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# A Conversation with Philip Roth

Philip Roth

Joyce Carol Oates

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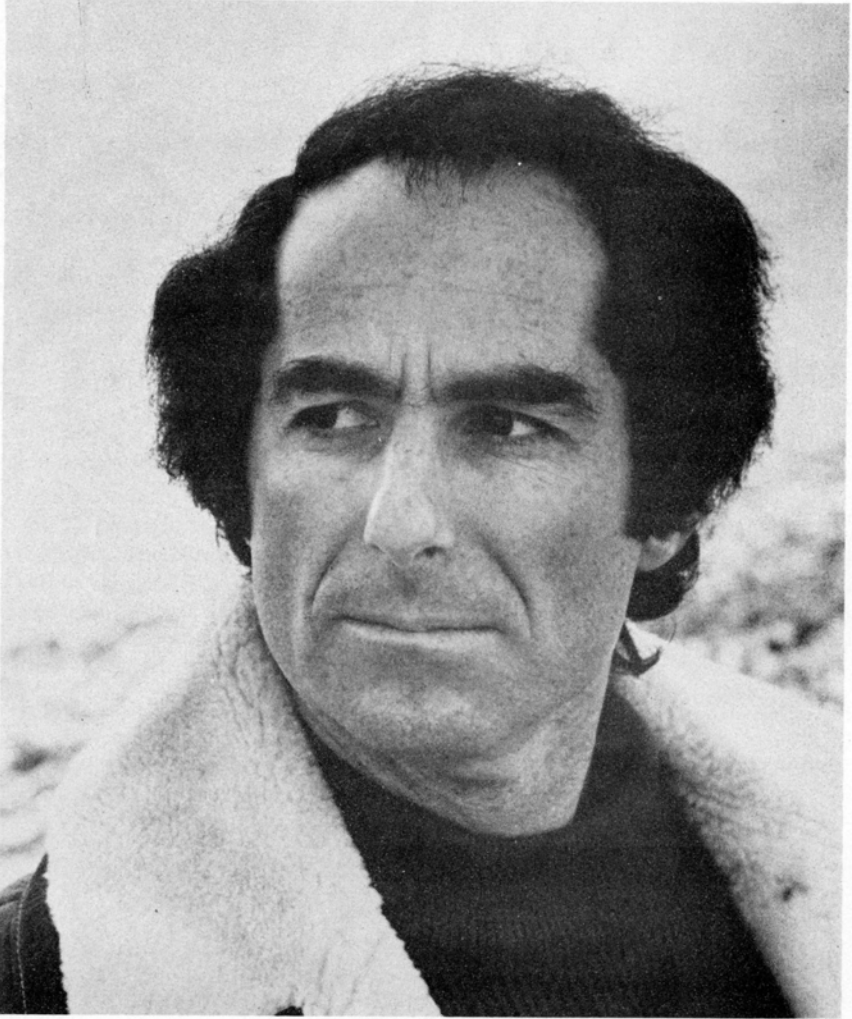


Photo by Nancy Crampton

PHILIP ROTH

# *A Conversation with Philip Roth*

JOYCE CAROL OATES

JCO: Your first book, *Goodbye, Columbus*, won the most distinguished American literary honor—the National Book Award—in 1960; you were twenty-seven years old at that time. A few years later, your third novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, achieved a critical and popular success—and notoriety—that must have altered your personal life, and your awareness of yourself as a writer with a great deal of public “influence.” Do you believe that your sense of having experienced life, its ironies and depths, has been at all intensified by your public reputation? Have you come to know more *because* of your fame? Or has the experience of enduring the bizarre projections of others been at times more than you can reasonably handle?

ROTH: My public reputation—as distinguished from the reputation of my work—is something I try to have as little to do with as I can. I know it's out there, of course—a concoction spawned by *Portnoy's Complaint* and compounded largely out of the fantasies that book gave rise to in readers because of its “confessional” strategy, and also because of its financial success. There isn't much else it can be based on, since outside of print I happen to lead virtually no *public* life at all. I don't consider this a sacrifice, since I never much wanted one. Nor have I the temperament for it—in part this accounts for why I went into fiction-writing (and not acting, which interested me for a while in college) and why writing in a room by myself is practically my whole life. I enjoy solitude the way some people I know enjoy parties. It gives me an enormous sense of personal freedom and an exquisitely sharp sense of *being alive*—and of course the quiet and the breathing space I need to get my imagination going and my work done. I take no pleasure at all in being a creature of fantasy in the minds of those who don't know me—which is largely what the “fame” you're talking about consists of. As a writer I want to be recognized for what I consider good in my writing—which is something different from being recognized on the street or by the head waiter. Flaubert: “‘To be known’ is not my chief concern—that can give complete gratification only to very mediocre vanities.” I quote this so as to make it clear that it is hardly the *absence* of vanity that makes me dismissive of this “fame.”

