

BOOKS & THE ARTS

The Bonds of Love

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FROM BONDAGE
(Volume III of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*).By Henry Roth.
St. Martin's. 397 pp. \$25.95.

Henry Roth, who died last year at age 89, wrote one of the great novels of the century, *Call It Sleep* (1934). It is the story of a poor Jewish boy on the Lower East Side, trying to survive and grow in a world where it was dangerous to go out and maybe even more dangerous to stay in, and yet where life was holy. Roth not only assimilated D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce and William Faulkner but, on his first try, wrote a *Bildungsroman* that was entirely worthy of them. No one has ever written better about how it is to be a child, an immigrant, a Jew. No one has known so well how to use Yiddish and the life of the ghetto to light up the English or the American language.

Then, like a sensational rookie pitcher whose arm just went dead, Roth stopped. For forty years, he and his wife, Muriel Parker, tried everything, or at least everything they could afford, in the hope of getting him writing again. They moved from New York to Boston to Maine to New Mexico—his last address was a trailer on New York Avenue in Albuquerque, where he died. (I met him there in 1980.) Unable to be a writer, he went from being a toolmaker to a farmer to a psychiatric orderly to a schoolteacher, from obscurity to fifteen minutes of fame (in the sixties, when *Call It Sleep* came out in paperback and sold more than a million copies) to a more comfortable obscurity—this time, he said, at least they had hot and cold running water. They never made it to China, where, after the revolution of 1949, they had hoped to dedicate their lives to the Chinese people; their group fell apart and they couldn't learn Chinese. They evolved (that was their word) from communism to psychoanalysis to a liberal form of Jewish chauvinism. They

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brought up two children together and lived a decent life. But nothing "worked" for him, nothing lit his fire. From time to time he wrote an essay or short story, but he knew no one would remember those pieces if not for *Call It Sleep*. Sometime in the seventies, Roth met Ralph Ellison; they traded grim hypotheses about themselves and each other, and about blacks and Jews, and they laughed.

But then, as if to confound all those who say there are no second acts in American lives, Roth resumed his *Bildungsroman* as if it had been only yesterday that he had stopped. He told me in 1980 that he had recently written hundreds of new pages. He now saw *Call It Sleep* as the first part of a trilogy. In the second part the hero would

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"escape from his family by becoming a rat, a real bastard," and moreover, "a Jewish anti-Semite." In the finale, he would at last "grow up and be reconciled with humanity." Yes, his wife said caustically, "in the arms of Eda Lou Walton"—Roth's first love, and the woman to whom he dedicated *Call It Sleep*.

No one understood the secret of Roth's miraculous renewal, but nobody could deny he was renewed. He poured thousands of new pages down on St. Martin's Press in New York, where editor Robert Weil did a heroic job of transforming them into three roughly coherent volumes (Weil says there are more to come) that Roth anointed with the gloomy Shakespearean title, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. Their format is a strange one, cutting back and forth between a *Bildungsroman*, written in a narrative voice that seems to come out of a past long before *Call It Sleep*, and (in a different typeface) the author's midrashim and reflections on his characters, his story and himself, composed from the early eighties to the early nineties. Narratologists would probably say it's wrong of me to try to distinguish a "nar-

rator" from an "author," when all the text offers us is two narrators, and neither one should be "privileged" above the other. However, the eighties/nineties narrator discusses many events in his life that are identical with events in Henry Roth's (for example, having a beloved wife, Muriel Parker, a composer who gives up her career for the author of *Call It Sleep*, and who dies in 1990). So I call the eighties/nineties narrator "Neo-Roth." (Neo-Roth composes on a word processor, which he calls "Ecclesiastias." He talks to Ecclesiastias with the same irritated reverence my cousins use when they talk to their Harleys and their fast cars.)

