

OF BOOKS, MEN AND IDEAS

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THE NORMAN CONQUEST: OR, THE ART OF MAKING IT — WITH EVERYTHING BUT MONEY

I.

The United States of America has had many inspiring meanings for peoples around the globe. Liberty, freedom, democracy, and equality come immediately to mind. Greater, however, than even these is the magnetism of individual success. For, the American Gospel of Success continues to be "without doubt America's persistent claim to the fealty of every man." This cult, this belief in the agency of success, in the self-made man, has become, especially in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a reality unto itself. So much so, in fact, that William James once labeled success the "American bitch-goddess."

And who, in truth, has not been enticed to worship at the glittering shrine of this goddess? The struggling masses yearning to be free, industrial barons, railroad tycoons, Wall Street brokers, manufacturers, salesman, workers, publishers, comics, and, interestingly enough, editors, writers and critics — indeed everyone came, at one time or another, to this shrine, seeking gold, silver, and change. Some, of course, came and left; others, came and

wept; still others, came and stayed.

Some of those who stayed and succeeded have reported their experiences directly or, leaving behind letters, memoirs, and reminiscences, have found biographers to record them for posterity. By an odd coincidence, two such records, among many others, lie before us: *Making It** by Norman Podhoretz, distinguished editor of *Commentary*, and *Everything But Money*** by Sam Levenson, school teacher turned television star. To be sure, though similar in some ways, they are dissimilar in most others. But both autobiographies are, most assuredly, concerned with the revelations emanating from the shrine of success.

One such "astonishing" revelation came to Mr. Podhoretz at the ripe age of thirty-five when he learned that "it was better to be a success than a failure . . . better to be rich than to be poor . . . better to be recognized than to be anonymous." His success story, the subject of tense speculation, heated gossip, and wouldn't-touch-it-with-a-ten-foot pole disclaimers in New York's books-and-brains circles for months prior to publication, is now

* *Making It*, by Norman Podhoretz (New York: Random House, 1968).

** *Everything But Money*, by Sam Levenson (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1966).

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available for inspection. *Making It* is a curious, provocative, audacious, and vulnerable book. This ruthless confession, though it does not, as promised, tell us all, still tells us enough to make it an important clue to those ideas and values that have so deeply influenced our present cultural outlook.

Part of this outlook, of course, is, we know, the curious contradictory feelings our culture instills in us toward the ambition for success. On the one hand, we are commanded to be successful, to achieve such various goals as money, power, fame and social position; on the other, it is impressed upon us, by both direct and devious means, that if we obey the commandment, we shall inevitably fall prey to a radical corruption of the spirit. Podhoretz chose to succeed. Hence, the need for his confessional.

The protagonist of this book has two models: D. H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer. What D. H. Lawrence did for the "dirty little secret" of Victorian sex, Podhoretz sets out to do for what has replaced "sex" in our ethos, namely, the lust for fame and worldly goods on the part of intellectuals who overtly deny such ambitions in themselves and pronounce them low, ignoble, and ugly in others. And in this account of his own lustful career, he also seeks to imitate Mailer's *Advertisement for Myself*, a far better book, by the way, than *Making It*.

II.

The Podhoretz advertisement begins in Brownsville, that area in Brooklyn, incidentally, which Al-

fred Kazin some years ago described so sensitively and movingly in *A Walker in the City*. His parents were typical of this middle class neighborhood. The mother spoke with a Yiddish accent of which he gradually became ashamed; the father, not especially observant — except for dietary laws and certain major Jewish holidays — "respected observance in others and encouraged it in [him], less . . . out of any religious conviction than out of a commitment to Jewish survival that was more instinctual than reasoned and consequently all the greater in its force." Though opposed to any forms of Jewish assimilationism, whether overt or concealed, the father never "got caught up in any one of the organized varieties of ideological Jewish nationalism." The son, he consequently decided, would not attend a yeshiva but would, instead, "be an American."

