"LISTENING" TO THE RHETORIC OF THE "McCARTHY ERA" IN *I MARRIED A COMMUNIST*

Corina Alexandrina LIRCA[1]

Abstract

I Married a Communist is a long novel and the seventh book in the Zuckerman series to feature the character Nathan Zuckerman, a character-narrator who for the second time chooses to step aside and focus on the life story of a different character. The novel comprises the narrator's apparent reporter-like reconstruction of Ira Ringold's life experiences by locating them within a political, social and autobiographical context. The audience soon realizes the unreliability of the narrator who in an effort to render coherence to the man's destiny fills in the gaps of information with his own imagined explanations. The novel also offers an explanation to Zuckerman's choice of a writing career.

Keywords: the rhetorical approach to narrative, Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator's (un)reliability

Introduction

Published one year after *American Pastoral*, it is the seventh of the Zuckerman series and the second book of the late1990s trio depicting the postwar history of Newark, New Jersey and its residents. *I Married a Communist* features the novelist Nathan Zuckerman as a secondary character and the narrator of another story centered on a different main character, making use of the device of framing. This is also the second big-picture book, playing an exceptional individual off against historical circumstances. The novel is set in the period when the US were at war with the Communist regimes of North Korea and China, and the public wave of terror against Communism was fueled by a whole McCarthyite crusade against the so-called Communist subversives -the blacklist and political dismissals – "the McCarthy era". It is another long novel by Philip Roth told in eight untitled sections.

Progression

For the second time in the series, Nathan Zuckerman's narrative functions overwhelm his character ones and the progression gives clear prominence to the story of a different character. It is a novel in which the interest of the audience is propelled forward by the release of cognitive tension. Again Nathan Zuckerman makes it explicit that this is one of the novels he has produced. Nathan gives away the process of writing the book while making the portrait of Ira Ringold, by reproducing (verbatim of indirectly) the words of Murray Ringold and supplementing them with his own reminiscence on Ira's life. As with the previous installment, Zuckerman begins by explaining what determined him to write another book about an exceptional man from his past: firstly, it is the chance

[1] Assistant PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş

BDD-A6512 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:16 UTC)

encounter with his teacher Murray, a ninety-year-old who carries in his head all the tragic story of so many people in his life and, secondly, his own "receding from the agitation of the autobiographical," which has him entering into competition with death, "the final business" (IMC 72).

The framing device employed in *American Pastoral* is activated again. This is a novel mediated from a definite moment in the present by Nathan Zuckerman. It is July 1997. Nathan 64 years old has been living for four years in a cabin near the university town of Athena. On a Sunday night he encounters Murray Ringold (his highschool teacher of English), who has just enrolled to a course on Shakespeare at a summer academy for the elderly, which leads to a series of six evenings the two spend together in Zuckerman's cabin. Their topic of discussion is Ira Ringold, Murray's younger brother. Ira, also known as "Iron Rinn", used to be radio theater star and a communist, as well as one immense influence on the school-age Zuckerman. Roth makes sure his readers have a very good sense of the general course of future events before getting very far into the narrative. In this respect he uses the explicit technique of the inverted chronology. Zuckerman benefits of hindsight, and his naratees benefit of detailed knowledge about the internal political conflict during the Cold War, a worthy stage on which this drama is played out.

The narrators mention Ira's rise, fall and death close to the beginning of this book and as a result the general trajectory of the narrative follows the path of Nathan Zuckerman's writerly attempt at reconstructing Ira's destiny (which means presenting the character in a series of key moments in his existence and give background information) .

With the technique employed, Zuckerman/Roth (we should not forget that there is a multilayered communication going on in the entire Zuckerman series) encourages his audience (the narrator's audience/authorial audience) to invoke the rule of configuration (Rabinovitz 111), in particular the specific rules of *balance with regard to focus* and *balance with regard to action*. Ira's doom and death being announced in the first pages of the novel activates expectations regarding the protagonist's faults and mistaken choices, as well as unfavourable courses of events, expectations which the novel *I Married a Communist* finally fulfills. Indeed, this book is to a large extent predictable to the end – being but another rise and fall story.

Under the circumstances, what the narrator does in order to generate, sustain and resolve the audience's interests in narrative is provide gradual relief of cognitive tension resulting from the difference of knowledge between the narrator and his audience sprinkled with the introduction of a few instabilities (according to Phelan "variables occurring within the story and between characters, created by situations, and complicated and resolved through actions" 15). One of the most important centers around the concept of transgression failure, another around the young Zuckerman's choice of life-model and, subsequently, of a career.

