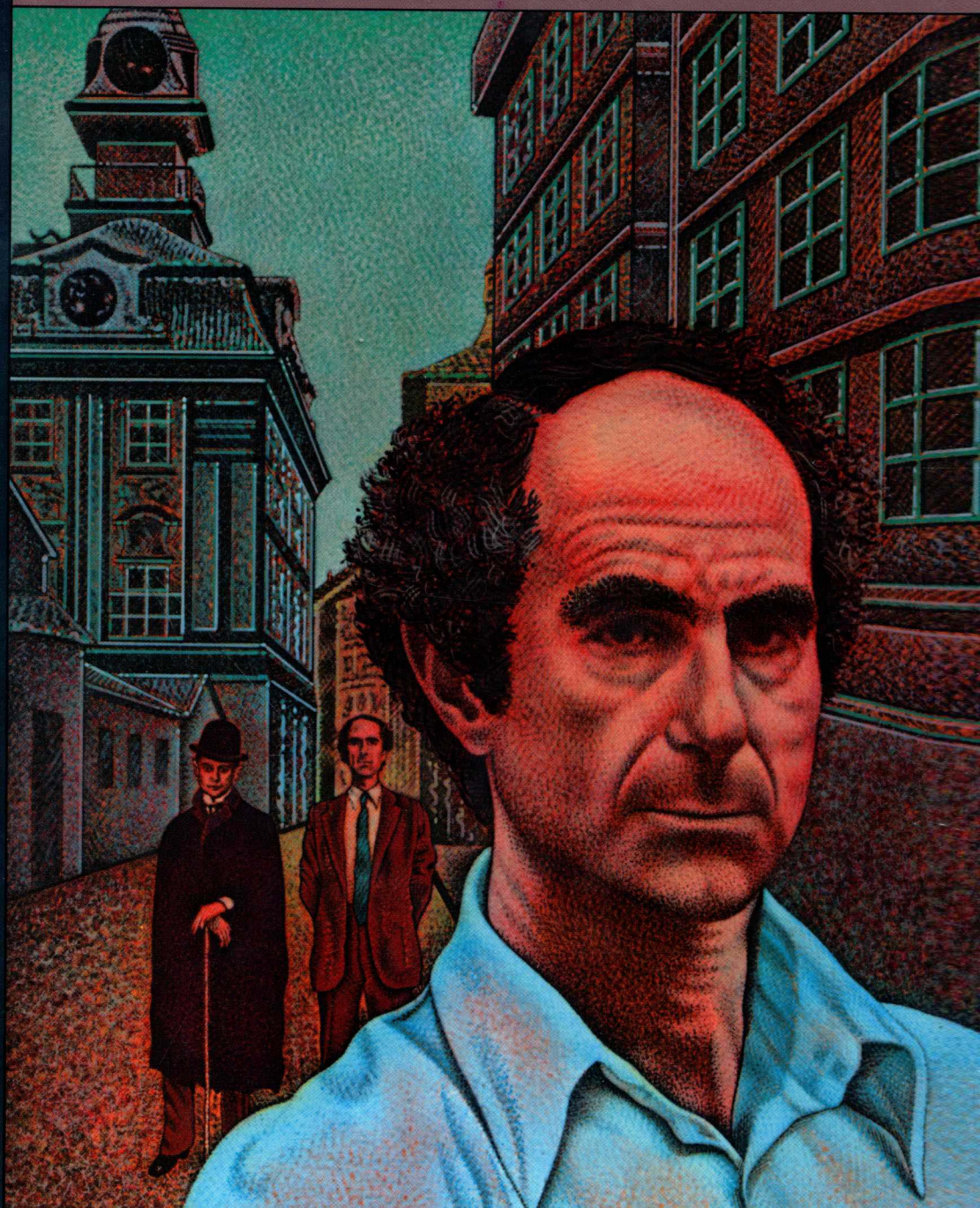


Modern Critical Views

PHILIP ROTH

Edited and with an introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



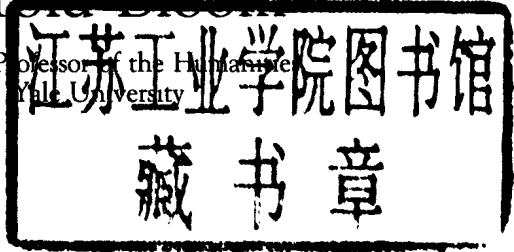
Modern Critical Views

PHILIP ROTH

Edited with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Editor's Note

This volume gathers together what, in its editor's judgment, is a representative selection of the best criticism so far devoted to the fiction of Philip Roth, arranged in the order of critical publication. The editor's "Introduction" centers upon Roth's major achievement, the trilogy *Zuckerman Bound*, with its epilogue *The Prague Orgy*. By insisting upon the profound moral intensity of Roth's vision, the editor sets himself at some variance with much received opinion upon Roth's work.

The chronological sequence of criticism begins with Stanley Edgar Hyman's generous and accurate prophecy of Roth's future, founded upon the early evidence of *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Letting Go*. Hyman's judgment is complemented by two further exegeses of *Goodbye, Columbus*, Stanley Trachtenberg's meditation upon "the hero in stasis," and Jonathan Raban's analysis of "two meal scenes."

Portnoy's Complaint, Roth's most famous and scandalous work, provokes Bruno Bettelheim's impersonation of what might be called "Dr. Spielvogel's revenge" upon his patient, Alexander Portnoy. It is supplemented here by what Theodore Solotaroff calls his "personal view" of Roth and his achievement up through *Portnoy's Complaint*. The exuberant controversy continues with Allen Guttman's judicious survey of Roth's early work, including *Portnoy's Complaint*, and Tony Tanner's sympathetic observations upon the deliberately "unfinished" quality of the book, since Portnoy himself is so clearly a transitional figure for Roth.

Irving Howe's notorious condemnation of Roth and *Portnoy's Complaint* is the inevitable centerpiece in this volume, since it inspired Roth to the enormous counterattack of *Zuckerman Bound*—in particular, of *The Anatomy Lesson*. I have juxtaposed it here with Roth's best and most revealing critical performance, in which he looks at Kafka, and, in that mirror, beholds much of himself.

