

Purity and Danger: On Philip Roth

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The Human Stain, by Philip Roth, Houghton Mifflin.

AT LEAST since Baudelaire portrayed Poe as a martyr to “the savagery of bourgeois hypocrisy,” writers have found an unfailing source of creative energy in assaulting the canons of genteel propriety. In his epochal 1911 essay on the genteel tradition, George Santayana named it a “yoke,” a “tyrant from the cradle to the grave.” While one of the constraints Santayana had in mind was the genteel Brahmin social code of compulsive heterosexuality, half a century later homosexuality became, for some, not the antidote to but the image of a stifling normativity. “Most American white men are trained to be fags,” declared LeRoi Jones in 1966, using his favorite shorthand term of abuse that refers less to sexual preference than to the alleged weakness and softness of the white bourgeois intellectual, insulated from “the real,” from the “pain” of physical labor. Three years later, a fellow Newark native created a character who vigorously, if unwittingly, affirmed Jones while narrowing his sweeping judgment. Philip Roth’s Alexander Portnoy, furious at his mother’s imperturbable sense of her own goodness (“I hate to say it about myself, but I’m too good”), accuses her of trying to make him an obedient “little gentleman,” a “fruitcake”—“exactly what the training program was designed to produce.” That she has not succeeded leaves Portnoy surprised: “the mystery is that I’m not like all the nice young men I see strolling hand in hand in Bloomingdale’s on Saturday mornings.” Arguably, it is not the handholding that most annoys or threatens the frantically self-abusing Portnoy. It is instead the condition of “anti-humanity that calls itself nice.” As Nathan Zuckerman (Roth’s fictional alter ego and author of the scandalous best-seller *Carnovsky*) remarks in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983): “I don’t care if [my kid] grows up wearing pantyhose as long as he doesn’t turn out nice. . . another frightened soul tamed by inhibi-

tion.” The real “struggle,” declares Portnoy, is “to be bad—and to enjoy it! That is what makes men of us boys, Mother.”

The unending struggle of the nice Jewish boy (marked like a road map with “shame and inhibition and fear”) to be a bad man comprises Roth’s consuming subject in a number of novels. That he conducts this struggle with bravura imaginative energy, rage, and wit is no surprise. More improbable is the resonance he achieves. For he turns what seems a merely adolescent commitment to “badness” into his own version of a Melvillean “No, in thunder,” a moral vision and an epistemology which, in novel after novel, find their *raison d’être* in exposing the “fantasy of purity” as the appalling incitement for moral, aesthetic, and political violence. Various incarnations—as ideology, as political correctness, as the myth of pastoral, as American exceptionalism—this fantasy of transparent identity posits a return to “imagined worlds, often green and breastlike, where we may finally be ‘ourselves,’ ” and flattens human experience to an “idyllic scenario of redemption through the recovery of a sanitized, confusionless life.” So concludes Zuckerman in *The Counterlife* (1986), where he offers circumcision as the antithesis of pastoral, circumcision as the mark of history and of distinction, “quintessentially Jewish.” Fourteen years later this ethnic particularism is surmounted in a novel that condemns the “tyranny of the we and its we-talk” propagated by political correctness. The antithesis to pastoral is universalized and ontologized as “the human stain” (in the novel of that title). It is in “everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. . . . The stain so intrinsic it doesn’t require a mark.” It “*precedes* disobedience. . . and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It’s why all the cleansing is a joke.” Or, as Zuckerman puts it near the end of *I Married a Communist* (1998), “there’s only error. *There’s* the heart of the world,” because “everything that lives is in movement. Because purity is petrification. Because purity is a lie.” Emerson also speaks of the perpetual error which is not disobedience but human existence itself: “it is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we

suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately.”

The proximity of Roth and Emerson should suggest that the moral and epistemological dimensions of Roth’s revulsion from the “nice” and concomitant pursuit of the “bad” link him to writers of the American Renaissance. I want here to sketch some of these lines of kinship as they are broadly represented in several of his novels, and then go on to explore their most intricate orchestration to date—in *The Human Stain*. Greil Marcus has recently argued that Roth is our Dos Passos thanks to the sustained meditation in his trilogy *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* on what it means to be an American. Roth’s creative reimagining of classic American literature deserves to be taken seriously, an act of affiliation that reverberates, in a different register, as the subject of *The Human Stain*.

