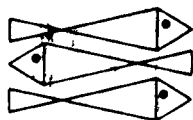


A Philip Roth Reader

With an
introduction by
Martin Green

Including selections from
all the novels, the
entire text of "The Breast"
(newly revised), as well as
the essay-story
"Looking at Kafka."

A Philip Roth Reader



Farrar | Straus | Giroux
NEW YORK

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The revised version of "Novotny's Pain" appeared first in a limited-signed edition published by Sylvester & Orphanos

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Printed in the United States of America
Published simultaneously in Canada
by McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., Toronto

Designed by Irving Perkins Associates

First printing, 1980

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Roth, Philip.
A Philip Roth reader.
Includes bibliographical references.
I. Title.

PS3568.0855P47 1980 813'.54 80-19790

**A Philip
Roth
Reader**

BOOKS BY PHILIP ROTH

Goodbye, Columbus
Letting Go
When She Was Good
Portnoy's Complaint
Our Gang
The Breast
The Great American Novel
My Life as a Man
Reading Myself and Others
The Professor of Desire
The Ghost Writer
A Philip Roth Reader

Introduction

Philip Roth seems to me the most gifted novelist now writing, at least if one puts a stress on tradition in using the word “novelist.” He translates his intelligence and his feelings into the terms specific to serious fiction, with more firmness than Bellow, more richness than Mailer, more patience and steadiness and taste and tact than anyone else. That is the case I shall argue.

He has at least one special claim on all serious readers, that he is himself the serious reader as writer. Of course, most good novelists have always read seriously; though their reading (as reflected in their critical judgments) has often been weirdly distorted by compulsions deriving from their needs as writers. But what makes Roth special is not only that his critical sense is not so distorted, but that it plays a part, a big part, in his imaginative creations. His stories are full of beautiful insights into books and authors, into the business of teaching and criticizing, and into living with works of literature over time.

I know no other novelist, for instance, who makes the discussion of books such a valuable part of his story’s action—with critical comments quite substantial in themselves and yet not an obstacle to the flow of dramatized life. These comments are appreciation rather than analysis—much less exegesis—but they are none the less critical in the best sense. And if this is possible

because so much of his novels' action takes place among different parts of the protagonist's mind, nevertheless it *is* dramatized life—and there are more external exchanges.

For instance, in *Letting Go* (1962), James's *Portrait of a Lady* immediately becomes a point at issue between Gabe Wallach, the hero, and Libby, the woman with whom he gets most deeply entangled. He sends her a copy that has between its pages a letter from his dying mother. And there is in both Libby and his mother a kind of strained idealism, imposing strain as well as charm on those around them, which reminds the reader of Isabel Archer. And the decorum of James's novel (in both the art of narrative and the life narrated) contrasts with the indecorousness of Libby's plight. The burden of these (unspoken) comparisons and contrasts bears on Libby, but if the reader, at a second reading, reverses the arrow, toward Isabel, he will find that rewarding and relevant too. Points are being made about Isabel, and James, which shade in the picture of Libby and Roth. There is a penumbra of such implications, a halo of literary critical meanings, which surrounds and sets off the central icon.

Then, in *The Professor of Desire*, David Kepesh goes to Prague largely because he is devoted to Kafka, visits the latter's home, discusses him with a Czech professor (himself devoted to Melville) and finally dreams about him. In the discussion he has talked about his own sexual impotence, and waywardly suggested that *The Castle* is a story of similar sexual oppression. (The Czech professor, who suffers the political oppression of state Communism, interprets *Moby Dick* in terms relevant to *that* suffering.) In Kepesh's dream, he visits Kafka's still-surviving whore, and hears all about his sexual practices, even has them performed before him. Kafka's face and fate having been evoked in our mind before, the contrast is poignant and cruel—the contrast between Kepesh and Kafka, but also that between Kepesh's devotion to, and his desecration of, Kafka's image.

