

Against France: An American Novelistic Fantasy

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There is a geography of the American Jewish novel that takes one farther afield from New York City than might have been intuitively expected. Consider the two writers who will be the focus of these pages. From the time of *The Ghost Writer* (1979), Philip Roth has been pre-eminently a novelist of the western Massachusetts region known as the Berkshires. His most recent major work, *The Human Stain*, is set in an imaginary campus in the Berkshires, stages a memorable visit to the nearby summer home of the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood, and comes to something of a tragic climax in one of the area's principal towns, Pittsfield. Somewhat further north, Saul Bellow has never concealed his pleasure in repairing to 'the good place', Vermont. *Ravelstein*, Bellow's most recent novel, features a few scenes in neighboring New Hampshire, but the Bellow aficionado immediately recognizes in that venue a transposition of the author's cherished 'good place', where the 'dew takes up every particle of light', Vermont.¹ Our point of departure will be equidistant between the two, between the Berkshires and the Green Mountains, in the sleepy town just over the Massachusetts border into Vermont, Bennington. It is a writerly community: W. H. Auden taught at the local college; Robert Frost is buried there. Yet it is an improbable work of visual art, the allegorical sculpture standing before the local art museum, and more particularly the allegory unwittingly staged by its effort at allegory, along with its heuristic value for a reading of both *The Human Stain* and *Ravelstein*, that will be the focus of these comments.

The Bennington Museum is home to a particularly large collection of work by the American primitivist Grandma Moses. In front of the museum, however, before confronting the *kitsch* of Grandma Moses, the visitor is faced with a bizarre work of sculpture by the Vermont artist Clyde du Vernet Hunt. Called 'The American Spirit' it was cast in bronze in 1939, and consists of three figures, somewhat different in scale, each incarnating a different cardinal virtue: a standing Abraham Lincoln, impressively clad in cloak and top hat, embodies Charity; a semi-nude woman, Faith, is sprawled on her knees before the president and is looking submissively up at him; Hope is a nude callipygean boy standing erect before the President and

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staring at his midregion. The suggestion that the revered President is engaged in – or choosing between – heterosexual and homosexual fellatio became so pronounced during the Clinton presidency that the ladies of Bennington who run the museum decided to write up and distribute to purchasers of museum entrance tickets a sheet describing the genesis of the sculpture, lest they be obliged to refute the impression of a sexual act the mere mention of which would indelibly taint the lips of whoever sought to dispell it.



'The American Spirit'
by Clyde du Vernet
Hunt, © The
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If Lincoln (Charity), we learn from the sheet, was a lifelong subject, in both bronze and marble, for the patriot artist, Faith and Hope were actually recastings of two originally totally separate statues: a nude woman in marble, lost in reverie, and sprawled on her knees was originally entitled Nirvana and was to be a personification of that Buddhist principle of spiritual emancipation; and the nude boy, who would be said to embody Hope, was originally a post-World War One tribute entitled 'Fils de France'. Thus 'Nirvana' was neutralized under the name of Faith, and France (or her son) under that of Hope. Hunt's bizarre inspiration was to yoke together Nirvana, the child of France, and Lincoln under the allegorical names of Faith, Hope and Charity. All that was needed was a decision to discreetly drape kneeling Nirvana (become Faith) and the group would be consolidated, at the expense of both Nirvana (dare one say the Nirvana principle, the dimension of

Freud's thought America has always regarded as unassimilable?) and (the future of) France, a consolidation effected in the name of American moral sanctimony: the cardinal virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity.

