Postmodern Plague Narrative: The Representation of the Polio Epidemic in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*.

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Abstract: The article discusses Roth's use of the theme of the polio epidemic in his novel *Nemesis* (2010). Initially, *Nemesis* seems to comply with the tradition of plague writing, in which the material reality of the disease is largely ignored and the disease itself becomes "a figurative way of speaking of other things" (Gilman 2009, 4). The epidemic exposes a hidden weakness in the main protagonist, which is his inability to accept the imperfect world. One of the central themes in the novel becomes the problem of theodicy: the main protagonist is obsessed with the question of why God kills innocent children. The mythical and allegorical aspect of the narrative is reinforced by allusions to Oedipus and Job. However, a closer examination of the narrative mode employed by Roth reveals that the main concern of the text is typically postmodern: the story illustrates the impossibility of arriving at the objective truth. That is why eventually *Nemesis* will not yield a coherent allegorical meaning.

Keywords: polio, Roth, postmodern, epidemic, plague, allegory

Introduction

Traditionally, plagues were conceptualized as divine intervention; their function was both punitive and therapeutic. Sinners were punished for their transgressions and those who deserved it were offered a chance for redemption (see Gilman 2009). In her *Illness as a Metaphor*, Susan Sontag challenged this traditional paradigm, which she believed to have persisted in an essentially unchanged form until the modern times, arguing that "illness is not a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (Sontag 1978, 3). The present article examines Philip Roth's treatment of the polio epidemic in his novel *Nemesis* (2010). Polio, similarly to the diseases discussed by Sontag (cancer and tuberculosis, and later

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AIDS[8]), also has its own mythology. The question which will be addressed is to what extent Roth reproduces this mythology and complies with the tradition of plague writing, in which the material reality of the disease is largely ignored and the disease itself becomes "a figurative way of speaking of other things" (Gilman 2009, 4), and to what extent he redefines this paradigm.

The history of polio in the USA

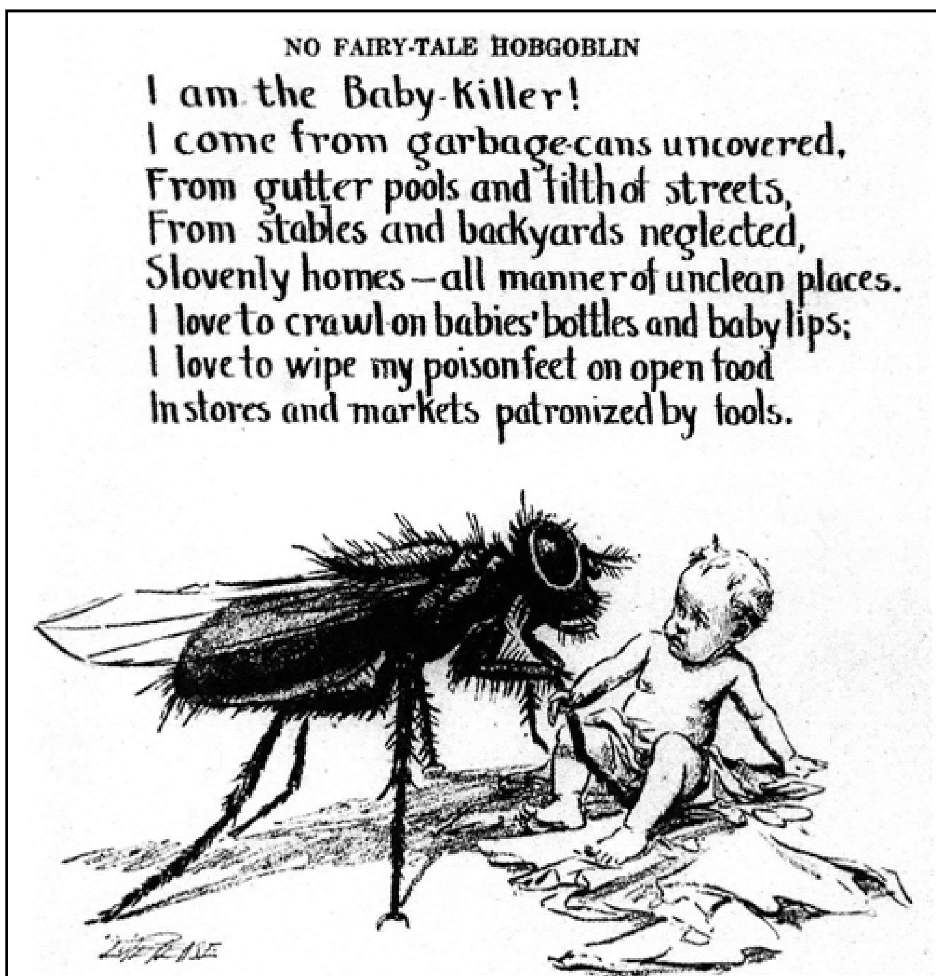
Before the invention of the vaccine in the 1950s, the United States suffered repeated outbreaks of polio, the largest one being that which hit New York in 1916 (to which Roth makes several references in *Nemesis*). In the decade preceding the mass vaccination (1944-1954), over 364,000 cases of polio were diagnosed in the United States (Silver 2007, 19). With little or no exaggeration, the narrator of *Nemesis* sums the 1940s up as the time when "the greatest menaces on earth were war, the atomic bomb, and polio" (Roth 2010, 245). Polio was a particularly dreaded disease, since its causes were still largely unknown and it attacked mostly children, either killing or crippling them for life (hence, the virus was dubbed "The Crippler"). Frequently, a perfectly healthy child became completely paralyzed, to the point that it could not even breathe or swallow, in a matter of days. Surviving polio victims were living proof and constant reminders of how dangerous polio was.

