PHILIP ROTH

Reading Myself and Others

'Awfully good'
New York Times

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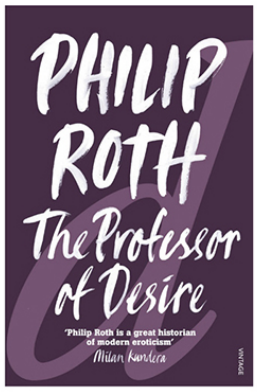
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The Professor of Desire
'Philip Roth is a great historian of modern eroticism'
Milan Kundera
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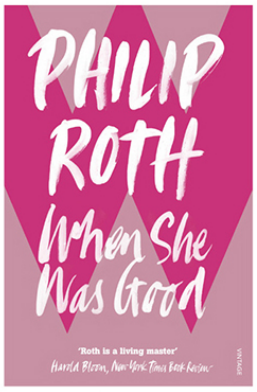
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'Roth is a living master'
Harold Bloom, New York Times Book Review
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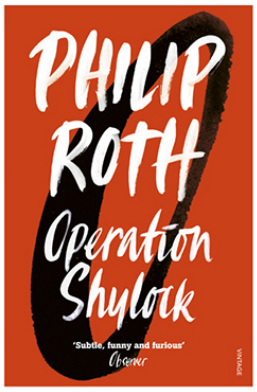
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Operation Shylock
'Subtle, funny and furious'
Observer
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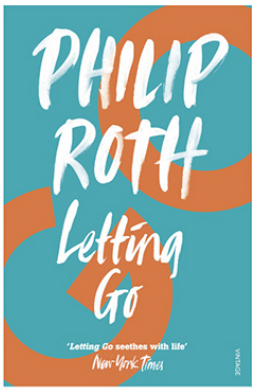
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Letting Go
'Letting Go seethes with life'
New York Times
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PHILIP ROTH
Our Gang
'The uncontested master of comic irony'
Time
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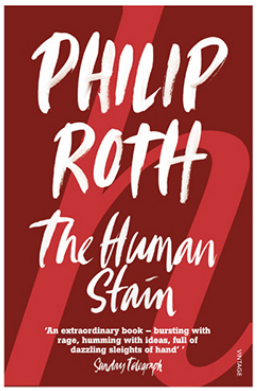
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The Human Stain
'An extraordinary book – bursting with rage, humming with ideas, full of dazzling sleights of hand'
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Portnoy's Complaint
'The most outrageously funny book about sex yet written'
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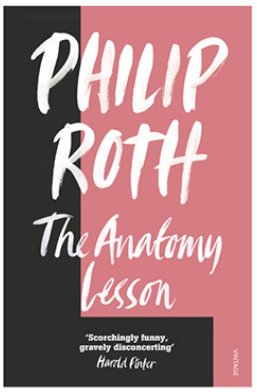
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'Scorchingly funny, gravely disconcerting'
Harold Pinter
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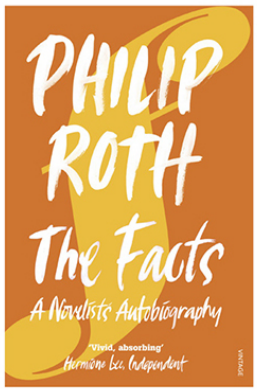
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A Novelist's Autobiography
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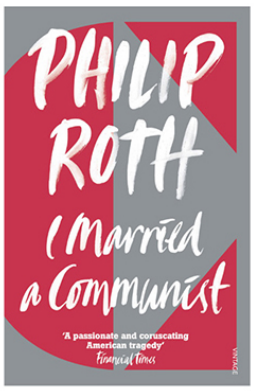
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I Married a Communist
'A passionate and coruscating American tragedy'
Financial Times
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PHILIP ROTH
Shop Talk
'Riveting'
Sunday Times
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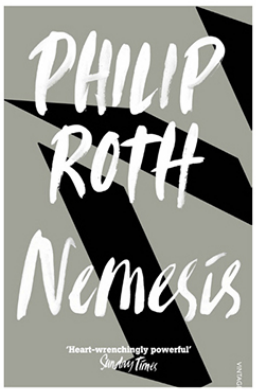
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Nemesis
'Heart-wrenchingly powerful'
Sunday Times
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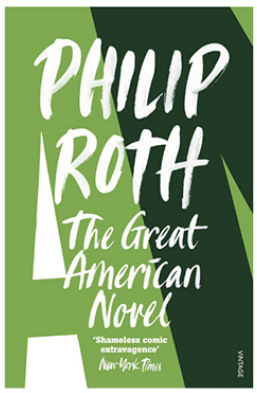
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The Great American Novel
'Shameless comic extravagence'
New York Times
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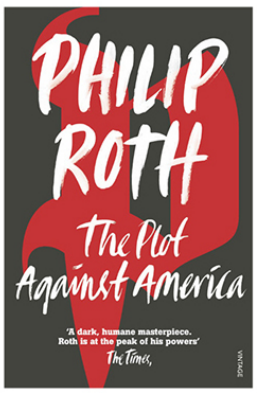
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The Plot Against America
'A dark, humane masterpiece. Roth is at the peak of his powers'
The Times
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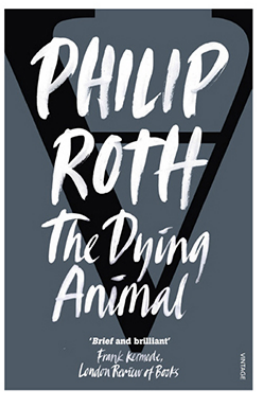
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The Dying Animal
'Brief and brilliant'
Frank Kermode, London Review of Books
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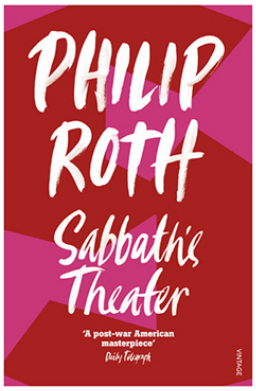
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Daily Telegraph
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Acknowledgments
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ABOUT THE BOOK

