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Plotting the Frames of Subjectivity: Identity, Death, and Narrative in Philip Roth’s

The Human Stain

Most of Philip Roth’s novels are concerned with the symbiotic relationship between experience and narrative, or, to quote Nathan Zuckerman in The Counterlife (1986), “the kind of stories people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into” (111). In what has become known as his American trilogy—American Pastoral (1997), I Married a Communist (1998), and The Human Stain (2000)—Roth continues this fictional trajectory, albeit with significant variations, returning after a decade to his narrative mask of the perennial Zuckerman. Zuckerman’s position within these texts, at least on the surface, is that of observer of and commentator on other lives, not

1. Several reviewers of The Human Stain described that novel and the two preceding it as a modern American historical trilogy, although not everyone agreed on their structural connectedness, with Carlin Romano questioning the “trilogy” conceptualization as perhaps nothing more than New York Times critic Michiko Kakutani passing on the idea from Roth and Houghton Mifflin’s publicity department. Even though such cynicism is not entirely unfounded—publishers do engage in hyperbole—Roth does seem to have written The Human Stain as the third volume in a trilogy. David Remnick, who spent time with Roth preparing a New Yorker profile and would have spoken with the novelist before Kakutani’s review, refers to the books as a “trilogy on postwar American life” (76). In an interview marking the publication of The Human Stain, Roth states, “I think of [American Pastoral, I Married a Communist, and The Human Stain] as a thematic trilogy, dealing with the historical moments in postwar American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation” (“Zuckerman’s Alter Brain” 8). Asked in 2003 when he first realized that the books were coming together as a trilogy, Roth responded: “Once I was nearing the end with I Married a Communist. . . I thought, what else do you know? And I said for god sakes, it’s right in front of you, it’s right in front of your nose. And there it [The Human Stain] was, of course. And I thought, treat ‘98 as though it were ‘48, treat ‘98 as though it were ‘68. You see? See it, if you can, as history” (“Philip Roth”).

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his own. Although now impotent, Zuckerman can still flex his imaginative muscle and do so in ways that illustrate an ongoing desire to define his own subject position. In *I Married a Communist*, the aging narrator recounts his conversations with Murray Ringold, his former high school teacher and brother of the radio star Iron Rinn (Ira Ringold). Ira had been a hero to the young Zuckerman, and as in *American Pastoral* we see an attempt to understand the self through the process of memory. In contrast to his role in that novel, Zuckerman is not the primary focalizer in *I Married a Communist*. He shares this narrative task with Murray Ringold, and the structure of the novel is a continual shifting between the two storytellers. In the long passages where Murray’s recounting of his brother’s life is barely framed, it is easy to forget that Zuckerman is the narrative filter through which these conversations and recollections take place. Indeed, the very notion of Zuckerman as an important “filter” is problematized by the narrator himself. At one point early in the novel, when Nathan is reflecting on his choice to live alone, he halts his reveries to assert: “But my seclusion is not the story here. It is not a story in any way. I came here because I don’t want a story any longer. I’ve had my story” (71). When he quickly lapses right back into his own ego, Nathan again abruptly interrupts himself, declaring, “But the story is Ira’s” (72). Such comments may arouse curiosity, but the narrator denies the reader any clearer insight into his present state of mind.

In this second novel of the American trilogy, Zuckerman is more a passive agent than an active participant. No reimaginings or recreations forge the narrative. Instead, there is the reception of voices. On the threshold of old age, Nathan reflects: “Occasionally now, looking back, I think of my life as one long speech that I’ve been listening to. . . . The book of my life is a book of voices. When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: ‘Listening’” (222). In this novel, the story is more or less the mimetic recounting of Ira Ringold’s life, not the actual act of recounting it. While the narrative structure of *American Pastoral* reveals just as much about Zuckerman as it does the Swede, *I Married a Communist* is striking in its refusal to be “about” Zuckerman in any significant way.2

2. For an extended discussion of the ways in which *American Pastoral* is more Zuckerman’s story than it is the Swede’s, see Royal.
The same cannot be said of *The Human Stain*, arguably the best crafted and most ambitious work in the American trilogy. In this novel, Roth once again returns to the theme of narrated lives, but in ways that are vastly more revealing than those used in the story of Iron Rinn. The structure of *The Human Stain* is similar to that of *American Pastoral*: Nathan Zuckerman presents the tragic tale of a uniquely memorable figure while giving readers a glimpse into the assumptions and privileges that constitute storytelling. Put another way, in both novels, Zuckerman’s narrative reflects a postmodern reading of identities (American, ethnic, masculine) and the ways in which such identities are constructed. This emphasis on storytelling leaves *I Married a Communist* seeming somewhat out of place within the trilogy, at least in terms of its narrative discourse. It shares with the other two novels a thematic concern with postwar American history—the basis for most of the critical attention given to the trilogy—but its relatively uncomplicated use of first-person narration stands in stark contrast to the ambiguous disclosures found in its companions. One reviewer suggests as much when he asserts that the tragedy of Iron Rinn is the “weakest” of the three novels “because Murray Ringold relates what he already knows—there is no massive finding-out mission for Zuckerman to execute, and therefore no action” (Gessen 118).

As with *American Pastoral*, where reviewers focused almost exclusively on the rise and fall of Swede Levov, in *The Human Stain* the story (as opposed to the plot, or discourse) is deceptively straightforward. What is more, the book bears all the markings of Roth’s later fiction: a provocative subject (in this case political correctness and the academy), a larger-than-life tragic protagonist, and an ethical subtext pertaining not only to a particular historical moment but to American culture at large. So it is not surprising that most reviews centered on the controversial or recent historical subjects of the text, political correctness and the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinski affair. While these analyses provide fruitful insights into the book’s explicit thematic issues, they say little about the overwhelming significance of

