


Roth's Graveyards, Narrative Desire, and "Professional Competition with Death"

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Thematic Issue ***History, Memory, and the Making of Character in Roth's Fiction***
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Abstract: In her article "Roth's Graveyards, Narrative Desire, and 'Professional Competition with Death'" Debra Shostak analyzes Philip Roth's 1954 short story "The Day It Snowed" and surveys a range of his books. Shostak offers a reading of *Sabbath's Theater* and *Everyman* to explore Roth's fictional forms and his conception of storytelling, elucidates how the traumatic knowledge of death at graveside initiates the psychoanalytic process of repression, repetition, remembering, and telling, and uncovers several motifs or formal strategies that appear when Roth deploys cemetery scenes: the linear plotting toward death is often embraced within circular narrative structures; the voice of the mother, dead or alive, presides over the protagonist's traumatic confrontation with mortality; and the narrative represents the battle waged between eros and thanatos. From the beginning of his career, Roth has sent his characters to meditate in graveyards or over coffins at crucial junctures such as narrative beginnings and endings. Drawing on psychoanalytic accounts of narrative desire, Shostak argues that Roth is preoccupied with the graveyard scene as a symbolic incitement to the compulsion that he calls in *The Human Stain* "professional competition with death."

Debra Shostak

Roth's Graveyards, Narrative Desire, and "Professional Competition with Death"

Toward the end of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, Nathan Zuckerman visits Coleman Silk's grave where, he writes, "I was completely seized by his story, by its end and by its beginning, and then and there, I began this book ... And that is how all this began: by my standing alone in a darkening graveyard and entering into professional competition with death" (337-38). Roth has sent a surprising number of his characters to meditate in graveyards or at funerals, especially at crucial narrative junctures such as beginnings and endings. I propose that Roth deploys the graveyard scene as a symbolic incitement to the narrative impulse focused on "professional competition with death." For Roth, as for Zuckerman, the gravesite serves as a primal scene—psychoanalytically, a source of repression, repetition, remembering, and telling; narratively, an initiatory moment. In many of Roth's novels, the absence signified by the grave stimulates narration, either displacing the trauma of death into the energies of erotic or reportorial desire, or rendering the epistemological problem of reckoning with death's utter absence, or gazing unflinchingly upon the chasm in a moment of narrative stasis, while refusing comforting platitudes about what it all means. To compete with death, Roth suggests, requires oppositional and even counterfactual storytelling: contesting reality by way of skepticism, perhaps, or sex, or talking to the dead. Of course, the game is rigged. The narratological condition described by Peter Brooks thwarts Roth's efforts: "the realization of the desire for narrative encounters the limits of narrative, that is, the fact that one can tell a life only in terms of its limits or margins. The telling is always *in terms of* the impending end" (52; in all subsequent quotations emphases are in the original). So Roth's scenes recur from book to book, holding in suspension the contraries—that a man stands alone in a darkening graveyard telling stories to keep the living alive.

Such gravesite scenes abound in Roth's oeuvre. Consider, for example, the three-thousand-word eulogy that begins *The Counterlife* (1986). Nathan Zuckerman finds his brother's story of sexual obsession irresistible: "Henry wasn't dead twenty-four hours when the narrative began to burn a hole in Zuckerman's pocket" (13). Roth thereby initiates the dizzyingly self-contradictory chapters that burn a hole in the novel's coherence. Or consider the climactic scene in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), when a younger Zuckerman, crazed by bodily pain and tribal obligation, screams in a cemetery, "'We are the dead! These bones in boxes are the Jewish living! These are the people running the show!'" (668), then blacks out, smashing his jaw on a gravestone, silencing him. His date with the grave heightens the bite of Roth's closing line. Zuckerman acts "as though he still believed that he could unchain himself from a future as a man apart and escape the corpus that was his" (697)—where the corpus connotes both bodily mortality and the fatal commitment to write.

