

*Nemesis* and the Persistence of Tragic Framing: Bucky Cantor as Job, Hebrew Prometheus, and Reverse Oedipus

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ABSTRACT. This article analyzes the protagonist of *Nemesis*, Eugene “Bucky” Cantor, in order to delineate those elements that define him not only as a Promethean figure, but as a modern incarnation of both Job and Oedipus. The evocative power of these archetypes contributes to establishing the tragic framework of the novel and the heroic status of its protagonist, both of which resist the narrator’s attempt to deconstruct them in the final chapter.

The Prometheus archetype is a recurrent presence in Philip Roth’s works and it is in the *Nemeses* tetralogy that the author further develops the syncretic use of *topoi* and symbols of Hebrew and Greek mythology and Attic tragedy that had only been hinted at in *American Pastoral*. If in the Zuckerman novels, particularly in *Zuckerman Bound* and *The Anatomy Lesson*, the figure of Prometheus is alluded to with a certain degree of irony, in the American trilogy it acquires a more epic grandeur and tragic *gravitas*.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in *American Pastoral*, Roth introduces Jobian themes, which he is able to integrate within the context of the Swede’s Promethean transgression of the boundaries of ethnicity and history. The objective of this article is to analyze the characteristics of the protagonist of *Nemesis*, Eugene “Bucky” Cantor, in order to define those elements that make him not only a Promethean figure, but a modern incarnation of the biblical Job. Moreover, I will discuss those traits that Bucky shares with the figure of Oedipus; it will be observed how the very co-existence within the protagonist of the intrinsically divergent features of Job, Prometheus and Oedipus contributes to heightening the tragedy of his fall. The tragic and mythological elements in *Nemesis*—such as the choral “we” voice at the beginning and end of the narrative, the ironic twist of a seemingly malevolent fate that characterizes the plot, Bucky’s *hubris*, his *hamartia* and his Oedipal shortsightedness—have been identified by a number of critics. More than merely being

“half-baked allegories” and “allusions” (Kaminsky 111, 114), the mythological *topoi* in the novel inevitably trigger reader expectations and are relevant to the framing and construction of the narrative and the characterization of its protagonist. The identification of these archetypes and their evocative force is fundamental to the comprehension of the existential quandaries contemplated but arguably not answered by the novel. Rather than dismissing the presence of tragic or mythological figures as marginal, this essay examines how they are used within the text and how they problematize the novel and our reading experience. To this end, I will consider how the narrator, Arnie Mesnikoff, attempts to deconstruct the tragic frame of the narrative and the heroic status of Bucky in the last chapter and how these elements resist being deconstructed due to the fundamental ambiguity of Arnie’s narratorial agency.

In his review of *Nemesis*, J. M. Coetzee states that the words of the *Book of Job* are echoed in the questions posed by Bucky regarding divine justice. However, he also adds that “Roth’s novel evokes a Greek context more explicitly than it does a biblical one” and that the title *Nemesis* “frames the interrogation of cosmic justice in Greek terms” (Coetzee); in particular, Coetzee observes the similarities between Bucky and the figure of Oedipus in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. The parallels between the two figures are apparent, particularly if we consider the nature of heroes and gods in Sophocles’ universe and the relationship humankind entertains with cosmic forces in Sophocles and Aeschylus, described by Dario Del Corno as follows:

The magnanimity of Sophocles’ heroes does not save them from suffering: the grander they are the more unfortunate, because this is the necessity inherent to their human condition, fully immersed in a world of unsolvable contradictions, of conflicts with forces that are inevitably prepared to overwhelm them. The gods are the symbol of these forces and necessities, not only as a dramaturgical function, but as a sign of a conviction that views their agency as the root of human damnation [. . .]. The gods in Aeschylus are the guardians of a superior justice [. . .]. However,

Sophocles' tragedies boldly reveal the gods as being responsible for all human misery. (213, my translation)

The idea that cosmic forces can overwhelm anybody, however righteous he or she may be, is present in *Nemesis*, as is the idea of a human existence inevitably characterized by suffering. Moreover, Bucky is certainly a highly moral character who accuses “the gods” of being responsible for human suffering: like Prometheus and Job, he denounces what he perceives as the tyranny or irresponsibility of existing divine order and like them he is motivated and defined as a character by his rebelliousness; this trait differentiates him from the tragic characters of Sophocles' universe whose final reaction to their adverse fate is acceptance of the mysteries of human existence (Del Corno 213). The characterization of Bucky as a Job figure is not limited to his questioning of divine justice but is fundamental to identifying the act of *hamartia*—the misstep that causes his fall—as a contradiction of his Job-like sense of self-righteousness. The protagonist, therefore, avoids becoming a mere shadow of Oedipus by incorporating those elements of defiance and righteousness that are characteristic of Prometheus and Job. Bucky reveals himself not only as an Oedipal figure, but also as a “reverse-Oedipus” since key biographical, character-defining elements of the mythological figure are chronologically inverted.

