

Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost*

(Vintage Books, London - 2007)

I The Present Moment

I HADN'T BEEN in New York in eleven years. Other than for surgery in Boston to remove a cancerous prostate, I'd hardly been off my rural mountain road in the Berkshires in those eleven years and, what's more, had rarely looked at a newspaper or listened to the news since 9/11, three years back; with no sense of loss—merely, at the outset, a kind of drought within me—I had ceased to inhabit not just the great world but the present moment. The impulse to be in it and of it I had long since killed.

But now I'd driven 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

thousands of men like me left incontinent by prostate surgery. By going in through a catheter inserted in the urethra to inject a gelatinous form of collagen where the neck of the bladder meets the urethra, he was getting significant improvement in about fifty percent of his patients. These weren't great odds, especially as "significant improvement" meant only a partial alleviation of the symptoms—reducing "severe incontinence" to "moderate incontinence" or "moderate" to "light." Still, because his results were better than those that other urologists had achieved using roughly the same technique (there was nothing to be done about the 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), I went to New York for a consultation, long after I imagined myself as having adapted to the practical inconveniences of the condition.

In the years since the surgery, I even thought I'd surmounted the shaming side of wetting oneself, overcome the disorienting shock that had been particularly trying in the first year and a half, during the months when the surgeon had given me reason to think that the incontinence would gradually disappear over time, as it does in a small number of fortunate patients. But despite the dailiness of the routine necessary to keep myself clean and odor-free, I must never truly have become accustomed to wearing the special undergarments and changing the pads and dealing with the "accidents," any more than I had mastered the underlying humiliation, because there I was, at

the age of seventy-one, back on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, not many blocks from where I'd once lived as a vigorous, healthy younger man—there I was in the reception area of the urology department of Mount Sinai Hospital, about to be assured that with the permanent adherence of the collagen to the neck of the bladder I had a chance of exerting somewhat more control over my urine flow than an infant. Waiting there envisioning the procedure, sitting and flipping through the piled-up copies of *People* and *New York* magazine, I thought, Entirely beside the point. Turn around and go home.

I'd been alone these past eleven years in a small house on a dirt road in the deep country, having decided to live apart like that some two years before the cancer was diagnosed. I see few people. Since the death, a year earlier, of my neighbor and friend Larry Hollis, two, three days can go by when I speak to no one but the housekeeper who comes to clean each week and her husband, who is my caretaker. 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. I read, mainly the books that I first discovered as a student, the masterpieces of fiction whose power over me is no less, and in some cases greater, than it was in my initial exciting encounters with them. Lately I've been rereading Joseph Conrad for the first time in fifty years, most re-

cently *The Shadow-Line*, which I'd brought with me to New York to look through yet again, having read it all in one go only the other night. I listen to music, I hike in the woods, when it's warm I swim in my pond, whose temperature, even in summer, never gets much above seventy degrees. 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 discolors 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. There are plastic underpants with strongly elasticized edges designed for incontinent swimmers that are advertised as watertight, but when, after much equivocation, I went ahead and ordered a pair from a pool-supply catalogue and tried them out in the pond, I found that though wearing these biggish white bloomers beneath a bathing suit diminished the problem, it was not sufficiently eradicated to subdue my self-consciousness. Rather than take the chance of embarrassing myself and offending others, I gave up on the idea of swimming regularly down at the college pool for the bulk of the year (with bloomers under my suit) and continued to confine myself to sporadically yellowing the waters of my own pond during the Berkshires' few months of warm weather, when, rain or shine, I do my laps for half an hour every day.

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GUIDAGE POUR LE COMMENTAIRE

Repérages linéaires

© Novel title + Date: ghost story? / haunting? / ghost writer (title of a 1979 novel by Roth) / tragedy (a stage direction in Macbeth)? Readership = contemporary readers

◇ Chapter I = opening chapter >>> **setting**, outset of plot/ **diegesis** + **characterization** + reading contract (narrative choices)

◇ Chapter title : emphasis on time

--- PART I ---

ℹL1: 1st person narrative = **homodiegetic narrator** + New York as place of return.

