PHILIP ROTH'S ZUCKERMAN SERIES OF BOOKS – DIFFICULTIES IN RETRIEVING COHERENCE

Corina Alexandrina LIRCA[1]

Abstract

Thereaders of the Zuckerman books by Philip Roth are required quite a generous degree of activity in order to make the series appear completely coherent. Difficulties come from the fact that this is a nine-book project, which took Roth twenty-seven years to complete, a period when these books were interspersed with others. Also from the fact that the project contains such a variety of configurations and patterns, as over the years the treatment of the character Nathan Zuckerman (the main coherence device) has shifted dramatically, being used to serve a variety of purposes. The result is a number ofsurface inconsistencies that need to be explained by applying rules of coherence to make sense of all the project's potentialities.

Keywords: rhetorical approach to narrative, Nathan Zuckerman, coherence, inconsistencies, bundling conventions.

Theorists of reader criticism, as well as of the rhetorical approach to narrative have always underlined the enhanced efforts of readers in dealing with series of novels. Accordingly, readers of the Zuckerman series of books by Philip Roth are no exceptions to this task. Being the result of some of the most significant literary efforts ever made, the Zuckerman project is more complex than many other literary undertakings by other writers if we consider length (nine books), the period of time it took to be published (27 years), the eclectic corpus of literary works, and the wide range of topics, narrative strategies and themes. The fictional counterpart of Philip Roth, the writer-figure and his alter brain, Nathan Zuckerman is the "ghost writer" continually stretching himself and his readers and reinventing his fictional selves in surprising ways. For all these reasons the project is not immediately coherent, to put it another way it falls into the category of "the not-yet-coherent" (Rabinowitz 146). There are numerous surface ruptures that need to be explained and readers require a special effort and the application of particular rules of coherence to make sense of the project's potential.

I build my analysis of the Zuckerman project as a whole on conceiving coherence as the every reader's pursuit in which they partake in order to determine as much as that is possible the authorial intention. According to Rabinowitz (149) readers do that by identifying and building their explanation on the shared conventions of coherence, by means of which writers planned their effects. Rabinowits points out that the fundamental rule of coherence is to start from the premise (even if this eventually proves to have been a mistake) that there is an implicit coherence and that "apparent flaws in its construction are intentional and meaning bearing' (146). Therefore, here I state my assumption about the basic element of coherence of the Zuckerman project: the series presents Roth's stand

[1] Assistant prof. PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureș.

BDD-A20519 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:16 UTC)

on what making literature means and on the way this profession impacts the writer's everyday life and eventually decides his destiny.

In *Before Reading* (148) the theorist identifies three types of situations in which texts appear to be incoherent. First, texts can be insufficient—that is, they can be apparently incoherent because of gaps in their fabric, holes that need to be filled in. Second, works can be overabundant—they can have a surplus of information that we need somehow to tame, including details that seem to contradict one another and that we need to reconcile. Finally, works can be simply disparate—and we need rules to help us bundle them together into convenient packages.

The Zuckerman project, due to its bulkiness and particularity, includes all three to a larger or lesser extent. **Firstly,** I will refer to the **gaps**. The series chronicles an American writer's life. It starts with the writer in pursuit of authorial validation in his early twenties and ends with the writer's acknowledgement of the decline of his physical and, most importantly, authorial powers in his late seventies. In between these two biographical points Nathan Zuckerman is depicted:

- trying to cope with the consequences of achieving editorial fame (*Zuckerman Unbound*)
- enduring an unnamable pain and creative impotence (*The Anatomy Lesson*)
- attempting to retrieve a dead writer's stories from behind the Iron Curtain ("The Prague Orgy")
- experimenting with the creation of fictionalized counterlives (*The Counterlife*)
- researching and chronicling the lives of three remarkable people in his entourage (the American trilogy)

These are exactly seven selected moments in the life in Zuckerman flashed on the page, all concerned with the evolution of his writing career, evolution conveyed (mostly) by means of Zuckerman's own books or journal entries.

What about the holes in between, what about what is going on in the interstices? As a rule every reader assumes that what is not depicted is not an important or relevant. Zuckerman's childhood and teenage are not depicted, nor are his marriages or divorces for that matter. And the list of such textual lacunae can be enlarged. Our view on this matter is that by means of these gaps the author/narrator leaves out information which tends to be repeated, as we have already witnessed Zuckerman's dealing with certain major issues, or unproblematic periods in the character's life. Actually, getting divorced and being diagnosed with cancer and being completely estranged by your only sibling are far from being unproblematic, but these aspects have either been tackled or they do not condition his writing career or his conception of literature which are the subject of the series. Therefore, when, occasionally, references are made to any of these biographical periods not depicted extensively, it is because the implied author intends to make a point about grounds or consequences of his character's calling.

