

INTRODUCTION

In his 2004 interview for the French magazine *Le Monde* 2, Philip Roth explains that *American Pastoral* (1997), his twenty-second book, is in fact quite an old project. Roth began to compose the novel during the Vietnam War. He had formulated the concept and invented the family, the rebellious daughter, and the bombing, but he still couldn't write the book. He was blocked, he claimed, because it was the daughter rather than the father who seemed to him the suffering character ("Interview with Savigneau" 24). As time passed, the abandoned project became a novel which recounts the life of an ordinary American Jew—Seymour Levov, whose peaceful post World War II version of paradise is destroyed by a powerful foe—his daughter Merry, who becomes a militant radical during the 1960s.

If, in the Vietnam years, Roth couldn't go any further with his book manuscript, the 1990s marked a new stage in his career. Indeed, *American Pastoral* represents Roth's creative response to the novel that preceded it, the subversive *Sabbath's Theater* (1995). In his 1999 interview with Alain Finkielkraut, Roth recognizes the liberty he felt with his Dionysian Sabbath. Like "Dostoevsky who fell in love with Raskolnikov, or Genet with himself," Roth also "fell in love with" Sabbath because it is through this fictional character that he found "the freedom to imagine beyond all conventions" ("Interview Finkielkraut 2" 118-119).¹ After Sabbath, it was possible again to address a more kindly conventional character. This time Roth focuses his attention on the victim. Not less than ten years after *The Counterlife* (1986) where he categorically rejects the pastoral as literary genre, the narrator Nathan Zuckerman returns to it, now as an observer of another man's idyllic scenario of "a sanitized, confusionless life" (*Counterlife* 326). As such, the self-reflexive *Counterlife*, the subversive *Sabbath's Theater*, and the ironically titled *American Pastoral* represent Roth's questioning of the pastoral theme in a series of counter-texts.

Today, Philip Roth is one of the world's most prolific and most decorated writers. In May 2011, he was the winner of the fourth Man Booker International Prize, the newest jewel in his crown of literary awards. Reprinted in the prestigious

1 « Ou, pour être plus précis, l'écrivain adore le personnage qui lui apporte la liberté, comme Dostoïevski qui tombe amoureux de Raskolnikov ou Genet de lui-même. Parce qu'il se donne la liberté d'imaginer bien au-delà des conventions. » The translations from the French are mine.

"Library of America" series, his fiction is incorporated into the American literary canon. However, his constant revisiting of the same themes and the same material, the use of the same narrator—Nathan Zuckerman—have incurred the critics' wrath.² Roth has often been accused of repeating himself. The essays assembled in this book, however, counter this view by reconsidering Roth's writing method as a career-long exploration of situations he regards as foundational for capturing and shaping American reality.

One of these situations is the whole complex issue of pastoral longing. In an interview with Pierre Assouline, Roth discusses the notion of the pastoral as "everyman's dream, a dream for a rewarding and peaceful life of accomplishment. A bucolic existence of calm, order, optimism and success" ("Interview Assouline").³ The desire of Roth's protagonist for happiness and harmony without antagonisms takes its origin in an idyllic dream. The titles of the novel's sections evoke the Bible, but the pastoral dream may have a much broader existential meaning. Milan Kundera, whom Philip Roth introduced to American audiences with the Penguin book series "Writers from the Other Europe," offers the following definition for this dream: "Behind all the European faiths, religious and political, we find the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good, and that we are therefore entitled to multiply. Let us call this basic faith a *categorical agreement with being*" (248; emphasis in original).

American Pastoral recounts the events that emerge in the 1960s to compromise this profound human aspiration. Merry Levov's childhood takes place in the 1950s-1960s, when the successful assimilation of the Jewish community in the American society brings material prosperity and optimism. In *Operation Shylock* (1993), Roth mockingly defines the integration of the Jews into the American dream as "the pastoralization of the ghetto" and describes their affluence in the following terms:

1959. The Jewish success story in its heyday, all new and thrilling and funny and fun. Liberated new Jews, normalized Jews, ridiculous and wonderful. The triumph of the untragic. Brenda Patimkin dethrones Anne Frank. Hot sex, fresh fruit, and Big Ten basketball—who could imagine a happier ending for the Jewish people? (132).