It is, typically, a presence and a contrast that are evoked each time. In an essay-story of 1973, "Looking at Kafka," Roth imagines a Kafka who had survived his tuberculosis and come to America, to be Hebrew teacher to the American author in Newark in 1942 (when Roth was nine). This Kafka would have de-

stroyed his manuscripts and ceased to be a writer. His remarkableness would be all suppressed, his quality unnamed and unrecognized, except for a something the boy Roth would apprehend without comprehending. And he would be involved in the Roth family affairs by an attempted match between him and Roth's aunt—yet another foredoomed failure in Kafka's series of attempts to marry. (It is worth noting that Roth's father was himself an insurance agent, whose parents emigrated from Austria-Hungary.) The contrast—left to the reader to develop—is between the self-denying and self-defeating Czech, spiritual athlete and ascetic, and the brash and greedy son of immigrants, the Jew who got away, whose writings embody the all-voracious culture around him, even as they bitterly criticize it.

In his most recent novel, *The Ghost Writer* (1979), he makes a similar fantasy-use of Anne Frank, who appears in the life of the author's representative, having survived the holocaust. She represents to him the life of suffering and denial, of moral dignity and achieved beauty, to contrast with his own anxious egotism and overprivilege—to feed his anxiety about (among other things) his assigned task of creating equal beauty out of privilege. This use of her, and even more that of Kafka, which makes the reader turn, at every pause in Roth's lifelong self-analysis, to compare him with the other man, strikes me as wholly original and wholly successful.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Roth is unusually susceptible to literary influence, which means, to some degree, literary fashion, and leads, in some cases, to unsuccess. There is some writing of Roth's as epitaph on which we might take his own line from the very successful *My Life as a Man* (1974): "I leave it to those writers who live in the flamboyant American present, and whose extravagant fictions I sample from afar, to treat the implausible, the preposterous, and the bizarre in something other than a straightforward and recognizable manner." That mode was not indeed right for Roth, but his susceptibility to influence does not necessarily lead to disaster. Frequently it leads to success, as we have seen, and most often it stamps individual works with their special character.

Goodbye, Columbus (1959) surely bears the mark of Salinger's

influence. Obviously, *The Breast* (1972) was conceived because of Kafka's precedent—and Gogol's—and the contrast between this metamorphosis and Kafka's is an important part of its statement about the author and his culture. In *My Life as a Man* the story "Courting Disaster" was surely conceived by the aid of Nabokov's precedent in *Lolita*—though I see no significant contrast there. While Mailer (the Mailer of "The Time of Her Time") may be responsible for certain of Roth's scenes, or stresses within those scenes, especially a kind of sexual anger; and Bellow is a pervasive presence throughout Roth's oeuvre, though most notably in the early works.

Perhaps Roth's cultivation of his susceptibility to influence, and the weaknesses it brings, are more obvious than the strengths. But it seems to me that Roth consummates and combines the tendencies of these other writers, and produces a classical concentration of the literary imagination of our time. As I read him I find Salinger combined with Mailer, and Nabokov combined with Malamud, and I feel I am getting the best of each of them—when Roth is at his best. And it strikes me as a significant coincidence that a gifted novelist should cultivate this particular gift just when a school of criticism was arising which focused its attention on "the anxiety of influence."

However, the most poignant literary context into which to put Roth is a quite different one. It is the most poignant because it is more than, but not other than, literary. I mean the Polish and Czech writers he has published in the Penguin series of which he is the General Editor, Writers from the Other Europe. Obviously, his interest in these writers, all (except Bruno Schulz) post-war names, and essentially Roth's contemporaries, represents a questioning of himself comparable to that embodied in his cult of Kafka. But this time the question is, more transparently, What would have happened to me and what kind of writer would I have become if my grandparents had not come to America from Eastern Europe? Moreover, the project of finding these writers and publishing their books is a kind of action of intervention; it makes a difference to their lives; it involves, conceivably, some risk to them, as well as at least some effort for him; he steps out of the charmed circle that threatens to imprison a writer of his

type—the charmed circle of popular success, of purely literary effort, and of merely erotic subject matter.

