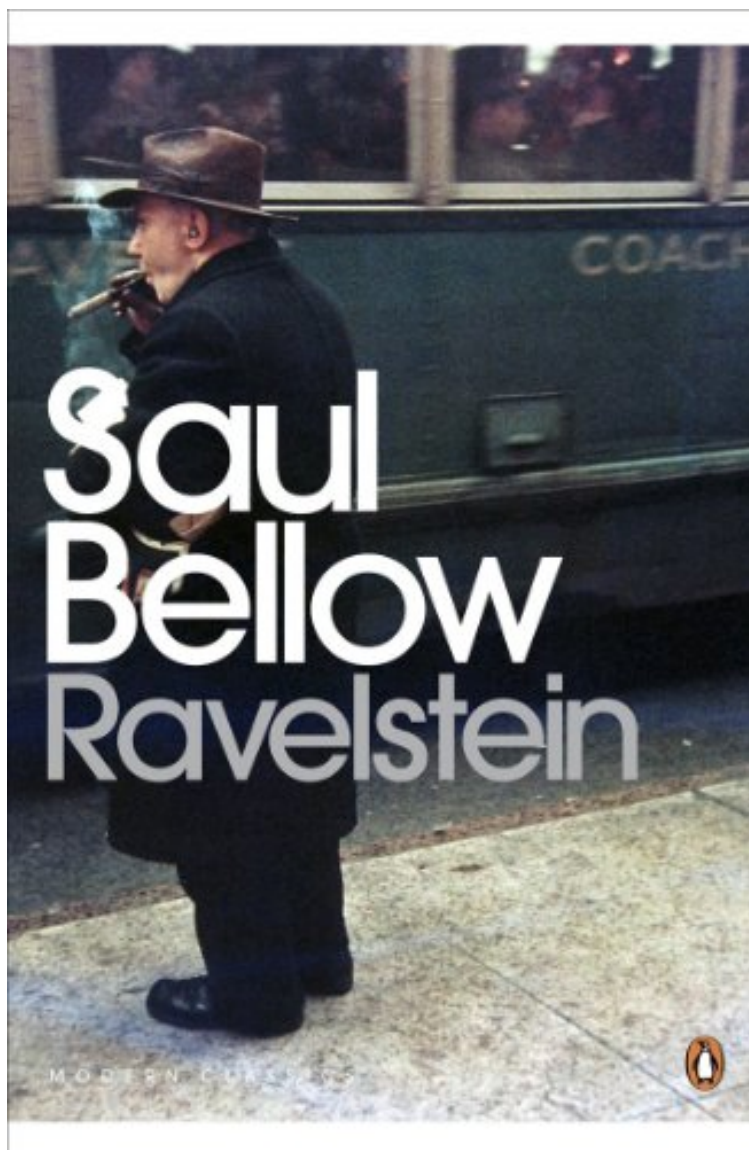


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Ravelstein



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur Abe Ravelstein is a brilliant professor at a prominent midwestern university and a man who glories in training the movers and shakers of the political world. He has lived grandly and ferociously-and much beyond his means. His close friend Chick has suggested that he put forth a book of his convictions about the ideas which sustain humankind, or kill it, and much to Ravelstein's own surprise, he does and becomes a millionaire. Ravelstein suggests in turn that Chick write a memoir or a life of him, and during the course of a celebratory trip to Paris the two share thoughts on mortality, philosophy and history, loves and friends, old and new, and vaudeville routines from the remote past. The mood turns more somber once they have returned to the Midwest and Ravelstein succumbs to AIDS and Chick himself nearly

