Fictional Realms of Possibility

Reimagining the Ethnic Subject in Philip Roth’s American Pastoral

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In his 1960s manifesto, “Writing American Fiction,” Philip Roth takes a look at the place of writers in contemporary American society and evaluates their tasks within that culture. He argues that reality has outpaced — and out-fictionalized — fiction. Highlighting a couple of outrageous but nonetheless real news items, stories that would fit quite nicely within an engaging fictional narrative, he concludes that:

the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s one meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (176)

For the young Roth writing in 1960, having acquired an impressive critical success with his first book “Goodbye, Columbus” and Five Short Stories, the imaginative world of the purely artistic paled in light of the nitty gritty newspaper and television news stories occupying most of the media attention and making themselves available to even the most basic readers.

For the writer of fiction, a solution had to be sought. In an effort at novelistic preservation, Roth tentatively attempts to resolve the dilemma of the writer by suggesting a space for contemporary authors, an alternative that he isn’t necessarily completely sold on:

it may be that when this situation produces not only feelings of disgust, rage, and melancholy but impotence too, the writer is apt to lose heart and turn finally to other matters, to the construction of wholly imaginary worlds, and to a celebration of the self, which may, in a variety of ways, become his subject, as well as the impetus that establishes the perimeters of his technique. What I have tried to point out is that the vision of the self is individual, power, and — out imagined as the only seemingly real thing in an unreal-seeming environment, has given some of our writers joy, solace, and muscle. (190–91).
The tone of this essay, originally appearing in *Esquire* magazine, is ambiguous at best. Roth, the author, seems unsure of how contemporary American fiction will secure its place within the mind of the common reader, and turns to the realm of the self, or the writing of the self, as a possible salvation. As a writer at an aesthetic crossroads, he asks, "For what will [the fiction writer's] subject be? His landscape?" (177).

Such a question may seem somewhat innocent in light of subsequent fictional explorations – see for instance two different examples of reality-capturing texts, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, both of which attempt to portray, either directly or indirectly, the actual social and political essences of their times – but in this period of American writing, coming as it did at the tail-end of high modernism and immediately before the experimentation of the 1960s, Roth's artistic concerns most certainly resonate. The subject and landscape of Roth's earlier works reflected the actual lived experience surrounding his native Newark and adopted Chicago, but early in the 1960s, the novelist came to believe that the emphasis on such concerns wasn't enough. The territory of his subsequent fiction would not be the realm of Jamesian realism, with all of its resulting social and psychological conundrums, but the world of self-reflexive identity construction where subjects attempt to rewrite themselves, where counter-selves vie for dominance, and where the ambiguity of ethnic identification becomes a central concern.

In later works – particularly in two of his most significant and critically acclaimed novels, *The Ghost Writer* and most certainly with *American Pastoral* – Roth has his protagonists reimagine their realities and establish a space where they can renegotiate their subjectivity, especially within the perimeters of ethnic identity. By reimagining, I mean that the protagonists of the particular works – in most cases of Roth's fiction, Nathan Zuckerman – take their lives and create a counter-reality to that which they are experiencing. These imaginings suggest a multi-faceted sense of self, freeing up the subject to explore possibilities that are not confined to one fixed notion of what it means to be an American writer, a man, or a Jew. The individual can define himself as observant or secular, as American or Israeli, or as consciously ethnic or assimilated, many times at once, as if trying on different hats. Such a stance, then, illustrates not only the nature of narrative creation (in both the formal artistic and the informal/everyday manner), but more specifically, the ways in which issues of identity formation help to establish the subject within certain ethnic-specific assumptions. What Roth does in both *The Ghost Writer* and *American Pastoral* is similar to what he did in *The Counterlife*, but with a variation. In the latter, he explores the ways in which his narrators – for the most part Nathan Zuckerman, but also including both his brother Henry and his wife Maria – recreate themselves through their own writings, reimagining multiple scenarios of their lives and assuming different subject positions in each case. In
The Ghost Writer and American Pastoral the narrator’s recreating focus is not so much on himself as it is on “the other”: in the first case the historical figure, Anne Frank, and in the second a fictionalized Olympian-like athlete, Seymour “Swede” Levov. However, the similarities between all three texts is that the narrators’ exercises in reimagining lives, either of their own or of others, are engaged in specifically to define themselves within their own communities, be they social, familial, creative, or ethnic.

