

Roth's Humorous Art of Ghost Writing

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Paule Lévy,

"Roth's Humorous Art of Ghost Writing"

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Abstract: In her article "Roth's Humorous Art of Ghost Writing" Paule Lévy analyses Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*, the last novel featuring Nathan Zuckerman, in which Roth reassesses his favorite *alter ego's* itinerary while exploring the troubled relation between writing and aging. Lévy considers *Exit Ghost* as an ironic sequel to *The Ghost Writer* and posits that in the light of Derrida's theories of writing and "hauntology" the central motifs of ghosts and "spectrality" in the novel are a means for Roth to reflect anew on the ambiguous relation between autobiography and fiction. Lévy asks whether *Exit Ghost* should be read as an expression of Roth's pessimism, as a "ghost novel" predicting its own disappearance as a cultural artifact, or whether it should be read as an assertion of Roth's indefatigable vitality and faith in the priceless value of art. Lévy's study is a textual analysis and a close examination of the dialogic links between the storyline and its haunting multifarious intertext—in particular Joseph Conrad's partly autobiographical novel *The Shadow Line*, a central reference in *Exit Ghost*.

Paule LÉVY

Roth's Humorous Art of Ghost Writing

In *Exit Ghost*, the last novel featuring Nathan Zuckerman, Philip Roth reassesses his favorite *alter ego's* itinerary while exploring the troubled relation between writing and aging. I consider *Exit Ghost* as an ironic sequel to *The Ghost Writer* and in the light of Jacques Derrida's theories of writing and "hauntology" I focus on the central motifs of ghosts and "spectrality" in the novel. I show that "ghost writing" in all senses of the term is a means for Roth to reflect anew on the ambiguous relation between autobiography and fiction, as well as on the future of literature in the United States at a time when it is being challenged by the recent developments of technology and media culture. Should *Exit Ghost* be viewed as an expression of Roth's pessimism or rather as an assertion of the author's indefatigable vitality and faith in the priceless value of art? The question will be broached by means of a thorough textual analysis and a close examination of the dialogic (Bakhtine) links between the storyline and its haunting multifarious intertext—in particular, Joseph Conrad's partly autobiographical novel *The Shadow Line*, which is a constant reference in *Exit Ghost*, while its title seems to take on a symbolic value.

While *The Ghost Writer*, which inaugurated the Zuckerman cycle, could be viewed as a *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Joyce), *Exit Ghost* appears as a story of decrepitude and decline. Zuckerman is now an old man, sapped by illness, doubting his own talent, and aware that he is playing his last cards. Started soon after the death of Saul Bellow, one of Roth's most revered literary masters, and published a year after the publication of *Everyman* in 2006, a poignant meditation on old age and death, *Exit Ghost* strikes an even gloomier note: "this book is certainly dark; it's without any laughs" (Lawson, BBC Radio Interview). The novel seems to reflect back on the totality of Roth's oeuvre through a tight network of parallels, duplications, and echoes. Thus Roth returns to the characters whom left stranded at the end of *The Ghost Writer*: E.L. Lonoff, the reclusive writer whom Zuckerman used to see as his spiritual father, and Amy Bellette, Lonoff's protégée, whom Zuckerman's fertile imagination had turned into a reincarnation of Anne Frank. It is as if the narrator, now at the end of his "Life as a Man," intended to reexamine his past and meditate upon the ravages of time on the people surrounding him and on the country he lives in.

The story develops over a span of eight days, just before George Bush's re-election. Nathan has left the Berkshires to undergo surgery in New York. There he meets incidentally Amy Bellette again, he becomes acquainted with a certain Kliman, a young writer who intends to publish a biography of Lonoff, and he considers exchanging residences with a couple of Upper West Side intellectuals, David and Jamie Logan. The tenuous, diaphanous story line is frequently interrupted by dialogs in italics between a "He" and a "She:" these are purely imaginary exchanges between Nathan and Jamie, who exercises a strong degree of sex appeal on him. The novel ends on one of these "conversations," there is no return to the narrative frame.

