

Two Cases of Generation Conflict in Jewish-American Fiction*

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Writers have written different versions of the more or less painful process of assimilation of the East-European American Jewry into American Society. Conflict between parents and children, especially sons, is one facet of the difficulty which surfaces during that process. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the predicament of the second-generation Jewish son as portrayed in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934) and that of the third-generation Jewish son as depicted in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), and thereby to consider the social and psychological evolutions of Jewish-American life as represented in these two works of fiction.

I

The prologue of *Call It Sleep* introduces us to the uneasy atmosphere of an immigrant family reunited on Ellis Island. David Schearl, the young protagonist of the novel, comes to America cradled in his mother's arms and meets his father Albert who has arrived there earlier to prepare for their domicile. The hopeful-anxious arrival in "the Golden Land" is one of the standard scenes in early Jewish-American fiction, but the description in *Call It Sleep* is unique in the following implication: David's dubious age—either one-and-a-half or two—poses the ominously brooding question of who his real father is and, therefore, becomes the deep-seated cause for the awkward relationship between the parents. The father's harsh voice and his angry yet aloof glare alarm little David and hurtle him even closer to the bosom of his loving mother.

Soon after the main body of the narrative starts, David, aged six, learns that Albert has almost killed his fellow worker and has consequently lost his job. There the old image of that glaring father is superimposed by the image of an awful vindictive man with fiery eyes and a hammer raised high in the air as if to strike one down. This terrifying image in David's mind materializes vividly when he desperately kicks his harrassing friend's nose, drawing blood, and is confronted with Albert's fury which is close to madness:

"Answer me!"

Answer me, his words rang out. Answer me, but they meant, Despair! Who could answer his father? In that dread summons the judgement was already sealed. Like a cornered thing, he

shrank within himself, deadened his mind because the body would not deaden and waited. Nothing existed any longer except his father's right hand—the hand that hung down into the electric circle of his vision.¹

Bonnie Lyons points out the electrifying power of Albert's raised hand as well as his symbolic hammer and indicates his likeness to Thor, the wrathful Norwegian God of thunder.² We should also see in Albert's description the intimation of his likeness to the Judaic God who wills to administer punishment with his "right hand" on the disobedient son who has broken the Mosaic law not to kill one's neighbor—which by indirection commands one not to physically injure one's neighbor, not to "shed human blood." (83)

Ironically, however, this father of justice is not free from vice, either. Superficially, Albert cuts the familiar figure of a displaced immigrant father who blusters at home; but his sociological problem, invested with psychological complication, is more profound than that of the typical first-generation Jewish father character. He has, in his own time, been a rebellious, even mutinous, son to his father and to the old Judaic tradition. He once had a violent quarrel with his father and let his sire be gored to death by a bull's horn before his own eyes. Hence his emigration to the new world and his constant shifting from one job to another as if trying to escape the nightmarish memory of his sinful past.

Despite his sense of insecurity, Albert is a physically strong man in clear contrast with David who is a crybaby and an easy prey to the pranks of street urchins. Here is David's jealous observation of Albert's powerful build:

Strong, how strong his father was, stronger than he'd ever be. A twinge of envy and despair ran through him. He'd never have those tendons, those muscles that even beneath the thick undershirt, bulged and flattened between shoulder and armpit, no, he'd never be that strong, and yet he had to be, he had to be. He didn't know why, but he had to be! (174)

This passage evidently suggests an oedipal relationship. The bosom and arms of Genya, the gentle, protective, devoted mother, offer such sweet restful haven to David, and he feels himself so one with her that he clings to her and watches her movement "hungrily" as she works about the house. Therefore, he fears his father's presence and welcomes his absence, even fantasizing to murder him.

The above quotation is slightly reminiscent of Franz Kafka's desperate comparison between his father and himself that he drew in his letter to his father. Unlike Kafka Senior who was a very self-complacent and successful businessman, Albert Schearl is a failure in society; but they share, to some degree, the chilling derisive attitude toward the son as well as their physical superiority over him. However, there is one drastic difference between the two instances of father-son relationship: that is, while

Franz Kafka gave up trying to emulate the father and seemed to have developed a case of negative oedipus complex in Freudian terms, David despairs but is determined to surpass the parent some time in the future. Apparently David's case is one of a positive oedipus complex.

