


Roth's Fiction from Nemesis to Nemesis

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**Emily Budick,**

**"Roth's Fiction from Nemesis to *Nemesis*"**

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 16.2 (2014)**  
Thematic Issue ***History, Memory, and the Making of Character in Roth's Fiction***  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Roth's Fiction from Nemesis to *Nemesis*" Emily Budick discusses Philip Roth's novel *Nemesis* as the culminating work of a career in which one nemesis or another has afflicted almost all of the author's protagonists. During the bulk of Roth's career, the hero's nemesis was generally, as in the ordinary, literary usage of the term, the protagonist's enemy, whether Judge Wapner in *The Ghost Writer* or the alter-Roth in *The Counterlife*. In *Nemesis* Roth restores the word nemesis to its classical meaning: Nemesis, as the goddess of revenge and cosmic balance. The nemesis in Roth's novel, therefore, is mortality itself, against which human beings vainly strive. It is also the condition of disease and filth that human beings shares with each other and the natural world, that some humans would, with hubris, attempt to put themselves beyond.

## Emily BUDICK

### Roth's Fiction from *Nemesis* to *Nemesis*

In his review of Philip Roth's *Nemesis* in *The New York Review of Books* J.M. Coetzee faults Roth's narrator for failing to see the truly "tragic" dimensions of Bucky Cantor's experience. By "tragic" Coetzee means the classical tradition of tragedy as represented by Greek drama and as continued by such narrative fictions as Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* and Albert Camus's *The Plague*. Roth, argues Coetzee, "place[s] himself in a line of writers who have used the plague condition ... [as] simply a heightened state of the condition of being mortal" (12). And Coetzee continues, "the title *Nemesis* frames the interrogation of cosmic justice in Greek terms; and the plot pivots on the same dramatic irony as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*: a leader in the fight against the plague is unbeknown to himself a bringer of the plague" (12). Of course, one must immediately add here against Coetzee's confidence that Bucky is indeed a carrier of the plague that it is by no means clear that Mr. Cantor is anything more than another one of the epidemic's victims. Earlier in the text the Jewish community blames the Italians, who deliberately descend upon the Jews with the wish to infect them with the disease, but who are, in Bucky's view and in the view of the book as well, I think, powerless to do so. Nor is the idiot Horace (classical allusion in that name!) the source of the disease, although there are those who wish to think he would be. Bucky's self-blame is, if anything, an inverted narcissism, the equal but opposite tendency to blame oneself for what is finally a natural phenomenon much like death itself. There is no heightened tragic fate in the Greek sense that is involved here, only the very human fate of mortality, which, for Roth, might finally be the ultimate tragedy that all human beings must inevitably confront. In other words, for Roth to be human is to live the fate of an Oedipus, but not primarily in the Freudian sense developed in Roth's earlier fiction. Rather, in his movement backwards from the Oedipus of Freud (which focuses on sexual competition) to the Oedipus of Sophocles (which has to do with taking responsibility for a world we cannot transform), Roth reflects on the entirety of his career. Compared with the fear of death, sexual anxiety pales as the motivating force of human existence. Indeed, one might even sacrifice one's sexual life (as does Bucky Cantor) in order to keep death at bay. This might well explain why Roth declared that *Nemesis* would be his last novel. *Nemesis* is the culminating work in the series of Roth's novels at the end of his career: *The Dying Animal*, *Everyman*, *Indignation*, *The Humbling*, and *Exit, Ghost* in which the aging writer (and/or his aging personae in his texts) confronts what all humans must confront: their demise. If Bucky Cantor is indeed, unbeknownst to himself and without obvious symptoms, the carrier of the plague, it is only because he, like everyone else, carries within him the seeds of his own death and of the mortal condition that infects our human world wherever we might be. Like us, he is little aware of the symptoms of his mortal condition until they assert themselves in the form of bodily dysfunction.