The first book, *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park*, appeared in 1994; the second, *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*, came out last fall, just after Roth died (though he did get to work on the galleys); the third, *From Bondage*, was published this June. The hero's name has been changed from David Schearl to Ira Stigman (= stigma, stigmata; get it?); he is a teenager, and he lives with his quarreling parents in East Harlem, where they have moved from the Lower East Side. East Harlem was then a suburb, largely Jewish until after World War II. (It elected both Fiorello LaGuardia and Vito Marcantonio.) Ira's emotions themselves have a postwar ring: the anger of a city child who felt at home in the old neighborhood, which he idealizes, and who sees the suburban move as a personal betrayal. One of the few things that makes the move bearable is that much of his mother's large family has followed her uptown, and Ira can find a fine assortment of interesting and colorful people who love him just a short walk away. Among them is a 14-year-old girl cousin with whom Ira enjoys fast, rough, domineering sex ("Turn around... bend over...").

It's possible to get into the flow of these narratives, but first you have to reconcile yourself to the fact that Roth's lyrical genius, his visionary gleam, is gone. You will find plenty of fascinating pages here, but you won't find any that will change your life. These new books, especially the first one, read like a midrash (or is it a Monarch Outline?) on *The Book*. The midrash is full of fascinating background; it may even teach you more about the everyday world of *Call It Sleep* than *Call It Sleep* itself. It's as if Neo-Roth is telling us: "Yeah, I knew that neighborhood, I even knew that family, and sure, things were tough, but it's not like there was thunder and lightning and the earth opening up. Those parents were just *proste menschen*, ordinary people, not

mythical gods. There was no big deal about them. Somebody tell that kid to lighten up!"

Ira's life seems to have been written as one work. As a result, the boundaries between *From Bondage* and *Diving Rock* are not so clear. Ira steals fountain pens; is expelled from Stuyvesant High (where the teachers are Dickensian sadists); contemplates suicide (diving off the rock when the currents would engulf and drown him) but chooses life ("the river... told him" that he must live and suffer); enrolls at

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Clinton (where the teachers are slightly less malevolent); forms a friendship with a rich Jewish boy, Larry, who shows him how to be polite and refined; wins a scholarship to Cornell but turns it down because he isn't ready to leave home and goes to C.C.N.Y. instead.

Larry is a poet, and he introduces Ira to the bohemians of downtown, where, for the first time in his life, Ira encounters modern poetry. T.S. Eliot is the star, and the basic idea is "a clean break between what's gone before and now." Downtown is where he meets Larry's girlfriend, Edith, an older (thirtysomething), sophisticated woman, a modern poet, critic and instructor at N.Y.U. She is part of Margaret Mead's circle, and Neo-Roth settles some old scores with Mead (but neglects to explain the original ball games). He tells us to stay tuned: This is going to be his first love. *From Bondage* features an extended love triangle with Edith/Eda Lou, Ira and Larry, written in an archly comic mode, à la Aldous Huxley. Edith's version of modern love is saturated with modern lit: She examines real and prospective lovers by springing *Ulysses* on them. Larry doesn't get it, and so, unknowingly, flunks body language; but Ira eats it up. So when are they getting into bed together? Not so fast! After 600 pages (*From Bondage* plus half of *Diving Rock*), their love is still unsummed. Roth draws out the foreplay; if he could wait forty years, we can wait a few hundred more pages. Now there's nothing wrong with these characters or their story, but you have to fight a temptation to call it *Call It Sleep-Lite*.

But there's a theme laid down in *Diving Rock*, and carried on in *From Bondage*, that's unforgettably "heavy": Ira's incestuous affair with his kid sister, Minnie. This affair begins before they even know how to do it (after a while Ira goes to a prostitute, who shows him what to put where and

how). It goes on for years; as *From Bondage* ends, we don't know if it's really over. When *Diving Rock* came out last year, there was lots of discussion about whether the real Henry Roth and his real sister had committed incest. I don't see why anyone outside their family should care. What we readers should care about is how he writes incest. And he writes it brilliantly, with a remarkable fusion of physical detail and emotional energy. He shows it to us at once from outside, where it's a blatantly disgusting thing to do, and from inside, where it's the one inescapable, perfectly right thing to do. Here his energy level surges up to *Call It Sleep*-like peaks (remember, there was an incestuous love there too); when he does anything else, his prose sags.