Zuckerman resides in the Berkshires, which is the most obvious way by which Roth underlines his sense of kinship with his great predecessors. Melville and Hawthorne enjoyed there an intense, if brief, friendship in the 1850s, and it is where, as Zuckerman notes at the start of *The Human Stain*, Hawthorne in the 1860s lived not many miles from where he lives now. The lonely Zuckerman wishes he could “find sustenance in *people* like Hawthorne, in the wisdom of the brilliant deceased.” Zuckerman does find sustenance in *The Scarlet Letter*, both in general ways—linking Puritan censoriousness with its contemporary resurgence during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandals—and in more particular ones—troping “The Minister in a Maze” chapter that narrates Dimmesdale’s inner “revolution” that incites him to do “wicked” things. The central topic of Roth’s conversation with his nineteenth-century neighbors, and with Emerson and Whitman, is, inevitably, American individualism. Like his predecessors, Roth does not limit the self to its most familiar mode of flinty independence. While admiring obstinate autonomy, he also shows how it is vitiated by its imperative of self-vigilance and control, sources at once of its strength and brittleness, of its susceptibility to unraveling or to letting

the “brute out” in anarchic overthrow, to borrow a phrase from *The Human Stain*.

“To be in any form, what is that?” Behind Whitman’s query in “Song of Myself” is a conviction of the self’s volatility, its propensity to waywardness. “Mine is no callous shell,” he declares, “I have instant conductors all over me.” Implicitly, the poet rejects the notion of the possessive individual as a bounded entity. Writers of the American Renaissance and after dramatize alternatives to the dominant Cartesian assumption that the self is sovereign—defined prior to and fortified against experience. Such insistence on self-ownership can result in the monomaniacal self-absorption of an Ahab (with his self-described “queenly personality” and “royal rights”) or many of the pariahs who haunt Hawthorne’s short stories. To puncture this inflated self, writers collaborate with and find power in more improvised and vulnerable modalities of being that are conventionally deemed abject or trivial—Bartleby’s elected passivity, Whitman’s negligent leaning and loafing, Emerson’s esteem of whim and the nonchalance of boys, Ishmael’s suicidal reveries and moments of self-dissolution, Melville’s naming of “irresponsibility” as the “profoundest sense of being,” and, a bit later, Henry James’s pleasure in the “saving virtue of vagueness.”

The Human Stain (2000) and *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995) are Roth’s two most powerful late novels, not least because they explore the temptation of irresponsibility and abjection that mocks the proprietary logic of American individualism. As if testing the limits of what Emerson calls “abandonment”—his belief that “the one thing we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety”—both novels dwell with relentless avidity on the badness of their bad boys. One, Mickey Sabbath, is a low-rent noble savage, a potbellied American rebel and failure at most everything, who by the nineties is deemed a “fifties antique,” a man whose “waywardness constituted” his existence’s “only authority.” Feeling “uncontrollable tenderness for his own shit-filled life,” Sabbath takes pleasure in knowing “that he’d never had to please.” The other, Coleman Silk of *The Human Stain*, dean of Athena College, is an African-American who has spent his adult life passing as a Jew. In the wake of a campus scan-

dal that has left him a pariah, he risks further contempt now that he has become immersed in a passionate affair with an illiterate woman less than half his age. Coleman Silk's late-blooming abandonment of control reverses the conviction that has hitherto ruled him—the self is a disciplinary project that maximizes freedom by tabooing impulse. Roth discerns a fatal purism in the very assumption that the self is a project, yet he also finds admirable Coleman's commitment to the “raw I” and its “passionate struggle for singularity.”

