

**Philip
Roth
through
the Lens
of Kepesh**

**Paul McDonald
& Samantha Roden**

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE
GENERAL EDITORS : CHRISTOPHER GAIR & ALIKI VARVOGLI

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Philip Roth through the Lens of Kepesh

Paul McDonald and Samantha Roden

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General Editors' Introduction

Approaches to Contemporary American Literature

The election of Barack Obama as 44th President of the United States in November 2008 represented both an historic and a symbolic moment in the history of the nation. Not only was Obama the first non-white President; he was also a figure whose origins lay at the edge of, and beyond, the geographical boundaries of the country. Born in Hawaii—the newest state and one far removed from continental North America—Obama came from a region unfamiliar to most Americans, unless they had spent vacations there; the son of a Kenyan father and white American mother, he was a reminder of America's origins as a nation of immigrants, but also an anomaly in a country where the overwhelming majority of African Americans are descendants of slaves. Moreover, Obama spent four years of his childhood in Jakarta, Indonesia, experiencing a life very different from the norms of the United States.

In other ways, however, Obama's biography enacted a familiar myth: the rise from a 'broken' home with an absent father, success in high school (interrupted by moments of crisis featuring alcohol and illicit drug use), through an education at Columbia and then Harvard Law School, to triumph in local Chicago politics and finally the Presidency epitomised the myth—if not the actuality—of the American Dream. While the road to the White House has been tougher for some than for others, with Abraham Lincoln and Bill Clinton possibly coming closest to being antecedents of Obama's path, even the scions of wealthy, well connected families, such as George and George W. Bush, have always highlighted their populist roots in their political campaigns.

Of course, Obama's election by no means signified the end of racism in America: jails remain disproportionately occupied by

African American males, economic inequalities continue to be marked along ethnic lines and even as distinguished an African American as Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was, in 2009, a victim of arrest apparently based on racial profiling as he attempted to enter his own home. And yet, in the past thirty or forty years, there have been a series of pronounced shifts in academic approaches to racial, ethnic and gender issues, that have called attention to the multitudinous voices constituting what Walt Whitman famously called a ‘teeming nation of nations’.

For present purposes, our focus will remain on the literature and literary criticism of the period running from, roughly, the early 1970s to the present. Until then, the literary canon had been constructed around a body of white, largely male, New Yorkers and New Englanders, most notably the figures of F.O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941) and Henry James (‘The Master’). In the Twentieth Century the scope widened to include mid-Westerners such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, and, post-World War Two, Jewish American novelists including Saul Bellow, E. L. Doctorow and Philip Roth, who were placed alongside perpetuators of a more ‘traditional’ American literature such as John Updike, and the new voices of what would eventually be labelled ‘postmodernism’, such as Thomas Pynchon and, slightly later, Don DeLillo. While there is no doubt that Nineteenth Century writers—most notably, Whitman, Herman Melville and Mark Twain—had recognised the multicultural possibilities of America, it is the era we are concerned with in this series that changed the way the country viewed and narrated itself in literature, with multicultural fictions that often combined critical and commercial success. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975) famously interweaves the stories of three families to rewrite the history and parody the mythology of the United States. The opening pages of the novel rapidly move from a turn-of-the-century world that seems straight out of Henry James or Edith Wharton to a sudden realization of the plurality of American life:

That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and

the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants.

...

In New York City the papers were full of the shooting of the famous architect Stanford White by Harry K. Thaw, eccentric scion of a coke and railroad fortune. Harry K. Thaw was the husband of Evelyn Nesbit, the celebrated beauty who had once been Stanford White's mistress. The shooting took place in the roof garden of the Madison Square Garden on 26th Street, a spectacular block-long building of yellow brick and terra cotta that White himself had designed in the Sevillian style. It was the opening night of a revue entitled *Mamzelle Champagne*, and as the chorus sang and danced the eccentric scion wearing on this summer night a straw boater and heavy black coat pulled out a pistol and shot the famous architect three times in the head. On the roof. There were screams. Evelyn fainted. She had been a well-known artist's model at the age of fifteen. Her underclothes were white. Her husband habitually whipped her. She happened once to meet Emma Goldman, the revolutionary. Goldman lashed her with her tongue. Apparently there were Negroes. There were immigrants.