The final group of essays begins with John N. McDaniel's overview of Roth through *My Life as a Man*, rightly emphasizing Roth's artistic courage. Sanford Pinsker's defense of *The Breast* as comic allegory is counterbalanced by Mary Allen's restrained and effective feminist analysis, which concludes that Roth is incapable of surmounting his personal obsession with masochistic men and destructive women. Hermione Lee's

emphasis is interestingly different in her brilliant account of Roth's quest for literary self-identity. Finally, Sam B. Girgus acutely examines Roth's relation to the developing tradition of American Jewish writing, emphasizing Roth's profound sense of the limits of freedom. This book in a sense comes full circle here, back to the editor's "Introduction," which salutes Roth as the most authentic instance of moral heroism in that tradition.

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Introduction

Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Bound* binds together *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson*, adding to them as epilogue a wild short novel, *The Prague Orgy*, which is at once the bleakest and the funniest writing Roth has done. The totality is certainly the novelist's finest achievement to date, eclipsing even his best single fictions, the exuberantly notorious *Portnoy's Complaint* and the undervalued and ferocious *My Life as a Man*. *Zuckerman Bound* is a classic apologia, an aggressive defense of Roth's moral stance as an author. Its cosmos derives candidly from the Freudian interpretation of ambivalence as being primal, and the Kafkan evasion of interpretation as being unbearable. Roth knows that Freud and Kafka mark the origins and limits of a still-emerging literary culture, American and Jewish, which has an uneasy relationship to normative Judaism and its waning culture. I suspect that Roth knows and accepts also what his surrogate, Zuckerman, is sometimes too outraged to recognize: breaking a new road both causes outrage in others, and demands payment in which the outrageous provoker punishes himself. Perhaps that is the Jewish version of Emerson's American Law of Compensation: nothing is got for nothing.

