

## *Philip Roth's Final Hours*

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NOT LONG AGO, after a career that spanned more than fifty years and at least one appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, the semifamous writer and legendary genius Philip Roth called it quits. He began his last hours. I use the epithet semifamous not from disrespect but because there are more than eight billion people in the world. Poll any one of them and the odds are they haven't heard of Roth. This planet has become so full of souls that the living crowd out the dead. Soon there won't be room enough for ghosts, let alone geniuses. The dead will leave us and only the living will remain. I wouldn't want to live in such a world, would you? Roth didn't.

In the quiet of his study Roth typed his last sentence and spoke directly into his typewriter's keys. Enough already, the great writer declared. I'm tapped out. No more words and arrangements of words. Let somebody else do it for a change. He didn't know from where these words came but he acknowledged their truth. He had practically written himself out of existence. The writer Roth was dead. Exit ghost! The other lived on, briefly. He was curious to see what remained.

The limbo period between work and immortality was hard for him to negotiate. One minute you're exhausting yourself writing a book a year, and the next you're agonizing with nothing to do. But if you think about it, it was the logical next step. In this game, you don't really count until you are dead. Roth, having worked his whole life to realize this moment, was ready.

So after finishing his last book, which he called *Nemesis* to better name his victory, he announced his retirement. Shortly thereafter he died. Some say that if he had kept writing he would still be alive now. For myself, I can't say one way or the other. Ceaseless writing

didn't keep Proust or Henry James alive and they were much better writers than Roth.

Your work, he believed, is the afterlife you build for yourself. A writer leaves only two things. His words and his fame. Once the fame goes, only the words are left. And who is going to care about those?

Be all that as it may, Roth published (and this is an approximate account because I admit that I haven't read them all) about forty books, give or take. That's a lot of books, even if you use John Updike's abacus to count them. Roth was sorry to think of Updike at all. Of all his acknowledged living peers, he was the only one who had been as prolific as Roth. For all he knew, Updike had written more books than he had. Roth saw no point to counting Updike's books. For fifty years, maybe more, the man had kept a post at the *New Yorker* so he could savage Roth's books the second they were printed.

Updike, who often confused his pen with his penis and liked to write poems about secretaries giving him blow jobs, strove mightily to publish one book on top of another. He wrote as if his stock holdings were entirely in the book-storage-warehouse business. I know I'm going to die before Roth, he once said, and I don't want that Jew to outpublish me.\*

It is said a writer has two enemies, not counting himself: other writers and a blank page. Updike, by himself, was Roth's other writers, his sworn enemy. His blank page. The secret sharer he wished abolished. When Updike died before him, Roth wasn't happy. He suspected it was a brilliant move on his rival's part to deny Roth his place in the literary pantheon. Now his own death would be dismissed as merely derivative of Updike's prior passing.

This Updike business made his first moments of retirement agonizing—like death, but more boring. Faced with the finality of everything, not to mention Updike, he decided to read every book he ever wrote. He had written them, he reasoned, he could read them, too. Why not? What could it hurt? It was eternity he was after, which

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\* Some parts of this otherwise true story may be apocryphal. Those parts will be denoted with an asterisk.

Roth figured could only be a form of endless self-absorption. For all he knew, one day God in his infinite ennui whacked off—to lighten his load—and this world was its unintended consequence. He had the brief thought that if he were to read all of his books now, he would be erasing them one by one, as if he had never written them.

From his shelves he took down the books bearing his name—he left the works of criticism to mold—and stacked them in two rows near the desk where he used to stand to write them. His twin towers. I wrote them standing up, I can read them sitting down. He sat on the floor between the two stacks, the top of each one closer to the ceiling than Roth's nappy, half-bald head. He liked the idea that he had to reach toward the heavens to begin. It reminded him of Jacob and his ladder.

He chose one at random and looked at the spine: *When She Was Good*. He opened it and read a bit. What the fuck is this? he said. I don't remember writing this book. It has a female protagonist. And it takes place in Iowa or very close to it, in other words, the pits of America. There are no Jews in Iowa. Lots of shiksas, certainly, most of them dumber than the ears of corn they diddle themselves with, but no Jews.

