PHILIP ROTH AND THE RHETORICAL EXCHANGE IN FICTIONAL LITERATURE

Corina Alexandrina PUŞCAŞ[1]

Abstract

In view of one of the most important contemporary principles of literature, as it was expressed by Terry Eagleton when he famously stated that for literature to happen the reader is as vital as the author, the paper below is meant to investigate the opinion and attitude of Philip Roth regarding the author-audience communication occasioned by the fiction he writes. In order to be able to reflect upon the rhetorical transactions going on on the site of rothian fictional texts, a precise mode of reading needs being adopted – the rhetorical approach to narrative, a coherent theoretical system with sufficient explanatory power to account for the three elements involved in the literary act –writer, book and reader.

Keywords: the rhetorical approach to narrative, actual audience, authorial audience, narrative audience and rhetorical transactions

Introductory remarks

Philip Roth is one of the most influential and most acclaimed living American writers, a novelist that has rightly earned his place in the pantheon of the American writers. Roth is a writer who, during his half a century career in literature, depicted America with its diversity and democratic plurality, as well as its ups and downs, while mainly concerned with an obstinate and obsessive analysis of every angle of his own making as a writer within the American landscape, his writing career being a unique adventure of self-seeking with hundreds of accidents (Antip 361-2). Being a writer of Jewish-American descent, the reading of his books has always got too mixed up with discussions of ethnic themes. Therefore, we feel that now it is time to undertake a fresh critical analysis of the communication Roth initiated and maintained through his literary projects, an analysis which is to exploit textual form, authorial agency, and reader response, i.e. the three elements involved in the literary act – book, writer and reader. As this is without doubt an extensive project, the present paper aims at casting light on one limited element of this discussion: Roth's attitude to the author-reader communication in his fiction, in other words the way Roth perceives and communicates with his readers through his literature.

To our advantage, Roth is a writer who has a complex engagement with issues of narrative theory. In fact, there can be distinguished three types of actions. First, in his tales Roth intersperses comments on their status as narratives—on their mode of delivery, the situation of the telling, the response of listeners/readers, and other issues. Second, Roth's execution of his various narrative projects is remarkably detailed, insistent, and original. For example, he often involves multiple agents in the narrative transmission, such transmissions resulting in experiments with narrative frames and embedding, as well

[1] Assistent PhD., *Petru Maior* University, Târgu-Mureş

BDD-A2891 © 2013 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:26 UTC)

as with audiences. Third, Roth has repeatedly referred in interviews and essays to the craft of writing literature, as well as to the experience of reading empirically or academically.

The reasons why Roth writes and the role the reader has in his fiction writing

In his interviews Roth has often been challenged to refer to the purpose of his craft and to the way he understands the communication between a writer and a reader on the site of a literary work. He has confessed repeatedly that he goes to great pains every time he writes a novel:

> When I write, I'm alone. It's filled with fear and loneliness and anxiety […] There are some days that compensate completely. In my life I have had, in total, a couple of months of these completely wonderful days as a writer, and that is enough ... […] You know, it's a choice to be occupied with literature, like everything else is a choice. But you quickly identify with the profession. And that's the first nail in the coffin. Then you struggle across the decades to make your work better, to make it a bit different, to do it again and to prove to yourself that you can do it (Interview by Martin Krasnik)

and that this calling holds a load of encumbrances:

> It's a horrible existence being a writer filled with deprivation. I don't miss specific people, but I miss life. I didn't discover that during the first 20 years, because I was fighting - in the ring with the literature. That fight was life, but then I discovered that I was in the ring all by myself […], that, in many ways, I am standing on the outside of life (idem).

Despite this, Roth has kept writing for more than half a century now, and has been doing it out of a strong compulsion: "Without a novel, I'm empty" (2004 interview by Jeffrey Brown). He writes "to prevent [his] mind from obsessing about nothing. Not writing is painful for [him]" (idem). Moreover, he has always been interested in "life and the attempt to get life down on the pages" (Interview by Krasnik).