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3. Sven Birkerts, Jay L. Halio, Lorrie Moore, and Norman Podhoretz all acknowledge Roth’s attack on political correctness in their reviews. David L. Kirp, John Podhoretz, Carlin Romano, and William G. Tierney approach the novel as a pointed critique of contemporary academia.
Zuckerman’s role as the constructing force behind the narrative, for as in *American Pastoral*, all information in *The Human Stain* is filtered exclusively through this seemingly—and, as I will argue, deceptively—unobtrusive narrator. For many readers, Zuckerman is merely the writerly conduit through whom Silk’s story unfolds. Among reviewers who did note the importance of Zuckerman within the text, Lorrie Moore comments that the “novel is strongest and is even magical when Zuckerman is actually present on the page” (8); Michiko Kakutani acknowledges the thematic links between Silk and Zuckerman (and by association Roth the author); and Igor Webb, indirectly harking back to earlier novels such as *The Ghost Writer* and *American Pastoral*, emphasizes the centrality of Zuckerman in terms of the imagined life, arguing that for Nathan, “it is through imagination that, in the world of radical autonomy, we seek truth: this is the thing, this obsessiveness, that Zuckerman holds in reverence” (652). Yet while acknowledging Nathan Zuckerman as a significant presence, these critics work from the assumption that the story of Coleman Silk, as presented by Zuckerman, is more or less true: they assume, in other words, that as a historian of Silk’s life, Zuckerman is a reliable narrator and compiler of facts, and that his narrative efforts (discourse) correspond to the actual events (story).⁴

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⁴ I focus primarily on the initial critical reaction to *The Human Stain* because reviews written immediately after a novel’s publication can have a significant impact on how the book is subsequently received, and even the more insightful ones tended to overlook the structural intricacies of Roth’s text. Much the same could be said about the rich and increasingly diverse body of scholarship on the novel to date. Elaine B. Safer reads it as an example of Roth’s ongoing use of black humor and farce. Both David Brauner and Jeffrey Charis-Carlson focus on the novel’s “Americanness,” which for Brauner is rooted in the text’s critique of the pastoral ideal, and for Charis-Carlson is found in Roth’s thematic uses of Washington, D.C. On the subject of the book’s engagement with racial identity, Dean J. Franco uses the backdrop of Clinton’s presidency to analyze the ways in which Roth deconstructs notions of race; Brett Ashley Kaplan reads Roth’s concepts of racial fluidity in relation to Anatole Broyard (who is commonly seen as the real-life counterpart of Coleman Silk); and Marietta Messmer views the novel as a dialectic between constructivist and essentialist concepts of ethnicity. Both Geoffrey W. Bakewell and Timothy L. Parrish offer intertextual readings of *The Human Stain* in its links to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, respectively. Only Debra Shostak has approached the novel in terms of narratology, with a brief discussion centered on the trope of secrets: who knows what and who withholds what information. Her analysis is a useful starting point for exploring more fully the function of narrative secrets as a framing of subjectivity.
However compelling the story of Coleman Silk may be, those familiar with Nathan Zuckerman should be on their guard. Despite the noticeable changes in Zuckerman’s character in the American trilogy—his less than manic demeanor, his subdued approaches to authorship, his resignation to the prostate cancer that has left him both impotent and incontinent—his manipulative and even mischievous side has carried over from his younger days. One can sense this in *American Pastoral* when he ironically describes the “neutral, dereligionized ground of Thanksgiving” (402), as well as in the rhetorical machinations regarding betrayal in *I Married a Communist*. A revealing indication of Zuckerman’s role as narrator can be found in his letter to Philip in *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography* (1988), where he warns his creator that compared to fiction-making, “the facts are much more refractory and unmanageable and inconclusive, and can actually kill the very sort of inquiry that imagination opens up” (166). What is more, he sees in Philip’s writing a tendency that will play itself out more fully in such works as *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993) and *American Pastoral*—a blurring of the historical and the imaginary, the unwritten life and the written life, the text and the countertext. Philip (Roth)’s métier, in other words, lies in the art of narrative deception, a strategy of misrepresentation that is ironically more representational—at least in terms of what it says about the construction of texts and by association the construction of identity—than fact. “It’s through dissimulation,” Zuckerman reminds his creator in the autobiography, “that you find your freedom from the falsifying requisites of ‘candor’” (184). As the final thirty-five pages of *The Facts* make abundantly clear, Zuckerman understands in Philip’s writings the necessity of imagining lives. Making the case as he does, might one go on to assume that Zuckerman himself—a fictional representation of a fictional representation of a living author abundantly concerned with representations of the self—engages in similar narrative acts when recounting the story of Coleman Silk?

Judging from Zuckerman’s re-creation of the events that make up *The Human Stain*, such would seem to be the case. A close reading suggests that much of what transpires is just as much a matter of the narrator’s imagination as it is of recorded fact. As Elaine B. Safer has recognized, Zuckerman’s own imaginings, not the recounting
of Silk’s ordeal, are the focus of the novel (224). Safer points out that the two sources of information from which Zuckerman reconstructs his narrative—Silk’s aborted book manuscript, “Spooks,” and his conversations with Silk’s sister, Ernestine—cannot alone account for all the events that unfold in the novel. She cites the romantic bedroom scene where Faunia dances for Coleman and Faunia’s speculations at the wildlife habitat as examples. I would argue that these are certainly not the only events whose verisimilitude is called into question. Except for the ice-fishing scene at the very end of the novel, Zuckerman’s accounts of Les Farley have to be a constructed fiction (especially the stream-of-consciousness narration that closes out the first chapter), for Zuckerman would not have had access to information reflecting Les’s state of mind. We are given no source for the information narrated in Les’s therapeutic visit to the Chinese restaurant, in his trip to see the Moving Wall memorial, or in his proleptic conversation with a psychologist at the VA hospital. Similarly, there are no clues as to how Zuckerman knew about Silk’s confrontation with Les right outside his kitchen door, an event mentioned no fewer than three times in the novel (63–64, 70–71, 294–95). This incident would not have been in Silk’s “Spooks” manuscript, for it occurred after he’d given that to Nathan, nor could Silk have told Zuckerman about it, because it took place during a time when they do not see each other. At the Tanglewood orchestra rehearsal in August 1998, the narrator informs us that he had not seen Coleman since July, when they met Faunia at the dairy farm, and at no time during their brief meeting at Tanglewood does Silk bring up the topic of Les, nor would he, under the circumstances. Indeed, Zuckerman’s own language throws into question the actuality of the Coleman-Les confrontation: when he first mentions the event, Zuckerman prefaces his narrative with the comment, “As I reconstruct it” (63). While his wording suggests the constructed nature of this narrative event, no source from which he is reconstructing it is made clear.

