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Robinson Crusoe, Goodbye Columbus

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Jackson Burgess, I believe it was, who told me when I was a very young fiction writer that a novel written in the first person should make clear the circumstances of the narrator when he (or she) was telling the story and why he was telling it. One might be at some pains to think of novels that indeed followed this rule, but Burgess, himself a novelist and professor at Berkeley, likely also pointed out one of the many glaring exceptions: *Huckleberry Finn*. The rule came to my mind this week because I have been re-reading another exception, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and this on the heels of Philip Roth's novella *Goodbye Columbus*, which to some extent illustrates what Burgess had in mind.

> Crusoe himself, in describing how on his island he started to keep a journal, writes:
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> > I drew up the state of my affairs in writing, not so much to leave them to any that were to come after me—for I was likely to have but few heirs—as to deliver my thoughts from daily poring over them, and afflicting my mind; and as my reason began now to master my despondency, I began to comfort myself as well as I could, and to set the good against the evil, that I might have something to distinguish my case from worse; and I stated very impartially, like debtor and creditor, the comforts I enjoyed against the miseries I suffered.

This a good description of why many of us, professional writers and not, may find ourselves putting pen to paper, but it does not describe why sometime afterwards, back in civilization, Crusoe would have taken the trouble to set down, and with such order and in

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such detail, the story of his "Strange Surpizing Adventures" (as the book's original title put it). As in considering many first-person stories—*Goodbye Columbus* included—a reader may be tempted, if not forced, to conclude that the story was set down above all because it was thought to be a "good" one, in the sense of being like previously popular works, likely to engage readers, and likely to earn money. But this latter analysis explains better the motivations of Defoe (long dogged by debts) or Roth (an ambitious young writer hoping to make a living from fiction writing) than those of their narrators.

It may make little sense to fault a classic, which has proven able to speak in so many different ways to so many different generations and cultures, but, in some ideal world, we—or my professor and I—would have liked to see Crusoe's narration, both in its contents and its style, reflect the effects of twenty-eight years of extraordinary isolation and self-reliance. Or are we to take the book as arguing, consciously or subconsciously, that human beings or Englishmen are such that they can endure any number of trials and tribulations without much effect—be this on their psychologies, on their ideas of how to communicate with others, or on their ethics, their ideas of what is important in life? (Novels and reportage about the Holocaust challenge such an argument.)

For its part, *Goodbye Columbus* tells the story of a young librarian who has a summer romance, including repeated sexual intercourse, with a young Radcliffe and suburban New Jersey woman, and this because she is of a higher social class and snobs him. (A moment in the narration: "I did not want to voice a word that would lift the cover and reveal that hideous emotion I always felt for her, the underside of love.") Where does this leave him in the fall when the romance, surprise, surprise, comes to an end? With a feeling that, goddamn it, he is going to prove to this woman (Brenda Patimkin, daughter of a successful sink and toilet manufacturer), and to the wide world she represents, that he, Neil Klugman deserves to be taken much more seriously, treated with much more respect. (*Klug* in German means clever, intelligent, sophisticated, wise, and traces back to an ancient German word meaning noble or refined.)

So how is Roth's Klugman going to prove his worth after the romance is all done? The answer is not spelled out in the book, but is implicit: via the writing, with its superior intelligence and craft, and with the anger that simmers just below its surface. The librarian not only writes the story of his summer romance, but fixes if not buries his beloved within

this showcase of his literary talents. And thereby, this Klugman/Roth, beyond the pages of the story itself but through its telling, transforms himself from someone a Radcliffe girl would have hold her glasses while she goes for a swim, and babysit her younger sister when she goes to the airport, into someone bright young women more generally would (no less myopically?) look up to and wish they could get to know better and take care of.

It is from this perspective that the set pieces—which take up a good deal of the book and show off (in the good and bad senses of this phrase) the narrator's/writer's talent—seem most appropriate. I have in mind, for example, the charming dialogues between Neil and his Jewish mother of an aunt, and the seemingly too-long soliloquy of a struggling Jewish salesman, drunk at the wedding of his more successful brother's son. Of course it may be said that in such passages Roth is writing about his real subject—not summer romance, but being Jewish in the United States, and in northern New Jersey in particular. But from the perspective of the present piece—with this idea that a first-person narration should be written for a particular reason by someone who has arrived at some particular place by or after the end of the story being narrated—these set pieces are also justified.

From this perspective, if Neil had felt as confident in his understanding of young women or in his writing about sex, Brenda and the sex scenes would not have been handled in such cursory fashion. We would have spent as much time between the sheets and in intimate revelation and caress as in passages such as this one, when he calls his aunt in Newark to tell her he's staying another week in Short Hills with Brenda and her family:

> "Aunt Gladys," I said, "how are you?"
> "You're sick."
> "No, I'm having a fine time. I wanted to call you, I'm going to stay another week."
> "Why?"
> "I told you. I'm having a good time. Mrs. Patimkin asked me to stay until Labor Day."
> "You've got clean underwear?"
> "I'm washing it at night. I'm okay, Aunt Gladys."
> "By hand you can't get it clean."
> "It's clean enough. Look, Aunt Gladys, I'm having a wonderful time."
> "*Schmutz* [dirt, filth] he lives in and I shouldn't worry."
> "How's Uncle Max," I asked.
> "What should he be? Uncle Max is Uncle Max. You, I don't like the way your voice sounds."
> "Why? Do I sound like I've got on dirty underwear?"
> "Smart guy. Someday you'll learn."

"What?"

"What do you mean *what*? You'll find out. You'll stay there too long you'll be too good for us."

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