

**In Search of (a Jewish American Writer's) Biography:  
Hero and Antihero in Alan Lelchuk's *Ziff: A Life?***

"Maybe life is stranger than fiction"  
A. Lelchuk, *Ziff: A Life?*

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Writing a life is not inherently unequivocal and straightforward just because it has to take into account a number of pertinent facts. Rather, numerous considerations add to and underline the complexity of the undertaking. Among them are the possibilities that the author of biography is actually a writer of fiction; that the subject written about is a writer himself and the author's former close friend; and that, measured by the celebrity standard of literary success, the subject of biography is far outshining the biographer-novelist. As a result, questions arise as to the subject or hero of biography, the writer who is chronicling the subject's life, and the purpose of the work. On a broader scale, the notion of hero and antihero and the definition of these terms within a specific cultural context are at stake.

In his 2003 novel *Ziff: A Life?*, the Jewish American writer Alan Lelchuk takes up these and a range of related issues. Focusing on two Jewish American writers who both represent and ironically undercut the established concepts of hero and antihero, the novel raises the question of what it means to write a life. More precisely, probing the boundaries between life and art, the tension between fact and fiction, and the reliability and factual inclusiveness of biography, it illustrates the hazards of a writer's writing a literary life. In the context of Lelchuk's novel, this paper will explore the notions of hero and antihero as they pertain to writing, literature, and the literary marketplace in contemporary American culture. It will probe the issues of writing a life, of fact versus fiction, of postmodernism and its pitfalls, of literary friendship versus envy, of Jewishness and the Holocaust, and of the latter's role in and the very definition of literary success versus failure.

While the novel's epigraph by Virginia Woolf highlights the problems of writing biography, it also applies to autobiography, such as Anzia Yeziarska's *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. Published in 1950 as Yeziarska's autobiography of her life in America as a Jewish immigrant, a writer, and a woman, it actually is a factual account much adorned by fiction. In fact, Yeziarska's daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen warns in her introduction that *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* should not be taken at face value

or “simply be called an autobiography. For it contains as much fiction as fact. Rather, it is Anzia’s conception or interpretation of her life, much refined by art” (Henriksen 12). Yet Henriksen admits that seen from this perspective, the inventions her mother “chose to add to the spare essence of her life [...] make this fictional autobiography more truth-revealing” (Henriksen 13). In terms of writing a life, Henriksen thus argues against the mere accumulation of facts in favor of making sense of a life, if need be by means of invention.

In her recent biography of Virginia Woolf, Hermione Lee equally holds that “There is no such thing as an objective biography” (Lee 3). To illustrate this very point for his biography-writing novelist in *Ziff: A Life?*, Lechuk has chosen an epigraph from Woolf’s Notebooks as a thought-provoking argument. Here Woolf maintains that though “facts have their importance,” the biographer’s task is to “extract the atom” of a person’s life. Thus “the best method would be to separate the two kinds of truth. Let the biographer print fully, completely, accurately, the known facts without comment; Then let him write the life as fiction” (Woolf cited in Lee 10 and Lechuk, *Ziff* XIII).

In Lechuk’s novel, this is exactly the precept Daniel Levitan learns to follow in the course of writing the biography of his former friend and fellow Jewish American writer Arthur Ziff. Yet in a twist to the complexity of this undertaking, the framing of the novel’s plot both creates and adds to an ironic undercutting of the issues involved. And while “it is the ingenious plot that makes the book truly memorable” (Gordon 2), the fast-moving and absorbing novel encompasses a whole range of different novelistic genres at once. It is a detective novel full of suspense and literary sleuthing. It is a literary novel replete with allusions to a wide range of well-known literary figures and works. It is a literary biography enveloped in a novel on the art and pitfalls of writing biography. It is a Jewish American novel that challenges the pieties of ethnic writing. It is a satire on the literary marketplace in contemporary America.