The problem, of course, lay in the fact that it was precisely to the extent that the three were moralistically yoked together that they appeared to be on the brink of sexual perversion. And all at a stone's throw from the obelisk commemorating the Revolutionary Battle of Bennington. It is almost as though the will to combine the three into a larger idealized unit, the stuff of what Freud called Eros (but analyzed in terms of narcissism), had been given the lie by the Nirvana principle, a 'death instinct' whose structure had from the outset been that of 'unconscious sexuality' itself.²

But for that configuration to become apparent, time – and the Monica Lewinsky scandal of a subsequent American president – would be needed. Whence the necessity of a printed history of the genesis of the bronze trilogy, installed in front of the Museum in 1949, which became imperative only during the Clinton presidency. Before that, a museum official informed this visitor, the sculpture group had been presented in response to a commission from John Rockefeller as a potential adornment for New York City's Rockefeller Center. Rockefeller is said to have rejected the work with some horror, but the fact that the sculptor himself saw fit to submit it as an unambiguous expression of patriotism is a sign of just how *unconscious* a work it may have been.

And one of the dimensions it sought to repress, in the name of American morality, was a certain future for France.

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'Father Abraham' is the name given to the Bennington sculpture on the Web. It is a circumstance that puts one in mind of the Kafka parable beginning 'Ich könnte mir einen anderen Abraham denken'. Or perhaps of the seminal moment in Proust, the goodnight kiss sequence, when Marcel's father fails to conform to the etching of Biblical Abraham in the manner of Benozzo Gozzoli given to the young protagonist by Swann. For the Bennington sculpture, in the fullness of time, has come to constitute its own 'other Abraham', the allegory of the allegory it appears intent on staging: Abraham Lincoln, incarnation of a cardinal virtue, would be perceived during the closing years of the 20th century to be able to embody that virtue only to the extent that he was involved in a spectacular pair of sexual perversions – as the Bennington Museum's embarrassed production of its information sheet, at the time of the Lewinsky scandal, makes clear.

Stranger still, what was at stake in the Bennington trilogy – the blatant sexuality, the negation of (Freud's) Nirvana and of a certain future for France, all in the name of American morality – has managed to work its way into the most exalted precincts of American prose, and it is to that phenomenon, as exemplified by the twin cases of Roth's *The Human Stain* and Bellow's *Ravelstein*, both published in 2000, that we now turn. If I refer to twin cases, it is because of the remarkable similarity between the two novels. Indeed, it would be possible, with a bit of ingenuity, to summarize each novel identically. Consider the bivalence of the following: a courageously conserva-

tive academic, doomed by reason of his sexual adventurism, asks, before dying, an old novelist friend to write up the story of his life. Each book, moreover, is dominated by a threat thematized as quintessentially French.

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We turn first to *The Human Stain* since Roth has made the connection with the Lewinsky affair a principal motif of his novel. The book, set on the imaginary Berkshire campus of Athena College, is in fact an attempt at tragedy in the Aristotelian sense, and Roth's Greek chorus of townfolk is principally engaged in commenting on the Lewinsky affair. The hero of Roth's tragedy, however, and to that extent a Clinton surrogate in his reckless sexuality, is Coleman Silk, a Hellenist and conservative college administrator who has been unjustly forced out of the college under curious circumstances. Noting that two students registered for his class have never shown up, he one day asks his students whether anyone knows them or if they are merely 'spooks'. It turns out that the two delinquent students are African Americans, and that the word 'spooks' carries the secondary (derogatory) meaning of 'Blacks'. The result is that Silk's enemies on campus are able to hound him – unfairly – as a racist until he resigns. In addition his wife, heartbroken by events, dies under the strain, and Silk, a former dean, consoles himself by beginning a scandalous sexual liaison with a college cleaning lady, Faunia Farley. He asks Nathan Zuckerman, a novelist and Roth's alter ego, to tell his story in a book. Finally, both Silk and Faunia will meet their end in a car crash provoked by her jealous former husband, a crazed Vietnam veteran.

Now if the scapegoating of Coleman Silk constitutes a tragedy in the full Aristotelian sense, it is because it contains both an *anagnorisis* and a *peripeteia*. For midway into the novel, we discover that Coleman Silk, Jewish administrator of Athena College, is in fact not a Jew at all but a light-skinned Black 'passing' as a Jew. There is thus a profound justice in the apparent injustice of the persecution of Coleman Silk as a racist. For he became who he was by cruelly – hubristically – denying his race. Silk is an American Oedipus, his flight from his race a virtual parricide, even as his carrying on with the cleaning lady is thematized as virtually incestuous.