Little wonder, therefore, that, though he continued his Hebrew studies for five years at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where, once again, he proved himself, as in grade school, a precocious student and the "adored darling" of another group of teachers, Podhoretz, winding up as class valedictorian, felt that his life was "diluted and undercut by the element of continuity" fostered there. And what he strangely remembers best of those years is the "sexual education" he received at that school. For he reveals, with tittering glee, that "a series of smoldering rabbis' daughters made [his] adolescent sex life far more

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abundant than the fiercely pragmatic chastity of the girls in [his] own neighborhood would otherwise have permitted." Fortified by these experiences and the loving care previously lavished on him by a Mrs. K. — his curiously nameless high school English teacher whom he ungratefully and, it would appear, gratuitously mocks for attempting, perhaps, because she is childless, to adopt and to transform this "slum child" into an ivy-leaguer — he gains admission to Harvard. Unable to accept because of lack of funds, he wins, instead, a Pulitzer scholarship to Columbia.

Shedding his "Crown Heights accent," Podhoretz enrolled at Columbia, there "to break with the familiar, to learn "the meanings of poetry and history," to know that "the past had been inhabited by men like himself" — in short, to become "an American." Coming into intimate contact with three of Columbia's greatest teachers — Moses Hadas, Irwin Edman, and Mark Van Doren — and overcome with a "hunger for success," he won their attention and approval — he is forever seeking approval — by "jumping with both feet" into the groves of academe. Thus, he began "studding his record with as many A + 's as A' s."

Successful at last in substituting Western culture for Brownsville, Podhoretz reached the conclusion that Columbia "represented universality" while the Seminary was "sharply parochial . . ." What the latter school had to offer was "narrow, constricted provincial and less relevant to [him] personally than the heritage of what was, after all,

a Christian civilization." Furthermore, its "endless harpings on the suffering of the Jews" made his Columbia-trained sensibilities "raw." Columbia, on the other hand, engaged in the business of making "a gentleman out of any young man of 'foreign stock' on whom it chose to confer the benefits of a higher education," succeeded eminently in its appointed — anointed — task. Podhoretz became "a gentleman," a term, let us hastily recall, which, however variously defined, means, according to Maurice Samuel, that it stands in abiding opposition to the idea of Jew. His *sensibilities* now easily offended "by the lower-classness of Brownsville," Podhoretz was, in fact, "a facsimile WASP."

The person at Columbia most responsible for this "conversion experience" was Professor Lionel Trilling, one of America's eminent teachers and critics. What Podhoretz greatly admired in him was not only that, as critic, he had the power "to expose the filaments which connect a great work of literature to all the life around it, energizing and vitalizing it," or that he understood literature as an "act of the moral imagination and as an agent of social and political health," or that, as teacher, he inspired a number of generations of critics, but also that he was, in our protagonist's sense, "a success." For Mr. Trilling is, we know, the first Jew ever to be given a permanent appointment in the Columbia English department, "which was among the last holdouts against Jews of all the departments in the university." And since it was at Columbia that the

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desirability for success he absorbed at home was irrevocably confirmed, who else but Mr. Trilling could possibly serve for Podhoretz as *the* idol who, however significant his other achievements, would also add value to the American ethos of worldly success.

But what Podhoretz seems to overlook is that both Mr. Trilling and the late Mr. Hadas, his teachers who "made it" in the academic world, were, on closer scrutiny, far less "WASPish" than everyone presumes. In fact, as they scaled the heights of their respective careers, they turned, for reasons one has cause to believe that were other than nostalgia, to their past origins. To be sure, the road they followed was not unlike that of our protagonist. Mr. Trilling, it is important to note, began his literary career in the late twenties writing for *The Menorah Journal*, an influential quarterly published primarily for the Jewish intelligentsia and college youth of that period. Thereafter, captivated by the culture of Matthew Arnold, he entered the mainstream of English and American letters, achieving, of course, national prominence. Yet, how strange that Mr. Trilling himself, already established among the foremost of American literary critics, should have written, some eight years ago, a highly sensitive "Introduction" to the *Collected Stories of Isaac Babel*, depicting that Russian author's passivity before his secular fate or the violent contraries that raged within him between his vision of the way of violence and the way of peace. And anyone acquainted with these tales, especially "The Story of My

Dovecot," will surely not fail to recognize the inherent danger that awaits the Jew in any complex involvement, especially in academia, with a foreign ethos.

