

"SELECTED AFFINITY"

2021 Philip Roth Lecture, Ayad Akhtar

I want to thank the selection committee for the invitation to address you all today. Philip Roth's work has been an important and formative influence in my own practice as a writer, and so it's a particular thrill to be here today in celebration of the opening of the Philip Roth Personal Library at the Newark Public Library. I will speak for about 45 minutes, at which time I'll look forward to your questions. Finally, I want to thank Toronto-based poet Eva H.D. for a rich exchange of sources and thoughts, which helped shape my remarks here today...

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Philip Roth's own descriptor for the focus of this annual lecture is American Literature and History, but previous speakers have offered personal reflections on Roth's work and its relationship to their own. In trying to make some sense of what I might say that felt worthy in either respect, about literature and history, or about my relationship to Roth's work, I would eventually come to feel that, perhaps, neither was what was called for this year. Instead, I'm going to speak from a growing feeling I have that something alarming is happening in the culture at large, and which is increasingly reflected in the cultural thinking and production of our current era. The title of this talk is "Selected Affinity" – a play, of course, on "elective affinity," an idea that runs from alchemy

through Goethe and into the social sciences of the 19th century. The notion being, of chemical elements, or people, or cultural forms that evince analogy and kinship, and which, therefore, enter into mutually arising relationship. In the case of today's title, *selected* affinity and not an elective one, because, during this talk, this public thinking-through, if you will, I will endeavor to wend my way to a proposition, namely that we are at the dawn of a new era in which our affinities are no longer the result of our own interest or tendencies, but are increasingly selected for us for the purpose of automated economic gain. The automation of our cognition and the predictive power of the technology to monetize our behavior, indeed our very thinking, is transforming not only our discourse with one other, transforming not only our societies, but our very neurochemistry. That this might be a welcome arrival of a wholesale digital corrective to the problems of the human condition is a thesis I largely reject. As I recall, Saul Bellow once said of writing novels — and I'm paraphrasing here — the challenge was to put his best ideas to the test and hope that those ideas failed. The optimizing rhetoric of our digital utopist/billionaires has, alas, yet to be put to a litmus test as rigorous and resonant as the one Bellow lays out for literature. By the end of these remarks, I will have hoped to circle the question of just what sort of place a literature worthy of the name might have in this era of automation.

Of course, it would be hard to proceed with this year's lecture without at least some acknowledgment of the controversy surrounding Blake Bailey and his recent biography of Philip Roth. As a board member of PEN America for six years now, and its current

president, the situation surrounding Norton's decision to suspend promotion and later, publication, of the book was the subject of much conversation internally at PEN. What I found surprising about this situation was the lack of any entreaty private or otherwise, from the publisher in defense of so-called freedom of speech. It's not unusual for PEN to hear from publishers during dustups like these, and to ask for support, at least when such a defense serves their interests. Let me be clear: I am not defending Blake Bailey or his book, or its quality or its right to be; I am also not contesting the right of a publisher to make whatever decision it deems necessary – but the evident lack of any concern for principle, whether that principle was for Norton to do their due diligence when confronted with credible accusations against an author they had under contract, or on the other hand, the principle of the freedom of expression – this evident lack of concern for anything but commercial prospects and corporate liability, well, it certainly shed some light for me on why the calls for PEN to speak out on behalf of publishers have started to ring a little hollow. There is a larger story here about the deeper incursion of mercantile thinking into the ground water of our most prized philosophical ideals. And as such, this matter does dovetail with some of my thinking to follow.

It should not have come as a surprise that Philip Roth was perhaps not the best judge of character – whether in the matter of choosing his own biographer, or perhaps in the matter of anyone else. In a particularly evocative articulation of Zuckerman's poetics of living, Roth writes in *American Pastoral*: "...getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong

and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive." A joyfully erring judge of character then, at least on the page, and likely beyond it, but then again, we don't come to Roth's work for its judiciousness. Its formal brio; its vital, coursing energy; its infectious intellectual static; its sublime fusion of the personal and political; and above all perhaps, the whiplash swing and staggering beauty of the American language as it flows into us from his pages. Yes, all of this is why we read Roth, and read him over and over and over. Judiciousness? Probably not.

But then again, it's unlikely anyone would make a serious case for the artist-as-judge. For while we expect an artist to shape stirring, hopefully profound depictions of our prevailing moral questions, we don't expect an artist to pronounce final judgment on such things. There may be an art to writing a convincing dissenting opinion, or a fine amicus brief, but no one would confuse the authors of either with an artist.