At the same time, Silk, as we have said, is a surrogate for Bill Clinton, whose sexual adventures and misfortunes seem to be the principal focus of the Greek chorus of townfolk. It is not for nothing that the novel reaches a resolution of sorts when the police report that there was no evidence that Silk was being sexually serviced by Faunia in his car at the time of his fatal accident.

Now if Coleman Silk is Philip Roth's Oedipus, metaphorically slaying his parents in their race and living to pay the ironic price, his Delphic oracle is the hysterical *normalienne* teaching at the college, appropriately named Delphine Roux. Driven by sexual frustration, she spends the novel emitting enigmatic (and occasionally) anonymous letters, electronic and manuscript, intended to destroy her nemesis Coleman Silk. Hence, for example, the day on which she wanders into the New York Public Library with a copy of Julia Kristeva's volume on melancholia under her arm and an anonymous letter denouncing the dean for his sexual hijinks, which she is hesitant to mail, in her purse. In the reading room, she encounters an apparently

eligible partner reading – could it be? – a novel, in French, by Kristeva's spouse Philippe Sollers. She sits across from him only to see him smile in her direction at someone entering the room behind her – with whom he takes off. In frustrated rage, she mails the missive denouncing the dean and leading to his eventual ruin.

Delphine Roux exemplifies a profound, almost clinical narcissism. She convinces herself that Silk's sexual humiliation of the cleaning lady is in fact a *pis-aller* for his will to humiliate Delphine herself: 'it's me', as she puts it in one of her ravings, 'in effigy, you are out to get'.³ The disgraced dean would have never forgiven the French intellectual her role in the original 'spooks' scandal, an orgy of political correctness leading to his resignation. From the fantasy of being sexually victimized *in another woman's body* to the will to avenge herself as a wave of 'unbridled idealism' sweeps over her, it is not long before Delphine finds herself in the throes of a full-blown delusion of persecution. Eventually, crafting a personal ad, born of her sexual frustration, to the *New York Review of Books*, she writes her way into the stunning realization that the male she is looking for corresponds quite transparently to none other than her nemesis Coleman Silk. Whereupon she 'accidentally' emails her no-longer anonymous ad, with a single keystroke, to every member of her college department. Delphine delivers herself of her oracle, but it is the gesture of a paranoid narcissist ('News of the scandal will reach everyone she's ever known, and the shame will follow her unflinchingly forever').⁴

If the core of Freud might be encapsulated in the proposition that we are all of us condemned to act out simultaneously the roles of Oedipus and Narcissus, Roth has given us a book in which those roles have been distributed between a race-denying parricidal Oedipus, Coleman Silk, and a violently self-consumed and self-destructive Narcissus, Delphine Roux. That the Oedipal tragedy, so just in its apparent injustice, *englobes* the narcissistic comedy of the French intellectual is but a sign that the genre chosen by Roth is larger than satire. Yet the centrality of that satire should not be denied. Delphine Roux, obsessed with her 'Frenchness', thesis on Bataille in hand, is a target Roth is interested in demolishing. For she represents the threat perceived by American letters as 'French theory' – and known in France, because of the excess with which it has been pursued on American campuses, as 'la théorie américaine'. (Roth is sufficiently alive to that irony to refer to it as 'the so-called discourse she picked up in Paris and New Haven'.)⁵ This is not the venue in which to discuss the vicissitudes of certain French readings of German language texts when they arrived in monolingual American English departments and were dubbed, *faute de mieux*, literary (or French) theory. Suffice it to say that Silk speaks for Roth when he sees embodied in the normalienne 'the sort of prestigious academic crap that the Athena students needed like a hole in the head but whose appeal to the faculty second-raters would prove irresistible'.⁶

