

Gifts reserved for age: a Lacanian study of comedy in Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*

James Milton Mellard

Northern Illinois University, 8615, Turning Leaf, Boerne, Texas, 78015-6521, USA. E-mail: jsmellard@aol.com

ABSTRACT. The critical problem surrounding Philip Roth's recent *Exit Ghost* (2007), the ninth and projected by the author as the final Zuckerman novel, is how it can function as comedy when one major character is dying of brain cancer and its protagonist is seventy-one years old, beginning to receive an elderly male's gifts reserved for age – prostate cancer, prostate surgery, impotence, and incontinence – and, despite all, falls in love with a thirty-year-old married woman. A sequel to *The Ghost Writer* (1979), the first Zuckerman novel, whose character relations it repeats, *Exit Ghost* has comparatively less humor than its predecessor but there is humor enough. Moreover, and more important, it fits the genre of comedy because of the functions it gives to the classically traditional motifs of the phallus, castration, age versus youth, *Eros* and *Thanatos*, and the like. It is from a Lacanian critical perspective that it can be shown how the novel moves toward comedy's conventional happy ending because of the duality of meanings attached to the matter of castration, the way in which Roth/Zuckerman displaces the object of desire from the young woman and finds it – enjoyment, *jouissance* – in the very process of writing itself.

Key words: comedy, phallus, castration, Lacanian theory.

RESUMO. Dons reservados para a idade madura: um estudo lacaniano sobre a comédia em *O fantasma sai de cena* (2007), de Philip Roth. O grande problema para a crítica de *O fantasma sai de cena*, até agora o penúltimo romance de Philip Roth, concebido como o último envolvendo Nathan Zuckerman, é classificá-lo como comédia, e um de seus mais importantes personagens está morrendo de câncer no cérebro e o protagonista tem 71 anos e já está recebendo os dons reservados para a idade madura masculina, ou seja, câncer de próstata, cirurgia prostática, impotência, incontinência urinária e, apesar de tudo, apaixona-se por uma mulher casada, de 30 anos. Sendo uma continuação da série iniciada por *The Ghost Writer* (1979), o primeiro romance em que aparece o personagem Zuckerman, cujas relações com os demais personagens se repetem, *O fantasma sai de cena* contém menos humor do que os outros romances, embora o tenha em dose suficiente. Mais importante ainda, o romance enquadra-se no gênero da comédia pelas funções proporcionadas pelos clássicos motivos tradicionais do falo, da castração, da idade avançada versus juventude, de *Eros* e *Thanatos* e outros que tais. A partir da perspectiva crítica lacaniana, pode-se perceber como o romance evolui para o final feliz convencional da comédia pela dualidade de significados vinculados à castração, ou seja, a maneira pela qual Roth/Zuckerman desloca o objeto de desejo da jovem e o (prazer, *jouissance*) encontra no próprio processo da escrita.

Palavras-chave: comédia, falo, castração, teoria lacaniana.

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age

To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort (ELIOT, 1971, p. 54).

The sphere of comedy is created by the presence at its center of a hidden signifier [...] , namely, the phallus. Who cares that it is subsequently whisked away? (LACAN, 1992, p. 314).

Castration [...] is what introduces a gap into the very logic and dynamics of (human) enjoyment, a gap on account of which enjoyment never directly coincides with itself or with ourselves as its bearers, but inevitably raises the question of how we relate to our own enjoyment – (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 192).

Introduction

Philip Roth's recent *Exit Ghost* seems symptomatic of our current historical moment.

Published in 2007, it appeared not only at a time when its author, seventy-five in 2008 and still very active literarily, has advanced into an era of seniority

marked by unprecedented sexual expectations but also at one when the novel itself might speak to, or for, an entire generation. If we trust current advertising, we must believe that the direst phobias of the now regnant baby boomers are urinary control and sexual dysfunction. By foregrounding so prominently one man's (dual) phallic functions, Roth seems precisely to situate *Exit Ghost* in the age of Viagra and Flomax, Detrol and Depends. In the good old 1950s and for some decades thereafter, we were persuaded by commerce that the primary obstacles afflicting male and female sexual relations were bad breath and underarm odor. But in our present moment, which is the orientation Roth supplies in the title of the novel's chapter 1, the obstacles seem more, shall we say, primal, and to memorialize that paradoxical "conjunction of the high and the low" about which Hegel waxes philosophical, nature's combining in the one appendage both regeneration and excretion, making "the organ of highest fulfilment" also "the organ of urination" (apud ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 183). In Roth's novel, the explicit problem driving the reclusive Nathan Zuckerman to leave his pastoral retreat in western Massachusetts involves the contradictory and conflicting ones addressed by Detrol and Flomax, the TV ads for the one showing active folks bolting for the nearest restroom, those for the latter displaying happily active males leaving those same facilities with satisfied smiles of relief on their faces. Because of prostate surgery, Nathan has won the daily double of second millennium masculine fears: he becomes both impotent and incontinent. But as this, his presumably final statement, testifies, this is no country for old men. None is very content (nor, one is certain, has any ever been) to allow time to have its way.

Not entirely a laughing matter, Nathan's problem nonetheless has a traditional link to the function of comedy, for comedy, in the odd, embarrassing, psychoanalytic matter of the phallus and castration, addresses that problem and allows us to call Roth's novel comedy, and not tragedy, even when to many of the reviewers there has seemed not all that much humor in it. But neither genre depends on humor as such. Rather, according to Alenka Zupancic, a Lacanian theorist who has written a major study of comedy, one difference between comedy and tragedy is that tragedy incorporates a phallic object into a subjective destiny by making a person who or what he or she is. Comedy does not. This difference between the genres may be observed in how Roth uses Nathan's

phallic wound versus how Ernest Hemingway uses that of Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*. Nathan's resulted from a potentially life-saving surgery, and he speaks about it in his narration candidly and ironically. The wound inflicted upon Jake Barnes was one suffered honorably in warfare, but in Hemingway's narration it is neither named explicitly nor spoken of directly at all. Nonetheless, it fixes a subject's destiny. Jake Barnes is who he is because of it. While Hemingway's novel is often very funny (though not structurally a comedy), its humor does not come from talk of Jake's thing. But while Roth's would seem to some marked by comparatively less humor, much of it does indeed come from talk of Nathan's, often in what we might call the inflated description of the more sensitive matters associated with the male organ. It is the incontinence in particular that bears out Zupancic's remark:

[...] it is the destiny of the phallus in comedy that it can appear only as a comic object, that is to say, [as] an object that materializes in itself the very contradictions of the Symbolic [order] that produces it (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 216).

Indeed, one of the more jocose passages of Roth's prose occurs in the description of how Nathan, like some local Loch Ness monster, swims in his lake, trailing a phosphorescent tail:

I swim there without a suit, out of sight of everyone, so that if in my wake I leave a thin, billowing cloud of urine that visibly discolours the surrounding pond waters, I'm largely unperturbed and feel nothing like the chagrin that would be sure to crush me should my bladder involuntarily begin emptying itself while I was swimming in a public pool (ROTH, 2007, p. 4).

Thus, though there is humor in *Exit Ghost*, and I will provide other instances later, there is not such a preponderance of it here as in some of Roth's previous novels, but the novel still functions, and functions exceedingly well, as comedy for reasons that need have little to do with humor as such and because Nathan's phallic wound never becomes his destiny as a subject.

