**OLD AGE AS MASSACRE: PHILIP ROTH'S ELEGIES OF AGING IN
EVERYMAN AND *AMERICAN PASTORAL***

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Abstract: *I intend to explore Philip Roth's representation of aging in his 1997 novel, American Pastoral, and in the allegorical, medical life story of his generic hero, Everyman (2006). My arguments connect the writer's constant preoccupation with the biological life of the body and the cultural significance of aging, divergently projected in these two novels.*

Keywords: *literature and medicine, aging, illness, biography, sexuality, death.*

1. Introduction

Although present in many of his novels, aging and the pitfalls of diminishing physical ability dominate the background of Roth's late novels. Either voiced by his predilect alter-ego or by anonymous protagonists, the burden of the aging body is one of the allegories that anchor Roth's interest in individual destiny in the vast soil of contemporary history and the condition of modern man. Rather masculine than universally human, the writer's perspective could be read as an ironic elegy hesitating between bitter nostalgia and cynical resentment. I intend to focus on two novels, published almost a decade apart, *American Pastoral* (1997) and *Everyman* (2006). Apparently, the two novels share very little beyond Roth's trademark interrogations concerning older age as pretext for reevaluating the past. My aim is to identify Roth's strategy concerning the connection between the individual past and collective history in his recurrent interest in the ages of man. I intend to argue that this strategy projects one of the writer's specific manners of contrastively revealing the relationship between limited, private and ultimately subjective life and the greater framework of an interval (specifically, postwar and contemporary America). Aging and mortality are two of Roth's arch-themes, spanning the last two decades of his literary career, when the real biography of the older writer often mirrored itself in the fictional life stories of his male main characters.

2. *Everyman* revisits Medieval fears

Roth's aging protagonists are men of unusual vitality that paradoxically obsess about death with obstinate passion. Indeed, as Alex Hobbs noted, the main character of *The Humbling*, Simon Axler, is a "man trying desperately but ineffectually to fight against old age with sex" (Hobbs 2016:50). Similarly, the unnamed protagonist of *Everyman* revisits his erotic past in order to validate his virility and turn it into an argument of physical strength and endurance. The novel draws its title and symbolic background from a fifteenth-century morality play, entitled *Everyman*, deploring the vulnerability and precarity of the human condition. In a similar manner, but in a modern framework - sabotaged by illness, unable to escape its demoralizing frequency, as he gets older - Roth's generic *everyman* reevaluates his biography in the precise terms of his failed relationships, and his somber conclusions are echoed by the chilling coldness of the speeches his family gives at his funeral. As *Everyman*, - standing for all humanity, like his Medieval counterpart - grows older, not only his health erodes, but also his erotic success plunges, reaching unprecedented levels of ridicule. His

philandering began quite late, in his late forties, but it quickly proved avid and prodigious. It lasted about two decades, and it coincided with a gradual waning of his sexual success. He rejected this painful scenario, although he noticed his third wife's obsession with youth and implicitly classified it as a character flaw. His own clinging to the same illusion remained unacknowledged, as his need to persist in comparing old age to youth overflows his view of his own brother. Older yet healthier, Howie is the object of his brother's envy and unjustified hatred. However, "he did not retain for long the spiteful desire for his brother to lose his health — that far he could not go as an envier, since his brother's losing his health would not result in his regaining his own. Nothing could restore his health, his youth, or invigorate his talent" (Roth 2006:99). Twenty years later, having a well-trained eye for spotting and approaching young women, he continued to employ seduction strategies befitting confident, younger men: "He'd said «How game are you»?, and she'd replied «What do you have in mind?»" (Roth 2006, 133). The flirtation remained strictly verbal, as the young woman he met while trekking on the boardwalk disappeared for good after playfully taking his number.