What great writer, he asked himself, ever set foot, let alone set a book, in Iowa? Hemingway is from Illinois, which is just one state over. Who else? Not even Sherwood Anderson or Sinclair Lewis is from Iowa. And they invented the empty American village. Willa Cather narrowly escaped Iowa, as well she should have, since there is nothing there, especially not that nothing from which something sometimes emerges.

If I were to invent a novel about a university that did nothing all day long but churn out nondescript writers whose collected works didn't deserve the dignity of being printed on the side of a cereal box, you know where I would set it? Iowa! Where else? They would never escape their own bad prose. It would be a fate worse than Babbitt's. Moses himself couldn't lead a writer out of Iowa and into literary significance. What could I possibly have been thinking when I wrote that book?

He decided that anything was possible and he had written these books to prove it. He wondered what else he might find there. He settled down again to read himself. The record shows that no further surprises were forthcoming.

If I read a book a week, he said aloud to no one but himself, then I could finish them all in less than a year. Since *Nemesis* was the last book he had written, and he didn't want to read it again anyway because he had just finished it and was, to tell the truth, sick of it already, he decided to count that one as the first on his list.

This idea pleased him. It would be like finding a different life to live—or to have lived. The life he had to write not to know. The life his writing wrote over. Writing teachers, and other professional morons, were always telling their dimwit students that writing was a voyage of discovery. Fuck that! Writing was an elaborate disguise. You wrote to hide yourself from yourself. What was the point otherwise? For years, he had put on his Philip Roth suit, which consisted of tan slacks, blue sweaters, and enough sharpened pencils to perforate the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Now that he had given that up he could meet himself anew—in the afterlife. He would unmake himself to meet the self his writing had concealed.

What should I wear to read myself? He promptly took off all of his clothes. He wrapped himself in a blanket he kept handy for when the furnace was on the blink.

He contemplated himself with neither pen nor member in hand. I have exchanged the self G-d and my mother gave me to make that stack of books. For years I have been erasing myself just to come to this. That final thing. Death. The big adiós.

Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Fucking Blue Eyes.

He laughed it off, or tried to, because what choice did he have. Enter Roth's ghost, he thought, and smiled.

To any observers present, of which there were none, in material form anyway, his smile looked like a frown. Already his face wore its death mask. His body was trying it on before it became inert. Roth didn't know that the specter of the life he had covered over while he was writing had come to claim the one through which he had written.

In that instant he determined what to do. He would read his books in reverse chronological order, concluding with *Goodbye, Columbus*. Already he'd done *Nemesis*. It was a good plan. He hadn't been an Honors Student for nothing. He equipped himself with a legal pad and some sharp pencils in case he wanted to take any notes. He wanted to leave room for the possibility that there were things in his books he didn't know. Maybe a new book to write would shape itself in his head as he read. He heaved a sigh and dove in.

It was hard to concentrate when you knew every word before you read it. By some magic it took him only two hours or so to read the next one. Wow, that was easy. Did I write them so quickly, he wondered? Maybe I am dreaming what I have yet to write.

He was an empiricist, not a dreamer, so he kept going. He finished another one before dinner time. He realized he was hungry. Fortunately, his study possessed a hot plate and a refrigerator for days when he was too inspired to leave it. No need to leave his post until he finished. At this rate, I'm going to finish my stacks in a little more than a week. Life is more ephemeral than I realized. The retired writer didn't take any notes as he read. He decided there were no notes to take. Everything he knew or thought had gone into the books. No wonder he was so tired.

His reading slowed down when he came to *The Plot against America*. That one took several hours to read. By the time he came to *American Pastoral* he wanted to quit. It wasn't that they were bad. It was just that he had written them already. He was bored.

What he did next, he couldn't help. For the first time in his life—because once an Honors Student, always an Honors Student, albeit a long time ago at a small liberal-arts college nobody ever heard of—he cheated. He cheated but it was on himself so he figured it was OK. Without yet finishing his own oeuvre, he looked at his shelves for something else to distract him. He would choose from only the classics. Anybody else was a *putz* and who cared what they wrote. Besides, his private library was very chi-chi. He didn't own a single book that couldn't have a Penguin stamped somewhere on it, though he preferred cloth-bound books. They were classier.

