

RHETORICAL COMMUNICATION IN *THE ANATOMY LESSON* BY PHILIP ROTH

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Abstract

Published in 1983 as the third installment of the Zuckerman saga, *The Anatomy Lesson* is set in 1973 and features an ailing 40-year-old Nathan Zuckerman. Roth constructs his narrative in a form that breaks conventional patterns. The communication he proposes is not straightforward: this is a third person novel that turns out to be a third-person autobiography. Roth's (and Zuckerman's) choice is meant to point out the relationship between narrative form and character identity.

Keywords: the rhetorical approach to narratives, third-person autobiography, Nathan Zuckerman, the narrative as therapy

The Anatomy Lesson has been given extensive attention since its publication in the early eighties and most of the critics or reviewers approached it focusing on the thematic. In what follows the reading of this novel is done through the perspective offered by the theory of the rhetorical approach to narratives, as the purpose of this paper is to view it as a purposive communicative act. The theory of the rhetorical approach to narratives sees the books as achieving their significance by advancing a coherent story (by means of creating and solving tensions and instabilities) about possible people and a possible fictional world, by proposing some generalizations which highlight general truths about the world, and by assessing the artistic technique that conveys the message as efficiently as possible. This is a method which calls for close reading and naturally builds the act of interpretation on the act of reading. Therefore, my reading is meant to offer a fresh way of thinking about the subtle and not-so-subtle communication Roth initiated in *The Anatomy Lesson*, as well as about textual form, authorial agency, and reader response.

Published in 1983, this third installment of the Zuckerman saga is set in 1973, and features an ailing 40-year-old Nathan. The epigraph to the novel, taken from the *Textbook of Orthopedic Medicine* by James Cyriax, M.D., states: "The chief obstacle to correct diagnosis in painful conditions is the fact that the symptom is often felt at a distance from its source."

PROGRESSION

Similarly to the previous book of the series, in *The Anatomy Lesson* the author chooses to introduce the first major instability not until almost in middle of the narrative (the end of chapter II). In this case the principle of movement in the first part of the narrative is the relief of tension between narrator/writer and the authorial audience. Everything up to the introduction of the first instability (but also for about two dozen pages after) serves to disclose information about the protagonist and his environment, information that is necessary for the authorial audience's understanding of how and why he will act the way he does in the

focused narrative of related events (of chapters III-V) that follows this point. This arrangement makes the following parts of the story move with economy and power to its climax.

Chapter I. "The Collar"

When he is sick, every man wants his mother; if she's not around, other women must do. Zuckerman was making do with four other women. He'd never had so many women at one time, or so many doctors, or drunk so much vodka, or done so little work, or known despair of such wild proportions. Yet he didn't seem to have a disease that anybody could take seriously. (ZB 297)

This is how the novel begins. It is a paragraph which introduces a cognitive, probably an affective and definitely an ethical tension. Everything that follows after this paragraph in chapter I, II and most of III, and which appears to be scattered information, is in fact meant eventually to elaborate on this first paragraph statement and will add up to a coherent set of preliminary conditions for the central events of the story.

Thus, the audience learns it is 1973 and Nathan Zuckerman, now 40, is in pain. The pains started in 1972 ("eighteen months ago"). Since then, Nathan has tried countless medical approaches, but not one of his doctors could find the root of his illness. He has also resorted to a number of gadgets ("the hot shower by Hammacher Schlemmer", "the electronic pain suppressor" etc.), but in vain. "By December 1973, he'd run out of hope of finding a treatment, drug, doctor, or cure – certainly of finding an honest disease." (ZB 314) To diminish the "hot line of pain that ran forward behind his right ear into his neck, then branched downward beneath the scapula like a menorah held bottom side up" (ZB 298) and to be able to sit or stand, Nathan wears an orthopedic collar. But that does not help him very much. He is still unable to write, unable to do his daily chores, unable to do anything but lay down on his 'playmat' and watch the trials of Richard Nixon sideways. "Through his prism glasses he followed our President's chicanery – the dummy gestures, the satanic sweating, the screwy dazzling lies. He almost felt for him, the only other American he saw daily who seemed to be in as much trouble as he was." (ZB 302) To alleviate pain he takes "Valium or aspirin or Butazolidin or Percodan or Robaxin [or] [...] the vodka. And as tens of millions of Russians have known for hundreds of years, that is the best pain suppressor of all" (ZB 314). He also distracts himself from the pain by engaging with one of his four women who take care of him in sexual activity back down there on the playmat ("step right up, sit right down").

