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essay

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Roth's Rotten Prophet

On Reading Negative Phenomena of Culture

Reading Philip Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theater* may typically leave one with a strange ensemble of emotions: repulsion and fascination, sympathy and vexation. I will argue that this coincidence of opposites is neither accidental, nor can it be explained with reference to the paradoxical nature of human experience in general. Rather, Roth's rotten prophet Mickey Sabbath, the leading character of *Sabbath's Theater*, instantiates a very particular dialectical logic that can be observed in a wide range of cultural phenomena: a logic of what I shall call "salutary destruction". The ambiguity that the reader of Sabbath's theater may experience is an essential ambiguity that corresponds to the dialectics of "salutary destruction". Understanding this structural link between Roth's novel and these corresponding cultural phenomena may enable us to perceive subtle kinships between literary, religious and philosophical spheres of thought and experience.

Mickey Sabbath's pedigree is the angle of impact by which I will present my argument, as the lineage of Mickey Sabbath implicitly links him to the *Sabbatians*, a 17th century Jewish sect that, too, engages in a logic of salutary destruction. The narrator of the novel tells us that Mickey Sabbath's ancestors, who were called "Shabas", "wrote [their name] all kinds of ways: Shabas, Shabbus, Shabsai, *Sabbatai*" (ST¹ 357 [emphasis mine]). The founder of Sabbatianism was a self-designated Messiah called *Sabbatai Sevi*, who lived in the 17th century. Sabbatai Sevi's mission was essentially manifested in moral transgression and destruction of values.² So was Mickey Sabbath's. Thus Roth's imaginary rotten prophet is linked to Sabbatianism by name and by the particular kind of religious/anti-religious "mission" that he pursues.³ But the common feature of transgression and destruction as such does not form the particularly interesting convergence between Roth's prophet and the founder of a Jewish sect. The punch-line of the analogy that I am developing is that the destruction pursued by Sabbath and likewise by Sabbatianism is described as *both necessary and salutary*. In my attempt to fully appreciate Mickey Sabbath's relationship to Sabbatianism and thus the peculiar religious dimension of the mission of the former, I shall begin by expounding the logic of the latter in more detail.

Sabbatianism is essentially an adaptation of the kabalistic doctrine of salvation to the dreadfulness of the actual historical situation in which it evolved, i.e., the 17th century. The structure of the world, thus the basic assumption of orthodox Jewish doctrine of salvation and likewise of Sabbatian heresy, is being internally amended through the process of "*tikkun olam*", the restitution of all things. The orthodox interpretation of the "*tikkun*" assumes that Israel had been dispersed among the nations in order to collect the sparks of the souls. Through their pious acts and prayers, the Israelites were meant to lift the souls up from their prisons. At the climax of this process, the Messiah comes and gathers the last sparks, thus depriving the power of evil of its tools.⁴

It is the phase of the overcoming of evil by the Messiah that the Sabbatians conceptualise in a heretical kind of way. In their view, the Messiah must become immersed in evil so that he can break its

spell. "[I]n order to force open the prison doors from within", Gershom Scholem puts it, "the Messiah himself must descend into the realm of evil."⁵ Doing just that, the Messiah himself adopts evil acts. The clash between a world that appears to be the complete opposite of salvation, i.e., a world where Israel is being prosecuted and exiled, and the expected restitution of all thus things climaxes violently in the person of the Messiah: Sabbatai Sevi proclaimed and practiced a doctrine according to which everything that had previously been forbidden by the Torah was now commanded. This abolition of (previous) values is an ultimately constructive passage through destruction⁶; "the power of destruction is a constructive power"⁷. For destruction and transgression only occur because the negativity of the world resists any kind of *undialectical* intercession. The Sabbatianists expressed this logic with the metaphor of the seed corn, which must rot in the earth in order to sprout and bear fruit⁸:

The Torah, as the radical Sabbatians were found of putting it, is the seed-corn of salvation, and just as the seed-corn must rot in the earth in order to sprout and bear fruit, the Torah must be subverted in order to appear in its true Messianic glory. Under the law of organic development, which governs every sphere of existence, the process of Salvation is bound up with the fact of man's actions being, at least in certain aspects and in certain times, dark and as it were rotten.⁹

The coherence of world and Torah is lost in a time when Israel appears to be utterly forsaken. Consequentially, the Torah must join the subversion that occurs in history by being subverted, which calls forth actions that are "dark and as it were rotten".

