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# Only Sensations Remain: The Hypertrophy of the Aesthetic in Philip Roth's *Everyman*

Thomas Austenfeld

Conventional American understandings of aesthetics are put to the test in Philip Roth's short 2006 novel *Everyman*. As Roth describes the process of ageing, he increasingly depersonalizes – and correspondingly universalizes – his subject matter, ultimately suggesting that aesthetics has to do less with the value judgments of beauty and more with the life-affirming sensory perception of the world in general. Roth's literary predecessors, the great medieval drama *Everyman* and the early modernist *Jedermann* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, are allegories of faith which preach the ultimate rejection of the earthly life of the senses in exchange for receiving the unearned grace and goodness of the Christian God *in extremis*. Roth's novel, by contrast, is the story of a secularized Jew who declares religion "a lie" (51). The text must necessarily derive its elegiac force not from the Christian hope for the afterlife but instead from an insistent celebration of the aesthetic and a constant awareness of its fleeting nature. Roth's unnamed Everyman dwells in the world knowing that only aesthetic perception may assign meaning to the individual human being. The life of Roth's Everyman becomes co-extensive with his ability to employ his senses. Following an epigraph that pays homage to that great celebrator of aesthetic indulgence, John Keats, the novel dwells at length on the protagonist's childhood fear of anesthesia (lit.: an-aesthesia, the absence of sense perception). It logically concludes as the character's sense perceptions end. Roth's *Everyman* thus develops the hypertrophy of the aesthetic, raising questions about the limitations of literature in attempting to transcend the merely aesthetic realm. The text's insistent descriptions of various illnesses – hernia, appendicitis, migraine, occluded arteries, enlarged prostates, etc. – make readers question both the ultimate validity of sense perceptions and the limits of universalizing human fates. Everyman is an advertising executive, an amateur painter, a swimmer, a serial monogamist, a man afraid of death for his entire life. Roth examines these roles within a framework of allusions to American literary history, ultimately forcing us to reexamine the reliability and endurance of our senses.

Considering Philip Roth's short 2006 novel *Everyman* with the categories of aesthetics provides a perhaps unexpected key both to its narrative arrangement and to its author's interpretation of the literary tradition he evokes by naming the novel *Everyman*. Aesthetic approaches to texts do not have much *cachet* at the present time but can look back at a long and distinguished history. Philosophers of art, including Schopenhauer and Heidegger, have long theorized that the proper aesthetic attitude to art may well be more revealing of reality than our everyday manner of encountering the world.<sup>1</sup> In other words, an aesthetic approach to literary texts may result in a heightened, more accurate perception of reality. Two recent studies of Philip Roth's work, one focused specifically on the Zuckerman novels, another on "intellectual protagonists," taken together, lead one to conclude that an aesthetic renaissance in criticism may be at hand.<sup>2</sup> The question that haunts readers of *Everyman* is the question of its peculiar reality – a situation and a nameless "character" with whom it is enormously difficult to sympathize. Can aesthetic categories help explain that reality?

Invoking aesthetics as a valid paradigm for Roth criticism requires some explanation, since the mere mentioning of "aesthetics" tends to remove texts into a critical empyrean where quotidian reality has become irrelevant. Initially, nothing could seem less appropriate than an aesthetic approach when reading Roth. After all, his early successes *Goodbye Columbus* (1959) and *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) were at the same time so strongly realistic and so deeply concerned with questions of Jewish-American identity that their political and social relevance – and provocation – easily superseded old-fashioned aesthetic concerns. Roth's work during the decade of the sixties was "confessional," to use an analogy with the nearly contemporary poetry of Robert Lowell, and also highly topical at a time when sexuality began to be discussed in America far more openly and in more mainstream media than in previous decades. Roth's enormously prolific production since those early successes has invited critics to categorize his works mostly under narratological, thematic, and of course political *topoi*. Till Kinzel, for example, in his 2006 study *Die Tragödie und Komödie des amerikanischen Lebens*, rightly focuses on the "Amerika-Trilogie" (10) composed of *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*, held together by the narrator

<sup>1</sup> The foregoing is a paraphrase of a sentence on p. 23 of *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Cooper.

<sup>2</sup> Kinzel and Wöltje, discussed below.

