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Henry Roth's Neglected Masterpiece

After the publication in 1935 of his first and only novel, Call It Sleep, HENRY ROTH *retired completely from the literary scene until last year when his parable, "At Times in Flight," appeared in* COMMENTARY *(July 1959). Asked to write a memoir of his years as a poultry farmer in Augusta, Maine, Mr. Roth produced another parable, "The Dun Dakotas," which we publish here along with* LESLIE A. FIEDLER's *revaluation of* Call It Sleep. *Mr. Fiedler is the author of* An End to Innocence *and* Love and Death in the American Novel. *A new edition of* Call It Sleep *will be issued in the fall by the Pageant Book Co.*

IT WOULD not be quite true to say that Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* went unnoticed when it appeared in 1935. One contemporary reviewer at least was willing to call it "a great novel" and to hope that it might win the Pulitzer Prize, "which," that reviewer added mournfully, "it never will." It never did, the prize going instead to H. L. Davis's *Honey in the Horn,* which was also the Harper Prize Novel of the year and was even touted by Robert Penn Warren in the *Southern Review*—then still being subsidized by Huey Long. Not only the Southern Agrarians were looking elsewhere, however, when Roth's single book was published; almost everyone seemed to have his eye on his own preferred horizon, on which he was pretending to find his own preferred rising star.

The official "proletarian" party was busy hailing Clara Weatherwax for a desolately enthusiastic tract disguised as fiction and called *Marching! Marching!* "*Marching! Marching!*"—runs the jacket blurb—"is the winner of *The New Masses* contest for a novel on an American Proletarian theme, conducted jointly by *The New Masses* and the John Day Company—the first contest of the kind ever held." It was also the last such contest, partly, one hopes, because of the flagrant badness of the winner (the climax of Miss Weatherwax's book runs as follows: ". . . some of us thinking *Jeez! Bayonets! Machine Guns! They got gas masks on those bags around their necks on their chests—gas!* and others *For God's sake, you guys, don't shoot us! Come over to our side. Why should you kill us? We are your brothers*") —but chiefly, one suspects, because a basic change in the political line of the Comintern instituted in 1936 led to the substitution of the Popular Front novel for the Proletarian one.

John Steinbeck, the most sensitive recorder of that shift, was to publish his resolutely proletarian *In Dubious Battle* in 1936, but this reflects a lag demanded by the exigencies of publishing. *The Grapes of Wrath,* which represents the full-scale political-sentimental novel of the last half of the 30's, did not reach print until 1939. Meanwhile, Dos Passos and Farrell, the most ambitious talents of the first part of the decade, were closing out their accounts by putting between the covers of single volumes those fat trilogies

(*Studs Lonigan* actually appeared in 1935; *U.S.A.* was that year in its last stages) which seemed for a while to the literary historians the great achievements of the period. And at the same time, Hemingway was preparing for his own brief fling at being a "proletarian" author, improbably publishing a section of *To Have and Have Not* in *Cosmopolitan* magazine during 1934.

To the more dogged proletarian critics, Henry Roth seemed beside Weatherwax or Dos Passos, Farrell or even Hemingway woefully "poetic" and uncommitted. "He pleads [prefers?] diffuse poetry to the social light . . ." the reviewer for the *New Republic* complained, adding rather obscurely but surely unfavorably that Roth "pinkly through the flesh sees the angry sunset." Actually, there was some point in chiding Roth for not writing a "socially conscious" book, since his dedication to Eda Lou Walton (his teacher, sponsor, and friend, who had identified herself clearly enough with the proletarian cause) indicated a declaration if not of allegiance at least of general sympathy. Certainly Roth did not take his stand outside of the world bounded by the *New Masses,* the *Nation,* and the *New Republic,* as, say, did John Peale Bishop, whose *Act of Darkness* was also published in 1935, or Thomas Wolfe, whose *Of Time and the River* was just then thrilling the adolescent audience for whom he had rediscovered *Weltschmerz* in *Look Homeward, Angel.* Nor was Roth willing to launch the sort of satirical attack on social commitment undertaken only a year later by another young Jewish writer, Daniel Fuchs, in *Homage to Blenholt.*

