ABSTRACT. Although many early reviewers of Indignation were quick to link it directly to the novelist’s earliest works, few approached the novella within the context of Roth’s more recent writings. This framework becomes especially significant when it comes to Roth’s ongoing experimentations with narrative voice, a stylistic concern that reaches back to Portnoy’s Complaint and continues to find new expressions. Placed within this context, Indignation can be read as another recent twist to Roth’s preoccupation with storytelling and the ways in which narrative—or more specifically, the act of narrating a life—constructs the subject.

Readers of Philip Roth’s twenty-seventh book of fiction, Indignation, have been quick to place it within the context of his earlier works, particularly those novels and stories that he produced early in his career. Initial assessment of the novella seemed to suggest that it is reminiscent of middle-class initiation narratives found in such works as “Defender of the Faith” (1959), Goodbye, Columbus (1959), and When She Was Good (1967). In the various reviews appearing in the weeks following the novella’s publication, critics pointed out the similarities between Indignation and several of these earlier texts. For example, Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, writing in the Wall Street Journal, said that with Indignation, “Philip Roth turns back the pages and writes about a college-age protagonist,” alluding to the novelist’s formative years from which he was to draw much of his early fiction. On Bloomberg.com, Craig Seligman noted in his review that “the book’s main thrust is the theme that has preoccupied Roth since his earliest work: what high school English teachers use to call Society versus the Individual.” Ron Charles, writing in The Washington Post, argued that, thematically speaking, Indignation doesn’t break any new ground, and that it contained “the comic sexual frustration of Portnoy’s Complaint [as well as] the assimilation anxieties of the Zuckerman books.” In The New York Review of Books, Charles Simic alluded to Portnoy’s Complaint (1969) when pointing out the text’s tensions between father and son, and writing in The Atlantic, Christopher Hitchens observed what he sees in Indignation as “pungent throwbacks to Portnoy,” namely, the literary potential of liver and the onanistic use of socks (112). And James Wolcott, holding forth in The

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New Republic, called the depiction of Marcus Messner, the novel’s protagonist, “a portrait of the artist as a young grump” (32), alluding indirectly, at least in my reading of his review, to Roth’s own künstlerroman, The Ghost Writer (1979). What is more, in my own conversations with friends and colleagues since the novel’s publication, I get the sense that the readers are not impressed with Roth’s latest book and that Indignation is primarily nothing more than a novelistic retread, something that Roth has done before and something that he has done much better.

Granted, Indignation does not measure up to the grand texts of Roth’s later career—it lacks the narratological muscle of Operation Shylock (1993), the sheer exuberance of Sabbath’s Theater (1995), and the historical reach found in the American Trilogy and in The Plot Against America (2004). Nor does it have the dramatic impact of some of his more recent novellas, such as that minor key masterwork, The Dying Animal (2001), or even arguably the more somber Everyman (2006). Nonetheless, Indignation demonstrates Philip Roth’s ongoing attempts to push the envelope of narration and, as such, stands as a notable example of what appears to be his doggedly persistent attempts, now paced at a rate of a novel a year, to not go gentle into that good night. In other words, Roth’s latest novella is far from something that he has done before and done much better; more accurately, it is something that he has done before, yet something that he has done differently. All novelists have certain themes, tropes, and even formulas that they return to again and again, and Roth is no exception. Indeed, the constant revisitation, and revisioning, of these concerns is what makes a great artist. Reminiscent of Peter Tarnopol’s revised narratives in My Life as a Man (1974)—“[A]ll I can do with my story is tell it. And tell it. And tell it. And that’s the truth.” (233)—Indignation is thus another twist to Roth’s preoccupation with storytelling and the ways in which narrative—or more specifically, the act of narrating a life—constructs the “truth” of the subject.

