

## A Course in Ghost Writing: Philip Roth, Authorship, and Death<sup>\*1</sup>

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In an interview with a French magazine published in October 2012, Philip Roth (b. 1933) admitted that he had not written any fiction since *Nemesis* (2010), and that in fact he retired from fiction writing altogether (“Dernier Livre”); about a month later the news reached the English-speaking world through a short piece in *Salon* (see Daley). I interpret Roth’s decision to announce his retirement, especially in such a roundabout manner, as representing an attempt to be absent and present at the same time. Roth, whose novels have dealt extensively with what it means to be a writer, has been contemplating, representing, and enacting these two possibilities for much of his career. He has cultivated his public image as a partial recluse, paradoxically making himself available to the public as someone famous for avoiding the public: “Fanfare for Agoraphobia” as Mark Shechner puts it (179). Shechner explains this paradoxical performance by looking at Roth’s celebrity and the way any celebrity needs to be protected yet recognizable. But Roth’s absent presence has its roots in a more literary context as well: his decision to retire is part of an overreaching dynamic within his oeuvre and public image. This dynamic has often been enacted by invoking the meeting points between life and death.

Critics who have written about Roth’s retirement in the general press pick up on this matrix of life-death-presence-absence. One of the responses to his announcement carries a title resonant with my argu-

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debate/philip-roth>>.

ment here: "Philip Roth: A Eulogy for a Living Man" (Gianopoulos). What is registered by titling a piece about a living man "A Eulogy" is that Roth's retirement is also a way for Roth to proclaim the death of Philip Roth as author. Adam Gopnik, a *New Yorker* critic, fancies that Roth is producing a novel about a writer who decides to retire, where Roth writes something like: "To stop writing had turned out to be the one final way to make his writing matter! Absence had provided a keener presence than the past ten years of books." As Gopnik describes in terms close to my argument to follow, Roth secures posthumous authority even while he is alive. He has been doing so at least since 1979 with *The Ghost Writer*, the novel that will be at the center of this paper.

For Philip Roth, the author's death, or the semblance of death, can be a source of prestige or even authority. That there is a connection between death and writing is a commonplace in literary criticism. There are numerous thinkers who make this link in nuanced ways, with examples ranging from critic Helen Sword's study of the modernists' fascination with ghosts and spirit mediums, to Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood's almost mystical description of authors as *Negotiating with the Dead*, the title of her nonfiction book on writing,<sup>2</sup> and to French philosopher Maurice Blanchot's dense rewritings of the Orpheus myth in *The Space of Literature*. I do not mean to rehash this issue. Before going into my reading of Roth it is, however, worth considering one of the most influential marriages between death and authorship. When, in the 1968 essay, Roland Barthes wished to describe the extent to which traditional authors are no longer relevant for the reading of their works, he famously pronounced "The Death of the Author." In Barthes's essay, which I am not treating here as a theoretical argument but as a source for an expression that has been widely circulated, death signifies the end of authority over the meaning of the text. Roth complicates the perception of death as a loss of authority by showing that, if it coexists with life, it may, in fact, increase authority.

A sense, voiced by several critics, that the images and names of authors (but not necessarily their production) are omnipresent in contemporary media is an important context for the Roth's fascination with absent presence. Roth experienced this phenomenon as a celebrated author and has become a proof-text for discussions of it. Particularly around the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Roth became a household name, and his personal life became the matter of public interest to such an extent that he was the subject of gossip and talk show jokes. Even when looking at the time when Roth's celebrity was at its height, we should not forget that star authors are a common phenomenon in the contemporary literary world. As British cultural scholar Joe Moran notes in a book published in 2000, "there is no avoiding authors in contemporary American culture" (1). This sense of the ubiquity of literary authors and the disquiet about this over-presence was visible in the 1970s, when Roth was experiencing the height of his celebrity and writing *The Ghost Writer*. For example, in a 1975 *New York Magazine* piece, prominent critic Alfred Kazin complains that the successful authors are "public figures [...] playing the role of confessional prima donnas" (36). The main target for Kazin's critique is Norman Mailer, but Roth is also listed as a culprit. Kazin pits Mailer, Roth, and others against less successful writers who are rarely seen. One of his examples for such writers is Bernard Malamud, who some identify as the inspiration for E. I. Lonoff, a central character in *The Ghost Writer*. But Kazin also invokes the more dramatically reclusive Thomas Pynchon and J. D. Salinger. The title of Kazin's piece, "The Writer as Sexual Show-Off: Or, Making Press Agents Unnecessary" suggest that writers do enough self-promotion to make press agents redundant. It also exhibits the moral distaste Kazin feels for such showing off. He represents many other critics, intellectuals and writers for whom this over-presence is a problem. Or, as Moran formulates it: "There is a danger then that the anti-individualizing effects of the literary marketplace—the creation of the author as a 'personality' by a vast network of cultural and economic practices—will actually threaten the whole notion of authorship [...]"

taking away agency from the author" (*Star Authors* 61). This sense that authors are overly available and that this availability may be detrimental to their power provides some of the impetus for Roth's contemplation of authors as absent, so absent that they are dead.