The most disconcerting effect of his condition is his impossibility to write anymore. "Writing the last page of a book was as close he'd ever come to sublimity, and that hadn't happened in four years." (ZB 299). Interestingly, when he makes the inventory of his writing outcome he enumerates "four published novels, [...] three buried alive" (idem). Because of the unbearable aching it entails, he cannot write by himself, either by hand or at the new IBM (meant to replace the old manual Olivettis, he had been "hammering" at for 20 years). He cannot write with the help of a secretary either: "[h]e couldn't write without seeing the writing" (ZB 303). Even when he forces himself to concentrate and ignore inconveniences, he realizes that he has "nothing left to write, and with nothing to write, no reason to be [...] Every thought and feeling, ensnared by the selfness of pain" (ZB 301-2).

With his writing at a standstill, Zuckerman considers all possible causes suggested by his diagnosticians: tension or loneliness or “finding new ways to be unhappy” (319) or guilt over the complications his writing has wrought on his family or penance for his literary and financial success or punishment for having affronted people with his indecency or for having enraged his tribe with his shamelessness or unconscious fear of every imaginable achievement or failure (e.g. “frightened of being admired and frightened of being despised” ZB 320) or unconscious suppression of his own talent “for fear of what it’d do next” (idem). “But Zuckerman wasn’t buying it [...] He had great faith in his unconscious – he could never have come this far without it.” (ibidem) Shostak remarks that in this novel Roth “questions [...] the psychoanalytic doctrine according to which somatic phenomena always *mean*” (41; emphasis in original).

He also rejects the explanation related to pain as a test of character. His twenty years of writing have demonstrated enough character: obstinacy, artistic principles, determination and patience. And then it strikes him: pain has come to “rescue Zuckerman from the wrong calling” (ZB 321), to replace a life of relentless work, loneliness, projects, suppressions and self-justification with what he has recently experienced because of his suffering: laziness, voices (of women) and diversity, escapades, surrender and an unjustified life. This is how the chapter ends. Placed in this noticeable position this doubt about his practicing this profession is a very important clue: “[h]is pain is professionally debilitating, but Zuckerman is not exactly suffering from a writer's block in terms of subject but more from an intense doubt as to the social validity of his profession. Zuckerman's doubts center on whether producing novels ‘matters’ in any significant sense” (Frank, unpaginated Internet source)

Chapter 2. “Gone”

This title alludes to Zuckerman’s multiple losses: “[g]one, mother, father, brother, birthplace, subject, health, hair – according to the critic Milton Appel, his talent too” (ZB 324). Narrative progression continues with tension relief throughout the second chapter. If the first chapter is meant to reveal information about his physical and mental condition at the time the sequence of events start unfolding, this chapter illuminates two junctures in the protagonist’s recent past. One is the greatest loss of all: the death of his mother. There is a controlled and tender portrayal of Zuckerman’s grief at his mother’s death:

the mother who’d been so enormous to him for the first ten years of his life was as diaphanous in recollection as the chiffon hood. A breast, then a lap, then a fading voice calling after him, “Be careful.” Then a long gap when there is nothing of her to remember, just the inevitable somebody, anxious to please, reporting to him on the phone the weather in New Jersey. (ZB 329)

The episode of his mother’s death and funeral also reveals Zuckerman feeling of guilt for having put his mother through an ordeal with the publication of *Carnovsky*. When he discovers an obscene and hate-filled note on a green index card addressed to his mother by someone who hated Zuckerman’s books and took it out on her, he thinks:

He’d walk over to Meyer Lansky’s hotel to find out from the bell captain who could be hired to do a little job. Why not that for a change, instead of flying back to New York to file the green index card under “Mother’s Death”? You could not be a

nothing writer fellow forever, doing nothing with the strongest feelings but turning them over for characters to deal with in books. (ZB 343)

But he flies home. This is a first clue that Frank is right in recognizing “an intense doubt as to the social validity of his profession [...] Zuckerman's problem is that he does not know if the novel that transformed him into a wealthy and famous writer did indeed kill his father” (unpaginated). All this furnished the doubt! On page 440 we have the enforcement.

The other juncture in the writer's recent past is the attack the critic Milton Appel unleashes upon Zuckerman's career earlier that year, i.e. May 1973, accusing him of talent loss, of coming from a “thin personal culture”, of having no historical sensibility, of “being the worst of Jewish writers” and “a social menace”. To make matters worse several days before the action of this novel begins to unfold, Appel indirectly turns to Zuckerman to have him write a letter in support of the Israel Jews. This stratagem enrages Zuckerman who starts having an inappropriate behavior. This is a very noticeable detail. This is the first time he displays this side of him outside his books, the non-character narrator underlines. Frank notices that his reaction is directly connected to his own doubt “as to the social validity of his profession. Zuckerman's doubts center on whether producing novels ‘matters’ in any significant sense. The absurd consequences of his writerly success has, ironically, voided the vocabulary he previously engaged to morally make sense of, and defend, to himself and others what he does for a living” (unpaginated).

