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Playful Punches, Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: Dialectically Reading The Human Stain

Joe Holroyd

ABSTRACT. This essay explores Roth's skeptical treatment of language-use, ideology and—more broadly—any rigidly stratified modes of thought and behavior in The Human Stain. Jacques Lacan's conception of linguistic structures as inherently psychologically restrictive deepens this analysis, as does his championing of linguistic play. The case is made for a multi-lingual world, in which such activities as boxing and sex are to be valued alongside more conventional languages. The paper concludes by finding, in Roth's work, the same tentative optimism Lacan found in Freud's talking cure.

Philip Roth's writing is characterized by conflict between a desire to champion the individual over societal codes and conventions, and an almost fatalistic sense that these countervailing forces will always overwhelm individual self-determination and self-expression. This conflict often manifests itself in, at the very least, an ambivalence about language itself: as Kasia Boddy expresses it in Boxing, A Cultural History, “For Roth, the very idea of direct and authentic address has always been suspect” (371). This essay will primarily comprise close reading of passages from Roth’s novel The Human Stain, making explicit the connection between language play, identity play, and the fluid, competitive, pugilistic nature of its primary subject, Coleman Silk’s consciousness and self-formation. Likewise, Roth’s fragmented plotting and play with chronology and narrative perspective will be shown to elicit a perpetual expanding and challenging of the critical lens through which his characters and the society
they inhabit are seen. It is possible to go so far as to compare Roth’s skepticism to Jacques Lacan’s concept of language as an invariably restrictive network of systems of power, identity, and relationship designation. This analysis will not constitute a thoroughgoing psychoanalytical reading of the text but will primarily explore Roth’s craft through more conventional devices and categories of novel criticism, its close reading comprising discourse analysis and the theory of the Bildungsroman, as well as a broader humanistic analysis of the theme of boxing. But Lacan’s concepts of “the symbolic order” and “the big Other” from his 1964 seminar—his conception of individual human identity and consciousness, self and social, as being largely determined by something like a linguistic superego, that the self “in so far as we are the subject who thinks . . . depends on the field of the [big] Other, which was there long before we came into the world, and whose circulating structures determine us as subject” (Lacan, Seminar of 1964 246)—will operate as a kind of corollary or extension to the discussion of Roth’s work here.

It must be emphasized that these ideas do not, in my understanding of Lacan—nor, it will be the contention here, for Roth—moot a condition of strict linguistic determinism. According to Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language, which is not to say that it is structured by language in any reductive sense. Indeed, Lacan’s conception of the unconscious is that it comprises only signifiers (word sounds) and not the signified (the concepts to which they refer); thus the unconscious is not identical with language as formulated within the conscious mind. This suggests the case for immersive linguistic play, after the fashion of Lacan’s therapeutic1 model whereby one follows a string of signifiers to the site of a repression, such that one may become an active, shaping agent in this material of which the unconscious is composed. A multilingual model of human communication and expression emerges from this linguistic play, a model where—since signifiers comprise the substance and mechanism of repression—engagement in other languages can be therapeutic, in both escapist and more deeply psychoanalytical senses. Play between subject and object—narratives that evoke simultaneous equivalence and difference in constructions of identity, after the fashion of the mirror stage2—will be shown to be central to the (therapeutic) narrative method here.

Despite Roth’s pervasive skepticism towards direct address and grand narratives, The Human Stain does suggest at least one space, however contingent, in which the ideals of individualism and self-determination within a meritocracy can be enacted: the boxing ring. In the novel, as Boddy and others have argued, boxing functions as an independent mode of self-enactment and expression—an alternative language, then. This language system functions within the broader context of a world of perpetual conflict, of violence, but also a multi-lingual world, in which conflict and violence can sometimes be reframed progressively. The political spirit of this novel also manifests itself in a liberating endorsement of deconstructive and subversive
treatments of categories and forms—from lively narrative digressions and treatments of narrative reliability, through fluent and fluid adoption of different narrative idioms, to the protean approach to violence that can be taken by the masterful boxer, or to social and ethnic identity by the skilled (linguistic) code-switcher. In exploring these playful, perhaps therapeutic engagements with different language modes, Lacan’s notion of play between affectivity and intelligence as central to the therapeutic exploration of (repressed) signifier chains—language—will be a useful supplement to more conventional literary analysis.

This essay will build upon Boddy’s work, attempting to find, particularly within *The Human Stain*, the existence of a progressive narrative towards modes of expression and self-formation akin to Lacan’s statement of 1953 that “The thing must be lost in order to be represented” (qtd. in Dor.). *The Human Stain* certainly makes a case for the subjectivity of personal experience and identity and the inadequacy of various metanarratives—not least an excessively politically correct mode of race and gender discourse—for understanding or expressing personal history and identity; these things must sometimes “be lost” for self and personal integrity to be found. While such crudely ideological grand narratives and language modes are especially subject to scrutiny in Roth’s work, the broader Lacanian critique of language as operating as a flat system—where meaning is transferred between signifiers—is relevant. The alternative of boxing as a playful, performative and/or ritualistic mode of violence will be important here, where boxing can be conceived as a mode of self-expression apart from conventional language use, politically correct or otherwise, and apart from the symbolic order, to give it a Lacanian framing, perhaps even as something more akin to a depth model (of language). Joyce Carol Oates’ seminal *On Boxing* is useful in elucidating these ideas. Boddy’s analysis of contemporary cultural uses of boxing as falling into one of three categories—dialectical, iconographic, and naturalistic—is also of value. Roth’s work occupies particularly the dialectical category, but also engages with the naturalistic, and offers, alongside Oates, a critique of the purely iconographic. *The Human Stain*, in keeping with its place within the American trilogy and, indeed, Roth’s larger oeuvre, is not a simplistic or reactionary celebration of the spirit of self-determining (American) individualism. It also radically questions the individual subject’s capacity to be self-determining in anything but the most finite and contingent of contexts, and thus likewise radically challenges our capacity to *know* another human subject, or indeed, as per Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage, ourselves. Herein the polemic acquires symmetry and evokes a dialectical mode of reading: Roth’s heroes are subject to the same ontological skepticism as the various metanarratives against which they rail. There is certainly something bleak to Roth’s aesthetic here. But this bleakness is not simply that of the classical tragedy with which *The Human Stain* is so intertextually profuse, but rather a more progressive, modern mode of reading tragedy, in keeping with a similarly progressive reading of the violence of boxing.
Finally, the essay will conclude with tentative optimism, in a reframing of Lacan’s championing of “psychoanalysis alone,” around literature such as The Human Stain which, in its play with language, positions itself “At this juncture of nature and culture,” engages with the symbolic order, and through that engagement may be able to “recognize this knot of imaginary servitude [that the symbolic order and the big Other impose and] that [we] must always undo again, or sever” (Lacan, Mirror 445). Linguistic structures are, after the fashion of Lacan’s thought, central to the construction of human identity. Where these are restrictive, repressive, then, linguistic play can be therapeutic, as can engagement in other modes of expression and human interaction, such as boxing and sex, which—as Lacan defines the subconscious—are structured like language without necessarily being identical to language. And in this relative structural proximity, yet simultaneous difference, one can find therapeutic engagement.