Exit Ghost received a mixed critical reception. Many scholars and critics were perplexed by the numerous digressions, the abrupt denouement, the apparent vacuity of the embedded scenes, as well as the resort to prior fictional material, which they perceived as utter lack of inspiration: "if you look at all of Roth's books, this is a footnote—"this quote is from an unidentified audience member in Derek Royal Parker's roundtable discussion (26)—"the feeblest fiction Roth has written for a long time"

(Kemp <<http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/fiction/article72424.eca>>), "detumescence, a novel that withers on the vine" (Churchwell

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/06/fiction.philiproth>>). Fortunately, the novel also gave rise to more perceptive judgments: "Most of Roth's work and certainly *Exit Ghost* gain emotional depth and yield further literary richness with each subsequent reading ... It is a literature of absorption and saturation, yielding a cumulative effect, rather than an effort at representative realism" (Hellman <<http://www.sfgate.com/books/article/Review-Philip-Roth-s-Exit-Ghost-2519848.php>>). The regressive and apparently unsubstantial plot is in fact part and parcel of the novel's ambiguous message. It is not incidental that the depiction of a writer's decline should take place against the devastated backdrop of a city and a country traumatized and profoundly altered by 9/11. In such a context, what is the future for US-American democracy and culture?

As he makes his return upon the New York scene, Zuckerman (whom we had lost track of ever since *The Human Stain*), appears as a shadow of his former self, a kind of ghost bewildered by a world he has long left behind. For years he has been leading a solitary life in the Berkshires, one entirely devoted to his art: "I'd been alone these past eleven years in a small house on a dirt road in the deep country ... I see few people ... I don't go to dinner parties, I don't go to movies, I don't watch television, I don't own a cell phone or a VCR or a DVD player or a computer. I continue to live in the Age of the Typewriter and have no idea what the World Wide Web is. I no longer bother to vote. I write for most of the day and often into the night (*Exit Ghost* 3-4).

Such withdrawal, however, has been largely due to prosaic considerations. A prostate operation has made Nathan not only impotent (as we saw in *American Pastoral*) but also incontinent, thus making social life highly problematic for him. An insufferable smell now emanates from him, should he delay to change his diapers. Life in the country has therefore proved more convenient, as well as a source of solitary pleasures. Now a parodic version of Thoreau at Walden, Nathan particularly enjoys swimming in a neighboring pond: "without a suit, out of sight of everyone, so that if in my wake I leave a thin, billowing cloud of urine that visibly discolors the surrounding pond waters, I'm largely unperturbed and feel nothing like the chagrin that would be sure to crush me ... in a public pool" (4). Disease has not left the mind untouched. Nathan now worries about his mental faculties and his capacities to pursue his creative work for he suffers frequent losses of memory: "the leakage I was experiencing wasn't just from my penis" (162). Past and present, fantasy and memory, reality and invention keep telescoping in his confused mind: "I had begun to live in a world full of holes" (14). The narrative's alleged flaws therefore appear as highly mimetic, just like the style, rooted so to speak, in corporeity so as to make pain palpable: "How many books can you think of, whose second paragraph discusses the details of urology? He's putting it right in front of you and insisting that you look at something that's very uncomfortable" (Rodgers 27).

What *Exit Ghost* stages, then, is above all a desperate attempt at controlling, preserving, maintaining all that may slip out in old age: life, dignity and a sense of meaning. As if he felt that "a shadow line" now separated him from the man he used to be, Nathan often refers to Joseph Conrad's eponymous volume. Partly inspired by an episode in Conrad's youth, *The Shadow Line* is a novel of initiation which the author composed in his old days and dedicated to his son, Borys, who had enrolled in the army at the age of seventeen on the eve of World War I. The story, which Conrad had originally planned to entitle "First Command," is that of a very young naval officer who proves able to overcome both the hostile forces of nature and his own vulnerabilities as he guides his first ship to its destination. "Command is a strong magic," Conrad's hero declares (65), retrospectively amazed at his own courage and resourcefulness. As for Zuckerman, he wishes to recapture the boldness and magic of youth as he heads to New York to undergo a surgery supposed to cure his incontinence, and which he hopes will allow him to start life anew (no wonder he plans to visit Ground Zero as soon as he arrives). Yet the city he rediscovers after so many years seems strangely unfamiliar, uncanny.

