

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ  
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

# ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ



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# ART'S HUMBLING

Philip Roth, *The Humbling*, Houghton Mifflin, 2009

“Old age isn’t a battle; old age is a massacre” remarked the unnamed protagonist of Roth’s *Everyman* (2006), a short novel with a high body count, and where growing old is synonymous with miserable lonely suffering: “Impotently putting up with the physical deterioration and the terminal sadness and the waiting and waiting for nothing. This is how it works out.” But countering this grim stoicism is everyman’s appetite for more life, for not wanting the end to come “a minute earlier than it had to,” a yearning fortified by memories of the prelapsarian bliss of family and childhood. This thick layer of *gemutlichkeit* insulation is what many Roth heroes, even the raw, unflinching truth teller Mickey Sabbath, depend on to bear the slings and arrows. So while waiting for the end, *Everyman*’s protagonist also dedicates himself to “eluding” death, gaining strength while visiting his parents’ graves, where in communion with them he feels a tender “longing for everyone to be living. And to have it all over again.” But soon the novel abruptly concludes, as everyman dies on the operating table during a minor procedure; this scene is the final flashback of a narrative that begins with his burial, and together the two terminations formally enact a deadly redundancy or circularity that mocks a more conventional, linear narrative arc.

Just when we thought Roth in *Everyman* had cut to the bone, reached the grim nadir of emotional bleakness, here is *The Humbling* which makes *Everyman* look like a day at the beach. It is a world bereft of *gemutlichkeit* and the only art is suicide. Imagine a Philip Roth protagonist without

parents! This is the easiest way to measure the desolation of *The Humbling*. Roth’s central figure, Simon Axler, is a man alone, “finished with everything.” This “last of the best classical American stage actors” has, at sixty-five, “lost his magic,” stricken by a sudden and intractable inability to perform. On top of that, his chronic spinal pain has worsened with age making the former “theatrical prodigy” vulnerable to falls that open cuts on his hands and face. “Every morning when he awoke to his emptiness, he determined he couldn’t go on another day, shorn of his skills, alone, workless, and in persistent pain. Once again, the focus was down to suicide; at the center of his dispossession there was only that.” And the reader’s focus is similarly concentrated; because Roth only gives the barest sketch of family and career history. All we are told is that his elderly parents died in a car crash and that an older sister had died of lupus when he was twenty, and we are provided a brief account of his failed marriage and a list of some of his best known roles—the effect is to isolate Axler even more starkly. All we can attend to is Axler’s present dilemma, which is a series of unanswerable questions: “he had played with absolute assurance since he’d become a professional in his early twenties—what had destroyed his confidence now?...A self-travesty had come into being who did not exist before...how had it happened? Was it purely the passage of time bringing on decay and collapse? Was it a surprising manifestation of aging?” Suicidal, “awash with terror and fear,” lost in the compulsions of hyper self-consciousness, he checks in to a mental hospital. But the

questions continue to pile up during his therapy sessions. His sympathetic psychiatrist, hoping that a revelation of origins will help trigger a recovery of Axler's powers, is skeptical that the torment "could truly be causeless." But though Axler works hard to be forthcoming, no cause presents itself, just "one failed explanation after another." And then, as precipitously as his paralysis about performing struck, just as inexplicably his suicidal urges subside. Axler draws a very Rothian moral, telling his doctor: "*Nothing* has a good reason for happening...You lose, you gain—it's all caprice. The omnipotence of chance...the unpredictable reversal and its power."

