

Narratological Quicksands in the Nemesis Tetralogy

Pia Masiero

Since the publication of his first collection of short stories, *Goodbye, Columbus*, in 1959, Philip Roth has written more than thirty books. In 2000, on the occasion of the publication of *The Human Stain*, Roth looked back on his production and decided to reshuffle the list of his already published books. Since then, Roth has organized his works list (often included at the beginning of his books) under headings that include the names of his most famous characters—Nathan Zuckerman, Philip Roth, and David Kepesh—which correspond to an internal chronology. This authorial choice directs his readers' attention to a specific feature of his literary production, namely the construction of storyworlds around well-defined and recognizable (authorial) masks and (narrative) voices.

More than ten years have gone by since that momentous decision, which has certainly reshaped Roth's oeuvre in changing the trajectory of its (possible) reception. Of the seven fictional books published since, three have found their natural collocation in these newly created groups (*The Dying Animal* (2001), listed under "Kepesh Books"; *The Plot against America* (2004), under "Roth Books"; and *Exit Ghost* (2007), under "Zuckerman Books"), and four have lingered in the limbo of the "Other Books" section up until the publication of *Nemesis* (2010), which spurred another authorial retrospective intervention with the creation of the new heading "Nemesis: Short Novels." In addition to *Nemesis*, the three other books in this tetralogy include *Everyman* (2006), *Indignation* (2008), and *The Humbling* (2009).

This regrouping also comes belatedly, and seems to be an indication that the four books were not there to start with, but took a more defined shape at some moment during the composition of *Nemesis*. "It happened as I proceeded," Roth told Mark Lawson in an interview for BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* and added: "This is my little Lego set." For

literary scholars and attentive readers, however, this “boy’s delight,” as Roth defines it in that same interview, cannot go unnoticed, as it touches the core of the relationship between narrative matters and interpretative stances.

What cannot be ignored is that now—that is, after *Nemesis* and the consequent creation of the new grouping—the placing of these short novels *precedes* our reading experience of them. To those who are skeptical about the importance of paratextual details—and this paratextual detail in particular—I simply say that readers who pay attention to them cannot but read differently from readers who do not. *Not* paying attention implies not attending to a directly formulated and accessible authorial intention conveyed through a first-order illocutionary act, in which Roth *does* something by *saying* something.

But what does this decision signal? Roth might be wondering—both consciously and unconsciously—what will happen to his storytelling after his death. A first answer would thus consider the thematic context of the tetralogy—facing one’s destiny, death, mortality, fragility—and assume that Roth may want to take care of his will. As the protagonist of *Everyman* muses, “Writing a will—that was the best part of aging and probably even of dying, the writing and, as time passed, the updating and revising and carefully reconsidered rewriting of one’s will” (*Everyman* 62–63). In *Exit Ghost*—the book that stands chronologically between *Everyman* and *Indignation*—an aging Zuckerman wonders what the future of his writing will be once he has lost his grip on memory and remembering. Via Zuckerman, Roth demonstrates he is thinking about the possibility that his world as a novelist might no longer be what it was. What follows, however, will not address the thematic concerns of the tetralogy directly, but will be essentially devoted to the workings of Roth’s narratological choices with a special focus on their effects on readers.

Roth’s fictional contemplation of the impact of powerful nemeses on his characters is refracted and mirrored in narrative experimentations revolving around violations—the narratological quicksands

of the title—of the mimetic code of verisimilitude. What happens when voices are besieged by death and destruction? What happens to words when life is imperiled or gone? In narratological terms: Who speaks from where? The new kid on Roth's narratological block seems to be a narrative voice playing with the reader's mimetic expectations.

