

Abstract

Nathan Zuckerman has been the distinct narrator-protagonist in Philip Roth's Zuckerman novels, starting from *The Ghost Writer* (1979). Different from the previous eight novels, *Exit Ghost* (2007) portrayed Zuckerman as an author, ill and senile. Coming back to New York city after his 11-year rural seclusion in search of medical cure, Zuckerman found he was a "no longer," no longer fit in the technologically-wrapped urban milieu, no longer following contemporary literary taste, and even failing to maintain what he used to be. More acute suffering is while his desire was ignited by a young but married woman, he no longer possessed the body to enact his passion. The "no-longer" correspondence between one's body and desire or mind gives rise to the re-configuration of the ethical relation, not only in love, in friendship but in writing.

Suffered from the impotence and incontinence, Zuckerman went through ethical difficulties marked by the idea of the body, the inevitable helplessness of old age and sickness. Corresponding to Emmanuel Levinas's idea of the radical passivity in face of the other as well as the embodied ethical subject, the ethical relation in *Exit Ghost* is worth-exploring in that the ethical responsibility implied a predicament when others made inescapable the corporeal declining and disabilities and requested a different ethical edge or possibility. That is, responding to others is one thing, but to preserve the sense of selfhood is *an-other*. The reading of Roth's *Exit Ghost* is like the extension of the loop of Levinas's ethics in which the other was put ahead of the consciousness of the self, the ipseity. The other half of the ethical loop presented in *Exit Ghost* was a situation in which the self was radically passive and vulnerable in *face* of one's own body as the Other.

Key words: body, Levinas, exit ghost, illness, senility

Exit Ghost (2007), claimed to be the last one of Philip Roth's Zuckerman series, starting from *The Ghost Writer* (1979), portrayed Nathan Zuckerman in his senility and serious illness coming back from his 11-year seclusion to New York for the purpose of better medical cure but simultaneously involving himself in various struggles made acute by his physical condition both in terms of being a man and a writer. This novel actually presents its significance partly in that the "ghost" appears in the titles of the first and the last novels of Zuckerman series, seemingly implicating a message that should not be ignored—what does the "ghost" designate or how does it string the Zuckerman stories? Does it refer to Zuckerman's father, the writing idol, the ethnic background, the changing environment, new generation, one's own desire, or even himself? Among these various connotations, what are their relationships among each other and how do they contribute to more sophisticated reading of Roth's writing? To narrow down the focus, I take the "ghost" in *Exit Ghost* as the point of departure and explore how Zuckerman, being ill and senile, perceived what the "ghost" was. And, as the word designates, the exploration of the "ghost" will go from what was the invisible but perceivable force haunting and even overwhelming him.

The first hint to the mystery of the "ghost" could be found in Roth's explication about what concerns him in writing *The Ghost Writer*—"the difficulties of telling a Jewish story—How should it be told? In what tone? To whom should it be told? To what end? Should it be told at all?—was finally to become *The Ghost Writer's* theme" (183 Lee). In terms of Zuckerman books, the meaning of the "ghost" starts from his obsession with his ethnic background which is involved with great ethnic suffering and pain as an ineradicable historical trauma. Hence, as a writer, he had intended to write with a liberated and inspiring state of mind and simultaneously was expected to take the responsibility of being a Jewish writer. The dilemma was that the definition of being a Jew as a sufferer was contrary to his actual life experience in American. However, he was doomed to shoulder the ethnic trauma and responsibility, as he stated that "(b)eing a Jew in New Jersey was comical just because it was somehow bound up with these ghastly events" (Finkelkraut 128). That is the aspect that most of the critics elaborate about Roth's struggle of being a writer and its limitations coming from his ethnic restraints.

What is worth-noting is that the ghostly shadow of being a Jewish writer has been intertwined with that of being a man in pain and illness in several of Zuckerman books, especially the state of being senile and seriously ill in *Exit Ghost*. That is, with the frail corporeal state emphatically depicted, it is not difficult to find that the "ghost" must be closely related to the body. With the discussion of this paper, I would like to shed light on another side of Roth's writing—his concern with the *human* of being a writer. The analysis will start from his using "ghost" in the titles of

Zuckerman series and examine how it is concerned with the sense of body, as the ghost originally means the bodiless being. So, while Zuckerman was losing control of his body and nearly ended up with being a “no-longer”, does that mean he himself was becoming the ghost? In addition, if being a Jewish is what Zuckerman was obliged to make response to in writing, then the body is definitely something else that Roth was seriously concerned about. Hence, to get a clearer picture of the “ghost,” I would take the body (especially in seniority and illness) as the axis to examine the possible implications. Specifically speaking, with the intension to better understand the intriguing idea of the “ghost”, this paper mainly aims to unravel the ethical reconfiguration of the body presented in this novel to examine how such physical condition influences the interaction with others, writing and even oneself.

