

***CLOSING THE CIRCLE – A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO EXIT GHOST BY PHILIP ROTH***

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*Abstract:* Exist Ghost is the last novel in the Zuckerman series which features the fictional character Nathan Zuckerman. With this novel the series has come full circle as this installment comprises the character-narrator's farewell after his final attempt at living, loving and writing, as well as several other mimetic, thematic and synthetic elements that close the circle of the series. My analysis focuses on the dynamics of reading this novel as the very last in the series, by following the narrative structure closely in order to underline the pattern of instabilities and tensions, the sequence of attitudes that the authorial audience is asked to take and the conventions the author employed so that readers would experience this text as closing the series.

**Keywords:** *the rhetorical approach to narrative, Nathan Zuckerman, progression, closure*

Published in 2007, *Exist Ghost* is the ninth and, based on Roth's statements and plenty of textual evidence, Roth's final text in the Zuckerman series of novels. A rhetorical analysis of this novel as closing the circle of the Zuckerman series should focus on the dynamics of reading it, by closely following its instabilities and tensions, the sequence of attitudes that the authorial audience is asked to take and the conventions the author employed.

**The title.** Roth's has excellent knowledge of theoretical categories and literary conventions. He is perfectly aware that titles and subtitles are privileged (Rabinowitz' *rules of notice*) and he uses them to let readers know where to focus attention and find the main message. The title of this novel is in fact a stage direction sentence signaling a departure, which may be found in the scripts of William Shakespeare's plays. In a BBC radio interview, Roth stated that using this direction as a title

came to me because of Macbeth. Last year in the summer I was going to see a production of Macbeth here in America, and I re-read the script that afternoon, and I came upon the Banquo scene, ghost scene, and it just leaped out — 'exit ghost' — and that's the title of my book, so I just lifted it. In the novel Jamie and Billy read *Macbeth* aloud to each other, marveling grimly at its relevance to George W. Bush's first administration. (Roth 2007)

In his interview for Spiegel, Roth re-stated the moment of having encountered and chosen it as a title and added:

It [i.e. "exit ghost"] appears in three plays. I found it in *Macbeth*. I was going to see a production of Macbeth, so I was re-reading the play. I read the stage direction, and it just leaped out at me. It also appears in *Hamlet*. And then when *Julius Caesar* appears to Brutus. (Roth 2008)

Furthermore, this title hints at the title of the first Zuckerman book, *The Ghost Writer*, which depicts events that unfolded approximately half a century earlier, when the protagonist, now 72, was an aspiring writer of 23. Back then Nathan Zuckerman, a budding writer, received his mentor's validation and as a result he became a confident voice. By choosing the word "ghost" for the title of this novel Roth effects a return to the beginnings of the Zuckerman series and thus closes the circle. On top of that, because "exit" is a theatrical term instructing an actor to leave the scene, it becomes clear that this 2007 novel is the "swan song," the final dramatic appearance of the Zuckerman voice. The fact that the novel is a

first-person character narration charges the title with the meaning that the performer himself has realized that this is his last appearance on the stage of his (literary) life, and he is using up all his energies during his very last performance.

**Progression.** The authorial intention to close the Zuckerman series with this particular novel is perfectly visible in the progression pattern.

In this novel, Nathan Zuckerman the writer, who has the previous three times taken a step aside to allow other characters to take center stage in the books he composes, chooses to be in the limelight again, the novel being Zuckerman's account of return and realization of his impending demise. The story refers to events that unfold over the course of "a little more than a week" (EG 279), starting on 27 October 2004, but by means of the associative memory the character-narrator also foregrounds an overload of events from the recent past (events and people connected to his old age) or from the distant past (some of which already depicted in the first installment of the series, such as the Zuckerman's visit to the Lonoffs in 1956, others meant to fill in the mimetic gaps between the plots of the different books of the series).

