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Intertextuality, Authenticity, and Gonzo Selves in Anya Ulinich's *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel*

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We judge the author of a novel by how well he tells the story. But we judge morally the author of an autobiography, whose governing motive is primarily ethical as against aesthetic.

(Roth 1989: 165)

In her graphic novel *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* (2014), Anya Ulinich compellingly explores the tensions between life and art, fact and fiction and autobiography and the novel. This essay traces two of her strategies for achieving this: Ulinich's intertextual dialogue with a number of works by Philip Roth and with Bernard Malamud's short story 'The Magic Barrel'; and her creation of what Miriam Libicki has called a 'gonzo self'. I will argue that these strategies mediate the aesthetic imperatives of what Roth has called the 'written world' and the ethical obligations of the 'unwritten world' (Roth 2001: xiii) in order to arrive at an authentic sense of herself as an artist and writer.¹

Graphic novels have always made conspicuous use of literary allusions. From Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1986), with its closing epigraph from Juvenal and references to Shelley, Blake and Nietzsche, to the pervasive references to modernist fiction, most notably James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1922), in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), many of the foundational texts in the medium have incorporated high-cultural references to signal their debts to more established forms of literature, while at the same time implicitly staking their claims for inclusion in the canon. Among the most important literary influences on American Jewish women graphic novelists have been American Jewish male novelists, and among these Philip Roth has been pre-eminent.² At times Roth's influence is implicit. Take, for example, the episode in Diane Noomin's 'Baby Talk: A Tale of 3 4 Miscarriages' when Noomin's fictional alter ego, Didi Glitz, interrupts a story in which Noomin is relating her history

of miscarriages through another surrogate self, Glenda, by pulling (a version of) her creator through a hole in one of the panels into the strip itself, insisting that ‘you said you were tired of hiding behind a fictional character!!’ (Noomin 2012: 92).³ These complex metafictional moves resemble those performed by Roth in novels such as *The Counterlife* (1987), *Deception* (1990) and *Operation Shylock* (1993). More specifically, Didi’s intervention in her creator’s art is reminiscent of the letter Roth’s perennial alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, writes to the author at the end of *The Facts* (1988), except that in this case he advises him *not* to dispense with his fictional avatars, since ‘you, Roth, are the least completely rendered of all your protagonists’ (Roth 1988: 162). At other times Roth appears explicitly, for example in Vanessa Davis’s strip, ‘Stranger in a Strange Land’ (2009), in which she represents the ambivalent, evolving responses of her autobiographical persona as she reads Roth’s notorious novel in bed.⁴ *Portnoy’s Complaint* also appears in Miriam Libicki’s contribution to *The Jewish Graphic Novel* (2010), ‘Jewish Memoir Goes Pow! Zap! Oy!’, in which she cites Roth’s novel as ‘emblematic of an era of confessional art,’ which, in its ‘language of raw confession, its rueful yet over-the-top humor, and its conversational narration’, anticipated, and paved the way, for the advent of what she calls ‘gonzo literary comics’ (254). Libicki glosses this term as follows:

The word *gonzo* (coined about late journalist Hunter S. Thompson in the 1960s, etc.) refers to a creation in which the identity and presence of the creator is inextricably involved ... *Literary*, because the discussed autobiographies and semi-autobiographies are not confessions for confession’s sake, but aim to reach out to the larger cultural conversation about the human condition, using tools from literature and high art, as well as creating techniques unique to comicking” (2010: 254).

For Libicki, Roth is “one of the pioneers” (along with Allen Ginsberg, Leonard Cohen and Woody Allen) of a quasi-autobiographical, self-reflexive style of writing that influenced the “gonzo self”

personae developed by comics artists such as Robert Crumb, Harvey Pekar and Justin Green (Libicki 2010: 254), who in turn influenced a younger generation of women comics writers (Libicki, Davis, Phoebe Gloeckner) to produce their own gonzo literary comics.

Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel (2014), the debut graphic novel by Anya Ulinich, situates itself, implicitly and explicitly, in this tradition of gonzo literary comics. Its self-conscious literariness manifests itself most conspicuously in the allusions to the literary canon that litter the text. There are references to Anglophone novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Ulinich 2014: 26, 60), *The Bell Jar* (72), *Wuthering Heights* (91, 169), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Stephen King's *Misery* (341), to European classics such as *The Little Prince* (317) and *The Tin Drum* (184), to the great Russian authors, Puskin (63, 177), Dostoyevsky (87, 90, 92), Tolstoy (270, 273) and Chekhov (242, 271, 274), and the Russian expatriate and naturalized American authors, Joseph Brodsky (30) and Vladimir Nabokov (341). Appropriately enough, given that Ulinich is part of a generation of Russian Jewish emigres who have moved into the vanguard of American letters in the twenty-first century, however, the most significant intertexts in the novel are by Russian Jewish and American Jewish authors.⁵ Ulinich made her name with *Petropolis* (2007), a novel that takes its title from a poem by the Russian Jewish poet Osip Mandelstam, which itself borrows the Hellenized version of St Petersburg from an earlier generation of Russian writers such as Pushkin. In a characteristically self-reflexive episode, early on in the novel, Alik, the Russian childhood sweetheart of Lena, Ulinich's protagonist, nostalgically quotes the opening lines of Mandelstam's poem and Lena responds by informing him that 'my friend Kevin translates Mandelstam' (Ulinich 2014: 17). This exchange takes up the left-hand side of a full-page panel that is occupied on the right-hand side by a depiction of Lena and Alik as young art students (with the heading 'Moscow '88-'90') in which Alik is quoting the same lines, but this time they are rendered in Cyrillic.

This panel nicely demonstrates the sophistication of Ulinich's narrative and the complexity of its explorations of (the relationship between) memory, language and identity. Because the sequencing of panels in English-language comics conventionally runs from left to right, we are

likely to read the conversation in which Alik and Lena reminisce about their younger days before we read the dialogue of their younger selves, inverting the order of the actual occurrence of the events. Similarly, we will read the translation of the Mandelstam poem before we see (but do not read, unless we are fluent in Russian) the lines in the original. These chronologies are further complicated by the fact that the two halves of the panel mirror each other visually, producing a conflation of past and present (in both cases, the tall figure of Alik, pictured in profile, towers above Lena, who is walking just ahead of him), and by the fact that the text accompanying these images performs another temporal inversion, since the more recent representation uses the past tense (‘ ... and so we walked ... ’), whereas the reconstruction of the more distant past uses the present (‘ ... we walk and recite poems ... ’) (17, ellipses in original). Finally, this episode both invites the reader to identify Lena with Finkle herself and establishes an ironic distance between the two. On the one hand, Lena’s friend who translates Mandelstam seems to be a reference to Kevin Kinsella, a real-life poet and translator of Russian poetry based in Brooklyn and a friend of Ulinich’s, implying that Lena is simply a pseudonym for Ulinich. On the other hand, Lena’s first novel is called *The Village Idiot’s Guide to America* - another sly literary reference, the title parodying that of the first novel by her fellow Russian Jewish, naturalized American novelist Gary Shteyngart, *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* (2002) - rather than *Petropolis* and she betrays no knowledge of the importance of the Mandelstam poem assumes to the literary career of her creator. The blurring of these boundaries - between life and art, fact and fiction, autobiography and the novel, and the author and her gonzo self - are central to *Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrel* and in the remainder of this essay I want to focus on the ways in which Ulinich frames her interrogation of these categories in terms of an intertextual dialogue with an older, male, American Jewish literary tradition.

Ulinich’s engagement with the work of Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud whose critical and commercial success, together with that of Saul Bellow, moved Jewish American literature in the post-war period from the margins to the mainstream, conforms neither to the agonistic Bloomian idea of the anxiety of influence nor to the gynocritical tradition of intertextuality

established by pioneering feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar and Elaine Showalter. Rather than attempting metaphorically to overcome or supersede her predecessors, or placing herself in a distinctively 'female literary tradition which depends upon an at least implicit notion of intertextual relations between women writers' (Allen 2000: 144-45), or attempting to recover lost or marginalized female voices, or 'writing back' to a dominant 'patriarchal discourse' (Kundu 2008: 21), Ulinich instead adopts a palimpsestic model of intertextuality, in which she over-writes the male-authored precursor texts that underlie her own. Once again, Miriam Libicki offers a helpful explanation of this kind of intertextual practice when she describes her own response to the male literary gonzo comics artists as 'trac[ing] [my body] overtop [sic] shadows of these funny, tragic ... two-dimensional men' (Libicki 258).

