

**NATHAN ZUCKERMAN, A COMPELLING COMMUNICATION DEVICE
IN THE LITERATURE OF PHILIP ROTH**

*Nathan Zuckerman, un puternic și convingător mijloc de comunicare în literatura lui Philip
Roth*

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Abstract: Philip Roth's most accomplished character and his most developed protagonist/narrator is undoubtedly the writer-figure Nathan Zuckerman, his "alter brain", as Roth himself has called him. The paper comprises a thorough analysis and synthesis of this character with regard to all its three dimension: mimetic, thematic and synthetic, as they emerge from the entire Zuckerman series.

Keywords: Nathan Zuckerman, self-reflexivity, self-exposure, narrator reliability

In his career of over half a century Philip Roth has created a wide range of memorable characters. To Roth these are more than characters, these are essential narrative devices. In 2000 in a list of "Books by Philip Roth" included in the front matter of *The Human Stain*, Roth switched from the chronological organization of his own books to an organization around the (central) characters they depict: Zuckerman Books, Roth Books, Kepesh Books and Other Books. According to Shostak, "The highlighting of the books' voices by name reveals Roth's interest in retrospectively finding patterns in his compositional process, imposing a coherence from without that nevertheless bespeaks an internal coherence, if not exactly a plan" (2004 10). But in my opinion this highlighting also shows the conception of these series protagonists as contrivances serving the technical purposes. That does not mean Kepesh, Zuckerman and the fictional Roth do not hold strong mimetic and thematic features.

Among many fascinating revelations there is Shostak's discovery that Roth initially began work on *American Pastoral*, which he published in 1997, as early as 1972, at the end of the Vietnam War, which was "the most shattering national event of [his] adulthood," but could not progress beyond Merry's bombing. Twenty years later, however, **when he had created a vivid, intelligent, highly reflective writer character (Nathan Zuckerman)**, he felt it was time to get back to the story of the exceptional man's fall and write it through a "mediating consciousness".

Asked in a radio interview why he chose to use Nathan Zuckerman as a narrator in the American trilogy, instead of letting the main characters tell their own story, points to the artificiality and the usefulness of this character, when he says: “The biggest problem I solve is that nothing stands between me and my spontaneous reaction to my material” (NPR: *Fresh Air* show - American Novelist Philip Roth Oct. 31, 2003). He tried to avoid being involved in a cunning strategic process. He needed “to land on that voice which would give me the most verbal freedom, imaginative freedom, and that’s what Zuckerman does for me. There’s something about his intelligence that awakens mine”. In other words, Zuckerman became the perfect device for evoking in mythic terms a boyhood idol, as well as a ravishing period in the history of the US. Moreover, there was the idea that he needed to recuperate his native town: Newark, and again Nathan Zuckerman as a character born in Newark came in handy. In a recorded interview broadcast on 25 Dec. 2005 by *Open Source* Philip Roth explains the circumstances that determined the choice of Newark as setting and not only for the novels he wrote after returning from living in Europe for a long time. He was looking around for what to write next and realized that he had a good topic “staring [him] right in the face”, it was “in front of [his] nose”: Newark, which had become a tragic place (having burnt down). He realized that Newark was Atlantis that had been lost. Newark was just as interesting as Prague. “I have always been interested in these places where people live under pressure (the war was on).” Newark had been the 16th largest city in America when Roth grew up, but the riots burnt a good proportion of the city to the ground (a place with a great historical fall).

His most famous character may (still) be Alexander Portnoy (though after so many years, I have my doubts), but his most accomplished character and his **most developed protagonist/narrator** is obviously the writer-figure Nathan Zuckerman, his “**alter brain**”, as Roth has called him. The consideration of these books as a coherent enterprise has the great advantage of offering a thorough delineation of the protagonist’s portrait.

It has all three dimensions (mimetic, thematic and synthetic) clearly delineated.