In her groundbreaking book *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* (1996), Monika Fludernik has set the stage for a "cognitive and organicist model," (xi) according to which the readability of fictional representations of storyworlds depends on natural—that is, cognitive—parameters. Fludernik's seminal intuition allows her to propose "a narratological conceptualization of the cognitive reading process" (11) that revolves around the readers' projections of familiar knowledge and mostly automatic assumptions regarding textual material. According to this conceptualization, readers apply the same interpretative strategies to their reading that they employ in real-life situations. Fludernik's choice of the controversial word "natural" leads her to redefine narrativity as experientiality. On the textual level, this redefinition implies that "there cannot be any narratives without a human (anthropomorphic) experiencer of some sort at some narrative level," (13) and, on the fruition level, it results in "the evocation of consciousness or with the representation of a speaker role" (13).

Given this framework—which my classroom experience has demonstrated to be very much to the point of what reading is essentially about—the basic Jakobsonian communicative context is the one we as readers tend to apply by default: It represents, so to speak, our reading comfort zone, as it does not require any adjustments to automatic processing gestures. The question guiding my readings of the Nemeses tetralogy—who speaks from where?—condenses our default assumptions concerning the functioning of a storyworld that takes a certain shape according to the voice in charge of the narration (who speaks) and the deictic field (from where) that determines the focalizing perspective. The following analyses will demonstrate how each of

the books in the tetralogy require readers to exit their reading comfort zones when they are confronted with textual material that defies naturalizing hypotheses.

***Everyman*: “There’s Nothing Special about My Story”**

Around the grave in the rundown cemetery were a few of his former advertising colleagues from New York, who . . . told his daughter, Nancy, what a pleasure it had been to work with him. . . . And there were his two sons, Randy and Lonny, middle-aged men from his turbulent first marriage, very much their mother’s children, who as a consequence knew little of him that was praiseworthy and much that was beastly and who were present out of duty and nothing more. (1)¹

Everyman begins at the end, with a graveyard scene that acquaints the readers virtually with all the protagonists of the short novel. Well in keeping with the circumstances, people reminisce and the world of the yet unnamed deceased person takes fuller and fuller shape. And yet, once we get past the superficial feeling that everything is offered in a reader-friendly way and begin asking more precise questions, textual data become slippery.

Two items do not fall easily into place: the overriding presence of the deceased person who nonetheless remains without a proper name and the authorial decisions concerning the narrating voice. As for the former, the reader cannot but wonder whether this namelessness has to be linked to the title of the book and whether the singularity and uniqueness of the life we have just been synoptically offered has to be measured against the gauge of representativeness. This hypothesis—death as the great leveler—remains pretty much at the center of the reader’s experience of the book, even when an explicit reference—the protagonist’s father’s shop, “Everyman’s Jewelry Store”—is given. As for the latter, the hovering question concerns the narrator’s positioning as far as the diegesis is concerned: Are we facing an external or an internal

narrator? At first sight, the narrator would seem to know a good deal about the people gathered around the grave. He connects the present with the past: Nancy is “plainly pretty as her mother had been” (4); the sons with the “sensual fullness of their wide, identical mouths, just like their father . . . at their age” (13); he knows what people remember: “Then she remembered his stoical maxim from decades back” (4); and seems to be able to access the characters’ minds: “He paused to compose his thoughts so that he could speak sensibly” (5).

And yet, the hypothesis of an external authorial third-person narrator is not completely convincing, as it fails to explain all textual material. “In a matter of minutes, everybody had walked away—wearily and tearfully walked away from *our species*’ least favorite activity—and he was left behind” (15, emphasis added). The incidental sentence introduces a first-person plural pronoun that does not run counter to the proposed external-narrator explanation in itself—authorial glosses may, in fact, take this form—but amplifies a number of features that go in the same direction, namely, the *internal* positioning of the narrating voice. On a closer analysis, in fact, a good number of details concerning the people gathered around the grave depend upon verbs and expressions of visual perception hereafter marked with italicized words. About Howie, “it still *appeared as if* he could run a football through the middle of the line” (5); the two sons are “handsome men beginning to grow beefy and *seemingly* as closely linked with each other as . . .”; Lonny’s “entire body began to tremble and quake, and *it looked as though* . . .” (13); Maureen is “a battler *from the look of her* and no stranger to either life or death” (14). The presentation of Maureen—the only outsider—constitutes the most significant evidence of internal positioning. When Maureen is presented as the “only one person whose presence hadn’t to do with having been invited,” who “introduced herself as Maureen,” (2) the introduction has the uncanny quality of seeming to concern the narrator as well; when he describes how “she let the dirt slip slowly across her curled palm and out the side of her hand onto the coffin, the gesture looked like the prelude to

