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IN THE VORTEX OF WORDS
The Metanarrative Dimension of Philp Roth's *Deception*

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Abstract – This paper intends to offer a reading of Philip Roth's *Deception* by examining the exceptional narrative strategy adopted by the writer who plays a sort of "game of words" with the reader unknowingly implicated both in the form and content of the novel. The adoption of frequent and chaotic dialogues produces a vortex of significant and apparently insignificant conversations able to deceive (hence the title) the reader and the characters involved in an ambiguous reality. In many respects, the "deception" is not only connected with marital infidelity but also with narrative art and the way our lives are conditioned by our and others' lies. Significantly, the story of a betrayal is staged by a protagonist named Philip and his female interlocutor. Their talks seem to reproduce a dialogue based on the same strategies of a drama, whose main objective is that of convincing the reader of the coincidence between fiction and reality in an unending verbal circularity. At the same time the novel's metanarrative drive seems to shed light on Roth's skepticism as to the possibility of an authentic truth in the interpersonal relationship.

Keywords: Philip Roth; *Deception*; metafiction; betrayal; adultery.

1. Metanarrativity as a Literary Strategy

Philp Roth's *Deception* stands out from his vast narrative production for at least two important elements which, in some way, characterise its form and content. The first concerns the cyclic movement of its narrative discourse in which the tense, overlapping and recurrent dialogues create the inevitably 'explosive' effect of the psychological situations of each individual character. For this reason, one cannot talk in terms of plot as in Roth's other novels such as *American Pastoral*, *The Plot against America*, or *The Dying Animal*, in which the diegesis follows a logical-temporal sequence of events reflecting complex contexts and relationships. In the case of *Deception*, Roth adopts a technique that is unique in his narrative macrotext. Indeed, there is no narrator ready to put things into order in the course of the narration. On the contrary, each moment smoothly unwinds as relevant and irrelevant words are strategically combined to create a vortex in which everything is included and partly confounded. The novelty of *Deception* lies in the fact that the title already provides a frame for the beginning and end of the story – a frame to be filled with words which somehow give a semantic valence to the emptiness the novel appears to enclose. Hence a sort of literary playfulness whose result is the text transmitted to the reader who is partly involved in the making of the novel's verbal ambiguities.
As regards the second factor, it concerns the profoundly metanarrative nature of the text, from the moment all of the author's choices point to the development of a diegetic design without Roth, as narrative voice, actually defining the roles of the characters and their interpersonal dynamics. As Claudia Roth Pierpont notes, "the question of intent – whether we believe in his authorial excuses, whether the women are *meant* to be real – makes the

book feel like one of Escher's impossible constructions" (Roth Pierpont 2014, p. 168). Maurits Cornelis Escher's engravings, as is well-known, are based on geometrical distortions which, from a visible point of view, create paradoxical effects as if they are negating what they are stating in a permanent redefinition of space. In many ways, it may be said that Roth's method is similar to Escher's from the moment that, in this particular novel, he enjoys remixing the cards both for the reader and the protagonists themselves who seem to be living their lives in dialogical confusion, social instability and ontological precariousness. This fluidity, which involves precisely the metatextual dimension of *Deception*, is further enhanced by the presence of a narrator who is called Philip like the real narrator.[1] This element is part of a strategy which, on one hand, refers to the aforementioned novelistic circularity and, on the other, is directly linked to its metanarrative beginning. In fact, one may ask what narration in a general sense is if not a 'deception'. Essentially, it is a work constructed under the sign of ambiguity as represented by Barthes:

> Aussi l'écriture est-elle une réalité ambiguë; d'une part, elle naît incontestablement d'une confrontation de l'écrivain et de sa société; d'autre part, de cette finalité sociale, elle renvoi l'écrivain, par une sorte de transfert tragique, aux sources instrumentales de sa création. Faute de pouvoir lui fournir un langage librement consommé, l'Histoire lui propose *l'exigence d'un langage librement produit*. (Barthes 1953, pp. 26-27, my italics)

Thus, Roth places himself beyond literature, on the side of ambiguous choices which correspond, as Barthes writes, to "the needs of a freely produced language". From this point of view, the deception does not simply concern the compulsive infidelity characterising the main protagonist who is always ready to start new affairs that see him as an innocent actor vis-à-vis the theme of adultery.