Mimetically, Nathan Zuckerman is a writer of Jewish descent living in America. Through the series, his portrait is painted in a myriad of details about his personal and professional life. The focus is always on the latter as his major personality feature is his compulsion to write. Throughout the series, the audience has the chance to see him evolve. With the exception of the novels in the American trilogy, which are quite repetitive in this respect, each book depicts him

in a different stage of his writing career. Moreover, the sequence shows four phases of Nathan Zuckerman's attitude towards his calling:

1. self-reflexivity (the novels in *Zuckerman Bound*)
2. mixed emotions ("The Prague Orgy", *The Counterlife*)
3. reversed reflection (the American trilogy)
4. (overdue) self-absorption (*Exit Ghost*)

The 1st period is depicted in the novels of the first trilogy. It reflects Zuckerman's quest for an identity as a writer. He tries to accommodate what he knows he is with what people opine of him. "The self which Roth tries to explore is social rather than solitary and Roth's protagonists are concerned with the question of identity as it relates to society" (Singh 19) Encouraged by the two great American Jewish writers of the day, Abravanel and El Lonoff, the self-effacing short story writer, whose home in western Massachusetts he visited in December, 1956, Zuckerman becomes an earnest young writer. 1956 is a crucial year in Zuckerman's career. The Saturday Review accepts his story "Higher Education", this on the one hand singles him out as a promising young writer, on the other it draws on a family dispute, causing a rift with his father and disquiets an important community leader - Judge Leopold Wapter. Zuckerman spends the early 1960s writing much as his Jewish critics as well as his former teachers in Chicago would have wished. *Higher Education* (1959), a story collection, is followed by *Mixed Emotions* and *Reversed Intentions*, two naturalistic novels with impeccable moral credentials. The social upheavals of the period affects him, too, and he leads quite an unsettled emotional life: marries and divorces twice. While married to Laura - his third wife and lawyer associated with the peace movement - he writes *Carnovsky*, whose publication brings him instant and profoundly disturbing notoriety: the book contains massive disdain for the decorum of Jewish self-scrutiny, as well as details about an overbearing mother and an energetic sex life (including epic feats of masturbation). A series of unwanted consequences arise from the fame of the book: the public confuses him with his character, the press haresses him, former fans and the powerful critic Milton Appel denounce the book. Zuckerman's parents are assumed to be the models for Carnovsky's, which greatly affects his father who dies soon after the novel's publication, his last word to Nathan delivered from his deathbed in Florida, being "Bastard". After the funeral Nathan quarrels with his brother, he also divorces his third wife and his mother Selma dies a year later, in December 1970. All these lead to a long period of ill-health and writer's block. Nearly defeated by fame, assailed by pains, possibly

of psychosomatic origin, he begins to drink heavily, abuse various drugs, and entertain numerous women simultaneously. In 1973, after he has breakdown while in Chicago with the goal of starting Medical School and changing his career, he is treated for his addiction to painkillers as well as injuries sustained in his drunken fall. Interestingly all this unpleasant tumult is depicted in a rather humorous tone: “[...] coming to terms with the profane realities of what he had assumed to be one of the sacred professions is for him a terrific ordeal (his super seriousness is what the comedy is about)” (Singh 21).

The 2nd period entails a significantly changed perspective on his self. After his recovery, Zuckerman keeps a lower profile. He travels widely and lives for a time in London with an upper-crust English journalist he met in the late 1970s. The essential characteristic of the period is his identification with larger categories, such as the world of writers in America and Communist Prague, as well as to his ethnic group and the American nation, which means that he starts to see the vistas beyond his self.

Despite serious health impairment (he has prostate cancer surgery in the early 1990s which left him incontinent and impotent), the 3rd period is accounted the most orderly and enviable in his writing career. By the beginning of this stage of his life, the relationship with his fourth wife has broken down, he has returned to the US and, in 1993, buys a remote farmhouse in the Berkshires. There he lives in near-total isolation. He rarely gives interviews, treating visitors as a distraction, though he occasionally sees old Newark acquaintances and one or two friends from nearby Athena College. The prevalent focus is on fellow American men of great stature, as Nathan gives up his obsessive self-analysis and uses his investigative skills and imaginative power to appraise his subjects’ rise and fall within a clear-cut political and social environment. There can still be identified a tendency to comprehend his own personality, emotions, and behavior, as the three protagonists are in many ways spiritually similar to himself. He increasingly reminds observers of his own description of Lonoff: a scrupulous artist hiding out in "the goyish wilderness of birds and trees where America began and long ago had ended".

