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Writing and Parricide in Henry Roth's "Final Dwarf"

Lene Schøtt-Kristensen

For the briefest moment David felt a shrill, wild surge of triumph whip within him, triumph that his father stood slack-mouthed, finger-clawing, stooped... In the kitchen, he could hear the policeman interrogating his father, and his father answering in a dazed, unsteady voice. The sense of triumph that David had felt on first being brought in, welled up within him again as he listened to him falter and knew him shaken. (*Call It Sleep*) It was ridiculous to bear a grudge against the old guy. There was nothing left of him. A little old dwarf in a baggy pair of pants. *The final dwarf*. Kestrel smiled. ("Final Dwarf")

- 1 "Final Dwarf", originally published in *The Atlantic* in 1969, later included in *Shifting Landscape*, is arguably Henry Roth's most accomplished short story. The explicit theme of the story is a problematic father-son relationship; the implicit theme is writing. "Final Dwarf" can be read as an allegory of writing, which demonstrates how for Roth parricide and writing were inextricably linked together.
- 2 What did writing *Call It Sleep* mean to Roth, the Jewish slum kid from Harlem? Suggesting that all of Roth's work can be read as portraits of the artist, and thus as allegories of writing, I believe that this question is an important key to the author's work, including his monumental writer's block. Freud figures prominently in this article because Roth's work is saturated by Freudian ideas. Roth has made contradictory remarks about his own knowledge of and the possible influence on him by Freud but these questions appear all but irrelevant; theoretical knowledge and influence aside, Freud is in Roth's bloodstream, as it were.¹ *Call It Sleep* is an elaborate oedipal drama, as most critics have noted, as is

Mercy of a Rude Stream, but more than that, Roth's entire work reads as a dramatization of Jewish civilization and its discontents. Moreover, Roth, consciously or unconsciously, perceived his art and his artist's role in traditional Freudian terms. The following discusses some central Freudian aesthetic ideas that help to shed new light on Roth's work in general and on his writer's block in particular.

- 3 Freud never formulated a coherent aesthetics, let alone a theory of literature.² He seems, wisely, to have had strong reservations about such a project. But some concepts stand out as basic Freudian aesthetic ideas. One is the central idea that the work of art represents a wish-fulfilment, typically of infantile sexual and therefore shameful desires. Another is the idea that, although inextricably bound together, the form and the content of a work of art can be treated as two separate things. Both thoughts are expressed in "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming":

The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality... The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality. (131-32, 134)

- 4 Similarly:

The writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and *disguising* it, and *he bribes us by the purely formal* – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies. (140-41, emphasis added)

- 5 Suffice it here to note that Freud seems to perceive of art as a pretext, a cover and a substitute for something else. His attitude is that of the skeptical scientist, the moralist, and perhaps the puritan. The traditional psychoanalytical reading aims to retrieve the latent content behind the manifest statements of the text and to disclose the intimate personality of the artist – an approach which must be characterized as rather hostile, and in some fundamental way suspicious of art. This suspicion is of course built into the (problematic) Freudian distinction between content and form; to read is to unmask, to learn to see *through* the glitter of the surface.
- 6 The third basic Freudian concept which we shall touch upon is that of sublimation. Freud sees art as sublimated sex drive. Sublimation is the redirection of the libido rather than the repression of the drive and as such it is viewed favourably by Freud. It is a socially acceptable way of handling an unacceptable drive, an activity which fuses the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The artist may have the disposition of a neurotic but because of his remarkable capacity for sublimation and because of his strong sense of reality, he does not become ill. And yet, Freud also expresses doubt as to the ultimate value of sublimation as a healthy solution: art may at least partly be a substitute for the unacceptable sexuality but it remains associatively related to the repressed drive. The fact that the sublimated activity is never freed from its source means that it will never be able to replace it completely.
- 7 Freud seems to be uncertain about the nature of artistic creativity. Should we admire the artist or pity him? Is artistic creativity a healthy activity or a neurotic symptom? The result of a perfect fusion of the pleasure principle and the reality principle? Or a kind of cowardly escapist activity? Is the artist's project really hopeless, bound to cause him dissatisfaction because it is a substitute for something else? This uncertainty may have its roots in a doubleness which Freud seems to see as being inherent in the creative process.

