

2 A.M. June 16, 1972

Dear Aaron Asher,

What an astonishment, what a delight, to find in the mail a copy of Philip Roth's typescript, complete with artful inkings and transpositions! I read the last word a minute ago. While reading, I naturally stopped here and there to howl; one always does this with Philip Roth; he's the only writer who makes you laugh out loud. But look, now I have to quote you back at yourself: "words from me to you on its behalf would be ludicrously superfluous." So, then, to be ludicrously superfluous: it's all hilarious, serious, visionary, *logical*, sexual-philosophical; the ending amazes--the joke takes three steps beyond savagery and satire and turns into a sublimeness of pity. A terrifically unbalancing switch: what does that? I think it's the notion of equalities--equalities perfectly and justly balanced--that unbalances. Dr. Klinger's insistence on sanity, Kepesh's insistence on madness, come to the same thing. The book equalizes sanity and madness, just as it equalizes male and female sexuality, the nipple and the penis, total privacy and total exposure, imagination and incarnation. Ingenuity! Hegelian meshugas! --One literary reference Davy the Breast left out was Bartleby the Scrivener. Davy the Breast is likely to live as long as Bartleby, namely forever, but isn't there a resemblance? Bartleby equalizes everything too; he'd just as soon be a thing, noticing not much difference between self and thing. The breast carries on a lot about his distinctiveness as a personality, but really he doesn't care much whether he's nipple or penis, as long as he gets rubbed...oh God, this is already getting to sound like a term paper. --But I bet the Women's Movement will like\* this book...after all, it says, stimulation is stimulation. It obliterates active/passive roles. Hooray for Philip Roth, Unexpected Feminist! And (consider Claire's visits) Gay Liberator for Lesbians! --I nearly fell out of bed (I was reading in bed; no book ever demanded more to be read in bed) when the breast's father, a loving Jewish papa after all, for the first time doesn't kiss his son. A prude. --Ach, what a fruitcake-nutty mind, what an idea! (Flags up to the Women's Movement on this, uh, point, though: why is a breast funny? Flags up to Jews: ha, look, again with the shicksa!)

Thanks for sending the manuscript. Getting it was an Event, reading it was noisy with pleasure. One knows when one is reading something that will permanently enter the culture.

(I smother in parentheses this reference to your P.S.: please obliterate all, quote, I-knew-her-when feelings. The day we lunched together in the Russian Tea Room was one of the excruciatingly worst days of my life, like the time I banged the swinging corridor <sup>doors</sup> in Miss Florence O'Brien's face, P.S. 71, The Bronx, circa 1942.)

*Cynthia*

\* serves him right,  
if he meant to  
be was out to get it!

June 19/72

Dear Aaron:

I have to write you again, two days after reading The Breast. It isn't that I've re-read it; it just goes on re-playing itself, and I can't stop thinking about it. Yesterday Bernard Hallote (also a little bit out of Gogol, with a drop of Karenin in him too: a bureaucrat; and I am married to him) took The Br. with him out on the porch, meanwhile smoking a great phallic cigar. I kept poking my head out there, to see how things were going: "What are you up to now?" "Claire is squeezing his nipple." "Oh." I go in. Undifferentiated yowls out there. I go out. "Listen," I say, for this is the Burning Question, "were you surprised at that madness business? I was. I never thought of madness as a possibility. I believed every second he's a breast. Do you believe he's a breast?" Solemnly: "I believe, I will always continue to believe, he's a breast." And then Bernard Hallote said: "This will enter the culture." I said: "But that's exactly, word for word, what I wrote Aaron Asher!"

But what makes me keep on swimming with it, two days after, is the perfection of form. The ultimate logic of it. Like Zeus turning into a swan in order to screw Leda; that's what being Zeus means, Zeus can be anything. Ani m'amin b'emunah in Science, and, once given that, everything is incontrovertible and the metaphor is unassailable. And the idea is so brilliant, so really and truly genius-crazy (as genius-crazy as Freud, whom Roth resembles more than any other writer, not by derivation-of-his-system, but actually by resemblance of intellect, if it were only possible to subtract from Freud—but one can't—the shitty seriousness which undermines the great dazzling strokes of craziness, and if Freud had only been talented) that the book ought to be kept out of the hands of every writer in America, because reading it is just too damn discouraging: with that sort of brain around, why bother? I predict that after its publication there will be a great desert of non-novel-writing; watch and see; everyone will dry up, there will be mass suicides among the young, and the middle-aged will sit home and sulk, sucking their breast-shaped thumbs for a decade or so.

