Contesting the historical pastoral in Philip Roth’s American Trilogy

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In the 1990s, Philip Roth did something few of his readers would have expected: He shifted his narrative gaze from the games of self-reflexivity to the American historical landscape. What is more, he did so by bringing back his perennial artist hero, Nathan Zuckerman. Through a series of three novels, Roth revisited key historical moments of post-World War II America. Each book reads as a fascinating case study of the ways in which an individual must negotiate his (it’s usually males in Roth’s fiction) life in the face of historical forces beyond his control, or, as Roth has put it, the processes by which an individual becomes “history’s hostage” (Roth 2003). The American Trilogy stands as one of Roth’s most ambitious achievements and marks what is now being seen by many as the high point in his career.

The emphasis on history, especially recent American history, is nothing new in Roth’s fiction. America—America as an idea, America as a promised land, America as a refuge—has always been within Roth’s narrative vision. However, his novels of the later 1990s concern themselves more significantly with the dynamics underlying historical identity. What makes the American Trilogy so intriguing are the ways in which history reveals the fiction behind the American dream. In all three novels he writes the individual subject into the fabric of history, and by doing so he illustrates that identity is not only a product, but also at the mercy, of the many social, political, and cultural forces that surround it. Zuckerman in the American Trilogy functions as an interpreter of others’ narratives or, rather, a conduit for their histories. Through the process of reimagining events, or “enhancing” the facts that surround him, Zuckerman presents his information in ways that emphasize the links between the fiction of storytelling and the “fiction” of history.

The American Trilogy is not only an account of the individual “held hostage” by the forces surrounding them but also of how those forces are informed by the historical pastoral. By “pastoral,” I mean not only praise of the rural or rustic life but also notions of an idealized America, innocent and uncomplicated by contradictions or ambiguities. These could take the form of references to a simple agrarian society, ahistorical readings of race, and, of course, the “American dream” in all of its manifestations. The pastoral becomes historicized when it serves as a raison d’être for the national project, a belief in American purity that finds expression in such notions as John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill,” Manifest Destiny, and American exceptionalism. In the American Trilogy, Roth foregrounds the constructed nature of historiography in order to reveal the fictions that make up our national identity. Read in this manner, the novels form both a sweeping epic of late-twentieth-century America and, perhaps more importantly, a sobering look at the very myths that have sustained it.

The American Trilogy encompasses, at least for Roth, three of the most significant periods in post-World War II America: the Red-baiting heydays in the 1950s of Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (the focus of I Married a Communist [1998]), the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination and the cultural turmoil of the 1960s (the subject of American Pastoral [1997]), and the political witch-hunt surrounding President Bill Clinton’s impeachment in the 1990s (the springboard for The Human Stain [2000]). Perhaps more significantly, all three novels show how individual identity embodies national identity and how the forces of history threaten to overtake personal freedom and individual agency. The first novel of the trilogy, American Pastoral, revolves around high-school athletic idol, Swede Levov, his attempts to assimilate into the melting pot of WASP society, and how his daughter’s involvement with radical anti-Vietnam politics destroyed this pursuit of the “American dream.” I Married a Communist recounts the life of Ira Ringold and how his political ties to leftist causes in the 1940s lead to his political persecution in the 1950s. In the third novel, The Human Stain, the protagonist Coleman Silk, classics professor and former dean of Athena College, finds himself marginalized through the politically correct machinations of his colleagues, much in the way that Clinton was hounded by rightwing Republicans, and, despite his best efforts to live his life on his own terms, he too falls victim to what Nathaniel Hawthorne (whose work figures prominently in this novel) called “the persecuting spirit” (Hawthorne 1983: 126).