ℹL3: N = a man (gender revealed through "remove a cancerous prostate")

ℹL1-10: choice of tenses (I hadn't been / I'd hardly been / had rarely looked / I had ceased / I had long since killed) vs. Title(s): the past perpetually 'haunts' the present

ℹL3: "my rural mountain road" >>> promontory + geographical disconnection

ℹL5: insistence on social disconnection

ℹ **transit**° L6: 9/11 as turning-point >>> connotation: collapse & in this particular context: loss of powers, of potency + "three years back" = story time / narrated time = 2004

ℹL6-7: "with no sense of loss" / "merely [...] a kind of drought within me": **antithetic** >>> irony? + presence of word "loss" in the text worth noticing

ℹL8-10: wilful estrangement / alienation + present moment defined negatively // title: N defined by what he no longer does

ℹL12: Mount Sinai Hospital (does exist): geriatrics + ~~Jewishness~~ + Exodus (Moses meeting God & leaving the sinners behind) + promontory

ℹL14: "the thousands of men like me": inclusion into a larger group connected by incontinence + "incontinent" = loss of control

ℹL15-18: very technical / medical description + reads like an advert (**free indirect speech** = urologist's own words)

ℹL19-22: back to previous **narrative voice**: scepticism (inverted commas) >>> ironical distance?

ℹL22-24: surprising data from a man who supposedly lives in seclusion >>> reliability of N? **Internal focalisation** >>> reading contract

ℹL25: "the other hazard of radical prostatectomy" = **periphrastic** (reluctance to name impotence?) + confirms sense of loss

ℹL26: "I, like tens of thousands of others": blowing up nbs (10x) + inclusion into a larger unlucky group - 2nd time

ℹL27: names "impotence" at last.

ℹL28: past tenses: "I hadn't been in NY in eleven years" >>> "But now I'd driven the 130 miles" >>> "I went to NY" (**analepse**)

ℹ + recurrent realistic data (precise durations; detailed lengths; real events; real place names (= **toponyms**)) >>> precise / realistic setting >>> references known by readership (collective subconscious) >>> reinforces sense of loss + reading contract = **writerly text** (R.Barthes) as opposed to **readerly text** (connivance / complicity through **signifiers** (**connotations** / hidden meaning) more than through **signifieds** (**denotations** / immediate meaning))

☞L29-30: "the practical inconveniences of the condition" = **again periphrastic** + means he has never adapted to ... = sense of loss

☞L31-42: pathetic detailed description of state of incontinence ("the shaming side of wetting oneself", "the routine necessary to keep myself clean and odor-free", "the special undergarments", "the pads", "the "accidents"", "the underlying humiliation").

☞L36-37: exclusion from the "small number of fortunate patients" in whom incontinence disappears

☞L39: never came to terms w/ incontinence

☞L40: and /and (**hypotaxis**) >>> accumulation of undesirable symptoms

☞L 42 + L45: repetition of "there I was" (state > location)

☞L43: age specified: 71

☞L45: unwanted form of pilgrimage to Manhattan (**metonymic** of his younger life); i.e. he is no longer "vigorous", nor "healthy", nor young.

☞L47-53: gradual sense of extreme scepticism, from subjective narration ("about to be assured that [...] I had a chance of [...] somewhat [...]") to **stream of consciousness** ("I thought, Entirely beside the point. Turn around and go home." >>> readers' sense of immediacy / **extreme internal focalisation** = we totally share his "envisioning" the procedure & the pointlessness of the operation >>> from pity to empathy?

☞L51: "piled-up" (promontory) in this context of extreme sense of loss, is incongruous enough to be noticed & commented upon + *People* & *NY magazine* are what he fled from (extreme disconnection) / metonymies of his former life: he is at once in and out the scene he is telling.

