



Trends in Twentieth-Century American Literary Culture: Henry Roth's "Gateways of Esteem"

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In 1934, at the age of twenty-eight, Henry Roth published his first novel, *Call It Sleep*. In 1994, he published his second, the first in the four-book *Mercy of a Rude Stream* series. In the intervening sixty years, Roth published only a handful of short pieces, having fallen into a crushing period of writers' block. For many years, Roth turned his back on the literary career he had struggled to forge, instead working in a series of menial jobs. More than fifteen years in the writing, Roth's *Mercy* series, an idiosyncratic autobiographical fiction, marked an unlikely return to the literary realm. Roth was born in 1906 and died in 1995, his life spanning almost the entire twentieth century, while his career aptly illustrates the changing American literary landscape during that period. The considerable ebb and flow of Roth's fortunes as a writer can in numerous ways be traced to the vicissitudes of the wider literary culture.

Roth's family emigrated from Eastern Europe into America in the first decade of the twentieth century, living first in the Jewish ministate of the Lower East Side of New York City, then moving in 1914 to less homogenous Harlem. The *Mercy* series begins with a reconstruction of this transition, which Roth came to interpret as one of the most tumultuous episodes of his adolescence. Although previously a relatively pugnacious child, the move to Harlem clearly had a damaging effect on Roth. Amongst the "tough" Irish, he "felt outnumbered and defeated from the start...I retreated into myself and became an ingratiating kind of person in order to get along, which was a very bad thing for a kid at that age" (Friedman, 28). Growing up in this mixed and frequently anti-Semitic environment did much to inculcate in Roth a sense of inferiority. This was so marked that later in life he repeatedly found it necessary to envision his work passing through what he eventually termed a "gateway of esteem" (*From Bondage*, 65). Roth's writing career is marked (or marred) by the constant requirement for validation through following paths already trodden by others. As a result, his work may be construed as forever belated: for a Modernist, Roth seems always unusually in the slipstream of the *avant-garde*.

The years in Gentile Harlem began the process of coercing Roth towards repudiating his Jewish roots, and this was reinforced by his reading habits at this time. From an early age he had been a voracious reader, generally using the library in Harlem for the consumption of fairy tale books (his 1940 story "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple" is autobiographical in this respect). Roth soon progressed onto other authors:

Anything that had a narrative had immediate appeal. Any kind of damn yarn immediately affected me. I started off with fairy tales at about age ten. I think the

only reason I got off fairy tales was that I once picked up *Huckleberry Finn* by mistake. I remember that as one of my great transitions, from fairy tales to more realistic fiction. (Lyons, 168)

From Twain, Roth proceeded to Jack London, and was particularly affected by Hugo's *Les Miserables*. Roth also began to read and appreciate modern poetry (Robert Frost and Edna Millay especially), before becoming particularly preoccupied with the Modernists. In his early encounters with literature, Roth clearly recognised and internalised the importance of narrative and storytelling, while also appreciating the employment of rich and vibrant language.

More than once, Roth depicts his younger self, in his early twenties, discovering literary Modernism through reading first the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and, even more influentially, Joyce's *Ulysses*.¹ As Roth explained in a 1977 interview, he was profoundly affected:

[W]hat impressed me tremendously was that you didn't have to move out of your environment, out of an urban slum, to get all the material you wanted – convertible into great literature. This was the thing that made the greatest impression on me. All you had to do was look around a slummy Harlem street, and if you could find the equivalent vocabulary, you could create great literature. (Friedman, 31)

The effect on Roth was momentous and epiphanic. He came to believe that allusive and ornate Joycean prose could be employed in the description of subject matter with which he was familiar: the Jewish ghettos of New York City.