Just as Libicki draws a self-portrait super-imposed over the outline of a male figure, so Ulinich stages a visual encounter between her gonzo self and the male authors whose intertexts *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* writes on top of. Roth appears in a dream sequence, sitting next to the Lena on a Greyhound bus. At first she addresses him with unequivocal enthusiasm: 'Oh my God, Philip Roth, is this really you? ... Listen, I love your books! You and I are so much alike! It's like we had the same parents! ... When I first read *Portnoy's Complaint* I was, like, "Holy shit, this is me!"' (182). However, when Roth rebuffs her, telling her 'You're nothing like me! ... You're a perverse hybrid of Alexander Portnoy and his mother!' (182-3), she turns on him, exclaiming: 'You're so mean! Guess what - I hated *Exit Ghost* so much I threw it in a subway trash can!' (183). Paradoxically, however, this rapid transition from hero-worship to rejection itself constitutes a homage of sorts to Roth, since it self-consciously mimics the trajectory, and even contains verbal echoes, of encounters in Roth's own fiction between his gonzo selves and their fanatical admirers who are also (would-be) authors, such as those between Alvin Pepler and Nathan Zuckerman in *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), Jimmy Ben-Joseph and Zuckerman in *The Counterlife* and Moishe Pipik and 'Philip Roth' in *Operation Shylock*. In the first of these, Pepler tells Zuckerman (Roth's favourite gonzo self, whose literary career closely resembles his own) that *Carnovsky* (the novel

that gains Zuckerman the same sort of fame, fortune and notoriety as *Portnoy's Complaint* did for Roth) 'is the story of my life no less than yours' (Roth 1989: 238) - a hyperbolic claim echoed in Lena's assertion that 'it's like we had the same parents!' - before denouncing him when his attempts to be taken seriously as a fellow writer are dismissed. In *The Counterlife*, Jimmy Ben-Joseph greets Nathan with the words 'It's really you ... You wrote about my family!' - his incredulity at running into the famous author and claims to metaphorical kinship with Zuckerman anticipating Lena's responses to Zuckerman's creator - before attempting to coerce Zuckerman into helping him hijack a plane (Roth 1987: 95). Finally, in *Operation Shylock*, Pipik, the author's gonzo self's nickname for the man who is impersonating his gonzo self, expresses his enthusiasm in a series of barely coherent exclamations - 'The books! Those books!' (Roth 1993: 71) - echoed by Lena's initial effusions when her dream-vision of Roth appears next to her on the bus.

If these allusions to Roth's oeuvre in one sense reinforce the correspondences between his meeting with Lena and episodes in his own work, however, this should not disguise important differences between them. Firstly, the dynamic in Roth's novels between the celebrity author and his fan/rival is inverted in Ulinich's book: here it is the author's gonzo self, Lena, who is star-struck by, and then resentful of, the more feted author. Secondly, the celebrity author here exists in what Roth has called, after Paul Goodman (another American-Jewish author who wrote autobiographical fiction and fictionalized autobiography) the 'unwritten world': it is Roth himself, rather than one of his gonzo selves, whom Lena dreams of (Roth 2001: xiii). On the other hand, Lena, as Ulinich's gonzo self, exists in the 'written world,' a fact underlined by Roth's insistence that she resembles his own fictional characters more than himself, thereby disrupting the distinction between the two, as does the fact that in another sense Roth himself only exists here as a figment of the fictional Lena's imagination. Their surreal nature notwithstanding, the interactions between Roth's protagonists and their secret sharers actually take place--within the fictional framework of the novels in which they appear--whereas Lena's dialogue with Roth occurs only as what Freud would have called a dream-work. However, the status of this dream is profoundly ambiguous. If we read

Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel as fiction, then the dream is no more or less authentic than the rest of the narrative, but simply another part of the fictional world the author has constructed. If we read it as a thinly-veiled autobiography, or a graphic *roman à clef*, then the dream is both more and less authentic than the rest of the narrative: less so because it is the product of the gonzo self's unconscious, or rather of her reconstruction, from memory, of this self's dream-work, and therefore is at several removes from reality; more so because dreams, even allowing for the fact that when retold they must always be mediated through the conscious mind, offer uncensored access to the dreamer's fears and desires. The indeterminacy of the dream (is it a self-conscious fabrication, part of the dense weave of intertextuality that runs through the narrative, or is it a faithful representation of a dream that the author actually had?) reflects larger questions - existential, aesthetic and ethical - that are raised by and explored through Ulinich's *modus operandi* in *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel*.

