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PHD THESIS

*Philip Roth's Zuckerman Books
and the Rhetoric of Fiction*

SUMMARY

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	3
Abbreviations	4
INTRODUCTION	6
1. PHILIP ROTH – contexts, critical reception and disambiguation	23
1.1. Parameters of Roth’s literary career	23
1.2. Critical reception.....	27
1.3. The Zuckerman Books	30
1.3.1. What is the Zuckerman series of books?	30
1.3.2. Other books featuring the character Nathan Zuckerman.....	32
1.3.3. Were the Zuckerman books conceived as part of a project?.....	34
1. 4. Controversies and paradoxes in Roth’s literary career.....	37
1.4.1. Roth’s Jewish-Americanness.....	37
1.4.2. Roth’s autobiographical references.....	41
1. 5. Roth’s views on the rhetorical exchange literature implies.....	45
2. CONCEPTUALIZING THE RHETORICAL APPROACH.....	48
2.1. Basic assumptions underlying the choice of critical approach.....	49
2.2. The larger frame of Cultural Studies	50
2.3. Overview of the evolution of the neo-Aristotelian criticism.....	53
2.4. The Chicago School.....	58
2.5. Contemporary narratologists	63
2.5.1. James Phelan	62
2.5.2. Peter J. Rabinowitz	66
2.6. Concepts, principles and interpretative conventions involved in the rhetorical approach	68
2.6.1. Terminology and concepts	69
a. Plot versus progression (story and discourse).....	70
b. Character and the rhetorical approach principles of character interpretation	74

c. Thematism and the thematizing of narrative	80
d. Audience	85
e. Technique	88
f. Voice	91
g. The ethical dimension of rhetorical communication	92
2.6.2. The seven key principles of rhetorical interpretation	93
2.6.3. Narrative conventions.....	96
3. THE ZUCKERMAN BOOKS within the rhetorical framework of analysis	
General Remarks	101
3.1. <i>The Ghost Writer</i>	106
3.2. <i>Zuckerman Unbound</i>	111
3.3. <i>The Anatomy Lesson</i>	119
3.4. “The Prague Orgy”	129
3.5. <i>The Counterlife</i>	136
3.6. <i>American Pastoral</i>	164
3.7. <i>I Married a Communist</i>	178
3.8. <i>The Human Stain</i>	184
3.9. <i>Exit Ghost</i>	190
4. The Zuckerman project – intratextual relations and rhetorical synthesis	
4.1. Widening the framework, re-contextualizing and changing the dynamic of reading.....	196
4.2. The generative force and momentousness of <i>The Ghost Writer</i> in the design of the Zuckerman books by Philip Roth.....	198
4.3. Coherence and intratextuality.....	203
4.3.1. Theoretical considerations.....	203
4.3.2. Definition, principles and concepts.....	204
4.4. An intratextual investigation of the Zuckerman series.....	209
4.4.1. Difficulties in retrieving the coherence.....	210
4.4.2. Progression.....	215
4.4.3. Nathan Zuckerman.....	229
4.4.4. Narration technique.....	238
4.4.5. Other patterns in recuperating unity.....	246
CONCLUSION	250
BIBLIOGRAPHY	255

Key Words: Nathan Zuckerman, the Zuckerman books, the rhetorical narrative approach, overall design, self-referentiality, intratextuality, the theme of literature, “ghost-writing”

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this PhD dissertation is the Zuckerman series of novels, i.e. nine interlocking books by Philip Roth:

- a trilogy and epilogue - *Zuckerman Bound: The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *The Prague Orgy* (1985),
- a stand-alone novel *The Counterlife* (1986),
- a *second* trilogy – informally called the “American trilogy”: *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), *The Human Stain* (2000), and
- a second stand-alone novel *Exit Ghost* (2007).

