

## FROM FACTS TO FARCE: THE TRAGEDY OF PASSING IN PHILIP ROTH'S ZUCKERMAN NOVELS

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**Abstract** The present paper analyses Philip Roth's so-called Zuckerman novels, in which Nathan Zuckerman assumes the roles of narrator, protagonist, and Roth's alter ego. More precisely, the purpose of this paper is to address, and, if possible, to shed some light over the farcical nature of Roth's fiction, with a particular focus on *The Human Stain* (2000), wherein Coleman Silk, a light-skinned African American, decides to pass as white to have access to the opportunities post-war America had to offer. Philip Roth, Nathan Zuckerman, and Coleman Silk, together with their ways of posing, wearing masks, and using reality according to their needs and desires, constitute the gist of this analysis. Therefore, a discussion of Roth's craft as revealed in the Zuckerman novels will help us better understand his farcical nature, one of the many 'masks' Zuckerman's author wore throughout his long and prodigious literary career.

**Keywords** American literature, Philip Roth, passing, criticism.

When Anthony Hopkins gave life to Coleman Silk in the 2003 movie version of Philip Roth's 2000 novel *The Human Stain*, the irony of the situation resembled one of Roth's great farces: there's not only a Welsh-born American naturalized British Knight actor playing the role of a descendent of former slaves, but there's also a white man enacting the tragedy of a black man passing as white in order to succeed in society. Moreover, there is not only the factual reality (usually called convention) of an actor posing into whatever the role demands,<sup>1</sup> there is also the counterfactual reality (an important term in Roth's fiction) of not only passing for white, but also for a Jewish person. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to address, and, if possible,

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<sup>1</sup> "The British actor, like the American he becomes, embodies the trickster-like ability to don a mask and morph into something else," writes Patrice D. Rankine in "Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man," *Critique*, vol. 47, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 104.

to shed some light over the farcical nature of Roth's fiction, with a particular focus on *The Human Stain*. Philip Roth, Nathan Zuckerman, the author's alter ego, and Coleman Silk, the protagonist, together with their ways of posing, wearing masks, and using reality according to their needs and desires, constitute the gist of this analysis.

Apart from their common history, dictionaries give two distinct meanings for *farce*, which both inform to a certain extent the present paper. The etymology of the word, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, comes from the literal and metaphorical sense of the Latin verb *farcire*, which means *to stuff*. Borrowed from Old French and then anglicized, the word starts to denote, toward the end of the XIVth century, what is considered today to be the first dictionary entry, though not the most used one, that is, *force-meat* or *stuffing*. About two centuries later, even though the term in its second meaning started to be used as early as the XIIIth century, *farce* began its slow and interesting transition toward what is today its second and most popular meaning, that of (1) *a dramatic work (usually short) which has for its sole object to excite laughter* and of (2) *something as ridiculous as a theatrical farce; a proceeding that is ludicrously futile or insincere; a hollow pretence, a mockery*. First, the word has been applied to various phrases interpolated (*stuffed*) in litanies between the words *kyrie* and *eleison*, which literally meant "Lord have mercy" and were the only Greek words used in the Latin catholic liturgy. Then, the word drew nearer and nearer to its modern meaning and alluded to the interludes of impromptu buffoonery, which the actors in religious dramas were interpolating into their texts, thus leaving us with the perfect combination of decorum and playfulness, of solemnity and mischievousness. For the purposes of this paper, I argue that Philip Roth, Nathan Zuckerman, and Coleman Silk are, to a certain extent, perfect embodiments of farcical natures.

### **Philip Roth – *Unbound***

Philip Roth, a celebrated, yet controversial author, wrote more than twenty books and is considered, next to Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow, as one of the finest American novelists of Jewish descent. These authors integrated the thematic of Jewish tradition within the great American literary tradition, and, because of that, they, and others like them, suddenly, after the 1950's, embraced and consolidated an American identity that would not be the same without them. Thus, they, and Roth especially, were exposed to a twofold criticism (and praise, for that matter) from both the Jewish and American communities at large. For instance, Roth was the much-acclaimed promising young star of the Jewish American letters after his 1959 debut with *Goodbye, Columbus* only to become, a decade later, with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), a "self-hating Jew" who could not care less, his fiercest critics argued, about the tradition he was willingly insulting.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Philip Roth* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 68.