E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (1975)

Among the many strengths of Doctorow's novel is its ability to highlight the way that an intermingling of disparate voices—immigrant, African American and 'white'—is at the heart of American creativity, whilst the book provides constant reminders both of the power of national mythologies such as Benjamin Franklin's rags to riches narrative, and of just how hard it is to sustain principled opposition to this narrative in the face of the financial inducements and social opportunities offered to a few individuals. The transformation of the East European immigrant Tatch, defined by his socialism, devotion to his family and to apparently unshakable faith in core moral values into the Baron Ashkenazy, creator of movies depicting an implausibly harmonious (and immensely popular) multi-ethnic gang of American children finally reiterates Doctorow's insistence that history has always been told by the masters, but also his belief that—by 1975—there was the possibility of other histories emerging.

At least within the academic community, Doctorow was probably correct: while studies of Hawthorne, Melville and James most certainly did not disappear, they were joined by a growing corpus of studies that insisted that yes, ‘there *were* Negroes [or ‘African Americans’]. There *were* immigrants.’ Studies such as Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs* (1986), Michael J. Denning’s *Mechanic Accents* (1987) and Russell J. Reising’s *The Unusable Past* (1987) assimilated and developed the work of earlier multicultural critics such as Annette Kolodny and Richard Slotkin to challenge the assertions underpinning the construction of the American canon and demand spaces for works by women novelists and the writings of African Americans and immigrants. And while the *literary* value of literature did at times seem to disappear from the interminable canon wars of the 1980s and 1990s (though not in the books cited above), the theoretical battles that quite often really did split departments into highly antagonistic factions in the late-Twentieth Century do seem to have resulted in a Twenty-First Century critical culture in which a return to stress on the literariness of literature lives alongside the general embrace of the fact that writing the canon is not the preserve of Ivy League white males.

At the same time as the work of critics such as Tompkins and Reising recovered the long-marginalised presence of writings by women and African Americans, new generations of American writers from a plentitude of ethnic and class positions have assumed pivotal places in contemporary American literature. While there seems to be no doubt that Toni Morrison is the best known—and one of the most highly acclaimed—of these voices, she is but one figure in a literary marketplace that increasingly problematises the notion of what American literature *is* and the kinds of critical tools required to discuss it in any meaningful fashion. The focus on the ‘playful’, experimental postmodernism of the 1960s and 1970s has been replaced by (or, at least, joined by) a return to the search for the *authentic* experience of narratives of migration (both to and from the United States), of the precarious balancing of assimilation to a dominant culture and the desire to retain a culture of one’s own, and of the eternal questioning of what it means to be an ‘American’.

In an increasingly ‘globalised’ community, these narratives are now as often recounted by writers from North Africa or China as by those from Eastern Europe, but most seem to retain a faith—at some level—in the mythological promises of the United States that seemed to have been brought to life by Barack Obama. To listen to the taxi drivers of Boston, or Austin, or San Francisco, or Denver is to hear life stories—if not quite *novels*—that are at once strikingly different in the details of war zones fled and disillusionment with the ‘old’ country, and an innate faith in the possibilities of a world still almost as new as that first viewed by Fitzgerald’s Dutch sailors at the end of *The Great Gatsby*. And while contemporary American literature is as often marked by a disillusionment with the nation that can be traced through most of the nation’s literary history, this is accompanied by the sense of possibility that is heard so often in the voices of ‘ordinary’ Americans, but also by the recognition that—post-9/11—the United States is as vulnerable to external forces as are the nations left behind.

