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“The Essential If/Then: Nathan Zuckerman as Flawed Liberal Ironist in Philip Roth’s The Counterlife.”

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The Essential *If/Then*: Nathan Zuckerman as Flawed Liberal Ironist
in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*

Writers, through the *logos*, are generative in their labors and are capable of showing their readership “what private perfection—a self-created, autonomous, human life—can be like” (Rorty xiv). But what about the postmodernist writer—he or she who is especially concerned with invasive technology, psychoanalytical neuroses, the presumed death of God, infectious capitalism, tainted democracy and existential purposelessness? Is it possible for a postmodern writer like Philip Roth to address these crucial issues and successfully attempt a self-created liberal utopia? For Rorty, the single answer to these critical questions would be an equivocal, “Yes—If only....”

A Rorty Primer

Rorty's method for achieving postmodern human progress is not through theory and attending axioms, but through the recognition of the universal importance and potency of narratives. Rorty recognizes that storytelling is a powerful, protean tool for revisioning lives and is not a shop-worn linguistic fossil.

Embracing Rorty's goal of a liberal utopia in the age of the postmodern requires a rededication to the potentialities of narrative, metafictional palimpsests. To achieve such a utopia, according to Rorty, we must relinquish attempts to hold “all the sides of our life in a single vision, to describe them in a single vocabulary” (xvi). Rather, those who attempt self-definition *not* at the expense of others must employ a “contingency of language” that substitutes as a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of all possible vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling (xvi).

Extrapolating Rorty's ideological incorporation of narratives that revise and of metavocabularies that foster potentialities, this study examines Philip Roth's text, *The Counterlife*, through the lens of liberal irony. This investigation critiques Roth's protagonist,

Nathan Zuckerman, as a man who pursues individual perfection and wholeness, becoming an *ironist*, while failing to care about communal responsibilities, and hence, not achieving the *liberal* utopia Rorty envisions. Zuckerman's pursuit of ironist individuation exhibits his unsuccessful attempts to integrate what Rorty identifies as necessary for successful individual perfection (*i.e.* liberalism). Without the humane quality of such a liberalism, an ironist stands on the verge of degrading into no more than a solipsistic, revisioning megalomaniac—fashioning the world after his own image and mollifying his own desires.

Ultimately, Rorty is concerned with language as that which is “the constitutive core of all experience” (Grodin and Kreiswirth 626). If this is so, narratives enable us to apprehend our subjective realities and to exert creative control over our individual worlds. While Rorty rejects Nietzschean skeptical impulses to deny both the “deepest level of self” and a sense of “human solidarity” by reliance on the individual “will to power” (xii). He does, however, endorse a Nietzschean private fulfillment as long as it is coupled with a Deweyan concern for community-building (xiii). In *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Rorty attempts to “do justice to both groups of historicist writers” by giving them “equal weight” (xiv).

The idealized union of these albeit debatably dialectic philosophies is tentative at best. The urge for individual autonomy will usually be opposed to the cry for communal justice—for it is virtually impossible to pursue solely privatistic or libidinal urges without causing discomfort or eventual harm to others. Rorty explains:

The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, “irrationalist,” and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged. . . . But there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange. (xiv)

Rorty's shared vocabulary is crucial. Such a common vocabulary enables the realization "that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in re-creating themselves" (xiv). And this success is achieved by the "liberal ironist," who believes two basic tenets: that cruelty is that which must not be imposed upon fellow humans (hence Rorty's term "liberal") and that private desires, dreams and beliefs are *created* (a phenomenology, not imposed by fate or nature) and are contingent upon and beneficial to man's development and growth (Rorty's definition of "ironist") (xv).

This created realm of thought and existence is a "liberal utopia," where true community is a goal attainable not by "inquiry but by imagination" (Rorty xv, xvi). Citizens of this utopia must perform three necessary steps to maintain a membership in good standing. These are to: impose creative powers of language upon individual perceptions of this world; find words and thoughts to reconstruct the self in order to "become aware of our own half-articulate need to become a new person, one whom we as yet lack words to describe"; recognize others as undeserving of cruelty (xiv).

