

RADIANT POISON

Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and the end of the Jew as metaphor

By Vivian Gornick

For some twenty-five or thirty years—between the mid-1950s and the early 1980s—a single explosive development in our literature made the experience of being Jewish-in-America a metaphor that attracted major talents, changed the language, and galvanized imaginative writing throughout a Western world badly in need of a charge. Its two pathbreaking stars—one at the start, the other at the end—were Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, a pair of writers who strong-armed the culture into accommodating the experience. Not another writer after Roth could lay claim to the metaphor with the demanding savvy that he and Bellow had brought to the enterprise.

In its glory days, Jewish-American writing was an indicator of a cultural shift that a couple of million Americans had thought they'd never live to see: a shift that ushered in a final phase of assimilation for Jews at levels of American life previously unavailable

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to them (very much like the shift that has occurred over the past few decades for blacks, women, and gays). This shift was welcomed half a century ago with a violent rush of words that announced the arrival of a narrating voice whose signature traits were a compulsive brilliance, an exuberant nastiness, and a take-no-prisoners humor edged in self-laceration. These traits never deserted the work of those years; rather, they were integral to the entire undertaking.

An angry fever inhabited these writers of the Fifties and Sixties, one that burned with a strength that routinely threatened either to purge or to consume the body upon which it fed. Conventional English could not address the condition. It required a syntax and a sentence structure that could fan the fever, spread the infection, stimulate a nervous system clearly in distress. The American language was ready to accommodate. Virginia Woolf had once complained that she couldn't find the words to make an English sentence that would describe what illness felt like to her, because as an Englishwoman she was constrained from

taking liberties with the language. This is exactly what outsider literature does in this country: fashions the language anew, precisely so that it can express what it feels like to be ill. That, essentially, is what Jewish-American writing at its best has done. In my view, it would never be about anything else. In the hands of a Saul Bellow or a Philip Roth, such expressiveness could—and did—set off a literary charge of epic power.

They were thoroughly at one with their “illness”—that is, their newfound brashness over having been marginalized—these Jewish-American writers of the Fifties and Sixties, closing the gap between author and narrator to a degree not before seen in American literature. At the heart of the enterprise lay a self-regard that made the writing rise to unmatched levels of verbal glitter and daring, even as its dangerously narrowed scope ruled out sympathy, much less compassion, for any character on the page other than the narrator himself. Most especially was sympathy denied those closest to the narrator, the people he purportedly knew best: friends, family, lovers; particularly lovers—these, counterintuitively, acted only as a foil for the narrator’s biting sense of insult and injury. Saul Bellow once said to his biographer, “I had no idea that our moment would be so short.” The wonder is not that the moment was short but that it lasted as long as it did, and that it created so much influential prose out of so limited a sense of empathy.

Theirs was a magnificent instance of writers and a time well met. Postwar American literature—from the Beats to Norman Mailer to the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit—was ripe for declarations of outrage. What, after all, had it meant to have won the war only to be living inside the straitjacket of Cold War anxiety? Jewish-American writing, with its own scores to settle, was happy to join in the indictment—but what an irony its huge success was. Behind that singular forward thrust—beginning with the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953—lay a history of social integration that took so long to complete itself that by the time it did, the bad taste in the mouths of these writers had become toxic. It was this very toxicity that earned them emblematic status in a culture characterized by moral exhaustion and liberationist breakout.

At the turn of the twentieth century, if you were a Jewish immigrant, it was unlikely that you thought of the English language as anything other than a tool of survival. Yet a mass of writing in English—mainly melodrama and didacticism—poured out of a vi-

brant subculture. Mixed in amid the dross were a small number of novels and stories written with a kind of desperate inventiveness by women and men of sensibility. One of the strongest of these is Anzia Yeziarska’s 1920 story collection, *Hungry Hearts*. Set on New York’s Lower East Side, immersed in the life of the streets, the work is yet precocious, concerned as it is not with documenting social misery but with the idea of an inner life thwarted by self as well as world. Today, these stories can be read as artifacts.

