and rabbinic representatives on the various committees of the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish Agency? The Rabbinical organizations are exemplary practitioners of democratic procedure in their internal affairs. But the rabbis either did not care or did not think it important to concern themselves with the problems arising from a situation in which some of their over-ambitious members who know that "rocking the boat" by dissent will deprive them of the honors and sinecures were *appointed* to Jewish Agency and World Jewish Congress executive posts *precisely because they will be grateful and—silent.*

Democracy is possible only when there is freedom of the press and the media. Oligarchies stand four-square on the principle that "bad news" is *not* news, and thus must be suppressed. Criticism is "bad news" as American Jewish organizational house-organs. This is also the case of *Commentary* and its "scared intellectuals" who have become the "New Conservatives" in keeping with the strategy of the American Jewish Committee. As for the Anglo-Jewish weeklies, they are either Federation-owned or financially dependent upon Federation and other organizational support. As a result, we are cursed here with an utterly *unfree* Jewish press.

Democracy in America had two of its finest hours when the *full* account of the Mylai atrocities was published, and when the Supreme Court decided that the study and documents of "U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967" are in the public domain now and that American newspapers and the media in general may publish these "secret" documents. The First Amendment, according to Justice Brandeis, was written into the Constitution not because it added efficiency, but because its author feared that without it the Government would wield too much power.

The hundred or so American Jewish leaders whose names appear on scores of letterheads wield too much power because they and their organizations, national and international, only *invoke* democracy with platitudinous invocations and professions of loyalty. In points of fact, however, they do suppress *where they can* those inalienable rights and freedoms which *now* the Supreme Court has upheld and powerfully reaffirmed.

We have no Jewish Supreme Court, but *vox populi* is powerful, especially when the voices are young. I would like to see *some* of the youthful ardor and passion expended for unfree Soviet Jewry channelled also into protesting the many areas of unfreedom in the lives of Jews in America.

PHILIP ROTH AND THE JEWS

I Before Portnoy

Long before the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* early in 1969, Philip Roth was already a highly controversial figure in the minds of many American Jews. The publication of *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959 had a certain unsettling effect, and a few eyebrows had been raised even earlier, as Roth's first few stories began to appear in such magazines as *Paris Review, Commentary,* and the *New Yorker.* When the film version of "Goodbye, Columbus" was released to coincide with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint,* Roth became, for a time, America's most conspicuous author.

Philip Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1933, where his father worked for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company as an agent and manager. He graduated from Weequahic High School in Newark, and spent a year at Rutgers before transferring to Bucknell University, where he edited the literary magazine, majored in English, and wrote his first short stories. He graduated *magna cum laude* in 1954, and a year later received his M.A. from the University of Chicago, where he returned to teach after one year of military service. That much is fact, although these personal details figure prominently in *Goodbye, Columbus, Portnoy's Complaint,* and the three most recent stories (see bibliography). But fiction, as so many of us need to be reminded, is not subject to the same rules as history or sociology, and must be judged within the framework of art, rather than knowledge. That is to say, although there are certain obvious connections between the writer's background and his fiction, one must resist the temptation to see that fiction in terms of autobiography, whether it be overt or suppressed. It is perhaps not entirely incidental that Jews, traditionally the "people of the book", have often blurred these connections. Books have symbolized knowledge to the Jews for so long that it may be that fiction as opposed, say, to legend or speculation, sits a little uneasy in the Jewish mind.

Roth's first book, *Goodbye, Columbus,* contained the novella by that name, as well as five other pieces of fiction. All of the stories had mostly Jewish characters, and were in some way concerned with central elements and events in American and Jewish life. The main and secondary characters were, to a large extent, young, American-born, east-coast raised, intelligent, and educated. In 1960 the book was awarded the National Book Award for fiction, and its young author received critical praise. Irving Howe, writing in the *New Republic,* observed that

> Mr. Roth's stories do not yield pleasure as much as produce a squirm of recognition; surely, one feels, not all of American Jewish life is like this, but all too much of it is becoming so .... Even if only a fraction of what Mr. Roth portrays is true, it ought to create the most intense heart-searching among the very people who will soon be hectoring him.

The point is sometimes made that "Goodbye, Columbus" is not really a story about Jews, but is concerned rather with families and children who are products of the postwar social mobility of urban and suburban America, and who also happen to be Jews. But this is the whole point, of course: that more and more, American Jews in the late 1950's *just happened* to be Jews. Philip Roth wrote in 1961 that "small matters aside—food preferences, a certain syntax, certain jokes—it is difficult for me to distinguish a Jewish style of life in our country that is significantly separate and distinct from the American style of life." Such a comment applies not only to the Klugmans and the Patimkins, but in a larger sense explains or at least helps put into context the lives of all of Roth's characters of the 1950's, as opposed to the more distinctly Jewish lives experienced by the characters in the late 1940's, as described in *Portnoy's Complaint.*

In *Making It,* another book accorded more that its fair share of abuse (often, one suspects, for reasons not unlike those motivating some of Roth's critics), Norman Podhoretz remarks that the longest journey in the world, for him, was the subway ride from Brooklyn to uptown Manhattan. "Goodbye, Columbus" is about a similar kind of symbolic journey: from Newark to Short Hills, from Weequahic to Harvard. The story deals primarily, it seems to me, with the implicit journey involved in the inevitable clash of cultures in modern American life (this is also the central theme of *Portnoy's Complaint),* and as such is set in a world of suspensions: between Newark and Short Hills (urbia and suburbia), the library and the tennis courts, late adolescence and adulthood, and most important, between the last visible vestiges of immigrant culture and the initial vulgarities of having made it in the greater society. Furthermore, the story takes place during the Eisenhower years, when morality, emotion, and activism were all, in a sense, suspended; and in summer, when the realities of the year are, for the young, temporarily and joyfully set aside.