"Teeming, swarming city, city full of dreams/ Where specters in broad day accost the passer by!" These lines from Baudelaire's poem "The Seven Old Men" (The epigraph of Conrad's novel is itself borrowed from Baudelaire's "La Musique," a poem based on the metaphor of the sea voyage) could well apply to the ghostly city described in *Exit Ghost*. Realism verges on the eerie and the grotesque as Nathan roams the city streets, now bewildered by the trepidation and chaos of urban life, which he observes with a perplexity he humorously compares to that of Washington Irving's Rip van Winkle: "I couldn't have felt any more out of it myself, had I turned up on the corner of Sixth Avenue and West 54th with Rip's rusty gun in my hand and his ancient clothes on my back and an army of the curious crowding around to look me over, this eviscerated stranger walking in their midst, a relic of bygone days amid the noises and buildings and workers and traffic" (*Exit Ghost* 15).

What strikes Nathan most is the proliferation of cell phones, a new phenomenon to him, which inspires ironic reflections on the alienation and frantic consumption brought about by so-called communication technologies. To him, they have eradicated all meaningful forms of socialization and turned the city into a "nuthouse," peopled with absent-minded, grotesque zombies, blind and deaf to one another: "What had happened in these ten years for there suddenly to be so much to say...? For me it made the streets appear comic and the people ridiculous ... That the immense loneliness of human beings should produce this boundless longing to be heard and the accompanying disregard for being

overheard—well, having lived largely in the era of the telephone booth ... I found myself entertaining the idea for a story in which Manhattan has turned into a sinister collectivity where everyone is spying on everyone else" (64-65).

Nathan's paranoia and estrangement are somewhat reminiscent of the sense of stupor, disarray and utter dispossession experienced by Henry James's protagonist in *The American Scene* (1907) as, after an absence of twenty years, he contemplates an America radically transformed by massive immigration. How will communication be preserved, he wonders, in such a Babel of tongues and nationalities, and what is the meaning of American identity?: "He doesn't know, he can't say, before the facts and he doesn't even want to know or to say ... the great inscrutable answer to questions hangs in the vast American sky, to his imagination, as something fantastic and abracadabrant, belonging to no known language" (456). The answer inscribed on the "vast American sky" was indeed beyond imagination and language on 9/11: "like being overwhelmed by some rare astronomical event" (*Exit Ghost* 52). In *Exit Ghost*, New York City is still haunted by "the indelible memory of the doll-like people leaping from the high windows of the burning towers" (97). And, as Ellen Lévy observes, the nation as a whole seems to have crossed a "shadow line" beyond which things will never be the same (232). Like most New York intellectuals, David and Jamie Logan, for example, live in constant fear of a new catastrophe.

The tragedy, however, has given rise to a whole series of lies and manipulations. In *Exit Ghost*, physical, urban and social degradation is paralleled by the deterioration of the political scene and the ever-widening gap between politics and ethics. Nathan is outraged by the brutal propaganda of the Bush administration, and its grotesque distortion of democratic ideals. Here Zuckerman seems to echo the author himself: "This criminal administration has hijacked the event to bankrupt the country financially, to go at war needlessly. What could be more criminal than that? ... to utterly destroy whatever moral prestige America still had, it is hardly a pure country, but there were things it stood for that were pretty good and that's utterly destroyed" (Roth qtd. in Pozorski 157). Bush's reelection leaves Nathan relatively indifferent for he perceives the political debate as pure hypocrisy. Viewed through the filter of his alienation, the world is but a stage (quite significantly the title of the novel is borrowed from Shakespeare), society as a whole amounts to a dizzying "Vanity Fair:" "I felt ... that some optical tricks were being played on me, that things appeared as in the reflection of a funhouse mirror" (*Exit Ghost* 30).

