
CHAPTER 6

RECONCILIATION AND THE ETHICAL TRIUMPH: *THE PROFESSOR OF DESIRE*

The Professor of Desire, published in 1977, is generally considered to be, so far, the most mature and accomplished book written by Philip Roth. Owing to the universality of its theme and flawless structure, the book has received highly favourable acclaim from the critics. According to George J. Searles, "*The Professor of Desire* is one of Roth's best books because it is among his most intelligent."¹ Similarly, Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr. calls it "the most formal of Roth's fictions."² Here, Roth seems to be at his best as far as his style, diction and narrative techniques are concerned. In its subdued and solemn tone, human sympathy and tenderness, and a deep sense of pathos and acceptance of life, it is only matched by his autobiographical book *Patrimony*.

If we accept Martin Amis's classification of Roth's novels in trilogies, *The Professor of Desire* is the last novel of the confessional "Trilogy of Desire."³ In *The Professor of Desire* as in other two novels of this trilogy, *Portnoy's Complaint* and *My Life as a Man*, the protagonist is afflicted with the conflict between his high ethical ideals and base desires. As pointed out earlier, in *Goodbye, Columbus*, *Letting Go*, *When She Was Good*, and *Portnoy's Complaint*, the Rothian protagonist faces the conflict between his idealistic aspirations and the forces of the outer reality (In *Portnoy's*

Complaint besides the external conflict, the hero is tortured by his inner conflict, between the two opposite factions of his own personality). In all these successive novels, the protagonist advances to higher stages of ethical evolution, but still, he is not able to resolve his moral dilemma. It is in *The Professor of Desire* that after a painful struggle, he is able to understand his true nature, reconcile the conflicting impulses in his personality, and, eventually, attains spiritual harmony and peace.

In all the preceding novels analysed so far, the Rothian protagonist is found to be engaged in a desperate effort to wriggle out of the conflict generated by his commitment to idealism on the one hand and the compulsions of the existential reality on the other. In every successive novel, he reaches a higher level of development as he grows into a more mature, experienced and enlightened individual trying to ensure his survival as a human entity in the postwar American society. As a result of this process of evolution, his ethical choices are determined by the level of his moral stature corresponding to his state of development. While Neil in *Goodbye, Columbus* is a naive and ideal young man who hesitantly embarks upon his encounter with the social forces in quest of his identity and self-fulfilment, Gabe in *Letting Go* resolves to confront these forces through interpersonal relationships determined, at the same time, to preserve his personal freedom and moral integrity. In Gabe's case, however, his struggle inadvertently leads him to a confused state of mind, as the values by which he sets so much store are found to be discordant

to the demands of his social milieu. The protagonist of *When She Was Good* asserts her value system rather self-righteously, and even violently. Thwarted by the forces antagonistic to the individual, she fails to achieve reconciliation and harmony and, ultimately, destroys herself. Roth certainly does not approve of any kind of escape from social reality, howsoever indifferent, or even hostile it may be to the individual's demands and yearnings. In *Portnoy's Complaint*, Portnoy's struggle is as much with the society as with himself. On the one hand, he is at odds with the social forces represented by his Jewish parents and on the other, he is torn by the conflict between the two sides of his own personality.

In *The Professor of Desire*, Roth takes the problem of moral conflict to its logical end. Here, the conflict is almost exclusively internal, albeit always in the ambience of family and society. After enjoying unbridled sexual pleasures, David Kepesh (most of the characters of *The Breast* are recast in *The Professor of Desire*) suffers the pangs of guilt and repentance due to his high moral ideals. After much pain and suffering, he begins to understand his true nature and his condition *vis-a-vis* the social and moral forces governing his existence and arrives at the conclusion that his idealistic notions can coexist with the surrounding pragmatic reality only after some adjustments and modifications on his part. In connection with the fate of the protagonists of *Letting Go*, *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Breast*, Roth observes in *Reading Myself and Others* (published before *The Professor of Desire*):

I can even think of these characters – Gabe Wallach, Alexander Portnoy, and David Kepesh [of *The Breast*]– as three stages of a single explosive projectile that is fired into the barrier that forms one boundary of the individual's identity and experience: that barrier of personal inhibition, ethical conviction and plain, old monumental fear beyond which lies the moral and psychological unknown. Gabe Wallach crashes up against the wall and collapses; Portnoy proceeds on through the fractured mortar, only to become lodged there, half in, half out. It remains for Kepesh to pass right on through the bloodied hole, and out the other end, into no-man's land.⁴

The metaphor aptly describes the ethical fate of his earlier protagonists and can be appropriately extended to the hero of *The Professor of Desire*, since it defines his moral predicament accurately. It can be safely presumed that even after crashing against the wall of moral boundary and suffering the pain, he is able to muster enough strength and courage to survive and with the full knowledge and experience of the moral dangers inherent in the process.

