

On Being Blocked & Other Literary Matters

An Interview

Henry Roth

HENRY ROTH's 1934 novel, *Call It Sleep*, which the English critic Walter Allen called one of "the great achievements of American writing in this century," was reprinted in 1960 and appeared in a best-selling paperback edition four years later. After writing his story of a boy growing up in an immigrant Jewish family, Roth wrote no other book. There were rumors about his activities, but he remained silent and gave few interviews.

Henry Roth and his wife live in a trailer in northwest Albuquerque. They came to New Mexico in 1968 when he received a fellowship to the D. H. Lawrence ranch in Taos. The Roths are retired, although Muriel Roth still arranges music and accompanies on the piano. Both are active in the intellectual and cultural activities of the Jewish community in Albuquerque. Henry Roth is about five feet, seven inches tall and bears a strong resemblance to David Ben-Gurion.

This interview was conducted by JOHN S. FRIEDMAN, a former senior editor at the Denver Magazine who now works for the Community Services Administration in Washington.

Interviewer: I would like to start with some background information. What were your early experiences, and what led you to write *Call It Sleep*?

Roth: The book's locale is the East Side of New York City, which was a decidedly homogeneous Jewish section in those years. Now, in 1914, just prior to World War I, that first great catastrophe of modern times, my parents moved from the East Side to Harlem because my mother wanted to be near her newly-arrived kinfolk. I was then eight. My father always fitted his dreams into actions that were taken on other grounds. He would then fit his current delusions into them—something like a hermit crab—he thought that he might be able to go directly to the milk shed on the West Side of Manhattan where the freight cars came in with bulk milk, and buy milk directly from the wholesalers who were purveying it there, and start a milk route of his own.

Interviewer: Where did your parents come from?

Roth: They came from Galicia, an area or province in what was then the Austro-Hungarian empire under the Emperor Franz-Joseph.

Interviewer: Did you come over with your mother as a small child?

Roth: I was born in Galicia, the same place that my mother and father were born.

Interviewer: Where in Galicia?

Roth: I was born in my father's town called Tis-

menicz, near Stryj, in the Carpatho-Ukraine. My mother went to live with my father's family when he left Galicia and came here. By the way, have you read *World of Our Fathers*?

Interviewer: Parts of it.

Roth: Well, we followed the classic pattern of immigration, in which the husband came over first and accumulated enough money to send for the rest of the family. My father came here first and later sent for my mother and me. Here's another thing; afterward, there developed a confusion about my age at arrival, because my mother insisted that I was only eighteen months old. My father said I was over two years old.

Interviewer: So, you moved to Harlem when you were eight. How did that differ from the Lower East Side?

Roth: When we moved to Harlem, we moved to the fringe of what was then Little Italy, which was all right—to live with Italians is okay. We moved to East Harlem, east of Park Avenue on 119th Street. I don't know if you're familiar with that area or not. The train, the Grand Central train, climbs out of the tunnel at 96th Street, enters the trestle at 111th, and we lived just east of the trestle on 119th. The neighborhood was the last residue, or vestige, if that is the right word, of the Irish population in Harlem. The Irish at that time were the ethnic minority on the make. They were the ones who were the most upwardly mobile, and they were the dominant group in Har-

lem. They were the best prizefighters, the best baseball players, the best of everything; in fact, my mother, who had very little English at her command, would try to imitate some neighbor, saying, for example, that Mayor Walker was Eyereesh. I could just barely understand her, her Yiddish dialect compounded with an imitation brogue, you can imagine.

The Irish were very tough. If you fought, excelled at fisticuffs, okay. But I felt outnumbered and defeated from the start. The Irish are confrontational. You have to confront an Irishman. If he has a difference of opinion, it's strongly put, and you either have to fight about it, or answer in just as crisp and vehement terms. I retreated into myself and became an ingratiating kind of person in order to get along, which was a very bad thing for a kid at that age.

Interviewer: Was there anti-Semitism?

Roth: Oh, there was lots of anti-Semitism. It was taken for granted. Every other word was Jew bastard.

Interviewer: Coming from the Italians as well as the Irish?

Roth: No, the Italians were easier for some reason or other. I don't know if it was their Latin temperament or their native tolerance or simply their lower status as immigrants. They also had to learn to speak English in common with other foreign-born, the Irish did not. I thought all Irish were anti-Semites, and it wasn't until I made my first acquaintance with modern literature, and lo and behold, discovered that there were Irish men and Irish women who were just as sensitive and as gentle as I was, or thought I was. It was in the literature that I discovered the wonderful tenderness and sensitivity of the Irish: Yeats, Shaw, Synge, O'Casey, and Joyce. But until then, you had no chance to know it, because if you're a kid, and especially if you're a poor ballplayer and if you're poor at sports in general, you really get it. Sports weren't encouraged on the East Side. The only way you could have won respect from the Irish would have been to trounce them soundly, and I couldn't.

On the East Side, I think I was aggressive enough, but once we came into Harlem, I suffered a serious loss of morale. And why were we in this very fringe of Harlem, of Jewish Harlem? My father being what he is, again, in order to save a few bucks, because it would have amounted to very little—the rent was \$12 a month for this cold-water railroad flat in which we lived—settled outside of the fairly predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Harlem. That meant a tremendous change for me from the thoroughly Jewish East Side. If a kid is compelled to ingratiate himself, he is also compelled to learn new customs and traditions and modes of thought. He gets away from the whole Jewish fold.

Interviewer: Are you saying that you went into yourself because of the Harlem neighborhood?

Roth: Yes, because of two things. It was also my father. The home, to which kids normally retreat and get some sympathy and understanding, in my case, because of antagonism between my father and myself—ascribe it to all the Freudian things you want—was not a haven for me, especially since my parents quarreled. That meant that I really had no refuge except my mother. Notice that there is another person involved here, my sister, and yet for me she scarcely existed. My mother was my sole comfort, almost companion. It was terribly, terribly Oedipal.

