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THE GOLDEN CRADLE: PHILIP ROTH'S REVISION OF  
THE GOLDEN BOUGH TRADITION

Philip Roth's search for adequate artistic modes of expression and technical solutions often imposes the parallel discussion of stereotypes, of the foundations of contemporary theoretical, scientific or technical developments and his fictional character's search for freedom.

This authorial attitude makes possible the centrality of the conflict between authority and freedom both at the level of the plot and at a fictionally theoretical level. In one of the American writer's best known early novels, in *Portnoy's Complaint* the fictional characters' search for freedom directs attention to the relationship between individual freedom and Freudian fiction, but also demonstrates the inadequacy of art, or the aesthetic in solving life's problems even when the existential is declared fictional. Most of the characters of his early fiction are victims of their indiscriminate admiration of art, but for Nathan Zuckerman, an artist figure who has an extremely long career in Philip Roth's books 'high art' serves as a cradle.

This is so because the contemporary American novelist is convinced that art like magic in general is of great help for those who understand it but is a great danger for those who misinterpret it. Yet, in Philip Roth's interpretation art is mainly important because it can provide the human intellect and the ingenious individual with meaningful and valuable experiences. On the other hand art can imprison the undeserving. Nathan Zuckerman transforms the golden bars, which exasperate David Kepesh and Peter Tarnopol into elements of a golden cradle. In this paper I intend to discuss the

sources of Nathan Zuckerman's irreverence, his manipulation of structure, form and moral principles on the basis of three excellent and extremely controversial novels. The golden cradle of Nathan Zuckerman 'ars poetica' is relatively directly formulated in *The Professor of Desire* (1977), *The Breast* (1972) and *My Life as a Man* (1970). In these novels Philip Roth refuses to share his power and freedom with his characters yet these characters' respective debates concerning authority over their statuses as art-minded people, or as free individuals lead to a more or less comprehensive interpretation of David Kepesh's and Peter Tarnopol's statuses as creators, manipulators and also as prisoners of texts and ultimately of Philip Roth's fiction.

The above three novels can be interpreted as Nathan Zuckerman's golden cradle in many respects. Nathan Zuckerman appears for the first time in *My Life as a Man* and becomes one of the best-known Rothian characters. He is an artist who admires and recycles the modernists' power unlike David Kepesh or Peter Tarnopol.

It is important to state that in these books the protagonists' attempt to rule the existential through the aesthetic changes their 'existence' and this can be interpreted as the power of the aesthetic to rewrite the existential, in fictional terms of course.

This is so because Philip Roth's characters are convinced that art has the power to grant them the possibility of achieving some degree of freedom, but in the context of these novels this possibility remains an illusion for most of the protagonists, although it is available to the author and to some extent to Nathan Zuckerman. David Kepesh and Peter Tarnopol have a relatively limited view of freedom and they have to pay dearly for their ignorance regarding the delicate relationship between life and art.

I start from the thesis that the novelist stresses the centrality of freedom in these books, and interestingly enough Philip Roth obsessively reformulates, asserts and questions even his fictional interpretations of this theme. The result is a weird definition of freedom, which is similar to John Fowles's formula for a freedom that allows for other freedoms to exist.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. London: Jonathan Cape. 1969

In Philip Roth's books the above diversity is visible at the level of the plot as well and attracts our attention to a paradoxical introspection.<sup>2</sup> Actually self-reflexivity becomes an important element, a possibility to fictionally interpret the condition of both life and the art of fiction in Philip Roth's *The Breast*, *The Professor of Desire* and *My Life as a Man*.

His characters are in an extremely difficult situation because they exist in a fictionally postmodern world where the rules of the world 'which is outdoing even the contemporary artist's imagination' (Roth, *Reading* 42) make sense only for the protagonist who senses the presence of the 'novelist god.' The best-known Rothian character who matches the above definition is Nathan Zuckerman, the notorious manipulator, pornographer, rebel and literary father. In the present paper I attempt to discuss some aspects of the 'context,' which leads to Zuckerman's 'conception' in *The Professor of Desire* and *The Breast* and his birth in *My Life as a Man* the 'cradle' proper of this notorious artist character.

### *The Professor of Desire*

Philip Roth's characters try to achieve freedom aided by artistic imagination and creativity many Rothian characters manipulate texts in the hope that this strategy could grant them authority over both the surrounding reality and intellectual-aesthetic values. Philip Roth's characters do not always get support from their creator in their attempt to interpret the world around them, yet they do their best to master the conflicts of everyday life fully aware of the power of the textual environment. However, the text over which they are attempting to assume authority in its turn achieves a kind of freedom resulting from the characters' inability to fully master it in either the terms of 'high art' or those of reality. Their attempts and consequent failures reveal dimensions we could term meta-artistic and meta-existential respectively. I avoid the term metaphysical intentionally.

