



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

44 | Spring 2005  
Henry Roth's short fiction

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/425>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires d'Angers

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2005

Number of pages: 25-36

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Alan Gibbs, « A Means to an End: Henry Roth's Self-Consuming Short Fiction », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 44 | Spring 2005, Online since 05 August 2008, connection on 01 May 2019.

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/425>

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# A Means to an End: Henry Roth's Self-Consuming Short Fiction

Alan Gibbs

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- 1 American-Jewish writer Henry Roth (1906-1995) is best known as a novelist. More accurately, Roth is best known as the novelist who for many years failed to write novels: six decades lie between the publication of his first novel, *Call It Sleep* (1934) and his second, the first volume of the *Mercy of a Rude Stream* series (1994-98). In this intervening period, Roth wrote a number of short works, including stories, position pieces, and draft autobiographical extracts.
- 2 Especially in the period shortly before the writing and publication of the *Mercy* series, at a time when he felt reborn as a writer, Roth published a number of short pieces. Most of these, as with his longer works, were at least partly autobiographical. In many ways, they represent a series of preparatory exercises for the final magnum opus. Impressive as many of Roth's shorter works are, he took an approach to the short story, which might be described as utilitarian. Roth often used the form as a preliminary means to explore themes that he would develop at both greater length and depth in his novels. Moreover, in the *Mercy* series, Roth's obsessive urge to document his life led him to co-opt a number of previously published pieces into the larger narrative, thus challenging their status as discrete short stories.
- 3 The following considers both of these aspects. Firstly, this essay examines the consequences of Roth's incorporating an earlier work – a 1940 short story entitled "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" – into the text of the *Mercy* series. The second half focuses on the way in which Roth uses a short piece from 1977, "Itinerant Ithacan," as a springboard for later writing about the same episodes in the *Mercy* volumes. My focus in terms of Roth's interpolation of "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" into the *Mercy* series is not so much its thematic content, the unsuccessful attempt of a young New York boy to obtain a particular fairy book from the local lending library. Instead, the essay explores the significance of Roth's very act of inserting this earlier text into the later one.
- 4 After appearing in *The New Yorker* in 1940, "Purple" was also reproduced in *Shifting Landscape*, the anthology of Roth's short pieces.<sup>1</sup> Its interpolation into the *Mercy* series is

thus the piece's third materialisation in print. While the story, even as originally conceived, is undoubtedly somewhat autobiographical, the degree to which the reader understands it as such varies amongst these appearances. Part of the reason for these different readings derives from the variant contexts or, to use Jerome McGann's influential phrase, the bibliographical codes surrounding the story. These would actually posit it as entirely different every time it is published. McGann maintains that these codes "call our attention to other styles and scales of symbolic exchange that every language event involves. Meaning is transmitted through bibliographical as well as linguistic codes" (57).

- 5 For its appearance in the *Mercy* series, the bibliographical codes work primarily to ease the insertion of the story seamlessly into the larger narrative, stressing its similarity to the surrounding material. This process of absorption functions to suggest that the story is more autobiographical than the reader might otherwise have believed. "Purple" is perhaps no longer classifiable as a short story once it appears as part of the larger narrative that comprises the *Mercy* series. Instead, it is specifically cited (and sited) in this context to provide evidence supporting the autobiographical project of Ira Stigman, the narrator-protagonist and Roth's alter ego. Each time, however, this piece is published, it has served a different purpose, and is locatable by the reader as part of an ongoing, protean narrative. In its first appearance in *The New Yorker*, it represents an attempt (almost Roth's final one before a long silence) to sustain the stalled and seemingly dying writing career of the author of *Call It Sleep*. In its second incarnation, in *Shifting Landscape*, it serves the purpose of demonstrating the struggle and decline of a once promising writer. Mario Materassi, the editor of Roth's pieces in *Shifting Landscape*, externally constructs around them a narrative of Roth's triumph, failure, and comeback as a writer, of which "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" is but a small part.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, Roth's framing suggests that the story illustrates the young Ira's character.
- 6 Throughout the narrative of the *Mercy* series the character of Ira is problematised, as Roth seeks to dislodge any sense of stable subjectivity in order to deal with the dangerous autobiographical narrative of adolescent incest. Most obviously, Roth employs dual layers of narrative: not only that of Ira's adolescence, but also the voice of the old man narrating, as he types the principal narrative into his computer. But Roth further complicates the doubling of self by introducing additional narrative levels to the old and young Ira. By interpolating into the narrative of the *Mercy* series older pieces such as "Purple," Roth introduces another temporal dimension to the narration. Firstly, the insertion of these stories further obscures any sense of the reader's distinction between Roth and Ira: "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple," written by Roth, is ascribed in the *Mercy* series to Ira. Secondly, it grants a new temporal perspective.<sup>3</sup> As the commentary surrounding the interpolation of this story suggests, the narrator of the story is temporally far closer to the material he relates than is the old Ira: "Forty-five years ago, forty-five years closer to the self-involved, self-indulgent, ill-at-ease, lonesome, moody, aimless scapegrace he was then" (*A Star Shines* 68). This might imply that the story is therefore considerably more accurate. Elsewhere however, the mechanisms within which Roth frames interpolated works construct a model denoting them as flawed, inferior, and inaccurate in comparison to his current vision. After "Purple," for example, Ira finds it "
 

