

**THE TRAGICAL-COMEDY OF IMPERSONATION:
JEWS, AMERICA, AND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

He thought the same useless thought – useless to a man of no great talent like himself if not to Sophocles: how accidentally a fate is made ... Or how accidental it may seem when it is inescapable.

Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*¹

In *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk abandons his African-American mother in order to claim a Jewish place for himself in the American dream. The scene is a familiar one. It brings full circle a trajectory that Al Jolson began in blackface when he got down on his knees and, ending the era of the silent films, belted out a Yiddish-accented tribute to his dotting mother. I suggest we regard these mother-son exchanges as landmarks of impersonation that, while testing the boundaries of tribal and familial loyalty, also signal a radical shift in the American comedy of self-invention.

In my study of exile and the literary imagination, I explored America as the comic theatre of the Jewish diaspora.² In this theatre it didn't always matter whether dreamscapes became landscapes, since the frontier was endless. As immigrants from different ethnic origins made their own collective and individual claims on the American ethos of "becoming,"³ Jews from eastern Europe could fully realize the twin burden and opportunity of *galut*: distance from the sacred construed as the license to play in a yet unredeemed world. In narrative, in theatre, and in film, gestures of impersonation would hone the comic spirit. The first act in this drama belonged to Sholem Aleichem – Motl the cantor's son's reincarnation from a failed tinkerer in Kasrilevke to a successful entrepreneur in New York (1907); the second act was Al Jolson's (1927). The last act of the century behind us and the first of the century before us belong to Philip Roth. In 1993, Philip Roth appeared in duplicate – as character and as impostor – in *Operation Shylock*. Between himself[!], he espoused two radically different solutions to the Jewish problem – one literary, the other political, both diasporic: the

¹ Ph. Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York, 2000), p. 127.

² S. DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley, 2000). See especially chapters 4 and 9, on Sholem Aleichem and Philip Roth, respectively. And see also Ezrahi, 'America as the Theatre of Jewish Comedy: From Sholem Aleichem to Grace Paley,' *Studia Judaica XIII* (2005) (ed. L. Gyemant, Cluj, Romania), pp. 74–82.

³ See *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. D. Biale, M. Galchinsky and S. Heschel (Berkeley, 1998) for different perspectives on "monoculturalism" and "multiculturalism" and their effect on the evolution of Jewish culture in America.

endangered Jews of Israel can be written out of danger or even transferred out of danger – to the safety of *golus*.⁴

Although, as in so many of his other novels, the fate and the follies of Israel are foregrounded in *Operation Shylock*, the poetic license is uniquely American. Here was the culmination of a satiric imagination forged of twentieth-century materials and made in the USA – fuelled by the power of the grotesque and the transgressive to deflate the collective ego, propelled by the engine of sexual and intellectual ambition to expose the possibilities, the pieties, and the complacencies of a democratic sense of boundlessness.

But that was not Roth's last word. He inaugurated the new century by revealing the sinister dead end to which such celebrated acts of freedom can lead. In so doing he remains, as always, just one step ahead of the rest of us in naming the malaise of our time. If from *The Jazz Singer* to *The Human Stain* we can trace the move from blackface to whiteface, from the Jew impersonating the Black to the Black impersonating the Jew, we can also trace the escalating price of such transactions. *The Human Stain* exacts its full pound of flesh. While the mask on the face of both Al Jolson and Coleman Silk signifies trust in the American promise of self-invention, the latter will be avenged by forces enacting a form of dramatic justice, the triumph of fate over freedom. As the great American Promise sours and the grapes of Roth ripen and ferment, the drama moves from comedy or satire towards tragedy.

The insidious impostor "Philip Roth," who espouses outrageously seductive ideas in the guise of an esteemed American Jewish writer in *Operation Shylock*, is replaced in the next volume by the benign Coleman Silk, who impersonates merely to pass in a world that has come to tolerate and even "celebrate" Jews.

And here we reach the fine line between impersonation and imposture, between the relative innocence of the masquerade and the fraudulent assumption of another's identity. Mikhail Bakhtin and Natalie Davis have taught us and Roth has shown us how the changeling, the fool and the rogue may function as touchstones of changing social dialogue. Their masks "grant the right," in Bakhtin's words, "not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life."

The right not to be taken literally, not to be oneself; the right to live a life in ... the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks. ... and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets.⁵

⁴ Ph. Roth, *Operation Shylock* (New York, 1993).