He was ideologically in much the same position as Nathanael West, whose *A Cool Million* appeared in the same year with *Call It Sleep,* and whose technique, different as it was, also baffled the official "proletarians." Both had reached intellectual maturity inside a world of beliefs which they felt no impulse to deny but which they did not find viable in their art. West died inside that world and Roth apparently still inhabits it insofar as he retains any connection with literary life at all. At any rate, looking back from 1960 and the poultry farm in Maine to which he has finally withdrawn, that is the world he remembers. "Is Yaddo still functioning?" he recently asked an interviewer. "Whatever happened to Horace Gregory and Ben Belitt?" There is a half-comic pathos in the questions and the continuing faith from which they spring that a literary movement to which Roth never quite belonged must still somehow be going on.

But in Roth's novel itself there is little enough manifest social consciousness. Though his scene is Brownsville and the East Side of New York just after the turn of the century and his protagonists are a working-class Jewish immigrant family, there is small sense of an economic struggle. Jobs are gotten and lost because of psychological quirks and dark inner compulsions; money does not corrupt nor does poverty redeem; no one wants to rise like David Levinsky or fears to fall like the harried protagonists of Theodore Dreiser. If there is a class struggle and a revolutionary movement, these are revealed only in an overheard scrap of soapbox oratory at the climax of the novel, where they seem singularly irrelevant to the passion and suffering of Roth's child hero who is living through that climax.

> "In 1789, in 1848, in 1871, in 1905, he who has anything to save will enslave us anew! Or if not enslave will desert us when the red cock crows! Only the laboring poor, only the masses embittered, bewildered, betrayed, in the day the red cock crows, can free us!"

But even this prophecy uttered out of a "pale, gilt-spectacled, fanatic face," is turned into a brutal sexual jest, recast in light of the obsession which rides the book, its protagonist, and its author. "How many times'll your red cock crow, Pete, befaw y'gives up? T'ree?" asks a mocking Irish voice from the sidelines.

Perhaps it is this obsessive transformation of all experience into equivocations based on a hated and feared sexuality which put off the kind of reader who might have been expected to hail the kind of book Roth actually wrote. That the *New Masses* critics deplored him and the Southern Agrarians scarcely registered his existence is, after all, to be expected; nor is it proper to feel dismay over the yellowing lists of best-sellers in old newspapers, carefully documented testimony to what the largest audience was reading in 1935 *instead* of Roth. For some the whimsy, Anglophile or pseudo-Oriental, of James Hilton (both *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* and *Lost Horizon* topped the lists) seemed the specific demanded by the pangs of the Great Depression, while others found tranquility in the religiosity of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* or in Mary Pickford's *Why Not Try God?* For those less serious or more chic, there was the eunuchoid malice and sentimentality of Alexander Woollcott's *While Rome Burns;* and the most nearly invisible audience of all (furtive high school boys standing at the circulating library racks in candy stores and their older sisters behind the closed doors of their bedrooms) were reading Donald Henderson Clarke's *Millie* and *Louis Beretti*—the demi-pornography which no library would think of stocking twenty-five years later.

But what of those specifically interested in Jewish literature in the United States, those who, picking up a first novel by a twenty-seven-year-old New Yorker, thought of Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* or remembered Abraham Cahan's breakthrough to the rich disorderly material of Jewish American life? There is surely no more Jewish book among American novels. Though its young hero, David Schearl, for instance, goes to public school, that Gentile area of experience is left shadowy, unrealized. Only his home and the *cheder* and the streets between become real places, as only Yiddish and Hebrew and the poor dialects of those to whom English is an alien tongue are rendered as real languages. And yet those presumably looking for the flowering of a rich and satisfactory Jewish American literature were not moved to applaud.