Likewise, Zuckerman would not be privy to the thoughts of Delphine Roux. He might have gathered some of the information regarding her life through Herb Keble, Silk’s former and Roux’s present colleague—Nathan mentions a conversation with Keble at Coleman’s funeral—but Roux’s feelings for Silk and her yearnings
for a meaningful relationship would have to be nothing more than speculation. Even the source of the crucial anonymous letter beginning “Everyone knows” is never substantiated. On the basis of his own comparisons as well as those of a handwriting expert, Silk is certain that the letter was written by Roux. But Zuckerman’s narrative never establishes Roux’s complicity and employs tentative language in assigning the letter to Roux. As he and Silk are trying to identify the letter’s origin and understand how the relationship with Faunia was discovered, Zuckerman speculates that Delphine “might have begun” her letter intending not to reveal herself, and that neglecting to cover her identity “might have been explained by some extreme emotional state” at the time she was writing (38). Words such as “maybe,” “perhaps,” “seemed,” “probably,” “could have happened,” and “might have been” recur throughout this passage, emphasizing the uncertainty of the narrator’s knowledge (38–42). This is the kind of speculative rhetoric a fiction writer would use in testing out and determining his characters’ courses of actions, which in many ways is what Zuckerman is in the process of doing. That none of the novel’s critics have pointed this out is rather surprising, especially given the fact that most of the book’s much celebrated anti-PC attitude is based on the reader’s assumption that Zuckerman can actually know Delphine Roux, whom he never meets. But Roth never fully reveals his narrator’s sources of knowledge, and the resulting ambiguity gives added meaning to one of the novel’s most quoted passages, in which Zuckerman admits his own epistemological (and narratological) limitations:

Because we don’t know, do we? Everyone knows… How what happens the way it does? What underlies the anarchy of the train of events, the uncertainties, the mishaps, the disunity, the shocking irregularities that define human affairs? Nobody knows, Professor Roux. “Everyone knows” is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience, and it’s the solemnity and the sense of authority that people have in voicing the cliché that’s so insufferable. What we know is that, in an un cliché way, nobody knows anything. You can’t know anything. The things you know you don’t know. Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don’t know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing.

(208–9)
This passage brings to mind a moment in *Deception* (1990) when Philip’s lover, attempting to make sense of her relationship with him, tells the novelist, “The trouble with life is you don’t really know if this is a downward process. The trouble with life is you don’t really know what’s going on at all” (130). But perhaps more significantly, Zuckerman’s thoughts echo a sentiment found in *American Pastoral*, where the narrator speculates on his inability to fully understand the Swede:

> The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you.

Given that Zuckerman “can’t know anything” about all that happened to Silk, he relies on the power of his own imaginings, a narrative strategy he effectively utilized in *American Pastoral*. And as in the previous novel, his attempts to reimagine another life, his forgetting about being right or wrong and “just going along for the ride,” help to reveal the ways in which he constructs his own identity.

That the story of Coleman Silk is based in large part upon the fictional imaginings of Nathan Zuckerman is beyond question. Not only is the narrator ignorant of most of the events surrounding Les Farley and Delphine Roux, but much of the narrative detail not directly experienced by Nathan would have to be fictitious as well. For instance, he may learn of Silk’s past through Ernestine, but there are many parts of Silk’s story that his sister could not have known (such as the topics of her brother’s many narrated interior monologues). Nor would some of this information have been in “Spooks,” because Zuckerman does not learn of Silk’s racial and

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5. Even events directly experienced by Zuckerman bear the markings, the “stain,” of fiction. Nathan describes one of the police officers who found Coleman’s and Faunia’s bodies as “a poker-faced, quietly officious fellow whose Croatian family, I remembered, used to own the Madamaska Inn” (295). Astute readers will note the intertextual play with *Sabbath’s Theater*, a book that otherwise does not concern Roth’s favorite protagonist.
ethnic roots until after his death. “It was from Ernestine,” he men-
tions by way of explanation, “that I learned most of what I know
about Coleman’s growing up in East Orange” (317). But this is only
a partial explanation, for the narrator is curiously ambiguous as to
how he received the rest of his knowledge. There are noticeable
gaps in Zuckerman’s account of all the novel’s events, and when
direct (or even indirect) knowledge fails him, he turns to fiction.
Immediately after having lunch with Ernestine, Zuckerman heads
back to the cemetery and over the freshly dug grave of Coleman
Silk admits, “I was completely seized by his story, by its end and by
its beginning, and, then and there, I began this book.” He begins his
story by “wondering what it had been like when Coleman had told
Faunia the truth about [his past]—assuming that he ever had;
assuming, that is, that he had to have. Assuming that what he could
not outright say to me. . . he could not in the end resist confessing
to her” (337). It is at this point that Zuckerman most clearly reveals
the wellspring of his narrative: the wondering, the assuming—in
essence, his imagination. “I admit that [Coleman’s telling his secret
to Faunia] may not be at all correct,” Zuckerman says aloud to his
now-deceased friend, “I admit that none of it may be. But here goes
anyway” (338). And what “goes” appears to be the very text the
reader holds, a work of fiction entitled The Human Stain, the title of
the book—of fiction?—that Zuckerman tells Les Farley he is writing
during their one and only encounter (356).

But if Zuckerman constructs much of the novel as a fiction, the
question remains, why does he narrate Silk’s history? What is it
about the tragedy of Coleman Silk that so intrigues the aging nov-
elist? When Coleman first asks Nathan to write about his misfor-
tune, he refuses: “his ordeal wasn’t a subject I wished to address in
my fiction” (13). More than two years later, after Silk’s death,
Zuckerman is “completely seized by his story” and commits him-
selves to its telling (337). The reasons for Nathan’s change of heart are
twofold. First, from a novelist’s point of view, the story of Coleman
Silk has rich literary potential, as the narrator tells us:

There is something fascinating about what moral suffering can do to
someone who is in no obvious way a weak or feeble person. It’s more
insidious even than what physical illness can do, because there is no mor-
phine drip or spinal block or radical surgery to alleviate it. Once you’re in
its grip, it’s as though it will have to kill you for you to be free of it. Its raw realism is like nothing else.

The Nathan Zuckerman who writes this is the same individual who makes the lives around him the subject of his fiction, regardless of the consequences. He is the young man of whom Judge Wapter and his wife are suspicious in The Ghost Writer (1979), the denounced son and scandalous author of Carnovsky in Zuckerman Unbound (1981), and the miner of his brother’s illicit affairs in The Counterlife. For this perennial artist—as well as for his creator, Philip Roth—moral suffering is significant for its literary wealth.

