Letting the Repellent In:
An Essay in Autobiographical Criticism

> A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns. The way is to the destructive element submit yourself…. In the destructive element immerse.
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> -- Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (as recited to Benjamin Taylor by Philip Roth, while Taylor was floating in Roth's swimming pool)

In the early morning hours of May 10, 1968 -- a Friday -- a woman in her late 30s was killed instantly when the car she was a passenger in – a new Jaguar convertible, driven by a drunk driver -- crashed into a tree by one of the transverse roads that run through Manhattan's Central Park. The woman was Maggie Martinson Miller Roth, Philip Roth's estranged wife, from whom he had been seeking a divorce since their separation in 1963. In his autobiography, *The Facts* (1988), Roth writes that when Holly Miller, Maggie's daughter from her first marriage, phoned him the following morning to give him the news,

> …my immediate response was total disbelief: it was a trick, I thought, to get me to say something self-incriminating that could be recorded and used to sway the judge to increase the alimony in our next court go-round. I also didn't believe then that miracles happen, that one's worst enemy, who one has hoped and prayed would disappear from one's life, could suddenly be eradicated in a car accident…. All I had done the night before was to close my eyes and go to sleep; and now everything was over…. How could she be dead if I didn't do it?... I felt precisely like what she'd been

> telling me I was since the first time we'd broken up in Chicago in 1956: her ineradicable need for a conscienceless, compassionless monster as a mate had at last been realized -- I felt absolutely nothing about her dying at thirty-nine other than immeasurable relief.

Although he refused Holly's request to identify her mother's body in the morgue, he did volunteer to make the funeral arrangements. Knowing now that there would be no more alimony payments, he treated himself to a cab uptown to the funeral home. When he arrived, the driver remarked, "Got the good news early, huh?" It was only then he realized he'd been whistling all the way.

The day after the funeral, he went to the park to visit the scene of the accident:

> It was a splendid spring morning and I sat on the grass nearby for about an hour, my head raised to take the sun full in my face. Like it or not, that's what I did: gloried in the sunshine on my living flesh. "She died and you didn't," and that to me summed it up. I'd always understood that one of us would have to die for the damn thing ever to be over.

A few days later he left for the Yaddo Artists' Colony in upstate New York to finish writing *Portnoy's Complaint*, which he did in twelve days of inspired application, working up to 14 hours a day; then he took the bus back down to New York City, "feeling triumphant and indestructible," noting also

> the potential for personal resurrection that seemed to be promised by the astonishing annihilation of my nemesis, the violent dissolution of the enshackling marriage, and the imminent publication, on a grandish scale, of a book imprinted with a style and a subject that were, at last, distinctively my own.

The account he gives in *The Facts* regarding all these events is breathtaking in its ruthless honesty, its celebratory sense of liberation, and its unabashed display of what Graham Greene has called the "splinter of ice in the heart" necessary (at least in Greene's view) for any serious novelist to possess.

There's another scene in the sun, 25 years later, in 1993, that similarly commands my attention. This one is connected to the writing of *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), which in some ways might be read as the long-awaited sequel to *Portnoy*. (At least that's one of the ways I read it.) The moment is recorded by Claudia Roth Pierpont (no relation) in *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (2013):

> Opening the door to his empty apartment on West 77th, Roth was struck by the sight of sunlight gleaming on his highly polished parquet floor – so like the parlor floor of his childhood apartment…. "You're gonna be all right," he thought. An hour or so later, he was back in his studio, working on *Sabbath's Theater*.

This scene, like the earlier one, is connected with an experience of personal and artistic liberation, as well as with the writing of a novel that exemplifies those

qualities. Roth had just returned to his Manhattan apartment after spending much of the summer hospitalized in Connecticut for severe depression, during which time he was also in the process of extricating himself from another disastrous marriage -- his second, to the actress Claire Bloom. No doubt his sense that he was "gonna be all right" was boosted by the fact that Bloom had recently been served with divorce papers.

I find that both sunny scenes – the one in the park in the spring of '68, and in Roth's apartment in the fall of '93 -- have caught hold of my imagination, and won't let go. What follows is my attempt to wrestle with their implications, and to consider the place they hold in Roth's writing life, and my own.