**SLIPPING THE PUNCH: THE WILL TO SELF-DETERMINE AND THE SYMBOLIC ORDER**

One context in which the subject is relatively successfully self-determining in The Human Stain is in the passage of Coleman “Silky” Silk (hereafter Silky) from youth into manhood. It is incongruous, and all the more striking for this, in a novel that presents an otherwise factually and chronologically challenging narrative landscape. Our lens keeps widening and/or shifting, through such devices as analepsis, prolepsis, and radically subjective fragments of narrative, often achieved via free indirect discourse. Roth is determined to challenge us, to perpetually show us more of what we did not know: from the revelation regarding Coleman’s race, through the professional and personal insecurities determining Delphine Roux’s vendetta against Professor Silk and the Vietnam war atrocities determining Les Farley’s brutalized character, to Faunia Farley’s radical challenging of narrative reliability (in senses both interpersonal and literary) in the late revelation of her literacy—that her ostensible illiteracy has been a protective fiction, an attempt, it might be said, to achieve distance from the symbolic order. The social stereotypes, labels and pre-designated identities to which individuals may be reduced are perpetually shown to be inadequate to their human complexity in this novel; meaning is never allowed to settle and crystallize. Yet in the midst of all this complexity, the extensive narrative strand of Silky’s coming of age has much of the straightforward, progressive linear apprehensibility of the well-crafted traditional Bildungsroman, however ultimately complicated.

The Bildungsroman genre typically observes the protagonist’s gradual assimilation into society via a process of maturation—reaching a stage of assured maturity whereby he can now act as a mentor himself, reaching out to help others in their struggle to mature and assimilate. In The Human Stain, however, while the progressive dimension of the Bildungsroman form is largely
maintained with regards to the psychological development of its protagonist, the conservative dimension of ultimate assimilation into the societal norm is not. The *Bildungsroman’s* generic structure is eventually playfully complicated and even subverted, not least since Professor Silk’s *mentoring* roles are disparate and of varying success, from the egalitarian mutual-mentoring of the blissfully unassimilated pariahs he enjoys in his sexual relationship with Faunia Farley, to the cruel rejection he receives from his formerly most loyal mentee as his daughter is caught up in the spirit of judgment and censure to which he falls victim. Narrative *play* is of course central to the psychologically progressive mode of this novel. The narrator of *Stain*, Nathan Zuckerman, makes explicit that his construction of its various narratives is largely fictitious, a way of allowing him to play with and so reconcile himself to various personal and societal tensions. Narrative play is thus socially progressive, as it makes sense of the incongruity between, on the one hand, his own impressions of its tragic heroes, such as Coleman, and on the other, their designated social identities, such as the “racist professor.” Narrative play is also personally therapeutic, enabling Zuckerman’s own progression towards psychological health, working through his own depression in compassionate exploration of others.

Within the *Bildungsroman’s* dramatization of the passage into maturity there is, necessarily, a central conflict between the character and society. The revelation of Silky’s ethnicity, of particular significance in the novel’s larger plot, is sneaked almost incidentally into his *Bildungsroman* narrative’s inception, when the weaselly Dr. Fensterman is setting forth his disingenuous, quasi-compassionate case for solidarity between the marginalized peoples of the Jews and the African Americans. His desire is for Silky to drop a grade and thus allow Fensterman’s son to graduate as Valedictorian from their high school class, securing him a place at an elite university—which would not accept an African-American student like Silky anyway. Within the (micro-narrative) *Bildungsroman* of Silky, this is the generically appropriate disclosure, at the narrative’s outset, of the central conflict: he is a high-achieving, seemingly infinitely self-determining autonomous subject, nonetheless constrained within the material reality, the harshly determining conditions, of being an African American in 1940s America.

Dr. Fensterman and his obscene proposal act as an apt segue from the preceding cerebral, impotent, over-qualification of the aggrieved college professor, the retired Professor Coleman Silk, to the assured sensual, playful abandonment to physicality and virility of his younger alter-ego, the boxer, Silky Silk:

*Dr. Fensterman explained* to Mr. and Mrs. Silk that Bert wanted to follow his father into medicine, but that to do so it was essential for him to have a perfect record, and not merely perfect in college but extraordinary going back to kindergarten. *Perhaps the Silks were not aware* of the discriminatory quotas that were designed to keep Jews out of medical school, especially the medical schools at Harvard and Yale, where Dr. and Mrs. Fensterman were confident that, *were* Bert given the opportunity, he *could* emerge as the brightest of the brightest.
Because of the tiny Jewish quotas in most medical schools, Dr. Fensterman had had himself to go down to Alabama for his schooling, and there he’d seen at first hand all that colored people have to strive against. Dr. Fensterman knew that prejudice in academic institutions against colored students was far worse than it was against Jews. He knew the kind of obstacles that the Silks themselves had had to overcome to achieve all that distinguished them as a model Negro family. He knew the tribulations that Mr. Silk had had to endure ever since the optical shop went bankrupt in the Depression. He knew that Mr. Silk was, like himself, a college graduate, and he knew that in working for the railroad as a steward—"That’s what he called a waiter, Coleman, a ‘steward’"—he was employed at a level in no way commensurate with his professional training. Mrs. Silk he of course knew from the hospital. In Dr. Fensterman’s estimation, there was no finer nurse on the hospital staff [. . .] Needless to say, the arrangement would be kept confidential by everyone involved. (Stain 86-87, emphases added)

