

Effective and Resourceful Rhetorical Communication

in *Zuckerman Unbound* by Philip Roth

Comunicarea retorică eficientă și abilă din trilogia Zuckerman Bound de Philip Roth

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Abstract: Reading through the perspective offered by the theory of the rhetorical approach to narratives, I set out to write about the short novel Zuckerman Unbound as a purposive communicative act. I know that this analysis will offer a different way to think about the subtle and not-so-subtle communication Roth puts forward in the second Zuckerman book, but also an overview of textual form, authorial agency, and reader response in this text.

Keywords: rhetorical communication, progression, Nathan Zuckerman, writerly vocation

In order to reflect upon the rhetorical communication in a book, a thorough analysis of fundamental elements of narrative—character, plot, themes, progression etc.- based on a coherent theoretical system is needed, i.e. a precise mode of reading needs to be adopted. Upon close scrutiny of the theoretical landscape, the rhetorical approach to narrative has turned out to have a great explanatory power with regard to all three elements involved in the literary act –writer, book and reader- and, therefore, it meets my need to pay attention, simultaneously, to what the text is saying, to the structure of effects that the text generates, and to the way that the author's creative *making* of the text generates that structure of effects. The concept of rhetorical communication is at the basis of this analysis and interpretation of the second Zuckerman installment. A contemporary coherent system of theoretical principles and concepts which account for the complex phenomenon of fiction writing and reading and help illuminate narrative texts. It is connected with scholar and critic Wayne Booth, the founder of the Chicago School, but mainly based on research by James Phelan and Peter Rabinovitz. The theory of the rhetorical approach to narratives views the books as achieving their significance by advancing a coherent story (by means of creating and solving tensions and instabilities) 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. This is a method which truly does justice to the complexity of any narrative, while it calls for close reading and naturally builds the act of interpretation on the act of reading.

In accordance with the method mentioned I will focus first and foremost on explaining the dynamics of reading narrative, following the evolution of "instabilities" for unstable relations within story and that of "tensions" for those in discourse, which means that I will view this narrative as a dynamic event closely followed by the structure of the audience's interests and attitudes. Further, this framework of progression will be used to examine the characters and the relations between their mimetic, thematic and synthetic components; and finally, technique, voice and themes are considered, to complete the understanding of the author's creative *making*, by highlighting what literary devices the author has employed in order to generate the range of effects.

Progression. The story refers to events that unfold over the course of one week, but by means of Zuckerman's associative memory the non-character narrator also foregrounds an overload of events from the recent past (a few weeks or months before the real time of the story) or from the distant past (Zuckerman's childhood and teenage). The narrative progresses by the introduction of tensions between the narrator and the narrative audience. Interestingly, this tension is mainly fostered by the title of the novel and the titles of each subchapter.

Chapter 1 'I'm Alvin Pepler.'

It is one morning in May 1969, exactly six weeks after Nathan Zuckerman published his fourth novel, *Carnovsky*, which has become a bestseller and turned him into a millionaire star. Zuckerman, now 36, is going by bus to see his investment agent. "Gone were the days when Zuckerman had only to worry about Zuckerman making money: henceforth he would have to worry about his money making money." (ZB 135) While reflecting on his decision to hire a financial specialist at his literary agent's advice, Zuckerman's final thought is: "All this, this luck – what did it mean? Coming so suddenly, and on such a scale it was as baffling as a misfortune" (ZB 135-6). These two sentences in the fourth paragraph of the text create a strong cognitive tension, meant to propel audience forward in the narrative. In order to relieve tension the narrative will unfold in such manner as to offer audiences the necessary information to understand the paradoxical statement above. Based on the details acquired the audiences are to

form their own judgments, expectations, desires, and attitudes about the main characters and their actions.

Carnovsky is a wildly ribald and profane portrait of a young Jewish man and his sexual adventures. Passengers on the bus as well as pedestrians on the streets of Manhattan start recognizing him and turn into admonishers, advisers, confessors and sidewalk literary critics. The harassment follows him all day long: in a coffee shop, in a bank at Rockefeller Plaza, in the park, in the periodical room of the Public Library, in his building hall. It is on these introductory pages that the implied author makes his first thematic point: turning life into literature and acquiring subsequent fame imply having to face to a number of consequences. One type of consequence is connected to the multitude of interpretations given to the book by the large public. People's values differ, therefore readers are interested in the rhetoric of ethnic identity or of autobiography or of sexual behavior etc. and they react accordingly:

1. when he is assumed by his readers to be his own fictional satyr, Gilbert Carnovsky ("Hey, you do all that stuff in that book?" 139), Zuckerman is pitied, consoled, praised, envied etc.

