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AESTHETICS OF IDIOCY IN AMERICAN PASTORAL

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*"You put too much stock in intelligence."
(Marcia Umanoff to Lou Levov)*

To read *American Pastoral* (1997) through the prism of idiocy may first seem a risky proposition. My analysis will demonstrate, however, that the proposition is not risky at all. Rather, an approach through the prism of idiocy proves to be fruitful for it brings into the discussion of the novel a concept that sheds light on the strangeness of its characters, its awkward structure, and the audacity and wit of Philip Roth. If we think of *American Pastoral* in terms of a story whose *subject* is, at the core, idiocy, we may consider differently the intricacies of the plot. Indeed, we may even go so far as to acknowledge that some parts of the story do not require explanation. Eventually, we may come to grasp the very deceptive nature of the novel.

Idiocy should not necessarily be considered as the absolute antithesis of intelligence, rather it is a different form of activity that can even produce its own logic. Further, it does not always involve powerlessness or helplessness. On the contrary, it can prove very strong in the sense that it is that which defies and resists intelligence, that in front of which intelligence is powerless.¹ Indeed, to become conscious of this could be very depressing. This perhaps explains the fact that, in literature, desperation is often counterbalanced by humor: a story with an idiot hero is bound to be a comedy—and that is, against maybe all immediate evidence, how I read *American Pastoral*. My next step then is to unmask the comedy behind the tragedy. To do so, I propose that we start chasing the idiot in the text.

The use of the verb "chase" instead of the expected "track and trace" is not an error. We must "chase" the idiot, indeed, because he is definitely hiding. I even suggest that it is exactly how the story works: it hints at the idiocy of

¹ In her book *Stupidity*, Avital Ronell declares that "[e]ssentially linked to the inexhaustible, stupidity is also that which fatigues knowledge and wears down history" [RONELL 2002 : 3].

one character after another until it corners the hero in a very similar way as fate does in a tragedy. But what is idiocy and what is an idiot?² Part of the book's suspense is built on the hesitation raised by this question. I would invite the reader then to play the game of hide-and-seek—which we could more properly rename “who's the idiot here?”—that Swede Levov happens to be playing all too seriously.

I – The Idiot as a Lure

The novel recounts the defeat of intelligence, and more precisely, the defeat of a certain kind of intelligence. It shows, as we come to understand, how reality and history, that is to say life, ultimately destroy the Swede's plans for happiness. Some malicious power takes hold of his life and ruins it. To make sense, Swede's tragedy has then to be charged on someone's evil will or more probably, since “what on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?”³ on someone's stupidity [ROTH 1997 : 423]. Seymour Levov is thus determined to find who is responsible for this failure—his failure.

Of course, there is no mentally retarded character as such in *American Pastoral*, as we will find for instance in Roth's latest novel *Nemesis* (2010). In *Nemesis*, a “moron” called Horace haunts the streets and playgrounds of the city of Newark. Because he is an idiot and since he doesn't wash, he is suspected of spreading polio among the boys who are under the supervision of Bucky Cantor. But in the end, it will prove that we are on the wrong track.

In *American Pastoral*, the first time the narrative gets off on the wrong track is when Jerry, the Swede's younger brother and Zuckerman's classmate, is suspected of some kind of abnormality. Zuckerman remembers how secretive Jerry was and especially how he had made a fool of himself in a disastrous first teenage love affair.⁴ Jerry is then presented as a boy who lived in the shadow of his brother, who was neither as handsome, nor gifted, nor obviously as superior as the Swede and probably envied him. Jerry seems to have been different from the other boys. That is why Nathan Zuckerman thinks that he has discovered Levov's secret: “Is Jerry gay?” he asks the Swede [31]. But Jerry, on the contrary, has become something like a womanizer, a surgeon who married and divorced two of his nurses and is presently planning to marry a third one.

² The main problem comes from the fact that idiocy is both a scientific notion—a medical, psychological and philosophical concept—and a commonsensical intuition.

³ The novel's final sentence.

⁴ The hamster coat story [ROTH 1997 : 32-34].