I'm not interested in being Highly Visible—any more than in being Totally Invisible. I'm not built for either, and, with some effort, I have learned how to negotiate myself between those two extremes. I write and publish my books, I write *about* my books, I make contact with writers in America and elsewhere whose work interests me, I correspond with them,

I visit with them and they with me, but I don't appear on TV (I did, once, on NET, before fame struck), I no longer give public lectures, and I don't answer meaningless (meaning most) "fan" mail. And since parties are to "bizarre projections" what the swamp is to the malaria mosquito, I by and large don't go to them, except if it's a gathering of friends, or an occasion honoring somebody I like. I generally don't give interviews to journalists, not even into tape-recorders; it seems pointless. Whatever one says is invariably reduced to fifteen words, wrenched from context, and as often as not appears in print sounding like a translation from Chinese, *unidiomatic* Chinese. Anything about my work I want anybody else to know, or want to figure out for myself, I write down.

For the solitude (and the birds and the trees) I have lived mostly in the country for the last five years, right now more than half of each year in a wooded rural region a hundred miles from New York. I have some six or eight friends scattered within a twenty mile radius of my house, and I see them a few evenings a month for dinner. Otherwise I write during the day, walk four or five miles at the end of the afternoon, and read at night. Almost the whole of my life in public takes place in a classroom—I teach one semester of each year. I began to earn my living teaching full-time in 1956, and have stayed with it more or less ever since. My public reputation sometimes accompanies me now into the classroom, but usually after the first few weeks, when the students have observed that I have neither exposed myself or set up a stall and attempted to interest them in purchasing my latest book, whatever anxieties or illusions about me they may have had, begin to recede, and I am largely allowed to be a literature professor instead of Famous. I have to talk about the books I'm reading—if I don't my reading tends to get away from me and becomes relatively useless—and as it has turned out, a college classroom containing half a dozen smart undergraduates is one of the few places I have found in my travels where it is possible to have a coherent conversation about a book for more than three minutes at a stretch. And if it is not always brilliant conversation, it is at least responsible—which is to say, one, we have all actually read the book under discussion and even thought a little about it, and two, since the students are not privy to the latest information about the author and his wife, or his agent's wife, or his agent's wife's lover's agent, we are usually able to go an astonishing one hundred and ten consecutive minutes sticking to the subject at hand.

So: by keeping to the way of life that's always served me best, I have been able by and large to cut myself loose from "the destiny of 'Philip Roth.'" He goes his way and I go mine, and to tell you the truth, the less I hear about him the better.

"Enduring bizarre projections" isn't just something that "famous" novelists have to contend with, of course. Defying a multitude of bizarre

projections, or submitting to them, would seem to me at the heart of everyday living in America, with its ongoing assault from without *to be something palpable and indentifiable*. Everyone is invited to imitate in conduct and appearance the grossest simplifications of self that are mercilessly projected upon them by the mass media and advertising, all the while they must contend of course with the myriad expectations that they arouse in those with whom they have personal and intimate associations. Indeed, these "bizarre projections" arising out of ordinary human relations were a concern of mine in *My Life as a Man*—a novel that might have been called "Don't Do With Me What You Will."\*

JCO: Since you have become fairly well-established (I hesitate to use that unpleasant word "successful"), have less-established writers tried to use you, to manipulate you into endorsing their work? Do you feel you have received any especially unfair or inaccurate critical treatment? I am also interested in whether you have come to feel more communal now than you did when you were beginning as a writer.

ROTH: No, I haven't felt nor have I been "manipulated" into endorsing the work of less-established writers. I don't like to give the kind of "endorsements" that publishers prefer for advertising or promotion purposes—not because I'm shy about my enthusiasms, but because I can't say in fifteen or twenty words what I find special or noteworthy about a book. Generally, if I particularly like something I've read, I write the writer directly. At times, however, when I've been especially taken by an aspect of some writer's work which it seems likely is going to be overlooked or neglected, I've tried to help by writing longish paragraphs for the writer's hard-cover publishers, who always promise to use the "endorsement" in its entirety. So far they always have, though eventually—since it's a fallen world we live in—what started out as seventy-five words of critical appreciation seems to wind up on the paperback edition cover as a two-word cry of marquee ecstasy: "Best damn!" "Not since!" and so forth.