Critics of Roth’s fiction have rightly noted the postmodern aspect underlying this fragmented representation of reality. Sanford Pinsker, for instance, helped to establish the team “reimagining” in light of Roth’s later writings. In an insightful essay, he defines what he sees as Roth’s, and Cynthia Ozick’s, reimagining of dead but nonetheless significant literary precursors in order to create their fictions (reimagining, for instance, the works of Henry James, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Anne Frank, and Bruno Schulz). This, he believes, is a particularly postmodern concern: the rewriting of the (literary) authority figure in order to better define one’s own subject, and textual, position. Similarly, Michael Greenstein views Roth’s later fiction (and again, that of Ozick – several critics have observed the similarities between the two) as an exercise in multiple possibilities of reinventing boundaries of the Diaspora. The Counterlife, he argues, becomes a way for Roth to come to grips with issues of historic ethnic dissemination, exploring the benefits and the costs of Jewish identification within America, Western Europe, and Israel. But when a critic such as that of Western canonical precursors – but to the multiple representations of reality that the protagonist experiences in order to better define himself within a particular social, political, and ethnic time and space. In American Pastoral, in ways strikingly different from those in The Ghost Writer, Nathan Zuckerman reimagines his life, or more specifically the lives of those around him, in order to better understand himself. And, in the larger and more significant scheme of Roth’s project, that understanding is contextualized within a variety of issues underlying Jewish ethnic identity.

From My Life As a Man, recreating lives through fiction has been one of Roth’s most prominent themes. The first series of Zuckerman stories – The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound, The Anatomy Lesson, and The Prague Orgy, appropriately collected in Zuckerman Bound – shows a writer who is indeed able to transform life into fiction, but many times at the cost of both his mental and physical health. Roth further explores the multiplicity of ethnic representation, especially in terms of the American Jew’s relationship with Israel, in The Counterlife, but here the reinvention of the self is stated not through reimagining the subject but through rewriting the subject (similar in kind to what Tarnopol does in My Life As a Man). It is in one of Roth’s most critically successful, and Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, American Pastoral, that he is able most ambitiously to explore the art of reimagining. This novel, although reminiscent of The Ghost Writer, is different from the
earlier work in that Roth more fully confronts the ethnic and assimilative gaps between Jew and Gentile. In *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman reimagines a life with Anne Frank, but he does so solely to secure his place within the Jewish community in which he grew up, thereby giving his fiction legitimacy within that ethnic group. Having formerly privileged the world of "pure art," Zuckerman attempts to find his way back into the fold in order to stifle any charges of treason. In *American Pastoral*, however, the movement is not centripetal — from the outside world toward the ethnic community — but centrifugal, at least on the surface. The negotiations in this novel concern the attempts at assimilation and the problems and benefits that arise from it. As in the various narratives in *Goodbye Columbus*, the protagonist of *American Pastoral*, Seymour "Swede" Levov, goes back and forth between ethnic communities and is seduced by the non-Jewish world, with mixed results.¹

The review history of *American Pastoral* is a curious study in critical reading. All the initial major reviews focused on the novel’s fictional center, Swede Levov, and judged it by that character.² What most of these reviews have in common is an unremitting emphasis on the story of Swede Levov to the exclusion of the novel’s narrator, Nathan Zuckerman. Such an emphasis is not necessarily shortsighted — the novel does take as its subject matter the Swede and how he and his family deal with the turmoil of the 1960s — but it neglects the exercise in fictionalizing that Roth, through Zuckerman, attempts to foreground. As he did in *The Ghost Writer*, Roth here allows his protagonist to establish his ethnic identity through the act of reimagining the self, but in this case he does so in relation to the life of a local Jewish icon who represents everything that Zuckerman does not.

*American Pastoral* begins with Roth’s perennial alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, musing on the life of Seymour Levov, nicknamed “the Swede” by everyone at Weequahic High School back in the early 1940s because of his fair complexion, blond hair, and blue eyes, one of the only Jews Zuckerman can remember looking so Aryan. The Swede, a few years older than Zuckerman, was his community’s great athlete, excelling in several sports, and the kind of all-American young man that every boy wanted to emulate and every girl dreamed about. This hero, whom the narrator calls a “household Apollo,” (4) represented many things to his Newark community, the hopes and dreams of advancement and assimilation into the greater, and largely Gentile, America. As Zuckerman reminisces, “through the Swede, the neighborhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world” (3), allowing his Jewish admirers to look at the war abroad and the bouts of prejudice at home in a new and hopeful light, what the narrator calls “the happy release into a Swedish innocence” (4). What brings about this uncharacteristic nostalgia on the part of Zuckerman is threefold. First, we are told that the fictional bad boy, the writer of the scandalous Carnovsky (read, Portnoy’s Complaint), has recently recovered from prostate cancer, and irony of ironies, he is now impotent as well as incontinent. Second, he attends a high school reunion where he meets old and
beloved classmates, whose company stirs up powerful emotions, and there learns that their Jewish Apollo has recently died of cancer. Finally, and perhaps most significant, Zuckerman recalls how a couple of years earlier he had heard from the Swede and was asked by the former athlete to help him write a tribute, to be privately published, to his dead father, the founder of Newark Maid gloves and a powerhouse of a patriarch, Lou Levov. The Swede never gets around to writing the book, as far as Zuckerman knows, but it is this chance meeting and the encounters that follow that cause the narrator to explore the relationship between memory and imagination.

