STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXIX, 3, 2024, p. 101 - 120
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2024.3.06

"GOODBYE, AMERICANA, HELLO REAL TIME": THE DEATH OF IDEALISM IN PHILIP ROTH'S *AMERICAN PASTORAL*

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Article history: Received 15 March 2024; Revised 27 August 2024; Accepted 01 September 2024; Available online 30 September 2024; Available print 30 September 2024.

ABSTRACT. ***"Goodbye, Americana, Hello Real Time": The Death of Idealism in Philip Roth's* American Pastoral.** Philip Roth's 1997 *American Pastoral* is a textbook illustration of failed cultural transmission: the transference and transformation of values, idea(l)s and information in the lives of Seymour Levov, his family, his community prove to be governed by loss, misrepresentation and gradual decline into disorder. Far from delivering the romanticized version of life in the Jewish neighborhood that the title implies, the novel captures a disenchanted Americana, wherein idealism and radicalism clash against the background of the ideologically fractured 1960s. While 'the Swede' apparently initially embodies the (super)hero, middle-class American Dream, *American Pastoral* chronicles America's evolution after World War II, which is captured as a mixture of convention and rebellion, both stemming from clashing political ideologies. This paper examines the book's polarizing discourses, keeping an emblematic passage in mind: "Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride."

Keywords: *Americana, community, discourse, ideology, identity, myth, trauma*

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REZUMAT. ***"Goodbye, Americana, Hello Real Time": moartea idealismului în* Pastorala americană *de Philip Roth.*** *Pastorala americană* a lui Philip Roth (1997) constituie un exemplu tipic de transmitere culturală eşuată. Transferul şi transformarea valorilor, ide(alur)ilor şi informaţiei în vieţile lui Seymour Levov, familiei şi comunităţii sale se dovedesc guvernate de pierderi, reprezentări eronate şi, în cele din urmă, entropie. Departe de a oferi o versiune romanţată asupra vieţii în vecinătatea evreiască, aşa cum sugerează titlul, romanul surprinde o imagine dezvrăjită a Americii, unde idealismul şi radicalismul se ciocnesc pe fundalul unor ani 1960 scindaţi ideologic. În timp ce „Suedezul" pare că întruchipează iniţial (super)eroul Visului American al clasei de mijloc, *Pastorala americană* înregistrează evoluţia Americii după cel de Al Doilea Război Mondial, redată drept un amestec de convenţionalism şi rebeliune, ambele rezultate din diferite tipuri de îndoctrinare. Lucrarea examinează discursurile polarizante ale cărţii, luând în considerare un pasaj emblematic: „Poate cel mai bine ar fi să uităm de a avea sau nu dreptate despre oameni şi să ne bucurăm doar de călătorie".

Cuvinte-cheie: *Americana, comunitate, discurs, ideologie, identitate, mit, traumă*

American Dream, American Rage. An Introduction.

Ever since its initial 1997 publication, in the turbulent quarter-century that followed, *American Pastoral* has been increasingly acknowledged as an unquestionable *pièce de résistance* in Philip Roth's oeuvre. Elaine B. Safer's *Mocking the Age. The Later Novels of Philip Roth*[2], Timothy Parrish' edited *Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*[3], Debra Shostak's edited collection *Philip Roth.* American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America[4], David Gooblar's *The Major Phases of Philip Roth*[5], Brett Ashley Kaplan's *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth*[6], Andy Connolly's *Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition*[7], the very recent *Bloomsbury Handbook on Philip Roth*, edited

2 State University of New York Press, 2006. Includes the chapter "*American Pastoral*: The Tragicomic Fall of Newark and the House of Levov".

3 Cambridge University Press, 2007. Includes Mark Shechner's analysis on "Roth's *American Trilogy*".

4 Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. Includes studies on *American Pastoral* by David Brauner, Andrew Gordon, Jennifer Glaser.

5 Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011. Includes a chapter on "The American Experience: *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*".

6 Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Includes a chapter on "The American Berserk: *Sabbath's Theater* and *American Pastoral*".

7 Lexington Books, 2017. Includes a chapter on "Shattering the Liberal Consensus in *American Pastoral*".

by Aimee Pozorski and Maren Scheurer[8] are but a few of the seminal critical works which have contributed to this growing reputation.

This selection illustrates the variety of theoretical angles from which the novel has been and continues to be read, via constant additions to the existing body of work on *American Pastoral*. They prove the book's topicality and relevance throughout the decades, the proposed interpretations revolving primarily around Roth's approaches to issues of U.S. history, politics, class, race, ethnicity, and even gender relations, or investigating his authorial engagement with postmodern discourse, narrative and experiment. Among the reasons for the book's appeal to various types of readers, what stands out at first sight, as well as in retrospect, is its relentless portrayal of the socio-political dissolution of American values. *American Pastoral*'s inherent critique of the American Dream is projected against the sociopolitical turmoil that characterized America in the late-1960s and early-70s.