Some of them, on the contrary, protested against the unloveliness of Roth's ghetto images, the vulgarity and poverty of the speech he recorded—as if he had invented them maliciously. "Doggedly smeared with verbal filthiness," one such critic wrote. "*Call It Sleep* is by far the foulest picture of the East Side that has yet appeared." It is, of course, the typical, the expected response to the serious writer by the official spokesmen of the community out of which he comes. Yet there was in Roth a special kind of offensiveness, capable of stirring a more than conventional reaction; for the real foulness of his book is rendered not directly but through the consciousness of an extraordinarily acute and sensitive boy of seven or eight. Its vulgarity, that is to say, is presented as *felt* vulgarity, grossness assailing a sensibility with no defenses against it.

THE technique of *Call It Sleep* is contrived to make manifest at every moment that its real subject is not so much abomination in the streets as that abomination in the mind. Aside from a prelude, in which the arrival of David and his mother in America is objectively narrated, and a section toward the book's end which blends into a Joycean rhapsody the sounds of a score of city voices as overheard by some omniscient Listener—the whole substance of the novel is presented as what happens inside the small haunted head of David. It is only through him that we know the dark cellar swarming with rats whose door he must pass on his way in or out of the warm sanctuary of his home; the rage and guilt of his paranoid father or that father's impotence and fantasies of being cuckolded; his mother's melancholy, and her soft, unfulfilled sexuality; the promise of her body and the way in

which it is ogled by others; the fact of sex in general as pollution, the very opposite of love. For David, the act by which he was generated is an unmitigated horror (in a dark closet, reeking of mothballs, he is initiated by a crippled girl, her braces creaking as she embraces him, "Between the legs. Who puts id in is de poppa. De poppa's god de petzel. You de poppa"); and he longs for a purity he cannot find in his world, a fire, a flame to purify him from his iniquity as he has learned in *cheder* Isaiah was once purified.

No book insists more on the distance between the foulness man lives and the purity he dreams; but none makes more clear how deeply rooted that dream is in the existence which seems to contradict it. It is, perhaps, this double insight which gives to Roth's book a Jewish character, quite independent of the subject matter with which he happens to deal. Certainly, it reveals his kinship to Nathanael West, also a novelist of the 30's, whose relationship to his own Jewishness is much more equivocal than Roth's, but who quotes in his earliest book an observation of Doughty's about the nature of Semites in general which illuminates his own work as well as Roth's: the Semite stands in dung up to his eyes, but his brow touches the heavens. Indeed, in Jewish American fiction from Abraham Cahan to Philip Roth, that polarity and tension are present everywhere, the Jew mediating between dung and God, as if his eternal function were to prove that man is most himself not when he turns first to one then to the other—but when he touches both at once. And who can project the awareness of this more intensely and dramatically than the child, the Jewish child?

It is possible to imagine many reasons for Roth's retreating to childhood from adult experience; for retreat it does seem in the light of his second withdrawal, after the publication of a single book, into the silence in which he has persisted until now. To have written such a book and no other is to betray some deep trouble not only in finding words but in loving the life one has lived enough to *want* to find words for it. A retreat from all that 1935 meant to Roth: from the exigencies of adult sexuality and political commitment alike—this is what *Call It Sleep* seems to the retrospective insight of 1960. The book begins in 1907, and though it jumps quickly some five years, never quite reaches the year of the Russian Revolution (the roster of splendid betrayals listed by the street-corner speaker stops at 1905) and the vagaries of Leninism-Stalinism; just as in coming to a close in a boy's eighth year it stops safely short of the point where "playing bad" becomes an act that can end in deflowering or pregnancy. In its world before the falls of puberty and the October Revolution, one can remember 1905 and Mama—play out the dream of the apocalypse and the Oedipal triangle in all naivety.

