

Sabbath's Theatre

P.Roth

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Is this pornography? There certainly is a lot of graphic sex displayed. In former times this would have caused censure, nowadays it hardly makes for the raising of a single eyebrow. Or at least none that would be publicly announced. Community standards change? Is it enticing, does it cause physiological changes? I suspect that people who are looking for such thrills know where to get it, cheaper and more effective to boot.

Philip Roth is one of the supposed masters of the modern American Novel. Whenever he produces a new book, it causes a flurry of excitement on the literary pages in the Anglo-Saxon world. One naturally compares him to Updike, an almost contemporary, although I guess Saul Bellow, with whom he has more in common, is a more apt comparison, although the age difference is greater. There are otherwise many similarities, obvious as well as more subtle.

First Roth writes with an undeniable verve. This might be somewhat exhausting, especially in Sabbath's world, all the characters are caricatures, especially the main protagonist, whose main aim in life is to get properly fucked, and as often as it is physically possible too. Roth's prose races through the pages, as if he was chasing down along a freeway. The effect is that much of the novel reads not only as if a farce, but actually as if it is pure slapstick. Some parts are quite funny, and you can imagine the author chuckling when he wrote it. The telephone sex exchange between Sabbath and a young co-ed, is supposed to have been taped and distributed on a special phone-line by the concerned college authorities, and in the book it is displayed in full on a very long footnote that drags on page after page. A nice meta-literary touch worthy of a Tristram Shandy. Clearly Roth has a thing or two against modern political correctness and the hysteria connected with so-called sexual harassment.

Secondly it is as if the author occasionally runs out of imaginative steam, but the pace and the momentum demands an uninterrupted flow. Then he seems to dish out personal reminiscences only marginally edited to fit into the particular narrative. One suspects that Roth wastes nothing, anything is fed to his mill, and thus anything he happens to think of should somehow, sooner or later, be included in his total output. If you are a best-selling author you can get away with it, so why should you not?

Micky Sabbath is a Jew born in 1929 (the same year as the author? Most likely.) on the Jersey shore. His elder brother is killed in the war and then he takes to the sea, spending a few years in the merchant marine, which gives him plenty of time to sample the flesh at all the big ports of the world. He then settles in Manhattan, doing some kind of puppet theatre in the streets, mostly outside Columbia (I guess Roth might have gone there). His first wife disappears (did he kill her? he certainly likes believing that he did in later recollection) and then he takes up with some tall woman (being short he has always such a thing for the tall and inaccessible) retiring for thirty years or so to the isolation of a fictional (?) New England Town. There he discovers a lusty Croatian woman, with

whom he carouses and fondles in all ways imaginable (at least to the author?) for thirteen years until she is stricken with cancer and dies. He is of course heart-broken, going to her grave to masturbate or urinate. His wife, a recovering alcoholic, getting caught in the inanities of AA-speak he eventually leaves, fed up with her machinations behind his back with her shrink. Instead he finds a temporary sanctuary at an old friend and companion, most successful but impotent where it matters, in connection with the death from suicidal depression of a common friend. Predictably he is thrown out after having made quite a pass to his friends wife. He is at the end of his tethers and decides to end it all as well, old arthritic age getting the better of him, as well as obsessive ruminations on death and dying. (Reflecting the narcissistic obsessions by the author himself?). But before that he buys a plot at a cemetery close to his family grave using cash he has stolen from his hosts. But when he tries to kill himself down at his old home town, he finds that he cannot do it, so overcome with nostalgia for the good old days. (And it is here Roth lays it on thick with his own personal remembrances, which can do work for his main protagonist as well.) He returns to his wife, only to find that he has been replaced by a young lesbian lover, his belongings cleared out. He tries to be killed by a state-trooper, actually the only child of his Croatian lover, but the trooper finds that he cannot oblige. And so the novel ends after more than 450 pages in mid-air (or should we say mid-way) dumped as he is on a road-side. Does this mean that the author hold the possibility of a continuation possible? Surely he has fallen in love with his character, as an author has a moral obligation to do, and might enjoy finding out more about him. After all almost all novels are supposed to be auto-biographical, and Sabbath clearly is a character the author both have wanted to be as well as striven to avoid becoming.

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