ABSTRACT. Five major scholars in the field discuss the significance of Philip Roth’s brand new novella, Everyman. The roundtable participants focus on, among other issues, the overriding presence of death and dying in Roth’s recent work, the nostalgic tone of the new novella, the nature of Roth’s narrative voice in the text, and the place of Everyman within the context of Roth’s overall canon.

Keywords: American Literature Association, death, dying, Everyman, Jewish, narrative voice, nostalgia, novella, roundtable, Philip Roth

The Philip Roth Society organized a roundtable on Everyman at the annual meeting of the American Literature Association on May 25, 2006. The following is an edited transcript of the conversation. The panelists were David Brauner, senior lecturer of American literature at the University of Reading in England, author of Postwar Jewish Fiction: Ambivalences, Self-exploration, and Transatlantic Connection (2001); Derek Parker Royal, associate professor of English at Texas A&M University–Commerce, president of the Philip Roth Society, executive editor of Philip Roth Studies, and editor of Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author (2005); Mark Shechner, professor of English at SUNY–Buffalo, whose recent book on Philip Roth is Up Society’s Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth (2003); Debra Shostak, professor of English at the College of Wooster, whose Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives appeared in 2004; and the moderator, Bernard F. Rodgers Jr., Emily H. Fisher chair in literature at Simon’s Rock College of Bard and the author of Philip Roth (1978), Philip Roth: A Bibliography (1984), and Voices and Visions: Selected Essays (2002).
Bernard Rodgers: My name is Bernie Rodgers and on behalf of my colleagues and the Philip Roth Society I want to welcome all of you and thank you for joining us for this roundtable on Philip Roth’s new novella, *Everyman*. And we have decided to have a genuine roundtable today: no one has prepared a paper, instead we are going to have a conversation. The way it is going to work is that I am going to frame the discussion and raise some questions to start with, and we’ll see where we go from there. Our hope is that you all will also get involved.

I was thinking this morning of a quote from *Four Quartets*—“What we call the beginning is often the end/ And to make an end is to make a beginning./ The end is where we start from.” *Everyman* begins with three words, “Around the grave,” and ends with three words, “from the start.” The novella loops from the grave to the grave through the life in between. It recounts the life of a man who will be familiar to readers of Philip Roth: he has the Newark-area boyhood; the family, with a mother and father who are doting and the elder brother who is idolized; he has the good boy background of many of Roth’s other characters; he struggles between sex and morality throughout his life (although, unlike many of Roth’s characters, he appears to have had only four sexual partners, and he marries three of them). It is the story of a man’s life and death—Roth has called it a medical autobiography, because the illnesses
of this man are the frame of the story: ten illnesses, ten operations in the course of the novel.

I want to start by raising the question about how this makes us think about the discussions of death and dying and illness in Roth's early works. It is pretty obvious that there have been a couple of books recently that have been very much about this subject: Sabbath's Theater and The Dying Animal are both about sex and death. Sabbath's Theater has an epigraph from The Tempest, “Every third thought shall be my grave”; and The Dying Animal has an epigraph from Edna O'Brien, “The body contains the life story just as much as the brain.” In Everyman, Roth's epigraph is from Keats's “Ode to a Nightingale”:

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.

But there is a passage that is a kind of overture to the story that will follow—in the opening section, at the gravesite for the burial of this man—that I want to start with. It is a description by his daughter, in her eulogy, of the cemetery that they are standing in outside of Newark in Elizabeth, New Jersey. It is rundown, and she says, “Things have rotted and toppled over, the gates are rusted, the locks are gone, there's been vandalism. [. . . L]ooking around at the deterioration here breaks my heart—as it probably does yours, and perhaps even makes you wonder why we're assembled on grounds so badly scarred by time.”

I wanted to begin the discussion by asking how this book makes the rest of you think back to or rethink Roth's other works and the way that illness and death and dying have been parts of those other works. Let me just throw that out as a question for people to jump in on.

Mark Shechner: Can I suggest that there is one other “D” word, in addition to “Death,” that this book highlights? I am a fan of Roth, as you might have guessed, but being a fan of Philip Roth is sometimes like being a fan of Barry Bonds. (This is San Francisco after all.) And sometimes you have to sort of look at the dark side, too, as Roth makes you do. The other word is “Depression.” I think finally if there is a kind of key in which Roth's work has been written from the very first, it is the key of depression—and it goes all the way to the beginning. I think that if you find this a depressed or depressing book, you should go back to the beginning and read Letting Go sometime. It makes this book sound like Sesame Street.

Rodgers: The first page of Letting Go is a letter from his dead mother. The first page of his first full-length novel.
Shechner: And there’s also a pattern in Roth’s writing that I just want to men-
tion, of following a blockbuster or a whole series of blockbusters with a sort of
ersize for the left hand. And the exercise for the left hand is usually a very
depressed book. Think of the exuberant outpouring of Portnoy’s Complaint.
And what did he follow that with? The Breast, a book that is, on the one hand,
an erotic joke and, on the other, a book about complete entrapment. Later
on, Zuckerman Bound is followed by Deception, which is about the breakup of
his marriage and the death of a woman who was very close to him. You have
the American Trilogy—in which death is also prominently featured, by the
way—followed by The Dying Animal, a book about death. Then you have The
Plot Against America—a big, expansive, sort of muscular, teeming book full of
American history and footnotes, an invented history of America in the 1930s
and 1940s—followed by this “Gloomy Gus” of a novel.