It is a unified series of novels due to the recurrence of one character - Nathan Zuckerman, a writer himself and according to the majority of reviewers and critics one of Roth’s several “alter-egos” (I have a particular position with respect to the concept of alter-ego, which I briefly discuss in chapter I). The Zuckerman books are one of the most ambitious literary series of our time as they were published over a period of 28 years (1979-2007) and the volumes amount to 2,507 pages, not counting Nathan's letter to Roth in the author's autobiography (*The Facts*).

Critical reception – trends in Rothian exegesis. Immediately after publication and in repeated occasions ever since, the Zuckerman books have made the object of numerous specific projects of individual journal articles, chapters in books, conference papers and special issues of journals, however, so far not one book-length study has been published on the individual topic of the Zuckerman series. Another observation is that the exegesis that has been produced so far was intended to trace Philip Roth's artistic engagement with questions about ethnic identity, postmodernism (ideology), Israel, the Holocaust, sexuality, the human psyche itself etc., all of them being issues that loom far in his works.

The contribution of our research to Roth's exegesis/to knowledge

Although Roth's experiment has received much insightful commentary about both his themes and his techniques (especially by Shostak, Brauner, and Safer), There has not been yet put together an adequate account of the reading experience these novels offer. Central to any account of that experience will be an understanding of how we respond to Roth's speaker. Just what kind of emotional and intellectual engagement does Roth ask his implied audience to have with Nathan Zuckerman as he presents his voice against a variety of biographical and historical backdrops.

The thesis offers an original and up-to-date reading of a significant part of the current Roth canon. At the moment it seems to be the only study to focus on the process of writing fiction as an overarching theme and the rhetorical devices Roth employs to convey it as effectively as possible. Many critics have identified the themes of the ethics of writing, the relation between the "written world and the unwritten world" (Roth's favorite phrase to refer to literature versus life) and of self-referentiality. But nobody has gone as far as identifying the extent of these themes' implications over the entire series. Moreover at the time of submission it would also seem to be the first full-length analysis to consider the Zuckerman books exclusively.

Method. Strategically, it is obvious that rothian critics all adopt, to a larger or smaller extent, the interpretive maneuver James Phelan summarizes in a two-word slogan: "Always thematize!" They practice thematic criticism, while my undertaking is an occasional but hopefully cogent step aside from the trend, on the grounds that pure thematizing is rather reductive, as it moves one away from the richness of response authors and texts invite their audiences to have. I will view the series of books as achieving their significance by advancing a coherent story 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.

I set out to write a book about the Zuckerman books as purposive communicative acts. I hope this analysis will offer a fresh way to think about the subtle and not-so-subtle communication Roth initiated and maintained through the entire Zuckerman project, textual form, authorial agency, and reader response. My aim was to propose a new and comprehensive interpretation of the nine books comprised by the Zuckerman series; for this reason I was aware of the need to carefully choose the appropriate critical approach. In the selection process, first I decided I should conduct a narrative analysis of the Zuckerman project, and afterwards I settled

for the narrative theory titled the rhetorical approach, a method which calls for close reading and naturally builds the act of interpretation on the act of reading.

Statement of purpose. My aim is to demonstrate that the Zuckerman series despite its diversity and eclecticism is above all a unified and complete whole, that there is AN OVERALL DESIGN (some principle of a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts), or an organic unity. I am holding up unity as a goal to be achieved and a measure of aesthetic success. Due to the analytical approach chosen, ultimately, my purpose is to demonstrate that for *the reader* it is a coherent experience.

While it is a common sense idea to assume that books by the same author with a common character would have a number of other issues in common (the same fictional world, the same style of expression, the same voice etc.) that will justify their viewing as a unity, the heart of the matter surely is to what extent this unity exists and the impact it has on comprehension.

I also contend to ask and argue that Roth went to great lengths to write it as a unified project. One argument is that without the publication of *Exit Ghost* the author would have frustrated the reader's desire for unity - this also being a clear sign that the entire series, although definitely not initially conceived as a project of this magnitude, has become a coherent and complete project in the meantime.