The plot of Indignation is neither simple nor convoluted. It is the (mostly) first-person account of Marcus Messner, a dutiful and promising son of loving working-class parents whose formative years are spent in the Weequahic section of Newark during the 1930s and 1940s. He grows up working alongside his father in the family business, a kosher butcher shop in the neighborhood, and upon graduation assists his father full-time the summer before he enters a local college. These are the dawning days of the Korean War, and Marcus is conscious of the fact that he needs to maintain his good grades in order to avoid the draft, or if in fact he is drafted after graduating from college, doing what it takes to ensure that he enters the military as a junior officer and serves some function that places him far from enemy lines. Around this time Marcus’s father becomes obsessed with his son’s safety, worrying in an almost fanatical way about his whereabouts and eventually driving Marcus to leave Newark and begin his sophomore year at Winesburg College in northern Ohio. This ivy-tinged (and fictional) liberal arts college, a significant tip of
the pen to Sherwood Anderson's famous treatment of repressed desires and stifled dreams, should be just the place for Marcus to pursue his education unmolested and unscathed, but fate places into his path a series of obstacles—exasperating roommates, an unstable woman, and a sanctimonious dean—that sideline his vaulted ambitions and ultimately land him right where he dreaded most: in the front lines on the Korean peninsula.

Thematically, *Indignation* shares much with many of Roth's other novels. We see this in Marcus's frantically burdened (and burdening) father; his solid and stabilizing mother; references to the "good Jewish boy" and even the polish and princeliness of the book's Jewish idol, Sonny Cottler; Marcus's erratic and even fatal admirers, such as his roommate, Bertram Flusser, and especially his love interest, Olivia Hutton; the text's dialectic between America's Puritanical impulse (expressed most effectively through Dean Hawes Caudwell and the politically ambitious college president, Albin Lentz) and Marcus's free-thinking philosophy; the weight of history and the fear it engenders; the hapless protagonist held hostage by events beyond his control; the juxtaposition of Jewish customs, such as kosher practices, and images of violence; and the historiographic context—the "Historical Note" that concludes the novella—that both anchors and problematizes the narrative. Taken as a whole, Marcus's story resonates in ways similar to those found in the American Trilogy and other recent narratives. His is an object lesson in the unexpected consequences of the simplest actions—what the narrator Philip Roth calls in *The Plot Against America* "[t]he terror of the unforeseen" (114)—or as Marcus's anxious father says near the beginning of the recent novella, "It's about life, where the tiniest misstep can have tragic consequences" (*Indignation* 12).

This belief in the consequences of the "tiniest misstep" functions as one of the novella's central themes, and it appears in at least two other significant moments in the text. The first occurs at approximately a quarter of the way into the novel, when Marcus reveals, in a narrative move that must shock a first-time reader, that he believes himself to be dead and in a mysterious void where he is able to do nothing more than reconstruct the "series of mishaps ending in my death at the age of nineteen" (54). And again at the very end of the novel, a highly privileged position in a narrative, Roth revisits, through a voice other than Marcus's, the father's warnings and sums up the tragic lesson that Marcus Messner has learned, which has everything to do with "the terrible, the incomprehensible way one's most banal, incidental, even comical choices achieve the most disproportionate result" (231). This framing theme that comes to the fore at three key moments in the text brings to mind similar lessons found in several other of Roth's later works, such as the "getting it wrong" refrain in *American Pastoral* (1997)—"[G]etting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong" (35)—and the "everyone knows" theme woven throughout *The Human Stain*.
(2000)—“‘Everyone knows’ is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience […]]. What we know is that, in an unclichéd way, nobody knows anything” (208)—and even David Kepesh’s lascivious jeremiad in _The Dying Animal_—“Sex isn’t just friction and shallow fun. Sex is also the revenge on death” (69). In each of these examples, Roth draws our attention to the narrating subject, the individual telling his story, and the strategies he employs to make sense of his life. What is worth noting here is that far from being a hackneyed return to the trodden grounds of Roth’s early career, _Indignation_ both participates in the thematic explorations found in much of his more recent fiction, and, perhaps more significantly, serves as another illustrative example of the novelist’s ongoing concern with the act of narration.

