

THE STAIN AND THE SIGN.
POETICS IN PHILIP ROTH'S *THE HUMAN STAIN*

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ABSTRACT

The paper shows how Philip Roth's text discards and negates language, fiction and the temporality of narrative, replacing them with an experimental poetics that inscribes form into the body itself, endowing it with sensuality and musicality and manifesting itself as a new spatio-temporal form. Drawing on Heraclitus, Kenneth Burke, Friedrich Nietzsche and the poet S. Ulrik Thomsen, the paper further demonstrates how woman is in the place of the truth, and how "truth" in a sense is "no knowledge". The dialogue between the feminine and the masculine, and the passion between a woman and a man expands subjectivity into an Other, a Third Form tending towards formlessness and eliminating the dualism of thinking and sensing.

I shall attempt to construct a poetics based on Philip Roth's novel *The human stain*, or rather, perhaps, explicate those elements in the text that imply a certain congruity between being and form, ontology and aesthetics, and how the subject, being in dialogue with itself and an other, may conceive of itself *as form*; my interpretation will be carried out in the manner of an experimental reflection on aesthetics and ontology in the course of which I shall comment on and apply a selection of excerpts from the poetics of Søren Ulrik Thomsen, Danish poet; pre-Socratic philosophy, specifically Heraclitus' remarks on fusion and diffusion; Kenneth Burke's philosophy of literary form; Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of grades, degrees and opposition; Jacques Derrida's concept of totality and excess; Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection; and, of course, Philip Roth's own aesthetic reflection and philosophy of language and subjectivity as they appear implicitly in the text. While I do not intend to downplay the realistic representation of race and gender problematics in Roth's text (whose protagonist is Coleman Silk, an African-American passing for and becoming a Jewish-American college professor

who at the end of his life encounters a woman much younger than himself, Faunia Farley), I will discuss color as metaphor and as an aspect of form – specifically as a kind of infinite *gradation and evolution of form* through which “body” becomes “mind”, or rather, perhaps, the distinction between them is erased. I see the process of infinite gradation occurring simultaneously in the *forming* of character and self-reflection and in the *forming* of the text, and I see that process culminating in a negation of language and signification, and in an openness, even emptiness that I would call an *amorphē*: the formless vessel into which any form may be poured. I will not to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the novel; instead, I will select textual fragments that show character in dialogue with itself and with an other. In Roth’s text, the encounter of Self and Other, particularly of masculine Self and feminine Other, contains a potential poetics with profound epistemological implications.

Poetics is the creation of form and the explication and realization of the conditions for the creation of form; the metaphysical – and ontological – essence and purpose of form is, in the words of the Danish poet Søren Ulrik Thomsen,¹ to “produce *one self* as form” since “coming into existence as form is the only chance the subject has to transcend and reflect upon itself in its objectivity” (Thomsen 1985: 50). It seems obvious to me that the protagonist of Roth’s novel, Coleman Silk, produces himself “as form”, initially by casting himself in the language of Greek tragedy and of the white academic elite but ultimately by negating that language as he enters the final change of identity. The text thus strives towards the fulfillment of a radical *ontos* which extends itself into and almost merges with an equally radical *poetics* whose substance, paradoxically yet logically, gravitates towards the non-substantial: a poetic form comprising aesthetics and Being and including them in a spiralling, centrifugal motion where the limits of Being and form are continuously expanding in accordance with the law of Heraclitus phrased as follows by Plutarch in *On the E at Delphi*

Reason can grasp nothing which is at rest or which is really real; for it is not possible to step twice into the same river, according to Heraclitus, nor to touch mortal substance twice in the same condition: by the swiftness and speed of its change, it scatters and collects again – or rather, it is not again and later but simultaneously that it comes together and departs, approaches and retires

(Barnes 2001: 70).

Both Being and form “approach” and “retire” simultaneously so that identity may be examined and revealed through the study of form. As I have indicated

¹ Citations are from the Danish original, *Mit lys brænder – Omrids af en ny poetik/My light is burning – Sketching a new poetics* (1985) by the Danish poet Søren Ulrik Thomsen. [My translation.]

above, and as I will show in my analysis, in Roth's novel form tends towards the formless and towards a meta-fictional conception of itself as an *amorphē* – an open form, or in a sense an empty form which is the only thing accessible to reason since it cannot “grasp nothing which is at rest or which is really real”. The question remains, then, how to “study” the formless, and how to conceive of it; can it, indeed, be conceived at all? The text contains the clue to this question, perhaps, but before I get to the text itself I will take a brief look at Kenneth Burke's study of form.