Interviewer: You never mentioned your sister in the book.

Roth: She was never important.

Interviewer: You say you retreated into yourself. What did that mean? Did that mean that you read a lot, or does that mean that you would sit alone...

Roth: That means that you become an extremely moody type of person and precocious. In the sense that you ruminate a great deal and daydream a great deal and you find your satisfaction in books. I think I must have read every fairy tale, myth, legend, every book of that type that the library had. I simply read fairy tales from morning till night. I'd fall asleep with a fairy tale. Just as an example of the point I'm trying to make: my father is kind of slight, small, rather puny. He is barely five foot, one. And yet it was necessary for me to make him quite strong in the novel. A true naturalistic writer would have made him what he was scrawny; this was the resentful child talking through the novelist, and *Call It Sleep* is a kind of fairy tale.

Interviewer: In other words, then, most of *Call It Sleep* is autobiographical?

Roth: The interesting thing is this: none of it is autobiographical, or all of it is autobiographical; in the sense that no incident in it does not have some real base somewhere, either in my own life or often in what I heard or saw. Nothing is, you might say, totally unfounded and totally created in a situation, but always it had to be something I felt intimately or had seen. However, the total structure is not autobiographical. Everything is arranged in order to obtain a novelistic structure. The episodes, in the order they happen, are entirely created. Do I make myself clear?

Interviewer: Yes. I wish you'd explain that a little more, though. How did you choose?

Roth: This isn't exactly something that can be answered. You have a feeling that you want to create a structure, a unified form. And in order to achieve this effect you employ any contributory experience, autobiographical or not. But your pri-

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mary aim is the creation of a total effect. In other words, the creation of a novelistic work, effect, of a work of narrative art. Now why this particular aim? That's another thing altogether. Why the symbolism? . . . and so forth.

Interviewer: When you say the creation of an effect, what is the effect?

Roth: I can't tell you the effect that a novel has.

Interviewer: I mean, would it be a particular emotion in a scene that you're trying to convey?

Roth: It's the entirety. It's the summary impact. There is something, evidently, within the individual that responds to this particular literary activity, that wants, that needs the apocalyptic impact of *Call It Sleep*, for example. Why should he feel this need? I don't know why. On the other hand, the apocalyptic portent seems very appropriate at this date, both with respect to the time and novelistically.

Interviewer: How much had you thought out the novel before you began writing?

Roth: I didn't. Let me put it this way. There was a woman who became interested in me, and to whom I dedicated *Call It Sleep*: Eda Lou Walton. She was a professor of English literature at New York University, who thought that I had a great deal of talent, who sponsored this long work—it took about four years—and thought I ought to get a chance to write. So when I started to write, I started autobiographically about things I knew. I tried to relate a situation as I remembered it. And then something strange happened.

When I got back to New York (she had paid for my stay at a Peterborough inn, when she herself had been invited to the MacDowell colony), and I continued writing, I found myself in conflict. Either I continued along the autobiographical line and adhered strictly to fact, or I gave in to the impulses and urges to manipulate the facts, to rearrange the facts in such a way that I felt would make them more interesting. A conflict arose between reality autobiographically and reality imaginatively. I remember that I spent over two weeks pondering which I should do. Should I follow this autobiographical line, or should I begin to rearrange these facts in such a way that they would assume an autonomous meaning. I didn't know that this was being novelistic. Finally, the novelistic impulses won out, and I had then one thing to decide. Was I going back to the beginning to start all over again, or would I pretend that I had done the right thing from the inception and go on from there. I was afraid of starting over again, that seemed a trap. Probably by then one hundred pages were already written, something like that. The experience is very strange, because you get to a stage where you realize that imaginatively you could do a better job of actuality than actuality itself.

Interviewer: Let me backtrack a little. You said that Eda Lou Walton enabled you to write. What were the circumstances?

Roth: She supported me. She lived with me. All of that. She was a woman about eleven years or so older than I . . . a very, very fine person. She also had some kind of, I suppose you would say, psychological difficulty. Why this fixation on youth? I was still an undergraduate. But I think she also had an extraordinary sensitivity to people who had some talent. And a great discernment of talent. I wasn't the only young person she aided artistically. There were other people. She was a poet and literary critic in her own right. I might add, our affair lasted about ten years.

Interviewer: How active was she in the actual preparation of the manuscript? Did you discuss it with her?

Roth: I recall while we were in Peterborough, when I had written the first chapter or so, and I showed it to her, I received some praise. But after I began to write a novel rather than an autobiography, I never showed it to anybody. I sometimes think that she must have read part of it without my knowing, because she was that kind of woman. She wouldn't hesitate, in other words, to intrude upon your private papers; so that she must have reassured herself—I am just guessing at this point—that I was writing, and that my work justified the support she was giving me. And yet, on the other hand, I wonder.

In any event, nobody to my knowledge saw what I was doing, except my sister, who typed the first draft, and a girl, a rabbi's daughter, who typed the final draft. Those were the only people apart from the author who saw the work in progress.

Interviewer: What happened when Eda Lou Walton saw it?

Roth: When she read it, presumably for the first time, and finished it, she burst into tears and said: "You are so much greater an artist than I am."

Interviewer: How did you happen to meet her?

Roth: I went to CCNY, and she taught at NYU. I remarked about her propensity for youth. She had an affair with one of her students who was also rather talented: a young man who was very beautiful and who was in her freshman English class. His name was Lester Winter, of Hungarian Jewish origin. At that time there was something called pre-dental school; it required a couple of years of academic work and that was the reason he found himself in her English class. He intended to be a dentist. I came into the picture in this particular way. Walton decided with another instructor to start a student writers' club. I must say about NYU, it was very advanced, in respect to subjects of contemporary relevance. There

was greater rapport between student and instructor than anything I had known at CCNY. In this writers' club Lester Winter was invited to become a member because, although he intended to become a dentist, he showed considerable talent as a lyric poet. I was in awe of all these people who came to read for the benefit of the undergraduates. People like Leonie Adams, Louise Bogan, or Margaret Mead, who also wrote poetry—friends of Eda Lou Walton. Margaret brought a friend there, Ruth Benedict, I believe, who was well known in anthropology and wrote poetry too under a *nom de plume*.