Gurumurthy Neelakantan (211) and Inbar Kaminsky (111, 114) seem to suggest that the combination of Greek tragedy, urban realism, and elements of the *Book of Job* present in *Nemesis* may represent a failed experiment either on Roth's or Arnie's part. Rather than affirming the failure of the tragic framework or its hero, I believe the novel can better be described in terms of *pastiche* or syncretic hybridism. Even if we apply the Oedipal model of tragedy to *Nemesis*, as Coetzee does, there are many incongruities that allow us to doubt whether this can be done without integrating other mythological character or story types, both ancient and modern, such as the Exodus (Kaminsky 116-117), Ulysses (Deresiewicz), and Captain Ahab (Duban 71-76). Part of this perceived failure is due to the audaciousness of combining the characteristics of a fundamentally Judeo-Christian figure with that of the Greek tragic hero within a single character—however, the

presence of the Aeschylean Prometheus figure, which in itself represents an anomaly,<sup>2</sup> helps to bridge the gap. The impression of Bucky's failure as a tragic hero is also due in part to the intervention of the narrator Arnie, who in the final chapter critiques Bucky and deconstructs that same narrative that has been so far a constant series of "attempts to fit Bucky's story into the framework of Greek mythology" (Kaminsky 111); however, Arnie's intervention raises more questions—regarding primacy, reliability and empathy—than it manages to answer.

Bucky is a protagonist who is defined from the outset by his physicality, which also defines him socially. He is a Weequahic Jew, perfectly integrated into his community of origin and unlike the Swede or Coleman Silk he has neither the desire nor the ethnic traits necessary to transcend its barriers. Not only does he actively take part in his community but he is a relevant figure in it; he feels responsible for the well-being of the children he is in charge of and the community even invests him with an importance that goes beyond his duty as a physical education teacher, becoming a popularly elected authority of sorts. He is unwillingly given this role after he defends the children of the community from the spitting Italians (13-16) who have come to infect them. This particular feat performed by Bucky is the equivalent of Oedipus' banishing of the Sphinx through which the mythological character conquers the throne of Thebes. To say that Bucky is completely at peace with his origins is not entirely correct, however, the hereditary constraints that seem to worry him or impede the obtainment of his goals are neither ethnic nor historical; his quandaries have more to do with the ignominy of having had an irresponsible father-figure whose influence he continually tries to live down in what can be considered a sustained act of symbolic patricide. Even the surname "Cantor" indicates that Bucky has not been given the name of his father but that of his grandfather, in a gesture that consigns the biological parent to oblivion so that his name is forgotten and never mentioned in the text. Moreover, Bucky's poor eyesight is a characteristic that symbolically ties him to Oedipus—a connection also recognized by Kaminsky (114)—as both characters share the inability to see what their fate holds and to recognize that they are responsible for the spreading of the plague. However, Bucky's physical and not merely metaphorical lack of vision is evident from

the beginning and this detail is the first element that characterizes Bucky as a *reverse* Oedipus: *Nemesis* starts with a protagonist who is evidently short-sighted, and after having discovered the truth he does not blind himself but is instead continuously tortured by guilt, which seems more in keeping with a Judaic-Christian cultural context.

In spite of his physical defects and the shame of his origin, Bucky does possess both a physical and a moral strength which set him above others and through which he gains the admiration of the children under his tutelage. Considering that most of Bucky's social interactions are with children (and their parents) we can say that his status among them is certainly that of a superior being, and herein lies the essence of his Promethean nature. He may be one among many in the adult world at large, but within his microcosm he is an unshakable guardian and a pillar of the community during the Polio crisis. In the eyes of his young wards—and their parents—he is the communitarian, fatherly Prometheus and a surrogate “heroic older brother” (18) to them all, including the narrator, Arnie Mesnikoff: the first person plural pronoun “we,” initially used by the narrator, is a clear indicator of this communitarian perspective. Pia Masiero states that “*Nemesis* begins by connecting history [. . .] with a community” through this use of an enigmatic “we” which “fails to produce an *I*” (56-57). This form of narration, according to both Kaminsky (114) and Leah Hager Cohen, is evocative of the Greek chorus, “at once *communal* and all-knowing” (Cohen, emphasis added), which can only strengthen the tragic framing of the novella. However, according to Masiero (57-58) and Kaminsky (110-11), the presence of *we* rather than *I* also causes difficulties in negotiating the information we receive and raises doubts about the reliability of the narrator, a factor that will become even more important when Arnie's *I* resurfaces in the final chapter.