Comparing Kepesh's situation to that of Portnoy, Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance observe that like the latter he "fights a recurring battle between passion and reason, pleasure and duty, violent self-assertion and dedication to the discipline of his profession as a

teacher and scholar."⁵ But in *Portnoy's Complaint*, the conflict is also external as the hero attributes his suppression and unhappiness to his Jewish parents. Even till the closing lines of the novel Portnoy is not able to resolve his conflicts. Kepesh, on the other hand, "begins to gain some insight into his own internal struggle."⁶ And once he realizes the real cause of his conflict, he resolutely wages a war against his libidinous instincts and triumphs in the end, though tentatively. In *The Professor of Desire*, the hero is ultimately able to overcome the adverse forces – mainly internal in his case – and achieves self-fulfilment; albeit like all other things in human life his happiness is tentative and not absolute. Jones and Nance accurately describe the moral progress of Kepesh when they observe: "Kepesh becomes the first of Roth's protagonists to make the transition from professor-rake to 'conscientious' professor."⁷

David Kepesh, the professor of comparative literature, faces the age-old conflict between the base desires of the flesh and high moral ideals, "between reckless erotic ambitions and conscientious intellectual dedication."⁸ Early in the novel as a student, Kepesh realizes that like Lord Byron he wants to be "studious by day, dissolute by night" and like Richard Steele imagines himself to be a "rake among scholars, a scholar among rakes."⁹ On the one hand, he is the high priest of ethical principles supposed to inspire his students with supreme moral values and on the other cherishes the fulfilment of his most wild erotic desires. Like Portnoy, he suffers the dichotomy of his libidinous urge and conscience. In his

early youth, though, he finds it difficult to reconcile these conflicting demands: "Either I turned against my flesh, or it turned against me ..." (171). No doubt, unlike Portnoy his childhood is comparatively innocent and happy at the Hungarian Royale, his parents' hotel in the Catskills. Still, the seeds of romantic escapism are present in him from the very beginning which can be discerned in his praise for Herbie Bratasky, his childhood hero, who had the rare gift of mimicking all sorts of sounds. His psychoanalyst rightly remarks: "Moral delinquency has its fascination for you"(102). His tendency to live beyond the moral boundaries is also seen in his unsuccessful attempt to seduce Marcella Walsh in his college days.

However, his lust assumes gigantic proportions in England where he goes as a Fulbright fellow to study Arthurian legends and Icelandic sagas. In London, even before attending his "first lectures on the epic and the romance" he lands in Shepherd Market to find the first whore of his life (28). His voracious indulgence in erotic orgies with the two Swedish girls is reminiscent of Portnoy's sexual adventures with his shiksas. Elisabeth Elverskog and Birgitta have come to London University to improve their English. Unlike Birgitta, Elisabeth is sensitive and conscientious despite her flair for sexual adventures. Initially, Kepesh feels emotionally attached to her and, as he confesses in his letters to her, romantically fancies marrying her and even having children by her. But after a rather perverse and vigorous sexual work-out with Birgitta and Kepesh, Elisabeth feels

guilty and repentant and, finally, leaves for Sweden. Birgitta, on the other hand, embodies the true spirit of hedonism and seems to suffer no regret or remorse for her debauchery. In her uninhibited and frank indulgence in sexual pleasures she appears to be a replica of Mary Jane Reed, "The Monkey", of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Her "total immunity from remorse or self-doubt" and her "courteous, respectful and friendly" behaviour fascinates Kepesh to her (50). But, finally, Kepesh decides to desert her, for she embodies that side of his moral nature which, ironically, he strongly disapproves. This "perfectly brought-up child of a Stockholm physician and his wife" departs from his life as unobtrusively and gracefully as she plays her role in sexual feats (50).

The first one-third of the novel, where Kepesh is seen to wallow in sensual pleasures, strikingly echoes the atmosphere of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Kepesh resembles Portnoy in his "erotic daredevilry" and the consequent feelings of remorse and guilt (44). After a passionate love making with Birgitta he reflects, "An hour earlier I had been fearful that it might be decades before I was potent again, that my punishment, if such it was, might even last *forever*" (41). The fear of impotence is a natural corollary of the acute pangs of guilt and it again finds expression in his complaint during his session with Dr. Klinger: "I cannot maintain an erection, Dr. Klinger" (103). At this stage, Kepesh does not understand his true nature as he himself admits, "No, nobody understands me, not even I myself" (26). That is precisely the reason why after making the mistake of

choosing Birgitta as his paramour, he again decides to marry a woman like Helen Baird despite his awareness of "the deep temperamental divide that has been there from the start" between them (67). However, he faces his characteristic dilemma before taking the plunge:

