

than the “prejudices of our culture.” Yet there is nothing we need more desperately than some sort of answer to the question “What is man?” rather than merely “Where does he come from and how did he get here?”

In *Persephone*, one of the most petulant and least informed of his works, John Ruskin undertook to correct the botanists who said that the purpose of a flower was the production of seed. The truth is, he insisted, the other way around. The purpose of a seed is to produce a

flower. Biologically this is, of course, nonsense. But is it also nonsense from a human point of view? If nature has no purpose except survival, is it equally true that man has none either? He at least can and does make the purpose of seeds the production of flowers. Is not this fact as natural, as real, and as significant as any other? Insofar as Darwinism encouraged a negative answer, its consequences have been as disastrous as Darwin’s Victorian antagonists said they would be. «»

## Tough-Minded Mr. Roth

ALFRED KAZIN

GOODBYE, COLUMBUS, by Philip Roth. Houghton Mifflin. \$3.75.

SEVERAL WEEKS AGO I was awakened, while reading the *New Yorker*, by Philip Roth’s “Defender of the Faith,” a story with such extraordinary guts to it that I went around for days exhilarated by the change in the literary weather. Mr. Roth’s story described the agonizing moment of decision in the life of Sergeant Nathan Marx, a combat veteran sent back to the States in 1945 to train troops. Sergeant Marx found himself being cajoled into obtaining special favors for three Jewish recruits until, lied to once too often, he punished the ringleader with deliberate harshness. The story ended with a picture of troops preparing to go off to the Pacific, “trying as best they could to accept their fate. Behind me, Grossbart swallowed hard, accepting his. And then, resisting with all my will an impulse to turn and seek pardon for my vindictiveness, I accepted my own.”

It was this conscious acceptance that particularly interested me in the story, for the narrator, reluctantly exploited by Jewish fellow feeling throughout most of the action, rose to an unusual level of moral complexity in affirming his own deliberate hardening of heart. In punishing the soldier so severely, Sergeant Marx was affirming his own—not altogether admirable but candidly mature—acceptance of his own raw human limitations, and the reader

was left with a deepened sense of the necessary and painful decisions on which life rests.

This is a note that Jews, in writing about other Jews, do not often strike; the appeal to raw human nature, to the individual in his human complexity and loneliness as a mere human creature, is less common than the grand collective themes of Jewish life, of Jewish solidarity in the face of oppression. Even the most gifted and profound writers among Jews tend to describe love and hate, misery and savagery, as if they were merely symbols of the depth and range of Jewish experience. The unusual thing, Mr. Roth’s achievement, is to locate the bruised and angry and unassimilated self—the Jew as individual, not the individual as Jew—beneath the canopy of Jewishness. I admired Mr. Roth’s story because he had caught perfectly the drama of personal integrity in the face of group pressures that is so typical of American literature, and I was not surprised to learn that Mr. Roth’s story had aroused the darkest displeasure among some readers of the *New Yorker* and that he had been called in and worried over by at least one professional Jewish organization.

YET IN TURNING to this collection of his stories, I can see that Mr. Roth’s favorite theme is not the anarchical self struggling with its natural loyalties—which might be the story of

George F. Babbitt—but romantic and credulous youth defeated in love by a brutally materialistic society, like Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*. The long, hilarious, but sharp-edged title story tells of a poor Jewish boy from Newark who fell in love with a rich Jewish girl from Short Hills, and lost her. It is so much the story of the boy’s romantic infatuation versus the girl’s bourgeois calculatingness that no reader should be fooled by Roth’s Jewish material into thinking that he is interested exclusively in its local color. The story is brilliant, and in a culture like ours the symbols are national. Neil Klugman, the poor boy from Newark, works in the public library; his parents are nobodies, and the aunt with whom he lives is a gross Yiddish immigrant. He falls in love, rapturously, with Brenda Patimkin, who goes to Radcliffe, whose father can spend a thousand dollars on each nose operation for his children, and whose brother Ronald, six feet four, once a football hero at Ohio State, is marrying Harriet Ehrlich of Milwaukee. Harriet was “a young lady singularly unconscious of a motive in others or herself. All was surfaces, and she seemed a perfect match for Ron, and too for the Patimkins . . . she nodded her head insistently whenever anyone spoke. Sometimes she would even say the last few words of your sentence with you, though that was infrequent; for the most part she nodded and kept her hands folded. All evening, as the Patimkins planned where the newlyweds should live, what furniture they should buy, how soon they should have a baby—all through this I kept thinking that Harriet was wearing white gloves, but she wasn’t.”

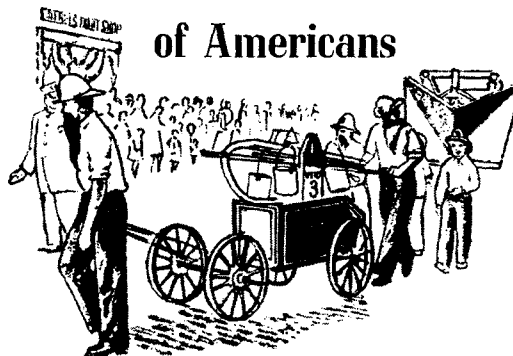
The tone of voice in which Neil Klugman describes the Patimkin family seems perfect to me. He is rapturous as well as satirical, aloof but envious of their grossness, constantly amazed by their height, their girth, their appetites, their profusion. Ron Patimkin, lying in bed rapturously listening to a record of the football crowd at Ohio State saying good-by to the town and the college years, “goodbye, Columbus,” is the thickest, dumbest, solidest, most amiable American football hero yet; Neil, watching him swim, “looked back to see Ron taking the length in

sleek, immense strokes. He gave one the feeling that after swimming the length of the pool a half dozen times he would have earned the right to drink its contents."