In his unwilling role as guide and guardian of the community, Bucky tries to bring comfort to its members: “Look, you mustn't be eaten up with worry and you mustn't be eaten up with fear [. . .]. We'll come through this, believe me. We'll all do our bit and stay calm and do everything we can to protect the children, and we'll all come through this together” (38). This is Bucky's moment of Oedipal *hubris*, as he promises the Weequahic community that they will be able to protect

themselves from the pestilence, likening him once again to Oedipus, who declares that he will end the plague of Thebes. Coetzee also notices the similarities that Bucky shares with Oedipus regarding the irony of his fate, that of being the oblivious infector: “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” (Coetzee). Bucky’s Oedipal essence is always accompanied, however, by his role as Promethean benefactor and semi-divine protector, which is confirmed by the people of the community who look on him with “anxious eyes, beseeching him as though he were something far more powerful than a playground director twenty-three years old” (38). The episode of the spitting Italians not only invests him with this role but is also indicative of how Bucky applies the lesson of his grandfather to “stand up for himself as a man and to stand up for himself as a Jew” (25).

Bucky is one of the many Jewish characters in Roth’s fiction whose Promethean characterization includes physical strength and the ability to defend themselves, qualities that defy the anti-Semitic stereotype of the passive Jewish victim. Epic figures like the Swede and Ira Ringold, far from conforming to the image of Jewish “weaklings” (28), are characterized by their strength and physical prowess. The protagonist’s strength becomes even more relevant in *Nemesis*: the exceptionality of his physical characteristics and his athletic ability is continuously reiterated and its communitarian and educational significance expanded upon by the narrator in various instances. His demand to a group of anti-Semitic thugs, whom he is prepared to fight, to “cut the ‘you people’ crap” (15) could be indication enough of the social relevance of his physical strength, but it is spelled out even more clearly when Arnie explains Bucky’s motivations for wanting to become a physical education teacher: “He wanted to teach them what his grandfather had taught him: toughness and determination, to be physically brave and physically fit and never to allow themselves to be pushed around or, just because they knew how to use their brains, to be defamed as Jewish weaklings and sissies” (28). The most eloquent description of Bucky in this sense is given in the final pages of the book which describe his prowess in tossing a javelin. In these last passages

he is depicted as a being who far transcends commonness, both physically and in character: “And yet, at twenty-three, he was, to all of us boys, the most exemplary and revered authority we knew, a young man of convictions, easygoing, kind, fair-minded, thoughtful, stable, gentle, vigorous, muscular—a comrade and a leader both” (275). From this passage we understand that he possesses the moral-ethical qualities of the mythological Prometheus that are present in both Aeschylus’ and Shelley’s reimagining of this figure.

Bucky’s athletic gesture (278-79) clearly expresses a power that goes well beyond the physical, serving as an example of his ability to capture the imagination of the children assembled and fill them with “awe” (279). This is another side to his Promethean nature as he is not only a protector and a defender, but also a guide who brings the “fire” of physical masculinity to the children of his community; in this sense, he can once again be compared to the Swede whose physicality and athletic prowess bring to his community the Promethean knowledge or hope that the limits of ethnicity and history can be transcended. The words “Through him, we boys had left the little story of the neighborhood and entered the historical saga of our ancient gender” (279) indicate that Bucky provides Arnie and his peers with a historically defined gender characterization that they crave. When polio strikes, it truly proves to be Bucky’s *nemesis* as it threatens the physical well-being of the children, which is his *raison d’être* as a Prometheus figure, and takes away those physical qualities that had put him above other people. The juxtaposition of Promethean heroism and dedication to others with the irony of Oedipal fate renders the fall more tragic and the irony all the more bitter; before we get to Arnie’s deconstructive evaluation of the events, this tragic conclusion—including Bucky’s subsequent self-imposed exile from society—seems perfectly consistent with the tragic-mythological references apparent in the text.