Consider, too, the passing references in Roth's novellas, *Indignation* and *The Humbling*, aiming the sexual narrative toward death under the sign of the burial ground. Roth's narrator in *Indignation*, Marcus Messner, describes the sexual frustrations of the 1950s U.S., when student couples "went out to the town cemetery and conducted their sex play against the tombstones or even down on the graves" (48-49). Roth exposes Marcus's blindness to how such "sex play" will, according to the social rules against which he strains, eventually send him to his death. In *The Humbling*, the narrator describes how a college dean, longing for Simon Axler's sexual partner, "phoned from a local cemetery, where, she announced, she was 'stomping around in a fury' because of the way Pegeen had treated her" (56). The scare quotes around the dean's reported action convey the narrator's cynical detachment, reflecting Axler's condescension toward her and lending a bitter foretaste of Pegeen's later abandonment of Axler, which motivates the suicide that closes his story. Or look to the funeral of one of the first young polio victims in *Nemesis* (2010), when Bucky Cantor uncomprehendingly confronts the fact that the dead no longer feel or think or grow. Bucky "imagin[es] Alan roasting like a piece of meat in his box" (69), and he meditates on "That box from which you cannot force your way out. That box in which a twelve-year-old was twelve years old forever" (63). Roth repeats, from *The Anatomy Lesson*, the figure of the "box" that also appears toward the end of *Everyman*, when the protagonist takes comfort at his parents' gravesite from their "bones in a box" even as he confronts their disappearance (170, 180-81). In Roth's imagination, the box emphasizes the blank, mechanical geometry

of death. When these figures try to control their own narratives, they smash against the inescapable materiality of loss hinted at in the graveyard.

Consider, also, how some of Roth's most innocently deluded figures imagine that the past whose story the cemetery signifies may redeem present deaths. For example, the alter-ego "Philip Roth" who narrates *Operation Shylock* fantasizes that the consort of *his* doppelganger buries Pipik, "with traditional Jewish rites, in a local cemetery dating back to pre-Revolutionary Massachusetts ... To be surrounded in death by all these old Yankee families, with their prototypical Yankee names, had seemed to [Pipik] exactly as it should be for the man whose gravestone was to bear beneath *his* name the just, if forlorn, epithet 'The Father of Diasporism'" (366). Roth identifies the naïve appeal to the imprimatur that US-American lineage might place on the names of those who are, in pre-Revolutionary terms, far from "American"—like Roth himself. The delicious irony that the name on Pipik's gravestone would be "Philip Roth" challenges death, since the narrating "Philip Roth" survives the "Philip Roth" who would be buried there. Roth gestures reflexively again at storytelling when "Philip" imagines that Pipik had "chosen the plot there himself" (366). The "plot" where Pipik is buried is the (historical) plot of Jewish American life he wishes to consecrate in his zany (political) plot to return the Jews to Europe, all constituting the (narrative) plot into which Roth—and "Roth"—inserts him.

The intentionality of the "plot" becomes central to Roth's storytelling competition with death, and *Patrimony* offers an example. Roth recounts driving by "accident" to the cemetery where his mother is buried instead of to his father's apartment, where he plans to tell Herman Roth of his fatal brain tumor: "Though I wasn't searching for that cemetery either consciously or unconsciously ... I had flawlessly traveled the straightest possible route ... to my mother's grave" (20). The scene's pairing of repression of and confrontation with the fact of death encapsulates the central human problem of such knowledge. In the memoir's final pages, Roth circles back implicitly to that moment. Confessing how he incongruously chose to dress his father, a man "rooted all his life in everydayness" (234), in an ancestral shroud for burial, he recounts a dream in which his dead father reproaches him, saying "'I should have been dressed in a suit. You did the wrong thing.'" Roth realizes that "I had dressed him for eternity in the wrong clothes" (237)—the dream blatantly displacing his anxiety that he has not told his father's story right. The narrative engages Roth in "error," the psychological phenomenon according to which desire both belies and interpenetrates reality. Roth errs because he desires at once to evade and confront the knowledge of death's finality. This desire determines the arc of Roth's storytelling and holds its greatest meaning in its contradictions.

It may seem as if all Roth's roads lead to the grave. Either "consciously or unconsciously," he "flawlessly travels" to the scene not of dying itself, which might elicit gestures of sentimentality or spirituality, but of burial—the site of the body's vanishing, the hole in the earth that speaks of the final nothingness of material being. The *memento mori* of the grave leads Roth to several formal choices. First, according to the compulsion to remember and tell, Roth embraces linear plotting toward death within circular narrative structures that feature traumatic repetition as well as closure that hovers between oppositions—such as love and hate, transcendence and materiality, tragedy and irony. Second, the voice of the mother, dead or alive, presides over the protagonist's traumatic confrontation with mortality. Third, Roth represents the battle waged between eros and thanatos, perhaps most obvious in Mickey Sabbath of *Sabbath's Theater*. Indeed, if every third thought is his grave, as Roth quotes Prospero in the novel's epigraph, the first thought, here and elsewhere, may be "mother" and the second "sex." Scholars and critics remark the death-haunted character of Roth's later work: Aimee Pozorski, for example, notes that gravesite scenes appear often in the major work since *Sabbath's Theater* (148; see also Posnock; Shipe; Shostak). Roth has, however, been preoccupied with mortality from the very beginning, as David Brauner observes (218). Indeed, the 1954 short story "The Day It Snowed," published when Roth was just twenty-one, drives toward a climactic visit to the cemetery. In its relative simplicity, the story offers a sketch for the narratological pattern and some of the tropes I explore in some of Roth's books and in more detail in *Sabbath's Theater* and *Everyman*.