When the narrative portrays the Swede's wife Dawn as a shallow former beauty queen, it takes clearly another wrong track. Is Dawn entirely beyond reproach? Her wish to raise cattle and her tenderness for the bull Count seem foolish to many observers, first of all to Lou Levov. But Lou, Swede's father, can also be suspected. He is blind to other people's concerns. Stuck as he is in his memories of the past, he is unable to keep up with the present. Like an idiot, Lou Levov keeps asking more or less stupid questions: why does his son not transfer the factory abroad and why does he not leave dangerous Newark; why should Jerry keep on divorcing his wives; why is porn so attractive even to adult and well-balanced individuals—there are obviously many things Lou cannot comprehend. His wife tells him so on several occasions: "Lou, maybe not everybody sees it your way" [350].

But the idiot of the story is more likely to be Merry, Swede's own daughter. She is responsible for the ruin of the Levovs' household and of their success-story of three generations. Furthermore, her stuttering designates her physically from the start as an idiot: stutter is one of the most recognizable symptoms of idiocy. Basically, she is a child who has not grown up, who has been blocked in a violent adolescent crisis. Aiming to oppose her father—his success, wealth and social status—she develops what seems to be extremist points of view. Young as she is, she looks merely like the caricature of a political activist. This is precisely the reason why Merry can be seen as an idiot: not because she is a terrorist, but because she fails to become one. She does not succeed in "bringing the war home" as she intends to, but instead stupidly blows up her small village's post-office, killing an innocent citizen. But Merry seems so smart in her conversations with her father... It may not then be as simple as that. Rita Cohen, who appears in the end (but is it true?) as a dummy, a mere puppet in Merry's hands and completely spellbound by her, describes Merry as an evil genius. Merry, then, might as well be the exceptionally intelligent, manipulative mind that systematically and perversely destroys the Swede's ego.

We should now return to the novel *Nemesis*, the end of which, interestingly enough, demonstrates that the idiot is not always who it was thought to be. In this text, where death snatches innocent boys due to a terrible illness, it is not filthy Horace shaking hands with them who is a menace, but the loving Bucky Cantor, the thoughtful and righteous protagonist, who probably spread polio among the children while trying to protect them: "I wanted to help kids and make them strong, and instead I did them irrevocable harm," he laments [ROTH 2010 : 271]. What a fool he was! When he discovers the tragic consequences of his foolishness, he mercilessly destroys his own life by rejecting the redeeming love of his fiancée. He is ultimately the real idiot

in the story.

In the same way, is the Swede *American Pastoral's* supreme idiot? Bucky, like Seymour Levov, is much too serious. He was raised to be a good son, then a good man, but this does not mean an intelligent man. For instance he has no humor and cannot understand religious faith. The Swede has also quietly moved away from religion and we know from the start that "there appeared to be not a drop of wit or irony to interfere with his golden gift for responsibility" [ROTH 1997 : 5]. Let us check to see if the guess is a good one.

II - *The Idiot Mind*

If our guess is right, it means that the real idiot in the story is not the mentally deficient, but the blind instigator—and at the same time victim—of his own tragedy. It is especially the one who foolishly persists in holding his ground when everything around is falling apart or going "berserk," like the Swede in his factory when a riotous mob spreads chaos all around Newark [86]. Seymour, then, is clearly an insane person, the true moron of the story.

And here we are: back to those famous idiots of epic dimension whose stories abound in the Old Testament or the Greek myths. Among them are Abraham, Job, and of course Oedipus, perfectly righteous and pious men, of all men the least deserving of God's or the gods' wrath, neither of their malignity. They have in common the will to imprudently fight adversity and share a *hubris* that leads them to oppose forces far more powerful than their own. On these grounds, the tragic character of Oedipus⁵ is probably the stupidest of them all, for he refuses to see that he is responsible for the evil that strikes his city, *despite his innocence*. He will very consciously blind himself for good after having discovered that he had been so blind while he was able to see: the kind of punishment Bucky Cantor will also more or less impose upon himself. Like Oedipus, Swede Levov cannot comprehend that he might simply be innocent of all that befell him, and that his innocence which, in this case, is close to idiocy, might well be the very cause of his tragedy.

Abraham, Job, Oedipus and then... the Swede. The all-too-perfect Swede, Nature's marvel and amazing creation. He, so gifted that he seems perfectly immune from any human weakness. What gnaws at him year after year?

⁵ An amusing scene from Woody Allen's movie *Crimes and Misdemeanors* plays with this very comic aspect of Oedipus' character: "Who committed this terrible deed? Good Heavens, it's me!"