Comedy and the phallus

[T]he significance of the phallus and the significance of comedy revolve around the same thing: the missing link between life and the signifier (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 215).

In an occasional romantic comedy, says Northrop Frye, we find a theme "of the rejuvenation of the senex", a theme "based on the folklore motif of the healing of the impotent king"

(FRYE, 1957, p. 183). This theme is precisely the one underlying *Exit Ghost*. The novel begins with Nathan's decision to return to ordinary life. The essence of comedy, and of the comic plot, is immersion in life, real life, the present moment. "Comic experience", as Zupancic suggests, "is strictly bound up with the present" (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 177). But, says Nathan, "I had ceased to inhabit not just the great world but the present moment". Rather, he divulges at the outset, "The impulse to be in it and of it I had long since killed" (ROTH, 2007, p. 1). Since the comic immersion in life is signified by the phallus, it is a function of the phallus that prompts Nathan to begin what turns out to be his "knightly quest" (ROTH, 2007, p. 82), his big adventure in the Big Apple. Up to this moment, it was to escape a terrorist's anti-Semitic death-threat (ROTH, 2007) and to avoid the threat of humiliation caused by having to wear his version of Depends –plastic underwear and absorbent pads – that Nathan had lived alone in the Berkshires for the eleven years between 1993 and 2004. It was for repair of a leaky urinary apparatus that caused him, he reports, to drive

[...] the hundred and thirty miles south to Manhattan to see a urologist at Mount Sinai Hospital who specialized in performing a procedure to help the tens of thousands of men like me left incontinent by prostate surgery (ROTH, 2007, p. 1-2).

Thus, it is during just over a week in October and November, 2004, on either side of the reelection of George W. Bush to the presidency, that Nathan goes down to New York for his procedure, arranges there with an attractive young couple to trade living quarters for a year, meets a friend of theirs who is writing a biography of an author young Nathan had idolized back in the 1950s, encounters an old acquaintance from that era romantically linked with that author, himself becomes enthralled with the wife in that young couple, and ends by abandoning his surgical cure, rejecting the new digs he had agreed with the couple to take on, and heading with all due speed back to his old way of life in the pastoral hills of western Massachusetts. For a guy his age, it's a hectic week or so. But does he gain anything for his trouble?

While the odds of improving the incontinence are not that great, Nathan admits, they are much worse for correcting the other problem, the one more traditionally attached, shall we say, to the problem of romance in comedy. For this

[...] other hazard of radical prostatectomy that I, like tens of thousands of others, had not been lucky enough to escape – nerve damage resulting in impotence (ROTH, 2007, p. 2).

nothing surgically can be done. Nonetheless, in the odd way of comedy, though Nathan goes down to Manhattan to get the rectifiable problem fixed, it is, in what comprises the real plot of the comedy, a fix (of a literary sort) only for the irreparable other problem that he will realize. In *Exit Ghost*, it is "how" to fix it that becomes the technical problem. Roth will, that is, subject an unsatisfactory present situation to a potential transformation to test whether Nathan's life of self-imposed isolation in the Berkshires might after all be sufficient. Until entering the present moment, he does indeed imagine it is enough. Very Thoreauvian, with modern conveniences, his is not a bad life to have. I listen to music, he tells us. I hike in the woods. In warm weather, he says, I swim in my pond, whose temperature, even in summer, never gets much above seventy degrees. Occasionally, he says, he drives down to the nearby college town called Athena for supplies, to eat in a restaurant, to make a few purchases, or perhaps to visit the college library. In summers, he frequently drives over to Tanglewood, not far away, to attend concerts. I don't give readings, he says, or lectures or teach at a college or appear on TV. When my books are published, I keep to myself. I write every day of the week – otherwise I'm silent. Though it is impossible for him to stop the urinary flow or to resurrect that organ of enjoyment and insemination, he does manage to keep stiff an upper lip. What, he asks, rhetorically, "does it matter any longer if I'm incontinent and impotent?" (ROTH, 2007, p. 5).

The incontinence, as Zuckerman admits, does in fact bother him enough to avail himself of the best in current medical treatment. But, as far as his story goes, it is a promise, one he makes to his best friend in the Berkshires, that in effect forces him to do something about it. The aggressively importunate Larry Hollis, focused on organizing the lives of those around him right up till he dies, insists, "All I'm pushing on you is a little normality. This is too separate an existence for any human being", he admonishes (ROTH, 2007, p. 9). Long after Nathan's prostate cancer, Larry himself is diagnosed with cancer of some sort (not named), and commits suicide, but not before leaving Nathan a message he receives after Hollis is dead. You must promise me, he enjoins Nathan, that you will not go on living as you were when I found you. Thus, for this or an unspoken, perhaps unconscious reason of his own,

Nathan heads off to Manhattan to see a doctor. While the doctor makes no absolute promises of any cure at all, Nathan admits nonetheless it is only with some effort that he can restrain [his] sense of rejuvenation, a sense of hope, of possibilities, that prompts him to imagine himself “swimming in the [Athena College] pool at the end of the day, carefree and without fear of embarrassment”. Still, he suspects, “It was ludicrous to feel so triumphant” (ROTH, 2007, p. 16).

Indeed, as if to remind him just how ludicrous the sense of rejuvenation, in a sort of foreshadowing of his own future or as a memento mori as insistently symbolic as Yorick’s skull, a ghostly figure from his youth appears to him in the luncheonette of the medical building even before Nathan has the first treatment. There, Nathan sees a woman whom he had known for a brief time when he was just twenty-three. The woman’s head, recently shaved and now covered with a light fuzz, exhibits a sinuous surgical scar [that] cut a serpentine line across her skull, a raw, well-defined scar that curved from behind her ear up to the edge of her brow. More from her voice, which Nathan overhears, than from her appearance, which of course had changed much in nearly fifty years, he recognizes the woman as Amy Bellette, who in 1956 was just twenty-seven when he first met her in the story told in *The Ghost Writer*. But rejecting the opportunity of reintroducing himself to Amy, now seventy-five and obviously suffering from cancer and its treatment, Nathan leaves “the luncheonette and the astonishing reappearance and pathetic reconstitution” of a woman “whose existence – so rich with promise and expectation when I first encountered her – had obviously gone very wrong” (ROTH, 2007, p. 18). But the shadow she casts follows him. The next morning, after his quick, simple, magical, fifteen-minute surgical procedure, Nathan once again imagines himself swimming in the college pool, “leaving no stream of urine in [his] wake”, entering a “life [that] seemed limitless again”, himself “a man no longer powerless over something so elementary as managing to piss in a pot”, a man in possession of “control over [his] bladder”, a man who could “be like everyone else” – “As though the ever-hovering shadow of humiliation isn’t, in fact, what *binds* one to everyone else” (ROTH, 2007, p. 19). Thus, as he will learn (ROTH, 2007, p. 62-63), that initial surgical procedure fails, the incontinence remains, and though he may schedule a second or even a third if necessary, the humiliation, the tie that most

insistently binds him to the humanity his former friend Amy Bellette represents, returns, leaving him “drained of pride and feeling all the limitations of [his] strength, a man at the point where he fails whether he resists or acquiesces” (ROTH, 2007, p. 63).

