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# "At Times in Flight": Henry Roth's Parable of Renunciation

Steven G. Kellman

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- 1 By 1959, Henry Roth's one great bid for literary glory had been out of print for more than two decades. Published in 1934, *Call It Sleep* was the only book named by two contributors, Alfred Kazin and Leslie Fiedler, in a symposium on "The Most Neglected Books of the Past Twenty-Five Years" that appeared in *The American Scholar* in 1956. But both the novel and its fifty-year-old author were still neglected by most of the arbiters of literary taste. Roth was living, with his wife, Muriel, and his sons, Jeremy and Hugh, in self-imposed obscurity and poverty in rural Maine, raising and slaughtering ducks and geese. Although William Rose Benét's *Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, published in 1948, included an entry for Roth's former mentor and lover, Eda Lou Walton, the volume made no mention of Roth himself or his forgotten novel. Nor, until 1965, did any other standard reference work acknowledge the existence of Henry Roth.
- 2 When Harold U. Ribalow, an energetic impresario of American Jewish culture who edited several early, influential anthologies, learned that the author of *Call It Sleep* was still alive, he immediately lay siege to him in Maine. Before persuading Roth to allow re-publication of his legendary novel, he managed to coax him into writing something new, a story that Ribalow placed in the July, 1959 edition of *Commentary*, the monthly journal sponsored by the American Jewish Committee. Titled "At Times in Flight," it became Roth's favorite among his own short pieces. Subtitled "A Parable," the six-page story is doubly parabolic; it deploys a sequence of actions both to suggest universal truths about the limits of art and to represent events in its particular author's life.
- 3 In "At Times in Flight," an unnamed narrator recalls the summer of 1938 spent at an artists' colony named Z located near Saratoga Springs, New York. He was attempting, under contract, to write his second novel, but, as he notes, "It had gone badly—aims had become lost, purpose, momentum lost."<sup>1</sup> He had already completed a section of the book, but now not even the freedom of an artists' colony could help him to break his writer's block. Also residing at Z that summer was a young musician

named Martha whom the inexperienced narrator makes awkward gestures at courting. Learning that she shares his fancy for sparkling water, he begins driving her into town every morning before breakfast to drink from the natural fountain in Saratoga Springs. Their daily route takes them past the town's famous equestrian track, and they marvel at the sight of trainers and animals preparing for the imminent racing season. "A horse is a beautiful thing," he observes. "Enormously supple and swift, they seemed at times in flight" (101).

- 4 Since neither Martha nor the narrator has ever attended a race, they decide to watch one together from the woods abutting the track at the edge of the Z estate. From their private, secret perch, the horses and their riders are distant, tiny figures. However, as the race proceeds the competitors come galloping toward them. Just as the pack thunders past, one of the horses trips and breaks a hind leg. The jockey scurries off the track, but a crew hurries to the scene of the mishap to dispose of the crippled horse. Fearful of a ricocheting bullet, Martha retreats into the woods, but the narrator remains to witness a member of the racetrack staff euthanize the animal with a pistol shot to his head. After watching the carcass hauled away in a truck, he rejoins Martha, mindful that "behind us was a scene that I should muse on a great deal, of a horse destroyed when the race became real" (104).
- 5 By subtitling his short story "A Parable," Roth invites the reader to muse a great deal on more than just the events it depicts. "*Ars brevis, vita longa*" (104), reflects the narrator about the melancholy spectacle he has just witnessed. It is not immediately clear what art has to do with the scene, unless viewed as a fatal demonstration of the transience of equestrian accomplishment. However, as odd as it is to find classical aesthetics invoked to treat horse racing as an "art," it is odder still that Roth, who tutored Latin to local schoolchildren in Maine, inverts the familiar aphorism *ars longa, vita brevis* to read "*ars brevis, vita longa*." If anything, the horse's sudden collapse would seem to illustrate the brevity of life, not art. Yet the reader of "At Times in Flight" is alerted to look to this straightforward account of the death of a horse to learn something about the tenuousness of art and its relationship to the span of a life. Musing a great deal on this story means contemplating the role of the Muses in the affairs of mortal human beings, for whom times are always in flight.
- 6 In classical mythology, Pegasus was the favorite horse of the Muses. Though the horse that takes a tumble in the story remains unnamed, Roth himself invoked the famous winged figure of antiquity in a conversation that his Italian translator, Mario Materassi, taped on February 8, 1986. In his terse remarks, included within the collection *Shifting Landscape*, which reprinted "At Times at Flight," twenty-seven years after its publication in *Commentary*, Roth summarizes the story as "the killing of Pegasus, so to speak, the shooting of Pegasus" (105). The author does not mention, and may or may not have been aware of, the Greek tradition that Pegasus created Hippocrene, the fountain on Mount Helicon that is