The novel's deception clearly concerns, first and foremost, narrative art considering the fact that writing becomes the stage on which Roth stretches the connection between fiction and reality, otherwise definable as the contrast between truth and lies, to its extreme consequences. In many ways, it could be said that the writer presents a narrative text which is, albeit indirectly, pervaded with a series of questions: to what extent are our daily lives conditioned by our lies and those of others? If lies betray the trust another person places on us, to what extent can adultery be seen as a fictional narration that we transmit to another person, in other words the person betrayed? And finally, the most important question from a narratological point of view, why is *Deception* presented in such a way as to convince the reader that the narrative fiction coincides with reality? In other words, the explicit autobiographical details provide the foundation for this novel, which is the story of a betrayal. Literary invention becomes the narration of an autobiographical invention, that is, it shows the reader the way in which the protagonist Philip Roth (who should be real but *cannot be so for the sake of literary convention*) narrates his form of deception which, in diegetic terms, is adultery and, consequently, the betrayal committed against his wife. In fact, we are entering here into the realm of *metafiction*. Naturally, behind the metanarrative tension, there is something more than a simple plot with characters betraying their partners. As Margaret A. Rose has noted, parody and metafiction always call into question "an attack (implicitly or explicitly) on theoretical oppositions between reality and unreality in the artwork or as given in the

[1] The fact that the character is given the same name as the author is not exactly new from a technical point of view. For example, in some of his novels, James G. Ballard also gives the protagonist his own name.

canons of literary criticism" (Rose 1979, p. 150). Ultimately, Roth's intention is to widen the possibilities of his creative writing by adopting a strategy which, from the point of view of reading for pleasure, abolishes all the elements envisaged by the narrative pact in order to provide the reader with a living text which is, first and foremost, an experiment and, I would also add, a self-representation as autobiography in the form of an intense dialogue. The reason why I do not say pseudo-autobiography, which may seem more correct, is that there is no such thing as a totally honest and truthful autobiography: all autobiographies offer a view of life in which order substitutes disorder, the linear disposition of events substitutes the chaos of daily life and the fiction of reconstruction the objective truth of events. There is, in other words, a sense in which autobiography and fiction overlap.

Besides, we may consider a Victorian autobiography like Trollope's, among many others. *Deception* is built upon precisely this kind of ambiguity, even though it uses dialogue as the dominant form to render autobiographical invention more credible. In this respect, Searles has justly observed: "True to its title, *Deception* is deceiving. Despite the erotic hard sell of the dust jacket, there are no graphic descriptions of sex – or of anything else. The novel is pure dialogue, without a phrase of exposition or attribution, without a single 'he said' or 'she said' – just bare-naked talk" (Searles 1992, p. 254).[2] This dialogue which is represented without any recourse to moments of description or verbal elements that allow us to recognise who is talking ("he said", "she said" etc), offers a version of events aiming to suggest they are real. We have already noted that the narrator knows very well that it is all a deception. However, he cannot avoid believing in it, believing in his words which, as is the case for every written word in a narrative work, move axiomatically upon a scene which is not real. It goes without saying that his suspension of disbelief becomes the reader's suspension of disbelief as well.

