

## Secrecy and Self-Invention: Philip Roth's Postmodern Identity in *The Human Stain*

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Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), a fitting final part of the novelist's recent trilogy comprising *American Pastoral* (1997) and *I Married a Communist* (1998), dramatizes powerfully the interplay of secrecy and self-transformation that determines human identity. Identity in its varied performative guises had always been a central problematic in Roth's fiction. For a novelist whose works register forcefully the solidity and specificity of the identifiable material world, a characteristic Roth shares with most nineteenth-century realist writers, the deconstructive turn of the narrative in this novel, which calls into question the essentialist notions of self, class, and racial identity, inaugurates a radical shift in direction. This decentering principle, not a wholly unfamiliar strategy in Roth's works, is notably at work in his earlier novels such as *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), *The Counterlife* (1986), *Deception* (1990), and *Operation Shylock* (1993). Telling a poignant tale of men and women driven by despair and angst in contemporary multicultural America, *The Human Stain* focuses on the constitution of identity and difference by negotiating the definition of self and the distortions it is subject to in the perception of the other.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the Rothian narrator's self-appointed role in reclaiming the complex identities of his protagonists by ascribing motives to their actions seems hardly objective because ultimately the images he carves of them are constructs of his own imagination. This constructedness of identity in Roth's fiction, if a typical postmodern discursive practice, not only disengages from the genre's characteristic reveling in dissipation and disputation of the self, but contrary to all expectations invests the self with the open-endedness of reinvention. *The Human Stain* effectively explores the transgressively audacious quest for freedom of its central characters that is shot through with the comedy of self-inventions and misreadings.

If Roth's notion of identity is both fluid and protean, then the reader's conjecture of the novel as dissipating in a plethora of signifiers is paradoxically belied. On the contrary, provisional understandings of human action and character

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000; London: Vintage, 2001). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parentheses.

are reached that only serve to underscore the belief that human beings in the last analysis are unknowable. Curiously enough, the same secrecy and self-invention that continually recreate human identity not only aid in gaining tentative understandings but also radically complicate the given identity, empowering it to resist easy readings. In *The Human Stain*, Roth foregrounds the claim to an identity that refuses to be socially constructed and instead seeks privileging of its own narrative. Much as the novelist's sympathies are with such a claim, he is all too aware of the fact that suppressing the unconscious is not the same thing as breaking away from history. This essay seeks to examine how *The Human Stain* illuminates in particular such questions raised by the debates on identity in postmodern discourse.

Before we analyze how the notions of secrecy and self-invention animate the performative identity in *The Human Stain*, it would be profitable to compare the notions of subjectivity that obtain in Roth with that of his fellow American writers, particularly Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, John Barth, John Updike, and Saul Bellow, as a means of contextualizing the author's canon. Riddled with conspiratorial contingencies, Pynchon's fictional universe is hardly the place for locating an identity imbued with personal or individual character. In DeLilleian fiction, human identity is overridden with hyperreal presences of technology on the one hand and terror on the other. Often mediated through myth, Barth's delineation of identity is chimerical and inscribed with unending archetypal experiences. In Updike, identity is continually negotiated through the persona's sexual and religious experiences. Bellow portrays a fragmented identity that can be recouped only under susceptibility to the benign intimations of life. While sharing thematic affinities with Updike and Bellow, Roth also has a parallel with the postmodern writers cited here in that like them he "redefine[s] the human self as an entity constructed by, and not simply reflected in a culture's social discourses, linguistic structures, and signifying practices."<sup>3</sup> Roth parts company with his fellow postmodernists, however, in his clear and forceful depictions of subjectivities that succeed in working through traumas of life.

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* is saturated with images and themes that have a bearing on the multicultural America of the late twentieth century, as are the remaining two novels in the trilogy *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*.<sup>4</sup> It is an ambitious novel that in unraveling the complexities of human identity also maps out American national identity, an identity invigorated by a narrative of change and redefinition.

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<sup>3</sup> Tammy Clewell, "Subjectivity," *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, ed. Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist (London: Routledge, 2001) 382.