Interviewer: You said you were awed when you first joined the group. Did you write?

Roth: No. I didn't join the group. I was merely invited to attend, as a friend of Lester Winter. The curious thing is that Lester Winter, who showed promise as a lyric poet, lapsed into triviality after a year or two, and Eda Lou Walton lost interest in him. And here's this guy, myself, who has been tagging along, who was going to be a zoologist, at best, or otherwise a biology teacher, who begins to manifest a literary bent.

Interviewer: How did you get into writing? What was the first step?

Roth: First, I got to talking. You have to remember: here was a kid of nineteen or twenty, who was only vaguely conscious of what was happening, and here was an older woman with a doctorate, and all the rest. She was very perceptive, and she sized up this individual as one with a much greater gift than anyone she knew—that's how she put it.

Interviewer: And this was when, 1928?

Roth: By 1927, I think, our affair had started. I was now twenty-one and still an undergraduate.

Interviewer: Did she give you tips in the beginning, or did she just say start writing?

Roth: There was really nobody to tell me anything. I mean, either I was too dense, or I had to learn by myself. But you should remember the enormous narrative mass that I already had accumulated, beginning with fairy tales, going on to Victor Hugo, to Mark Twain, to Jack London, and everybody else. Reading completely uncritically, just absorbing, without even being conscious of the construction of a novel, or the nature of a narrative, as I think back on it. Novels I thought were true accounts. When I read Mark Twain, when I read Victor Hugo, I thought this was an actual account.

Interviewer: What year did you begin the book?

Roth: 1930. I graduated from CCNY in 1928. The writing went on from 1930 until the end of '33. Three years to get a first draft, and then some re-

writing. It was in galley in 1934. So it was a very, very slow process.

Interviewer: But you had already written something she had read?

Roth: When I was a freshman, we were given the usual term paper: to write a piece of expository prose. How to build something or other. I had been a plumber's helper the summer before my freshman year, and I wrote what I thought was a piece of how to—how to put in new plumbing. Instead, it was an impression. So, the instructor in the course, Dixon, submitted the theme to *The Lavender*, the CCNY literary magazine. They printed it, and he gave me a D for the course. Eda Lou read it afterward.

Interviewer: Do you have a copy of it?

Roth: I don't know whether I have a copy, or whether my copy is at the Boston University library.

Interviewer: What issue?

Roth: I entered college in 1924, so I would look for it around 1925. I think it had a good beginning—what it's like to be a plumber's helper. It goes a little downhill at the end.

Interviewer: The only piece of writing you did before you began the novel?

Roth: That is a fact.

Interviewer: Of course while at CCNY you did other writing, but it wasn't fiction.

Roth: I did one other thing. There was a course in descriptive writing given by a professor. I received a lot of credit for my descriptions; there was no publication.

Interviewer: What was your major at City College?

Roth: Well, I started off majoring in science. I was going to be a biology teacher or a zoologist. Then part way I began to feel aspirations or intimations of another sort—literary. Slowly my whole college career twisted around, so that I was still getting a science degree, but beginning to major in English, and then at the end some education courses in order to teach. My college career was simply a calamity. I retch in retrospect.

Interviewer: Why?

Roth: Because it was such a complete frustration. I had no feeling of obtaining an education, of realizing myself or my aptitude. Competition for biology courses was keen. By the time I took a biology course I was no longer interested in the subject. The English courses, except for the one in descriptive writing, did nothing to further or develop latent talent, or enhance native capacity. My degree was a travesty.

Interviewer: You graduated in 1928. What did you do? You said you were at loose ends.

Roth: Well in 1928, the summer of '28, I got a job with the IRT. I was a pipefitter's helper. After graduation, which by the way, was without a diploma because I had lost so many fractions of a credit because of D grades, I got this job through an Irish friend. I worked there into November, or something like that, on the IRT, in the repair barn, and then through other people that I knew, I got a job as a scene shifter at the Provincetown Playhouse. That lasted a few months. And then I got a few substitute teaching jobs. I was a failure as a teacher.

Interviewer: No writing during this period?

Roth: No writing during this period. I was completely at a loss.

Interviewer: So then you came in contact with this group at NYU just about the time you got out of City College, about 1927?

Roth: Oh no, before, because Lester Winter had begun attending NYU in 1924, and by year's end was a member of the writers' club.

Interviewer: But you didn't begin work on the book until 1930; so about three years passed from the time you met Walton until the time you began the book?

Roth: Well, actually I met Eda Lou Walton while a sophomore, which was in 1925, as a friend of Lester Winter. At that time I still thought I was going to be a biology teacher. I had no literary pretensions. It was my friend Winter who was the literary person or showed literary ability.

Interviewer: What happened after you worked at Provincetown and became a substitute teacher?

Roth: That was all after graduation, after 1928. I was at loose ends. So completely a failure did I feel my college education to have been, that I began on my own the study of Italian, German, Latin, and Greek—living at the time in a cold-water flat on Essex Street.

Interviewer: Then how did you begin the book?

Roth: Eda Lou Walton was invited to stay at the MacDowell Colony in 1930, and she put me up at an inn in Peterborough. She was working on a long poem at the time. Given the leisure, I was to begin writing in proof of my ability, to test whether I had literary talent or not.

Interviewer: When you began writing, were you consciously following any books that you had read, did you bring along any books that you had read as models?