Zuckerman Bound merits something reasonably close to the highest level of aesthetic praise for tragicomedy, partly because as a formal totality it becomes much more than the sum of its parts. Those parts are surprisingly diverse: *The Ghost Writer* is a Jamesian parable of fictional influence, economical and shapely, beautifully modulated, while *Zuckerman Unbound* is more characteristically Rothian, being freer in form and more joyously expressionistic in its diction. *The Anatomy Lesson* is farce bordering on fantasy, closer in mode and spirit to Nathanael West than is anything else by Roth. With *The Prague Orgy*, Roth has transcended himself, or perhaps shown himself and others that, being just past fifty, he has scarcely begun to display his powers. I have read nothing else in recent American fiction that rivals Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and episodes like the story of Byron the light bulb in the same author's *Gravity's Rainbow*. *The Prague Orgy* is of that disturbing eminence: obscenely outrageous and yet brilliantly reflective of a paranoid reality that has become universal. But the Rothian difference from Nathanael West and Pynchon should also be

emphasized. Roth paradoxically is still engaged in moral prophecy; he continues to be outraged by the outrageous—in societies, others and himself. There is in him nothing of West's Gnostic preference for the posture of the Satanic editor, Shrike, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, or of Pynchon's Kabbalistic doctrine of sado-anarchism. Roth's negative exuberance is not in the service of a negative theology, but intimates instead a nostalgia for the morality once engendered by the Jewish normative tradition.

This is the harsh irony, obsessively exploited throughout *Zuckerman Bound*, of the attack made upon Zuckerman's *Carnovsky* (Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*) by the literary critic Milton Appel (Irving Howe). Zuckerman has received a mortal wound from Appel, and Roth endeavors to commemorate the wound and the wounder, in the spirit of James Joyce permanently impaling the Irish poet, physician and general roustabout, Oliver St. John Gogarty, as the immortally egregious Malachi (Buck) Mulligan of *Ulysses*. There is plenty of literary precedent for settling scores in this way; it is as old as Hellenistic Alexandria, and as recent as Saul Bellow's portrait of Jack Ludwig as Valentine Gersbach in *Herzog*. Roth, characteristically scrupulous, presents Appel as dignified, serious and sincere, and Zuckerman as dangerously lunatic in this matter, but since the results are endlessly hilarious, the revenge is sharp nevertheless.

Zuckerman Unbound makes clear, at least to me, that Roth indeed is a Jewish writer in a sense that Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud are not, and do not care to be. Bellow and Malamud, in their fiction, strive to be North American Jewish only as Tolstoi was Russian, or Faulkner was American Southern. Roth is centrally Jewish in his fiction, because his absolute concern never ceases to be the pain of the relations between children and parents, and between husband and wife, and in him this pain invariably results from the incommensurability between a rigorously moral normative tradition whose expectations rarely can be satisfied, and the reality of the way we live now. Zuckerman's insane resentment of the moralizing Milton Appel, and of even fiercer feminist critics, is a deliberate self-parody of Roth's more-than-ironic reaction to how badly he has been read. Against both Appel and the covens of maenads, Roth defends Zuckerman (and so himself) as a kind of Talmudic Orpheus, by defining any man as "clay with aspirations."

What wins over the reader is that both defense and definition are conveyed by the highest humor now being written. *The Anatomy Lesson* and *The Prague Orgy*, in particular, provoke a cleansing and continuous laughter, sometimes so intense that in itself it becomes astonishingly painful. One of the many aesthetic gains of binding together the entire Zuckerman ordeal (it cannot be called a saga) is to let the reader experi-

ence the gradual acceleration of wit from the gentle Chekhovian wistfulness of *The Ghost Writer*, on to the Gogolian sense of the ridiculous in *Zuckerman Unbound*, and then to the boisterous Westian farce of *The Anatomy Lesson*, only to end in the merciless Kafkan irrationalism of *The Prague Orgy*.