Since becoming "fairly well-established" I've written such paragraphs on behalf of books by five writers: Edward Hoagland (*Notes from Another Century*), Sandra Hochman (*Walking Papers*), Alison Lurie (*The War Between the Tates*), Thomas Rogers (*Pursuit of Happiness and Confessions of a Child of the Century*), and Richard Stern (*1968 and Other Men's Daughters*). In 1972, *Esquire*, for a feature they were planning, asked four "older writers" (as they called them), Isaac Bashevis Singer, Leslie Fiedler, Mark Schorer and myself, each to write a brief essay about a writer under thirty-five he admired. Singer chose Barton Midwood, Schorer chose Judy Rascoe, and I chose Alan Lelchuk, whom I'd met when we were both guests

\* Joyce Carol Oates's most recent novel is *Do With Me What You Will*.

over a long stretch at Yaddo, and whose novel *American Mischief* I'd read in manuscript. I restricted myself to a somewhat close analysis of the book, which, though it hardly consisted of unqualified praise, nonetheless caused some consternation among the Secret Police. One prominent newspaper reviewer wrote in his column something to the effect that "you would have to understand the Byzantine politics of the New York literary world" to be able to figure out why I had written my fifteen hundred word essay, which he described as "a blurb." It didn't occur to him that somebody whose life's-work is writing fiction might simply be interested in what a "younger" writer was trying to do, and when given the opportunity, had chosen to talk about his interest in print. But then that one might have an analytical, rather than a political purpose, is invariably beyond the comprehension of those who protect us Americans against subversive conspiracies.

In recent years I've run into somewhat more of this kind of "manipulation"—malicious hallucination mixed with childish naiveté and disguised as Inside Dope—from marginal "literary" journalists ("the lice of literature," as Dickens called them) than from working writers, young *or* established. In fact, I don't think there's been a time since graduate school when genuine literary fellowship has been such a valuable and necessary part of my life. Contact with writers I admire or towards whom I feel a kinship is precisely my way *out* of isolation and furnishes me with whatever sense of "community" I have. Fortunately I've almost always had at least one writer I could talk to turn up wherever I happened to be teaching or living; these novelists I've met along the way, in Chicago, in Rome, in London, in Iowa City, at Yaddo, in New York, in Philadelphia, are by and large people I continue to correspond with, exchange finished manuscripts with, try out ideas on, listen to, and visit with, if I can, once or twice a year. By now some of these whose friendships go back a ways have fallen out of sympathy with the direction the other's work has taken, but since we seem not to have lost faith in one another's integrity or good will, the opposition tends to be bearable, and in its way, of use—of use, negative though it may be, because it is without the moral superiority, or academic condescension, or theoretical hobby-horsing, or competitive preening that sometimes tends to characterize criticism written by professionals for *their* public. Novelists are as a group the most *interesting* readers of novels that I have yet to come across.

In a sharp and elegantly angry little essay called "Reviewing" Virginia Woolf once suggested that book journalism ought to be abolished (because ninety-five per cent of it was worthless) and that the serious critics who do reviewing ought to put themselves out to hire to the novelists, who happen actually to have a strong interest in knowing what an honest and intelligent reader thinks about their work. For a fee the critic—to be called per-

haps a "consultant, expositor or expounder"—would meet privately and with some formality with the writer, and "for an hour," writes Virginia Woolf, "they would consult upon the book in question . . . The consultant would speak honestly and openly, because the fear of affecting sales and of hurting feelings would be removed. Privacy would lessen the shop-window temptation to cut a figure, to pay off scores . . . He could thus concentrate upon the book itself, and upon telling the author why he likes or dislikes it. The author would profit equally . . . He could state his case. He could point to his difficulties. He could no longer feel, as so often at present, that the critic is talking about something that he has not written . . . An hour's private talk with a critic of his own choosing would be incalculably more valuable than the five hundred words of criticism mixed with extraneous matter that is now allotted him."