The juvenile simplicity of the terms of the struggle between “nice” and “bad” indicate their origin in the enduring need to engage Mom, be it through outrage or obedience. Roth finds in this regressive fixation a version of the entrapment that ensnares American writers, including himself, who imagine they have escaped small-town philistinism. Of Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe, and Sinclair Lewis, Zuckerman says, “they couldn't endure the smallness; and then they spent the rest of their lives thinking about nothing else. . . . Not getting away becomes their job—it's what they do all day.” How to end this parochialism and monasticism (“starving myself of experience and eating only words”) preoccupies Zuckerman as part of a larger question: how to escape writing and reach “the real thing,” “the bilge, the ooze . . . the stuff. No words, just stuff. Everything the word's in place of. The lowest of genres—life itself. . . . No more words!” At the end of *The Anatomy Lesson*, hospitalized after a nervous breakdown, Zuckerman starts tagging around with the interns as they make their rounds and is soon helping postoperative patients out of bed, drawn to the most ravaged and reeking. “This is life. With real teeth in it,” he thinks as he plunges his hand into a dank tangle of sheets and bed wear and towels.

Zuckerman's frenzied pursuit of life with real teeth, an abiding quest of American writers, expresses one of those “moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth,” as Emerson writes in “Experience.” The quest is futile since our discovery that we exist teaches us that we see only “mediately.” Zuckerman learns the futility in his own way when he finally realizes he must remain “a man apart,” that is, a writer.

In vain as well is William James's plea in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1908) that we stop what he calls the "conceptual decomposition of life" (substituting concepts for life) by abandoning language ("I must deafen you to talk") and letting "life teach the lesson." James remarks: "I say no more," yet announces this in the middle of his lecture, thereby consigning his hope of surmounting language to the merely figurative. He recommends that we "fall back on raw unverbilized life" as a legitimate revealer of "truth," but warns that in so doing we risk becoming again "as foolish little children in the eyes of reason." At the end of *Portnoy's Complaint* the protagonist has no more words left and like an angry child concludes his monologue to his psychiatrist with a "pure howl," a sputtering "aaaaahhhhh!!!!!" which requires four lines of "a" to join it with "h." But Portnoy hasn't come to the end of anything, as the novel's famous "Punch Line" discloses. To this primal scream, his psychiatrist responds that now at last they can begin.

Portnoy is the ultimate bad boy book. It takes the entire Zuckerman trilogy to work through hilariously the outrage *Portnoy* provoked among readers and the counterrage and penitence, mocking and sincere, this provoked in Roth. Nathan Zuckerman fantasizes and tries to enact (with varying degrees of conviction) a panoply of atonements, be it martyring himself to the (Henry) Jamesian "religion of art," or marrying the (somehow) still living Anne Frank ("Oh, marry me, Anne Frank, exonerate me before my outraged elders"), or becoming a gynecologist (not only would it "bestow a new perspective on an old obsession," but also "he owed it to women after *Carnovsky*"), or enrolling in medical school ("he'd take a residency in leprosy and be forgiven by all. Like Nathan Leopold"). He describes his offense in writing *Carnovsky* as the "culture crime of desublimation." His mistake was to make a "Jewish comedy out of genital life" instead of obeying those whom he mockingly imagines as urging him to "sublimate, my child, sublimate, like the physicists who gave us the atomic bomb."

Roth's sly irony here asks us implicitly to see him as a Dionysian liberator (or at least transgressive Jewish comedian) opposing a culture dedicated to death, a suggestion that reads as a parodic sketch of the two best-known 1950s arguments for "desublimation," the "aboli-

tion of repression,” and the “resurrection of the body”—Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* and Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death*. Roth’s suggestion might itself elicit an ironic reply. For many, Roth’s work has been regarded not as liberating but as testament to numbingly repetitive, misogynistic, priapic obsessions (charges reprised upon the publication of his latest novel, *The Dying Animal*). A critique of Roth along these lines might borrow some of Lionel Trilling’s summary of Marcuse: “In the spirit of William Blake, Marcuse characterizes the phallus as an agent of alienation and tyranny—Blake calls it a ‘pompous High Priest’ whose insistence that we enter ‘by a secret place’ denies that the body is holy in ‘every Minute Particular.’”