<sup>4</sup> The novel has received rave reviews. Cf. Lorrie Moore, "The Wrath of Athena," Rev. of *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth, *New York Times Book Review*, 7 May 2000: 7-8; Rita D. Jacobs, Rev. of *The Human Stain*, by Philip Roth, *World Literature Today* 75.1 (2001): 116; and Michiko Kakutani, "Confronting the Failures of a Professor who Passes," Rev. of *The Human Stain*, by Philip Roth, *New York Times*, 2 May 2000: E1+.

*The Human Stain* tells the story of Coleman Brutus Silk, a classics professor and sometime dean of faculty at Athena College in western Massachusetts, who is hectorred by the forces of political correctness and hate. Given Roth's perception of Nathan Zuckerman as one whose "life" and "work" have been "determined" by "lines of fracture"<sup>5</sup> that he is unable to hide successfully, it only adds to narrative justice that he observe the life of Coleman, another man whose life is split at its very core owing to his duplicitous act of passing. Already past his mid-sixties and troubled by the knowledge of mortality ushered in by prostate cancer, Zuckerman in the novel's present has relocated to the remote Berkshires, in Coleman's neighborhood, with a Thoreau-like commitment to observe the self at work. Presenting an apt cameo of Zuckerman, Lorrie Moore notes: "Alone, prostateless, now outside the sexual fray, Zuckerman has become a melancholic poet of twilight and chagrin, the combination of perspicacity and weary tranquility becomes him as a narrator."<sup>6</sup> Zuckerman first meets Coleman soon after the death of Iris, Coleman's wife, following a stroke. Visiting Zuckerman, a paranoid Coleman requests him to author "the Spooks" book on his behalf and expose the atrocity of the racist charge laid against him by the Athena academic community that had claimed his wife's life. Though Zuckerman refuses to play Coleman's amanuensis, he finds him irresistible and soon becomes his friend and well-wisher. His goodwill for Coleman is further strengthened by the discovery that they share not only a love for jazz but also a similar ethnic upbringing, as near contemporaries, in the suburbs of New Jersey.

Playing confidant to Coleman, Zuckerman soon learns of his friend's affair with Faunia Farley, a thirty-four-year-old janitorial help with the Athena College who doubles up as a cleaning woman in the local post office, and how that relationship has transfigured his outlook on life. Motivated by sexual jealousy and misplaced feminist sympathies, Delphine Roux, the Yale-educated literary theorist who heads the combined language and literature department at Athena, reads into Coleman's affair a classic stance of misogyny and abject subjugation of the female, and, on impulse, sends him an unsigned scurrilous letter. In the wake of this intrusion into his personal life, Coleman, for all practical purposes, goes into self-exile and seeks solace in the company of Faunia, his fellow traveler and mistress. Driven by loneliness, Zuckerman visits a classical music rehearsal held at Tanglewood, and, sighting Coleman and Faunia there together, he is seized with the serendipitous awareness that Coleman after all could be harboring a secret. Despite Coleman's "air of being someone firmly established, if need be an obstinate and purposeful opponent—the angry faculty giant who quit rather than take their humiliating crap—somewhere there's a blank in him too, a blotting out, an excision, though of what I don't begin to guess" (213). Finally, at Coleman's funeral, Zuckerman, moved by the solemn understanding that "the proper presentation of [Coleman's] secret [is his] problem to solve" (45), resolves

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<sup>5</sup> Hermione Lee, Interview with Philip Roth, "The Art of Fiction LXXXIV," *Paris Review* 26.93 (1984): 221.

<sup>6</sup> Moore 8.

to depict Coleman's "disaster" and "disguise" (45) in his fiction. In light of this new-found purpose, Zuckerman begins to comprehend that there is no way he could quarantine "the turbulence and intensity" (45) that living entails, and this acceptance of common humanity, or human stain if you will, is what eventually lends his life as a human being and a novelist its significance.

