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**Getting People Right. Getting Fiction Right:**

**Self-Fashioning, Fictionality, and Ethics in the Roth Books**

**Stefan Kjerkegaard**

On the basis of readings in several self-fashioning and thought-provoking novels by Philip Roth this article seeks to rethink a limited set of narratological core concepts such as fiction and fictionality in light of their treatment within recent theories on narrative communication by James Phelan (2011) and Richard Walsh (2007). I will argue in favor of a simpler and more rhetorical model than used by these two leading scholars within narratological studies. According to the definition employed in this essay, the self-fashioning novel uses autobiographical material and means with the intention of reaching specific aesthetic ends. These means might include the author’s name, as in autofiction, or other material like gender, correspondence in history, identity,

and so forth. Autofictional novels use and abuse the autobiographical contract where author, narrator and protagonist share the same name. Hence, some autofictions try to hide the fact that they are novels by assimilating autobiographical genres such as autobiography, confession, memoir and so forth, while others are in fact more or less autobiographies, but use rhetoric related to and imported from fiction.

I shall read Roth's novels consecutively, as gradually developing new understandings of reality and identity, and trace the intersections of aesthetics and ethics in Roth's body of works. For the most part, my focus will be on *The Facts. A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988) and *Operation Shylock. A Confession* (1993), two of the most ambiguous of the Roth Books with regard to their limits as works of art, their genre, and their use of autobiographical material. Employing James Phelan's distinction between ethics of telling and ethics of the told (Phelan 2007), I will argue that the uncompromising aesthetic of these two works, as well as those published immediately before and after them (*The Counterlife* [1986] and *American Pastoral* [1997]) is designed to transcend readers' initially negative moral judgment and lead them to a deeper kind of ethics, grounded in dialogue, discourse, and sociality as such. I will contrast Phelan's understanding of narrative ethics, as seen from the viewpoint of the literary work as an artifact with Judith Butler's thoughts on ethics and self-narration in *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

Richard Walsh's idea of fictionality plays an important part in the above-mentioned enterprise. Walsh understands fictionality as a rhetorical rather than an ontological quality (*The Rhetoric of Fictionality* 7). Walsh argues that whether you read a text as fictive or assume that a statement is fictional depends on relevance. What he wants to develop is not a theoretical discourse that removes the artistic enunciation from the world, or from referentiality altogether. On the contrary, to adopt a fictionality approach in relation to any kind of work or discourse is, in Walsh's view, to maximize relevance. The novelty of his theory is that it leads literature back to a simpler

rhetorical model – simpler than the ones developed within classic rhetorical narratology, for instance Seymour Chatman’s idea of an implied author and reader – and that it takes into account an always already communicative relationship between a sender and a receiver (empirical author and reader), and disengages the concept of fictionality from specific media and genre questions. The concept of fictionality can therefore be applied to literature as well as to everyday conversations or full-blown fictional narratives (Cf. “Ten Theses About Fictionality”). In Walsh’s words:

Fictionality is neither a boundary between worlds, nor a frame dissociating the author from the discourse, but a contextual assumption by the reader, prompted by the manifest information that the authorial discourse is offered as fiction. (36)

Walsh’s understanding of fictionality is compatible with a more discursive approach like Butler’s. I will use both to argue that Roth’s innovative late novels are not merely quixotic and playful metafiction, but serious attempts to tell us something about who we are and how reality works. Their innovation, to use Walsh’s words from *Novel Arguments*, “far from being a refusal of engagement, is an attempt to extend fiction’s capacity for thinking about the world” (18).

The second part of the article begins with remarks on how mediatization might influence literary readings and the literary system as such. Hjarvard defines mediatization, in a general sense, as the

process whereby societies to an increasing degree become dependent on the media and their logic. This process is characterized by a *duality*, in that the media have become *integrated* into the operations of other social institutions and cultural spheres, while also acquiring the status of social institutions *in their own right*. As a consequence, social interaction – within the respective institutions, between institutions, and in society at large – takes place via the media. (17)

Applied, specifically to literature, mediatization is the way that novels have grown conscious of themselves as a medium within a mediatic system (Jameson 162). At the same time, fictionality has become more visible to readers of literature, who have to adjust their way of reading to view fiction from a different rhetorical level. The background of mediatization can also be related to the field of media ecology. In *Writing Machines* (2002) Katherine Hayles maintains that the power of a media-specific analysis “comes from holding one term constant across media . . . and varying the media to explore how medium-specific possibilities and constraints shape texts” (31). Mediatization is especially relevant for novels like Roth’s in which authors deliberately fashion themselves by means of text and context. My initial premise for developing new methods for reading the Roth Books is that in the light of mediatization today, literary works must be understood as being read by actual readers within a rhetorical system in which authors are communicating intentionally for specific purposes and on the basis of specific occasions (see Phelan’s definition of narrative [“Rhetoric / Ethics” 203]). However, this occasion seems to be amplified when literature employs the rhetoric of fictionality. In most fiction, for instance, this occasion tends to be divided between the author’s purpose for writing the work and the narrator’s or character’s reason for telling the story. However, in the narratives by Roth that are the focus in the first part of the article, these two types of occasions coincide with or are played out against each other, thereby leaving the reader with a difficult task. The most adequate approach is still rhetorical, but one not limited to narrative fictions alone. Rather, we need a discursive approach that, as Paul Dawson recently put it, “acknowledges fictional narratives as public statements in a broader discursive formation” (104) and allows us to examine fictionality and factuality as rhetorical devices.

