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Grasping the "Raw I": Race and Tragedy in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*[1]

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"Practical identity" in philosophical literature signifies the set of commitments that define a person's ethical life: commitments to family, to country, to a profession, or to a cause that a person must fulfill in order to have integrity and act ethically. It is a commonplace that some roles that generate commitments are inherited: we do not, for example, choose many of our family roles, our national identity, or our race. Whether we are responsible to norms within these unchosen roles is already a vexed question as we contemplate practical identity.

Within this subgroup of inherited roles, we find an additional complication. A society's conventions determine to a large extent whether an inherited role subjects the individual who inhabits it to injustice. Being a daughter, for instance, does not necessarily subject one to injustice. But it can if the norms around being a daughter involve less education, less freedom, and more responsibility than the norms involved in being a son.

The situation is even more complex with race: while the status "daughter" exists independently of social norms, "race," depending on whom you ask, may be a complete social construct to begin with. Regardless, race is certainly something we in our culture inherit. We do not just inherit it the way we inherit hair color; we often inherit it as a *role*, as coming with its own set of expectations and norms. The same thing applies, then, to race as does to "daughter": depending on the society in which you live, your racial identity can subject you to injustice. Unfortunately, in American society, being of a racial category other than white has frequently entailed deep, wrenching injustice.

It seems intuitively unfair, then, to imagine that an unchosen, perhaps completely constructed and *unjust* role could generate ethical obligations. To put it another way: it would seem impossible that violating norms generated by such a role could itself be unethical. How could refusing to participate in an unethical scheme be unethical?

In this paper, I will use Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* to probe this question and others. What claim, if any, can an unjust social convention such as racism make on an individual's practical identity? Can unjust institutions make loyalty to disadvantage ethically obligatory? Thinking of race in this context, I will claim, challenges assumptions about autonomy and ethics that are at the crux of our experience of ethical life. I will also argue that *The Human Stain* is a tragedy. Roth's language and plot themselves suggest this; more important for my purposes, Roth's novel can also be parsed according to philosophical theories of tragedy. In arguing for its philosophical significance, I will primarily refer to the Hegelian tradition of tragic analysis, a tradition that frequently associates tragedy with attitudes towards social roles and with social upheaval.[2] Hegelian analyses of tragedy also characteristically highlight questions of agency and freedom: Roth's portrayal of his protagonist ultimately challenges, I will argue, contemporary conceptions of freedom, specifically those entailed by the American dream. Roth's novel highlights this conception of freedom as particularly self-deceptive and as having enormous tragic potential. In challenging us to recognize the tragic potential at the heart of our society, Roth warns us, I think, that we ignore this potential at our own risk.

The "Raw I"

The Human Stain features Coleman Silk, described as a precocious teenager growing up in 1930s New Jersey who discovers an early passion and aptitude for the classics. Overcoming disadvantaged origins, he becomes a successful college professor, scholar, and dean at prestigious Athena College. But Coleman's success is at the price of a betrayal of self and family: Coleman is black, but light-skinned enough to "pass" and so to take advantage of the upward mobility offered to white men of his generation.

Coleman grows up in a predominantly white neighborhood and excels at school, following his father's example of how to live a dignified life as a black American. But his father dies during Coleman's first year at Howard University. Coleman's first year had not gone well: in a Washington, D.C. Woolworths, Coleman has been called a nigger for the first time; at Howard itself, he has seen himself as a Negro for the first time, and he finds that he wants neither. Roth's narrator, the novelist Nathan Zuckerman, reports:

> Then he went off to Washington and, in the first month, he was a nigger and nothing else and he was a *Negro* and nothing else, and he wasn't having it. No. No. He saw the fate awaiting him, and he wasn't having it.…You can't let the

> big they impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they become a we and impose its ethics on you. (Roth 2000, 108)

With the vertiginous realization that, if he does not *say* he is black, strangers do not generally *assume* he is black, Coleman resolves to grasp "the raw I with all its agility." He decides to *choose* to be white, to shed his burdensome identity as a black man once and for all. He "was Coleman, the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I." He is now free on the big stage "to go ahead and be stupendous. Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they, and I" (Roth 2000, 109). Tellingly, Coleman sees the deception he is about to practice as part of his new, powerful self: "Self-knowledge but *concealed*," he says. "What is as powerful as that?" (Roth 2000, 108). Coleman's body has betrayed him in placing an obstacle between him and the life he wants to lead; but its betrayal has not been thorough enough, allowing Coleman to practice betrayal in return.

I think that we can absolutely endorse Coleman's refusal to allow the "big they to impose its bigotry" on him. Part of the vice-like grip of racial identity is that one *usually* cannot simply walk away from it the way one can (theoretically) walk away from or hide a religious, political or sexual identity that might limit one's life chances. Coleman's luck in being *able* to walk away from the injustices of racism and realize his potential should, theoretically, be cause for celebration. His refusal to let the "little they become a we and impose its ethics on [him]" might make us flinch a bit: a struggling black community needing his talents does not in itself generate obligation, but his callous dismissal of this community seems intemperate. And what are we to make of someone who wants to be a *pioneer* of the I?

Our discomfort intensifies as Coleman embarks on a lifetime of deception and betrayal necessitated by his decision to be white. He approaches the afternoon in which he tells his mother he is abandoning her for the white world the same way that he approaches the boxing matches he wins with such ease and style. His break with her is complete: he is not about to replicate his body's half-hearted betrayal and so never sees her again. When strangers guess his ethnic identity, they tend to guess Jewish; he allows this mistake to take root, then marries Iris Gittelman, a Jew whose "sinuous thicket" of curly hair has a chance of accounting for his children's probable hair type. In the moment in which he announces to his mother his intention to abandon her, "there floated through Coleman the eerie, crazy fear that all he ever wanted from Iris Gittelman was the explanation her appearance could provide for the texture of their children's hair" (Roth 2000, 136).

