"THE PRAGUE ORGY" BY PHILIP ROTH – A "SCINTILLATING EPILOGUE"

Corina Alexandrina LIRCA, Teaching Assistant Ph.D.,
"Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureş

Abstract: The novella "The Prague Orgy" by Philip Roth is the epilogue to the first trilogy of his Zuckerman series of books and my study aims at giving an account of the reading experience it offers based on the critical method called the rhetorical approach to literature. Central to the paper is understanding just what kind of emotional and intellectual engagement Roth asks his implied audience to have with Nathan Zuckerman as he presents his voice against a new and unexpected biographical and historical backdrop: Communist Prague of 1976. I will also show that, despite the radical shift Roth operates with this novella within the Zuckerman trilogy, it is a clever and fitting epilogue to the series as it recasts the previous three books in a new and deeper light.

Keywords: rhetorical approach, Philip Roth, Nathan Zuckerman,

Introduction

"The Prague Orgy" is the epilogue to the first trilogy of the Zuckerman series of books by Philip Roth, which consists of: *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983). The text is about sixty pages long, which makes it a novella, and it is written in the form of three entries in "Zuckerman's Notebooks", i.e. Zuckerman's journal. The story depicts his so called alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, making a fruitless trip to Communist Prague, in order to retrieve an unpublished series of stories by a martyred Yiddish writer. As a result, it contains details about the hard life and struggle for surviving of artists in a Communist country in the 1970.

Chronological Details

"The Prague Orgy" is not the first published text to feature Nathan Zuckerman as a character - it is the fourth. However, the novella (in its incipient form) was in fact the text in which Nathan Zuckerman was born (in Roth's fictional universe) as a well-established and successful writer of 43. Roth 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). Interestingly, this means that Zuckerman's first story was, in fact, the one depicting his experience in Prague, whereas the experiences recounted in *The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson* (the novels which he published in 1979, 1981 and 1983, namely before he published "The Prague Orgy" in 1985) were imagined later. Roth wanted to publish the Prague tale, but he needed to create a context for it, one that would highlight the contrast between the benign plight of the American writer and the one of the Czech writer. This also explains the method and time 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 "The Prague Orgy".

BDD-A23412 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:54:04 UTC)

Roth invented Nathan Zuckerman (this chief character of his fictional world) while in Prague himself and before having him recount the adventures he witnessed there, he had the character look back to his youth.

Under these circumstances one would believe that "The Prague Orgy" generated the rest of the series, or at least the first part of it. The truth is that, in the final form of it, this novella of about sixty pages has a very narrow topic: the visit Zuckerman pays to communist Prague and the surprise of discovering there a world in which writers, teachers and scientists were demoted to menial tasks, whereas crooks and drunks were running the country. *The Ghost Writer*, on the other hand, introduces a number of tensions and instabilities which are to be solved throughout the trilogy, even throughout the entire series, therefore it can be seen as the book with the generative power needed to support the entire series.. What "The Prague Orgy" does in relation to the first Zuckerman trilogy is of a different nature and will be explained towards the end of this paper.

Progression and Technique

In what follows, I will try to give a detailed account of the reading experience, particularly of the emotional and intellectual engagement with Nathan Zuckerman Roth asks of his authorial audience. This account is based on the rhetorical approach to narrative, which views the novella as a purposive communicative act, achieving its significance by advancing a coherent story about possible people and a possible fictional world, by proposing some generalizations which highlight general truths about the world, and by assessing the artistic technique that conveys the message as efficiently as possible. Two concepts are at the root of explaining the mimetic: *tension* and *instability*[1]. "The Prague Orgy" as a narrative mainly progresses by the introduction and the relief of the tension of unequal knowledge between author and his authorial audience: he and his narrator know all about these events, while the authorial audience is completely unfamiliar with them. The authorial audience do know who the narrator-character is, as the text appeared published for the first time as a coda to the volume which includes Roth's first three Zuckerman books, but tension needs to be relieved when it comes to a new and particular stage of Nathan Zuckerman's life and to two completely new characters mentioned in the first four lines. Until the end of the first journal entry, when the major instability (a situation which requires solution) of the novella is finally introduced, the narrative propels readers forward by means of cognitive tension, orienting them toward the acquisition of information that will influence their judgments, expectations, desires, and attitudes about the characters and the instabilities they face. The second and the third entries are based on solving the novella's major instability. The story refers to events that unfold over the course of three days (one in January 1976 and the other two in February, the same year).

