

## **Jerkin' the gherkin: Philip Roth's hands-on humor**

O humor mão-na-massa de Philip Roth

Samuel Chase Coale\*

**Abstract:** Sex, outrage, shock, and satiric humor have become Philip Roth's trademark, which this essay discusses in relation to ten of his novels, from *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) to *Nemesis* (2010).

**Keywords:** Jewish literature. Sex in literature. Humor. American literature.

**Resumo:** Sexo, indignação, choque e humor satírico tornaram-se a marca registrada de Philip Roth, que este artigo discute em relação a dez de seus romances, de *O complexo de Portnoy* (1969) a *Nêmesis* (2010).

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura judaica. Sexo na literatura. Humor. Literatura estadunidense.

“‘Come, Big Boy, come,’ screamed the maddened piece of liver that, in my own insanity, I bought one afternoon at a butcher shop and, believe it or not, violated behind a billboard on the way to a bar mitzvah lesson” (*Portnoy* 12). Thus did a new voice appear in American fiction in 1969 – Philip Roth’s, not the maddened liver’s – complete with its sexually outrageous and provocative act, its confessional directness, and its comic incongruities: masturbation, bar mitzvahs, billboards, and butcher shops, “believe it or not.” And thus did Roth embark on his career-long exploration of “the delightful imbecility of lust” (*Animal* 15), eager to shock the conventional bourgeoisie of the postwar era, gearing his fiction “towards disharmony, disruption, fragmentation, and the experience of shock” (Zima 83).

Think of some of these sexual shenanigans: Mickey Sabbath jerking off on Drenka Balich’s, his dead mistress’s grave; Coleman Silk, 71, cavorting naked with Faunia Farley, 34; David Kepesh masturbating into the hair of his lover or demanding to watch her menstruate. Sex, outrage, shock, and a lacerating, satiric humor have become Roth’s trademark, summarized perhaps by Farley in *The Human Stain* (2000): “We leave a stain, a trail... of cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen... the stain that precedes disobedience, that encompasses disobedience...” Of course from such a perspective “the fantasy of purity is appalling” (*Animal* 242).

Roth’s sexually explicit antics continue to assault conventional proprieties, “the malevolent Puritanism” (*Stain* 76) he sees everywhere in American culture. The masturbatory monologue that became *Portnoy’s Complaint* involved both self-definition and self-abuse, each of which seemed to mirror the other. Sexual confession thrived on middle-class morality, and vice-versa, a relic perhaps of the kind of rigid binaries produced by the Cold War in the 1950s: male vs. female, kinky sex vs. “regular” sex, the private vs. the public persona, self vs. society.

What charged Roth’s prose, however, was his exacerbated sense of discontent, his over-the-top soliloquies of complaint, themselves icons of scatological humor. Such complaints suggest the third-generation immigrant vs. the world created by parents and grandparents, the marginalized vs. the center, the soul vs. the psyche, eager to create its own rhetorical discourse, a new unrepressed sense of identity, subverting the false but harmonious hegemony of the American postwar suburban realm.

Rages Portnoy: "What causes me to be living in this predicament, torn by desires that are repugnant to my conscience, and a conscience repugnant to my desires" (93)? His elders perform their lives within the boundaries of "self-control, sobriety, sanctions" (56): "Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass – *I happen also to be a human being!*" (53). Years later in *The Human Stain* in 2000, the cry remains the same. Roth assaults yet again "America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony... Hawthorne's 'persecuting spirit'... to enact the astringent rituals of purification" (2). Disgusted with the Religious Right's attack on Bill Clinton, Roth's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, wishes to wrap the White House in a mammoth banner, which would proclaim, "A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE!" (3)

Portnoy's masturbatory monologue becomes Roth's most cherished fictional strategy as his characters hurl harangues, deliver diatribes, and jeer their jeremiads at the world and themselves. The sheer rush of Roth's style – its ruthless, raucous, ribald, rancorous, and relentless rabble-raising, often lyrical and Whitmanic in its sweep and rhythms – suggests the cranky stand-up comedian, unleashing his woes upon the audience, a Lenny Bruce who exposes and exploits human foibles, incongruities, cruelties, and fantasies without limit.

The claustrophobic and self-enclosed nature of such male-driven orations, however, suggests nothing so much as a kind of mental masturbation overtaking its physical counterpart. Such tirades may assure a character's integrity and intactness, as a form of self-protection or preemptive strike, but they can also insulate and isolate, creating a voice in a vacuum, the cry of a would-be victim howling out his wrath to readers that may tire easy of such blasts.

In "Gender, Narcissism, Masturbation," which appears in his collection of essays, *The Spooky Art* (2003), Norman Mailer acknowledges that "the act of writing is so close to the psychic character of masturbation" (135) because, for one thing, it exposes the fears of the ultimate narcissist: "It is not the love of the self but dread of the world outside the self which is the seed of narcissism" (134). For Mailer sex with another human being leads to connection and communication: "If one masturbates, all that happens is, everything that's beautiful and good in one goes up in the hand, goes into the air, is *lost*. Now, what the hell is there to *absorb*? *One hasn't tested oneself*" (137).

Of course, Roth is aware of such limitations in his monological methods: "Of course I have greatly refashioned my attachment [to my origins] through the effort of testing them, and over the years have developed my *strongest attachment to the test itself*" (italics mine). So how could he turn his hands-on humor into a broader, more comic, and lately more tragic vision?