So Roth has been doing this for a long time, been going through these
cycles of expansion, exuberance, energy, and then spiritual retrenchments.
Going back to what I call a sort of the ground note, the key of “D,” the key
of the “Depression,” and this is just another book in that sequence. Not that
the cost of getting old and dying is not real to him. But it becomes real to him
in a characteristic way. Anybody remember the comic strip Li’l Abner? There
was a guy named Joe Btfsplk in it, who walked around with a cloud over his
head and brought bad luck to everyone around him.

David Brauner: Roth mentions Li’l Abner in the novel.

Shechner: Maybe that is why it occurred to me. The guy walked under a
cloud, there was lightning coming down and rain. And it is the kind of raw
Joe Btfsplk that comes to the fore in this book.

Rodgers: Can I pick up on that for a minute, before we go back to this ques-
tion of illness and death in the earlier books? Do other people have thoughts
about this rhythm in Roth’s work that I think is really interesting and prob-
ably very important? Any other thoughts about this?

Brauner: It seems to me that what Mark [Shechner] has been suggesting is
that there is a missing half to the narrative if you are taking a psychoanalyti-
cal viewpoint, which you seem to be. The word missing is “manic,” because
what you are suggesting is actually that you get these incredibly exuberant,
expansive—we might use the word “manic”—highs, and then the lows, the
reflective, the meditative, the depressive, the melancholy, the contemplative
books that follow. I think one could make that case in a fairly compelling way.
But on the other hand, one could just as easily see it in a more aesthetic framework, as Deb [Shostak] does in her book, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives* when she spells out the narrative trajectory of his career as zigzagging from one novel to another. Each novel is a kind of reaction against the one that comes before, or perhaps a sequence if we are talking about the American Trilogy or *Zuckerman Bound* tetralogy. So you do not have to necessarily see that pattern—I mean, the rhythm is there, certainly, there is a definite pattern there of a kind of exuberance followed by something more melancholy—but you do not have to see that pattern in psychoanalytical terms; you can see it more in terms of the way Roth works aesthetically, and you can see it as a much more self-conscious kind of ongoing response to his own work.

**Debra Shostak:** I guess I see two related patterns. One is that the “D” word that I see missing in *Everyman*, although it is sort of there, is “Desire.” The book is almost all about death. In many of his novels he has balanced the two of them, had a dual trajectory. Here, we have desire, but it is all in the past and not very good, and so the focus really is on Thanatos. It seems to me that the other formal difference, picking up from what David [Brauner] was saying, is this compositional difference. In other words, what does it take to write this sort of short form and what does it demand or leave out as a possibility? My guess is that probably everybody up front here actually likes the ones that are exuberant and full and is a little disappointed when he does these little five-finger exercises that do not have the very broad canvas, the rage and the comedy. I mean, I was desperately looking, and about the funniest line I found here was when the little boy is about to go under the knife and thinks that he hears the doctor say, “I’m going to turn you into a little girl.” That was about it.

**Rodgers:** I think that this point about the aesthetic pattern is interesting too, but from a slightly different perspective. How do you write novels for fifty years? How do you write a new novel every two years? What is involved in getting yourself to do that over and over again, and to see it as ever new, engaging, and interesting, aside from the fact that this is what you do? How do you do that? I think that one of the answers is that Roth keeps setting different challenges for himself aesthetically; he wants to try to do different things. And I think that in this novel he is trying to write in a different tone, to write a novella, to see how much he can put into it, and to see whether he can make this flow in a way that is quite extraordinary in terms of the present and the past and the way he uses memory in the book. So I think there is an aesthetic impulse here that is really just a human impulse. Updike does the same thing. Anyone who writes this much for so long faces the temptation to silence, asks “What more do I have to say?” And partly it is answering another question—“How am I going to say it?”—that keeps them going, I think.
Derek Parker Royal: In a recent NPR interview Robert Siegel asked Philip Roth how he determines how long a particular narrative should be—this brings back Mark [Shechner’s] observation about the cycle of longer four-hundred-page works versus novellas—and Roth’s response was this: he asks himself questions when he starts writing, and when he feels that those questions are answered he stops. And there does seem to be this series of questions that he apparently keeps asking himself, dealing with the various “Ds”—death, depression, and desire, as well. One of the things that I find interesting is, especially over the past ten years or so, the number of critics and reviewers who are noticing that death is now a part of his writing, when, as you all have mentioned, you go back and look at the earlier works you find it is there from the very beginning. Which makes sense, because issues of desire mean nothing without their polar opposite. He may be emphasizing one “D” more now than he did before, but as he grows older the series of questions change and shift as well.

Shostak: I want to go back to what you were saying, Bernie [Rodgers], about the compositional question. It seems to me that one of the things he has done here that affects me—and which is why some of us are not altogether sure we like the novel—is pose the question of what you do when the end point has got to be in the beginning. You started out with those various quotations about the end circling around to the beginning, and in Everyman we certainly do get the end at the beginning. But this makes it an entirely deterministic narrative—there cannot be any surprises except little blips along the way—and it seems to me that is part of why it feels very claustrophobic.

Rodgers: I guess I disagree with all of you, because I am not disappointed with the book. I think that on page after page—not every page, but many—it contains some of his finest writing. And I think that it is full of surprises because of the way he manages to describe the vitality of a life in the context of death. I found that very impressive. Unfortunately, if you live long enough death becomes an all-too-constant companion. At seventy-three, it is on his mind, and that does not surprise me at all.

