The years immediately leading up to the publication of Sabbath's Theater were not the easiest for Philip Roth, at least in terms of his private life. Although having recently received both a National Book Critics Circle Award for Patrimony and a PEN/Faulkner Award for Operation Shylock, by 1995 he had experienced a number of personal tragedies and setbacks. He had undergone a Halcion-induced breakdown in the mid-1980s. In 1989 his father, Herman Roth, lost his fight with brain cancer (the subject of Patrimony). That same year Philip Roth experienced a heart attack and an emergency quintuple bypass operation. And in 1994 he formally ended his increasingly rocky relationship with Claire Bloom, his companion of over fifteen years. On top of that, critical reception of his latest novel at the time, Operation Shylock, was lukewarm at best, gravely confounding his overly optimistic expectations. So it is particularly telling that, when asked in a 2000 interview at what point he had felt happiest in his career, Roth quickly replied, “When I was writing Sabbath’s Theater. [. . .] Because I felt free. I feel like I am in charge now” (Remnick 88).

This feeling of artistic liberation, coming as it does after tragedy and personal crisis, can be found in the very pages of Sabbath’s Theater, a novel that exudes a vibrant yet controlled—and for some readers, notorious—energy that perhaps best defines his fiction. And it is for this reason that an assessment of his American Trilogy—American Pastoral (1997), I Married a Communist (1998), and The Human Stain (2000)—can most fruitfully begin
within the context of the novel that immediately preceded it. Sabbath's Theater is in many ways a turning point in Roth's career, one in which, having mastered the labyrinthine games of postmodern narrative, he confronts head on the chaos of contemporary American culture as well as the artist’s role in it. Several times throughout the novel, its protagonist, the puppeteer pornographer Mickey Sabbath, is directly associated with America (in both its ideal as well as repellant qualities). His Croatian-bred lover, Drenka Balich, longs to go “dancing with America,” and having stated this says to him subsequently, “You are America. Yes, you are, my wicked boy” (419). In another interview, Roth himself acknowledges that his 1995 novel served as a “springboard” to the Pulitzer Prize-winning American Pastoral. In the former he wanted to “create someone who is deep in the disorder […] someone who is not fearful of the repellant, who says I am repellant. I am disorder. Someone who wants to be dead, but he can’t die. He has the opportunity finally to kill himself, and he can’t leave, everything he hated was here” (Interview). This connectedness to America, the novelist goes on to say, is similar to that felt by Seymour “Swede” Levov in American Pastoral. As Roth writes, in an inverted echo of Sabbath’s Theater’s closing words, “everything that gave meaning to [the Swede’s] accomplishments had been American. Everything he loved was here” (Pastoral 213). In other words, the odyssey of Mickey Sabbath, in all of its excessive outrageousness, helped pave the way for Roth’s fuller treatment of national character in the American Trilogy.

After clearing the way—or perhaps even scorching the narrative earth—with Sabbath’s Theater, Roth freed himself up to take on recent American historical events. This is not to suggest that prior to the American Trilogy national and cultural contexts had never been a part of his writing. On the contrary, the project of America has been in Roth’s fiction from the very beginning. One has only to think of the suburban landscapes found in his collection, Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories, the satirical politics of Our Gang or The Great American Novel, or the diasporic musings that make up Operation Shylock, to realize that America—America as an idea, America as a promised land, America as a refuge—has always been within Roth’s field of narrative vision. Yet in the American Trilogy, what he has done is to write the individual subject into the fabric of history, and in doing so he illustrates that identity is not only a product of, but also a hostage to, the many social, political, and cultural forces that surround it. As Roth has said in a recent interview, this fictional strategy “freed up something that had never been freed up in my work before. Namely the joining of the public and the private, seeing the private drama as a public drama, really, or put another way, so saturated by history, the private drama, that it’s determined by history” (Interview). This is a striking departure from the kind of writing found in such novels as The Anatomy Lesson, The Counterlife, and Deception, works that by 1990 were being criticized by many readers as solipsistic exercises in bellybutton gazing.

