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War: Situating *The Human Stain* and  
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Canon**

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## Philip Roth and America's Inexplicable War: Situating *The Human Stain* and *American Pastoral* within the Vietnam Canon

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### Roth and the Vietnam Canon

In a 1974 interview with Walter Mauro, later chronicled in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975) Philip Roth lambasts the 'morally out of control' American government of the Vietnam War years, a period he deems 'the most "politicized" of [his] life'.<sup>1</sup> Pontificating with historical retrospection, Roth describes 1960s and '70s America as a 'foreign invader' and recalls the sense of virulent 'dispossession and powerlessness' that typified the anti-war movement.<sup>2</sup> That slippery subject of the Vietnam War most acutely manifests itself in *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Human Stain* (2000), two novels in Roth's American trilogy, which David Gooblar argues represents Roth's first major (self-less) engagement with the American culture around him.<sup>3</sup> Conscious breaks from his self-absorbed prose, *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* tackle the inexplicability of the Vietnam era through the microcosm of domestic experience, offering the vatic narrator Nathan Zuckerman's metafiction as representation of the past. Although the novels broadly situate Roth within the Vietnam literary canon, his relatively late publishing dates illustrate a markedly unique approach to a victor-less, mission deficient war that is

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975) 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>3</sup> David Gooblar, *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* (London: Continuum, 2011) 131.

notoriously complicated to represent. Most importantly, Roth's portrayal of the war's domestic reality reflects the canon's morphing trajectory, away from the straight-forward platoon novel and towards allegorical representation. This essay will first examine the earlier Vietnam canon and will then explicate how Roth domesticizes and mythologizes the war, specifically through his illustrations of Merry in *American Pastoral* and Lester in *The Human Stain*.

By the late 1990s, before the final instalment of the American trilogy even landed in bookstores, the Vietnam platoon novel and tales of burning rice fields had already become topically hackneyed. Torrents of non-fiction, fiction, oral histories, songs, films, poetry and readers, dating from Robin Moore's poem 'The Green Berets' (1965) to Stuart O'Nan's *The Vietnam Reader* (1998), flooded the American literary scene in clearly defined waves. As O'Nan chronologically outlines in his reader, after the mid-70s and the Fall of Saigon, Vietnam writing transitioned from non-fictional, empirical accounts to fictional stories saturated with imaginative reflection. With the exception of early (read: naïve) pro-war propagandist pieces and a few minor works in support of the Green Berets, most authors depict the grotesqueness of warfare and the disquietude of homecoming as an ethically tragic, governmental failure – leaving questions about the war's rectitude seldom unanswered. For decades, this morally strenuous literature engrossed the American public, and yet, only after the deluge of titles slowed to a trickle did Philip Roth publish *American Pastoral*. One must ask, why now? Why the forty-two year interlude between the conflict's birth and the book's release? What could Roth's Vietnam writing possibly offer – besides undoubted Rothian witticism – that hundreds of other on-topic novels had not already thoroughly explored?

Based solely on his trilogy's publishing dates, Roth's Vietnam fiction falls squarely within the 'reader' wave (late 1980s to present), but admittedly, this

categorization does not wholly fit. More accurately, Roth appears to emulate (intentionally or inadvertently) prosaic and thematic aspects from his literary and artistic predecessors, ranging from Tim O'Brien to Norman Mailer, while simultaneously forging a picture of the war that is uniquely Rothian. Although Roth admits in *The Facts* (1988) that he was a casual anti-war demonstrator, combatting what he ingeniously terms the cultural 'deluge of verbal napalm', his writings are ultimately less politically engrossed than, for example, Mailer's ardently peacenik protests.<sup>4</sup> Nor was he a soldier like O'Brien – not for any significant time, at least; enlisting in the army directly after the Korean War, he was promptly discharged with a back injury, making Roth one of the only Vietnam writers never to see action in the war.<sup>5</sup> Although he lacks experience humping the jungle and firing a gun in combat, Roth manages to represent the turbulence surrounding this historical era, not only in *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* (which largely constitute his Vietnam oeuvre), but also in similar works. Notably, *Our Gang* (1971), a quirky, satiric novel about the rocky Nixon years, opens with 'Tricky' preposterously conflating Vietnam murders with abortion; the heavily melodramatic *Indignation* (2008) illustrates a young narrator's unsuccessful attempt to elude the Korean War draft, an evasion that inevitably conjures images of Vietnam; and although the second instalment in the American trilogy, *I Married a Communist* (1998), is virtually silent on Vietnam, it reveals turbulent McCarthyism as a precursor for civil unrest in the next twenty years.

Even with Roth's prodigious ability to narrativize American political and cultural history, obvious in these briefly summarized novels, *American Pastoral* in particular proved laborious to write, indicated by the novel's twenty-five year gestation period.<sup>6</sup> The task of artfully and truthfully illustrating the notoriously perplexing Vietnam plagues

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Roth, *The Facts* (London: Vintage Books, 2000) 150, 138.

<sup>5</sup> Hermione Lee, *Philip Roth* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1982) 50.