What polio represents in Roth's text, then, is, as Coetzee suggests, the mortal condition itself, but without any of the dignity that might accrue to a tragic view of death. Death, the novel suggests, is simply the inevitable, natural culmination of human existence, which human beings nonetheless convert into a nemesis in all the complex meanings of that term. *Nemesis* is one of those odd words that in popular usage comes to take up a meaning almost the total opposite of what it originally meant. Especially in reference to literary texts, a nemesis is most typically an arch enemy of a dramatic hero: the joker, say, for Batman, or Moriarty for Sherlock Holmes. Throughout his fiction Roth has displayed numerous such antagonists of his protagonists: the girl friends and mothers who emasculate his vital male heroes, Judge Wapter in *The Ghost Writer*, the brother in *The Counterlife*, or the alter-Roth in *Operation, Shylock*, and so on. Hence, for the characters in Roth's *Nemesis* and for the literal human beings that suffered the polio epidemic of the 1950s (not the 1940s when the novel is set: *Nemesis*, like *The Plot Against America*, is allohistory), polio is the nemesis that required, as Marc Shell has pointed out in his book on polio, heroic action on the parts of individuals and even of the nation itself in order to defeat it. To defeat polio, as to defeat a military enemy, is deemed heroic. It is in part to emphasize this idea that Roth fantasizes a polio epidemic to coincide with World War II. There are enemies afoot we have to fight. But in Greek mythology Nemesis is herself a god: she is the goddess of divine retribution specifically in relation to those who suffer from hubris or arrogance or narcissism (inverted or otherwise), like Bucky. Thus, in the classical story, it is the goddess Nemesis who punishes Narcissus for his prideful love of self-making good on the idea that Nemesis is the power that preserves equity and justice in the world. Nemesis does not necessarily take revenge. She simply keeps competing human fortunes in balance. Viewed against this background the popular, literary represen-

tation of the enemy as the nemesis might well include an idea of the hero as always tending toward the hubristic, which is a fair enough reading of a character like Holmes, not to mention Roth's young, rather brash, protagonists. Polio in this context is the nemesis that corrects Bucky's inverted hubris. Bucky cannot defeat polio either in himself or others. Nor, however, is he responsible for it. Polio defeats the idea of self-blame as well. It is, as tragedy would have it, in the cards, until, with the advent of the Salk and Sabin vaccines, it is not in the cards any more.

As the narrator Arnie puts it,

That the polio epidemic among the children of the Weequahic section and the children of Camp Indian Hill was a tragedy, he could not accept. He has to convert tragedy into guilt. He has to find a necessity for what happens. There is an epidemic and he needs a reason for it. He has to ask why. Why? Why? That it is pointless, contingent, preposterous, and tragic will not satisfy him. That it is a proliferating virus will not satisfy him. Instead he looks desperately for a deeper cause, this martyr, this maniac of the why, and the why is either in God or in himself or, mystically, mysteriously, in their dreadful joining together as the sole destroyer. I have to say that however much I might sympathize with the amassing of woes that had blighted his life, this is nothing more than stupid hubris, not the hubris of will or desire but the hubris of fantastical, childish religious interpretation. (*Nemesis* 265)