The American Trilogy encompasses, at least for Roth, three of the most significant periods in post–World War II America: the Red-baiting heydays of Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (the focus of I Married a Communist), the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination and the cultural turmoil of the 1960s (the subject of American Pastoral), and the political witch-hunt surrounding President Bill Clinton’s impeachment (the springboard for The Human Stain). All three of these novels emphasize the malleability of identity in that each of the novels’ main characters take on “alternative” selves: Seymour Levov becomes the Swede, all-American athlete and hero of Weequahic Jews; Ira Ringold becomes Iron Rinn, Abraham Lincoln impersonator and famous radio actor; and Coleman Silk becomes Silky Silk, the African American boxer who makes fights his way into the ring (and then into academia) by passing as a Jew. Perhaps more significantly, all three novels show how individual identity embodies national identity and how the forces of history—American history, specifically—threaten to overtake personal freedom and individual agency. The first novel of the trilogy, American Pastoral, revolves around Swede Levov (Nathan Zuckerman’s high school athletic idol), his attempts to assimilate into the melting pot of WASPish 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, instigated in many ways by the tell-all memoirs of his former wife, and former silent movie actress, Eva Frame, whose book is also titled I Married a Communist. In the third novel of the trilogy, 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 right-wing Republicans, and despite his 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.”

In the several years following the publication of its first installment, Roth’s American Trilogy has received an impressive amount of critical interest,
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” (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.

With their highly evocative headings, “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 strictly 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, while traveling on an away game with his high school baseball team, 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 description of the house is particularly suggestive:

Embedded in this description of the Old Rimrock house 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, ill-fitting, “pieces” of the Levov family—the Jew from Weequahic and the Irish Catholic from Elizabeth—

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)
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. Big, Ruddy, Happy. No brains probably, but didn’t need ’em—a great walker was all Johnny Appleseed needed to be. All physical joy” (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: “The pleasure of it. The pure, buoyant unrestrained pleasure of striding” (316). These images, of the rustic house and of Johnny Appleseed, reveal the pastoral quest underlying the Swede’s transplantation 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*, the second in Roth’s American Trilogy. Although the book failed to garner the kind of attention that *American Pastoral* had, it nonetheless addresses many of the same issues and extends Roth’s fictional study of postwar America. Like the previous novel, *I Married a Communist* is narrated by Nathan Zuckerman who 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, Nathan 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 than he had known as a youth. Ira had been stationed in Iran during World War II, and there he became friends with Johnny O’Day, a fervent and uncompromising communist and union leader. After the war Ira lives with O’Day, becomes involved in a labor union, and due to his tall physique and plain-spoken manner, soon begins impersonating Abraham Lincoln at various rallies—a Lincoln who debates not only nineteenth-century issues of slavery but also contemporary topics such as the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. He eventually lands a job as one of voices and creative forces behind network radio’s *The Free and the Brave*, a popular weekly dramatization of inspiring moments in American history. 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 Nathan’s novel-length conversation with Murray Ringold.

Although references to the pastoral are not nearly as prominent as they are in the story of Swede Levov, they can nonetheless be found throughout *I Married a Communist*. Whereas a de-ethnicized emersion into whitebread 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. Ira’s understanding of the world was simple and uncomplicated, and as a young boy Nathan felt the draw of his words: “There was something marvelously bracing about [talking with Ira], a different and dangerous world, demanding, straightforward, aggressive, freed from all the need to please” (*Communist* 24). 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” (315). And, as we learn toward the end of the novel, much of Ira’s life is the result of his attempts to recreate himself, 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” (158). The free, unanchored self is indeed an American ideal, and for young Nathan Zuckerman, that ideal of America became flesh in the form of Ira Ringold. 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 circum-scribed by so much American history, who was personally familiar with so much American geography, who had confronted, face to face, so much American lowlife. I’d never known anyone so immersed in his moment or so defined by it. [. . .] For me, on those nights up in the shack, the America that was my inheritance manifested itself in the form of Ira Ringold. (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 plain-spoken impersonation of Abe Lincoln, his uncompromising dedication to the common working man, his unlamented Walden-like retreat—become a stand-in not just for America, but for an idealized America, one that epitomizes serenity and simplicity.