There is another reason why Zuckerman becomes involved in Coleman Silk’s story. In a 1960 Esquire magazine essay, Roth suggests that in order to become more relevant as novelists, contemporary American writers must make the realities they see around them more credible by abjuring what Roth saw as “a voluntary withdrawal of interest by the fiction writer from some of the grander social and political phenomena of our times” (“Writing American Fiction” 180). Even in his most metafictional works, Roth makes clear his belief that a writer should engage with the world beyond the self. When Zuckerman states in The Counterlife that “it is INTERESTING trying to get a handle on one’s own subjectivity—something to think about, to play around with” (321), he is not advocating fictional solipsism. Grappling with identity is a means to a larger goal, which in The Counterlife is an understanding of the American ethnic subject. Similarly, in The Facts, when Philip tells us that he “spontaneously set[s] out to improve on actuality in the interest of being more interesting” (107), his target is not mere curiosity but the dynamics involved in the inscription of the self. What Roth finds “interesting” in these two passages is similar to what Zuckerman finds “fascinating” about Silk’s moral dilemma: a socially charged premise upon which to explore his life as an aging Jewish man.

Nathan Zuckerman in The Human Stain could be described as a writer tempted by the kind of voluntary withdrawal Roth refers to in “Writing American Fiction.” Zuckerman’s self-imposed monasticism—an isolation not unlike that symbolically embodied at the end of the novel in Les Farley, a “solitary man on a bucket. . . atop an arcanian mountain in America” (361)—is an attempt at “solid work,” an
“[a]bnegation of society, abstention from distraction, a self-imposed separation from every last professional yearning and social delusion and cultural poison and alluring intimacy, a rigorous reclusion such as that practiced by religious devouts who immure themselves in caves or cells or isolated forest huts” (43). Yet Zuckerman cannot maintain this social disengagement, admitting that such a separation “is maintained on stuff more obdurate than I am made of” (43). This is where Coleman Silk comes in. Silk disrupts Zuckerman’s austere existence by exploding onto the scene, “banging on the door and asking to be let in” soon after the death of his wife, Iris (10). As Zuckerman recounts the episode, Silk “roamed round and round my workroom, speaking loudly and in a rush, even menacingly shaking a fist in the air when—erroneously—he believed emphasis was needed” (11). Coleman’s lumbering into the novelist’s workroom becomes a metaphorical intrusion into the writerly text-space. Coleman demands to become a focus of narrative, a wish that the writer ultimately grants through his re-creation of his life.

Narrating these events approximately two years after Silk’s death, Zuckerman pinpoints an incident that seems to have nurtured his fascination with his subject: an innocent dance. One Saturday evening, after a casual game of cards, Coleman and Nathan hear Frank Sinatra’s rendition of “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered” coming from the radio. Coleman, a lover of big band music, is in a particularly jovial mood that evening and, moved by the music, asks his companion to dance. Zuckerman (who, at the telling of this narrative, knows about the professor’s past) describes his unlikely dance partner as having once been “not only a studious boy but a charming and seductive boy as well. Excited. Mischievous. A bit demonic even, a snub-nosed, goat-footed Pan” (25). Coleman’s appeal as a dancing partner, and as a “mischievous” subject for fiction, awakens something in Nathan. Yet beyond the overly easy homoerotic implications that could be read here, the narrator’s feelings have a broader and farther reaching significance:

6. Lest one be tempted to read into Zuckerman’s reclusiveness any phallic significance, the narrator states outright that such is not the case: the preliminary diagnosis of prostate cancer occurred eighteen months after he isolated himself in the Berkshires. His surgery and subsequent impotence, he maintains, did nothing more than give physical credence to his previous decision (36–37).
There was nothing overtly carnal in [the dance], but because Coleman was wearing only his denim shorts and my hand rested easily on his warm back as if it were the back of a dog or a horse, it wasn’t entirely a mocking act. There was a semi-serious sincerity in his guiding me about on the stone floor, not to mention a thoughtless delight in just being alive, accidentally and clownishly and for no reason alive.

(26)

The effect this dance has on the novel’s narrator should not be underestimated. As Nathan makes clear early on, he has chosen a life of artistic seclusion, an existence that includes the “encircling silence as your chosen source of advantage and your only intimate” (44). The way Zuckerman describes the Sinatra-serenaded dance suggests a reevaluation of his own disengaged life:

This was how Coleman became my friend and how I came out from under the stalwartness of living alone in my secluded house and dealing with the cancer blows. Coleman Silk danced me right back into life. First Athena College, then me—here was a man who made things happen. Indeed, the dance that sealed our friendship was also what made his disaster my subject. And made his disguise my subject. And made the proper presentation of his secret my problem to solve. That was how I ceased being able to live apart from the turbulence and intensity that I had fled. I did no more than find a friend, and all the world’s malice came rushing in.

(45)

Zuckerman finds himself bewitched (and bothered and bewildered) by this “goat-footed Pan,” so much so that recounting his story assumes almost salvific importance. The impromptu dance, then, becomes a central metaphor in the novel, one directly linked to the narrative act: just as Coleman guides the unsuspecting Nathan across the stone floor of his cabin, Zuckerman the author maneuvers Silk onto the “dance floor” of his text and in doing so touches the very fleshiness, the “warm back,” of his being. Coleman playfully dances Nathan “right back into life,” and in telling Silk’s story, Zuckerman writes the life back into his deceased subject.

7. Perhaps it is no accident that music and reminiscence function so prominently in both *The Human Stain* and *American Pastoral*, with songs providing a nostalgic and dreamy springboard into speculations on the self. For an insightful reading of Roth’s use of music in these novels, see Shechner (169–73).
But this is not all. What leads to Coleman’s mirthfulness—and what so fascinates Nathan—is their topic of conversation before and after the dance. When they hear Sinatra on the radio, Silk is reading Zuckerman a recently rediscovered letter from his former lover Steena Palsson. After they dance, Silk reveals that he is having an affair with Faunia Farley, his Voluptas, as he calls her, and securing his sexual prowess with Viagra. Because of this, Zuckerman experiences an episode of what could popularly be called male bonding, a rarity in Roth’s fiction:

I thought, He’s found somebody he can talk with... and then I thought, So have I. The moment a man starts to tell you about sex, he’s telling you something about the two of you... Most men never find such a friend. It’s not common. But when it does happen, when two men find themselves in agreement about this essential part of being a man, unafraid of being judged, shamed, envied, or outdone, confident of not having the confidence betrayed, their human connection can be very strong and an unexpected intimacy results.

