Illness and Its Treatment in Philip Roth's Fiction

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Despite some early successes, Philip Roth only became America's most important contemporary novelist in the latter half of his career; and, in those later works, illness and its treatment became significant elements, along with Roth's familiar literary, Jewish, American, and gender and sexual themes. About the same time as this transformation began, Susan Sontag, Roth's close contemporary—she was born in January, 1933, in New York City, he was born two months later in Newark, New Jersey—published her essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). The timing may have been pure coincidence, but Sontag's argument about the destructiveness of looking for meaning in disease, and of creating metaphors and interpretations to confirm that meaning seems to have found a home in Roth's later fiction, something that is all the more remarkable because of Roth's (and Sontag's) acutely analytical style.[1]

Looking for meaning in illness, after all, even more so than concern about mortality generally, has always been a focus of the arts, especially literature. In the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, for example, the title hero seems to accept that, "as for us men, our days our numbered" after he is told by Enlil, father of the gods, that "everlasting life is not your destiny"; and Gilgamesh is willing to risk that mortal life in battle against enemies such as Humbaba.[2] But, when Gilgamesh's near-double, Enkidu, is killed by disease rather than combat, Gilgamesh is driven to defy the destiny given him by Enlil and to discover the secret of immortality—not to avoid death per se, but to avoid what we might call a "natural" death, and what Gilgamesh thinks

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of as a unnatural one: death by illness, or age. We see the same opposition in the two fates between which Achilles must choose in Homer's Iliad: an early but valor-filled demise on the battlefield of Troy, or a long life, devoid of honor and terminated by natural causes:

> Mother tells me,
> the immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet,
> that two fates bear me on to the day of death.
> If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy,
> my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.
> If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,
> my pride, my glory dies . . .
> true, but the life that's left me will be long,
> the stroke of death will not come on me quickly.[3]

As with much literature from warrior cultures around the world, these two works posit death in battle as the desired outcome—not just because of the fortitude it requires, but because death by natural causes seems, to Gilgamesh and Achilles, somehow terrifying or repulsive. Many such heroes avoid our more common and mundane fate through mortal combat, but the rest of us, the mass of humanity, as Henry David Thoreau put it, "lead lives of quiet desperation," in no small part because of the ever-present prospect of accident, disease, and infirmity. Illness has been our enemy since time immemorial, and an enemy against which we had few weapons, until relatively recently.

The measures we have now to treat illness are the products of modern medicine. I might mention that there is a slight ambiguity in my title, "Illness and Its Treatment in Philip Roth's Fiction," since I am interested in the medical treatment of illness, as well as in the literary treatment of both illness and medical care. That is a distinction that we may not have needed to

ISSN- 0111-8854

make a hundred years ago because, while disease has always been a prominent literary metaphor for the human condition, the medical response to it was so ineffective and inconsistent that it only began to play a noticeable role in the arts at the end of the nineteenth century. By then, the discoveries of Edward Jenner, Louis Pasteur, Joseph Lister, Robert Koch, and others had begun to provide doctors with medicines and procedures that could actually treat some diseases – something that the medical profession, for all its millennia of mysterious potions and high fees, had never previously been able to do. It is little wonder, then, that the field of medicine has attracted more literary comment in the last 150 years than it ever did before, especially in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century fiction. Consider that archetype of modern fiction, Dr. Bernard Rieux in Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), who continues to struggle against the disease ravaging his city even though he knows he is powerless to affect its course or to save the lives of its victims. Yet Rieux's existential response to his own medical impotence is, in a sense, no novelty; prior to Edward Jenner's discovery of a small pox vaccination in 1796, no doctor had been able to affect the course of any disease or directly to save the lives of any of its victims. Koch helped to add cholera, tuberculosis, and anthrax to the list, barely half a century before Camus' novel was written, while Pasteur, Lister, and, in the twentieth century, Alexander Fleming targeted infection with antiseptics and then antibiotics.