A Rothian Character's Quest

In *The Counterlife*, Roth's postmodern narrator/protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, is a novelist¹ engaged in the heroic quest for the autonomous, satisfied self, not necessarily *one* self—a series of selves will do. Zuckerman says:

All I can tell you with certainty is that I, for one, have no self, and that I am unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon myself the joke of a self. . . . What I have instead is a variety of impersonations I can do, and not only of myself--a troupe of players that I have internalized, a permanent company of actors that I can call upon when a self is required, an ever-evolving stock of pieces and parts that forms my repertoire. But I certainly have no self independent of my imposturing, artistic efforts to have one. Nor would I want one. I am a theater and nothing more than a theater. (320-321)

He attempts this perfection of self through the construction of counterselves or counterlives as told through counter-narratives. These sometimes opposing stories need not replace or destroy stories that precede or follow. Rather, they are like musical counterpoint, making a harmonic whole, overlaying one version upon another to generate integrity and foster wholeness. Zuckerman addresses this point as he writes to Maria:

Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as *being oneself*. In fact, those who most seem to be themselves appear to me people impersonating what they think they might like to be, believe they ought to be, or wish to be taken to be by whoever is setting standards. So in earnest are they, that they don't even recognize that being in earnest *is the act*. For certain self-aware people, however, this is not possible: to imagine themselves being themselves, living their own real, authentic, or genuine life, has for them all the aspects of a hallucination. . . .

I realize that what I am describing, people divided in themselves, is said to characterize mental illness and is the absolute opposite of our idea of emotional integration. The whole Western idea of mental health runs in precisely the opposite direction: what is desirable is incongruity between your self-consciousness and your natural being. . . . 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. (319-320)

By such multiplying, layering and overlapping selves and narratives, Roth fashions a narrative that mirrors Rorty's postmodern search for self-awareness and self-knowledge. In "The Ironic Politics of Richard Rorty," Buscemi writes that Rorty embraces "dynamic experience" and that as a consequence of "this experiential field arise situations, temporarily distinguishable but overlapping and interpenetrating, in constant process of fusion and fission" (143). Certainly, Zuckerman embodies Rorty's dynamic experiences of "fusion and fission."

The novel's narrative proliferation of multiple stories, morphotic selves, and non-linear time are indicative of Zuckerman's compulsion for self-creation. It has been said that his "obsessive reinvention of the real never stopped, what-could-be having always to top what-is" (Roth 247). Zuckerman posits for himself a series of counter-lives, each one developed in *separate* chapters but peopled with the *same* characters. These stories are oftentimes reconfigurations of the *same* people in completely *different* circumstances—he who was dead in the opening chapter, reappears alive and well in a subsequent chapter. This hypothetical characteristic of Roth's novel has been noted by Shostak who writes: "One of the first things a reader notices is the novel's radically speculative nature, in the sense that Roth foregrounds the speculation and invention inherent in the *act* of writing" (198).

Because of this albeit appealing unstable quality, Zuckerman gets to try on roles as if he were trying on clothes in a dressing room. He posits, "If. . ." or "What if. . ." and fleshes out an entire sequence of events dependent upon the newly posited supposition. Take for instance, Zuckerman's ruminations regarding his brother's demise: "What if instead of the brother whose obverse existence mine inferred—and who himself untwinnishly inferred me—I had been the Zuckerman boy in that agony? What is the real wisdom of that predicament?" (42). Nathan continues this theoretical narrative, embracing this new, controlling theorem—posing, exploring and recording all possible ramifications for each new situation, each new statement—essentially negating the entire opening of the novel, which presents a nearly thirteen-page eulogy for his once-dead brother. After Zuckerman satisfied his hypothetical ponderings that *he* was the sick brother having the heart problem, by the fifth chapter, he is fine—no traces of illness are mentioned—as if his life-and-death illness never happened.

Zuckerman's *If* questions theorize and thematize the effects of the postmodern quest for self by constructing a series of "if-then stories." These are his fleshings-out, his fictional developments, or what Rorty refers to as contingent narratives, where one creates a set of linguistic "guesses about what [he] will do under what conditions" (Rorty 14). Zuckerman is aware that his assumptions and guesses are hypothetical, and he makes no apology for them. He

explains, “It’s *all* impersonation—in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after a while impersonates best the self that best gets one through. . . . [S]ince there is no way of proving whether I’m right or not, this is a circular argument from which there is no escape” (320).

In *theory*, his impersonations offer a potential uplift. As such, both Zuckerman and the novel have unlimited access to the imaginative and the creative. But in *practice*, it creates several severely critical obstacles, and poses even more potent questions: How can a novel *mean* anything if it lacks both an authoritative narrative and a sense of immutable historicity? What if such a text embraces a theory of multiple selves? How can one read a text with no permanently recognizable characters? Isn’t the construction of a series of counter stories cruel in its disregard for the Other? Must characters acquiesce to their “author,” or are they forced to rebel? In asserting his narrative contingencies, doesn’t Zuckerman become a narrative solipsist?

