

*The Human Stain* by Philip Roth (Jonathan Cape) R150

10 September 2000

It is sobering to reflect that Philip Roth, who first came to notoriety as the creator of Portnoy, the manic masturbator, now has elected as fictional alter ego the sixty-five year old novelist Nathan Zuckerman, rendered impotent by an operation for prostate cancer.

But if the sexual energy of the narrator has of necessity been dissipated, the vigour of the imagination is unimpaired – to be sure, no longer the over-heated imagination of the adolescent: rather, now, the mature but by no means resigned acceptance of “the pointless meaningfulness of living.”

Zuckerman, excluded from the life of the passions he observes, particularly in the Viagra-fuelled vigour of his seventy-one year old friend and neighbour, Coleman Silk, deals poignantly with what Stephen Watson has called, in a somewhat similar context, “all that is intractable in desire and desiring.” This intractability Zuckerman describes as the “the sexual caterwaul” from which he abdicated even before his operation, because he “could no longer marshal the wit, the strength, the patience, the illusion, the irony, the ardor, the egoism, the resilience – or the toughness, or the shrewdness, the falseness, the dissembling, the dual being, the erotic *professionalism* – to deal with its array of misleading and contradictory meanings.”

But Zuckerman is here only as a frame narrator, placing into his own richly experienced perspective the “intoxication with the last fling” of Coleman Silk. Driven to resign his academic post in disgust after being unfairly accused of racism, Silk takes up with Faunia Farley, a thirty-four year old female janitor of his former college, and estranged wife of the traumatised Vietnam veteran Lester Farley..

Their story is placed in relation to the history of mid- and late-twentieth century America as much as to the tragic passions of the Greek dramas Silk has spent his life teaching to groups of increasingly unresponsive students. In Silk, personal and national history intertwine with a specific cultural heritage to create the complex fabric of a personality at one with itself and yet at war with its environment, a man true to his instincts and yet untrue to his origins: born a light-skinned black man, he passes his whole professional career as a white, disowning his past and his family.

Silk’s defection has political significance, of course, but in this novel the political never precedes the personal: the history of American racism, like the rest of American history, is experienced from within, not imposed upon the characters. They are the creatures of history, not its puppets. (All the more’s the pity, then, that Roth trivialises his theme by insisting on a running parallel with the hardly epic antics of Clinton and Lewinsky.)

The novel’s engagement with history is spelt out by Zuckerman towards the end of the novel, in a passage which brings to the surface the connection with *Oedipus the King*: “The man who decides to forge a distinct historical destiny, who sets out to spring the historical lock, and who does so, brilliantly succeeds at altering his personal lot, only to be ensnared by the history he hadn’t quite counted on: the history that isn’t yet history, the history that the clock is now ticking off, the history proliferating as I write, accruing a minute at a time and grasped better by the future than it will ever be by us.”

It is in keeping with this view of history that Silk and Faunia’s deaths are plotted as a consequence, one might say, of accruing American history: they die in a car accident contrived by Lester Farley, driven beyond his precariously maintained equilibrium by a Veteran’s Day gathering. Here, too, their fate is not mere mechanical mishap: Lester Farley may be an agent of destiny, but he is also a man with a history of his own. (I am not betraying a plot surprise here: the deaths of Silk and Faunia are prefigured from very early in the novel.)

In ranging between his characters, Roth enters effortlessly into the consciousness of Silk, of Faunia, even of Lester. Where he falters in his superb control of point of view is in his rendering of the consciousness of Delphine Roux, the young, French-born, Bataille-quoting, Chanel-wearing Chair of Literature and Language who is largely responsible for Silk’s prosecution on the spurious racism charge. Allowing us access to her mental processes, Roth in fact makes her sneer at herself for our delectation: “She had tried as best she could, with the choice of clothing as with her manner, to impress upon him the intricate interplay of *all* the forces that came together to make her so interesting at twenty-four.”

At such times one suspects that Roth's prejudices are perilously close to those of Silk, and that he is denying Delphine the right to a fair hearing that he extends to his other characters: she is all too clearly a caricature of the newly-empowered feminist discourse-mongers that many academics of a certain generation regard as the barbarians at the gate.

Given Delphine's ideological accessories, the implication that Silk is the unacknowledged object of the young woman's sexual fantasies is as facile as it is suspect, the capitulation of all that sassy Frenchified theory to the direct virility of the "phallic entitlement, the phallic *dignity*, of a power-house of a warrior prince" (This is Silk on Achilles, but we are presumably invited to extrapolate the sexual attitudes here celebrated to the body of the novel and its boxer hero.) Indeed, the novel's take on political correctness in general is by now over-familiar and predictable.

The sexual descriptions are, as one would expect in Roth, explicit, even disquieting, but never prurient or voyeuristic or sentimental: here the down-to-earth Faunia acts as spokesperson for the novel's thesis: "'The human stain,' she said, and without revulsion or contempt or condemnation. Not even with sadness. *That's how it is* – . . . we leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen – there's no other way to be here."

*The Human Stain* manages to make that potentially bleak vision into an affirmation, without shirking the nightmare lurking just below the surface of the American idyll. 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."

The solitary man is Lester Farley.