Nathan Zuckerman. Kinzel's observation about the facticity and high realism of these novels which lend them considerable "diagnostic" value for our times<sup>3</sup>, foregrounds the role of the novelist as observer and chronicler more than as cultural critic or philosopher. Roth's *The Plot Against America*, a work Kinzel characterizes as "kontrafaktisch" (11), is a novel that logically does not fit into the realistic category and that Kinzel dismisses both because he considers counterfactual works historically suspect and because he believes that *The Plot Against America* exposes serious narrative and dramatic weaknesses in its second half. Yet it is again a novel that engages the reader with its realism, though a fictitious one, because Roth uses his own family and episodes from his own biography to heighten its realistic effect. I would argue that *The Plot Against America* is realistic in the same way in which *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is realistic: it is a boy's adventure story that meets the standard of probability though not of historical accuracy. Kinzel's introduction links Roth's work directly with the political questions of the present day and sees the author's significance grounded especially in his ability to polarize the reader's ideological sentiments. That approach is of particular significance since Roth participated in, and published throughout, the series of ideological, sexual, political, and societal upheavals we associate with the decades since the nineteen-sixties.

At the same time, Roth's status as American intellectual – reflected in the intellectuals who populate his fiction – has recently been discussed by Wiebke-Maria Wöltje in *My finger on the pulse of the nation: Intellektuelle Protagonisten im Romanwerk Philip Roths* (2006). Wöltje's assumption that intellectuals are both engaged with the contemporary world and sufficiently removed from it to view it critically<sup>4</sup> lends more agency to the Zuckermans of Roth's world and, by extension, to the other writers, artists, professors he employs as narrators. Early on, Wöltje quotes Mark Shechner with "[y]ou can drown in Roth-criticism. By 2003, the sheer tsunami of it stupefies" (2),<sup>5</sup> suggesting that the plethora of critical contributions may render any attempts at categorization futile for the moment. Since so much of the criticism has dealt with specifically Jewish questions of identity and self-representation, the works that are less

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kinzel, 10-11: "Die erstaunliche Faktenehrlichkeit und Direktheit des Zugriffs dieser Romane macht ihren hohen diagnostischen Wert für unsere Zeit aus."

<sup>4</sup> "... Stimmungen . . . registrieren . . . mit denen sie sich selbst verändern – und aus denen sie ihre Kunst schaffen" (2).

<sup>5</sup> The original quotation is in Shechner (245).

topically focused may require an alternative critical *régime*. Wöltje's concluding chapter determines that, in the post-postmodernist setting of his 1997 *American Pastoral*, Roth has moved beyond the ideological trench warfare of his earlier work to settle Zuckerman safely in . . . the realm of the aesthetic! (167). Wöltje's conclusion, written just before the publication of *Everyman*, looks like an anticipatory evaluation of that novel:

Erst im Zustand der scheinbar unüberbrückbaren Spaltung der Intellektuellenschaft . . . erfährt die Wertschätzung der Ästhetik als gesellschaftlich wirkungsvolle Kraft eine Renaissance. . . . Die Ästhetik der Post-Postmoderne steht in deutlichem Gegensatz zu den dominanten intellektuellen Trends der Zeit und adressiert doch ein universales, intellektuelles Anliegen, dessen Erfüllung bereits die New York Intellectuals als Teil ihres gesellschaftlichen Auftrags gesehen haben. (202)

While aesthetic categories of literature are, then, only now once again receiving attention in criticism, an accomplished literary work is quietly supposed to be aesthetically pleasing,<sup>6</sup> inviting in turn the reader's aesthetic sensibilities. This generous literary understanding of aesthetics is not to be confused with aestheticism, roughly the doctrine of "art for art's sake." Rather, aesthetic potential is inherent in every accomplished literary work and often goes unnoticed. If, then, we can develop the proper aesthetic attitude to *Everyman*, the text may yield up its full significance to us. Ideally, to use the kind of analogy favored by Aristotle and Wayne Booth, the reader and the text become friends by getting to know each other.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I use "aesthetics" to refer to both sensory and sensual categories. Such a generous use of the term opens our view towards Roth's interchangeable practice in the matters of sense and sensuality and, more particularly, allows us to identify that very generosity as a key to apprehending the character Everyman's strictly world-immanent, physiological frame of reference.