Moreover, adding to the novel’s allure to the literary reader, it is a *roman à clef* featuring a number of characters with a close resemblance to well-known real-life persons.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the hero Arthur Ziff is clearly modeled on the writer Philip Roth,

<sup>1</sup> Whereas the *roman à clef* aims at veiling the true identity of described persons and events, its appeal to the reader lies in discovering clues that link its characters and plot to often well-known actual persons and events. Other examples in contemporary American literature are novels by Saul Bellow. In *Humboldt’s Gift*, Bellow fashioned the title character on the American Jewish writer Delmore Schwartz and in *Ravelstein*, he drew the title figure as a likeness to friend and author Allan Bloom. By contrast, Philip Roth denies that his 2004 novel *The Plot Against America* “is a roman à clef to the present moment in America” (Roth, “The Story Behind...” 11).

while his counterpart, the writer Daniel Levitan, draws heavily on the novel’s creator, Alan Lechuk. The literary friendship between Ziff and Levitan is, in turn, based on the former real-life friendship and important working relationship between Roth and Lechuk. Furthermore, the unnamed Israeli writer sought out by Levitan is a fictional image of Aharon Appelfeld. And Ziff’s French ex-wife and prominent actress Jeanne Lemaire is obviously fashioned on Roth’s British ex-wife and famous actress Claire Bloom, including her 1996 post-divorce, tell-all memoir *Leaving a Doll’s House*. Whereas these references could have served as trivial gossip on the above celebrities and their human frailties, Lechuk transforms them into the material of a literary novel that moves beyond topical allusions to larger issues. He translates actual characters and events into a sharply probing, action-driven narrative that takes the reader from continent to continent and from one breath-taking adventure to another.

More importantly, the references provide a rich source of intertextuality with the work of both Roth and Lechuk. Thus an annotated bibliography in the novel’s appendix on Ziff’s works sets the writer Ziff in perspective, while casting an ironic light on the writer Roth. At the same time, allusions to Lechuk’s previous works serve to establish him as a worthy counterpart to Ziff/Roth. Foremost among the hinted-at texts is Lechuk’s first novel, the 1973 *American Mischief*, on the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 70s that firmly established Lechuk’s literary reputation. Yet, for its sexual explicitness and challenge to Norman Mailer,<sup>2</sup> it earned Lechuk the name of *enfant terrible*. An epithet also widely used for Roth, it again establishes a link between the two. In addition, *American Mischief* offered Lechuk an initial view of the vagaries of the publishing world (Rosenthal 65/66) that figure large in the Ziff novel.

In the two writers Ziff and Levitan, the novel presents a pair of figures that are both opposites and complementary doubles. They are hero and antihero in terms of their literary success, and alter egos in terms of the similarity of their work. To the admiring yet wary Levitan, the provocative if tantalizingly enigmatic Ziff is “one of the two or three most famous (serious) writers in the country, maybe in the world,” who through his books has created “an aura of mystery about his true self and real adventures, especially sexual ones,” has become “the great demon of Jewish orthodoxy and conventionalism, the *dybbuk* enemy of the rabbis and suburbanites,” and has wound up “in a marriage that was second only to Marilyn M. and Arthur M.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Mailer did not approve of the way Lechuk portrayed him in *American Mischief*, where the revolutionary student Lenny Pincus takes the character ‘Norman Mailer’ by his word and fulfills the writer Mailer’s anarchic credo by killing the ‘Mailer’ character.

in celebrity prominence.”<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the successful if controversial Ziff, Levitan feels a failure as a writer. The biography project on Ziff therefore seems a challenge to be taken seriously, as it could put him “back on the literary map” (ZAL 5). But Levitan the novelist feels incompetent as a biographer. He is also divided on his attitude towards Ziff, torn between fond memories, hurt feelings, and writer’s envy. For ten years, the two had been best friends, sharing a love for literature. In fact, the well-established older Ziff had served as “mentor” and “guide” (ZAL 17) to the emerging writer Levitan, and spurring the younger one to write his first successful novel, Ziff had stood for “clarity, honesty, generosity, artistic truth” (ZAL 20). Since then, Levitan has felt betrayed by his friend for having used material from Levitan’s life and presented an unflattering portrait of him in his fiction.

Yet despite his misgivings and Ziff’s disapproval, Levitan decides to write the biography as a re-evaluation of their complex friendship. It will force him to face uncomfortable questions about his own repressed envy and about Ziff, “a man of rich paradoxes” (ZAL 65) whom he considers “smart, shrewd, self-protective, literary, and very clever [...but also] vulnerable, blind, narcissistic, [and] missing in certain emotions” (ZAL 65). Thus, pursuing Ziff’s “elusive persona” (ZAL 47) in a biography would not be “an act of revenge. It would be an act of clarification, a journey of the self” (ZAL 47) that would contribute to defining Ziff’s place in American letters. Furthermore, writing the biography would not only have to consider the obvious and hidden facts of Ziff’s life, but necessitate, as similarly argued by Henriksen and Woolf, a writer’s skill of invention or fictionalizing those facts in order to reveal a deeper truth.