**Fiction and fiction fatigue: *The Facts. A Novelist’s Autobiography***

With these theoretical remarks and the preliminary framework at hand, I will turn to Roth's two novels, *The Facts. A Novelist's Autobiography* and *Operation Shylock. A Confession*. First a few words on the context of these two works. *The Facts* is a turning point in Roth's way of using a self-fashioning strategy. It begins and ends with letters from the real author Roth to his fictional alter ego Nathan Zuckerman and covers a more or less factual account of Roth's life before his breakthrough novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). Before *The Facts*, Roth used his alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, as a kind of fictive reflective instance in his authorship and also with respect to its celebrity status; for example in *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), Zuckerman becomes the victim of his own celebrity as the author of the sexually explicit novel *Carnovsky*, an obvious allusion to *Portnoy's Complaint*. But after *The Facts*, Nathan Zuckerman assumes a slightly different role in Roth's writing: as a secluded and omniscient narrator, he serves more of a narrating technique and an opportunity to foreground a particular story as, for instance, in *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Human Stain* (2000). Debra Shostak's comments on "Zuckerman's vanishing act [as] a structural metaphor for Roth's theme: the unreadable 'reality' of the visible world renders the perceiving subjects as fleeting as his object of perception" (37).

However, *The Facts* must be understood in relation to the previous work *The Counterlife*, a contradictory novel about Nathan Zuckerman and his brother Henry. It reflects people's fragmented lives and makes it impossible for readers to form a coherent story of the events told. In the penultimate chapter, when Henry cleans up the estate of his late brother, the famous writer Zuckerman, he comes upon a chapter from a yet unpublished novel. This chapter and another that Henry finds on the same occasion constitute the beginning and end of *The Counterlife*. In the concluding chapter

Everyone was identified by name . . . even Nathan who had never before written about himself *as himself*, appeared as Nathan, as "Zuckerman," though nearly

everything in the story was either an outright lie or a ridiculous travesty of the facts.

(226)

Furthermore, according to Henry, Nathan projected his own story onto Henry in the abandoned unfinished novel. In subsequent novels, Roth takes this indeterminable game of a somewhat coherent reality played out between the two brothers in *The Counterlife* to new heights and thereby widens the boundaries of fictionality beyond fiction.

At first *The Facts. A Novelist's Autobiography* looks like an autobiography, but several things point in other directions. For one, it resembles a novel since, curiously, its title includes the name of the genre. If it were a traditional autobiography, the primary title *The Facts* would be a pleonasm. With autobiographies, we are not supposed to question whether something is factual or not. The contract or “the pact,” to use Philippe Lejeune’s words, between the author of an autobiography and the readers is that it is all factual. As we enter the novel, we soon learn that these facts in the manuscript presumably sent from Roth to Nathan Zuckerman about the novelist’s life are bracketted by two letters: One from the author to Nathan Zuckerman and one from Zuckerman to the author. As readers of Roth’s earlier fiction, such as the preceding novel *The Counterlife*, we are familiar with Zuckerman as Roth’s alter ego, and we know that Zuckerman is a fictional character, who can have no acknowledged role in a traditional autobiography. The story that unfolds between the two letters is surprisingly mundane and not always in accordance with the life of Roth. For instance, while the name of Roth’s wife is not Josie but Margaret, the circumstances in which these two meet and the way she dies later on, are in agreement with the facts. David Gooblar concludes: “It would have seemed a conventional, almost boring, book from such a notoriously adventurous writer, had it not been for its prologue and epilogue” (33). The interest of the book is not the facts told—facts that both Roth and Zuckerman themselves dismiss as negligible--but the

way we enter and leave the autobiographical space through the letters between the author and his alter ego.

Given these complicating factors, we have to revise our conception of the book as an autobiography and accept it as a novel, but an unusual one. We could define it as autofiction, i.e., a novel that both uses and undermines the autobiographical contract as described by Lejeune above where author = narrator = protagonist: for although we do not read “novel” anywhere on the front cover, we immediately comprehend the work as fiction when we come upon Roth’s letter to Zuckerman prior to the prologue of the manuscript. In this first letter, Roth admits to suffering “fiction-fatigue” and introduces the manuscripts as embodying “[his] counterlife, the antidote and answer to all those fictions that culminated in the fiction of you [i.e., Zuckerman]” (6). He also alludes to the pitfalls of trying to write about facts: “Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imagining of the facts” (8). Zuckerman responds to the manuscript containing the story of the young Roth by calling it “steeped in the nice-guy side” (170) and suppressed by the facts. In other words, Roth does not manage to tell the truth, because he is not using fiction.

Zuckerman cuts to the bone of the problematics of factuality in autobiography:

The truth is that the facts are much more refractory and unmanageable and inconclusive, and can actually kill the very sort of inquiry that imagination opens up. Your work has always been to intertwine the facts with the imagination, but here you’re unintertwining them. (166)

Zuckerman also clarifies the difference between writing a novel and an autobiography:

What one chooses to reveal in fiction is governed by a motive fundamentally aesthetic; we judge the author of a novel by how well he or she tells the story. But we judge morally the author of an autobiography, whose governing motive is primarily ethical against aesthetic. How close is the narration to the truth? (163)



Roth needs Zuckerman, if he wants to tell the truth. He needs *fiction* in order to tell the truth. Facts are not enough and they are, incidentally, quite boring. What we can learn from this intentionally *failed* autobiography is that it *intends* to tell the truth, but that truth must sometimes be framed by fiction in order to come across as truth. The fictive correspondence between Roth and Zuckerman does not intend to corrupt the facts but to support them. Both an aesthetical and an ethical approach are needed here, if we remind ourselves of what Zuckerman writes above.