Shechner: I was just going to say that as a card-carrying member of the AARP, I wanted to put in a senior’s point of view. But actually I do not. I do want to introduce another “D” word. Along with “Depression” and “Desire,” let me give you “Disaster” as well. Because I think that desire and disaster have always been linked in his imagination. One of the great scenes of all of literature is that scene in Portnoy’s Complaint where Alexander Portnoy and his friend Smolka are over at the house of Bubbles Giraldi. And he touches himself, and he jacks off in his own eye, and it starts burning. Then he has
this fantasy of going blind and coming home with a guide dog. His mother says, “What’s that? You can’t bring that dog, that dirty creature, in the house.” And he says, “But Mom, it’s my seeing eye dog. You see, I’m blind.” That is a pattern that goes all the way through Roth’s work—and there is desire in this book—but each time desire raises its head, it gets cut off. It’s part of the interesting vitality in *Everyman*. There is Merete who takes his thumb in her mouth as they are going in the car. In fact, what happens is that he is riding in the car, and this woman, Merete, takes his thumb and puts it in her mouth, and he says, “I saw my life falling apart.” Something like that. That is the first thing he thinks. He doesn’t think, “Wow, I’m going to have an incredible time,” but “I saw my life falling apart.” It happens again when he is an old man sitting on the boardwalk, and he keeps seeing this jogger with her ponytail go bouncing by. And he thinks, “Wow, maybe one more shot at it.” And he starts chatting up the jogger one day. I cannot remember the exact lines, but it was so incredibly clumsy.

Rodgers: “How game are you?”

Shechner: Right. “How game are you?” he says to her. Now what jogger in her twenties is going to fall for a line like that from a seventy-three-year-old geezer on a boardwalk? It is destined to fail. But it seems that is the pattern: where there is desire, there is disaster.

Brauner: I agree, that is one of the key scenes of the book. It is also one of the number of scenes in this book where, it seems to me, he is deliberately playing with the expectations of readers familiar with his early work and puncturing them. It is like that scene earlier where Millicent Kramer is lying in the bed. A student lying in bed: you know where it is going to lead—sex. But no, it leads to death in a really quite shocking way when he casually mentions ten days later that she killed herself. It is the same thing on the boardwalk. You think, okay, this guy is old, he is not very well, but he is still going to have sex. He is still going to have this affair with this beautiful young woman. We have been here a hundred times; but this time, no. It is not actually that his pick-up line is so lame, that is not what punctures the illusion or self-delusion. It is further on. He says, “You know where to find me.” And Roth writes, “Engagingly she swung the piece of paper in the air as though it was a tiny bell and to his delight shoved it deep into her damp tank top before taking off down the boardwalk again.” You think he scored in spite of his lame line. But no: “She never called. [. . .] She must have decided to do her jogging along another stretch of the boardwalk, thereby thwarting his longing for the last great outburst of everything.”
**Audience member:** A few points I want to make, if I can connect one to the other. First of all, I wholly agree with Bernie [Rodgers’s] point that Roth is getting older, and his sense of his own mortality dictates his program for writing. I do not think his program for writing is an aesthetic construction, which he has decided on in some sort of premeditated way. I think that is a bit of folly, really. There is an aesthetic program, but it comes organically from within. Now, two: in connection with the business with death, I’m surprised that no one has said anything yet about the Lear-like repetition of “nothing, nothing, nothing.” Because that addresses the sense of emptiness and pointlessness that is associated with what he is facing. That is an emotional contour in the book, “nothing.” Third point, which I’ll get to very quickly, I think that death—this is a generalization that is maybe out of the blue—I think that a lot of Jewish writers, Bellow in particular, have been very much preoccupied with death. Has anyone read Harold Bloom’s last book, *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine*? It is one of the darkest books I have ever read, and I think in a way it is very reminiscent of Roth. Bloom’s argument there is that he can no longer believe in the idea of the covenant. There is a kind of quarrel with God, or the God that wasn’t there, just as there seems to be, in a rather indirect way, with Philip Roth.

**Rodgers:** Can I just say that it is not indirect at all, the kind of militant antireligious secular rationalism that Roth has expressed? He expressed it very strongly in his interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air* a couple of weeks ago, and it is very clearly in the book. He writes that from the time his Everyman was thirteen, from “the Sunday after the Saturday of his bar mitzvah,” he never entered a synagogue again:

Religion was a lie that he had recognized early in life, and he found all religions offensive, considered their superstitious folderol meaningless, childish, couldn’t stand the complete unadulthood—the baby talk and the righteousness and the sheep, and the avid believers. No hocus-pocus about death and God or obsolete fantasies of heaven for him. There was only our bodies, born to live and die on terms decided by the bodies that had lived and died before us. If he could be said to have located a philosophical niche for himself, that was it—he’d come upon it early and intuitively, and however elemental, that was the whole of it. Should he ever write an autobiography, he’d call it *The Life and Death of a Male Body*. But after retiring he tried becoming a painter, not a writer, and so he gave that title to a series of his abstractions.

This jibes so completely with his comments in the interview that I think it is fair to say Roth is speaking here for himself, as well as for his character. So not just the subject of death but, especially, the last scenes of this book—where his Everyman talks to and about the bones of his parents in a cemetery that is the same Elizabeth cemetery where Philip Roth visits the graves of his own parents—are incredibly moving to me. Both as fiction and as autobiography. This is the only sense of anything after death that he really
has, and I think this idea about what death is and means is an important part of the book.