dies. Extrait Chapter One Odd that mankind's benefactors should be amusing people. In America at least this is often the case. Anyone who wants to govern the country has to entertain it. During the Civil War people complained about Lincoln's funny stories. Perhaps he sensed that strict seriousness was far more dangerous than any joke. But critics said that he was frivolous and his own Secretary of War referred to him as an ape. Among the debunkers and spoofers who formed the tastes and minds of my generation H. L. Mencken was the most prominent. My high school friends, readers of the American Mercury, were up on the Scopes trial as Mencken reported it. Mencken was very hard on William Jennings Bryan and the Bible Belt and Boobus Americanus. Clarence Darrow, who defended Scopes, represented science, modernity, and progress. To Darrow and Mencken, Bryan the Special Creationist was a doomed Farm Belt absurdity. In the language of evolutionary theory Bryan was a dead branch of the life-tree. His Free Silver monetary standard was a joke. So was his old-style congressional oratory. So were the huge Nebraska farm dinners he devoured. His meals, Mencken said, were the death of him. His views on Special Creation were subjected to extreme ridicule at the trial, and Bryan went the way of the pterodactyl the clumsy version of an idea which later succeeded the gliding reptiles becoming warm-blooded birds that flew and sang. I filled up a scribbler with quotes from Mencken and later added notes from spoofers or self-spoilers like W. C. Fields or Charlie Chaplin, Mae West, Huey Long, and Senator Dirksen. There was even a page on Machiavelli's sense of humor. But I'm not about to involve you in my speculations on wit and self-irony in democratic societies. Not to worry. I'm glad my old scribbler has disappeared. I have no wish to see it again. It surfaces briefly as a sort of extended footnote. I have always had a weakness for footnotes. For me a clever or a wicked footnote has redeemed many a text. And I see that I am now using a long footnote to open a serious subject shifting in a quick move to Paris, to a penthouse in the Hotel Crillon. Early June. Breakfast time. The host is my good friend Professor Ravelstein, Abe Ravelstein. My wife and I, also staying at the Crillon, have a room below, on the sixth floor. She is still asleep. The entire floor below ours (this is not absolutely relevant but somehow I can't avoid mentioning it) is occupied just now by Michael Jackson and his entourage. He performs nightly in some vast Parisian auditorium. Very soon his French fans will arrive and a crowd of faces will be turned upward, shouting in unison, Miekell Jack-sown. A police barrier holds the fans back. Inside, from the sixth floor, when you look down the marble stairwell you see Michael's bodyguards. One of them is doing the crossword puzzle in the Paris Herald. "Terrific, isn't it, having this pop circus?" said Ravelstein. The Professor was very happy this morning. He had leaned on the management to put him into this coveted suite. To be in Paris at the Crillon. To be here for once with plenty of money. No more of the funky rooms at the Dragon Volant, or whatever they called it, on the rue du Dragon; or in the Hotel de l'Acadmie on the rue des Saints Pres facing the medical college. Hotels don't come any grander or more luxurious than the Crillon, where the top American brass had been quartered during the peace negotiations after the First World War. "Great, isn't it?" said Ravelstein, with one of his rapid gestures. I confirmed that it was. We had the center of Paris right below us the place de la Concorde with the obelisk, the Orangerie, the Chambre des Dputs, the Seine with its pompous bridges, palaces, gardens. Of course these were great things to see, but they were greater today for being shown from the penthouse by Ravelstein, who only last year had been a hundred thousand dollars in debt. Maybe more. He used to joke with me about his "sinking fund." He would say, "I'm sinking with it do you know what the term means in financial circles, Chick?" "Sinking fund? I have a rough idea." Nobody in the days before he struck it rich had ever questioned Ravelstein's need for Armani suits or Vuitton luggage, for Cuban cigars, unobtainable in the U.S., for the Dunhill accessories, for solid-gold Mont Blanc pens or Baccarat or Lalique crystal to serve wine in or to have it served. Ravelstein was one of those large men large, not stout whose hands shake when there are small chores to perform. The cause was not weakness but a tremendous eager energy that shook him when it was discharged. Well, his friends, colleagues, pupils, and admirers no longer had to ante up in support of his luxurious habits. Thank God, he could now do without the elaborate trades among his academic pals in Jensen silver, or Spode or Quimper. All of that was a thing of the past. He was now very rich. He had gone public with his ideas. He had written a book difficult but popular a spirited, intelligent, warlike book, and it had sold and was still selling in both hemispheres and on both sides of the equator. The thing had been done quickly but in real earnest: no cheap concessions, no popularizing, no mental monkey business, no apologetics, no patrician airs. He had every right to look as he looked now, while the waiter set up our breakfast. His intellect had made a millionaire of him. It's no small matter to become rich and famous by saying exactly what you think to say it in your own words, without compromise. This morning Ravelstein wore a blue-and-white kimono. It had been presented to him in Japan when he lectured there last year. He had been asked what would particularly please him and

