

## *Philip Roth and fine art*

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Brauner, D. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2817-7847>  
(2024) Philip Roth and fine art. In: Pozorski, A. and Scheurer, M. (eds.) The Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth. Bloomsbury, New York, pp. 113-124. ISBN 9781501380242  
doi: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501380273.ch-10> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/116466/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501380273.ch-10>

Publisher: Bloomsbury

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

## Philip Roth and Fine Art

Fine art was an important point of reference for Philip Roth throughout his life. Growing up as the younger brother of an aspiring artist, Sandy, Roth ‘would wonderingly “debrief” his brother when he returned from life drawing class at the Art Students League, where he’d been sitting in a room with an actual naked woman – “of all things, drawing”’ (Pierpont 2015: 20).<sup>1</sup> Although Roth comically suggests that his awe at his brother’s experiences had more to do with his exposure to the unadorned female form than with his draughtmanship, it is clear, from his descriptions of the fictionalised version of Sandy, who appears in *The Plot Against America* (2004), that Sandy’s technical skills also made a lasting impression, offering a template of sorts for the younger brother who had artistic ambitions of his own. Whereas the real-life Sandy ‘studied to be a painter at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn’ (Pierpont 20) and went on to have a successful career in advertising before devoting himself to painting for the last two decades of his life, his younger brother Philip dedicated his whole adult life to the art of fiction.

Later in life, Roth formed friendships with a number of painters, most notably Philip Guston and R.B. Kitaj. These relationships fed into his work in various ways, from Philip Guston’s illustrations for a special edition of *The Breast* (1982) and Roth’s essay on Guston in *Shop Talk*<sup>2</sup>, to Roth’s use of Kitaj’s notion of ‘diasporism’ in *Operation Shylock* (1993) and parts of the painter’s biography in *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995) and *The Human Stain* (2000).<sup>3</sup> Conversely, Roth’s work has been important to a number of contemporary artists, most notably Bryan Zanisnik and Bernardo Siciliano.<sup>4</sup> There has been little scholarship on the role of the visual arts in Roth. Ross Posnock devotes a chapter of his monograph on Roth to the relationship between the author and the painter Philip Guston, but the chapter is more

about Guston than Roth and has little to say about Roth's response to Guston's art, or anyone else's, in his own work.<sup>5</sup> There have been two essays on *The Dying Animal* that deal with Roth's use of art in that work: Zoe Roth's 'Against Representation: Death, Desire, and Art in Philip Roth's *The Dying Animal*', in which she argues persuasively that the novella is 'a meditation on how art mediates experiences of desire and death' (Roth 2012: 96); and Francesca D'Alfonso's '*The Dying Animal* e la lezione dei maestri', which discusses how 'Roth makes use of literary and pictorial references to create an intense and constantly lively dialogism' (D'Alfonso 2016: 55).<sup>6</sup> In this essay, I will explore Roth's engagement with fine art in his late novel *The Dying Animal* and in his early novella 'Goodbye, Columbus', arguing that in both cases painting in general, and certain painters and paintings in particular, provide models for understanding Roth's own aesthetics.

Fine art in 'Goodbye, Columbus' serves two principal functions: it represents the imaginative possibilities of art, in particular its potential for transcending the banalities and vicissitudes of everyday life; and it contributes to what is arguably the dominant discursive field of the story: that of seeing and being seen, looking and being overlooked. The two central relationships of 'Goodbye, Columbus' – between the narrator/protagonist, Neil Klugman, and Brenda Patimkin; and between Neil and the unnamed black boy who frequents the Newark Public Library, where Neil works – are both framed in terms of visual metaphors.

'Goodbye, Columbus' begins by juxtaposing the act of looking with the act of not looking. The opening line of the story – 'The first time I saw Brenda she asked me to hold her glasses' (Roth 1970 [1959]: 2) – emphasises that the initial impression that Brenda makes on Neil is a visual one, a point that is reinforced when, in response to his Aunt Gladys's query 'How did you meet her?', he responds pedantically: 'I didn't really meet her. I saw her' (2). In contrast, 'myopic' Brenda archly avoids looking at Neil, firstly handing over her glasses so that her vision becomes blurred (Neil looks at her 'looking foggily into the pool')

and then, after reclaiming them, having emerged from the pool with ‘eyes watery though not from the water’ (2), deferring putting them back on ‘until she turned and headed away’ (2). As she does so, Neil ‘watche[s] her move off’ and is aroused when Brenda ‘caught the bottom of her suit between thumb and index finger and flicked what flesh had been showing back where it belonged’ (2). Whether or not Brenda’s ‘finger ... flick[ing] ... [her] flesh’ is, as Neil implies (partly through the alliterative series of fricatives), a provocative gesture performed for his benefit, what is unmistakable is the contrast between his male gaze, intently following all Brenda’s movements, and Brenda’s studied indifference to Neil’s own appearance.