A discussion of Roth's art, as this is revealed in four of his novels, will help us understand his farcical nature, one of the many 'masks' Roth wore throughout his long and prodigious literary career. This preview is necessary because it gives us a chance to relate both to Roth's *ars poetica* and to Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of *The Human Stain*, which is the focus of this paper. These four novels, written over a period of almost a decade, and published together in 1985 under the title *Zuckerman Bound*, are *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), and *The Prague Orgy* (1985). Apart from their literary value, the four novels are relevant because they give Roth the chance to prove once more his real talent and craft and, most importantly, after his controversial success with *Portnoy's Complaint*, the Zuckerman novels introduce 'writing about writing' as a big topic in Roth's universe.

Both defending and defining his art, before writing the Zuckerman novels, but after experiencing his biggest and lowest achievements with the novels *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and, respectively, *The Breast* (1972), Roth wrote that

*"his continuing preoccupation [was] with the relationship between the written and the unwritten world. [...] This simple distinction is more useful to me than the distinction between imagination and reality, or art and life, first, because everyone can think through readily enough to the clear-cut differences between the two, and second, because the worlds that I feel myself shuttling between every day couldn't be more succinctly described. Back and forth, back and forth, bearing fresh information, detailed instructions, garbled messages, desperate inquiries, naïve expectations, baffling new challenges... in all, cast somewhat in the role of the courier Barnabas, whom the Land Surveyor K. enlists to traverse the steep winding road between the village and the castle in Kafka's novel about the difficulties of getting through."*<sup>3</sup>

As Roth wants us to believe, when reading his work we are faced with a reversed mimesis: it is not art imitating life, but life imitating art. That is why literary moves and characteristic Rothian effects become reasonable within the boundaries of the written world. For instance, Roth's kinship with Kafka, both literal and literary, is perfectly justified.<sup>4</sup>

Preserving life and settling scores are two other important elements of Roth's literary art. In a conversation with the Czech writer Ivan Klima, he condescendingly asserts that "in a culture like mine, where nothing is censored but where the mass media inundate us with inane falsifications of human affairs, serious literature is no less of a life preserver, even if the society is oblivious of it."<sup>5</sup> Thus, writing for Roth becomes a noble and serious endeavor to mirror the sanctity of life back to the world, but it also becomes a tool to engage in a dialogue with the

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 27.

<sup>4</sup> In Roth's 'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting'; or *Looking at Kafka*, collected in *Reading Myself and Others*, a marvelous short story of counterfactual reality and alternative history, Kafka survives his early death only to come to the 1940's New Jersey to become a Yiddish professor about to marry the narrator's aunt.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Roth, "A Conversation in Prague," *The New York Review of Books* (April 12, 1990): 7.

critics of his novels and to address the craft of writing. Indeed, after Irving Howe's 'attack' on Roth published in *Commentary* in December 1972 and entitled "Philip Roth Reconsidered," the author realizes it is time for his own reconsiderations of his work. It took him seven years to respond, but the outcome is a real turning point in his career, probably more important than *Portnoy's Complaint*. On the one hand, this reconsideration gives Roth a chance to respond to criticism and thus to prove he is a great writer; on the other hand, it gives the readers four interesting novels, full of satire, sarcasm and parodic insight into the world of the literary and artistic life. And, probably, Roth's reconsideration of Howe's reconsiderations sets forth the first big farce!

Howe's greatest reproach is that in writing *Portnoy's Complaint*, and this fact has been foreshadowed ever since some overprized short stories in Roth's first book *Goodbye, Columbus*, the author "denies himself, programmatically, the vision of major possibilities" and that "his work drives a narrative toward cognitive ends fixed in advance."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Howe demystifies the much-praised Rothian voice and accuses Roth of being unable to cope with a tradition "which can no longer nourish his imagination."<sup>7</sup> In doing so, Howe dismisses both Roth's style (limited first person point of view, technical sophistication, self-consciousness and improvisation) and Roth's themes (false starts, caricature of Jewish problems, and lack of faith for his own materials) and concludes, hastily and along with others, that *Portnoy's Complaint* "signaled an end of philo-Semitism in American culture."<sup>8</sup> With all his criticism, Howe gets at least one thing right: when Roth writes the Zuckerman novels his "ends are fixed in advance", meaning that he wants to prove Howe and others wrong.

