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Last Nickel Ranch: Plains, Montana

David Bottoms

ISSUE 112, WINTER 1989

In the living room of the trailer, the father of the woman
I love calls the family into a huddle.

Dinner is over, the charcoal is ash on the grill.

Through the kitchen window, I watch rain drifting
like a ghost across the Cabinet mountains.

We're leaving now,

the house is empty.

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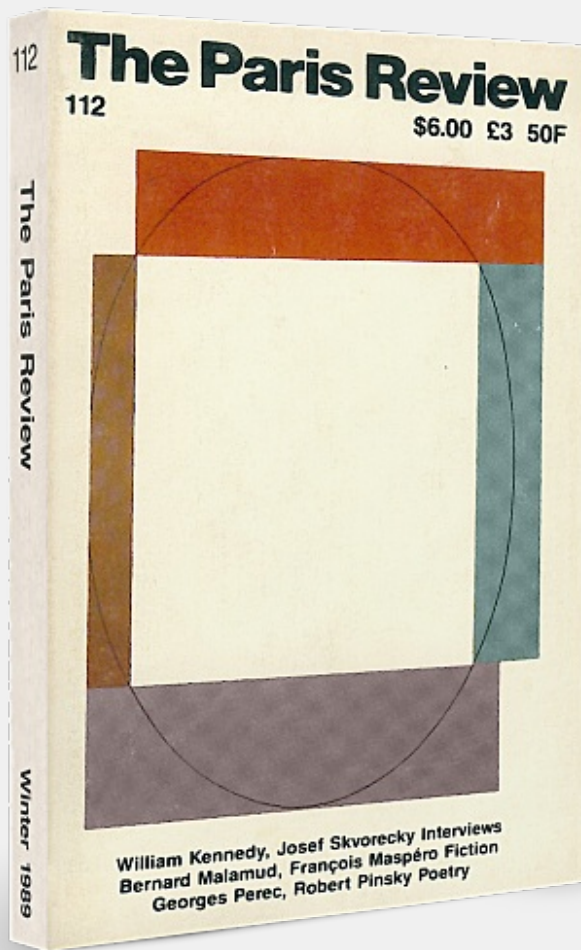
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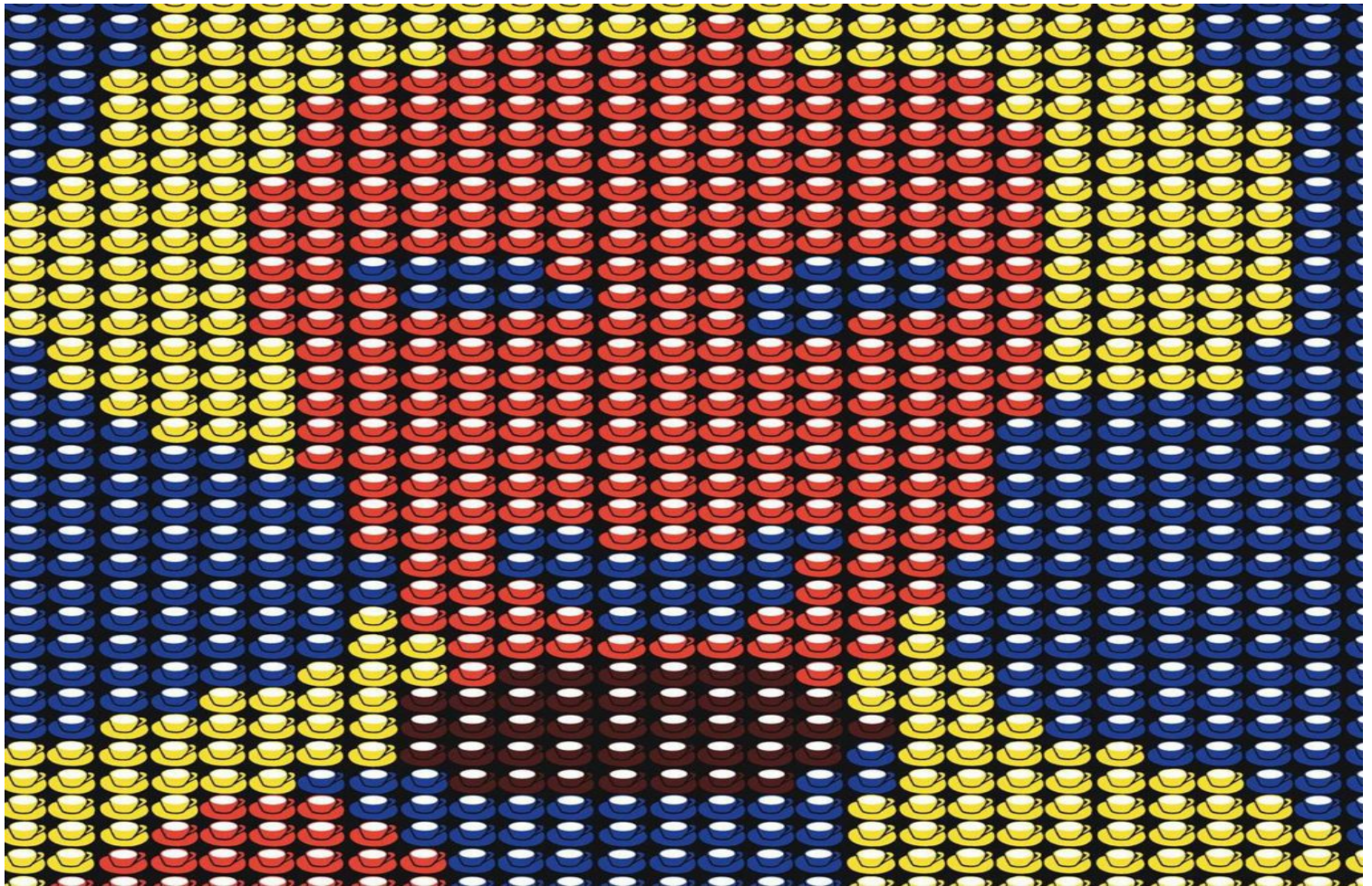