Indeed, the novel’s protagonist is more striking as a narrating voice than he is a character. Much like Nathan Zuckerman in _The Ghost Writer, The Counterlife_ (1986), _American Pastoral_, and _The Human Stain_, Marcus is most fully himself when he is telling stories. However, unlike the creatively mischievous Zuckerman, Marcus is hopelessly naïve, almost to the point of unbelievability—e.g., when Olivia brings him flowers in the hospital, he fails to recognize them as roses—and this artlessness determines the scope of his narrative. For example, he is unable to decipher two of the biggest enigmas in the novella, his father’s sudden obsession with Marcus’s safety and the vacillations of Olivia Hutton, and these mysteries go largely unanswered. The reader is just as clueless as the narrator when it comes to making sense of events—and possibly even more frustrated than Marcus, given the blatant lack of closure concerning these occurrences. This stands in sharp contrast to the storytelling of Zuckerman, who, in the face of such unknowns as Amy Bellette, Swede Levov, and Coleman Silk, creates his own “reality” by imagining the lives of others. In fact, what is most striking about Marcus as a narrator is how much he does not know and how much he resigns himself to not knowing. Whereas Zuckerman defines himself through his necessary fictions, Marcus is condemned to a narrative limbo by his inability to transform the stories around him.

Let us return to the startling revelation that appears fairly early in the novella, that Marcus Messner’s story is what appears to be the book of the dead. Coming as it does so soon in the text—which, in many ways, harkens back to the narrative strategies employed in _The Human Stain_, when early on Roth exposes Coleman Silk’s great secret—many readers may feel that Roth is tipping his hand a little too early in the game, that in revealing Marcus’s corporeal absence he is giving up the ghost (so to speak) of his very narrative. Fairly early in the novella, after relating how easy it was to seduce Olivia Hutton, his one love interest at Winesburg College, and immediately before he expresses how stupefied he was to receive his first blow job, Marcus tells us, in an extended quote that is central to our understanding of the text, that
[w]hat happened next I had to puzzle over for weeks afterward. And even dead, as I am and have been for I don’t know how long, I try to reconstruct the mores that reigned over that campus and to recapitulate the troubled efforts to elude those mores that fostered the series of mishaps ending in my death at the age of nineteen. Even now (if “now” can be said to mean anything any longer), beyond corporeal existence, alive as I am here (if “here” or “I” means anything), as memory alone (if “memory,” strictly speaking, is the all-embracing medium in which I am being sustained as “myself”), I continue to puzzle over Olivia’s reactions. Is that what eternity is for, to muck over a lifetime’s minutiae? Who could have imagined that one would have forever to remember each moment of life down to its tiniest component? (54-55)

It would appear, then, that Marcus is nothing more than a disembodied voice in the void, a narrating presence that brings to mind Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* (1953) or even *How It Is* (1961), a sharp postmodern swerve that temporarily detours Marcus’s realistic tale and violently disrupts readers’ expectations. (One might even imagine the “dead” Marcus, torn between the endless tedium of his story and his desire to narrate a cohesive self, echoing the Irish novelist, “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” [*Unnamable* 414].) However, Roth later contextualizes this narrative aberration in the penultimate section of the novella. Appearing 224 pages into the 233 page book, in a chapter titled “Out from Under,” an anonymous heterodiegetic narrator enters to inform us that the story we have been reading up until this point is not a note from limbo. Instead, the text in front of us represents the thoughts of a young man in a morphine-induced stupor—astute readers examining Roth’s brief table of contents will have guessed as much from the title of the first chapter, “Under Morphine”—unaware of the fact that the bayonet wounds he suffered on the battlefields of Korea have gravely incapacitated him, severing all but one leg from his torso and mutilating his intestines and genitals. Here, the kosher butcher’s son has been slaughtered in a most unceremonious manner, what little blood that hasn’t been drained from him polluted with the narcotics that deny his consciousness. As we learn in the final pages of the book, Marcus may not actually be dead in the first section of the book, but he is nonetheless bereft of any corporeal presence and, for all practical purposes, is nothing more than memory. He is a self without physical limits, a subject who is nothing more than pure voice.

