Complicating the ›Culture Wars‹

Re-reading *The Human Stain*

Jens Martin Gurr

1. Four Beginnings: Key Issues and Contexts

A first way of beginning a discussion of Roth's novel would be with a review discussing its »prophetic« nature: In December 2010, two years into the first Obama administration and six years before the election of Donald Trump, Volker Hage called *The Human Stain* (2000) the »unsurpassed« U.S. novel of the decade, a »crucial work of the period, one of those books that, at some temporal distance, can be esteemed more appropriately« (n.p., my translation). He singled it out for the farsighted treatment of three topics, oddly incommensurate as they may seem: (1) the threat to privacy, not least with the advent of the internet and digital communication, (2) the impact of Viagra, and (3) the changing role of race in the decade that saw the election and inauguration of Barack Obama as the first African American president (Hage, n.p.). Commenting on the diagnostic function of literature, Hage here insightfully states:

> Literature can be prophetic. Not in the simplistic sense of a prognosis, but as atmospheric anticipation. Clear-sightedness has nothing to do with clairvoyance; it is the ability of writers like Roth to sense societal change early on, to imagine the consequences of events, to extrapolate them into the future. (n.p.; my translation)

A second way of beginning a discussion of *The Human Stain* would be with a seemingly unrelated CliFi novel published more than 20 years later, Stephen Markley's 2022 *The Deluge*. In the early 2040s, a character here tells us, this is the ascendant perception of identity politics:

> Now all the talk is about how wrong it is to identify a person based on any nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other imagined community. Calling someone »she,« »American,« »trans,«, »Black,« or »Catholic;« is sud-

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> denly frowned upon. […] This new ideology's most vociferous proponents argue that a collective human identity is the only way forward, that the next generation must understand how these imagined divisions, created barbarically out of thin air and handed down generation after generation, have led the human project to the brink. (Markley 870f.)

A third way of beginning would be with the controversy over Blake Bailey's 2021 authorized biography of Philip Roth, which, shortly after publication, was pulled from the market by its publisher Norton over allegations of sexual misconduct and rape against the biographer. In an epilogue to her review of the biography added after the scandal had broken and the biography had been taken up by another publisher, Judith Shulevitz wrote:

> The book was back on the market [with Skyhorse, which also acquired Woody Allen's autobiography when his original publisher dropped it]. But the damage was done. Bailey had dragged Roth down with him, fairly or unfairly – and that guilt by association, it seems to me, is what we still have to deal with. I can't stress emphatically enough that Roth was never implicated in anything like what Bailey has been accused of. So what are readers supposed to do with the news about Bailey? Should it change the way we read his biography? How about the way we read Roth? (2021, n.p.).

One might further specify some of the questions raised by the controversy over Bailey's biography: Can we separate the artist from the work? Does it matter who speaks and what has become of the notion of the »Death of the Author« – has it entirely lost its meaning, or only in cases where the integrity of the author is in question and impinges on their work? Is the notion of »presumed innocent until proven guilty« irrelevant in cases of sexual misconduct or rape, because rape charges so shockingly rarely lead to convictions in court that legally determined guilt cannot be a prerequisite for condemnation? Does it *intellectually* invalidate the biography if the author of the biography is a presumed rapist? Might there be other reasons not to want to buy it? Would it make a difference if the author were dead and no longer profited personally from sales of the book? What about reading it if one bought it before the scandal broke? What about quoting from it?[1]

A fourth entry point is afforded by Adrian Daub's recent critical account of the »cancel culture« debate and its alleged global triumph originating on US campuses, a »transfer« Daub compellingly comments on as a »moral panic«. Without discussing *The Human Stain* in detail, he points out the curious fact that Roth's novel is frequently

1 For insightful discussions of whether and how still to engage with the work of artists known or alleged to have engaged in sexual misconduct or who have voiced opinions held to be problematic or untenable, cf. Daub; Matthes; Domainko et al.

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adduced in evidence of claims of »political correctness« and »wokeness« running riot on US campuses. How, Daub rightly asks, can a novel logically be adduced to ›prove‹ the existence of a real-world issue? What I find significantly less convincing is his somewhat literalist criticism of Roth's temporal relocation of the ›real‹ campus episode at the heart of *The Human Stain* from the 1970s to the 1980s (in interviews) and then as an alleged cultural diagnosis of the late 1990s in his novel (cf. Daub 183–185; for the Roth discussion generally, see 182–188). This, as well as the unquestioned suggestive association of Roth with cultural conservative Allan Bloom (187), underestimates the complexity of Roth's novel. In interesting ways, Daub here falls prey to the fallacy of not reading fiction as fiction he criticizes in others.