Like Mickey Sabbath's. Sabbath is a broken man who leads a "rotten" life, according to the moral conventions of the society that he lives in. His wife, Nikki, has deserted him, possibly on finding out about his relationship with Roseanna, who then became Sabbath's wife. Sabbath betrays Roseanna with Drenka, herself a married woman, whom Sabbath subsequently seduces or introduces to a life of polygamy, fornication and in many respects scandalous sexual practice. Sabbath disregards society's conventions both in his actions and his views. He despises the mediocrity and phoniness of the world in which he lives, particularly its "secular" spirituality¹⁰, to which his own messianic spirituality stands in stark contrast. Frequently, Sabbath gives himself titles that indicate his messianic self-understanding.

Nikki had run away from him, Roseanna was fed up with him, but all in all, for a man of his stature, he had been improbably successful. Ascetic Mickey Sabbath, at it still in his sixties. The Monk of Fucking. The Evangelist of Fornication. *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*. (ST 60)¹¹

Sabbath connotes his transgressions with a prophetic calling, which becomes increasingly explicit throughout the novel:

His cockiness, his self-exalted egoism, the menacing charme of a potentially villainous artist were insufferable to a lot of people and he made enemies easily, including a number of theater professionals who believed that his was an unseemly, brilliantly disgusting talent that had yet to discover a suitably seemly means of "disciplined" expression. Sabbath Antagonistes¹², busted for obscenity as far back as 1956. Sabbath Absconditus, whatever happened to him? His life was a long flight from what? (ST 125)¹³

These passages indicate that even though Sabbath is not certain about the precise nature of his calling, he is in fact convinced that he is on a mission. His antagonism and destructiveness are not merely the consequence of social disintegration and the (ultimately contingent) failure of his biography. Much to the opposite, it is the destruction of the constitution of the *world* that is naturally heading in the wrong direction – a world in which "There is *nothing* that keeps its promise."¹⁴ His wife Nikki left him, and he searches for her in vain throughout the novel. The promise of unbound joy that Sabbath ex-

perienced in his affair with Drenka is broken by her death. At the end of the first scene of the book, Drenka reveals to Sabbath that she will die of cancer. When dashing through an underground station in New York and reciting from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Sabbath concludes by affirming his desire to destroy the natural order of things altogether: to destroy time.

The train reached Grand Central. People rushed for the open doors. The girl was alone. Sabbath was freed. "Pray you now," Sabbath shouted as he wandered off the train alone, looking in all directions for Nikki's daughter.¹⁵ "Pray you now," he exclaimed to those standing back from him as he strode majestically along the platform, shaking his cup out before him, "pray you now ...", and then without even Nikki's daughter to prompt him, he remembered what is next, words that could have meant nothing at all to him in the theatre of the Bowery Basement Players in 1961: "Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish."

This was true. It was hard for him to believe that he was simulating any longer, though not impossible.

Thou'lt come no more;
Never, never, never, never, never.

Destroy the clock. Join the crowd. (ST 303 [emphasis mine])

This passage forces up and negates his desire expressed earlier on: his desire to escape the merciless progression of time.

Turning life back like a clock in the fall. Just taking it down off the wall and winding it back and winding it back until your dead all appear like standard time. (ST 302)

