Interpreting Academic Identities:
Reality and Fiction on Campus

IHELG Monograph

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Benjamin De Mott once wrote, “No novel of academe has ever produced a believable prof.” (1962, p. 245). Times have changed. Within the last few years some of our most celebrated authors have written academic novels and concocted entirely believable professors. We may not like what we see, but Saul Bellow’s Ravelstein, Philip Roth’s Coleman Silk, and Francine Prose’s Ted Swenson, along with an oddball assortment of their colleagues, are painfully believable professors of the late 20th century.

In his highly regarded, The College Novel in America John Lyons defines the academic novel as “one in which higher education is treated with seriousness and the main characters are students or professors” (1962, p. xvii). Although such a workmanlike definition is useful for setting the parameters of the academic novel, one aspect that the definition does not take into account is the positionality of the reader. Unlike articles in refereed journals that are designed for one’s scholarly peers, academic novels have a broad reach – they are meant for the general public. Although the academic novel may paint a portrait for an uninformed public about what takes place on campus, most readers who are academics will likely take different interpretations from an academic novel. Academic novels are helpful for academics not merely for the pleasure one may derive in reading fiction, but also for what the text tells us about ourselves; a good novel can be a mirror to our lives. In what follows I am particularly interested in how three prominent novelists have constructed academic identities. Bellow’s, Roth’s and Prose’s books are the most well read academic novels written over the last decade, and they deserve a careful reading. They take up the perplexing question: what does it mean to be an academic?
In Ravelstein (2000), Saul Bellow concocts essentially a two-character play. Abe Ravelstein is a brilliant philosophy professor at a prestigious midwestern university, and the narrator, Chick, is Ravelstein’s friend and colleague. Ravelstein is a closeted gay man dying of AIDS and he asks Chick to write his memoir. As with other novels by Bellow, Ravelstein is short on plot and long on character development. It is a novel of ideas where we hear the inner workings of two great minds who are two old friends. Bellow moves the dialogue effortlessly from Borscht belt comedy routines to philosophical meditations on death and dying that are entirely believable.

As the book opens, the reader finds that Ravelstein has penned a polemic about academic life and he has become rich and famous. Ravelstein and Chick are at a penthouse hotel in Paris, and Ravelstein is about to buy a $4500 gold Lanvin jacket. He no sooner buys the coat then he spills expresso on the lapel. We learn to forgive Ravelstein his excesses — stereos with speakers at $10,000 apiece, lavish dinners, silk ties that he airmails to Paris to get cleaned, $20,000 gold watches, Oriental carpets, Lalique chandeliers — because he combines exorbitant spending with an exuberance for life.

Chick tells us that Ravelstein also has a unique ability to avoid personal grudges or pretensions. Chick reminds Ravelstein at one point that a friend had “almost” gotten Ravelstein the appointment he wanted at the elite Midwestern University where they both work. Ravelstein responds: “That’s true. I’m the only one with rank who doesn’t have a named chair. After all I’ve done for the university — And the only chair the administration offers me is the electric chair” (p. 36). Chick continues by telling the reader, “But Ravelstein was unusually free from such preoccupations and grievances” (p. 37). As we traverse the text we tend to believe Chick. Ravelstein seems to be an
academic character who is larger than life; he is someone who toward students gravitate. He has students over to his house for pizza parties, and they intermix dialogue about one or another philosopher while watching Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls. At the same time, he never has any problem flunking out students who he does not think are excellent; he also works mostly with men.

The reader hears how two old academics speak to one another on any number of topics, and in particular, how they view the state of the academy and society. Although Ravelstein is thought of as a conservative philosopher, Chick relates how he is able to converse with blacks on the streets who stop him and admire his clothes: “These young dudes are lovers of high fashion. ... They’re extremely savvy about automobiles, too, comments Ravelstein” (p. 47). Ravelstein marvels at “how well-spoken [blacks are] on TV” (p. 56), and Chick relates that Ravelstein has an excellent relationship with his black maid: “As nearly as any honky could, he took into account her problems with her prostitute daughter, her jailed criminal son, and with the other son whose HIV troubles and scrambled wives and children were too complicated to describe” (p. 92).