Such references to the pastoral are not uncommon in Philip Roth’s fiction. In his first major narrative, “Goodbye, Columbus,” the protagonist, Neil Klugman, is captivated not only by Brenda Patimkin, but also by her suburban existence in Short Hills. To a young man raised in the urban bustle of Newark, such a life is indeed idyllic. Neil is fascinated by Brenda’s world, and he describes it in terms that are both angelic and grandiose. His first trip to Short Hills brings him “closer to heaven” (Goodbye 8), and when he first embraces Brenda, he swears that he feels the flutter of “tiny wings” beneath her shoulder blades (14). Ron Patimkin, Brenda’s athletic brother, is described as “Proteus” (19) and “colossal” (65), Brenda’s petty problems take on a “cosmic” magnitude (26), and the entire Patimkin family appears to Neil as “Brodbergnaggs” (22) and “giants” (41). As with Swede Levov, sports are a central part of the Patimkin’s life, and this too becomes a part of Neil’s pastoral.7 He notices, at one point early in his relationship with Brenda, the twin oak trees standing outside the Potemkin’s picture window: “I say oaks, though fancifully, one might call them sporting-goods trees. Beneath their branches, like fruit dropped from the limbs, were two iron, a golf ball, a tennis can, a baseball bat, basketball, a first-baseman’s glove, and what appeared to be a riding crop” (21–22). And associated with these sports—the fruits of leisure afforded by this privileged suburban existence—is the variety of fruit that is hidden in the basement refrigerator, a veritable cornucopia of “green-gage plums, black plums, red plums, apricots, nectarines, peaches, long horns of grapes, black, yellow, red, and cherries [. . .] melons—cantaloupes and honeydews—and on the top shelf, half of a huge watermelon, a thin sheet of wax paper clinging to its bare red face like a wet lip.” To such sensual and Edenic images, Neil can only rejoice, “Oh Patimkin! Fruit grew in their refrigerator and sporting goods dropped from their trees!” (43).

Sports and the pastoral even figure prominently in Portnoy’s Complaint. During one session with Dr. Spielvogel, Alexander Portnoy waxes poetic over the transcendent joy of playing baseball as a youth, conjuring the kind of transcendent imagery that has traditionally defined the sport. “Doctor,” he says at one point, “you can’t imagine how truly glorious it is out there [in center field], so alone in all that space [. . .] just standing nice and calm—nothing trembling, everything serene—standing there in the sunshine” (68–69). Then, in words that could just as well describe the mythic streets of gold lining the great American dream, he longingly concludes that “in center field, if you can get to it, it is yours. Oh, how unlike my home it is to be in center field, where no one will appropriate unto himself anything that I say is mine!” (68).

However, as Roth’s fiction makes abundantly clear, attempts at capturing this Edenic ideal—to “get to it,” as Portnoy tells Spielvogel—are elusive at best, self-deluding at worst. Neither Neil Klugman nor Alexander Portnoy finds comfort in their objects of desire—Klugman in Brenda’s suburban promised land and Portnoy in his prelapsarian world free of sexual complications. Peter Tarnopol’s quest for a satisfying relationship in My Life as a Man turns out similarly frustrating, as does Nathan Zuckerman’s attempts in his first trilogy (The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound, and The Anatomy Lesson) to reconcile his art with the real-world demands of his family, reading public, and critics. And nowhere has Roth made this point more forcefully than in his postmodern tour de force, The Counterlife. In the last section of the novel, “Christendom,” when Zuckerman comes to realize the futility in trying to find a home life in the rustic countryside of (what he sees as) genteelly anti-Semitic England, he warns against “those irrepressible yearnings by people beyond simplicity to be taken off to the perfectly safe, charmingly simple and satisfying environment that is desire’s homeland.” Then, in driving home his point, the narrator tells his English wife, Maria, “How moving and pathetic these pastorals are that cannot admit contradiction or conflict! That that is the womb and this is the world is not as easy to grasp as one might imagine” (322). Zuckerman’s (and Roth’s) choice of words is particularly revealing. His reaction to pastoral England is “moving” in that it represents a longing for the consummation of his social and artistic desires. Yet at
the same time it is “pathetic” in that Zuckerman—a writer attuned to the ambiguity and irreconcilable conflicts that constitute his art—knows better than anyone that such a longing is nothing more than an empty fantasy. The pastoral, as Nathan sees it in *The Counterlife*, represents “the womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory” (323), and therefore has never really existed. Even worse, it is a state of mind that can drain the lived existence of its human poignancy. As Maria tells her embattled husband—and in words that aptly apply to Roth himself—“The pastoral is not your genre” (317).