In *The philosophy of literary form* Burke puts forward twelve propositions on the relation between economics and psychology. In proposition 7 he states that the “processes of change of identity are most clearly revealed by analyzing formal works of art and applying the results of our analysis to the ‘informal art of living’ in general” (Burke 1973: 308). Further, in proposition 10 Burke states: “‘Style’” is an aspect of identification” (1973: 309). Finally, proposition 11 proposes the thesis that human relations “should be analyzed with respect to the leads discovered by a study of drama” (1973: 310). The reversal of “life” and “drama”, psychologically and aesthetically, is apparent in Roth's novel as Coleman Silk, once African-American, now Jewish-American classics professor at Athena College teaching a.o. Greek drama, stages, fictionalizes and aestheticizes himself through the adoption of the style and language of the white erudite elite. He becomes his own impresario, affirming and negating identity and Self at one and the same time. The “sign”, language, affirms the “stain”, elemental human nature, by reflecting it; the sign also transforms the stain by enacting a self-propelled catharsis: Aristotle provides the metaphysics and Homer's epic the literary model, the original script casting the modern subject in an inevitable cycle of revenge and anger, driven forward by the protagonist and by the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, who are complicit in the ensuing repetition of the tragedy of the House of Atreus.

Affirmation through catharsis turns into negation aiming at a higher level of metamorphosis as Coleman Silk meets his “Helen of Nothing”, as she calls herself, Faunia (the feminine form of Faunus, Roman god of nature and fertility; the Greek parallel is Artemis). The deeper dimension of Coleman's metamorphosis cannot be a mimetic repetition of the tragedy of the House of Atreus; for the motive for a change of identity is *desire* as the impelling force moving the subject towards that which is other than itself – that which, in the words of the poet Thomsen, “is not immanently contained in one's own form” (Thomsen 1985: 64). Thomsen notes the following about desire:

It crosses the border between the subject of desire and the Other, the object of desire, in order to erase the difference between them and thereby suspend the *tension* created by that difference.

The process of crossing over also erases *signification* as posited by difference; the two forms that previously made up each other's Other now realize the mutual project of desire (the purpose of which is the opposite of becoming identical by reducing one's own form to the other's form): they erase and realize one another in a wholly new form, an original identity: *A genuine Third*.

However, this new form or identity immediately produces a new Other: that which lies beyond the limit just given by the transformation. In relation to this new Other new meaning has been produced

(1985: 64).

The new Other in relation to which "new meaning has been produced" appears in the encounter between Faunia and Coleman as a specific *form* that is poetics and Being at once. I shall specify this by analyzing some fragments of the text.

The formation of a "genuine Third" is blocked by a series of fictionalizations that narrator and protagonist attempt, repeatedly and – in the case of the protagonist – with great frustration and anger, to counteract and transcend by writing their own fictional accounts; the protagonist's account is called *Spooks*, a title the narrator changes into *The human stain*. One level below these fictional accounts we find a number of anonymous internet postings, a.o. one sent by a "Clytemnestra", address "houseofatreus.com", commented on by the narrator as follows:

I still had no way of knowing who at the college might have had the turn of mind to conjure up the clytemnestra posting – the most diabolic of art forms, the on-line art form, because of its anonymity – nor could I have any idea what somebody, anybody, might next come up with to disseminate anonymously. All I knew for sure was that the germs of malice were unleashed, and where Coleman's conduct was concerned, there was no absurdity out of which someone wasn't going to try to make indignant sense. An epidemic had broken out in Athena – that's how my thinking went in the immediate aftermath of his death – and what was to contain the epidemic's spreading? It was there. The pathogens were out there. In the ether. In the universal hard drive, everlasting and undeletable, the sign of the viciousness of the human creature.

Everybody was writing *Spooks* now – everybody, as yet, except me

(Roth 2001: 291).