CUED by whatever fears, Roth's turning to childhood enables him to render his story as dream and nightmare, fantasy and myth—to escape the limits of that realism which makes of other accounts of ghetto childhood documents rather than poetry. In its own time *Call It Sleep* was occasionally compared to Farrell's *Young Lonigan,* but one cannot conceive of such a foreword to Roth's book as that written for Farrell's by "Frederic M. Thrasher, Associate Professor of Education, New York University, Author of *The Gang.*" Roth's book aspires not to sociology but to theology; it is finally and astonishingly a religious book, though this fact even its latest admiring critics tend to ignore or underplay. Only in the account of a child's experience could a protégé of Eda Lou Walton (it would have been another matter if he had been sponsored by Mary Pickford) have gotten away with a religious resolution to a serious novel about ghetto life; and it was to a child's experience that he was canny enough to turn. An evasion of responsibility? A strategic

device of great subtlety? It is not necessary to decide.

David Schearl, at any rate, is portrayed not only as a small boy and a Jew but also as a "mystic," a naive adept visited by visions he scarcely understands until a phrase from the sixth chapter of Isaiah illuminates for him his own improbable prophetic initiation. Having just burned the leaven of the year in preparation for the Passover ("All burned black. See God, I was good? Now only white Matzohs are left"), David sits watching the play of light on the river and is transported ("His spirit yielded, melted into light . . . . Brighter than day . . . Brighter"). But he is awakened from his ecstasy by the tooting of a barge ("Funny little lights all gone. Like when you squeeze too hard on a toilet . . ."), thrust back into darkness until two Gentile hoodlums persuade him to drop a strip of zinc down into the third rail of a trolley line and he feels that in the dark bowels of the earth he has discovered the source of all light ("And light, unleashed, terrific light bellowed out of iron lips"). This light he identifies with the burning coal that cleansed the unclean lips of Isaiah, though his rabbi mocks him ("Fool! Go beat your head on a wall! God's light is not between car-tracks")—and in his joy he wets his pants.

For better or worse, the prophetic poetry reduced to an exercise learned by rote and beaten into unwilling boys has come alive in David, delivered him from fear so that he can climb the darkest stairway untroubled. ("Gee! Look! Look! Is a light . . . Ain't really there. Inside my head. Better is inside. . . .") Released a little from the warm bondage that binds him to his mother, he can climb now even to the roof of his house, where he meets for the first time the Gentile boy, Leo, a twelve-year-old seducer and eater of forbidden foods, beside whose absolute freedom David's limited release seems slavery still. And in Leo's house he finds new images for the inner light, the purifying flame, in a portrait of Jesus with the Burning Heart and a box bearing the symbolic fish, the name GOD. For the rosary that box contains, he agrees to introduce Leo to his sluttish cousin Esther, whose grimy favors Leo finally wins in the cellar beneath her mother's candy store.

As Leo and Esther squeal and pant in the darkness of one cellar shed, David crouches in another trying to exact light from the holy beads for which he has betrayed his family, his Jewishness, his very desire for cleanliness.

> Past drifting bubbles of grey and icy needles of grey, below a mousetrap, a cogwheel, below a step and a dwarf with a sack upon his back . . . sank the beads, gold figure on a cross swinging slowly . . . At the floor of the vast pit of silence glimmered the round light, pulsed and glimmered like a coin.
>
> —Touch it! Touch it! Drop!

But the light eludes his efforts; and the other two, who have performed the act of darkness at the very moment he sought the light, emerge blaming each other as they are discovered by Esther's sister. "Tell 'er wut I wuz doin', kid," Leo blusters. "Yuh jew hewhs! We wuz hidin' de balonee– Yaa! Sheenee!"