If that were not enough, polio's grip on the public imagination was further strengthened by various polio awareness ads, which, irrespective of their educational value, were truly horrifying, and as such they instilled even more fear in the American people. During the infamous 1916 epidemic, *Newark Evening News* published the following fly warning (on the next page). This conceptualization of the polio virus as an enormous evil fly about to devour an innocent baby was a reflection of the erroneous belief (which still persisted in the subsequent decades) that the virus is spread by insects, mostly by flies.

Another interesting example of re-imagining the virus is a short movie *The Crippler* (1948),[9] described by Wijdicks as "a children's ghost story" (2021, 83).

8 See Susan Sontag *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989).

9 The movie was part of the Polio awareness-raising campaign; it was produced by the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (commonly known as the March of Dimes). *The Crippler*'s cultural significance is frequently stressed in books on the history of polio in the USA (see Oshinsky 2005; Dehner 2008, 301; Stolley 2018, 108; Wijdicks 2021, 83).



(*Newark Evening News* 1916, 10; after Cirillo 2016)

Against the backdrop of eerie music and ominous clouds, the virus delivers the following speech: "My name is virus poliomyelitis.… I consider myself quite an artist, a sort of sculptor. I specialize in grotesques, twisting and deforming human bodies. That's why I am called The Crippler." As he speaks, the clouds converge to form a sinister crooked figure, which casts its shadow on earth (Seavey 1998, 0:32:04 to 0:32:31). In the 1940s and early 1950s, children and their parents lived in this shadow. Interestingly enough, these two different images of polio, that of a brute beast and that of a sadistic artist, are combined in *Nemesis*, when Bucky declares God, the alleged creator of the virus, to be "an omnipotent being

who [is] a union not of three persons in one Godhead, as in Christianity, but of two—a sick fuck and an evil genius" (Roth 2010, 264-265).[10]

The origins of *Nemesis*

Roth recognized the literary potential of the polio theme quite late. In a 2010 interview with NPR, he explained the origins of *Nemesis*:

> On a yellow legal pad I began to write down all the subjects, the historical events that I've lived through that I've not dealt with in fiction. And there's some that I can write down and they're just not my subjects, no matter what I do with them but when I came to polio, it was a great revelation to me. That polio was even on the list. I never thought of it before as a subject. And then I remembered how frightening it was and how deadly it was and I thought, 'OK, try to write a book about polio.' (Roth 2010a, 0:04:25 to 0:04:59)

One might risk the question why polio happened to be the very last item on the long list of topics that Roth considered interesting enough to write about. Arguably, despite its obvious literary appeal and the fact that it was firmly rooted both in American and Roth's personal history, it was not an obvious choice for him because it yielded itself too easily to all manners of allegorical interpretations, consistent with the tradition of plague narratives. For the same reason for which plague was a favorite subject of mediaeval moralists, it may have been avoided by contemporary realist authors.

In his review of *Nemesis*, Coetzee notes that "the plague condition is simply a heightened state of the condition of being mortal" (2010). In Nina Gilden Seavey's documentary *A Paralyzing Fear. The Story of Polio in America* (1998), a polio victim confesses, "When I almost died and I had all that pain, I learned a lot of things about life, what's important and what isn't. Everybody learns it, but usually it takes a lifetime. I learned it in a period of days" (1:26:04 to 1:26:24). To a postmodern writer, the idea that some profound wisdom is bestowed upon those who venture close to death must seems suspicious.

10 To be more precise, these words are used by the narrator when he tries to reconstruct Bucky's perspective.

*Nemesi*s and the polio mythology

Another possible reason why Roth might have been initially reluctant to handle the topic of polio could be the fact that polio occupies a special place in American culture and mythology. It was very difficult to write about polio without bathos or sentimentality. Polio has become the story of the triumph of mind over matter, of the indomitable spirit which overcomes the imperfections of the body, best illustrated by the life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who, after being struck by polio and rendered an invalid at the age of 39, became president, saved the nation from the Great Depression and led to the victory against the Nazis. The story of Franklin Delano Roosevelt is more than just a myth or an isolated incident. Jude Silver and Daniel Wilson in their book *POLIO VOICES: An Oral History from the American Polio Epidemics and Worldwide Eradication Efforts* argue that it reflects a certain general truth about polio survivors:

> Polio survivors as a group have lived remarkably successful lives. Significant numbers of them finished their schooling, married, had children, and enjoyed successful careers. Many had taken to heart the Protestant work ethic reinforced during their polio rehabilitation: hard persistent effort pursued over a long time brought significant rewards. That ethic had carried polio survivors through painful therapies. Many polio survivors applied then that same principle to the challenges they faced in gaining an education, raising a family, and succeeding at work. Polio survivors pushed their bodies to enable them to succeed in spite of the obstacles. That was how they had beaten polio initially, and it was a lesson that stayed with them for a lifetime. (Silver 2007, 8)

Nemesis, Roth's story about a fictitious polio epidemic in Newark in 1944, does not seem to be a straightforward deconstruction of the tradition of plague narratives and the American polio mythology. Bucky, the main protagonist of *Nemesis*, has all the makings of a proper hero. His story should be another success story. He has a deeply ingrained sense of duty and an earnest desire to prove himself in the face of adversity. This desire is motivated by an inferiority complex; his father was a thief and a gambler and he himself is exempt from military service because of his poor eyesight, which Coetzee and Giannopoulou

(2016, 27) see as a direct reference to Oedipus. Bucky is a pillar of the local community, revered by the playground boys, who admire his athletic prowess and self-confidence, and respected by their parents. He may strike us as very different from Roth's usual characters. The narrator describes him as "endowed with little force of mind" (Roth 2010, 273), "largely a humorless person, articulate enough but with barely a trace of wit, who never in his life had spoken satirically or with irony, who rarely cracked a joke or spoke in jest" (Roth 2010, 273).

