THE CONDITION OF THE INTELLECTUAL IN PHILIP ROTH'S *ZUCKERMAN BOUND*

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Abstract

Once the concept of *the intellectual* is defined, the present paper continues by examining Roth's depiction of Jewish-American intellectuals in his first trilogy, *Zuckerman Bound*. The focus is placed on the type of intellectual represented by the protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman.

Keywords: intellectuals, the writer, moral and phisical consequences of a chosen profession, self-estrangement

What is an intellectual?

The concept of *the intellectual* needs clarifying, being one of those classified by the philosopher W. B. Gallie as 'essentially contested'. Clarification emerges from highlighting one major opposition: *intellectuals* versus *intellectual workers*. Contrary to a logical, pervasive but shallow definition, intellectuals are not simply the people working with their intellect and forming a very large and prolific group nowadays, due to current democratic conditions in most countries, such as mass education possibilities, an abundance of universities and a wide range of white-collar employment opportunities. Paul A. Baran proposes calling them: intellectual workers. They are businessmen, physicians, corporate executives, stockbrokers, university professors, teachers, technicians, preachers, politicians etc.

In public consciousness an intellectual has characteristics that make him/her stand out in the category of intellectual workers. These have been pointed out by several cultural phenomenon theorists. Our view of the category is in accordance with the one expressed by Tzvetan Todorov, who explains that intellectuals must necessarily fulfill two conditions:

> What defines an intellectual? Current usage of the word implies, I think, that two conditions must coexist. The first is that the individual in question is engaged in an activity of the mind resulting in the production of a work. The principal activities of the mind - literature, science, and philosophy - operate through the intermediary of language. Filmmakers are habitually considered intellectuals as well. Painters, musicians, and actors are less often included in this category; they are classified instead as "artists" (one thus speaks of "artists and intellectuals"). The second condition is that the individual is not content simply to produce a work but is also concerned about the state of society and participates in public debate. A poet shut off in an "ivory tower" or a scientist in a laboratory is not an "intellectual." Nor are politicians, preachers, and propagandists, for they do not produce a work. (Todorov 1997: 1121)

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The first condition is also mentioned by Avrom Fleichman, the author of *The Condition of English. Literary Studies in a Changing Culture,* who in an appendix to the book attempts to define the category of intellectuals by listing five features. According to Fleichman, among others intellectuals are those professionals who can be labeled as *honorific* or *reputational*, which means not necessarily the best and wisest but the most widely recognized or widely published authorities in a society. The second condition highlighted by Todorov is supported by Baran "the intellectual is systematically seeking to relate whatever specific area he may be working in to other aspects of human existence. Indeed, it is precisely this effort to interconnect things […]" (Baran 1988: 53) and by Avrom Fleichman, who sees it as *functional*: "intellectuals as fulfilling social roles in religion, education, technology, and elsewhere" (1998: 142).

To conclude this argument, the term *intellectuals* as used in this study refers to individuals engaged in an activity of the intellect, resulting in the creation of written work, that has become widely read or studied, regularly quoted (and for this reason their author invited to speak to audiences), and who demonstrate through their work deep concern with the state of society, "a sincere search for truth" (Gerard Genette). As a result, the category includes: scholars, theorists, critics, poets, dramatists, novelists, film-makers and other influential figures in philosophy, linguistics, psychiatry etc. Their culture must necessarily include vast knowledge at least with regard to their field of activity and a set of skills such as: arguing, reflecting, analyzing, criticizing, formulating, contesting ideas etc.

The intellectual in *Zuckerman Bound*

In Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Bound*, consisting of the novels *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1982), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), and the novella *The Prague Orgy* (1985), there are several characters (not many though) worthy of the label of *intellectual*. Out of all, Nathan Zuckerman is no doubt the most prominent intellectual figure. In the spirit of the above argument he deserves to be labeled *an intellectual* due to his profession - he is a professional fiction writer, having "an activity of the mind resulting in the production of a work" (in the words of Tzvetan Todorov), making a systematic effort to interconnect things (Paul A. Baran) and fulfilling a social role (Avrom Fleichman) – and due to his sudden immense success with his first novel *Carnovsky* – "most widely recognized or widely published authorities in a society" (Avrom Fleichman).

To assess the condition of the particular type of intellectual Nathan stands for, it is necessary to analyze the protagonist from two specific angles: the turmoil Zuckerman´s hyphenated origin (Jewish-American) triggered and maintained, and the consequences of publishing fiction successfully.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, Nathan Zuckerman's type of intellectual is essentially defined by a feeling of 'self-estrangement' (James D. Wallace). Zuckerman's perspective, and implicitly Roth's, on this matter is obvious throughout the trilogy, but it is particularly made explicit in *The Anatomy Lesson* when Nathan Zuckerman reports his

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initial admiration for Milton Appel, the literary counterpart of Irving Howe (the critic that after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* started the most fierce attack on Roth).