Early on in *The Human Stain* we learn that the priest is no longer high and mighty. And heterosexuality is less defensively homophobic. Such are the implications to be drawn from the odd spectacle of a now impotent Zuckerman, at sixty-five a reclusive, incontinent, “helpless eunuch” after prostate surgery, dancing the foxtrot with a bare-chested man of light yellow skin, who is “still trim and attractive” at seventy-one. “There was nothing overtly carnal in it, but because Coleman Silk was wearing only his denim shorts and my hand rested easily on his warm back. . . it wasn’t entirely a mocking act.” Zuckerman relishes the “unexpected intimacy” of their “human connection” and feels as if he has met his “soul mate.” Still a “seductive,” “boyish soul,” a “goat-footed Pan,” Coleman puts on Sinatra singing “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered” and dances Nathan “right back into life.” What this pagan tableau of relaxed male courtship suggests is a desublimation in which pleasure and play replace sexual compulsion. This less frantic mode of desublimation is rare in Roth’s work, indeed is distinctly absent, for instance, from *Portnoy’s* portrait of a taboo-shattering momma’s boy, or from the Zuckerman trilogy’s quixotic and penitential search for the real. In their near hysterical devotion to being bad, the heroes of the two earlier novels paradoxically retain a boyish commitment to purity, to the myth of pastoral and its nostalgia for the “womb-dream of life” “before the split began.”

In contrast, *The Human Stain* proposes in effect a desublimation

free from the consolations of pastoral. Unlike pastoral, the human stain does not imply a prelapsarian moment that begs for recovery. It simply testifies to the fact that “we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there’s no other way to be here.” This recognition makes one potentially less vulnerable to fantasies of purity. The obdurate human stain “de-idealizes the species” by keeping us “everlastingly mindful of the matter we are,” to borrow what Roth says of sexual desire. He enacts this de-idealization by creating a plot that is faintly ludicrous in places, including the dance of Coleman and Nathan, and the central flashback that recounts Silk’s self-invention. Both episodes are set, that is, on the brink of a “precipitous absurdity,” in the words of Zuckerman’s onetime neighbor Hawthorne, who was describing the precarious position of the writer of romance. What keeps Roth from crossing over the brink is his amplitude of novelistic detail and command of multitudinous facts. He leaves the stain of verisimilitude even on events that are, in a phrase describing Coleman’s passing, “flavored with just a drop of the ridiculous, the redeeming, reassuring ridiculous, life’s little contribution to every human decision.”

Roth’s commitment to the brute materiality of the human makes it apt that the simple fact of Zuckerman’s aging helps liberate him from the self-obsessions of his earlier incarnations. A self-effacing narrator in the first two books of the trilogy, Zuckerman in *The Human Stain* dramatizes his emergence from the solitude of renunciation. Receptive to Coleman’s “allure”—“an allure that I could never quite specify”—Zuckerman lets this human connection bring him back to life and to art, as he becomes imaginatively at one with his friend (“Coleman Silk’s life had become closer to me than my own”) and compelled to tell his life’s secret story. If the young Zuckerman had taken Henry James as his model of ascetic (and gentile) devotion to high art, now at last he achieves his Jamesian calling. Zuckerman approximates something of Lambert Strether’s power, in *The Ambassadors*, of sympathetic identification (“I seem to have a life only for other people”) and imaginative appropriation.

Given the younger Zuckerman’s thirst for raw, unvarnished life,

Coleman's anarchy would naturally be seductive to the older Zuckerman. "Free to be abandoned. . . because there is no future," Silk is enjoying a last fling (facilitated by Viagra), an intense affair with a thirty-four-year-old illiterate cleaning woman. Faunia Farley is "not deformed by the fairy tale of purity" and her laconic, calm voice, free of sanctimony, is part of her capacity for being "game in the face of the worst." Coleman has never felt closer to anyone than he does to Faunia and he entrusts her with his secret, something he never did with his wife of three decades. Exuberant at discovering the pleasure of intimacy and being unburdened of his double life, Coleman dances with Zuckerman as part of his unexpected renewal of passion. His late-blooming abandonment dissolves the unceasing fury that has gripped him following a disastrous turn in his career and life.