Zuckerman calls Diana and asks her to come over (the second woman in his life whose portrait is briefly made, creating a detour from the narration of Zuckerman's angry reaction) and later dictates a furious letter to her addressed to the critic. When the girl refuses to type it, they quarrel and Zuckerman announced her that he intends to change careers and become an obstetrician, for which reason he is going to medical school at the University of Chicago. How does he motivate this decision? “I want to forget Jews [...] Enough of my writing, enough of their scolding. [...] Who quarrels with an obstetrician? [...] No [more] words, just stuff.” (ZU 369) Here the progression brings to light for the first time the novel's major instability. His assured statement of intention at this point in the narrative raises some doubt in the authorial audiences to whether it will in fact be fulfilled. Frank names Zuckerman's attitude - the “morally crippling doubt” of literature versus the belief in exacting science - and he writes: “Zuckerman there is certainty in medicine”.

Chapter 3 “The Ward” (a term alluding to his apartment which suffocates him and enhances his suffering instead of relieving it)

Interestingly, this chapter's movement forward is effected by means of an alternation between progression by tension and progression by instability. Although the narration by the non-character narrator is done by looking back to events that have already happened, the beginning of the chapter makes clear that this is when the novel's focused action begins to unfold. It is one morning in December 1973, a few days after Zuckerman and Diana disputed over the letter to Appel and his decision to go to medical school. Zuckerman receives both the confirmation of admission to the medical school in Chicago – classes start on 4th January (now the audience interest is propelled by the desire to see what comes out of his going to the medical school. Will he change professions indeed?), and Dr. Kotler's pillow brought by a delivery man. The parcel is an opportunity for the narrator to reveal information about

Zuckerman's meeting the dolorologist Dr Kotler, a short gregarious Jew in his 70s and fellow townsman (another father figure) and by memory associations the other two of Roth's women: Gloria and Yaga. Zuckerman is fascinated by Yaga as a potential character, therefore keeps interrogating her hoping he will finally get back to writing. But his efforts amount only to his confirmation that writing cannot help the people pouring out their stories, being treatment only to writers. Even so, at this point in his life, he cannot administer himself this treatment as "[...] he could [not] make their stories his, no matter how passionate and powerful they seemed beside his trivialities [...] the story he could dominate and to which his feelings had been enslaved had ended. Her stories weren't his stories and his stories were no longer his stories either" (ZB 394-5).

A blank space between lines lets audience know narrative switched back to the real time and Nathan is shown preparing for the 800-mile flight to Chicago: he tries to suppress pain with a hot shower, takes a Percodan, a few marijuana puffs, packs his bags and phones Jenny (one of his women, a genuine wife material for Zuckerman - in her latest letter she invited him to move to the mountains and marry her), Dr Kotler (to make an appointment for a pain-relieving session of hypnosis) and, eventually, Milton Appel. All these phone calls are meant to offer him reasons to stay or to provide him psychological alleviation of pain. He fails each time: when Jenny answers he hangs up, he makes the appointment but never goes to see the doctor, moreover, the invectives and the furious arguments he lays out in his brief phone conversation with Appel have the effect of making him feel worse.

From the moment Zuckerman decides to phone Appel the action on the next three pages progresses by an alternation of fonts: roman, regular font when conveying Zuckerman's rage, as well as his driven and determined thoughts and actions, and italic font when expressing Zuckerman's attempts to reason and to prevent himself from making a huge mistake:

Too late for reason: he had Harvard on the phone and was waiting to be connected to the English department. The real shit side of literature, these inspired exchanges, but into the bitter shit I go if churning up shit is what it takes to get better. *Only Appel has nothing to do with the pain. The pain pre-dates that essay by a year. There are no Jewish evil eyes or double Jewish whammies. Illness is an organic condition. [...] Go get hypnotized. Even that's less primitive than this. Let the oracular little dolorologist be your fairy godfather, if it's a regressive solution you're after. [...] But no further appeals to the Court of Appels.* (ZB 400)

The phone discussion which follows determined a 1985 NY Times reviewer to state that "Roth, characteristically scrupulous, presents Appel as dignified, serious and sincere, and Zuckerman as dangerously lunatic in this matter" (apud Wallace 25). This, together with the observation on the typing artifice above, hints at a more complex narratorial method than the apparent one. I believe that in between Philip Roth, the implied author, and Nathan Zuckerman, the 40-year old character, there is another conscience: that of a more mature, saner and older Nathan Zuckerman narrator, one that has chosen to detach himself from a previous frame of mind and course of actions and, therefore, writes as if the character and the narrator were two different people. The easy access into the main character's mind (free indirect discourse) could be an obvious argument in this respect.