This scene signifies on a number of different levels. It provides an early example of Brenda’s vanity and of Neil’s instinctive indulgence of it. Brenda’s literal short-sightedness, in common with innumerable other examples of impaired sight or blindness in the Western literary canon, also hints at a moral short-sightedness, a suggestion reinforced when, as Neil picks her up for their first date and watches the end of her tennis match with dusk descending, ‘all [he] could see in the darkness were her glasses’ (7). Most importantly, it initiates a discourse of visibility and invisibility that runs throughout the novella. This discourse is related to its representation of race, which is in turn mediated through a network of references to the French post-impressionist painter, Paul Gauguin, best known for the work he produced during two prolonged visits to Tahiti (from 1890 to 1893 and from 1895 until his death in 1903).

Early in the story, arriving for work at the Newark Public Library, Neil notices a ‘small colored boy’ addressing one of the ‘pale cement lions’ who ‘stood unconvincing guard on the library steps’ (22). Later the same day the boy, whom Neil dubs ‘the lion tamer’ (23), appears inside the building to ask him: ‘where’s the heart section?’ (24).

He had the thickest sort of Negro dialect and the only word that came clear to me was the one that sounded like heart.

‘How do you spell it?’ I said.

‘*Heart*. Man, pictures. Drawing books. Where you got them?’

‘You mean art books? Reproductions?’

He took my polysyllabic word for it. ‘Yea, they’s them.’

‘In a couple places,’ I told him. ‘Which artist are you interested in?’

The black boy’s eyes narrowed so that his whole face seemed black. He started backing away, as he had from the lion. ‘All of them ... ’ he mumbled. (24)

The portrait that Neil paints of the boy is clearly affectionate but nonetheless inflected by subtle racism. The boy’s ‘thick ... Negro dialect’ is at one level a convenient device for drawing attention to the vexed relationship between morality (‘heart’) and aesthetics (‘art’), a subject to which Roth would return periodically throughout his career. At the same time, taken in conjunction with the ironic nickname that Neil gives him (‘the lion-tamer’) and the condescension implicit in Neil’s observation that he ‘took my polysyllabic word for it’, it suggests that, for Neil, the boy is a native version of the exotic primitive figures who populate Western primitivist art, simultaneously idealised and patronised. Like the lion whom the boy goads (‘Man, you’s a coward’) in an attempt to overcome his fear, Neil is a figure of authority who metaphorically guards the entrance to the library’s holdings; a cultural gatekeeper whose questions intimidate and confuse the boy (22). The fact that the boy’s appearance somehow appears to become blacker during this exchange (‘his whole face seemed black’), coupled with the fact that he remains unnamed throughout the story, suggests that his role in the story is fundamentally symbolic. But what precisely does he symbolise?

The answer is complicated. After Neil directs him to Stack Three, assuring him that he can ‘go look at whichever ones you want’ (24), the boy hesitates and then sets off, ‘scuffling and tapping up towards the heart section’ (24). Neil’s description of the boy’s movements (redolent of minstrel performers) and his wry reference to ‘the heart section’ are faintly supercilious, but when his colleague, John McKee, makes insinuations about the boy (‘He’s been hiding in the art books all morning. You know what those boys *do* in there ... Those are *very* expensive books’) Neil dismisses his concerns: ‘People are supposed to touch them’ (25). When McKee starts to make racist comments (‘They’re taking over the city’) Neil turns his satirical wit on him to expose the absurdity of his prejudices: ‘Just the Negro sections’ (25). Later, Neil decides to seek out the boy, in order to prevent another colleague, Mr Scapello, from ‘descend[ing] upon ... [him] with his ‘chalky fingers’ (25), the word ‘chalky’ here suggesting both Scapello’s dusty fustiness and his ethnic whiteness. Neil discovers the boy transfixed by a ‘print, in color, of three native women standing knee-high in a rose-colored stream’ in a ‘large-sized edition of Gauguin reproductions’ (25). While the boy looks at the Gauguin paintings, Neil looks at the boy looking:

He was very black and shiny, and the flesh of his lips did not so much appear to be a different color as it looked to be unfinished and awaiting another coat. The lips were parted, the eyes wide, and even the ears seemed to have a heightened receptivity.