At the end of the 1990s, as the United States and the entire world were preparing for the arrival of a much-anticipated New Millennium, warning signs appeared to multiply in the public sphere, as well as in the private circles of individuals confronted with seemingly abrupt transformations. It was such a symbolical moment that prompted Philip Roth to focus on one of the crucial decades in American history. *American Pastoral* inaugurates the *American Trilogy* series[9] with a plot that captures the political radicalization and unrest of America in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the perverse effects of the noble idea of freedom of speech whenever it is misused or ideologized. The novel also addresses the disconcerting entitlement of concurrent truths, the growth of anti-war sentiments, and the seeming proliferation of threats to until-then quintessential definitions of success, stability, and structure.

In short, the novel is the story of Seymour 'the Swede' Levov, a Jewish son, husband and father who exemplifies the notion of the American Dream for his community by his almost enviable example of integration, and of his daughter, Merry, who chooses to eschew the so-called American values that her father embraces and becomes a domestic terrorist. My claim is that, while Swede Levov's undeterred commitment to the accomplishment of upward mobility, his personal history and beliefs are representative of Newark's Jewish-American aspirations, Merry's shocking and violent downfall ultimately reveals the disintegration of many of America's romanticized historical and sociopolitical ideals. At a time when extremist ideologies seem to be yet again

[8] Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. Includes Eric Leonidas' contribution, "Countering Pastoral: Philip Roth and Ecology".

[9] Which also includes *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000).

on the rise throughout the world, I aim to continue and complement the already rich scholarly literature in the field of Roth Studies[10], as well as potentially shed new light on some lesser discussed passages in *American Pastoral*, via a series of close (con)textual readings.

From Riches to Rags: A Brief Summary of a Long Tragedy

The American Dream myth of modern and contemporary United States is undermined by the historical context in which the *American Pastoral* plot unfolds. Crucial to the novel are the Vietnam War and the ensuing protests against the United States' involvement, as well as the multiple equal rights and opportunities (including women's) movements, all of which polarized America. In the Levovs' immediate proximity, the emblematic mid-20th century Newark, New Jersey urban pauperization and race riots spark chaos, which destabilizes communal and individual selves alike. As a multilayered fictional illustration of several of the above-mentioned rebellions, Merry Levov's evolution from the offspring of America's Sweetheart[11] to a wanted enemy of the state encapsulates the riches-to-rags destiny of a Jewish family whose dreams are shattered by the dissolution of an entire way of life and thinking.

It is important to note that Roth's real-life existential and philosophical concerns frequently made their way into his writings. In the case of *American Pastoral*, his exasperation with U.S. political incoherence and the dangerous ideological exaggerations resulting from it well into the 1990s fueled his investigation of previous paradoxical times and reactions, in search of roots and reasons. As revealed by Claudia Roth-Pierpont (2013, 206), the kernel of this novel had existed since the beginning of the 1970s, when Roth had drafted a piece he never developed until two decades later.

Going against his often commented upon image as a writer of predominantly white male protagonists, he was fascinated with the possibility of closely observing a female character unlike any he had created before, one who was highly representative of an era that grew to preoccupy him.

> The pages were about a politically radicalized young woman who blows up a building to protest against the Vietnam War. Why a woman? Because, unlike the angry young men of the anti-war movement, Roth explains today, the

[10] While Terry Gifford offers a most useful, comprehensive overview of the evolving meanings and uses of the term 'pastoral' in *Pastoral*, Routledge, 2019, further essential contributions to investigating Roth's oeuvre apart from the already mentioned ones can be found, for instance, in Matthew A. Shipe's *Understanding Philip Roth*, University of South Carolina Press, 2022 or Derek Parker Royal's *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, Praeger Publishers, 2005.

[11] Meredith's mother, Dawn Dwyer, is a former Miss New Jersey and a Miss America contestant.

> women acted without the threat of being drafted and becoming cannon fodder. There was a 'purity to their rage,' he says, which made them less immediately explicable and more compelling as a subject […] 'Young, college-educated women not afraid of violence—this was extraordinary in the history of American politics and American women'. (Roth-Pierpont 2013, 206-7)

This exceptional—yet not necessarily positive—fluidization or even reversal of gender roles, the proliferation and acceptability of violence as argument and solution, feed a literary version of the American 1960s that reignites and revisits the decade's major social and political debates. Not only does *American Pastoral* put forth one of the most memorable Rothian male protagonists, but it also proposes one of the fiercest antiheroes: Merry Levov. The heart wrenching conundrum resides in the fact that the Vietnam War proved excruciatingly divisive for the American people. The ensuing state of perplexity is illustrated by the nexus between father and daughter, separated by an unprecedented and insurmountable ideological abyss. As Roth-Pierpont observes:

> The Swede's tragedy derives from the fact that his daughter hates America. […] The loving little girl has grown up to hate her parents, too—for being bourgeois capitalists, for continuing to live their superficial lives while Vietnamese suffer. At sixteen, she can hardly tell her parents and her country apart. Among the most affecting scenes in the book are the face-offs between father and daughter: she, arguing with all the outraged moralism of youth; he, trying desperately to protect her from the potential consequences of her idealism. Neither seems completely right or wrong; the author's understanding enfolds them both. (Roth-Pierpont 2013, 214)