On the one hand, the artist controls and rules in the sense that he rearranges reality to his own liking. He creates a fantasy world with himself as the centre and the ruler, and thus achieves the wish-fulfilment which reality has denied him. On the other hand, the artist is still driven by his infantile wishes and desires (Møller 26-27). But this uncertainty may also have its roots in Freud's own confusion. We find at least two conflicting images of the artist in Freud's aesthetic speculations. One is of the artist as someone endowed with an advanced knowledge of the unconscious: "creative writers are valuable allies" of the psychoanalyst ("Delusions and Dreams" 34). Freud considers the artist with awe, and sees art as a valuable opening into our knowledge of the human mind. The other image is of the neurotic patient, or the infantile and primitive person. One very interesting aspect of the primitive nature of the artist has to do with his apparent belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, that is the belief that one's thinking can affect and alter the world. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud explains that this belief normally characterizes the developmental stage of the child's first three years, that is, the stage of primary narcissism. But in art this belief is preserved (Møller 33).

- 8 There is, then, a doubleness inherent in the creative process as Freud sees it – but there is certainly also a doubleness and ambivalence in his own valuation of art and the artist. His valuation seems to cover a range of feelings from respect and awe to suspicion and skeptical disdain. He "appears both to mock the impotence of fantasy and to fear its power."³ The same ambivalence seems to be true of Roth's attitude to art.
- 9 Roth seems similarly to have understood his own writing and his writer's role in Freudian terms. Several passages in *Call It Sleep* suggest that Roth saw David, his artist figure, as a child at play behaving like a creative writer, fulfilling his wishes by creating a world of fantasy. The wishes that David fulfils for Roth are parricidal and incestuous, as is underlined by the disturbing final image of the boy in the family bedroom. It is a complex and highly ambiguous image which suggests victory as well as defeat. David has triumphed in the sense that he has realized his secret infantile desire; he has killed the father and now has his mother all to himself. But he has lost in the sense that he has won too great a victory. Perhaps suggesting a retreat into neurosis, the final image pictures David as a little Oedipus, almost in bed with his mother, his throbbing foot an allusion to Oedipus's name, which means swollen foot, and which is an allusion to an erect penis (Rudnytsky 20). Roth's final image of the artist reflects his bleak, Freudian outlook; it suggests the impossible nature of the artist's sublimation project in alluding to Freud's insight that the sublimated activity, art, will never be able to replace the underlying drive completely. Similarly, it reflects Freud's conception of the artist as a potentially neurotic, infantile, primitive person.
- 10 The Freudian (and Rankian) concept of the neurotic's family romance adds an extra dimension to the idea that art should represent a wish-fulfilment. The neurotic's family romance is a fantasy, a stage in the development of the neurotic child's estrangement from his or her parents. Normal children, as well as neurotic children, will inevitably become gradually dissatisfied with their parents as they grow up; comparing their parents to others, they will feel that they are slighted, they may regret that they have to share their parents' love with a sibling. Such disappointments are inevitable, but the neurotic child cannot bear them: "His sense that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated then finds a vent in the idea, often consciously recollected later from early childhood, of being a step-child or an adopted child" (Freud, "Family Romances" 221).⁴ The child replaces his parents or the father alone because he longs for the "happy,

vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women ("Family Romances" 224-25). Moreover, Freud writes that if there are any other particular interests at work they can direct the course to be taken by the family romance:

for its many-sidedness and its great range of applicability enable it to meet every sort of requirement. In this way, for instance, the young phantasy-builder can get rid of his forbidden degree of kinship with one of his sisters if he finds himself sexually attracted by her. (224)