These questions all revolve around Ulinich's self-representation, which is replete with paradoxes. On the one hand, Ulinich invites her readers to identify Lena Finkle as a gonzo version of herself: not only do her biography and career correspond closely to those of Ulinich herself, she resembles her visually (which is to say that she is recognizably a self-portrait) and is represented in most respects as a credible version of the author. On the other hand, her status as a gonzo self is complicated by the fact that this self is herself represented as the author of her own narrative and by the fact that it is bifurcated, or, rather, split into a number of constituent selves. In fact, my previous assertion that Lena looks very like her creator needs to be qualified: this is only the case in those parts of the book set in the recent past. When Ulinich represents a younger Lena she depicts her non-realistically, as a cartoonish figure – a distinction that also applies to the representation of the worlds these two Lenas inhabit -- and these past and present selves are often directly juxtaposed in adjacent panels or even within the same panel. Secondly, Ulinich depicts a miniature but otherwise naturalistically drawn version of Lena, whom I shall call mini-Lena, who haunts the contemporary protagonist throughout the narrative, interrogating, admonishing and teasing her, exposing her illusions and self-delusions. Lena herself variously calls this diminutive doppelganger a 'soul', a

‘conscience’ and an ‘inner self’ (42) but she is really more of an externalization of her sceptical and self-questioning consciousness, a (self-)satirical superego or jaded Jiminy Cricket. Finally, Lena is also represented during Part Four of the narrative – ‘my year of unreasonable grief (abridged)’ - as a duck in the scenes in which she visits her former lover and begs him to take her back; if mini-Lena might be thought of Lena’s superego, then duck-Lena, as I shall call her, can be seen as a visual representation of her id, her unmediated inner self, exposed.

This proliferation of selves is also mediated through the graphic novel’s intertexts. Lena’s dream-dialogue with Philip Roth ends with Roth advising her, in terms that implicitly link him to mini-Lena (who typically addresses Lena by her surname in curt sentences): ‘Don’t read me, Finkle. Read Malamud. **Read “The Magic Barrel”**’ (182, bold font in original). This is immediately followed, as Lena wakes up, by a panel in which the man actually seated next to her is reading a copy of Malamud’s collection of the same name. Although this is the first explicit reference to Malamud in the narrative itself, Ulinich signals her debt to him long before this point, most obviously in the title of her graphic novel, which incorporates that of Malamud’s story, itself the title-story of a collection which won the National Book Award in 1959, the year after its publication and in the name of its protagonist, (a feminized version of Leo Finkle, the anti-hero of ‘The Magic Barrel’). In fact, the allusions to Malamud begin even before the main narrative: in the largest of a montage of images that adorn its front cover, which depicts Lena reading a book on which is visible the single word ‘Bernard’; and in its dedication, which reads: ‘For Effie and Emily ... With apologies to Bernard Malamud’ (n.p.).

Ulinich also takes elements of the plot of her graphic novel from Malamud. In ‘The Magic Barrel’, the barrel is a receptacle in which Pinye Salzman, a marriage broker, claims to keep the details of his clients, as his ‘drawers are already filled to the top’ (Malamud 1968: 172). Later, Malamud’s narrator, using free indirect discourse to paraphrase the thoughts of Leo Finkle, the rabbinical student who hires Salzman to help him find a wife after being ‘advised by an acquaintance that he might find it easier to win himself a congregation if he were married’ (170),

adds the epithet ‘magic’ in a tone of acerbic irony, to signify Leo’s belief that the barrel was ‘probably a fragment [sic] of the imagination’ (185). In Ulinich’s story the equivalent of the magic barrel is an online dating agency Lena signs up to -- on the advice of her friend, Eloise, and egged on by mini-Lena, who reminds her that ‘OKCupid is free!’ (96) -- in order to broaden her sexual experience (in this context Lena’s ‘magic barrel’ might also be interpreted lewdly). This is another of those episodes in the narrative at which the relationship between autobiography and fiction becomes vexed: although OKCupid actually exists, in the context of the graphic novel it also seems to allude to the moment in Malamud’s story when Salzman is described as a ‘commercial cupid’ (176). There are other parallels between the experiences of Leo and Lena Finkle: for example, Leo’s first date is recommended by Salzman on the basis that she hails from a ‘Well Americanized family’ (173), while the chief attraction of Lena’s first husband is that his status as a U.S. citizen offers her the chance to obtain a green card. However, the most important thing that Malamud offers Ulinich is not narrative structure but a way of thinking about the relationship between authenticity, intertextuality and the ethical and aesthetic obligations of an artistic vocation.