If, thus says Sabbath's logic, the harm caused by time cannot be healed by winding back the clock peacefully, then destruction is the only means there is left. And this is where Mickey Sabbath and Sabbatai Sevi meet. For both, the progression of events in time is unbearable. "There is nothing that keeps its promise" (ST 1), thus the narrator entitles the first section of *Sabbath's Theater*, condensing the disaster of *Mickey Sabbath's* individual history. The promises made to the chosen *people of Israel* are obfuscated by the persecution that the Jews experienced in the 17th century when the Sabbatian movement evolved. The breach between the hope that is triggered by what was promised on the one hand and what reality offers on the other hand is so vast that any attempt to live comfortably within reality would betray hope. Indeed any attempt even to express hope within reality amounts to treason; it is the contention of his contemporaries with the way things are that leads Sabbath to detest society. If hope in itself becomes inexpressible, all that is left to do is to rage against reality destructively, and thus to exhibit the breach between hope and reality by exposing the forsakenness of the latter.¹⁶ Mickey Sabbath does this by destroying the mediocre concessions of his contemporaries in a Nietzschean fashion, and by pleading for an impossible destruction of the inescapable, natural order of our lives: time (as such). For Sabbatians, the rotten prophet Sabbatai Sevi personifies a comparable breach: the breach between *his times* and the promise made to Israel. He embodies the need for the restitution of all things by becoming completely immersed into evil as Messiah. He destroys traditional values in order to indicate how urgently a restitution of all things, including *relative* values that are rooted in this world, is required. In this respect, both Sabbath and Sabbatianism react to a forsaken world by entertaining a logic of what I call salutary destruction: destroying the world for the benefit of a promise that was made for/in this world but has recently been obfuscated.

I yet have to indicate what allows me to claim that this logic is deeply embedded in our culture on the whole and, more particularly, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. I will name but a few examples. Euripides's drama *Telephos* articulates the belief that 'the weapon that struck the wound also heals it' "([o'] trw,saj iva,setai)"¹⁷, this belief must have been consensual at the time.¹⁸ It holds that nothing else than the material of the very same instrument with which harm has been done will heal. The offensive medium, the weapon that struck the wound, is itself the remedy. The term [o'] trw,saj iva,setai was famously adopted in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*¹⁹, which conceptualises a counter-negativity that is the *only* possible remedy in a completely reified world – a world that will suffocate and devour any undialectical attempt to contradict. Both in the Jewish²⁰ and (consequentially) in the Judeo-Christian²¹ tradition, the overcoming of death is conceptualised in a kind of way that engages in a logic of *mors mortis*, death of death²²: Death will destroy anyone and everything, thus, the only hope is that the power of death can be turned up against death itself.

The mentioned guises of "salutary destruction" inhabit central locations in the occidental history of ideas. Others must be dragged out of niches: Franz Kafka's Zürau-aphorisms speak of "constructive destruction". Kafka writes about Kierkegaard's "Aesthete":

There is an enchantment accompanying his argument of the case. One can escape from an argument into the world of magic, from an enchantment into logic, but both simultaneously are crushing, all the more since they constitute a third entity, a living magic or a destruction of the world that is not destructive but constructive.²³

In his studies on Kafka and the theory of art, Maurice Blanchot relates Kafka's term "constructive destruction" to Gershom Scholem's study of the heretical kabala that I have used above in order to demonstrate the link between Sabbath's Theater and Sabbatianism.²⁴

Drawing my essay to a close, I would like to emphasise that destruction is *never* desirable as such. I would argue, however, that there can be such a thing as a very particular destructiveness that has salutary dimensions. The aim of this essay is not to encourage destructiveness, but to encourage a differentiated perception of the desire for an obfuscated promise, a hope for the impossible that can be hidden in the midst of evil.

In an interview, Philip Roth said of his work: "Updike and Bellow hold their flashlights out into the world, reveal the real world as it is *now*. I dig a hole and shine my flashlight into the hole."²⁵ A desideratum of (theological) hermeneutics could be to create awareness for the sublime transmissibility between dark dimensions of religion, philosophy and contemporary culture. Time and again, these meet in unexpected locations: In the hole where Roth's flashlight captures the desperately longing gaze of his prophet Mickey Sabbath, descendent of Sabbatai Sevi, the rotting seed corn of salvation.