(27)

The juxtaposition of Nathan’s impotence and Coleman’s Viagra-fueled affair is profoundly significant. After learning of his friend’s sexual exploits, the narrator begins to question his own hermitlike existence and briefly loses his mental equilibrium. No longer certain that he can ever completely discount sex from his life, he wonders: “How can one say, ‘No, this isn’t a part of life,’ since it always is? The contaminant of sex, the redeeming corruption that de-idealizes the species and keeps us everlastingly mindful of the matter we are” (37). Nathan’s intimacy with Coleman draws him out of his idealized and sterile reclusiveness and back into the reality of life’s entanglements. For a writer without physical potency, this return may have its inevitable drawbacks—the unresolved tensions, the frustrated longings, the unfulfilled moments of desire—but as Zuckerman goes on to suggest, it allows the novelist to reenter the realm of the truly human. As in most of Roth’s novels, desire becomes a revitalizing force; here it not only serves its expected erotic purpose but, more notably, functions as a narrative stimulant.

It should come as no surprise to Roth’s readers that references to sex abound in the novel. There is Coleman’s Viagra, his youthful
adventures in Greenwich Village, Nathan’s impotence, Steena Palsson’s sensual “poem,” Faunia’s seductive dance, Delphine’s thwarted longings, Zeus’s mythological horniness, President Clinton’s indiscretions, and, one of the title’s many connotations, the stain on Monica’s infamous dress. All of these taken together suggest a vibrancy of being, an unabashed celebration of life, and the kind of fantastic tribute that Zuckerman brings to his assessment of the morally beleaguered president: “I myself dreamed of a mammoth banner, draped dadaistically like a Christo wrapping from one end of the White House to the other and bearing the legend A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE” (3).

Yet just as prominent as the references to sex are the many allusions to its conjoined opposite, death. If, as David Kepesh reminds his interlocutor in The Dying Animal (2001), “Sex isn’t just friction and shallow fun [but] also the revenge on death” (69), then one can see death as the ultimate ontological payback—Thanatos overtaking Eros. Because of the life-affirming references to sex, its counterpart death necessarily becomes a dominant theme in the novel and one that goes a long way in explaining the narrator’s fascination with Coleman Silk. Zuckerman is preoccupied with mortality throughout the American trilogy, and not only because he is a cancer survivor. Each of Roth’s subjects in the three novels—Swede Levov, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk—becomes distinctive only through his demise. What gives significance to each life, at least in Zuckerman’s eyes, is its departure from the public stage that it helped to animate, especially in The Human Stain, where Silk’s vibrancy is most profoundly felt in its absence. As the narrator explicitly states, the novel’s very genesis occurs at a graveside: “And that is how this all began: by my standing alone in a darkening graveyard and entering into professional competition with death” (338). Although Coleman may “dance” Nathan back into life, he does so, ironically enough, by fostering within the writer a keen awareness of the narrative implications surrounding death.

8. Some reviewers noted the centrality of death in the American trilogy, including John Leonard, who observed: “[C]ompared to Roth, Nietzsche was Chuckles the Clown. It’s all chaos theory [in Roth’s later fiction], lacking even the pretty patterns of the fractals” (9).
Such an emphasis is a relatively new phenomenon in Philip Roth’s fiction, especially when contrasted with the themes in such works as *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Stories* (1959), *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), *The Breast* (1972), *The Professor of Desire* (1977), and *The Ghost Writer*. In these novels the author privileges Eros over Thanatos, the very focus that, for better or for worse, established his reputation as a serious novelist. The reality of death is certainly there in the early novels—again, how can one explore the meaning of the erotic without an awareness of its binary opposite?—but its presence is largely muted. It is not until the late 1980s that Roth begins to engage the topic of death, beginning with such works as *The Counterlife* (where desire leads to the “deaths” of both Henry and Nathan Zuckerman), *Patrimony* (an account of Herman Roth’s terminal brain tumor), and *Operation Shylock* (where mischievous narrative play is punctuated by Philip’s illness and Pipik’s cancer), and these, in turn, anticipate the thanatological masterpieces *Sabbath’s Theater* and *The Dying Animal*. One could read this thematic shift biographically. Roth lost his mother in 1981 and his father in 1989; in *The Facts* (published before the death of Herman Roth), the author reveals the burdens of living through this experience. Significantly, narrative becomes a response to this loss: as Philip tells Nathan in the letter that opens *The Facts*, part of his purpose in writing the autobiography might be “as a palliative for the loss of a mother who still, in my mind, seems to have died inexplicably. . . as well as to hearten me as I come closer and closer and closer to an eighty-six-year-old father viewing the end of life as a thing as near to his face as the mirror he shaves in” (8–9). Roth’s own brush with death would seem to compound this awareness. In *Patrimony* and *Operation Shylock* he depicts the reality of his heart attack and bypass surgery in 1989 and the effects that experience had on his writing. All of this being the case, it is no wonder that as a novelist Roth would become preoccupied with issues of death, as exemplified most dramatically in *Sabbath’s Theater*.9

9. A passage in David Remnick’s profile is particularly revealing of Roth’s narrative uses of death. Asked when he felt happiest in his career, Roth answers, “When I was writing *Sabbath’s Theater*. . . . I felt free. I feel like I am in charge now” (88). Although meditations on death inform his earlier novels, one could read *Sabbath’s Theater* as Roth’s first
Although not nearly as manic as that of Mickey Sabbath, Coleman Silk’s life nonetheless anticipates the darker implications of desire, especially for its narrator, Nathan Zuckerman. In this light, one could read Coleman’s impromptu fox-trot with Nathan as an unintentional dance of death. The novel contains numerous connotations of demise and barrenness, including not only the references to Zuckerman’s prostate cancer but also passages devoted to Silk’s funeral, his metaphorically dead African American past, the death of Faunia’s children, Les Farley’s social “impotence,” Iris Silk’s stroke, Faunia’s invalid father, Silk’s dying relationship with his children, the horrific suicide scene that Faunia helps clean up, and the allusions to Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. But perhaps the most notable intimations of death and sterility occur in three extended and significantly placed passages: the scene where Silk takes Zuckerman to meet Faunia at the dairy farm; the concert at Tanglewood at which Zuckerman last sees Silk alive; and the ice-fishing encounter between the narrator and Les Farley.