retarding - was that the right word? - arresting, inhibiting, to view this evidence of the writer he was, he once was, the preserved specimen of the writer he had been: the arrogant, egotistic, self-assured author of his first novel. Rereading his product

of forty-five years ago drained him of what he was today...something better than he had been, he thought, he hoped" (*A Star Shines* 72, original emphasis and ellipsis).

- 7 The gentle derision directed at his younger self, combined with the hope and belief that he is today "something better" as a writer, suggests that these earlier works are, to a degree, repudiated. Roth thereby constructs a hierarchy of access to autobiographical truth, expressing a firm preference for the present over earlier powers of recall.
- 8 Crucially, in the *Mercy* series, Roth introduces written records of events from the period between the recalled event and the period in which the older Roth/Ira (since they are here indistinguishable) now writes. These records – what I would term 'interim memories' – highlight the changes in perception wrought on Roth/Ira by the passage of years and demonstrate the effects upon current recall of having previously written accounts of the same incidents. The following passage, concerning Ira's attempts to recall his serendipitous borrowing of *Huckleberry Finn*, illustrates aptly how the very fact of having previously penned "Purple" affects Roth's/Ira's subsequent powers of recollection:
- There was something awry with the time frame of the picture, with the ambience of the moment of his borrowing the books. He was on the downstairs, the adult floor of the library—that was his distinct impression—and the lady with the pince-nez was the head-librarian: As befitted her rank, she was the one who always stamped books downstairs. The chances of the *Purple Fairy Book*, or of any fairy book, being downstairs were very slight. Hence it was something he had concocted in his own imagination, a sheer figment. (*A Star Shines* 149)
- 9 Ira thus candidly highlights the problems he encounters when his seemingly genuine memories become hopelessly entangled with the details of the short story penned in 1940. It is as impossible for the reader as it is for Ira to determine the degree to which the *Purple Fairy Book* and the female librarian with the pince-nez are recalled from his experiences at the time, or from "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple." Bruce Kawin suggests that "in the human memory, repetition more often than not is the destroyer and not the saver: a neutralizer, habituator, falsifier.... We set seal after seal on the experience – to flatten it, in fact to kill it" (27-28). Conversely, the use of interpolated texts by Roth actually serves as an admission of the difficulty posed by interim memories; by foregrounding this problem he invigorates rather than flattens the narration.
- 10 Roth could, of course, have chosen to redraft "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" in order to integrate the incident more seamlessly into the principal narrative of the *Mercy* series. In an aside to his computer, Ecclesias, however, he admits that "Recollections formed so long ago become discreet [sic], immutable" (*A Star Shines* 205).<sup>4</sup> Interim memories exert such a strong shaping force on Roth's powers of recall that he feels forced to acknowledge the present-day constructedness of his ostensibly autobiographical writing. This proposition helps to explain why pieces such as "Purple" are grafted into the *Mercy* series as extraneous, sometimes ill-fitting interpolations. The effects of Roth's strategies of interpolation are manifold. Not the least of these is that the narrator of the *Mercy* series becomes an extremely protean and elusive subject, divided against himself. Given the shameful nature of the revelations of Ira's behaviour (namely the adolescent incestuous relationship with his sister) this divided subjectivity perhaps represents a further example of Roth's tendency to use the short story form for apparently grander purposes. The interpolation of "Purple" and the resultant decentring of Ira's subjectivity extend numerous other elusive and evasive narrative strategies whereby Roth seeks to shift blame by disowning the actions of his protagonist.

