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THE SMALLER THE GAP THE GREATER THE DISTANCE: THE IMAGE OF THE WRITER IN THE NOVELS OF PHILIP ROTH

The themes of Philip Roth's novels have always evolved within a clearly recognizable assumption that culture and family life put often unbearable pressures upon sensitive individuals who, not to lose their sanity, resort to bizarre attitudes and practices. With the publication of "My Life as a Man" (1974), and the so called Zuckerman trilogy, which includes "The Ghost Writer" (1979), "Zuckerman Unbound" (1981), "The Anatomy Lesson" plus a short novella "The Prague Orgy" (1985), Roth, while maintaining this basic premise, narrows it down to what it means to be a writer living in today's United States.

After WW II novels about writers have become more popular and frequent in the United States than ever before. Nabokov, Bellow, Mailer, Malamud, Styron, Updike, Heller, Roth, Barth, Doctorow, to mention only some of the best-known names, have written important and memorable novels about lives of writers. It seems that the image of the writer has become an almost obligatory theme in American literature today, a kind of literary myth, just as the life of the frontiersman was a myth in the 19th century, or as the Lost Generation writers' going to Europe, to escape America's philistinism, was in the 1920s.

Set against the recognizable background of contemporary America, this new myth, made out of the writers' own careers, is, by its very nature, personal, self-centered, confessional. It usually contains an implication that the veracity of what is inside the novel is conditioned by, and a reflection of the novel's outside, that is the author.

The life and career of Nathan Zuckerman, a Jewish American novelist, resembles Roth's own biography. Both were born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1933. The novels that both wrote about their Jewish backgrounds brought them fame as well as the angry responses of those who see them as lampooners of their own family and ethnic traditions. Their fascination with sex is similar, too. Zuckerman's best-selling novel "Carnovsky" and Roth's "Portnoy's Complaint" are filled with explicit and exultant confessions of adolescents. Both books made their authors popular, financially secure and controversial.

Those who look for meaningful relationships between the fictional Zuckerman and the real life Roth in his latest novel, "The Counterlife" (1987), will, however, be baffled by the fact that the character who, in the past, so convincinly resembled Roth, lets it be known that there is falsity in the process of a writer's self-depiction.

Zuckerman, now in his mid-forties, still rich and famous after the success of "Carnovsky" but "sick of old crises, bored with old issues" wanting "to break away from the writer's tedious burden of being his own cause" proclaims ways of using his literary vocation as a means of renewing his life and art. He believes that by "conjuring up" life's fictional alternatives, detecting and playing with the existing subjective versions of reality he can work out a creative and satisfying way of "counterliving". His own life as a writer is to him an embodiment of such an attitude: "being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as being oneself". To dispel any doubt about this being a reflection of the writer's own conflicts and contradictory perceptions of himself, Zuckerman declares what might serve as the novel's motto:

> I can only exhibit myself in disguise.
> All my audacity derives from masks[1].

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[1] Ph. R o t h, The Counterlife, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1987, p. 275.

He is convinced that the processes that he recognizes and utilizes in his art are unknowingly employed by everyone:

> The treacherous imagination is everybody's maker - we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other's authors[2].

Zuckerman's aesthetic and moral transformation, the replacement of the old "artificial fiction of being myself" with the "genuine, satisfying falseness of being somebody else" leads to his rejection of the traditional concept of the writer's conscious self. He believes he does not have, and is not willing to "perpetrate" upon himself what he sees as the "joke of a self". What he possesses instead is "a variety of impersonations", "a troupe of players" he can "call upon when a self is required". The whole Western idea of being divided in oneself "as the opposite of mental health" seems to him erroneous because:

> [...] there are those whose sanity flows from the conscious separation of those two things. If there even is a natural being, an irreducible self. it is rather small, I think, and may even be the root of all impersonation - the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate[3].

Consequently, people who consciously or unconsciously invent reality's fictional alternatives, who "impersonate what they think they might like to be, believe they ought to be, or wish to be taken to be" are authentic, mentally healthy.