We first address the initial question: *How can a novel really mean anything if it lacks both an authoritative narrative and a sense of immutable historicity?* In *The Counterlife*, Roth tackles and fractures the very stuff of fiction. The act of imagining new selves, “other realities, other others, to the extent that the novel denies the reader the comfort of a recognizable central self or central set of events from which the alternatives develop” lends little coherence and even less comprehension (Shostak 198). In so doing, Roth constructs a novel that examines and challenges the structure of fiction, becomes self-reflexive, and contemplates the theme of its own fabrication. Therefore, this novel *means* what it *does*—its form and function are both the vehicles of meaning-making and meaning itself, in process.

Roth has succeeded in constructing the postmodern anti-novel, complete with theoretical treatises on narrative structure, non-linear time, and the nature of self. Goodheart concurs: “*The Counterlife* rises to a level of reflectiveness that one is obliged to describe as theoretical—and theoretical in a postmodernist sense. . . . in that it represents an attitude toward the self or perhaps more accurately an action toward or even against the self” (440). By shattering traditional Western literary conventions and unities, Roth presents Nathan Zuckerman, a true postmodern man, entirely deconstructed to the point of having no unified sense of self. Despite

his seemingly pathetic condition, Zuckerman does not succumb to a modernist sense of despair. He rejects paralysis and pursues personal development by multiplying first person stories.

Shostak concurs:

[I]n textualizing the self, in seeing the self as narrative, as discursive invention, Roth recovers metafiction from the implicit nihilism and anxiety of the postmodern decentered or indeterminate self. . . the novel challenges us to transcend the anxiety of the interpretive act, to embrace and be liberated by the duplicity of reality itself and not merely the duplicity of language. For what makes *The Counterlife* stand out among metafictional exercises is its paradoxical commitment to—and redefinition of—the “real” (although admittedly an unstable real), which is evident in Roth’s consistently mimetic narrative. (199)

This acrobatic and metafictional narrative enables and empowers Zuckerman to become a man-in-the-making—a human in progress—experimenting with what Rorty terms “contingent vocabularies” and straining for useful metaphors until finding a new one that will suffice for each new situation. Zuckerman says this is so “[b]ecause I’ve decided to give up the artificial fiction of being myself for the genuine satisfying falseness of being somebody else” (69). Despite his inauthenticity, Zuckerman becomes the character readers love to hate. With his ambivalence toward liberal social virtues, Zuckerman is the engaging scoundrel-cum-anti-hero, the ironist-cum solipsist. Fundamentally, he is a protagonist who misses the mark of Rortian liberal irony.

From the onset of the novel, Zuckerman recognizes his predicament and resolves to face the challenge of non-historicity and to find his selfhood by role-playing and storytelling *ad infinitum*. In the process, Zuckerman becomes a prime example of the postmodern ironist. By his self-awareness and his awareness of narrative dependency, Zuckerman enacts what Rorty asserts “leads to a recognition of the contingency of conscience, and how both recognitions lead to a picture of intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are” (9).

Through his metaphor-making and storytelling, Zuckerman exerts his power of “inspirational nomenclature” and constructs a scene where Maria—his sometimes lover, sometimes wife—teaches him that there doesn’t have to be one, true linear story-line (Roth 119). According to Maria, life contains paradoxes and ambiguities. Of course, the entire premise in her lesson is ironic since *Zuckerman* writes this scene and constructs the dialog, limning a version of Maria who declares:

Things don’t have to have to reach a peak. They can just go on. You do want to make a narrative out of it, with progress and momentum and dramatic peaks and then a resolution. You seem to see life as having a beginning, middle, and ending, all of them linked together with something bearing your name. But it isn’t necessary to give things a shape. You can yield to them too. No goals—just letting things take their own course. You must begin to see it as it is: there are insoluble problems in life and this is one. (191)

Using storytelling to test his hypothesis, Zuckerman affirms a personal truth and establishes a sense of self when he is with *this* Maria. He imposes his imagination upon his subjective reality and plays out scripts; hopefully he learns some life-lesson from this conversation with her. Considering the speculative nature of this novel, one may ask if this scene ever really happened, or if it is merely a creation posited by Zuckerman (and ultimately constructed by Roth). At the end of the day, is such dramatic ambiguity important?