"New York, Jan. 11, 1976"

[1] In the terms introduced by Phelan in 1989, the principles of movement in a narrative are *tensions* between narrator/writer and audience (variables created by the discourse and concerning of uneasiness related to knowledge, values, beliefs, opinions, expectations between authors and/or narrators, on the one hand, and the audience on the other) or *instabilities* within the story and between characters (variables created by situations, and complicated and resolved through actions).

BDD-A23412 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:54:04 UTC)

This first journal entry depicts Nathan Zuckerman in the winter of 1976, in top form, physically and mentally recovered from the strange affliction he was suffering from in *The Anatomy Lesson*. He also seems to have overcome his past of torment and familial feuds. The first paragraphs reveal that Zuckerman has received the visit of two strangers, two Czech immigrants to the US, Zdenek Sisovsky and Eva Kalinova:

A woman of about forty, pale eyes, broad cheekbones, dark, severely parted hair – a distraught, arresting face. One blue vein bulges dangerously in her temple as she perches at the edge of my sofa, quite still. In black, like Prince Hamlet. Signs of serious wear at the seat of the black velvet skirt of her funereal suit. Her fragrance is strong, her stockings laddered, her nerves shot.

He is younger, perhaps by ten years: thick-bodied, small, sturdy, with a broad, small-nosed face that has the ominous potency of a gloved fist. I see him lowering the brow and breaking doors down with it. (Roth 509)

Zdenek Sisovsky introduces himself as a Czech writer, forced to live his country, mother, child and wife after the publication of his book in 1967, a mild satire which caused a scandal. Zuckerman was confronted with a similar scandal, after the publication of his first book, which makes Sisovsky feel entitled to say: "I don't wish to compare our two books. Yours is a work of genius, and mine is nothing. When I studied Kafka, his fate in the hands of the Kafkologists seemed to me to be more grotesque than the fate of Josef K. I feel this is true also with you" (Roth 510). According to Zdenek, both have had to suffer the consequences of "the written world." Moreover, in Sisovsky's eyes, Zuckerman has managed to overcome critics persecution and to turn into "the American authority on Jewish demons" (Roth 515), which justifies both their visit and Zuckerman's finding out of Eva Kalinova's story of a life hunted by such demons.

Eva Kalinova is Sisovsky mistress and a former renowned actress of Czechoslovakia. Currently, because of her poor English competence, she is but a bitter refugee who works as a salesperson for women's dresses. Back in Czechoslovakia she used to be an accomplished Chekhovian, who, because of an affair with what the state agents called a Jewish "parasite," Pavel Polak, fell into disgrace. Eva has had an ironical fate – after her adultery came to light, her life and career were seriously affected. The authorities used her youth performance as Anne Frank (her very first theater part) to drive her off stage by demonstrating that she was a Jewish subversive. Eva's destiny is Roth's way of telling his audience that not only writers suffer, but actors suffer as well the consequences of their art making. There is a perfect analogy between the fate of writers and that of actors, which Roth insists on because he knows from experience that some people in the audience fail to see the difference between a role/a character and life.

The end of Sisovsky's confession reveals some more information about his family background, particularly his father, a potential "lost master" of the short story. This is the part where the story's major instability is introduced: Sisovsky is seeking the aid of Nathan Zuckerman to ask him to make an excursion to Prague to recover from his jealous ex-wife, Olga, the notebooks with Yiddish stories of his deceased father (an innocent killed by the Nazis).