But that is why, in an irony perhaps even larger than Roth's immense tragedy, one is struck by how profound the resonances, the affinities are between the novel and a remarkable strain of French thought. It is nowhere more apparent than in the title, *The Human Stain*. The phrase is one of those doubly inscribed locutions (like the original 'spooks') that structure the novel. For on the one hand, in this novel of race-denial and the will to 'play one's skin' any way one wishes, 'human stain' cannot but refer to pigmentation. But there is a second meaning to the phrase: the 'shameless

impurity of sex', 'the contaminant of sex, the redeeming corruption that de-idealizes the species and keeps us everlastingly mindful of the matter we are',⁷ as Bataille might almost have put it. (And here we are moving north from the Berkshires to our sculpted trio in Bennington: the suspicion of fellatio as cause of Silk's ultimate fall, the shadow of Monica Lewinsky and an American president never far from the consciousness of Roth's chorus of townfolk; and all, as we have seen, in a context that would obliterate a certain idea of France . . .). Eventually, the phrase 'human stain' makes an appearance, no doubt as an elaboration of Roth's thoughts on unmanageable sexuality. The ostracism of a local crow by its flock, a bird with which the scandalously erotic cleaning lady has come to identify, is attributed to the fact that humans have attempted to raise it: 'we leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen.' Faunia continues: 'Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain that is so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark . . .'.⁸ It is an odd passage on several counts. Mark, after all, is the name of Coleman Silk's endlessly rebellious son. Thus the stain before the mark may speak to a fundamentally pre- or even anti-Oedipal sexuality. But it is the manifestly un-Christian resonances of this sexualized 'stain before the mark' that interest me. Have not the best readings of Freud, so indebted to the French, insisted on the status of the drive as an 'alien internal entity', a sexuality originally seduced into the other?⁹ And is not the stain (or 'trace') prior to 'the sign' as close as one can get to the original inspiration of grammatology?¹⁰ None of this has been perceived in a novel so engagingly mordant in its dismissal of French intellectuality. But as the novel shuts down, its scandalously oral sexuality, its dismissal of a certain (French) Freud, indeed of a certain France, all seem to be winking toward our trio in Bennington. It is time to head north.

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Or rather northeast to Bellow's Vermont, which lies about as far down the road east from Bennington's Lincoln Trilogy as Roth's Athena campus lies south. We have already summarized Bellow's *Ravelstein* in terms equally applicable to *The Human Stain*: against a backdrop of menacing Frenchness, a conservative American academic, doomed by his sexual recklessness, asks an author friend to write up his life after he has died. *Ravelstein* is as much memoir as novel, the writer's Vermont retreat has been shifted one state east to New Hampshire, and the academic, this time, as is widely acknowledged, is a version of Allan Bloom, the conservative political philosopher whose *Closing of the American Mind*, a mind said to be closed largely because it had become so pathetically *open*, owed a good deal of its commercial success to Bellow's preface. So Bellow's alter ego Chick, the narrator, is to *Ravelstein* as Roth's Zuckerman is to Coleman Silk.

But differences need attending to. Abe Ravelstein was homosexual and his reckless proclivity for very young males – among whom the 'pretty boys in Paris' – will lead to his death by AIDS.¹¹ And Chick, the narrator, unlike Roth's Zuckerman, has his own surprising love life to pursue. He has married the far younger Rosamund, a doctoral student of Ravelstein's in Chicago, and the memoir is something of a paean

to her selflessness. By the end of the book, she will have saved Chick's life by rushing him home from a Caribbean island where he has been gravely poisoned by a toxic serving of red snapper in a French restaurant. In certain respects, the book comes with the starkest of biblical morals: of two old Jews apparently slated for death, the heterosexual is 'saved' by the woman he loves, and the homosexual 'destroyed by his reckless sex habits'.¹²