As the Rothian character 'emplots' his understanding of art into his individual reinterpretations of the fictionally real conflicts he

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of self-conscious fiction see Patricia Waugh's 1984, *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge.

encounters, he is compulsorily rendered to be unsuccessful in his search for a comprehensively defined identity, or sense of freedom. Philip Roth starts employing meta-fictional techniques because he intends to interpret not only the dimensions 'beyond' reality, or 'beyond' 'art-experiences' but also the ones, which occasionally shape, control and distort the creative process.

The definitions of freedom the Rothian protagonists reach in *The Breast*, *My Life as a Man* and *The Professor of Desire* are only partially valid. These definitions ignore exactly the aspect, which the protagonist is desperately in need of, or at least acknowledges as a definite priority. This priority is authority over his well-defined self, resulting from adequate understanding and interpretation of the effects of objective and subjective chronology, personal and authorial drives, aesthetic commitment and ultimately, his right to free choice.

David Kepesh and Peter Tarnopol try to explain their existence on the basis of art-experiences, which they constantly misinterpret and rarely, if ever are able to master. Nathan Zuckerman is a relevant exception in this respect but as we are going to see his status restricts his possibilities.

David Kepesh's and Peter Tarnopol's faith in the power of words results in them verbalising all the secrets of their private lives in the hope that this can help them overcome their traumas, much in the fashion of earlier Rothian characters. Tricky Dixon, the anti-hero of *Our Gang* is an extremely negative character and Philip Roth's intentions are clearly of a different nature in that novel. Alexander Portnoy 'complains' and fails to handle his own problems. Still he seems to come out 'victoriously' through his textual manipulations and through his attempts to claim authority over Spielvogel's diagnosis.

David Kepesh, the professor of desire lectures on literature and attempts to interpret his disoriented sexual greed through literary experiences rather than examine reality or understand the nature and power of art. *The Professor of Desire* exemplifies Philip Roth's taste for manipulation. I 'restore' the logical and chronological sequence of the novels that present the fate of the professor of comparative literature, firstly discussing some aspects of the protagonist's search for freedom in *The Professor of Desire*.

Some critics consider that this novel is a kind of answer, a thumbed nose shown to the critics who misinterpreted *The Breast*. Actually *The Professor of Desire* offers the case history of the hero of an earlier Philip Roth novel, *The Breast*. There he was transformed into a huge mammary gland because of his inability to bridge the gap between wild imagination, savage lust, and the intentions of textual authority over his fate. Sanford Pinsker amplifies this notion by pointing out that David Kepesh is the victim of archetypal human conflicts. “Young David is caught between temptation and restraint, between the impulses of exhibitionism and the aftermaths of shame” (Sanford 124–125).

David Kepesh claims that at twenty he must stop impersonating others and become himself, or at least begin to impersonate the self he ought to be, but this he cannot do. The reason for his inability is closely connected to his approach to great artists. He impersonates artists and fictional characters and mystifies his mistaken Hungarian Royale interpretation of male superiority instead of reflecting on them as possible ‘art’ or life experiences and as a result the dangers of over-identification increase with every new attempt to assert his right to free choice.

Yet Philip Roth is unusually clear about the fictionally biographical sources of David Kepesh’s alienation in the Hungarian Royale syndrome. While still a child David is attracted by perplexing models of ‘superior’ male identity, which he does not discuss with his father and would not even think of consulting his mother about. The people associated with the Hungarian Royale admire Herbie’s perfect body. Herbie is considered to be a great entertainer considerably admired by women and the male members occasionally secretly savour his obscenities in the hotel.

David for some time behaves like a new Candide who admires the ideal male image Herbie seems to stand for. As time passes David understands that his duty is to ‘get somewhere’ and strengthens his intellect instead of his muscles but the influence of the ‘idol’s’ obscenities obstructs all his attempts to become a conscientious intellectual and even to chart the road to freedom.

His extensive reading, the intellectual urge to adjust reality to alternatives for interpretation offered by high art only emphasise his addiction to this kind of desire. The dependence he develops through

incessant cross interpretation contradicts the very goal he set forth; it undermines the possibility of a valid definition of the free individual on the basis of available interpretations of life situations contained within great works of art. Another of his obsessions results in a strange taste for role-playing. His fictional biography reveals that at college he is awarded leading roles in university productions of plays by Giraudoux, Sophocles, and Congreve. In the same period of his life David Kepesh improvises a long 'dialogue' of his parents which he refers to as tragical-comical-historical-pastoral.

