

**“HONING, REFINING, SHARPENING AND EXPANDING” THE THEME OF
LITERATURE IN THE ZUCKERMAN SERIES BY PHILIP ROTH**

Corina Lirca, Assist. Prof., PhD, “Petru Maior” University of Tîrgu Mureş

Abstract: Throughout the series of the Zuckerman books there are a number of recurrent themes given more or less prevalence in each book: self, death, illness, father-son relationship, referentiality etc., but because the project is without any doubt the saga of the artist’s life, it soon becomes clear that, overall, these recurrent themes are meant to compliment the prevailing concern. In other words, they are particulars of the overarching one: the theme of literature.

Keywords: the Zuckerman series, the thematic, literature, referentiality.

The Zuckerman series of nine books published between 1979 and 2007 is held together by more than the common fictional world, with the character of Nathan Zuckerman as its most prominent mimetic element. A major unifying key factor is the set of themes which is introduced in the first book of the series, *The Ghost Writer*, and then with every sequel they hark back, a recurrence clearly explained by David Brauner in the one of the best Roth monograph written: “Roth is the type of author who never rests easy, never feels finished. He tracks down his quarry again and again, revisiting old hunting grounds and breaking into new ones; honing, refining, sharpening and expanding his armoury” (2).

While in the first three books (*The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*) and the last novel of the series (*Exit Ghost*), Roth has Nathan perform obsessive self-analysis and exploration of the relationship between life and art, i.e. the impact of literature making on a writer’s life (a task taken up in different tones and at different scales in the novella “The Prague Orgy” and the novel *The Counterlife*), in the second trilogy of this series (*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*), the author gives Zuckerman, the writer, the task of investigating and chronicling in turn three destinies of remarkable men from his past, all defeated by historical circumstances, which clearly meant a departure from the major focus of the series so far. The truth is that the American trilogy is characterized by a different approach to the relationship between life and art - it highlights the purpose of the writing profession, as well as the worthiness of its outcome. This is why we can assert from the very beginning of our argument that, thematically, the series is characterized by a recurrence of themes, by an obsessive return of interrelated notions and ideas: self, art, death, illness, father-son relationship etc. and that the recurrent themes are all particulars of the overarching concern - the THEME OF LITERATURE.

The Zuckerman saga accommodates his theory about writing and expresses his perception of life as a writer. Having Nathan Zuckerman (the writer-character ghost writing the Zuckerman books) as a normative voice, even in *The Counterlife* in which the presence of the narrator is only inferred by audiences, Roth articulates his principles of literature in a coherent and forceful manner. McDonald observes Roth is very much aware of literary clichés and of what critics (and readers) might make of them. As every work in the series provides messages, espouses values, criticizes or supports a certain ideology, we can determine—within limits, of course—Roth's vision of literature from a variety of angles.

First of all, we notice Roth's intention to show that *literature making takes its tolls*. Thus, five out of the nine Zuckerman books intentionally "flatten the myth of the glamorous writing life" (Sheppard):

- *The Ghost Writer* depicts the irony of being in young Nathan's shoes, a Newark-born writer who was hailed as the most promising voice in American letters.

- Zuckerman Unbound finds the hero in his 30s, beleaguered by celebrity and controversy. *Carnovsky*, a Portnoy-like novel, has angered the community and his own family. As a result, his father's dying word to him is "Bastard."

- In *The Anatomy Lesson*, Zuckerman is plagued by illness and disillusion and the grand paradox of the writer's life: "Chicago had sprung him from Jewish New Jersey, then fiction took over and boomeranged him right back" (ZB 430).

- "The Prague Orgy" belittles the struggles of famous American writers in the 70's, by pitting them against the condition of the writers in Communist Czechoslovakia.

- *Exit Ghost* concludes the myth deflation when it points to the frustrations accompanying the shortcomings of the aging writer of fame.