Two years earlier, charges of racism had driven Silk from his position as a college dean and professor of classics. He had uttered the word "spooks" in class ("Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?"), referring to two perennially absent students he later learns are black. In his small college community, where his ambition and success have made him unpopular, he is bereft of defenders, deserted by friends. His estrangement from his four "perfectly white" children increases, and, when his wife dies amid the tumult of the scandal, he becomes vengeful and misanthropic (when he first met Zuckerman he sought to enlist his help on the score-settling memoir he was composing) and soon encounters more trouble when an enemy on the faculty threatens to make public his ongoing affair. Her efforts become moot when Coleman's lover's ex-husband, a psychopathic Vietnam veteran who has been stalking the couple, forces them off the road into a fatal car crash.

Thus when the novel begins Coleman is already dead, and it ends with Zuckerman resolved to get the facts by interviewing Coleman's sister, the one person with whom he has remained in touch. But the more Zuckerman learns the more elusive becomes the meaning of Coleman's passing as a Jew. "How petty were his motives? How pathological? . . . did he ever relax his vigilance, or was it like being a fugitive forever?" The questions pile up without answer. Coleman never apolo-

gized, never explained, insulating himself in his secret as a way to cast off his various pasts. At seventy-one, in the midst of his last fling, he believes he has found “the freedom to leave a lifetime behind.” Fifty years earlier, he had repudiated his family for a life of passing, and then he repudiated, in effect, the family he created by keeping his secret from his wife and children.

While seemingly subversive, passing is actually a salient instance of self-imposed purification, a reduction of the self to a disciplinary project of control and subtlety. These very qualities had helped make “Silky Silk” an excellent college boxer. The art of boxing in fact becomes his model for passing, for they both require a slipperiness and poise that affords him the pleasure of being “counterconfessional” in the same way he enjoys being a “counterpuncher.” But passing requires still more: the willingness to “murder” his loving mother “on behalf” of his intoxication with being free. Only by meeting this “test” can he “be the man he has chosen to be.” In his lethal fantasy of auto-genesis, Coleman imagines he has turned himself into an artifact, a “cunning self-concoction . . . a product on which no one but he held a patent.”

Determined to choose his affiliation rather than suffer ethnic or racial ascription, Silk insists he is passing only because he wants to be free, “not black, not even white. . . nor was he staging some sort of protest against his race.” What he feels compelled to surmount is “ancestor worship” in any form, including his brother’s life commitment to advancing the race. Seeking to be neither black nor white, Coleman shrewdly elects a third possibility—the equivocal form of whiteness that is postwar American Jewishness. Roth is careful to specify the historical moment when it is plausible that Coleman’s will to radical self-determination merges with becoming a Jew. “The act was committed in 1953 by an audacious young man in Greenwich Village, by a specific person in a specific place at a specific time.” From that time and place emanated the rising cultural significance of Jewish intellectuals, writers who challenged genteel decorum by flaunting “the disputatious stance, the aggressively marginal sensibility, the disavowal of community ties.” This is how Zuckerman in *The Anatomy*

Lesson had described his own models of conduct and thought. To be part of the “post-immigrant generation” was to be granted a ticket out of the ghetto, set free to think critically, without the baggage of other ethnic groups with their “Old Country link and a strangling church,” or of WASPs and their blind loyalty to the American way. Majoring in classics at N.Y.U. in the early fifties, Coleman is part of a Greenwich Village circle of people who assume all along that he is a Jew. “Who was he not to go along for the ride,” thinks Coleman of his good fortune to be present just at the moment when “taking on the ersatz prestige of an aggressively thinking, self-analytic, irreverent American Jew reveling in the ironies of the marginal Manhattan existence” is not so reckless as it might have seemed.

Doubtless a touch of pardonable romantic nostalgia simplifies Roth’s sketch of the New York Jewish intellectual milieu. One might add that even the vaunted freedom of the bohemian scene had not altogether abolished ethnic/racial divisions of cultural labor. “Just as Negroes knew about jazz, Jews were expected to know how to write book reviews,” remarks Anatole Broyard in *Kafka Was the Rage*, his memoir of postwar Greenwich Village. Broyard is pertinent here as a likely model for Coleman Silk. A transplant to New York from New Orleans, Broyard was a light-skinned black man who passed as white (but not as a Jew) his entire adult life, only, like Coleman, to be outed posthumously. Significantly, Roth resists duplicating a division of cultural labor, as if honoring Broyard’s (and Coleman’s) own eluding of expectations. In Broyard’s case he started as a jazz expert in *Partisan Review* and two decades later became an influential book reviewer in the *New York Times*.