For Roth, these moments in the sun marked turning points in his life and art – "points of liberation", you could say, or even Wordsworthian "spots of time". I borrow the latter phrase from Wordsworth's epic autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, which tells the story of his poetic development and triumph – a triumph it also exemplifies. Here is what Wordsworth has to say, about 250 lines into Book 11 of the 1805 version:

> There are in our existence spots of time,
> That with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
> By false opinion and contentious thought,
> Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
> In trivial occupations and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired –
> A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
> That penetrates, enables us to mount
> When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
> This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
> Among those passages of life in which
> We have had deepest feeling that the mind
> Is lord and master, and that outward sense
> Is but the obedient servant of her will.
> Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
> Are scattered everywhere…

The "spots" – specific moments in place and time -- are described here as "worthy of all gratitude"; and this is certainly the case with the two scenes from Roth's life I have cited. They were not only meaningful for him personally and artistically, but also, I think, significant for American literary history as well, given the author's stature, and that of the two novels they are associated with. In a review article I wrote a couple of years ago on Blake Bailey's biography of Roth (*Philip Roth: The Biography* [2021]), I noted "the nearly ecstatic creative freedom that Roth periodically experienced in the wake of his exit from encumbering relationships". In the Central Park "spot", Roth marks two things: his blameless liberation from the disastrous marriage to Maggie (and,

concomitantly, from the ongoing ordeal of a divorce settlement that promised to be onerous), and also his literary coming of age – or what was to be, with the imminent publication of *Portnoy*, his coming of age – as a major American novelist. The feeling of sitting atop golden hours is palpable. It is notable also that the first "spot" is celebrated with a distinct lack of ambivalence, if his own account is to be believed. But I, for one, don't buy it. I don't believe he felt "absolutely nothing about [Maggie] dying at thirty-nine other than immeasurable relief." It sounds like he's protesting too much. Perhaps in the writing he was getting a little carried away with remembering the exuberance of his sudden freedom, long as it was in coming. Then again, perhaps I am giving him too much credit here; it's a weakness I have in regard to my literary heroes, of whom Roth is certainly one.

The second "spot", which occurred in Roth's Upper West Side apartment in the fall of 1993, holds an analogous significance in his personal and artistic life: liberation from another deeply painful marriage (and not only for him, to judge from Bloom's relatively evenhanded account in her memoir *Leaving a Doll's House* [1996]), and the coincident resumption of writing another seminal book (in both senses). For while *Sabbath's Theater* cannot be said to hold

a place in American literary history quite comparable to that of *Portnoy*, it was the author's favorite of his novels (mine, too), and it tells a similar tale of sexual and moral transgression and liberation. Roth's revealing description of the protagonist, taken from his essay "The Ruthless Intimacy of Fiction", is worth quoting in full:

> Unlike Swede Levov in my subsequent novel, *American Pastoral*, Sabbath is anything but the perfect external man. His is, rather, the instinctual turbulence of the man beneath the man: the unmanageable man, the unexonerated man – better, the refractory man: refractory meaning "resistant to treatment or cure", refractory meaning "capable of enduring high temparatures." Refractory not as a pathology but as a human position. The refractory man being the one who will not join.
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> His refractory way of living – unable and unwilling to hide anything and, with his raging, satirizing nature, mocking everything, living beyond the limits of discretion and taste and blaspheming against the decent – this refractory way of living is his uniquely Sabbathian response to a place where nothing keeps its promise and everything is perishable. A life of unalterable contention is the best preparation he knows of for death. In his incompatibility he finds his truth.

(Not a bad self-description of his author, either.)

Sabbath's Theater is a very dark novel – much darker than *Portnoy*; though it is also a very funny book – as funny, I think, as *Portnoy*. And its humor, though blacker, shares with that earlier work a quality of "raucousness"

identified by Roth in a remark about the writing of *Portnoy* quoted by his best friend Benjamin Taylor in the latter's affectionate but clear-eyed memoir *Here We Are: My Friendship with Philip Roth* (2020): "I discovered I was not a gloomy but a raucous talent." What makes *Sabbath* particularly interesting to me – more interesting, as a work of art, than *Portnoy* – is the way its raucousness coexists with its darkness, and how the two offset each other. In *Sabbath*, the darkness overshadows the raucousness – as it should in a more mature work; and therein lies its appeal. (Though mine is a gloomy, not a raucous talent, which probably explains my preference for the latter.)