Similarly, the late Moses Hadas, a "lapsed rabbi," who, in his scholarly commerce with the Greeks and Columbia gentility, never lost touch, even when granted the laurel of "University Orator," with his past. Witness, for example, the last review he ever wrote, — a discussion of *Keeper of the Law* published posthumously in *Commentary* (how ironic!) — in which he speaks with profound reverence about his teacher, the late Professor Louis Ginzberg and his days at the Seminary. And those of us who knew him personally were convinced that, behind his twinkling eyes and the small smile that covered his handsomely bearded face, there was a cold mind to be sure, but also a warm heart which secretly yearned for a past that preceded the Greek gods. Unlike his student, he never *really* became a "facsimile WASP." This lesson was, despite his postscript to this review, obviously lost to Podhoretz.

What did not, however, escape him at Columbia was another lesson which, though less profound, is no less important: the difference between jealousy and envy. Because of his grades, precocity, and faculty approbation, Podhoretz won the coveted Kellett Fellowship for study abroad. His friends attributed this success to his glibness, to "an adaptability bespeaking flabbiness of soul, rather than any virtue of mind or character." Astounded, he reached the terribly

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real and, at times, frightening conclusion that his friends, professing love, envied him. Which leads him to distinguish — it is one of the best things in the entire book — between envy and jealousy, as follows: Jealousy would, for example, say “I wish I had as much money as you, but I don’t mind if you have it too”; whereas envy would say, “I wish I were as rich as you and you as poor as I.” Or, to put it differently: “Jealousy is the covetous emotion appropriate to a situation of abundance, and envy the covetous emotion appropriate to a situation of scarcity.”

If applicable everywhere, this truth is most germane in academia. Nothing is more frustrating, depressing, and exasperating than to recognize that men, supposedly dedicated to the spirit, should lack generosity of spirit. Failures themselves, they make a virtue of failure and forever rust with envy. They can never rejoice in anyone else’s prize, however minimal, nor in anyone else’s glory, however silent. For the innocent, such envy shatters the child-like illusion that the world might declare a holiday whenever a race is won: a book published, an article printed, an address delivered. What terrifying self-doubt it arouses in the helpless, hapless victor! His success, however limited, is poisoned by envy.

For the determined, however, such temporary disturbances are no hindrance to further success. Podhoretz left for Clare College, Cambridge. There he came under the dazzling influence of the overpowering F. R. Leavis, one of England’s leading critics. Winning also this

master’s ultimate accolade, Podhoretz was invited to write for *Scrutiny*. Furthermore, he won an even greater success with “a First in English Tripos.” The aftermath of these triumphs, nevertheless, left him depressed. He began slowly to discern that getting a Ph.D. — he had been toying, interestingly enough, with the idea of writing a dissertation on Disraeli, the “ghetto parvenu” who “made it” to the top of the greasy pole of Victorian political life — was really not the *summum bonum*. Instead he found “his heart lusting for publication.” Cambridge, with its easy ancient pace, now became a dull place, terribly unimaginative, and oblivious to everything that was going on in the world. He hankered for America, especially since he, like James Baldwin, came to the added and distressing realization that he was an American: “hopelessly, helplessly, ineluctably so.”

III.

Prior to his permanent return to America from Cambridge, Podhoretz paid a brief visit home one summer. Spending a day with the Trillings at Westport, he learned from them perhaps the most important lesson of his life. During a discussion of his future plans, they informed him, much to his surprise, that it was really “power” he was after, the power of “money, fame, and eminence in a profession.” He finally admitted that of the three, he wanted most “to be a famous critic.”

This choice was due, in no small measure, to his being exposed, dur-

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ing his Columbia years, to a whole array of critics who taught there: Andrew Chiappe, Richard Chase, F. W. Dupee, and, of course, Mr. Trilling himself. He would become not only a critic but a special kind of critic — a “New York intellectual” which, in the forties and early fifties meant “the combination of a commitment to left wing anti-Stalinism and a commitment to avant-gardism.” And this was, indeed, the spirit that pervaded what Podhoretz calls admiringly “the family” (others call it “the gang,” and, most recently, Truman Capote, under somewhat different circumstances, called it the “Jewish Mafia”) consisting, in part, of those people who appeared most frequently in *Partisan Review* and other “little mags”: Harold Rosenberg, Hannah Arendt, Leslie Fiedler, Sidney Hook, Alfred Kazin, Saul Bellow, Isaac Rosenfeld, and Mr. Trilling. Their style, too, was unique: “it was characteristically, hypercritical, learned, allusive; it took its bearings not from any American tradition of letters . . . but from heavier modes of critical discourse which could be traced to France or Germany or Russia.” To be part of this group, to curry their favor, to win their approval, to sip dry martinis in their company was, Podhoretz believed, “the power” and, naturally, “the glory.”

