THE ZUCKERMAN SERIES BY PHILIP ROTH – THE EVOLUTION OF AN EXTENDED PROJECT

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Abstract

As early as 1972, while in Prague, Roth "encounters" (creates) a vivid, intelligent, highly reflective writer character (Nathan Zuckerman) and, as a result, he undertakes to write a new project of linked novels featuring this character and having an overarching meaning. Of course, the initial plan suffered a multitude of alterations in the 28 years it took to be delivered completely, the initiation of the series as well as its continuation stemming from Roth's propensity for writing sequels. However, there is a clear wholeness and neatness in the design of each of the books which make up this series.

Keywords: linked novels, Philip Roth, the Zuckerman project, sequels, installments

What is the Zuckerman series of books?

When in 2000, Philip Roth published *The Human Stain*, the publisher added in the front matter a list of "Books by Philip Roth", which meant changing the chronological organization of his life work to an organization around the (central) characters they depict: Zuckerman Books, Roth Books, Kepesh Books and Other Books. Back then there were eight Zuckerman books, but the series was enlarged in 2007 with the ninth and last installment:

The Ghost Writer (1979)	books collected as *Zuckerman Bound*
Zuckerman Unbound (1981)	
The Anatomy Lesson (1983)	
The Prague Orgy (1985)	
The Counterlife (1986)	
American Pastoral (1997)	informally called the American trilogy
I Married a Communist (1998)	
The Human Stain (2000)	
Exit Ghost (2007)	

The books make up a unified series of nine interlocking novels (and a novella) due to the recurrence of the character Nathan Zuckerman, a writer himself. They represent one of the most ambitious literary series of our time, one of Proustian scale: being published over a period of 28 years (1979-2007) and amounting to 2,507 pages. They form a grand prose text, characterized by a hectic range of topics, narrative strategies, themes, and even different levels of accomplishment, Roth himself having admitted he has evolved significantly since the beginning of his career.

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Were the Zuckerman books conceived as part of a project/plan/scheme?

This is a question critics or reviewers have not focused on. Roth has never been explicit on this matter either. However, I dare state that there had been a plan in Roth's mind from the very beginning. To demonstrate this I will start by mentioning that, in her monographic study, Debra Shostak, too, expresses some conjecture in this respect:

The highlighting of the books' voices by name [when grouping them as Kepesh books, Zuckerman books, Roth books] 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).

Then there is Roth himself who gave a number of clues in this respect. He admitted that his "inspiration for the character came after several trips to Czechoslovakia. He was stirred by the contrast between the benign annoyances of literary celebrity in the U.S. and the repression of writers in Prague, Kafka's home town" (Sheppard 4). This means that Zuckerman's first story was in fact the one depicting his experience in the Prague, whereas the experiences recounted in *The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson* were imagined later. He wanted to publish the Prague tale, but he needed to create a context for it, one that would highlight it. This also explains the mode of narration in *The Ghost Writer*: the young writer's pilgrimage to the E.I. Lonoff's home in the Berkshires is narrated by the 43-year-old Zuckerman, the age Zuckerman has when he visits Prague. In Roth's mind, Nathan Zuckerman was born at the age of 43. To put it another way, Roth "meets" Nathan Zuckerman (this chief character of his fictional world) while in Prague himself and before having him recount the adventures he witnesses there, he has the character look back to his formative years.

Similarly, in an interview with *The London Sunday Times* in 1984 (republished in *Reading Myself and Others*), while explaining the importance and the implications of the idea of Holocaust to Zuckerman's life, Roth confesses that this meaning and "a certain thematic architecture" will only reveal themselves when the books are published in one volume. Indeed, in 1985 when *Zuckerman Bound* comes out with "The Prague Orgy" as an epilogue, the brick-thick book invites and supports a deeper understanding and highlights the coherence of the project Roth had in mind. I believe this is how far Roth's initial project had gone with his character Nathan Zuckerman, but the character turned out to be so lively and with such great potential that Roth could not abandon it. So he decided to enlarge the project by writing something unlike anything he has written before and use Zuckerman, the novelist with his "powerful transforming urge" (*RMO* 162) in *The Counterlife*.

As for the circumstances in which the Zuckerman project took an unexpected course with the publication of *American Pastoral* first and then *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain,* there are a number of aspects which need mentioning here.

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, but could not progress beyond Merry's bombing. Twenty years later,

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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, Roth indicates 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 [him] the most verbal freedom, imaginative freedom, and that's what Zuckerman does for [him]. There's something about his intelligence that awakens [Roth's]". 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 in his mind 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 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": his childhood 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).

The success of this narrative technique and of the topic of tragic historical circumstances determined Roth to write two sequels to *American Pastoral.* He used three more powerful periods in American life - the Vietnam years, the McCarthy era, as well as the era of the political correctness- in the rest of the America trilogy. This entire second trilogy is based on the realization that: "[h]istory comes into the living room. The large forces that make the world go, they come into our living room" (Jeffrey Brown's interview 10th Nov. 2004) and that he likes depicting that.

Finally, by writing *Exit Ghost,* it was obvious that Roth purposefully added or enhanced (retroactively) qualities that were necessary for the series to constitute itself as a finished project: completeness, roundness and closure. Interviewed by Hermione Lee for Spiegel, in the wake of the novel's publication, Roth explained that this novel is the end of Zuckerman, but 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,

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playfully Roth said: "[…] now he is in Zuckerman Heaven which actually does sound like a book. Or 'Zuckerman in Hell'?

Conclusion

In view of all the facts enumerated above, it is now safe to assert 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.

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