As he and his wife begin their family, Coleman prays that his children's bodies not betray his betrayal of his own family. Two sons and then twins, a boy and a girl, are born. All four look convincingly Jewish, and Coleman's relief is explicit: "The family was now complete. They'd done it–he'd made it. With not a sign of his secret on any of his kids, it was as though he had been *delivered* from his secret." Elated at this deliverance, he almost confesses his secret to Iris, resolving to "present his wife with the greatest gift he possessed: he would tell the mother of his four children who their father really was. He would tell Iris the truth" (Roth 2000, 177). But he is saved, or at least prevented, from making this confession by watching Iris react to the crisis of a friend whose husband had secretly fathered another family. Iris's description of the betrayal elicits one of Coleman's many analogies to Greek tragedy. Her friend, Iris reports, compares learning of the other family to finding corpses buried under the floor. "Yes," Coleman responds, "it's like something out of the Greeks. Out of *The Bacchae*." "Worse," Iris says, simultaneously cutting his aggrandizement down to real-life size and intensifying it, "because it's not out of *The Bacchae*. It's out of Claudia's life" (Roth 2000, 179).

Warned off by Iris's fury on behalf of her friend, Coleman considers himself saved "from the most childishly sentimental stunt he could ever have perpetrated" (Roth 2000, 179). Years later, Iris dies never knowing that her husband was black—this despite, as Zuckerman tells us, the fact that this information would not have bothered her in the slightest. Not, anyway, at the outset of their courtship.

One of Coleman's children, Mark, obsesses about family history and resents Coleman's lack of information about where *exactly* in Russia Coleman's grandparents immigrated from. Years later, Coleman rehearses the recurrent conversation with his son in his mind: "'Where did our great-grandparents come from?' Russia. 'But what city?' I asked my father and mother, but they never seemed to know for sure. One time it was one place, one time another. There was a whole generation of Jews like that. They never really knew" (Roth 2000, 176). Mark rebels against Coleman's nominal (or actually, though Mark does not know this, fake) Jewishness by becoming Orthodox. One of the most unforgiving moments of the book depicts Mark saying Kaddish over Coleman's grave, the ancient words conveying, as Zuckerman puts it, "the sobering message" that "a Jew is dead" (Roth 2000, 314). But Coleman was no Jew, and Mark is rendered pathetic in his observant grief. We are reminded at the book's end that it is still possible that one of Coleman's children will conceive a child whose appearance will expose Coleman's secret. But with Coleman's death in the book's final chapter, there will

be no one to offer an explanation for an unusually dark skin tone. There will only be astonishment, bafflement, and, perhaps, misdirected accusations.

In the figure of Coleman's older brother, Walt, Roth gives us a parallel life against which to assess the ethics of Coleman's decision. Walt returns to East Orange after finishing college on the GI bill. In the decades preceding the civil rights movement, he fights segregation locally, becoming the first black teacher in a white district, then the first black principal, then the first black superintendent of schools (Roth 2000, 322–323). We are given Coleman's list of accomplishments in a warped comparison: the first Jewish classics professor in the country, among the first Jewish faculty at Athena College, and, by the 1990s, its first Jewish dean of faculty.[3] The irony reaches an almost unbearable pitch when Coleman, late in his career, is accused of using a racist remark to describe black students. It is the sixth week of the semester and the students in question have yet to attend a single seminar. In class, Coleman speculates aloud that these absentee students must be "spooks"; he wonders, in other words, if they exist. But "spooks" has also a nastier, racial meaning, and, unbeknownst to Coleman, the students in question are black. When the students, tipped off by their dutifully attending classmates, lodge a complaint, Coleman is called upon to apologize. Coleman points out that he could not have meant his comment as a racial insult since he did not know they *were* black precisely *because* they'd never been to class. Ever the professor, he produces etymologies and linguistic records to prove that "spook" indicating a ghost and "spook" as a derogatory term for black people are unrelated (Roth 2000, 84). When his explanation is not accepted and he is asked again to apologize, Coleman rails against the black anti-Semitism that he asserts is to blame. The irony intensifies: Coleman is not a Jew, so his students could not successfully be black anti-Semites *in this case* even if they wanted to be. Coleman did not know his students were black; they in turn do not know *he* is not only not Jewish but black. Both their accusation that he is racist and his accusation that they are anti-Semites thus strangely misfire.[4] But however ludicrous the accusations against Coleman may be, his charging these students with black anti-Semitism is yet more ludicrous since *he* at least, we assume, still knows that he is not a Jew. As a result of the "spooks incident," Coleman resigns from Athena College in disgrace. Iris dies shortly thereafter of heart failure, and Coleman blames the College for her death. "Creating their false image of him …they had killed his wife of over forty years. Killed her as if they'd taken aim and fired a bullet into her heart" (Roth 2000, 11).

Although we might want to celebrate Coleman's escape from the injustices of his inherited role, we are left with no ambiguity about the havoc Coleman's

bid for independence has wreaked. His mother dies still broken-hearted at her son's renunciation of her; his sister and brother suffer in different but agonized ways (Roth 2000, 321). There is also the less tangible but no less glaring harm done to Coleman's wife and descendents. Perhaps it is true that what you don't know can't hurt you. Nevertheless, we cannot escape the sense that a grave harm has been done to each of them. Ironically, it is a harm concerning *who they are*: in his determination to be *who he is* defined *independently* of his race, Coleman has denied his descendants important information regarding who *they* are. They are condemned to be unknowingly self-created even if they think, as in Mark's case, that they are upholding heritage by embracing inherited roles.

The damage is not only to Coleman's family but also to himself. His adherence to the "raw I" develops character traits in Coleman that reverberate through his life, causing estrangement from his children and a disgraced ending to a distinguished career. His refusal to allow his body to betray who he believes he *is* continues in his refusal to accept the decline of sexual capacity that comes with his seventy-one years. Viagra enables him to initiate a torrid affair with an apparently illiterate college janitor.[5] It is his lover's ex-husband, himself suffering from Vietnam-induced post traumatic stress syndrome, who kills them both.