--- PART II ---

☞L54-55: geographical remoteness. Metonymic passage from one S to the other (last word of previous S ("home") as thought transition)

☞L56-57: cancer was not the original reason for fleeing NY >>> reason: unknown yet, probably revealed later in the novel

☞From L57 onward: suddenly switches to simple present (as if to escape the agony of waiting for the operation)

☞L54-67: insists on social disconnection; NB: uses negative clauses to evoke social activities / uses positive clauses to evoke writing/reading. + this N is completely at odds with his readership (21st century readers, living in a world of constant social connection) >>> What of the reading contract? How are we made to read on, despite the fact that we are made to adopt the **point of view** of what could be defined as an old bear and an anti-hero? He is not even a father figure (too pathetic, too impotent and powerless...) >>> Tone (irony)? Wisdom? Lucidity / clear-mindedness? Experience? Knowledge? Suffering >>> What about the reader's position? Cynicism, pity or empathy?

☞L64: chosen obsolescence / self-defined prehistoric form of writing

☞L65: hint at voting (2004 is a presidential election year)

☞L65-66: as a writer, the narrator could stand for an alter ego for the author; but always keep in mind that however autobiographical a novel may seem, it is first and foremost fiction. On the other hand, you should not underestimate the fact that the protagonist is a writer because it obviously invites us to ponder over literary creation (**reflexive dimension**).

☞L66-76: even his readings belong to the past but they provide him with "exciting encounters": reading & writing seem to foster endurance, since next step in narrative is the evocation of hiking & swimming.

☞ L68-74: "whose power over me is no less **[litotes]**, and in some cases greater than it was in my initial exciting encounters with them." No wonder that he chooses to refer to Joseph Conrad's *The Shadow Line* (1. It's one of the later works by Conrad (>>> old age); 2. The novella is a confession (it has an openly retrospective nature); 3. The shadow line = the **threshold** of the protagonist's development; 4. It contrasts youth & old age and deals with wisdom, experience & maturity). It could mean that *The Shadow Line* will function as a **hypertext** for *Exit Ghost* (this could be mentioned in the conclusion of your commentary).

>>> But the main question is: What does the 'shadow line' stand for in Roth's story? NY as the symbolic line between Past & Present / between memories & an improbable future? The passage from youth into old age? The unbridgeable gap between his present social indifference, due to ageing and illness, and his former vigor?

☞ L74-97: Back to incontinence as a recurrent motif; his bladder completely escapes his control / seems to have a life of its own ("should my bladder involuntarily begin emptying itself") + he now defines himself as one of the "incontinent swimmers" whose plastic underpants are "advertised as watertight" and finally chooses to be "largely unperturbed" (**oxymoronic**) by swimming naked in his own pond, whatever the temperature. Empiricism has led him to mistrust the language of advertising as much as the urologist's. The ridicule of the incontinent swimmer's situation can be heard in the [b] alliteration ("wearing these **biggish bloomers** **beneath** a **bathing suit**") and is in keeping with the following phrase ("not sufficiently eradicated to subdue my self-consciousness"). He resignedly avoids "the college pool" (a young men's pool).

--- POST-READING NOTES ---

☞ **Movement of the text**: highly **metonymic** (based on contiguity) : readers have to follow the stream of thoughts imposed by the narrator & have to reconstitute the chronology of events thanks to the clues he gives throughout the passage: his move to his rural retreat takes place eight years before 9/11. Since 9/11 he has cut himself off from the newspapers and the news, so as to exist wholly apart from the turmoil of current events. Two years after his departure, he develops prostate cancer, and the operation leaves him in a condition hardly designed to encourage him to re-enter society. His estrangement from urban culture is seemingly the result of the strong affinity for the routine pleasures of this rural seclusion. His attempt to alleviate his incontinence is the starting point of *Exit Ghost*.

☞ **Relation between text time (narrating time) & story time (narrated time)**:
 [Order] mainly analeptic (flashback);
 [duration] summary (story time > text time);
 [frequency] repetitive (incontinence as recurrent motif = obsessive).