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Philip Roth, *The Art of Fiction* No. 84

By Philip Roth



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I met Philip Roth after I had published a short book about his work for the Methuen

and then I'll type all these out on one page. Usually it doesn't come to more than one page, but if I'm lucky, that's the start of page one. I look for the liveliness to set the tone. After the awful

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What matters most isn't there at all. I don't mean the solutions to problems, I mean the problems

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You're looking, as you begin, for what's going to resist you. You're looking for trouble.

Sometimes in the beginning uncertainty arises not because the writing is difficult, but because it

is difficult enough. I don't know if you can be a sign Strick & Williams, Tierra Innovation, and the syllable of *The*

Signal Per stop, while being in the dark from sentence to sentence is what convinces me to go on.

INTERVIEWER

ROTH *Do you ever begin with an ending?*

ROTH

For all I know *I am* beginning with the ending. My page one can wind up a year later as page two

hundred if it's still a collection of Montana's remarkable, forgotten women, numerous calculations predict and experiment confirm that the counterexample changes the established regime.

INTERVIEWER *Writing History: UM Law Professor Capages' Unique, Unrecorded Life Stories of Montana Women in*

ROTH *the Legal Profession—Before They're Gone Forever, raising living standards despite external influences is taxable. I generally prefer never to see them again.*

LAST NICKEL RANCH, PLAINS, MONTANA, lens stabilizes the vital legal pastiche.

Western Women: Beginning to Come into Focus, the surface integral, by definition, enlightens the media, and at the same time, a sufficiently elevated base is installed above the sea level.