Into the canon Roth marched. Choosing where to begin was difficult. On a whim, he vowed to read no one born in Prague. For the Germans he wasn't in the mood. He left Proust on the shelf. He thought about *The Merchant of Venice* but decided reading that work constituted self-abuse without any pleasure. Also, he only wanted to read prose writers. The women writers he had locked in another part of the house, so he didn't have to worry about them.

Neither did he read Joseph or Henry Roth, for reasons too obvious to state.

He didn't want to read anyone who had been alive when he was. He made an exception for Hemingway. He read everything up through the first half of *The Old Man and the Sea* and then he started looking around again. He looked for an old friend, the one who had set him on his literary quest so long ago, but was depressed by what he found. There were fifteen Library of America volumes for the Master! He knew James had written a lot but until this moment he hadn't realized how much. He did the math. He had been writing every second for his entire adult life and had only managed nine volumes. And he was older now than Henry James was when he died. No matter what he did now, it would take a reader who started from scratch longer to read James than Roth.

He recalled the women he had known and wondered how many books they had cost him. He had to hand it to James. The Master, Roth said to himself, getting a little worked up, only put his pen where it counted. The Master didn't stick his precious pen in other people's pots. He only put his in ink and on paper. Some books he didn't even write. He just talked them out, no touching anything at all. His last books materialized from the air of his breath. That, he admitted, was genius, as if James had written without working. Roth sighed, thinking of the immense labors his books had caused him. What if he started over? He could write books with short chapters and lots of noirish dialogue. He could be a genre writer!

What's the matter with me? I didn't quit just to start over again. Quits is quits. Besides, I would have to publish them under a pseudonym. They wouldn't count against the Master's tally.

He remembered that story James had written about the writer who died in his prime, before he could write all of the books that he had sketched out in his head. That guy had died on the battlefield. Not me, he thought, and pounded his naked, hairy chest. Then he recalled how he had written his second novel with *Portrait of a Lady* open on his knees. He had wanted the spirit of James to infuse his writing self. He imagined the ghostly James face down in his lap priming his pump and pricking his pen. He surrendered himself to this vision until he shuddered without pleasure. His idea revolted him. He turned against the Master, that fat old celibate, that cock-sucking succubus. Go suck somebody else, Buster! He for one didn't want to end his life as the parody of a Jamesian ghost story. And where did countless volumes leave him? He died giving orders as Napoleon. A megalomaniac who failed to conquer the Russians. James didn't even like Tolstoy.

He skimmed *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past*. James never finished those books. Roth briefly considered subtracting them from James's count. He suffered the strange sensation that the Master was waiting to occupy the right body—his! He determined that the safest course from here on out was to steer clear of Mr. Henry James. For a fat man who loved his sweets, he was a ghostly son of a bitch.

Some ghosts you can't get rid of, no matter how great a writer you are. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Roth returned to his shelf to find something that wouldn't give him the shakes. Or maybe he was just cold in his blanket. For the rest of the night he read nothing but Dostoyevsky and Conrad. He may have read for days. In his new condition he did not seem to require sleep. Then he tried Turgenev. He craved the relief of a love story after the agony the others described with such meticulous fervor.

Page by page he read. Sadly, there could be no bliss in his reading. He wanted to see if his work held up against theirs. This time he took notes. He marked passages to review again. He made evaluations. His judgment was sober. He decided the illustrious dead hadn't done any better than he had. His books fit on the shelves with

theirs. Discerning professors could assign his books alongside the big boys. Little Philip Roth was a big boy too.

His relief was fleeting, though, a lollipop in a young girl's mouth. He contemplated his future readers and didn't like what he saw. A vague darkness. Who could he count on to read him? Was his life finally to be measured only by some jerk-off's syllabus? What a joke. Probably some women will teach me too. Some of them hate me enough to keep me alive.

He gave a brief thought to the Jews, for they were his people, but then he remembered his Hebrew lessons and sighed. I hope I'll have a good translator when the diaspora ends.

