

"dictated by" the "coherence and the economy of the life-story" (p. 9); to generalize this, overstretches the material basis as well as the perspective brought to bear and the method employed. It also results in a new kind of exclusivity, a new impoverishment of the genre.

Despite such doubts and objections, the book remains not just a very stimulating but a very substantial contribution. Girard (p. 3) argues that "The value of critical thought depends not on how cleverly it manages to disguise its own systematic nature or on how many fundamental issues it manages to shirk or to dissolve but on how much literary substance it really embraces, comprehends, and makes articulate." By this, as by any other criterion, Weinstein's study is valuable.

H. M. Klein

SANFORD PINSKER, ED.

Critical Essays on Philip Roth
Bosten: G. K. Hall, 1982. Pp.
278.

The assumption behind any critical anthology is that its subject is worth such concentrated attention, but there are moments when, reading these pages, one wonders why anyone would devote so much time and energy and close reading to so apparently disagreeable a writer as Philip Roth. There is much here to discourage those of us who have enjoyed Roth's fiction, and perhaps the most discouraging thing of all is that Sanford Pinsker really has put together an interesting and representative collection of essays. It is sad that Roth has been the target of so much antagonism, but it is even sadder that his work has been so poorly served even by critics who profess to admire it.

Granted, there were moments when I thought I was back reading student themes—the essays "The Great American Novel," by Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, and Robert Forrey's "Oedipal Politics in *Portnoy's Complaint*" are particularly ill-composed and insipid—but in such a collection a certain amount of academic piffle

is, one supposes, unavoidable. For the most part, however, Mr. Pinsker has made good choices. You may, now and then, find yourself choking with rage at, for instance, Irving Howe's brilliant and unfair (translation: at odds with my own opinions) "Philip Roth Reconsidered," but you will only very rarely be bored. Even when the criteria of selection stray a little, as with Stephen J. Whitfield's "Laughter in the Dark: Notes on American-Jewish Humor," which makes only passing reference to Roth, perplexity yields to gratitude. Whatever made Mr. Pinsker include this gem, I, who had never seen it before, am delighted that he did.

But what is a little disturbing is the degree to which, with all this application of wit and intelligence, Roth's critics, both *pro* and *con*, have never really gotten past manning the barricades. Everyone has an axe to grind, it seems, which can lead to some highly selective readings—it is difficult to believe sometimes that people can be talking about the same novel. The reasons for this are fairly obvious: Roth's critics have tended to identify his artistic merit with his attitudes towards his material. Is he anti-Semitic? Is he misogynous? For the moment (and it has been a long moment, extending the entire length of his career), these are the questions that seem to absorb professional comment on his work. Eventually, assuming that Roth isn't slated for oblivion, the partisan wrangling will subside—after all, if the Irish can swallow Joyce, the Jews can be trusted to come to terms with *Goodbye, Columbus*—but right now there seems to be little enough cold-eyed, purely literary inquiry.

And what passes for formal analysis is, more often than not, that treacly stuff that goes under the name of "psychological criticism"—forget about management of plot and style; let's get down to the author's sexual failures. To some degree Roth has this coming—writers who make such extensive use of the psychoanalytical format are playing with fire—but one might have hoped that everyone wouldn't have risen quite so easily to the bait. However, this too will pass.

In any case, buy Mr. Pinsker's anthology. There is a great deal in these essays which is worthwhile, and together they perform the highest service that can be asked of such a collection—they make you want to go back and reread the fiction.

Nicholas Guild