How sensible and human! It surely would have seemed to me worth a hundred dollars to sit for an hour with Edmund Wilson and hear everything he had to say about a book of mine—nor would I have objected to paying to hear whatever Virginia Woolf might have had to say to me about *Portnoy's Complaint*, if she had been willing to accept less than all the tea in China to undertake that task. Nobody minds swallowing his medicine, if it is prescribed by a real doctor. One of the nicer side-effects of this system is that since nobody wants to throw away his hard-earned money, most of the quacks and the incompetents would be driven out of business.

Until this arrangement becomes the custom, I'll continue to look to a few writers whom I admire also as *readers*, to help mitigate my own feelings of isolation. "A sense of unspeakable security is in me at this moment, because of your having understood the book." Melville to Hawthorne, in a letter about *Moby Dick*. Just the sort of professional intimacy and trust that is signalled by this simple outpouring of gratitude from one isolated writer to another seems to me the best thing we have to give one another.

As for "especially unfair critical treatment"—of course my blood has been drawn, my anger roused, my feelings hurt, my patience tried, etc., and in the end, I have wound up enraged most of all with myself, for allowing blood to be drawn, anger aroused, feelings hurt, patience tried. When the "unfair critical treatment" has been associated with charges just too serious to ignore—accusations against me, say, of "anti-semitism"—then, rather than fuming to myself, I have answered the criticism at length and in public. Otherwise I fume and forget it; and keep forgetting it, until actually—miracle of miracles—I *do* forget it.

And lastly: who gets "critical treatment" anyway? Why dignify with such a phrase most of what is written about fiction? What one gets, as far as I can see, is what Edmund Wilson describes as "a collection of opinions by persons of various degrees of intelligence who have happened to

have some contact with [the writer's] book."

JCO: What Edmund Wilson says is true, ideally, yet many writers are influenced by the "critical treatment" they receive. The fact that *Goodbye, Columbus* was singled out for extraordinarily high praise must have encouraged you, to some extent; and the critics, certainly, guided a large number of readers in your direction. I began reading your work in 1959 and was impressed from the start by your effortless (effortless-seeming, perhaps) synthesis of the colloquial, the comic, the near-tragic, the intensely moral . . . within wonderfully readable structures that had the feel of being traditional stories, while being at the same time rather revolutionary. I am thinking of "The Conversion of the Jews," "Eli the Fanatic," and the novella "Goodbye, Columbus," among others.

One of the prominent themes in your writing seems to be the hero's recognition of a certain loss in his life, along with a regret for the loss, and finally an ironic "acceptance" of this regret (as if the hero had to go this way, fulfill this aspect of his destiny, no matter how painful it might be). Consider the young girl in *Goodbye, Columbus* and her twin in "Marriage a la Mode," both of whom are eventually rejected. But the loss might have broader emotional and psychological implications as well—that is, the beautiful but too-young girl must have represented qualities that were also transpersonal.

ROTH: *a.* You correctly spot the return of an old character in a new incarnation. The "Goodbye, Columbus" heroine, inasmuch as she existed as a character at all or "represented" an alternative of any consequence to the hero, is re-constituted (re-appraised?) in *My Life as a Man* as Tarnopol's Dina Dornbusch, "the rich, pretty, protected, smart, sexy, adoring, young, vibrant, clever, confident, ambitious" Sarah Lawrence girl he gives up because she's not what the young literary fellow, in his romantic ambitiousness, recognizes as a "woman"—by which he means a knocked-around, on-her-own, volatile, combative handful like Maureen. Furthermore, Dina Dornbusch (incidental character that she is) is herself re-constituted and "re-appraised" in fiction by Tarnopol, in the two stories, preceding his own autobiographical narrative (the "useful fictions"): first in "Salad Days," as the licentious, childish, slavish, nice suburban Jewish girl whom he buggers under her family ping-pong table, and then in "Courting Disaster," as the altogether attractive, astute, academically ambitious college senior who tells Professor Zuckerman, after he has severed relations with her—to take up with his own brand of "damaged" woman—that under all his flamboyant "maturity" he is "nothing but a crazy little boy." Both these characters are called Sharon Shatzky, and together stand in relation to Dina Dornbusch as fictional distillations do to their models in the



unwritten world. These Sharons are what can happen to a Dina when a Tarnopol sets her free from his life to play the role such a woman does in his personal mythology. This mythology, this legend of the self (the useful fiction frequently mistaken by ordinary readers for veiled autobiography) is a kind of idealized architect's drawing for what one may have constructed—or is yet to construct—out of the materials actuality makes available. In this way, a Tarnopol's fiction is his *idea* of his fate. Or, for all I know, the process works the other way around, and the personal myth meant to *reveal* the secret workings of an individual destiny actually makes even *less* readable the text of one's own history. Thereby increasing bewilderment—causing one to tell the story once again, meticulously reconstructing the erasures on what may never have been a palimpsest to begin with.