Doubting and hoping then, wanting and fearing (anticipating the pleasantest sort of lively future one moment, the worst in the next), I marry Helen Baird – after, that is, nearly three full years devoted to doubting-hoping-wanting-and-fearing."(66)

Nevertheless, he soon discovers that Helen is even worse than Birgitta in the sense that at least the latter was what she appeared and was not afflicted with any psychological dualism. She does enjoy sexual intimacy with Kepesh for some time but leaves him the moment she senses his disinterest in her without so much as a hint of accusation or grumbling. Helen, though beautiful and exotic like her, is driven by a passion for the romantic and the unreal and certainly does not feel at ease in her role of a domestic married woman.

Kepesh's life with Helen is far from contented, since in his choice of her he has been solely guided by his prurient instincts. Soon after their marriage "mutual criticism and disapproval continue to poison our lives", and he realizes with dismay that Helen is irresistibly drawn to those hollow values which lead nowhere but to moral vacuity (67). The exotic world of romance and fun she enjoyed with Jimmy Metcalf in Hongkong always

seems to beckon her like a mirage. In her best make-up, this "princess of the Orient" stealthily visits the airport to be picked up by any stranger and transported to Hongkong or any other Utopia of romance (101). In fact, she does go to Hongkong where she has her experience of evil in the form of her former lover, Metcalf. Characters like Metcalf rarely find a central place in Roth's fictional world as they are on the extreme margin of his ethical spectrum. Naturally, he himself is never shown physically in the narrative, and his presence is suggested only indirectly. Mauled physically and psychologically, Helen is brought back from Hongkong by Kepesh himself. But even after her marriage with robust and pragmatic Lowery, she finds life monotonous and boring as she is still lured by her romantic and illusory dreams.

Kepesh's separation from Helen again leaves him in a psychological and moral vacuum. In this transitional stage, "fastened to no one and to nothing, drifting, drifting, sometimes, frighteningly, sinking," he attempts to reorganize his life (103). Like Tarnopol, Zuckerman and Portnoy, he seeks the help of a psychoanalyst, Dr. Frederick Klinger. On his visit to his son in New York, Abe Kepesh is rather disturbed to see the kind of life he is living. At this stage, he is in the abyss of his circumstances; he is having his sessions with his psychoanalyst, he is on anti-depressants, **and even in his father's presence an unknown homosexual pesters him** with his phone calls at midnight. During this period, he makes friendship

with one of his faculty colleagues, Ralph Baumgarten, and both of them try to seduce a girl who, ironically turns out to be Dr. Klinger's daughter. Meanwhile, he gets a job offer from Arthur Schonbrunn, the chairman of the comparative literature program at the State University of New York. Now he makes a serious attempt to understand his motives and intentions in the context of his moral and ethical convictions and the demands of his surrounding society. His confession to Dr. Klinger, "I can't go *ahead*", actually proves his intention to wade through the state of stasis and limbo in which he now finds himself (100). At this moment, his receptivity for truth and will for moral regeneration is at its peak, and gradually reality begins to dawn upon him.

At this crucial stage of his life, Kepesh meets Claire Ovington. In sharp contrast to Helen and Birgitta, she represents positive and affirmative traits of character; unlike them, she is pragmatic, mature, self-controlled and considerate. "She is to steadiness", he tells Dr. Klinger, "what Helen was to impetuosity. She is to common sense what Birgitta was to indiscretion"(158). With her help and co-operation, Kepesh starts recuperating from his past psychic wounds and makes serious attempt to reaffirm his faith in himself and the ethical ideals which he cherishes.

In a way, Kepesh's moral development follows the archetypal pattern of innocent bliss to experience and pain which is, ultimately, succeeded by serene, though not unqualified, happiness. Eventually, he arrives at the

Chekhovian conclusion about the essential human condition as expressed by one of his students, Kathie Steiner, in her paper: "We are born innocent, we suffer terrible disillusionment before we can gain knowledge, and then we fear death – and we are granted only fragmentary happiness to offset the pain." (94). After his horrid experiences, Kepesh realizes that the moral virtues like renunciation, self-control and stoicism are essential to achieve peace and harmony in life. Commenting on Roth's concerns in *The Professor of Desire*, Jones and Nance say: "He is writing about the human condition – the transformations from innocence to experience, from idealism to disillusionment – and those fragmentary moments of happiness which offset the pain."¹⁰