"Prague, Feb. 4, 1976"

BDD-A23412 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:54:04 UTC)

In the second journal entry, Zuckerman documents in reversed chronological order two events: his visit to the Klenek Palazzo occasioned by the regular Tuesday's night party, and the visit he paid "earlier that day" to his new acquaintance Bolotka.

At the party he enters the perverted world of a persecuted and state-monitored group of Czech intellectuals. The crowd's way to counteract the state's treatment is the choice of a promiscuous life in which they freely talk about sex, ask to have sex, and have sex. Here Zuckerman meets Olga Sisovsky, Zdenek's wife, an attractive woman, a writer herself and a notorious drunk. She admits to having the manuscripts, but Zuckerman leaves the party without having negotiated their retrieval.

It is Bolotka who introduces Zuckerman to Olga at Klenek's house. Rudolf Bolotka, Zuckerman's guide through Prague, is a most interesting character: formerly a theatrical producer and now a janitor in a museum. Separated from his wife and children, he has many girlfriends, which is the reason (he admits) he cannot leave Prague, though he has been allowed to go. He gives Zuckerman a haunting portrait of a city where the writers, teachers and scientists are now demoted to menial tasks, and where crooks and drunks run the government agencies. The section propels its audience forward with more cognitive tension relief.

"Prague, Feb. 5, 1976"

This third entry serves Zuckerman to give a detailed account of his second and last eventful day in Prague, which culminates with his tempestuous expulsion from Czechoslovakia. It is here that Zuckerman puts down in his journal the idea that his mission to Prague "approximates the parables of old when the hero went on some quest or the other" (Singh 102):

In the old parables of spiritual life, the hero searches for a kind of holiness, boning up on magic practices!! As he goes off hunting after his higher being, getting help from crones and soothsayers, donning masks – well, this is mockery of that parable… The soul sinking into ridiculousness even while it strives to be saved. (Roth 557)

Actually the entire second day in Prague develops in such a manner as to confirm that "[i]t is by ridiculousness that Nathan's journey is marked" (Singh 102).

Zuckerman receives the early visit of Olga Sisovsky in his hotel room. She declares herself in love with Zuckerman and wants him to marry her and take her away to America. While in the restaurant having breakfast, Nathan meets Oldrich Hrobek, a young student interested in American literature who tries to warn Zuckerman that the government suspects him of espionage and that he should leave Prague immediately. According to Bolotka, however, it is Hrobek and his professor who are in trouble with the authorities, not Zuckerman.

As Prague is under Soviet occupation, Zuckerman experiences firsthand the paranoia under which his fellow writers must live when he is accosted, followed and spied by the state police, "Prague [turning out to be] a nightmare realm of distorted beings and real danger" (Wallace 29). It is now that he truly gets a taste of what being an intellectual in Communist Prague is like and compares it with the way in which writers are treated in America:

The workmen at their beer remind me of Bolotka, a janitor in a museum now that he no longer runs his theatre. "This," Bolotka explains, "is the way we arrange things now. The menial work is done by the writers and the teachers and the construction engineers, and the

BDD-A23412 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:54:04 UTC)

construction is run by the drunks and the crooks. They get along better with the Russians." I imagine Styron washing glasses in a Penn Station barroom, Susan Sontag wrapping buns at a Broadway bakery, Gore Vidal bicycling salamis to school lunchrooms in Queens – I look at the filthy floor and see myself sweeping it. (Roth 540)

The story continues with Zuckerman's satirical confrontation with Olga, the guardian of the stories Zuckerman has come to Prague for. To enhance the feeling that his journey is but a comedy of ridicule, Zuckerman depicts himself as a "straitlaced [exaggeratedly proper] person" (Singh 102) when the dialogue he has with Olga in her apartment that afternoon is given in the form of a playlet and he introduces himself with the following "stage direction": "Enter Zuckerman, a serious person" (Roth 557). At first, out of resentment against Sisovsky, she refuses to give up his father's stories, but later, she complies.