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Notes

- 1 ST = P. Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* (London: Vintage 1996).
- 2 See G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi. The Mystical Messiah. 1626-1676* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).
- 3 The connection between Roth's figure and the antinomian branch of 17th century Judaism has been made before and has been questioned, if not to say attacked, notably by Mark Shechner. See M. Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 149f, p. 153. Whether or not one finds Shechner's case convincing is eventually not decisive for the reading that I am about to present: Even if Philip Roth had never heard of the Sabbatian movement, Mickey Sabbath instantiates a figure who resembles Sabbatai Sevi, and it is interesting to compare these two Jewish heretics. This I will now try to do, starting by exploring Sabbath's "mission".
- 4 G. Scholem, *Major trends in Jewish mysticism*, foreword by Robert Alter (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp. 310f.
- 5 G. Scholem, *Major trends in Jewish mysticism*, foreword by Robert Alter (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 311.
- 6 G. Scholem, *Judaica 4*, ed. R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), p. 178.
- 7 G. Scholem, *Judaica 3. Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973) p. 207 (translation my own). Scholem quotes Bakunin.
- 8 See also 1. Cor. 15,36: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies."
- 9 Scholem (1995), 317.
- 10 "Secular spirituality, that's all he [Sabbath's friend Norman] exuded – maybe they all did, the producers, the agents, the mega-deal lawyers." (ST 341)
- 11 It should be noted that Sabbath, although he is a circumcised Jew, relates to a Christian idea in this passage ("evangelist"). In the face of his arthritis, he also sympathises with Jesus Christ: "A nail through either palm you sympathize with when you suffer osteoarthritis in both hands." (ST 171) It is the institutionalised form of (Christian?) religion that he objects to. Upon Nikki's expressions of detest against "Priests, rabbis, clergymen and their stupid fairy tale" he flatly responds "I am no fan of the clergy myself." (ST 110)
- 12 Sabbath later remarks: "All I know how to do is to antagonize" (ST 143).
- 13 Sabbath's more sober remarks on his religious nature are less assertive: "Maybe it wasn't repulsion at all that he [Norman] felt but something like awe at the sight of white-bearded Sabbath, come down from his mountain-tip like some holy man who has renounced ambition and worldly possessions. Can it be that there is something religious about me? Has what I've done – i.e., failed to do – been saintly? (ST 141)
Ultimately, it is suffering and death that Sabbath flees from. – That Sabbath is actually following a mission can also be seen in his "dialogue" with his deceased mother, whose ghost appears to him. "All you ever wanted were whorehouses and whores. You have the ideology of a pimp. You should have been one." (ST 160) To which he replies by affirming that his "perspective" is indeed an (elaborate) ideology. "Ideology, no less. How knowing she had become in the afterlife. They must give courses." (ST 160)
- 14 Thus reads the title of the first section of the novel (ST 1; emphasis mine).
- 15 Sabbath (erringly?) assumed to have spotted his missing wife's daughter Nikki.
- 16 This strategy was realised particularly by Theodor W. Adorno. See J. Schmidt, "Constructive Destruction" as Response to Suffering. Prolegomena to a "Concept" of Salutory Disaster on the Crossroad of Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion and Literature, p. 25ff. (Master-Dissertation, unpublished)
- 17 The phrase is found in *Epit 3,20*, where Apollodorus tells of the healing of Telephos from the rust of the spear with which he was struck.
- 18 See C. Preiser, *Euripides: Telephos. Einleitung, Text, Kommentar* (Hildesheim [et. al.]: Olms, 2000), p 375, note 944.
- 19 Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, transl. by E. B. Ashton, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1973, p. 53.
- 20 Hos 13:14: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes."
- 21 "When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'" (Isa 25,7)
- 22 "[...] mors devorat mortem [...]". M. Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Ausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.), vol. 40/1, p. 267, l. 4f.
- 23 F. Kafka, *Wedding Preparations, In the Country, And Other Posthumous Writings*, with notes by Max Brod, transl. by E. Kaiser & E. Wilins (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), p. 118. Precisely in what respect this refers to the Aesthete in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* remains somewhat obscure. I have argued elsewhere that the polyphonous outset of Kierkegaard's early pseudonymous writings, including *Either/Or*, stages a constructive destruction of language. See J. Schmidt, *Vielstimmige Rede vom Unsagbaren. Dekonstruktion, Glaube und Kierkegaards pseudonyme Literatur* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2006), p. 51; p. 197.
- 24 M. Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, transl. by Ch. Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 12-26, p. 26.
- 25 See M. Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. vii. The full transcript of the interview can be found online.