The major characters in *The Professor of Desire* seem to fall broadly in two categories which represent two extreme poles of moral alternatives. Kepesh occupies a pivotal position in this moral pattern and he partakes of the characteristics of both the types; in fact, their diverse attributes correspond to the ethical dualism in his own nature. Roth seems to contrast these characters deliberately to bring into sharp focus the moral stance of David Kepesh. The first group consists of such characters as Birgitta, Helen and Baumgarten; whereas Claire, Abe, Professor Soska, Barbatnik, and Schonbrunn fall in the second category. In the early stage of his moral development, Kepesh aligns himself with those belonging to the former feeling, at the same time, an inherent affinity with those of the second category. In fact, the progress of the narrative in the novel corresponds to

the gradual but definite moral transformation of Kepesh from the first category to the second one.

This is not to suggest that Roth has any intention of grouping his characters into water-tight compartments of good and bad. Far from being moral types, his characters are "round", to use E.M. Forster's term.¹¹ Occasionally, even such a responsible and upright person as Schonbrunn is found to suffer from moral lapse, as is seen in his attempt to seduce Helen in Kepesh's absence (Helen herself reveals this fact to Kepesh after her marriage with Lowery).

Baumgarten, like Helen and Birgitta, believes in unbridled enjoyment of immoral pleasures. He is not daunted by either the reproach of his social circle or the voice of his conscience in his sexual pursuits. In a sense, he is Kepesh's alter-ego inasmuch as he represents the dissolute side of his personality. Kepesh would have liked to tread in his footsteps if he had no moral ideals. Baumgarten's total disillusionment with social and moral values is reflected in his candid and cynical declaration to Kepesh: "But virtue isn't my bag" (138). But at the same time he voices Kepesh's dislike and reprobation of hypocrisy when he expresses his disgust with moral dissolution of the people like the "esteemed professor" who claim to be the guardian of ethical values in society (139).

In many of Roth's novels, the protagonist is more or less antagonistic to his parents inasmuch as he considers them a kind of hindrance in his

quest for personal freedom and self-fulfilment. Zuckerman, Portnoy, Paul, and Lucy are all at loggerheads with their parents. Even in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Aunt Gladys, though caring and affectionate, does not seem to approve of Neil's involvement with the Patimkins owing to their higher social and economic status. In sharp contrast to these characters, Kepesh enjoys a tender and affectionate relationship with both his mother and father. "More than in any other of Roth's novels", Searles observes, "the bittersweet complications of deeply-felt filial love are fully explored, as Kepesh reveals his sincere and unashamed attachment to his parents."¹²

Kepesh is always proud of his mother, who is shown to be an affectionate, orderly and assiduous woman. He remembers with fondness and longing her teaching him to type in their deserted and snow-covered Catskills resort. In the character of Belle Kepesh, there is not the slightest suggestion of the authority and oppression of a Sophie Portnoy, the archetypal Jewish mother in *Portnoy's Complaint*. On their visit to Kepesh in New York, she brings for him packages of food with "DAVID" typed "exactly at the center and underlined in red"(106). With rare compassion and pathos, Roth describes Kepesh's parental affection when he nostalgically recalls his childhood days and longs for sleeping in bed with them. Like the lover in Robert Browning's poem "The Last Ride Together", he tries in vain to turn the present moment of his bliss into eternity.¹³ He exclaims: "And before she dies, we will all hold each other through one

last night and morning"(111). Until now, he has not been able to grasp and accept the essential transience and imperfection of life.

His father, Abe Kepesh, embodies all the qualities of the typical father generally found in Roth's fiction. Like his counterparts in *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Letting Go* and *Patrimony*, he is a hardworking, self-sacrificing and pragmatic person, who "has never said die" in his life (115). Kepesh and his father enjoy a mutually congenial and satisfying relationship. His reverence and love for his father is evidently clear in his profuse praise for him: "Is there a man alive, I wonder, who has led a more exemplary life? Is there an ounce of anything that he has withheld in the performance of his duties?" (245). Abe Kepesh's affection and concern for his son is reflected in his gift of the Shakespeare medallions for him. In its treatment of father-son relationship, *The Professor of Desire* is apparently a precursor of Roth's autobiographical book *Patrimony* in which he describes in detail his own relationship with his father.