There is a perceptible interest in the quantification of ages and years in Roth's *Everyman*, as numbers are mentioned for precision, with the protagonist's life marked by distinctive milestones. This ironic autobiography that *Everyman* unfolds, as his life unravels narratively, is, indeed, as he intended, "The Life and Death of a Male Body" (Roth 2006:51-52), and its remarkable events are closely tied to memorable years that changed its course. This careful division serves the purpose of fueling the illusion of order and predictability, of an ordinary life troubled only by increasingly significant medical crises. After his final failed attempt at sexual seduction, he seems to bitterly acknowledge his limits: "I'm seventy-one. This is the man I have made" (Roth 2006:98).

Ben Schermbrucker argues, in a study on Roth's view of the human condition and, implicitly, of death, that "*Everyman's* treatment of the relationship between sexuality and aging provides additional reasons for Roth's rejection of the idea that death can be made philosophically palatable" (Schermbrucker 2015:46). He goes on quoting from a televised interview, in which Philip Roth declared his preoccupation with demolishing the mythologies of the golden age of wisdom:

The standard story is that age brings wisdom [. . .]. I'm not so sure about that [. . .] I don't feel any wiser than I was at 20, or the day before yesterday. I feel just as stupid as I've always been [. . .] So there are lots of myths about old age: there is the myth of the golden years [. . .] I'm trying to write about what I take to be the realities of old age and not the mythologies of aging (Roth 2009, qtd. in Schermbrucker 2015:46).

In conclusion, Roth's intention to mirror the metamorphoses of aging could be interpreted as a direct interest in the manner aging changes the perception of death.

3. Lamenting the end

Everyman is possibly Roth's most death-oriented novel, as it begins with the protagonist's funeral and it ends with his demise, focusing, between these cardinal moments, on his life story, as reimagined and told by himself. It could be (and it was) considered an exemplary tale of one's confrontation with mortality and, ultimately, with death, and Roth's declaration in a 2006 interview "I have been looking into so many graves of late, I thought, well, it's time to write about it" (Roth 2006) could be read as it's ironical trigger. However, a lucid, unforgiving (therefore emblematically "Rothian") meditation upon the inevitable degradation implied by the aging process is equally obvious here. Roth typically projects, in his novels deploring the ravages of old age, a predilect triad connecting aging, illness and death. He imagines a direct line of consequence, one that correlates aging and illness, and this

relation is of particular importance in this analysis. Roth deemed his novel “the story of a man's life through his illness” (Roth 2006) and it begins with “his early education in mortality” (idem) – as a child in hospital, he witnessed the final days of another young boy. Later, as a young man, he asked himself if it weren't too early to meditate upon potential “terrifying encounters with the end”, exclaiming, revolted: “I'm thirty-four! Worry about oblivion [...] when you're seventy-five! The remote future will be time enough to anguish over the ultimate catastrophe!” (Roth 2006: 32). However, the episodes of illness that follow are closely tied to milestones in the protagonist's biography. It appears as if each new age or decade debuts with a bout of illness, signaling his faltering health and the irreversible degradation of his physical prowess. As Thomas R. Cole and Benjamin Saxton noted in their medical reading of Roth's novel, “Everyman's life is punctuated by four major episodes of illness that in medieval, medical, and theological parlance would be known as the Four Ages of Life” (Cole, Saxton 2014:408; see also Covey 1985). Moreover, his marital history is included in this biographical sequencing, his three wives, Cecilia, Phoebe and Merete acting as symbolic guardians of the four ages.

The age of thirty-four coincides with a reawakening of his childhood fear of death, fueled by the sudden realization that “this was his turning overnight from someone who was bursting with health into someone inexplicably losing his health” (Roth 2006:34). After a burst peritonitis crisis (the intentional use of “bursting” signals the recurrence of an explosion that shook the protagonist's life – the death of his younger brother Sammy, from the same illness), another interval of physical wellbeing followed, but, as the man was in his mid-50s, another, more serious, crisis followed. In disbelief, Roth's protagonist refused to accept that he could be thrown into the midst of a far more severe storm than the one that accompanied his burst appendix. He still considered himself the young son of an elderly man, and as long as this relationship could be invoked, he was safe from major disaster. Yet a silent, potentially deadly condition came upon him unexpectedly:

He was sure that the breathlessness was the result of having seen how far his father's condition had deteriorated in just the past few days. But in fact it was his that had deteriorated, and when he went to the doctor the next morning, his EKG showed radical changes that indicated severe occlusion of his major coronary arteries (Roth 2006:42).