Roth thus produced his first novel, *Call It Sleep*, distinctly under the sway of Joyce and high Modernism. Unfortunately, *Call It Sleep* was published in 1934, a little after the moment of high Modernism in Western literature. In America, economic hardship demanded a more unflinching examination of the realities of social class than *Call It Sleep* offered, as suggested by the commercial success of Michael Gold's crudely didactic *Jews without Money* (1930). In an era of Depression and high unemployment, with the proletarian novel gaining in popularity, Roth's highly-wrought Modernist prose, as he later admitted, "didn't strike a posture, didn't locate anywhere, defend anything, or attack anything explicitly":

The thirties was a period of polarization, left and right, a period infused with imminence: the coming struggle for power. My novel was a kind of carry-over, was conditioned by a previous apolitical, a-economic (if not anti-), semimystical [sic] decade espousing art for its own fair sake. It appeared belatedly. (*Shifting Landscape*, 47)

The novel received mainly warm reviews from the liberal press, whilst provoking open hostility from the left. In the *New York Herald Tribune*, for example, Fred T. Marsh argued that Roth's novel represented "the most compelling and moving, the most accurate and profound study of an American slum childhood that has yet appeared... [it is] a work of superior craftsmanship, more than that, a work of significance, authority and depth" (Marsh, 6). By contrast, a now-infamous anonymous review in the *New Masses* concluded by declaring it "a pity that so many young writers drawn from the proletariat can make no better use of their working class experience than as material for introspective and febrile novels" (*New Masses*, 27).² *Call It Sleep* also suffered from the effects of the Depression: after two imprints, totalling 4,000 copies, the publisher went bankrupt and the novel largely

disappeared for nearly thirty years, to be remembered only by a small but passionate band of admirers.

By the time *Call It Sleep* was published, Roth actually agreed with most of the left-wing critiques of his novel. In 1934 he had joined the Communist Party, and now felt very much that his novel had been overly shaped by high Modernism and Joyce. Paying heed to the Party's demands for social realism, Roth adopted this as his new "gateway of esteem". Accordingly, he began to write a novel depicting the struggles of a working-class German American immigrant in the Mid West, who found a way out of his desperate plight through membership of the CP. Unfortunately, Roth's considerable strengths as a writer did not lie in producing didactic narrative and his attempt to write programmatic socialist realism was a disaster. Roth completed an opening section, on the strength of which he received a handsome advance from Scribner. No longer feeling the necessity to write, however, Roth stalled, finding himself unable to continue. To William Freedman, Roth elaborated on possible reasons for this abrupt block:

[I]t's a matter of maturity. I didn't want to go through this man's life.... What Scribner's had accepted was the boyhood stage. Now I would have to do a whole section on his life as a young man, and then I'd have to go into his marriage, his kids, his jobs, his strikes, and so forth. That's why I say maturity. All that seemed to be a function of maturity, and I hadn't matured that way. (Freedman, 10)

Roth's alleged immaturity, and the demand on him to write in a realist mode, combined to produce his first blockage. To these one might add an inhibiting perfectionism hanging over Roth following the formal sophistication of his first novel. Wrecked by success, Roth apparently suffered from some kind of Bloomian anxiety of influence following the publication of *Call It Sleep*, although stemming from his own previous achievements rather than any external literary precursor.

In the next few years, Roth published a few short stories, but by 1940 was apparently finished as a writer. The block that had set in during his attempt to produce the second novel persisted for the next few decades. During this time, Roth and his family (a wife and two sons) moved away from New York to rural Maine. Soon after arriving there, Roth burned almost all his notebooks and any work formerly "in progress." While partly driven by persecution from the FBI for his Communist connections, this conflagration also served to signal Roth's apparently final break with his writing career. In Maine, Roth took up various occupations barely worthy of his talent: teaching, fire-fighting, wood-cutting, working as an orderly in a mental hospital, and finally farming ducks and geese.

Roth continued farming until the early 1960s. This period was also marked, however, by changes in American culture that eventually paved the way for the return of both *Call It Sleep* and Roth's writing career. In 1953, Saul Bellow published *The Adventures of Augie March*, in 1957 Bernard Malamud published *The Assistant*, and in 1959 Philip Roth published *Goodbye, Columbus*; all three were critical and commercial successes. The literary market in America was opening up for so-called ethnic writers, and the example of these last three underlines the burgeoning market for Jewish American novels. Since the end of World War Two, Jewish culture had moved towards the mainstream, just as Gentile America began to develop a sympathy for that very subculture. The possibility developed that Roth's novel, originally a failure as a belatedly high Modernist work, might re-emerge by being encompassed within the new popular genre of Jewish American fiction.