A glance at two of those Eastern European writers will show what Roth is saying—or rather, what he now no longer needs to say—about himself, his work, and his culture. Tadeusz Borowski, who was born in the Ukraine in 1922, was a student in Poland when the Germans marched in; he spent time in Auschwitz and Dachau, and after 1945 wrote for the Communist Party in Poland until he committed suicide (apparently out of shame or guilt) in 1951. His collection of stories, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, is about the life of prisoners in concentration camps, and focuses on the ugliness of their behavior to each other as well as the horror of their oppression by the guards. Milan Kundera, a Czech born in 1929, the son of a famous musician, presents a different sort of contrast to Roth, because essentially like him in talent, temperament, and subject matter. Another child of fortune, he writes stories of erotic intrigue so elegant and playful they can remind one of Chekhov or Boccaccio. But just because he is a parallel figure to Roth, the difference between their fates is striking. Kundera has been expelled from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia twice, and is—or was when Roth wrote about him in introduction to a collection of his stories—relegated to the provinces, forbidden to travel, not allowed to teach at the Prague Film School, his books removed from libraries and bookstores, his plays banned from theaters. Roth compares Kundera to Mailer, to bring out his light, humorous, and unmelodramatic eroticism; and mentions also the very limited social freedom of Kundera's protagonists. The reader is bound to reflect that that freedom is to be found again in the scope of Mailer's (and Roth's) eroticism—their moral and imaginative scope in general. Kundera and Roth show similar talents molded into different forms and directed toward different fates by the forces of history.

It is perhaps notable that it was certain contemporaries, rather than Flaubert, Mann, James, or other of Roth's oracles, whom I was reminded of, who are for me the relevant surround to his work. Those grander and as it were more official sponsors I feel as living presences only in reading *When She Was Good* (1967).

There one *can* feel Flaubert and James, standing to the left and right of the author's chair, and bending over his shoulder to read each paragraph he completes. But when, in *The Ghost Writer*, we are aware of Henry James, and in *The Professor of Desire*, of Chekhov, it is as part of the subject matter. As "influences"—as rivals the author must measure up to, face up to—they have been successfully distanced, just by being incorporated. The reader feels no anxiety of influence. And their absence or their distance from most of his work fits in, as a part of Roth's treatment of the general theme, the grandeur and misery of ideas, the comedy and tragedy of their influence and non-influence upon behavior. In *My Life as a Man*, Peter Tarnopol remarks that he has just used one of his father's phrases, "what one owes oneself," and adds that his effective thinking owes more to his father than to, say, Aristotle. The same point is made more incisively in an interview printed in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975).

Roth says there that he should have defended himself (against charges that his early work was vulgarly anti-Semitic) by citing, not as he did the precedent of Flaubert and the value of objectivity, but the precedent of Henny Youngman, the comic he enjoyed as a boy, and the value of Jewish vaudeville. He adds that as much as *The Wings of the Dove* it was Jake the Snake he'd admired and learned from, growing up—the owner of his corner candy store, a lewd anecdotalist and local satirist.

Or take the parallel contrast, in *My Life as a Man*, between Caroline Benson, the hero's college English teacher (Virginia Woolf, on whom he writes his thesis, standing behind her), and Sharon Shatzky (daughter of Al "the Zipper King" Shatzky), whom he inducts into sexual shamelessness. Peter Tarnopol is intoxicated by his success with Miss Benson quite as much as by that with Sharon. The two affairs proceed in tandem, twin flowerings of his youthful talent, and though the two women cannot be brought together, and the two sides to his nature are dangerously dissociated, neither of those facts is the point the story makes. Its point is just the diversity of pasture on which his pride so greedily and happily crops. Tarnopol has no inhibiting shames and guilts—until much later in the story. And it is that comic, and earthy, and bawdy strain of his native culture, so unlike the austere, the

noble, and the exquisite artists he admires, which Roth employs in his fiction to set it at a distance from its "classical" sponsors.