The city indeed functions as a hall of mirrors and Nathan soon gets caught in that web of illusions. Within a few days, a few hours, he feels assailed by absurd preoccupations and desires. However unlikely, the dream that he might eventually be cured leads him to revise his existential stance, to renounce the asceticism and discipline he had so dearly acquired. His encounter with Amy—"a visitation so unimaginable" (18)—revives memories of his unbridled youth. As for Jamie, she arouses in him unseemly emotions: "She had ... a huge gravitational pull on the ghost of my desire" (66). From here on a large part of the irony of the novel stems from the absurd contrast between Nathan's decaying body and the vitality of the passions inhabiting him. Like the narrator of *Everyman*, or like Dencombe, the dying writer in "The Middle Years," the short story by Henry James so often referred to in *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan now dreams of an extension of life: "At such a rate a first existence was too short ... one should have a second age ... Ah for another go, ah for a better chance!" (*Figure in the Carpet* 239). This irrational dream, however, entails a comic process of regression: "Precipitously stepping into a new future, I had retreated into the past—a retrograde trajectory, not that uncommon but uncanny anyhow" (*Exit Ghost* 52). This is highlighted by the reiterated motif of ghosts and by the tight network of inversions and doubles between text and intertext.

Many references to Roth's previous novels are deliberately distorted, "desubstantialized," so to speak, as if he intended to empty them of relevance or meaning. Thus, the smooth, elegant Jamie Logan, all clad in cashmere—"she had an impeccable soft surface" (32)—is but a pale version of the fascinating Amy in *The Ghost Writer*. And Nathan's fantasies about the young woman cannot measure up to the dazzling Anne Frank fiction he once invented about Lonoff's *protégée*. Now an old lady disfigured by cancer, Amy is an ironic mirror to the narrator's decrepitude. She is haunted by memories of the deceased Lonoff, whose presence/absence permeates the novel and who now appears under the guise of a mischievous ghost, prompt to deride his former disciple's grotesque emulation of him: Nathan's professed dedication to art, on the one hand, and his infatuation with Jamie, a woman half

his age, on the other. The pair formed by Lonoff and Zuckerman in *The Ghost Writer* now finds an ironic counterpart in the relation between Nathan and Kliman, an admirer just as intrusive and grotesque as Alvin Pepler in *Zuckerman Unbound* or Jimmy Lustig in *The Counterlife* yet far more dangerous. In order to make himself a name, Kliman intends to publish a scandalous biography of Lonoff, one claiming that the key to Lonoff's life and writing ("The Figure in the Carpet," to put it in Jamesian terms) is that he committed incest with his half-sister. That would account for the writer's seclusion and for the creative block which affected him at the end of his career. Kliman claims that this "revelation" will serve to revive public interest in a writer now fallen into neglect.

Zuckerman is outraged by the young man's cynicism: "So you're going to redeem Lonoff's reputation as a writer by ruining it as a man" (*Exit Ghost* 101). He is enraged that Kliman, while trying to extort from him juicy information about Lonoff's private life, should posit himself as his spiritual son: "I'm now just a few years older than you were then ... I'm trying to do no more or less than you did" (44). Yet Kliman's bold energy, vitality, and insolence do remind Zuckerman of the transgressive young author he himself used to be: "the ruthless sense of necessity. The annihilating impulse in the face of an obstacle. Those grandstand days when you shrink about nothing and you're only right" (48). For a while Nathan believes that the intensity of his furor against Kliman (whom he also suspects of being Jamie's lover) will bring him back to life: "back in the moment, back into the turmoil of events ... Let the belligerence out!" (104). But the salutary reawakening he expects turns out to be of a different nature: "I could tell that the pad cradled in my plastic underwear ... was heavily soaked and that it was time to hurry back to the hotel to wash and change myself" (102). "'You stink', he shouted at me, 'you smell bad! Crawl into your hole and die!' ... You smell like death!" But what could a specimen like Kliman know about the smell of death? All I smelled of was urine" (104).

