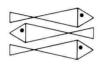
# PHIIP ROTH

THE GHOST WRITER

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# The Ghost Writer

### BOOKS BY PHILIP ROTH

Goodbye, Columbus
Letting Go
When She Was Good
Portnoy's Complaint
Our Gang
The Breast
The Great American Novel
My Life as a Man
Reading Myself and Others
The Professor of Desire
The Ghost Writer

# For Milan Kundera

# The Ghost Writer

## 1 Maestro

It was the last daylight hour of a December afternoon more than twenty years ago—I was twenty-three, writing and publishing my first short stories, and like many a Bildungsroman hero before me, already contemplating my own massive Bildungsroman—when I arrived at his hideaway to meet the great man. The clapboard farmhouse was at the end of an unpaved road twelve hundred feet up in the Berkshires, yet the figure who emerged from the study to bestow a ceremonious greeting wore a gabardine suit, a knitted blue tie clipped to a white shirt

by an unadorned silver clasp, and well-brushed ministerial black shoes that made me think of him stepping down from a shoeshine stand rather than from the high altar of art. Before I had composure enough to notice the commanding, autocratic angle at which he held his chin, or the regal, meticulous, rather dainty care he took to arrange his clothes before sitting—to notice anything, really, other than that I had miraculously made it from my unliterary origins to here, to him—my impression was that E. I. Lonoff looked more like the local superintendent of schools than the region's most original storyteller since Melville and Hawthorne.

Not that the New York gossip about him should have led me to expect anything more grand. When I had recently raised his name before the jury at my first Manhattan publishing party—I'd arrived, excited as a starlet, on the arm of an elderly editor-Lonoff was almost immediately disposed of by the wits on hand as though it were comical that a Jew of his generation, an immigrant child to begin with, should have married the scion of an old New England family and lived all these years "in the country"—that is to say, in the goyish wilderness of birds and trees where America began and long ago had ended. However, since everybody else of renown I mentioned at the party also seemed slightly amusing to those in the know, I had been skeptical about their satiric description of the famous rural recluse. In fact, from what I saw at that party, I could begin to understand why

hiding out twelve hundred feet up in the mountains with just the birds and the trees might not be a bad idea for a writer, Jewish or not.

The living room he took me into was neat, cozy, and plain: a large circular hooked rug, some slipcovered easy chairs, a worn sofa, a long wall of books, a piano, a phonograph, an oak library table systematically stacked with journals and magazines. Above the white wainscoting, the pale-yellow walls were bare but for half a dozen amateur watercolors of the old farmhouse in different seasons. Beyond the cushioned windowseats and the colorless cotton curtains tied primly back I could see the bare limbs of big dark maple trees and fields of driven snow. 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.

After directing me to one of a pair of easy chairs beside the fireplace, Lonoff removed the fire screen and peered in to be sure the draft was open. With a wooden match he lighted the kindling that apparently had been laid there in anticipation of our meeting. Then he placed the fire screen back into position as precisely as though it were being fitted into a groove in the hearth. Certain that the logs had caught—satisfied that he had successfully ignited a fire without endangering the two-hundred-year-old house or its inhabitants—he was ready at last to join me. With hands that were almost ladylike in the

swiftness and delicacy of their movements, he hiked the crease in each trouser leg and took his seat. He moved with a notable lightness for such a large, heavyset man.

"How would you prefer to be addressed?" asked Emanuel Isidore Lonoff. "As Nathan, Nate, or Nat? Or have you another preference entirely?" Friends and acquaintances called him Manny, he informed me, and I should do the same. "That will make conversation easier."

I doubted that, but I smiled to indicate that no matter how light-headed it was bound to leave me, I would obey. The master then proceeded to undo me further by asking to hear something from me about my life. Needless to say, there wasn't much to report about my life in 1956—certainly not, as I saw it, to someone so knowing and deep. I had been raised by doting parents in a Newark neighborhood neither rich nor poor; I had a younger brother who was said to idolize me; at a good local high school and an excellent college I had performed as generations of my forebears had expected me to; subsequently I had served in the Army, stationed just an hour from home, writing public-information handouts for a Fort Dix major, even while the massacre for which my carcass had been drafted was being bloodily concluded in Korea. Since my discharge I had been living and writing in a five-flight walk-up off lower Broadway, characterized by my girl friend, when she came to share

the place and fix it up a little, as the home of an unchaste monk.

