

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY IN PHILIP ROTH'S "AMERICAN PASTORAL"

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Abstract:

Against the perception - often abetted by Roth himself - that his fiction has compromised the integrity of Jewish- American cultural identity, Roth has consistently asserted his primacy as an artist by claiming and dramatizing what we might call the self's essential elusiveness. Near the conclusion of *The Counterlife* (1986) Roth's alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, reflects that should such an entity as "an irreducible self" exist, it "is rather small, I think, and may even be the root of all impersonation - the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate."²

Key words: identity, American dream, alter ego

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Roth's postmodern definition of self makes it difficult for his reader to assert with any confidence that his books endorse a particular point of view or cultural position, which is precisely why Roth disclaims the identity of "Jewish" writer. Nonetheless, with his work in the 1990s it has become obvious that Roth - in Cynthia Ozick's words - "is being catapulted along a fascinating trajectory" which is culminating in an expression of Jewish identity that no one - not Irving Howe or Philip Roth - could have imagined thirty years ago.³ *American Pastoral* (1997) completes Roth's trajectory in two remarkable ways. First, through Nathan Zuckerman's identification with Swede Levov, "the blue-eyed blonde born into our tribe,"⁴ Roth explores the possibility of writing a kind of tribal narrative. For the first time in his oeuvre Roth employs Zuckerman to imagine the type of story that might be told by a Jewish writer rather than by a writer who is a Jew. By framing the narrative through the perspective of Zuckerman, Roth also invokes the earlier Zuckerman canon to make sense of this story. Like his obvious model, Marcel Proust, who rewrites the life of "Marcel" until he has created *Remembrance of Things Past*, Roth rewrites Zuckerman's story as a way of rewriting all of his previous Zuckerman stories. In portraying Zuckerman's perspective on the meaning of the second half of the American twentieth century through his idolatry of Swede Levov, *American Pastoral* reframes Roth's entire oeuvre.

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² Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* (New York: Farrar, 1986), p. 320;

³ Elaine M. Kauvar, "An Interview with Cynthia Ozick," *Contemporary Literature* 34.3 (1993), p. 373.

⁴ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York: Houghton, 1997), p. 3,

Zuckerman's reappearance in *American Pastoral* signals Roth's re-evaluation of the fictional stance toward identity - whether understood as cultural identity or individual subjectivity - codified in *The Counterlife*. In *American Pastoral* it is as if Zuckerman is transformed into an earlier version of himself - the one that existed before he discovered the burden - and joy - of subjectivity. No longer his own subject, Zuckerman thus ostensibly removes himself from being the protagonist and displaces that role on to the character of Swede Levov. Where Zuckerman is the product of a culture "whose elders, largely undereducated and overburdened, venerated academic achievement above all else," Seymour "Swede" Levov is a stunning athlete, a master of "physical aggression," whose exploits on the field allow the community to indulge in "a fantasy about itself" that is "almost like the Gentiles" in that they could make "athletic performance the repository of all their communal hopes" (3-4). Zuckerman's initial stance toward Levov is one of unadulterated hero worship. When he encounters Swede in 1985 at a Mets game, forty years after Swede was the Weequahic high school star, Zuckerman is as awestruck as he had been as a high school student. "You might as well have told us he was Zeus," a companion says to him (17). Zuckerman reiterates, though, that the strength of Swede's appeal was not only his athletic greatness, but that he was a Jew who could compete with and defeat the Gentiles on their own field of dreams. Later, when Zuckerman is recreating Swede's life, he relates how Swede knocked the novel's arch-WASP, Joe Orcutt, and the history he represents, "flat on its ass" for overstepping the established boundaries of the weekly touch football game (381). Levov's nickname, Swede, like Zuckerman's description of his visage, "steep jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe," suggests that this character was born to make the transformation that Zuckerman has struggled so ardently for in his life and art: to become an American who happens to be a Jew (3). Zuckerman's awe for the athletic prowess of Swede masks his awe for the ease with which Swede appears to assimilate himself into mainstream American life. Where Zuckerman's fictional portrayal of Jews caused him to suffer the indignity of being called a traitor to the Jews, Swede's life affords Zuckerman the opportunity to dramatize how a Jew could receive as his due the promises of American success. Swede oversees a successful business, marries a Catholic former Miss New Jersey, fathers an attractive and gifted child, and owns a stunning country home built at the time of the American Revolution. If in having all the accoutrements of a perfect American life Swede is to Zuckerman emblematic of an "unconscious oneness with America," then the question that haunts Zuckerman and drives the narrative is a startling one, "where was the Jew in him?" (20). Before *American Pastoral*, Roth might have asked such a question in order to discover a role, a provisional identity. In this novel, however, Roth allows Zuckerman to raise this question precisely so he can explore the deleterious consequences of forsaking one's Jewish origins. Thus, when Zuckerman discovers in 1995 at his high school reunion that Swede Levov has just died having lived a life that did not fit the storybook plot Zuckerman had assumed, he finds himself inventing a narrative that locates Swede's fall in the loss of his Jewish identity. With *American Pastoral* Roth in a sense completes his assimilation story by rendering judgment upon its naive hopefulness.