Clearly enough, the U.S. is "No Country for Old Men" (the phrase is borrowed from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," a poem often referred to in *Exit Ghost*; also based on the metaphor of the sea voyage, it opposes the finitude of life to the eternity of art). To Zuckerman, Kliman's stance epitomizes not only the age-old conflict between generations—"the merciless encounter between the no-longers and the not yets" as he puts it humorously—but also a deep-seated quarrel between Ancients and Moderns, between the ethic and esthetic tenets of Nathan's generation of intellectuals and those of a new public viewed as impervious to literature (*Exit Ghost* 257). While Kliman claims he has found "proofs" of his allegations about Lonoff, Zuckerman, who long perceived himself as the victim of a public unaware of the difference between reality and fiction, derides the absurdity of all biographical approaches—"dirt-seeking snooping ... the lowest of literary rackets" (102)—for they freeze textual ambiguities into grotesque analogies and amount therefore to symbolic murder ("a second death" 154). To him, "the independent reality of fiction is all there is of importance" (*The Facts* 4).

Zuckerman's indignation finds an echo in Amy's violent diatribes against the base sensationalism of what she calls cultural journalism: "tabloid gossip disguised as an interest in 'the arts.' Who is the celebrity, what is the price, what is the scandal? What transgression has the writer committed...? Without the least idea of what is innately transgressive about the literary imagination, cultural journalism is ever mindful of phony ethical issues" (*Exit Ghost* 182). In Amy's opinion a crass "political correctness" has infiltrated all intellectual spheres, contaminating even the events organized by such a respectable institution as the New York Public Library: "They had Gertrude Stein in the exhibit but not Ernest Hemingway. They had Edna St Vincent Millay but not William Carlos Williams or Wallace Stevens or Robert Lowell. Just nonsense. It started in the colleges and now it's everywhere. Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison but not Faulkner" (176). Here Roth seems to echo Harold Bloom: "The poems of our climate have been replaced by the body stockings of our culture" (*How to Read* 24). To Zuckerman and Amy, such "deadly literal mindedness" is turning America into a cultural wasteland. No wonder Amy expresses her anger in a letter which she claims was dictated to her by Lonoff's ghost, a letter bound to remain dead letter, however, for the old lady never sends it.

It now clearly appears that the ghost motif, the uncanny and the grotesque, the reiterated theme of broken communication, as well as the allegedly "unsubstantial" story line, are meant to express the terror of a world from which literature is/might be eradicated: "Reading/writing people, we are finished, we are ghosts witnessing the end of the literary era" (186). *Exit Ghost* may in fact be viewed both as an "American Jeremiad" (for references on the "American Jeremiad," see Bercovitch) and as a ghost book, a "performative" novel, so to speak, enacting through a dizzying *mise en abîme*, its own

obsolescence as cultural artifact, while expressing Roth's grim pessimism: "So it feels to me very much like a dying moment for literary culture in my own country but you can't have computers and iPods and Blackberries and blueberries and raspberries and have time to sit for two or three hours with a book" (Lawson, BBC Radio Interview).