(26)

Once again, the focus of Neil’s gaze here is the boy’s color, an ambiguous term that is sometimes used as a synonym for blackness (as in the initial description of the ‘small colored boy’) and sometimes as something close to its antonym (as in ‘his lips did not so much appear to be a different color etc.’). The boy’s wide-eyed, open-mouthed expression seems to

invoke racist iconography, yet for Neil the boy's blackness is as much an object of aesthetic fascination as a signifier of racial difference. Just as, in the course of their earlier conversation, Neil becomes fascinated by the way that, in his perception, the blackness of the boy's face intensifies as he struggles to clarify the nature of his artistic interests, so here Neil becomes preoccupied by the particularities of pigmentation in the boy's physiognomy. Neil's impulse to shield the boy from the hostile scrutiny of his colleagues arises from an instinctive sympathy with his status as a member of a disadvantaged minority group but it also partakes of paternalism, implicating Neil in a colonial history of exploitation that is the queasy backdrop to Gauguin's paintings. The story sets up an analogy between the boy's preoccupation with the exotic figures he sees in Gauguin's paintings and Neil's preoccupation with the boy himself, an analogy that is reinforced by the fact that the boy himself takes on the qualities of an 'unfinished' painting. At the same time, there is an implicit correspondence between Neil and Gauguin: just as the artist arguably objectifies and idealises the Tahitian women who populate the paintings that entrance the boy in the library, so Neil arguably fetishises the boy's appearance, painting his own portrait of him as an exotic other.

In the symbolic imaginary of 'Goodbye, Columbus', then, the boy is both a representative of the inner-city deprivation that led, eight years after the story's publication, to the Newark race riots; and a type of noble savage, whose innocent, wholehearted appreciation of the beauty of fine art stands in opposition to the superficial materialism of the Patimkins. Neil has one foot in, and ultimately has to choose between, these two worlds with their contrasting values. His exposure to Gauguin – looking at the pictures through the awed eyes of the boy – changes the way that he looks at the world around him. At first, he associates Short Hills, the suburb where the Patimkins live, with the idealised world of Gauguin's Tahiti: 'I sat at the Information Desk thinking about Brenda and reminding myself

that that evening I would [drive to] ... Short Hills, which I could see now, in my mind's eye, at dusk, rose-colored, like a Gauguin stream' (27). Yet as he spends more time there, it comes to represent everything that is inimical to Gauguin's Edenic vision. Whereas the trees in Gauguin's Tahiti are lush and laden with fruit, those in the Patimkins' garden are weighed down with sporting goods. Whereas the 'native women' in Gauguin's paintings are in, and of, a state of nature, entirely unselfconscious, Brenda self-consciously cultivates her beauty, posing to best advantage. The family portraits that adorn the walls of the study in the Patimkin home are 'photo-paintings' that represent their subjects with 'bud-cheeks, wet lips, pearly teeth, and shiny, metallized hair' (28), their synthetic qualities contrasting with the post-impressionist painterliness of Gauguin's work.

Ultimately, Neil's encounter with the boy, and more specifically with the boy's encounter with Gauguin, functions as a sort of epiphany, particularly if we read 'Goodbye, Columbus' as a *Bildungsroman* in the tradition of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As the boy becomes a regular visitor to the library, returning again and again to look at Gauguin, Neil tries to nourish the boy's enthusiasm, first by encouraging him to take the book out on loan (the boy tells him that he doesn't want to, lest 'somebody dee-*stroy* it') (42) and then by lying to a man who wants to take the book out (claiming that it is already out on loan). In the early stages of the novella there are a number of references to Neil's vision being temporarily impaired: while sunbathing with Brenda 'the colors splintered under [his] closed eyelids' (12); and when he is playing basketball with Brenda's younger sister, Julie, he falls into one of those instantaneous waking dreams that ... send ... 'deadly cataracts over my eyes' (19). However, the novella ends with a moment of clarity, again framed in terms of looking and seeing. Neil stares at his own reflection in the window of the Lamont Library, 'look[ing] hard at the image of me, at that darkening of the glass, until my gaze pushed through it ... to a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved', before taking a train back to



Newark to ensure that he is 'back in plenty of time for work' (97). Rejecting Brenda and the Patimkin family fortune that an alliance with her would have entailed, Neil instead chooses to identify himself with books and all that they represent. Instead of the shiny surfaces and sterile orderliness of the Patimkins, Neil opts for the rich, jagged messiness of art, as signified by the 'broken wall' of 'imperfectly shelved' books; rather than a life of leisure, Neil commits himself to 'work' (the final word of the novel), both in the context of his job at the library and in the context of a (subtly suggested) future as a writer.

