

Abstract

The present study seeks to explore the ways in which Jewish identity is discursively deployed in three novels by Jewish-American writer Philip Roth: *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Human Stain* (2000). Calling upon a framework of philosophical approaches to identity structured around the key terms of otherness, performativity and ethics, culled from theoretical writings by Judith Butler, Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Lévinas, the thesis analyses how writing about Jews in America functions as a political act, initially perhaps against the author's will, and engages the terms of "majority" and "minority." The central topos is that of otherness, viewed as inaccessible and irreducible (Lévinas), but endowed by the characters we will apprehend with powerful fictions, both appealing and repulsive, foci of desire and derision. In relation to our Jewish protagonists, white otherness (Chapter 1), black otherness (Chapter 2) and other Jews (Chapter 3) will be unearthed as crucial sites of imaginative investment which inform the creation of their individual Jewish-American selves. These selves are performed in discourse alternately with and against their discursive precedents, underscoring the aspect of performativity that Butler calls citationality and establishing an intricate dialectical pattern of repetition and opposition.

The first chapter grapples with Jewish-American fictions of whiteness, which involve on the one side an adulation of the mythical WASP as capable of a powerfully straightforward and proactive existence, a mode of being unimpeded by constant questioning and crippling self-reflexion, and on the other side, a punning condescension towards the figure of the dim-witted *Goy*. This stereotyping of whites appropriates the discourse of white superiority, remodelling and questioning it, and paving the way for the discussion, in the following chapter, of Jews as disrupting the binary (black and white) structuring ideology of the American racial imagination. Thus in Chapter 2, a different perspective is introduced: Jewishness is apprehended through blackness, foregrounding the notion of minority and black-Jewish relations. By paying detailed attention to the protagonist of *The Human Stain*, a black passing as a Jew named Coleman Silk, we point to socially enforced aspects of Jewishness in contemporary America. These limitations and drawbacks emerge as ironic because of the duality of Coleman's identity: the accusations made against him on the basis of his assumed Jewish identity would hold no sway over him if he revealed his blackness.

The final chapter sheds further light on the dynamics of Jewish identity in Roth's novels, a dynamics which incorporates all the previously mentioned elements. It identifies the intergenerational boundary as a crucial limit, in the vicinity of which Jewish attitudes, beliefs and longings are re-defined and re-appropriated by the younger generation. Parents, especially fathers, represent a heritage full of ambiguous meaning, which is contentious because highly personal and emotionally charged. The text follows Roth's protagonists in their struggle to find their own way through this labyrinth of significations laying a claim on them, as they self-consciously negotiate, through trial and error, an ethical position which would allow them to uphold their selfhood without trampling otherness.

Key words: America, discourse, ethics, fiction, identity, Jewishness, otherness, performativity, selfhood