Coleman's refusal to accept the role his physical body gives him complicates our sympathy with him. Coleman seems to feel that his body is once again betraying him, this time by aging, by refusing him the sexual prowess that he once enjoyed. But it is harder to excuse Coleman's behavior on this front. Aging is an "injustice" we all face, should we be fortunate to live long enough; but, as a universal disrespecter of persons, it is hard to think of it as an injustice at all. Both of Coleman's rebellions—against his race and against his body—seem to stem from his insistence on the "raw I." In neither case is he willing to be defined by something that limits his idea of who he is. But in the case of his body, his defiance seems less heroic and more attributable to pride, stubbornness, or intemperance.

I will have more to say about character later; first it is worth confronting some of the moral questions that Coleman's story raises. For all the harm Coleman causes to himself and others, with what justification could we say that he *should* have stayed with the black community and experienced all of the disadvantages that doing so would have entailed? We might try to imagine a middle position: that Coleman stay in the black community—thus not betraying his birth family—but, unlike Walt, decline to dedicate his life to ending segregation, preferring to pursue a career of his choice. It was part

of the evil of institutionalized racism, however, that there could have been no such middle position. If Coleman had stayed in the black community, his life trajectory would *not* have entailed becoming a college professor and administrator, only minus the activism. His life would have been completely different: no graduate school, no professorship, no deanship, no opportunities to pursue the literature he loved so deeply. By the middle of Coleman's career, what was unimaginable at its beginning happened: Coleman himself, as dean, is responsible for hiring Athena College's first (let us say) openly black professor. But that does not change the fact that the wheels of justice were turning too slowly for Coleman himself. Justice is *individual;* justice delayed is justice denied. But what to say about an action that, although itself a justified rebellion against radical injustice, generates such betrayal and deception?

I don't see any way out of finding Coleman's actions ethically problematic. But, given that his wrongs are driven by resistance to an unjust system, how do we pinpoint the wrong? We might say: his *renunciation* of this unjust role was not problematic; only the callousness with which he carried it out deserves our censure. But would one have been possible without the other? The deception and betrayal he practices on his family were arguably necessary to the success of the enterprise: likely anyone with less of a strong sense of his or her "raw I" would not have pulled it off. When Coleman announces to his mother his intention to betray her, she responds by tracing his sense of his "I" to infancy: "I don't know why I'm not better prepared for this, Coleman. I should be…. You've been giving fair warning from almost the day you got here. You were seriously disinclined even to take the breast. Yes, you were" (Roth 2000, 139). Comparing Coleman's intolerance of the "big they" and the "little we" to Walt's willingness to fight one in the name of the other, Roth's narrator Zuckerman offers only their respective identities as explanation: "Walt was Walt, vigorously Walt, and Coleman was vigorously not" (Roth 2000, 105). There seems, then, to be no explanation for behavior other than character. Coleman was born with a sense of the "raw I": only so can he engage in this betrayal successfully. In recounting Coleman's justificatory conversations with himself, the narrator puts the point another way: "Don't most people want to walk out of the…lives they've been handed? But they don't, and that's what makes them them, and this was what was making him him" (Roth 2000, 139).

We might instead decide that the wrong of Coleman's actions is in the fact that his deception affects people—family members—to whom he owes honesty. Let us imagine for a moment a black man light-skinned enough to pass as a white man who has no living family and makes the same decision Cole-

man did. Let us further imagine that, conscious of not wanting to extend the deception to those with whom he has intimate relationships, he does not marry and begets no children. Perhaps, as Coleman's sister herself suggests, not having children should have been the price Coleman paid for his lifelong deception. But this again seems desperately unfair: why should an appallingly unjust social convention determine whether those it oppresses can ethically choose to have children or not? Why should one be dependent on the luck, if one wants to call it that, of having no living relatives before one can escape the institution to begin with?

Indeed, such stories force us to consider the role of moral luck. Most of us will not be faced with this kind of oppression; those of us who are will not usually *also* be given an opt-out solution that generates the same kind of deception as Coleman's. In other words, Coleman's luck in being light-skinned enough to pass was the cause of his *moral* unluck: his being faced with a choice very few others would face, and a choice with significant moral ramifications.

The Human Stain as Tragedy

Tragedy and Social Roles

I suggested above that *The Human Stain* is a tragedy. Why should this matter? One answer is that Roth himself invites this analysis. The book's epigraph is from *Oedipus Rex*, and Sophoclean themes of fate and destiny recur throughout the book. The ageing Coleman finds a letter written to him by a white girlfriend of his youth. This girlfriend, upon meeting his family, left him with the simple declaration, "I can't do it," and with no doubt as to what the "it" referred. Coleman reflects that, had she agreed to marry him and raise biracial children (knowingly, as opposed to Iris, who unknowingly rears biracial children), "he would have lived another life." Zuckerman continues:

> He thought the same useless thoughts—useless to a man of no great talent like himself, if not to Sophocles: how accidentally a fate is made…or how accidental it may all seem when it is inescapable. (Roth 2000, 127)

Resolving at another point to terminate his relationship with the janitor and live a more humble life, Coleman the classics professor determines "[t]o live in a way that does not bring Philoctetes to mind. He does not have to live like a tragic character in his course" (Roth 2000, 170). But minutes later, infuriated by his son's moral condescension, Coleman abandons his resolve. The affair continues until it ends with bloodshed and disorder on a scale that would have made Sophocles proud.[6]

Still: why should whether *The Human Stain* is a tragedy be a matter for philosophers, rather than a matter for literary theorists? I have three answers to this question. First, from its earliest instantiations, tragedy has often involved reflection on *roles*, the collision of roles, and the relationship of individuality to roles. Hegel's assessment of the difference between ancient and modern tragedy, for instance, is that the ancient Greeks had a limited sense of self *behind* their roles as compared to moderns.[7] Ancient Greeks, according to this analysis, primarily thought of themselves *as* instantiations of roles. Tragedy resulted when equally justified roles collided and individuals instantiating those roles were destroyed in the conflict, the collision between Antigone and Creon being the *locus classicus* for this theory. Coleman as much as acknowledges that this is the version of tragedy he is resisting when he says that he "saw the fate" of the "big they" and "little we" "awaiting him, and… wasn't having it" (Roth 2000, 108). Coleman refuses to be reduced to a role by either the white or the black community: he insists on being a *modern* protagonist with a sense of individuality beyond his roles. This refusal seems all the more justified since racism traps in a way more modern and more pernicious than the way Oedipus, for instance, was trapped by fate. The gods may be unjust, but they are gods; their ways are not our ways. Racism is humans trapping humans, and in ways all too human.

