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**Textual Identity in Selected Novels by Philip Roth:
Representation, Dissimulation, Creation**

(Textuální identita ve vybraných románech Philipa Rotha: zpodobnění, skrývání a
vytváření identity)

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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

Abstrakt

Záměrem této studie je prozkoumat, jak se židovská identita odráží a rozvíjí v diskurzu tří románů židovsko-amerického spisovatele Philipa Rotha, jmenovitě v *Portnoyově komplexu* (*Portnoy's Complaint*, 1969), *Americké idyle* (*American Pastoral*, 1997) a *Lidské skvrně* (*The Human Stain*, 2000). Její teoretický rámec vychází primárně z filozofických přístupů k problému identity a zakládá se na klíčových pojmech jinakosti, performativity a etiky, jak je formulovali zejména Judith Butler, Paul Ricoeur a Emmanuel Lévinas; částečně se ovšem opírá i o sociologické studie. Práce se zabývá politickým rozměrem literárního ztvárnění identity, v jehož intencích dochází k rozkolísání ustálených definic „většiny“ a „menšiny.“ Autor píšící o Židech v Americe s ním musí počítat, ač třeba zpočátku proti své vůli. Jinakost jako ústřední topos je nahlížena jako nepřístupná a nezredukovatelná (Lévinas), ovšem postavy, jimiž se budeme zabývat, si do ní promítají své vlastní, rozporuplně citově zbarvené představy: střídavě po ní touží a zesměšňují ji. U našich židovských hrdinů tedy postupně odhalíme jinakost bělochů (kapitola 1), černochů (kapitola 2) a dalších Židů (kapitola 3) jako zásadní body, k nimž se upíná jejich představivost, a na něž se tudíž postavy odkazují při utváření své osobnosti v kontextu židovství a Ameriky. Tyto odkazy se odehrávají na půdě diskurzu: buď se oproti předchozím výpovědím vymezují, nebo se s nimi ztotožňují, což odpovídá citačnímu aspektu performativity, jak jej zdůrazňuje Butler, a

poukazuje na dialektický rozměr celého procesu, v němž se složitě proplétají přitakání a opozice.

První kapitola se soustředí na to, jak si američtí Židé představují bílou většinu: na jednu stranu obdivují mytického WASPa, který je podle nich schopen žít a konat přímočaře a nezatěžuje se neustálým tázáním a ochromující sebereflexí; na druhou stranu pak k postavě nahlouplého *góje* chovají blahosklonnou shovívavost, často přiosřenou satirou. Tím, že stereotypizují představitele většiny, si přivlastňují, přetvářejí a zpochybňují diskurz bílé nadřazenosti a narušují tak binární (černo-bílou) ideologii, která strukturuje americkou rasovou představivost. Dané téma je pak rozvinuto v následující kapitole, v níž je celá problematika pojata z jiné perspektivy: židovství zkoumáme skrz afroamerickou identitu a důraz je přenesen na pojem menšiny a černoško-židovské vztahy. Zabýváme se zde protagonistou *Lidské skvrny* Colemanem Silkem, černochem, jenž ovšem valnou část života strávil v předstírané roli Žida. Fakt, že své židovství pouze hraje, dává vyniknout vnějším omezením, která si na židovství vynucuje soudobá americká společnost. Ona omezení a nevýhody v případě jeho podvojně identity nabývají ironického rozměru, neboť na základě svého předstíraného židovství hrdina čelí obviněním, jež by vyzněla naprosto absurdně, kdyby odhalil svůj černošský původ.

Poslední kapitola dále osvětluje mechanismy, jimiž se v Rothových románech ustavuje židovská identita, přičemž právě ony uvádějí do pohybu všechny již zmíněné dílčí složky. Hranice mezi generacemi se zde považuje za zásadní zlom, okolo něhož dochází ke kritickému zhodnocení židovských postojů, názorů a tužeb: mladší generace si je tímto způsobem osahává a osvojuje. Rodiče a především otcové představují rozporuplný odkaz tradice, jehož nejednoznačnost je o to větší, že je nabitý výsostně osobními pocity a významy. Text sleduje Rothovy hrdiny na jejich cestě labyrintem předdefinovaných pojetí židovství, na nichž se ne vždy úspěšně snaží vyvzdorovat si eticky přijatelnou pozici, jež by jim dovolila prosadit sebe sama, aniž by pošlapali cizí jinakost.

Klíčová slova: Amerika, beletrie, diskurz, etika, identita, jinakost, performativita, židovství

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0 Preliminaries

0.1 Note on the text

The text of the thesis consistently uses BrE spelling, except for the quotations, which are left in their original orthography, i.e. most often AmE. Translations are mine, whereas emphases are original unless otherwise stated.

0.2 Abbreviations

The following is a list of abbreviations used for frequently referenced works:

<i>AP</i>	<i>American Pastoral</i>
<i>PC</i>	<i>Portnoy's Complaint</i>
<i>RM&O</i>	<i>Reading Myself and Others</i>
<i>THS</i>	<i>The Human Stain</i>

1 Introduction

1.1 An American writer “who is a Jew”

Were it not for Philip Roth’s Jewish opponents of the 1960s, Jewish identity might not have become such a central issue as it appears from today’s perspective in his impressive body of work. Although initially, the effect of their criticism looked to be quite the opposite at a cursory glance. After the publication of his début short-story and novella collection *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), it seemed as if the indignant reaction of many Jewish individuals and institutions (including the Anti-Defamation League) at first prompted Roth to tone down the Jewish motifs in the two follow-up novels, *Letting Go* (1962) and especially *When She Was Good* (1967), as Timothy L. Parrish remarks in a note to his essay “The End of Identity: Philip Roth’s Jewish *American Pastoral*” (148). Having stated early on in his career “I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew” (qtd. in Parrish, “End of Identity” 131), and counting Dostoevsky and Flaubert among his literary heroes alongside Kafka, Roth clearly surpassed the parochialism of most of pre-World War II Jewish American writing,¹ at least in ambition at a time when he was still to confirm his recently gained spurs. Nevertheless, the upsurge of criticism following in the wake of *Goodbye, Columbus* brought Roth in the midst of a heated argument over Jewish identity, the position of Jews within American society, and crucially, over the responsibilities of a Jewish individual to the whole Jewish community.

Accused of not giving “a balanced portrayal of Jews as we know them” (*RM&O* 155), Roth rebutted that literature does not concern itself with balanced portrayals (*RM&O* 156) and that in telling stories about Jews which might seem morally compromising to some, he was not speaking “for American Jews; ... [but] to them” (*RM&O* 168). In contrast to his detractors, who wanted Jewish American writers to send primarily a reassuring message about Jews as respectable and assimilated to the white majority in the U.S., Roth clearly eyed such an instrumental interpretation of literature with some distaste: “*Madame Bovary* is hardly recognizable as a sociological study ... this does not, however, diminish its brilliance as a novel, as an exploration of *Madame Bovary* herself” (*RM&O*

¹ See General Introduction to the *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*. Of course, there is one notable exception, Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934), which however went unnoticed at the time of its publication and was rediscovered in the 1960s.

155). For someone who cherishes such modernist attitudes which tend to apprehend the literary work of art in isolation,² finding himself in the crossfire of identity politics must indeed have been a depressing encounter with wilful misunderstanding. Roth invoked Ralph Ellison's position as similar: a writer condoned for his artistic capabilities but severely criticized by other members of his ethnic community for hindering rather than advancing their common cause (*RM&O* 166-7).

The comparison is an apt one, even though there remains a lot to be said about the dynamics of the relations between American Jews and African-Americans as both cooperating and competing minorities; this will constitute the background of Chapter 2. In his essay about the then-recently deceased *New York Times* editor Anatole Broyard (a name that will also come up in Chapter 2),³ critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has stated:

So, here is a man who passed for white because he wanted to be a writer and he did not want to be a Negro writer. It is a crass disjunction, but it is not his crassness or his disjunction. His perception is perfectly correct. He *would* have had to be a Negro writer, which is something he did not want to be. ... We give lip service to the idea of *the writer who happens to be black*, but had anyone, in the postwar era, ever seen such a thing?

(qtd. in Shechner 153; second emphasis added)

Roth's predicament looks strikingly alike: how to be a writer who simply happens to be a Jew writing about Jews? Or, more to the point, how to be *read* as such a writer? Regardless of his personal self-conception, the critical reception of his novels is very much a collective endeavour, in the course of which Roth has been conveniently labelled as "Jewish-American." This hyphenated authorship then seems to preclude or at the very least disfavour ethnically neutral readings of the author's works.

In Roth's third novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, the issue of Jewishness apparently resurfaces with a vengeance. However, a look at Roth's essay "In Response to Those Who Have Asked Me: 'How Did You Come to Write That Book, Anyway?'" suggests that it never really left his mind, whatever his actual reasons (if any) might have been to give it less prominence in the two novels following *Goodbye, Columbus*. The essay, published in

² Linda Hutcheon states that modernism has "the notion of the work of art as a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous object deriving its unity from the formal interrelations of its parts" (125); postmodernism, on the other hand, foregrounds the intertextual and political aspects of a text.

³ See p. 36 of this study, "Negotiating Jewishness in the American racial space."

Reading Myself and Others (33-41), sums up the intricate genesis of Alexander Portnoy as a Jewish character and of his story through a series of textual inspirations, abortive attempts and abandoned drafts which went on during the major part of the 1960s. The collection of essays also includes texts, many of them written in response to the accusations of his opponents, in which Roth clarifies his opinions on the representation of Jews in literature, on the role of stereotypes and on the impact imagined Jews may have on the lives of real ones. If a New York rabbi⁴ chastises him for what he perceives as fuelling anti-Semitism by depicting morally ambiguous Jewish characters, Roth retorts that ingratiating self-censorship does even worse service to the cause of being accepted by the white majority (164). If Bellow's and Malamud's Jew most often is the paragon of ethicality, "victimization ... dignified survival ... sanity and renunciation" (229), can Jews also be shown as deeply conflicted personalities coming to terms with selfish yearnings and experiencing the rift between their private and their social selves? Roth believes they can, and we might add that ethics will not only remain a central topic but enter a whole new dimension (see particularly Chapter 3).⁵

This thesis will explore the modes and implications of identifying as a Jew in contemporary America as portrayed in Philip Roth's fiction, namely three novels: *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), and two more recent ones, *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Human Stain* (2000). The protagonists of these novels question, repudiate and reclaim their identity, often trying (and failing) to refashion it in spectacularly radical ways, and always with reference to the conundrums of being a Jew in the contemporary United States. As a consequence, Jewishness stands out as an ever-shifting locus of identification which is either escaped from or escaped to in the course of primarily generational and social conflicts; by tracing the imperfect escapes of the characters, we hope to trace the ways in which Jewish selves are established in these novels. The thesis will try to show how Roth's characters are repeatedly unsettled rather than stabilized by the choices of identification they make, and by their evolutions within the multi-dimensional space of ethnic cultural constructs. In order to facilitate this discussion, we need first to lay a theoretical groundwork of approaches to identity, so as to establish a discourse apt to articulate our investigations, findings and misgivings. We will particularly rely on the work of Paul Ricoeur, Judith Butler and Emmanuel Lévinas.

⁴ Roth does not disclose his name (*RM&O* 160-1).

⁵ See p. 46 of this study, "Redefining ethics."

Apart from their ideas about identity, we will also borrow from Ricoeur and Lévinas a few notions concerning ethics as the discipline which studies the interaction of the Self with the Other, the fundamental encounter that stands at the beginning of all identification. By closely reading relevant passages in the selected novels and cross-referencing our interpretations with a more systematic, though not excessive, philosophical vocabulary we will have adopted, we will try to unearth significant patterns in acts of affirmation or disavowal of Jewish-American identity. To provide context to the resulting characterization of the discourse on Jewishness in Roth's novels, sociological studies about Jews in America will be shortly introduced where appropriate and thereafter occasionally made reference to, thereby complementing the interdisciplinary scope of the work. They will constitute a generalizing way to confront American public discourse about Jewishness and will provide us with abstractions and stereotyping tendencies; otherwise, we ourselves would have to glean these patterns laboriously from a considerable corpus of primary texts, which would constitute a serious impediment to our main endeavour, and would moreover still fail to take into account unrecorded fragments of discourse, which are accessible only to direct witnesses.

1.2 Conceptualizing identity

At the outset of this brief summary of some of the approaches to identity in contemporary Western philosophy, I would like to point out that the writings of the aforementioned philosophers are here treated in a highly selective and necessarily simplifying manner. Some of the complexities left out are merely discursive in origin, stemming from the author's style which echoes the intricate and provisional nature of his or her subject-matter; some might very well prove of utmost importance in a context other than this present study. In other words, the aim is not to provide an exhaustive account of the thinkers' findings, but a provisional framework for speaking about identity which we will occasionally update as need arises.