- 11 Of crucial importance is how these interpolations, these “recollections formed so long ago,” affect the subsequently-written evocations which comprise the bulk of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*'s narrative discourse. Roth interpolates these pieces – fictions, earlier drafts, even letters – in a relatively unmediated way, to illustrate the difference made by interim recollection, that is, by having previously written about an episode. Although much of the published version of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* consists precisely of reworkings and reeditings of previous drafts, it appears that there are earlier versions of certain episodes, generally from before he began writing drafts of the *Mercy* series, which Roth felt, for various reasons, disinclined to reedit. These pieces are therefore inserted jarringly into the principal narrative precisely to demonstrate how interim recollection affects his subsequent ability to construct a narrative based on memory.
- 12 To turn to Roth's use of the short story as an arena of formal and thematic experimentation, the following section examines “Itinerant Ithacan.” This is the longest work published by Roth between *Call It Sleep* and the *Mercy* series, a fact that immediately suggests its importance. Roth himself was clearly aware of its significance as a work geared towards future writing. In *Shifting Landscape*, each piece is bookended with various contextualising comments, often extracted from contemporaneously-written letters. Those selected to introduce “Itinerant Ithacan” are notable for what they reveal about the direction that Roth's writing was then taking. For example, Mario Materassi elaborates on Roth's description of the work as experimental: “The experiment consisted of...two seemingly unrelated nuclei in a work that required sustained narrative tension and well-defined focal concentration. In this perspective, ‘Itinerant Ithacan’ is to be seen as a most important stepping stone toward the conception of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*” (192). The story therefore works as an experimental precursor to the *Mercy* series perhaps less significantly in terms of the subject matter and more through the narrative strategies adopted. The tension between present day incidents, the writer constructing the historical-autobiographical narrative, and that narrative itself, the “two seemingly unrelated nuclei” Materassi identifies above, is precisely what Roth develops at greater length in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. The presence of this juxtaposition of then and now in “Itinerant Ithacan” makes the piece an important conceptual stepping stone towards the later work. Roth himself was also apparently aware of the importance of the formal experimentation in “Itinerant Ithacan.” In an interview excerpt reproduced before the story in *Shifting Landscape*, he describes trying to “work a narrative together with the author's quotidian” (193). Again, Roth clearly conceives of the piece as a speculative exploration of narrative strategies he later employs more fully in the *Mercy* series. As an aside, one might add that the present day narrative, “the author's quotidian” mentioned above, in “Itinerant Ithacan” is considerably more complete than the frequently rambling digressions in the *Mercy* series. In “Itinerant Ithacan,” perhaps because of the nature of the short story as discrete, “the author's quotidian” is much more tightly developed, suggesting that the short story form actually imposed a welcome discipline on Roth that is lacking from the protracted later work.
- 13 Since “Itinerant Ithacan” runs to twenty-six pages whilst *Mercy of a Rude Stream* comprises over fourteen hundred, the narrative and thematic scope of the latter work is, obviously, markedly wider.<sup>5</sup> It is not merely the case that “Itinerant Ithacan” contains fewer narrative incidents than the *Mercy* series, but also that the same events in the later work characteristically take much longer to narrate. The greater detail in the *Mercy* series reinforces much of what we know about Roth's writing practices. In the years from the

mid-sixties onwards, evidence from his collected papers reveals that as well as working on individual shorter pieces, Roth was sketching out scenes for a much longer, semi-autobiographical narrative. Roth began shaping the *Mercy* narrative in earnest from 1979 onwards, two years after the publication of "Itinerant Ithacan," rewriting and extending drafts of the series until his death in 1995. The significant difference in length between the narration of the same incidents in "Itinerant Ithacan" and the *Mercy* series reinforces the sense of Roth's growing garrulousness as he reached old age.