*Everyman* opens with as strong an invitation as one might wish for to justify aesthetic criticism. Before the narrative begins, the epigraph has prepared the reader for a universe of sense and sensuality by quoting John Keats, that quintessential celebrator of aesthetic perception. Yet instead of reveling in sensuality, the lines from "Ode to a Nightingale" point painfully to the end of life:

<sup>6</sup> See the introduction by Singer and Dunn to their *Literary Aesthetics: A Reader* 3-12.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, esp. Book VIII; Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Reading*.

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow...  
(Epigraph, *Everyman*).

The senses of sight and sound are assaulted with pale complexions and groaning voices; the spark of life does not animate but merely shakes the body with palsy. What can an everyman do to battle these cosmic forces of decay? How would readers, prepared in this manner, begin to empathize with a character they have not yet encountered? In the happiest scenario, the mutual knowledge of text and reader, the desired outcome of the encounter, would be akin to the meeting of two minds, the reader's and the book's. A reader reading a book is supposed to have a mind; a book often reveals its individuality in the form of a representation of its author or its protagonist(s). Perhaps more stringently than other genres, novels are supposed to have "personality" – they are conventionally character-driven.

Yet, attempting to get to know *Everyman* in this way fails. Through every stylistic and narrative tool available to him, Roth thwarts the reader's expectation of personal significance. It is difficult for readers to care about the protagonist. Our very history of reading novels is put to the test in encountering this work. To offer just one example, the main character Everyman is never named anything other than "Everyman" or "he". In a tour de force, Roth avoids giving him a name, while other characters do have names. Perhaps we will identify, at least for a time, with this Everyman, since we normally don't think of ourselves as "named" either, but that feeble effort at identification is undercut from the start: the first episode describes Everyman's burial.

While the remainder of the narrative will take us through his life, few readers are likely to embrace eagerly, and identify with, the corpse just placed in the cold New Jersey ground. The presence of the named characters in the book suggests that the reader take on Everyman's point of view, but the book is not a traditional first-person narrative; the narrator is not autodiegetic. To the contrary: not naming the main character results in de-personalization, which runs counter to everything the novelistic form has achieved since its beginnings. Whereas the history of the novel in eighteenth and early nineteenth century England was fueled by the attempt to personalize, to individualize, to make its readers care about one or more specific human beings particularly from the lower

and middle classes, Roth attempts the opposite. In the place of the individual whose fate is supposed to elicit our interest – flesh-and-blood characters such as Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, Clarissa, Emma, to name just a few – Roth gives us *Everyman*.

An aesthetic appreciation of this novel begins then with a recognition of its aesthetic properties, its particularity. If it made the reader resonate with the sensory and sensual perceptions of its protagonist, it would have achieved a kind of sympathetic communication. Roth's peculiar practice in this text is to use characterization and plot to suggest universalizability in lieu of particularity, an unusual choice in the novel if, as I suggest above, the novel works best when it individualizes. The notion of universalizability denies a relevant individualistic aesthetic attitude. Demonstrating how the universalizing is achieved in and through the text allows us to consider the ingredients of Roth's aesthetic. Roth uses *Everyman*'s fate to advance what I would call a “clinically aesthetic” view of the world. He asserts through this text that aesthetics at its most basic, biological level – in other words, sensory perception and sensual enjoyment – composes the extent and the limit of human life. Roth's *Everyman* is a hypertrophy of the aesthetic, an apotheosis of sensory and sensual perception, an aesthetics of the body.

Roth's privileging of aesthetic sensibility may remind readers fleetingly of that older apostle of aestheticism, Walter Pater. The two writers share a sense of art's special status as a vehicle of authentic living. But the traditional criticism leveled against Pater by conservative readers – that his hedonism is implicitly immoral – does not gain traction when applied to Roth. In a review of Denis Donoghue's biography of Pater, for example, critic Roger Kimball writes:

Donoghue rightly notes that Pater “looked at an object under the sign of pleasure, not of truth.” He approvingly quotes another critic who spoke of “the disjunction of sensation from judgment” in Pater’s work. The “Paterian imagination,” he writes, seeks “relations” instead of “duties.” “It follows that Pater practised consciousness not as a mode of knowledge but as an alternative to knowledge.” . . . Indeed, his chief concern was “his pleasure in feeling alive.” “Aesthetic criticism” in Pater’s sense deals “not with objects, works of art, but with the types of feeling they embodied. . . . Ontology is displaced by psychology.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 24 January 2007 <http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/13/may95/pater.htm>

Roth takes the “pleasure in feeling alive” to a new extreme by making it the single, or singular, desirable state for his Everyman, thereby advancing a factual, bodily understanding of aesthetics that exceeds Pater’s by equating being alive with experiencing aesthetic stimulation. Understanding human beings bodily is universalizing, to be sure. Ironically, then, Roth’s insistent depersonalization of his protagonist enables him to foreground his privileging of aesthetics. To understand Roth’s method, we need to describe how he achieves that universalization which is so counterintuitive to the art of the novel.

Titling the novel *Everyman* is the first indication that Roth intends to universalize. No reader can claim not to be addressed by this title; none can escape the fate of every man. The gendered pronoun need not confuse us: Roth’s character is male, and *everyman* is the appropriate term, though “everyperson” might have been equally acceptable. In so titling the novel, Roth guides the interpretive possibilities open to his readers. He takes us back, by strong suggestion to literary history, into the late medieval world of the anonymous drama *Everyman*. That canonical text stands godfather to Roth’s novel, though “godfather” suggests a religious dimension which Roth’s narrator emphatically denies. For students of European modernism, another text lurks in the background as well, Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s early twentieth century *Jedermann*, the play that made the Salzburger Festspiele famous<sup>9</sup>. There are important generic differences: the medieval and early modern texts are plays, Roth’s text is prose fiction. In the fifteenth century, the publicly performed play was the best way to reach a large and largely illiterate audience<sup>10</sup>. In pre-WW I Salzburg, a play still suggested the public spectacle of a community’s shared values. In keeping with democratic sentiments of the early twenty-first century and the democratic vehicle of the novel, Roth’s text is necessarily a fiction in prose. Only in this form can it claim universal readership and universal applicability.

But while Roth may allude to the titles of familiar works and may even borrow the plot – a man’s encounter with mortality; a “master plot” if there ever was one – he eviscerates any religious or transcendental message suggested by his models right from the start. Both the medieval *Everyman* and *Jedermann* are allegories of faith. Though composed more than 500 years apart, both texts inscribe the tenets of Christianity about the afterlife, the temporary folly of humankind, and

<sup>9</sup> Although its first performance occurred in Berlin, in 1911.

<sup>10</sup> The first printing dates from 1509.

the goodness of God *in extremis*. Roth's *Everyman*, by contrast, makes clear from the beginning that faith is not an option. Roth's novel is the story of a secularized Jew who declares religion "a lie . . . early in life" (51). His father, a jeweler, has returned to religious practice after losing his wife and, late in life, has "taken to going to the synagogue at least once a day" (51). But Everyman himself practices a thoroughly contemporary bodily essentialism, devoted to scientific truth:

There was only our bodies, born to live and die on terms decided by the bodies that had live and died before us. . . . Should he ever write an autobiography, he'd call it *The Life and Death of a Male Body*. (51-52)

In this imaginary title, Philip Roth comes perhaps closest to suggesting the ultimate motivation for writing this particular novel. The emphasis on "male" recalls the epigraph with its Keatsean evocation of "a few, sad, last grey hairs" – a classic male complaint rather than a human universal – while the focus on *body* suggests an absence of "soul." Finally, the singular indefinite article suggests that the putative writer of this autobiography sees himself merely as one instantiation of a general class, male bodies. Whatever particularity he may have had – social function, children, works, memories, consequences of any sort it might leave behind – is erased. There is a peculiar bleakness to this view of existence. One might be tempted to call it existential, but it lacks the muscularity of Sartrean existentialism and the moral challenges of Camus' existentialism. It is, once more, biological or even clinical aesthetics.<sup>11</sup>

