INVOKING NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS IN INTERPRETING PHILIP ROTH'S ZUCKERMAN PROJECT

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Abstract

The present paper is meant to offer an overview of Philip Roth's nine-text long project informally known as the Zuckerman books in light of the four sets of narrative rules as described by Peter J. Rabinowitz in his *Before Reading* book. Based on the idea that readers approach a literary work with these conventions about literature in mind, this brief study attempts to show how this knowledge can be used during the reading and after the reading of the lengthy rothian project in order to perform appropriate authorial reading.

Keywords: narrative conventions, authorial audience, reader-response criticism, rhetorical approach to fiction

One of the most important contributions to the contemporary rhetorical debate, a theoretical project advancing both the rhetorical approach to fiction and the reader-response criticism, belongs to Peter J. Rabinowitz's. It is his 1987 publication titled ***Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation***, a study comprising a set of clearly delineated narrative conventions, influencing both the writing of literature and the reading of literary texts, as they guide writers' creative strategies as well as readers' efforts to interpret a text and assemble it into an intelligible whole. These conventions enhance understanding and interpretative decisions and are used by readers interested in performing authorial reading, rather than reading for authorial intention. With this approach readers enter the author's hypothetical, ideal audience and attempt to decipher all the conventions the author makes use of. It is a democratic model of interpretation entailing reciprocity between authors and their audiences.

Rabinowitz inventory of narrative conventions comprises four categories (according to the "operations or activities that [...] it is appropriate for the reader to perform when transforming texts" 43): rules of notice, signification, configuration, and coherence.

The **rules of notice** refer to giving greater attention to particular aspects and the important details in a text. There are two interrelated aspects of noticeability: ***concentration*** (e.g. places that authors expect special attention to; explicit textual signals, such as repetition, figurative language, claims for importance; privileged positions , such as titles, beginnings and endings, epigraphs, and descriptive subtitles; and ruptures, both intratextual ruptures, such as the blatantly irrelevant, the inappropriate, breaks of style, theme, plot or characterization, and intertextual ruptures, i.e. transgression of social or literary norms) and ***scaffolding*** (i.e. the arrangement of those places into a structure with carefully organized divisions, on which readers can build an interpretation).

The **rules of signification** refer to attending to textual details in order to assign new, generally more abstract, meanings to them. Rabinowitz identifies five kinds of rules

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of signification: ***rules of figurative language***; ***rules of source***, which guide the readers understanding of authority and of degrees of reliability according to the source of information (character, narrator, author); ***rules of snap moral judgment*** , i.e. "efficient techniques are necessary so that the reader can know quickly who stands where" (85), thus authors tell readers quite directly what they should think of their characters by making use of the New Critical doctrine of consistency of character, which proposes a number of metaphorical rules related to the physical appearance features of eyes, voices, speaking habits etc., to their names or to moral qualities enchainment (i.e. "one moral quality is linked to the presence of another that lies more or less contiguous to it" 89; such rule is used to assume a kind of innocence by association: we trust the friends of our friends and the enemies of our enemies 90, to assume that one moral failing naturally accompanies another 91; to distrust Space Invaders 91; to use allusions to famous characters or mythological figures as a basis for chaining moral judgments 92: to link ethical quality and aesthetic taste 92) ; ***rules of truth and realism***, according to which "the authorial audience knows it is reading a work of art, while the narrative audience believes what it is reading is real; but we can assume that in other respects the narrative audience shares the beliefs, prejudices, desires, fears, and expectations of the authorial audience, except where there is some evidence to the contrary, either in the text or in literary conventions" (100); and ***rules of cause***, i.e. narratives are seen as causative, therefore when they are given the cause readers will try to predict what will happen in terms of the effect, when they are given effect, they will make assumptions about the cause.

Rules that refer to readers' activities while reading are called rules of configuration, after reading are called rules of coherence. **Rules of configuration** come into use when considering the text as a developing entity doubled by the evolving pattern of readerly expectations: "in a given literary context, when certain elements appear, rules of configuration activate certain expectations" (111). This framework of rules is made use of "any way [the writers] wish, either by accepting it, stretching it, or even ignoring it" (113).

