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## INDICE | TABLE OF CONTENTS

### SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

#### Narrating World War II. Transcultural Articulations of Postmemory in Literature and Other Media *a cura di Alice Balestrino e Paolo Simonetti*

- Alice Balestrino – Paolo Simonetti, *Introduction. Narrating World War II: Transcultural Articulations Of Postmemory in Literature and Other Media* 13
- Paolo Simonetti, *Inventing (Post)Memory, Writing (Non)Fiction: Jerzy Kosinski, Philip Roth and the Legacy of World War II* 27
- Alessandra Crotti, *The Return of the Shakespearean Jester: Postmemory and the Modes of Remembrance in Howard Jacobson's Kalooki Nights (2006)* 39
- Daniela Henke, *Commemorating the Unexperienced: The Strategical Function of Jean Améry's Memories in the Postmemorial Novel Morbus Kitahara by Christoph Ransmayr* 53
- Tom Vanassche, *Screaming silences. Screen Memories and Postmemories of the Resistance and the Shoah in two French Contemporary Novels* 67
- Pilar Martínez Benedí, *Multidirectional Trains: Co-operative (Post)Memory in Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad* 85
- Alessandra Pellegrini De Luca, *Appropriation and Displacement: Postmemorial Articulations of the Italian Antifascist Resistance* 99

Nicola Paladin, <i>A Future-Oriented Past: Deictic Reformulations of WWII in Contemporary War Comics</i>	117
Alice Balestrino, "A Thousand of Kaleidoscopic Possibilities." <i>Postmemorial Agency in Jonathan Safran Foer's Tree of Codes</i>	133
Tommaso Gennaro, "Un'ombra divenuta eterna". <i>Tracce esposte della memoria di guerra</i>	145
Carla Subrizi, <i>Trauma and Intimacy: Transcultural Bodies and Performative Memory in Louise Bourgeois' Cells</i>	159
Fabio Simonetti, <i>Researching Testimonial Objects: The Postmemory of the Allied Occupation of Italy through the Imperial War Museum's Collections</i>	171
Marco Malvestio, "If Necessary for Years, If Necessary Alone": <i>History, Memory, and Fiction in Contemporary Representations of Dunkirk</i>	189
Elia Romera-Figueroa, <i>Voiced Postmemories: Rozalén's "Justo" as a Case Study of Singing, Performing, and Embodying Mourning in Spain</i>	203

### MISCELLANEA

Andrea Fenice, <i>Analysing Epistemic Disparity: The Use of Possible-World Theory in the Identification of Rhythmic Strategies</i>	223
Domenico Pio Chirico, <i>Lettura pirandelliana di una trilogia lorchiiana</i>	245
Lorenzo Graziani, <i>Il topos del "giardino dei sentieri che si biforciano" e le sue declinazioni espressive postmoderniste</i>	263

## RECENSIONI

- Valentina Sturli, *Estremi occidenti. Frontiere del contemporaneo in Walter Siti e Michel Houellebecq*  
(Lorenzo Marchese) 283
- Claudio Gigante, *Una coscienza europea. Zeno e la tradizione europea*  
(Marco Viscardi) 291

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SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

NARRATING WORLD WAR II.  
TRANSCULTURAL ARTICULATIONS  
OF POSTMEMORY IN LITERATURE  
AND OTHER MEDIA

*a cura di Alice Balestrino e Paolo Simonetti*

Paolo Simonetti  
Sapienza Università di Roma

## Inventing (Post)Memory, Writing (Non)Fiction: Jerzy Kosinski, Philip Roth and the Legacy of World War II

### Abstract

In this essay, I argue that Marianne Hirsch's definition of postmemory might be extended to hybrid forms of autobiographical writing such as the fraudulent survivor's autobiography and the counterfactual or uchronic memoir. To that effect, the essay deals with Jerzy Kosinski's controversial first novel *The Painted Bird* (1965) and Philip Roth's uchronia *The Plot Against America* (2004) as peculiar types of postmemorial works. Though both writers experienced the war during their childhood and their texts were written at a great remove from the war-period, these works can be considered World War II novels since they register and represent the war as a central, traumatic event. Kosinski's and Roth's recollections of the wartime period in their novels are so distorted, manipulated, and fictionally imagined (if not utterly invented) that they share the same "oscillation between continuity and rupture" typical of the postmemorial narratives described by Hirsch.