The rhetoric of the clytemnestra posting exhibits an inferior form of the judgment of the goddess Athena whose cool sense is here transformed into the vengefulness of Clytemnestra, in the modern version, vicious gossip directed at both Coleman and Faunia after their death in a car accident (which might have been murder). Clytemnestra's posting casts Faunia in the role of "an innocent woman of thirty-four" who was, according to the self-styled "author" of this particular version of *Spooks*, "functionally illiterate"; the rhetoric re-enacts, in the manner and style of contemporary American Puritanism, the drama of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, placing Coleman in the role of Agamemnon who sacrificed his own daughter to the goddess Artemis in or-

der to gain a favorable wind for sailing on to Troy. A rumour was disseminated that Coleman had forced Faunia to abort, and there is a general consensus that he “had a score to settle with Athena College” because he was coerced into resigning after the “spooks” incident (which I will comment on later) and he “wreaks his vengeance” on Faunia: “On her flesh. On her limbs. On her genitals. On her womb” (Roth 2001: 291-292). Clytemnestra’s revenge, perpetrated against Agamemnon because of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, is converted into the vicious, lurid double-talk of Puritanical outrage and condemnation in “the universal hard drive”. The allusions to Greek mythology and to Homer are not explicit in the posting; but they feed the collective fantasy emanating from the communal subconscious, a fantasy that incessantly searches for catharsis and cleansing while reducing and inverting the Homeric and the heroic. The restoration of heroism and heroic proportions in modern (American) civilization appears on the internet in the guise of a verbalized subconscious, impotent because divorced from action. Real action would involve the inscription of transcendence and metamorphosis in the direction of the Other and the *genuine Third*, as I have noted earlier. The “universal hard drive” is an ironically decadent and deficient poetics that would diminish the desire for the Other to the status of a vulgar anonymity engaging in sensationalist speculation. Yet there is a double irony here; for Coleman’s desire for the Other and for the subject as form is also immanent in his own *Spooks* manuscript, which is chaotic and angry, as reported to the reader by the narrator, and eventually discarded. We may infer that desire is diminished in the manuscript as it re-enacts, perhaps in the manner of a playful staging, the Oedipus-like ritual of purification, exile and blindness that precludes transcendence and metamorphosis.

The reductive language of the “hard drive” appears earlier in the novel, as Delphine Roux erroneously sends a message she had intended to delete. The Freudian mechanisms of “negation” and “the return of the repressed” appear as ironic manifestations of defective self-transcendence and limited self-conception. The young Frenchwoman, hired on faculty by professor Silk, realizes that the lover she is seeking through the internet is none other than Coleman Silk:

Mature man with backbone. Unattached. Independent. Witty. Lively. Defiant. Forthright. Well educated. Satirical spirit. Charm. Knowledge and love of great books. Well spoken and straight-speaking. Trimly built. Five eight or nine. Mediterranean complexion. Green eyes preferred. Age unimportant. But must be intellectual. Graying hair acceptable, even desirable ...

And then, and only then, did the mythical man being summoned forth in all earnestness on the screen condense into a portrait of someone she already knew

(Roth 2001: 273).

The error of using a public medium for personal messages turns into a communicative disaster:

... Delphine neglects to observe that earlier, at the outset, instead of addressing the ad to the *New York Review of Books*, she had automatically addressed it to the recipients of most of her communications – to the ten staff members of the Athena Department of Languages and Literature. She neglects first to observe that mistake and then, in her distracted, turbulent, emotionally taxing state, neglects also to observe that instead of hitting the delete button, she is adding one common-enough tiny error to another common-enough tiny error by hitting the send button instead

(Roth 2001: 277).

Roth's method is starting to become clear. The "universal hard drive" which disseminates personal fantasies of the Other as well as collective fantasies on sex and violence is, as Plato would see it, three times removed from the *genuine Third*. Coleman's autobiographical manuscript *Spooks* is twice removed, and the narrator's fiction – *The human stain* – is once removed. Greek mythology and Homer are woven into the fictionalizing and aestheticizing accounts of Coleman and Zuckerman, playfully so I would say, and they are negated by Faunia who turns fiction and the sign into Nothing as in the following:

"Most women want to own everything," she says. "They want to own your mail. They want to own your future. They want to own your fantasies. 'How dare you want to fuck anybody other than me. I should be your fantasy. Why are you watching porn when you have *me* at home?' They want to own who you are, Coleman. But the pleasure isn't owning the person. The pleasure is this. Having another contender in the room with you. Oh, I see you, Coleman. I could give you away my whole life and still have you. Just by dancing. Isn't that true? Am I mistaken? Do you like this, Coleman?"