he said he would like a kimono. This one, fit for a shogun, must have been a special order. He was very tall. He was not particularly graceful. The great garment was loosely belted and more than half open. His legs were unusually long, not shapely. His underpants were not securely pulled up. "The waiter tells me that Michael Jackson won't eat the Crillon's food," he said. "His cook flies everywhere with him in the private jet. Anyhow, the Crillon chef's nose is out of joint. His cookery was good enough for Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, he says, and also a whole slew of shahs, kings, generals, and prime ministers. But this little glamour monkey refuses it. Isn't there something in the Bible about crippled kings living under the table of their conqueror feeding on what falls to the floor?" "I think there is. I recall that their thumbs had been cut off. But what's that got to do with the Crillon or Michael Jackson?" Abe laughed and said he wasn't sure. It was only something that went through his head. Up here, the treble voices of the fans, Parisian adolescents boys and girls shouting in unison were added to the noises of buses, trucks, and taxis. This historic show was our background. We were having a good time over our coffee. Ravelstein was in high spirits. Nevertheless, we kept our voices low because Nikki, Abe's companion, was still sleeping. It was Nikki's habit, back in the U.S., to watch kung fu films from his native Singapore until four o'clock in the morning. Here too he was up most of the night. The waiter had rolled shut the sliding doors so that Nikki's silken sleep should not be disturbed. I glanced through the window from time to time at his round arms and the long shifting layers of black hair reaching his glossy shoulders. In his early thirties, handsome Nikki was boyish still. The waiter had entered with wild strawberries, brioches, jam jars, and small pots of what I had been brought up to call hotel silver. Ravelstein scribbled his name wildly on the check while bringing a bun to his mouth. I was the neater eater. Ravelstein when he was feeding and speaking made you feel that something biological was going on, that he was stoking his system and nourishing his ideas. This morning he was again urging me to go more public, to get away from the private life, to take an interest in "public life, in politics," to use his own words. He wanted me to try my hand at biography, and I had agreed to do it. At his request, I had written a short account of J. M. Keynes's description of the arguments over German reparations and the lifting of the Allied blockade in 1919. Ravelstein was pleased with what I had done but not quite satisfied as yet. He thought I had a rhetorical problem. I said that too much emphasis on the literal facts narrowed the wider interest of the enterprise. I may as well come out with it: I had a high school English teacher named Morford ("Crazy Morford" we called him) who had us reading Macaulay's essay on Boswell's Johnson. Whether this was Morford's own idea or an item in the curriculum set by the Board of Education, I can't say. Macaulay's essay, commissioned in the nineteenth century by the Encyclopedia Britannica, was published in an American textbook edition by the Riverside Press. Reading it put me into a purple fever. Macaulay exhilarated me with his version of the Life, with the "anfractuosity" of Johnson's mind. I have since read many sober criticisms of Macaulay's Victorian excesses. But I have never been cured I never wanted to be cured of my weakness for Macaulay. Thanks to him I still see poor convulsive Johnson touching every lamppost on the street and eating spoiled meat and rancid puddings. What line to take in writing a biography became the problem. There was Johnson's own example in the memoir of his friend Richard Savage. There was Plutarch, of course. When I mentioned Plutarch to a Greek scholar, he put him down as "a mere litterateur." But without Plutarch could Antony and Cleopatra have been written? Next I considered Aubrey's Brief Lives. But I shan't go through the whole list. I had tried to describe Mr. Morford to Ravelstein: Crazy Morford was never downright drunk in class, but he obviously was a lush he had a drunkard's red face. He wore the same fire-sale suit every day. He didn't want to know you, he didn't want to be known by you. His blue abstract alcoholic look was never directed at anyone. Under his disorderly brow he fixed his stare only at the walls, through the windows, into the book he was reading. Macaulay's Johnson and Shakespeare's Hamlet were the two works we studied with him that term. Johnson, despite his scrofula, his raggedness, his dropsy, had his friendships, wrote his books just as Morford met his classes, listened to us as we recited from memory the lines "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world." His grim cropped head, his fiery face, his hand clasped behind his back. Altogether flat and unprofitable. Ravelstein wasn't much interested in my description of him. Why did I invite him to see the Morford I remembered? But Abe was right to put me onto the Keynes essay. Keynes, the powerful economist-statesman whom everybody knows for *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, sent letters and memoranda to his Bloomsbury friends reporting on his postwar experiences, in particular the reparations debates between the defeated Germans and the Allied leaders Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and the Americans. Ravelstein, a man not free with his praises, said that this time I had written a first-class account of Keynes's notes to his friends. Ravelstein rated Hayek higher than Keynes as an economist. Keynes, he

