IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN PHILIP ROTH´S AMERICAN TRILOGY: SELF-INVENTION AND HISTORICAL DETERMINISM

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Abstract

In the contexts of the Zuckerman series of novels, the American trilogy represents a new phase for the identity construction of the writer Nathan Zuckerman: he appears restricted in action and rather dimmed in personality and he gives up his pervasive self-questioning, on the other hand, he becomes aware of the interplay between history and identity. Foregrounding the lives of three remarkable men, the trilogy demonstrates that free invention of personal identity, in a society advertised as having the cult of individualism, of change and of personal control over environment, is after all prevented by the very ideological and historical circumstances that prompt it in the first place.

Keywords: identity, self-invention, history, individualism, ideology

In the three novels Philip Roth published in the 1990s (*American Pastoral, I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*), Nathan Zuckerman, one of Roth´s alter-egos and protagonist in *Zuckerman Bound* and in *The Counterlife,* steps back and trades the protagonist stand for the witness position. This move Roth makes represents the end of Zuckerman´s self-exploration and the beginning of enquiries into the intricate identities of three other remarkable characters.

Before making a thematic analysis of the construction of the identity of Seymour Levov, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk, I feel it is useful to briefly investigate the depiction of Nathan Zuckerman (the secondary character and narrator) in the American trilogy. One possible explanation for the new narrative strategy seems to be the fact that Roth has so far exhausted his view on the condition of the young and middle-aged writer and has decided to foreground other outstanding individuals in this trilogy. However, with every novel of the trilogy we read we come to see that Roth does not completely abandon the construction of the identity of the writer Nathan Zuckerman. He depicts Zuckerman as suffering a change of paradigm.

At the time he is concerned with the stories of these men, Nathan is a famous writer living in seclusion in the Berkshires, suffering from an irreparable medical condition. He has opted for a withdrawal from the world, and effectively from his own life´s story, in order "to decontaminate and absolve [himself] from the striving" (*IMC* 72). Now he mostly

> "keeps up the daily discipline of his craft in sheltered solitude in the Berkshires, revisiting youthful memories or tracing out the intrigues of some acquaintance whose travails catch his sympathy and interest. He's stirred to action now mostly

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through narrating the actions of others. […] his private life has quieted down, no longer the main attraction." (Sarah Kerr, "Nathan, Farewell", internet unpaginated source)

In the previous novels, Nathan Zuckerman appeared an "an assimilated, educated, middle-class Jew[s] with a fairly consistent take on the pressures and opportunities of life in the United States at midcentury, leaving […] [him] to concentrate on struggles towards identity that float relatively free of current events" (Shostak 233). In other words, Nathan Zuckerman used to be a writer exploring his own and the others´ construction of identity as a matter of personal choice in one´s interaction with American culture, more specifically with the Jewish subculture.

The situation changes radically in the American trilogy. After he has tasted of both the sweetness and the bitterness of fame, and, overwhelmed by physical ailments and social interaction problems, he decides to live austerely in rural New England, his pervasive inquisitive writerly spirit never rests and gets him entangled in investigating stories that grant him a reality check. Confronted with unexpected knowledge about familiar people from either his past or present, Zuckerman ends up connecting their destinies to the historical circumstances that surrounded their lives. The first time he acknowledges this change of paradigm is in *American Pastoral:*

"I began to contemplate the very thing that must have baffled the Swede till the moment he died: how had he become history´s plaything? History, American history, the staff you read about in books and study in school, had made its way out to tranquil, untrafficked Old Rimrock, New Jersey… People think of history in the long term, but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing" (*AP* 87).

The sudden thing that is history – especially American history – is both the natural law that shapes people´s lives and the rationale for narrating in all three novels. Namely, Nathan Zuckerman after researching obsessively into the stories of the three men, stories organized "in relation to the allegory of the Fall" (Shostak 243), turns toward "a deterministic conception of history as the context for American subjectivity" (idem). Throughout the American trilogy of the 1990s the narrator is bewildered to discover that events of half a century or more of American history undermined "exactly the opportunities for self-invention to which Zuckerman was committed throughout the novels that center on his biography" (Shostak 236).

The protagonists of the American trilogy are all outstanding individuals, with genuine intelligence, which gives them to power to transgress, to re-invent themselves in order to escape from the burdens of selfhood or society, to become impersonators, but the change they operate about themselves are superficial, are in the form of masks "always in danger of being stripped away" (Shostak 150). Each of them will be assess briefly further in this study.

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In *American Pastoral* Seymour "the Swede" Levov is the Jewish superego, "who by his apparent difference from Jews promises to erase the otherness of Jews in America" (Shostak 101). Enabled by his appearance (a fortunate physical endowment, Seymour being large, fair and athletic) to adopt an assimilated American identity, he marries a former Miss New Jersey with an Irish Catholic descent and thus believes he has achieved the pastoral dream in which cultural differences do not matter at all. The dream is shattered by the very fruit of this union, their daughter Merry, who chooses to become a Jain and turn to violence.

It is Shostak who notices that at first sight Swede is "Zuckerman´s anti-thesis, giving no purchase on the complexities of an inner life because he has been so dedicated to the surface satisfactions of the life he has chosen" (41). While this difference is true, at a deeper analysis we discover an essential similar trait: narrating his own life story in *The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound, The Anatomy Lesson,* Nathan was also guilty of continually contesting his unbreakable tie to Jewishness, just like Seymour who chose to deny or rather ignore it. Hence, to a certain extent, the Swede´s tale is Zuckerman´s own tale as well. Sooner or later both Zuckerman (clear signs are visible in *The Prague Orgy* and *The Counterlife*) and Seymour will end up acknowledging and accepting that they are members of the People of the Book.