What individualizes in Roth's work the four Zuckerman novels (*The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson* and *The Prague Orgy*) is the fact that Roth no longer shuttles between the written and unwritten world, but between two already written worlds. By instituting himself and the entire criticism of his work inside the written world Roth clearly states the power of fiction and presents and represents himself in his true literary image, that of a novelist. Apart from sharing the same hero, Nathan Zuckerman, the four novels are essentially different. In a way, they are all *useful fictions* and, as a matter of fact, Nathan Zuckerman appears for the first time in Roth's earlier novel *My Life as a Man*, as Peter Tarnopols's character, another Rothian alter-ego, but it is *The Ghost Writer* which finally introduces Zuckerman as a narrator and possibly as Roth's alter-ego.

Furthermore, *The Ghost Writer* consists of a literary pilgrimage that Nathan Zuckerman, a young writer, takes to a recluse and once venerated Jewish writer, Emanuel Isidore Lonoff. Nathan is in search of a spiritual father, one who could understand and legitimize as art of fiction a prose entitled *Higher Education* that his natural father, a podiatrist from New Jersey, dismissed as being defamatory, useless and dangerous for the Jewish community, because people, that is *gentiles*, "don't read art – they read about *people*. And

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<sup>6</sup> Howe, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 75.

they judge them as such.”<sup>9</sup> But they never get the chance to discuss this matter, since Lonoff is about to end a thirty year-long marriage to Hope because of Amy Bellette, a former student, now a librarian helping Lonoff to sort his manuscripts. Amy’s mysterious past, Lonoff’s gratitude and the drinks served after dinner make Nathan imagine the perfect solution for everybody: what if Amy were in fact Anne Frank, who survived the Holocaust and lived anonymously in the United States? This way, Manny Lonoff would save his marriage and Nathan would reconcile with his father by marrying Anne Frank, proving that after all he is not a traitor, thus redeeming his image. Unfortunately, things do not go that way, and the next day, after a domestic fight, and “the rites of confirmation” completed, Nathan leaves Manny, who is curious to learn someday “how we all came out. It could be an interesting story. You’re not so nice and polite in your fiction. You’re a different person.”<sup>10</sup>

*Zuckerman Unbound* is a typical and apologetic novel about the hardships of being a novelist, except that in Roth’s case, the difficulties do not come from failure, but from success. This time, things are more transparent. Zuckerman is Roth’s alter ego who suffers from the success of his latest book – *Carnovsky* – which is clearly *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Again, the conventions of fiction are laid down, and everybody treats Zuckerman as being Carnovsky himself. More than that, not only that the novel and its success bring a new identity to Zuckerman, but they also provoke his divorce and presumably the death of his father. In fact, *Zuckerman Unbound* is a perfect prelude to *The Anatomy Lesson* – the actual ‘attack’ on Irving Howe. The death of the father and the imminent relation of his former wife with a catholic priest give Zuckerman relative autonomy. With no strings attached, without a family to turn to (except for a scared mother and an outraged brother), Zuckerman can no longer be blamed for betraying his people. He is finally unbound.

*The Anatomy Lesson* finds Zuckerman in deep physical pain. His mother has long since passed by now, and Nathan and his brother have severed any ties. In order to find a cure for himself and redeem his presumable sins, Zuckerman has another fantasy: he will change professions and will become a doctor. In a sense, this is Zuckerman’s return to origins. He goes back to Chicago to attend medical school at the university where he studied English and where he started writing his first stories. On the way there, though, he plays probably the farce of his life, taking the identity of his enemy, the critic Milton Appel. He does not stop here, and invents a new identity for himself, and consequently for his enemy. This new identity is that of an owner of a pornographic magazine and of an adults’ bar. He even tries to convince the driver of the limousine, which takes him around Chicago, a divorced woman, to come to New York and work for him.

Finally, the last novel, *The Prague Orgy*, presents a healed Zuckerman engaged in another big Jewish problem. Once having solved the internal problem of treason, having cleared his name, Zuckerman sets out to solve the problems of the Jewish Diaspora. Namely, he goes to communist Prague to recover the manuscript of a presumably great Yiddish writer.

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 37.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Unfortunately, he fails and gets in more trouble, so the Czech authorities decide to throw him out of the country and accuse him of being a Zionist agent. The farce comes full circle – repudiated by his people at the beginning, Zuckerman ends up being identified with his people! The fact is not only a farce, but also a drama, the search for one’s collective identity, tradition, and self-image.

