Remarks on Sabbath

One of the chief attractions of puzzling over Sabbath's Theater, Philip Roth's novel from 1994, is doubtless similar to the one experienced by readers of Ulysses in the last century--deciphering an exceedingly complex narrative that crosses years and decades in no particular order, identifying casually dropped clues about the major and minor characters that eluded one in earlier readings, and spotting the appearance of at least a few figures who show up in novels Roth published before and after this one. A nurse in a cancer ward with a brief two-page appearance in Sabbath is the same Jinx Possesski who plays a central role in Operation Shylock, the immediately preceding Roth novel that was published in 1991; and Matthew Balich, a young policeman who plays a small but important role in this novel, is the same disbelieving cop Nathan Zuckerman confronts at the end of The Human Stain.

Sabbath is essentially the chronicle of a man--Mickey Sabbath--undergoing a breakdown. Set in New York and covering three days in the middle of April, 1994, the story extends back to the era of the Depression and World War II in a small town near the coast of New Jersey and later to New York in the fifties and sixties, and finally to the New England village of Madamaska Falls, where Sabbath goes into retreat for thirty wasted years. (For a spell, he is "adjunct professor of puppet theater," a lofty title bestowed by a mediocre local college from which he is driven out in 1990 after having an affair with a twenty-year-old student--an event that is turned into a spectacular scandal with enormous punitive force.) The novel is so dense with detail and narrative transpositions that it would require a miracle of retentiveness to maintain an effective

grip on the text during a first reading. Though not as difficult as Ulysses, which it deliberately echoes, this book is meant to be read repeatedly and carefully studied. There is no other way to track the voluminous biographical details of the characters with which the story has been tiled. On a first reading, I doubt the most careful student can establish from page to page into what phase of the character's life he has been dropped--especially when dealing with the five-year period of 1990-1994, which takes up most of the novel. Are we in Madamaska Falls, during the year of "the Great Scandal," over in Roderick House, the private psychiatric hospital for alcoholics and addicts, where Roseanna, Sabbath's aggrieved wife, is drying out after decades of hard drinking? Or in New York, where Sabbath entertains himself by practicing "the magical art of begging," his demented conception of comical self-degradation, and by visiting dangerous streets and taunting impoverished blacks, some of doubtful mental stability? Let me modify that. The individual scenes are clear, but their place in the chronology of the story is not. Working out this perplexing, lengthy sequence is one of the assignments Roth has given us.

There is more. We obtain (again) an enormous amount of biographical information about Sabbath, ostensibly intent on suicide and bearing "a superabundance of desperation." But a reader shortly understands that he is far too vital for anything so extreme. Sabbath is desperate--"homeless, wifeless, penniless, mistressless," as Roth describes him--but not depressed. A former seaman on freighters running cargo along the Caribbean and the coast of Latin America, he has concentrated on almost nothing but sex for most of his adult life. In the fifties, after his discharge from the Army, he began a career as a theater director; that petered out when his first wife, the actress Nikki,

vanished from New York, never to be accounted for again. Sabbath is a Jew by birth but an atheist who lacks any identification or fellow-feeling for Jews, a Jew who marries Gentiles and remains childless, who cannot even imagine becoming a father, who does not believe in friendship, moral feeling, permanent domestic attachments, and who has long ceased to believe there is "meaning" or a "pattern" in life. This must be a painful experience for the man. By the spring of 1994, the ostensible "present" of the novel, Sabbath is suffering from several profound losses and has immersed himself, as Roth says, in "books about death." Which ones we are never told. But the clear suggestion is that Sabbath is struggling to bear profound losses, including that of his brother Morty, to whom he was extremely close, and his lover, Drenka, along with parents, who have all disappeared into death's dateless night. Meaning and significance are proving harder to abandon than Sabbath had imagined.

The mind sometimes comes to its own defense when conventional methods fail. Shortly before Drenka falls ill, Sabbath begins to have fantasies of his long-dead mother hovering around him, offering the support and occasional criticism he seldom enjoyed as a youth. Similarly, Nathan Zuckerman in Exit Ghost imagines the dead E.I. Lonoff speaking to him, soliciting aid for the impoverished, cancer-stricken Amy Bellette, whom Zuckerman is visiting at her squalid apartment in New York.