In her groundbreaking book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), Marianne Hirsch defined postmemory as a powerful and very specific form of memory implying an emotional connection to a past that is not directly experienced, but rather "shaped by stories we had read and heard, conversations we had had, by fears and fantasies associated with persecution and danger;" these experiences "*seem* to constitute memories in their own right," but they are actually "mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (2012, 4).<sup>1</sup> Though Hirsch explicitly linked the term postmemory to the "generation after," focusing on "intergenerational acts of transfer," the concept might be extended to other hybrid forms of

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<sup>1</sup> As Marianne Hirsch herself declared in an interview published on the website of the Columbia University Press, she first used the term "postmemory" "in an article on Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in the early 1990s," but since then she has been "trying to define and refine it, on the basis of personal experience and [her] reading and viewing of the works of writers and artists of what we might think of as the 'postgenerations.'" She further defined the concept in her 1997 book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, and again in her essay "The Generation of Postmemory," published in *Poetics Today* in 2008.

autobiographical writing, namely, the fraudulent survivor's autobiography, and the counterfactual or uchronic memoir. These types of narratives imply what S. Lillian Kremer aptly called, after Norma Rosen's 1974 definition, "witness-through-the-imagination" (Kremer, 8; Rosen, 58): they describe an experience that occupies a transitional ground between personal involvement, secondary testimony, and fictional re-enactment and re-invention.

The aim of this paper is to read Jerzy Kosinski's controversial first novel *The Painted Bird* (1965) and Philip Roth's uchronia *The Plot Against America* (2004) as peculiar types of postmemorial works. Roth and Kosinski were born in 1933, the very year of Hitler's rise to power. Both writers experienced the war during their childhood – Roth in the relatively safe Jewish neighborhood of Weequahic in Newark, New Jersey; Kosinski in the more dangerous Polish countryside; even though they never saw active combat and their texts were written at a great remove from the war-period, both works can somehow be considered World War II novels since they register and represent the war as a central, traumatic event. The Second World War made a lasting impression on Roth and Kosinski, so it is safe to assume that their lives, as well as their careers as writers, were shaped by it.

In "The Ruthless Intimacy of Fiction" – Roth's eightieth birthday address that now stands as the closing speech at the end of a long and prolific career, delivered at the Newark Museum on March 19, 2013 – the writer described August 14, 1945, the day Imperial Japan surrendered in World War II, as "the most thrilling day of [his] young American life," because "[b]etween December 1941 and August 1945, an American child didn't just live at home, in the neighborhood, and at school," but "also lived within the ethos of a tragic catastrophe that was global" (2017, 391-2). In another speech, delivered on November 20, 2002, Roth talked about "the shaping paradox" on which his identity as a Jewish and an American writer was founded, linking it to the experience of the war: "[O]ur innate provincialism *made* us Americans, unhyphenated at that, in no need of an adjective, suspicious of any adjective that would narrow the implications of the imposingly all-inclusive noun that was – if only because of the galvanizing magnum opus called World War II – our birthright" (334).

As for Kosinski, in a 1988 speech he stated that his perceptions of the war "are very varied" since he "was twelve years old when the Second World War ended," but "[a]fter a war like that, you are, in many instances, much older than the typical twelve-year-old and, in many others, much younger" (2012, 181). Talking about the repercussions of the war on his life and his fiction, Kosinski remarked

that “[n]o movie can re-create it. No teacher can evoke the image of it. The reality is far beyond the scope of what Americans can imagine,” even though he, as a novelist, is “much more aware of it now than [he has] ever been” (182); he concluded by stating that the war “was complex in every conceivable way” (185). This is probably the reason why, in *The Painted Bird* as well as in *The Plot Against America*, Kosinski’s and Roth’s recollections of the war are so distorted, manipulated, and fictionally imagined (if not utterly invented), that they share the same “oscillation between continuity and rupture” that was typical of the postmemorial narratives described by Hirsch.