In his highly-detailed study *Soi-même comme un autre*,⁶ Paul Ricoeur draws a distinction between two basic modes of identity: identity in the specific sense of

⁶ Translated as *Oneself as Another* by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

“sameness,” and ipseity or “selfhood.”⁷ Selfhood consists of upholding the self in time, the trait that enables responsibility and explains why we expect that if someone makes us a promise, they will keep it (140): we expect that the self that vouches for the promise in the present will deliver on it in the future. Sameness, by contrast, can be understood as the contents of identity,⁸ the characteristic qualities that lend instantaneous recognisability to individuals by virtue of the stability of these qualities (141-2), whereas selfhood has no synchronic differentiation because it is a purely temporal structure and therefore it acquires individuality only diachronically. This does not mean that the two are completely discrete, nor for that matter that identity as sameness is unchanging: it is a “sedimented” structure (147), the sedimentation of which can be enacted in a narrative which involves the interaction of both sameness and selfhood.

Ricoeur even sketches a classification of narratives according to which of the two is mainly used to establish characters as bounded entities. The classification might further exemplify the distinction, so let us consider it briefly: it is a continuum ranging from fairy tales, which typically rely on the characters’ sameness to establish them as individualities (the good ones remain good, the bad ones bad), to novels of the *Bildungsroman* type, where a major conversion of the protagonist’s sameness occurs, to modernist stream-of-consciousness narratives which seem to rely much more on selfhood to maintain the characters’ unity. In the present study, the distinction will be particularly useful to discuss cases of conversion, i.e. a complete overhaul of sameness which however does not affect selfhood, such as Coleman Silk’s passing as Jewish in *The Human Stain*.

Let us now nuance the notion of sameness as the predicated content of the self. Ricoeur seems little preoccupied how this supposed content emerges. Where Ricoeur implies that sameness consists of an essence which lends itself to expression, Judith Butler insists that identity is created by performing (see already her early essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”).⁹ The contrast between *expression* and

⁷ For obvious reasons, I will use the latter terms whenever referring specifically to Ricoeur’s concepts, so as not to confuse with “identity” in the general meaning.

⁸ The metaphor is crude and does not do justice to Ricoeur’s (often overly) intricate reasoning, but we hope it will serve its purpose.

⁹ Of course, Butler develops her theory especially in connection to gender, but she also offers insightful analyses of ethnicity (see e.g. Chapter 6 in *Bodies That Matter*, “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge”). In order to be able to benefit from Butler’s theoretical work, we assume that

performing is a crucial one: in signifying, expression points elsewhere, to a pre-established meaning, whereas performance asserts itself as the primary mode of existence of that meaning. Furthermore, Ricoeur is concerned with the ethical perspective of the self deployed in a hypothetical situation at the origins of the social contract where ethical imperatives have not yet been recruited to serve “culturally contingent” meanings (38; Ricoeur uses the phrase to distinguish between ethics as a universal concept and their peculiar instantiation in Biblical faith). In opposition to this, Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter* that this supposed pre-social nature of some structures of thought is only a convenient fiction by which society legitimizes its arbitrary normative decisions in order to perpetuate itself: “Performativity is thus not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always *a reiteration of a norm* or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (12; emphasis added).

In other words, Butler posits individual identity (since we do not need Ricoeur’s distinction now, we may simply call it identity) as a contention between the self and socially imposed meanings. The self can choose which elements of identity it will emphasize and which ones it will downplay, but in order to acquire this desired identity socially, the self must perform it in a socially recognizable way.¹⁰ Thus, it is easier for someone with a body conventionally interpreted as female to claim a woman’s identity; it is easier for someone with dark skin to play the role of an African-American; and it is easier for someone whose identity is already anchored as Jewish in their community to perform themselves as Jewish. It is easier, but *not* required, and the individual performances are crucial in that they tend to renegotiate the boundaries of social meanings, of what it means socially to be a woman, a black person or a Jew. It is also in these terms, as socially recognizable constructs, stable to a point but continually redefined and renegotiated, that identities can be created by actualizing existing material, or dissimulated by manipulating the conventional meanings (e.g. “black person,” “woman” etc.) that society has assigned us prior to our decision and that for some reason we wish to distance ourselves from. These meanings can then be

the power structures regulating the performance of both gender and ethnicity are similar in nature. In doing this, we follow a path already trodden by Karolína Jelínková in her very inspiring thesis *William Faulkner’s Light in August: Constructing Race in the Community* (2006; thesis supervisor: PhDr. Hana Ulmanová, PhD, MA).

¹⁰ Performativity as the site of meaning, of the actualization of meaning, results in a dialectical relationship between repetition and variation.

represented in literature, which thus plays a crucial role in the process of redefinition of those constructs.

Inasmuch as identity choices are driven by desire, encounters of the “I” with significant others (relatives, friends, partners, enemies etc.) have a formative influence on the way it develops. In the process of subjectivation, the other exists always prior to the self, as Butler points out in *Giving an Account of Oneself* in a psychoanalytical vein: “the other is always there, from the start, in the place of where the ego will be” (52); by the same token, she can then quote Jean Laplanche as “posit[ing] a foreign desire as a precondition of ‘one’s own’ desire” (74). Formative experiences of the other provide us with a vocabulary and a guidebook of individuation; within each social group, they give us a blueprint of what is desirable or appropriate for a member of that particular community. In this respect, they are the basis upon which compliance with or revolt against stereotypes will be elaborated by the individual. As attested by Emmanuel Lévinas in *Totalité et infini*,¹¹ the Other, or more precisely “the epiphany of the face [l’*épiphany* du visage]” of the Other (173), also plays an important role in restraining the desire of the Self, in reminding it that alterity is something it cannot genuinely subsume under its totalizing project of self-creation, that there is a transcendent rift between the Self and the Other which cannot be satisfactorily bridged over, and therefore that the desire to be the Other ultimately boils down to frustration.

Lévinas’s ideas will come in useful already in Chapter 1, entitled “Fictions of Whiteness,” which ponders the complicated relationship of Roth’s characters to the white majority, alternatively idealized and envied as the WASPs, and ridiculed as the Goyim. The second chapter, “The Minority Challenge,” will hinge upon an approach to Jews as a minority among other minorities, and especially on the mutual interaction with blacks. The third, Performing Jewishness, will then be centred upon competing notions of what being Jewish and being *accepted as Jewish* requires and entails. The thesis will thus be structured according to three highly distinctive modes of otherness which shape Jewish existence in contemporary America, and with which Philip Roth’s protagonists contend: the dominant otherness of the whites; minority otherness, primarily represented in our study by African-Americans; and finally, other Jews.

¹¹ *Totality and Infinity*.

2 Chapter 1: Fictions of Whiteness

In his study *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*, focussed on “how Jews *negotiated* their place in a complex racial world” (5), Eric L. Goldstein points out that after centuries of living at the margins of European society, “‘apartness’ ... [was] one of the most salient aspects of Jewish identity” (3). What feels like apartness from the inside looks like otherness from the outside, and Jews indeed fit the role described by David Singer as “paradigmatic outsiders” to society (qtd. in *RM&O* 222). As such, Goldstein claims, they have frequently been the site towards which the majority population directed their collective imaginings of issues they felt uncomfortable with, issues that were looming enigmatic and unknown, coupling otherness with otherness. For instance, in interwar America, the Jew emerged as “a focus for discussion and debate ... [over] the features of modernity about which white Americans were ambivalent: business, urban life, intellectuality, self-interest [etc.]” (121). But in Philip Roth’s novels, the mechanism seems to function the other way round as well: the otherness of white Americans has made them a titillating mystery to Jews and a powerful site of continuous imaginative investment on their part, ranging from idolatry to derision.

2.1 The irresistible appeal of WASPness

Seymour “Swede” Levov, the protagonist of *American Pastoral*, was undeniably a sight in suburban Newark where Roth’s narrator Nathan Zuckerman first met him during their childhood in the 1930s. Tall, handsome, sportive and fair-haired, he not only proved wrong the widespread stereotype of Jews as physically ungifted (Goldstein 37), but through his athletic prowess became a hero for the whole of his Jewish community during World War II: “almost like Gentiles (as they imagined Gentiles), our families could forget the way things actually work and make an athletic performance the repository of all their hopes” (*AP* 4). How did the Jewish community become fascinated with a boy who owed his academic achievements to baseball and basketball, those *Goyische* time-wasters, instead of studious application, which was the proper Jewish way to shine?

Roth’s Jews often imagine Gentiles as having a powerfully bland, unselfconscious and contentedly well-rooted way of being. As the majority and as the ones in power, they have adroitly divested the Native Americans of their rights as those-who-were-here-first and conferred these upon themselves, claiming the position to scrutinize and

judge all the latecomers.¹² Under such scrutiny, Jews have developed an attitude which Roth sums up as “What will the goyim think?” (*RM&O* 156), underscored by the resonances with their European history. This hypertrophied self-reflexivity, expressed in the question “Is there anything wrong with us, *according to their rules?*”, is accompanied by a corresponding assumption about the Gentiles as the other: as the ones in power, the Gentiles probably fit the rules they make, so there is no reason for them to question themselves. Jewish self-reflexivity is counterweighed with white self-assurance. While this lack of introspection can be ridiculed, as we will see later,¹³ it is also the locus of an ideal of integration which has been haunting the Jewish American imagination.¹⁴

Swede shows unmistakable signs of this blandness and thus represents to his community the prototype of the American Jew become American, the boy Newark Jews feel confident they could show for inspection to the Gentiles, that is if ever the Gentiles decided to conduct an inspection. Characteristically, Swede’s identity is allegorized by a Gentile narrative, *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, the story of a poor boy who works his way up from menial jobs to league baseball and dies a martyr’s death in the process, sacrificing himself to the cause of baseball (7-9). In Zuckerman’s memories, Swede is the epitome of such single-mindedness: “the contradiction in Jews who want to fit in and want to stand out ... resolved itself in the triumphant spectacle of this Swede ... No striving, no ambivalence, no doubleness” (20).

Years later, in the 1990s, when Zuckerman confronts Swede again in an encounter that will ultimately prompt him to reconstruct the high school idol’s life story, he finds his curiosity disappointed at first, fooled by the self-complacent unconflicted mask that Swede has become accustomed to wear: “I could not decide if that blankness of his was like snow covering something or snow covering nothing” (37). Only this time, the apparent equilibrium has had to be reclaimed at the price of a soul-tearing inner struggle: having lived the American Dream as owner of a glove factory after his father,

¹² From the point of view of one specific group of settlers coming to America in the 17th century, the Puritans, there was an additional religious reason for ostracizing Jews. As Martin Procházka points out in *Lectures on American Literature*, the Puritans disputed the Jewish people’s Biblical epithet of “chosen” and applied it to themselves, comparing their own pilgrimage to the New World to the wandering of the Jews and stressing the type-antitype relationship (27-8).

¹³ See p. 22 of this study, “Lampooning the Goyim.”

¹⁴ According to Goldstein, at the beginning of the twentieth century, many American Jewish community institutions used to organize (and ostentatiously enjoy) blackface minstrel shows in order to emphasize their whiteness and display their degree of integration (67).

Swede awakens into lurid American reality at the end of the sixties as his beloved teenage daughter Merry turns into a leftist terrorist and kills three people. From this point on, he has to reassess painfully all his views on life and happiness, facing what Mark Shechner calls “the foulest circles of hell that Roth can dream up for the unreflective: tormented self-reflection” (143), as his utter disbelief that Merry could do such a thing has to come to terms with the undisputable fact that she did it. This also means that the crippling Jewish self-reflexivity that he seemed to have escaped (a feat for which he was admired) fatally catches up with him.¹⁵ Zuckerman recalls his adult impression of Swede before setting out to learn his story: “[At first, I thought:] He’s all about being looked at. He always was. He is not faking all this virginity. You’re craving depths that don’t exist. This guy is the embodiment of nothing. / I was wrong. Never more mistaken about anyone in my life” (39).

At first glance, Swede’s brother Jerry does not seem to have any qualms about being ruthlessly successful in the WASP way, thus disproving our theory. A wealthy cardiac surgeon, happily divorced three times and taking on a fourth wife, he strikes Nathan, who was one of his few childhood acquaintances for a bewildering moment, as having not at all changed since when he was that “eccentric boy,” except of course his bodily build (61). But Jerry’s blunt manners and conquering voraciousness are too unrefined and ambiguous to be universally socially commendable; he has been a rash misfit from boyhood and fits better the Jewish hustler stereotype, operating in the tradition of business-savvy *Yiddishkeit* brought from overseas (Cowan 232). The shift from entrepreneur to educated professional, especially in the field of medicine as is Jerry’s case, is typical of the latter generations of Jewish immigrants (Cowan 232-6).

For Alexander Portnoy, the foul-mouthed analysand spewing forth scandalous confessions in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, the American component of his hyphenated identity constitutes an idealized refuge of calmness for his embattled self. Harrowed by his childhood and what he understands as its repercussions in his adult life, beset by a burning rage and a desire to tell it all, let it all out,¹⁶ he struggles with the formidable figure of his domineering mother, Sophie, who has poisoned the well of all things Jewish

¹⁵ Bonnie Lyons discusses fatality in Roth’s American trilogy under the appropriate heading “Philip Roth’s American *Tragedies*” (emphasis added).