Indeed one has the impression that the courtly Chick is intent on preserving Rosamund – and even himself – from contamination by dimensions of sexual sleaze Ravelstein is prepared to bear witness to, for they are more than he 'wanted to hear'. And the figure of that rejection is an archaic 'place in the psyche' harking back to 'the age of the pyramids or Ur of the Chaldees'.¹³ One recognizes in that psychical bedrock the birthplace of Biblical Abraham. Thus it is the Jew in Chick who rejects the homosexuality, the Jew for whom the derogatory Yiddish word *andreygenes* was almost all the Greek he needed. 'Ich könnte mir einen anderen Abraham denken', was the line out of Kafka recalled by the Lincoln Trilogy – the Internet's 'Father Abraham' – in Bennington. Abe Ravelstein is Chick's other Abraham. In the Bennington context, we have modulated from Faith (alias Nirvana) in her affinities with Roth's Faunia Farley (behind whom Monica Lewinsky) to Hope (alias Fils de France, or Ravelstein's 'pretty boys' of Paris). This 'other Abraham', it will be objected, was no president, neither Lincoln nor Clinton, but the novel answers that objection early on: 'Abe's "people" in Washington kept his telephone line so busy that I said he must be masterminding a shadow government. He accepted this, smiling as though the oddity were not his but mine.'¹⁴ Bellow thus imagines Ravelstein as a stand-in for Clinton, which was precisely Roth's conceit regarding Coleman Silk in *his* novel.

There is even a racial component to Ravelstein's transgressions and it meshes curiously with the racial transgressions of Coleman Silk. At one point ailing Ravelstein enigmatically asks Chick to draw a check for 500 dollars to a name Chick does not recognize. Ravelstein explains that he prefers that Nikki, his official boyfriend, not see evidence of the payment in Ravelstein's own check-book. Christopher Hitchens has suggestively pointed out that the passage has been seriously truncated in relation to the original proof copy sent to reviewers. There the payment was made for services rendered to a 'handsome little boy' Ravelstein had 'brought home one night'.¹⁵ His name, Eulace ('pronounced Ulysee') Harms, is a clear indication that the boy was Black. It was a detail that Chick or Bellow preferred not to think about, a case of what the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips calls Chick's 'curious blandness' about the subject of Ravelstein's homosexuality.¹⁶ Now another subject Chick repeatedly tells the reader he will not delve into is the substance of Ravelstein's ideas. Hitchens, however, does, and points out that the 'chaos' associated with African-American rage was 'the whole motif of *The Closing of the American Mind*'.¹⁷ Bloom is said never to have recovered from the moment in 1968 at Cornell University, where he taught, when armed Black students took over a student center. A remarkable configuration emerges from the excised sexual detail (concerning Eulace Harms) in *Ravelstein* and the racially tinged motivation of the Bloom best-seller. Sexual attraction to the object of one's intellectual condemnation, a transgressiveness fundamentally marked by race, appears to be a dimension Chick, who is at

times capable of clapping his hands over his ears and squeezing his eyes shut, would repress from his novel.

In this, of course, *Ravelstein* is the opposite of *The Human Stain*. Roth's Zuckerman was able to plunge into the racial drama of Coleman Silk because it was in important ways a transposition of Roth's own vexed relation to his Jewish identity. The accusation of self-hating Jew has been with the author since *Portnoy's Complaint*, so the anti-Black Black Coleman Silk, both unjustly (i.e. superficially) and justly (profoundly) accused of anti-Black sentiment, was in important ways Roth (or Zuckerman) himself. But if an Abrahamic 'blandness' in relation to Ravelstein's sexual existence and a novelist's principled indifference to his protagonist's ideas both loom as potential weaknesses of the book, Bellow holding back precisely where Roth is prepared to plunge, what is it that Bellow's Chick would give us of his hero? The answer has something to do with temperament, a kind of humor, something that has Bellow evoking, on the first page of his book, Abraham Lincoln's 'funny stories', H. L. Mencken, 'spoofers', 'self-spoofers' and jokes. We touch here on the splendidly demotic, streetwise, downtown wit of Bellow's prose, which remains wonderfully on display in *Ravelstein*. Indeed Roth has associated this side of Bellow's achievement, its 'screwball authority', with Damon Runyon, and speaks of the author's accomplishment in terms of closing the 'gap between Thomas Mann and Damon Runyon'.¹⁸ The Mann side is, of course, the high-cultural, and indeed there may be a touch of doomed Aschenbach in Ravelstein (as Roth explicitly suggested about his own Coleman Silk). But the larger mysteries in Bellow tend to be anthropological (it should not be forgotten that his academic training was in anthropology), and we shall turn now to an anthropological mystery in *Ravelstein* that is less opposed to Bellow's jokiness than it is its other face.

