

## Queensland University of Technology

### Philip Neilsen

### Philip Roth at 11.00am

#### Biographical note:

Philip Neilsen is professor of creative writing and literary studies at QUT, where he founded the creative writing program. He has published a dozen books of poetry, fiction and literary criticism and edited major anthologies. He wrote the first monograph on David Malouf's work, *Imagined Lives* (University of Queensland Press), and edited *The Penguin Book of Australian Satirical Verse*. His creative work has been shortlisted for and won prizes including a CBC Australian Notable Book award, and been translated into several languages. He has been a member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council and chair of the Queensland Writers Centre. Together with Professor Robert King he is researching the therapeutic use of creative arts to assist in the 'recovery' process of individuals with mental illness. His most recent book is a fifth collection of poetry, *Without an Alibi* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2008). He is currently co-editing *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* with Professor David Morley, Director of the Warwick Writing Programme, UK.

#### Keywords:

Life-writing – therapeutic – multiple selves – poetry – mixed genres

**Philip Roth at 11.00am**

And as he spoke I was thinking, *the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into.* Nathan Zuckerman in *The Counterlife*

Philip Roth is correcting proofs  
when he looks out his French windows at the woods  
the silver birches with triangular leaves  
and sees Alex Portnoy limping alongside him.  
The boy seems angry, reading aloud  
from a dog-eared paperback.

This is all wrong. By now Alex  
should be on the honest streets of Newark  
the blood smell of butchers and hot bread,  
hopeful in a young man's clothes  
the sidewalk a gleam like a silky pet.  
Soon he will meet intellectual women  
kinder than he deserves,  
more real than he can reasonably hope.

Then a yellow plane pulls a fence across the sky.  
Lindbergh is the new president  
there are dogs and megaphones  
a circus of newsprint  
Jews herded into streets narrow as knives.

He eats boiled potatoes, gristle of meat,  
writes *history is a very sudden thing*  
because forgetting lets death in.  
That is one way to recovery:  
the image defuses the fact, tenderly  
as if it were a roadside bomb.

11.05am and Zuckerman stands in Roth's garden  
making faces through the glass.  
He slides a note under the door:  
'You know we still need each other.  
Without me you are too nice – you bore people.  
Together we can hurt your enemies,  
smuggle our lust into pastel houses.  
So put down your pencil  
and stroll with me through the trees as well.  
You don't even have to leave the room.  
We will walk among the quick bright birds  
and the slow sun inviting'.  
It is hard to refuse.

If my life is a story I have made  
then I should be ready for any complication:  
the ironic comment overheard by a cop  
the damage done by drunken parents  
to *volkish* blue eyed blondes.  
He remembers the touch of their woollen gloves,  
the day warm and watchful as a coffee shop.

Briefly it rains, a sardonic damp smell  
forces him out on the street again, dodging horses,  
curses of street vendors. On the same day  
that Zuckerman is banished from university  
Philip sees his father fight, a bloodied beast  
in the kitchen, charging again and again,  
letting history through the door  
to strut about like a righteous pilgrim.

It is a monstrous daily effort  
to arrive each morning at this desk, to start again.

Alex, Nathan and Philip, terror of the critics,  
leaving behind religious fraternity, easy patriotism,  
the academy, monogamy and Chicago,  
always alert for phony victimhood.  
So much more yet to say, Zuckerman agrees.  
Such good fortune that modern Newark,  
hammered clean, gentrified,  
still glistens for him.

His desk is the colour of America,  
which is always in fashion somewhere.

The woods are still outside at 11.10am  
silver birches with untidy leaves.  
The bark more white than silver he notices,  
with black diamond shapes.  
Graceful, articulate, they net insects  
which skittle and hover, find new footing,  
converge and shine.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

In the poem I draw on narrative psychology which argues that life-writing can have therapeutic effects for the writer (Pennebaker & Seagal 1999, Pennebaker 2000); as well I explore the enabling effects of mixing life writing and fiction (Hunt & Sampson 1998) and of creating multiple selves in creative works (Sampson 2007, Magee 2008).

### *Research contribution*

‘Philip Roth at 11.00am’ is innovative in combining two areas of investigation in creative writing and literature. I investigate both the idea of life writing as therapeutic for Roth, and the (reflexive and enabling) blurred boundary between life writing and fiction, by introducing three of Roth’s characters who draw on memoir (Portnoy, Zuckerman & young Philip) and the two selves Roth constructs in his own memoir. I set up a dynamic where the narrative of the poem proposes the therapeutic advantage of utilising one’s life-story in fiction (increased sense of coherence, agency and control) and also affords a perspective (through the device of multiple selves), on the constructedness and instability of identity. The poem argues that Roth’s writing strategies make the constructed subjectivities both more coherent and more open to representing ‘lived experience’. This is evoked by concrete imagery and convergence of characters.

### *Research significance*

The poem is submitted for refereeing for an ERA A-ranked journal. It sits in the context of my scholarly articles on therapeutic life-writing (Neilsen & Murphy 2008, 2009) and application of those ideas in both poetry and fiction (Neilsen 1997, 2008, 2008a, 2008b) published nationally and internationally.

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