¹⁶ As Roth remarks, what the novel reads like should not be confused with how it was written. *Portnoy’s Complaint* is painstakingly stylized in order to look like a straightforward confession: “‘naturalness’ happens not to grow on trees” (*RM&O* 219).

with her relentless grip on Alex's private space. A fierce enforcer of dietary laws and of the ban on self-abuse, she even (partly unconsciously) brandishes a knife against her son when she is mad at him (47), echoing Abraham's Biblical gesture against his son Isaac. In his essay "Some New Jewish Stereotypes," discussing recurrent Jewish traits in his students' creative writing assignments, Roth characterizes this variety of the Jewish mother as "[t]he fire that warms but can also burn or asphyxiate" (*RM&O* 142-3) even prior to the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Since in her possessive over-protectiveness, Sophie also vilifies and prohibits quintessentially American activities, Alex endows the rare occasions when he escaped her attentiveness enough to engage in them with unambiguously positive meaning. To wit: baseball is used as a metaphor for being in control, something Alex blatantly lacks (76), eating lobster with his sister's fiancé Morty Feibish is experienced as a thrilling transgression (87), and roaming American plains in a convertible, dreaming about the frontier, feels great in spite of all the safety hazards that the mother stresses it entails (211); even when Alex moves to Israel in a desperate attempt to start anew (292), the life he imagines is strikingly similar to the one the rugged frontiersmen of American mythology led. Significantly, though, those few Jewish activities that are inaccessible to the mother retain a similar tint of undiluted nostalgia to them. The memorable example here is the visit to the male *shvitz* bath, where the otherwise sidelined and unimposing father Jack fleetingly succeeds to reaffirm his authority and for once evince unconditional admiration from his son by virtue of his impressive "*shlong* [that] brings to mind the fire hoses coiled along the corridors at school" (54).

Sophie's daunting omnipresence in her son's private life engenders sexual frustration. We should point out that Alex seems to counterbalance the tight, enclosed relationship with his Jewish mother by orienting his sexual fantasies towards the Gentile woman, the *shiksa* as the Other.¹⁷ A shy teenager, he has had time enough as a boy to fantasize about them before actually *making acquaintance* with any of them, so that it is difficult for him to see past his carefully elaborated and enormously simplifying erotic ideal in his dealings with them. "The real McCoy" of his erotic musings would more appropriately be named "The *unreal* McCoy," because obviously, there exists no such

¹⁷ Roth mentions this in "Some New Jewish Stereotypes" when he analyzes notable similarities between his Jewish students' short stories: "The Jewish women are mothers and sisters. The sexual yearning is for the Other. The dream of the *shiksa* – counterpart to the Gentile dream of the Jewess, often adjectivally described as 'melon-breasted.'" (*RM&O* 143).

person outside his dreams. She is nothing but the emblem of a never-to-be-achieved degree of sexual release, painstakingly crafted out of the *shiksas* teenage Alex used to skate behind stealthily until late at night “on the lake in Irvington Park” and then spy on in their American homes attired for Christmas (160-1). Sexually dominating the *shiksa* then becomes a metaphor for retaliating against an America that crushes his father at work (7) and looks down on, or at least sidewise at, the Jews:

[D]on't tell me we're just as good as anybody else, don't tell me we're Americans just like they are. No, no, these blond-haired Christians are the legitimate residents and owners of this place, and they can pump any song they want into the streets and no one is going to stop them either. O America! ... America is a *shikse*¹⁸ nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!

(164)

In his adult encounters with Gentile women in the flesh, Alex constantly oscillates between the selfish drive to appropriate the other by giving the woman the role of the *shiksa* as he imagines her for the purpose of his gratification, and the ethical reminder that such instrumental use deprives the human other of his/her alterity and thereby defeats his own fantasy of sexually conquering otherness in the same movement that it tries to complete it.¹⁹ The erotic attraction of the ethnic Other is a recurrent motif in Roth's work: like Alexander Portnoy, both Swede Levov and Coleman Silk, the central character of *The Human Stain*, enter life-altering relationships with Gentile women.

Why does Alex not renounce to Jewishness and embrace WASPness, then? Because in spite of everything, he cannot help himself but wonder: “Is this truth I'm delivering, or is it just plain *kvetching*? Or is *kvetching* for people like me a *form* of truth? Regardless, my conscience wishes to make it known, before the beefing begins anew, that *at the time* my boyhood was not this thing I feel so estranged from and resentful of now” (105-6). And even though America may be an irresistible *shiksa*, appropriating her would lead Alex's conflicted Jewish-American self only to an illusion of transcendence.

¹⁸ The orthography of Yiddish words in English often varies; one can find both *shikse* and *shiksa*.

¹⁹ As Lévinas formulated the contradiction in *Totalité et infini*: “In experiencing pleasure, the Other is both one with me and separate from me. ... The point of pleasure is not to restraint, objectify and reify the freedom of the Other, but to leave it unrestrained, not desiring to objectify it in any way. [L'Autre, en la volupté, est moi et séparé de moi. ... Le voluptueux de la volupté, n'est pas la liberté domptée, objectivée, réifiée de l'Autre mais sa liberté indomptée, que je ne désire nullement objectivée.]” (243). Reification is a mode of appropriation of the Other.

2.2 Lamprooning the Goyim

Grappling with WASPness by the desire of either assimilation or conquest, the Jewish imagination stumbles over one issue of prime import: the view of the Jews as the Chosen People. Far from being a remote problem of the Biblical past, coming to terms with this chosenness, working out what it means to you personally, still greatly affects the lives of contemporary American Jews, as Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen tell us in their study *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America*. Presenting the results of a detailed survey of the Jewish American practices of Judaism,²⁰ the authors state: “A good number of our interviewees rejected Jewish claims to unique election outright – and then in the same breath qualified that rejection” (128). Whatever personal signification individual Jews happen to attach to chosenness, it conventionally manifests itself in discourse through an exclusionary aloofness adopted in face of the Gentile world, a distancing whose verbal instantiations range from mild quips to outright disparagement. This is reflected in a myriad of everyday situations, ranging from stereotypical depictions of Gentiles as dumb or coarse (the truly pejorative counterparts of the blandness that Swede’s entourage was fascinated with) to misgivings about intermarriage (Cohen 117-21 and elsewhere), spawning comments which are often irreverent and sarcastic.

For instance, in the already mentioned scene of skating on the frozen lake, Alex simultaneously yearns for the *shiksas* and ridicules the houses they live in, the curtains of which “are embroidered with lace, or ‘fancy’ in some other way that my mother describes derisively as ‘*goyische taste*’” (PC 161). Tackiness indeed appears a fault the Jews are quick being reproachful about; discussing the Hawaiian shirt worn by a WASP guest at her son’s party, Swede’s mother Sylvia qualifies it as she does “everything distasteful to her in wearing apparel: ‘loud,’” and his father Lou produces the following backhanded compliment: “Comes the summer, and these reserved, correct people wear the most incredible costumes. ... Still, I got to hand it to this goy: you have to have guts to wear those pants and those shirts” (AP 334).

²⁰ The survey was directed at “moderately affiliated Jews” (5), which means that the respondents were more religious than Roth’s characters under present scrutiny are; however, chosenness remains a topic with Roth, as documented by ambiguous novelistic contributions to the ongoing controversy around the legitimacy of Israel (novels like *The Counterlife* or *Operation Shylock*). More importantly, the diachronic analysis of sociological data in *The Jew Within* points to a renewed interest in spirituality which has been reintroducing Judaism in the Jewish mainstream since the 1970s (53); Roth generationally belongs to the previous trend of secularization after immigration which culminated in the 1960s (52).

Confronting Christianity, the judgment is even harsher and more indignant. The indictments are not theologically sophisticated, they just point at obvious incongruities accessible to anyone even remotely acquainted with the New Testament. Infuriated, Jack Portnoy compounds his ideas of the *Goyische* lack of common sense with *Goyische* meanness and indignantly raves: “They worship a Jew, do you know that, Alex? ... they took a Jew and turned him into some kind of God after he is already dead, and then – and this is what can make me absolutely crazy – then the dirty bastards turn around afterwards, and who is the first one on their list to persecute?” (PC 43). Similarly, Alex is perplexed by the “little cut-out models of the scene in the manger” on the Gentiles’ lawns at Christmas, a further proof of tawdriness: “How can they possibly *believe* this shit? Not just children but grownups, too, stand around on the snowy lawns smiling down at pieces of wood” (162).

Of course, these condescending puns and witty satirisms stem primarily from discursive habit, and Alex himself bemoans Jewish stupidity right after exploding over the inanity of Christmas: “The idiocy of the Jews all year long, and then the idiocy of the *goyim* on these holidays! What a country! Is it any wonder we’re all of us half nuts?” (162). Roth’s Jews are far from considering themselves perfect, but when they make fun of someone who happens to be a Gentile, they usually refer explicitly to the person’s whiteness, as if it accounted for his/her shortcomings. Even the expression *Goy*, as opposed to Gentile, is reserved for this type of context and apart from the racial categorization, it carries a derogatory semantic overtone; a Jew guilty of the same mistake would be typically characterized as *schlemiel* or “*shvantz*” (PC 148), i.e. an idiot, words which resound with similar exasperation but without racial specification.²¹ The practice could arguably be qualified as racist, since it shares remarkable affinities with the way the word “nigger” came to be used by white Americans, except of course the social setting: as a minority and therefore not dominant in society, American Jews have no history of transgressing from verbal abuse to the equivalent of either pogroms or lynchings.²²

²¹ I am grateful to my supervisor for pointing out to me that there is in fact a *hidden* racial specification in the word *schlemiel*; though obviously not a racial slur, the term comes from Yiddish folklore, which was strictly internal to the community, and therefore *schlemiel* was *de facto* used only of Jews (June 27th, 2011).

²² This does not mean that Gentiles did not *suspect* the Jews of violent predilections, typically for ritual murder, a stereotype depicted in Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer*, which takes place in czarist Russia. The prejudice reached the shores of the New World as well, one famous case being the Leo Frank trial of

As much as contempt for the *Goyim* is in great part a manner of speaking, there are turfs on which the opposition between the two worlds is contemplated in dead earnest. The issue of intermarriage is a particularly contentious one. When Swede decided to marry his first wife Dawn, née Dwyer, a Catholic of Irish American extraction, his father Lou subjected her to a cross-examination the more thorough for the reason that Irish Catholics have an unyielding reputation in religious matters. From the Jewish perspective, the matter is as much of religious as tribal import (Cohen 130-1) and Roth parodies the bargaining between Lou and Dawn about the future children's religious education in a brilliant, fast-paced dialogue stripped of quotation marks and *verba dicendi*. Replying to Dawn's concession that "We'll be what my mother calls once-a-year Catholics," Lou reminds one of Shylock: "IS THAT IT? ONCE A YEAR? (*Claps his hands together.*) LET'S SHAKE ON THAT. ONCE A YEAR. YOU'VE GOT A DEAL!" (AP 397-8).

2.3 Beyond the stereotype

We have amassed a fair amount of stereotypical ways in which Jews imagine Gentiles. It is now time to challenge their authority by taking up a different point of view. The destabilization of stereotypes is an important aspect of stereotyping, because they exist dialectically in society, they are a site of contention and therefore vary in time.²³ So far, virtually no space has been dedicated to Coleman Silk, the protagonist of *The Human Stain*. The reason is that in a way, he performs the role of a blind test²⁴ in our inquiry.

For Coleman is a peculiar kind of Jew. A former Classics professor at Athena College in New England, he was born black, or more precisely "light yellowish ... [with] the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white" (*THS* 15-6); the distinction matters. For reasons that will be dealt with in due time,²⁵ he nevertheless decided to live his adult life as Jewish. Because of this, he oscillates between inner blackness and outer Jewishness, compounding the black and Jewish perspectives and most importantly performing his Jewishness out of a different set of starting criteria than Jews by birth. Moreover, since his is not an open conversion but an act of

1913-15, which also showed how Jews became conflated with Negroes in the Southern imagination as sexual predators (Goldstein 43).

²³ See Butler's discussion in *Bodies That Matter* of how homosexuals appropriate the originally exclusionary and pejorative straight discourse about them for inclusionary purposes (224).

²⁴ A test in which substantial information is withheld from a group of subjects involved in the testing in order to elicit unbiased reactions from them; see the following paragraph.

²⁵ See p. 29 of this study, "Parodying Jewishness."

dissimulation, of passing as Jewish, there are occasions when the assumed Jewish performance is fleetingly disrupted by the inwardly contained black performance which typically surfaces in emotionally charged situations. Therefore, his attitude towards whites accordingly deviates from the Jewish patterns we have established. We used the term “blind test” to refer to the fact that most of the characters who register the disruptions in Coleman’s Jewishness are unaware of his secret, thus guaranteeing that in their reactions, they are not just voicing prejudice, which would be independent of context, but befuddlement at actual discrepancies.