On the face of it, *The Dying Animal* (2001) has little in common with 'Goodbye, Columbus'. Written more than four decades later, the third in a loose trilogy of fictions sharing David Kepesh as a protagonist (after *The Breast* (1972) and *The Professor of Desire* (1977)), *The Dying Animal* focuses on the ageing Kepesh's erotic obsession with one of his former students. Formally, it has more in common with *Portnoy's Complaint* than 'Goodbye, Columbus': like the former, the narrative is addressed to a mysterious interlocutor who remains silent until the final line of the book.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the analyst Dr Spielvogel's belated intervention takes the form of a punchline to a joke ('Vee may now to begin', he offers in broken English, at the end of Portnoy's lengthy, no-holds-barred confessional monologue), the unnamed addressee of *The Dying Animal* issues Kepesh with a stark warning: 'Think about it. Think. Because if you go, you're finished' (Roth 2001a: 156). This is a response to Kepesh's announcement that he intends to go to the bedside of his former student and lover, Consuela Castillo, who is due to have a mastectomy. In rushing to the hospital, Kepesh is reneging on his long-standing resolution not to become emotionally involved with any of his sexual partners, so that the primary meaning of his friend's prophecy that to do so would mean that he is 'finished' refers to Kepesh's decision to abandon his credo of 'emancipated manhood' (112). Yet it also carries a hint that to commit to this relationship will also be the end of him in a more literal sense – that he, rather than, or perhaps together with, the

cancerous Consuela, is the dying animal of the title.<sup>8</sup> Then again, in existential terms, however, we are all dying animals, and it this recognition that is at the heart of the novella's engagement with art.

*The Dying Animal* is suffused with references to fine art – sculpture and painting – to an extent singular in Roth's *oeuvre*.<sup>9</sup> These references almost invariably cluster around the figure (in both senses of that word) of Consuela: in this respect, there are interesting parallels between the representation of the black boy in 'Goodbye, Columbus' and the representation of the second-generation Cuban immigrant with whom Kepesh becomes obsessed. Just as Neil both looks at art through the black boy's eyes and describes him as though he were himself a work of art, so Kepesh participates sympathetically in Consuela's discovery of art and also objectifies her, reifying his aesthetic theories in the form of her form. Early on, he reflects on her engagement with modern art:

She [...] finds the impressionists ravishing but must look long and hard – and always with a nagging sense of confoundment – at cubist Picasso ... Art that smacks of modernity leaves her not merely puzzled but disappointed in herself. She would love Picasso to matter more, perhaps to transform her, but there's a scrim drawn across the proscenium of genius that obscures her vision and keeps her worshipping at a bit of a distance. She gives to art, to all of art, far more than she gets back, a sort of earnestness that isn't without its poignant appeal. (4-5)

Like Neil witnessing the boy's enthusiasm for Gauguin, Kepesh is charmed, and loftily amused, by the spectacle of a young person discovering art for the first time (Kepesh's patronising judgement that Consuela's 'earnestness ... isn't without its poignant appeal' recalls Neil's condescending characterisation of the boy's naïve enthusiasm for 'heart').

Because she is older and has more formal education than the boy, Consuela's responses to art are ambivalent, or at least are represented ambivalently by Kepesh: she 'finds the impressionists ravishing' (a suggestive adjective) but struggles to appreciate Picasso, yearning for an epiphany that remains elusive. The metaphor that Kepesh uses to describe the 'distance' that prevents Consuela from fully communing with art that 'smacks of modernity' is instructive: he represents Picasso as a performer whose 'genius' is obscured from Consuela's gaze in spite, or perhaps because, of the 'earnestness' with which she attempts to penetrate the veil by 'look[ing] long and hard' (in contrast to the way that Neil's 'looking hard' at the end of 'Goodbye, Columbus' results in a revelation).

Kepesh's characterisation of Consuela arguably says more about (the limitations of) his own vision than Consuela's. For Kepesh, Consuela can never truly appreciate art because her function is to inspire his art (this is, I think, the implication of the otherwise obscure qualification 'to all of art' in the final line of the passage above). Rather than representing her as a conventional muse, however, Kepesh insists that she is herself the work of art. At the same time, she attains this status only through the authority of his critical judgement.

[T]o get to hear me say 'Look at you', as though she herself were a Picasso, she had merely to undress and stand there. I ... the Sunday morning PBS aesthete, New York television's reigning authority on what is the current best to see, hear and read – I had pronounced her a great work of art, with all the magical influence of a great work of art. Not the artist but the work of art itself. (37)

Here it is Consuela who has become the performer and Kepesh the audience for the performance. Kepesh insists that she is '[n]ot the artist but the work of art itself' (37), but this does not entirely resolve the ambiguity of the earlier phrase 'as though she herself were a

Picasso', which might mean either that she resembles a work by Picasso or that she has become an artist like Picasso. There is a note of self-satire in Kepesh's characterisation of himself as 'New York television's reigning authority' on culture, but at the same time an earnestness reminiscent of the one he attributes to Consuela in his invocation of 'the magical influence of a great work of art'. Moreover, he claims that other male admirers of Consuela share this perception of her: '[Carlos] too knows she is a work of art' (46). All this begs the question of who has the power here. Is it Consuela, who has 'merely' to strip to elicit Kepesh's adoration, or is it Kepesh, who invests her with this power through the authority of his gaze, which he instructs her to internalise: 'Look at you'. Does Consuela exert a 'magical influence' over Kepesh or does he confer this influence on her, depriving her of any real agency by mystifying and objectifying her?