Strong as David's oedipal fixation may be, the mother-son relationship in this novel should not be discussed exclusively in psychological terms. Sociological aspects should also be accounted for. We should bear in mind the fact that his is a family of greenhorns in which the mother and the son need to shelter each other both from the hostile foreign environment without and from the irritable, violent father within. Only the kitchen-dining room during the day time provides a peaceful quiet corner for the still-maladjusted mother and son. The recurrent image of Genya is that of a classic Jewish mother whose "skillful preparation of food"³ is a gesture of offering her love. In the scenes of mother-son communication, she is invariably either cooking supper or serving snacks to David. The depiction of one Sabbath evening when Genya lights the ritual candles which warmly radiate over the Sabbath bread is the most prominent example of the precious "hushed hour, the hour of tawny beatitude" (69) for the immigrant mother and her son.

In 1969, Henry Roth told an interviewer that the Jewish slum in the Lower East Side where he spent his own young childhood in the early 1910's was a very congenial, homogeneous community of Orthodox Jews—in fact "a secure enclave"⁴—with which he completely identified. Then, what he did with this memory when he wrote the novel was that he "grafted" onto it the bitter, dislocating psychology, which he underwent as a seven-year-old when he moved to the harsh, heterogeneous environment of Harlem in 1914. The point of merging different milieus seems to have been to present a metaphor for the condition of an impressionable young immigrant son striving timorously yet impetuously for broader experience and understanding.

The frightening part of the experience of growing up in the inimical, threatening atmosphere both inside and outside home is rendered not only realistically but also symbolically with the image of the cellar of the tenement house and with the impressionistic free associations that take place in David's consciousness. The cellar arouses his sense of fear, for it represents (1) general darkness and the unknown, (2) the horror and guilt of sexuality as it is identified in his mind with his initiation into the children's sexual game which was imposed on him by a crippled girl in a dark closet, and (3) death in association with a black funeral carriage that he saw in the neighborhood and with dark underground where the dead must be confined everlastingly. Furthermore, inseparably connected with the second implication of the cellar is the enervating fear of his father approaching him with a hammer, threatening to punish him for his sexual sin of that revolting initiation moment.

Against such numbingly painful fear, his mother's love and care soon lose absolute soothing power, mainly for three reasons. First of all, not only is she insensitive to his anguish of sexual initiation, but she herself is susceptible—at least in David's observation—to the seduction of his father's friend Luther. Secondly, she is unable to offer a comforting answer to his question of what happens after death. On the

contrary, she exacerbates, rather than assuages, his anxiety by showing an irritated reaction to his question and giving such a disquieting description of death as shutting eyes in eternal sleep from which one never awakens. Thirdly—and most important—her own memory of falling in love with and then being deserted by a gentile appalls him and disillusiones him out of the perfect mother's image. When he learns of this shocking fact of her past through bits of Yiddish words scattered through a conversation that is carried mostly in unintelligible Polish between his mother and his aunt, he is frustrated by its mysterious obscurity—the enigma which is deepened by the picture of the corn on which his mother has chosen to spend a little portion of the poor family's precious money, as a bitter-sweet reminder of her deviant past. Nevertheless, he also feels clandestine elation at having eavesdropped on the secret and still continuing to assume the unknowing, innocent air and thus deceiving the mother. Bonnie Lyons explains this psychology as feeling superior to them.⁵ To try a more specifically Freudian interpretation, we may say that this is the first stage of the normal healthy process of resolution and elimination of mother fixation, the process which starts around the age of six.⁶

This marks the beginning of David's struggle for deliverance from the sense of fear and for the acquisition of confident independent existence. His quest takes on a rather mystic turn and is conducted symbolically as a search for light—light which saves him from the fearful darkness. The image of the purifying “angel-coal” which appears in the sixth chapter of the Book of Isaiah is linked in his mind with the vision of God “brighter than day” which his pious grandmother is said to have once seen. Thus he comes to identify God with a burning ember and light, and he starts looking for the transcendental “angel-coal” which must be something quite different from the filthy black coal he sees daily in the cellar.