His fate, told again by Nathan Zuckerman who befriends him and later on discovers his secret from his sister, is tragic and ironic: unjustly accused of racism at the college, he loses his wife, his tenure and his social status and devotes the rest of his life to a scandalous affair with illiterate cleaning woman Faunia Farley, until they are both killed in a bogus car accident staged by Faunia’s mentally unhinged former husband Les, a Vietnam vet suffering from PTSD and prone to fits of rage. Having to defend himself against the charges of racism, Coleman of course keenly feels the injustice of it all and tries to defend himself with the help of a lawyer. Having proven helpful once, Nelson Primus however oversteps the line the second time around that Coleman comes to see him, and feeds him too much chiding tinged with overbearing self-satisfaction, to which Coleman reacts: “I never again want to ... see your smug fucking lily-white face” (81).

“Lily-white” echoes both Coleman’s elder brother Walt’s indictment of him over the phone after he got wind of Coleman’s plans to deny his identity (144-5), and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, where the narrator recalls that “[he] was praised by the most lily-white men of the town” (15). If “white” can be intensified, e.g. as “lily-white,” the intensification undermines its claims to being an absolute binary distinction, as the one-drop laws would have it, and foregrounds whiteness as a continuum. It is also slightly sarcastic, because the result of compounding whiteness is again the same whiteness, so it ridicules over-emphatic concerns with racial purity as pleonastic and sterile. This being said, Coleman leaves Primus wondering: “Lily-white? ... Why ‘lily-white?’” (81).

Why indeed? Why not “*Goyische*,” an invective Primus would arguably hardly have wondered at? Because Coleman’s Jewishness is an *assumed* one and underneath it, his insulted blackness is seething with rage. Having striven for years to appear as Jewish, Coleman has to revert back to his original place in the racial nexus in order to vent his anger; otherwise, the insult would not have yielded any catharsis. We thus have

circumstantial evidence for our paradigm of racial slurs, listing “lily-white” along with “Goy” and “nigger.” Seeing how befuddled Primus is by a Jew who calls him lily-white (instead of *Goy*, the reader is tempted to fill in, though Roth does not say it explicitly), we conclude that only “Goy” and “nigger” are conventionally expected to be used by Jews.

As for the fascination with WASPness we have described at length in the first part of the chapter, Coleman is completely immune to it; instead of dreaming up a WASP ideal, he assumed a Jewish self unburdened with phantasmal content, for purely practical purposes. Not that other Jewish characters do not sometimes see through the fiction. When he first moves to his newly bought eighteenth-century colonial mansion in Old Rimrock,²⁶ a small town in Morris County, Swede is mesmerized with William Orcutt, a local architect whose ancestry in the county reaches back to 1774 and includes fighters in the War of Independence (*AP* 305). Jerry’s accusations of his “playing at being [a WASP]” (280) do not prevent Swede from contemplating idyllic images of himself as Johnny Appleseed, striding the country with the self-assurance of one truly at home there (318). But it later turns out that Orcutt is trying to escape the community that Swede is striving so hard to integrate (323) and Swede uncovers the profound “dissatisfaction” (381) hidden under the mask of affirmative unselfconscious WASPness, earlier described as “[t]he comfort taken by Bill Orcutt in being Bill Orcutt” (359), that Orcutt sports in front of the world.

2.4 The essence of whiteness: a simplifying abstraction

We have been investigating whiteness as a powerful site of imaginative investment on the part of Philip Roth’s Jewish characters. The fictions they entertain about whiteness play a non-negligible role in their satisfaction, or potential lack thereof, at being Jews. For in spite of all its positive connotations of superiority, apartness also nurtures a feeling of being out of place in one’s country of origin, America. This is in great part due to the fact that well-rootedness in the U.S. seems tightly interwoven with the narrative of arrival to the New World, still acutely present in the minds of the newer immigrants, of whom Roth’s protagonists, born in the 1920s or 1930s, are the children and grandchildren. They and their families attribute a cluster of dominant qualities such

²⁶ The paragon of such country abodes dating back to the days of the American Revolution would be Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello.

as blandness or self-confidence to those who can trace their arrival further back, into America's colonial past, precisely by virtue of this temporal precedence.

However, at closer inspection, this attribution reveals itself to be a *non sequitur*. It stems from an essentialist approach to identity: if one looks at the attributes of whiteness as an expression of the essence of Gentiles, one presupposes a direct relationship between how they act (i.e. assertively) and what they are (i.e. the first settlers to come to America). If we invert the perspective, Gentiles lose the one-dimensional forcefulness Jews invest them with, as we have seen in the case of William Orcutt; alternatively, we can remark that a black passing for a Jew like Coleman Silk does not share these same preconceptions, further invalidating their claims to corresponding to the one essence of whiteness. This should lead us to rethink essentialist identity as a simplifying abstraction and look at the problem from the point of view of performativity, which enables us to account for the discrepancies enumerated above. If we reinterpret blandness and assertiveness merely as ways to perform whiteness,²⁷ not expressions of an essence of whiteness, we can then link these manifestations to the position of power the Gentiles occupy in American society rather than to a myth of them as the Pilgrim or Founding Fathers. While the essentialist abstraction conceals the arbitrary nature of white dominance by rationalizing it through a temporal precedence of arrival to America, performativity discloses this arbitrariness by stressing that whiteness is just a construct in public discourse. In joining this discourse, Roth summons the construct and then subverts it by portraying characters who entertain ambiguous attitudes towards it, attitudes other than those of the Gentiles themselves and specifically Jewish in both their admiring and scornful modalities.

²⁷ Or indeed, as ways of endowing a performance of whiteness with meaning: after all, these characteristics are uttered by the Jews who contemplate the Gentiles, not the Gentiles themselves.

3 Chapter 2: The Minority Challenge

The history of the relationship between African-Americans and American Jews is an eminently convoluted one. As assimilationism gave way to multiculturalism, the one-time rival contenders for acceptance in the majority society have transformed into competitors in the race for race, for the status of the prime minority challenger of the racist American society. America has had immense difficulties in the past when trying to apprehend its social landscape through a raster other or more refined than black and white, which is its trademark structuring ideology (Goldstein 3). This is well-documented on the position of Jews, who have drifted back and forth between the categories. An example of this confusion can be found in the conflicting attitudes of Southern white supremacists: while minister Arthur T. Abernethy wrote in 1910 a full-scale study drawing disparaging parallels between Jews and blacks, *The Jew a Negro* (Goldstein 43), Thomas Dixon published racist novels which portrayed the Jews as part of the white race (Goldstein 46).

Jews themselves have always tended to refuse identification with the blacks; when in an article in 1906 Booker T. Washington drew a parallel between the injustice of lynching and pogroms, a local Jewish paper refused it flatly on grounds that blacks actually are carnal and violent, whereas Jews are only “thought to be too acquisitive” (Goldstein 55). However, conscious of their own history of persecution, they have also tended to advocate the black cause or at least accept it, the more so once they acquired a surer and more confident footing during World War II. Goldstein explains that the war effort bound the nation together and the army participated in reinterpreting ethnic differences as much less problematic religious differences, putting alongside Protestant, Catholic and Jewish chaplains. Significantly, though, black ethnicity was excluded from this process of levelling and African-American soldiers had their own black chaplain and separate services (206-7).

After the War, Jews start getting a vote in what counts as American, so they give their ethnic liberalism, which originally stems from their own experience, a new, star-spangled coat of paint: “[a] new civic discourse [emerged], which allowed the Jews to speak with the authority of full Americans while also condemning all forms of racial discrimination as ‘un-American’ and antidemocratic” (Goldstein 196). But the impending Civil Rights Movement will soon refuse the outstretched arm as condescension: as the Jewish paper had distanced itself from Washington’s claims of affinity, James Baldwin,

Harold Cruse and many others now in turn disavow the Jews (Goldstein 218).²⁸ Such is the complicated background to Coleman Silk's decision to stop appearing socially as black and recast himself as Jewish.

3.1 Parodying Jewishness

We said in the preceding chapter that Coleman was born black. It would have been better to say that he was born with good predispositions for performing blackness: his physical features readily allowed such an interpretation and his life narrative and credentials were constructed as part of a black community from the outset. In other words, the black community was ready to authenticate his claims to black identity because it had solid grounds to do so, and this is what established him as black, though Coleman never really reflected his blackness until college, when he was first "called a nigger" (*THS* 102), and then only as a burdensome and constraining over-specification of his identity which he set out to get rid of. Luckily, his looks also enable him to perform as white, to pass as white; or, as he ultimately decides, as a Jew. To ensure success, he has to sever bonds with his preceding community (disowning his mother, he is in turn fiercely disowned by his brother [145]) and establish his new credentials as a Jew: marry a Jewish wife, have white children with her, reinvent family history.

In doing this, Coleman performs a parody of Jewishness, in the postmodern sense that Linda Hutcheon gives to the word parody: an act not primarily of ridiculing but of recontextualization (26).²⁹ Jewishness is superimposed on blackness, but it does not completely recover it or replace it; instead, the two continue to influence one another in an interaction made obscure by dramatic irony: most of the characters are not aware of the duality, but like the lawyer Primus, they are at a loss to account for Coleman's

²⁸ Of course, the view detailed here is highly selective and simplifying; we aimed to present an overview, not an in-depth discussion, which is also why, aiming for consistency, we dared base the account primarily on a single source, Eric L. Goldstein's study. However, as this is a contentious issue, we should point out that it is absolutely not our intention to lay any blame for the failure to co-operate at either the African-Americans' or the Jews' hands: this argument is outside the scope of this study. As anthologies like *Struggles in the Promised Land*, jointly edited by Jack Salzman and Cornel West, suggest, recent black-Jewish relations have been spoiled by hateful nationalism and cowardly opportunism on both sides. For instance, in his contribution, Cornel West makes a convincing indictment of the "double standards" of his Jewish antagonists: according to these spokesmen, he "must denounce, isolate, and make no contact with xenophobic Black nationalists, but certain progressive Jewish intellectuals have no duty to identify and criticize Negrophobic sentiments of their neoliberal or progressive friends" (415). This shows that cooperation and dialogue have not been hindered exclusively by blacks, as one might mistakenly have inferred our meaning to be from our streamlined introduction into the problem.

²⁹ For Hutcheon, this recontextualization reaches primarily across time; in our case, it transcends race boundaries.

behaviour during the scandal solely with the facts they know, instinctively confirming the composite nature of Coleman's performance. Can we then call Coleman's passing simply a conversion, in the sense that Ricoeur uses the term?

According to Ricoeur, conversion is a change of identity which utterly replaces the sameness of the self with a different sameness while leaving its selfhood intact;³⁰ but Coleman clearly insists on the duality of his self, which he interprets as a separation of the inner core and outer crust, performed and maintained by the powerful "raw I" (108) which is not bound by the straitjackets imposed by either majority or minority: "You can't let the big they [the majority] impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they [the minority] become a we and impose its ethics on you. ... Singularity. ... Self-knowledge but *concealed*. What is as powerful as that?" (108). Coleman's sameness does not exist as a holistic object in a vacuum, in which case it would arguably be possible to replace it completely with another one; instead, it is a layered structure firmly anchored both in history and society. Precisely in reaction to his personal history and his place in society, Coleman decides to add artificially another layer to his sameness in order to free himself of some of the constraints that he feels are holding him back. His act is not an indifferent switching of the content of identity, but a manoeuvre which, as part of the politics of the self, aims to re-deploy his identity in a different narrative, partly acting *as if* the switching indeed was a complete conversion in order to alienate and thus excise his former black family, and partly pretending that there never was any conversion at all for the sake of the Jewish family he founds. Both these extreme attitudes to the shift of sameness are fictions which the self finds politically useful in order to negotiate its place in society.

Coleman's parody of Jewishness can be exemplified on the details of his circumcision, which also further undermine the straightforwardness of the conversion. Following a real conversion to Judaism, an adult man is usually circumcised, but as Brett Ashley Kaplan remarks in "Reading Race and the Conundrums of Reconciliation in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," Coleman's mother had his foreskin removed already as a baby. Kaplan explains that in pre-World War II America, circumcision was a "middle-class marker" connected with standards of hygiene (183), of which the mother was probably aware as a hospital nurse. If anything, Coleman's circumcision was thus originally a

³⁰ For the definition of this distinction, refer to p. 13 of this study, "Conceptualizing identity."

correlate of the family's social aspirations, together with his father's emphasis on education and accurate language (*THS* 92-3). However, when later designedly placed in the context of Jewishness, the modification of Coleman's penis opens itself to possible reinterpretation as a marker of ethnic or religious belonging.