**Royal:** You said just now that one of the central passages of the book, which you just read, reflects the thoughts of not only the unnamed protagonist, but of Roth himself. And I think this is fascinating. I like this novel, and I am not as critical as I think a couple on the panel might be. But one problem I have with this is trying to determine what distance, if any, there may be between his protagonist and the narrative voice of Philip Roth. Or the narrative voice that he has created here. You are right: we have a very dark philosophy here. It reminds me of John Leonard’s review of *The Human Stain.* Referring to the novel’s bleakness, Leonard says that compared with Philip Roth, Nietzsche is “Chuckles the Clown.” And this bleakness comes out with a vengeance in this novel. So one of the questions that I have wrestled with in reading this book is how much of this is the protagonist’s idea and how much of this is a detached narrator. Or how invested is the narrative voice in the story. At times there seems to be quite a bit of detachment, almost as if the narrator is being critical of the unnamed Everyman. At other times there seems to be a complete collapse between the narrative voice and the subject himself. And that brings up issues of tone. Many of the reviewers who have been critical of the novel have argued that, especially in the second half, it tends to lapse into sentimentality and becomes a little too nostalgic. I think we do see more and more of that in the last third of the novel.

**Rodgers:** What is wrong with nostalgia in a seventy-three-year-old?

**Shechner:** What is right with sharing it with the world at twenty-five dollars a shot?

**Rodgers:** Well, do not buy the novel if you are not interested in a novel about aging and death.

**Shechner:** But one of the things that any of us should be doing is recommending to our audience here whether or not the book is worth their twenty-five dollars. One of the things I hope we do not do is lapse into being academics and teasing out themes. We should be talking about our own experiences of reading a book. I do a lot of book reviewing, and one of the things I have to do as a book reviewer is finally tell my readers whether they should read the book or not. And I have to say for the only time ever in my life I found
myself nodding in positive agreement with the review by Michiko Kakutani that appeared in the *New York Times*. I usually grind my teeth when I read the Big K. But this is one time when she said things that sort of rang a bell for me. I am going to read some of her phrases. She says, “As for his life story, it’s been orchestrated to underscore themes that Mr. Roth has examined with more energy and originality many, many times before.” So one thing she notes is that the book lacks originality and energy. Then she goes on to say in the conclusion:

> With the exception of his childhood memories of his father’s jewelry shop, which possess a touching emotional specificity, this man’s story is depicted in spindly, cartoonlike terms: one impossible wife, one saintly wife, one ditsy airhead of a wife; two resentful, sourpuss sons, one doting daughter; several decades in the advertising game, followed by a stint in retirement as an amateur artist. All are delineated in a brusque, summary manner, as if Mr. Roth couldn’t be bothered with filling in the details, or wanted to leave those details deliberately vague in a misguided effort to make his hero more of a representative man.

Now whether we conclude that this is an aesthetic strategy or just a failure of energy, the question is, what effect does it have on the reader? I find the human dimension, the filling in of the character of the narrator himself, may be the thinnest and least unconvincing of almost any narrator I have read of Roth. For the reader, it leaves a lot to be desired, and I think it gives the book a kind of slap-dash quality that other books in the past have not had.

**Brauner:** Let me respond briefly to that and also something that someone in the audience said earlier. You were saying that Roth is seventy-three and it is not surprising that he is thinking about death, his mortality, and so on, and that this is what determines the subject matter of his book. But as Mark [Shechner] said earlier, quite rightly, you can trace this back even earlier than that to Roth’s very first published story, “The Day It Snowed.” It is an incredibly morbid, and also maudlin, tale. And you can trace that side of his work all the way through. He published that story in 1954. And that is all about death and about the way people speak, or fail to speak, honestly and plainly about it. I think it is one thing to say that it is hardly surprising that this book is rather haunted by the specter of mortality. But this is not really about an eschatological turn, to be academic for a moment, in Roth’s work. I think you can see that right from the early Roth, so I don’t think that is what is going on here. Having said that, the kind of attenuation of characterization that you are talking about, Mark [Shechner], that Kakutani sees, I think is there to a certain extent. But the crude reductiveness is as much Kakutani’s problem as Roth’s, to play devil’s advocate for a moment. I also find the novel disappointing, but only in the context of being a big fan of Roth. For me it is minor Roth, it is lesser Roth, but there are still marvelous things in it. I think that
Kakutani is more crudely reductive than Roth is in the way she characterizes his characterization.

**Shostak:** I actually think that the minor characters are some of the liveliest figures in the novel. To me, part of what is interesting is that he has taken as a protagonist a person that is not all that interesting. He just has a life, and he encounters these minor figures who give the sparkle to the novel and we do not see much of them. But I do not think we need to see much of them to get a sense of the liveliness of these figures. I want to hasten to say that although I am disappointed in this novel, it is only because it is not the novel I wanted him to write; it is not that I think it is a bad novel. I think again it is part of the aesthetic problem he set himself to write about this sort of a figure who is an everyman—and I do not want to push the allegorical notion. He is not Portnoy, he is not Zuckerman, he is not even Kepesh.

**Brauner:** He is almost intellectual, really. Although he has artistic pretensions, they fall flat. That in itself is a departure and makes it interesting.

**Royal:** He purposefully creates this flat character, and I think that, as you mentioned, Deb [Shostak], the minor characters are engaging—especially since as they fall away from him one by one, that, in an ironic way, creates his character. In reading through the novel again yesterday, I was struck, not so much by the emphasis on death as by the emphasis on aloneness and loneliness. I did not do a count, I should have, but the words “alone,” “loneliness,” or “aloneness,” in some form or another, come up again and again and again. For me, at least, this is what makes the book so depressing. It is not so much the death part, but it is being stripped of everything that the unnamed protagonist defines himself by, his relationships, until they are gone. There is this long passage about how he has more or less screwed up his life by following his passions, about his jealousies for his brother’s good health, and about how one by one those relationships peel away. And I think that part of the narrative stance that Roth has created here gets back to my earlier comment about the connectedness of the narrator to the protagonist. It seems to me that at times, and when the novel is most powerful, is when the narrator in an almost godlike way looks from afar and pronounces him a sad individual. That is the tone we get at the very end. There is a very cold ending to this novel. And I am not giving anything away here, because we know he dies. He goes into his final and tenth operation—might this be like the ten plagues? I quote from the very end: “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.” Ending at the start, as you mentioned Bernie [Rodgers]. This is very detached.