So, what was Roth blamed for? First of all, he was and probably still is singled out for the defamatory image Jewish people have in his writings. Then, he was accused for using cheap effects, themes and easy-going characters for attaining commercial success and favoring an audience over a highly established readership. Finally, his art was seriously questioned and denied. In hindsight, those dramatic remarks proved to be in Roth’s advantage, because they forced the novelist to serious reconsiderations and gave him new themes as well as new challenges. In fact, they obliged Roth to eventually distill his art and add nuance to his major themes. Even though his material, as Howe referred to his Jewish portrays, is no longer as clearly visible today as it used to be a few decades ago, it helped Roth accomplish one of his major objectives, that of preserving life. The indecency of a 60 year old character by the name of Epstein who had an affair with a neighbor, affair which eventually cost him his life (as presented in one of Roth’s first short stories), is no longer referred to as shameful, because the Jewishness of the character was a mere accident in its author’s fictional world. In the end, what was of importance was not the character’s ethnicity, but the causes and consequences of his deeds. As a favor to Howe, in *The Ghost Writer*, Roth prevents Lonoff from engaging in an affair with Amy Bellette, thus making it clear that extramarital affairs are not a matter of race, but of choice. Moreover, when Zuckerman, in *Zuckerman Unbound* cuts all his ties with his family and his people, Roth is coming forth with the argument that, in the written world, family ties and identity links are often perceived as clear-cut and strict as in the unwritten world. At the same time, when he disguised himself as his enemy critic and, by the liberties enjoyed in the fictional world, provided for the later the identity of a director of a dirty magazine, Zuckerman, along with Roth behind him, suggests that critics are as eager as the novelists to satisfy their instincts, needs, and fantasies. Finally, when Zuckerman risks his life in Prague to recover a long-forgotten manuscript, it is Roth’s way of saying that both critics and novelists alike are capable of saving good writing.

### ***The Human Stain – Unbound***

*The American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000) represent a trilogy of equal importance to the previously discussed four novels. Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of all three, no longer plays center roles, but chronicles the stories of three important moments in American history, as they impact the lives of his characters Seymour Irving Levov, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk. These memorable characters represent, enact, and react to the social, political, and psychological conflicts that define post-war America as Zuckerman himself lived them (and now recounts) from the perspective of a recluse writer who devotes himself entirely to writing, having lost with age the cunningness of

his ego and the prowess of his sexual drives, that once caused him many troubles. Thus, the trilogy becomes a powerful and beneficial reflection on history, success, old age and death. As usual, Rothian meditation ends up in farce, since none of these three heroes seems to be able to cope with the perennial conflict between appearance and essence.

In the *American Pastoral*, Swede Levov, a “fair-complexioned Jewish student” with blue eyes and an “insentient Viking mask,” represents everything that generations of American Jews had hoped for. Even though he was the prototype of the athlete, being the baseball star both in high school and college, he renounces a professional sports career, only to take over his father’s hand gloves business, settle down, marry and lead a respectful and abundant suburban life. His only fault, hence both the tragedy and farce, was that he married an Irish catholic woman and that he happened to be a contemporary of the Vietnam War. His hopes and efforts of integrating himself and his family into the American way of life are all shattered when he realizes that being an American not only means leading a respectful life, but also facing the historical events that intersect it. Moreover, it rests on his daughter’s shoulders to remind him of that, when she becomes a radical opponent of the Vietnam War and bombs innocent people.

The same conflict between what it means to be an individual and what it means to be an American plays a central role in *I Married a Communist*, reinforcing a theme that is going to also be addressed in *The Human Stain*, that is, what is the price people need to pay in order to transgress individual, yet ethnic, backgrounds. Ira Ringold is a War World II veteran and a famous progressive radio voice that falls victim of the McCarthy era. As Ira Rinn, a tall and gaunt man, who looks like Abraham Lincoln and hosts a radio show about inspiring American historical models such as Nathan Hale, Orville Wright, Wild Bill Hickok or Jack London, he becomes a victim of the Un-American Activities Committee. But the tragedy, and farce of all this, is not the he was a communist, which in a way he was, but that he was uncovered as a communist by his wife who by denouncing her husband thought of protecting herself as a closeted Jewish person. The irony of the whole situation comes out when we find out that Ira, who was impersonating famous Americans in his show *The Free and the Brave*, was accused of un-American activities, which was not true; instead, he was indeed guilty because he actually murdered somebody in self-defense.