Chapter 4 “Burning”

The next chapter finds Zuckerman on board the flight to Chicago, his pain and doubts kept under control with vodka and marijuana. A nearby passenger’s curiosity about him triggers his impulse towards impersonation. Zuckerman delights in assuming the identity and calling himself Milton Appel, creating a new character for the critic as a pornographic publisher, subjecting the reviewer to extreme humiliation and holding him up for massive ridicule. “There is living fiction all around and fiction is taken for truth and life turned into art” (Singh 22). He needs to discharge the anger he has against Milton Appel. He maintains this act, which looks like a Zuckerman “with a Pepler inside” (Singh 100), almost to the end of the book in his conversations with the strangers. “He couldn’t have stopped even if he wanted to. Let him speak” (ZB 456) is what the narrator concludes the chapter with.

The enacted fantasy about the pornographer Milton Appel is shaped as an allegory for his real life conflict with his detractors: just as the writer Nathan Zuckerman has made efforts to defend his sexually-driven novel as a depiction of what is human and natural and real, “Milton Appel”, the pornographer, defends his occupation. “Nobody is putting these people in chains! I am taking them *out* of their chains! I am a monster with something to offer! I am changing American fucking forever! I am setting this country free!” (ZB 473)

Once in Chicago Zuckerman visits his friend from college days Freytag, at present a doctor anesthesiologist. Zuckerman, fueled by guilt and the vodka and Percodan he ingested to alleviate his back pain, refuses to believe Freytag's observation that "everybody's trapped in the thing he does best" and therefore exists within limits, within history (ZB 610).

Chapter 5 “The Corpus”

Zuckerman is propelled through Chicago by pain, anger, remorse, Percodan, alcohol and a woman driver in wicked black boots. He is undone by a visit to a Jewish cemetery. In a hilarious scene, Zuckerman ends up passing out in the cemetery, his fall broken by a tombstone, which, Freytag tells him “sounded like a rock hitting the pavement. You took the impact on the point of the chin. Burst the skin. Your two front teeth snapped just below the gum line” (ZB 670). The accident takes place during an out-of-the-blue violent confrontation with the elder Freytag, in which Zuckerman sees the spirit of his father and of all fathers, the moment the old man says the following (echoing Zuckerman's father's curse on his son): “How can all of this end with Gregory? Eat shit? To his father? I'll break his neck for what he's done to this family! I'll kill that little bastard! I will!” (ZB 667). “Freytag's fury precipitates the ultimate Oedipal catastrophe, the son's decision to kill his father” (Wallace 28-29). The last things he sees before regaining consciousness in the hospital are his driver's boots.

His jaw is broken and is wired shut. Ultimately his voice is silenced. He stops speaking and takes up writing again. The last section of the novel depicts Zuckerman's stay in the hospital recovering from his burst mouth. At the end the audience again witnesses what might be considered a fault: Freytag and Walsh treat Zuckerman's burst mouth, but do not consider doing so with the back pain. Nowhere till the very last word in the novel Zuckerman is offered alleviation to this pain, let alone a satisfactory explanation of its causes. This means failing to solve the novel's major instability. Apparently this is how things stay, factually, there is a compromising solution to this instability and the one concerning Zuckerman's desire to change a career: Zuckerman learns that because pain comes in all sizes and shapes,

medicine, too, is affected by doubt and has its own limits (Frank). Zuckerman is not recovered completely, but his back pain fades to the point where he is able to write again and explain for himself (as well as his “readers” because, as a result of this alleviation he can and does write his autobiography) in written form that his back pain is an immanent and unexplainable condition with which he must cope:

Everybody wants to make pain interesting--first the religions, then the poets, then, not to be left behind, even the doctors getting in on the act with their psychosomatic obsession. They want to give it significance. What does it mean? What are you hiding? What are you showing? It's impossible to suffer just the pain, you have to suffer its meaning. But it's not interesting and it has no meaning - it's just plain stupid pain. (ZB 439)

According to Frank, understanding that there is pain which cannot be alleviated is a critical point in the successful maintenance of self-identity: pain has become an integral part of that identity.