Loren Glass argues a similar point in his reading of the entire range of Roth's Zuckerman books from *The Ghost Writer* to *Exit Ghost*, the final installment when Zuckerman is in his seventies. Glass writes that Zuckerman, and the deaths and near deaths he faces in several of the novels, were "conceived as a way of managing the conflict between [...] posthumous fame and the instantaneous contemporaneous celebrity" (224). In imagining the death of an author-character, Roth can supply an image of himself as already dead and therefore eligible for "posthumous fame." Glass's "fame" is associated with death because it is usually granted by posterity long after the author is dead. Still, it seems that, for Glass, Roth's interest in death is mainly a result of a desire for literary immortality, not a focus of interest in and of itself. I will show that death itself is crucial in Roth's conception of authority by giving a more extensive reading of *The Ghost Writer* than Glass provides.

### Roth's Living-Dead Writers

In *The Ghost Writer*, the aspiring writer Nathan Zuckerman invents a story in which Anne Frank survives the Holocaust but still has the world continue to think she is dead. One crucial reason why Zuckerman could come up with such a narrative is that in the course of the novel he learns that living authors may gain power by seeming dead and alive at the same time.<sup>3</sup> *The Ghost Writer* presents a portrait of an artist as a young man at the same time as it parodies the tradition of artistic coming of age narratives. Unlike James Joyce's paradigmatic novel, Roth's text depicts only one episode in the process of its protagonist's coming of age: Nathan Zuckerman, a Jewish American writer just starting out, visiting E. I. Lonoff, the experienced but reclu-

sive writer, in his New England home, where they discuss literature. Later, marital disputes between the Lonoffs ensue, partly because of Zuckerman and partly because of Amy Bellette, an ex-student of Lonoff's who is also staying over. During the night, Zuckerman discovers that Bellette and Lonoff were lovers. He then imagines or writes a narrative in which Bellette is in fact Anne Frank under a false name. The narration of the story of Anne Frank makes up the "Femme Fatale" section, while the other three sections of the novel are about Zuckerman's evening, night, and morning at the Lonoffs'. The novel as a whole is narrated by Zuckerman in hindsight roughly twenty years after the events, but the "Femme Fatale" section can be seen as written during the visit to Lonoff, or soon thereafter.

The trope of the author as both dead and alive appears in other novels by Roth as well, especially those featuring Roth's alter-ego, Zuckerman. In *The Prague Orgy* (1985), Zuckerman travels to Czechoslovakia in order to retrieve literary manuscripts written by a victim of the Nazis. In one of the sections of *The Counterlife* (1986), Zuckerman dies, is commemorated in a eulogy he wrote himself, and comes back to his lover as an authorial ghostly interviewer; in the next section, Zuckerman is alive again. In *I Married a Communist* (1998), Murray Ringold is an author-like figure because he narrates much of the novel. His narrating voice comes to Zuckerman's ears, haunting and disembodied in the dark; and, by the end of the novel, we hear of his death. In *Exit Ghost* (2007), Zuckerman, who seems to be near death himself,<sup>4</sup> encounters a dying Amy Bellette who imagines the writer E. I. Lonoff's ghost speaking and dictating to her.

We find dead authors in non-Zuckerman books as well, such as in *Operation Shylock* (1993), where the protagonist is named Philip Roth. The fictional Roth discovers that there is a man in Israel who is presenting himself as Philip Roth the novelist and is advocating the return of Jews to Europe. "Roth" travels to Israel and at one point enters the imposter's hotel room and looks at him sleeping. He muses: "So this [...] is what I look like sleeping [...] This is what I would look like if I were to die tonight in bed. This is my corpse. I am sitting here

alive even though I am dead. I am sitting here after my death [...] I am sitting here and [...] I do not exist. I left half an hour ago. I am here sitting *shivah* for myself" (183). While staring at his own uncanny double, his thoughts almost inevitably reach death and nonexistence. From contemplating his double as a corpse, he moves to thinking of himself as a ghost, invoking the cinematic image of a spirit departing the body and looking back at its former home.<sup>5</sup>

### Lessons from Lonoff

In *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman is searching for a lesson on how to gain literary authority, the power to influence people through literature, and one's role as an author. The novel helps us see why the need for authority is urgent for the young Zuckerman. Just before leaving New York for the Berkshires where the opportunity to meet Lonoff arises, Nathan Zuckerman enters into a conflict with his father, Dr. Zuckerman. Nathan has written a story, "Higher Education," based on an old family feud over money. Dr. Zuckerman demands that his son refrain from publishing this story. He argues that a tale depicting greedy Jews will provide fuel for anti-Semites. Nathan refuses to heed his father's demands (these demands are backed up by a letter from a prominent Jewish judge), and Dr. Zuckerman is attacking Nathan's right to publish and thus undermining his authority. The family troubles receive extensive treatment only in the second section of the novel. However, it is important to note that Zuckerman (as the older narrating I) makes sure to insert a reference to it into his exposition of Lonoff's character in the first section of the novel. By presenting the conflict over "Higher Education" early on in *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman shows that it determines his reasons for visiting Lonoff. Zuckerman needs to learn how to gain enough literary authority to defend himself from his father and the judge. He thinks that the teacher he needs is the reclusive E. I. Lonoff.