the source of poetic inspiration, when a blow from his hoof broke through the ground. However, the emphasis within the story on the salubrious natural waters in Saratoga Springs reinforces the parallels to Pegasus, the soaring steed who in the visual representations of ancient Greece is seen at times in flight. Set in an artists' colony and narrated by a frustrated writer, "At Times in Flight" employs a Pegasus figure to ponder the death of creativity. Contrasting "reality" with "art," the narrator, witnessing the horse's defeat, which he takes personally—"I felt a sense of loss," he tells Martha (104)—, suggests the prevalence of the "real" and the failure of flight. In the story's final words, "a horse destroyed when the race became real," he is reconciled to the extinction of Pegasus and the triumph of "reality." Realizing that he cannot soar above the quotidian, he is ready to abandon his literary calling.

- 7 In its very title, "At Times in Flight" makes a mockery of the conventional use of art to evade the ravages of time. The story, which begins with a statement in the imperfect tense—"I was courting a young woman, if the kind of brusque, uncertain, equivocal attentions I paid her might be called courting" (99)—, is narrated by a man looking back on an earlier episode in his life. His prose is punctuated with chronological markers, phrases and terms such as "in those days" and "then," that emphasize the passage of the years—how, despite the desperate stratagems of art, he is ineluctably immersed in time. The narrator tells Martha that he had not bet on the hapless horse, but in a sense, by pinning his hopes on the power of art, the thwarted author had. The death of the Pegasus figure leaves the blocked novelist bereft and adrift. Like Dante, he finds himself in a dark wood, "the narrow and rather somber band of trees that bordered the racetrack," (104) in immediate need of guidance. "Well, lead the way back," he tells Martha. "You've got a better sense of direction than I have" (104).
- 8 In the gloss he provided in 1986, Roth states: "The story implies that the art itself no longer had any future" and "that it also implies that in the death of the art there is a beginning of the acceptance of the necessity to live in a normal fashion, subject to all the demands and all the exigencies and vicissitudes that life will bring" (105). But beyond the story's power to embody universal aspirations and disappointments, "At Times in Flight" is a personal parable, a thinly disguised recollection of Roth's own experiences twenty-one years earlier. Almost all of Roth's fiction not only draws directly from the author's life but is modified autobiography. *Call It Sleep* began, at the suggestion of Eda Lou Walton, as a straightforward memoir, a project to occupy Roth after she deposited him at the Peterborough Inn in New Hampshire while she took up residence at the nearby MacDowell Colony. As he explained to Irit Manskleid-Mankowsky for her 1978 M.A. thesis, "the very original conception of the book was to include my entire trajectory—from ghetto child to Greenwich Village" (Manskleid-Mankowsky 114). However, after seventy-five pages, Roth abandoned his factual first-person narrative and began instead to fictionalize his life, focusing entirely on his experiences from arrival at

Ellis Island until the age of eight. Though it presents its young protagonist, David Schearl, as an only child, while Roth himself had a younger sister named Rose, *Call It Sleep* is nevertheless faithful to much of its author's own immigrant childhood on New York's Lower East Side. In *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, the fictional tetralogy that Roth composed during the last of his eighty-nine years, the protagonist is called Ira Stigman rather than Henry Roth, but he, too, is an arthritic octogenarian living in Albuquerque and recalling his family's move from the Lower East Side to Harlem, his disgraceful expulsion from Stuyvesant High School, and his romantic attachment to a New York University professor twelve years his senior. Roth changes her name, slightly, from Eda Lou Walton to Edith Welles, and he calls Stigman's wife M rather than Muriel, his older son Jess instead of Jeremy, and his younger son Herschel instead of Hugh. But he does not even bother to alter his parents' names, Chaim and Leah, or his mother's maiden name, Farb. The autobiographical basis of Roth's final volumes is so transparent that his sister, Rose Broder, successfully extracted \$10,000 from him as indemnity for his depiction of incest between the protagonist and his sister. Calling her Minnie instead of Rose did nothing to placate her outraged prototype.