2. Self and the others

The intersection between reality and fiction already begins with the names of the characters, which, on the diegetic level, is the first clue that the discourse seems to point to autobiography – to the first-person narration of a personal experience pivoted on a betrayal. However, more than a clue to betrayal, the fact that the protagonist is called Philip is part of the strategy of ambiguity which, from the point of view of the novel's construction, appears to be a decisive structural element. At the same time, it must be underlined that *Deception* is not a personal diary or the text of a confession: it is a novel, not a representation of something founded on reality. In this sense the fact that the main protagonist's name is Philip means nothing on an interpretative level. What we know is that the real Philip Roth is printed above the title, that is, as the owner of the copyright of *Deception*, while the character of the narration is the product of the author's inspiration:

> Most of *Deception* consists of precoital and postcoital conversations between adulterous lovers: an unnamed literary Englishwoman and a Jewish-American novelist named Philip, who is living in London. Roth, too, is a Jewish-American novelist who has lived in London, but he insists that *Deception* is fiction, not autobiography. The novel's protagonist offers the same argument to his shocked wife after she discovers a notebook recording his conversations with

[2] Here the critic is obviously referring to the cover of the first edition of the novel.

> his mistress. He tells her that he made the whole thing up, that she has been taken in by a trick of literary ventriloquism. (Johnson 1990, p. 66)

From a semiotic angle, Roth's tendency to exaggerate the possibilities of narrative produces an effect of estrangement on the reader. In many ways, those who read *Deception* will find themselves, in the words of Wolfgang Iser, in "a sort of no-man's land of unformulated connections, and it is these that involve the reader directly in the novel" (Iser 1990, p. 136). The critic's reference here is to Faulkner's masterpiece *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), but it would not be incorrect to apply the same judgment to Roth's method which, as in his other novels, draws directly on his personal life. In fact, as often happens in literature, personal daily experience is an essential element in igniting the literary imagination. Hemingway could not have described Africa and gamehunting if he had not experienced it first-hand. Faulkner could not have narrated an epic of Southern American cotton planters and blacks if he had not seen such characters for himself. John Fante, also, always wrote about himself, but he knew that in writing about himself he was creating something that was not strictly autobiographical.

By the same token, Roth is perfectly aware that there is a direct link between the phases of his own experiences as an American Jew and his writing but he also knows that the art of narrative is not life and that once experience becomes fictional it is no longer autobiographical. Roth skilfully plays on this and, as Gooblar has noted, always maintains "a refusal to impose a restrictive and reductive vision upon a reliably complex and unknowable world" (Gooblar 2011, p. 155). In many ways, the novel plumbs into this complex and unrecognisable world, adopting a technique which, in its verbal execution, becomes an equally complex and impenetrable narrative.

It needs to be added here that the novel's structure simulates a dramatization that is almost always centred on the dialogues between the protagonist, Philip, and his female interlocutors. In this sense, *Deception* is very different from his other works in being staged in such a way as to resemble the dialogue of a play. In other terms, the work cannot be considered strictly as a novel since it has the same intensity and rhythm of a theatrical performance in which voices alternate within the same space apparently revolving around love and forms of betrayal whether mental of merely physical.

The hybrid form of the work also implies a hybridization of language which, with its rather destabilising effect of the reader, deliberately aims to imitate what happens in reality. From a narratological point of view, it would seem that Roth has decided to take to the extreme consequences Henry James's idea that each character in the novel must live more in showing than telling: the narrator must show how a character moves and talks and never describe them externally or declare explicitly whether a character is good or bad, whether they betray or are faithful, or whether they tell the truth or lies. In *Deception*, Roth is never judgmental or apodictic but only shows what the characters say to one another without adopting the voice of a narrative intruder. While it is true that this technique functions very well in the theatre (we recognise the characters by their physiognomy, their clothes and the sound of their voice), it functions to a lesser extent on the printed page. Behind the dramatization of the situations with the exclusive use of dialogue, there undoubtedly lies a strategy which refers to psychoanalytic therapy: words become the substance upon which the cure for the evil of living is constructed, from satisfaction to frustration. Yet it is true that in many ways *Deception* represents the therapy in a negative, if not contemptuous way. This aspect clearly emerges in the words of Philip's lover: "Actually I think they're all quite creepy […] I didn't think I'd heard anything that I hadn't thought a million, million times before" (Roth 2006, pp. 144-145). As Mauren Scheurer observes: "While therapeutic talk is disparaged […] the entire novel

is written in dialogue and has the quality and intimacy of a therapeutic exchange" (Scheurer 2015, p. 42).

