

Every Man, According to Philip Roth

Aging men do not have an easy time of it in Philip Roth's late novels. Simon Axler in *The Humbling* sees his career as an actor disappear when his talent declines. When his affair with a much younger woman deteriorates and she rejects a marriage proposal, Axler commits suicide. Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's alter ego and the character he developed in a number of novels over thirty years, is considerably aged and struggles with prostate cancer in *Exit Ghost*; treatment has left him impotent and incontinent. When he returns from self-exile in New England to an alien, contemporary Manhattan, he fails to win over a married woman in her twenties. The ninety-year-old Murray Ringold of *I Married a Communist* remains active and attentive to life in extreme old age, but even he has to cope with the murder of his wife and the premature death of his daughter. Coleman Silk and his much younger lover—these May-December affairs never seem to work out—are killed by her former husband in *The Human Stain*. At the end of *Sabbath's Theater*, Mickey Sabbath is standing "ankle-deep in the puddle of the springtime mud." A furious cop has pitched him out of a squad in a forest at night and he has nowhere to go.

And then there is Roth's *Everyman*, the character and the novella from 2006. Identified only by his religion—we're told that his father had "a Jewish name"—Everyman has retired from his successful, decades-long career in advertising. Frightened by the attacks of September 11, he has left New York for a retirement community on the Jersey Shore, where he was raised and where he hopes to create a second career as a serious artist. How many novelists and painters are buried in ad agencies, one wonders, eager to pursue what they consider their true vocation? Everyman is one of them, but his post-career intentions are stymied when he begins to lose interest in his work. Two years into retirement, the vacancy of his days becomes painful and

burdensome. His neighbors are friendly enough, but most of their discussions revolve around ailments, treatments and grandchildren. The few whose interests are broader seem tethered to spouses they've been with for decades, unwilling to make new acquaintances.

So Everyman falls into the life characteristic of so many elderly people, who have to fill up their days when they no longer report to a job. In *The Humbling*, Simon Axler, driven off the stage, is asked by his agent what he does all day. "Walk," he answers. "Sleep. Stare into space. Try to read. Try to forget myself for at least one minute of each hour." Medicine and forms of social care have managed to extend the lives of the elderly, but after retirement they often have nothing to do. A character in Saul Bellow's *The Actual* remarks that golf courses are a lot like cemeteries, green, flat and quiet. Everyman's friends are stricken with serious illness or die off. A former wife has a disabling stroke. His two sons are far away and indifferent. A minor character Everyman meets in an art class he is teaching has such severe, unremitting pain that she commits suicide.

"Passing the time without painting was excruciating," writes Roth, describing the daily experience of Everyman. His large collection of art books, once studied with keen interest, no longer interest him. His evenings are spent peering at the ocean he used to swim in, as he remembers his beloved parents and the vitality of his youth. Everyman is consumed by sadness, depression, loneliness, regrets. "Nothing any longer kindled his curiosity or answered his needs," Roth writes, "not his painting, not his family, not his neighbors, nothing except the young women who jogged by him on the boardwalk in the morning." At age 71, young and attractive only remind him of what he can no longer have.

The loss of interest in his artistic activity is a central part of Everyman's decline. When Roth describes how Everyman "had become bored with painting," I remembered a passage from James Breslin's biography of Mark Rothko. Rothko experienced the same troubles as Everyman—failed marriages, age, poor health, anxiety about his career as a painter. But none of this distress affected his life in his studio or his commitment to work. "Between 1949 (when he arrived at his new format) and 1969 (the last full year of his life)," writes Breslin, "Rothko—regardless of sales, shows, reviews, depressions, marital troubles, health problems—regularly produced about twenty paintings a year, as if his work provided the point of stability in an often turbulent life." Painting was a vocation for Rothko, not a profession, not even a career, as the word is conventionally used. Everyman cannot make that claim, perhaps because painting was never a calling, but simply part of his work in an ad agency.