Philip Roth's balanced, melancholic, yet relentless satire of the American pastoral gone awry incorporates the ironies and inequalities of middle-class life in 1960s America, as he illustrates the multiple sides of the social and political conundrum that leads to implosion in the novel. A legitimate and long-functioning paradigm includes the Levov family tradition in the leather industry. Their creed is working for wealth and rising by industriousness, which they have practiced for decades. On the one hand, Roth skillfully incorporates the nostalgic though painful process of Jewish immigration and settlement in the Newark, New Jersey community: "Swede Levov's grandfather had come to Newark from the old country in the 1890s and found work fleshing sheepskins fresh from the lime vat, the lone Jew alongside the roughest of Newark's Slav, Irish, and Italian immigrants in the Nuttman Street tannery of the patent-leather tycoon T. P. Howell" (Roth 1998, 11).

On the other hand, while, in the Swede's youth, the Protestant ethic of hard work as the basis of American capitalist welfare still seemed to apply to Newark's "big breweries, big tanneries, and, for the immigrant, lots of wet, smelly, crushing work" (Roth 1998, 11), the 1960s' political upheavals and changes of public discourse bring about the fierce militantism against exploitation that Merry Levov comes to embrace. The Protestant work ethic, that once was the bedrock of the American Dream, is now perceived by some members of the younger generation as self-serving capitulation to bourgeois greed. Roth's novel illustrates contending ideological and psychological patterns alongside the impossibility of finding a reasonable middle ground. The bluntest indictments against American capitalism and the Protestant work ethic come from Rita Cohen, the unscrupulous propagandizing guru who allegedly inspires Seymour's daughter's fanaticism. The mysterious young woman pretends to visit Levov's factory on a research assignment. In terms of her plausibility as a character, Roth plays with the protagonist's and the reader's minds alike: after the tour, she discloses her connection to the Swede's fugitive daughter and starts antagonizing him with alleged revelations about his missing child's radicalized beliefs and violent actions.

Resorting to activist jargon and bellicose shaming strategies, Rita draws calumnious parallels and compares Merry's father to a profiteering plantation owner ("You take good care of your niggers. Of course you do. It's called paternal capitalism" (Roth 1998, 135)). Such resonant provocations encapsulate a misguided type of militantism via the misrepresentation of the history of race relations in America, alongside an oversimplified approach to the nuanced business models and policies of prosperity and welfare. The accusations foreground the Swede's own bitterness, disappointment, and revolt as he defends his version of the American Dream, though oblivious to the fact that there might be other versions, not shored up by bourgeois capitalism. Seymour tells Rita:

> You have no idea what *work* is. You've never held a job in your life, and if you even cared to find one, you wouldn't last a single day, not as a worker, not as a manager, not as an owner. Enough nonsense. I want you to tell me where my daughter is. That is all I want to hear from you. She needs […] serious help, not ridiculous cliches! (Roth 1998, 135)

Such harsh exchanges showcase the growing conflicts and traumatic confrontations between illusion, reality and alternative ideas about the American 1960s, which Roth marks as a turning point in recent U.S. history.

Conflating Family and Nation: A Dystopian Pursuit

The recurrent notion that being ideologically completely right or completely wrong is no longer essential or even possible in a complex, complicated, fluid contemporary world, informs Roth's novel. The tensions it portrays are, consequently, multi-faceted: the war between nations is echoed by the ones between classes and generations. Aversion, rejection, and polarization shape a narrative that alternatively gives legitimate credence, at least in part, to all sociopolitical voices vying for agency and power. Roth emphasizes seemingly irreconcilable differences in which mutual respect and understanding become near-impossible to achieve. No one is perfect, no one is infallible, yet no one relents or repents. Anti-war, pro-violence: this intriguing mix underlies the Levovs' drama. Public discourses incorporating narratives and counternarratives of the American Dream have perverted the individuals' capacity for dialogue and acceptance.

To prove the ontological and epistemological dissonances that he decides to explore, Roth resorts to an entire arsenal of narrative voices and methods. Description, dialogue, interior monologue, flashbacks and flashforwards are parts of the construction of the text's fictional universe. The Swede's story is pieced together in retrospect by one of Roth's favorite alter-egos, Nathan Zuckerman, witness, narrator and commentator throughout the entire *American Trilogy* and a steady presence in a number of other Rothian novels. Due to his reputation as an inquisitive writer, he is asked by the Swede to help him deliver a minute account of the Levovs' major life events (including his own, perhaps surprising, unhappiness). Seymour's brother, Jerry, former friend and valedictorian of Zuckerman's class, is one of the most sarcastic and, simultaneously, accurate inside narrators the latter encounters. His brief account of trauma is precise in terms of the grand allegory of decay projected by the Swede's and his daughter's essential discrepancies.

> The 'Rimrock Bomber' was Seymour's daughter. The high school kid who blew up the post office and killed the doctor. The kid who stopped the war in Vietnam by blowing up somebody out mailing a letter at five A.M. A doctor on his way to the hospital. […] Quaint Americana. Seymour was into quaint Americana. But the kid wasn't. He took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in. […] Good-bye, Americana; hello, real time. (Roth 1998, 68-69).