Only once does Chick have Ravelstein explode, and that is when he is near death and his room is full of friends; a black nurse walks in and says that it is time for him to take his AZT. Everyone hears her. The next day Ravelstein tells Chick he could have killed the woman when she blurted out what he thought was a secret – that he had AIDS. When his lover, Nikki, tries to forgive the woman by saying she is from the “ghetto” – what could one expect – Ravelstein explodes again. He explains how ghetto Jews were highly civilized, but not black people: “It’s not a ghetto that they come from, it’s a noisy, pointless, nihilistic turmoil” (p. 142).
Throughout the book the reader gets the sense that the two men are physically and philosophically trying to make their way through the barbaric swamps of the late twentieth century. Ravelstein lives in an apartment building appropriately named “The Alhambra.” His life is a castle with a moat around it where detritus and decay surround him. His conservative attack on the academy has been to point out the moral quagmire in which the academic community now dwells. As Chick notes, all or most of the students of his generation had read Plato’s Symposium (24) whereas today’s students know nothing and learn nothing even though an average BA costs $150,000. “Parents might as well flush these dollars down the toilet, Ravelstein believed” (47).

Ravelstein also cautions Chick about his friendship with the mysterious Professor Grielescu. Grielescu, Ravelstein has heard, is connected with the Fascist Iron Guard of the prewar Romanian government. He had been a Foreign Service official in the Nazi regime. “As a Romanian nationalist back in the thirties he was violent toward the Jews” Ravelstein explains to Chick (125). The discussion continually returns to Grielescu and how Chick should stop befriending him; it is immoral, explains Ravelstein, to befriend such a man.

If Ravelstein is outspoken, and Chick eggs him on to speak out about the cultural decline of the academy, one hidden aspect of Ravelstein’s life is with regard to his homosexuality, or what he prefers to call his “inversion.” Ravelstein’s lover, Nikki, appears in the text, but only as an “Oriental” lover who usually sleeps late after a night of watching Kung Fu movies. At one point Ravelstein is feted by members of the Reagan and Bush administrations for his ideas; there is no mention of whether he feels excluded,
odd, or second-class by not being able to bring Nikki to events where he “spent a fortune on formal attire, cummerbund, diamond studs, patent leather shoes” (15).

Chick is equally uncomfortable discussing Ravelstein’s sexuality. When Chick’s wife accuses him of having an affair with Ravelstein, Chick guffaws and says he wouldn’t even know what to do. He accepts that Ravelstein “[is] doomed to die because of his irregular sexual ways” (160) and that he is “destroyed by his reckless sex habits” (189). Nevertheless, they remained best friends.

Much has been made of the fact that the novel is a thinly veiled paean by Saul Bellow to his best friend, Allan Bloom, who wrote The Closing of the American Mind (1987) and taught at the University of Chicago until his death from AIDS. One surely does not need such background information to enjoy the strength of Bellow’s narrative or to learn about the complexity of academic identities; nonetheless the information helps. Bloom was not merely a cultural conservative but in the vanguard of the intellectual revolution in the Reagan era. His book deplored what had taken place in the 1960s, and in one dyspeptic passage after another he railed against the sexual adventurism of Margaret Mead, the hedonistic music of Woodstock, the black power movement, and the nihilism that had overtaken every classroom in America. In some respects, the “real” information about Professor Ravelstein adds to the texture of the text, rather than detracts from it. Here, then, we have a novel that is enhanced by reality.

We also learn from Chick that Ravelstein “seldom had a full night’s sleep. Class preparation often kept him up. To lead his Oklahoma, Texas or Oregon students through a Platonic dialogue, you needed exceptional skills as well as esoteric dialogue” (54). One wonders if Oklahoma students are dumber than those from New Mexico. If
Ravelstein has such a difficult time with students at the University of Chicago, what would he have done if he taught at Chicago State? Or perhaps learning is impossible at all but the most elite of institutions?

An academic reader comes away from this text with a maddening sense of contradictions – and in an odd way that is the pleasure of the text. Chick writes of Ravelstein as if he understands African Americans, but the language used about black people is objectifying and patronizing. Ravelstein and, by inference, Chick marvel when black people are well spoken on TV; he is surprised when they know high-fashion; the troubles that befall Ravelstein’s maid are thought of as commonplace among black people – what could one expect, after all, from the “nihilistic turmoil” from which they came.