In the several years following the publication of its first installment, Roth’s American Trilogy has received an impressive amount of critical interest. With its references to the myths surrounding John F. Kennedy, his tragic and untimely ascension, and the turmoil and upheavals of the late 1960s—a period that, in many ways, continues to define our political landscape—it is not surprising that that the Pulitzer Prize-winning American Pastoral stands out as the recipient of most of this attention. On the surface,
the novel is about Swede Levov and his attempts to make sense of his daughter Merry’s Vietnam War protest bombing of the community’s general store and post office, an act of domestic terrorism that killed the town doctor and destroyed the Levovs’ comfortable middle-class lives. It is divided into three sections, each with revealing titles. In the first, “Paradise Remembered,” the narrator, Zuckerman, recalls his high-school idolizing of the Swede as the all-American pride of his Jewish Newark neighborhood. The narrator reminisces that “through the Swede, the neighborhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world,” a condition that he later describes as “the happy release into a Swedish innocence” (Roth 1997: 3–4). It is also in this first section of the novel that Zuckerman learns of the Swede’s family tragedies. While attending his forty-fifth high-school reunion, Nathan runs into Jerry Levov, Seymour’s younger brother, who tells him about Merry’s murderous behavior, the family’s unsuccessful attempts at finding her, and the Swede’s twenty-five-year mourning period over the loss. The real shocker for the narrator is the news that the Swede had died just several days before the reunion. This causes him to fall into reverie, a dream-like reflection on Seymour Levov’s life that serves as the gist of the novel. As he listens to the hypnotic rhythms of the Pied Piper’s 1944 hit, “Dream,” Zuckerman calls up his memories of the Swede and then begins to imagine what his life might actually have been like. “I dreamed a realistic chronicle,” the narrator tells us. “I began gazing into his life” (Roth 1997: 89). From this moment on, Zuckerman completely recedes into the background as the narrator, and at no point after this does he reassert himself as the one who is putting together the Swede’s story.

“The Fall” and “Paradise Lost,” the next two sections of the novel, recount the fall of the house of Levov: the Swede’s struggles to find Merry, his wife’s inability to come to terms with the tragedy, and the looming breakdown of their marriage. What makes the novel’s misfortunes so poignant is its physical, as well as thematic, setting. For Swede Levov, Old Rimrock is a pastoral ideal, a place where he and Dawn can escape their strict ethnic upbringing—his wife grew up in the strongly Irish Catholic section of Elizabeth, New Jersey—and melt into the de-ethnicized pot of the larger American society. This foregrounding of the pastoral is drawn out by two significant images in the novel. The first is the family’s Old Rimrock house. When the Swede first lays eyes on the old stone house, he is smitten with a romanticized sense of social belonging, a feeling that here is where his future family will live out their American dream:

The stone house was not only engagingly ingenious-looking to his eyes—all the irregularity regularized, a jigsaw puzzle fitted patiently together into this square, solid thing to make a beautiful shelter—but it looked indestructible, an impregnable house that could never burn to the ground and that had probably been standing there since the country began.

(Roth 1997: 190)

Embedded in this description is the grand promise of the New World. The jigsaw puzzle, the irregular stones, the construction of the many parts into a seemingly indestructible whole all suggest varying aspects of the American dream and the melting-pot philosophy. For the socially marginalized, or ill-fitting, “pieces” of the Levov family—the Jew from Weequahic and the Irish Catholic from Elizabeth—their new rural home becomes for them a means to assimilation into “normal” American society. In this way, the Swede’s Old Rimrock habitat is similar to the green light at the end of Daisy Buchanan’s dock in The Great Gatsby. Seymour Levov, much like Jay Gatsby, reaches out for an idealized version of American life, one that will allow him to escape from any predetermined notions of identity and reinvent himself on his own terms.

The other image that typifies the pastoral ideal is that of Johnny Appleseed. For the Swede, there is no figure more representative of his new life in Old Rimrock than the man who defined himself by journeying throughout America’s wilderness. “Johnny Appleseed, that’s the man for me,” thinks the Swede. “Wasn’t a Jew, wasn’t an Irish Catholic, wasn’t a Protestant Christian—nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American” (Roth 1997: 316). What better myth for the Swede’s idealized America than the story of a man who more or less “planted” and nurtured the pastoral onto the national stage. Before Merry’s bomb, in the family’s salad days, whenever the Swede walked to and from the general store, he imagined himself this legendary American figure, moving across the earth and flinging his arms wide with nature’s seeds. These images, of the rustic house and of Johnny Appleseed, reveal the pastoral quest underlying the Swede’s transplanted onto the historically rich Old Rimrock soil. And they create a setting that, by contrast, dramatically intensifies the unrealized dreams he harbors.