1956 was something of a watershed year for Roth. Firstly, it marked the beginnings of his rebirth as a writer. In July, *The New Yorker* published one of the fruits of Roth's new attempts to write, a short story entitled "Petey and Yotsee and Mario." Although very short and rather slight, the appearance of the story at least proved to Roth that he could still produce publishable work. Coincidentally in this year, interest in *Call It Sleep* – published more than twenty years previously – began to reawaken. Walter Rideout's influential study *The Radical Novel in the United States*, for example, lauded *Call It Sleep* as American literature's "most distinguished single proletarian novel" (Rideout, 186). This is, of course, hugely ironic: after all, *Call It Sleep* had originally been dismissed as *insufficiently* proletarian by the left-wing press. Moreover, when Roth had subsequently attempted a consciously proletarian novel, he had become blocked.

Roth's novel also gained notable attention from two other critics, no lesser figures than Alfred Kazin and Leslie Fiedler. For its 25th anniversary edition, *The American Scholar* printed a symposium asking critics and academics to name their "Most Neglected Books of the Past 25 Years". The only novel to be mentioned by two different contributors was *Call It Sleep*. Fiedler argued that, "no one has ever distilled such poetry and wit from the counterpoint between maimed English and the subtle Yiddish of the immigrant" (Fiedler, 478). Kazin was equally fulsome, ascribing to Roth "the patient sensibility of Wordsworth and the unselfconscious honesty of Dreiser," before commending "the slowness, the patience and the strange inner serenity of this book - as of something won, very far deep within, against the conventional cruelties of modern city life" (Kazin, 486). The importance of such high praise from such reputable critics in such a respected publication should not be underestimated, especially for a writer so dependent upon the esteem of others. Although it would take a few more years, the foundations for the rediscovery of *Call It Sleep* by the American public, and for Roth's renaissance as a writer, had been laid.

Harold Ribalow, another critic with a high regard for Roth's forgotten novel, was instrumental in its republication in 1960. Fortuitously learning of Roth's seclusion in Maine, he travelled there and convinced Roth that the book should be reissued, despite the latter's firm belief that "from a business standpoint it would be a foolish venture and would not do any better than it had the first time" (Bronsen, 278). Ribalow felt that the new hardback edition should contain a number of prefatory articles to introduce *Call It Sleep* and its author. He wrote the first, about the novel's history and the high regard in which it was held by a small cult of critics. The edition also featured "A Critical Introduction" by Maxwell Geismar and "A Personal Appreciation" by Meyer Levin. All three articles, then, were written by prominent Jewish American critics, an important observation if one recalls the flourishing genre of Jewish American fiction at that time. Ribalow clearly believed that the new market for *Call It Sleep* would be as a Jewish American rather than a Modernist or proletarian novel.

The hardback reissue was, however, more a critical than a commercial success. It would be another four years, and it would take a cheap paperback edition, before the astonishing rebirth of *Call It Sleep*. The next figure in this narrative is literary editor Peter Mayer, subsequently to become an executive with Penguin, but then working for Avon, a small publishing house in New York. Mayer's introduction to Roth's novel came about by chance, and his management of its reprinting was chaotic, to say the least. Mayer gives an account of the republication of *Call It Sleep* in a 1990 interview, existing as a manuscript in the American Jewish Historical

Society's Roth Collection (*Papers P702, Box 5, Folder 12*).³ He had discovered Roth's novel when working as a cab driver and living in the Lower East Side. There, another driver recommended *Call It Sleep* as a "great novel...about these streets," and Mayer visited the New York Public Library over the next few days to read it "at the rate of 40 or 50 pages a day" (3). When employed by Avon a few years later, having been overwhelmed by the novel, Mayer paid a visit to the bookstore housing Pageant Press, who, having reissued the novel in its 1960 hardback incarnation, now held the copyright. There he bought the rights to the novel for \$2,500.

Mayer quickly proved himself to be not only an astute purchaser, but also a master publicist. Before its republication, he claims to have written "letters to every literary editor and critic in America, saying that this book was to all intents and purposes a new book, since virtually nobody had read it in some thirty years" (3-4). Mayer played up the eccentricity of Roth himself - his disappearance and unusual lifestyle - correctly feeling that such mythologising would spark wider interest. Mayer also strongly disapproved of the 1960 edition's three prefaces, all by Jewish writers, believing this had pigeonholed the novel and drastically restricted its audience. In contrast, Mayer "decided to treat *Call It Sleep* as an American book and not a Jewish book or a Jewish American book" (4).⁴ To this end, he persuaded British (and Gentile) critic Walter Allen to write an Afterword for the new edition.