Secondly, I will comment on **the surfeit** in each novel. Indeed, there are pages of information which appear extraneous and make the text a little excessive. According to

BDD-A20519 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:16 UTC)

Rabinowitz, however, in general in novels these are only apparently irrelevant textual features. Admittedly, they do not contribute to plot or characterization, or do not serve some immediate function, like the provision of verisimilitude or local color, but they "are to be treated as figurative"/symbolic (154). As for contradictory information in this over 2,500-page project, there are just a few, unimportant pieces. Rabinowitz clarifies this matter also: characters are more likely to be correct after undergoing experiences worthy of narration than before them. Thus Zuckerman's final perception of himself and his art, his altered views are to be considered by the reader as wiser and more understanding than those views he holds at the beginning of the series. We, the readers, are to accept the last vision in a text, as it comes from a reliable character.

Thirdly, the Zuckerman project appears to be a mixture of **disparate materials**. Many critics have noticed, the Zuckerman books do "not merge smoothly into a continuous narrative" (Wallace 18), as there are a number of aspects which challenge the readers' smooth grasping of Zuckerman's saga. Thus, the most significant are discontinuities of point of view (*The Ghost Writer* is related in the first person, *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson* are in the third person, the epilogue, "The Prague Orgy," is presented as an extract "from Zuckerman's notebooks," then the rest of the novels are first person narrations interspersed with third person and with free indirect discourse) and the inexplicable gaps between the events narrated in each book. Knowing the genesis of the series, one can understand why Roth, shifted direction on so many axes while working on this project. The sequence has not been published "serially" and there have been other novels written in-between. In every trilogy Roth goes deeper and deeper and twists around to different perspectives again and again. Then again he makes entirely new shifts, recasting all previous books in a deeper light, like he does with the surprising installment of *Exit Ghost* in 2007, much criticized by the audience because of the new progression approach, which at a deeper analysis can easily be understood as the perfect conclusion.

In order to bundle such material 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. Roth's comments on the project are of utmost importance in figuring out the bundle rule. Thus, in an interview by Hermione Lee, Roth refers to his character Nathan Zuckerman, as depicting "the drama of his own life", and to the nine books as "charting Zuckerman's adventures as a writer". In light of this statements, the variety of configurations, progressions, topics, techniques are subordinated to an organizational design: the biography of a writer, from the moment he is validated as one till the demise of his literary power and capability. Moreover, Roth enhanced the coherence of both his every book taken individually and his project by using different bundling conventions:

The Ghost Writer – Roth has Zuckerman call it a bildungsroman and alludes to his becoming a writer.

BDD-A20519 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:16 UTC)

Zuckerman Unbound – Roth gives this booka governing metaphor asthe title, and makes sure that the end makes it explicit. In the economy of the project the title suggests a phase in Zuckerman's life in which his ties with his old life are cut off and he is completely left to devote to his calling.

The Anatomy Lesson - In a wider sense, a lesson is an insight gained by a learner into previously unfamiliar subject-matter. The lesson in Zuckerman's case is triggered by pain and it teaches him about the relationship between life and literature.

"The Prague Orgy" – Roth has Zuckerman, the narrator himself, name this story a "parable", to point out that the brief journey to Prague is to depict a universal truth, which as it was already shown in the previous chapter is related to the relation between literature and the historical, social and political condition of the writer.

The Counterlife – In the title Roth makes it clear that the writer Nathan Zuckerman is playing with the potentialities of fiction to fabricate counterfates.

The American trilogy – The three novels make upa loose trilogy. The bundling activity in their case is "facilitated through the use of parallelisms" (Rabinowitz, 159). Parallels along the axis of Zuckerman's interest in other people's destinies imply parallels along another: the protagonists are all exceptional men, attempting transgression and ending in failure. The novels are variations of the same theme, i.e. it is appropriate to see them as three different exemplifications of the same metaphoric meaning: exceptional individuals' attempts at transgression promised by the "American dream" crushed by historical circumstances.

Exit Ghost – "Exit" is a theatrical term instructing an actor to leave the scene; therefore, the novel is a "swan song," an idiom referring to a final theatrical or dramatic appearance, or any final work or accomplishment. It is a novel employing the character-narration technique; this, together with the title, carries the connotation that the performer/the narrator-protagonist is aware that this is the last performance of his lifetime, and is expending everything in one magnificent final effort.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that reading the entire Zuckerman project is notundemanding and uncomplicated, but I contend that it is *because* of the surface ruptures, *because* of the extraneous details and the unexpected patterns, *because* of the elements of surprise that characterize each new installment of the character Nathan Zuckerman and *because* of the complex system of significations, that this particular series of novels has been so highly appreciated in current academic critical discussion. Furthermore, when observing the sequence through the lens of the bundling convention, these nine texts turn out to be formally discrete narratives which represent *reflections of one another, as well as different ways of saying in chronological order what is, in the end, the same story.*

BDD-A20519 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:16 UTC)

Bibliography

Lee, Hermione. "Age Makes a Difference" - Roth interview. *The New Yorker,* Sunday, 1 Oct. 2007. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/01/age-makes-a-difference>. 1 March 2014

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

BDD-A20519 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:00:16 UTC)