Neil Klugman's rebellion is part of the era of the rebel without a cause. It is a rebellion largely without issues and almost wholly without noise, but not lacking in substance. It must proceed without the various and convenient hanging posts which made the rebellions of late adolescence so much easier in the 1960's. Neil is also drifting, working in the library only until something better comes along, reacting against the narrow worlds of his fellow workers, exchanging fantasies with the Negro boy who comes in to look at the reproductions of Gauguin and who, like Neil, is in search of another way of life, of a time and place somehow more authentic for himself and yet, at the same time, completely out of reach. "Could you go there?" he asks Neil, pointing to a painting of the South Sea Islands. A decade later, an entire generation of young Jews would take their cue for authenticity from a generation of young Blacks.

Roth, as the critics have all mentioned, is an acute social observer, a realist, an expert at dialogue and detail. He describes the setting at the very beginning of the story, with the description of Brenda at the swimming pool. Neil Klugman is

a sort of explorer, entering upon new worlds which America herself was just learning to enjoy. If, as some critics never tire of pointing out, Neil is far removed from his origins and ancestors, he is probably no closer to the new world which he watches and then enters, slowly, like an uninvited guest, into a world of people who have been molded out of the type of "plastics" which sent audiences of young people into howls of knowing laughter when the word itself was mentioned in the film, *The Graduate.** Neil enters that world with a sense of humor and a razor-sharp capacity for detail generously endowed by his creator. Consider this cautious descent into the depths of Patimkinville:

> The basement has a different kind of coolness from the house, and it had a smell, which was something the upstairs was totally without. It felt cavernous down there, but in a comforting way, like the simulated caves children make for themselves on rainy days, in hall closets, under blankets, or in between the legs of dining room tables. I flipped on the light at the foot of the stairs and was not surprised at the pine paneling, the bamboo furniture, the ping-pong table, and the mirrored bar that was stocked with every kind and size of glass, ice bucket, decanter, mixer, swizzle stick, shot glass, pretzel bowl—all the bacchanalian paraphernalia, plentiful, orderly, and untouched, as it can be only in the bar of a wealthy man who never entertains drinking people, who himself does not drink, who, in fact, gets a fishy look from his wife when every several months he takes a shot of schnapps before dinner. I went behind the bar where there was an aluminum sink that had not seen a dirty glass, I'm sure, since Ron's bar mitzvah party and would not see another, probably, until one of the Patimkin children was married or engaged. I would have poured myself a drink . . . but I was uneasy about breaking the label on a bottle of whiskey. You had to break a label to get a drink.

This is a poignant description of Jews who, no matter how assimilated they seem to be, still cannot rid themselves entirely of their cultural characteristics. Having no use for a bar, they build their world instead around food.

It is interesting how few explicitly Jewish references are to be found in the story. There is, in fact, only one significant passage on Jewishness, but the compelling power and humor in this masterfully awkward exchange between Neil and Brenda's mother is more than sufficient.

> "We're all going to Temple Friday night. Why don't you come with us? I mean, are you orthodox or conservative?"
>
> I considered. "Well, I haven't gone in a long time . . . I sort of switch . . ." I smiled. "I'm just Jewish", I said well-meaningly, but that too sent Mrs. Patimkin back to her Hadassah work. Desperately, I tried to convince her I wasn't an infidel. Finally I asked: "Do you know Martin Buber's work?"
>
> "Buber . . . Buber," she said, looking at her Hadassah list. "Is he orthodox or conservative?" she asked.
>
> ". . . He's a philosopher."

* It is an unfortunate irony that, while thematically at least, "Goodbye, Columbus" was the father of "The Graduate," or at least its older brother, the people who brought Roth's novella to the screen borrowed so many of their techniques from Mike Nichols' masterpiece that despite their loyalty to most of the dialogue and some of the detail, it was a second-rate film. Furthermore, the changes in setting and the attempt to update the story, the resolute refusal to treat it as a period piece, was its complete undoing.

". . . Is he *reformed?*" she asked, piqued either at my evasiveness or at the possibility that Buber attended Friday night services without a hat, and Mrs. Buber had only one set of dishes in her kitchen.

"Orthodox", I said faintly.

"That's very nice," she said.

"Yes."

"Isn't Hudson Street Synagogue Orthodox?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I thought you belonged."

"I was bar mitzvahed there."

"And you don't know that it's orthodox?" she asked.