Philip Roth’s writing career spans a remarkable five decades, a period that has seen him rise to become one of the greatest chroniclers of post-war American life. Collected here are some of his finest interviews, essays and articles discussing his own fiction and the range of controversies that it sparked, including his long interview with the *Paris Review*. Here too are Roth’s writings on American fiction, Milan Kundera, baseball, and his deep admiration for Franz Kafka. Coursing through each of these pieces is the Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness that have defined Roth’s writing for half a century.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 1997 Philip Roth won the Pulitzer Prize for *American Pastoral*. In 1998 he received the National Medal of Arts at the White House, and in 2002 the highest award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Gold Medal in Fiction, previously awarded to John Dos Passos, William Faulkner and Saul Bellow, among others. He has twice won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has won the PEN/Faulkner Award three times. In 2005 *The Plot Against America* received the Society of American Historians' Prize for 'the outstanding historical novel on an American theme for 2003–2004'.

Recently Roth received PEN's two most prestigious prizes: in 2006 the PEN/Nabokov Award 'for a body of work … of enduring originality and consummate craftsmanship' and in 2007 the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, given to a writer whose 'scale of achievement over a sustained career … places him or her in the highest rank of American literature'. In 2011 Roth won the International Man Booker Prize.

Roth is the only living American writer to have his work published in a comprehensive, definitive edition by the Library of America.