Jerzy Kosinski came from Poland to the United States in 1957, nearly penniless, and published his first novel, *The Painted Bird*, in 1965 (he had already published two books on collective behavior under the pseudonym Joseph Novak: *The Future Is Ours*, *Comrade: Conversations with the Russians* in 1960, and *No Third Path* in 1962). The narrative appears as a first-person account of a six-year-old boy who was entrusted by his parents to the care of a family during the war in order to ensure his survival. But the boy’s foster mother unexpectedly dies, and he is left alone to roam the villages of Eastern Europe, desperately trying to stay alive. Though in the book the narrator is represented as virtually stateless, the fair-haired uneducated and superstitious peasants consider the dark-haired boy a Jew, a gypsy, or an evil spirit, and subject him to all kinds of violence, brutalities, tortures, and sadistic practices. For instance, he is forced to hide in a pit full of human excrements, and after the experience he becomes mute; then he is hanged by his wrists from the ceiling and left at the mercy of an aggressive dog, and later on, he almost freezes to death underneath a frozen lake.

*The Painted Bird* was greeted as one of the most imposing novels of the decade; it was translated into several languages and soon became a bestseller in Europe and a cult book in America, a major work of Holocaust literature. What gave more relevance to the work was the crucial fact that it was generally considered autobiographical: an impressive, exemplary testimony of the traumatic effects of war on the author. Critics compared *The Painted Bird* to Anne Frank’s diary and Gunter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*. Elie Wiesel, the famed Holocaust survivor, reviewed it in “The New York Times Book Review,” in a praising article entitled “Everybody’s Victim,” where he wrote: “It is as a chronicle that *The Painted Bird* [...] achieves its unusual power.” Apparently, Wiesel’s initial response to the novel was lukewarm, but Kosinski himself went to him and

confessed that the book was essentially autobiographical.<sup>2</sup> According to Wiesel, *The Painted Bird* is “[w]ritten with deep sincerity and sensitivity, [...] transcends confession and attains in parts the haunting quality and tone of a quasi-surrealistic tale;” he concludes the review stating that what happens to the boy because of his dark complexion is so absurd that “could as easily not have happened at all. Or, which is the same, it could have happened to anybody, everywhere” (31 October 1965).

In fact, the events Kosinski narrated in his book never happened to him. Years later, it came out that during the war he lived in hiding under a false name and identity (his real name was Lewinkopf) with his parents, who “went into hiding, living as Christians under assumed names” (Franklin 2017), and that they had conveniently adopted a blonde, blue-eyed boy who could pass for a gentile, in order to disguise their identities. In 1982, a cover story published in *The Village Voice* challenged details of Kosinski’s biography and accused him of being a liar, a plagiarist, an agent of the CIA in disguise, and a literary fraud who used ghostwriters for writing his fiction. The renowned critic Jerome Klinkowitz wrote an article significantly titled: “Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski.” By then Kosinski was a bestselling author (his second novel, *Steps*, won the National Book Award), an eccentric media celebrity, a film-maker (he co-wrote the screenplay of the movie adaptation of his famous novel, *Being There*), an actor, and a famous polo player. For a period, he was also president of the American branch of PEN, the international writers’ association.

Notwithstanding this, the sentence was irrevocable, even though, paradoxically enough, Kosinski himself was an actual survivor: he was accused of using the dramatic events of the Second World War to create a fictional past and a fake identity for his persona, and this eventually ruined his career. Journalists, scholars, and critics began to make all kinds of allegations: that Kosinski wrote *The Painted Bird* in Polish and asked someone to translate the novel into English; that it was plagiarized from popular novels written in Polish; most of all, that the book could definitely not be called a Holocaust Memoir. In an “Afterward” written in 1976 for the second edition of *The Painted Bird*, Kosinski answered those critics who claimed that he had “exploited the horrors of war to satisfy [his] own peculiar imagination,” as well as those who “insisted that, given the raw materials of war-torn Eastern Europe, anyone could concoct a plot overflowing

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<sup>2</sup> At least according to what James Park Sloane wrote in an article published in 1994 in *The New Yorker*: “At the time of Kosinski’s suicide in 1991, Wiesel said, ‘I thought it was fiction, and when he told me it was autobiography I tore up my review and wrote one a thousand times better’” (Sloane 1994, 46).

