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CLASSICAL GREEK ARCHETYPES IN PHILIP ROTH'S *AMERICAN PASTORAL* AND *THE HUMAN STAIN*

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I.

After a 50-year-plus literary career—from *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959) to *Nemesis* (2010)—Philip Roth has demonstrated a deep knowledge of European and North American literature: throughout his novels, there are countless references to novelists, dramatists and short story tellers as diverse as William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, Thomas Mann, Gustave Flaubert, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway and Saul Bellow, just to give a few examples.¹

In *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Human Stain* (2000), Roth takes a particular interest in classical Greek literature. In this essay, I will demonstrate that he resorts to the use of classical imagery and archetypes in order to establish a connection between past and present and to show how some of his characters, whose behavior and fate echo that of classical figures like Oedipus, rush to meet their fate by precisely trying to escape it. The underlying idea in both novels is that trying to escape one's past actually brings about one's fall. In the case of Roth's characters, attempting to escape their fate involves passing, that is to say pretending to be what they are not.

II.

American Pastoral tells the story of Seymour (Irving) Levov—an assimilated Jew—who is known as the "Swede" on account of his good looks: blue eyes, blond hair and super athletic skills are features that enable him to turn into a sports hero at a relatively young age. Levov, who is compared to Zeus at the outset of the novel, is recurrently viewed "as a god," almost as a "divine"

¹ See SÁNCHEZ-CANALES [2011a, 2010] for a detailed analysis of the presence of European writers in Roth's fiction.

being, a “mystique” and a “mythic character” who “had no limits” [ROTH 1997 : 15, 72]. This godlike creature is, however, a mere human being with clay feet. He is, like the gods and goddesses who inhabit the Homeric world, an imperfect individual whose tragic fall is announced early in the story when he is described by the narrator Nathan Zuckerman as “an instrument of history” [5]. This quote is essential in the novel because, beyond the apparent legend of the sports hero is the figure of a mortal who is in the hands of fate. Being in the hands of fate means that, no matter how hard a person strives to escape, elude or change its course, his fate is ineluctably determined. (This is one of the central themes of not only *American Pastoral* but, as we will see later on, of *The Human Stain* as well.)

The implication of such a fact is that the apparently divine Swede, who is subjected to historical forces which inexorably escape his control, is in reality a man doomed to fall backward into failure. Through his story-life—and through the story-life of Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*, among others—“Philip Roth, who seems to show a deterministic view of history, underscores the idea that fate is something predetermined for every individual” [SÁNCHEZ-CANALES 2011b : 207]. For this reason, any attempt to escape it will have tragic consequences for the human being: “If you dare the gods and are fluent, what terrible thing do you think will happen?” [ROTH 1997 : 90-91]. It is in this sense that I find that the Swede—and more clearly Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*—can be compared with Sophocles’s Oedipus. Like the classical Greek king, the more the Swede attempts to elude his fate, the more he rushes to meet it, as is described in the second part of the novel entitled “the Fall” [117-281].

In the classical Greek tragedy, the hero’s fall is always preceded by excess or a tragic flaw—i.e. *hamartia* in Aristotelian terms—which leads him to perdition. In the case of Oedipus, his tragic flaw consisted in returning home and, in this way, in ignoring the oracle’s prophecy, according to which he would kill his father and marry his mother. As Aristotle explains in the next extract from his *Poetics*, Oedipus’s *hamartia* opens his eyes by revealing who he really is.

Reversal is a change to the opposite direction of events [...] with probability or necessity: as when in the *Oedipus* the person who comes to bring Oedipus happiness, and intends to rid him of his fear about his mother, effects the opposite by revealing Oedipus’ true identity. [...] Recognition, as the very name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, leading to friendship or to enmity, and involving matters which bear on prosperity or adversity. [ARISTOTLE : 11, 65]

In Oedipus's case, knowledge, which brings about his ruin, entails continuous suffering on his part. Stephen Halliwell explains that