Curiously, then, it was during a period of rapidly increasing effectiveness that the medical profession became a target of fiction writers. In the ninety years between the appearance of Gustave Flaubert's Dr. Charles Bovary (in *Madame Bovary,* 1856) and Albert Camus' Dr. Bernard Rieux (in *The Plague*, 1947), doctors were often portrayed as lacking understanding,

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insight and sympathy, professionally and otherwise. Though Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) is a direct attack on the medical profession, based on the "therapy" prescribed for the author by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, Gilman's fictionalized account exacerbates the mistreatment by making the doctor also the patient's husband. In contrast, in *The Awakening* (1899), Kate Chopin portrays the family physician, Dr. Mandalet, in a more traditional guise, as a wise and perceptive confidant, but one who can neither save his patient nor reveal his insights. Doctors cannot save Hanno in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901), as he moves through the stages of typhoid fever, but the death of Hanno's father, Thomas Buddenbrooks, of a toothache shortly after leaving the dentist office is both preventable and gruesomely comic. Indeed, dentistry was a branch of the medical profession particularly vulnerable to attacks at the time – perhaps most famously in the unlicensed title character of Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899).

One of the best-known discussions of the cultural and literary exploitation of illness is Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). In it, Sontag argues that distortions based on popular misconceptions can be seen in the metaphoric presentation of certain illnesses, especially tuberculosis in the nineteenth century and cancer in the twentieth. Those distortions derive from "punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about" what it is to be ill, leading to the revelation of "something singular about the person afflicted."[4] Thus, according to Sontag, Gustav von Aschenbach, in Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice," is "just another cholera victim," while for Hans Castorp, in Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, having tuberculosis "is a promotion. His illness will make Hans become more singular, will make him more intelligent than he was before. [. . .] The disease that individualizes, that sets a person in relief against the environment, is

tuberculosis" in the nineteenth century and, more recently but in a less glamorous way, cancer.[5] Sontag finds further evidence of this disparity in the reactions of those stricken with such diseases, suggesting that "No one asks 'Why me?' who gets cholera or typhus. But 'Why me?' (meaning 'It's not fair') is the question of many who learn they have cancer."[6]

Sontag had personal reasons for her interest in disease and the misconceptions it spawns: her father, involved in the fur-trade in China before World War II, had died there in 1939, when Sontag was only five years old, of tuberculosis (though her mother misled her for years, first about the fact of his death and then about the cause). Sontag herself was stricken with three different cancers in her lifetime: in 1976, two years before publishing *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, and twenty years later she also survived uterine cancer, before succumbing in 2004 to acute myelogenous leukemia. Is it any wonder, then, that *Illness as Metaphor* focuses primarily on two diseases, TB and cancer? Philip Roth's medical history is private, but his most important and most frequent narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, is a victim both of prostate cancer and of an operation used to treat that disease – an operation which leaves him "impotent and incontinent."[7] Both of these attributes might be read as metaphors for narrative deficiencies, but such an interpretation seems out of place when applied to the narrator of what is probably Roth's finest fiction, *American Pastoral* (1997), the first volume of his so-called American Trilogy; issues of impotence and incontinence are not raised directly in the second volume, *I Married a Communist* (1999), but return in force with *The Human Stain* (2000), in which there is nothing shameful about Zuckerman's incontinence, and his impotence is explained as more the result of volition than a flawed operation, since, as

ISSN- 0111-8854

Zuckerman says, that "operation did no more than to enforce with finality a decision I'd come to on my own."[8] Thus, the temptation to read Zuckerman's medical condition as a metaphor is precisely the interpretative approach against which Roth's narratives are constructed.

