

## READING THE ZUCKERMAN CHRONICLE FOR MIMETIC ENDS – RHETORICAL ASPECTS OF NARRATIVE PROGRESSION

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*Abstract: On reading the Zuckerman series, readers are first and foremost concerned with tensions and instabilities and their resolution or relief in each and every book. An overview of the series shows that Roth chooses (most often than not) to resume tensions and instabilities every time he creates a new book in the series and tie (all) ends in Exit Ghost. It is equally true that about the middle of the series there are two moments in the reading process when the authorial audience have to effect changes in their assumptions and expectations. Firstly, with The Counterlife they literally have to stop trying to read for mimetic ends, recognizing that they are reading a synthetic construct, secondly, with American Pastoral (the first of a stylistically unified trilogy), they have to accept that the mimetic function of Nathan Zuckerman has been deliberately diminished, while the thematic and, most importantly, the synthetic have been augmented. Then again, Exit Ghost represents an unequivocal shift back to a full depiction of the mimetic functions of Nathan Zuckerman.*

*Keywords: the rhetorical approach to narrative; narrative progression; the Zuckerman series; the mimetic; tensions and instabilities*

When one reads a Zuckerman book one follows the mimetic tensions and instabilities and their resolution or relief until the end of the book. If one reads the books of the series in order, it becomes clear that Roth chooses to resume (some) tensions and instabilities every time he creates a new book in the series and that in 2007 with the publication of *Exit Ghost* the author ties (all) ends, readers' expectations are met and they experience a sense of completion. However, the mimetic evolution of this series of novels by Roth is rather surprising. In general, it is not an easy task for his readers to recognize a plot pattern and to know soon enough how it is going to continue and eventually end. Roth is playful and aware, however, that texts do not have only kind of meaning, the one that results by reading a book in isolation. He knows that after his readers have finished each and every book in the series, they will think about them retroactively and in the larger context of the series, reshaping them in the process. This is the type of activity which I resolve to undertake in this paper, activating a set of *rules of coherence* (Rabinowitz 141-158) with reference to the mimetic level of The Zuckerman series.

### The textual world

This series is Zuckerman's gigantic text of HIMSELF and of his art. These are all texts Zuckerman wrote himself about himself/other protagonists/significant characters and the process of writing these books. If the first four books are roughly chronicles of four key moments in his own life as a writer, the next four are the result of the imaginative force of Zuckerman's mind: *The Counterlife* is a literary construct made up of incomplete analogies, inconsistent and contradictory intentions, multiple, overlapping, and centerless selves, whereas the American trilogy is a series of literary reconstructions of other people's lives, framed by Zuckerman's own (briefly depicted) biographical circumstances. Finally, *Exit, Ghost* is a concluding (roughly) autobiographical narration. The only time when Zuckerman

does not sublimate the (real) things that happened to him – is when he delivers “The Prague Orgy”.

The Zuckerman series is, without doubt, a **personal-discovery series of books**. Each book jolts us into accepting a particular meaning about the relationship between art and life. Each progression carries us toward a climax in which Zuckerman suddenly acquires some key knowledge that gradually changes his perspective on life and art. As such, it mainly calls for the application of rules of signification requiring us to generalize from the protagonist's discoveries to larger political and philosophical statements.

This series of books is, to use Roland Barthes's terminology, *predominantly indicial* or *metaphoric* being character oriented, rather than “metonymic” (plot oriented). As a result, instead of performing (in the words of Peter J. Rabinowits) *operations of configuration* we tend to emphasize *operations of signification*. The mimetic component of the writer Nathan Zuckerman (so developed and so much emphasized) is very important for Roth. It contextualizes his thematic concerns about the act of writing, in other words it shows the process of how the writer (a professional category) has come to understand and consequently write literature. It traces the journey of the writer's consciousness through a series of “subject-positions” (Shostak defines the concept as “construction[s] of both choices and conditions” 7); these shifts of position with regard to literature and the act of writing are a consequence of the way Zuckerman experiences reality.

Getting to the bottom things regarding the textual world, I must underline that:

- in all these novels (and the novella) Zuckerman tries to get to the bottom of events, which makes the project a series about the search for coherence;
- by the end of every book Roth makes sure that the reader realizes that the events hold deeper metaphysical meaning;
- the plot of the project revolves around an American writer's conception of the relationship between art and life.