said, had exaggerated the harshness of the Allies and played into the hands of the German generals and eventually of the Nazis. The Peace of Versailles was far less punitive than it ought to have been. The war aims of Hitler in 1939 were no different from those of the Kaiser in 1914. But setting this serious error aside, Keynes had a great many personal attractions. Educated at Eton and Cambridge, he was polished socially and culturally by the Bloomsbury group. The Great Politics of his day had developed and perfected him. I suppose in his personal life he considered himself a Uranian British euphemism for homosexual. Ravelstein mentioned that Keynes had married a Russian ballerina. He also explained to me that Uranus had fathered Aphrodite but that she had had no mother. She was conceived by the sea foam. He would say such things not because he thought I was ignorant of them but because he judged that I needed at a given moment to have my thoughts directed toward them. So he reminded me that when Uranus was killed by the Titan Cronus, his seed spilled into the sea. And this somehow had to do with reparations, or with the fact that the still blockaded Germans just then were starving. Ravelstein, who for reasons of his own put me on to Keynes's paper, best remembered the passages describing the German bankers' inability to meet the demands of France and England. The French were after the Kaiser's gold reserves; they said the gold must be handed over at once. The English said they would settle for hard currencies. One of the German negotiators was a Jew. Lloyd George, losing his temper, turned on this man: he did an astonishing kike number on him, crouching, hunching, limping, spitting, zizzing his esses, sticking out his backside, doing a splayfoot parody of a Jew-walk. All this was described by Keynes to his Bloomsbury friends. Ravelstein didn't think well of the Bloomsbury intellectuals. He disliked their high camp, he disapproved of queer antics and of what he called "faggot behavior." He couldn't and didn't fault them for gossiping. He himself loved gossip too well to do that. But he said they were not thinkers but snobs, and their influence was pernicious. The spies later recruited in England by the GPU or the NKVD in the thirties were nurtured by Bloomsbury. "But you did that well, Chick, about Lloyd George's nasty youpin parody." Youpin is the French for "kike." "Thank you," I said. "I wouldn't dream of meddling," said Ravelstein. "But I think you'd agree that I'm trying to do you some good." Of course I understood his motive. He wanted me to write his biography and at the same time he wanted to rescue me from my pernicious habits. He thought I was stuck in privacy and should be restored to community. "Too many years of inwardness!" he used to say. I badly needed to be in touch with politics not local or machine politics, nor even national politics, but politics as Aristotle or Plato understood the term, rooted in our nature. You can't turn your back on your nature. I admitted to Ravelstein that reading those Keynes documents and writing the piece had been something like a holiday. Rejoining humankind, taking a humanity bath. There are times when I need to ride in the subway at rush hour or sit in a crowded movie house that's what I mean by a humanity bath. As cattle must have salt to lick, I sometimes crave physical contact. "I have some unclassified notions about Keynes and the World Bank, his Bretton Woods agreement, and also his attack on the Treaty of Versailles. I know just enough about Keynes to fit his name into a crossword puzzle," I said. "I'm glad you brought his private memoranda to my attention. His Bloomsbury friends must have been dying to have his impressions of the Peace Conference. Thanks to him they had world-historical ringside seats. And I suppose Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf absolutely had to have the inside dope. They represented the higher interests of British society. They had a duty to know an artist's duty." "And what about the Jewish side of the thing?" said Ravelstein. "Keynes didn't like it much. You may remember that the only friendship he made at the Peace Conference was with a Jewish member of the German delegation." "No, they wouldn't really have cared for a man as common as Lloyd George, those Bloomsburies." But Ravelstein knew the value of a set. He had a set of his own. Its members were students he had trained in political philosophy and longtime friends. Most of them were trained as Ravelstein himself had been trained, under Professor Davarr and used his esoteric vocabulary. Some of Ravelstein's older pupils now held positions of importance on national newspapers. Quite a number served in the State Department. Some lectured in the War College or worked on the staff of the National Security Adviser. One was a protégé of Paul Nitze. Another, a maverick, published a column in the Washington Times. Some were influential, all were well informed; they were a close group, a community. From them Ravelstein had frequent reports, and when he was at home he spent hours on the telephone with his disciples. After a fashion, he kept their secrets. At least he didn't quote them by name. Even in the Crillon penthouse today the mobile telephone was held between his bare knees. The Japanese kimono fell away from legs paler than milk. He had the calves of a sedentary man the shinbone long and the calf muscle abrupt, without roundness. Some years back, after his heart attack, the doctors told him he must exercise, so he bought an expensive sweat suit and elegant gym shoes. He shuffled around the track for several days and then gave it up. Fitness was not his cup of tea.

He treated his body like a vehicle motorbike that he raced at top speed along the rim of the Grand Canyon.