The enormous diversity of American literatures currently being created ensures that a series called ‘Approaches to Contemporary American Literature’ is bound to be both eclectic and inconsistent. There is no longer even the possibility—or the desire—to create a master narrative able to ‘contain’ (to return once more to Whitman) the multitudinous voices that constitute a ‘national’ narrative. Indeed, recent approaches to the Trans- or Post-national condition would rightly question the enduring legitimacy of such a concept. This means that the series makes no claims to unfurl organically, beneath any but the broadest of themes. Books studying the emergence and development of particular hyphenated American groups are accompanied by those looking at genre, or at single authors. To study the world we live in requires tools and methodologies that may differ from those used to approach the texts of the past. What unites the books in this series is their contribution to our understanding of the here and now.

Introduction

In a career spanning well over half a century, the Jewish American novelist Philip Roth has told many different stories in many different ways. His work moves from traditional realism, through dark comedy, postmodernism, experimental-confession, to neo-realism, and, by the time Roth announced his retirement from writing in 2012, he'd covered a vast amount of ground as a storyteller. However, in some ways his preoccupations as a novelist have varied very little. From the first stories he published in the late 50s, through to his final novella, *Nemesis* (2011), Roth has focused on the conflict between duty and desire. This manifests itself in different ways for different protagonists, of course, but it is difficult to find a Roth story that doesn't have a version of this dilemma at its heart. In our view this is expressed most clearly via Roth's scholar-hero David Kepesh, and we offer a reading of Roth's oeuvre which aims to put the three novellas in which Kepesh appears at the centre. This does not mean that our focus will be entirely on Kepesh or the Kepesh books. We will offer a chronological reading of Roth's work, addressing the Kepesh novels in the context of his entire fictional output, but revealing as we do so the centrality of these stories and the significance they have in relation to Roth's philosophical and aesthetic preoccupations.

The Kepesh trilogy spans three decades of Roth's career, beginning with *The Breast* in 1972, continuing with the *Professor of Desire* in 1977 and concluding with *The Dying Animal* in 2001. The trilogy has received scant scholarly attention to date, with several book length studies treating it as a minor aside in Roth's oeuvre. Thus, David Brauner's *Philip Roth* (2007), virtually ignores all three books, and David Goodbar's *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* (2011), while discussing *Professor*, has little more than a paragraph on *The Breast*, and omits *Animal* altogether. This is strange given that, as one critic noted, 'Kepesh's style comes the closest among Roth's characters to

matching the author's true voice as revealed in his various essays' (Kevin. R. West, 232), and several others have observed similarities between Kepesh's opinions and those of his creator.¹ It often feels that Kepesh is close to Roth, perhaps as much so as with his more obvious pseudo-autobiographical incarnations like Nathan Zuckerman, or 'Philip Roth.' We aim to show that these novellas are not only worthy of critical analysis in their own right, then, but also, as suggested, that an appreciation of Roth's themes and strategies in this trilogy can deepen our understanding of his entire fictional enterprise, offering an invaluable perspective on his work.

This book begins with a discussion of the desire versus restraint dilemma that informs all of the early stories, from those collected in *Goodbye Columbus* (1959), to the controversial *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). This provides a context for a discussion of *The Breast* (1972), where the quintessential Rothian conflict is writ large. Viewed as a coda for *Portnoy*, Kepesh's metamorphosis becomes both a symptom of the fractured psyche and an expression of an overweening desire to unite it. In the starkest possible terms, it registers the desire/restraint, id/superego conflict that torments earlier heroes like Neil Klugman and Alex Portnoy; in one sense Kepesh's status as a breast becomes a comic expression of their dilemma. The joke that Roth plays on his protagonist here—i.e. transforming him into an ironic representation of his desires, and hence an unstable symbol of unity—is akin to several attempts in later works to construct images that symbolically encapsulate his characters' conflicts and hold them in transient symbolic stasis.