Organization of the dissertation. In order to be able to sustain a clear line of reasoning, I decided to adopt an **organizational schema** with two paths, which I feel will have especially important consequences for the progression of the whole argument: the outside-inside approach and the rhetorical analytical-synthetic interrogation of the literary material

CHAPTER ONE. PHILIP ROTH – contexts, disambiguation, and critical reception

Because the rhetorical approach, by no means, follows the traditional pattern in emphasizing historical background and biographical information and because I feel such an approach is necessary, I decided to furnish the focused discussion of the Zuckerman books with a larger frame - the outside-inside approach. Therefore, the dissertation begins with a chapter which, after it briefly locates Roth as a writer within contemporary American literature, gives an overview of Roth's literary production and its critical reception up to the present moment, necessary in order to place the bulky text in a larger context. I particularly chose to focus on the

parameters of Roth's literary career so that I point out to a number of aspects which single him out. The chapter continues with a discussion meant first to delineate the range of books titled the Zuckerman books and second to assess the circumstances of their publication. Necessary for the clarity of my argumentation is reference to my position concerning Roth's Jewish-Americanness (his belonging to the Jewish community in the US) and his extensive usage of biographical information in his fiction writing. The chapter ends with several observations on Roth's attitude towards the rhetorical exchange going on between himself as a writer and his readers on the site of his novels, Roth's views on the craft of writing and the process of reading as well as arguments in favor of choosing the rhetorical approach.

CHAPTER TWO. Conceptualizing the rhetorical approach

Despite changing topic radically, the second chapter of the dissertation is another important contribution to the larger frame, i.e. it is vital to the building of an outside perspective over my discussion. It is concerned with describing the theoretical system employed in the exploration of Philip Roth's series of books: the rhetorical approach to narrative. It offers a rounded, albeit not exhaustive, view of what it means to claim that narrative is rhetoric; as rhetorical acts themselves, they are an attempt to show the power of the anti-foundationalist, ethical, ideological, and audience-oriented rhetorical approach. It is a chapter meant to help contextualize my analysis and synthesis and prepare the claims I want to make about the experience of reading the Zuckerman books. It consists of an overview of the evolution of this approach from Aristotle to contemporary theorists, followed by a subchapter on the contributions of the most prominent contemporary narratologists (James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz) of the movement and by a brief and systematic description of the concepts, principles and the various terms employed by this approach. This study employs a lot of terms and distinctions, of which most belong to Phelan, while others were coined by Genette.

CHAPTER THREE. The Zuckerman books within the rhetorical framework of analysis

The forward movement of the argument in this chapter is the analysis and interpretation in turn and in chronological order of the nine Zuckerman books, for each being allotted an individual subchapter. According to Booth, each book teaches us how to read it; therefore, I

follow the signals of each of the nine Zuckerman books to locate the meaning of these narratives in the text. I view the individual narratives as dynamic events closely followed by the structure of the audience's interests and attitudes. To focus on explaining the dynamics of reading narrative means following progression, i.e. the evolution of "instabilities" for unstable relations within story and that of "tensions" for those in discourse. The explicit concentration on progression is justified by the fact that, through concentration devices and scaffolding, it highlights the major themes in each book. This also enables me to prove a series of accusations of faulty technique wrong. Contrary to most literary analyses (which have as major focus the action of thematizing), this one pays equal attention to the mimesis, to the ideational generalizations carried by the progression and characters, as well as to the synthetic (the construction of each text) so often foregrounded by Philip Roth. Moreover, to focus solely on thematizing equals making a literary work to aspire the condition of allegory, whereas, as it is widely acknowledged, Roth's literature has always had a rich mimetic dimension and invited to take the mimetic function seriously.