Modern tragedy, again according to Hegel, does not focus on the clash of distinct individuals who represent roles; instead it depicts the individual as the ground on which different passions, roles, or beliefs themselves vie for prominence. In Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, we read that, in modern drama, the "principal topic is provided by an individual's passion, which is satisfied in the pursuit of a purely subjective end, and, in general, by the fate of a single individual and his character in special circumstances" (Hegel 1975, 1206). So, for example, Hamlet is both the son of a murdered father and heir to the throne, but the focal point of drama in Shakespeare's play is Hamlet's inner life, his agonizing indecision and tortured self-accusations. In Coleman's destruction, we again see the roles clash within Coleman himself: his roles as his mother's son and as a black man are incompatible with his desired role as a budding intellectual. The last is a role he cannot pursue while keeping faith with the first two roles. In *The Human Stain* as in *Hamlet*, the individual's struggle with an inherited role is central to the drama's tension. In Coleman's case, as again in Hamlet's, the attempt to define the self in the face of conflicting roles drives him to undertake actions that eventually destroy him. In its focus on an individual's struggle with roles, then, Coleman's is a modern tragedy.

But Coleman takes the individual's struggle with roles to a new level. Yes,

Coleman is a member of a family, a black man, and a classicist; but he is above all else *Coleman*. Ironically, it is the deceitful Polonius in whose mouth Shakespeare coins the phrase, "To thine own self be true"—a dictum that Coleman takes as defining a role to trump all other roles. We cannot imagine Hamlet, much less Antigone, resolving to act on "the raw I with all its agility." But Coleman does, signaling another modern revision in the relationship of individual to roles. Coming from Coleman, this new individuality sounds natural.

Perhaps it sounds natural because Coleman is so thoroughly an American. In a sense, *The Human Stain* is a particularly American tragedy. For all Coleman is doing is taking the American dream, the idea that you can be whoever you want to be, seriously.[8] This radical privileging of individuality, I suggest, is our contemporary world's contribution to Hegel's theory of tragedy. The trajectory of tragedy's evolution, then, would be: ancient tragedy presents the clash of roles in the external world; modern tragedy highlights the clash of roles within the individual; contemporary American tragedies of a certain kind showcase individuals who believe that they can exist independently of roles, then find that this belief is in fact unsustainable. In Coleman's case, his belief that he can remain true to his "raw I" by rejecting one of society's most unjust roles causes him to violate basic ethical principles regarding deceit and betrayal.[9] America itself, by coupling a dream about the "raw I" with institutionalized racism, made for him the fulfillment of its dream impossible except at a high ethical price. And American society threatens also to destroy those who are willing and able to pay that price. The first thing looking at *The Human Stain* as a tragedy does, then, is expose this newer attitude towards individuality and its ethical ramifications.

Tragedy and Freedom

The second reason that thinking of *The Human Stain* as a tragedy matters philosophically is that tragedy often turns on conceptions of freedom.[10] Oedipus tries to work free of the prediction that he will kill his father; Romeo and Juliet try to break free of their familial constraints; Schiller's Karl Moor thinks he can construct a new moral order free of traditional norms. Tragedies often portray, in other words, flawed conceptions of freedom that inspire the agent to fling himself against constraints he cannot, in fact, escape. Looking at Coleman's case as a tragedy invites us then to ask: What faulty or incomplete idea of freedom is Coleman pursuing?

The answer, I think, is again in the "raw I" that Coleman embraces with such conviction. For Coleman, to be free is to be essentially unencumbered,

to be fully undefined by the surrounding world. Freedom is defined by acting only on those desires that one actively chooses and that conform to one's independent conception of oneself. It involves resistance to any kind of unchosen influence and the belief that a betrayal of the "raw I" is more terrible than a betrayal of any particular people, norms, or cultures.

This vision of freedom is in fact suggested by liberal theories that emphasize choice as the essence of autonomy. It is also often implicit, I think, in Kantian views that describe paradigmatic freedom as freedom from all commitments. As one such theorist, Christine Korsgaard, puts it, freedom is dependent on the rational self being able to *shed* roles that cannot be reflectively endorsed. For her, the *real* self is the free, unencumbered self, the self defined only by itself. It is this free self that I must live up to, to whom I am above all beholden, and whom I must not fail.[11]

I am not the first to suggest that the philosophical idea of the unencumbered self as the paradigmatically free self badly serves those who live under oppression. When we focus on autonomous choice as *the* defining factor of human agency, we discount the fact that the range of choices open to an individual may itself be a product of warped social institutions. We also neglect the fact that social conditions can corrupt one's ability to choose well at all. When we predicate the idea of autonomy on an individual's ability to be a self above her desires, evaluating and "shedding" components of her identity from a universal point of view, we de-emphasize the interconnectedness of roles and the fact that shedding one role might enmesh one in actions that one no more wants to endorse than one wanted to endorse the original role. As Roth's novel painfully illustrates, those unwanted consequences can be all the more agonizing when the roles themselves are based on an injustice.

If it is true that injustice can harm its victims in this way, one moral to take from Roth's novel is trivial: racism is a deep evil. It is systematically, poisonously evil because it makes doing things that should be ethically defensible—for instance, choosing a career that tracks what one loves or choosing to live a life free of prejudice—ethically problematic. It traps people into roles that are bad for them and stunt them but that they nevertheless cannot shed without perpetrating deception and hurt. Of course, this *kind* of conflict is not unique to racism. We often find ourselves forced to compromise our most cherished desires for the sake of other roles. But racism intensifies the conflict involved in such compromise. I think many of Coleman's actions are unethical: he practices callous deceit, shows little regret, continues to deceive long after it is unnecessary, and carries the egoism of the "raw I" into situations where it is not needed to combat injustice, for instance in his bedroom.[12] But

much of his unethical action is in response to very bad moral luck: the bad luck of living in a society with prejudices against a role he did not choose; the ostensibly good luck of being able to escape that role; the bad luck of having his rejection require deception and betrayal.[13] We must blame Coleman, I think, but blame him with the humility that comes with the recognition of moral luck. We can blame him but must add: there but for the grace of God, perhaps, go we.