ALSO BY PHILIP ROTH

Zuckerman Books

The Ghost Writer
Zuckerman Unbound
The Anatomy Lesson
The Prague Orgy

The Counterlife

American Pastoral
I Married a Communist
The Human Stain

Exit Ghost

Roth Books

The Facts
Deception
Patrimony
Operation Shylock
The Plot Against America

Kepesh Books

The Breast
The Professor of Desire
The Dying Animal

Nemeses: Short Novels

Everyman

Indignation
The Humbling
Nemesis

Miscellany

Shop Talk

Other Books

Goodbye, Columbus
Letting Go
When She Was Good
Portnoy's Complaint
Our Gang
The Great American Novel
Sabbath's Theater

‘America’s greatest living novelist’
Sunday Times

‘There aren’t supposed to be degrees or intensities of uniqueness, and yet Roth is somehow inordinately unique. He is bloodymindedly himself, himself, himself’
Martin Amis

‘Opening the first page of any Philip Roth is like hearing the ignition on a boiler roar into life. Passion is what we’re going to get, and plenty of it’
Guardian

‘He is a writer of quite extraordinary skill and courage; and he takes on bigger enemies in every book he writes’
Frank Kermode

‘Philip Roth is a great historian of modern eroticism’
Milan Kundera

‘There is a clarity, almost a ruthlessness, to his work, which makes the experience of reading any of his books a bracing, wild ride’
The Times

‘He is skilled, witty, energetic and performs like a virtuoso’
Saul Bellow

‘Nobody writes about the American family with more tenderness and honesty’
New Statesman

‘Roth is a living master’
Harold Bloom

To Saul Bellow,
the “other” I have read from the beginning
with the deepest pleasure and admiration

PHILIP ROTH

Reading Myself and Others

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

AUTHOR’S NOTE

The twenty-three pieces that appeared in the original edition of this collection were written sporadically over a period of fifteen years, between the time my first book of fiction was published in 1959 and my eighth in 1974. Most come out of the end of that period, a few are from the beginning, hardly any out of the middle—suggesting that they are largely the by-products of getting started as a novelist, and then of taking stock. (The material added for the 1985 Penguin edition—the four interviews at the end of Part One—were published between 1979 and 1984.) Because recognition—and with it, opposition—came to me almost immediately, I seem to have felt called upon both to assert a literary position and to defend my moral flank the instant after I had taken my first steps; later I tried to gain some perspective on what I’d been reading and writing since.

Together these pieces reveal to me a continuing preoccupation with the relationship between the written and the unwritten world. The simple distinction is borrowed from Paul Goodman. I find it more useful than the distinction between imagination and reality, or art and life, first, because everyone can think through readily enough to the clear-cut differences between the two, and second, because the worlds that I feel myself shuttling between every day couldn’t be better described. Back and forth, back and forth, bearing fresh information, detailed

instructions, garbled messages, desperate inquiries, naive expectations, baffling challenges . . . cast somewhat in the role of the courier Barnabas, whom the Land Surveyor K. enlists to traverse the steep winding road between the village and the castle in Kafka's novel about the difficulties of getting through.

Reading Myself and Others is divided into two parts, each arranged more or less chronologically. There is considerable overlap, but myself—as reader and read—is what's at the heart of Part One. This section consists mainly of interviews in which I describe what has generated my work, the means employed from book to book, and the models I associate with my efforts. The interviews reached their final form in writing, though some began in conversational exchanges that laid out the terrain and suggested the tone and focus of what appeared in print.

Part Two is made up of selected articles and essays, many of them occasioned by an invitation—to give a talk, to oppose an adversary, to introduce a writer, to mark an event. They point to difficulties, enthusiasms, and aversions that have evolved along with my work. At the bottom of the opening page of nearly every piece I have noted the occasion that prompted it; in the first section, the interviewer is identified, the date given, and where it seemed pertinent, the circumstances of the interview described. The full details of publication appear in the Acknowledgments.

ONE

Writing and the Powers That Be*

Tell us first of all about your adolescence—its relationship with the type of American society you have represented in Goodbye, Columbus; *your rapport with your family; and if and how you felt the weight of paternal power*.