The severity of his illnesses increased with age, as the loss of youth directly impacts the quality of life. Aging becomes an underlying condition that, unlike others, cannot be avoided or healed, despite its status as permanent focus of the medical institution. Defying age, prolonging life far beyond the limits imagined by previous scientific knowledge, transforming fitness and wellness into the mantras of adulthood and fighting the unavoidable effects of decreasing vitality have become the principal purposes of modern day medicine. Roth seems eager to tackle this myth and question its euphoric effects. Despite the young wives, his permanently wandering eye and a constant openness to sexual adventure, Roth's Everyman is painfully aware of his inability to fit into the paradigm of ageless, eternal vigor. He was under the impression that “he was merely doing everything he reasonably could to stay alive. As always — and like most everyone else — he didn't want the end to come a minute earlier than it had to” (Roth 2006:66), but, as he got older, “eluding death seemed to have become the central business of his life and bodily decay his entire story” (Roth 2006:71).

In his final years, after 9/11, he left Manhattan for a retirement village close to the beach and took painting as a hobby. “He was sixty-five, newly retired, and by now divorced for the third time. He went on Medicare, began to collect Social Security, and sat down with his lawyer to write a will” (Roth 2006:62). He met a woman that further stirred his irrational fears, Millicent Kramer. A widow suffering from depression, tortured by chronic back pain,

the woman came to his painting class as if to mirror his age and illness-related angst. Close to his age and bearing the resemblance of a martyr, Millicent appears crushed by her suffering and the loneliness it entails. Her physical condition was so severe it isolated her, as she had to take an opiate pill to alleviate her debilitating pain. Her suicide by sleeping pills signals the tragic bravery of someone who refused the daily humiliation and savage cruelty of disability. She couldn't have been further from the image of the younger, sensuous female that constantly seemed to attract Roth's Everyman, yet "he could see unmistakably how attractive she must have been before the degeneration of an aging spine took charge of her life" (Roth 2006:92). There is certainly an implicit similarity of biological destiny between Millicent and Everyman, despite the fact that he experienced pain only sporadically and had long intervals of good life and health between crises. Meeting someone his age, who was emotionally connected to their spouse and valued married life implies an unavoidable parallelism between characters. Yet, however noble her exit, Millicent's death is no less meaningless and absurd, as Roth does not retract his cynical perspective on it: "in the novel there is no humanizing of death, no attempt to turn it into an integral part of life, no harnessing of its otherness in a dialectical relationship with life: death is simply the bitter, unjust end" (Schermbucker 2015:41). Their closeness in age triggers a tide of unanswered questions that haunt Everyman and make him doubt his life choices. Her suicide puzzles and fascinates him, as if it could be a valid choice he could make for himself:

But how does one voluntarily choose to leave our fullness for that endless nothing? How would he do it? Could he lie there calmly saying goodbye? Had he Millicent Kramer's strength to eradicate everything? She was his age. Why not? In a bind like hers, what's a few years more or less? Who would dare to challenge her with leaving life precipitously? (Roth 2006:164)

This passage echoes the existential angst of Simon Axler in *The Humbling*, where Roth "exposes the brutal fact about mortality and loneliness: the brutal fact that life comes to an end gradually, if not suddenly, and that it is indescribably hard to come to terms with this" (Safer 2011:46).

4. *American Pastoral* and the nostalgia of innocence lost

Although differently calibrated from the temporal perspective concerning the aging process, *American Pastoral* is fundamentally a novel that laments, in an elegiac tone, the irretrievable loss of young age and the decay implied by aging. The contrastive tone deriving from the essential opposition between then and now, old and young, vitality and disease/decay generates the central tension of the novel, exposing the pitfalls of the American Dream.