I suggest in a moment what Arnie overlooks beyond the obvious fact that scientists seeking a cure for polio do eventually discover the cure, albeit for this specific disease and not others which will take its place. For the moment I focus on Arnie's loaded use of the word "tragedy." By tragedy Arnie means, simply, unfortunate, terribly sad. But the word directs the reader to a different and more complex reality: the fatedness of death in which what we can do is not defeat death, but cope with its fatality. While there is no cosmic cause for the polio virus there is a human cause for the epidemic proportions of the disease and its deadly consequences. This cause has everything to do with humankind's failure to accept the reality of illness and death. Although he does not develop these ideas in his essay, Coetzee begins his review with a brief history of polio that is precisely to the point of Bucky's false self-recriminations and the lasting damage they do to his life. In the final pages of the book when Arnie becomes a fleshed-out character who appears within the story itself, Arnie argues (weakly, according to Coetzee) against Bucky's self-recriminations by saying to him: "*Polio* did them the harm. You weren't a perpetrator. You had as little to do with spreading it as Horace did. You were just as much a victim as any of us was" (271; emphasis in the original). Putting aside for the moment the use of the word "perpetrator" in a novel in which polio is part of a triad of horrors (the other two being the Holocaust and Hiroshima [the word is repeated one page later]), the mention of Horace takes the reader back to a much earlier moment in the book when the mentally retarded Horace is blamed by Kenny, one of the by-now hysterical children, with spreading the disease: "He's got shit all over his underwear! He's got shit all over his hands! He doesn't wash and he isn't clean, and then he wants us to take his hand, and shake his hand, and that's how he's spreading polio" (199). Shaking hands is Horace's way of interacting with a world that otherwise shuns him and to which he can have no other contact other than this rather superficial, external one. And indeed Bucky does take his hand, as he always has, and he does, perhaps, in this way contract and then spread the disease far beyond the city lines where it had heretofore been confined. Coetzee observes (in seeming confirmation of Kenny's tirade) that "the polio virus is passed on via human feces" (12). This is confirmed in other books about polio epidemics as well, including Shell's memoir. Yet, ironically, Coetzee continues writing that the

regime of hand-washing, regular baths, and clean underwear ... cuts down transmission ... rob[s] communities of their resistance to the virus ... Polio, which had once been a relatively benign childhood disease like many others, turns fatal, because of increases in public hygiene, such as are being urged on Bucky by the city authorities. Horace, we need to see, does not produce the plague-like qualities of the paralyzing and often fatal disease, even if he himself might well (like Bucky is) be a carrier of the disease itself. In fact, it is the communal hysteria — the compulsion to wash away this non-human but very natural stain — that makes the community vulnerable to the scourge, which might otherwise have remained just one more childhood disease among many. When one of the mothers rails against the disease in the following terms, we have to find her remarks doubly problematic, however genuine and understandable the mother's emotions: "Our Jewish children are our riches," she exclaims. "Why is it attacking our beautiful Jewish children?" (37).

No reader can but shudder at the insular Jewish mentality exposed by imagining that polio is attacking beautiful Jewish children. For the moment, however, what is more pertinent to my argument is the

mother's use of the word "attack," which, like the word "perpetrator" above in relation to Bucky, links polio to the war that is, in the novel, raging in Europe at the same time as the epidemic.

Shell notes how the language of the "war" against polio (in the 1950s) is militaristic. In Shell's view this attitude hampered efforts to deal with the disease as a disease and not as an infiltration from foreign sources (as hinted at by Roth in the scene with the Italian youths). It also made those who succumbed to the disease failures of resistance. The war analogy, I suggest, also obscures the degree to which polio was not an enemy in the same way that the nazis and the Japanese were. Or, to now contradict myself, it confirms how it was indeed such an enemy in the sense that it is part and parcel of what it means to be human and mortal. It is part of the tragic dimensions both of history and nature. We shake hands with our acquaintances. At the end of a war we shake hands with our enemies. Such gestures are what define us and our relations as humans. And these gestures carry with them unavoidable risks. The alternatives, however, are equally awful, and not shaking hands might well produce something on the scale of World War II Holocaust and Hiroshima included. But unlike human enemies, polio does not attack intentionally, nor does it target any one in particular. It is simply a natural force, like death. Polio is not attacking beautiful Jewish children or any beautiful children or children at all (Bucky is not a child when he gets polio and neither is Roosevelt). Like Kenny's scapegoating the mentally retarded child or the Jewish children blaming the Italians or the Italians blaming others, the Jewish mother sees the universe scapegoating the Jews. Whatever the purely physical, viral causes of disease, its consequences within human interrelations are very human indeed. Whatever the human causes of genocide and war, they function, ironically, as scourges, much like polio itself. Hence, perhaps, Roth's construction of an allohistory in this book, as in *The Plot Against America*. Roth imagines a polio epidemic in the 1940s so as to tempt the reader to see the epidemic as the Jewish population sees it within the story, as an anti-Semitic attack. The Jewish position is only a particular ethnic take on the human position, which sees illness as an attack against humankind.