Roth's speculations about the writer's ability to juggle with fiction and reality as well as his own image are, in an interesting and highly complex way reflected by the plot and the structure of the novel.

"The Counterlife" consists of five parts or chapters containing various versions of the same situations. In part one, Henry Zuckerman, Nathan's brother, who criticizes the writer for defaming his family and the Jewish cultural heritage, has a heart condition, yet refuses to take a medication that would

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[2] Ibidem, p. 145.
[3] Ibidem, p. 320.

render him permanently impotant. A risky heart surgery is performed but proves unsuccessful. Henry dies. Nathan attends the funeral. In part two the same Henry survives the operation but decides to abandon his wife and children and settle in Israel. Nathan visits him there and tries to dissuade him. On the way back, described in part three, Nathan is involuntarily involved in an attempt to hijack the plane. In part four we learn that it is Nathan who had a heart condition and an operation that proved to be fatal. After his funeral Henry goes through the papers left by Nathan and is enraged to find there a description of his own death and funeral. He destroys parts of what was to be a book. The last part of the novel further complicates the situation. Nathan did not die. After his trip to Israel he joins Maria, a gentile Englishwoman. Having gained, after his visit to Israel, a strong sense of Jewish identity, he lets Maria know his displeasure with what he perceives as her family's deep-rooted anti-Semitism. Maria, surprised by Nathan's new obsession, and angered by his use of her in his novel, which reduces her to "a series of fictive propositions", decides to leave both him and his unfinished story:

> [...] I recognize that to be born, to live, and to die is to change form, but you overdo it... I can't take a lifetime of never knowing if you're fooling. I can't be toyed with forever... I will not be locked into your head in this way. I will not participate in this primitive drama, not even for the sake of your fiction[4].

Nathan, in the last words of the novel, cautions her: "This life is as close to life as you, and I, and our child can ever hope to come".

That falsehood and fantasy may play an important part in the process of a writer's self-depiction, Roth has been indicating since Nathan Zuckerman was first introduced in "My Life as a Man" in 1974. The very structure of that book suggests that Roth wanted to focus on the relationship between the writer and his fictional image. The narrative is divided into two sections. The first consists of two stories called "Useful

[4] Ibidem, p. 312-315.

Fictions" and deals with the adventures of a fictional novelist, the very Nathan Zuckerman, the second, called "My True Story" is about the author of these stories, a young novelist, Peter Tarnopol, on whose ostensibly "true" life Zuckerman's fictional adventures are based. What is interesting here is, that while portraying Zuckerman Tarnopol consistently mixes his own characteristics with features that are strikingly ficticious. So does Roth portraying Tarnopol. Consequently, the three authors, seemingly similar, do not coincide with each other.

In his widely quoted essay published in 1961 and entitled "Writing American Fiction" Roth accuses American novelists like Bellow, Malamud and Styron of imaginative falsification of life, of creating characters that exist outside social or historical realities, of focusing on the "celebration of the self" which is often "excluded from society, or ... exercised and admired in a fantastic one"[5]. In "My Life as a Man", published about thirteen years after "Writing American Fiction", Tarnopol, chagrined by his psychoanalyst's inaccurate evaluation of himself, discusses the importance of the writer's central preoccupation, the self, in a way that seems to contradict Roth's earlier views:

> [...] his (the writer's) self is to many a novelist... the closest subject at hand demanding scrutiny, a problem for his art to solve - given the enormous obstacles to truthfulness, <u>the</u> artistic problem. He is not simply looking into the mirror because he is transfixed by what he sees. Rather, the artist's success depends as much as anything on his powers of detachement, on <u>de</u>-narcissizing himself. That's where the excitement comes in. That hard <u>consciuos</u> work that makes it <u>art</u>![6]

To John W. Aldridge, Roth's determination in "My Life as a Man" to "seek his subject through the exploration of the self" is an example of how the author succumbed to the "errors and evasions of artistic responsibility which he once detected in the work of others". Aldridge also accuses Roth of being caught

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[5] Ph. R o t h, Reading Myself and Others, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1975 (quotations from "Writing American Fiction"), p. 117-135.