This is a vivid yet ironic representation of the pastoral—the life of prosperity that results from the successful realization of the American dream. Like Kundera, Roth

² The most recent example is the outraged reaction of a member of the Man Booker International Prize jury.

³ « La pastorale, c'est le rêve de tout un chacun, celui d'une vie aboutie, gratifiante et sereine. Une existence bucolique toute de calme, d'ordre, d'optimisme et de réussite [...] »

offers a blistering attack on humanity's desire to avoid the unpleasant, or, to put it in Kundera's words, kitsch. The pastoral, explains Roth, implies an absolute satisfaction with a life which purges the hideous ("Interview Finkelkraut 1" 119).⁴ Like kitsch, the pastoral is an aesthetic ideal which "excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence" (Kundera 248). Kitsch is "the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word," declares Kundera (248). It is exactly this sense of perfection that the antagonist Merry Levov rejects about the pastoral setting in which she finds herself. Sex, consumerism, and sports cannot satisfy her. She embraces anti-war radicalism and, with the bomb, brings home to her family a different, unpredictable history and negation of her parents' world. During this turbulent moment in America, the chaos of history intrudes everywhere, even in the most conventional cities and in the most comfortable living-rooms of the prosperous liberal Americans. For Roth, the conflict in Vietnam exemplifies how the pastoral dream of the post-World War II generation faces the awful intrusion of a counter-history which is impossible to contain.

Fifteen years have passed since the publication of *American Pastoral*. Do we have enough historical distance at this time for a serious critical assessment, especially when the task is rendered difficult by Roth's continuous literary output? Before we start looking for an answer, perhaps we need to remember that at least one important element in Roth's body of work seems to have found closure. In 2007, Roth's favorite narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, withdrew from his role as witness of post-World War II America. The literary series of the Zuckerman Books ended. A special issue of *Philip Roth Studies* duly mourned him.⁵ Can we, then, consider *American Pastoral*, one of the books Zuckerman narrated, as finished, along with him? The answer to this question is negative, and the essays collected in this volume are careful to avoid the scholars' utopia of providing a definitive, all-inclusive interpretation. *American Pastoral* remains an open dialogic narrative which questions simple and unitary ways of considering reality and fiction. Even as critics gain a greater temporal distance, reality perpetually intervenes to offer new contexts which, in turn, make new interpretations possible.

In the first section of this volume, "History, Place, Self," Hana Wirth-Nesher opens the debate by interpreting Zuckerman's nostalgia as a means to forsake the past for a fantasy about two glorious bygone eras in the history of the United States: the moral and military victory of World War II and the golden days of President John F. Kennedy. Nostalgia for these eras, Wirth-Nesher argues, is blind to the Holocaust and the Vietnam War. *American Pastoral*, then, represents "a flight from history and moral responsibility."

4 « garder tout ce qui est repoussant à l'écart ».

5 See Pozorski, Aimee, and Miriam Jaffe-Foger, eds. *Mourning Zuckerman*.

The staging of historical trauma also constitutes the main theme in Aimee L. Pozorski's essay. However, unlike Wirth-Nesher, Pozorski suggests that it is not World War II that the Newark Jewish community seeks to forget by idolizing the Swede, nor is it the Vietnam War that his daughter brings home by bombing the local post office, but the War of Independence. In fact, Pozorski observes, the consequences of the American Revolution are far from idyllic: slavery, segregation, colonization and other forms of violence result from this event, which she sees as "traumatic in its purest sense," for "the ideals of equality and democracy, while apparently desired, came too soon to be adequately and responsibly implemented." Merry Levov's violent anti-war protest intends to unmask the fallen ideals behind the democratic project.