At some level, because it is about the phallus, desire, and the fulfillment of desire, comedy is also always about castration. It is, ultimately, the phallus and castration, in all their psychoanalytic complexity, that give thematic significance to the narrative and to character relations found in the structure of comedy. In terms of the phallus, just about any story generated by the relations among characters as determined by an object (much like the cinematic notion that Alfred Hitchcock dubbed the MacGuffin) always has to do with who has it, who wants it, and, where a human object of desire is involved, who “is” it. In terms of castration, that story involves how those who have it represent obstacles to those who want it. Since the meaning of the phallus, and thus of castration, is social and hence has a variable value, it is in the domain of the social that it affects comedy and its structure. On the structure of comedy, Northrop Frye makes several points that suggest how the phallus and castration work in it. In character relations, comedy’s most conventional feature is that a young man wants a young woman, who of course would be it, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, who seems to have it, and that near the end [...] some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will, that is, to take it from the opposition. Thus, as Frye says, since the obstacles are typically paternal, the comic resolution ordinarily involves a representative of the younger generation’s overcoming the opposition provided by representatives of the older generation. Since the male point of view tends to dominate plots of any sort, comic plots thus typically pit a son against a father, or, as Frye puts it, they express “a clash between a son’s and a father’s will” (FRYE, 1957, p. 164). But surrogates – representatives – of these will also work. Thus, if the obstacle to the comic hero’s desire is not the father, then usually it will turn out to be some representative, someone who partakes of the father’s closer relation to established society. In comedy, it often turns out that the hero’s antagonist is “a rival with less youth and more money” (FRYE, 1957, p. 164-165) or, if not money, some coin of the realm, such as success or power, that means much the same thing. Thus, in the structure of comedy, in terms of the phallus, and of castration, it is

ordinarily the case that it will be the father or his surrogate who has the phallus, the young man who wants it, and the young woman who is – stands in for – it. The permutations of this comic structure, while not without limit, are manifold.

How are the permutations worked out in *The Ghost Writer* and *Exit Ghost*? In these novels, whose structures of character relations and desires somewhat repeat each other, Roth gives unusual (but, in terms of comic structures, nonetheless acceptable) twists to his plots. Essentially, and simply enough, he turns the most typical convention – the one where the young man wants and gets the girl – on its head. In *The Ghost Writer*, the hero who gets the girl (Amy Bellette) is the old man (the writer Manny Lonoff), and the young man (Nathan) who at the outset flirts with wanting the same girl really wants something else (displaced into his fantasy creation of Anne Frank) that the old man has – his success as a fiction writer. Moreover, the old man's wife (Hope), who would be expected to be hurt by her husband's taking up with the young woman, likewise prefers something else – her freedom from a man chained to his writing desk. In such twists of plot, Roth must attend to two major conventional issues: incest and social values. He addresses the incest head on, for from the outset he makes Nathan wonder about the relation of Lonoff to Amy:

“So the girl isn't his daughter”, as he had first thought, but, well, “Who is she then, being served snacks by his wife on the floor of his study? His concubine?” (ROTH, 2007, p. 21).

While concubine is not far from the appropriate word, the inappropriate generational relation is modified, though the incest does not quite go away, by the fact that Amy is somewhat older than her appearance suggests, and by the further fact that it seems to be the young woman herself – “I love you so, Dad-da. There's no one else like you” (ROTH, 2007, p. 118) – who persists so strongly in demanding the sexual relation.

The threat of age inappropriateness itself is ameliorated by an inversion of social values. Thus, in the novel, the humor – ironic, of course – comes from the inversion of the standard values to ones in which the older man and the young woman whose unconventional erotic desires are fulfilled are regarded as the losers, and the two others who conventionally would be the losers are declared by the plot to be the winners. We all know, as Frye says, that “comedy usually moves toward a happy ending” (FRYE, 1957, p. 167), but a writer must always

define in terms of a specific plot what constitutes such an ending. In *The Ghost Writer*, ultimately, Roth resolves the comic plot in a contest not of youth versus age but of devotion to art versus a devotion to erotic attachment. Nothing is necessarily wrong in either art or the erotic. Emphasis is everything. Thus Hope gladly leaves Lonoff to Amy Bellette because he has turned a respected career as a short-story writer into a monomaniacal religion of art. Amy is happy enough because, as it were, she as belle lettres weds herself to an accomplished (if a bit aged) practitioner. Though at first entertaining romantic thoughts about Amy, Nathan is more interested in the creative fantasy of Anne Frank into which he converts Amy than he is in Amy herself. Thus, he too is happy enough with his outcome, for he seems more concerned about the creative urge expressed in art than about the *procreative* one demanded by life itself. In the end, as is virtually commanded by any comic ending, in a feature seen frequently in the pairing off of principal characters in a dance or a wedding, all the players in *The Ghost Writer* seem to get what or whom they want.

Comedy's subjects

The presiding genius of comedy is Eros, and Eros has to adapt himself to the moral facts of society (FRYE, 1957, p. 181).

In *Exit Ghost*, Roth repeats the same pattern in the romantic love triangle he had used in *The Ghost Writer*. The central roles include young man, old man, and young woman, but Roth again inverts romantic comedy's conventional relations, with the old man, rather than the youth, cast in the role of hero in *Exit Ghost*. In this novel, Lonoff is long dead (having died of leukemia in 1961), Nathan and Amy Bellette have both grown old, and each has become afflicted by other types of cancer and attendant maladies. In his experiments with the age-inappropriate romantic relation, Roth here puts Nathan into Lonoff's place as old man at one point of a romantic triangle fleshed out in the other two points by a young woman and a young man. Whereas in 1956 merely an aspirant writer, Nathan himself is now the successful, socially esteemed elderly writer whose it is that very success. But in contrast to the earlier novel, where he ceded his interest in the young woman (the living Amy as opposed to the imaginary Anne), here in *Exit Ghost* Nathan pursues, or appears to pursue, an object of romantic interest found in another beautiful young woman. While this object is neither Amy Bellette nor the fantasized Anne Frank, Roth repeats the dual role Amy supports in the text of *The Ghost Writer* by,

in effect, giving Amy another incarnation in Jamie, as suggested by the obvious rhyme in the given names (and the potential for love – *aime* – in their French connections). Like the young Amy, Jamie Logan is stunning and talented. She is a seductive thirty-year-old who is, as Nathan had been in 1956, an aspirant writer, one who (Nathan at least imagines) desires the success of the older writer (himself) so much that she is willing to become romantically involved with him. As what Greek New Comedy calls the *senex* and raising here, as in *The Ghost Writer*, all those flags signaling potential, at least symbolic, incest, Nathan it is who in Lonoff's place now competes with a young man for the sexual favors of the young woman. That young man, Richard Kliman, also desires to be a writer. Kliman's aim is to write a biography not of Nathan (who, as Roth's alter ego, surely would be appropriate as such a subject) but of Lonoff. For Nathan, Kliman's aim, which is to focus on exposing the writer's scandalous past (one that also focuses on an incestuous relation, this one of Lonoff with a half-sister), provides almost as strong a motivation for the romantic competition between the two as does the desire Nathan assumes they share for the affections of the same young woman.

In the conventional comedic conflict of youth versus age, Nathan repeats Lonoff's role and Kliman repeats Nathan's. The "generational dispute" Kliman himself makes overt: "Look, old men hate young men. That goes without saying" (ROTH, 2007, p. 50). Indeed, in this dispute of fathers and sons, Nathan adverts to the apparent relation when, during a public discussion with Kliman, Nathan tells us,

People in the coffee shop might easily have thought Kliman was my son from the way I let him go on in his self-delighted and domineering way, and also because, at strategic moments, he reached out to touch me [...] in order to drive home his point (ROTH, 2007, p. 261).