The string of qualifiers, conditional verbs, and condescending expressions of commonality and empathy comprise a powerful satirical mode in characterizing Dr. Fensterman. Fensterman’s misappropriation of the common voice, indeed, his presumption to speak as an authority of the marginalized, transparent in his crude use of rhetorical ethos and anaphora—"Dr. Fensterman knew . . . He knew . . . He knew . . . He knew"—not only develops a claustrophobic, oppressive, and corrupt environment, so that the reader craves something physical, spontaneous, and youthful from the performative identity of Silky. It also connects with one of the central tropes of the preceding narrative of the persecution and public disgrace of “racist” Professor Coleman Silk: the cause of the marginalized can be misappropriated by the most cynical, self-serving of agencies.

Moreover, the narrative mode itself also elucidates Professor Silk’s own self-admonishment for even participating in such institutionalized, dishonest discourses, however righteous his position. Describing how he now avoids even stepping foot in the college town where he was formerly Dean, for fear of “coming apart and breaking unstoppably into an overly articulate version of the wronged man’s blues,” he also discloses a “weariness with his own barely submerged, easily galvanized bitterness; down in the streets of Athena he now felt [. . .] a greater aversion to himself” (Stain 84). Coleman voices a repulsion from not just the institution that has wronged him, but all such “overly articulate” discourses of victims of such institutions as his own; he even finds his own defensive participation in this undignified discourse deeply unattractive. The forceful, mechanistic diction of “barely submerged, easily galvanized bitterness” connotes the psychologically oppressive power of this discourse; the model of the symbolic order, of language as the chief determinant of self—and repression—is certainly applicable here. But the mode of therapeutic (language) play that Lacan moots is also relevant as Silky’s narrative takes over, after the fashion of Lacan’s notion of “play [where the] substitution of one signifier for another, of a certain place, [whereby] the possibility is created not only for the development of the signifier, but also for the creation of continually new meanings” (Lacan, Formations of the Unconscious 19).
So Lacan’s model is not one of rigid linguistic determinism, and there is hope to be found at least in Professor Silk’s expression of a will to escape, to remove himself from such discourses that torment him so. Fensterman’s narrative, representing the most unattractive end of that spectrum upon which Professor Silk’s own voice currently resides, is, then, an entirely appropriate transition into a different, far more attractive self-narrative in Coleman Silk’s identity: the genesis, perhaps, of the ideals of an earlier Professor Coleman Silk who, we learn as a framing to the whole novel, when first appointed Dean, destroyed all the old inherited hierarchies and nepotisms, and instead established an ethos he could believe in: “In short he brought in competition, he made the place competitive, which, as an early enemy noted, ‘is what Jews do’” (Stain 9).

Fensterman’s narrative ends in one last qualifier, his most overtly obscene in its tacit admission of the furtive, dishonest nature of the proposal—“Needless to say, the arrangement would be kept confidential by everyone involved”—and Silky enacts what the reader has been craving after this narrative claustrophobia: “Coleman broke loose [. . .] and burst away up the street” (Stain 88). The narrative then endorses what is true and worthy in the midst of all Fensterman’s disingenuousness, however cynically employed, as we learn that “the Jews and their kids [. . .] these days loomed larger than anyone in Coleman’s extracurricular life” (Stain 88), and this is certainly one of the emergent socio-cultural observations in the novel: the commonality between these two minorities in America. As Zuckerman observes: “For Coleman’s father, the Jews, even audaciously unsavoury Jews like Dr. Fensterman, were 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” (Stain 97). But the narrative mode we are entering here, beyond this preamble, is not that of qualification—embittered or otherwise—nor that of the detached, cerebral socio-cultural anthropologist. As we slip into a different milieu, the sensual, impulsive world of the young boxer, Silky Silk, the narrative mode transforms with the cast of characters. A hard-boiled directness takes over as we switch into boxing Bildungsroman and learn, in syntax to match the unequivocal narrative immediacy: “Doc Chizner was a dentist who loved boxing” (Stain 88). As always in this expansive novel, there is an endeavor towards socio-demographic balancing of the cast of characters. Having brutally satirized the Jewish Dr. Fensterman, the narrative now shifts into identification and solidarity with another aspect of the group—the Jewish community—from which this low mimetic character has sprung. This is a fine example of Roth’s ongoing project of perpetual qualification and expansion upon socio-demographic observations such that social/racial/gender groups are never treated reductively; the dynamic functioning of the symbolic order is scrutinized: the individual is always, ultimately, privileged over the determining forces and languages of the society, however tragically at times. And, while The Human Stain is, of course, peppered with references to
classical tragedy, I use the term here after the fashion of Arthur Miller’s more socially progressive definition in “Tragedy and The Common Man” as being the consequence of a man’s “total compulsion to evaluate himself justly; as springing from his ‘integrity’, his ‘best estimation of himself’” (144).

From the Latinate, qualifier- and preamble-ridden convolution of Dr. Fensterman, “Doc” Chizner’s world emerges as one of punchy parataxis and Anglo-Saxon directness, where Silky learns “the finer things. How to move his head. How to slip punches. How to block punches. How to counter” (Stain 89), in this aptly named chapter “Slipping the Punch.” Silky’s talent takes shape in a narrative mode that, in its fluid economy, expresses a sublimating abandonment to physicality—how through the choices that come simply and fluidly to the well conditioned talent that he is, Silky can control a dangerous environment. Analogously, of course, in slipping the blow that African-American identity delivers to the will to self-determine in post-war America, Silky is free to counter with another identity, the Jewish Professor Silk. You slip one punch in order to continue to compete in a different space.