Similarly, Ravelstein cautions Chick about a friend who may have committed crimes thirty years before, but not a word is mentioned about the silence of a government in the early 1980s that studiously ignored the AIDS epidemic. Indeed, throughout the book there is an unending paradox of how someone can condemn individuals on the one hand, and yet on the other, be dying in part because of inactivity of other individuals. Chick states that Ravelstein does not hold grudges, but his famous book is one long grudge against those who had starring roles in the 1960s.

How is it possible that such an intelligent narrator as Chick might assume that all students of his generation read Plato – or that college tuition costs $150,000? Doesn’t a contradiction exist between portraying a man as sympathetic to his students, yet also willing to fail them without regard? Is it not odd that one can speak of the importance of the humanities but work almost exclusively with white men?
Chick states that Ravelstein “despised campy homosexuality,” and yet he paraded about in gold Lanvin jackets, silk cravats, and diamond cuff links. The man was an academic Liberace ensconced in a drawing room complete with Oriental rugs, crystal chandeliers and young men. How is it possible that someone can know intellectual matters so well, but not understand himself? Such a question is the focus of the novel, although Bellow may not have meant it to be.

Ultimately, good academic novels revolve around the importance of words and language, their meaning, interpretation, and reinterpretation. The reader becomes equally involved with the determination of the text, and presumably other academics might read this book on multiple levels as I have done. The text succeeds because of the elegance of Bellow’s writing and the contradictions that exist between what Ravelstein and Bellow believe and the way the academic reader sees the academy.

Ravelstein and Chick speak frankly and closely to one another. There is a bond between them and they do not mince their words; one hears how they view race in America. The narrator assumes he is praising Ravelstein’s ability to speak with the downtrodden black masses, but I read it as racism. Ravelstein condemns Grielescu, and when Chick admits that he finds Grielescu funny, he notes, “to Ravelstein this was a cop-out. ... To say he was amusing was to give him a pass” (202). Chick thus points out the moral fortitude of Ravelstein, but at the same time Chick finds his friend’s sexual orientation disgusting. How does Chick reconcile that a moral man partakes of what he sees as immoral activities? And for myself, I am mystified that a self-proclaimed moral man might die of a disease yet never once utter even the slightest disappointment at today’s Grielescus’.
And finally, it bears noting that Bellow does not do well with his presentation of women. An ex-wife of Chick’s is a stick figure who is vindictive and petty; his current wife, whom he clearly loves, comes across as flat and obsequious. She was one of the few female students of Ravelstein’s, but we hear little from her and know next to nothing of her view of Ravelstein. Toward the book’s end Chick ends up ill and his wife saves his life, but one never gets a sense of who Rosamund is other than an extra in the drama that is Ravelstein’s and Chick’s lives. Thus, women too, are relegated to their traditional roles in this drama – as observers of life, rather than as participants.

Ultimately, we conclude the novel where it began: trying to unravel Ravelstein. We hear two brilliant academics speak on multiple levels and act in contradictory ways. The book is a contemplation on what it means to be human and how academics manage their multiple identities. As with any text, the author may not have intended such a reading, but as noted at the outset, different audiences will have different interpretations.

Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) is also a text where language is key and the academic characters exist on multiple levels. Whereas Ravelstein has his Chick, Coleman Silk, the hero of *The Human Stain*, has his Nathan Zuckerman. If Bellow is Chick, then any reader of Roth’s previous oeuvre knows that Roth is Zuckerman. If Ravelstein is Bloom, then many assume that Silk is loosely based on Anatole Broyard. Unlike Ravelstein who asks his good friend to write a memoir not as an angry lament but as a remembrance of a life lived, Coleman Silk asks a neighbor whom he casually knows to write his biography to set the record straight.

Coleman Silk, a Jew, has taught Classics at Athena College for most of his professional life. He also has become a long-serving and well-respected Dean of the
College. When he returns to teaching he makes the mistake one day of asking his class about two missing students by inquiring, “Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?” (p. 6). The two students happen to be black. They lodge a protest. After some initial contretemps with his department chair, Delphine Roux, Coleman resigns in protest.

Just as Ravelstein’s name is filled with symbolic significance, so is Coleman Silk’s, for he is not who he is thought to be. Coal-man Silk is not Jewish and he is not white. He is a light-skinned black man who has spent his entire life enacting a charade to avoid discrimination. His wife does not know he is black, and he becomes estranged from his family once they discover that he is trying – successfully - to pass as a white man. Coleman’s discussion with his mother about his decision to pass as a white man and the implications of his actions is an excruciating passage. She realizes she has not only lost her son, but her grandchildren. “You tell me the only way I can ever touch my grandchildren is for you to hire me to come over as Mrs. Brown to baby-sit and put them to bed, I’ll do it,” says Mrs. Silk. “Tell me to come over as Mrs. Brown to clean your house, I’ll do that.” Roth seems to be asking, “what is the price an individual will pay to succeed in society?” What Roth does not ask is what price society demands from an individual in order for him or her to succeed.

