

OF BOOKS, MEN AND IDEAS

Maurice Wohlgelehter

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,

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with unalloyed joy, the increase in subscriptions from 20,000 to 60,000, bespeaking a success, he tells us further, that, is based on a "new Commentary" which reflects "a more advanced stage of acculturation than the old" and an emphasis "more general than Jewish." Lest anyone worry that the original purpose of *Commentary*, subsidized by communal funds, was forever lost, Podhoretz soothes our collective conscience with the thought that the magazine "remained explicitly Jewish *in part* [*Italics mine.* M. W.] of its contents." For successfully turning this journal over to the family of intellectuals, Podhoretz became a "culture hero" whose bid for fame was now assured. So famous did he, indeed, become that he was invited to a White House party or two, and once, following the publication of his controversial essay on the Negro problem, was consulted about "the situation in Harlem" by "a very high member of the Kennedy Administration." What more could a former kid from Brownsville ever want!

To be sure, Podhoretz would be the first to admit that the startling success of *Commentary* was not entirely due to his own genius. He correctly concludes that, during the sixties, the "Jews were culturally all the rage in America, no doubt in part because ethnicity was beginning to take the place of region as the main source of color and individuality in an age when the progressive eradication of regional differences was threatening to leave the country with an otherwise blandly homogenized culture." Besides, the family, whatever else

might be said about it, consists of exceptionally good writers. Thus, they not only appeared in such prestigious journals as *Partisan Review* or *Commentary* or *Dissent* or *Encounter* but also in such unexpected places as *Vogue*, *Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, as well as the *New Yorker* and *Esquire*. Most, if not all, of them, apparently, made it.

But, there may be a more profound reason for the evolving success of the avant-garde writer and intellectual. Whereas, in the decades preceding the fifties and sixties, there existed an ongoing clash between these writers and bourgeois society, between those who, possessing extreme liberal views, would rant against the cant of the *nouveau riche*, between the lonely, impoverished artist and the wealthy and gregarious businessman, a drastic change took place in these two decades. The opposing forces effected, for any number of reasons, a *modus vivendi*. So startling was this change that writers and editors like Podhoretz began to search for the exact causes and, what is even more significant, were at a loss on how to adjust to their new challenge of success. The matter is rather sharply defined by Irving Howe in *The Idea of the Modern*:

In the war between modernist culture and bourgeois society, something has happened recently that no spokesman for the avant-garde quite anticipated. Bracing enmity has given way to wet embraces; the middle class has discovered that the fiercest attacks upon its values can be transposed into pleasing entertainments, and the avant-garde writer or artist must confront the one challenge for

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which he has not been prepared: the challenge of success.

And Podhoretz adds that an authentic change has taken place in the middle class which has become an authentic sharer in authentic culture. The public will now accept the intellectual, his work and, in our case, his magazine.

In any event, what is certain is that Podhoretz helped bring about vast changes in many phases of American cultural life through an increase of American intercourse with Europe in politics and literature, effecting radical changes in American "middlebrow" society. He was able to conquer all by a confidence in himself and what he set out to do with his organ. The family, consisting of American and European intellectuals, found a home, a resting place, and an ever-widening circle of middle-class readers at *Commentary*, to the delight of all concerned, especially the editor. Which merely proves Freud's comment that "a man who has been the indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror, that confidence of success which frequently induces real success." Our conqueror, no less than the medieval one, introduced, one fears, a kind of "feudalism" in letters, resting "authentic culture" in the powerful hands of the "lords" of the family, to the exclusion, at times, of all others unable or unwilling to join or genuflect before them. That such might, indeed, be the case, does not minimize the result. America or, at least, its middle class, was culturally "on the move again" and might, in

time, and with further conquest, even become "highbrow." The prospects, one gathers, appear good if only they would follow the leader.