- 11 The concept of the family romance is thus wonderfully open.
- 12 In *Call It Sleep* there is one very powerful scene which dramatizes quite concretely the idea of the neurotic's family romance: it is the scene in which David breaks down in the *cheder*, the Hebrew school, and lets the two rabbis in on his secret fantasy that his mother is dead and that his real father is a Christian organist from the old country. With this fantasy David denies his parents, he commits a symbolic patri- and matricide, and reinvents himself as a Gentile and as an American. At one stroke he seems to have freed himself; he has escaped the Jewish world of commandments and restrictions and erased his old identity as the fearful, guilty Jewish son. He has killed the Jewish father and he has banished his forbidden degree of kinship with his mother, whom he, of course, desires sexually.
- 13 David's family romance, his fantasy that he is somebody else, may be read as an analogy to Roth's own desire to escape his Jewish origins - as has also been suggested by Werner Sollors and Hana Wirth-Nesher.⁵ In her reading of the climactic electrocution scene in "The Rail," Wirth-Nesher suggests that it is "as if David dies out of his immigrant life and is born into the world of English literacy and culture, the world of Henry Roth's literary identity, but at the cost of killing both the father and the mother" ("Between Mother Tongue" 485).
- 14 Although never using the term, Roth does actually describe the creation of *Call It Sleep* in terms similar to that of the family romance.⁶ The author's treatment of his sister, for instance, seems quite literally to fit into the scheme of the neurotic's family romance. She does not appear in *Call It Sleep*, and Roth, in 1971, attributes her elimination to his jealous egotism. Later he will refer to a sexual motive. Interestingly, both motives, jealousy and sexual shame, act in accordance with the idea of the family romance. Roth has also made several interesting comments about the autobiographical sources of David's mother. He has explained that Leah Roth was the source of both Genya and Bertha ("these contrasting female figures" [Bronsen 268]), and, complicating the picture, he has also pointed out that Genya is modeled partly on Eda Lou Walton. All of which suggests that Aunt Bertha may represent a truer and certainly less idealized portrait of Roth's real mother. Accepting Roth's second explanation we may speculate that Roth through his family romance denies certain aspects of his real mother by relegating them to an aunt, namely the Jewish greenhorn Aunt Bertha, and by modelling David's mother, Genya, at least partly after Eda Lou Walton. In his fantasmatic reinvention of his origins Roth effectively erases his Jewish family, his parents and sister by descent, claiming that his true parents, his parents by consent, are, in effect, Eda Lou Walton, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot.⁷
- 15 The following statement from Roth about *Call It Sleep* seems to reflect the author's awe-struck fear of the magic power of the novel, the meaning it held for him not just as a writer but as a man: "I often said to myself while I was writing the novel that some day I'd

pay for it, and of course I did" (Freedman 154). For Roth, *Call It Sleep* came to represent an awesome act of transgression, the symbolic fulfilment of forbidden wishes. To Roth, the Jew, the novel represented apostasy from Judaism, a denial and betrayal of the Jewish family, the Jewish people and the Jewish past. His act of self-creation was an act of parricide and Jewish heresy.⁸

- 16 In an interview with Bonnie Lyons, Roth talks about his (real) father's reaction to *Call It Sleep*. It appears that Herman Roth was affected – he felt “remorseful” – but apparently the parricide that Roth committed with *Call It Sleep* did not really sink in: “The reaction of my father was: ‘I shouldn’t have beat him so much’” (*Shifting Landscape* 167). To all appearances, Herman Roth actually thrived on his son's success as a writer. The Henry Roth Collection in the Special Collections at Boston University attests to this impression. The collection, which is very small, seems to have been created largely by virtue of Herman Roth's contributions. It includes some of his personal papers, a Yiddish play, *Sin of Divorce*, written by him around 1940, and the information that he offered to help Boston University financially. One postcard dated 1965 from Henry to Herman reads: “Dear Pop: Had enough of fame? I have.”⁹
- 17 Roth did not succeed in killing the father – neither the real father nor the internalized one. In keeping with the suggestion that Roth himself understood the role and function of art in Freudian terms, his writer's block can also be understood in Freudian terms. In *Writer's Block*, Zachary Leader attempts to construct a Freudian theory of writer's block, a subject about which Freud himself wrote very little.¹⁰ Freud's theory of writer's block, as it is rendered by Leader, is fairly crude and cannot be said to be universally true; rather, it seems to have been tailored to the specific case of Henry Roth. Leader claims that Freud would label writer's block as inhibition. In Freudian terms writer's block would be conceived of like any other inhibition, as a restriction that the ego imposes on itself so as not to arouse anxiety symptoms. Writers usually have a special flexibility or looseness of repression; compared to non-creative people they are in closer contact with their unconscious. The blocked writer, however, has lost this flexibility of repression:
- The strength of the repressive mechanism prevents the blocked writer from releasing powerful instincts and wishes, and writing takes on the character of a dangerous transgression, one which, because the fantasies that motivate it are usually or ultimately Oedipal, is associated with the parent. The writer's anxiety about the release of his wish... is thus a version of castration anxiety... The need to repress simply reasserts itself, overpowering the sublimative compensations of art and resulting, if not in silence, then in other presumably more thorough sublimations. (48-49)
- 18 Art is basically seen as a symbolic parricide, with everything that such an act entails, and writer's block in consequence is seen as castration anxiety – the blocking agent is the internalized image of the father. In his (highly speculative and not very convincing) attempt at psychoanalysing Leonardo da Vinci, Freud suggests that the painter's blockage or inhibition is brought about by the reassertion of repressive forces, that it is a product of the increased pressure from the impulses that are being repressed: the repressed wish for the mother, or the infantile past. However dubious Freud's analysis of Leonardo, we may suppose that Roth's writer's block is of a similar kind and that the factor which reactivated *his* infantile past is his relationship with Walton, a relationship which appears to have had semi-incestuous undertones for Roth himself. Walton, who was his senior by eleven years, appears to have fulfilled several functions for the young man: artistic mentor, bread winner, lover and surrogate mother. The need to repress reasserted itself

and resulted in several thorough sublimations, among which I suggest that we can count Roth's joining the Communist Party and his escape to Maine.¹¹ Freud suggests that