Roth’s “stain” is, again, all too human. Once Silk resigns from Athena, at the age of seventy-one, he begins to have an affair with a woman who is an illiterate janitor at the college and half his age. One man or another has victimized Faunia Farley since childhood, but she and Silk seem to, if not enjoy one another’s company, at least need one another. Shortly after the affair begins Silk receives an anonymous letter that says
“everyone knows you’re sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age” (38). The emphasis is on “everyone knows” and, of course, as the story progresses we discover that no one knows. Silk is a confederate who successfully passed.

As with Ravelstein, Zuckerman tells the story looking backwards. Silk has died and Zuckerman is his elegist. What killed Silk? The irony, of course, is that if academe did not kill him, then it was at least a willing accomplice. Roth paints the American campus as a hypocritical contradiction: it is an entity that is supposed to be a bastion of free speech, academic freedom, and civility, and yet Silk is neither able to say who he is nor utter a synonym for “ghost” that is misinterpreted as an epithet for who he really is.

The personification of this illness comes by way of the young woman whom Silk hired and ends up as his department chair, Delphine Roux. In one remarkable sentence Zuckerman describe her thusly:

By 1995, the year that Coleman had stepped down from the deanship to return to teaching, the lure of petitably pretty Delphine’s all-encompassing chic, with gaminish intimations of a subterranean sensuality, along with the blandishments of her Ecole Normale sophistication had appeared to him to have won over just about every wooable fool professor and, not yet out of her twenties—but with an eye perhaps on the deanship that had one been Coleman’s—she succeeded to the chair of the smallish department that some dozen years earlier had absorbed, along with the other language departments, the old Classics Department in which Coleman had begun as an instructor (p. 190).

Coleman does not like her, Zuckerman does not like her, and certainly neither Chick nor Ravelstein would like her either. She is everything that Ravelstein rails against; she uses
current theoretical jargon, employs a feminist perspective, coddles students, and assumes that new pedagogies need to be employed in the classroom. Roux is not only the person who confronts Silk about his allegedly racist remark in the classroom, but she also has penned the anonymous note that “everyone knows.”

Whereas Bellow’s women have merely walk-on roles in his two-character play, Roth’s women, particularly Delphine Roux, have a central role, albeit they are not heard from very much. Perhaps the least convincing aspect of The Human Stain is the caricature Roth has drawn of Roux as a card-carrying feminist. True, there must be someone, somewhere, who has written an anonymous note to one’s colleague about an alleged sexual peccadillo, but Roth tries to paint Roux as a feminist every-woman, and virtually anyone, except the Ravelstein’s of this world, who has walked on today’s campuses will find the portrait unconvincing.

Again, as with Bellow, because Roth is such a brilliant writer the reader knows how much words and interpretations matter. Silk is a Professor of Classics at Athena College; small wonder that a woman who argues that there are multiple interpretations to texts will be viewed as the villain – she is not only killing Coleman Silk by her attacks on his classroom discourse and her anonymous notes; she is also killing the academy.

The irony is on Roth. Even though he creates a stereotype that is hardly believable in Delphine Roux, the true nature of the academy is shown by the lie that Coleman Silk has had to live. Would a Black Coleman Silk have ever been hired to teach Classics at Athena College in the 1950s? Would he have ever risen to be the College dean? What Roth seems incapable of handling is the inherent contradiction between the pathos he creates for the man, Coleman Silk, who had to partake of remarkable
intellectually gymnastic abilities simply to survive, and the academic Coleman Silk who is portrayed as the protector of the academy from the Visigoths, embodied by Delphine Roux.

Roth’s blandishment that today’s campus is an intellectual prison rings less true for those who work in these prisons. We all have individual prisons, to be sure, and the strongest part of the book is the retelling of Coleman’s life where we see how he feels he needs to bury himself deeper and deeper within his own jail. But a more thoughtful analysis is not forthcoming about the nature of the academy other than easy analyses about what some perceive to take place on today’s campuses. As I learned to care for Silk the more I learned about him, the less I believed the silly portrait Roth had created of academe.