Nonetheless, Jewishness becomes more than social convenience for Coleman as society finds flaws in the seemingly flawless project of self-creation and self-dissimulation of his "raw I," and unwittingly discovers ways to re-engage the self he thought he had succeeded in rendering independent. The accusation of racial slander which initiates his downfall makes him furious not only because it is blatantly false, but also because it wrenches from him the control he thought he had established over his life in his carefully elaborated position of black passing as Jew. His initial reaction is extremely indignant and he tries to reclaim the self-shaping rights that he feels were taken from him by writing a book called *Spooks* about the incident from his perspective, narrativizing what according to him is the true account of the events. But on reading the first draft, Coleman decides to drop the whole enterprise; he moves beyond the youthful self-deceiving conviction that he was able to fool the others about himself as he pleased, and admits that he might have fooled them simply because they let themselves be fooled. To Zuckerman he says "Who will believe it [the story]? I hardly believe it myself any longer" (19), a prescient remark since later on, some of the minor characters tell their own "true" accounts of his racist scandal, as many variations on *Spooks* ("Everybody was writing *Spooks* now" [291]) which win over Coleman's narrative not by virtue of their accuracy, but by virtue of being condoned by the community: "Even if you demonstrate something's a lie, in a place like Athena, once it's out there, it stays" (294).

Coleman then tries to retreat into the total privacy of a love affair with Faunia, but even there, he is reached by the unforeseen consequences, in the person of Faunia's jealous ex-husband, of what he publicly made his identity to be. When Les Farley insults him, he insults him as a Jew as well as the lover of his former wife: "There weren't too many kikes³¹ in Vietnam, not that he can remember. They were too busy getting their degrees. Jew bastard. ... She goes down on *him*? Jesus Christ. Vomit, man" (70). Les also

³¹ As Goldstein mentions, *kike* was originally a derogatory expression for Jews of Eastern European origin used by well-established Jewish families of German origin who had immigrated to America earlier in the 19th century, and who were afraid that the newcomers, poor and shtetl-bred as they were, would spoil their respectable and unproblematic reputation; one of the possible etymologies traces the term back to Eastern European names which often ended in -ki (127). Goldstein adds that by the 1920s, it had become common among non-Jews.

hates him as a Jew and eventually “kill[s him] as a Jew” (325); the irony is biting: fake Jewishness once liberated him, and anti-Semitism flared up the brutality that cost him his life. Butler aptly summarizes the limited agency of acts of self-constitution which implies the possibility of such ironies: “As much as it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also *impossible to sustain that kind of mastery* over the trajectory of those categories *within discourse*” (*Bodies* 227; emphasis added). One who like Coleman takes “pleasure in overstepping boundaries” (*THS* 31) must realize that boundaries can also overstep *him*, and hold him accountable for an overstepping he never actually made.

3.2 Racism as a discursive placeholder

The efforts of African-Americans since the 1960s to recast Jews as part of the white racist machinery in power contribute to Coleman’s downfall: posing as a Jew does not help anymore against charges of racism. It is perhaps even worse, because in starting their own political agenda, the blacks have had to distance themselves even more loudly from the patronizing Jews than from the indifferently hostile WASPs. Coleman’s long time colleague and friend, Herb Keble (a proud African-American as opposed to a closet one like Coleman), throws him overboard as soon as he sees that he might work the case politically and conquer some territory for black academia, even though he denies it in his otherwise apologetic eulogy at Coleman’s funeral (*THS* 309-10).³² In the era of political correctness, anti-Semitism and racism have moved beyond being just persecution from the majority: they are now weapons in the political struggle between minorities.³³

However, racism as a controversial theme has also been a point of contention in dialogues between Jews themselves; in Roth’s novels, it is especially one of the axes along which the generational divide is articulated: the children seem to take pride in their greater liberality and use it to delineate their position as distinct from their

³² Zuckerman is wary of Keble’s speech which strives to reintegrate Coleman posthumously among Athena’s worthies while carefully avoiding to challenge the status quo: “Herb Keble was just another one out trying to kosher the record, albeit in a bold, even an interesting way, by taking the guilt upon himself, but the fact remained that he couldn’t act when it mattered, and so I thought, on Coleman’s behalf, Fuck him” (*THS* 312).

³³ When characterizing the purpose of black anti-Semitism, H. L. Gates said that it serves “to bolster the isolationism essential to their identity-driven platforms” (qtd. in Kaplan 184).

parents' one. In *American Pastoral*, Merry, through Rita Cohen, who claims to be her envoy when Merry disappears after the bombing, holds her father guilty of racial indifference compounded by capitalist exploitation (*AP* 135). Similarly, Alexander Portnoy takes a hard line against his mother's custom to make their black cleaning lady eat separately and "on a special glass plate that doesn't absorb her germs":

I will eat with her, Mother, at the same table, *and the same food*. ... But no, no, Mother doesn't get the idea, apparently. Too bizarre, apparently. Eat with the *shvartze*? What could I be talking about? She whispers to me in the hallway, the instant I come in from school, "Wait, the girl will be finished in a few minutes..."
*But I will not treat any human being (outside my family) as inferior!*³⁴

(*PC* 82-3)

Notwithstanding these accusations and fights, racism seems to be in great part a discursive decoy for an animosity which may be lodged elsewhere. The object of the dispute can then be metonymically replaced by any grudge one side invents against the other, because the real point of the dispute is the dialogical act of dispute itself. For instance, in her first open encounter with Swede, Rita starts with a critique of his bourgeois way of life which according to her alienated Merry: "I know what it means to run a plantation. You take good care of your niggers. Of course you do. It's called paternal capitalism. You own 'em, you sleep with 'em ... Lynch 'em only when necessary" (*AP* 135). Here, the use of racism as a discursive device stands out particularly because it is employed partly figuratively, the plantation as a metaphor for Swede's Newark Maid glove factory. When in a latter interview, Rita greets Swede with a perverted travesty of seduction, she acts as if uncovering another source of friction underlying the charges of racism: Merry's exaggerated early teenage dependence on her father which Swede allegedly abused. "Let's f-f-f-fuck, D-d-d-dad" (143): while coaxingly spreading her legs for him, she mimics Merry's stutter and performs a grotesque caricature of her innocent childhood request to "kiss me the way you k-k-kiss umumumother" (89), to which Swede at first playfully replied "N-n-no" (90), but realizing too late that his imitation of her stutter must have been hurtful, he eventually "kissed the stammering mouth with

³⁴ Jewish liberalism is also brought to a comical paroxysm of absurdity in Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall*, where a similar row occurs between the parents of the protagonist, Alvy: Alvy's mother has fired the black cleaning lady because she had been stealing from them, to which his father replies "She is a coloured woman, from Harlem, she has no money! She's got a right to steal from us - after all, who is she gonna steal from if not us?"

the passion that she had been asking him” (91). In saying “underlying,” we do not mean to imply that the oedipal interpretation is truer or closer to the core of the argument, if such a core there is; it just means that Rita constructs this meaning as more obverse or implicit than that of the open argument about exploitation which Merry herself explicitly made while still at home. Indeed, the core of the argument is not really an issue here, since we have said that it can be metonymically replaced.

Swede’s nagging thoughts tend to corroborate this plasticity of the point of contention: even though he is inclined not to believe Rita’s voice to be anything more than a corrupted echo of Merry’s, and does not yield to her temptation, he still “wonder[s] if this strange parental misstep was not the lapse from responsibility for which he paid for the rest of his life. The kiss bore no resemblance to anything serious ... but after the disaster, when he went obsessively searching for the origins of their suffering, it was that anomalous moment ... that he remembered” (91-2). One thing he is sure of is that there is a conflict, but none of its instantiations, be it racism or child abuse, seems completely convincing.

As for Alexander’s case, in his effusive outburst against his mother’s segregating practice, he may call the black maid “the cleaning lady” (PC 82), without any reference to race, and use the slightly derogatory (or at least more emotionally charged, since it is Yiddish) term “*shvartze*” in a free indirect speech attributed to his mother so as to indict her xenophobia, but outside of the parental home, where he does not contend with his progenitors anymore but with the world, his speech betrays a less unambiguous egalitarianism. When The Monkey picks him up as a stranger in the street and takes him on a guided tour of his erotic fantasies about *shiksas* come to life, Alex is both exultant and wary, because he fears she might be the bait of a panderer bent on robbing him. The procurer is, perhaps unsurprisingly, imagined in stereotypically racist terms: “And here he comes, I thought, my *shvartze*, out of the closet, – eyes, teeth, and razor blade flashing! Here comes the headline: ASST HUMAN OPP’Y COMMISH³⁵ FOUND HEADLESS IN GO-GO GIRL’S APT!” (181).

The straightforwardness of the accusations made by the younger generation of Jews is further problematized by the views of people like Swede’s father Lou, the founder of Newark Maid. Commenting on the 1967 race riots in Newark, which miraculously left his

³⁵ The abbreviation stands for Assistant Human Opportunity Commissioner, Alexander’s position within New York bureaucracy.

factory unscathed, Lou may slightly sound like an exponent of the “paternal capitalism” that Rita scorns, but he finds himself defending the African-Americans, if almost in spite of himself:

“ ... I hired 'em, treated them like human beings, kissed Vicky's ass for twenty-five years ... [And today in Florida,] my wonderful friends look up from the paper and they tell me they ought to take the schvartzes and line 'em up and shoot 'em, and I'm the one who has to remind them that's what Hitler did to the Jews. And you know what they tell me, as an answer? 'How can you compare schvartzes to Jews?' ... when I am arguing with these fascist bastards, Seymour ... *I am arguing against what I should be arguing for!*” “Well, sometimes you wind up doing that ... out of conscience.” “*Conscience? Where is theirs, the schvartzes' conscience ... after working for me for twenty-five years?*”

(AP 164-5)

Lou's dilemma brings racism back into focus as the primary issue; it shows that even though minority protection has often been hijacked by Roth's younger Jews in a fight that was as much generational as ideological, tolerance and persecution remain among themes that Jewish Americans feel strongly about, themes which force them to scrutinize their opinions and ethical stance. Roth's depiction of a character named Vicky, a long-time coloured worker who stays in the plant with Swede during the worst period of the riots because “This is mine too. You just own it” (162), perhaps sounds too idyllic, but as a token of an idealized irrecoverable past which Jerry mockingly calls “that outmoded America, that decorous America where a woman had twenty-five pairs of gloves” (277), it is justifiable. It reminds us that Swede's American pastoral was possible only as long as he fashioned his dreams on fictions of WASPness, and his family and black workers in turn accepted his dreams as theirs; once Merry, Dawn and the anonymous employees start dreaming on their own, the pastoral shatters into dust and leaves Swede questioning the models he started with in the first place.

3.3 Negotiating Jewishness in the American racial space

We have unearthed race as one of the sites of contention in a struggle which seems paradigmatic in Philip Roth's works: the complicated negotiations of Jewish identity and commitment in which the younger generation engages in order to delineate anew and on its own the territory of what it means to be Jewish. The younger generation here

referenced is not to be taken as an absolute entity; it always refers relative to a certain point in history, as shown by Alexander's revolt in the 40s, Merry's revolt in the 60s and Coleman's son Mark's revolt in the 80s; the topic will be further developed in the final chapter.³⁶ In emphasizing this contention, Roth strikes a unison with Eisen and Cohen, who in *The Jew Within* have identified the parents as much more problematic role-models of Jewishness than for instance grandparents: children tend to apprehend critically the Jewish practice of their progenitors and often define their own stance against it rather than in keeping with it (43-5; 52-3). Among Roth's more secular Jewish protagonists, the debate is less fraught with religious issues, but this only leads to their own children being prone to reintroduce religiosity in the discussion, be it in the form of Jainism for Merry, or as a resurgence of interest in Judaism for Mark.

In Coleman's case, blackness is the background against which the social implications of Jewishness gain in plasticity, but it is more than just a background: the parodic interactions of both elements bring out the consequences of minority identification for the politics of the self. The space of identity coordinates is an ever-changing, unstable one, and by manipulating it, one must expect as much to be manipulated by it, because it exists in discourse, and as we have seen in the quote from Butler, any control the self exerts over discourse is but provisional. Thus, though Coleman elected Jewishness as a path to the freedom of self and success, it ultimately backfired on him, because the discursive position in which he felt snugly and safely ensconced by virtue of his own wits was, without his being aware of it, unsettled and repositioned by the emergence of a vocal black minority discourse; a discourse which made it possible to articulate political claims that attacked Coleman from a direction he did not even realize he had to guard.

It has become a commonplace in Roth studies to compare Coleman Silk's story with the life of Anatole Broyard, a black book critic and writer who successfully passed for white during his whole life, although Roth has categorically refused Broyard being a source of inspiration.³⁷ The present paper does not intend to take any stance as to whether that may be true or false, a judgment which in my opinion falls beside the point,

³⁶ See p. 39 of this study, "Fathers and sons."