Derek Parker Royal responds to this interpretation by anchoring the Swede to place and ethnic identity. The territory of the Swede's assimilative trajectory—his idealized American home, the surrounding area of Old Rimrock—is systematically demythologized, but Roth does not make a stance against assimilation. The power of *American Pastoral*, Royal concludes, "lies in the fact that the project of defining the ethnic self, in particular the Jewish ethnic self, is never completely finalized." The novel stands as one of Roth's most significant contributions to the understanding of the ethnic self.

Judith Johnsey also discusses the Swede's attempts at assimilation by considering the ways in which his efforts to negotiate space articulate a sense of cultural belongingness. Johnsey interprets Merry's acts as the logical conclusion of her father's paradox: by seeking to assimilate in America, he has reached a liminal zone. He has lost his connection to his own history. Ultimately, he is left with no identity and no cultural home.

Ann Basu reads *American Pastoral* as an interrogation of post-war male selfhood and nationhood embodied in Swede Levov. The novel questions and finally dismisses the pastoral mythology of bodily wholeness, order, innocence, and perfectibility personified by the Swede. It simultaneously depicts the disintegration of the post-World War II political consensus into the divisive politics and violence of the Vietnam era. The movement from order to disorder associated with the rapidly changing gender relations during that period embroils the Swede in a disorderly counter-narrative activated through females.

The second section of this collection explores the novel as a creative reference to reality and as a fictional representation of the various discourses on this reality. Entitled "Voices of Dissent," the section opens with Philip Abbott's analysis of *American Pastoral* in light of democratic theory. Abbott argues that Roth's historical American trilogy (*American Pastoral* [1997], *I Married a Communist* [1998] and

The Human Stain [2000]) presents a strikingly detailed image of American populism. Unlike most democratic theorists, Roth is willing to explore the nature and source of populist anger and to expose its poignant dimensions. Abbott suggests that by appending Roth's insights, it is possible to ameliorate populism's contested status in democratic theory by acknowledging the positive role of emotion, properly understood, in political protest.

Linda S. Watts picks up Abbott's analysis of populist empowerment in order to investigate the novel's representations of principled dissent, namely "the act of standing up and speaking out for a point of view, however unpopular, on the basis of a belief or deeply held value." By placing these representations within the context of other source material available on anti-war activists, Watts reads *American Pastoral* as an act of historical memory, focused in particular on American anti-war activities of the 1960s and 1970s. "Although Roth's novel defies the details of chronology and historical sequence," Watts argues, "the impulses and actions he ascribes to Merry coincide closely with those of lived-world Weatherwomen." If history is the contest for meaning among competing truth claims, what part does historical fiction play within this process? Watts asks this question in her assessment of the novel's representation of historical figures and events and concludes that Roth's *American Pastoral* denies readers an unequivocal answer.

Early reviews of the novel, however, ignored its fictional nature and pointed out the inconsistencies in its representation of history. Robert Boyers, for instance, accused Roth of failing to present "an adequate study of social disorder. [The novel] does not tell us what we need to know about America, what a novel can tell us about the complex attitudes and allegiances of a time and a place" (40-41). It is curious that such critics seem to forget that *American Pastoral* is a work of fiction. It constitutes neither a sociological study, nor a political analysis, nor a historiographical research. Inconsistencies and incompleteness abound in fiction. Gustave Flaubert found in surgery a brutal metaphor for literature: the writer performs an autopsy on the corpse of reality. Like his French predecessor, Philip Roth embraces the metaphor of surgery, but surpasses Flaubert in brutality. Among Roth's favorite metaphors for his own writing method is that of imagination not as a meticulous surgeon, but as a butcher who "clubs the fact over the head, quickly [he] slits its throat, and then with [his] bare hands, [he] pulls forth the guts." As a result, the reader should not seek a faithful representation of reality in a novel, because "By the time the imagination has finished with a fact, [...] it bears no resemblance to a fact" ("This Butcher" 3).