In agreement with Eco's observation on the possibilities related to plot (76), Rabinowitz identifies ***two metarules of configuration*** — something will happen (a change will certainly occur), but not just anything will happen (the configuration of events will have to confirm/frustrate the predictive value of information that was given notice in the text) (117) — and **three more specific rules**: ***rules of undermining***, i.e. conventions by which situations or characters get set up in a state of inertia or stability which is undermined later because of the lure of the unfamiliar or of the chutzpah (punished arrogance) or of imminent cataclysms; ***rules of balance with regard to focus***, i.e. conventions that allow us to recognize that there is a limit on what may happen within the world of the narrative; and ***rules of balance with regard to action***, i.e. conventions that govern our expectations about what will happen and that concern repetitions, parallel plot lines, antecedent/consequent patterns (events, strong attractions/repulsion, what people say, i.e. warnings, promises, maxims, tasks, questions etc. all of which having consequences, the

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more notice they are given, the stronger expectations will be, because all of them activate expectations that the novel finally fulfills.)

The **rules of coherence** come in handy when dealing with literary works (after having read them) whose coherence is implicit (i.e. it is neither explicit, nor inexistent/unmanageable). Coherence is seen as an activity undertaken by readers in order to recuperate the intention of the author from the planned effects conveyed by narrative conventions. The most basic rule of coherence is that the literary work is coherent and that inconsistencies are not elements the author overlooked but aspects charged with meaning. Particular coherence rules are applied by readers to fill in apparent gaps in the text (the ***rule of inertia*** – "unless we are given reason to believe otherwise […] events in the blank spots continue along the same path as the events preceding them" 151), to take apparently surplus significations and show their relevance to general patterns ("when notice is given to apparently irrelevant textual features—features that do not contribute to plot or characterization, for instance, or that do not serve some immediate function, like the provision of verisimilitude or local color—then they are to be treated as figurative"; when dealing with contradictory information, readers are supposed to apply the "trust the last" rule, or what Cullers calls *"the pattern of alethic reversal*" 154), and to take disparate materials and relate them through naming ("Academic readers, in particular, name and thus classify works—for instance, by appropriating them to particular generic categories, by elucidating their central theme, or by finding their governing metaphoric or mythic structure" 158), bundling (the use of parallelism, the rule of conclusive endings: "readers *assume* that authors put their best thoughts last, and thus *assign* a special value to the final pages of a text" 160), or thematizing.

To sum up Rabinowitz' inventory, it is worth mentioning his observation that writers sometimes aim at creating the conditions for their readers to apply a particular narrative rule, only to make the latter discover later that they have been tricked (90-91), i.e. authors intentionally undermine readers expectations (111) for the sake of rhetorical effects.

Roth has deep knowledge of the narrative rules/conventions. Many times, he refers to them in the series (e.g. "a pistol in act one, must go off in act three" *Counterlife*). First and foremost, Roth is very much concerned with the debate around the **rule of source** (warning against the confusion of author, narrator, and character). Actually, this is one rule which he builds a whole plot around, whereas more than half of the books of the series contain mimetic and thematic references to this issue. The question "Who is speaking?" is one of the first that any reader must ask. It is only the most naive reader who makes gross errors of confusing the (character-) narrator with the author. The plot of *Zuckerman Unbound* depicts a great number of readers who tend to err by breaking the rule, and many times in the other plots of the series Zuckerman is confronted with similar situations and the consequences of such confusions. He goes through numerous moments of stress—the furors surrounding the publication of *Carnovsky* have followed him most of his adult life—when such niceties are forgotten. True, with Roth's books, there is a hazy area where fiction

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and autobiography melt into one another and often amateur and professional critics make the mistake of merging author and narrator.

As far as **rules of notice** are concerned, Roth's **choice of titles** makes it clear where he wants us to concentrate our attention. *The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound, Exit Ghost* prompt us to concentrate on the protagonist. *The Counterlife, The Anatomy Lesson, The Prague Orgy, The American Pastoral* encourage us to concentrate on plot. *I Married a Communist* highlights the relationship between Ira Ringold and his wife, whereas *The Human Stain,* used in a number of different contexts in the novel, stresses a variety of important aspects and has multiple meanings. Every title in the American trilogy encourage us to give fatalist readings to the novels, even to interpret them as variations on a single theme. The title of the last novel, i.e. *Exit Ghost,* has a very important role in the economy of the entire Zuckerman series. It affects both concentration and scaffolding: it draws attention to the connection with the first novel of the series (and implicitly with all the others) and it signals closure to the series. Moreover, it confirms our assumptions that the title of the first novel refers to Nathan and not to what many critics argued, i.e. E. I. Lonoff.