What kind of terrible secret does he hide? Nathan Zuckerman takes a wild guess: what if the secret were that he had no secret, no inner-life at all, despite his apparent need to confess? What if he were a complete idiot? After all, behind the smooth facade he is maybe the most conventional of men, a perfect bore, as he appears to be at the Italian restaurant.

Nathan Zuckerman, who is a writer, will then have to imagine another form of idiocy, which will be more interesting for the sake of the novel and the pleasure of the readers.⁶ It will not consist in the Swede's lack of intelligence but in his inability to cope with responsibility. That is what the novel will prove to be the ultimate characteristic of idiocy: the Swede keeps asking questions and does not hear the answers. Levov keeps shouting at Merry, Rita Cohen, Sheila Salzman, his wife Dawn and finally at everybody and at God himself: "I want an answer!" [359]. Like Oedipus, he gives orders hoping to identify the troublemaker that unleashed the gods' wrath. The unanswerable question of responsibility paralyzes Levov's mind and leaves him stupid.⁷ The idiot, then, is not the subject who is not responsible or beyond responsibility because, like the mentally retarded, he is unable to distinguish between right and wrong. On the contrary, the idiot is the one who *takes upon himself beyond reason*. Avital Ronell defines stupidity in the following terms: "Neither a pathology nor an index as such of moral default, stupidity is nonetheless linked to the most dangerous failures of human endeavor" [RONELL 2002 : 3]. Stupidity, she argues,

which cannot be examined apart from the Subject accredited by the Enlightenment, poses a challenge to my sovereignty and autonomy. Where politics intersects with ethics the question emerges of where to draw the line, if there is one, of responsibility. To be what it is, responsibility must always be excessive, beyond bounds, viewed as unaccomplished. You are never responsible enough [...] [19].

Swede Levov's average intelligence is thus defeated by this unanswered question of cause and responsibility: like Bucky Cantor, he cannot draw the line that would save him.

⁶ It is not the "real" Swede that has an inner life and asks himself existential questions, but the more complex persona that Zuckerman will build to cope with his disappointment. Indeed, there is little doubt that the "real" Swede is a total jerk. And that's what ignites Zuckerman's imagination in the first place: the void he senses but cannot penetrate.

⁷ In the Swede's case, the answer is that the question as such has no answer, which means that it is a wrong question. By sticking to it and looking for a start or a cause to his collapse, he proves his lack of intelligence and wit.

But Swede Levov has been an idiot in yet another sense: he cherishes a naïve, unrealistic dream of a life without conflicts, that is, the “pastoral” dream. The pastoral temptation—that we might as well understand as a bourgeois trope meaning a semi-conscious longing that escapes the vigilance of intelligence—is another form of idiocy. It appears in the novel under three different aspects:

- a) the dream of a united family: the happy gathering of the loved ones (father, brother, daughter);
- b) the ideal of friendship and urbanity: the peaceful encounter of converging minds at a harmonious dinner with close friends and pleasant conversation;
- c) the faith in general progress, one generation doing better than the previous one, that should prevail upon social, ethnic and religious tensions.

The three dreams outlined above happen to be dramatically unaccomplished for the Swede. They represent a very naïve conception of happiness symbolized by the silly figure of Johnny Appleseed. The bull Count and life in the countryside, souvenirs from Switzerland, the beauty pageant and marrying Miss New Jersey: all these elements constitute the pastoral ideal of the Levovs. Instead of this simplistic vision of life, reality makes its complexity acknowledged through highly unpredictable events. These events are both tragic and comic: an adolescent (a would-be terrorist) kills three innocent persons; an intoxicated woman aims her fork at the eye of an old, considerate and innocent father who is nice and helpful.

III – The “Idiot Body”

The body seems then to be the innocent victim of the idiot mind: three corpses blown up by bombs and an old man’s face wounded by a fork. But there are two different sorts of bodies in *American Pastoral*. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the perfect, radiant body from the physical tokens of idiocy: what we can call the “idiot body.”

