

Philip Roth: *The Dying Animal* (Cape) R150.

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The bleak title of this almost equally bleak novel is taken from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium": "Consume my heart away; sick with desire/And fastened to a dying animal/It knows not what it is."

It is as well to bear in mind this despairing confession of emotional ignorance in approaching Roth's latest disquisition on the nature of desire and mortality, since on the surface the text offers no such redeeming incertitude: it appears to be one unwavering assertion of sexual certainties gleaned from a lifetime of unrelenting experience.

The narrator is the seventy-year old David Kepesh, cultural commentator and part-time lecturer at a New York college – the latter capacity being a convenient source of the young women to whom Kepesh is single-mindedly, not to say obsessively, attracted – though he has a self-made rule not to "get in touch with them on a private basis until they've completed their final exam and received their grade", thus avoiding *Disgrace*-like unpleasantness. Of course, such a rule can protect Kepesh only against the strictures of society, the "animus and resentment and grievance from above": it cannot safeguard him against the perils of passionate involvement with women forty years his junior.

One such woman is Consuela Castillo, a twenty-four year old Cuban émigrée aristocrat who grants Kepesh access to her considerable charms with an easy grace: "I think that in me Consuela sensed a possessable version of her family's refinement, of that unrecoverable aristocratic past that is more or less a myth to her. A man of the world. A cultural authority."

Since Kepesh's own interest in Consuela is very much more carnal than this, it torments him that she does not want him for his sexual powers: "I still can't say that anything I ever did sexually excited Consuela about me." It matters little to him that she gives him her devotion and her body: what Kepesh wants or claims to want is the "purity" of a relationship based on nothing but sexual attraction, though he knows his quest is doomed to failure: "The eternal problem of attachment. No, not even fucking can stay totally pure and protected."

Of course, for a seventy-year old man to invest his whole value system in his sexual powers is courageous, not to say perverse: the Yeats poem from which the book takes its title starts, after all: "That is no country for old men." But Kepesh is deliberately defying the standard consolations of old age in insisting on competing with the young men; and having opted to do so, he tries to use his own greater experience as a means to remain in control at all times. This produces the book's least attractive moment, as he kneels over Consuela and forces her to administer oral sex: "I was so bored, you see, by the mechanical blow jobs that to shock her, I kept her fixed there, kept her steady by holding her hair, by turning a twist of hair in one hand and wrapping it round my fist like a thong, like a strap, like the reins that fasten to the bit of a bridle."

This ugly moment is not an aberration as much as the most brutal enactment of Kepesh's uncompromising sexual manifesto: "There is no sexual equality and there can be no sexual equality, certainly not one where the allotments are equal, the male quotient and the female quotient in perfect balance. . . . it's the chaos of eros we're talking about, the radical destabilization that is its excitement."

Adam Mars-Jones has pointed out, in his *Observer* review, that there is an unresolved contradiction between this view of sexual relations and Kepesh's celebration of the sexual emancipation of the sixties with its "Gutter Girls, the female trailblazers of a completely spontaneous sexual change" who "democratized the entitlement to pleasure." To the older Kepesh, democracy has little place in the unruly kingdom of desire, and equality is for naive ideologues.

In the event, Kepesh's confident generalisations are severely tested and possibly invalidated when Consuela develops breast cancer and he discovers, without perhaps recognising it for what it is, a fund of tenderness in himself, even while he realises that "Hers was no longer a sexual life." This may be an answer to his own rhetorical question, posed early in the novel: "Do men find women so enchanting once the sex is taken out?" Not that there is, even then, a clear-cut answer: Kepesh's manifest concern for the stricken Consuela is in turn questioned by an ending the nature of which I won't reveal here; suffice it to say that the novel ends less confidently than it began.

The Dying Animal is considerably shorter than Roth's other novels, and has been read as a coda to his great trilogy of America-since-the-fifties, *I Married a Communist*, *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*. Certainly its scope is much contracted: where the earlier novels consciously took on whole eras of American history, this novel restricts itself for the most part to the obsessions of its protagonist, with only a relatively brief excursus on American history, a fanciful juxtaposition of the sexual revolution of the sixties with the Plymouth Puritans and those who dared to defy them by dancing around a maypole.

Compared with the sweep of history and variety of characters of *The Human Stain*, then, this is a much reduced book; but Roth reduced is still larger than almost anyone else writing at the moment, and *The Dying Animal* is a work of such technical assurance, such strong and controlled writing, that it represents its own formidable challenge to that mortality of which it is ever conscious. If it's matter of raging against the dying of the light, Roth rages with the best of them.