



## INTRODUCTION

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*American Pastoral*, by Philip Roth, was hailed by reviewers as an American classic upon its release in 1997. Winner of the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and listed by *Time* magazine among the “100 best contemporary English-language novels,” it has brought its author immense international critical acclaim and popularity [GROSSMAN 2005]. Having inserted itself within the American canon, the book is studied today in departments of Contemporary Literature all over the world.

In an interview for the French journal *Le Monde* 2, Roth suggests an explanation of the book’s appeal to the international audience: *American Pastoral* helps its readers understand the mysteries of American society. “We must admit that we are ignorant of our respective countries. Incredibly ignorant,” Roth observes [ROTH 2004 : 29].<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, his intuition that the novel attracts readers precisely because it represents the political and social history of the United States stays in stark opposition to critics who blame contemporary American literature for being self-centered, claustrophobically American and irrelevant in other cultures. In his article titled “The Insularity of American Literature: Philip Roth Didn’t Deserve the Booker International Prize,” Anis Shivani declares that American literature flourishes in isolation. It fails to produce important works because it has “not yet confronted history.” “History proper, for America, hasn’t really started yet,” contends the critic who apparently ignores the fact that in the end of the twentieth century, the exploration of the past turns out to be the dominant concern of American fiction [SHIVANI 2011]. *American Pastoral*, too, turns resolutely to the chaos of American history. Although published five years after the Los Angeles riots, the novel returns to an earlier period of national unrest, that of the Newark Riots, the Vietnam War, and Watergate. It even looks back further in time as the essays assembled here show, back to the very foundations of American democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> « Car il faut bien dire que nous sommes ignorants de nos pays respectifs. D’une ignorance inouïe. » [My translation]

In 1973, in his self-conducted interview “On *The Great American Novel*” for *Partisan Review*, Philip Roth described the sixties as “the demythologizing decade” [ROTH 1985 : 86]. What he meant was that

much that had previously been considered [...] to be disgraceful and disgusting forced itself upon the national consciousness, loathsome or not; what was assumed to be beyond reproach became the target of blasphemous assault; what was imagined to be indestructible, impermeable, in the very nature of American things, yielded and collapsed overnight. [ROTH 1985 : 87-88]

Still in this 1973 essay, Roth contends that the sixties saw the emergence of a “counterhistory, or *countermythology*” which challenged “the mythic sense of itself the country had when the decade opened with General Eisenhower” [ROTH 1985 : 89, emphasis in original]. More than two decades later, Roth continues to wonder how to understand “the enigmatic American reality” and the American Trilogy, whose first volume is *American Pastoral*, represents his most compelling attempt to come to terms with it [ROTH 1985 : 91].

In *The Great American Novel* (1973), it was through baseball that Roth demythologized “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 on behalf of that idealized mythology” [ROTH 1985 : 90, emphasis in original]. In *American Pastoral*, baseball is the sport that makes Seymour Swede Levov his community’s idol and myth, but it is a terrorist act—his daughter’s bomb—that demythologizes his idealized vision of America. Earlier, Smitty’s book, Roth explained, attempted to “imagine a myth of ailing America,” and his own narrative represented “an attempt to imagine a book about imagining that American myth” [ROTH 1985 : 92]. Similarly, *American Pastoral*—recounted by Nathan Zuckerman—is yet another attempt to imagine the sixties, the “decade of disorder, upheaval, assassination, and war” [ROTH 1985: 91]. If in *The Great American Novel* Roth’s engagement with history took the form of a full-scale farce, *American Pastoral* offers an imaginative response to it—a later counter-text—this time in the form of an American tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

But it is not only because *American Pastoral* engages with the history of America in the decades between the Second World War and the Vietnam War that makes its power and originality. There is something in the rise and fall of Seymour Levov that renders his story deeply moving and meaningful

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<sup>2</sup> See the concept of counter-text developed by Debra Shostak in her monograph *Philip Roth : Countertexts, Counterlives* [SHOSTAK 2004].

to any reader anywhere in the world. Some of its power—and much of its originality—arises from the feeling that it tells the story of a personal tragedy, of failed dreams and disillusionment. Roth's subject and his characters arouse readers' deep interest and sympathy. And yet, what makes the novel so compelling?