- 9 In "At Times in Flight," Roth calls the woman whom the narrator is courting Martha, but his description of her—"a very personable, tall, fair-haired young woman, a pianist and composer, a young woman with a world of patience, practicability, and self-discipline—bred and raised in the best traditions of New England and the Middle West" (99-100)—corresponds exactly to Muriel Parker, a descendant of New England gentry who grew up in Illinois and who would be Roth's wife from 1939 until her death in 1990. Like the story's narrator, Roth himself spent the summer of 1938 at an artists' colony in upstate New York; naming the place "Z" does little to disguise the fact that he is writing about Yaddo when he recalls "playing charades in the evening in the darkly furnished, richly carpeted, discreetly shadowed main room, the ample servings of food, the complaints of constipation" (100) and of course the proximity to Saratoga Springs and its famous racetrack. Oblique reference in the story to "the missives that were wont to be sent by the hostess to her guests calling attention to some minor infraction of the rules or breach of propriety" (100) is an allusion to Elizabeth Ames, the formidably fastidious executive director of Yaddo with whom Roth clashed more than once.
- 10 During the summer of 1938, when Henry Roth and Muriel Parker both witnessed a horse race—for free, from the edge of Yaddo—for the first time, Seabiscuit, the scruffy equine underdog who became the hero of Depression-weary Americans, was receiving more news coverage than FDR, Hitler, Clark Gable, or anyone else. But Roth had placed his bets on Pegasus, the emblem of artistic inspiration. He had been admitted into Yaddo largely on the strength of a deceptive recommendation from Walton, who had herself spent the summer of 1929 there. In a letter that she sent on February 3, 1938, Walton urged Elizabeth Ames to offer Roth

a place. Inflated beyond the usual conventions of testimonial puffery, Walton's reference made spurious claims about Roth's productivity. "Henry Roth is on the last lap of his book now which is supposed to be out for fall publication if things go right," she assured Ames, who accepted Walton's word and her protégé (Walton).

- 11 But Walton's contention that publication of Roth's second novel was imminent was inaccurate by fifty-six years, and Roth found himself unable to do any significant writing throughout the weeks he spent at Yaddo. Writing "At Times in Flight" in 1959, a year before the re-publication of his only book, *Call It Sleep*, was a way for Roth to ponder the truncation of his literary career—his own failure to take artistic flight and his flight from the writing life. At the time he wrote "At Times in Flight," Roth was still less than halfway through the longest writer's block of any major figure in American literary history—sixty years between the publication of his first novel, *Call It Sleep*, in 1934, and his second, *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park*, in 1994. In 1959, long before he began work on that first volume of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, the series he counted on to redeem a wasted life, Roth could of course have had no way of knowing if or when the block would be broken. However, when, eager to recover *Call It Sleep* and discover what its vanished author had written since, Ribalow tracked him down in rural Maine, Roth responded with a slightly fictionalized memoir that examines parabolically his own creative paralysis. An example of emotion recollected in anxiety, "At Times in Flight" is at once an *apologia pro vita sua* and a palinode, a renunciation of the author's art that is nevertheless itself a forceful affirmation of that art.
- 12 Though *Call It Sleep* is dedicated to Eda Lou Walton, she is mentioned nowhere in Roth's short story. When he began his stay at Yaddo, at her behest and with her assistance, he had been living with Walton in her Greenwich Village apartment for ten years. Throughout the Depression, she provided Roth with shelter, food, and clothing. Pygmalion to his Galatea, the NYU instructor plucked the uncouth immigrant student out of his family's Harlem tenement and introduced him to the leading thoughts and thinkers of the day. At her 61 Morton Street salon, Roth met such cultural luminaries as Louise Bogan, Kenneth Burke, Hart Crane, James T. Farrell, Horace Gregory, Mark Van Doren, Margaret Mead, and Thomas Wolfe. Outfitting him with a Dunham pipe and English tweeds, Walton took on the task of reinventing her young urban savage as an urbane intellectual. She accompanied him to performances of *Carmen*, *Petrushka*, and *Tristan und Isolde*. She spurred him on to autodidactic forays into Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Goethe. Together they attended readings by Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and William Butler Yeats and saw Arturo Toscanini conduct at Carnegie Hall.
- 13 Roth never ceased to acknowledge that, without Walton's support and encouragement, *Call It Sleep* would not have been written. However, as grateful as he was for the crucial role she played in his personal transformation, Roth also grew increasingly frustrated in his relationship with Walton, whose abundant sexual attentions he could not begin to