Coleman Silk himself, the main character in *The Human Stain*, is no stranger of the inner struggle that both Levov and Inn are forced to bear. Thus, the three heroes set forth another thematic unity that eventually individualizes the trilogy. In Roth’s words, in an interview with Charles McGrath in *The New York Times Book Review*, this theme is “Self-transformation. Self-invention. The alternative destiny. Repudiating the past. Powerful stuff.”<sup>11</sup> Before presenting Silk’s transformation, let us consider some of the critical takes on Roth’s novel.

In “Bellow at 85, Roth at 65,” Norman Podhoretz reviews Saul Bellow’s *Ravelstein* and Roth’s *The Human Stain* in order to praise their literary achievements throughout long and prodigious careers. Recognizing the distinct stylistic features of the two, Podhoretz goes on to identify certain similarities. Among those common things, that the reviewer brilliantly discerns,

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<sup>11</sup> Charles McGrath, “Zuckerman’s Alter Brain,” *The New York Times* (May 7, 2000): 7.

one is of particular importance for the economy of the present paper. Thus, the narrative device both authors use is that of a biographer telling the story of someone who is forced to bear the consequences of a secret. Moreover, both Ravelstein and Silk seem to have 'borrowed' the lives of two controversial intellectuals, because Alan Bloom and Anatole Broyard are "persons who are fictionalized only to the point of appearing under made-up names."<sup>12</sup> In turn, the narrators, Chick and Zuckerman seem to have 'borrowed' the life of their authors, being Bellow's and Roth's alter-egos, or as Roth once said, they are their authors' "other brain." But, more than that, Podhoretz immediately adds, Chick and Zuckerman do not resemble Nick Carraway who tells Jay's story in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or Marlow who recounts Kurtz's tale in Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. In contrast, they remind us, the critic suggests, of Shakespeare's Horatio. This does not mean that Ravelstein and Silk are modern Hamlets; rather, the two narrators are summoned, one could add, simply, "to tell my story". The implication, in reference to our discussion of *The Human Stain*, is that Roth has Zuckerman consider his friend's story worth telling.

Another similarity between the two novels that Podhoretz identifies in his article is that both of them are perfect examples of what critics usually call the genre of the "campus novels". The thematic of this genre, which has its best representations mainly in British fiction, with Kingsley Amis and David Lodge arguably the authors of the genre's two favorite novels, *Lucky Jim* and *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses*, as well as the connections between *Ravelstein* and *The Human Stain*, caught the eye of Jay Parini who, in "The Fictional Campus: Sex, Power, and Despair", writes about the way in which novels about the academic life both impact and reflect our perception of a given part of society which usually is considered to be run according to its own rules. Parini's review of Roth's novel and his insightful remarks are meant to open up our discussion towards the real thematic of the novel, besides its narrative devices which Podhoretz introduced to us. But, Silk's passing or posing, Parini informs us, drifts towards absurdity and caricature and it only gives Roth a chance to "use the campus setting as a way to vent his rage against political correctness." Moreover, the critic seems to accuse the novelist of playing a farce and he even puts words in Roth's mouth by assuming that the author "would doubtlessly claim that he intentionally made the situation absurd, as an exercise in hyperbole. Unfortunately, it's neither funny nor useful as a point of hyperbole. Roth is merely trading on the general public's fantasies about what goes on within the closed walls of the academy."<sup>13</sup> In the end, it seems that Parini's reading of Roth's novel brings to our current discussion its very rationale: *The Human Stain* is more of a farce, than a tragedy, and before proving that, let us consider the reasons for which some critics read the novel as a tragedy.

Elaine B. Safer's article, "Tragedy and Farce in Roth's *The Human Stain*", makes the necessary connection between farce and tragedy, while Patrice D. Rankine's "Passing as Tragedy: Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, the Oedipus Myth, and the Self-Made Man" clearly

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<sup>12</sup> Norman Podhoretz, "Bellow at 85, Roth at 67," *Commentary* (July-August, 2002): 38.