For Rorty, finding essential truth is irrelevant. What matters are the *new* truths that are created through encountering new conflicts and engaging in new scenarios. In other words, what *is* important is what Zuckerman acquires as a result of his exchanges. Rorty writes:

The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to . . . look for appropriate forms of nonlinguistic behavior. . . . [I]t works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like ‘try thinking of it this way’--or more specifically, *try* to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following

new and possible interesting questions. (9)

In *The Counterlife*, Roth has constructed a text that propels the reader “toward the next thought, the next feeling, a future desire; it does not normally dawdle in description, or stop for meditative poesy, or paralyze its movement with refinements” (Gass 361). While the text flows and is somewhat historical, in the sense that each isolated scenario makes sense as a whole, the novel twists, folds and loops upon itself in what Hoberman calls a “textual Mobius strip” (qtd. in Marowski and Matuz 363). If Roth’s postmodern narrative is so tangled and acausal, what is one to learn from the text concerning the ultimate nature of the self?

In *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Rorty develops his theory of selfhood, where in order to attain a sense of self, one must make a mark on language, rearrange one’s vocabularies (stories) in creative and varied manners and aspire to “overarching conditions of possibility” where one is open to the potentialities that result from one’s metavocabularies, role-playing and imaginative experimentation (25). One attains self-awareness via the act of self-creation. By this, Rorty admonishes man to confront contingency, to invent new self-reflective metanarratives—to strain for the condition of irony, achieving full empowerment and full self-awareness. This empowerment, however, is also the Achilles heel, so to speak, in the ironist’s arsenal. In the larger scheme of things, just how can one achieve authority over one’s own life by verbal revisioning, yet not wielding ultimate authority over another’s? In Rorty’s own terms, “It is the problem of how to overcome authority without claiming authority” (105). The answer to this dilemma is evasive.

Nathan Zuckerman as Narrative Solipsist

Despite the imprecision of the ironist’s methodology, it is clear that Nathan Zuckerman is the incarnation of Rorty’s “irony.” He strives for the primacy of self and demands individual sovereignty. His quest is an ironist’s journey in search of useful and successful selves. His language is meaning and the path to meaning: “My carnality is now really a fiction and, revenge of revenge, language and only language must provide the means for the release of everything”

(184).

Not simply a mirror of emotional or intellectual states, Zuckerman's vocabulary is vital and creative. He does not merely ponder situations. He confronts conflicts and constructs new ones in response; his words create and perhaps more important for this study, are catalysts to action. Not satisfied with merely sitting and thinking, Zuckerman conceives of scenarios, acts them out and acts on them. Unlike Beckett's Molloy or Estragon, Roth's Nathan Zuckerman steps beyond contemplation, rejects paralysis and *acts*. Zuckerman recognizes his neediness and his lack of a central self, but does not capitulate to despair or existentialism. He grapples with both internal and external pressures, and like Jacob, wrestles with his own personal demon of fear. He overcomes by narrative self-fashioning. He reconstitutes himself by redescription and forges onward to a new set of roles, fueled by the powers of his imagination and will.

The defect with Zuckerman's self-generated lives lies in the nature of his actions. Take, for example, what happens after positing a new script for himself. He thinks that he is "[c]aught up entirely in what has come to feel like a purely mythic endeavor, a defiant, dreamlike quest for the self-emancipating act, possessed by an intractable idea of how my existence is to be fulfilled, I now must move beyond words to the concrete violence of [action]" (204). With this tendency toward violence, regardless of whether it is toward himself or others, Zuckerman crosses the boundary that separates liberal irony from what I call "narrative solipsism." He must protect himself and thrive, but chooses to do so by inflicting his stories and narratives upon others.

While it is true that Rorty's ironist must create, when presented with the ultimate powers found in the imagination, one must learn how to navigate the fine line between exploration and invasion. One needs to foster a steadfast refusal to interfere in the growth and development of an Other. Zuckerman is the representation of a human being, a social creature who lives within a community. His insistence then, on being his own actor, director, script writer, producer, promoter, and editor—in essence, his own god—must be seen with all of its social implications. Zuckerman lives with others, interacts with others, and affects others. Any change in the script or metavocabulary of *his* life necessarily changes those of *others*.