In one sense, *The Dying Animal* might be read as an exemplary case study for Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze'. Yet it also might be seen as an implicit subversion of the male gaze. Given Kepesh's status as a cultural critic, it's hard not to see an allusion to the title of Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' when he announces, with reference to his enjoyment of looking at Miranda, one of Consuela's predecessors: 'Just the pleasure of looking was lovely' (8).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the light of Mulvey's observations on how female characters in film are 'stylized and fragmented' through the camera's focus on legs, breasts and other aspects of actresses' anatomy, Kepesh's unapologetic fetishising of Consuela's breasts seems to be a self-conscious provocation (it also seems to carry a hidden trace of *The Breast*, in which Kepesh himself is transformed into a massive mammary gland, becoming the object of voyeuristic scrutiny). He also eulogises Consuela's vagina, claiming that 'Schiele would have given his eyeteeth to paint it. Picasso would have turned it into a guitar' (103). Yet at the same time he is at pains to explain that the parts are not greater than the whole: 'All of her was something to watch' (103-4). Moreover, by repeatedly framing

female beauty in terms of the canon of fine art, rather than the cinematic tradition, Kepesh seeks to transcend the voyeur/object of desire dynamic.

Kepesh's allusions to fine art extend beyond Consuela to encompass his other lovers: he compares Miranda to 'an incipiently transgressive Balthus virgin' (7)<sup>11</sup>, and claims that the 'monumentality at the base sustaining [the] slender torso' of Caroline Lyons, an old mistress with whom he resumes sexual relations at the same time as he is seeing Consuela, makes him feel 'as though I were Gaston Lachaise' (70).<sup>12</sup> However, Consuela is the main locus of these references. Sometimes Kepesh invokes modern sculptors to characterise Consuela. In his first description of her he refers to her 'polished forehead of a smooth Brancusi<sup>13</sup> elegance' (3); later, he claims that she resembles 'a work of idealized sculptural art ... like a Maillol' (124).<sup>14</sup> Mostly, however, he situates his aesthetic appreciation of her in the classic European tradition of painting.

On her first visit to his apartment, Kepesh tells Consuela that '[t]here must [be] a duchess looking like you on the walls of the Prado' before picking out from his library 'a large book of Velázquez reproductions' which the two of them peruse, sitting 'side by side ... [for] a stirring quarter hour' (14-15). Whereas Neil in 'Goodbye, Columbus' uses his position as a cultural gatekeeper to provide access to European art for the young boy to whom it is as alluringly exotic as the South Sea islanders were to Gauguin, Kepesh uses his position of cultural authority to encourage Consuela to see herself in the Western canon, thereby implicitly granting himself access to her. To put it more crudely, he uses art here as a kind of foreplay: watching Consuela's excitement at encountering Velázquez 'for the first time', Kepesh gives himself over to the 'delightful imbecility of lust' (15). At the same time, the fact that they 'turn ... the pages' of the book together, participating in a collaborative act of looking, means that this is not simply the exploitation of a (former) student by her (former) teacher (15).

A similar juxtaposition between high art and carnality is invoked when, at Kepesh's invitation, Consuela presents herself menstruating as a spectacle for her lover's scopophilic pleasure: 'Consuela pulled out her tampon and stood there in my bathroom, with one knee dipping toward the other and, like Mantegna's Saint Sebastian, bleeding in a trickle down her thighs while I watched' (71). On the one hand, Consuela seems here to subject herself passively to Kepesh's perverse desires. On the other hand, as was the case when she undressed herself in the earlier scene, her self-possession and the element of self-conscious performance complicates the dynamic between the lovers. As this scene develops, Kepesh himself adopts a submissive position, literally (going down on his knees to 'lick her clean') and figuratively (he feels 'intimidat[ed] and 'humbled'). While Kepesh ignominiously prostrates himself 'at her feet', kneeling 'on the floor', Consuela maintains a 'statuesque equanimity' (73).