Far from being the classic period of explosion and tempestuous growth, my adolescence was more or less a period of suspended animation. After the victories of an exuberant and spirited childhood—lived out against the dramatic background of America's participation in World War II—I was to cool down considerably until I went off to college in 1950. There, in a respectable Christian atmosphere hardly less constraining than my own particular Jewish upbringing, but whose strictures I could ignore or oppose without feeling bedeviled by long-standing loyalties, I was able to reactivate a taste for inquiry and speculation that had been all but immobilized during my high school years. From age twelve, when I entered high school, to age sixteen, when I graduated, I was by and large a good, responsible, well-behaved boy, controlled (rather willingly) by the social regulations of the self-conscious and orderly lower-middle-class neighborhood where I had been raised, and mildly constrained still by the taboos that had filtered down to me, in attenuated form, from the religious orthodoxy of my immigrant grandparents. I was probably a "good" adolescent partly because I understood that in our Jewish section of Newark there was nothing much else to be, unless I wanted to steal

cars or flunk courses, both of which proved to be beyond me. Rather than becoming a sullen malcontent or a screaming rebel—or flowering, as I had in the prelapsarian days at elementary school—I obediently served my time in what was, after all, only a minimum-security institution, and enjoyed the latitude and privileges awarded to the inmates who make no trouble for their guards.

The best of adolescence was the intense male friendships—not only because of the cozy feelings of camaraderie they afforded boys coming unstuck from their close-knit families, but because of the opportunity they provided for uncensored talk. These marathon conversations, characterized often by raucous discussions of hoped-for sexual adventure and by all sorts of anarchic joking, were typically conducted, however, in the confines of a parked car—two, three, four, or five of us in a single steel enclosure just about the size and shape of a prison cell, and similarly set apart from ordinary human society.

Still, the greatest freedom and pleasure I knew in those years may have derived from what we said to one another for hours on end in those automobiles. And how we said it. My closest adolescent companions—clever, respectful Jewish boys like myself, all four of whom have gone on to be successful doctors—may not look back in the same way on those bull sessions, but for my part I associate that amalgam of mimicry, reporting, kibbitzing, disputation, satire, and legendizing from which we drew so much sustenance with the work I now do, and I consider what we came up with to amuse one another in those cars to have been something like the folk narrative of a tribe passing from one stage of human development to the next. Also, those millions of words were the means by which we either took vengeance on or tried to hold at bay the cultural forces that were shaping us. Instead of stealing cars from strangers, we sat in the cars we had borrowed from our

fathers and said the wildest things imaginable, at least in our neighborhood. Which is where we were parked.

"The weight of paternal power," in its traditional oppressive or restraining guises, was something I had hardly to contend with in adolescence. My father had little aside from peccadilloes to quarrel with me about, and if anything weighed upon me, it was not dogmatism, unswervingness, or the like, but his limitless pride in me. When I tried not to disappoint him, or my mother, it was never out of fear of the mailed fist or the punitive decree, but of the broken heart; even in post-adolescence, when I began to find reasons to oppose them, it never occurred to me that as a consequence I might lose their love.

What may have encouraged my cooling down in adolescence was the grave financial setback my father suffered at about the time I was entering high school. The struggle back to solvency was arduous, and the stubborn determination and reserves of strength that it called forth from him in his mid-forties made him all at once a figure of considerable pathos and heroism in my eyes, a cross of a kind between Captain Ahab and Willy Loman. Half-consciously I wondered if he might not collapse, carrying us under with him—instead he proved to be undiscourageable, if not something of a stone wall. But as the outcome was in doubt precisely during my early adolescence, it could be that my way in those years of being neither much more nor much less than "good" had to do with contributing what I could to family order and stability. To allow paternal power to weigh what it *should*, I would postpone until a later date the resumption of my career as classroom conquistador, and suppress for the duration all rebellious and heretical inclinations . . . This is largely a matter of psychological conjecture, of course, certainly so by this late date—but the fact remains that I did little in adolescence to upset whatever balance of

power had enabled our family to come as far as it had and to work as well as it did.