There are many gods blamed in *Nemesis* for the polio epidemic, from the sun god of pagan times (and perhaps of Native American times as well) to the God (always spelled in the novel with a capital G) of the Christians and the Jews. But polio itself is the god (named Nemesis) in the novel: not the arch enemy, but the avenger taking revenge against human hubris and pride, the ways in which human beings set themselves apart from the filth of the universe (as one ethnic group does from the presumed filth of another: nazis from Jews, Jews from Italians; "our" beautiful Jewish children, the mother exclaims). In this sense polio is the god enacting its revenge against a human world intent upon preserving itself at all costs. Arnie is wrong that everything in human experience is to be credited to chance, but Bucky is also wrong that anyone or anything beyond the immanent physical world is targeting humans. Humans are producing the fatal consequences inherent in denying their mortality, which is to say, also their shared human fate.

One comic performance of the tendency of humans to deny mortality and to fantasize themselves Adams and Eves in a new Eden is when the Jewish campers sit around the campfire pretending to be Native Americans. With their faces "darkened" with "cocoa powder" and decorated with "war paint," the children sit around the camp fire in Indian garb and listen, baffled much like "kids" in "shul" (synagogue), by the following rhetoric: "When first the brutal anthropoid stood up and walked erect ... there was man! The great event was symbolized and marked by the lighting of the first campfire ... For millions of years ... our race has seen in this blessed fire the means and emblem of light, warmth, protection, friendly gathering, council ... The campfire is the focal center of all primitive brotherhood. We shall not fail to use its magic" (209-10). Although by "race" the camp director means the human race, the children's darkened faces suggest race in another sense. The identification here is with those "primitive" beings who knew better than modern humans how to keep death at bay. These other humans, of course, who inhabited the land before the white settlers, and those of darker skin who were dragged into it, also, however, occasion the original sin of the American continent where Jews now take their place alongside other US-Americans employing a kind of magical belief in their own innocence to ignore the consequences of time and to defeat the encroachment of death. Death takes the form of the "fearless Mishi-Mokwa," the huge Faulknerian bear played by one of the children in an old fur coat. With a call of "Slay him! Slay him!" the children cheer with "delight ... finding themselves encompassed by murder and death" — in no way fathoming the link to the way in which their Indian forebears were slain or perceiving the connection to the "important war news" from Europe to which

the children are next treated (215-16). The children respond to this news with similar raucousness, with cheers for England and the U.S. and with boos for Germany and Japan. The campfire ends blissfully with the singing of "God Bless America." Lest the context of polio be lost in all this, the scene includes reference to the fact that President Roosevelt has just been nominated for a fourth term as president of the United States — the term he will not survive. Not only is Roosevelt the most famous and prominent victim of polio in the history of the disease, but his internment of the Japanese during World War II has been compared by critics like Shell with the isolation of polio victims themselves in hospital wards and institutions. The internment of the Japanese also echoes the Holocaust that the US-American participation in the War will bring to an end, albeit far too late.

The point of this scene of US-American fantasy, in which US-Americans, even its Jews, imagine themselves primitive natives of the land, living in a kind of Edenic bliss threatened only by forces of nature like the bear, which they can defeat (the bear's defeat is already implicit in the fur coat) is not only that there is no paradise in which humans are immune from on the onslaughts of disease (the Native Americans were, of course decimated by the small pox virus, which the white settlers introduced into Eden and which, like the polio virus, would one day become a preventable disease), but that the very US-Americans who bless the U.S. and their president are the descendants of those US-Americans who assisted in the extermination of the Indians — an event that parallels what is going on in Germany to the Jews. Indeed, in early Hebrew and Yiddish writings in the United States, Native American history was of special fascination to the writers who saw in the Indians ethnic others, bound together as tribes, whose endurance was much like that of the Jews.