2. when he is seen as having depicted his ethnic community in a humorous manner, he is accused of belittling the Jewish, of offending the memory of the concentration camp victims and of being a self-hating Jew.

It is the final year of the turbulent sixties, with the recent murders of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., and this leads the disconcerted Zuckerman to wonder, when one woman follows him, yelling and searching for something in her purse, if he might not become the target of a furious radicalist. This persecution by his readership reaches an unprecedented climax later that day when at 6 pm, after he happily spots an empty restaurant to grab a sandwich, read the evening paper and "be off the streets by seven", Zuckerman has to confront a rabid fan who idolizes him, and therefore latches onto him and won't let go. Alvin Pepler, from Zuckerman's home town of Newark, New Jersey had his 15 minutes of fame as the reigning champion of a quiz show during the 1950s, but his star fell after a scandal questioning the show's credibility. Now he attempts to write his own story and asks Nathan for advice. This is when another thematic point is made: famous writers are also harassed by unrelenting would-be writers asking for advice.

Chapter 2 'You're Nathan Zuckerman.'

By now the audience have already understood Zuckerman's frustration caused by his success and given the intensity of the last incident are hoping for a peaceful evening once Nathan is off the streets. But no, a new wave of badgering hits the protagonist later that evening. Back home, Zuckerman checks with the operator his phone calls during the day (a commercials producer insisted that Zuckerman "endorse appetizer snacks", an Italian journalist phoned four times to be granted an interview lest he should lose his job, and a female fan, Melanie, called three times), and opens the mail - eleven letters in all: four addressed to Gilbert Carnovsky, one sent by a Jewish detractor, one by a TV producer inviting him to be the star of a reality show, one by a rich woman inviting him to Switzerland, one by C. apologizing for leaving without a farewell.

All these calls and letters help relieve cognitive tension further as they are more and more evidence of the "misfortune" accompanying the sudden success. Some evidence adds new information: Zuckerman is chased by the media professionals. The narrator has Nathan recall his only date with Caesara O'Shea, a famous actress (which the media turned into a hot subject, furnished with false information). This is a reason for the narrator to make another thematic point by criticizing tabloids and television and their false reports, as well as aggressive style of journalism.

The same evening Nathan is harassed by a mysterious man who calls him three times and threatens to kidnap and kill his mother in Miami if the young successful writer does not give him \$50,000 in cash in the next 48 hours. These threats and another of Zuckerman's memories about a visit to Miami account for another consequence of his publishing books: his family's suffering. These calls introduce the first instability in the novel: who is the blackmailer and what will he do eventually?

Every time the phone rings, Nathan hopes that it is Laura, the wife whom he deserted shortly before publishing his best seller, and who he is longing for in the middle of this turbulent period of his life. Thinking of the reasons for leaving her, he realizes it was not the fact that she was too virtuous and that she bored him, it was something else – he himself is the reason, with his own "reputable, responsible, drearily virtuous face". (*ZB* 170) His understanding points out to a weakness he has: he uses people in his work, to inspire him, but he needs to think that he is still virtuous.

Coldhearted betrayer of the most intimate confessions, cutthroat caricaturist of your own loving parents, graphic reporter of encounters with women to whom you have been deeply bound by trust, by sex, by love – no, the virtue racket ill becomes you. It is simply weakness – childish, shame-ridden, indefensible weakness – that condemns you to prove about yourself a point that you only subvert by [a point by which you subvert] everything that enlivens your writing, *so stop trying to prove it*. Hers is the cause of righteousness, yours the art of depiction (ZB 170-1).

There's a kind of yearning in him not to be the author of the send-up satire Carnovsky, but rather the author of filial loyalty or romantic love or marital constancy, if not fidelity. It is clear that Nathan would like to get back together with his wife provided that she calls back. But Laura does not. Here is the second instability.

Chapter 3 Oswald, Ruby et al.

The first four paragraphs elaborate upon Zuckerman's living across a funeral parlor and his encounter with funeral gatherings first thing each day. Later the narrator reveals that the sight of the funerals made him think of his father in the nursing home. This information together with the title of the chapter (hinting at the two famous assassins of 1969) creates some expectations of events unfolding in this direction.