with brutal drama” (Kosinski 2015, xx-xxi), by vindicating the difference between fiction and autobiography:

They wanted to cast me in the role of spokesman for my generation, especially for those who had survived the war [...]. Facts about my life and my origins, I felt, should not be used to test the book’s authenticity [...]. Furthermore, I felt then, as I do now, that fiction and autobiography are very different modes. Autobiography emphasizes a single life [...]. A fictional life, on the other hand, forces the reader to contribute: he does not simply compare; he actually enters a fictional role, expanding it in terms of his own experience, his own creative and imaginative powers. (xiii-xiv)

However, this defense was ultimately useless. In the end, Kosinski’s reputation was ruined, and he committed suicide in 1991. In a sense, he became indeed everybody’s victim – victim of a greater, universal trauma, linked not exclusively with the war, but most of all with his (self-imposed?) role of witness.

In *The Painted Bird*, as well as in other novels, Kosinski asserted the fictional nature of all remembrances; his book opens a gap, a deep divide between facts remembered and facts recreated, imagined, invented – as ultimately all facts are when they are re-presented on paper. Drawing on the ideas he explored in his “Notes of the Author on *The Painted Bird*,” Kosinski stated that a fictive event is “neither an actual event nor totally a created fiction with no base in experience; it is an event as fiction [...] both illusory and concrete,” so that

The remembered event becomes a fiction, a structure made to accommodate certain feelings. Without these structures, literature would be too personal for the writer to create, much less for his readers to grasp. There is no art which is reality; rather, art is the using of symbols by which an otherwise and unstateable subjective reality is made manifest. [R]emembering is the automatic process of editing. (2012, 90)

If this sounds familiar, it is because Primo Levi, the famous Italian writer who survived Auschwitz and who committed suicide in 1987, reflected in his books on the same mechanisms that falsify memory in conditions of trauma and in case of interference from other competitive memories. In *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986) he wrote about the shame or guilt that coincided with reacquired freedom, a shame linked to the awareness that “i ‘salvati’ del Lager non erano i migliori, i predestinati al bene, i latori di un messaggio,” but that in fact “sopravvivevano di preferenza i peggiori, gli egoisti, i violenti, gli insensibili, i collaboratori della ‘zona grigia’, le spie” (Levi 2003, 63). Following this reasoning, Levi concluded that “non siamo noi, i superstiti, i testimoni veri” (64), because, in a sense, the true witnesses are only the dead; those who survived are all somehow impostors.

Furthermore, the content of Kosinski's novel poses another problem. According to Tomasz Mirkowicz, the Polish translator of *The Painted Bird*, Kosinski admitted that in writing his book he drew heavily on a postwar Polish text, a compilation of accounts by Polish children who survived the war hiding in forests and bunkers during the German occupation, published in Cracow in 1946 and translated into English in 1996 as *The Children Accuse*. According to Sue Vice, who confronted the texts, nowhere did Kosinski plagiarize material from his source; it seems that he used the Polish text, especially the section entitled "In Hiding," as a background for his imagination and a supplement to his own experience (2000, 73). In the end, we can infer that the cruel experiences narrated in the book are indeed *true*, or at least verisimilar, though they did not occur to the author. Moreover, when he was a child, Kosinski was certainly traumatized by his experience of surviving the war in Poland, and his false identity was initially more a necessity than a literary impersonation. It is reasonable to think that his later disguises and multiple identities were also a result of that original trauma.

In an essay significantly called "Why Do We Believe Primo Levi?", Mario Barenghi wrote that in *Se questo è un uomo* "the criterion of truthfulness [...] cannot consist of conformity between the autobiographical account and an event that is intrinsically shapeless, lacking in form" (Barenghi 2013, 16), such as the experience of the Lager. On the contrary, "the equilibrium that characterizes Levi's masterpiece is the product of a narrative strategy based on a precise economy of memory" (26). Barenghi concludes that "the main reason why Primo Levi is credible is that, in his cognitive endeavor – the *conditio sine qua non* for his testifying – the facts don't add up" (40). Contrary to what one could think, the level of fictitiousness of his work is what made it credible. Klinkowitz himself stated that Kosinski's voice had "an intensity which imparted to everything he said an aura of truth and authority" (158). He was, simply put, a great storyteller.