As it can be noticed none of Roth's famous answers refer to an overt purpose to communicate something to his readers. Under these circumstances, one might assume that Roth attaches no importance to the audience of his books. Moreover, to confirm this, when asked about the role of the reader in his activity, Roth often downplays it, as it is clear from the 2004 interview:

> JEFFREY BROWN: But put it in terms of us, your readers. What do you want to do for us?
> PHILIP ROTH: Oh, I'm going to sound very ungracious -- nothing, frankly. I can't worry about the reader, just as the reader can't worry about me. We all have to take care of ourselves, and I don't think about the reader. […] I think about the book. I think about the sentence, I think about the paragraph, I think

BDD-A2891 © 2013 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:26 UTC)

> about the page. I go over it and over it and over it. The book begins to make its demands. The demands are intellectual, they're imaginative; they're aesthetic.

What Roth maintains here is that his major concern (and sole) is to create a highly aesthetic piece with a flawless and unique structure and that the reader is of little importance and value to him.

Rhetorical transactions and the rhetorical approach to narrative

To take for granted Roth's words on the prevalence of the aesthetics in his craft and read his books in this manner, by "purifying" the interrogation into the totally "aesthetic", is to eliminate a vital context of the literary work by ignoring the transactions between an author and his audience. For that reason, we dare contend that an intense communication between Roth and his audience (i.e. a rhetorical transaction between Roth and his reader) is at the basis of his writing activity. In fact, Roth thinks of his audience with every choice he makes about the situation of telling a story and the mode of delivery or when he experiments with framing and embedding, as the way he writes every book (the author's creative *making* of the text) is directly connected to the structure of effects that the text generates. According to t**he rhetorical approach to narrative** (an audience-oriented critical approach which claims that narrative is rhetoric, that books of fiction are rhetorical acts), any written work of art is the means by which an author addresses readers at a cultural, rhetorical moment, in order to communicate knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs. Also, the text is "the site of that rhetorical transaction, and it views those transactions as having both a formal and an affective structure" (Phelan 1989 207).

In *Narrative as Rhetoric***.** *Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology,* James Phelan states two significant principles in literature: (1) any narrative is rhetoric because narrative occurs when someone tells a particular story for a particular audience in a particular situation for some particular purpose(s); (2) the reading of narrative is a multidimensional activity, simultaneously engaging our intellects, emotions, ideologies, and ethics. To apply Phelan's theory, there is an inherent rhetorical relationship between Roth as the author, his text, and his readers, resulting from the complex, multilayered processes of writing, on the one hand, and of reading, on the other, processes that call upon our cognition, emotions, desires, hopes, values, and beliefs (19).

Phelan defines the narrative structure as

> […] a dynamic event, one that must move, in both its telling and its reception, through time. In examining progression, then, we are concerned with how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers' interests in narrative. I postulate that such movement is given shape and direction by the way in which an author introduces, complicates, and resolves (or fails to resolve) certain instabilities which are the developing focus of the authorial audience's interest in the narrative. Authors may take advantage of numerous variables in the narrative situation to generate the movement of a tale. (1989 15)

BDD-A2891 © 2013 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:26 UTC)

Phelan's story-discourse model of narratives includes two types of movement propellers: **instabilities**, variables occurring within the story and between characters, created by situations, and complicated and resolved through actions, and **tensions**, 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 authorial audience on the other. (idem) Some narratives progress through the introduction and complication of instabilities, others progress primarily through tensions, whereas the majority, by means of both. As (professional) readers for progression we should always ask ourselves: What does a writer do there to propel the reading forward? In the terms introduced by Phelan, the principles of movement in a narrative is the either the tension between narrator/writer and the authorial audience or an instability between characters.

The concept of multiple audiences

To account for the communication entailed by Roth's narratives, it is important to take up the question of audience, as it is discussed by the rhetorical approach and emphasize that there are differences among real readers, narrative readers, and authorial readers. This distinction between real readers and authorial ones was clearly made in Booth's *Critical Understanding* (1979). Booth emphasizes the author as Constructor of the text, whose choices about the elements of narrative largely control the responses of the audience. Writers cannot know and have control over who reads their books (the class, gender, culture, historical situation etc. of the *actual audience*), but they cannot write without having an audience in mind either, therefore their writing is designed for a hypothetical audience: the *authorial audience*, which is assumed to read the books the way their authors intend them to be read. The authorial audience is supposed to know particular cultural conventions or to be familiar with historical events or to have knowledge of specific previous texts etc. "Reading as authorial audience therefore involves a kind of distancing from the actual audience, from one's own immediate needs and interests." (Rabinowitz 24) The communication between author and reader entails both sides to give up part of their freedom, which means acknowledging "conventional limitations". The writer has to work with such conventions to be understood, while the reader has to have knowledge of these conventions.