Lonoff is a figure of both literary authority and death. He is associated with authority and status by the high regard Zuckerman affords him. Unlike his authority, Lonoff's deathliness is hinted at rather than pronounced explicitly. Zuckerman describes how Lonoff was at one point so well-hidden and unknown that some assumed he was dead: "Even among his readers there had been some who thought that E. I. Lonoff's fantasies about Americans had been written in Yiddish somewhere inside Czarist Russia before he supposedly died there [...] from injuries suffered in a pogrom" (*The Ghost Writer/GW* 10). The stories project a distant author figure. One expression of this sense of remoteness is that some readers imagine the stories were written by a man who was not only a Yiddish author from Russia but who must already be dead. Furthermore, the only picture Zuckerman sees of Lonoff before their meeting is a "watery sepia portrait" (10), taken before 1927. Sepia photographs with their red tint obscure the view of the subject, making it seem ancient and otherworldly (even more than black-and-white pictures, which are often sharp). When the only photograph existing of a person is as a young man, the reason is usually that he died an untimely death. This image makes Lonoff's authorial production and existence after 1927 figuratively posthumous. If the sepia image is not enough to suggest Lonoff's death, then consider that the portrait in question is on the flap of a book called *It's Your Funeral*. Through these moments, Lonoff is presented to us as a person who is both alive and dead at the same time.

The novel links reclusiveness and seeming death, and Lonoff's seclusion is part of the power of the dead author. The out of the way Berkshire home is described in the first sentence of the novel as a "hideaway" (3). The draw of reclusiveness is irresistible by the time Zuckerman examines Lonoff's living room: "Purity. Serenity. Simplicity. Seclusion. All one's concentration and flamboyance and originality reserved for the grueling, exalted, transcendent calling. I looked around and I thought, This is how I will live" (5). A list of nouns separated into different sentence fragments for emphasis in describing the living room is followed by another list of Lonoff's qualities (con-

centration, etc.), and rounded off by adjectives (grueling, etc.) describing the writer's calling. All these descriptors culminate in one thought: "This is how I will live." The capitalization of "This" signifies the beginning of a new sentence-thought, but it also functions to reify the above description into a unified way of life, a "This" that Zuckerman plans to imitate in order to become an author.

However, the full lesson for Zuckerman is not that authors need to be truly dead or even *seem* absolutely dead in order to have impact. In fact, the novel also features the opposite idea that authors must also seem alive and present. These are not contesting points of view but they complete one another. Ironically, Lonoff, who embodies the ideal of the absent author, tries to show Zuckerman that absence is not sufficient for literary authority. Though he himself is distant enough to seem as good as dead, he wants something else for Zuckerman. When Zuckerman expresses his desire to live permanently in a rural setting as a recluse, Lonoff cautions: "Don't try it [...] If your life consists of reading and writing [...] you'll wind up like me. Fantasy for thirty years" (GW 30). As he presents it, Lonoff chose an unexciting personal life, one that seems like a living death. He describes his way as unsatisfactory and restricting "his range of imagination." Addressing his wife, but at the same time advising Zuckerman, he says: "an unruly personal *life* will probably better serve a writer like Nathan [...] His *work* has turbulence—that should be nourished" (33; emphasis added). Lonoff speaks of the creative process and not about influencing readers, but his advice also suggests that authors need to present themselves as alive, or at least as people who have lived. The important point here is that the living authors in *The Ghost Writer* will not find it in their interest to be perceived as fully dead, but rather as both dead and alive at the same time.

The idea that the liminal space between life and death can be a source of authority is already present in Roth's early story "The Conversion of the Jews" (1958; *Goodbye Columbus*). In this story the twelve-year-old Ozzie runs to the roof of the synagogue after Rabi Binder, the socially sanctioned authority figure, has hit him (the con-



text of an argument about God's ability to impregnate a woman without intercourse). On the roof, Ozzie gains so much authority that he is able to make his mother, Rabi Binder, an elderly Jewish custodian, his classmates, and a group of firemen get on their knees and admit the feasibility of the Immaculate Conception. This is possible because the adults believe that Ozzie is threatening to commit suicide. On the level of realistic motivations, the adults' fear for the child and/or their reputations gives him power over them. The story, though, also invites a figurative reading by way of its religious overtones and by setting the scene in the moments when day turns into night. Roth secures dusk's place as a figure for the border between life and death when he writes: "If one should compare the light of day to the life of man: [...] sunset to—the dropping down over the edge to—to death; then [...] that moment the day ways fifty years old" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 157). The religious overtones of the authority of the dead come to fruition when Ozzie's mother worries that her son will become a "martyr" (155). On this figurative level, Ozzie is invoking the power of placing oneself on the brink of death, a power that seems to have held interest for Roth since early in his career.