In the first sentence of the story the narrator-character announces his narrative audience that he is about to share with them events which he has already experienced: "I hadn't been in New York in eleven years" (EG 1). The narrator's temporal relation to the scene he is describing establishes a tension based on the temporal distance between the time of the action and the time of the narration which makes the audience to align themselves with the narrator as "we" all look back at the characters. This technique, called double focalization, establishes a distance between Nathan Zuckerman the character involved in the events and Nathan Zuckerman the narrator looking back to events, eventually determining the authorial audience to direct their attention to the thematic component of the narrative. Nathan Zuckerman has been most of the time treated by the author as a character who is a faithful and a self-conscious reflector of his experience. Roth clearly endorses the values behind his account and does not give Zuckerman different traits as a narrator and a character, despite the fact that Roth has Zuckerman make subtle comments on his own narration.

The narrative in the first chapter of the book (titled "The Present Movement") progresses largely by the introduction and resolution of cognitive tension of unequal knowledge between author and authorial audience. The author and his narrator surrogate know all about the events of October 2004, while the authorial and narrative audience are completely unfamiliar with them.

Action starts two days before the 2004 U.S. presidential election, when Zuckerman returns to New York after eleven years of living in seclusion in his mountain cabin in the Berkshires. The reason he comes to the city is to undergo a medical procedure that would rid him of incontinence. Leaving Mount Sinai Hospital where he had a urologist appointment, Zuckerman sees Amy Bellette, a woman he met in 1956 in E.I. Lonoff's house, episode thoroughly depicted in Roth's novel *The Ghost Writer*. He follows her to a restaurant and while observing her order and eat by herself, he realizes she has had brain surgery.

While continuing to reduce tension by giving information about the circumstances of his visit to New York, the implied author, introduces the first major instability of the novel. Roth has Zuckerman give in to an impulse, the "most thoughtless snap decision" (EG 44) he has ever made: he arranges to swap for one year his cabin in the mountains with the Upper West Side New York apartment of a couple of young aspiring writers, Billy Davidoff and Jamie Logan. This defines the central issue of the whole narrative: will Zuckerman go all the way with this impulse of "precipitously stepping into a new future" (EG 52)? Will he be able to return and adapt to the turmoil and excitement offered by the Big Apple?

The same chapter accommodates the introduction of the second instability resulting from the sudden conflict that breaks out between Zuckerman and Richard Kliman – another young writer. Kliman, a promising Harvard graduate, Logan’s former lover, intends to publish a biography of E.I. Lonoff in which he explains everything in Lonoff’s life as a result of scandalous secret in his teens. Even without knowing what the secret is all about, Zuckerman threatens to prevent publication. Thus, the second instability is: how will this friction be settled? Who will have his desire come true: Kliman or Zuckerman?

The second chapter (“Under the Spell”) progresses by relieving more cognitive tension, by complicating both instabilities even further and by toying with a frame story (i.e. a playlet casting only two individuals - *he* and *she*).

The first instability of the plot stemming from Zuckerman’s “rash moment” to have a house-exchange is complicated by Zuckerman’s unexpected infatuation with the beautiful young writer named Jamie Logan. While the agreement was that he return to the city for a year and Jamie and her husband retire to Zuckerman’s country home, the truth of the matter is that Zuckerman would want Jamie to swap husbands instead of homes. Zuckerman knows that he cannot act upon his new obsession with Jamie – at this stage of his life he is not only incontinent but also impotent. However, this does not prevent his attachment to her:

I left without daring to touch her. Without daring to touch her face [...] Without daring to place my hand on her waist. Without daring to say that we’d met once before. Without daring to say whatever words a mutilated man as I was says to a desirable woman forty years his junior that will not leave him covered in shame because he is overcome by temptation for a delight he cannot enjoy and a pleasure that is dead. I was in deep enough [...] I was learning at seventy-one what it is to be deranged. Proving that self-discovery wasn’t over after all. (EG 122)