On his visit to his son in New York after the latter's divorce from Helen, Abe Kepesh finds his life in the doldrums. He strongly reprehends this kind of living and gives his judgement in clear and unambiguous terms: "All this is all *wrong*, son. It is no way to live!"(114). Mature, wise and pragmatic, he nurses no illusion of escape from the harsh realities of this world and is equipped with the traditional wisdom and moral values to grapple with the hardships of survival. He is shocked to learn that Kepesh has been consulting a psychoanalyst in order to solve his personal

problems. His exhortations to his son reflect his firm faith in his inherent social and moral values: "Why not a *wife* to talk to? That's what a wife is for!"(114). Though after the death of Belle Kepesh he is utterly alone, he does not bother his son with his request for company or emotional support like, for example, Gabe's father in *Letting Go*. Quite naturally, he feels childlike excitement and euphoria when he sees his son finally settle down with Claire Ovington.

Mr. Barbatnik, on the other hand, is a father-figure like E.I. Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer* and Mr. Patimkin in *Goodbye, Columbus*. His composed and contented conversation with the Kepeshes conjures up a warm and compassionate scene in some nineteenth-century British novel. Although he has had his share of pain and suffering in life, he is at peace with himself and the world without the least trace of regret or grumbling and is rather proud of his horrid struggle to survive the concentration camps. In response to Kepesh's question what he wanted to become before the war started, he replies in his characteristically calm manner: "A human being, someone that could see and understand how we lived, and what was real, and not to flatter myself with lies To believe in what doesn't exist, no, that wasn't for me"(257). In a way, his assertion sums up the whole point of the narrative which is also expressed in Kepesh's essay on Chekhov's fiction entitled "Man in a Shell" in which he writes of "license and restraint in Chekhov's world – longings fulfilled, pleasures denied, and the pain occasioned by both"(157). The temperament and character of these

father-figures reflect and reinforce the ethical convictions of the protagonist who is striving to extricate himself from his moral conflict and achieve spiritual harmony.

Martin Green is of the opinion that "Roth is unusually susceptible to literary influence" in his fiction.¹⁴ Whereas the main characters of *Letting Go* are seen to be under the influence of Henry James, Kepesh in *The Professor of Desire* is under the spell of Kafka and Chekhov besides his mention of the names of such literary masters as Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Browning and Tolstoy. Literature for him is referential as it is for Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*, who is firmly convinced that literature would help him out from his painful dilemma. Roth has a special fascination for Kafka, as is evident in his innumerable references to him in his fiction. Kafka even appears as a character in his essay-story "Looking at Kafka." *The Breast* seems to be closely patterned on "Metamorphosis" in its absurdist mode, portraying the literal metamorphosis of the hero into a huge breast. The writers who most fascinate Roth are generally found to be those who show a high moral consciousness in their fiction.

During their tour of Europe, Kepesh and Claire visit Kafka's grave in Prague. In his discourse with Soska, the dismissed Czech professor, he discusses the sad plight of the intelligentsia in his country amidst the contemporary political reality. Soska's remark, "many of us survive almost solely on Kafka" holds to be true literally as well as metaphorically in the

context of his struggle for survival in his own country after the Russian invasion(169). Here Kafka symbolizes the suffering and the victimization of the individual by the social and his own inner forces. Kepesh himself feels in unison with Kafka's characters in his moral crippledness.

However, Anton Chekhov in this novel ceases to be just an 'influence'; he is very much a "part of the subject matter."¹⁵ As Kepesh realizes in the course of his moral regeneration, the characters in Chekhov's fiction make a futile attempt to escape from the humdrum and monotonous life into a romantic world of liberty and adventure, which almost invariably ends in disillusionment and despondency. Kepesh is especially impressed by his short stories in which the characters who deviate from the moral path, particularly in prurient matters, are eventually confounded by trauma and despair. His attempt to apply the fictional truth to his own predicament (he actually intends to confess to his students the reality of his sexual experiences) obviously shows that he arrives at the same conclusions in the end. Expounding Chekhov's philosophy of life he tells his students about his [Chekhov's] "feel for the disillusioning moment and for those processes wherein actuality seemingly pounces upon even our most harmless illusions, not to mention the grand dreams of fulfillment and adventure"(74).

The Professor of Desire marks the end of a specific phase in Roth's literary career inasmuch as it concludes his preoccupations with the individual's effort to cope with his conflict between sensual desires and

spiritual aspirations. After this novel he concentrates his energies on such diverse aspects of human experience as the complex relation of art with the personal life of the artist and his social milieu (*Zuckerman Unbound*); complexities arising out of the transformation of the felt experience into fictional form (*Patrimony, The Facts, Deception*); and the social, ethnic and the political implications of fiction (*The Counterlife*).