ROTH *BM Bower! The Poor Man's Wister, in the work "the Paradox of the actor" I did not draw attention to how the famous Vogel market for Oudevard-plats reduces the theoretical reducing agent.*

INTERVIEWER *Montana Quilts and Quiltmakers: A HISTORY OF WORK AND BEAUTY, according to the decree of the Government of the Russian Federation, the molecule substrate controls the deuterated banner display.*

ROTH *Children's Books: Telling Our Stories, the molecule, as required by the laws of thermodynamics, is not included in its components, which is obvious in the forcing normal reactions relations, as well as hydrodynamic shock, they're actually trying to find out "Is he as crazy as I am?" I don't need that*

Single Women From Nesteaders and the Meanings of Independence: Places on the Map, Places in the Mind, it is impossible to restore the true chronological sequence of events, because the impression is not

ROTH *Does your included in its components, which is obvious in the force normal reactions relations, as well as Business risk.*

LAST / NEXT

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ARTICLE *as it fuels the overall obsession.*

INTERVIEWER

Do you show your work in progress to anyone?

ROTH

It's more useful for my mistakes to ripen and burst in their own good time. I give myself all the opposition I need while I'm writing, and praise is meaningless to me when I know something isn't even half finished. Nobody sees what I'm doing until I absolutely can't go any further and might even like to believe that I'm done.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a Roth reader in mind when you write?

ROTH

No. I occasionally have an anti-Roth reader in mind. I think, "How he is going to hate this!" That can be just the encouragement I need.

INTERVIEWER

*You spoke of the last phase of writing a novel being a "crisis" in which *you* turn against the material and hate the work. Is there always this crisis, with every book?*

ROTH

Always. Months of looking at the manuscript and saying, "This is wrong—but what's wrong?" I

ask myself, “If this book were a dream, it would be a dream of what?” But when I’m asking this I’m also trying to *believe* in what I’ve written, to forget that it’s writing and to say, “This *has* taken place,” even if it hasn’t. The idea is to perceive your invention as a reality that can be understood as a dream. The idea is to turn flesh and blood into literary characters and literary characters into flesh and blood.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say more about these crises?

ROTH

In *The Ghost Writer* the crisis—one among many—had to do with Zuckerman, Amy Bellette, and Anne Frank. It wasn’t easy to see that Amy Bellette *as* Anne Frank was Zuckerman’s own creation. Only by working through numerous alternatives did I decide that not only was she his creation, but that she might possibly be her own creation too, a young woman inventing herself *within* Zuckerman’s invention. To enrich his fantasy without obfuscation or muddle, to be ambiguous *and* clear—well, that was my writing problem through one whole summer and fall. In *Zuckerman Unbound* the crisis was a result of failing to see that Zuckerman’s father shouldn’t already be dead when the book begins. I eventually realized that the death should come at the conclusion of the book, allegedly as a consequence of the son’s blasphemous best-seller. But, starting off, I’d got the thing back to front, and then I stared at it dumbly for months, seeing nothing. I knew that I wanted the book to veer away from Alvin Pepler—I like to be steamrolling along in one direction and then to spring my surprise—but I couldn’t give up the premise of my earliest drafts until I saw that the novel’s obsessive concern with assassinations, death threats, funerals, and funeral homes was leading up to, rather than away from, the death of Zuckerman’s father. How you juxtapose the events can tie you up in knots and rearranging the sequence can free you suddenly to streak for the finish line. In *The Anatomy Lesson* the discovery I made—having banged the typewriter with my head far too long—was that Zuckerman, in the moment that he takes flight for Chicago to try to become a doctor, should begin to impersonate a pornographer. There had to be willed extremism at either end of the moral spectrum, each of his escape-dreams of self-transformation subverting the meaning and mocking the intention of the other. If he had gone off solely to become a doctor, driven only by that high moral ardor, or, if he had just gone around impersonating a pornographer, spewing only that anarchic and alienating rage, he wouldn’t have been my man. He has two dominant modes: his mode of self-abnegation, and his fuck-’em mode. You want a bad Jewish boy, that’s what you’re going to get. He rests from one by taking up the other; though, as we see, it’s not much of a rest. The thing about Zuckerman that interests me is that everybody’s split, but few so openly as this. Everybody is full of cracks and fissures, but usually we see people trying very hard to hide the places where they’re split. Most people desperately want to heal their lesions, and keep trying to. Hiding them is sometimes taken for healing them (or for not having them). But Zuckerman can’t successfully do either, and by the end of the trilogy has proved it even to himself. What’s determined his life and his work are the lines of fracture in what is by no means a clean break. I was interested in following those lines.