In much of what came up around the publication of Bailey's biography and the controversy that resulted, some saw an affinity between Bailey's credibly alleged sexual predations and what some saw as his biographical subject's puerile sexuality – throughout all of this, a certain kind of, let us call it, *moral stridency* was front and center. Some bemoaned a stunted moral sense in Roth that prevented him not only from choosing the right biographer for the job, but limited the greatness and ultimate relatability of his work. One important young contemporary writer commented, in a

tweet later deleted, that the masculine cult of the ego had held Roth in its grip, and that Roth would have been a much greater writer had he done more work to loosen that grip. Others rushed to defend Roth and his work against what they called a new Puritanism, reminding those willing to listen that yesterday's moral heroes are often tomorrow's villains.

Strident clarity in one's moral vision of the world is no guarantee that one will be able to write great sentences, or craft indelible scenes; moral certainty of this sort offers no edge in seeing a picture of the world that is dramatically or lyrically compelling; indeed, certainty of this sort is no real advantage to understanding at all. Knowledge of the world, or of nature, or of people is not aided by a foremost commitment to purity in one's moral approach. If anything, moral purity is only a liability in that regard, splitting the world, into acceptable and unacceptable, defensible and indefensible. It impoverishes the artist's access to – and ultimately knowledge of – reality, rich and roiling as it is.

And yet, to leave it at that would be misleading. We live in an era of either/ors. This matter, like everything, is considerably more complicated.

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One of our most brilliant literary minds, Vivian Gornick suggests: “In the end, a writer survives only if there’s wisdom in their work. A hundred years later, a *reader* must recognize the emotional patterns as their own, no matter what the social circumstances of the writer was.” It’s my belief that Gornick is describing something true here, not just one of many equally valid points of view, that what moves us and keeps us reading Plato, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare, or George Eliot, is recognition, recognition of patterns still resonant across the great expanse of centuries. Our patterns of power, of longing, of suffering, of loving, losing, the patterns of our great struggles to understand, to live rightly, and to know the good. So, yes, it would be silly to deny the centrality of moral inquiry, of moral questions, to the artistic impulse.

In Gornick’s view, what endures in literature, what makes work great, is what she calls wisdom. And which she defines as occasioning recognition. Recognition. In Old English, gecnawan; from which we derive k-know or know in our modern tongue. So Gornick and the etymology both suggest that wisdom arises from recognition, which is a kind of knowing. It seems to me that perhaps the most wide-ranging and baleful development in our collective contemporary life, is the new preponderance of a practice derived from digital technology which treats knowledge and information as synonymous. For while the way to wisdom leads through knowledge, there is no path to wisdom from information.

In our lives today, we are subject to a dominion of endless digital surveillance; to note this fact is not to break any news. And yet, the sheer scale of the domination continues to defy our imaginative embrace. Virtually everything we do, everything we are, is transmuted now into digital information. Our movements in space, our breathing at night, our expenditures and viewing habits, our internet searches, our conversations in the kitchen and in the bedroom, all of it observed by no one in particular, all of it reduced to data parsed for the patterns that will predict our purchases. But the model isn't simply predictive. It is also influencing. Daniel Kahneman's important work in behavioral psychology has demonstrated the effectiveness of unconscious priming. Whether you are aware or not that you've seen a word, that word affects your decision making. This is the reason that the technology works so effectively. The regime of screens that increasingly comprises the surface area of our daily cognition operates as a delivery system for unconscious priming, the website banners, the promotions tab in your gmail, the Instagram story you swipe through, the brand names glanced in email headings, the words and images insinuated between posts in feeds of various sorts. Otherwise known as advertising technology, or ad tech for short. The ads we don't particularly pay attention to shape us more than we know, an array of sensory and meaning stimuli barely strong enough to hold our attention, yet working at every moment to adhere us to the platforms.

Adhesiveness. That's what the technology aspires to achieve, the metric by which it self-regulates and optimizes. The longer we adhere, the longer we stick around, in a

show, on YouTube or Facebook, on the New York Times app, the deeper we scroll, the more times we touch our screen, the greater the yield of information, the more effective the influence. We are only starting to understand just how intentional all of this has become, just how engineered for maximum *engagement* the platforms are. In fact, the platforms have been built, and are still being optimized, to keep us glued, to keep us engaged.

Merchants of attention have learned that nothing adheres us to their attention traps like emotion, and that some emotions are stickier than others. The new and alluring, the surpassingly cute. The frenzied thrill at the prospect of conflict or violence. The misfortune of others. Perhaps most emblematically, the expression of our anger, rightful or hateful. All of this lights up a part of our brain that will not release us from its tyranny. Our fingertips seek it. To say that we are addicts is not even to measure the magnitude of what is happening.