Sex as an instrument of power and subjection. You develop this theme in Portnoy's Complaint *and achieve a desecration of pornography, at the same time recognizing the obsessive character of sexual concerns and their enormous conditioning power. Tell us in what real experience this dramatic fable originated or from what adventure of the mind or the imagination.*

Do I "achieve a desecration of pornography"? I never thought of it that way before, since generally pornography is itself considered a verbal desecration of the acts by which men and women are imagined to consecrate their profound attachment to one another. Actually I think of pornography more as the projection of an altogether human preoccupation with the genitalia *in and of themselves*—a preoccupation excluding all emotions other than those elemental feelings that the contemplation of genital functions arouses. Pornography is to the whole domain of sexual relations what a building manual is to hearth and home. Or so it would be, if carpentry were surrounded with the exciting aura of magic, mystery, and breachable taboo that adheres at this moment to the range of sex acts.

I don't think that I "desecrated" pornography but, rather, excised its central obsession with the body as an erotic contraption or plaything—with orifices, secretions, tumescence, friction, discharge, and all the abstruse intricacies of sex-tectonics—and then placed that obsession back into an utterly mundane family setting, where issues of power and subjection, among other things, can be seen in their broad everyday aspect rather than through the narrowing lens of pornography. Now, perhaps it is just in

this sense that I could be charged with having desecrated, or profaned, what pornography, by its exclusiveness and obsessiveness, does actually elevate into a kind of sacred, all-encompassing religion, whose solemn rites it ritualistically enacts: the religion of Fuckism (or, in a movie like *Deep Throat*, Suckism). As in any religion these devotions are a matter of the utmost seriousness, and there is little more room for individual expressiveness or idiosyncrasy, for human error or mishap, than there is in the celebration of the Mass. In fact, the comedy of *Portnoy's Complaint* arises largely out of the mishaps, wholly expressive of the individual, that bedevil one would-be celebrant as he tries desperately to make his way to the altar and remove his clothes. All his attempts to enter naked into the sacred realm of pornography are repeatedly foiled because, by his own definition, Alexander Portnoy is a character in a Jewish joke—a genre which, unlike pornography, pictures a wholly *de*consecrated world: demystified, deromanticized, utterly dedeluded. Fervent religionist that he would be, Portnoy still cannot help but profane with his every word and gesture what the orthodox Fuckist most reveres.

I cannot track down for you any single experience, whether of the mind or the body, from which *Portnoy's Complaint* originated. Perhaps what you want to know is whether I have firsthand knowledge of "sex as an instrument of power and subjection." The answer is, how could I not? I too have appetite, genitals, imagination, drive, inhibition, frailties, will, and conscience. Moreover, the massive, late-sixties assault upon sexual customs came nearly twenty years after I myself hit the beach and began fighting for a foothold on the erotic homeland held in subjugation by the enemy. I sometimes think of my generation of men as the first wave of determined D-day invaders, over whose bloody, wounded carcasses the flower

children subsequently stepped ashore to advance triumphantly toward that libidinous Paris we had dreamed of liberating as we inched inland on our bellies, firing into the dark. “Daddy,” the youngsters ask, “what did you do in the war?” I humbly submit they could do worse than read *Portnoy’s Complaint* to find out.

The relationship in your work between reality and imagination. Have the forms of power we have mentioned (family, religion, politics) influenced your style, your mode of expression? Or has writing served increasingly to free you from these forms of power?

Inasmuch as subject might be considered an aspect of “style,” the answer to the first question is yes: family and religion as coercive forces have been a recurrent subject in my fiction, particularly in the work up to and including *Portnoy’s Complaint;* and the coercive appetites of the Nixon Administration were very much to the point of *Our Gang*. Of course the subjects themselves “influence” their treatment and my “mode of expression,” but so does much else. Certainly, aside from the Nixon satire, I have never written anything determinedly and intentionally destructive. Polemical or blasphemous assault upon the powers that be has served me more as a *theme* than as an overriding purpose in my work.