³⁷ In an online interview with Robert Hilferty, Roth has stated: "There was much talk at the time that he was based on a journalist and writer named Anatole Broyard. I knew Anatole slightly, and I didn't know he was black. Eventually there was a *New Yorker* article describing Anatole's life written months and months after I had begun my book. So, no connection."

but the juxtaposition of the two narratives is useful in that it highlights previously unmentioned significant differences in how Jewishness, blackness and whiteness are socially constructed and how they interact. We are now moving beyond Roth's text and interpreting it in the wider context of discourse on race, without implying that the point is at all raised in *The Human Stain*; the fact remains that while Coleman's blackness has no bearing on his children's institutional Jewishness since their mother is Jewish, Broyard's racial identity acts as a switch extinguishing his children's whiteness once disclosed. This ideological discrepancy in the social establishing of ethnic credentials, the maternal line rule versus the one-drop rule, is another indication of how Jewishness transcends the black and white dichotomy of American racial imagination and corroborates the already alluded to uneasiness with which the position of Jews in the racially polarized American society has been contemplated.

4 Chapter 3: Performing Jewishness

In *The Jew Within*, Cohen and Eisen speak about “a postmodern Jewish self” (35) based on a selective mentality which orchestrates the different building blocks of personality that are offered to the self, both Jewish and non-Jewish, according to personal predilection and signification (2; 36-8). The concept can be viewed as an instantiation of one of the distinctions Brian McHale draws between modernism and postmodernism, only simplified and applied specifically to Jews.³⁸ In *Constructing Postmodernism*, McHale distinguishes between epistemology as the dominant mode of modernism and ontology as the dominant mode of postmodernism; or, to be more precise, he argues that such an abstraction, if one-dimensional and normative as abstractions usually are, can be useful in intellectually apprehending the myriad of practices heaped under the label of postmodernism (24).

The distinction is explained thus: the epistemological viewpoint considers that each individual has one self evolving in a common world, and sets out to explore, clarify and decipher this self and this world; by contrast, the ontological viewpoint, associated with postmodernity, holds that one consists of a plurality of selves³⁹ acting in several different worlds (McHale 32-3). The notion may sound slightly schizophrenic or science-fictional, and indeed, science-fiction does provide a framework to thematize it in a literal way,⁴⁰ but it also has a less lurid and more conventional meaning: even though Cohen and Eisen speak of *one* postmodern Jewish self, this self is clearly a multifaceted, fragmented one, continually finding its way through and interacting with many different situations or contexts of life. These contexts form clusters which can be interpreted as interconnected and partly overlapping worlds, in each of which the self establishes a partly independent presence without requiring overall coherence according to an overarching external principle; prohibitions and inclinations become avowedly context-sensitive.

³⁸ McHale calls these distinctions “little narratives” (24), as opposed to metanarratives, in order to emphasize their provisionality and stress that they are used for pragmatic, not ideological purposes.

³⁹ The terminology here differs substantially from Ricoeur’s and the inconsistency may be misleading; if we were claiming the same thing from what this thesis takes to be Ricoeur’s point of view, we would be writing about “a plurality of samenesses” instead of “a plurality of selves.”

⁴⁰ In the chapter “POSTcyberMODERNpunkISM” (225-38), McHale discusses fictional accounts of bionic enhancements and virtual reality as ways to undermine a holistic approach of the self and the world, respectively. These accounts enact the aforementioned plurality literally.

Roth's characters represent both the exultation and the anxiety engendered by the possibility of choosing what one is to be. They grapple with the responsibility entailed by the making of such choices, disclosing a considerateness for the other people affected by these choices which is at odds with the egotistical drive fuelled by selfish desire. Thus, Roth introduces an ethical aspect into his writing: my choices are not only mine, they encroach upon the alterity of my fellow beings, typically by determining in turn the range of choices available to them, especially in the case of children. Performing Jewishness then consists not only of selecting pieces to cite out of previous performances, but also of evaluating and re-evaluating the impact that each choice might have on others.

4.1 Fathers and sons

The heading does not mean to imply that in Roth's fiction, generational conflicts occur only between men; after all, we have already devoted quite some time⁴¹ to Alexander Portnoy's mother and Swede Levov's daughter. Apart from being a convenient paradigm, irrespective of the actual gender roles of the antagonists in its instantiations, the title "Fathers and sons" simply points to the fact that the narrators or reflector characters in these conflicts are overwhelmingly masculine, i.e. even when one of the contenders is female, the perspective adopted is that of her male counterpart. We can document this on a remarkable symmetry between Swede and Merry's story on the one side, and Alex and his mother Sophie's on the other. Both of these narratives stage a parent who gets involved in exaggerated physical intimacy with their child, and an interpretation of this child's subsequent revolt as stemming from this transgression. In the first one, Swede as the father comes up with the surmise which starts to nag him (*AP* 93), whereas in the second one, it is the son Alex who traces his adult frustrations back to his mother's habit to consider their two bodies as a single territory entrusted to her care (*PC* 50-1).

From this remark upon the prevalence of the masculine point of view, we can reintroduce the father-son relationship as spectrally present even in narratives in which the dramatic bulk rests on another theme or conflict. In other words, even if the relationship with the mother or daughter is foregrounded, the relationship to the father

⁴¹ See p. 19 of this study, "The irresistible appeal of WASPness," and p. 33, "Racism as a discursive placeholder."

stands as a significant shaping experience in the background and makes accidental irruptions into the story. In narrating *American Pastoral*, Nathan Zuckerman does not even form part of the central drama because he is telling another man's story, but when he first mentions Swede's father Lou, he slips towards a casual recollection of "the father whose anxieties were shaping my own" (11), i.e. his own father. He then continues with a characteristic of Lou Levov:

[A] father for whom everything is an unshakable duty, for whom there is a right way and a wrong way and nothing in between, a father whose compound of ambitions, biases, and beliefs is so unruffled by careful thinking that he isn't as easy to escape from as he seems. Limited men with limitless energy ... men for whom the most serious thing in life is *to keep going despite everything*. And we were their sons. It was our job to love them.

(11)

Two aspects of this description are crucial. First, the father is depicted as a powerfully ambivalent figure: a daunting personage full of shortcomings, not the least of which is a lack of critical thinking, and yet he is the addressee of an emotional duty conceived of as the responsibility of the son *to* the father. Second, the progression of the personal pronouns is of highest import, because through these pronouns, Zuckerman insinuates his father back into the stream of thought alongside Lou and thus demonstrates that if his father's irruption was accidental, his significance is not. The first sentence ("[A] father...") uses the third person singular to refer, depending on interpretation, either personally to Lou or generically to a type of Jewish fathers; the second sentence ("Limited men...") then definitely shifts to the generic interpretation by adopting the third person plural. In both these accounts, Zuckerman's father is present only potentially, because the generalization stems purely from Lou, but the first person plural of the last two sentences ("we were their sons") brings him back in full force at the moment when the contrapuntal coda to a whole paragraph of paternal stubbornness, a coda enacted by a short and precise flourish postulating the duty of filial love, takes effect.

As an irruption into Swede's story, Zuckerman's father may seem marginal, but we have to remember that we are in fact being told *Zuckerman's* story about Swede. As the narrator, Zuckerman reconstructs *a* story about Swede, not *the* story; reconstructing means constructing anew, not recovering a pre-existent structure, of which the narrator

is very much aware, as is evident from the following remark upon forming opinions about other human beings: “the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion empty of all perception, an astonishing farce of misperception. ... The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living” (35). When he imagines Jerry’s reaction to his text, Zuckerman underscores the speculative ontological status of his narrative and the fact that he is reconciled to his enterprise consisting in “getting Swede wrong,” not right: “‘That’s not my brother,’ he’d tell me, “not in any way. You’ve misrepresented him. My brother couldn’t think like that, didn’t talk like that,’ etc.” (74); from that point of view, the principle of representation itself is misrepresentation.

If we allow that these (mis)representations are at least partly endowed with consistency, that they both quote and modify previous (mis)representations, the irruption of Zuckerman’s father then gains meaning as an underlying discursive precedent to Lou: even though the progression of the excerpt about Jewish fathers is linearized as starting with Lou, then generalizing and only afterwards including Zuckerman’s father, its actual structure is in fact quite the opposite. In terms of sheer temporal succession, Zuckerman first (mis)represents his father, then possibly generalizes, and then, while imagining Swede’s story many years later, informs his (mis)representation of Lou by the discourse which he first patched together to account for his own father, in which process this discourse is of course re-actualized and re-fashioned.

The oblique but undeniably formative influence of the father can also be traced in many aspects of Coleman’s narrative: some elements of Coleman’s identity are superficially associated with his father’s views, but their deeper significances reveal a noticeable drift which renders the reference to the father ironic. Some of these are just playful details; for instance, the father holds great admiration for English as “the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dickens” (*THS* 92) and gives middle names to his three children after characters from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*;⁴² Coleman retains this interest in language, but becomes a Classics professor: as signifiers, language and classics remain present, but they are slightly reoriented from English and Shakespeare towards Greek, Latin and the Antiquity. Other imperfect parallelisms of this kind define

⁴² He chooses Brutus for Coleman.

who Coleman is in contrast to his father: the father believes that Jews are “like Indian scouts, shrewd people showing the outsider his way in, showing the social possibility, showing an intelligent colored family how it might be done” (97), in the light of which Coleman’s decision to pass as Jewish can be viewed as a deliberate and wilful misreading of his father’s position, which takes a step further than Mr Silk ever really advocated.

Coleman’s revolt against his father links him thematically with Rothean Jews even before he decides to pass as one, because it is a struggle for re-appropriation and self-identification rather than pure antagonism. About his motivation, his sister Ernestine remarks: “Was it to get away from Daddy? But by the time he did it, Daddy was dead” (325). Indeed, the father was rather the symbol of two constrictions that made Coleman seethe with rage: first, his ancestry, which he dismisses in a lapidary way (“The hell with that imprisonment” [144]), and second, the precision of language with its strict and uncompromising compartmentalisations. As a child, he was taught by his father to distinguish specific breeds of dogs instead of generically prattling “See the bow-wow” (93), but his choice of passing rests precisely on a discursive practice based on obfuscating boundaries, encouraging ambiguities and skilfully navigating in imprecision.⁴³

4.2 Echoes of the past: Jewish words, Jewish names

We have, with Judith Butler, established performativity as being based on citationality; it is time we paid attention to the lexical peculiarities of the discourse which is being submitted to citation and thereby to a process of resignification. A form of continuity intimately connected with our previous inquiry concerning the father-son paradigm, Jewish words (either Yiddish or Hebrew) and Jewish names form part of a tradition which can be as meaningful as it can be burdensome to those who struggle to establish their own way of performing Jewishness.

In Roth’s fiction, Yiddish vocabulary appears as isolated words or phrases, disruptions of an English which is not broken anymore, unlike the language of the first

⁴³ Characteristically, his son Mark rebels in turn against this imprecision. The story which Coleman invented for his wife Iris and his children places his ancestry vaguely somewhere in Russia, the exact location having fallen victim to “a general Jewish geographical amnesia” (*THS* 176), which he conveniently invokes. Only Mark is dissatisfied and requires precision, detail and clarification, running counter his father’s strategy: “Russia is gigantic, Dad. *Where* in Russia?” (176). Coleman uprooted himself in order to become free, while Mark establishes his freedom by trying to rediscover his roots: two antithetical strategies are used to attain the same goal. This suggests that like racism, roots are a discursive placeholder rather than the core of the argument in the generational struggle for self-assertion.

immigrants. Among the protagonists of the three novels under scrutiny, it is consistently used only by Alexander Portnoy. There may be several reasons for that: first, the narrative is stylized as confessional, which favours employing a recognizable idiolect for the narrator; by contrast, the two other novels are narrated with more restraint and distance by a narrator who is only tangentially implicated in the story, and tends to restrict stylistically marked expressions to the direct or free indirect speech of specific characters. This is particularly salient in *American Pastoral*, where Yiddish words are nearly absent, except for certain passages where Lou Levov speaks or thinks (*AP* 332-3), whereas Swede can hardly find a place for Jewish quaintness in his dream of assimilation. For Yiddish words are emotionally charged, both positively, as they carry an evocative sentimental value, which in relation to literature Roth derisively characterizes as the “kick that comes of seeing the words ‘kugel’ and ‘latkes’ in print” (*RM&O* 141), and negatively, which is more important in the present discussion.

We have seen in the first chapter that they often replace native English invectives, and how this affects Coleman’s performance of Jewishness: when irate, the insult he opts for is “lily-white” instead of “*Goyische*,” because the latter’s emotional value was not allowed firmly to take root in his assumed Jewish identity. Accordingly, most of *The Human Stain* is significantly devoid of Yiddish words, apart from the memorable scene where Zuckerman loosens his composure as a narrator at Coleman’s funeral and inwardly accuses the conciliatory eulogist of “trying to *kosher* the record” now that it is too late (*THS* 312; emphasis added).⁴⁴

Yiddish words in *Portnoy’s Complaint* are undoubtedly mined for their burlesque, exuberant potential, but the expressivity and emotional investment they involve carry a meaning beyond that. Alex’s Yiddish lexicon is not restricted to the commonplace *Goy* or *meshuga*,⁴⁵ he also repeatedly utters words connected with food and bodily functions, words which his mother used as well and which are indexes⁴⁶ of her incursions into her son’s privacy. In order for Alex to regain control over his body, a control also questioned by a rebellious testicle that refuses to descend (*PC* 43), and re-establish the perimeter of intimacy, he has to reclaim these words as his own by including them into the discourse

⁴⁴ The scene is important because it enacts one of Roth’s greatest themes, which is indignation: the ultimately futile revolt of the intelligent mind against the absurdity of reality, but also against the crippling limits of intelligence itself. As one of Roth’s greatest achievements and contributions as a writer, the topic would deserve a separate study.

