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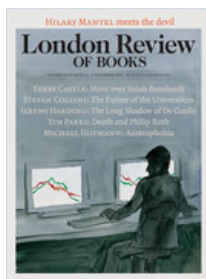
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Tim Parks

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Cape, 280 pp, £16.99, October 2010, ISBN 978 0 224 08953 1

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In the 1980s I translated some of the late novels and stories of Alberto Moravia, elderly but still prolific. These books, which abandoned observation of society for concerns with ageing and sex, did not get a good press and have since disappeared from the shelves, while Moravia's earlier work will be a part of Italian education for decades to come. Translating, I was struck by the almost cavalier perfunctoriness of the late books, combined with a ruthless narrative dispatch. The weightiest themes were tossed off with an insouciance that bordered on slapstick. Twenty years later, Philip Roth's recent short novels create something of the same impression. Above all, Roth's chronicling of modern American history is now little more than an alibi: the draft and the Korean War in *Indignation*, the 9/11 aftermath and Bush's re-election in *Exit Ghost* and the 1944 polio epidemic in *Nemesis* interest him only in so far as they can be used to induce a generalised atmosphere of collective fear.

Death is everywhere in these novels. The words *dread*, *terrified*, *frightened*, *scared*, *horror*, *jeopardise*, *imperial*, *vulnerable*, *panic* abound. Only pages into *The Humbling* we hear that Simon Axler, a celebrity actor, is 'awash with terror and fear'. In each book a close acquaintance of the central character dies unexpectedly in a way quite unconnected with the main events. Roth asks how we can live a full life given the precariousness of the human condition, when 'the tiniest misstep can have tragic consequences.' As one protagonist after another is denied happiness, I am reminded of the intensely phobic atmosphere in Hardy's novels, or of Lawrence's obsession with overcoming fear whatever the cost. 'Everything gruesome must be squarely faced,' Axler says.

Every aspect of plot development is bent to Roth's theme – he is unashamedly didactic. Death breeds fear and fear breeds religion and social timidity, which reduce us to an oppressed half-life from which we break out at our peril. Childhood may be relatively happy – it offers, as the young narrator Marcus tells us in *Indignation*, 'unimperial, unchanging days when everybody felt safe and settled in his place' – but as soon as the sex instinct kicks in, parental protectiveness turns into restriction. As Marcus ventures away from home, his father is suddenly and inexplicably afraid that any misbehaviour on his son's part, however insignificant, will lead to disaster. The family, as with almost all Roth's families, is Newark Jewish and not well off, increasing the protagonist's sense of vulnerability. Marcus is so infected by his father's apprehensions that, excited by a girl in the university library, he decides not to masturbate in the bathroom in case discovery leads to expulsion from college and, consequently, the draft, Korea and death. It is not American foreign policy that threatens him but his erotic drive.

Since *The Dying Animal* in 2001 Roth has alternated between protagonists of his own age (*The Dying Animal*, *Everyman*, *Exit Ghost*, *The Humbling*) and young men on the brink of adulthood (*Indignation*, *Nemesis*). All were born around the same time as Roth, so that the novels of old age are set in the contemporary world and the novels of young adulthood in the 1940s and 1950s. Each of these short books offers a new take on what is essentially the same plot: something happens out of the blue and a state of fear is induced (in *The Humbling* Axler has lost his acting talent; in *Nemesis* there is a polio epidemic); the fear heightens the desire to live. In particular, it heightens the erotic drive: 'I was determined to have intercourse before I died,' Marcus says in *Indignation*. Eros and Thanatos are never allowed to lose sight of each other; and will eventually be brought into sharp juxtaposition as the story closes in catastrophe; having dreamed of a connubial happiness that might reconcile him to lost artistic powers, Axler is abandoned by his new woman and promptly kills himself.

At no point is any character allowed to challenge Roth's scheme. In the exhilarating opening pages of *The Dying Animal*, the exuberant 62-year-old David Kepesh, ever 'vulnerable to female beauty', has evaded retribution for abandoning his wife and child many years before and, largely thanks to the genius that won him a professorship and regular appearances on radio and TV, has been able to enjoy a life of sexual freedom.

