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PHILIP ROTH'S ART OF IRONY IN *AMERICAN PASTORAL*¹

VELICHKA IVANOVA

Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris

Upon its release, Philip Roth's novel *American Pastoral* (1997) won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (1998) and it has been the object of sustained critical attention ever since. Among the many perspectives adopted by scholars and critics, this essay focuses on an aspect that has not been explored in detail before—Philip Roth's art of irony. To put into play an ironic perspective on *American Pastoral* may seem unusual at first sight. Indeed, the novel is usually read as a tragic story of a virtuous man whose life is devastated by the chaos of history in the sixties. Seen in this way, *American Pastoral* appears as a nostalgic narrative that resurrects an innocent America prior to the Vietnam War. It marks "the beginning of a series of novels which are more elegiac and less comic than the preceding ones" [BLEIKASTEN 2001 : 105].² Critics have noted that Roth's nostalgia for a lost and bygone America goes hand in hand with his sympathy for his male protagonist and male secondary characters. André Bleikasten, for example, arrives at the following conclusion:

In any case, we should note that in this novel, the novelist's esteem and affection are exclusively for the older men, the men of his own generation, and even more, for those of the previous generation, the alleged representatives of lost integrity and vigor, such as Lou, the indomitable father of the Swede [111].³

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the conference "*American Pastoral*: Philip Roth" organized by Martine Chard-Hutchinson at the University Paris 7, France, November 18, 2011. Portions of the paper have appeared previously in French in my monograph *Architecture d'un rêve. American Pastoral de Philip Roth: une étude narrative* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2012). I would like to thank Pia Masiero, and Gustavo Sánchez-Canales for their comments on the present version. Special gratitude is due to Theodora Tsimpouki who took the time to read two versions of the draft and for her continued support throughout this project.

² "le début d'une série de romans plus élegiaques et moins comiques que les précédents." [My translation]

³ "Notons en tout cas que, dans ce roman, l'estime et la tendresse du romancier vont exclusivement aux anciens, aux hommes de sa propre génération et plus encore à

American Pastoral, then, is read as a tragic novel about the fall of the Utopianist Seymour “Swede” Levov. A melancholic narrator recounts this fall and mourns the American Eden destroyed by the turbulent sixties. Such interpretations of *American Pastoral* as an elegiac, tragic, nostalgic, or melancholic narrative—as a book of mourning for an idyllic past—focus exclusively on the male protagonist. They derive from the novel’s narrative structure which encourages the reader’s identification with the suffering Levov. Indeed, from page 89 on, the narrator Nathan Zuckerman disappears and, through the use of internal focalization, the narrative espouses the point of view of the main character Seymour Levov. Some critics, however, resist the invitation for consonant reading, which, according to Dorrit Cohn, matches the ideology of the main character [COHN 1978 : 26]. In his monograph *Philip Roth* (2007), David Brauner, adopts a more nuanced approach. Brauner observes that *American Pastoral* can be read as “a tragedy in the Aristotelian tradition,” but also points out a series of ironies, for all the utopias so relentlessly pursued by Seymour Levov—the most beautiful woman, the perfect child, the successful factory and the perfect assimilation into WASP America—lead to a completely opposite result [BRAUNER 2007: 168]. The final irony of the novel, Brauner argues, is that the antagonists—“the serpents in Seymour’s Eden”—are themselves also engaged in their “particular dreams of Utopia” [BRAUNER 2007 : 171].

The examples Brauner discusses reveal the effects of situational irony which by definition involves situations where actions have an effect that is opposite from what was intended. The classic example is the Athenian tragedy by Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*. Laius and Jocasta, the king and the queen of Thebes, and Oedipus who ignores he is their son, take all the necessary actions to avoid fulfilling the ominous prophecy but these actions instead lead them inexorably toward it. In fact, irony, considered situationally, is neither comic nor tragic but is simply a method whereby action leads to the opposite result of intention. But situational irony is not the only manifestation of irony. It is now necessary to explain what is meant by the term “irony.”