"I'm not too surprised at Lloyd George," Ravelstein said. "He was a contentious little fucker. He visited Hitler in the thirties and came away with a high opinion of him. Hitler was a dream of political leaders. Whatever he wanted done was done, and quickly. No muss, no fuss. Very different from parliamentary government." It was enjoyable to hear Ravelstein on what he called Great Politics. He speculated often on Roosevelt and Churchill. He had a great respect for de Gaulle. From time to time he got carried away. Today, for instance, he spoke of Lloyd George's "pungency." "Pungency is good," I said. "In the matter of language the Brits had it all over us. Especially when their strength began to bleed away and language became one of their important resources." "Like Hamlet's whore who must unpack her heart with words." Ravelstein, with his bald powerful head, was at ease with large statements, big issues, and famous men, with decades, eras, centuries. He was, however, just as familiar with entertainers like Mel Brooks as with the classics and could go from Thucydides' huge tragedy to Moses as played by Brooks. "He comes down from Mount Sinai with the commandments. God had handed down twenty but ten fall from Mel Brooks's arms when he sees the children of Israel rioting around the Golden Calf." Ravelstein loved these Catskill entertainments; he had a natural gift for them. He was very pleased with my Keynes sketch. He remembered that Churchill had called Keynes a man of clairvoyant intelligence. Abe loved Churchill. As an economist, Milton Friedman had it over most others, but Friedman was a free-market fanatic and had no use for culture, whereas Keynes had a cultivated intelligence. He was, however, wrong about the Versailles Treaty and deficient in politics, a subject of which Ravelstein had a very special understanding. Abe's "people" in Washington kept his telephone line so busy that I said he must be masterminding a shadow government. He accepted this, smiling as though the oddity were not his but mine. He said, "All these students I've trained in the last thirty years still turn to me, and in a way the telephone makes possible an ongoing seminar in which the policy questions they deal with in day-to-day Washington are aligned with the Plato they studied two or three decades ago, or Locke, or Rousseau, or even Nietzsche." It was very pleasant to win Ravelstein's approval, and his students kept coming back to him now in their forties, some of whom had figured significantly in running the Gulf War, spoke to him by the hour. "These special relationships are important to me, top priority." It was as natural that Ravelstein should need to know what went on in Downing Street or the Kremlin as it had been for Virginia Woolf to read Keynes's private report on German reparations. Possibly Ravelstein's views or opinions sometimes worked their way into policy decisions, but that wasn't what mattered. What mattered was that he should remain in charge somehow of the ongoing political education of his old boys. In Paris too he had a following. People who had taken his courses at the cole des Hautes études, just back from a mission to Moscow, also rang him up. There were sexual friendships and intimate confidences as well. Beside the wide black leather sofa back home where he took the calls was an electronic panel of which he made expert use. I couldn't have operated it. I had no high-tech skills. But Ravelstein, though his hands were unsteady, controlled his instruments like a Prospero. In any case he didn't have to worry now about the telephone bills. But we are still atop the Hotel Crillon. "You have good instincts, Chick," he said. "Too bad you didn't have more nihilism in your makeup. You should have been more like Cline with his nihilistic comedy, or farce. The scorned woman saying to her boyfriend, Robinson, 'Why can't you say "I love you"?' What's so special about you? You get a hard-on like anybody else. Quoi! Tu ne bandes pas?' A hard-on to her is the same as love. But Robinson the nihilist is high-principled about one thing only, not to lie about the very, very few things that really matter. He'll try any kind of obscenity but he draws the line at last, and this tramp woman, deeply insulted, shoots him dead because he won't say 'I love you.'" "Does Cline mean that this makes him authentic?" "It means that writers are supposed to make you laugh and cry. That's what mankind is looking for. The situation of this Robinson is a replay of the drama of the Middle Ages in which the most vicious, abandoned criminals turn again to the Blessed Virgin. But there's no disagreement here. I want you to do me as you did Keynes, but on a bigger scale. And also you were too kind to him. I don't want that. Be as hard on me as you like. You aren't the darling doll you seem to be, and by describing me maybe you'll emancipate yourself." "From what, exactly?" "Whatever it is that controls your sword of Damocles hanging over you." "No," I said. "It's the sword of Dimwitoclese." The conversation, if it had taken place in a restaurant, would have made the other diners think that we were telling sexy jokes, having a rollicking time. "Dimwitoclese" was Ravelstein's kind of gag, and he laughed like Picasso's wounded horse in Guernica, rearing back. Ravelstein's legacy to me was a subject he thought he was giving me a subject, perhaps the best one I ever had, perhaps the only really important one. But what such a legacy signified was that he would die before me. If I were to predecease him he would certainly not