The event that sets Zuckerman off is the letter he receives from the Swede asking about the tribute to his father. This request, out of the blue, strikes the narrator as a little unusual, but the correspondent explains in his letter, “Most everybody thought of my father as indestructible, a thick-skinned man on a short fuse. This was far from the truth. Not everyone knew how much he suffered because of the shocks that befell his loved ones” (18). This last sentence piques Zuckerman’s curiosity and becomes a catalyst for the series of imaginings that will explore the American (Jewish ethnic) subject. When Zuckerman meets the Swede once more, he attempts to discover the truth behind this mysterious request. What could have befallen the successful family of the glove maker? More importantly, how might this have affected the Jewish titan beloved by all, especially the narrator, to a point where he would need to reach out for help? There must be something forbidding bubbling beneath the peaceful bourgeois surface of his former hero. “What did he do for subjectivity?” Zuckerman asks himself at one point. “What was the Swede’s subjectivity? There had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable” (20). The author becomes almost obsessed with understanding the Swede. He notes during a meeting with his former hero, “all that rose to the surface was more surface. What he has instead of being, I thought, is blandness – the guy’s radiant with it. He has devised for himself an incognito, and the incognito has become him” (23). What Zuckerman is pondering here is similar to what he had explored in both The Ghost Writer and The Counterlife: the question of the self and the possibility of recreating multiple layers of identity, even to the point of contradiction and counter-positions.

Yet one significant difference between The Ghost Writer and American Pastoral is that in the former, the transition between the real and the imagined worlds is more obvious. Zuckerman begins recreating the life of Amy Bellette in the third chapter of the book, “Femme Fatale,” and there’s no question as to the plot’s transition from the artist’s actual life experience to his fictional representation of that life. Philip Roth, in 1979, wanted very much to engage in the realm of counterlives, but the possibility of narrative labyrinths, of purposely confusing the reader and performing a bit of in his words, “Jewish mischief,” was not what he was intending. In American Pastoral, however, the transition between the real and imagined
world is subtle, almost imperceptible — and deliberately so. It was so subtle, in fact, that contemporary reviewers of the novel neglected to notice it, as the above referenced critical survey shows. Whereas Zuckerman’s reimagining of Amy Bellette had been abrupt, the older and world-worn Zuckerman’s movement into the fictionalized life of the Swede is surprisingly smooth (perhaps an indication of the subdued countenance brought about by his sagacious age and physical deterioration?). During his high school reunion, the writer is immersed in nostalgia, and the band playing Johnny Mercer’s “Dream” helps to contribute to this feeling (in fact, lyrics from “Dream” make up one of the two epigraphs in the novel). Listening to this song, Zuckerman tells us that they “lifted the Swede up onto the stage,” in other words, placing the Swede’s story in the center of his, and the reader’s, imagination (88). He is aware that he is performing this literary act, and transcribes this process — in essence, Roth’s entire basis of reimagining — into eloquent rhetoric:

Since we don’t just forget things because they don’t matter but also forget things because they matter too much — because each of us remembers and forgets in a pattern whose labyrinthine windings are an identification mark no less distinctive than a fingerprint — it’s no wonder that the shards of reality one person will cherish as a biography can seem to someone else who, say, happened to have eaten some ten thousand dinners at the very same kitchen table, to be a willful excursion into mythomania. (55)

Zuckerman here admits outright that what he’s engaging in is nothing less than fictionalization, a recreation of reality that represents existence differently from more accurately remembered events. In light of this admission, it is indeed surprising that more critics of the text failed to note this fictional transition — or perhaps it is a testimony to Roth’s abilities at fictional subtleties and sleight of hand that hardly anyone noticed. But what is most important, this act of “remembering” is not so much a matter of choice as it is a psychological constant. As the narrator states, it is a natural and very personal act, “no less distinctive than a fingerprint.” For Roth, remembering (or reimagining) reality is the way in which we make sense of our lives, a process similar to narrative in ordering and creating the self. Just as Zuckerman does in The Ghost Writer, in the more recent novel he takes his life — or more significantly in this case, the lives of those around him — and reconstructs it in order to define better his own place within his culture.