There are clearly also inhibitions which serve the purpose of self-punishment... The ego is not allowed to carry on those activities, because they would bring success and gain, and these are things which the severe super-ego has forbidden. So the ego gives them up too, *in order to avoid coming into conflict with the super-ego.* (*Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* 240-41)

19 As Leader suggests, the self-punitive inhibition is really a version of inhibition as such. In "Dostoevsky and Parricide," Freud shows how the writer could only allow himself some success in his writing once he had debased himself by losing at the gambling tables. Similarly, Roth seemed to be ready to allow himself to write *Mercy* only after he had punished himself with prolonged abstention from writing (or at least from publishing), his recovered flexibility of repression also probably partly brought on by old age. Moreover, the actual writing of the *Mercy* series can be seen as an act of self-punishment. As most readers will know, *Mercy* is a confessional work. The work is aimed at countering and negating *Call It Sleep*, at turning art back into life, a project which involves the revelation of an incestuous relationship between the author, or his alter ego the character Ira Stigman, and his sister. It is a work of repentance and self-abasement, presenting the author figure as an abominable apostate, yearning for forgiveness and for his lost Jewish world. Moreover, *Mercy* represents the author figure as a moral masochist. A moral masochist is a victim of suffering, a person who exists only in suffering. It is someone, who, on account of a guilt complex, is driven by a need for punishment.¹²

20 Let us round off the Freudian account with a hilarious passage from Freud's *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, which suggests that to the blocked writer writing can become so strongly eroticized that the very physical act in itself provokes anxiety:

Analysis shows that when activities like playing the piano, writing or even walking are subjected to neurotic inhibitions it is because the physical organs brought into play – the fingers or the legs – have become too strongly eroticized... As soon as writing... assumes the significance of copulation, or as soon as walking becomes a symbolic substitute for treading upon the body of mother earth, both writing and walking are stopped because they represent the performance of a forbidden sexual act. The ego renounces these functions, which are within its sphere, in order not to have to undertake fresh measures of repression – *in order to avoid a conflict with the id* . (240)

21 Undoubtedly, writing came to represent a forbidden sexual act to Roth, because it was inextricably associated with parricide and incest. In *Call It Sleep* David's, and Roth's, anxieties about the release of their wishes are personified in Albert Schearl, the great castrator, complete with hammer or whip in hand. In *Shifting Landscape* the castrator, or the blocking agent, can be recognized in the *dybbuk*, which would come to haunt the author when he attempted to write. In his account of the writing process which led to the short story "Broker" (1939), Roth speaks of experiencing anxiety and an "approximate nervous breakdown":

Somewhere around one or two in the morning I became aware of a terrible feeling of anxiety; I think it was real fear. Sweat broke out on my brow, and I had a desire to just scream... The anxiety, by the way, persisted. I seemed to be sort of disembodied... It seemed to return whenever I seriously thought to write commercially or anything but a letter... The thing would sort of attack me. (*Shifting Landscape* 60)