In Yeziarska’s work, whether the narrator speaks in the first person or in the third, the story is inevitably divided between the moment when she announces her “wild, blind hunger” for her own life and the moment when she realizes that she is trapped by a repression from which any hope of release is dim. The bakery window against which Yeziarska presses her nose is not America; it is self-possession. At the end of her autobiography she writes, “I realized that the battle I thought I was waging against the world had been against myself, against the Jew in me”—that is, the self she has experienced as shamed and fearful.

There is no subject, really, in Yeziarska’s writing. The work is all language, language by the rushing mile, language that the writer stops up, cuts off at one length or another, calls a story or a novel but which, in fact, is only the ongoing sound of that unleashed voice announcing its overwhelming necessity. Occasionally, there comes a page radiant with clarity and detachment, and the reader takes hope—*now* the story will go forward!—but turn that page and we are heading once more into the hurricane. The performance is astonishing. And all the more so when one realizes that forty years on it will be repeated with infinitely greater sophistication and impact, but not much more detachment or control.

College-educated Jews born of immigrant parents in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century wanted badly to leave that testifying voice behind. Coming of age in the 1930s, many of this generation felt liberated enough in imagination to think of themselves as Jewish-American rather than simply as Jewish. The tricky thing for the Jews of that generation was how to talk and write

American without sounding like one newly arrived to the culture.

In this context, Delmore Schwartz is the Richard Wright of Jewish-American writing. He is the writer without whom—the one whose work formed the bridge between immigrant writing and the writing that was to become more authentically Jewish-American than his own. Born in Brooklyn in 1913 into a household where more Yiddish than English was spoken, he was a paragon of the arriviste generation of Jewish-American intelligentsia. His personality was marked by a tidal wave of brilliant speech that blended his immigrant experience with the sound of the street, and came out of the mouth of a man who read Eliot and Pound each morning before breakfast. He saw himself as an alienated Jew who was yet convinced that to serve a literary culture imprinted by European modernism was a holy mission. In his writing, Schwartz would always be both precocious and reverential, at one and the same time an original and a keeper of the culture.

All his life he would remember how much he had suffered being a Jew at Harvard when he went to teach there at the end of the Depression. Cambridge in the Forties was death for Delmore. Even as he despised the patricians in the English Department, he found himself yearning for their recognition and acceptance, and for this he hated himself. Feeling compromised, he was driven to put on a frantic display of urban Jewish smarts, an outrageous behavior that, of course, alienated the Harvard grandees all the more. It was only standing at a bar in Greenwich Village, surrounded by friends and intellectual well-wishers, that he found the responsive presence he required to feed the writing self he now identified with saving literature from the philistines. This was a crusade of immensechutzpah, one that reflected the speed and urgency with which the Jews of his generation responded to the invitation, however grudging or partial, to imagine themselves not only partaking of American culture but influencing it as well.

It was one of those incendiary periods in social history—the late Thirties and early Forties—when, out of the break-up of class stability, there arises

a complicated promise of change that is experienced by some as salutary, by others as threatening. The Great Depression had brought about an extraordinary leveling of social hierarchies—suddenly, all kinds of people did not know who they were or where they stood—and this circumstance had released emotional extremity of every kind. Thousands of people remembered the Depression as a time of indiscriminate kindness, and thousands remembered it as a time of shocking murderousness. Out of this agitation came an energetic pathology.

Thus, in the Thirties and Forties, there were more Jews breaking into white-collar jobs, the arts, and the professions—right alongside a virulent Jew-hatred that made itself felt at every level of society, from the most sophisticated to the most primitive, and nowhere more than in New York City. Arthur Miller's 1945 novel, *Focus*, was a frightening but plausible fable of the polite anti-Semitism of corporate Manhattan meeting the Christian Front variant in lower-middle-class Brooklyn. The novel tells the story of an amiably conservative WASP working in a big Midtown firm who, in his adult life, suddenly finds it necessary to wear spectacles. As soon as he puts the glasses on, a startling change occurs in his appearance: he looks Jewish. From there the novel takes off. The protagonist loses his job, is ostracized in his neighborhood, and at last is not only threatened but attacked. The book is one long, anxiety-provoking read.

Yet agitation was better than stasis. For intellectually ambitious Jews, this period was the equivalent of the Sixties and Seventies for African-American intellectuals: the door of assimilation had been opened wide enough that some of them (if turned sideways) could walk through, even while just across the threshold stood the gatekeepers gazing quizzically, with either thinly disguised distaste or open hostility.