In her review of *Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrel*, Yevgeniya Traps implies that Ulinich’s book is a sort of hard-boiled updating and contemporary critique of Malamud’s tale: ‘Like Leo, she [Lena] looks for it [love] in a magic barrel of sorts. And when redemption does not come, Lena throws the barrel away and writes a realistic story about it’ (Traps 2014). However, Lena reads ‘The Magic Barrel’ itself as a realist critique of romantic notions of love. When she awakes from her dream-dialogue with Roth, Lena looks across at the man in the adjoining seat reading Malamud’s book and is struck by his ‘odd face ... like a child and an old man at once,’ and by the fact that ‘he looks so ... familiar’ (184, ellipses in original). These observations echo Leo’s reaction when he first comes upon the photograph of Salzman’s daughter, Stella, with whom he becomes infatuated: ‘It gave him the impression of youth ... yet age ... the eyes ... were hauntingly familiar, yet absolutely strange’ (183). When she questions him about the book, ‘the orphan’ (the nickname by

which Lena refers to him in the rest of the narrative) tells her that the title story is ‘about ... true love,’ but after Lena has read it herself she contradicts him:

This isn’t a story about true love ... See here, at the end, as Leo is running toward Stella, it says: ‘He pictured, in her, his won redemption. Violins and lit candles revolved in the sky’. Notice how the point of view switches here - from Leo’s to the author’s? Malamud butts in with his sarcastic ‘violins’ to show that Leo’s ‘love’ for Stella is nothing more than panicked grasping for some kind of meaning ... It’s a story about a crisis of faith and the rush to self-delusion. (188)

Later, Lena tells ‘the orphan’ that ‘The Magic Barrel’ is ‘the story of my life!’: a punchline of sorts to the metafictional joke that begins when Lena thinks to herself, as she starts to read Malamud’s story: ‘Funny, a story about a guy whose name is almost identical to mine ... and it’s about dating, too!’ (186). She also suggests that ‘there should be a sequel where they [Stella and Leo] get together and disappoint each other’ (189). In one sense, the graphic novel is that sequel: Lena and ‘the orphan’ soon embark on a passionate affair that begins with violins and lit candles (depicted hovering in the sky above the lovers in a Chagallesque splash-panel) but ends abruptly, when the orphan suddenly announces, ‘I have to break up’ (278). The absence of any explanation, the subtle evasion of responsibility indicated by ‘have to’ (implying that he has no choice) and the use of the first person, which transforms the dissolution of a partnership into a unilateral action that allows no possibility of negotiation, let alone reciprocity, all suggest the irrevocable nature of ‘the orphan’s’ decision, so that it comes as no surprise that he ignores Lena’s repeated pleas, in her incarnation as forlorn, tearful duck-Lena, to persuade him to take her back.

On the face of it, then, Lena resembles Leo in her naive romanticism - her projection of love onto an unworthy object - with the difference that she learns of her own self-delusion through a painful process of disillusionment. But Lena’s reading of Malamud’s story is not the only possible

one. Malamud himself saw it as being about the ‘the problem of not loving, of not being able to love’ (qtd in Davis 2007: 163) and his biographer, Philip Davis, interprets what he calls the ‘sudden commitment’ that Leo Finkle displays at the end of the story as a self-transformative act analogous to the way in which the author himself had had to ‘make and remake himself in the struggle of writing, fashioning his vocation out of the ordinary in making his characters also fully realize themselves’ (162). If we follow the implications of Davis’s reading then Leo Finkle is a gonzo self for Malamud, just as his namesake Lena is a gonzo self for Ulinich. The protagonist’s inability to love is indeed a theme that runs through *Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrel*, as demonstrated by the image of her ‘freeze-dried heart,’ which recurs in various forms over the course of the book: as the opening image of Part One of the narrative, enclosed in shrink-wrap; and then, in successive representations, as partly thawed, engorged, wilted, and finally pierced by a screwdriver (the symbolic representation of ‘the orphan,’ whose only real commitment appears to be to the renovation of his apartment). More than this, however, it is a book about the artist’s vocation and the way in which Lena has to make and remake herself in order, finally, to commit herself to it -- and in this context another interpretation of ‘magic barrel’ suggests itself: a metaphor for the mysterious alchemy of art.