"Yes. I do. It is."

"Then *you* must be."

"Oh yes, I am," I said. "What are you?" I popped, flushing.

"Orthodox. My husband is conservative," which meant, I took it, that he didn't care. "Brenda is nothing, as you probably know."

"Oh?" I said. "No, I didn't know that."

"She was the best Hebrew student I've ever seen," Mrs. Patimkin said, "but then, of course, she got too big for her britches."

Mrs. Patimkin looked at me, and I wondered whether courtesy demanded that I agree. "Oh, I don't know," I said at last. "I'd say Brenda is conservative. Maybe a little reformed . . ."

The phone rang, rescuing me, and I spoke a silent orthodox prayer to the Lord.

Hidden in the humor of the moment is the sad truth that not only are the denominational labels themselves virtually meaningless to large numbers of Jews, but, as always happens, the divisions and the organizations come in time to replace the content and the differences which they supposedly represent. Before the exchange just quoted, Neil has explained to Mrs. Patimkin that his mother lives in Arizona. She asks whether his mother is a member of Hadassah, for in her world affiliation has come to replace commitment as a measure of identity. "Do they have Hadassah there?" asks Neil. Her reply is classic: "Wherever there are Jewish women," she answers, and the issue is closed.

Roth deals with identity and related themes in his other stories as well. "Defender of the Faith", for example, is a moving and rather complex account of two American soldiers and their ambivalent relationships to their tradition or, in the words of the author,

> one man who uses his own religion and another's uncertain conscience, for selfish ends; but mostly it is about this other man, the narrator, who because of the ambiguities of being a member of his particular religion, is involved in a taxing, if mistaken, conflict of loyalties.

When this story was first published in the *New Yorker*, the author began to receive letters of this sort:

> Mr. Roth:
>
> With your one story "Defender of the Faith", you have done as much harm as all the organized anti-Semitic organizations have done to make people believe that all Jews are cheats, liars, connivers. Your one story makes people—the general public—forget all the great Jews who have lived, all the Jewish boys who served well in the armed services, all the Jews who live honest hard lives the world over . . .

While this letter, and others like it, may be understandable in the context of Jewish concern about public image, it raises serious questions. Are there to be certain strictures upon the writer of fiction? Dare there be? The *New Yorker* was also flooded with mail from distraught readers:

> . . . We have discussed this story from every possible angle and we cannot escape the conclusion that it will do irreparable (sic) harm to the Jewish people. We feel that this story presented a distorted picture of the average Jewish soldier and are at a loss to understand why a magazine of your fine reputation should publish such a work which lends fuel to anti-Semitism.
>
> Cliches like "this being art" will not be acceptable.

The truth is, of course, that there is really no such thing as the "average" Jewish soldier, or the average anything. The desire on the part of some readers to encounter in their reading only Jewish saints is as unreasonable as the allegation that Roth has presented them only with demons, rather than human beings struggling with real problems. Fiction involves taking what on the surface appears to be "average", and showing how, under close observation, the concept becomes meaningless. Or, as Roth said in reply to his critics,

> To confuse a "balanced portrayal" with a novel is finally to be led into absurdities. "Dear Fyodor Dostoevsky - All the students in our school, and most of the teachers feel that you have been unfair to us. Do you call Raskolnikov a balanced portrayal of students as we know them? Of Russian students? Of poor students? What about those of us who have never murdered anyone, who do our school work every night?" "Dear Mark Twain - None of the slaves on our plantation has ever run away. We have a perfect record. But what will our owner think when he reads of Nigger Jim?" "Dear Vladimir Nabokov - The girls in our class," and so on. What fiction does, and what the rabbi would like for it to do are two entirely different things. The concerns of fiction, let it be said, are not those of a statistician - or of a public relations firm. The novelist asks himself, "What do people think?"; the PR man asks, "What *will* people think?" But I believe this is actually troubling the rabbi, when he calls for his "balanced portrayal of Jews." What will people think?
>
> Or, to be exact: what will the *goyim* think?

There were other readers who complained that Sheldon Grossbart, the main character in the story, had too much in common with the standard Jewish stereotype. Roth answered by replying that Grossbart should be seen as

> a Jew who acts like the stereotype, offering back to his enemies their vision of him, answering the punishment with the crime. Given the particular kinds of denials, humiliations, and persecutions that the nations have practiced on their Jews, it argues for far too much nobility to deny not only that Jews like Grossbart exist, but to deny that the temptations of Grossbartism exist in many who perhaps have more grace, or will, or are perhaps only more cowed, than the simple, frightened soul I imagined weeping with fear and disappointment at the end of the story.

"Grossbart is not The Jew", Roth continued, "but he is a fact of Jewish experience and well within the range of its moral possibilities."