This is the message that comes through loud and clear in the American Trilogy, and not just in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*. 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 the novel’s narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, emphatically asserts, such a presumption of absolute knowledge—knowledge that precludes the kind of “contradiction or conflict” he cites in the above-quoted *Counterlife* passage—is a ruse, and an insidious ruse at that. By refusing the possibility of any ambiguity, one denies the very essence of lived experience:

Because we don’t know, do we? *Everyone* knows . . . How what happens the way it does? What underlies the anarchy of the train of events, the uncertainties, the mishaps, and disunity, the shocking irregularities that define human affairs? *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 unchallenged 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. (*Human Stain* 208–9)

This not knowing, the question mark that lies at the very center of our being, is for Roth one of the indelible “stains” of existence. And it is something that should never be denied.

This brings us back to *American Pastoral*. The Swede’s attempts to create an idealized American existence, free from the ethnic, religious, and economic baggage of his past, rests on the assumption of individual, as well as national, certainty. Indeed, for Philip Roth the figure of Swede Levov is nothing less than the merging of the personal and the political. The Swede’s 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” sections that make up the last part of the novel could just as well allude to America during the 1960s. It is no accident that Zuckerman says of the Swede at one point, “But of course. He is our Kennedy” (83), and that the president’s assassination is alluded to no less than three other times in the novel. As Roth seems to suggest, 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 drives him or what makes him tick. Yet there is something encouraging, even empowering, about this admission of incomprehensibility. In confessing his ignorance of Swede’s motives, Nathan 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 then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you. (35)

Zuckerman’s words here bear a striking resemblance to his comments on Delphine Roux’s “everybody knows” letter. Assuming a privileged point of view, 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. His wife accuses him of idealizing her and of trying to create for her a dollhouse existence. “You were like some kid!” she screams in exasperation. “You had to make me into a princess. Well, look where I have wound up! In a madhouse!” (178). The pastoral significance of the Swede’s adopted home is further demythologized by the his straight-shooting glove-making father, Ira Levov. Even before Merry’s
bomb, Lou tries to disabuse his son of any idealized notions of Old \textit{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 candi-
did with each other about this—this narrow, bigoted area. The Klan
thrived out here in the twenties. Did you know that? [. . .  The resi-
dents] 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)

His brother Jerry puts the matter even more bluntly. In a diatribe against his
brother's worldview, taking up approximately nine pages of the text, Jerry
speaks 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 wanted to be a real American jock, a real
American marine, a real American hotshot with a beautiful Gentile
babe on your arm? 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! (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 na-
tionalistic fantasy. "And that is why, to this day." Jerry charges, "nobody knows
who you are. You are unrevealed—that is the story, Seymour, unrevealed" (276).

Similarly in \textit{I Married a Communist}, Ira Ringold's search for an idealized
American life is called into question. Much like the Swede, Ira longs to
escape the ambiguities and complications that could compromise his "pasto-
ral," 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. His Zinc Town shack serves as a sort of monk's habitat, an ascetic
retreat where he can free himself from the bourgeois trappings of his life with

Eve. His performances as Abraham Lincoln represent an attempt to embody
an unadulterated national hero, the man who had done more than any other
American to free the enslaved from their shackles. 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
bluntly puts it once his protégé is queued as a member of the Communist
Party, thereby affecting O'Day's own efforts at political organizing, Ira's dia-
tribes on the working class and impersonations of Lincoln were nothing
more than an empty façade. Much like Jerry Levov does with the Swede in
\textit{American Pastoral}, O'Day cuts through his former colleague's pretense in no
uncertain terms. Ira, also known as the \textit{actor} Iron Rinn, was "[a]lways imper-
sonating 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.
And pussy, fancy Hollywood pussy. Doesn't retain a vestige of his revolu-