Matthew McBride's essay proceeds to explore the distorted version of reality that *American Pastoral* constructs. Like Watts, his analysis focuses on Merry Levov. Called "an insane murderer," "crazy," and "mad," Merry progressively

becomes a hysterical subject. As McBride suggests, faced with realities seemingly incongruous with the established order, some individuals question the edifice of the law. Others, excluded or alienated by ideology, actively resist its power and discover the essential lack behind the law. The lack leads them to hysteria. For McBride, this process probably drives Merry to transform Roth's novel of the American pastoral into a chronicle of the American berserk.⁶

Focusing on Merry again, Erica D. Galioto uses a psychoanalytic approach to *American Pastoral* and interprets Merry's stuttering beyond some of its more limiting perceptions. She applies Lacan's theory of *anamorphosis* to voice, which she then maps onto Merry's stutter. Merry's anamorphic stutter, Galioto concludes, forces her father into a recognition of his own shortcomings. Seymour's self-scrutiny prompts his own aggression, and ultimately his own confrontation with the superficial nothing that structures his reality.

Entitled "Narrating the Pastoral," the third section of this book addresses the narrative construction of *American Pastoral* and the role of Nathan Zuckerman as narrator. Ben Railton opens this cluster of readings with a comparative analysis of Roth's narrator and the narrator in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). Both narrators undertake an analytical engagement with their representative American characters, which illustrates the complex and critical work involved in the production of any realistic chronicle. In so doing, Railton argues, the novelists-narrators both participate in and exemplify American literary realism's "contributions to the understanding, ongoing development, and revision of seminal national narratives like the American Dream."

Gary Johnson focuses on the allegorical elements in *American Pastoral*, "for this is the novel in which Roth most clearly and consciously reveals how memory and narrative can salvage meaning from a life." The first chapter of the novel is, in fact, a historically contextualized discourse on *allegoresis* and the problems of interpretation that inhere during the process of constructing allegorical figures. Johnson demonstrates that Roth adopts allegory both as a mode of composition and as an interpretive act.

Also interested in allegory, Debra Shostak asserts that the narrative trajectory of the novel revolves around the trope of the Fall. Roth enfolds the story of a putatively assimilated Jew, Swede Levov, within the imaginative probings of the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman. *American Pastoral* illuminates the drama of identity

⁶ It is interesting to note that "American Berserk" is a piano composition by contemporary composer John Adams. The piece was first performed on February 25, 2002 in Carnegie Hall, New York City. The composer explains: "As its title suggests, 'American Berserk' is a short, high-energy work for virtuoso pianist. The title, from Philip Roth, hints at the darker, manic edge of American life evoked in his novel, *American Pastoral*." I owe this observation to Theodora Tsimpouki.

construction as Levov “bends and breaks in response to historical contingencies”; at the same time the novel sheds light on the act of narration as a historiographic enterprise inflected by the narrator’s desires.

In her narrative analysis of speech and consciousness representation in *American Pastoral*, Pia Masiero demonstrates that “nothing is impersonally perceived.” Even if the narration in the second and third sections of the book is focalized through the Swede, Zuckerman continues to be present as the origin of everything the reader is offered. Zuckerman’s mediating voice narrates the Swede’s consciousness by the three types of rendering of a character’s interiority identified by Dorrit Cohn—psycho-narration, quoted monologue, and narrated discourse. Zuckerman’s authorial glosses, Masiero argues, aim at implicating the reader in the Swede’s logic and in his existential predicament. “Zuckerman’s empathetic (often hybridized) presence alongside the suffering Swede is what the reader witnesses” throughout the second and the third sections of the novel.