I. Body in Levinas’s Ethical Relation

The exploration of the ethical relation is based on Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of ethics—the obliged responsibility for others, instead of the criteria of social morality, telling the right from the wrong. The body, undeniably, functions as the essential facet to interact with the others. Espousing Roth’s presentation of one’s senility and sickness with Levinas’s ethics is adequate owing to Roth’s concern with the body especially in the way he portrayed Zuckerman as a character suffering from cancer in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1998) and encountered with the death of his father in *Patrimony* (1996). When asked about the relationship between his writing and the places he stayed, Roth once responded that “Now it seems to me that what I’ve had instead of Newark or Chicago or Mississippi or Philadelphia has been the human body. There’s my terrain—and in more books than this one. When I was writing *The Anatomy Lesson* I made a list of novels about illness and disease” (Finkelkraut 140). Roth’s concern with physical pain has been resumed in his later works. However, along his portrayal of the inevitable corporeal suffering, Roth seems to imply an ethical angle that evolves around the body. That is, by giving the body its due in being, Roth means to probe into people’s inevitable relation with it, something that they are obliged to make response to as well as being responsible for.

In *Totality and Infinity* (1979), Levinas contends,

Life is a body, not only lived body (*corps propre*), where its self-sufficiency emerges, but a cross-roads of physical forces, body-effect. In its deep-seated fear life attests this ever possible inversion of the body-master into body-slave, of health into sickness. *To be a body* is on the one hand to stand on the earth, to be in the *other*, and thus to be encumbered by one’s body. (164)

That is, life can do without the body. But what does the body mean? Levinas

maintains that it is more than a tool or a medium to the self. Instead, two prominent aspects should be taken into consideration to see how the body fosters an ethical relation—the relation with the Other.¹ First, the body is the everlasting channel or opening in which we are situated in an incessant process of perceiving and thus helplessly make responses to the events, the people and the world around us. More important is that the relation goes prior to our consciousness, or more precisely, the sense of ourselves, since Levinas maintains that

(c)onsciousness does not fall into a body—is not incarnated; it is disincarnation—or, more exactly, a postponing of the corporeity of the body. . . . To be conscious is precisely to have time . . . to have a distance with regard to the present itself, to be related to the element in which one is settled as to what is not yet there” (1979: 165-66).

So, what is incarnation—to have a body? In *Humanism of the Other*, Levinas remarks that “(t)he body is a sensing sensed Sensing, it nevertheless remains on this side, the side of the subject; but sensing, it is already on that side, the side of objects . . .”(16). With the body, the subject could not help being cast in a relation with the surrounding objects. Yet, what marks the body as the sensing sensed, the plane for the subject-object interaction, is the sensibility of the body. The sensibility means an opening, “the stripping of the skin exposed to wound and outrage. Opening is the vulnerability of a skin offered in wound and outrage beyond all that can show itself, beyond all that of essence of being can expose itself to understanding and celebration” (63). With the comparison of the stripping of the skin and the exposure to wound and outrage, Levinas aims to stress the vulnerability and passivity of the self in face of the Other via the body. Moreover, the passivity and vulnerability of the self indicate an asymmetrical relation in which the self is obliged to take responsibility.

Second, while Levinas means to draw on the notion of the body to explicate the ethical relation with the Other, Philip Roth demonstrates another ethical dimension embedded. The body, to Roth, is not just something that one cannot do without by which we assert ourselves and interact with others; moreover, it conveys messages which are beyond our comprehension and even override the self who feels impeded and dominated. That is, the body is not only the plane in which the unavoidable ethical relation with the Other itself in which the self has to take responsibility for.

¹ The Other and the other(s) have been alternatively used by Levinas and could seem pretty confusing to the reader. The other(s) mean people that we communicate or interact with in life while the Other convey the concept of alterity or otherness which is perceived in the sensibility and is the property that we encounter in face of the other(s). But, it is not the equivalent of the other(s), as Levinas remarks that the Other “arises behind all collection of being, as the one to whom I express what I express. . . . He is neither a cultural signification nor a simple given. He is primordially, *sense* because e lends it to expression itself, because only through him can a phenomenon such as signification introduce itself, of itself, into being” (1972: 30). Another prominent message here is that the Other has closely related to the body where our sense lies in.

