# MISCHIEVOUS COMMUNICATION OR THE CAT-AND-MOUSE GAME OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES IN THE FICTION OF PHILIP ROTH

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## *Abstract*

Philip Roth has famously explored, exposed and exploited every period of his life for fictional purposes. This raises in the minds of critics and readers alike more or less inclined towards biographical interpretation a number of questions related to reliability, technique, Roth's stance and the extent to which (auto-)biographical details source the text. This paper looks at these queries, particularly with regard to the Zuckerman series of books.

**Keywords:** self-reference, alter-ego, biographical reading, audience certainty, artistic identity

Roth is notorious for using in his fiction details from his personal life or the lives of his family members, acquaintances, friends, detractors etc. So far he has managed to remain enigmatic as to precisely how far his fiction relates to real life.

**Biographical similarities between Roth and his character Nathan Zuckerman.** Roth's exploitation of autobiographical details is particularly obvious in the Zuckerman series of books, which parallel a large number of real events and circumstances in Roth's life. Both Philip Roth and his character Nathan Zuckerman were born in 1933 and spent their childhood and teenage in Newark, New Jersey. They are both the sons of American-born parents and the grandsons of European Jews who were part of the nineteenth-century wave of immigration to the United States. Their education is fairly similar: they attended Weequahic Highschool in Newark, Bucknell University, and then the University of Chicago. They were both earnest young 1950s writers, encouraged when starting out by well established writers (Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud/E.I. Lonoff). They were both pilloried for publishing a story, featuring a mildly dislikeable Jewish character. Their first book was a book of short stories depicting Jewish life in post-war America. The book won them critical recognition, and along with that, condemnation from some people within the Jewish community for depicting what they saw as the unflattering side of contemporary Jewish American experience. Both became best known--notoriously so --for their fourth book - *Portnoy's Complaint/Carnovsky*-, a novel published in 1969, a wildly comic representation of their middle-class New York Jewish world in the portrait of Alexander Portnoy/Carnovsky, an outrageous psycho-sexual (and tragicomic) character. Their books also made celebrities out of their authors, uncomfortable positions that they would later fictionalize in such novels as *Zuckerman*

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*Unbound* (1981) and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1987). Their books explore the relationship between the lived world and the written world, between "fact" and "fiction." They both travelled to Prague and took an interest in the literature produced in Czechoslovakia. They also travelled to Israel on various occasions. They lived in New York, most of their youth and adult life. They also lived in London, as they both were married to an Englishwoman (details about Roth's divorce and his ex-wife scandalous memoir revelations have been fictionalized and borrowed to another character in the series: Ira Ringold). Later in life they both choose to become somewhat of recluses by moving to a cabin atop a mountain in New England and at some point they both decided to return to New York. Zuckerman's life in New England reflects his creator's. Although Roth's farmhouse is in Connecticut rather than Massachusetts, and he is rumored to be in better shape than his alter ego, Zuckerman's seclusion and commitment to his work are clearly taken from life.

This parallel can be enlarged by mentioning a myriad of smaller details, such as the analogy between Irving Howe's reprehension of Roth's work in the 1960s and 70's and Milton Appel's stinging criticism of Zuckerman's literature, in *The Anatomy Lesson*. "The identity of Mr. Howe is hidden like a lamppost in the living room." (Gass unpaginated)

On the other hand it is equally true that there are a number of important biographical details which do not coincide: Roth's parents did not die until the 1980s, for example, and they were not killed by embarrassment over *Portnoy's Complaint*. Roth has had fewer marriages than Zuckerman, spent more time in universities and written more books. Even Lonoff – who is often described as a stand-in for Malamud is a character drawn from multiple sources.

**Revealing information about family and other people.** Roth also makes extensive use of the circumstances of other people's lives in the literature he writes. In this respect, his favorite joke (which he has told in several interviews) is a quotation by Ceslov Milos: "When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished". (He also uses this idea in *The Counterlife*). While his parents and brother were never as bothered by this fact as it could be surmised, his wives were. Some reviewers, especially those in the British press such as Rachelle Thackray of *The Independent* and Linda Grant of *The Guardian*, consider that Roth riposted to his ex-wife's (Claire Bloom) unflattering memoirs (which portray a Roth unable to bottle his vanity and incapable of living in the same household with Bloom's daughter, Anna Steigerthe) with the depiction in *I Married a Communist* of an evil, anti-Semitic character named Eve Frame — a thinly veiled reference to his second wife. Linda Grant identifies a series of the similarities between Bloom and Eve Frame: Frame is a Jewish actress, so is Bloom. Frame's second husband is a financier, so was Bloom's. Eve Frame has a daughter who is a harpist, Bloom's girl is an opera singer. Ira tells the daughter to move out, Roth did the same. Ira has an affair with the daughter's best friend; Roth, Bloom alleged, came on to her own daughter's best



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friend. A similarly uncomplimentary similarity can be traced between his first wife and the wife of Peter Tarnopol in *My Life as a Man*.