Although the impetus for David's quest for redemptive light comes from the Jewish background as described above, his enlightening experiences take place in the gentile environment. The first major incident is the intimidating but thrilling encounter with young gentile ruffians and the subsequent forced exposure to electric short-circuiting on the streetcar rail. Symbolically this happens on Passover, the Jewish holiday commemorating liberation and deliverance, and David's mystically intuitive mind registers the electric power and light as God's ember and light.

According to Allen Guttmann who underscores the Freudian implication of the act of inserting the sword in the crack of the rail and being struck by the powerful electric light, this is a metaphoric fusion of the phallic and the divine.⁷ In other words, it is a fusion of the psychological search for manhood and the spiritual search for redemption. To add a sociological interpretation, it signifies the merger of two cultural elements - traditional Judaic and secular American - in one episode. All in all, it is an apt metaphor for the beginning of social-psychological acculturation of a young immigrant son.

The second occasion of attraction to the gentile world is the friendship with a Polish-Catholic boy called Leo, who is free from persistent maternal attention, and who is liberty incarnate in David's eyes. Meeting Leo on the symbolically sunny,

airy rooftop of the confining tenement house, David is deeply impressed with his rosary and cross with presumably talismanic powers. Furthermore, the picture of Jesus and the sacred heart wondrously enthralls him because he intuitively associates the man in the picture (Jesus) with the man in the Torah (Isaiah) by the common denominator of radiant light; he admires the picture with awe, saying, "Gee! He's light inside and out, ain't he?" (320)

The old rosary which he covets and procures, however, does not redeem him from his fear, for in accepting it in exchange for his pimpish service, he is perpetrating a serious sin of selling his relative along with himself out to the gentile. Nevertheless, this rosary starts to function as the ironic first link of the whole chain of momenta toward his ultimate quest for redemptive light.

The action toward the final quest evolves quickly in the following manner. Fleeing the dark cellar of shameful sexuality in Esther's house, he takes refuge in the Hebrew school, but when his mother is mentioned, he recalls the overwhelming common history of apostasy shared by his mother and himself. Then impulsively disclaiming filiation with his parents and claiming orphanhood, he rushes out of the school and wanders about the antagonistic city, not knowing where to turn. Finally, soon after returning home in trepidation, the rosary betrays his complicity in his mother's disloyalty and symbolically reveals his possible illegitimacy. Accordingly, he is disowned by his jealous father, and is driven out of the house by his dismayed mother so as to rescue him from the impending chastisement by the enraged father.

Thus being thrust to the helpless, ungracious position of total isolation and anxiety, he takes a deliberate action of seeking for deliverance at the rail. After the powerful, ecstatic moment of electrocution, he re-experiences all the images of fear and of light in a hallucinatory unconscious state. Then, in the visionary cellar, where he is lashed down by his punitive father, he feels himself to be reduced to "nebulous nothing" (428)—symbolic spiritual death; and from that self-effacing vantage point of nothingness, he detects one ember, the "angel-coal". In this mystical, imagistic vision, the image of the cellar, with all the connotations of horror, and the image of the coal, with the dual implication of filthy blackness and God's pure radiance, coalesce and dissolve his fear at long last. Silence which follows triumphs over the angry father's voice, suspends the raised hammer in the air, and dispels the darkness.

Coming to himself and then being carried home in a policeman's arms is symbolic of the spiritual rebirth of the young immigrant son. Here we must recall the prologue where David arrives in the New World cradled in Genya's arms. The protagonist-narrator of *The Rise of David Levinsky* by Abraham Cahan says that the day of landing in America is the second birthday of an immigrant. If David's coming to America is his second birthday, it may follow that the day of electrification at the rail is his third birthday.