When the epidemic breaks out, he considers it his duty to continue his work at the playground and refuses the tempting job offer of a waterfront director at a summer camp where his girlfriend Marcia works, far from the city besieged by the epidemic. But when the offer is repeated, it catches him off guard. Engrossed in the vision of his future happiness with Marcia (her father has just blessed their prospective union), he quickly agrees, without giving it any serious thought. This baffling narrative development is presented in the following way:

> 'Tell him yes,' Mr. Cantor said, and he startled himself no less by what he'd just agreed to than he had done asking permission of Dr. Steinberg to become engaged to his daughter. 'Tell him I will,' he said.
> Yet he'd had every intention of taking his grandmother's suggestion and going to the shore for the weekend and marshaling his forces so as to return to his job rejuvenated. If Jake and Dave could parachute into Nazi-occupied France on D-Day and help to anchor the Allied beachhead by fighting their way into Cherbourg against the stiffest German opposition, then surely he could face the dangers of running the playground at Chancellor Avenue School in the midst of a polio epidemic. (Roth 2010: 54)

Accepting the job of a waterfront director at Indian Hill, Bucky prioritizes his own safety. The decision contradicts his firmly held belief that by supervising the playground at Chancellor Avenue School, he makes his own contribution to the war effort. Consequently, abandoning the playground in the midst of a polio epidemic means deserting his post in the time of danger.

After he arrives at Indian Hill, people start to get sick. Soon it turns out that the spreading disease is the dreaded polio. Bucky suspects that he has brought it to the camp from Newark, and indeed, the spinal tap confirms that he has the virus. Shortly afterwards, he develops symptoms of paralytic polio himself

and when he finally leaves the hospital he has a withered arm and leg. But the greatest damage has been done to his psyche. "You think it's your body that's deformed," says Marcia, "but what's truly deformed is your mind!" (Roth 2010, 260). Bucky blames his cowardice for the fact that children at Indian Hill contracted polio. At this point he might remind the reader of Oedipus (see Giannopoulou 2016). Bucky punishes himself by rejecting Marcia's love, claiming that she deserves better than to be married to a cripple.

Thus, Bucky's story is the very reversal of a typical polio survivor story, which the narrator openly states: "He was the very antithesis of the country's greatest prototype of the polio victim, FDR, disease having led Bucky not to triumph but to defeat" (Roth 2010: 246). The epidemic exposes Bucky's hidden weakness, which leads to his downfall. The same sense of responsibility which fueled the Protestant work ethic and saved a great many of polio victims is the reason of his unmaking. Unable to live up to his self-imposed high standards, Bucky gets mercilessly crushed by them. Dr. Steinberg's warning, given to Bucky in the early days of the epidemic, turns out to be prophetic: "We can be severe judges of ourselves when it is in no way warranted. A misplaced sense of responsibility can be a debilitating thing" (Roth 2010, 102). The same harsh judgement is passed on Bucky by the narrator at the end of the novel: "Such a person is condemned. Nothing he does matches the ideal in him. He never knows where his responsibility ends" (Roth 2010, 273).

Nemesis as a tale with a moral

The narrator is convinced that Bucky makes the greatest error not when he flees the city to the apparent security of Indian Hill but when, overwhelmed by shame and guilt, he cuts himself off from the outside world and chooses the life of a recluse, a gesture which also could be interpreted as a rebellion against the absurd world where innocent kids are sentenced to senseless suffering and death. When Bucky claims that his life is an interrupted series of calamities inflicted upon him by some higher power (his father is a thief, his mother dies at his birth, the kids that he is taking care of get sick and die, his friend dies in France, and he himself turns out to be the carrier of the virus), an analogy between him and Job becomes very clear (see Coetzee 2010; Aarons 2012, 10; Batnitzky 2014). In contrast to Job, Bucky eventually curses God and plunges into despair.