- 22 "Final Dwarf" can be read as Roth's attempt to confront both his real father and his *dybbuk*, his writer's block, again. If *Call It Sleep* is Roth's portrait of the artist as a boy – and a young man – "Final Dwarf" is a portrait of the middle-aged artist and as such also an implicit allegory of writing. "Final Dwarf" can be understood as a reenactment of the parricide that Roth committed with *Call It Sleep*, and a far more aggressive one because the story is so evidently autobiographical. In this barely disguised day-dream Roth brings the latent desires out in the open.
- 23 "Final Dwarf," then, comes out of Roth's nearly silent period, his middle age, or the Maine years, a period which is not very well documented in the author's published work but which is represented in detail in the unpublished "Maine Sampler," a 755-page-long manuscript, which is based on Roth's journals from a period spanning the years 1947-65.¹³ It covers the bulk of the years Roth and his family, his wife Muriel and his two sons, spent in Maine, primarily the years in the farmhouse outside Augusta, where the Roths lived from 1949 to 1965. This is roughly the period in Roth's life which began with his relinquishing all hope of writing again and ended with his being rediscovered as the author of *Call It Sleep*, the period in his life in which he was supposedly not writing. Roth's escape to the cultural backwater of rural Maine, to a life as, among other things, a waterfowl farmer, this creation of a new "persona" for himself, smacks of self-dramatization and can be seen as a drastic ritualization of his need to purge himself and create a new life. Roth seems to have escaped to Maine in order to be reborn as someone other than a (Jewish) literary man. His escape can be understood in Freudian terms, as a self-punitive restriction or inhibition, as an unconscious need to repress the creative urge, that forbidden parricidal desire. But Roth could not suppress the desire altogether. Nor could he, however, come to terms with his *dybbuk* or with his real father.
- 24 The overall theme of the "Maine Sampler" is that of the rebirth of the writer, which is quite ironic considering that Roth apparently went to Maine in order to be reborn as someone other than a literary man. In keeping with the theme of rebirth and regeneration Roth makes subtle references to Thoreau's *Walden* as a model for his own work. In the opening story *Kestrel*, Roth's alter ego, is engaged in the project of moving a cabin from somewhere else to place it in his back garden so that his father, Pop, who has his permanent address in New York, can come to stay there in the summer time. Thus the opening seems very ominous as regards the prospect of beginning a new life; the mythical Thoreauvian cabin is not for *Kestrel*, it will be inhabited by Pop, by his *dybbuk*. Not even in Maine could Roth escape his father.
- 25 "Final Dwarf" dramatizes one of these visits by Pop. It depicts a seemingly trivial shopping trip – the middle-aged son is driving his old father Pop around while taking care of some of his own errands – but is a beautiful example of Roth's ability to turn an everyday event into a drama of murderous intensity. The story plays on two principal themes: the theme of stinginess and the theme of the artist's vision and desires.
- 26 At first, the reader is unaware that Pop is present in the story. The opening scene of "Final Dwarf" presents us with the son who is picking up a new pair of glasses which he has obtained through a Sears mail-order catalogue, it shows *Kestrel's* pleasure and triumph: "He was so *pleased* with the reading glasses he had ordered through the catalogue and he was so ingenuous in his *enthusiasm* that the woman behind the counter, the Sears mail-order clerk, asked his permission to try them on" (emphasis added).¹⁴ He gloats over his bargain: "He *smiled*, placed a five-dollar bill on the counter... At least fifteen bucks to

the good, he thought *triumphantly*: that's how much more the unholy alliance of opticians and the American Optical Society would have soaked him" (156 emphasis added). Not only pleased, but triumphant; he almost got something for nothing. As noted, stinginess is a key theme in the story; it is a trait which Kestrel despises in his father, but which he has inherited from him, as becomes clear in the following scenes. Kestrel's mood falls as he remembers that "his father was waiting for him in the car" (157) – the father who is the origin of all his own character traits, including his stinginess and his artist's vision and desire.

- 27 Roth once talked about "the side of Judaism that you had come to dislike in the first-generation Jews who had to subordinate everything in order to make some kind of economic base for themselves" (Lyons, "Interview" 55). For Roth, his own father clearly represented "this side of Judaism"; he seems to have understood stinginess or a general obsession with money as a specifically Jewish characteristic. In fact, some passages in the "Maine Sampler" can be read as the author's reproduction and affirmation of ugly anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews and money. Pop appears as someone who has turned "bargain shopping" into a way of life.¹⁵ At first glance, Pop is not very much like Albert Schearl of *Call It Sleep*. The older father figure is a more recognizable Jewish character, his language identifiable as that of a Jewish immigrant. But their cheapness, and the Freudian character traits associated with cheapness, such as "repressed," "retentive," "anal," even "anal-sadistic," unite them, establish continuity between them. Thus it seems appropriate that Roth should (re)-create a (bargain) shopping tour to represent a day in the life of Kestrel and Pop and to explore his father's and his own stinginess. In keeping with the Freudian characterology, Pop has problems with favours; he cannot bear being indebted to other people, so he constantly manipulates them into doing things for him, constantly conceals his real wishes and motives, as is clear throughout the story.
- 28 The second central theme or motif of "Final Dwarf" is vision, more precisely the artist's vision and desire: "True, the lenses weren't prescription lenses and did nothing to correct his astigmatism" (156); they do, however, offer the seer a special vision. The clerk, who tries them on, is bewildered and disturbed by what she sees through the glasses and she quickly takes refuge behind her own (prescription, we assume) bifocals. The glasses are not for her. The non-prescription glasses symbolize the special vision and desires of the artist, here resembling the Freudian artist who is endowed with a special knowledge of the unconscious and of our forbidden desires and motives. The two themes, stinginess and the artist's vision, are elegantly fused in the symbolic glasses. Kestrel's artistic vision is forever shaped, or warped, by the fact that he is his father's son; stinginess made him buy these glasses rather than prescription glasses – and stinginess is a trait which he has inherited from his father. Throughout the story Kestrel oscillates between triumph and defeat as he realizes that everything he is, he is by virtue of his patrimony.
- 29 Father and son go through the shopping tour, Pop trying half-heartedly to be the selfless father who does not want to be a nuisance, Kestrel trying harder to play the role of the solicitous son. What father and son are really engaged in is a compulsory ritual of punishment and revenge. Kestrel, who is aware of his own filial hatred, tries to check himself, keeps urging his father to put on his seat belt as a protective measure, that is, as a measure to protect him from his son's designs. Kestrel is trying to be civil, knows that he should bear with his old father, because he himself is the one with the upper hand; but this rational thought develops into an ugly feeling of triumph, and leads him to rejoice in the fact of his father's frail old age. He actually sees that his father is dying:

Oh, hell, Kestrel thought as he waited. He never could do anything to please his father. Ever since childhood it had been that way. Still, he had to get over it. It was ridiculous to bear a grudge against the old guy. There was nothing left of him. A little old dwarf in a baggy pair of pants. *The final dwarf*. Kestrel smiled. (160)

30 Kestrel parks the car inconveniently for Pop, who is on his way to get (cheaper) day-old cookies at Arlene's, and as he watches his father, he feels that "There seemed to be a special emphasis about the way he hobbled, as though he were trying to impress the pain he felt on his son" (160). Is Pop acting – exaggerating his pain in order to gain his son's sympathy and thus indirectly punishing him for his inconsiderate behaviour? Is he, in other words, punishing Kestrel with his own suffering? Or is it only Kestrel who sees the special emphasis in Pop's hobbling because he feels guilty about his inconsiderateness and about his feelings of hatred? One problem in this father-son relationship seems to be that they are too much part of each other to be able to see each other as separate individuals – a complex which appears to be a symptom and a product of the incestuous family, which Roth treats in detail in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.

31 Driving homewards to Kestrel's Maine farmhouse, Pop tries to engage his son in a political discussion about black Americans. He reveals a shocking racism, claiming that he wished John Kennedy had been shot before he became president:

Yeh, the Niggehs! What they [Robert and John Kennedy] made such a good friend from the Niggehs! You're such a good friend from the Niggehs? There! ... You know, you can't talk to a Niggeh no more since the Kennedys? ... Not to a man, not to a woman, not to a child. Even a child'll tell you: go to hell, you old white fool. (163)

32 Pop's attack, of course, is primarily an attack on his son; what he is essentially saying is that he would not mind seeing *him* shot. And he goes on pointing to the worst imaginable scenario:

You'll be just like me. Wait. I seen already *philospohes* like you. Your cousin Louis Cantor when he lived was a *philosophe*, a socialist. Every time he came to the house he brought the socialist *Call*. So what happened in the end? He laughed from it. "What a fool I was," he used to say. (165)

33 Kestrel, in retaliation, plays with the idea of killing his father: "Two inches to the right, he thought, two inches that way with the steering wheel, and it would all be over with the old fool. Just two inches *now*; he'd go through the windshield like a maul, he'd slam that rusty granite [of the ledge]" (164). But, as before, he checks himself, realizing that killing his father this way would in all likelihood result in his own death, too. This is Kestrel's bitter insight into the oneness of father and son.

34 Throughout the story it seems that Pop is unaware of his son's parricidal feelings; only when eventually trying on the symbolic mail-order bifocals can he see what is going on. He sees his son is going right into the stone wall and he finally puts on his seat belt. Here Roth elaborates on the symbolic meaning of the glasses; they work as a symbol of the artist's vision and in this particular case it is the Freudian artist's vision, the vision which insists on focusing on the semi-unconscious ugly feelings below the surface, such as parricidal desires. Kestrel's oneness with his father is further cemented in the symbolic connotations of the glasses. As already noted, Kestrel bought these particular non-prescription glasses because he is his stingy father's stingy son. He has, in a word, inherited everything from his father, including his artist's vision. As Roth points out in the interview attached in *Shifting Landscape*, the story is prophetic because it "meant the shrinking of the liberal" (166). In an ironic reversal the final dwarf becomes not Pop, who is approaching death, but Kestrel, who will end up like him.

