



AMERICAN PASTORAL'S DISORDERLY WOMEN

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Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) begins with an evocation of an exhilarating moment of national regeneration immediately after the Second World War, sustained by a domestic Cold War politics of consensus which promoted the American Way as a cultural campaign during the 1940s and 1950s to energize and unify Americans by refreshing their belief in their nation's common purpose.¹ The novel traces the unraveling of that unity during the 1960s and early 1970s, ending with the days of the Watergate hearings in 1973, after the nation has been split by the emerging women's movement, race riots, the anti-Vietnam protest and violent radicalism. The narrator Nathan Zuckerman's story about the athlete Seymour Levov, nicknamed "the Swede," revisits these periods of post-war history from the standpoint of the 1990s, when Zuckerman is an elderly man in his sixties. Roth's novel entwines the divisive politics of the Vietnam era with the emergence of second wave feminism and rapidly changing gender relations in that period in order to evoke images of the beleaguered American male personified in the Jewish protagonist, the all-American looking Swede.² The novel scrutinizes and finally dismisses a mythology of origins—expressed in both the notion of the American Way and the eponymous pastoral—that perpetuates an ideology of America as a unified entity in which the (male) individual is fully integrated with the nation. Depicting an American man whose identity is shattered primarily through the agency of female antagonists, it critically focuses upon the prevailing motifs of innocence and

¹ A recent study by Wendy Wall has examined the emergence of 'the American Way' as a popular term in the mid-1930s, greatly publicized by newspapers and magazines, notably an essay contest in Harper's magazine in 1937 when the Second World War was looming. She notes that this term denoted "a profound sense of anxiety—an anxiety shared by Americans across the political spectrum—about national identity and unity in an increasingly threatening world" [WALL 2008 : 17].

² Betty Friedan's seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) could be said to have initiated second wave feminism; it stimulated many feminist writings in the later 1960s and 1970s by, among others, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, and Germaine Greer.

perfectibility in these two foundational narratives, re-envisaging the relationship between man and nation as a tormented and guilty one.

American Pastoral tests narratives of American identity predicated on unity and order in its portrayal of the Levov family, which has been in thrall to its “stories of old” [ROTH 1997 : 236]. In portraying the downfall of the Swede, the third-generation American son and ace baseball player, Roth’s novel demonstrates that these stories or myths have buttressed an ideology which is shown to be failing; as the novel concludes, “the old system that made order doesn’t work anymore” [422]. The novel works to undo the national ruling concepts of natural order, harmony and innocence, which underpin a powerful—and male-centered—ideological vision of what it is to be an American. It does this by means of a counter-narrative about disorder represented by what Roth calls “the indigenous American berserk” [86]. The novel creates a rhetorical space where rival national narratives are heard and tested, an arena where, in Richard Sherwin’s words about the courtroom, “order itself, and the norms that uphold it, are on trial” [SHERWIN 2000 : 69]. Roth shows that his counter-narrative springs from and responds to America’s orderly narratives, exposing the contradictions internal to each of the “stories of old” about national identity and the contradictions between them. Importantly, the American berserk is activated through women, a prime example being the fourth-generation Merry Levov, the Swede’s daughter, who becomes involved in political radicalism in the late 1960s and consequently carries out bomb attacks which kill four people.

American Pastoral consequently dissects the symbolic bonds that are intended to unite the American man with his nation. Roth makes repeated reference to bodily sufferings or trials so as to undo a national symbolism of bodily wholeness. The Swede begins by feeling supremely comfortable within his own skin, his sense of physical wholeness symbolizing the sense of unity present in the post-war spirit of national renewal. However, as events begin to tell on the Levov family, bodily trials begin to threaten that sense of a unified self. “He was our Kennedy,” says Zuckerman, evoking at one and the same time the iconic properties shared by the Swede and his president—his “exuding American meaning”—and the darker fate to come [ROTH 1997 : 83]. The Swede’s subsequent physical derangement, ultimately evidencing itself in the prostate cancer that kills him, is catalyzed by disorderly and treacherous women both inside and outside the family. The Swede experiences a traumatic and irreversible estrangement from his runaway daughter, a growing distance between himself and his wife Dawn, whom he eventually discovers to have been unfaithful to him, and a corresponding diminishment of his father, Lou, involving fatal challenges to Lou’s, and the