<sup>6</sup> Debra B. Shostak, *Philip Roth: Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 310.

most writers, and this representational complexity perhaps partially accounts for the gaps between the war's end and Roth's publishing dates; a deeper explanation will be assessed later. In *Dispatches* (1977), the most praised Vietnam novel next to *The Things They Carried* (1990), Michael Herr passionately declaims, 'conventional journalism could no more cover the war than conventional firepower could win it. All it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into communications pudding'.<sup>7</sup> Between a guerrilla Viet Cong army and booby-trapped jungles, a deeply vague and morally controversial plan to exterminate communism, President Lyndon Johnson's abandonment of the US public's war effort in favour of his domestic social programs, war footage streaming into American living rooms at dinner time, and the refusal to admit a North Vietnamese victory, representing the US's longest and undeclared war is a literary quagmire.<sup>8</sup> What Herr terms 'communications pudding', linguistically similar to Roth's 'deluge of verbal napalm' claim, suggests a governmental and media generated opacity that literature, particularly fiction, seeks to combat. By spending numerous years on conceptualizing both *The Human Stain* and *American Pastoral*, Roth allows himself time to digest, assess, and untangle this historical Gordian knot retrospectively, to 'mature his credentials' in order to capture 'the infectious volatility of the moment', to formulate a mythical yet comprehensible approach to an incomprehensible war.<sup>9</sup> Notably, the 'masterworks' of Vietnam literature were largely written during the late-1970s to late-1980s, with adequate time to process the war, and almost all are fiction.

Like Vietnam writers from the mid-1970s onwards, who abandoned the empirical nonfiction of early work, Roth produces what Tim O'Brien (the master of Vietnam

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<sup>7</sup> Eric James Schroeder, *Vietnam, We've All Been There: Interviews with American Writers* (London: Praeger, 1992) 1.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (London: Century Publishing, 1983) 16.

<sup>9</sup> Alain Finkielkraut and Philip Roth, 'The Ghosts of Philip Roth', *Conversations with Philip Roth*, Ed. George J. Searles (London: University of Mississippi Press, 1992) 125.

‘masterworks’) terms an explicating ‘story-truth’.<sup>10</sup> More than halfway through *The Things They Carried* (1990), a collection of platoon stories, O’Brien bluntly concedes that his ‘true’ war tale is almost entirely invented. In the ironically named ‘How to Tell a True War Story’, he claims that with Vietnam literature, ‘You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened [...] [and] you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain’.<sup>11</sup> Although not a remarkably new idea by the 1990s – in fact, it appears as yet another exploration into the phenomenological limits of postmodern fiction – this Vietnam-centred explication inevitably links to the intricately spun portrayals of Lester and Merry in *The Human Stain* and *American Pastoral*, respectively. Perhaps the ‘story-truth’ is what Roth yearns for in ‘Writing and the Powers that Be’ when he preaches ‘expressiveness’ over ‘making a statement’;<sup>12</sup> but again, Roth (even before his Vietnam writing) is no stranger to the powers of fiction, nor do his previous books lack the analysis of fictive roles. Nevertheless, this imaginative approach implies more than a free-wheeling creative license – it entails a responsibility to depict the war’s nature lucidly and poignantly, in ways that the media and nonfiction strive for but cannot reach. ‘For all the talk about Vietnam being a television war,’ Herr postulates in a 1992 interview, ‘I always believed it was a writer’s war’.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the war generated (and continues to generate) a literary call to arms, with Roth falling into the popular category of fictional representation. However, it is somewhat reductive to position *The Human Stain* and *American Pastoral* so neatly within this general box; after all, the not-so-innovative ‘story-truth’ is a rather weak construction with which to begin, and the novels defy conventional Vietnam canon classification.

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<sup>10</sup> Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo, 1991) 179.

<sup>11</sup> O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 157.

<sup>12</sup> Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* 12.

<sup>13</sup> Schroeder 38.

Stepping beyond the Vietnam platoon ‘story-truth’, Roth uniquely frames *American Pastoral* through the microcosm of familial, domestic experience, relinquishing the traditional burning rice fields and instead situating his grandest Vietnam novel (and arguably his grandest novel ever) in picturesque Old Rimrock, New Jersey. ‘The joining of the public and the private’, claims Roth in an interview, ‘seeing the private drama as a public drama [...] so saturated by history’ implies that ‘the private drama [...] [is] determined by history’.<sup>14</sup> Remarkably few Vietnam novels illustrate the war’s ‘private drama’, its domestic reality; exceptions include a smattering of ‘homecoming’ works in the 1970s and 80s, the most recognized of which include Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (1977), Louise Erdrich’s novel *Love Medicine* (1984), David Rabe’s play *Sticks and Bones* (1972), the film *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and finally the controversial movie that re-defined Jane Fonda’s career, *Coming Home* (1978). Here, the veteran literally brings the repulsiveness of war back to America, returning to a previously embracing society that now views him as physically and psychologically damaged.<sup>15</sup> Suggesting a continuation of violence from Vietnam to the home front, Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1974) superlatively illustrates Vietnam’s lasting effects, as the war follows the veteran back to the United States in the form of the drug trade. Although ‘homecoming’ works poignantly portray Vietnam’s domestic *aftermath* in America (as in *Dog Soldiers*, the haze of smoke never lifts), they hardly express the interior lives of American citizens *during* the war. The reader knows, for example, *Ceremony*’s protagonist Tayo (who literally vomits his Vietnam experience back onto his Native American reservation land), but learns little about the people who, *during* Vietnam,

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<sup>14</sup> Derek Parker Royal, ‘Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*’, *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, ed. Derek Parker Royal (London: Praeger, 2005) 186-187.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart O’Nan, *The Vietnam Reader: The Definitive Collection of Fiction and Nonfiction on the War* (New York: Anchor, 1998) Kindle Locations 8799-8800.

prayed for Tayo's safe return home. In this way, Roth's *American Pastoral* begins to fill a domestic gap, one that Mailer first sought to close in the 1970s.