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Ravelstein is a profoundly Lévi-Straussian novel: its subject is the way in which men exchange women. The protagonist spends much of the book trying to pry Chick free from his brilliant and beautiful scientist wife Vela, Romanian by birth, with the result that Chick will marry Ravelstein's student 'groupie' Rosamund.¹⁹ Now the turning-point in the process of substituting or exchanging women comes in Paris: 'Paris [this is an important aside] was where Abe Ravelstein and Vela had their first falling out'.²⁰ Ravelstein rushes into Chick's hotel room, finds Vela, horrified, in her slip; she wheels round and slams the bathroom door behind her, whereupon the two men, paying scant heed to what has happened, embrace, elated at being reunited. Shortly thereafter Vela will declare that she is uninterested in seeing Ravelstein again. His defense is perhaps more offensive than the original offense: 'There wasn't all that much to be seen'.²¹ Vela will eventually hint to Chick that the two men 'were carrying on together', implying a homosexual liaison.²² Chick relates his reaction to Ravelstein: 'It seemed like a joke'.²³ Chick is precisely right. What the misencounter in Paris reproduces is the very scenario of Freud's *Witz*: a male aggresses a female, she leaves the room in disgust, and the male bonds with a second male over the discomfiture of the woman that has just ensued.²⁴ Thereafter Ravelstein will go to work on separating Chick from Vela, resulting in her replacement (or substitution) by

Rosamund. Such is the homosocial (as opposed to homosexual) structure of kinship in Lévi-Strauss. And indeed it may be claimed that one of the stakes negotiated by the novel is keeping the homosocial bond between Abe and Chick free from any taint of homosexuality.²⁵

Thus the joke and the anthropological mystery, Freudian *Witz* and Lévi-Straussian structure of exchange, or, in Roth's terms, Damon Runyon and Thomas Mann, turn out, in *Ravelstein*, to be identical. Here the Lévi-Straussian dimension complicates (while illuminating) matters. For it was the anthropologist's contention that whereas society consists of the exchange of women, words, and goods, women, unlike words and goods, have a propensity to speak, to emit signs of their own. And it is what Vela tends to say that ends up lubricating her ouster (or replacement). For Ravelstein's effort is twofold: to demonstrate that Vela is insufferably Francophile (which is already a problem for a Jew such as Chick in the throes of the 'Vichy syndrome') and that her greatest friend, the Romanian mythographer Radu Griliescu, modeled on Mircea Eliade, was a notorious fascist and anti-Semite now making use of Jewish friends such as Chick to whitewash his catastrophic past as a member of the Romanian Iron Guard. The references to the life of Eliade, from the murder of his disaffected disciple I. P. Culiuanu on the University of Chicago campus to the withdrawal of an invitation from Gershon Scholem to lecture in Jerusalem, are all precisely noted.²⁶ What seems less than precise (or more compulsively *driven* than reasoned) is the effort to link Eliade with Céline. (The Céline of the *Bagatelles* and *Les Beaux draps* is the author who keeps surfacing in the book.) To nazify Eliade seems, for Ravelstein, perhaps for Bellow, to Gallicize him.

