THE GENERATIVE FORCE AND MOMENTOUSNESS OF *THE GHOST WRITER* IN THE DESIGN OF THE ZUCKERMAN BOOKS BY PHILIP ROTH

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger research - the doctoral dissertation titled **Philip Roth's Zuckerman Books and the Rhetoric of Fiction.** The aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate that the Zuckerman series despite its bulkiness and eclecticism is above all a unified and complete whole, that there is an overall design or an organic unity, and that it is not only I who is holding up unity as a goal to be achieved and a measure of aesthetic success, but it was also Philip Roth's ambition with this series of books. Therefore, the topic of **The Ghost Writer**'s generative force and importance is right at the heart of this dissertation. The paper has the following line of argument: an overview of all nine Zuckerman books, followed by several possible counterarguments to my thesis and a number of examples which illustrate the force and momentousness of Roth's first novel of the series in generating the rest of it.

Philip Roth's Zuckerman books make up a series of nine interlocking novels (and a novella) characterized by the recurrence of the character Nathan Zuckerman, a writer himself. They represent one of the most ambitious literary series of our time, a series of Proustian scale, some would notice, as they were published over a period of 28 years (1979-2007) and the volumes amount to 2,507 pages. They form a grand prose text, characterized by a hectic range of topics, narrative strategies, themes, and even different levels of accomplishment, Roth himself having admitted he has evolved significantly since the beginning of his career.

The first three novels, covering events from 1956 to 1973 (plus Nathan's Newark childhood by means of a number of flashbacks) recount the writer-apprentice protagonist's pilgrimage to cull the wisdom of the reclusive author E. I. Lonoff (*The Ghost Writer*), the wildly successful (both critically and financially) writer's ordeal of unwanted attention from his public and accusations of betrayal from his family (*Zuckerman Unbound*), and the ailing Zuckerman's attempt to get rid of a mysterious writing-barring neck pain and at the same time change career (*The Anatomy Lesson*). The novella "The Prague Orgy" is a brief and fitting text which rounds Zuckerman's quest for his identity by pitting the plight of the writers in Communist Czechoslovakia against the condition of the writer in America. The stand-alone novel which followed one year after *Zuckerman Bound,* is undoubtedly the most experimental

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of all the Zuckerman books and brought Roth great critical acclaims. Here Roth imagines some life-and-death scenarios for both Zuckerman and his brother Henry (both of whom "die" in the course of the book).

By the mid-1990s, though, Roth would give up the self-referentiality (depicted not only in the Zuckerman books) and take Zuckerman out of himself by making him the witness and narrator of a trilogy of historical novels (*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*). Three brand new and round characters (Zuckerman's highschool acquaintance, Seymour Levov; his boyhood mentor, the radio actor Ira Ringold; and his neighbor, Coleman Silk) confronted with the vicissitudes of three distinct historical situations ('60s radicalism, '50 Communist witch hunts, '90s political correctness) will all lead Zuckerman into inferring that even exceptional people can become historical casualties. These are novels which have moved many readers with the tragic plots and stories, but because they lack the author's earlier self-questioning they bear a sense of moral rigidity. What these novel do for Roth's public perception is to redefine his literary ambitions, to revise his literary reputation, and raise his stature, but most of all, to place the early work in a potentially new and better light, but most of all to make him a quintessential American writer, according to Brauner.

In 2007 *Exit Ghost* comes out to offer completeness and closure to the series. Roth places Zuckerman back at the center of his fictional undertaking and depicts him in a last attempt at dodging the difficulties of aging – physical ailments and the decline of his creativity.

As it can be easily noticed, the series is characterised by an utter ecclecticism, hence my way of pointing out the coherence of these disparate materials is two-fold. First, I connect them through the naming of a central theme: fiction about writing fiction. Roth/Zuckerman self-consciously addresses the difficulties of being a writer and the role of the writer in the construction of an individual identity and a mythical national one, i.e. the Zuckerman project depicts the ethical, epistemological and ontological dimensions of the writer's identity. Second, the series is bundled through highlighting the close relationship of derivation which can be noticed between *The Ghost Writer* and the rest of the books.

Second in the organizational schema of this paper is discussing ideas which might undermine my argument about the generative force and momentousness of the first novel of the series. After managing to piece together the genesis of the Zuckerman books, I realized that there might be two main counterarguments to this statement:

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1. *The Ghost Writer* was not the first chronological story in which Roth depicted the character of Nathan Zuckerman
2. Roth shifted direction on so many axes while working on this project that would have been impossible to have anticipated in *The Ghost Writer* everything that the project currently includes on the mimetic, the thematic and the synthetic levels.

Indeed, Zuckerman as a character 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). This means that Zuckerman's first story was, in fact, the one depicting his experience in the Prague, whereas the experiences recounted in *The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson* (the novels which he published in '79, '81, '83 - before he published "The Prague Orgy" in '85) 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 mode 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. 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 formative years.

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 shocks of discovering there a world in which writers, teachers and scientists were demoted to menial tasks, whereas crooks and drunks were running the government agencies. *The Ghost Writer*, on the other hand, introduces a number of tensions and instabilities, which are to be solved throughout the entire series.