## Closure

As I have resolved to see the project the Zuckerman project in its entirety I must necessarily consider here an element of progression which provides unity to the series: its closure. Due to the unique status of the ninth and final text, *Exit Ghost's* final chapter is ultimately tripartite in nature: not only does it mark the end of the playlet (fiction in fiction) Zuckerman writes, *He and She*, it also closes this novel as a unit and the Zuckerman series as a project. The words “Exit Ghost” (as stage direction or title) announce three partings. First, being addressed to *the playlet character* of Nathan Zuckerman they refer to the exit of the imagined Zuckerman (framed narrative level). Secondly *the narrator-character* states his departure with this last text: “And along the way, like Amy, like Lonoff [...] I would die too, though not before I sat down at the desk by the window [in the Berkshires] and [...] wrote the final scene of *He and She*” (280). Thirdly, the words together with the last sentence of the novel, “Gone for good” (idem), the implied author says farewell to its narrator character Nathan Zuckerman. These three partings coincide when the text ends. Zuckerman has realized his attempt at re-living has failed and his writing capability has been dissolving and that the time has come for him to return to his seclusion (and even silence). Also Roth (the author) has realized that this would be the last book featuring this character narrator, though when he set

about writing it he had no such intention: “When I began the book, I don’t know that I thought this was the last [...] The story simply foretold the end. And the way it unraveled, there was a completion and a conclusion” (Lee, interview of 2007). Accordingly, the time has come for the Text to conclude.

Much time and space, chronological and textual, have passed between *The Ghost Writer* and *Exit Ghost*. Nathan Zuckerman has necessarily evolved as a result of this experiment in textuality. The Zuckerman who penned the last twelve pages of *Exit Ghost* is not the Zuckerman who fantasized in *The Ghost Writer* - and the differences are irreconcilable. Despite imitating the self-assured and vigorous Nathan, the aging Zuckerman realizes that the past is irretrievable.

Interestingly the end of *Exit Ghost* is not as strong as expected. Readers assume that the last pages of the last novel contain the narrator’s/author’s best thoughts, particularly congruent not only with the events of the text that precede them, but also with the novels that precede this one. This would be the bundling technique called the rule of conclusive endings (Rabinowitz 161). But this time Roth frustrates readers’ expectations, by not applying this interpretive convention that permits us to read it in a special way, as a *conclusion*, as a summing up of the work’s meaning. There is not much in the way of the author’s expressing here most pressingly his points— aesthetic, moral, social, political, epistemological. No wonder readers have remarked that this story does not really feel like the perfect conclusion and numerous interviewers kept asking Roth whether he would use Zuckerman again, or, even worse, readers (professional or not) expressed disappointment at the level of accomplishment of this last installment. Moreover, the viability of *Exit Ghost* outside Zuckerman’s system of texts has been harshly challenged. For were there no *Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, “The Prague Orgy”, *The Counterlife*, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain* to set the stage for the establishment of models for intratextual interpretations, *Exit Ghost* undoubtedly would remain a nebulous mass, despite its internal structure.

Yet, within the framework of the Zuckerman books, *Exit Ghost*’s textual function constantly points to its intratextual nature and, in so doing, encourages the reader to reread the eight other texts in a new way. What is more, only, apparently, the balance of the configuration is upset through violation of the convention of conclusive endings. Granted, this is not a very neat ending, at least not very congruent with what went before in terms of technique. But this does not imply it is a weak one. The last pages of the novel are occupied with the playlet which is obviously far from being plausible, as it is nothing else but the result of Zuckerman’s imagination. At the end of this playlet the “fictional character” Zuckerman is instructed through theatrical/stage directions to pack bags and leave before the heroine gets there. What we are dealing with here is a surprise ending. Hence the necessity to thematize it, to understand it as it has been prefigured. The complication arises out of the fact that Zuckerman chooses to express his decision to go back to his retreat atop the New England mountain by means of playlet directions and not as he has done so far telling the story in the first person (there is the method and there is the information). An explanation could be that it is easier this way for Zuckerman to accept his defeat through art and it would have been too painful to admit it directly. Another explanation may be that he uses this amplification of

reality through a piece of literature to give his feelings and his decisions the weight he could not have otherwise.

Moreover, once we receive the information about his return we understand that the entire series Zuckerman is provided with roundness. It started in the rural area of Massachussets with Zuckerman arriving at a writer's hideaway and it ends with the same writer going to live there for good. It started with an energetic, a little insecure, but brilliant young writer ready to set off in his career and it ends with a highly esteemed writer drained of energy, strength, depleted of his health and having reached the end of the road: he has gone the full circle of his career. Because all these reasons this is not an open ending, it is subtly conventional and it clearly sums up the meaning of the entire series.

### **Integrating the *The Counterlife* and the American trilogy in the overall design of the series**

Mimetically speaking, the organicism of the Zuckerman chronicle is destabilized twice. The first time is in connection with *The Counterlife*, a text purposefully created to inspire recalcitrance by posing the challenge of post-modern fragmentation, ambiguity and the hermetically sealed wholeness. Readers, confronted with *the difficult* (a term Phelan<sup>1</sup> has come up with in order to explain one type of recalcitrance), have to effect a change in their assumptions and expectations, have to stop trying to read for mimetic ends here and recognize that they are reading a synthetic construct that Roth can maneuver as he sees fit. In fact, it is a text that Zuckerman, the narrator, maneuvers as *he* sees fit. Narrator and author have their readers confronted with a radical narrative with serial chapters that cancel one another and then self-cancel, and as a result striving for a clue to coherence. They find it on page 387 of the novel, when Nathan Zuckerman in a letter addressed to Maria admits that he has been recasting the ground of his being, sitting down at the word processor, cutting and pasting another self, creating a new person each time, showing us that at least in literature the self is notoriously mobile, as mobile as Zuckerman would have it. The readers in need of their mimetic coherence finally understand that in *The Counterlife* Zuckerman reinvents himself fully five times, giving himself a slightly different character profile and a different destiny in each chapter.