"What luck," he says, watching, watching. "What incredible luck. Life owed me this."

"Did it now?"

"There is no one like you. Helen of Troy."

"Helen of Nowhere. Helen of Nothing"

(Roth 2001: 232).

Coleman's question, "Who are You?" prompts the reply "I am whatever you want" from Faunia (Roth 2001: 234); she is amorphous, polymorphous, detached from the tenuous association with Faunus-Artemis-Iphigenia. She discards language altogether, not wanting to be lectured to by the professor: "Can't you avoid the fucking seminar? Enough of the seminar! I can't learn! I don't learn! I don't *want* to learn! Stop fucking teaching me – it won't work!" (2001: 234). And, in reply to Coleman's statement about their relationship, "This is more than sex," Faunia contends: "No, it's not. You just forgot what sex is. This is sex. All by itself. Don't fuck it up by pretending it's something else" (2001: 203).

Form comes out of the formless, paradoxically, as a non-substantial precondition for substance. I have noted elsewhere that Faunia's statement "I am whatever you want" implies a new womanhood, an "open Being" that includes

the male form and that “creates form by uniting sensuality and intuitive knowledge” (Veisland 2007: 84). Further, Faunia erases substance by counteracting the stain and its signifiers; by always engaging in direct speech she posits, and wittingly so, a diegesis that, according to Socrates, is the closest approximation to the light of truth. Plato’s light is not a transcendental essence or the *form of forms*. The light is *mind itself* – manifest yet not conceptualized as space and form. That particular form is the *dance* in Roth’s text, vibrantly present as the atomic activity of Heraclitus’ fusion and diffusion, occurring in an inconceivable moment. Faunia’s “Helen of Nothing” continuously erases meaning and concept on its way to the *genuine Third*, a trans-formed form that includes her “contender” in a constant becoming. The elemental force motivating the two protagonists is an Achillean anger powerful enough to annihilate even the stain, itself an elemental imprint on human nature *prior to* the mark.

What is “the stain”? Faunia uses the expression about a crow named Prince at the local animal shelter. The bird was kept in a cage and handfed by humans, after which it was never accepted by its own kind again. Faunia comments:

“That’s what comes of hanging around all his life with people like us. The human stain,” she said, and without revulsion or contempt or condemnation. Not even with sadness. *That’s how it is* – in her own dry way, that is all Faunia was telling the girl feeding the snake; 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. Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It’s in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn’t require a mark. The stain that *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It’s why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It’s insane. What is the quest to purify, if not more impurity? All she was saying about the stain was that it’s inescapable. That, naturally, would be Faunia’s take on it: the inevitably stained creatures that we are. Reconciled to the horrible, elemental imperfection. She’s like the Greeks, like Coleman’s Greeks. Like their gods. They’re petty. They quarrel. They fight. They hate. They murder. They fuck

(Roth 2001: 242).

Zuckerman, the narrator, elaborates quite a bit on Faunia’s simple statement, and there is a good reason for that. Being impotent after a prostate cancer operation, Zuckerman engages in his own fictional “hard drive”: the cited elaboration on the stain, which is his, not Faunia’s. The way towards “Nothing”, or “Helen of Nothing”, the desired feminine, is through an aesthetic and epistemological detour leading, by necessity, through the stain. In the process, the primary fiction, i.e. the “universal hard drive”, conceives of the stain as a primal, vulgar fantasy; the secondary fiction, Coleman’s *Spooks* is only mentioned briefly in conversations with the narrator, then discarded – edited by Zuckerman, of

course, but essentially deleted as we do not know it. The tertiary fiction, the text of *The human stain*, again conceives of the stain in its own way, as a kind of mythologically contrived nadir of desire and possession involving the Greek gods. I would situate the stain on the border of *death*, while invoking Julia Kristeva's comments on *abjection*:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver

(Kristeva 1982: 3).