The suffering and incontinence of the body makes great and inevitable impact on one's interaction with others. The following discussion of the ethical reconfiguration of the body in *Exit Ghost* focuses on the ethical relation established by dint of the body but also examines how the body acts as the Other and influences one's relation with others.

II. *Here and Now with Others*

Exit Ghost resumes Roth's concern with illness and death, making acute the physical perception and condition by portraying Nethan Zuckerman turning old and obliged to move back to New York in search of medical help. As the sections of the novel was respectively titled "The Present moment," "Under the Spell," "Amy's Brain," "My Brain," and "Rash Moments," Roth made clear how the relation with others in a sense compelled one's focus on the present moments and the body, emphasizing one's physical condition as well as sensuous reactions toward the other. During his return to New York, Zuckerman perceived that challenge and lamented that "I had ceased to inhabit not just the great world but the present moment" (1). What he sensed is more than re-orienting himself to the city, as Zuckerman specified the situation—"All the city would add was everything I'd determined I no longer had used for: Here and Now. Here and Now. Then and Now. The Beginning and the End of Now" (41). Unable to seclude himself, he had to resituate himself and respond to the immediate—"Here and Now." However, it not merely involves the very place and the very moment but intriguingly entangles the memory, old friends, strangers and the desire circulating among them. The present moment is more than a temporal concept. It is also composed of the on-going events and people which he was encountered with, such as Amy Bellette's helpless and lonely life, Richard Kliman's annoying inquiry of E.I. Lonoff's personal background, and Zuckerman's own irresistible desire for Jamie Logan who wanted to swap their apartment in New York with Zuckerman's house in Bershires. Those encounters, beyond his anticipation and imagination, had tremendously challenged and changed his life as he commented about his re-exposure to different forces in the surroundings, in that

(a)s a onetime creature of intense responsiveness who'd over the preceding decade tautened himself into a low-keyed solitary, I'd got out of the habit of giving in to every impulse that crossed my nerve endings, and yet, in just my few days back, I had arrived at what might turn out to be the most thoughtless snap decision I'd ever made (43-44).

In his solitary life, Zuckerman had been suspended from responding to the constantly changing society. Now, being in New York, the sensibility was so furtively ignited that he was nearly despite himself, losing self-control. He was "no longer" able to

tackle with the occurrences and the encounters. Being rather vulnerable and passive, Zuckerman felt like “opening myself to the irritants, stimulants, temptations, and dangers of the present moment” (53). It is a situation in which he was overwhelmed, not knowing how to respond. Hence, he chose to shun away from Amy Bellette, avoided Kliman who tried to probe into some scandalous secret of E. I. Lonoff, his idol writer, and hesitated to choose either side of the presidential election.

III. Before the Body of the Other

Passive and vulnerable was Zuckerman among these encounters; however, one occasion that makes distinct his responsibility toward the ethical relation is his irresistible desire for Jamie Logan. Ever since he met the couple, Billy Davidoff and Jamie Logan, he was infatuated with her charm and tried every means to get close to her. On account of his physical incompetence and incontinence, he could barely take any actual action to reveal his love. His feelings and desire were resorted to the dialogues which he wrote as scenes of a play, virtually enacting the possible communication and interaction. In the dialogues, he appeared brave and even voluptuous in expressing how he felt about her, a verbal courtship, consciously knowing that he was physically restrained and sexually incapable. For this, Levinas’s idea of desire will shed light on the significance of Zuckerman’s passion for Jamie and how it presupposes the ethical relation with the other. First of all, “Desire, which traces sense in being, will be clarified by an analysis of the otherness toward which Desire tends” (1972: 30). It is a feeling accompanying our sensibility and presenting the inclination or connection with something other than us. Second, “the Desire for exteriority has appeared to us to move not in objective cognition but in Discourse, which in turn has presented itself as justice, in the uprightness of the welcome made to the face”(1979: 82). That is, the inclination toward the alterity cannot be subsumed under one’s conception or cognition but initiates a discourse, a written or spoken communication with the other. The discourse then is characterized by the sense of justice, meaning that no imposition of any idea or concept on the other is allowed or possible. Instead, it is an opening of the self, the welcome presented in face of the other as Zuckerman narrated, “(s)he had a huge pull on me, a huge gravitational pull on the ghost of my desire. This woman was in me before she even appeared” (66). Zuckerman’s desire for Jamie reveals it is a power embedded in the sensible which he could not control by himself, despite the fact that there was a great age gap between them and little chance to get together, no matter emotionally or physically. He couldn’t help indulging himself in the swirl of the passion by inquiring into the personal background of this couple and actualizing his desire aroused by the sensuous stimulus in writing dialogues between “He” and “She,” “a play of desire and