Eleven scholars from both sides of the Atlantic set out to answer this question by bringing into light various aspects of the narrative that render it both complex and appealing. Lazare Bitoun's "Philip Roth en contexte" opens the readings by placing Roth's work in the context of Jewish American literature. After a survey of earlier novels by American Jewish writers from the beginning of the twentieth century, Bitoun focuses on the important role Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud have played in what has come to be called "The Golden Age of the Jewish American Novel." If for Saul Bellow "all Jews are men," and if for Bernard Malamud "all men are Jews," Philip Roth seems to take a broader and more complex view on the predicament of modern man. Following a review of most of Roth's novels and short stories, Bitoun contends that, in essence, Roth tells us that men are men, and if they are Jews, they are bound to face a complex fate.

In response to critics who claim that the contemporary American novel remains provincial and fails to engage with the great works of foreign literature, Gustavo Sánchez-Canales traces the references to "Classical Greek Archetypes in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*" and the third novel in the American Trilogy, *The Human Stain* (2000). Roth's protagonists echo their classical counterparts as they try to escape their fate but at the same time rush to meet it. The underlying idea in both novels, Sánchez-Canales contends, is that the desire to obliterate the past destroys the present.

Still in a comparative perspective, Debra Shostak examines Roth's original 1972 manuscript and notes for *American Pastoral* held in the Roth Collection at the Library of Congress and suggests that Roth may have imagined his way into that novel by thinking about the Holocaust, specifically with regard to the iconic figure of Anne Frank to whom he later returned explicitly in *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and *Exit Ghost* (2007). Entitled "*American Pastoral's* Ghost Writer: Anne Frank in Old Rimrock," her essay proposes that the presence of Anne Frank in Roth's initial conception of *American Pastoral* deepens the novel's historical resonances. Shostak explores how Roth may have worked through Anne Frank in order to arrive at his shattered pastoral of twentieth-century Jewish American life.

The second cluster of essays engages with the representations of American national identity in *American Pastoral*. In "Troubling Nationhood: Philip

Roth's All-American 'New Frontier,'" Theodora Tsimpouki explores *American Pastoral* with regard to the exceptionalist frontier rhetoric. She argues that by foregrounding the Swede's naïve assumption of individual and national certainty, Roth challenges the myth of the American nation as a continuous narrative of national progress and exposes the ground of hierarchy and violence committed in the fulfillment of this nationhood. Tsimpouki shows the ways in which *American Pastoral* unravels the inconsistencies and contradictions underlying the sixties' rhetoric of hope for new frontiers that would enhance American national coherence at the same time that it endorsed imperialist policies.

In "The Fall of the House of Levov: Bill Orcutt and the Unmaking of America in *American Pastoral*," Aimee Pozorski suggests that the plans of reconstruction and rebuilding of the architect Bill Orcutt evoke the larger political project of Abraham Lincoln and Edgar Allan Poe. In the 1960s, as in the 1850s, there prevails a sense that the "American house" needs to be put in order. Although he is not talking about the American history of slavery in *American Pastoral*, nor even about the construction of racial identity which he will eventually undermine in *The Human Stain*, Roth is nonetheless still invested in the question of civil and human rights as upheld within and by the United States. Shaped now in terms of the conflict in Vietnam and the radical underground movement, Roth's architect—in the making and unmaking of the American dream house—raises questions about the foundation of America, the role of conflict within its walls, and the legacy of the egalitarian dream.

In the next essay of this cluster, Ann Basu argues that Roth's novel constitutes a disorderly response to beliefs in new beginnings free of history and narratives of identity assuming order, innocence and perfectibility. *American Pastoral* exposes the contradictions that have defined American culture since the post-war attempt to contain potentially violent national divisions by imposing a unified sense of identity. Entitled "*American Pastoral's* Disorderly Women," the essay focuses on the roles of the female characters. Basu demonstrates the ways in which Roth creates a counter-narrative about disorder activated through female voices, thus opening a rhetorical space where rival national narratives are heard and tested.

The next essay departs from Roth's concern with history and focuses on his imaging of suburban space. In "The Machine in the Garden State: Jewish Environmentalism in *American Pastoral*" Joshua Kotzin explores the novel through the prism of ecocriticism. He reads *American Pastoral* alongside Cynthia Ozick's "The Pagan Rabbi" (1966) where an intemperate love for nature is posed against traditional Jewish beliefs and practices. The

comparison between the two narratives shows that the terms of “pastoral” and “Jewishness” come under a critical interrogation in Roth’s novel. Kotzin discusses and contextualizes Roth’s literary antecedents and identity positions.

The next cluster of essays examines the novel’s formal features. In his provocatively titled essay “Aesthetics of Idiocy in *American Pastoral*,” Rémi Astruc invites the reader to take a different path from the usual perspective on the novel, to perceive not only the tragedy of a man and his family, but the comedy of an idiot. Astruc brings into the discussion the concept of idiocy which enables him to shed light on the strangeness of the characters, the awkward structure of the narrative, and the audacity and wit of Philip Roth.