**Audience member:** I have got two points. One is that Roth titles this *Everyman*, deliberately invoking the Medieval morality play. So I think the flatness that you are talking about, which is a disappointment, is deliberate. Because if you think of this as a parable or a morality play, that is the effect he is trying to deliver. The other point is that by making him such a narrow character I think Roth allows us as readers to project our emotions into him. This is the only Roth novel that has ever made me cry. It is a personal response: I had a heart attack recently, so reading this thing really hit home. For me, the novel worked. That deliberate flatness and the generic hero, like in a morality play, worked and brought an emotional response.

**Shostak:** I want to respond to that. I think some of the most moving parts are the ones where the narrator and protagonist seem to conflate.

**Rodgers:** The nostalgic moments.

**Shostak:** The nostalgic moments. The swimming and wanting to take a bite out of his own arm. It is the narrator speaking, but it sounds like it is the character’s voice. This goes back, in a different way, to the point that Derek [Parker Royal] was making. There is a kind of weaving of the narrator in and out of the character. And I think there is something sort of confusing about that. Not that I think it is an aesthetic mistake, but that may be part of what is giving us some of the responses that we have.

**Audience member:** Roth has always taken subjects that are taboo, and dying is a taboo subject. I think it’s interesting to look at *Sabbath’s Theater*, for example. We have Sabbath speaking to his cousin Fish. And the scene is sort of humorous, but Fish says, I am paraphrasing, that I am a hundred years old and I never should have lived. Life is not worthwhile because you have to die. But then that is counteracted with a zest for life. And you then have Sabbath who at the end, even though he is talking about death all the time, says who wants to leave this world? Everything he hated was here. But in this book, except for some of the minor characters, it is death and looking at bones. I think that Roth always gets his pain across because there is so much humor in his work. For me, there is too much focus on the bones and the bareness.
Rodgers: I think that we all realize Roth is a transgressor, that outraging, breaking conventions, crossing boundaries has been something he has been doing throughout his career in one way or another. And, in this book, I am reminded of the comment Joan Didion makes in *The Year of Magical Thinking*—another book that is painful to read. She says that this culture does not want to deal with death and grief. It does not want to talk about it; it wants you to get over it and move on as soon as you possibly can. And I think he is responding to that attitude in a typically Rothian way—by insisting on talking about it. It is difficult for anybody who has gone through the experiences that he is describing, or who has seen loved ones go through them, to read this book. I found that, as you did, very powerful.

Shostak: But I think it is even more than that, because also what the novel is charting throughout is the body and the body decaying. He writes, “He’d married three times, had mistresses and children and an interesting job where he’d been a success, but now eluding death seemed to have become the central business of his life and bodily decay his entire life’s story.” And I think that last phrase is really telling because it is the story of bodily decay, and that is something else we do not talk about.

Rodgers: But it is a story that a lot of people go through. And a lot of people at this age start to think and talk about it.

Shechner: It happens to me and my friends sometimes.

Rodgers: And Roth says this. He says that all the people at the Starfish Beach retirement village talk about are their illnesses and operations.

Royal: He has said in a number of interviews that one of the reasons why he wanted to write this book was that there were so few books out there, that he knew of, on the process of dying and decay.

Audience member: I want to get back to the narrative here. And it is not a misnomer to say “narrative.” Because I think that Everyman, in a sense, is kind of a foil for Roth who is, in effect, the narrator, or at least a surrogate for Roth. And where does the power lie? Not in the fact that Everyman is dying, and has had three wives, and has made mistakes, and is an American Jewish version of Ivan Ilych, who does not have much of a voice. It is because Roth is
possessed of a great deal of power in the rhetorical flow of the book. I am sustained, not by Everyman, but by the power by which Everyman is described. And having said that, I could say, well, shall I read a passage and dramatize the impact of his prose? That is what sustains the book and gives it its power. And it seems to me that if we dwell on bones and rotting corpses and the graveyard, we are missing that part of the book where the power lies, and it is the power of Roth’s, or the surrogate’s, voice and the flow of the rhetoric.

Rodgers: And I think this is where we are disagreeing up here. I agree with you: I think the book is filled with set pieces that I think are really wonderful. I, too, think it is crude reductiveness on Kakutani’s part to accuse this book of crude reductiveness. There is page after page of amazing writing here and things that are very touching in a way that is earned—earned because he can do it, earned because he can make me feel what he makes me feel when he writes this. The descriptions of his parents with him as a boy in the hospital; the description of him noticing the other boy in the hospital bed; the description of his brother Howie coming back to take care of him when he is ill; the description of bodysurfing at the Jersey shore. There are set pieces of this kind where the writing is simply amazing.

Royal: Deb [Shostak], I want to refer to a comment you made earlier, where you said that the most powerful moments of the novel are those nostalgic pieces where there is a collapse between the narrator and the protagonist. I agree with you there. But basically there are two narrators here whom I am interested in and who confuse me at times. One is this Tolstoyan, god-like figure who is looking down and who can be critical of his protagonist. But emotionally the most moving passages are the ones you all have been pointing out, especially the bodysurfing memory toward the end. This leads me back to the critical arguments regarding nostalgia and sentimentality. I agree with what Bernie [Rodgers] said earlier. I mean, so what? What’s wrong with nostalgia? Because in the absence of a god, the absence of the solace of religion, what do you have? What you have are memories. And I do not think he whitewashes these memories. These help to bridge the gap that is there in his loneliness, because when he thinks back to his life with his parents, his parents with him at the hospital, himself at the beach bodysurfing, he is not alone anymore. He is not by himself decaying, he is with others where he is his own person. It is in those moments when the narrator is detached and critical that we see the protagonist by himself alone and breaking down. He describes himself as depersonalized, he is no longer a person. So the only hope is in those memories, in that nostalgia, that come out in the elegiac passages.