Zuckerman's rapprochement with his past begins with his reinvention of the father. Zuckerman first begins to think about Swede as a subject for narrative at the

suggestion of Swede himself. Swede writes Zuckerman to ask for his help in writing a tribute to his father, Lou Levov. Roth's assumed reader is of course well aware of Zuckerman's difficult relationship with his own father, whose trenchant analyses of how his son's fiction betrayed both their family life and American Jews generally became the primary subject of Zuckerman's work. Speaking of the ethos adopted by the generation of Jewish fathers that includes Swede's father and his own, Zuckerman observes that they were "men for whom the most serious thing in life is to keep going despite everything" (11).

In his narrative role of making sense of Levov's life, Zuckerman is forced to confront his own existential dilemmas, particularly of the limitations his relationship with his father, a solemn understanding of his craft as a writer and, more importantly, mortality.¹ Ironically, this motto describes Zuckerman's writing career as it does Swede's life. If in the end both Zuckerman and Swede betrayed their fathers' wisdom about maintaining the integrity of the clan, then their persistence in going on despite everything fulfills Zuckerman's assertion that "we were their sons. It was our job to love them" (11). Because Swede dies before Zuckerman can consider his collaboration seriously, the proposed story about Swede's father becomes Zuckerman's story of Swede. As a substitute father-story, Zuckerman's account of Swede's effortless immersion into America is concerned with the search for what might be called the father's wisdom.

Realizing his own naivete in both underestimating Swede and responding lukewarmly to his request to play Lou Levov's biographer, Zuckerman decides instead to record Swede's life "as another assailable man" (89). In doing this, Zuckerman "virtually disappears into the consciousness of its main character" (Goodheart 306). Such a narrative strategy aids in dramatizing the epic clash between Swede and his antagonists. Zuckerman's apologetic stance on his craft being driven by the illusion that [one] might get it "right someday" (63) in no way effaces his role as moral referee in being the biographer of Swede. In undertaking such a vatic responsibility, Zuckerman's actions qualify as apocalyptic because they attest to his belief in the power of the word to redeem the world.²

The story of Swede Levov also becomes the story of Lou Levov's judgment of Swede. Implicit within that story - indeed, motivating that story - is Zuckerman's desire to reach his own father as well. As if uncomfortable with the prospect of writing a narrative that is not obviously about either himself or his father, Zuckerman begins by dramatizing how inappropriate Swede is as a subject for a Zuckerman narrative. If Zuckerman wants to "to imbue Swede Levov with something like the tendentious meaning Tolstoy assigned to Ivan Ilych," then he is perhaps unaware of the extent to which Swede's story mirrors his own (30). After asking himself "what did [the Swede] do for subjectivity?" Zuckerman decides to make Swede's seeming absence from identity conflict the point of the narrative (20). To tell Swede's story, then, Zuckerman must transform himself into a character unafflicted by the call to transformation. Zuckerman says that he would

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² G. Neelakantan. *Monster in Newark: Philip Roth's Apocalypse in "American Pastoral"* *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), Vol. 23, *Philip Roth's America: The Later Novels* (2004), pp. 55-66 Published by: P57

think about the Swede for six, eight, sometimes ten hours at a stretch, exchange my solitude for his, inhabit this person least like myself, disappear into him, day and night try to make the measure of a person of apparent blankness and innocence and simplicity, chart his collapse, make of him, as time wore on, the most important figure of my life. (74).

In the guise of highlighting Swede's blankness, Zuckerman conceals from himself the nature of his identification with Swede. Both because Zuckerman idolized Swede as a child and because Zuckerman feels intellectually superior to him as an adult, he cannot quite admit to himself that he and Swede share the same story. As one whose interest in cultural identity has been refracted primarily through the question of what it means to be an artist, Zuckerman is unfamiliar with thinking about how identity choices might be made for reasons other than aesthetic experimentation. As Zuckerman writes, Swede does not become imbued with Zuckerman's sense of radical subjectivity; rather, Zuckerman's subjectivity is subsumed by Swede's narrative.

References:

- [1]. Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* (New York: Farrar, 1986), p. 320;
- [2]. Elaine M. Kauvar, "An Interview with Cynthia Ozick," *Contemporary Literature* 34.3 (1993), p. 373.
- [3]. Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York: Houghton, 1997), p. 3,
- [4]. G. Neelakantan. *Monster in Newark: Philip Roth's Apocalypse in "American Pastoral"* *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-), Vol. 23, *Philip Roth's America: The Later Novels* (2004), pp. 55-66