Ulinich’s graphic novel begins with Lena receiving an invitation from the U.S. consulate general in St. Petersburg to give a series of talks at colleges and libraries in Russia. Her initial response to this -- ‘I get to stay at a fancy hotel and impersonate a fancy “American novelist!”’ (4) - is partly facetious, but it also reveals an uneasiness about her status as an American and as a novelist. She struggles throughout most of the narrative to finish her second novel, eventually dumping her manuscript into the trash, telling herself, ‘I should stop pretending to be a novelist and go get a real job’ (343) and even denouncing the medium itself: ‘Novels are so stupid! With their plots, deliberate as garbage truck routes, and character development, steady as garbage collection’ (342). These feelings of fraudulence extend to her experiences of teaching writing (‘I feel like I’m participating in a **scam!**’ (102, bold font in original)), a source of sharp satirical comedy in the

novel but also of existential angst (the words ‘impersonate’, ‘pretending’ and ‘scam’ all suggest a profound sense of self-alienation, of inauthenticity). It is tempting to read Lena’s doubts about her credentials as a writer and her disillusionment with the novel form autobiographically, as an explanation for Ulinich’s decision to move into the graphic novel form. On the other hand, Ulinich trained as a visual artist before becoming a novelist, so, in a sense, the graphic novel might be seen as a return to an earlier vocation rather than a renunciation of her career as a novelist. Furthermore, Lena is as self-deprecating about her artistic talents as she is about her abilities as a novelist, superimposing over a beautiful, impressionistic representation of the ballroom in the Hermitage Gallery a note on a scrap of paper that reads: ‘Alik could probably do a good job drawing the ballroom, but I **give up!**’ (46, bold font in original). Ayelet Waldman sees this lack of confidence - the feeling of being an impostor of sorts, of impersonating an artist rather than authentically being one - as pervasive, inflecting the balance between text and image in the narrative:

Ulinich’s reliance on hand-lettered dialogue and captioning might be considered excessive. In later sections, the images are sometimes reduced to ornamentation, stranded in and around massive captions and dialogue balloons. It’s as if Ulinich doesn’t trust in her abilities as an illustrator, when in fact the novel’s more pictorial panels are invariably its most gripping. And yet it’s also possible to read Ulinich’s irrepressible, ever-expanding text bubbles and balloons as an authentic and ultimately touching expression of the insecurity of the immigrant, affirming herself in a language other than the one in which that self was originally constituted, pressing her point without confidence it will be understood. (Waldman 2014)

The paradox Waldman identifies here - that Ulinich’s, and Lena’s, feelings of inauthenticity manifest themselves, formally and thematically, with a compelling authenticity - is at the heart of the novel. Lena is an outsider in every context she finds herself in: when she first arrives in America

she feels out of place in the Hasidic Jewish community that sponsors her ('I really don't like learning how to be a Jew') and she doesn't feel that she belongs fully either in her newly adopted homeland ('I'm an immigrant, *not* an expatriate') or in her mother country ('I'd gone back to Moscow just twice in the last twenty years') (73, 8, 8, italics in original). When her friend Yvonne warns her that she is putting men off by 'looking at men like you're going to eat them', advising her to 'look more ... demure ... Close your mouth, and smile like the white girl next door,' Lena demurs: "'I'm not the 'white girl next door'. I can't even fake it'" (163). It is only through the rejection of these inauthentic selves - the religious Jew, the Russian expat, the 'fancy American novelist,' the 'white girl next door' - and the reconciliation of her authentic selves (Lena, mini-Lena and duck-Lena) - that Lena is able finally to embrace her vocation as a writer.

For most of the narrative, Lena's relationship with mini-Lena is fractious. When she decides to consummate her long-term, on-off relationship with Alik, Lena expels her alter ego, leaving her in the hallway outside her hotel room, complaining that, 'She really doesn't like when I point out that she's being a goddamned cliché' (42). Later, she dangles her over a hot cup of coffee when she accuses her of being 'an excellent immigrant child, Finkle, **a.ka. a smart drone!**' (92, bold font in original). Finally, after being turned out of 'the orphan's' apartment, duck-Lena drops mini-Lena down a drain, telling her that she has no use for her 'materialist rationality' (318). However, after Lena has discarded her duck alter ego, mini-Lena reappears, unharmed, and they have the following exchange:

'You're alive!' [thinks Lena]

'And you're not a duck!' [says mini-Lena]

'No, I'm not a duck anymore ...' [thinks Lena]

'You have your own story, Finkle.' [says mini-Lena] (350, ellipsis in original)