If we tackle the narrative with traditional narratological methods, we are bound to notice a good deal of unreliability in the novel. But how are we to judge unreliability? In relation to an implied author or to the empirical author? In other words, how can we keep fiction and non-fiction separate? Reading Roth's work as fiction means placing Roth and Zuckerman at the same diegetic level. Reading it as autobiography requires us to ignore Zuckerman's presence. Hence, the rhetoric initiated by the actual author is both fictional and non-fictional, and this rhetoric trumps both of the above readings in relation to relevance. The novel asks us to make sense of the truth *of* the fiction rather than the truth *in* the fiction. Paul de Man reminds us that both facts *and* fiction can be used rhetorically, at the same time. This does not mean that we cannot disentangle fact from fiction, or autobiography from fiction. It just means that the rhetoric of fiction is one approach among others in the entire rhetorical matrix of the work. Paul de Man, moreover, points to some crucial insights concerning the relation between rhetoric and autobiography, and between rhetoric and fictionality. When reading self-fashioning novels, we do well to remember de Man's admonishment that autobiography is also a "figure of reading" (921), one that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The rhetorical use of autobiographical material (or simply factuality) is an effective way of engaging the reader, since it invites us to judge the text within both an ethical and aesthetical frame at the same time. Autobiographical material often has a testimonial and therefore ethical appeal built into it, demanding someone who listens. This was suggested by Zuckerman in the quote mentioned just

above, but it is also an experience we can learn from the controversy about James Frey's book *A Million Little Pieces* (2003). If we read *A Million Little Pieces* as a partly fictionalized autobiography, perhaps even as an autofiction, we would not feel betrayed.

### **Operation Shylock**

Now, if we turn to *Operation Shylock. A Confession*, the questions of genre, fictionality, and truth become even more complicated. The protagonist and first-person narrator of the novel, a writer by the name of Philip Roth, prepares to travel to Jerusalem to interview the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld. Appelfeld calls Roth and says that a man who looks like the author and names himself "Philip Roth" uses the author's celebrity in Jerusalem to advocate for a new diaspora which seeks to return Israeli Jews to Europe, thus solving the "space problem" for both Jews and Palestinians. After arriving in Israel, the novel's narrator, Philip Roth, seeks out the impersonator who has appropriated both his identity and his sensual girlfriend, Jinx. The narrator ends up in a web of entanglements, which among other things involves the PLO and the Israeli intelligence service.

While in Israel, the protagonist attends the trial of accused Second World War criminal John Demjanjuk. These events are historical facts. In 1986 Demjanjuk was deported to Israel to stand trial for war crimes, after being identified by Holocaust survivors as "Ivan the Terrible," a notoriously cruel guard at the Treblinka extermination camp. Demjanjuk trial mirrors the novel's doppelgänger motif. Is Demjanjuk really Ivan the Terrible? And even if he was, is he now the same person as the person who committed the terrible crimes at Treblinka? Has he not changed, this peaceful family man from Cleveland, Ohio? Can people change the narrative about themselves? The narrator names his doppelgänger Moishe Pipik, Yiddish for Moses Bellybutton, and recognized within Roth circles as the author's childhood nickname. The name serves as Roth's self-ironic

commentary on the story as such, apparently an example of exceptional navel-gazing, being a story about not just about one, but three Philip Roths (two in the narrative plus the author behind it).

It is also noticeable that the first-person narrator, like the empirical Roth, is recovering from a devastating experience with the prescription drug Halcion. Both the reader and the narrator initially wonder if the doppelgänger could be just another drug-induced hallucination. We also wonder how and why Pipik vanishes in the narrative without further explanation. The intelligence mission, moreover, that the protagonist is involved in is like the title of the book called “Operation Shylock.” We hear rumors of a secret mission to Athens, yet never find out any details since both narrator and the empirical author choose to omit the last chapter. This is a decision that both Roths make, author and protagonist, after a meeting with a man named Smilesburger, a representative of Mossad, the Israeli Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, at the end of the novel.

*Operation Shylock*, if we are to believe the paratexts enclosing it, does not claim to be a novel; neither does it claim to belong to the category of *fiction*. Nevertheless, no skilled reader of literature would deny its very explicit use of fictionality or deny that it is in fact a *novel*, most likely an autofiction. Yet deciding that it is an autofiction does not necessarily help the reader much when trying to get a hold of the story on all levels. Unreliability, for instance, is not a feature confined to the novel. In an interview, Roth insisted that the novel is a confession, not a novel:

As you know, at the end of the book a Mossad operative made me realize it was in my interest to say this book was fiction. And I became quite convinced that it was in my interest to do that. So I added the note to the reader as I was asked to do. I’m just a good Mossadnik.<sup>1</sup>

No professional reader within the Western literary world would believe Roth when he claims to be a “good Mossadnik.” But the fact is that Roth did include a note to the reader, in the novel, simultaneously underscoring and undermining its fictionality of the book. The note reads:

This book is a work of fiction. The formal conversational exchange with Aharon Appelfeld quoted in chapter 3 and 4 first appeared in *The New York Times* on March 11, 1988; the verbatim minutes of the January 27, 1988, morning session of the trial of John Demjanjuk in Jerusalem District Court provided the courtroom exchanges quoted in chapter 9. Otherwise the names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. This confession is false. (399)

One can only wonder why a work of fiction would have to confess that it is fiction. In addition, a confession that confesses it is false seems often more interesting, rhetorically, than a confession which blindly believes in its truthfulness.<sup>2</sup> This uncertainty is perhaps the built-in premise that distinguishes the genre of autofiction from autobiography as such. As Roth scholar Debra Shostak observes:

[D]espite our convention that autobiography is a genre, that it is possible to write the self, the genre is effectively self-cancelling. There is no self to write, at least not as a stable entity with presence in the world that can be mirrored in language. (25)

Hence, Roth places his discourse in an effective feedback loop between fiction and non-fiction. As readers we are inclined to call this a novel that transcends its fictional limits. Philip Roth is of course very much aware of this transcending, and when asked, in the same interview, what is real, he answer:

The only thing I've told them is that when I wrote "Portnoy's Complaint," everybody was sure it was me, but I told them it wasn't. When I wrote the "Ghost Writer" everybody was sure it was me, but I said none of these things ever happened to me. I never met a girl who looked like Anne Frank. I didn't have some nice writer take me

into his house. I made it all up. And now when I tell the truth, they all insist that I made it up. I tell them, ‘Well, how can I make it up since you’ve always said I am incapable of making anything up?’ I can’t win!”<sup>3</sup>

Instead of trying to win an impossible game concerning what is real, Roth completely changes the rules, and perhaps even the game, in his late authorship. Fictionality is no longer restricted to a certain genre or medium, say the novel or book. It becomes a rhetorical strategy that can be used across genres and media, as in the interview above.

As critical readers, we might argue that Roth drops all ethics and evades moral responsibility, turning reality into a self-indulgent and postmodern game where no rules apply. However, as I shall demonstrate, Roth’s decision to use fictionality rhetorically, outside the confines of a novel, embraces a liberating aesthetic, designed to surpass readers’ initial moral objections, but only to point out an even deeper kind of ethics. Inspired by his own novel *The Counterlife*, Roth explores new dimensions of fictionality in *The Facts* and subsequent novels, using his own name and story more explicitly. He discovers how the boundaries of his literary work can be challenged in new ways by combining autobiographical material with fiction. Roth scholar David Goblar, drawing on archival research in the Library of Congress, concludes that we should read the novels following *The Counterlife* together, as a unit. Apparently, Roth had played with the idea of publishing four novels in one volume, entitled *Two-Faced* and containing: 1) *The Facts. A Novelist’s Autobiography*; 2) *Deception. A Novel*; 3) *Patrimony. A True Story*; and 4) *Duality. A Novelist’s Fantasy*, which provided early drafts of *Operation Shylock* (35). In this convincing study, Goblar shows how the “hallowed autonomy of the author [...] his apparent immunity from the ethics that handicap others – may be precisely the target of these four books’ tangled representations of the ethical dilemmas of writing” (50). These fictional works do not simply continue the pattern for which Roth has been taken to task previously, namely “probing the

permeability of the borders between fact and fiction, exploring the ways in which non-fiction may be just as unreliable a representation of reality as fiction, and playing games with the readers' expectations of divulgence" (Gooblar 34). Instead, Roth is challenging himself as author through autobiographical experiments that transcends the border of fiction and hence the idea that facts determine fiction. In a way what he is doing in these works is upping the ante. The Philip of the novel *Deception* explains this in a way which I find telling:

I portray myself as implicated because it is not enough just to be present. That's not the way I go about it. To compromise some "character" doesn't get me where I want to be. What heats things up is compromising me. It kind of makes the indictment juicier, besmirching myself. (183-184)

*Operation Shylock* intensifies this compromising game. At the end, the first-person narrator Philip Roth asks himself a question, which offers a starting point for examining how these novels investigate new paths of narrative. The narrator repeats, almost like a credo, the sentence: "Nothing need hide itself in fiction," but then he adds "but are there no limits where there's no disguise?" (377).

It would be hubris to claim that I, or anyone, can unequivocally answer this question; still, the question that I would like to offer is that there *are* limits, even if a writer like Roth tests them emphatically. One of the main topics Roth explores is that of identity, but the insight he comes to is that self-fashioning does not work out as we usually imagine it. Zuckerman puts the uncertain merits of self-fashioning well in a letter in the final chapter of *The Counterlife*, although he subsequently moderates this statement somewhat:

Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as *being oneself*. . . It's *all* impersonation – in the absence of a self, one impersonates

selves, and after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through. (319-320)

This comment suggests that identity construction is not immune to fictionality (see also Shostak, “Fictions of Self-Exposure”). To some degree, all autobiography is subject to invention. Yet this does not necessarily constitute ethical and moral freewheeling. The opposite could be argued: That construing our selves is imbued with an ethical obligation, which is based on a dialogical approach toward reality.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Judith Butler tries to answer the following question: “Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?” (19). Butler pursues an answer to this question by bringing diverse thinkers such as Foucault, Adorno, Levinas, and Laplanche together. She begins with the premise that language is not merely a tool we use, but a discursive structure humans are born into. To give an account of oneself to another exposes a constitutive structure of address that underlies all account-giving. Thus Butler argues that ethics are necessarily social, and manifested dialogically in our exposure toward others, not in self-identity. In other words, awareness of our incompleteness, rather than a coherent understanding of identity, constitutes the grounds of ethical self-construction. Autonomy of the self is possible only as a *dispossession* from ourselves in relation to the other. As Butler explains: “It is only in dispossession that I can and do provide any account of myself” (37). Since this dispossession makes it possible to explain ourselves, Butler calls for humility toward our own opacity, and for mutual recognition of the opacity of ourselves and others. We may not be able to give a true account of ourselves, but that is the only responsible thing to do anyway:

The “I” can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have

been present, which are prior to one's own emergence as a subject who can know, and so constitute a set of origins that one can narrate only at the expense of authoritative knowledge. Narration is surely possible under such circumstances, but it is . . . fabulous. Fictional narration in general requires no referent to work as a narrative and we might say that the irrecoverability and foreclosure of the referent is the very condition of possibility for an account of myself, if that account is to take narrative form. The irrecoverability of an original referent does not destroy narrative; it produces it "in a fictional direction," as Lacan would say. (37)

According to Butler fictionality adds coherency to narratives. Paradoxically, when we introduce an original referent, such as a flesh and blood person, narrative coherence becomes more difficult but no less pressing. The irrecoverability of an original referent does not destroy the narrative, but reinforces a special moral obligation to tell it. To be responsible, then, is to try to give an account of your self, no matter how incoherent the narrative may be.