monopolize. And he chafed at the role of kept man. "She was both a mistress and a mother," he later recalled. "It was good, and it was bad. It was maybe good for the writer, but it was bad for the person. He fell in the habit of not being an independent, mature individual who was willing to face the world on his own and make his own living" (*Shifting* 295). By 1938, Roth was anxious to free himself of his dependency on the sophisticated older Walton. "It was a real continuation of infancy to be supported by a woman so long," Roth, long insecure about his manhood, would later tell an interviewer (Lyons 162).

- 14 When he drove up to Saratoga Springs, in a Model-A Ford purchased by Walton, Roth was troubled by the irregularity of his domestic arrangements. He would later sometimes fault his demeaning dependency on a generous older woman for his inability to follow up on *Call It Sleep*. But he was also suffering under another burden of guilt that he dared not acknowledge either in 1938 or 1959; it was only with the publication of *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*—the second of the four volumes of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*—in 1995 that Roth confessed obliquely to having had incestuous relations with both his sister, Rose, and his first cousin, Sylvia. By the time he arrived in Yaddo, where he hoped to write his way out of a literary impasse, a second novel that for four years had refused to take flight, Roth yearned to lift himself out of bondage to what he regarded as abnormal, degrading alliances. In a talented, sensible stranger named Muriel Parker, he embraced the opportunity for a normal life.
- 15 Without mentioning his sister, his cousin, or his benefactor, "At Times in Flight" provided a way for Roth to grapple with problems that still plagued him two decades after his summer in Yaddo. The character he names Martha, as a surrogate for Muriel, represents "the most wholesome traditions" (100). Though she, too, came to "Z" as an aspiring artist, she is, the narrator suggests, much more sensible and stable than he is. He at first does not believe that she, a hale antithesis to the neurotic scribe that he is, would be at all interested in him romantically. "I was so committed to being an artist—in spite of anything" (100), he says. One of the compelling mysteries of Roth's life is what happened to that commitment in the late 1930s. "At Times in Flight" is its author's retrospective attempt to explain how and why he relinquished his dedication to writing. Approached by Ribalow and others to account for his abandonment of the literary calling after *Call It Sleep*, he created the story both to explicate and break his notorious silence.
- 16 At the time he wrote his story, Roth, who joined the Communist Party of the United States shortly after completing *Call It Sleep*, still considered himself an atheist and universalist with little sympathy for tribal identities. Though he was later celebrated as a pioneering master of American Jewish literature, he would still, in 1963 in a short piece in the Zionist magazine *Midstream*, declare: "I can only say, again, that I feel that to the great boons Jews have already conferred upon humanity, Jews in America might add this last and greatest one: of orienting themselves

toward ceasing to be Jews" (*Shifting* 114). It was not until the outset of the Six-Day War of 1967 that, fearing the imminent annihilation of the state of Israel, Roth renounced Marxist anti-Zionism and reaffirmed his Jewish identity. But the narrator of "At Times in Flight" does not explicitly identify himself as a Jew or, apart from the reference to her "wholesome traditions," Martha as the scion of Protestant Yankee gentry that Muriel Parker in fact was. However, his brief recollection of "the seltzer man on the East Side laboring up the many flights of stairs with his dozen siphons in a box" (100) hints at a Jewish background that might have made Martha seem even more unattainable, and desirable.