Unlike the qualitative researcher who is supposed to walk the straight and narrow path of the non-generalization of one’s findings, the novelist has different concerns. Coleman Silk is surely not everyman; his circumstances are so unique that few will be able to say that they walked in his shoes. But a skilled writer such as Roth succeeds when he enables the reader to reflect on his or her own life by way of the experiences of a character such as Silk. The writer fails when he develops an easy burlesque and tries to pass that off as reality. Here, then, academic identity intertwines with today’s great challenges: how to reconcile race, class and gender in the early 21st century. The playing out of this drama occurs on a college campus that is unfortunately a cartoon of academe. Nevertheless, the strength of the portrait of Coleman Silk enables us to reflect on the compromises and contradictions we live as academics.
Francine Prose is not so well known as Bellow or Roth, but she will be. Blue Angel (2000) is her eleventh novel and in many respects it is a companion piece to The Human Stain. Rather than invent a narrator who tells the protagonist’s story, we learn about Ted Swenson through an ongoing internal dialogue he has with himself. Instead of being a respected classics professor at an elite private college, Swenson has been a creative writing teacher at mediocre Euston College in rural Vermont for twenty years. We meet Abe Ravelstein as he has become a literary success; Ted Swenson wrote two good novels a long time ago, but he has been unable to finish his third novel. Whereas Ravelstein is without a plot, and The Human Stain looks backwards at the events that have happened, in Blue Angel the events unfold. Although Bellow and Roth have funny moments in their books, neither is a funny novel. Bellow’s is an angry elegy for a dead friend; Roth’s is a cranky lamentation for someone symbolically killed. Prose’s novel is an example of satire at its best. She develops caricatures, but the reader surmises that the author knows they are stereotypes and encourages us to accept the actions that happen in order to understand the underlying themes, rather than assume that the events are reality.

The critical word in Blue Angel is not “spook” but “yum.” As the novel begins the college is on a sexual harassment alert because of the events that have transpired at a neighboring college, which also is the college where Swenson’s estranged daughter is enrolled. A professor showed his art history class a slide of a classical Greek sculpture of a female nude and said “yum.” The female students in the class protested and the professor was placed on probation. As a classic example of foreshadowing, the reader knows that somehow Ted Swenson is going to get in trouble for sexual harassment.
Unlike the intellectual contradictions with Ravelstein or the human complexity of Silk, Ted Swenson appears like an entirely understandable, and even likeable, fellow. He is in love with his wife, Sherrie, and he has never cheated on her either with student, colleague, or friend. He is respectably middle-class. He actually enjoys having dinner in the kitchen with Sherrie where a splurge is to share a bottle of wine and have chicken with fresh fennel from the garden. He celebrates when the worn-out Honda Civic only costs two hundred dollars to get fixed, and he luxuriates by occasionally sleeping late. He also has typical male anxieties. After waking up late one morning he reacts in fear because Sherrie is not there. She’s left him! He rushes to the kitchen to find a note from Sherrie saying that he looked tired and she let him sleep. “Arlene gave me a ride. Much love, S.” “Poor Sherrie!” he thinks. “Married to a lunatic convinced she’d abandoned him when she was only trying to let him get some shut-eye. Sherrie loves him. She signed her note: Much love."

The strength of this book is the constant internal monologues Swenson has with himself over such seemingly trivial matters as how his wife signs a note. Prose follows in the well-worn footsteps of John Updike, and no one captures interior dialogue better. She is an astute ethnographic observer of everyday life and has the talent to turn those observations into an immensely readable narrative. The reader learns about the perfectly normal life that Ted Swenson leads, and by his typicality, we also come to like him.

Some of the best scenes in the book are his struggles to get through his class, and get through to his class. The current students in his creative writing seminar seem to have a propensity for writing short stories about humans having sex with animals, dead and alive. He has read so many short stories over the years that in class he occasionally
forgets which story he has read last and who one or another student is. At the same time, he tries to work with his students in a quiet way so that they learn something about writing. He usually fails.