"The Day It Snowed" focalizes the perspective of a child, Sydney, from whom the adults around him suppress the knowledge that some family members have died. Told that they have "disappeared," Sydney believes that if they have simply chosen to go elsewhere, they might be found again. Roth narrates much of the story in free indirect style, capturing the child's inability to interpret the signs around him. Beginning "Suddenly people began to disappear" (34), Roth's story explores Sydney's

literal understanding of "disappear"—as the reverse of being "visible" and "present"—rather than as a euphemism veiling the knowledge of death. The repeated word "disappear" supplies a structuring motif, invoking narrative principles that Peter Brooks identifies. Drawing on Freud's account of eros and thanatos in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to describe the desires that propel narrative toward both continuation and the stasis of ending, Brooks notes how narrative "claim[s] overt authority for its origin, for a 'primal scene' from which ... 'reality' assumes narratability" (96). Brooks calls the relation between "initiatory desire" and the "deathlike ending," when narratability ceases, "Freud's own masterplot" (96), where repetitions fill the space of the middle. Freud of course identifies compulsive repetition as a sign of repressed trauma. As Cathy Caruth explains, "the repetition at the heart of catastrophe—the experience that Freud will call 'traumatic neurosis'—emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (2). The repetition of "disappear," then, from Roth's first sentence onward, suggests that the concealed meaning of death is the trauma that both initiates the narrative and drives it towards its close.

The story's turning point occurs with another incremental repetition, when Sydney asks of a nameless old man, "Why does everybody have to disappear on me?" Although the man explains that "to disappear is to die" (42), the moment ironically fails to signal Sydney's fall into knowledge. Rather, Sydney misplaces the emphasis and is overjoyed to learn that his family members "didn't do it [disappear] on purpose" (43). Sydney adapts the new fact into a new misconception. By bringing Sydney in the closing paragraphs to the cemetery, where the funeral for his stepfather is occurring, Roth shows how the child fails to grasp what death is. Sydney asserts, "Momma, he is dead and that's good ... you can stop looking, I can stop looking," and, running heedlessly after the departing old man, he is crushed by the hearse, "shatter[ing] forever his thin glass voice" (44). The new, displaced repetition—"can stop looking"—signifies Sydney's refusal of the appearance of absence, the gaze at the silent grave that might close the narrative with recognition. Repetition does not, according to the Freudian prescription, bring the repressed material into consciousness. Sydney does not so much look into the abyss as fall blindly into it, his trauma left unmastered. The senseless, mechanical death of the innocent child suspends the story between tragedy and absurd irony. The only recognition achieved is that of the reader, for whom the repetition of "disappearance" aesthetically requires Sydney's death—the story must return full circle to fulfill the thematic pattern with which it opens. The narrating voice indicates Sydney's stymied consciousness, stopping, unlike the reader, at the threshold of knowing and telling.

Sydney's mother is the source for him of concealed meanings and, therefore, despite herself, of his trauma and death. She informs him that his aunt has "disappeared," and although he does not understand her meaning, he neither asks for clarification, "because of her crying," nor asks his stepfather, "because his mother was the one he was supposed to ask questions of" (35). Roth establishes the mother as the origin of both knowledge and the comforts of its suppression; she thus figures both narratability and its limit. Roth reinforces the mother's symbolic position at the end of the story when, repudiating the knowledge that the old man gives Sydney, she screams the lie that "Poppa isn't dead" and demands that the old man be removed from the cemetery (44). Roth's irony is obvious, in that the old man and his news appear appropriately in the place where death discloses its indisputable material reality. Because of Sydney's desire not to be excluded from such knowledge—seen when he desperately calls "Mister Man" to come back, rejecting his mother's assertion—he is killed.