- 17 By 1987, Roth was attributing his writer's block to estrangement from his own Jewishness. "Detach the writer from the milieu where he has experienced his greatest sense of belonging," Roth told an audience in Italy, "and you have created a discontinuity within his personality, a short circuit in his identity. The result is his originality, his creativity comes to an end. He becomes the one-book novelist or the one-trilogy writer" (*Shifting* 299). But in 1959, Roth was still detached and still blocked. His inability to erase his Jewishness entirely from "At Times in Flight," as evidenced by the image of the seltzer man, is another symptom of the author's lingering anxieties. Twenty-one years after his troubled stay at Yaddo, the Roth who wrote the story is still unable to assuage his guilt over denying his people, abusing his sister, and squandering his creativity.
- 18 The final phrase of the story, "a horse destroyed when the race became real," opposes the Pegasus figure, the symbol of art, to "reality," which seemed to Roth, who suffered bouts of depression throughout his long life, to signify the kind of ordinary, unencumbered existence that he had never known. Pegasus has no place in that world. An immigrant Jew in Christian America, the victim of an abusive father, an incestuous degenerate, a failed writer enmired in a demeaning domestic situation, Roth agonized over the aberrancy of his existence. "At Times in Flight" is a fantasy of assimilation that, as in Freud's early theory of the artist as neurotic, conceives of creativity and normalcy as polarities. If so, balanced maturity is achieved by renouncing art. In 1938, Roth felt that the only way to release himself from his multiple burdens was to reject Walton and her literary world and embrace marriage to someone also willing to abjure art. Muriel Parker gave up a promising musical career as a performer and a composer in order to become Mrs. Henry Roth. And "At Times in Flight" is an attempt to justify the artistic sacrifice that both its author and the woman he met at an artists' colony made two decades earlier, in 1939, by becoming husband and wife. It is a story that concedes the virtue of matrimony in a wilful renunciation of artistic virtuosity.
- 19 According to the familiar modernist myth of creative alienation, the artist is a solitary, tormented freak endowed with a talent that is inseparable from the torment and the aberrancy. Charles Baudelaire claimed that, though the poet is at times in flight, he is a pathetic, maladroit creature



when brought to earth. Likening the poet to a sea bird that is magnificent when soaring through the maritime skies but awkward and ugly when grounded among common sailors, Baudelaire's poem "L'Albatros" concludes: "Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées/ Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;/ Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,/ Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher" (The Poet is like the prince of the clouds/ Who haunts the tempest and jests at the archer;/ Exiled on the ground amid jeers/ His wings of a giant prevent him from walking). The rare bird's special endowment, the very wings that permit him to rise above the earth, are also his handicap. Like Roth's unfortunate racehorse, in flight one moment and inanimate the next, the bird moves abruptly from majesty to misery.

- 20 In his lonely splendor, Baudelaire's Albatross is similar to the Greek warrior whom Edmund Wilson, in an influential 1941 essay, "The Wound and the Bow," interpreted as the archetypal artist. Philoctetes possessed a magic bow without which the Greeks could not defeat the Trojans, but he also suffered from a suppurating wound so loathsome no Greek could bear to be around him. And Wilson links Philoctetes to "the idea that genius and disease, like strength and mutilation, may be inextricably bound up together" (Wilson 289). For Roth to accept this idea meant that the only way to cure himself of his disease was to relinquish his gift, to abandon writing.
- 21 As a youngster haunting Harlem's Mt. Morris branch of the New York Public Library, Roth was indifferent to anything but fairy tales, legends, and myths. Commenting on his autobiographical short story "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple," Roth remembered himself as "a mopey, withdrawn kid who spent most of his time reading fairy tales.... I read every fairy tale, every myth there was in the library" (*Shifting* 66). It is likely that he became acquainted with Pegasus, stallion of the Muses, long before the more arcane, conflicted figure of Philoctetes. Pegasus is a positive archetype, an affirmation of the power and value of art, and it was not until after his failed attempts to follow up on *Call It Sleep* that Roth was ready to accept—and even endorse—the death of the mythological horse.
- 22 Roth saw himself as dropping out of the literary race in order to marry. He always credited Muriel, "the dearest and most precious person in my life, the one who made mine possible, the one who regenerated mine," (Roth "Batch 2" 1906) with having rescued him from despair. The marriage lasted more than fifty years, until her death in 1990. Written at the time of their twentieth wedding anniversary, "At Times in Flight" is the story of a man who renounces the madness and insecurity of art for the conventional stability of marriage. In his gloss on the killing of the race horse, Roth stresses the return to normality through the death of art: "When I say normal, I mean that now he's willing to accept marriage, he's willing now to accept the getting of a livelihood and all that *that* would imply, and so forth" (*Shifting* 105). At the conclusion of "At Times in Flight," the narrator is led away from the fallen horse by Martha.