And it was Mr. Trilling who helped him get this power by dropping his name to Elliot Cohen, the exceedingly bright and enterprising first editor of *Commentary*. They met and admired each other. What impressed Podhoretz most was the “Grand Design” Cohen had fash-

ioned for his magazine, namely, “to lead the family out of the desert of alienation in which it had been wandering for so long and into the promised land of democratic, pluralistic, prosperous America where it would live as blessedly in its Jewishness as in its Americanness, safe and sound and forevermore.” And because Cohen insisted that things Jewish could be talked about with the same disinterestedness, the same candor, the same range of reference, and the same resonance as with any other serious subject, he was able “to arrange for certain members of the family to shake hands in public with their own Jewishness for the first time in their lives.”

Since Podhoretz shook hands for so long with Mr. Leavis and Mr. Trilling, he learned, supposedly for the first time, that one could be an intellectual, even avant-garde, and, simultaneously, be interested in things Jewish. How odd of him! In what world had he been living? Is it possible that he should be totally unacquainted with a whole young generation of intellectuals who, though not, admittedly, of the family are not only their equal intellectually but also unashamed — in fact, proud and unafraid — to display their Jewishness in public. In any event, Podhoretz received his first assignment from Cohen: to review Malamud’s first novel, *The Natural*. He was gradually adopted into the family, especially after his blistering attack on Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*, and thus became a member in good standing.

This, of course, fed his “greed for

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the pleasure of publication” and his “ambition for the pleasures of success.” In the midst of all these pleasures, however, Podhoretz also learned that to be accepted into the family meant not only that he was good enough but also that, as an intellectual, he could expect “to be spoken of in the most terrifyingly cruel terms.” Hardly a kind word was said about anything he wrote, though the whole family always read it. But that, too, didn’t stop him or his superego, which, by his own admission, “is like a horse.” He kept on driving and striving, happy to see his name in print, to be praised, and, above all, to attract attention. Following a brief tenure as assistant editor of *Commentary*, he served in the army, thereafter returning to the security of his post with this magazine.

But things changed during his absence. Robert Warshow, his friend and counsellor, died suddenly, and Elliot Cohen, driven mad by his responsibilities and sundry other matters, sadly ended it all at his own hands. Subsequently, two men, so closely related that they acted as one, now ran the magazine. Podhoretz refers to them as “The Boss.” To anyone who followed *Commentary*, however, their identity is clear, and, in a book supposedly frank in its exposure, constitutes a serious compromise (another, for example, is his silence about his salary after it reaches \$20,000). It would seem that our protagonist wishes to lend the book a note of gratuitous secret gossip, of which, in truth, there is really little. In any event, he and “The Boss” soon found themselves, as in any family,

quarrelling violently. Unable to bear these thrusts at his ego, Podhoretz left, only to be “invited” back to become editor-in-chief. Granted fame, fortune, and power—the power “to put autonomy to a truly creative use” — the magazine would now reflect *his* image. He had made it, at last.

What he did with *Commentary*, after he wrested the editorship, was to take it out of the largely “academic types” and bring it back into the family, because he believed that “there was more lively intelligence and more intellectual seriousness to be found within the family and among its relatives in Europe, than among any other group in America.” The magazine was, obviously, to be transformed into “a center for the revival of the long dormant tradition of American social criticism.” But what ever became, one is prompted to ask, of Cohen’s “Grand Design,” of arranging a marriage between the intellectuals and American culture, and at the same time a reconciliation between them and the Jewish community? This, too, would apparently come to an end. Though condescending to shake hands with Judaism in public, Podhoretz would never make that handshake firm. Thus, “the proportion of general articles in each issue grew much higher than it had ever been while material of special Jewish concern not only played a less prominent role but tended to be less parochial in appeal.” “Less parochial,” of course, means less Jewish, to the abiding joy, one supposes, of the publication committee of the American Jewish Committee.

Hence, our editor-in-chief boasts,