But, as certain critics have asked, why dwell on the life of Swede Levov, an idealized figure whose recall encourages nostalgia and sentimentality? Some accused Roth in American Pastoral — and subsequently in the next two novels of his postwar American trilogy, I Married a Communist and The Human Stain — of “softening” his harsh edges and giving in to the myth of the American dream. Nonetheless, such criticism is shortsighted in that it does not take into account the reasons underlying Zuckerman’s ponderings. Zuckerman himself tells us of the Swede’s
symbolic importance when he realizes at the reunion, “But of course. He is our Kennedy” (83). Such an association with the 1960s Irish-Catholic icon should not be taken lightly, for the Swede not only represents the perfect high school hero, the one whom everyone should admire, but he also stands as the assimilated Jew who has successfully integrated into the American mainstream and in the process become something of a myth. But Zuckerman’s story of the Swede, as far as we know, is not the actual life of the Swede. The only things the reader directly knows about Swede Levov, at least in terms of narrative disclosure, is that he has requested the assistance of Nathan Zuckerman to memorialize his father, that his daughter blew up their town’s post office in the late 1960s, and that he had recently died from cancer (as revealed by the Swede’s brother, Jerry). The rest, well over three quarters of the novel, is just fiction. After Zuckerman learns from Jerry the little bit of information about his Swede at his high school reunion, and immediately before he is nostalgically swept up by Johnny Mercer’s “Dream,” he contemplates his fascination with his hero and acknowledges, “anything more I wanted to know [about the Swede], I’d have to make up” (74). Clearly, the life of the Swede, the protagonist who is the focus of almost all reviews of the text, is indeed a fiction. Unlike other framed narratives, especially those composed by Zuckerman and his own author, Peter Tarnopol, there is never a place where the story stops and we are once again aware of the creator who has created the fiction. After page 89, the reader loses any awareness of Nathan Zuckerman and is swept up in the saga of the Swede. The narrator never returns to contextualize his story or to sum up things, which probably accounts for the exclusive critical focus on the Swede. This absence, however, is notable not only because it makes the “dream” of the Swede’s life more prominent, but more significantly, it foregrounds the act of recreation or of imagining the life of another (and of the self.) The disappearance of Zuckerman as the author of this story merely underscores Roth’s project in American Pastoral, the process and the power of reimagining lives.5

The life that Zuckerman imagines is anything but pastoral. Being a success in high school athletics and completing an admirable stint in the Marine Corps, the Swede marries a former Miss New Jersey, Dawn Dwyer, buys an old stone house and settles down in rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey. Their angry 16-year-old daughter, ironically named Merry, becomes obsessed with the Vietnam War and gets involved with violent radicals, and in 1968 blows up the small town’s only post office, accidentally killing the community’s prominent and much beloved doctor. After the explosion Merry goes into hiding, evading both the FBI and her family. The core of American Pastoral is devoted to imagining the life of the Swede after this tragedy: the attempts to find his daughter, communication with her alleged associates, his and Dawn’s emotional hardships, and the ultimate disintegration of the family.

To Zuckerman — and to the reader fascinated with cultural assimilation — the
profoundly memorable Swede represents everything that is America. He is described at one point as a Johnny Appleseed figure, and his love for his country is never questioned. As the narrator muses, the Swede “lived” in America the way he lived inside his own skin . . . Yes, everything that gave meaning to his accomplishments had been American. Everything he loved was here” (213). Not only does the Swede represent America in general, but the progress of the ethnic American in particular. The Levovs “flew the flight of the immigrant rocket, the upward, unbroken immigrant trajectory from slave-driven great-grandfather to self-driven grandfather to self-confident, accomplished independent father to the highest high flier of them all, the fourth-generation child for whom America was to be heaven itself” (122). This is reminiscent of Roth’s thoughts on “the man in the middle,” the individual attached to his ethnic cultural history while at the same time longing for a more integrated and assimilated life. But instead of the almost uncritical representation of this movement that can be found in his 1992 “The Man in the Middle” essay and even more so in Patrimony: A True Story, the plight of the Swede is anything but successful. In fact, the centrifugal move, the progression from the center of the ethnic community into the wider melting pot of America, brings only pain and hardships. The portent of this tragedy is clearly expressed by the Swede’s brother, Jerry, when he describes to Zuckerman what he sees as the underlying premise of his brother’s family: “[Dawn’s] post-catholic, he’s post-Jewish, together they’re going to go out there to Old Rimrock to raise little post-toasties” (73). Humor aside, Jerry is cognizant of the potential problems awaiting the near perfect life of the Swede, and he anchors his concerns in the rhetoric of ethnically based conflicts. What could be more wholesomely American than the Post brand cereal Jerry refers to, and how could it ever create political and emotional upheaval? In true Rothian form, the irony here presents a central issue that will play itself out with a heavy emphasis on ethnic identity.