In the segments concerned with the rule of realism and the rule of balance regarding focus Rabinowitz takes the opportunity to deploy of one of the book's most important—and most widely influential—concepts in his book *Before Reading* that of the narrative audience. Rabinowitz is the one who introduces this third type of audience: the *narrative audience*, as "a role which the text forces the reader to take on" (95), in order to perceive the imagined events of the book as true. The narrative audience is, in a sense, the authorial audience moved inside the world of the narrative; just as an author has an ideal audience, so too does a narrator. In the authorial audience, we know that the events and characters of fiction are not real; in the narrative audience, we believe that they are. Thus,

BDD-A2891 © 2013 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:26 UTC)

discussing the matter of audiences is directly connected to the level of commitment to participate in the mimetic illusion. Full acceptance of the fictional illusion means entering the narrative audience, whereas remaining covertly aware of the synthetic means entering the authorial audience. In other words, the authorial audience has the double consciousness of the mimetic and the synthetic, while the narrative audience has a single consciousness of the characters as real.

The distinction above has implications for the way we should understand Roth's relationship to his audience. Thus, his novels entail complex rhetorical transactions and communication with different types of audience. When Roth states that he is not concerned with the existence or interests of an audience, what he means is the actual audience, the real readers. He knows that a writer cannot control who reads, how they understand and feel about his books, therefore he has never intended to "offer readers a morally transforming experience" (2004 interview) or of other kind:

> Your role [as a writer] is to write as well as you can. You're not advancing social causes as far as I'm concerned. You're not addressing social problems […] What you're advancing is... there's only one cause you're advancing; that's the cause of literature, which is one of the great lost human causes. So you do your bit, you do your bit for fiction, for the novel. (idem).

To demonstrate that Roth is most aware of his audience and that his involvement with a variety of audiences is very complex, we can bring to attention the case of his series of novels called the Zuckerman books. It is a series made up of nine books based on the embedding and framing technique. Consequently, all these novels 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; the writer-character addresses here a second degree narrative audience, this represents an interlocutor of the narrator, an invisible eavesdropper who hears and sees the dialogic scenes.

(2) the mid level, narrated by Zuckerman himself in the first person (to our surprise, twice he shrewdly 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 first degree narrative audience for whom the narrative situation of the writer Zuckerman is not synthetic but real; 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

BDD-A2891 © 2013 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:26 UTC)

rhetoric; Roth, the author addressing the authorial audience who should not believe the series is true of Zuckerman and the ideal audience that an author implicitly posits in constructing a text, the one which will pick up on all the signals in the appropriate way.

Conclusion

In view of all the facts enumerated above, it is now safe to assert that despite not admitting it overtly, Roth has a keen awareness of the transaction between readers and his texts, of what happens when they read. His books would not have the powerful artistic effects they have, would not be as effective as they are in conveying meaning without thorough consideration of the affective progression of a book which is the responsibility of the audience. Roth only pretends to suppress his awareness of the existence or importance of an audience. What he actually does is refuse to think of his flesh and blood readers, while he does have in mind an implied authorial audience whose attention, imagination, process of reasoning, reactions and feelings he manages and strives to engage by the way he writes his books.

Bibliography:

Antip, Felicia. *Aventuri ale constiintei de sine. Scriitori evrei fata in fata cu destinul lor.*: Bucuresti: Hasefer, 2006

Booth, Wayne C. *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. First published 1961

Brown, Jeffrey. "News Hour with Jim Lehrer." Two-part interview. PBS, 27 October 2004 and 10 November 2004

Krasnik, Martin. "It no longer feels a great injustice that I have to die." Roth interview. *The Guardian*, 14 Dec. 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/ 2005/dec/ 14/fiction.philiproth>

Phelan, James. *Narrative As Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996

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

Phelan, James, and Peter J. Rabinowitz. *Understanding Narrative. The theory and interpretation of narrative series*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994

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

BDD-A2891 © 2013 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 02:04:26 UTC)