write a memoir of me. Anything beyond a single page to be read at a memorial service would have been unthinkable. Yet we were close friends, none closer. What we were laughing about was death, and of course death does sharpen the comic sense. But the fact that we laughed together didn't mean that we were laughing for the same reasons. That Ravelstein's most serious ideas, put into his book, should have made him a millionaire certainly was funny. It took the genius of capitalism to make a valuable commodity out of thoughts, opinions, teachings. Bear in mind that Ravelstein was a teacher. He was not one of those conservatives who idolize the free market. He had views of his own on political and moral matters. But I am not interested in presenting his ideas. More than anything else, just now, I want to avoid them. I want to be brief, here. He was an educator. Put together in a book his ideas made him absurdly rich. He was spending the dollars almost as fast as they came in. Just now he was considering a new \$5 million book contract. He could also command big fees on the lecture circuit. And he was a learned man after all. Nobody disputed that. You have to be learned to capture modernity in its full complexity and to assess its human cost. On social occasions he might be freaky, but on the platform you could see how well grounded his arguments were. It became only too clear what he was talking about. The public saw a higher education as a right. The White House affirmed it. Students were like "the mackerel-crowded seas." Thirty thousand dollars was the average annual college tuition. But what were students learning? The universities were permissive, lax. The Puritanism of an earlier time was gone. Relativism held that what was right in San Domingo was wrong in Pago Pago and that moral standards were therefore anything but absolute. Now Ravelstein was no enemy of pleasure or opposed to love. On the contrary he saw love as possibly the highest blessing of mankind. A human soul devoid of longing was a soul deformed, deprived of its highest good, sick unto death. We were offered a biological model that dismissed the soul and stressed the importance of orgasmic relief from tension (biostatics and biodynamics). I don't intend to explain here the erotic teachings of Aristophanes and Socrates or of the Bible. For that you must go to Ravelstein himself. For him Jerusalem and Athens were the twin sources of civilization. Jerusalem and Athens are not my dish. I wish you well with them. But I was too old to become Ravelstein's disciple. All I need to say now is that he was taken very seriously even in the White House and on Downing Street. He was Mrs. Thatcher's weekend guest at Chequers. Nor did the President neglect him. Reagan invited him to dinner, and Ravelstein spent a fortune on formal attire, cummerbund, diamond studs, patent leather shoes. A columnist on the Daily News said that to Ravelstein money was something you threw from the rear platform of speeding trains. Ravelstein with shouts of laughter showed me the clipping. Through it all he was deeply amused. And of course I didn't have the same reasons for amusement. The vast hydraulic forces of the country had not picked me up, as they had him. Although I was Ravelstein's senior by a good many years, we were close friends. There were sophomoric elements in my character as there were in his, and these leveled the ground and evened things up. A man who knew me well said that I was more innocent than any adult had the right to be. As if I had chosen to be nave. Besides, the fact is that even extremely nave people know their own interests. Very simple women understand when it's time to draw the line with a difficult husband when to siphon the money out of their joint back account. I paid no particular attention to self-preservation. But luckily or perhaps not too luckily this is cornucopia-time, an era of abundance in all civilized nations. Never, on the material side, have huge populations been better protected from hunger and sickness. And this partial release from the struggle for survival makes people nave. By this I mean their wishful fantasies are unchecked. You begin, in accordance with an unformulated agreement, to accept the terms, invariably falsified, on which others present themselves. You deaden your critical powers. You stifle your shrewdness. Before you know it you are paying a humongous divorce settlement to a woman who had more than once declared that she was an innocent who had no understanding of money matters. In approaching a man like Ravelstein, a piecemeal method is perhaps best. I had come up to his penthouse luxury suite on this June morning in Paris not so much to discuss the biographical essay I was going to do as to collect some facts about his parents and his early life. I didn't want more detail than I could use and I was by now familiar with the large outlines of his life story. The Ravelsteins were a Dayton, Ohio, family. His mother, a powerhouse, had put herself through Johns Hopkins. His father, not a successful man, was the local representative of a large national organization, banished to Dayton. A fat neurotic little man, a hysterical parent, a disciplinarian. Little Abe, when he was punished, was ordered to strip naked and then he was beaten with the strap that held up his father's pants. Abe admired his mother, hated his father, despised his sister. But Keynes, to glance at him once more, had little to say of Clemenceau's family history. Clemenceau was a seasoned cynic; he loathed and distrusted the Germans; he wore gray kid gloves at the negotiating table. But we'll ignore the gloves what