Instead of reading the narrator’s putative self-effacement and empathetic identification with the character, however, readers might consider free indirect discourse as a vehicle of irony: the ideology of the deluded Swede does not coincide with the ideology of the undeluded narrator, even if, on the phraseological level, their perspectives merge (Uspenskij 102-103). Irony springs from the contrast between Seymour’s blindness to reality and the narrator’s knowledge of individuals and events. The encounter with Rita Cohen is an eloquent illustration of this. When Rita arrives at the Swede’s factory, the third-person narrator immediately tells us who Levov’s young visitor is, but Levov himself remains ignorant. The Swede perceives her as “feisty innocent, eager to learn” (124), and in his elation, becomes pathetically loquacious, puts his arm around her and begins calling her “honey,” only to discover, after hours spent together, that the diligent student is in fact Merry’s mentor in world revolution. Ironically, the “utterly insignificant pebble” overpowers the “conservatively dressed success story six feet three inches tall and worth millions” (134-135; emphasis in original). The situations the narrator chooses to present can only have an ironic effect if the reader is sensitive to the book’s inherent humour. For instance, the comparison of beauty pageants to county fairs is inferred, not stated, and Dawn Levov’s achievement is gently mocked. It seems to me that critics have yet to conjure with just how funny a book *American Pastoral* is. Indeed, judicious writers have always practiced the art of contrast between the serious and the comic. The European novel began as a half-serious genre which merges both comedy and tragedy. In *Tom Jones* (1749), Fielding laid down the rules for the new genre defined as a “prosai-comi-epic writing” (181). Like his European forbears, Roth pursues this art with great success.

Consequently, Roth's dialog with the literary tradition is the object of the fourth section of this volume. Entitled "In Dialog with Books," it opens with David Brauner's reading of *American Pastoral* along with the third novel in the American Trilogy, *The Human Stain*. The allusive language of these novels articulates a dialectics between the pastoral and its antithetically opposed philosophy which Brauner terms the "anti-pastoral." Both represent not simply alternative modes of fiction, but two irreconcilable worldviews, one standing for harmony, purity, and order; the other standing for conflict, impurity, and chaos. Brauner concludes that ultimately, "Roth denounces 'the utopia of a rational existence' in favor of the confusion, irrationality, incoherence and mess (in all the senses of that word) of 'lived reality.'"

Literary references abound in *American Pastoral*: the titles of the novel's three sections echo Milton's epic; the Swede is described first as a Greek god—"our household Apollo" (4), then as an American Ivan Ilych (31); during his forty-fifth high school reunion, Zuckerman thinks of the inescapable destiny of man personified by the three Greek goddesses of fate—the Moerae (52); the six *rugelach* he eats remind him of the Proustian madeleine, but their savour fails to dissipate the apprehensiveness of death (47); one of his classmates has escaped his "Dostoyevskian family" and become a psychiatrist (85); the "great outlaws" of literature like William Burroughs, the Marquis de Sade and "the holy saint Jean Genet" are said to constitute "The Let Every Man Do Whatever He Wishes School of Literature" (365). The numerous references to literature in *American Pastoral* show how important it is to establish the intellectual and cultural tradition in which Roth stands.

Thus, Gustavo Sánchez-Canales places *American Pastoral* in dialog with the classic tradition. He analyzes the presence of classical motifs such as *hamartia* and *moira*. In much the same way as Greek classical dramatists like Sophocles, Roth offers a deterministic view of life. Sánchez-Canales sees the main character's tragic fall as his predetermined "fate."

Jessica G. Rabin returns to American literature, namely to William Faulkner. She examines *American Pastoral* in light of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and reads both narratives in light of the biblical book of II Samuel. She interrogates in the heroes' family tragedies aspects of "paradise(s) lost." Structurally, both Faulkner and Roth use outsider narrators who nevertheless attempt to piece together and create histories; thematically, both raise issues about miscegenation and its implications for identity, as well as the apparent impossibility of being both a strong leader and a good family man. Both texts allude to and reframe King David's lament.

David Rampton asserts the importance of the nineteenth-century Russian novella “The Death of Ivan Ilych” (1886) for Roth, whose abiding interest in the pains of ageing and the confrontation with death has taken on Tolstoyan proportions in the latter part of his career. In *American Pastoral*, Rampton argues, Roth offers us much more than an American version of Tolstoy’s *Everyman*. Tolstoy’s harsh sentence is put up, then questioned, by the narrator Zuckerman, even if Roth’s themes are Tolstoy’s. It is impossible to produce a narrative of the Tolstoyan type today, asserts Rampton, because reality itself escapes definitions and moral certainties.