How elusive both the facts and the so-called truth can be is one of the points of Lechuk’s novel. On the structural level, it is captured in the framing and the underlying satiric thrust. For rather than offering a straightforward narration of fiction, the novel is bracketed by a preamble and a postscript/appendix that add to the semblance of the account’s factuality. On the narrative level, the text is not a biography proper but a novel about writing a biography with interspersed rough drafts and quotations from the Ziff biography. This strategy of blurring the lines between fact and fiction is both a clever way of unsettling the reader and an ironic critiquing of postmodernist fiction by playing with its conventions. Obviously taking aim at Roth’s own works of postmodernist fiction and his play with ever more elusive fictional selves in numerous novels and his 1988 novelist’s counter-autobiography, *The Facts*, this ironic play is evident in the *Ziff* novel both in its framing and the

<sup>3</sup> Alan Lechuk, *Ziff: A Life?*, p. 4; subsequently cited as ZAL.

critical commentary by Levitan on the practice of postmodernist writing. Somewhat envious of Ziff’s success, Levitan criticizes the nature of postmodernism and the relation of fact and fiction in Ziff’s novels, “honed so carefully in order to tease and to obfuscate, to tease and to manipulate, to entice and to mislead” (ZAL 5). Missing an emotional depth in Ziff’s admittedly brilliant play with literary conventions, Levitan ultimately prefers Sterne, Dostoyevsky, and Joyce to the perceived “literary scam” (ZAL 97) of postmodernism.

In his hunt for clues linking Ziff’s reclusive life to his prominent place in American letters, Levitan is faced with Ziff’s staunch opposition to the biography project. Here again, the fictional realm of the novel and the figure of Ziff seem to mirror or rather anticipate actual facts of literary life in the relation between Roth and Lechuk. For it is striking that only few reviews appeared after publication of *Ziff: A Life?* and that one of the few, an article by Claire Dederer, is a harsh criticism of the novel’s satiric tone. Could it mean that a big player behind the scenes was objecting to Lechuk’s novel and was therefore manipulating both the output and the result of critical reactions? To put it differently, did/does Philip Roth, who carefully orchestrates the reviewing process of his own works,<sup>4</sup> also want to control his image in works by others?<sup>5</sup> Be it as it may, in the fictional space of the novel Ziff continually impedes Levitan’s biography project by threatening withdrawal of friendship and legal trouble for breach of privacy. Here again, the definition of fact and fiction is fluid. In addition, the antiheroes in Ziff’s two newly published short stories anger Levitan as they seem to bear an unfavorable resemblance to himself.

Levitan’s ensuing research into his subject of biography probe Ziff’s status as a literary hero and flesh out the relation between his life and work with previously unknown facts. The result, as ominously predicted, will “change the way we view Arthur Ziff, and hence the American cultural and literary scene” (ZAL 83). So far, Ziff’s stature has been marred by a bad boy image, particularly in the view of the Jewish community. In fact, for his early, sexually explicit novels in his native Jewish American setting, Ziff has been the bane of orthodox rabbis and self-righteous Jewish leaders, while achieving respect for his work in other quarters. According to the highly ironic annotated bibliography, one of Ziff’s early novels, *The Carnal*

<sup>4</sup> In a highly unusual step, Roth has publicly discussed in “The Story Behind ‘The Plot Against America’” the meaning of his 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*, before it was even published.

<sup>5</sup> So far, there “has been no full-scale biography of Roth,” as David Zucker notes (130). Yet reportedly, Roth has picked Ross Miller to write and publish his “definitive biography” by 2009/10 (Smith B2). Miller is also the editor of the collected works of Philip Roth for the Library of America, the first two volumes of which have been published in late 2005.

*Confessions of Rabbi Shmuel Siegel* (1966), was actually a “smashing send-up of official Judaism, a huge hit and savage satire, placing young Ziff dead center on the celebrity and infamy map” (ZAL 393).