☞ **Figurative language**: **[syntagm]** **metonymic** movement from Manhattan to the Berkshires **[paradigm]** **isotopy** of estrangement & powerlessness

→ **Consigne:** Comment on the passage, paying particular attention to setting & characterization

NB: The term **setting** refers to the place and time in which a story takes place ; while characterization stands for the construction of characters.

Rappel des conseils pour l'introduction: (à rédiger s/ le brouillon après avoir élaboré un plan détaillé, voire la conclusion)

1. Situer et caractériser brièvement le passage (= mettre l'extrait dans son contexte immédiat)
2. Annoncer un angle d'attaque en se servant de la consigne (= originalité, intérêt du passage révélé par la consigne = problématique)
3. [Lorsque l'extrait s'y prête] Structure, composition du passage
4. Faire apparaître un plan motivé & la progression interne envisagée (= stratégie qui dégage le plus gd nb d'effets parmi ceux que l'on a repérés)

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1. The text under study is the **incipit** of Philip Roth's novel *Exit Ghost*. The title of the first chapter ("The Present Moment"), from which the text is extracted, openly lays emphasis on time and implicitly foreshadows the past as a predominant motif in the novel.
 2. The instruction prompts us to analyze the handling of time & space in relation to *Exit Ghost's* protagonist, who is also its narrative instance. If there is any such relation, what of its nature?
 3. Given the symptomatic contiguity he stages between then and now, it seems highly improbable that the **autodiegetic narrator** would be the same semiotic construction outside his relation to the past, more so when ageing and illness have led him to live as a recluse. As for the place, his return to New York undeniably forces him to acknowledge & measure how much he alienated himself from contemporary American life. But it also prompts him to consider the written word (the only medium he still uses) as a worthy option in the struggle against ineffectiveness. Here is food for thought for his contiguous/metonymic readers...
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⌚ Narrator-Character's relation to time (age & loss of control)

🦋 Estrangement

📝 A writerly text

CORRIGE : Excerpt from Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* (pp.1-4)

→ Comment on the passage, paying particular attention to narration & characterization

(1) The text under study is the incipit of Philip Roth's novel *Exit Ghost*. The title of the first chapter ("The Present Moment"), from which the text is extracted, openly lays emphasis on time and implicitly foreshadows the past as a predominant motif in the novel.

(2) The instruction prompts us to analyze how the narrative choices in *Exit Ghost* contribute to the reader's perception of its protagonist, who is also its narrative instance. The fact that the narrator is autodiegetic should not be underestimated since it establishes him as an element of both narrated and narrating levels as well as it creates a contiguous relation between narration and characterization. Besides, because the novel is incipient, the question of the reading contract should be raised, more so when the narrator-character is also our focaliser.

(3) Given the anamnestic nature of the text, it seems highly improbable that the autodiegetic narrator would be the same semiotic construction outside [A] his relation to the past and his painful perception of what he is not any more. [B] On a symbolic level, especially when ageing and illness have led him to live as a recluse, his return to New York undeniably forces him to acknowledge & measure how much he alienated himself from contemporary American life - and contiguously, from the readers. [C] But it also prompts him to consider the written word (the only medium he still uses) as a worthy option in the struggle against his - and the readers' - ineffectiveness.

The homodiegetic narrator's choice of verbs and tenses in the first ten lines ("I hadn't been" / "I'd hardly been" / "had rarely looked" / "I had ceased" / "I had long since killed") is quite surprising in the light of the chapter's title. It seems to imply that the past perpetually 'haunts' the narrating present while it straightforwardly characterizes the protagonist through what he no longer does. The constant use of analepsis and summary in the first part of the text (from "I hadn't been in NY in eleven years" to "I went to NY") induces the reader's parallel disorientation. The movement of the text is highly metonymic : readers have to follow the stream of thoughts imposed by the narrator and have to reconstitute the chronology of events thanks to the clues he gives throughout the passage: his move to his rural retreat takes place eight years before 9/11. Since 9/11 he has cut himself off from the newspapers

and the news, so as to exist wholly apart from the turmoil of current events. Two years after his departure, he develops prostate cancer, and the operation leaves him in a condition hardly designed to encourage him to re-enter society (i.e. New York). His attempt to alleviate his incontinence is the starting point of *Exit Ghost*.