"Society" for Sabbath is the object of unremitting but passive opposition, even hatred. The loss of his brother in the war against Japan was a devastating privation, the worst of his life, but one entirely bereft of "patriotic" significance, and lacking any connection to the shared sacrifice required to destroy a murderous enemy for the good of humanity.   Sabbath does not read newspapers or listen to the news; nor does he bother to

vote or take an interest in politics. Had the Internet arrived when the novel was written, he would have spent idle hours looking for women "in cyberspace," avidly contemplating their pictures, pondering strategies for attracting them. All of his forms of relating to people in the novel, from the profound to the superficial, fall into easily identifiable categories. There is light-hearted but mocking banter; verbal aggression, sometimes intense; attempted sexual conquest; or simple indifference. He relishes toying with people by insinuating remarks that make them apprehensive or angry, and if a confrontation gets underway, he is often eager to raise the level of aggression. He is fearless, it should be noted, but not at all physically violent. The work-a-day life of millions of people is utter anathema to him; he has lived for years on his wife's income as a high school art teacher, and when he did deign to work, earned no more than a pittance as a part-time college instructor. His goal in any case was never to earn money but to pick up female students; the experience of receiving a check simply fed his rage and illustrates how everything routine or conventional offends the man. Sabbath "hated the dough, hated being an employee on a payroll who got a paycheck that he took to a bank where behind the counter there was a person they called a teller because she had it in her to tell even Sabbath to have a good day." He even detested endorsing the check and having the stub torn off, in the days where there was one, and seeing the deductions tallied up. The repetitiveness and regimentation inseparable from the world of jobs--and above all the need to submit to it all--is utterly intolerable to a man who thrives on novelty, titillation, provocation.

High-strung, sardonic, witty, sarcastic, embittered, aggressive, cynical, but also burdened with painful self-contempt, remote from the conventions of life, Sabbath

requires little to raise his spirits. A fresh change of clothes supplied by his hosts when he goes to New York, "new khaki trousers and his new Jockey briefs," even new handkerchiefs--along with the prospect of seducing his friend's wife, Michelle, and finally the chance to explore New York for a few hours--these are enough to leave him "sublimely effervescent." But Sabbath's expectations for many years have been low. Life for him is a kind of Nietszchean becoming and passing away into nothingness; any "meaning" we find is imaginary, the product of a weak and suffering species unwilling to accept that there isn't any--unless, of course, those "books about death" offer him something to believe in after all. (It is testimony to the character's self-absorption that while the Pacific Theater, where his brother died, draws a lot of attention in the novel, there is hardly a single reference to Hitler's war and the genocidal Nazi goals in Slavic Europe.)

Sabbath, like many of Roth's characters, *does* think, chiefly but not only about methods of sexual gratification. He is, despite everything, an autodidact, an intellectual of a limited type; he can give his grounds for the rejection of the conventional one way or another. In this respect he is like the aging David Kepesh of *The Dying Animal*, published seven years later and for me a companion text. Both characters are determined to have as many sexual experiences as possible, but Kepesh, a conventionalized version of Sabbath, is wealthy, learned, far more established in life, a semi-retired English professor and television critic. He falls into acute depression when he breaks up with the young and beautiful Consuela, a Cuban student with whom he began an affair. Teaching for Kepesh, as with Sabbath, is a means of attracting young women. "I'm very vulnerable to female beauty," Kepesh says at the beginning of the novella. "Everybody's defenseless

against something, and that's it for me."