Similarly, many readers were disturbed by "Epstein", the story of a Jewish man who is driven to commit adultery. There were those who suggested that the very idea of a Jew committing adultery was so impossible that only an anti-Semite could have written the story. Others felt that, as in "Defender of the Faith," there is an implication that the act resulted from some specifically Jewish trait. Again, Roth explained himself, this time in the context of his understanding of what fiction is:

> It is not my purpose in writing a story of an adulterous man to make it clear how right we all are if we disapprove of the act and are disappointed in the man. Fiction is not written to affirm the principles and beliefs that everybody seems to hold, nor does it seek to guarantee us the appropriateness of our feelings. The world of fiction, in fact, frees us from the circumscriptions that the society places upon feeling; one of the greatnesses of the art is that it allows the writer and the reader to respond to experience in ways not always available in day-to-day conduct; or, if they are available, they are not possible, or manageable, or legal, or advisable, or even necessary to the business of living. We may not even know that we have such a range for feelings and responses *until* we have come into contact with the work of 'fiction' . . . Ceasing for a while to be upright citizens, we drop into another layer of consciousness, and this dropping, this expansion of moral consciousness, this exploration of moral fantasy, is of considerable value to a man and to society.

"I suppose it is tantamount to a confession from me of lopsided schizophrenia," he added, "to admit that the character of Epstein happened to have been conceived with considerable affection and sympathy."

In "The Conversion of the Jews," a young boy challenges the religious doctrines which his rabbi is teaching. He questions some concepts as the idea of the Chosen People, the fact of Jewish clannishness, and various elements of Jewish particularism. And although Roth allows the rabbi to respond to the boy with a measure of skill and dexterity that one might not have anticipated, Ozzie Freedman possesses and seeks a deeper level of spirituality. In a strange interlude that breaks up an otherwise hectic, almost frenzied story, we get a glimpse of the kind of indefinable reverence that Ozzie alone seems to comprehend:

> As she touched the flaming match to the unlit wick of a Sabbath candle, the phone rang, and Ozzie, standing only a foot from it, plucked it off the receiver and held it muffled to his chest. When his mother lit candles Ozzie felt there should be no noise; even breathing, if you could manage it, should be softened. Ozzie pressed the phone to his breast and watched his mother dragging whatever she was dragging, and he felt his own eyes get glassy. His mother was a round, tired, gray-haired penguin of a woman whose gray skin had begun to feel the tug of gravity and the weight of her own history. Even when she was dressed up she didn't look like a chosen person. But when she lit candles she looked like something better; like a woman who knew momentarily that God could do anything.

Or, in the description of the janitor's strange mumbling in the back of the synagogue, we learn that

> To Ozzie, the mumbling had always seemed a monotonous, curious prayer; what made it curious was that Old Blotnick had been mumbling so steadily for so many years, Ozzie suspected he had memorized the prayers and forgotten all about God.

This is a virtually perfect story, one of the great achievements in recent American fiction.

In "Eli the Fanatic" Roth had an opportunity to explore a theme which later transformed itself into harsh reality: the reactions of suburban Jews to an explicit expression of Jewishness. When a Chassidic community attempts to establish a yeshiva in suburbia, the Jews, as one might by this time have come to expect, are more concerned than anybody else, and feel extremely uneasy, even threatened. Eli Peck, the main character, experiences in somewhat different terms the moral agony of Sergeant Nathan Marx—how does one Jew respond to another in a public situation? But Chassidim are not mere Jews, and the situation is more complicated, as Eli's friend warns him:

> "Eli, you're dealing with *fanatics*. Do they display common sense? talking a dead language, that makes sense? Making a big thing out of suffering, so that you're going oy-oy-oy all your life, that's common sense? Look, Eli, we've been through all this. I don't know if you know—but there's talk that *Life* magazine is sending a guy out to the Yeshivah for a story. With pictures."

Or, what will the goyim think?

II Portnoy Reconsidered

In a much quoted remark made just prior to the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, Philip Roth surmised that "the moment the book arrives on the scene it will be an event . . . In a year or two it will be a book again." The novel, which rapidly became what Daniel Boorstin has called a "pseudo-event" received a great deal of publicity and comment in the media. For the most part, the reviews were favorable, although among American Jews there was a conspicuous division of opinion. There were, on the one hand, those who like theologian Eugene Borowitz, applauded the work "because of its astonishing candor . . . a frankness in detail and honesty in nuance that is a small miracle of recall and recording," while other voices were less enthusiastic and in some cases attempted to re-open the discussions which had taken place between Roth and his critics in the early 1960's. Although the author and a number of his supporters had already responded to the almost inevitable accusations of anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred, the new novel, set in much stronger terms than the comparatively mild stuff of *Goodbye, Columbus*, rekindled some of the old flames, and apparently sparked some new ones. "I'm sure these charges will be made again," the author predicted, "though the fact is that I myself have always been far more pleased by my good fortune in being born a Jew than any of my

critics may begin to imagine. It's a complicated, interesting, morally demanding, and very singular experience, and I like that."