As far as frequency is concerned, narrative time is repetitive since incontinence is a recurrent and somehow obsessive motif. It is no detail to mention that in this first person narrative, the protagonist's gender is bluntly revealed in line 3 through the phrase "remove a cancerous prostate", which could only apply to a man. As it were, prostatectomy - a consequence of ageing (L43: he is 71) - is part of the hero's characterization and in the narrator's own words he is either one of "the thousands of men" (L14), or again one of "the ten thousands of men" unlucky enough to suffer from post-operation incontinence, or conversely *not* one of the "small number of fortunate patients" in whom incontinence disappears. The use of hypotaxis in lines 41-42 ("the special undergarments and changing the pads and dealing with the accidents") gives us a sense of accumulation that emphasizes the pathos.

On the poetic level, the ridicule of the incontinent swimmer's situation can even be heard in the [b] alliteration in lines 88-89 ("wearing these biggish bloomers beneath a bathing suit") and adds up to the following phrase ("not sufficiently eradicated to subdue my self-consciousness") as he eventually decides to avoid "the college pool" (a pool for young and vigorous men). The periphrasis he uses to refer to incontinence in lines 29-30 ("the practical inconveniences of the condition") implies that eight years after the operation he has never adapted to the humiliating symptoms.

Yet if references to incontinence pervade the whole passage, another symptom (first obliquely mentioned in L25, then openly named in L27) draws our attention: "impotence".

In this particular context, "9/11", explicitly evoked as the starting point of social disconnection, cannot but be construed as a symbolical double for the protagonist. In the American collective subconscious 9/11 connotes the notions of collapse and powerlessness and it is therefore metaphorical of the character's loss of potency. The irreversible nature of the situation is conveyed through a gradation in skepticism (L47-53) from a very subjective form of narration ("about to be assured that [...] I had a chance of [...] somewhat [...]") to free indirect speech ("I thought, Entirely beside the point. Turn around and go home."). Of course the aim of the operation is to alleviate incontinence, but the "piled-up copies of *People* and *New York magazine*" (L51-52) that he flips through in the urologist's waiting room, in a narrative context of extreme internal focalization in which the reader totally shares his "envisioning the procedure", is yet another instance of his extreme sense of loss, for both names refer to what he estranged himself from. They are objective-correlatives of his former life and, as if to escape both the agony of the waiting and the painful feeling of being no longer "vigorous", nor "healthy", nor young (L45), the narrative voice suddenly switches to the simple present and metonymically moves from Manhattan to the Berkshires as we read "Turn around and go home."

The various references to the setting are used to highlight the remoteness of the character's home in the first place. His state of seclusion is announced as early as line 3 ("my rural mountain road") and is later emphasized with the use of qualifiers in lines 54-55 ("in a small house on a dirt road in the deep country"). His present home is totally at odds with his past home (Manhattan). But because "there I was" is used twice (in lines 42 and 45) to refer more to the character's state of mind than to his actual location, it is very likely that the narrated places take on a higher level of meaning. Social alienation is even greater than geographical seclusion. Living up a mountain places him above his fellow citizens and the fact that he goes to Mount Sinai Hospital (L12), an existing place with a geriatrics department, reminds the reader of Moses in the Exodus, going up Mount Sinai on his own, leaving the sinners behind, meeting God and finally becoming the Lawgiver. Or perhaps, the reference to Mount Sinai reads as yet another promontory (like his home place, or the piled-up magazines) and is a metaphor of a pathetic phallic conquest. The latter interpretation is backed by the antithetic mention of "no sense of loss" and "merely [...] a kind of drought" in the same clause about his decision not to be connected with the rest of the world any more (L6-7).

