# A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO ASPECTS OF PHILIP ROTH'S NARRATION TECHNIQUE IN THE ZUCKERMAN PROJECT

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*Abstract*

The Zuckerman project is characterized by a variety of narration techniques. The first book of the project is a first-person narration. A different narration technique (third-person narration) is adopted with the second installment, i.e. Zuckerman Unbound (also maintained through The Anatomy Lesson). Then Roth switches back to first-person narration and the diary style in the "Prague Orgy" and introduces fractures specific to metafiction in The Counterlife. Next, with the American trilogy he draws heavily on the technique called paralepsis. Finally, with Exist Ghost he surprises again. Over the course of the Zuckerman project, Roth submits his authorial audience to a continuous puzzlement, disregarding expectations or better said mocking at their expectations and their urge for the logical linkage with what the previous autonomous books conveyed.

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

All readers revel in a skillfully written book. And writers know that. For this reason technique matters. And we have strong reasons to believe that it matters greatly to Roth. The concern with technique often drives Roth into metafiction and then the subject of how novels are made becomes as important as what is in them. The whole Zuckerman saga is Roth's chance to show very explicitly HOW NOVELS ARE MADE. When he opens his autobiography, *The Facts*, with a letter addressed to his fictional counterpart, Nathan Zuckerman, Roth observes that the most recent novel to give Nathan voice, *The Counterlife*, "can be read as fiction about structure" (6). Fiction about fiction was, of course, not new among Roth's novels. Each of the three earlier novels about Zuckerman and the novella "The Prague Orgy", published together as *Zuckerman Bound*, "meditate[s] in one way or another on the relations between invented worlds of fiction and the life of their inventor. But not until *The Counterlife* does Roth fully explore the theoretical implications" (Shostak 198).

## Audiences, narrator reliability and diegesis[2]

Lonoff's words on the last page of the novel *The Ghost Writer*: "I'll be curious to see how we all come out someday. It could be an interesting story. You're not so nice and polite in your fiction […] you're a different person" (128), do more that give validation to Zuckerman's professional calling, they hint at the fact the narrative audience is at that

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[2] *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*, Phelan's study published in 2005, focuses extensively on the matter of narrative technique and provides us with a number of instruments and concepts necessary to understand Roth's choices throughout the project.



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particular moment reading the very book the old bard predicted "more than twenty years ago", while within a different layer, the authorial audience with its awareness of the synthetic and the artificial world, understand that they are reading a book written by an implied author about a writer writing a book on some events which happened .

This narrative technique that Roth adopted is not one in which a narrator refers to writing books in a book. The book mentioned by the narrator is the book the authorial audience are reading. When we ask ourselves: "And what happened to the book Zuckerman mentioned in *American Pastoral*, or the one hinted at in *The Anatomy Lesson*, or to all the books Zuckerman mentions one way or another?" the answer is: THESE (the Zuckerman series) are those books. Zuckerman is a character in his own books. The idea is that Zuckerman's writing his books parallels Roth's writing the series. There is one important consequence arising from this: there are no disruptions in terms of author-narrator relationship. Zuckerman's unreliability as a narrator is acceptable as behind him stands Zuckerman the implied writer who allows his fictionalized narrator-character to be as unreliable as it is necessary in order to be compelling and efficient in his writing.

The homodiegetic narration that Roth chose to tackle in the Zuckerman series has direct consequences over what constitutes mimesis in these books. On the one hand, throughout *The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound, The Anatomy Lesson,* "The Prague Orgy", *Exit Ghost* and occasionally in the novels of the American trilogy*,* the homodiegetic narration is an unselfconscious narration, characterized by paralipsis (the narrator telling less than he knows; according to Phelan, paralipsis is a paradox but not a problem), on the other hand, in four of the novels (*The Counterlife, American Pastoral, I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*) the narration deals heavily with the issue of paralepsis, the narrator telling more than he knows, hence the necessity to discuss the narrator's reliability and unreliability.

Nathan Zuckerman is a homodiegetic narrator with a fluctuating complex relationship between his narratorial and his character functions in the course of every novel. An important question at this point addresses Roth's rhetorical reasons for the paralepsis. The shift in American trilogy to narrator functions is also a shift from the focus on mimetic to the one on thematic functions, maybe even synthetic. Then with *Exit Ghost* a shift back.

In the Zuckerman series there are two novels narrated not by Zuckerman, although Nathan continues to be the central consciousness in these too, but by a non-character narrator. The reason: centering on a character who, in the circumstances depicted there, loses control and falls prey to vice and degradation. These are exceptions within the project and the technique signals the distancing, for in both of them, there is a strong disassociation of the voices and values of author/ narrator and of the main character. And we are generally not expected to accept the vision of the protagonist as it comes from a frankly unreliable character.



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**The entire series of Zuckerman books constitutes a long and complex narrative of rhetoric.** In stating that, we want to call attention, first, to the rhetorical dimensions of the Zuckerman's action: he is *telling particular stories to a particular audience in particular situations for, presumably, particular purposes.* Secondly, we want to call attention to the parallel between the Zuckerman's action and Roth's: the particular story that Roth is telling is the Zuckerman's telling of his own or other people's story. In analyzing these parallel acts of telling, there arises the need to focus on teller and telling, technique, story, situation, audience, purpose and intratextuality: all the elements that help determine the shape and effect of the series.