Death as the complete annihilation of the body becomes, paradoxically perhaps, the precondition for becoming human, becoming a subject. As Thomsen puts it, "...as *inscribed* into the body, death is not posited in contradiction to subjectivity; on the contrary, death posits bodily subjectivity as a temporal passing in space, i.e. as concrete duration" (1985: 60). Zuckerman's own awareness of death and of the termination of desire produces a singular approach to the stain: it becomes moribund desire.

The stain is natural, as death and desire, extracted from the mark and the sign of the natural. As Zuckerman phrases it, the stain precedes disobedience and ethics; as it precedes the sign, language, and concept, I also see it as a natural disorder. The stain is a desire, an instinctual drive whose formlessness is disseminated into the world of phenomena and into language; here it provides the fuel, temporarily and not finally, for order, form and fiction. It is significant that fiction does not abolish or erase formlessness; or in other words, we may not conceive of fiction as a contradiction of the formless; form and formlessness are interwoven, even to the extent that the *amorphē* in-forms the *morphē* in such a manner that there is no dualism, opposition or contradiction. We see this process fully unfolded in the case of the protagonist. It is precisely the polymorphousness and the amorphousness of subjectivity and of the mind that allows Coleman to create himself in the image of the college professor, to re-make himself aesthetically, so to speak. However, as I have noted elsewhere, Coleman's "slide into the 'other'" does not make this "otherness" permanent; it does not turn into "an absolute structural totality" (Weisland 2007: 86). This means that whatever he "is" now may at

any time become what he “was” before: African-American. This process also follows the simple yet paradoxical law of Heraclitus: fusion and diffusion occur simultaneously. A Derridean translation of the process would be the non-originary origin, *différance*. The process is also indicative of a complementarity of Being, form and phenomena that cannot be fixed in an absolute concept. The relation between Coleman and Faunia is best described as hyphenated: they are a being-in-between. There are no absolutes and no oppositions – only grades and degrees, as Nietzsche says in *Beyond good and evil*:

How we have managed from the beginning to cling to our ignorance, in order to enjoy a life of almost inconceivable freedom, thoughtlessness, carelessness, heartiness, cheerfulness – to enjoy life! And only upon this foundation of ignorance, now as firm as granite, could our science be established, and our will to knowledge only upon the foundation of a much more powerful will, the will to no knowledge, to uncertainty, to untruth – not as the opposite of the former will, but rather – as its refinement! For even if *language*, in this case as in others, cannot get past its own unwieldiness and continues to speak of oppositions where there are really only degrees and many fine differences of grade ...

(Nietzsche 1998: 25).

The philosopher further notes that “there are degrees of apparency and, so to speak, lighter and darker shadows of appearance”; he asks “Why should the world *that is relevant to us* not be a fiction? And if someone asks, ‘But musn’t a fiction have an author?’ shouldn’t we answer him bluntly, ‘*Why?*’” (Nietzsche 1998: 35).

Epistemology and aesthetics are cleverly blended to make up a non-dualistic philosophical statement that I find a powerful echo of in Faunia’s reluctance to learn and in Coleman’s aestheticizing of himself; both gestures are the symptoms of what Nietzsche has referred to as the free spirit.

In his preface, Nietzsche poses the question “Assuming that truth is a woman – what then?” (1998: 3). Faunia is a woman who occupies the place of truth – which is one reason why Coleman the scholar is attracted to her; he has an intuition that she might know who he “really” is (or “was”), and it turns out that he is right. He has had that intuition before; when he was young and in love with a blonde from Minnesota, Steena, who did not know he was black because of his light skin color, he stumbled on a single word in a poem she had written to him:

He has a body.
He has a beautiful body –
The muscles on the backs of his legs and the back of his neck.
Also he is bright and bash.
He’s four years older,
But sometimes I feel he is younger.

He is sweet, still, and romantic,
Though he says he is not romantic.

I am almost dangerous for this man.

How much can I tell
Of what I see in him?
I wonder what he does
After he swallows me whole.

Rapidly reading Steena's handwriting by the dim hall light, he at first mistook
"neck" for "negro" – *and the back of his negro ... his negro what?*

(Roth 2001: 112).

