A RHETORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE DIFFICULT IN THE COUNTERLIFE BY PHILIP ROTH

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Abstract: The Counterlife*, the 1986 novel by Philip Roth, subjects its authorial audience to a riddling reading experience as the text departs from the conventions of literary realism,accommodating a discretionary universe, fragmented and contradictory situations, conflicting selves, dead ends, all of which are but obstacles to the interpreter, difficulties in the process of translation. The rhetorical approach helps me offer a plausible rationale based on the concepts of audience and narrative levels, while preserving the mimetic, the component responsible for our emotional response to the story.*

Keywords: the rhetorical approach to narrative, Nathan Zuckerman, recalcitrant literary material

Published in 1986, *The Counterlife* was the fourth full novel and the fifth text to feature the fictional novelist Nathan Zuckerman. For the first time in this sequence of books (actually in Roth's career) the readers were subjected to the reading experience of a text which does not accommodate a unified story, as each of five sections of*The Counterlife* – "Basel", "Judea", "Aloft", "Gloucestershire," and "Christendom" – depicts alternative fates for Henry and Nathan Zuckerman. The inventiveness and experimentalism of the novel are directly connected to its synthetic component, i.e. its narrative technique. It is well known that when in a literary text the writer destroys the suspension of disbelief, controlling the plot around the significance of events rather than their logical order, as it happens in this book made up of four almost distinctive narratives, (s)he does it so that the synthetic is foregrounded on purpose in different ways and to different degrees.

There are numerous aspects in *The Counterlife* which make the understanding *complicated*: bewildering shifts in tone and perspective, fragmented situations, a mixture of modes – fantasy and reality -, characters that seem to be made up of multiple conflicting selves. Also there are three different surrogate narrators - Nathan Zuckerman, Maria, and Henry, who tell contradictory stories. Moreover, the novel depicts an unprecedented discretionary universe (the narrative knits and unravels their stories), with chapters which almost up to the end cancel what went before, and then cancel themselves by reaching dead-ends: Henry is rendered impotent by heart medication, undertakes surgery and dies; Nathan himself dies on the operation table because of similar causes; Henry undertakes heart surgery in order to get rid of medication and its effect on his potency, survives surgery, then decides to move to Israel for good – decision irrevocable; Nathan discovers that in marrying Maria he entered a family of rabid anti-Semites. Finally in our list of reasons why the novel is complicated, it is the fact that the novel vertiginously accumulates, recasts and re-interprets its materials. Roth himself explained in an interview (taken a little before this novel was published) that *The Counterlife* "is a book where you never get to the bottom of things" (Milbauer 252). True, the novel ends without giving its readers the chance to fully grasp its meaning, which makes us suspicious and impatient. At the end we know for certain that it departs strenuously from the conventions of literary realism. An interpretation of the book at first sight demands making use of the postmodernist approach with its fashionable academic feints and tropes. Such an interpretation has been provided by Shechner (226) when he highlights Nathan's letter to Maria as Roth's explanation of what he has been up to in the performance of Zuckerman.

> I realize that what I am describing, people divided in themselves, is said to characterize mental illness and is the absolute opposite of our idea of emotional integration. The whole Western idea of mental health runs in precisely the opposite direction: what is desirable is congruity between your self-consciousness and your natural being. But there are those whose sanity flows from the conscious separation of those two things. If there even is a natural being, an irreducible self, it is rather small, I think, and may even be the root of all impersonation-the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate. I'm talking about recognizing that one is acutely a performer, rather than swallowing whole the guise of naturalness and pretending that it isn't a performance but you. (*CL* 324*)*

This statement of life itself as inherently theatrical is a very postmodern view and is seen by Shechner as *a statement of method*. According to him, what the narrator Nathan Zuckerman did was to reinvent his being while sitting down and writing in order to demonstrate that at least in literature the self is fairly mobile, in fact it is as mobile as a narrator wants it.

> [...] we are being treated to a Wildean lesson about the authenticity of masks, and if we've been reading Roth right along we can even guess why: to deny, for the nth time, that his characters can be identified with their author, an error for which Roth has taken more than his fair share of abuse. One aim of the Nathan-Henry-Maria repertory theater in The Counter-life is to drive home the point once and for all about the separation of art and artist and to close the book on the question of whether Nathan Zuckerman or Peter Tarnopol or David Kepesh or Alex Portnoy is or is not Philip Roth. But, then, read this way the book is [...] discomfitingly defensive [...] (Shechner 223)

If one takes a closer look at the text, though, another perspective, the rhetorical one, offers an equally satisfying explanation, if not a better one. In good rhetorical fashion, with regard to the resistance of *The Counterlife* to reveal its meaning, I first set out to identify its source. But before I must agree with James Phelan on two aspects: the attraction such texts exerts over interpreters (professional or not) and the confidence that comprehension can be eventually acquired.