Nathan's return to his calling occurs when he has his jaws wired shut, which makes him unable to talk, and forced to listen and observe others in pain. The very moment of this return takes place “[i]n communicating with an emergency room doctor, Gordon Walsh, who is an ex-Demoral addict, [when] Zuckerman writes what will become the first sentence of what will become *The Anatomy Lesson* and thus turns the novel into a third person autobiography, and thus a kind of history.” (Frank)

The bottom line of this third novel is the writer's failed attempt at getting a second life. A host of negative circumstances make him blame everything on and condemn his vocation. He is sick and tired of the plight of being a writer and therefore he would trade them for “the feel of life, of being alive”:

I'm sick of raiding my memory and feeding on the past. There's nothing more to see from my angle; if it ever was the thing I did best, it isn't anymore. I want an active connection to life and I want it now. I want an active connection to *myself*. I'm sick of channeling everything into writing. I want the real thing, the thing *in the raw*, and not for the writing but for itself. Too long living out of the suitcase of myself. I want to start again for ten hundred different reasons. (ZB 442)

When the novel ends it is obvious that Zuckerman is not going to become a doctor, but at least he has overcome his writing block. This change of heart is connected with his passion for writing. At the centre of his self-hood is his excessive imaginative force. More specifically, authentic experience is denied to Zuckerman because at the centre of his selfhood is his compulsion to write, to channel everything into writing. It is true that this is an acceptance which is still a little postponed in this novel, as the final lines of the book: “He still believed that he could unchain from a future as a man apart and escape the corpus that was his” (ZB 505) emphasize that “Zuckerman's struggle for complete self-hood is far from over for Zuckerman” (Singh 101).

TECHNIQUE

Despite not being narrated in the first person this novel is written by Zuckerman, which in fact is similar to the case of *Lolita*. The way in which the non-character narrator uses style to collapse the distance between him and the character Nathan Zuckerman is a

clear sign that the former is Nathan Zuckerman. The third person signals a moral distance between what was going on at that particular time in Zuckerman's life and the attitude the author Nathan Zuckerman has toward those events at the time he writes this book.

Thus, Roth constructs his narrative in a form that breaks conventional patterns: a third person novel that turns out to be a third-person autobiography - Zuckerman sees himself as an interesting case which deserves a history of sorts. Roth's and Zuckerman's choice is meant to point out the relationship between narrative form and character identity. As Frank notices, this technique highlights "the intellectual distance between the Zuckerman who experienced the identity transformation triggered by two kinds of pain, and the Zuckerman, having learned the 'lesson' who narrates the case history" (unpaginated).

The book is the result of Nathan Zuckerman's realization of the role of writing and its value - to make sense of the experience which is as important as understanding how some pains can be diagnosed and alleviated:

Zuckerman learns that what he can do as a writer is to demonstrate that there are things that cannot be alleviated [or explained], but that the ineffable, like pain, can be understood by locating that phenomenon within a cultural and autobiographical context, in narrative. [...] Zuckerman knows that a novel cannot definitively account for them either--there are no cultural overseers, just various professionals operating within their respective epistemological and moral limits--but a novel can point out this fact. (Frank)

According to the same critic, although doctors can reveal the physical and physiological dimensions of disease, they have not the tools to explain the significance of the experiencing of that disease in a patient's necessarily changed life. To put it another way, they do not have the vocabulary to re-transform the patient into the person. With *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth suggests that novelists occupy useful social roles by showing how narrative can be therapeutic in delineating that significance, by capturing the "before" and "after" in one fell swoop. Through constructing the modernist autobiographical narrative of "how I got to the point where I can tell the story just told," the narrator gains some control over the transformations responsible for the telling.

The non-character narration is explained by Roth in this way:

The Ghost Writer is narrated in the first person, probably because what's being described is largely a world Zuckerman's discovered outside of himself, the book of a young explorer. The older and more scared he gets, the more inward-looking he gets, the further out I have to get. The crises of solipsism he suffers in *The Anatomy Lesson* is better seen from a bit of distance. (RMO 300)

CONCLUSION

Zuckerman's third person autobiographical narrative provides an illustration of a compulsive writer's capacity to construct a language which can help him articulate defining life issues and in this way gain a better sense of who he is because he is capable to articulate how he has become. The point this novel makes is that turning first-person experiences into third person autobiography is a means to make the ineffable of his insecure and instable identity describable, definable, and ultimately meaningful and livable. It is a narrative of self-identity by a writer so harshly affected by unfavorable personal experiences that he needs a

language of interpretation, offered by autobiography, to transfer the private world of the ineffable into the general and public world of the explainable.

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