<sup>13</sup> Jay Parini, "The Fictional Campus: Sex, Power, and Despair," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 22, 2000): 13.



identifies the tragic features of Roth's novel. Safer constructs her argument around the relationship that Coleman Silk has with Faunia Farley after they both had lost everything they had and are faced to admit to themselves and to one another (though we may never know if that was the case since the events are reconstructed by Zuckerman) the crude reality of their secrets. They both are tainted with the human stain and they both seek purification, which they can only get through death. This is, in Safer's view, the tragic element of the novel. The critic's reading is actually more drastic than that. For her, Coleman and Faunia are the only tragic characters in a cartoon world, or to be more exact, they are the only ones who can transgress their condition. This means, that at "one level, Coleman and Faunia resemble cartoon characters: an elderly professor, revitalized by Viagra, in love with a young janitor of the college. Coleman seems a stock character of an older man desiring a young woman, like the elderly Carpenter in Chaucer's "Miller's Tale". On a second level Coleman and Faunia are rounded personalities, tragic and more complex than any Roth has previously portrayed."<sup>14</sup> And that is why their death is the novel's main purveyor of catharsis, or at least their death in a car accident caused by Faunia's ex-husband is the main 'incentive' for Zuckerman to write Silk's story. Other than that, with a phrase borrowed from Roth himself, everything that is going on in the novel is part of a "paradoxical theater" on whose stage everything and everyone is satirized, lampooned, and poked fun at, from Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky to the Vietnam War veterans and academic life. That is why Safer's conclusion is important for our own discussion of *The Human Stain* as an exemplification of Roth's farcical nature.

In contrast, Rankine's text moves the interpretation of Roth's novel from tragicomedy directly to tragedy. From the very beginning of her essay, Rankine considers Coleman Silk as a tragic character and views passing itself as a tragedy. Like other commentators, she acknowledges the "painful hilarity" of Roth's novel, but she refuse to consider it a farce. For her, passing, which involves a "sometimes sadistic joke of American Identity", is a strong literary motif that pertains to human and social tragedy. In her view, "Philip Roth amplifies the trope of passing and the dilemma of race change by linking them to Greek tragedy. He represents the phenomenon of passing by employing the full range of tragedy's attributes—its dramatic structure, its Bacchic underpinnings, and its conclusion in farce."<sup>15</sup> Thus, she integrates the novel, which inspires both pity and fear, that is, *pathos* and *phobos* – the main ingredients of tragedy, into a universal framework of literary genres, as well as into the particular compound of an important American literary motif:

*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 centuries, many people saw black identity as an undesirable proscription, the rich contribution of blacks to American*

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<sup>14</sup> Elaine B. Safer, "Tragedy and Farce in Roth's *The Human Stain*," *Critique*, vol. 43, no. 3, (Spring 2002): 219.

<sup>15</sup> Rankine, 107.

*society notwithstanding. For those who were able, passing was in some ways a natural choice, given the desirability of whiteness in America's hierarchical caste system.*<sup>16</sup>

In this way, Rankine's article rounds up the general coordinates of our discussion of *The Human Stain*. Because the purpose of the present interpretation is to discern Roth's farcical nature, Rankine's contribution is very important for laying down the 'trigger' of the entire demonstration. Although there is no doubt about the tragic elements of the novel, Rankine's extreme interpretation of the novel seems to overlook an important factor. She appears to forget that between the "undesirable proscriptions" of identity and the "natural choice" of passing there is the will of the individual. Unlike in the Greek tragedy, Roth's character is not at the gods' will, but in control of his own destiny. In other words, Coleman Silk is not doomed, as Oedipus is at the gods' mercy. Moreover, to bring to an end this long preliminary overview of both Roth's literary figure and literature, Roth himself is not at the literary critics' 'mercy'. He fights back, like Silk does, he resents those who misconstrue his work, he proves he has a will. Hence, the farce.

As showed before, Philip Roth "reconsidered" his work after he engaged in a writing dialog with one of his harshest critics, Irving Howe. This not only means that he acknowledged his limitations, as Howe suggested, but that Roth, in a way, surpassed them, rehashing his literary career and giving life to four novels which, indeed, set some literary scores, but also brought to the reader's attention a very credible and complex character in the guise of Nathan Zuckerman. Thus, the main hero of *Zuckerman Bound* (four novels that form a trilogy with an epilogue) mirrors, all proportions granted, Roth's transgression from a preponderantly Jewish-American writer to a celebrated American writer capable of writing another trilogy, whose last novel is the subject of this presentation. Along the way, the transformation is also visible from the point of view of Zuckerman himself. He is no longer the "angry" young man fighting for a place in the literary world. When he lost his passion, he suddenly found his compassion, therefore making him able of concentrating on others and become an insightful observer of the American life as this was affecting the life of characters like Swede Levov, Ira Rinn or Coleman Silk. Moreover, critics were ready to discover and praise this change. Roth's 'Americanization' was ready to be recognized by Podhoretz who finds Roth to be Saul Bellow's equal, identifies the narrative devices used in *The Human Stain*, and circumscribes the thematic of the novel. The genre that Roth employs gives Parini a chance to compare the author with Bellow, again, but also with other respectable British writers, such as David Lodge and Kingsley Amis. Finally, Safer and Rankine open up the critical analysis to both the tragic and farcical way in which Roth understands to portray Silk's passing. As the title of this paper suggests, these are the facts. Let us see how they become farce.