There was only one way for intellectual Jews of these decades to be taken seriously, and that was through the replication in their work of high culture. No intellectual Jew walking through the door of American literary life in the Forties would have dreamed of drawing attention to himself by writing otherwise. From Laura

Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* (the protest novel of popular fiction) to Miller's *Focus* (the paranoid realism of the incensed middlebrow) to Saul Bellow's *The Victim* (the brooding modernism of the future major novelist), we have, in whatever class of literature these books occupy, work that could have been written by any one of a significant number of imaginatively sympathetic gentile writers. The boldness of these books lay in writing about Jews; it did not lie in *sounding* like Jews. That, in itself, would prove the

most vital, if not telling, complication of all.

Let's stop to appreciate the moment. It is the late Forties. The Second World War has ended, the reality of the Holocaust has not yet been absorbed, the United States is at the height of its glamour and power, and the future seems to belong to any who might claim it. Devotion to the claustrophobic atmosphere of one's own hyphenated experience is at an all-time low. The enthusiasts outnumber the skeptics. They have decided to love America: surely America will love them back.

But it was not—and now they began to see that it never had been—a simple matter of American culture extending a warmhearted welcome. Such long adversarial relationships as that of the Jews and WASP America have a startling yet predictable consequence: by the time the door opens, those knocking at it are infected with the poison of self-doubt, a substance more toxic than all the historical humiliations combined. As W.E.B. Du Bois and James Baldwin knew, for blacks the danger began with whites hating them, and ended with them hating themselves.

In the late 1950s, Leslie Fiedler wrote two essays on Jewish-American writers. One of his most penetrating points was his observation that the Jewish-American novelist had internalized the stereotype of the Jew in American literature. When he sat down to write, he had trouble shaking off the hostile or sentimental images that appeared regularly in the work of gentile writers. It's impossible to overestimate the value of such an insight. In our own time, we see—through the efforts of would-be artists among women, gays, and

blacks—how long and hard is the road that must be walked in order to leave behind both testament and stereotype, and arrive at the place where one is able to render the full, free taste of one's actual experience. The Jews, said Fiedler with some bitterness, would become jurists, professors, theater greats, and corporate heads long before they would occupy the world of serious literature and produce a Dos Passos, a Hemingway, a Faulkner, or even a Steinbeck, a Farrell, a Penn Warren.

Interestingly enough, there were works of gut-level imagination being written by American Jews in the Thirties and Forties that were neither generic social realism nor highbrow modernism; but, aimed at the mass-market reader, they failed to gain serious consideration. It is astonishing today to read some of them and find embedded in their pages the origins of the antisocial wildness that only twenty years later would deliver Jewish-American writing as we know it into Fiedler's Promised Land.

In 1937 a novel by Jerome Weidman called *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* became a runaway bestseller. *Wholesale* traces the period during which a big-city garment-district hustler named Harry Bogen completes his swindler's apprenticeship and turns pro—cheating, framing, embezzling—all the while gloating about how smart he is, and how deeply stupid everyone else is.

Harry Bogen was a kind of gutter-snipe not seen before in Jewish-American writing. There is not a page in the book on which Harry is not scheming. Scheming is his life's blood. When he gets what he wants he no longer wants it—it's the *next* thing on his ever growing list that he must have, and that next thing inevitably involves gobbling someone up. A psychic tape-worm is at work in Harry. He must eat others because he himself is being eaten from the inside out. But as few can sustain thinking of themselves as cannibals, it becomes necessary to dehumanize those whom one is about to consume. Thus, Harry speaks of everyone—and I mean everyone—he encounters in vivid, degrading epithets: Jews are "kikes" and "mockies"; blacks are "niggers"; women, "pots," "pussies," and "bitches"; and gentiles get the

simple, perpetual sneer “goyim.” In 1941, four years after the publication of *Wholesale*, Budd Schulberg published *What Makes Sammy Run?* and it was “Sammy Glick” rather than “Harry Bogen” that entered the American language as a euphemism for ruthless self-advancement, New York Jewish style. But for my money, it was the wrong choice; as raw as Sammy Glick is, Harry has him beat by a mile.