- 35 As Bonnie Lyons suggests, the “brilliance of this savage story depends largely on the complex connections between the images of the final dwarf and Kestrel’s glasses” (*Henry Roth* 154). Both the final dwarf image and the glasses involve the “transposition of selves... Wearing Kestrel’s glasses, the old man sees through Kestrel’s eyes. What he sees is an image of Kestrel’s murderous fantasy, the magnified approach of the stone wall.” And we end up with a “double transformation of father to son and son to father” (*Henry Roth* 154).
- 36 As suggested, both *Call It Sleep* and “Final Dwarf” can be read as allegories of writing. Roth indirectly dramatizes the Freudian insight that art is a pretext, a substitute for something else, namely the forbidden infantile parricidal wish. Moreover, his story can be seen as reflecting the Freudian ambivalence about art, an ambivalence which is also his own. The artist appears as a figure offering a valuable opening into the human mind, as someone who is endowed with a special knowledge of the unconscious. But he also appears as a semi-neurotic person, as infantile and primitive in his savage desires. In both *Call It Sleep* and “Final Dwarf” the parricidal sons experience a triumphant moment when they see their fathers defeated: Albert Schearl stands “slack-mouthed, finger-clawing, stooped” (433), Pop becomes a “little old dwarf in a baggy pair of pants. *The final dwarf*” (160). Both victories, however, are equivocal. As suggested, the final image of David may reflect a retreat into neurosis and, accordingly, it can be seen as a reflection of Roth’s ambivalent feelings about art. “Final Dwarf” reflects the middle-aged man’s awareness of the impossibility of killing the father, as suggested by the insight into the oneness of father and son and by the reversal, his suspicion that he will end up being like his father. Moreover, Kestrel, or Roth, sees that his special artist’s vision is inextricably – and unbearably – linked with his patrimony: he bought the special glasses because he is his stingy father’s stingy son. He became the writer Henry Roth by virtue of his patrimony.
- 37 The final image of Pop in “Final Dwarf” suggests that he is defeated; it is an image of the *old man groping* beside him for the seat-belt buckles. And, as suggested by Roth’s interview with Lyons, “Final Dwarf” was not only prophetic as to the fate of Henry Roth, it was also a kind of eye-opener to Herman Roth: “In this story, he began to understand the essential and irreconcilable animosity that existed between us” (*Shifting Landscape* 167). Moreover, there is a powerful note of triumph in Roth’s letter dealing with the story, which is included in *Shifting Landscape*. Characteristically Roth does not seem to distinguish between the fictional “Pop” and his own father¹⁶: “the son has for all intents and purposes killed his father, as in fact he should. The mere physical continuity of the old boy is of no great account. (And it so happens that when he left, as he did within the week, I felt he was... crawling off to die)” (166, ellipsis in original). As if the story did, in fact, fulfil the forbidden wish. As if Roth sees himself as the primitive Freudian artist who believes in the omnipotence of thoughts; as if words could kill.
- 38 But the final image of Kestrel himself also suggests defeat. “Final Dwarf” began on a note of pleasure and triumph: Kestrel’s gloating over his bargain, his new glasses, can be read as an image of the artist’s triumph, an affirmation of art. But the story ends on a note of defeat: “Kestrel sighed. He felt shriveled. He removed a hand from the wheel, replaced the glasses in his pocket” (166). The glasses were no good, after all. This gesture reflects Roth’s despair at art. The story illustrates the ambivalence that Roth seems to have felt about art in general; it shows him as an artist who fears the power of art just as he mocks its impotence.
- 39 Just as Roth never resolved his relationship with his father, so he never resolved his ambivalence about art. Albert Schearl, Pop, and Herman Roth represent the source of