Because of this sweeping power over others, Zuckerman becomes a kind of narrative totalitarian. His constant shifting between roles and states of being, causes a domino effect in the roles and states of being of the other characters, too. Sometimes these changes are positive and even desired, as when Maria feels that “you wanted me, not to reenact the dead past but to strike out happily on a new course, to rise in exuberant rebellion against your author and remake your life” (313). There are cases when practicing irony is a communal act—voluntarily participatory and mutually beneficial. But this is not always the case.

Zuckerman creates his new selves by rewriting the scripts of his lives, but he does so at the expense of others. This is his *hamartia*; he is therefore, a *flawed* liberal ironist since both his ultimate goal and his methods are tainted. He may wish to find his *own* perfection, but in so doing, he coerces and dictates scripts for others, mostly against their wishes. A large part of his motivation in this text is that he wants his wife, Maria, to return to him at the novel’s end, regardless of the method. Goodheart offers that “Zuckerman’s excursus into the theory of self, it turns out, is an exercise in wooing back his estranged wife, who had more than she could take . . .” (439). Trying to coerce Maria, Zuckerman argues that she should come back to him and learn to imagine new lives as a couple. He says, “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” (321). In this case, Zuckerman assumes that what is good for the proverbial goose is good for the gander. His needs for a wife and partner supersede those needs that Maria may have to develop her *own* autonomous self. *His* needs are privileged over hers and his will is imposed upon them both.

Not a man of subtleties, Zuckerman is fully aware of his tendency toward self-centeredness. He knows what he is doing, yet will not acknowledge the cruelty he inflicts upon others. Rather, he convinces himself that rewriting scripts is necessary for both his and others’ good. When thinking aloud, he says, “People don’t turn themselves over to writers as full-blown literary characters—generally they give you very little to go on at all. Most people . . . are absolutely unoriginal, and his job is to make them appear otherwise. It’s not easy. If Henry was

ever going to turn out to be interesting, I was going to have to do it” (156).

Henry, Nathan’s brother, is especially victimized by Zuckerman’s despotism. He is rewritten as dead, alive, impotent, lecherous, adulterous, boring—you name it. Henry’s seen it and done it all through Zuckerman’s ironic powers of metavocabularies. My question at this point is whether Zuckerman’s methods at editing Henry’s roles are insensitive because of Zuckerman’s needs or frankly cruel. Henry’s own judgment on this matter is clear; Zuckerman is a solipsist—certainly not the liberal for whom Rorty calls. Henry says that Nathan is “a man utterly without a sense of consequence. Forget morality, forget ethics, forget feelings” (226). According to Henry, Zuckerman’s narratives have made him become “a pure cannibal, murdering people, eating people, without ever having to pay the price” (238). Zuckerman is a self-centered individual who garners a deep satisfaction “from just these perverse distortions of the truth, as though he wrote to distort, for that pleasure, primarily” (230).

Henry recognizes the powers inherent in words and recalls that Nathan was “made out of words . . . made himself out of words” (208). Henry had awe for such powers, yet he paid no deference to his brother. This is understandable because Zuckerman is not a benevolent potentate; fealty is not rendered to the unjust. Nathan subjects Henry to a series of unfair tribulations—unfair because according to Rorty, one need not step on others in order to rise. Henry functions as a mere stepping stone to Nathan’s ironist advancement. Nathan fostered no compunction for killing off his brother to advance his own growth.

Zuckerman’s fantasy regarding Henry’s decision to undergo bypass surgery so he can indulge in supposed extramarital relations with his dental assistant does not yield the happy ending one may wish for Henry. While Henry dies under the knife, he is miraculously found alive and well in Israel later in the novel. He has abandoned home and family (his wife and children) in order to reject his personal selfhood and to pursue political and cultural agendas. Zuckerman has drawn *this* Henry not growing individualistically but being voluntarily subsumed by a collective community.

Henry has rejected the individual self and assimilates into the collectivity of Judaism—

into what for Zuckerman is a series of dead metaphors and stereotypes. Henry is as good as dead for Zuckerman, merely an historical character in an historical collectivity. He is described as in a “crazy flight” from the possibilities of personal life to a form of “self-travesty” or rather, a parody of a self (132). All personal and private aspects of Henry are gone. What had once made Henry an individual—his dreams and fantasies, his id—has been absorbed by the historical and cultural elements of historical stasis.

