

RELATIONAL SELVES IN PHILIP ROTH'S PATRIMONY**Sorina Chiper, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

Abstract: Philip Roth's novel Patrimony is focused on the father-son relationship, covering the last period in Roth's father's life. As the old man's illness progresses, so does the sense of intimacy between Roth the father and Roth the son, to the point that the author feels as if he were the father of his biological father. The article traces this growing intimacy, which reveals an autobiographical self that is relational rather than individualistic. It also dwells on the uses of memory as a resource for one's identity and as an ethical injunction to embrace and maintain alive what came before.

Keywords: relational self, father-son relationship, Patrimony, Philip Roth, intimacy.

Introduction

In a dialogue with Stein recorded in *Everybody's Autobiography*, Dashiell Hammet – an American author of detective novels and short stories – suggested that in the age when there are no more genuine heroes or characters, a challenging topic for novelists is the relationship between fathers and sons. Philip Roth took up precisely this challenge in *Patrimony*, the book that covers the final years in his father's life from the discovery of his brain tumor up to Roth's dreams of his burial.

The father-son relationship is featured in other works by Roth as well. What sets *Patrimony* apart is the fact that the father is not the mighty target of ridicule, irony and bilious attack, as it used to be the case in other novels. Unlike *The Facts*, for instance, *Patrimony* depicts Philip Roth's father as an elderly man devastated by the impending and uncontrollable force of destiny manifested as irrational biology. This novel invites one to reconsider the nature of the autobiographical self, which has long been conceptualised on the model of the Cartesian self: an autonomous individual, a reasonable person, a solitary writer of his own existence, who looks back on his life in a – presumably – honest way.

1. The father-son relationship

Philip Roth's father, Herman Roth, was once a successful agent in an insurance company.

In his old age, he was like a Samson whose Delilah had been weakness and disease. In *Patrimony*, there is nothing fearful or awe-inspiring in the old Herman, just the recognition that the will of the mind cannot determine the body to stay alive, whole and healthy.

Patrimony is built on the father-son relationship after the death of Roth's mother, Bess. However, Bess Ross was still alive in the father's and son's memory and dialogue. For Herman, she remained a standard against which he judged the other women whom he met after her death; for Philip, she was the epitome of the self-sacrificing and self-effacing Jewish mother, whose very obedience to the will of her husband caused her fatal heart-attack. In her absence, though Herman was living with a woman, Philip took the maternal role of looking

after his father and nursing him. To overhear Herman tell Lil on the phone that “Philip is like a mother to me” (Roth 1991: 180) came as a surprise since Philip would have expected to be associated, in his father’s mind, with a father rather than with a mother. Previously, when Herman listened to Philip and did as he instructed him to, Philip perceived it as a borderline moment that demarcated the end of the era when his father had been issuing orders, expecting the rest of the family to obey, and the beginning of a new area where he – the son – took on the Father’s commanding role in the family:

“I then spoke four words to him, for words that I’d never uttered to him before in my life. ‘Do as I say,’ I told him. ‘Put on a sweater and your walking shoes.’

And they worked, these four words. I am fifty-five, he is almost eighty-seven, and the year is 1988: ‘Do as I say,’ I tell him – and he does it. The end of one era, the dawn of another (Roth 1991: 82-83).

Despite his self-conception as his father’s father, Philip accepted Herman’s association of him with a mother figure as valid, and launched himself into a discourse of praise for what his father had taught him, i.e. the vernacular:

“... his description was, in fact, more discriminating than my commonplace expectations while at the same time much more flagrant, unblinking, and enviably, unself-consciously blunt. Yes, he was teaching me something, ... something coarser than could be accommodated by my predictably vainglorious boyhood yearnings for a judicious, dignified father to replace the undereducated father who I found myself half-ashamed of at the very same time that his assailability, particularly as a target of anti-Semitic discrimination, quickened my solidarity with him and hardened my hatred of his belittlers: he taught me the vernacular. He *was* the vernacular, unpoetic and expressive and point-blank, with all the vernacular’s glaring limitations and all its durable force” (Roth 1991: 181).

It was in the vernacular that Herman distilled the most enduring features of his character, namely stubbornness and resilience. These were features that he carried in his blood as the survival kit that allowed his family to escape the Holocaust and to make the safe journey to the United States. Even though Philip seemed to ignore it, he had inherited these features himself, as his Polish friend reminded him during a phone conversation. This conversation was an occasion for Philip to admit that he felt connected to his father in ways that, up to that point, had never been so clear. It also allowed Philip to elaborate on the trajectory of his relationship with his father, from his youth to the moment when he became, symbolically, his father’s mother.

