

ordinary and bizarre suburban life: the dark threat of Joan's lover, Harry; his successor, Julien, a Captain of police; Joan's high-brow salons; a dog, Mischief; a child, Harald; extortion, quashed by the director of the "Fathers Club"; Simon's performance with an amateur theatrical group, the Orsino Players, and later political campaigning on a Christian platform (Simon Peter).

In an article on his stories and the short story in general (in *The Narrative Voice*, ed. John Metcalf [Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972]), Thompson has argued that "by making us 'see the point' the author has turned his story into an intellectual exercise. And worse, the moment we 'see the point' the characters themselves are erased from our consciousness" (p. 235). *Across From the Floral Park* itself seems pointless; it is like a review of Simon's appropriate role as a Dictator in the drama, *Revenge*: he "injected a terrible humanity into what might have been a hollow allegorical figure" (p. 127). This is one of Thompson's further points: we tend to read stories as parables rather than seeing their business of invoking humanity. He does not want "the intellectual progress toward epiphany"; he wants to affect the reader's emotional awareness, to emphasize "the immediate *experiencing* of the character" (Metcalf, p. 236). This is perhaps why his novel tends to the mode of open form, consistent with the flux of experience, a stream of happening and perception that isn't ended (see Alan Friedman, *The Turn of the Novel*, Oxford University Press, 1966). Such is the force of the epigraph from Jonathan Seeg: "There is no bottom to Truth. No bottom at all. To any of them." Or, as Simon says, "There are no standards anymore, no guidelines to indicate how one ought to behave in a given situation. . . . Therefore the responsibility inevitably falls upon the individual" (p. 21). Perhaps, also, this is why *Across From the Floral Park* is "inevitably" a comic novel, with many throwaway characters and encounters.

Simon's subject is his emotional life and its rationalization. As narrator he is curiously attractive: he has something of Nabokov's self-indulgent personae, and something of the cuteness and deliberate naiveté of Vonnegut's protagonists. He is predominantly infantile, "protected by a layer of innocence thick as fat" (p. 105); obsessed by Joan's elegance, he believes that "to be civilized is the most important

thing" (p. 50). He is suspicious to a paranoid degree, has a strong vein of romantic and Victorian cliché, and is Orsino, the lovesick self-dramatizer: Simon precisely defines himself as a character actor, and is a caged bear like those in the Park's zoo. He wants to own everything in his self-centered, house-centered world; he is "a present-tense man" (p. 47); he delights in inverting metaphorical expressions to the literal, "They are of a lower class; therefore they are shorter" (p. 40). He frequently addresses the reader familiarly, inviting approval of actions taken and aesthetic judgement of what Simon *knows* is a "story." He is ingenuous (Simple Simon) and dead to certain ranges of human emotional response; he excludes the outside world, preferring the womb-like conservatory where newspapers give him all of life (Simon pure). He is frightened by living, as shown in things observed which the reader is virtually led to identify as symbolic images.

The novel's climax is a reversal. After Harald's birth, Simon forces the house bound, increasingly introverted Joan out into the Park, with its animals; he subsequently is locked out by her. No longer caged, an outcast at life's feast, Simon is totally dispossessed, and can only wistfully note a honeymoon couple dancing in the Park's gathering darkness. *Across From the Floral Park* ends in firm emotional awareness—of the reader, of Simon, who is presumably released from preoccupation with the past into a world of the heart, the real present tense. The book is quirky, individualistic, amusing, pathetic, and involving; it does not encourage objective distancing but rather "immediate experiencing," and remains, above all, quite remarkably novel.

Louis K. MacKendrick

PHILIP ROTH

My Life as a Man

New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1974.

Pp. 330. No price given.

If there is any truth at all to the widely voiced suspicion that *My Life as a Man* is autobiographical, then we should all breathe a collective sigh of relief over not having been born Philip Roth. In Maureen

Tarnopol, the protagonist's estranged but still lethally ascendant wife, Roth has created the quintessential bitch, his most telling study to date in draconian love.

The book takes the form of a pair of short stories, "Salad Days" and "Court-ing Disaster," by Peter Tarnopol, followed by "My True Story," his account of the matrimonial catastrophe that provided their raw material. The short stories, which in strictly artistic terms are more successful than the memoir, serve as evidence of Tarnopol's obsession with his hated marriage, an obsession from which he is unable to free himself even after Maureen's death, and are only fully intelligible against that background.

Tarnopol regards his marriage as a trap set for him not only by Maureen, who tricked him into believing she was pregnant, but in some sense by himself as well. Both he and Nathan Zuckerman, his persona in the short stories, fall victims to the notion, brought on by an excessive susceptibility to the influence of fiction, that only suffering validates existence, that life is significant only when it is intensely disagreeable. Hypnotized by the images of life as it appears in the works of their favorite writers, they are distrustful of happiness. Thus, they reject women they find desirable and with whom they might have been happy in favor of psychosexual cripples whose attraction lies in the misery they have endured and can inflict.

The women in the novel, in both the short stories and the personal narrative, reveal Roth's characteristic strength-in-weakness as a storyteller; they are roughly divisible into two types, identifiable as the Ones Who Got Away and the "Shiksas." The former are everyman's erotic fantasy and do not so much get away as they are wantonly thrown away by a protagonist temporarily blind to their value, while the latter are always either frigid or sexually repulsive and usually destructive of the hero's capacities as an artist. With variations, and sometimes in combination, these types appear over and over again in Roth's work.

Yet as types they are so powerfully drawn that one is embarrassed to describe them as such. This is especially true of Maureen, who is like something out of a nightmare. Her characterization is essentially two-dimensional—Roth makes no

attempt to be fair—but she is an incredibly effective monster, like a modern Medea seen exclusively from Jason's point of view.

There is a certain amount of fat in this novel—the account of Tarnopol's break with his analyst, with its endless back-and-forth over the patient's right to privacy, is pure self-indulgence and should have been drastically edited—but, in spite of this and the very real suffering of all its characters, *My Life as a Man* is a wonderfully funny book and possibly Roth's finest so far.

Nicholas Guild

ISMA'IL WALYY AL-DIN

Homos Akhdar

Cairo: Kitabat Mo'aserah, 1973.
Pp. 96. Piasters 10.

Homos Akhdar is the third part of Isma'il Walyy al-Din's trilogy *al-Gamalia* (the other two parts are *Hammam al-Malatili*, 1971, and *al-Aqmar*, 1972). *al-Gamalia*, an old district of Cairo, is the setting for this trilogy and the common thread that joins the three parts together. The characters of the novel are either representatives of the lowest social class who are doomed to live in this poor slum area, or else they represent those elements of the upper class who, for some reason or another, are attracted to this underdeveloped part of Cairo.

The protagonist of *Homos Akhdar* may be placed among the upper class. Badie'a, a divorcee in her early fifties is a lonely desperate woman whose adopted son was killed in a car accident; in this fashion she lost the only person who gave meaning to her life. Another reason for her desperation is the fact that—for political reasons—she is not permitted to lecture or publish anything concerning her field of research: the history of Cairo during the Fatimid era.

At the funeral of her son she meets a young undertaker to whom she feels attracted in spite of his poverty, vulgarity, and moral corruption. The master-servant relationship between the two de-