### **Coleman Silk – *Unbound***

Like any good novel, *The Human Stain* is difficult to summarize. The last part of Roth's trilogy touches on many important aspects of culture, literature, politics, and society. But since our

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 108.

focus is on his passing, in the last part of the paper, we are going to devote our attention to Coleman Silk, some of his deeds, and their consequences. After a summary of the novel, we will show that, even though he embodies tragic features, Roth's character is not a tragic hero. Or, to better carve out Roth's message, the world in which Silk lives is not a tragic world. After all, in this 'tragic' conclusion lies Roth's farcical nature.

The gist of the novel is simple and clearly cut. A light-skinned African American decides to pass as white to have access to the opportunities the whites had in post-war America. Although at first, his decision seems to be personal, it soon turns out that, once unleashed, the hero's passing has the most crucial consequences, to such an extent that in the end it forces Silk to lose everything that a pretense life supposedly brought him. Thus, his loss is double, and this is the ultimate farce that Roth brings to our attention. A simple check on a draft registration card gives young Silk the opportunity to serve in the military and become a beneficiary of the G.I. Bill. We are not only faced with an individual who marks the "white" box just to get the right to engage in combat, but we become the witnesses of a person who tries to pass as a Jewish person. A valedictorian in high school, whose family is offered bribes so a Jewish doctor's son could get his position, a good boxing fighter coached by a Jewish dentist, Coleman Silk seems the prototype of the young African American who is going to succeed in life as long as he follows given paths: Howard, a historical black college, medical school, good practice, family. But he appears to want more. After leaving Howard, the university that his father thought fit for him and his brother to attend, fighting the war, and studying classics at NYU, Silk marries a Jewish woman and starts a prodigious academic career at a small liberal arts college, where he is supposedly the first Jewish professor to become dean and whose tenure, ultimately, becomes synonym with the college's image. Everything works well, but after a life of hard work and deserved recognition, instead of enjoying his seniority, Silk becomes the victim of a political correctness scandal. In a typical process of moral sentencing, Silk is forced to resign, thus losing the benefits of his long-life work. The situation gets even worse when, affected by the whole scandal, Silk's wife dies, making him lose the symbolic legitimacy of his invented life. Shamed and defeated, Silk tempts life one more time and has an affair with a much younger woman, whose disturbed ex-husband causes a car accident in which both the old classics professor and the young janitor lose their lives, thus being punished, as the novel's epigraph suggest, for crimes they did not understand.

The epigraph, taken from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, foreshadows the tragic features of Coleman Silk. When Oedipus finds the truth of his situation and asks his brother-in-law / uncle "What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?", Creon answers "By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood..." In Silk's case, even though it is not quite clear that he wants to undergo a process of purification, the punishment is double: not only that he is banished (as Oedipus was) from the academia, but he is also murdered. To see why this happened and to help us understand what Silk was guilty of, in other words what human stain needed to be purified, let us consider three key moments in the character's biography.

The first moment presents the Silk family around the dinner table with the father warning the son that he does not know how to quit undefeated. This particular incident is

important in understanding the struggles that young Silk goes through in figuring out his destiny. As it later turns out, one of Coleman Silk's stains, and therefore mistakes, is that he would not know when the time to stop is. After winning a few boxing matches, being undefeated, the father plays one of those boring didactical roles in which the parent tries to regain his authority in the face of the son who desperately seeks to make father-figures out the persons he considers help him succeed in life in a way that outwits the actual father's order of things. The conflict starts when the father admits he is not the father or at least Coleman does not credit him with that authority, since young Silk seems to pay more attention to his boxing coach. The lesson that is about to be taught suddenly becomes very important when the father actually assumes the role of a boxing trainer and needs to give the son some advice: "If I were your father [...] you know what I would tell you now? [...] I would say, 'You won last night? Good. Now you can retire undefeated. You're retired.' That's what I'd say, Coleman."<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, Coleman has other plans and when he retires, he is already defeated.