In the case of Oedipus, the plague is the result of his act of patricide and it is regarding this particular point that he and Bucky differ. According to Bucky’s personal perception of the events, the origin of the curse can only be a malevolent and tyrannical God, and even after the dreadful Oedipal recognition that all along he has been the “Typhoid Mary of the Chancellor playground”

(248), this conviction never wavers. It is in this regard that we move away from an Oedipal characterization of Bucky to a purely Promethean or Job-like one. Oedipus, in fact, is a character who typically does not question his unjust fate but rather realizes that it is he who has lacked vision and blinds himself as a form of retributive punishment. Prometheus and Job, on the other hand, are defined by their questioning of divine justice and are presented as morally superior figures, their righteousness being the basis of their transgression. Bucky is a modern incarnation of Job in that he questions the same (Hebrew) God after having witnessed a manifestation of a divine order that seems totally indifferent to human suffering; he is Prometheus for the same reason, in that he cannot but rebel and speak out against a cruel divinity. Bucky is a character who, rather than denying the existence of God (as Marcus Messner does in *Indignation*), is personally offended by what he perceives as a lack of responsibility on God's part, so that his act of Promethean rebellion, and the *hubris* that motivates it, is set within a monotheistic Hebrew context.

After the first of the Weequahic children dies he begins to question what he sees as flaws in cosmic justice: "Yes, better by far to praise the irreplaceable generator that has sustained our existence [. . .] than to swallow the official lie that God is good and truckle before a cold-blooded murderer of children. Better for one's dignity, for one's humanity, for one's worth altogether, not to mention for one's everyday idea of whatever the hell is going on here" (75-76). His words echo those of Job towards his visitors who believe in the total infallibility of providence and divine retribution: "'He destroys the blameless and the wicked.' If the scourge slays suddenly, He laughs at the plight of the innocent" (Job 9.22-23). In his analysis of the figure of Job, James A. Craig writes that "The voice of conscious integrity within could not be silenced [. . .] Job insists upon personal integrity, and he cannot deny his own inward sense of right" (482). In this sense Job definitely resembles Bucky: his existential questions are an expression of "The voice of conscious integrity within." Bucky's *hubris* is characterized, therefore, by a sense of moral superiority towards cosmic order and divine justice. William Deresiewicz describes Bucky's outlook as a "refusal to acknowledge limits: this, in the classical conception, is the very definition of hubris.

Bucky's moral extremism, far more than his theology, is the source of his downfall." "Puerile and irrelevant" (Aarons, "Just as He'd Feared" 224) as Bucky's interrogatives may seem to some—including the narrator—they are the same questions Job poses and they represent the motivation behind his Ahab-like conduct. If we wish to give a grander scope to his existential quandaries, we should consider that far from being limited to the Newark polio epidemic, Bucky's Job-like questioning of divine justice also hints at the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, if only briefly and indirectly (154, 208-09) and, according to Aarons ("Expelled" 51), the implicit connection between these historical events seems to pervade the entire novel.

Until we reach the last chapter of *Nemesis* there is no real criticism of Bucky's worldview and no one to critically respond to his position with the same degree of inner conviction until Arnie intervenes with narratorial authority. Up until that point, if the reader has recognized the myriad of tragic-mythological *topoi* and accepted a framing of the narrative in this sense, there should be no obstacles to the act of immersion in the diegesis as it is presented through Bucky's perspective; we will tend to empathize with him rather than with other, secondary characters and be sympathetic towards his ethical and metaphysical concerns within the limits of the fictional frame.<sup>3</sup> Marcia and her father are the only interlocutors towards whom Bucky voices these concerns but their voices remain marginal. Granted that their presence allows us to partially question the protagonist's view of the world, we remain strictly within the realm of Bucky's focalization and their words bounce off the armor of his conviction—his hubristic sense of right and wrong—at least until he makes the hamartic decision to leave Newark (133). The communitarian hero who was obsessed with the idea of responsibility and whose Promethean rebellion against cosmic tyranny took place on a universal plane now becomes preoccupied solely with his individual fate. He suddenly submits to his own sense of self-preservation and seems, at least for the moment, almost to have forgotten his righteous resentment towards God. Within the context of the Greek-Judaic tragic framework delineated so far, it may be this moment of weakness, this decision to flee, that renders him vulnerable to his *nemesis*. From a symbolic point of view, once he renounces those principles on which his *hubris* was based,

he seems to demonstrate to himself that he too is irresponsible just like the father and the God towards whom he has directed his indignation.

