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PASSING AS A RESULT OF CULTURAL TRAUMA IN P. ROTH'S HUMAN STAIN

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Abstract: The actions of a Republican-dominated Congress that sought to impeach President Clinton and the political correctness frenzy of the 1990s provide both setting and theme for The Human Stain (2000), the last novel in Roth's social history trilogy. The novel takes place in 1998, the year the president was impeached. The Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal is the analogue for the virtual "arraignment" of classics professor Coleman Silk. Silk enrages his politically correct colleagues because he unwittingly uses the racial slur spooks, when he comments ironically on the ghostly nature of two students who have enrolled but never have attended class.[1]

Key words: Passing, cultural trauma, racism, political correctness.

Introduction: Philip Roths The Human Stain (2000) completed his well-received trilogy about post-World War II American life that began with American Pastoral (1997) and I Married a Communist (1998). Together the three novels make up a kind of fictional history that takes in many of the key events of the past half-century: World War II, the McCarthy era, Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, Watergate, and even the impeachment of Bill Clinton. As Roth told Charles McGrath, "I think of it as a thematic trilogy, dealing with the historical moments in postwar American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation" [2]. Roth positions many of his characters as critical of Political Correctness or as representatives of its hypocrisy, especially when they share the fantasy of the dissolution of the category of race in favor of an uncompromised and untethered selfhood.[3]Hence Coleman's sister, Ernestine, decries the ''buffoonery'' of having to ''be so terribly frightened of every word one uses,'' lest one be accused of racism.[4] Racial reconciliation, Roth implies here, can never be achieved as long as the ''reactionary authorities'' of political correctness remain unchecked.[5] In short, in The Human Stain's paradoxically liberally-inflected neo conservative view, political correctness prevents racial reconciliation by insisting on stifling categorization. While The Human Stain thus charts the conundrums of racial reconciliation, it also leaves open the possibility of what Roth, in discussing

[1] Safer, Elaine B. Mocking the age : the later novels of Philip Roth, State University of New York Press, Albany 2006. P117

[2] McGrath, Charles. "Zuckerman's Alter Brain." New York Times Book Review 7 May 2000:

[3] Mitchell Cohen, ''In Defense of Shaatnez: A Politics for Jews in a Multicultural America,'' in Insider/Out sider: American Jews and Multiculturalism, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susan Heschel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p 48

[4] HS, 328–29.

[5] Ibid., 329.

Kafka, calls "personal reconciliation." Kafka haunts Roth and, as Sanford Pinkser notes, "if ever a contemporary American writer imagined himself as Kafka's doppleganger, it is Roth".[6]

Materials and methods: While "bordering on mockery," The Human Stain is similarly "touched by a spirit of personal reconciliation." This Roth/Kafka version of reconciliation—a denuded form of the much more idealized model proposed by President Clinton's initiative on race—is a means of coming to terms with the defects of the self, not a means of overcoming them. In modeling himself on Kafka, in being Kafka's doppleganger, then, Roth offers a work that chronicles the struggle for reconciliation at both personal and social (in this case, racial) levels. If Roth imagines himself as Kafka's double, claiming that "Every one was influenced by Kafka in those days,"[7] Anatole Broyard, on whom Roth based his enigmatic main character, Coleman Silk, imagined himself as the disseminator of Kafka in America and as a figure who, like Kafka, longed to be "transfigured."[8]