This essay discusses *The Human Stain* as a prescient and remarkably differentiated exploration – directly or obliquely – of questions commonly debated under the labels of ›identity politics‹, ›political correctness‹ and ›cancel culture‹, ›safe spaces and education‹, as well as ›the canon wars‹. In addition to staging the debate on these issues themselves, the novel also insightfully negotiates the polarization of American society and politics in the ›culture wars‹ over these and related issues. Controversies over identity politics and its consequences, over #MeToo and sexual misconduct, but also over the connection between a person's personal conduct and the legitimacy of engaging with their work, over the importance of who speaks, over the role of fiction and fictionality in such debates – there is hardly a text that better lends itself to unravelling these debates than *The Human Stain*, published in the year of the strongly polarizing and acrimoniously contested presidential election that brought George W. Bush into office.

Critical opinion on the political positions of the novel with regard to questions of identity politics, campus culture and the literary canon is surprisingly divided. Especially early reviewers read it as a rant against »political correctness«: In this vein, Parini argued that »Roth uses the campus setting as a way to vent his rage against political correctness« (n.p.), while Moore stated that »[t]he book indulges in the sort of tirade against political correctness that is far drearier and more intellectually constricted than political correctness itself« (n.p.). Other readings understood *The Human Stain* as an attack primarily against the right. Thus, Boxwell speaks of »an angered response to the moral crusade of forces arrayed on the political and religious right engaged in a counterrevolutionary coup against the 1960s« (122).

While the predominant reading appears to understand the novel as an attack against ›political correctness‹, I here build on more balanced readings and seek to show that Roth's novel in fact contains precisely what Moore finds lacking: »Roth, usually fond of both sides of an argument, fails to extend understanding toward – and only makes fun of – the possible discomfort of minorities or women in settings like Athena« (n.p.). The fact that it is – with equal forcefulness – claimed as being directed against the left and against the right might already be taken as evidence of

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its even-handedness.[2] To be sure, even-handedness is not inherently a virtue – in a debate over racism, slavery, or the holocaust, there can be no even-handedness.[3] In highly polarized contexts such as the U.S. culture wars and U.S. politics generally, however, even if a critic's own political, intellectual and ethical sympathies are clearly on one side, one might not want to all too quickly dismiss entirely the values of a sizeable share of the population – here, an attempt at understanding the other side or at least seriously entertaining the notion that they, too, might not just be evil or narrow-minded, seems imperative. In this situation, even-handedness, say, in the sense of an offer of a conversation about these issues is clearly a virtue.

The Human Stain is the concluding novel of a loosely woven »thematic trilogy« (Roth in McGrath 8) of historical novels on three defining moments and phases in American history since World War II: While *I Married a Communist* (1998) engaged with the right-wing radicalism and intolerance of the McCarthy era and *American Pastoral* (1997) negotiated left-wing radicalism and its occasionally murderous consequences in anti-Vietnam terrorism, *The Human Stain* (2000) uncomfortably hints at disturbing parallels and continuities and brings together both forms of blind and hypocritical intolerance[4] – »the malevolent puritanism with which you will be tarred and feathered« (76) – and reveals that the right-wing attacks against Clinton and the left-wing form of political correctness that undoes Coleman Silk both spring from the same source, »America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony« (2), the impulse Hawthorne – quoted in the novel – called »the persecuting spirit« in its most self-righteous form. *Les extrèmes se touchent*. Here lies a central irony of the novel: Coleman Silk, who passes for white to escape the racist stereotypes of a society in which he would never have been hired as a Black Classics professor in the 1950s, is forced from his job over spurious allegations of racism against two Black students. The scandal over Clinton's »incontinent carnality« (3) in the White House forms the backdrop to Coleman's affair with Faunia, and the ritual of pseudo-purification that costs Coleman his job is the same that nearly cost Clinton his with the inquisitorial Puritanism of Kenneth Starr. The parallels between Coleman and Clinton, implicit

2 For discussions of *The Human Stain* in the context of ›political correctness‹ and the culture wars, cf. also Anténe, Barnard, Boxwell, Godfrey, Kimmage, Medin, Moore, Morgan, Sánchez Canales.

3 To argue that, in the logic of the novel, the extremes meet, emphatically does not mean to suggest that the left and the right are indistinguishable ethically or to anachronistically align Roth with the kind of relativism we saw with Trump after the Charlottesville murder, when he claimed that there were good people and bad people on both sides. The specific moral fervor and the »persecuting spirit« in some strands on the left and on the right are the same.