[6] Ph. R o t h, My Life as a Man, Corgi Books, London 1976, p. 242.

in the confusions of his theme, of having "no firm understanding of what his novels are supposed to mean", of not knowing how "to discover and possess a subject". Aldridge says:

> [...] the problem with Roth is that he cannot function as his own psychiatrist. He cannot find the meaning of his anguish or his anger: hence, we cannot. All he can do is talk, talk, talk, sometimes brilliantly, sometimes tediously, but always toward a point that is never reached because it does not exist. What he is up to really is - to use his own phrase - a form of literary onanism[7].

There has been a profusion of Roth's "talking" about writing since Aldridge wrote these words more than a dozen years ago. The writer-protagonist's confusions about not so much his art as his own image in it, confusions often bordering on, as Aldridge saw it, "fanatical self-infatuation" have continued to be Roth's fascinations in the Zuckerman trilogy. Yet Aldridge's claim that Roth's exploration of the writer's psyche goes in no definite direction lost most of its strength when hints that Zuckerman finds himself motivated to deal with the conflict between what the writer knows and what he imagines became more frequent.

In the "Ghost Writer" Nathan Zuckerman, a 23-year-old fledgling author of only four published short stories (younger than in "My Life as a Man", which was published five years earlier) describes his visit to a much older, reclusive, recently "discovered" writer, E. I. Lonoff. Lonoff's restrained and ascetic attitudes appeal to Zuckerman more than those of a successful, rich and self-publicizing author, Felix Abravanel, whom he had met some three years earlier and now compares with Lonoff. At the same time the young writer fantacizes about the power of imagination - "if only I could invent as presumptuosly as real life", of being freed of responsibility toward his family and Jewish readers, of being a part of the unrestrained world of love and sex. When he meets Amy, a haunting young woman, a former student of Lonoff and now possibly his mistress,

[7] J. W. Aldridge, The American Novel and the Way We Live Now, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford 1983, p. 34-35.

he takes her for the miraculously survived death camp martyr, Anne Frank, imagines himself marrying her - a symbolic indication that imagination rather than discipline will dominate his future artistic perceptions.

In "Zuckerman Unbound", Nathan is already a man in his thirties and an author of four novels. The fourth one, the best-selling, scandalous "Carnovsky" (published like "Portnoy's Complaint" in 1969!) brought him a million dollars, fame and lots of shocked readers. Nathan enjoys being rich and a celebrity (he is closer now to the worldly Abravanel than to the self-denying Lonoff), yet is not quite able to deal wrth the confusions his writing has brought into his life. Strangers accost him in the street, take him for Carnovsky, offer jokes, sex or insults. Someone threatens to kidnap his mother. His family is ashamed, wishes Nathan made his fortune in some other way. The biographical fantasy about being famous and powerful as an artist he engaged in in "May Life as a Man" and "The Ghost Writer", having now materialized reverses itself in a paradoxical way, becomes his own nuisance and burden. He himself is the object of public fantasy, the victim of the readers' imagination. Zuckerman sees himself, as the title suggests, as a latter-day Prometheus who, having brought the gift of literary fire, "Carnovsky", to free man, as well as himself, of the darkness of cultural and sexual conventions and prejudices, is misunderstood, punished, and forever bound and chained by his readers. Seeing the writer's growing frustration and self-imposed isolation, his friend and literary agent observes:

> First you lock yourself away in order to stir up your imagination, now you lock yourself away because you've stirred up theirs... you have successfully conducted your novelistic experiment and now that you are famous all over the haywire country for being haywire yourself, you're even more stultified than before... you're humiliated, you idiot, because nobody aside from you seems to see it as a profoundly moral and high-minded act. "They" misunderstood you[8].

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[8] Ph. R o t h, Zuckerman Unbound, [in:] Zuckerman Bound, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1985, p. 304-305.

The writer is determined to free himself of the unbearable repercussions of his success as a writer. His "unbinding" takes place on different levels. The death of his father, who before he dies calls him "bastard", removes the bonds of familial allegiances. The way the public responds to his writing frees him of his earlier illusions about art's moral function in the society. The discovery that he himself, in a curious way, has become the victim of his own fiction draws his attention to the readers inability "to distinguish between the illusionist and the illusion", makes him want to protect himself from the "real consequences" of his art.