The rise of psychoanalysis has meant that the diseases portrayed in much of modernist and postmodernist literature are emotional or psychological rather than physical, and Philip Roth's early career is no exception. *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), for example, is the title character's long rant on his psychiatrist's couch, ending in the only words Alexander Portnoy does not speak in the novel, in an exaggerated Viennese accent: "So [*said the doctor*]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?"[9] Obviously, the psychological state of the characters—especially, in Roth's case, his narrators—is never far from an author's mind. About twenty years in, however, the direction of Roth's career took an extraordinary turn, from merely interesting to downright remarkable, and one of the hallmarks of that change is the increased importance of physical ailments in his later novels. We might anticipate a greater interest in illness and its treatment in the work of an older novelist, as those concerns make themselves felt in his life and the lives of those close to him, though Roth was not yet fifty years old at the time. Nor do I think it is coincidental that this focus on physical disease seems to have begun shortly after the publication of Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, when both writers were prominent figures in the New York intellectual scene. Whatever its sources, however, that change transformed Philip Roth into America's most important novelist at the turn of this century.

ISSN- 0111-8854

How good is Philip Roth? In 2006, the *New York Times* asked 124 writers, critics, and editors around the country to name the "best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years," and printed the resulting list of twenty-two titles.[10] Toni Morrison's *Beloved* was named by the most respondents; Don Delillo had three separate novels on the list; Cormac McCarthy had two. No other writer had more than one, except Philip Roth, who had a total of six:

- *Counterlife* (1986)
- *Operation Shylock* (1993)
- *Sabbath's Theater* (1995)
- *American Pastoral* (1997)
- *The Human Stain* (2000)
- *The Plot against America* (2004)

In other words, according to some of the most prominent figures in the American literary community, Philip Roth produced over one-fourth of the best twenty-two novels published in that time period, an incredible achievement. And others have concurred: he is the only living writer ever to have his works reprinted in the prestigious Library of America series. He is the only writer to have won three PEN/Faulkner awards (for *Operation Shylock*, *The Human Stain*, and *Everyman*). He has twice won the National Book Award, twice the National Book Critics Circle Award, and his novel *American Pastoral* received the Pulitzer Prize in 1997. Most recently, Roth was given the 2011 Man-Booker International prize. After (and not before) the award was announced, however, one of the three-judge panel, Carmen Callil, publicly objected to the prize, saying of Roth, "I don't rate him as a writer at all."[11] Callil's complaint was only complicated by the fact that she is the founder of the feminist press Virago, publisher of the actress Claire Bloom's 1996 memoir *Leaving a Doll's House*, which gives an extensive description of her difficult relationship with Roth, whom Bloom divorced the previous year.

The Noble Prize for Literature has so far eluded Roth, and the Callil fiasco certainly did not help with that. However, Roth's literary contributions are not limited to his writing, something the Nobel committee may eventually take into account: as editor of a series of fiction from Eastern Europe during the Cold War, Roth helped to bring into English translation such works as Jiri Weil's *Life with a Star*, Bruno Schulz's *Sanatorium under the Sign of Saturn*, Danilo Kis's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, Milan Kundera's *Laughable Loves*, Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, and others – many dealing with the Holocaust. Even Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* has as an afterword, in its American edition, a conversation between Roth and Levi.

Carmen Callil is, by no means, Roth's only detractor. In fact, Philip Roth is one of contemporary literature's most controversial writers, and controversial on multiple fronts. His early work—especially *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) and *Portnoy's Complaint*—established Roth's initial reputation based on his humorous and sometimes savagely satiric presentation of Jewish life in America, and (in *Portnoy* and later works) on sexually explicit descriptions and what some object to as coarse language and subject matter. Roth's satire on contemporary Jewish life in America is already succinctly laid out in *Goodbye, Columbus*: in one of the stories, "The Conversion of the Jews," a child must threaten suicide by jumping off a roof before the rabbi, his parents, and the entire Hebrew school will admit that, if God can do anything, he can arrange for a virgin birth; in another, "Defender of the Faith," an American Army sergeant, who meets with his share of ignorance and prejudice because he is proud to be a Jew, nevertheless thwarts a Jewish soldier's attempt to use family's influence to ensure a favorable assignment; and in "Eli

the Fanatic," a suburban Jewish community's intolerance is expressed in embarrassment and outrage when a traditionally dressed Holocaust survivor begins to wander their streets. In these cases, and in most of his other early works, Roth contrasts the sense of "chosenness" in the post-war American Jewish community with ideals of egalitarianism and acceptance, and equates it with self-entitlement. Not surprisingly, then, his satires earned the enmity of many American Jews.