Coleman is also puzzled by the line "How much can I tell / of what I see in him?"; he does not understand what is so ambiguous about him, and the meaning of her poem becomes increasingly opaque; he has a growing feeling that she knows the "truth" about him. Another woman acquaintance has an uncanny ability to spot black people who really look white to him:

One evening she takes him around to a tiny Bleeker Street jewelry shop where the white guy who owns it makes beautiful things out of enamel. Just shopping the street, out looking, but when they leave she tells Coleman that the guy is black. "You're wrong," Coleman tells her, "he can't be." "Don't tell me that I'm wrong" – she laughs – "you're blind"

(Roth 2001: 134).

Coleman's blindness extends into his reading of Steena's poem; the poem is a reading of him and *for* him: "I am almost dangerous for this man". The simple statement is baffling because it implies the challenging inclusion of the feminine into the masculine in such a way (a "dangerous" way) that the two do not form a totality but remain open. That is why Steena's poem continues with the question: "How much can I tell / of what I see in him?"; the question is, again, misinterpreted by Coleman who reads it as a potential sign of Steena "knowing the truth" about him. The question, rather, implies the inability of language to reveal and communicate. The subtle grading which follows Nietzsche's edict that there are no oppositions, only degrees, and that there is "no knowledge", submerges race and color under gender and sex, making a powerful case for heterogeneity in both cases; hence the difficulty connected with "reading" people in the street, i.e. determining their race. The poem creates a poetics on a small but still comprehensive scale, culminating in the truly "blinding" question – with no question mark appended – "I wonder what he does / after he swallows me whole." Swallowing her "whole" would imply including the marginal (femininity) into the limited and limiting totality of the masculine; the phrase

also signifies the reading process itself where “swallow” means “read”, which Coleman cannot do since he is “blind”, like Oedipus. Further, the poetics of Steena’s poem consists in conceiving subjectivity, feminine and masculine, as body (and, in connection with body, color, race) subtly blending into form, or rather two forms approximating the *genuine Third* posited by the verb “swallows”. There is an “after” following close behind “swallows”, as stated in the last line, “after he swallows me whole”. This is an open “after” since the Third Form produces a new, further limit, thus procreating subjectivity endlessly. The impetus for this creative activity – which is aesthetic, psychological and epistemological at the same time – is sensuality, poetry, music and the dance. For just like Faunia (Coleman’s last lover) Steena dances to Coleman. Søren Ulrik Thomsen says:

In its capacity as temporality poetry has formalized sound, and this presents an eminent quality and possibility compared to the other genres; for poetry is capable of transcending the dualism of thinking and sensing, a dualism that would split subjectivity into a body without language and a language without body. Poetry as musicality constitutes a unique possibility to establish subjectivity as form, and form as subjective duration

(Thomsen 1985: 61).

Coleman’s “thinking”, initially the object of a dualism and split off from sensuality as he throws himself into a brilliant career at Athena College, fuses with sensuality in the dance performed by Faunia, and before her by Steena. He even dances with the narrator, which is Coleman’s way of enticing Zuckerman into a manner of the sensual, or a sensual practice that would pave the way for narration. The sensual body turned into form is not an “excess”, as Derrida would have it in his comment on the Cartesian Cogito, hybris and hyperbole in *Writing and difference*:

The extent to which doubt and the Cartesian Cogito are *punctuated* by this project of a singular and unprecedented excess – an excess in the direction of the non-terminated, Nothingness or Infinity, an excess which overflows the totality of that which can be thought, the totality of beings and determined meanings, the totality of factual history – is also the extent to which any effort to reduce this project, to enclose it within a determined historical structure, however comprehensive, risks missing the essential, risks dulling the *point* itself

(Derrida 2001: 69).

If there is no opposition and no knowledge, as Nietzsche would have it, there is no totality; hence there can be no excess. The supposed “hybris” of Coleman Silk in his capacity of Dean at Athena College is played with in the text as it enters the classical Greek tradition posited by the narrator and, to some extent, by the protagonist himself, as the governing hermeneutics of the text.

My point is that this hermeneutics is discarded, not by the narrator but by the women characters, especially Faunia and, before her, Steena who “know the truth”. Prompted by Coleman Faunia even admits that she has known all along that he is black and that she does not care. He does not need to escape while being with her; he needs to exist, simply, and that means integrating thinking and sensing.