a carnal act,” his conclusion—“Clearly this was a man to whom she’d once given much thought” (14)—is perspicuous for the absence of any cognitive privilege. The internal hypothesis is furthermore strengthened by what seems to be an emotionally involved reading of the situation: “Any note of tenderness, grief, love, or loss was *terrifyingly* absent from [Randy’s] voice” (14, emphasis added).

Our (automatic) efforts at naturalizing narratives are likely to lead us to privilege the hypothesis of internal positioning—and visualize this voice as belonging to someone in the tribe, forgetting tiny, but nonetheless present violations concerning the reading of other minds—over the simplest solution of the external narrator which would nonetheless require us to overlook the insistence on knowledge recovered through visual perception and on the emotionally implicated adverbial choice just quoted; the third alternative, a figural narration, does not seem to be available, because none of the characters presented can be considered a good candidate as reflector since we are never offered a recognizably singular point of perceptual origin. In one way or another, none of the possible solutions can be considered fully satisfactory.

The graveyard scene has presented a portrait in absentia, emerging from outside views attuned to the different familial perspectives involved. As far as readers’ expectations are concerned, it is all too natural to expect a (re)telling of the story by the only one who could not tell it in the first scene.

Though he had grown accustomed to being on his own . . . since his last divorce ten years back, in his bed the night before the surgery he worked at remembering as exactly as he could each of the women who had been there waiting for him to rise out of the anesthetic in the recovery room. (15)

The graveyard scene that opened the book recedes in the background to give way to a differently focalized stretch of narrative—the who-speaks-from-where question we have just tentatively answered returns to haunt us, as a difference in focalization requires a redefinition of the

coordinates of the narrative we are reading. The mimetic rule of verisimilitude requires the constant anchoring of the narration of a given event to the moment of narrating; such anchoring helps readers to tune in to the embodied experience of the protagonist by providing the existential coordinates from which the narrated events are looked at. This narrative premise seems to set the stage for a figural narration: an external voice presenting events through the filtering of a recognizable consciousness that readers assume belongs to the same person who has just been buried. The situation, after all, allows an easy transition between the two male personal pronouns as this second one is immediately given health problems, more than one wife, and the “sublime experience” (15) of a private nurse—all ingredients that we have already been told about.

The alternatives concerning the narrating voice of the first few pages are clearly not available here any longer: In offering an inside view on the workings of a mind, figural narratives require the existence of an external authorial narrator. The crucial question that has to be ascertained concerns the *kind* of relation this narrator entertains with the restricted perspective he purports to present: is his presence just a transparent medium, or is it audible? Is all we are offered attributable to the protagonist’s remembering? In all respects, this narrative structure is double-layered—the narrator represents a metaphorical backdrop that becomes audible each time the restricted perspective is transgressed. Breaches are to be measured in reference to the deictic field constituted by the precise standpoint the first paragraph (whose opening lines are quoted above) has depicted—the *now* represented by “the night before the surgery” and the *here* constituted by a hospital room.

The (naturalizing) problem with what follows concerns the fact that the anchorage to this moment of recollection is maintained in the first pages and then dissipates. What had been put forward as the target of that remembering—the women “waiting for him to rise out of the anesthetic”—soon becomes a much vaster project—a personal biography that has “by this time become identical with [his] medical biograph[y]”

(80). Even if this would be easy enough to naturalize given the present moment—after all, didn't the Everyman of the homonymous allegorical play go through a reckoning of his life while facing death?—readers are nonetheless liable to get lost in the maze of shifting deictics, and an ambiguous interplay between narrating voice and internal perspective.

