

Everyman

reviewed by [Todd Shy](#) in the [August 8, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Everyman

Philip Roth
Houghton Mifflin

"In my time," one of Saul Bellow's characters muses, "parents didn't hesitate to speak of death. What they seldom mentioned was sex. We've got it the other way

around.” No American novelist has written more candidly and aggressively about both than Philip Roth. From the raucous confessions of *Portnoy’s Complaint* to the stirring remembrances in *Patrimony* and the musings of what became his trilogy on postwar American life, Roth has endowed his characters with almost lawless freedom. But in Roth’s work freedom is not a romantic dream of transcendence; it is a grounded, embodied experience of life. His characters don’t want to escape their humanity, they want to explore it and maximize it. They prefer the nooks and dead ends of the labyrinth to promises of release.

By opening his most recent novel with the protagonist’s funeral, Roth undermines the usual illusion of narrative and establishes the story as a stripped-down confrontation with death. It is as if *Hamlet* began with Act V, or the Gospels with Gethsemane. The protagonist, a retired advertising executive and artist, has died unexpectedly. His brother muses at his grave, “He should have lived longer.” Similar words, Roth observes, must be spoken at every funeral. And they always ring true. *Everyman* is a sober reminder that every life is on the clock, that every birth is a journey to that second womb, the grave.

But while the book’s title, taken from a medieval allegory about death, suggests universality, the hero seeks what Roth calls the “sublime singularity.” A man has died, and he remains to the reader nameless—potentially universal—and yet it is this man, a jeweler’s son in Elizabeth, New Jersey, who as a child used to carry diamonds for his father to a shop in Newark and who had a hernia operation at the age of nine and who saw a bloated dead body from a ship torpedoed by Nazis wash up on the shore and whose boss once, in the lobby of the Four Seasons, paid him a beautiful compliment in front of a client, one which the man never forgets, and who felt himself a failure as an artist and who was estranged from one daughter—his loyal Cordelia—and who once, in Paris, lied to his wife on the phone even as he purchased a necklace for his lover and joined its antique clasp around her neck. And so on and so on, the mad rush of one life. The tragedy of life is always a particular tragedy, and the bliss is utterly specific bliss.

Despite the title (and the name of the family’s jewelry store—Everyman’s), the novel never imposes itself as an allegory. Even the universal experience of death is peculiar, as Roth’s hero discovers while watching dirt being shoveled into his own father’s grave. He suddenly sees the scene as if there were no coffin, “as if the dirt they were throwing into the grave was being deposited straight down on him, filling up his mouth, blinding his eyes, clogging his nostrils, and closing off his ears.” In

despair, he wants to cry out: “I’ve been looking at that face since I was born—stop burying my father’s face.” That corpse is not just any man, or Everyman; he is this son’s father.

These moments of intensity seem unprotected and raw. It’s as if Roth’s hero can value tenderness only at the far end of severity. He remembers, for example, returning from the beach in childhood and “licking his forearm to taste his skin fresh from the ocean and baked by the sun,” and this common recollection is intensified and made peculiar and unexpectedly savage: “Along with the ecstasy of a whole day of being battered silly by the sea, the taste and the smell intoxicated him so that he was driven to the brink of biting down with his teeth to tear out a chunk of himself and savor his fleshly existence.” While it is natural to want more and more from life, Roth suggests, the source of our pleasure does violence too—to families, to strangers and to ourselves, as the hero in this novel knows all too well.

Roth’s characters here and elsewhere do not fear death so much as they resent losing life. In *Everyman*, the aged hero is gripped by the realization that he has “diminished into someone he did not want to be.” He decides that “old age isn’t a battle; old age is a massacre.” As for the other residents of his retirement community, loneliness and leisure provide torturing opportunities for regret, for “looking hungrily back at the superabundant past.” He visits his parents’ graves, and, weeping for them and for himself, he imagines a conversation whose brevity is moving. “I’m seventy-one,” he tells them, “Your boy is seventy-one.” His mother’s reply is unsentimental: “Good. You lived.” His father adds, “Atone for what you can atone for, and make the best of what you have left.” The son can’t pull himself away. “The tenderness was out of control. As was the longing for everyone to be living. And to have it all over again.” The fury in Roth’s work is an expression of his love of life.

Leaving his parents’ gravesite for the last time, the hero spots an old man digging a grave, and he approaches him because he had thought such work is surely now done with machines. But this grave digger mostly works with a shovel. Roth’s protagonist is moved by the care shown in these labors—the removal of the sod, the precision of cutting the walls square, the attention to the flatness of the earthen floor, as if the dead must not tilt. Then he discovers that this old man had dug his parents’ graves—had turned the same dirt he imagined choking his father—and he thanks him for his consideration, for the “concreteness” of both his work and his descriptions. The gratitude in the exchange shadows a grim, unnarrated suggestion:

he is speaking to the man who will, in a matter of days, dig his grave too.

Roth closes the novel with a reference to the hero's "hard-won subjugation of his darkest thoughts." Triumph, in Roth's view, involves not rising from the grave or avoiding the grave, but giving everything its due before the end comes: physicality, sensuality; the decency of work, affection, grief, remorse; the dirt our buried bodies displace and the near-transcendent power of memory. Roth is a savage elegist, and *Everyman* is a moving, even wrenching book to read. Bellow, Roth's only rival in this regard, lets his characters draw nourishment from the world they explore; Roth's heroes exhale and exhale and exhale, as if daring themselves to exhaust their own vitality. Which, of course, everyman does regardless.