Roth: No. I think I said before that I had acquired this tremendous mass of narrative material which apparently quite unconsciously trained me,

as it were, in the form that narrative takes, without my knowing explicitly what form narrative should take or does take. How do you build suspense, portray scene, situation, character, etc.? I learned simply by gulping down narratives by the dozens and hundreds, because of the withdrawal from my own milieu. Sooner or later, the very mass, you might say, the quantity asserted its own form: *Call It Sleep* was put together without my ever saying to myself explicitly, this is how a narrative goes. Now, I don't know whether I can say how a narrative goes to this day, but it isn't necessary. It wasn't necessary then. What I did was to develop a sense, an intuition, or second sense of the narrative.

Interviewer: Had you been particularly influenced by any books in childhood?

Roth: Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* in childhood. And in early youth Joyce's *Ulysses*, a decisive influence. In 1925, Eda Lou Walton went to France and when she returned she smuggled into this country a copy of *Ulysses*. I remember it was a paperback. I think you had to smuggle it in because it was banned. She and Lester Winter spent a couple of weeks in a house they rented from one of the instructors at NYU, in a town called Woodstock, which then had a railroad station with planks between the rails and no platform. During that time, I had access to *Ulysses*. Lester wasn't interested in it. He thought it wasn't necessary to go to such great lengths to be original. I read it, and although I understood only a part of it, nevertheless, what impressed me tremendously was that you didn't have to move out of your environment, out of an urban slum, to get all the material you wanted—convertible into great literature. This was the thing that made the greatest impression on me. All you had to do was look around a summy Harlem street, and if you could find the equivalent vocabulary, you could create great literature. You didn't have to go to sea or to the Klondike or the Yukon or France or any place else.

Interviewer: At the time, had you read people like Dreiser?

Roth: Oh yeah, I had read him. He still didn't seem to relate to my own condition, whereas Joyce did. One of the artists who had an influence on me, I was about fourteen when I first read him, was Coleridge. I lived with "The Ancient Mariner."

Interviewer: What attracted you to it?

Roth: I guess the simplicity and the whole undefined quality of the narrative, and along with the narrative, the words. Speaking of language, I was also influenced by Synge. He insisted that speech should be crisp like an apple.

Interviewer: I know you feel akin to Eliot. What is your favorite work of his?

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Roth: *The Waste Land*. It formulates, in a literary sense, plight. You never knew before that plight could be a legitimate subject for poetry. The poet was writing out of plight.

Interviewer: Did you ever try to write poetry?

Roth: No. I think poetry requires a singing, disciplined tone. I became self-conscious when I tried to write poetry, while in prose I had an unconscious virtuosity.

Interviewer: We have skipped over the whole subject of being Jewish, of Jewish books, of Jewish education.

Roth: It stopped when we left the East Side. Up until then, my Jewish education was similar to the Jewish education of all the other Jewish kids on the East Side. I couldn't conceive of myself as being anything but Jewish. Everybody went to *cheder*; you couldn't imagine not observing the Sabbath. God was in the universe and watching over us. And that snapped when we moved from the homogeneous and extremely protective East Side to Irish Harlem.

You really can see *Call It Sleep* that way. What I did was to take a hostile environment and superimpose it, unjustly, even though it's autobiographical; now you can see how autobiographical it is and isn't. I took a hostile environment and superimposed it on what was really a very protective and homogeneous environment, which is the East Side. Anybody who knew it would know that.

Interviewer: Isn't that a valid criticism of the book someone could make?

Roth: Oh sure, absolutely. There you are. Therefore, it is not authentically autobiographical. It's a very valid criticism if one wants to make it. And yet I can't account for my doing what I did, or why the book became some kind of Jewish immigrant classic.

Interviewer: Has anybody ever said to you: "It wasn't this way"?

Roth: I think one individual once in a review did say that. He was justified. But he was comparing the book to actuality. But as soon as you do that, I don't know whether you're doing a valid thing. Then it's some other kind of book. What was leading me in the creation of *Call It Sleep* was not the actuality, but something inside which was trying to express itself via autobiographical detail.

I tried to express some kind of terror which was not really true of the child's experience on the Lower East Side. It may have been true of the reality that was in the making at the time of the writing, prior to World War II, the Hitler period, and the Holocaust. It may have been a compilation of what the individual felt who was writing. After all,

it was not the child who was writing, but the adult who was conscious of all kinds of undercurrents, of tremendous apprehension, of tremendous uncertainty and potential violence. It turns out that he is kind of prophetic of what is to come. I wasn't trying to prophesy. I had no idea. All I was doing was expressing the deepest feeling of the individual at that time.

Interviewer: You said that the break was also a religious break. Does that mean that you didn't have any more formal Jewish education once you moved to Harlem?

Roth: Almost entirely not. I mean it was touch and go. Once in a while, my mother and father would say: "Oh God, he's growing up without anything." They would insist I go to a rabbi and go to *cheder*, and I would attend for a while, and promptly defect.

Interviewer: Did you speak Yiddish at home?

Roth: I spoke Yiddish.

Interviewer: Did your mother ever learn English?

Roth: She learned enough to get by. My father was better at it. He became a waiter after he was a milkman, and fairly fluent.

Interviewer: What was your mother's reaction to the book?

Roth: She never read it. Poor Mama, she couldn't read English. She could read Yiddish. It's so difficult to explain, how much illiteracy there was in a tenement slum. Neighbors would come into our apartment and Mom would read the serial in the newspaper in Yiddish. There would be two or three women who were illiterate, they came from Russia, and I would mock them. Poor Mama, how tolerant she was.

She was very proud the book was published. She trusted me. If you love somebody and she loves you, you can't betray a person under such circumstances.

The reaction of my father was: "I shouldn't have beat him so much."

Interviewer: Did he feel betrayed?

Roth: He felt remorseful. Later in Maine, I wrote "The Final Dwarf" (it appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the mid-60's). In this story, he began to understand the essential and irreconcilable animosity that existed between us.