From the beginning of the book France appears to be the privileged target of Bellow's *Kulturpessimismus*. Chick is a 'great skeptic when it comes to the French', Abe notes.²⁷ 'The French had *had* it,' the narrator later opines. Whatever the proficiency of the French in the arts of intimacy, the key point is that Vichy was not 'solely a product of the Vichy occupation'.²⁸ Is it any coincidence that the ailment Ravelstein is described as suffering from most frequently in the book is not AIDS but the 'Guillain Barré' virus, and that Chick's brush with death had been caused by a toxic meal served to him on the island by 'Bédier, a tough guy playing the Frenchiest of French hosts'?²⁹ As for Vela and the Romanians they are, if anything, more French than the French: 'No modern French woman would put on such an act. Often people from Eastern Europe cling to France, they have no life at home, home is disgusting, and they need to see themselves in a French light only . . . They hope to turn into Frenchmen. But your wife is even more peculiar . . .'³⁰ Thus Ravelstein.

Whereas Roth's version of a quintessential French presence is Delphine Roux, the voice of 'theory' corrupting American literary sensibility, for Bellow the obsession is French complicity in the genocide. In his own version of philo-Semitic anti-feminism, the accomplished woman *speaks*, which was already a problem for the structuralist purist, and what she speaks is French (or at least Francophile) fascism. And if she fails to speak (for one hears very little from her in the novel whose victim she is), it is because her silence is meant to serve as a cover for French (or Francophile) fascism.

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Our subject has been American moralism, what Roth calls the 'ecstasy of sanctimony', and the price that France should be made to pay for it. In the emblematic case of Hunt's Bennington trilogy, the 'Fils de France' was de-Gallicized, rebaptized Hope, and absorbed into the 'American Spirit'. Whereupon, as Bellow's Chick might have put it, the French had *had* it. The pertinence of such concerns in the wake of the conflict concerning the war on (or in) Iraq will be obvious. Indeed this reading of two masterly novels from considerably *before* the war may stand as a partial explanation of the reticence of an American intelligentsia so little eager to contest whatever price for France the Bush Administration has (or had) in store for it. For the French, in the eyes of Bellow, stood (tendentially) guilty of complicity in the genocide. Worse yet, they became in *Ravelstein* the novelistic vehicle *par excellence* for discussing murderous anti-Semitism in general: Eliade, to use Bellow's baseball lingo, was a minor league Céline; to be truly sinister both he and Vela had to wax more French than the French. And they were already paying the price. In the eyes of Roth, Delphine Roux, his emblematic French character, aside from her onslaught against the protagonist, stood guilty of helping to corrupt American literary sensibility with *theory*, and would be made to self-destruct.

Here things need to be nuanced. For Bellow's Abrahamic condemnation of the French appears to partake of American moralism, whereas, in Roth, Delphine stands guilty of collaborating *with* such moralism: it is she who issues the decisive missive condemning Coleman Silk.

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It is in light of that ambiguity that we would conclude this excursus on American presidents – Abraham Lincoln and Bill Clinton – and surrogate presidents – Coleman Silk (with his Clintonesque travails) and Abe Ravelstein (with his 'shadow government') – with a coda, a bookend of sorts to be paired with the Bennington sculpture, propping up our two novels, on the subject of the most intriguingly ambiguous of American cases. In the annals of American sanctimony and the price France should be made to pay for it the archetypal figure is surely Woodrow Wilson. But it is not so much Wilson as his sometime aide William Bullitt, more specifically four junctures in his ambiguous career, that merit lapidary evocation in – or as – this conclusion.