The power relations between Kepesh and Consuela become even more ambiguous in two key episodes in the novel that both revolve around detailed ekphrastic descriptions of two paintings. The first of these is initiated by Consuela, who, months after the end of their affair, sends Kepesh 'a postcard (a Modigliani nude from the Modern)' with a note thanking him for a letter of recommendation, which helps her secure a job in advertising (97).<sup>15</sup> Kepesh convinces himself that the choice of the Modigliani is a coded invitation to resume the affair, reading the nude as a symbolic self-portrait:

the cylindrical stalk of a waist, the wide pelvic span, and the gently curving thighs ...  
the patch of flame that is the hair that marks the spot where she is forked ... the  
trademark Modigliani nude, the accessible, elongated dream girl he so ritualistically  
painted ... A nude whose breasts, full and canting a bit to the side, might well have  
been modelled on her [Consuela's] own. A nude represented with her eyes closed,

defended, like Consuela, by nothing other than her erotic power, at once, like Consuela, elemental and elegant. A golden-skinned nude inexplicably asleep over a velvety black abyss that ... I associated with the grave. One long, undulating line, she lies there awaiting you, still as death. (98)

This passage begins with a lyrical description of the nude that emphasises her eroticism and resemblance to Consuela, but the use of the word 'forked' introduces a note of tension, denoting the bifurcation of the lower half of the model's body but also hinting (through its status as a near-homonym for 'fucked') at her vulnerability. Similarly, the term 'accessible', in the following line, might be understood both as a descriptor for the ease with which viewers of the painting might apprehend its subject and as a reference to its subject's defencelessness. That defencelessness seems at first to be situated in the context of a potential sexual threat that she would be ill-equipped to repel but the final two lines of the passage radically redefine the painting: instead of a celebration of the male gaze objectifying an oblivious woman into an erotic fantasy of sexual availability, it becomes an ominous portent of death, a *memento mori* in which the 'black abyss' gaping beneath the woman's torso resembles a grave and the woman's closed eyes signify not resignation, or unconsciousness, but the eternal sleep of death. On the narrative level, this shift in emphasis anticipates the way in which Consuela's diagnosis of cancer transforms her from a symbol of Eros to Thanatos. Just as the Modigliani nude seems to represent the threat of mortality for the viewer as much as for the subject of the painting ('she lies there awaiting *you*, still as death' [my emphasis]), so Consuela comes to represent the inevitability of death for Kepesh. More radically, there is a suggestion here that the male gaze itself is nothing more than a (futile) attempt to stave off intimations of mortality; a self-deluding celebration of the beauty of the

female body and of the heterosexual male desire for it that is in denial of the withering of both the desired and desiring flesh.

This Freudian subtext becomes more clearly legible in Kepesh's discussion of the twentieth-century British artist Stanley Spencer's painting, 'Double Nude Portrait: The Artist and his Second Wife' (1937):

Spencer is seated, squatting, beside the recumbent wife. He is looking ruminatively down at her from close range through his wire-rimmed glasses. We, in turn, are looking at them from close range: two naked bodies right in our faces, the better for us to see how they are no longer young and attractive ... For the wife, particularly, everything has begun to slacken, to thicken, and greater rigors than striating flesh are to come.

... You could be looking through the butcher's window, not just at the meat but at the sexual anatomy of the married couple.<sup>16</sup> Every time I think of Consuela, I envision that raw leg of lamb shaped like a primitive club beside the blatantly exhibited bodies of this husband and wife. (143)

There are multiple ironies in Kepesh's (mis)reading of the painting. While Kepesh emphasises Spencer's unflinching gaze and uncompromising representation of decaying flesh ('two naked bodies right in our faces'), he himself becomes uncharacteristically coy when it comes to the invocation of death here (referring euphemistically to 'greater rigors than striating flesh'). Similarly, he draws attention to the complex chain of looking that the painting initiates: the viewer of the painting looks at the self-portrait of Spencer looking at his second wife, Patricia Preece. Yet there is more going on here. Firstly, Kepesh does not discuss Patricia's own gaze, which is directed somewhere beyond the frame of the painting.



Unlike the quiescent generic Modigliani nude, Preece is fully aware of her surroundings and arguably resists objectification, refusing to meet the eye of Spencer or the viewer and exuding an air of self-possession and detached indifference. In contrast to her relaxed, languid posture, the Spencer of the painting crouches awkwardly, with a strained intensity, his head bent and body bowed in submission like a penitent pilgrim before a shrine. Whereas a slight smile plays on Preece's lips, Spencer's expression seems weary and dejected; while Preece seems entirely at ease, Spencer appears to be disgusted with himself. Moreover, the portrait of Spencer is cropped so that only one of his eyes is visible, making it unclear where his gaze is directed: is it at Preece, as Kepesh assumes, or is it at his own flaccid phallus, which rests impotently at the right side of Patricia's stomach, rather than between her parted legs, where it might promise potential coitus? You don't have to know anything about Preece's sexuality and her troubled marriage to Spencer to sense where the power in this painting lies, but it would be odd, given his obvious interest in the painting, if Roth himself hadn't known something of its context.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not there is an ironic distance between Roth and his narrator, Kepesh clearly misreads the painting when he suggests that it is Patricia, 'particularly', for whom a fate worse than 'striating flesh' awaits. In fact, this is a portrait of frustrated male desire and it is primarily Spencer – whose flesh has a grey pallor, in contrast to the warmer, orange hue of Preece's body – for whom the leg of lamb in the foreground is a fatal portent.