In Roth's fiction, you beat life's capriciousness by embodying it, a capacity that is the artist's gift. "Caprice is at the heart of a writer's nature," he once wrote; to let go the pieties about a just and ordered universe and to abide within the bruising zigzags of surprise and tumult is to catch the very rhythm of history, which, says Roth, is another word for "the terror of the unforeseen." To live with the terror inspires the imagination's transformative energy, its strength of contestation and resistance, what he calls "counterlife," the inveterate Rothian impulse to affirm the possibility of change by rewriting the plot of one's life. For instance, *The Counterlife* (1986) is the narrative enactment and celebration of that capacity and *The Human Stain* (2000) is the anatomy of counterliving as personal and social tragedy. Along with sex, and more lasting, art as counterlife is the "revenge on death" and on history, to borrow a phrase from *The Dying Animal* (2001). Paralyzed with self-doubt—his "I don't act anymore" extends to off stage as well --Simon Axler has lost the creative will to unsettle and remake, ironically, the very qualities that defined his performing genius. "You couldn't be routine. You wanted to go everywhere...as far out as you could go," as his admiring agent reminds him.

In *Everyman*, Roth denied his protagonist the power of counterliving, of self-

revision, replacing it with the "stoical maxim" (repeated twice) that "there's no remaking reality. Just take it as it comes." What mostly comes is the humiliation of waiting for nothing; what consoles and keeps him yearning for more is his loving daughter and loyalty to family memories. Roth rations even less to Simon Wexler, who is deprived of the strength for counterliving and is permitted only humiliation, this time in the form of an improbable love affair with a forty year old woman, an embodiment of caprice in all its erotic allure and savage selfishness. Even for a novelist famous for setting himself audacious challenges—dragging sainted Anne Frank back from the dead (*The Ghost Writer*); turning the realist novel inside out (*The Counterlife*); making his main character an enormous mammary gland (*The Breast*)—*The Humbling* is a drastic work—an all out assault on the possibility of redemption. In *The Humbling* it is not only Simon Axler who is humbled; sex and art also lose their creative power; here they are no longer the "revenge on death," just different instruments of death. The only thing left unbesmirched is stubborn, artless life, immune to stain because it is nothing but mess.

To serve as the catalyst of Axler's humbling, the bait ensuring his final disintegration, Roth dusts off a trusty, familiar plot device—the femme fatale. Here she is a charming and attractive younger woman, the forty year old daughter of old friends and former acting colleagues. She suddenly drops in on Axler, just when "he was sure he was finished with everything." Her name is Pegeen Mike, named for the character her mother, two months pregnant, played in a church basement production of *Playboy of the Western World* where her co-star had been twenty-five year old Simon Axler. Axler had first seen Pegeen in the hospital "as a tiny infant nursing at her mother's breast." Even before we are told that Pegeen Mike "had lived as a lesbian since she

was twenty-three” and has paid a friendly social call on this old family friend only to discover that she now wants Simon to be her transition to heterosexuality (she has recently stopped living with her long time companion who is changing genders: “if Priscilla could become a heterosexual male, Pegeen could become a heterosexual female”), even before this, Roth’s details are pregnant: the pastoral scene of infant suckling at the breast, the double gendered name Pegeen Mike, even the Synge title. These hint at what will soon be revealed—Pegeen’s promiscuous bisexuality that is all unbridled will. “Girl-boy...child-adult,” Pegeen “does what she wants to do. She has been like that all her life,” her blandly adoring father will later remark.

When she first pays Simon a visit she already has a new girlfriend, the dean at the nearby college, where Pegeen teaches environmental science. The dean had become smitten by Pegeen and hired her, and is now her “devoted protector and par-amour.” But as the heartbroken dean later tells Simon: “She promised we’d be together forever, and three weeks later she left.” The dean has taken to phoning up people, including Axler, at odd hours to denounce Pegeen. The more Axler hears—“she’s utterly ruthless, utterly cold-hearted, incomparably selfish, and completely amoral,” the dean warns him--the more disconcerted he grows but also the more devoted, for Pegeen has quickly become “the closest person on earth to him.” With the “invulnerable air of a happy person,” she embodies a “rescue fantasy” (as her skeptical mother puts it) to the desperate Axler, and happiness becomes the drug that paralyzes his already diminished agency. Musing on the likelihood that Pegeen will eventually lose interest in her “experiment” (how she ominously describes her affair with Axler) “he believed he was seeing clearly into their future, yet he could do nothing to alter the prospect. He was too happy to alter it.” The passivity