Via multiple voices and a carefully curated, multifocal lens on the 1960s and Seymour and Merry's love/hate relationship with the idea of the American Dream, Roth brings into the conversation different ways of relating to and

thinking of America as a country and as an idea. His protagonists' inability to understand nuances and accommodate other opinions and choices than their own makes them incapable of distinguishing between private priorities and communal or national prerequisites. The comprehension and transmission of compatible values proves impossible when the individuals' definitions of the self in context vary drastically. Roth suggests that Levov and his daughter provide case studies that might seem exaggerated, but not implausible.

For the Swede, the only possible way of relating to America is through unconditional love and respect of its values. His idyllic vision integrates elements of the conservative version of American success. He perceives the obstacles he encounters as mere ways of reaffirming his belonging and loyalty to the homeland of his choice and making. After becoming a United States Marine upon graduation at the end of World War II, which he sees as a tremendous opportunity, he goes back to civilian life and continues building an edifice of personal satisfaction he never even questions, let alone criticizes or rejects.

> Got to marry a beautiful girl named Dwyer. Got to run a business my father built, a man whose own father couldn't speak English. Got to live in the prettiest spot in the world. Hate America? Why, he lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin. All the pleasures of his younger years were American pleasures, all that success and happiness had been American, and he need no longer keep his mouth shut about it just to defuse her ignorant hatred. […] Everything that gave meaning to his accomplishments had been American. Everything he loved was here. (Roth 1998, 213)

Such passages, wherein private history is revisited and reinterpreted in retrospect, emphasize Levov's identification with Americanness as an earned distinction, the ultimate step on his upward mobility ladder. Marrying into U.S. respectability, claiming ownership of what he considers an estate built on hard work and meritocracy, inheriting and growing a business, like the exemplary American entrepreneurs he has always admired, enjoying the rewards for overcoming the myriad challenges his immigrant background imposed and which he embraced as incentive: in Levov's mind, these are ingredients of a simple recipe for instant happiness, promised to and cherished by generations.

His belief in these values makes the fall even harder for the Swede, as his recollections of his steps fail to provide a clear explanation for his daughter's estrangement and transformation into an enemy of himself, the family, and the nation. Despite his attempts at self-analysis, the man's confrontations with his decisions and his overall evolution as an individual, a husband, a father, and a citizen confirm his allegiance to the moral code he associates with the privilege of living in America and his family's accomplished aspirations. Much like the

nation, he is frustrated about not having foreseen failure, while always striving to do what he genuinely believed to be the right thing.

Shockingly to him, his own flesh and blood, Merry, rejects, despises, and radically dissociates herself from the America that supports his view of himself and the world. Her resistance to any connection to her father's world, her ingrained fury, and her radicalized political views are oftentimes described by contrast with her father's beliefs and experiences, which deepens the division between Levov and his daughter and reflects deep generational and national ruptures in 1960s America. Merry's expressed abhorrence of what she believes to be the essence of the United States contributes to keeping the Swede's non-excessive, disciplined, reasonable version of socio-cultural cohabitation viable. Her definition of Americanness is strikingly different from his. Roth captures Merry's extremist vision through her father's eyes as follows:

> How could a child of his be so blind as to revile the 'rotten system' that had given her own family every opportunity to succeed? To revile her 'capitalist' parents as though their wealth were the product of anything other than the unstinting industry of three generations. […] There wasn't much difference, *and she knew it,* between hating America and hating them. He loved the America she hated and blamed for everything that was imperfect in life and wanted violently to overturn, he loved the 'bourgeois values' she hated and ridiculed and wanted to subvert. (Roth 1998, 214)

Seymour's dismay is predicated precisely on the blurring of the lines between public and private, political and personal, love and hate. He fails to grasp his daughter's furious attacks towards a system that has molded and validated himself and his positive views about the American Dream. He feels betrayed and wronged by accusations that he suspects do not echo Merry's realistic, well-informed beliefs, but rather insidious, brainwashing propaganda. Having slipped entirely into the Protestant rather than the Jewish skin of America's immigrant forebears, thus enjoying the benefits that his community craves, Seymour Levov is fully enveloped in the myth of the American Dream.

However, when his daughter is outed as a terrorist, he finds himself plunged into the chaos that defies what he has always relied on: order and stability, values that the American majority still abides by. As Timothy Parrish points out,

> What seems to be a family narrative—the story of how descendants of immigrant Jews achieve the American dream—is also a national one. […] To Merry, her father embodies that mixture of American exceptionalism and cultural imperialism that made the war against Viet Nam possible. Not only is

> Swede an example of the American dream that this generation will be better off than the previous one, but as the owner of glove factories in Newark and Puerto Rico his success story is built on the exploitation of African Americans and Puerto Ricans. (Parrish 2000, 97)

Parrish picks up on the oftentimes misconstrued connections and hardly justified appropriations that feed Merry's rage, as she begins to obsess about herself as a representative and defender of all those she believes are persecuted. It is also interesting to note Roth's sensitivity to the nuances of forced conflations of race, ethnicity, class, status, and gender issues. By resorting to overall umbrella-notions such as "minority issues", "exploitation", "discrimination", and "marginalization" in ways that vilify and denounce as evil what used to be standard, unquestionable behaviors, with no chance of atonement or reconciliation, Roth's generational conflicts also illustrate a battle of sociopolitical ideologies, opposing discourses and representations that turns literally explosive in the absence of moderation and mediation.