Roth admits his overall tendency to be intrusive and indiscrete as "[t]here is no novelist […] who isn't fascinated by the real. There is fascination, mesmerization with the real, the thing itself […] As a writer you just have to present it" (Fresh air: Radio interview Oct. 31, 2003), but he also declares the existence of a certain line he would not cross: "I wouldn't want to live with a novelist. Writers are highly voyeuristic and indiscrete. But the writer should be no more ruthless with the other than with himself. The same intensity of focus should be turned inward as outward" (interview Roth gave in 1987 USNews, apud Levi).

**Technique and stance.** Roth's using "the real" in his fiction is not an uncommon technique. Every writer uses the substance of his own or another real person's life to create fiction. Roth himself has offered comprehensive explanation of his technique to settle this matter: his books of fiction are the result of "the interplay between my previous fiction, recent undigested personal history, the circumstances of my immediate everyday life and the books I've been reading and teaching" (*RMO* 112-113). Besides, according to the structuralist thought, the moment facts are turned into fiction they are essentially altered. What a literary work does is not to communicate or convey some pre-existent truth but to create a different and arbitrary "real," which depends entirely on the unfolding of the discourse. The line of discourse is thickened by reminiscences, alterations, revivals or absences, the object of the discourse being in fact multiple, separate and discontinuous realities.

What is unusual, though, is that in many of his novels (particularly in the Zuckerman and the Roth books) the writer purposely employs a playful treatment of autobiography, as the reporting of facts is direct and total, indirect and fragmentary, false and misleading. He toys with all these alternatives and this invites the audience's confusion. Asked in an interview "where the real Philip Roth end[s], and where literature begin[s]", Roth's answer was

> I just don't understand that question. I don't read or perceive books in that way. I'm interested in the object, the ... the thing, the story, the aesthetic jolt you get from being inside this ... thing. Am I Roth or Zuckerman? It's all me. You know? That's what I normally say. It's all me. Nothing is me. (interview by Martin Krasnik, December 2005)

The consequence of this is a clever cat-and-mouse game with his readers. In the chapter "Philip Roth's Fictions of Self-Exposure," Shostak shows that Roth "makes capital out of his readers inclinations toward biographical interpretations of his work" (31) by "promising an 'objective' truth and then failing to deliver" (52). As Shostak sees it, Roth uses self-reference as a kind of seduction, a "gambit" to bring his readers to the point of losing "assurance that [autobiography] records subjectivity rather than evanescent subject-positions" (53). In other words, Roth takes advantage of and needs



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his audience to hold information on his personal and socio-historical situatedness. These elements are very much a part of the communication act and transaction between the writer and his audience, particularly because of Roth's playful tendency to subvert his audience's certainty.

**The matter of alter-egos.** Particularly in the case of his Nathan Zuckerman character, many critics have manifested the impulse to view the author and the character as closely aligned. Critics have traced Roth's personality in his books and Zuckerman's traits in Roth's real life experiences, public statements etc. This is not only natural but to a certain extent valid, considering the arguments above. For instance, Saul Maloff, in his *The Ghost Writer* review in the *Commonweal*, notes: "it may be fairly added that though *The Ghost Writer* is not in any literal sense a roman a clef, certain personal traits are unmistakably caught – not in full portrait, of course, but in broad strokes, a gesture here, a tone of voice there, a turn of mind everywhere". (1979, 9 Nov.) The idea is that Nathan Zuckerman is a fictional construct, a narrative device, not a mirror image of Philip Roth. Therefore, I find it both unnecessary and erroneous to ever refer to Nathan Zuckerman, or any other character for that matter, as Philip Roth's alter-ego.

**To conclude**, performing biographical readings of his books is a mistake, as Roth has repetitiously warned in interviews and essays. Admittedly, the information about his biography helps, even enhances understanding, keeping the lines between Roth and his fictional inventions straight, it is difficult and useless and this whole matter has to be taken as is a function of Roth's "style." Moreover, one does not need analysis of such background information to enjoy the strength of Roth's narrative or to learn about the complexity of artistic identities.

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