Wholesale isn't about a primitive on the make; it is the primitivism itself flung down on the page, talking fast and hard in your ear and in your face. It's an extraordinary act of mimicry, prefiguring the work of Bellow and Roth in that not only is it voice, all voice, nothing but voice; it's a voice working its way into the reader's ear like a plumber's snake, moving directly and relentlessly, carefully avoiding vital organs like the heart, straight down to the gut.

Harry Bogen is the deracinated Depression itself: survival in a world where all bets are off. For readers of the psychologically (as well as physically) starved Thirties, Harry was an anodyne. No matter that he was a predator: readers loved that he was eating so well. *Wholesale* is a literary equivalent of the blaxploitation movies that forty years later had African-Americans cheering on the bloodthirsty protagonist: it, too, wanted blood—someone's, anyone's.

Wholesale is at once of its moment and a harbinger of the writing that, less than a generation later, would mine similar material with a skill and a worldliness Weidman could not possibly have had at his disposal. Rightly perceived as a piece of popular fiction powered by vicious daring, *Wholesale* nonetheless revealed a level of Jewish-American angst more murderously unforgiving than had previously been imagined. Ultimately, that angst would define the work of writers who learned to hammer their molten fury into the tempered steel of a weapon. The question, then as now: To be used against whom?

In 1949, Saul Bellow, thirty-three years old, with two books under his belt (*Dangling Man* and *The Victim*), was living in Paris on a Guggenheim fellowship, feeling pressured to produce

a third book in line with the modernist minimalism that had ensured the critical success of the first two, and soon realized that he was harnessed to a novel for which he had no heart: the writing felt cramped, the vision received, the connection between himself and his material severely strained. The situation made his face ache. Every morning he went off to work at his rented studio as though he were going to the dentist. But one day, the sight of an unremarkable image changed everything. The Paris streets were flushed daily by open hydrants that allowed water to run along the curb, and on this particular morning Bellow noticed a dazzle of sunlight on the water that accentuated its flow. His spirits lifted, and he was made restless rather than depressed. Suddenly there opened up before him the memory of a kid from his boyhood who used to yell out, “I got a scheme!” when they were playing checkers; then he recalled this kid's vividly abnormal family; and then the Chicago streets from which they had all sprung up like weeds pushing through concrete. An urge to describe that long-ago life overcame him.

Instantly, the gloom disappeared, the unwanted novel got put aside, and Bellow began to write “in a spirit of reunion with the kid who had shouted, ‘I got a scheme!’” Soon enough that kid got named Augie March, and around him an astonishing sentence structure began to form, one that instead of shaping the character seemed to release the character; and not just release him, but determine the course his adventures would take. Language and subject couldn't chase each other fast enough. Bellow marveled at what was happening. It was as though these stories, these people, this word order had been locked up inside him for a lifetime. As he said years later of a character in *Augie*, “You might put it that he had been in hock for years; for decades. He and I together had been waiting for an appropriate language. By that language and only that language could he be redeemed.”

For the first time in his working life, Bellow felt he owned his writing. With those remembered rhythms in his ear, that syntax and vocabulary on his tongue—an amalgam of immigrant speech, tabloid reporting, and being

told in school that “George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were *your* Presidents”—he could take a deep breath and exhale the poetic, ragged, semicriminal world full of hungry expectation from which he had emerged. This language that came out of him now was not, strictly speaking, English; it was American—*his* American—a language, he said, laughing, that “was mine to do with as I wished.”

The Adventures of Augie March injected a sense of live movement into an atmosphere pervaded by the stagnancy of spirit—“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”—that had allowed Western literature to now live with itself. Alienation of the self was all well and good, Bellow's intensely new American voice called out, but the fact remained that we were *alive*—alive and still yearning. If anyone could make clear the bottomlessness of human yearning, it was Augie March. Here he was, a first-class hunger artist, pushing his way out of a garishly populated disenfranchisement that was, in its own way, a war zone, to claim his right to “not lead a disappointed life.” In 1953 that thought was received, both in Europe and in the States, as a welcome aggression against the veneration of spiritual exhaustion that characterized serious literature of the moment. The aggression lay in the daring of the prose—the unexpected vocabulary, the liberty-taking sentences, the mongrel nature of its highbrow-lowbrow narration—in service, ultimately, to what felt like a piece of rescued wisdom about the meaning (that is, the origins) of a disappointed life.

