it will be useful to compare scenes in which the protagonists endure corporal punishment. First, the well-known pandybat scene from *A Portrait*:

Stephen closed his eyes and held out in the air his trembling hand with the palm upwards. He felt the prefect of studies touch it for a moment at the fingers to straighten it and then the swish of the soutane as the pandybat was lifted to strike. A hot burning stinging tingling blow like the loud crack of a broken stick made his trembling hand crumple together like a leaf in the fire: and at the sound and the pain scalding tears were driven into his eyes. His whole body was shaking with fright, his arm was shaking and his crumpled burning livid hand shook like a loose leaf in the air. A cry sprang to his lips, a prayer to be let off. But though the tears scalded his eyes and his limbs quivered with pain and fright he held back the hot tears and the cry that sprang to his throat.

-Other hand! shouted the prefect of studies.

Stephen drew back his maimed and quivering right arm and held out his left hand. The soutane sleeve swished again as the pandybat was lifted and a loud crashing sound and a fierce maddening tingling burning pain made his hand shrink together with the palms and fingers in a livid quivering mass. The scalding water burst forth from his eyes and, burning with shame and agony and fear, he drew back his shaking arm in terror and burst out into a whine of pain. His body shook with a palsy of fright and in shame and rage he felt the scalding cry come to his throat and the scalding tears falling out of his eyes and down his flaming cheeks.²

The poetic structure of this passage is obvious, in the symmetry of the two sections separated by the prefect's order, the triads of verbal adjectives, the incessant repetition of shaking and burning, and the use of similes. The first simile—"a blow like the loud crack of a broken stick"—transforms sensation into sound, and the next two—"like a leaf in the fire" and "like a loose leaf in the air"¹—transform sensation into visual imagery. The use of passives and impersonal forms—"a cry sprang," "the pandybat was lifted"—dissociates the actions from their agents. This distancing might be justified as reflective of the shocked detachment of the mind observing bodily trauma, or of the boy's heroic attempt at self-control, but the overall effect of the poetic tropes is to shift

² *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, The Viking Library Critical Edition, Chester G. Anderson, editor (New York: Viking, 1968), pp. 50–51.

the focal balance of the passage from the immediacy of experience to its quality as a representation.

The following passage from *Call It Sleep* describes David's first beating at the hands of his father, after he has bloodied a playmate in some boyish roughhousing:

Answer me, his words rang out. Answer me, but they meant, Despair! Who could answer his father? In that dread summons the judgment was already sealed. Like a cornered thing, he shrank within himself, deadened his mind because the body would not deaden and waited. Nothing existed any longer except his father's right hand—the hand that hung down into the electric circle of his vision. Terrific clarity was given him. Terrific leisure. Transfixed, timeless, he studied the curling fingers that twitched spasmodically, studied the printer's ink ingrained upon the finger tips, pondered, as if all there were in the world, the nail of the smallest finger, nipped by a press, that climbed in a jagged little stair to the hang-nail. Terrific absorption....

Suddenly he cringed. His eyelids blotted out the light like a shutter. The open hand struck him full against the cheek and temple, splintering the brain into fragments of light. Spheres, mercuric, splattered, condensed, and roared. He fell to the floor. The next moment his father had snatched up the clothes hanger, and in that awful pause before it descended upon his shoulders, he saw with that accelerated vision of agony, how mute and open mouthed Yussie stood now, with what useless silence.

"You won't answer!" The voice that snarled was the voice of the clothes hanger biting like flame into his flesh. "A curse on your vicious heart! Wild beast! Here, then! Here! Here! Now I'll tame you! I've a free hand now! I warned you! Would you heed!"

The chopping strokes of the clothes hanger flayed his wrists, his hands, his back, his breast. There was always a free place for it to land no matter where he ducked or writhed or groveled. He screamed, screamed, and still the blows fell.