It is significant that O'Day is the one to question Ira's political com-
mitment. He represents the pure and uncompromising life of a Marxist
precisian, and although he embodies an ideological ideal, his life is any-
thing but attractive. Without a family, without real friends, and without a
life outside of union organizing, his is the most depersonalized of exist-
ences. 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. As Murray
tells Nathan, "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" (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 contra-
dictions" (83). Nathan 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 "because purity is prostitution. Because purity is a lie. Because
unless you're an ascetic paragon like Johnny O'Day and Jesus Christ, you're
ured on by five hundred things” (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 Nathan 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” (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.” 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, Nathan 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” (Pastoral 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 Nathan is unable to extract from Swede any detail surrounding this apparent shock. Instead, the Swede does nothing more than bring 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 blandness” (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 ponderes, “what did he do for subjectivity? What was the Swede’s subjectivity? There had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable” (20).

This inability to fathom his high school hero is analogous to the Swede’s own failure to comprehend the reality underlying Old Rimrock 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, Nathan 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 “life[s] the Swede up onto the stage,” and by doing so places the Swede’s story at the center of his own (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 Nathan 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: why does Nathan tell us the story of the Swede? Or stated differently, what investment does the narrator have in the story he is telling? As Zuckerman reminds us from the beginning, the Swede was the pride of the Weequahic Jewish community, so it should come as no surprise that the narrator feels a sentimental duty to recognize his story.

The narrative structure of I Married a Communist is notably different from that of American Pastoral. Although it may be true that our ultimate source of information is Nathan—he is a first person narrator, and everything we know from Murray is filtered through him—one does not get the sense that he is manipulating the facts as he hears them from Murray. There are times in the novel when the narrator completely recedes into the background, and all we have are Murray’s (apparently) unmodified words. Here, in contrast to the first novel in the American Trilogy, Nathan Zuckerman is more of a passive agent than he is an active participant. There are no reimaginings or re-creations that forge the narrative. Instead, there is the reception of voices. At one point in the novel, Nathan, now a 64-year-old man, says, “Occasionally now, looking back, I think of my life as one long speech that I’ve been listening to. […] The book of my life is a book of
voices. When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: ‘Listening’” (222). In *American Pastoral*, Nathan attempts to make sense of the Swede through reimagining or “dreaming” his life—metaphorically lifting him onto the narrative stage, as he says at one point—but in *I Married a Communist*, his understanding is inspired through listening, a rather significant difference, given Iron Rinn’s prominence on the radio. “How deep our hearing goes!” Nathan acknowledges toward the end of the novel. “Think of all it means to understand from something that you simply hear. The god-likeness of having an ear! Is it not at least a semidivine phenomenon to be hurled into the innermost wrongness of a human existence by virtue of nothing more than sitting in the dark, listening to what is said?” (311). In a curious shift in narrative perspective, the godlike ability of the artist to be in full control of the medium, and creating something from nothing, becomes displaced by the “godlikeness” of aural omnipresence.

In *I Married a Communist*, the central narrative is more or less the mimetic recounting of Ira Ringgold’s life and not the *actual act* of recounting. It is not necessarily Nathan Zuckerman’s story, as is arguably the case in *American Pastoral*. Unlike the story of the Swede, Nathan is not the only storyteller we have on the life of Ira Ringgold. He shares this narrative task with his former teacher and Ira’s older brother, Murray, and the entire novel is a constant shifting back and forth between both men. As such, the act of recounting is not singular and solitary, but communal in nature. Or, put another way, one could call it a team effort. In fact, in a 2000 interview, Roth describes this narrative style through the language of sports, an apt metaphor in a novel where Zuckerman’s interlocutor once taught him about “boxing with a book” (*Communist* 27): “He [Zuckerman] listens to the story of Ira Ringgold being told by his brother, Murray Ringgold, as Murray knows Ira’s story. [...] Murray and Zuckerman pass the narrative ball back and forth down the court until the story of Ira’s failure is recorded unto the last betrayal” (“Alter Brain” 8). And although sports do not figure near as prominently as they do in the Swede’s story, in *I Married a Communist* Nathan nonetheless makes a central link between heroism on the field of play and heroism in the field of politics. In describing his outlook as a teenager he recalls,