Though the story stops short of recounting Roth's bitter exchange of valedictions with Walton, it prefigures his marriage to Muriel, the birth of their two sons, and the family's removal to rural Maine, where, slaughtering waterfowl, picking blueberries, chopping wood, fighting forest fires, collecting maple syrup, and working in a mental hospital, he seemed to accept "the necessity to live in a normal fashion, subject to all the demands and all the exigencies and vicissitudes that life will bring." For Roth, as for the unnamed narrator of his story, the race had become "real," which for him meant abjuring the rough magic of literary art. "At Times in Flight" is a parable of its author's own flight from the writing life, a gloss on how he lost the will to create fiction, except of course in this short tale of love and death at an artists' colony.

- 23 Just as Emily Dickinson has been mythologized into the Eremite of Amherst, Henry Roth has become the Rip Van Winkle of American novelists, the author who produced a youthful masterpiece and then disappeared for sixty years, reemerging on the verge of death with a massive parting testament, a manuscript that sprawls beyond the four volumes that were published as the cycle *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. In fact, the silent years were never entirely silent, as "In Times of Flight" itself demonstrates. Roth continued to write and market fiction even after departing Yaddo, leaving Walton, and marrying Parker. He sold the short story "Broker" to *The New Yorker* in 1939, and throughout the 1940s and 1950s submitted as many as a dozen pieces, including a play called *Oedipus, Meet Orestes*, to that magazine. "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" appeared there in 1940, "Petey and Yotsee and Mario" in 1956. "Many Mansions" was published in *Coronet* in 1940. In 1960, the year that a new hardbound edition of *Call It Sleep* appeared, to little reaction, *Commentary* published "The Dun Dakotas." In 1966, two years after the bestselling Avon paperback of *Call It Sleep* dispelled Roth's obscurity, *The New Yorker* published "The Surveyor."
- 24 But Roth's literary output between 1934 and 1994 was meagre. Even as it surveyed some of the reasons for his retreat from art, "At Times in Flight" marked the beginning of his return, his attempts to resuscitate Pegasus. The final tetralogy, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, would revert to the themes of the earlier short story. Ira Stigman, its aging narrator, agonizes repeatedly over the question of why he failed to follow up on a famous early book. But it was not until the publication of *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*, the tetralogy's second volume, in 1995, that Roth felt able to confront in print the guilty memories of incest that contributed significantly to his creative paralysis. But that is another, longer story.

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## NOTES

1. Roth, *Shifting Landscape*, 99. Further page references are to this edition, and are given in parentheses after the quotation.

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## ABSTRACTS

D'inspiration autobiographique, "At Times in Flight" évoque l'expérience de Henry Roth à Yaddo, colonie d'artistes où l'auteur a fait la connaissance de sa future épouse, Muriel Parker. Démuni et incapable d'écrire, il s'était, ensuite, retiré de la scène publique dans l'isolement rural de la province du Maine. "At Times in Flight" nous présente ainsi un homme qui renonce aux risques d'une vie d'artiste pour la stabilité d'un mariage qui le fait « retourner dans les normes ». Cette évocation de l'auteur face à son échec propose une réflexion sur les limites de l'inspiration. Pégase, le cheval ailé que l'auteur utilise ici comme symbole, représente la fin de la faculté créatrice chez Roth mais aussi son renoncement à la vie d'écrivain. Cependant, cette même nouvelle, qui explique comment et pourquoi l'auteur de *Call It Sleep* a abandonné sa vocation littéraire, signale un nouveau début dans sa carrière. Le sous-titre "A Parable," rend d'ailleurs "At Times in Flight" doublement « parabolique » : sa composition qui marque la fin de la longue période de blocage qu'elle décrit, annonce aussi une nouvelle période de création chez Henry Roth.

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Steven G. Kellman is professor of comparative literature at the University of Texas at San Antonio and author of *The Translingual Imagination* (Nebraska) and *The Self-Begetting Novel* (Columbia). His biography of Henry Roth, *Redemption: The Life of Henry Roth*, will be published by W. W. Norton in 2005.