While he is deliberately sacrificing virtually everything on the altar of desire, he is an intellectual who instead of acquiring the wisdom provided by artistic heritage reinterprets everything even the great modernists' works (Chekov, Flaubert, Kafka) and as it is but natural with a Rothian protagonist, his own chaotic life. He considers American girls to emanate a sense of "all-pervasive atmosphere of academic property" (*P. D.* 22). He finds the expression and the justification of his overheated sexual desires in Shakespeare and finally his desire to be the girl's arms that touch her breasts translates as Romeo's words uttered under Juliet's balcony.

David Kepesh in his search for a free self wants to define freedom in an existentialist sense on the basis of already reinterpreted art-experiences. He does not understand a word of the Arthurian legends and Icelandic sagas in London and considers that the fact that he is supposed to read them is all punishment for his being smart. What he discovers while at King's College is that he is ready to die as Maupassant did, or that it does not make sense to have a whore who does not look like a whore and he develops an obsessive taste for enormous breasts.

I realize with an odd, repulsive sort of shrill that this woman whose breasts collide above my head like caldrons-whom I chose from among her competitors on the basis of these behemoth breasts and a no less capacious behind-was probably born prior to the outbreak of World War I. Imagine that, before the publication of *Ulysses*, before ... (*P. D.* 28).

The professor starts from a Kafkaesque understanding of the self to adopt an elegantly post-modernist interpretation of the Chekovian 'romantic disillusionment' acknowledging its authority for Kepesh's

predicament while he is still living 'as a man.' *The Breast* has already discussed the paradoxes of desire and the constant, but ineffective struggle between David Kepesh's education and animal instincts, which were meant to suppress his need for more physical satisfaction on the basis of re-valued spiritual or aesthetic satisfaction. Although sex, or rather love-making, is an essential metaphor of creativity in his works Philip Roth can not accept the idea that reading great works of art can result in good sex.

In fact David Kepesh is seeing a psychiatrist because of his impotence, the death of his sexual desire. The other power at work is predictably literature, providing desire for creative participation. The third factor at work is the 'real,' over the interpretation of which David Kepesh fails to gain authority, first because personal identification is rendered impossible through the instability of his self.

He truly hopes to find a sound definition of freedom, but his obsessive insistence to explain his actual needs and deeds by way of high art prevents him from comprehensive interpretation of any possible analogies. *Macbeth*, *Crime and Punishment*, "The Duel" can not help him overcome the negative effects of his "fascination with moral delinquency" (*P.D.* 74).

David Kepesh does not understand that the modernists did not write moral treatises and thus he cannot construct a new identity for himself on the basis of his readings. Philip Roth demonstrates that art is amoral and it can endanger the ignorant. David Kepesh is incompetent and as a result he is refused this comprehensive interpretation and thus he loses track of his quite equivocally formulated intellectual and physical ambitions.

The libidinous slob's sense of reality changes its spectres and as temptation dominates him he ignores moral grandeur, aesthetic and sensual satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> Submissive response to temptation becomes with him the source and target of 'abnormal, amoral' lust.

He fails to understand that prostituting literature in the name of purely sexual desire and exhibitionism can only result in a deep sense of guilt and shame, which further undermines his chances to achieve

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<sup>3</sup> The terming of desire as 'erotic' and 'thanatic' is again used after Docherty, Thomas. *Reading (Absent) Character. Towards a Theory of Characterization in Fiction*. Oxford: Clarendon. 1983. 224-25.

freedom. David Kepesh obscures his own thirst for freedom as he is torn between reckless sexual ambitions and pretended conscientious intellectual dedication. The avalanche of passion, and cynicism cannot only not satisfy the professor's desire but also renders him incapable of valid revisions resulting in possibilities for a new start. His consequent impotence renders literary creativity questionable as well. David Kepesh is not able to function as an artist, or rather as an interpreter of other artists' works.

The result is anxiety and impotence. He understands that there is more life in art than his actual life and his vitality vanishes. Philip Roth is explicit about this authorial conviction. David Kepesh is freed of his former wife whom he interpreted as the cause of his intellectual blockages only to discover that nothing has changed. He has to realise that 'cutting the roots,' severed the illusion of possible links between him and the great artists of the past and it resulted in his loss of identity. In the end he is a man with no identity, or genuine intellectual dedication and as a result he cannot interpret the meanings of human existence formulated by art.

He does not actually try to dominate those around him. David Kepesh vindicates isolation, retirement in a kind of Ivory Tower, in the name of responsible order, but left alone he is at least as deficient as when confronted with the burdens of an unhappy marriage.