- 14 In narratological terms, in the later work the proportion of narrative to story significantly increases, thus significantly slowing the speed of Ira's 'telling.'<sup>6</sup> This slowing pace is typically characterised by a greater solipsism in the *Mercy* series accounts. By the time Roth came to write the *Mercy* series, his commitment to understanding (as well as both expiating and exorcising) his earlier self had clearly become an obsession. In *From Bondage*, the third volume of the series, a scene between Ira, Larry and Edith (the latter two respectively Ira's best friend, and his future mistress, currently a college professor) takes place in which they discuss, amongst other things, Ira's growing fascination with T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.<sup>7</sup> A briefer version of this scene also appears in "Itinerant Ithacan," and the variations between the two accounts are characteristic of a general pattern of change. For example, added into the *Mercy* version is a digression concerning a previous incident wherein Ira comes into some money by dubious means at the ballpark where he works as a drink seller. The ensuing discussion of Ira's moral fibre, both between the characters and between narrator and reader, is characteristic of the greater focus upon Ira's self in the *Mercy* series. Much of the greater length of the later narrative may be attributed to this solipsistic dwelling upon the autobiographical protagonist in such minute psychological detail.
- 15 Another example of the greater detail in the *Mercy* series account might be made by comparing the two versions of R's/Ira's first meeting with Edith. This incident, pivotal for his development as a writer, comprises two sentences in "Itinerant Ithacan" and two-and-a-half pages in the *Mercy* account. The earlier description of the encounter runs as follows: "It was then that R was introduced to Eda Lou. She was dark, petite, and grave - and yet with ready smile of solicitude for his tongue-tied confusion" (200). As suggested above, the incident is narrated in summary form, whereas in the *Mercy* account it is a narrated scene, including a representation of the actual conversation held between Ira and Edith, in which the reader is allowed access to, rather than merely told about, Edith's "solicitude for his tongue-tied confusion." Likewise, in comparison to the brief "dark, petite, and grave" Eda Lou of "Itinerant Ithacan," the *Mercy* series provides a full, flattering portrait of Edith, who is to become so important in Ira's life:
- By some kind of inevitability, he knew, knew that the petite olive-skinned woman, turning away with winning and receptive mein, smiling countenance, like a dark-hued source for rays of generosity, sympathy, smiling countenance with prominent, sad eyes, the woman with small earrings, bunching a minute handkerchief, toying with a thin gold necklace, was Edith Welles. (*Diving Rock* 336)
- 16 Notwithstanding the possibly unconvincing abundance of impressions recorded in this instant in such a cascade of purple prose, the greater length of the *Mercy* series allows for greater depth throughout. Edith, for all her shortcomings as a tangible character, is considerably more rounded than the Eda Lou of "Itinerant Ithacan."
- 17 The *Mercy* version also draws the reader's attention to the "inevitability" of Ira's meeting with Edith. This gestures towards a theme that Roth develops in the *Mercy* series and

which is absent from "Itinerant Ithacan": namely, the importance of chance, or, alternatively, the intervention of destiny, in his life. By the time Roth began to write the *Mercy* version of these events, it appears that he had realised the full implications of, for example, his chance meeting with Lester Winter which in turn led to meeting Eda Lou Walton, which in turn led to him becoming a writer. While the *Mercy* series explores the gradual growth of the autobiographical protagonist from slum-dwelling immigrant to artist, the element of chance or coincidence within this narrative is also developed with considerably more thematic clarity than in any of Roth's earlier works. According to Henry Krystal, this attitude towards the past is typical for a person of Roth's age: "Old age, with its losses, imposes the inescapable necessity to face one's past. This development determines that one either accepts one's self and one's past or continues to reject it angrily. In other words, the choice is, as Erik Erikson put it, integration or despair" (83). Roth, at his advanced age, is faced with the choice of accepting the past as somehow both random and inevitable, or railing against it, a dichotomy that indeed characterises these novels. In "Itinerant Ithacan" Roth allows an element of chance, whereas in the writing of the *Mercy* series he all but imposes an inevitability on the grand narrative of his alter ego's life.