Zuckerman eventually chooses to withdraw from the New York scene, leaving it to the Klimans of this world, whom he fears will probably choose him as their next victim: "And what would my 'incest' be? ... My great unseemly secret. Surely there was one" (*Exit Ghost* 275). At this point, however, "The Lesson of the Master" (to recall a famous story by Henry James) remains pervaded by ironic paradox. While he rages against Kliman, Zuckerman seems to have forgotten that he himself has been a biographer, at the service of those who came seeking his attention and help: Seymour Levov in *American Pastoral*, Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*. Strangely enough, *Exit Ghost* itself ends on a long biography of George Plimpton, Philip Roth's friend and mentor at the *Paris Review* (the troubling presence of this biography, which has nothing to do with the plot, has received but little critical attention at this point).

Viewed in ontological and epistemological terms, *The Shadow Line* permeating the novel in infinite refractions refers to the porous, at times indeterminate border between self and other, between reality and invention, between life and art. A border which Roth himself cheerfully crosses, whenever he pleases, although he keeps asserting its vital importance. Sometimes in rather incongruous terms: "You know, you may begin picking up strong identifying marks in the character that identify him as if it were you, but by the time you feed this material through the meat grinder, it comes out a strange hamburger, you know, which isn't you. I'm not a hamburger, as Flaubert also said (Lawson, BBC Radio Interview).

Just like the picturesque "hauntology"—a hybrid concept borrowed from Derrida and referring both to haunting and to ontology—enacted in the novel, the striking image here proposed refers to the tremendous power of incarnation (in the etymological sense of the term, from the Latin, *carnis*, which means meat or flesh) and reincarnation, which according to Roth is at the root all story-telling. However haunted by castration and defeat, writing allows the novelist access to that "Other Scene"—Psychoanalysis often refers to "The Other Scene" of the subconscious—of purely imaginary nature ("ruminant in narrative form" as Zuckerman puts it) where phantoms may be exorcised, where desire may be fulfilled, where the anguish of solitude and finitude may be subdued. From then on, time is free to flow backward, *eros* and *thanatos* are reconciled, while paradox turns into evidence. Roth sticks out his tongue at death, he opens new existential vistas for his characters through the tireless inventions of "counterlives," miraculous alternatives to the frustrations of the real. To Roth life means invention while invention generates a surplus of life. However futile, the embedded micro-stories in *Exit Ghost* authorize, through a reiterated pun on the verb "to come," a burlesque reformulation of Zuckerman's plight: "No I can't come" (*Exit Ghost* 288). The only operation liable to regenerate Nathan is that "literary surgery" (*The Counterlife* 358) which he describes as: "the effort to repossess life," "a life more highly charged and energized" (*The Facts* 7, 5).

Similarly, in *The Shadow Line* it is the writing of his logbook that allows the young captain to preserve his sanity, in the absence of wind or in the midst of storms, on a phantom ship whose crew is devoured by fever and fear. As for the novel *The Shadow Line* itself, it was a means for Conrad, then a very old man—in a letter to Sir Ralph Wedgwood, Conrad depicts himself as "aware of being crippled, of being idle, of being useless" (Berthoud 8)—to remain through imagination at the side of a beloved son whom he feared so much for and could not follow to the war (in fact, the boy did get wounded on the front). As Plato remarks, one always writes for nothing: "in water" with pen and ink, sowing words which can neither speak for themselves nor teach the truth"

(<<http://www.units.miamioh.edu/technologyandhumanities/plato.htm>>). Yet writing does permit you to keep afloat in dire circumstances. Here, one is also reminded of the French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze's view of literature as "an enterprise of health:" "Not that the writer would necessarily be in good health . . . but he possesses an irresistible and delicate health that stems from what he has seen and heard of things too big for him, too strong for him, suffocating things whose passage exhausts him, while nonetheless giving him the becoming that a dominant and substantial health would render impossible" (*Essays* 3). According to Deleuze, all writing even involves "an athleticism but far from reconciling literature with sports and turning writing into an Olympic event, this athleticism is exerci-

sed in flight and in the breaking down of the organic body" (*Essays* 2). This could be an apt explanation for Roth's vibrant tribute to his friend George Plimpton, who was not only a distinguished literary critic, but also a dedicated athlete eager to measure himself up to the best sportsmen of his time.

