

# “I’m Done”: Philip Roth, Serio Ludere, Narcissism, and Nemesis

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*Drawing on the Renaissance concept of serio ludere (serious play), this essay investigates the relationship between play and Philip Roth’s loss and restoration of his identity in each of his novels. The relationship between Roth’s play and his art has attracted little attention apart from investigations into his presumed trickery (Rudnytsky, 2007). But the pattern in Roth’s life of periodic collapse, briefly alluded to by him in The Facts as “the crack-up” followed by the “controlled investigation” (7) always starts with play. The relationship between the crack-up and the “controlled investigation” is that between the player and the game. Roth’s deliberate, lively process from psychic and physical collapse to autocratic self-command provides artistic mastery—a genuine technical mastery, like that of a ballerina executing thirty-two fouetté turns.*

## 1. Serio Ludere

Ilan Stavans had it right, never forgetting play in *The Plagiarist*, his send-up of a Philip Roth novel, in which Nathan Zuckerman sues Philip Roth (*Jewish Daily Forward*). The heart and soul of Roth’s artistry is play, but no critic mentions this, apart from commenting on Roth’s mischievous attempts to induce readers to sort fact from fiction. Roth’s light-hearted trickery—a major focus in criticism about him—remains a mere facet of the diamond. He may polish his oeuvre with tricks, but the depths swirl with games. Playing with negation of, indeed destruction of himself allows Roth to create characters and make them come alive. Negation offers a back door to the truth when the front gate is locked. “You ask who this person in the dream can be,” says Freud’s patient, “It’s not my mother” (*Negation*, 235). Roth says “no” to his identity, to his loves, to everything, and again “no,” until “no” finally becomes “yes,” when the truth reveals itself, and the novel is written. But negation of the self is as terrifying as death, so must be joked about or denied if the writer is to find the courage to create. “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—” Emily Dickenson advises (poem 1263, 506).

Play and its role in artistic creativity, the escape from the self experienced by actors, and the Renaissance neo-Platonic idea of serio ludere or serious play all go a long way in illuminating Roth's literary legacy and even in explicating his October 2012 announcement of his retirement from the profession of writing, if indeed it is to be taken seriously. Roth himself has famously said, "Sheer playfulness and deadly seriousness are my closest friends" (Searles, 98). He might have been taking a page from Oscar Wilde, who offered a "philosophy" for his comic masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest*, namely that we "should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality" (qtd. in Oscar Wilde, *More Letters*, 196). The standard scholarship on serio ludere chimes with Roth's and Wilde's thinking. Edgar Wind, citing Plato, observes that "the deepest things are best spoken of in a tone of irony," (236) and Johan Huizinga remarks in *Homo Ludens*, "Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play" [his Italics]. (3)

What definitions of serio ludere from Plato to Roth share is the role of play in making life and work bearable. "Sheer playfulness" frees Roth from himself as he inhabits the roles he creates, an exciting but frightening experience, and "deadly seriousness" involves gathering together the emotions thrown about like flotsam and jetsam and reassembling them, each time according to a new blueprint. Roth's remark makes clear that that play is not trivial but serious. The drive to play and its consequences occupy his emotional and intellectual life, such that any personal relationship must take a back seat to his writing. Serio ludere is a return to a childlike as well as a childish state—by that, Roth escapes from his judgmental side and frees himself to write. Asked about the process of beginning a novel, Roth answered that after "the awful beginning" comes the "months of freewheeling play, and after the play come the crises, turning against your material and hating the book" (Lee, no pag).

The adjective "freewheeling" implies exhilarating carelessness leading to chaotic crisis, the pattern that repeats itself in Roth's descriptions of the relationship between his life and his work. In his autobiography, *The Facts*, he relates that in *My Life as a Man*, Peter Tarnapol gets tricked by Maureen Johnson in "almost exactly" the same way that Roth was tricked by his own wife (Roth, *Facts*, 107). Titling the chapter "Girl of my Dreams" was anything but ironic. His first wife does help Roth to fulfill his dream of becoming a writer: in her role as "my worst enemy ever," she puts him into a state of disorienting anxiety, making it possible for him to begin the writing process, and therefore he designates her "the greatest creative-writing teacher of them all . . . specialist par excellence in the aesthetics of extremist fiction." Because he's serious, because this confession exposes him so much, he kids about it. He truly finds beauty in her trickery, her "little gem of treacherous invention," (Roth, *Facts*, 107) namely the purchase of a urine specimen from "a pregnant black woman," (ibid. 108) in order to fool him into thinking she is pregnant and so to force him into a marriage so hellish that he decompensates. Playing with the story of his ex-wife playing games, he can reassemble a self shattered by his awful marriage and rearrange memories in a novel.