After such a denouement, nothing is possible for David but a plunge into hysteria, a hysteria which overcomes him as he is rereading the passage about the calling of Isaiah, betrays him into telling to his *rebbe* a story compounded half of his father's delusions, dimly perceived, and half of certain reminiscences of his mother, ill understood: his mother is not his *real* mother, he is a bastard, son of a goyish organist in an old country church etc., etc. This fantasy the *rebbe* hastens to carry to David's home, arriving a moment before the horrified parents of Esther appear with their own scandal. And David, overwhelmed by guilt and fear, offers to his father a whip, grovels at his feet, the rosary falling from his pocket as if to testify to the truth of his illegitimacy, his

contaminated blood. At this point, he must run for his life, his father's long rage at last fulfilled, presumably justified; and he runs where he must, toward God in the dark cleft, to the third rail, the coal of fire that can take away iniquity.

He snatches a ladle from beside a milk pail and flees to an obbligato of city voices, which from the girders of a half-finished building, a warehouse, a bar, a poker table speak with unclean lips of lust and greed, hatred and vengefulness. Only David dreams of a consummation that will transcend and redeem the flesh, finally thrusts the metal he bears between the black lips of the tracks and the awful lightning is released, his body shaken by ineffable power, and his consciousness all but obliterated. Yet his intended sacrifice redeems no one, merely adds a new range of ambiguity to the chorus in which one voice blasphemes against the faith of another and all against love. Himself dazzled, the reader hears again certain phrases he has before only half understood, listens again, for instance, to the bar-room voice that mocked the street-corner orator, "How many times'll your red cock crow, Pete, befaw y'gives up? T'ree?"—notices the "three," the name "Pete," and remembers the other Peter who, three times before the cock crow, denied his Rabbi.

In the interplay of ironies and evasions the final meaning of the failed sacrifice, the private apocalypse (the boy does not die; the world is not made clean; only his parents are rejoined more in weariness than affection over his bed) is never made quite clear, only the transcendence of that meaning, its more than natural character. Turning the final pages of Roth's book, one realizes suddenly how in the time of the Great Depression all the more serious fictionists yearned in secret to touch a religious note, toying with the messianic and the apocalyptic but refusing to call them by names not honored in the left-wing journals of the time. The final honesty of Roth's book lies in its refusal to call by any fashionable honorific name its child hero's bafflement as he learns the special beauty of a world which remains stubbornly unredeemed: "Not pain, not terror, but strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence. One might as well call it sleep."

The Dun Dakotas

HENRY ROTH

THERE was something ruinous about the time, or fatal to creative gusto, or so I feel. I have my inklings about its nature, my brief illumination, but just what it was I leave to others more competent at defining abstractions or rendering something definitive out of the multitude of eddies and appearances. The same sort of thing, we know, has happened before, also in a kind of revolutionary age, or one of rapid transition—the Romantics of the 19th century who either died physically, or figuratively, on the stump.

I have spent a great deal of time wondering about it; I don't spend so much now. By now, I console myself with the thought that my creative powers, such as they were, even though fully employed, would be on the decline anyway, and by now I would have met myself perhaps with certain volumes published, and conscious of a certain modicum of acclaim, and in possession of certain emoluments,

to be sure. What difference does it make? The years would have been over in any event. Poor solace, I know. The mind shuttles and reminds. We go this way only once; and shuttles again and rejoins: once is enough.

I think it's been a tough time for writers, as it is. But on the other hand, when hasn't it been? And yet I know that there are periods of greater and lesser ferment, and inevitably those artists are luckier who have as a booster, so to speak, a dynamic time. We, at least those of my generation whom I knew, had it for a time, so I think, the fag end of it. But enough, you know, to get a sense of heady pioneering, stir, viable horizons. What's done's done, undone's undone; take it or leave it.