In Roth's subsequent work, the voice of the mother remains a powerful trope for the mediation or suppression of the traumatic knowledge of death that the grave might otherwise convey. Although the Zuckerman of *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) is forever bedeviled by the ambiguity of his father's last word—has he called his "apostate son" "Bastard"? (375)—by the time, in *The Anatomy Lesson*, Nathan's mother's last word reaches him, its message is unmistakable. Asked to write her name, "instead of 'Selma' [she] wrote the word 'Holocaust,' perfectly spelled" (447). The knowledge that her death and word communicate to Zuckerman stirs the stark summary that all is "Gone" (474), the word that Roth chooses to title the novel's second chapter (445). Much later, when in *Exit Ghost* Roth renounces his aging alter-ego, the final chapter begins with a pitiable, wish-fulfilling dream of reversing time in a return to the womb. Zuckerman telephones his long-dead mother, a "corpse in a grave," to ask her to commit incest with him; obligingly, she "leave[s] the cemetery for [his] bedroom" where, arousing his desire, she speaks the "triumphant words ... 'birth! birth! birth!'" (242). Roth then de-

flates such foolish fantasies, dashing Zuckerman's dream of escape from the tomb, when he juxtaposes the scene to Zuckerman's reminiscence of his friend George Plimpton, who "died as we all do: as a rank amateur" (264).

The forlorn fantasy of the maternal voice in *Exit Ghost*, mixing eros and thanatos with infantile wishes, highlights the lengths to which the human imagination may go in cloaking the fundamental reality of death. In the unmasked narrative voice of *Patrimony*, Roth makes such paradoxical gestures plain: "'If there's no one in the cemetery to observe you, you can do some pretty crazy things to make the dead seem something other than dead.' He shrugs, 'Oh, you can try talking to the dead if you feel that'll help ... but it's hard not to know ... that you might as well be conversing with the column of vertebrae hanging in the osteopath's office'" (21). As his paragraph tumbles toward its climax, however, his prose softens the arch tone: "you can even get down and place your hands directly above their remains—touching the ground, *their ground*, you can shut your eyes and remember what they were like" (21). The tender specificity of the action and the familiar repetition—"their ground"—are only partly nullified by Roth's bitter insistence on the unvarnished facts: "even if you succeed and get yourself worked up enough *to feel their presence*, you still walk away without them. What cemeteries prove ... is not that the dead are present but that they are gone. They are gone and, as yet, we aren't" (21). Roth's plain language, together with the tolling repetition of "gone," as in *The Anatomy Lesson*, demonstrates the incomprehensible distance that lies between the two states. The grave proves a black hole in multiple ways.

Yet Roth's dismissal of talking to the dead in *Patrimony* reverses when, four years later, *Sabbath's Theater* takes it up as a desperately poignant endeavor. From the opening pages of the novel, Roth's narrator emphasizes how Sabbath, "ferociously a realist" who "had all but given up on making contact with the living, let alone discussing his problems with the dead," finds himself in constant communication with his dead mother: "His mother was there every day and he was talking to her ... His dead mother was with him, watching him everywhere, encircling him" (16-17). James Mellard interprets Mickey Sabbath's conversations with his mother's ghost in relation to the Lacanian narrative of the Real described by Slavoj Žižek (193-94): "In Lacanian terms," Mellard writes, "the ghost of the mother is an irruption of the Real into the structure ... of ordinary existence" (71). Sabbath must, Mellard argues, resolve his mourning for his youthful losses—for his brother, Morty, killed in the war, and for his mother's loving attention to Mickey, banished by her grief for her first son. His mother's ghost "bring[s] Sabbath to the symbolization of the grief that has driven his outrageously transgressive life" (71-72). Although Sabbath believes that "His mother had been loosed on him. She had returned to take him to his death" (17), he has it wrong, Mellard suggests, because she has instead appeared so as "to restore him to real, ordinary, meaningful life" (71). Thus, Roth locates the confluence of psychoanalytic and storytelling impulses at the cemetery. When Sabbath's mother brings him to the threshold of the grave, her figure, in all its resonant liminality, also brings the reader to the threshold of the narrative. Indeed, the metaphor of the threshold—the limit at which Sydney was stopped in "The Day It Snowed"—pinpoints how the graveyard scenes work thematically and narratively in both *Sabbath's Theater* and *Everyman*, which Roth organizes in much the same way. Several of the examples I've noted—"The Day It Snowed," *The Anatomy Lesson*, and *Exit Ghost*—lead toward a late cemetery or funeral scene as a pivotal or climactic moment. The effect of this narrative structure is to make the apparently unforeseen or repressed signification of death the goal of the discourse.