I mentioned that the two scenes in the sun, described respectively in the autobiography and Pierpont's biography, have gotten hold of my imagination. But I think this hold has little or nothing to do with their companion novels' places in American literary history, or with what the Rothian "spots" tell us about their author's personal morality. What I find so compelling – and also enviable; almost as enviable as compelling -- has perhaps more to do with what these scenes have to say about a certain kind of freedom. In this case, radical artistic freedom – the freedom exemplified by the specific projects of *Portnoy* and *Sabbath*. The protagonists of both novels are bedeviled by

the same enterprise of transgressive liberation that so occupied their author throughout his career -- and no more so than when he was writing these works. The freedom aimed at by Roth and (arguably) his two greatest creations -- the third would have to be Zuckerman -- has as much to do with the promise, hope, and imagination of freedom as with its realization. In Roth's own circumstances, as they are presented by himself and Pierpont in the two "spots", the possibilities inherent in this freedom were opened up not only by writing itself, but even more by the fact that he had survived, and fought to survive, in order to be free to write these two books in particular: breakthrough novels dedicated to the art of psychic survival in America, and to the necessary acts of transgression, breaking through, and getting free that enable – and celebrate -- that achievement.

Roth's fictional alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman, who offers up an incisive critique of his creator's version of "the facts" at the end of that book, has this to say about the "fight for survival" (the name "Josie" is Roth's pseudonym for Maggie):

> …it's with Josie, anyway, that you fought the primitive battle that either you didn't ever fight with your family, or you're unwilling to fight in remembering them now, or you have fought with them

> only by proxy, through Alexander Portnoy and through me. I'm speaking of the primitive battle over who is going to survive.

And a few pages later, Zuckerman adverts to "the primitive, prehistorical scene of you sitting near the site of Josie's violent death, a happy widower being warmed by the sun…." What strikes me in both "spots", what has taken such a hold of my imagination, is the troubling connection between catastrophe, survival and creativity: the sense of having come through arduous personal trials and tribulations to write again – and to do it triumphantly. I said that I find the creative freedom that Roth felt he had attained to in these recorded moments "enviable". But let me be clear. I don't envy Roth any of the things that helped him get to these moments: his unapologetic ruthlessness and selfishness, or the pain he inflicted upon others, including his unsparing and sometimes brutal criticism of their writing – even that of his friends. I'm thinking here in particular of the harsh criticism he leveled at his friend Bernard Malamud, in person, during a visit he made with Pierpont near the end of Malamud's life. Malamud was already quite ill, and had shown Roth a manuscript he was working on. In the course of the visit, Roth told him just what he thought of what he'd written, and in no uncertain terms. After the visit, Roth asked Pierpont whether he'd been too harsh, and she told him he had.

It was surely not for nothing that the writer/producer Mark Richman, who fought a ten-year (losing) battle with Roth to adapt *Letting Go* into a movie, described him as "a man with the inner life of a roach. A more despicable son of a bitch was never born." I have to wonder if the pain Roth inflicted on others – whether in the cause of honesty, or of something else – was not somehow connected to a need to free himself, at least at times, of human attachments in order to create the solitary space, in Tacitean fashion, he required to write. (*Facit solitudinem, pacem appellat*.) It may have been he was simply unable to balance the needs of others with his own creative needs, and invariably sacrificed the former for the latter. (He certainly would not have been the first great artist to do so.) I also have to wonder, regarding the sense of triumph associated with Roth's survival and creative achievements, whether that triumph was worth it in the end. Is it ever worth it to hurt people in pursuit of your art? If I answer no, does that just mean I'm not a serious enough artist? If I answer yes, does that mean I'm a repellent human being?