of his happiness structures their relationship, which takes the predictable form of sugar daddy indulgence. He enjoys pampering Pegeen with expensive clothing and a chic haircut to turn her into a sleek straight woman. “It was an orgy of spoiling and spending that suited both of them just fine,” a remark that doesn’t erase his nagging self-doubt that he may simply be “blinded by a stupendous and desperate illusion” that a new wardrobe and hairdo “could dispose of nearly two decades of lived experience.” Axler can’t deny that he may prove to be “no more than a brief male intrusion into a lesbian life.” Pegeen’s own willingness to allow Axler to refashion her seems like a surrender to his will and her own need for a rescue fantasy; but Axler intuits the slippery reversal that is Pegeen’s signature, as he wonders “if indeed hers was the will being subjugated—if indeed it wasn’t she who had taken him over completely, taken him up and taken him over.”

That Pegeen is very much in charge is borne out in the bedroom. There she is the star performer, turning their sex life into an elaborate theatre of fantasy and props. In the bedroom we come to understand what her spurned lover, the dean, means when she tells Axler that “Pegeen’s nobody.” She has the fluid anonymity of a masterful performer. She starts by insisting he slap her hard in the face during sex because it makes her feel like a little girl and also a whore. And armed with her “small plastic bag of sex toys,” including a leather harness with a slot for her green rubber dildo, Pegeen merrily rearranges roles and dissolves boundaries, indifferent to any notion of a core identity either in her or in Axler; “she looked like a gunslinger getting dressed, a gunslinger with a swagger...she grabbed the green cock and, having moistened it first with baby oil, pretended to masturbate like a man.” When she urges Axler to let her penetrate him and promises she will be gentle (“It will be a new frontier. You’ll like it”), he

nervously declines, remarking, “you don’t look like you’ll be gentle.” But she does extract a promise that he will fellate her “big green cock.” Poor Axler; if this isn’t daunting enough, she then discloses her ongoing lesbian affairs, casually mocking him: “You really think you’ve fucked the lesbian out of me in ten months”? Startled and upset, Axler covers up his emotions with some stage craft spontaneity; he falls into the Irish accent he hadn’t used since *Playboy of the Western World*. This invocation of the play makes clear that this bedroom scene is ambidextrous playboy Pegeen’s re-writing of Synge (or at least his title). Shaken but aroused, Axler’s “gaze remained hypnotically fastened to hers” as she fellates him (the fate of his promise to reciprocate is left unknown) and the “helplessness in him, the feeling that he had been abandoned by his sense of reality and that the affair was a futile folly” abates but only because he realizes that the helplessness is the turn on—“the oddity was what was so exciting.” His “conducting a love affair with a lesbian whom he’d first seen nursing at her mother’s breast,” he reflects, makes as little sense as the sudden end of his ability to go out on stage. He has eroticized senseless contingency, a valiant if attenuated act of counterliving. For it cannot banish the “terror”: the “terror remained too, the terror of going back to being completely finished.”

Pegeen is only warming up. Soon the hypnotized Axler, ever the obliging sugar daddy, recruits a young woman to join them in bed (“I am providing her Tracy the way I give her the clothes”) and asks Pegeen “to be in charge. You and the green cock.” But she insists they share responsibility. And as he feels her trembling with excitement, “her trembling thrilled him. It was as though they had merged into one maniacally tempted being.” This marks the height of their intimacy; in the bedroom Pegeen is once again “the ringmaster,” and

he watches without interfering. Happily relegated to voyeur, Axler is nonetheless alarmed when he sees gunslinger Pegeen’s green cock plunging in and out of Tracy:

This was not soft porn....There was something dangerous about it now, this Woman-on-woman violence. There was the primitive about it, as though in the room filled with shadows, Pegeen were a magical composite of shaman, acrobat, and animal. It was as if she were wearing a mask on her genitals, a weird totem mask, that made her into something she ordinarily was not and was not supposed to be. She could as well have been a crow or a coyote, while simultaneously Pegeen Mike. His heart thumped with excitement—the excitement of the god Pan looking on from a distance with his spying, lascivious gaze.