The system is built to keep us engaged, to keep that neurochemical leak of dopamine steadily coursing, and it operates with a premium on efficiency, which is to say, the platforms optimize for performance based on empirical feedback. An early architect of the ad tech model writes that the largest monolingual dictionary in the world, the *Woordenboek* of the Dutch language, with over 430,000 entries, is “dwarfed by the size of the keyword lists maintained by search engine markets. Like a stock portfolio manager, who keeps a set of assets with current prices, the search engine maintains

encyclopedic word lists along with dollar-sign values, and constantly adjusts bids to reflect realized performance.”

“divorce lawyer in reno” /cost per click \$1.45 /revenue per click \$0.90

“nevada cheap divorce” /cost per click \$0.75 /revenue per click \$1.10

“nevada divorce lawyer” /cost per click \$5.55 /revenue per click \$2.75

The most expensive word in the English language? Mesothelioma. A decade ago, attorneys seeking damages and making fortunes on contingency fees bid up the value of this word as high as \$90 per click. It would be hard to print money faster than these ad tech auction markets can make it.

Part of what this process reveals is the persistent self-regulating nature of the technology. Like a virus needing a healthy sampling of the population in order to spawn variations, for the tech to be able to tailor and deliver advertising in its various forms, you need eyeballs. The more of them, and the longer they stay, the greater the opportunity. John Stankey, CEO of ATT, was unusually clear about this prime directive in 2018, as he addressed his new employees at then just-acquired HBO. I quote him here from *The New York Times*:

“We need hours a day,” Mr. Stankey said, referring to the time viewers spend watching HBO programs. “It’s not hours a week, and it’s not hours

a month. We need hours a day. You are competing with devices that sit in people's hands that capture their attention every 15 minutes." (This, mind you, was 2018.) Continuing the theme, Stankey added: "I want more hours of engagement. Why are more hours of engagement important? Because you get more data and information about a customer that then allows you to do things like monetize through alternate models of advertising and subscriptions."

But even this model of an elementary attention trap, if you will, doesn't begin to express the active vanguard of today's engagement technology. Platforms churning through content with the greatest velocity have the ability to shape the emotional responses of consumers almost in real time. Watch a video on YouTube, or like a post on Facebook or Twitter, and you will be offered another, and another, and another. Behind the suggested offerings is a logic of emotional response. The platform is seeking your trigger, and nothing drives engagement like outrage. Moral outrage. Those we know it right to hate; those we love because we are united together against those we know are right to hate. This is the logic behind the viral campaigns leading to the historic slaughter of Rohingya in Myanmar. This is the logic of the increasingly truculent divide between right and left in this country today. Driven by engagement and the profit that it generates, each side drifts further and further from the other, the space between them becomes more charged, richer with opportunity for the platforms to monetize it. I have often thought of late that it would do us some good to recognize

what we take for clash in ideologies might have more electrical engineering behind it than we realize.

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Engagement technology isn't just shaping the world without but remaking the world within. In attempting a sketch of the technology's damage to contemporary interiority, and I will do my best not to play the part of the Luddite, for to do so would be to imply that I believed an alternative was possible. I don't think it is. We have finally arrived at a long-imagined end. For more than a generation, science fiction writers and aficionados have speculated about the possibility and imminence of the singularity, that is, the moment when AI will finally eclipse human intelligence. To many, it's meant the robot capable of thinking, and with an intellect surpassing our own. Let me suggest that digital problem-solving has already surpassed human capacity. Indeed, our advanced societies are increasingly ordered by a digital matrix of data collection, pattern recognition and decision making that we cannot even begin to fathom. And which is happening in every single successive millisecond after millisecond. The synergy of data technology, computer processing speeds and capacity, and an almost frictionless non-local interconnectivity – all of it enables exchange, delivery of services, production of goods, growth of capital, and most centrally, the endless catalogue of our every interface, however glancing, however indirect, with this system's sprawling and

ubiquitous apparatus. The singularity is here; we could call it the era of automation; and its inescapable imprint on our inner lives is already apparent.