Swede's own, paternal authority. These splits in familial unity are reflected also in the malfunctioning of the family-run and family-structured Levov glove business within the wider context of 1960s' urban breakdown, racial violence and extremist politics. The Swede's bodily trials manifest themselves as internal divisions making him a "riven charlatan of sincerity" whose mask-like face conceals the "tormented inner Swede," under the pressure of experiences he has no means to comprehend and is unable to process [206]. The Swede's mask mirrors symbolically the masking functions of pastoralism and the American Way: both forms of mythological thinking seek to conceal deep and continuing racial and social divisions behind a homogenized and physically well-bounded image of the American individual.

The decaying cadaver of national manhood is personified not just in the Swede, but in the many men of the Swede's generation who are, Zuckerman realizes, succumbing to the ravages of prostate cancer more than fifty years after the moment succeeding World War Two when American national unity was supposedly at its height and "Americans were to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together" [40]. The Swede eventually dies of prostate cancer while Zuckerman himself has been left impotent and incontinent by prostate disease. Prostate cancer is clearly operating here as a concentrated metaphor for a contemporary American national body fragmented by the Vietnam War and assailed by political corruption: a nation in long-term decline suffering a failed democratic fraternity. Roth draws upon the accumulated metaphorical meanings of cancer prevalent in American culture to indicate an insidious form of social degeneration issuing from an uncontrollable spread of disease—the American berserk in its pathological form.³

Disorderly Women and the American National Body

American Pastoral explores the ways in which women threaten the national integrity during the period of Vietnam and Watergate. Roth records, firstly, the subversive impact of Merry's body upon the American national body. An early harbinger of trouble is Merry's childhood stutter: an imperfection

³ The extent to which cancer has operated as a metaphor for social disorder, disintegration and contamination in later twentieth-century American and Western culture has been charted in Susan Sontag's *Illness As Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978). Cancer makes a metaphorical appearance in the literature of this period, notably in *An American Dream* (1965), Norman Mailer's novel of a culture in decay.

that dismays the whole family and resists its most strenuous attempts at amelioration, as her parents and then a language therapist struggle to control her unruly tongue. Christopher Eagle's recently-published essay examines the links between Merry's stuttering, societal gender norms, political agency and violence, and argues that "Merry [...] use[s] her stutter *performatively* as a means to resist and eventually attack her father's adherence to social norms" [EAGLE 2012 : 20-21, emphasis in original]. Merry's halting speech is a prime marker of a bodily disorder that later also becomes visible in excessive weight gain in her teenage years. Further to Eagle, her speech disorder undermines her father's attempts at "orderly" speech exemplified by his language about boundaries and fear of boundary-breaching which he displays when dealing with his teenage daughter's increasingly rebellious behavior: he tells Dawn they must "draw the line" and that Merry has become "out of bounds" [ROTH 1997 : 103, 71].

Velichka Ivanova powerfully argues in a study of Roth's *The Dying Animal* that Roth's work is engaged in "tracking the struggle of the masculine self to preserve its wholeness against a female other perceived as a threat" and that it thereby exposes, rather than reinforces, the misrepresentation of women in male-dominated society [IVANOVA 2012 : 32]. *American Pastoral's* over-riding concern with masculine wholeness is likewise undoubtedly linked to gender norms and the female threat to masculine normativity; but in addition, like its companions in Roth's American trilogy, *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000), it firmly links masculine normativity to a male-inflected American national identity that is equally under threat. Merry's unruly physique and vocal presence indicate her resistance to assuming the American identity marked out for her by the Swede. Her troubled physical self comes to symbolize her status as an outsider and her subversive role within the family. The compromised bodily state of one whom the Swede had visualized as the perfect American child evidences a dual relationship to the national body. In one sense, it provides further evidence of national physical deterioration, and—when it emerges that Merry has been raped while on the run—of national vulnerability by having been violated. Yet, given that the well-ordered national body has been historically conceived of as a masculine entity, closely linked to a citizenship from which women were historically debarred, Merry's bodily presence has another, more sinister, function: it threatens the national body by being a contaminating agent, a vector of disease originating outside that body, seeking to penetrate and destroy it.⁴