On this reading, part of Coleman's bad moral luck is that his light skin invites him to assert a kind of freedom that ultimately destroys him. But the agony of bad moral luck is sometimes combined in tragedies with what would seem to be the opposite of luck, namely, necessity. It is one of tragedy's standard operations to challenge our faith in our own freedom by exhibiting a kind of necessity that appears to crush the individual. This necessity is often expressed in the form of irony. Arriving as Thebes' savior, Oedipus is also the source of its corroding illness. Attempting to evade a divine prophecy, he runs straight into the prophecy's fulfillment. Blind to the actual identity of the man he kills and the woman he marries, Oedipus appears at the end of Sophocles' tragedy blind.[14]

Roth's plot, as we have seen, trades heavily in ironies.[15] Coleman deceives his children about their true ethnic identity; one son embraces the identity he in fact does not share with his father with a ferociousness that dooms their relationship. Having escaped the injustice of one role, Coleman dies caught in the conflict between two victims of injustice: a sexually abused women and a traumatized veteran. In perhaps the book's most damning ironic twist, his own refusal to be defined by words consumes him: having escaped a role that made him the target of racial slurs, Coleman's career ends when he is accused of using a racial slur. The unjust, singular constraints of the words "nigger" and "Negro" propelled Coleman out of his first community; the multiple meanings of the word "spook" do not save him from being expelled from his second. The irony continues: having escaped his society's earlier racial injustice, he falls victim to society's nascent *consciousness* of these injustices. Convicted finally of the evils of racism (though no thanks to Coleman; rather thanks to Walt and others like him), American society in Roth's portrayal has followed the pendulum to its other extreme: despite Coleman's essentially irrefutable evidence that he could not have meant "spooks" as a racial slur, he is pronounced guilty by his community and effectively ostracized.[16]

Another way tragedies depict necessity is in portraying punishments that fit their crime: the metaphorically blind Oedipus blinds himself; Antigone's throwing earth on her brother's body sentences her to burial under the earth;

Claudius is poisoned by his own poison. Coleman's crime is to want to be only himself, the self without the constrictions of either the "big they" or the "little we." But the character he develops in the process of being only himself leads him to do things that ultimately destroy that self.[17] His cultivation of the "raw I" makes his career and his family possible, but it also both takes away from him and contributes to the violence and the ignobility of his death.[18] Coleman dares to evade the prophecy, not divine but just as intractable, that he would, as a black man, live a life of disadvantage. He pays by losing both the family and the good reputation his attempted evasion allowed him to acquire. The punishment indeed fits the crime. But in Coleman's case, even the punishment leaves us again painfully aware of the original injustice that motivated the crime. The motive for his action was not objectionable the way that Claudius' ambition or Iago's jealousy, for instance, are. Coleman's determination to embrace the "raw I" was, at base, a response to racial injustice he had every right to try to escape.[19]

Be that as it may, the book's ample ironies and the fitting nature of its punishments seem to mock Coleman's bid for freedom. They show it up as naïve, self-deceptive, delusional. Try as he might, he will not evade the social web in which he is caught; he will not become unencumbered, and any attempts to act as the "raw I" will be punished. Roth's depiction of Coleman's fateful struggle to become a free, unencumbered self suggests, I think, that freedom is more dependent on institutions and conventions than we—often wooed ourselves by the American dream and liberal, autonomous visions of the self—like to think. Unjust social conventions, in addition to being simply unjust, can produce a false sense of choice, a distorted sense of self, and can foster character traits that intensify the ethical dilemmas that face those already oppressed. Roth in a sense makes this point over and over again as *The Human Stain* depicts the havoc wreaked in individual lives by social injustice: Coleman's lover's chances at happiness are doomed, Roth makes clear, because of a lifetime of abuse by men; Coleman's murderer cannot escape what he did in Vietnam while fighting for his country, a country that mocked and abandoned him upon his return. We are less free, Roth seems to be saying, than we like to think we are. Acting with too absolute a sense of the "raw I" is a denial of this fact, and is a denial, to repeat, we undertake at our own risk.

Tragedy and Social Conflict

There is one final way I will consider in which we can analyze *The Human Stain* as a tragedy. Tragedies, again under a Hegelian description, describe

what happens when central beliefs within a society collide. To return to Antigone and Creon: both family and state were, in Creon's Thebes, foundational ethical powers. It was then inevitable that, when they collided, individuals would be destroyed. In Hegel's parlance, such crisis can cause the inadequacy of one articulation of ethical life to give way to a new, more complete articulation: in the case of the ancient Greeks, the unreflective beauty of Greek communal ethical life is ultimately interrupted by individual reflection. This reflectivity eventually replaces the original, unreflective ethical life as a source of ethical legitimacy.

It is this strain within the Hegelian tradition that inspired much of Raymond Williams' *Modern Tragedy*. According to Williams:

> Important tragedies seem to occur, neither in periods of real stability, nor in periods of open and decisive conflict. Its most common historical setting is the period preceding the substantial breakdown and transformation of an important culture. Its condition is the real tension between old and new: between received beliefs, embodied in institutions and responses, and newly and vividly experienced contradictions and possibilities. (Williams 1966, 54)

In focusing on historical, cultural paradigm shifts as the most fecund ground for tragedy, Williams' book is a sustained response to George Steiner's 1961 claim that tragedy in the modern world is no longer possible: that the reconciling, redemptive narratives of (for instance) Christianity and Marxism have eliminated the raw, irresolvable conflict that is central to tragedy (see Steiner 1996). Williams diagnoses this willingness to abandon tragedy as dangerously self-deceptive, as an invitation to deny the social struggle in our midst. To say that tragedy is no longer possible is to say that tragedy is "about something else," not about us and the "deep social crisis, war, and revolution, through which we have all been living" (Williams 1966, 62).