Secondly, Roth reveals, by means of Nathan Zuckerman's confrontations with his readers, his opinion on the *power of imagination*. Zuckerman is over the course of the series many times at odds with his family, friends and acquaintances because of his using them as sources for his literature making. In spite of the camouflage that Nathan has provided his family in his books, a number of people identified them anyway, and that recognition and the way they are depicted causes them pain. The most vehement accusations are brought by his father and by his brother Henry who both tell him that a writer should also have limits and a sense of consequence. What Zuckerman (and Roth implicitly) tries to show in this matter is what Singh pointed out: "distancing [...] is achieved between the writer's creation and the writer's life [...] via his imagination" (Singh 107). Nathan never uses people's real selves and has good reasons not to: "People don't turn themselves over to writers as full blown literary characters – generally they give you very little to go on and, after the impact of the initial impression, are barely any help at all. Most people (beginning with the novelist himself, his family, just about everyone he knows) are absolutely unoriginal, and his job is to make them appear otherwise" (CL 145). People by themselves only offer him a starting point and "it is the writer's creativity that imparts them liveliness in the work of fiction" (Singh 107). Moreover, the power of imagination makes the self of the other people fluid and that does not apply to writers solely: "The treacherous imagination is everybody's maker – we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration up of everyone else. We are all each other's authors" (CL 355).

Thirdly and in close connection with the previous point, Zuckerman voices Roth's idea that, no matter how many similarities they might discover, *readers should not confound a writer's real life and his art*. In *Zuckerman Unbound*, after the successful publication of his first book, Nathan is harassed by readers who "had mistaken impersonation for confession and were calling out to a character who lived in a book" (ZB 200). It is, however, true that *Zuckerman Bound* is made up of a series of mock-romans a clef, presenting self-consciously distorted accounts of Roth's life or writing career. For this reason it is interesting to follow Zuckerman's reaction and his opinion on this issue in *Zuckerman Unbound*:

Fiction is not autobiography, yet all fiction, I am convinced, is in some sense rooted in autobiography, though the connection to actual event may be tenuous indeed, even nonexistent. We are after all, the total of our experiences, and yet experience includes not only what we in fact do but what we privately imagine. An author cannot write about what he does not know and the reader must grant him his material (ZB 210).

or in *The Counterlife* (an excerpt from the eulogy read at Zuckerman's funeral):

The gift for theatrical self-transformation, the way they are able to loosen and make ambiguous their connection to a real life through imposition of talent. The exhibitionism of the superior artist is connected to his imagination; fiction is for him both a playful hypothesis and serious supposition, an imaginative form of enquiry – everything that exhibitionism is not. It is, if anything, closet exhibitionism, exhibitionism in hiding. It is true that, contrary to the general belief, it is the distance between the writer's life and his novel that is the most intriguing aspect of his imagination (CL 200).

and notice that these parallel Roth's words in an interview:

You should read my books as fiction, demanding the pleasure that fiction can yield. I have nothing to confess and no one I want to confess to... This is not to say that I haven't drawn heavily from my general experience to feed my imagination. But this isn't because I care to reveal myself, exhibit myself, or even express myself. It so I can invent myself. Invent my selves. Invent my worlds (RMO 350).

Thus, the fiction represented by this series “problematizes liberal humanist pieties about referentiality, truth, boundary and origin” (McDonald IV). His choice to bring this issue to the fore is meant to make a stand on the nature and ethics of telling stories.

Fourthly, the series also makes clear *what drives Zuckerman/Roth to writing fiction*. On the one hand, it is what Zuckerman states in *The Counterlife* and Singh summarizes as “the realization of a certain loss lead[ing] to seeking of solutions in the realm of imagination” (89), on the other hand it is Zuckerman's fascination with the power of literature with its “recurring images, themes, and structures [to] mediate between chaotic experience and the inchoate need to organize, analyze, and comprehend” (Wallace 19). For one reason or another, Nathan continuously puts down his experience. However, his accurate recording of details is conflated with his imagination which more often than not takes flights of fancy. It is Zuckerman's professional deformity to turn life into art (not only while writing) and art into life, i.e. his tendency to live fiction. The line between the written world and the unwritten one is very thin, contours are blurred with Zuckerman. There are proofs all over the series. In *The Ghost Writer*, for example, while sitting at Lonoff's breakfast table: “Instead I was continually drawn back into the fiction I had evolved about her and the Lonoffs while I lay in the dark study, transported by his praise and throbbing with the resentment of my disapproving father” (ZB 180). What he does here while in the company of his mentor with whom he is having breakfast, is imagine introducing “Anne Frank” as his prospective wife to his own father, which would redeem his aesthetic sin against the Jewish tribe. He creates a story in his imagination.