Adapted to narratological terms, Butler tells us that none of us are sovereign authors and that we have no control over other people's stories. With regard to Roth's autobiographical novels, his message is that we are all *implied* authors, each trying to live our counter lives as well as possible by finding the way that "best gets one through." When we read Roth's books in sequence, as gradually developing new understandings of identity that require the adjustment of aesthetic measures, Zuckerman's words in the 1997 novel *American Pastoral* provide an important clue:

And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of *other people*, which gets bled of the significance we think it has and takes instead a significance that is ludicrous, so ill-equipped are we to envision one another's interior workings and invisible aims? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing



that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that – well, lucky you. (35)

Getting people wrong need not be gloomy fact; it can, as implied in the quote, offer opportunities for trying to get people right, and thereby acknowledging their opacity as well as our own.

Zuckerman's recognition comes with its obligations and entrenched ethics, and these surface not only within the occasions provided by Roth's fictional universe, but also within the empirical author's occasion of writing. As a result, in Roth's case what James Phelan calls the ethics of the telling differs radically from the ethics of the told. I am aware that I am citing Zuckerman to explain Roth; but if Roth, like Zuckerman, didn't believe in the chance of getting people right, why bother keep on writing books? Roth's later novels offer the obvious answer: Because getting people right is the quixotic business of literature.

In *Operation Shylock* Roth goes to Israel because he is going to conduct an interview with the author and Holocaust survivor Aharon Appelfeld. The interview figured in *London Review of Books* in 1988 and is also reproduced in the novel. Here Appelfeld states that he tried to write the "story of his life" several times, but always in vain. He wanted to be faithful to reality and what really happened, but the story that emerged always proved to be a weak scaffolding. He therefore concludes that the things that are most true are easily falsified and elaborate this statement with the following paragraph:

Reality, as you know, is always stronger than the human imagination. Not only that, reality can permit itself to be unbelievable, inexplicable, out of all proportion. The created work, to my regret, cannot permit itself all that. The reality of the Holocaust surpassed any imagination. If I remained true to the facts, no one would believe me. But the moment I chose a girl, a little older than I was at that time, I removed “the story of my life” from the mighty grip of memory and gave it over to the creative laboratory. There memory is not the only proprietor. There one needs a causal explanation, a thread to tie things together. The exceptional is permissible only if it is part of an overall structure and contributes to its understanding. I had to remove those parts which were unbelievable from “the story of my life” and present a more credible version. (n. pag.)

*Operation Shylock* tries unsuccessfully to challenge this view by being unbelievable, inexplicable, out of proportion, in short, by being in accordance with reality as described by Appelfeld. We see this in the novel when the above interview is followed by a highly fictional letter from the fake Philip Roth (Pipik) to the narrator Philip Roth.<sup>4</sup> So the lesson of Roth’s most daring autobiographical writing is: Reality *can* be represented if it is represented by features that defy fictional plausibility: lack of structure, purpose, logic, causality, etc. Such a strategy, however, can give us access to the exceptional, not only by creating alternative worlds, but by extending, subtracting, adding chimeric and fictional entities to reality. We need fictionality to represent reality, precisely because reality *is* unrealistic.

In Roth’s sense, then, fictionality is not only a mirroring of reality; it is a privileged dialogue between the realities that constitute our common reality. I am therefore in agreement with Shostak that “Roth seems to view the enterprise of fiction-making as a multidimensional and many-voiced dialogue” (*Countertexts, Counterlives* 3). Continued throughout Roth’s novels, between Roth and

himself and his more or less fictive avatars, this dialogue is ultimately between realities *on* reality. Fictionality facilitates this dialogue. Adopting Bakhtin's observation about dialogism in the novel, we might say that the rhetoric of fictionality facilitates a dialogical structure that can override and be used beyond fiction. Here I slightly disagree with Richard Walsh, who emphasizes the reader's role in the rhetoric of fictionality without considering the theoretical implications of doing so. In my view it is actually the sender who frames his or her discourse, sometimes as unambiguous (generic) fiction, sometimes ambiguously about its status as fiction. The potential dialogue that the rhetoric of fictionality can open up might be one of the main reasons for the highly nuanced communication models concerning fiction developed by for instance Seymour Chatman (1978: 151).