Coleman’s decision to pass as a Jew is presented by Roth as a practical solution to his quest for self-invention rather than as ratifying a cultural/racial identity politics that equates blackness with body, sexuality, and suffering, Jewishness with mind and virtue. This tidy opposition informs the most notorious fifties discussion of blacks and Jews, Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro,” and the consequence is that Mailer’s effort to blacken the Jew into a hipster/outlaw comes at the cost of a (by now) embarrassing racial primitivism. In *The Human*

Stain Jews are gifted in athletics (a Jew initiates Coleman into the world of boxing), while black people are widely cultured and classically educated. Coleman (pre-passing) is valedictorian of his high school class in East Orange, New Jersey, and one day his parents (“a model Negro family”) receive a visit from a Jewish doctor whose son is a close second in the class. Dr. Fensterman offers a bribe if Coleman will throw his final exams. Concealing their outrage, Mr. and Mrs. Silk politely decline. Mr. Silk is a Du Boisian figure who dwells in the deracialized “kingdom of culture,” loves Shakespeare, encourages his son to learn Latin and Greek, and serves as his intellectual model. Trained to excel in body and mind, Coleman fashions himself into a “heretofore unknown amalgam of the most unlike of America’s historic undesirables.”

Roth’s careful disruption of expectations serves two entwined purposes: for one thing, it makes credible Coleman’s belief that his decision is more about freedom than race; for another, it defuses the predictable pathos and melodrama that usually attends the novel of passing. The locus of this pathos is typically the passing character (often called a tragic mulatto in turn-of-the-century parlance) who suffers the guilt of race betrayal, having naively imagined that “joy and freedom . . . seemed to be inherent in mere whiteness,” in the words of the heroine of Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1929). In Fauset’s tough-minded antitragic mulatta novel of passing, the brash heroine’s decision to pass in Greenwich Village is, like Coleman’s, less a betrayal of race than an assertion of modernist individualism, a “joke upon custom and tradition.” But even Fauset’s novel concludes with the heroine’s self-revision (she realizes that freedom is not inherent in mere whiteness), confession (of her secret), and reconciliation (with her family). This cathartic, reintegrative trajectory is conspicuously absent from Coleman Silk’s life.

Although he is a man who seizes his historical moment, Coleman is making a very old mistake. With the fatal simplicity of all romantic individualists, he imagines his will is sovereign. “The objective was for his fate to be determined . . . to whatever degree humanly possible, by his own resolve. Why accept a life on any other terms?” Isabel Archer

could not have said it more succinctly. And like Isabel, Coleman will be “blindsided” (in his case literally) by what he could not have foreseen. As does James, Roth tenderly but unsentimentally regards his protagonist’s deluded overreaching and draws the inevitable moral: “freedom is dangerous. Freedom is very dangerous. And nothing is on your own terms for long.” A colleague eulogizes Coleman as an “American individualist” who, in the tradition of “Hawthorne, Melville, and Thoreau,” resisted the “coercions of a censorious community.” But Roth, unlike the eulogist, is not mythologizing his protagonist. As did his nineteenth-century predecessors, Roth instead inquires into the costs of oppositional individualism.