temptation and flirtation and agony—agony all the time—an improvisation best aborted and left to die” (146). Encountering Jamie is the sensuous experience that he did not anticipate but fostered an ethical relation with the other that could not be subsumed under his recognition or enacted at his will. The sensuous again illustrates the vulnerability of the self. The only difference is that he is active in making response to his desire for the other, though by writing down the imaginary dialogues between them. Zuckerman’s desire for Jamie marks a prominent aspect that Roth demonstrated—the other half of the ethical loop. The desire makes all the more conspicuous the agony resulting from the state of his body no longer able to realize his passion toward the woman he adored so much. That is, the ethical condition is not only related to the body and the sensibility but varies with the changing state of the body. Time becomes an important factor to the ethical situation.

Paradoxically, at the moment his desire was strongly ignited, the sense of impotence and incapability crippled his selfhood, as he delineated, “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 . . . (52-53)” and “I experienced the bitter helplessness of a taunted old man dying to be whole again. . . .” (67). As Zuckerman was torn between his sensuous desire for Jamie and the acute awareness of his physical situation, he was entangled in a vulnerable and helpless relation with the body. However, simultaneously, he regained the sense of the self in an ethical relation aroused by sensibility, bodily related. That is, the vulnerable and passive position does not reduce the self to mere passive or dormant entities. Interestingly speaking, the self is animated to assert more awareness of the self as well as taking responsibility for the other. The body serves as more than the channel to transmit the sensuous reaction towards the other and its environment. It acts as an ethical Other that the self could not help making responses to. The body on the one hand succumbs the self under its command in the senile corporeal condition and on the other makes conspicuous the sense of self in a sense. What is worth-noticing is that the self is no longer self-sufficient and autonomous with a clear center. Instead, the self, facing the Other (no matter it was the body or the desire intended for the lady he adored), was perpetually in the state of being obliged to make responsibility for the body in order to enact his passion and desire for the other. There is an Other before the other in Zuckerman’s adoration for Jamie Logan. And as Levinas maintains that “the first body is the body of the other, from whom my own embodiment—in its blend of passivity and activity—takes on its significance as moral compassion”(1972: xxxiii). Hence, in Zuckerman’s enchantment for Jamie, the ethical relation of course bases itself on the sensibility but is marked by the combination of the passivity and

activity. Though these two elements have an intriguing entanglement between each other, the latter has been demonstrated by Zuckerman's perception of hope and being eager to be whole (healthy) again. However, what Roth reveals here in the novel is that while the body of the other goes prior to the self, the awareness of the body of the self is aroused by the body of the other. Roth here elaborates the ethical reconfiguration of the body. The ethical loop here goes from the recognition of the body of the other to that of one's own body. In sensibility, one recognizes the body of the other and comes to know one's desire. And, from one's desire, one has to *face* the body of the self. So, the ethical relation is founded on sensibility which reveals not only one's desire but reminds one's relation with the body, something that one takes for granted but has its own distinct property, *other* than the self.

Except for Zuckerman's desire for Jamie Logan, two more examples will better elaborate the other half of the ethical loop. One is Zuckerman's meeting Amy Bellette again. She was the lady he was enchanted with while he was a novice writer in *Ghost Writer*. The other is the death of George who was an ambitious and aggressive journalist. Both make acute his sense of the aging and deteriorating state of the body.

In the section titled "Amy's brain," Amy told Zuckerman about her life with Lonoff and the miserable moments she had to endure. But what troubled her most was the brain tumor which seemed to steer her life, especially in the interaction with others. It was the situation when Zuckerman asked her to confirm if she promised to give Kliman the manuscript of Lonoff's novel, she was shocked, saying "I never would have done that. I couldn't have" (180). And while Zuckerman reminded her if her tumor might have done that, she was almost broken down, crying "Oh, Nathan, I had that damn tumor. And now I made mistakes in judgment. I made mistakes with him that were unforgivable even *with* the tumor" (196). Her life was helplessly dominated by her physical condition. So, at this moment of life, who was she? What was she? The physical condition revealed an inevitable relation with the body. How to face the overwhelming power of the body? In a vulnerable and passive situation, is there still any possibility to correctly express herself?