This may be the richest passage in the novel. Its seed is in the book’s opening sentence: “He’d lost his magic.” In this bedroom threesome the magic returns as Roth’s imagery conjures a primal scene of dramatic art, magically fluid transformations, originating in the totemic rituals of the shaman’s shape shifting, that bring animal and human together while dividing spectator from performer. Here that division is gendered: the clearly spooked Axler is a Pan who keeps his distance from the magical acrobat Pegeen Mike, indeed his “lascivious gaze” depends on that distance. In his unease he calls the female coupling he watches “dangerous” and redolent of “violence” though the narrator describes Pegeen as “gently penetrating Tracy....Pegeen did not have to force her open.” When Pegeen is finished, she whispers to Tracy, “time to change masters” and “gently” rolls her toward Axler. He then expresses his own primal sense of theatre --“Three children got together...and decided to put on a play”—that is decidedly sanitized and infantile. What role he assigns Tracy is left out. When they take her back to her car and she and Pegeen kiss passionately vowing to see each other soon, Axler’s sense of erotic “exhilaration” has vanished. Prefer-

ring spectatorship to equal collaboration with Pegeen, Axler in his helplessness is drawn to the regressive lure of the infantile, his broken will offering no resistance.

Sitting alone in the kitchen after they return home, Axler displaces his identification with the infantile onto Pegeen whom he fantasizes is about to announce that she wants to have a child. "He was imagining the least likely thing that might happen, which was why he was imagining it; he was setting out to put their audacity back into its domestic container." So powerful is this reverie, which includes a fantasy that he has recovered his theatrical powers, Axler is soon seeking genetic counseling to find out if impregnating Pegeen is not too risky. At last he has shaken his torpor and misery and feels the "determination that was originally his when he came to New York to audition at the age of twenty-two." He now believes "life can begin again." Yet this will to recover has been a fantasy born of his panicked reaction to the evening with Tracy when Pegeen revealed her theatrical gifts as a "magical composite." Overwhelmed by her appetite and energy, which mock his own paralyzed will, Axler has put Pegeen into a domestic fantasy as expectant mother. And he has joined her there: he is experiencing "the deep biological longing for a child that is more commonly associated with a woman than with a man." If Pegeen's former companion has changed genders, her current one seems on the way.

Of course when a distracted and cold Pegeen arrives for the weekend, Axler soon realizes that he has only been digging "himself deeper into delusion and fantasy." This is the end she tells him, "It's not what I want. I made a mistake." And her outfit speaks louder than words—she is "back in her boy's zippered red jacket." When she tells Axler that she can no longer "be a substitute for your acting," he implicitly confirms her remark when he says: "I never

had the strength for you anyway." It takes her five minutes to end and exit their relationship, leaving Axler to cope with "a fall that he had brought on himself and from which there was no recovery." After futile, humiliating calls to her parents, whom he blames for encouraging Pegeen to leave, Axler faces up to his responsibility. The result is he resolves to commit the suicide he had been contemplating from the start. In the novel's final pages, Axler drags a shotgun around his empty house, even putting it inside his mouth. But still he hesitates.