However, in the process of revisiting and/or investigating Ziff’s writing career and present life, a remarkably positive if confusing counterimage emerges that differs radically from the negative perception of the “selfish man, the narcissist writer, the novelist of sex and dirt” (ZAL 106). Obviously, Ziff’s project of reinventing himself in fiction has translated into reinventing himself in a counterlife. In a turning point of the novel, this evolving mysterious and elusive picture prompts Levitan to wonder whether the implied statement in the biography’s projected title *Ziff: A Life* is not actually evolving into the question, *Ziff: A Life?* The added question mark thus indicates a further undermining of the certainty of facts and serves as commentary on the strangeness of life in relation to fiction.

This slowly surfacing revised image of Ziff is intricately linked with his Jewishness and the Holocaust as a new-found literary theme. Whereas both Ziff and Levitan had agreed early in their career to exclude any Holocaust material from their work, disdaining as they did the profitable publishing industry around the topic, Levitan now discovers projects by Ziff that run opposite to Ziff’s early critical position. So as another irony of the novel, Ziff’s bad boy image is miraculously revised and complemented by a good boy image based on hitherto hidden Jewish pieties, values, and attachments. At the center of these new revelations is Éva Kertész, a Hungarian professor of literature at Budapest University and member of “*ISCLT, the International Society for Contemporary Literature and Theater*” which is, as Levitan marvels enviously, “*a loyal band of a hundred literary pilgrims trekking around the world to talk books!*” (ZAL 290; italics RR) A staunch supporter of Ziff, Kertész offers purported facts of Ziff’s hidden life in Europe that show him in a completely new light. Allegedly, Ziff has helped launch a new generation of European writers and critics and is therefore treated, especially among Jews in formerly Communist Eastern Europe, “like a literary god” (ZAL 126). Despite obvious parallels to the real life Philip Roth, these fictional facts go clearly beyond what is known about him.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In the literary series “Writers from the Other Europe” – inaugurated by Roth in 1974 and managed as General Editor until 1989 – Roth had sought “to bring together outstanding and influential works of fiction by Eastern European writers” (Roth in Schulz 5). Here, he had introduced to American readers the Polish Jewish writer Bruno Schulz (a victim of the Nazis in 1942) with the short story collection *The Street of Crocodiles*. The series also helped to introduce to American readers the East European Holocaust survivor and Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld. He appears as a character in Roth’s 1993 novel *Operation Shylock* and also in Lechuk’s *Ziff*.

In the novel, Ziff considers himself the literary heir to Henry James and in Rome has instigated the restoration of the Isabel Archer palazzo for use as an American Studies Center. He has helped writers, critics, and students in need with monetary support. In Budapest, he has set up an Institute for victims of the Holocaust to give “Grants, fellowships, and/or other financial aid” to those with “unusual or noteworthy tales pertaining to the Holocaust” (ZAL 199). The more Levitan hears about Ziff’s European activities, the more he is mystified by the newly emerging Ziff and his glowing image of a literary and human hero.

But in a further subversive twist, Ziff’s Holocaust project in Budapest threatens to undercut his European good deeds. For Levitan comes to suspect that Ziff is exploiting these stories for his own purposes in a newly started Holocaust novel on Raoul Wallenberg. May it be that Ziff (like Roth) still adheres to his old mantra of relentlessly using in his fiction what has come into his life, or rather of deliberately taking advantage of other people to further his own literary reputation?<sup>7</sup> But in the course of his literary sleuthing Levitan also finds out that for years, the Jewish bad boy Ziff has secretly improved on his Jewish education by studying sacred Jewish texts with famous rabbis and experts in the field. Furthermore, the discovery of an apocryphal novella by Ziff again reveals him in a very different, sympathetic light. It tells the tale of how the prodigal Jew Ziff began “a journey of discovery of Judaism” (ZAL 313) through a passionate love affair with a young Jewish woman, remarkable for her orthodoxy, passion for civil rights, and conflicted emotions. The tale mesmerizes Levitan, both for its “Tolstoyan simplicity” (ZAL 316) and for “the full Ziffian irony [...] set up against the writer himself” (ZAL 307). For in the company of this woman, Ziff is thrown back to a different world, “a Jewish world circumscribed by ritual and atmosphere. One that he had sharply revolted against and mocked in his adult fiction” (ZAL 310). Thus, Levitan’s many discoveries about Ziff’s hidden life slowly piece together an image that includes not only Ziff as the protagonist of his literary biography but Ziff as a born-again Jew and a truly admirable character. In addition, Ziff’s Holocaust novel *The Wallenberg Wars*, when it is finally published to wide public acclaim, reestablishes his stature as a writer.