This reference to memory and its relation to subjective presence undergird Marcus’s narrative. He ponders, from a perspective that he assumes to be otherworldly, if eternity “wasn’t an endless nothing but consisted instead of memory cogitating for eons on itself,” (55), and seems amazed that the after-life would be “not only *not* without remembering but that remembering would *be* the everything” (56). The Marcus who is now before us, the Marcus whose existence is brought vividly to life throughout most of *Indignation*, is nothing more than “memory upon memory, nothing but memory” (57). As in a number of other novels by the author, notions of self are inextricably linked to recollections of the past, and identity is the contingent sum of one’s history.
Given all of this, then, the major question of the novella becomes, why does Roth make this narrative move? Why require that readers invest so much in Marcus’s voice, temporarily throwing us off balance with his pseudo-Beckettian sleight of hand and then supposedly “righting” us by re-imposing a more “realistic” explanation for Marcus’s unanchored presence? What we have in *Indignation* is not some contrived narrative gamesmanship (as several reviewers have seen it), but the logical conclusion of the various premises established in many of Roth’s more recent novels. We have, for example, the sheer prominence of memory in *Patrimony* (1991). “You mustn’t forget anything,” Philip says of his father’s philosophy, “that’s the inscription on his coat of arms. To be alive, to him, is to be made of memory—to him if a man’s not made of memory, he’s made of nothing” (124). Or Zuckerman’s admonition in *American Pastoral*, as he narrates the life of his high school hero, that he was “a biography in perpetual motion, memory to the marrow of my bones” (45). Or the significance of voices in *I Married a Communist* (1998). On the threshold of old age, and listening to his former high school teacher narrate the life of his brother Ira, Nathan reflects, “Occasionally now, looking back, I think of my life as one long speech that I’ve been listening to. […] The book of my life is a book of voices. When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: ‘Listening’” (222). Or the disembodied dialogues that compose the entirety of *Deception* (1990) or the He/She sections of *Exit Ghost* (2007). We see here a series of examples from Roth’s later works—and these are only a few—that emphasize the inextricable links between memory, the narrating voice, and the creation of the subject. What is more, it is important to remember that in both *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, the “facts” of Swede Levov and Coleman Silk are in many ways the “fictions” of Nathan Zuckerman, memorable subjects engendered through his creative imagination and given life through the act of narration. We can reach back to earlier works and find the narratively-contingent subject in *The Counterlife*, a novel that by its very nature is nothing more than constructed and deconstructed lives—“we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring,” as Nathan tells his brother Henry (145)—and even further in texts such as *The Ghost Writer* (Nathan reimagining the life of Amy Bellette as Anne Frank) and *My Life as a Man* (Peter Tarnopol reconstructing the life of his own narrative creation, Nathan Zuckerman). In fact, we can even see the source of this trajectory in Roth’s seminal (in more than one sense of the word) novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), a text in which the narrative subject is created through nothing but voice…or rants, a means through which Alex often express himself.

Perhaps it is appropriate to pause momentarily at the threshold of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, since so many of Roth’s themes and styles, leading up to and including his more recent narrative, are imbedded in that breakthrough novel. Indeed, there are several notable similarities between *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *Indignation*. Both contain homodiegetic narrators, good Jewish sons, who
cannot understand the situations in which they find themselves and who do not know when to shut up. Both are texts made up of various diatribes that become volcanic at times. Both include protagonists who have problematic relationships with their fathers, go off to small liberal arts colleges in Ohio during the time of the Korean War, are quick to frame themselves as victims of circumstance, and study to be lawyers so as to fight against those injustices. And both incorporate misunderstood objects of desire, The Monkey and Olivia Hutton, that become the undoing of their central characters. But perhaps more significantly, both revolve around an anger provoked by perceived unjust treatment—or, in a word, indignation. When sitting in front of Dean Caudwell to explain his inability to sustain any friendly relationships at college, Marcus inwardly sings to himself the Chinese national war anthem, which contains in it “the most beautiful word in the English language: Indignation!” (95). Similarly, Alex Portnoy reminisces over his progressive youth and his love of the Chinese National Anthem, which includes his favorite line, “commencing as it does with my favorite word in the English language: ‘In-dig-na-tion […]’” (169). Note here that the syllables and the italicized emphasis are exactly the same in each text.