Unrealized dreams are also the subject of I Married a Communist. Zuckerman ruminates on the downfall of another one of his adolescent heroes, Ira Ringold, a working-class stiff who gains celebrity as a 1940s broadcasting icon. Over the course of the novel, Zuckerman recounts his relationship with the radio star, and through his conversations with Murray Ringold, Ira’s older brother and the narrator’s high-school English teacher, he is able to learn more about his one-time hero. After serving in World War II, Ira becomes involved in leftwing politics and through this connection eventually lands a job in radio dramatization. In this business
he meets Eve Frame, also a radio star and a one-time silent-film actress. His marriage to her, his contentious relationship with Eve’s daughter with a previous husband, and the various betrayals that make up their relationship—the novel is filled with betrayals, making it the central theme of the book—become the focal point of Zuckerman’s novel-length conversation with Murray Ringgold.

Whereas a de-ethnicized emersion into white-bread America had been the Swede’s pastoral dream, Ira’s becomes a socially just and politically progressive America—just substitute the proletariat for rustic shepherds. His tirades against capitalism and his arguments for a working-class utopia become another version of Roth’s unattainable pastorals, a realm free from the complexities of daily living. Like the Swede, Ira has a dwelling out in the country (in Ira’s case, an old shack in Zinc Town, New Jersey) that serves as his “oasis defense against rage and grief” (Roth 1998: 315). And, as we learn toward the end of the novel, much of Ira’s life is the result of his attempts to make himself anew, much like his actress wife. As Murray tells his story to Nathan, he describes how Eve Frame, née Chava Fromkin, was a self-hating Jew desperate to recreate herself as an aristocratic Gentile (in many ways anticipating what Coleman Silk will try to do in The Human Stain): “All she’s trying to do is get away from where she began, and that is no crime. To launch yourself undisturbed by the past into America—that’s your choice” (Roth 1998: 158). The free, unanchored self is indeed an American ideal, and, for young Zuckerman, that ideal of America became flesh in the form of Ira Ringgold. This was especially the case during his first summer visit to the rustic Zinc Town dwelling:

I had never before known anyone whose life was so intimately circumscribed by so much American history, who was personally familiar with so much American geography, who had confronted, face to face, so much American lowlife. ... For me, on those nights up in the shack, the America that was my inheritance manifested itself in the form of Ira Ringgold.

(Roth 1998: 189)

Much like Swede Levov with his Old Rimrock house and his Johnny Appleseed fantasies, Ira and his colorful life—his humble beginnings as a ditch digger, his bumming across America during the Great Depression, his plainspoken impersonation of Abe Lincoln, his uncompromising dedication to the common working man, his unadorned Walden-like retreat—become a stand-in for an idealized America, one that epitomizes serenity and simplicity.

However, attempts at capturing this Edenic ideal are elusive at best, self-deluding at worst. This is the message that comes through loud and clear in the American Trilogy. One of the pivotal events in The Human Stain occurs when Coleman Silk receives the anonymous letter that Delphine Roux has supposedly sent to him. In it she states that “everybody knows” what is going on in Coleman’s life. However, as Zuckerman emphatically asserts, such a presumption of absolute knowledge is an insidious ruse. By refusing the possibility of any ambiguity, one denies the very essence of lived experience:

Because we don’t know, do we? ... Nobody knows, Professor Roux. “Everyone knows” is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience, and it’s the solemnity and the sense of authority that people have in voicing the cliché that’s so insufferable. What we know is that, in an uncliquéd way, nobody knows anything. You can’t know anything. The things you know you don’t know. Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don’t know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing.

(Roth 2000: 208–9)

This not knowing is for Roth one of the indelible “stains” of existence. Any attempt at ignoring the contradictions or imperfections that make up our daily experience is tantamount to denying the very core of humanity. To live is to be in a constant state of epistemological flux.

In American Pastoral, the Swede’s attempts to create an existence free from the ethnic, religious, and economic baggage of his past rests on the assumption of individual, as well as national, certainty. Swede is nothing less than the merging of the personal and the political. His quest for an unambiguous and uncomplicated life parallels his nation’s attempts at retaining the façade of innocence, even in the face of civil and international embroilment (e.g., the assassination of Kennedy, the Vietnam War, the race riots of the 1960s). In this way, “The Fall” and “Paradise Lost” could just as well describe America during the 1960s. It is no accident that Zuckerman says of the Swede at one point, “But of course. He is our Kennedy” (Roth 1997: 83), and that the president’s assassination is alluded to no less than three other times in the novel. And the motives and desires that underlie the “American dream” are never pure, nor can they ever be definitively understood. This is the conclusion that Zuckerman reaches with Seymour Levov. Try as he might, he is never able to grasp fully the Swede’s consciousness, to understand what makes him tick. Yet, there is something encouraging, even empowering, about this admission of incomprehensibility. In confessing his ignorance of Swede’s motives,
Zuckerman concludes “that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong” (Roth 1997: 35). Zuckerman’s words here bear a striking resemblance to his comments on Delphine Roux’s “everybody knows” letter. Feeling comfortable in the certainty of your knowledge runs counter to reality and denies the more “human” and less predictable side of experience.