Roth's art, but they simultaneously represent the *dybbuks*, or the blocking agents which forbid the creative desire. Moreover, "Final Dwarf," like *Call It Sleep*, suggests that killing the father is to win too great a victory, since parricide is also suicide. "Final Dwarf" reads as the middle-aged man's bitter realization of the same paradox. The story also points to other works: to the unpublished "Maine Sampler" and to *Mercy of a Rude Stream* whose father figure has more in common with Pop of "Final Dwarf" than with Albert Schearl. Moreover, it seems likely that Ira Stigman of *Mercy* got his name from "Final Dwarf," from Roth's imaginative use of the symbolic meanings of the complex of astigmatism. And Roth, of course, continued to speculate about the parricidal implications of writing. In *Mercy* he represents his young artist, Ira Stigman, as Freud's primal man. Ira's desires go beyond the nuclear family to include both sister and cousin; his parricidal designs are directed against his father as well as the older patriarch, his grandfather Zaida.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Werner Sollors "A world somewhere, somewhere else" page 164, note 2 for Roth's comments on Freud.
2. I am indebted to Lis Møller for the following explication.
3. The words are from Frederick Crews, who in his Freudian analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne, speculates that Hawthorne "appears both to mock the impotence of fantasy and to fear its power" (73).
4. See also Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Interpretation of Mythology*, 61ff.
5. Sollors and Wirth-Nesher read the ending of *Call It Sleep* in a similar way, although Sollors uses the term "family romance", whereas Wirth-Nesher does not. See Wirth-Nesher, "Between Mother Tongue and Native Language in *Call It Sleep*" and Sollors, "'A world somewhere, somewhere else.'"
6. As is also noticed by Sollors in "A world somewhere" pp.164-65, note 164.
7. I draw here on Sollors's useful terms of consent and descent. See his *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*.
8. Roth had many reasons to feel guilty about his master-piece. To Roth, the Communist, the novel was an act of political heresy, modernism being anathema to the "proletarian movement"; it reflected a special kind of bourgeois decadence. Moreover, he could not forgive himself that he had shut himself up in the sheltered ivory tower which Walton provided for him during the worst years of the Great Depression. Ever since he completed *Call It Sleep*, Roth guiltily attempted to leave that tower of privilege. Finally, Roth had presented an idealized picture of himself in the novel; he had lied about his personal history, most importantly about his sexual history.
9. The Henry Roth Collection in the Department of Special Collections, Boston University, Box 3.
10. Assuming that the writer's block is a neurotic symptom, and that the curing of the block equals the curing of the person, Leader contradicts one of Freud's theoretical premises – the idea that the healthy do not write – but he follows the idea that the writer is endowed with an advanced knowledge of the unconscious.
11. Roth, who had joined the Communist Party as he was finishing *Call It Sleep*, often spoke of his political affiliation and conviction as a kind of superego demanding "that you write as a social realist and that you write objectively and that you write about the proletariat and the revolution

and so forth." The Party's demand had the effect of "pinning me against the wall. Since it was the last thing I could really do, it had the effect of making me overly conscious about myself as a writer. Trying to write, you might say, with an eye on the revolution, or on the Party, trying to write with the maximum of social consciousness was not the kind of thing that I was cut out for. Nevertheless, I felt a compulsion to do so." (*Shifting Landscape* 46). In "No Longer at Home" (1971), Roth speaks in Freudian metaphors, suggesting that his social or political consciousness represents his superego, his writer's talent or urge his libido. See *Shifting Landscape* 169-70.

12. See my thesis "The *Leydn Jar*: A Study of Henry Roth" for a more detailed definition of moral masochism and for a reading of Roth as a moral masochist.

13. The "Maine Sampler" can be found in the Henry Roth Papers at the American Jewish Historical Society, New York City.

14. *Shifting Landscape* 156. All further quotations from "Final Dwarf" are taken from this reprint of the story and are denoted by page numbers in parentheses.

15. The term comes from Paul Auster, who, in his autobiographical *The Invention of Solitude*, interestingly portrays his (second generation) Jewish father as a man who, in some ways, resembles Roth's father. Like Herman Roth, Auster's father was a hard worker, who dreamt of becoming a millionaire, and he was a man who turned "bargain shopping" into a way of life: "He did not want to spend [money], he wanted to have it, to know that it was there. ...At times, his reluctance to spend money was so great it almost resembled a disease" (53).

16. At least the reader cannot tell from the excerpt of the letter which has been included in *Shifting Landscape*.

ABSTRACTS

D'inspiration autobiographique, la nouvelle « Final Dwarf » reflète les difficultés relationnelles d'Henry Roth avec son père, Herman. Le drame oedipien qui est au cœur de *Call it Sleep*, de *Mercy of a Rude Stream* et de l'inédit « Maine Sampler », se manifeste ici en tant que désir parricide pour constituer une représentation de l'acte d'écrire. La nouvelle se présente alors comme une allégorie de la création littéraire. Freudienne et intertextuelle, cette approche tente d'explorer le redoutable blocage de l'écrivain : si pour Roth l'écriture est synonyme de parricide, le blocage pourrait être perçu comme une peur de la castration.

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