The narrative progresses by instability. The threats disturb him and Nathan stays up all night, considering all kinds of solutions. Before calling his agent and after that, Nathan records in his composition books all details he remembers about the encounter with Alvin Pepler and the mysterious phone calls, trying to make a connection between them. These moments in the progression of the novel draw the audience's attention to Zuckerman's defining attribute (a dimension which in this novel is at no point turned into a function) - his writerly vocation:

Zuckerman found a fresh composition book and [...] began to record what he could still recall of the previous day's business. Because this was his business: not buying and selling, but seeing and believing. Oppressive perhaps from a personal point of view, but from the point of view of business, yesterday was wonderful! He should do business like that every day. (ZB 217)

and reveal his professional routine:

[...] he sat back down at his desk and for another hour recorded in his composition book everything the kidnapper had said. In spite of his worries, he was smiling to himself as he saw on paper what he'd heard

the night before on the phone. He was reminded of a story about Flaubert coming out of his study one day and seeing a cousin of his, a young married woman, tending to her children, and Flaubert saying, ruefully, '*Ils sont dans le vrai.*' A working title, Zuckerman thought, and recorded in the wide window of the composition book cover the words *Dans le Vrai*. [...] On the inside of the front cover, facing the blue ruled lines of the first page, was the chart [...] Here Zuckerman composed his subtitle, printing in block letters across the rows of rectangles [...] : 'Or, How I Made a Fiasco of Fame and Fortune in My Spare Time'. (ZB 226-227)

Out in the street, the same morning, Nathan runs into Alvin Peppler standing in front of his building. The prolonged conversation reveals Alvin's genial memory, his repressed aggression masked by his polite but clamant need for a second opinion on a review he has begun writing (in its discussion of the complex relationship between life and art, the review reflects Nathan's own conflicts), all the while Zuckerman trying to find clues to support his assumption about Alvin being the blackmailer. When the writer tries to get away from his stalker, the latter launches into a tirade of infamous accusations of Nathan having stolen the subject of *Carnovsky* from him. While sheltering into the funeral parlor Zuckerman again starts to take notes on the back of the parlor's brochure. "Another writer with his urgent thoughts." (ZB 245) Zuckerman depicts Alvin as a fascinating character (his "secret sharer", his "pop self", his double) in a prospective book titled *The Vrai's Revenge*.

His feelings of harassment make him go in search of Laura, "his pillar of strength" (Singh 95). Zuckerman's visit to Laura's apartment brings resolution to the instability related to their marriage. She is not at home, but Rosemary, her elderly neighbor, telling him about the way the novel affected Laura, as well as clues that his wife might be living with another man, settles things. "He would never have to worry about being bored by her again." (ZB 254)

Furthermore, a phone call from Florida, which at first Zuckerman thinks is about his mother having been kidnapped, announces him about his own father agonizing. Nathan must rejoin his family and witness the last hours of the dying man. Another instability arises with this news.

Chapter 4 "Look Homeward, Angel"

The title of the chapter alludes to a 1929 novel by Thomas Wolfe, autobiographically inspired Bildungsroman, the novel which Zuckerman read at 16 and prompted him to become a

novelist. On the trip to Florida to visit his mother and dying father, Zuckerman comes face to face with the last and most painful impact of his newfound fame. His father, surrounded by family on his deathbed, curses Zuckerman just before he dies, whispering the word “Bastard!” Being the last word of a dying man, this word is given great emphasis by the author. It is the complication of an instability that was introduced in *The Ghost Writer*, and which was not given a satisfactory resolution - the conflict between him and his family regarding his responsibility as a Jewish writer. Actually his father was the only one in the family to accuse him of disrespect for their family and community. It looks as if the instability is solved by his father’s death, but instead of offering resolution this death complicates this instability. To everyone’s surprise (protagonist and audience) the most scathing indictment comes from his brother.

Do you really think conscience is a Jewish invention from which you are immune? Do you really think you can just go have a good time with the rest of the swingers without troubling yourself about conscience? Without troubling about anything but seeing how funny you can be about the people who have loved you most in the world? [...] When all he wanted to hear was 'I love you!' [...] Oh, you miserable bastard, don't you tell me about fathers and sons! (ZB 288)

The book ends with Zuckerman visiting the Newark of 1969, a falling neighborhood, inhabited by African-American poor people. Zuckerman's sense of nostalgic emptiness when he considers his old Newark neighborhood and as well as his loss of father and brother gives closure to the novel and advances a satisfactory explanation for the title.