Immediately after Coleman dances the narrator “right back into life,” he invites his friend to accompany him to Organic Livestock, the dairy farm where Faunia lives and works. It is Silk’s habit to visit the farm while his Voluptas is milking her cows: he likes to stand just outside the stall and watch her silently perform her duties. Roth here constructs a bucolic domain—another one of his imagined pastorals—inhabited solely by females, cows and workers all. The farm exudes “an opulent, earthy oneness with female abundance” in which he feels entirely at home (48). What is most striking about this scene is its reference to fecundity. Not only do the cows excel at milk production, but their output is pure and free from the “stains” of pasteurization and homogenization. With adjectival verve, Zuckerman all but romanticizes the “creamy-colored cows with the free-swinging, girderlike hips and the barrel-wide paunches and the disproportionately cartoonish milk-swollen udders” (47). In the center of all this abundance stands Faunia Farley, who appears to the observant narrator as if in a portrait, “cows framing her figure” (48).

full-scale engagement with a topic that turned out to be artistically liberating for him. As I will argue, in Roth’s later fiction, particularly *The Human Stain*, art becomes a way, however tentative, to turn the tables on death.
Nathan frames her again, figuratively, through highly evocative language reminiscent of Henry James’s introductions of his heroines (49–50). These associations of feminine or maternal wholesomeness give emphasis to Coleman’s newfound vivacity and what it might represent to the aging novelist.

Along with this life-sustaining abundance, however, lies a more sober reality, one that undermines the episode’s very richness. Soon after commenting on the productiveness of the dairy cows—employing such words as “sensual,” “voluptuous,” “blissfully,” “pleasured,” “opulent,” and “abundance”—Zuckerman notes that these bovines reproduce by means of artificial insemination, a sterile procedure that nonetheless, according to Faunia, “could prove to be an emotional process for everyone involved” (48). It seems plausible that this information has an emotional effect on Zuckerman, who might find in the dairy cows—animals who create without sex—a metaphorical kinship. Indeed, the narrator uses this event to speculate on his own subject position, and he does so against a backdrop of mortality. He refers to this episode with dramatic rhetoric, calling it a “theatrical performance” with two principal actors and he himself merely playing the part of a walk-on or extra. This episode obsesses Zuckerman, for he tells us that in the following nights, “I could not sleep because I couldn’t stop being up there on the stage with the two leading actors and the chorus of cows, observing this scene, flawlessly performed by the entire ensemble, of an enamored old man watching at work the cleaning woman–farmhand who is secretly his paramour” (51). What so preoccupies him somehow involves death, for he notes that observing the two clandestine lovers “was something, I suppose, like watching Aschenbach feverishly watching Tadzio” (51) and concludes his speculations by emphasizing the deaths of Coleman and Faunia just four months after this scene. Zuckerman’s uneasy commingling of Eros and Thanatos reaches a crescendo here:

The sensory fullness, the copiousness, the abundant—superabundant—detail of life, which is the rhapsody. And Coleman and Faunia, who are now dead, deep in the flow of the unexpected, day by day, minute by minute, themselves details in that superabundance.

Nothing lasts, and yet nothing passes, either. And nothing passes just because nothing lasts.
Throughout this moving passage, Zuckerman qualifies the pastoral significance of his visit to Organic Livestock, and along with it its erotic implications, by introducing the reality of the transitory moment.

Another important “death scene” appears at the very end of the novel when Zuckerman meets Les Farley for the first and only time. Up until this point, the novelist has never had any direct contact with the Vietnam War veteran (although it is easy to miss this fact, given the several detailed passages on Les’s wartime experiences and post-traumatic stress disorder). Indeed, that is what makes this encounter so striking. From the beginning Nathan has been an active participant in the narrative that he creates—and at several points in the novel his story intrudes into, and almost replaces, Coleman’s—but this is the only time when he steps into a scene and appears off balance.\(^{10}\) The reason behind this change is that Les Farley is the character in the novel most closely associated with death. After two tours of duty in Vietnam—during the second, a return to action he volunteered for, he went “ape-shit” and spewed “death and destruction” via “door gunning” (65)—Les is “deadened” to existence, threatens to kill Coleman and Faunia, and purportedly causes their automotive deaths.\(^{11}\) But perhaps Les’s most notable associations with death occur during the final ice-fishing scene. When Nathan comes upon Les’s pickup, he is on his way to visit Silk’s sister and brother, Ernestine and Walter, and contemplating the passing of the former college dean. “Coleman, Coleman, Coleman,” the narrator repeats, “you who are now no one now run my existence” (344). With these prefacing, almost incantatory, thoughts about death, he finds Les, a solitary figure ice fishing on a frozen lake. Zuckerman is taken by the “pristine” site, “the icy

\(^{10}\) This moment brings to mind the meeting between Quentin Compson and Henry Sutpen in the concluding pages of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*: Quentin, the primary narrative voice in the novel, personally encounters for the first time one of his narrative’s central players, after which his commentary is uncharacteristically muted.

\(^{11}\) An important difference between Roth’s novel and Robert Benson’s film adaptation of it is that in the latter we know that Les Farley caused the deaths of Coleman and Faunia. In the book, this “fact” is merely another one of Zuckerman’s narrative speculations. So although all clues within the novel point to Les as Coleman’s and Faunia’s murderer, the grounds for this reading are nonetheless tentative.
white of the lake encircling a tiny spot that was a man, the only human marker in all of nature, like the X of an illiterate’s signature on a sheet of paper” (361).

The signifying “X” here could also represent the nullification of existence, for in the midst of this immaculate setting rests the terrifying potential of Les’s auger. The tool unnerves Nathan, becoming the central point of the narrator’s focus during his conversation with the lone fisherman: “The auger out on the ice. The candor of the auger. There could be no more solid embodiment of our hatred than the merciless steel look of that auger out in the middle of nowhere” (352). As Les relates the dynamics of ice fishing to the novelist, describing how utterly dark it is for the fish underneath the ice, Nathan notes a “chilling resonance” in his voice “that made everything about Coleman’s accident clear” (358). Zuckerman senses danger and knows that he should leave, but as with his fascination with Coleman’s suffering—“Once you’re in its grip, it’s as though it will have to kill you for you to be free of it” (12)—an absorption in the here and now keeps him put. The narrator explains: “[T]he thought of who he was drew me on. The fact of him drew me on. This was not speculation. This was not meditation. This was not that way of thinking that is fiction writing. This was the thing itself” (349–50). Confronted with the enigmatic “thing itself,” Zuckerman realizes that he is out of his element and, in an effort to recover a sense of equilibrium, draws attention to his art. When Les asks Nathan for the name of one of his books, he replies: “The Human Stain. . . . It’s not out yet. It’s not finished yet” (356). Such is indeed the case, for his effort to make sense of the story of Coleman and Faunia and Les—and of himself within the context of that narrative—is a work in progress. This metafictional moment, in which both Zuckerman and Roth refer to texts they are in the process of creating, can be read as a writer’s awareness of the role of art in addressing issues of mortality; in the face of the void, this awareness becomes a textual exercise in delineating the very limits of subjective representation.