Although my reasoning is very close to Aristotle's appraisal of poetry as more philosophical and universal than history (81), there is still a difference. Using fictionality as a dialogical strategy in search of an adequate representation of reality and of the self does not imply aiming at a universal truth, rather it means adjusting to the brutal facts of reality by showing alternatives, counterlives, all of us as possible characters and implied authors. In this sense the alter ego Zuckerman is no more "alter" than Roth, when he shows up in a literary work. After the Roth Books, his most explicit autobiographical period, Roth returns to generic fiction. For despite the obvious relation to postmodernism and metafiction of the subsequent novels, there is as well a certain kind of verisimilitude.<sup>5</sup> This is the main reason why Roth still needs Zuckerman as a narrator *and* character *in* the story. Roth needs his character-narrator precisely to create verisimilitude, to facilitate the dialogue as precisely as possible. But the character-narrator does a lot of things which a normal human being is not capable of, so despite the verisimilitude the narrating is often unnatural, but in a discreet way (Iversen et al.). These shifts in the narrating mode when Zuckerman suddenly becomes omniscient are apparent to only the most careful readers. A stunning and significant example of such "unnatural" narration is in *American Pastoral*. At the

beginning of the novel, Zuckerman is dancing at a reunion party, while thinking of the Swede Lebov, the protagonist of the story that we are about to hear. Up until now in the narrative, Zuckerman has not shown extraordinary skills or abilities to read other people's minds, but suddenly, out of the blue, the story of Swede Lebov begins:

To the honeysweet strains of "Dream", I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion, and I dreamed . . . I dreamed a realistic chronicle. I began gazing into his life – not his life as a god or a demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man – and inexplicably, which is to say lo and behold, I found him in Deal, New Jersey, at the seaside cottage, the summer his daughter was eleven [...]. (89)

But Zuckerman is not the only one to engage in such storytelling; in *Operation Shylock* Philip Roth, the narrator, is speaking of Pipik, who suddenly disappears from the story, but still plagues his thoughts: "I needed a demise for him neither more nor less incredible than everything else about the lie that he was, needed it so as to proceed *as if* I had been delivered from his interference for good and it was safe to write truthfully of what had happened, without my having to fear that publishing my book would provoke a visitation a lot more terrible for me than his aborted Jerusalem debut. I came up with this. I imagined a letter from Jinx . . ." (*Operation Shylock* 362), and then the story continues *as if* this episode is not based on "as if." Zuckerman also has some thoughts on the protagonist in *I Married a Communist* Ira Ringold, whose retreat to a shack resembles Roth's own life and also his way of narrating his late books: "The palliative of the primitive hut. The place where you're stripped back to essentials, to which you return – even if it happens not to be where you came from – to decontaminate and absolve yourself of the striving. The place where you disrobe, molt it all, the uniforms you've worn and the costumes you've gotten into" (72).

Zuckerman compares this retreat to the Eastern philosophical concept of the aging man who leaves

for the woods, “receding from the agitation of the autobiographical,” and, becalmed, “enters into the competition with death, drawn down into austerity, the final business” (*I Married a Communist*, 72).

These examples indicate an ethics of telling that, in Roth’s late novels, overrides the ethics of the told. Such uncompromising self-scrutiny leads to a different type of fiction and a different approach to the use of fictionality as a rhetorical resource. Roth arrived at a more uncompromising use of the fictitious for the benefit of narratives in which fiction is not the end, but the means to situate and tell his own narrative right as well – also when it happens in generic fictions. This ethic of telling overrides all kinds of ethics of the told, including ethics of the told that transcend the novel, even what Phelan calls “default ethics of the telling in literary narrative since modernism” (“Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative 67). The experience Roth gets at with *Operation Shylock* and his other Roth Books is that with his own “self” as original referent, to use Butler’s term, in an ethics of the told, he can expand the narrative boundaries and designate the ethics of telling to trump “the story of our lives”. Nothing needs to hide itself in fiction, neither the author and the reality he stems from, nor the fictionality of the narrating act.

What these books are telling us is that the “word people” Zuckerman talks about above are in fact closer to the real thing. Our lives and the texts that cover them (autobiographies and confessions, for instance) must always be seen in relation to counterlives and, not least, countertexts. What if these countertexts in fact *are* literature *per se*? If this is so, we may think that Philip Roth really is a character, but so are you and I. Consequently, it is possible to imagine that seeing people, including ourselves, as characters may be the closest we will ever come to getting people right, a conclusion that might be sad for life, but is a victory for literature. Leland de la Durantaye claims that “[p]utting the private lives of *real people* on display is surely different to displaying the private lives of *fictional characters* like the ones he names” (326). This he asserts in

relation to an interview with Roth, where Roth says: “Privacy is the domain of the novelist. The invasion of their privacy accounts for much of our interest in Emma Bovary, in Anna Karenina, in Raskolnikov and Lord Jim. The serious, merciless invasion of privacy is at the heart of the fiction we value most highly” (Searles 200). Although I agree with Durantaye that it matters whether a character is invented out of pure fantasy or built upon a factual person situated in history, I still maintain that an invasion of privacy demands invention and, therefore, use of fictionality. Hence, the question of ethics versus aesthetics in relation to fiction and non-fiction must be posed in a slightly different way, which is what I have been seeking to do in this article.

### **Adjusting methods towards fiction in a mediatised time**

As I have demonstrated above, Roth’s self-fashioning novels challenge our usual way of comprehending narratives. The nature of these narratives often exceeds the boundary between fiction and non-fiction in ways that make it necessary to resort to alternative approaches. In order to authorize ourselves as readers, we often need to accept invitations to read some passages, or even entire sections of a narrative, as fictional and others as non-fictional. This leads to readings that must try to sort themselves out in relation to the shifting border between aesthetics and ethics. These ambivalences towards fiction are, of course, an essential aspect of the genre in its historical development. Catherine Gallagher points to the paradox that as “the novel distinguished itself through fictionality, its fictionality also differentiated itself from previous incredible forms.” Hence the novel from its very beginning “slowly opens the conceptual space of fictionality in the process of seeming to narrow its practice” (340). Roth’s novels might be said to take this paradox towards its culmination and, thus, the novel towards its end, but let me briefly comment on that.