I will center most of what follows upon *The Prague Orgy*, both because it is the only part of *Zuckerman Bound* that is new, and because it is the best of Roth, a kind of coda to all his fiction so far. Haunting it necessarily is the spirit of Kafka, a dangerous influence upon any writer, and particularly dangerous, until now, for Roth. Witness his short novel, *The Breast*, his major aesthetic disaster so far, surpassing such livelier failures as *Our Gang* and *The Great American Novel*. Against the error of *The Breast* can be set the funniest pages in *The Professor of Desire*, where the great dream concerning "Kafka's whore" is clearly the imaginative prelude to *The Prague Orgy*. David Kepesh, Roth's Professor of Desire, falls asleep in Prague and confronts "everything I ever hoped for," a guided visit with an official interpreter to an old woman, possibly once Kafka's whore. The heart of her revelation is Rothian rather than Kafkan, as she integrates the greatest of modern Jewish writers with all the other ghosts of her Jewish clientele:

"They were clean and they were gentlemen. As God is my witness, they never beat on my backside. Even in bed they had manners."

"But is there anything about Kafka in particular that she remembers? I didn't come here, to her, to Prague, to talk about nice Jewish boys."

She gives some thought to the question; or, more likely, no thought. Just sits there trying out being dead.

"You see, he wasn't so special," she finally says. "I don't mean he wasn't a gentleman. They were all gentlemen."

This could be the quintessential Roth passage: the Jewish joke turned, not against itself, nor against the Jews, and certainly not against Kafka, but against history, against the way things were, and are, and yet will be. Unlike the humor of Nathanael West (particularly in his *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*) and of Woody Allen, there is no trace of Jewish anti-Semitism in Roth's pained laughter. Roth's wit uncannily follows the psychic pattern set out by Freud in his late paper on "Humor" (1928), which speculates that the superego allows jesting so as to speak some "kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego." The ego of poor Zuckerman is certainly intimidated enough, and the reader rejoices at being allowed to share some hilarious words of comfort with him.

When last we saw the afflicted Zuckerman, at the close of *The*

Anatomy Lesson, he had progressed (or regressed) from painfully lying back on his playmat, *Roget's Thesaurus* propped beneath his head and four women serving his many needs, to wandering the corridors of a university hospital, a patient playing at being an intern. A few years later, a physically recovered Zuckerman is in Prague, as visiting literary lion, encountering so paranoid a social reality that New York seems, by contrast, the forest of Arden. Zuckerman, "the American authority on Jewish demons," quests for the unpublished Yiddish stories of the elder Sinovsky, perhaps murdered by the Nazis. The exiled younger Sinovsky's abandoned wife, Olga, guards the manuscripts in Prague. In a deliberate parody of James's "The Aspern Papers," Zuckerman needs somehow to seduce the alcoholic and insatiable Olga into releasing stories supposedly worthy of Sholom Aleichem or Isaac Babel, written in "the Yiddish of Flaubert."

Being Zuckerman, he seduces no one and secures the Yiddish manuscripts anyway, only to have them confiscated by the Czech Minister of Culture and his thugs, who proceed to expel "Zuckerman the Zionist agent" back to "the little world around the corner" in New York City. In a final scene subtler, sadder, and funnier than all previous Roth, the frustrated Zuckerman endures the moralizing of the Minister of Culture, who attacks America for having forgotten that "masterpiece," Betty MacDonald's *The Egg and I*. Associating himself with K., the hero of Kafka's *The Castle*, Zuckerman is furious at his expulsion, and utters a lament for the more overt paranoia he must abandon:

. . . here where there's no nonsense about purity and goodness, where the division is not that easy to discern between the heroic and the perverse, where every sort of repression fomenta a parody of freedom and the suffering of their historical misfortune engenders in its imaginative victims these clownish forms of human despair . . .