Therefore, before undertaking an analysis of the text as metatext, it is important to point out this characteristic which, in many respects, not only puts the novel form into crisis but, even more so, the reader's process of interpretation. As a result, there is a heightened degree of ambiguity which reflects on the discourse itself and determines ontological uncertainties (the female characters often ask themselves "what am I doing here?") and psychic divisions (the real author himself seems to be divided between the character and the implicit author who is narrating the character).

3. A questionnaire or metahistorical narration?

As often occurs in Roth's novels, the first words reveal to the reader not only the theme to be explored but also how the writer intends to develop his argument and through what techniques and rhetorical strategies. In the case of *Deception*, a close analysis of the first page reveals the specific thematic and narratological coordinates which characterize the narration:

> 'I'll write them down. You begin'.
> 'What's it called?'
> 'I don't know. What do we call it?'
> 'The Dreaming-About-Running-Away-Together-Questionnaire.'
> 'The Lovers-Dreaming-About-Running-Away-Together-Questionnaire.'
> 'The Middle-Aged-Lovers-Dreaming-About-Running-Away-Together-Questionnaire.'
> 'You're not middle-aged.'
> 'I certainly am.'
> 'You seem young to me.'
> 'Yes? Well, that shall certainly have to come up in the questionnaire. Everything to be answered by both applicants.' (Roth 2006, p. 7)

There clearly emerges a dialogical structure that dispenses with the elements which usually distinguish a narrative text. The first segment informs us there is an I and a you while referring to the main action: that of writing. At the same time, however, the indicative mode of "You begin" suggests a metanarrative and almost tautological way of beginning: the first-person narrator tells us that someone is starting to talk about themselves and in this way projects us immediately into a psychological and existential territory. Nevertheless, such a self-centred approach is partly negated by the words which immediately follow. In fact, his response to her question is that the title of the text will be "The Dreaming-About-Running-Away-Together-Questionnaire". Yet from the moment the title is announced there also follows the image of a mutual linguistic battle as the woman adds the term "lovers" thus transforming the title which is further integrated by a counter strike on the part of Philip who adds, with a certain self-irony, "middle-aged". All of the first exchanges concern the questionnaire which, in a certain sense, they themselves complete immediately after showing that the words the reader has read so far are a sort of preamble so much so that the first phrase with which the second part begins (post-preamble) is precisely "Begin", the same word with which the novel opens. The first considerations we are induced to make as readers regard our disorientation precisely because our expectations are not gratified, on the contrary a sort of psychological frustration is produced.

In fact, it cannot go unnoticed that Roth is demanding a narratological nakedness from his narrative text which is reflected in a zero degree presence of contextual indicators (spatial, temporal etc). We are provided with less information we would normally find in a twentieth-century play where the spatial context is presented, albeit in a few words, and, for the sake of convention, the name of each character appears in the written text against the lines they speak. Thus, the search for this silence in relation to the characters and the context of the action can hardly prevent us from reflecting and leading us to believe that Roth the writer intends to create a situation in which textual nakedness is the interface of the interior nakedness of the characters:

> 'Begin.'
> 'What's the first thing that would get on your nerves about me?'
> 'When you are at your worst, what is your worst?'
> 'Are you really this lively? Do our energy levels correspond?'
> 'Are you a well-balanced and charming extrovert, or are you a neurotic recluse?'
> 'How long before you'd be attracted to another woman?'
> 'Or man.' (Roth 2006, p. 8)