American Pastoral tracks polarizing contexts of the Vietnam War to illustrate the dramatic consequences of History upon histories. Merry's encounter with anti-war activists, whose indignation seems legitimate and resonant with many people's cravings for stability, predictability, and peace, marks the beginning of a downward spiral leading to her transformation into a cold-blooded terrorist. As scholar Leslie Oster points out,

> Levov's shock, his painful awareness of his daughter as a murderer, crackles on the page. […] Beautifully written and compelling, *American Pastoral* is sometimes difficult to read because of what it asks us to confront. Most of us believe ourselves to be caring, decent people with good values who, at the very least, "do no harm". We are much like the Swede. As we read, we wonder: have our goals as a society and the lifestyle we've evolved been a mere self-delusion leading to disaster? (Oster 2001, 148)

Apart from indicating anew Roth's tapping into some of America's most painful ruptures, *American Pastoral* shows us how national division often can foment family division. In the above quotation, Oster makes a convincing point about the book's impact. The destruction of the Swede's innocence, his consternation about the U-turn from the American pastoral to the apocalyptic aptly anticipate many Third Millennium conundrums: Has idealism bred monsters? Has American democracy, alongside its interpretations, annotations, manifestations in time, veered distractingly towards desideratum, rather than status quo? Have the large-scale symbols of grandeur and projected images of the American Dream-like perfection made Americans vulnerable to a flawed reality?

By echoing passionate viewpoints via the opinions of major and minor characters alike, Roth exposes the tragic inconsistencies of the American Dream, its constant transformations and mutability, its permeability to class, ethnicity, status, race, religion, gender issues, the sociopolitical pressures that it creates, and its often divisive, rather than unifying effects. In the novel, Roth captures the devastating discontinuities inherent in the turbulent sociopolitical landscape of the 1960s via multiple, oftentimes conflicting perceptions. Advantaged by his appearance and diligence, Levov enjoys opportunities hardly accessible to others, being able to exert agency and build on his family legacy steadily and honestly, he believes, until proven otherwise. His heartbreak and disappointment are genuine.

> Three generations. All of them growing. The working. The saving. The success. Three generations in raptures over America. Three generations of becoming one with a people. And now with the fourth it had all come to nothing. The total vandalization of their world. (Roth 1998, 237)

Middle-Class Americana and Identity Crises: An Implosion

Published at the end of the 1990s, after Roth had witnessed the hesitations and transformations of post-1960s America, alongside the exposure of the flawed idea of sociopolitical unity in America, *American Pastoral* looks at a nation buffeted between political and generational counter currents: the greater good versus the smaller comfort, generalizations versus particularizations, devotion to grand causes versus the suburban, middle-class well-being, promised after the Second World War as a return to a long-lost normalcy.

Featuring dramatic transformations of U.S. public discourse, policies, and actions throughout the '60s and '70s, Roth's novel

> exposes the shallowness and inadequacy of those decades. Security is derailed by the actions of a young girl who chooses to protest the order of her life by physical violence, first in protest against the Vietnam War and President Johnson, then against society at large. […] As the novel progresses […] we learn that her protest is deeper: it is against the greed and self-corruption she believes drives all those who seek middle-class life in America. […] Among the larger themes of *American Pastoral* is the undermining of the American Dream of success measured only by material wealth. (Nadel 2011, 29)

As the novel unfolds, it becomes increasingly obvious that, in extremist circles, protesting war marks the beginning of a rather perilous age of dissent for which

justice and equality are, in fact, populist pretexts. The humane predisposition to plead for negotiation, peaceful solutions, reasonable socio-political interactions, impartiality, and equal opportunity for all, is cannibalized by radical groups who exploit naivete and rebelliousness for militant agendas. Merry falls prey to alleged revolutionary promises and becomes angrier, bitterer, and further disconnected from everyday life in her immediate Jewish community. Moreover, she embraces the very violence she presumably objects to, and she assumes a self-proclaimed justiciary role, disregarding its blatant incongruity with her background, status, and upbringing.