The subversive ending compounds the satiric thrust of the novel. It ironically undercuts any notion of unquestionable greatness and artistic quality, while returning to the issue of reality versus fiction. For Levitan has worked so hard on the biography in “a self-induced creative trance” (ZAL 331) that it has become his reality, while

<sup>7</sup> As to the analogy to Philip Roth, Paul Berman remarks that one of Roth’s “favorite transgressions is to seize on other people’s real-life tragedies [...] for crafty literary purposes of his own” (Berman 28).

the day-to-day life has faded into a kind of illusion. Furthermore, when Levitan's biography *Ziff: A Life* finally appears coincident with Ziff's new novel *The Wallenberg Wars*, Ziff's work wins out by far with the critics. To Levitan, who considers the literary value of Ziff's Holocaust novel vastly overrated, this is a clear case of the American "Culture Machine" (ZAL 349) at work. While it praises *The Wallenberg Wars* for being a Holocaust novel and by the well-known writer Arthur Ziff, it attacks Levitan's biography as a calumny and a failure by a second-rate writer.

In the novel's ultimate irony and clear attack on the workings of the global literary marketplace, Ziff is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003 for his remarkable work on Jewish themes. Levitan, for his part, has won a measure of celebrity himself, as his biography of Ziff has greatly contributed to revising Ziff's image. In the process, however, Levitan has lost himself, i.e., for the price of becoming an authority on Ziff, he has lost Ziff's friendship and himself as a writer. For with the burgeoning of Ziff societies and conferences,<sup>8</sup> Levitan's frequent speaking engagements as an expert on Ziff keep him from writing any more fiction of his own. Yet Levitan is left with the nagging suspicion that he has been set up by Ziff to write the biography all along. Has Ziff not needed, in addition to a Holocaust novel, a biography that showed him in a favorable light in order to attain the coveted Nobel Prize, a writer's ultimate reward?

While the satiric thrust of Lelchuk's novel is clearly directed at the inner workings of the literary market place and its influence on a writer's critical and/or economic success or failure, it also ironically undercuts the notion of hero or antihero in the literary world. The writer Ziff, an erstwhile free spirit, bad boy, and critic of American society, who metamorphosed into a model Jew and secret benefactor of the literary world, has possibly been corrupted by his will to fame and manipulated the system at all levels. His latest novel *The Wallenberg Wars*, obviously written to satisfy the requirements of the so-called Holocaust Industry, is only one case in point. Levitan, on the other hand, a complementary and counter figure to Ziff, is also ambivalent in the end. For years he had been a thoroughly "un-American" (ZAL 356) failure or antihero in terms of public recognition. Yet when his literary breakthrough finally occurs, it is no longer in his original field of writing fiction, but in the self-effacing endeavor of making sense of and reinventing his literary counterpart's life. Even though it comes at the high cost of obliterating his own life – both his personal one and that of a writer of fiction – Levitan remains caught up in the never-ending journey of explaining Ziff to himself and to others.

<sup>8</sup> As to Roth himself, a Philip Roth Society was founded in 2002 and the journal, *Philip Roth Studies*, was inaugurated in 2005.

Almost tragically, the irony has come full circle. For a number of complex paradoxes and questions remain. Who is this new Ziff? Is he not just another impersonation? And if so, after the carefully orchestrated reinvention of himself, what kind of truth does there remain to his life, as the question mark in the title implies? By the same token, how does the issue of authenticity reflect on Levitan and his project of writing a life? Whereas Ziff has lost his personal credibility in a relentless bid for literary fame and only lives on through what Levitan has made of him in his literary biography, Levitan has doubly lost his true self, both by writing Ziff's biography and by perpetuating the lie of his former friend's authentic self. Thus, the novel's ultimate irony lies in its final message that the deeper truth of biography, called for by Woolf, Henriksen, and Lee, has been obviated by inauthenticity – on the part of Ziff, a cynical manipulator and postmodern impostor; of Levitan, who as beneficiary of Ziff's celebrity status has conveniently abandoned his own pursuit of meaning in the writing of fiction; and of both writers in their self-sustaining, symbiotic relationship.

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