Henry James's "The Middle Years" (1893), a story Zuckerman reads "two times through" during the night spent at Lonoff's study (113), offers Zuckerman an additional lesson about the power of a dying author, one who is between life and death, not simply dead. James's story, which Zuckerman summarizes as part of the text of the novel, shows the power a dying novelist, Dencombe, has over one adoring reader, Dr. Hugh, a personal physician to a wealthy countess. Hugh attends Dencombe's sickbed out of admiration for the writer's craft. Doing so, he neglects the countess, who disinherits him just before she dies. Hugh pays dearly for his devotion but is not sorry for his choice. R. Clifton Spargo, writing about Roth's novel, argues that James's story is an "allegory about the dangers of literary devotion and overly receptive reading" (97). Making readers more receptive to the author is exactly what literary authority, as I have defined it, does. Significantly for my argument here, Hugh's sacrifice happens at the time

when Dencombe's health is failing rapidly, and his death seems eminent. Part of Dencombe's power over Hugh derives from his place on the threshold between life and death.

Dencombe seems to exert power not only over Hugh but over the characters in *The Ghost Writer* as well. Zuckerman reads "The Middle Years" because he finds a quote from its final deathbed scene above Lonoff's writing desk.<sup>6</sup> Zuckerman first writes that he "could understand why [Lonoff] might want these three sentences hanging over his head while beneath them he sat turning his own sentences around" (76-77). This observation suggests that these sentences about the task of the artist are important, a kind of motto for Lonoff. That the sentences "hang over his head," the constant danger of the Sword of Damocles, is ominous, and—even before we learn that they came from the mouth of the dying novelist—suggests how connected they are to dying. Lonoff endowed these sentences with great authority. Before quoting the death scene verbatim (signifying that he too paid close attention to it), Zuckerman writes that "down both margins of the final page describing Dencombe's death, Lonoff had penned three vertical lines [...] the six surgically precise lines seemed to simulate the succession of fine impressions that James's insidious narrative about the novelist's dubious wizardry had scored upon Lonoff's undeluded brain" (115). The lines on the page reflect physical impressions on Lonoff's brain. The medically tinted vocabulary, perhaps inspired by Dr. Hugh's profession—"surgically," "insidious," "brain"—suggests this physicality is mixed with the fantastic "wizardry" and the aestheticist's "fine impressions." The powerful impressions made by this scene are the reason why Lonoff has a quotation from it "hanging over his head." Zuckerman understands that the author-character's dying is part of what makes the story and that quote impressive, especially for Lonoff. Zuckerman learns from the story that the liminal position between life and death might give a story and its author power.

The dying author and the author thought of as dead when he is in fact alive both inhabit the border between these two states. The title of

the novel *The Ghost Writer* gives us a perfect image for this state: the ghost. In the novel none of the characters works as ghostwriters; no one here produces texts that will be published under somebody else's name. At the same time, all writers in the novel seem to be to some extent ghosts, both in this realm and in one that is beyond mortal reach, or, as in Zuckerman's case, aspiring to such a state. In American popular culture as well as a variety of literary traditions, the ghost is a figure stuck between two worlds, having powerful effects on reality without being tangible or fully present. Zuckerman learns that authors can have such a power as well.

### Zuckerman's Higher Education

Up till now I have been describing the novel in terms of an educational experience. I have chosen to do so because the novel returns again and again to themes of teaching and learning. For instance, Lonoff is a part-time creative writing teacher, and the title of the section which describes Lonoff is "Maestro," a word not only suggesting a mastery of an art form but also a role as a teacher.<sup>7</sup> Beyond the content of the novel, there is the context of its writing to justify a focus on education. Mark McGurl's influential history of post-1945 American literature, *The Program Era*, demonstrates the crucial place universities and especially creative writing programs have had in shaping American fiction. In an intentional hyperbole, he suggests that perhaps all contemporary literary novels "must be considered campus novels" (47). He furthermore connects this trend to the prevalence of authorial self-reflexivity, "autopoetics" as he calls it, in postwar fiction (see esp. 46-56). *The Program Era* uses Roth as a prime exemplar for this autopoetic impulse, though it does not give *The Ghost Writer* significant attention. McGurl's argument shows that some of the most fruitful questions to ask of a contemporary novel would revolve around education and its relation to writing. It is, therefore, important to examine the process of

learning about the power of the liminal space between life and death (and not only the forms taken by this power in the novel).

Lonoff is not the only source through which Zuckerman discovers that death and absence are important for literary authority. In fact, this sense is rooted in a specific context in the history of approaches to literary reading and education. This context is enacted in the novel through Zuckerman's descriptions of his undergraduate education at the University of Chicago, where Roth was briefly a graduate student. There, Zuckerman was exposed to the idea that authors are absent and should remain so. The years in which Zuckerman (and Roth) studied at the University of Chicago were the years in which New Critical Formalism was the dominant movement in American academia. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley had published the first version of their now famous "The Intentional Fallacy" in 1946, urging scholars to disregard even the clearest statement of intentions by the author when assessing and analyzing their work (see Wimsatt 3-21). Even if an author is still with us there is no reason to call on him to explain his writing, they insist. In a somewhat mocking tone they suggest that we should not, "in the spirit of a man who would settle a bet [...] take advantage of the fact that [T. S.] Eliot is still alive" and write "to ask what he meant" (18). In essence, they suggest that all writers should be considered as already dead, and they should always be seen as beyond reach. Their continuing physical presence is severed from their roles as authors.