Further, the sexual nature of much of his writing—some would say the *obsessively* sexual nature—and the way in which female characters are often portrayed as sexually exploited (and often as *willing* to be sexually exploited), as vindictive and ruthless, and (perhaps most telling of all) as intellectually undistinguished has earned Roth accusations of misogyny and perversion. As with the attacks on Roth's satiric portrayal of Jews, however, those accusations require reading individual characters as intentionally representational—making Portnoy's mother, for example, not just a comic creation to drive young Alexander to distraction, but the embodiment of all Jewish mothers, and all women, for that matter.

Significantly, Roth's transformation as a novelist may have answered many of the objections of his Jewish critics, if not of his feminist ones, as can be seen from Carmen Callil's condemnation. The transformation seems to have begun in 1979 with the first appearance as narrator of Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's fictional alter ego and greatest character achievement, who provides the narrative in nine of Roth's best works, from Zuckerman's remembered youthful indiscretions at age twenty-three in *The Ghost Writer* (1979) to his possible demise in

ISSN- 0111-8854

Exit Ghost (2007) at age seventy-one. Narrating *The Ghost Writer* twenty years after the events described, Zuckerman recalls himself as the young author of a popular, *Goodbye, Columbus*-like story collection entitled *Higher Education*, from which, as Zuckerman's father says ruefully, "you certainly didn't leave anything out."[12] Roth's American Jewish detractors are represented in the novel by Leopold Wapter, a family friend who sends Zuckerman a list of ten questions about his writing, including such gems as, "Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels?"[13] Wapter also recommends that Zuckerman attend "the Broadway production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*," in order to "benefit from that unforgettable experience."[14] Visiting the established Jewish writer E. I. Lonoff, Zuckerman seeks advice about his own "Jewish question," and meets Amy Bellette, Lonoff's young friend. Then, almost as if Roth had asked himself what he might do to rehabilitate himself with his Jewish detractors, and so perhaps revitalize his career, he has Zuckerman fantasize that Amy Bellette, whose "speech was made melodious by a faint foreign accent,"[15] is actually Anne Frank herself, who has survived the death camp but hidden her identity in America. Tongue-in-cheek, Roth has Zuckerman end his fantasy with an announcement to his family, "'We are going to be married.' 'Married? But so fast? Nathan, is she Jewish?' 'Yes, she is.' 'But who is she?' 'Anne Frank.'"[16] And, in truth, in 1979, little short of his marrying Anne Frank was likely to stem the attacks on Roth by those claiming his writings were anti-Semitic.

Amy Bellette's imagined identity as Anne Frank and Zuckerman's responses to Roth's "Jewish problem" initiate a trend in much of Roth's later fiction that delves into the art of

ISSN- 0111-8854

improvisation, where variations on a theme create parallel "counterlives." That feature captures center-stage in a later Zuckerman novel, *The Counterlife* (1986), the first chapter of which details the death of Nathan's younger, married brother Henry, who dies on the operating table after opting for risky surgery because he cannot accept the sexual impotence caused by his heart medication. In the second chapter, Henry has survived the operation and joined a fundamentalist group of Jewish settlers on the West Bank. In the fourth chapter, it is Nathan, not Henry, who suffers from impotence, chooses surgery in order to consummate his relationship with Maria (the name of one of Henry's lovers in the first chapter), and dies, only to return, in the last chapter, married to Maria and with a daughter. The narrative experimentation goes much further here – the novel also contains pages of Zuckerman's notes and fiction, for example, and characters in one chapter have access to other chapters as written texts, so that on page 314 Maria can write to Zuckerman, "all the way back on page 73 I saw where you were preparing to take us" – but these are merely postmodern games meant to obscure Roth's point that meaning is given to our lives not by our traumas (medical or otherwise) or even by our joys, but by our reactions to them, our treatment of them.[17]