His 'orderly' isolation is dominated by chaos, a chaos that cannot be interpreted through literary experience, as he remains burdened with the problems of his fictionally unresolved 'existential' dilemmas. The crisis is further deepened by the fact that his dying mother pays a last visit to her son and at this point even the disintegration of the model family seems inevitable. The call of the past confuses David even more if possible and the well-meaning mother's death seems a judgement on David's inability to sustain "steady, dedicated living" (*P. D.* 125). Dr. Klinger tries in vain, as is but natural with a Rothian analyst, to close the gap between libido and conscience.

Claire Ovington, the erotic, innocent, virtuous and orderly woman seems to offer Kepesh the possibility of a new start. David Kepesh returns to his abandoned book on Chekov motivated by identification with the stories that tenderly express the 'humiliations and failures' of 'socialised beings,' which "seek a way out of the shell of restrictions and convention" (*P. D.* 201).

The therapy continues as David Kepesh and Claire travel to Prague where Kafka becomes the spiritual authority and he discusses Kafka's relevance to the citizens of Prague with a Czech professor. After visiting Kafka's grave, he starts writing his next lecture and again the situation is awkward as Kafka's "Report to an Academy" provides the form, while two prostitutes act as muses.

The lecture is planned to help his students understand how Madame Bovary and other great novels 'concerned with erotic desire' have a 'referential' relationship to the students' own lives and to the life of their teacher and David Kepesh claims that he wishes to give to his students an honest interpretation of his life.

There is no external ointment for the professor's internal conflict. David Kepesh remains suspended between reckless sexual ambitions and fake conscientious intellectual dedication, and later he will become the slave of his sensuality, and lose not only his 'battle,' but also his body in Roth's earlier novel *The Breast*.

### *The Breas*

The protagonist of *The Breast*, is the same David Alan Kepesh, the Stony Brook professor of comparative literature who has apparent public success, lives with a nice young schoolteacher, in short his life seems to be stable. Certainly the scheme is just too nice. No doubt, David Kepesh is governed by a disposition to maintain his male identity and status as a professor but indications of slippage in his male identity suggest the storm that is approaching.

Actually, too much identification with the adored woman brings about a desire that is directed against his masculinity. David Kepesh feels in Claire's breast an imposing organ continually exposing sexuality. David Kepesh has a similar relationship with high art, as he employs the power of art to explain everyday situations repeatedly by way of identifying art with reality.

Total identification with the beautiful woman's breast leads to catastrophe. David's admiration for women's breasts is formulated in *The Professor of Desire* in three interesting contexts: family, art and history. The mother's breasts are interpreted as the basis of his father's decision to marry his mother and are associated with an orderly, safe existence. In the scene I quoted earlier breasts come to be associated

with individual desire and the possibility of invoking Shakespeare and the London scene bring history, Joyce and the perplexed David to the same level.

In *The Breast* David admires Claire's breast and adores it but has no intention to become a breast. Yet, in the manipulated logic of the book misinterpretation of his desire leads to misplacement and finally he becomes a breast.

The uneasy quality of the situation is asserted: identification to the degree of metamorphosis into a female breast implies renunciation of, or even denial of, heterosexual desires, and the adoption of the woman partner's role in a homosexual relationship, which David Kepesh certainly does not favour. The result of this abnormal logic is that the breast is examining itself and a unique, extremely complex narrative emerges.

It is difficult to define or stabilise this essential element of the fictional material. Even the gender of a mammary gland governed by the male sexual drive is difficult if not impossible to establish. David struggles with similar difficulties, he insists on his male status even when he attains a degree of absolute physical identification with what he earlier interpreted as the symbol of spiritual fertility. This confers to him the sexual potential he so much admired and envied but an intellectual transformation is not possible.

Through this incredible transformation he becomes a female breast without losing his masculine desires. The question is whether this 'rebirth' can be interpreted as freedom. Naturally, or unnaturally the problems are further complicated by the embarrassing duality of the situation.

The character's metamorphosis creates a sensual female breast governed by his masculine desires, because it is David Kepesh, who is a male, after all. The professor-turned-breast has an extraordinary intellectual task, but this does not refer to his academic research, but to his exasperated attempts to explain his own identity. The nature of the metamorphosis of the professor of comparative literature is impossible to describe. Along with David Kepesh we experience the sense of deconstruction of the intellect, but cannot define it except as a status, which displays a typical post-modern lack of stability.

His fears and wishes take him down the road of regression till he is subject to transcendence. Alienation from male impotence leads to

total identification with female erotic power, destroying virtually all elements of his male identity, except for the desire for sexual intercourse with the female, whose imposing, permanently inflated organ he becomes by abandoning his ruined male sexuality.