Coleman Silk, Roth's protagonist and an epitome of secrecy and self-invention in *The Human Stain* (whose narrative construction of the self outstrips Zuckerman's proverbial inventiveness) was born into a lower-middle-class African-American family with serious cultural aspirations. An exceptionally brilliant student and an invincible champion in the ring, Coleman did not ever suspect that he would be discriminated in America because of his ethnic affiliations. He grew up into adulthood endowed with a granite will to carve a self hardened by secrecy. Ironically, the first turning point in his life occurs when Fensterman, his classmate Bert's father and the Jewish doctor who works in the same hospital as his mother, visits the Silks, offering three thousand dollars in return for Coleman making way for Bert to graduate as a class valedictorian. Not conceded by his parents, however, this request from a social superior had a miraculous effect on Coleman in that it helped him to empower the "I" behind his ego. Training to be a fighter under Doc Chizner, a Jewish dentist for the United Electrical Workers in East Orange where his father, Clarence Silk, was the optician supplying spectacles, Coleman unconsciously treats him as his surrogate father. In a way the Jewish success story of Fensterman and Chizner and the mentoring roles that Jewish people in general and Chizner in particular represents further in him a psychic affinity for the Jews. Meanwhile, Clarence Silk discovers that Coleman has been visiting the Newark Boys Club for boxing sessions, and confronts him. As it turns out, this occasion betrays Coleman's symptoms of widening psychic rupture with his family: "'I see. So who then is your father, if I may ask?' 'You know. You are. You are, Dad.' 'I am? Yes?' 'No!' Coleman shouted. 'No, you're not!'" (92). Significantly, and in stark contrast to her husband's authoritarian ways, Gladys Silk has always extended her son "conscientious kindness and care" (95), unconsciously conflating him with her patients.

If Coleman's racial secret is embedded in a deep-seated psychic malaise, his ability for self-invention is, at least in part, catalyzed by the sociocultural and political ethos of the first half of twentieth-century America. Fittingly, Coleman's early interest in boxing serves as a trope to configure his obsessional secrecy and self-invention that would radically redefine his identity. His first intimations of a racial identity shrouded in secrecy reaches him through Chizner. While accompanying Coleman for a match involving the Army and the University of Pittsburgh—an occasion he would exploit to impress upon the Pitt coach why he should consider Coleman for a four-year scholarship for track—Chizner suggests to Coleman that he "not ... mention that he was colored" (98). Reinforcing his sense of self grounded in secrecy, this worldly, pragmatic advice from his mentor sees Coleman, unflinching in his aggression, triumph over his opponent in the

ring. Musing over his success at the end of the day, Coleman would think: "It was that something he could not even name made him want to be more damaging than he'd ever dared before, to do something more that day than merely win. Was it because the Pitt coach didn't know he was colored? Could it be because who he really was was entirely his secret? He did love secrets.... The power and pleasure were to be found in the opposite, in being counterconfessional in the same way you were a counterpuncher, and he knew that with nobody having to tell him and without his having to think about it" (99-100).

At his father's insistence, however, Coleman attends Howard, the all-black university. On one of his trips to downtown Washington, he is refused a hot dog at Woolworth's for being a "nigger" (102). Aghast at the pervasive racial prejudice in Washington, Coleman painfully registers the "enormous barrier against the great American menace that his father had been for him" (106). Thwarted by the stigmatized African-American racial identity, his post-Woolworth's craving for freedom subtly associates it with parricide. His subconscious wish to kill the father, the symbol of authority, heritage, and unfreedom, is fulfilled when Mr. Silk drops dead while serving dinner on the Pennsylvania Railroad dining car in Philadelphia. Seeing in his father's death a supreme opportunity to evade both the whites and the blacks or, as he puts it, "the big they" with "its bigotry" and "the little they" with "its ethics" (108), Coleman chooses to explore "singularity" of his "boundless" self in a "self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they, and I" (109).

Quitting Howard in 1944, Coleman decides to seek the draft immediately, even if it means lying about his age. Further, he is guilty of the sinister move of misinforming the draft board that he is white, taking advantage of his light complexion. Emanating from his secretive self, these lies eventually facilitate his upward mobility, thanks to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, popularly known as G.I. Bill, passed earlier the same year. In self-fashioning his identity from African-American to Jewish-American, Coleman exploits his light skin at a crucial historical juncture and thus presses his claims on the American Dream.<sup>7</sup>

Similar to the incident of racial insult at Woolworth's, his being thrown out of a Norfolk warehouse for being black further exacerbates Coleman's bruised ego. Denying his basic humanity in refusing him food and sex, America in Coleman's wrathful imagination conjures up into "the other" that can be hoodwinked only by strategically playing the game its own way. On his discharge from the military in 1946, Coleman enrolls in classics at New York University, though given an option he would have gladly settled in Greenwich Village as a poet or a playwright. Although his innate craving for the life of a creative artist remains