One of his most significant conquests, Podhoretz assures us after finally making it, is his essay "My Negro Problem — And Ours," of which "he is prouder than anything [he] had ever done as a writer." It is, we know, his answer to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, which, though commissioned for *Commentary*, originally appeared in the *New Yorker*. In it, Podhoretz advocates, among other things, miscegenation as the desirable outcome of the Negro problem. This long piece, reprinted in *Doings and Undoings*, is, however sensational the contents, however widespread its notoriety, and however countless the articles, editorials, letters and exchanges it engendered, no solution, our protagonist must surely understand, to this problem, nor an adequate answer to Baldwin. Let us never forget that the key word in the title of Baldwin's work is *Fire*. In other words, resorting to a currently popular though frightening adage: "Burn, baby, burn." It is the same violence that pervades the rest of Baldwin's thought and writings, even religion, as witnessed in the chapter on that subject in *Go Tell It On the Mountain* entitled "The Threshing Room Floor." To violence of this kind, miscegenation is not, surely, the desirable outcome of the Negro problem. And one is terribly tempted to ask Podhoretz whether he really believes what he says, that if his son John, his only son, were to come home one day and say, "Hello, Dad! Guess

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who's coming to dinner," he would accept it graciously. It might, one is tempted to guess, leave him speechless, artless, lifeless.

Of such stuff are the dreams that make this book which, we are told, is a "Mailer-like bid for literary distinction, fame, and money all in one package." The package, once unwrapped, might yield all three, but, as an experiment in self-revelation, it explodes not with a bang but a whimper. What Podhoretz, imitating Mailer, is obviously attempting to do is to prove that the "best way for an American to deal with the ambition for worldly success was to throw himself unashamedly into it in the hope of coming up again on the other side." Which only forces the perplexed reader to ponder: "Isn't *this* the other side?" Or "Isn't this where we came in?" Or, better still, "What else is there to conquer?"

One closes *Making It* with a feeling that, despite all protestations to the contrary, Podhoretz, at least in this mini-confessional, may not be "all success." It is quite obvious, on close reading, that he is far less sure of himself than he would have us believe. Seeking approval anywhere, everywhere, he still seems filled with those anxieties which, one expects, he would surely have dropped into the East River as he followed the "long road" from Brooklyn to Manhattan. The desperate need for absolution is not all in consonance with the self-satisfaction (self-adulation is a better word!) he professes, on being able, as a leader of the New York intellectuals, to travel the "shorter road" from Manhattan to a poolside on a

clean, sunlit Caribbean isle, drinking Bloody Marys prepaid by Huntington Hartford. There must be more, much more, that he has yet to tell us.

For some critics to complain that, with the exception of a few members of the family, say, the Trillings, Bellow, and Cohen, we are told so little about the others is to miss the point of the book. Who else really matters? We are asked in this book only to gaze unswervingly at a Brownsville boy — bright, sharp, precocious — who brashly invaded the New York literary world and, with the proper help, won the battle, if not the war. This is not to say, of course, that we do not simultaneously get an excellent discussion of American intellectual history of the sixties, of the growth of the literary establishment and how it was instrumental in directing and shaping "our culture," political as well as aesthetic ones. For that is, really, the heart of *Making It*.

But, the man at the top, if we be permitted to draw a comparison from baseball lore with which he is intimately acquainted, is the Eddie Stanky of the literary establishment: one who, with guile, wheedle, brains and bluster made the "big leagues." He is not, alas, a Joe DiMaggio whose natural grace (prior, of course, to his recent donning of that garrish Oakland uniform), coolness under pressure, and laconic speech made him an immortal even in his playing days, the idol of all his peers. Hence, this autobiography, however striking and at times, exciting, will, after it ceases to be an amusing and envious conversation piece among the literati,

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not become, like Bobby Thomson's home run, the shot heard around the world. Our hero has made it only to first base. Because the book has aroused so much interest, Podhoretz might yet, after making it with a homer on his next trip to the plate, come home again.

IV.

To compare *Everything But Money* with *Making It* will undoubtedly evoke from the family and others the inevitable cries of: "Incredible! Intemperate! Insufferable! Intolerable! Indecent!" Only the wildest of imaginations could possibly conceive two such disparate works as even remotely similar. How is it possible to compare, say, the measured cadences of Leavisian rhetoric with prosaic comments of a former high school teacher of Spanish? One is "highbrow"; the other, "middlebrow" if not "lowbrow." They are not in the same league, at all; not at all. True, perhaps.