The trilogy marked something of a departure for Roth because never before had his work so clearly portrayed the effect that history has on an individual's possibility for self-creation. Even a work such as Ghost Writer (1978), which is generally seen as Roth's confrontation of the Holocaust, lacks the integration between historical actuality and character possibility that characterizes the American Trilogy. In that novel Roth movingly portrays the awe that the Holocaust inspires in the American Jew, but the novel does not suggest that either Zuckerman or Roth have been, as it were, invented by the Holocaust. To understand Human Stain, then, one must first confront how in the trilogy Roth has made Nathan Zuckerman very much subject to the histories he portrays. Each of the novels employs a kind of a Proustian technique whereby Zuckerman's present is absorbed by his memories of the past so that his current identity is but a consequence of the events—and other lives—he recalls. Proust's achievement was to subsume the historical within his narrator's individual personal time. Roth, by contrast, makes identity an effect of the history that permeates one's choices. To longtime Roth readers this narrative premise is startling because it may seem to undermine the familiar understanding of Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's narrative alter ego, as the epitome of the self-obsessed. The Zucker man we see in this trilogy differs from what readers of earlier Roth novels understood as a postmodern approach to identity in which Zuckerman, the quintessential self, became a kind of stage for an endless play of different, even contradictory, roles. Because Roth's ethic of the artist insists on his primacy to create according the will and whim of his imagination, his Zuckerman self-explorations have courted the possibility that they might exist independent of outside pressure—that they are only and purely self-driven. Yet, Roth's formal strategies are not deployed merely to deconstruct themselves as fictions that are separate from life or even to engage in contemporary philosophical debates concerning the nature of the self. Rather, they represent a carefully worked out

[6] Sanford Pinsker, ''Jewish-American Literature's Lost-and-Found Depart ment: How Philip Roth and Cynthia Ozick Reimagine Their Significant Dead,'' Modern Fiction Studies 35, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 225.

[7] Philip Roth, '''I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting'; or, Looking at Kafka,'' Reading Myself and Others (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 256.

[8] Anatole Broyard, Kafka was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir (New York: Carol Southern Books, 1990), 69

intellectual/fictional response to the contradictory identities Roth has experienced as a Jew who is also an American.[9]

Results: Addressing such concerns, Zuckerman, in "The Counterlife", notes that "What people envy in the novelist aren't the things that novelists think are so enviable but the performing selves that the author indulges, the slipping irresponsibility in and out of his skin, the reveling not in T but in escaping 'I,' even if it involves—especially if it involves—piling imaginary afflictions upon himself" [10] Although many would say that these conflicting self-impersonations point up the fundamental indeterminacy of narrative, Roth's work suggests that these conflicting identities compose everyone's seemingly mundane reality. Zuckerman's (or Roth's) narrative strategies merely reflect this tendency. As we read Roth's oeuvre back through the trilogy, we see that his fiction has never suggested that the self is an empty form to be invented and reinvented at will. Rather, Zuckerman's seemingly endless self-inventions are a consequence of the historically situated identity choices available to him. The American Trilogy underscores this position by embedding Zucker man's story within those of other characters whose lives have resembled and even shaped Zuckerman's own life. In American Pastoral Zuckerman recounts the life of Swede Levov and his tragic relationship with his daughter, Merry, who must hide from the police because of her activities as a 1960s revolutionary. In "I Married a Communist" Zuckerman recounts his youth through his friendship with the brothers Ringold, whose lives were nearly destroyed by the McCarthy-era communist hysteria. Finally, in The Human Stain, Zuckerman tells the story of Coleman Silk, an African American who "passes" for a Jew. In each of these novels more pages are devoted to the stories of these other characters than to that of Zuckerman. Still, Zuckerman remains the protagonist of these novels because his story is being filtered through theirs. American Pastoral, for example, begins contemporaneously in the 1990s but ends back in 1974 with Richard Nixon's impending resignation. More tellingly, it ends with Swede, the Newark Jewish boy who would become an American success story, powerless to counter his father's argument that Jews who do not marry within the family (i.e., other Jews) invite doom. Through his telling of Swede's story, Zuckerman replays his own personal and cultural rebellion against his father only to surrender to his father's wisdom at last. Additionally, by suspending the narrative in 1974, Roth situates the present of the novel in a never-finished past. Although any of the novels can be enjoyed for its own sake, the trilogy calls attention to how completely cumulative Roth's work is, because each novel refers back to and, in subtle ways, transforms Roth's entire body of work. What makes The Human Stain so remarkable and so controversial is that Roth's ostensibly Jewish protagonist, Coleman Silk, is actually born African American. Thus, in the guise of telling a Jewish story, Roth also tells an African American one. As such, The Human Stain is the logical outgrowth of Roth's lifelong aesthetic commitment to the fluidity of the American (or ethnic) self.[11]