Storytelling and remembering rely on similar practices: they both arrange confused and juxtaposed images in an ordered structure. Kosinski's guilt – what critics described as his mortal sin – was that he felt that his own experiences of the war period were not enough to make a good story, or at least to serve as an exemplary narrative by a World War II effective survivor; they were factually insufficient to convey the fullest trauma of the times. So, he felt the need to write a novel and present it informally as an autobiography. According to Timothy Neal, "Kosinski was aware that in order for his work to be sufficiently valued he had to appear as a testifying witness, not as an artist" (2010, 433-4). So, the construction and exploration of trauma bind Kosinski to both Holocaust witnesses and (more closely) the generation of postmemory, because though he

was in some sense present in the place and time, his account exceeds his own experience. In Neal's words, "postmemory testimony is a legitimate form of what became fraud" (436) in the case of Kosinski.

What would have happened if Kosinski had told the true story of his World War II years? We can only imagine a reaction like the one Philip Roth describes in his memoir *Patrimony*, subtitled "A True Story" and published in 1991, only three months before Kosinski's suicide. In the book, Roth's father invites a friend of his for dinner, Walter Herrmann, a survivor of two concentration camps who came to the U.S. in 1947. Herrmann is writing a book about his wartime experience and wants Philip Roth to introduce him to a publisher. Before presenting the scene in *Patrimony*, Roth mentions his friend Levi and his books about the Holocaust, so that the reader expects Herrmann's to be a similar memoir, full of tragic and painful experiences. Instead, it turns out that Herrmann's account of how he survived the war hidden in Berlin before being sent to Auschwitz is actually the account of the sexual intercourses he had with the different women who protected him. With a mischievous smile, he tells Roth: "My book is not a book like Elie Wiesel writes [...]. I couldn't write such a tragic book. Until the camps, I had a very happy war." It is significant that before showing his manuscript, Herrmann shows Roth and his dining companions what the narrator calls "the credentials entitling him to write his book" (1991, 213): first, the number tattooed on his wrist testifying his stay at Auschwitz; then the identification papers issued to him by the Germans; and finally, as an "additional certificate of validation" (214), the wrapping of a pack of cigarette on the inside of which he had penciled a tiny letter from Auschwitz to his mother.

These 'testimonial objects' should serve to attest to the truth of his account. Nonetheless, after the dinner, when his father asks Roth what he thinks of Herrmann's book, the writer describes it dismissively as "a pornographic best-seller about the Holocaust." His father replies, not so humorously: "Maybe it'll be a best-seller like *Portnoy*" (220), stressing the connection between Herrmann's memoir and Roth's famous (and irreverent) work of fiction. Incredible as it may appear, it seems that Walter Herrmann actually exists, though Roth used a different name to describe him, and that he published his memoir in 1996. The fact that it did not have any success at all demonstrates that, in the end, Herrmann's credentials were not enough to make his story credible, or interesting.

Growing up in Newark, New Jersey, Roth's exposure to the war was considerably less acute and traumatic than Kosinski's. Yet, he remarked several

times that his conscious memories really began with the war. His 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*, provides an alternative history of the United States during the war years: in Roth's version of the past, pro-Nazi famous aviator Charles Lindbergh becomes President in 1940 instead of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the nation remains neutral during World War II. Roth's uchronia is a mediated reinvention of the author's relatively safe childhood in a fictional (but all too plausible) context of menace and violence, as he himself describes it:

At the center of this story is a child, myself at seven, eight, and nine years of age. The story is narrated by me as an adult looking back some sixty years at the experience of that child's family during the Lindbergh presidency. (2017, 340)

The incipit of the novel reads: "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear," thus presenting *The Plot Against America* as a fake memoir of a traumatic experience. Nonetheless, immediately after this sentence, the narrator states: "Of course, no childhood is without its terrors" (2004, 1), giving the narrative a wider, universal meaning, and virtually framing the novel as a Bildungsroman.<sup>3</sup> Clearly enough, the sense of menace comes not exclusively from the newly elected president or other historical or subjective circumstances, because it is a "perpetual" fear. When the uchronic element is introduced in the narrative, it is already turned upside-down, since the character/narrator wonders whether he "would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn't been president or if [he] hadn't been the offspring of Jews" (1). The narrator imagines what would have happened whether Lindbergh had not been elected (imagining our own reality as a uchronia) and whether he himself hadn't been a Jew (a fact that remains undifferentiated in the alternative history). Roth makes it clear that fear comes from two factors: one fictive (Lindbergh's election) and one real (the character's Jewishness), echoing the twofold structure of the novel as uchronia/memoir.