⁴ The ambiguity about the significance of the female body is highlighted by Dana

The novel places the symbolic threat posed by the female body in the historical context of an era of violent radicalism like that which characterized Patty Hearst's involvement with the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974. It reprises and redefines the debates current at that time about the extent to which the female engagement with extreme violence was autonomous or not, therefore raising the complex question of how feminism and radicalism were related to each other as a threat to national unity. The factor most urgently prompting this question in her case was Patty Hearst's emergence and subsequent deviation from the long-established, wealthy, influential—and thus definitively American—Hearst family; a factor which places her threat to the national body deep inside that body. Roth raises a similar specter when he visualizes Merry as working from within to reveal the incipient fragility of American identity, and also draws on the otherness and ambiguity of her Jewish inheritance from her father to test further the boundaries of the American body.

Therefore the afflictions, or trials, of Merry's contentious female body are symbolically aligned with tests (an alternative meaning of "trials") to determine who is, or is not, an American. The Swede, in the final pages of the novel, imagines Merry as a marauding alien, a "veiled intruder," come back to finish the destruction of the Levovs by breaking back into the family circle out of which she has previously broken [ROTH 1997 : 421]. Insiders have become outsiders by jumping the line, and are now succeeding in inserting themselves again, by force, into American national life. "The outlaws are everywhere. They're inside the gates," the Swede realizes [366]. The language of boundary breaching and contamination characterizes an era in which those who have been deemed to be outside its scope violently claim their place within the nation. The bombings destroy the orderly narratives of identity that have sustained both the Swede and Lou. The violence of the

Nelson. She has pointed out that "'America' is repeatedly invoked specifically as a 'woman' to portray a passive and even sickly body" [NELSON 1998 : 42]. In the nineteenth century, the period with which Nelson is concerned, the imagery of "Miss America" is fairly straightforward. The suffering female body of America was usually represented as needing men's protection and male intervention to be cured. Nelson quotes from *The Federalist Papers* and debates about the Constitution to substantiate her argument that the national body was regarded as being properly managed by men, and that disorders of the body were characterized as feminine disorders. The feminine body is thus conceptualized as needing to be protected and cured. Yet, claims by women to equality at that period were represented as the national body turned monstrous and requiring the reassertion of the masculine order to regain its proper shape. In this context, women's bodies are thus conceived of as alien to, and therefore as threatening, the national body [42-43].

bombings exists beyond both men's ideological frameworks and so, for them, is un-American. Jerry is the one member of the Levov family to acknowledge its existence and, though with bitter sarcasm, to accord Merry her American identity: "[y]ou wanted Miss America? Well, you've got her, with a vengeance—she's your daughter!" [277] Merry's actions are incomprehensible to the Swede and their violence is unamenable to any of his attempts at a controlling narrative. Yet, as Swede's brother Jerry says to Zuckerman, "He [the Swede] took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in" [68].

Treachery and Disorderly Women

Merry is both the victim and the agent of contamination. She stands for an America that has turned on itself in the post-war decades of the 1960s and 1970s. The keynote of the novel is treachery, expanding in significance from the personal, to the familial, to the national scale, destroying unity on every level. But it is in Roth's consideration of female treachery and violence in particular that the bleakness of *American Pastoral's* vision becomes fully apparent. The "disorderly" women of *American Pastoral* lead the way in perpetrating those betrayals which unleash the subterranean violence and accelerate the attrition of the Swede's America. Merry is betrayal incarnate, exploding both family ties and community cohesion in Old Rimrock with her acts against the state. Her self-proclaimed associate Rita Cohen, a girl of a childlike stature who claims to be able to put the Swede in touch with his runaway daughter and who initially evokes a paternal response from him, enacts a cruel and repellent seduction routine in front of him that betrays and mocks the father/daughter relationship between him and Merry. Roth's characterization of the young women in the novel in general favors the Swede's bewildered perception of them as "girls in hiding, dangerous girls, attackers, implacably extremist, completely unsociable" [255].