Interviewer: Has the book ever been translated into Yiddish or Hebrew?

Roth: Neither. It has been translated into Polish, Finnish, French, Italian, German, and Dutch.

Interviewer: How important was it to your development to be a Jew in New York in the 20's?

Roth: The importance in my development of be-

ing a Jew lay precisely in the lengths I went to, or the efforts I made, to escape the stigma of being Jewish. I had developed an antipathy for the business world. I loathed it. The kids with whom I grew up became very successful. But why didn't I go in the path of becoming a successful Jewish businessman? I didn't want it. Maybe because I read all those damn fairy tales where the values are different.

All my uncles and aunts were deeply engrossed in becoming successful. Their lives were moored to the aim of accumulating and acquiring enough money. With me, it all went the other way, maybe because we moved from the Lower East Side, where it was all taken for granted, to Irish Harlem. The Irish didn't want to make a lot of money. Somehow they wanted to express themselves to the fullest and enjoy themselves. They had a different set of values from those regarded as Jewish values. Maybe in order to escape from the Jewish values, I turned my back on these practical pursuits. But I couldn't, on the other hand, become an Irishman. I was suspended in between. What does one do? You dream of a world outside and the world outside is the world of Coriolanus.

My only way, in retrospect, was the world elsewhere, which for me was the world of art. In that way, I could turn my back on the acquisitiveness of my Jewish brethren, and I could also turn my back on the contempt of the Irish for what I was—a Jew. In art, I could find a form of expression that was still valued in society. I think more than anything else, this is the secret of what makes Roth what he is. The place that seemed to offer a haven was the Village. The Village, with its aura of art, seemed to be the world elsewhere, as Coriolanus said: "I quit this city. There is a world elsewhere." The Village became the one way in which I could escape, or finally shed to an extent the burden of being Jewish. There, one mingled with non-Jews as well as Jews. There, sensibility and art were the entrance fees.

Interviewer: While you were in the Village, did you meet any artists, any people who were writing?

Roth: I did, through Walton. This is a most peculiar thing, because I really was too young, too undeveloped intellectually to meet these people on an equal footing. Here I was an undergraduate, and a slow and groping one, and here were people already well-established in the arts and humanities. There was Mead, for example—where the hell did I come off meeting Margaret Mead on an equal footing; and Hart Crane and Constance Rourke, and there were a number of other people who were either professors or recognized literary figures. Mark Van Doren was there and Hal White of NYU and his wife Margaret Marshall of the *Nation*—of that order. There would be cocktail parties and other gatherings, and where was I—still an undergraduate. Often the conversation was

way the hell over my head. I was naive, undeveloped, and without a cultivated background, anything but an intellectual. Here were conversations about society and books, about ideas. Somehow I was supposed to be able to follow. I don't know how I got away with it, because I often didn't know what they were talking about. But they seemed to be interested in my responses, probably because I was so plebeian.

Interviewer: What about people your age who were writing?

Roth: I continually associated with people who were ten or twelve years older than I was. There were some people like William Troy, the literary critic, who was not so much older in age, but far beyond me in accomplishments.

Interviewer: Did you ever talk about writing *per se* with any of the people, like Hart Crane?

Roth: Yeah, I talked about writing, but as I say, I hadn't yet begun to write. Later on, I felt more at home. By the way, Horace Gregory was another I met at that time, and his wife Marya Zaturenska, the poet. As I began to write, I began to understand something of the process; it was kind of self-taught; but before that, I was talking out of what was my background—quite different from theirs. In a sense, the young man already had a rather peculiar way of seeing things and deducing things.

Interviewer: Once you had gotten into the book, you said it took about three years. Were you doing anything else?

Roth: No.

Interviewer: And once it was finished, what happened?

Roth: Well, Walton read it and was very enthusiastic about it. It was sent out to Harcourt Brace first. That would be about the very end of '33 or the beginning of '34. I can't remember. They kept it awhile, and they felt it wasn't relevant to the times. During the period of the Depression, writers tended to write either escapist literature or about the socialist transformation of their central characters due to the cataclysmic upheavals of the Depression. *Call It Sleep* has nothing to do with either, not directly. It was simply trying to express an insight, instead of addressing itself to social problems. So publishers didn't feel that the reading public would be interested. I don't remember where else it went. But it ended up at Ballou and Company.

I don't know if it would have been printed had it not been for another individual who also at that time was having an affair with Walton. She was not casual in her affairs but not exclusive either. She had them simultaneously. This man was a lawyer who ran ads in the New York

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Times on behalf of leftist causes. I recall one about writers that looked like a baseball scorecard. He was a maverick perhaps. I used to wonder what people meant when they said of a person that he had learned nothing and forgotten nothing. Well, now I know. Whether for the sake of *Call It Sleep*, or for Eda Lou's sake, he brought the novel to Robert Ballou. Ballou at that time had Steinbeck as his author, also Meyer Levin and then Henry Roth. You can imagine what returns authors such as these would bring today. But at that time the poor man was going broke. It didn't take many thousands in those days to buy into a publishing company, which was what this man I've mentioned did. He owned a controlling share of Ballou, and this was the book that he recommended for publication. It might never have gotten printed otherwise. So I owe him a kind of debt, not to mention the debt I owe Eda Lou Walton which is beyond repaying.

Interviewer: What happened when it appeared?

Roth: It received very good reviews. There was no reason why the author should not have felt he didn't have enough talent to warrant going on.

Interviewer: What about sales?

Roth: It sold out the first printing. The publishers were taken by surprise; the second printing was quite late in coming out, sold poorly, and eventually was remaindered. The first printing was perhaps 1,500 copies and the second about the same. The damn book now sells in the first edition for fifty dollars or more.

Interviewer: Did you feel that you should continue?