4 For this parallelism, cf. also Barnard; Boxwell 123; Franco 90; Holroyd 63; Medin 85; Morgan 118; Posnock xvii; Safer 211f.

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throughout the novel, are made explicit when Coleman muses: »Here in America either it's Faunia Farley or it's Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk!« (154; cf. also 2, 344). (What the novel appears to be blind to in criticizing only the *attacks* on Clinton and Silk, is the problem of sexual relations in constellations with a significant power differential – a limitation made all the more apparent by the #MeToo movement 17 years later.)

With its drastic attack on intolerant radicalism of *any* persuasion, Roth's novel thus shies away from simplistic sermonizing on behalf of either side: »It was the summer [of 1998] in America when the nausea returned […], when the smallness of people was simply crushing, when some kind of demon had been unleashed in the nation and, on both sides, people wondered ›Why are we so crazy?‹« (3). To be more precise, however, one would rather have wished for the self-critical questioning implied in »why are *we* so crazy« (my italics), where the problem, one might argue, was and remains the polarization that only ever believes the other side to be »so crazy«.

2. The Debate on Identity Politics

Roth's central theme in much of his fiction is the tension between the self-realization of an individual and the competing claims of the family or a larger community (cf. also Parrish), a tension that frequently yields enlightening reflections on the central American themes of self-reliance, individuality and personal freedom. In most of Roth's novels, the individual struggles to break away from the Jewish community; here it is the struggle between the Black community and the individual Coleman Silk. What, the novel asks, ultimately defines identity? Is it nature or nurture? Is it a matter of choice or of origins? Is it self- constructed or imposed by others? What would be the more courageous decision – to live as a Black man in an openly racist society – and the novel consistently makes clear that 1950s America, when Coleman makes his decision, was deeply racist (cf. esp. 102–106, 120) – or to deny one's roots and to cut off all family ties to pass as white?[5]

It is important to note here, however, that passing as Jewish in 1946 was still not to be equated with passing as generally »white«, because there were still restrictions on the number of Jewish students at many colleges (86f.) and anti-Semitism was still fairly current in US academia. There is a further irony in the fact that Coleman as an African-American passes as a Jew – Zuckerman refers to Coleman's identity as an »amalgam of the most unalike of America's historic undesirables« (132) and thus also ironically comments on the »supposed strife between African-Americans and

5 The motif of »passing« is of course by no means unique to Roth's novel but is frequent in American literature and was a particularly common theme of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance.

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Jews … [an] animosity that developed between blacks and Jews in America after the civil rights movement.« (Kaplan 2005: 184).

Coleman's repudiation of his past and his invention of a self – »To become a new being. […] The drama that underlies America's story« (342) – explicitly links Coleman to the classic American theme of self-invention and self-realization[6]:

> He was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I. […] Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum*. […] Instead the raw *I* with all its agility. […] The passionate struggle for singularity. (108, cf. also 120, 183)

Similarly, in his apologetic eulogy during Coleman's funeral, Coleman's African American colleague Herb Keble – ironically without knowing his real story – refers to Coleman as an »American individualist par excellence« (311, cf. also 334). In one sense, this antagonism against the »we« (108) justifies Coleman's behaviour as a heroic act of self- reliance in the great American tradition, and if Coleman found it necessary to pass in 1946, that may say at least as much about the society in which he lives as it does about himself. As one reviewer appropriately asked, »Would a Black Coleman Silk have ever been hired to teach Classics at Athena College in the 1950s?« (Tierney 168).

The Human Stain, thus, is on one level the classic American story of self-realization and transcendence of the limitations of one's origin – »the pursuit of happiness« – but it is also the story of how, through ›the return of the repressed‹, one's own history ultimately proves inescapable.

> [A]ccording to the logic of *The Human Stain*, racial reconciliation can only be achieved by eschewing identity politics. By arguing that racial reconciliation relies on jettisoning the group identity associated with ›identity politics‹, many of Roth's characters take a neoconservative argument against ›political correctness‹ and transform it into a classical liberal argument about the powers of self-fashioning. (Kaplan 2005, 173)[7]

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6 The attempt to escape one's family and a powerful desire for self-realization, beyond their ambivalent relationship of attraction and repulsion, strongly connects Coleman Silk and Delphine Roux. For a detailed discussion of symbolism, telling names and suggestive contrasts and parallels between Coleman and Delphine Roux, Delphine and Lester Farley, Delphine Roux and Faunia Farley, Steena Palsson and Faunia, and even between Coleman and the hand-raised crow at the Audubon Society, cf. Gurr.