Following this line of thinking, Duban (2013) compares Bucky to Captain Ahab. Duban writes: "a defining quality of Nemesis is Arnold's characterization of Bucky's crazed, self-centered revenge as a phenomenon in which Bucky resembles Melville's Ahab, relentlessly haunting and hunting himself—his own White Whale, as it were" (2013, 72).

This suggests the surprising presence of a strong moralizing impulse in Roth's novel, an impulse which we would normally associate with the literature of previous epochs (as it is based on the belief in a clear-cut distinction between good and evil). Bucky's story might also remind us of Hawthorne's Wakefield, who one day leaves his wife on a strange whim, not realizing that he will not be able to return to her ever again. What was intended as a silly prank seals his fate forever. Hawthorne concludes,

> Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe. (Hawthorne)

Bucky has also lost his place in the system and has become the Outcast of the Universe. His life used to be filled with other people, his students, their parents (when the children got sick, he remembered to phone their parents or visit them and pay his respects), his grandmother, Marcia. His contribution to the welfare of the community was universally appreciated. Now, he claims that he is "no much of a socializer" (Roth 2010, 269) and the narrator imagines him in his lonely flat, watching the news or eating a Portuguese meal:

> I thought of him doing these things by himself and, like a lovesick swain, attempting on Sundays not to pine for Marcia Steinberg …. One would have predicted, remembering the young man he'd been, that he would have had the strength to battle through to something more than this. And then I thought of myself without my family, and wondered if I would have done any better or even as well. Movies and work and Sunday dinner out—it sounded awfully bleak to me. (Roth 2010, 269–270)

Read in this way, *Nemesis* differs surprisingly little from the mediaeval and renaissance plague narratives, in which plague usually reveals some hidden moral truths and is used as means of edification. One might argue that the story of Bucky's failure becomes a convenient vehicle for a moral lesson about the importance of recognizing one's limitations and accepting the verdicts of Fate with humility. The polio epidemic is a test which exposes a serious weakness in Bucky's character: his need to believe in some higher power according to whose will the events on earth unfold, which the narrator condemns as hubris:

> I have to say that however much I might sympathize with the amassing of woes that had blighted his life, this is nothing more than stupid hubris, not the hubris of will or desire but the hubris of fantastical, childish religious interpretation. We have heard it all before and by now have heard enough of it, even from someone as profoundly decent as Bucky Cantor. (Roth 2010, 265–266)

How narration problematizes narrative

However, what significantly complicates the matter is the unusual mode of narration employed by Roth (see Giannopoulou 2016, 19–25). Most of the story seems to be told by a third-person narrator with Bucky as a focalizer. The narrator relates to us the contents of Bucky's consciousness in what appears to be an unchanged form. What the narrator says about the outside world also seems to reflect Bucky's way of thinking. Yet at the very beginning of the story the narrator assumes the perspective of the communal "we"[11] (we the kids from the neighborhood), which is very difficult to reconcile with the fact that the story includes the details of Bucky's intimate conversations to which none has been privy. Finally, somewhere in the middle the narrator surprisingly reveals his identity as that of Arnie Mesnikoff, one of the playground kids that Bucky supervised: "Three more boys had come down with polio—Leo Feinswog, Paul Lippman, and me, Arnie Mesnikoff" (Roth 2010, 197). Interestingly enough, until Part III we learn next to nothing about Arnie; we remain oblivious as to what happened to him after he had been taken to hospital; the story focuses on Bucky

11 Stangherlin observes that "[t]his form of narration, according to both Kaminsky (114) and Leah Hager Cohen, is evocative of the Greek chorus" (2016, 76).

alone. Arnie continues to describe Bucky's stay in Indian Hill, including his romantic rendezvous with Marcia, as if he were there himself and not in hospital, fighting for his life. When Arnie mentions his own name again, he does it as if he were talking about a stranger: "All Bucky could think of were their names, and all he could see were their faces: Billy Schizer. Ronald Graubard. Danny Kopferman. Myron Kopferman. Alan Michaels. Erwin Frankel. Herbie Steinmark. Leo Feinswog. Paul Lippman. Arnie Mesnikoff" (Roth 2010, 197).