Connected with the theme of literature is the THEME OF THE SELF. Knowledge of the self, Bahtin discovered, is found in language. According to the Bakhtian understanding of novels (“Discourse in the Novel”), when one uses another voice (i.e. the writer impersonates a character, like Roth impersonates Nathan Zuckerman, or Nathan Zuckerman impersonates the characters he writes about) the self becomes visible to itself. In view of this explanation, the primary purpose of fiction is inquiry into subjectivity. Roth’s purpose then, as well as Zuckerman’s (as the fictional universe of Nathan parallels its author’s; Roth purposefully created a narrator character who professes writing and who appears only minimally displaced from the author’s life as demonstrated by numerous references to details from his biography), is to answer abstract questions about the self by contextualizing the subject and depicting it in action. He captures the self in a multiplicity of writing positions so that his writing helps him to achieve “the sense of reality.”

The Zuckerman novels of the 1970s and 1980s offer Roth’s perspective on the duties and the predicament of a writer of fiction as response to his detractors accusing him of anti-Semitism in the representation of Jews. Criticism made his writerly subjectivity visible to him. Later on, particularly in *The Counterlife*, Roth exposed the autobiographical fallacy in a very clever way. He showed that “making literature meant inventing by drawing counterlives from the writer’s self. [...] Impersonation implies starting with ‘yourself’ [...] and then making yourself look or sound exactly like someone else. [...] the self is just a point of departure [...]” (Shostak 8) At the end of *The Counterlife* in his letter to Maria, Nathan Zuckerman remarks: “Obviously the whole idea of what is a self philosophers have gone on about at extraordinary lengths, and, if only from the evidence here, it is a very slippery subject. But it is interesting trying to get a handle on one’s own subjectivity—something to think about, to play around with, and what’s more fun than that?” (321). Furthermore, Roth has Zuckerman elaborate a related theory around a cluster of theatrical metaphors: “impersonation,” “act,” “performance” – that similarly denies the existence of some primary selfhood (Shostak 173). “Being Zuckerman is one long performance and the very opposite of what is thought of as *being oneself*” (CL 319).

In the American trilogy, Zuckerman has a different approach to the matter, once he has become convinced that “the freedom to invent selves is a writer’s special privilege” (Shostak 172). The fact that the men he depicts in the three novels are to a large extent fabrications of his imagination discloses Zuckerman’s primary purpose: to inquire into his own subjectivity. Shostak explains: “Fables of identity are the useful fictions by which we attain a coherent vision of subjectivity in the attempt to make ourselves present to ourselves” (173).

Shostak has noticed Roth “has not only provided critiques of postmodern epistemologies of identity but has also offered fresh angles on the problems of writing the self in a variety of genres, from autobiography and memoir to dialogue and reflexive fiction” (17). She even argues that Roth’s career “has provided an index to the shifting ideologies in the latter part of the twentieth century, as the terms under which he conducts his investigation shift -roughly, for example, from a psychoanalytic view of selfhood determined by the past to a poststructural interpretation of selfhood as performance, or from realistic to postmodern narrative strategies, or from the ethnic subject construed in terms of assimilation to the same subject construed as internally multiple, indeterminate, or self-divided” (14). This Zuckerman

saga Roth reflects this ideological evolution of Roth, always subverting conventions, with respect to the concept of the self precisely because it is composed of mimetic narratives that celebrate the discursiveness of identity.

Another theme connected with the theme of literature is the THEME OF THE SON'S NEED FOR AN APPROVING FATHER FIGURE. It is this need that makes Nathan write, then hesitate about his profession, then suffer excruciating pain and writer's block etc. This theme is also present in every book of the series. *The Ghost Writer* "was Roth's way of emphasizing the necessity for benediction in a writer's life, which was in his case plagued by unrelenting hostility of various critics" (Singh 19). Lonoff or Abravanel embodies the possibility of an alternative father for 'Nathan Dedalus': "The disputatious stance, the aggressively marginal sensibility, the disavowal of community ties, the taste for scrutinizing a social event as though it were a dream or work of art - to Zuckerman this was the very mark of the intellectual Jews in their thirties and forties on whom he was modeling his own style of thought" (ZB 479). In *Zuckerman Unbound*, the theme is treated quite extensively but ironically. In *The Anatomy Lesson* the theme is particularly depicted in the Appel episode, as Appel is "another avatar of the father, representing first an alternative to the inadequacies of Dr. Zuckerman and then, in the terrible wound he inflicts (however inadvertently) on Zuckerman's sensibility, the high cost of transgressing the law of the father" (Wallace 25). Father figures like Lonoff abound in *Zuckerman Bound*. Usually Nathan is out to win their approval, but sometimes he squares off with them in Oedipal battle.

