

Review of *Exit Ghost* by Philip Roth

In the last week of October, 2004—Philip Roth has chosen to be exact about his dates in recent books—Nathan Zuckerman returns to New York from rural Massachusetts for a medical procedure to correct his incontinence. Deprived of potency and bladder control years before by an operation to remove a cancerous prostate, the narrator of *Exit Ghost* has heard that injections of collagen into the bladder might restore a measure of sphincter control. The procedure is experimental, but the mere prospect of recovering some manly bodily pride and casting off the humiliation of lost control of his bladder sets the story in motion, stimulating Nathan's desire for a more ample life than he has allowed himself as a secluded writer in the Berkshires. "A painless fifteen-minute procedure, and life seemed limitless again," Nathan muses. "When I came to New York, New York did what it does to people—awakened the possibilities. Hope breaks out."

He regards himself as quite remote from the technological wonderland that has emerged in the last ten years, lacking a VCR, a CD player, a cell phone, or a computer with access to the Internet. That great, expanding phalanx of modern electronic distraction forms no part of his life. "I do not even bother to vote," Nathan tells the reader, adding (this would be easy to guess) that he seldom bothers to read a newspaper. But the fantasy of a new life takes hold anyway and is furthered by listings in the *New York Review of Books*. Alone at an Italian restaurant, Nathan turns to the *New York Review*, disregarding a portentously titled sequence of articles called "The Election and America's Future," turning instead to the personals at the back. "Energetic," "complex," "thoughtful," and "beautiful" are the way women are describing themselves, but what

really draws his attention is a property ad from a young couple on the Upper West Side who wish to exchange their spacious apartment for a home in the country. Into this rapidly developing story come Billy Davidoff and his lovely wife, Jamie, of a wealthy Houston family. Old money, oil money, the kind that brings her parents into social contact with President Bush's family, and the daughter into private schools and ultimately Harvard. Jamie is frightened of another September 11th-like attack that would threaten to carry off thousands more, including herself and her husband. Those are her grounds for wanting a respite from the city. By Jamie's beauty and her casual self-confidence that belies the claim of anxiety, Nathan is smitten.

There are two other major characters, perhaps a third, if the reader may include the appearance of a ghost. That would be E.I. Lonoff, introduced nearly thirty years ago in the first Zuckerman novel, *The Ghost Writer*. The setting was 1956, Nathan was at the beginning of his career, and Amy Bellette was a young and very attractive student who wanted to begin (or continue) an affair with Lonoff. She returns in *Exit Ghost*, unseen by the narrator for nearly fifty years, and by 2004 vastly aged and (like Nathan) stricken with cancer—but of the brain. He spies her in Mount Sinai Hospital, where his own procedure has taken place, and follows her to a cheap diner nearby. Half of her hair has been shaved away, and the exposed half of her skull is scarred by an ugly incision. For the moment, Nathan decides against making contact.

Falling deeper into the fantasy of a rich new life in New York, but also doubting the wisdom of what he is doing, Nathan attempts to seduce Jamie, for whom he has developed a “desperate infatuation,” even though the medical procedure he has agreed to will probably prove unsuccessful. Even if it is, it will contribute nothing to the recovery

of his potency. He'll apparently be content with whatever he can get. What he finds in addition to the mild and friendly young husband, the interested but unyielding wife, and the cancer-stricken Amy Bellette, is young and offensive Richard Kliman, a literary journalist on the make. Kliman is only 28, the son of a rich Los Angeles entertainment lawyer, aggressive, and ultimately poisonous. He is also a friend of the married couple and a former college classmate of the wife—indeed, Nathan believes he is having an affair with her. Kliman also has information about the late Lonoff, dead since 1961, that he intends to use for a planned biography of the writer. Stricken with envy, and more than doubtful about his ambition to write a biography, Nathan wants nothing to do with him.