⁵ M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trs. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, 1981), p. 163. See also N. Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, 1983), and *Remaking Impostors: from Martin Guerre to Sommersby*, Hayes Robinson Lecture, 1997 (Egham, 1997). And see also Ezrahi, 'Acts of Impersonation: Barbaric Space as Theatre,' where I explore impersonation of the inimical other (Jew impersonating Nazi) as performance, as ritual of identification in the context of war and occupation in contemporary Israel: *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, Catalogue for exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, ed. N. Kleeblatt (New Brunswick, 2001), pp. 17–38.

If, however, we assume that it is conventionally necessary for the impersonator's true identity to be revealed on stage, the circumstances in which this takes place are as crucial to the social dialogue as the original act of disguise. It is significant, then, that in *The Human Stain* neither the masking nor the unmasking takes place in "real time."

Although the valedictory scene between Coleman and his mother provides the point of departure for his invented biography, it is recounted only toward the middle of the novel. It is not enacted in real dramatic time, I submit, because what will become the focus of exploration are not the psychological and moral consequences of a young man's decision to impersonate someone of another faith and color but rather the unfolding of an inexorable plot set into motion by this action. Fate and freedom are locked in battle here: fate as the inevitable consequence of deeds performed in the name of freedom, imposed not as the workings of conscience, but through the ultimate agency of a higher authority.

This is called to our attention first in the convergence of the theme of trespass in the public and the private realms, the realms of the powerful and the ordinary, or, if you will, the world-historical and the fictional. The pigment on the skin of an impersonator, like the trace of semen on the dress in the Oval Office, is the stain of passing into territory designated for others. The stained face is fully revealed only after the principal characters have met their bloody death, but the stained dress is introduced on the novel's second page.

Granted, it might take some stretch of the imagination to see just how Monica's blue dress is like Coleman's white face – or Jolson's blackened *punim*... Ostensibly the analogy lies not in the stain itself – the stain that signals our flawed, hubristic human nature – but in the self-righteous response to all who dare to reach – the "persecuting spirit" of the times that applies its venom equally to the great and the humble. The dust jacket proclaims that "in a time of cultural warfare, with 'the persecuting spirit' on the rise, a president is hounded over a sexual affair, a professor loses his job over a single word, and the nation succumbs to an 'ecstasy of sanctimony.'" That, anyway, is the explicit sur-text of this novel: the same "ecstasy of sanctimony" that nearly succeeded in removing Bill Clinton from real office did succeed in ruining the fictitious career of Coleman Silk and even contributing to the death of his wife.

But Coleman, it turns out, has been accused of the wrong sin; he is, ironically, hounded out of his job because of having referred in his classroom to two absent African-American students as "spooks" – which is interpreted by his colleagues as a racist slur on the part of the "Jewish" professor. Coleman's real sin, his indelible stain, the act of repudiating his mother and his race, is never revealed publicly; it works not as a social force but as a cosmic avenging spirit, releasing the furies of our time disguised as guardians of political correctness.

As satire, the narrative could have switched tracks rather smoothly with the sudden revelation of the secret at its core. With names like Delphine

Roux (Number One persecuting spirit, disguised as professor of French literature) and Faunia Farley (the presumably illiterate, much abused and voluptuous 34-year-old who is Silk's mistress), with relentless frontal attacks on the sacred cows of American popular and academic cultures, a full, farcical unmasking could only have strengthened Roth's position as our grandmaster of satire, of farce, of *commedia dell'arte*.

Structurally and texturally, however, from the very beginning this novel also bears the signature and ambition of Aristotelian tragedy. The terms of reference in the opening pages come quite transparently from the canons of western and American culture: authorized by an epigraph from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the drama opens on the campus of a college called Athena, with a professor of Greek and Latin at center stage. Add to this the classical sites of American transactions, invoked in the idioms of Steinbeck and Hawthorne: the rural post office "looked as if it might have sheltered an Okie family from the winds of the Dust Bowl back in the 1930s"; the woman who cleans the post office, with whom Professor Silk is having an affair, looks as though she belonged to the "church-ruled hardworking goodwives who suffered through New England's harsh beginnings, stern colonial women locked up within the reigning morality and obedient to it." [p.1]

Hawthorne "himself" makes a direct appearance on the next page, summoned to pronounce on the "persecuting spirit" of the times, which match in fervor those of seventeenth-century Salem. The language of classical tragedy continues as a running commentary throughout the narrative.⁶ The narrator is the writer Nathan Zuckerman, familiar to us from his earlier incarnations as chief witness to American culture. Here, his own biography and consciousness are so subordinated to Coleman's that his writerly instincts become mere instruments in the revelation of the other's fate – suggesting that, like Coleman, he serves a god higher than his own authorial ego.