The ambiguity depends on two jarring trajectories. On the one hand, the presence of the narrator is both signaled by typical quotational signals—“Would everything be different, *he asked himself*” (97)—and by overt narratorial intrusions—“This ordinarily even-tempered man struck furiously at his heart like some fanatic at prayer” (158). On the other, the focusing on the protagonist is at times so intense as to disrupt the usual referential pattern: “He did not want them to cover his father's face. . . . I've been looking at that face since I was born—stop burying my father's face!” (60). Here, in a highly charged emotional moment—his father's funeral—the protagonist's naked *I* surfaces. The most glaring narrative intrusion still far ahead, the temptation would be to consider the third person account just a confession in disguise—a distancing effect that a representative of our species may want to resort to while facing such a challenging predicament as the umpteenth surgical operation. This hypothesis would furthermore be corroborated by the surfacing of second-person addresses—“True, he had chosen to live alone, but not unbearably alone. The worst of being unbearably alone was that you had to bear it—either that or you were sunk” (102)—and by what I called the maze of shifting deictics. “He was remembering *now* her brief period as a track star” (77, emphasis added); “There was an absence *now* of all forms of solace” (129, emphasis added). Now when? The answer is not simple, because the first, original recollection opens up on other embedded recollections, creating a recognizable pattern: The protagonist remembers remembering, and we lose track of the Chinese box of memory in which we are enclosed. Two more issues may furthermore haunt the reader: How is it that, after a final paragraph break has (probably) consigned the narrative back into the hands of the third-person narrator whose voice opened

the book, the description of his last hours does not contain a single reference to his endeavor to remember? Conversely, why does the very paragraph inaugurating the figural narrative omit any reference to the way his talking to his parents' bones had "made him feel buoyant and indestructible" (181)? Roth seems to want to fragment narratologically what life has already broken.

Indignation: As Marcus Lay Dying

Indignation inaugurates the alternation that will be confirmed in the following two short novels, as it is built around the retrospective account of the protagonist's life in his own voice. In stark contrast with *Everyman*, which has no chapters, only a long narrative flow interrupted by paragraph breaks, *Indignation* offers the reader a table of contents at the beginning of the book. Here the reader is presented with the key to naturalize what he or she is going to read. The bulk of the book—more than two hundred pages—consists of the chapter "Under Morphine"; the second and final chapter—just seven pages—echoes, chiasmus-like, the first, "Out from Under." And yet, in spite of being told about the circumstances of the telling, readers fall prey to one of Roth's subtle games, and they forget. The liability to forget depends, first of all, on the distribution of textual material. The book opens with a chronological notation linking the global historical arena with the protagonist's existence: When "the agonies of the Korean War began" (1), Marcus enters Robert Treat, a small college in downtown Newark. The question of who speaks is immediately settled, as the first-person pronoun welcomes us immediately. First-person contexts are generally easier to naturalize, as the typical pattern around which they are structured—retrospection—is recognizable as "imitat[ating] the temporal continuity of real beings" (Cohn 144). The retrospective slant, already implicit in the past tense, is, furthermore, very soon explicitly referred to: "I look back at those seven months [before college] as a wonderful time" (7). The specification of the where and when of this present tense is, however, deferred for another fifty pages:

What happened next I had to puzzle over for weeks afterward. And even dead, as I am and have been for I don't know how long, I try to reconstruct the mores that reigned over that campus and to recapitulate the troubled efforts to elude those mores that fostered the series of mishaps ending in my death. (54)

Readers are taken aback by this revelation—another demonstration, if one is needed, that we are essentially impervious to paratextual suggestions. As the revelation of the present of the narration is not a last-minute plot twist, the reader has to cope—while reading—with the issue of literalness struggling between two explanatory frames. The first, natural, has the narrator speak, as the title goes, “Under Morphine”; the second, unnatural, has the narrator speak from an unspecified (and unspecifiable) condition of postmortality. This second alternative is founded on Marcus’s saying, “I am dead,” and not, “I am dying.” By the end of the book, the apparent violation is redressed with a perfectly sensible explanation the third-person narrator in charge of the telling in the final chapter provides: “Now he was well and truly dead, out from under and far beyond morphine-induced recollection” (226).