In his review of *The Breast*, Peter Fenninger suggested that the novella 'might be an exercise in introducing ideas for a longer work,' and with the publication of *The Professor of Desire* this turned out to be the case ('*The Breast Needs More*,' unpaginated). Here Roth continues a postmodern project that begins in *The Breast*, and continues in novels such as *My Life as a Man* (1974). Like the latter, *The Professor of Desire* makes self-conscious references to Roth's own

1 For instance, West cites Elaine Showalter's observation of the 'little distance between alter ego and the author,' and Carlin Romano's contention that it's 'the author talking' (232).

fiction (most notably *The Breast*), and employs overt intertextuality to destabilise its narrative; he creates a postmodern context for Kepesh's story and the psychodynamics of desire and restraint. In this book Kepesh is still searching for ways to reconcile the duelling aspects of his psyche, pulled as he is between the lifestyles of scholarship and indulgence. This is underscored by the ambiguous comic image of Kafka's whore. Kafka is often emblematic of self-denial in Roth's writing, and Kafka's whore becomes a polysemic symbol expressing both restraint and desire simultaneously. It is a repellent signifier representing a fundamentally irreconcilable conflict, and suggesting again that there can be no resolution to Kepesh's dilemma, except the one that befalls him in the earlier book—his transformation into a mammary gland.

It will be seen how these early incarnations of Kepesh anticipate the comic identities of later Roth heroes; for instance, like Kepesh, Roth's writer-hero, Nathen Zuckerman, is a performer in search of the role that will reconcile his fractured psyche. The *Zuckerman Bound* (1986) trilogy, together with novels such as *The Counterlife* (1987) see him shift between 'real' and imaginary personas, including pornographer, obstetrician, lover of Anne Frank, heroic saviour of Jewish cultural heritage, and, not least, author. These themes continue in the so-called 'Philip Roth' books where the author blurs the distinction between fact and fiction still further. As in the *Professor of Desire* these books destabilise narrative and apparently undermine the possibility of meaning, whilst at the same time registering a profound desire for coherence. *The Counterlife* also picks up on the notion of the pastoral explored in the closing sections of *Professor*. In the latter the farmhouse scenes with Kepesh's lover Claire seemingly represent a potential life of fulfilment for the hero, but this is undermined as his self-understanding deepens; *The Counterlife*—a novel which constructs England and Englishness as a metaphor for the pastoral ideal—continues to unpick the idea of a conflict-free life and expose its absurdity. Indeed, increasingly Roth's books stress the inevitability and even the desirability of conflict, and this, together with an acceptance of uncertainty, becomes central to his philosophy and his aesthetic. He addresses this in relation to

character in *The Counterlife*, for instance, when he re-explores the notion of a performing-self first mooted in *Professor*. We will show that an acknowledgement of uncertainty begins in *The Breast* and then deepens through the books he produces in subsequent decades.

While uncertainty appears to be inevitable for Roth, the search for meaning is crucial and ennobling. This is seen in *The Breast* where Kepesh's struggle to interpret his predicament is nothing less than heroic. The human need to find meaning appears to be fundamental to Roth, and it features again in the 1993 novel, *Operation Shylock* where the theme of contradiction is re-cast as a doppelganger story. Here 'Roth' is the hero of his own fiction; he is shown to be struggling like Kepesh to live an ordered life, even as his other self—his doppelganger Pipik—disrupts it. The doppelganger theme once more represents both a desire for unity, and recognition of the inevitability of fragmentation.

Where *Professor* dramatizes a clash between the professor and the rake, Roth's 1995 masterpiece, *Sabbath's Theater*, appears to show the rake get the upper hand—unlike with Kepesh, Micky Sabbath's Super Ego appears never to be in abeyance, and dissent and self-indulgence dominate his philosophy of life. But even here the hero's behaviour seems to make a moral point, qualifying his 'immoral' conduct and constructing yet another contradiction reminiscent of the Kepesh stories.

When Nathan Zuckerman appears again in the so-called American Trilogy, it is to feature in novels that explore the possibility of a conflict-free life. Various utopian narratives appear to offer meaning and structure of the kind that Kepesh desires at the end of *Professor*, but once again none are viable; indeed, all are potentially pernicious. We address this theme at length in a discussion of the American Trilogy's final instalment, *The Human Stain*, where Puritanism and Political Correctness are seen as controlling narratives that encroach on the individual's desire for autonomy.