I use the word "repellent" advisedly. It was precisely Roth's attitude to the "repellent" that seemed to determine the terms of his triumph. In Bailey's biography, he quotes Roth's remark to Bellow regarding the creation of *Portnoy*, in contrast to what had come before: "I kept being virtuous, and virtuous in

ways that were destroying me. And when I let the repellent in, I found that I was alive on my own terms." Taylor, in turn, tells of something that Roth recited to him when he was floating in the pool at Roth's house in Connecticut – and thus, Roth told him, "ideally situated to hear it." He read out loud a passage from Conrad's *Lord Jim* that he said "has been my credo, the life-blood of my books":

> A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns. The way is to the destructive element submit yourself…. In the destructive element immerse.

And in his definitive critique of his creator's autobiography, Zuckerman has this to say:

> If I were you (not impossible), I would have asked myself this as well:…if I could admit into autobiography the inadmissible; if the truly shaming facts can ever be fully borne, let alone perceived, without the panacea of imagination.

As an autobiographer, I have to ask myself these same questions. By "imagination", I take it that Zuckerman means the fictional imagination. But there is also the autobiographical imagination (which some would say amounts to the same thing) -- and mine is now compelled to speak. I suspect I may have my own "splinter of

ice" in the heart. Nothing as deeply placed as Roth's or Greene's, though; maybe more like just the tiniest of surface slivers on the pericardium. But if I take my pulse carefully, I can feel it there when I write about the people I love. My first wife Diane died of metastatic breast cancer when she was 54, and I had just turned 50. But even before she was dead – months before, in fact -- I had begun to write my first book-length memoir, some early pages of which were drafted in the hospital, as I sat by her bedside during a month-long siege of "tumor" (by then it had grown into a collective noun) that had spread throughout her abdomen. The summer she died (2004) I finished the first full chapter, and over the next two years of widowerhood I completed the book, which was published in 2007 as *Failure: An Autobiography*. Soon after, I began an account of Diane's death, which supplied the core of the next book-length memoir (which remains unpublished as "The Widower: An Afterlife"). I wrote most of it over the summer and fall of 2011, and completed the manuscript in 2012.

I know I would not have been able to write either of these books if Diane had not died. Though I certainly felt no "relief" at her death (except maybe that the ordeal of her suffering was over), the guilt I have to carry – and will carry for the rest of my life – comes partly (but only partly) from the fact that I was unfaithful to her when she was sick and dying. My infidelity

was not one of the flesh, but rather of the spirit – to get Catholic for a moment (if you will forgive me, Philip). I am only half-Jewish, and the wrong half at that; my mother was an almost-totally lapsed Irish Catholic. Though Roth might have liked that she grew up in Scranton, PA, a neighbor to Newark, and in some ways -- obsoletely industrial ways -- kin to it. The affair, which was conducted almost entirely over AOL Instant Messager, was with an old girlfriend, went on for four years (2000-2004), and did not end conclusively until a few months after Diane died. I wrote about it at length in *Failure* (in a chapter titled "My Failure as a Husband"), and so will not rehearse the details here, except to say the whole thing constituted a double betrayal: in fact, and then again in print. (My own immersion -- if not wallowing -- in the destructive element.) I deeply regret the affair, but not the writing about it -- nor the fact that what I wrote was published. Indeed, I am glad the book was published.

But it's not the publication of the book that concerns me here; it's the writing and aftermath of it – and even moreso, the long, lonely aftermath of Diane's death, which included the writing not only of *Failure*, but of "The Widower" as well. Those years (2004-2012) were especially lonely ones. Our only child, Zack, was away for much of the time – in college for five years, and traveling in Europe for three summers – and I relied a lot

on my writing to keep me company. Though I cannot say that I was exactly unhappy in my loneliness; there was even a certain pleasing bittersweetness to it, filled as it was with thoughts and memories of Diane. These found their way into *Failure*, and of course even more into "The Widower". I felt gratitude for a number of things as I was writing. First of all, simply for being able to write, and to fill the time when I was not working with writing. For the emotional and intellectual outlet that writing provided. For the gradual proliferation of pages (tea in, pages out, in my case). For the sense that although I was indeed lonely, I was not alone (a reversal of the usual formulation). When I say I had my writing to keep me company, I mean, more specifically, that I had about me, and within me, the world of the book – especially "The Widower" – that was taking shape out of my loneliness.