## 2. Narcissism

It remains a cliché of Roth criticism to establish the magnitude of his narcissism, yet critics who do so have pointed out neither his desire to dangle it in our faces nor the fun he has in so doing. Roth's aperçus routinely reveal his delight in playing with narcissism: "Me-itis. Microcosmos. Drowning in the tiny tub of yourself" (*Operation Shylock*, 55). In *The Facts* he writes, "The person I've intended to

make myself visible to is myself, primarily . . . why I do what I do, why I live where I live, why I share my life with the one I do" (4). One can imagine Roth standing in front of the mirror, like Dickens or like Rowan Atkinson, and experiencing both delight and terror in the process of discovering his characters by erasing himself. Roth excels at this in *Operation Shylock*, face to face with a "Philip Roth" impersonator who has a "Philip Roth" passport.

His chief audience, that is, remains himself, and this is a sign that he is narcissistic, but he revels in his narcissism in a way that that we may as well envy: many people cannot grow novels in the soil of their own narcissism. Roth appears to be able to do so, his play and his narcissism complementing one another such that he becomes highly creative. Why?

When I wander among the psychoanalysts seeking interpretations, what comes to mind is "Roth amid the alien corn." None offer better explanations than Roth himself, who has characterized psychoanalysis as a process limited to "uncontrolled investigation," while he sees his own writing as "controlled investigation" (Searles, 224). A pattern is visible in Roth's life of periodic collapse, briefly alluded to by Roth in *The Facts* as "the crack-up" followed by the controlled investigation, that is, "the need for self-investigation it generated" (7). This relationship between the crack-up and the "controlled investigation" is that between the player and the game, whatever game Roth plays in order first to lose his identity and then, by re-finding and re-assembling it, render himself capable of writing a good story. A synergy develops between the recurrent crack-up and the inevitable self-analysis, both serving the art while the artist himself cracks up, or at least fears that he is doing so (Searles, 224). This recurrent dynamic process, from psychic and physical collapse to autocratic self-command provides artistic mastery—a technical mastery, like that of a ballerina executing thirty-two fouetté turns. Roth has always known that he needed the crack-up in order to prepare the self-analysis, observing, "the things that wear you down are the things that nurture you and your talent" (*Facts*, 174).

Let us return to Roth's narcissism. Mere mortals, that is, non-creative persons with normal inhibitions, find it liberating to read Roth's wild fantasy, perhaps because they lack the narcissism to exhibit their own fantasies or the artistic control to tease out the implications of a narcissistic experience. But a master narcissist can imagine himself devolving into an enormous breast that glories in being massaged rather than giving milk (*Breast*, 13) —or, after emergency quintuple coronary bypass surgery, envision "my heart as a tiny infant suckling itself on this blood coursing unobstructed now through the newly attached arteries . . . I whispered to that baby . . . 'Suck, yes, suck, suck away, it's yours, all yours, for you . . .' and never in my life had I been happier" (*Patrimony*, 226). If you have the talent, you can—like David Kepesh in *The Breast*—feed on your own narcissism. Roth's narcissism sets him apart from ordinary mortals who, when they indulge in that particular nectar and ambrosia (designated only for gods) end up like Narcissus himself: starving to death. Roth can afford to play destructive or narcissistic games because the rewards to his creativity compensate for the personal unhappiness and the sense of self-destruction he endures in order to remain creative.

Freud laments in *Creative Writers and Day-dreaming* that most people can't play as well as artists, can't lose themselves in play the way artists and children can. (SE IX, 143) A child losing himself in a game runs no risks, since his identity is anything but formed, and indeed, playing contributes to the eventual forming of identity. The reverse holds true for adults, who sense that the harder they play,

the more their identities go up in smoke. Unless, like Roth, their identity exists primarily in art. Good actors, good artists, and good writers can lose themselves in play but live to tell the tale. The best of them embrace the usual side-effects—from the house burning down to the psyche burning down—because the game provides the character and the story, and because such world-class artists can summon the Atlas-like strength to pick up the pieces when the game is over. The writer may have a nervous breakdown, but the phoenix rises from the ashes in the form of *I Married A Communist* and *The Human Stain*. After the chaotic play of self-destruction in the form of the breakdown, the artistic play—the *serio ludere*—can finally begin: Roth then plays in earnest with characters and situations.