In accordance with David's resuscitation, Albert who has almost disowned him reclaims fatherhood and even goes out of his way to buy the medicine to be applied on the son's injured foot. Likewise, the final image of Genya is also pacified and reassured as she prepares milk and an egg and tells David to go to sleep to "forget

it all" (440).

However, we should not overestimate the seeming reassertion of Genya's former status as all-important protector and nurturer for her son. David does not intend to share with her the experience of "incredible, barbaric power" and of the "hawk of radiance" (417), but silently shuts his eyes to see if he can revive that transcendental moment—or what he "calls sleep"—in quiet solitude. As he tries to relive that sensation, he feels "not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence." (440) Spiritually, it is a strange "triumph" of "acquiescence" to darkness and of finally being purified by the white ember of God's coal. Psychologically, to quote Guttman again, it is a Freudian "triumph" of plunging "his phallic dipper-sword into the source of power and, presumably, of manhood."⁸ It is a psychological triumph over his father who has been impotent because of jealousy. David's earlier intention of surpassing his father has been realized.

Moreover, in sociological terms, it is a strange "triumph" of drawing the attention of all the American immigrants and being accepted and embraced by them and of feeling comfortable on the American soil—the street cobblestones in New York City. This is evident because it is when David closes his eyes, lying in bed, and feels the cobblestones under his body and sees the blurred images of various shoes, representing various types of Americans, all hurrying over to rescue him that he has the sensation of "acquiescence" and "triumph". In other words, it is a "triumph" of assimilation, of being reconciled with—or "acquiesced" to—American reality. This personal sense of social triumph is again reflected on the sense of social triumph over his father who blunderingly answers the policeman's official questions in bad English and still betrays his greenness.

Henry Roth thus presents an enigmatic picture of a half-rebellious, half-conforming second-generation Jewish son, embodied in David Schearl, who has mysteriously unified the Judaic message of the Book of Isaiah and the American technological phenomenon of electricity after a series of progressive and retrogressive acts of revolt against his parents. David's newly acquired self is an ambivalent mixture of two cultures, independent of those of his parents.

II

Unlike David Schearl, the son of a wretchedly poor immigrant couple living in the Lower East Side of the early 1900's, Alexander Portnoy, a third-generation Newark Jew, has spent his adolescence in a comparatively comfortable living condition and in a fairly liberal social milieu in the post-World War II decade. Nevertheless, assimilated as he is, he, too, has to fight a tormented battle against the ghost of his old ethnic tradition, and lying on a psychoanalyst's couch, he spins out grievance after grievance about the constriction which he constantly felt as a young Jewish boy, and which he is still conscious of even as thirty-three-year-old Assistant Commissioner of Human Opportunities for the City of New York. As a result, the entire novel, though consisting almost exclusively of Alex's long, long "complaint" and, therefore,

lacking the carefully-knit narrative structure of *Call It Sleep*, presents one extreme, deformed version of the sociological, psychological conflict between the second-generation Jewish parents and their third-generation son—a conflict which is quite a long distance from that found in the strangely realistic-symbolic account of an earlier Jewish immigrant life rendered artistically in *Call It Sleep*.

In the Portnoy household, “the patriarchal vacuum,”⁹ an ambiguous hint of which was visible in *Call It Sleep*, is most conspicuous, and the parental hierarchy is completely reversed. The father, who should “by rights” be reproving the unruly son, is always “collapsing in helplessness, enfeebled totally by a tender heart!” (45) and hardly fulfills even the secondary role of a submissive assistant justice. It is the mother who sits on the high throne of the moral chief justice and who continually scolds and corrects the son’s aberrations.

The portrait of Sophie Portnoy is Philip Roth’s hyperbolic contribution to the Jewish mother caricature, which was given a hilarious expression by the humorist Dan Greenburg in *How to Be a Jewish Mother* (1964), and which was repeatedly exploited by artists, both serious and pop, throughout the 1960’s. Sophie, in her relative affluence and comfort is somewhat different from Genya Schearl whose unstable status as a new arrival in America sometimes deprives her of psychological leisure to observe subtle changes in her son; like other energetic, domineering Jewish mother characters, Sophie concentrates her attention on Alex and tries to take excessive care of him, especially concerning food and general health. In fact, she keeps such a vigilant watch over him, and her existence is psychologically so oppressive that to the five-year-old Alex’s mind, every teacher at school seems to be his mother in disguise keeping an eye on him. She is not only an “omnipotent matriarch”¹⁰ but also an omnipresent one.