Roth embeds this conflict in the guise of the family’s stone house in Old Rimrock. When the Swede first sees the old stone house, on a high school away game with his baseball team, he becomes enchanted with it and vows to buy it for his future family. He even witnesses a happy young girl in a swing hung from the boughs of an old and large tree. For him, this scene represents everything American, and the Swede encounters the house in the following manner:

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. Primitive stones, rudimentary stones of the sort that you would see scattered about among the trees if you took a walk along the paths in Weequahic Park, and out there they were a house. He couldn’t get over it. (190).
One does not have to read very far to see the grand promise of America being painted. The jigsaw, 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. This is not necessarily a grand mosaic where each piece bears its distinct characteristics and flavors. It is significant to note the context under which this house is being idealized. The America represented here is the America of the Mayflower and of the Pilgrims, and surrounded by references to Johnny Appleseed and the likes of Bill Orcutt, the Levovs' neighbor who can proudly trace his ancestry back before the Revolutionary War. If the Jewish Swede and his Catholic-raised wife want to fit into this image, to melt in and become a part of this idealized jigsaw, they must do so on someone else's terms.

As one might imagine, this assimilative notion begins to turn sour after Merry's destruction of the post office and her subsequent disappearance. The lives of the Levovs become nightmarish with the media attention, the perceived accusations from their neighbors, the cruel threats from Rita Cohen, one of Merry's supposed associates, and the depression into which Dawn plunges. In fact, Dawn underscores this point, and the significance of the Old Rimrock home, when she screams at the Swede, "You had to make me into a princess. Well, look where I have wound up! In a madhouse! Your princess is in a madhouse!" (178). At first the Swede resists this characterization of his ideal American home, but later he discovers that Bill Orcutt and Dawn are having an affair, and what is more, Orcutt, an architect, is working with Dawn to draw up plans for a new home into which supposedly the Levovs will move. Here, the thematic link between the home and the American dream takes an even more negative twist.

The surrounding area of Old Rimrock and its symbolic significance are further demythologized later on when Roth imagines what happens when the Swede's parents visit the stone house for the first time. Lou Levov, the straight-shooting glove maker, sees through his son's idealization of his new home, and tells him outright what it represents:

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? ... It is Republican out here from top to bottom ... [The residents] didn't like the Jews and the Italians and the Irish - that's why they moved out here to begin with.... 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. (309).

Notwithstanding the strong tone of anger in his speech, Lou has an authentic awareness of - and real life experience in - the circumstances surrounding ethnic people, especially of the Jew, in America. The Swede longs to fit in and become a part of this "grand" history, but he demonstrates little historical recognition of his ancestors' place in it. As Zuckerman notes soon after this confrontation, "What
was Mars to his father was America to [the Swede]” (310). Lou may be overstating his case – after all, he does come from a generation that experienced discrimination at home and whose families in Europe suffered a more heinous fate – but he nonetheless acknowledges the importance of honoring your roots. Sticking with the tribe may have its drawbacks, but it is a safe way to preserve the memories and the traditions in which one has grown. Assimilation, according to Lou, could be tragic, the worst part of which being the loss of your ethnic self.