5 MARCH 1987

Julian Barnes
Philip Roth in Israel

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Even for Kepesh, though, there are rules. To be safe, he no longer seduces his pretty students until after they have completed his course and taken their exams. Roth takes great pleasure imagining his seduction of the extravagantly well-endowed, indeed 'devastating' Consuela Castillo, 'a creature so gorgeous everybody is afraid to sit next to her'. Sure enough, no sooner does the professor get his girl than he moves into the realm of dread, afraid he will lose her, afraid she will devour him. To maintain some mental stability he continues an old affair with a more experienced woman – and is now afraid she too will leave him should the truth come out about Consuela.

Kepesh's determination to live intensely doesn't bring happiness, but Roth won't allow a conventional way of life to seem more attractive: the professor's son, Kenny, is brought into the book to show how much worse things are when instincts are suppressed behind a façade of probity. Determined not to repeat his father's crime by leaving his own children, Kenny is nevertheless subject to the same longings, eventually takes a mistress and, with maudlin earnestness, commits to her as well as to his wife, establishing a second and even more suffocating prison for himself. The conversation in which Kenny, with pious complacency, describes his decision to meet his mistress's parents while Kepesh responds with scathing incredulity is one of the funniest in the book. 'One either imposes one's ideas or one is imposed on,' Kepesh tells us, acknowledging the fear that underlies didacticism. All Roth's voices, whether in dialogue or narration, are energised by an urgent need to persuade – sometimes they are hectoring, sometimes seductive. Internal monologue is rare. All is assertion and insistence, between the characters themselves and between narrator and reader.

Fear and the drive to overcome it are central: guilt and innocence, good and evil, are rarely an issue – at least until *Nemesis*. In *The Dying Animal*, Kenny Kepesh's 'good' behaviour is a response to his fear of losing his self-image as a good person: 'He lives in fear of a woman telling him he's not [admirable].' In *Indignation*, Marcus is never morally concerned with 'wrongdoing', only with getting caught. Good behaviour is just a code, determined by collective fear. *The Humbling* is one of the few books that gives us 'a horrible transgression': Axler meets a woman in a mental hospital who says that, having lived so long 'in the constraints of caution', she went mad on seeing her 'rich and powerful second husband' abusing her eight-year-old daughter. The story then focuses on her fear of confronting the problem. You must 'get strong' is Axler's only advice. All these books are constantly concerned with the need to be strong in the face of danger. The question we are prompted to ask of Roth's characters is not 'What was their moral flaw?' but 'Where did they make their fatal mistake?'

A large part of *Exit Ghost* revolves around what is supposedly another horrible transgression but which the reader is never able to conceive as such. The ageing Nathan Zuckerman, one of Roth's established alter egos, returns unadvisedly to New York after 11 years' seclusion in the forests of New England. He is appalled that a young biographer is planning to reveal that E.I. Lonoff, his mentor, had an incestuous relationship with his half-sister in adolescence. Convinced that this will destroy Lonoff's reputation, Zuckerman vows to block the book's publication. But few people are likely to care whether a largely forgotten writer had a relationship with his half-sister in adolescence and the reader soon senses that Zuckerman's real concern is that his own transgressions might become the object of biographical scrutiny. Since Roth rarely risks leaving us without proper explanation, the matter is made explicit in the final pages. 'Once I was dead, who could protect the story of my life?' Zuckerman asks. Fear now extends to the afterlife.

In the recent novels focusing on older men, we are given one protagonist who still just about has his charisma (Kepesh in *The Dying Animal*), one who is losing it (Zuckerman in *Exit Ghost*), one who has lost it and – he senses – his freedom (Axler in *The Humbling*), and one who may have had talent, but chose not to use it, the protagonist in *Everyman*. The closer the character is to Roth's own position – and he is still a charismatic writer – the more energy the book has. The novels about young men don't have that advantage (though by setting them in Newark, where he himself grew up, Roth injects a note of fond nostalgia). Marcus in *Indignation* at least has talent and drive, and it is his manic oscillation between self-assertion and fearful withdrawal into the safety of convention (he destroys a roommate's LP but then immediately buys him a replacement) that gives the book its nervous edge. Eugene Cantor in *Nemesis*, however, is a young man who is never more than worthy, entirely lacking the charisma that animates Roth's more typical protagonists. Deprived of that frequent figure in Roth's novels, the stolid if unimaginative father who provides his family with protection, he was brought up by his grandfather, who 'saw to the boy's masculine development, always on the alert to eradicate any weakness', raising him to be a 'fearless battler' and nicknaming him Bucky for the courage he displayed when killing a rat in the family's grocery shop.