Roth's artistic goal and greatest fear lies in this side effect: loss of self, a state of being that actors often experience as desirable, probably an escape. How easy to understand Roth's fascination with acting and actors, his sympathy in his most recent novel, *The Humbling*, for Simon Axler, the actor who had "lost his magic" (1) and could no longer act. Now how did Roth come up with that story? How did he make it interesting? We won't get far pointing out that he enjoyed acting in college, starring in a production of, appropriately enough, *The Madwoman Of Chaillot* (Maas, 74) but we might get somewhere observing that *Portnoy's Complaint* started out as stand-up comedy. While Roth in the early 1960s was in analysis after the collapse of his first marriage, he "began to perform sketches and do shtick, imagining what an analysis of a particular, mythological Jewish man would really sound like," his friend Bernard Avishai relates in *Promiscuous: Portnoy's Complaint and Our Doomed Pursuit of Happiness*, adding that the riffs, performed at dinner parties, grew "a little maniacally," and that eventually Roth started wondering if he could "write like this" (44). An early version of *Portnoy's Complaint* was actually a play, "The Nice Jewish Boy," read at the American Place Theatre by a young, undiscovered Dustin Hoffmann (44).

Roth enjoyed losing himself in the wacky role of "Jewboy," one of *Portnoy's* other incarnations, and in real life he lost himself with Claire Bloom, the beautiful English actress to whom he was married for the last five years of their seventeen-year-relationship. One can imagine that the two of them had in common the need to submerge themselves in playing roles, trying out scenes. Bloom loses herself in the role of the cruelly betrayed wife and Roth plays with the material she tosses him, sending "faxes that . . . demanded the return of . . . the gold snake ring with the emerald head from Bulgari; \$28,500 per annum he had given me over twelve years; \$100,000 of his money used to buy bonds in my name; \$10,000 for the 'special travel fund' of my own; \$150 per hour for the 'five or six hundred hours' he had spent going over scripts with me. . ." (Bloom, 228-9). Bloom and her companions react by laughing "like children," because in her heart of hearts she knows that their lover's quarrels serve the same purpose as child's play, that she and Philip Roth star in a drama designed by their impossible demands upon each other. He wants peace and quiet and a woman who appears only when he desires her; she wants constant togetherness and she insists that he take an interest in her daughter.

What two such high-management personalities invariably create—an exhilarating blowout complete with nervous breakdowns—is bad for the soul of the ordinary mortal but fantastic for the art upon which a Roth relies for the meaning of his existence. They played games, Roth and Bloom, and reaped the rewards of art. Their narcissism is no mortal narcissism: for immortal art, at least for prose that people are bound to read well into the next century, the kind of deep narcissism exhibited

by Claire Bloom and Philip Roth, the creative synergy wrought by their bond, becomes an absolute necessity.

Roth offers a sly hint of his need to play with narcissism—effectually transforming it into performance art—in *The Facts*, by putting into Zuckerman's mouth a tough critique: "you, Roth, are the least completely rendered of all your protagonists. Your gift is not to personalize our experience but to personify it, to embody it in the representation of a person who is not yourself. You are not an autobiographer, you're a personificator" (162). In other words, fleshing out his real experiences stirs less of a creative impulse than "personifying" or acting out something that could happen or could have happened, given his own set of feelings and conflicts, or given his reactions to dramatic events in his own life. He remarked to Hermione Lee, "Nathan Zuckerman is an act. It's all the art of impersonation, isn't it? That's the fundamental novelistic gift" (Lee, no pag). As a novelist Roth is an actor manqué: he knows how to play a role, Stanislavski style, to the point where he loses himself. Driven to write, he knows that he can always rely on his gifts as a novelist to resurrect him, so it is worth it to him to play to what feels like the point of no return.