Female treachery dominates *American Pastoral's* concluding section "Paradise Lost" in which the Swede and Dawn are hosting a dinner-party during the summer of 1973 at the time of the televised Watergate hearings, when the Nixon presidency has been put on public trial for corruption (his impeachment only subsequently averted by his resignation). On that same day, ten years or so after Kennedy's pristine image has been replaced by Richard Nixon's smudged one, the Swede has finally tracked his ruined daughter to a derelict area of Newark and has learnt from her that her childhood therapist, Sheila Salzman, a woman whom the Swede trusted and also had a brief affair with after the trauma of Merry's disappearance, had

secretly sheltered Merry after the bombing. On his return home, shaken and sickened by his discoveries, the Swede finds out at the dinner party that Dawn is conducting an adulterous affair with their WASP neighbor, Bill Orcutt, completing the wreckage of his family life. Orcutt's alcohol-sodden wife, Jessie, seals the psychological downfall of the Levovs by stabbing the Swede's father, Lou, just above the eye when Lou tries to make her eat. Betrayal by these women is a sign that an American ideology reliant on a myth of unified masculinity has reached the point of failure. But is Roth's berserk, the "the real American crazy shit," transformative?⁵ Or is this disorderly quality in *American Pastoral* in fact a primarily negative phenomenon?

Arguably, the "madness" of these berserk women detaches the Swede from an American persona he has believed to be natural. It makes him conscious of the limits of his identity as those limits collapse and the knowledge of their artificiality is therefore thrust upon him. In his recognition that he has *become* American as the result of a process of self-construction, the Swede becomes aware of himself also as potentially "other," an otherness that brings his almost-ignored Jewish inheritance to mind. In the alienating seduction scene with the Jewish Rita, he cannot help responding to her otherness as a woman; but her otherness recalls his own potential otherness as a Jew. His passivity and powerlessness in regard to her indicate a lack of masculinity that has historically been held to be characteristic of Jewish men.⁶ And when he finally meets Merry again, the Swede unwittingly affirms his deep affinity with her in her alienation and her bodily infirmity, even in the act of asserting her difference from him—he claims her as his daughter even when he vomits upon her in disgust. He then seizes Merry's tongue in a bizarrely intimate act, demanding of Merry not just the confirmation of her physical reality but also that she utters an assertion that she belongs to him, not only as his flesh and blood but by being innocent of murder. In this way, the Swede tries to assume control of an identity-threatening situation by gaining control of both Merry's speech and her body, as when previously he and Dawn had tried to subdue her childhood stutter by subjecting her to years of therapy. Paradoxically, he demands speech from her even as he prevents her from speaking by holding her tongue, since it is not her voice he wishes to hear, but the echo of his own. As Merry finally rejected therapy by embracing her stutter, so she now

⁵ Jerry's words to the Swede when the Swede rings him to confide his grief at the circumstances in which he finds his daughter [277].

⁶ See Gilman's *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins, c.1986. [74-76].

refuses speech to the Swede, and denies him the self-affirmation he craves of her. His instinctive physical response to her instead admits a human affinity—and a shared guilt—that he has not allowed himself to acknowledge. In that moment he feels all the “shame of masquerading as the ideal man” [174]. In debunking unitary narratives of American identity, Roth can be seen as making us readers aware of the instability and fluidity of personal and national identities, presenting an American self charged with the dynamism of continually becoming and unbecoming.