**Teller and telling**

By viewing Zuckerman´s telling and Roth´s telling as parallel rhetorical acts, we can recognize a crucial element of its construction that may not initially jump out during a first reading: the novels of this series are narratives with AT LEAST three interrelated levels. These are

(1) the inner level, the events narrated by the *writer* Zuckerman: his own life experience in the first five (from *The Ghost Writer* to *The Counterlife*) and in *Exit Ghost*, as well as the stories of Seymour Levov, Ira Ringold and Coleman Silk in the American trilogy; this can be called the Levov/Ringold/Silk/(younger) Zuckerman story;

(2) the middle level, narrated by Zuckerman himself in the first person (to our surprise, twice he does it in the third person as well) who discloses his act of writing about himself/somebody else. This level is the report of his own telling the protagonist's story (or his own) to the narrative audience; this is Zuckerman's story framing either personal events from the past or other people's tales, i.e. framing the inner level; this can be called the framing story.

(3) the outer level, constructed and designed by Roth as implied author: the largely covert communication from Roth to his audiences (implied and real) of the narrator telling the Zuckerman's story of the protagonist story; this is Roth's story or Roth's rhetoric.

Roth gives us a number of clues related to the conception of this project. Mimetically speaking this is not only Roth's project/series of books: it is also Zuckerman's series of texts, with one exception (the notes taken in the form of journal entries) they are novels written to be published. Zuckerman writes all these autobiographical or biographical texts endeavoring to come to some understanding of himself and of the world. However, as he himself discloses, his authorial audience should no more believe they are true of Zuckerman than Roth's authorial audience should believe *The Facts* is true of Philip Roth. There always is a combination between fact with imagination, there are significant alterations as we are dealing with his fictionalized biography. For this reason and not only the Zuckerman saga is both thematically and structurally connected to the general body of Philip Roth's work.



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One important issue related to the act of telling is the p**oint of view/ focalization.** This will lead to conclusions regarding the ETHICAL VALUES conveyed in the series. (Technique and progression complicate the ethical positioning of the authorial audience.) I dare say that these books are *all* character narrations. Roth (the implied author) does not use a "dual focalization" in depicting Zuckerman narrating the books in the series. Zuckerman (the narrator), on the other hand, uses it many times both when he lives voyeuristically through the characters he depicts (in the American trilogy and *The Counterlife*) and when he reports events that happened earlier in his life. In this way he signals the difference between his own perception of things and the perceptions of the people he describes in his narration or between the vision and values of the older Zuckerman and the ones of his young self-absorbed and contemptuous self. This indicates that many times there are ethical conflicts between Zuckerman's perception and his subjects'.

The device of non-character narration in *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson*, has been used to substitute the necessary dual-focalization in relation to the events depicted. Roth, the implied author does not want to use dual focalization here to subvert the authority of the character. There are a number of clues which make us aware that it is still Zuckerman the narrator of these books, even if they appear to be non-character narrations. The much older and more experienced Zuckerman narrates a series of controversial events in his 30s and 40s. He has to do it in the third person to place clear distance between him who narrates and him who is depicted. The narrator is a very sophisticated one. I argue that he not only borrows Roth's conception of art but also his technique, a virtuoso technique. His motive for telling about himself in the third person is to exonerate himself from the rather reproachful unfolding of events and attitude Nathan had back then. It is a device which enables him to hold these stories to a standard of complete honesty. He is aware the ethical conflict that may make readers part company despite agreement on other issues. This technique shows great consideration for ethical values.

A technique employed throughout the series is the ***shift in person***. In *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson* which are both (apparently) non-character narrations readers can observe frequent changes from the narrator's third person to the protagonist's first. The shift is extremely well marked in the text—overdetermined, in fact—because it is signaled in at least three ways. Similarly, in the American trilogy which is a character narration of a writer character telling the story of another character in the third person, these accounts have a similar change of perspectives marked by the shift in person (third changes to first). Roth's talent is revealed by the shift in linguistic style (occasionally there are strong Jewish American influences) in addition to the shift in person. Shifts in linguistic style are especially important in distinguishing the source of particular phrases in texts that use free indirect discourse, since they can work with extreme efficiency, even within a single sentence. Sometimes, the signification of stylistic shifts is reinforced by typography, i.e. some phrases are italicized. The non-character narrator does not employ



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the Jewish vocabulary, and tonality. Roth makes his shift even clearer by accompanying the shift in person and style with a ***shift in tense***, from past to present.

One of the device Roth uses most successfully to create the rhetorical effects is the p***erspective***. Repeatedly texts suddenly change their vantage point from Zuckerman's perspective to the limited perspective of one of the characters—that is, when readers start seeing what one of the other characters sees, which means that the words read represent what the character is saying or thinking. Alternatively, sometimes the vision of a scene is too large for a character to have, it is a vision of events that is beyond that available to the characters, therefore it can be assumed that the accompanying words are those of Zuckerman the narrator (but never of the implied author, unless we go all the way and consider that Zuckerman is Roth's "ghost writer" and then everything written is Roth's vision and voice and conception).

**Conclusion**

The consideration of the Zuckerman books as a coherent enterprise has the advantage of greatly enriching the perception of the synthetic (narrative technique), as readers can see that Roth cleverly exploits a wide range of devices. The VARIETY and the INVENTIVITY insofar as narrative strategies stand out. It becomes obvious that Roth constantly reinvents Zuckerman in each text and gives himself a different task to solve each time - mimetically, thematically and synthetically.

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