Sometimes it seems to me that no one but novelists and nuts carries on in quite this way about living what is, after all, only a life—making the transparent opaque, the opaque transparent, the obscure obvious, the obvious obscure, etc. All this endless reconsidering! There is a madman who talks, kneeling down, into a sewer grating near the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York—I have sometimes passed him early in the day, and from the bits of his monologue that I overhear, it sounds to *my* ears as though he's just writing a novel out loud: "Sure, she outlived him, and you want to know why? . . . Ah, don't hand me that! I'm incapable even of thinking such a thought!" And so on. Delmore Schwartz, from "Genesis": "Why must I tell, hysterical, this story / And must, compelled, speak of such secrecies? / . . . Where is my freedom, if I cannot resist so much speech blurted out . . . / How long must I endure this show and sight / Of all I have lived through, all I lived on: Why?"

b. ". . . loss, regret for the loss, and *yet* an ironic acceptance of the regret." You've pointed to a "theme" I hadn't thought of as such before—and that I'd prefer to qualify some. Of course Tarnopol is relentlessly kicking himself for his mistake, but it is just those kicks (and the accompanying screams) that reveal to him how strongly determined by character, how characteristically Tarnopolian, that "mistake" was. No more than a Joseph K. has an existence that is distinguishable from his trial, does Tarnopol have an existence separate from his mistake. He is his mistake and his mistake is him. "This me who is me being me and none other!" The last line of *My Life as a Man* is meant to point up a harsher attitude toward the self and the history it necessarily has compiled, than "ironic acceptance" suggests. To my mind it is Bellow, in his last two pain-filled novels, who has sounded the theme of "loss, regret for the loss, and *yet* an ironic acceptance of the regret"—as he did early on (less convincingly I think) at the conclusion to *Seize the Day*, whose final event I always found a little forced, and then further schmaltzed-up with its sudden swell of *Urn-Burial* prose to "elevate" Tommy Wilhelm's misery; I prefer the conclusion to

"Leaving the Yellow House," with its moving and ironic *rejection* of loss—no "sea-like music" necessary there to make the elemental human feeling felt. If there is an ironic acceptance of anything at the conclusion of *My Life as a Man* (or even along the way) it is of *the determined self*. And angry frustration, a bedeviling sense of characterological enslavement, is strongly infused in that ironic acceptance. Thus the exclamation mark.

I have always been particularly taken by a passage that comes near the end of *The Trial*, the chapter where K., in the cathedral, looks up toward the priest with a sudden infusion of hope—that passage attaches to what I'm trying to say here, particularly with the word "determined," which I mean in both senses: driven, resolute and purposive—and yet utterly fixed in position. ". . . if the man would only quit his pulpit, it was not impossible that K. could obtain decisive and acceptable counsel from him which might, for instance, point the way, not toward some influential manipulation of the case, but toward a circumvention of it, a breaking away from it altogether, a mode of living completely outside the jurisdiction of the Court. This possibility must exist, K. had of late given much thought to it." As who hasn't of late? Irony enters when the man in the pulpit turns out to be oneself. If only one *could* quit one's pulpit, one might indeed obtain decisive and acceptable counsel! How to devise a mode of living completely outside the jurisdiction of the Court when the Court is of one's own devising. It is the ironic acceptance of the loss that must inevitably follow upon a struggle such as *that*, that I would prefer to point to as a "theme" of *My Life as a Man*.

JCO: Was it you, or someone more or less imitating you, who wrote about a boy who turned into a girl . . . ? How would that strike you, as a nightmare possibility? (I don't mean *The Breast*: that seems to me a literary work, rather than a real psychological excursion, like other writings of yours.) Could you—can you—comprehend, by any extension of your imagination or your unconscious, a life as a woman?—a writing life as a woman? I know this is speculative, but had you the choice, would you have wanted to live your life as a man, or as a woman (you could also check *other*)?