Such an ethical relation with the body is exemplified by the death of George Plimpton, a writer who oriented Zuckerman into the literary circle of New York, though they had not met for decades. His death means his losing the literary anchor, and for that he kept asking himself, "How could George be dead? . . . How could that happen to *him*? And how did what happened happen to me for these past eleven years? . . . I defined my life around that accident or that person or that ridiculously minor event?" (252) He still remembered how George told him, "It's our time. . . . It's our humanity. We have to be a part of it too" (253) but George's death had battered the last stroke of his hope as being a man and writer, especially he was informed of

George's death by Richard Kliman who was eager to uncover some scandal about Lonoff that was concealed from the public. He seemed to be lapsed into the state that was earlier lamented by Lonoff, "Reading/writing people, we are finished, we are ghosts witnessing the end of the literary era" (186). Besides, the generational clash makes more acute his helplessness, as he maintained that "I felt myself—despite myself—growing progressively smaller the more flamboyant the display of Kliman's self-delight"(256). But, while his contemporaries are "'no-longers,' losing faculties, losing control, shamefully dispossessed from themselves, marked by deprivation and experiencing the organic rebellion staged by the body against the elderly; they are 'not-yets,' with no idea how quickly things turn out another way" (256-57). The lament is not merely over the physical capacity but their social status that they used to define themselves.

So, from the body of the other, one gets closer to the body of himself. Zuckerman was actually clear about how the body deprived him of his ability to enact his desire or even keep intact his sense of self. His vulnerability in face of the physical condition not only reveals his helplessness but his attempt to regain the control over the body, though in vain. It was an irreversible relation with the body as the Other—a powerful and dominating counterpart that the self could not resist or evade as Zuckerman recalled the eroded memory and incontinent misspeaking as

something diabolical residing in my brain but with a mind of its own—the imp of amnesia, the demon of forgetfulness, against whose powers of destruction I could bring to effective counterforce—were prompting me to suffer these lapses solely for the fun of watching me degenerate, the ultimate gleeful goal to turn someone whose acuity as a writer was sustained by memory and verbal precision into a pointless man. (158-59)

It became a relentless part with him, but not of him. Such a body demanded his full responsibility and claimed not merely his ability to love and live as a man and a writer, similarly portrayed in *The Anatomy Lesson*, in which Roth focused not just on the body, but the order of "body when it blocks out all that is not body: the body in pain, when part, cultures high and low, language itself give way before the onslaught of physical suffering" (Kartiganer 44). He could not help but make responsibility for the body to function in daily encounters. For instance, he had to move to the city in search of medical treatment of his physical condition. Moreover, he had to resort his love to writing and only in the writing could he confess his admiration for Jamie in a bold and unscrupulous way. Sadly speaking, Zuckerman neither wrote for his distinct observation and insights on life nor for the aesthetic ideas, not to mention making it an amazing journey with language. His writing became the outlet for his desire which

was still fervent, while the body was no longer able to make it come true. Hence, at the end of the novel, he was pessimistically conscious of reaching the end of his effectiveness, and felt “(a)ll I left were instincts: to want, to crave, to have. And the stupid strengthening of my determination to act. At last, to act!” (276). Yet, no matter how strong his instincts and his determination to act are, he still could not get beyond the constraints set by the body, an Other that one is constantly obliged to take responsibility for.

The image of a door was employed at the end of the novel to illustrate the irresistible dilemma of his ethical relation. “A door between clarity and confusion, a door between Amy and Jamie, a door to George Plimpton’s death, a door swinging open and shut just inches from my face. . . . All I know is the door” (269). The ethical relation with his aging and incontinent body leaves him at a threshold of yes and no, life and death, self and other. Yet, it is impossible to completely deny the existence of his intention and will as Jamie evoked his desire for love and his responsibility to defend against Kliman’s inquiry about Lonoff’s privacy. Besides, all these intention and desire to love comes posterior to one’s response to the body, as Levinas stresses “(i)ncarnation is an extreme passivity; to be exposed to sickness, suffering, death, is to be exposed to compassion, and, as a self, to the gifts that costs” (1979: 195). That is why Zuckerman had to flee from the scene even after he successfully persuaded Jamie to come to his place for a talk. The title “Exit Ghost” may well explain that facing the body in illness and suffering, one is vulnerable, passive and deprived of the ability to take initiative in one’s relation with others, since he was obliged to make responsibility for the body which had lost its function in carrying out his intention and enact his desire. The ethical relation with the ghostly existence was presented in his writing where he could resume his interaction with others. The examination of *Exist Ghost* not merely reveals the ethical reconfiguration of the body but also indicates a different perspective on the notion of the ghost that Roth may imply here.

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