James A. Craig states that the essence of Job is the resistance of his moral integrity and the fact that it never wavers. This allows him to resist the temptation of conceding to the accusations of hidden sins moved against him by his visitors (482, 492) and it is his persistent self-righteousness that elicits a direct intervention from God:

Job insists upon personal integrity, and he cannot deny his own inward sense of right. To do so would be to unsheathe the sword of his own scabbard with suicidal result. If Jahwe (Jehovah), his God, is to be justified by his admission of guilt, by self-condemnation despite the inward sense of perfect rectitude, then the voice within must rise imperious in the maintenance of its personal rights and Jahwe must needs justify Himself in the presence of this ethical imperator. Job felt what Schiller later wrote:

For, by the laws of spirit, in the right  
Is every individual character  
That acts in strict accordant with itself;  
Self-contradiction is the only wrong. (Craig 482-83)

Bucky's "wrong" is his "Self-contradiction" and it characterizes him as a Job figure who fails to find resolution: unlike Job, Bucky is unable to elicit an answer from God and there is no reconciliation of man and deity, no renewal of the covenant, as in the final passages of the *Book of Job*. Our protagonist has broken "the laws of spirit" by making the choice to go against those principles with which he had, in his Promethean rebelliousness, openly faced the injustice of the universe. His defeat is therefore twofold: he receives retribution not only from the gods he had initially rebelled against, but also from the "inward sense of right" he has contradicted. Apart from being an unresolved Job, he is also an incomplete Prometheus as he does not maintain his role as the ever-defiant defender of his community and is tormented continuously by the thought that "he

could at least have remained in Newark, fighting their fear of polio alongside his endangered boys” (173); instead he has “yielded to fear, and under the spell of fear he ha[s] betrayed his boys and betrayed himself” (176). In his analysis of the protagonists of both *Indignation* and *Nemesis*, Deresiewicz places their retribution within the context of Greek tragedy: “Marcus and Bucky belong to Euripides; like Pentheus in *The Bacchae*, they refuse to release their rigid self-conceptions and so, like him, are torn apart. Marcus is dismembered on the battlefield. Bucky’s frame is wrenched by polio, and his spirit is emasculated.” This point of view serves us well in explaining why Bucky continues to torment himself with guilt over time, acting as his own self-directed, retributive force. It does not, however, take into account his flight for Indian Hill as an act of *hamartia*, as it is a contradiction of Bucky’s inner sense of responsibility: a betrayal of his “rigid self-conceptions” rather than a refusal of their release.

The ceremony around the campfire at Indian Hill is a final, indirect salute to Bucky’s former Promethean heroism and it is invoked through the rites of atavistic fire worship in which the campers partake. Mr. Blomback, who is leading the ceremony, declares that “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” (209-10). Soon after this scene we enter the retribution or punishment phase of Bucky’s Promethean arc. With the physical manifestation of the *nemesis* in his own body, the Herculean physicality of the javelin thrower is lost forever; the total immobilization of his body during the initial phase of the illness parallels the chains that constrain Prometheus in his punishment. The crippling disfigurement of Bucky’s limbs also coincides with the manner in which Oedipus is symbolically castrated by his father through the injury of his feet as an infant, bringing us back to the idea of Bucky as a reverse Oedipus. In Bucky’s case, the mutilation/castration—Bucky in fact considers himself a “gender blank” (246)—takes place as a form of final punishment rather than being an initial stigma of the sins of the father. Beyond physical immobility, Bucky’s personal version of Promethean punishment includes the torment of guilt that is his own ordeal of the eagle: “not just crippled physically by polio but no less

demoralized by persistent shame” (246). When Arnie encounters him years after the events concerning the polio epidemic, he has severed all links with his previous acquaintances, including Marcia, so that he alone bears the weight of his destiny. Bucky himself admits that through Marcia he was “the luckiest guy in the world. And unstoppable” (252-53). Therefore, not only was he “too happy or too fortunate” (Coetzee) by his own declaration, he is also a character who has repeatedly rebelled against the gods and is guilty of moral *hubris* and ultimately self-contradiction; within the frameworks of both Greek tragedy and the Book of Job, he is a multiple offender.