> Virtually all texts, to one degree or another, present some obstacles to the interpreter, some material that initially seems resistant to whatever translation schema the interpreter is employing. We academic interpreters naturally gravitate toward recalcitrant material, but we typically assume that all recalcitrance can yield to understanding, even if all that is finally revealed is the inevitability of recalcitrance." (177-8)

The reputable narratologist 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).

Many of the interpreters of *The Counterlife* tended to assume that the book's resistance to explanation is of the stubborn type, therefore, have found an account of its functionality. According to them, although it cannot be fully comprehended, readers may be able to comprehend its effects, because "when readers encounter the stubborn, the interpretive task shifts from explicating it to explaining the purpose of its recalcitrance" (Phelan 180), which means that they focus on explaining the functionality of the stubborn. Like Shechner did.

I, on the other hand, dare contend that *The Counterlife* offers an encounter with the difficult, which is a stance that contradicts not only a number of previous interpreters, but, to a certain extent, Roth himself. In the interview by Asher Z. Milbauer and Donald G. Watson,

Roth himself offered a response-based account of his strategy, saying what he wanted his readers to experience and highlighting many of this fictional world´s particular ground rules:

> Normally there is a contract between the author and the reader that only gets torn up at the end of the book. In this book the contract gets torn up at the end of each chapter: a character who is dead and buried is suddenly alive, a character who is assumed to be alive is in fact dead, and so on. This is not the ordinary Aristotelian narrative that readers are accustomed to reading or that I am accustomed to writing. It isn't that it lacks a beginning, middle and ending; there are too many beginnings, middles and endings. It is a book where you never get to the bottom of things - rather than concluding with all the questions answered, at the end everything is suddenly open to question. Because one's original reading is always being challenged and the book progressively undermines its own fictional assumptions, the reader is constantly cannibalizing his own reactions. (Milbauer 252)

What Roth underlines here is the authorial audience's reaction to the book while reading it, whereas the continuation of his answer points to the potential complaints they might have:

> In many ways it's everything that people don't want in a novel. Primarily what they want is a story in which they can be made to believe; otherwise they don't want to be bothered. They agree, in accordance with the standard author-reader contract, to believe in the story they are being told - and then, in "The Counterlife," they are being told a contradictory story. "I'm interested in what's going on," says the reader, "only now, suddenly, there are two things going on, three things going on. Which is real and which is false? Which are you asking me to believe in? Why do you bother me like this!" (idem)

This is the solution he offers and the ground rules for the interpretation and comprehension of the fictional world:

> Which is real and which is false? All are equally real or equally false. Which are you asking me to believe in? All/none. Why do you bother me like this? In part because there really is nothing unusual about somebody changing his story. People constantly change their story - one runs into that every day. "But last time you told me . . ." "Well, that was last time -this is this time. What happened was . . ." There is nothing "modernist," "postmodernist," or the least bit avant-garde about the technique. We are all writing fictitious versions of our lives all the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories that, however subtly or grossly falsified, constitute our hold on reality and are the closest thing we have to the truth. (253)

Roth also provides the audience with a code to ease their producing of a cognitive explanation, their translation of the text's language. This code consists of categories that organize the numerous signals in the language of the text into fewer, more general units: the *counterlife*, the *countertext*, the *countercharacter*.

> Why do I bother you like this? Because life doesn't necessarily have a course, a simple sequence, a predictable pattern. The bothersome form is intended to dramatize that very obvious fact. The narratives are all awry but they have a unity; it is expressed in the title - the idea of a counterlife, counterlives, counterliving. Life, like the novelist, has a powerful transforming urge. (idem)

This explication is sufficient as long as we consider only the surface levels of the story. Then, the reader having survived a radical narrative with serial chapters that cancel one another and then self-cancel finds the clue to coherence by going back to part two of chapter

four and revise ideas expressed (surprisingly not in noticeable positions). From this point of view, chapter 4 turns out to have a crucial role: it sketches the general movement of the whole narrative. However, at a closer examination of narrative levels and of the novel's progression, readers may realize that the author uses a number of rhetorical devices - such as the interrogation Maria undergoes at the end of chapter four, the sudden change of perspective in the middle of the same section, as well as the letter Nathan writes to Maria - to let the authorial audience know that there is more to this book than a story told by a non-character narrator in which Henry and Maria discover in chapter four the manuscript of a book in progress (that is chapters 1, 2, 3, and 5 of *The Counterlife*) and that Nathan Zuckerman is the supposed author of chapter four as well as he is the main character in the entire book.