This is a justification for the narrator Kepesh, the kind of justification a civilized man believes he needs as he explains his troubles to his patient companion, the unidentified listener in the novella who remains silent until the last page of the story. Sabbath acknowledges no such need to justify himself; he simply does whatever his urges press him to do. An utter reprobate, a self-taught theater director and a former seaman, indifferent, high-spirited, amoral, he simply does whatever he wants within the limits of his age, the law, and his exiguous funds. If anything redeems the man--and it does--it is the scale of his suffering, which Roth is able to dramatize at length and with great force, though on a first reading the condition stimulating his desperation is likely to be overshadowed by the wretchedness of his character. All readers of the novel know that the longest-lasting attachment of his life, Drenka Balich, dies of cancer prematurely young, in November, 1993, and the hospital death-bed scene, reserved for the end of the novel, is presented with overwhelming pathos. Equally effective, devastating even, is the intermittent but extended treatment of his ties with his older brother, Morty, a bomber pilot shot down over the Philippines and dead for half a century by 1994. That event produces Sabbath's life-long, deforming hatred of the Japanese and effectively destroys his family as well: the mother, once as vivid and vital as Sabbath, retreats into the silent immobility of depression, an experience that lasts for the remaining forty-six years of her life. (The rhetoric Roth deploys to dramatize the impact of the experience is among the most powerful in the book.) In August 1964, when Sabbath was a director, his first wife, Nikki, simply vanished from the streets of New York, never to be heard of again. True to form, poor Sabbath, unable to content himself with one woman, had already begun an

affair with the then-young Roseanna when Nikki disappeared. Unable to find her, anywhere, despite contacting police departments in various parts of the country, both he and Roseanna leave New York and seclude themselves in rural New England for decades. Many years later, by a cruel twist, Dean Kimiko Kakazaki emerges as the figure "leading the coven that cost him his job" at the college in Madamaska Falls; this was after his affair with twenty-year-old Kathy Goolsbe becomes public. The "Japanese viperina," "the midget Jap dean," as the puppeteer names her, is eager to have the elderly man as a "trophy" in the never-ending campaign to protect college women against instructors like Sabbath; students would otherwise be "victimized and intimidated." The Japanese have struck again, and the gall is deep. Driven out of New York by the inexplicable loss of his wife, driven out of New England by the scandal, suffering acute pain from arthritis of the hands (a condition produced by decades of manipulating puppets), Sabbath is now, in the winter of 1994, exposed to yet another convulsion in his emotional life. Some months after Drenka's death in November, he becomes retrospectively and sharply jealous of all the men she was with in her years of adultery. Thrilled to have these affairs described when she was alive--he even asked her once to try her hand at a crude sketch of one man's genitals--her sexual adventures now leave him suffused with a "stupendous, deforming emotion."

When the novel begins, Drenka, twelve years into the reciprocally adulterous affair--she is married to another Croatian immigrant, hopelessly dull--insists that Sabbath commit himself to fidelity: "Either foreswear fucking others or the affair is over." Of course, Sabbath has long since lost the ability to attract women. Those opportunities virtually ended with age and the impact of the Great Scandal. Still, he insists on the

privilege of sexual freedom, and up until the end of the novel, he never stops scouting for prospects. A sexual addict? In the Age of Psychology, some readers will undoubtedly interpret him this way. The self, struggling with inner deadness caused by the early destruction of his family, needs the endless stimulation of pursuing and finally having sexual relations with as many women as possible as frequently as possible--any woman, any time, under nearly any circumstance. What keeps him alive are the thrills of sex (but not especially pornography) and endless verbal aggression. "God bless you sir," he calls out to a man who has dropped a coin into his cup, "God bless you and your loved ones and your cherished home with the electrical security system and the computer-accessed long-distance services."

At a moment when Sabbath is planning an encounter with Drenka's widowed husband, Roth comments that avoiding the man forever "would be making life too easy on himself. [Sabbath] would long ago have died of boredom without his extensive difficulties." Along with emptiness and deadness would be the lack of certainty, the confusion over the self and its identity; any hope for developing that were lost when his brother died and his mother became mute with depression. In his ruminations over breakdown and suicide, Sabbath wonders continually whether he isn't feigning the whole experience of desperation and premature death. Intending to walk into the sea at the Jersey coastline near the end of the novel, Sabbath unavoidably asks himself, as he often does in the novel, "But am I even playing at this? Even at this? Always hard to determine."