Evidently, though, Roth’s representations of an American berserk associated with women and the Vietnam era can be construed as deeply negative. Roth’s alignment of the 1960s and 1970s with the American berserk, personified in Merry and Rita and erupting socially in the race riots witnessed by the Swede in Newark, emphasizes the re-emergence of violent, chaotic, destructive elements envisaged as endemic to American culture, but to the exclusion, it might appear, of outcomes productive of beneficial social and political change.⁷ Such a representation of the era tends to forego any sense of these decades as transformational. Roth demonstrates in *I Married a Communist* that his protagonist’s growth to manhood through a “passage of trials” entails both perpetrating and suffering betrayals as an integral part of self-making. Roth there engages with a tradition of the *Bildungsroman* that conceptualizes a path to manhood in which betrayal, though guilt-ridden and painful, stands also as a key formative experience. But in *American Pastoral*, betrayal seems to be an agent of unmaking rather than a formative experience, the betrayals perpetrated by women being of a particularly destructive nature. Roth is drawing ironically on visions of Eve’s original betrayal of Adam in representing the wreckage of the Swede’s pastoral Eden; but his fall from innocence, though inescapably necessary, is in no way fortunate. The Swede is so shattered by his knowledge that in later life he is portrayed as having been frozen behind a mask, unable to overcome the betrayals that have been visited upon him. Especially does *American Pastoral*’s apparent connection of extreme radicalism and emergent feminism in that decade display a reluctance to view women’s self-making as being in any way constructive. None of Roth’s treacherous women seem to engage in a meaningful self-making despite their supposed “thirst for self-transformation” [254]. Even the striving and aspiring Dawn tries to eliminate her past by having cosmetic surgery and thus erases her history

⁷ This is despite the advances of the Civil Rights movement in the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Act (1965) and the very real gains experienced by minority groups—including, of course, Jews—following the relaxation or abolition of the barriers imposed on entry to employment, higher education and the professions.

from her face.

Treachery is indeed a keynote of the novel for all the characters, including indeed the Swede himself who at the novel's end is overwhelmed by the feeling that he has betrayed Merry by inadvertently revealing her whereabouts to Sheila and his brother Jerry who might now give her away to the police. But at the same time, one might well feel that Roth invites a more sympathetic hearing for the male voices, particularly those of the Swede and Lou, than the female ones. It might be argued that ultimately Roth's treatment of *American Pastoral's* disorderly "dangerous girls"—and women—fails to allocate them enough conceptual space to fully explore their role within the post-war American historical framework. Additionally, it is possible that in reinforcing a sense of rupture between the generations and within the American national body conjured up by the American berserk, it views Merry and Rita as part of a "lost" generation swept up in an incomprehensible and vicious phenomenon that has run America aground in chaos.

However, Roth's position perhaps becomes somewhat clearer on an examination of the concluding dinner party scenes of 1973. The dinner-party conversation moves from the on-going Watergate crisis to the recently-released film *Deep Throat* starring the porn star Linda Lovelace and featuring explicit scenes of oral sex, the like of which have not been previously viewed by the general public. The unstated link between the film and the political crisis lies in the nickname Deep Throat which references the film, having been accorded to an unidentified informant in the Nixon administration who has implicated the president himself in the Watergate cover-up. The film sparks a heated conversation between the disgusted Lou and the lecturer Marcia Umanoff, a provocateur with a malicious edge, as to whether Linda Lovelace is a figure of degradation or of a liberated empowerment that is giving Lovelace "the time of her life," as Marcia puts it [361]. The debate as to whether Lovelace's sexual acts in the film are indicative of empowerment or disempowerment also implicitly concerns itself with the speech acts of the secretive Deep Throat against the Nixon regime.⁸ The questions of Merry's acts of violence and the related subsequent acts of betrayal perpetrated by everyone closely associated with her, questions

⁸ If we ask how Roth might be intending the connection between the two Deep Throats to be read, it is hard to ignore the possibility that he is making sardonic reference to a contrast between a revelatory act of speech and an act which entails gagging. It is also probable that he is indirectly remarking on the limits of feminism by referring to the deep divisions which started to split second wave feminism during the 1970s over the issue of pornography.

constantly present in the Swede's mind and therefore forming the unspoken backdrop to this conversation, are thus positioned in the same frame as Deep Throat's verbal riposte to the political corruption of the Nixon presidency and the sexual license in *Deep Throat*.

These treacherous acts form a matrix with the televised "trial" of Nixon: they help to define the parameters of discussion about individual and collective responsibility for the events that have brought about the fall of shibboleths but also the era of a disgraced democracy. As Bill Orcutt says of the recent cultural changes they exemplify, "I think everybody here is wondering what the limit is" [365]. None of these acts is morally unambiguous; not even the Deep Throat who speaks out against the Watergate cover-up is free of taint, since he speaks in secrecy and is later revealed to be associated with the Nixon administration.⁹ The important point is that, for the Swede, Merry's violent acts are reintegrated into the social and political context from which they have sprung; they have now become part of "reality" instead of being a crazy, incomprehensible phenomenon. Merry opens his eyes to the actual in the harshest manner. "The daughter has made her father see," Zuckerman declares near the end of the novel, and Lou is aptly brought to the same understanding when he receives a stab wound just above the eye from Bill Orcutt's drunken wife, Jessie [418]. If the Swede's fall from innocence had been at all fortunate, it would have been at this moment of realization; but this conclusion is vexed, as has been noted, by his failure to profit from it in later life.