To those who have followed the changing climate of *Commentary*, (in whose pages Saul Bellow had once praised the author of *Goodbye, Columbus*, with whose implicit criticisms of American Jewish life Bellow had agreed,) it was not unexpected that the most hostile of all the Jewish reviews of *Portnoy* should appear in that journal. To make matters worse, Peter Shaw made mention in his review of Roth's previous encounters with the critics. Unfortunately, Mr. Shaw misrepresented Roth's position, and had the author claiming "that it is actually better to highlight Jewish traits that might be regarded as ugly than to hide or gloss over them." Roth, for his part, had not said this. He had asserted rather, that in the long run anti-Semitism depended upon nothing so rational as objective reality or even artistic representation; that nothing is gained by the attempt on the part of some writers to portray Jews as angels rather than as mortals; that, finally, the mission of the writer of fiction was profoundly different from that of the writer of public relations.*

To be sure, Peter Shaw's portrayal of Roth as "bad for the Jews" undoubtedly spoke for many American Jews who have always felt uncomfortable about Philip Roth. Generally, the argument goes something like this: American Jews are in a peculiar and delicate position, and must therefore be especially sensitive to what is said and especially *written* concerning themselves, particularly when it is likely to affect and possibly influence public (i.e., gentile) opinion. Furthermore, the argument continues, there are *some* Jewish writers who present their characters in the most flattering of circumstances, as good and upright citizens, as victors, even as heroes (at this point names such as Harry Golden, Leon Uris and Chaim Potok are usually invoked.) The more complex cases (in other words, the better writers), Bellow, Malamud and Singer are somehow not seen as threatening in the same way as Roth, who surely must be no friend of the Jews. *His* characters, it is alleged, are drawn wholly without sympathy or compassion. One irate reader went so far as to suggest that "there is something defective in them which Mr. Roth ascribes to their Jewishness." Peter Shaw's review, although more sophisticated than the standard attacks upon Roth, follows this same basic line, carried one step further:

> The real message here, or rather the real aspiration, is not to sweep away anti-Semitism, but to transcend being Jewish. If only you try hard enough, Roth's book tells us, it can be done. This is a message that will not do the Jews any more damage than other specious advice they have received from time to time, so that one has to agree with Roth that his books are not harmful as charged.

Roth had already responded to such criticisms, and has (at least, thus far) chosen not to continue the debate. Whether the exchanges between the author

* *See also "The New Jewish Stereotypes," reprinted in this issue.*

and his critics in the 1960's made any impact is difficult to ascertain—Roth feels they did. With the publication of *Letting Go* (which concerned Jews only slightly), and *When She Was Good* (which concerned them not at all), the debate subsided, at least until 1969. Most Jewish periodicals, incidentally, were surprisingly sympathetic to the new novel, although a more accurate measure of Jewish opinion might be determined from a sampling of book-sermons on the Friday nights and Saturday mornings of early spring, 1969.

In the literary world, although critical reaction was generally favorable, it was largely without direction. One of the few in-depth analyses of the book that has yet appeared was by Patricia Meyer Spacks in the *Yale Review*, who sees Portnoy as "the perpetual innocent confronted by profound racial experience in which he feels himself an unwilling or incomplete participant." She continues:

> The possibilities of salvation and of damnation are for Portnoy, mid-twentieth-century man, only sexual. The wanderings of Odysseus and of Don Quixote invite—or at least make possible—allegorical interpretations. The impediments such heroes face emblemize their psychological and social problems and suggest the kind of possibility they believe in. Portnoy is imagined with no such scope as they, but his problems, too, have social as well as psychological significance, although his apparent unawareness of this fact is another of his conspicuous intellectual limitations. He inhabits a world of diminished possibility and demands that it yield meaning; his experience suggests the limitations inherent in such a world.

Most reviewers, however, took advantage of the pseudo-event by concentrating on Roth's career, the serialization of certain sections, Roth's talent for satire and mimicry, and the book's supposed pornography. When they turned their attention to the novel itself, most of the discussion centered upon the most obvious elements: the psychiatrist, whose "punch-line" which ended the novel was accorded more than its share of importance; the tiresome theme of the Jewish mother, and what was taken to be Jewish self-hatred on the part of the main character. It was suggested in several reviews that with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* the Jewish novel in postwar America had reached some sort of nadir, or end-point, although most critics were at a loss to explain how or why this was true. One happy exception was Helen Weinberg's comments in *Judaism*; she defined the book's chief concern as:

> The restlessness, the near feverishness, the anarchistic itchiness of the young American Jew, burdened with the remnant of an authentic tradition of justice, law, reason, and righteousness, while forced to live in the mad, illogical, meretricious world of American culture.*

The suggestion that the novel was fundamentally about a young American Jew who was being torn apart by different and competing cultures differed markedly from those whose attempts to universalize the theme were premature,

* It is interesting that both of these reviews were by women, for in general it seems, from the people with whom I have spoken, that a great many men but very few women enjoyed and appreciated the book.

at best. In his book, *Radical Innocence*, Ihab Hassen defines American Innocence as the repeating attempt of every generation in America to begin its task anew "without the secret betrayals of history":

> For them the frontiers of land or sea or space never seem to close. To this tendency, another, which we call Experience, has run counter; it is the urge to reflect on the past and redeem it. There is always the Territory Ahead to which Huck Finn can "light out". Evil could be left behind, and in the titanic struggle with Nature, men could still emerge victorious.