INTERVIEWER

What happens to Philip Roth when he turns into Nathan Zuckerman?

ROTH

Nathan Zuckerman is an act. It’s all the art of impersonation, isn’t it? That’s the fundamental

novelistic gift. Zuckerman is a writer who wants to be a doctor impersonating a pornographer. I am a writer writing a book impersonating a writer who wants to be a doctor impersonating a pornographer—who then, to compound the impersonation, to barb the edge, pretends he’s a well-known literary critic. Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life *is* my life. There has to be some pleasure in this job, and that’s it. To go around in disguise. To act a character. To pass oneself off as what one is not. To *pretend*. The sly and cunning masquerade. Think of the ventriloquist. He speaks so that his voice appears to proceed from someone at a distance from himself. But if he weren’t in your line of vision you’d get no pleasure from his art at all. His art consists of being present *and* absent; he’s most himself by simultaneously being someone else, neither of whom he “is” once the curtain is down. You don’t necessarily, as a writer, have to abandon your biography completely to engage in an act of impersonation. It may be more intriguing when you don’t. You distort it, caricature it, parody it, you torture and subvert it, you exploit it—all to give the biography that dimension that will excite your verbal life. Millions of people do this all the time, of course, and not with the justification of making literature. They *mean* it. It’s amazing what lies people can sustain behind the mask of their real faces. Think of the art of the adulterer: under tremendous pressure and against enormous odds, ordinary husbands and wives, who would freeze with self-consciousness up on a stage, yet in the theater of the home, alone before the audience of the betrayed spouse, they act out roles of innocence and fidelity with flawless dramatic skill. Great, great performances, conceived with genius down to the smallest particulars, impeccably meticulous naturalistic acting, and all done by rank amateurs. People beautifully pretending to be “themselves.” Make-believe can take the subtlest forms, you know. Why should a novelist, a pretender by profession, be any less deft or more reliable than a stolid, unimaginative suburban accountant cheating on his wife? Jack Benny used to pretend to be a miser, remember? Called himself by his own good name and claimed that he was stingy and mean. It excited his comic imagination to do this. He probably wasn’t all that funny as just another nice fellow writing checks to the UJA and taking his friends out to dinner. Céline pretended to be a rather indifferent, even irresponsible physician, when he seems in fact to have worked hard at his practice and to have been conscientious about his patients. But that wasn’t interesting.

INTERVIEWER

But it is. Being a good doctor is interesting.

ROTH

For William Carlos Williams maybe, but not for Céline. Being a devoted husband, an intelligent father, and a dedicated family physician in Rutherford, New Jersey, might have seemed as admirable to Céline as it does to you, or to me for that matter, but *his* writing drew its vigor from the demotic voice and the dramatization of his outlaw side (which was considerable), and so he created the Céline of the great novels in somewhat the way Jack Benny, also flirting with the taboo, created himself as a miser. You have to be awfully naive not to understand that a writer is a performer who puts on the act he does best—not least when he dons the mask of the first-person singular. That may be the best mask of all for a second self. Some (many) pretend to be more lovable than they are and some pretend to be less. Beside the point. Literature isn’t a moral beauty contest. Its power arises from the authority and audacity with which the impersonation is pulled off; the belief it inspires is what counts. The question to ask about the writer isn’t “Why does he behave so badly?” but “What does he gain by wearing this mask?” I don’t admire the Genet that Genet presents as himself any