- 18 As an illustration of this, one may compare the two renderings of the protagonist's reaction on being told by Lester/Larry that he is in love with Eda Lou/Edith, an announcement which has an important bearing on his own chances with the woman. In "Itinerant Ithacan", R is simply left dazed by Lester's announcement: "If only his mind weren't forever groping in its phlegmatic murk - if only for once it would skip free into clarity. He shook his head" (201). By contrast, in the later account, Ira "listened, heard, comprehended" (*Diving Rock* 306), while the music to which the two friends are listening underlines Ira's understanding the momentousness of the occasion: "he had just turned off the aria from *La Forza del Destino*" (307). The relative comprehension of his protagonist reflects Roth's own grasp of the importance of Lester/Larry's announcement: by the time of writing the later account, Roth, like Ira, is more aware of the possible future which awaits him should he subsequently be able to oust his friend from Eda Lou/Edith's affections.
- 19 In the *Mercy* series the tension between the aleatory nature of Ira's growth into an artist and the seeming inevitability of his destiny becomes insistent after Edith befriends him. Another crucial episode common to both versions in this respect is Edith's smuggling a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses* through customs, a book with which Ira rapidly becomes obsessed in terms its innovations of form. The later version is once more considerably longer (around eleven pages compared to a little more than a page), and culminates in Ira's epiphany that Joyce's language transforms his subject matter: "Language was the conjurer, indeed the philosopher's stone, language was a form of alchemy. It was language that elevated meanness to the heights of art" (*From Bondage* 77). The way in which this episode is introduced in the *Mercy* version, portentously emphasising the importance of the event for Ira, underscores the greater thematic depth of the later account:

It would only be some time later that Ira came to realize the import of what took place in that elegant living room in that small fraction of time. And yet, the very fact that the event left behind, however small, an irreducible knot within memory would forever mark in Ira's mind the momentous instant of transition when the past departed from its old aim, its previously envisaged future, to a new one, the



instant when sensibility redirected its commitment from an old to a new function. (  
*From Bondage* 61)

- 20 The “irreducible knot within memory” emphasises Roth’s realisation that the teleological perspective granted many years later places pivotal significance on apparently minor events. A major difference thus begins to emerge as we see the earlier short story’s focus – the protagonist caught between two worlds, the immigrant upbringing of his past and the artistic circle of his future – sharpened and deepened into the novel’s theme, which becomes the growth of an artist. The series may thus be characterised as a *Künstlerroman*, a Jewish-American *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, relocated to 1920s New York City.
- 21 This reading of the longer work as a *Künstlerroman* is reinforced firstly by Ira’s growing infatuation with Joyce: as he begins to read *Ulysses*, he describes his compulsion to “subject himself to this shibboleth of modern novels,” as a means of passing through what he terms a “gateway of esteem” (*From Bondage* 65). In other words, Ira finds it necessary as an artist to initiate himself thoroughly in the techniques of literary modernism, hence his obsessive reading of first Joyce, and then Eliot. With regard to the latter, a later episode, wherein the protagonist argues with a sceptical Lester/Larry over the merits of *The Waste Land*, while it appears in both “Itinerant Ithacan” and the *Mercy* series, is characteristically given much more weight in the longer work. In the short story, it is difficult to take the argument, which seems rather less consequential, to be greatly symbolic of R’s growing artistic sensibility, not least because there is no evidence of the latter. In the *Mercy* series, by contrast, Ira has already shown evidence of his sensitiveness towards language, has had a short piece published in the college magazine, and is similarly beginning to appreciate that he may be the real artist in comparison to the dilettante Larry. For anybody familiar with the facts of Roth’s life, Edith’s question in the later work, “And you think Joyce and Eliot will guide you towards realizing future literary ambitions?” (*From Bondage* 163) seems prophetic indeed.
- 22 “Itinerant Ithacan” might be seen as Roth’s *Mercy* series in miniature, an observation which raises a pertinent question. Namely, what is actually added by expanding a modest twenty-six page short story into four volumes of material? Undoubtedly, the earlier story is an accomplished piece in itself, not least in its density and in the skilful way Roth begins his dual-level formal experimentation. But this experimentation is only tentatively begun in “Itinerant Ithacan”; it is in the *Mercy* series where this dispersed narration reaches its full fruition, through contributing to the devastating effect of the revelation regarding the existence of Ira’s sister, and their incestuous relationship. The two narrative levels enable Roth in the *Mercy* series to decentre the autobiographical protagonist, thus shattering the reader’s sense of subjectivity, a process redoubled, moreover, through the interpolation of earlier works such as “Somebody Always Grabs the Purple.” Similarly, and amongst many other thematic aspects, the vastly increased scope of the *Mercy* series allows Roth to address in more depth the tension between the twin elements of chance and inevitability in his development as an artist.
- 23 Roth’s approach to the short story is thus convincingly conceived as utilitarian. In the instances delineated above, he firstly reuses or consumes earlier works as a means to disrupt subjectivity. Secondly, he uses the form as an exercise, experimenting with themes and narrative strategies that he develops in greater depth in his novel series. None of this should diminish the status of Roth’s shorter pieces, a number of which deftly and vividly portray the preoccupation of a lifetime spent guiltily searching for sources of redemption. Nevertheless, one cannot help but conclude from the main direction of his