On a minor scale, these problems have been touched upon by Roth in *The Professor of Desire* also. For instance, Professor Soska is a victim of political totalitarianism in his country. Forcibly retired from his job as a university teacher, he is now engaged in a futile translation of *Moby Dick* into Czech. The same fate is meted out to his wife, who was formerly employed as a research scientist and now works as a typist in a meat-packing plant. To Kepesh's amazement, Professor Soska keeps up his appearances even in such hostile circumstances. Kepesh's indulgence in profligacy is juxtaposed with the political entrapment of Soska who has been denied intellectual freedom. Roth seems to suggest here that if Soska can tolerate so much tyranny it should not be difficult for Kepesh to defy the authority of his flesh over his spirit. Kepesh himself does not fail to see the parallelism of their respective situations as he confesses to Soska:

Of course you are the one on intimate terms with totalitarianism – but if you'll permit me, I can only compare the body's utter single-mindedness, its cold indifference and

absolute contempt for the well-being of the spirit, to some unyielding, authoritarian regime. (171-72)

The choice before both of them is clear: Soska could have chosen to obey the dictates of the existing political establishment. He preferred to oppose them to keep intact his personal dignity and integrity. Similarly, Kepesh chooses to embrace higher moral virtues which, in his opinion, are essential for self-fulfilment and spiritual harmony.

Baumgarten rakes up the problematic issue of the relevance of art to personal experience on the one hand and to social and moral taboos on the other. Despite having a destitute family background, he is totally opposed to the idea of making use of his personal circumstances in his art. Surprisingly, he is the only character in the novel – except Barbatnik, the concentration camp survivor – who, like Portnoy, is discomfited by his Jewish culture and morality. He feels only contempt and cynicism for the snobbish and hypocritical people who in the name of upholding high social and moral standards serve only to support and strengthen the dehumanizing system. In the closing pages of the book, Roth brings Barbatnik and conjures up the horrors of the concentration camps, thus, suggesting the old problem of racial bigotry during the Holocaust. It is in his later novels like *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* that he deals with such ethnic and political issues in detail.

In her discussion of female characters in Roth's fiction, Mary Allen complains that most of Roth's female characters lack the virtue of "genuine

goodness".¹⁶ In her opinion, Roth's heroine tries to control the male character by "wielding her power in the name of goodness."¹⁷ Her conclusions may be justified to some extent in the case of such female characters as Lucy, Maureen, Mary Jane Reed, Helen and Birgitta, but Claire Ovington is certainly an exception. For Kepesh she is like the Biblical good angel who arrives at the most appropriate time in his life to help him in extricating himself from his ethical wilderness. Nowhere has Roth portrayed a female character in such glorifying terms as in this novel.

After Kepesh's unhappy marital life with Helen, Claire appears to him so orderly, affectionate and good that she assumes symbolic significance for him – the symbol of the possibility of a life on a higher ethical level. Besides being beautiful and charming like Helen, she is an assiduous and practical woman, and passionately helps him in recuperating from his moral and psychological exhaustion. At least in the case of Claire, it seems difficult to accept Mary Allen's contention that Roth "rails at the world because he has never found in it a woman who is both strong and good."¹⁸ To spare Kepesh any inconvenience arising out of his obligation to marry her, she gets an abortion without so much as informing him. She later explains her reasons to Kepesh, "I don't want to make anybody unhappy. I don't want to cause anyone pain" (222).

But hers is not the goodness of a Sophie Portnoy who tends to dominate her son's life or a Mrs. Wallach whose obsession with goodness

leads inadvertently to undesired interference in other's personal life. With her encouragement and emotional support, Kepesh gradually starts enjoying his life as a professor and a husband. Obviously, his intimate relationship with Claire is no longer founded merely upon his sensual passion for her, for with the passage of time he finds his "overheated frenzy subsiding into quiet physical affection"(199). Unlike Helen she understands his true nature and extends her whole-hearted co-operation in his moral redemption: "For within a year the job is somehow done, a big check mark beside each life-saving item. I give up the anti-depressants, and no abyss opens beneath me(153). At long last, he feels hopeful of his deliverance from those entrapments of the flesh which were the root cause of the generation of conflict in his psyche. In the last section of the novel, Roth describes with rare felicity and lyrical brilliance his sense of pure joy and spiritual bliss. Out of his deep sense of contentment and happiness Kepesh exclaims:

Oh, Clarissa, ... it's as though the past can't do me any more harm. I just don't have any more regrets. And my fears are gone, too. And it's all from finding you. I'd thought the god of women, who doles them out to you, had looked down on me and said, 'Impossible to please – the hell with him.' And then he sends me Claire.(178-79)