THE COUNTERPUNCH

The sport of boxing, at its most fundamental—in the ring, in the fight—is often described, and certainly narrated in The Human Stain, as a space that is color, creed, and race blind. This is a space where society’s doctrines, prejudices, and pre-designated identities are replaced by one simple doctrine of competition, after the naturalist model described by Boddy where “authenticity [is] evident in sweat, bruises and blood” (371)—and both form and content evoke this here. It is a space where Silky learns what, certainly, could be described as hubris, but can perhaps more humanely be conceived as “integrity,” according to Miller’s aforementioned model of tragedy. Silky, with his irrepressible but playful spirit of self-determination, gravitates towards this space where “if you were good and you were between thirteen and eighteen, you got matched up” (Stain 89) against another fighter, the only determining quality to the match here being weight. It is one environment, however finite, however contingent, where the distinctively American ideal of self-determination in a meritocracy can be realized. For, as Joyce Carol Oates observes, “[t]he suggestion is of a world-model in which we are humanly responsible not only for our acts but for those performed against us. As in the theatre or the church, settings are erased by way, ideally, of transcendent action” (Oates 13). Oates builds towards this aphorism via a discourse expounding the manner in which:

Because a boxing match is a story without words, this doesn’t mean that it has no text or no language, that it is somehow “brute,” “primitive,” “inarticulate,” only that the text is improvised in action; the language a dialogue between the boxers of the most refined sort (one might say, as much neurological as psychological: a dialogue of split-second reflexes). (11)
Lacan’s conception of language is of a flat system, where words (signifiers) are not inherently connected with the things they refer to (the signified). Repression then occurs where harmful signifiers are repressed, repressive signifier chains amassing in their absence. Oates describes boxing as more a depth model of language, “as much neurological as psychological,” where its neurological vocabulary of bobs, slips, weaves, and punches leaves no space for repression, no signifier-signified gap. Faced with a father imprisoned in a repressive fortress of words, this alternative language of the “most refined sort” is of obvious appeal to Silky. It offers him escape into another mode of discrete linguistic (relative self-) determinism:

That’s why he liked shadowboxing and hitting the heavy bag: for the secrecy in it. That’s why he liked track too, but this was even better. Some guys just banged away at the heavy bag. Not Coleman. Coleman thought, and the same way that he thought in school or in a race: rule everything else out, let nothing else in, and immerse yourself in the thing, the subject, the competition, the exam—whatever’s to be mastered become that thing. (Stain 100)

Immersion in an alternative language system after a model that precludes such repression as inherent within conventional language can clearly be a space in which one can find relief from these other repressive pressures. And it also, arguably, offers a model for success, whereby Coleman’s imperative is to “let nothing else in, and immerse yourself in the thing [. . .] become that thing,” which may be transferable. He can then return to the symbolic order with a roadmap for success despite repressive forces. We can certainly conclude that Coleman’s boxing offers him a therapeutic escapism, and perhaps also that it is somewhere he learns something of the transformative value in the immersive pursuit of one idea, irrespective of countervailing forces or repressions.

But, as throughout this novel, the protagonist is forced to confront, evaluate, and articulate this private thing that he values most (the sanctity of the ring, the sanctity of his own ethnic identity) when it is made public, challenged by an antagonist. Boddy has observed the manner in which the preceding novel in the American trilogy, I Married a Communist, has something of this progressive antagonism, the Socratic dialogue, about it, with Zuckerberg as the young acolyte sitting at the feet of a series of books and “men to whom I apprenticed myself” (Communist. Qtd. in Boddy 379). Boddy notes that this novel, intertextually engaging with Shakespeare’s Macbeth, explores “[t]he ‘dichotomies’ of the heart, its ‘thousand and one dualities’ [which] are, Nathan concludes, what make us human and alive. To find a situation in which there is ‘no antagonism,’ we have to look at the stars; in other words, we have to die” (380). Or, to express it another way, Roth shares Lacan’s position on the real as a perpetually elusive, dialectical space.

The Human Stain explores these dualities, but perhaps also suggests a mode of existence beyond them, which need not only be resolved in death. In keeping with Oates’ expression of boxing as the most refined form of a language,
Coleman’s commitment to his boxing is challenged by “[t]he father who never lost his temper. The father who had another way of beating you down. With words. With speech. With what he called ‘the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dickens.’ With the English language that no-one could take away from you” (Stain 92). Of course, this must be read in the bitterly ironic context within the broader plot of the novel, where Professor Silk’s language has been precisely taken away from and turned against him in the (willful) misinterpretation of his utterance of the word “spooks” as a racist epithet—whereby he now “is the college racist” (Stain 83). Moreover, there is a barely repressed rage inherent in the father’s fortress of words: “But if he couldn’t in the dinning hall, at least at home he was able to speak with all his deliberateness and precision and directness and could wither you with words” (Stain 93, emphases added). This return to latinate- and-qualifier-profuse prose is then juxtaposed with an Anglo-Saxon stream-of-consciousness poetics of play and abandon:

And here at the very start of Sunday dinner, he ran out of the house and for nearly an hour he did his roadwork, up central avenue and over the Orange line [. . .] running and throwing punches, sprinting, then just running, then just sprinting, then shadowboxing all the way back to Brick Church Station, and finally sprinting the stretch, sprinting to the house, going back inside to where the family was eating their dessert and where he knew to sit back down at his place, far calmer than when he had bolted, and to wait for his father to resume where he had left off. (Stain 92, emphases added)

The percussive repetition of the action verb “sprinting,” the abandon to “just” physical expression, is expressed through a breezy assonance in the description of Silky’s sublimating physicality—in Oates’s aforementioned words—of the “most refined sort.” As he bursts from the repressive nuclear core of the family, this physically expressive, playful mode of boxing training is elevated to something of at least comparable psychological value to what one can do with words, perhaps even something greater, in keeping with Oates’s notion of transcendent action.