Yet, more important, Roth makes it plain that, figuratively, Kliman *is* the young Nathan of *The Ghost Writer*. The connection begins with the very first conversation, by phone, the two have with each other. That there will be conflict, comedy's contest of age and youth, Nathan realizes immediately: "Without its ever turning outright belligerent, the unfaltering forward march of [Kliman's] voice made clear he was prepared to do battle" (ROTH, 2007, p. 48). On several grounds, conflict between Nathan and Kliman is there from the start – over Kliman's plan to write about Lonoff, to mine Amy Bellette's dying brain for information, and to get from her the

manuscript she holds that Lonoff left with her at his death. But there is a kinship Nathan also recognizes at once. It was, unexpectedly, a passing rendition of me at about that stage, Nathan tells us. It is as though Kliman were mimicking (or, as now seemed more to the point, deliberately mocking) my mode of forging ahead when *I* started out. All Nathan's youthful features are exhibited by the young man. There it was: the tactless severity of vital male youth, not a single doubt about his coherence, blind with self-confidence and the virtue of knowing what matters most. But there is more:

The ruthless sense of necessity. The annihilating impulse in the face of an obstacle. Those grand grandstand days when you shrink from nothing and you're only right. Everything is a target; you're on the attack; and you, and you alone, are right (ROTH, 2007, p. 48).

But if seeing himself in this young man, who to Nathan also seems supremely obnoxious, is bad enough, worse it is to Nathan to find that this surrogate son competes with him for one and the same sexual object. That object, Jamie Logan, is married now to another young man, but in college Kliman had been a boyfriend of hers – "Another reason I couldn't bear him", he says. "The reason" (ROTH, 2007, p. 51). Whenever Nathan imagines the relationship between Kliman and Jamie, he feels nothing but the jealousy of a lover. "I preferred not to think too graphically", he says, to think

[...] about why she was arguing the cause of the [...] man who had been a boyfriend at college and with whom (I could imagine all too easily) the link remained sexual even after her marriage to devoted Billy (ROTH, 2007, p. 108).

When he does think graphically, however, when, that is, he writes of Kliman and Jamie in one of his little scenes, he imagines just how it is that Kliman (one of the not-yets) has it, the big dick, the phallic signifier of precisely those its that as one of the no-longers Nathan inevitably imagines himself lacking: She says, Richard, I'm married. He retorts,

I know that. Billy's the guy to marry and I'm the guy to fuck. You tell me why all the time. 'It's so thick. The base is so thick. The head is so beautiful. This is just the kind I like' (ROTH, 2007, p. 257).

Whatever in fact Kliman has, Nathan knows he himself does not have it. In mating competition with Kliman, "a big, virile, handsome boy" (ROTH, 2007, p. 165), Nathan sees himself only as

[...] a man bearing between his legs a spigot of wrinkled flesh where once he'd had the fully functioning sexual organ, complete with bladder sphincter control, of a robust adult male (ROTH, 2007, p. 109).

What once upon a time had been a

[...] rigid instrument of procreation was now like the end of a pipe you see sticking out of a field somewhere, a meaningless piece of pipe that spurts and gushes intermittently, spitting forth water to no end, until a day arrives when somebody remembers to give the valve the extra turn that shuts the damn sluice down (ROTH, 2007, p. 109-110).

It is with such an instrument, he imagines, that he must do battle to win the girl.

In art, as in advertising, even more frequently than it is a bottle of Coke, it is the beautiful young woman who is it, is that it which represents the object of desire, the signifier of life, potency, vitality. That it is, of course, the phallus – a term used much only in psychoanalysis (or is it, rather, only in psychoanalytic literary criticism?). In *Exit Ghost*, Roth makes it absolutely clear that Jamie Logan represents that object, that signifier for Nathan Zuckerman. From the first moment he sees her, Nathan records upon himself the seismic impact of her being. Despite her keeping herself on the thin side, he says, Her sensual presence was strong. Indeed, since that presence, as so often it is with the beautiful woman, seems to emanate from her breasts, Nathan thinks it is perhaps because she is thin – clearly, her breasts weren't those of an undernourished woman – that she projects such a powerful sensual presence. But her appeal lies in yet more – a low-cut, lacy silk blouse that resembled a little lingerie top – that suggests a direct erotic appeal, one, it seems, of the bedroom itself. In fact, he realizes, upon looking again, that [it] was a little lingerie top. Moreover, associated with the sensual power are both the attraction of wealth lying in a sweater she wears that “could easily have cost a thousand bucks” and the erotic attraction of the Japanese geisha – she, “in enticing repose, as though she were wearing a kimono” (ROTH, 2007, p. 35) – found in the languid way she wears the sweater. Clearly, for Nathan, he of the leaky bladder and the flaccid penis, Jamie Logan is the signifier, the phallus, representing the power of sexual desire, the possibility of erotic fulfillment. Thus, speaking to her husband, Billy Davidoff, Nathan realizes he really is addressing her, a goddess, a force of nature that moves soul and body. She represents, he imagines,

[...] a motive hidden even from myself when I began, out of a yearning whose might I would have hoped had all but withered away. Whatever the force prying me back open at seventy-one – whatever the force that had sent me down to New York to the urologist in the first place – was quickly regathering its strength in the presence of Jamie Logan wearing her wide-necked thousand-buck cardigan sweater hanging loose over a low-cut camisole (ROTH, 2007, p. 36-37).

Thus it is that Jamie Logan seems to Nathan, as the Lacanians say, the object a, the thing more himself than himself, a thing (phallic) represented by a “woman [who] was in me before she even appeared” (ROTH, 2007, p. 66). Seemingly playing “a tauntingly aloof temptress” (ROTH, 2007, p. 38), in a repetition of the role of the femme fatale played by Amy Bellette in *The Ghost Writer*, Jamie Logan, as this thing, brings Nathan back to life, to sexual desire, after his prostate surgery and the impotence and the incontinence accompanying it. “I [had] set out to minimize the loss by struggling to pretend that desire had naturally abated”, he admits,

[...] until I came in contact for barely an hour with a beautiful, privileged, intelligent, self-possessed, languid-looking thirty-year-old made enticingly vulnerable by her fears [of terrorism] and I experienced the bitter helplessness of a taunted old man dying to be whole again (ROTH, 2007, p. 67).

Whereas once, only a matter of days ago, Nathan was (he thought) perfectly happy to live a life unmarked by “the drama of self-discovery”, content to think of “regeneration” as nothing more than “soft-headed fantasy” (ROTH, 2007, p. 42), Jamie Logan precipitates him into a “new future” (ROTH, 2007, p. 52), catapulting him, in the fashion Zupancic suggests almost always happens in comedy, into the present,

[...] back into a world of ambitious literary youth that was of no interest to me but opening myself to the irritants, stimulants, temptations, and dangers of the present moment” (ROTH, 2007, p. 53).

The preposterous was seeping in fast from every quarter, and my heart pounded away with lunatic eagerness, as if the medical procedure to remedy incontinence had something to do with reversing impotence, which of course it did not – as though, however sexually disabled, however sexually unpracticed I was after eleven years away, the drive excited by meeting Jamie had madly reasserted itself as the animating force. As though in the presence of this young woman there was hope (ROTH, 2007, p. 52-53).