The actor in Philip Roth must have perceived a bonanza for his writing when he met the drama queen that Claire Bloom became in their relationship. Without the wholehearted inclination to play such games, especially squalid and dangerous games, which count among the favorites of children, and without the stamina to master them, there'd be no Philip Roth the writer. The more embarrassing, the more secret, the more personal, the more shameful the daydream felt, the greater the possibility for mastery of a conflict, an impulse, and of course, a story.

In "The Maniac in Me," an article based on his memoir *Monkey Mind* (2012), Daniel Smith admires Philip Roth's mastery of anxiety, the emotion that defines most of Roth's characters and dramatic situations, remarking: "I absorbed many presumptive lessons from Roth's novels — about the double-edged blade of familial love, about the venerable bond between Judaism and anxiety — but the Rosetta Stone was *Defiance in the Face of Shame*" (The New York Times, April 12, 2012). *Defiance* is the beginning of mastery, the Rosetta stone of it, and Roth himself chooses a curiously identical way of describing the impetus for his need to defy in his autobiography, *The Facts*, "I wonder if a breakdown-induced eruption of parental longing in a fifty-five-year-old man isn't, in fact, the Rosetta stone to this manuscript" (9). Extinction of the parents feels like extinction of the self. The need to reestablish the self, master the terror of losing it, tackle the puzzle of himself, is met aesthetically. By portraying his father's deterioration and death in *Patrimony*, Roth is able reconcile himself with his own mortality.

Conflicts, impulses, even psychoses, militate against the integrity of the self, and the writer dives deeper where the mere mortal would tend to try to keep his head above water. The writer shakes his fist at the monsters of the deep, and so begins to master them. Or he collapses: describing himself "coming undone," in *The Facts*, Roth is "unable to wield the whip over the facts sufficiently to make real life amazing." The facts run away like unruly slaves, and in the throes of "a breakdown" (7) he cannot chase them and put them back behind bars. He feels better when he subdues them, like Zuckerman giving his terrible writing students "a taste of the Zuckerman lash" (*My Life as a Man*, 66). He plays with "the facts" sadistically. The sadistic control is preceded by a masochistic destruction of self.

This idea that "defiance in the face of shame" is the Rosetta stone of Roth's art fits with *serio ludere* in the sense that the psychic collapse leads inevitably to shame—at feeling helpless, at feeling exposed to his own most primitive feelings—and a childish defiance is the first means of controlling an inchoate shame. Without the defiance, there's no possibility of moving toward artistic control. Defiance strikes the keynote in many of Roth's characters, resonating throughout his oeuvre. Alex Portnoy longs for freedom from his mother and his desires; Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* determines to box his way out of his love for his black family and into acceptance as a white man in white America. Coleman Silk defies American racism in his efforts to master both the crisis of his own identity and that of America's identity. Finally, *Everyman* and subsequent novels try to master the fear of death. *Indignation*, Roth's 2008 novel about a college student dying in the Korean war, tells the story from the point of view of the dead boy. *The Humbling* (2009) ends with a suicide presented as an actor's final triumphant performance.

Taking a grand tour through early, middle and late Roth suggests that he does master anxiety through defiance, indeed through indignation, a word that he claims as a title, "the most beautiful word in the English language," as the doomed hero says. Both are forms of negation, of saying no to Roth the man in order to say yes to the characters he plays (*Indignation*, 95). The main character, Markus Messner, rages at the thought of being dead at 19, of dying in a war in which he never wanted to fight, of dying with little real sexual experience, and of having so many indignities forced upon him in life, from the strictures of his overbearing father to the platitudes of the boorish anti-Semitic dean. Marcus Messner is the embodiment of defiance, spouting Bertrand Russell's defense of atheism in protest of the requirement that he attend chapel and flouting 1950s college suppressions of sexuality with a gleeful abandon that loudly protests Roth's own frustrations as a college student; Roth has said in interviews that he never realized how hemmed in he felt as a college student, that only now can he look back at the damage done to his generation. Only now can he revel in Messner's defiance when Roth himself was a good boy, making no trouble.