Kepesh's fetishizing of Claire's breast has turned her into a fantasy-mother and him into a nursing infant; he seems to regress further and merges himself with the breast as if there were no boundary between the self and the nurturing world. The breast is the womb and they are both Kepesh. (Crews 66–67)

David Kepesh, the professor of comparative literature blames art for what has happened to him.

... might be my way of being Kafka, being Gogol, being a Swift. They could *envision* these marvellous transformations – they were artists. They had the language and those obsessive fictional brains. I didn't. So I had to live the thing. (B.72)

Thus, he exposes yet another deficiency contributing to his perplexing misery, namely his lack of authority over the fictional reworking of the real. The result is not freedom but imprisonment, as he becomes the captive of his own contaminated imagination. He has no faith in fiction, insisting on the importance of reality (although his awareness of it is questionable). At one point David Kepesh states 'reality has more style.'

No, the victim does not subscribe to the wish-fulfilment theory, and I advise you not to, neat and fashionable and delightfully punitive as it may be. Reality is grander than that. Reality has more style. There. For those of you who cannot live without one, a moral to this tale. 'Reality has style,' concludes the embittered professor who became a female breast. Go, you sleek, self satisfied Houyhnhnms, and moralize on that! (B.34)

When any chance of normality disappears, David Kepesh insists that he is not abnormal and given the absurdity of the environment he is right: in the abnormal world where a person can wake up as a female breast nothing makes sense, no value judgements can be reliable. David Kepesh insists on his right to have sex, and he wants it with a highly professional prostitute.

Why shouldn't I have it [sex] if I want it! It's insane otherwise! I should be allowed to have it all day long! This is no longer ordinary life and I am not going to pretend that it is! *You* want me to be *ordinary*-you expect me to be *ordinary* in this condition! I'm supposed to be a sensible man- when I am like this! But that's crazy on your part, Doctor! ... Why shouldn't I have anything and everything I can think of *every single minute of the day* if that can transport me from this miserable hell! ... Instead I lie here being sensible! That's the madness, Doctor, *being sensible!* (B. 36-37)

David Kepesh, the breast cannot see, and doesn't even really want to relinquish his identity as a breast. He interprets his life as a dream or a Dali painting and tells the doctor that he cannot foresee a miracle and suspects that the breast wants to continue to exist. David Kepesh's search for freedom, although much in the mode of a post-modern comic allegory, displays some alienation motifs very similar to those expressed by Niel Klugman's identical attitude, when he uses Gaugin's painting and *Gulliver's Travels*, to explain his problematic status.

Certainly Kepesh's understanding of arts should have been deeper and thus we have to look for the sources of his startling disintegration. Poor Kepesh is suspended between reality and imagination, left alone with the chance to 'sleep the sleep of the sated' as he sways in his hammock, and endures the absurd within the constraints of the analyst's couch.

The trap according to Philip Roth offers no other possibility but an ironic toleration of that situation as literary influence becomes an explicit part of David Kepesh's enslavement and he declares that he got it from fiction. Teaching Gogol's "The Nose" and Kafka's "Metamorphosis" forced him to out-Kafka Kafka.

But Dr Klinger is there to tell him that hormones are hormones and art is art, to make him accept himself as *real*. David Kepesh's task is to accept the situation. Philip Roth's comment on this incredible situation is laconic.

For him there is no way out of the monstrous situation, not even through literary interpretation. There is only the unrelenting education if his own misfortune. What he learns by the end is that, whatever else it is, it is the real thing: he *is* a breast, and must act accordingly. (Roth, *Reading*. 63)

This is a most cruel authorial statement and it is clear that Philip Roth deprives his character of the possibility to employ the fictional conclusions of the novelist's experiments with life, art and creativity. The professor of comparative literature is doomed to fail because he refuses the traditional moral and ethical solutions to his dilemmas although he is not in possession of valid alternatives. He invokes art to help him sort out his existential problems but because he cannot master either dimension all he can do is revolt against the above state of affairs claiming that reality has more style. His final argument makes the whole story credible. He castigates a world that is crazy enough to allow things like the one that happened to him occur.

### *My Life as a Man*

The professor of comparative literature ended up as a breast as a result of his mistaken interpretation of the relationship between art and life. The situation does not get any better in *My Life as a Man*, where Philip Roth's experiments with the narrative point of view limit his protagonist's possibilities. The first part of the novel belongs to Peter Tarnopol, but in the second half of the novel, entitled 'My True Story,' Peter Tarnopol is telling Peter Tarnopol's story in the third person.

This means that he cannot identify with the interpretations of his fictional experiences. Consequently his search for freedom is in all instances mirrored through polemics or someone else's fictional understanding and is actually a travesty of Camusian interpretation of freedom. Authority over definition of freedom is thus transferred to Spielvogel, Maureen, Susan rather than to Tarnopol.