The pastoral is a state of mind that cannot account for conflict, contradiction, or uncertainty, as Swede Levov so tragically learns. After Merry throws her bomb, many around the former high-school superstar point out the fallacy of his Old Rimrock dreams. The Swede’s adopted home is further demythologized by his straight-shooting glove-making father, Lou. Even before Merry’s bomb, Lou tries to disabuse his son of any idealized notions of Old Rimrock, especially as it stands for an assimilated and homogenized America free of ethnic strife or prejudice:

You’re dreaming. I wonder if you even know where this is. Let’s be candid with each other about this—this narrow, bigoted area. The Klan thrived out here in the twenties. Did you know that? ... They wouldn’t give a jew the time of day. I’m talking to you, son, about bigots. Not about the goose step even—just about hate. (Roth 1997: 309)

His brother Jerry puts the matter even more bluntly. In a diatribe against Swede’s worldview, taking up approximately nine pages of the text, Jerry spews forth a scathing indictment that stands as the centerpiece of Roth’s pastoral critique:

You wanted Miss America? Well, you’ve got her, with a vengeance—she’s your daughter! ... You longed to belong like everybody else to the United States of America? Well, you do now, big boy, thanks to your daughter. The reality of this place is right up in your kisser now. With the help of your daughter you’re as deep in the shit as a man can get, the real American crazy shit. America amok! America amuck! (Roth 1997: 277)

Jerry argues that in attempting to live out the “perfect” American life, his brother has in essence lived on the terms of others. The reality of the Swede, the inner self that strives for excellence, has always been concealed in a nationalistic fantasy. “And that is why, to this day,” Jerry charges, “nobody knows who you are. You are unrevealed—that is the story, Seymour, unrevealed” (Roth 1997: 276).

Coleman Silk, too, hides himself behind a “pastoral” mask, but one that is deeply invested in the denial of racial memory. Just as the Swede attempts to erase the traces of his Jewish ethnicity, so does Coleman try to rid himself of the “stain” of American intolerance. Upon enlisting in the Navy, he repudiates his African-American heritage and as a result becomes, in the words of Zuckerman, “the greatest of the great pioneers of the I” (Roth 2000: 108). He refuses to subsume his identity within American racial politics, choosing instead to reconstruct it beyond both white power structure and the black community. Coleman Silk becomes not white—as most assume when reading the novel as one of racial passing—but what might more accurately be described as “none(ot)-other.” Yet, it is this denial of race, this dream of a homogenized American ideal, that marks him as an absence. In words reminiscent of Jerry’s accusations of the “unrevealed” Swede, Zuckerman explains his frustrations in trying to get a fix on Coleman and coming up with nothing. “It’s something not there that beguiles,” the narrator confesses at one point, “and it’s what’s been drawing me all along, the enigmatic it that he holds apart as his and no one else’s. ... There is a blank. That’s all I can say” (Roth 2000: 213).

In American Pastoral, Zuckerman had been unable to “get it right” with the Swede, and the same can be said of his attempts at understanding Coleman. Indeed, the mystery of Silk is ironically made manifest through what is normally seen as an indelible identifying mark. When he first meets Coleman, Zuckerman notices a “small, Popeye-ish, blue tattoo” on his right upper arm, a mark (or stain) that seems out of keeping with his neighbor’s professorial exterior (Roth 2000: 21). Yet, this tattoo, far from signifying anything explicable, has just the opposite effect. It becomes, for Zuckerman, a “tiny symbol, if one were needed, of all the million circumstances of the other fellow’s life, of that blizzard of details that constitute the confusion of a human biography—a tiny symbol to remind me why our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong” (Roth 2000: 22). It is no accident that the enigmatic symbol was acquired during Silk’s stint in the Navy, an occasion that forever exiled him from his African-American past. In attempting to retrace his identity outside of racial history, he becomes, much like the Swede, an empty subject in search of a nonexistent American Eden.