Nathan's indecorous honesty and novelistic ruthlessness cause him to alienate just about every potential father, though from time to time he tries to come to terms with them: "Zuckerman's fantasy of reconciliation with his father through marriage to the ultimate Jewish martyr, Anne Frank, is reconstituted as the quest, only slightly more realistic, to recover the writings of the Jewish Flaubert from the netherworld of contemporary Prague" (Wallace 29). But here in communist Czechoslovakia he is stopped by the Kulturminister Novak whose task is "to bring the aims of literature into line with the aims of society, to make literature less inefficient, from a social point of view" (ZB 776) and who, in turn, is under his dead father's influence (it is "the dead father's power over the sons who slew him" idem). He expels "the offending son", instructing Zuckerman in filial piety:

Those Czechs who inflame the anger of our mighty neighbor are not patriots-they are the enemy. There is nothing praiseworthy about them. The men to praise in this country are men like my own little father. You want to respect somebody in Czechoslovakia? Respect my father! I admire my old father and with good reason. I am proud of this little man. (ZB 779)

In search of one father's text, Zuckerman is presented with another: the dead father's abstract authority as preserved and protected by Novak, the minister of culture. Similarly, every protagonist in the American trilogy defines himself against a father-figure. Finally, in *Exit Ghost*, due to his age and his new acquaintance of the three young writers, Nathan somehow gets to experience the reverse of this theme: but it is still a matter of conflict between generations.

This is no doubt one of the most obsessive themes of the project, an obsession clearly depicted in *The Anatomy Lesson* where one of Zuckerman's mistresses berates him for his neurotic obsession with Milton Appel: "Oh, what a pity you can't shake free. That you should still be aroused and hurt by this! Are you always fighting your father? I know it may sound like a cliché, probably it would be with somebody else, but in your case I happen to think that it's true. I look through these books on your shelves, your Freud, your Erickson, your Bettelheim, your Reich, and every single line about a father is underlined" (ZB 510-11)

The particularity of the relation of the "son – father", in other words "the tension of the Oedipal conflict" (Wallace 17), most of the times, resolves around the desire of that "son" his that father accept his writing/penmanship. In *The Ghost Writer* and in *Zuckerman Unbound*, his real father's response to his writing (to "Higher Education" and *Carnovsky*) has already been established. Never again will he be willing to conform to the rules of good penmanship his father attempts to enforce, and never again will he earn his father's praise with his writing. "The excommunication of Dr. Zuckerman's final word to his son, 'Bastard'" (Wallace 27) allows no doubt about that. The episode of Milton Appel in the next book of the series detonates those tensions with deadly effect and prepares the ambiguous closure of the epilogue. Nathan has several attempts and strategies for transforming the Oedipal conflict: "all [those] intellectual adoptions and the substitute fathers" (28). His ultimate attempts to lay the father to rest are reinventing himself – "he become[s] his own father" (idem) or through his own paternity, both of which fail.

To conclude, Nathan Zuckerman, the major binding element of the Zuckerman series, is Roth's speaking-tube, conveying a conception of literature perfectly aligned with its author's. The ideology of writing is conveyed both by Roth's choices of form and technique in this series and by direct/sublimated ideological questions and answers. An analysis of the progression of all nine books taken in turn reveals that Roth's purpose in writing the Zuckerman project is to create fiction about literature, with focus on the purpose of, drive for and reaction to literature making. Roth orchestrates his writer character's dilemmas in such clever way as to make the series a complex means for self-explanation/expression, profession psycho-analysis and literary theory articulation.

Bibliography

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Discourse in the Novel". *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981
- Brauner, David. *Philip Roth*. Contemporary American and Canadian writers. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007
- McDonald, Paul John. *Philip Roth: His Ethical Sensibility Considered in Relation to his Developing Fictional Aesthetic* (PhDThesis). Birmingham: University of Central England, 1993
- Roth, Philip. *The Counterlife*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986
- Roth, Philip. *Reading Myself and Others*. London: Vintage Books, 2007
- Roth, Philip. *Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and Epilogue*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985

-
- Sheppard , R. Z. "Goodbye, Nathan Zuckerman." *Time Magazine*. Monday, Nov. 7, 1983
<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,949878-4,00.html>>. 10 Mar. 2008
- Shostak, Debra B. *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004
- Singh, Nandita. *Philip Roth: A Novelist in Crisis*. New Delhi: Classical Publishing Co, 2001
- Wallace, J.D. "'This Nation of Narrators': Transgression, Revenge and Desire in *Zuckerman Bound*". *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (Summer 1991), pp. 17-34.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195085>>. 16 May 2008