What unlocks his enchained will are two things: the first is the example of Sybil Van Buren, a diminutive, conventional suburban housewife he had befriended in the mental hospital. As she told him then, Sybil is determined to have her second husband killed after witnessing him having sex with her eight-year-old daughter—his step daughter--and subsequently lying his way out of it. "I need someone to kill this evil man" and asks Axler if he would do the job. He politely declines. Months later he reads in the newspaper that Sybil has done it herself, murdered her husband at point-blank range with a rifle. Axler is shocked; how could this "helpless" "fragile" "childlike" woman shoot her husband dead? "If she could do that, I can do this" becomes Axler's mantra as he struggles to pull the trigger. The other facilitator is Chekhov; "finally it occurred to him to pretend that he was committing suicide in a play. In a play by Chekhov. What could be more fitting....It would be his last serious turn at acting, and, preposterous, disgraced, feeble little being that he was, a lesbian's thirteen month mistake, it would take everything in him to bring it off." A play that had marked Axler's first big New York success, *The Seagull*, ends with the suicide of the sensitive young writer, which is reported in the play's final line. Axler appropriates it as his own farewell, making it serve as the eight words of his suicide note,

found next to his body by the cleaning woman later in the week.

*The Humbling* is disturbing, pitiless, and expertly paced but not particularly moving, and this seems intentional given the stringency of Roth's narrative strategies—minimal explanation, context, and characterization. These bare conditions are not those of literary realism but of artless and "clumsy life at its stupid work" (to borrow from Henry James) as it assails us. And to honor the fact of the inexplicable and of the world's bottomless capacity for brute ambush is a perennial Roth aim. "You lose, you gain--it's all caprice." "This life's a fluke from start to finish." Here today, gone tomorrow. Who knows why? These truisms are watchwords of Roth's universe and in response he lavishes most attention on those who dive into the currents of "unforeseeable contingency" and ride the crashing waves of the counterlife. But the extremity of *The Humbling* is clear: in putting a Chekhovian touch on his suicide, Simon Axler's minor creative flourish is a near parody of counterlife. It redeems nothing. Such is the reduced state of art in *The Humbling*. Indeed, the art most praised is suicide, extolled by inmates of the psychiatric hospital as the saving act of self-fashioning: "It's exhilarating. It's invigorating. It's euphoric" announces one who regards it as the stunning rebuke to all, including herself, who imagine her to be merely helpless and ineffectual. "Your life is falling apart, it has no center, and suicide is the one thing you can control." Axler shares her enthusiasm, telling the group that suicide is theatre: it is "the role you write for yourself...All carefully staged—where they will find you and how they will find you....But one performance only." One pedantic elderly man, an attempted suicide, lectures them on how "outsiders" regard suicide. They have a mania to explain it and judge it, for explanations help cushion the blow for those who survive.

Here is glimpsed the logic of Roth's suspicion of explanation. In accepting "the omnipotence of chance," that all we get is "one failed explanation after another," the narrator of *The Humbling* refuses the insulation of understanding, just as he refuses the insulation of *gemutlichkeit*. Stripped of these basic obligations of the genre of literary realism, *The Humbling* is a novel that seems more a work of allegory. What Roth is staging, in other words, is not a critique, say, of a culture that produces soulless, promiscuous sociopaths (Pegeen), nor an inquiry into her psychology, though all her splashy sexual theatrics will doubtless give the novel buzz. Nor is he staking *The Humbling* on our coming to grow emotionally engaged with Simon and Pegeen; the thinness of characterization thwarts intimacy. Simon and Pegeen (and Sybil Van Buren) are intended less as realist characters than as emblematic figures—those of impaired will and sheer will, those whose acting (on stage and off) is founded on instinct and forgetting, and those whose inability to act is a drowning in self-consciousness and the aging body's waning vitality. This depersonalization reminds us of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, which, as Philip Fisher has shown, is structured as the rise and fall of fortune's wheel—the aging character's fall is the younger character's rise. When, through chance, powerful actors intersect with diminished ones the result, in both novels, can be catastrophe. By not asking why, not fleshing out the stark severity of the collision and turning it into the comfortable upholstery of realist fiction, Roth insists on humbling art and paying tribute to clumsy life. This chastening defines the refusal that *The Humbling* is built on.