Similarly, in I Married a Communist, Ira Ringold’s search for an idealized American life is called into question. Much like the Swede and Coleman, Ira longs to escape the ambiguities and complications that could compromise his “pastoral,” except for Ira this takes the form of the political. A Communist utopia is the end point of Ira’s quest, and at least outwardly,
he is unbending in that pursuit. However, a grand irony underlies Ira’s attempts at ideological purity. At the same time he is espousing political certainty, he is living a life that betrays ambiguity. His Communist rhetoric and his bourgeois lifestyle certainly do not mesh. As Johnny O’Day, Ira’s old army buddy and leftist ideologue, bluntly puts it once his protégé is ousted as a member of the Communist Party, Ira’s diatribes on the working class and impersonations of Lincoln were nothing more than an empty façade. Much like Jerry Levov does with the Swede, O’Day cuts through his former colleague’s pretense. Ira, AKA the *actor* Iron Rinn, was

always impersonating and never the real thing. ... Betrayed his revolutionary comrades and betrayed the working class. Sold out. Bought off. Totally the creature of the bourgeoisie. Seduced by fame and money and wealth and power. Andussy, fancy Hollywood pussy. Doesn’t retain a vestige of his revolutionary ideology—nothing. An opportunistic stooge.”

(Roth 1998: 288)

It is significant that O’Day is the one to question Ira’s political commitment. He represents the purc and uncompromising life of a Marxist, and although he embodies an ideological ideal, his life is anything but attractive. Without a family, without real friends, and without a life outside of union organizing, his is the most depersonalized of existences. He, more than anyone else in the novel, is without ambiguity or contradiction. In other words, he is the least “human,” and as such, serves as an unappealing foil to the blundering compromises of Ira. In a similar manner, we can read Les Farley in *The Human Stain* as a deadening will to purity. Despite his struggles with posttraumatic stress disorder, he embodies a longing for uncomplicated perfection. This can be most clearly seen in the final pages of the novel when Zuckerman encounters Les ice fishing against a pristine backdrop of sheer whiteness. His secret fishing spot admits no one and is untainted by impurities. The spring underneath the ice, Les tells the narrator, “cleans itself. [It’s] all God-made. Nothing man had to do with it. That’s why it’s clean and that’s why I come here. If man has to do with it, stay away from it. That’s my motto” (Roth 2000: 360). It is no accident that all of the characters in the novel, Les Farley is the one most closely associated with death, as demonstrated by his stints in Vietnam, his presumed murder of Coleman and Faunia, and, as Zuckerman is unnerved to discover, his wielding of the auger: “The auger out on the ice. The candor of the auger. There could be no more solid embodiment of our hatred than the merciless steel look of that auger out in the middle of nowhere” (Roth 2000: 352).

These tendencies toward ontological or ideological purity, as exemplified through Farley and O’Day, leave no room for human interaction. As Murray tells Zuckerman in *I Married a Communist*, “when you decide to contribute your personal problem to an ideology’s agenda, everything that is personal is squeezed out and discarded and all that remains is what is useful to the ideology” (Roth 1998: 261). Despite his best attempts, Ira cannot ultimately live a political absolute, as his brother points out early on: “He was not perfect from the Communist point of view—thank God. The personal he could not renounce. The personal kept bursting out of Ira, militant and single-minded though he would try to be. ... Ira lived everything personally, ... to the hilt, including his contradictions” (Roth 1998: 83). Zuckerman acknowledges this during the last evening of his conversation with Murray, bringing his one-time hero back down to earth by recognizing these contradictions. Ira is more “human” than his political mentor “[b]ecause purity is petrification. Because purity is a lie. Because unless you’re an ascetic paragon like Johnny O’Day and Jesus Christ, you’re urged on by five hundred things” (Roth 1998: 318). In language that sounds strikingly similar to the “everyone knows” passage in *The Human Stain* and the “getting people wrong” comments in *American Pastoral*, Murray sums up his brother this way: “he could never construct [a life] that fit. The enormous wrongness of this guy’s effort. But one’s errors always rise to the surface, don’t they?” to which the narrator replies, “It’s all error ... Isn’t that what you’ve been telling me? There’s only error. There’s the heart of the world. Nobody finds his life. That is life” (Roth 1998: 319).

