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Reading Roth/Reading Ourselves:

Looking Back

Victoria Aarons

In “The Ruthless Intimacy of Fiction,” an address delivered by Roth on the occasion of his 80th birthday celebration at the Newark Museum in 2013 and published in the recent Library of America collection of his nonfiction (2017), Roth argues that at the “heart” of the realist novel is the “passion for specificity,” the attentiveness to the particularity of experience, to “the hypnotic materiality of the world one is in” (393). The attention to detail, to the seemingly trivial mundanities and minutiae that make up a life—the flotsam left in one’s wake—is the stuff and substance of the novelist’s craft. But it is also the material landscape to which we, as readers of fiction, are drawn, the “hypnotic” allure, the fixation on those things that ground us in this life, that root us in the commonality but at the same time the uniqueness of our experience. The quotidian, thus, takes on deep emotional resonance for Roth. The task, then, of the novelist is to “rummage around in memory” for the myriad of observable details to enact life on the page (“Ruthless Intimacy” 392-3). It is the artful representation of the familiar, of the real, in all its “concreteness,” its specificity and particularity, that seems to recreate for Roth the heady experience of being alive. As Roth puts it, “without the crucial representation of what is real, there is nothing.... It is from a scrupulous fidelity to the blizzard of specific data...from the force of its uncompromising attentiveness, from its *physicalness*, that the realistic novel, the insatiable realistic novel with its multitude of realities, derives its ruthless intimacy. And its mission: to portray humanity in its particularity” (“Ruthless Intimacy” 393). This “ruthless intimacy” at the center of Roth’s fiction, including the stark materiality of complex human motive, derives its

uncompromising realism from those pinpoints of targeted vulnerability, the sharp arrows directed to those most uncomfortable places of evasion and prevarication: ruthless because relentless, the novelist's undistracted eye focused on the host of maneuverings and disarrangements that make up a life; intimate because of its piercing clarity and familiarity—"No hocus-pocus," as the narrator of *Everyman* regrettably admits (51). No amount of strategic plotting, of self-reinvention, and of the attempts to escape history—the unanticipated ambushes of history and the history of one's own making—can safeguard Roth's characters from the betrayals of self and others. The juxtapositions of the material and the existential, then, create the conditions for Roth's realism, a realism based in large part on the playful anatomy of the invented, reimagined self, participating in the fantasy of, as Nathan Zuckerman puts it, "turning what-was into what-wasn't or what-might-be into what-was" (*The Counterlife* 38), or, as the protagonist of *Indignation* longingly wishes, "if only this and if only that" (229).

Roth thus presents his characters as figures bearing the very seductive possibility of a "multitude of realities." Disenchanted with a worn-out, dampened, banal, and diminished life, one can slip into another, "an exchange of existences," as the wily Zuckerman says. But, in changing those distasteful and objectionable aspects of one's existence, one would do well to caution against the intemperate, impulsive desire, the head-long rush to "change *everything*," as Zuckerman chastises his brother Henry (*Counterlife* 156). In other words, one would do well to show some restraint, as Roth's characters more often than not humorously fail to do, only too late recognizing, as does the narrator of *Indignation*, that even "the tiniest, littlest things do have tragic consequences" (14). One cannot, finally, walk out of one life into another without fallout, without, that is, the inevitable repercussions for the treachery and betrayals teeming around individual action. For Roth, however, the trick, the sleight-of-hand, is the agility of pretense, to

“pretend to be anything we want. All it takes is impersonation,” which as Zuckerman promises, “is like saying that it takes only courage” (*Counterlife* 367). Roth’s characters often struggle with questions of what knowledge to retain and what to discard. As Roth has put it of his own trajectory from the provincialism and insularity of his upbringing to the expanded worlds opening to the young novelist, how to navigate and arbitrate “the desire to repudiate and the desire to cling, a sense of allegiance and the need to rebel, the alluring dream of escaping into the challenging unknown and the counterdream of holding fast to the familiar” (Preface xiii-xiv). The reader of Roth’s fiction is thus carried along by the allure of the intoxicating performance of strategic self-impersonation, by the drama of self-transformation, and by the possibility of stepping out of one existence—the one messily bequeathed to us—and into another redemptive and paradisiacal one, the elaborate if stumbling creation of “imagined worlds, often green and breastlike, where we may finally be ‘ourselves’” (*Counterlife* 369). Of course, as Roth ironically reminds us, we all know what happened in that mythological paradise when we tried to be “ourselves.” Such transgressive delights have never been, in the Solomonic words of another Rothian character, particularly “good-for-the-Jews” (“The Conversion of the Jews” 150).

Reading Roth has always been, and continues to be, an invitation to the kind of “ruthless intimacy” that turns the critical gaze back toward the reader. If we are honest brokers about our participation in, as Zuckerman would have it, the ventriloquy of self-impersonation, in reading Roth we come to see ourselves and the contingencies of our situation in all their “particularity,” the plenitude and want of both our self-made and externally imposed worlds, “the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into” (*Counterlife* 111). We come to see the performative aspects of our maneuverings—those “strategies of aggression...strategies of retreat,” as Nathan Marx in “Defender of the Faith” puts it (194)—

mirrored, as Roth says in a 2016 interview with Daniel Sandstrom, in “the plight he has invented for his characters...the lifelike ramifications of the ensemble they make” (“Interview *Svenska Dagbladet*” 387). For the honest reader of Roth’s fiction, there is no turning from the direct gaze that confronts us; there is nowhere to run, caught off guard by the treachery of human impulses and desire and “ambushed...by the unpredictability that is history” (“My Uchronia” 345). In other words, in reading Roth well, that is, reading Roth un-blinkered, the reader is confronted with the great finality that accosts the narrator of *Everyman*, that “There’s no remaking reality” (5), or, as Arnie Mesnikoff, the narrator of *Nemesis*, reminds us, “the tyranny of contingency—is everything” (243). Thus, in exposing the mundanities, the absurdities, the strategic choreographies, and the exigencies of our experience, Roth taught us to read ourselves.

