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Philip Roth and Adrienne Rich: The Primacy of Reality in Fantasy and Imagery

By Sara L. Voorhees

In viewing the relationship between writing and life in both the *Ghost Writer* and *The Counterlife* it is clear that all writing is a reflection of reality. All writing, even if it is pure fantasy or an imitation of an actual event, cannot be just fiction alone. Writing is a mirror for life, it reflects our world outside of the written page. Often reality described in fiction seems unreasonable, farfetched and absurd. Yet what must be recognized is that reality itself is often unfathomable and seemingly fantastic. In “Writing American Fiction” Roth writes,

> the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupifies, is sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist (Philip Roth “Writing American Fiction” 120).

Writing only brings what is real to our acknowledgement, even if it is often exaggerated in fiction. In fiction reality is often distorted but all fiction necessarily depends on what is actual.

In the *Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman is preoccupied with fiction. In chapter one, Zuckerman fantasizes about being I.E. Lonoff’s prodigal son. In chapter two, Zuckerman sees himself as the typical troubled and alienated artist and he identifies himself with Stephen in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He identifies himself with Stephen because both writers are misunderstood by their families and eventually break from their families altogether. In the third chapter, Zuckerman fantasizes that Amy Ballette is really Anne Frank and in the fourth chapter Zuckerman’s fantasies continue even though the real events that surround him are fantastic and stage-like themselves.

In all four chapters, there are a multitude of fragmented stories and all are based on

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1 This paper was originally written for Prof. Abba Lessing’s Philosophy 230—Philosophy and Literature.
Zuckerman's imagination and distortion of actual people and events. However, it must be pointed out that his fantasies are conscious fantasies. Zuckerman knows that he is parodying himself in all of his fictions. He knows he is playing various roles. For this reason, this book is extremely funny. If Zuckerman really believed all of his delusions we, as readers, would think that he was a character in need of psychiatric help. Zuckerman knows that he really isn't Lonoff's "new found son," the "respectable artist" and "lover of Anne Frank." In truth he is none of these roles and he knows it. If Zuckerman really believed that he was all of these roles, the fun would be gone and the game would be over.

In life, we, like the character of Zuckerman, prefer fantasy over reality when reality does not present to us the fantastic or what Roth calls "figures [and situations] that are the very envy of every novelist." What is real is often less interesting than fiction. The last chapter, "Married to Tolstoy," illustrates this point clearly. While Hope and Lonoff argue and discuss Lonoff's trivial breakfast egg, Zuckerman is fantasizing about writing home to his family concerning his marriage to Anne Frank and their expected child. As John Barth puts it,

What the hell, reality is a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there, and literature never did, very long...Reality is a drag (CLC 334).

For this reason Zuckerman continues to fantasize even though he knows that his fantasies are not real. When Lonoff says,

I turn sentences around. That's my life. I write a sentence and then I turn it around. Then I look at it again. Then I have lunch (Roth *Ghost Writer* 26-27).

Zuckerman continues to fantasize about Lonoff being an inspired artist even after he hears what his work is really like. He continues to fantasize about what it would be like to be Lonoff, have Lonoff's praise, or really be Lonoff's new found son. Zuckerman acknowledges the reality that Lonoff "turns sentences around" yet this does not stop him from continuing to fantasize about him. Amy Ballette is a boring amateur writer, but as Anne Frank she is fascinating. Even though he has already acknowledged that she is not the woman in his fictionalized dream, he still fantasizes that she is Anne Frank.

Every time he pictured Amy at the dentist's office reading about Otto Frank in Time magazine, or in the library stacks searching for her "real
When Zuckerman describes his ex-girlfriend Betsy to the Lonoff family he knows that he is distorting the truth but he continues to delude the Lonoffs about the reality of their relationship anyway. He says,

I wound up in wonder at the idiot I had been to relinquish her love. Describing her in such sterling qualities, I had, in fact, brought myself nearly to the point of grief, as though instead of wailing with pain and telling me to leave and never come back, the unhappy dancer had died in my arms on our wedding day (Roth, Ghost Writer 50-51).