Reading Roth’s novel in dialog with Tolstoy, I argue that the narrator’s evocation of Tolstoy’s statement not only points to the central theme of *American Pastoral*—the Levovs’ materialistic Eden nurtures its own destruction—but, transformed into an open question at the end of the novel, it also suggests the dialogic orientation of Roth’s narrative. Thus, *American Pastoral* constitutes Roth’s most creative, even dialogic, response to Tolstoy. Roth’s “multivoiced world” opens a dialogic dystopian space.

Matthew McKenzie Davis continues to explore the dialog between *American Pastoral* and the European literary tradition. Davis shows that Marcel Proust’s first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past—Swann’s Way* (1913) exhibits a defining structural and stylistic influence on the initial volume of Roth’s American Trilogy—*American Pastoral*. The parallels between these texts underscore the reflexive nature of Zuckerman’s use of the Swede.

In the final essay of the volume, Till Kinzel reads *American Pastoral* as a novel of cultural memory. Cultural memory captures and shapes a society’s identity. The novel represents an evocation of the historical past, a creative dialog with the literary tradition, and “a reminder of the paradoxical structure of America’s relation to the pastoral: for the anti-pastoral which America again and again risks to become results from the very desire to establish a utopia of purity.” Kinzel’s conclusion, which can also serve as a coda to the book, is that Roth’s polyphonous novel constitutes a major contribution “to the ongoing negotiations of what America was, is, and may become.”

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In his 1999 interview with Roth, Alain Finkielkraut proposes cultural and political readings of *American Pastoral*, to which the novelist responds with a much broader interpretation of his text. Forsaking the concrete socio-political and historical context, Roth considers the situation of the main character as representative of

the human condition. The Swede's mission as a man, as a father, as a husband, is "to control what is beyond control in this world and his fate is tragic" ("Interview Finkielkraut 1" 119).⁷ The whole second part of the interview⁸ revolves around Mickey Sabbath, the character with whom Roth identifies most, in many ways. Whereas Sabbath bears the aesthetics of chaos and impurity, Seymour Levov stands for order, while his daughter Meredith who is "chaos itself," is not less infatuated with the ideology of purity. From this standpoint, *American Pastoral* and *Sabbath's Theater* establish two kinds of antagonist aesthetics, the utopian one of harmony and beauty, and the dystopian aesthetics of disorder and impurity.

The present book intends to open the debate on *American Pastoral* along these lines, and, in so doing, represents a scholarly attempt not to offer "the final word" on such a masterpiece, but rather to open these questions further. Having brought together a number of academic voices from eight countries (Bulgaria, Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States), this collection of essays aims to reenact a dialog of critical readings with the text and among themselves. The second goal of this book is to place *American Pastoral* in a larger transnational context. This is the best way to locate a work of art and the only frame that can reveal its value.

The various methods of inquiry adopted here demonstrate the ways in which different areas of specialization enhance or illuminate one another. The ultimate aim of this book is to widen appreciation for Roth's work and at the same time to open communication between various methods of reading in order to provide for readers, whether students, scholars, or the interested general public, a multifaceted account of *American Pastoral*.

"Too many urges, and that's not even the tenth of the story," says Mickey Sabbath, Roth's transgressive puppeteer (*Sabbath's Theater* 158). Certainly, the twenty essays collected here cannot exhaust the multiple meanings of Roth's masterpiece. Sabbath's imperative: "For every thought a counter-thought, for every urge a counter-urge" stands as the watchword for our dialog of academic voices, which will doubtless in turn inspire new readings (158).

Velichka Dimitrova Ivanova

7 « sa mission en tant qu'homme, en tant que père, en tant que mari, est de maîtriser ce qu'il peut de ce monde non maîtrisable et son destin est tragique. »

8 Published in the subsequent issue 24 of *L'atelier du roman*. In the first part of the interview, Roth discusses *American Pastoral*. The second part focuses on *Sabbath's Theater*. Comparisons between the two abound.

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