That farewell-to-Prague has as its undersong: here where Zuckerman is not an anomaly, but indeed a model of decorum and restraint compared to anyone else who is at all interesting. Perhaps there is another undertone: a farewell-to-Zuckerman on Roth's part. The author of *Zuckerman Bound* at last may have exorcised the afterglow of *Portnoy's Complaint*. There is an eloquent plea for release in *The Anatomy Lesson*, where Zuckerman tries to renounce his fate as a writer:

It may look to outsiders like the life of freedom—not on a schedule, in command of yourself, singled out for glory, the choice apparently to write about anything. But once one's writing, it's *all* limits. Bound to a subject. Bound to make sense of it. Bound to make a book of it . . .

Zuckerman bound, indeed, but bound in particular to the most ancient of Covenants—that is Roth's particular election, or self-election. In his critical book, *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), the last and best essay, "Looking at Kafka," comments on the change that is manifested in Kafka's later fiction, observing that it is:

. . . touched by a spirit of personal reconciliation and sardonic self-acceptance, by a tolerance of one's own brand of madness . . . the piercing masochistic irony . . . has given way here to a critique of the self and its preoccupations that, though bordering on mockery, no longer seeks to resolve itself in images of the uttermost humiliation and defeat Yet there is more here than a metaphor for the insanely defended ego, whose striving for invulnerability produces a defensive system that must in its turn become the object of perpetual concern—there is also a very unromantic and hardheaded fable about how and why art is made, a portrait of the artist in all his ingenuity, anxiety, isolation, dissatisfaction, relentlessness, obsessiveness, secretiveness, paranoia, and self-addiction, a portrait of the magical thinker at the end of his tether . . .

Roth intended this as commentary on Kafka's "The Burrow." Eloquent and poignant, it is far more accurate as a descriptive prophecy of *Zuckerman Bound*. Kafka resists nearly all interpretation, so that what most needs interpretation in him is his evasion of interpretation. That Roth reads himself into his precursor is a normal and healthy procedure in the literary struggle for self-identification. Unlike Kafka, Roth tries to evade, not interpretation, but guilt, partly because he lives the truth of Kafka's terrible motto of the penal colony: "Guilt is never to be doubted." Roth has earned a permanent place in American literature by a comic genius that need never be doubted again, wherever it chooses to take him next.

STANLEY EDGAR HYMAN

A Novelist of Great Promise

Television has destroyed boxing in our time, perhaps permanently by killing the neighborhood clubs at which young fighters learn their craft. As a result boys are brought up into the big time too soon, and acclaim and fortune are won by the semi-skilled who then naturally continue to be semi-skilled. Consequently, we will probably never again see fighters with the artistry of Archie Moore or Ray Robinson.

In the literary arenas the same thing is done by gushy reviewing. Philip Roth is a case in point. In 1959, at the age of 26, he published his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus*, consisting of the title novella and five short stories. It was greeted with a cascade of adulation, of which some remarks quoted on the back of the paperback reprint are a fair sample. "One catches lampoonings of our swollen and unreal American prosperity that are as observant and charming as Fitzgerald's," Alfred Kazin wrote in the *Reporter*. "At twenty-six he is skillful, witty, and energetic and performs like a virtuoso," Saul Bellow wrote in *Commentary*. "What many writers spend a lifetime searching for—a unique voice, a secure rhythm, a distinctive subject—seem to have come to Philip Roth totally and immediately," Irving Howe wrote in the *New Republic*.