[...] *hamartia* can best be understood as designating a whole area of possibilities, an area unified by a pattern of the causal yet unintended implication of tragedy's characters in the pitiable and terrible "transformation" of their own lives. *Hamartia*, in short, embraces all the ways in which *human vulnerability, at its extremes, exposes itself not through sheer, arbitrary misfortune* (something inconsistent with the intelligible plot structure which Aristotle requires of a good play), *but through the erring involvement of tragic figures in their own sufferings.* [HALLIWELL 1995 : 17; emphasis mine]

Like Oedipus, the Swede has also spent a great deal of his life trying to escape his fate and, much the same as his classical counterpart, his clash with harsh reality—which also entails knowledge—ends up in predictable tragedy. Just like Oedipus—and Coleman Silk—the Swede's *hamartia* consists in passing for what he is not.²

When he was a teenager, the Swede created a new identity for himself. In this way, he tried to escape—i.e. efface—his true self, his (Jewish) background, which he regarded as an imperfection or impurity.³ Effacing what is viewed as an imperfection—the human stain that gives title to Roth's 2000 homonymous novel—entails giving up on one's own past.

Once the characters have removed their imperfection, they begin to create a world of their own. It is then that the characters in *American Pastoral* find themselves trapped between two opposing worlds, the idyllic world inhabited by the Swede and his wife summarized in the name of his house and property—*Old Rimrock*—and the world inhabited by his daughter Merry symbolized in the names of her cities of residence, *New York* and *Newark*.

Old Rimrock is a kind of Pastoral or Arcadia where the Swede intends to lead a life of retreat. In the classical world of Greek poets like Hesiod and Homer and Roman poets such as Virgil, the myth of the *Golden Age* alludes to a state of complete happiness which is situated in a remote past in which individuals ignore worries. They are not subjected to ailments typical of old age or to the anxiety provoked by death because death is regarded as a

² PARRISH [2007] addresses the issue of identity in detail.

³ For an extended analysis of the issue of impurity in Philip Roth's novels, see BRAUNER [2004, 2007].

peaceful sleep. In such a place, there is no room for wars, injustice or discord. The theme of the Golden Age is typically associated with a simple life in the countryside. The individual lives with the gods in such a harmonious environment. One day, however, the human being, seized by *hubris*—etymologically this means “arrogance” or “excess”—brings about his *hamartia*, which is the beginning of man’s downfall. In *The Iliad*, there are references to “idyllic places” that later on are called *locus amoenus*—etymologically, “a pleasant place.” Old Rimrock seems to be modeled on the classical *locus amoenus*.

The Swede is not the only character in *American Pastoral* who, by effacing part of his background, pretends to dwell in a *locus amoenus*. Like Delphine Roux in *The Human Stain*, who tries to slough off her French background, the Swede’s wife Dawn also wants to distance herself from her past—symbolized in her becoming Miss New Jersey during her youth:

She went to Avon to get away from her beauty, but Dawn couldn’t get away from it any more than she could openly flaunt it. You have to enjoy power, have a certain ruthlessness, to accept the beauty and not mourn the fact that it overshadows everything else. [ROTH 1997 : 195]

Dawn’s new identity—her name means “the first light of day” or “daybreak”—is symbolized in her facelift. Like her husband, Dawn’s goal is to efface a painful part of her past. The problem is that this surgical operation, however successful it is, cannot erase memory. The Swede observes: “He did a great job [...] Erased all that suffering. He gave her back her face,” to which his mother replies: “Maybe you erase the suffering from the face, but you can’t remove the memory inside” [298]. Dawn suffers a tragic fall too: from Miss New Jersey—a kind of goddess of beauty—to a human being of blood and flesh:

Because Dawn *had twice been hospitalized in a clinic near Princeton for suicidal depression*, [the Swede] had come to accept that *the damage was permanent and that she would be able to function only under the care of psychiatrists and by taking sedatives and an antidepressant medication*—that she would be in and out of psychiatric hospitals and that he would be visiting her in those places for the rest of their lives. [177; emphasis mine]

While it is true that Dawn would like to erase her Miss New Jersey background, it is also true that she feels very proud of her achievements and successes. These are acutely summarized in the label that identifies her in the cattle market: “Dawn Levov, Arcady Breeders, which was the name of her company, taken from their Old Rimrock address, Box 62, Arcady Hill Road” [199].