To be sure, he knows that on the campus of Athena College, in “the tranquil Berkshires” (ROTH, 2007, p. 66), he did in fact notice the attractive young women, and noticed them even more in the City, “however much I wanted not to be aroused by the very desires actively quelled through living in seclusion across the road from a nature preserve” (ROTH, 2007, p. 65). Yet, now, having met her for only just more than moments, it was noticing Jamie Logan that bewildered me most. Having agreed with Jamie and her husband to trade residences for a year, he to live in Manhattan, they to live in the Berkshires, he now nurtures a fantasy that she might leave Billy in the city and live instead in pastoral seclusion with Nathan at his place. He finds himself, he realizes, “thinking how pleasant it would be if [...] Jamie escaped her dread of terrorism by coming back to the tranquil Berkshires with me” (ROTH, 2007, p. 66). As Hemingway’s Jake Barnes says to Lady Brett Ashley, when she opines that the two of them “could have had such a damned good time together”, “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” (HEMINGWAY, 1954, p. 247).

Castration and happy endings

Comedy usually moves toward a happy ending, and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is ‘this should be’, which sounds like a moral judgement. So it is, except that it is not moral... but social (FRYE, 1957, p. 167).

So how does a man such as Nathan Zuckerman, far too old for a socially approved romance with a woman of thirty, conjure a happy ending for his own story? In our Lacanian, psychoanalytic approach, the answer lies in the duality of the meanings attached to castration itself. “The usual misunderstanding generated by the notion of castration,” Zupancic (2008, p. 192) tells us, “is that we automatically see in it only an operator of removing, of taking away”, as, in short, “an operator of lack”. It is what Zupancic calls “the Lacanian revolution” in our view of castration that we come to understand the function’s duality, its paradoxical conjoining of no and yes. Lacan proposes that castration occurs, as Zupancic (2008, p. 192) says, in the

[...] structural coincidence of a lack and a surplus, a coincidence between ‘no more enjoyment’ and ‘more enjoyment’, a coincidence [...] elegantly expressed in the French *plus-de-jouir*, which can have both meanings.

Thus, the mere fact, as in the case of one such as Nathan Zuckerman, “that the body is separated from its own enjoyment does not imply simply a

painful loss or deprivation” (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 192). It means, rather, that enjoyment may, and always does, appear somewhere else, for it does not go away. Because of the psychological function of castration, desire and enjoyment are made autonomous. They are mobile, separable, detachable from the genital organs, from any organ in particular, except, we may say, from the brain. Thus, in summation, Zupancic writes, “Castration is what gives enjoyment its relative autonomy, what accounts for its possible objectification (enjoyment as object) and for its possible detachability” (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 192).

Because of the objectification, detachability, and mobility of enjoyment, which, psychoanalytically, is always presumed to be sexual at its basis, enjoyment may move from what seems the normal, genital, order to another part of the body or to another activity entirely. Indeed, says Zupancic (2008, p. 194), in how we experience enjoyment, the “human norm is a fundamental dislocation”. But, since no human subject ever really has *it*, that is, the phallus, which is strictly a signifier of the ultimacy humans desire, the drama of having, wanting, and being takes place in an imaginary register. There, all Nathan’s remarks about having lost it due to the effects of his surgery all those years ago are essentially moot in relation to the significance of the phallus and castration (as is, in that little scene quoted above, Kliman’s bragging to Jamie about having it). Moot, but not meaningless. They are full of meaning because they suggest where desire, and enjoyment, have gone. Nathan’s loss of the biological, physiological function of the penis merely foregrounds the function in the symbolic register of desire and its fulfillment somewhere else. As, perhaps, Nathan learned or merely had confirmed for himself nearly a half century before as “nothing less than E. I. Lonoff’s spiritual son” (ROTH, 1995, p. 9), he displaces the fulfillment of his desire into *writing*. Writing is his life, his life is writing. I am tempted, he had said before the trip to New York, “by the thought of not publishing at all – isn’t the work all I need, the work and the working?” (ROTH, 1995, p. 5). Inevitably, however – and his question about work-as-all is the fly-in-the-ointment – he must express in that fetishised activity the duality of castration. Indeed, this duality may be the truth – “the not-so that reveals the so” (ROTH, 1995, p. 120) – that Nathan associates with “the transforming exigencies of prose fiction”. Though to this he appends the claim that fiction’s exigencies “allow for no sweet dreams” (ROTH, 1995, p. 43), they of course do, but not sweet ones alone, and the

evidence of the predictable duality we will find in those little scenes so insistently eroticized.

In those scenes, on a small scale, and apart from whatever readers might assume about the very novel they hold in their hands, Nathan creates some of the freshest, wittiest, most amusing moments in *Exit Ghost*. Essentially, they resist quotation or paraphrase because they depend so entirely on context and sequence – as the saying goes, you had to be there. As in a play, they have to be heard. Still, they work, and work effectively, precisely because they express castration, its typical contradictions. Mostly between Nathan and Jamie (there is one – (ROTH, 2007, p. 257-60) – devoted to her and Kliman), there are five of these – comprising about one quarter of the book (about 75 of its 292 pages) – that Nathan sets off as if they were pieces of a dramatic script. Marked by sexual flirtation, verbal byplay, literary allusiveness, stylistic sophistication (look for the “drama of the triplets” (ROTH, 2007, p. 226) they claim to be in imitation of Joseph Conrad), the scenes identify all speakers simply as He or She. Indeed, that device is part of the literariness. As Nathan writes, the scenes might belong to He and She. This would be “a play of desire and temptation and flirtation and agony”, for Nathan, the agony in particular, and – he *claims* – thus would be for him “an improvisation best aborted and left to die” (ROTH, 2007, p. 146). But, given the way castration functions, that claim clearly is a *méconnaissance*, an unconscious misprision of the hold that even pain may have upon one’s desire and enjoyment. Indeed, it belongs to the very pleasure of the literariness, and the satisfaction it gives. Of that, there is more. Though Nathan informs readers of all this in the same (italicized) authorial text (one of the sort made *de rigueur* for later dramatists by George Bernard Shaw in the quasi novelization of his plays), it is, however, from Chekhov, not Conrad, that Nathan gets his title and focus. Explaining that Chekhov once published a story called He and She, Nathan admits that his own use of the phrase comes not from the story (which, I can report, is difficult to find) but from a bit of literary advice regarding storytelling the Russian offered in a letter: “The center of gravity”, wrote Chekhov in 1886, “should reside in two: he and she” (ROTH, 2007, p. 146).

In those little scenes in *Exit Ghost*, such indeed is the center of gravity. One supposes that Chekhov’s advice comes from a sense that everything needful for a human subject to address is found in the intercourse, the copulative relation, of

the two sexes, and so the basis of storytelling itself is comedy, and romantic comedy perhaps in particular. Comedy, Zupancic (2008, p. 213) suggests, “is essentially a genre of the copula”. But, despite Chekhov, “It is not simply a genre of the two”. Instead, Zupancic says,

[...] the two, the redoubling and other different kinds of duality that are so prominent in comedy, are vehicles for exploring what is most central to comedy: the function and operation of the copula (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 213).