"Please papa! Please! No more! No more! Darling papa! Darling papa!" He knew that in another moment he would thrust his head beneath that rain of blows. Anguish! Anguish! He must escape!³

It is significant that David shrinks within himself and deadens his mind because his body won't deaden. Unlike Joyce's passage, where the body seems deadened by the observing intellect, the emphasis here is on the somatic core of experience, the most fundamental, preverbal, instinctual self-awareness. David is reduced to the circle of his immediate perception and sensation. Contrary to Joyce's passage, here sound (the father's voice) is transformed into sensation (the bite of the hanger).

³ *Call It Sleep* (New York: Avon, 1964) pp. 83–84.

His father's voice needs no narrative identification because it is presented from within the boy's perception, particularly in the opening phrase, where it appears without quotation marks. "Despair!" and "Anguish! Anguish! He must escape!" are articulations of inner sensation and impulse. The distance between the represented experience and the medium of representation is in this case minimized as far as language can permit, with the exception of the unnecessary third-person pronoun of the last enunciation.

I do not mean to suggest that Roth's language is not metaphorical or that it is devoid of poetic usage, far from it. But his similes—"like a cornered thing...as if all there were in the world...biting like flame"—all serve to isolate and intensify the experience; they do not elicit images that are as external to the event as Joyce's leaves. Robert Alter notes a distinctly Melvillian influence in the "cosmic sweep" of Roth's "explosive power of hyperbole that enlarges and violently transforms the experience it describes." We see such power in this passage's "splintering the brain into fragments of light," etc. For Alter this Melvillian cast is a unique trait of American literature, presenting "images of humanity facing the absolute ultimacy of existence."⁴ This ultimacy emerges in each of David's physical traumas—beatings, falling down stairs, and electrical shock—where we are shown the most primal seat of selfhood, awareness suspended between being and the void. Against this cosmic—or microcosmic—background, we view the world from the perspective of the boy's unrelenting effort to integrate his emerging ego in a confusing and hostile environment. David's every perception and experience derive meaning from the sole end of self-understanding imposed upon him as a human being. This makes him seem in a sense heroic beyond his years, but then, he is simply performing the task of self-integration accomplished by all children. Roth's genius lies in representing childhood as a metaphysical drama believably focalized in an everyday boy.

As I've suggested, *Call It Sleep* is formally unlike *A Portrait* inasmuch as it does not suggest itself as a *kunstlerroman*. There is little temptation, as there is in Joyce's novel, to read the story as that of the coming-to-be of the artistic sensibility that eventually produced the book we're reading. On the other hand, though, the story does culminate with the

⁴ Robert Alter, "Awakenings," *New Republic*, January 25, 1988, pp. 33–37

protagonist attaining a new level of awareness or self-mastery, that is characterized by a newfound recognition of himself as a fashioner of images. In both novels this self-recognition is attained as the fruit of a concise spiritual evolution whose stages have comprised the plot. In Davey Shearl's case, his confused wish to follow the lesson of Isaiah, and literally see the light by means of contact with a third rail of the trolley system, leads to the book's culminating vision—from whence the title—as seen by the boy while recovering from the shock:

He might as well call it sleep. It was only toward sleep that every wink of the eyelids could strike a spark into the cloudy tinder of the dark, kindle out of shadowy corners of the bedroom such myriad and such vivid jets of images—of the glint on tilted beards, of the uneven shine on roller skates, of the dry light on grey stone stoops, of the tapering glitter of rails, of the oily sheen on the night-smooth rivers, of the glow on thin blonde hair, red faces, of the glow on the outstretched, open palms of the legions upon legions of hands hurtling toward him. We might as well call it sleep. It was only toward sleep that ears had power to cull again and reassemble the shrill cry, the hoarse voice, the scream of fear, the bells, the thick-breathing, the roar of crowds and all sounds that lay fermenting in the vats of silence and the past. It was only toward sleep one knew himself still lying on the cobbles, felt the cobbles under him like the black foam, the perpetual blur of shod and running feet, the broken shoes, new shoes, stubby, pointed, caked, polished, buniony, pavement-beveled, lumpish, under skirts, under trousers, shoes, over one and through one, and feel them all and feel, not pain, not terror, but the strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence. One might as well call it sleep. He shut his eyes.⁵

