

Philip Guston by Philip Roth

In 1967, sick of life in the New York art world, Philip Guston left

"One time, in Woodstock," Ross Feld said, "I stood next to Guston in front of some of these canvases. I hadn't seen them before; I didn't really know what to say. For a time, then, there was silence. After a while, Guston took his thumbnail away from his teeth and said, 'People, you know, complain that it's horrifying. As if it's a picnic for me, who has to come in here every day and see them first thing. But what's the alternative? I'm trying to see how much I can stand.'"

—From *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston* by Musa Mayer

[1989]

In 1967, sick of life in the New York art world, Philip Guston left his Manhattan studio forever and took up permanent residence with his wife, Musa, in their Woodstock house on Maverick Road, where they had been living off and on for some twenty years. Two years later, I turned my back on New York to hide out in a small furnished house in Woodstock, across town from Philip, whom I didn't know at the time. I was fleeing the publication Portnoy's Complaint. My overnight notoriety as a sexual freak had become difficult to evade in Manhattan, and so I decided to clear out—first for Yaddo, the upstate colony, and then, beginning in the spring of 1969, for small rented house tucked out of sight midway up a hillside meadow a couple of miles from Woodstock's main street. I lived there with a young woman who was finishing a Ph.D. and who for several years had been renting a tiny cabin, heated by a wood stove, in the mountainside colony of Byrdcliffe, which some decades earlier had been a primitive hamlet of Woodstock artists. During the day I wrote on a table in the upstairs spare bedroom while she went off to the cabin to work on her dissertation.

Life in the country with a postgraduate student was anything but freakish, and it provided a combination of social seclusion and physical pleasure that, given the illogic of creation, led me to write, over a four-year period, a cluster uncharacteristically freakish books. My new reputation as a crazed penis was what instigated the fantasy at the heart of *The Breast*, a book about a college professor who turns into a female breast; it had something to do as well with inspiring the farcical legend of homeless alienation in homespun America that evolved into *The Great American Novel*. The more simplehearted my Woodstock satisfactions, the more tempted I was in my work by the excesses of the Grand Guignol. I'd never felt more imaginatively polymorphous than when I would put two deck chairs on the lawn at the end of the day and we'd stretch out to enjoy the twilight view of the southern foothills of the Catskills, for me unpassable Alps through which no disconcerting irrelevancy could pass. I felt refractory and unreachable and freewheeling, and I was dedicated—perversely overdedicated, probably—to shaking off the vast newfound audience whose col-lective fantasies were not without their own transforming power.

Guston's situation in 1969—the year we met—was very different. At fifty-six, Philip was twenty years older than I and full of the doubt that can beset an artist of consequence in late middle age. He felt he'd exhausted the means that had unlocked him as an abstract painter, and he was bored and disgusted by the skills that had gained him renown. He didn't want to paint like that ever again; he tried to convince himself he shouldn't paint at all. But since nothing but painting could contain his emotional turbulence, let alone begin to deplete his self-mythologizing monomania, renouncing painting would have been

tantamount to committing suicide. Although painting monopolized just enough of his despair and his seismic moodiness to make the anxiety of being himself something even he could sometimes laugh at, it never neutralized the nightmares entirely.

It wasn't supposed to. The nightmares were his not to dissipate with paint but, during the ten years before his death, to intensify with paint, to paint into nightmares that were imperishable and never before incarnated in such trashy props. That terror may be all the more bewildering when it is steeped in farce we know from what we ourselves dream and from what has been dreamed for us by Beckett and Kafka. Philip's discovery—akin to theirs, driven by a delight in mundane objects as boldly distended and bluntly depoeticized as theirs—was of the dread that emanates from the most commonplace appurtenances of the world of utter stupidity. The unexalted vision of everyday things that newspaper cartoon strips had impressed upon him when he was growing up in an immigrant Jewish family in California, the American crumminess for which, even in the heyday of his thoughtful lyricism, he always had an intellectual's soft spot, he came to contemplate—in an exercise familiar to lovers of Molloy and *The Castle*—as though his life, both as an artist and as a man, depended on it. This popular imagery of a shallow reality Philip imbued with such a weight of personal sorrow and artistic urgency as to shape in painting a new American landscape of terror.

Cut off from New York and living apart from Woodstock's local artists, with whom he had little in common, Philip often felt out of it: isolated, resentful, uninfluential, misplaced. It wasn't the first time that his ruthless focus on his own imperatives had induced a black mood of alienation, nor was he the first American artist embittered by the syndrome. It was as common among the best as it among the worst—only with the best it was not necessarily a puerile self-drama concocted out of egomaniacal delusion. In many ways it was a perfectly justified response for an artist like Guston, whose brooding, brainy, hypercritical scrutiny of every last aesthetic choice is routinely travestied by the misjudgments and simplifications that support a major reputation.