The Zuckerman narratives appear to end with the cleverly titled *Exit Ghost*, taken from a stage direction in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* while simultaneously echoing the first title in the series, *The Ghost Writer*, and possibly suggesting Zuckerman's own final exit, though that is not specifically confirmed in the novel proper. (Roth has since announced his retirement as a writer, possibly making *Exit Ghost* the final installment in the Zuckerman series.) Other elements indicating that the latest work in the series has come full circle from the first include

ISSN- 0111-8854

Zuckerman's living in rural seclusion for years only "a ten-minute drive" from the now-dead E. I. Lonoff's house, the setting of much of *The Ghost Writer*; Zuckerman's own renewed fascination with Lonoff (and Lonoff's "secret") once he is contacted by an ambitious young biographer; and the reappearance of Amy Bellette, then the subject of Zuckerman's Anne Frank fantasy and now an older woman living with advanced cancer.[18] In between *The Ghost Writer* and *Exit Ghost*, in some of Roth's greatest work, including *The Counterlife* and *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman himself endures a series of conditions and procedures that leave him, by the end, with those possibly ironic (but not metaphoric) debilities for a writer, incontinence and impotence.

A similar, though much compressed trajectory can be seen in Roth's Kepesh novels, a three-part series that, over a period forty years, moved from metamorphosis to metastasis, in the narratives of English professor David Kepesh: *The Breast* (1972), *The Professor of Desire* (1977), and *The Dying Animal* (2001). In the first, with apologies to Gogol and Kafka, Roth has the mammary-obsessed Kepesh wake up one morning to discover he is a giant, disembodied woman's breast. *The Breast*, written shortly after *Portnoy's Complaint*, shows its connection with that longer novel in the prominent role accorded to Kepesh's analyst, Dr. Klinger, and by Kepesh's contention that his metamorphosis is evidence "that my analysis has 'taken.'"[19] He also anticipates Sontag in bewailing "the uniqueness and enormity of my misfortune. WHAT DOES IT MEAN? HOW HAS IT COME TO PASS? AND WHY? IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE, WHY DAVID ALAN KEPESH?"[20]

Breasts continue to play a prominent role in the last of the series, *The Dying Animal*, in which Kepesh, age seventy, is revisited by Consuelo Castillo, his lover from eight years earlier, less than half his age, and a former student of his, as Kepesh has made a career of preying sexually on women in his courses. Consuelo comes to him on New Year's Eve, 1999, with the request that Kepesh take nude photos of her, explaining that she is about to undergo treatment for breast cancer, and may lose not only her beauty but her life. Kepesh feels the cancer in her armpit: "Two small stones, one bigger than the other, meaning that there is a metastasis originating in her breast."[21] But Consuelo's actual situation eludes him, even though Kepesh knows, "There's something about her case I'm failing to understand."[22] In the end, she calls him to say she has been scheduled for a radical mastectomy, and it is at this point of the novel that the narrative, an apparent monologue until the last page, is revealed to have been a one-sided dialogue. When he says he must run to join her, Kepesh's auditor tells him, "Don't go. […] Because if you go, you're finished."[23] Who speaks those lines is not revealed—angel of death, current lover, both, or neither? What is clear, though, is that Kepesh (and not Consuelo or his friend and fellow philanderer George O'Hearn, dead of a stroke at fifty-five) is the dying animal of the title. The phrase is taken from William Butler Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium," about old age and death. In it, the narrator knows, "An old man is but a paltry thing,/ A tattered coat upon a stick," but imagines a paradise of the soul once it is freed of the dying animal of its body:

> Consume my heart away; sick with desire
> And fastened to a dying animal
> It knows not what it is; and gather me
> Into the artifice of eternity.[24]

In going to comfort Consuelo, Kepesh finally moves beyond lust in what may be the last moments of his life.