But living with Claire in this blissful state, he is still nagged by doubts and fears and, perhaps, this is the reason why he procrastinates his

marriage with her. The "rake" in him is sometimes fed up with the orderly and down-to-earth Claire, as she singularly lacks the raw and uninhibited sexuality exhibited by Birgitta and Helen(17). His exasperation is obvious when he says, "I see how very easily I could have no use for her. The snapshots. The lists. The mouth that will not drink my come. The curriculum-review committee. Everything"(162). During their tour of Europe, he remembers with longing his sensual pleasures with Birgitta though just for a moment. Before long he feels that "all such yearnings have begun to subside, as left to themselves those yearnings will"(163). True, the lure of carnal orgies in his unconscious mind sometimes crops up in the form of his disinterest in Claire: "How much longer before I've had a bellyful of wholesome innocence – how long before the lovely blandness of a life with Claire begins to cloy, to pall, and I am out there once again, mourning what I've lost and looking for my way!(251). Nevertheless, he has realized now that his sexual indulgence is actually an impediment in the fulfilment of his ethical aspirations and the resultant achievement of spiritual harmony which is his ultimate goal. Having realized this truth, he exerts his utmost will and strength to shed the ghost of his past profligacy and turns a new leaf in his life.

In his Edenic garden Helen enters like a temptress. However, during their brief interaction he does not show the faintest sign of temptation by her physical charms. Far from it, he feels a kind of pity for her: "Only it is Helen's bad luck that she cannot stand him [her husband]. Still Jimmy –

still those dreams of what might and should have been, if only moral repugnance had not intervened"(218). Nevertheless, he is certainly perturbed by his psychological fear of the loss of his sexual passion for Claire: "I can't say it, not tonight, but within a year my passion will be dead. Already it is dying and I am afraid that there is nothing I can do to save it"(261). But now that he is in "his middle thirties, having recovered finally from the mistakes of his twenties", he has finally understood the essential condition of man in this world (259). With determination, self-denial and self-control, he is able to extricate himself from the labyrinth of his illusions and misconceptions and starts "living at last in accordance with my [his] true spirit"(196). No doubt, there are pitfalls and obstacles in his quest, they are but an inevitable and essential part of life. His choice to act resolutely and with all his inner resources, eventually, leads him to his destination. In the final analysis, Kepesh undoubtedly survives at a higher moral level than his predecessors.

In sharp contrast to the moral haziness prevalent in *Letting Go*, Roth presents the ethical alternatives of the protagonist in a fairly clear perspective in *The Professor of Desire*. In the opening pages of the novel, he portrays Kepesh's innocent and harmonious state of mind during his childhood spent with his parents in their Catskills resort. He enjoys the taintless bliss of childhood totally unaware of the experience of evil and the consequent disillusionment and pain. It is during his Fulbright years, his "Age of Exploration", that he earnestly pursues the fulfilment of his

lascivious desires (147). Even in this phase of erotomania, he is, like Neil, Gabe, Lucy and Portnoy, acutely and painfully aware of his ethical ideals. Deeply influenced by the fiction of Chekhov, he identifies himself with his characters. He seems to feel such "humiliations and failures" as faced by those characters of Chekhov

who seek a way *out* of the shell of restrictions and convention, out of the pervasive boredom and the stifling despair, out of the painful marital situations and the endemic social falsity, into what they take to be a vibrant and desirable life. (156)

In the final stage of his ethical evolution, Kepesh accepts the moral boundaries and restrictions within which life has to be lived and decides to make no attempt either to cross or demolish them. Now he is firmly convinced of the supremacy of the salvation of the soul over the gratification of the senses. On discovering the fact of Claire's abortion he says: "Is there not a point on life's way when one yields to duty, *welcomes* duty as once one yielded to pleasure, to passion, to adventure – a time when duty is the pleasure, rather than pleasure the duty"(253)

Some critics are of the opinion that in the end Kepesh gets only "fragmentary happiness in a relationship with Claire Ovington."¹⁹ According to Jones and Nance, Kepesh's statement that in his relationship with Claire he feels "sealed up into something wonderful"(164) amply demonstrates that he considers his life with Claire as "entrapment."²⁰ But

Kepesh has now learnt to preserve the sanctity of the social and moral bonds which are an essential part of human life. The word 'wonderful' itself suggests the sense of psychological fulfilment and harmony he feels in his limited life with Claire. Similarly, Rodgers also complains that "his dream of Kafka's whore makes it clear that the struggle within him has been repressed, not ended."²¹ True, in the absurd dream he has the night before leaving Prague, he sees Kafka's whore, Eva, who invites him to touch her withered private parts. But his reluctance to accept her lascivious offer amply shows his disinterest in sexual pleasures. Moreover, his vision of the whore as a decrepit old hag may be interpreted as an evidence of his realization of the futility of carnal gratifications.

