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Eng 376

"Not So Nice": Son-worship and spiritual adoption in *The Ghost Writer*

Funny, provocative, and never facile, Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* challenges assumptions about the life, the work, and the madness of art. The untamable novel resists ideological adherence, throws off shallow analysis, and never stoops to moralism. Nathan Zuckerman, an up-and-coming writer "to keep an eye on" (*Saturday Review)* has been in conflict with his otherwise supportive family over their depiction in one of his recent stories. Accordingly, his long-amicable relationship with his father suffers a dramatic break at a Newark bus stop. When Nathan is invited to the home of his literary idol, he hopes that E.I. Lonoff will adopt him as his "spiritual son". But Lonoff's literary life turns out less glorious than envisioned and more unhappy. Indeed, although Nathan may have expected glory and honor from an induction into the ascetic religion of art, he ultimately finds in Lonoff more of his father than he expected.

Nathan hints early on that his relationship with his father has been unsettled by his vocation as a fiction writer (10). We first witness this family drama in a scene between the author and his father, who insists that "'You are a good and kind and considerate young man. You are not somebody who writes this kind of story and then pretends it's the truth.' 'But I did write it,'" Nathan rebuts. "'You're not,'" pleads the father, shaking his son's shoulders just a little (95). How poignant! Relating the sound of the bus door, closing shut between him and his father, Nathan reflects "What I heard was the heartrending thud that follows the roundhouse knockout punch, the sound of the stupefied heavyweight hitting the floor." But what he instead saw "was my bewildered father, alone on the darkening street-corner by the park that used to be our paradise…" (96) Nathan understands the knockout punch he has administered to his father, by his story and by his leaving. Yet, that Nathan makes no move to turn around indicates the depth

of his alienation with his family. Not many pages later Nathan confesses that he went directly to the artist' retreat and then did not write to his family, for weeks (105). Leaving his father on the sidewalk in the rain might have been done simply in a flash of anger. But to not even write—after promising he would—indicates not merely teen angst, but that piercing alienation of the young artist's individuation. Tempers escalate further when Nathan's mother goes to great lengths to reach him at his rural literary retreat, all in order to plead that he write back to his father's friend, an uppity judge who, in a masterpiece of rhetorical manipulation, goes beyond a father's concern to an accusation of Anti-Semitism (107). When Nathan refuses to write back to the judge, his mother says "But—what about your father's love?" to which the restless young romantic declares "I am on my own!" One would expect the appeal of his father's love to impact a young man's decisions. Not so for Nathan—yet not because he does not want his father's love. Nathan's earlier exclamation, "The Big Three, Mama! Streicher, Goebbels, and your son!" rings as a darkly comic hyperbole that expresses not just anger, but—"your son!"—genuine emotional hurt at a savage indictment of his character. Indeed, Nathan doesn't declare his independence because he doesn't want his father's love, but because he is determined to be approved for who he actually is—rather than who his family demands he be.

As the young writer himself admits, he subsequently sought "patriarchal validation elsewhere" (10). Indeed he had traveled to the remote mountain-top home of "the most famous literary ascetic in America" (10) "to submit myself for candidacy as nothing less than E.I. Lonoff's spiritual son, to petition for his moral sponsorship and to win, if I could, the magical protection of his advocacy and his love" (9). We have a confession in Nathan's own reflective language, that his invitation to Lonoff's literary mountain hideaway became, for him, an opportunity to seek fatherly approval from a true aesthete who would understand his gift, unlike his rigid family. A recollection of three years prior, when Nathan met another literary hero, Felix

Abravanel, manifests more of Nathan's yearnings by revealing an earlier petition for literary adoption. Nathan confesses "But if I did not fall at [Abravanel's] feet straightaway…", before going on to detail his strategic restraint in Abravanel's company; apparently Abravanel's presence in a room triggers worshipful convulsions, lest we think Lonoff is the first prospective adoptive father Nathan has petitioned. Indeed, when Nathan was still in college, his work was read by Abravanel, whose reportedly juicy mistress suggested that—maybe—"Felix" should talk to Knebel (apparently Abravanel's publisher) about the young Mr Zuckerman. Naturally the "effect" on Nathan is "no more stunning" than if she had suggested that Felix would right away ascend to Heaven to discuss his "funny little mimeographed story" with Dostoyevsky, and return (62). Such comic hyperbole indicates just how stunned the young Nathan would have been at this casual proposal to generously put him on the literary map—and with a catapult—again indicating Nathan's eagerness for a literary father who would both affirm him personally and confirm him in his work as a great author in his own right. But as Nathan ultimately relates, Abranavel "wasn't looking for a 23-year-old son" (66). Nathan himself testifies as well that his experience with Abravanel was "why… I had mailed my four published stories to Lonoff" (66). And upon the conclusion of Nathan's first conversation alone with Lonoff, Nathan proclaims "I loved him! Yes, nothing less than love for this man with no illusions… that did it, released in me a son's girlish love for the man of splendid virtue and high achievement who understands life, and who understands the son, and who approves" (56). *And who approves*. Indeed. After having read Lonoff's fiction extensively, sharing an eventful dinner, and talking about literature, Nathan proclaims the dour aging writer's virtue, celebrates his "understanding" of "the son", and revels in his approval. Without a doubt Nathan believes his petition for "patriarchal validation" to have been granted by the most honored of literary saints—a stark improvement, he thinks, over his own rigid father.