In an uncharacteristically and anachronistically mythic, almost formulaic, voice, the narrator reverts to the family as the archetypal realm of tragedy and casts Coleman's self-emancipation as a form of betrayal resonating with primordial acts of parricide.⁷

⁶ The notice of Faunia's funeral is sent on an email address identified as clytemnestra@houseofatreus.com [289]. Further: "Mark Silk [Coleman's son] apparently had imagined that he was going to have his father around to hate forever. He thought Coleman was going to stay here till the whole play could be performed, as though he and Coleman had been set down not in life but on the southern hillside of the Athenian acropolis, in an outdoor theater sacred to Dionysus, where, before the eyes of ten thousand spectators, the dramatic unities were once rigorously observed and the great cathartic cycle was enacted annually. The human desire for a beginning, a middle, and an end – and an end appropriate in magnitude to that beginning and middle – is realized nowhere so thoroughly as in the plays that Coleman taught at Athena College. But outside the classical tragedy of the fifth century B.C., the expectation of completion, let alone of a just and perfect consummation, is a foolish illusion for an adult to hold." [314–5] See other examples on pp. 171, 291, 332.

⁷ See B. Simon, *Tragic Drama and the Family: Psychoanalytic Studies from Aeschylus to Beckett* (New Haven, 1988).

He was murdering her. You don't have to murder your father. The world will do that for you... Who there is to murder is the mother, and that's what he saw he was doing to her... Murdering her on behalf of his exhilarating notion of freedom! That is the test... to give the brutality of the repudiation its real, unpardonable human meaning, to confront with all the realism and clarity possible the moment when your fate intersects with something enormous. This is his. This man and his mother. This woman and her beloved son. If, in the service of honing himself, he is out to do the hardest thing imaginable, this is it, short of stabbing her. This takes him right to the heart of the matter. This is the major act of his life, and vividly, consciously, he feels its immensity. [139 – *emphasis mine*]

The self-abnegation involved in Coleman's "honing himself" is, for his mother, not only an abandonment of her and the rest of his biological family, but an act of self-enslavement: "You think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman *Brutus*. You're white as snow and you think like a slave," she tells him in what will prove to be their last meeting. [139 – *emphasis mine*] Once again the classical reference – this time to Roman betrayal as filtered through Shakespeare. And once again, in this context, the Greek tragedian is invoked to frame the deeds of these ordinary mortals: "He thought the same useless thoughts – useless to a man of no great talent like himself if not to Sophocles: how accidentally a fate is made... Or how accidental it may seem when it is inescapable." [127]

Through its strange and destiny-driven meanderings, *The Human Stain* becomes a vindication of that pronouncement, at the level not of character development but of plot, of action that sets the inescapable into motion. Maybe Coleman Silk, an ordinary man in ordinary times, doesn't have the stature of the great classical hero; he will, however, share his fate. While detouring through race relations and political correctness in the American academy in the 1990s, Nemesis is working its way subliminally towards the inevitable denouement: in what may be the most ironic reversal of the American promise in Roth's generation, fate triumphs over personality, "spirit" over individuality.

Coleman Silk never comes to the recognition of an Oedipus or a Lear – or, for that matter, even Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths – of the monstrous deed he has done and its impact on his own and others' lives; revelation of his secret comes only after death and only, it would seem, for the sake of knowledge of an abstracted sort, not for the cathartic or therapeutic impact on either character or presumptive audience. No real consequences, that is, for those most directly involved. The masquerade becomes who he is. Having met the woman he decides to marry, "non-Jewish Jewish Iris – as the medium through which to make himself anew," he is represented as thinking that "he'd finally got it right. He was no longer trying on and casting off, endlessly practicing and preparing to be. This was it, the solution, the secret to his secret... As a heretofore unknown amalgam of the most unlike of America's historical undesirables, he now made sense." [132] In his own eyes, he had grown into a kind of alloyed integrity. Silk's invented biography will unfold from hereon in as a success story, his marriage and career

will be crowned with all the laurels that talent and hard work can produce. His secret will be so well kept, even by the gods, that he will manage to father four children with no visible trace of their genetic origins.