The narrator's view of the protagonist is appropriately scientific. The jeweler's magnifying glass professionally known as a loupe, introduced early in the narrative, becomes a recurrent motif suggesting that readers are contemplating Everyman's life in the manner of a specimen, through a microscope. Just as a scientist examines an insect not to discover its personality but instead its generic features in order to generalize about the population, so Roth depersonalizes his main character to the extent possible in a literary genre that has been traditionally devoted to the opposite pursuit, the illustration of individuality and the celebration of a private life. The imagined autobiography would sound even more like a biology textbook if it were entitled *The Life and Death of the male body*, but

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<sup>11</sup> See Debra Shostak, especially her chapter "Anatomies of Desire" (21-65), for an insightful scholarly analysis of the maleness *topos*, and particularly what she calls "male hysteria," through Roth's body of work.

even a male body may be a specimen so long as no name, no identifying mark, no personality are attached to it.

How might the character Everyman measure the value and success of his life if the traditional comforts of religion are not available to him? The text suggests a radical hyperaesthetics, an equation of life with sensory perception, illustrated through physical objects of beauty as well as through human bodies with sexual attraction. While the life-giving impetus of sexual attraction confirms the biological argument, the emphasis on sensory perception of beauty adds a human element that transcends mere biology. Everyman inherits a disposition towards beauty from his father, enhances it through his professional and matrimonial choices, and logically ends his life in a state entirely devoid of aesthetics. He dies under an-aesthesia; i.e., while under the care of a medical doctor, a scene fully realized at the end of the text. At the point of Everyman's dying, the novel has come full circle from its epigraph; the move from John Keats, the champion of aesthetic perception, to a state of an-aesthesia, the total absence of aesthetic perception, has been completed.

If the insistent anonymity of the main character is an obstacle to empathy, readers will attempt to invest personality into the cipher they are reading. Considered closely, Everyman is not without antecedents in Roth's universe. David Kepesh, the protagonist of the trilogy *The Breast* (1972), *The Professor of Desire* (1977), and *The Dying Animal* (2001), shares many of Everyman's ways of looking at the world. Particularly in *The Breast*, Kepesh is as hypochondriac as Everyman will be later, and Kepesh's singular focused wish while transformed into a breast is to experience sexual stimulation which, to him, is his only link to a normal bodily existence. More significantly, the situation *in extremis* which he has constructed for his protagonist allows Roth to focus on essentials. In an interview with Alan Lelchuk (1972), Roth says about *The Breast*: "What [Kepesh] has become has narrowed his life down to a single issue: his anatomy" (73). Everyman's reduction, a quarter-century later, is a *reductio ad sensuum*, a narrowing to sense perception. It might not be too far-fetched to see *Everyman* as a coda to the Kepesh trilogy. Critics generally acknowledge that Roth's "style has changed over the years, but it has not 'developed' in the traditional sense . . . the early books are as intricate and sophisticated as the later ones" (Allen 22). Accordingly, one may see the increasingly obsessive focus on the physicality of human existence beginning with Kepesh's sexual antics and self-revelatory lecture in *The Professor of Desire*. Nearly a quarter-century later, in *The Dying*

*Animal*, Kepesh's sexual desire has attained a certain frantic quality: no longer is sex a conquest, a possession, a ritual seduction of his students; instead, Kepesh experiments with ever stronger sense stimulations involving, for example, his lover's menstrual blood. Mark Shechner observes that "Kepesh becomes that most pitiable and engaging of male figures: the clown of vanity" (199). As others, among them David J. Zucker, have observed, "[Roth's] protagonists . . . regard the sex act as a talisman against death" (135). While *The Dying Animal* begins with the narrator's assertion "pleasure is our subject" (22, see also Safer 133-146), its conclusion is a death-watch, this time still for someone else, namely his lover Consuela [sic] stricken by breast cancer. The novel's title still conjures the present participle, *Dying*. The narrator will still be alive by the end. But by the time *Everyman* appears, the death watch will be for the self, with a concomitant reduction in available sense stimuli and concomitant increase in franticness – for a short while.