My writing during those years also took on the function of a kind of recuperation: a recuperation of Diane, of the time we had spent together (23½ years), of its value and significance. A recuperation, through writing, of loss, as Proust, the supreme master of these things, epitomizes. There were some hard times during those 13 years of widowerhood, before I moved to Seattle to be with Julie, who became my second wife – some bad summers when I did no writing at all, except in my journal. The summer of 2009 stands out as a particularly low point. I think I missed

Diane more acutely that summer than ever before – more painfully, even, than the summer right after her death. But it was not just bereavement I was experiencing in 2009; it was also depression – the worst depression I'd had since the fall of 1980, just before I met Diane. My psychopharmacologist upped my dosage of Zoloft, and in my misery that summer I decided to see another therapist as well. I remember her remarking that while many of her clients felt alone, I really *was* alone.

But other summers, my aloneness was experienced differently. If it did not the Rothian note of triumph over adversity – let alone his feeling of "invincibility" -- it had another note: a Giddingian note, if I may, of "expectationalism". The quality of having what I call an "expectational" space in which to contemplate, imagine, project and dream, day after day, with no real pressures upon me except those of expression: how to get it right in writing. (Though granted, those pressures can be formidable.)

Two of my own "spots" stand out in this regard: the summer of 2005 – the summer after the summer Diane died; the summer I was making real progress on *Failure*, and wrote most of it -- and the summer of 2011, when I was doing the same with "The Widower". And those summers in turn contain within them two distinct, concentrated, emblematic "spots" that I preserve in

memory, in Wordsworthian/Proustian fashion. They exemplify, for me, this quality of "expectationalism".

In late June of 2005, Zack had just graduated from high school, and gotten a job as a gofer in the art department of a Spike Lee movie, *Inside Man*, that was headquartered in the old Brooklyn Navy Yard. He'd gotten the job with the help of my friends Miles and Doug, who was good friends with the Art Director of the film. Zack would be living with Miles in Long Island City while he commuted to work every day. The evening of the day he graduated, I drove him and his stuff to Miles', then drove back alone on the Long Island Expressway to Huntington. It was midsummer, and the sun was still up. I knew I was going home to an empty house – but I found, somewhat counterintuitively, that I was looking forward to this. I had a whole "summer of writing" ahead of me, and I was already well-embarked on *Failure*. I had gotten through the first year of Diane's death, and was also now at the beginning of my first sabbatical – which, counting the summers at both ends, would last 15 months. As I drove back to Long Island in the golden light of a midsummer evening, I was conscious of feeling a Wordsworthian gratitude: gratitude for the "summer of writing" that was coming up; gratitude that Zack had found a fun job that he could do right after graduation; and gratitude, perhaps more than

anything else, for the time alone, which I would be spending with Diane as I wrote.

Was I also in some kind of denial that afternoon, driving home alone in the sun? Maybe, but it didn't really feel that way; it felt like freedom. The freedom of summer, of my first sabbatical, and of writing. I was looking forward to a wide expanse of time in which to think about Diane, to feel her vestigial presence, to commune with her. To feel, in my loneliness, that she was still abiding with me. Precisely because I had lost her, I could now recuperate her, and possess her in a way I never had before. My loneliness was a measure of how much I missed her, and how much I loved her. The emptiness I felt without her was a reminder of the love I had had for her, and still had. Only now, it seemed, could I fully and rightly appreciate her: what she stood for, the kind of specific person she was, the tastes and beloved things and humor and worldview we had shared. The knowledge that all of these things had really existed in the world, along with her, was a comfort to me. They had not existed in vain; they could be partly recuperated in memory; they would persist for a while. For all these reasons, my loneliness was dear to me.

The summer of 2011 also contained – literally: was the container for all of the thoughts and feelings occasioned by –

another solo car trip. This one much longer, from southern Vermont back to Long Island, and in July, right after the long weekend of the Fourth. I had come to my friend Eric's rental mansion in Manchester, VT for the holiday, and was now on my way home. At the time, I was in the middle of writing "The Widower", and was looking forward to getting back to the writing desk. Once again, the house on Long Island would be empty. Zack had graduated from Ithaca College in May, and was spending the rest of the summer up in Ithaca, before going to Milan in September on a year-long Fulbright Teaching Fellowship. I was now on my second sabbatical, and although this one would last only a semester, I intended to make the most of it. So on that long, sunny, solitary drive back to Long Island, I was psyched up for another "summer of writing", and I contemplated the prospect as though it were a kind of magic talisman held in my mind.