To defend her radical(ized) views, Merry would instigate as much destruction and chaos as possible. This lack of boundaries and filters creates a tragic rift not only within her family, but from reality as well. Not incidentally, Roth includes Cuba in her radical trajectory: her revolt is larger than its apparent roots and goes beyond the borders of 1960s America. Indeed, Merry envisions herself as the imaginary spokesperson for the oppressed of the world. She believes that her crusade is just as fierce and hypothetically heroic as her father's conventionalism:

> She believed that in Cuba she could live among workers without having to worry about their violence. […] She had concluded by this time that there could never be a revolution in America to uproot the forces of racism and reaction and greed. Urban guerrilla warfare was futile against a thermonuclear superstate that would stop at nothing to defend the profit principle. Since she could not help to bring about a revolution in America, her only hope was to give herself to the revolution that was. (Roth 1998, 260)

Roth suggests, thus, that both the Swede's and Merry's highly idealistic ideological beliefs, as well as their opposing views on America, might in fact feed on similarly idyllic representations. In direct or indirect renditions of Merry's obsessive hate-and-elation speeches, as well as in her father's and the entire community's search for an explanation for her violence and subsequent downfall, one can easily detect the general(ized) type of challenge Roth responds to: mounting identity crises. Individuals, professionals, social groups, and parts of the nation as a whole are subject to turmoil and transformation due to reconfigurations of the American Dream. Since America's inception, the American Dream has been about immigrant success through integration and acculturation to an American way of life. The era captured by Roth, however, unveils the flaws in the design.

Underneath Roth's protagonists' vision of the American Dream there lie the hopes, illusions, and endeavors of an entire segment of the Jewish community to which Seymour and Merry Levov belong—one that has struggled

for legitimacy and respect among Gentiles and America's multicultural structure. Or so the Swede thinks. Instead, Roth's novel provides a nuanced analysis of the different iterations over the years of what constitutes Jewish-Americanness. While the professed ideal of cultural transformation and assimilation falters significantly throughout the '60s and '70s, the American pastoral dissipates into a dramatically romanticized and antiquated view of the United States and its history of immigration.

In terms of the parallels between disfavored groups that Merry and her collaborators draw, based on rather misplaced identification and false empathy, Roth might have had a number of real-life sources of inspiration. In the novel, Seymour becomes very interested in the well-known African American Marxist activist, Angela Davis, in his quest to understand Merry's motivations. Angela Davis was "a communist professor at UCLA who is against the war, [and who is subsequently] tried in San Francisco for kidnapping, murder, and conspiracy" (Roth 1998, 157). Seymour learns that Davis was an inspiration to Merry. Yet, the shortcomings of misinformed mimicry are evident.

> This […] is fascinating because it links Jews and African Americans (this is something Roth has done in novels such as *The Human Stain*). In this novel, one needs to look into this relationship because, in it, the Jewish-American women take an African-American woman as their model. And this mimicry is, in some ways, comical. […] It has the element of radical chic. (Feuer 2014)

Superficial as it may sound, the idea of 'radical-chic' points to the inherent shallowness of discourses that are embraced fanatically and the limits of their applicability and relevance to real world sociopolitical nuances. Radicalism as a fashionable trend is suggested throughout Merry's evolution, which moves from rebelliousness and dissent to recklessness and murder. The exploration of similarities and dissimilarities between ethnic minorities in the United States is an important topic, which lends itself to in-depth research and discussion. So are, however, its underlying limitations and the dangers of generalizations it formulates: the significance of nuanced critical thinking is crucial. Artificially appropriating stories to strengthen theoretical and sociopolitical positions, Roth suggests, highlights the paradoxical nature of identification with and affiliation to causes that do not necessarily justify either the means or the execution of said positions.

The novel's connection to 'real time' has also been emphasized by Claudia Roth-Pierpont, who brings to the readers' attention yet another interesting case study:

> He was particularly inspired by the case of Kathy Boudin, a young woman who became a prominent member of the violent anti-war group the Weather Underground. […] Roth was acquainted with Boudin's parents—he says that Kathy "couldn't have had a more terrific childhood"—and he had been friendly with a family who lived across the street from the Greenwich Village town house that the so-called Weathermen accidentally blew up. […] Back in 1970, Roth tells me, he was so frustrated with the war that—however figuratively—"I was pretty ready to set off a bomb myself". (Roth Pierpont 2013, 207)

Thus, starting from a mix of his own dilemmas and observation of the appalling realities around him, the author primarily focuses on the effect of radical ideologies upon social, communal, and family interactions. The novel functions as a manifesto against extremism by illustrating the destructive power of public discourses that shape private actions and imagination in hardly controllable or reasonable ways. Anticipating the era of fake news, conspiracy theories, and large-scale social media manipulation, Roth describes Merry as the offspring of generations of hard-working, hyphenated American-Jews, whose idealistic representations of the United States and sustained efforts to claim full belonging to the nation are ironically blown up from within. The one to do so is the all-American child whose mother is Miss America and whose father is the epitome of Jewish Americanization.