7 In another essay, Kaplan reads the novel as »imagin[ing] a postracial consciousness where the limiting identitarian strictures that feed racism can be abolished« (2005b, 126).

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Here, however, I would like to argue that the novel can also be read as a remarkably insightful and ambivalent negotiation of identity politics. Contrary to what might be expected in the light of readings discussing the novel as a rant against »leftist« campus culture, I will argue that, in rather complex ways, it anticipates reservations formulated by Mark Lilla, Walter Benn Michaels or John McWhorter and other – broadly speaking – leftist intellectuals. In this vein, Hayes has commented on Roth's »merciless satire of the hermeneutics of suspicion« and has critically highlighted the intellectual and political fallacy of assuming a causal linkage between »representation in creative literature« and »democratic participation«:

> Roth's satire, caustic though it may be, is carefully judged. It is aimed not at the ideal of democratic representativeness itself but at the over-literal interpretation of the ideal […] *The Human Stain* suggests that the attempt to link the process of representation in creative literature to the promotion of democratic participation can be very misleading (231f., 234).

Even more centrally, however, the novel appears to provide a take on the critique of identity politics formulated by Mark Lilla in the wake of the 2016 presidential elections, a critique first formulated in a *New York Times* essay in November 2016 and then in his 2017 polemical book-length essay *The* Once *and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. Lilla's self-professed progressive critique is in keeping with previous criticism of identity politics as (1) wrongly short-circuiting textual and democratic representation of minorities, (2) dramatically overstating the effects of language use on real-world politics, thus neglecting concrete campaigning and political work in favour of ineffectual symbolic politics, »leav[ing] those groups it professes to care about more vulnerable than they otherwise would be« (Lilla 2017, 12); (3) neglecting questions of class at the expense of questions of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, (4) fragmenting potential progressive alliances into identity-based interest-groups, or worse, self-obsessed individuals. My concern here is not to evaluate the adequacy of these critical diagnoses – I am here interested in the ways in which a literary text can shed light on the debate or can help initiate a conversation about these issues.

Writing only a few days after the 2016 presidential election, Lilla made sure to clarify he is not critiquing identity politics from a conservative perspective: »It is a truism that America has become a more diverse country. It is also a beautiful thing to watch. […] It's an extraordinary success story.« (n.p.). But he also argued that it was one of the »lessons of the recent presidential election campaign and its repugnant outcome […] that the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end« (n. p.):

> [T]he fixation on diversity in our schools and in the press has produced a generation of liberals and progressives narcissistically unaware of conditions outside their self-defined groups, and indifferent to the task of reaching out to Americans

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> in every walk of life. […] By the time they reach college many assume that diversity discourse exhausts political discourse, and have shockingly little to say about such perennial questions as class, war, the economy and the common good. (2016, paragraphs 4–5)

The notion that identity politics ultimately segments the population into different identity-based interest groups and that this leads to a loss of shared perspectives and to the inability to pursue common goals, a division that ultimately plays into the hands of the right, is one that has long been held against identity politics. Lilla, too, argued in his 2016 *NYT* essay:

> Hillary Clinton was at her best and most uplifting when she spoke about American interests in world affairs and how they relate to our understanding of democracy. But when it came to life at home, she tended [to] slip into the rhetoric of diversity, calling out explicitly to African-American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters at every stop. This was a strategic mistake. If you are going to mention groups in America, you had better mention all of them. If you don't, those left out will notice and feel excluded. Which, as the data show, was exactly what happened […] Fully two-thirds of white voters without college degrees voted for Donald Trump. (n.p.)

One of the consequences of identity politics' neglect of class[8] at the expense of gender and sexuality (Lilla 2017, 93 and especially Michaels), combined with the perception of »liberalism« as »a creed professed by educated urban elites cut off from the rest of the country«, is that it leads to resentment at feeling neglected. Thus, liberalism »leaves so many Americans indifferent if not hostile today«. (Lilla 2017, 10).

It is in the depiction of Lester Farley and his resentment at being left behind and treated unfairly by »the government« (66, 69, 72, 213, 247, 355) that the issue of class and resentment is being negotiated in the novel, resentment that Nelson Primus pithily summarizes as follows »These are people whose fundamental feeling about life is that they have been fucked over unfairly right down the line« (80). In the novel, Lester ventilates his resentment in tirades against the »high-and-mighty Jew professor« (71; also 256), various Asian ethnic groups (69, 215), »that draft dodger sleeping in the White House« (213) and his general misogyny.