Curiously, *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), which admittedly are not Mailer's finest works, compose nearly the entire canon of the American domestic experience during Vietnam. Mailer, who claims, 'I've never been outraged as much in the years I've been living as by that war', exudes anti-war fervour most intensely in *The Armies of the Night*, the nonfictional account of a Washington, D.C., anti-Vietnam demonstration.<sup>16</sup> Somewhat humorously, the straightforwardly titled *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is ostensibly unrelated to the war; only the last words of the novel, 'Vietnam, hot damn', explicitly state Mailer's motives.<sup>17</sup> Given the novel's title, this story of an Alaskan hunting trip emerges as a thinly veiled anti-war commentary, tellingly punctuated by sentences like 'they maim game all over the place and then let them suffer'<sup>18</sup> and with an entire chapter dedicated to the 'rundown on the guns for those good Americans who care'.<sup>19</sup> Released in the heat of the conflict, Mailer's Vietnam novels raise the tangential issue of the paucity of anti-war literature produced during this period. While this question evades a definitive answer, an elementary response points to the tradition of war writing favouring the soldier over the public. Whatever the paucity's cause, Roth draws from an exceedingly limited domestic tradition, which makes *American Pastoral* (juxtaposed against the Vietnam canon) a unique undertaking, in which the people at home finally receive a voice.

### Vietnam in *American Pastoral*

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<sup>16</sup> Schroeder 97.

<sup>17</sup> Norman Mailer, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) 208.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 64.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 77.



*American Pastoral* is Roth's first attempt to domesticize and mythologize the Vietnam experience. Roth presents Seymour 'Swede' Levov, a Jewish all-American hometown hero and glove factory owner with a former Miss New Jersey wife, an idyllic stone house, and a daughter who blows the Swede's desired pastoral existence to smithereens. Levov's radical, stuttering daughter Merry bombs a local post office at five in the morning, attempting to bring 'the [Vietnam] war home to Lyndon Johnson'.<sup>20</sup> In actuality, it is *Roth* who brings the war home, as he fictionally explodes a general store in suburban New Jersey rather than a Viet Cong camp in Hanoi. Merry's bomb, which kills a local doctor innocently delivering a letter, 'transports [the Swede] out of the longed-for American pastoral [...] and into the indigenous American berserk'.<sup>21</sup> Through this blast and its aftermath, Roth illustrates the crumbling domestic idealism of Vietnam-era America, with Nathan Zuckerman (Roth's fictional photocopy of himself) mapping the carnage.

'Story-truth' acquires an elevated, fantastical definition in *American Pastoral*, permeating the novel through Zuckerman. After meeting the Swede twice since childhood, the writer Zuckerman proceeds to spin an intense mythopoeic fantasy about the Levovs' life, based solely on vague gossip and a heightened impression of the Swede's former football all-stardom – taking 'story-truth' to a level where little 'truth' is actually involved. In fact, Roth seems to substitute mythology for 'story-truth' altogether. As Zuckerman 'lift[s] the Swede up onto the stage', the yarnning begins: "I dreamed a realistic chronicle,' Zuckerman asserts, admitting, 'I began gazing into his life'.<sup>22</sup> The quixotic nature of Zuckerman's metafiction, which extends to the Swede's family, perhaps accounts for the unilateral portrayal of Merry as the embodiment of a

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<sup>20</sup> Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (London: Vintage Books, 1997) 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 88, 89.

revolutionary, which Mark Schechner claims is Roth's labelling attempt 'to anoint Merry with a distinctive profile'.<sup>23</sup> This distinctiveness, however, appears as reductive as Lester's crazed-veteran character in *The Human Stain* (to be examined later). In this way, Roth allows Zuckerman to mould his metafictional characters rigidly, to construct them to fit concretely within his fantasy.

Further building Zuckerman's myth of the Levovs, a distinctly American myth, the Swede positions Merry within a historical narrative, calling her 'a Joan of Arc of the movement' and exclaiming '[my] daughter is one with John Brown!'<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Zuckerman christens the Swede 'our Kennedy' while consciously setting the section 'Paradise Lost' against the backdrop of the Watergate hearings.<sup>25</sup> Roth seemingly presents a historical cornucopia within *American Pastoral* to signify the Vietnam era as both culmination and crisis in American culture – both a mythic crescendo and fall. As the children of the patriotic post-World War II generation (an era which Roth gave 'all [...] [his] heart'),<sup>26</sup> Vietnam writers grapple with the cracking illusion of American's exceptionalism (a myth itself) – what Mailer calls 'the hubris of the American vision'.<sup>27</sup> In this respect, the novel's classical partitions recalling the Adamic narrative ('Paradise Remembered', 'The Fall', and 'Paradise Lost') reflect not only the Swede's fall from his self-determined perfection, but also America's backsliding – from the thrill of late 1940s post-war domination to the absolute failure of Vietnam. Merry's innocent Audrey Hepburn fantasy (a nod to 1950s bliss) is replaced by the 'terrifyingly pure', radical rhetoric of the anti-war movement.<sup>28</sup> Merry's Vietnam protests eclipse the Swede's much-

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Schechner, 'Roth's American Trilogy', *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. Timothy Parish (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007) 147.

<sup>24</sup> Schechner, 'Roth's American Trilogy', 160.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 83.