It cannot be coincidental that it is from this world of color-blind transcendent action that the prospect of slipping the punch of his racial identity first emerges. When Doc Chizner, with his color-blind pragmatism, expresses to Silky the possibility of attaining a boxing scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, he is at his most attractive, to both the young boxer and, certainly, to at least this reader: “Now, it wasn’t that on the way up Doc told him to tell the Pitt Coach that he was white. He just told Coleman not to mention that he was colored” (Stain 98). As he expounds this situation to Coleman, his persuasiveness remains rooted foremost in its hard-boiled directness, but, within this pragmatism, it also expresses a simple championing of personal over racial identity, framed within the language of a discrete transaction: “‘If nothing comes up,’ Doc said, ‘you don’t bring it up. You’re neither one thing or the other. You’re Silky Silk. That’s enough. That’s the deal.’ Doc’s favorite expression: that’s the deal. Something else Coleman’s father would not allow him to repeat in the house” (Stain 98).
There is a dark foreshadowing of the Oedipal betrayal Coleman enacts in turning away from his family and racial identity upon his father's death in that last line—that his father cannot accommodate such “deals,” such pragmatism. And Coleman's is a tragic role; Roth is not championing his rampant individualism, his playful irreverence, uncritically. But this critique lurks quietly in such discrete foreshadowings here. We see how Silky has discovered an arena for his engagement with the language of violent physicality, however contingent, that is meritocratic and allows a sublimating, creative performativity in his engagement with it—something that his father appears to be in dire need of in his own engagement with language. Silky's father is precisely trapped by the big Other of the Lacanian symbolic order, whose circulating structures determine him as a subject. But Silky avoids this discourse as he avoids emotional antagonism. Instead he does battle with himself on the road and then returns to the dinner table with that antagonism exploded, or at least “slipped,” as his racial identity will be later; he finds another way, beyond death, or even any other less dramatic Oedipal or symbolic conflict.

To be sure, there is a far simpler explanation of Silky's action here: he is experiencing stress relief, escapism. But it is also valid to recognize Roth's elevation of this physical language. This is a trope throughout the novel, and another extrapolation upon its central polemic regarding the prescriptive and aggressively reductive way language is used by racists and the excessively politically correct alike. The notion that, just as there is no one single (politically) correct model of language as a communicative and performative medium, and that society and individual psychologies are perhaps best served by a profusion of contexts and modes of linguistic expression, likewise verbal language is not the only valid medium of communication or expression of self. Just as Oates argues of the physical language of boxing that it can “celebrate the physicality of men even as it dramatizes the limitations, sometimes tragic, more often poignant, of the physical” (9), likewise we, like Silky, can admire the poignant nobility of his father's wielding of verbal weapons, even in the midst of the But if's and at least's that curtail his privileging of this language mode. We can simultaneously recognize the value and limitations of various languages, verbal and physical. But we, like Silky, can only acquire this dialectical vision—as opposed to simply an antagonistic reaction to such discourses—by being multilingual, by not permanently immersing ourselves in the discourse of any one language mode, and by slipping the punches that would otherwise enmesh us in only the one fight. Dialectical vision must be elicited by playful engagement in a proliferation of language modes, symbolic orders, rituals. Definitions and identities, including personal identity, must be resistant to reductive characterizations, such as those of race or gender. Like Silky, we must remind ourselves that there are other fights, other (symbolic) orders—such as the violent meritocracy of the ring.
Boddy notes of Oates that “On Boxing was praised for its refreshing avoidance of ‘hot competitive drive’ and she herself has dismissed Hemingway’s ‘equation of masculinity with greatness in literature’” (372). Silky’s engagement in boxing is presented as similarly psychologically and socially progressive. Boxing enables Silky to discover the possibility of emotional release through physical action, allowing him to see through a more objective, dispassionate lens the challenges posed to his will to self-determine, such as his father’s antagonism. This serves as a psychological model, a narrative foreshadowing of the manner in which it is ultimately his physical relationship with Faunia that permits him the same critical distance from his vilification as a racist professor. Thus boxing is certainly not merely a crudely iconographic celebration of masculine greatness; it is presented dialectically, as being of at least comparable value to conventional linguistic rational discourses or more conventionally nurturing physical intimacy. Boddy also notes that “Oates wanted to challenge the widely held assumption of female in comprehension of boxing, and by extension of men per se” (372). A central dimension in this more sensitive and dialectical presentation of the language of boxing is its positioning within Roth’s fragmented plotting amidst other similarly progressive presentations of non-linguistic modes of exploration and expression of self.

Another physical language extensively explored in The Human Stain is that of sex, which is introduced via the outraged moral majority reduction of Coleman’s “abuse” of an “illiterate woman”/“victim” half his age. This tabloid reduction is then incrementally deconstructed via the sensitive, nuanced common language—albeit, like boxing, largely non-verbal—of physicality that Coleman and Faunia share, and is finally exploded by the revelation of Faunia’s literacy. Not only is this clearly a parallel narrative to that other explosion—the aforementioned cognitive dissonance the reader experiences on the first revelation of Coleman’s ethnicity in the face of his ostensible identity as the “racist professor”—but there are also obvious connections with the Clinton impeachment that frames the novel. Another example of Roth widening his (dialectical) lens can be observed in Professor Silk’s overhearing of a discrete locker-room conversation amongst young male professors, at some distance from their conventional, politically correct (or, one might say, big Other-mindful) public discourses. These professors rail against Monica Lewinsky’s “closure generation that is proud of its shallowness [. . . who] fix on the conventionalized narrative, with its beginning, middle, and end—[for whom] every experience, no matter how knotty or ambiguous, must lend itself to this normalizing, conventionalizing, anchorman cliché.” (Stain 147). They then make a series of very lewd propositions regarding the physical relationship between Clinton and Lewinsky—essentially, that Clinton’s fault was not in his transgression, but rather in his coyness with Lewinsky: that a deeper transgression (anal sex is mooted here) would have ensured her loyalty via a “transgression shared [creating. . .]”
mutual culpability” (*Stain* 147). Of course, in the lewd, bantering mode of the discourse within which the proposal emerges here, it can easily be dismissed as mere poor-taste chauvinist humor. But Roth’s narratives are not characterized by idle and arbitrary locker-room banter. And this mooting of sex as another mode of human communication, and of identity and relationship designation—language, again, one might say—is then dialectically explored. Herein lies Roth’s counter-punch: the deeply dialectical mode of reading that this novel can evoke in the reader, and perhaps also evokes in some of its unlikely heroes, in whom we observe liberating engagement in these different languages. The emergent equivalence between these other, physical, languages of boxing and sex demonstrates precisely that sex is no more necessarily reducible to the iconographic—the tabloid of the “grandstanding creeps” (*Stain* 50) of the Clinton impeachment, and the deeply insecure pseudo-feminist Delphine Roux, to whom we will return—than is boxing.