In hewing so close to tragic themes, Roth accepts, I think, Williams' challenge to see tragedy not as "about something else" but very much about us. Tragedy on this reading exposes fault lines in a society's self-conception that will ultimately convulse it. Roth chooses for his backdrop a moment we could describe in Williams' terms: a moment in American history when racial stereotypes are still deeply "embodied in institutions and responses," but these embodied prejudices are contrasted with "newly and vividly experienced contradictions and possibilities." Surely one description of the violence and assassinations of the 1960s is that they reflected the "substantial breakdown and transformation of an important culture."[20] And surely one point of a novel like Roth's is to prevent us from believing that tragedy is impossible in contemporary American society.

But we can put a finer point on it. *The Human Stain* shows us, I think, two incompatible facts about American society: first, that America asks us to believe that we are free to be whoever we want to be; second, that America, like most societies, is riddled with injustice that can systematically warp any attempts to realize that dream. This injustice also threatens to warp individuals' moral character, facilitating character traits like Coleman's egomaniacal clinging to the "raw I" or other destructive characteristics such as apathy, defeatism, vengefulness or bitterness. To formulate this point in terms used by Terry Eagleton: tragedy marks "the limits of an existent regime of knowledge." It "shows up what is necessary for a certain social or legal order to exist, and thus, in sketching its outer horizon of meaning, the points where it trembles into silence."[21] The social fact that *The Human Stain* "shows up" is the way black Americans were made the silent exception to the claim that "all men are created equal." It was indeed a silence that "marked the limits of an existent regime of knowledge": the denial of African-Americans' basic rights exposed the failure to keep faith with the "self-evident" truth at the heart of the American political system. And the silence was indeed "necessary for a certain social or legal order"—namely, segregation and institutionalized racism—"to exist." If tragedy in fact articulates the basic tensions and silences that underlie a social order, one reaction is to work to alleviate that tension. An obvious step to ease the tension at the heart of *The Human Stain* is to work to eradicate society's injustices. We must do this, to put it again in Williams' terms, "because there can be no acceptable human order while the full humanity of any class of men is in practice denied."[22] But to connect tragedy's articulation of society's tensions to tragedy as isolating faulty conceptions of freedom: a second step in easing this tension is to be clear about the kind of freedom our society is actually capable of sustaining without doing violence to fundamental principles of ethical life. This step would involve de-romanticizing and amending the idea of the unencumbered self and its less philosophical counterpart, the American dream. It would require acknowledging the fallacy of the "raw I" and recognizing the harm such a fallacy can cause. Both steps are daunting; the second may be as difficult as the first. *The Human Stain*, it seems to me, offers an indictment of America's reluctance to take either step.

Conclusion

Coleman dies when his lover's ex-husband, mad with (again, misfiring) anti-Semitic jealousy and P.T.S.D., runs the car in which Coleman and his lover are driving off the road. (The killer's confession is at [Roth 2000, 257].) The car careens over an embankment and into a river; both occupants are killed

instantly. Since there are no witnesses, the crash is ruled an accident. But vicious and sordid rumors are spread about the accident's cause. The worst of these, posted anonymously on Athena's faculty discussion board, claims that the crash was a murder-suicide, Coleman's final act of brutality against a woman he had regularly abused (Roth 2000, 291–293).[23] At his funeral, Coleman's children engage in aggressive damage control, determined to salvage scraps of their father's reputation. Coleman dies with his secret still a secret; only his sister Ernestine, anonymously attending the funeral, knows it and then shares it with Zuckerman.

Within Ernestine's confiding in Zuckerman, we finally find evidence of something otherwise missing from the novel: we find a brief moment of recognition on Coleman's part of the harm he has done.[24] Coleman had in fact remained in touch with his sister throughout his life, calling to inform her of his marriage, the births of his children, his wife's death. Ernestine reports that, speaking again of his estranged son Mark, Coleman had once said to her: "I got there what I produced…even if for the wrong reason. Markie doesn't even have the luxury of hating his father for the real thing. I robbed him…of that part of his birthright, too….[H]e would have hated me for never telling him and because he had a right to know." Coleman's acknowledgement that he has robbed his children of their "right to know" is given to us at a distance, as it were: only through someone else's account and only after his death. It is also the most cursory of admissions: it leaves unmentioned other harms Coleman's deception caused, leaving us to speculate on how deep or wide his acknowledgement actually was. Ernestine herself says that, after this brief discussion, "because there was so much there to be misunderstood, we just let the subject drop" (Roth 2000, 231–232). Nevertheless, Coleman's acknowledgement of his children's rights goes some way to alleviating our fear that Coleman's grasping of the "raw I" had made him entirely oblivious to the harm he has caused others.

But Coleman's acknowledgement remains, like so much in the novel, a secret from the greater community. This fact means that *The Human Stain* denies us two other moments that often typify tragedy. First, Coleman's abrupt death means that he is given no opportunity to repent, to articulate humility, to recognize publicly how he has wronged his family and ask forgiveness. There is no culminating scene in which, like Oedipus or Creon, Coleman appears—bloody, bruised, but enlightened—acknowledging publicly the error of his ways. The silent nature of Coleman's rebellion also prevents us from gleaning the comfort that sometimes comes at tragedy's end: the comfort that, despite our horror at the hero's destruction, at least progress has been made in articulating the tensions of a society and their possible solution. This is the

comfort we feel when witnessing Oedipus's humility, Creon's repentance, or Fortinbras's dignified honoring of Hamlet. There is no such comfort at the end of *The Human Stain*. Coleman's tragedy is a silent one: no one except his surviving siblings and Zuckerman know the truth about Coleman's life. Since the community is not allowed to witness the truth of his life, Coleman's death proves nothing, clarifies nothing, uncovers nothing. There is no communal catharsis *within* the novel.[25] Any communal catharsis will have to be experienced solely by the novel's audience.[26]