Roth's ambivalent incest vision may be part of a larger conflict about sex itself. Sometimes he considers it just plain disgusting and his writing turns clunky: "He had used Edith basely... to gratify his sexual urge—and in front of a mirror to intensify his gratification—and she, poor woman, had more than acquiesced—had urged him on." (He drags St. Augustine in to legitimize this way of talking.) It is essentially men who are guilty of this abomination. Women apparently have no desires of their own. But women—even saintly women, even Mom, even his wife—pollute and incriminate themselves by going along.

In spite of this, when Roth focuses on the affair between Ira and Minnie, he portrays sex with great empathy for both of them. The fact that this guy over 80 can write so vividly about sex between people under 20 is a stirring tribute to the power of the imagination. He's best on the details: on the experience of losing control, making too much noise and risking discovery, on learning to put on a condom so it won't fall off, on missing a period, on learning to give your partner pleasure along with your own, on depths of rage and hate that love and pleasure can open up—and on how all these classic sexual risks and terrors explode through the roof if the person whose sweat is mixing with yours is your sister. This is both thrilling and unnerving to read—and not only for those of us who love our sisters. In Roth's best writing, both early and late, sex and incest come to symbolize each other. Stated as a formula it sounds absurd, but his gift as a writer makes it feel right.

Ira and Minnie's incest is the source of the best scene in *From Bondage*: It is the mid-twenties. Ira is a junior at C.C.N.Y.; Minnie, a senior at elite Julia Richmond

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High School, is planning to go to Hunter and become a teacher. Their affair seems to be winding down, and both are falling in love with people who are not only outside their family (about time!) but outside their people—goyim, non-Jews. One day Minnie bursts into the house sobbing, and throws herself into Ira's arms: "My s.... The speaking test. I failed.... I have a lateral s.... They don't want me.... It was only the Jewish girls."

(Minnie is hysterical, but historically right. Boards of education all over the United States were appalled to find that people who passed their teaching exams were overwhelmingly Jews. They added a speech test designed specifically to keep Jews out. For a couple of decades, this policy kept U.S. school systems effectively *Judenrein*. It was only after World War II and the G.I. Bill that Jews broke through.)

Ira offers brotherly support, and tells how anti-Semites have hurt him, too. But Minnie wants more: She wants him to fuck her, right here, right now. She talks dirty to turn him on; it works, as she knew it would. She says he has ruined her, now she's just a whore. He says she's not ruined. "So do it to me if there's nothing wrong with me." But their parents will be home any minute. She doesn't care, let them see what she is. Her screaming gets louder, more out of control. "So fuck me and I'll shut up.... You're my brother, so cure me.... You know you can do it in a minute." She lifts her skirt up, and pulls her panties down. "Get your cock out.... I want it."

Breathing heavily, Ira reaches to lock the door. But he can't bring himself to do it. "No. For once, no." Instead, he presses her to get dressed, to wash herself, freshen her face, look normal. In a little while, she is grateful. He steers her and himself back to their books. They look like a perfect brother and sister when their parents come home.

Ira looks back on this harrowing scene, and attacks himself: "He had tainted her forever." But readers are likely to disagree. After years of taking advantage of Minnie, he has finally offered her the protective care a sister might expect from an older brother—for once, Ira has acted like a mensch. It's true that, in the past, Minnie herself was always "consenting"; but she was hardly an "adult." Ira wasn't very grown up either; but he may be on his way now. Whatever it might mean to outgrow incest, this dreadful scene could be a start. The nightmarish moment they have just shared might turn out to be a turning point in both their lives, a moment of overcoming and moral growth.

It *might* be—but you won't get a chance to decide, because it's vanished from the published book. I read this scene in a set of

galleys that I received at the end of March and took it for granted as I imagined my review. Then, some weeks ago, in the Jewish Museum, a man I'd never met saw me carrying the galleys and asked me if the rumor was true that Roth's sister's lawyers had "forced them to take out all the incest." I laughed, read him a little from the scene I've quoted above, and said not to worry. But then I realized I had never seen the book itself. I called the publisher and spoke to Robert Weil, Roth's editor, and to other people in many departments, and to Larry Fox, Roth's lawyer and literary executor. I spent most of the day on the phone. It was a strange day. (*Dummkopf*, why didn't I at least get it on tape?)