<sup>26</sup> Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* 10.

<sup>27</sup> Schroeder 96.

<sup>28</sup> Roth, *American Pastoral* 284.

loved, World War II ‘manly, patriotic challenge’<sup>29</sup> and effectually ‘disrupt [...] the anticipated American future that was simply to have unrolled out of the solid American past’.<sup>30</sup> The Swede, who claims, ‘Everything he loved was here’ in America, wrestles with this cracking American exceptionalism within his own home.<sup>31</sup>

Zuckerman (and by extension Roth) fabricates an essentially American myth to contextualize and explain the Levovs’ (and consequently America’s) collective trauma, aggrandizing the earthly story into legend. One may consider Frank Ankersmit’s *The Sublime Historical Experience* (2005), which ties memory to ‘the crucial role that myth still plays in our modern(ist) historical consciousness’, for a clue to Roth’s motives; the collective imaginary process of mythmaking, Ankersmit asserts, soothes the pain of loss while providing an explanation for trauma.<sup>32</sup> Exactly in this way, Zuckerman dreams the complex story of the Swede and ‘The Rimrock Bomber’ to mythologize the traumatic experience of his childhood hero. Offering a microcosmic picture for the domestic history of the Vietnam era, Roth seems to incorporate new ideas of emotive retrospection into his novel, including the recently birthed trauma theory (to be discussed at greater length with *The Human Stain*).

Roth takes his own statement (‘the private drama [...] [is] determined by history’) a step further in *American Pastoral*; the private drama is not only *determined* by history, but *becomes* a historically based mythology itself. Roth radically incorporates the domestic experience by focalizing the narrative through Merry – and through Merry’s gaze at the television set. He thus illustrates the seepage of traumatic history into family life through the advent of new media, leaking images of America’s inexplicable war into

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 85.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 213.

<sup>32</sup> Frank Ankersmit, *The Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) 318.

the family home. Nicknamed America's first 'television war' or 'living room war' by then CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite, Vietnam cascaded into American homes with almost real-time footage of battles and soldierly life, and unlike during World War II and Korea, average Americans could *participate* in Vietnam through this revolutionary media.<sup>33</sup> One may recall the opening of Steve Hasset's song 'And what would you do, ma', which compellingly connects the gruesomeness of war to domestic spaces through television:

And what would you do, ma  
if eight of your sons step  
out of the TV and begin  
killing chickens and burning  
hooches in the living room,  
stepping on booby traps  
and dying in the kitchen [...] <sup>34</sup>

Like Roth, Hasset illustrates the participatory effect of the war; with television, the 'booby traps' are now also 'in the kitchen', and bombs explode the local post office – the war has come home to roost.

Supplanting the soldier on the ground with the television viewer, Roth flips the traditional Vietnam novel on its head. The immolating monks committing suicide before a crowd of news cameras most fully demonstrate this aspect in *American Pastoral*, as the Swede notes, 'once that [immolation] started up he found that he couldn't keep [Merry] away from the television set'.<sup>35</sup> Watching the monks' ultimate sacrifice, the Swede reasons, was the catalyst for Merry's radicalism. Whether this rings true or is merely a

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<sup>33</sup> *Vietnam War with Walter Cronkite*, perf. Walter Cronkite. RKO, 1985.

<sup>34</sup> O'Nan *Kindle Locations* 9347-9350.

<sup>35</sup> Roth, *American Pastoral* 155.

father's attempt to evade his own culpability, the Swede's insistence that the television permanently imbedded within Merry the seeds of revolution illuminates Roth's motives. The transmission of war scenes into the Levov house through the television is, in fact, metaphorically how Roth frames the novel – outside Vietnam but also wholly within it. With forethought, he states: Merry '[turned] their *living room* into a battlefield' [italics mine].<sup>36</sup> America's first 'living room war', Roth compellingly proposes, extends from Saigon to Old Rimrock, New Jersey.

Although few works in the Vietnam canon pertain to the domestic experience during the war, notably, even fewer consider the female perspective, which is inextricably linked to the domestic in *American Pastoral*. As O'Nan rightly notes in *The Vietnam Reader*, Vietnam literature's hero is almost entirely the male 'combat infantryman'.<sup>37</sup> Intriguingly, *American Pastoral* substitutes a male soldier throwing grenades in the jungle for a young girl watching television then bombing a local post office, effectually replacing the warrior figure with a warring, female teenager and therefore standing virtually alone in a torrent of male focused fiction. After a thorough search of the canon, *American Pastoral* aside, one may stumble upon a singular critically acclaimed Vietnam novel from the female perspective – Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985). A comparison of the novels reveals the aforementioned entanglement of the feminine and the domestic. Mason's novel chronicles the ill-starred life of seventeen-year-old Sam Hughes, a girl whose father was killed in the war and whose Uncle Emmett remains traumatized by his military service. Utterly obsessed with the monumental scar that Vietnam left on her familial history, Sam rabidly memorizes her father's Vietnam journals, eventually stealing away into the Kentucky wilderness to re-enact his wartime experience.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 113.

<sup>37</sup> O'Nan *Kindle Locations* 146-148.