It is significant that the state David describes is not sleep itself, but near-sleep, the dreamy semiconsciousness between sleeping and waking when the conscious mind is aware of the associative imagery of the unconscious. This is the state of Stephen Dedalus, whose soul is "waking slowly, fearing to wake wholly," when he is inspired to compose his villanelle in the night.⁶ Toward sleep, then, David finds the power to kindle images, cull and reassemble sounds, and know himself in memory. This ability corresponds to Stephen's ideal of "disentangling the subtle soul of the image from its defining circumstances."

We might recall that David's first image-making experience, the vision of his father wielding a hammer, occurred when the vision "entered his sleep." With pain and terror overcome, however, David's image-cultivating is no longer governed by panic and dread, but by

⁵ Op. cit., p. 441.

⁶ Incidentally, it is also the state in which Marcel, Proust's narrator begins *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and his half-waking reflections serve as both catalyst and paradigm of the past—recapturing endeavor.

aesthetic pleasure. The images are no longer imposed upon his threatened ego as symbols of annihilation; they are rather sought out in calm self-recognition. The crowd is now turned toward him, not toward his father, as in the fearful vision. The people are no longer "stretched like white cobbles to the end of the world"; it is David who is stretched out on the cobbles, with the people running to his aid. The outstretched palms of the legions are reminiscent of the extended arms of roads and ships in one of Stephen's last diary entries, whose voices say to him: "We are your kinsmen." The sense of anticipation and self-possession is similar in the two cases, but Stephen is running away from his people, whereas David's people are running to him.

Moving toward sleep is an act of self-possession for David. In reassembling his experience from the vats of the past in the form of the impressions his psyche presents to his watchful awareness, he finds the "strange triumph and, acquiescence" of meaning, of giving shape to his identity as he knows himself within and as he fits into the world. In "sleep," at last, he comes to know himself, as Stephen would say, in relation to himself and in relation to others. It matters little that becoming an artist is not David's goal; what he attains is the requisite ability of a Stephen, but David's life in images does not need to be validated by means of external representation. For an immigrant boy in the melting pot, securing a stable sense of self and community is redemption enough.

While *Call It Sleep's* tight focalization on the awareness of the protagonist through an evolution of conscience calls to mind *A Portrait* far more than any other of Joyce's works, there is also a distinctly Ulyssean resonance in the novel, and one that seems rather intentional at that. Roth does borrow techniques from Joyce's aim of representing as nearly as possible the actuality of Dublin on a specific day, and he stops short of the exhaustive research into the veritable details of the locale in question, but he does bring the area within earshot of David's the third-rail shock to life to a degree unseen elsewhere in the novel, calling to mind the "Wandering Rocks," "Cyclops," and "Circe" chapters of *Ulysses*. With minimal narration, he introduces a host of figures and alternates their voices as we join their conversations or interior monologues in medias res. There is Bill Whitney, an aging warehouseman; Jim Haig, a British sailor scheming to open a fish-n-chips on Coney Island; the prostitutes Mimi and Mary; a group of Jewish card

players; an old peddler who implores the "founder of the universe" as he schleps his baby carriage full of pretzels; Motorman Dan MacIntyre and the passengers of his Tenth Street car, including a kind-faced American woman telling everyone about the accessibility of the Statue of Liberty ("You can go all the way up inside her for twenty-five cents"); and Callahan, the barkeep, and his customers, including one O'Toole, a self-aggrandizing blowhard straight out of "Cyclops" who combines the Citizen's stature and belligerence with the Nameless One's style of racontage ("So I says..."). Like the Nameless One, O'Toole knows the pain of urinating when afflicted with a "dose" ("I twisted all the pipes I wanna we'en I'm pissin!"). Roth succeeds in conveying the impression that each of these fragmented characterizations represents but a moment, to which we are privy, in the continuous narrative of the character's life. Each voice reveals part of an ongoing personal drama—accidents, abortions, loves lost and found, prejudices and petty vexations. All the while a communist speaker and the Salvation Army compete for the public's attention, representing the two poles of popular salvation, just as the ubiquitous vice-regal procession and Father Conmee represent the poles of Irish authority in "Wandering Rocks." Like Joyce, Roth portrays the urban scene via the diversity of its voices and the least common denominator of the motives and concerns they reveal. O'Toole and his motley court in Callahan's bar, in particular, suggest a tip of the cap to the Dubliner.