BDD-A6512 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:16 UTC)

The Protagonist

Ira Ringold's downfall was brought about by a series of unfortunate events, mistaken life choices and unfavourable concurring factors such as: McCarthyite politicians and the McCarthyite "witch-hunt", his wife scandalous book about him, a gossip columnist's actions, as well as his own attempt at transgressing. The destiny of Ira Ringold is closely tied to the events of the fifties in the US. It was a booming decade, economically, demographically and culturally speaking. Politically and socially, though, things were worse than ever. In order to acquire political success and recognition, Senator Joseph McCarthy, at the suggestion of one of his advisors, initiated one of the most hindering campaigns: the Communist witchhunt.

Thousands and thousands of Americans destroyed in those years, political casualties, historical casualties [...] But I don't remember anybody else being brought down quite the way that Ira was. It wasn't on the great American battlefield he would himself have chosen for his destruction. Maybe, despite ideology, politics, and history, a genuine catastrophe is always personal bathos at the core. Life can't be impugned for any failure to trivialize people. You have to take your hat off to life for the techniques at its disposal to strip a man of his significance and empty him totally of his pride. (*IMC* 3)

According to the narrator, one of McCarthy's victims was Ira Ringold, a radio theater actor, friend of Nathan Zuckerman and brother to Nathan's high school English teacher, Murray Ringold. Passionate and idealistic, he played Abe Lincoln for local school programs and union rallies as a student, then he worked on a radio show called "The Free And The Brave". Ira, a radio star himself, married former silent movie star Eve Frame, who brought some degree of fame to his theatrical company. About that time politics began to creep into their playscripts and rumors started to circulate. It was a period when people were summoned before the newly formed House Un-American Activities Committee to discuss their questionable political motivations.

Lists. Lists of names and accusations and charges. Everybody..has a list. Red Channels. Joe McCarthy. The VFW. The HUAC. The American Legion. The Catholic magazines. The Hearst newspapers...Lists of anybody in America who has ever been disgruntled about anything or criticized anything or protested anything...all of them now Communists or fronting for Communists or 'helping' Communists or contributing to Communist 'coffers,' or 'infiltrating' labor or government or education or Hollywood or the theater or radio and TV...All forces of reaction swapping names and mistaking names and linking names together to prove the existence or a mammoth conspiracy that does not exist. (*IMC* 103)

Ira and Eve's life went from bad to worse both because of the political upheaval going on around them, and because of Ira's difficult relationship with Sylphid, Eve's daughter from a previous marriage, an opportunistic young woman who dominated her weak mother. Everything culminated with his *betrayal*, a term overused during the Red scare. Paradoxically, it was not the *betrayal* of his country, as the rumors had it, but the *betrayal* of his marriage that brought about his defeat. When Eve found out that Ira had

BDD-A6512 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:16 UTC)

been having an affair, she sought revenge, by co-writing a tell-all book, titled "I Married a Communist," telling all about his party ties. The book ruined Ira's career, but Eve, too, suffered consequences. The star actress Eve Frame was, in fact, a Jewish anti-Semite born Chava Fromkin. Ira was defended by fellow-travelling journalists from "The Nation" and "New Republic". They brazenly declared that Ira had never been a Communist, that he had never had anything to do with the Party, that the Communist plot to infiltrate the broadcasting industry was a concoction of lies. Their lies and counterattack finished Eve's career. As Murray shrewdly remarks, "By the time all these savage intellects, with their fidelity to the facts, were finished with the woman, to find anything anywhere of the ugly truth that was the story of Ira and Eve, you would have needed a microscope" (*IMC* 310) The fifties, then, as presented in this novel, were not simply an age of economic boom, prosperity, and conformity, but the age of gossip, betrayal, disgrace and paranoia.

Ira Ringold, the self-educated six-foot-six-inch actor and the object of Nathan's youth worship, was definitely not an innocent man. First, he had lived all his life blighted by the brutal personal secret of having killed a man. Second, he was not an innocent liberal whose radio career was brought to an end in 1952 because he got on the wrong mailing list or signed the wrong petition or got himself photographed with declared Communists. He was an active and devoted member of the Communist Party (though denying it when confronted by both Nathan and Nathan's father), taking his orders from Moscow, speaking against his country and in favour of U.S.S.R. Moreover, his political activity harmed others around him: Murray and his wife became indirect victims of McCarthyism, while Nathan lost a Fulbright grant because of his link to Ira.