Twice in this chapter, abrupt changes in writing style and textual presentation, i.e. changed typography and genre (drama as opposed to prose), signal the introduction of another narrative level in *Exit Ghost*. Back to his hotel room after having spent time with Jamie (once during the election night, the second time the following day) Zuckerman gives in to his compulsive desire to write and he puts down two scenes of a play titled *He and She*, composed of imagined conversations between him and Logan. While the first one is entirely the product of Zuckerman’s imagination, the second one only rewrites his private conversation with Jamie in a manner he would have had it – a casual relaxed exchange sprinkled with tender words, questions he dared not ask her (about having a love affair), flirtation, confessions of feelings his feelings (jealousy, attractiveness, excitement, love), the discovery of a common plight (specific to writers: the need to escape pain), a reference to rash moments (Conrad’s *the Shadow-Line*), her admiration, the profession of writing literature, their friendship etc. After the second scene of the playlet ends, the novel contains Zuckerman’s confession of purpose: the scene represents the beginning of a “play of desire and temptation and flirtation and agony” titled *He and She* like Chekhov’s story. He sees it as the “fictional amplification” of pain, as compensation for inabilities and impossibilities; as “the un-lived, the surmise, fully drawn in print on paper” (EG 147) which, at least to him, matter more than life itself.

The second instability of the text is complicated by the “Lonoff’s secret” issue and by the fact that the relationship between the ambitious and eloquent writer Kliman and the reserved and wise senior Zuckerman in 2004 somehow parallels the relationship between the fledgling, but similarly ambitious and bright Nathan and his elderly mentor Lonoff in 1956. As it turns out, the responses to the two aspiring writers’ requests for support, validation and confirmation are reversed. While Nathan was eventually validated by his mentor in 1956,

Kliman is repeatedly deprived of the aging Zuckerman's support and encouragement. Despite empathizing with Kliman's efforts to tell the truth and make his first breakthrough, Zuckerman refuses to endorse the young writer's efforts out of duty to his late mentor. Here is part of their first exchange, a return of Roth to a recurrent theme in the series:

[Richard:] "Why do you insist on trivializing what I want to do? [...]"

[Zuckerman:] "Because the dirt-seeking snooping calling itself research is just about the lowest literary rackets."

"And the savage snooping calling itself fiction?"

"You characterizing me now?"

"I'm characterizing literature." (EG 102)

For the nth time in this series, it all comes down to the distance between the writer's creation and the writer's life, an error for which Zuckerman has taken more than his fair share of abuse.

In chapter three ("Amy's Brain") progression means more emphasis on the second instability of the novel as Zuckerman has a telephone conversation with and then pays a visit to Amy Bellette in her apartment (to find out more about Lonoff's secret – an incestuous relationship with his half-sister). Because of numerous references to the events in Lonoff's house in 1956, to his life before and after that year, to Amy's real biography etc., the novel is in this chapter in a conversation with *The Ghost Writer*. It answers question left unanswered in the first installment (e.g. the nature of the relationship between Lonoff and Amy), it reveals further development of those events (e.g. the divorce of the Lonoffs, the novel I.E. Lonoff was writing at the time of his demise) and, thus, it provides the long-awaited closure to the first installment.

Chapter four ("My Brain") is made up entirely of another scene in the play by Nathan Zuckerman, put down in his hotel room after having visited Amy. The dialogue between him and Jamie, i.e. between *he* and *she*, creates an imagined and impossible present for the two of them. Zuckerman confined to the life of the mind, imagines another conversation in which he flirts with Jamie, informs her of his feelings for her, interrogates her about her lovers and sensual experiences, uses examples from literature to make his points and admits to envying her husband and the man he believes to be her lover.