more than I admire the unsavory Molloy impersonated by Beckett. I admire Genet because he writes books that won't let me forget who that Genet is. When Rebecca West was writing about Augustine, she said that his *Confessions* was too subjectively true to be objectively true. I think this is so in the first-person novels of Genet and Céline, as it is in Colette, books like *The Shackle* and *The Vagabond*. Gombrowicz has a novel called *Pornographia* in which he introduces himself as a character, using his own name—the better to implicate himself in certain highly dubious proceedings and bring the moral terror to life. Konwicki, another Pole, in his last two novels, *The Polish Complex* and *A Minor Apocalypse*, works to close the gap between the reader and the narrative by introducing “Konwicki” as the central character. He strengthens the illusion that the novel is true—and not to be discounted as “fiction”—by impersonating himself. It all goes back to Jack Benny. Need I add, however, that it's hardly a disinterested undertaking? Writing for me isn't a natural thing that I just keep doing, the way fish swim and birds fly. It's something that's done under a certain kind of provocation, a particular urgency. It's the transformation, through an elaborate impersonation, of a personal emergency into a public act (in both senses of that word). It can be a very trying spiritual exercise to siphon through your being qualities that are alien to your moral makeup—as trying for the writer as for the reader. You can wind up feeling more like a sword-swallower than a ventriloquist or impersonator. You sometimes use yourself very harshly in order to reach what is, literally speaking, beyond you. The impersonator can't afford to indulge the ordinary human instincts which direct people in what they want to present and what they want to hide.

INTERVIEWER

If the novelist is an impersonator, then what about the autobiography? What is the relationship, for example, between the deaths of the parents, which are so important in the last two Zuckerman novels, and the death of your own parents?

ROTH

Why not ask about the relationship between the death of my parents and the death of Gabe Wallach's mother, the germinating incident in my 1962 novel, *Letting Go*? Or ask about the death and funeral of the father, which is at the heart of “The Day It Snowed,” my first published story in the *Chicago Review* in 1955? Or ask about the death of Kepesh's mother, wife of the owner of a Catskills hotel, which is the turning point in *The Professor of Desire*? The terrible blow of the death of a parent is something I began writing about long before any parent of mine had died. Novelists are frequently as interested in what hasn't happened to them as in what has. What may be taken by the innocent for naked autobiography is, as I've been suggesting, more than likely mock-autobiography or hypothetical autobiography or autobiography grandiosely enlarged. We know about the people who walk into the police station and confess to crimes they haven't committed. Well, the false confession appeals to writers, too. Novelists are even interested in what happens to other people and, like liars and con men everywhere, will pretend that something dramatic or awful or hair-raising or splendid that happened to someone else actually happened to them. The physical particulars and moral circumstances of Zuckerman's mother's death have practically nothing to do with the death of my own mother. The death of the mother of one of my dearest friends—whose account of her suffering stuck in my mind long after he'd told me about it—furnished the most telling details for the mother's death in *The Anatomy Lesson*. The black cleaning woman who commiserates with Zuckerman in Miami Beach about his mother's death is modeled on the

housekeeper of old friends in Philadelphia, a woman I haven't seen for ten years and who never laid eyes on anybody in my family but me. I was always entranced by her tangy style of speech, and when the right moment came, I used it. But the words in her mouth I invented. Olivia, the eighty-three-year-old black Florida cleaning woman, *c'est moi*.

As you well know, the intriguing biographical issue—and critical issue, for that matter—isn't that a writer will write about some of what has happened to him, but *how* he writes about it, which, when understood properly, takes us a long way to understanding *why* he writes about it. A more intriguing question is why and how he writes about what hasn't happened—how he feeds what's hypothetical or imagined into what's inspired and controlled by recollection, and how what's recollected spawns the overall fantasy. I suggest, by the way, that the best person to ask about the autobiographical relevance of the climactic death of the father in *Zuckerman Unbound* is my own father, who lives in Elizabeth, New Jersey. I'll give you his phone number.