As for **rules of configuration**, many times throughout the series Roth encourages us to invoke these rules. Therefore, most Zuckerman books are more or less predictable. Roth makes sure his readers have a good sense of the general course of future events before getting very far into the narrative. In this respect he uses a number of explicit techniques.

1. Prophetic titles. Out of nine books four novels announce the basic shape of their plots on the cover (*Zuckerman Unbound, The Anatomy Lesson, The Counterlife, Exit Ghost*), warning us about how they are going to end. As a general rule with Roth, titles and subtitles are to be treated metaphorically or symbolically. More specifically, we are expected to treat them as a guide to the specific directions outward in which the novelist intends us to read. The title *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain,* for instance, serve, among other things, to remove the novels from a specifically parochial context and place them in a larger frame.
2. Inverted chronology is the technique used in two other novels: *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist.* This guides readers through the order of presentation. The novels contain close to the beginning the information about the protagonists' tragic ends and then narrate their lives as flashbacks. In *American Pastoral* in chapter one page 34 the narrator sketches out the conclusion of the novel we have barely begun to read.
3. Mythic patterns. Both "The Prague Orgy" and *The Counterlife* –to some extent- are based on the myth of the quest (i.e. a journey towards a goal), which serves as a plot device. The hero sets forth from the world of common day into a land of adventures, tests, and various rewards. This journey pattern also allows the storyteller to showcase alien locations and cultures.
4. Epigraphs are useful devices for raising readers´ expectations and Roth makes use of them in *Zuckerman Unbound, The Anatomy Lesson, American Pastoral, I Married A Communist?, The Human Stain?* and *Exit Ghost.*

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5. Comparing the course of a story to another familiar plot in order to preview it is what Zuckerman does in *Zuckerman Unbound* ("lady macbeth of the […] District") and *American Pastoral* (Zuckerman likens Seymour to Johnny Appleseed and also repeatedly invokes Tolstoy's short story "The Death of Ivan Ilych"). Protagonists are also likened to famous real people and their destinies: Coleman to Bill Clinton, Levov to John Kennedy etc.
6. Explicit prefiguring. This is simply straightforward description of what is to come, and it is used by Roth at times, such as in *American Pastoral*.

Most configurations in the series follow the pattern on antecedent/consequence, and readers' activity implies what Rabinowitz calls applying the other-shoe rule and its variants. Only twice (mentioned at point 2 above) we have the reversed configuration. Strange/Surprising events are narrated, which is normally a signal for the narrative audience to look forward to an explanation of its causes, they wait for the text to tell the causes. In those cases Roth uses the let-me-tell-you-why configurations.

Sometimes, however, Roth encourages us to invoke the rule of configuration, then intentionally undermines our expectations. Roth makes use of his readers' expectations not only to create a sense of resolution (that is, by completing the patterns that the rules lead readers to expect, either with or without detours), but also to create surprise (by reversing them, by deflecting them, or by fulfilling them in some unanticipated way) or to irritate (by purposefully failing to fulfill them) (to use Rabinowitz' terms, 111). In this respect, *The Counterlife* is the most surprising, experimental, avant-garde in the series. No wonder it had such tremendous critical acclaim (current academic writing privileges novels which confound expectations).

As for **rules of coherence**, to the readers of all nine texts in the Zuckerman project it becomes apparent that there was an initial design about Zuckerman books, but it did not have the size, the scope or the form the series currently has. The series evolved and turned out this way out of Roth's propensity for writing sequels. In the twenty-eight years Roth wrote the Zuckerman series, the theme of the ethics of and the significance of writing remained at the heart of these books featuring Nathan Zuckerman, which together with the character's recurrence contribute greatly to the forming of a coherent project. However, the context, the purpose and the way in which he articulates his conception on the ethics of literature varies considerably from text to text.

In conclusion, the validity and wide applicability of Peter J. Rabinowitz narrative conventions and theory as described in his *Before Reading* is once again confirmed by the possibility to interpret in their light the wide range of works the Zuckerman project is made of and thus to assemble them into an intelligible whole.

Work cited

Rabinowitz, Peter J. *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

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