Episodes in the graveyard, however, frame and incite the telling of *Sabbath's Theater* and *Everyman*. By appearing at both the narrative threshold and its close—and repeating at other points along the way—the gravesite scenes unfold the protagonists' capacities to peer over the edge into their own mortality. Roth's form traces the psychoanalytic process that follows upon traumatic experience. The primal scene at the grave initiates each novel in either its story or its discourse, in Seymour Chatman's terms (9), and then the discourse returns to the gravesite through repetitions that organize the narrative middles around memory. In neither novel does this circularity produce the reconciliation or healing for its protagonist that Freud's masterplot prescribes—Roth is too fond of suspensive closure—but both give an inkling of what death *is*. The traumatic knowledge of death thus inscribes Roth's fictional form in *Sabbath's Theater* and *Everyman* within a recursive structure. At graveside, one can only look back.

Sabbath's Theater's discourse does not begin at the grave as such, but its story does. Like *Everyman*, the narrative of *Sabbath's Theater* is analeptic, although its temporal zig-zaggings are far more complex than in the later novel, in keeping with its greater density of rhetoric and incident. The opening chapter of *Sabbath's Theater* is a flashback telling of Sabbath's extravagant sexual relationship with Drenka, but the memories largely constituting the narration, recounted recursively in the "present" of the discourse, logically begin fifty pages into the novel, with Sabbath's visit to the cemetery where she is buried (50). In the first chapter, Sabbath contemplates the central lesson of Roth's novel: "Take your pick. Get betrayed by the fantasy of endlessness or by the fact of finitude" (31). The story that follows is continually motivated by traumatic absences, which mock any innocent longing for the fantasy of endlessness that had duped Sabbath—that, indeed, he had first learned as a child from his mother: "He'd grown up on endlessness and his mother—in the beginning they were the same thing." Sabbath's first guiding illusion was his oedipal fulfillment from his mother, which disguised her latent capacity to show how time rips the fabric of the Imaginary to expose the Real: "His mother, his mother, his mother ... The ocean, the beach, the first two streets in America ... and in the house a mother who never stopped whistling until December 1944" (31). Morty is killed in December 1944, "Morty," whose very name signifies death and whose death marks the reversal of Sabbath's illusion—from endlessness toward the belief he cynically cherishes in his maturity, that life stops irrevocably with loss.

Sabbath's Theater meditates on the dual betrayals of endlessness and finitude that the suicidal Mickey marks by repeatedly visiting burial sites once he understands that he "didn't have a life, except at the cemetery" (51). The gravesite scenes make literal the endless chain of loss that is the narrative of living, playing eros against thanatos. Sabbath's darkly comic first visit to Drenka's grave, there to invoke her ghost while he masturbates, repeats several times, when he spies on Drenka's other lovers, who reenact his devotional desecration of her grave. Loss and absence gain materiality for Sabbath when he heads to the graveyard. Roth occupies much of the "present" of the narration with Sabbath's circuitous movements to pay respects to his old friend and theatrical producer, Lincoln Gelman, who has committed suicide. As Sabbath drives to New York for the funeral, his mind is filled with his other ghosts—his first wife, Nikki, and his mother: "All he could talk about with his mother, who was gliding about inside the car, drifting and plunging like debris in the tide, was what had led to Nikki's disappearance" (105). By vanishing without a trace, Nikki has created for Sabbath another kind of paradoxical endlessness. She leaves him no way to bring her story to a close; he cannot resolve her disappearance with the idea of finitude. If for Sabbath, to speak with the dead makes mourning meaningful, Nikki's disappearance leaves him in a condition of permanent trauma—without a grave, he finds no full stop. Her inexplicable, interminable absence stands for the enigma that is death. Nikki becomes the exception that proves the rule that Sabbath has a life only at the cemetery: "'I could never again think about the future'" (144), he declares.