With all its literary allusions, *Exit Ghost* enables Roth to acknowledge his debt to his literary fathers—without any "anxiety of influence." It also makes it possible for him, an aging man with no children, to inscribe himself in a literary lineage while ensuring a kind of posterity for himself: did not Maria, Zuckerman's young pregnant wife in *The Counterlife*, often complain that her husband's book mattered more to him than their child to come? In fact, *Exit Ghost* can also be seen as a means for the writer to reflect from an ironic distanced viewpoint on his own posthumous future at a time when a publication of his own biography is under consideration: "It No Longer Feels a Great Injustice that I Have to Die," he declares in an interview in 2005 (Roth and Krasnik

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/14/fiction.philiproth>>). Thus writing allows Roth to reassert the vital bond between past, present and future, between self and other, between world and words. Like that novel which Conrad chose in fact to dedicate not only to his son Borys, but also to all the other young men then risking their lives on the front ("To Borys and all others who like himself have crossed in early youth the shadow line of their generation" [37]), *Exit Ghost* enables Roth to celebrate literature's capacity to preserve communication and to function as a bridge between generations, countries and human beings. As Saul Bellow suggested in "Distractions of a Fiction Writer," "chances are what [the writer] is trying to throw a bridge from this same place, from a room in Chicago to, let us say, Ahab, to Cervantes, to Shakespeare, to the Kings of the Old Chronicles, to Genesis. For he says: 'Aren't we still part of the same humanity, children of Adam?'" (236).

However, as Derrida observes, writing (*l'écriture*) at once "originally hermetic and secondary" (82)—is only a simulacrum or substitute, it only proposes a trace of what has been; the immediacy of living speech is lost, as well as the full sense of one's presence to oneself. Indissociable from textuality, spectrality can be viewed as a metaphor for the essential negativity at the heart of language: "Death strolls between letters" declares Derrida (108). Therefore, all transcriptions are but "shadow lines" that partake of the spectral. They imply an erasure of being, a word which Maurice Blanchot defines as "the word which language shelters by hiding it or causes to appear when language itself disappears within the silent void of the work" (22). The same points were made by Kafka, an author so dear to Roth, in a letter to Milena dated 1922: "writing is an intercourse with ghosts, not only with the ghost of the receiver, but with one's own which emerges between the lines of the letter being written ... Written kisses never reach their destination, but are drunk en route by these ghosts" (*Letters to Milena* 223). Roth at times reaches the same conclusion: "What's on the page is like a code for something missing" (*The Facts* 162). All the more so, since identity and meaning may eventually dissolve in the crazy proliferation of doubles and mirrors: "You've written metamorphoses of yourself so many times you no longer have any idea what *you* are or ever were. By now what you are is a walking text," Zuckerman declares in *The Facts* (162). The enterprise is nevertheless worthwhile: "Certainly a life of writing books is a trying adventure in which you cannot find out who you *are* unless you lose your way" (*The Counterlife* 135). Therefore, written lines are both "lines of flight" (Deleuze, *A Thousand* 9) and lifelines, life-giving lines. Moreover, the ghosts of fiction are more likely than servile transcriptions of the real to highlight the strangeness of our quotidian, to capture the essence of things and beings while laying bare their comic absurdities. Hence the vibrant homage paid to Zuckerman by one of his admirers: "Thank you ... For everything. The humor. The compassion. The understanding of our deepest drives. For all you have reminded us about the human comedy" (*Zuckerman Unbound* 192).

Exit Zuckerman, alas, although he eventually reasserts his desire to return to his "House of Fiction"—a term borrowed from Henry James's Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (7)—in The Berkshires, a haunted house whose windows nevertheless remain widely open onto the world. As for Roth himself, he has lately announced his intention to retire. Ghosts, however, will forever endure. Roth's work has haunted and delighted generations of readers, providing them and himself with indispensable, revitalizing "counterlives."

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