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November 13, 2009: How Does a Hallowed Secularist Face Death?

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Title: How Does a Hallowed Secularist Face Death?

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11/13/2009—Philip Roth has always struck me as a secularist, albeit, of course, one in earnest connection with Jewish identity and tradition. But he does not seem to live out of any serious exchange with the wisdom of Jewish tradition. Thus, when Roth confronts death, he must do so as any secularist would. This comes to mind in reading the review by Elaine Blair of Roth's book, *The Humbling*, in the *New York Review of Books*. As his powers wane in old age, the hero, Simon Axler, an actor, contemplates suicide, and in the end manages to kill himself, but only by imagining his own suicide as the role of Konstantin Gavrilovich in *The Seagull*. This is depressing and pathetic. How much is it caused by Roth's own secularism? As I age myself and come into contact with people in their 80's and 90's, I find a great deal of despair. Some of this is probably inevitable. But some of it may root in the foundation of humanist secularism, which takes the self as the only reality. So, when the self dies, there is nothing left to reality. Of course the people I am talking about, like Roth himself, were all trained in religious traditions: Christianity or Judaism. Nevertheless, the particular people I know are not religious, at least not any longer, and it shows in the lack of resources they have in confronting their own deaths. Would a hallowed secularism be any different? I hope that it would, because in such an orientation, the self would be a part of something larger. That something would not be God but it would have reality apart from my existence. Thus my death is not the end of everything. If "I" am all that is, my death is ultimate absurdity. But if "I" am part of a larger story, that story, which goes on without me, can give meaning to my existence.