The lack of such a moment at the end of *The Human Stain* is particularly cruel since American society is so clearly implicated in the injustice at the heart of Coleman's life. Our desire for acknowledgement on Coleman's part of his wrongdoing is likely to be—and should be—ambivalent. What do we want him to acknowledge? That he should have succumbed to the "big they" and "little we" and lived a life of disadvantage, all because of human bigotry? That we are indeed obligated by inherited roles, however unjust? Surely not. Surely what would bring more relief and a sense of justice at the novel's end would be his society's acknowledgement of the impossible choices that a human evil like racism generates. It would be an acknowledgement that American society had a part in Coleman's cultivation of a character trait that leads to his untimely death; that American society is partly to blame for his estrangement from his children and the death of his wife; that Coleman, in short, is not a "raw I," but a person deeply, tragically implicated in a web of social injustice. Perhaps, believing as he did in the "raw I," Coleman would have resisted such a moment. Perhaps he would have preferred to die maligned and vilified than surrender to the "big they"'s communal narrative, no matter how redemptive. Perhaps it is for this reason that Roth assigns him a death that cuts him off so brutally, so ignobly, from his community—a death, in effect, so raw.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the anonymous referees of *Expositions* for their suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper; I would especially like to thank Bernard Prusak for his detailed help in thinking through the intricacies of the novel's plot and its philosophical implications.

2. There is a wealth of substantial scholarship on tragedy in Hegel: Christoph Menke, in *Tragödie im Sittlichen: Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit nach Hegel* (Menke 1996), gives a comprehensive account of Hegel's complex theory of tragedy and its relevance for moral political theory, highlighting especially the tension between autonomy and authenticity typical of modernity. Allen Speight argues for the centrality of tragedy to Hegel's conception of agency in his *Hegel, Lit-*

erature, and the Problem of Agency (Speight 2001). Other scholarship of note includes Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict since Aristotle* (Gellrich 1988); Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," in *Hegel and the Arts* (Houlgate 2007); and Mark William Roche, *Tragedy and Comedy: A Systematic Study and a Critique of Hegel* (Roche 1998).

3. Roth's narrator reports that, as its first Jewish dean,"[Coleman] made the place competitive, which, as an early enemy noted, 'is what Jews do'" (Roth 2000, 9).
4. It is, in another sense, possible that his students are black anti-Semites and that Coleman, despite not being a Jew, suffers here from anti-Semitism. As noted earlier, there certainly was anti-Semitism among the College faculty, and Coleman likely suffered from it despite the fact that his colleagues were wrong in thinking he was Jewish. But I want here to highlight the sense that the alleged anti-Semitism misfires epistemologically: in order for a racial attack to be executed successfully, the person attacked should not only be *believed* to be a member of the targeted group, but *actually* be a member of that group. Let us assume for a moment that these students are targeting Coleman because they think he is Jewish and that, in addition, they dislike Jews. In this case, their motivations would be anti-Semitic, and they would, from a character or intention point of view, be anti-Semites. But on another level, epistemological accuracy is necessary for a specific act of anti-Semitism to be successful. To parse the point according to the conventional epistemological criteria of justified true belief, Coleman's students are justified in their belief that he is Jewish, but their belief is not true. On this level, the act misfires. There is, incidentally, no evidence that the students are anti-Semites. There is not even evidence that they thought Coleman was Jewish, much less that this belief motivated or intensified their accusations against him.
5. The plot is in fact yet more complicated: she is only "passing" as illiterate, for reasons of her own, and is actually keeping a detailed journal of the events.
6. Roth employs tragic vocabulary in other instances as well. In his last conversation with his mother, Coleman reflects that "he was murdering her. You don't have to murder your father. The world will do that for you" (Roth 2000, 138). He also refers to a group of young faculty members commenting on the Monica Lewinsky affair as "the chorus" (Roth 2000, 151). A malicious and anonymous posting about Coleman's death is sent from the account "clytemnestra@houseofatreus.com"; the book's final chapter is entitled "The Purifying Ritual."
7. Hegel suggests, for instance, that "what principally counts in Greek drama, whether tragedy or comedy, is the universal and essential element in the aim which the characters are realizing" (Hegel 1975, 1206). In another passage, he claims that "modern tragedy adopts into its own sphere from the start the principle of subjectivity. Therefore it takes for its proper subject matter and contents the subjective inner life of the character who is not, as in classical tragedy, a purely individual embodiment of ethical powers" (Hegel 1975, 1223). For a challenge

both to this claim about ancient Greeks' sense of agency and to Hegel's reading of this claim into *Antigone*, see (Gellrich 1988, 57–78).

8. Roth's narrator Zuckerman suggests as much: "Was [Coleman] merely being another American and, in the great frontier tradition, accepting the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard if to do so contributes to the pursuit of happiness? Or was it more than that? Or was it less?" (Roth 2000, 334).
9. I think of Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Bigger in Richard Wright's *Native Son* as two other examples of individuals who assert a raw individuality against social norms and are destroyed in the process. Both Edna and Bigger violate fundamental ethical norms in the pursuit of individuality—Edna by committing adultery, Bigger by murdering Mary—and pay for this violation with their lives. *Passing*, a 1929 novel by Nella Larsen, also ends with the violent death of one of the main characters, a woman who is passing.
10. Hegel for instance says that dramas depicting tragedy are only possible in cultures that explicitly recognize human freedom: "truly tragic action necessarily presupposes either a live conception of individual freedom and independence or at least an individual's determination and a willingness to accept freely and on his own account the responsibility for his own act and its consequences" (Hegel 1975, 1205).
11. See Korsgaard (1996, 102). John Rawls' theory of the original position, which places individuals who do not know their particular commitments in the defining moment of justice, is sometimes criticized along these same lines, fairly or not. For a classic articulation of this kind of criticism, see Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," in Sandel (2005, chap. 23).
12. Coleman's intemperance could, I suppose, be understood in terms of another standard feature of tragedy, namely, as a character flaw. I use this phrase while conscious that translating *hamartia* as "flaw," rather than as "error," has caused a good deal of misinterpretation of Aristotle's point. But, as Amélie Rorty points out, error is not quite right either. She writes: "Though a protagonist's *hamartia* might sometimes just involve his making a factual error, it is the sort of error that a person of his character would be typically prone to make. In combination with his character, it misleads his action" (Rorty 1992, 10). This, I think, is a description that could be applied to Coleman's intemperate reactions to his children and friends. See also (Sherman 1992). For the source of Aristotle's use of *hamartia*, see Aristotle, *Poetics*, 53a10.
13. Allen Speight discusses the role of regret in moral luck: see Speight (2001, 56). Coleman's lack of regret means that Speight's analysis here, however, cannot apply: Coleman neither wishes he had acted differently nor suggests he could not have acted differently.
14. Both Menke and Speight discuss the importance of irony in Hegel's conception of tragedy and agency more generally. Their focus, however, is primarily on the ironic subject, the subject who says the opposite of what he means or, as Menke