The defeat of intelligence in *American Pastoral* writes itself onto the body. It is either an injured body by a bomb or a fork or a savage body reluctant to culture: Merry’s imperfect vocal organs, for instance, that cause her stutter; sexuality popping up inadvertently between the Swede and Merry’s speech therapist as it will later do between Dawn and Orcutt; Rita Cohen’s lust opposed to Levov’s stubborn intellectual need to get answers; the

conversation about the pornographic film *Deep Throat* in the last chapter; the Jain's dirty body in Merry's last appearance; Dawn's mental recovery thanks to a face-lift: all these examples show the ways in which the body interferes with the pastoral ideal of purity. Not only these wild or injured bodies contrast resolutely with the perfection of Swede and Dawn's natural elegance, but they defeat in a way the alleged powers of the mind. Indeed, they prove that intelligence is useless and inappropriate.

Clearly, the pastoral ends with in the body. More precisely, it ends with an act of violence on the "idiot" body ("idiot" in the sense that it is absolutely defenseless: it offers itself to the violence of the blade): "The pastoral stops here," says Zuckerman at the end of the *The Counterlife* [ROTH 1986 : 323].⁸ It ends with an incision on the foreskin of a new-born boy. A series of parallels can be drawn between circumcision and the Rimrock bombing. According to Zuckerman, both are "barbaric" acts that contradict the ideals of modern Reason—peace, security, harmlessness. Both are in a way some kind of injustice since they are performed on innocent bodies. The shedding of blood is the token of innocence destroyed as well as the birthmark of impurity. It marks the end of the pastoral. It is no accident then that the novel's middle chapter is evocatively titled "Paradise lost." The difference between *The Counterlife* and *American Pastoral* is that circumcision was still a sacred act in *The Counterlife*, although for an atheist like Zuckerman it appears as a cruel and absurd ritual. There was still grandeur in it. In *American Pastoral*, on the contrary, the process of "depastoralization" seems completely farcical, senseless, stupid, even ludicrous. It is no more a sacrifice but an absurd murder.

With the injured body or the brutal interference of sex represented by the ambiguous kiss between Merry and her father, by Rita Cohen's indecent proposals, by the cuckolding episode in the kitchen, by Swede's own conjugal treachery, everything and everyone is entangled in impurity. How, then, can we decide who is to blame and who is faultless? The very categories of right and wrong are blurred. In these conditions, all moral expectations turn into a form of idiocy. The discussion about Linda Lovelace and the movie *Deep Throat* can be read as a grotesque allegory of all this. There is a kind of stupidity attached to the body and to sexuality. This stupidity becomes apparent in pornography. Pornography resists intelligence and understanding. That is why Lou Levov, who is clearly the idiot in this conversation, laments: "Why my son takes his lovely wife to such a movie is something I'll go to my grave not understanding. [...]"

⁸ It is the first appearance of the concept within Roth's fiction.

cannot believe that. These are intelligent, educated people.” And Marcia Umanoff teases him: “You put too much stock in intelligence. [...] It doesn’t annihilate human nature” [ROTH 1997 : 350]. Marcia continues to provoke Lou: “And what [...] is so inexhaustibly interesting about decency?” [359].⁹ The fact is that one cannot discuss rationally pornography. It is, in a way, a bewildering encounter with idiocy: there is nothing to argue about in pornography, nothing to understand, and nothing to fight against. It is the body’s raw and disruptive power that intelligence can neither struggle with nor comprehend.

IV - Idiocy as Poetics

Avital Ronell reminds us that, challenged by stupidity, intelligence is bound to be defeated. But art? Even the gods are left helpless, she reports Schiller to have said. What about the artists, then? Their inspiration seems to have been rather fueled by it. According to Ronell, like malice, cruelty or banality, stupidity “has largely escaped the screening systems of philosophical inquiry” [RONELL 2002 : 20]. Conversely, the “severest of poets have ventured, as if prompted by some transcendental obligation, into a consecrated domain where language meets its unmaking in stupidity, idiocy, imbecility, and other cognates of nonknowing” [6].

Poets have repeatedly found in idiocy a challenge that allows them to speak from the thin line that separates language from silence. Likewise, some novelists, since Dostoevsky, have found in idiocy a peculiar way of looking at the world. It has become a nourishing process for their art, a subject for their stories, and since at least Benjy in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), an interesting point of view and narrative voice to tell them. They have proved that idiocy could be a narrative strategy.