In Portnoy's *Complaint*, the serious problem of a son feeling identified with his mother, seduced by her to the point where he can never become independent, is clothed in spirited play. Portnoy's mother, too, is a player—she plays different roles, her son Alex meanwhile playing at pretending not to know her secret. And so *serio ludere* conjures the story. Roth imagines as Alexander Portnoy's first and greatest dilemma the games played by his ubiquitous, all-powerful mother: little Alex believes that his mother and his schoolteachers are the same person in different guises. Through mysterious, magical means his mother apparently moves between home and school faster than a speeding bullet: "I would rush off for home, wondering as I ran if I could possibly make it to our apartment before she had succeeded in transforming herself" (3). Although Alex feels helpless in the face of this witch who might kill him "if I were to catch sight of her flying in from school through the bedroom window" (4), he remains the only one in his family to know her secret, a fact implying similarity to the point of identity between him and his mother.

What remains serious is conflict, conflict rendered tolerable, if not actually minimized, through exaggerations, through playing with tragic moments in order to find humor in them: putting the "id" back in "Yid," as Portnoy tells his analyst. The overwhelming mother, avatar of aggression and sexuality (she points a knife at him to make him eat; she takes his penis in her hand and suggests he pee for her; when he is four years old and again when he is in his thirties, she puts his hand on her thigh) becomes both source and annihilator of his own identity. To forge any sense of identity that he

can call his own, he grabs the one part of his body that does not seem to be part of her: "My wang was all I really had that I could call my own" (33). He can never feel sure that this woman of a thousand identities has no wang of her own tucked away somewhere, since she brandishes phallic objects and seems preternaturally aware of what he is really doing when he vaults into the bathroom on the pretext of diarrhea. He can and cannot get away from her: he is doomed to become what Freud termed one of the psychically impotent: "where they love they do not desire and where they desire they do not love" (Freud, *Debasement*, 183).

Roth evolves a formula for playing that strongly resembles that of Oscar Wilde, treating the trivial things in life seriously, the serious things with sustained triviality, a *serio ludere* that ridicules the Oedipus complex while validating it with a vengeance. Portnoy breaks every taboo (Kosher dissolves in lobster; masturbation happens on the 107 bus; only non-Jewish women become sexual objects) in order to assert his independence, but he never fails to end up right back where he started: his mother's little boy, the "puzzled penis" (Prefatory remark, *Portnoy's Complaint*) doomed forever to wield that penis as a weapon against women who represent the mother he loves to hate.

If the parents, especially the mother, in *Portnoy's Complaint* remain over-the-top caricatures, the bizarrely determined Maureen in *My Life as a Man* courts our sympathy no matter how disgusting her behavior, no matter how profound her self-loathing, and no matter how much we despise her, feeling relieved when she dies. The sense that she cannot help devolving, and that even at her lowest and most fiendishly provocative moments she longs for love and beauty, render her a character for whom one unexpectedly experiences protective love, even though one hates her and finds her so degraded and degrading. "She's a lunatic, doctor!" sobs Peter Tarnapol to the same psychoanalyst who seems to have treated Portnoy, the appropriately named "Playbird" or "Spielvogel," who plays and is played himself. Because Maureen consistently throws Tarnapol into chaos, she creates for him the perfect environment for writing. She always insists that she is his muse, he invariably denies this, but she's right: she never fails to lie, but like the lie of a good plot, the kinds of lies she tells can never be guessed in advance. Teetering off balance, Tarnapol, like Roth, can finally write.

In *The Human Stain*, an ambitious taking of America's pulse along with his own, Roth plays with American attitudes toward race, class and gender, joking about politicians "Gush" and "Bore" while simultaneously helping a rapidly ageing, gravely handicapped Nathan Zuckerman, who has never recovered from prostate surgery, try to find his identity as a writer. Revealing in an interview that he had as a young man dated a "Negro" woman, Roth remembered her mother's discussion of relatives being "lost to all their people," because they could pass as white. This conversation appears to have become the kernel from which *The Human Stain* grew: the story made "a lasting impression. Self-transformation. Self-invention. The alternative destiny. Repudiating the past. Powerful stuff." (McGrath, *New York Times*, May 7, 2000, no pag). Again, loss precedes redemption as the novelist loses his own identity in the creation of many selves.