All this, of course, Roth is perfectly aware of, draws our attention to, makes use of. For him it is only a starting point, but for the critic—at least for me—it's still a source of wonderment; in the work of other Jewish-American writers, too, but Roth gives the phenomenon a classical completeness. How can any writer be so in tune with Mann, Woolf, James and still so raucous and raunchy in word and deed? Even more, how can any writer pass so surefootedly and unembarrassedly from one to the other? No English novelist has ever been able to do that. Roth's work does reveal some of the limits of the process (his heroes are deeply upset by other people's vulgarity, and their vigor of language finds only a feeble counterpart in their behavior). But his stress is on the zest of it, and his stress is convincing. The range of his movement is an achievement, and a vivid case of his interest in the limited powers of "ideas" and "literature."

Roth's world of vulgarity is Jewish. To be a Jewish child, however, an experience Roth makes much of, is to grow up in a world of refinement. His heroes' families are the heart of all refinement. In *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) we read, "The guilt, the fears—the terror bred into my bones! What in their world was not charged with danger, dripping with germs, fraught with peril? Oh, where was the gusto, where was the boldness and courage?" But, the reader might reply, you know where they were—down at the corner candy store, in Jake the Snake's sardonic judgment on all refinement. When Portnoy, grown up, declares that "to be bad and enjoy it makes men of us boys," he is reciting Jake's lesson. He grows up, as Jewish, with a map of life in which areas of refinement and vulgarity are marked off from each other clearly, but with the routes of passage, and the visiting hours, equally clear.

To be Jewish was also to embody the Protestant work ethic. In *My Life as a Man* we are told, of the Zuckermans, "A strong character, not a big bankroll, was to them the evidence of one's worth." And, by a natural extension, to be Jewish was to be a good husband and father and family man. In Roth's novels, wives constantly praise and protect husbands, mothers admire and idolize

sons, sisters love and support brothers. As a boy, watching the men play softball on weekends, Portnoy longed to grow up to be a Jewish husband and father. As a man, he found that even Gentile girls wanted a Jew for a husband, because he could be relied on to stay around the house, to give them kids to rear and Kafka to read.

In fact, to be Jewish, according to Roth, is to be middle class. The goyim are characteristically upper, like Susan McCall in *My Life as a Man*, or lower, like Mary Jane Reed, The Monkey in *Portnoy's Complaint*. Of course, there *are* middle-class WASP girls in his novels—it's a type that fascinates Roth—the point is not that the Gentiles are never middle class, but that the Jews always are. Characteristically, non-Jewish Americans appear to Roth's Jews as either vulgar and violent, or else desiccated and heartless. So to be Jewish is to be called, quite specially, to uphold social values and embody social faith.

But Roth's work also records a rebellion, an exasperation with, a blasphemy against, that piety. That has seemed, especially to Jewish readers, the main thrust of his work, from *Goodbye, Columbus* on. The story "Epstein," for instance, is built around the scene in which the father stands naked before his wife and child, his genitals apparently marked with venereal disease; a scene that outrages the piety taught in Leviticus against "uncovering the nakedness" of a father.

Roth has always claimed that there was nothing anti-Jewish in this, nothing more than the artist's need to find pungent means of expression, and that seems plausible to me. On the other hand, that artist's need is, in our present phase of culture, for a pungency offensive to piety; to be an artist is to be in a state of inflamed exasperation, and it is not philistine to sympathize with those who protested.