As intimated in the quote above, the young Philip had been ambivalent in his relationship with Herman. The father’s lack of formal education made him feel “half-ashamed” and it stimulated his imagination to take his father with him, in his mind, when he went to college for his classes. This act of mental generosity was meant to allow Herman, in Philip’s day-dreams, to benefit by proxy from the education that Philip’s generation could acquire. In positioning himself as his father’s “double” or “medium” in the classroom, Philip strove – metaphorically – to reduce the widening gap between his father’s generation of Jews in America and his own.

Philip seems to imply that to a certain extent, his father’s generation worked against themselves, by pushing their sons through the American educational system so as to become

acculturated. Yet, in becoming Americans, they also acquired the force to distance themselves from their parents' legacy. It was precisely due to his American education that Philip could take a critical look at his inherited cultural background and expose it in his prose. Philip's personal battle with Jewish values and mentalities, from the position of a first-generation American, implied an inevitable fictional attack on his father as the embodiment of the Law, of the all-mighty authority that required submission and expected the reproduction and proliferation of the same cultural norms. In Roth's own words, "He wasn't just any father, he was *the* father, with everything there is to hate in a father and everything there is to love" (Roth 1991: 180).

This love-hate dialectics defines Philip's relationship to his father from the time when the latter was "powerfully healthy and driving me crazy with advice that was useless and strictures that were pointless and reasoning that caused me, all alone in my room, to smack my forehead and howl in despair" (Roth 1991: 180) to the time of his physical frailty and vulnerability as an aging man. The connection between the two became stronger as their physical intimacy increased. After the death of his mother, Philip shared a bed with his father and from his father's room, he put off the man who was calling the father at night to scare him. On another occasion, while crossing the street, Herman handed him his fake teeth in a gesture that, for Philip, spelt the end of the "physical estrangement that, not so unnaturally, had opened up between us once I'd stopped being a boy" (Roth 1991: 152). A further step across the divide occurred when Philip cleaned up his father's "shit" – his "patrimony" and watched the old man bathing naked in the bath-tube. This is a critical episode in the account because it highlights a touching moment of identification and Philip's internalization of the injunction that had been his father's life-long motto: "*You must not forget anything*" (Roth 1991: 177).

2. Performative memory

For both father and son, memory was performative but in different ways: for Herman, memory kept his European experience alive and reinforced his survivorship. It enabled him to mark and reassert his presence, to position himself within a chain of historical events and a network of family and community members. When making new friends, Herman placed them on his memory maps in terms of locations they had shared and people that he had known in the area as customers of the life insurance company that he had worked for. The stories that he remembered allowed him to certify that he himself had been there, present in the history of the neighborhood. On another occasion, when he fell ill, memory allowed him to make sense of his brain tumor and overcome his terror:

"on and on, remembering the illnesses, the operations, the fevers, the transfusions, the recoveries, the comas, the vigils, the deaths, the burials – his mind, in its habitual way, working to detach him from the agonizing isolation of a man at the edge of oblivion and to connect his brain tumor to a larger history, to place his suffering in a context where he was no longer someone alone with an affliction peculiarly and horribly his own but a member of a clan whose trials he knew and accepted and had no choice but to share. In this way did he manage to domesticate his terror" (Roth 1991: 71).

For Philip, memory was performative in that, in its conjunction with imagination, it could help him recreate the father in artistic representation: "'I must remember accurately,' I told myself, 'remember everything accurately so that when he is gone I can re-create the father who created me'" (Roth 1991: 177).

Re-creation in a loop and renewed intimacy with the parents in imagination are recurrent tropes in *Patrimony*. The book is precisely the result of Roth's re-creation, for his readers, of "the father who created me," in full awareness of the narrative value or appropriateness of episodes that he had allegedly promised his father to keep secret. In the eyes of the son, Herman appeared as a family man, a hard-working sales-agent and low-level manager for a company that should have beatified him for his dedication. He was a man who allowed himself to be robbed without retaliation and who insisted on doing right, doing well and doing good; a catalyst for the family association that he presided; and a person with an extraordinary "capacity for renunciation and iron self-discipline" (Roth 1991: 79), for whom memories were life sustaining: "To be alive, to him, is to be made of memory – to him if a man's not made of memory, he's made of nothing" (Roth 1991: 124).

3. Roth's identity as a relational self

Roth's fictionalization of his memories shows that he was probably more like his father than he had been willing to admit. If in his previous autobiographical works, Roth was careful to mark his difference from his father, *Patrimony* allowed him to acknowledge the multiple points of convergence between them and to see the extent to which they mirrored each other. When Philip himself had to undergo heart surgery, he became aware of the extent to which their lives had been "if not identical, so intermeshed and spookily interchangeable." That was an occasion when he felt "at one" with his father, as he had felt in the past "when [he] used to smuggle him secretly into class with [him], the intellectual homunculus for whose development [he] felt as responsible as [he] did for [his] own" (Roth 1991: 225).

