Many and varied are the gripes of Roth. In 30 books and dozens of short stories, he has been America's post-World War II poet laureate of angst, alienation and anger. Inviting readers to associate his views with those of his main characters, Roth has skewered Jewish-American morals and mores. In two brilliant novels - American Pastoral (1997) and The Human Stain (2000) - he deconstructed the deconstruction of "The American Dream" and the rise of identity politics.

Roth is the greatest living writer in the United States. But at 76, he seems psychically and philosophically stuck on a single theme. With an evangelical zeal and, one suspects, with perverse pleasure, Roth insists that we ante up for the endgame of physical deterioration, depression and death. And that we should expect neither explanation nor consolation.

In two novellas, The Dying Animal (2001) and Everyman (2006), he has taken us, with John Keats, to a place "where men sit and hear each other groan; Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs... Where but to think is to be full of sorrow." With the publication of The Humbling, alas, it's déjà vu all over again.

As the novella opens, Simon Axler, Roth's protagonist, a successful stage and film actor, is in free fall. Chronic back pain, "whose debilitating progress had accelerated with age," makes it almost impossible for him to walk any distance or sit or stand for very long. Axler's wife, whose son has died of a drug overdose, has sued for divorce, "completing yet one more of the many millions of stories of unhappily entwined men and women." Most significantly, Axler finds he can no longer lose himself in his roles. It was a fluke, he tells his agent, "that a talent was given to me, a fluke that it was taken away." His career is over: "I can no longer make the imagined real."

Since Axler cannot bear to be himself, or even play himself, he has a nervous breakdown. During his 26-day stint in the hospital, he begins to conceive of suicide as "the role you write for yourself. You inhabit it and you enact it. All carefully staged - where they will find you and how they will find you. But one performance only."

Just as he's concluding that he's finished with work, women and happiness, Axler reconnects with Pegeen Mike Stapleford, the daughter of old friends. Twenty-five years his junior, she's a "lithe, full-breasted woman," dressed in scruffy work boots and a red zippered jacket, "with something of the child still in her smile." A lesbian for 17 years, Pegeen decides she wants a man - this man.

As he has so often before, Roth explores the redemptive power of sexual desire in The Humbling. But he's more interested here in the capacity, indeed the necessity, to sustain life and reclaim exuberance by exercising the imagination. Playing out a rescue fantasy - "a heterosexual Pygmalion and a lesbian Galatea" - Axler costumes Pegeen in expensive clothes and takes her to a hair stylist. He then conceives a kitchen scenario in which she pledges her fidelity if he will schedule back surgery, step back on stage and impregnate her.
His fantasy's a flop, of course. But after all is said and done, the stripping away of illusions in *The Humbling* is neither touching nor all that troubling. Because it's hard to identify with or care about any of the characters. Like so many of Roth's women, Pegeen is, to put it kindly, not fully realized. Does Roth agree with one of her lovers, one wonders, that she's a "cunning naif," sexually potent, but at bottom a "nobody," who others "endow with a power she really doesn't have"? Or, just as bad, that she's "motivated by no one's intentions but her own"?

Axler is a misanthrope's Everyman, a self-absorbed rationalizer, inclined to believe, as womanizers do, that a "man's way is laid with a multitude of traps." It's hardly cause for celebration (or serious contemplation) that the Pegeen of his imagination restored his "force and naturalness" and brought to an end his shame and his sabbatical from the world. And readers may conclude, though Axler does not, that he could - and should - have found courage elsewhere.

Although Axler ultimately assumes responsibility for all that's happened, moreover, Roth gives equal - or even greater - force to the proposition that Axler - and Everyman - have minds of their own, "indifferent, if not maliciously hostile" to their aims. And that "there was no other way for it to wind up." In a sense *The Humbling* ends where it begins: with "all the world's a stage" metaphors, an unstable and unsatisfying mix of rage and resignation and an "obscure indictment," a "hubbub of sounds empty of meaning," yet "carrying a spell full of personal significance," proclaiming that a man's complex personality is "entirely at the mercy of 'thin air.'"

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