I was told that the rumor was absurd, and apart from typos, there were no changes at all. Still, people were startled to hear I had a set of galleys. Which set of galleys? they asked, thus kindly letting me know there was more than one. I tried to find out if Roth's sister or anyone else was suing or threatening to sue. And who actually made the decision that changes had to be made, and on what basis? I was told that nobody was threatening anybody, and Roth's sister was a very nice 90-year-old woman in a nursing home in the Bronx, and she wasn't disturbing anybody, and why should anyone want to hurt her? I asked the lawyer, So where's the pressure coming from? He said, What pressure? I wondered, What *film noir* am I in?

At this point I could sense a process I've seen before: Corporate legal departments win the culture wars. Editors—or, as they are always reminded when there's trouble, editorial employees—are hung out to dry and forced to smile. Writers are forgotten (is that guy dead? alive? or what?) and always the last to know.

In the scene you'll find in print, Minnie comes home distraught and tells her sad story, Ira consoles her in decent normal ways and that's just about all. The publishers haven't exactly "taken out all the incest" but they've done their best to clean it up. When Ira curses the anti-Semites who have done Minnie wrong, she says the real reason for her misfortunes in school is that "I let you lay me." Her guilt and magical thinking are not implausible. What's weird is the way her own desires, so active and volatile in the writer's version, are airbrushed out of the publisher's version. In the galleys, as Roth wrote them, the sexual bond between brother and sister is fearfully intense. In the book it's redescribed not only as something *he* did to *her* (did they bring in Catharine MacKinnon to rewrite her dialogue?) but as a force that can be

eliminated if you simply put it in the past tense. In the galleys, the crosscurrents and contradictions of desire create a harrowing but brilliant scene, a dramatic explosion with transformative power. In the published book, with the woman's desires written out of the script, nothing can happen and there's nothing to remember.

The rewriting is especially sad if we look at it in the light of one of Neo-Roth's most poignant notes to himself. He says he had tried to keep his sister out of his story because he felt guilty toward her. Then he came to see that excluding her would only continue the mistreatment that he felt so guilty about. He asks himself, "When will you admit her to the realm of a legitimate character, acting, active, asserting herself, an individual?" He answers, "I don't know if I'll ever be able to write about her in all the emotional dimensions she deserves. But I have to do something." Roth did do something: He created a compelling girl-woman with inner depth who has grown up too fast and who deserves sympathy and respect. The way in which *From Bondage* was cut suggests that somebody with power wanted to "protect" Roth's sister from him. But also to "protect" the Jewish people from an incest story by one of its most beloved writers, where the girl is not a helpless victim of male lust (there's always room for more women as victims) but an "acting, active, asserting" individual who wants to do it herself.

Does Henry Roth's sister need such protection? Do the Jewish people? (For that matter, do any people?) What we do need is protection from our protectors, breathing space to live and reflect on our lives. Corporate censorship is a crime against the living as well as against the dead. I hope future editions of *From Bondage* will be free enough to let Minnie Stigman come into her own, and I hope we will all be free enough to look her in the face and live with her.

Henry Roth was inspired by the audacious, expansive, world-conquering spirit of twentieth-century Modernism. The world that was his to conquer was the claustrophobic world of the modern ghetto: the street, the block, the house, the apartment, the family. Roth, like many writers, saw the social forces that were pulling the modern family and the modern self apart. But, as a Jew living through a Jewish family, he also saw something else: the family imploding, crashing in on itself, with a love so intimate it was incestuous, perishing from its very richness of being. He never freed himself from bondage to this tragic vision, except to fall into something even worse: the feel

of not to feel it, a life in death. Roth wandered in a desert of paralysis for 40 years. But then he came back, to wrestle with his angel, to try to make a home in the bonds of love. I think all of us are caught up in his

struggle: This is what the words "modern life" mean. But there are people with power who want to paper it over. We need to watch out for them and the desert that has been prepared for us all.