

Roth's Final Effort

The Humbling is the last in the grim cycle of novellas that Roth produced in the final years of his career and is easily the weakest of the four. The aging, nameless hero of *Everyman* spends his final year in acute loneliness and dies during what should have been a routine procedure to restore a blocked carotid artery. Marcus Messner's college career in *Indignation* is aborted (in 1952) when he refuses to attend chapel services; losing his college deferment, he is drafted into the U.S. Army and fatally bayoneted during the Korean War. Bucky Cantor in *Nemesis* is stricken with polio in the post-war epidemic in Newark, New Jersey. He survives, but his life prospects are ruined by the disfiguring impact of the disease. (He has a withered left arm and "a useless left hand" and weakened muscles in his left calf that cause "a dip in his gait.")

Roth's last hero isn't spared the headsman's ax. Sixty-five-year-old Simon Axler is a stage actor whose talent has inexplicably disappeared; his recent performances in *The Tempest* and *Macbeth* in Washington, D.C. were memorably bad. Forced into retirement, he endures a phase of prolonged depression and later a stay in a psychiatric hospital outside of New York. There he meets other depressed people, including Sybil Van Buren, a young woman whose husband has molested her daughter. She asks Axler to shoot the man because she has seen him assume the role of killers in a few movies. Axler declines, of course, and by the end of the story she does the job herself. But Axler regains his stability by having an affair with Pegeen Mike, a much younger woman, a lesbian, the daughter of acting friends in the Midwest who strenuously object to the romance. He is also harassed by the dean of a New England college who had been having an affair with Pegeen and is determined to win her back. Axler ultimately fails as well,

when Pegeen abandons him and decides that her sexual preferences incline toward women after all. Axler, who had consulted a fertility specialist in order to explore the possibility of starting a family, falls back into depression and at the end of the novel shoots himself. It should be added that severe back pain is afflicting the aging actor and impairing his ability to have normal sexual relations with Pegeen.

Things fall apart in this novel, identities shift and slide. After his failures on the stage with Shakespearean drama, Axler sinks into an immobilizing depression, convinced that his acting days have ended. Axler's wife has left him and departed for the West Coast. It was her third failed marriage, and her only son, the product of the second, ended up dying of a drug overdose. "Pegeen Mike" is given a double-gendered name and has trouble establishing her true sexual interests; her first name sounds vaguely feminine, but I've never come across it before. Priscilla, whom Pegeen had had an affair with during a lonely spell teaching at a college in Montana, has decided to have a sex-change operation and becomes a "man." She "betrays" Pegeen in the process. Pegeen herself decides for thirteen months to experiment sexually with Axler, but changes her mind and abandons him for women again. Sybil Van Buren ends up shooting her husband. (The molesting father was a physician no less.) In a different novel, the woman might simply have contacted law enforcement and brought charges, but in Roth's world Sybil is demented with rage and makes an orphan of her two children. Axler speculates that, in fact, the very thought of adding to their misery encouraged the wife to commit the murder. He remarks to himself, "*The suffering that's going to be Allison's*"—the daughter's. "It was probably the very thought that had driven Sybil to murder her husband—thereby enlarging Allison's suffering forever."

Perhaps Roth believes that our contemporaries lack a core and go about bearing masks and assuming their roles. Mickey Sabbath in *Sabbath's Theater* (the title is suggestive) is never sure if he's acting when he bursts into tears or proclaims his suffering. Describing the experience of Axler, the narrator remarks that "The worst of it was that he [Axler] could see through his breakdown the same way he could see through his acting. The suffering was excruciating and yet he doubted that it was genuine. . . ." Perhaps it is the drama of self-expression that Roth's characters find so attractive.

So Roth threw into his final novel the immense sexual confusions of the present age. (If the novel had been written a few years later than it was, he would have had to contend with the debate over acceptable pronouns used to identify the "questioning" and "the confused" who "refuse" to accept a "binary" definition of their gender and instruct reporters to identify them as "they." I see in a recent *New York Times* article that such resolute people now have the prefix "Mx." attached to their names.)

Still, if the story in *The Humbling* is arresting, the novel fails. We know by now that much of the material derives from Roth's personal experience, and the writing seems to get flatter as the novel proceeds. *The Humbling* feels like a perfunctory effort to transpose the facts of his life into a novel. Thanks to the labors of Claudia Roth-Pierpont, his biographer, we know that Roth fell into depression in the early 1990s, when intermittent back pain that had been under control returned with crippling effect. We also know that critics faulted *Operation Shylock*, that strange novel from 1992 on which Roth apparently set high expectations. (I've read that a planned *Time* magazine cover story was canceled after *The New Yorker* published a hostile review by John Updike.) After this happened, in the summer of 1992, Roth checked himself into a psychiatric hospital near his Connecticut home and stayed for a number of weeks. He had an affair with a

lesbian that flared for a while, as Axler does, and--much later--began to doubt his talent for producing novels, especially longer ones. Writing is a kind of performance after all, and it would hardly be surprising if Roth, who produced a shelf of books over fifty years, began wondering if hadn't written himself out as he approached his eighties. There are more of life's borrowings: Claire Bloom, his former wife, told him that the great English actor Ralph Richardson confessed to her near the end of his career that he felt his talent had run out. These autobiographical details need not vitiate *The Humbling*, but the writing and the sex scenes are too routine to offset them.

The movie version of this with Al Pacino as Axler and Greta Hartwig as Pegeen is better than the novel and departs from it in a few significant ways. The first is a fantasy Pacino's Axler has that Pegeen is actually his daughter. He dreams of having had an affair with Pegeen's mother decades before and that the younger woman is a product of it. Incest is thereby introduced at the fantasy level, apparently as a kind of sexual fillip. To heighten the atmosphere of sexual weirdness, Priscilla makes an appearance as another competitor for Pegeen and is presented as a young black actor of uncertain gender though apparently male. And Axler's chosen method of suicide is radically different. In the movie, the actor responds to his agent's pleas to return to the theater, an option Axler rejects in the novel. Al Pacino performs the final scene in *Lear* at the end of the movie, and plunges a knife into his belly at the end of the play. The agent, sitting next to a lighting technician, interprets this as a brilliant modification of the original, when, of course, *Lear* dies of a broken heart. Pacino briefly raises himself off the floor of the stage to suggest to the shocked audience that the act of seppuku was not real, but promptly lies back down as life ebbs from his face. The director apparently saw this as a more fitting way for the actor's life and career to meet its conclusion.

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players,” according to Jacques in *As You Like It*. Maybe Roth agreed with this famous claim. On the final page of the novel, Axler contemplates the end of *The Seagull*, when Konstantin Gavrilovich kills himself because he regarded himself as a failure. “What could be more fitting,” Axler thinks. “It would constitute his return to acting. . . .” And he gives a final thought to Sybil Van Buren, telling himself that “if she could do that”—murder her husband—“he could do this.”

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