Furthermore, the result of her omnipotence and omnipresence is her sheer self-complacency. Her self-image is a pathetic saintly woman whose devotion to her family is unduly unappreciated and unrequited, and she puts on a patronizing air and obliquely demands gratitude as well as obedience. When Alex contradicts her admonition, she immediately takes up her favorite and effective verbal weapon, which introduces the most painful psychological conflict into the mother-son relationship. With the two kinds of strategies—(1) biting ironical comments on his infidelity and ingratitude, and (2) ostentatious wailing and questioning of “what she has done to deserve such a child” (96)—she succeeds in inculcating guilty conscience in Alex’s mind. In reproducing her accusatory lines, Philip Roth has skillfully given form to Dan Greenburg’s definition of the basic skill of being a Jewish mother: “the ability to plant, cultivate and harvest guilt. Control guilt and you control the child.”¹¹

In contrast with such an overbearing “castrating mother” is Jack Portnoy, the kindly “benighted father” (133), who, in Alex’s consciousness, is characterized with psychosomatic constipation and headache developed through frustration and anxiety. In Alex’s opinion, this unsuccessful insurance salesman lacks everything that is essential to be a success in “this Holy Protestant Empire” (43), and he retains unwanted residues of Old World character traits, such as weeping easily and uncontrollably.

Just as tears are part of Sophie Portnoy's ammunition to combat Alex's offensive, so are Jack Portnoy's tears. However, his tears are less aimed at dramatic effect and more genuine than hers. Take for instance the scene of debate over Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The defiant son declares himself an atheist and calls his father an ignoramus, and the defeated father's head droops, and his body doubles over "as though he has just taken a hand grenade in his stomach. Which he has. I know." (69-70)

Since Alex knows that the father is truly hurt, he betrays a mixed reaction here. On the one hand, he can justify his own argument intellectually and abhors the father's unrestrained emotional outbreak; on the other hand, he feels compunction for having thrown "a hand grenade" into the father's tender heart. Ordinarily, he denounces any likeness to this ineffectual, teary father, but he also sympathizes with the kindly father who is forever waging a pitiable losing battle in the capitalistic American society, and who at home sometimes acts as an intercessor between Alex and the "castrating mother." Alex reveals an obvious sense of camaraderie with his father, as well as that of disdainful spurning.

Now to look at the sociological phase of the generation conflict in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Jack and Sophie are stereotypical examples of the second-generation Jewish-American parents living in comparative ease after having survived the Depression decade and World War II. Stanley Feldstein, a historian, maintains that when the Jews had moved out of the poor slums and had assimilated into the more American, more well-to-do, more respectable suburban community, they felt themselves to be "torn apart from familiar social moorings" and were "overcome with the desire for their children to receive a Jewish education."¹² However, in many cases, the children's reaction to their parents' somewhat superficial, sudden recovery of the sense of peoplehood was either a perplexed or exasperated one as they faced modern American society on the one hand, and their fairly secularized parents who paid only lip service to the Jewish tradition on the other. Alex's attitude toward the father's apparently pious remark about "the wonderful history and heritage of the saga of your people" (69) is one such example.

Another sociological side to the generation conflict was caused by the parents' somewhat egocentric hope for their children to be successful in American society—the parents' vicarious wishful thinking and their desire for ultimate gratification through their children's accomplishments. Sophie and Jack Portnoy, with such pseudo-religious and secular visions about their son, try to educate him into "a nice Jewish boy"¹³ whom everyone will look up to, and whom the parents can take pride in; and naturally, they are shocked and scandalized when Alex defies their expectation.