Just when the reader thinks that some sort of new equipoise has been struck, with Henry in Israel and Maria and Zuckerman in England, the reader learns that Nathan will next undergo surgery to correct *his* heart problems. He subjects himself to the knife in what is probably the grandest form of editing and restructuring of the self. And alas, it is now his turn to die.

Presented with narrative silence for the first time in this novel, the reader is not made privy to Zuckerman’s passing—the reader does not hear his thoughts or read his words. Along with the blank space on the page, the reader is also presented with a major shift in point of view.

It is here the reader learns that Zuckerman has stolen Henry’s diaries and pilfered personal information. The revelation of this theft is told through a limited omniscient narrator, seen through the eyes of Henry. Zuckerman has reportedly distorted this contraband information by taking excerpts out of context in order to write a novel and create professional success at the expense of his brother’s comfort and happiness. This invasion of Henry’s privacy is symptomatic of Zuckerman’s abusive power.

Nathan’s sense of Other is the source of his power over Henry. Nathan’s decision that “we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other’s authors,” empowers Zuckerman as inventor/author, and enables him to exert authorial control over Henry and his own private stories (145). Zuckerman’s counterstories, are power plays—methods of gaining control over the other and posing the self as ruler. This need for dominance and control are counter to Rorty’s liberal concern for the welfare of the Other.

Zuckerman has absolutely no such concerns. His desires are entirely selfish. In evaluating Nathan, Henry offers that he

lived as he died, died as he'd lived, constructing fantasies of loved ones, fantasies of adversaries, fantasies of conflict and disorder, alone day after day in this peopleless room, continuously seeking through solitary literary contrivance to dominate what, in real life, he was too fearful to confront. Namely, the past, the present, and the future. (229)

Proof that Zuckerman is not a Rortian liberal ironist is his “solitary literary contrivance to dominate.” His self-constructions posit distance from an Other. While it is true that he resorts to contingent languages and metavocabularies when applying his imagination, the flaw of his character is that he seeks to dominate—not to navigate—the obstacles and people with whom he comes into contact. Zuckerman then, is the ultimate narrative solipsist—one who is unwilling to relinquish control even after his own death.

The ruler is dead, but there is no one other than Zuckerman himself, willing to say, “The King is dead, long live the King.” Instead of sorrow at the potential loss of an author, Henry rebels against his maker and wages revenge against him and his text by destroying the errant parts of the manuscript. Shostak writes:

Nathan has made of Henry a textual object, and Henry's response is that of the objectified character under authorial control. At the same time, his is the response of a reader who is helpless in the face of an author's invention, unable to satisfy his or her own desire by determining the course the narrative will take. Instead, reader and character alike are subject to his version, his interpretation, his picture refuting and impugning everyone else's. (210)

Zuckerman's grip on the narrative reins is so unyielding that even after his death and the destruction of his manuscript, he retains authorial control over the novel. The imposition of his imagination, the metavocabularies he employs, the counterstories he develops, and the strong sense of ironism he acquires, have enabled him to defeat even death. He manages to appear as a ghost in dialog with Maria, and even manages to get the destroyed chapters of his novel printed, albeit out of sequence and posthumously (although this is nothing new for this novel).

Besides authorial victimization of his brother, Zuckerman's ultimate narrative sovereignty is displayed in his multi-faceted relationship with and his behavior toward Maria. They are sometimes lovers, sometimes married partners, sometimes uneasy Platonic friends. Unlike Henry's sheer anger toward Nathan's invasive storytelling, Maria is at first charmed by Zuckerman's revisionary powers. In response to her phantom interviewer (*i.e.*, the now-dead Zuckerman), Maria says that Nathan's desire was in "[m]aking you believe what he wanted you to believe was his very reason for being. Maybe his only reason. I was intrigued by the way he'd turn events . . . into reality—that is his kind of reality" (247).

Zuckerman creates new lives with Maria, lives that by their nature, force her to experience many varied and difficult roles—all to fit his needs and whims. While she is the wife of an emotionally abusive, cold man, she is also the mother to Phoebe, a young and demanding child. Her roles are fairly draining, as they would be for anyone. But the sheer violence involved in the plucking-out from one role to inhabit another role, especially take their toll. This all begs the question: How much fragmentation must Maria experience to permit Zuckerman his contingency and autonomy?