New Criticism, which is never mentioned in the novel, resembles in some ways two other views of literature and education that *are* cited in the novel: the one put forward in E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, and the philosophy of education which Robert Maynard Hutchins preached and put into practice at the University of Chicago. These surely left their mark on Zuckerman, otherwise the older narrator would not have mentioned them at all. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, first published in 1927, is closer to New Criticism, even if it is less important to Zuckerman's development. This collection of lectures enters the novel in a roundabout fashion. Zuckerman calls his class-

mates in the creative writing course “orthodox Forsterites” because they criticize Zuckerman’s story for not having a “round” narrator (63), thereby alluding to Forster’s well-known distinction between flat and round characters (see Forster 73-89). In *Aspects*, “flat” is not always a derogatory term—some novels (those by Dickens, for instance) are best served by a fair share of flat characters. However, the orthodox Forsterites seem to be more strict than the letter of the law. Zuckerman is not an infidel, but more of a reform or non-practicing Forsterite. He is influenced by the British novelist’s views, even as he recognizes their limitations and potential for being ridiculed. This last point is expressed when in the same scene, Zuckerman thinks of a certain voluptuous woman as being round; in Forster’s terms, she would be considered a flat character, of course.

Setting aside this sexist joke, Forster adds to our understanding of Zuckerman’s education because *Aspects of the Novel* is manifestly ahistorical, striving to see all novelists as if they exist outside of “the stream of time” (14). Indeed *Aspects* as a whole puts great emphasis on technical choices and largely ignores political, cultural, historical, or even literarily-historical contexts. Indeed, the introductory lecture is explicit about this choice in a way that encourages thinking about dead authors as alive, and living ones removed to the realm where dead authors exist. While halfheartedly apologizing for not being a true scholar, not being one who might contextualize the novels in their historical moment or in literary development, Forster suggests a better way to think of the writing of novels:

We are to visualize the English novelists *not* as floating down that stream [of time] [...] but as seated together in a room, a circular room, a sort of British Museum reading-room—all writing their novels *simultaneously*. They do not, as they sit there, think “I live under Queen Victoria, I under Anne, I carry on the tradition of Trollope, I am reacting against Aldous Huxley.” The fact that their pens are in their hands is far more vivid to them. They are half mesmerized, their sorrows and joys are pouring out through the ink, they are approximated by the act of creation [...] (9; emphasis added)

Before giving theoretical justification for this move, Forster bases his rhetoric on a vision of authors as they write. In this vision, history is canceled and all novelists who have ever lived (at least those he considers as worth reading) sit and work in the same room. He asks us to insert the authors into a sphere beyond time, where *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and *Ulysses* (1922)—both mentioned earlier as extreme points of reference for defining what a novel can be—are being written at the same time. In this vision, authors are not spirits: “The fact that their pens are in their hands is far more vivid to them.” They have hands; they feel the tool of their trade. Indeed, they even have personalities and personal histories: “their sorrows and joys are pouring out through the ink.” However, when Forster says “they are approximated by the act of creation,” his audience is meant to understand that when they write all novelists are together, that sharing a craft is far more meaningful than personal lives or even the fact that some are still living, while others are dead. Authors *qua* authors are always locked away in this spiritual timeless British Museum reading-room. One can imagine Zuckerman reading this text as part of his higher education and wondering how exactly one finds his way to this intangible room.

The second view of literature and education encountered by Zuckerman, Robert Maynard Hutchins's philosophy of education, sometimes called Secular Perennialism, also promotes the author as an absent presence. Hutchins was the president and then the chancellor of the University of Chicago between 1926 and 1951.<sup>8</sup> In broad terms, his theory of education stressed the role of the great books of the Western tradition as basic to the education of all students and as crucial to their functioning as citizens of a democracy. Zuckerman describes how, when leaving his parents' home for Chicago, he “was ready as any adolescent could be to fall headlong for Robert Hutchins' Humanities One” (12). In this introductory class, known as Humanities One, canonical texts, mostly in philosophy but also literature, would have been discussed *not* as historical artifacts valued as a way of learning about the past, but as pertinent ethical teachers for the

present and the future, “perennial” as the approach’s name suggests. This course is mentioned in the novel as contrasted to the Jewish education Zuckerman’s parents gave him, an education Zuckerman satirically describes as “discussions [...] about [...] the perils of intermarriage, the problem of Santa Claus, and the injustice of medical school quotas” (12). Their teachings concern the preservation of ethnic uniqueness. “Humanities One” would suggest to the students that cultural particularism is something they should leave behind if they want to be proper citizens of the West. Almost a century after Hutchins first implemented his ideas, it is almost too easy to see how he is particularistic in his own Eurocentric way. But, in his course, Western was the same as universal. This kind of ahistorical view as to what it is to be an educated person would prepare a young intellectual for the prospect of abandoning his particular—for Zuckerman—Jewish social connections for what he sees as a higher realm.<sup>9</sup>