Taking up Rémi Astruc’s invitation to read the comedy behind the tragedy, Velichka Ivanova focuses on “Philip Roth’s Art of Irony in *American Pastoral*.” Inspired by Linda Hutcheon’s analysis of irony as a discursive practice, she concentrates on verbal and structural ironies. If, according to Hutcheon, the scene of irony is a social scene and irony is a communicative process, an ironic interpretation of *American Pastoral* implies necessarily an analysis of the reader’s encounter with the text. Ivanova asserts that any claim to a definitive answer of the novel’s questions should be dismissed for it is in the reading process that the text reveals its ironic connections.

Developing her own earlier work on focalization in *American Pastoral*, Pia Masiero’s “On Focalization Once Again: What about the Reader?” analyzes the dynamics of the readers’ involvement alongside the narrator’s in the plight of the main character. To tackle the narrative core of the book, namely, an empathetic immersion on the narrator’s part resulting in a figural situation, Masiero employs Vittorio Gallese’s notion of “we-centric space.” One of the discoverers of mirror neurons, Gallese proposes an account of empathy which goes beyond the standard notion of simulation and depends on a “non-conscious and pre-reflexive mechanism.” Masiero uses this notion to concentrate on one single narrative feature, which, she argues, “may enhance the overall awareness of the functioning of empathetic responses,” namely, deictics. Deictics bespeaking proximity provide situations more readily imaginable because they involve more efficiently the readers’ bodies which exist in the here and now of the present moment. The textual evidence Masiero presents demonstrates how Roth’s masterful employment of deictics creates the desired effect of implicating the reader in the Swede’s predicament as much as Zuckerman himself was implicated in the first place.

In the final essay, “‘Nothing Hangs Together,’ or Using *American Pastoral* to Teach Literary Theory,” Erica Galioto shares her experiences teaching literary theory through Roth’s novel. In her view, their mutual difficulty reinforces one’s need for the other; whereas literary theory demands an object of analysis, *American Pastoral* necessitates organizing theoretical structures. The goal of each, as Seymour Levov and his readers learn, is to show that what “hangs together” in our world, our literature, and our lives is dependent upon our lenses of perspective and their philosophical underpinnings. After analyzing the difficulty of teaching literary theory to undergraduates, Galioto provides an overview of her course’s organizing framework before detailing her instruction of *American Pastoral* and her students’ use of literary theory to confront the novel’s difficulty. Like Orcutt’s paintings that mean more or less than they appear depending upon the observer, Galioto’s students illustrate that *American Pastoral* can mean everything, nothing, or something depending upon the reader and his/her choice of theoretical lens.

These essays consider *American Pastoral* from various perspectives—contextual, intertextual, historical, political, ecocritical, narratological, neuropsychological, literary-theoretical, and pedagogical. Rather than setting the narrative within limited set of critical frames, they illustrate some of the various approaches through which one single work of fiction may be viewed. They invite the readers to enter the book’s pages as if they were entering an unstable area of play where uncertainty only intensifies the pleasure.

In his 1973 self-interview “On *The Great American Novel*,” Roth declared that “the genre is the message, and the message is agnostic: ‘I tell you (and I tell you and I tell you), I don’t know” [ROTH 1985 : 91]. *American Pastoral*, like its earlier counter-text *The Great American Novel*, is told by a character-narrator, a device intended “to call into question the novel’s ‘truthfulness’—to mock any claim the book might appear to make to be delivering *the answer*” [ROTH 1985: 91, emphasis in original]. Merging the serious with the comic throughout his career, Roth’s literary strategy has always represented “an attempt to be simultaneously as loyal to one’s doubts and uncertainties as to one’s convictions” [90]. If, like the earlier narrative, *American Pastoral* engages compellingly with American history and the flaws of American society, it does so without delivering a definitive message. For, as Roth wrote in the seventies, the novelist remains “skeptical of the ‘truth’ turned up by imagination as of the actuality that may have served as inspiration or model” [90]. The novel does not paint the picture of “what America is ‘really like.’” Rather, it is its mystery that ignites the imagination of both writer and

reader: “*Not* knowing, or no longer knowing for sure, is just what perplexes many of the people who live and work here and consider this country home,” Roth claimed [90, emphasis in original]. Like other great works of contemporary literature, *American Pastoral* probes into the human condition in this world of uncertainty.

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