Roth ridicules the analytic approach. Roseanna, determined to stay on the wagon, attends daily AA meetings, driving as far as fifty miles from home to find them, and

acquires the imbecilic language and syntax of the self-help movement--"drunkalogs," "cross-talk," "inner peace and spirituality." "And is the only way to get off the booze to learn to talk like a second grader?" Sabbath asks his wife. "As an active alcoholic," she answers, "I compromised myself so horribly hiding alcohol, hiding the disease, hiding the behavior…You're as sick as your secrets." Two hundred pages later, which is a few years earlier in the chronology of the story, Roth renews his attack on psychology, when Sabbath visits his wife at Roderick House, the private psychiatric hospital in Usher she has entered to free herself of alcoholism (a nod here to the drinking troubles of Poe, who produced literature in spite of them). Sabbath falls into a conversation with a suicidal young woman, and they soon begin ridiculing Eric Erikson's theory of the stages of growth, which enjoyed great popularity in the sixties. A standardized form of everyone's life seems to be the point of the exchange. The talk moves on to the subject of incest, of which Roseanna claims to be a victim; the young woman calls this "the simplest story about yourself that explains everything--it's the house specialty." After leaving the hospital, Roseanna begins reading books and pamphlets in bed at night with titles like Came to Believe, Twenty-four Hours, and The Little Red Book; these are among the innumerable volumes on "recovery" recommended by AA and thought to be effective in keeping believers off alcohol. Asked by her husband how she imagines these books are helping her, Roseanna says, almost predictably, that she is "getting in touch with my inner self." "Whatever happened to the Roseanna Cavanaugh who could think for herself?" Sabbath asks, rhetorically. Perhaps Roth believes that the stupor of alcoholism is no worse than the stupor of psychobabble.

In The Human Stain, Roth tacks from a different angle. Coleman Silk learns from the young Faunia Farley, who has become his lover, that her step-father molested her during her childhood. When she attempted to flee from home, her parents arranged psychiatric sessions for the girl. Psychiatry emerged as the favored solution of a post-war generation of parents wealthy enough to pay for therapy but unable to imagine the conditions of family stability that would make it irrelevant. The refractory child, exposed to physical and sexual abuse, will be brought into line by a psychiatrist who will "treat" these inexplicable "symptoms" of disorderliness. The parents' malfeasance, in the form of multiple marriages, physical violence, and sexual abuse, may itself be the source of disturbed children, but is not always seen as related to the trouble. The therapist in this case ends by casting doubt on Faunia's claim of abuse. The step-father is footing the bill, paying the piper, and the psychiatrist falls in line by siding with him. In Roth's view, psychology is either shallow, guilty of a reductive analysis of the mind; or its practitioners are simply corrupt. In Freud's Standard Edition there is no reference to God (except as a father figure and the object of fantasy more generally), sin, evil, providence or grace. The spiritual apparatus of the Church is set aside, and the paying public, confused and disturbed by turns, tacitly accepts the disenfranchisement. Sometimes the Church itself is confused. In Operation Shylock, Jinx Possesski becomes suicidal, and as a believing Catholic enters treatment in the Christian Interpersonal Therapy Workshop. Roth isn't Catholic, of course, but the accounts in his stories are a plea for a concept of the mind that goes beyond formulas and accepts irrationality and understands that perverse figures like Sabbath are unlikely to be "socially improved" by therapy. Wyndham Lewis in his book on Shakespeare calls Iago "the animal human average," and

Roth would accept that as a description of the species. Imagine a therapist entreating Iago to be more thoughtful in dealing with others, and you have an approximate view of Roth's regard for modern psychology.

In each of the books that I have been reading, Sabbath's Theater, The Human Stain and The Dying Animal, Roth presents us with incongruous erotic attachments that are doomed to a bitter conclusion. Sabbath really has fallen in love with Drenka, though it isn't clear whether he is aware of it; and she is dead for about five months before the "present" of the novel ostensibly begins. Roth considers both of his characters crude and degraded, though charged with a vitality and a will that apparently make their stories worth inventing and telling. In The Dying Animal, Kepesh, another sexual monomaniac, surprises himself by falling in love with the young Consuela, but plunges into severe depression when the affair appears to come to an end. They return to each another near the end of the story, but Consuela, like Drenka, is stricken with cancer, and her own mortality is suggested by the end of the novella. Coleman Silk, driven out of Athena College by a bogus scandal that abruptly terminates an impressive academic career, finds consolation, if not precisely love, in his affair with the young Faunia Farley, little more than half his age. Coleman's wife has died shortly before the novel begins. The unexpected renewal of his sex life (abetted by Viagra) with an attractive and much younger woman appeases his acute moral suffering and stimulates a resurgence of his taste for the popular music of his youth. When Coleman is introduced at the beginning of the novel, his interest in classical music has fallen away, replaced by the dance and swing music of the 1930s and '40s. "All those sugary sweet dance tunes that kids of our

generation heard on the radio," says Nathan, "could be heard coming from Coleman's house as soon as I stepped out of my car in his driveway." In Sabbath's Theater, an element of his youth that Sabbath recalls with special force is the swing music of the Benny Goodman quartet, Count Basie, Freddie Green, and Lionel Hampton. The music connects him with what he considers a happy childhood and above all with his brother, himself an amateur clarinetist. At the end of the novel, he even recovers the instrument Morty played.