A boy with no special intellectual powers, Bucky is determined to become the strong, positive, protective figure his parents were not. Rather than fight society like Kepesh or Zuckerman, he aims to put himself at the conventional heart of it. When America enters the Second World War, Bucky, unlike Marcus in *Indignation*, longs to join the fight, to make his destiny one with that of his country; but he is too short-sighted to enlist.

Ashamed, he falls back on his sporting abilities and becomes a gym teacher. He will train boys to be strong, confident, fearless Americans.

For most of the narrative Bucky is referred to as Mr Cantor, a curious anomaly until we discover, in the closing pages, that the story is being told not by an omniscient narrator but by one of the boys who was under Bucky's protection when, in the sweltering summer of 1944, he took charge of a Newark city playground. Organising games for the children, making sure they have enough to drink and don't get too much sunshine, the 23-year-old Bucky is a generous, confident figure who would surely have been equal to the task were it not for the outbreak of polio and the consequent welling of collective fear and ethnic tension as the Italian and Jewish communities accuse each other of causing the epidemic. When a band of Italian kids turns up, threatening to infect the Jewish boys by spitting at them, Bucky faces the enemy down, to the admiration of his charges. He is fighting their war as surely as if he were on the Normandy beaches. The analogy is frequently drawn.

But polio is not an enemy Bucky can see or repulse. In 1944 the disease remained a mystery. All that was understood was that it was an infection passed on by poor hygiene and exacerbated by heat and humidity. As his playground children start to fall ill, Bucky is a protector who can't protect. He visits stricken families, attends funerals, makes himself a pillar of society, but can't help but be aware of his impotence. When mourners sing God's praises, he rebels. Why praise a divinity who is a 'cold-blooded murderer of children'? Thus Roth uses the epidemic to bring his conventional young man to the anti-conventional position of a Kepesh or a Marcus. It would be better, Bucky now feels, to worship the sun than this killer God with his 'lunatic cruelty'. 'Better for one's dignity, for one's humanity, for one's worth altogether, not to mention for one's everyday idea of whatever the hell is going on here.'

At the moment of Bucky's maximum disorientation, enter Eros. The girl is from a richer, intellectual, doctor's family, a fact that intensifies her attractions and his sense of inadequacy and vulnerability. But Marcia loves Bucky, the couple are engaged, and her father, a protective figure par excellence, treats the young man as an equal. 'Fostering less fear,' he tells him, 'that's your job and mine.' Marcia is a counsellor at a summer camp for better-off children situated on a lakeside in the hills of Pennsylvania. Concerned for Bucky's welfare ('Please protect Bucky,' she prays), she finds a job for him there as a swimming instructor. Bucky's whole identity is invested in his role as heroic protector of poor city children. But Marcia has promised evenings of lovemaking on a secluded lake island.

Roth is not much interested in the vacillating mind: his dilemmas are short-lived. Despite Bucky's misgivings, the will to pleasure, sanctioned by the anxious invitation of his socially superior girlfriend, quickly prevails. Bucky reneges on his contract in the city and heads for the camp, where he hopes to establish himself as mentor and role model to another group of children who 'could actually be shielded from mishap by an adult's vigilant attention'.

Marcia has a 'slender elfin' body that is as 'vulnerable as a child's', which enormously excites the protective Bucky, but their island lovemaking is quickly spoiled: Bucky is still angry with God. Marcia is a conventional girl and unwilling to listen to his provocations; if he wants conventional happiness he must toe the line. 'So, just in time, before he began to ruin things, Bucky reined himself in.' Actually, he has already ruined things, because now he is tormented by the conviction that he should have stayed in the city: 'If he could not fight in Europe or the Pacific, he could at least have remained in Newark, fighting their fear of polio alongside his endangered boys. Instead he was here in this haven devoid of danger ... Rashly, he had yielded to fear, and under the spell of fear he had betrayed his boys and betrayed himself.'