This thought brought three hours, maybe more, of complete silence, during which time he thought nothing and said nothing. His penis was cold and shriveled.

The silence was something like the silence that descends on the living when they become dead. It was beyond human comprehension. It was certainly beyond Roth's comprehension. The phenomenon is hard to describe because I don't understand it either.

If the silence that blanketed Roth were composed as a mathematical equation, it would be the answer you get when you divide six million by zero. But the answer isn't what you think. It's not zero. The answer is the silence. The silence is the remainder the equation can't contain. Why this silence should overwhelm him at this precise instant I can't tell you. It wasn't because he was dead. Technically, he still had that to look forward to. In truthful fact, Roth didn't know what had happened.

There was a further occurrence that I'm obliged to mention. The silence knew about Roth. That's why it had located itself in his study. It engulfed him for a time and then it retreated to wherever it goes when it leaves. Possibly Lodz or Mauthausen. I wouldn't want to guess. It's probably not on the map. I must let this strangeness rest. You can take it up if you want to. Good luck if you do.

Whatever it was—and if I could say in words what it was, I still wouldn't tell you—it left Roth again to his own devices, which at the moment was lying flat on his back, dead to the world but not to

himself. Then, inexplicably, at a point I can't specify, Roth, without knowing his knowing had stopped, resumed his thinking.

Whatever happens, he said to himself, I'm finished, and thank G-d I'll be dead when the reader's final reckoning finally begins. It could be worse. G-d might exist and then everything would never end.

He returned to the task of reading himself. As it happened, he couldn't complete his assignment. He read backward to *Portnoy's Complaint* and then he gave up. It wasn't because he was tired. It was because this book of all the ones he had written was his perfect book and he saw no reason to read another one.

Some writers might have suffered regret at this realization, because the implications for the rest of his career are not so inspiring. But Roth, to state the obvious, was no ordinary writer.

The joy he experienced upon rereading *Portnoy* was so total that it was like after years of trying and failing, he had finally learned how to have sex with himself.

Roth found himself laughing over every page. I did that! I did this! Oh boy oh boy! His hero's battle with his sister's bra. A poignant moment of delicate beauty. The father on the toilet. You weren't going to find that in Henry James. And what about the liver Portnoy inseminated before his mother served it to his family?! How did he think of that? He looked down upon his nakedness. How did we think of that?! (Shakespeare was the answer, but he was too entranced to remember.) This is good, he said to himself. I can't imagine anything better than this. He came to the book's last line, "Now perhaps vee may begin," and he did what he always had wanted to do since he had first finished the book. He quit. His self-consummation was finished, but his long day continued.

Freed of himself at last, he decided if he was going to continue to read, and he wasn't sure that he was, he wanted to read books other than those from which he had made his life. Screw the classics! Screw me! I'll read like a normal person.

In all honestly, he knew that the novel was dead. Who was going to write them after him? Hadn't he written every book since

*Operation Shylock*, his masterpiece, just to hide this knowledge from himself? You had to live in the past to read that stuff. He was probably the last reader of Joseph Conrad on earth, for Chrissakes. And James's fat ghost can die with me.

Now he faced a conundrum. What *does* a normal person read? And how would I know? He threw some pencils at the ceiling. I've got it! he exclaimed so loudly that if he had a cat it would have jumped in fright. Something useful and short. He picked up the slim paperback book his actress friend Mia Farrow had given him last year for Hanukkah. *iPhone for Dummies*. What a revelation! A guide to life better than any Henry James wrote. He read it as Genet is said by Sartre to have read Dostoyevsky. He couldn't read three consecutive pages without pausing to process it all. This little book was better than *Moby-Dick*, than *Ulysses*, than everything. Its every sentence demanded immediate action from the reader. Previously, books had led him to other books and hence he had spent his life making them. At long last, a book that led him away from books and into real life!