My idealism (and my idea of a man) was being constructed along parallel lines, one fed by novels about baseball champions who won their games the hard way, suffering adversity and humiliation and many defeats as they struggled toward victory, and the other by novels about heroic Americans who fought against tyranny and injustice, champions of liberty for America and for all mankind. Heroic suffering. That was my specialty. (25)

These links between sports and the nation are made throughout the American Trilogy. The Swede, as a model of athletic prowess—an end in football, a center in basketball, and a first baseman in baseball—is a stand-in for America itself. His association with national identity is alluded to throughout the novel (e.g., the John F. Kennedy references, his need to settle in historic Old Rimrock, the imagery of Johnny Appleseed, his marrying a Miss America contestant), but it is with sports that Roth makes his most effective links. As the previous references to “Goodbye, Columbus” and *Portnoy’s Complaint* suggest, sports have figured prominently in Roth’s writings. This has especially been the case with baseball, that most American of all sports. And perhaps nowhere does Philip Roth better articulate his passion for the game than in a 1973 essay, “My Baseball Years.” In it he directly associates his understanding of his country with the national pastime: “(My) feel for the American landscape came less from what I learned in the classroom about Lewis and Clark than from following the major-league clubs on their road trips and reading about the minor leagues in the back pages of *The Sporting News*” (237–38). In words that call to mind Nathan’s comments in *I Married a Communist*, Roth confides to the reader, “Baseball made me understand what patriotism was about, at its best” (236), and as a result the game became nothing less than “the literature of my boyhood” (238). In his fiction he has likewise directly linked baseball to the goals of the nation. In his wildly farcical work, *The Great American Novel*, Roth sets out not to demean or demythologize baseball but to use the game to highlight those political tensions that have defined recent American history. As he states in one interview, mischievously conducted with himself, his purpose in writing the book was to discover “in baseball a means to dramatize the struggle between the benign national myth of itself that a great power prefers to perpetuate, and the relentlessly insidious, very nearly demonic reality [...] that will not give an inch in behalf of that idealized mythology” (90).

This last passage is particularly telling, for not only does Roth metaphorically connect baseball’s pastoral associations with those of the nation, he also emphasizes the uncertain reality behind those ideals. He recognizes as false any assumptions of “purity” or “innocence” that might accompany his country’s
actions (particularly in his lifetime), and acknowledges the politically mixed motives inherent in our national identity. In other words, Roth, through his narrative conduit Nathan Zuckerman, is able to admit what both Swede Levov and Ira Ringold cannot: the ambiguity underlying the American project. Their attempts to discover their own American pastoral—a paradise free of ethnic, economic, and political complications—prevents any awareness of the unflattering or even malignant characteristics of their surroundings. In this way, the Swede and Ira become parts of a long line of American literary figures whose failure to grasp the ambiguous nature of existence lead to their 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 pasted 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 Levov and Ira Ringold attempt to live an idealized American life.

However, instead of the pastoral, both men find its antithesis, what Zuckerman calls “the indigenous American bersek” (Pastoral 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. 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: “In Gossip We Trust. Gossip as gospel, the national faith. [. . . ] McCarthyism as the first postwar flourishing of the American unthinking that is now everywhere” (Communist 284). What the first two novels in Roth’s American Trilogy clearly illustrate is the more troubling side of the American dream. In American Pastoral, after Nathan 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, postwar era, a romanticized meditation on what his country once was. It is significant to note, however, that Nathan 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 Illych, Nathan Zuckerman reveals that “Swede Levov’s life [. . . ] had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore just great, right in the American grain” (31). The “simple” and “ordinary” are given heroic treatment in Weequahic’s “household Apollo” (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 Nathan 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 are no actors. There is no class struggle. There is no discrimination or lynching or Jim Crow, nor has there ever been. There is no injustice, nor is there justice. There are no utopias. [. . . ] There is just the furnace of Ira and the furnace of Eve burning at twenty million degrees. [. . . ] There is the furnace of Karl Marx and of Joseph Stalin and of Leon Trotsky and of Paul Robeson and of Johnny O’Day. There is the furnace of Tailgunner Joe McCarthy. 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. (322–23)