From the get-go, Augie tells us that he's never seen himself as anything other than a blank slate upon which “life” would write a story. “All the influences were lined up waiting for me,” he says. “I was born, and there they were to form me, which is why I tell you more of them than of myself.” It hasn't occurred to him until now that his headlong plunge toward raw experience might prove paradoxically fateful, in that he was not only being made by the world but was himself doing quite a bit of the making. In calculating the cost of what has been lost, injured, or cast aside as he has moved frantically through his on-the-run life, Augie at last takes into account his own emotional unsteady-

ness. He has not, after all, fled the ghetto in one piece; there's a leak in his appetite-filled heart. An inability to love reliably has made him culpable in the accumulation of sorrow laced inescapably through not only his destiny but, we come to feel along with him, that of all humanity. Never again would a character like Augie March hold the page in a Bellow novel, speculating with more gravity than irony, more tenderness than grievance, on the terrible dynamic in human affairs that implicates us all.

For Bellow, the writing of *Augie March* was pure joy. It was the joy that made his protagonist entranced by the surge of life within and around him; one proposition in the book never in question is that to live in pursuit of experience, whatever the consequence, is of irreducible value. Yet, almost immediately after *Augie* was written, this naked exultation in life for life's sake began to complicate itself in Bellow's prose and soon gave way to a tone of voice and a vision that grew steadily more manic than eager, more ironic than candid, more brilliant than lyric. With the increase in writing glitter, there grew apace a self-pitying disconnect emanating in ever greater degree from an unchanged (and unchanging) first-person narrator who would dominate the books to come. It was as though that early joy had stemmed from the appeasement of a prolonged hunger that, once achieved, made joy unnecessary to a writer not equipped for it by nature. From here on, his pleasure would consist in attention paid to the humiliation of having had to be hungry for so long: a tendency that proved consequential as Bellow's writing took a view of life that repeatedly opened itself to the charge of solipsism.

Over the next thirty years, Augie would transmute into Henderson, Herzog, Charlie Citrine: ever more fabled and feverish narrators who come to experience the world as a place of anxiety rather than promise, and themselves as men of trusting spirit under perpetual siege, pitched relentlessly forward into a universe of monumental angst where all bets are *really* off and every kind of social threat keeps coming at them: the corporate gangsters who "do" the world, the women who

promise and don't deliver, the homegrown fast-talkers with pity for none. Everywhere this narrator turns, they're at him, pulling the rug out from under him, while he (year by year, title by title) becomes ever more spellbound by the tumult. Increasingly, all he can do is stand there and be inundated.

It was the inundation—in book after book after book—that came as a literary astonishment, the vividness and the gorgeousness of it, glowing with the force of dazzling, inventive complaint pouring from the mouth of this lunatic Jew who had swallowed a library, this betrayed lover of art, history, and women, pining for the return of a civilization whose loss he cannot stop documenting. Early Bellow readers encountered the sheer raciness of the performance—migod, can he really be *doing* this?—with shivery delight.

Herzog was the pivotal novel. This is the book that delivers in full the sound of the Jewish-American narrator (the one no gentile could possibly imitate) in a frenzy of spiritual homelessness, putting in place for all time the way that the world, instead of fortifying him, just keeps coming at him. The novel tells of how Moses Herzog, a failed academic whose wife has just left him for his best friend, goes mad with disbelief that this humiliation has been visited on him—*him!*—and rushes about, obsessing like the Ancient Mariner, writing unsent letters to the living and the dead, going endlessly over the whole sorry story of the betrayal with anyone who comes his way. This fever of Herzog's is the book. He wants to understand—Oh, God, yes, to understand!—what has happened, not only superficially to him alone but to humanity at large: locally, nationally, globally; historically, culturally, politically.