Enter Angela Argo, “a skinny, pale redhead with neon-orange and lime-green streaks in her hair and a delicate, sharp-featured face pierced in a half-dozen places. She wears “a black leather motorcycle jacket and an arsenal of chains, dog collars, and bracelets.” (p. 8). During the first few weeks of class she says nothing, and Swenson grows worried. He is not worried for her, but that she might be disruptive. “Her presence is a lit firecracker sparking in their midst” (p. 9). When Angela finally speaks she makes precisely the point that Swenson wanted the class to hear. Angela is writing a novel and it is actually good; as he reads it he realizes that she is the most talented student writer he has ever taught.

Swenson begins to convince himself that he is in love with her. As unlikely a partner as she might be, he falls for her because she knows how to write. She has something that he has lost, and metaphorically, that loss is not simply his writing ability but his youth. Step by step we see Swenson drive himself down a road and we know where it will end. Angela appears to be the one taking Swenson down that road, rather than vice versa; she wants Swenson to get her novel published and she knows how to attract him, but Prose also has us recognize that he is an adult, albeit a deluded one. When she asks him to drive her to Computer City to get a new computer he agrees, but he also knows where events are leading:

Swenson hardly sleeps all night. Shouldn’t he wake Sherrie and discuss his plans for the day? Couldn’t he have brought it up earlier, at any point during the
evening? Why didn’t he feel like mentioning it? What does that imply? Is it wrong to drive a student to Computer City without telling your spouse? Or to spend all night twisting in your bed because you’re getting to spend a morning with some sophomore in Beginning Fiction? Swenson moans with shame. What if he wakes Sherrie and has to explain that moan? He’ll say he just remembered some department business. He never lies to Sherrie. Here’s where the betrayal begins (p. 154).

As with Bellow and Roth, what makes Prose’s book in part successful is that kind of writing. She has captured the internal back and forth that academics have as they try to deal with one or another moral dilemma that is either real or imagined. The reader comes to care for Swenson, who loves his wife, daughter, and students. He seems like a nice fellow who is simply struggling to get through the day. As events unfold, we find ourselves saying, “Don’t do it. Get out of there. Go back.”

But Swenson doesn’t listen. He ends up helping Angela install the recently acquired computer in her dorm room and they have a single, failed attempt at sex when his molar inconveniently explodes and he ends up in excruciating pain. It is all downhill from there. He tries to get her novel published, but fails. She tells him she only led him on so he would get the book published, and she then exposes him. He loses Sherrie, his daughter won’t speak to him, and a wonderfully portrayed absurdist college committee calls witnesses and is about to strip him of his tenure.

Blue Angel is a novel of comic despair where we learn how much the academic doesn’t understand about himself. The analogy to Nabokov’s Lolita has been made, but Angela is her own woman. She knows what she is doing and is in control of her life.
Unlike Delphine Roux whom one tends to believe is Roth’s take on all of academe, Angela speaks for no one other than herself. The success of the book is that pathos is mixed with comedy, for we have learned to like Ted and to rue his downfall, even if he does do – or tries to do – what he should not.

Helen Garner has written:

The erotic will always dance between people who teach and learn, and our attempts to manage its shocking charge are often flat-footed, literal, destructive, rigid with fear and the need to control. For good or ill, Eros is always two steps ahead of us, exploding the constraints of dogma, turning back on us our carefully worked out positions and lines, showing us that the world is richer and scarier and more fluid and many-fold than we dare to think (1998, p. 161).

Ted’s position has indeed exploded. After he leaves the pretentious academic trial he walks out onto Euston’s snowy quad and a doe stares at him. He sees the deer “as a sign of hope, of possibility and forgiveness” (p. 313). One senses that Swenson has learned a bit about himself. His struggle has been to confront the danger zone of the erotics of teaching and to see a student as a real person. Unlike the current onslaught of Grande Bouffe comedies where academic Lotharios get their comeuppance but have learned nothing, Swenson has learned from his experiences. He has learned how much he loves Sherrie, and he has learned, as the final lines tell us, “what a relief it is it admit, even just for one moment, how much he will never know” (p. 314).

Blue Angel comes full circle and returns us to wondering what it means to be human and academic. Saul Bellow etches the contradictions of academic identities on a literary landscape. Philip Roth sears those identities into the consciousness of who
Coleman Silk actually is, and what academe actually is. Francine Prose responds in kind by pointing out what a college campus colludes in doing and suggests that at our base, the human condition, whether academic or not, is filled with life’s daily trivialities, the struggle to make sense of our lives, and if we are lucky, the realization that we will never truly know.
References