But after the abominations, the muttered threats, the curses, and the cold stares have ended, we would do well to look dispassionately again at both works and their authors. We will find that they *do* have a few things in common. Both Podhoretz and Levenson were reared in New York ghettos: one in Brownsville, the other in Harlem; both hail from parents who, though not especially observant, transmitted a smattering of traditional values to their children; both were educated in the New York public school system; both received their higher education in the

city: although one attended Columbia, the other, Brooklyn College; both made it to the very top of their professions: one, the editor of a prestigious magazine, the other, a funny man appearing on all the major networks of the country. In short, both achieved stardom.

It is not, however, their similarities we are after but their differences. For in these differences lies the measure of the men and their books.

Sam Levenson is one of eight children. Reared in the squalor of a small Harlem tenement of the twenties, he was subject to all kinds of discomfort and indignities. The stoop was his resting place, the gutter his playground. And yet, he does not write with any bitterness about his youthful escapades. The word "fire" is not part of his vocabulary; he has no intention of advocating the burning down of his old neighborhood. In fact, he tells us nothing whatsoever of his "Horatio Alger" story, of the success he achieved in rising from "rags to riches." We are not introduced to any other funny men, or agents, or impresarios, or network magnates who helped him along the way. The secrets lurking behind moving cameras and smoked screens are nowhere revealed to us in this book. Not a line is devoted on how this former school teacher, with his round face and steel-rimmed glasses, learned to regale millions of viewers with his favorite stories, while laughing, all the time, at his own jokes. *Everything But Money* is a book about everything but money. It is a book that, if not superbly written, makes some superb obser-

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ventions.

What are they? What does this man who made it see when he casts a quick glance at his past? What, indeed, does he retain from the ghetto which, though no longer habitable, taught him the lessons that, despite his success, he has not forgotten? Central to his impoverished home was education. In that sense, he considered himself a privileged child. "I was heir," he tells us, "to an ancient tradition of learning. Our household heroes were almost exclusively men of learning, spiritual leaders, poets, musicians, philosophers. We hung their pictures on our walls, along with our diplomas." To be schooled, therefore, was not a legal imposition but a golden opportunity. It was part of the dream that had brought millions of immigrants to America. The measuring rod of success was not the amount of money these eight children could possibly bring into the home from shop and street but rather the honor they brought their parents. And no honor was equal to a report card consisting of A's and B's. The status symbol in his home was "a dog-eared, smudgy library card."

Little wonder, therefore, that on growing older, Levenson, the established comic moving in a cafe society far removed from his ghetto youth, could, unashamedly, recall the Friday evening in his home:

The transformation of time began when Mama would usher in the Sabbath at twilight. As we stood there watching her bless the candles and murmuring prayers, we could feel the metamorphosis of a weekday into a holy day . . . the mystery and magnitude of the experi-

ence affected our behavior. . . . Mama's relationship with God was different from Papa's. He taught us to worship God formally, using prayers we had memorized. Mama's was an intimate, personal kinship. God was her Father and our Grandfather. She appealed to God directly: "Dear God, how long will the strike go on? Have a little mercy. The children need shoes . . ." I must help Mama with her bundles because God said, "Thou Shalt Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother. . ."

Or consider, for example, his warm and immensely accurate description of the *Seder* night with its many rituals and traditions. It shows a man who, despite all his fame, could still claim, during the retelling of the Exodus, that he "belonged to history and history belonged to [him]."

All this, of course, the sophisticated writer and critic would brand as sheer sentimentalism. It is too emotional, too puerile to be engaged in publicly. But, might not such sentimentalism, too often relegated to grandmothers, too often mocked, convince us that we do, indeed, belong to history?

Of course, Podhoretz would never be found guilty of engaging in such sentiments. Leaving Brownsville, he left behind more than just his neighborhood. He deliberately cut himself off from his parents and what they represented, even if they adhered to none of the "isms" of their day. Hence, when his mother saw him in all his glory as writer and editor, she could hardly recognize him. She perceived, Podhoretz tells us not without satisfaction, that "whereas Jewish sons who grow up to be successes in certain occu-

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pations usually remain fixed in an accessible cultural ethos, sons who grow up into literary successes are transformed almost beyond recognition and distanced almost beyond a mother's reach."