Lilla polemically argues and Roth's novel at least suggests that identity politics, by alienating what still seems the majority of non-academics with moralizing and excessively rigid linguistic policing, provokes counter-reactions and right-wing intolerance and thus furthers societal polarization. Moreover, the language of identity politics is a marker of distinction for what in *The Human Stain* is called a »well-

8 As German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz influentially argued, the new »class society« of »late modernity« is not exclusively or even primarily one of economic means but primarily one of »lifestyles«, cultural preferences and unevenly distributed »cultural capital« (275 f.).

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mannered gang of elitist egalitarians who hide their ambition behind high-minded ideals« (80), a marker of distinction that suggests a form of condescending classism one is otherwise so vehemently opposed to.[9] The epithet does not become wrong just because it's Coleman's snobbish lawyer Nelson Primus who says this – rather, this is further evidence of the novel's complex play with positions and perspectives. Theirs is precisely the kind of ›progressive‹ arrogance Lilla criticizes the US democrats for – those thus snubbed as the »deplorables« in Hillary Clinton's notorious phrase overwhelmingly voted for Trump in 2016. Thus, as a non-college-educated white harbouring resentment against a government – really or allegedly – ignoring his concerns, with a susceptibility – or at least indifference – to racism, sexism, and nationalism, Lester Farley could be seen as a study in the making of a Trump voter.

3. Negotiating ›Political Correctness‹, ›Cancel Culture‹ and ›Safe Spaces‹: *The Human Stain* and the »Coddling of the American Mind« Debate

Lilla somewhat indiscriminately brings together identity politics and the campus culture notions of ›microaggressions‹, ›trigger warnings‹ and ›safe spaces‹ when he accuses »identity liberalism« of

> concocting inoffensive euphemisms to describe social reality, protecting young ears and eyes already accustomed to slasher films from any disturbing encounter with alternative viewpoints […] Scapegoats – today conservative politicians – are duly designated and run off campus in a purging ritual. Propositions become pure or impure, not true or false. And not only propositions but simple words. Left identitarians […] pars[e] every conversation for immodest locutions and rapping the knuckles of those who inadvertently use them. (Lilla 2017, 14, 90f.).

This, Lilla repeatedly insists, is in effect a de-politicizing pseudo-politics that, while it is unhelpful to the causes it seeks to promote, is also intellectually limiting to students, because it prevents them from engaging with uncomfortable and potentially provocative positions. In their widely debated 2015 article, »The Coddling of the American Mind« (the kernel of a 2018 book of the same title), Lukianoff and Haidt similarly argued that »[i]f students graduate believing that they can learn nothing from people they dislike or from those with whom they disagree, we will have done them a great intellectual disservice.« (n.p.)

9 See Lilla's critique of educated urban elites in the U.S. as frequently showing towards uneducated rural Americans a condescension they would brand as unacceptable if shown towards people from the Global South.

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In a train of thought attributed to Coleman, he reflects on, in remarkably similar terms, just this combination of narrow-minded moralizing and lack of intellectual adventurousness:

> Appropriate. The current code word for reining in most any deviation from the wholesome guidelines and thereby making everybody »comfortable«. […] he could teach »Appropriate Behavior in Classical Greek Drama,« a course that would be over before it began. […] coercions of propriety. The tyranny of propriety. […] It's as though not even the most basic level of imaginative thought had been admitted into consciousness to cause the slight disturbance. A century of destruction unlike any other [was drawing to a close] and here they are up in arms about Faunia Farley. Here in America either it's Faunia Farley or it's Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk! (152–154).

By connecting moral outrage at both Clinton and Silk – though ignoring the power differential in both relationships in a way only possible before #MeToo – the passage once more hints at the fact that censoriousness and Hawthorne's »persecuting spirit« are to be found on the Left and the Right (»appropriate«, of course, also captures left-wing as well as right-wing narrow-minded propriety).[10]

The novel thus once more complicates the attribution of »political correctness« – or, today, »cancel culture« – as being a leftist obsession. Thus, it has long been established that both have been used by the right as a campaigning term for allegedly excessive leftist language policing:[11] »The phrase ›political correctness‹ is used rhetorically by the Right to describe leftist ideas such as multiculturalism and feminism that they do not agree with and as a stigmatizing term« (Barnard 121). Moreover, attempts at censoring opinions, both in the form of seeking to have academics fired and of banning or censoring books, occur both on the left and on the right: »Of the 471 incidents we found of attempts to get professors fired, about 164 of them (35 %) were from the right.« (Haidt/Lukianoff), while attempts at banning books – especially on LGBTQIA+ subjects, on sexuality and sexual health, and on racism – are even more prevalent on the right (cf. PEN; ALA).