Ironically declaring, ‘If it were up to women, there would be no war’, Sam near-painstakingly envisions her home as a battlefield.<sup>38</sup> For example, when her Uncle Emmett detonates a flea bomb in the house, Sam ‘imagined that the smell was Agent Orange’, thinking later, ‘Emmett had helped kill those Vietnamese, the same way he killed the fleas’.<sup>39</sup> Like Merry in *American Pastoral*, Sam transforms into a pseudo-soldier, emulating the warrior experience within a domestic space. When Sam begins to ‘[hump] the boonies’, claiming, ‘Here I am [...] In country’, the country she conceptualizes is not America, not Kentucky – but the wilds of Vietnam.<sup>40</sup> At one point in her ‘boonie’ exploration, an almost-humorous encounter with a ‘Viet-Cong’ befittingly juxtaposes the *real* Vietnam with the absurdity of her experience: ‘She saw a face, a face with beady eyes. It scared her. It was a V.C. Then she saw a sharp nose and streaks around the eyes. It was a raccoon’.<sup>41</sup> Although Sam’s wilful hallucinations are certainly more of a game than Merry’s solemn protests, Mason still digs at the profounder thematic issue of a domestic representation during Vietnam. Inevitably, questions about *In Country*’s female perspective continually appear in interviews with Mason, who admits, ‘What did I know? I was a girl, I had never been to Vietnam. I felt intimidated writing about the subject’.<sup>42</sup> Like Roth, whose novels never drift far from New Jersey, Mason claims that she situates her narrative in small-town America, far away from Vietnam’s underbrush, in part because Kentucky is familiar territory. Comparing these congruous statements, it becomes clear that Mason conflates the female perspective with the domestic experience – to write a Vietnam novel about a teenage girl, Mason must place her protagonist in a domestic space. Although Mason clumsily declares, ‘I don’t know that women are often

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<sup>38</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (London: Chatoo & Windus, 1986) 208.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 208-209.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 210.

<sup>41</sup> Mason, *In Country*, 213.

<sup>42</sup> Schroeder 138.

much motivated to write about men's experiences in [war]', additionally citing her inability to understand 'what would motivate someone to write a piece of fiction about the flower power or the peace movement', her work nevertheless begins to fill the domestic gap in ways similar to *American Pastoral*.<sup>43</sup>

One may arrive at the basic (yet marginally true) conclusion that Roth and Mason employ female characters to illustrate Vietnam's domestic experience simply because women are traditionally associated with the home. This reductive assumption, however, grossly underestimates the intricately metaphorical significance both writers inculcate within their female, provocatively gendered characters. Sam, whose name itself is unisex, hot-headedly obsesses over the war in a way that Mason distinctively portrays as manly. Forgoing make-up and dances for trekking the wilderness, Sam emerges as a non-traditional woman figure, like 'Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher' who one 'wouldn't want to meet... out in a swamp at night'.<sup>44</sup> Equating the domestic domain with a warzone, Mason draws the feminine closer into the societally traditional masculine sphere, comparing women to soldiers; 'soldiers murdered babies,' Sam thinks grimly, 'but women did too. They ripped their own unborn babies out of themselves and flushed them away, squirming and bloody'.<sup>45</sup>

Even more than Mason, Roth fascinatingly posits Merry as a figurative halfway point between the masculine and the feminine. Early in the narrative, in a sexually devious manner that readers naturally expect from Roth, Zuckerman presents a quasi-incestuous scene between father and daughter, offering yet another explanation for Merry's radicalism. After a sun-drenched beach trip, riding back home in the car, Merry 'half innocently, half audaciously, precociously playing the grown up girl, said, "Daddy,

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 176.

<sup>44</sup> Mason 208.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 215.

kiss me the way you ki-k-kiss umumumother”’.<sup>46</sup> Moments later, ‘[the Swede] looked down to see that one of the shoulder straps of her swimsuit had dropped over her arm, and there was her nipple, the hard red bee bite that was her nipple’.<sup>47</sup> Shockingly, and against his better judgment, he ‘kissed her stammering mouth’.<sup>48</sup> This telling scene, which graphically depicts Merry’s pre-pubescent breasts (the literal buds of her femininity), is further illuminated when compared with a passage later in the novel. Retrospectively looking at his child as a baby, through the lens of his daughter as a teenager, the Swede remembers:

No fat. Not an ounce anywhere. The cleft, as though an awl had made it – that beautifully beveled joining that will petal outward, evolving in the cycle of time into a woman’s origami-folded cunt [...] The lovely dormancy of the invisible bosom before the swell begins. All the turbulent wanting-to-become blessedly, blessedly dormant. Yet in the neck somehow is the woman to be, there in that building blow of a neck ornamented with down. The face. That’s the glory.<sup>49</sup>

The same glorious face Merry hides beneath her veil as a Jain; everything he had hoped for, she blasts to pieces. In the passage, it appears that the seeds of Merry’s femininity are about to sprout; her newly grown flower ‘will petal outward’ with time. What a disappointment it must have been for the Swede, his daughter never truly developing into the potential woman he envisions.

Instead, she transforms into a brutish teenager, characterized by the oft-repeated ‘she’d gotten so fat’, shedding this image later for her equally unfeminine, tall, emaciated physique.<sup>50</sup> As a Jain, she even eradicates her womanly locks: ‘her [hair was] still blond like his but long and thick no longer because of a haircut that was itself an act of

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<sup>46</sup> Roth, *American Pastoral* 84.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 90.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 91.