The scene of the little Jewish Indians abounds with ironies. The "epic dimension" of Bucky's trip to the Poconos, which promises a "future new and unknown to him [that] was about to unfold" will not bring safety (140). It is not the case that "no destroyer could possibly overleap so grand a natural barrier in order to catch him" (141). The campfire scene also foreshadows Arnie's statement concerning Bucky's own sentimentalizing and nostalgic narrative which produces no curative therapy and that also partakes heavily of a pioneering, settler impulse that Fitzgerald had satirized earlier at the beginning of the twentieth century at the end of *The Great Gatsby*. "Talking like this," Arnie says vis-à-vis Bucky's narrative, "was a pouring forth that before long he could not control, neither an unburdening nor a remedy so much as an exile's painful visit to the irreclaimable homeland, the beloved birthplace that was the site of his undoing" (245). In the campfire scene we get US-America's — indeed, by extension humanity's — primitive origins in the belief in ritual and magic to which we return painfully again and again, unable to reclaim it and thereby, perhaps, to change our undoing. The exile's painful return is the repetition compulsion without the possibilities of illumination that narrative might provide. It goes well beyond the pleasure principle and remains there. And it is a national — indeed, an international — as well as a personal event. It is tragedy pure and simple in the sense that it implies a denial of fate, of fatality. For, if Bucky and Arnie both misunderstand the nature of tragedy and its relation to an idea of nemesis and if Arnie is too willing to vindicate Bucky altogether, the book does communicate to us a theory of cosmic justice that has to do (as in the tragic model) not with the outcome of events but with the assumption of responsibility we take for ourselves within those events. Bucky is right that he ought not to have left Newark for Indian Hill, which might be to say that he should not have abandoned his present reality for a fantasy of the past that turns out to have been a prelude and rehearsal of the present in all its pitfalls and disappointments. Bucky comforts himself for his decision by acknowledging what is true: that "He wasn't a doctor. He wasn't a nurse." But he is wrong when he concludes from that that "he could not return to a tragedy whose conditions he was impotent to change" (178). Tragedies, in the Greek sense, are not about the power to change: they are about acceptance. They are about self-knowledge and the assumption of responsibility for one's own deeds. Although Bucky feels both guilty and ashamed that he is not taking part in the war effort with his friends, one of whom gets killed just as the polio epidemic is at its peak, in truth he has no choice in the matter. His physical profile precludes him from service. He does, however, as he is informed by his anti-Semitic boss, have a choice in relation to leaving his job in Newark. "He has no choice," he tells his boss, to which his boss rightly responds, "You have no choice, do you? Sure you got a choice. What you're doing is making a choice. You're making your escape from polio ... You Jewish boys got all the answers" (138-39; in "Defender of the Faith" Roth also puts true lines into the mouth of an anti-Semite). If Bucky has a choice, then Arnie's argument that everything is chance is

also not a compelling argument: "Sometimes you're lucky and sometimes you're not," our narrator Arnie tells us. "Any biography is chance, and, beginning, at conception, chance — the tyranny of contingency — is everything. Chance is what I believed Mr. Cantor meant when he was decrying what he called God" (242-43). Chance may well be what Mr. Cantor is decrying when he blames God for the disease, but it is not the case that every biography is ruled by chance and the tyranny of contingency. That Bucky is subsequently "demoralized by persistent shame" (246) in relation to the decision he makes to leave Newark for Indian Hill may indicate an excess of self-blame on Bucky's part, but it is nonetheless appropriate in a way that his shame about not serving in the army is not. It is not that Bucky is wrong to feel shame. What is wrong is that he permits himself no forgiveness. This is, as I suggest earlier, inverted narcissism and inverted pride. His unwillingness to marry his fiancé is the final evidence of his refusal to accept his human frailty. He will not inflict his mortal body on her. Is anyone's body less mortal? Less frail?