Here, looking up into the pristine night sky, Nathan 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 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.” And so too is the possibility of the American dream. Philip Roth may have been critiquing it throughout his career—from “Goodbye, Columbus” through Our Gang and The Great
American Novel to The Counterlife and his most recent novel, The Plot Against America—but one thing he has always acknowledged is that national identity is wrapped up in the hopeful as well as the tragic. “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. In her memoir, Claire Bloom describes Roth’s reactions to many of these unfortunate events. She says of his “mental coming-apart” in the late 1980s that Operation Skylark, the book in which Roth depicts his Halcyon madness, “is neither inaccurate nor overblown” (178). Her accounts of Herman Roth’s failing health and the author’s simultaneous bypass surgery more or less corroborate the events narrated in Patrimony. And in terms of his reaction to the reception of Operation Skylark, Bloom claims that the disappointing reviews, particularly John Updike’s ungenerous assessment of it, induced a deep depression that eventually led him to commit himself to psychiatric hospital (204). Although clearly not without its interpretive biases, Bloom’s are nonetheless the only accounts readers have, outside of the author’s fiction, of Roth’s state of mind during this time.

2. One can even go on to read this kind of “doubling” in Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of all three volumes. He himself is an alternate identity, or narrative mask, of the living author Philip Roth.

3. Hawthorne’s comment comes in the “Custom-House” introduction to The Scarlet Letter when he is discussing his ancestors’ occupational histories in Salem. For detailed study of Hawthorne references in The Human Stain, see James Duban.

4. In addition to the numerous newspaper and magazine reviews that greeted the three novels’ controversial subject matter, scholars have wasted no time in focusing on the trilogy, specifically American Pastoral and The Human Stain. In a mere span of seven years—a relatively short time in the world of academic publication—there have been no less than fifteen essays devoted to at least one of the novels in the American Trilogy, and in 2004 a special issue of Studies in American Jewish Literature was devoted exclusively to Roth’s fiction since Sabbath’s Theater. See, in particular, Edward Alexander, Robert Alter, James Duban, Gary Johnson, Timothy L. Parrish, Derek Parker Royal (“Fictional Realms”), Elaine B. Safer, Ada Savin, and the special issue of Studies in American Jewish Literature (edited by Royal).

5. Throughout this essay I will use the word pastoral as it applies not only to praise of the rural or rustic life, which at times is the case with Old Rimmock, but also to notions of an idealized America, innocent and uncomplicated by contradictions or ambiguities. These could take the form of references to a simple agrarian society, American exceptionalism, ahistorical readings of race, and of course the “American Dream” in all of its manifestations.

6. Although there were some positive reviews of the novel when it first published, most critics noted that I Married a Communist failed to measure up to the narrative virtuosity of American Pastoral. Michiko Kakutani, Robert Stone, and James Wood all pointed out, in one way or another, that the novel’s stylistic force was compromised by its heavy-handed emphasis on politics. Reviews in conservative publications, such as Norman Podhoretz’s in Commentary and John Derbyshire’s in National Review, predictably took Roth to task for his apparent romanticization of left-wing politics. John Leonard in the left-leaning The Nation argued the opposite, that I Married a Communist suffers from a lack of true understanding of American radicalism. And then there were the reviewers—such as Mark Shelden, David Gates, and Scott Raab—who emphasized the autobiographical nature of the novel, how the novel was Roth’s way of getting back at his ex-wife Claire Bloom for her scathing portrait of him in Leaving a Doll’s House. Since its initial release there has been little critical notice of I Married a Communist, especially when compared to amount of scholarly attention devoted to the other two novels in the American Trilogy. To date, Ellen Lévy has written the only sustained essay on the novel.

7. For a discussion on the links between sports, particularly baseball, and the pastoral, see Roger Angell, Donald Hall, Michael Novak, and Deeanne Westbrooke.

8. For a more thorough discussion of Zuckerman’s significance as the narrative focus in this novel, see my essay, “Fictional Realms of Possibility.”

9. Most recently and along these lines, Roth balks at the suggestion that the United States “lost her innocence” after the September 11 attacks. In an interview with the French newspaper Le Figaro, he asks, “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” (qtd. in Leith 21).

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