*Everyman* does not only have a literary parentage in Roth's *oeuvre*, he also has a father in the novel who fills his own life with meaning by attending to beauty in the form of jewelry. The father's trading partners, Hassidic Jews from Brooklyn, diamond traders who have learned their business in Rotterdam, provide the last link to the old country and the old religion. Though he trades with observant Jews, the father sees permanence is in diamonds, not in religion, and for the boy, religion has lost further significance and provides merely a spectacle, not meaning:

The diamond merchant who came most frequently – and whose migration route had carried him and his family in only a few years from Warsaw to Antwerp to New York – was an older man dressed in a large black hat and a long black coat of a kind you never saw on anyone else in Elizabeth's streets, not even other Jews. He wore a beard and sidelocks and kept the waist pouch that held his diamonds secreted beneath fringed undergarments whose religious significance eluded the nascent secularist – that, in fact, seemed ludicrous to him. (20-21)

*Everyman*'s father clings to the idea of the permanence of diamonds. He could have coined the slogan, "diamonds are forever":

The stroke of genius was to call the business not by his name but rather Everyman's Jewelry Store, which is how it was known throughout Union County to the swarms of ordinary people who were his faithful customers. . . . "Beyond the beauty and status and the value, the diamond is imperish-

able. A piece of the earth that is imperishable, and a mere mortal is wearing it on her hand!" (56-57)

Once more, then: the central attraction of the diamond is in its beauty, its sparkle. The object provides aesthetic pleasure. What distinguishes the diamond from other pretty objects, however, is its association with imperishability. The imperishability pertains only to the diamond, of course, not to its wearer. The woman who wears it is imperishable only by association; through an iconic relationship to the object she wears. She remains just as mortal as ever, or, as everyman.

Once Everyman has become a grown-up secularist, he extends the *topos* of beauty/status by association to its ultimate end: he becomes a successful advertising executive who is attracted to his own product. The novel's opening sentence, which we realize later is the proleptic scene of Everyman's burial, calls attention to the man's profession and announces the burden of the text, the apotheosis of pleasure: "Around the grave in the rundown cemetery were a few of his former advertising colleagues from New York [who said] what a *pleasure* it had been to work with him" (1, emphasis added). That innocuous phrase, used daily by millions, attains ominous significance as the novel proceeds. For *pleasure* is the only thing Everyman will seek or produce in his life. His life is devoted to aesthetics in the form of sensory perceptions. The work he performs is transitory to the extreme and devoted to arousing and gratifying the senses. It concerns itself merely with the suggestion of lasting value, not its creation. One advertising project described in great detail is a fashion photo shoot, featuring towels, in the Caribbean island of Grenada (109 ff). By displaying young girls at the poolside wearing the towels, the advertising campaign suggests that the girls' beauty and youth are part of the product. Ironically, Everyman is unable to maintain critical distance from his own product. He has an affair with the Danish model on the crew and later marries her in his third, ultimately disastrous marriage. Sensationally, the advertiser has fallen prey to his own machinations.

The trajectory of Everyman's professional life, a successful advertising career even while being a painter *manqué*, is paralleled in his relationships with his three wives. His successive marriages lead him from being to seeming, from substance to fluff. Diamonds are forever, marriages are not. Organized religion gives way to cultic worship of sex. Everyman marries his first wife, Cecilia, to please his parents. As a boy, Everyman had been his father, the jeweler's, "reliable son" (10) when, as a teen-

ager, he transported diamonds on the bus and locked up the safe in the back of the store. The last act of filial piety he performs is to marry Cecilia. Phoebe, his second wife, is a sensible mate and the perfect choice for his middle years. She is competent, smart, and beautiful. Merete, the Danish model, is exclusively an aesthetic or sexual pleasure:

His third marriage had been founded on boundless desire for a woman he had no business with but a desire that never lost its power to blind him and lead him, at fifty, to play a young man's game. (96)

Consequently, when he most needs conjugal care after "emergency coronary artery surgery, he discover[s] [Merete's] terror of illness and her uselessness in the face of danger. . . . He had replaced the most helpful wife imaginable with a wife who went to pieces under the slightest pressure" (124).

Everyman is a *senex amans* at whom we dare not laugh. As Roth describes the process of ageing, he increasingly depersonalizes – and correspondingly universalizes – his subject matter. Death is the great equalizer, and Roth will kill off his protagonist in an operation gone awry, under total anaesthesia. All of us know that our lives are going to end some day, yet most of us probably live as if that possibility were negligible. By having Everyman die at the beginning of the novel, Roth invites his readers to contemplate his protagonist's fate from the armchair while staying attenuated in a *memento mori* attitude throughout. We can watch the inexorable event unfold and might even pity the hero who has no idea what is coming. Yet because we never truly care for the protagonist, the ache that is such an integral feature of elegiac writing – as in Keats – rarely materializes, and the concomitant pity may never appear.