It is itself the signifier that joins or links or connects the two sides of “the duality of life”, “the biological and the symbolic, of nature and culture” (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 214). In *Exit Ghost*, the copulative scenes – the scenes, shall we say, of the copula and of symbolic copulation – are precisely those little ones between He and She. In the writing of those scenes Nathan finds his enjoyment, and in the scenes themselves he represents the enjoyment of He and She. But as an expression of the enjoyment available to postoeidipal subjects (that is, castrated ones), the awareness of it is inevitably ambivalent.

While Nathan’s comment on there being no sweet dreams in one’s fiction implies that it permits none of the yea of desire, those little he-and-she scenes are clearly marked by the conflict of nay and yea, lack and excess, loss and restoration. The single one of these involving Kliman (from which I quoted above) seems largely to express Nathan’s sense of lack in the presence of the young man presumed to have it, but Nathan nonetheless even here imagines that it is not the it Kliman has that Jamie desires. Rather, it is the it Kliman himself desires to have. We know, even if he does not, that he does not have it, and it is an aspect of the literariness of these scenes that informs us. The means by which Kliman reveals his lack lies in his very claim to the contrary. It is his boasting to Jamie about having it that is a certain sign of his own lack, for it is the lack typically associated with a literary figure, comedy’s braggart, the *miles gloriosus*. Indeed, much of the pleasure in the scenes, for He and She (when He is Nathan), as well as for readers, arises from the traditional literary means by which Nathan’s antagonist expresses his lack. Readers know that a girl like Jamie can never end up with a guy like Kliman – not in romantic comedy (though it might happen involving minor characters in subplots, as in Jane Austen). In Nathan’s little scenes, whatever it is that Jamie wants, it will be what Nathan has, whatever it is.

It is into writing that Nathan relocates his enjoyment, his *jouissance*. Thus, his little scenes he writes are almost perfect expressions of the exigencies of desire, castration, and the phallus as they function in life and in comedy. They support Lacan's contention that as the phallus signifies life's flight, it also signifies how "life triumphs, whatever happens", how, no matter what, that "little fellow [...] survives" (LACAN, 1992, p. 314). But stories require conflict, and it is upon whatever happens to that little fellow (the hero and the phallus) they must focus. Thus, in stories as in life, we must not focus simply on survival without contradiction, without ambiguity, without the paradoxes of castration. Amidst these, in a phrase Nathan uses elsewhere, because one is a grownup, oedipalized (and thus necessarily castrated) subject, one must have a "strategy [...] to endure and go on" (ROTH, 2007, p. 161). The double-sidedness of the copula gives us that strategy. Thus, while all the little scenes of verbal intercourse between Nathan and Jamie function mainly on the side of having it, on, that is, the side of pleasure, fulfillment, *jouissance*, they nonetheless must also reveal the downside of castration, the paradox – the pleasure in pain, the pain of pleasure – of castration's law. Necessarily, then, the little things with Jamie, while scenes permitting Nathan the sort of intercourse available to a man experiencing his particular (physiological) phallic infirmities, are themselves as marked by desire and fear as is the one scene Nathan devotes to the claims (slyly revealed, of course, as bogus) of his rival. In the first of those between himself and Jamie that Nathan writes, the ambiguity is quite plain. Having finished their "abrasive little talk about Kliman, Lonoff, and the allegation of incest", Nathan laments that he had left Jamie "without daring to touch her" (ROTH, 2007, p. 122). But because of the very mobility and detachability of desire, Nathan's desire to touch Jamie can be displaced, relocated, put into something else that can be controlled. Here, of course, is where, and why, the writer's desire – the desire of the writer to write – takes over. Going back to his hotel room, and as he had done for the first of their little scenes (ROTH, 2007, p. 90-93), Nathan "once again [...] set down as quickly as [he] could an exchange with Jamie". It is an exchange, not the exchange, for Nathan pointedly notes that it is one "that had not taken place" (ROTH, 2007, p. 146-147, emphasis added). Because desire and enjoyment are mobile, it becomes the case, as Nathan says, that "the conversations she and I don't have [are] more affecting even than the conversations we do have". Indeed, he admits, the flesh-and-blood Jamie gives

way to the imaginary one, for in the scenes he creates the fantasy *She* of the written, fictional scenes shines for him more "vividly at the middle of her character" than ever will "the actual 'she'" (ROTH, 2007, p. 147). But that's the good news.

As castration constitutes each human subject, it is the very motility of desire that in us generates anxiety toward it. It is, Zupancic (2008, p. 192) says, the "autonomy of enjoyment that makes possible and opens up the space for what is colloquially referred to as the 'fear of castration'". What the subject fears is less the loss of the thing itself than it is loss of control, control of enjoyment, control over this "part of our being" that acts so independently of our consciousness (ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 192). For Nathan, then, unlike the notes to himself he records in his daily chore book, the little imagined scenes he writes (as opposed to *records*) are "an aid to nothing, alleviated nothing, achieved nothing". Yet to him, upon leaving Jamie, it seemed "terribly necessary to write [it] the instant [he] came through the door" (ROTH, 2007, p. 147). Clearly, it is Nathan's fear, fear of losing control over his enjoyment, that generates this sense of compulsion, of necessity. He continues to write because he fears that if he does not he will lose it, lose not the pleasure, precisely, but the ability to create, and thereby to control access to, the pleasure, even if it is pleasure connected to pain, even if it amplifies the pain. Of all this – desire, castration, enjoyment, the phallus, and how happy endings may come from them – Nathan's chapter-ending summing up says perhaps all there is to say. We may think that

[...] one's pain quotient [is] shocking enough without fictional amplification, without giving things an intensity that is ephemeral in life and sometimes even unseen (ROTH, 2007, p. 147).

But Nathan understands otherwise. Not for some, he says. For some very, very few, he says,

[...] that amplification, evolving uncertainly out of nothing, constitutes their only assurance, and the un-lived, the surmise, fully drawn in print or on paper, is the life whose meaning comes to matter most (ROTH, 2007, p. 147).

Despite Nathan's sense of resignation, there is something grandly mythic about *Exit Ghost*. In another such comedy – one, for instance, such as William Faulkner's last novel, *The Reivers* (1962) – the comic protagonist might have found "a benevolent grandfather" (FRYE, 1957, p. 171) who would trump any power of the plot's dominant blocking character. But since Nathan is the hero of *Exit Ghost*, he has to be, as it were, his own grandfather.

He has to win the battle, or lose it, on his own. Though he has no children and so no grandchildren, he is capable of that. In the way of any comedic world, the power he wields in *Exit Ghost* is one enabling him to set some things right (but not all, since, for instance, he can't change the Bush election results). His power is, as I have suggested, the transformative one of prose fiction. But if the verdant world to which lovers escape in romance is already disallowed in Nathan's choice to go home to the Berkshires alone, then the one modality of transcendence left to him as creative storyteller is, simply, storytelling itself. In a comedic form such as we find here, there is, Frye (1957, p. 171) suggests, a ritual mode in the plot's ternary action that is "like a contest of summer and winter in which winter occupies the middle action". But, more apropos, there is also a psychological form that, Frye says, "is like the removal of a neurosis or blocking point and the restoration of an unbroken current of energy and memory" (FRYE, 1957, p. 171). Here, the psychological form seems dominant, for Nathan must reconcile himself to the fact of mortality in general, to old losses of friends like Manny Lonoff, of recent losses of ones like George Plimpton, and of future losses such as, soon enough, that of Amy Bellette and, to be sure, his own death eventually to come. But for the nonce he refuses to die until he has done the one needful thing, that one thing he has done and can do again to construct a world such as he might imagine. I would die too, he concedes, but

[...] not before I sat down at the desk by the window, looking out through the gray light of a November morning, across a snow-dusted road onto the silent, wind-flurried waters of the swamp, already icing up at the edge of the foundering stalks of the skeletal bed of plumeless reeds, and, from that safe distance, with all of them in New York having vanished from sight – and before my ebbing memory receded completely – wrote the final scene of *He and She* (ROTH, 2007, p. 280).