Readers and reviewers have accused a feeling of dissatisfaction regarding the end of this novel. They have incriminated the book for not projecting an alternative to the negative side of fame it so forcefully condemns, for not giving closure to the Alvin Pepler issue or for the change of tone (the humor and the irony in depicting the media craze and the fans’ attack is out of the blue replaced by the anguish of the family crosstalk and the grief of mortality and loss). First of all, nowhere in the book the implied author creates expectations for a solution with respect to the media and public turbulence (such as the protagonist’s determination to put an end to it), in other words the narrator does not introduce any instability with regard to the fame ordeal. Therefore, no resolution is needed. Secondly, the Alvin Pepler threat, despite being accompanied by the readers’ expectations of a verdict is part of the entire bulk of fame downsides, so nothing has been altered in that respect, the downsides remained. Besides, the fact that in the four days Zuckerman was in Miami the blackmailer did not phone once is a proof he

had exhausted his hatred in the streets and the handkerchief “job”. As for the change of tone, that was part of the whole design it seems. Despite the light tone, clues that something dramatic was going to happen are offered by Roth all along: assassinations mentioned, funeral houses and mourners described. Moreover, progressively, Zuckerman detaches himself from his New York anonymity, his dream that he will be rescued by a goyim actress, his third wife, his father (who dies), his younger brother (who accuses him of having exposed and abandoned every dimension of his previous experience), and his desolate old neighborhood in Newark, which he views from the security of a limo driven by an armed chauffeur. **The overarching theme** of the book is more than the experience all writers undergo as they mine their lives in order to procure their writing material, it is a meditation on the intermixture of experience and fiction, the impact one has on the other, creating changed dynamics in both. In other words, up to the end of the narrative its progression indicates that the overarching theme is the pressures, responsibilities and resulting impact of putting pen to paper and baring one's soul.

The author builds to the overarching theme by introducing a number of supporting subthemes. One of these subthemes given great emphasis by the story progression is the extent to which the details of a character can be safely compared to those of the flesh and blood author of the book. There are numerous incidents in this story which give a great chance to show the absurdity of this fault of understanding. Although the character does nothing to refute, Zuckerman could not be depicted as more righteous and more innocent than he is, therefore the contrast and the ridicule of the situation is maximal.

The last part of the narration explodes the instability related to this subtheme and the one of the conflict regarding the combined issue of moral offence brought to the family and ethnic derision. This is an end Zuckerman tied only superficially in the previous tome with his “real life” fiction triggered by the mysterious Amy Belette. Actually what his father warned him so many times against, has become actual trouble in this second volume. The last pages of *Zuckerman Unbound* have to be perceived by readers as a climax of Zuckerman's ordeal which leaves him empty inside. Zuckerman becomes “unbound” as he has just lost his father, his wife, his affectionate connection to his younger brother. Moreover, his dear Newark has lost his childhood charm due to the new inhabitants, i.e. Zuckerman has also lost his ties.

Hermione Lee explains the connection between *The Ghost Writer* and *Zuckerman Unbound*: like the Dedalus family in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Nathan's

family is “the material for, and the obstacle[s] to, the fully adult writer who can master and describe himself and his world” (34), later on “[t]he Jewish son who grows up to be a novelist is ‘in possession’ of his material, but he is also ‘unbound’, dispossessed, ‘no longer any man’s son (ZB 224)” (idem).

Technique: non-character narration and therefore a lot of stream of consciousness. I dare say it is a false non-character narrative. One argument to support my statement: Nathan Zuckerman is, in many ways, the least persuasive of the characters in the book because he is so earnest, the constant straight man, the only figure who has everything figured out about how you distance yourself from your material (and thereby your life). An “omniscient” narrator lets Zuckerman be the observer of everyone else’s bizarre reaction to his wealth, his fame, and his repudiation of his family/Jewishness/sexual modesty. The only time in the novel Zuckerman becomes full of life is during and immediately after the encounter with C. [A new love would have taken him out of the seclusion, probably would have started to appreciate the other side of fame: money, fashion, fun, self-pampering etc.] The “narrator” indeed depicts Nathan intimidated by the attention and by constant criticism retreated from his oldest friends and from the public eye, seeking his privacy in his new apartment, hoping that his self-imposed solitude would offer him the mood to create, instead he obsesses about people on talk-shows talking about his book and particularly about his personal life (particularly lies) and is incapable to write consistently again. This book is again one by Nathan Zuckerman written years later but the older self chooses to distance himself from the younger one and therefore adopts this technique.

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Acknowledgements

This paper is a result of the project `Transnational Network for Integrated Management of Postdoctoral Research in Communicating Sciences. Institutional building (postdoctoral school) and fellowships program (CommScie)" - POSDRU/89/1.5/S/63663, financed under the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013.