These many selves are born and grow in the face of the brutally disintegrated physical self of Roth's alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, whose distressing symptom after prostate surgery—incontinence—is painted in putridly realistic detail. One can almost feel Nathan Zuckerman's flesh decomposing as he isolates himself more and more from the world because he is afraid that his diaper may not hold the urine, he is afraid of being a smelly old man in public. Unified in age and decrepitude with Coleman Silk, the man unable to tell his story, Zuckerman and he engage in a relationship that resembles that

of an old married couple. They even dance together. The many characters in Silk's drama swirl around the two old men like misbegotten children, tolerable because they are the fruits of love—namely the collaboration between Zuckerman and Silk. Mastering illness by imagining it in every detail, Roth provides for the acceptance of his characters' deterioration. Which he achieves by offering both old men his love, describing their worst faults with tender pity.

The Human Stain is one of the last hurrahs of sexual life—The Dying Animal another—in which a seventy-something man, Coleman Silk, enjoys a final, Viagra-charged affair with the elusive Faunia, whose jealous ex-husband eventually kills the two of them. Since about the year 2000, Roth's writings have been increasingly devoted to the mystery of death rather than to the mysteries of love and sexuality. The prevailing themes of novels written after *The Human Stain* are ageing, illness, death, the fear of dying, or retreat from death through exploration of the past, or of imagined alternate pasts, like the idea that Charles Lindbergh could have become president instead of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In these novels Roth faces the challenge of mastering the fear of extinction. How to master death, something so alien to experience, with nothing but narcissism and philosophy to help? By trying to imagine a man's life through his illnesses and his death, including his funeral; by dwelling on the universality of this. By imagining a dead boy as possessing an eternal consciousness. By glamorizing a suicide as a triumphant return of creative power. And also by revealing the daring of the very old, their desires, their efforts to continue to live when everyone around them seems too young to understand how great those efforts are.

For the shame in ageing trumps the shame of experiencing or confessing sexual fantasies, especially those not shared by ordinary mortals. This is Dylan Thomas's message—*Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*—and Roth isn't going quietly either. A world-class novelist who announces that he is "done" with writing wishes for this announcement to be stapled to the bulletin board with a gold border around it. Clearly Roth does not wish to fade away unnoticed. The titles themselves spell out a message: *Everyman* (2006) seeks comfort in the fact that all humans die, but the hero never has a name, so it can't be Roth. *Everyman* is all humanity, but without a name he feels refreshingly unreal. *Exit, Ghost* (2007) implies a man who goes quietly, but naturally he doesn't: he falls in love and goes for the girl, even if mostly in fantasy, and even while losing his memory and plagued by problems with adult diapers.

By the next book, *Indignation* (2008) we're back with a vengeance to defiance in the face of shame, and to an underdog hero, the individualist Jewish atheist among the thoughtless, bigoted Christians, who shakes his fist at the idiots, but this hero is dead before we readers even know it. In the creation of this feisty but tragically dead underdog, Roth can rejuvenate his young self: he can be nineteen again. Roth's re-vamped nineteen-year-old self built on an improved—because more rebellious—plan rises from the grave in this novel. Finally, *The Humbling* offers a hero who seizes control by killing himself, egging himself on with memories of a woman who shot her abusive husband: "if she could do that I can do this, if she could do that..." (139) and then he thinks of pretending "that he was committing suicide in a play" (139). And the idea that drives him forward is the fantasy that this particular play will restore his youthful self, because "in his mid-twenties, when, as a theatrical prodigy, he accomplished everything he tried and achieved everything he wanted, he had played the part of Chekhov's aspiring young writer . . . it was an Actors Studio Broadway production of *The Seagull*, and it marked his first big New York success, making him the most promising young actor of the season, full of certainty and a sense of singularity, and leading to every unforeseeable



contingency" (140). Here is the ultimate defiance in the face of shame: an old man killing himself dies feeling as though he's returning to his young, successful self.

In these four novels published since *The Human Stain*, Roth plays with the fear of death and its finality, alternately dictating to it and bowing to it, but always having the last laugh. He masters his audience by imagining death and dying in ways that suggest rebirth and rejuvenation. Both his comic and his tragic resolutions strengthen the reader's ego as well as Roth's, to the extent that we enjoy and feel enriched by his work. *Serio ludere* here includes self-empowerment, the game being that imagining death conquers it. This holds a degree of reality, in the sense that Roth's work will hardly die with him.