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<sup>7</sup> Ross Posnock and Debra Shostak emphasize this key issue. See Posnock, "Purity and Danger: On Philip Roth," review of *The Human Stain*, by Philip Roth, *Raritan* 21.2 (2001): 94, and Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 154.

unfulfilled, at least he internalizes the drive for creating, transforming, and transfiguring that is fundamental to art and further systematically brings to bear these powers in nurturing his own independently elected identity. Dean Franco puts the issue in perspective: "Coleman's whiteness and Jewishness are established by the erasure of his blackness—an identity itself contingent, the being of which is a being-under-erasure."<sup>8</sup> Of course, the earlier Norfolk incident momentarily weakens his resolve, leading him to characterize himself as a prodigal son. "This was what came of failing to fulfill his father's ideals, of flouting his father's commands, of deserting his dead father altogether. If only he'd done as his father had, as Walter had, everything would be happening another way. But first he had broken the law by lying to get into the navy, and now, out looking for a white woman to fuck, he had plunged into the worst possible disaster" (182). But this contrite mood would soon be overtaken by his obsessive desire to realize the American Dream; he would consider no price too high for this, including the repugnant act of passing.

In undertaking this project of self-transformation, Coleman appropriately exchanges his freshly minted self in the heady sensual world of desire and women; after considerable deliberation, he contracts a matrimonial alliance with Iris Gittleman, daughter of unconventional Jewish parents. This choice prefigures subliminally a pact with ethnicity,<sup>9</sup> though consciously the need for an explanation "her [Iris's] appearance could provide for the texture of their children's hair" (136). Coleman's sexual conquest of women both before and after Iris dramatizes tellingly the centrality of the project of secrecy and self-invention to his identity, and the lengths he will go to in order to sustain this make-believe narrative of self-making. Even while enrolled at New York University, he has an affair with a white girl named Steena Palsson. Having decided to invite Steena for Sunday dinner with his family at East Orange, Coleman is gripped by a compulsive need to justify his act of passing. "He would get her," so muses Coleman, "to see that far from there being anything wrong with his decision to identify himself as white, it was the most natural thing for someone with his outlook and temperament and skin color to have done" (120). To his dismay, Steena breaks her relationship with him, unable to overcome her racial prejudice. Meeting her again a few years later, Coleman, by then already married and settled in New York, is gripped by a reverie: "That is, he walked away understanding nothing, knowing he could understand nothing, though with the illusion that he *would* have metaphorically understood something of enormous importance about this stubborn determination of his to become his own man if ... if only such things were un-

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<sup>8</sup> Dean Franco Jr., "Being Black, Being Jewish, and Knowing the Difference: Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*; Or, It Depends on What the Meaning of 'Clinton' Is," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 23 (2004): 91. Special Issue ed. Derek Parker Royal.

<sup>9</sup> Not only does Coleman pass for a Jew, but he also marries a Jewish girl from a liberal, almost anarchic, family. While allowing him the privilege of ethnicity, this decision also ensures that his quest for freedom will not be threatened in any way. Many reviewers have drawn attention to this issue. See notably Andrew Bachman, "America from the Waist Down," *Tikkun* (Nov./Dec. 2000): 63.

derstandable" (125–26; original ellipsis). After his prospects with Steena fail, Coleman seeks Ellie Magee, a black girl, though his enthusiasm for her wanes soon with the change in his perception of her ability to promote the "conception of himself that's been driving him all his life" (135). Only when he meets Iris is he convinced that he has found the woman who would "give[s] him back his life on the scale he wants to live it" (136). To Iris's queries about his family, he blatantly lies that his parents are dead and that he has no siblings. Thus Coleman, in searching for the "singularity" that has "been his inmost ego-driven ambition" (131), maneuvers reality endlessly, though the way he lives his life testifies to nothing more than "the pleasure of being conventional unconventionally" (110).