Dawn's label enables me to refer to one of the main axes of *American Pastoral*: the Pastoral vs. the Antipastoral—i.e. “Counterpastoral” [SHOSTAK 2004] or “idylle de l'expérience” [IVANOVA 2010]. The characters of the novel are trapped between two antithetical worlds, the idyllic world inhabited by the Swede and the world inhabited by his daughter Merry.

The incompatibility between the Swede's quasi-mythical world and the modern world represented by Merry can be easily perceived when Zuckerman says that

[t]wo years after her disappearance, there is a bomb blast in *the most elegant Greek Revival house* on the most peaceful residential street in Greenwich village—three explosions and a fire destroy the *old four-story brick townhouse*. [ROTH 1997: 149; emphasis mine]

Virtually overnight, his Pastoral is destroyed when it comes into contact with the real world—the Antipastoral—embodied in Merry, in her blowing-up of the Old Rimrock post office and the tragic consequences of her attack. Merry—“[t]he unreality of being in the hands of this child!”—“is the symbol of the brutality of history, the unexpected” [ROTH 1997 : 134; SÁNCHEZ-CANALES 2011b : 213].

III.

The comparison between Seymour Levov and Zeus made by Nathan Zuckerman can be made again in the case of Coleman Silk, a septuagenarian classics professor who is charged with an unfair accusation of racism brought against him.

For instance, just like Zeus—known as the father of both men and gods—lived on Mount Olympus, from where he observed human beings, saw everything, governed all and rewarded or punished for good or evil behavior, Coleman, during his 16-year-plus deanship, used to be a dominant figure at Athena College—i.e. a satirical counterpart of Zeus' Mount Olympus. Much the same as tyrannical Zeus, Coleman used to be feared because he ruled Athena College despotically [ROTH 2000 : 7-10].⁴

A second aspect in which Zeus and Coleman are similar consists in their prolific sexual life. Zeus had a reputation for having numerous love affairs with both immortal and mortal beings. As a consequence of his sexual intercourse, he had countless children, among whom the twins Apollo and

⁴ All quotations from the novel will be taken from the 2001 [2000] Vintage edition.

Artemis. Coleman, a kind of modern Zeus, had four kids with his wife Iris—the counterpart of Hera, Zeus’ wife—among whom his twin children Mark and Lisa are noteworthy mentioning. Finally, Zeus’s promiscuous sexual life is satirized in Roth’s depiction of Coleman’s consumption of Viagra. According to the narrator, the old professor needed Viagra to overcome his sexual problems with Faunia Farley. In one of his initial conversations with Nathan Zuckerman, Coleman compares Zeus’s prolific sexual life with his mistresses and his own with young Faunia: “Thanks to Viagra I’ve come to understand Zeus’s amorous transformations. That’s what they should have called Viagra. They should have called it Zeus” [32].

The framework within which *The Human Stain* is written is set in the epigraph of the novel—“What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?” “By banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood...” (*Oedipus Rex*). Like *American Pastoral*, *The Human Stain* offers Roth’s deterministic view of life.

The epigraph from *Oedipus the King* is not the only direct reference to classical Greek literature made in *The Human Stain*. Coleman Silk’s explanation of the origins of European literature, which becomes a key referent in *The Human Stain*, also helps to set the novel within a classical framework. In this way, a strong link between the ancient and modern worlds is established. The following extract, which focuses on the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon over a slave woman called Briseis, foreshadows Coleman’s quarrel with Les Farley over Faunia.⁵

“You know how European literature begins?” he’d ask, after having taken the roll at the first class meeting. “*With a quarrel*. All of European literature springs from a fight.” And then he picked up his copy of *The Iliad* and read to the class the opening lines. “Divine Muse, sing of the ruinous wrath of Achilles ... *Begin where they first quarrelled*, Agamemnon the King of men, and great Achilles’. And what are they quarrelling about, these two violent, mighty souls? It’s as basic as a barroom brawl. *They are quarrelling over a woman. A girl, really. A girl stolen from her father. A girl abducted in a war.*” [4; emphasis mine]

This brief passage, which summarizes some crucial events in *The Iliad*—Achilles’ wrath, his confrontation with Agamemnon over Briseis and the slave woman’s abduction—allows me to connect Achilles’ and Coleman’s respective lives: like Achilles, who confronts Agamemnon over Briseis,

⁵ Book I of *The Iliad* [1-611] entitled “Quarrel, Oath, and Promise” is devoted to the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon.