Bucky does, however, maintain his defiant attitude towards divine injustice and never stops voicing his indignation towards what he perceives as cosmic tyranny: the ever defiant attitude he maintains likens him to the mythological Titan, and the lack of renewal of the covenant between man and God justifies the definition of him as an unresolved Job.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Swede (another Rothian Job figure), whose final reaction to his downfall remains, at best, the subject of speculation, Bucky’s persistent and righteous indignation is explicitly portrayed. Aarons states that he is unable to “accept mere chance as a cause” as this forces the “Jew in him” to rebel: “to do otherwise is to cast himself into an arbitrary universe, to decry intentionality. Unable to accept arbitrariness or determinism, he rejects the Greek notion of tragedy in favor of the Hebraic embrace of the tensions played out between an omniscient God and imperfect human beings” (“Just as He’d Feared” 230). Although Aarons’ analysis accurately identifies the Jobian dynamics present in *Nemesis* (230-31), the statement above requires clarification: it is debatable whether we can completely negate the presence of intentionality, personal responsibility, or free will in Greek tragedy (See Del Corno 196, 211, 239 and Vernant 29-63). Moreover, Sophocles’ tragedies certainly deal with the tensions between omnipotent, mysterious gods and human beings (Dodds 49). Deresiewicz, on the other hand, describes Bucky’s tragedy as a misunderstanding of the nature of tragedy wherein “he substitutes a Jewish or JudeoChristian metaphysics not for a pagan one (since Oedipus also felt guilt, and the Greeks certainly asked why) but for a modern mechanistic, atheistic one.” Bucky’s tragic failure within the realm of Judeo-Christian metaphysics seems, however, to be more a

question of incompleteness than substitution as he fails to live up to the Job-Prometheus role in which he had been previously invested. Moreover, if Bucky's view of cosmic order can be considered mechanistic, it seems neither atheistic nor modern—an opinion also held by Coetzee—and appears to be quite consistent with that of the Sophoclean universe (Del Corno 213-14). Far from defining a precise tragic or mythological model that can be applied to *Nemesis*, we can only speak in terms of suggestive evocations and recognize their relevance in the construction of a narrative frame or in the summoning forth of a tragic-mythological “Past Storyworld Possible Self”: a concept that indicates the reader's recourse to “past projections of the self into storyworlds” in order to aid “new conceptual integration processes” or immersion when facing a new narrative (Martinez 125).

However, Kaminsky's observation regarding “the lack of catharsis and the absence of a moral end to the story” (114) in *Nemesis* may be well justified as there seems to be no final resolution or revelation; the final chapter of the novel is mostly occupied by a philosophical-theological dialogue which may be seen as a failure to close or maintain the tragic frame until the end of the story. Regarding the nature of cosmic justice or lack thereof, *Nemesis* provides no definitive answers but merely contrasting interpretations of the events given by the protagonist and the narrator. In the final chapter, Arnie Mesnikoff becomes more present as a character and actively voices his opinions, dismantling the tragic framing that has characterized the narrative up to this point and effectively undermining the tragic/heroic stature of Bucky. In the words of Coetzee, up until this point the narrator has been “so unobtrusive that the question of who he is barely rises [. . .]. After twenty pages, as we move into the story of Bucky, even the most minimal traces of an identifiable storyteller vanish. So familiar does the narrating voice turn out to be with what goes on in Bucky's mind that we might guess it is simply Bucky's own I-voice transposed into the third person.” Even when Arnie does reveal his identity as a homodiegetic narrator/character, specifically as one of the children who falls prey to the polio epidemic (*Nemesis* 108), he then “sinks away again” (Coetzee) without having altered the course of the narrative as we return to the

previous mode of focalized narration (Masiero 57-58). When he does resurface, both protagonist and narrator offer their interpretation of the events: the God-as-fiend explanation that Bucky sustains is totally refuted by Arnie and his “philosophical position is pretty much trashed” (Coetzee). The offering of any explanation or attributing a sense to these events is in itself folly; this is the act of “stupid hubris” that Arnie attributes to Bucky, “the hubris of fantastical, childish religious interpretation” (*Nemesis* 265), a *hubris* altogether different from that which we have previously recognized him to be guilty of within the framework of the Greek-Judaic or Promethean-Oedipal-Jobian tragedy that constitutes the main narrative. By virtue of his narratorial authority, Arnie’s voice can be seen to prevail over that of the previously established protagonist and his interpretation of events. However, the reader is not merely presented with the problem of accepting Bucky’s “Gnostic doctrine” (264) or Arnie’s nihilistic viewpoint but rather with the dilemma of resisting or going along with the narrator’s dismantlement of the previously established narrative frame and the heroic status of the protagonist. If we consider *Nemesis* as a dialogue between these positions, or rather a dialogue between two divergent interpretative texts within the text, we must ask ourselves whether primacy, quantity, and previously established empathy prevail over narratorial authority—or more precisely, over the narrator’s evaluation of events outside the frame of the main analeptic narrative of the previous pages.