And write it he does. In it, he would get the girl, but his sense of honor, or perhaps it is only his fear, prompts him to do the right, the moral, the ethical, the socially proper thing. He gives her up. Moreover, since otherwise, within the novel's incest plots, he risks becoming what Žižek (1998, p. 99) calls the obscene father, "the excessively enjoying father" of malevolent jouissance, it is that gesture which produces a truly comedic ending to this tale.

Humor and the gifts reserved for age

Castration is not simply an amputation of enjoyment, but precisely its emergence in the form of an appendix. –(ZUPANCIC, 2008, p. 192).

As a comedy, *Exit Ghost* dramatizes castration and, seemingly paradoxically, happy endings. How such endings are achieved is always the payoff (or not) of the writer's magic show. As the writer/god who creates the novel, it is ultimately Philip Roth whose show it is and who must solve certain problems if he is to give to the novel enough of the humorous to make its comedic structure convincing. Many of the reviewers of the novel contend that Roth failed in this respect. Fairly typical is a judgment by Anderson (2007): "Good Roth is the funniest writer alive; his humor converts all of his cranky, self-serious hobbyhorses into high art. But there are perilously few laughs in *Exit Ghost*". In general, I think early readers were transfixed by the novel's subject, and subject matter. Since the novel's main character is a man of seventy-one with health issues, Roth necessarily deals with subjects that in themselves are not very funny – the ravages of aging and associated themes of illness, disease, deterioration of mind and body, and the ultimate threat of death itself. For him, and perhaps for many reviewers, this is familiar territory in Roth. His novels preceding *Exit Ghost* – *The Dying Animal* (2001) and *Everyman* (2006) – though really excellent in their own ways, are neither one a bundle of laughs. Indeed, vis à vis those two novels, it seems that Roth intends expressly that *Exit Ghost* be different in tone and narrative genre.

I have suggested that Roth participates in an epochal moment, and in part it is *Exit Ghost's* candid, and ironic, realism about the depredations of aging that so places it. If one is of a certain age (and we know who we are) and owns a computer with email capabilities, one almost daily is guaranteed to receive jokes and cartoons focusing on the issues the novel addresses. As I was drafting this essay, in fact, a friend of my wife who usually sends us files of the wit and wisdom of Maxine sent along an email containing a series of cartoons for those growing older. One of them shows a lascivious old man, cupping his good ear with his right hand, in bed with his bemused partner and instructing her, "Shout dirty to me". In another, an old man on a couch is feeling up an elderly woman: She's saying, "They're not up there anymore, Walter". In another, labeled "Ethel and Stanley's First Computer", while Stanley seems to be sexually assaulting the machine, Ethel is saying, "Wait a minute, honey. It says insert

your floppy disk". I have a distinct feeling that women send these around much more frequently than men. At any rate, it is my wife's women friends who forward most of these. Whatever. These days, for women and men alike, it appears to be such ubiquitous comic panels and, in my experience, especially those featuring Maxine that seem the fonts of geriatric wisdom on what the slightly more urbane, but no less ironic, Eliot (1971, p. 54) would call "the gifts reserved for age".

It seems plain that to this national phenomenon Roth means to add a literary voice. In *Exit Ghost*, he thus finds all sorts of ways to treat humorously many of those gifts reserved for each of us if we live long enough. It is perhaps what has become of Nathan himself and Amy Bellette that produces Roth's major generic, and geriatric, challenge: how does one turn prostate cancer or a brain tumor into a subject of comedy? One does so in the way of Maxine and those other jocular figures – by treating one's own infirmities with a sense of ironic humor if not of actual acceptance. As much as Nathan, Amy is herself capable of comic or ironic or sardonic self-awareness. She thinks of herself as "just a nutty old woman rambling on. The excrescence of the excrescence" (ROTH, 2007, p. 181). About her brain cancer, Amy makes frequent jokes. In what we may call her tumor humor, she turns the cancer into a sort of homunculus, perhaps something a bit like the ghost in Descartes' machine – but an evil one – that in her place acts or thinks or speaks. It was once Manny Lonoff who had been there to guide Amy; now it is the tumor. In her battle to save Lonoff's reputation from Richard Kliman, the tumor betrays her and Manny both. Of Kliman, she laments to Nathan,

Before I knew I had the tumor, he paid me a visit [...] . I was already talking a mile a minute. I served him tea and he was so proper and he seemed, to my tumor, to speak so brilliantly about Manny's stories – to my tumor, he seemed a purely literary being, an earnest, Harvard-educated young man who wanted nothing more than to restore Manny's reputation. My tumor found Kliman *winning* (ROTH, 2007, p. 177).

In a scene that Roth sets up very precisely, it happens to be Amy who has perhaps the funniest, and most touchingly ironic, line in the novel. About a Lonoff biography, Amy and Nathan worry most about the possibility of an incestuous relationship with an older sister. Both of them desperately hope to protect Lonoff's great secret by denying Kliman material with which to finish the tell-all biography he has undertaken. While Kliman, without Amy's confirmation, can only speculate about incest in

Lonoff's youth, he knows that Lonoff has written of such in the manuscript of a novel that Amy possesses and of which Kliman has read about a half. To help Amy protect Lonoff, Nathan proposes to her that the old writer with whom she had lived for four years, till his death, had taken his incest plot from the life of Nathaniel Hawthorne, from "the cunning, scholarly, unprovable conjectures about Hawthorne and his sister Elizabeth", "his beautiful, enchanting older sister" (ROTH, 2007, p. 200).

What? she said loudly, as though I'd startled her from sleep. Have I missed something? Who's talking about Hawthorne?

I am. With good reason.

You're confusing me hopelessly.

I don't mean to. Listen to me. You won't be confused. I mean to make everything clear to you.

Oh, would my tumor love that (ROTH, 2007, p. 199).

