

Questions and Proposals about Philip Roth's *Everyman* (2006)

(The edition of Roth's *Everyman* referred to below is the Vintage International Edition, released April of 2007.)

1. *Everyman* is unremittingly about illness and death; and it is also explicitly so. Roth means no subtlety here: several of the novel's scenes take place in a graveyard, easily one of the first sites to come to mind when we envision death (indeed, "grave" is the first noun in the first sentence of the book.) You'll also notice that those scenes are very long, and that in them is a kind of catalog of all the possible feelings one might have in a graveyard, whether the death be our own (meaning, as we anticipate dying ourselves) or that of a loved-one. This is a book which seems almost to demand that we experience the feelings aroused by death and *without reprieve*, the narrator, as he makes this demand, a sympathetic task-master, for sure, but an unstintingly and very energetically truthful one as well.

What do you make of this "explicitness," as I am calling it? What does Roth's explicitness in the treatment of death accomplish, *for you*, in your encounter with the story, and, following from that encounter, your encounter with the subject of death in your own life? Or, if this explicitness (this un-subtlety) doesn't aid in that encounter, why doesn't it?

2. The following is a corollary to Question #1: Perhaps another way to think about Roth's "explicitness" in the treatment of death and dying is to remember that the book is meant as an allegory, drawing its title from the late 15th century Christian morality play, *Everyman*. In this play, a man meant to represent "every" man, meaning, all of us, is informed by Death of his approaching end. As *Everyman* nears death, he is abandoned by his false friends, Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods, and so falls back on his truer ones, Good Deeds, Strength, Beauty, Intelligence and Knowledge. However, at the very end it is only Good Deeds who accompanies him to heaven, the play making the stern point that we leave the world with nothing we have received, only that which we have given.

Now, a 15th century allegory about giving and receiving (a Christian allegory, in other words) is *not* the story, nor the feeling or imaginative opportunity, we find in Philip Roth's *Everyman*. And yet in using the title of

the 15th century morality play—a play, I would argue, anyone with even a modest background in English literature would be familiar with—Roth means to designate his story as a moral one too. (You’ll also note that Roth’s protagonist is never named, his anonymity allowing us more readily to identify our “everyman” soul with his own.) And so my question is: If this is a moral tale, what is the moral? And, just as possible: If this is not a moral tale, what are we then to make of this painful book?

3. You may have noticed that the book is also unremittingly about the *physical* dimension of death and decline, dwelling as it does, and for perhaps longer than we would like, in the intricacies of heart surgery, hospital rooms, back pain, the dirt thrown on coffins, the bones of the buried, the “dust” we are made of. “There were two upright shovels with their blades in the large pile of earth to one side of the grave” (p. 57): the novel is filled with images like this one, images observed by a strobe-lit kind of consciousness somehow beyond or untroubled by the impulse to emote, to judge, to ideate, to sentimentalize, to rationalize—in other words, to defend itself against the sight of death. Why do you think Roth insists as ferociously as he does on the physical dimension of suffering and death, and, connected to this last question, why does he show this dimension as starkly as he does?

4. For me, one of the most remarkable features of Roth’s *Everyman* is the speed of its sentences. They are not simple, necessarily, but they don’t evolve via the modifying clause (as do those, for example, of Virginia Woolf’s novels, which we’ll be reading this fall). They don’t pause—via elaboration, internal contradiction, “second thought,” physical description, and so on—to complicate information present at their beginnings. They rather barrel ahead, with an inevitable-feeling speed, from one unit of information to the next, the effect being to bind together otherwise disparate elements of the protagonist’s life in what registers for the reader as an inextricable relation. Here is an example:

“The profusion of stars told him unambiguously that he was doomed to die, and the thunder of the sea only yards away—and the nightmare of the blackest blackness beneath the frenzy of the water—made him want to run from the menace of oblivion to their cozy, lighted, underfurnished house.” (p. 30).

In this single sentence we move “unambiguous” doom to the comparatively

surprising “cozy” and “lighted”—meaning, from very bad to very pleasant, without a transition that would secure as discrete the emotional connotation of either value. I haven’t read every novel in the world, but on the basis of the handful I have read, it does seem that most writers would reserve the one reality--the doom--from the cozier one, stationing them in separate sentences at least, maybe even separate paragraphs. But again and again in *Everyman*, elements which would seem to contradict one another--or even potentially to negate one another—coincide so that neither one securely may stand on its own.

(It should also be noted that Roth often conveys his meanings through the *sounds* of his words and sentences (and in this way his prose rewards the musical attentiveness we might bring to a good poem.) An example of this sound-rich kind of prose comes on page 30: “Why must he mistrust his life just when he was more its master than he’d been in years?” “Mistrust” and “master” sound alike, and so, in a sense, repeat one another. Roth in this way has taken emotional states we tend to polarize (mistrust vs. mastery) and collapsed that polarity, confusing the two states—and us--in the process.)

I wonder if others of you remarked this feature of the novel. And, if you did remark it, what do you make of it? How is Roth’s management of his (unsparingly unsentimental) sentences consistent with what you are growing to understand about the novel as a whole?

5. The protagonist’s sexual appetite and/or his failure at his marriages: You find this everywhere in Philip Roth, and *Everyman* is no exception. How does this element of the novel influence your experience of the novel generally? Does the protagonist’s (fill in the blank) wantonness? dog-brained idiocy? sinfulness? sensuality? triumph?—the estimation here will vary from reader to reader—influence your response to his health problems and ultimately to his death? I think what I’m asking is how this element of the story mattered, for you, to the rest of it. Did you find yourself thinking that if he’d been loyal to his wife (or wives), he wouldn’t have developed heart failure? And, if you did find yourself forming that (admittedly pretty reactionary, unreasonable, maybe even delusional but also human and understandable) judgment, did you then find that judgment upbraided by other insights gained later in the book? And if you do not identify with the course of reactions I’ve outlined above, why do you not?

6. This is not a theistic story, at least not in any way I can see. On the other hand, I wouldn't necessarily call it an *a*-theistic story, only because the question of Belief versus Non-Belief doesn't seem the agenda either of the protagonist or his author. Rather, the interest here seems emphatically a *materialistic* one, the novel staking its faith first to last in the bodily, the earthly, the concrete. For the protagonist, and perhaps for the novel generally, "There was only our bodies, born to live and die on terms decided by the bodies that had lived and died before us. If he [the protagonist] could be said to have located a philosophical niche for himself, that was it—he'd come upon it early and intuitively, and however elemental, that was the whole of it." (p. 52).

If the novel's materialism, as I am calling it, is for you one of its strengths—
-if it has something to offer you--how is it a strength, what does it offer?

And if the novel's materialism is for you a weakness, how is it a weakness?