### 3. Nemesis

When in October 2012 Philip Roth dropped two bombshells—stating that he would write no more novels and that he did not believe in psychoanalysis—it was hard to believe that he meant this seriously. Could he be joking? Can an artist relinquish a calling in the way that a man who works from nine to five retires, finding closure in the gift of a gold watch? Is Roth with this announcement engaging in serious play, preparation for different kinds of literary work? Can we really believe that he is abandoning simultaneously a career and a guiding set of beliefs, the one never having existed for him without the other?

A glance at his remarks about the novel that he claims will remain his last offers some insight. Roth has said that *Nemesis* concerns the ways in which good and bad luck—instead of unconscious choices—guide our lives. But surely he jests. *Nemesis* in fact demonstrates the ways in which unconscious guilt drives a personality to its doom. The hero, Bucky Cantor, “who'd lost a mother at birth and a father to jail” (25) believes himself to be a carrier of polio. Bucky holds himself responsible for the deaths of several young boys on the playground he supervises. This seems an inexplicable feeling in an otherwise sane, responsible, caring young man, unless one connects it to unconscious guilt over the death of his mother, who dies giving birth to him. Like most sons, Bucky must identify in some way with his father, about whom he knows only that he was “a shady character” who went to prison for embezzling. Insatiably scrupulous, punctiliously honorable, a walking reaction formation in the face of his father's dishonesty, Bucky nonetheless becomes a thief, but one who steals only from himself and from his fiancée the marriage and the life they both desire together. Although one can read the novel as a series of events generated by luck—the boys on Bucky's playground who contract polio have bad luck—the wild card of luck makes no sense of Bucky's personality. His appeal as a character comes from our response to his sense of guilt. Yes, Roth is kidding someone—possibly himself—about giving up the idea that unconscious motivations influence life deeply.

The sad and beautiful *Nemesis* ultimately offers a portrait of an American underdog who, like most American underdogs, is a hero who stays young no matter what. Even though the final section of the novel depicts Bucky as a broken, prematurely aged fifty-year-old, his youthful athleticism twisted by polio, the final image of Bucky is not this destroyed, disappointed man. Instead, we get a memory of a young athlete in top form, a moment that Roth has stated is his favorite scene in the book, the one in which Bucky “seemed to us invincible.” In this scene, Bucky hurls the javelin—a spear—in an image elevating the American idea of the underdog who can still “shake a spear(e).” (Last time I looked, Google listed 604,000 results for “Shake-a-spear”). One can't help but think of Prospero abjuring his

rough magic—especially since the magician's final scene in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has been read as Shakespeare's goodbye to the theatre. Like Bucky Cantor, Prospero has been hurling something as potent as a spear; he has "given fire" and "rifted Jove's stout oak/With his own bolt," but by the end he states his intention to "break my staff" (5,1).

This triumphant spear-hurling Bucky, gleaming in the reflected glory of Prospero, dominates the book's end. How American an ending! Age cannot wither, nor custom stale, the memory of Bucky in the minds of the boys who admired him. Bucky's last name, Cantor, slyly casts Roth as the bard of America. He remains a Jewish bard in the end, for a cantor is a Jewish liturgical singer. And yes, Roth is our American bard, and when he's gone we will remember Portnoy as much as we remember Zuckerman and Cantor.

Philip Roth "done" with writing? Perhaps. Before announcing that he "was done," Roth re-read his novels, beginning with the last, to see if he'd been "wasting" his time, and decided that like the boxer Joe Louis he'd done the best with what he had. (Remnick, no pag) If what goes around comes around, shouldn't Roth have already gotten the Nobel prize? That is a question to play with. If he never gets it, the nemesis of those who find Roth too narcissistic, or too anti-woman, or too this or too that, will have triumphed. Comparing the Shakespearean vision of youthful Bucky Cantor throwing his javelin to Roth's portrait of himself as an average guy who tries hard, it seems to me that Roth is playing with two unrealistic visions of the way in which we will remember him. We won't think of him as an average Joe who is modest in describing his achievement, and whose achievement remains indeed modest. But even if some year he gets the Nobel prize, will we think of him as the American Shakespeare? Or does he, like Somerset Maugham, remain a notch below the bard, "in the very front row of the second rate?" (qtd. in Leavitt, no pag). If the hubris of casting himself as Prospero is tempered by the modesty of portraying himself as someone who managed to do the best he could, then could Roth still win the Nobel prize? It's a tough play. He might have to toy with the idea of writing one more novel.

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