Mini-Lena's enigmatic final line here can be interpreted in a number of ways: as a reference to the fact that she has stopped trying to live vicariously, through (the stories of) others (Alik, 'the orphan,' her mother and her children); that she has successfully sloughed off her previous inauthentic impersonations and taken ownership of her own narrative (earlier Lena had written that she 'couldn't write anymore, because I no longer believed the story I was telling'); and as another metafictional allusion, to the fact that her existence has, from the start, seemed determined by her literary antecedent and near-namesake, her story a mere echo of Malamud's (168). What is clear, however, is that an unprecedented note of affirmation is being struck here, one that is echoed in the episode in which Lena bids a final farewell to 'the orphan.' When she tells him of her intention to write about him, mini-Lena exclaims: 'Wow, you're a real writer, Finkle, if those are the first words out of your mouth ... ' (358, ellipsis in original). 'The orphan' is rather less enthusiastic, worrying that 'you'll turn me into a stereotype, like the characters in those mean satires you like' (358) but Lena, buoyed up by her new ally mini-Lena, announces that, 'I'm better than that' (358). Again, this line is ambiguous, since 'better' here might be taken either as Lena's claim that she is too skillful a writer to flatten 'the orphan's' complexities into a stereotype, or as an assertion that she is too morally scrupulous to misrepresent him.

In fact, I believe both meanings are implied in Lena's new-found commitment to her own story, and in the way she represents the dialogue that directly precedes these parting words between the former lovers. Encountering 'the orphan' by chance, in a local bar, Lena is horrified when he tells her that as a boy he once killed a pet dog because his mother 'told [him] to', asking the 'boy-man' (269), as another of his former lovers refers to him, 'What else did your mother make you do?' (354, 342, 356). 'The orphan's' reply is rendered as a series of squiggles inside a speech bubble, so that readers can only infer what he might have said from the distress on Lena's face (itself partially obscured by the fact that her hands are covering her face), from the little he has said about his mother earlier in the narrative (namely, that 'she'd wake up at noon, come downstairs and ask my brother and me to help her *not kill herself* that day'), and from comments that he makes to

Lena about the existence of ‘bad mothers, who abuse’ (232, 264, italics and bold font in original). The implications of the censorship of ‘the orphan’s’ speech are complex and manifold. Does Lena decide not to divulge the details of ‘the orphan’s’ speech because she is not prepared to, as Vanessa Davis says of Robert Crumb, be ‘so mean’ as to ‘exploit ... people and experiences in my life in the most gratuitous possible way, for the sake of my “art”’? If so, then this suggests that she regards ethical considerations as more important than aesthetic ones (Davis 2010: n.p.). However, she doesn’t demonstrate similar restraint anywhere else in the narrative: if the censorship of the speech implies that *Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrel* is a graphic *roman à clef*, then it raises the question of why other potentially embarrassing revelations have not been excised. If ‘the orphan’ is referred to as such to protect the identity of someone in the unwritten world on whom he is based, why is this privilege not afforded to other characters? Finally, even if the precise nature of ‘the orphan’s’ revelations remain unknown, the mere fact of obscuring them invites speculation that might be just as damaging as any knowledge would have been; more so, arguably, since a reader who assumes that what he has to say is too shocking to print might construct scenarios even more lurid than whatever it was he might have said in the unwritten world.

All of this is to say that Lena both does and does not keep her promise to ‘the orphan’ not to be ‘mean’ in her representation of him, an ambiguity heightened by the fact that Lena herself is of course only the fictionalized author of the book, a gonzo self, and therefore her moral scruples are not necessarily coterminous with those of Ulinich. These tensions - between the aesthetic imperatives of the artistic vocation and the ethical obligations of friendship - together with the resonance of the term ‘mean,’ which recalls Lena’s outburst at Roth earlier in the narrative (‘You’re so mean!’), implicitly invokes another of Roth’s novels: *The Ghost Writer* (1979). In this novel a young Nathan Zuckerman, having alienated his family by publishing a story that, in his father’s words, ‘as far as Gentiles are concerned ... [will be read as] about kikes ... and their love of money’ (Roth 1989: 68), goes to visit E.I. Lonoff, a reclusive American Jewish author of short stories in whose greatest work ‘the pitiless author seem[ed] to ... teeter just at the edge of self-impalement’

(11). When he arrives, he meets not just Lonoff himself but his highly-strung wife, Hope, and a beautiful young woman, Amy Bellette, whose European accent and dark looks prompt Zuckerman to embark on an extended fantasy (which becomes the second part of the novel) in which he imagines her to be Anne Frank, who has secretly survived the war and decided to remain incognito because only if she was believed to be 'dead [would] she ... [have] written ... a book with the force of a masterpiece' (104-5). Although Zuckerman imagines himself wooing and marrying 'Anne Frank' - who would then serve as the ultimate riposte to his father's accusations of giving comfort to anti-Semites - it turns out that Amy is in love with Lonoff. In the dramatic climax to the story, an over-wrought Hope tells Lonoff she would prefer him to take Amy as his lover rather than continuing to live a life of martyred self-denial with her. When Lonoff dismisses her suggestion, she announces that she is leaving and rushes out of the house into the snow. The novel ends with Lonoff 'administering [Zuckerman's] rites of confirmation' into what Henry James (who is an important presence in the novel) called 'the sacred office' of fiction, telling him that he is 'curious' to read the 'interesting story' that he anticipates Zuckerman will fashion out of his experiences under Lonoff's roof, that he is 'not so nice and polite' in his fiction as he is in life, and that this is a good thing (128).