In pursuit of what John Stankey called *more hours every day*, the technology metes out its steady stream of tiny pleasures as the reward for your sustained attention. Touch the screen, or controller, respond to the offered stimuli like a rat in an experiment, receive what some are now calling a dopamine rush. What follows from this *engagement* with the devices is an education, in which the system absorbs our responses and in absorbing, begins to shape them. The fetishizing modality of the human unconscious, ever-elusive, ever-the-province of human myth, is now endowed with ordinal form, as the technology channels the nebulous pull of our proverbial id with Cartesian clarity, the movement of desire rerouted toward the system's mercantile ends. This careful, unceasing, inhumanly methodical curation of our pleasure principle becomes a larger force in our psyches, as the devices secure our access to the steady diet of incremental stimulation increasingly coextensive with the native ground of our very cognition. We may not notice that there is less and less time passing between touches of the phone. Every 15 minutes? That was so 2018. We're in 2021, and the urge to reach out for the screen now feels like a rightful impatience with boredom of any sort. But it isn't that. It's withdrawal. And from this endlessly recurring neurochemical deficit is born a sense of circumstance and a syllogism that goes like this: "Something is wrong if nothing is happening. Something is always happening on this screen. Nothing's wrong when I'm on this screen." The habit of succumbing to the syllogism — daily, hourly, every minute

— charts a course into an undiscovered country of distrust. Distrust of interior discomfort whatever its texture. Anxiety and uncertainty on the one hand; boredom on the other. Embedded in this scheme of endless distraction is a deeper logic. The system has come to understand the fundamental value of always reaffirming our points of view back to us, delivering to us a world in our image, confirmation bias as the default setting. This is the real meaning of contemporary virtuality. For in the virtual space, the technology combats and corrects our frustrations with reality itself, reality, which defies expectation and understanding, by definition.

I seek. I find what I know. I enjoy this recognition of myself. I am trained over time to trust in a path to understanding that leads through the familiar, that leads through me. "I" am the arbiter of what is true. "I" am the arbiter of what is real. What is more real than me?

In its basest form — (and make no mistake, the baser the form, the stickier the engagement) — in its basest form, what we're describing here is a profound technological support for enthrallment to primary narcissism. We don't need to know our Ovid in order to understand the perils of all this self-gazing, and yet, we may nevertheless fail to appreciate just how pervasive the social attitudes engendered by this orientation have become.

Self-obsession as a route to self-realization is, of course, not a new discourse. American advertising has been foisting this fiction on us for quite some time, exalting attention paid to even the most fugitive of our desires, encouraging us to think of the fulfillment of desire itself, however trivial, as the ultimate purpose of our national politics; so no, the message isn't exactly new, but the breadth of the messaging is unprecedented. The technology now floods the zone; the waters never recede; and in the process, the landscape and its use are entirely remade. Now, the affirming predicate of bias confirmation reigns supreme. "I know," is a social prime mover. Elevation of the "I"-that-knows is a greater social good. Exhibitionist displays of self-esteem are conflated with instances of political defiance. The self-valorizing anthems. The elevation of "me" and "my" to epistemological categories. And the now widespread misreading of the self's fragility as resulting not from the contingent situation of selfhood itself, but from society's failure and neglect to protect and recognize "me."

Accustomed to the pleasures of digital approbation, absorbed and convinced by a moralizing rhetoric that passes off our dependence on technology as righteous activism, we internalize another pernicious untruth, deeply damaging to our social fabric – namely, that the path to redemption and change will be paved by personal pleasure, pleasure we come to feel we shouldn't have to suffer even a moment's discomfort in order to enjoy. To use a beloved locution borrowed from the lexicon of contemporary self-esteem culture, we *deserve* this pleasure, because we *deserve* better; we *deserve* to feel good.

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All of this points to the very beginning of a new social ontology which we have, in fact, only barely sketched here, an evolving set of behaviors guided by the shift in incentives that technology has created. The glue is pleasure; the purpose is sales. It's the advertising model of thought; the entertainment model of consciousness. Self-promotion, self-commodification, self-marketing – all are now increasingly taken for forms of legitimate commentary and critique; ceaseless affirmation of our biases emboldens the strident certainty of our beliefs moral and otherwise. This is the complexion of public exchange in a newly-shaped public sphere, where the regime of screens afflicting our cognition has enshrined the centrality of certainty. Here, ideas have no inhering value, but operate as bait for the *hours a day* of human attention at stake, yet another demonstration of just how much the technology is reshaping our relations with one other. In fact, we are increasingly little more than grist for a monetizing mill that mixes, like cattle feed ground from cattle bones, our own deepest intimacies with the system's digital slop, feeding it back to us wholesale. In the process, we are being remade by what we consume. In the words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "I notice what I find increasingly troubling: a cold-blooded grasping, a hunger to take and take, but never to give; an ease with dishonesty and selfishness that is couched in the language of self-care; an expectation always to be helped and reward no matter whether deserving or not; an astonishing level of self-absorption; an

unrealistic puritanism from others; an over-inflated sense of ability, or talent, when there is any; an inability to apologize without justification; a passionate performance of virtue, well-executed in the public digital space, but not in the intimate space of friendship.” Stirring words. I doubt anyone will fail to see some truth in what she’s saying. But perhaps even more disturbing than the pain behind this passionate indictment is the predicament of those who occasioned it. The rest of us. For who, if they’re truly honest, would dare think they’d somehow escaped? After all, who among us has not succumbed to the selection of our affinities?