The issue that interests us here is not so much the eventual resolution, but Roth’s choice, first, to offer the readers the (paratextual) key; and second, to proceed with fifty-odd pages of unspecified retrospective recollection before the protagonist announces, “I’m dead”—in contrast with the very title of the chapter—and eventually disambiguate it all almost two hundred pages later. It is worth stressing that, of the three books that are divided into chapters, *Indignation* is the only one that presents a table of contents. This paratextual peculiarity would seem to corroborate Roth’s intention to play with readers’ expectations and assumptions, to manipulate them through a deft handling of the order of presentation of textual material. Crucial differences notwithstanding, this choice reminds us of Zuckerman’s telling us he dreamt a realist chronicle in *American Pastoral* and of readers’ forgetting.² Title

chapter notwithstanding, readers realize that the first fifty pages are to be filed under the heading “under morphine” *only after* page 54. The announcement and its specification both require readers to readjust their interpretative strategies and wonder about authorial intentions. Narrative grounds turn out to be slippery here, too. Elizabeth Tallent wonders: “What do dead narrators offer that live ones don’t?” (7). We might speculate that Roth wanted to explore the stakes at play once an impossible utterance is posited, to see whether a dead narrator allowed different, new effects. It is rather significant that Roth has Marcus describe his condition of postmortality by questioning the notions of *now* and *here* that are the necessary ingredients to define the embodied experience of a self around which narrative lives are (mimetically) built—“Even now (if ‘now’ can be said to mean anything any longer), . . . alive as I am here (if ‘here’ or ‘I’ means anything)” (54–55). Once the deictic field—the *now* and the *here*—cannot be defined any longer, what kind of narrative is possible? What happens to the interrelated notions of self and time? Postmodern texts do not shun the predicament and revel in fluid selves and times that the disruption of the deictic field warrants. With *Indignation*, Roth, who has never been keen on postmodern poetics, seems to espouse the opinion of Jacques Derrida, who maintained that “the condition for a true act of language is my being able to say ‘I am dead’” and yet “‘I am dead’ has a meaning if it is obviously false” (qtd. in Macksey 155). First Roth deploys the disruptive force of this act of language, only to falsify it, giving it a perfectly verisimilar explanation.

A partial consequence of this game readers have to cope with is deictic ambiguity. Here readers are forced to consider the possibility of an overlapping of story and discourse in what James Phelan calls dual focalization, which takes place when “the narrator’s focalization contains the character’s” (118). The whole book—final chapter excluded—is built around two levels of awareness and perception simultaneously present. The very first lines of the pivotal page 54—“What happened next I had to puzzle over for weeks afterward”—condense

this duality: so-to-speak “dead” Marcus “continues to puzzle over” (55), as narrating *I*, on his experiencing self “puzzl[ing] over” (54) what happened.

Dual focalization is a way to represent re-thinking and re-seeing, which is much in keeping with what may be deemed Roth’s Nemeses project—to contemplate narratological ways to represent threshold situations and require the reader to dwell on uncertain narrative ground.

***The Humbling*: “The Most Difficult Act There Is”**

The kind of problem that readers face with *The Humbling* (2009) is of a different nature. Returning to a telling in the third person that is strictly focalized on the protagonist, *The Humbling* does not pose particular problems as far as the transmission of information is concerned. Well in keeping with what happens in both *Everyman* and *Indignation*, the book closes after the death of the protagonist and the narration sheds the strict focalization to detail what cannot be narrated from an internal perspective. The third-person narrator is thus audibly present in the final paragraph and here and there during the narration of Simon Axler’s depression, his transformation (as the title of chapter 2 goes), and his final demise. The third-person narrator provides chronological notations, perceptual coordinates, using his cognitive privilege very sparingly—so much so as to let the protagonist’s deepest feelings emerge with the first-person pronoun in quoted interior monologues that are stripped of narrational filtering. This kind of narrating voice is very similar to the one we have met in *Everyman*, the possibility of its being homodiegetic excluded.