Roth: Oh yeah, I felt I was successful. I was successful and disciplined and even a recognized literary talent.

Interviewer: What did you do then?

Roth: The book came out in '34, a time when intellectuals were beginning to gravitate toward the Left almost without exception, and I along with the rest. We believed that the solution to societal ills was a new order of things, a socialist order. So I joined the Communist party in 1933. Very soon thereafter I thought I had found a wonderful character for a novel: a proletarian I had come to know in the Communist party, a very colorful guy. He was illiterate, in his early fifties, and sold the *Daily Worker* to eke out a living. It seemed to me that all I had to do was to explore his life's experiences and exploit the picturesque language that he used and I had a novel. I wrote perhaps seventy-five to one hundred pages. Because of Ballou's parlous financial condition, it was submitted to Scribner's, whose editor at the time was Maxwell Perkins. Without any kind of outline, Perkins advanced one thousand dollars

for the rights to publish the future novel. That was the end of my literary career. After that came the block which had shattered so many others. You could name a whole slew, who one after another stopped being creative writers. I thought at first each one was blocked for some unique personal reason or other, but apparently it was a social thing. They stopped writing, often became drunks, or defeated, went to Hollywood or into classrooms—a hundred and one different terminations. That became the hallmark of the 30's, incidentally, the decade that disabled an entire generation of writers.

Interviewer: What happened to the manuscript itself?

Roth: That disappeared. The opening chapter appeared in *New Writing* or *New Directions*.

Interviewer: Do you have the magazine?

Roth: I've got the magazine, not the manuscript. When we moved to Maine, I might as well explain, I still had the manuscript of the first one hundred pages; and then, I'm sorry to say, I destroyed it. I burned it together with a couple of very, very valuable journals during the McCarthy period.

Interviewer: After Perkins gave you the advance, what did you do?

Roth: I had already gone to the Middle West to get material for the first part, you understand.

Interviewer: Was there a commune or organization that you went to in the Middle West?

Roth: No. I went to get material for the book.

Interviewer: Did you struggle trying to complete it?

Roth: No, after the advance was paid, I felt as if I had accomplished all I had set out to do. I began to write in a very subjective way, which had nothing to do with the novel itself. I was beginning to find myself involved with myself, and that was a hopeless thing—to try to write of your own predicament when you're overwhelmed by it. You just don't get anywhere. It gets to be a kind of messy lyricism. You can't get out. I did that until I went to Yaddo in '38. There I met Muriel. I think, thanks to her, I realized I was disintegrating, what with all that continual navel-contemplation that I was doing at the time. So I dropped the whole business of writing. I ceased being a writer. I could no longer solve the personal problems that I had gotten myself involved in.

Interviewer: Do you think that the politics of the 30's, not only joining the Communist party but also what was happening in the United States and Europe, played a role in this?

Roth: I'm inclined to think so. I have a feeling

that the party's demand that you write as a social realist and that you write objectively and that you write about the proletariat and the revolution and so forth, had the effect of pinning me against the wall. Since it was the last thing I could really do, it had the effect of making me overly conscious about myself as a writer. Trying to write, you might say, with an eye on the revolution, or on the party, trying to write with a maximum of social consciousness was not the kind of thing that I was cut out for. Nevertheless I felt a compulsion to do so, and since I couldn't do it. . . .

Interviewer: And yet *Call It Sleep* has been called a proletarian novel, even though it is subjective.

Roth: It is not a proletarian novel. Probably Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* is a proletarian novel.

Interviewer: How active were you in the party?

Roth: Not terribly, although I might say I was badly beaten once while handing out leaflets on the waterfront in favor of industrial unions.

Interviewer: What did Walton say about your joining the party?

Roth: When I joined in '33, or '34, she became disconsolate. She said, "You are destroying yourself as an artist." I can recall waking up in the middle of the night and seeing her sitting on the bed, mourning the destruction of my art. And she was right. The irony is that she later joined the party herself.

Interviewer: Did the FBI harass you?

Roth: They would come to the house in Maine in snap-brim hats, and Muriel would look in the rear-view mirror when she was driving home from school and they would be following. It's a scary business. There has been no figure in American society more sinister than J. Edgar Hoover.

Interviewer: Between '34 and '38 how did you support yourself?

Roth: Walton supported me.

Interviewer: But she couldn't help you artistically at this point?

Roth: No, what she'd done before was to provide me with the kind of surroundings in which I could write. The writing failed, not because of her, but because of myself. I was involved in my own contradictions, my own conflicts and confusions.

Interviewer: Many parts of *Call It Sleep* show great psychological insight. How much of Freud had you read? Have you been influenced at all by Freudianism?

Roth: Actually I didn't need to know that much. I had read almost nothing of Freud. All you had

to do was get a few ideas. If you were that type of ruminative personality you could extrapolate Freud's ideas for yourself without having to go into Freud's writings to any degree. You didn't have to make a deep study. Any individual who has insight and has a feeling for psychological involvement is in a sense already a Freudian, or maybe even ahead of Freud. After all, there were artists who were writing profoundly psychologically who didn't know anything about Freud. They knew about human nature and themselves.

Interviewer: What was the effect of the party on your literary development?

Roth: Well, I think the party, as I said before, with its insistence on objectivity, on socialist realism, on the proletariat, on the development of class consciousness and the class struggle, all of this threw into relief my own fuzziness, my own confusions, and therefore I'd attempt to bring myself into line with the party lines. But I never did succeed. It was impossible.

Interviewer: Were there any other writers you knew who were also involved in the Communist party?

Roth: Oh yeah, I think most of them were, in one sense or another.

Interviewer: You said in 1938 you went to Yaddo. You met your wife and you stopped writing? Is that so?

Roth: That's correct. I went to the West Coast afterward in order to break my tremendous dependence on Walton. I stayed there about six months before returning.

Interviewer: Was that Hollywood?