The narrator guesses at but does not even dare to attribute to Coleman thoughts of contrition or defeat. Such thoughts come only from Coleman's sister Ernestine, and only at Coleman's graveside. "I think he himself came to believe that there was something awful about withholding something so crucial to what a person is, that it was [his childrens']... birthright to know their genealogy," Ernestine tells Nathan in the private conversation following the funeral. And there was something dangerous too. "Think of the havoc he could create in their lives if their children were born recognizably Negro." [320] At this point the importance of being Ernestine cannot be denied, if only as an instrument of closure and if only for the sake of knowledge, knowledge of one's roots, knowledge of "who one is."⁸

Yet this is hardly a sentimental celebration of return to "roots." The image of the writer or character living fully in the interstices of cultures is both a fictional artifact and an article of faith in Roth's work. A recent nonfictional publication, *Shop Talk*, records exchanges he had over the years with a number of contemporary writers. In a conversation with I. B. Singer held in 1976, the mention of Bruno Schulz and Franz Kafka provoked the Yiddish writer's judgment that the metamorphic forms of their imagination are an expression of their "rootlessness." "If Schulz had identified himself more with his own people," Singer argued, "he might not have expended so much energy on imitation, parody, and caricature... I think that Schulz had enough power to write real serious novels but instead often wrote a kind of parody. And I think basically he developed this style because he was not really at home, neither at home among the Poles nor at home among the Jews."⁹

Roth's response tends to ratify rather than to dispute Singer's point – though not the value he ascribes to it – by equating the serious with the "Real," and then downgrading Reality along with the forms of collective identification that testify to it. "I don't think," Roth says, "that with Schulz, any more than with Kafka, the greatest difficulty was an inability to be at home with this people or with that people, however much that may have added to his troubles. From the evidence of this book [*The Street of Crocodiles*], it looks as though Schulz could barely identify himself with reality, let alone with the Jews. One is reminded of Kafka's remark on his communal affiliations: 'What have I in common with the Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself.'" [*Shop Talk*, 84–86]

⁸ As interpreter of Coleman's unarticulated consciousness, his sister Ernestine explains that his son Mark had "intuited it, somehow understood that the children, who carried their father's identity in their genes and who would pass that identity on to their children, at least genetically, and perhaps even physically, tangibly, never had the complete knowledge of who they are and who they were.... I sometimes think that Coleman saw Markie as the punishment for what he had done to his own mother." [321]

⁹ Ph. Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and his Colleagues and their Work* (New York, 2001), p. 84.

Whether or not we would agree with Bashevis Singer's pronouncement on the value of novels over short stories, or "serious" over "parodic" forms, even as regards his own writing, he has unwittingly revealed those elements that compose the diasporic imagination. They certainly hold true for Roth, the ultimate diasporic writer. As master of "imitation, parody, and caricature," Roth too barely "identified himself with reality," and in fictions from *Goodbye Columbus* to *The Breast*,¹⁰ he indulged the delicious metamorphic forms that the spirit of exile facilitates in America. "It's possible to think of Schulz's 'rootlessness'... not as something that held him back from writing serious novels but as a condition upon which his particular talent and imagination thrived," he says of Schulz in what could be his own *ars poetica*. [*Shop Talk*, 85] Self-realization, salvation, is achieved through either self-invention or authorial intervention. Like an omnipotent Jewish mother, a meddling agency nearly always appears even in the later, more sober fiction to set the character free, to save him from his coronary, from the Arab-Israeli conflict, from Jewish Destiny itself – by changing the script.¹¹ Roth recognizes in writers as far-flung as Kafka and Bernard Malamud "the freedom conferred by masks... what Heine called *Maskenfreiheit*." [*Shop Talk*, 123]

So when Reality reasserts itself in *The Human Stain* not as an invitation to the carnival of self-invention but as fate, there is a terrible departure from former acts of prowess that characterized the comic spirit.¹² In this narrative, the character is explicitly attempting to create his life as a fictional enterprise; yet, when God appears "in the machine" (in this case an automobile driven at breakneck speed by a crazed Vietnam veteran intent on avenging his former wife and her "Jew Professor"), it is not as a beneficent savior but as an avenging force. Why? What is it in the hubris of impersonation that has caught the attention of the writer most fiercely committed to upholding the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of fiction?