Like Roth himself, Nathan Zuckerman belongs to those daring novelists who employ idiocy in their art. As a writer, Zuckerman is deeply fascinated by it as well as by perfection and the sublime. For these reasons, he is strongly attracted to the Swede. Seymour Levov embodies, at least in his childhood, a kind of a physical and moral perfection. At the same time, Zuckerman is fascinated by the dull emptiness of the man he meets at Vincent’s.

It will be interesting to consider the origin of Zuckerman’s daydream about the Swede. The painstaking story of the Rimrock bomber’s father that we

⁹ Rita Cohen will tease the Swede with just about the same words a little bit later, p. 370.

eventually read from chapter four onward proceeds from the incomprehension Zuckerman first feels while trying to grasp the Swede's personality. Therefore the novelist, like a private investigator who wants to understand but fails, can be seen as the first idiot of the story. *American Pastoral* is indeed a story told by an idiot. To fully comprehend the consequences of such a fact, we can think of another great novelist who renewed the genre of the detective story by including a dubious narrator: Agatha Christie in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). The comparison helps us to unmask the ultimate idiot in the book: the reader himself, for he takes for granted what a treacherous narrator tells him, that is to say a falsified version of the Truth, just like Doctor Sheppard in Christie's book consciously conceals some crucial elements of the crime when he writes a report on the investigation.

Swede Levov's idiocy therefore derives from Zuckerman's own idiocy. In fact, they may even be seen as doubles: the Swede is an idiot in exactly the same way that Nathan Zuckerman feels like an idiot while sitting in front of him at the restaurant, unable to penetrate his friend's mystery: two idiots sitting across each other. Later on, when Nathan Zuckerman writes his novel after this disappointing meeting, he shapes the character of the Swede after himself. That is why, paradoxically, Levov is both an idiot and a complex character.

American Pastoral is then, from the start, a deceptive novel where the reader has to prepare for many blanks, unanswered questions, and wrong tracks as we have already seen. Ultimately, the novel leaves the reader with an unanswered question whose answer is of utmost importance: What really happened? And with a series of other questions, for instance: Who manipulates the other, Merry or Rita? And who is Rita Cohen in the first place? Does she even exist? These are stupid questions, after all, because we know that the brain of the story is the treacherous and mischievous writer Zuckerman. We nonetheless fall in the trap because of the "willing suspension of disbelief" in fiction which is nothing else than the sheer power of literature and the reason why we still like to read novels even if we know that they are nothing but fiction (and represent a considerable loss of time in our utilitarian century). The suspension of disbelief also explains the novel's capacity to outwit rational intelligence and to offer interesting insights about idiocy. Indeed, the reader may appear as the final idiot of the series—literature is basically a question of make-belief, and thus of idiocy, and a matter of "playing the idiot."

We, as readers and as ordinary human beings, need answers to our questions like Zuckerman and like the Swede. We want to know the end of

the story. We want to read a well-balanced and rationally constructed plot. In other words, we expect some kind of perfection which corresponds to the classical laws of the nineteenth-century realist novel. We shouldn't forget, however, that the nineteenth century also gave birth to the modern novel. Flaubert, another writer fascinated by idiocy, even tried to write a novel about nothing, a novel characterized by insipidity and blankness exactly like the transparent surface of the Swede. Flaubert intended to compose a novel that would sustain itself only by the reader's sheer fascination for the void.

Let us then consider more closely the structure of the book. It can be described as an "idiot" structure designed to annihilate the power of the plot, on the one hand, and on the other hand and simultaneously, to ignite the reader's fascination. All the dramatic aspects of the plot—its breathtaking revelations, the serious elements in it—occupy the center of the book (chapters four to seven). The middle chapters are surrounded by two highly farcical episodes that open and close the book: Zuckerman's forty-fifth high-school reunion where he meets Jerry after many years and the final supper where the Swede discovers that he is everybody's fool. This structure, with farce encapsulating the tragic events, breaks the seriousness of the story and in a way resorbs it.