10 In this vein, Morgan points to the inverse parallelism with Coleman Silk in that Ringold in *I Married a Coomunist* is forced out of his teaching job »from the opposite side« (118).

11 As has also been frequently shown, ›cancel culture‹, in the form denounced by the right, is often a fiction – it happens less often than is widely claimed and those who have indeed been disinvited from festivals, conferences, podiums – allegedly cancelled or silenced, as the right has it – have frequently been interviewed and have had their say elsewhere, frequently with at least as much (or more) publicity than the event originally cancelled would in all likelihood have had (for an illuminating discussion of this mechanism, cf. Daub).

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What further contributes to the political even-handedness of the novel is an ambivalence in the portrayal of Coleman: While he sometimes seems a rather likeable common-sense liberal humanist against the modish careerism of Delphine Roux, he elsewhere appears as the unpleasant mouthpiece of cultural conservatism in the vein of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* when he speaks of contemporary students as »incredibly badly educated« and »far and away the dumbest generation in American history« (191f.). What are we to make, for instance, of the following passage (the debate continues for several pages)?

> His difficulties with Delphine Roux had begun the first semester he was back in the classroom, when one of his students […] went to her, as department chair, to complain about the Euripides plays in Coleman's Greek tragedy course […] the student, Elena Mitnick, found them ›degrading to women.‹ »So what shall I do to accommodate Miss Mitnick? Strike Euripides from my reading list?« »Not at all. Clearly everything depends on how you teach Euripides.« […] »Miss Mitnick's misreading of those two plays,« he was telling her, »is so grounded in narrow, parochial ideological concerns that it does not lend itself to correction. […] I've been reading and thinking about these plays all my life.« »But never from Elena's feminist perspective.« »[Our students have] been incredibly badly educated. […] Providing the most naive of readers with a feminist perspective on Euripides is one of the best ways you could devise to close down their thinking«. (184, 191, 192)

The position Coleman here formulates is the fairly common one that to evaluate the cultural production of the past by applying the ethical criteria of the present is not only anachronistic, it is also a fairly undemanding intellectual pursuit that proceeds largely by unreflectively responding to individual words without engaging with the complexity of a text. Although the novel thus again raises questions rather than simply taking sides – Coleman is too complex and ambivalent a character to lend himself to any simplistic manipulation of sympathy and a straightforward propagation of any specific position – Coleman's objections to a specific form of engaging (or refusing to do so) with potentially provocative subjects appear to foreshadow Lilla's critique:

> [Progressive academics once] imagined raucous, no-holds-barred debates over big ideas, not a roomful of students looking suspiciously at one another. They imagined being provocative and forcing students to defend their positions, not getting emails from deans suggesting they come in for a little talk. (2017, 92).

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4. Perspective, Intertextuality, Ambiguity, Reflexivity, or: Reading Fiction as Fiction

Though one would like to think it superfluous to point out that literary form – narrative perspective, questions of chronology, the difference between a character's voice and authorial voice – matters, some current discussions make the reminder seem worthwhile. This may especially be the case with *The Human Stain*. Thus, the chronology of the novel is central to how it ›works‹: When Zuckerman begins to write his book, Coleman and Faunia are already dead, and the text is cast as Zuckerman's retrospective attempt to reconstruct Coleman's life and downfall. Zuckerman knows about Coleman's family origins, but initially lets us share his own and everyone else's original perspective and leads us astray by first telling us that Coleman Silk was Jewish. The complexity of Coleman's identity in the novel is highlighted by the fact that he is thus introduced as a Jew before we learn about his real origins in a flashback after more than one fourth of the novel (85ff.). Furthermore, we learn about Coleman Silk's secret long before we know how Nathan Zuckerman finds out about it.

Even before the revealing flashback to his childhood and youth, however, there are hints at Coleman's African-American origins, but they only assume significance in retrospect, upon rereading. These hints are particularly frequent just before the beginning of the flashback (6, 11, 15 f., 45, 79, 81, 82, 84). Arguably the most interesting of these hints occurs when Zuckerman describes Coleman's appearance with its »tightly coiled, short-clipped hair« and the »light yellowish skin pigmentation« which gives him »something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white« (15 f.).