This is a bare outline of the plot, and I am giving nothing away if I tell the reader that very few of the projects come to fruition. Nathan pursues Jamie for just a few days, even as he is losing interest in the one-year property swap; he turns against the decision about as quickly as he makes it. Like other medical efforts to repair bodily defects Roth has described in past novels, the collagen procedure does not seem very successful. On the other hand (an example of another failed project), the would-be biographer seems to have been turned aside by the end; he casts to the pavement the copy of an unfinished, unpublished manuscript that occupied Lonoff at the end of his life. The manuscript, asserts Kliman, proves that the long-dead author committed incest with a half-sister when both were teenagers in Boston.

The core of the novel comes in the meeting between Amy and Nathan. They still have a great deal in common. Both revere the memory of Lonoff, and both (like Lonoff, who died of leukemia) are victims of cancer. Kliman has appealed to them for support in

his biographical quest, and both are determined to resist him. Each can remember the other at a much younger age; both are exposed to the corrosive power of time, the assaults of the ambitious young—Kliman is “armed to the teeth with time”—and the utter transformation of New York in general and literary life in the cultural capitol in particular. Nathan has fared better than Amy, who is a bit older. He is a well-established writer and the initial confidence bestowed by Lonoff decades ago has been borne out by consistent work; his experience of cancer may well have been arrested by the removal of his prostate. Amy, in her words, has “drifted” for several years, indeed decades. She lived with Lonoff after his wife left him (which is a significant difference from how matters fared in *The Ghost Writer*). But by 2004, Lonoff has been dead for decades, and Amy has contented herself with translating texts between English and Scandinavian languages. The initial literary promise that attracted Lonoff gave way...to something else. Her tumor will probably kill her. Nathan appears comfortable and stays at a Hilton when traveling to New York; Amy lives in utter destitution.

Still, there is that bond, and for both, the connection is far stronger than their differing fortunes. Amy is trapped, perhaps in a spiritual way, by the five years she lived with Lonoff, and claims to hold regular conversations with him. Indeed, he is said to have dictated a long letter Amy wrote that (a la Moses Herzog) she never sent to the *New York Times*. She had been enraged by a literary exhibit at the New York Public Library, which excluded Hemingway and Faulkner, Robert Lowell and Wallace Stevens, in favor of St. Vincent Millay, Gertrude Stein, Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison...I’m sure you get the picture. But the immediate provocation of her epistle is an article in the *Times* about the reaction of people living in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula to

some early Hemingway stories describing their forebears. They are, almost predictably, unhappy with the material. I believe I can safely attribute some of the ideas in Amy's letter directly to Roth himself. An interview he gave to a *New Yorker* reporter preparing a profile (reprinted in David Remnick's *Reporting*) offers nearly identical thoughts. "There was a time," the letter begins, "when intelligent people used literature to think. That time is coming to an end...Your paper's cultural journalism—the more of it there is, the worse it gets." And when it comes to depicting a writer or his life, Amy continues, "Your literary journalism is tabloid gossip disguised as an interest in 'the arts...Who is the celebrity, what is the price, what is the scandal?'" This precedes a long central paragraph, where the meticulous methods of a serious writer, building a novel or story "phrase by phrase and detail by detail," are exposed by a journalist "as a ruse and a lie. The writer is without literary motive...The writer's guiding motives are always personal and generally low."

This knowledge comes as a comfort, for it turns out that not only are these writers not superior to the rest of us, as they pretend to be—they are worse than the rest of us. Those terrible geniuses! The way in which serious fiction eludes paraphrase and description—hence requiring thought—is a nuisance to your cultural journalist.

Amy's letter has the character of a Nietzschean analysis. Journalism is an organ—arguably *the* organ—of public opinion. By demolishing the elevated status of art and the men and women producing it, reporters can establish that artists are not superior to the great newspaper-reading public. The relativism of political correctness asserts the equality of taste, an argument that can only be maintained by overturning the primacy of serious art. This is achieved by "exposing" the base motives of the people producing it.