In his letter to Roth that serves as an epilogue to *The Facts*, Zuckerman quotes his English wife Maria Freshfield's criticism of the manuscript, which Zuckerman is strongly advising Roth not to publish. (Maria is the fictional avatar of Claire Bloom.) In the manuscript, Maria complains, "nothing is random":

> Nothing that happens to him [Roth] has no point. Nothing that he says happens to him in his life does not get turned into something that is useful to him.

Is this the same as the process of "recuperation in writing" I mentioned earlier? No, I don't think so – and not only because my term is meant positively, whereas Maria's criticism refers to a writing strategy that is opportunistic, calculating and overly deliberate. What I mean by writing as recuperation is that writing – at least the kind of writing that is my goal and ideal – should take place in a contemplational space where one seeks a higher, enhanced form of living, which involves re-experiencing (or, in the case of fiction, transforming) the people and places and moments and events that have been significant for us. Writing is a vehicle for this kind of recuperation and repurposing. Granted, the kind of writing I have in mind here is primarily autobiographical writing – testamentary writing, you could say – not the kind of "purer" fiction Roth practiced. Yet his writing – at least the writing that dates from *My Life as a Man* (1974) onwards – was essentially autobiographical in impulse, if not final expression. But Zuckerman is right in yet another criticism of *The Facts*, when he points out that the writing is constrained throughout (that is, until we get to Zuckerman's voice in the epilogue) by the burden of veridical fidelity. We have the feeling that the writer, Roth himself, is unable (or rather not allowing himself, because of the documentary requirements of the autobiographical form) to let

loose, to let fly into the higher regions of truth-telling that were available to him only in the form of fiction. Zuckerman's complaint is that in *The Facts*, Roth is hiding behind the merely literal truth in a way he never would were he freeing himself through -- and into -- fiction. Zuckerman says, "…the most cunning form of disguise is to wear a mask that bears the image of one's own face." This, of course, was another fictional strategy of Roth's; I am thinking here, especially, of the character "Philip Roth" in *Operation Shylock*. The point seems to be not to free oneself from disguises, but rather to acknowledge that there is no self-portrayal that does not include some measure of disguise. And it's the constraint of disguise – any form and degree of disguise – that gives the storyteller the freedom to tell their story.

To give this paradox a slightly different and more personal turn, I have never felt so free as when I have been "locked into" an autobiographical writing project – which I was in the summers of '05 and '11. To be constrained or "locked in" in this way was to experience – as Roth himself well knew in the spring of '68, and again in the fall of '93 – the "ecstatic creative freedom" I referred to earlier. It was to dwell, if only briefly, on Olympian heights of possibility and "expectationalism". It was to "play king", in the memorable formulation of Hans Castorp, the protagonist of Thomas Mann's

The Magic Mountain. Up on the mountain, Hans has a favorite outdoor spot: a bench from which, in the springtime, he has a prospect of the valley "with its banks of blue columbine blossoming once again in the meadow…."

> And then to the sounds of the rushing brook…, he would lean back against the crude wooden bench, cross his arms, tilt his head to one shoulder, and begin to reminisce about it "all."
>
> That sublime image of organic life, the human body, hovered before him just as it had on that frosty, starlit night when he had pursued his learned studies; and in contemplating its inner aspect now, young Hans Castorp was caught up in a great many questions and distinctions….
>
> He had a special term for this responsible preoccupation with his thoughts as he sat at his picturesque, secluded spot: he called it "playing king" – a childish term taken from the games of his boyhood, and by it he meant that this was a kind of entertainment that he loved, although with it came fear, dizziness, and all sorts of heart palpitations that made his face flush even hotter. And he found it not unfitting that the strain of all this required him to prop his chin – and the old method seemed perfectly appropriate to the dignity he felt when "playing king" and gazing at that hovering sublime image.