efforts – notwithstanding the lengthy gap in his output – that Roth clearly perceived himself primarily as a novelist.

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## NOTES

1. References to both "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" and "Itinerant Ithacan" are from this publication, and are given in parenthesis after the quotation.
2. See Simon Turner's article in this collection for a lengthier discussion of Materassi's shaping role in *Shifting Landscape*.
3. In this respect, the interpolation of "Purple" works in precisely the same way as that of other pieces written at a different time to the manuscripts of the *Mercy* series. For example, Roth also incorporates "P & T Yuletide - a Sketch" into *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park*, volume one of the series. This piece was not previously published, but exists as a separate manuscript, predating the *Mercy* series.
4. "Discreet" rather than "discrete" is almost certainly an error missed by the copy editor. Elsewhere in his published work and manuscripts, Roth is evidently prone to the same slip (cf. *Requiem for Harlem*: "Life was full of chaotic fragments, discreet, in the mathematical sense, disparate" [168]).
5. I refer here, only to the published version of the *Mercy* series. There exist several hundred further pages of thus-far unpublished manuscript continuing the narrative into the 1930s.
6. In *Narrative Discourse* Gérard Genette identifies four 'movements' of speed in narrating: decreasingly ellipsis, summary, scene, and pause. While much of "Itinerant Ithacan" consists of summary and scene, the later, *Mercy* series accounts of the same incidents are either scene or, in

the frequent present-day interruptions, pause; the pace of the etiolated narrative in the *Mercy* series is thus generally markedly slower.

7. In the "Itinerant Ithacan" version, Larry and Edith retain the actual names of the people upon whom they are based, respectively Lester Winter and Eda Lou Walton, while the Roth figure is referred to as "R" rather than, as in the *Mercy* series, Ira.

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## ABSTRACTS

Entre *Call It Sleep* et le premier volume de *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, Henry Roth a publié nombre de pièces de fiction brève, dont des nouvelles, des articles et des ébauches autobiographiques. Même si ces récits ont leur intérêt propre, Roth les considère comme mineurs. Aussi s'en sert-il souvent pour tenter des expérimentations qu'il exploitera plus tard dans son œuvre ou bien comme extraits qu'il enserme tels quels dans ses longs récits. Les récits brefs de Henry Roth sont ainsi davantage des outils au service d'une stratégie plus large. Le présent article étudie l'insertion de la nouvelle « Somebody Always Grabs the Purple » (1940) dans le premier volume de *Mercy of a Rude Stream* ainsi que les liens entre le récit bref intitulé « Itinerant Ithacan » (1977) et les quatre volumes de *Mercy*. Cette étude se propose d'illustrer la façon dont Roth retravaille les matériaux thématiques de récits courts, les développe et se les approprie pleinement dans son œuvre romanesque.

## AUTHORS

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Alan Gibbs teaches at the University of Nottingham. His published articles on Roth include an interview with Robert Weil, the editor of Roth's *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, for *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, and a piece comparing the posthumous editing of Roth's *Mercy* series with Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth* for *U.S. Studies Online*.