Soon enough his mistake is punished. Six days later one of the younger counsellors and his closest friend at the camp come down with polio. Other victims follow, including Marcia's sister. Bucky rushes to have himself tested and is found to be a carrier. Entrusted to protect, he has instead brought destruction. As Bucky and Marcia talk together during their island rendezvous we have the predictable superimposition of Eros and death: 'The birch trees encircling them looked in the moonlight like a myriad of deformed silhouettes – their lovers' island haunted suddenly with the ghosts of polio victims.' Days later he himself shows symptoms of the disease and has to be hospitalised.

It's typical of the haste with which all these short novels are wrapped up that our narrator, Arnold Mesnikoff, now introduces himself and explains how, 27 years after that summer in which he also contracted polio, he recognised his old teacher Mr Cantor in the street and heard his story. Wheelchair-bound, limbs disfigured, Bucky rejected Marcia's wish that the couple marry anyway, and isolated himself in a prison of guilt, remorse and anger, living alone, seeing no one, growing unhealthy and overweight, labouring at a post office desk job. He therefore enjoys neither the cautious pleasures of the conventional man nor the riskier satisfactions of the charismatic intellectual. Bucky has got the worst of both worlds: in seeking to recover his lost honour by sparing his girlfriend life with a cripple, he scarcely lived at all. 'There's nobody less salvageable

than a ruined good boy,' remarks the now caustic narrator, the one-time admirer of the athletic and inspiring Mr Cantor.

The title *Nemesis* hangs over the book, inviting the reader to interpret events in the light of Greek tragedy and in particular the grim goddess who made sure that nobody would challenge the authority of the gods. In case we miss the point, Arnold undertakes the discussion for us: he criticises Bucky for the 'stupid hubris' that leads him to imagine he was 'an invisible arrow' shot by an 'evil being' to bring disease. Arnold then wonders, improbably, if after all 'maybe Bucky wasn't mistaken. Maybe he wasn't deluded by self-mistrust. Maybe his assertions weren't exaggerated and he hadn't drawn the wrong conclusion. Maybe he *was* the invisible arrow.' The introduction of Arnold as a narrator allows Roth to remind us that the Greeks saw as divine intervention what modern man thinks of as the merest bad luck while at the same time distancing himself from the debate and leaving his own position unclear. But so brazenly are we thrust towards this textbook enigma that readers may find themselves more intrigued by the author's loyalty to tired literary stratagems than interested in the fate of characters who were never much more than pieces on a chessboard.

Exit Ghost contains much bitter criticism of the crude literalism of a biographical approach to a writer's work. But these novels, each a little disappointing if taken singly, become interesting if we are willing to think of them as an extended conversation Roth has been conducting with himself about his own negotiations with social convention. *The Dying Animal*, *The Humbling* and *Exit Ghost* all revel in the prospect of a return in old age to an active, wayward sex life; they insist on its legitimacy in the teeth of moral nicety. Yet their unhappy dénouements carry the stern and conservative warning – for whom if not for the charismatic writer himself? – that it's a path which can only lead to disaster. *Indignation* and now *Nemesis* remind us of the intensities and delights of youth, but also of its fatal pitfalls, inseparable as ever from Eros. Marcus dies young and Bucky, who never had the charisma required to be a successful moral rebel, lives on as the ghost of himself. At least Kepesh and Zuckerman, however frustrated in old age, have had long and fruitful lives.

When the gorgeous, devastating Consuela abandons him, Kepesh, who likes to rhyme 'aestheticising' with 'anaesthetising', seeks refuge in masturbation and music. 'I played Beethoven and I masturbated. I played Mozart and I masturbated.' These lonely pleasures allow him to partake safely – in memoriam, as it were – of a little of life's intensity. Later, in *Exit Ghost*, Zuckerman is reduced to sketching out a screenplay of an erotic encounter that cannot occur in reality with a woman 40 years younger than him. Literature as a form of protection from life, a strategy for evoking and then overcoming fear? Perhaps. Certainly, it is in so far as these novels draw our attention to Roth himself and the endgame he is doggedly playing out that they begin to exercise some power over the imagination.

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Similarly, "Beautiful Consuela" explores just how much a man in love will take from his beloved: she tests the truth of his feelings by growing hideously fat, unwashed and altogether repulsive, and he remains with her gladly. Rhodes aims for parable and, despite inventiveness, comes closer to pat. (Feb.)