All this is maundering. If I write a third time, I'll keep it to the following three words: what an idea!

Cynthia

Thursday  
October 5, 1972

Dear Aaron,

This is a bread-and-butter letter--seeded Levy's with Breakstone's unsalted. The next time you give The Greatest Party of All Time (Including Eternity), have it at Ratner's ("Waiter, there's a fly in my soup." "How much soup can a little fly eat?"), where, in any case, it would be most interesting to see what happens while Styron and Hardwick worry aloud about the fate of "Palestine" [sic]. (Waiter, quick! Bring the tar and feathers!)

I ought to have prevented you from wasting money on a meal I knew wasn't meant to reproduce the exact atmosphere of Tel Aviv, but I didn't like to trouble your secretary with news of my Conspicuous Incorruptibility. Now I learn this was an error, because Ph. Roth gasped at the waste and said, "Darn. You shoulda told. Then they coulda put the price of your meal into an ad."

(Is this true? Does an ad cost as much as a Chinese meal?)

Roth also explained that the reason they give such teeny portions of each thing (I was watching closely) is that "they have so many over there, they shouldn't take away from the starving mouths."

So I learned a very great deal, including the fact that the Famous are O.K., they are not half bad.

Thanks for having asked us. I thought parties like this could happen only in the World-to-Come; now you've fixed it so that Paradise will be all anti-climax.

Best to Linda (who, by the way, radiates Brain. Is it all right to say that?)

Love,

*Arthur*

MALOFF  
Skyline Ridge  
Bridgewater, Conn. 06752

Mr. Aaron Asher  
HOLT, RINEHART & WINSTON  
383 Madison Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Aaron:

I delayed this reply because I thought it likely I'd review Roth's book. That now seems unlikely, though not out of the question. The reasons for this confusion have nothing to do with the book or my feeling about it; they're to do with personal matters. First, I had some magazine deadlines to meet; then, and urgently, I had to complete revisions on a book of my own, which Scribner's will be bringing out, probably next spring. Now we're leaving for Europe, and won't return till early October.

Hence the following, with the proviso I still may review the book, though the chances are faint.

Or

After Portnoy, what?/Where? Down? No, up; but not the nose--Gogol's organ. Roughly in between: the breast, like no other in nature or art. Roth's The Breast is more than a pleasure; it's a mechaiah. The thought of a sequel makes the blood run cold.

Use this as you see fit, including not at all. If it seems facetious, burn it.

Best,  
Saul

Photo copy

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
1050 EAST 59TH STREET  
CHICAGO • ILLINOIS 60637

September 16, 1973

Dear Phil:

Thank you very much for sending me a copy of The Great American Novel, and for inscribing it as you did. I checked, and found that you took that course with me on Mark Twain and His Contemporaries all of nineteen years ago. Naturally I'm pleased to have evidence that you learned something in that course and still remember it.

In one of my incarnations before I started to teach, I was a sports editor out in Spokane, Washington, and one of my duties was covering a team as nondescript but far, far less picturesque or interesting to watch than the Rupp Mundys. I became so damned fed up with baseball that once I'd resigned from the Spokesman-Review I never went to another game. So I approached a book about baseball with some trepidation. Your making me enjoy the games you wrote about--as you did--was quite an achievement.

But I've enjoyed reading all your books as they came along; and I couldn't help noticing that Our Gang and The Breast were "in the tradition," as the fellow says, of the tall tale. The Great American Novel I enjoyed most of the three, so I'm pleased to have your testimony on its fly-leaf that I introduced you to the genre.

When I read this book, or those of other tall tale writers, I go--for one thing--for a patterning that Henry James--of all people!--described in The American when he said that his hero Christopher Newman "had sat with Western humorists in circles around a castiron stove, and had seen tall tales grow taller without toppling over." I take pleasure having a storyteller build up an outrageous set of circumstances, then heap on top of them more and more outrageous circumstances--but circumstances (this is important) which are completely in keeping. For me, one high point in TGAN was your family history of the Baal family. I was fascinated, for one thing by the family resemblances. Even more, I liked the details you gave about the lives of players in the Mosquito Coast League in Nicaragua--their journeyings on mules (of course on mules), their inevitably unsanitary sleeping quarters, described in harrowing detail, their fated trouble with the water, their completely plausible addiction to (ugh!) raisin wine, the heat and the completely plausible arrangement with the squaws, including (of course) those fondlings and squeezings in the dugout.