Classical reason, the Cogito, is indeed “punctuated” in professor Silk’s classroom as he takes roll one day and discovers that two students are absent well into the semester which prompts his question: “Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?” (Roth 2001: 6). As a consequence of this question he is charged with racism. In a meeting with his successor, the new dean, he explains:

I was referring to their possibly ectoplasmic character. Isn’t that obvious? These two students had not attended a single class. That’s all I knew about them. I was using the word in its customary and primary meaning: ‘spook’ as a specter or a ghost. I had no idea what color these two students might be. I had known perhaps fifty years ago but had wholly forgotten that ‘spooks’ is an invidious term sometimes applied to blacks. Otherwise, since I am totally meticulous regarding student sensibilities, I would never have used that word. Consider the context: Do they exist *or* are they spooks? The charge of racism is spurious. It is preposterous

(2001: 6-7).

The passage quoted serves as an example of Coleman’s erudition and sophistication. It also illustrates how education and academic brilliancy is no defense against primal desires, here appearing in the form of communal judgment and, perhaps, as a Freudian slip in the question. We might say that the “absent meaning”, literally the “ghost” of meaning haunts Coleman here, playing a vast joke on him, returning him to the ranks of marginal outsiders. The dissociation of thought from sensing also occurs as the pure negation of thought, e.g. in Faunia’s ex-husband, the Vietnam vet Lester Farley’s conversation with the psychologist after he has run Coleman and Faunia off the road, killing them; the psychologist asks him what he was thinking, to which he replies “No thinking” and “Nothing”; the question as to whether he had a plan prompts the answer “No planning”. The whole conversation is a series of negations designed not to reveal Lester’s ‘secret’ which the veteran describes in a conversation with the narrator out on a lake:

And then there’s numerous springs underneath the lake. The water comes up from underneath, so the water constantly turns over. It cleans itself. And fish have to have clean water to survive and get big and healthy. And this place has all of those ingredients. And they’re all God-made. Nothing man had to do with it. That’s why it’s clean and that’s why I come here. If man has to do with it, stay away from it. That’s

my motto. The motto of a guy with a subconscious mind full of PTSD. Away from man, close to God. So don't you forget to keep this my secret place. The only time a secret gets out, Mr. Zuckerman, is when you tell that secret

(Roth 2001: 360).

The “secret”, in Lester’s version, is that things kept away from human hands stay clean. Lester’s comment links up with Faunia’s statement about the stain; but secrecy is also a potential staining – telling the secret, i.e. narration itself, is stained simply in the telling, in the converting of “nature” to “culture”. Steena’s question “How much can I tell / of what I see in him?” is pertinent here, for only the opacity and the *paradox* of the poem, its revealing yet not revealing, maintains the “secret” of the “neck/Negro” and of the natural processes of desire and of water flowing, becoming fused and diffused at one and the same time, mixing the “clean” with the “stained”, obliterating the nature-culture opposition. Heraclitus’ metaphor is spatial, narration and the body temporal, moribund. The simplicity of Faunia’s and Coleman’s passion is described by Zuckerman in the following:

Who are they now? They are the simplest version possible of themselves. The essence of singularity. Everything painful congealed into passion. They may no longer even regret that things are not otherwise. They are too well entrenched in disgust for that. They are out from under everything ever piled on top of them. Nothing in life tempts them, nothing in life excites them, nothing in life subdues their hatred of life anything like this intimacy. Who are these drastically unlike people, so incongruously allied at seventy-one and thirty-four? They are the disaster to which they are enjoined. To the beat of Tommy Dorsey’s band and the gentle crooning of young Sinatra, dancing their way stark naked into a violent death

(2001: 203).

Even Nietzsche would have liked the description above, and the passage makes explicit the process whereby death is inscribed into the body, making subjectivity into what Thomsen calls “concrete duration” (1985: 60). Roth’s poetics may thus be formulated as a radical integration of thinking and sensing, fusing and diffusing, reflected in the non-chronological narrative, and emerging, ultimately, as a transcendence of the clean-stained opposition. This transcendence is “secret” because it cannot be told, not even by an eloquent Zuckerman.

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