However, from Roth's point of view, he was in those days socially pious himself because in sympathy with his society's criteria of seriousness. The big fact of his development, as he describes it, has been that he came to doubt even those criteria. In his early work, he tells us, he was always trying to be mature and responsible, to be manly, in whatever he wrote. If we may take Peter Tarnopol to represent Philip Roth, he translates his par-

ents' values into literary terms, *seemingly* different, just as Peter's brother Morris translates those values into radical political terms. The brothers, being intellectuals, belong to a different branch of American culture from their parents, but one quite parallel in direction. Peter's position then, however he quarrels with his parents, is very different from his position after being defeated by Maureen, when he becomes unable and unwilling to be a man any more.

It is, nevertheless, in terms like manliness that Roth's heroes continue to measure themselves, despite his attempts to escape them. In an interview he said that his work changed with *Portnoy*, because of an increased responsiveness to what was unsocialized in himself. And Tarnopol tells Karen Oakes that now he's been broken by Maureen, he'll take Genet, Miller, and Céline as his literary heroes, and write like them. But he realizes immediately that he is sensitive to nothing so much as to his moral reputation. And Roth's later work, including *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*, has a strain of moral suffering that sounds deeper than anything else.

For that reason, one precedent I am always reminded of in reading Roth is George Eliot. Of course, a concern with conscience is hardly enough to isolate these two from the general run of serious novelists. But when one adds the special relation in each of them of conscience to comedy, the practiced irony of transition from the one mode to the other, the crowd of contenders thins out remarkably. That habit of transition is expressed in the elaborate sentences that come naturally to the pair of them. The irony is just sardonic enough to sanitize the tears—and which other authors' representatives spend so much time in tears?

And there is a similar pathos of ineffectiveness in both writers in their non-fiction, especially in political matters, so crucial to the kind of seriousness they speak for. Both are gifted essay writers, but—being so very intelligent as they are—their non-fiction is a sad comedown from their fiction, where their intelligence so overflows its immediate functions that it seems all-encompassing and omni-competent. The satire, just because it denies itself the full freedom of fiction, is a bit of a disappoint-

ment. *Our Gang*, for instance, seems to me the least exciting of his books (merely a duty done, dues paid by the writer as citizen), and one is as puzzled as in Eliot's case to say why it should be so forceless, why their strength as thinkers is limited to "personal relations."

But in *that* field, in saying exactly how personal concerns run with and against political ones, and exactly what life-gestures mean—what, say, the life styles of Susan McCall and Maureen Johnson signify—as in finding the exact word, syntax, intonation for his characters, Roth is supreme. By comparison Doris Lessing, in other ways George Eliot's heir, does *not* know the exact word, and lacks the broadly humorous gamut of feeling.

But of course to see likenesses between Roth and Eliot can only be preliminary to seeing differences. Roth is much more strenuously autobiographical in his stories, for one thing (I mean he invites the reader to wonder how autobiographical he is being). In this aspect he reminds me of Kingsley Amis, and the comparison brings out the weightier character of the American's work. The Englishman's talent expresses itself quite strikingly in acts of self-limitation, renunciations of the sort of seriousness we associate with George Eliot. Whereas the American won't stop trying, won't give up the great tradition. It is typical that whereas Amis announces as a saving truth that nice things are nicer than nasty ones, Roth (or at least Tarnopol) tells his analyst, "You're very hung up on the pleasure principle." Roth's heroes acknowledge that the women who give them the most pleasure fail to engage their imaginations; but though they curse themselves for that perversity, they pursue no illusion that they can just choose "nice things" henceforth.