I like to have not only such inevitable consequences given the imagined circumstances but also to have associated with them sundry earthy and/or profane events. At the inspired moment in "The Big Bear of Arkansas" (1841, as you surely remember) when the prodigious bear looms "like a black mist" and "walks through a fence like a falling tree would through a cobweb," and Jim Doggett is taking a crap, and when he tries to stand up, his pants fall to his ankles and trip him. And just after you tell how Spit Baal wet the horsehide in that indecent fashion in front of God and everybody, you describe in the same loving detail the pitch he pitched which outcurved and out-gyred any ball that ever was flung.

Thanks again for the book, and

Best wishes,  
Walter  
Walter Blair

file

Roth Quotes

"Mr. Roth's all-too-brief novella is an astonishing incursion into the fantasy world we, and his hero, associate mainly with Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' and Gogol's 'The Nose.' But there is more here than mere allegorical alienation. There is, as we should expect from the author of Portnoy's Complaint, a new shock world of sensual possibility. There is also humor and admirable writing. Need one say again that Roth is an admirable novelist who never steps twice into the same river?"

--Anthony Burgess

"An astonishing feat by an extraordinary writer."

--Brian Moore

"Philip Roth is the most brilliant of writers because of the intensity and relentlessness of his intuitions. The luck of it is that he is linked in with the circuits of so many of the rest of us, so that, just now, when some women wish to saw off their breasts and many men for the first time since adolescence are becoming fearful of women again, he has given us this précis, this heartfelt cry, of a man turned into a breast."

--Edward Hoagland

"A masterpiece. Philip Roth is our modern Tiresias whose understanding of mammals and mammalian glands is beyond that of any other author writing today. This book, like others by Philip Roth, is revolutionary in its essence and makes us question our bodies, our lives, and our tit for tat culture."

--Sandra Hochman

~~"Thank you for The Breast,"~~ "Everyone would say that it couldn't be done, and it can, by Philip Roth. Splendiferous. Skillfully reckless."

--Penelope Gilliatt

"I saw Claire's Knee and now I've read Philip's Breast. Just like the supermarket chicken in parts, you buy what you like best. I enjoyed it thoroughly. It is both poignant and true that when a man becomes a breast he still thinks like a ~~prick~~ <sup>prick</sup>--he wants to get into things. Mr. Roth has taken such authors as Kafka and Gogol and come abreast of them: 'Metamorphosis,' 'The Nose,' The Breast. Great fun these transformations."

--Rosalyn Drexler



--Mark Schorer

"Outrageous, hilarious, thought provoking."

"Phillip Roth has always been for me the younger American novelist by whom I feel most tested--tested for toughness of mind, penetration, technical resource; above all, maybe, for nimbleness. For his work has been alarmingly protean--each book moving, firmly and irrevocably, beyond the territory annexed in the previous. But now in The Breast he has written a story which--with all its appalling hilarity, its painful newness--casts a good deal of light backward and, I suspect, forward. It shows that the movement of his work has, after all, been toward comedy (as opposed to farce, satire, laughable lament). The foundation of comedy is a faith in justice, specific justice--that offenses are punished appropriately by whatever powers witness and temporarily tolerate our lives. The old (pre-Breast) Roth seems to say something less than comic: that our fate is to be ourselves. The Breast, however, hints--among numerous other hints and mysteries--that we ourselves choose, blindly but with howling ghastly justice, the punishments of our lives. It is about payment, retribution, not guilt alone (that is also the concern of Dante and one of the reasons his poem is a Commedia). So the new story seems to me the most interesting--the most resourceful and teasing--and the most open he has written for a long while: open to continuance and growth, further gifts."

--Reynolds Price

"I struggled against The Breast. I struggled against the title, and the preposterous concept of transfiguration. By the bottom of the first paragraph I was won over, and won over till the end. It is a marvelous fiction, intimidating, outrageous. Reviewers will talk about it in terms of a tour de force (what isn't, these days?), but Roth has done something very special, what the Dalí painting could never do, suggest how it would feel to become your dream rather than merely see it. The end is perfect."

--Geoffrey Wolff

"I naturally stopped here and there to howl. One always does this with Phillip Roth; he's the only writer who makes you laugh out loud. The idea is so brilliant, so really and truly genius-crazy that the book ought to be kept out of the hands of every writer in America, because reading it is just too damn discouraging: with that sort of brain around, why bother? It's all hilarious, serious, visionary, logical, sexual-philosophical; the ending amazes--the joke takes three steps beyond savagery and satire and turns into a sublimeness of pity. One knows when one is reading something that will permanently enter the culture."

--Cynthia Ozick