The Evolving Narrative of Reminiscence: A Review on A Study of the Writing of the Memories in Philip Roth’s Fiction

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Based on a detailed analysis of all the works written by contemporary American writer Philip Roth, Xin Huimin’s monograph A Study of the Writing of the Memories in Philip Roth’s Fiction divides his literary writing career of more than half a century into three phases: the Jewish writing phase, the American writing phase and the phase of “late style” writing. Drawing on related theories of memory, Xin explores how the protagonists in Roth’s seven novels use their various modes of memory to fashion and reconstruct their ethnical, national and personal identity, and further points out that these three distinct phases correspond to Roth’s shifts from a Jewish writer, an American writer, and to an aging writer. The book comprehensively manifests Roth’s ethical concerns, his political appeal and the aesthetic value of his works.

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Along with Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Cormac McCarthy, Philip Roth (1933-2018) was ranked by Harold Bloom as the greatest contemporary American writer. As stated in The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth, “Philip Roth has been perhaps the most critically significant and consistently controversial American writer of the past fifty years” (Parrish, 2007, p. 1). Roth had been engaged in literary creation for more than 50 years and wrote 31 works with diversified themes and styles. He attempts to construct and reconstruct racial identity, ethnic identity and self-identity of both the characters in his novels and himself through reproducing and imagining the past. In Xin Huimin’s recent monograph A Study of the Writing of the Memories in Philip Roth’s Fiction (2021), she finds that “most of Roth’s literary characters have a strong sense of the past, which is manifested in their lengthy even dragging narrative of reminiscence” (Xin, 2021, p. 16). In previous Roth studies, critics tended to connect this unique way of Rothian writing with the genre study of autobiography, ignoring the characteristics and multifacetedness of memory as well as the social and historical value it bears.

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Based on a close and comprehensive reading of all 31 works, the monograph mainly discusses Roth’s seven major works from the perspectives of Jewish traumatic memory, cultural nostalgic memory, and individuals’ confessional memory with relation to three respective phases of Roth’s writing career, i.e. the Jewish writing phase, the American writing phase and the phase of “late style” writing. Xin proposes that the memories are presented in different paradigms and various expressive forms at each phase, which is not only closely related to the socio-historical context of the author’s age but also highlights the transmutation of the themes and techniques of his writing.

In the first chapter “The Jewish Writing: Post-Holocaust Traumatic Memories,” Xin suggests that Roth accurately captures the mixed feelings of the American Jews towards the Holocaust memory and criticizes their collective aphasia and dodging in “Eli, The Fanatic” (1959) and *The Ghost Writer* (1979) at his Jewish writing phase. The characters’ choices of remembering or forgetting manifest not only the ethical dilemma the American Jews were facing after WWII, but also the aporia of the writing of the Holocaust for the Jewish American writers.

In “Eli, The Fanatic”, Roth illustrates his complex attitudes towards the protagonist Eli, the American Jewish community and the Jewish displaced persons. According to Victoria Aarons, Roth presents the dilemma for the “assimilated” Jew in the later half of the American twentieth century, which “is born of a deeply rooted ambivalence about the possibilities and consequences of refashioning the liberal American self in Jewish terms” (Aarons, 2005, p. 80). It is Eli’s inability to fully deny his Jewish memory that ultimately makes him “adrift in a limbo between past and present” (Xin, 2021, p. 47).

*The Ghost Writer* imaginatively transfers and parodizes the most widely circulated Holocaust text, *The Diary of a Young Girl: Anne Frank*. After tracing the formation of the Anne Frank myth, Xin finds that the fictional Holocaust narratives have gradually lost their authenticity and turned into implausible, rose-colored fairy tales. By depicting an ordinary girl with flaws and desires, *The Ghost Writer* finds a scapegoat for the Americans because “crying over the fate of that poor little girl was somehow cathartic and proved it was not in any way the audience’s fault that they allowed it to happen” (Corwin, 2013, p. 79). Roth’s iconoclastic writing expresses his critique of and rebellion against the blind acceptance of the Jewish memory imposed by the cultural industry.

The second chapter “The American Writing: Cultural Memories of the American Dream” examines the nostalgic retrospection in *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Human Stain* (2000) to explore Roth’s attitude towards the American Dream as a colored and racialized cultural memory in his American writing phase, and the related issues of memory politics. The American Dream, as Xin emphasizes in her monograph, is a concept that has undergone constantly change, and eventually become an unifying cultural memory for the Americans. However, the cultural memory of the American Dream that constructs American identity is a gendered and racialized myth in essence. The cultural memory centered on the idea of the American Dream in turn continues to reinforce the grand discourse of the American Dream.