Hoping to attain "identity negotiation"<sup>10</sup> with the near certainty of his marriage to Iris, Coleman undertakes the vexatious task of estranging himself from the past and all that it signifies. In order "to give the brutality of the repudiation its real, unpardonable human meaning" (139), he must perpetrate metaphorically the ritual murder of his mother. Such betrayal is exemplified in deserting her deliberately to seek his "alternate destiny" (139). The intensity of her emotional outbursts at his heartlessness is reminiscent of the valediction between Hector and his mother in Coleman's favourite classic *The Iliad*. Not one to mince words, Gladys Silk admonishes Coleman thus: "You think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman Brutus. You're white as snow and you think like a slave" (139). On her deathbed, she rants, "I got a sick baby at home" (321), unable to repress her anguish over how her son is completely lost to her. Disgusted by Coleman's resolve to leave his African-American ethnicity behind in adopting his putative white identity, Walter Silk literally shouts him out of the house with the reprimand: "Never. Don't you dare ever show your lily-white face around that house again!" (145). If mores and values of the white race govern Coleman's elected identity, he is nevertheless unable to exorcise fully his ethnic modes of relating to the world. Ernestine, Coleman's sister, voices this sentiment aptly: "He could cut himself away from us, but not from his feelings" (320). In critical moments of his life later, he unconsciously echoes the reproving words of his brother and mother on his sell-out to the white race. As Omer-Sherman points out insightfully, "Silk's choice of the awkward idiom is but a rupture of the uncanny, Roth's notion of 'identity' rushing in to lay claim to the being who has tried to smother it?"<sup>11</sup>

A respectable degree in classics and a steady marriage with a Jewish woman that practically quells any suspicions of his being black serve as Coleman's passport to gaining entry into Athena College, the citadel of WASP higher learning. With his charismatic personality and stellar scholarly achievements, Coleman

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<sup>10</sup> John N. Duvall and Nancy J. Peterson, "Introduction: Racechange and the Fictions of Identity," *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.3 (2003): 412.

<sup>11</sup> Ranen Omer-Sherman, "'A Stranger in the House': Assimilation, Madness, and Passing in Roth's Figure of the Pariah Jew in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *American Pastoral* (1997), and *The Human Stain* (2000)," *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth* (Hanover, CT: University Press of New England, 2002) 258.

quickly earns the distinction of being both a successful professor and a powerful dean of faculty who ushered in “a revolution of quality” (9). In 1995, nearly four decades after Coleman has settled for a life of passing, his nemesis catches up with him in the guise of an utterly innocuous question he raises concerning the absence of two black students. His enquiry is overlaid with racist intent and thus begins the character assassination of Coleman engineered by Delphine Roux. Midway through the semester, noting the continued absence of two students Coleman wonders: “Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?” (6). This provides grist to the mill of his politically correct colleagues, who gang up on and rouse racial antipathies toward him. Ironically, Coleman’s intent to characterize the students as ghosts or specters by employing the epithet “spooks” is rejected outright by his detractors. It is presumed that he has used the term denigratingly, if euphemistically, to suggest the students being Negroid. Himself an African American, Coleman stands persecuted ironically for uttering a term that is perceived to be connoting hatred toward the blacks. As Zuckerman observes: “Spooks! The ridiculous trivialization of this masterly performance that had been his seemingly conventional, singularly subtle life—a life of little, if anything excessive on the surface because all the excess goes into the secret. No wonder the accusation of racism blew him sky high. As though his accomplishment were rooted in nothing but shame” (335). It is valid, then, as Omer-Sherman suggests, that “Coleman Silk is haunted by nothing more nor less than the ghost within him, of his own repressed past.”<sup>12</sup> Unable to suffer the irrational forces of hate, Coleman prefers to quit Athena in indignation rather than submit to the indignities heaped on him. Although far from being an ideal wife, Iris rallies to his defense in the hour of crisis and dies a martyr battling his adversaries, when a stroke suddenly seizes her. Strangely, at no stage does Coleman confide in Iris about his racial secret.