Being conscious of his own distortion, Zuckerman breaks his fantasy and recognizes what really happened with humor. In truth, their breakup was not life-threatening and the result of it made him feel only a little bit guilty.

Writing acknowledges the reality of our world and at the same time it stays true to fiction because all fiction, like life, has an unrealistic and fantastic quality to it. Roth takes what he knows of reality; he knows that much of what is real is based on exaggeration and the fantastic. The writer, or writing itself, only brings this unreality in the world to light, and in some cases, this quality is distorted. But often the writer or writing doesn't need to distort reality because reality itself is fantastic enough. As Zuckerman put it,

Oh, if only I could have imagined the scene I'd overheard! If only I could invent as presumptuously as real life! If one day I could approach the originality and excitement of what actually goes on! (Roth, Ghost Writer 151).

Although Zuckerman delves into the realm of fantasy, he can never fully escape reality. He is always conscious of what is real and what is not. He knows that his fantasies are fantasies alone. He necessarily returns to the real events in the story. As Zuckerman necessarily returns to reality, fiction can never escape what is real completely. All writing originates from what is real before it can generate fantasy. As in life, we realize our actuality before we can temporarily live out fantasies. Like Zuckerman, we must return to reality or we would not belong in the social world but in a mental institution. Fiction is not an escape from reality but it is based on reality. Admittedly, when reality does not offer its
fantastic quality to us, we prefer fantasy as does Zuckerman. Nonetheless, we must necessarily live in a real world before we can create fiction.

Not only do Zuckerman’s fantasies end when he consciously recognizes his fantasies in reality, but Roth has designed the entire framework of the Ghost Writer to undermine our belief, as readers, that his fantasies are credible as well. In the Ghost Writer, Roth does not allow us, as readers, to escape into the world of the novel. We cannot sit back and escape into another reality. Instead the Ghost Writer challenges us, as readers, to be consciously aware that we are readers and only readers. This novel is made up of so many different texts that either have no beginning or end and have equal significance, that we as readers recognize an all-too-familiar feeling. Reality, like this fiction the Ghost Writer, is infinite.

The Ghost Writer deconstructs fantasy because all of Zuckerman’s fantasies are acknowledged as only fantasies and are broken with the return to his reality. We cannot escape into a character’s life because we find out only pages later that the character’s existence is only a fantasy. This is clearly seen in the entire chapter entitled “Femme Fatale.” Roth destroys any escape into fantasy for his characters and his readers. Even Roth’s characters cannot live out their fantasies. Lonoff cannot take off with Amy Ballette and Amy cannot fulfill her wish to be Lonoff’s mistress. Hope fantasizes about leaving for Boston and abandoning her husband but she also returns to her reality. Zuckerman’s fantasies about being Lonoff’s progeny son, and his entire fantasy about Lonoff being an inspired artist role model also crumbles as does his fictional dream about Amy Ballette. Even though reality is often fantastic and hard to understand, like the strange mistress/child scene between Amy and Lonoff, even though it is as boring as breakfast at the Lonoff house, it is still reality and not fantasy.

The quote that Zuckerman reads above Lonoff’s desk is an illustration of this entire book. On a small white index card, James’s quote reads, “our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task” (Roth Ghost Writer 98). Writing, like life, is uncertain and unreliable. Life is filled with fiction and we are often unsure what is true and what is not. Writing brings this ambiguity to light; its task is to illustrate the ambiguity of reality.

In the Counterlife the ambiguity and fantastic element of reality is taken even further. In this novel, we never know what the real story is, we never even confront reality. In the Ghost Writer we as readers have some sense of what really happens and what is fantasy. In the Counterlife all is fantasy. Roth does not try and make clear to us what is real and what is not; fiction and reality are completely blurred. We doubt everything in the text. As readers, we don’t know whose life is real or whose life is the fantasy. We don’t know if any of the events really happen or if some are founded and others are not. The
only thing that is real is fantasy. Fantasy, in the *Counterlife*, constitutes reality.