One could even read Indignation as an alternate reality for Alexander Portnoy. Had Alex not waited until he was thirty-three-years old to express his heated frustrations, and in the safety of a psychiatrist’s office, he may have ended up on the battlefields of Korea, as does Marcus. The difference between the two protagonists is that Marcus, as competent and as levelheaded as he appears to be, is nonetheless a victim of his own emotional tumult. He does not have the outlet of a Spielvogel nor does he have the luxury of kvetching, or ranting, within a controlled environment. In fact, one of the biggest ironies of the novella is that the protagonist, unlike his supposed namesake Marcus Aurelius, is anything but stoic. He lets his dissatisfaction and his anger—his indignation—get the better of him. The last time that Marcus sees his mother, she cautions him against falling prey to the family trait. “The Messners aren’t just a family of butchers,” she admonishes. “They’re a family of shouters and a family of screamers and a family of putting their foot down and banging their heads against the wall […]. Don’t you be. You be greater than your feelings.” And then she warns him, Cassandra-like, that if he is not careful, he will “be washed away by feelings. You’ll be washed out to sea and never seen again. Feelings can be life’s biggest problem. Feelings can play the most terrible tricks” (175). And the most terrible trick is played on the Winesburg College student. Indeed, his mother isn’t the only Cassandra in the novella. That title is shared with Marcus’s father, whose prophecy surrounding the “tiniest mishaps” comes to fruition. What the reader realizes at the end of Indignation, in tragic form, is similar to one of the comedic revelations of Portnoy’s Complaint: that for all their smothering annoyance, the parents might actually be right.

Yet, what Roth’s most recent novella shares with Portnoy’s Complaint is not only an indignation over the unjust treatments of their protagonists, but a
form of literary indignation over the constraints of traditional realistic narrative. Beginning with the 1969 bestseller and following through to the most recent *Indignation*, Philip Roth has been experimenting with the ways his stories are told and the means through which his subjects are revealed. And his revelations take on a variety of permutations. In *The Ghost Writer*, E. I. Lonoff tells a young and fawning Nathan Zuckerman,

I turn sentences around. That's my life. I write a sentence and then I turn it around. Then I look at it and I turn it around again. Then I have lunch. Then I come back in and write another sentence. Then I have tea and turn the new sentence around. Then I read the two sentences over and turn them both around. Then I lie down on my sofa and think. Then I get up and throw them out and start from the beginning. (17-18)

Much like Zuckerman's idol, Philip Roth—who has taken up residence in Lonoff’s Berkshires—turns subjects around. He creates a fictional self, and then turns it around. He begins another novel, and then gives his narrative voice another twist. He takes on another narrating subject, and gives it a spin. And so on. On a very simple and thematic level, there may be similarities between the settings and characters of his most recent novella and those of his earliest stories, but in more profound ways, *Indignation* is, narratologically speaking, the latest manifestation of Roth's overarching concerns with the construction of the subject and the ways in which our stories, our voices, and our memories make us who we are, or as Nathan Zuckerman puts it in *The Counterlife*, “the kind of stories people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into” (111). What distinguishes his most recent works is the darkness surrounding those narrating voices. And with *Indignation*, its narrator condemned by history and exiled in a morphine-induced oblivion, that darkness is all but complete.

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