In this novel we learn that Nathan Zuckerman, as a college student, found alleviation for his anguish provoked by his family in an essay by Milton Appel, which "had been cherished reading among Zuckerman's friends at the University of Chicago circa 1950" (345). This makes reference to an essay, entitled "The Lost Young Intellectual: A Marginal Man, Twice Alienated", Howe published in *Commentary* in October, 1946, pointing out that the modern Jewish American is a type of intellectual "whose interests usually fall into two main categories: cultural activity or radical politics. Usually born into an immigrant Jewish family, he teeters between an origin he can no longer accept and a desired status he cannot attain." (1946: 361) This bestows on him (Howe writes about an inevitably *male* young Jewish intellectual) a "marginal status and sense of estrangement." The critic locates the core of the problem in the intellectual's relationship to his family. This relationship suffers on several levels: religious ("Jewishness is no longer a vital part of his life"), linguistic (Yiddish "represents some kind of difference between his family and the external world"), educational (the mother tends to spoil her child, "developing in him – as if with unconscious skill – the sense of dependence on her which he is later to find so difficult to overcome"), and aspirational (the child is seldom given the chance to achieve his own aspirations, as he is supposed to fulfill his father's "own undeveloped and frustrated ambitions") (Howe 1946: 365). To the consequences of this dysfunctional nurturing, there must be added a "biting sense of irony" which the young intellectual has acquired from family associations and the Jewish cultural tradition and which makes him "a victim of his own complexity of vision: even the most harrowing of his feelings, the most intolerable aspects of his alienation, he must still examine with the same mordant irony he applies to everything else" (idem). The effect identified by Howe is "an internal split in personality," he cannot completely adjust to either his family's or the American society's demands. The solution this intelligent, cultured but frustrated Jewish-American offspring finds, which ultimately leads him to become a true intellectual (also the refuge he takes) is writing: "The word has become his final retreat; it alone has ultimate substantiality for him. The word becomes a substitute for experience rather than an aspect of it" (366).

This brings us to the second aspect of our argument. Throughout *Zuckerman Bound* there can be noticed an evolution of attitude towards writing, according to the effects it has on him in different stages of his writing career. Thus, according to Thomas Frank,

> [a]s a budding, overly Romantic, novelist in The Ghost Writer Zuckerman naively imagines that being a writer would free him from the bonds of the everyday world, literature being as far removed and transcendent from that world and as pure as any objective knowledge through its promise of 'offering moral perceptions to supply us with the knowledge of what is good or bad'. What had been authoritatively promised to Zuckerman in 'Humanities 2' at the University of Chicago was literature as moral overseeing, literature as manifesting the 'eternal verities' (1995: 378-9).

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However, Zuckerman is soon to discover (in the next novel of the trilogy, i.e. *Zuckerman Unbound*) that there are consequences to turning reality into fiction and acquiring public success. Besides the fact that literature does not offer the moral alleviation, certainty or authority it promises, it brings back paradoxical drawbacks, such as "American fame and sudden wealth, bizarre obsessive fans, failed marriages, and possibly the death of his own father, the chiropodist Dr. Victor Zuckerman." (379).

The Anatomy Lesson is even more pessimistic as to the condition of the young writer: moral and social consequences of his fiction publishing are accompanied by physical ones – an intense back pain which renders him unproductive, incapable to write anymore, plagued by "an intense doubt as to the social validity of his profession" (idem), which mainly comes from "internal conflicts and his pervasive self-consciousness" (Howe 1946: 366) all of which were triggered by the question whether his literature (the novel *Carnovsky*) was indeed the cause of his father's death.

Having lost his identity as a writer due to the "brooding silence" (idem) he lapsed into and hoping to find alleviation to his pain and certainty in medicine Zuckerman decides to change careers and become a doctor. After suffering even more intense pain due to a fracture to his jaw that literally prevents him from communicating, Zuckerman learns to accept his predicament. According to Thomas Frank, he understands that medicine too is limited and pervaded by uncertainty ("there are those kinds of pain that cannot be treated"), that he has to learn to live with his slightly alleviated physical condition (as it "has become an integral part of that identity"), and that writing has a moral and social function ("narratives can be therapeutic in delineating […] significance") (Frank 1995: 67). By depicting the before and after of an intense autobiographical event, the writer "gains control over the transformations" (idem) and that stimulates the act of writing and "a better sense of who they are" (Taylor:36).

In conclusion, in *Zuckerman Bound* Roth depicts a young Jewish-American intellectual with an aggressively marginal community sensibility (which makes him "a social type"), a pervasive self-consciousness and a taste for scrutinizing the social event. The transformations he undergoes within the circumstances of aspiring for and later experiencing writerly success allow him to make deep sense of his chosen profession. The fictional narrative which promised to offer him the absolute truth and free him from the bonds of his predicament turns out to generate a different outcome (reinforcing the relationship between a narrative form and one's identity): the ironical realization that literature (especially modernist autobiographical narrative) helps one preserve self-identity and gain control over an ironic, relentlessly transformative world by teaching one how to master an essential language of interpretation necessary in order to cope with the ineffable and the impossible. This demonstrates that writers truly hold essential social roles.

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