Over time, Maria recognizes within Zuckerman's stories the "insidiously undermining" cruelty that "deviously legitimiz[es] itself as literature" (205). She reaches her breaking point and decides to rebel against her author. In a Pirandello-like parallel universe, Maria escapes the confines of the novel and secedes as a member of Zuckerman's troupe of players. In her good-bye note to Nathan she writes:

I'm leaving. I've left. I'm leaving you and I'm leaving the book I know characters rebelling against their author has been done before, but as my choice of a first husband should have made clear—at least to me— have no desire to be original and never did. I loved you and it was kind of thrilling to live totally as somebody else's invention . . . but it's also quite creepy to think that I am monitored closely only to be even more manipulated and exploited than I was when you extracted me (for artistic purposes) from my situation upstairs. (312)

No stranger to the written word, Maria, too, is a writer who recognizes the creative powers in storytelling. She is the first to admit that, unlike Zuckerman's pieces, her stories, like her non-contingent sense of self, lack something. They are flat and are not the creative metavocabularies for which Rorty calls. It is clear that she writes the same old dross, using dead metaphors that are nothing more than Jamesian imposters of life. She imitates Victorian superficialities and social codes despite recognizing their inappropriateness for life today. In critiquing her own fictions, Maria identifies three types of writing (besides her writing). She says:

There are plenty of literate people who can write fluent, good English. No, this isn't anything really. It's embarrassingly beside the point. . . . There is fiction that is fired noisily into the air, wildly into the crowd, and there is the fiction that misfires, explosives that fail to ignite, and there is fiction that turns out to be aimed into the skull of the writer himself. Mine's none of those. I don't write with ferocious energy. Nobody could ever use what I write as a club. (194)

Maria's classifications of writers may seem complimentary on the surface—a glorification of their mysticism and potency—but all the types she enumerates are associated with acts that bear the potential for violence. Are these other writers more talented or successful than Maria? Certainly, they are more provoking than she, and according to Rorty, the act of provocation is vital—as long as it does not inflict cruelty or cause humiliation. Moreover, potent and violent images are apropos when considering Nathan Zuckerman as a writer and creator of stories. He is a craftsman, but he is prone to the oppression of others. His weapon-like use of words certainly refutes any considerations of him being a liberal ironist.

Zuckerman's words have been "fired" into crowds causing controversy; take for example his Carnovsky. They have misfired and have hurt him, causing the state of abandonment he endures at novel's end. Maria elaborates, "Nathan intensified and heightened [everything] as though it were taking place in a novel. The writer's refusal to accept things as they are—everything reinvented, even himself. He did with this life exactly what he did in his fiction, and

finally paid for it” (250). In short, Maria declares that Nathan deserves harm because he gave harm.

Narrative Comeuppance

Clearly, Nathan Zuckerman is a narrative authoritarian. Despite his obvious successes at attaining Rortian irony, he never quite learns to check his *id* and embrace the benevolence of liberalism. In exploring the avenues of self-creation through the telling of counterstories about counterlives, Zuckerman wields the power of language that is imbued with imagination. The construction of a communally responsible self is made possible only through contingent vocabularies that are propelled with ironic impulses.

While it is true that Zuckerman’s character is not centered or stable, his senses of self are continuous and evolving. He is the protean man incarnate, the word made flesh through narrative. Each newly created Zuckerman leads to an understanding of his self’s needs and desires; each newly created Zuckerman imposes concomitant effects to those around him.

Along with his navigation of authenticity and selfhood, Zuckerman also poses essential questions about the nature of subjectivity, authority and power. Zuckerman’s leaping from one life to another is intended to yield some source of contingent selfhood—not finding *one* self, but a malleable self that can converge and commune with other selves. Rorty’s liberalism proffers a view of Other as a member of a universal “we.” Both Nathan Zuckerman’s and the readers’ duty is akin to the Hippocratic Oath to “Do no harm.”

In order to successfully attain liberal irony, while theorizing his “I” in his own self-reflective fictions, Zuckerman must also consider the “we” and the “you” he creates. As author, he is omnipotent, but Rorty asserts that his power must be buffered with empathy; without which, as compelling as he may be, Zuckerman is a narrative solipsist, verbal authoritarian and flawed liberal ironist.

Notes

¹ The supposed autobiographical nature of this novel will be considered a separate issue—one that is precluded by space and time for the parameters of this paper.

² It is intriguing that author of this text, Zuckerman, dies. If this is so, how can the reader have a completed book in hand? This conundrum is played out when, in *absentia*, Zuckerman, as a ghost enters into dialogue with Maria and continues the narrative, wielding his powers of metavocabularies from beyond the grave.

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