In the *Counterlife* there are no distinctions between reality and fiction and most of the characters are “ghosts.” Most of the characters in this novel do not live in a stable reality, not only because Roth does not make it clear who exists, or whose story the *Counterlife* is, but even if all the characters are real, we are still not sure how credible they are, for most of them live in private fantasies anyway. We need only look at Lipman, Henry, Jimmy, Wendy, and Zuckerman.

Not only does Roth obliterate reality in this novel by its construction, but in Zuckerman’s letter to Maria, Zuckerman confesses that he is only an imitation of a human being. He then goes on to say that we’re all actors! For Zuckerman, the natural self does not exist. He says in this letter,

> Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as being oneself...if there is even in a natural being, an irreducible self, it is rather small, I think, and may even be the root of impersonation—the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate (Roth *Counterlife* 320).

Zuckerman asserts that not only do we as human beings create fantasies in our lives, but we are fantasy. There is not a self besides a million layers of performance. In our illusional selves, in our impersonation of our selves, we actually know ourselves most. In our roles we can at least know that we exist but without performing selves we are nothing real because there is not an innate self.

Zuckerman’s philosophy and Roth’s construction of the *Counterlife* assumes that all is fiction because fiction is based on reality and reality is only fiction. In fact fiction is the only life that we have. Reality is fantasy. Zuckerman believes that life is like a great manuscript, it is all narrative. As human beings, we construct our lives like books.

Yet Maria’s letter to Zuckerman undermines Zuckerman’s entire philosophy and Roth’s construction of the *Counterlife*. Maria will not participate in Zuckerman’s fantasies and she actually walks right out of Zuckerman’s book. She will not participate in her own fantasies for that matter, and she refuses to pretend to be anything but herself. She insists on her own authenticity. She says in her letter to Zuckerman,

> No, I won’t do it. I will not be locked into your head in this way. I will not participate in this primitive drama, not even for the sake of your fiction (Roth *Counterlife* 315).
Maria, like Lonoff, refuses to be a fictional fantasy. She refuses to live in the realm of fantasy. She is standing out for what is real. She refuses to play the games of performance and stands for what she knows is actual. She knows who she is and she knows she is not Zuckerman’s Maria.

In the *Counterlife*, all of Zuckerman’s fantasies ultimately end in disaster. His characters walk out on him. Henry will not be a part of his book and neither will Maria. Reality is stronger than fantasy. Fiction must necessarily be the distortion and the fantasy of something and this something is reality. Fiction cannot exist without reality. As Zuckerman asserts that all is fiction and that the basis of self, if there is even a basis for self, is the skill to impersonate, then there cannot be fiction because fiction necessarily depends on reality. Even when Zuckerman asserts that he is one long performance he is conscious that he is only playing. He knows that he is pretending to be a performer and that he is pretending to be himself. If he were really an actor, he would not consciously be calling himself one. By consciously being aware of his imitation of a natural being, he is asserting his natural being. Awareness of performance, in short, undermines his performance. If he really was a fictional character, he would not be conscious of play acting. If one is aware of performance there must necessarily be something real inside this person to make them aware that they are performing.

In addition, fiction cannot be the basis for reality because fiction stems from what is real. If fiction creates reality, then how could fiction even call itself real when all sane human beings have a consciousness of their tangible and concrete existence before their “roles”? Consciousness is necessarily attached to actuality. From actuality, potential fictions can arise, but to assume that fiction creates reality annihilates the importance of reason, intellect and consciousness.