Kepesh explicitly associates Consuela with the leg of lamb, but there is also an implicit analogy between Preece's 'striating flesh' and the malignant tumour that is destroying Consuela's flesh. However, the more compelling analogy at this stage of the novel is between Spencer and Kepesh – both are impotent voyeurs, able only to look at the object of their desire. When Consuela receives her diagnosis, she asks Kepesh, the great idolater of her body, to worship once more at her shrine, posing for a series of photographs so that he

can preserve the beauty of her breasts. She allows him to touch her breasts but no more: she doesn't, she insists, 'want anything sexual' (129). Like Preece, who displays her body for her artist husband but withholds the sexual pleasure that it promises from him, Consuela exposes herself knowingly to Kepesh's male gaze as a way of affirming her own erotic power, before which Kepesh is powerless. As Zoe Roth suggests, '[t]he "dying animal" is not ... Consuela, but Kepesh' (100); or rather, Consuela is *a* dying animal but it is Kepesh who is *the* dying animal.

If 'Goodbye, Columbus' is a portrait of the artist as young man that invokes painting (specifically Gauguin's exotic vision of a prelapsarian state of pristine beauty) as a model for the transcendent power of art, *The Dying Animal* is a portrait of the artist as an old man that engages in a dialogue with fine art (particularly Spencer's double nude portrait) to represent what Kepesh calls the 'wound of age' that is fatal to all human animals. Ultimately, however, these two visions of art are not necessarily incompatible: artists and their subjects must die but through art itself they live on.

#### Works Cited

- D'Alfonso, Francesca. 2016. 'The Dying Animal e la lezione dei maestri', *Merope* 64: 55-78.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1975. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen* 16.3: 6-18.
- Pierpont, Claudia Roth. 2015. *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books*. London: Vintage.
- Posnock, Ross. 2006. *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Roth, Philip. 1970 [1959]. *Goodbye, Columbus*. New York: Bantam.
- Roth, Philip. 1988. 'That Butcher, Imagination: Beware of Your Life When a Writer's at Work', *New York Times Book Review* 14 February, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>
- Roth, Philip. 2001a. *The Dying Animal*. London: Cape.
- Roth, Philip. 2001b. *Shop Talk*. London: Cape.

Roth, Zoe. 2012. 'Against Representation: Death, Desire, and Art in Philip Roth's *The Dying Animal*', *Philip Roth Studies* 8.1: 95-100.

Shostak, Debra. 2021. 'Representing "Roth"', *Revue Francaise d'etudes americaines* 166: 75-91.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> There was another painter in the Roth family, too: an uncle on the maternal side 'whose canvases had pride of place in the Roth household, right along with a framed copy of the Declaration of Independence,' according to Claudia Roth Pierpont (20).

<sup>2</sup> Entitled 'Pictures by Guston', it is partly an essay about the trajectory of Guston's career, partly about the friendship between the men and the collaboration on *The Breast* that was born of it, and partly about a shared aesthetic: 'each of us had begin to consider crapola [Guston's term for Americana] not only as a curious subject with strong suggestive powers to which we had a native affinity but as potentially a tool in itself' (Roth 2001b:135). For Roth, this interest in the iconography of popular culture was primarily a way of facilitating a process of what he calls 'self-subversion' (135) and relatively short-lived, whereas for Guston it was central to his life's work after his turn away from abstract expressionism.