Shostak: It seems to me one of the things that is interesting is a comment that Roth made in at least one interview, when he said he did not even realize
that the protagonist did not have a name until he was pretty much through with the first draft. Not to beat any old dead horses but, this brings us back to the whole autobiographical thing. Where is the distance between Roth the narrator, the character, and Roth the writer? I think that some of the power of this is precisely in Roth’s own nostalgic remembering of the past, of what life was like. He repeatedly goes back to Newark and the 1940s and the 1950s because that is where it is alive.

Rodgers: I think the hernia at nine, appendicitis in his thirties, and bypass surgery in his fifties are all autobiographical. All those things happened at those times to Philip Roth. I imagine this book starting out like *My Life as a Man*, with him sitting down and starting to write about these subjects and then later coming up with the idea of putting this other, Everyman frame around it. That is why the character did not have a name.

Shostak: So then what I think happens, and this is more about the narrative itself, is that you have this interesting interweaving of the present narrative, which is about bodily decay, and this other juxtaposed narrative where he is still alive, where all the memories are taking him back to the times when there is some sort of vitality, or connection, or something that is not happening in the present.

Shechner: I want to get back to the comment made earlier about the power of Roth’s rhetoric. Yes, it is moving in a way, but it is precisely his emotional writing here that finally makes me distinguish this book from a lot of other Roth writing. Roth for me is and has been all along one of the real masters of the English language. And the emotional passages, as moving as they can be as an expression of the things that do happen to a man, nevertheless are not the kind of writing that I associate with Roth at his best. Roth at his best makes the language lift off the page and brand themselves upon your imagination—not to your sense of mortality, but to your imagination of what language can do. It is one of the things he took from all of those years of reading Shakespeare and absorbing *King Lear*: that language itself can become magical. I find that with a few exceptions here, and there are some exceptions, the prose itself does not become magical in the same way that it does in other books. The prose here is a good, utilitarian, smart, higher journalism.

Rodgers: Mark [Shechner], what do you think about the first fifteen pages of the book as writing?
Shechner: I think the scene at the grave site is a moving scene. I am moved by it. And the thing I am moved by most, actually, is one of the sons who despises the father and does not know what to say when he throws the dirt on the grave, says something like, “Sleep easy, Pop.” That is dynamite stuff, I agree.

Rodgers: Can I give an example, just in those first couple pages? This is the protagonist’s older brother who we have already been told on the first page of the book has been his hero and this extraordinary figure in his life. It is his turn to speak at the grave: “His voice was husky with emotion when he whispered to his wife, ‘My kid brother. It makes no sense.’ Then he too addressed everyone. ‘Let’s see if I can do it. Now let’s get to this guy. About my brother. . . .’” That—the voice of that Jersey guy—only Philip Roth can do. I find it so affecting, such mastery of a certain kind of dialogue and a certain kind of voice. And it is not just Howie’s voice that comes through this way in the book. There are other voices too. There is Phoebe’s voice—the wife who finds out he has had this affair—in a page and a half rant against him that is brilliant. And to say, as someone has, that to then have the rant end with the comment, “But these episodes are indeed well known and require no further elaboration,” demonstrates the novel’s lack of imagination, is to ignore that the page and a half that precedes that sentence is incredibly powerful. You do not need any more than what we are given to understand all that was going on.

Shechner: And also add Millicent Kramer’s speech about her husband. There are moments in the book of voices given to the others, voices at the periphery, that I agree are powerful.

Rodgers: But the earlier point was about Roth’s rhetoric. He is the one who is doing this. He is the one who is taking us page to page here.

Audience member: The comparable rhetorical strategy is in American Pastoral when the narrator begins to describe the making of gloves in relation to Swede’s vocation. And Swede is a kind of ineffectual everyman. And it is not Swede who is important here. It is the power of Roth’s voice developing detail on detail regarding the history of the glove factory. . . .

Rodgers: And he does it in Everyman about jewelry.

Royal: And about grave digging.
Audience member: . . . and the position between the powerful voice of the narrator and the ineffectuacity and disorientation of the protagonist.

Brauner: I was very much reminded of those passages about glove making, which are very powerful and brilliant pieces of writing, in the descriptions here that Kakutani refers to as the finest bits in the novel—the detailed descriptions of the father’s business with watches and diamonds. Some of that writing is brilliant. There are some fantastic passages of writing in this book, as there are with all of Roth. I agree completely with Mark [Shechner] that what makes Roth a great writer is not his subject matter and not his themes; it is his voice, undoubtedly. He is a master stylist. At times you just catch your breath at the brilliance of the rhetoric. And there is some of that here. There is plenty to make the book worth reading. But Roth is a victim here of his own brilliance. If you are going to measure this by the yardstick of his best writing, there is not enough of that here. There is far too much of that rather muted, rather bare factual medical history. He said that one of the titles he played around with before he decided on Everyman was The Medical History. Well, it would have been quite a good title because there is too much unadorned, unmagical medical history here. And those longueurs in the novel, frankly, detract from the brilliance. Yes, there is brilliance, but it is all relative. For me, it is not a Sabbath’s Theater, it is not an American Pastoral, it is not a Counterlife, it is not a Ghost Writer.