The different perspectives, through their alterations create scenarios that expand and fragment the definition of freedom to such a degree that the perplexed protagonist can't abandon or reverse them any more, however hard he tries. Tarnopol's understanding of freedom remains contaminated, emptied of factual authority and any sense of the search, in short it is doomed to disintegration.

A fine example of the eloquent polemic on the aesthetic implications of the search for freedom, and its existential interpretations arises out of Tarnopol's rage at Spielvogel's fictionalised version of his self-image.

Spielvogel, in his article “Creativity: The Narcissism of the Artist” besides altering Tarnopol’s case history identifies the search for freedom of the artist with narcissism. The protagonist revolts against this definition, but later cannot entirely cope with it.

And if I may, sir – his self is to many a novelist what his own physiognomy is to a painter of portraits: the closest subject at hand demanding scrutiny, a problem of his art to solve – given the enormous obstacles of truthfulness, *the* artistic problem. He is not simply looking into the mirror because he is transfixed by what he sees. Rather, the artist’s success depends as much as anything else on his powers of detachment, on *de*-narcissizing himself. That’s where the excitement comes in. That hard *conscious* work that makes it *art!* Freud, Dr. Spielvogel, studied his own dreams not because he was a ‘narcissist,’ but because he was a student of dreams. And whose were at once the least and the most accessible of dreams if not his own. (M. L. A. M. 240)

What Tarnopol articulates as the ‘problem’ of art in this passage is, precisely, the problem of the ‘subject’ scrutinising himself in the hand-held mirror of writing – holding the mirror, he would argue, at a distance, thus guaranteeing freedom, the detachment and authenticity of self-scrutiny.

But the question of how the ‘closest’ subject at hand refers to himself inevitably touches upon the cause and effect as well as the role of fiction, aspects that are interrelated and determine the protagonist’s perception of his duties and possibilities.

The forces at work, be they psychic or related to artistic creativity result in a strange detachment which involves Tarnopol’s meditation on ‘autobiography.’ This meditation connects the process of the fictional artist’s search for artistic and existential freedom with the relation of subjectivity to textuality.

Most sophisticated among all dilemmas is perhaps the extent to which Tarnopol’s detachment determines his authority as an artist over art and reality, over the subjective and the objective factors at work. His fear is that the fictional artist as a subject becomes a prisoner of his own reflection, confined in a state of inability to feed on the outside world.

This fear brings about yet another danger, namely that entering fiction, trying to master art for the sake of artistic privacy and

displaying the secrets of the conflict between life and art can not create the desired series of 'detached,' free variations of the quest. The dilemmas he himself creates overwhelm Tarnopol since he is not in possession of a valid interpretation of freedom.

While Tarnopol locates his difficulties in defining his identity as a free, creative individual in the context of the intricacies of literature, Spielvogel doesn't accept the identification of the respective problems in the fictional artist's problems. He declares that the sources of Tarnopol's confusion are his women and the psychoanalyst explains the situation on the basis of the Oedipal complex. "As he saw it [...] – I had cultivated a strong sense of superiority, with all the implications of 'guilt' and 'ambivalence' over being 'special'" (*M. L. A. M.* 217).

The example is typical of the replacement of Tarnopol's definition of the search for freedom by pleading theoretical interpretations that render his interpretation fluid. Thus Spielvogel undermines Tarnopol's thesis that he could attain a certain degree of freedom through the proper observation of his problems with art and women.

However enraged he is, Tarnopol accepts Spielvogel's Freud-based authority when trying to define the sources of his problems with women and thus he loses authority over nearly all aspects of desire and cannot define his search for freedom in either sexual or artistic terms.

His loss of authority stems from too much dependency on the past (literary, psychological influences: Tolstoy, Flaubert, Freud; childhood), in most of the cases based on misinterpretations and undermining the stability of his understanding of free will and consequent free action.

High Art and childhood are interpreted as the ideal, as the embodiment of perfection, to which any attempt to achieve freedom should make reference. Thus Tarnopol ignores his own status and is constantly attempting to assume authority over the other, the woman, in the name of perfect intellectual and sexual harmony, the ideal spiritual and physical environment for creativity.

Because he always projects his desire for freedom on the above dimensions, he has to experience the inadequacy of his attempts, as they don't match his projections of the ideal and do not formulate 'useful' conclusions that he could profit from. He cannot articulate freedom because of his strong commitment to the search for the ideal,

since every failure fosters the disintegration of the misinterpreted definition of his status.