One of the ways in which we can see that Zuckerman was affected by this set of ideas is found in the college essay he wrote about Lonoff. There, he “‘analyzed’ Lonoff’s style” (8), marking his Russian origins by comparing him to writers from a general Western canon who are also Russian: Chekhov and Gogol. Donald Kartiganer sees this interpretation as a reading that occludes Lonoff’s strength as a Jewish author. Taking a note from Harold Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence, Kartiganer claims that Zuckerman’s misreading protects his creativity from Lonoff’s influence (38-39). In my view, Zuckerman’s essay does not express his real view of Lonoff. In fact, Zuckerman’s discovery of Lonoff is almost simultaneous with his analysis of him as a Jewish writer. Kartiganer acknowledges (without drawing the same conclusion as I do) that Zuckerman’s paper is the kind of formalist reading that was encouraged by his teachers, a reading dealing with language but not identity (either the reader’s or the writer’s). Zuckerman’s fascination with Lonoff is actually due to their common Jewish background. However, the “feelings of kinship” is something that the young Zuckerman had to partially repress in his student essay in order to succeed in college (13). I am led to suspect

that, like many a good student, he wrote what his teachers wanted to read. In the process of summarizing this paper, he gives readers an idea of what he learned in the literature classroom.

### A Final Paper on Anne Frank

Zuckerman shows that he has learned and internalized this connection between authority and absent presence when he goes on to write a text that can be described as a final paper. I am speaking of the “Femme Fatale” section of the novel, the narrative of Anne Frank as Zuckerman reimagines her. “Femme Fatale,” it is clear, should be read as part of the story of Zuckerman’s coming into being as a writer. Indeed, in a letter to his editor, Aaron Asher, describing crucial revisions, Roth writes “Anne Frank is all Zuckerman’s invention – he needs to invent her, to save himself from the world of his fathers and judges” (qtd. in Hayes 172).<sup>10</sup> In the context of my paper, “Femme Fatale” is a text about an author who decides to make it appear as if she was dead, even though she is in fact alive. She inhabits the authoritative position of absent presence, under the extreme circumstances of pretending to be dead.

The starting point for Zuckerman’s reimagining of Anne Frank is Amy Bellette. When he first sees Bellette, before finding out that she is or was Lonoff’s lover, he thinks she might be Lonoff’s teenaged daughter. Because of her looks and imagined family connections, he is willing to wait seven years to marry her. From Zuckerman’s point of view, Bellette is—both sexually and intellectually—a titillating blank, inviting him to fill it with his fancies. In his most elaborate fictional account of her, he imagines that she is in fact a fellow Jewish writer, “the most famous” of all Jewish writers, Anne Frank (152). A creature of Zuckerman’s imagination, this Anne Frank is a living author.<sup>11</sup>

In “Femme Fatale,” Anne, having changed her name to Amy Bellette, immigrates to the United States where she becomes a student at Athena College, taking Lonoff’s creative writing class. Meanwhile, as



was in fact the case, her father, who she was sure had perished along with the rest of her family, survives. The transformation of the diary, a private text, into a book, the *Diary*, with a potential for influencing the public, was based on the assumption that she is dead. This logic is apparent in a 1972 draft of what much later became *American Pastoral* (1997), where a surviving Anne Frank lives in Prague and writes in a diary entry dated "Monday, Sept. 11, 1979": "if I had 'lived,' there would have been no 'Diary of a Young Girl,' because Daddy and I would not have to memorialize me" (qtd. in Shostak 125).<sup>12</sup> The importance of death to Anne Frank's status as a published, even canonical, author can help explain what Amy/Anne thinks of as "the improbable part" of her story (GW 129): why she does not come forward as Anne. Instead of reuniting with her beloved father, she decides to let "Anne Frank," a name that now also signifies a public figure, be seen as a dead author.

Some readers may think that the way Roth treats Anne Frank as a literary author is problematic. At face value, the fact that she was a diarist may suggest that she did not mean to publish and influence readers. However, in 1944 Anne Frank already wanted to publish a book about her experiences and started rewriting the diary with this end in mind (Stroom 60-62; Frank 578, 647). In describing her time in hiding, Roth makes sure his readers are aware of this intention, when he writes: "of course it had to eventually occur to any girl so *mad on books and reading* that for all she knew she was writing a book of her own" (137). He also quotes Anne Frank: "*my greatest wish is to become a journalist someday and later on a famous writer*" (138).<sup>13</sup> Even without knowing the historical Anne Frank's literary intentions, it is clear that in *The Ghost Writer* Anne Frank is treated as a fellow author: she takes a creative writing class with Lonoff, she is said to be the most famous Jewish author, and she compares her diary to notable books.