In the *Counterlife*, I believe that Roth contradicts his own construction of the novel which blurs reality and fiction and Zuckerman’s philosophy that all of reality is fantasy. Roth confronts what is real head on. Although he does so in the means of fiction, he still addresses very real issues that cannot be called fantasy based. Social and political issues ring throughout this novel, and they cannot be considered only fiction or some kind of fun game. As Shuki puts it,

In a society like yours, where eminent novelists are without serious social impact whatever the honors they accumulate and however much noise or money they make, it may even be exhilarating to find that the consequences of what you write are real, whether you like it or not (Roth *Counterlife* 162).
Writing, even if it is fiction, has real consequences. Life, even if it does have a fictional and absurd quality to it, is in fact real. Zuckerman’s confrontation with Sarah and the old woman who directed their anti-Semitism in rude innuendo does exist. Although this old woman may be entirely fictional, her words: “open the window...open the window immediately there’s a terrible smell in here,” (Roth Counterlife 291) happen outside of this text in our reality.

Often what is real seems fictional, it is unbelievable and hard to imagine. It is absurd. It is hard to believe that Wiesel’s account of his Holocaust experience is real, it is hard to imagine that the child he saw hanged at the gallows had actually dangled on a rope for an extended period of time before he finally died. It is hard to believe that people like Shuki’s brother were tortured, decapitated, and castrated. Even if this brother is a purely fictional character, this kind of human degradation exists. Reality is fantastically real. Fiction is based on what is real, and reality is full of the fantastic. It is not all based on fantasy as Zuckerman would like to believe.

Unfortunately fantasy is often dangerous when it makes its appearance in reality. In American society, we are victimized by ideals, deceptions and fantasies. Adrienne Rich’s poem “The Images” illustrates the corruption of images and fantasy’s images. Fantasies are not harmful except when the object of the fantasy does not choose to be the object. She writes,

when did we ever choose
to see our bodies strung
in bondage and crucifixion across the exhausted air

when did we choose
to be lynched on the queasy electric signs
of midtown

when did we choose
to become the masturbator’s fix
emblem of rape in Riverside Park the campground
at Bandol the beach at Sydney?

It is not merely fiction that women are victimized by fantasy and images of fantasy. Fantasy has the potential to destroy human dignity because fantasy has no barriers. Most women do not choose to be the target of some masturbator’s fantasy, but because fantasy has no limits
and is controlled only by the fantasizer, the object of fantasy is always a victim. One cannot scream, kick, or shoot someone else's fantasy. One can only wish their fantasy away. Yet still beyond the victim's control, the fantasy exists safely in the fantasizer's head. Rich's anger at images of fantasy is the same anger that Maria has with Zuckerman's fantasy of her. The parallel in Rich's poem lies in the following passage in which Maria says,

Sure it's lovely being listened to as opposed to being shut up, but it's also quite creepy to think that I am monitored closely only to be even more manipulated and exploited than when you extracted me (for artistic purposes) from my situation upstairs (Roth The Counterlife 312).

Fantasy in life is not dangerous unless one has not asked to be the object of an undesired fantasy. Rich's poem and Maria's rejection of a fictionalized self illustrate their demand for authenticity. Ultimately Roth and Rich address reality and fantasy in fiction and poetry as life addresses reality and fantasy on a day to day basis. Both Roth and Rich address the problem of "images" and "fantasy lives" in the medium of imagery through poetry and fiction but this does not invalidate their work.

Writing depends on reality and reality is full of the fantastic. Yet because reality has a fantastic quality to it we should not assume that it is simply fantasy. Writing necessarily reflects what is actual and what is actual is often absurd and hard to believe. Roth's writing in both the Ghost Writer and the Counterlife play on fantasy. In both books, his characters are attracted to fictional realities. But necessarily, all of his characters return to reality. In the Counterlife, when Zuckerman refuses to accept reality, his characters walk out on him. We, in life, like Zuckerman, prefer fantasy over reality when reality does not show us its fantastic quality. Yet we all, like writing, depend on reality and authenticity to exist.

Works Cited