Then, how does Alex rebel against and thwart his parents' prospects about him and what they claim to be their ethnic heritage? David Schearl, the little loner, sought for a mystical way to redemption and independence apart from his parents, but Alex looks for liberation and independence through overtly breaking and mocking the parents' injunctions and secretly playing the sexual libertine. He does so "BECAUSE WE CAN'T TAKE ANY MORE! BECAUSE YOU FUCKING JEWISH

MOTHERS ARE JUST TOO FUCKING MUCH TO BEAR!" (136)

However, unlike the eight-year-old David who finally achieves a symbolic moment of manhood and spiritual-psychological transcendence, the thirty-three-year-old Alex remains "half the time a helpless infant" (124) and cannot attain psychological freedom that he hankers after. He can never really bask in the illicit enjoyment of law-breaking and evil-doing because his mother, with the meager help of his father, has engrained in him a nagging moral sensibility, and also because he understands the social side of his parents' personal histories and their basic outlook on life. The inevitable result is an aggravated guilty conscience and a heavier sense of pressure. He complains:

I am marked like a road map from head to toe with my repressions. You can travel the length and breadth of my body over superhighways of shame and inhibition and fear. See I am too good, Mother, I too am moral to the bursting point—just like you! (139)

His description of himself is an immature Jewish son, smothered by his parents' relentless onslaught of words and tears that are so exaggerated that the whole situation appears like one big Jewish joke.

In fact, Alex's overstatement of his Jewish-son predicament is not an accidental outcome of his psychoanalytical self-explanation but is a planned, conscious attempt at producing a Jewish joke. He presents himself as some kind of a cross between a Jewish *schlemiel*-protagonist and a freak-protagonist in a cheap melodrama or a circus show. One example:

. . . what we have before us, ladies and gentlemen, direct from a long record-breaking engagement with his own family, is a Jewish boy just dying in his every cell to be Good, Responsible & Dutiful to a family of his own. The same people who brought you Harry Golden's *For 2¢ Plain* bring you now—The Alexander Portnoy Show! If you like Arthur Miller as a savior of *shiksies*, you'll just love Alex! (173)

Obviously, the very objective of Alex's masochistic self-caricaturization with such verbal stage-props as hyperbole and obscene language is to declare the final war against the ethnic and parental pressures and to secure a psychological breathing space, amidst the life of the Jewish-American "people" who have produced such writers with the theme of assimilation as Harry Golden and Arthur Miller. His humorous language is the final sizzle of his last reserve of ammunition, after various explosives of law-breaking and *shikse*-hunting have misfired. Here Roth seems to be utilizing his own adolescent experience of trial defiance¹⁴—most probably to underline the childishness of Alex Portnoy.

Ironically, in spite of his willful attempt at self-emancipation through self-persiflage, Alex does not come out as a winner of the verbal battle of vengeance. Even if his obscenity is effectively offensive enough, there is also too much masochistic humor which cuts back on, rather than relieves, his anguished self-pitiful mind, and which involves him even more inextricably in his emotional turmoil. As he self-consciously dramatizes his "pain" comically, he is too sane not to notice the elements of distortion and illusion in his "complaint" or not to admit the ambivalence of his love-hate relationship with his family and his boyhood memories. He implores Dr. Spielvogel to get his parents off his back and to release him from the role of the smothered son in the Jewish joke, exactly because he has come to realize that it is hard to tell whether that cumbersome role has been stuck to him or, on the contrary, he sticks to that role. Accordingly, what he can finally do is to suspend the rational language and utter a facetiously elongated howl to get the repression out of his system.

Now, after the monologist's howl subsides, the author steps in and pulls the last joke on the protagonist and on the reader: a single punch line delivered by the heretofore-silent analyst Dr. Spielvogel, "Now vee may perhaps to begin yes?" (309) How are we to interpret this punch line? First of all, it intimates that Alex's effusive "complaint" is cyclic and that he may begin anywhere and go on infinitely. Secondly—and by extension—it means that only when the patient voluntarily terminates his frantic endless "complaint," can the doctor at length begin his treatment and restore sanity. This means, by indirection, that Spielvogel's line is Roth's joke on the Jewish joke on the Jewish family situation. Roth is parodying and satirizing the Jewish joke which was originally invented to turn the painful situation into a bearable occasion for laughter but has gotten out of control and is, in Ruth Wisse's words, "worse than the situation it was intended to alleviate."¹⁵