There is an interesting parallel between Coleman’s aforementioned rejection of his father’s mode of engagement with the symbolic order and Faunia’s rejection of Coleman’s mode—right down to the subsequent need to run from the table:

All Coleman was doing was reading her something from the Sunday paper about the president and Monica Lewinsky when Faunia got up and shouted, “Can’t you avoid the fucking seminar? Enough of the seminar! I can’t learn! I don’t learn! I don’t want to learn! Stop fucking teaching me—it won’t work!” And in the midst of their breakfast, she ran. (*Stain* 234)

The foreshadowing of the self-inflicted reality of Faunia’s “illiteracy” is evident in the designation of true emphasis in Roth’s italicization of “I don’t want to learn,” and if Faunia is the novel’s most linguistically (self-)deprived of the novel’s victims, she also, perhaps by virtue of this distance from conventional language and intellect she imposes on herself, is possessed of a “Savage Wisdom” (*Stain* 40) whereby she recognizes that distance from the symbolic order(s) of language can be simultaneously liberating and disempowering.

As another fragment of the narrative emerges, we observe that Faunia is no passive victim of a predatory Coleman, but rather precisely possessed of a savage wisdom of self whereby she seeks out kindred unconventional spirits:

“And so,” she whispered to the bird, whose lustrous blackness beneath her hand was warm and sleek like nothing she had ever fondled, “here we are instead. A crow who really doesn’t know how to be a crow, a woman who doesn’t really know how to be a woman. We’re meant for each other. Marry me. You’re my destiny, you ridiculous bird.” Then she stepped back and bowed. “Farewell my Prince.” (*Stain* 247)

Her expression of this wisdom in her communication with her other lonely companion here is especially meaningful if we consider the notion of *slipping the punch* of fixed identity (in particular gender, racial, and ethnic identity) by adopting another identity, or, indeed, discovering or creating a world that is hermetically sealed from public language and its attendant identity-conferring symbolic order: “In a strange voice of her own, Faunia said, ‘I love
that strange voice he invented” (Stain 243). And, since, as Boddy also notes, “The connection is reinforced by the game Roth seems to be playing with their names—the story of a black man—coal man—presented in parallel” (372) with various other narrative strands in the novel, the reader might well be predisposed towards a playful finding of parallels in other arbitrary signifiers, such as the “lustrous blackness” of this other object of Faunia’s affection, especially since we later learn that she has known Coleman’s secret ethnicity all along—that this recognition of a hidden self was central to his appeal for her.

This revelation of her savage wisdom, and that Coleman’s “invention” of his own “strange voice” in slipping into an identity other than that conferred on him by his default place in the symbolic order is central to her affinity with and attraction to him, is further foreshadowed in her relationship with the crow: “‘He didn’t want anybody to know his background! Ashamed of his own background! Prince!’ she called, turning back to face the cage whose door was still wide open. ‘You’re ashamed of your notorious past? Oh, you good boy. You’re a good crow’” (Stain 240). Of course, Roth’s description of the cage “whose door was still wide open,” which the crow elects not to leave, reminds us that rejection of any one identity in adoption of another confers yet another set of boundaries and restrictions, literal and psychological. One may escape a particular explicit or public positioning within the symbolic order, but its overarching (repressive) structures will likely endure.

This understanding of personal identity as radically socially mediated is interwoven in fragments, in the midst of the other strands of this dialectically unfolding narrative, such that the reader is drawn to identify parallels between the contingent positions of the various subjects, such as the far less obviously sympathetic Delphine Roux. The unfolding of her narrative, and the deconstruction of her violent public assault on the character of Professor Silk as a consequence of her repressed libido, occurs in the midst of the revelation of the extent of the affinity between Coleman and Faunia. Our reading of Delphine Roux thus becomes much deeper and more humane; rather than seeing her as simply some kind of archetypal, politically correct, pseudo-feminist monster, we identify her as yet another victim of the symbolic order. In her abject dependence upon the big Other in condemning Coleman, Delphine Roux’s psychological position is revealed to be the least enviable of all.

This deconstruction of Roux is preceded by a consolidation of the affinity between Coleman and Faunia and the elevation of their other language, their “strange voice” of physical intimacy, to a comparable position to that high status accorded to Silky’s engagement in boxing. Faunia’s dramatic-monologue narration of an intimate dance, via the free indirect style, shares a common stream-of-consciousness Anglo-Saxon poetics of play and abandon to the aforementioned episode of Silky’s run from the dinner table. It also establishes part of her attraction to Coleman as the commonality of savage, wisdom-engendering experience they share. If the exorcism of her demons,
the shaking off of the signifiers of her positioning in the symbolic order, is
tougher than that of the dynamic young Silky’s, who simply enjoys the run and
returns “far calmer than when he had bolted,” Roth balances the profu-
sion of her hardships at the beginning of this episode with a commensurate,
meditative repetition of the very word “calm” to demonstrate what an effect
this physical language has on them both:

So soon in the dance, and already she could peel him and eat him like a piece of
fruit. It’s not all about being beat up and being the janitor and I’m at the post
office cleaning up other people’s shit, and there’s a terrible toughness that comes
with that, with cleaning up everybody else’s waste; if you want to know the truth,
it sucks, and don’t tell me there aren’t better jobs, but I’ve got it, it’s what I do,
three jobs, because this car’s got about six days left, I’ve got to buy a cheap car that
runs, so three jobs is what I’m doing, and not for the first time, and by the way, the
dairy farm is a lot of fucking work, to you it sounds great and to you it looks great,
Faunia and the cows, but coming on top of everything else it breaks my fucking
hump [. . .] But now I’m naked in a room with a man, seeing him lying there with
his dick and that navy tattoo, and it’s calm and he’s calm, even getting a charge out
of seeing me dance he’s so very calm, and he’s just had the shit kicked out of him,
too. He’s lost his wife, he’s lost his job, publicly humiliated as a racist professor, and
what’s a racist professor? [. . .] That’s the stigma and it’s not even true, and yet now
he’s calm. I can do that for him. I can make him calm like this, he can make me
calm like this. All I have to do is just keep moving. (Stain 227; emphases added)