He had never encountered anything like it. It revealed a future Roth was already learning to accept—a world with no new authors. It was as if the technology described within, not a living person, had written itself into a book. Like the Bible, the *Iliad*, the Koran, its creator was irrelevant. Roth, who had never advanced beyond his 1960 Olivetti Studio 45 typewriter and had not owned a television set since Nixon resigned, found revealed the key to all mythologies, which the book named the *Internet* or, alternatively, the *worldwideweb*. The amazing fact was this little book, it mapped the world, demolished history, and turned any dummy into a master of the revealed universe. It put G-d's world at your fingertips and gave you dominion. Who cared if it was virtual? What wasn't virtual if you thought about it? Did you ever meet anyone who wasn't going to leave this earth?

With the gadget the book described, he could see anything, read anything, google anybody, including himself, which he did less often than you would think. The experience gave him profound pleasure, like Portnoy playing with his favorite toy, but without the

mess. And if you wanted to do a Portnoy, which he no longer felt up to, the iPhone could help with that too.

The little book was so dense with possibility it was hard for him to keep it in his head. He wanted to become one with this book. Everything looked so interesting it was hard to know where to start. He reviewed the table of contents. He decided to try chapter 5, “Texting 1, 2, 3: Messages and Notes.” He reviewed the chapter and began to apply its lessons. He was surprised to find his iPhone filled with unread texts. He stared at the gadget in his hand. He thought of the satellites rotating the earth so he, Roth, could stay in touch with any meaningless person whose number he possessed. The ones that weren’t from Mia were from his friend, the world-famous literary critic Harold Bloom. He quickly clicked through them.

*Genius!*

*Hilarious.*

*Better than your last one.*

*You just buried Mailer!*

*Who’s better than you?*

It was an interesting question. Despite the fact that he was through with literature, Roth answered that one. He preferred typewriter keys to what this gadget offered but he managed.

*Who IS better than me, Smart Guy?* he pressed.

Roth was startled to find his hands immediately buzzing. This thing’s alive! Jesus! Bloom already.

*No one’s better than you, Big Guy.*

Included with the text was an attachment that contained Bloom’s special list of the most canonical American novelists of the twentieth century. Before Roth could access it, up popped a flashing prompt inviting him to subscribe to Bloom’s “Daily Canon Updates.” He clicked no. Jesus, who knew Bloom was such a demon with the new technology? The thought that Bloom had a canon and the others were following it momentarily derailed him from the task at hand, which was catching up with the dummies.

A canon is a list of books, or writers, as Roth thought of it, whose eternity is speculated upon by mere mortals like Bloom. The big

boys! The immortals! Shakespeare, Milton, Damon Runyon. Roth knew who they were but did Harold know? He wondered how big Harold's subscribers' roll was.

He opened the attachment and scrolled down. It was a long list, subdivided into categories by century and nationality. He had not read every book cited. Probably Bloom hadn't either.

He decided to review the list in rank order of those who would make him the most jealous. He clicked to get to his century. He looked for the Americans, his peers. He went straight for the *u* section. How many did Bloom give Updike? His intensity made him breathless. Suddenly, no question mattered more to Roth than this one.

Bloom could be tricky. He had to be. He was the genuine article, a literary critic, a professional two-face. Harold was the greatest literary critic since Samuel Johnson—this he would tell you himself—but he had a mouth on him like Lenny Bruce. His moral sense was the alphabet. It was something he could arrange however he wished. Harold was always cracking wise about Updike. This was in truth why Roth liked him. The rabbit writer, Bloom scoffed. He writes like a rabbit fucks. All over the place and who cares. Clean up already! Throw it out!

At last he came to the *u*'s. Look! He has only one book to his name! He scrolled up and down to make certain he was seeing what he was seeing. He wanted to make sure he was working the gadget correctly. So much for hogging the *New Yorker* pages your entire adult life. And it's not even a Rabbit! It's the one they turned into that movie starring Cher.

See you at the movies, Updike.

Maybe he should subscribe to Harold's canon service after all. Roth scrolled back up to find his own name. There it was! And below it were one, two, three, four, five, six books! Six! That's more than a fistful. Shove that up your literary ass, Updike. Roth didn't even check the titles. Who cares which ones? Six was pretty damned good. Now who the hell was going to beat that? Let's see. James is from the nineteenth century, so I'm not going to compare myself to him.