The inactivity and ennui that set in leave Everyman with little to do but contemplate his endless mistakes--life-changing errors, choices from long ago that cannot be reversed, decisions whose effects will persist until the end of his life. Leaving New York was an error that isolates him in small-town New Jersey. The two estranged sons from his first failed marriage ridicule his artistic ambitions. An affair with a beautiful young model wrecked a perfectly sound second marriage. He married the model with whom he had the affair, though he hardly knows her; the decision seems to justify the risk he took when he began the affair. But that marriage, like his first two, come to an end. The woman's chief assets are youth and beauty, but they fail to compensate for several deficiencies. Adding to the burden of estranged wives and children is an avoidable quarrel he provoked with his brother that has cost him a close attachment, one that he needs more than ever. Roth develops all of these themes with distressing exactitude.

Everyman's only meaningful attachment is with his daughter by his second marriage, who remains devoted despite her awareness of the philandering that destroyed her parents' relations. And he remains loyal to the memory of *his* parents. Standing before their graves in the cemetery where he plans to be interred, he is aware that the human forms in the earth have long disappeared, but he thinks of the remains. "They were just bones, bones in a box, but their bones were his bones, and he stood as close to the bones as he could, as though the proximity might link him up with them and mitigate the isolation born of losing his future and reconnect him with all that had gone."

Everyman, on the other hand, has privileges that he and his creator may have taken for granted. The novel was written before the Great Recession struck in 2008, and though the economic decline officially lasted hardly more than a year, its effects continue to linger. Many of the aging had their financial assets severely depressed by the experience, and others lost their jobs and earnings potential when they were needed most. One of the leading financial stories of the media in recent years has been the plight of those who have not saved sufficiently for retirement. Everyman's troubles are real enough, but they oppress as much as they do because he can take his means of support for granted. An updated version of the novel would have the character struggling with the super-added burden of inadequate funds.

Physical pain, often severe, appears in many of Roth's novels, and it is a topic he knows from first-hand experience. His knowledge of the vulnerability of the body, the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, began during his single year in the Army in the 1950s. A back injury led to an early discharge and continued to plague him for decades, at times affecting him so severely that he medicated himself with pain-killers and alcohol. Promoting the autobiography *Patrimony* on book tours in 1992, according to his biographer Claudia Roth Pierpont, he was

reduced to lying on the floors of airports to minimize the stress on his back. Roth tore a meniscus in his knee, and the initial treatment proved ineffective. Then there was the prescription for Halcion, a soporific that was discovered to induce suicidal depression. The product was pulled from the market, but after Roth took the drug he had to spend weeks recovering in a psychiatric hospital; this is described in a direct, factual manner in *Operation Shylock*.

Everyman has numerous cardiac troubles, and Roth writes with comfortable ease about stents, angioplasty, blocked arteries, and anesthetic procedures employed in surgery. One isn't surprised to learn from Roth Pierpont that he himself had a quintuple bypass operation in 1989. *The Anatomy Lesson*, part of the Zuckerman trilogy from the 1980s, ends when the hero is given a tour of a cancer ward in a Chicago hospital. Zuckerman is a patient there himself, having shattered his jaw after falling, of all places, in a cemetery. The author describes in *Everyman* "the deadening depersonalization of a serious illness," and many of these illnesses have entered his texts, including *The Counterlife*, *Everyman*, *The Humbling*, and others.

The reader learns at the beginning of the novel that *Everyman* will be dead by the end of it; the opening pages describe his funeral service at the cemetery he chose to be buried in. I assume Roth wants the reader to understand that he is reading a story about an average person's experience of old age, and not a metaphysical thriller as to whether the central figure will survive. The drama is in *Everyman*'s affairs, mismanaged marriages, estranged children, the loneliness, illness and depression that are typical of old age. He had planned to return to New York and emancipate himself from the isolation of the retirement village. There he would be closer to his daughter from his second marriage and to surviving friends. Fears of a second terrorist attack seem to diminish with time and the emptiness of his life on the Jersey Shore. Death intervenes and deprives him of a chance to restart his life, however. He has a blocked

carotid artery and has to enter the hospital for his seventh heart-related procedure in as many years. But he suffers a cardiac arrest and never wakes up. Roth, the determined atheist, tells the reader that Everyman "was freed from being, entering into nowhere without even knowing it. Just as he'd feared from the start."

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