And then, in the final twenty pages of the book, the full extent of their affinity,
and Faunia’s savage wisdom, is revealed. This revelation comes with a preamble
that appears to qualify the text’s engagement with mythology—particularly
classical tragedy and other religious ontologies—endorsing instead precisely
the more progressive, modern reading of the tragic dimension after the fashion
of Miller’s championing of man’s subjective integrity: “Because her not asking
questions isn’t because she’s dumb or doesn’t want to face things; her not asking
questions is, in Coleman’s eyes, at one with her devastated dignity” (Stain 337).
In expressing his admiration for, and affinity with Faunia, justifying her as the
choice of confidante for his most closely guarded secret, Coleman extols her as
being “Not courageous. Not heroic. Just Game [. . .] She’s not religious, she’s
not sanctimonious, she is not deformed by the fairy tale of purity, whatever
other perversions may have disfigured her. She’s not interested in judging—she’s
seen too much for all that shit” (Stain 340). So, when he asks her “What would
you think [. . .] if I told you I wasn’t a white man?” (Stain 341) her response
may initially shock Coleman, but it feels entirely consistent with the dialectical
mode of reading these characters which Roth’s fragmentary craft has evoked, as
Faunia counters his skepticism with: “I know what you are. I lived down south.
I met ’em all. Sure, I know. Why else would I like you so much? Because you’re
a college professor? I’d go out of my mind if that was you” (Stain 340). And
then, moreover, “When he told her the whole story, she listened all right, but
not because she found it incredible or unbelievable or even strange—it certainly
wasn’t reprehensible. No. It just sounded like life to her” (Stain 341).
THE SYMBOLIC ORDER AND THE BIG OTHER AS A PRISON

Literally placed in the plot in the midst of these incrementally coalescing fragments of Coleman and Faunia’s affinity and common integrity, we have the narrative of Delphine Roux. Inescapably trapped by the symbolic order, Delphine is, in one of Roth’s distinctive feats of ironic counterpoise of style and content, professionally fluent in the type of post-structuralist, deconstructivist discourse which should amply equip her to perform a (Lacanian) self-diagnosis, but she is revealed to be utterly impotent in this regard:

In imperfect revolt against her Frenchness (as well as being obsessed with her Frenchness), lifted voluntarily out of her country (if not out of herself), so ensnared by the disapproval of Les Trois Grasses as to be endlessly calculating what response might gain her their esteem without further obfuscating her sense of herself and misrepresenting totally the inclinations of the woman she once naturally was [. . .] (Stain 271)

The proliferation of qualifiers, parentheses, and subordinate clauses through which Roth creates Delphine’s voice here evokes some of the formal aesthetics of the French radical theorists, to be sure, but to all the greater ironic effect as its content turns out to be that anathema of French radicalism: petit-bourgeois sensibility.

Delphine Roux’s narrative expresses a position precisely trapped by the symbolic order, her insecurities driving her to seek the approval of those she hates because they deride her. Here she neurotically fixates upon these (big) Others—Les Trois Grasses—from whom she seeks validation for her identity. Her leading of the violent assault on Coleman’s integrity is certainly a symptom of this. But the most telling symptom of the manner in which her aggressive behavior is the product of repressed drives, of abject assimilation to the symbolic order, is the condensation of her repressed attraction towards him.

Roth juxtaposes many pages of prose after the fashion of the aforementioned French academic-turned-neurotic Latinate diction with a burst of resignation-borne, straight-speaking Anglo-Saxon, as Delphine finally allows herself to experiment with a direct expression of her desires as she writes:

Seeks. All right then, seeks. Do as the students say—Go for it! [. . .] Do not hide from the truth of what you are and do not hide from the truth of what you seek [. . .]

She wrote now in a rush.


And then, and only then, did the mythical man being summoned forth in all earnestness on the screen condense into a portrait of someone she already knew. Abruptly she stopped writing. The exercise had been undertaken only as an experiment, to try loosening the grip of inhibition. (Stain 272, emphasis added)
But, of course, it is not merely inhibition but a far deeper repression that has been *condensed* by this process, this following of the repressive chain of signifiers, a process, sadly, that only serves to compound her neurotic fixation upon Coleman as the enemy.

**PLAYING WITH RITUALS**

In his opening polemic, the novel's narrator rails against the manner in which, further to the Clinton Lewinsky affair:

> In the Congress, in the press, and on the networks, the righteous grandstanding creeps, crazy to blame, deplore, and punish, were everywhere out moralizing to beat the band: all of them in a calculated frenzy with what Hawthorne [. . .] identified in the incipient country of long ago as “the persecuting spirit”; all of them eager to enact the astringent rituals of purification. (*Stain* 3)

This is precisely the “fairy tale purity” that Coleman resists, and his repulsion from it is correlated to the attraction and understanding that he and Faunia share. But how, beyond the savage ascetic wisdom, the hermetic crow’s cage of a willfully illiterate existence such as Faunia’s, is one to avoid falling prey to these “astringent rituals of purification,” with which Roth purposefully frames the narrative, and which enmesh Delphine Roux? Oates relates the ideal of the “transcendent action” of boxing intimately to the manner in which boxing “as in the theatre or church” is a performative spectacle, often improvisational, yet also deeply ritualistic. As in religious experience, as in theater, as in the sexual act, there is a release of tension from its immediate object here, call it what you will: sublimation, transference; catharsis, escapism; (divine) revelation, opiate of the masses. The ongoing consideration of the first of these models, the psychoanalytic, is certainly worthwhile with regards to Silky’s enactment of ritualistic violence.

The progressive character of Silky is irresistibly drawn to the aforementioned universe where “the persecuting spirit” is ubiquitous, be it at the hands of the racists, the politically correct puritans, or indeed the quietly, acceptably, brutalized father who “beat you down” and “withered you with words,” yet to whom you simultaneously owed so much love and respect. Silky counters his humane, humanist mother’s objection to this ritualistic, violent—yet, within these parameters, fundamentally meritocratic—world by showing how such clinical meritocracy actually protects a skilled practitioner like himself, for whereas “[i]n the street this guy could have beat me silly. But in the ring? With rules? With gloves? No, no—he couldn’t land a punch” (*Stain* 90).