“The Conversion of the Jews,” for instance, a story I wrote when I was twenty-three, reveals at its most innocent stage of development a budding concern with the oppressiveness of family feeling and with the binding ideas of religious exclusiveness which I had experienced first-hand in ordinary American-Jewish life. A good boy named Freedman brings to his knees a bad rabbi named Binder (and various other overlords) and then takes wing from the synagogue into the vastness of space. Primitive as this

story seems to me now—it might better be called a daydream—it nonetheless evolved out of the same preoccupations that led me, years later, to invent Alexander Portnoy, an older incarnation of claustrophobic little Freedman, who cannot cut loose from what binds and inhibits him quite so magically as the hero I imagined humbling his mother and his rabbi in "The Conversion of the Jews." Ironically, where the boy in the early story is subjugated by figures of real stature in his world, whose power he for the moment at least is able to subvert, Portnoy is less oppressed by these people—who have little real say in his life anyway—than he is imprisoned by the rage that persists against them. That his most powerful oppressor by far is himself is what makes for the farcical pathos of the book—and also what connects it with my preceding novel, *When She Was Good*, where again the focus is on a grown child's fury against long-standing authorities believed by her to have misused their power.

The question of whether *I* can ever free myself from these forms of power assumes that I experience family and religion as power and nothing else. It is much more complicated than that. I have never really tried, through my work or directly in my life, to sever all that binds me to the world I came out of. I am probably right now as devoted to my origins as I ever was in the days when I was indeed as powerless as little Freedman and, more or less, had no other sane choice. But this has come about only after subjecting these ties and connections to considerable scrutiny. In fact, the affinities that I continue to feel toward the forces that first shaped me, having withstood to the degree that they have the assault of imagination and the test of sustained psychoanalysis (with all the cold-bloodedness *that* entails), would seem by now to be here to stay. Of course I have greatly refashioned my attachments

through the effort of testing them, and over the years have developed my strongest attachment to the test itself.

Our Gang *is a desecration of President Nixon and it takes its theme from a statement on abortion. In what period of your life have you most strongly felt the weight of political power as a moral coercion and how did you react to it? Do you feel that the element of the grotesque, which you often use, is the only means by which one can rebel and fight against such power?*

I suppose I most strongly felt political power as moral coercion while growing up in New Jersey during World War II. Little was asked of an American schoolchild, other than his belief in the "war effort," but that I gave with all my heart. I worried over the welfare of older cousins who were off in the war zone, and wrote them long "newsy" letters to keep up their morale; I sat by the radio with my parents listening to Gabriel Heatter every Sunday, hoping upon hope that he had good news that night; I followed the battle maps and front-line reports in the evening paper; and on weekends I participated in the neighborhood collection of paper and tin cans. I was twelve when the war ended, and during the next few years my first serious political allegiances began to take shape. My entire clan—parents, aunts, uncles, cousins—were devout New Deal Democrats. In part because they identified him with Roosevelt, and also because they were by and large lower-middle-class people sympathetic to labor and the underdog, many of them voted for Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party candidate for President in 1948. I'm proud to say that Richard Nixon was known as a crook in our kitchen some twenty-odd years before this dawned on the majority of Americans as a real possibility. I was in college during Joe McCarthy's heyday—which is when I began to identify

political power with *immoral* coercion. I reacted by campaigning for Adlai Stevenson and writing a long angry free-verse poem about McCarthyism for the college literary magazine.