In *American Pastoral*, Seymour Levov and Coleman Silk are two vindicators of the American Dream. After encountering setbacks in their life, Levov and Silk incline to cling to the illusory past and try to restore the declining American Dream from the past. The disasters brought by the tumultuous movements in the 1960s are epitomized by Levov’s daughter Merry, a member of Weatherman, whose bomb interdicts the upward mobility of her assimilated Jewish family. This also leads to the shattering of Levov’s American Dream. Referring to the
feminist movement in the 1960s, Merry’s bomb is a metaphor of the destruction of the gendered American Dream, which is believed and practiced by Levov whose masculinity is threatened accordingly. Suffering from melancholia, he spends his days obsessing over Merry and the good old days. This family tragedy reflects that the whole American society at that moment is experiencing a castration and is consequently indulging in a cultural melancholia. The American people have to falsify and beautify a pastoral past and search for the lost “American Dream.”

In addition to deconstructing the myth of the American Dream from the perspective of gender, Xin also focuses on Roth’s critique of the racialized American Dream in *The Human Stain*. Coleman Silk’s performance of his racial identity as a Jew exposes the falsity of the American Dream. In order to find his own place in this unequal society, he resorts to his nostalgic memory to revolt against this racialized dream by performing and repeating his own past to construct his racial identity. The back and forth between the reminiscence of past and reality discloses Roth’s reflection on the chaos in the United States during the 1960s.

Xin discusses Roth’s “late style” and confessional memory by examining his three late novels *The Dying Animal* (2001), *Everyman* (2006) and *Nemesis* (2010) in Chapter Three “Late Style’ Writing: Individuals’ Confessional Memories”. “Late Style” is a term coined by Theodor W. Adorno and then illustrated by Edward Said, indicating a unique style used by an artist in his or her late period of life. Instead of focusing on cultural memory, Roth’s late novels “begin to pay much attention to the memories of the individuals and try to reflect on the existence of the individual through individual introspection and confession” (Xin, 2021, p. 115), which is mainly represented in the form of confessional memory.

With the decontextualized and ontological presentation of individual’s existence as its salient features, the late Rothian writing dwells on the living conditions of the marginalized individuals, especially the aging and the weak, and uses confession as an introspective way of presenting the inner selves to relieve their memory burdens eventually. The protagonists’ probing into their guilty past through confessional memory also contains Roth’s ethical concerns of the issues like desire, death, and disease. Roth suffers from illness in his later years, and his contemplation of the human flesh is naturally projected into his late writing. In *The Dying Animal*, Roth affirms the connection between human flesh and desire through his writing of Kepesh’s confession about his erotic past, arguing that desire enables human flesh to thrive, and flesh fosters desire. The loss of desire means the decease of life, and death of flesh brings the end of desire. *Everyman* writes about the anonymous narrator’s life, his reaction to illness and death, and his regret for an irrevocable past in the form of memories. In *Nemesis*, Mesnikoff’s dragging confession of his “guilt” as a polio carrier shows Roth’s attitude towards the ethical choice people should make between responsibility and personal survival in the face of the unknown and deadly diseases. The protagonists’ confession of their past could also be considered as a care of the self or the aesthetics of existence as discussed in Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* and other works.

Through the discussion of Roth’s writing of various forms of memories, Xin’s monograph presents the transition of his identity from a Jewish writer to an American writer, and eventually a writer of human nature. Xin proposes that this transition is influenced by a combination of factors including the author’s age, physical condition, and socio-historical context. At the same time, Xin also demonstrates Roth’s unchanging literary and aesthetic pursuits in his literary career. Roth dedicates himself to applying memory as a vehicle to explore the concealed truth and expose the good and evil of human nature, which is disclosed by the employment of the
postmodern skills such as parody, transfiguration, and the pungent or ironic language at his Jewish writing phase, by the more unrelenting ironic language and subversive parody at his American writing phase, and by the realistic confessional narrative of individuals’ memories at his “late style” writing phase. In a word, Xin’s study of memories in Roth’s representative novels will not only help readers grasp the flow of the author’s work as a whole, but also allow critics to make a more objective and unbiased assessment of his work.

**Conclusion**

Xin’s *A Study of the Writing of the Memories in Philip Roth’s Fiction* investigates the intricate relationship between memory and historical context and in parallel, the writer’s health condition along with his way of understanding life. Roth is different from other American Jewish writers in that he constantly swings between his American identity and his Jewish identity while other American Jewish writers, such as Isaac Singer and Saul Bellow, examine their Jewish identity consciously through their works. Roth is also different from the third generation of American Jewish writers who tend to associate their writings with American mainstream culture. As their predecessor, the outcast state of the Jewish people often becomes the primary concern of Roth’s works.

Investigating Roth’s fiction from the perspective of memory can not only shed light on Roth studies and provide a novel interpretation, but also supply a new paradigm for examining other literary works preoccupied with past and memory. The study of memory, cultural memory in particular, enables readers to view violent acts such as the Nanjing Massacre or the Holocaust on a more meaningful level so as to understand how racial memory, national memory and individual memory work together to fashion or reconstruct self-identity. The ethical and political concerns raised by Roth in his fiction would serve as a reference for future studies concerning Jewish literature and the Holocaust literature.

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