I think that the idea of literature, specifically the novel, as an autonomous product is very hard to maintain in today's mediatized society. We often simply treat novels differently than we used to, e.g. reading them in a more "straightforward" fashion as a kind of communication with the obvious sender, an author (see Dawson 2012). The idea of "the literary work" is something we bring into our reading, but only in order to maintain focus. At closer view it does not exist, at least not materially. In my readings above I for instance draw on a lot of discursive material which is not included in the books, but I would still claim that this material is a vital part of the the literary work as such. The reason why we see this difference between book and literary work must also be found within the idea of mediatization. Literature's familiar relation to the book medium has in our time of new media become much more unfamiliar. Literature today in short also happens outside the book.

Novels and literature respond to this change by adapting strategies that challenge "straightforward" readings and call for new methods of interpretation. For example, Susan Lanser, in her recent article "The 'I' of The Beholder" (2005), describes a way of reading that is refreshingly obvious and forthright. Her premise is that a number of theories have failed to adequately describe the difference between fiction and autobiographical literature, and she insists that an essentialist view which uses a categorical either/or distinction – either it is referential or not – simply does not hold. She then proposes a convention-based reading. The question is not *whether* there is unauthorized traffic between a fictional discourse and an autobiographical referential discourse, but under which circumstances it takes place, that is *when* such traffic actually happens. Her starting point is that it happens most of the time when we are reading. Even in generic fictional texts<sup>6</sup> readers assume that certain statements are in fact autobiographical. Her proposal for a more sufficient and pragmatic method of description is a continuous scale between attachment and detachment to the author. Some genres are typically more attached than others. Lanser's argument

relies on a certain background knowledge that the reader must have in order to *attach* or *detach* the reading of a text. Yet this background knowledge cannot be the same at all times. It must be changeable. In other words, the mediatization of our society must be considered a determining factor in relation to how much and which kinds of information a reader might acquire about the author before reading a work. In Roth's example the attachment is vital and an intentional aesthetic strategy, which informs our way of reading literature; and conversely a strategy that informs and forms the shapes of his literature.

My thinking on this point is not new but corresponds to what the Russian formalist Boris Tomaševskij calls *legend* in his classic article "Literature and Biography":

we must consider how the poet's biography operates in the reader's consciousness.

Here we shall not regard "biography" as a self-sufficient class of historical writing (...); instead we shall consider the "literary functions" of biography as the traditional concomitant of artistic work." (82)

However, I would argue that the process of mediatization supports this biographical concomitant of artistic work in a rather drastic way, even to the extent that in some cases, for instance in autofiction, literary form is also the product of a mediatized society. One could of course argue that Tomaševskij and the examples from Roth used above do not belong to our current time of new media. Roth's authorship, however, demonstrates a more general point. Starting with his scandalous breakthrough novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Roth's oeuvre anticipated the continually intensifying mediatization of the literary system. In this connection, in his study on literary celebrity, Joe Moran concludes:

It is clear that Roth's explorations into the nature of fame and his resulting experiments with conjectural autobiography, although they may have provided him with a way of writing about and coming to terms with his celebrity, have only reproduced that celebrity. (115)



This reproduction of the author as celebrity – as a *brand* – is now a common strategy among contemporary writers and publishers that often affects the intentional aesthetic choices behind a work, partly because it helps the book sell and attracts attention to the author, partly because it investigates and uses the aesthetic conditions influenced by new media logics in our mediatized society. Today authors better have a self-fashioning strategy, and perhaps this goes for all of us, that we often install ourselves as authors or spin doctors in relation to the narrative of our lives with the possible danger of over-reflection and lack of spontaneity that implies.

Roth’s oeuvre is of course an illustrative example of these points, but also of how to avoid being too much of a spin doctor by trying to put one’s narrative, the author’s brand, at risk. You could say that Roth, aesthetically speaking, forms and informs his writing in response to this mediatization and different kinds of media logics. He uses the fact that his readers regard him as a self-fashioning writer strategically in his books. Seen from the inside of his literary work, Roth could be said to extend the play of the implied author to such a degree as to encompass the narratives outside of his books. But the simpler solution is to say that we in fact have a real author communicating with a real audience, sometimes by means of fiction, sometimes not. I would therefore propose that we revise James Phelan’s latest model of narrative communication (2011) by incorporating the consequences of this reasoning. It looks like this:

REVISED CHART OF VARIABLES IN NARRATIVE COMMUNICATION

		Fictionality /Factuality	
Implied Author		Resources	Actual Audience
(outside the text; in history; occasion of writing)		Occasion Structure / Gaps Character(s) FID Narratee / Narrative	(rhetorical readers; in history; occasion of reading)

		Audience Authorial Audience Etc.		
		<i>Paratext, genre, medium</i>		

I have simplified Phelan's model by adjusting the chart in two fundamental ways. Firstly, do we really need to discern between characters and narrators? Inspired by Richard Walsh and instructed by Roth's late novels, I would claim that either we have the voice of the empirical author, or it is a character speaking. Phelan's chart arises out of the excellent question of why characters are not a part of the usual narratological communication models, and he blames the story-discourse distinction, and, if indirectly, Chatman's idea of unmediated transmission in narratives. He then proposes three channels of mediated communication: author-narrator-audience, author-character-audience, and then a third channel of narrative structure in which "the author skips over both the narrator and the characters in order to communicate to the audience through that structure" (66). Though I agree with Phelan's fundamental claims that narrative is about a specific somebody telling something to somebody else for some purpose, and also that ethics is an integral part of this rhetoric (57), I like to propose simplifying the model by omitting narrators. Secondly and much more importantly: Phelan does not really dive into the question of fiction and non-fiction in his article. It is unclear whether this distinction makes a difference in relation to the chart; that is whether we should consider it as implied in the chart, surrounding it or something completely different. However, one could add another thing to the chart that could possibly solve this hesitation by Phelan, namely fictionality, which in my opinion must be understood as one of several of the rhetorical devices at the author's disposal, that is, not an entirely fixed frame encircling the communication system of narrative in literature, but rather a rhetoric, although a privileged and