The fourth period brings yet another change in the character’s outlook: an ageing writer who, fed up with loneliness and isolation and the rumination on his past, makes a final attempt at seizing life. The 71-year-old novelist, hoping to be cured of his incontinence, travels to New York in 2004. There he tangles with a would-be biographer and lusts after a challengingly buxom young woman – the half of a couple with whom he resolves to switch homes. Eventually he

realizes it is a far-fetched decision and flees back to his Massachusetts mountain atop. This is Zuckerman's last arresting and glum appearance. He is aware of his imminent demise and is expending his last breath on one final effort.

Zuckerman's **personality, with consistent traits of character** is also clearly delineated by the nine books of the series. A thorough analysis reveals a series of radical polarities of Zuckerman's character: blocked writer but logorrheic pornographer, a sensitive man but a fierce writer etc.

Lonof's last words to Zuckerman are these: "I'll be curious to see how we all come out someday. It could be an interesting story. You're not so nice and polite in your fiction." (p.) Indeed. With a pen in his hand, Zuckerman can be a dangerous person, one who holds clichés up for inspection and probes toward truths that give the term subversive whole new meanings. Nathan has always found his strength in great adversity. Maria's words in *The Counterlife* prove it: "You have a defiant intelligence: you like **turning resistance to your own advantage**. Opposition determines your direction. You would probably never have written those books about Jews if Jews hadn't insisted on telling you not to" (CL 192).

On the other hand, as Nandita Singh shows, Nathan Zuckerman is a **"sensitive and ethical man** with an ingrained sense of social responsibility [...] He has drifted away from his parents and none of his personal relationships has yielded him any happiness. This explains the resultant self absorption as he tries to seek solace within his craft." (Singh 20); **"a man with many frailties**. Artistic success brings its own failure and Zuckerman has to pay for success in terms of personal happiness" (21). His soft/**sensitive** side of his personality is always a big surprise for the people who have read his books before getting to know him: [Maria's words] "I would have thought you were more hardheaded," she says. "Those portraits you paint of the men in those books didn't prepare me for this." "My books aren't intended as a character reference. I'm not looking for a job." [Zuckerman's reply] (CL 194)

His writing of books of fiction is his passion, calling and satisfaction of intellectual needs, on the one hand, and **his ordeal**, torment and imprisonment on the other. One of Roth's most famous lines is: "Without a book I'm empty." How about Zuckerman? Zuckerman, too. Writing frees Zuckerman from all emotional, intellectual, social, political constraints; writing even relieves him from the distress caused by his prostate cancer and impotence. Researching,

inquiring, distancing, isolating, piecing together, inventing, re-inventing are all activities that Zuckerman partakes of in order to produce his fiction.

Nathan has a **prodigious imagination**. “An exceptional imaginative force. Blocked from a satisfying harmony with the world, this force **subverts the meaning of ordinary experience**. [...] In this subversive, anti-world of imagination, everything becomes possible.” (Singh 97) Nathan’s imagination even creates alternative identities for himself and acts them out (e.g. the “Anne Frank” explanation, the Milton Appel the pornographer playlet, the mask of “straight man” Zuckerman wears in “The Prague Orgy”; the entire opus of *The Counterlife*) and for other people. In other words, with the power of his imagination Zuckerman constructs the texts of himself and of the others. The imagined world take precedence over the real one: having its own rules, everything being permitted in a fantasy – “the wild freedom of Zuckerman’s inner world” (Singh 97). However, maybe this salient feature of his personality should be held responsible for his failure to perfectly adjust to the real world: “His imagination has destroyed his ability to be a human being in the ‘everyday sense of the word’ according to Lonoff.” (Singh 110)

Interestingly one of the personality faults, i.e the fact that he rarely takes action against people who oppose him, in other words **he seldom counterattacks** (e.g. he fails to respond to Judge Wapter, he chooses not to argue with Lippman, he has very little reaction against Maria’s family’s anti-Semitic insinuations, he does not do much about his suspicions related to and the threat expressed by Farley in *The Human Stain*) is replaced by a trait which has led to the production of most of his work. **His response can be called a counterplay**, a term used in chess to refer to countering the opponent's advantage in another part of the board, i.e. Zuckerman chooses to write books about all these conflicts. This is his way of confronting his detractors. When he does attack such as the three instances in *The Anatomy Lesson* (the phone call to Milton Appel, the impersonation of “the pornographer” Milton Appel and the assault on old Mr. Freytag) or the one instance at the end of *The Counterlife* (the restaurant quarrel with the anti-Semitic Englishwoman), he does it because antagonism is taking a toll on his very own physical condition (by suppressing his frustration for too long he ends up in a nearly paralytic state), i.e. physically he cannot take it anymore and he needs to release accumulated venom (e.g. “He couldn’t have stopped if he wanted to. Let him speak.” ZB 480).