In "The Anatomy Lesson" Zuckerman, several years older, is still struggling with "the unreckoned consequences of life in art". He is tormented by a debilitating, undiagnosed pain in the neck (which, on the symbolic level seems tantamount to the confusions of being a writer) and hostile critics, personified here by a Jewish Harvard professor, Milton Appel, who accuses Zuckerman of being a "sell-out to the pop-porno culture" and of "depicting Jewish lives for the sake of belittling them". The writer angrily fights back. He thinks that Appel, like most American readers, is not able to distinguish between the author and his literary creations, between "life and art". Now he is unbound enough to declare:

> Life and art are distinct... Yet the distinction is wholly elusive. That writing is an act of imagination seems to perplex and infuriate everyone[9].

In an interview in "Paris Review" Roth makes it known that his protagonist only echoes his own views:

> Nathan Zuckerman is an act. It's all the art of impersonation [...] Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existance out of the actual drama of my life is my life. There has to be some pleasure in this job, and that's it. To go around in disguise. To act a character. To pass oneself off as what one is not. To pretend [...] You don't necessarily, as a writer, have to abandon your own biography completely to engage in an act of impersonation. It may be more

[9] Ph. R o t h, The Anatomy Lesson, [in:] Zuckerman Bound...

intriguing when you don't. You distort it, caricature it, parody it, you torture and subvert it, you exploit it - all to give the biography that dimension that will excite your verbal life[10].

If Roth sounds here as if playing with his own biography in fiction were mainly a source of creative amusement, his hero complains about the results of such a persuasion. To escape the frustrations of being a writer, being "chained to my dwarf drama till I die", Zuckerman decides in "The Anatomy Lesson" to abandon literature and study medicine instead. An accident, or self-inflicted injury, brings him to a hospital, where, as the novel closes, he inspects the wounded and the sick, wants to be useful, a healer.

To some critics the protagonist's decision to give up literature signified his symbolic death and suggested that Roth had inconclusively exhausted the writer theme. Joseph Epstein thought that:

Roth himself may feel he can go no further in this vein. He has written himself into a corner and up a wall[11].

Others argued that the author of Zuckerman became the victim of the malaise his literary look-alike suffered from - a mixture of self-reflected narcissism and masochism.

"The Counterlife" proves that Roth is neither tired with, nor thematically trapped by writing about the dilemmas of his profession. Zuckerman is not only revived here as a character but also given full control of his mental and artistic life. He proclaims himself to be the healer he wanted to become in "The Anatomy Lesson". His cure is the explicit theory about life being governed by stories, and writers being controlled by fantasies.

Yet anxieties so dominant in Roth's earlier novels reappear, and intensify. Zuckerman fears the possibility of being

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[10] H. L e e, Interview with Philip Roth, "Paris Review" 1984, Fall.

[11] J. E p s t e i n, What Does Philip Roth Want? "Commentary" 1984, January.

seen as a "terrorist", of being misunderstood and abandoned by those he wants to be his partners in his "counterliving". If left by Maria, who may stand metaphorically for the reader whom the writer shapes and controls, his whole theory, Zuckerman suspects, would prove not viable, and old frustrations would return. He would again be reduced to "the isolating unnaturalness of self-battling", the old state of being "completely otherless and reabsorbed within". At the end of the novel he entreats Maria to return to him:

> Come back and we'll play with it together. We could have great times as Homo Ludens and wife, inventing the imperfect future. We can pretend to be anything we want. All it takes is impersonation[12].

The novel ends before we learn if Maria agrees to return to Nathan. Her decision becomes the reader's own. Will he accept the writer's invitation to enter the confusing and, as Maria sees it, restricting, yet enchanting world in which his fantasies endlessly multiply ours, in which distinctions between life and art are abolished and in which people create and live in "imagined worlds where we may finally be ourselves". Is such a world possible? Does fiction have the power to shape and improve our individual relationships with reality?