The lexical field of social estrangement pervades the last part of the text as early as line 54, where the narrator uses negative clauses to evoke social activities and positive clauses to evoke reading and writing, a solitary occupation. The same polarization applies to writing devices ("I continue to live in the Age of the Typewriter and have no idea what the World Wide Web is." (L63-65). These self-avowed obsolescence and prehistoric inscription in the world make him very alien to Philip Roth's readership, who are 21st century readers, living in a world of constant social connection, using mobiles and computers all day long. This alienation makes it impossible for the readers to identify with a focalizer openly portrayed as old bear who, in spite of his age, cannot even stand for a father-figure because he is too pathetic, impotent and seemingly powerless. In these circumstances the question of the reading contract is central. How are we made to read on this narrative? Besides, how can the readers rely on a narrator who supposedly cut himself off from the world of news and surprisingly knows enough of a urologist's fame to convey his words in free indirect speech in lines 15-18 - a very technical and medical description of the procedure that reads like a TV commercial? What about the reader's position? Should it be pity, empathy or cynicism? Neither option is tempting enough. Yet we do read and draw much pleasure from the reading...

One of the reasons might be found in the skeptical tone the narrator uses to qualify his quest for control over his bladder. In lines 19-22, the inverted commas are explicit markers of the ironical stance the narrator takes to comment on the efficiency of the procedure. In lines 74-97, when the incontinence motif resurfaces, the syntax the narrator uses to refer to his bladder and to show that it completely escapes his control has humorous undertones: the bladder seems to have a life of its own ("should my bladder involuntarily begin emptying itself"). The same can be said about his defining himself as one of the "incontinent swimmers" whose plastic underpants are "advertised as watertight" or when he uses an oxymoronic statement to say that he is "largely unperturbed" by being incontinent in his own pond. Empiricism has led him to mistrust the language of advertising as much as the urologist's.

His clear-mindedness implies that perhaps his estrangement from urban culture is simply the result of a strong affinity for the routine pleasures of his rural seclusion. Moreover, even though his readings, too, belong to the past (L66-76), they provide him with "exciting encounters": reading and writing seem to foster endurance, since after mentioning them the next step in the narrative is the evocation of hiking and swimming. No wonder that he chooses to refer to Joseph Conrad's *The Shadow Line*: the novella is one of Conrad's later works; it is a confession (it has an openly retrospective nature like our excerpt); the "shadow line" stands for the threshold of the protagonist's development; and finally, it contrasts youth and old age while dealing with wisdom, experience and maturity. It could mean that *The Shadow Line* will function as a hypertext for *Exit Ghost* or it simply reinforces the reflexive dimension of the novel. Indeed, because the narrator is also a writer and a scholar in the plot, it obviously invites us to ponder over literary creation.

For instance, we could wonder what the 'shadow line' stands for in Roth's story, outside its obvious reference to Joseph Conrad's literary work. Is New York the shadow line between the character's past and present, between his memories and an improbable future? Is the shadow line simply the passage into old age or the metaphor of an approaching death? Or else is it the unbridgeable gap between his present social indifference, due to ageing and illness, and his former vigor? Whatever the interpretation, the reading contract seems to be a very literary one, one in which the reader must accept the constraints of what Roland Barthes called a writerly text (as opposed to a readerly text) in which connivance between the narrator and the reader is reached through the signifiers (connotations / hidden meanings) more than through the signifieds (denotations / immediate meanings).

Characterization and narration in the opening chapter of *Exit Ghost* are closely related by a metonymic link that goes as far as questioning the status of the reader. The text is an undeniably writerly one, that requires readers to decode elements of the setting as yet other signs of an explicitly impotent though implicitly omnipotent narrator, himself a metonymic alter ego for Philip Roth who guides us across the symbolic shadow line between denotation and connotation. Polysemy and intertextuality are present in the title of the novel itself, for at this stage of the reading several constructions come to mind: that of a ghost story (which is very unlikely, given the realistic nature of the setting and the main character), that of haunting as a recurrent motif on a symbolic level, that of a ghost writer (which was the title of a 1979 novel by Roth and refers to surrogate writers) or maybe it is proleptic of a tragic event, for "exit ghost" is also a stage direction in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.