The disparate cast of the chapter finally becomes an "umbiliform" crowd—a community—when they are interrupted and united by David's "accident." Whitney throws down a broom from his warehouse, and O'Toole uses it to push David from the rail. As a policeman administers artificial respiration, members of the encircled crowd begin speaking to one another in a babel of dialects and degrees of broken English, like a haphazard village born of curiosity and compassion for the boy. In the urban American environment of competing ethnic groups, especially in the age of immigration Roth depicts, shared values and cultural identity are not assumed—they are not the background condition they would be in Dublin, for instance—but emerge only in crisis, and the question of community marks a particularly American aspect of the novel. Roth was anything but a believer in the solitary, defiant heroism of the artist. In a

1969 interview⁷ he expressed his belief that the individual disintegrates unless associated with some larger entity. In his childhood, Roth suffered a loss of community when his family moved from the Jewish Lower East Side to a mixed area of Harlem, causing him to become socially maladjusted and to reject his faith and customs. *Call It Sleep* is a recreation of the lost community. After writing it, however, Roth did not regain any sense of communal identity in American culture, he says, and was subsequently unable to write until the 1967 Israeli-Arab War gave him a sense of identification with a people:

If there is anything dramatic about all this, I suppose it can be explained as the way a fictioneer does things. Significant for me is that after this vast detour, the once-Orthodox Jewish boy has returned to his own Jewishness. I have reattached myself to part of what I had rejected in 1914.

Note that in this version of the apostasy, Roth lost his faith in 1914, in which case he obviously did so without the help of James Joyce, who was working on *A Portrait* and getting ready to flee Trieste at the time. And why, if one accepts my reading of *Call It Sleep* as at all accurate, should its author have any complaint against Joyce anyway? I hope I have at least strongly suggested that Roth learned lessons from *A Portrait* and surpassed it in some aspects, and that his Ulyssean echoes are nothing short of masterful, while remaining perfectly adapted to their uniquely American milieu. In short, Henry Roth of 1934 was an exceptionally talented writer of the post-Ulysses generation, who was thoroughly capable of assimilating state-of-the-art novelistic techniques while sacrificing nothing of his own originality. To fully understand—if such a thing were even possible—the doubtlessly complex issues that led Roth to abandon the field and take up waterfowl raising would demand a far longer journey into the man's psyche than this critic is prepared to make. What is clear, though, is that from the other side of the sixty-year self-imposed silence, Roth shouts back with increasing bitterness that Joyce somehow made him do it: a blame-laying unworthy of a man of his talent and seniority, and rendered that much more pathetic by the fact that he seems to confuse Joyce with Stephen Dedalus.

⁷ David Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 36 (1969), pp. 265–80.

The form of Roth's *magnum opus* is that of a fictionalized autobiography, with interpolated passages of first-person, present-time reflections by Roth's alter-ego and subject of the memoirs, Ira Stigman, and also his dialogues with his computer, Ecclesias. When these interpolations add the perspective of the aged author to the telling of the events of his youth, they occasionally reach high levels of the dual-perspective technique. But too often they seem gratuitous, the unedited ranting of a cranky, perhaps lonely man, with little relation to the narrative, and one's patience with the talking word processor grows shorter. One of the digressions is even taken up with a discussion of its own boredom potential as a provider of a break in the drama. Roth here joins the company of writers who prove my axiom that in the "postmodern" world, metatextuality is the refuge of the unimaginative. It is also in these authorial digressions that Roth has Ira vent his anger at his version of Joyce.