Roth admits through Zuckerman and other characters that what he is professing in "The Counterlife" is like "tipping over the edge", posing confusions that may prove futile, or destructive. When in one of the novel's possibilities, Nathan dies, Henry, always suspicious of his brother's literary experiments condemns them thus:

> [...] the closest Nathan could ever come to life's real confusion was in these fictions he created about it [...][13].

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[12] R o t h, The Counterlife, p. 321.

[13] Ibidem, p. 229.

Maria, afraid of the pernicious properties of fiction, puts Nathan's death down to his "refusal to accept things as they are - everything reinvented, even himself". Then she says:

He did with his life exactly what he did in his fiction and finally paid for it. He finally confused the two - just what he was always warning everybody against[14].

Self-renewals and transformations, so often central in Roth's novels, have always been accompanied there by new conflicts and dangers, enchantments have been shadowed by unexpected fears and frustrations. Looking for self-renewal through the concept of "counterliving" Zuckerman creates a situation which may, or does, depending on how one interprets the novel, become the source of new mental chaos, or even his death. After the publication of "The Counterlife" Roth admitted that he was for a long time "in a deep state of confusion, uncertainty and frustration" about the way the book, his "most complex narrative position ever taken", "wanted to go every which way". Then he understood that "the confusion is the issue" in the book[15].

Joseph Epstein criticized Roth a few years ago for "insisting that he is not, in his novels, writing about Philip Roth, except through the transmutations of art" while continuing to "cultivate the idiosyncratic vision, to plow away at (his) own obsessions, becoming a bit of a crank, something of a crackpot, and risk being a minor writer indeed"[16]. The other, better way for an author who wants to write about himself, Epstein argues, is "through invention, imagination, fresh creation, greater subtlety".

"The Counterlife" seems to be cut out to meet Epstein's expectations. It is probably Roth's best novel about Zuckerman the most imaginative and the most witty reflection on the ambiguous relations of words and reality, a fresh way of dealing with the image of a writer in fiction.

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[14] Ibidem, p. 250.

[15] Ph. R o t h, Writers Have a Third Eye, "US News and World Report" 1987, February 2.

[16] J. E p s t e i n, op. cit.

Epstein and Roth are still far away, however, when it comes to characterizing new autobiographical fiction. "The closer we get to our own day, Epstein points out, "the smaller the gap between the fictional and the autobiographical". "Contrary to the general belief", Roth says in "The Counterlife", "it is the distance between the writer's life and his novel that is the most intriguing aspect of his imagination".

In his own statements and interviews, Roth implies that, though his writing has always been slow and full of frustration, his reinventing himself in fiction has been done for enjoyment rather than out of necessity. His hero is allowed to learn about the "intriguing" part of dealing with himself slowly, in stages, by way of defending himself against the backlash of his being popular and controversial. The author and the hero of "The Counterlife" meet in their fascination with, and sanctification of the falseness of literary self-depiction. The reader can trust neither the artist nor the tale.

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IM MNIEJSZA PRZEPAŚĆ, TYM WIĘKSZY DYSTANS:
WIZERUNEK PISARZA W PROZIE PHILIPA ROTHA

Nathan Zuckerman, bohater kilku powieści Philipa Rotha, także wydanej w styczniu 1987 r. "The Counterlife", przypomina swojego twórcę. Roth nie tworzy jednak autoportretu literackiego, ukazuje raczej rosnącą potrzebę tworzenia atmosfery tajemniczości i swoistego kamuflażu wokół postaci Zuckermana, podkreśla dystans między pisarzem i jego literackim alter ego. W "The Counterlife" Zuckerman ukazuje fikcyjne i subiektywne, nieskończenie złożone interpretacje samego siebie i swojego otoczenia. Dostrzega w nich źródło siły i artystycznej inspiracji pisarza. Pomysłowo ilustrując nową filozoficzno-artystyczną postawę swojego bohatera, Roth każe czytelnikowi zastanawiać się nad złożonością życia, potencjałem ludzkiej wyobraźni i potrzebą tworzenia własnych masek.