Coleman describes Faunia to Nathan this way: "In bed is the only place that Faunia is any way shrewd…In bed nothing escapes her attention. Her flesh has eyes. Her flesh sees everything. In bed she is a powerful, coherent, unified being whose pleasure is in overstepping the boundaries." The description will inevitably remind readers of Drenka, who made her appearance in print six years before. Still, Roth announces early in The Human Stain his essential pessimism on the possibility of reclaiming or redeeming life by means of sexual enchantment, of compensating somehow for its disappointments: Coleman himself, although under Faunia's spell, concedes that "every mistake that a man can make usually has a sexual accelerator." Coleman and Faunia are killed when her deranged former husband stages a car accident that he, the husband, survives; I think his original intention was for all three to die in the accident.

Faunia and Kathy Goolsbe, the twenty-year-old Sabbath seduces, are understood by "the academic community" to be innocent young women, barely out of grade school, who need protecting against the depredations of men, above all college professors. What they chiefly need, Roth implies, is protection against a debased academic establishment--"super virtuous antagonists and their angry, sinister fixed ideas"--that tries to take charge

of their lives under the guise of a morality that is itself a manifestation of resentment and control. Faunia tells Coleman that "the good liberals down at Athena" are pressing her to enter a literacy program; should he apply the same pressure, the affair will be over. Readers in fact know that Faunia has at least functional literacy, and by the end of the novel, Zuckerman learns that she kept a diary. Only Zuckerman, the onlooker-narrator struggling with prostate cancer, seems interested in establishing the truth behind the deaths of Coleman and Faunia. People in town, including college instructors, circulate false rumors that illicit sexual activity caused an avoidable car accident. A large measure of Roth's indignation here is over the success of "the community" in shaping the story and imposing itself, the punitive force of "propriety," and "the ecstasy of sanctimony." Well before the novel was written, this had become a familiar subject, "a rendezvous," as Nietzsche would say, "of questions and question marks." The sexual revolution upended the social repressiveness of the Eisenhower years, both of which are fully described in The Dying Animal. Various currents of feminism quickly moved in to restore control. As Allan Bloom wrote in 1987, "The new interference with sexual desire is more comprehensive, more intense, more difficult to escape than the older conventions, the grip of which was so recently relaxed….The July 14 of the sexual revolution was really only a day between the overthrow of the Ancien Regieme and the onset of the Terror." The new standard of what might be called appropriate sexual relations calls for "equality" between sexual partners, so that no one is able to impose his or her--chiefly, in the eyes of its proponents, his--will. David Kepesh calls this "the standard unthinking." "There is no sexual equality," he declares roundly to his silent interlocutor, "and there can be no sexual equality, certainly not one where the allotments are equal, the male quotient

and the female quotient in perfect balance. It's the chaos of eros we're talking about, the radical destabilization that is its excitement…What it is is trading dominance, perpetual *imbalance*…" [Italics in the original.]

Who has the authority to tell the 71-year-old retired, widowed Coleman Silk that he cannot have sexual relations with the divorced, 34-year-old Faunia? Neither has any connection to Athena College. (Dean Roux, who helped drive him from the school earlier, sends Coleman a crude anonymous note indicating that "Everyone knows you are exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age.") Or to tell Sabbath that he cannot have sexual relations with a 20-year-old student? Roth would say the question is misplaced. Who is to forbid Kathy from getting involved with Sabbath, a man who is running an academically insignificant afternoon program on puppet design and puppet theater? In a more traditional college, this would have been considered nothing more than a noncredit extra-curricular program with the most tenuous tie to formal undergraduate studies. It is clear from the history of the affair that Kathy is a more-than-willing partner in her instructor's degraded routines. So what happened to "rights"? And above all "student rights," the battle cry of the generation that attended college twenty years before Kathy? They have been subsumed under a definition of virtue justifying itself as a call for "protection." But who is being virtuous, in what way, and on behalf of whom? And who is being protected? From whom and by whom?