I'll tell you. In the whole range of my thoughts on the subject—and who hasn't his private continuum — right now it's morning. The sun is over the stable, and before me, between the house and stable lies the framed bit of snow-covered countryside in the state of Maine. You can see this could be the origin of a great many things that I could say about my life since *C.I.S.* was published. I can hear the geese bickering behind the stable, and anything I would mention would represent some phase of my present existence—and of course would have its trail all the way back to New York City, the slum childhood, the awareness of some talent, the creative period and the débâcle, and so forth. One has to put a term to things—fill it in as you like. I was a writer once, just as I was an eager East Side kid before that, and a mopey Harlem youth in the interim, who am now a waterfowl farmer. I don't know —now—how long I'll continue to be that. For one thing, one boy is already at college, and the other soon to go. Who will help around the place, lug in geese to be processed, help pluck, shovel the long driveway, chuck cord wood down the cellar bulkhead, and do the hundred chores of arms and legs. And at fifty-four, one's back begins to feel at times as if the plates had been welded.

I'D LIKE to tell you a story, a yarn. It's sort of importunate at the back of my mind, though I'm not sure it's appropriate. And yet I find that these importunings are somehow more apt to be better guides of my destination than my reasoning.

It concerns an expedition into the Dakotas, and more particularly concerns a prologue that I was engaged in writing for the second novel—this, after I had already written a sizeable section. I haven't the prologue with me any more, and won't even attempt to reconstruct it as it was. The inevitable mule team, the soldiers trudging alongside, led by a Captain and a Scout, were crossing from the Bad Lands to the Black Hills. They had been commissioned to do a topographical study of their part of the country, and this was during the 70's of the last century. You can imagine the gnarled terrain, or consult an encyclopedia, or consult Mr. Eliot—the wrenched and contorted land, the lopped pillars and the grinning gulleys—the Scout reined in his horse: "Captain," he said, "did you ever see red cabbage a'growin'?"

The captain reflected: "I've seen red cabbage. I don't know as I ever saw it a'growin'."

"You'll see it now," said the Scout. "Look around you."

And the Captain looked. And on every ridge surrounding them, there were Redskins mounted on their ponies, their eagle feathers against the sky, a veritable paling of feather-crested men.

"Well," said the Captain, "what do we do now?"

"We gamble," said the Scout. "That's all we can do." He urged his horse ahead a few steps, and raised his arm in signal for parley. And down one of the nearby slopes clattered the bonneted Chief and some of his Braves. "How." No doubt, they said, "How." And perhaps, how kola.

"White man on my people hunting ground," said the Chief.

"Chief," said the Scout, "we're just passin' through. White Father in Washington send us to make picture."

"Picture?"

"Picture of the land. So all white settler stay out. Keep peace."

"Ugh!" the Chief relaxed.

"Chief gamble?" said the Scout, producing a deck of cards. "Chief savvy cards?"

"Savvy poker," said the Chief.

"Good." They placed a blanket on the ground, and the two men gambled. They gambled for silver dollars, there between the Black Hills and the Bad Lands, among the stupendous shapes, under the stupendous sky. And the Chief's luck was extraordinary, and the Scout's bad luck equally so. He lost hand after hand, stake after stake, and his pile of silver dollars dwindled. "Never see such luck," said the Scout.

"Ugh," said the Chief. "Chief heap lucky. Heap strong."

And when his last silver dollar had changed hands, the Scout rose. "Chief," he said, "you won all our money. You let us pass now?"

The Chief folded his arms across his chest and dreamed a long dream or a long thought—whether of bison, or the bright tepees of childhood, or the game birds of youth I do not know.

But that was as far as I got for over twenty-five years, waiting for the decision of the Chief who had turned into stone or into legend, waiting for a man to decide what history was in the dun Dakotas, waiting for a sanction; and oddly enough it would have to be the victim who would provide it, though none could say who was the victim, who the victor. And only now can I tell you, and perhaps it's a good sign—at least for my generation, who waited with me—though perhaps it's too late.

"Will the Chief let us pass?" the Scout repeated. "Always remember Great Chief."

And the Chief unfolded his arms and motioned them the way of their journey. "Go now," he said.