The cost is best summed up in the word that unravels Coleman’s life, the word his enemies seized upon as racist and that Zuckerman broods about: “Spooks! To be undone by a word no one even speaks anymore. . . . Spooks! The ridiculous trivialization” of his [Coleman’s] “singularly subtle life.” This is part of what Zuckerman means when late in the novel he describes Coleman’s “harshly ironic fate.” But the harshest irony is one Zuckerman doesn’t mention—that “spooks” describes with uncanny aptness what Coleman’s purity of self-making engenders—his status as “not just an unknown but an uncohesive person.” Zuckerman remarks this as he admits his frustrating inability to answer the question “how did such a person as Coleman come to exist? What is it that he was?” Or to turn Coleman’s fateful question in on himself—“Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?” No unequivocal answers are possible because Coleman Silk, having fortified himself against experience, has made himself into an abstraction. Like those other immaculate idealists Isabel Archer and Jay Gatsby (and, closer to home, Hawthorne’s obsessive self-masker Reverend Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil”), he has been true to his platonic conception of himself. And this fidelity disembodies him—“somewhere there’s a blank in him,” notes Zuckerman. That void expresses his spectral status, one that afflicts other keepers of secrets: “Each a ghost, and awe-stricken at the other ghost!” says Hawthorne of the forest reunion of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. “Art thou in life?” they ask each other; “it was no wonder

that they thus questioned one another's actual and bodily existence." Ghostlike, Coleman glides through his schematic life, as if he has visited upon himself the murderous "savagery" he first inflicted on his mother when he threw his origins overboard. "Anybody who has the audacity to do that doesn't just want to be white. He wants to be able to do that," says Zuckerman, at once admiring his friend's unflinching willfulness and appalled by his self-devouring fate.

There is an element of tragic Greek necessity in that fate. For Roth, the ruthlessness of Coleman's self-making and the novel's high body count are correlative and reminiscent of the escalating carnage of the *Iliad*, "Coleman's favorite book about the ravening spirit of man." Roth also draws an epistemological moral from Coleman's story: "there really is no bottom to what is not known" about other people. But above all, Coleman's story is an American one: becoming a new being is "the drama that underlies America's story, the high drama that is upping and leaving—and the energy and cruelty that rapturous drive demands." The bleakness and beauty of indomitable individualism are caught in the novel's final tableau, a Gatsbyesque vision of the fresh green breast of the new world—an icy white lake "encircling a tiny spot that was a man, the only human marker in all of nature 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." Inevitably, death also lives at the heart of this pastoral of entrancing simplicity and purity. The solitary fisherman is Les Farley, the psychotic ex-husband, Coleman's killer. This location is his special "secret spot"—"away from man, close to God"—that Zuckerman intrudes upon. "It's nice to have a secret spot," Farley tells him. Here emerges the tie between Coleman and his killer; both are guardians of secrets, the imperative of vigilance that preoccupies the American isolato.

This imperative can produce within the American solitary an anarchic energy close to rage, as Stephen King knows (*The Shining*), and as Zuckerman's nineteenth-century Berkshire neighbor knew. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Arthur Dimmesdale's vigilance in maintaining his

double life is strained near breaking—"No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true"—and almost unravels after his passionate reunion with Hester. With "unaccustomed physical energy" he hurries home through the forest, at every step "incited to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other, with the sense that it would be at once involuntary and intentional; in spite of himself, yet growing out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse." Dimmesdale doesn't quite let the brute out, though he nearly utters "blasphemous" suggestions to the deacon and wicked words to children, and yearns to dally and trade oaths with a "drunken seaman." Of Dimmesdale's "profounder self" of "ravenous appetite" we are permitted only these tantalizing glimpses. He soon dies, as he makes public confession of his secret. Coleman Silk lets his "profounder self" emerge in his eleventh hour abandonment, as his secret sharer Les Farley shadows him. Letting out the brute, Coleman confides his secret to his lover, recovers his body and the human stain of entangling intimacy.

Five years earlier in *Sabbath's Theater* Roth devoted an entire novel to a man who all his life has "let the whole creature out." Mickey Sabbath, a "squat man. . . obviously very sexed-up and lawless, who didn't give a damn what anybody thought," is a man without secrets (even his phone seductions are taped and made public) and has lived a life virtually the opposite of Coleman's. Sabbath understands his life as a problem, not as a project: "the problem that was his life was never to be solved. His wasn't the kind of life where there are aims that are clear and means that are clear and where it is possible to say, 'This is essential and that is not essential'. . . There was no unsnarling an existence whose waywardness constituted its only authority and provided its primary amusement." Slovenly and broke, he is not above begging in the subways while quoting from *King Lear* and mocking his own literary grandiosity.