I mean is that we aren't doing psychobiography here. This morning, moreover, Ravelstein was in no mood to go into the facts of his early life. The place de la Concorde was losing its early freshness. The traffic below was thinner but the June heat was thickening, rising. In the sun, our pulse beats were somewhat slower. After the first surge of the feelings, the strong tickle at the heart of a life vindicated by an incomplete victory over many absurdities, everything had come together to place Abe Ravelstein, an academic, a lousy professor of political philosophy, at the very peak of Paris among the oil sheiks at the Crillon, or among CEOs at the Ritz, or playboys at the Hotel Meurice. Under the sun, our conversation pausing, he lapsed or slumped for a while; his hemispheric eyebrows were drawn upward. His lips, poised to say more, said nothing for the moment. On his bald head you felt that what you were looking at were the finger marks of its shaper. He himself was momentarily elsewhere; he was subject to these intermittences. Though his eyes were open, it was possible that he didn't see you. As he seldom had a night of uninterrupted sleep, it wasn't unusual, especially in warm weather, for him to lapse briefly, to doze, to drop out, two long arms hanging over the sides of his chair and the strange shapes of his mismatched feet. One was three sizes bigger than the other. And it wasn't only the broken sleep, it was the excitement, the wringing, the tension of his pleasures, of his mental life. His fatigue this morning might have been due to the grand dinner he had given us last night, an extraordinary party on the place de la Madeleine chez Lucas-Carton. Digesting all those courses was bound to take it out of you. The main dish was chicken seasoned with honey and baked in clay. The ancient Greek recipe had recently been found by archaeologists in an Aegean dig. We dined on this delicious dish attended by no fewer than four waiters. The sommelier, wearing his badge of office on a chain of keys, supervised the filling of the glasses. For each course there was an appropriate wine, while other waiters working like acrobats reset the china and the silver. Ravelstein had a look of wild happiness, laughing and stammering, as he did when he was on a roll beginning every clause in his long sentences with "Thee-ah, thee-ah, thee-ah this is the finest cuisine in Europe. Thee-ah, thee-ah Chick is a great skeptic when it comes to the French. He, thee-ah, thinks their cooking is all they have to show for themselves since the disgrace of the thee-ah-thee-ah 1940 when Hitler danced his victory jig. Chick sees la France pourrie in Sartre, in the loathing of the U.S.A. thee-ah and worship of Stalinism and in philosophy and linguistic theory. Thee-ah hermeneuticshe says harmonetics are little sandwiches eaten by musicians during the intermission. But you have to admit that you can't get a meal like this anywhere else. Notice how Rosamund is glowing. Now there's a woman who relishes exquisite food and thee-ah thee-ah thee-ah restaurateur's presentation. Also Nikki, someone who can judge cookeryyou wouldn't deny it, Chick." No, I would not. Nikki was training in a Swiss hotel school. I can't say more than that because I'm not the ideal person to recall the minute particulars but Nikki was an accredited matre d'. He was ready to go into fits of laughter when he modeled the cutaway coat of his trade for Ravelstein and me, and put on his professional dignities. Now tonight's dinner had been laid on for me. It was Ravelstein's way of thanking his friend Chick for the support he had given him in the writing of his bestseller. The idea of the entire project, he said, was mine from the first. It would never have been done if I hadn't urged him to do it. This was always and handsomely acknowledged by Abe "It was Chick who put me up to it." There is a parallel between inner-city phenomena and the mental disarray of the U.S., the winner of the Cold War, the only superpower remaining. That's one way of boiling it down. This is what Ravelstein's books and articles had to tell us. He took you from antiquity to the Enlightenment, and then by way of Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau onward to Nietzsche, Heidegger to the present moment, to corporate, high-tech America, its culture and its entertainments, its press, its educational system, its think tanks, its politics. He gave you a picture of this mass democracy and its characteristicwoefulhuman product.

In his classroom, and the lectures were always packed, he coughed, stammered, he smoked, bawled, laughed, he brought his students to their feet and debated, provoked them to single combat, examined, hammered them. He didn't ask, "Where will you spend eternity?" as religious the-end-is-near picketers did but rather, "With what, in this modern democracy, will you meet the demands of your soul?" This tall pin- or chalk-stripped dude with his bald head (you always felt there was something dangerous about its whiteness, its white force, its dents) did not step up to the platform to bore you silly with the correct order of the epochs (the Age of Faith, the Age of Reason, the Romantic Revolution), nor did he present himself as an academic, or as a campus rebel encouraging revolutionary behavior. The strikes and campus takeovers of the sixties had set the country back significantly, he said. He did not court students by putting on bull-session airs or try to scandalize thementertain them actually, as histrionic lecturers do by shouting "Shit!" or "Fuck!" There was nothing at all of the campus wildman about him. His frailties were visible. He obsessively knew what it was to be sunk by his faults or his errors. But before he went under he would describe Plato's Cave to you. He

would tell you about your soul, already thin, and shrinking fast faster and faster. He attracted gifted students. His classes were always full up. So it presently occurred to me that he had only to put on the page what he was doing viva voce. It would be the easiest thing in the world for Ravelstein to write a popular book.

Furthermore, to be perfectly frank, I was tired of hearing about his unsatisfactory salary, his Byzantine borrowing habits, and the deals and arrangements he made putting his treasures in hock, his Jensen teapot or his Quimper antique plates. After following with more exasperation than interest the story of his beautiful Jensen teapot five years in the hands of Cecil Moers, one of his own Ph.D.'s, given as security for a \$5,000 loan (and finally sold by this Ph.D. for ten thousand to some dealer), I said, "How long can you expect me to put up with this boring dispute, this boring teapot, and all your other boring luxury articles? Look, Abe, if you're living beyond your means, a struggling aristocrat victimized by his need for beautiful objects, why don't you increase those means?" At this, I recall, Ravelstein brought both hands to both his ears. The hands were finely made, the ears were gross. "What should I register with an escort service?" "Well, you're not much of a dancer. You might hire out as a dinner-table conversationalist. Like a thousand bucks a night ...

