

*"Trolley Car Runs" is a twelve page excerpt (pages 138 to 149) from Henry Roth's work-in-progress, Mercy of a Rude Stream, that the writer has kindly given to RSA for publication in the first issue of its new series. Our journal is particularly grateful for this privilege because this is the one exception Mr. Roth intends to make in his decision never to publish any segment of Mercy in the original language during his lifetime. It seems reasonable to say that this exception is owing in part to the fact that Call It Sleep has received considerable critical attention in Italy-the most consistent outside the United States. Italy is also the country where Henry Roth has been most widely honored.*

*When Mr. Roth, in the spring of 1989, consented to release the first one hundred pages of Mercy for translation into Italian, he did so with a stringent proviso: no one but the translator was to set his eyes on the English text. The same proviso holds true as regards the permission to translate the next three hundred pages-"after which," as Mr. Roth somewhat wryly put it, "that's it. You'll have to wait until I'm gone." Unless the writer changes his mind, which at the moment seems doubtful, the body of Mercy of a Rude Stream, now totaling well over three thousand pages, will have to wait at least three years after the writer's demise before becoming accessible to the public. As Benedetta Bini wrote in her review of Alla merce di una brutale corrente, "Aspettiamo, dunque, fingendo di non avere fretta." The few pages that follow will presumably be the only portion of Roth's work-in-progress to be available for - it is to be hoped - a long time to come.*

*People interested in Henry Roth's work often wonder why he refuses to publish during his lifetime even a segment of Mercy. Mr. Roth has given*

two reasons, one that concerns the writer and the other that concerns the man. The first reason is his unwillingness to grant the imprimatur to a text still in the writing. As Mr. Roth engages in constant revision and rewriting, he feels that pre-publication in English would tie his hands behind his back, so to speak, should the need arise to modify any portion of the text that has become known. He does not intend to run the risk of finding himself unable to partially or totally change any portion of his work-in-progress. (This risk, of course, is nonexistent with regard to translations).

The second reason is Mr. Roth's desire to shield himself, particularly from that part of his public personally close to him. Since *Mercy* is presented by its author as a "novel in memoir-form," the general public might feel encouraged to read it as a faithful depiction of the writer's life, placing emphasis on the "memoir" rather than on the "novel." By withholding *Mercy* from publication in English for at least three years after his death, Mr. Roth intends to free himself of all preoccupations concerning the possible susceptibilities of heirs, relatives, friends, and survivors of old friends and acquaintances. He wants to feel free to recollect when he wants to rely on memory, and to invent when he finds it necessary to rely on imagination. He wants to avoid having to dot all i's and cross all t's in marking the distinction between reminiscence and fiction.

Roth's "novel in memoir-form" cannot find shelter in a sweeping denial such as that formulated by Ernest Hemingway: "In view of a recent tendency to identify characters in fiction with real people, it seems proper to state that there are no real people in this volume: both the characters and their names are fictitious." Roth's very definition of his work indicates that there are real people in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. However, it is doubtful whether we can legitimately substitute "Roth" for "Stigman" simply on the grounds that both the Roths and the Stigmans lived on West 119th Street between Park Avenue and Madison from the summer of 1914 on - just as the Roths and the Schearls in *Call It Sleep* lived on the same fourth floor of the very same five-storey corner building between 9th Street and Avenue D prior to their move to East Harlem. Do these coincidences - and there are many more - authorize us to conclude that there are real people in *Call It Sleep*, or that the Stigmans in *Mercy* (as well as the Stigmans in "The Surveyor" and in "The Prisoners") are "real"? Is Kestrel's father in "Final Dwarf" just a thinly disguised portrait of Henry Roth's own father? If it is true that most of Roth's fiction seems to rely

*heavily on autobiographical elements, what are we to make of the fact that there is no trace in it of his younger sister, except, briefly, in "Petey and Yotsee and Mario" - and then again in Mercy, where several hundred pages into the story of Ira as a single child, suddenly the writer spirits a female sibling onto the scene?*

*For the time being, such questions cannot receive a final answer, and the complex entwining of personal and fictional elements lying at the foundation of Henry Roth's work will have to remain untangled. While waiting for the whole of Mercy of a Rude Stream to become available to us, we can only wonder at the role that autobiographical material will play in his work-in-progress, and contain our curiosity to see the ever-growing design of his immense mosaic.*

*"Trolley Car Runs" offers a tantalizing peek into Mercy of a Rude Stream. In selecting this particular segment from the four hundred pages of Mercy available to us, I had a two-fold aim in mind. On the one hand, I wanted a segment that could be lifted out of its context without showing too much shredding from the process. On the other hand, I thought the reader might be interested in examining this excerpt vis-à-vis Call It Sleep, so as to form an idea of the different perspective here employed by the writer in dealing with a basically analogous family situation. I feel that this segment, focused on the comical difficulties encountered by Ira's father as a trolley car conductor, meets these requirements. Although an integral part of the whole, it has a clearly defined unity of focalization, and an equally well defined logic of development. At the same time, the colorful Yinglish spoken by the Stigmans, the sharp humor of their conversations, the ever-new flare-ups of old family disputes, the moving mixture of estrangement and assimilation experienced by these first generation immigrants, all remind one of Call It Sleep.*

*Mercy of a Rude Stream, of course, is not an attempt at rewriting Call It Sleep. With all that they have in common, the two novels are worlds apart. This is owing, primarily, to Roth's abandonment of his early Joycean stance as uncommitted narrator, aloof in his Olympian detachment. (An irruption of the first person narrator-typical of Roth's new stylistic attitude-has been deleted from our segment because it touches upon personal matters, the relevance of which would be lost if seen out of the general context. The deletion has been indicated by means of ellipses.)*

*The profound difference between Mercy and Call It Sleep is also apparent on the very level where similarities are most pronounced-namely, the cast of characters. More than by their names, temperament and physical aspect, the characters in the two novels are differentiated by the conflictive interactions that animate them. The Schearl and the Stigman families may consist of an identical nucleus formed by a father, a mother and a male child; they may have the same background; they may speak the same language; they may even share the same address-but they do not act out the same, or even similar, conflicts. Theirs are two very different tales.*

*Just how different, one can begin to discover in "Trolley Car Runs."*

*M. M.*