Moreover, there is a fundamental ambiguity or contradiction in Arnie’s behavior as a narrator which is observable in the reading experience of Coetzee; we seem to recognize in Arnie an attitude that fluctuates between a continued form of respect and the iconoclastic deconstruction of a figure he himself has previously elevated to tragic-heroic status. His intervention is described by Coetzee as obtrusive and unfamiliar as it forces us to detach from the consolidated frame: “the narratorial device that we have assumed—the mask or voice with no mind of its own and no stake in the story—is *thrust aside* and a *stranger*, Arnie Mesnikoff, reveals himself,” forcing us to “reconsider the whole story we have been reading” (Coetzee, emphasis added). According to Coetzee, Arnie is not only a stranger but an unnecessarily cruel one who in the “unkindest” and

“meanest” fashion “disparages Bucky’s transgression itself,” effectively depriving him of one of the fundamental traits of the righteous Promethean hero. Conversely, Neelakantan may have a point when he states that “the reader also grows impatient with Eugene for luxuriating in grief and would rather see him affirm life. Fellow polio survivors Arnie Mesnikoff, Eugene’s one-time ward and also the novel’s narrator, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, America’s much-revered president, exemplify a more enabling way of living with the reality of polio” (215); from this point of view, Arnie becomes the voice of the reader’s impatience and his reassessment of the events is, therefore, long awaited.

If in *American Pastoral* there is no evident or immediate answer to the final Jobian question “what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?” (423), the rational explanation Arnie gives is an attempt to answer the same question applied to Bucky and determine what is “wrong” with him and his worldview: ultimately to demonstrate how he alone is responsible for his unhappiness. However, the narrator’s answer may not satisfy us on an instinctive level, since the logic of Arnie’s argument is weighed against some 240 pages of involvement in Bucky’s story. Therefore, it is equally justifiable to see Arnie’s intervention in the final chapter as an intrusion that disturbs a previously established empathy he himself—as a narrator—has endeavored to create. Moreover, the key to naturalizing the preceding narrative Arnie offers (241, 245-46) only seems to elicit more doubts. According to Masiero, in the previous chapters “the information Arnie gives defies being reconstructed as a mere report of what Bucky tells him. Obsession on Bucky’s part and attention on Arnie’s part notwithstanding, the quantity of detail is too great for any real person to remember” (59). This consideration contributes to highlighting the ambiguity of a narrator who creatively *constructs* a narrative from the point of view of a character, explaining in minute detail his motivations and thought-processes, only to deconstruct the character later. According to Coetzee, Arnie’s intervention prompts us to question his reliability as a narrator as his words denote a lack of understanding or depth, which distances him from the reader who has accepted the frame and cosmic laws of the tragic genre:

Since Arnie does not go ahead to reflect on ancient (elevated) versus modern (debased) conceptions of the tragic—from what we know of him we might suspect that he would not see the point—we may guess that it is the ironical author himself who is dropping these telling Greek terms into Arnie’s discourse, and not without purpose. That purpose, one might guess further, might be to arm the hapless Bucky against his spokesman, to suggest that there may be a way of reading Bucky’s resistance other than the dismissive way Arnie offers. (Coetzee)

Coetzee recognizes a lack of understanding in Arnie and his attitude seems even more contradictory as it is he himself who has presented the story up until this point with a level of detail and empathetic involvement that seems to be at odds with his final deconstruction of Bucky as a tragic hero. The narrator has, so far, given precedence to the act of narrating within a tragic framework more consistent with Bucky’s understanding of the universe than his own, as if the act of composing the narrative required him to do so in spite of his better judgment. Coetzee proposes the notion that it is the author himself who is manipulating the narrator in this sense and he reads the dialogue between Bucky and Arnie in terms of an opposition between “ancient (elevated)” and “modern (debased)” values. However, without calling Roth himself into play and remaining within the confines of a diegetic analysis, we could see this ambiguity, this putting forth of mixed messages, as a feature of Arnie himself: it may be an expression of his unwillingness to let a hero figure go, to let it be besmirched by an excessive degree of realistic, rationalistic scrutiny.