A point could be made here that Roth is making a case against assimilation. The Swede, who after leaving home seems to display none of the Jewish sympathies or priorities exhibited by his parents, lives a tragedy in which his family disintegrates. However, that is only one side to Roth’s exploration of his subject matter. There may be a cost in disregarding your ethnic roots, but there is nonetheless an equal risk of defining yourself by them exclusively. The most prominent embodiment of Jewishness, both religious and ethnic, in the novel is Lou Levov. Much like Nathan Zuckerman’s father in The Ghost Writer and Roth’s own father in Patrimony, he more than anyone in the text represents the Jewish past and the acknowledgment of it (again, Roth embodies Jewish values within the patriarch). Lou is central to the story in that he stands in most clear contrast to the Swede. In addition to the above quoted passage, where he chastises his son for living in Old Rimrock, he likewise badgers his family and those around him concerning the ideas and the values of Jewish life. He discourages the Swede from marrying his first Gentile fiancée, one he meets while in the Marines, on grounds of interfaith marriage. Similarly, he is outraged when his son brings home a second non-Jew, Dawn Dwyer. Lou challenges Dawn to a religious discussion – one that is intense and becomes argumentative, and finally relents his objection to the marriage after his adversary holds her own. However, he never lets his son forget his preference for a Jewish daughter-in-law.

The most telling representation of the father is in his dedication to his business, the Newark Maid glove company. Lou is passionate, almost fanatical, about gloves, and he is equally dedicated to bringing his two sons into the Newark Maid fold. The younger, Jerry, is repulsed by the business and his father’s persistence in thrusting it upon him and he leaves to become the “trouble” or less dedicated son. But after returning from the military, the Swede acquiesces to his father’s wishes and joins him in running the business, and eventually takes it over. Roth goes into surprising detail in his description of ladies’ glove making – one could be highly impressed at the vigor and thoroughness of his research on it – and there are several passages that betray an almost gentle reverence for the business. However, this tenderness is almost entirely reserved for the Swede when he inherits the company. Lou Levov, an intense and at times acerbic man, is associated with the harsher side of the business. The reader is first introduced to both the father and the glove busi-
ness through the tannery where Lou made his start. It is described in a striking and harsh manner that suggests something resembling a Dantean descent into hell:

The tannery stank of both the slaughterhouse and the chemical plant from the soaking of flesh and the cooking of flesh and the dehairing and pickling and degreasing of hides, where round the clock in the summertime the blowers drying the thousands and thousands of hanging skins raised the temperature in the low-ceilinged dry room to a hundred and twenty degrees, where the vast vat rooms were dark as caves and flooded with swill, where brutish workingmen, heavily aproned, armed with hooks and staves, dragging and pushing overloaded wagons, wringing and hanging waterlogged skins, were driven like animals through the laborious storm that was a twelve-hour shift—a filthy, stinking place awash with water dyed red and black and blue and green with hunks of skin all over the floor. (11–12)

Roth is not suggesting here any connection, causal or otherwise, between Lou’s Jewish ethnicity and hell. On the contrary, after this extended passage the author tells us that despite this experience, Lou remained a somewhat civil man. But this association does suggest a harshness, albeit tempered by a dedicated love for the family, that characterizes the father. Roth’s own experience with religious patriarchs and practicing Jews—Rabbis, editorial writers, intellectuals, community leaders—has been very mixed, especially in the early years. It was not uncommon in the criticism to find along with an admiration for his fiction a strong, at times abusive, resentment. What Roth brings in his descriptions of Lou is the problematic image of the father—and by association, ethnic identification—that embodies both loving acceptance and unnecessary judgmentalness. Roth has made his career not so much by exploring the distinctions between Jew and Gentile, but perhaps more significantly by exploring the relationships and the shades of self-expression within the Jewish American community. And along with the problems that may arise with assimilating into the larger culture, there comes the concern among Jews of the possible crises inherent in such a move. Those who attempt to lose or hide their Jewishness may be shunned or find themselves without a people to call their own. Roth uses Lou Levov and the family glove business to highlight this possibility. This is born out grotesquely in the final pages of the novel. Lou hocks (aggressively intruding a concern) in a fatherly yet condescending manner a drunken guest at his son’s dinner party and, to finally shut him up, the guest, Orcutt’s wasp wife, plunges a fork in his face, missing his eye by an inch. Not only has the Swede had to suffer a lifelong series of fatherly reproofs concerning ethnic identity, his “de-ethnicized” home turns from a safe and welcome haven into a dangerously uncertain place for his outwardly Jewish father.