ROTH: Both. Like the hero-heroine of *Orlando*. That is, sequentially (if you can arrange it) rather than simultaneously. It wouldn't be much different from what it's like now, if I wasn't able to measure the one life against the other. It would also be interesting not to be Jewish, after having spent a lifetime as a Jew. Arthur Miller imagines just the reverse of this as "a nightmare possibility" in *Focus*, where an antisemite is suddenly taken by the world for the very thing he hates. But I'm not talking about mistaken identity or skindeep conversions, but magically becoming *totally* the

other, all the while retaining knowledge of what it was to have been one's original self wearing one's original badges of identity. In the early sixties I wrote a not un-funny (though not very good) one-act play called *Buried Again*, about a dead Jewish man who when given the chance to be reincarnated as a *goy*, refuses and is consigned forthwith to oblivion. I understand perfectly how he felt, though if in the netherworld I am myself presented with this particular choice, I doubt that I will act similarly. I know this will produce a great outcry in *Commentary*, but, alas, I shall have to learn to live with that the second time around as I did the first.

Sherwood Anderson wrote "The Man Who Turned Into a Woman," one of the most beautifully sensuous stories I've ever read, where the boy at one point sees himself in a barroom mirror as a girl, but I doubt if that's the piece of fiction your question is referring to. Anyway, it wasn't me who wrote about such a sexual transformation, unless you're thinking of *My Life as a Man*, where the hero puts on his wife's undergarments one day, but just, as it were, to take a sex *break*. Of course I have written frequently *about* women, some of whom I identified with strongly and, as it were, imagined myself into, while I was working. In *Letting Go* there's Martha Reganhart and Libby Herz; in *When She Was Good*, Lucy Nelson and her mother; and in *My Life as a Man*, Maureen Tarnopol and Susan McCall (and Lydia Ketterer and the Sharon Shatzkys). However much or little I am able to extend my imagination to "comprehend . . . life as a woman" is demonstrated in those books. I never did much with the girl in *Goodbye, Columbus*, which seems to me apprentice-work and rather weak on character invention all around. Maybe I didn't get very far with her because she was cast as a pretty imperturbable type, a girl who knew how to get what she wanted and to take care of herself, and as it happened, that didn't arouse my imagination much. Besides, the more I saw of young women who had flown the family nest—just what Brenda Patimkin decides *not* to do—the less imperturbable they seemed. Beginning with *Letting Go*, where I began to write about female *vulnerability*, and to see this vulnerability not only as it determined the lives of the women—who felt it frequently at the very center of their being—but the men to whom they looked for love and support, the women became characters my imagination could take hold of and enlarge upon. How this vulnerability shapes their relations with men (each vulnerable, to be sure, in the style of *his* gender) is really at the heart of whatever story I've told about these seven woman characters.

JCO: In parts of *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Our Gang*, *The Breast*, and most recently in your baseball extravaganza, *The Great American Novel*, you seem to be celebrating the sheer playfulness of the artist, an almost egoless condition in which, to use Thomas Mann's phrase, irony glances on all

sides. There is a Sufi saying to the effect that the universe is “endless play and endless illusion;” at the same time, most of us experience it as deadly serious—and so we feel the need, indeed we cannot *not* feel the need, to be “moral” in our writing. Having been intensely “moral” in *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good*, and in much of *My Life as a Man*, and even in such a marvelously demonic work as the novella “On The Air,” do you think your fascination with comedy is only a reaction against this other aspect of your personality, or is it something permanent? Do you anticipate (but no: you could not) some violent pendulum-swing *back* to what you were years ago, in terms of your commitment to “serious” and even Jamesian writing?

ROTH: Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness are my closest friends; they are the ones I take those walks with in the country at the end of the day. Other people on country roads have dogs for companions, I have them. I am also on friendly terms with Deadly Playfulness, Playful Playfulness, Serious Playfulness, Serious Seriousness, and Sheer Sheerness. From the last, however, I get nothing; he just wrings my heart and leaves me speechless.

I don't know whether the works you call “comedies” are so “egoless.” Isn't there really more “sheer” self in the ostentatious display and assertiveness of *The Great American Novel* than in a book like *Letting Go*, say, where a devoted effort at self-removal and self-obliteration is necessary for the kind of investigation of self that goes on there? I think that the “comedies” may actually be the most ego-ridden of the lot; at least they aren't exercises in self-abasement. What made writing *The Great American Novel* such a pleasure for me was precisely the self-assertion that it entailed—or, if there is such a thing, self-pageantry. (Or will “showing off” do?) At any rate, all sorts of impulses that I might once have put down as excessive or frivolous or exhibitionistic, I allowed to surface and proceed to their destination. When the censor in me rose responsibly in his robes to say “Now look here, don't you think that's just a little too—” I would reply, from beneath the baseball cap I often wore when writing that book, “Precisely why it stays! Down in front!” The idea was to see what would emerge if everything that was “a little too” at first glance, was permitted to go all the way. I understood that a disaster might ensue (some have informed me that indeed it did) but I tried to put my faith in the fun that I was having. *Writing as pleasure*. Enough to make Flaubert spin in his grave! When manic inspiration flagged, I took trips up to Cooperstown and stayed there for a few days at a stretch, wandering around by myself in the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. I held Babe Ruth's tattered little glove in my own hand, and watched the movie version of Abbott and Costello's “Who's on First” routine, as attentive and worshipful as a Catholic at