As for the second counterargument – the impossibility to have anticipated the entire series in the incipient novel, I admit, it makes a rather strong case against my statement. The project was published over a period of 28 years. The range of topics, narrative strategies, themes these books have are completely hectic. The ideas to write the second half of the Zuckerman books came to Roth circumstantially, i.e. on his return from living in London for a long time, he was shocked by the tragic condition of his native place Newark – it had been burnt down and poor American-African people were living where Jewish-American used to

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prosper – and he realized that he needed to recuperate it. Therefore, he activated the voice of a former character, i.e. Nathan Zuckerman, and thus he did the fictional recuperation.

Roth, indeed, could not have anticipated the entire evolution of the series in *The Ghost Writer.* Instead, Roth depicted in it a character with a great fictional potential: the writer Nathan Zuckerman. He is characterized not only by great talent, but also by a thorough analytical power, by a number of inner and outer conflicts, as well as decisional dilemmas. Roth also placed a number of threats, promises, warnings uttered by other characters in the book. All he did in the subsequent novels was to exploit these latent elements and thus ensure the coherence of the series.

Lastly in my line of reasoning, I intend to support my thesis with several of examples of mimetic, thematic and synthetic echoes present in *The Ghost Writer* which resound throughout the project. On the mimetic level, there are a number of warnings, promises and thoughts which reverberate throughout the entire series. Thus, Lonoff warns Nathan about the drags of celebrity in a line he addresses his wife: "Let Nathan see what it is to be lifted from obscurity. Let him not come hammering at our door to tell us that he wasn't warned" (*ZB* 116). In the next novel , *Zuckerman Unbound,* Roth depicts the writer Nathan Zuckerman bewildered by his success and exposure, confronting the drama of not being able to control the effects of the clash between life and art. Lonoff also repeatedly warns his pupil not to follow his example of isolating himself from humanity: "'Don't try it,' he said. 'if your life consists of reading and writing and looking at the snow, you'll wind up like me. Fantasy for thirty years'" (*ZB* 22). The famous writer sees the danger threatening Nathan and does his duty to apprise him not to deprive himself of experience, but as Singh observes "[t]he advice proves valueless as the protégé cannot help but follow his master's footsteps." (19)

In *The Ghost Writer,* Roth makes it clear that the young Nathan is offered two models of a writer's life: there is the Dionysian lifestyle of Felix Abravanel, a worldly, fashionable author, and the model of the ascetic artist, reclusive E.I. Lonoff. Zuckerman decids to adopt the latter: "Purity. Serenity. Simplicity. Seclusion. All one's concentration and flamboyance and originality reserved for the grueling, exalted, transcendent calling. I looked around and I thought, This is how I would live" (*ZB* 4). This reflection is what Singh considers to be at the core of "the entire Zuckerman Trilogy" (22). I, on the other hand, believe that the first trilogy marks Zuckerman's struggle to be accepted by society and the isolation is not yet embraced, it is merely imposed by the misreading he its confronted with and its consequential attacks. In fact, the above reflection is what generates the second trilogy of the series. It is in these three novels that the author depicts a writer modeled on Lonoff: living ascetically in voluntarily

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assumed isolation (thoroughly elaborated upon in *Exit Ghost*), writing fervently and diligently and dedicating himself completely to his calling. Devoid of a life of experience, while living in the Berkshires, Zuckerman does exactly what Lonoff did about forty years before, when as an aspiring writer Nathan visited him - he "looks longingly at the life of actual experience" (Singh 90) led by the others.

It is again Singh who observes that before their separation at the end of the novel "Lonoff makes a fine yet important distinction between the author and his creation: 'I'll be curious to see how we all come out some day. […] You're not so nice and polite in your fiction[…] You are a different person'" (93). Here we have the premature explanation of a number of instances of conflict occurring in later novels: when Henry turns mad after reading "Basel" and "Judeea", when the Swede's brother appears so revolted with respect to Nathan's book on his sibling etc.

Similarly, themes that are introduced in this first novel are taken up and developed in the ones that followed: the ethnic torment, the search for identity, the theme of renewal, the theme of referentiality, the son's need for an approving father figure and, of course, the overarching theme of literature. As for the synthetic level, again the readers of the later novels can identify certain techniques in *The Ghost Writer* being employed again and refined. Thus, the invention of alternate selves, the major theme and technique of *The Counterlife,* appears first in *The Ghost Writer*- first when Nathan asks Lonoff: "How would you live now if you had your way?" (49), second, in the next chapter of the novel when puzzled by the identity and the presence in that house of Amy Bellette, "Nathan's hyperactive, imaginative mind starts conjuring […] possible selves for her" (Singh 90). He imagines that she is the Anne Frank who survived and is now living incognito. Finally, in relation to the same theme and technique near the end of *The Ghost Writer* Nathan asks himself: "But what do I know, other than what I can imagine?" (129) This is also the technique Zuckerman employs in narrating the stories of Seymour Levov, Ira Ringold and Coleman Silk in the American trilogy. He does research into their real lives but he imagines the rest. In reconstructing the lives of these people he finds intriguing, Zuckerman "incorporates his own suppressed longings and struggles for identity" (Singh 91). This is the fundamental principle of fiction writing (and the basis of the series' overall design) according to Roth/Zuckerman, and it is illustrated both thematically and synthetically: making literature consists of inventing by drawing counterlives from the self of the writer as well as of other people.

In conclusion, *The Ghost Writer* has had a prolonged and continuing effect. It contains the mimetic, thematic and synthetic germs of the entire Zuckerman books. It is our

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strong conviction that this series of novels would not have existed unless the first book were highly loaded with potential for mimetic, thematic and synthetic development and enlargement.

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