The Vietnam War years were the most "politicized" of my life. I spent my days during this war writing fiction, none of which on the face of it would appear to connect to politics (though there was a time when I at least associated the rhetoric employed by the heroine of *When She Was Good* to disguise from herself her vengeful destructiveness with the kind of language our government used when they spoke of "saving" the Vietnamese by means of systematic annihilation). But by being "politicized" I mean something more telling than writing about politics or even taking direct political action. I mean something akin to what ordinary citizens experience in countries like Czechoslovakia or Chile: a daily awareness of government *as a coercive force*, its continuous presence in one's thoughts as far more than just an institutionalized, imperfect system of necessary controls. In sharp contrast to Chileans or Czechs, we hadn't personally to fear for our safety and could be as outspoken as we liked, but this did not diminish the sense of living in a country with a government morally out of control and wholly in business for itself. Reading the morning *New York Times* and the afternoon *New York Post*, watching the seven and then again the eleven o'clock TV news—all of which I did ritualistically—became for me like living on a steady diet of Dostoevsky. Rather than fearing for the well-being of my own kin and country, I now felt toward America's war mission as I had toward the Axis goals in World War II. One even began to use the word "America" as though it was the name, not of the place where one had been raised and to which one had a strong spiritual attachment, but of a foreign invader that had conquered the country and with

whom one refused, to the best of one's strength and ability, to collaborate. Suddenly America had turned into "them"—and with this sense of dispossession and powerlessness came the virulence of feeling and rhetoric that often characterized the anti-war movement.

I don't think—to come to your last question—that *Our Gang* uses the "element of the grotesque." Rather, it tries to objectify in a style of its own that element of the grotesque that is inherent in the moral character of a Richard Nixon. He, not the satire, is what is grotesque. Of course there have been others as venal and lawless in American politics, but even a Joe McCarthy was more identifiable as human clay than this guy is. The wonder of Nixon (and contemporary America) is that a man so transparently fraudulent, if not on the edge of mental disorder, could ever have won the confidence and approval of a people who generally require at least a *little* something of the "human touch" in their leaders. It's strange that someone so unlike the types most admired by the average voter—in any Norman Rockwell drawing, Nixon would have been cast as the fuddy-duddy floorwalker or the prissy math teacher school kids love to tease; never the country judge, the bedside doctor, or the trout-fishin' dad—could have passed himself off to this *Saturday Evening Post* America as, of all things, an *American*.

Finally: "rebelling" or "fighting" against *outside* forces isn't what I take to be at the heart of my writing. *Our Gang* is only one of eight disparate works of fiction I've written in the past fifteen years, and even there what most engaged me had to do with *expressiveness*, with problems of presentation, rather than bringing about change or "making a statement." Over the years, whatever serious acts of rebelliousness I may have engaged in as a novelist have been directed far more at my own imagination's

system of constraints and habits of expression than at the powers that vie for control in the world.

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*An interview conducted by the Italian critic Walter Mauro, for his collection of interviews with writers on the subject of power. (1974)

On *Portnoy's Complaint**

Would you say something about the genesis of Portnoy's Complaint*? How long has the idea of the book been in mind?*

Some of the ideas that went into the book have been in my mind ever since I began writing. I mean particularly ideas about style and narration. For instance, the book proceeds by means of what I began to think of while writing as "blocks of consciousness," chunks of material of varying shapes and sizes piled atop one another and held together by association rather than chronology. I tried something vaguely like this in *Letting Go*, and have wanted to come at a narrative in this way again—or break down a narrative this way—ever since.

Then there's the matter of language and tone. Beginning with *Goodbye, Columbus*, I've been attracted to prose that has the turns, vibrations, intonations, and cadences, the spontaneity and ease, of spoken language, at the same time that it is solidly grounded on the page, weighted with the irony, precision, and ambiguity associated with a more traditional literary rhetoric. I'm not the only one who wants to write like this, obviously, nor is it a particularly new aspiration on the planet; but that's the kind of literary idea, or ideal, I was pursuing in this book.

I was thinking more in terms of the character and his predicament when I asked how long you had in mind the "idea of the book."

I know you were. That's partly why I answered as I did.

But surely you don't intend us to believe that this volatile novel of sexual confession, among other things, had its conception in purely literary motives?