Zuckerman has been under surveillance all this time so it does not come as a surprise the fact that once he has procured and brought the manuscript to his room, he is visited by government agents, the stories are confiscated and he is told that, unless he leaves the country immediately, he will be imprisoned. Novak, the minister of culture himself, escorts Zuckerman to the airport as he is being expelled from Czechoslovakia. Novak lectures Zuckerman on the virtues of hardworking Czech citizens, as opposed to the "sexual perverts," "alienated neurotics," and "bitter egomaniacs" Zuckerman has chosen to meet, whom most Czechs consider "malcontents and parasites and outcasts," in Novak's words (Roth 564-565).

Accusations of dissatisfaction with regard to closure are based on the fact that the text's major instability remains mostly unsolved: it is empty-handed that Zuckerman goes "back to the little world around the corner" (Roth 569), consequently, the audience, as well as Zuckerman, have no way of ever finding out whether the stories were just as good as advertised. The trip, however, is not as meaningless as it appears. There is completeness offered to the novella and not only. The last paragraphs of the story contain the narrator's/author's best thoughts, congruent not only with the events of the text that precede them, but also with the novels that precede this story. Therefore, the truth of the matter is that the way this story ends is the perfect conclusion.

It is this lack of task fulfillment which triggers Roth's closing the novella with a despairing meditation about writing. Placed in the privileged position of the end, it is twice noticeable (the end of story and the end of the trilogy *Zuckerman Bound*). Here, Roth purposefully applies a bundling technique, called the *rule of conclusive endings* (Rabinovitz, 161), a widely applicable interpretive convention which permits the meditation to be read in a special way as a summing up of the vast work's meaning, as a rounding off of the trilogy. Therefore, here the author expresses most pressingly his points— aesthetic, moral, social, political, epistemological. The most important of all being:

One's story isn't a skin to be shed – it's inescapable, one's body and blood. You go on pumping it out till you die, the story veined with the themes of your life, the ever-recurring story that's at once your invention and the invention of you. (Roth 568-569)

The Thematic and Other Generalizations

The way "The Prague Orgy" closes makes it clear that this text, as well as each of the three previous Zuckerman books, published in 1985 as a magnum opus titled *Zuckerman Bound*, is principally about "the relations between invented worlds of fiction and the life of

BDD-A23412 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:54:04 UTC)

their inventor" (Shostak 197), or as Wallace put it: "the unresolvable tensions generated in the process of writing itself" (23).

This last text of the trilogy with its enlarged perspective offers Zuckerman another lesson on the topic of literature – the lesson about oppression, resilience and the unforeseen consequences of art. This experience helps Zuckerman view his plight with different eyes. It is now clear that the first three novels, covering events from 1956 to 1973 (plus Nathan's Newark childhood by means of a number of flashbacks) have literature as the major theme and are about the connection between the written world and the real one - they recount the young writer-apprentice's **visit** to the reclusive author E. I. Lonoff in order to find validation for his calling and his own rejection of the Jewish community values (*The Ghost Writer*); the successful (both critically and financially) writer's **efforts** to protect his privacy and his family, who accuses him of betrayal (*Zuckerman Unbound*); and the ailing Zuckerman's **attempt** to get rid of undiagnosable neck pain and change career (*The Anatomy Lesson*). With these in mind, the novella "The Prague Orgy" is a brief and fitting text which rounds off Zuckerman's quest for his identity by pitting the plight of the writers in Communist Czechoslovakia against his own condition as a writer in America.

Furthermore, the epilogue saves the trilogy from the frequent accusations of impoverishing introspection, of constant "fixation on self" (Yardley 2), on Zuckerman's inner monologue, which Jonathan Yardley, for instance, identifies as "the greatest weakness in his work, one that has kept him from fully realizing his amazing literary gifts because it personalizes and narrows everything it touches" (idem). When the writer Zuckerman leaves his personal torments aside to fight another writer's cause, his own life question is joined another. Whoever cause it is, one thing is certain, Zuckerman realizes and accepts that there are numerous consequences to writing literature: "No, there's nothing that can't be done to a book, no cause in which even the most innocent of books cannot be enlisted, not only by them, but by you and me" (Roth 552).