American Pastoral is narrated by an elder Nathan Zuckerman, now in his sixties, remembering the Paradise of his boyhood in Newark (the first part of the book is entitled *Paradise Remembered*). The novel actually begins with the revelation of his childhood adoration for his hero, the baseball adolescent deity, Seymour "The Swede" Levov, the idol of an entire generation of Newark young boys. Embodying an ideal of assimilation and Americanization, the son of a Jewish family of leather manufacturers, The Swede also essentialized the implicit youth obsession lying at the heart of the American Dream:

The Swede. During the war years, when I was still a grade school boy, this was a magical name in our Newark neighborhood, even to adults just a generation removed from the city's old Prince Street ghetto and not yet so flawlessly Americanized as to be bowled over by the prowess of a high school athlete. The name was magical; so was the anomalous face. Of the

few fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish public high school, none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov (Roth 1997:3).

Now aged almost 70, The Swede transcended the realm of legend into Zuckerman's life as a writer when, shortly before dying of prostate cancer, he asked him for help – Seymour Levov wanted to write a tribute to his father and he turned to a professional to do so. The project never came to fruition, but, instead, Zuckerman reimagined Swede's life and biography in the allegorical terms of postwar American History. Their meeting over dinner in New York proved demythologizing for Zuckerman – although the Swede preserved his physical appearance in good shape, despite that “beneath the promontory of cheekbones, a little more hollowing out than classic standards of ruggedness required” (Roth 1998:23), the former athlete confessed he'd undergone prostate surgery; that singular event that, in Roth's fictional imagination is an incontestable mark of aging and physical humbling, along with numerous other details, led him to question the strange narrative “that was feeding my sense of someone who was not mentally sound” (idem).

Roth reunites the two men – the former adorer and the once adored – in their elder years to make obvious the unforgiving passage of time in their biographies but also, most probably, to connect individual perishability to the wider frame of historical hazard. Roth's “lateness”, understood in the terms proposed by Adorno (1993) and Said (2007) as a predilection to reflect upon aging, loss and death in the final part of an artist's career, seems to become perceptible in *American Pastoral*, although his 1997 is not necessarily part of his actual late work. The forty-fifth high school reunion brought together a generation of Americans that, despite their different metamorphoses, had in common at least one trait – they grew older as part of the same collective history. The dancing, reminiscing, compliments, and flirting of the occasion were all manners of defying old age, illness and the implicit isolation of physical degradation. “Let's speak further of death”, Roth's fictional alter ego invites, “and of the desire - understandably in the aging a desperate desire—to forestall death, to resist it, to resort to whatever means are necessary to see death with anything, anything, anything but clarity” (Roth 1998:47). In a study dedicated to Roth's late oeuvre (with a focus on *Exit Ghost*), involving a persistent obsession with illness and physical disability, Michael Shipe (2009) reflected on the cultural meaning of the seclusion of old age and infirmity. Extending the argument to *American Pastoral*, the nostalgic disposition of Roth's narrator emerges from a fractured sense of belonging to contemporaneity – elders turn to the past for meaning and enlightenment and, as Zuckerman ultimately decides to do, reinterpret, expand and rewrite individual histories in order to find coherence within the frame of objective history. Illness and Swede Levov's discovery of „what physical shame is, what humiliation is, what the gruesome is, what extinction is” (Roth 1998:29) apparently connect the two protagonists – narrator and character – but, at a closer look, it is old age and their opposition and nonadherence to the present that generates Zuckerman's tragic hypotheses concerning his childhood hero.

5. Conclusions

A parallel reading of Philip Roth's *Everyman* and *American Pastoral* reveal the writer's complex interest in the mythology of aging and his intention to explore its potential as one of his creative trademarks. Focusing on individual biography and collective history, these novels explore, with an overt interest in a universal dimension, the muted tragedy of physical degradation as signifier of a vaster crisis specific to modern man – old age isolates

and alienates one in their own biography, but, at the same time, it detaches them from the present, strengthening their late and rather futile understanding of the past.

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