Ira’s inability to get it right is reminiscent of Jerry’s accusatory words to the Swede, “nobody knows who you are. You are unrevealed” (Roth 1997: 276). And this declaration is central to a thematic understanding of *American Pastoral*. The Swede is an unknown entity not only to his brother, but to the narrator as well. In the novel’s opening section, Zuckerman tells the reader that he chances upon the former high school all-star in the summer of 1985, thirty-six years after idolizing him on the football field, and then unexpectedly receives a letter from him ten years later. In the letter the Swede asks the author if he would help him in writing a tribute to his father—a man who suffered “shocks that befell his loved ones” (Roth 1997: 18), but who is now dead—to be published privately for family and friends. They meet in a New York restaurant, and, during the course of the conversation, Zuckerman is unable to extract from Swede any detail surrounding this apparent shock. Instead, the Swede brings up commonplace niceties: pictures of his children, news of his business dealings, innocuous updates on his brother Jerry. Nathan tries to uncover some hidden motives or disturbing memories behind the Swede’s request.
to meet, but instead he finds that “all that rose to the surface was more surface. What he has instead of a being, I thought, is bladdness” (Roth 1997: 23). This leaves Zuckerman at a loss to understand the man who had meant so much to him in high school. He is left with nothing more than unanswered questions as he ponders, “what did he do for subjectivity? What was the Swede’s subjectivity? There had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable” (Roth 1997: 20).

This inability to fathom his high-school hero is analogous to the Swede’s own failure to comprehend the reality underlying Old Rimmock and, by association, the idealized America for which it stands. However, Zuckerman’s response to his intellectual impotence—a fitting word, given the fact that he has been impaired by prostate surgery—is markedly different from the Swede’s. Being unable to know completely what has happened in the man’s life, Zuckerman relies on a strategy that serves him well as a writer: He imagines the life of Seymour Levov. Or, put another way, he constructs a history that allows him to comprehend more clearly the enigma of his subject. Almost everything that we know about the Swede’s life—the details surrounding Merry’s bombing, her flight and disappearance, the family’s attempts to cope with her actions, and the Swede’s finding her years later as a follower of Jainism—is, as far as we know, the product of Zuckerman’s imagination. After hearing Johnny Mercer’s “Dream” at his high-school reunion, he figuratively “lift[s] the Swede up onto the stage,” and by doing so places the Swede’s story at the center of his own (Roth 1997: 88).

When *American Pastoral* was originally published, most critics failed to notice, or at least failed to acknowledge, that the story of the Swede was more or less a fabrication, the result of Zuckerman’s nostalgically induced musings. By stating that his narrator “dreamed a realistic chronicle,” Roth apparently threw his readers off track by purposefully blurring the boundaries between the “dream” and the “real.” As such, the novel becomes more of a narrative on Zuckerman and the ways in which he constructs reality, and less of an explanatory tale of the enigmatic Swede. When we realize that the story of Swede Levov is made up or imagined by Zuckerman, then the storyteller, not the story, becomes our primary novelistic focus. And along with this awareness comes the question: What investment does the narrator have in the story he is telling? The same question could be asked of *The Human Stain*. The story of Coleman Silk is also full of gaps, blank spaces, and narrative silences. In recreating the life of his neighbor, the narrator again turns to fiction as a source of “history,” a rather appropriate means by which to expose the “unrevealed” object. And what fascinates Zuckerman about both figures is their desire to embody the pastoral. By narrating the lives of these enigmas, Zuckerman reveals just as much, if not more, about American historiography than he does the subjects of his stories.

Roth himself recognizes as false any assumptions of “purity” or “innocence” that might accompany his country’s history (particularly in his lifetime), and acknowledges the politically mixed motives inherent in our national identity. In an interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, he bails at the suggestion that the United States “lost her innocence” after the 9/11 attacks: “What innocence? From 1668 to 1865 this country had slavery; and from 1865 to 1955 was a society existing under brutal segregation. I don’t really know what these people [who called America innocent] are talking about” (Leith 2002: 21). In other words, Roth is able to admit what Swede Levov, Ira Ringold, and Coleman Silk cannot: the ambiguity underlying the American project. Their attempts to discover their own American pastoral—a paradise free of ethnic, economic, and political complications—prevent any awareness of the unflattering or even malignant characteristics of their surroundings. These three protagonists serve in a long line of American literary figures whose failure to grasp the ambiguous nature of existence leads to his downfall. Much like Hawthorne’s Goodman Brown, who will not admit the darker side of the human heart; much like Melville’s Ahab, who must know without any doubt the reality behind the pasteboard mask; and much like Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, who refuses to see the more sordid reality behind the green lights of Daisy’s dock, Swede, Ira, and Coleman attempt to live an idealized American life.