Thus, authority over the other comes to be assumed more in the name of pity and disgust, and leads to exasperated sexual lust instead of balanced intellectual and sensual congress. Aesthetic ideals are shaken to pieces by a total lack of beauty, and are banished abruptly by brutality brought on by both false choice and a self-deprecating sense of superiority.

The women he chooses do not conform to his fictional model of the female 'overgratifying' the male: Maureen and Susan surrender and expose a total lack of defensive capabilities and vulnerability that these aspects kill sex and implicitly destroy their relationship with Tarnopol.

Yet Maureen in accepting Tarnopol's authority over her sexuality vindicates authority over Tarnopol developing a counter-desire for punishment, assuming the stature of a threatening mother. She invents a status that could fit Spielvogel's interpretation of Tarnopol's needs, but is against Peter Tarnopol's understanding of erotic desire. Tarnopol incorporates this element in his search for freedom rendering him unable to ignore Maureen's threats.

It is but natural that he cannot understand his own needs either, since he hesitates between total narcissistic exhibitionism and his need for authority over the secrets of his existence. When he complains to Susan about Spielvogel's article, he responds most vociferously to what he considers a violation of truth and authority.

Just read on. Read the whole hollow pretentious meaningless thing, right on down to the footnotes from Goethe and Baudleaire [...] Oh, Jesus, what this man thinks of as *evidence*! "As Sophocles has written," – and that constitutes *evidence*! (*M.L.A.M* 246–247)

So Tarnopol refuses Spielvogel's fiction-based authority over interpretation of his status, but at the same time he expresses dismay at Maureen's inability to convert the diarist's private musings into public fictions, although she announces her intention to do so.

Although he has been 'absorbed' by literature, and mourns being deprived by the freedom granted by creativity, he returns to the same altar, and is ready to sacrifice reality hoping that a fictional revision of the truth can reverse his alienation. The individual, Tarnopol thinks at

this stage of his search, could gain freedom through a detachment that can be achieved through other characters' fictional revisions bearing reference to other fictional definitions.

But his speculations are essentially false, since this only means that he would like to gain authority over art created by others simply in exchange for being the subject of the other artists' fictional enterprise. The above logic was true in the case of Sarah Woodruff and is available to Zuckerman, at least to a certain extent, in Philip Roth's later novels.

His understanding of the search for freedom constructs a fictional network which instead of depending on its creator, reduces its author to the statute of a subject that can logically be a determining factor only by accepting full authority of fictional creativity over adequately articulated artistic intentions. In his case this move means total surrender.

Thus Tarnopol rarely speaks of himself the exception being if he is being seen or interpreted by some other. The result is predictable, Tarnopol can't even formulate a sound definition of his identity. 'My True Story' is a revision of the 'useful stories' over which Zuckerman has authority. Spielvogel's "Creativity," and Maureen's diary also deprive Tarnopol of authority over fictional revision of the 'real' although they are supposed to provide a better understanding of the conflicting fictions creating Tarnopol's character.

Peter Tarnopol hopes that his accurate, definable identity can be created by means of writing detailed perspectives of his identity. He faces similar dilemmas when trying to define the sources of freedom through the creative act as son of 'A Jewish Father,' but no proper evidence can be reached regarding the origins of the artist's status.

His sense of freedom is further disintegrated by his attempt to search for a literary father and offers another unquestionable proof of the fact that creative art is yet another aspect he cannot cope with. Since he has no real authority over art, his unfinished manuscript disintegrates that sense of manhood which he formerly believed would generate the desired plenitude, which he thinks, is freedom.

By now the various abandoned drafts had gotten so shuffled together and interwoven, the pages so defaced with X's and arrows of a hundred different intensities of pen and pencil [...] what impressed one upon attempting to, penetrate that prose was not the imaginary

world it depicted, but the condition of the person who'd been doing the imagining; the manuscript was the message, and the message was Turmoil. (*M.L.A.M.* 238)

So Tarnopol invokes art as a possible source of freedom, yet in reality his search for freedom is nothing but fictiveness, a multiplication of possible 'realities,' which prevent any valuable contact with the factual world. Tarnopol's fictional revisions and corrections are mercilessly displaying his incapacity to achieve authority over both felt life and fiction.

He ends up being dominated by his stubborn insistence on participation in the creative process over which he has no authority. His attempts to revise his own life fail; he is neither a successful 'man' nor a successful 'writer.' Peter Tarnopol has to acknowledge his manuscript as a 'corpse,' which he cannot bring himself to remove from "the autopsy room to the grave" (*M.L.A.M.* 238). The death of a fictional alternative authorised by Tarnopol himself closes the circle featuring a perplexed artist-hero searching in vain for identity or freedom.