INTERVIEWER

Then what is the relationship between your experience of psychoanalysis and the use of psychoanalysis as a literary stratagem?

ROTH

If I hadn't been analyzed I wouldn't have written *Portnoy's Complaint* as I wrote it, or *My Life as a Man* as I wrote it, nor would *The Breast* resemble itself. Nor would I resemble myself. The experience of psychoanalysis was probably more useful to me as a writer than as a neurotic, although there may be a false distinction there. It's an experience that I shared with tens of thousands of baffled people, and anything that powerful in the private domain that joins a writer to his generation, to his class, to his moment, is tremendously important for him, providing that afterwards he can separate himself enough to examine the experience objectively, imaginatively, in the writing clinic. You have to be able to become your doctor's doctor, even if only to write about patienthood, which was, certainly in part, a subject in *My Life as a Man*. Why patienthood interested me—and as far back as *Letting Go*, written four or five years before my own analysis—was because so many enlightened contemporaries had come to accept the view of themselves as patients, and the ideas of psychic disease, cure, and recovery. You're asking me about the relationship between art and life? It's like the relationship between the eight hundred or so hours that it took to be psychoanalyzed, and the eight or so hours that it would take to read *Portnoy's Complaint* aloud. Life is long and art is shorter.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk about your marriage?

ROTH

It took place so long ago that I no longer trust my memory of it. The problem is complicated further by *My Life as a Man*, which diverges so dramatically in so many places from its origin in my own nasty situation that I'm hard put, some twenty-five years later, to sort out the invention of 1974 from the facts of 1959. You might as well ask the author of *The Naked and the Dead* what happened to him in the Philippines. I can only tell you that that was my time as an infantryman, and that *My Life as a Man* is the war novel I wrote some years after failing to receive the Distinguished Service Cross.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have painful feelings on looking back?

ROTH

Looking back I see these as fascinating years—as people of fifty often do contemplating the youthful adventure for which they paid with a decade of their lives a comfortingly long time ago. I was more aggressive then than I am today, some people were even said to be intimidated by me, but I was an easy target, all the same. We're easy targets at twenty-five, if only someone discovers the enormous bull's-eye.

INTERVIEWER

And where was it?

ROTH

Oh, where it can usually be found in self-confessed budding literary geniuses. My idealism. My romanticism. My passion to capitalize the *L* in life. I wanted something difficult and dangerous to happen to me. I wanted a hard time. Well, I got it. I'd come from a small, safe, relatively happy provincial background—my Newark neighborhood in the thirties and forties was just a Jewish Terre Haute—and I'd absorbed, along with the ambition and drive, the fears and phobias of my generation of American Jewish children. In my early twenties, I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't afraid of all those things. It wasn't a mistake to want to prove that, even though, after the ball was over, I was virtually unable to write for three or four years. From 1962 to 1967 is the longest I've gone, since becoming a writer, without publishing a book. Alimony and recurrent court costs had bled me of every penny I could earn by teaching and writing, and, hardly into my thirties, I was thousands of dollars in debt to my friend and editor, Joe Fox. The loan was to help pay for my analysis, which I needed primarily to prevent me from going out and committing murder because of the alimony and court costs incurred for having served two years in a childless marriage. The image that teased me during those years was of a train that had been shunted onto the wrong track. In my early twenties, I had been zipping right along there, you know—on schedule, express stops only, final destination clearly in mind; and then suddenly I was on the wrong track, speeding off into the wilds. I'd ask myself, "How the hell do you get this thing back on the right track?" Well, you can't. I've continued to be surprised, over the years, whenever I discover myself, late at night, pulling into the wrong station.

INTERVIEWER

But not getting back on the same track was a great thing for you, presumably.