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Gornick suggests that wisdom is what causes a work of literature to endure. Wisdom, a kind of knowing, a movement from insight to something higher, larger, deeper. The spatial metaphors falter on the shoals of paradox, perhaps inevitable for any attempt to take the full measure of wisdom’s compass. The brightening of vision, or the loss of it, into a darker seeing of more infinite depth. None of this, however, suggests anything like a path of certainty, moral or otherwise, leading to the kind of wisdom Gornick is talking about. Indeed, certainty has little with wisdom at all. Might in fact be something closer to wisdom’s opposite. Wisdom: a kind of knowing ever-riven with contradiction, a knowing intimate with the inevitably of *uncertainty*, which is the very discomfort and condition the curated cascade of confirmation bias is working to undo in us, second after second. Indeed, literature neither arises from the certain or the pure, nor aspires

to either. There is no ordained path, no studied or sanctioned route to the confrontation with contradiction that is its source. If literature can occasion a different order of seeing, all around a thing, down to its center, or a seeing as broad as the world itself – if this is what literature can do, it is not by means of an engineered moral code. There is no blueprint. No forbidden terrain, for, indeed, any road, from anywhere, can lead to literature and the wisdom that causes it to endure.

For a writer, elective affinity is the lamp that lights the way. It was ever so for Philip Roth, a writer of passionate affinities, if there ever was one. Affinities he felt toward the great American writers, even at a time when the prevailing social thinking imagined him as Jewish first and American second (if at all), and an affinity that led to his embrace of even a virulent anti-Semite like Celine. “Céline is my Proust!” Philip Roth once said. “Even if his anti-Semitism made him an abject person. To read him, I...suspend my Jewish conscience...Céline is a great liberator.” The path of affinity almost always leads to contradiction, like that of an American Jewish novelist emulating an anti-Semite. Contradiction, which, if Fitzgerald is right, would be another form of wisdom. For, in Fitzgerald’s famous words, it’s the ability to hold opposing thoughts that defines any fine mind.

In Benjamin Taylor’s *Here We Are*, a touching account of his friendship with the writer, Taylor writes of Roth reading aloud to him a passage in Conrad’s *Lord Jim*: “A man that is born falls into a dream like [one] 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, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up ... In the destructive element immerse." And Roth looks up and adds: "It's what I've said to myself in art and, woe is me, in life too. Submit to the deeps. Let them buoy you up." The downward movement that lifts. Or the ascent that sinks "slowly as a kite" — as Elizabeth Hardwicke writes in *Sleepless Nights*. The paths to the wisdom of contradiction are legion, which is why any artist with a nose for a possible route, alive to her own affinities, will not ultimately be bucked by the concerns of the many. For something else the technology has done is to enable a collective voice, a gathering place for our various camps of confirmed bias. These agglomerations of outrage are not just left-leaning or right-leaning, *groupings* superintended by a cascade of algorithmically collated slogans of belonging, group creedal statements honed, like shibboleths, to the very locution. One of the characteristics of the automating technology is that it is very effective at herding opinion in ways not meaningfully different from policing it. So it is that the singularity now operates as its own form of an ever-present central committee. No flesh-and-blood party steward is even required.

The writer today, wherever she is, must not be cowed by fear, however real, of opprobrium, retaliation, and group exclusion. She must know that her path to the transmutation of knowledge which produces the wisdom of literature can, in the end, only lead from her own sense of things. The singularity will not lead her there, not in

the form of the information masquerading as a kind of knowing, nor in the metaphysics of group belonging. No. And any defense of the path to literature, to the writing of it, to the reading of it, to the teaching of it – any such defense can only be as strong as those willing to heed it. Fundamentally, this is not a matter of judgment, not for a court of public opinion or of any other sort. It is a matter of the heart, a matter of that wisdom that we call love.

I will end today with a quote from Roth's address to the audience on his winning the National Book Award for *Goodbye, Columbus*. Having recently read about a symposium at the Iowa Writer's Workshop where leading novelists of the day were canvassed about "The Condition and Function of the Writer in Contemporary American Society," Roth commented: "Should the writer? Can the writers? Is the function of the writer in contemporary...?" Baloney! What questions! What a lightweight approach to human character! Imagine—should Jane Austen? Can Thomas Hardy? Is it the function of Sir Walter Scott...?"

Thank you.