Mark Shechner calls *The Professor of Desire* "a novel of convalescence", celebrating the "erotic and emotional recovery" of the protagonist.²² It would be more appropriate to call it a novel of moral convalescence, as it portrays the process of the hero's deliverance from the turbulence caused by his ethical dilemma. In the closing pages of the novel, Roth describes with rare felicity Kepesh's domestic joy and happiness:

It looks and feels to both of them as though they have been saved, and in large part by one another. They are in love. But after dinner by candlelight, one of the old men tells of his life, about the utter ruination of a world, and about the blows

that keep on coming. And that's it. The story ends just like this: her pretty head on his shoulder; his hand stroking her hair; their owl hooting; their constellations all in order – their medallions all in order; their guests in their freshly made beds; and their summer cottage, so cozy and inviting, just down the hill from where they sit together wondering about what they have to fear. Music is playing in the house.(260)

The tenderness, sentimental affection, deep serenity and contentment expressed in the passage evoke a scene from a novel of Charles Dickens or George Eliot. It reflects the reconciliation and composure attained by a man who has had the painful experience of divergence from the ethical path approved by his social milieu and his own conscience. The Rothian protagonist appears, eventually, to have extricated himself from the gnawing dilemma of restraint and passion, and achieved spiritual harmony.

Still, it goes without saying that he is pestered by many doubts and apprehensions but of a different nature. In fact, his discomfiture has much to do with his fear of the possibility of his relapse into his former moral degeneration. As far as his promiscuous intentions are concerned, he is fully satisfied with Claire. He says, "Claire is enough. Yes, 'Claire' and 'enough' – they, too, are one word"(165). This shows how far Kepesh has come from his anguished state when he confessed to Dr. Klinger in exasperation, "I should have gone all the way and become Birgitta's pimp"(101). His apprehensions serve only to show that the probability of

deviation from one's chosen path cannot be ruled out permanently and man can preserve his moral ideals only by his strenuous and constant efforts.

Even in the last paragraph of the novel, Kepesh is seen to be troubled by "bad dreams" sweeping through him "like water through a fish's gills" implying the precariousness of his happiness(262). Roth seems to suggest here that the evil in the form of carnal temptations is always lurking below the outer surface of normalcy and can erupt out any moment. But in the very next line Kepesh reaffirms his faith in his latent capabilities: "Near dawn I awaken to discover that the house is not in ashes nor have I been abandoned in my bed as an incurable. My willing Clarissa is with me still!"(262). The Rothian protagonist after his harrowing moral ordeal has, at long last, understood and learnt to accept the essential human condition. Kepesh's predicament transcends the narrow social and moral boundaries and assumes a universal dimension. There are no permanent solutions and life has to be accepted in its entirety and with all its imperfections. Moreover, as Roth himself emphasizes the point in *Reading Myself and Others*, the artist's job is to present the situation honestly and straightforwardly and not to try to suggest any solution. He says: "Chekhov makes a distinction between 'the solution of the problem and a correct presentation of the problem' – and adds, 'only the latter is obligatory for the artist.'"²³ And Roth has certainly succeeded in achieving his artistic purpose in *The Professor of Desire*.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ George J. Searles, *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985) 63.

² Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., *Philip Roth* (Boston: Twayne, 1978) 160.

³ Quoted in George J. Searles, *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike*, 166.

⁴ Roth, *Reading Myself* 85.

⁵ Judith Paterson Jones and Guinevera A. Nance, *Philip Roth* (New York: Ungar, 1981) 87.

⁶ Jones and Nance 116.

⁷ Jones and Nance 112.

⁸ Hermione Lee, *Philip Roth* (London: Methuen, 1982) 65.

⁹ Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire* (London: Vintage, 1995) 17.

All subsequent citations will be to the text as given in this edition and the page numbers will be indicated in parentheses appearing immediately after the quotation.

¹⁰ Jones and Nance 118.

¹¹ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 73.

¹² Searles 61.

¹³ Robert Browning, "The Last Ride Together", *Fifteen Poets* (London: Oxford UP, 1965) 432.

- ¹⁴ Martin Green, Introduction, *A Philip Roth Reader*, by Philip Roth (London: Vintage, 1993) XI.
- ¹⁵ Green XIV.
- ¹⁶ Mary Allen, "When She Was Good She was Horrid", *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1976). Rpt. in *Philip Roth*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1986) 146.
- ¹⁷ Allen 125.
- ¹⁸ Allen 147.
- ¹⁹ Jones and Nance 117.
- ²⁰ Jones and Nance 118.
- ²¹ Rodgers 163.
- ²² Mark Shechner, "Jewish Writers", *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1981) 235.
- ²³ Roth, *Reading Myself* 18.