It is an appalling spectacle of late-twentieth-century America that Roth has painted in these novels. His characters, who range across many levels of society, descend into alcoholism and drugs, imagine nothing more important than sex, tape their lewd

telephone conversations, take (and later share) pictures of their sexual organs, and organize malicious schemes, like Delphine Roux in The Human Stain, to destroy the career of an honorable man. Kepesh and Consuela spend New Year's Eve 2000 together taking in the events on TV, observing stupefying celebrations as Europe and North America pass into the new millennium. Both are disgusted. "No bombs go off," Kepesh muses, "no blood is shed--the next bang you will hear will be the boom of prosperity and the explosion of markets…Watching this hyped-up production of staged pandemonium, I have a sense of the monied world eagerly entering the prosperous dark ages. A night of human happiness to usher in barbarism.com." Note that: "*eagerly* entering."

The critique of TV is familiar, but is more essential than ever as the medium extends its degrading impact. Near the end of Sabbath's Theater, after discarding the option of suicide, Sabbath returns to his home in Madamaska Falls, planning a reconciliation with Roseanna. "Take a vacation from your grievances," he wisely tells himself. But spying into the bedroom, he discovers his wife in bed with Christa, a coarse, young German immigrant with whom he and Drenka a few years before had organized a threesome. She and Roseanna are watching a TV program on gorillas, and, losing interest in it, begin imitating gorillas grooming and cleaning each other, "the two of them living in a gorilla dimension…enacting the highest act of gorilla rationality and love." The line separating human from animal is effaced, the species are merging, as we all make our way through what Roth calls the Age of Total Shlock.

At Roderick House, near a nursing station, "a baby cocaine dealer" enters to have her vital signs checked, chanting, with a headset booming in her ears, "Lick it! Lick it! Lick it, baby, lick it, lick it, lick it, lick it!" At the end of the novel, Sabbath finds

himself lost on his way to the cemetery where his family is buried and where he intended to acquire a plot. He discovers new construction that has come to disfigure the coast of New Jersey; the new developments, indeed, are the cause of his losing his way. "Here, at the outlying frontier of the county, where as recently as when his mother had died there'd been miles of sea-level brush, there was now risen everywhere something with which somebody hoped to advance his interests and nothing that didn't say, 'Of all our ideas, this is the worse,' nothing that didn't say, 'The human love of the hideous--there is no keeping up with it.'"

Families are broken up by ill-will and finally divorce, and children bear the impact of the experience; Kepesh is hated by his son. In the early Roth stories of the late 1950s, including "Epstein" and "Goodbye, Columbus," the Jewish family was ridiculed, often sharply, but Sabbath's father was a kindly "butter and egg man" of the immigrant working class, and his mother, a vital, self-sacrificing woman who never imagined a greater good than the welfare of her family. In an earlier phase of his career, Roth might have lampooned such a constellation, but Sabbath's childhood memories of contact, reality, and warmth are among his happiest. His family is later blown to pieces by the war. Families like that, typical of immigrant Jews from the early decades of the last century, seem as remote as Rome.

The college students depicted in <u>Sabbath</u> and <u>Human Stain</u> are worse than ignorant; they are dispiritingly monotonous and vacuous, herded into colleges and universities in order to benefit from a vague idea of training unrelated to education. Kathy Goolsbe, the twenty-year-old who falls in with Sabbath, is a pathetic, meager young woman, "a creature who speaks only in the stunted argot of her age-group," "a

graceless girl, ill-educated, coarse, and incoherent in the preferred style of the late-twentieth-century undergraduate…" Young students in Human Stain complain that Eurpides presents "a derogatory" picture of women and have difficulties with their "self-esteem." Coleman Silk's children believe every false and disreputable story about their father disseminated by the staff at Athena College. Those of us who have taught at universities in the last ten years are obliged to concede that the image of senior instructors administering the Republic of Virtue and that of bored, indifferent and ignorant students is credible.