Therefore, a necessary point in giving an interpretation is the one regarding audiences and narrative levels. *The Counterlife*raises the question of narrative levels and audiences more provocatively than any other narrative in the series. Furthermore, Roth's manner of incorporating the synthetic component into his narrative requires a very careful use/manipulation of the concepts of—and the relations between— the authorial and narrative audiences.

Apparently *The Counterlife* is a clear case of a narrative in which the mimetic illusion is broken and the authorial audience's usual covert awareness that character is an artificial construct becomes overt. This would be perfectly true provided the book had only two layers, instead of four. But the truth is that this is a book written by an implied author about a novelist (a surrogate author) writing a book about his own death (proof of this is including in the book an interview taken by Zuckerman to Maria, while in this layer of the book Zuckerman is already dead). This means that the narrative level of the events which happened in 1978 is not the fictional *real level* and that there is another level, a cover one in which Zuckerman is writing everything toying with destinies of his characters, creating counterlives and countertexts. Zuckerman reinvents himself fully five times (these are only events that supposedly happened in 1978), giving himself in each chapter a slightly different character profile and a different destiny. However, in the fourth (Maria´s letter and Zuckerman´s reply) and the third (the interview) layer of narratives, there is synthetic foregrounding of characters. Both instances are only occasional feature of the text, and applied to the protagonist (quite atypical) and another character.

What happens to the progression when the synthetic component of the protagonist's character becomes the dominant one? There seems to be a two-fold answer: on the one hand, this leads the audience to a wonderfully complicated self-consciousness about its own reading activity; on the other, the narrative functions as a critical text (by inducing a large dosage of reflexivity into the activity of writing and then reading) which investigates—or better, puts under a metafictional microscope—the concepts of character, progression, and audience.

This technique of Roth in *The Counterlife* also requires a comprehensive view of the concept of audience. There is the authorial audience, the ghost-writer's authorial audience, the narrator's audience and the narratee. This also challenges the ideas about the importance of the affective structure of the narrative text and about the connection between that affective structure and the mimetic component of character. Any rhetorical explanation seeks to preserve the mimetic component of the story by finding a plausible, naturalistic rationale for the narration to provide a logical explanation. This means finding a rhetorical purpose for the narrator´s telling the story to the narratee. The need to preserve the mimetic is a natural impulse in the reading activity: the mimetic component is responsible for our emotional responses to it - a crucial part of the distinctive quality and power of narrative.

The surrogate author, Nathan Zuckerman, becomes more and more playful as the narrative progresses. His narrative audience asks questions like these: *What twist will he give his construction next? Will I be able to follow it? What will that in turn set up?* In general, *can he meet his own challenges to write this self-reflexive work that induces reflection on its own reading* and *can they catch all the devices by which he tries*? The audience no doubt progresses through the narrative enjoying the challenge, wanting to be equal to it, but hoping also that they are not so equal to it that they feel somehow ahead of our playful guide. Whenever they do feel like they are catching up to the surrogate author Nathan Zuckerman, we have not only the satisfaction of meeting his challenge but also the gratification of learning something new—or articulating more clearly something we've already known—about our reading. The result of using such an intricate technique is that the authorial audience of *The Counterlife*is led to reflect on the possibilities of contextualization and to realise that the Reader occupies an important place in the framework of a literary text.

To conclude, due to its unusual form, *The Counterlife* is certainly unlike anything Roth has done before, a highly inventive, formally experimental novel. In the words of Shechner, "[a]n elegant novel, it constructs an elaborate counterpoint between the inertia of history and the agility of the imagination, and would appear to be evidence, if such were needed, that it is possible for a novel to contradict itself repeatedly and wind up all the more convincing for its contradictions" (219). These qualities make *The Counterlife* (1986) perhaps Roth's most ambitious and meticulously constructed novel.

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