Mayer's hard work paid off. He soon received a phone call from the *New York Times* checking whether the novel's release would be on time, since the newspaper planned to run a full page article on the front of its *Book Review*. In fact, the novel had slipped behind schedule, but this news prompted Mayer to do everything in his power to speed things up. He ordered the immediate printing of the book in Chicago, and air-shipped the books to New York. There, he got the New York Avon staff to go out with boxes and cartons of books in taxis, buses and private cars to distribute them to bookstores all over the city.

Irving Howe's highly complimentary review indeed appeared on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review* on October 25th 1964, and referred to *Call It Sleep* as "one of the few genuinely distinguished novels written by a 20th-century American" (Howe, 1). To give a sense of the importance of this review, one need mention only that this was the first time in the history of the newspaper that a paperback reprint had been given front page treatment. Similarly significant is the fact that Howe refers, just as Mayer had hoped, to Roth's novel as "American" rather than Jewish American. Although to a certain extent riding on the wave of the growth of Jewish American literature, and retrospectively exalted as a progenitor for Bellow, Malamud et al, *Call It Sleep* fared perceptibly better by not being narrowly pigeonholed. Deftly transgressing the boundaries of the Modernist, the proletarian, and the Jewish American novel, *Call It Sleep* finally enjoyed commercial success.

Michael Denning cites as another possible reason for the success of the reissued *Call It Sleep* its ironic reclamation by the Left. He suggests that the rediscovery of Roth's "ghetto pastoral" occurred simultaneously with the "revival of [Woody] Guthrie's work...in the early 1960s" as a "crucial part of the New Left's appropriation of depression iconography" (Denning, 281). In comparison to 1934, the mid-sixties perhaps took a more sophisticated view as to what constituted the proletarian novel. This meant that, for example, Kenneth Ledbetter could claim in 1967 that *Call It Sleep* represented "perhaps the most authentic and compelling expression the American proletariat has received" (Ledbetter, 123). Ledbetter went on to criticise the blinkered hostility of the 1930s reviewers: "The error of the more

militant Marxist critics who first reviewed the novel was their failure to recognize the complex system of symbols growing organically out of Roth's account of David's childhood, symbols that reflect more accurately and compellingly than any other expression of the period the point of view and the possibilities of the proletariat" (125).

There is no hyperbole in describing the novel's reception in late 1964 as a phenomenon, one which surprised not only Roth, but also Mayer and Ribalow. In 1934, with limited fanfare, *Call It Sleep* sold some 4,000 copies; in 1964, four editions totalling 250,000 copies sold out within weeks of publication. For over six months from November 1964 onwards, the reprint remained amongst the top ten selling paperbacks in America, actually topping the list for a significant period. By January 1965, the Avon edition was already in its sixth printing, by April its eleventh, and by March of the following year, Harold Ribalow reported seeing "the thirteenth printing on the newsstands" (*Papers* P702, Box 7, Folder 3, letter to Roth dated March 2 1966). Even Roth's curmudgeonly stance towards his novel's rebirth seemed to soften as its success grew. He wrote, for example, that "it seems to have broken through the usual confines of the highly literate reading public and made inroads into a mass non-jewish [sic] audience, which gratifies me immensely" (*Papers*, P702, Box 5, Folder 11, letter to Mario Materassi dated January 4 1964).⁵

A combination of the sales of *Call It Sleep* and the arrangement with his new literary agents, who worked hard to sell foreign and film rights to the novel, meant that Roth was now earning enough money to rescue him from having to continue breeding waterfowl. The Roths' new financial comfort combined with a number of other factors to encourage Roth once more to pursue a writing career. For example, since Roth now saw the maintenance of his former reclusive life as a pretence, this suggested a certain pressure on him to live up to the role of artist. Peter Mayer claimed to have received "hundreds of letters for Roth, which we forward to him, and almost all beg him to write another book" (quoted in Bell, 7).