All of which brings us to young Kliman. Because Lonoff, it is claimed, had a dark secret too, and Kliman is going to bring it to light. This will be justified by the need to illuminate the life and work of a neglected writer. Lonoff secluded himself in the Berkshires for decades in order to conceal a heinous act committed as a youth—incest. His final unpublished manuscript, dealing with the topic, proves it—or so the naive, ignorant Kliman believes. Roth reserves his harshest epithets for the young writer, who has contributed his share to the literary chatter brought forth by *Vanity Fair*, *New York* and *Esquire*. “Reckless,” “hard-driving,” “shameless” and “opportunistic” are the words used to describe Nathan’s young enemy (for an enemy is what he becomes)—when he isn’t “a rancorous beggar beneath a presumptuous bully” practicing “dirt-seeking snooping calling itself research.” Nathan declares to the reader, “I had to master Kliman, if nothing else. Mastering him was my last obligation to literature.”

“Mastering” this aggressive young man is a difficult task. In their initial encounter from a day before, enraged by Nathan’s refusal to participate in the project, Kliman screams, “You’re dying old man, you’ll soon be dead! You smell of decay. You smell like death!” (The insults will remind some readers of those hurled at Uncle Sammler in Bellow’s 1970 novel *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, which in turn are said to originate nearly verbatim from language cast at Bellow himself by a student during a talk at San Francisco State.) The young can say unimaginable things, and how unsurprising it is that after this confrontation, Kliman still appeals to Nathan for help in preparing his book!

Much of the energy of the novel goes toward overthrowing the fallacy that details of an author’s life can be drawn directly from his novels. Even Amy Bellette, somewhat

demented by her encroaching malignancy, has to be reminded of this. “You know the fluctuations of a novelist’s mind,” declares Nathan. “He puts everything in motion. He makes everything shift and slide...Fiction for [Lonoff] was never representation. It was rumination in narrative form.” To demonstrate this, Roth has prepared “he/she” sections consisting of dialogue appended to several chapters of the novel. The passages represent the fictitious recasting of conversations between Jamie, Kliman and Nathan, notes toward a future novel. This point is emphasized by another writer, by Proust, who says in the concluding section of *Time Regained* that for an author, “there is not a single gesture of his characters, not a trick of behavior, not a tone of voice which has not been supplied to his inspiration by his memory. Beneath the name of every character of his invention, he can put sixty names of characters that he has seen, one of whom has posed for the grimaces, another for the monocle, another for the fits of temper, another for the swaggering movement of the arm, and so forth.” Writers typically hide themselves behind the characters they create, borrowing liberally from people they have seen or known, and stories that seem “factually true” have only apparent biographical value.

Roth is putting the attempted literary biography near the center of the story because the form has become so ubiquitous in recent decades. And the favored revelation is often scandal or duplicity that seems to discredit the subject.. After Lonoff’s, whose life is the next target of Kliman’s malevolent excavation? Zuckerman’s? In the afterword to his splendid biography of Mark Rothko, even the late James Breslin concedes motives remote from disinterested scholarship:

Biographers want to ride into eternity on the coattails of the great; and many of them, while enjoying the ride, take an ungrateful look under the coat to check for torn or sweat-stained shirts, middle-age paunch, navel lint, or other hidden signs

of human imperfection....Biographers are voyeurs who enjoy being privy to secrets. I don't deny any of these motives; I take great pleasure in knowing certain things about Rothko that only I know...

Breslin had no intention of producing a derogatory biography, and his long study of Rothko is a classic of fair-minded scholarship. But his confession suggests how varied the motives can be of even serious scholars who attempt to fix in print the lives of artists who've produced important work. Kliman's goal is less ambiguous--it is a career-promoting effort designed to leave the public comfortable in its self-satisfaction by unearthing the transgressions, quite possibly imaginary, of a dead writer.