Roth takes the notion of disappearance to absurd lengths when Sabbath thinks even the cemetery has disappeared. Driving to visit his family dead and "arrange ... for his own burial" (351), he believes that the cemetery has been "plowed under for a supermarket! *People were shopping at the cemetery,*" and it is only by driving "in circles" (352) that he realizes his mistake and finds the place, untouched. Roth thereby inverts the error of *Patrimony*, when he flawlessly traveled to his mother's burying ground. Here, the meaning of Sabbath's error—to lose the cemetery—lies in his momentary repression of his abiding commitment to death, to which the narrative unerringly returns him. Although, unlike Sabbath, the protagonist of *Everyman* does everything in his power to avert consciousness of death, the novel's form inevitably returns to the discursive beginning. *Everyman* opens at the protagonist's gravesite—"grave" and "cemetery" appear in the first sentence—which is at once the initiatory trauma and endpoint of the plot. When Roth commits the novel to an analeptic structure, everything is in the nature of flashback. Although he includes many large and small digressions into memory, the circular narrative is also superimposed on a roughly V-shaped linear structure. *Everyman* first narrates the plot's final scene, looping at times into the past to provide back-stories for those attending the burial, insofar as they relate to Everyman. Then the scene shifts back in time to Everyman's penultimate night, explicitly announcing the narrative's structure of repetitions whereby Roth chronicles the protagonist's intertwined history of physical ailments and doomed entanglements with women—this novel's dry version of the oscillation between eros and thanatos: lying "in his bed the night before the

surgery he worked at remembering as exactly as he could each of the women who had been there waiting for him to rise out of the anesthetic" (15). An approximate chronology follows, finally returning, through narrated memories, to the "present" of his death. His earliest memories link two traumatic perceptions of death: hospitalized in 1942 for a hernia operation, he believes he "registered a death" (27), of the boy in the next bed; and he obsessively thinks about a "drowned body [of a seaman] that had washed up on the beach that past summer" (25). The description of the boy's perceptions, condensed into an overdetermined sign, could stand for the entirety of Roth's novel: "he couldn't get the word 'graveyard' to stop tormenting him" (26).

As Roth's novel traces the temporal progression of Everyman's life, consisting, as Ross Posnock identifies, of the twin betrayals of his flesh and of others (55), it also cycles through his simultaneous repression and recognition of the traumatic knowledge of death. Victoria Aarons notes that Everyman is at once "preoccupied with his own death but in narcissistic denial of its inevitability" (117) and Roth shows him bouncing between views in the cemetery scenes. The novel's second trip to the cemetery occurs when Everyman remembers his father's burial, which provokes a further embedded flashback. The memory incited by this gravesite scene is of his father's devotion to his jewelry business, propelled by his faith in the transcendent properties of diamonds, which he believes offer "'a piece of the earth that is imperishable'" (57). Roth exposes the vanity of the wish for imperishability by the logic of narrative juxtaposition; the novel immediately returns to the brutal realism of the framing memory, of "upright shovels with their blades in [a] large pile of earth to one side of the grave" (57). The cemetery scene recounts Everyman's existential panic by way of his epistemological confusion. He fantasizes that his father is being buried alive, the dirt "filling up his mouth, blinding his eyes, clogging his nostrils" (59-60), and concludes in his identification with the dead, as he "could taste the dirt coating the inside of his mouth" (62). Such confusion, bringing the dead object back to life within his own hysterical subjectivity, is one way of contesting reality, however futile.

Whereas this scene should by the logic of sequence lead toward Everyman's recognition of his own mortality, the climactic cemetery scene reverses the sense, leaving him, like Sydney, in a denial that readers may choose to understand either as opening up to tender, transcendent meaning or as piercing irony. This framing scene seems a more "objective" visit, as Everyman appears not to be on a purposeful errand. Instead, he diverts himself to the family burial place—once more echoing Roth in *Patrimony*—and never makes it to his intended destination. Such a physical detour again suggests the Freudian meaningfulness of error—an impression solidified when Roth almost immediately digresses into a flashback about two funerals Everyman has recently attended, at which he thinks: "death does not even seem natural. I had thought—*secretly I was certain*—that life goes on and on" (*Everyman* 169). His body travels to the site that should contradict his conscious convictions but fails to do so. The scene at first bears out his certainty as, weeping over the "bones in a box" that were his parents, he finds solace by claiming those bones as his: "This *was* what was true, this intensity of connection with those bones" (170-71). Yet Everyman's poignant communing with his familial past, countered by his matter-of-fact conversation with the gravedigger about the technology of burial, tonally reflects the contradiction implicit in his truest and, at once, most self-deluded sentiment about the cemetery, expressed by yet another repetition: "He did not want to go" (173), "He never wanted to go" (177). He does not wish to leave the cemetery, which consoles him with his nearness to his parents, even though they are nothing more than "bones in a box." And if he does not leave—ultimately, of course, he cannot—he is proof that life does not "go on and on."