Roth begins his complaint in *Shifting Landscapes*, where he attributes to Joyce Stephen's famous assessment of history as that from which he was trying to awake, and goes on to suggest that in abandoning Ireland in favor of cosmopolitan society Joyce attained immobilization (p. 110), though it must be said that more writers than not would doubtlessly welcome the sort of "immobilization" that can produce *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*. Roth, by his admission, suffered from this problem until, by virtue of the Six-Day War, he became identified with Israel. He cites the necessity of combining his existing narrative and his feeling for Israel, since he cannot put aside his "overpowering attachment" for Israel and ignore the real world in favor of the character's world. He does not believe it possible to divorce the reality of the artist from the reality of his product. This, it turns out, is Joyce's great sin: to have ignored the World War I in his works. This critique would seem to demand that all artists occupy themselves exclusively with contemporary events, and sounds a lot like the old party line that was directed at Roth in the Thirties, come back through the back door as his own belief this time. Furthermore, says Roth (p. 194) Joyce ignored the Irish struggle for independence for the sake of something he was writing. Roth's critique leaves absolutely no room for Joyce's disdain for militant nationalism of any stripe, his rejection of the romanticist fantasies of the Celtic Revival, and not least his inability—as a man of conscience—to live with the social, intellectual,

and spiritual tyranny of obsessive Irish Catholicism. Indeed Roth takes all of this rather lightly, and shows not the slightest evidence of respect or even tolerance toward Joyce as a person capable of acting conscientiously, and even of paying a great price for his beliefs. No, the Joyce that Roth creates is merely a phantom constructed of all the most imbalanced traits of young Stephen. And what he offers as an antidote to artistic detachment is equally a phantom, namely his much trumpeted identification with Israel. I do not for a minute doubt the intensity of Roth's feeling, but what are we to make of this total identification with a homeland in which Roth spent a grand total of two months (p. 221), and whose language and culture he admittedly does not share (p. 229)? In practice, his combining of patriotic feeling and memorial narrative does not occur: the latter is merely interrupted by the present-time passages, in which he declares himself sympathetic to Israel.

In what sense, then, is Roth any less of an exile than Joyce? In effect, Israel is a non-issue; Roth's homeland is New York, and it is of New York that he writes. Like Joyce, he writes from memory about a past and place from which he is removed. Are we to suppose that James Joyce ever stopped feeling Irish, or identified with his place of origin? This would obviously fly in the face of the massive evidence of his entire written works. In what sense is Roth's commitment ("I daydream of Israel") to Israel superior to Joyce's long-distance Irishness? Joyce was at least engaged with Ireland as the subject of his art; Roth has no experience that would enable him to represent his "adopted" land. Again, it is old New York that is at issue, not Israel. The worst aspect of Roth's critique in *Shifting Landscapes* is that it apparently has no relationship to Joyce's actual work, but is based rather on what Roth imagines to be an attitude. He says that his negation of *Call It Sleep* and of the individual who fathered it took the form of a negation of Joyce, not of his virtuosity and innovations, but rather "the direction he faced" and "what proceeded from his monstrous detachment and artistic autonomy." Whatever these proceeds were, if they did not show up in Joyce's actual writing, then it's hard to know where Roth finds them, and indeed why they are any of his business. The fact is that James Joyce was, as Stanislaus Joyce tells us, capable of hating Ireland, with a hate born of frustrated love.⁸ This love of Ireland and its people—as well as his con-

⁸ Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper*. (New York: Viking, 1958), p. 228.

tempt—is quite evident in his painstaking realism of place, character and language. Henry Roth has an extraordinary ways to go before he could even begin to render such a service to Israel. One has only to compare Joyce's portrayal of the devotion for Parnell felt among his father's generation, for example, to Roth's entirely exterior view of a terrorist attack in Israel—which he hears about on the television news—to understand which of the two is more effectively engaged in history.