But distance, however commendable in aesthetics, is not, needless to say, indigenous to a Jewish ethos. For such distance separates one not only from his past but also from his present and, perhaps, even from himself. Nowhere, therefore, in all of *Making It* do we, for example, find our protagonist even remotely concerned with *Weltschmerz*, of whatever kind, or with the needs of suffering mankind. F. R. Leavis can be "an incorruptible guardian of standards in a decadent culture," and can display "a knowledge of the literary, cultural and social history of England frightening in its intimacy," and can give "the final word about literature" but he cannot, assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, give Podhoretz the final word about himself. That self, however buried beneath the dazzle of fame and success, belongs to a tradition of which Leavis has little knowledge and less talent.

With what marked difference, Levenson, though less learned and less finely attuned to the cadences of the English language, catches in his own way, the very essence of the educational experience as he stood in the unheralded confines of his high school classroom:

What good does it do a young American to know the subjunctive if he feels no sympathetic pain for a foreign child of his own age who goes to bed hungry every night of his life? . . . Let no child be "edu-

cated" until he has seen and discussed the ugly pictures and made some moral commitment to the advancement of other human beings besides himself, a commitment not to be his brother's keeper but his brother's brother.

The whole purpose of education, obviously, is to provide an environment — more in the home than the school — which will encourage the student to deliver his personal message to the world.

Needless to say, literature, like all other disciplines, can be, and often is, its own reward. Although the critic, poet, and artist need not necessarily be concerned with the prison house of common day, nevertheless, we find some of the greatest poets — Milton is the most notable example — who, whatever their later disillusionment in change, were deeply committed to man's search for freedom, knowledge, and the good life.

Hence, in his "last will and testament" with which he closes his book, Levenson addresses his children, beseeching them to follow carefully the paths leading to and from his successful life:

Do not "play it cool." Get involved. . . Men of good will are inclined to take freedom for granted. They believe that freedom, like the sun, will rise every morning. History has proved that it can be blacked out for decades. . . A free enterprise system not founded upon personal morality will ultimately lose its freedom.

These simple truths, so often regarded as prosaic or the province only of institutionalized religion, never reach a greater degree of relevancy than during a crisis such as

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we witness across the campuses of American and, more recently, European universities. Were there a sense of moral commitment, many students would not have violated all sense of decency by invading — as happened recently at Columbia — a President's office and rifling his private files, and committing other degrading acts unworthy of a human being. The personal morality of respecting a teacher, so deified in our tradition, seems terribly lacking on our campuses today. To counter this condition only with "a sensitivity to the nuances of English style" is obviously inadequate in our age of anxiety and chaos.

The "sentimentalism" of home, of respect for parents, teachers, learning, and the absolute need to clean up the dirty places left by some students and their instructors who claim to be "highbrow" might be the crying need of our time. Our survival does not depend exclusively on the wresting of editorships of prestigious magazines but rather upon our understanding of man-made miseries, on feeding the two-fifths of the human race that goes to bed hungry every night, on defending, however difficult, those laws which prohibit, bombings, killings, lootings. It might, in short, depend on *not* "being distanced beyond a mother's reach."

V.

To recognize all this does not, of course, insure the significance of any book. For, despite its seven editions or so, *Everything But Money* still lacks the style, grace, learning, and literary significance of *Making It*. It is, in some ways, a kind of preparatory school primer and, beyond a quick first reading, would not, unlike *Making It* which displays a sharp insight into the raging literary ideas of the fifties and sixties in a style worthy of the finest among academicians, merit a second one. Hence, though any comparison between the two books and their authors would yield disastrous results, we can still profit from their differences, the differences which, in our time, separate the "highbrow" from the "middlebrow," the elite among editors from the elite among funny men.

Whatever the vast differences that distinguish the two, one thing is certain: they both prove that the "Gospel of Success" still does, and probably will forever, lay "claim to the fealty of everyman;" that, when the "self-made man" reflects on his life and works, he engages either in nostalgia or "dirty little secrets"; that success is, indeed, a "bitch-goddess" at whose shrine men of all kinds rise and fall.