THAT TONE is Mr. Roth's particular achievement. He is acidulous, unsparing, tender, yet more than anything else he is *young*, he sees life with a fresh and funny eye; in the midst of the tense romance between poor boy and rich girl, one catches lampoonings of our swollen and unreal American prosperity that are as observant and charming as Fitzgerald's description of a Long Island dinner party in 1925. Boy and girl are physically unrestrained with each other, yet when they talk birth control they express a horror of Mary McCarthy's daring descriptions of fornication in *Partisan Review*, of old-fashioned moral defiance and Bohemian adventurism, that itself is funny in its wryness. Yet comic as "Goodbye, Columbus" is, hilarious as the rich, overstuffed, overbearing Patimkins are, it is made increasingly clear that the gap between poor Jewish boys and rich Jewish girls in modern American society can be final. Even before the romance crashes, the theme is pushed home in the protection that Neil Klugman extends to a little Negro boy who visits the Newark Public Library to look at a book of Gauguin reproductions, instead of taking it home, because "I *likes* to come here. I likes them stairs." There is a bond between the poor Jew and the little Negro boy that will never be felt between Neil and the Patimkins. When Brenda, perhaps unconsciously, allows her mother to discover that she has been sleeping with Neil so that the family itself can decisively end the romance, the betrayal is felt by Neil as a betrayal not only of his love but of his dignity as a human being who comes from the slums. He has gone up to Cambridge to see Brenda, and bitterly standing outside the beautiful Lamont Library after everything is finished, he feels like throwing a rock through the glass. Like Gatsby, he has not only been betrayed by the girl he loves, he has been made to feel that his origins alone are at fault. His humiliation is complete.

Yet brilliant as this story is, it is

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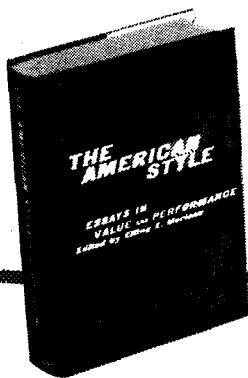
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not nearly as deep, as many-sided, as moving as *The Great Gatsby*. It is all a little too sharp-edged, too much in control, indeed all too much in the *New Yorker* mode. The best of the *New Yorker* story writers, like John Cheever, always make me feel that, keen as they are, there is a whole side to their observations of American society that is entirely fantastic, imaginative, almost visionary, and so belongs to themselves alone. Roth, though emphatically not tailored to the *New Yorker*, involuntarily fits it because of a certain excess of intellectual theme over the material. There are too many symbols of present-day society, too many quotable bright sayings; the stories tend too easily to make a point. I don't like "The Conversion of the Jews," the story of an independent little boy who, by threatening suicide, made his rabbi and his mother more tolerant of non-Jewish beliefs. The point—"You shouldn't hit me about God, Mamma. You should never hit anybody about God"—is altogether too clear; there really isn't a story apart from it. Something like this can be said about the last story, "Eli, the Fanatic." A group of prosperous young Jews in a suburb are embarrassed by an old-fashioned Talmudical school in their midst and, particularly by one of the teachers who

walks about town in east European rabbinical dress. They commission a young Jewish lawyer to get these unwelcome foreigners out of town, or at least to make the uncouth stranger change to American clothes. But the lawyer, already mentally overdriven by the pressure to conform, is suddenly seized by a vision and, exchanging clothes with the teacher, walks about town in fur hat and caftan until he is locked up as a mental case.

THE STORY, though appreciable social commentary, adds up only to its theme; it is all too easily paraphrasable, and in its own way as shallow as the psychoanalytical clichés that Eli's wife is always throwing at him. I admire the edge and fierceness of Mr. Roth's mind, but his book leaves me worried about his future. For he has put so much of himself into being clear, decisive, straight, his stories are consciously so brave, that I worry whether he hasn't worked himself too neatly into a corner. He shows himself too anxious in each story not only to dramatize a conflict but also to make the issue of the conflict absolutely clear. He has intelligence and courage aplenty; what he needs is more of the creative writer's delight in life for its own sake, in figures that do not immediately signify a design.

## The Village Round the Square

ROBERT SHAPLEN

THE IMPROPER BOHEMIANS: A RE-CREATION OF GREENWICH VILLAGE IN ITS HEYDAY, by Allen Churchill. Illustrated. Dutton. \$5.

It may be, as Malcolm Cowley once said, that the American character is essentially so conservative that any Bohemia a sojourner seeks can never be more than "a stepping stone, a phase." Through the years, the most famous Bohemia in the United States, offering the greatest number of "isms" within arm's reach, has, of course, been Greenwich Village, that cosmopolitan way station for a good many men and women of talent, water hole for many more who are charlatans and poseurs, and refuge

for others who are quite simply sick, sick, sick.

The trouble has been that, even with a score card, you couldn't always tell the players, partly because, like chameleons, they kept changing their colors with the shifting political, economic, artistic, and alcoholic weather. Still and all, even the guessing game was usually fun. Speaking of the twenties, which was the gaudiest and gayest time, Edmund Wilson once wrote: "In those days, in Greenwich Village, wherever you went to a party, there was always an impressive person who seemed so free from affectation that