The prospect of individual autonomy is one of Roth's key themes throughout his career: time and again his novels ponder the possibility of self-determination. Roth's heroes are often seen struggling to free themselves from the defining narratives of heritage or convention:

these commitment issues feature as far back as *Goodbye Columbus* (1959) and *Letting Go*, and can be seen later in novels such as *Sabbath's Theater* where the hero's nonconformity takes an extreme form. In the third instalment of the Kepesh trilogy, *The Dying Animal*, this theme is re-examined more subtly. Here Kepesh is reintroduced as a seventy-year old man torn between his desire for his young lover Consuela, and his reluctance to commit to her. This final book in the trilogy also sheds fresh light on Roth's attitude to masculinity and what critics occasionally see as an unhealthy tendency to privilege the male perspective; according to some this is such a feature in Roth's writing that, as Carmen Callil remarked, it's 'as though he is sitting on your face and you can't breathe' (quoted in Alison Flood, unpaginated). In *Animal* Roth makes a decision to link the issue of male identity with the general issue of gender politics: while the older Kepesh is as manipulative as many of Roth's earlier heroes, his decision to allow Consuela to take control of her identity at the end of the book marks an interesting shift in power. As Debra Shostak suggests, she 'escapes Kepesh's point of view,' in using his skills as a photographer and his preoccupation with her breasts for her own ends, effectively reclaiming her identity even as she faces death from cancer. Shostak correctly sees this evasion of Kepesh's masculine perspective as disrupting and undermining his construction of self 'in terms of power and pleasure,' and ultimately challenging his history of 'detachment' ('Roth and Gender', 124). Some would say that shift in power comes early in the novel, when Consuela asserts her presence by biting at the hero's penis, or when he finds himself on his knees drinking her menstrual blood. Either way it is clear that in this book Kepesh must reassess his position in the light of a new threat both to his autonomy and to the psychological integration he has always craved: the inevitability of decay and demise. Thus the novel explores a theme that will be examined from a number of perspectives in Roth's late novellas. Mortality is an issue throughout the Kepesh trilogy, of course, particularly in *The Dying Animal*, and in Roth's late writing it is explored extensively. *Everyman*, for instance, presents an unnamed hero whose self-imposed isolation has similarities with Kepesh; like him, *Everyman* is both driven and partly destroyed by

desire, and at the end of his life he must reflect on the worth of an existence founded on this paradox. *Exit Ghost* and *The Humbling* meanwhile construct aging heroes who also need to reconcile the consequences of age with the demands of desire. In the former, Zuckerman forgoes the opportunity of sex with a younger woman, seeking instead the consolation of art, but in the latter sex again offers apparent rejuvenation for the aging hero, Simon Axler. Like Kepesh, Axler is a performer—literally an actor—and the novel shows him to be locked in the familiar Rothian role of reductive masculinity; however, as with *The Dying Animal*, the book can be seen to qualify assumptions about masculinity, ultimately constructing Axler as the butt of a joke that underscores his abjection.

In one early interview Roth identified himself as a ‘redface’ writer, yoking together the terms ‘redskin’ and ‘paleface’ that Philip Rahv once used to describe divergent strains in American writing. The former utilise a colloquial voice, and look to low culture for inspiration; the latter are more cerebral, and have an orientation toward high culture sophistication. Roth saw his early career as a ‘zigzag’ between styles of writing that could be associated with these two extremes (see *Reading Myself*, 82-83). Thus earthy, overt comedies like *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *The Great American Novel* (1973) might be considered redskin in form and feel, while the more stylistically restrained novels like *When She was Good* and *Letting Go* would fall into the category of paleface. Roth explained this clash of sensibilities in terms of his own background: as a child he was exposed to the ‘redskin’ vernacular culture of the Jewish working class, but in later life embraced the ‘paleface’ high culture of his liberal education. It will be argued that Roth’s divergent voices first begin to find unified expression in the Kepesh novels, and in this respect these books set the tone for much of his later career. This shift in style is clearly evident in *The Breast*, and certainly by the time he completed the trilogy Roth was less associated with overt comedy, and more with the kind of restrained humour seen in the Kepesh novels. Arguably this becomes the dominant humour in Roth’s work, and its legacy can be seen even in his twenty first century novels, where comedy relies less on Rabelaisian excess, and more on the kind

of sophisticated irony and deep comic structure that first emerged in the Kepesh series.