Yet this final perception is the reader's, not Everyman's. The irony of his failure to understand corresponds to his fantasy of speaking to the dead. Vicki Aarons is exactly right to point out that this moment in the cemetery inserts Everyman into "the continuity of generations" (123) and displaces him from his narcissism. His naked feeling is indisputable: "This *was* what was true, this intensity of connection with those bones" (*Everyman* 171). But his communion can only be one-sided; it is not his parents who speak to him, but only his desire. Unlike Sabbath, Everyman lacks imagination; he cannot body forth a mother's voice to offer him the fantasy of a return to the Imaginary. Unsurprisingly, then, as Aarons writes, "What he mourns over the graves of his parents is not only their deaths ... but his own death" (124), because that particular grief is arguably what any encounter with the grave evokes. Indeed, Roth prepares for this insight in the scene in which Everyman envisages that "life goes on and on." The husband of a woman who weeps uncontrollably at several funerals Everyman

attends explains brutally, "That has been the story for fifty years ... She's like that because she isn't eighteen anymore" (169). Grief is as much, or more, for the self as for the other.

Suffice it to say, then, that Roth lets no one—least of all *Everyman*—off the hook at the close of the novel, whose narrative juxtaposition of transcendence to materiality repeats the unresolved contradiction. As *Everyman* submits to his last surgery, his sensual memory of his child's "unscathed body" at the beach is triggered by the "words spoken by the bones [that] made him feel buoyant and indestructible" together with "the hard-won subjugation of his darkest thoughts" (181). Roth opens this most rapturous passage of the novel by uniting the man's delusion and act of repression. When the novel's final phrases bluntly announce *Everyman*'s death—"He was no more, freed from being, entering into nowhere without even knowing it" (182)—Roth seals the irony that he has repudiated this most obvious insight about his own mortality. The repetitions just produce more repetitions, the circularity of the narrative ultimately taking precedence over its linear promise of enlightenment. The ending returns us to the beginning, without ending in insight. Death is nothing more than absence, the yawning grave, offered as a blank hole in the narrative if not as the character's reconciliation to fact.

And yet, and yet. In his professional competition with death, Roth seems to have it both ways. Roth's ambivalence is visible when, underscoring the analeptic form of both *Everyman* and *Sabbath's Theater*, he introduces a common trope, in scenes that perform climactically in each novel—the recitation of the names of the lost. The appearance of the list is brief in *Everyman*, where Roth frames it with the beat of another powerful word: "leaving." Dreaming that he is holding the corpse of Millicent Kramer, the suicide from his art class, *Everyman* names all those he has cared about and has lost or will lose: "Momma, Poppa, Howie, Phoebe, Nancy, Randy, Lonny ... Can't you hear me? I'm leaving! It's over and I'm leaving you all behind!" The narrator is merciless in identifying *Everyman*'s ontological anxiety and impotence: "*Leaving*—the very word that had conveyed him into breathless, panic-filled wakefulness, delivered alive from embracing a corpse" (165). Only loss can wake him, however temporarily, from his own dream of endlessness.

A mordant, deflated irony closes *Everyman* and seems to trail off into nothingness. The extensive scene Roth narrates at the cemetery that *Sabbath* nearly missed, however, the scene in which the names of the lost appear, shows *Sabbath* not as fearful but as welcoming death. This is the longest cemetery scene in *Sabbath's Theater*, appearing more than three-quarters of the way through the novel, and is thematically and narratively transitional, driving home the ambivalence lurking within all these scenes. Here, the list of "beloveds" covers more than a page—beloved fathers, husbands, wives, mothers, sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers, each headstone read out with reverence and exactitude, though the buried are strangers to *Sabbath*, and though the epitaphs are wearily the same. As the narrator, in free indirect style, quips, "Nobody beloved gets out alive" (364). But the litany of names leads to *Sabbath*'s own family and, again according to an analeptic narrative structure, toward a recounting of his richest, most comforting, most sensorily pleasurable memories of his family. These root memories are as much the fount of *Sabbath*'s being as his misplaced oedipal complacencies, his vitriol, and his sexual transgressions, and they irrupt, as a rather different form of the Real, through the narrative's consistent tone of acerbic yet casual cynicism. Call it sentimental, perhaps, but the magnificent sweetness of this passage serves as a counterweight to the heavy reverberations of the compulsively repeated terms of loss in Roth's oeuvre: "gone," "disappear," "leaving," "graveyard."