puts it, "buries his meaning by saying its opposite." See Menke (1996, 97) and Speight (2001, 110–111). Hegel famously describes this kind of irony as evil in *Philosophy of Right*, §140.

15. Because of its almost mechanistic connecting of a plot's components, this level of irony skates dangerously close to the comic. In fact, while giving an earlier version of this paper at a conference, I had the uncanny experience of hearing people laugh as I recounted the plot summary of *The Human Stain*. But Roth's plot is anything but comic except in the most cringe-inducing, heartless way. What prevents the many ironies from becoming comic in the novel is the sympathy engendered for the protagonists by the details of the plot. Stripped essentially of these details, the ironies indeed risk being comic. Eagleton quotes the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh as claiming that tragedy just is "underdeveloped comedy"; see Eagleton (2003, 188).
16. Roth's lampooning of Coleman's academic colleagues makes their self-righteousness in the face of Coleman's alleged misdeed almost unbearable. When Zuckerman describes the incident to Coleman's sister after his death, she responds, "I don't believe I've ever heard of anything more foolish being perpetrated by an institution of higher learning. It sounds to me more like a hotbed of ignorance" (Roth 2000, 328).
17. We could perhaps describe the very development of these character traits as another instance of bad moral luck. Coleman indeed has objectionable character traits, but they are all too familiar: he is judgmental, condescending, and impatient; he terrorizes junior faculty and is by all accounts a domineering father. (Coleman's own description of his parenting style is a sad and very human example of good intentions gone unappreciated: see Roth [2000, 174].) But we know such people, and usually their character traits, although problematic, do not end in bloodshed. The fact that they do in Coleman's case has again to do with the thoroughness with which he must cultivate his "raw I" in order to evade racial injustice successfully. By saying this I do not (as should become clear) excuse him. Coleman is not *forced* by his circumstances to continue to develop these character traits. It is at least conceivable that he could have perpetrated this major deception and gone on within his lie-based life to cultivate gentle, compassionate character traits. But the fact that he does not is, I think, not unrelated to his particular situation either.
18. Another way of putting this is that, from the moral standpoint of the novel, Coleman dies fighting for the wrong thing. Our sympathy for his deception is based on the fact that Coleman originally asserts "the raw I" against a deep injustice. Had he died as a direct consequence of *this* assertion of the "raw I"—had someone discovered his secret and killed him for it, for instance—the plot would follow a more standard tragic trajectory. Instead, Coleman dies having asserted the "raw I" against the community in ways that are made to seem petty

and even pathetic. Roth depicts Coleman's clinging to his love affair, especially after a particular argument with his son, as a direct rebellion against society in general and his children in particular: see Roth (2000, 174). Coleman is asserting the "raw I" once again, but in a cause much less noble. His death at the hands of his lover's ex-husband instead appears caused by an aging man's adolescent defiance of both his body and of social norms.

19. The difficulty of assigning responsibility to tragic action is another common theme in the literature on tragedy. Terry Eagleton, for instance, writes that

> "[t]here is no unswerving trajectory between intention and effect….[T]he question 'am I responsible for my actions?' thus cannot be answered in the terms in which it is commonly proposed, since it betrays too thin a conception of what it is to act…. Our free actions are inherently alienable, lodging obstructively in the lives of others and ourselves, merging with the stray shards and fragments of others' estranged actions to redound on our own heads in alien form. Indeed, they would not be free actions at all without this perpetual possibility of going astray." (Eagleton 2003, 110)

20. Another of the book's ironies is that the silent nature of Coleman's betrayal allows him to live through the 1960s without participating in the movement for social change himself. By the late 1960s, he in fact *cannot* participate in it as a black man without admitting to a lifetime of deception and very likely ending both his marriage and career. For this reason, Coleman's fate does not bear witness to the social paradigm shift that tragedies, again according to Williams, showcase. In fact, that paradigm shift passes him by, locked as he is into his assumed role as a white man.

21. Eagleton is summarizing Timothy Reiss's position in *Tragedy and Truth*. Reiss's analysis rests on a Foucauldian analysis of the "absence of significance" to which I will not try to do justice to here. See Reiss (1980, 3 ff.) and Eagleton (2003, 19).

22. For this reason, in Williams' view, revolution remains necessary: I leave Williams' nuanced discussion of tragedy's tie to revolution undiscussed here. See Williams (1966, 77).

23. In the interest of space, I leave undiscussed the subplot involving Delphine Roux, a subplot whose consequences significantly increase the scandal surrounding Coleman's death.

24. Recognition is of course one of the characteristics of tragic plots articulated by Aristotle: see Aristotle, *Poetics*, 52a30. Aristotle primarily talks about recognition in Oedipus' sense, that is, of recognizing a previously unknown fact about oneself; recognition in tragedy can also encompass, however, an agent's recognition of guilt or responsibility.

25. Roth does leave open the possibility that Coleman's story will indeed reach the community in the form of a novel by Zuckerman.

26. Again I think of Richard Wright's depiction of Bigger Thomas, who acciden-

tally murders a white woman but later comes to take responsibility for his crime and even embrace it. Wright is careful to give Bigger character traits throughout that bar the reader from sympathizing with him entirely. But Bigger is allowed a moment of recognition and regret before his electrocution, and the path is then open for the audience to sympathize with him at the end.

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