Which brings us to that other, and largest, difference between Roth and Eliot—the character and intensity of his erotic preoccupation. This is of course a general difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists, between nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture; but that difference too is exemplified in classical form by Roth. If novelists now can write only about personal relations, *they* are nowadays only erotic, or almost so. Out of that subject matter he makes his farce, comedy of manners, moral tragedy, satire, sociology, everything. But

what is most striking, to my eye, are the signs that our eroticism has seriously scarred Roth's conscience, and even his imagination. Take conscience first: in *My Life as a Man*, Tarnopol ends his relationship with Susan in a scene at her mother's house in which she (hitherto strikingly modest) "comes on very shameless," and when he says the final goodbye she reaches up from her chair and takes hold of his genitals. Her mother has just accused him of debauching Susan—"Must she be driven crazy with sex too?"—and though she quite misses the moral intention of his relations with Susan, the reader is left feeling that she was accidentally right. Tarnopol *has* taught Susan to "try to be bold, to be shameless, to be greedy"—for character-building purposes; and since it is after he has dismissed the mother's accusations that the daughter makes her final grotesque gesture, the story seems to confirm them for us.

As for the scar on Roth's imagination, that is what is announced by the episode I described in *The Professor of Desire*, where Kepesh's long love of Kafka finds expression in a pornographic fantasy. Roth is implying something very similar to what Susan Sontag said in "The Pornographic Imagination" (1967). "There is, demonstrably, something incorrectly designed and potentially disorienting in the human sexual capacity—at least in the capacities of man-in-civilization. Man, the sick animal, bears within him an appetite which can drive him mad." Sontag's dissent from the sexual orthodoxies of liberal humanism is like that of Norman O. Brown, and leads her, like Brown, to a choice between accepting pornography, obscenity, abjection and accepting the ideal of chastity. "Human sexuality is, quite apart from Christian repressions, a highly questionable phenomenon, and belongs, at least potentially, among the extreme rather than the ordinary experiences of humanity. . . . [It is] . . . one of the demonic forces in human consciousness. . . . Even on the level of simple physical sensation and mood, making love surely resembles having an epileptic fit at least as much, if not more, than it does eating a meal or conversing with someone."

It is no accident that Susan Sontag sees modern art as "a spiritual project," and that her culture heroes are "perverse spiritual athletes" who drive their art and thought toward "si-

lence," like Artaud, Wittgenstein, Beckett, or like Roth's Kafka.

There is another critic who can, I think, be profitably placed beside Roth, and that is Lionel Trilling. I am thinking of two essays in particular, "The Fate of Pleasure" and "The Teaching of Modern Literature." The first discusses, as a feature of modern culture in general, that turning away from pleasure, that cult of the sublime, which we noted in Roth's eroticism. The second lists the modernist books Trilling taught at Columbia (Roth's teacher-heroes often draw up similar lists), and discusses the false position of the teacher who encourages in his students a kind of spiritual revolt, a pursuit of the extreme and intractable, the anti-social, which he himself does not live by. In *The Professor of Desire* the whole narrative is a self-explanation by a teacher of a course in erotic literature, composed in order to escape that false position and meet his students in sincerity. But it is in *My Life as a Man* that the most moving parallel occurs between Trilling's essay and Roth's fiction.

The crux of that book is Tarnopol's destruction by a crazy wife, and his passive participation in the process. Why did I do this, or let this happen? he asks a hundred times, and the main answer comes on p. 194 of the novel (p. 26 here). "My trouble in my middle twenties was that. . . . Stuffed to the gills with great fiction—entranced not by cheap romances, like *Madame Bovary*, but by *Madame Bovary*—I now expected to find in everyday experience that same sense of the difficult and the deadly earnest that informed the novels I admired most. My model of reality, deduced from reading the masters, had at its heart *intractability*." And hence it was that crazy Maureen could impose herself upon him as authentic, as more real than the girls he liked, as his spiritual equal and mate. This is, I think, exactly what Trilling was talking about.

Of course, Roth grew up under Trilling's aegis, for he was a child of the fifties, as he has often told us. In an interview with himself, he says he first saw writing as "something like a religious calling, and literature a kind of sacrament." In the fifties, he says, cultural loyalties divided the young as political ones were to do, and the young Roth, *choosing* literature, felt he had committed himself to every noble value. Tarnopol (or his alter ego, Zucker-