Transformed into a text that resists reading, Coleman, with his patently miraculous “cunning self-concoction” (129) of an identity that refuses to honor “the contract drawn up for [his] signature at birth” (155), chooses to reveal his mystery only when he befriends Faunia Farley, his “comrade-in-arms” (164). A female counterpart to Coleman, Faunia, too, has a secret and an authorship of a life all her own. Born into a prosperous white family south of Boston, she has to voluntarily banish herself from all that has gone into constituting her identity in order to escape a lascivious stepfather and a complicitous mother. Significantly, Coleman meets her in 1998, the year that witnessed the sexual scandal involving President Clinton and the White House intern Monica Lewinsky. As luck would have it, the power of violence and malevolence inherent in “the ecstasy of sanctimony” (2) and “the persecuting spirit” (2) that have continually plagued American public life, not exempting even the President of the nation, overtakes the protagonists Coleman and Faunia and brings about their tragic end. Overwhelmed with righteous indignation by the false accusation of racism and the

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<sup>12</sup> Omer-Sherman 258.



tragic demise of his wife that it led to, Coleman à la Philoctetes learns to reengage with life only when he is “contaminated by desire” (20) through Faunia. Boosting his potency through recourse to Viagra, which in Coleman’s grateful imagination assumes the figure of “Zeus” (32), and letting the Voluptas-like Faunia “to turn sex into a vice” (26), Coleman relegates the entire “Spooks” episode and abandons himself to carnal pleasure, an arena rife with self-invention.

Forever haunted by a psychopathic husband and a traumatic past that testify to the power of “the ruthless” over “the defenseless” (240), Faunia lives from moment to moment and is grateful for the small mercies of life. Through the narrator’s lens, we glimpse the terrain of despair that has been her life: “Was she thinking about how long it had all gone on? The mother, the stepfather, the escape from the stepfather, the places in the South, the places in the North, the men, the beatings, the jobs, the marriage, the farm, the herd, the bankruptcy, the children, the two dead children. No wonder half an hour in the sun sharing a pizza with the boys is paradise to her” (161). If occasionally Faunia is put off by “the privilegedness of his [Coleman’s] suffering” (234), she is often moved by “[h]is generosity” (236). Initially baffled by her reluctance to accept his tutelary authority, Coleman sooner than later wakes up to the possibility of applying “the hammer of Faunia to everything outlived, [including] the exalted justifications,” that would help him to “smash” his “way to freedom” (171). Similarly, Faunia, too, stumbles on to the awareness, as it were, that both of them are pariahs adrift in a hostile world. It is only proper that she leave the gold ring gifted by Coleman with Prince, the odd crow, kept in a cage at the Audubon Society. Pondering the complications of being hand-raised, Faunia articulates an antipastoral worldview: “We leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there’s no other way to be here.... The stain that is there before its mark” (242). Clearly belying her claims to illiteracy, the diary, discovered posthumously, establishes Faunia as no less a match for Coleman in the art of reinventing an identity.

The dramatic conflict in *The Human Stain* stems from the contestatory will to power of characters whose identity is nourished on secrecy and driven by self-invention. According to Steven Kellman, “Silk’s life converges and collides with others who also believe in self-begetting.”<sup>13</sup> Each character in Roth’s novel tries to skewer and thwart the claim of the other, though unbeknownst to each there exist deeper psychic affinities and longings. Delphine Roux, Coleman’s colleague while he was still serving Athena, scion of an aristocratic family in France, is self-avowedly on exile in America “in *flight* from her love story” (199). In many ways similar to Coleman, Delphine exhibits a firm determination to be “the author of [her] own life” (272), and, not unexpectedly, her life drama is as profoundly mis-

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<sup>13</sup> Kellman, Steven G. “The Human Stain.” *McGill’s Literary Annual* 2000. ed. John D. Wilson and Steven G. Kellman, vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 2001) 429.