<sup>49</sup> Roth, *American Pastoral*, 271.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 376, 378, 414.



violence'.<sup>51</sup> What, the novel intrinsically asks, stunted her feminine growth? What radically curbed the potential she so obviously displayed in infancy? Altogether, Merry's excess or gauntness appears wholly unnatural, and through her defeminized body, Roth executes a powerful metaphor; Merry's fatness, it seems, derives from her consumption of the war (internalizing every negative aspect of Vietnam, as fed through the television set), just as her anorexia is a literal purging of her wartime violence. Schechner's argument that Merry singularly embodies the 'distinctive [revolutionary] profile' may indeed hold true, plainly because all other budding parts have been squashed by the war. Although Roth may not have intended this connection, Merry is metaphorically akin to the Vietnamese girls whose female sexual organs developed improperly after exposure to 'huge quantities of the highly toxic herbicide dioxide ("Agent Orange")' during the war.<sup>52</sup> Roth seems to present a genetically female Vietnam activist for the sole reason of defeminizing her, to show the negative effects of the war as consumed within her domestic reality.

Notably, *In Country* and *American Pastoral* (and hence illustrations of women during the war) appear relatively late in the Vietnam canon, over a decade after the first inundation of platoon novels. The novels' 1985 and 1997 respective publishing dates demonstrate the canon's morphing trajectory – trending away from pure description or protest towards allegorical reflection that encompasses vaster perspectives. Somewhat appropriately, near the end of *In Country*, Uncle Emmett surmises: 'The main thing you learn from history is that you can't learn from history'.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the novel is an attempt to educate – or at least to offer commentary. By focalizing Vietnam through the female, and thus examining the domestic ramifications of the war through their gendered

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 243.

<sup>52</sup> T.N. Le and A. Johansson, 'Impact of chemical warfare with agent orange on women's reproductive lives in Vietnam: a pilot study', *Reprod Health Matters* 18 (2001): 156.

<sup>53</sup> Mason, *In Country* 226.

constructions, Roth and Mason seek to untangle Vietnam's inexplicability through a disparate perspective. Therefore, instead of situating Roth's Vietnam oeuvre within the 'reader' wave (which certainly offers its own form of reflection), it is more apt to discard traditional classification altogether, supplanting in its place a notion of historical commentary. The further writers move away from Vietnam in literal time and fictional space, the more exegetical the canon becomes. Although the war remains inexplicable, the canon encompasses vaster ways to imagine and perform that inexplicability.

### Vietnam in *The Human Stain*

At first glance, Roth's third instalment in his American trilogy appears to revert *back* to hackneyed, traditional representations; Roth finally gives the reader the classic male infantryman that O'Nan claims is the canon's hero. Although not critically considered as profound an engagement with Vietnam as *American Pastoral*, *The Human Stain* explores the topic as fully as its acclaimed predecessor. Thematically, the novel indulges in the clichéd practice of illustrating the Vietnam veteran as laden with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a condition that affects some seven hundred thousand Vietnam vets.<sup>54</sup> In the novel's opening, distinguished dean and classics professor Coleman Silk innocently questions his class about two absent students; 'do they exist', he asks, 'or are they spooks?'<sup>55</sup> Those fatal words, unintentionally laden with racially prejudiced undertones, and the politically correct witch-hunt thereafter exile Silk (a light-skinned African-American passing as a Jew) from the academic community, and only his affair with Faunia Farley, an Athena janitor half his age, can dance him back to life. Faunia's crazed veteran ex-husband, Lester, lurks ominously and perpetually in the

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<sup>54</sup> Karnow 25.

<sup>55</sup> Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2000) 6.

background as a figure of Zuckerman's overwrought imagination; if mentioned at all in academic discussion, Les appears solely as a peripheral figure. However, *The Human Stain* is undoubtedly as much a novel about Lester and Vietnam as it is about Coleman and racial stratifications in the twentieth century.

Attempting to penetrate (and simultaneously create) the veteran's thoughts, Zuckerman begins to present Lester's musings through free-indirect discourse; as Lester describes himself, he is 'a loyal American who'd served his country with not one tour but two, who'd gone back a second time to finish the goddamn job [...] The second time he goes berserk.'<sup>56</sup> The emphatic word 'berserk', while conjuring images of the often-quoted 'indigenous American berserk' in *American Pastoral*, additionally emphasizes the stereotypical portrayal of Lester as irrevocably damaged by the war.<sup>57</sup> In fact, negative criticism of the well-received *The Human Stain* often mentions the unsavory portrayal of Lester as Roth's chief misstep; take, for example, Lorrie Moore's scathing comment in her otherwise unaggressive critique, citing the 'hatefully rendered interior monologues' of 'Faunia's psychotic ex-husband and Vietnam veteran, whom Roth seems to construct from every available cliché of the Vietnam vet'.<sup>58</sup> Admittedly, Lester fits almost too cozily into the unified 1970's authorial and Hollywood depiction of the broken veteran, what O'Nan similarly deems a 'reductive' if not outright 'slanderous' representation.<sup>59</sup> Yet Roth employs Lester's character for aims grander than a simple emulation of *The Deer Hunter*.

On the second page of the novel, Zuckerman suggestively comments that Hawthorne, 'who, in the 1860s, lived not many miles from my door', identified in

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 64-65.

<sup>57</sup> Roth, *American Pastoral* 86.

<sup>58</sup> Lorrie Moore, 'The Wrath of Athena', *The New York Times* 7 May 2000  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/05/07/books/the-wrath-of-athena.html>>

<sup>59</sup> O'Nan *Kindle Locations* 150-151.