The alternative to Kliman are the spirits, or ghosts, who appear in the story. The enigmatic title—*Exit Ghost*—is a stage direction. Nathan believes that he truly encounters the late Lonoff at Amy's dreadful dwelling place, amidst the relics from the writer's study, including a desk lamp and an easy chair: "What, are *you* here?" he asks himself silently, quoting in fact a line from T.S. Eliot's *Little Giddings*. The poet is on a pre-dawn walk in a city when

I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable.

"Somebody has to protect [Lonoff] from this man," exclaims Amy, deathly ill, and hardly able to fend off the intrusive, persistent appeals of young Kliman. "Any biography he writes will be the resentment of an inferior being writ large." As for the unsent letter to the *Times*? Lonoff's final words to her are "Reading/writing people, we are finished, we are ghosts witnessing the end of a literary era—take this down."

One notes that Roth says “reading/writing people,” and not writers. The two form a community because they obviously need each other. The public that continues to read serious fiction needs good writers, and the writers, most of them anyway, need the support of intelligent readers. Indeed, readers play a role in producing books, because authors have to shape them by using common words commonly understood, while relating intelligible stories susceptible to approximate understanding. A few lofty titans like Joyce can produce their own private novels, such as *Finnegans Wake*, indifferent to the fact that few people will trouble to read them. But even great talents like Roth seldom make such an assumption, and need ordinary people like us to continue their work. Roth has argued that such an assumption is getting harder to make. In his *New Yorker* interview, he commented that “Every year, seventy readers die, and only two are replaced. That’s a very easy way to visualize it. Readers are people who read serious books seriously and consistently. The evidence is everywhere that the literary era has come to and end.”

Zuckerman finally is driven back into the country, to the Berkshires, to a kind of exile that may be representative of what modern conditions produce for serious readers, too. With their own cultivation, they may all feel banished to a foreign country, which may simply be their private, inner lives that they share with very few others. The reaction can be provoked by the *mélange* of conditions Zuckerman experiences in the city. Jamie defends Kliman by saying that he “lives in a careerist world where if you’re not a careerist you feel like a failure. A world that’s all about reputation.” Not virtue, knowledge, or wisdom, or even simple decency, but status. And of course money. Coleridge’s *Mariner* holds the *Wedding Guest* “with his glittering eye,” but the chief

glittering object that attracts people today is cash, and there is money, money everywhere. Kliman's more-than-comfortable family lives in a grotesque southern California mansion, with marble and columns and a swimming pool in a heavily landscaped yard. Jamie is more attractive and sensitive, but her father is depicted as loutish and rich, and she has had access to private schools and clubs all her life.

The outer, for Roth, has captured the inner. That is why the novel begins on election week, 2004. The timing establishes how consumed people are by great public questions, whether it be the stock market, the war in Iraq, global warming, or any number of other topics. The night of the election, Jamie and her husband are communicating with friends on their cell phones, gathering polling results from various sources. They would do better to ignore the tally and concentrate on their art. And the cell phones they employ? Nathan observes people using them everywhere, absorbed in banal, superfluous conversations, "which made the streets appear comic and the people ridiculous. And yet, it seemed like a real tragedy, too." A tragedy, because the phones seem to annul, not amplify, human faculties, depriving people of the experience of walking city streets, "thinking the myriad thoughts that the activities of a city inspire."

The ghost in the machine? Not for Zuckerman. The specters—serious readers and writers--are trying to flee the machine. By the end of the novel, the cell phones have become representative of the ever-expanding role of technology generally, and "seem," says Zuckerman, "like the embodiment of everything I had to escape." Ghosts in Shakespeare often issue warnings and prophecy, and the spirit Roth resurrects in his novel questions whether people can remain fully human without what Milton called "the precious life-blood of a master spirit." Observing the portable phones, Zuckerman

concludes, “I saw the measure of how far I had fallen from the community of contemporary souls. I don’t belong here anymore. My membership has lapsed. Go.”

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