In Part III, which takes place 27 years later, Bucky and Arnie, two polio victims, reunite and talk about that fateful summer of 1944 when they contracted the disease. Thus, the whole book turns out to be Arnie's reconstruction of those events from Bucky's perspective, on the basis of the conversations that they had in 1971. The questions asked by Coetzee in his review of *Nemesis* are most relevant: "If it seems unlikely that the prickly Bucky would have confided to the younger man the details of his lovemaking with Marcia, then is Arnie making up that part? And if he is, may there not be other parts of Bucky's story that he has left out, misinterpreted, or simply not been competent to represent?" (2010).

These questions cast doubt on the entire narrative. Does it tell about the events that have really happened or the events that Arnie imagines to have happened, events conjectured, second-guessed and hypothesized? One needs to remember that Arnie is the ideological opponent of Bucky, an atheist who undermines the validity of Bucky's religious outlook on life, who insists that polio is "pointless, contingent, preposterous, and tragic" (Roth 2010: 265) and ridicules Bucky's attempts to invest it with deeper meaning. Hence, it stands to reason that his bias might have influenced his supposedly objective narrative.

Arnie himself is an example of an extremely successful polio victim. Most likely modelled on architect Ron Mace, he is the co-owner of a popular firm "specializing in architectural modification for wheelchair accessibility" (Roth 2010, 242). His disability has not prevented him from becoming a happy husband and father. Ironically, he claims that he owes his success not to the Protestant work ethic but to pure luck, part of which was the fact that the disease struck him when he was too young to ask the question why. This might help him to win the reader's sympathy, but on the other hand the reader may be alienated by his harsh judgement of Bucky and such callous cynical remarks as: "A damaged man is sometimes very attractive to a certain type of woman" (Roth 2010, 255). When Arnie firmly establishes himself as a diegetic narrator, his per-

spective, which is clearly a product of his specific life circumstances, is bound to be questioned by the reader. To Arnie, Bucky must seem an allegory of the old world of grandiose but futile gestures. Arnie's possible misrepresentation of Bucky is psychologically very plausible. Inevitably, as we grow older our childhood heroes tend to shrink, and the events from the childhood acquire almost mythical proportions,[12] which is clearly shown by the last scene of the novel, Arnie's extremely vivid memory of Bucky throwing a javelin. This should warn us against accepting Arnie's story at its face value.

We might also see some palpable inconsistencies in Arnie's logic. Somewhat offhandedly, Arnie remarks that rejecting Marcia was for Bucky "his last opportunity to be a man of integrity" (Roth 2010, 262). Still, he criticizes Bucky for seizing this opportunity. He does not see Bucky as a modern day Lord Jim, who tries to redeem his honor, tainted by a similar act of cowardice, but as a pathetic fool.

To Arnie, Bucky's alleged guilt is a product of a hypersensitive conscience. He absolves Bucky from all responsibility, calling him "an unsuspected carrier" (Roth 2010, 249). Still, the facts incriminate Bucky. During an epidemic, it is a customary procedure to quarantine those who have had contact with the sick. The authorities were slow to act but eventually they did act, shutting the playgrounds down and quarantining the city. Even before those decisions were made, Bucky should have realized that, since the sick boys had attended his playground and he had had physical contact with them, he constituted a potential health hazard. When he leaves Newark for Indian Hill, he clearly puts his own well-being above the safety of others. Arnie's unwillingness to see this is a corollary of his unwillingness to recognize Bucky as a proper tragic hero. In Arnie's blatantly mechanistic vision of the universe, there seems to be no room for individual responsibility and heroism:

> You got it like the rest of us unfortunate enough to get polio eleven years too soon for the vaccine. Twentieth-century medicine made its phenomenal progress just a little too slowly for us. Today childhood summers are as sublimely worry-free as they should be. The significance of polio has disappeared completely. (Roth 2010, 248–249)

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12 In the previously quoted interview with NPR, Roth claimed that a boy is most alive from the age of nine until twelve (Roth 2010a, 0:05:56 to 0:06:00).