⁴⁵ Incidentally, both these Yiddish words originally come from Hebrew.

⁴⁶ In C. S. Peirce’s sense of indexes as signs metonymically related to what they stand for.

by which he performs his revolt and his refusal of the mother's stifling prohibitions. When he ends up vomiting following a multilateral sexual escapade, he jeeringly invokes his mother's commendation, in her own partly Yiddish terms, because he knows she would consider the mishap as proving right her notions of a healthy life: "Then I got up, went into the bathroom, and, you'll be happy to know, regurgitated my dinner. My *kishkas*, Mother – threw them right up into the toilet bowl. Isn't that a good boy?" (155). The only occasion in which a whole Yiddish phrase appears is when he laments the short-circuiting effect an erection has on rationality; the groan "*Ven der putz shteht!*" (148) is an echo of Sophie's disapproval of what she views as bodily imperfections. Conversely, for Swede, Yiddish expressions are not emblematic of a decisive contention between him and his father, which may be another reason why he does not adopt them: he does not feel the need to appropriate them and master their bullying accusations.

The peculiar tension between loss and resurgence of linguistic heritage is tellingly reflected in the onomastic domain, where the generational dynamics were further complicated by interventions of the American bureaucracy. The practice of Americanizing the names of immigrants upon their arrival on Ellis Island constitutes an outsider's incursion into private or tribal continuity and thus becomes another strategy waiting to be reclaimed from its inventor, the white majority, and endowed with personal significance through active use, not just passive sustainment thereof.⁴⁷ Of course, the protagonists rarely adopt the project boldly and unquestioningly enough for it to unfold unproblematically, and when they do, they encounter or realize the impediments later on. Such ingrained hesitancy is at the source of the admiration for bland and conquering WASPness, and characterizes Jewish performativity in Roth's work.

Alexander dreams of reversing the strategy: instead of giving himself a less Jewish-sounding new name, he invents an utterly non-Jewish antecedent to alleviate his fear of Gentile prejudice. He privately composes an introductory speech for the skating *shikas*:

⁴⁷ As Mary Antin points out in her autobiography *The Promised Land*, Jewish immigrants often also willingly renamed themselves; but this was false willingness, adopted under pressure from the white majority and little different from institutional renaming: "With our despised immigrant clothing we shed also our impossible Hebrew names. A committee of our friends, several years ahead of us in American experience, put their heads together and concocted American names for us all. Those of our real names that had no pleasing American equivalents they ruthlessly discarded, content if they retained the initials" (187-8).

“Portnoy, yes, it’s an old French name, a corruption of *porte noir*,⁴⁸ meaning black door or gate. Apparently in the Middle Ages in France the door to our family manor was painted...’ et cetera and so forth” (*PC* 167-8), but he renounces to the endeavour almost immediately because he is afraid his nose, his “shnoz” (168) as he calls it, would give him away as Jewish anyway. In *American Pastoral*, Swede Levov experiences renaming firsthand during his boot camp training in World War II: as instructors yelled their orders at him, only two protracted vowels, “Ee-oh” (210), remained out of his family name. However, in the army, name corruption acted democratically along with other kinds of abuse (“[they] called us [i.e., all of us] all kinds of names” [210]), as an equalizing and truly integrating force, which in retrospect allows Swede to refer to “[b]eing a marine ... [as] the best experience I ever had in my life” (210).

As to his very nickname, Swede, it lays claim to a fair-haired, Viking, almost Aryan heritage (*AP* 3), but in this case, the seemingly straightforward metaphorical signification is undermined by the intertextual associations of the sobriquet: “the Swede,” a character from Stephen Crane’s short story “The Blue Hotel,” is an archetypal stranger newly arrived in a frontier community and deeply uncomfortable with not belonging there. Perhaps most importantly, even though the narrator consistently refers to him as the Swede, the name is attributed on the basis of outward physical resemblance only;⁴⁹ one of the other characters uncompromisingly rules that “[h]e ain’t no Swede” (774). For our scrutiny of Swede Levov, the allusion further stakes out the difference between looking like a Gentile and *being* one.

Coleman’s predicament is exactly the opposite: he approaches the Jewish community as a disguised outsider and wants to anchor suitably and conformingly (though vaguely) his Jewishness, not destabilize it. Therefore, he claims that Silk is “an Ellis Island attenuation of Silberzweig, imposed on his father by a charitable customs official” (*THS* 130). The irony is that even though on the surface, this looks like an unchallenging acceptance of the enforced renaming, the underlying purport of the claim is still to re-appropriate the strategy, because Coleman refers to *a renaming that never happened*. He does not accept a real renaming: what he does is to invent a fictional renaming, relying on the general awareness of the Ellis Island practice and

⁴⁸ Sic; “porte” is a feminine noun and French adjectives agree in gender, therefore: “porte noire.”

⁴⁹ “It was a venerable custom of the country to entitle as Swedes all light-haired men who spoke with a heavy tongue” (Crane 774).

appropriating it as a building block of his layered and self-engendered identity. The surface dichotomy between acceptance and disavowal of the renaming seems resolved in favour of acceptance, but the resultant narrative is in fact a fiction which in the deeper-lodged dichotomy between acceptance and disavowal of *blackness* sides with disavowal, not acceptance. In terms of how Coleman performs Jewishness, the whole scheme is ultimately another deviance from the practice of Roth's "genuinely" Jewish protagonists, like his surprising choice of racial slurs:⁵⁰ instead of being obsessed with reworking the racial signification of his name like Alexander or Swede, he exhibits the invented link between Silk and Silberzweig as a credential. Notice also that while Alex's abortive Porte-Noir mystification is dismissed as unrealistic, Coleman carries his Silberzweig fiction out; while the former considers his nose too distinctive to be anything else than Jewish, the latter deems the colour of his skin ambiguous enough to allow both black and white identification.

Why does the re-appropriation of renaming matter? If we accept Ricoeur's definition of violence as residing "in the power exerted by one will over another will" (256),⁵¹ the renaming practice is a violent, unethical manipulation of identity⁵² on the part of the white majority. By claiming the right to indulge in this manipulation as well, Roth's Jews challenge the prerogatives the whites arbitrarily reserved for themselves and thereby unsettle their social dominance. This may be one of the implicit reasons why Alexander overwhelmingly refers to his Gentile girlfriends by nicknames which mingle affection with slight contempt: The Pumpkin, The Pilgrim, The Monkey.

4.3 Redefining ethics

In his essay "Imagining Jews," Philip Roth comments on the omnipresent connection made in Saul Bellow's and Bernard Malamud's novels between Jewishness and ethicality; he states that readers have been

⁵⁰ See p. 25 of this study, "Beyond the stereotype."

⁵¹ "[La violence] réside dans le pouvoir exercé sur une volonté par une volonté."

⁵² With reference to the gematria, a hermeneutic method in Judaism working with precise numerical values assigned to individual letters of the Hebrew alphabet, we could argue that in relation to the Jewish tradition, renaming can be perceived as particularly invasive, because truncating the name results in modifying the sum which represents it. Yet, since Roth's concern is primarily with secular American Jews, it would probably be stretching the argument too far, in a territory which belongs rather to Chaim Potok. Zuckerman's comment on a related topic in *The Human Stain* seems striking ("The most irreducible words in any language. One's name. Irreducible and irreplaceable" [282]), but given the context, it may be just a rhetorical flourish.

conditioned ... to associate the sympathetic Jewish hero with ethical Jewhood as opposed to sexual niggerhood, with victimization as opposed to vengeful aggression, with dignified survival rather than euphoric or gloating triumph, with sanity and renunciation as opposed to excessive desire – except the excessive desire to be good and do good.

(*RM&O* 229)

Roth writes against what he perceives to be a tradition of ethical Jewhood, but it is a “writing against” which is very much akin to the sundry practices of re-appropriation we traced among his characters. Rigidly correlating Jewish identity with ethics (or rather morality, as we shall see) is but another stereotype, albeit positive; in fact, it even carries dangerous supremacist undertones, as Roth implies by the opposition between “Jewhood” and “niggerhood,” undertones which run blatantly counter any sustainable notion of ethics. What is more, stereotyping ethics results in stripping it of its value: there is nothing admirable in ethical behaviour if no choice is involved. In order to re-endow Jewish ethicality with meaning, one must allow it the possibility of failure, otherwise it would have no counterpart to define itself against.⁵³

In order to clarify our argument, we will appeal to Ricoeur’s distinction between morality as socially approved legislation, in other words the norm, and ethics as a personal requirement on the self informed by the praxis of communal life; this definition, Ricoeur argues, also means that ethics come before morality (200). Whereas morality stems out of socially sanctioned and codified rules which do not further require self-reflection, self-reflection is an integral part of ethics: unlike morality, whose basic requirement is deontological and thus simply relational (“Does my action satisfy the norm?”), ethics are governed by teleology (“Is this action good?”), a requirement which is ultimately future-oriented and therefore provisional and in need of constant re-definition. Thus, exploring the discrepancies between ethical imperatives and one’s actual behaviour in real-life situations can be seen as an ethical practice in itself, because

⁵³ This is not to say that the contrast is absent from Bellow’s or Malamud’s work, but it is achieved differently. For instance, in Malamud’s *The Assistant*, the ethical Jew is confronted with the unethical Gentile, who ultimately embraces righteousness and becomes Jewish in the process, which again leads us dangerously close to notions of supremacy. In this sense, Roth’s failing Jew escapes the potential supremacist implications of Malamud’s repenting Gentile while creating a similar ethical tension.

it puts the ruthless spontaneity of the self on hold and forces it to perform a backward glance destined to modify its current and future actions (Ricoeur 210).⁵⁴

The misguided conflation of morality and ethics is at the heart of Alexander Portnoy's discontent at being himself. Recall the definition of his ailment given as an epigraph to the novel: "**Portnoy's Complaint** ... A disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature." The obvious interpretation of "ethical and altruistic impulses" is to link them with Alexander's egalitarianism and socialist leanings, but these are attitudes he never really questions, never analyses; they were handed down to him as *moral* maxims pertaining rather to the field of institutionalized ideology (after all, his job as Human Opportunity Commissioner is to enforce equality *bureaucratically*) than independent thought. In Alexander's case, when morals as a system of rules lose their perspective on ethics, they start to operate through fear, be it of his relentless mother ("I get a hot lunch and all the inhibitions thereof" [195]) or of the society's judgment, as documented by his recurrent anxiety over possibly making the headlines in a scandalous story which would hurt his humanist credentials (181; 271; 281).

Those of Alexander's attitudes which are overtly labelled as "ethical" being thus compromised, we have to look elsewhere, examining scenes which are more ambiguous and whose outcome, far from being predetermined, is unsure and laboured. In the Introduction, we have already mentioned Emmanuel Lévinas's concept of the "epiphany of the face" (*Totalité* 173); for Lévinas, this puzzled recoiling of the otherwise conquering Self before the irreducible alterity of the Other constitutes the fundamental experience of ethicality, the origin of all ethical requirements. It is the promise of transcending totality, a concept which in Lévinas refers to the limited and infertile world generated by and for the Self, into infinity, over which the Self can claim no control, which is beyond the Self's potency.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ricoeur calls this the hermeneutical approach to ethics. As with a text, in which "one apprehends the whole through each single part and vice versa [le tout et la partie se comprennent l'un par l'autre]" (210), concrete ethical practice is in constant dialogue with ethical ideals; thus, "interpretation of the self becomes esteem of the self [l'interprétation de soi devient estime de soi]" (211). In this framework, as Ricoeur mentions earlier (190-3; 200), literary fiction can interact with the personal ethics of readers as one of the sub-narratives or sub-texts (one of the "parts") written in a hypothetical (because fictional) mode.

⁵⁵ Since Lévinas writes in the context of the two World Wars and Stalinist Russia, it is understandable why he advocated the ability of the Self to relinquish its potency face to face with the Other as a prime condition of ethicality.

If we scrutinize Alexander's relationships with his *shiksas*, The Pumpkin, The Pilgrim and The Monkey, we realize at once that he repeatedly breaches the boundary established by Lévinas: the nicknames, as instances of renaming, are controversial in themselves, as discussed above.⁵⁶ Commenting on sexual intercourse with them, he ponders whether he cares at all about their whole bodies, let alone their faces as Lévinas urges him to: "I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds ... As though my manifest destiny is to seduce a girl from each of the forty-eight states" (265). In the case of The Monkey, whose love affair with Alexander is given significantly more narrative space than the two others, he cannot help himself but find faults with her, alternately ridiculing and trying to educate her, shape her to correspond to *his* idea of what she should be like; paradoxically, his constant nitpicking is not unlike his mother's attitude towards him.