Merry, the rebellious daughter, has the merit of bringing her father back to reality, to, what Zuckerman calls, "the indigenous American berserk" (*AP* 86) and making him acknowledge the impossibility of transgression. He realizes that the pastoral fantasy of America (i.e. the good life based on material success, respectability, beauty and love) has been deflected by historical circumstances. "The novel", Shostak writes, "suggests that the Swede´s tragedy serves as penitence for the sin of his own innocence, for the vision that, mesmerized by the propaganda of the American experiment, refused to see ineradicable differences" (246). Its conclusion is that any attempt at transgression triggers the vengeance of history in a valueless, decayed society.

If the protagonist of *American Pastoral* is a harmless and apolitical Jewish American, who only wants to achieve quietly the promise of the American dream, the one in *I Married a Communist* (Ira Ringold) is a Jewish American who is consumed by ineradicable anger and who "desires to live a life of exemplary political purity: first as the public spokesperson of the most cherished values of the American myth, as evident in his career impersonating Lincoln on the stage, and then to extend those values in his pursuit of a socialist revolution to right class inequities" (Shostak 249).

Zuckerman has not been openly politically or socially involved (except for his brief experience in *The Prague Orgy*), still there is a side of him that makes him be seen as simply a less extreme and distorted version of Ira, more rational and less violent; the analogy between them is generated by the fact that both have been caught up in the dream of a rewarding and protective America, either of them having begun as a "Jewish child" who "didn´t care to

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partake of the Jewish character", who, rather, "wanted to partake of the national character" (*IMC* 39).

Ira´s strong motivations to succeed were the dire poverty of his childhood and the unjust situation that made him a murdered at the age of sixteen. His envisaged solution was two-folded: a career in politics that would enable him to defend and trumpet social equity (the ideology of Communism holding the promise of his agenda), and a home/family that would provide him with love, comfort, peace of mind, as well as stability (all of which seemed to be promised by the beauty, culture, and grace in his wife, Eve Frame). His fall is caused by the fact that he fails to see that marrying Eve means entering a world that divides him from himself (i.e. he becomes seduced by a life of abundance, materialism and acquisitiveness), and that Eve is capable of exposing his self-dividedness. This tragedy of betrayal and self-betrayal occurs during the American juggernaut against Communism in the 1950s, i.e. the main actors are fated to exposure in this age of betrayal.

In the course of Murray´s long performance of Ira´s story, Zuckerman discovers once again that "the American context – which would seem historically to have invited self-invention as a legitimate, even necessary process of American becoming- in the end punishes such efforts" (Shostak 150). History has punished Ira for persisting in his delusion, for being "drunk on metamorphosis" and the "heroic reinvention of himself" (Shostak 301).

In *The Human Stain* Nathan investigates one more man´s attempts to reinvent his identity against the determinations of American history, this time specifically related to racial inequality. Coleman Silk´s project is very similar to Seymour Levov´s or Ira Ringold´s: he observes the opportunities for fluidity that America seems to offer him, particularly due to the fact that Coleman too has a physical endowment that allows him latitude in inventing a different racial identity: "He could play his skin however he wanted, color himself just as he chose" (*HS* 109).

What is ironic, though (if we consider Zuckerman´s and the other´s efforts to escape the identification with Jewishness so far in the series), is that it is the Jewish identity that Coleman Silk assumes when he decides to repudiate his black identity. Shostak remarks, however, that "[t]he choice of a Jewish disguise for Coleman was ´strictly utilitarian`, having nothing to do with the ethical, spiritual, theological or historical aspect of Judaism" (154), the level of "acceptance Jews found in twentieth century American life made it far easier and more appealing to be Jewish than black" (idem).

Coleman Silk´s plight is characterized by another significant difference: his mask is not stripped away during his lifetime, though Coleman repeatedly betrays himself in his language (his use of "spooks" - not an accident but a need to punish himself for his deceptions; the "lily-white face" phrase addressed to his lawyer also discloses his distance from whiteness), but the tragedy of his destiny lies in his impossibility to effect a

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reversibility, i.e. to come clean about who he really is. Shostak states that this is also traumatic and "no less damaging than the act of exposure itself" (153).

All these three outstanding individuals have taken the promise of the American dream of assimilation and freedom to self-invention at face value. Their life stories, investigated and pieced together by Nathan Zuckerman, who identifies himself with each and every one of them, supply a cast of characters doomed by their efforts to escape history. It was just a matter of time before history caused them to fail irreversibly. Change is indeed a value highly cherished and nurtured by the American society, as it means progress, development and growth. But the change these men pursed was one with an edge. It implied the disavowal of one "essential" aspect of their self: their ethnicity. Therefore they all had to pay for their intelligence and ability to re-write their identities unfettered by historical definitions.

The social role of the writer (narrator) in all these stories was not only to selflessly keep the memory of three valuable fellow humans alive – by entering like any biographer into, "professional competition with death" (Shostak 338), but also to make sense of histories that resist simple interpretations. He writes, then, to draw attention to the inescapability of history and of determinism: the subject cannot in the end live outside or stop history.

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