It is both fitting and revealing, then, that Roth chose to read these very pages from *Sabbath's Theater* at the public celebration of his eightieth birthday at the Newark Museum on 19 March 2013. Roth began his talk that evening by referring to his recent announcement that he had finished writing novels (Roth first announced his retirement in a French publication in October 2012; see "Philip Roth") The presentation was at once a beautiful farewell and a renewed avowal of the writer's mastery and grace with respect to both his subject and his prose. Like Prospero, to whom he alludes in the epigraph to *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth began by abjuring the rough magic of his art—telling the audience of all the familiar things that he would no longer write about—from his bicycle basket to stamp albums, glove factories, and fight night at Laurel Gardens. Roth's renunciation of storytelling took the form of an aesthetic of the real, of the "passion for specificity, for the hypnotic materiality of the world one is in" ("A Celebration"). Roth then introduced the character who, he seemed to imply, might represent his own closely held feelings. Facing the "infinite capriciousness of existence," he said, *Sabbath* takes "a savage journey into his raw wound," but, Roth noted, he does so with "great sadness about the

deaths of others and great gaiety about his own." In the writer's passion for the hypnotic materiality of the world, of course, nothing looks so real as the grave. But ultimately, Roth averred of Sabbath, "in his mischief, he finds his truth"—the truth of "ungovernable laughter."

This seesaw of feeling and knowledge, sadness and gaiety, acceptance and refusal, lies at the heart of Roth's professional competition with death and may explain why his fiction keeps circling back to the gravesite. Indeed, it seems no accident that the final words of the excerpt Roth read at his birthday celebration were the climactic words of Sabbath's visit to the ancestral graveyard. As the narrator observes when, preparing for suicide, Sabbath arrives at the cemetery to buy a plot near his familial dead, "He felt himself at last inside his life, like someone who, after a long illness, steps back into his shoes for the first time" (*Sabbath's Theater* 357). When he at last reaches his family's graves, Sabbath announces himself like Hamlet leaping into Ophelia's grave, "Here I am" (370). This statement of arrival and reconciliation, of an identity unmasked, of an embrace of the circle that links birth and death served as Roth's birthday farewell. In the novel, however, Sabbath goes on to consolidate his identity by writing a satirical epitaph for his own monument, highlighting his most treasured and socially scurrilous behavior. The narrative then jumps, with a mid-sentence ellipsis, to trace Sabbath's encounter with the repressed memory at the chronological source of his trauma: the death of his brother and his mother's virtual death as a response to this loss. The abrupt transition, like the temporal delay of the scene's appearance in the novel's discourse, suggests the depth of psychic disruption that the memory holds for him. Only the grave can truly put Sabbath inside his life.

And so the closing scenes repeat his oscillation between accepting mortality ("He was dead ... and there was no longer the illusion of ever escaping" [435]) and asserting his life force, as when he shrieks like a gorilla outside the window of his second wife, Roseanna (441), and, returning one last time to Drenka's grave, urinates there as an homage to their most intimate sexual transgressions. Unlike *Everyman*, then, Sabbath appears to embrace death in defiance of a life dominated by loss, and the discourse seems to close with a fierce howl that epitomizes both the novel's and its protagonist's knowing perspective on death. But like *Everyman* the novel, *Sabbath's Theater* hesitates on the brink of its own ambivalence. Sabbath's rejection of suicide in the final sentence invites endless repetition, a narrative that will not end—and its ambiguity with respect to the inevitability of death forecasts *Everyman* even as it repeats Roth's totemic words of loss: "How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here" (451). In Roth's marvelous closing ambiguities—is the "here" that he can't "leave" life? the cemetery? isn't his "hate" a testament to what he loves?—lies once again an intimation of endlessness. The equivocation resembles that in *Patrimony*, with which I'll conclude. As I quoted earlier, Roth writes, "What cemeteries prove, at least to people like me, is not that the dead are present but that they are gone. They are gone and, as yet, we aren't" (21). In his final contrast lies the conundrum of the burial ground. Where do we place the emphasis? On "they are gone"? Or on "as yet, we aren't"? In the encounter with the Real, it is, in the end, only every third thought that is the grave; in the others is, stubbornly, something else.

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