"There are always opposing forces... one is always at war," declares Zuckerman in *The Dying Animal* (112), forever aware of "the antagonism that is the world" (*Stain* 316). Such monologues will inevitably clash with others, producing the confrontations and dialogues of Roth's later dialogical novels, masturbators, if you will, masturbating "at" others. His riffs and his use of hyperbole and rhetorical flourishes pummel one another as Jew attacks Jew, Newark assaults New York, autobiography subverts fiction, and aging males pander to college-age nymphs. Such antagonisms suggest Bakhtin's notion of carnivalization in the novel, as these various voices "develop [ ] an open, negative dialectic that admits the unity of opposites but no positive synthesis" (Zima 108). Such open-ended combat also leads to Roth's postmodern vision in his later work, which resists closure while mining the psychic depths of various shocks of

recognition and regret. He seems to have arrived at the vision that the individual self can only be defined relationally as opposed to another self or its own idea of itself, thereby undermining any absolutism of any kind, be it Jew, American, male, female, or human being. Hybridity, Salman Rushdie's notion of the mongrel self provides the only "essence" we can unearth in contemporary culture.

Roth has been known to play mind games: if you can't love the mind you fuck, then try to fuck the mind you love. He delights in impersonation, role-playing, narratives nested within other narratives to the point that one narrative can completely eviscerate the previous one. And we have experienced this in such "middle" novels as *My Life as a Man* (1974), *The Counterlife* (1986), *Deception* (1990), and *Operation Shylock* (1993). The self itself becomes a grab bag of role, instincts, desires, and multiple personalities. In *The Counterlife* Zuckerman expounds on this vision:

Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as *being oneself*. In fact, those who most seem to be themselves appear to me people impersonating what they think they might like to be . . . the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate... It's *all* impersonation—in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after awhile impersonates best the self that best gets one through... I, for one, have no self... What I have is a variety of impersonations I can do... But I certainly have no self independent of my imposturing, artistic efforts to have one. Nor would I want one. I am a theater and nothing more than a theater (*Counterlife* 365, 366, 367).

In the 1990s, Roth expanded his territory exponentially in the nihilistic, raunchy sexuality and flight of *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) and in his American trilogy that explores and examines American lives as lived in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1990s: *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000). The masturbatory melodies continue as does the humor, but now both are played out on a larger political and cultural canvas.

Nate Zuckerman in the trilogy has become an impotent bystander, reclusive but relentlessly alert. Portnoy has turned more philosophical, more curious about the world beyond him yet still intimately involved with his own, the darker domains of Seymour "Swede" Levov, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk, not to mention 1960s bomb-tossing daughters, Communist-tainted conspirators, and black-white complexities. Zuckerman is now spanking the signifying monkey rather than the monkey itself, still versed in sexual outrage and worldly antagonisms, but seeing them from a wiser, fuller, perhaps less visceral perspective, not so much complaining about himself but communing and commiserating compassionately with others, often, as Coleman Silk, "blindsided by the terrifyingly provisional nature of everything" (*Stain* 336).

Looking up at the night sky at the conclusion of *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman observes "that universe into which error does not obtrude. You see the inconceivable: the colossal spectacle of no antagonism. You see with your own eyes the vast brain of time, a galaxy of fire by no human hand. The stars are indispensable" (323).

In a quartet of novels, which Roth has grouped together as "Nemesis: Short Novels," that includes *Everyman* (2006), *Indignation* (2008), *The Humbling* (2009), and *Nemesis* (2010), masturbation takes a back seat to mortality. The focus on death, on life as a series of random

events, chance coincidences, and often-fatal accidents, trumps Roth's focus, but there is still time for sexual encounters and hijinks. For example in *The Humbling* Pegeen Stapleford, who is a self-declared lesbian, has an affair with the aging actor, Simon Axler, whose theatrical triumphs are long behind him, at one point straps a green cock in a harness around her waist and "pretended to masturbate like a man" (93). She asks, "You really think you've fucked the lesbian out of me in ten months?" (94), part of an on-going conversation about sex that is both ludicrous and laughable. "Chance – the tyranny of contingency – is everything" (243), explains the narrator of *Nemesis*, in which a polio epidemic upstages sexual penetration or play of any kind, despite athlete Bucky Cantor's successfully assaulting his girlfriend's virginity. The spread of the disease mutes his earnest passions.

Ah, but lest we think the "old" Roth has cooled his jets, there is still *The Dying Animal* (2001), which Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* blasted as so much narcissistic navel-gazing and others as a masterpiece in miniature. David Kepesh, self-proclaimed TV cultural critic and professor, seduces the lovely and lubricious Consuela Castillo, his flavor of the month, his student conquest of the moment. Kepesh praises the 60s sexual revolution, in which women became implicated in their own desire, no longer the innocent victims of predatory males. He celebrates Janie Wyatt, queen of the Gutter Girls, and delights in the title of her senior thesis, "A Hundred Ways to be Perverse in the Library."

And in regards to his priggish son, Kepesh laments, "My son can fuck only a girl with the right moral credentials. Please, I tell him. It's a perversity..." (88).

The sexual juices still flow if not as readily in the last four novels, including *Exit Ghost* (2007). Even if Nathan Zuckerman remains incontinent and impotent, all is not lost.

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\* **Samuel Chase Coale** é professor de inglês na Wheaton College, Estados Unidos.

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