As already mentioned, the second *begin* is a verb which, on the narrative level, would seem to have the effect of annulling the first *begin*, which has been a false beginning, almost to side-track the reader who is still struggling to glean the meaning of the dialogical system that Roth has set up. Until this moment the narrative has had the sole objective of referring to the idea of a questionnaire which, in many respects, suggests a psychoanalytical session rather than a dialogue based on a mutual exchange of information: what immediately appears to be imposed is a certain circularity in the questions, at least in the first few pages, in which whenever she asks a question (What's the first thing that would get on your nerves about me?'), Philip invariably responds strategically with another question ('When you are at your worst, what is your worst?') to which the woman does not answer but elaborates, so to speak, by pressing him with another question ('Are you really this lively? Do our energy levels correspond?'). In effect, the questions are expanded to the point of becoming not only a questionnaire but also an almost obsessive self-interrogation. In light of the following sessions, these semi-aggressive questions accumulate in a sort of expansion of concentric circles. In fact, Philip asks her a question which is connected with her way of being ('Are you a well-balanced and charming extrovert, or are you a neurotic recluse?') and she answers by asking him a very intimate question ('How long before you'd be attracted to another woman?') which allows the interlocutor to shift the discourse onto the terrain of sexual ambiguity ('Or man'). The resulting effect is that the form of the questionnaire is not only ambiguous but is simply the opposite of a real questionnaire – it is, in effect, an anti-questionnaire.

4. A closure against the grain: the triumph of artifice

The final pages of the novel confirm the fact that the conversation over the questionnaire has nothing to do with the narration or the representation of the betrayal. Behind the organisation of the rapid dialogues and the adoption of a realistic and apparently transparent language lies the real theme of *Deception*, which is writing: "Should I write it?". The real question involves a reflection on the narrative method and on the discourse which may or may not be written. If narrative works contained all the thoughts that go through an author's mind, they would open gulfs into which writing itself, which must not

be confused with reality, would collapse. To narrate means to enter the logic of lies[3] because writing is an artifice. It is not the truth which is narrated but deceptions, tricks and masks of the self – the multiple masks which every human being wears no less than the characters in *Deception*. At the end of the novel, the final long-distance conversation with his former lover is about books again rather than people and the concern is more on how to narrate than on what to narrate, on the identification of the real character and the difference between real-life and fiction: "However visible you may be feeling, you weren't identified in that book or made overtly identifiable. However much you may have served as a model, the great British public happens to be ignorant of it and you only have not to tell them for them to remain ignorant" (Roth 2006, p. 201). Thus, once again, as at the beginning of the diegesis, the comparison is between real and fictional events. Apparently, for a writer like the one presented by Roth, his fiction is worth more than the real world which only serves to draw models from, precisely as is the case for the story that has just been written: the important thing is to conceal the identification of the model. It is no accident that his lover draws conclusions which correspond exactly to things as they are in real life, that is, that the writer only thinks about his writing: "What it comes down to is that a woman comes to a man to a chat a little, and all the man is really thinking about is his typewriter. *You love your typewriter more than you could ever love any woman*" (Roth 2006, p. 201, my emphasis). The reply of the narrator-protagonist is significant in that, from a narratological point of view, he confuses the artifice of fiction (the typewriter) with reality (the model that has inspired him). Characteristically, the world in which Philip lives is made up of books that have been written and books that are to be written and this is why in the final long telephone conversation the woman underlines the fact that his book would, on the other hand, be constructed in a different way and would have expressed their feelings more clearly: "And it – *my* book – is all about kissing and telling, because if I were to write this book I would be doing that" (Roth 2006, p. 201, emphasis in the text). Philip's reply is that she should attempt to write a novel and tell her version of events:

> 'Should I write it?'
> 'I'm not the one to say no, especially as I may do another about you.'
> 'You wouldn't. You're not. You aren't, are you?'
> Laughing. 'Yes, of course I will. This'll be part of it.'
> 'Well, I'd be amazed. I would call that scraping the barrel, really.'
> 'Don't underestimate yourself. You're a great barrel. For me you were.'
> 'Was I? Oh, I felt so angry. I was angry for months. Although I was very torn, really, because as soon as I read it, I also couldn't be angry.'
> 'Why was that?'
> 'Because it was so, so tender… I think. Unless I got it wrong.'
> 'No. I thought there were some things you'd like. Things I planted just for you to be amused by.'