To support myself I crossed the river to New Jersey three days a week to a job I'd held on and off since my first summer in college, when I'd answered an ad promising high commissions to aggressive salesmen. At eight each morning our crew was driven to some New Iersey mill town to sell magazine subscriptions door-todoor, and at six we were picked up outside a designated saloon and driven back to downtown Newark by the overseer, McElroy. He was a spiffy rummy with a hairline mustache who never tired of warning us-two high-minded boys who were putting away their earnings for an education, and three listless old-timers, pale, puffy men wrecked by every conceivable misfortune-not to fool with the housewives we found alone at home in their curlers: you could get your neck broken by an irate husband, you could be set up for walloping blackmail, you could catch any one of fifty leprous varieties of clap, and what was more, there were only so many hours in the day. "Either get laid," he coldly advised us, "or sell Silver Screen. Take your pick." "Mammon's Moses" we two college boys called him. Since no housewife ever indicated a desire to invite me into the hallway to so much as rest my feet-and I was vigilantly on the lookout for lasciviousness flaring up in any woman of any age who seemed even half willing to listen to me from behind her

screen door—I of necessity chose perfection of the work rather than the life, and by the end of each long day of canvassing had ten to twenty dollars in commissions to my credit and an unblemished future still before me. It was only a matter of weeks since I had relinquished this unhallowed life—and the girl friend in the five-flight walk-up, whom I no longer loved—and, with the help of the distinguished New York editor, had been welcomed for the winter months as a communicant at the Quahsay Colony, the rural artists' retreat across the state line from Lonoff's mountain.

From Quahsay I had sent Lonoff the literary quarter-lies that had published my stories—four so far—along with a letter telling him how much he had meant to me when I came upon his work "some years ago" in college. In the same breath I mentioned coming upon his "kinsmen" Chekhov and Gogol, and went on to reveal in other unmistakable ways just how serious a literary fellow I was—and, hand in hand with that, how young. But then nothing I had ever written put me in such a sweat as that letter. Everything undeniably true struck me as transparently false as soon as I wrote it down, and the greater the effort to be sincere, the worse it went. I finally sent him the tenth draft and then tried to stick my arm down the throat of the mailbox to extract it.

I wasn't doing any better in the plain and cozy living room with my autobiography. Because I could not bring myself to utter even the mildest obscenity in front of Lonoff's early American mantelpiece, my imitation of Mr. McElroy—a great favorite among my friends—didn't really have much to recommend it. Nor could I speak easily of all McElroy had warned us against, or begin to mention how tempted I would have been to yield, if opportunity had only knocked. You would have thought, listening to my bowdlerized version of what was a tepid enough little life history, that rather than having received a warm and gracious letter from the famous writer inviting me to come and spend a pleasant evening in his house, I had made this journey to plead a matter of utmost personal urgency before the most stringent of inquisitors, and that if I made one wrong move, something of immeasurable value to me would be lost forever.

Which was pretty much the case, even if I didn't completely understand as yet how desperate I was for his recognition, and why. Far from being nonplused by my bashful, breathless delivery—out of character though it was for me in those confident years—I should have been surprised to find that I wasn't down on the hooked rug, supplicating at his feet. For I had come, you see, 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. Of course, I had a loving father of my own, whom I could ask the world of any day of the week, but my father was a foot doctor and not an artist, and lately we had been having serious trouble in the

family because of a new story of mine. He was so bewildered by what I had written that he had gone running to his moral mentor, a certain Judge Leopold Wapter, to get the judge to get his son to see the light. As a result, after two decades of a more or less unbroken amiable conversation, we had not been speaking for nearly five weeks now, and I was off and away seeking patriarchal validation elsewhere.

And not just from a father who was an artist instead of a foot doctor, but from the most famous literary ascetic in America, that giant of patience and fortitude and selflessness who, in the twenty-five years between his first book and his sixth (for which he was given a National Book Award that he quietly declined to accept), had virtually no readership or recognition, and invariably would be dismissed, if and when he was even mentioned, as some quaint remnant of the Old World ghetto, an outof-step folklorist pathetically oblivious of the major currents of literature and society. Hardly anyone knew who he was or where actually he lived, and for a quarter of a century almost nobody cared. 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 (as, in fact, his father had nearly perished) from injuries suffered in a pogrom. What was so admirable to me was not only the tenacity that had kept him writing his own kind of stories all that time but that having been "discovered" and popularized, he refused all awards and degrees, declined membership in all honorary institutions, granted no public interviews, and chose not to be photographed, as though to associate his face with his fiction were a ridiculous irrelevancy.

The only photograph anyone in the reading public had ever seen was the watery sepia portrait which had appeared in 1927 on an inside jacket flap of It's Your Funeral: the handsome young artist with the lyrical almond eyes and the dark prow of a paramour's pompadour and the kissable, expressive underlip. So different was he now, not just because of jowls and a belly and the white-fringed, bald cranium but as a human type altogether, that I thought (once I began to be able to think) it had to be something more ruthless than time that accounted for the metamorphosis: it would have to be Lonoff himself. Other than the full, glossy eyebrows and the vaguely heavenward tilt of the willful chin, there was really nothing at all to identify him, at fifty-six, with the photo of the passionate, forlorn, shy Valentino who, in the decade lorded over by the young Hemingway and Fitzgerald, had written a collection of short stories about wandering Jews unlike anything written before by any Jew who had wandered into America.

In fact, my own first reading through Lonoff's canon—as an orthodox college atheist and highbrow-intraining—had done more to make me realize how much I was still my family's Jewish offspring than anything I