Though Roth's recent fiction has often focused on dying animals and exiting ghosts, death itself is rarely a meaningful event for the author or his characters. In *Everyman* (2006), a retelling of the medieval morality play about dying, the unnamed protagonist has become alienated from his successful brother, his own children, and his three ex-wives and, like the medieval model on which he is based, Roth's everyman dies at the end, on an operating table, anesthetized. "He went under feeling far from felled, anything but doomed, eager yet again to be fulfilled, but nonetheless, he never woke up. Cardiac arrest. He was no more, freed from being, entering into nowhere without even knowing it. Just as he'd feared from the start."[25] Marcus Messner, whose narration of *Indignation* (2008) is literally all in his mind, inhabits a consciousness sequestered—by "syrette after syrette of morphine squirted into his arm"[26]—from the pain of fatal wounds he receives in the Korean War; he dies while recounting the callow and fairly innocuous activities that caused him to be expelled from Winesburg College, lose his deferment, and end up drafted into the American army, and (like many other Roth characters) searching for meaning in the haphazard course of human fate. Finally, in *The Humbling* (2009), the protagonist, Simon Axler, once a leading stage actor, can only bring himself to commit suicide by reprising one of his greatest roles, as Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplev, who is reported to have shot himself in the final line of Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Like *Exit Ghost* and *The Dying Animal*, each of those three other novels from the last five years of Roth's publishing career –

ISSN- 0111-8854

Everyman, *Indignation*, and *The Humbling* – contains detailed descriptions of illnesses and medical treatment, as does (most significantly) his final novel, *Nemesis* (2010).

In separating dying from death, however, Roth is careful not to violate Sontag's prohibition on distorting reality by giving meaning to the randomness of disease, whether of the mind or the body. A novelist herself, Sontag was not arguing for a blanket prohibition on metaphors. Indeed, she later described the opening of *Illness as Metaphor* as "a brief, hectic flourish of metaphor, in mock exorcism of the seductiveness of metaphorical thinking."[27] She admits that "one cannot think without metaphors," but goes on to suggest there are "some metaphors we might well abstain from or try to retire." And, cleverly connecting the two books on illness and AIDS back to her first book, *Against Interpretation* (1966), she concludes that, while "all thinking is interpretation," sometimes it is better to be "'against' interpretation."[28] Having published *Illness as Metaphor* in 1978, Sontag was well situated to analyze the growing AIDS crisis in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989); beginning in 1990, the two essays comprised a single paperback volume.

Roth's most Sontagian treatment of illness is, significantly enough, contained in one of his most recent fictions, *Nemesis* (2010), which deals with a 1944 polio epidemic in Newark, New Jersey. The novel is narrated (a little improbably) by Arnie Mesnikoff who, as a child, is one of the regulars at the Chancellor Avenue playground where Bucky Cantor works as the summer director. Seventeen years later, they chance to meet, and Cantor tells Mesnikoff his life story during a series of weekly lunches, providing the basis for Mesnikoff's narrative. What

ISSN- 0111-8854

brings the two men together in 1971 is not just their shared experiences on the playground and in the Chancellor Avenue School, where Cantor was the physical education teacher for a year, but the fact that they were both left disabled by polio after that summer of 1944. What separates them in 1971, and finally drives them apart, is their differing reactions to their fate. While Mesnikoff is able to come to terms with his physical limitations, Cantor cannot. In Sontag's terms, he is still asking "Why me?" He is still trying to find meaning in the senselessness of his infection, and in this he is not alone. Consider, for example, the review of the novel by National Public Radio's Heller McAlpin, who suggests, "*Nemesis* evokes comparisons with Albert Camus' moral fable, *The Plague*, set in his home country, Algeria. But where the plague-struck coastal city of Oran serves as a symbol for France under German occupation and a portrait of resistance—and, more generally, of the human condition—the polio epidemic that strikes Newark in Roth's novel fails to take on metaphorical significance. Instead, polio remains Bucky's personal nemesis, lacking broader resonance largely because of the way he reacts to it, insisting on converting 'tragedy into guilt.'"[29] Sontag's point, of course, is that illness should not be given metaphorical significance, and as much as Cantor himself tries to personalize it, Roth finally rejects such a romanticization or vilification of disease. Though his mentor and prospective father-in-law, Dr. Steinberg, cautions the playground director that "a misplaced sense of responsibility can be a debilitating thing,"[30] Cantor tries to give meaning to his fate, by creating for himself an important role in this "war upon the children of Newark," even as he has been rejected, for medical reasons, as a soldier "in the real war" his friends are fighting overseas.[31] Despite Cantor's bitterness over the way polio destroys his body and, according to him, his life,