[3] cf. Gramigna 1980. In particular, the critic asks: "[…] qual è il desiderio, il desiderio profondo che il racconto ha adempiuto in quanto racconto? insomma qual è il desiderio del racconto? Quello di essersi svincolato dal referente, meglio: di aver annullato il proprio referente" ([…] what is the desire, the profound desire that the story has fulfilled as a story? All in all, what is the desire of the story? That of being freed from the referent, or rather, of having annulled one's own referent", Gramigna 1980, p. 125, my translation). This is precisely what Roth does in *Deception* which, on close analysis, annuls the referent (that is the reality of betrayal) in order to describe its occurrence in a hypothetical story.

> 'Oh, there were. I didn't miss them. It was very strange reading it, absolutely strange. Because I was in no doubt which of it was addressed to me. I may have been wrong but I felt no doubt. And which bits of it were not, particularly.'
> 'I'm sure you didn't miss any of it. But that was our life, I thought, as it might have been. Our life also.'
> 'I saw. I saw. It's such a strange story.'
> 'I know. No one would believe it'. (Roth 2006, pp. 201-202)

The epilogue returns to the idea of the book and of its being written: "It was very strange reading it, absolutely strange". In this way, the writer – not the Philip of the story – reveals that his novel may not yet contain all that his imagination has created around a love story narrated as a form of betrayal. In fact, the phrase "I may do another [book] about you" also evinces to the reader that, from the point of view of a narrator, the imagination is almost infinite in that the job of the writer is to transform small insignificant details into significant stories; hence the possibility of continuing endlessly by drawing on the same event. It is not a case of "scraping the barrel", but more simply of setting the narrative engine in motion again. In fact, when Philip says to the woman: "You're a great barrel. For me you were", he is really confessing her the fact that, for a narrator, there is never an end to a barrel but reality is an infinite space from which to extract endless stories, as Maurice Blanchot[4] has observed.

In order to avoid any interpretative misunderstandings, the last words of *Deception* make clear that novels are meant to be read and to communicate the strange experience of human life: "It was very strange reading it, absolutely strange". Needless to say, the woman's words are revealing as being almost an epiphany of reading: the strangeness to which she refers is connected with the unpredictable adventures of human life, of the making and unmaking of relationships, of that "particular web" which is our dialogue with others and the rest of society. Indeed, we are at the same time alone and with others, independent and free yet bound and almost imprisoned by affections, habits and family ties. The greatness of Philip Roth in this particular novel lies in the fact that he stages all these things in such a way as to enlarge as much as possible the range of options offered by narrative art, its artifices and conventions. For this reason, *Deception* may be rightly considered, in its metanarrative dimension, one of the most significant expressions of Roth's experimentalism.

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[4] cf. Blanchot 1977. In the Italian version the subtitle significantly reads "Writings on the senseless game of writing" – an allusion to writing as an end in itself. As Blanchot writes, "Writing, the need to write, no longer writing which by an inevitable necessity, has always been at the service of words or so-called idealised thoughts, or moralisers, but writing which, through its own strength, slowly unleashing itself (in the uncertain power of absence), does not *seem to concentrate on anything but itself* […] writing, one could say, outside discourse, outside of language (Blanchot 1977, pp. ix-x, my italics). Although this may not be automatically applicable to Roth's thought and method, one may recognise in Blanchot's words the same attitude and the same tension of transcending the limits of the real world.

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