An earlier and more profound narrative speculation on death occurs when Zuckerman attends a concert rehearsal in the Berkshires. This event is significant, the narrator reminds us, because it is the first time he has seen Coleman since the day at
Organic Livestock and the last time he sees him and Faunia alive. On a Saturday afternoon in August 1998, “out of loneliness” (205), Nathan drives to the Music Shed at Tanglewood to enjoy an open rehearsal of the Boston Symphony. Although the day promises to be one of leisure and delight, the novelist is preoccupied with issues of death. He notes that the audience is composed mostly of aging tourists, whose presence creates in him a portentous feeling, then comments, “We were about a three-hour drive west of the Atlantic, but I couldn’t shake this dual sense of both being where I was and of having pushed off, along with the rest of the senior citizens, for a mysterious watery unknown.” Overcome by this ambiguous yet fatally tinged state of mind, Zuckerman speculates:

Was it merely death that was on my mind in thinking of this debarkation? Death and myself? Death and Coleman? Or was it death and an assemblage of people able still to find pleasure in being bused about like a bunch of campers on a summer outing, and yet, as a palpable human multitude, an entity of sensate flesh and warm red blood, separated from oblivion by the thinnest, most fragile layer of life?

As Nathan spots Coleman and Faunia in the audience and observes that nothing about the two lovers “seemed at odds with life” (207), his ruminations ironically turn all the more morbid. He waxes philosophical over “[t]he stupendous decimation that is death sweeping us all away”:

I began, cartoonishly, to envisage the fatal malady that, without anyone’s recognizing it, was working away inside us, within each and every one of us: to visualize the blood vessels occluding under the baseball caps, the malignancies growing beneath the permed white hair, the organs misfiring, atrophying, shutting down, the hundreds of billions of murderous cells surreptitiously marching this entire audience toward the improbable disaster ahead. . . . The ceaseless perishing. What an idea! What maniac conceived it?

Much as in the previous scene at the dairy farm, Zuckerman is unable to stop himself from turning to matters of mortality, especially when confronting what could otherwise be seen as a life-affirming relationship—the sensual and almost innocent love between Coleman and Faunia.
Immediately following these somber thoughts, however, Zuckerman witnesses an event that seems to preclude any preoccupation with death. Yefim Bronfman walks onstage to play Prokofiev “at such a pace and with such bravado as to knock my morbidity clear out of the ring” (209). The very appearance of this esteemed pianist exudes vitality, calling to mind the descriptive language Nathan had previously reserved for Coleman Silk the young boxer, the vibrant septuagenarian fortified by Viagra, and the “goat-footed Pan” who danced the narrator back into life. Bronfman appears as “conspicuously massive through the upper torso, a force of nature camouflaged in a sweatshirt, somebody who has strolled into the Music Shed out of a circus where he is the strongman and who takes on the piano as a ridiculous challenge to the gargantuan strength he revels in” (209). Appearing when he does, in the midst of Nathan’s gloomy reveries, Bronfman’s presence in this scene is significant. Like Zuckerman (and Roth), he is an artist figure impressively adept at his chosen medium, and his music provides Zuckerman a reprieve from thoughts of the “mysterious watery unknown.” Contextualized in this way, art becomes the only possible response to the reality of the grave, as can be seen in the narrator’s final observations on the performance. Nathan Zuckerman the artist, caught up in the musical excitement, is completely taken as the pianist “gets up and goes, leaving behind him our redemption. With a jaunty wave, he is suddenly gone, and though he takes all his fire off with him like no less a force than Prometheus, our own lives now seem inextinguishable. Nobody is dying, nobody—not if Bronfman has anything to say about it!” (210). Similar speculations on the redemptive nature of art appear in the graveside passage, where Zuckerman responds to Silk’s death by beginning a novel (337); the dairy farm scene, when he quiets his thoughts of death by metaphorically transforming the moment with Coleman and Faunia into a staged performance; and the final encounter with Les, as the narrator transposes the terrifying “thing itself” into narrative.

Yet if, for Zuckerman, art is the natural rejoinder to death, it is one whose effectiveness is ultimately transitory. Soon after the

12. Here Roth once again culls his art from reality: in July 1998, Bronfman appeared at Tanglewood to play Prokofiev with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.
excitement of experiencing Bronfman, “our redemption,” the narrator wanders away from the stage and onto the Tanglewood lawn. The optimism engendered by the mighty pianist dissipates, leaving Nathan once again in a thanatological funk. Looking back at the Music Shed from a distance, he states: “I could see inside, under the lights on the stage, that the eight beautiful bass fiddles were in a neat row where the musicians, before going off to take a break, had left them resting on their sides. Why this too should remind me of the death of all of us I could not fathom. A graveyard of horizontal instruments? Couldn’t they more cheerily have put me in mind of a pod of whales?” (210). It is at this point that Nathan decides to attract the attention of Coleman and Faunia and engages them in an awkward exchange. After this, he wanders around “like a sleepwalker” (212)—perhaps due to the uncomfortable conversation as well as his previous meditations on death—and tries to understand why Silk (and his lover) affects him so. His conclusion is revealing, especially as it contrasts sharply with the vibrant and unambiguous presence of Yefim Bronfman:

It’s something not there that beguiles, and it’s what’s been drawing me all along, the enigmatic it that he holds apart as his and no one else’s. . . . There is a blank. That’s all I can say. They are, together, a pair of blanks. There’s a blank in her and, despite his air of being someone firmly established, if need be an obstinate and purposeful opponent. . . somewhere there’s a blank in him too, a blotting out, an excision, though of what I can’t begin to guess. . .