## *II. 7. The Narrative "I" as an Object (a Breast)*

Since demonstrating all the narrative innovations employed in the three novels by Philip Roth would require more space than I can afford I am going to restrain my conclusions in this respect to his handling of style and discourse in *The Professor of Desire*, his manipulation of the narrative 'I' in *The Breast* and his experiment with the narrative structure in *My Life as a Man*.

David Kepesh's declared temptation is for high art, but he is dedicated to sexual greed. He is characterised by the above hypocrisy and the style and the language of the novel actually hesitates between the discourses and registers characteristic of pornography, or pulp magazines and high art. The contrast thus created at the level of the style is characteristic of all three Philip Roth novels discussed in the present chapter. Similarly, Peter Tarnopol and Nathan Zuckerman quote at length Henry James and Conrad against an essentially pornographic background.

The outcome of the plot in Philip Roth's novels suggests that the humiliations and failures of traditional literary discourse lead to the

character's imprisonment in his mistaken interpretation of the role and possibilities of 'high art.' This alternation of established and negative aesthetics supports the perplexing quality of David Kepesh's obsession with 'high art' and subverts the possibility to discuss the misery of the professor of comparative literature in the context of traditional dignity and pathos characteristic of great literature of the past.

Philip Roth's characters are trapped by the magic power of 'high art' because they remove the distance between the aesthetic and the existential. Wayne C. Booth warns us that removing the distance between the aesthetic and the existential results in the death of art (Booth. *The Rhetoric*. 117–132). Yet, Philip Roth intentionally declares art superior to the existential dimension in these novels and the story of David Kepesh's transformation into a female breast documents the power of art to change the fictionally existential dimension. Philip Roth's characters are obsessed with Kafka and in his "Looking at Kafka" he offers us a fictional variant of Kafka's fate in America.

David Kepesh is dominated by the magic of fiction and his admiration for the works of Chekov, Flaubert, Kafka and Claire's breast leads to his metamorphosis into a female breast instead of becoming a potent and highly creative male. *The Breast* also announces that Gregor Samsa's transformation into a huge insect is subject to revision when David Kepesh announces that he has "out-Kafkaed Kafka" (B. 82). Debra Shostak praises the above characteristics of the novel. "One of the strengths of *The Breast* is the way in which Roth makes an absolutely implausible premise believable—precisely the lesson that he learned best from Kafka" (Shostak 318).

The transformation is an incredible nightmare, which is not a dream in spite of the hero's attempt to interpret it as a dream, although in real terms it cannot be explained. The problem, as discussed by Debra Shostak, is illustrated through dislocation caused by the catastrophic difference between 'objective' and 'subjective' perceptions of David Kepesh's existence.

I think it important to state at this point that the fictional quality of both the objective and the subjective dimensions is also of great relevance in these books. *The Professor of Desire* attempts to

demonstrate that the dislocation of the character is due to the influence of fiction. Philip Roth does not describe the process, the physical transformation of David Kepesh into a female breast nor does he care to create the theoretical dimension that could make it credible. The absence of such sections increases the shocking quality of the transformation as both the protagonist and the reader are confronted with David's metamorphosis as an accomplished narrative fact.

This means that the metamorphosis proper has no relevance. On the reader's part identification with David Kepesh is impossible because he is an object, a part of the body. Yet, we have to accept him as an objectively existing real character and in truth, it is not the breast we are startled by. We have to cope with the subjective element imprisoned into this physical shape 'who' suffers of claustrophobia because he is a potent, desirous 'conscience' who has a male identity. Debra Shostak searches for possible definitions of David Kepesh's consciousness and reaches the conclusion that David Kepesh's consciousness is not a result of his transformation but its condition.

As I demonstrated earlier in this chapter David Kepesh's dialogues testify to the gradual transformation of his consciousness and his final acceptance of being enclosed in a woman's breast on the basis of his insistence to remove the distance between the aesthetic and the existential dimensions. Even though he is a huge mammary gland, a dirigible, he remains the professor of comparative literature and his obsessive reinvention of the real on the basis of art-experiences compels him to accept his strange 'objective' embodiment.

At the end of the novel he seems to accept his condition, but is not ready to give up his male identity or his knowledge of literature. Roth does not resolve the problem of his character's identity. The talking breast who is a male professor of comparative literature thus grows into a metaphor of the postmodern indefinite self. Debra Shostak argues much in the same way in her essay.

Perplexed though, he declares that he is a breast, but if he is really a breast he is not what he is. The logic falls close to Philip Roth's interpretation of the situation when he told an interviewer "I am not what I am – I am, if anything, what I am not!" (Shostak 319)

The breast-professor then is not simply a pun, but a fictional interpretation of the difficulties in discussing the theme of freedom as