Shostak: It strikes me that there is a kind of complaint that runs through here, which is what the protagonist says to Nancy, and she repeats at the grave, “There’s no remaking reality. Just take it as it comes.” There is a wonderfully flat sentence referring to one of his sons, sort of like Gertrude Stein: “He had done what he did the way that he did it as they did what they did the way they did it.” It seems to me that this flatness is what the contrast is between the present and the dying of the body and those gorgeous passages that are all about the past.

Shechner: I just want to ask a question. Is anybody but me bothered by the fact that he is finally not a very likeable guy and that maybe, since Derek [Parker Royal] talks about being alone, perhaps he deserves to be alone because his social instincts are so poorly developed?

Rodgers: I guess likeable is relative. Do you like Kepesh better than him?

Shechner: Kepesh is full of life, he’s the alter id.
Rodgers: It is all a matter of taste, Mark [Shechner]. I want to ask a question that picks up on these longueurs you are talking about, David [Brauner]. Starting on page 79 of the novel and running through about page 156, he stops the medical history. He had just had his ninth operation right before this stopping at page 79, and on page 156 we get the tenth illness. I found it really interesting that he spends seventy-some pages suddenly doing something else. At least I thought he was doing something else; I wonder what you all thought about what he was trying to do there. This is where he starts talking a lot about the past, he starts talking about the Starfish colony, he starts talking about the other people who live there, he starts talking about his daughter, and there is a lot of the detail about the marriages. It is like the book has this break in the middle where this history of the body stops, and it changes, not direction, but tone. I wonder if anybody else felt that, and if so, what you thought of it.

Audience member: It reminded me of Norman O. Brown’s book that came out in the 1950s, *Life Against Death*. Basically, it becomes animated when he talks about his father’s jewelry store and the watches and the piling on of detail. There is an energy here, which perhaps comes through reminiscence. But, again, the narrator, at least through the consciousness of Everyman, is addressing the vitality of the past in contrast to the elimination and diminution of that life.

Audience member: If that contrast worked, then you would have the tension that I think is Roth’s best quality. I do not find the tension. I think that these passages are good. They give you a sense of life, in contrast to the focus on bones, but I do not get that pull. There is a textured structural relationship that I usually feel in Roth, that is why I love him. I don’t find it here.

Royal: Well, for me, it all comes back again to these two kinds of narrators. One satisfies me critically and another satisfies me emotionally. And I think, Bernie [Rodgers], in some of the pages that you have just mentioned you find a lot of the emotional side that comes through. For instance, and we have cited this several times, that scene where he is at the beach that, on the one hand, verges on sentimentality, but on the other hand is extremely moving. He remembers surfing the Atlantic, going through the waves: “Along with the ecstasy of the whole day of being battered silly by the sea, the taste and the smell intoxicated him so that he was driven to the brink of biting down with his teeth to tear out a chunk of himself and savor his fleshly existence.” A lot of this takes place in those pages you refer to. But again, there is this going back and forth, and maybe that is the tension that may or may not be here.
do see the tension there, but the tension is in the issue of the narrator. Again I come back to the question “what is the attitude of the narrator toward Everyman?” I think the flatness is a big part of it. These more moving emotional moments also come out when this novel seems to be, curiously, very similar to other novels and supposed nonfiction that we have had from Roth. For instance, when Everyman by chance drifts off to his parents’ grave site, we are reminded of *Patrimony* when Philip gets lost and goes to his mother’s grave. Maureen, who is the protagonist’s nurse? Well, here’s Jinx Possesski. There are not only so many moments that are out of Roth’s life, as Deb [Shostak] and Bernie [Rodgers] mentioned, but so many that are intertextual allusions to his other fiction as well.

**Brauner:** The discussion with the gravedigger reminds me of the discussion with the caretaker of the cemetery in *Sabbath’s Theater*. And there are even more obscure things, like that passage we have all referred to about biting a chunk out of himself. That reminds me of that very early autobiographical piece, “Recollections from Beyond the Last Rope,” where he talks about these lazy summers on the beach. And that also ends with an intimation of mortality. So you can see all of these connections. On the one hand they make this richer, this kind of intertextuality; on the other, it makes you judge this book by those other books. And in that sense he does not necessarily do himself any favors because often those comparisons are to the detriment of *Everyman*.

**Audience member:** Is it really repetition, or a kind of incremental repetition?

**Brauner:** It is never just repetition. I would not say that.

**Shechner:** In the Christian *Everyman* the point is made that not only do we all die, but that we live *in order* to die. That is, our death, which leads to either eternal damnation or eternal salvation, is where everything is heading. So you live your life in order to die in the right way. Now is it possible, since Roth is an entirely secular person who cannot possibly harbor such thoughts, that an idea like that can be transformed aesthetically in such a way that characters are better dead or more interesting dead than they are alive? I mean the scenes that Bernie [Rodgers] quoted around the grave at the very beginning are very moving because all the people around the grave have their own dramas, and their dramas get enacted around the grave. There’s also the scene in which Everyman—or E-man or E-male, whatever you want to call him—is remembering his father’s death. And this is an extraordinary scene where he imagines that the dirt being shoveled upon his father is actually filling up his father’s body cavities.
I do find that moving, and frightening at the same time. And I wonder if the book’s aesthetics do not follow, in their own secular way, the eschatology of a Christian narrative, though Roth cannot write a Christian narrative as such.

Shostak: But it opposes it. Because, as you said, he is a secularist. All you are left with is the body. And in that scene what I find is even more moving than that image is when he walks away with the taste of the dirt in his mouth. In other words, that’s all that we can come away with—the taste of death.