Amy/Anne believes that public knowledge of the fact that she survived will diminish the power of her text. Zuckerman's version of Anne's story, the only section of the novel to use the third-person focalized narration and not the first-person, begins several years after

the *Diary* is published, with Amy/Anne travelling to New York in order to view the Broadway production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. After seeing the play, she wants to call her father. However, she does not, because, as she explains to Lonoff, she can think of emerging from death only in terms of how it might impact the performance of the play (see GW 123). She is afraid that as a survivor her image will not be as powerful.

The possibility that coming out as a survivor would weaken her status as author first occurs to her after she spends a day in Boston reading her diary for the first time since the war. This scene takes place a short while after its publication in Dutch and before it appears in English.<sup>14</sup> When thinking about the reasons to remain hidden, she returns again and again to “the power of her book” and its ability to influence readers. But her power would work “only if she were believed dead” (145). Her seeming death is the precondition for her role as literary author: “dead she had written, without meaning to or trying to, a book with the force of a masterpiece to make people finally see” (145-46). Being dead or being thought dead in the present is what enables her to have written a masterpiece in the past. The present can affect the past, thereby showing how death and the semblance of death can foster literary authority. In the end, she decides to remain in hiding, dead to the world.

Significantly, Anne’s writing seems ghostly even to herself. On first reading her published diary, the sight of her name on the cover makes her feel that it is “Her book. Hers” (GW 134). But this perception of the book belonging to her quickly fades. In some ways, Anne’s position is the same as that of a reader encountering a book for the first time: “She still remembered most of what happened to her in the achterhuis [sic; Dutch for the house behind, known as the secret annex], some of it in minute detail, but of the fifty thousand words recording it all, she couldn’t remember writing one [such page].” When she encounters her diary in Boston she feels like reading “whole pages of her tribulations as new and strange to her as her native tongue” (134). The Anne who wrote the diary has disappeared.

She is not even available to herself. All that remains are traces etched on the page. This sense of alienation of Anne even to herself is part of what enables her to go on living as Amy and remain dead as Anne.

Of course, the estrangement is not complete. For Anne, the book is as “strange [...] as her native tongue.” This is an ambivalent simile because one’s native tongue is not “strange” to most people. However, for Anne, who has not read or spoken Dutch for many years, it is without a doubt strange but still not completely beyond her experience. Here Roth may be invoking Freud’s famous essay about E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” where Freud deciphers the German word “*unheimlich*” as signifying a frightful feeling of “something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (241).<sup>15</sup> Anne, in fact, writes “uncanny” in the margin of her book, echoing the English title of this essay. The passage from *The Diary* that elicits this feeling most powerfully is one where the real Anne Frank used text as a metaphor for self-alienation, putting her name into quotation marks: “*I view the affairs of a certain ‘Anne’ at my ease, and browse through the pages of her life as if she were a stranger*” (135). While the real Anne imagined herself as a character in a book in order to find some distance from herself, Zuckerman’s Anne feels the uncanny estrangement by actually finding her past self in a book. The *unheimlich* is what one would feel encountering when encountering a ghost or an authorial voice that seems available and intangible at the same time.

I have written earlier that, according to *The Ghost Writer*, authors gain authority by seeming both alive and dead at the same time. If this is the case, why does it seem desirable to Anne as Zuckerman imagines her to be perceived as only dead? The answer is that, in the *Diary*, Anne, as she characterizes herself, seems alive. This sense of her being alive means that, in order to seem both dead and alive, she must be perceived as dead outside of the *Diary*. The impression that Anne Frank is alive is shared by many readers, including Roth. In a letter about Anne Frank to his friend Jack Miles on December 2, 1977,

Roth writes that “She was, in the simplest and most attractive sense of the word, alive. And that is what is so crushing, and so representative, about her death” (Pierpont 116). Most of what Roth knew about Anne Frank comes from the *Diary*, so I assume that he is referring to her image there. Here, Roth highlights the contradiction that is crucial for his representation of Anne.<sup>16</sup> Part of the reason she seems so alive in the book is that, by the ending of the *Diary*, Anne is, of course, still not dead. Only in a postscript do readers learn about her murder. Because the *Diary* is not about death, but about life, Anne as Zuckerman imagines her thinks that she needs to remain dead. She cannot afford a postscript that says she is still present.