Roth: I had some kind of illusion that maybe I could get something in Hollywood. But that illusion was quickly dispelled, because I'm just not that type. I came back broke. I came back part of the way on a freight train, and part of the way by bus. And then I got on WPA. I worked with a pick and shovel and tried desperately to become a commercial writer, someone who wrote to sell, and I did sell a couple of things to the *New Yorker*.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Roth: I think it was '39, '39 or '40. One short story I sold to the *New Yorker* had to do with a Negro, or black, a rough guy who stood there and watched his truck go to pieces under an elevated trestle—you remember the old elevated trains in New York City. The story was called "Broker." Another one was a recollection of Harlem life called "Somebody Always Gets the Purple," meaning the Purple Fairy Book. And then finally, it seemed just too much trouble to write that way, to write sweat and blood with a view toward selling, and so that ended. The war came on.

The government offered courses in machine-tool work, free. While I was still on WPA, I sold a short story. I got off WPA, found some substitute teaching, then a steady job teaching at night at Theodore Roosevelt High School. I took the course in machine-tool work in what is called precision metal grinding, and then I did that for five or more years. I worked in machine shops in New York City and Boston.

Interviewer: Did you find a discrepancy between what you had been doing with artists, intellectuals, and so forth, and then going to work in an entirely different setting? Did you miss Village life? Did you miss the artistic life?

Roth: Well, here was a guy who apparently had all that it took to become a successful novelist and failed; the result was a profound and consuming frustration. I was only too glad to get away from it.

Interviewer: Why didn't you become a journalist or an editor of a magazine?

Roth: I didn't think I was that good. I didn't think I was that kind of person. I'm sure that had I had the least gift to become an editor or journalist or anything of the sort, I would have done it. But to do that took a certain kind of ability, and I did not have it. All I had was a sense of the innovative, a lyric ability. Not an ability to address myself to fact and figures to social institutions, or others. I think what I did have was an impressive narrative skill—and an evocative skill.

Interviewer: Did you try to write something, and then become dissatisfied, or was it that you just couldn't get anything down on paper?

Roth: The former. I would become dissatisfied with my writing, and not go on. I had written the first section of my second novel and made an outline of what I was to do next, and I was supposed to go to the Middle West again and collect fresh material and I just couldn't get myself to do it. So what happened? I am not quite sure. Sometimes I think it was a failure of will.

Interviewer: I can understand your conflict: wanting to create and not being able to create again after *Call It Sleep*.

Roth: Yes. Look at the symbolism of *Call It Sleep* at the end. A shunt is thrown across the third rail and there is a short circuit. All hell breaks out.

Do you think I knew what was happening when I joined the Communist party? I was supposed to go on to write about a Jewish immigrant boy who went from his Harlem slum and found himself at last at home in Greenwich Village in the world of art. Communism intervened as a way of solving the problems of humanity, as a way of absolving me from being a Jew. But it didn't work. It didn't work for anybody. That was the shunt.

Interviewer: During the war you worked in the machine-tool trade. What did you do after the war?

Roth: Muriel and I now had two children. We were married in '39. I wanted to leave New York, and part of the reason I wanted to leave was my feeling of intense frustration. This city had, so to speak, paid into me, had fed me, on every street corner. I had become a connoisseur of its changes of mood. And yet I could no longer use it or digest it. Here it was supplying me with literary stimulation, and I couldn't respond to it. So I think that was the reason for my wanting to get away from New York. Also, there was a desire on both Muriel's and my part to give the kids something better than the streets of New York. But I think that was secondary. The primary thing was the frustration I felt in the metropolitan environment at not being able to exploit it as I had before. There was nothing else that I could think of doing, except to get out of there.

I already had attained to a high degree of skill as a precision grinder. It's a very specialized skill, incidentally, and I don't really know why the hell I chose it. Toolmakers in general don't like working with tolerances as close as those I had to work with: ten thousandths of an inch. And it's all done on a grinding machine or by what's called lapping. By the way, you can't do it by any other method because the work has been subjected to a hardening process, and only grinding takes off ten thousandths of an inch at a time. I think I had a knack for it. Also I came to the craft with a considerable mathematical background, so that helped.

Since I had the skill I could go anywhere. It was then very much in demand. I got a job with Keystone Camera in Boston. But once you have been bitten by this creative bug, if you want to put it that way, once you have known creativity at its height, which *Call It Sleep* was to me, it doesn't much matter what other kind of work you do. What the hell else will ever satisfy you thereafter? I worked for a year and a half at Keystone, then we left Boston and went to Maine. Real estate there at that time was literally dirt cheap. For \$1,200 you could buy a house in fairly good shape and 110 acres.

Interviewer: What year was that?

Roth: That was '46, September 1946. I left Keystone, and we moved to Maine. Years before, part of *Call It Sleep* had been written there in 1932—and I developed an attachment for the place or the state. We moved to the town of Montville. It was back country. The first fall there I shot two deer. I never shot a deer after that. I never wanted to.

The joke about Montville is that it's located between two towns: one called Liberty and the other called Freedom. So I always told people that

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we were damned emancipated after we moved there. Anyway, there was no work to be had in Montville, other than woodcutting. I was no woodcutter, so we moved to Augusta, Maine. I found a job in the Augusta State Mental Hospital, where I worked for the next four years as a hospital attendant, or psychiatric aide, as they called it. Meanwhile, Muriel taught elementary school. She only had three degrees.

Interviewer: Were you paid room and board in that hospital as well?

Roth: In the beginning you got room and board and \$26.70 or \$27.60 a week. I don't remember.

Interviewer: Did you live at the hospital then?

Roth: I lived at the hospital a year, while Muriel taught school in another town.

Interviewer: Were you working with patients?

Roth: Since I was a college graduate, and not too much of an alcoholic, I was elevated to supervisor, supervisor of the second shift. But then I started to organize the guys. We were all getting so little money. I tried to get them into a union. And that went against the superintendent's ideas of what a supervisor's duties should be.