<sup>3</sup> Pierpont is dismissive of the possibility that Kitaj's art had any influence on Roth, claiming that '[h]e had little feeling for Kitaj's painting, and Kitaj's frequent Jewish subject matter did not reflect the kind of Jewishness that was meaningful to Roth' (191). Yet Kitaj's invention of Joe Singer, an avatar of the artist who appears in a number of his paintings of the 1970s and 80s ('The Jew etc.' [1976], 'The Listener (Joe Singer in hiding)' [1980], 'The Jewish Rider' [1984-5]) seems to me to anticipate Roth's use of Nathan Zuckerman as an authorial alter ego, beginning in the late 1970s. Kitaj also produced a self-portrait 'as Mickey Sabbath' and drew a number of portraits of Roth. Burton Silverman, another near-contemporary of Roth's, also produced a pencil portrait of the author when he visited him at his Connecticut home in 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Zanisnik has mounted two exhibitions engaging with Roth's work: 'Every Inch a Man (2012)' and the 'Philip Roth Presidential Library' (2016, 2017). Siciliano's exhibition, 'American Pastoral', held at the Aicon Gallery in New York in 2021, was named after and partly inspired by Roth's novel of the same name. For an excellent account of Zanisnik's engagement with Roth, see Shostak 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See Posnock 2006: 236-259. In this chapter ('The Two Philips'), Posnock twice quotes Roth's claim that his novel *The Ghost Writer* (1979) 'had a lot to do with Philip [Guston]' (249, 256) but offers little in the way of elucidation beyond a sketchy hypothesis that Lonoff and Anne Frank (Amy Bellette) might both have been inspired by different facets of Guston's art and a rather vague assertion that the novel 'honors what Guston achieved coincident with his friendship with Roth – a counterself that was the condition for renovating his art' (257).

<sup>6</sup> I agree with much of Roth's argument, but whereas she claims that her namesake's representation of Consuela 'resists the objectification of women' (Roth 2012: 96), I suggest that it both indulges in and subverts this process of objectification and whereas she suggests that '[d]esire and art ... allow Kepesh to experience death vicariously, to separate himself from his own mortality while enjoying the erotic spectacle' (99), I argue that the erotic spectacle implicates Kepesh in a dynamic of looking that emasculates him, confronting him with the impossibility of separating himself from his own mortality. D'Alfonso's article is published in Italian and therefore not entirely accessible to me, but her abstract is available in

---

English and summarises her argument that ‘the paradigm of mortality (Yeats, Kafka, ecc.) is connected to the subject of the nude and flesh in painting (Modigliani, Spencer, ecc.) which are seen as a metamorphosis that leads to death’ (D’Alfonso 2016: 55).

<sup>7</sup> The only information we are given as to the identity of this mysterious ‘you’ is that [they] ‘are of the current age’ (Roth 2001a: 113).

<sup>8</sup> This suggestion is of course implicit in the context of the phrase itself, taken from Yeats’s poem, ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ (1928), which explores the struggle of the aging (male) artist to remain vital.

<sup>9</sup> These references extend to the activities of Kepesh’s family: his son, Kenny, ‘runs a little company that restores damaged works of art’ (Roth 2001a: 77).

<sup>10</sup> Even in a pre-#MeToo era, Kepesh feels obliged to exercise a degree of restraint, or at least circumspection, in his dealings with his female students, noting that ‘I haven’t broken this rule [not to make any sexual advances until his students have completed his course] since, back in the mid-eighties, the phone number of the sexual harassment hotline was first posted outside my office door’ (Roth 2001a: 5). Nonetheless, Kepesh’s son, Kenny, expresses indignation at his father’s practice of ‘[s]educing defenceless students’ (90).

<sup>11</sup> The invocation of Balthus is another provocation, given the controversial nature of the Polish-French painter’s representation of pubescent girls. Kepesh milks the analogy, repeating the allusion twice more in the passage that follows: ‘All evening long, much like a young girl escaped from the perilous melodrama of a Balthus painting into the fun of the class party, Miranda had been on all fours with her rump raised ... or lounging gleefully across the arms of an easy chair seemingly oblivious of the fact that with her skirt riding up her thighs and her legs undecorously parted she had the Balthusian air of being half undressed while fully clothed’ (Roth 2001a: 7-8).

<sup>12</sup> Lachaise was a French sculptor best known for his female nudes.

<sup>13</sup> Constantin Brancusi was one of the most influential sculptors of the twentieth century.

<sup>14</sup> Aristide Maillol was a French sculptor and painter who worked in the latter half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, focusing on the female form.

<sup>15</sup> Although it is unnamed in the novel, readers of the first US and UK editions will infer the painting to be ‘Reclining Nude’ (1919), since it is reproduced on the front of the dustjacket.

<sup>16</sup> There is an echo of Kepesh’s reference to the butcher’s window here later in the novel, when Consuela tells him that the doctor who is in charge of her cancer treatment is ‘not a butcher’ (Roth 2001a: 132). I wonder if there is also a buried allusion to a piece that Roth wrote for the *New York Times Review of Books*, in which he referred to the imagination of the novelist as a ‘butcher’ (Roth 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Preece was a lesbian who continued her premarital relationship with another artist, Dorothy Hepworth, during her marriage to Spencer, refusing to have sexual relations with her husband. It seems to me that it might be Hepworth to whom Preece is directing her gaze and implicitly offering herself.