Chapter five ("Rash Moments") provides resolution to both major instabilities in the text. First, Nathan accepts to meet Kliman in a coffee shop, thinking it is his "last obligation to literature" to "master" the young biographer (EG 252). On this occasion Zuckerman finds out details about the death and funeral of a fellow writer of his time and age -George Plimpton, then painfully realizing the gap between his decaying generation of "no-longers" ("losing faculties, losing control, shamefully disposed from themselves, marked by deprivation and experiencing the organic rebellion staged by the body against the elderly" EG 256-7) and the flamboyant generation of "not-yets", he fails to fulfill his plan of discouraging Kliman to become Lonoff's biographer, as well as to convince him that there is an "impenetrable line dividing fiction from reality" when Kliman used Lonoff's novel as the chief piece of evidence of his incest thesis.

As for the second instability, Zuckerman phones Jamie from his hotel with the intention to call off the deal but instead invites her over, an invitation she declines, at which point, Nathan leaves the hotel and New York for his mountaintop in the Berkshires, having admitted to his inability to control anything anymore and having realized that Kliman's next target after Lonoff will be Zuckerman himself.

**Closure.** Interestingly, the very end of *Exit Ghost* coincides with another abrupt change in writing style and typography: the last of the playlet scenes, which re-writes

Nathan's last conversation with Jamie in a manner that allows him to have a dignified retreat. This (together with the rest of the playlet) has generally been interpreted as Zuckerman's final attempt at regaining control over his life and his profession.

*Exit Ghost's* final pages are charged with extra meaning: not only does the last page of the text mark the end of the novel as an autonomous unit, it also closes the entire project. A parallel is clearly drawn between the stage direction to leave addressed to the playlet character of Nathan Zuckerman (fiction in fiction) and the "exit" of the narrator-character with this last text. We can identify another "farewell": the implied author says farewell to his narrator character Nathan Zuckerman. As a result, the three partings coincide when the text ends. Other guideposts indicating the onset of the series closure are "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*" (EG 280) or the very last sentence of the novel, "Gone for good" (idem). Being the last sentence (a privileged position) of the text its message is essentially significant: Zuckerman realizes that he has failed to resuscitate his social life and that his writing capability is also failing precipitously and as a result he decides to retire irrevocably. The time has come for him to return to his seclusion, and for the Text of the Zuckerman series to conclude.

Many readers are of the opinion that the end of *Exist Ghost* is not as neat and emphatic as expected. There is an interpretive convention according to which the last pages of a novel should contain the narrator's/author's best thoughts, congruent not only with the events of the text that precede them, but, considering that this is the last book of the series, also with the novels that precede this one. This is according to Rabinowitz the bundling technique called the *rule of conclusive endings* (161). But Roth frustrates readers' expectations of his applying this literary convention that permits readers to read it in a special way, as a summing up of the work's meaning. There is not much in the last pages of *Exist Ghost* in the way of the author's expressing most pressingly his points— aesthetic, moral, social, political, epistemological. No wonder readers kept asking Roth whether he would use Zuckerman again. What is more, readers (professional or not) have expressed disappointment at the level of accomplishment of this last installment and the viability of *Exit Ghost* outside Zuckerman's series 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 intratextual interpretations, *Exit Ghost* undoubtedly would remain an obscure book, despite its internal structure.

And yet, the novel has its merits. First, 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. Secondly, only apparently the balance of the configuration is upset through violation of the convention of conclusive endings. Granted, the novel does not have a very spectacular ending or congruent enough with what went before in terms of technique. But this does not imply it is not a fitting one. The last pages of the novel are occupied with the final scene of 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. Zuckerman chooses to emphasize his decision to go back to his retreat atop the New England mountain by means of these playlet directions. An explanation could be that it is easier for Zuckerman to accept his defeat through art. 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.

Reading the last pages of the novel, the authorial audience understand that the entire series Zuckerman is provided with roundness. Closure is an important part of the satisfaction of literature and Roth felt the need to provide the series with a sense of completeness, finality and roundness through the closure he wrote. The series started in the rural area of Massachusetts 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 and strength, with irreversible ill-health and feeling that he has reached the end of the road: he has gone the full circle of his life and career. For all these reasons the novel can be said to be accommodated with a fitting and rather conventional ending, which clearly sums up the meaning of the entire series.