Interviewer: And he fired you?

Roth: He couldn't very well fire me. There would have to be cause. But he demoted me, and put me on the worst shift, the midnight shift, and also put me on what was called the "shit ward," the infirmary, because the poor geriatrics, the senile patients, were committed there. I was continually occupied changing beds, linen, all of that. It was all right.

We fought like hell to get our room and board commuted to cash and increased—it was only five dollars a week in lieu of room and board—and thereby live at home. The superintendent was a cagey guy who deliberately tried to provoke me as he had succeeded in doing before with other attendants who had tried to unionize, and then he fired them for insubordination. But something or other warned me, although I have a very bad temper, something warned me this time, brother, you'd better stay in control.

Also, Muriel was suffering from an undiagnosable syndrome akin to Guillaume Barré, and was helplessly paralyzed and we had two kids to care for.

The superintendent was a louse. However, the poor bastard contracted Parkinson's disease after a few years, so I felt sorry for him. When he quit the job, I wrote him a letter expressing my admiration for his devotion to a difficult task.

I wish to hell I had sat down and written what I saw and did in that hospital while I was working there. It just shows you how unprofessional I was. How little I was facing reality and practicality.

Christ, a guy like myself just writing his day-to-day experiences at a place like that could easily have written something that would have sold.

But all I could write about was my quandary and all I did was fill up space. I was a mess. Sometimes I wondered whether the right guy had been given the keys to the place.

Interviewer: Were you in much contact with the patients' problems?

Roth: Not a great deal. We were mostly custodial. There was once a suggestion made by one of the doctors that I might be of use in the role of therapist. Nothing came of it.

Interviewer: What year did you leave the hospital?

Roth: In '53. The same year that good old Joe Stalin of unlamented memory died. I left in January, and I think Joe died in February or March. When I left the hospital, I began raising waterfowl in Maine, and continued until 1968.

Interviewer: Were you still involved in the party in 1953?

Roth: Oh yeah, I still thought of myself as a member of the party: very loyal and committed, but all the time I was only too well aware that my feeling about Stalinism was one of fear. Communism was not, as I have said, a creative thing for me. I could not develop in it. It was sterile. I got no ideas out of it. I put no ideas into it.

Interviewer: Fear of what?

Roth: I don't know. Fear of the terrible discipline that was expected of me. Fear of not measuring up to what was expected of a comrade. What's the word, the monolithic attitude, and I knew I wouldn't be able to conform.

Interviewer: Why then did you continue to be involved in the party?

Roth: A matter of conscience. You thought it was the thing you should be doing to help change the world. That was your idea of how to help improve the world, improve the lot of the deprived and the oppressed.

One final thing: in '67 the June war broke out in the Middle East. Now, I think this is an important point. Quite contrary to party discipline, party program, party line, I felt myself turning away from party directives and turning toward Israel. Despite what I thought I should be doing or feeling, I nevertheless began to side more and more with Israel in the months and days preceding the war. You remember, in May, the Syrians were going to drive the Jews into the sea. I felt a greater and greater sense of sympathy with Israel. Now, whether the Holocaust had something to do with it or not, I don't know. As a matter of fact, I was not so much affected by the Holocaust, but I

began to feel a terrible anxiety on behalf of all those Jews who were going to be driven into the sea, and who apparently were going to be annihilated, and I couldn't stand the thought that I was supposed at the same time to say hoorah.

According to the party line, the Arabs were anti-imperialists and they were only fighting for their own freedom from imperialists. As a good Communist-party member, it was my manifest duty to support them, but on the contrary, it was for Israel that I felt a tremendous sense of concern. It was Israel that I hoped would prevail in the coming war and that marked the beginning of a great change in myself in every respect. When Israel defeated the Arabs in a matter of a few days, my exaltation knew no bounds. I felt at last that Jews had redeemed themselves by self-sacrifice and sheer valor. From that point on, and there were other reasons, I experienced a resurgence of my long dormant literary vocation. I began to try to set down my thinking on why I felt this way about Israel—by the way, we were in Mexico at the time. The reports I read—the first one was that the Israelis had destroyed the Egyptian air force—were all in Spanish. My Spanish wasn't too good, so I had to dig it all up and go back again and read it over.

For the first time, I began to write along entirely different lines. No longer was it merely narrative, and no longer merely perceptions or impressions, but rather trying to think what the hell do I feel about Communism, what do I feel about Israel, what do I feel about Judaism, and why. That marked the beginning of the resurgence of my own writing.

I now write. It's no longer recognizably narrative, although it may include narrative elements.

I no longer attempt to maintain continuity. But I write and that's the important thing.

The gestation period of an individual's rebirth is of undetermined duration. The only valid proof for a writer is to produce something of literary merit. When that happens, I shall certainly seek publication. Israel is my chief concern now and any work of literary merit that I can achieve would be in her behalf, to muster sympathy and support for her struggle for survival and security.

This reunion with Judaism I regard as a rebirth. I am now using my art to its maximum in order to build support and sympathy for Israel. The internal problems of that country are secondary to my fervent wish to see the nation survive.

My conversion reminds me of Eliot's conversion. *The Waste Land* verges on the unintelligible. The only way he reclaimed coherence was by conversion. It gave him a center.

Interviewer: What attracts you to Israel?

Roth: At last we have become a nation. We have ceased being a shadow people, a city people.

Interviewer: What are your future plans?

Roth: I have been invited to Israel for a short time this summer and fall. I have enough money now to live on frugally; all the fame—the legacy of my youth—a guy can want. A devoted wife.

There's one act of a play begun. I have a file box. It's about a foot high. When that gets so I can't close it, I will call my work done.

Like Eliot, I will "die" twice. My first death was when I joined the party and died as an artist. Until my reprieve, I had been waiting for the second death.