Yet Sabbath acquires poignancy not from the predictable source—the primitive's joyous affirmation of life is a cliché he scorns and enacts—but rather from his capacity to mourn. All along he has been

in touch with the past; indeed, his is a “life with the dead” that includes talks with his late mother and with his brother, a pilot killed at twenty in the Second World War, and Sabbath is still haunted by the never solved disappearance of his young wife years before. In his life with the living he stands by and witnesses the slow dying of his mistress of thirteen years. But cutting against this melancholy and saving the novel from bathos is Sabbath’s outrageous, insatiable, and shameless sexual appetite, as repulsive as it is comic. The novel’s extraordinary final eighty pages transform Sabbath from a “walking panegyric for obscenity” into a figure of Whitmanesque pathos, the “baffled and balk’d” Whitman of “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”: “I too am but a trail of drift and debris.” As the poet wends the shores, hearing the ocean of life moaning, “endlessly” crying for its “castaways,” he enters into the spirit of that “sobbing dirge of Nature”: “I list to the dirge, the voices of men and women wreck’d.” Sabbath too hears such voices.

“I am merely debris, flowing swiftly along the curbs of life,” Sabbath remarks at one point. Bent on suicide, feeling that his “porous” self is “running out now drop by drop,” he visits a cemetery at Bradley Beach on the Jersey shore to buy a space in the family plot. He finds none left, discovers that his father’s centenarian cousin is still alive, pays him a visit to say goodbye, and steals a carton of his brother’s things—pictures, letters, medals, an American flag with forty-eight stars. Walking the beach, Sabbath unfurls the flag, wraps himself in it and weeps, stopping “not until two hours later, when he returned from tramping the beach wrapped in that flag. . . crying all the way, rapidly talking, then wildly mute, then chanting aloud words and sentences inexplicable, even to himself.” “And all from only a single carton. Imagine, then, the history of the world. We are immoderate because grief is immoderate, all the hundreds and thousands of kinds of grief.” Sabbath’s immoderate grief is the source of his disdain for any form of the moderate, the cardinal bourgeois virtue that, for him, bespeaks a desperate effort at control, an effort to escape being blindsided by experience. Confronting a wealthy, well-meaning old friend Sabbath tells him “there is no protection. . . . What we are in the hands of *is not protection*. . . . Even you are exposed—what do you make of that?”

Exposed! Fucking naked, even in that suit! The suit is futile, the monogram is futile—nothing will do it. *We have no idea how it's going to turn out.* “Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the end,” writes Wallace Stevens in “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” of “Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore. He is singing and chanting the things that are part of him.”

Sabbath's Whitmanic self-dissolution, his unfurled, “porous,” leaky existence, is the counterlife to Coleman Silk's artfully defended self. One of Roth's strengths is his antitherapeutic worldview, and it would be a mistake to see Sabbath as offering an implicit corrective to Coleman or vice versa. Both characters enact disparate modes of American individualism, each is an “unalterable animal” of “unalterable necessity” (in the words of Wallace Stevens that Roth used forty years ago as the epigraph to *Letting Go*). Perhaps Sabbath and Silk can best be differentiated by the fact that Coleman learns only late in life what Sabbath learned early on—that “anyone with any brains understands that we are destined to lead a stupid life *because there is no other kind*. There is nothing personal in it.” Or, as Whitman says in “As I Ebb'd”: “I perceive I have not really understood any thing . . . and that no man ever can.”

Roth is the hedgehog who knows one big thing—unknowability. This is the epistemological human stain we are morally required to embrace, and Roth's conviction bespeaks the stoical skepticism of canonical American and high modernist literature. The other side of this skepticism, for Roth, is his exuberantly inventive engagement with American literature, an act of creative affiliation that itself is exemplary of the freedom of art. The slipperiness of affiliation—how it sponsors freedom as well as entrapment—is one of the cautions and ironies of Coleman Silk's story. Not to confuse the freedom of art with what Henry James liked to call “clumsy life at its stupid work” is another difficult but salutary demand Roth places upon us.