No, what I have in mind for you is a book. You could base a popular book on your actual class notes." "Yah," he said. "Like Fielding's poor Parson Adams who goes to London to have his sermons printed. The parson needed money, and he had nothing to sell except his sermons. He had written them out. I don't even have notes. The advice you're giving me, Chick, is the advice of a much-published author. You remind me of Dwight Macdonald. He said to Venetsky, one of his friends, who was dead broke absolutely at wit's end for money 'If you're in such a bind, Venetsky, why don't you sell one of your bonds. One can always do that.' It never would have occurred to him that Venetsky had no bonds. The Macdonalds had them. The Venetskys didn't." "This is Macdonald as Marie Antoinette." "Yes!" Ravelstein shouted, laughing. "Thee-ah old depression joke about the hobo who pitches a rich old lady and says, 'Ma'am, I haven't swallowed a bite of food in three days.' 'O you poor man, you must force yourself,' she says." "I don't see how you can miss on this," I told Ravelstein. "All you have to do is prepare a proposal. At the very least you can get a small advance. It couldn't be less than twenty-five hundred dollars. My guess would be nearer to five thousand.

Even if you never write a word of this proposed book, you'll pay off some of the debts and revive your borrowing power. How can you lose?" He jumped at this. To bilk a publisher out of a few thousand bucks and at the same time free himself to wheel and deal was tremendously appealing. In outlook, he was anything but petty. But he did not expect my Utopian brainstorm to come to anything. He had gotten used to the theater of small-time intrigue where he could ironically, satirically dramatize and assert his exceptional stature and scope. So the outline was prepared and sent, a contract was signed, the advance was paid. The priceless Jensen silver teapot was gone for good, but Ravelstein's credit line was reopened. He wired money to Nikki in Geneva, who bought a new outfit from Gianfranco Ferré. Nikki had the instincts of a prince, he dressed like one in Nikki, Ravelstein saw a brilliant young man who had every right to assert himself. This was not a matter of style or self-presentation. We are speaking here of a young man's nature and not of his strategies. To his own surprise, Abe Ravelstein then found himself writing the book he had signed up to do.

The surprise was general among his friends and the three or four generations of students he had trained. Some of these disapproved. They opposed what they saw as the popularization, or cheapening, of his ideas. But teaching, even if you are teaching Plato or Lucretius or Machiavelli or Bacon or Hobbes, is a kind of popularization. The products of their great minds have been in print for centuries and accessible to a general public blind to their esoteric significance. For all the great texts had esoteric significance, he believed and taught. This, I think, has to be mentioned, but no more than mentioned. The simplest of human beings is, for that matter, esoteric and radically mysterious. One more odd bit from that evening at Lucas-Carton. It ended with an after-dinner wine. We had come to the estuary of the feast and were once more facing the gulf of common fare. Ravelstein pulled out his French checkbook. He had never before had a Paris account. For long years he had been a tourist or midlevel worshipper of French civilization but under a budgetary cloud wanting to be a high-stepper, but broke. On our own side of the Atlantic there was a shadow parallel to this. As a Jew you are also an American, but somehow you are also not. Imagine, however, reaching into your pocket to leave a grand seigneur tip and finding little more than lint along the seam. But Ravelstein, with his shaking hand, wrote tonight's check in an ecstasy. Now the waiter had brought a dish of chocolate truffles with the bill and it broke Ravelstein up to see Rosamund opening her purse and wrapping up the small peaked chocolates covered with cocoa dust. "Take 'em! Take every last one," said Ravelstein the Jewish comedian. He raised his cracked nightclub voice. "Those are edible souvenirs. Every one you eat will bring this feast back to you. You can write it down in your diary and remember how bold and forward you

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were, dumping these truffles into your bag." Ravelstein thought all the better of you for stepping out of line. Later, he would occasionally say to Rosamund, "Don't give me that well-bred-young-lady, lace-paper-doily routine. I saw you swiping those chocolates at Lucas-Carton." The fact is that he liked minor crimes and misdemeanors. Just under the surfaces of his preferences there were always ideas to be found. In this instance the idea was that uniform good conduct was a very bad sign. Ravelstein himself, moreover, had a weakness for goodies what he called friandise. On his way home from the office he often stopped at the grocery store to buy a bag of kid candy. He'd stuff himself with sugared fruitjellies, preferably lime-flavored half-moons. *Revue de presse* The magic still sparks and flashes on the page...Masterful in its thoroughness and intricacy...the prose rings as clearly as a meditation bell. Roland Merullo, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (front-page review) This book rings with laughter and joy....Ravelstein is an extraordinary character...it is hard not to feel privileged at being allowed a glimpse into a human connection as intimate and rewarding as this one. Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post Book World* (front-page review) "With his new novel, Saul Bellow proves that he still dominates. . . . Ravelstein is full of heart and wisdom, and I want to praise it without a pinch of qualification. Sven Birkerts, *Esquire* A cause for celebration...Bellow hugs the modern world hard in this novel...Ravelstein is rich, deep, and unnervingly entertaining. Jonathan Wilson, *The New York Times Book* (front-page review)