Introversion, isolation and negativism. On the one hand, there is his difficulty to adjust to the success that has come his way, to the new status and its full of advantages, he suffers from

harassment and intrusion “Chagrined by such good fortune” (his agent Andre Schevitz p) Related to this is his romantic life attitude: his erotic passion is not accompanied by the desire to establish meaningful long lasting relationship – **constantly “stresses the lonely nature of the human being”** (Singh 94). He casts every woman away. “He seems unmotivated by strong emotions” (95). On the other hand, “[h]is opposition to the world is not based on any ethical or moral commitment he believes in. It is the product of imaginative displacement” (Singh 99) In other words his **compulsive imaginative transformations** of reality he performs either while writing or while socializing have determined the society’s antagonism and his own retreat, seclusion or exile. His life characterized by **a deep nihilism**, as Nandita Singh shows in her book is a consequence of his imagination high ranking. “His place was certainly quiet enough for total concentration. He’d had his high studio windows double-glazed so that nobody’s television or phonograph would blare through [...] He’d spent half his life sealed in rooms just like it.” (ZB 300) He diligently follows in the footsteps of his master, E.I. Lonoff, about whom his wife complained: “There is his religion of art [...]: rejecting life, not living is what he makes his beautiful fiction out of” (ZB 190).

In *The Anatomy Lesson* becomes clear that “Zuckerman’s art likewise demands a rejection of life” (Singh 99)

Writing [...] was the only worthwhile attainment, the surpassing experience, the exulted struggle, and there was no way to write other than like a fanatic. Without fanaticism nothing great in fiction could ever be achieved. He had the highest possible conception of the gigantic capacities of literature to engulf and purify life. He would write more, publish more, and life would become colossal. But what became colossal was the next page, he thought he had chosen life but what he had chosen was the next page, stealing time to write stories, he never thought to wonder what time might be stealing from him. Only gradually did the perfecting of a writer’s will begin to feel like **the evasion of experience and the means to imaginative release, to the exposure, revelation, and invention of life**, like the sternest form of incarceration. He thought he’d chosen the intensification of everything and he’d chosen monasticism and retreat instead. (ZB 424-425)

Zuckerman’s imagination is very prolific and as a result Zuckerman ends up writing profusely. Therefore we disagree with Nandita Singh who states: “His imagination serves no purpose and at the end no longer even produces stories. The strange sterility in himself that even

Nathan notices is a reflection and a comment by Roth, not only on an individual but the entire human society” (102). In fact all the books in the series are books that Zuckerman writes more or less in the immediacy of the events he depicts in them. Even the two novels written in the third person is Zuckerman’s (i.e. *The Anatomy Lesson*).

Mimetically Roth has created such a rich character in Nathan Zuckerman in the very first volume of the series, that there is no wonder that he decided to make a trilogy out of him, and then kept him as narrator for several other novels besides. And all this from sitting in a room all day, turning sentences around.

Thematically, Nathan Zuckerman has served Roth as the perfect device to make a great number of statements about literature. He essentially represents the American writer and the saga illustrates the shifting terrain of the writer’s identity. The category of writer is an amorphous, temporal one, open to negotiation and change as circumstances demand, characterized by lack of homogeneity. The term needs to be constantly interrogated and this is what Roth did with every book of the series.

The Ghost Writer – a promising young writer in search for his voice and his talent validation

Zuckerman Unbound – the writer bewildered by his success and exposure, confronting the drama of not being able to control the effects of the clash between life and art.