\* \* \*

As a conclusion, I want to open the possibility that “Femme Fatale” and *The Ghost Writer* as a whole can be seen as Zuckerman’s bid for authority. By writing about Anne Frank and Lonoff, Zuckerman intimately connects himself with the dead and thus gains some of the power of being both dead and alive. In Roth’s short novel *Everyman* (2006), the unnamed protagonist (Everyman) encounters a gravedigger, who by describing his craft helps Everyman commune with his dead parents and face his own mortality (see 171-82). Like this gravedigger, Zuckerman is alive but in touch with the dead. He builds his authority from this position. The same can be said of Roth. Readers know Roth, and not Zuckerman, is the one who wrote about these ghostly writers. Through associating himself with real and fictional authors who are at the border between absence and presence, life and death, Roth fosters his own persona as a partially available author and partially beyond reach. This association, which has roots in *The Ghost Writer*, emerges in Roth’s management of his authorial image up to, and including, the announcement of his retirement. With this announcement, he presents himself as being alive as a private

person, but dead as an author. Unlike some other forms of retirement, this position has the potential of helping maintain authority.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on my PhD dissertation carried out at the Hebrew University Jerusalem; its writing was supported by the Open University of Israel. I am thankful to the many people who have read and commented on my dissertation and paper. I am most grateful to Prof. Emily Miller Budick, who supervised my dissertation and was a wonderful mentor. Emily passed away while I was still working on this paper. It is dedicated to her memory.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. the *Connotations* debate on Atwood and “The Return of the Dead” in her fiction: [www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm](http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01613.htm).

<sup>3</sup>In focusing on the life-death duality, my reading runs in parallel to other readings of the novel that highlight such conflicts or binaries. For example, Ogden shows through close analysis of the novel’s opening how “life cannot be absorbed into fiction, as if one is contained within the other. Rather, the relationship between life and fiction is characterized by some kind of antagonism” (88).

<sup>4</sup>This was captured by a special issue of *Philip Roth Studies*, *Mourning Zuckerman* and the obituary that was included in it (Pozorski, “Mourning”; Jaffe-Foger, “Eulogy”). Some critics, however, have emphasized that Zuckerman does not actually die in *Exit Ghost* but rather reaches the end of the novel with some life left in him (Brühwiler 131; Shipe 203).

<sup>5</sup>The importance of death in Roth’s work has been widely discussed by academics as well as reviewers. A few examples would include: Glass; Jaffe-Foger, “Death”; E. Moran; Pinsker; Pozorski, “Confronting”; Wood.

<sup>6</sup>The quote is: “We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art” (77).

<sup>7</sup>Maestro, of course, carries a musical charge. However, the role of other art forms, including music, dance, visual art, embroidery, and film in the novel’s negotiation of absent present authorship is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>8</sup>Zuckerman meets Lonoff in 1956, three years after his last year in college (1953). This means that Zuckerman started school in 1949, having two years to study with Hutchins.

<sup>9</sup>More information about Hutchins and his “great books” courses can be found in Dzuback, especially 65-67. Gerald Graff discusses Hutchins in the context of the history of literary higher education in the U.S. (see 133-36, 163-67).

<sup>10</sup>Hayes's source is Roth's Letter to Aaron Ascher, Nov. 22, 1978. Box 97, Folder 6. Philip Roth Papers, Manuscript dept. Library of Congress.—Several critical readings of "Femme Fatale" see it in a similar way: Norman Ravvin sees Anne Frank as a "secret sharer capable of understanding [Nathan's] divided loyalties" (84), while Hana Wirth-Nesher writes that "Nathan has projected his own wishes and identity onto Anne/Amy" (26). Debra Shostak describes Frank as one of Roth's counterlives, a fictional self in dialogic relation to his other fictional selves. Reading drafts of an unpublished manuscript from 1972 where the idea that Anne Frank is still living first appears, and other unpublished material, Shostak deduces that Frank had had this role in Roth's thinking for many years (123-24).

<sup>11</sup>I will add that, in emphasizing Anne Frank's role as author, I do not mean to suggest that interpretations stressing her role as a victim of the Nazis are mistaken; they are not. However, reinventing Anne Frank is useful for Zuckerman for reasons having to do with authorship.

<sup>12</sup>Shostak's source is "Original 1972 version of *American Pastoral*, PR 1998." Box 3 of 17, Accession 21, 771. Philip Roth Papers, Manuscript dept. Library of Congress. This manuscript can now be found in Box 39, Folder 1.

<sup>13</sup>The italics are in the original. In this context they signify quotations from the Dutch *Diary*, not emphasis.

<sup>14</sup>This day is narrated as part of a third-person paraphrase of Amy/Anne's story told to Lonoff after she has attended the play. In other words, the day in Boston is depicted later in the novel even though it predates the play and the confession of her true identity to Lonoff.

<sup>15</sup>See David Gooblar's essay for an extensive discussion of the importance Freud had for Roth during the period before and during the writing of *The Ghost Writer*.

<sup>16</sup>Roth is far from idiosyncratic in this view of Anne as "alive." As Rosenfeld argues, she is seen by her readers as "a young [...] vivacious girl full of life" (248). Or, as Spargo puts it, in connection with the production of the play: "If early reservations about the stage-worthiness of the *Diary* had turned on the morbidity of its subject matter, as well as on the more fundamental question of whether audiences could reasonably be expected to identify with characters who were already dead, Anne's youth and romantic hopefulness seemed to offer a way out for all involved with adapting the *Diary*." Accordingly, "the *Diary* was read through the most recognizable of everyday plots—the coming-of-age love story, or a tragically interrupted romance of two young lovers" (Spargo 99). It makes sense to turn the *Diary* into a play because Anne Frank seems to be recognizably alive even as we know she is deceased.

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