A further hint, occurring immediately before the flashback, is to be found in Coleman's argument with his lawyer Nelson Primus, who advises him to end his relationship with Faunia. Infuriated, Coleman tells him »I never again want to […] see your smug fucking lily-white face« (81), and Primus wonders about this curious expression. This might, in Freudian terms, be called »the return of the repressed«, and it is this seemingly pointless insult to his lawyer which reveals, before we even know Coleman is Black, that his perception of life and of people's chances in life is shaped by his being African American. One's roots, the past, and history, it seems, are inescapable; and the American ideals of self-realization and constant reinvention of the self come at a high price. The full significance of Coleman's locution, however, only becomes apparent much later. When Coleman tells his mother he is going to withhold his family history from his wife-to-be Iris and to deny his family, his brother Walter tells him never »to show [his] lily-white face around [the] house again« (145).

The foregrounding of Zuckerman's attempts to reconstruct Coleman's life and his thoughts – as well as those of other key characters, Faunia, Delphine Roux, Les Farley – leads to a fascinating layering of narrative personae, reflecting conscious-

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nesses and focalising instances. In one passage, for instance, the author Philip Roth has his narrator Zuckerman imagine what Coleman might have believed Faunia was thinking about her life and her past (cf. 164f.).

Zuckerman thus constructs a number of powerful passages of largely free indirect speech in which he gives us insights into Coleman's view of the »spooks« incident, of the parallels between Clinton's case and his own, or of his relationship with Faunia or with his daughter Lisa (151–164). Similarly constructed passages of free indirect speech simulate Les' perceptions of his experience in Vietnam and his rage and frustration in his present life (64–74). Delphine Roux' perspective on the »spooks« affair, on Coleman's relationship with Faunia, on her own desires, experiences with men and her feelings of repulsion as well as attraction for Coleman Silk are similarly rendered in long passages of free indirect speech (259–283, cf. also 193–201). One of these is the ultimately farcical passage in which she formulates a personal ad for the *New York Review of Books* looking for a partner and ends up accidentally mailing it to her entire department (259–277). The partner she seeks, it becomes clear here, is exactly Coleman Silk. Finally, there are a number of such passages of free indirect speech which reconstruct Faunia's thoughts (165–169, 225–247).

Thus, although Zuckerman himself knows about Coleman when he begins to write the book, he attempts to recreate for the reader his own lack of knowledge while hinting at Coleman's secret all along. Even after the revelation, the novel maintains a double perspective in that Zuckerman recreates and shares with the reader his original perspective of not knowing. This allows for fascinating reflections in passages about times with Coleman when Zuckerman himself did not know yet, while we as readers have already been told about Coleman's secret. A key passage of the novel brings together many of its key themes, concerns and narrative devices:

> I sat on the grass, astonished, unable to account for what I was thinking: he has a secret. […] How do I reach that conclusion? Why a secret? [S]omewhere there's a blank in him too, a blotting out, an excision, though of what I can't begin to guess … can't even know, really, if I am making sense with this hunch or fancifully registering my ignorance of another human being. Only some three months later, when I learned the secret and began this book […] did I understand the underpinning of the pact between them: he had told her his whole story. […] How do I know she knew? I don't. […] Now that they're dead, nobody can know. For better or worse, I can only do what everyone does who thinks that they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It's now all I do. (213, cf. also 63, 208f., 321, 326, 333, 337, 338, 339 *et passim*)

These fundamental limitations on what can be known about another human being in general apply to all characters in the novel and their thoughts about one another. In

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this vein, Zuckerman also frequently speculates whether Coleman ever told Faunia his secret (326, 337 and 340f.), and even his assumption that Les Farley forced them off the road and killed them remains unproven (256f., 350 and 354).

Zuckerman thus constantly foregrounds the fact that his narrative is to a large extent based on imagination and that his history of Coleman's life and particularly of his last months is at least as much construction as it is reconstruction. The novel is therefore fundamentally also concerned with what can ever be known about another human being and with the importance of narrative imagination in reconstructing a life (cf. also Safer 224 and Royal).

Thus, criticism accusing Roth of presumptuously arrogating the right to imagine, as a white writer, the life of a Black man passing as white, overlooks the fact that the problematic nature of such an attempt is made explicit on a metafictional level through the mediating figure of Roth's narrator Nathan Zuckerman and thus becomes a central topic of the novel itself. Indeed, the novel is not least cast as Zuckerman's exploration of the problematic nature of reconstructing an identity, of imagining a life, with frequent meditations on how much will always remain unknowable about other people: »What we know is that […] nobody knows anything.« (208f.), »there really is no bottom to what is not known.« (315; for a discussion of the novel's metanarrative and intertextual strategies, cf. Gurr).