America a ‘persecuting spirit’. With the 1990’s media frenzy surrounding America’s orally fixated President, and the staining of Coleman Silk’s reputation with one simple word, *The Human Stain* certainly exists within a swirl of persecution. Interesting, however, is Gooblar’s insistence that this spirit applies chiefly to Clinton and Silk, when Lester’s name evocatively rhymes with *The Scarlet Letter*’s heroine.<sup>60</sup> What Gooblar terms ‘labeling’, a denial of ‘self-determining individuality’, arguably pertains more fully to Lester, who until the ice fishing finale, exists solely within the tainted, gossipy realm of Zuckerman’s metafiction.<sup>61</sup> Virtually unexplored in critical evaluations of the text, Lester’s fundamental position within *The Human Stain* emerges as a villainous scapegoat for Zuckerman, who self-servingly molds Lester to explain the tragic befalling of his friend Coleman. ‘It was her ex-husband’, Zuckerman zealously declares to Faunia’s father, after her and Coleman’s murder; he later writes, ‘I did not witness the murder but I know it took place’.<sup>62</sup> His ardent certainty relies upon nothing but a self-created image based on historical stereotypes. Roth therefore employs reductive portrayals of previous illustrations precisely to criticize their use. One may consider O’Brien’s 1994 thriller *In the Lake of the Woods* as a related text; the novel offers hypotheses for a woman’s disappearance, blatantly implying that her Vietnam veteran husband is the prime suspect. Narrators of *The Human Stain* and *In the Lake of the Woods* both equate fighting in Vietnam with damning evidence of murderous guilt.

Although Zuckerman endows Lester with a Vietnam movie antihero’s vocabulary and dragoons him mercilessly, Roth (contrary to Moore’s view) does not simply present a cartoonish vet figure, but thoroughly gives voice to the American experience in Vietnam. Zuckerman filters Vietnam through Lester, as he does through Merry, offering deeper

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<sup>60</sup> Gooblar 138.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 139.

<sup>62</sup> Roth, *The Human Stain* 300, 303.

characters within reductive shells. Through a series of domestic flashbacks and overt references to classical literature, Roth examines the domestic sphere and perpetuates a mythmaking ideology as fully in *The Human Stain* as in *American Pastoral*. Unlike the Levovs' tale, where the domestic narrative of Merry's protest *replaces* the militaristic narrative, Lester unfortunately *reenacts* his wartime trauma through the guise of domestic experience. One may recall the uncomfortable scene in the Chinese restaurant, where a group of veterans try to re-introduce Lester to the world; in the corner, two women shuck beans:

Thirty feet away, and Les can pick up the scent of whatever's the brand of cheap toilet water they've sprayed behind their four gook ears – it's as pungent to him as the smell of raw earth. With the same phenomenal lifesaving powers that enabled him to detect the unwashed odor of a soundless sniper in the black thickness of a Vietnam jungle, he smells the women and begins to lose it.<sup>63</sup>

His senses begin to blur excruciatingly, as the Chinese restaurant in suburban America transforms into a warzone. The bean-cleaners might as well be 'soundless sniper[s]'. More prominent and critically ignored than the restaurant scene, however, is the death of Faunia's children; like the legacy of Vietnam, Aimee Pozorski contends in *Roth and Trauma*, the narrative's undertone suggests that 'we have the blood of the children on our hands'.<sup>64</sup> Conflating his alarming flashbacks of wartime murder with the memory of his own children's fiery death, Les unintentionally offers his children's demise as dramatic allegory for US involvement in Vietnam. One may remember the concluding chapter of *The Things They Carried*, which jarringly breaks away from military life to elucidate the cancerous death of nine-year-old Linda, O'Brien's love as a boy; here, the baffling death

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<sup>63</sup> Roth, *The Human Stain*, 220.

<sup>64</sup> Aimee Pozorski, *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)* (London: Continuum, 2011) Kindle Locations 2068-2070.

of a child, outwardly unrelated to Vietnam, likewise reveals how even domestic scenes ‘inscribe the traces of war’.<sup>65</sup>

Within Lester’s memory, Vietnam and the abortive rescue of his children intermingle, become almost indistinguishable. Before ‘[bashing] in the side door’ of his house as if sieging an enemy camp, Lester recalls:

...he smelled the smoke. The only way he’d survived in Vietnam was that any change, a noise, the smell of an animal, any movement at all in the jungle, and he could detect it before anyone else — alert in the jungle like he was born there. Couldn’t see the smoke, couldn’t see the flames, couldn’t see anything it was so dark, but all of a sudden he could smell the smoke and these things are flying over his head and he began running.<sup>66</sup>

The family property quickly transforms into the Vietnam jungle, as Lester simultaneously suffers analogous traumas. Unlike Mason’s *In Country*, where Sam wilfully conflates American terrain with Vietnam, Lester’s near-hallucinatory amalgamation of his home with a battlefield (with spectral helicopters ‘flying over head’) is symptomatic of his PTSD. Concluding one of his verbal tirades with ‘My kids are dead, but my body is numb and my mind is blank. Vietnam’, Lester perpetually (and often manically) links his domestic tragedy to the war overseas.<sup>67</sup> After extracting his children from the literal burning wreckage of his home-life, Les offers a contradictory appraisal of their condition, citing Faunia’s neglect as reason for his children’s death (‘That’s why they died’), while emphatically claiming ten sentences later: ‘*They – were – not – dead*’.<sup>68</sup> His resolute insistence – ‘Two tours in Vietnam you’re not going to tell him what dead is’ – crumbles beneath incongruous statements.<sup>69</sup> As with the inexplicability of Vietnam itself, Lester’s jumbled assertions turn into Herr’s aptly described ‘communications pudding’. Although

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* Kindle Locations 2312-2316.