The next year, *Goodbye, Columbus* won the National Book Award as "the most distinguished work of fiction published in 1959." Roth was promptly awarded a Guggenheim fellowship as well as a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters with a citation saying in part:

From *On Contemporary Literature: An Anthology of Critical Essays on the Major Movements and Writers of Contemporary Literature*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz. Copyright © 1964 by Avon Book Division, The Hearst Corporation.

"*Goodbye, Columbus* marks the coming of age of a brilliant, penetrating, and undiscourageable young man of letters." Undiscourageable? Who had tried?

The merits of *Goodbye, Columbus* and its author are immediately evident. The novella shows a sardonic wit, and the sharp eye of a born writer. The Patimkin way of life, with its white hair "the color of Lincoln convertibles" and its 23 bottles of Jack Daniels each with a little booklet tied around its neck, decorating the unused bar, has been rendered for all time. There are other sure touches: the cherry pits under Neil's bare feet in the TV room; the Ohio State sentimental record of the title. The long monologue by Patimkin's unsuccessful half-brother Leo at the wedding is a masterpiece: funny, moving, perfect.

But the faults of *Goodbye, Columbus* are as readily visible. The novella has no values to oppose to Patimkin values other than a small Negro boy who admires Gauguin's Tahiti, which seems a considerable overmatch. Some images are bad, like Brenda treading water "so easily she seemed to have turned the chlorine to marble beneath her"; the language is sometimes as inadequate as: "I failed to deflate the pout from my mouth." Most important, the novella shows Roth's architectonic weakness. Many of the incidents do not advance the action; the end is merely a running-down.

The stories show the same balance of strength and weakness. "Defender of the Faith" is the only one of them that seems wholly successful to me. "Eli, the Fanatic" reaches one high point of power and beauty, when Tzoref replies to all the smooth talk about the 20th century with: "For me the Fifty-eighth," but the rest of the story is rambling and diffuse. "The Conversion of the Jews," with its pat moral, "You should never hit anybody about God," is ultimately hokum, as "You Can't Tell a Man by the Song He Sings" is immediately hokum. "Epstein" is an inflated joke.

The minor result of the shower of praise and coin that Roth received was to make him arrogant. In a speech, "Writing American Fiction," at a 1960 symposium, he knocked off his elders and betters: Malamud displays "a spurning of our world," Salinger tells us "to be charming on the way to the loony bin," and so on. The major, and really unfortunate result has been to convince Roth that he has nothing further to learn. Three years later, *Letting Go* appears with the same merits and the same faults as *Goodbye, Columbus*.

Let us get the faults out of the way first. Since the novel is six times as long as the novella, it shows Roth's architectural weakness six times as strongly. It never in fact becomes a novel, with a unified

dramatic action, but falls apart into two narratives which have only a pat complementarity: the failure of Gabe Wallach in the world of personal relations, specifically with the divorcée Martha Reganhart, despite every advantage; and the limited success of Paul and Libby Herz in the same world, despite every handicap. For the rest, it is a series of comic set pieces and vignettes: dirty diapers and high thought among the instructors at Midwest universities; Swedish modern and espresso in Jewish apartments in Brooklyn; the Kodachrome European trips of Central Park West dentists.

The prose is still quite lame in spots. Characters experience "relief—though by no means total relief" and children eat "manipulating their food like Muzak's violinists their instruments." There are letters that no one would ever have written, and long pedestrian explanations of past events by the author. In the style of college humor magazines, Roth will interrupt a scene to remark: "It's the little questions from women about tappets that finally push men over the edge." At the same time, there is a balancing pomposity; the book has no fewer than *three epigraphs*—by Simone Weil, Wallace Stevens, and Thomas Mann—any one of which would do for a dissertation on Covenant Theology.

A two-page history of the marital sex life of the Herzes has a clinical leadenness that would sink the most buoyant novel. Beyond that there is cocktail-party Freud. A pathetic event finally ends the liaison between Gabe and Martha. Martha's older child, Cynthia, pushes her younger brother, Mark, off the top of a double-decker bunk, which results in Mark's death. Roth spends laborious pages showing us why—it was penis-envy! Finally, Gabe's weakness is Hegelian essence: "He is better, he believes, than anything he has done in life has shown him to be." Not being the sum of his actions, Gabe is not really anything in the book.