That Portnoy may in fact be one more American Innocent (as was suggested by Patricia Spacks) might appear strange to those in whose judgment he has already been embodied as the encapsulation of evil. But the fundamental question the novel deals with is: *What becomes of the individual when the cultures and traditions which are somehow a part of him come into conflict, producing a crisis not only in identity, but in morality and purpose as well?* When Sophie Portnoy complains that "the problem with me is that I'm too good", she is merely reflecting the ironic underside of her son's dilemma: that *he* is too bad, that he wants to be bad, that ultimately, he is not capable of being bad, even though he has rejected the "suffering heritage" which he thinks stands between himself and badness. The first distinction that Portnoy learned as a child, he recalls, "was not night and day, or hot and cold, but *goyish* and Jewish." It is this dialectic against which he rebels, but also it is this category to which—at least metaphorically— he continually returns, for it remains the most compelling force in his life. When Portnoy complains bitterly to his parents that "there is just a little more to existence than can be contained in those disgusting and useless categories," the statement is strongly ironic, for the greater part of his life's struggle is concerned with exactly this. Of course, the struggle goes far beyond the literal Jewish-Gentile dichotomy; it extends into the tension between his overt (hereditary) idealism and the (environmental) depravity of his situation. *But he is at ease with neither:*

> The Jews I despise for their narrow mindedness, their self-righteousness, the incredibly bizarre sense that these cave men who are my parents and relatives have somehow gotten of their superiority—but when it comes to tawdriness and cheapness, to beliefs that would shame even a gorilla, you simply cannot top the *goyim*.

Amidst these adolescent ravings are several of the crucial themes which have understandably caused discomfort among Jewish readers: the embarrassing, occasional strands of gentile-hatred extant in Jewish tradition, based upon the once-useful supposition that the gentiles were *all* pagans; the inherent difficulty which the Jew faces in attempting to approach Christianity in any serious intellectual fashion; and finally, the age-old problem of misinterpreting the idea of "chosenness" in terms of superiority—all of which are themes dealt with in Roth's shorter fiction as well. It can, of course, be argued that it is a perfectly natural tendency of any sociological group to regard itself in terms of exclusivity

and even superiority, but this renders the issue no less real for the modern Jew. The additional complication of Christianity having stemmed from Judaism and of its having been from the outset not only un-Jewish but noticeably un-Christian as well does not help matters:

> The outrage, the disgust inspired in my parents by the gentiles, was beginning to make some sense; the *goyim* pretended to be something special, while *we* were actually *their* moral superiors. And what made us superior was precisely the hatred and the disrespect they lavished so willingly on us!

The division of the universe into Jews and Others (whether they be Christians, pagans, or Americans) has fascinating ramifications regarding the place of the gentile in *de facto* Jewish society. When Portnoy's friend Hershie becomes involved with a *shiksa*, the relationship is suddenly a community concern. Appropriately enough, Alice was also a cheerleader, and for the other students, recalls Portnoy, "I believe there was actually a kind of civic pride in the fact that a gentile could have assumed a position of such visibility in our high school, whose faculty and student body were about ninety-five percent Jewish." Is there better proof, or a more telling comment regarding Jewish acculturation into American society? Far more striking, however, and no less real is the prevailing attitude toward Alice's pastime, which represented the ultimate in *goyim-nachas* (certain amusements, such as hunting, drinking, and fighting, which Jews have traditionally regarded as inappropriate behavior, despite their prevalence and popularity in the larger culture):

> . . . When Alice performed what the loudspeaker described as her "piece de resistance" twirling a baton that had been wrapped at either end in oil-soaked rags and then set afire. . . I think there was a certain comic detachment experienced on our side of the field, grounded in the belief that this was precisely the kind of talent that only a *goy* would think to develop in the first place.

But this condescending detachment toward the *goyim* is, oddly enough, only one side of the coin. Operating simultaneously is an opposite force, which Roth captures masterfully: a near-reverence, a sort of fawning upon those aspects of the larger culture which are in essence most routine. The very epitome of American blandless nevertheless retains, for the foreigner and the outsider, an aura of mysterious fascination. If Alice was on the one hand a baton twirler, she was also, on the other, part of another world, representing far more to the Jewish adolescent . . .

> How do they get so gorgeous, so healthy, so *bold*? . . . these are the girls whose older brothers are the engaging, good-natured, confident, clean, and powerful halfbacks for the college football teams called *Northwestern*, and *Texas Christian* and UCLA . . . These are the children from the coloring books come to life, the children they mean on the slogans we pass in Union, New Jersey, that say CHILDREN AT PLAY and DRIVE CAREFULLY, WE LOVE OUR CHILDREN — these are the girls and boys who live "next door," the kids who are always asking for "the jalopy" and getting into "jams" and out of them in time for the final commercial . . .