In this way, and in others, after over half a century of prolific and distinguished literary productivity, Roth remains a primary, even primal, voice of American cultural, intellectual, and literary conscience. And Roth’s America, in all its particularities and peculiarities, is a landscape with which we are—if not entirely, comfortably at home—then keenly familiar. As is, of course, Roth. To the very core, Roth is an American writer, writing, as he says, in “the American moment” (“I Have Fallen in Love with American Names” 47). As Roth suggests, for the native-born writer of his generation, as tangled up as his writing was with Jewish identity and history (especially during the repositioning of the post-war period), “The American adventure was one’s engulfing fate.... As a novelist, I think of myself and have from the beginning, as...irrefutably American...under the spell of the country’s past, partaking of its drama and destiny” (“I Have Fallen in Love with American Names” 47). Roth is an American Jewish writer of his time and place, enveloped by that history, growing up at a time when “the definition of the Jew” took on “such stunning emotional and historical proportions” (“Interview with *Le Nouvel*

Observateur”131). In an essentializing, formative way, Roth’s agitating company of characters become metonymic reflections of Roth’s restless, mutating America. His characters’ limitations represent America’s limitations, the landscape that has shaped them, just as they, from the materiality of its spiraling center—“every last American thing”—have been shaped (“Ruthless Intimacy” 393). “America,” then, is part of the ensemble of recurring Rothian characters; their fates are entwined. America is seared behind the lenses of his characters’ visions of themselves, their making, their stories, and their place in history. Roth’s characters as well as the playground of his fictional landscape—America—find themselves in a similarly untenable situation, both on shaky grounds with stories that need defending, in a demanding ethical register of “character.” The “everyman” of Roth’s thus named novel concedes: “No one could say there wasn’t enough sadness to go around or enough remorse to prompt the fugue of questions with which he attempted to defend the story of his life” (95). Such a regrettable afterthought might well be attributed to America itself. The making of character, for Roth, thus extends to the comportment and disposition of an age. Both America and the protagonists of the country’s drama-in-the-making are on the novelist’s couch, America the “patient,” just as Roth’s characters—and by extension his readers—are. And both might be said to be characterized by their limitations, their missteps, and miscalculations, in other words, by what they are not but might have been. Thus, the character of Roth’s America, like *Everyman*’s protagonist, might well be thought of as defined, thwarted, saddened, and “assailed by remorse not just for this mistake but for all his mistakes, all the ineradicable, stupid, inescapable mistakes—swept away by the misery of his limitations” (158).

And who knows this better than Roth? After all, as he famously analogized in a 1981 interview with French essayist Alain Finkielkraut for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, “America is the

place I know best in the world. It's the only place I know in the world. My consciousness and my language were shaped by America. I'm an American writer in ways that a plumber isn't an American plumber or a miner an American miner or a cardiologist an American cardiologist. Rather, what the heart is to the cardiologist, the coal to the miner, the kitchen sink to the plumber, America is to me" ("Interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*" 133-4). That is, America is the artifact, the substance that Roth shapes and excavates for possible punctures and wounds, the center stage for the imagination. In other words, America is the defining and motivating point of origin and source of knowledge for Roth's fiction; his body of fiction is tangled up in the ever-mutating "American moment." As Roth has suggested all along, America is tough competition for the novelist's imagination. In "Writing American Fiction," Roth argues that "the American writer...has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's one meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist" (*Reading Myself and Others*, 176). There is a kind of absurd implausibility for Roth in America's persistent condition of self-reinvention, symptomatic of the unguarded, unmeasured, frantic attempts, not unlike those of Roth's characters, to defend its own stories. This fraught condition is no doubt even truer now, in the opening decades of the 21st century, than it was in 1960 when Roth first wrote this piece.

Roth has written that "The treacherous imagination is everybody's maker—we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors" (*Counterlife* 164). But we are all each other's readers as well. Roth's attention to ironic detail in his fiction is not only theorized in his prose, but is also a characteristic of that

prose. Roth, in telling us how to read him, also embodies the concerns of how he thinks he should be read. As Roth has said, “At best writers change the *way* readers read” (“Interview with *The Paris Review*” 170). For the better part of the past century, Roth has posed for readers a view of America and of themselves that is unrelenting in its honesty and perspicacity. In changing the *way* we read, Roth has changed the ways in which we view the worlds in which we live. In doing so, Roth forces both the backward glance and the inward gaze. Like Neil Klugman, one is compelled to see his or her “reflection,” to have “looked...in the mirror,” and, as Roth’s prototype uncomfortably but not entirely unwelcomingly manages to do, “looked hard at the image of me, at that darkening of the glass, and then my gaze pushed through it” (“Goodbye, Columbus” 136). Roth is, after all, a realist and realism requires the energy and the courage to look frankly at one’s character and one’s place in history, to look head-on and without blinders, but also with humor, with farcical, skeptical, self-parodic, self-ironic, and self-critical recognition, but with humor nonetheless. Thus said, reading Roth is and always has been, as even the deeply suspicious Yakov Blotnik would admit, “good-for-the-Jews” (“Conversion” 150). After all, Roth, the deeply self-proclaimed American writer is too, in the end, a deeply American Jewish writer, a historically important voice in the production of American Jewish identity in the past half century.

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