erable as his. In a mood of intense self-preoccupation, Delphine meditates thus: "I will construct myself outside the orthodoxy of my family's given, I will fight *against* the given, impassioned subjectivity carried to the limit, individuality at its best—and she winds up instead in a drama beyond her control" (272). Unconsciously drawn to Coleman and finding no way to sublimate her libidinal desires, she is mired in a love-hate stance toward him. Delphine's ambivalent emotional upsurge quickly turns into animus for Coleman, leading her to lay on him the outrageous charge of racism in the "Spooks" episode, and the calumny of sexual exploitation in the Faunia Farley affair. Though rationalizing to herself that she wants to save the hapless Faunia from Coleman's misogynistic perversity, she is unconsciously motivated by sexual jealousy. The audacious opening words—"Everybody knows"—of Delphine's anonymous letter to Coleman through recurrence in the text attain the power of a mock mantra. Contrary to her belief that she has figured Coleman out, she is ironically as ignorant as everyone else of his essential racial secret. Trying to compose an advertisement for the *New York Review of Books* seeking an ideal life-partner, she prepares an outline that unmistakably conjures up the figure of Coleman. In a fit of shock at this dark self-knowledge, she emails her message to her departmental faculty instead of sending it to the newspaper office. Once the enormity of her thoughtless act registers with her, she tries at damage control by concocting a tale that the entire episode was a hoax perpetrated by Coleman to avenge himself on her and Athena before enacting the murder-suicide of Faunia and himself. For all her atrocious conduct, Delphine is strangely all too human, and this is attested to by the pathetic wreck she becomes on hearing the news of Coleman's death: "what would they think if they saw her now, carrying on like the widow herself?" (280). Fleeing the nets cast by her family, her admirers, and her nation to carve out for herself a distinct identity in America, Delphine has unwittingly allowed herself to be ensnared in the nets of alien customs, mores, and habits; if anything, she is not even fully aware of her tragedy.

Les Farley, Faunia's estranged husband, who eventually sends his wife and her Jewish lover to their graves, is himself an embodiment of secrecy. And given his traumatic past, it is hardly surprising that the formation of a stable identity remains an unfinished project in his life. A Vietnam veteran who suffers from PTSD in the novel's present, he has experimented with dairy farming and other odd jobs before joining a road crew. Farley's avatar as a bloodthirsty killer is inspired by the government of the United States, which had twice enlisted him for participation in the horror-ridden theater of war in Vietnam. Seeking to avenge the death of his boys in a house fire for which he holds Faunia directly responsible, Farley is on her trail. He is infuriated to learn that Faunia's current lover is an academic, Jewish, and much older than Faunia. After all, the lost cause of soldiers like him owes much to the betrayal of the American government and the fashionable radicalism of the university professors who protested the nation's involvement in Vietnam. It is the enduring presence of such a traumatic past in his consciousness that drives him to have both Faunia and Coleman killed. Secre-

tive himself, Farley is strangely clueless about Coleman's African-American racial identity. Privy to this secret through Ernestine, Zuckerman in Coleman's grave ruminates thus: "Buried as a Jew, I thought, and, if I was speculating correctly, killed as a Jew. Another of the problems of impersonation" (325). Sharing a need to deconstruct Coleman's discourse of supremacy and power, Delphine and Farley take recourse to character assassination and homicide respectively, blissfully unaware that they are fighting shadows cast by his liminal performative Jewish identity. It comes as no surprise, then, that even in his death Coleman is able to carry off his bluff successfully.

The moot question that runs through *The Human Stain* concerns the debate over whether it is humanly possible to gain knowledge of the other. Learning from Ernestine after Coleman's funeral that her brother is not white but African American, Zuckerman, overcome by stupefaction, thinks aloud: "I couldn't imagine anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than this unmasking. Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing" (333). Lacking self-knowledge, Delphine harbors the illusion that she has neatly appraised Coleman. Similarly, Zuckerman, who had always believed in the power of his narrative to negotiate the complex human curve, is humbled in the face of Coleman's secret. He finds it personally edifying to realize that his craft is hemmed in by limitations and that he has no access either to the truths or lies about human beings. Zuckerman's apology for trading in illusions remains: "For better or worse, I can only do what everyone does who thinks that they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It's now all I do" (213). If, like Delphine and Farley, Zuckerman is deceived by Coleman's reinvention of identity, at least for him the entire experience had been one of learning—learning how little he can read in the mystery book on being human.

Putting the entire Coleman episode in perspective helps Zuckerman understand that his fictional postmodernist identities pale in comparison with the self-begetting characters he encounters in the real world. The recurring tropes of authorship in the novel underscore the dynamic process of identity negotiation that enlivens it. Interestingly, the competing versions of reality that these self-styled authors project transform the novel into a well-knit system of prolepses and contrapuntal actions. Roth perhaps posits the belief that both living creatively and writing intensely demand in equal measure a privileging of self-sufficiency and participation. Although a fine intellect, Coleman could never manage to write the "Spooks" book. Since "writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time" (345), Coleman cannot but fail as a writer because his strategy of secrecy overdraws on his fund of creativity. As Amy Hungerford rightly points out, "Coleman could only conceal because secrecy is his identity" and that