This indicates the indisputable decline of idols and ideals and the transformation of the pastoral into its opposite. Through Merry's violent actions, the once triumphant narrative of endless opportunity turns into a denunciation of stratification, opportunism, class, race, gender divisions long obliterated from the mainstream national mindset. The Levovs' tragedy resides in the lack of genuine communication between increasingly different perspectives on Americanness and its (dis)contents. Individual protest gestures jeopardize the ingrained confidence in adaptation and assimilation towards the common goal of democratic inclusiveness. Once that statuesque ideal is shaken off its pedestal, the dilemmas and backlashes are unavoidable:

> When Merry becomes a revolutionary and detonates a bomb in the local post office that kills an 'innocent' bystander, she also explodes her father's happy success story into the American berserk. In this moment national history becomes family narrative to the extent that the Viet Nam War and the American unrest of the sixties is caused not by American foreign policy or Communist Revolutionaries but by our American belief in cultural transformation as an inherent social good. […] The novel ultimately mourns the inevitable disappearance of the Jewish identity experienced by Swede and Zuckerman and Philip Roth as boys. (Parrish 2000, 97)

Jewish Immigrants and The Goy[12] Ideal

One of Roth's main avenues of exploration in *American Pastoral*, as in most of his fiction, is the aforementioned issue of Jewish-American identity and how a history shaped by immigration connects to preconceived notions of happiness and the American Dream. While seeing these elements grow further and further apart, Roth intertwines the individual, the communal and the national ideal by having the reader watch the seeds of Jewish discontent grow roots in the soil of WASP American ideals. The neighborhood stories in which the writing abounds feature successful members of the (once) immigrant community who embrace and replicate the American Dream. The characters' recollections of their historical neighborhood's evolution are inevitably marked by both admiration towards and mimetic representation/ (re)enactment of goy behavior.

For example, while meditating on the fate of the Levovs, Zuckerman presents memorable passages, which sound nostalgic and premonitory alike.

> The first postimmigrant generation of Newark's Jews had regrouped into a community that took its inspiration more from the mainstream of American life than from the Polish shtetl their Yiddish-speaking parents had recreated around Prince Street in the impoverished Third Ward. The Keer Avenue Jews, with their […] flagstone front steps, seemed to be at the forefront, laying claim like audacious pioneers to the normalizing American amenities. And at the vanguard of the vanguard were the Levovs, who had bestowed upon us our very own Swede, a boy as close to a goy as we were going to get. (Roth 1998, 10)

The questioning of 'mainstream', 'normalizing' middle-class values in the United States during the 1960s is a leitmotif in this novel that showcases the dissolution of trust and truth as bases for generative social interaction. As such, it inevitably affects the afore-described pioneers of Jewish-American integration and goy-like sophistication. For dramatic and empathic effect, Roth resorts to the family drama framework, yet the issues he addresses are vaster. Making Merry the militant embodiment of the counter-pastoral impulse, "Roth examines the assault against both historical and literary metanarratives that constitute the American mythic ideal, interrogating a consensus ideology reflected in a modernist vision of history and literary theory" […] (Stanley 2005, 3).

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[12] Plural *goyim* ['gȯi-əm]: a non-Jewish person. *Gentile*, sense 1. (a person of a non-Jewish nation or of non-Jewish faith especially: a Christian as distinguished from a Jew) Etymology. Yiddish, from Hebrew *gōy* people, nation. 'Goy.' Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, *Merriam-Webster*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/goy. Accessed 21 May 2024.

Although attention is drawn to the protagonists and many analyses of the novel focus almost exclusively on them, the picture is further complicated and nuanced by the secondary characters. Representative of Newark's shared mentalities and patterns is the Levov father figure, for instance, with his undeterred determination to accomplish the highly motivational American Dream. Roth's narrative showcases the Swede's inherited commitment to his family's well-being, which is predicated on an unflinching devotion to his and the nation's heritage:

> Mr. Levov was one of those slum-reared Jewish fathers whose rough-hewn, undereducated perspective goaded a whole generation of striving, college educated Jewish sons: a father for whom everything is an unshakable duty, for whom there is a right way and a wrong way and nothing in between […] Limited men with limitless energy; men quick to be friendly and quick to be fed up; men for whom the most serious thing in life is *to keep going despite everything.* And we were their sons. It was our job to love them. (Roth 1998, 11)

Such descriptions of the neighborhood spirit capture the transmission of communal and national ideals to and among individuals in Newark's Jewish community, alongside the literalness of America's forebearers' understanding of it. If, at the beginning of Seymour's own education, this seemed the natural, proper, and recommendable way to act for full integration into the American cultural framework, in retrospect, the newly realized flaws in its design haunt the narrator who tries to untangle the Levovs' apparently inexplicable drama, a metonymical version of the then national drama. Roth does not avoid an interrogation of the cracks in the ideas of individual success and the American Dream: "Fifty years later, I ask you: has the immersion ever again been so complete as it was in those streets, where every block, every backyard, every house, every *floor* of every house—the walls, ceilings, doors, and windows of every last friend's family apartment—came to be so absolutely individualized?" (Roth 1998, 43)

The reader is exposed to a layered perspective on the alienation and disenfranchisement brought about by the abrupt transformation of individual, communal, and national status quos. The author's position and the narrator's commentaries encapsulate both denunciation & sympathy, as

> Roth portrays the members of the 'greatest generation' who were baffled by the demythologizing decade of the sixties with sympathy, but he also critiques the myths by which they lived and exposes their refusal to acknowledge how that very mythology might propagate the social and economic injustices that sixties radicals battled. (Stanley 2005, 3)