To be deeply engaged in a writing project, for me, was and is a bit like "playing king". One experiences the Olympian heights; one feels one is sitting atop golden hours; one "contemplationalizes". If one is Philip Roth – or Zuckerman, who is perhaps more Roth than Roth himself – one wonders about the connection between catastrophe, survival and creativity. Or if one is me, in the 13-year period of my widowerhood, one also

wonders about these things as one goes on long, lonely walks through the neighborhood in suburban Long Island, contemplationalizing about Diane, about what those 23½ years all meant, and about how one might recuperate these things through writing, and make them live again.

What interests me about all these "spots of time" – Wordsworth's, Mann's, Roth's and my own – is how they transport us; how they allow us – compel us, effectively – to be in two different places and times simultaneously. They are contemplational moments where we are invited to do our own various reckonings. Where we are engaged in creative dreaming that does not issue – at least not immediately – in any creative products, but paves the way for later creative production. They are moments of ideational "pregnancy", if you will, to be stored up and called upon later. (Wordsworth refers to this same process in *Tintern Abbey*: "…in this moment there is life and food For future years.") The "spots" possess "a renovating virtue…by which pleasure is enhanced."

And pleasure is much to the point here. In Roth's first "spot" – the one in Central Park in the spring of 1968 – he was clearly feeling pleasure basking in the sun, in the immediate wake of Maggie's death. In the second "spot", in his apartment in the fall of 1993, he was experiencing a sense of well-being

in anticipation of his imminent divorce from Claire Bloom, in the wake of his having survived a summer of severe depression, and especially in contemplation of resuming work on *Sabbath's Theater* – and of the freedom in which that project was to be resumed. My moments of looking forward to my two "summers of writing" were enjoyed in aloneness and loneliness – both of which were a direct result of Diane's death. As I said earlier, I would not have been able to write either *Failure* or "The Widower" if Diane had not died. I also said that the guilt I have to carry regarding Diane comes partly – but only partly – from having cheated on her when she was sick and dying. So what does the other part of the guilt come from? It comes, I think, from the remembrance – the recognition -- of my sense of freedom in the wake of her death. My freedom in my loneliness; a freedom that would not have been available, would not have happened, if Diane had not died. It is true to say that it was Diane's death that finally made me a writer; just as it is true to say that it was Maggie's death that made Roth, if not a writer, then finally a best-selling one – and a great one. Certainly, he would have written *Portnoy* even if Maggie hadn't died. The book was nearly finished before the accident. Would it have been completed any differently if she hadn't been killed? Would the content have been any different? Impossible to say. But I do think it would have been completed less "triumphantly", less "invincibly", if

she hadn't died. The sense of triumph at the completion of *Portnoy* would have been less sweet, less dramatic, less Olympian.

And my own writing? Senator, I am no Philip Roth. How can I even compare our different situations? I am finding it exceedingly difficult even to get my personal essays published in small literary journals. Apparently, they are too "critical" to be acceptable as personal essays, and too "personal" to qualify as critical essays. They fall between the cracks.

But my difficulty in publishing, and Roth's critical and popular triumphs, aren't really the point here, either. So what is the point? The point, it seems – once again -- is freedom. Roth's freedom, and my own. But at a price. And was it worth it? Diane's death made me a writer. It did so through a process of suffering, loss, bereavement, loneliness, and liberation. Diane's death cleared out a place for me to write in. It freed me to be alone. To taste, for many years – 11 of them, until I met Julie – the bitter fruit of loneliness, and to make what I could out of it. Can I say I owe my writing, my becoming an autobiographical writer, to Diane's death? Yes, I suppose I can. Am I grateful for that? Yes I am – horribly grateful. "All gratulant if rightly understood," Wordsworth wrote at the end of *The Prelude*. Does that then mean also that I am grateful, in

some sense, for Diane's death? I guess it does, yes. And that statement is breathtaking, too – no less so than Roth's statements about his reactions to Maggie's death. He basked in the sun, and I walked through the neighborhood, alone. And didn't really mind it. They were lonely, rich walks. Things were brewing and fermenting inside me the whole time, and when they were ready, I drank it down. All of it. The heady wine of loneliness. None of it went to waste.

That's my own repellent truth, and I am letting it in.