Coleman confronts Les Farley, a Vietnam veteran, over Faunia. It is no accident that Les' wrath, like Achilles' and Coleman's, is uncontrollable. Les is irate because of Vietnam, because of Faunia's previous affairs and above all because of her present affair with Coleman. Coleman, on the other hand, is enraged at some of his students and colleagues because of the unfair accusations of racism and male chauvinism brought against him.

When early in the novel Nathan Zuckerman refers to Achilles' downfall, he also indirectly refers to Coleman's. In this sense, it is possible to claim that Achilles' and Coleman's lives—respectively, the classical and modern worlds—are once again clearly interwoven.

[...] Great heroic Achilles, who, through the strength of his rage at an insult—the insult of not getting the girl—isolates himself, positions himself defiantly outside the very society whose glorious protector he is and whose need of him is enormous. A quarrel, then, a brutal quarrel over a young girl and her young body and the delights of sexual rapacity: there, for better or worse, in this offense against the phallic entitlement, the phallic *dignity* (emphasis in original), of a powerhouse of a warrior prince, *is how the great imaginative literature of Europe begins, and that is why, close to three thousand years later, we are going to begin here today ...* [5; emphasis mine]

At the end of *The Human Stain*, Nathan Zuckerman explains that *The Iliad* is a poem “about the ravaging spirit of man” [335]. This poem represents Coleman's troubled state of mind throughout the novel.

In *The Human Stain*, as in the case of *American Pastoral*, *The Iliad* and other classical works, in spite of the characters' submission to outer forces, they try to cast off their fates by passing for what they are not. In Debra Shostak's words,

[i]n reinforcing a deterministic view of the individual actor's fate at some distance from the freewheeling self-inventions of the preceding work, Roth shows the self not just as a subject *in* history, but subject *to* it. [SHOSTAK 2004 : 237]⁶

While in the case of the Swede his passing consists in his effort to efface his Jewishness from an early age, Coleman's passing consists in his attempt to hide his true identity—his African American background—as an epitome of his wish to obliterate a part of his past (history). Coleman passes and

⁶ For a more detailed account of the role of history or the past in *The Human Stain*, see MORLEY [in SHOSTAK 2011].

Delphine, who tries to break with her “classical” past, becomes an advocate of modern criticism and political correctness in order to succeed at Athena College and by extension in American academia. However, both Coleman and Delphine fail to do so because, like the Greek gods and goddesses whose fates were constrained by *moira*, the goddess of destiny, the fates of Roth’s characters seem to be beyond their control.

Athena College has turned its back on the study of classical literature: Delphine’s scorn of Coleman’s “humanist approach to Greek tragedy” reflects the little room there is for the classics in this college [ROTH 2000 : 193]. Besides, the unfair accusations of racism and male chauvinism brought against Coleman evidence a ferocious attack against classical education. To a certain extent, such an attack is launched against a key part of the characters’ own culture.

The superficial study of the classics and their possible disappearance from the college syllabi will ultimately bring about the denial of a significant part of contemporary humankind’s history. [SÁNCHEZ-CANALES 2009 : 112]

Ironically, it is through the modern individual’s ignorance or negligence of the classics that the whole education system collapses. For this reason, one may go so far as to claim that Coleman Silk’s death embodies the failure of the American education of the 1990s.

We may now turn our attention to one of the most significant scenes in *The Human Stain*—Coleman Silk’s funeral. Professor Keble’s opening words at Coleman’s funeral will help us see and understand the response of the audience to his death.