The juxtaposition of the tragic and the ludicrous is precisely what defines the grotesque. Indeed the novel's structure is clearly grotesque: Roth intends to break the linearity and causality (and therefore rationality) of the traditional narrative.¹⁰ He prefers a circular structure instead, an organization which may seem redundant and imperfect as if it were broken by stutter. What is important for the reader is not to understand how things turn out in the end but to realize that in the end things never work the way they are expected to. Life does not give clear answers and for Roth, it seems that literature has to remind us of this fact. Regarding life, regarding history, we find ourselves in situations similar to that of the idiot Benjy in Faulkner's novel: we see terrible things happen around us but we are unable to understand them or react properly. This is maybe the ultimate lesson that idiocy—and Roth—eventually teaches us: life is irrational and treacherous. Faulkner borrowed the title of his novel from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606):

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more; it is *a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*. [Act 5, sc. 5, emphasis mine]

¹⁰ On the grotesque structure of the novel, see ASTRUC, chapter 5.

The Swede is that shadow in a tale without any proper conclusion and Zuckerman is the idiot telling it with great talent.

That brings me to my last point: the aesthetics of idiocy permeates the style of *American Pastoral*. Nathan Zuckerman's taste for details, blatant in the way that he makes the Swede, and the Swede's father, decorticate the fabrication process of ladies' gloves, can appear strenuous for the reader. How can we explain it? Is it Roth's writing weakness? Obviously not. It is intentional. Detail has been the Levovs' way of ensuring their success in trade and life. The attention to detail is these successful immigrant Jews' recipe to secure their access to America and, in a way, their primordial version of the pastoral. What could be more interesting for Lou Levov than a glove? He truly believes in its importance and this is what he teaches his son. But Lou Levov is a simple man. Educated people like Marcia Umanoff, and supposedly the readers, laugh at him. For us, what can be *more stupid* than a glove? The same with the tiresome descriptions. Detail comes to stand for nothing else than a laughable attempt to keep a grip on reality, far from the hazards of intellectual ideas and abstractions. Factual details are stupid: they are incredibly trivial and down-to-earth, but that is exactly why they should provide, according to Lou Levov, a strong hold on reality in order to prevent his family from the consequences of the disastrous idealism that is characteristic of intellectuals like Marcia or Gentiles like the Orcutts. Of course, attention to detail should also prevent something like Merry's bombing from happening to the Levov family. At the same time, detail plays an important role in the book's structure. The minute recording of details constitutes a major part of the idiot literary strategy of *American Pastoral*, that is, a major part of Zuckerman's poetics. The accumulation of numerous details in his report is—and here lies Roth's genius—what in the end is supposed to counterbalance, on the one hand, the emptiness of the lives he depicts, and on the other hand and simultaneously, the lack of verisimilitude of the plot he nevertheless shrewdly invents.

Conclusion

The pastoral is a simplistic and therefore quite stupid literary genre: it reduces reality to a consensual naïve story. Nineteenth-century realism, however, while trying to pay attention to the minute details of real life, and acknowledging therefore its complexity, promotes another kind of idiocy: the need for a thorough and rational explanation. At the core of Zuckerman's project to write a "realistic chronicle" lies the need to find answers and to restore causality [ROTH 1997 : 89]. Indeed, Zuckerman's

Swede does eventually get some answers—for instance from Rita Cohen or from Merry herself when he finally discovers her hiding place. In this way, Zuckerman provides us with a version of what might have happened, whereas life itself remains unanswered. The novelist's version is still incomplete because the insights offered by literature are nothing else but questions. The “realistic chronicle” itself has its share of blanks and mysteries... Meanwhile, it has perhaps managed to partly quench our thirst for possible answers.

Be that as it may, I hope to have shown how fruitful it can be to look at *American Pastoral* through the magnifying lens of idiocy. 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, may prove a rewarding reading strategy. We know by experience as well as from Aristotle's *Poetics* that a tragedy affects us deeply, but that we laugh at the flaws of human beings, that is, we laugh when we read a story which ridicules a fool. We should remember that Roth is a comic writer. Certainly, he is known and read for his apparently more serious novels rather than for the sheer satires and comedies of his earlier works. As readers, we are impressed by the spectacle of seriousness and intelligence and we are less sensitive to the humorous nature of a piece of art. Therefore, I would invite the reader to read *American Pastoral* at least twice, perhaps three times and more. The more we read the novel, the more clearly its comic power manifests itself. Like Nathan Zuckerman, we should look behind the surface in order to enjoy the comic treatment of a serious subject. *American Pastoral* is doubtless a tragedy, but it is also—and perhaps more authentically—a very funny novel.

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