Roth's criticism takes some rather nasty and embarrassing *ad hominem* turns in both volumes of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. First of all he criticizes Joyce for not being redeemed by the selfless love of a wonderful woman, as he had the good fortune to be (we learn time and again). It's hard to understand why someone who has had such good fortune and has been so well loved cannot find it in himself to be a bit more magnanimous to the less fortunate, but Ira roundly assails Joyce for not escaping his monstrous ego (though I'd still like to know the grounds for this judgment), for marrying "a functional illiterate" and secondly for not elevating her to his level. From what Brenda Maddox tells us of Nora, I'm not at all sure she needed or wanted the elevating, thank you all the same, but that's not the main issue here. Notwithstanding the late Mrs. Roth's undoubted virtues, the goodness incarnate that we're given in the novel as Ira's wife is quite uninteresting and poorly drawn. It remains to be seen whether we will get his usual fine characterization once his memoir arrives at the point in his life where he met her, but in the meanwhile she remains a shadowy guardian angel, as lacking in substance as the mythical Israel and the phantom Ecclesiastes.

The major complaint about Joyce, once Roth gets down to it, seems to be that he lacks the latter's somewhat masochistic style of self-revelation, hiding instead behind the mask of artistic detachment. Joyce refuses to confront the "human element, the interchange, the unavoidable confrontation between man and man, man and woman, especially with regards to the latter as intellectual equals ... as well as amorousness for their sexual roles, without both of which true tenderness could not be felt, nor delineated. It is simply not the case that because one does not address these realities in Roth's maudlin way that one does not address them. To what recurrent theme do Bloom's thoughts turn time and again? To what is Molly assenting at the end of the book, having the last word? Of what is the whole of *Ulysses* and its June 16, 1904 date a memorial? As for Bloom, Roth finds that the sins of the father are visited

upon him: like Joyce, he suffers from a lack of proper identification with his people. He is merely a "nominal Jew," though I'd suggest it would be hard to find any other kind in a novel. In any case, Bloom is a Jew "without a memory, without wry anxiety, exilic insecurity, not merely oblivious of his heritage, but virtually devoid." He doesn't think of the Kishinev pogrom that took place the year before (though I don't see why he'd need to on any given day), he doesn't think of Dreyfus, he doesn't ask if the pork kidney is kosher, etc. etc. Well, let's see, Bloom has been baptized first Protestant and then Catholic, is the son of a gentile mother, was educated in the Irish schools, nonetheless feels estranged any number of times...but why even bother trying to defend against absurd charges? Roth calls Joyce's attempt to depict a Jew's consciousness "gall, insufferable egotism, and ignorance," and declares that Bloom should have run home to Molly for comfort after the Citizen run-in, even if she was busy cuckolding him. Ham...I don't recall Davey Shearl's father doing the same after his run-ins with his bosses, but never mind. The more devastating weakness in Roth's comment is that its essentialist premise would prohibit any artist from depicting anyone not of his own folk; he probably doesn't mean that this daring to depict consciousness applies only to Jewish subjects, does he?

The low point of Roth's anti-Joycean railing comes when he has first-person Ira accuse Joyce of the sin to which he, Ira, has confessed with some great fanfare and an excessive amount of pensive foreshadowing as he and the computer debate the merits and necessity of disclosure—namely sororal incest. The claim is that whereas Ira has been brutally frank in confessing his incest via the fictional surrogate, Joyce is guilty of covering up a similar relationship, thus again throwing his entire career under the shadow of dishonesty and bad faith, as opposed to the heroic Ira. The evidence for this charge? Joyce had a sister who entered a nunnery and never spoke a public word about her famous brother. May we all avoid conviction on such airy stuff as this. Truly, the ranting about Joyce is so nasty, mean-spirited, and illogical, that one is tempted to the conclusion that it is part of a characterization. It is after all, all delivered under the name of Ira Stigman, not Henry Roth. But if Roth intends such distance, it is indeed an anomaly in the work, which otherwise sticks quite close to the form of a similar fiction, that is one that flaunts its veneer of fiction and its status as a rendering of the veritable author's life. Besides, that would be a very poor and cowardly

cover for such a scathing critique, and would fly in the face of Roth's entire argument against detachment and in favor of honest engagement.