Roth ends the novel in affirmation, not by having his narrator find metaphoric revelation in this illness, but by having Mesnikoff simply remember a particularly meaningful moment with Cantor back on the playground of his youth.

Reviewers of *Nemesis* have frequently compared Roth's fictional polio outbreak of 1944 to the spread of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, but it might just as well be considered a metaphor for the Holocaust: nearly a million Jews from Hungary alone were murdered by the Nazis during that same summer of 1944. In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Sontag expands her argument to include a disease that, initially in the United States, especially, was mischaracterized as limited to gay males and, therefore, seen by some as a punishment for homosexuality. Even more than in cancer, then, Sontag could find in AIDS metaphors that reversed the romantic, even sexy imagery that attached itself to tuberculosis until well into the twentieth century. But Roth is not Sontag and, despite his reputation as a chronicler of casual sexual encounters, Roth has never confronted the issue of AIDS in his fiction, or even taken much account of the likely ramifications of "safe sex" on his characters.

If it is true that "art does not mean, it is," and if life imitates art (or vice versa), then it should not be surprising that writers such as Philip Roth and Susan Sontag have come to recognize the essential meaningless, interpretation-resistant elements of life, including, most prominently, illness. Nathan Zuckerman transcends his own incontinence and impotence by recognizing that those most personal of debilities really have nothing to do with him personally. In perhaps the most famous lines of *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman dismisses, on some level,

ISSN- 0111-8854

the writer's search for meaning in art as antithetical to the impossibility of finding meaning in life (about others, but it would be equally true about oneself): "The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong."[32] We are certainly wrong when we look for meaning, instead of understanding—wrong, but alive.

[1] An earlier version of this paper was originally presented at the Free University of Berlin's Topos Excellence Unit on the History of Medicine.

[2] *Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Volume A, ed. Sarah Lawall. (New York: Norton and Company, 2002), 17.

[3] Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Volume A, ed. Sarah Lawall (New York: Norton and Company, 2002), 158.

[4] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1990) 3, 38.

[5] Ibid., 37.

[6] Ibid., 38.

[7] Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 28.

[8] Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 37.

[9] Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Random House, 1969), 274.

[10] A. O. Scott, "In Search of the Best" in *The New York Times Book Review* (21 May 2006), 17. Scott never explains why votes for Updike's four Rabbit novels were tabulated together, but those for the individuals novels in trilogies by McCarthy and Roth were tabulated separately.

[11] "Booker Judge Resigns after Roth Wins Prize," *The Guardian*, (19 May 2011), Home Pages 5.

[12] Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 83.

[13] Ibid., 103-4.

[14] Ibid., 102.

[15] Ibid., 25.

[16] Ibid., 158.

[17] Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 314.

[18] Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 47, 57.

[19] Philip Roth, *The Breast* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 24.

[20] Ibid., 26.

[21] Philip Roth, *The Dying Animal* (New York: Vintage International, 2003), 134.

ISSN- 0111-8854

[22] Ibid., 136.

[23] Ibid., 156.

[24] William Butler Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 407-8.

[25] Philip Roth, *Everyman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 182.

[26] Ibid., 225.

[27] Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 93.

[28] Ibid.

[29] 265.

[30] Philip Roth, *Nemesis* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 50.

[31] Ibid., 63.

[32] Roth, *American Pastoral*, 35.

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