So if the Jew has achieved some sort of parity, in a certain sense he remains an outsider. But if, in America, the other side seems so exotic (no

matter which side one is on), if the differences between groups are indeed so great, then where are the meeting grounds? Money? Mannerisms? Education? It goes deeper than that, as Neil Klugman discovered when he explored a foreign lifestyle and, like Alexander Portnoy, realized that the natural breaking down of those mysterious barriers is inevitably sexual. For Portnoy, it is sex itself, as soon as he has reached puberty, which is the great equalizer in the social struggle. He gradually becomes aware of this, at one point confessing to the doctor: "I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls as much as I stick it up their backgrounds, as though through fucking I will discover America." It goes beyond that, however, as in the case of Sally Maulsby, a wealthy coed whom Alex virtually forces to perform fellatio on him. His encounter with Sally, he realizes, involved more than mere equalizing: it was an opportunity to get even. She was, he recalls,

> just something nice a son once did for his dad. A little vengeance on collecting down in the colored district. A little bonus extracted from Boston and Northeastern for all those years of service, and exploitation.

I do not mean to suggest that the sex described so vividly in the novel has to do *only* with intergroup relations, with success, equalization, and revenge among America's various ethnic groups. Certainly, the novel's very construction virtually insists that close attention be paid to the Freudian and intensely *personal* aspects of the story. But this has been amply documented and discussed elsewhere. If there is, indeed, a universal understanding to be extracted from this work, it is to be found on the most pluralistic terms, for there is far too much that is compelling and unambiguous for it to be seen as merely coincidental, or parallel to some other more important theme.

* * * *

Among black writers in America, Richard Wright, then James Baldwin, Malcolm X., LeRoi Jones, and more recently Eldridge Cleaver have made the reading public conscious of the intense and often overt sexuality at work between Blacks and Whites in American society. Mailer, Millet, Greer, and others have shown how the war between the sexes is both political *and* sexual. *Portnoy's Complaint*, as far as I know, is the first significant combination of inter-ethnic and inter-personal sexuality; in fact, it may be the first significant exploration into the sexuality of the Jewish–WASP relationship. In "The New Jewish Stereotypes," Roth describes a certain universal fantasy of Jewish adolescents, concluding with the hero's initiation into sex with the *shiksa* next door.*

* It seems likely that Roth was heavily influenced by his students in the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, among other places where he has taught. Subsequently, *Portnoy's Complaint* seems to have altered the type and, alas, the level of originality of much of the fiction written by young Jewish males, if the manuscripts submitted to RESPONSE are any indication. It is as though Roth pulled the rug from under some would-be writers by using their real concerns and experiences so expertly that these subjects can barely be described any more. This became even more clear when I participated in a fiction workshop last year, led by Alan Lelchuck at Brandeis University: time and again Jewish college students would write autobiographical stories dealing, in essence, with the clash of cultures a la a sort of updated Huck Finn which, at their strongest, seemed to be poor imitations of Roth's epic and at their weakest, lacked the very honesty and momentum that provided the energy for *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Whether this fantasy is really universal or even common is less important than the fact that, at least for some people, it clearly exixts, as plainly as the tense relationship between black men and white women in the South. Much has already been written on the "types" which Roth uses in the novel: Portnoy, his mother, the father, the rabbi, the school friends. But of far more significance than even the individual portraits are the more general cultural practices and mannerisms of both Jewish and gentile worlds which are so vividly captured and described, expecially when the two cultures are portrayed in terms of each other. This is what makes Roth's portrayals of Jewish life so memorable, for they are described *from the inside out*, without omitting the larger context. As a superb mimic, the author is at his best in preserving the speech patterns of each group and the values implicit in them: "Pianist! Oh, that's one of the words they just love, almost as much as *doctor*, Doctor. And best of all, *his own office. He opened his own office in Livingston.*" This much has been achieved before—by other writers, even by night-club comedians. What accounts for the greatness of Roth's achievement is that he dares to ask, as others have not: What does the other side look like *from here?* So, for instance, when Portnoy goes to Iowa to visit Kate's family, we have an indescribably funny scene in the encounter between the New Jersey *yid* and the Iowa *goyim*, as Alex discovers that *their* values are also reflected in their speech:

> Then there's an expression in English, "Good morning," or so I have been told; the phrase has never been of any use to me. Why should it have been? At breakfast at home I am in fact known to the other boarders as "Mr. Sourball," and "The Crab." But suddenly, here in Iowa, in imitation of the local inhabitants, I am transformed into a veritable geyser of good mornings . . . "Good morning", he says, and now it occurs to me that the word "morning" as he uses it, refers specifically to the hours between eight A.M. and twelve noon. I've never thought of it that way before. He wants the hours between eight and twelve to be *good*, which is to say, enjoyable, pleasurable, beneficial! We are all of us wishing each other four hours of pleasure and accomplishment. Why that's terrific! . . . My God! The English language is a *form of communication*. Conversation isn't just crossfire where you shoot and get shot at! Where you've got to duck for your life and aim to kill. Words aren't only bombs and bullets—no, they're little gifts containing *meanings!*

But even this realization is not enough, for in the crucial moment, after Alex and Kate have decided to get married, he says to her, calmly, "And you'll convert, right?" Her reply is instantaneous: "Why would I want to do a thing like that?" And suddenly the differences are important again, and there can be no union between these worlds.