(213)

As with the ice-fishing auger, Zuckerman is fascinated by Silk’s (deathlike) blankness to the point that he cannot turn away. And like Les Farley, Coleman represents for the narrator an indeterminate “X,” a Derridean signifier whose referent is never fixed but always deferred. Ironically, what ultimately defines the former boxer and college dean—described by Zuckerman earlier in the text as an aggressive and “forcefully smooth big-city charmer, something of a warrior, something of an operator” (4)—is the presence of an absence.

These references to death, the void, and blankness, especially as they apply to Coleman Silk’s character, are all tied to one of
the novel’s central maxims: nobody knows. Zuckerman’s morbid preoccupations may indeed be the result of his ordeal with cancer and his growing awareness of mortality, a natural consequence of aging. Given Roth’s ongoing fascination with the dynamics underlying subjectivity, however, they could just as well suggest a larger thematic concern with identity. Silk is another in a long line of protagonists whose identity is always in flux and ambiguously defined. Just as Jerry Levov tells his brother, the Swede, “Nobody knows what you are” (*American Pastoral* 275), Zuckerman admonishes Delphine for her arrogant assumption that “everyone knows”—“Oh, stupid, stupid, stupid Delphine Roux. One’s truth is known to no one, and frequently... to oneself least of all” (*Human Stain* 330)—and likewise is astounded by his own limits of decipherability. When Nathan sees Coleman’s concealed token from the U.S. Navy, a “small, Popeye-ish, blue tattoo situated at the top of his right arm,” he is taken aback and reads it as a “tiny symbol, if one were needed, of all the million circumstances of the other fellow’s life, of that blizzard of details that constitute the confusion of a human biography—a tiny symbol to remind me why our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong” (21–22). The tattoo becomes, then, a signifying mark of individual indeterminacy, of something that both is and is not there.

In many ways, Coleman Silk is himself a signifying mark, one of American ethnic subjectivity. As an African American male passing as a Jew, he obscures his past for the purposes of self-pliability. His success in deceiving everyone around him is a testament to the constructed, as opposed to the determined, nature of identity. Zuckerman finds Silk an enigma, is unable to read him, and at times can only approach him through questions. The narrator asks at one point, “Was he merely being another American and, in the great frontier tradition, accepting the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard if to do so contributes to the pursuit of happiness? Or was it more than that? Or was it less?” (334). In one way Zuckerman sees Silk as another Jay Gatsby, changing himself for the sake of the green dock lights that dot the American landscape. Yet his uncertainty in deciphering the former college dean—was it more? was it less?—suggests that something else is at stake here.
Coleman Silk is not only an American concerned with matters of self-definition, but an ethnic American attempting to control the means of his own signification. His power, recalling his old boxing skills as a counterpuncher, lies in his ability to embrace the opposite, what the narrator calls “being counterconfessional” (100). Zuckerman (and Roth) presents Silk’s struggle as one of competing communities trying to impose their “readings” on the individual subject. He considers Coleman “the greatest of the great pioneers of the I” and expresses his predicament in heroic terms:

He saw the fate awaiting him, and he wasn’t having it. Grasped it intuitively and recoiled spontaneously. You can’t let the big they [the white power structure] impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they [the black community] become a we and impose its ethics on you. Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. . . . Instead the raw I with all its agility. Self-discovery—that was the punch to the labonz. Singularity. The passionate struggle for singularity. The singular animal. The sliding relationship with everything. Not static but sliding. Self-knowledge but concealed. What is as powerful as that?

(108)

In one sense, Silk’s struggle—at least as Nathan narratively conceives it—illustrates what bell hooks describes as the essentializing dangers of ethnic identification. Instead of arguing for an “authentic” African American experience, hooks holds out for the possibility of multiple expressions within that community. Her postmodern reading of ethnicity empowers the individual and encourages an awareness of shared experiences among other marginalized subjects.

The tragedy of Coleman Silk is that he fails to nurture any shared sense of ethnic experience. And in the process of creating his own identity, he denies that of his actual family. When Zuckerman reveals the ethnic history of Silk, we learn that his family’s roots are not only African but also Native American, Scandinavian, Dutch, and English. Coleman abjures this heredity and reinvents himself, much like Faunia’s favorite crow, Prince. The bird “didn’t want anybody to know his background” (240) and instead “invented his
own language" (243).14 As Roth reveals in his story of Coleman Silk, self-definition can be a double-edged sword, engendering not only the possibility of being but perhaps communal alienation as well. It requires the kind of negotiations that Werner Sollors theorizes in *Beyond Ethnicity*, those between relations of consent and relations of descent (6). Re-creating the self can be a high-stakes game, as Silk learns: “[F]reedom is dangerous. Freedom is very dangerous. And nothing is on your own terms for long” (*Human Stain* 145).

Perhaps this is why Zuckerman is both fascinated with Coleman’s situation and inclined to speculate on death. Silk, in many ways, “kills” his past in order to pave the way for his future; along with the negation of identity comes the possibility of subject re-creation. This is where the many references in *The Human Stain* to fictional creation become significant. Through the narrative voice of Nathan Zuckerman, Roth establishes a metaphorical link between the constructed nature of identity and the constructed nature of the text *as it relates to* subjective representation. In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman reimagines his protagonist in order to better understand and more effectively construct his own Jewish American subject position. Much the same could be said of the narrator’s re-creation of Silk. In mapping out Silk’s ethnic character, or the absence thereof, Zuckerman demonstrates the viabilities as well as the limitations involved in composing (ethnic) identity. Nathan’s account of Coleman Silk—its gaps, its speculations, its many fabricated passages—is just as much of a constructed fiction as Silk’s invention of himself, as the narrator realizes at the end of the novel when he recognizes why Coleman could never finish the “Spooks” manuscript. “Of course you could not write the book,” Zuckerman says to a now-deceased Silk. “You’d written the book—the book was your life. Writing personally is exposing and concealing at the same time, but with you it could only be concealment and so it would never work. Your book was your life” (344–45). Coleman’s unfinished text of the self gets to the heart of Philip Roth’s (post-modern) project of signifying American identity, ethnic or otherwise. It proposes that the very act of narrative is in many ways an

14. Throughout *The Human Stain*, Silk’s behavior is associated with birds in general, and crows in particular. See especially the references to “swooping” (24, 165–69, 238–47).
incomplete and “slant” means of getting at ourselves. Perhaps another implication of the novel’s title is that the representation of identity is always already in an unfinished state, marked by the stain of subjectivity.

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