Then, finally, this punch line may be Philip Roth's own aesthetic manifesto of his unique style. A style which he calls "redface"—a definition which Roth has coined from Philip Rahv's terminology of "paleface" and "redskin".¹⁶ Ideally for Roth, it is a deft mixture of Jamesian linguistic subtlety and moral seriousness on the one hand, and of linguistic crudity and obscenity modeled after literary South-West humorists and street vaudevillians, on the other. With *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth has reached the point of viewing the moral problem of guilt as a comic idea and has tapped a new comic vein of combining his two mutually contrasting preoccupations and attachments of long standing. Judging from his interviews and essays, it looks as if this novel had prepared the way for the more objective, artistic expression of his new-found comic streak in *The Great American Novel*.¹⁷ Roth could "perhaps begin" after Portnoy stopped "complaining".

In the final analysis, despite its tantalizing open-endedness, *Portnoy's Complaint* is a cathartic book which must have purged the author, if not the protagonist, of the legendary Jewish mother joke. Since then, Philip Roth has not produced any more extreme Jewish mother figure. At the same time, he has modulated the hilarious tone of his comic amalgam of the subtly serious and the obscenely humorous, in his more recent novels with the ever-recurrent theme of the Jewish-son problem: *The Professor*

of *Desire* (1977) and *The Ghost Writer* (1979) present less of fantastic mother images and more of ambivalent antagonistic-congenial father-son relationship, and the plaintive tone of these novels is less hysterical and more tempered than their notorious precursor.

III

It may sound too hasty yet to pass any judgment on the mental attitude of a writer who has so repeatedly shown unexpected shift in attention during his two-decade writing career as Philip Roth, but it appears that he has of late been growing less rebellious and more nostalgic and sentimental about his childhood in Newark. He seems to have even gained a sense of peoplehood which he flatly disavowed in a symposium in 1961.¹⁸ Fifteen years later, in 1976, in his essay entitled "In Search of Kafka and Other Answers," he recounted his first visit in 1974 to Prague, the Czechoslovakian city of Franz Kafka—one of Philip Roth's intellectual-psychological kinsmen—and confessed to having felt "connection" not only with his ancestors who had come from East European towns much like Kafka's Prague, but also with the six million victims of the Nazi Holocaust.¹⁹ *The Ghost Writer* reveals such identification with the Jewry in its committed reference to *Anne Frank's Diary*.

Henry Roth, too, has experienced a surge of some ethnic consciousness after his long years of apostasy since his adolescence. In the interview cited before, he definitely admitted to his identification with the Jewish experience. To quote from it at some length :

I started writing again in the summer of 1967, simultaneously with the outbreak and conclusion of the Israeli-Arab war. . . . I found myself identifying intensely with the Israelis in their military feats, which repudiated all the anti-Jewish accusations we have been living with in the Diaspora. . . . I identified with Israel without being a Zionist and without having the least curiosity about Israel as a practical, political entity. Suddenly I had a place in the world, and an origin.

Significant for me is that after his vast detour, the once-Orthodox Jewish boy has returned to his Jewishness. I have reattached myself to part of what I had rejected in 1914.²⁰

Since Henry Roth has been a one-novel writer so far, and has not put into print whatever he was writing at the time of the above interview,²¹ we should not try to reach any conclusion about his recent sense of Jewishness. Nonetheless, an interesting fact remains: the two Roths, who belong to different generations, but who were both brought up in fairly Orthodox Jewish families as young boys and have written respectively epoch-making sociological-psychological novels about unsub-

missive Jewish sons—different in vision and style but similar in the fundamental theme of generation conflict in a Jewish-American family—have each made, if only temporarily, some degree of about face. However, this is not to deny the fact of their assimilation. Is their shifting back symptomatic of the general Jewish-American ambivalence, which, according to Stanley Feldstein, is witnessed even among the young Jewish New-Leftists today, and which is “the marvellous incongruity of each citizen”²² of America in this age of American pluralism?