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[9] Tim Parrish, BECOMING BLACK: ZUCKERMAN'S BIFURCATIN SELF IN THE HUMAN STAIN,p 209

[10] Roth, Philip. The Counterlife. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.p210

[11] Tim Parrish, BECOMING BLACK: ZUCKERMAN'S BIFURCATIN SELF IN THE HUMAN STAIN, p 211

As we know, the Negro (also called colored, then black, and now African American) was circumscribed by an elaborate legal and social apparatus, from slavery in the seventeenth century, to antimiscegenation laws in the eigh teenth century, to segregation in the late nineteenth century and more than half of the twentieth.2 Random acts of systematic violence—slave beatings, lynching, and police brutality—served to mark the Negro body and reify American apartheid for centuries.3 Passing, although an individual choice, reifies the tragic reality of a social order.4[12]

Passing is a strong trope, both a historical reality and one of America's most abiding literary motifs.5 Passing is the possibility of race change, the individual's potential escape from what at times amounts to a deterministic, social blight. It might be said to allow the individual to succeed despite the odds against him or her racially.6 The Human Stain extends the painful hilarity of what Ralph Ellison, following Constance Rourke, saw as the ongoing, sometimes sadistic joke of American identity.7[13]

Analysis: Perhaps more remarkable, as we shall see, the novel takes shape as a loose sequel to Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952), a clear acknowledgment of Ellison's importance as a writer and intellectual to Roth. Even without the Ellisonian scaffolding, though, the novel offers a compelling meditation on the possibilities and limitations of self-making in recent American culture. As an American, can one truly invent oneself as one pleases? Is ethnic identity binding or changeable? To what extent does the cultural history of a period define one's identity? Can you be born black and yet become Jewish? More specifically, can a Jewish author sympathetically imagine the life of a black character? The drama of passing is an individual's ostensible triumph over the "destiny" or "fate" of superior social forces, namely Negro identity. That is to say, through the cen turies, many people saw black identity as an undesirable proscription, the rich contribution of blacks to American society notwithstanding.8 For those who were able, passing was in some ways a natural choice, given the desirability of white ness in America's hierarchical caste system.9

Conclusion

The drama of Coleman Silk raises these and other questions as we discover that Coleman is never quite who we—or the other characters— think that he is. Roth's complicated manner of introducing Coleman underscores the fluidity of Coleman's character because he allows us to understand Coleman as a Jew before we see him as* an African American. With Coleman's "secret" waiting to be sprung, the book begins as a kind of academic novel about a college dean, Coleman Silk, whose career as a successful classicist has been undone through mean-spirited politicking in the guise of political correctness. His fall begins when, expressing his irritation at two students who had failed to appear for class six weeks into the semester, he sarcastically asks the rest of the class if the missing students are real or only "spooks." The students are not

[12] Patrice D. Rankine (2005) Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth's The Human Stain, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man, Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 47:1, 101-112, DOI: 10.3200/CRIT.47.1.101-112

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ghosts—the connotation he means—but they are black. "Spooks" is taken by the students and the faculty to mean a denigrating epithet for blacks. His campus enemies, led by French feminist Delphine Roux, brand him a racist. Instead of apologizing for his mistake, Coleman defends his right to use the English language as he pleases and his battle with his enemies only becomes more entrenched. Eventually he resigns in disgrace. During this ordeal his wife dies, he blames her death on the college, and he fantasizes about writing a revenge-memoir, ironically titled Spooks. Silk never writes his book, though, and instead lives relatively happy in the pursuit of a love affair that eventually kills him. The book that Coleman does not write becomes instead The Human Stain and its author is Nathan Zuckerman. As a character who functions as Roth's fictional alter ego in previous works, Zuckerman enters this narrative to provide an indirect way for Roth to comment on his own legitimacy in writing such a passing narrative.

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