As these episodes with Lou and the Old Rimrock home demonstrate, the issue
of Jewish identity is an unquestionably central one, both within and outside of that ethnic community. Roth makes this point most impressively in a passage describing a Thanksgiving meal shared once by the Levovs and the Dwyers (the author uses dinner scenes in very dramatic ways). Here the Jewish and Catholic families and their assimilated “post-ethnic” children gather around the table to participate in the most American of holidays. In this rather extended passage Roth forcefully emphasizes the dialectical progression of what he had more subtly suggested earlier: the ideal of the American melting pot as well as the ironic undermining of that ideal, a process that foregrounds the question of ethnic identification. The two in-law families, once (and perhaps still) suspicious of each other, are politely sitting together displaying gentle toleration of each other, however,

It was never but once a year that they were brought together anyway, and that was on the neutral, dereligionized ground of Thanksgiving, when everybody gets to eat the same thing, nobody sneaking off to eat funny stuff—no kugel, no gefilte fish, no bitter herbs, just one colossal turkey for two hundred and fifty million people—one colossal turkey feeds all. A moratorium on funny foods and funny ways and religious exclusively, a moratorium on the three-thousand-year-old nostalgia of the Jews, a moratorium on Christ and the cross and the crucifixion for the Christians, where everyone in New Jersey and elsewhere can be more passive about their irrationalities than they are the rest of the year. A moratorium on all the grievances and resentments, and not only for the Dwyers and the Levovs but for everyone in America who is suspicious of everyone else. It is the American pastoral par excellence and its last twenty-four hours. (402).

Here, more than anywhere else in the novel, the narrative seems to shed its multiple layerings of the Swede and Zuckerman, revealing the voice of Philip Roth. It resonates with the kind of irony that the author excels in, the kind that not only turns on its subject matter, but does so with wit and more than a bit of an edge. It is also the kind that is purposefully ambiguous. One could read this passage, especially its last sentence, as an admission that assimilation seems an elusive ideal. However Roth does highlight the downside to religious and ethnic exclusivity, suggesting that such territorialization can be dangerous in its own right (such as fork to the face). What is most significant here is that Roth presents the issue of assimilation and ethnic identity without ultimately resolving the problem. The power of *American Pastoral*, as in other Roth novels, lies in the fact that the project of defining the ethnic self, in particular the Jewish ethnic self, is never completely finalized. It is an ongoing project, a negotiation of possibilities both between ethnic communities and within the Jewish community itself. It is similar to the “post-ethnic” ideas so central to the theoretical underpinnings of such contemporary ethnic writers as R. Radhakrishnan. Perhaps it is no accident that the
episode that shattered the Swede’s life, Merry through the bomb, took place in 1968 right when identity politics were beginning, and the narration of the story occurs in the late 1990s, when the questioning of identity politics and its value — both in academia and the culture at large — has reached a high pitch.

Yet within the context of Philip Roth’s work it is most important to remember that the story of the Swede’s American pastoral is imagined by Nathan Zuckerman. The aging author of Carnovsky, possibly approaching the last years of his life, has had more than his share of Jewish ethnic identity wrestling. Roth, the author of Portnoy’s Complaint, has experienced the same. Instead of answering the question, Why fantasize about a nostalgic and sentimental subject?, one should rephrase the question: What stake does Zuckerman have in reimagining the life of his high school hero? The answer may lie in an important minor character, the Swede’s younger brother, Jerry. In this relatively subdued novel, one that overall does not display the highly charged rhetoric that characterizes many of Roth’s other novels, Jerry stands out as the only one capable of frantic oratory. (One can almost imagine Roth, in the otherwise controlled process of writing American Pastoral, feeling the need to burst out every once in a while, using Jerry’s voice as a form of catharsis.) Even more than his father, Jerry is not afraid to speak his mind; yet Jerry’s rantings appear selfless and more or less get to the heart of the matter, as if the reader, turned off by his presentation, cannot help agreeing with him. In an excited conversation between both brothers, after the Swede has temporarily found his daughter, Jerry lashes out at his brother. The rhetoric is tellingly similar to that which Zuckerman uses at the beginning of the book. The core of the Swede’s problems, Jerry tells him is that “You don’t reveal yourself to people, Seymour. You keep yourself a secret. Nobody knows what you are” (275). He closed himself off from Merry and did not reveal his feelings after finding her, as he does with others, and “that is why, to this day, nobody knows who you are. You are unrevealed — that is the story, Seymour, unrevealed” (276). Then Jerry links this state to both the idealized America embodied in Old Rimrock and the inheritance of the father:

You think you know what this country is? You have no idea what this country is. You have a false image of everything. All you know is what a fucking glove is. . . . You’re still in your old man’s dreamworld, Seymour, still up there with the Lou Levov in glove heaven. . . . You wanted Miss America? Well, you’ve got her, with a vengeance — she’s your daughter! . . . With the help of your daughter you’re as deep in the shit as a man can get, the real American crazy shit. American amok! America amuck! (276–277)

It is as if this tirade of Jerry’s, underscoring the mystery of Swede as well as his lack of awareness in family concerns, is Zuckerman’s — who after all is the author of this episode — ongoing exploration of the ethnic self. The Swede’s life is inextricably linked to questions of assimilation and familial responsibility. And if we posit in
Zuckerman — and his creator, Philip Roth — a concern for Jewishness, then the process of revealing and coming to understand the ethnic self becomes central to our interpretation of the text. In his inability to read Swede Levov upon meeting him in 1995, Zuckerman creates his hero’s story not necessarily for the purpose of understanding the high school legend, but to understand himself.

