

*Everyman* by Philip Roth (Jonathan Cape)

29 July 2006

From being American literature's naughty boy, in *Portnoy's Complaint* almost forty years ago, Philip Roth has now become its Grand Old Man, one of only three living American authors to have their works published in a definitive edition by the Library of America. He has won the Pulitzer Prize and a whole series of other awards, all listed on the cover of Roth's latest novel, along with a full-page picture of an unsmiling Roth in front of his writing studio, all testifying to a life well spent.

Inside the covers, though, a very different story unfolds. Roth's *Everyman*, who remains anonymous throughout, is dead when we meet him on the first page, and the rest of the novel circles back to this grim conclusion, recapping his life in a skilfully contrived series of flashbacks. From the distanced recollections of the mourners, we move unobtrusively to *Everyman*'s own consciousness; and that consciousness is largely a matter of loss and regret and anger.

As in *The Dying Animal*, Roth's subject here is mortality. He takes his title from the medieval morality play in which *Everyman* is confronted by Death, and speaks what Roth has called the first great line in English drama: "Oh Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind."

Roth's *Everyman*, though, has death more or less constantly in mind, ever since the age of nine, when a drowned sailor washed up near his family's holiday home, and when he dies, although not expecting his death to occur just at that moment, it is hardly an unforeseen event: "eluding death seemed to have become the central business of his life and bodily decay his entire story."

Roth's title, in fact, is one of the more puzzling aspects of the novel. It invites comparison with the medieval play, only to resist any parallels one might want to draw. The medieval *Everyman* meets Death in the context of a firm body of belief in an afterlife, sin and redemption; Roth's *Everyman* is, like his author, defiantly unreligious: "No hocus-pocus about death and God or obsolete fantasies of heaven for him."

Also, the title suggests that the protagonist is in a significant sense representative of all humanity, and this is underlined by the fact that the character "never thought of himself as anything more than an average human being." But Roth's *Everyman* is in the first place, as a successful advertising executive, more prosperous than most; having had any number of operations, starting with a hernia operation when he is nine, he has a worse medical history than most; and having married and divorced three wives, he has a worse record of human relations than most.

Roth's character, then, is hardly an *Everyman*. And yet, such is the power of Roth's writing that in reading the book one consents quite readily to his implication that he is speaking for all of us, and enters into his plight with some sympathy and understanding: ultimately, after all, it is a plight we all share, with whatever modifications of detail.

All this makes *Everyman* sound like a very sombre novel, and it is indeed dark – Roth has remarked with satisfaction that the cover looks like a tombstone. And yet it is not a depressing book. This may be because its raging against the dying of the light is based on

such a strong sense of what it is that old age and death take away: the delight in living, in swimming in the sea, for instance, or, as always in Roth, in making love.

And if the novel is largely a catalogue of error, in particular his loss of his wonderful second wife owing to an infatuation with the “little hole” of a stupid and inept younger woman, this is balanced by a recollection of his extraordinarily happy childhood, “the world as it innocently existed before the invention of death, life perpetual in their father-created Eden”; and, in this Eden, apart from his gravely affectionate parents, he had his older brother Howie, who had been “the object of his worship when they were children and in return had always treated him with gentleness and affection.”

Above all, he has Nancy, “the child whose presence had never ceased to delight him”, the daughter of his gentle and generous second wife: “there are such people, spectacularly good people – miracles, really – and it was his great fortune that one of these miracles was his own incorruptible daughter.”

Thus, if Roth’s *Everyman* is at most average in terms of moral conduct, he has the good fortune to have known some exceptionally good people, and the good sense to recognise this. If, on the one hand, this emphasises his folly in squandering such riches, on the other, it makes a case for the beauty of life: death is terrible because it means the loss of all this.

But Roth’s book is a lament rather than a philosophical treatise. It offers no consolation in the form of wisdom gained; like Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, it mercilessly records the comfortless death of a man who has not been equal to life’s gifts.

And yet this potentially dispiriting chronicle is invigorated by the sheer energy of the writing; there is something affirmative, even exhilarating, about a job as well done as this, even though it may be a victory snatched from the jaws of death.