These messages clearly struck a chord, and Roth's notebooks and manuscripts from the mid-1960s onwards reveal that he was already working on scenes that would eventually find their way into the *Mercy* series. As a way of preparing for this final grand opus, Roth also published a number of short stories and memoir pieces during the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps the most substantial and accomplished of these was "The Surveyor," published in 1966. "The Surveyor" is significant in terms of Roth's evolution as a writer and as an individual, partly for the subtlety with which it is executed, but mainly because of the theme of the protagonist's relationship to Judaism. Since his adolescence, Roth had turned his back on his Jewish roots, as later reinforced by his involvement with the CP. In its commemoration of the history of Jewish persecution in Europe, "The Surveyor" suggests the first signs of Roth's rapprochement with Judaism, confirmed more fully a year later by Roth's enthusiastic support for Israel during the 1967 war with Egypt. Although Roth's reading of the political situation in the Middle East remained unsophisticated in retrospect (as Steven G. Kellman asserts, "he sentimentalized the nation" [Kellman, 346]), he nevertheless clearly believed that his new identification with Israel provided him at last with a solid ideological position and a distanced identity from which to write again, in particular to approach the difficult autobiographical material that formed the basis of the *Mercy* series: "what the war and the newly solidified identity did most was to liberate the youthful period.... It liberated me to examine and write about the whole youthful sexual awakening" (Freedman, 16). Above all, Roth's reconciliation

with Judaism represents another “gateway of esteem”; as Morris Dickstein assesses, “Roth’s unswerving devotion to Israel over the last 20 years could be seen as yet another dependency, replacing his long indenture to Marxism” (Dickstein, 35).

In the interview with Freedman, Roth went on to suggest that the dual protagonists of the *Mercy* series, young and old Ira, derived from his reconciliation with Judaism, his wish to contrast “the diaspora youth leaving his Judaism” with “the old man, in a counter movement, reuniting” (Freedman, 16). This assertion underlines one aspect of Roth’s development, during this time, of a different approach to the style of his first novel. This consisted of what he termed a “continuum,” a two-level narrative form split between the concerns of the present day and reflections on autobiographical incidents from decades earlier. For Roth, now cognisant of the practices of Postmodernists such as Borges and Calvino, the telling could become part of the story.⁶ This represented for him a major narrative innovation in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, which not only tells the story of the adolescent protagonist, but also depicts the elderly narrator writing and reflecting on the very narrative we are reading.

Roth’s changed attitude towards the novel may also be characterised as embracing a type of unfinished aesthetic. In part, this is a reaction against the highly wrought art of *Call It Sleep*, a novel from which Roth felt alienated by the time he began writing the *Mercy* series. Again, this new aesthetic may be traceable to Roth’s search for a gateway of esteem amongst literary currents prevailing at that time. In both *Gates of Eden* (1977) and *Leopards in the Temple* (2002), Morris Dickstein explores the impact of the Beats upon American literature, identifying precisely the kind of unpolished approach to writing that seems to have had an effect on Roth during the 1960s, as he started to write again.⁷ Kerouac, for example, also incorporated the everyday experience of the writer into the text, a text which was to be much freer in form than previous work. Kerouac’s style, according to Dickstein, “taught writers from Ginsberg to Bob Dylan to go with the *flow*, to avoid censoring outlandish images, to tap their fantasies as they shaped their memories” (Dickstein, 101). The similarity here between “flow” and Roth’s “rude stream” is irresistible, and it is hard to avoid concluding that Roth was indeed one of those Dickstein identifies as having been freed up by the Beats’ aesthetic. Similarly, the mixture of autobiographical experience with imagination and fantasy is another apt description of the path Roth’s new writing was taking.