CHAPTER FOUR. The Zuckerman project – intratextual relations and rhetorical synthesis

This chapter builds on the work of chapter three, re-contextualizing the findings of this early chapter - in other words, many of the argumentative strands of that chapter are picked up in this one. The synthesis as a strategy adopted in this chapter widens the framework so as to view the books sequentially and as a coherent and extensive site of rhetorical communication between Roth and the reader. For this reason this section has different dynamic, grouping information intratextually, allowing the nine books to converse with each other in the manner Roth treated them, and Shostak pointed out to in her impressive monograph. This brings to light both the lines of intersection and the disruptions.

This chapter begins with some general remarks related to the new framework and dynamic of reading. Several pages are allotted here to the generative force and momentousness of *The Ghost Writer* in the design of the Zuckerman books. The rest of the chapter has as dominant focus the concept of intratextuality and the intratextual investigation of the entire series, which means identifying difficulties in retrieving the coherence, as well as ways of

recuperating coherence with respect to progression, the character-narrator Nathan Zuckerman, narration technique etc.

The Zuckerman project is without any doubt the saga of the artist's life and central to the project is **THE THEME OF LITERATURE**. The Zuckerman saga accommodates Roth's theory about writing, having Zuckerman as a normative voice. Synthetically (and not only), Nathan Zuckerman is highly accomplished and attentively developed. Roth created Zuckerman as fictional character for particular persuasive purposes of the rhetorical context offered by literature, knowing very well that this speaking "I" is a role negotiated in this context between him and his audience. Roth casts Nathan Zuckerman as a protagonist, as a minor character, as a narrator and/or as listener to other people's stories. Putting him centre-stage or side-stage, Roth activates or recapitulates a wide variety of themes, but in particular, the relationship between life and art, and the consequences of confusing the two. Nathan Zuckerman is "a figure who's served as a vehicle for, and a pained practitioner of, Roth's brand of 'seeming self-exposure'" (Tayler). The relationship between the creator Philip Roth and his fictional alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman is, however, a little more complicated: Zuckerman has, from the very beginning till the end of the series, been Roth's *ghost writer*. Roth pushed Nathan to the front and "pretended" that his character wrote all these novels/books. The series begins and ends with titles that point to the protagonist purposefully highlighting its artificiality. This fact conveys that Roth's purpose in creating Nathan Zuckerman was mainly of synthetic (and thematic) nature.

The consideration of these books as a coherent enterprise has numerous advantages. First, the mimetic is greatly illuminated, as courses of actions are better understood and instabilities left unresolved are picked up and either complicated further or given resolutions. Also, the protagonist's portrait is better delineated. Secondly, the thematic begins to resemble a kaleidoscope. When the overview give readers the vantage point to notice that throughout the series themes are rotated just like in kaleidoscopes in which bits of colored glass and a clever system of mirrors produce a succession of symmetrical designs. Indeed the variety of mimetic contexts depicted are meant to reflect the same themes but in constantly changing thematic patterns. Finally, the perception of the synthetic is enriched as readers can see that Roth cleverly exploits a wide range of devices.

CONCLUSION

Being the result of some of the most significant literary efforts ever made, the Zuckerman project is highly accomplished and more complex than many other literary undertakings by other writers if we consider length, the period of time it took to be published, the eclectic corpus of literary works, and the wide range of topics, narrative strategies and themes. It is no doubt wrought to high mimetic standards of plot structure and character analysis, it is very rich thematically, and despite being primarily a set of related realistic texts portraying the life of an American artist it has evident sophisticated features of metaliterary structures. What gives even greater value to it is Roth's choice to have the series "ghost-written" by this fictional counterpart, the writer-figure and his alter brain, Nathan Zuckerman. This "ghost writer" continually stretches himself and his readers and reinvents his fictional selves in surprising ways. Nathan Zuckerman is more than a character to Roth. It is a spirit.