No, I don't. But the conception is really nothing, you know, beside the delivery. My point is that until my "ideas"—about sex, guilt, childhood, about Jewish men and their Gentile women—were absorbed by an overall fictional strategy and goal, they were ideas not unlike anybody else's. Everybody has "ideas" for novels; the subway is jammed with people hanging from the straps, their heads full of ideas for novels they cannot begin *to write*. I am often one of them.

Given the book's openness, however, about intimate sexual matters, as well as its frank use of obscenity, do you think you would have embarked upon such a book in a climate unlike today's? Or is the book appropriate to those times?

As long ago as 1958, in *The Paris Review*, I published a story called "Epstein" that some people found very disgusting in its intimate sexual revelations; and my conversation, I have been told, has never been as refined as it should be. I think that many people in the arts have been living in a "climate like today's" for some time now; the mass media have just caught up, that's all, and with them, the general public. Obscenity as a usable and valuable vocabulary, and sexuality as a subject, have been available to us since Joyce, Henry Miller, and Lawrence, and I don't think there's a serious American writer in his thirties who has felt restricted by the times particularly, or suddenly feels liberated because these have been advertised as the "swinging sixties." In my writing lifetime the use of

obscenity has, by and large, been governed by literary taste and tact and not by the mores of the audience.

What about the audience? Don't you write for an audience? Don't you write to be read?

To write to be read and to write for an "audience" are two different matters. If you mean by an audience a particular readership which can be described in terms of its education, politics, religion, or even by its literary tone, the answer is no. When I'm at work I don't really have any group of people in mind whom I want to communicate with; what I want is for the work to communicate itself as fully as it can, in accordance with its own intentions. Precisely so that it *can* be read, *but on its own terms*. If one can be said to have an audience in mind, it is not any special-interest group whose beliefs and demands one either accedes to or challenges, but those ideal readers whose *sensibilities* have been totally given over to the writer, in exchange for his seriousness.

An example which will also get us back to the issue of obscenity. My new book, *Portnoy's Complaint*, is full of dirty words and dirty scenes; my last novel, *When She Was Good*, had none. Why is that? Because I've suddenly become a "swinger"? But then apparently I was "swinging" all the way back in the fifties, with "Epstein." And what about the dirty words in *Letting Go*? No, the reason there is no obscenity, or blatant sexuality either, in *When She Was Good* is that it would have been disastrously beside the point.

When She Was Good is, above all, a story about small-town Middle Westerners who more than willingly experience themselves as conventional and upright people; and it is their own conventional and upright style of speech that I chose as my means of narration—or, rather, a slightly

heightened, somewhat more flexible version of their language, but one that drew freely upon their habitual clichés, locutions, and banalities. It was not, however, to satirize them, in the manner, say, of Ring Lardner's "Haircut," that I settled eventually on this modest style, but rather to communicate, by their way of saying things, their way of seeing things and judging them. As for obscenity, I was careful, even when I had Roy Bassart, the young ex-G.I. in the novel, *reflecting*—had him safely walled-up in his own head—to show that the furthest he could go in violating a taboo was to think "f. this and f. that." Roy's inability to utter more than the initial of that famous four-letter word, even to himself, was the point I was making.

Discussing the purposes of his art, Chekhov makes a distinction between "the solution of the problem and a correct presentation of the problem"—and adds, "only the latter is obligatory for the artist." Using "f. this and f. that," instead of The Word Itself, was part of the attempt to make a correct presentation of the problem.

Are you suggesting, then, that in Portnoy's Complaint *a "correct presentation of the problem" requires a frank revelation of intimate sexual matters, as well as an extensive use of obscenity?*

Yes, I am. Obscenity is not only a kind of language that is used in *Portnoy's Complaint*, it is very nearly the issue itself. The book isn't full of dirty words because "that's the way people talk"; that's one of the *least* persuasive reasons for using the obscene in fiction. Besides, few people actually talk the way Portnoy does in this book—this is a man speaking out of an overwhelming obsession: he is obscene because he wants to be saved. An odd, maybe even mad, way to go about seeking his personal salvation; but, nonetheless, the investigation of this passion, and of the