In Roth’s fiction, the masks of identity, or creations of a self, are multi-layered: Roth has created a mask (Tarnopol) that has created a mask (Zuckerman) that has itself created a mask (the Swede). A closer look at the presentation of the Swede’s life help to reveal these “labyrinthine windings” (55) that underlie narrative creation — or put another way, it helps us to understand the various ways in which we construct, order, and understand the world. Roth has spent his career exploring the writing of the self in its relation to his American Jewish experience. In *American Pastoral*, he creates someone who is nothing like the troubled novelists and academics who have populated his previous fiction, but instead reimagines the life of a successful (quintessentially American?) athlete and businessman whose home is brought down due largely to the complexities that comprise identity. Along with *The Ghost Writer*, it stands as one of Roth’s most significant contributions in the understanding of the ethnic self.

NOTES

1. The Swede was not created out of thin air. True to his style, Roth based his protagonist on a real person, Seymour “the Swede” Masin. Tad Friend reveals that Masin, a blond blue-eyed legendary athlete, attended high school in the Weequahic section of New Jersey, twelve years before Roth.

2. See, for instance, the reviews by Todd Gitlin, Robery Boyers, Robert Cohen, Elizabeth Hardwick, Tom Wilhelms, Louis Menand, and Michael Wood. These initial reviews, with the possible exception of Wood, of *American Pastoral* were surprisingly disappointing. Regardless of any thematic focus – different readers privilege different issues – they contained an alarming number of errors and misreadings. For instance, Boyers makes at least two factual errors regarding the novel’s plot, and Hardwick, in an act of critical negligence, makes errors in referring to the recent novel and to previous works of Roth. (In fact, in her review of *American Pastoral*, Hardwick devotes barely one third of her essay to that novel.)

3. Roth facetiously used this phrase to describe his labyrinthine project, *Operation Shylock* (“Bit of Jewish Mischief” 1).

4. In this sense, Roth’s reimagining is similar to Toni Morrison’s concept of “re-memory” in *Beloved*, a process not of recalling the past, but of stitching together various remembrances to recreate something new.

5. In terms of the novel’s metafictive subjective matter, it may be helpful to the rather compositional nature of Zuckerman’s reimaginings, the kinds of weaknesses and gaps characteristic of any initial creative project. For instance, one could argue that some el-
lements of the Swede’s story—such as the “conversation” with Angela Davis and Dawn’s not-too-unexpected affair with Orcutt—are novelistically contrived. And others, like the incomplete presence of “The Disciple Who Calls Herself ‘Rita Cohen,’” are never fully explained, creating a sense of narrative disunity (176).

6. This tough yet loving representation of the Jewish patriarchal figure is most clearly evident in a previous work, Patrimony. At one point, when his father Herman is expressing his philosophy on the significance of Jewish boxers, Roth succinctly states its ethnic import: “They fought two battles. They fought because they were fighters, and they fought because they were Jews” (203).

7. Here I am using R. Radhakrishnan’s definition of the “post-ethnic” subject. He describes it as reflecting a sense of Derridean différence: ethnic “meaning,” or in other words, identity, is defined in terms of its differences from other communities. However, these distinctions can never be truly essentialized, and ethnic identity as such (what it means to be Italian, what it means to be black, what it means to be a Jew) is always deferred, something that is always ready in the making. Such a strategy, according to Radhakrishnan, “conjoins in a relationship of complementarity the twin tasks of semanticizing the indeterminacy of the temporality of the ‘post’ and radicalizing the ethnic momentum beyond authoritarian closure” (69). Roth himself attempts, jokingly at times, to articulate this open-ended state of the assimilated ethnic American. See, for instance, the above quoted passage on Jerry’s criticism of his brother’s family, i.e., the “post-toasties” comment.

8. Even though he was taking a wider cultural approach in his review of the novel, Louis Menand noted that what makes American Pastoral so great is that it doesn’t answer any questions. It literally ends in a question mark.

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