NOTES

*This paper is based on a paper delivered in Japanese at the General Meeting of the Research Institute of Kobe College on June 27, 1980.

1. Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (Penguin Edition, 1976), p. 82. Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses following the quotation.
2. Bonnie Lyons, *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1976), p. 57.
3. Bernard Sherman, *The Invention of the Jew* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1969), p. 158.
4. See David Bronsen, “A Conversation with Henry Roth,” *Partisan Review*, XXXVI (1969), 265–280.
5. Lyons, p. 45.
6. Keigo Okonogi, *Furoito* (Tokyo: Kohdansha, 1978), p. 44.
7. Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 54.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Philip Roth, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (Bantam Edition, 1970), p. 45. Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses following the quotation.
10. Sanford Pinsker, *The Comedy That “Hoits”*: *An Essay on the Fiction of Philip Roth* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1975), p. 60.
11. Dan Greenburg, *How to Be a Jewish Mother: A Very Lovely Training Manual* (Los Angeles: Price/Stern/Sloan, 1979), p. 13.
12. See the section on “The Suburban Dilemma” in Chapter 9 of Stanley Feldstein’s *The Land That I Show You: Two Centuries of Jewish Life in America* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978).
13. “A Nice Jewish Boy” was the title of one of the earlier versions of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, a play read as a workshop exercise at the American Place Theater in 1964. — Bernard Rodgers, *Philip Roth* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), pp. 83–84.
14. Philip Roth says that as an adolescent from a rather Orthodox Jewish family, he found immense pleasure and a sense of male friendship in “raucous discussions of hoped-for sexual adventure . . . conducted in the confines of a parked car,” which were the means “by which we either took revenge on or tried to hold at bay the cultural forces that were shaping us.” — “Writing and the Powers that Be” (1974), collected in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 4–5.
15. Ruth W. Wisse, *The Schlemiel As Modern Hero*, c. 1971 (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 120.
16. Philip Roth, “On *The Great American Novel*” (1973), collected in *Reading Myself and Others*, p. 82.
17. For the discussion and analysis of Philip Roth’s dual identification with the subtle and

the crude and its fictional flowering in *The Great American Novel*, see his interviews and essays collected in *Reading Myself and Others*, and also Chapter 44 in Walter Blair and Hamilton Hill, *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978).

18. "Jewishness and the Younger Intellectuals," *Commentary*, XXXI (April, 1961), 306-359.
19. "In Search of Kafka and Other Answers," *New York Times Book Review*, Feb. 15, 1976, pp. 6-7.
20. Bronsen, "A Conversation with Henry Roth".
21. At the time Henry Roth was interviewed by Bonnie Lyons in 1972, allegedly for the last time "since he wants neither to be a legend in his own time nor to repeat himself," he was still trying to write — Lyons, p.157. Since then, nothing has been published.
22. Feldstein, p. 461.

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Two Cases of Generation Conflict in Jewish-American Fiction

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One way of looking at Jewish-American fiction is to see it as a representation of the painful process of assimilation into American society. Conflict—both psychological and sociological—between parents and children, especially sons, is one facet of the difficulty which surfaces during that process. Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* portrays, in a manner both realistic and symbolic, a second-generation Jewish boy who strives timorously yet determinedly for an experience and vision broader than that of his Old-World parents.

Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* is a much more facetious version of a third-generation Jewish son, struggling against a family which is much less impoverished but, nonetheless, just as constricting and oppressive. The essential difference between the two novels is that the spiritual quest for enlightenment and independence in *Call It Sleep* culminates in electrified ecstasy that is strangely fantastic yet substantial, but Portnoy's verbal attempt at rebellion is incomplete and unfruitful, finally betraying his love-hate relationship with his family.

Since the publication of their provocative novels, the two writers seem to have made some degree of about face, for they have each revealed sympathy for both the family and the Jewish peoplehood. Their wavering between a sense of revolt against the Jewish peoplehood and a sense of identification with it may be one evidence of the general Jewish-American ambivalence.