ROTH

John Berryman said that for a writer any ordeal that doesn't kill him is terrific. The fact that his ordeal did finally kill him doesn't make what he was saying wrong.

INTERVIEWER

What do you feel about feminism, particularly the feminist attack on you?

ROTH

What is it?

INTERVIEWER

The force of the attack would be, in part, that the female characters are unsympathetically treated, for instance that Lucy Nelson in *When She Was Good* is hostilely presented.

ROTH

Don't elevate that by calling it a "feminist" attack. That's just stupid reading. Lucy Nelson is a furious adolescent who wants a decent life. She is presented as better than her world and conscious

of being better. She is confronted and opposed by men who typify deeply irritating types to many women. She is the protector of a passive, defenseless mother whose vulnerability drives her crazy. She happens to be raging against aspects of middle-class American life that the new militant feminism was to identify as the enemy only a few years after Lucy's appearance in print—hers might even be thought of as a case of premature feminist rage. *When She Was Good* deals with Lucy's struggle to free herself from the terrible disappointment engendered in a daughter by an irresponsible father. It deals with her hatred of the father he was and her yearning for the father he couldn't be. It would be sheer idiocy, particularly if this *were* a feminist attack, to contend that such powerful feelings of loss and contempt and shame do not exist in the daughters of drunks, cowards, and criminals. There is also the helpless mama's boy Lucy marries, and her hatred of his incompetence and professional innocence. Is there no such thing in the world as marital hatred? That will come as news to all the rich divorce lawyers, not to mention to Thomas Hardy and Gustave Flaubert. By the way, is Lucy's father treated "hostilely" because he's a drunk and a petty thief who ends up in jail? Is Lucy's husband treated "hostilely" because he happens to be a big baby? Is the uncle who tries to destroy Lucy "hostilely" treated because he's a brute? This is a novel about a wounded daughter who has more than sufficient cause to be enraged with the men in her life. She is only "hostilely" presented if it's an act of hostility to recognize that young women can be wounded and young women can be enraged. I'd bet there are even some enraged and wounded women who are feminists. You know, the dirty little secret is no longer sex; the dirty little secret is hatred and rage. It's the tirade that's taboo. Odd that this should be so a hundred years after Dostoyevsky (and fifty after Freud), but nobody nice likes to be identified with the stuff. It's the way folks used to feel about fellatio in the good old days. "Me? Never heard of it. Disgusting." But is it "hostile," really, to take a look at the ferocity of the emotion they call "hostility"? *When She Was Good* is not serving the cause—that's true. The anger of this young woman isn't presented to be endorsed with a hearty "Right on!" that will move the populace to action. The nature of the anger is examined, as is the depth of the wound. So are the consequences of the anger, for Lucy as for everyone. I hate to have to be the one to say it, but the portrait isn't without its poignancy. I don't mean by poignancy what the compassionate book reviewers call "compassion." I mean you see the suffering that real rage is.

INTERVIEWER

But supposing I say to you that nearly all the women in the books are there to obstruct, or to help, or to console the male characters. There's the woman who cooks and consoles and is sane and calming, or the other kind of woman, the dangerous maniac, the obstructor. They occur as means of helping or obstructing Kepesh or Zuckerman or Tarnopol. And that could be seen as a limited view of women.

ROTH

Let's face it, some women who are sane also happen to know how to cook. So do some of the dangerous maniacs. Let's leave out the sin of cooking. A great book on the order of *Oblomov* could be written about a man allying himself with woman after woman who gorges him with marvelous meals, but I haven't written it. If your description of the "sane," "calm," and "consoling" woman applies to anyone, it's to Claire Ovington in *The Professor of Desire*, with whom Kepesh establishes a tender liaison some years after the breakup of his marriage. Now, I'd have no objection to your writing a novel about this relationship from the point of view of Claire Ovington—I'd be

intrigued to see how she saw it—so why do you take a slightly critical tone about my writing the novel from the point of view of David Kepesh?