The Anatomy Lesson – the mature writer bearing the consequences of publishing successfully and enacting the doubt of his art

The Prague Orgy – the American writer with his carefree attitude and his taking for granted the democratic opportunities in his country, as opposed to the Czech writer under the communist regime

The Counterlife – the writer attempting once again to make sense of his life by resorting to a number of fantasies of self-knowledge

American Pastoral –
I Married a Communist –
The Human Stain -

} the writer animated by nationalistic ends

Exit Ghost – the aged writer conflicted by the impulse to renounce life battles and the will to stay standing in the thick of it

The progression demonstrates that Roth acknowledges that a writer's identity is fluid, and constantly changes and with it the ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Consequently, a writer's worldview, including their construction of themselves and the term writer, is open to constant revision.

The portrait of the writer in this series is a little complicated by his ethnic belonging. Because of this, the series illustrates a writer's destiny with an edge: his Jewish descent. True enough, Zuckerman's Jewishness remains a fact, but, as an artist, he has most of the time struggled to fashion an aesthetic response to everything in America and elsewhere. Zuckerman would like and many times succeeds to view ethnicity as an aspect of identity which allows him to express his individuality in a way that does not make him stand out. This is why assimilated Jews are his chosen topic.

Synthetically, Nathan Zuckerman is highly accomplished and attentively developed. Interviewed by Hermione Lee for Spiegel, Philip Roth denied any emotional attachment to his character: "there is no friendship between me and the figures in my books [...] It's a functional relationship. It is only about: Can I make this character interesting enough to carry the book on his shoulders? Can he deliver in the book?". Similarly, in a recorded interview broadcast on 25 Dec 2005 by *Open Source*, Roth said that when he writes he tries to find his freedom - a way, a device, a technique that maximally deploys his powers as a writer. And that is what Nathan Zuckerman was for him all those years. He 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 lets Roth activate or recapitulate 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 unpaginated).

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. Zuckerman life is largely modeled (more obvious in his comic texts and less so in the ones of the second half of the series) on Roth's in unquestionable ways. This raises the question of how much invention went into Zuckerman's making. Philip Roth creates this device to play with autobiography, at the same time reacting badly to the idea that he's an autobiographical writer. "To label books like mine 'autobiographical' or 'confessional'", he once told the French writer Alain Finkielkraut, "is not only to falsify their suppositional nature but, if I may say so, to slight whatever artfulness leads some readers to think that they must be autobiographical." Both his method and his own words point out that "he's happy to exploit confusion between Roth and Zuckerman for illusionistic purposes, but equally keen to pour cold water on readers drawn by a supposed voyeuristic appeal" (Tayler unpaginated). As he told Hermione Lee in 1984: "Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life. There has to be some pleasure in this job, and that's it. To go around in disguise. To act a character. To pretend. The sly and cunning masquerade." This is why he wrote the entire series and Nathan Zuckerman was the device Roth used to accomplish his goal.

When it comes to technique one might wonder whether there is distance between Roth and the surrogate author Zuckerman? As much as there is between an author and the reliable narrator. Roth trusts Zuckerman, as the latter is a writer just as serious and diligent and devoted and intelligent as he is. He does not want to undermine his authority by writing, conveying meaning from behind him. That is why whenever there are reproachable matters he has Zuckerman writing that book in the third person or from a very distant point of view in the past: Zuckerman is ironic about his younger or driven self. Not Roth is ironic about Zuckerman. Roth has complete confidence in Zuckerman and his driven, but honest voice, as well as perceptive intelligence.

With Zuckerman:

In *The Ghost Writer* Roth assigns his character a number of roles: a writer, a son, a brother, a nephew, a cousin, a member of the larger family, a member of the Jewish-American community, an objective observer of social reality. The treatment of this Zuckerman character implies giving greater/heavier emphasis to particular roles in one book and to other roles in another. With writing so many sequences to *The Ghost Writer*, Roth creates specific situations and explores the numerous possibilities (foreshadowed in *The Ghost Writer*) for the construction

of Nathan Zuckerman. At the end of the 1990's Roth decides to make Zuckerman give up speaking on his own behalf and start speaking for others. Thus, Zuckerman takes responsibility for a disentangling other people's destinies (interestingly, only after their deaths), lending his authorship and sponsorship to their moral/ethical/social representation. In other words he takes up pleading a case for someone else (his "represented client").

To conclude, 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. 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.

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