One does not have to reduce Bucky's decision to "flee" Newark (his word) to a pure and simple fear for his life. He is also unable to take the recriminations of the parents against him, and he is incapable of absorbing the pain of the children's death and suffering. Yet, when he hangs up the phone with Marcia after having agreed to come to Indian Hill, "there to confront him were his ideals — ideals of truthfulness and strength fostered in him by his grandfather, ideals of course of sacrifice that he shared with Jake and Dave, ideals nurtured by him in boyhood to place himself beyond the reach of a crooked father's penchant for deceit — his ideals as a man demanding of him that he immediately reverse course and return for the summer to the work he had contracted to perform" (135). Those ideals exist, and they have merit. As he later says to Marcia, even before the polio spreads to Indian Hill, "It isn't a matter of *doing*, — it's a matter of being there" (197; emphasis in the original), and Bucky is right about this. Whether the polio epidemic is the result of divine decree or necessity, or whether it is only a matter of chance, the problem for an individual like Bucky is what personal responsibility he takes, not in the sense of assuming responsibility for, as if he were somehow to blame, but in the sense of acting in a credible and committed manner in relation to the catastrophe, whatever his role in it or absence thereof. What Bucky wants instead, which mirrors his decision to flee, is exemption: "If only the test revealed that he was not the person responsible! If only he were about to be proved blameless!" What follows in this passage is equally telling: "then, when the examination at the hospital was over and everything certified to be okay, he could stop off at the Stroudsburg jewelry store on the way back to camp to buy the engagement ring for Marcia. He hoped to be able to afford something set with a genuine jewel" (237). If he is blameless, not only can Bucky not feel remorse concerning his decision to come to Indian Hill, but he can totally throw off his concerns for those who have been stricken by the disease.

The test results reveal, of course, that he may not be blameless, that he may well be the person responsible for bringing polio to Indian Hill, albeit inadvertently, since he is that highly improbable phenomenon called the "healthy infected carrier" (236). As Bucky later puts it, he is a "medical enigma" (264), not, as Arnie would have it, a "theological enigma" (265): both he and God are in some sense responsible for the epidemic, but not because either one of them ordains it or wishes it. Rather, on the human level, the infection resides in an otherwise healthy carrier. On the more cosmic level, it resides in the universe that may also be fundamentally healthy and, if I may venture to speak the unspeakable, good. The link between Bucky's ignoble choice to abandon his ideals and leave Newark and the spread of polio to Indian Hill is not one that can ever be made definitive and clear, any more than God's creation of the universe can be said to contain the seeds of suffering and destruction in any plausible, logical way. "There's no proof that you were [the carrier to Indian Hill]," Arnie says to Bucky, to which Bucky says, "There's no proof that I wasn't" (248). Both are right. The point is that moral life has to be lived in the absence of proof, in the absence of certainty. Bucky, we might say, to invoke Nathaniel Hawthorne, suffers from a kind of US-American absolutist literalism, evident in Jay Gatsby as well. This brings me to a particular Hawthorne character who, like Bucky, also suffers from obsessive guilt and the need to present that guilt to the world through materializing it, as Bucky does through making his deformed limbs an emblem of what he believes to be his deformed soul, his "deformed mind," as Marcia calls it. This precursor of Bucky also has a fiancé who seems to understand a dimension of the truth that the male protagonist does not.

Like the minister's fiancé in "The Minister's Black Veil," Marcia voices a nearer truth than either Bucky or Arnie. "What's truly deformed," Marcia says to Bucky after he has finally consented to see her, "is your mind ... You've *always* been this way. You could never put things at the right distance — never! You're always holding yourself accountable when you're *not*. Either it's terrible God who is accountable, or it's terrible Bucky Cantor who is accountable, when in fact, accountability belongs to neither" (260). Her final plea to him is: "Don't save me, for God's sake. Do what we planned — marry me!" And she ends with this: "You are not doing anything to me — I am responsible for my decisions!" (262). Exactly. What Bucky will not accept is that he cannot escape the decisions he made. He can never be blameless in that way. But Bucky's idea of being responsible in relation to Marcia is irresponsible, because he does not credit and respect her capacity for taking responsibility for the decisions she makes. Her decision could, after all, turn out to be the wrong decision. But it is her choice to make. Toward the end of the text Arnie entertains the idea that Bucky might be right about his having introduced the virus into Indian Hill. What if that is the case? What if a choice turns out to be the wrong choice? Do we have any alternative but to take responsibility for that choice, not in the way that Bucky does — condemning himself to a life of guilt for his not being blameless — but as Marcia would, by becoming a responsible mate and partner of the man she loves. Bucky will sacrifice himself rather than permit her what could, of course, amount to a self-sacrifice (there are no guarantees in life, even if everything isn't wholly determined by chance), but could also turn out to be a sacrifice of or for neither of them. In any event, there is hubris and no small measure of sexism in his not allowing Marcia the same nobility of soul he imagines for himself.