However, instead of the pastoral, all three find its anathesis, what Roth calls the “indigenous American berserk” (Roth 1997: 86). Merry’s bomb awakens Swede to the turmoil of the 1960s, but in a more general sense, it illustrates the fictitiousness of any mythologized national Eden. Coleman’s desire for a life free of racial complications is ironically undermined by accusations of his own racism. And Ira’s dreams of both a just America and a comfortable bourgeois marriage are turned upside down after he is branded a Communist, especially after “the whole irrational frenzy” of the gossip media take a hold of his and Eve’s lives. What the novels in Roth’s American Trilogy clearly illustrate is the more troubling side of the American dream. In *American Pastoral*, after Zuckerman attends his forty-fifth high-school reunion, he lies awake in bed, alone and in the dark, composing a speech on what America was like for his graduating class of 1950. In many ways, it reads as a “golden age” tribute to the immediate post-Depression, post-war era, a romanticized meditation on what his country once was. It is significant to note, however, that Zuckerman never gives that speech, and that what seems sensible to him as a late-night rumination never makes it to the light of day. Instead, he
“dreamed a realistic chronicle” by reimagining the life of an all-American hero. With more than just a slight ironic twist on Tolstoy’s assessment of Ivan Ilych, Zuckerman reveals that “Swede Levov’s life … had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore just great, right in the American grain” (Roth 1997: 31). The “simple” and “ordinary” are given heroic treatment in Weequahic’s “household Apollo” (Roth 1997: 4), and in the figure of the Swede we see what is arguably both the promise and the problem of our post-World War II culture.

The ambiguous construct of the American dream is given a similar treatment in the final pages of *I Married a Communist*. After Zuckerman concludes his six-night conversation with Murray Ringold, he heads out to the deck of his country house and stretches out on the chaise lounge. There, he looks up at the clear evening sky and remembers that as a child uncertain about death, his mother reassured him by telling him that when people die they “go up to the sky and live on forever as gleaming stars.” He then, in an extended yet highly moving passage that concludes the novel, imagines that all of the principals in Iron Rinn’s drama, now dead, are there above him fixed in the peaceful sky, where

[There are no longer mistakes for Eve or Ira to make. There is no betrayal. There is no idealism. There are no falsehoods. There is neither conscience nor its absence. ... There is just the furnace of Ira and the furnace of Eve burning at twenty million degrees. ... What you see from this silent rostrum up on my mountain on a night as splendidly clear as that night ... is that universe into which error does not obtrude. You see the inconceivable: the colossal spectacle of no antagonism. You see with your own eyes the vast brain of time, a galaxy of fire set by no human hand.

The stars are indispensable.

(Roth 1998: 322–3)

Here, looking up into the pristine night sky, the narrator takes the pastoral to new heights. Such perfection is a dream, beyond human reach, but, as the last line of the novel suggests, its possibility is nonetheless necessary. The ideal may be out there on some an ethereal plane, but just as prominent is Nathan Zuckerman, standing on the dance floor of his high-school reunion, listening to Johnny Mercer’s “Dream,” or in his living room dancing with Coleman, the “snub-nosed, goat-footed Pan,” to the rhythms of “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered” (Roth 2000: 25). And so too is the possibility of the American dream. Despite the fact that Roth has been critiquing it throughout his career, he has nonetheless acknowledged that our national identity is wrapped up in the hopeful as well as the tragic. The pastoral may be an untenable realm for his protagonists, but it is one whose pull is keenly felt. “The stars are indispensable”: For Philip Roth, such a statement could just as well stand as a bittersweet epitaph to the aspirations of an entire nation.

**Notes**

1 For a complete listing of resources on Philip Roth, visit the Philip Roth Society’s bibliography and research guide at www.rothsociety.org.

**References**