The virtues of *Letting Go*—of Roth, really—are equally impressive. He has the finest eye for the details of American life since Sinclair Lewis. When Margie Howells of Kenosha moves in with Gabe as an experiment in Bold Free Union, she comes with Breck shampoo, an Olivetti, an electric frying pan, a steam iron, and a copy of the *Oxford Book of Seventeenth-Century Verse*. The Spiglianos (he is the chairman of Gabe's department) have 11 budgetary tins in their kitchen, one labelled: "John: Tobacco, scholarly journals, foot powder."

Roth's ear is just as remarkable as his eye. When Blair Stott, a Negro on pot, talks hip, it is the best hip, and a delight. When Gabe and Martha quarrel over money, every word rings true, and the reader can feel a sick headache coming on. No manner of speech seems to be beyond Roth's powers. An elderly Midwest woman says to Gabe: "You talk to the

top professors and you see if they're not Masons." Paul recalls necking with a girl in high school, sitting in her living room while her father called out from the bedroom: "Doris, is that you, dolly? Is somebody with you? Tell him thank you, dolly, and tell him it's the next day already, your father has to get up and go to work soon, tell him thank you and good night, dolly."

If Gabe is a thin Hegelian essence, Martha is a gorgeous rich *Existenz*. She is the total of what she does. "A woman at least realizes there are certain rotten things she's got to do in life and does them," Martha explains to Gabe. "Men want to be heroes." She is bawdy and vulgar, honest and decent, funny and heartbreaking. Gabe's effort, as he finally recognizes when he loses her, had been to turn her into a sniveling Libby. Martha's vitality dominates the book, and if Gabe's final "letting go" of the world is at all poignant, it is poignant chiefly in that he had a chance to keep Martha and failed it.

The best of *Letting Go* comes from the marvelous quality of Roth's imagination. A fellow-dentist with whom Gabe's father goes ice-skating is characterized in a phrase; he only makes "little figure eights, and all the time, smiling." The failure of Paul's father in the frozen foods business is one magnificent sentence: "One day, creditors calling at every door, he got into the cab of a truckful of his frozen rhubarb and took a ride out to Long Island to think; the refrigeration failed just beyond Mineola, and by the time he got home his life was a zero, a ruined man." At her low point, Libby, who has converted from Roman Catholicism to Judaism on marrying Paul, tries to commit suicide; when that fails she decides to make potato pancakes, "to bring a little religion into her house."

Two episodes of almost indescribable complexity, at once awful and uproarious, are the clearest sign of Roth's great promise. One is Libby's abortion, which becomes entangled with the effort of an elderly neighbor, Levy, to steal a job-lot of jockey briefs from another elderly neighbor, Korngold; it culminates in a horrifying and splendid scene when they both invade the Herz bedroom just after Libby comes home from the operation. The other is Gabe's mad effort to persuade a scoundrel named Harry Bigoness to sign a legal document that will enable the Herzes to keep their adopted baby. Eventually Gabe steals the baby in the night and drives it to Gary, Indiana, to confront Bigoness.

Roth may be the Lewis of Suburbia, but he is potentially much more. His "Writing American Fiction" speech rejects all the easy affirmations of America, and concludes on Ralph Ellison's sombre final image of the Invisible Man waiting underground. Roth really does know how hard life is. *Letting Go* concludes with Gabe, who has tried to do good without

attachment, as Lord Krishna recommends in the *Gita*, left with little good achieved and no attachments either. I think that after he has seasoned longer, after another book or two, if he is prepared to learn from his mistakes, Philip Roth will be a fine novelist. Providing, that is, that all the matchmakers and promoters leave him alone.