partly framing rhetoric, which can be used regardless of genre and medium. This, however, would entail that we extend the use of the chart by saying that the middle column is not only textually based but also applies to non-textual narratives as those Roth launches in interviews on his books. Indeed, this would in fact also be acknowledging one of Phelan's other main claims in his 2011-text, namely that "literary communication is an event rather than a structure" (59). What's left at the author's disposal is different ways of mediation in a hierarchical rhetorical order: fictionality, factuality and other narrative tools such as a certain structure, voice, characters, FID etc. To examine a narrative in a rhetorical way, we must bring forward the resources that are essential to look at in relation to the narrative. The hierarchy will be different in each case and we'll have to acknowledge that the border of the literary work or narrative text will never be entirely fixed.

First and foremost, my proposed theory describes how fictionality can be used as a highly developed communicative resource which both the author and the reader can explore *together*. It is crucial that we understand this exploration from a dialogical perspective that takes into account that fiction is something which happens between a sender and a receiver, or in Richard Walsh's words: "Fictional narrative is a communicative gesture, the rhetorical force of which attaches to the process rather than to the substance of a representational product: acts of fiction are not accounts of imagined worlds, but imaginings" (146). The plural here is essential. By conceptualizing literature within the rhetoric of fictionality we do not abolish the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. Walsh's position, rather than being pan fictional as suggested recently by Brian Richardson (2011), locates the distinction elsewhere, in a place which is ultimately rhetorical instead of ontological or epistemological. Nevertheless, when comparing Walsh and Richardson, it is peculiar that Walsh only deals with generic fictions but still develops a theory which, in my view, can handle works that combine fictional and non-fictional elements; while Richardson deals with works that intersect the boundary, but still advocates for the exclusively fictional approach: Richardson talks about

“intrusions” (77) into the fictional world. Yet when it comes to experimental and self-fashioning novels, there may not be a fictional world to intrude upon in the sense Richardson implies.

I am not claiming that my revision of Phelan’s model of fictionality as rhetoric can solve all the problems posed by playful narratives and novels like autofictions. Such challenges will have to be approached, individually, from one instance to another, before we can gain a clearer sense of how fictionality is applied, and what kind of dimensions and values the rhetoric of fictionality offers. What we can learn by reading autofictions is that telling the truth doesn’t mean telling it without fictional means. As I proposed in the first part of this article, sometimes we are better off dealing with the truth *of* fiction rather than the truth *in* fiction. Secondly and more generally: Self-fashioning novels do not only contest our idea of the author, but also of the role of the reader. Blending Phelan’s and Walsh’s methods, as I have sought to do, is difficult because they approach the literary work from opposite directions. In “Rhetoric, Ethics, and Narrative,” Phelan writes: “rhetorical literary ethics seeks to identify the ethical dimension of any literary communication by working *from the inside out rather than from the outside in*” (57, my emphasis). Walsh, by contrast, approaches the literary work from the outside in, that is from context to fiction.

Both methods have clear strengths. Phelan’s readings pays attention to the literary works as aesthetic objects, while Walsh’s super-rhetorical position, more rhetorical than rhetorical narratology itself, explains how the words in a literary work first and foremost are the author’s – not the narrator’s or the implied author’s. So if Phelan ignores real authors communication in favor of the rhetoric of the literary work, Walsh ignores the benefits that come with close reading, the aesthetic refinements of a decontextualized reading and in general looking at narratives in the literary work as textually based and bounded. Both Walsh and Phelan, however, struggle with a seemingly paradoxically concept of fiction that, as in Roth’s late novels, seems to be severed from its usual media-specific boundedness, and informed by this knowledge they both seek an alternative

approach toward narratives in general in which it is impossible to ignore both real authors, real readers and real fiction.

My theoretical contribution in this essay in continuation of the readings in the Roth books therefore has shown that we might profit from rhetorical simplicity, when reading highly complex novels such as autofictions, which uses both fictive and non-fictive elements. This simplicity has the advantage of not being caught within ontological fallacies when reading and thinking about the relation between narrative and fiction, and, in addition, that a message from these complex novels in fact can be deduced by a reader. However, and admittedly, the rhetorical simplicity and strength is gained somewhat at the expense of close reading and the literary work as a self-contained and self-referential aesthetic object. Hence, the challenge for literary studies in the future is perhaps not so much to develop even more rhetorical models, but rather to combine the rhetorical reading, not just with the features of the literary work, but also with the idea of art.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, March 9, 1993 (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-double.html>).

<sup>2</sup> Brauner makes a convincing reading of this note as only referring to itself and not the whole narrative (96), which I will not go into here, just as I will not comment on the preface, where Roth tries to establish an authentic framework for the story.

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, March 9, 1993 (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-double.html>)

<sup>4</sup> I have deleted this footnote.

<sup>5</sup> I agree with Richard Walsh when he describes metafiction as “all about connection, not solipsism” (*Novel Arguments* 42). At least that would be my answer to those who would claim that Roth’s metafiction is solipsistic.

<sup>6</sup> Generic fiction is defined in relation to the medium or genre in question, for instance a novel whose fiction begins, as anticipated, on the first page.

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