At times, the language of classical tragedy becomes so insistent as to read like a defiant attempt to reassemble the cultural canons that the Delphine Roux of the world have dismantled – part of the attack on political correctness from the "inside." The Jewish novelist creates an African-American character to assume the identity of a white Jew – and then abdicates by submitting the whole *geschichte* to a higher authority, the Greeks, vindicating both their version of the story and their place in the pantheon. But

¹⁰ *The Breast*, a kind of metamorphic fantasy in the manner of Schulz perhaps, was illustrated by Guston, as Roth explains: "For me his blubbery cartoon rendering of the breast into which Professor David Kepesh is inexplicably transformed – his vision of afflicted Kepesh as a beached mammary groping for contact through a nipple that is an unostentatious amalgam of lumpish, dumb penis and inquisitive nose – managed to encapsulate all the loneliness of Kepesh's humiliation while at the same time adhering to the mordantly comic perspective with which Kepesh tries to view his horrible metamorphosis." [*Shop Talk*, 137–138]

¹¹ See, on this, Roth's *The Counterlife* (New York, 1996) and *Operation Shylock*, and my discussion of them in *Booking Passage*, chapter 9.

¹² This is also true of Roth's *American Pastoral* (Boston, 1997).

in so doing, Roth is in a way abdicating his own place in the pantheon, rescinding his own constitutionally-protected access to the comic muse.

The loyalty exacted here may be neither to tribal boundaries nor even to the rite of self-manufacture, but to some higher, more structural principle. Roth is invoking, with the nostalgia of age, that youthful Dionysian moment in the 5th century BCE when the comic, the tragic, and the satyr-drama shared the same stage.¹³ But certain Aristotelian principles have been conceded to our peculiarly American, peculiarly postmodern, sensibility. "I couldn't imagine anything that could have made Coleman more of a mystery to me than this unmasking," Nathan muses.

Now that I knew everything, it was as though I knew nothing, and instead of what I'd learned from Ernestine unifying my idea of him, he became not just an unknown but an uncohesive person...Was [Coleman] 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? [334]

The frontier tradition and the democratic invitation yield to a form of knowledge gained posthumously, thus serving ends that, as I've already suggested, are neither therapeutic, nor cathartic, neither salvific nor integrative. The propriety of knowledge is not the character's but the time's. Devoid of any teleological consciousness, devoid of the powerful theodicy of restitution at the end of time that feeds the Jewish comic imagination, America puts its faith in history as the unfolding theatre of redemption. And here lies the real secret of the novel. As Sacvan Bercovitch argues, America's trust in history rather than in prophetic promise is the source not only of its comic vision but also of its terror. "Hence the grand line of dystopian writers in America - of doomsday prophets. If America fails, history fails; and there's no proviso from heaven that America will not fail, or that it will be restored if it does."¹⁴ Indeed, here Nathan's final verdict is that as a "created self," Coleman was "finally ensnared by the history he hadn't quite counted on...the we that is inescapable: the present moment, the common lot, the current mood, the mood of one's country, the stranglehold of history that is one's own time. Blindsided by the terrifyingly provisional nature of everything." [335-6 - *emphasis mine*]

On the very cusp of the millennium, with catastrophes waiting in the wing, Philip Roth dismantled the twin platforms of infinite invention and ambition that he himself had so painstakingly, mischievously, and lovingly constructed. This is the way the novel ends:

Only rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a solitary man on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that's constantly turning over its water atop an arcadian mountain in America. [361]

Arcadia, this American pastoral, a lone fisherman on a frozen lake who is really - no, not *really* but *also* - a vengeful Vietnam veteran resting after having stalked and then killed his ex-wife and her lover. Here, at the intersection of the long aftermath of the Vietnam war, the persecutorial wrath of political correctness and the hubris of self-invention, the fate of these people yields a quiet knowledge. The American melting pot that became a multicultural stew released a toxic, avenging spirit - but maybe, just maybe, it has rediscovered something else, a consciousness yielded from the rubble of our self-creations, the we that is inescapable, beyond our blackness or our Jewishness or even our Americanness: As the metamorphic imagination gives way to a sense of inevitability, a more humble and human spirit, something that the ancients began to know in their inner, most tragic imagination, comes to compete with the hubris - and comedy - of self-invention.

¹³ See *Nothing to Do With Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, ed. J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (Princeton, 1990).

¹⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch, private communication. Discussed in Ezrahi, 'After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2001), p. 312. And see also S. Bercovitch, 'Trickster Huck,' in *The Trickster*, ed. J. Campbell Reese (Atlanta, 2000).