In this light, one of the novel's accomplishments is Seymour Levov's portrayal through multiple lenses, as either heroic figure for the postwar generation or demonic exploiter to the Vietnam-war protesters. He is torn between these hypostases: victim or perpetrator according to context, circumstances, and beholders. Born, bred, and reared as the sensible school and neighborhood hero, he must meet the community's expectations of him as a model and a savior. Roth suggests that the pressure and normativity of responsibility become crushing for the younger generation once twentieth-century history poses unprecedented national and international challenges. The Swede's always appropriate modesty, care, and selflessness turn him from an exemplary member of the Jewish community and a worthy American citizen into the victim of his own good intentions. Never a dissenter and a protester himself, he is not just confronted with the physical decay of his increasingly ailing body, but he is also confronted by the moral and ethical challenges of his shattered idealism, from which there seems to be no rescue or redemption.

> It all began—this heroically idealistic maneuver, this strategic, strange spiritual desire to be a bulwark of duty and ethical obligation—because of the war, because of all the terrible uncertainties bred by the war, because of how strongly an emotional community whose beloved sons were far away facing death had been drawn to a lean and muscular, austere boy whose talent it was to be able to catch anything anybody threw anywhere near him. It all began for the Swede—as what doesn't?—in a circumstantial absurdity. And ended in another one. A bomb. (Roth 1998, 79-80)

Roth's subtle understanding of causes, effects, and the crucial emotional influence of the Jewish community becomes evident in such passages as above. He dives deep into the Levovs complicated family dynamics, as the successive generations prove increasingly different and distant from those of the Greatest Generation in terms of actions and expectations. Seymour's ideal of universal, cardinal, essential kindness is countered by his father's warning that choosing emotionally will not reasonably support his American Dream (in this respect, there are multiple parallels between Roth's *American Pastoral* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*).

When the Swede decides to marry for love—of wife and Americanness alike, it seems—, he is baffled by his father's warnings:

> What is 'in love' going to do for you when you have a child? How are you going to raise a child? As a Catholic? As a Jew? […] They raised a child who was neither Catholic nor Jew, who instead was first a stutterer, then a killer, then a Jain. He had tried all his life never to do the wrong thing, and that was what he had done.

> […] The most serious thing in his life, seemingly from the time he was *born,* was to prevent the suffering of those he loved, to be kind to people. (Roth 1998, 386)

Seymour Levov's evolution, his embrace of the American Dream, shows that marrying Miss America does not instantly integrate one in the WASP body of the nation, and affiliation does not equal assimilation; neither should it do so, Roth suggests. As the Swede's fate is reconstructed, reread, and reinterpreted, strong signals surface to indicate that appearance and essence do not coincide, that the projected utopia he envisions for himself, his daughter, and Newark's Jewish community does not incorporate or acknowledge all the nuances that come with living in America. The Swede only apprehends in retrospect the power and ubiquitous presence of the everlasting immigrant hyphen, as he mentally revisits his conversation with his parents while he struggles to cope with the trauma of Merry's radical transformation.

The entire construal and deconstruction of Seymour Levov's myth, by himself and others, moves between self-mystification in the initial stages and self-examination once everything falls apart. His, his daughter's, his wife's (yet another character worthy of further exploration), his family's confusion, and the reshuffling of values are caused by essential shifts in perspective, expectations, civic attitudes, and interpretations of exemplariness associated with American society and its concomitant American Dream: its layers from inclusive education to financial opportunity, success patterns and accessibility and, above all, as in many of Roth's works, the increasingly forgotten art of constructive conversation.

Conclusion

As Halio points out, the initial implausibility of the Swede's and Merry's drama and its gradual sinking into the narrator's, the characters', and the community's consciousness as an awareness-raising episode, trigger essential questions as to the reconfigurations of mentalities and reactions imposed by socio-historical events and evolutions.

> Roth's title, *American Pastoral*, is deeply ironic, and his irony is pervasive. How could the events he describes through his fictive surrogate Zuckerman have happened? Why did they happen? What insidious disease so infected American middle-class culture that it could and—if the Levov family tragedy is representative—did cause such terrible destruction? Roth does not directly answer these questions. On the contrary, his novel ends with them: What is wrong with the Levovs' life? What life could be less reprehensible than theirs? (Halio 1999, 137)

Like most postmodern works of fiction, Roth's *American Pastoral* leaves the moral of the story for the readers to determine for themselves. The book launches a provocative and complex interrogation of ethics and idealism in contemporary life, alongside their darker counterparts: opportunism and radicalism. Presenting itself as a fictional mélange of tragic comedy with docudrama[13], it encapsulates Roth's cautionary tales against extremism and miscommunication in private and public spheres alike. It also emphasizes the importance of affect in social interactions and demonstrates that sensitivity to individual needs, fears, desires can hardly be encompassed by stereotypical discourses, no matter which side of the political and ideological spectrum they stem from.

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[13] a drama (as for television) dealing freely with historical events especially of a recent and controversial nature. "Docudrama." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/docudrama. Accessed 21 May 2024.

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