In *The Plot Against America*, Roth makes a literary operation that is equal and opposite to Kosinski's in *The Painted Bird*: he puts his real self as a child and his real family in a fictitious historical context, so that the resulting book is a peculiar mixture of memory and invention. When he was writing the novel, Roth had to reinvent himself as a child, in an attempt to recover a childhood that was twice lost, because it never existed. Moreover, there is a discrepancy of perception

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<sup>3</sup> In a similar way, at the very beginning of *The Painted Bird* Kosinski's narrator states in a brief introductory remark that the book's six-year-old protagonist "was sent by his parents, *like thousands of other children*, to the shelter of a distant village" (2015, 3, my italics).

between the 1943 boy who experiences the uchronic events, and the present, adult self who is telling the story. If we add the distance of memory to the dual perspective offered by every uchronia – where history as it is told by the narrator overlaps with history as we remember it – then we have a mediated account of the sort described by Hirsch as “a triangulated look with which we engage images of childhood vulnerability in the context of persecution and genocide” (Hirsch 2012, 156). This is the reason why Roth called his novel “a kind of false memoir.” Such a complex structure required a significant mnemonic effort, as the author himself confessed:

It took a certain amount of trial and error before I figured out how to let the boy be a boy while at the same time introducing through the adult’s voice a mediating intelligence. I had somehow to make the two one, the mediating intelligence that discerns the general and the child’s brain that degeneralizes the general, that cannot see outside the child’s own life and that reality never impresses in general terms. I had to present a narrative in which things are described both as they happened and as they are considered through hindsight, joining the authenticity of the child’s experience to the maturity of the adult’s observations. (2017, 340)

Roth’s idea is very similar to Kosinski’s, especially when he states in the same essays that “[l]iterature is manipulated to serve all sorts of purposes, objectives public and private, but one oughtn’t to confuse such arbitrary applications with the arduously attained reality that an author has succeeded in actualizing in a work of art” (343). A different kind of reality lurks throughout the pages of his uchronia: though the events depicted are clearly and overly not true, neither are they completely false. Narrating this story helped the author discover, for instance, that his father’s notorious stubbornness, in a different historical situation could be described as a form of resistance, defiance, or even as a sort of heroism.

We could say that the children who are protagonists of Roth’s and Kosinski’s novels are the authors’ ‘postmemorial alter-egos,’ because they are personally related to the writers’ actual experiences in (and of) the war, while at the same time they share a sense of “belatedness” towards World War II that connects both narratives to Hirsch’s notion of postmemory. What *The Painted Bird* and *The Plot Against America* have in common is their authors’ sense of inadequacy and belatedness toward their own experience of the war. The question they indirectly pose in their works is the same question asked by Paul Crosthwaite in his book *Trauma, Postmodernism and the Aftermath of World War II*: “How to perceive and commemorate a conflict whose effects on the self and the wider world are so palpable, but which one did not in fact live through?” (2009, 6, 7) – or, as we

have seen, not experienced in its fullness? Maybe it is impossible. Maybe, as Theodor Adorno famously stated, writing literature after such an atrocity as the Holocaust is barbaric. Yet *The Painted Bird* and *The Plot Against America* manage to deal with the unrepresentable, the unbelievable, the meaningless, in original artistic ways. As Kosinski stated: “Only by being imaginative toward your own life, perhaps by perceiving yourself as a character in a drama, can you make it meaningful” (2012, 1). Forty years later Roth stated that in writing his novel he “tried to turn the epic back into the disaster as it was suffered without foreknowledge, without preparation” (2017, 345); in other words, to restore history to its original unpredictability. Inventing one’s self in history, inventing an alternate history around oneself, may be the only way to represent the unrepresentable.

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