Yet the unfolding night's events call into question just how much of an improvement Lonoff would be over the father Nathan already has. More than simply upsetting Nathan's idealizations, Lonoff turns out to be entirely less glorious than Nathan imagined. Nathan confesses this impression, actually, quite early on, telling us that upon first seeing Lonoff, Nathan thought he looked more like the "local superintendent of schools than the region's most original storyteller since Melville and Hawthorne" (4). Notwithstanding his later proclamation of Lonoff's virtues, then, Nathan actually admits early on that Lonoff doesn't strike the figure that he had in his imagination. While the pair's earliest conversations allow Nation's idealizations to continue, by the end of the novel, Nathan has witnessed some realities and guessed rightly at others, which threaten his previous romanticization of the acclaimed writer. Firstly there is the apparently miserable Mrs Lonoff, who breaks a wineglass against the wall at dinner and storms away crying that she "cannot bear having a loyal, dignified husband who has no illusions about himself *one second more!*" (42). Apparently Lonoff's literary asceticism is not celebrated by everyone. Later Hope proclaims along similar veins: "That's what he makes his beautiful fiction out of—not living!", and "She thinks with her it will be the religion of art up here. Oh, will it ever! … see how noble and heroic he is by the twenty-seventh draft" (173). Lonoff's spouse of at least thirty-five years condemns their tepid marriage in the hearing of the enamored young Zuckerman. She even mocks the "religion of art," calling into question the lifestyle Nathan had come to seek initiation into. The "she" Hope refers to is Miss Bellette, Lonoff's former student, and perhaps mistress. For Nathan, most upsetting of all to his worship is the matter of whether Lonoff slept with that "severe, dark beauty." Nathan mourns: "Oh, Father, is this so, were you the lover of this lovesick, worshipful, displaced daughter half your age? Knowing full well you'd never leave Hope? You succumbed too? Can that be? *You?*" Indeed, there are some possibilities even Nathan's imagination cannot withstand, "no more than any son can" (175). Perhaps the

humanization of Lonoff is completed when Nathan at last reflects upon him "pressing a dark hat over his bald head, he completed the picture of the chief rabbi, the archdeacon…" (180). No longer the "man of splendid virtue and high achievement," Lonoff is the "magisterial high priest of perpetual sorrows," who concludes Nathan's "rites of confirmation" (180). Nathan, then, has fully left his father's house and been initiated into the religion of art. Yet just before Lonoff goes out the door after his frustrated, fleeing wife, he makes this fittingly reflective remark: "I'd be curious to see how we all turn out someday. It could be an interesting story." Since Lonoff is referring to Nathan's work, he seems to wonder how the scene at hand—the breaking glass, Hope's walking out, Amy's escape—will "turn out" in Nathan's fiction. Even more interestingly, Lonoff adds "You are not so nice in your fiction," (180) perhaps suggesting that Lonoff isn't sure he and Mrs Lonoff will be depicted flatteringly. Thus the departing words of Lonoff, which conclude the novel, witness Nathan's adoptive literary-spiritual Father, asking the same question about Nathan's work as Nathan's biological father. A cryptic remark bears a subtle message that ties the novel's beginning to its end. Nathan has dramatically rejected one father only for the new one to raise the same concern about his literary son.

Even as Nathan's art sends him away from his father seeking an adoptive father, when Lonoff's real character unsettles Nathan's worship, Nathan must pursue his art without a father figure. In the first place Nathan's provocative stories unsettle his relationship with family, propriety, and tradition. In his imagination, the literature he loves so much may offer a substitute for what he has lost. But his meeting with his actual hero exposes all such imaginings as fantasy: the life of art doesn't cost him merely his father, but his fathers. Accordingly, on the novel's final page, Nathan is left alone in Lonoff's house with a stack of paper, suggesting that for better or for worse, Zuckerman is Lonoff's effective literary heir. The next Zuckerman book surely enlightens the outcome of their discipleship.