The primary goal of this dissertation has been a holistic approach to Roth's Zuckerman project within the rhetorical interpretive framework. Overall, my research made me confident in asserting that this is a compelling, beautifully written series that definitively reveal Roth as a restlessly, relentlessly interrogative and "dialogical" writer whose work is so dense that the reader has to attend it page by page to stay even with its agile maneuvers. It pays to read him closely: every page is packed with ore and very little is to be thrown away. And this is what this dissertation does in chapter three: every book has been broken off into smaller pieces, as it needed to be compartmentalized in order to be read at all. Chapter four gives up compartmentalization in favor of reading for unity, of looking for ways of putting things together, well aware of the rigidity of unified reading (which tends also to be univocal) desensitizing readers to the richness of texts.

My purpose has been to place some of the fundamental aspects of Philip Roth's Zuckerman books in a significantly different context from that in which they are frequently placed. In order to think teleologically about these books it was vital, in my view, to first of all reflect on the question, why? – what is the purpose of all this? I have attempted to argue for the pre-eminence of the driving force of unity and coherence that enhance the quality of the experience of the readers. That is not to say that other ends are not important: they clearly are. However, the probability of achieving these other ends, I would argue, is greater to the extent we are successful in enhancing the experience of the readers sense of unity.

I researched this set of books and the critical literature about them with the desire to reach a wholeness and neatness in the design of the Zuckerman series, the wish to be capable to renegotiate its natural segmentation, the need to discover patterns of texts and of my reading of these texts, as this way of negotiating one's way around the textual system figures the way one makes sense of the world, the urge for **totalizing tendencies**. Luckily, my declared desire to reach this wholeness and neatness in the design of the Zuckerman series was rewarded by what Alison Sharrock calls in "pulling texts apart and then looking at the myriad ways of their putting together".

The outcomes of this thesis are:

1. **A range of evidence that there is a very complex, sophisticated and strong overall design in the Zuckerman series of books**, in other words that the Zuckerman books are a project which seriously and effectively internalizes a drive for unity and coherence. As literary criticism researchers are very well aware, when you ask any question about a literary piece there will be many varied answers from different perspectives. Thus the specific focus of my answer depended extensively on the chosen frame of reference: the rhetorical approach to narrative, which I felt answered quite effectively the question of coherence, as it addressed, to a significant extent, the challenges posed by the reader's effort to make sense of the reading experience and observe the unity. I demonstrated that the author enhances unit, not for its own sake, but rather to enhance the experience offered to the readers. My line of argument placed emphasis on the act of reading performed in according to the author's lead, constantly bearing in mind that any text is written by someone in order to achieve a particular purpose.

2. **The realization of the existence of a number of cues in the series which highly impact the understanding of the overall design and determine the existence of a virtuous circle of comprehension enhancement**. The impact of each and every one of these books is maximized when the outcomes of the first demonstration themselves become inputs, and we move into the virtuous circle of understanding enhancement. Having demonstrated that the Zuckerman books represent a literary series with effective unity and coherence enhancement strategies in place, I argued, in this context, that a good grasp of the all the aspects of coherence in these books lead to a superior understanding of the series. This claim was the result of my setting the task of doing justice to the complex rhetorical transactions offered by skillfully told narratives.

3. The contention that, although not all these books have an incontestable artistic value or have received completely favorable reception, **their value is enhanced by the fact that they are part of this project.**

The series demonstrates Roth's inventive capacity as a story teller, his awareness of the variety of patterns and resources of narratives, of the multitudinous interactions of character and progression and of the potential for multiple layers in a book. Given this situation and the bulky material representing the series, my inquiry does not attempt to be exhaustive. It does, however, retain the vaulting ambition of comprehensiveness, the goal of establishing the underlying principle of the project, the different types of patterns involved, the main thematic concerns and techniques employed. I could continue this analysis and synthesis by bringing the conclusions reached so far into dialogue with some things I have barely (or not at all) touched on. But literary analysis, synthesis and interpretation must reach a (if provisional) end, even if rhetorical reading, like relationships between people, stops nowhere.

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