“he [w]ould only reveal more secrecy.”<sup>14</sup> Ironically, Roth’s protagonist becomes “a victim of his own self-inventions,” as Timothy Parrish argues in an insightful reading of the novel, as much as he is of “academic political correctness.”<sup>15</sup>

Far less self-absorbed than Coleman is Faunia, both a survivor of traumatic events and a self-exile from her class and social status. She willingly embraces the self-effacing act of illiteracy. If she has concealed her identity, interestingly she has also felt the need to maintain a diary where she can bare herself naked. In metaphorical terms, Faunia qualifies as being much more Jewish than Coleman is because she, like Anne Frank, has felt a compelling need to record for posterity the story of her undeserved suffering. It is entirely another matter, as Debra Shostak notes, that Faunia’s “record remains unread—except, perhaps, by the censor, Sylvia,” Faunia’s father’s companion.<sup>16</sup> With her intellectual sophistication and the theorist’s need to demystify the world, Delphine has paradoxically depleted her investments in the unconscious. Her life becomes a site of conflicts and confusions, and bereft of emotional bearings her pact with the forces of horror and debilitation is complete. Unhinged by the battalion of unfortunate vicissitudes, Lester has no core identity; jealously guarding his secretive existence in the hills, his story requires the agency of the other for revelation. As Jeffrey Charis-Carlson suggests, “Zuckerman might be wrong about some elements of Lester’s history,”<sup>17</sup> but this unreliable version of Farley’s life is nonetheless preferable to relegating him completely to the limbo of oblivion.

The concluding frame of the novel captures Zuckerman conversing with Lester, who is seen ice-fishing in the arcadian surroundings of the Berkshire Hills. The same provides a fitting finale to the dramatization of reinvented identities that forms the crux of the novel. Assuring Lester that he would keep his whereabouts a secret, Zuckerman also reveals to him in the characteristic vein of a postmodern author about his book in progress that will be called *The Human Stain*. And now that he has revealed the secret, Zuckerman knows only too well that he needs to relocate elsewhere, lest he jeopardize his own existence. Nevertheless, his meeting with Lester turns out to be both therapeutic and epiphanic. His earlier resolution following prostate surgery to sever all human ties and live only for his craft like a recluse would have made him as solipsistic as Lester. After all, “[t]he world’s malice [that] came rushing in” (45) because of Coleman’s friendship enables him to reassert his humanity. After Coleman’s tragic death, Zuckerman registers with horror that but for his friendship, he would be no

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<sup>14</sup> Amy Hungerford, “Bellow, Roth, and the Secret of Identity,” *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 145.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy L. Parrish, “Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Man in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*,” *Contemporary Literature* 45.3 (2004): 435.

<sup>16</sup> Debra Shostak 261.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Charis-Carlson, “Philip Roth’s Human Stains and Washington Pilgrimages,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 23 (2004): 114; *Philip Roth’s America: The Later Novels*, special issue, ed. Derek Parker Royal.

wiser than Lester nursing the illusion that quarantining the world would ensure his self-sufficiency.

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* is justifiably considered a paradigmatic shift in fictional discourses negotiating identity. It transcends the conventional thematic ends of a passing narrative and articulates a sustained critique of white racism firmly grounded in ethnicity. In a daring move, Roth jettisons the discursive praxis in American fiction of shying away from imaginatively embracing the other.<sup>18</sup> In the novelist's own canon, *The Human Stain* lays claim to a distinct place by its superb virtuoso realignment and recreation of his signature novelistic concerns such as the predilection for counterlives, the power of invention through sexuality, old age, and mortality. To conclude, Roth's characters in *The Human Stain*, notwithstanding their ills and imperfections, possess a certain god-like grandeur; the author's persona and narrator Nathan Zuckerman too partakes of the glory in redeeming the story of Coleman Silk from the cold indifference of death.

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<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Senior and Sanford Pinsker particularly highlight this aspect. See Jennifer Senior, "Philip Roth Blows Up," *New York Magazine*, 1 May 2000, 3 <<http://newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/features/2983>>, and Sanford Pinsker, "Climbing Over the Ethnic Fence: Reflections on Stanley Crouch and Philip Roth," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 78 (2002): 480.