**The thematic.** As progression is characterized by a slow movement in the direction of resolving instabilities and eliminating tensions and by very little in the way of action, this gives thematic prominence to the novel. Thematically the novel has multiple focuses. To begin with, in connection with the first instability, the readers discover the theme of the renewal – an important one throughout the series. In this final installment, the need to escape is the mechanism that sets in motion both the old Zuckerman and his young counterparts Jamie and her husband. As a rule (to which *Exit Ghost* is no exception) Roth both expresses and thwarts self-invention.

Related to this theme, there is the one of decrepitude and loss, which readers notice is in striking contrast with the vitality and ferventness pervading the entire *Zuckerman Bound*. Having reached an old age accompanied by serious physical impairments, Nathan Zuckerman starts to be haunted by an incredible sense of loss, which is amplified when he returns to the big city. In the interview Roth gave Spiegel he explains: “maybe he tries [to escape old age, to become strong again], but I think this last book is really about the life going out of him. He doesn't have the fight in him any longer. Momentarily there's a burst of fight and virility, but then he runs away” (Roth 2007).

As for the second instability, it is meant to emphasize yet again the theme of literature. To begin with, *Exit Ghost* is a book abounding with literary references from the title onward. All characters of significance in this book are writers. There are numerous references to real-life writers, e.g. George Plimpton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Primo Levi, and books, e.g. *A Doll's House*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Return of the Native*, *Rip Van Winkle*, *The Shadow Line* etc. Moreover, the characters continuously talk about book reading, book writing and book publishing. In fact, the novel contains a very eloquent demonstration of how a writer can turn life into literature. Zuckerman writes the play titled *He and She* starting from what he experiences and the people he meets. Regarding this transformation of life into fiction Nathan Zuckerman explained (earlier in *The Counterlife*): “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 160). This is what he demonstrates in *Exit Ghost* – his conversations with Jamie and the personality of the woman herself only offer him a starting point in composing the play, he does not describe her real self or reproduce her exact words – “it is the writer's creativity that imparts [characters and situations] liveliness in the work of fiction” (Singh 107). The bottom line is that the Zuckerman saga accommodates Zuckerman's/Roth's theory about writing. Having Zuckerman as a normative voice, Roth

articulates his principles of literature in a coherent and forceful manner, Roth's purpose in writing the Zuckerman project being to write *fiction about fiction*.

**Conclusion.** It is true that reading this book can be a much better experience provided one is familiar with *The Ghost Writer* (as well as the other books in the series), but the reading of the first installment is not compulsory as Roth (and Zuckerman) fills us in on the characters' life circumstances. On the other hand, reading *Exit Ghost* provides answers to many questions about events in the earlier book(s) and determines the reader to think about it (them) retroactively, reshaping them in the process. This novel as a narrative ending to the series sheds light, retrospectively, on the series as a whole, allowing it to mean and resonate.

What matters most is that *Exit Ghost* meets the Zuckerman seriesreaders' desire for closure and offers them a sense of completion. It is obvious that Roth purposefully added or enhanced qualities that were necessary for the series to constitute itself as a finished project: completeness, roundness and closure. In his interview for Spiegel Roth confirmed that this novel represents the end of Zuckerman, despite the fact that he had started to write it without having the desire to bring the series to an end: "It just happened, you know, as I remember it. 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. But in the beginning, all there was, was the idea of his return." Asked whether he might use the character again, playfully Roth said: "[...] now he is in Zuckerman Heaven." Despite its pervading pessimism, the novel being a graphic depiction of defeat, emptiness and dismay, *Exit Ghost* is what the series needed in order to come full circle, to have a shape that conveys meaning and order.

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