<sup>66</sup> Roth, *The Human Stain* 67.

<sup>67</sup> Roth, *The Human Stain* 73.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

Roth utilizes the banal portrayal of the shell-shocked veteran, something deeper obviously lies beneath the veteran scapegoat, as indicated metaphorically by the novel's ice fishing scene; one must plunge beneath the stereotypical surface.

In large part a war story, Lester's domestic trauma also exhibits all the trappings of myth, though Roth more subtly presents this fantasy in *The Human Stain* than in *American Pastoral*. In an interview with Eric Schroeder, author Larry Heinemann divulges that while writing his acclaimed Vietnam novel *Paco's Story* (1986), he continuously read 'The Iliad and The Odyssey, War and Peace' for inspiration.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Roth frames *The Human Stain* as a Homeric narrative, paralleling the most canonical war tale ever written with America's Troy (Vietnam). *The Iliad*, after all, is 'Coleman's favorite book',<sup>71</sup> and Lester and Coleman fight over Faunia, not-so-subtly nicknamed 'Helen of Troy'.<sup>72</sup> Fratricidal elements connect both narratives, argues Pozorski; simply put, the Greeks killed the Trojans, and anti-Vietnam sentiments bifurcated the American public, turning brother against brother.<sup>73</sup> By juxtaposing Vietnam with Troy, Roth suggests similar aspects of bloodshed and nation-making, lending historical importance to America's inexplicable war. More complexly, however, by aggrandizing the narrative and forging these classical connections, Roth seems to be grasping at a way to contextualize Vietnam, to erase its unintelligibility by situating America's war within a historical trajectory. Connecting back to Ankersmit's idea in *The Sublime Historical Experience* (2007), as with Zuckerman's mythopoeic fantasy of the Levovs', *The Human Stain* employs myth as an explanation for traumatic memory and reflective healing. Merry and Lester are both points around which distinctively American myths rotate.

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<sup>70</sup> Schroeder 147.

<sup>71</sup> Roth, *The Human Stain* 335.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 232.

<sup>73</sup> Pozorski Kindle Locations 2019-2021.

Although never critically mentioned, Roth's inclusion of Lester's visit to the touring Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall prominently stresses this engagement with trauma and myth making. While completing her design, the wall's architect Maya Lin writes in a journal, 'I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and pain that in time would heal'.<sup>74</sup> Published decades later in *The New York Review of Books*, Lin's essay illustrates a sentiment similar to Ankersmit's; after all, memorializing and mythologizing both act as sutures for traumatic wounds. Perhaps more saliently, the pilgrimage to the wall – as portrayed in *The Human Stain* and in other works such as Stewart O'Nan's *The Names of the Dead* – further develops the association between Vietnam novels and classical literature. Connecting with the overt *Iliad* references, Lester emerges as a modern age Odysseus, journeying to a metaphorical home after the traumatic devastation of America's Troy. Fittingly, the publishing dates of *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* correspond with the emerging field of trauma studies; in fact, core academic texts such as Felman and Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) and Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) appear only a few years before Roth's Vietnam novels – a connection that another essay could surely explore further.

Clearly, although Lester is far from an angry, female teenager, his character demonstrates Vietnam's tainting of domestic reality as adeptly as Merry's. Both characters metaphorically illustrate the complexity and gruesomeness inherent in America's longest and undeclared war. By focalizing his narratives through the microcosm of domestic experience, thus forsaking the classical platoon novel, Roth presents a dramatic new approach to untangle, contextualize and reflect on Vietnam. By domesticating the war and making it knowable, he relates it to the average American

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<sup>74</sup> Maya Lin, 'Making the Memorial', *The New York Review of Books* 02 Nov. 2000  
<[www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/nov/02/making-the-memorial](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/nov/02/making-the-memorial)>



citizen, and in turn legitimizes that knowability through mythology. The reasons for the late publishing dates of *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* become clear, as Roth illustrates an alternative viewpoint – from the gaze of the men and women at home – and allegorically represents war trauma through myth. Surely the canon will continue to become more allegorical and thus exegetical, contributing further myths to assuage America's still-open wounds from its inexplicable war.

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## First Response

This confident and articulate commentary on Philip Roth's *Human Stain* and *American Pastoral* begins by carefully situating Roth both within and against the established Vietnam canon, drawing on an impressive knowledge of contexts and other fictional engagements with the conflict – though not to the point of becoming overwhelming. He/she later introduces contexts such as trauma theory to explain the contemporaneity of Roth's late, retrospective response to the conflict. The readings of the individual novels are also perceptive; I especially liked the way the author explains the fiction-making of Roth's frame narrator in relation to the mythologisation of the historical moment, which was mediated uniquely through television.

The article offers suggestive avenues for further exploration. Whilst the gender-domesticity angle is convincingly related to Vietnam (directly via Merry in *American Pastoral*; intriguingly applied via Lester in *Human Stain*), I suspect there is more to be said here in a general sense, particularly in the guise of challenging and ambiguous character of Rita in the former work, whom the author does not mention. Although the author approaches these novels through a particular lens, these two (great?) American novels engage with a wider array of themes than the author has space to acknowledge here: the contradictions of capitalism, gender, campus politics, race/ethnicity/religion, the links between private and public memory.