Yet it is remarkable that Alexander struggles with this penchant of his, and is capable, if fleetingly, to put it on hold. During their holiday in Vermont, he recites "Leda and the Swan" by William Butler Yeats to The Monkey. This may seem as if he is mentoring her again, but she disarms him by taking an initiative which he did not foresee, by understanding the erotic dimension of the poem in a way he would not think of, thereby putting them on equal ground; taking his hand and placing it between her thighs, she exults: "Feel. It made my pussy all wet" (218). When later, she deciphers the innuendo in Yeats's image of "the indifferent beak" while holding Alexander's erect penis in her hand, he memorably exclaims: "Christ, you *are* a marvelous girl!" (220). "Marvellous" is the key word: for once, he consents to be simply fascinated at the display of undiluted alterity in her, without striving to control or modify it, to measure it up to an ideal. To prove that this is no submission to conventional morality, no shift to a sanctimoniously pious adulation of The Monkey, ravenous sex ensues; for a short moment, ethical impulses and sexual longing are no longer in conflict, but in confluence, because Alex abandons the prurient morality bequeathed to him by his mother and approaches ethics as a negotiation in which each person must speak for him or herself. The ambivalence of the scene (ethical yet indecorous) and the provisional nature of the resulting happiness (they inevitably fall apart) further stress that ethics is a site of contention which is shaped by successes and failures alike.

⁵⁶ See p. 44 of this study, "Echoes of the past: Jewish words, Jewish names."

4.4 “Loshon hora” and the responsibility of being Jewish

In the Introduction, we have already tackled the controversy that surrounded the publication of Roth’s first collection of short stories. Roth himself sums up the charges in the following way: “I had informed on the Jews. I had told the Gentiles what apparently it would otherwise have been possible to keep secret from them: that the perils of human nature afflict the members of our minority” (*RM&O* 161); in Orthodox Judaism, this infringement bears the name of “loshon hora,” literally “evil tongue,” and is considered a worse sin than idolatry or murder (Newman 98). The prohibition forbids not so much spreading lies as telling truths which might be possibly harmful to fellow Jews. This seems the main concern of Roth’s then-detractors, who summon the spectre of the six million to prove their point (*RM&O* 162), conceding that in Israel, in front of an all-Jewish audience, Roth’s writing might be “judged exclusively from a literary point of view” (*RM&O* 163).

Roth clearly is not one to condone such prescribed mutism. He brings the struggle for Jewish identity and ethics out into the public domain, offering a literary representation of the continuous cycle of re-evaluation of the ideal and re-adjustment of the praxis, the one informing the other. Without constant self-reflexive re-appropriation of the discourse on Jewishness, the danger is that it might stop being meaningful, lapsing into a frozen stereotype. In *The Human Stain*, Roth, or rather his narrator Zuckerman, indicts the unfortunate strategy sometimes employed by vociferous proponents of political correctness, consisting in an accusation starting with the phrase “everyone knows that”: “*Nobody* knows ... ‘Everyone knows’ is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience ... All that we don’t know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing” (209). His novels can be read as a reminder of this “nobody knows,” strangely reminiscent of Lévinasian alterity: no one, not even the Jews, knows what other Jews are like, we can only marvel at their otherness.

5 Conclusion

“Nobody knows what Jews are like” means that we, the readers and interpreters of Philip Roth’s novels, do not know either, one feels compelled to add. What is more, by uncovering one aspect of their identity, by “getting them wrong”⁵⁷ in one way, we already push them elsewhere by the same movement, so that they are constantly eluding our scrutiny, constantly one step ahead of us. The same applies to self-reflexivity: once Coleman Silk chooses to pass as Jewish, the identity he establishes is anything but that of those who are undesignedly and unselfconsciously Jewish; his identity lies somewhere in the restiveness and dissatisfaction beyond the conscious design of Jewishness. It cannot be reached by intellectual means: “he [Coleman] walked away understanding nothing, knowing he could understand nothing, though with the illusion that he *would* have metaphysically understood something of enormous importance about this stubborn determination of his to become his own man... if only such things were understandable” (*THS* 126). Even if Coleman were able to intellectualize it, he would just push the elusive core further away, defer it once again.

This fundamental otherness of the self seems to be at the origins of the endless spiral of citation, re-appropriation and actualization of previous discourses about the self. We have already quoted Judith Butler who comments on the issue from the ontogenetic perspective: “the other is always there, from the start, in the place of where the ego will be” (*Giving an Account* 52). The structure of this thesis has been therefore subdivided according to three distinct modes of otherness which were deemed significant and formative for the way Philip Roth establishes the Jewish selves of his protagonists: the Gentile world, the black community (and Jewish attitudes towards it) and otherness experienced within the Jewish community itself. Alexander Portnoy and Swede Levov have been our main Jewish protagonists, whereas Coleman Silk’s intricate affiliation with Jewishness and the ironies engendered by his performance thereof have hopefully provided contrast for our findings and refined our view of the peculiarities of Roth’s Jews, though we should be wary when trying to separate what counts as specifically Jewish and what is simply human. When accused of presenting moral defects as if they were Jewish traits, Roth retorted, “Who said [they were]?” Anna Karenina commits adultery with Vronsky ... Who thinks to ask, “Is it a Russian trait?” It is a

⁵⁷ See p. 41 of this study, “Fathers and sons.”

decidedly human possibility" (*RM&O* 152); the argument may in great part be a disclaimer against charges of self-hatred, but the truth is that by splitting hairs and analysing, we often ultimately lose sight of Jewishness, especially Roth's American secular Jewishness, and we are left with practices, actions and attitudes which are ethnically non-specific or at least correspond to the wider cultural framework of the Western civilization.

In a way, this is what Coleman sought to escape in relation to blackness; his aim was not to be Jewish, it was to be racially invisible, unrestricted by identity categories, with which society slavishly correlates the interpretation of everything one does. Once his endeavour founders on the social level because of the "*Spooks*" affair, he retreats into his private self with Faunia where at last Jewish, Gentile or black, old man or young woman, literate janitress or illiterate slut become roles assumed simply for pleasure, not for political purposes. He asks her, "Where did I find you, Voluptas? ... Who are you?", and she replies, "I am whatever you want" (*THS* 234). The beautiful resignation to all "social ways of thinking" (*THS* 229) liberates the self from a deposit of layers of identity which constrained its social being to inescapable pre-defined meanings, the unreasoning stereotypes which take as a rule that when a white professor says "spooks," it must be a racial slur. Conversely, Faunia refuses to give *any* additional meaning to her relationship with Coleman: "I'm dancing in front of you naked with the lights on, and you're naked too, and all the other stuff doesn't matter. It's the simplest thing we've ever done – it's *it*. Don't fuck it up by thinking it's more than this. ... It doesn't *have* to be more than this" (228). Unfortunately for her, such an idyll reveals itself as unsustainable. Firstly because, as we have seen, Les Farley's murderous rage ironically kindled with anti-Semitism pulls them harshly back into social existence, and Coleman's identity and narrative are reclaimed by his children and the Athena community, since he is powerless to prevent them from doing so. Secondly, the hedonism Faunia teaches to Coleman is deeply infused with nihilism, an apocalyptic level-mindedness yielding to the futility of meaning. Indeed, the "quest for significance" may be "ridiculous," as Coleman points out (171), yet it is nonetheless vital and positive; avowedly open-ended, it must continue to weave its way between blind ideology and nihilist resignation.

Therefore, in spite of this alluring nihilism, we have been studying how sundry elements of identity have sedimented into a Rothean discourse of Jewishness, striving to identify recurrent aspects of this discourse and mark them as significant. Whiteness, or

to be more precise WASPness, has struck us as a powerful site of imaginative investment on the part of Roth's Jews. Whites are seen as endowed with a wholesome naïveté which makes them proactive and conquering, a quality both appealing and repulsive to the Jews who entertain this fiction about them and alternately admire and ridicule the characteristics emanating from this interpretation of white otherness. It should be noted here that Gentile characters in turn conjure up their own fictions about Jews; for instance, The Monkey partly hates Alex as the archetypal wily kike, and partly regards him as her potential saviour, hoping that what she thinks to be his typically Jewish instinct for family life (*PC* 183) will exorcise the spectre of parents who were by and large indifferent to her during her childhood. The issue was not systematically treated in the course of this thesis because it seemed to us that these fictions tell us more about those who hold them, i.e. the Gentiles, than about those about whom they are held.⁵⁸

The relationship between the Jewish minority and the African-American minority has served further to map the emplacement of Jewishness in the American racial space, emphasizing that it disrupts the binary black and white model entrenched in the American racial imagination. The role of the analysis of Coleman's twofold identity and of his parody of Jewishness has essentially been to point out that while he thinks he is liberating himself from the straitjacket of blackness, he unwittingly accepts to be bound by different, i.e. Jewish, commitments, with which society will, often unjustly, continue to restrain him, even though the purpose of his affiliation with Jewishness was initially purely instrumental. An inquiry into Jewish attitudes towards blacks and racism has then revealed race issues as a controversial, but also to an extent substitute topic, especially in generational conflicts. In *American Pastoral* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, which are set in the 1960s, egalitarianism is enmeshed with socialism and anti-war activism in a compound illustrative of the revolt of a whole generation of young Americans, not only Jews.

Nonetheless, by challenging the one-dimensional interpretation of the generational conflict as political (in the narrow sense of the word), and by extending the paradigm beyond the 1960s, notably to Coleman's son Mark, we have been able to apprehend the generational rift as a boundary across which attributes of Jewishness are time and again re-defined, re-appropriated and actualized by being cited and simultaneously modified.

⁵⁸ From a different point of view, it could be argued that *Goyische* fantasies about Jews are on the contrary the main subject of this study, since its author is a Gentile himself.

The significance of this boundary is typified by the father-son relationship, which was also invoked in order to point to the prevalence of the male point of view in Roth's novels: although Jewish women are present and they often play crucial roles in the narrative, the narrators or reflector characters are overwhelmingly masculine. When occasionally, a female perspective is adopted and sustained for a few pages, the woman is generally a Gentile (e.g. Faunia [*THS* 164-9] or Dawn Levov [*AP* 178-80]); the side of Jewish experience pertaining to women is perhaps even conspicuously left untackled by Roth, and it has therefore remained mute in this study as well. Jewish women may form an important group of significant others who shape the male Jewish selves, but their otherness remains inaccessible.

Having surveyed how peculiarly Jewish vocabulary gets involved in the cycle of re-appropriation and re-signification, how a new generation of Jews imbues it with their own meanings and connotations, we finally explored the ethical dimension of this search for identity. Our goal was to set a limit to the re-appropriation, because by establishing its identity, the self often encroaches upon the territory of the other. What emerged out of our investigation presents itself as an intricate process of relentless sedimenting on the one hand, and unsettling on the other, of elements of Jewishness, a constant process of self-reflexive inquiry into what it means to be Jewish in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. In contrast to rigid morals, which are vulnerable to falsification, ethics revealed itself as a practice in flux, whose partial failures and successes alike keep it afloat, as long as they are repeatedly put under scrutiny. In the incipit of his essay "Pièces d'identité,"⁵⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas points out that the aforementioned questioning is both the end and the sustainment of Jewish identity:

As soon as one questions Jewish identity, one has already lost it. But it means that one still clings to it, or else one would spare oneself the questioning. The tension between this already and this still delineates a limit on which occidental Jews⁶⁰ venture as tightrope walkers, putting at risk their Jewishness.⁶¹ [S'interroger sur l'identité juive, c'est déjà l'avoir perdue. Mais c'est encore s'y tenir, sans quoi on

⁵⁹ The title of the essay is a pun which does not translate easily into English: in French, "pièces d'identité" can be interpreted either as an idiomatic collocation equivalent to the English "pieces of identification/ID," i.e. identity papers, or as a free combination of words meaning "elements of identity."

⁶⁰ We consider the U.S. as part of the Western civilization, and therefore American Jews as occidental.

⁶¹ The original uses the word "judaïsme," a term which in French covers both Jewishness and Judaism. We choose to translate it as Jewishness, as the English word "Judaism" has a narrower religious signification.

éviterait l'interrogatoire. Entre ce déjà et cet encore, se dessine la limite, tendue comme une corde raide sur laquelle s'aventure et se risque le judaïsme des juifs occidentaux.]

(78)

Philip Roth's brilliant exercises in *loshon hora*, if we choose to call them thus, are an integral part of this perilous search. In the vicinity of the hyphen in Jewish-American, his protagonists perform selves whose internal dynamics would baffle those who would think of them as "just some big-nosed variety of WASP" (PC 101).

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