However, contrary to what this passage might suggest, Arnie's vision can hardly be described as scientific or fully rational. He has his own hermeneutics of the plague with which Bucky's story, as it is told by Arnie, is consistent:

> Sometimes you're lucky and sometimes you're not. Any biography is chance, and, beginning at conception, chance—the tyranny of contingency—is everything. Chance is what I believed Mr. Cantor meant when he was decrying what he called God. (Roth 2010, 242–243)

As Arnie would have it, polio is a cosmic force beyond human control and it strikes arbitrarily whomever it pleases. What people found extremely baffling was that children who contracted the disease usually lived in good sanitary conditions. Only later was it discovered that people who lived in unsanitary conditions usually developed immunity as a result of an early exposure to the virus. Ironically, in America polio epidemics were a side effect of increased sanitation.

Dr Steinberg, who is presented as a medical authority, declares, "Epidemics have a way of spontaneously running out of steam.… Polio is still a mysterious disease.… We don't know what kills polio germs. We don't know who or what carries polio germs" (Roth 2010, 104). He does not add, however, that what *was* perfectly well known was that it was a highly contagious disease. In the novel, in the areas struck by the disease, people still come and go, congregate, shake hands, pay social calls, routinely perform jobs requiring physical contact with people who might be infected or, to make matters even worse, with people who have actually been infected. The few characters who do raise concerns are described as hysterical. On the one hand, such a representation of the epidemic, although causing our disbelief, may be plausible because it needs to be remembered that in the 1940s polio was not an unusual thing. It was endemic and every summer some children came down with polio. People had to learn to live with it. That is why dr. Steinberg insists that "you don't evacuate two hundred and fifty kids because of one case of polio" (Roth 2010, 231). It was usually very difficult to say when exactly the number of cases reached the number warranting declaring the state of epidemic, closing schools and introducing quarantine. Public health officials had to balance the need for safety with the risk of causing a panic. As a result, they were frequently criticized both for acting too early and too late. On the other hand, such a representation of the epidemic may be the result of Arnie's desire to free Bucky from the responsibility for his actions.

Conclusions

Nemesis can hardly be construed as a fully convincing picture of what might have happened had poliomyelitis struck Roth's home community in Weequahic in the summer of 1944. Since the events are revisited by the narrator after a period of 27 years and from the perspective of his childhood fan, the accuracy of the account of the epidemic is highly suspicious. In its attempts to present some kind of a moral that the epidemic supposedly reveals, *Nemesis* is antithetical to the modern plague writing as it was envisioned by Susan Sontag in her essay *Illness as a Metaphor*, where she argues that more attention should be paid to the physical reality of the disease (in *Nemesis* we get to know the facts of polio mostly from hearsay, newspaper articles and rumors circulated by people). Rather than on the disease itself, the narrative focuses on its influence on Bucky's inner life. Unlike a traditional allegory, *Nemesis* does not end with a straightforward message. Arnie's interpretation of the events, discussed extensively in Part III, may be questioned and even Arnie himself questions it at the very end of the book: "Maybe Bucky wasn't mistaken. Maybe he wasn't deluded by self-mistrust. Maybe his assertions weren't exaggerated and he hadn't drawn the wrong conclusion. Maybe he was the invisible arrow" (274–275). Thus *Nemesis* turns out to be a postmodern story about how imagination recreates the past and about the impossibility of arriving at the objective truth; the truth that it delivers is psychological and subjective.

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