Lourdes. Admittedly, I was bolstered along the way with a certain amount of good old-fashioned modernist *epater*-ing. Whenever, in uncertain moments, I wondered what "they" would make of all this horseplay, I would answer my doubts with a cryptic "Fuck them." It was only fitting that when *The Great American Novel* appeared, "they," for the most part, said, "And fuck you too, bud."

I don't know what to expect or anticipate next. *My Life As a Man*, which I finished just a few months ago, is a book I'd been writing, abandoning and returning to ever since I finished *Portnoy's Complaint*. Whenever I gave up on it I went to work on one of the "playful" books—maybe the despair over "losing" the one book accounted for why I wanted to be so playful in the others. At any rate, all the while that *My Life as a Man* was actually simmering away on the "moral" back burner, I wrote *Our Gang*, *The Breast* and *The Great American Novel*. Right now nothing is cooking; at least none of the aromas have as yet reached me. *For the moment* this isn't distressing; I feel (again *for the moment*) as though I've reached a natural break of sorts in my work, nothing nagging to be finished, nothing as yet pressing to be begun—only bits and pieces, fragmentary obsessions, bobbing into view, then sinking, for now, out of sight. Book ideas usually have come at me with all the appearance of pure accident or chance, though by the time I am done I can see that what has taken shape was actually spawned, in a very determined way, by the interplay between my previous fiction, recent undigested personal history, the circumstances of my immediate, everyday life, and the books I've been reading and teaching. The continuously shifting relationship of these elements of experience brings my subject into focus, and then the self-conscious literary brooding that occupies most of my waking hours eventually suggests to me the means by which to take hold of the material. I use "brooding" only to describe what this activity apparently looks like; inside, actually, I am feeling very sufi-sticated indeed.

\* \* \*

Philip Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1933; he attended Rutgers in Newark, and transferred to Bucknell University, where he received his B.A. He began graduate school in English studies at the University of Chicago but decided to drop out, in order to concentrate upon his writing.

His books are: *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959); *Letting Go* (1962); *When She Was Good* (1967); *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969); *Our Gang* (1971); *The Breast* (1972); *The Great American Novel* (1973); and *My Life as a Man* (1974). He is currently working on a group of essays that will probably be called *Reading Myself and Others*, and which deal, among

other things, with some of his contemporaries—Bellow, Malamud—and the predicament of “fame.” Since 1965 he has been on the English faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, where he teaches two courses in literature during the fall semester. In 1970 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Roth lives in Manhattan part of the time, in an attractive apartment in the East Eighties, not far from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Central Park; the rest of his time is spent in a country house near Kent, Connecticut. His Manhattan study is filled with books: shelves that reach to the ceiling, filled with literally every kind of book—from *The Story of O.* and *Portnoy's Complaint* to that old tombstone of encyclopediac knowledge, Baugh's *A Literary History of England*, once the most important single reference work for graduate students in English. On the walls: a sombre, appealing photograph of Franz Kafka, several striking photographs and frieze-rubbings that date from Roth's visit to the East in 1969 (in order to escape the overwhelming publicity of *Portnoy's Complaint*), and, in his living room, two caricatures of Roth by *The New York Review of Books* artist David Levine, and art-work by Philip Guston, who is a personal friend of Roth's. On a bulletin board in Roth's study are a few fan letters, including an enthusiastic tribute from Anthony Burgess, and a cartoon, probably from *The New Yorker*, that shows a middle-aged librarian screaming to an assistant, as flames rage around them in a library: “Don't bother with Philip Roth! Save Galsworthy!”