Like so many of Roth's later novels, *Nemesis* is a narration within a narration. Arnie tells Bucky's story, just as Nathan Zuckerman tells the stories of Swede Levov, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk, converting what is literally a first person narrative (since Arnie and Nathan are both present in the scene of story-telling) into a third-person narrative. Bucky or Mr. Cantor, as he is often called, is referred to in the third person throughout the narrative and while Arnie refers casually to himself as "me" earlier in the novel (108), it is only in the last section entitled "Reunion" that Arnie fully identifies himself as the transcriber of Bucky's story. "We," the final section begins, referring not only to Arnie himself but to the other members of his and Bucky's New Jersey community; and a few paragraphs later Arnie specifically identifies himself as "one of the Chancellor Avenue playground boys who, in the summer of '44, contracted polio" (241). This narrative frame, in which the first person narrator tells a story in the third person that is initially, in its telling, a first-person oral narrative, does not produce narrative distance, but, rather the opposite. It produces a closer identification between the author and both the narrator and the protagonist, while drawing the narrator and protagonist closer to each other as well, since the text self-consciously points to and illustrates the way in which all stories are as much third person objectifications of the first-person narrating self, and, equally, always, despite the use of the third person, first person narratives as well. Himself a polio victim Arnie tells Bucky's polio story because it has deep personal relevance to himself, above and beyond his childhood relationship to Bucky, although Arnie is quick to tell us (or rather, Roth is quick to have him tell us), that he did not know Bucky very well. Similarly, Roth tells Arnie's story of Bucky's story because that story, or those stories, carries deep personal significance for him. Otherwise, why write this novel or any novel in the first place? But the relationship of teller to teller is never one of absolute repetition. Nor it is always one of approval and confirmation of the story being reported. This, to some degree, antagonist relationship between and among tellers extends to the reader himself/herself, who is in any text one more narrator, perhaps not even the final narrator, if the reader conveys the story (say through a literary critical essay or lecture) to another listener or reader. Like Chinese boxes or Russian dolls fitted one into another, the narrative comes to occupy a larger and larger compass the more it is read and discussed, reaching heaven knows how far, if the text is a great one.

We might say, to return to the title of the text and its major trope, that each enveloping narrator is the previous narrator's nemesis, but not in the narrow literary sense of the word. To be sure, the narrators rival each other. Arnie has his own, often not so friendly view of Bucky's story, and Roth shows Arnie's weaknesses as a philosophical and theological thinker. In Coetzee's reading of the text Arnie is culpable for his failure to understand truly the dimensions of tragedy in the Greek sense. But in so challenging the precursor narrator, the subsequent narrator also chastens the narrative voice that precedes his or hers. Each subsequent narrator, in other words, restores a cosmic balance to a



world threatened by the egocentricity and narcissism of the storyteller who imagines that he or she has discovered and expressed a truth that cannot be challenged. Since the ultimate nemesis of all human life is death, such that the truths we produce in our lives are largely attempts to mediate or ameliorate or even refute that reality, one might speculate that, coming as it does after a cluster of novels in which Philip Roth confronts the reality of his own death, there can be for Roth no subsequent indulging in the fantasy that this nemesis will not, in the end, exact its ultimate revenge, which is justice and the leveling of all human life and achievement. It is inherently hubristic to write fiction and criticism, and I suggest that Roth is aware of this in *Nemesis*. We would all do well to remember that. If we do not, there is always the next critic to remind us that this is the case and death to finalize the point.

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