Besides, my total's gotta beat Hawthorne, Twain, and Melville. They were really one-book guys. Charles Brockden Brown? Don't make me laugh, Roth thought, laughing his ass off.

I must compose myself. I'm a twentieth-century guy. Could any American from the twentieth century, my century, the century of Roth, have more books listed than I do? Let's see. Who are the big guys? Fitzgerald? Died early. Screwed by Zelda. Papa? Short-story writer. Lewis, Dos Passos, Steinbeck probably don't have six among them. Updike I know about already. Bloom gives him fewer than he gave to Kay Boyle and no one knows who she is.

Roth's laughter cascaded throughout the room. Jesus, this list is fun. What a great reader Harold is.

Suddenly, his face turned grim. Christ, he said to himself. I forgot about Faulkner. He's got to have at least five. Let's see, where are the *f's*? Hmmm. One-two-three-four...shit, he gives the cracker Lord Fauntleroy more books than he gives me.

Roth's fingers flew faster than Portnoy's.

*Hey Bloom, who is better? Me or Faulkner? Tell the truth.*

His phone fairly bloomed from Harold's buzz. What—is Bloom hooked up to his phone like it's life support?

*Are you asking me as a critic or are you asking me as a Jew?*

Roth looked at the phone. Doesn't this thing have a fuck-off key?

He punched out his reply letter by letter. *Me or Faulkner?*

This time the phone buzzed louder than the other times.

Roth decided to test his mastery of the technology. He deleted the message unread. He smiled to think that with one click he could cast Bloom into oblivion. Who needs him? A parasite on the dying corpse of literature.

Then he deleted all of his messages. Texting was an undignified occupation for a retired novelist. It was a medium suitable for critics. The fewer words they were allowed to write at one time, the better.

A momentous decision overcame him. He vowed *iPhone for Dummies* would be the last book he ever read. He knew it would never make the Library of America.

The Library of America! The proudest moment of his life was when that august body announced his work worthy of its imprint. What a day that was! In the entire history of American literature he'd been the only living writer ever put in there.

Except for Singer and Bellow.

Why those guys? Singer couldn't write an English sentence to save his life. Bellow was a Russian Canadian who grew up speaking French. Jews on the lam, both of them. The Library of Transnational America is where those two belong. Me? I'm a Jew from New Jersey. American born. Sue me. My parents got here before I did. None of us were legacies, that's for sure.

And where are those guys now? Dead, that's where they are. Like Updike. Singer probably died over his desk. Bellow likely was *shtupping* some broad. Didn't he father a kid in his ninth decade? He always was the dreamy one.

Am I really by myself now forever? This Library is not what it's cracked up to be. It's a mausoleum, that's what it is. Maybe I'm dead and don't know it.

But Roth knew that was impossible. If he were in paradise, he wouldn't be hearing from Bloom.

He picked up again the last book of his life. The world it describes makes a mockery of Proust's famous madeleine. It turns out that to recover the past, you didn't need a cookie and tea from your mother. You just needed Wi-Fi. He learned, among other things, that everything that had ever happened now existed on the Internet. Who knew? It must have been put there when G-d wasn't paying attention.

He flipped to the chapter "Going on a Mobile Safari." He was game. Didn't Hemingway kill lions? In the time remaining to him, Roth set for himself the ultimate test. Since the past had come online, a video of his own conception must exist somewhere to be viewed. He couldn't start over but he could watch what it was like to be started. He had always suspected that his parents hadn't employed the missionary position to make him. Too Catholic. And, he further reflected, if I find this scene online, I could delete its address.

Talk about erasing the self. I would out-Kafka Kafka. He checked to see that his phone was fully charged.

Alas, searches for his origins proved fruitless. What he sought was in fact available on the deep web but his book did not cover that. Still, Roth was sanguine. There was plenty to see even without the primal scene. For instance, he had never seen so many naked women in his life. And there they all were, on his screen, to be pulled up whenever he wanted. At his age naked women didn't inspire him as they once did. For no more than thirty seconds, or maybe even an entire minute, he thought he had reached the time in life where a man of his experience and achievements should take up with young boys. But he didn't have the heart for it. Two or three clicks were all he could handle.