In much the same way the epigraph of the novel and Coleman’s initial explanation of the origins of European literature prepare the reader for what will follow, Keble’s words, as in the case of the messenger’s news in *Oedipus the King*, prepare the audience at the funeral for the verbal narration of the events. Keble directs his audience toward the response to that spectacle, the Aristotelian response of pity. The audience sympathizes with Coleman’s suffering as they try to understand the reasons behind his pain. This is part of the process which creates Aristotelian catharsis. In Sophocles—and in Roth through the character of Keble—this catharsis or purification is channelled into physical expression of tears shed both by Oedipus and his children in *Oedipus the King*. In *The Human Stain*, Aristotelian catharsis occurs through the audience’s sympathy and Mark’s hysterical cry.

When Mark had finished, he shut the book and then, having induced a grim serenity in everyone else, *was himself overcome by hysteria*. That

was how Coleman's funeral ended [...] He thought *Coleman was going to stay here till the whole play could be performed*, as though he and Coleman had been set down not in life but on the southern hillside of the Athenian acropolis, in an outdoor theater sacred to Dionysus, where, before the eyes of ten thousand spectators, *the dramatic unities were once rigorously observed and the great cathartic cycle was enacted annually. The human desire for a beginning, a middle, and an end—and an end appropriate in magnitude to that beginning and middle—is realized nowhere so thoroughly as in the plays that Coleman taught at Athena College.* [ROTH 2000 : 314-315; emphasis mine]

While Coleman attempts to escape his fate and gets eventually killed, Delphine also tries to escape her past and, although this does not kill her, it does cause her fall. Delphine treasures a ring with a carving of Zeus and Danae that a classics professor of hers gave her "as a love token" [186]. Indeed, the ring symbolizes the inescapable bond she still holds with that ancient Greek world she is not only trying to get rid of but also exterminate. Delphine is apparently consumed by an internal struggle between her French classical background and her American self-made life.

Faunia, like Coleman's Greek gods and the rest of human beings, is a flawed creature, not because she was born into original sin—"Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining"—but because "all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It's insane. What is the quest to purify, if not *more* impurity?" [242]. According to the narrator, evil probably originates in the human being's quest for purity. When individuals seek to become pure and holy, they actually become more impure and vicious. For this reason, purity should be something to elude, rather than something to pursue.

Faunia, who tries to "purify" her life and come to terms with herself alongside Coleman, fails in her attempt. Coleman, who tries to "purify" his African-American background by marrying a white woman, also fails. The taint of impurity or imperfection is present in the Coleman-Faunia relationship and in their eventual tragic end.⁷

In a scene towards the end of the story in which Coleman and Faunia dance alone in his house, Coleman compares Faunia's youth and beauty to Helen of Troy's. Coleman and Faunia are, like Paris and Helen, deeply in love with each other:

⁷ See note 3.

[Coleman] "There's no one like you. Helen of Troy."

[Faunia] "Helen of Nowhere. Helen of Nothing."

[Coleman] "Keep dancing." [ROTH 2000 : 232]

Faunia's words "Helen of Nowhere. Helen of Nothing" summarize her life and foreshadow her imminent death. This modern, American version of the classical Greek Helen is despite herself responsible for the new Troy. Just as Helen's lust spawned the Trojan War and the annihilation of men (warriors from both the Achaean and Trojan armies), Faunia, a sexually attractive woman, who is repeatedly referred to as Voluptas throughout *The Human Stain*, brings about destruction and death [37, 47, 116, 157, 234]. Just as king Menelaus tried to recover his wife Helen from Paris and outlived him, Les Farley tries to recover his ex-wife Faunia from Coleman and outlives him. Once again, the reader realizes that the Rothian characters' fates, which follow a classical Greek pattern, have been tragically predetermined.

If there is a lesson one learns from the story-lives of Coleman Silk, Faunia Farley and Delphine Roux in *The Human Stain* and from those of Seymour Levov and his wife Dawn in *American Pastoral* is that the tragic consequences of Oedipus's attempt to escape his fate repeat themselves in contemporary, modern life.

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