In the course of this monumental effort to grasp his situation, Herzog, in an offhand way, tells the reader that he has been a bad husband and father, a cold, ego-serving lover ("It was his pride that must be satisfied. His flesh got what was left over"), a self-involved friend, a painfully inconsiderate son. These recognitions, however, appear only as part of the great mix of subverting mad-

ness that is Herzog's book-length monologue, not to be taken any more seriously than anything else being speculated on, because the real guilt—the undeniable, unforgivable, criminal guilt—lies with *them*. The wife and the friend who have committed moral homicide on his watch. And actually, we can more or less forget the friend. It's the wife who now becomes the object of some of the most talented misanthropy in American literature.

Gradually, Herzog's wife, Madeleine, is presented to the reader as an embodiment of the kind of evil self-interest that represents a threat to the entire human race. A "plotting bitch" with cold, cold eyes, she had been born to do him in. In time, as Herzog goes on obsessing, he realizes that the problem isn't just his wife; it's women. All women. The women who exercise with cunning and calculation the powers that have been put into them, and them alone, for the specific purpose of bringing him to his knees. Standing on a train platform in New York's Grand Central station,

He saw twenty paces away . . . a woman in a shining black straw hat [and eyes that] reached him with a force she could never be aware of. Those eyes might be blue, perhaps green, even gray—he would never know. But they were bitch eyes, that was certain. They expressed a sort of female arrogance which had an immediate sexual power over him; he experienced it again that very moment—a round face, the clear gaze of pale bitch eyes, a pair of proud legs.

In despair over ever being able to fathom the nature of his natural enemy, Herzog cries out in his journal, "What do they want? They eat green salad and drink human blood."

Thirty years after the Depression—in the aftermath of the Second World War, and under the shadow of nuclear threat, gray-flannel anxiety, imminent cultural breakout—it is women who are the arch evil in the life of the Jewish-American protagonist. It is *they* who poison the spring of life at which our talented, high-minded narrator would otherwise be drinking happily; they who determine that he will stagger and drop in his prime, these agents of mortal threat, incomprehensible punishment, deliberate degradation. How can he defend himself against

such unearned malevolence except by writing this book?

What is the contemporary reader to make of such writing? Today, Moses Herzog sounds more like Harry Bogen than Everyman, with his equally mad take on the world as a place where one either eats or is eaten. We more or less understand Harry B.'s paranoia, but what exactly is it with Moses Herzog and all the Herzogs to come?

It is painful to realize that only as Bellow's place in the world took on greater definition did this live sense of grievance against women flare, rising up from a coldness lodged deep in the psyche that no amount of success could make warm to the prospect of fellowship. Painful, because the grievance, as such, was conspicuously absent from the earlier work.

Writing *Augie March* produced in Bellow a benevolence of mood so great that the book extends a striking tenderness toward women and men alike. Here, they are fellow creatures trapped in an existential misery of which they themselves are the originators, equally endowed with emotional frailty, and equally responsible for the moral ignorance with which they, as lovers, destroy each other. In *Augie March* it is, if anything, the woman's greater effort at self-understanding that makes the situation large.

Augie's love for Thea Fenchel is glorious in its extremity. She made his "soul topple over," he tells us. Never before has he been "so taken up with a single human being." In time, however, the heat between them cools, and Augie, himself in perpetual need of adoration, strays. He is surprised when Thea is devastated. Their parting scene elicits a feeling a reader almost never experiences in Bellow's work: heartbreak.

In this novel, Bellow knows what every great writer knows: that melancholy makes cowards of us all; that among men and women limitations of the spirit are shared and emotional incapacity evenly parceled out. After *Augie*, though, when the joy of discovering his own voice was spent, he forgot what he knew. The writing itself grew richer and wilder, even as that old, cold, grievous sense of deprivation ate at him, like a parasite demanding to be fed. In no time at all antagonism be-

tween the sexes became the nourishment of choice. It went down like ice cream.

With the sensational publication in 1969 of *Portnoy's Complaint*, it became evident that Philip Roth, eighteen years younger than Bellow, was the son arrived to work the father's ground with an even more alarming sense of outrage. The love-hate attachment to one's own outsidersness that had been linked to the war between the sexes would now be chained to it for all time. If in Bellow misogyny was like seeping bile, in Roth it was lava pouring forth from a volcano.