1. In the late 1920s, just as Hunt was yoking together – in plaster – his figures for the Lincoln Trilogy, Bullitt, an American diplomat, was at work with Freud on the psychoanalytic study of Woodrow Wilson that would appear only posthumously. In it, the compulsively *verbal* Wilson, his libido all in his mouth, is portrayed as being in a near psychotic state at Versailles. His apparent mission was to save the world. Clemenceau, whom Bullitt and Freud describe telling Wilson that he was 'seeking to destroy France', is said by the authors to have intuited Wilson's 'unconscious'.³¹

2. In June 1940, as American ambassador to France, Bullitt opted to stay in Paris rather than follow the French government south, and ended up handing the city over to the German military – for which he was criticized by de Gaulle and the State Department, but profusely thanked by Pétain.³²

3. Upon returning to Washington, Bullitt's principal concern seems to have been

to secure the removal of Roosevelt's *éminence grise*, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, accused – by Freud's sometime collaborator – of making a number of homosexual propositions to 'Negro' porters on a train. Roosevelt rejected Bullitt's recommendation and bristled at his references to Welles as a 'criminal'. Bullitt's ascent in the government effectively came to an end over the denunciation of Welles.³³

4. In June 1944, Bullitt joined the Free French army under de Gaulle, served as commandant in the infantry, and participated in the liberation of Paris.³⁴

It will be perceived that Bullitt, in the course of his career, came to occupy virtually every position in the structure we have elaborated: critic, with Freud, of American sanctimony, but vitriolic persecutor of homosexual 'crime'; combatant for the liberation of Paris from the Nazis, but insubordinate, delivering the city, in 1940, to the enemy

There are some bookends that deserved to be turned into books.

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Notes

1. Saul Bellow, *It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future*, New York, Viking, 1994, p. 251.
2. On the structural congruence between 'death instinct' and unconscious sexuality in Freud, see Jean Laplanche, *Vie et mort en psychanalyse*, Paris, Flammarion, 1970, Chs V–VI.
3. Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, New York, Vintage, 2000, p. 195.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
9. See Laplanche, *op. cit.* Note 2., Chs I and II.
10. See Jacques Derrida, 'Linguistique et grammatologie', in *De la grammatologie*, Paris, Minuit, 1967, pp. 42–108.
11. Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein*, New York, Viking, 2000, p.138.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 189, 225.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
15. Christopher Hitchens, *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere*, London, Verso, 2000, p. 227.
16. Adam Phillips, *Equals*, New York, Basic Books, 2002, p. 231.
17. Hitchens, *op. cit.* Note 15, p.221.
18. Philip Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2001, p. 149.
19. *Ravelstein*, *op. cit.* Note 11, p. 40.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
24. For a discussion of the congruence between the 'innocence' of the deflected joke and the intrinsic 'perversity' of the sexual drive, see Jeffrey Mehlman, 'How to Read Freud on Jokes: The Critic as

- Schadchen*, *New Literary History*, 6 (Winter) 1975; French translation, 'Une lecture du 'Witz' de Freud: l'interprète comme marieur,' in *La Psychanalyse à l'Université*, II(7) June, 1977.
25. For a discussion of homosexual 'panic' within essentially homosocial institutions (such as the military), see Eve Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990, pp. 184–8.
 26. For these incidents in the life of Eliade, see Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Cioran, Eliade, Ionesco: l'oubli du fascisme*, Paris, PUF, 2002, pp. 484–9.
 27. *Ravelstein*, *op. cit.* Note 11, p. 18.
 28. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
 31. Sigmund Freud and William Bullitt, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study*, New York, Avon, 1966, p. 284.
 32. 'The Swastika in Paris, in Orville Bullitt (ed.), *For the President: Personal and Secret Correspondence Between Franklin D. Roosevelt and William C. Bullitt*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1972, pp. 439–93. In his defense, Bullitt (p. 468) cabled to the State Department on June 11, 1940 a reminder of 'the tradition that the American Ambassador does not leave Paris. Remember Gouverneur Morris, and his wooden leg in the terror, Washburne in the Commune, Herrick [in World War I]'. According to Irwin Gellman (*Secret Affairs: Franklin Roosevelt, Cordell Hull, and Sumner Welles*, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 197), Roosevelt too had ordered Bullitt to leave Paris.
 33. Gellman, pp. 240–2.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 345.

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