There are a few admirable people in this trilogy. One would certainly be Coleman, victimized by an "academic community" that formerly stood for higher things. Consuela Castillo in The Dying Animal is presented as a fastidious, well-bred young woman from New Jersey's small but successful Cuban population. Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of Human Stain (and of course other Roth novels) strikes the reader as a perfectly decent human being. The last would be Norman Cowan, the Broadway producer, "a nice rich guy with some depth, and dynamite on the phone at the office," as Roth describes him, who calls Sabbath at his home in Madamaska Falls to alert him to the death of Lincoln Gelman, a victim of suicide; both men had backed Sabbath as a impoverished theater director on the Lower East Side in New York, after Sabbath's years of investigating brothels in Latin America as a seaman, and also after his discharge from the Army. Sabbath does leave for New York, in part for the malevolent satisfaction of seeing Gelman (whom he detested) in his coffin.

The Cowan household, a lavish one overlooking Central Park, reanimates Sabbath's self-contempt; his own poverty and degradation become even more

conspicuous by contrast. But it offers him also more opportunity to stimulate himself sexually. He begins having fantasies about Cowan's daughter, off at college, and tries to begin an affair, however improbably, with Michelle, the wife. The likelihood of this coming off would seem rather low, but Michelle, "brimming over with boredom," "did not love her husband" and was willing to consider Sabbath's proposal. Despite her interest, she finally backs down when Sabbath's recklessness, initially appealing, becomes too dangerous to disregard. "Crude she was herself," writes Roth, "besmirched, wily, connubially half-crazed, but not yet uncontrollably desperate." Other things intervene that impel the husband to drive Sabbath from his home--Cowan discovers a pair of his daughter's underpants in Sabbath's trousers, and also a bag of cocaine, which Sabbath--as indifferent to drugs as he is to alcohol--bought the day before "for a joke, for no reason at all, because he was getting a kick out of the dealer." Sabbath does, however, have one deed to perform for his benefactor, the conventional liberal, "a nice guy with some depth," who believes that the transforming powers of therapy can wrest Sabbath from his condition and render him normal. Sabbath had discovered, while searching the home, pornographic pictures of the wife, along with ten thousand dollars in cash. Assuming the husband knows nothing about them, Sabbath removes them from a drawer before Norman, "determined, indefatigable, almost irrationally humane," discovers them.

> Nothing was clearer to Sabbath than that Norman must never lay eyes on those Polaroids. And if ever he were to come upon the cash! On the heels of this friend's suicide and that friend's collapse, finding the pictures or the money both would turn the last of his illusions to ashes, smash the orderly existence to bits. Ten thousand in cash. For buying what? For selling what? Who and what is she working for? Her pussy photographer for posterity by whom? Where? Why? No, Normal must never know the answers, let alone getting around to the questions.

The materials seem related to our modern taste for self-documentation, especially of a sexual nature. In other times, a tomb stone with chiseled names and dates was enough for most. Today, people tape record (and preserve) at least some of their phone calls, maintain diaries, "journaling," to use the sort of word that Sabbath (and Roth) would detest, take dirty pictures of themselves and others, and "post" the material on the Internet in a veritable orgy of self-disclosure. Drenka herself kept a diary--in English? Or Serbo-Croatian?--describing in detail her sexual life outside of marriage. Although she had ample time to destroy the document before dying, she leaves it as a perverse and painful legacy for her son and husband. To establish what?

Before leaving the home and removing the pictures, Sabbath has a final exchange with Norman, one of the longer conversations recorded in this 451-page novel. Sabbath has no taste for pornography, and he really is indifferent to luxury and comfort, though in a characteristic gesture he does decide to empty the rather modest bank account that he shares with his wife when he arrives in New York. Taking the pictures and the cash is mostly a benevolent gesture, though it is true he will need the money. The exchange has always fascinated me, and after reading it for the umpteenth time, I began to understand why. It is about the only meaningful conversation that Sabbath consents to in the story. Nearly all of his other exchanges are of the kind I described earlier. He is upbraided by the incensed Cowan over the disorder he has brought into his home, though the host is not so angry that he cannot resist one final effort to have him committed to a psychiatric facility. After characterizing Norman the way he does in the lines quoted above, as "irrationally humane," Sabbath remarks to himself, almost wistfully, that "every person should have a friend like Norman. Every wife should have a husband like Norman,