Technique - Narrative Levels and Narrator Unreliability

Apparently, in *I Married a Communist* we discover a pattern of two narrators, who are also characters in the novel, reconstructing by sharing information the rise and fall of a third character, Ira Ringold; more specifically, at first sight, Nathan Zuckerman recounts a story that is told to him by Murray, claiming that his information about Ira Ringold is based on conversations with Ira himself and with his brother Murray. The fact is that in the course of the narrative process Zuckerman gradually discloses that he is voyeuristically living through Ira, using his imagination, and therefore he cannot really be relied upon as an objective reporter. What saves the credibility of the book, on the author-authorial audience plane, is the idea that this is another book "ghostwritten" by Nathan Zuckerman and Roth's audience knows what the relationship between the "real world" and the "imagined one" is, in his conception.

The Character-Narrator's Further Mimetic Development

As mentioned above, one text instability is the question of which of the many voices the young Nathan hears will penetrate to his core and which of his mentors will become his model. In this context, the narrative audience, the long-standing witnesses of

BDD-A6512 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:16 UTC)

Nathan Zuckerman's literary career, are offered an explanation of what triggered his choice of profession.

In his youth, Nathan had a number of potential career mentors, which looked like a political contest. There was Ira the Communist, looking not just for a party recruit, but for a son. But Ira was not a pure model because he let private life – a famous wife, family duties, mistresses – distract him from his political devotion and ultimately destroy him. Then, there was Johnny O'Day, a true fanatic who had no private life, and who nearly managed to recruit Nathan and bring him to the point of leaving college to move to a steel town in Indiana.

However, the true choice for Nathan's allegiance was between mentors professionally connected to teaching, interpreting and writing literature, since his destiny was to be a writer, not a union organizer. Ira's idea of writing was that of a Communist: "try to force into the script every corny party cliché, every so-called progressive sentiment they could get away with, manipulating the script to stick whatever ideological junk they thought of as Communist content into any historical context whatsoever" (*IMC* 150). Next, while Nathan was considering a career as a writer for tendentious radio programmes, there was the strong influence of his college literature professor Leo Glucksman, who persuasively lectured Nathan out of this virtuous conception of the artistic mission:

Art as the advocate of good things? Who taught you all this? Who taught you art is slogans? Who taught you art is in the service of ' the people '? Art is in the service of art [...] What is the motive for writing serious literature, Mr. Zuckerman? To disarm the enemies of price control? [...] Nothing has a more sinister effect on art than an artist's desire to prove that he's good [...] You must achieve mastery over your idealism, over your virtue as well as over your vice. (*IMC* 250)

Glucksman's aesthetic credo managed to woo Nathan away from Ira. Finally, there was Ira's brother Murray and Nathan's first English teacher as a potential mentor for him. Indeed, Murray Ringold proved to have been the best and most influential, his choice of a model. Unlike the sexual predator Glucksman, Murray exemplifies manliness as well as humane literacy rather than art for art's sake. Never trying to recruit Nathan for a party or ideology, he defines by example Nathan's literary vocation. When he used to read scenes from Macbeth to his students, Nathan was powerfully impressed "by how manly literature seemed in his enactment of it" (*IMC* 2).

Thus, the novel gives us clues as to the life choices which brought Zuckerman from a young man in search of a profession to the path of writing books of fiction and to this stage of his career:

Occasionally now, looking back, I think of my life as one long speech that I've been listening to. The rhetoric is sometimes original, sometimes pleasurable, sometimes pasteboard crap (the speech of the incognito), sometimes maniacal, sometimes matter-of-fact, and sometimes like the sharp prick of a needle, and I have been hearing it for as long as I can remember [...] whatever the reason, the book of my life is a book of voices. When

BDD-A6512 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:16 UTC)

I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: "Listening" [...] was I from the beginning [...] merely an ear in search of a word? (*IMC 320*)

Conclusion

Roth uses the broad setting of a troubled decade to show how a Newark man's life and career, which could have been another example of an accomplished American dream, were damaged beyond repair. The same context offers Roth the chance to strengthen the connection with the rest of the books in the Zuckerman series, by depicting the adolescent Nathan as a precocious writer and social philosopher. All in all, this is a thickly textured book, of the same thematic and emotional fabric with Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, and part one of the finest contemporary literary projects.

Bibliography

Phelan, James. *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989

Roth, Philip. *I Married a Communist*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998

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

BDD-A6512 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:01:16 UTC)