The second time the series is destabilized mimetically (though in my opinion only apparently) is with the publication of the American trilogy. All three novels *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain* displays a strikingly reversed content. Critics agree that in 1997, 1998 and 2000 (when the novels were published) Roth's intention was to dodge the much-leveled charge of every Zuckerman novel being another bulletin from the protagonist-writer's life, some sort of "navel gazing" and, as a result, they effect a *transition to the big-picture* (depicting irresistible social forces pit against hapless souls). The truth is that with American trilogy - Roth's brilliance found an entirely new way to tell Zuckerman stories. They contain a gallery of remarkable characters, *all men* ("I have a terrific weakness for these showmen" Zuckerman states in *The Counterlife*, page 149). The mimetic explanation of this jolt is that Nathan Zuckerman has made a shift in his perspective of his life

<sup>1</sup> In his 1996, book Phelan distinguishes three types of recalcitrance: the *difficult* (recalcitrance that yields to our explanatory efforts), the *stubborn* (recalcitrance that will not), and the *erroneous* (recalcitrance that stems from the authors incoherent conception of the book) (177-178).

and work. The life he starts living at the age of 59 when he moves to a cabin atop a mountain in the Berkshires as well as his desire to focus his writing on someone else represent, to a large extent, the choice of a counterlife he announces in “Christendom” (the last chapter of *The Counterlife*):

As a writer I’d mined my past to its limits, exhausted my private culture and personal memories, and could no longer even warm to squabbling over my work having finally tired of my detractors rather the way you fall out of love with someone. I was sick of old crises, bored with old issues, and wanted only to undo the habits with which I had chained myself to my desk, implicated three wives in my seclusion, and, for years on end, lived in the nut-shell of self-scrutiny. (288)

Zuckerman portrays himself very dimly in this trilogy, the very broad strokes of his characterization indicating that he is a representative rather than individualized figure, but Roth uses this representativeness to offer a study in the psychology of the writer’s act of creation, a study which invites thematic generalizing but also restricts the degree and kind of that generalizing. However, in *Exit Ghost* the implied narrator is set to recuperate Zuckerman’s mimetic dimension from before the American trilogy, and has Zuckerman not only narrate what he experienced in New York in 2004, but also important incidents and happenings connected to his moving and living in the Berkshires in the previous 11 years.

My last argument in favor the idea that there can be found a sensible mimetic explanation to the organic inclusion of American trilogy with the rest of the series is that in the second trilogy Zuckerman has never deserted his favorite subject: his own subjectivity. What these three works, which might be called the trilogy of the historical Zuckerman, do is to finally allow Roth's hero to look outside himself, which, until *American Pastoral*, was a dangerous thing (“If you get out of yourself you can't be a writer because the personal ingredient is what gets you going, and if you hang on to the personal ingredient any longer you'll disappear right up your asshole,” he writes in *The Anatomy Lesson* 399). The new books minimize the personal focus in an unprecedented way when he moves out of himself and writes about other people, but, as Bakhtin discovered, knowledge of the self is found in language and when one uses another voice (the writer impersonates a character) or when one engages in dialogue with another, the self becomes visible to itself: the other conditions the self, emphasizes the opposition. The alien discourse of all these other men he writes about awakens Zuckerman’s own consciousness and he defines himself against them.

## Conclusion

Mimetically speaking, the nine books featuring the character Nathan Zuckerman are a series of texts authored by the writer Nathan Zuckerman. With one exception (the notes taken in the form of journal entries – “The Prague Orgy”) they are novels written to be published. Zuckerman writes all these autobiographical or biographical texts endeavoring to come to some understanding of himself and of the world. There always is a conjunction of fact with imagination, there are significant alterations, being fictionalized autobiography and biographies. This and the two rather destabilizing moments in the middle of the series (the jolts represented by *The Counterlife* and the American trilogy) do not affect the credibility of the narrator and the coherence of the overall plot, because at the mimetic level, the focus is

not on the plot, but on the protagonist. The emphasized mimetic component of the writer Nathan Zuckerman is connected with the thematic concerns about the act of writing, in other words the series shows the process of how the writer (a professional category) has come to understand and consequently write literature, tracing the writer's consciousness through a series of "subject-positions", consequence of the way Zuckerman experiences reality.

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