This intimacy with violence in a finite and more meritocratic space must be attractive to those beset by the seemingly infinite violence and injustices of the world. Silky learns to escape into a meritocratic and progressive world of violence, a space where violence can be expressed positively; he learns that the repressed violence implicit in his father’s tortured dignity, or in random, frenzied outbursts of street violence, are not the only way; that violence is not only
the privileged ritual of the fascists, but can be wielded positively, in a playful and performative exercise of individual potency and integrity. He can find a world of his own in the boxing ring, where violence need not be repressed, where it can be expressed and understood. Oates claims that:

[T]hough springing from life, boxing is not a metaphor for life but a unique, closed, self-referential world, obliquely akin to those severe religions in which the individual is both “free” and “determined”—in one sense possessed of a will tantamount to God’s, in another totally helpless. The Puritan sensibility would have understood a mouth filling with blood, an eye popped out of its socket—fit punishment for an instant’s negligence. (13)

I would adjoin to this Silky’s further defense that “You don’t get mad, you just concentrate. It’s a sport. You warm up before a fight. You shadowbox. You get yourself ready for whatever is going to come at you” (Stain 95). In the deconstruction of its ritualistic components that the discipline offers the true student of the sweet science who Silky is, the practice of violence becomes divorced from any horizon of meaning, fascist or otherwise; it becomes just another mode of language use, which he can master and use to either negative or positive effect, “possessed of a will tantamount to God’s.” It is worth emphasizing again that Oates asserts that boxing is not simply a function of the symbolic order, “not a metaphor,” but something more akin to a language of its own. With regard to the aforementioned unjust, violent world, and the contrary reading of Roth’s work as irretrievably bleak with regard to the unknowability of other (human) subjects, this dialectical, multilingual vision also teaches that finite conditions can be created, in the combative world of the boxing ring, or indeed that of professional academia in which the pugilistic “Dean Silk” dominates for much of his career. Finite conditions can, indeed, be created, in infinite other arenas, and certainly through that other physical language of sex, even if contrary to or beyond strict propriety in accordance with the “puritan sensibility,” or the symbolic order. Meritocracies can be found—however finitely, however contingently—where we are “totally helpless” against their rules of cause and effect. The American dream of meritocracy need not always be a nightmare, but it must be recognized to be precisely a dream: an ephemeral ideal in engagement with which the dreamer must play, or, to mix metaphors and pun in a manner appropriate to the novel, must role with the punches. The dream of self-determination cannot endure within a static, stratified reality—the dreamer must actively seek out fresh, finite spaces and language modes within which to realize meritocracy. And, if not nearly a panacea for an unjust and violent world, perhaps Silky learns something similar from his playful engagement in boxing to what playful and intellectually agile readers can learn from their critical engagement in a great novel such as The Human Stain: they can liberate logic from one context and analogously apply it elsewhere, in a manner perhaps not just cerebrally liberating but also emotionally so, and such that they can at least come closer to knowing themselves and other subjects, however ultimately contingent, partial and finite that knowledge must always be. Not only can they
therapeutically pursue a chain of signifiers to the site of ultimate repression, but they can liberate this therapeutic, immersive practice, and analogously, empathically apply it elsewhere. This is the same renewed optimism, however tentative, however conditional, that Lacan found in Freud’s talking cure, because reading as dialectically artful a text as The Human Stain is a perpetual conversation.

NOTES

1. “Therapeutic” is not a term extensively used within Lacan’s work. Where it is used here, in reference to Lacanian thought, it should be considered to be something of a shorthand for the value of a given process to the analysand. In the literary context to which Lacan’s ideas will be contributing here, there will moreover be an endeavor to present engagement with as discursive/dialectical a text as The Human Stain as at least analogous to aspects of therapeutic procedures, in, for example, promoting better understanding of self and society.

2. Lacan’s reversal of Descartes’ dictum—I think therefore I am not—is central to his concept of identity formation. Human consciousness and identity are fundamentally schismatic according to Lacan’s conception of “the mirror stage.” First conceived after the model of philosopher Henri Wallon in the 1930s, the significance of the mirror stage developed throughout Lacan’s conception of “the symbolic order”, such that by the 1950s his position was that “The mirror stage is far from a mere phenomenon which occurs in the development of the child. It illustrates the conflictual nature of the dual relationship” (Lacan 1956: 17). Subject and object are inherently linked in perpetual flux within human consciousness and identity formation—from that first schism where the child sees the reflection of itself and thinks that is me—but not me. Through the 1950s and 60s, building particularly on the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, and the semiotic/anthropological theories of Barthes and Levi-Strauss, Lacan developed the conception that not just language and culture, but individuals themselves could be seen as codes of meaning. Further to Saussure’s notion of language as a flat system of signifiers, discourse writes the subject in the subject’s unconscious, where the relation of words to other words is more significant than that of words to objects. The mirror stage, then, is what distinguishes man in his intellectual development from other beasts; it is the first in an alienating series of necessary untruths, which allow us access to the symbolic realm. From here, it is easy to see how, constituted within the symbolic order, “the superego is essentially located within the symbolic plane of speech” (Lacan, Freud’s Technique 102).

3. “Contingent” is used here and elsewhere in the essay in the sense of being dependent on or conditioned by something else.

4. In stark contrast, it cannot be overstated, to the professional business of boxing that, of its various cynical discourses, is ridden with race, color, and creed biases.

5. Slavoj Žižek explores the value in enacting ritualistic violence, exemplified in the stylistics of fascism, in contexts where its performance divorces the stylistics from “fascist horizon of meaning.” It sublimates the violence in rituals, in so doing separating them from the socio-linguistic superego—constituted within and by the symbolic order, we should recall—which otherwise lends them such oppressive power. Further to the work of Lacan, Žižek posits a critical language that makes an important distinction between systemic violence (of the order of economic and political systems), objective violence (of the order of discriminatory patterns of behavior), and subjective violence (of the order of individual, often spontaneous, sometimes self-directed acts, which have the effect of misdirecting and obscuring our awareness of these other two more insidious forms of violence). These concepts are certainly applicable to the disparate, ubiquitous violence in The Human Stain.
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