How does *The Humbling* thus participate in issues of naturalization that characterize its fellow books? I suggest that the quicksand readers face in the third installment of the tetralogy concerns the Rothian macrotext; I would go as far as to say that *The Humbling* busts the Rothian novel. Book reviewers are unanimous in declaring *The Humbling* a flop. According to Michiko Kakutani, “Mr. Roth recounts [the] events in an offhand manner, as though he were simply going through the

motions of ticking off plot points on a spindly, ill-conceived outline”; Alex Clark deems it trite and “pointlessly crude,” made up of “sentences that are dismayingly free of Roth’s characteristic humour and mischief,” which “pile up in a shakily fabular framework but never manage to . . . foreground its larger intentions.” It is rather difficult to disagree with these takes on the book, unless one looks for “larger intentions” somewhere else.

Let us start here, too, with paratextual details. As I have said, before becoming part of a larger group, *Everyman* and *Indignation* when first published were listed at the end of the group titled “Other Books.” Understandably, *Nemesis*, the book that apparently provoked Roth’s rethinking and suggested the title of the new group, immediately made it in the Nemeses section. Mysteriously, *The Humbling*, which should have been listed together with *Everyman* and *Indignation*, at the end of the “Other Books” group, does not appear anywhere in the paratext. This may be certainly explained as an editorial mistake; and yet the absence of the book creates an uncanny effect around it. Playing this interpretative game, we may conjecture that *The Humbling* exists *only* within the context of the Nemeses tetralogy as a representation of the humbling of its author. The book begins with a peremptory “He had lost his magic”; the third-person narrator immediately offers the key to understanding the existential situation of the protagonist. Simon Axler, a once gifted and renowned actor, has to face the tragic awareness that “his talent [is] dead” (1). What he hopes is simply a bad period turns into the excruciating awareness of irreversible loss. His bafflement is total and takes the form of an endless musing in an effort to name that which has destroyed his confidence and explain the “inexplicable” (11).

Bluntly put, what would Roth write if he had lost his magic? What would the critics label as a humiliation? As reviews attest, it would be precisely *The Humbling*. The still-missing “last act” is putting up the act of being finished, destroyed by literary critics. Roth plays “the role of [his] own demise” (5) as he contemplates a writer’s worst nemesis—writing without being able to write any longer—and exorcises

it by committing a writerly suicide. “You seem to yourself and to everyone around you paralyzed and wholly ineffectual and yet you can decide to commit the most difficult act there is. It’s exhilarating. It’s invigorating. It’s euphoric” (14). What about considering these words, used by a young hospitalized woman to describe suicide, as depicting Roth’s own suicidal endeavor? “The most difficult act there is” for a famous and renowned writer could certainly be taken to be writing a book whose “ugliness is unique” (Jones).

Simon Axler manages to kill himself only because “finally it occurred to him to pretend that he was committing suicide in a play” (139). The note he leaves says, “The fact is, Konstantin Gavrilovich has shot himself” (140). The fact is that Gavrilovich has shot himself with the result of killing Simon Axler. The fact is that Simon Axler has humiliated himself with the result of humbling Philip Roth. All his career long, Roth has made clear in countless situations—via Nathan Zuckerman in most explicit ways—that a writer’s understanding of the world passes through his writing about it. Here Roth wants to ventriloquize the crossing of the ultimate border and face death and humiliation instead of death and fame. In his blog, Jonathan Jones ponders Roth’s feat: “He has something even when he has nothing. He is the most courageous writer alive, and this is another brave move in a career that still packs surprises, albeit nasty ones. Perhaps a new life as a horror writer beckons. Or is this the end?” Well in keeping with the other books of the tetralogy, readers face a question difficult to answer—another (genial) way to contemplate death and interrogate it.