Let's see then, Roth has Ira condemn Joyce by turns for leaving Ireland, not being engaged in contemporary issues, not taking part in either Irish nationalism or the war of independence, not marrying a brighter woman and not educating her, espousing a doctrine of artistic autonomy, having a monstrous ego, using the metaphor of the artist standing in the wings paring his fingernails, daring to portray a Jew's consciousness, not making the Jew stereotypical enough, not depicting true love, not finding true love, not being loved as well as Henry Roth, "facing the wrong direction," and committing incest with his sister and not being man enough to own up to it, like Ira. A very curious bill of goods indeed, the absurdity of which is exceeded only by Roth's antidote for such artistic and ethical enormities. For Roth to write a straightforward fictionalized memoir would make him guilty of his cardinal sin of ignoring contemporary reality in favor of his own past. Therefore, he will intersperse in the tale passages that demonstrate his commitment to a country and people among whom he spent a grand total of two months in his eighty—some years, whose language and customs he does not share, and also give the proof of the transforming power of love. What this amounts to in practice is simply having the first—person alter ego commentator declare them to be so, and repeat the declaration as often as possible: I have a great attachment to Israel, I would be nowhere without my wife. Meanwhile, even though these two factors have transformed my life and made it possible for me to write again, prolifically, I will nonetheless continue to bitterly complain about the two factors that led me astray and robbed me of all the good I luckily rediscovered, namely my family's move to 115th Street—eighty years ago—and the artistic success of James Joyce. If only Roth would drop the pretense and realize that the fictionalized autobiography of Ira Stigman is a masterpiece on its own and doesn't need to be justified by the whining voice of the cranky writer and his inane electronic sidekick. The commentator's self—indulgent egoism exceeds that of Stephen Dedalus at his worst, and makes Joyce's doctrine of impersonality look freshly appealing. One wishes the old guy would go off in the wings and pare his nails for awhile, leaving the stage to the characters.

Quite obviously, Roth's Ira doth protest too much. The disproportion between the vehemence of the attacks and their lack of substance is far

too great for them to be taken seriously. What nerve does the reputation of Joyce rub against in Roth that it provokes such a howl? Could it really be as simple as a kind of professional jealousy? Is Henry Roth, despite his redemption of the career he abandoned and his eleventh-hour success (which, given the size of his unpublished manuscripts and the public's favor, would seemed destined to continue indefinitely), really searching desperately for a scapegoat to relieve himself of the burden of lost time? It is fair enough to decide that the self-involvement and single-minded pursuit of a literary goal of a James Joyce or a Marcel Proust are not in one's temperament, that one would rather sacrifice one's art for the humble joys of family and waterfowl, but is it then fair to turn around and blame one's early mentor for having made one do it? The absurdity of Roth's ambition is that he would redefine the tradition to which he belongs so as to expunge Joyce from it. Reluctant Freudian though I am, I must admit that this move has all the classic marks of an Oedipal dilemma, a would-be parricide.⁹ He wants not only to believe he's not the result of Joyce's influence, he wants Joyce never to have been. The paradox must be horrible: I owe my resurgent reputation to a novel written under the influence of Joyce, but I repudiate that influence and the man, and I know much better than he. How could everyone be so wrong? How can Joyce continue to enjoy a reputation for which I am better suited? To put it another way, it's as if Roth wants to make Joyce Ira's Buck Mulligan, that is the usurper. Such attitudes are like those that make Stephen Dedalus bitter and frustrated, but we are indulgent because of his youth; they sit much less well on someone old enough to have overcome a half-century's writer's block. Ironically, the writer who has the most to say, and has worked out in most detail the question of paternity both literal and artistic, and who has most generously repaid all literary influences is none other than James Joyce. Henry Roth should study him more carefully.

⁹ It is interesting, in this regard, that Ira virtually repudiates one of his sons in favor of the son's estranged spouse in Mt. ~~Morris~~ Park; the old incestuous urge dying hard?