The resonances of these events for Ulinich's novel extend well beyond the debates it stages about the ethics and aesthetics of confessional fiction and the vexed relationship between the written and unwritten worlds. 'Anne Frank' is the nickname that Lena's first husband gives her (within the pages of the graphic novel he only ever addresses her by this name) and Lena's dream-vision of Roth seems to allude not only to the episodes from Roth's fiction that I discuss earlier but also to a passage in *The Ghost Writer* in which Amy/Anne daydreams about presenting her diary to Lonoff, who is teaching her creative writing at Athene College. Roth/Zuckerman conclude this fantasy of their own fantasy-figure with the sobering caveat: 'Perhaps she was only a very young writer on a bus dreaming a very young writer's dreams' (102). Since Lonoff is widely regarded as having been based partly on Bernard Malamud, this means that Amy/Anne's desire for his authorial

approval not only mirrors Zuckerman's in the context of *The Ghost Writer* but anticipates Lena's fantasy of kinship with Roth (in her dream) and Ulinich's assertion of kinship with Malamud (through the title of her book and in all the other ways that I have demonstrated over the course of this essay). Finally, the fact that Lonoff not only condones Zuckerman's confessional *modus operandi* but encourages him to persist with it, even if it means exploiting his own domestic discomfort, provides implicit justification for Ulinich's mining of her own (and other people's) lives in her fiction; for her audacious and hilarious brand of what Lynda Barry has called 'autobifictionalography' (Chute 2010:3). Miriam Libicki claims that 'gonzo artists are gonzo artists because they just can't be nice. If we were nice and dutiful, our artwork would be lousy' (262), but the slippage here between the use of the third-person plural ('they') and the first-person plural ('we') betrays an ambivalence on Libicki's part, a hesitancy in identifying herself with the 'meanness' she deems necessary for successful gonzo art. It is this ambivalence that Ulinich works through in the course of her graphic novel, creating a gonzo self (Lena) who in turn creates a number of further gonzo selves (mini-Lena, duck-Lena and the imaginary Philip Roth) who are meaner to Lena than she is to anyone else. Like Roth's Lonoff, Ulinich and Lena 'teeter just at the edge of self-impalement' without ever falling into the abyss of self-negation, ultimately arriving at an authentic sense of themselves as artists and writers.

NOTES

¹ Throughout this essay, I will be using the term authenticity in the sense that Adam Kelly defines it: as 'an ideal' which sees 'truth to the self as an end and not simply as a means' and which is characterized by 'self-examination rather than other-directed communication' (Kelly 2014).

² For an excellent discussion of the use of literary references in *Fun Home*, see Bauer 2014.

³ For an excellent discussion of Noomin's story (which was first published in 1991), and this episode in particular, see Lightman 2013.

⁴ This vignette is depicted in a borderless panel at the bottom of the second page of the strip, consisting of a sequence of three self-portraits of the artist propped up in bed. In the first she is

smiling and exclaiming “Ha!,” presumably signifying either amusement or recognition, or both; then she is frowning and rolling her eyes, suggesting dismay or disgust, or both; and finally she has fallen asleep and is snoring. The only text accompanying these images is situated directly above the panel and does not refer explicitly to Roth or his novel, instead posing a number of rhetorical questions related to the title of the strip, which alludes to her move from Brooklyn to Southern California: ‘Isn’t homesickness just part of self-exile? Isn’t it a Jewish legacy to not fit in really anywhere? Isn’t it always that you can take the girl out of Brooklyn, but not Brooklyn out of the girl?’ (Davis 2010: n.p.). These questions are echoed in a panel early on in *Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrel* with the heading “Brooklyn, 2001,” in which the eponymous protagonist poses questions that recall Davis’s to herself in a thought-bubble: “Why **these** people? Why **this** city? Why **this** language?” (9, bold font in original).

⁵ Others include David Bezomzgis, Gary Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar, Boris Fishman, Keith Gessen, Nadia Kalman, Irina Reyn, Sana Krasikov and Ellen Litman. For an excellent discussion of some of these authors, see Senderovich 2015.

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