***Nemesis*: “How Lives Diverge”**

Significantly, just like *Indignation*, the other first-person narrative in the tetralogy, *Nemesis* begins by connecting history with an individual existence, or, to be more precise, with a community. The peculiarity of the first pages of the book concerns precisely the presence of this *we* that guides our way into a new storyworld that is threatened by the impending doom of a polio epidemic. In the catalog Uri Margolin lists on

we narratives, *Nemesis* seems to belong to case (4): “A single member of the class utters all tokens of ‘we’ in a given stretch of discourse [providing] non-group members with an account of what befell the group.”

Readers do not negotiate these pages easily. First of all, the *we* fails to produce an *I*, as would be typical of these narrative situations; secondly, one wonders about the cognitive privileges of the narrating voice. If, on the one hand, the presence of the past tense warrants the knowledge deriving from the passing of time, there is not—as yet—any hint to explain how the homodiegetic narrator knows, for example, that “the kids sloshing away the slime reminded Mr. Cantor of how he’d had to clean up after killing a rat . . . when he was ten years old” (17). The issue of knowledge worsens when, starting from page 19, we plunge into a ten-page-long narrative stretch detailing Bucky’s familial setup and his upbringing in Newark with forays into his mind—“However irrational the thought, Mr. Cantor felt as though he had let [his grandfather] down” (26)—and into his grandmother’s mind, too: “[She] heard him weeping as she’d never known Eugene to weep before” (27).

When the story of that tragic summer is resumed, the first-person-plural pronoun is nowhere to be seen, and Bucky’s inner thoughts, motivations, and assumptions are up front. We seem to have entered a section where a third-person narrator tells the story according to a strictly focalized perspective showing the typical features of this kind of narrative situation. There is nonetheless a jarring detail that continues to remind us of the initial presence of the narrating *we*, namely, the unrelenting reference to the protagonist as “Mr. Cantor,” the name stemming from the perspective of the kids looking up at their gym teacher. “The next morning was the worst so far. Three more boys had come down with polio—Leo Feinswog, Paul Lippman, and *me*, *Arnie Mesnikoff*. . . . The sirens that he and Dr. Steinberg had heard the evening before could well have been from the ambulances speeding them to the hospital” (108–9, emphasis added). And here we are, ninety pages after the last occurrence of a reference to the first-person-plural narrator, the “‘we’ sayer explicitly refers to himself/herself . . . as participant

in the narrated events by means of ‘I’” (Margolin). The neutral beginning of the sentence—“three more boys”—renders the appearance of the *me* very surprising. And yet, what is more astounding is that the revelation of the identity of the *I* behind the plural *we* does not change the course the book has taken: In the very same paragraph in which the narrator eventually comes out of hiding, proper name included, there is an immediate lapse into a third-person perspective foregrounded in the objective pronoun *them*, which will be rigorously maintained for the other thirty pages of the chapter in which the *I* remains a ghostly presence adumbrated in the hammering repetition of Mr. Cantor’s name. In the second chapter, which leaves Newark behind for the Poconos, not a single reference to the *we* or the *I* is detectable, not even the flimsy onomastic trace embedded in the appellation *Mr.*, which is also shed to give way to a much more straightforward *Bucky*.

Nemesis too, therefore, explores the effects of confusing the line of transmission of information and complicates for the reader the answer to the basic question concerning who speaks from where. Apparently returning to a third-person internally focalized narrative, we go through the momentary lapse from the menace of being stricken by polio according to the protagonist’s moment-by-moment experiencing of it. Our Arnie is mentioned together with the names of other kids Bucky feels he has fled in leaving Newark, but returns in the aptly titled chapter “Reunion” with the apparent key to naturalizing the book:

I ran into him in 1971. . . . After our first emotional street meeting, we began to eat lunch together . . . and that’s how I got to hear his story. I turned out to be the first person to whom he’d ever told the whole of the story, from beginning to end, and . . . without leaving very much out. I tried my best to listen closely and to take it all in while he found the words for everything that had been in his mind for the better part of his life. . . . The fact that I had been one of the kids hanging around Chancellor that horrible summer . . . made him bluntly candid in a self-searing manner that sometimes astonished me. (241, 245–46)

The excerpt purports to offer a naturalizing hypothesis: Bucky Cantor has been obsessed with the events of that tragic summer for his entire life; this obsession has fixed each single thought and feeling and word punctuating the thoughts, choices, and dialogues with uncanny distinctness; Arnie is the recipient of this highly emotionally charged (auto)biographical account and he tells it in his own turn. And yet, narratological quicksands are not dispelled here, either, because the information Arnie gives defies being reconstructed as a mere report of what Bucky tells him. Obsession on Bucky's part and attention on Arnie's part notwithstanding, the quantity of detail is too great for any real person to remember: We witness here an example of "mnemonic overkill" (Cohn 162), which has definitely to be filed under the nonmimetic heading. An open question hovers over *Nemesis* as well: Is the naturalizing hypothesis strong enough to explain the second chapter, "Indian Hill"? Is this to be taken as an example of what Henrik Skov Nielsen calls the "impersonal voice" that renders first-person contexts comparable to third-person contexts?

Conclusion

Narratologically undecidable issues reflect the thematic concerns of the tetralogy; nothing requires more illusionism than imagining the final threshold: The precariousness of human existence is refracted in the precariousness of narrating voices that turn out to be both embodied and disembodied, recognizably human and ghostlike. All protagonists of the tetralogy happen to be born around the same time as Roth; their lives, like Roth's own, mostly belong in the past. The books are centered on nostalgic, angered, baffled, past-oriented tales; in the whole tetralogy there is nothing in the present tense but Marcus's "I am dead." The present tense of Roth's writing asks us to attend this most difficult linguistic and existential act with him—a veritable exorcism to "confuse death" (*Everyman* 75), an act of resistance in the shape of writerly *as-ifs*. The voice of the author is not posthumous yet.

Notes

1. Unless specified, the quotations in each section come from the book under analysis.
2. For a detailed analysis of these textual dynamics see Masiero “Nothing Is Impersonally Perceived” and *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books* 145–53.

Works Cited

- Clark, Alex. “Books: *The Humbling* by Philip Roth.” *Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 13 Nov. 2009. Web. 9 Jan. 2013.
- Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978. Print.
- Fludernik, Monica. *Towards a “Natural” Narratology*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Jones, Jonathan. “Is *The Humbling* the End of Philip Roth?” *Jonathan Jones on Art Blog*. *Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 5 Jan 2010. Web. 8 Jan. 2013.
- Kakutani, Michiko. “Two Storytellers, Singing the Blues.” *New York Times*. New York Times, 22 Oct. 2009. Web. 8 Jan. 2013.
- Lawson, Mark. *Front Row*. 27 June 2010. BBC, Radio 4.
- Macksey, Richard, and Eugenio Donato, eds. *The Structuralist Controversy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972. Print.
- Margolin, Uri. “Telling Our Story: On ‘We’ Literary Narratives.” *Language and Literature* 5.2 (1996): 115–33. Print.
- Masiero Pia. “‘Nothing Is Impersonally Perceived’: Dreams, Realistic Chronicles and Perspectival Effects in *American Pastoral*.” *Reading Philip Roth’s American Pastoral*. Ed. Velichka Ivanova. Toulouse: PU du Mirail, 2011. Print.
- _____. *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books: The Making of a Storyworld*. Amherst: Cambria, 2011. Print.
- Phelan, James. *Narrative as Rhetoric: Techniques, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1996. Print.
- Skov Nielsen, Henrik. “The Impersonal Voice in First-Person Narrative Fiction.” *Narrative* 12.2 (2004): 133–50. Print.
- Tallent, Elizabeth. “The Trouble with Postmortality.” *Threepenny Review* 1 (2005): 7–9. Print.