Yet in the son as in the father, animosity toward women-as-women was something that took time to come into its own. *Goodbye, Columbus*, for example, is remarkably gentle toward both its protagonists, a young man and woman equally drawn by the sexual pleasure they take in each other. Here, it is class difference (he's working-class from Newark; she's middle-class from Short Hills) that provides both the excitement and the denouement, and although there is not a moment when the narrator is not undercutting his own sentimental feeling (Philip Roth devoid of irony is unimaginable), the degree of mockery and self-mockery is so mild as to seem almost affectionate.

On their first date (at a tennis court) Brenda tells Neil about her nose job. He says, "Let me see if you got your money's worth." She says, "If I let you kiss me would you stop being nasty?" They kiss, and Neil reports:

I felt the wet spots on her shoulder blades, and beneath them, I'm sure of it, a faint fluttering, as though something stirred so deep in her breasts, so far back it could make itself felt through her shirt. It was like the fluttering of wings, tiny wings no bigger than her breasts. The smallness of the wings did not bother me—it would not take an eagle to carry me up those lousy hundred and eighty feet that make summer nights so much cooler in Short Hills than they are in Newark.

What is present here—and will eventually disappear entirely from Roth's work—is tenderness for women and men together. With tenderness comes comradeship: Brenda is not necessarily more sympathetic a creature than any other woman in Roth's oeuvre, but her

fundamental humanity is not in question. When, near the end of the novel, Neil asks himself, Who is she? What do I really know of her? it is not to demonize Brenda but to underscore the mystery of sexual love. At the very end, when each is accusing the other of fatal misinterpretation, Neil mourns, "I loved you, Brenda, so I cared." Brenda in turn pleads, "I loved you." They stare at each other. "Then we heard the tense in which we'd spoken. . . . I think Brenda was crying too when I went out the door. . . . And I knew it would be a long while before I made love to anyone the way I had made love to her."

A long while? How about never?

A decade later, in the novel that could be called Roth's *Herzog*, Alexander Portnoy lies on the analyst's couch and, as though declaring himself an opium eater, describes what has gradually developed into the clarified nature of his creator's relation to women-as-women rather than women-as-fellow-creatures. Speaking of himself in the agitated third person, Roth's Portnoy confides:

While everybody else has been marrying nice Jewish girls, and having children . . . what he has been doing is—chasing cunt. And *shikse* cunt, to boot! Chasing it, sniffing it, lapping it, *shutting* it, but above all, *thinking about it*. . . . It seems to make no difference how much the poor bastard actually gets, for he is dreaming about tomorrow's pussy even while pumping away at today's!

And then Alex gets down to it:

What I'm saying, Doctor, is that 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. *Conquer America*—maybe that's more like it. . . . I want what's coming to me. My G.I. bill—real American ass! The cunt in country-'tis-of-thee! I pledge allegiance to the twat of the United States of America—and to the republic for which it stands: Davenport, Iowa! Dayton, Ohio! Schenectady, New York, and neighboring Troy!

Portnoy's Complaint, even more than *Augie March*, was a book for its time. The novel was experienced, at the end of the outlaw Sixties, like a dam bursting, letting loose a flood of madman hungers and grudges wrapped in a degrading hilarity. It was not only the

force of the prose but the shock of *Portnoy's* deracinated explicitness—its adoration of the unbridled, the antisocial, the passionately infantile at the heart of things—that fed exuberantly into the spirit of the times. The application of all that excess to the proud, swaggering anxiety of (still!) being Jewish-in-gentile-America—as good a representation as any of all that the liberationist culture hoped to bring to its knees—ensured *Portnoy's* success as a landmark work whose literary qualities would forever be confused with the history of its moment. Which, as it happened, included Jewish assimilation as (very nearly) a *fait accompli*. That, perhaps, was the real rub.

Ironically, with each advance in a successful movement for social integration, it is anger—not hope, much less elation—that deepens in the petitioners at the gate. Ironic but not surprising: to petition repeatedly is to be reminded repeatedly that one is not wanted, never has been, never will be. Which is why an oppressed people greets the promise of liberation more often as a snarling antagonist than as a gratified suppliant. And the snarling itself, after generations of passivity, begins to feel good, and soon more than good: necessary; a thing in and of itself that is hard to give up.