Beyond the question of primacy there is also the closing of the novel itself, “the most lyrical pages of *Nemesis*” according to Coetzee and maybe the most memorable due to recency effect. Page 275 begins with an all-important “And yet,” an expression of concession or reassessment that shows an unwillingness of the narrator to maintain his previous dismissal of Bucky. The passage goes on to list those qualities, both physical and moral, that characterize him as a heroic figure, explicitly evoking and associating him with Hercules “the great warrior and slayer of monsters [. . .] the giant son of the supreme Greek God, Zeus, and the strongest man on earth” (276), and

concluding the passage and the novel with the phrase “he seemed to us invincible” (280). Moreover in this passage we notice the return of the narrating “we,” thus reinstating a communitarian perspective rather than that of the individual Arnie and reframing the narrative within the realm of tragedy through the use of the chorus. Even though Arnie seems to negate the tragic framing and deconstruct Bucky as the tragic hero (264-66), he does this within the limits of a parenthesis: on one side we have the analeptic narrative wherein Bucky is the tragic hero, on the other we have the celebration of the protagonist as if he were a heroic demigod, “restor[ing] Bucky to happiness” by “conjur[ing] a moment from the past and fix[ing] it for all time” (Cohen).

We as readers may not be willing to go along with Arnie in diminishing Bucky’s tragic-heroic stature while being at the same time too rational or not pessimistic enough to accept the outlook of the protagonist. If Bucky’s voice is consistent with the framing of the narrative within an ordered, hybrid Greek-Judaic tragic universe, Arnie’s is the almost metatextual, self-reflexive voice that tells us that any order we see in the universe is fiction, an interpretation we impose on chaos. What we can gain from the reading experience is that fictional order, even if tragic, seems to take precedence over a more rationalistic absence of order: if we accept the initial tragic framing we see Arnie’s intervention as intrusion and if we do not accept it we see Arnie’s intervention as a long-awaited reassessment of events. There is a potential middle ground between these two opposing positions: rather than ignoring Arnie’s deconstruction of Bucky’s claim to tragedy, or conversely, considering Arnie’s final assessment a “true” all-encompassing interpretation of the events, we can simply *subtract* Arnie’s realism from the grandeur of Bucky’s tragedy. It is then possible to celebrate the protagonist and empathize with his mortal weaknesses as we observe his fall, without necessarily having to accept or refuse his idea of cosmic order. Arnie’s attempt at reassessment, therefore, becomes the proverbial grain of salt with which the previous (and dominant) mythological and biblical *gravitas* is to be taken. Our level of involvement in the fictional framework of Eugene “Bucky” Cantor’s tragedy transcends our rational or real-worldly evaluation of the laws that govern this framework, however “fantastical” or “childish” (265) they may be. With

*Nemesis*, Roth shows us how tragedy and the tragic hero can retain their power in some way, even in the absence of gods.

### *NOTES*

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1. This change in perspective seems to coincide with the fact that the protagonists of these novels are external models rather than avatars of the author and it is no coincidence that these texts also represent the decline of Zuckerman himself: the fictional author has become, at this point, a passive observer rather than an agent and he directs his attention towards others' stories. Moreover, it is within the American trilogy that Roth substitutes the God or gods of tragedy with more humanistic agents: be they society, parents, *Über-Ich*, guilt, history, cultural and ethnic determinism, or existential chaos; the author demonstrates that his Prometheus figures can exist and maintain their original tragic force even within a secular context. In *Nemesis* Bucky Cantor refers to what he perceives as hostile cosmic forces as "God," because he does not have the cultural means to do otherwise. It is a matter of opinion whether a secular perspective renders Bucky's Promethean or Jobian struggle, however misguided, less heroic. For a more detailed analysis of the presence of Promethean dynamics in Roth's American trilogy and in the Zuckerman books see Stangherlin and Berryman.

2. The tragedy entitled *Prometheus Bound* (Προμηθεὺς Δεσμώτης) represents an anomaly within the works attributed to Aeschylus: for both stylistic and linguistic reasons there are doubts regarding its authorship, and the representation of Zeus as a tyrannical deity differs from the Aeschylean standard (Del Corno 188).

3. We must also consider the possibility that the reader's empathetic involvement—if we intend empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" (Keen 208)—may not have been triggered during the preceding narrative. If we consider the opinion of those critics, like Kakutani and

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Deresiewicz, who see Bucky as an unconvincing or one-dimensional protagonist, empathetic involvement will be impossible for some readers: it may more likely be triggered during the re-evaluation of events offered by Arnie, with whom they share a critical view of Bucky.

4. Neelakantan sees this as consistent with the Oedipal model: “Rendered an exile in his own land, much like the Greek hero Oedipus, Eugene raves against the unjust punishment meted out to him and his community by a bloodthirsty God” (212).

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