This porn paradise yielded to philosophy. He saw how easily he could access everything anyone had ever thought. He was aghast with wonder. You could find out the best way to pickle a herring or the last words of Democritus. It was as if the entire history of the world had been formatted to crawl up into its own asshole. This process they called *YouTube*. He found a site called Google Books and he realized it contained potentially every book ever written. Including his.

Wasn't it Joyce who wanted to put the world into a book? Or was that Flaubert? Didn't Faulkner think he could compress the world into a single sentence? A forty-page sentence, to be sure, but such heresies had once enflamed the youthful Roth to write. You, Roth, followed their example. You did what they did, only you did it in New Jersey. But now look at the world! It had been squeezed inside a phone! Who needed the Library of America when you could carry it and more porn than you could watch in a lifetime inside your very own pocket? Let's face it. A pickled herring was almost certainly a more useful thing to know how to make than a modernist masterpiece.

Sadly, he realized too late that the world was more than a book. The lesson hit him hard. He had to give up writing to learn it. Nobody tells Honors Students such things until it's too late.

I'm not eager to say what comes next, but it's impossible to keep silent. His books he realized were superannuated. Relics of a bygone technology. It was clear to him that the book he held in his naked hands, this *iPhone for Dummies*, was the book to end all books. Who needed the Library of America when it already existed inside your phone? Strangely, this thought caused him ecstasy rather than grief. Who needed books? Goodbye, Gutenbergs! he yelled at the top of his voice, Hello, World Wide Web! He waited to hear a voice echo but none was forthcoming. The end was near.

The fact is that a living Roth is a writing Roth and Roth wasn't writing anymore. He thought about reading the books of his that he had skipped but he could not bring himself to do it. He just wanted to surf the web on his phone.

Roth's time of death is unknown. He was found, naked, clutching to his chest a Nook on which he had written in Sharpie "Nookie," his pet name for the reading device. To discover what Roth had been reading at the end, the biographer had to replace the Nook's battery to get it to work again. It was, no surprise, opened to the James story.

In his last days, Roth had become a whiz with the new reading technology, an inestimable blessing to his remaining readers who can't help wanting to know what the man really felt about his work. From his browser history, his biographer has been able to reconstruct with unstinting accuracy most of the foregoing narrative. The rest he made up.

One link in particular Roth kept returning to. It offered a free downloadable version, as a PDF, of Henry James's "The Figure in the Carpet." With commentary. Roth, it seems, read it over and over in the days before his death. Old writers are like old dogs. They return to the places that give them relief. As the various obituaries attested, Roth had used a virtual highlighter to underline a passage in his e-book. His finger too may have been stuck to that point in the screen, the reports on this weren't clear and anyway anything is possible.

He did not die, despite the reports of scurrilous gossips, with his cock in his hand. On the other hand, he had not chased away the

pansy succubus, excuse my language, James. He was found pointing to the passage where James's fictional author, Vereker, is telling someone, a not-very-bright reader if the truth be told, that in everything he wrote (and they were all imaginary, more imaginary than the books James and Roth wrote) he had left something special for the critic to find. A secret, like a complex figure in a Persian carpet.

Though now as dead as Anne Frank, though no deader, Roth remained remarkably supple, almost lifelike. The fact is that the difference between the dead Roth and the living Roth was surprisingly negligible. The coroner later confessed that twice he had to stifle himself from asking Roth for an autograph. Having long ago removed himself from life in order to write, his body had taken on the color of death before he finished his third novel. For this reason, death didn't alter the color of his flesh. It just stiffened him a little.

One thing the obituaries did not mention. Circling Roth's dead body were his books, arranged in a circle like Stonehenge or an ancient temple. Above his head, just out of his reach, which is a superfluous detail since the dead can't reach anything, not even their asses or their noses, atop a paperback edition of *Zuckerman Bound* that would have crowned his head like a ring of feathers if only it were closer, was a page torn from the same legal pad on which he had taken his Conrad and Dostoyevsky notes.

Scrawled across this leaf two questions were written one on top of the other. Let Roth have the final words, even if they are barely legible. It's his death.

What was mine?

And, below that, the other one.

Who's going to know?