Philip and his gloom were not inseparable, however. In the company of the few friends he enjoyed and was willing to see, he could be a cordial, unharried host, exuding a captivating spiritual buoyancy unmarked by anguish. In his physical bearing, too, there was a nimble grace touchingly at variance with the bulky torso of the heavy-drinking, somewhat august-looking, white-haired personage into whom darkly, Jewishly, Don Juanishly handsome Guston had been transformed in his fifties. At dinner, wearing those baggy-bottomed, low-slung khaki trousers of his, with a white cotton shirt open over his burly chest and the sleeves still turned up from working in the studio, he looked like the Old Guard Israeli politicians in whom imperiousness and informality spring from an unassailable core of confidence. It was impossible around the Guston dining table, sharing the rich pasta that Philip had cooked up with a display of jovial expertise, to detect any sign of a self-flagellating component within his prodigious endowment of self-belief. Only in his eyes might you be able to gauge the toll of the wearing oscillation—from iron resolve through rapturous equilibrium to suicidal hopelessness—that underlay a day in the studio.

What caused our friendship to flourish was, to begin with, a similar intellectual outlook, a love for many of the same books as well as a shared delight in what Guston called "crapola," starting with billboards, garages, diners, burger joints, junk shops, auto body shops—all the roadside stuff that we occasionally set out to Kingston to enjoy—and extending from the flat-footed straight talk of the Catskill citizenry to the Uriah Heepisms of our perspiring president. What sealed the camaraderie was that we liked each other's new work. The dissimilarities in our personal lives and our professional fortunes did not obscure the coincidence of our having recently undertaken comparable self-critiques. Independently, impelled by very different dilemmas, each of us had begun to consider crapola not only as a curious subject with strong suggestive powers to which we had a native affinity but as potentially a tool in itself: a blunt aesthetic instrument providing access to a style of representation free of the complexity we were accustomed to valuing. What this self-subversion might be made to yield was anybody's guess, and premonitions of failure couldn't be entirely curbed by the liberating feeling that an artistic about-face usually inspires, at least in the early stages of not quite knowing what you are doing.

At just about the time that I began not quite to know what I was doing exulting in Nixon's lies, or traveling up to Cooperstown's Hall of Fame to immerse myself in baseball lore, or taking seriously the idea of turning a man like myself into a breast—and reading up on endocrinology and mammary glands—Philip was beginning not quite to know what he was doing hanging cartoon light bulbs over the pointed hoods of slit-eyed, cigar-smoking Klansmen painting self-portraits in hideaways cluttered with shoes and clocks and steam irons of the sort that Mutt and Jeff would have been at home with.

Philip's illustrations of incidents in *The Breast*, drawn on ordinary typing paper, were presented to me one evening at dinner shortly after the book's publication. A couple of years earlier, while I was writing *Our Gang*, Philip had responded to the chapters that I showed him in manuscript with a series of caricatures of Nixon, Kissinger, Agnew, and John Mitchell. He worked on these caricatures with more concentration than he did on the drawings for *The Breast*, and he even toyed with the thought of publishing them as a collection under the title *Poor Richard*. The eight drawings inspired by *The Breast* were simply a spontaneous rejoinder to something he'd liked. The drawings were intended to do nothing other than please me—and did they!

For me his blubbery cartoon rendering of the breast into which Professor David Kepesh is inexplicably transformed—his vision of afflicted Kepesh as a beached mammary groping for contact through a nipple that is an unostentatious amalgam of lumpish, dumb penis and inquisitive nose—managed to encapsulate all the loneliness of Kepesh's humiliation while at the same time adhering to the mordantly comic perspective with which Kepesh tries to view his horrible metamorphosis. Though these drawings were no more than a pleasant diversion for Philip, his predilection for the self-satirization of personal misery (the strategy for effacing the romance of self-pity that stuns us in Gogol's "Diary of a Madman" and "The Nose") as strongly determines the images here as it does in those paintings where his own tiresome addictions and sad re-nunciations are represented by whiskey bottles and cigarette butts and forlorn insomniacs epically cartoonized. He may only have been playing around, but what he was playing with was the point of view with which he had set about in his studio to overturn his history as a painter and to depict, without rhetorical hedging, the facts of his anxiety as a man. Coincidentally, Philip, who died in 1980 at the age of sixty-six, represents himself in his last paintings as someone who also endured a grotesque transformation— not into a thinking, dismembered sexual gland but into a bloated, cyclopsian, brutish head that has itself been cut loose from the body of its sex.

Philip Roth