In recent years, Roth has become interested in visiting Eastern Europe, in meeting writers there, and in introducing their work to American readers. (See the poetry of Miroslav Holub elsewhere in this issue, which Roth arranged for *The Ontario Review* to publish.) He recognizes a kinship with Eastern Europeans that might have something to do with this own grimly comic sense of the communal American predicament of the Sixties and the Seventies: an inability to sympathize with or take seriously the political “leaders” of the United States, and at the same time a depressing awareness of the fact that these people are not going to go away, no matter how exposed and ridiculed they are. (The Nixon of *Our Gang* adumbrated the “real” Nixon of the Watergate and related scandals.) Roth reads two newspapers a day and watches television news-broadcasts frequently; at the time of my visit with him (May 1974) he was, like nearly every New Yorker I encountered, obsessed with the intricacies and continuing revelations of the Washington political scandals. (Quite a while ago, before the issue of impeachment had ever been raised, Roth published a marvelous satiric speech by “Nixon,” in *The New York Review of Books*, in which he stated the various reasons why he should not be impeached: so Roth is something of a prophet, with an imagination that readily assumes and extrapolates upon the most foolish, tragi-comic possibilities.) A cynic once

said that no one would ever go bankrupt underestimating the intelligence of the American public, and so too it is probable that no one will never go far wrong underestimating the intellectual and moral character of the typical American politician. But years ago Roth raised the question: How can American writers, especially satirists, keep pace with ordinary reality in our time?

The serious writer, of course, chooses to concentrate upon intensely private, personal experiences, in which larger social or political events may be reflected, but kept at a distance (as they are in our own lives); the novel is a work of craftsmanship, an *art*, which makes it a more permanent and valuable phenomenon than the daily newspaper. *My Life as a Man* is in many ways the antithesis of Roth's more "public," extraverted works, in that it concentrates upon the comically grotesque experiences of a man who, in his early twenties, was tricked into marrying a woman he did not love. It can be read on at least two levels—as a very funny, self-conscious, utterly uninhibited confession of the kind men rarely make (one continually thinks, *How can Roth say such things in what will surely be read as an autobiographical work?*), and as an experimental novel, in which the author is consciously "writing" a series of stories, chapters, analyses, and summaries, some of which are the desperate fictional constructions of his hero, Peter Tarnopol. Tarnopol is a writer, highly praised, at the start of what should be a fine career, yet his marriage to an impossible woman named Maureen seems to be destroying him: out of his frantic misery come attempts at fiction, attempts at transforming his life into art, which are ultimately abandoned in favor of what Roth calls "My True Story."

The novel is experimental, also, in its constant questioning of the basic assumptions of literature, and in its hero's exasperated, humiliated recognition that whatever "art" is, his personal life does not resemble it in the slightest. Arguing, fighting, weeping, enduring an impossible but interminable relationship with his wife—who will not grant him a divorce—the young Tarnopol sees that he is not a character in a serious novel at all, but in a kind of soap opera. At one point Maureen herself is imagined as saying: "You want subtlety, read *The Golden Bowl*. This is life, bozo, not high art."

If Roth were to write *When She Was Good* today, it would probably be a totally different work; it is gravely serious, relentlessly "moral" in pursuing its heroine along the pathway her difficult, narrow personality sets for her and for the unfortunate men in her life. By contrast, *Portnoy's Complaint* deals with material that could be nightmarish, even tragic, but Roth's inventive genius allowed him to re-imagine his hero's experiences in a kind of Kafkan-Lenny Bruce style, so that Portnoy is an entirely believable, living human being, somehow stuck in a series of adventures that are

surreal. In fact, he complains to his psychoanalyst, Dr. Spielvogel (who is also Peter Tarnopol's incompetent psychoanalyst in *My Life as a Man*), that it is a waste of time for them to deal with his dreams, since his *real life* is fantastic enough.

*My Life as a Man* makes the point, as *Portnoy's Complaint* does also, that being a "man" is difficult, if not impossible: one can be reduced to a child, a little boy, by the manipulations of other people. In Roth, the nemesis is usually a woman, as it is usually a paternal figure in Kafka, but both Roth and Kafka deal with endlessly analytical heroes who believe themselves constantly on trial and constantly failing, unable to live up to standards of adulthood that seem to come easily to other people. Maureen, the Terrible Female, is killed in an automobile crash which she might have caused, in a moment of anger, and so Peter Tarnopol is "free." Or should be free. He is, at least, no longer married. But at the novel's conclusion he is beginning to realize that Maureen may be more of an obsession to him now that she is dead, than when she was living; and in any case, he is still himself: "This me who is me being me and none other!"