So it can be seen that our study extends way beyond the Kepesh trilogy, offering a reading of the entire Roth canon that throughout will make connections to these three intense, exceptional books; it will show how, in our opinion, they constitute the pulsing heart of everything this extraordinary author has written.

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The Rothian Dilemma: Early Stories

‘Real Jews:’ Goodbye Columbus

By the time Roth published *The Breast* in 1972 the theme of duty versus desire was well established in his writing. It can be seen in some of the early stories like ‘Epstein’ and ‘Conversion of the Jews,’ both of which were included in his first collection, *Goodbye Columbus* (1959). In the former the eponymous hero is dissatisfied with his conventional life and decides to take a lover; as is typical in Roth’s early fiction, this rebellious gesture has unfortunate consequences. Epstein develops a mysterious rash, followed by a heart attack. The story ends with him in an ambulance as his wife pleads with him to ‘live a normal life.’ (‘Epstein’ in *Goodbye Columbus*, 229). Later in *The Breast*, of course, we will again see how a hero’s transgressive behaviour can manifest itself physically. The child hero of the story ‘Conversion of the Jews,’ meanwhile, has a similar dissenting spirit. He argues with his rabbi over the possible existence of Jesus Christ, climbs onto a roof and refuses to come down until the adults have admitted that they believe in Jesus. His rebellion only takes him so far, however, and the end of the story sees him jump from the roof into a safety net, ultimately reconciled to the community.

Both stories depict heroes who strive to live life on their own terms but with limited success. Here and elsewhere in his early work characters who challenge community values tend to be thwarted, and their challenge is seldom seen in a positive way. His heroes are ambivalent dissenters, framed in stories that appear intolerant of individual demands and desires. Perhaps the clearest representation of this can be seen in the novella-length title piece, ‘Goodbye Columbus.’ Here Neil Klugman, a librarian from a poor part of town, starts a relationship with a member of a rich Jewish family from a salubrious area of Short Hills, Brenda Patimkin. He is drawn to her

mainly because she offers a potential route to social advancement for him. However, she and her family are seen to be detached from their Jewish roots; they are disparaged by Klugman's own family as not being real Jews, for instance, having sold out to middle-class American society: as one character says, 'Since when do Jewish people live in Short Hills? They couldn't be real Jews believe me' (*Goodbye Columbus*, 58). Throughout the story Neil himself is critical of their excesses and their superficiality, and his desire to access their world is ambivalent; like F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), he is a parvenu, simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the world of the economic elite. As with Fitzgerald's hero, Neil is never truly comfortable in the world of abundance; when he is with the Patimkins he feels as if 'four inches has been clipped from my shoulders,' and has a sense of losing his identity, so much so that he needs to 'sit down in my Brooks Brother's shirt and pronounce my own name out loud' (66). The novel is heavily satirical and much of the humour is directed against the Patimkins, but not exclusively: we see the shortcomings of Neil's Newark background too, and particularly the paucity of his career as a librarian. Thus he feels ill at ease in both environments: he is unhappy with his social niche, but unable to leave it, at least not with a clear conscience. Though he fears the library will ensnare him, then, he never really feels there is a genuine possibility of escape; he anticipates growing old in this humdrum world:

I ... waited patiently for that day when I would go into the men's room ... and ... studying myself (in) the mirror, would see that ... under my skin ... there was a thin cushion of air separating the blood from the flesh ... and so life from now on would be ... a bouncing off, a numbness. (33)

Neil hates the library but cannot imagine a life outside it, and appears reconciled to developing the 'numbness' that might ameliorate the pain of it. There is a sense of inevitability about the ending of the story which sees Brenda leave her diaphragm in a place where her mother finds it. When the latter forbids her daughter to see Neil again, he accuses Brenda of having left it out deliberately in order to terminate the relationship. But given his attitude to Brenda and her

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