While we have had occasion to observe much of Nathan's ironic self-awareness, as in those references to his penis as a "spigot of wrinkled flesh" (ROTH, 2007, p. 109) or to his trailing a cloud of urine as he swims, there are many others, as when he regards his decline of memory as a leakage like that he'd been experiencing from his penis (ROTH, 2007, p. 162), or when he invites Jamie Logan to come "live a posthumous existence with [him]" (ROTH, 2007, p. 231), or when he jokes about what it was like to be seventy: "Think of the year 4000 [...]. The year 4000. Take your time [...]. That's what it's like to be seventy" (ROTH, 2007, p. 39). In these ways, and many others, Nathan displays an ironic, sometimes even comic, sense of himself, his situation. In one of them, Roth weaves a strand of ironic humor around the titular motif of ghosts. Amy and Nathan feel themselves apparitions from a time long gone. But they feel likewise about people such as Manny Lonoff and those apparitional benefits of youth such as sexual desire, good memory, and a firm, healthy body. All these are ghosts of sorts, and they make jocular remarks or ironic or sardonic references to various ones of them. There is, of course, Nathan's sense of the resurrection of his desire, the ghost, he calls it, of my desire, desire that in the presence of Jamie Logan had on him such "a huge gravitational pull" (ROTH, 2007, p. 66). But Nathan also thinks explicitly of himself as a ghost, "a revenant, a man who'd cut himself off from sustained human contact and its possibilities" (ROTH, 2007, p. 31). Likewise, early in the narrative, when in the ghostly presence of Amy Bellette and her shaven skull, Nathan imagines another ghost, one whom she evokes. It is that of Manny Lonoff, and just as Amy confesses

that she talks to Manny all the time, Nathan also engages the dead writer in conversation. Amy's are about many things. Nathan's is about Amy. Noting wryly that Lonoff "was more corpulent than in life", Nathan says, "He'd put on weight in the grave". For his part, admitting that the "prospect of her suffering is unendurable", Lonoff's ghost enjoins Nathan, "Look after her" (ROTH, 2007, p. 167). Of the task, the dead writer, "adopting a tone of benign sarcasm", returns Nathan's insult about his corpulence. "I understand", he says laconically, "that you are no longer such a great lover. That should make it easier" (ROTH, 2007, p. 167-68).

Lonoff's ghost, with his sarcasm, leads Nathan on to the sardonic realism of another one, a memento mori of the fate of one's self and one's writerly products. Roth makes of Nathan's allusions to other writers a significant motif in *Exit Ghost*. Typically, Nathan refers to an author's late works, ones thematically or otherwise appropriate to "death and parting and loss" (ROTH, 2007, p. 124), Nathan's itemization in one of the *He and She* scenes regarding themes of Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, written when the composer was nearly eighty-five. Nathan alludes (ROTH, 2007, p. 161), for instance, to Faulkner's decision to publish *The Reivers*. He also refers several times (ROTH, 2007, p. 4, 137-138, 226 and 241) to a late novel (albeit about youth) by Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow-line*. From Conrad, in that same dialogue of *He and She* in which Strauss is invoked, Nathan quotes the work's opening line – "Only the young have such moments", "such", Conrad shortly explains, meaning *rash* moments. To this claim, Nathan's "He" retorts, "But these rash moments don't just happen in youth [...]. With age there are rash moments too" (ROTH, 2007, p. 138). And with age, as Eliot says, there come also those gifts reserved for it. And so it is that the conversation with Lonoff's ghost leads Nathan to a ghost of Eliot's, one found in another late, and thematically appropriate, work – "Little Gidding", the final section in *The Four Quartets*, Eliot's counterweight to *The Waste Land*. "How", Nathan asks himself, "does Eliot's ghost begin?" Himself he answers: "Sardonically. 'Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age'. But as if a mind standing at the refrigerator door, wondering why it's there, Nathan can't recall the rest. 'Reserved for age. Reserved for age. Beyond that I cannot go. A frightful prophecy follows that I don't remember. I'll look it up', he tells himself, 'when I get home' (ROTH, 2007, p. 169)¹. No doubt he will. *If* he remembers. Recall those gifts reserved for age. Thankfully, as had Nathan his cancer and its gifts,

Amy, too, had survived all hers, and about her enduring, and going on, Nathan is not above a small pun: "That she had survived [...] was a grave miracle" (ROTH, 2007, p. 167).

Conclusion

In the end, as it must, *Exit Ghost* reveals the specific form of the comedic structure Roth means to give it. In the novel's course, we find the word quest dropped in ways (ROTH, 2007, p. 82 and 165) that suggest that there may be something mythic or cyclic in Nathan's journey down to the City. Had Nathan made the home trade with Jamie Logan and Billy Davidoff, his trip would have been linear rather than cyclic. But, in fact, Nathan gives up on all that he imagines the City will provide him and returns to the Berkshires. So his story, as it forms at the end, involves a journey out and back, the traditional mythic adventure of the hero into the underworld, his trials and tribulations there, and his return to his place of departure. Though romance and comedy, as Northrop Frye says, fade into each other at the ends of their narrative spectra, *Exit Ghost* is comedy rather than romance but its form is quite synoptic of the genre. "The total *mythos* of comedy", Frye (1957, p. 171) says, "has regularly what in music is called a ternary form", and it is specifically this ternary form we find in Roth's novel. In Roth, it is not quite so straightforward as Frye describes it. Frye (1957, p. 171) says that "the hero's society rebels against the society of the *senex* and triumphs", but since the *senex* is Roth's hero, what is there for Nathan to rebel against? Much, actually, for the corrupt society described in *Exit Ghost* is that associated with the presidency of George Bush, and it wins by winning the election. So, in the specific terms of the novel, it is the political world of George Bush that represents an evil which nearly devastates Jamie Logan and is also the one Nathan himself will decide he must escape. Thus, in *Exit Ghost*, Roth's hero, by descending into the present moment of contemporary history, comes to see that the place from which he embarks upon his quest reverses the standard, corrupt, imperialistic, consumer-driven values of the Bush world and in that reversal suggests he had lived, in Frye's terms, in "a golden age in the past" (FRYE, 1957, p. 171).

Thus, having had his fun, as it were, in the evil City, Nathan, upon his return home, can inform us,

Now I was back where I needed never be in collision with anyone or be coveting anything or go about being someone, convincing people of this or that and seeking a role in the drama of my times (ROTH, 2007, p. 280).

In short, in Frye's terms, while Nathan had experienced in the Berkshires "a stable and harmonious order", in New York it was "disrupted by folly, obsession, forgetfulness, 'pride and prejudice', [...] events not understood by the characters themselves", but by returning home he has returned to "[that] harmonious, orderly, pastoral existence" (FRYE, 1957, p. 171). He leaves behind in the city all that to deal with he'd prefer *not*, as Melville's *Bartleby* might say. He understands that in the realm he has left behind "Kliman would pursue Lonoff's secret with all his crude intensity", that for her part "Amy Bellette would be as powerless to stop him as [...] to stop the tumor from killing her now". Though he will continue to send her money to sustain her while she lives, he knows that "she would be dead within the year anyhow". He also understands that as a not-yet

Kliman would persist and perhaps make himself of literary importance for a few months by writing the superfluous exposé revealing Lonoff's alleged wrongdoing as the key to everything. He might even steal Jamie away from Billy, if she was sufficiently troubled or deluded or bored to seek her escape in his obnoxious swagger (ROTH, 2007, p. 280).

Though such likely or possible eventualities are not to be desired, one has to accept what one can't change or prevent or understand. In another context, one focused on the writing and publication of his previous novel, he'd admitted, "I needed a strategy by which to endure and go on – as who doesn't?" (ROTH, 2007, p. 161). So he endures. But, as Roth has announced, Nathan goes – *Gone for Good* (ROTH, 2007, p. 292) – and he won't be back.

Note

In Eliot's 'Little Gidding', in part II, the three main gifts named by the 'familiar compound ghost' are identified as 'the cold friction of expiring sense/ Without enchantment [...]', 'the conscious impotence of rage/ At human folly [...]', and 'the rending pain of re-enactment/ Of all that you have done, and been [...]' (ELIOT, 1971, p. 54).

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Received on August 6, 2008.

Accepted on September 26, 2008.

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