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, probably for the first time in Jewish-American literature, woman-hating is openly associated with a consuming anger at what it has meant to be pushed to the margin, generation after generation; humiliated time and again into second-class lives; deprived, in egalitarian America, of a place at the table in matters of social importance. For men like Bellow and Roth, the sense of pent-up outrage was so intense that it was inevitable not only that it vent itself on those closest to hand but that it confuse them with the powers that be. Thus, humiliation goes kinky. Beginning with *Herzog* and *Portnoy*, theirs was a literature that screamed, “Don't tell me I don't run things around here!”—only it was screaming it at the women its authors slept with.

Portnoy was a watershed book; after it, the distance between narrator and author closed with remarkable speed, and the resemblance between Roth and Bellow began to take on historic meaning.

The more fully realized the Roth narrator became—the more celebrated and lionized, loved and rewarded—the more gripped was his creator by primeval angers and grievances. His impassioned association of woman-hating with being Jewish-in-America soon outstripped that of his talented elder by a cynical mile and revealed an even more extreme temperament. The misogyny in Roth's work seemed less and less a function of character, and more and more an indication of the author's own swamped being. In *Portnoy* the reader could believe that the women are monstrous because Portnoy experiences them as monstrous. In all the books that followed over the next thirty years, the women are monstrous because for Philip Roth women are monstrous.

The pity of it all is the loneliness trapped inside Roth's radiant poison. Portnoy cries out, “How have I come to be such an enemy and flayer of myself? And so alone! Oh, so alone! Nothing but *self!* Locked up in *me!*” Years later, Nathan Zuckerman sees life, from beginning to end, as the same howling wilderness. He is alone on the planet: alive but in solitary. All he has to keep him company is the sexual force of his own rhetoric. Unchanged and unchanging, Roth's male protagonist struggles on, book after book, decade after decade, doomed to repeat in language that glows in the dark the increasingly tired narrative of the illness from which he can neither recover nor expire: his solipsism. He has succumbed to the danger inherent in closing the space between author and narrator; he has fallen in love with the inability to see himself in anyone other than himself, a development that leads inexorably to stasis. By the late Eighties the very devotion to omnivorous self-presentation that for so long electrified his readers had become wearisome.

Ten years ago, Philip Roth, realizing that this material in its unreconstructed form had been sucked dry, suddenly and without warning, with the publication of *American Pastoral*, abandoned it, thereby bringing Jewish-American fiction at what had been its richest and most significant to an unceremonious close.

Roth's was the last generation of American Jews to be born into the hy-

phenated existence. Thereafter, the parents of most American Jews were also American. The claim on existential outsidership that, from its inception, had acted as a foundation for Jewish-American writing became, almost overnight, a thing of the past. No longer would the useful neurosis that marked those who'd grown up half in, half out of the culture be grounded in firsthand experience. After that, if an American Jew felt him or herself a born outsider, it was a personal problem, not a metaphor.

During this time when immigrant parents were disappearing from the lives of American Jews—the 1960s and '70s—relations between women and men were undergoing the historic sea change that was largely responsible for the erosion of complicity between Bellow and Roth and their readers. It was the women's movement, even more than the success of assimilation, that revealed the displacement behind all that trademark misogyny. As the social reality of Jewish outsidership waned, the rage at the heart of Jewish-American writing began to lose its natural source of energy. This turn of events delivered an unexpected piece of information about the entire enterprise. The work was inextricably bound up not so much with being kept out as with the sickness of *feeling* kept out. Woman-hating had been the synthetic fuel needed to keep the sense of illness alive. Without that, the work had nowhere to go and nothing much to say.

In the nineteenth century, Jewish mockery was described by a critic of Yiddish literature as “the sick despair of [those for whom life is] a permanent witticism.” It could never get beyond the limited force of its own excoriating humor. That force held everyone and everything up to superior ridicule, but it could not penetrate its own self-deceptions; hence, it could not deepen psychologically. If you accept this observation as a given—and I do—you cannot help wondering how much of Ur-Bellow and Roth will prove to have transcended its moment of cultural glory. Somehow it's hard to imagine yesterday's savaging brilliance transforming into tomorrow's wisdom. ■