As with *Call It Sleep*, Roth’s later work is similarly characterised by his tendency to look outwards at the wider literary culture in America. One can trace the influence of Postmodernism, in the widespread use in the *Mercy* series of metafictional practices which subvert subjectivity.⁸ Likewise, the much more unfinished, rough aesthetic apparently owes a great deal to the Beats. A third influence has, perhaps more questionably, been claimed in the tracing of postcolonial currents in Roth’s later work. Jeffrey J. Folks accuses Roth of opportunism, claiming that he rejected Modernism when it fell from critical favour, instead seeking “more fashionable hegemonies” in a kind of postcolonial mode (Folks, 290). Folks argues that whereas David, the protagonist of *Call It Sleep*, was a kind of proto-Modernist, “struggling toward the artist’s first awakening to the significance of his future role within high literary culture,” Ira, in the *Mercy* series, is “the subaltern, victimized by his position on the margin of cultural hegemony” (294). While Folks correctly identifies Roth’s penchant for gateways of esteem (he accurately characterises both David and Ira as “keen observers who gain acceptance by parroting the behavior of

the more 'refined,' assimilated boys to whom they are instinctively attracted" [290]) it is questionable whether Roth is as calculating a writer as this suggests. Folks even admits that David and Ira's attractions are "instinctive" and this is largely how Roth's search for gateways of esteem should be understood.

Roth's (over)reliance on models suggested by others means that his life and work, and the reception of his work, provide fascinating illustrations of the prevailing currents in twentieth-century American literature. His serial (and sometimes overlapping) embracing of Gentile Modernism, Communism, Judaism, and Postmodernism, suggest a search for acceptance by the culture of the time, possibly conditioned by his early experiences in Harlem. In terms of evaluating his work, notwithstanding its considerable merits, it is inevitably hindered by this dependency on others. Moreover, this dependency means that even the *Mercy* series, drawing on a curious melange of twentieth-century literary forms, is ultimately as belated, even old-fashioned, as his earlier work.

Endnotes:

¹ Besides mentioning this in interviews, Roth rendered this episode in the 1977 short story, "Itinerant Ithacan" and later reworked it for volume three of the *Mercy* series, *From Bondage*.

² This review did not pass without comment, and in the succeeding two issues of the *New Masses* a number of letters defended Roth, championing the novel's depiction of the pre-political child, and drawing attention to its author's socialist credentials. The following issue (March 5th 1935) included a full page article by Edwin Seaver entitled "Caesar or Nothing." This took the original review to task, and condemned what Seaver termed (after Lenin) "Leftism," the school of dogmatic left-wing criticism that "kill[s] a book because it does not bring out certain desired 'truths' which fall outside the scope of the particular work". In a corrective to the radical press's lukewarm reception of Roth's novel, Seaver concludes, "If there is a better, a more purposeful rendering of an East Side proletarian childhood than that contained in *Call It Sleep* I have yet to see it" (Seaver 21).

³ I have not been able to ascertain who conducted the interview, which seems never to have been published. I therefore quote page numbers from the manuscript in parenthesis. It is worth remaining sceptical regarding some of Mayer's claims, as he is clearly prone to exaggeration. For example, he states that in *The American Scholar* symposium mentioned above "about half of the critics pick[ed] *Call It Sleep*," (3) when in fact it was just Fiedler and Kazin.

⁴ According to Roth's account of their eventual meeting, Mayer also condemned the introduction by Ribalow as "execrable" (Papers P702, Box 23, Folder 13, 7). Ironically, Maxwell Geismar's introduction in the same edition criticises Walter Rideout's earlier reading of *Call It Sleep*, also for pigeonholing it, but here as a proletarian novel. Over the years, the novel has attracted - and generally eluded - attempts to confine it to a single genre.

⁵ Although dated 1964, this letter must have been written in 1965.

⁶ Although Roth claims throughout his writing to be largely unaware of developments in literary fiction, this is customarily disingenuous. His library holdings reveal works by metafictionalists such as Borges, Calvino, Garcia Marquez, Kundera and Eco (*Papers*, Box 51, Folder 1), of which Felicia Steele confirms that Roth had certainly read at least Borges (*Ficciones*) and Calvino (*The Silent Mr. Palomar*) (Felicia J. Steele, Personal Interview, Princeton, New Jersey, May 2002).

⁷ A similar influence may be traced in the work of numerous other writers. Considerably in advance of Roth, for example, Bellow's aesthetic took a similar turn between *The Victim* (1948) and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953).

⁸ For example, into the narrative of the first volume of the series Roth incorporates "Somebody Always Grabs the Purple," a short story written and published over fifty years earlier. In the narrative, authorship of the story is ascribed to the protagonist, Ira, but the astute reader's knowledge that the story is actually Roth's further complicates the already decentred and dispersed autobiographical figure at the heart of the novel.

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