The second moment that plays a large role in Silk's determination to pass reveals a lesson that, unlike the previous one, young Coleman learns. In fact, we think that Coleman learns the lesson this time just because the father does not teach it, but Doc Chizner, the boxing coach does. It seems that since his real father was not capable of providing him with an unstained identity, the coach had one ready at hand. Before going to a boxing tournament at West Point where he was going to referee a match, Doc Chizner gives Coleman some advice regarding race matters. In the eventuality that the Pitt coach would be interested in him and offer him a scholarship, Coleman was not to say anything about his ethnic background: "If nothing comes up, you don't bring it up. You're neither one thing or the other. You're Silky Silk. That's enough. That's the deal. [...] You look like you look, you're with me, and so he's going to think that you're one of Doc's boys. He's going to think that you are Jewish."<sup>18</sup> In short, that was the deal – for Coleman to become Jewish. That is the lesson that Coleman did learn. Unfortunately, like always in life, something, contrary to Doc's predictions, did come up. True, the slurring came up more than fifty years later, but it was punishment enough for disregarding the father's advice.

Finally, the third moment is a family episode once again. "He was murdering [his mother]" Roth writes when Coleman Silk sees his mother for the last time letting her know he is going to marry a Jewish woman and that his new family need never find out about his ethnic background. The mother's perplexity, grief and anger are clearly shown when she says:

*I don't know why I'm not better prepared for this, Coleman. I should be. You've been giving fair warning almost from the day you got here. You were seriously disinclined even to take the breast. Yes, you were. Now I see why. Even that might delay your escape. There was always something about our*

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

*family, and I don't mean color – there was something about us that impeded you. You think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman Brutus. You're white as snow and you think like a slave.*<sup>19</sup>

If we are to believe the mother's words, the freedom and free will that Coleman Silk desperately looks for are nothing but a grim prison. In fact, it is in this quote that the farcical nature of the novel clearly reveals itself. By posing as a Jewish person, by inventing for him a new identity, Silk is actually replacing one bondage with another. The father who liked Shakespeare and who gave his children Latin middle names could not have been more right when he decided to call his youngest son Brutus!

These three defining moments of young Coleman Silk's biography bear relevance once we understand the situation Roth's character placed himself in. Eager to reject his family and ready to embrace a new identity foreshadowed by his boxing coach, who happens to be a Jewish doctor, Coleman Silk decided to pass as white and 'doctor' his life accordingly. His posing forced him to engage in an exercise of self-invention that mirrored the tragic alternative of remaining a dutiful son limited in his choices not by his skin, but by the stigma that was attached to his mind and soul as being the child of black ancestry. No matter how tragic the alternative, the actual invention is no less ironic. Not only that he invented himself, he also invented his parents. And that is where irony, farce, and even sarcasm step in. There is one thing to reinvent yourself, but a totally different one to reinvent your parents. Coleman Silk exists – he is Iris's husband, Zuckerman's friend, the respected classics professor, his children's father, Faunia's lover and many other things, while his parents do not exist at all, except in his own words. And words, or to be more precise, one word was enough to shatter his entire self-creation.

In the end, his downfall is triggered not by the father he so forcefully rejects, but by the invented father whose advice, this time, he scrupulously followed: "I said spooks because I meant spooks. My father was a saloon keeper, but he insisted on precision in my language, and I have kept the faith with him. Words have meanings – with only a seventh-grade education, even my father knew this much. Back of the bar, he kept two things to help settle arguments among his patrons: a blackjack and a dictionary. My best friend, he told me, the dictionary – and so it is for me today."<sup>20</sup> If he indeed had been precise, as his invented father instructed him, he would have known better: a Jewish father's best friend is, in fact, a book, but that book is not the dictionary. Moreover, he would have also known that no mortal could make people out of words. But because he disregarded that, he himself ended up being a 'gook', that is a ghost for his African American family and a specter for everybody else. His becoming in-visible is his late optician father's last revenge. And that is the farce! A given, the farcical nature of Roth's writing prevents him from becoming invisible. His creations, with Zuckerman and Silk in the forefront, allow him to do and undo the most intricate mechanisms of human nature. Between tragedy and farce, although he seems to favor farce, Roth knows how to "invent" life that would not eventually destroy him. But this is a lesson Roth does not want to share with his characters.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 157.