Nevertheless, *American Pastoral*, by exposing the reality of the American berserk, restores a historical perspective to what seem like random, inexplicable events of violence. The bombings are therefore shown to be not the uniquely destructive acts that the Swede has taken them to be, but neither do they herald the complete disappearance of the old political order in the way that Merry, Rita and other "dangerous girls" might wish. Roth instead envisages the American berserk as the flip side of narratives of the American Way and pastoral innocence, an aggressive response to an aggressively divisive history, but a response that springs from the same ideological basis as that old order. The Swede has noted about girls like Merry and Rita that there is "something terrifyingly pure about their violence and the thirst for self-transformation" [254]. Roth here picks out two key features—purity and the urge to self-transformation—that have been apparent both in New World pastoralism and the American Way. These girls, then, aim to transform themselves; figuratively portrayed as re-

⁹ In 2005, he was revealed to be the Deputy Director of the FBI, William Mark Felt, Sr.

entering the very American body they have just rejected, they unconsciously subscribe to the very ideology, expressed in the language of purity, innocence and newness, which they are simultaneously working to discredit and destroy. This observation is borne out by the Swede's realization that, "in his uncensored hatred of Nixon, Lou Levov is merely mimicking his grand-daughter's vituperous loathing of LBJ," since both Lou and Merry believe that national evils are personified in one man [299]. The crux of the matter is that both Lou and Merry Levov display the same mistaken belief that the American people are essentially innocent. This perception of Merry sets her actions in perspective while it also tends to negate the subversive power of the American berserk. Roth's historical perspective, however, presents a complex view of the novel's female characters, making the argument that his view of women is misogynistic difficult to sustain.

Conclusion

American Pastoral constitutes a disorderly response to beliefs in new beginnings, historical metanarratives, and coherent American narratives of identity; it emits an energy that belies the bleakness of its vision and that resides above all in the energy of its language. Roth's "disorderly" narrative unleashes the dynamism that potentially exists in redrawing the lines which demarcate entitlement to residence within the American body. His prose generates a central contradiction with regard to the self for it conceives of it as decaying, fragmenting, and petrifying but at the same time changeable and turbulent, always in the process of becoming something other. It cautions against new stories to replace the "stories of old," but foregrounds the process of storytelling itself, and of allowing alternative narratives to speak within the main text. In so doing, it puts into play against each other the huge contradictions that arise from the anxious post-war attempt to contain potentially violent national divisions by imposing a sense of a unitary identity, contradictions that have shaped American post-war culture and whose currents and counter-currents have thrown up a multitude of unpredictable events, such as the bombings and the race riots that devastated Newark in 1967.

The novel is finally alive to its own wrongness, its treachery in claiming to speak for those who can never be fully known. The narrator Zuckerman is acutely aware that in telling the story of the Swede, he is speculating on the basis of fragmentary evidence as to his motivations, based on one brief meeting with the Swede himself and the testimony of his brother Jerry. Roth's presentation of American history in *American Pastoral* reflects this

fragmentation, this wrongness, in the novel's fractured, asynchronous structure. Nevertheless, the novel is still highly effective in showing the operation of cause and effect in the events of the post-war period. One might well disagree with Roth's deeply negative rendering of some of those effects as mediated through the actions of women. Yet one must allow that the novel stimulates rather than closes off debate on those questions. It is because *American Pastoral* is historically grounded that it does not seek to impose one narrative but allows for a multiplicity of narratives, and thus for the unpredictability of events arising from the anxious post-war attempt to contain potentially violent national divisions. In so doing, Roth, in ways that few novelists are able to achieve, charts the contradictions that have shaped, and are continuing to shape, American post-war culture.

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