The narrator thematizes the notion of depersonalization explicitly, the closer Everyman comes to his death. Living alone on the Jersey shore, long after Merete has left, he finds himself attracted to a young curvaceous jogger, though without any hope of reciprocity. Also nameless, she reminds him of "a Varga girl in the old 1940s magazine illustrations" (132); a sign of how far removed from the present time he has become. As he talks to the young girl and believes for a fleeting instance that she is interested in him, he feels "that sharp sense of individualization, of sublime singularity, that marks a fresh sexual encounter or love affair and that is the opposite of the deadening depersonalization of serious illness" (134). The text suggests that the eventual replacement of

sexual prowess by illness is equivalent to the replacement of individuality by anonymity.

As Everyman ages, his sensory perceptions move quickly from eros to thanatos. Since childhood, he has feared death in the hospital. Judging by the long string of illnesses and hospitalizations Everyman endures, his life is the opposite of the expected increase in wisdom and individuality that many humans strive for; instead, it is an inexorable process of "deadening depersonalization." The hospitalizations begin with a hernia operation in 1942, during which his roommate dies (16, 27). They continue with a burst appendix long undiagnosed and finally dangerously septic (37-41), vascular surgery when his coronary arteries are blocked twenty-two years later (42ff), then renal arterial angioplasty nine years later (62). "Now, not a year went by when he wasn't hospitalized" (71).

Unpleasant and painful sensations then proliferate. Male readers will sympathize with a terrible cringe – perhaps the only time in this novel – when they come across this sentence of Everyman's dying colleague: "[S]ometimes my prostate feels like I'm trying to excrete it" (153). The feeling of powerlessness – Latin "im-potence" or plain impotence is here illustrated not in the familiar trope of a non-responsive penis, but in the incredibly painful sensation of wanting to evacuate one's prostate. It is only fitting that Everyman who, late in life, has turned to painting, a more refined aesthetic pursuit than producing slick advertising copy, explains his eventual tiredness and lack of painterly inspiration to his daughter Nancy in a striking metaphor: "He explained . . . he'd had 'an irreversible aesthetic vasectomy'" (103). That image contains it all: the loss of sexual prowess, the ground of the metaphor, is yoked together with the aesthetic tenor to suggest a linkage between sexual and aesthetic pleasure in which the loss of one spells the loss of the other.

One wants to say that Roth celebrates the aesthetic dimension of life, but "celebration" seems hardly the correct term. The multiple sensory perceptions that accompany Roth's Everyman as he dwells in the world and experiences himself as self remain curiously solipsistic. Aesthetic present-ness to the world crystallizes as the only mode of being that is capable of assigning meaning, however transitory, to the individual human being. Everyman's life becomes co-extensive with his ability to employ his senses. He remembers his many operations as so many instances of arising from "the anesthetic" [sic] (15), being welcomed back by a woman; mother, wife, lover.

This time when he was asked by the masked anesthesiologist if he wanted the local or the general anesthetic, he requested the general so as to make the surgery easier to bear than it had been the first time around. (181)

Everyman's life concludes as sense perceptions end: "Cardiac arrest. He was no more, freed from being, entering into nowhere without knowing it. Just as he'd feared from the start" (182). The centrality of sense perceptions in Roth's *Everyman* invites readers to reconsider the root meaning of the term "aesthetics" by suggesting that the antonym of the adjective "aesthetic" is not "unaesthetic" or ugly, but "an-aesthetic" or devoid of sense perceptions. Roth's *Everyman*, an exercise in aesthetic hypertrophy, urges a radically bodily understanding of life's significance on the skeptical reader. It suggests a stark reality in which aesthetics – here understood as a category employing both sensory and sensual perceptions – becomes the measure of life's existence. Traditional distinctions between essence and existence are not at stake. Being and nothingness are not opposed; instead, the choice is now between perception and nothingness. Concluding *Everyman*, readers will still miss the human warmth – they might have settled for a human stain – that a clinically examined character just cannot seem to convey.

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