* * * *

Among the least commented upon sections of the novel, and also perhaps the most morally complex is the discussion of the Jewish dietary laws, which is crucial to the theme of cultures in conflict. On the one hand, Portnoy regards

the laws of *kashruth* as symbolically representative of all that was wrong with his upbringing: repression, paranoia, exclusivity, and superstition:

> What else, I ask you, were all those prohibitive dietary rules and regulations all about to begin with, what else but to give us little Jewish children practice in being repressed? Practice, darling, practice, practice, practice. Inhibition doesn't grow on trees, you know—takes patience, takes concentration, takes a dedicated and self-sacrificing parent and a hard-working attentive little child to create in only a few years' time a really constrained and tight-ass human being. Why else, I ask you, but to remind us three times a day that life is boundaries and restrictions, if it's anything, hundreds of thousands of little rules laid down by none other than None Other . . .

At the same time, however, the dietary laws are crucial in the context of the Jewish–gentile dichotomy and its broader implications. This dualism, as we have seen, can be understood as a metaphor representing the possibilities and choices in Portnoy's life. As much as he resents the prohibitions and inhibitions which are represented by Jewish tradition, he is equally alienated by what follows upon the release of these restrictions. Like Neil Klugman, again, he is caught between cultures: there is control, which he cannot abide, and there is breaking through into freedom, which for him is equally self-destructive:

> Let *them* (if you know who I mean) gorge themselves on anything and everything that moves, no matter how odious and abject the animal, no matter how grotesque or *schmutzig* or dumb the creature in question happens to be . . . all they know, these imbecilic eaters of the execrable, is to swagger, to insult, to sneer, and sooner or later to hit. Oh, they also know how to go out into the woods with a gun, these geniuses, and kill innocent wild deer, deer who themselves *nosh* quietly on berries and grasses and then go on their way bothering no one . . . There isn't enough to eat in this world, they have to eat up the *deer* as well. They will eat *anything*, anything they can get their big *goy* hands on! And the terrifying corollary, *they will do anything as well!*

* * * * *

Finally, there is the problematic business of Portnoy in Israel. Since 1948 (when Portnoy was fifteen) American Jewry has enjoyed a new frontier. It is here Portnoy learns that the pain of his dilemma is deeper than he suspected, for he is as estranged in Israel as in America. "Hey", he exclaims, "here *we're* the goyim"; but he soon discovers that it is precisely the inability to be an outsider in this place which makes him uneasy. In America, there was a certain protection, the invisible shield of the Diaspora, the basic but subtle realization that somehow it doesn't quite matter what happens there, for one is an outsider in that society, and at the same time an integral part of the sub-society which has been created to counter it. While landing at Lod Airport, his mind carries him back to his real promised land, the ball park in New Jersey on Sunday mornings, and the Jewish men at play:

> I tell you, they are an endearing lot! I sit in the wooden stands alongside first base, inhaling that sour springtime bouquet in the pocket of my fielder's mitt—sweat, leather, vaseline—and laughing my head off. *I cannot imagine myself living out my life any place but here.*

Several critics have noted and commented upon the fact that the scenes of Portnoy in Israel are somehow the least effective section of the novel. Helen Weinberg's explanation of this is worth following:

> It's a common malady of American Jewish writers, who seem to be excited by and even to enjoy the Diaspora to which an endless verbal response is required. Israel does not really call for the intellectual (or the imaginative and artistic) response that many Jews in America have become accustomed to as a mode of being.

For better or worse, the American experience has conditioned Jews to being comfortable as outsiders. This, in turn, has affected and molded the culture of American Jewry, and the change in perspesctive demand by Israel is often too much to absorb. After spending the night with Naomi, the Kibbutz girl, Portnoy realizes what he represents to Israeli society:

> . . . I had been made to understand that I was the epitome of what was most shameful in "the culture of the Diaspora". Those centuries and centuries of homelessness had produced just such disagreeable men as myself—frightened, defensive, self-depreciating, unmanned and corrupted by life in the gentile world. It was Diaspora Jews like myself who had gone by the millions to the gas chambers *without* ever raising a hand against their prosecutors, who did not know enough to defend their lives with their blood. The *Diaspora!* The very word made her furious.

So, ironically, Portnoy is an outsider even in Israel, although hardly of the type to which he has grown accustomed, even comfortable.

As Portnoy grows up, the frontiers "that never seem to close", as Hassen had called them, nevertheless offer fewer and fewer possibilities for redemption. Somehow, the "secret betrayals of history" are inescapable; the Territory Ahead appears to be roped off. As for Evil, it cannot be wholly left behind, but merely exchanged for melancholy at best, for despair at worst. Philip Roth's concern, when writing about Jews, is not to testify for or against them, but to explore the possibilities open to the Jew in modern American culture. If Alexander Portnoy is neither typical nor representative of American Jewry, that was not the intention of his creator. That he is within the range of its possibilities, however, is undeniable. By revealing and exploring some of the complex dynamics in the way that Jews can (and perhaps must) relate to American society, Philip Roth has performed the invaluable task of helping to evoke some of the painful and tremendously difficult honesty which American Jewry so desperately requires to better come to terms with its own unique situation.