Royal: Except for memory. That seems to be the one way out here. Again, it just strikes me that in all this bleakness the one avenue—not only for the protagonist but for, I assume, Roth, and then for me as a reader—is that we do have those recollections of the past where he does seem to connect up with himself as a boy, his parents, his brother. And this makes him less alone.

Rodgers: Terry Gross asked him in the interview—and she was very blunt about this—“Do you go to cemeteries? And if you go, why do you go? And what do you get from being there?” And then she asked him if he believed in any afterlife. What Roth said was that he did go to the cemetery, to see his par-
ents’ graves, and that it caused him to concentrate for the hour he was there, to think about them. And I think that this book reflects that description, of facing death by thinking about memories, and then about the bones, as opposed to something else. So I want to ask the panel to pursue the question that Mark [Shechner] has raised, which is the question about the extent to which Everyman, the Medieval morality play, is genuinely relevant to this book. We have heard Roth say in an interview that it was, that he read this drama, but I wonder what you all think about that?

Brauner: I agree with what Derek [Parker Royal] said earlier, actually. I think it is relevant, and I think it is most relevant in the sense of the increasing isolation the protagonist experiences. The trajectory that the Medieval play follows is that, one by one, the Everyman figure is abandoned by all his worldly allies and friends. I think Roth does translate that very effectively into a secular framework where that abandonment is not about being left alone to face your spiritual day or reckoning. He takes that allegorical narrative and translates it into a realistic framework whereby in old age people do find themselves increasingly isolated because their friends start to die, their parents have died, and often, as in this case, their family is estranged or divorced, not close either geographically or emotionally. That is the most frightening thing about this book, and I think that is where it really connects up most powerfully with the medieval play.

Shechner: My Jewishness is about as vestigial as Roth’s, but I think that one of the ways in which you do achieve a form of immortality within the Jewish tradition is to be remembered. The great Jewish sacrament, after all, is memory, Yizkor. To the extent that the character here does remember his father and does remember his lover and is remembered, at least fleetingly by his brother Howie and by the sons and the daughter and maybe by Phoebe—to that extent something as close to religiosity as Roth will allow himself to get is enacted.

Shostak: He pretty much says it at the end of the novel in the bones passage: “They were just bones, bones in a box, but their bones were his bones, and he stood as close to the bones as he could, as though the proximity might link him up with them and mitigate the isolation born of losing his future and reconnect him with all that had gone.” And then just a little further, “The bones were the only solace there was to one who put no stock in an afterlife and knew without a doubt that God was a fiction and this was the only life he’d have.”

Audience member: I heard the same interview that you did, but I thought you were going to go a little further. Toward the end of it Terry Gross asks
Philip Roth, “Where would you like to be buried yourself?” And Roth thought a moment and said, “Well it depends on where you like to visit.” Which I thought this was a wonderful Rothian moment.

Shechner: Right. She is the girl jogging by the boardwalk and he just made a pass at her.

Audience member: The allusion to Hamlet, the gravedigger’s scene, is just another wonderful example of Roth and Everyman contemplating what it is all about.

Rodgers: For those of you who have not read the book there is a long conversation with the man who digs the graves in which Roth goes into detail about grave digging in the same way he went into detail about glove making in American Pastoral.

Brauner: There is an allusion to Hamlet very early on as well. A lot of reviewers have noticed the gravedigger scene, and Roth himself in an interview said, “I had Hamlet on one side while I was writing.” But as a kind of coda to the opening graveside scene, the narrator says, “That was the end. [. . .] But then it’s the commonness that’s most wrenching, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything.” I think that Roth may well have had in mind here that scene early in Hamlet where Gertrude tries to tell Hamlet, “Snap out of it. You are overdoing the grief. It is common. All that lives must die.” And I think this scene is a response to that. He’s turning that on its head, saying it is precisely the commonness that makes it so shocking. We all know it is going to happen, we cannot escape it, but that does not make it any easier. It makes it more difficult.

Audience member: That is a good point because when she says that to Hamlet, he says to her, “Aye, madam, ‘tis common.” That gives you a balance that I usually see in Roth.

Shostak: I think there’s another dimension to this too, which is that we talk about death as an abstract thing and this whole book is about making it concrete. And what he says to the gravedigger at the end of this scene is, I thank you for the concreteness.

Royal: And the mood of the Everyman protagonist is almost at its highest immediately after the gravedigger scene. What makes the abrupt and cold conclusion
so powerful here is that he seems to be at his emotional high point, goes under complete anesthesia, and then dies. This adds to the punch of the ending.

**Rodgers:** I think the whole *Everyman* connection is very convincing as you all describe it. My first impression was that this was a kind of afterthought, that the original conception of the book was of an “everyman” in the way the term is used today in common speech, by people who had never heard of the morality play, and that afterward this became more intellectualized. But I find the way you are describing it persuasive as a way of explaining why it actually does have some deep connection to the book.

**Audience member:** I just wanted to add a sort of a footnote to this idea of the inevitability of death. I am reminded of Reinhold Niebuhr who said, and I am paraphrasing, “Of all God’s creatures, man alone is aware that he’s going to die.” And this adds a tragic dimension to life. We live with that thought.

**Rodgers:** And we also need to end this. I would like to close with a quote from *The Dying Animal* about exactly that. Kepesh says: “Can you imagine old age? Of course you can’t. I didn’t. I couldn’t. I had no idea what it was like. Not even a false image—no image. And nobody wants anything else. Nobody wants to face any of this before he has to. How is it all going to turn out? Obtuseness is de rigueur.”

Thank you all for coming.