Many of the central issues of the novel and many of its strategies of staging the debate come together in the discussions between Zuckerman and Coleman's sister Ernestine after their encounter at his funeral. Here, lamenting ›political correctness‹ in academia, a decline of standards in education generally, and criticizing the institution of Black History Month, Ernestine appears to express the kind of reactionary cultural conservatism Roth has often been accused of ventilating in *The Human Stain*:

> Sounds from what you've told me [about Coleman's resignation over the ›spooks‹ incident] that anything is possible in a college today. Sounds like the people there forgot what it is to teach. Sounds like what they do is closer to buffoonery. […] One has to be so terribly frightened of every word one uses? What ever happened to the First Amendment […] In East Orange High they stopped long ago reading the old classics. They haven't even heard of *Moby-Dick*, much less read it. Youngsters were coming to me the year I retired, telling me that for Black History Month they would only read a biography of a black by a black. What difference, I would ask them, if it's a black author or it's a white author? I'm impatient with Black History Month altogether. (328f.)[12]

12 For reasons of space I can only suggest here that, when Ernestine concludes her critique of identity politics in education, decline in academic standards and epistemic relativism by stating that »There are no more criteria, Mr. Zuckerman, only opinions.« (330f.), Roth's novel connects the present-day debate about »post-truth« with a debate raging at the time Roth wrote *The Human Stain*, namely the debate about theoretical physicist Alan Sokal's hoax essay

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Sánchez Canales, citing this passage, refers to Ernestine Silk as »one of Roth's mouthpieces« (125) – this is too simple, and too simple in several ways: As Scherr has pointed out, crucial factual inaccuracies in her account of the death of Charles Drew undermine a straightforward understanding of her role as Roth's mere »mouthpiece«: »›Dr. Charles Drew,‹ she told me, discovered how to prevent blood from clotting so it could be banked. Then he was injured in an automobile accident, and the hospital that was nearest would not take colored, and he died by bleeding to death.« (328f.) But as Scherr points out, this account is at least biased if not downright counterfactual. In turn, however, his claim that Roth »[laughs] at Ernestine's exasperating insistence on her ›politically incorrect‹ position while she simultaneously expounds politically correct dogma« (95) and that the novel thus deliberately discredits her positions on these matters seems to me to be short-sighted yet again: Rather than simplistically taking sides for or against any specific position in debates on identity politics, ›political correctness‹, questions of representation and canon formation or of the politics of memory and commemoration, Roth's novel stages the debate by having various positions voiced in a complex layering of perspectives that may or may not be undercut or relativized in the process.

5. Conclusion

Published midway between the first outbreak of the academic culture wars of the 1980s and current debates about identity politics, Roth's novel lends itself to bringing together the strands of our discussion, not in the form of lessons to be taken home, but of questions raised, ambiguities pointed out and trade-offs made explicit. What Hayes has argued about the novel's take on the canon debate – »Roth's response to the political questions raised by the debate as a whole is in fact much more nuanced than has generally been recognized« (227) – can thus in fact be observed for a range of other issues, too.

On some issues, however, the novel *does* appear to take a clear stance – not discursively, but performatively[13]: by virtue of being the provocative novel that it is, the novel ›performs‹ a critique of demands that literature provide a ›safe space‹: if literature itself, literary studies or academia generally is to be a ›safe space‹ in the sense that the objects of discussion must not be provocative to anyone, the novel, if not dis-

spoofing the – real or alleged – disregard for facts and scientific evidence in some branches of the humanities and social sciences.

13 This, to be sure, is not inconsistent with my critique of mining a novel for arguments for or against a certain position: I am not using the point of view of one character, but the ›performance‹ of the novel itself.

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cursively, then performatively, appears to suggest that we might as well shut down the humanities departments altogether.

Similarly, while it problematizes the possibility of Zuckerman's ever appropriately reconstructing Coleman's life with all its complex entanglements and motivations, it applies these reflections far more fundamentally to the reconstruction of *any* life and thus goes far beyond the rather narrow discussion about the legitimacy of even *trying* to reconstruct or narrate the life of someone with a different ethnicity. The novel thus appears as an impassioned and compelling plea for the fundamental artistic liberty of doing so as a *raison d'être* of fiction.[14]

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14 In sections I, II and IV, this essay re-uses individual passages from Gurr 2008, an introductory reading of the novel. These passages are here discussed in different contexts and with different guiding questions in mind.

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