revere a husband like Norman, instead of battening on his decency with her low-minded delights"--as Michelle does. Sabbath slips out of the apartment with the pictures and cash while Cowan is placing the call to his psychiatrist. Before that happens, he engages in this exchange, perhaps the most meaningful one of the book, in which Sabbath, about to be thrown out, asks, in effect, what he has done to provoke the expulsion: "What is awful? The kid's underpants wrapped around my dick to help me through the night after the day I'd been through?...Panties in my pockets after a funeral? That's *hope*." (Italics in original.)

Norman asks him where he plans to go on leaving the home; his implicit question is how his guest plans to live in a state of homelessness and destitution. Sabbath answers that fancy homes with the accoutrements of wealth the Cowans enjoy guarantee nothing, because "there is no protection" against the vicissitudes and hazards of destiny, pointing to his long-dead brother, his first wife's inexplicable disappearance, and the suicide-by-death of their common friend Gelman. "It's always been hard for you, Norman, hasn't it," says Sabbath, "to imagine me. How do any of them do it without protection? Baby, there *is* no protection. It's all wallpaper, Norman…What we are in the hands of is *not protection*," exclaims Sabbath, sufficiently riled by now to dispense with the usual retorts and come-backs. He goes on to call Cowan "naked," exposed, "even in that suit." Cowan makes the conventional argument, that while he understands the unpredictability of life, he intends to keep his as predictable and normal as possible, even though his wife, with her unreliability, threatens to undo everything he requires. As Norman leaves the room briefly, Sabbath begins to understand that Norman does, after all, recognize the danger his wife represents--to his sense of stability, to the unity of the family, to his fear

of ageing alone. This information comes in a long paragraph, and is perhaps somewhat too dramatic in describing Cowan's fears, but it does emerge as a revelation for Sabbath, and explains the decision to remove the pornographic pictures. He declares to the man, who has returned with the guest's clothes, a remark that I puzzled over for a long time. "You live in the world of real love," he said when Norman returns to the kitchen, holding in a sack the few possessions Sabbath has. No elaboration on that remark, but what I believe he means is that Cowan has created for himself the fantasy of a loving family, not because his wife loves him--she doesn't--or that his daughter does (though she may; we're never told). Sabbath considers it enviable.

"And what do you live in?" Norman asks. "The investment of everything in sex. And now you reap the lonely harvest"--the harvest, needless to say, that Cowan wants nothing to do with. Sabbath replies with what seems like the quintessential description of his self-contempt.

"You have kind-hearted liberal comprehension," answers Sabbath, "but I am flowing swiftly along the curbs of life, I am merely debris, in possession of nothing to interfere with the objective reading of the shit."

Roth is reconstituting the philosophic tradition of generating antithetical viewpoints, but in this case neither proponent can be said to be speaking the truth. Sabbath, borrowing from his unidentified tutor, Nietzsche, would say that of course there is neither a knowable truth nor an "objective reading" of anything. And Cowan himself is not entirely convinced of what he professes. It is clear from earlier passages in the text that he harbors doubts about his wife, as well as the security of the establishment he has set up for himself, including the monogrammed shirts and the eight flavors of jam that

have been thoughtfully put in a cabinet of his well-appointed kitchen. He appears to understand that his grip on this comfort is not as secure as he believes--that his notions of order and providence lack the foundation he assumes (or hopes) might be there. That monogrammed shirt bears the initials NIC, close to Old Nick, the medieval description of the devil and sin. Norman--nomos, norm--tries to assert human fundamentals on which he himself may not have the firmest grip. By removing the pornographic pictures of his wife, Sabbath makes a concession to his friend's illusions, but leaves the reader wondering how long they will last. Sabbath faints at the end of the scene, and Norman telephones a physician to arrange a hospital stay for the stricken man. It is one last effort--unsuccessful, because Sabbath shortly recovers himself--to replace the mother and brother the main character has lost. Sabbath is alone, cannot bear to be "saved," wants to be cast alone into the frozen world, and cannot destroy himself by suicide either. The last words of the novel? "Everything he hated was here."

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