Interestingly, even the theme of Jewishness is cast in a different light and in direct connection with the theme of literature. This time Roth has Zuckerman see that "his father's point of view [in *The Ghost Writer*, and Milton Appel's in *The Anatomy Lesson*] that Literature should be constrained and moral has become the view of the state [the Communist state]" (Singh 101), meaning that Zuckerman's predicament is multiplied and extended to a whole "nation of narrators":

In this small country the writers have a great burden to bear: They must not only make the country's Literature, they must be the touchstone for general decency and public conscience. They occupy high position in our national life because they are people who live beyond reproach. Our writers are loved by their readers. The country looks to them for moral leadership. (Roth 564)

It is obvious here that Roth's intention is not simply to suggest a facile comparison between the writers in the West with those in the East. His point is complicated with the theme of Jewishness, of father-son relationships and of the interchangeable relationship between the written world and the unwritten one:

Prague represents a realm in which pain is real and significant, where "stories aren't simply stories; it's what they have instead of life. Here they have become their stories, in lieu of being permitted to be anything else. Storytelling is the form their resistance has taken

BDD-A23412 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:54:04 UTC)

against the coercion of the powers-that-be" (Zuckerman, p. 762). Freedom and oppression, writing and silence, power and futility all inter-twine inextricably in Prague. (Wallace 29-30)

Also the theme of Jewishness is depicted in "a more theatrical version […] than the one Roth experienced as a boy in Newark, which he symbolized rather bitterly in *The Ghost Writer* in the figure of Judge Leopold Wapter" (Shechner 228). His trip to Prague facilitates his encounter with a sort of Jewishness in torment with Kafka as a central symbol. Not accidentally this central symbol is a master of the written word. His books, *The Trial*, "The Metamorphosis", and "A Hunger Artist", being accurate reflections of this tormented self: "involuted, ironic, neurotic, but also stoutly committed to Jewish identity" (idem). Shechner notices that Prague is the halfway house on the road to Judea, and *The Counterlife* comes into focus as the next station on the journey of self-integration.

Conclusion

This new and enriched exploration and re-iteration of Roth's themes of fame, the writer's social responsibility, the consequences of art making and Jewishness, provides a stinging conclusion to the complex volume. At only 86 pages, this book is a short but fitting epilogue to Roth's intense concentration on the life of Nathan Zuckerman. By publishing in 1985 the trilogy with "The Prague Orgy" as an epilogue, Roth recasts all three books in a deeper and richer light. No doubt there are more accomplished rothian texts than "The Prague Orgy", however this short novella has all the necessary features to appear "a scintillating distillation of everything one has come to love about Roth. His mastery of his fiction is apparent on every page" (Self).

Bibliographical references

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

Roth, Philip. *Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and Epilogue.* London: Penguin Books, 1989.

Self, John. *"Philip Roth: The Prague Orgy" Review.* Asylum.*10 April 2013* <http://theasylum.wordpress.com/2008/04/10/philip-roth-the-prague-orgy>. 28 Aug. 2013

Shostak, Debra B. "'This Obsessive Reinvention of the Real': Speculative Narrative in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*." *Modern Fiction Studies* - Volume 37, Number 2, Summer 1991, pp. 197-215.

Shechner, Mark. "Zuckerman's Travels". *American Literary History.* Vol. 1, No. 1, (Spring, 1989), pp. 219-230. Oxford University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/ stable/489980 >. 16 May 2008.

Singh, Nandita. *Philip Roth: A Novelist in Crisis*. New Delhi: Classical Publishing Co, 2001

Wallace, J.D. "'This Nation of Narrators': Transgression, Revenge and Desire in *Zuckerman Bound*". *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (Summer 1991), pp. 17-34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195085>. 16 May 2008

Yardley, Jonathan. "Homeland Insecurity". The Plot against America Review. *The Washington Post.* Sunday, October 3, 2004; Page BW02 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A63751-2004Sep30.html>. 28 Aug. 2013.

BDD-A23412 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:54:04 UTC)