From a position of bewilderment – "I don't understand anything" (Roth 1991: 129) – meaning his incapacity to grasp the depth of his connection to his father – Philip came to relinquish reason and to cherish their emotional connection and the celebration of life in its most mundane manifestations that his father's illness occasioned:

"you clean up your father's shit because it has to be cleaned up, but in the aftermath of cleaning it up, everything that's there to feel is felt as it never was before... once you sidestep disgust and ignore nausea and plunge past those phobias that are fortified like taboos, there's an awful lot of life to cherish (Roth 1991: 175).

Watching Herman bathe in the bathtub "like a baby playing in the water" (Roth 1991: 178) and cleaning after him, Philip experienced a renewed feeling of intimacy with his father. This intimacy is dramatized after his heart surgery when, upon waking up, Philip went through multiple identifications: with his father (who was also treading the thin line between life and death); with his new self (as if he were a baby who had come to life through the transplant of veins from his own body); with his old self (the son and father of his father, and the father of his new baby-self); and with his mother:

...during those first few nights, the thought that I was giving suck to my own newborn heart provided hours of the most intense pleasure, sessions during which I did not have to use any imagination at all to feel myself androgynously partaking of the most delirious maternal joy... I was as near to being the double of my own nurturing mother as, during the anxious, uncertain hours on the eve of the bypass, I had come to feeling myself *transposed*, interchangeable with – even a sacrificial proxy for – my failing father, choking on

his mortality at the dinner table. I was never a heart patient alone in that bed: I was a family of four (Roth 1991: 226).

As Judith Butler noted and as the quote above aptly demonstrates, “[p]eople we know and lose become “internal” features of the self” (Butler 1999: xv). On his hospital bed, Roth felt united with his mother; in *Patrimony*, the depiction of the evolving relationship between the increasingly debilitating father and the son revealed the internalization of the voice and the thoughts of the father. This internalization of the father became apparent in the two dreams that are related at the end of *Patrimony*.

In the former dream, Philip saw himself standing on a pier down in Port Newark, about fifty years before, watching a “defunct warship drifting blindly into shore” (Roth 1991: 237). This dream lends itself to multiple interpretations: on the one hand, Philip interpreted the ship as a symbol of his father and its state of desolation as an omen of the father’s impending death. At another level, the ship was a snippet of family history concentrated in a metaphor: the transatlantic journey of Herman’s immigrant parents, the struggle to get ahead in a society and a company that would discriminate against Jews, and the wrecking of Herman’s body by the brain tumor. Finally, the dream could have foretold of Philip’s state of bereavement after the death of the father.

The latter dream, however, implied that even though Philip was the one who decided when to put an end to Herman’s life after hours of lying unconscious, Herman remained alive in his subconscious as the embodiment of *the* Father. By telling Philip in the dream that as a corpse, he “should have been dressed in a suit” and that Philip “did the wrong thing,” Herman returned as the judge of Philip’s deeds; this specular apparition reminded Philip that, at least in dreams, he would always remain “his little son” (Roth 1991: 237), wondering to what extent, as a relational self, he performed the *oughts* and matched the *ideals* that his father had expected from him (Anderson, Chen 2002: 624).

The end of *Patrimony* restates Philip’s anguish to do the right thing in life and in his writing. This anguish was at its peak when Roth was praying to his father directly: “Don’t die. Don’t die until I get my strength back. Don’t die until I can do it right. Don’t die while I’m helpless” (Roth 1991: 229). In that context, “doing it right” referred to his farewell from his father, in real life. *Patrimony* can be read as a symbolic farewell as well, but one that, as Roth’s dream seems to intimate, has misfired: “I had dressed him for eternity in the wrong clothes” (Roth 1991: 237).

4. Concluding remarks

Patrimony is an autobiographical writing that focuses on the relationship between Philip Roth and his father, Herman. Through Philip Roth’s identifications with his father and with his mother, it showcases a view of the autobiographical self as relational rather than as a monad. On the other hand, the very last line in the book – “You must not forget anything” (Roth 1991: 238) – shows that the internalization of his father’s voice led to Philip’s appropriation of the defunct man’s motto and guiding principle in life. What he had been doing rather unconsciously, i.e. remembering for the purpose of artistic (re-)creation, became a conscious form of praxis: the work of memory and of commemoration, whose result is *Patrimony*. By restating the father’s injunction to remember without attributing it to him, Roth showed that he himself had become, symbolically, his father, and impersonated him by taking over his life-long work of remembering.

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