Irony as a relational strategy

In the opening pages of his book *The Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), Wayne Booth declares that “[t]here is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and

ceux de la génération antérieure, représentants présumés d’une intégrité et d’une vigueur perdues, tel Lou, l’indomptable père du ‘Suédois.’” [My translation]

many would hold to the romantic claim [...] that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it" [BOOTH 1974: ix]. Of the numberless studies devoted to this protean subject, I have found most useful Linda Hutcheon's *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994). Hutcheon theorizes irony as "a discursive practice or strategy" and focuses on verbal and structural ironies rather than situational irony [HUTCHEON 1994: 3]. The scene of irony, she suggests, is a social scene [4]. Irony is a communicative process. Ironic meaning, according to Hutcheon, possesses three major semantic characteristics: it is relational, inclusive, and differential [58].

Irony is a relational strategy in the sense that it operates not only between meanings (between what is said and what is implicit), but also between people (ironists, interpreters, targets of irony). Ironic meaning is inclusive (it implies simultaneous interpretations: "both/and") and at the same time differential (it includes mutually exclusive interpretations: "either one or the other"). "The unsaid is other than, different from, the said," Hutcheon explains [64]. Ironic meaning, according to the theorist, involves "an oscillating yet simultaneous perception of plural and different meanings" [66]. Hutcheon argues that the process of differentiation and relation involves a rapid oscillation between these meanings. She likens the process to the famous ambiguous image involving the rabbit/duck illusion.

What is interesting about ambiguous illusions is that they elicit a perceptual "switch" between the alternative interpretations. The indecision between the images we see illustrates that perception is a creative construction of the brain. Perception is an active process of the individual mind rather than a representation of objective reality. The idea of the optical illusion, then, allows Linda Hutcheon to think about ironic meaning as "something in a flux, and not fixed," which depends on the perceiver [60].

Hutcheon maintains that the irony of a message is "activated and put into play but the interpreter" [122]. In terms of narrative texts, the interpreter of the message produced by the narrator is the narratee. A distinction must be made between the narrator and the implied author. The narrator's irony may be directed at some subjects whereas the implied author's irony may be directed at others, targeting occasionally the narrator himself. Another distinction exists between the implied author as the consciousness that creates the fictional world and the real flesh-and-blood author [PHELAN 1996: 215]. If the speaker is the implied author, the interpreter who "ironizes" his/her text is the implied reader (authorial audience) [215]. The flesh-and-blood reader may or may not coincide with the hypothetical, ideal audience, for whom the author constructs the text. As a consequence, the

actual audience may or may not be prone to seeing irony according to the author's intention. Only an alert and critical individual reader may register the ironic intent. Hutcheon argues that such a reader may even see irony "in places where not every one might," not even the author [HUTCHEON 1994 : 123].

In this essay, I propose an interpretation of *American Pastoral* in terms of the reader's progressive encounter with the text. Like in the optical illusion oscillation, Philip Roth's reader does not remain passive. Readers are offered the possibility to switch between various interpretations: nostalgic, tragic, melancholic or ironic, among so many others. All these different readings are possible because irony is not concerned with dichotomy, but with dialectics. My intention is to show that, when faced with a complex work of art like *American Pastoral*, the reader should dismiss the quest for definitive answers and final truth in favor of engagement with a deeper level of communication among different perspectives. These perspectives are not limited to the characters and the narrator—*i.e.* the work itself, but rather, they include each individual reader's own individual point of view.

The reader is first attracted to the book as a material object. One particular element catches her eye from the outset: the book cover. The first hard cover edition of *American Pastoral*, designed by Milton Glaser, plunges the reader into a dynamic encounter with the book, for it constitutes already a reading experience. The eye reads the title, the author's name, and grasps the black-and-white picture of a group of young American boys and girls, all of them white, neat, nice to look at, perfectly peaceful, perfectly happy, drinking Coca Cola, the drink itself being one of the symbols of America. "American Pastoral" reads the title, half of it white, half of it bloody, whereas the idyllic picture is already burning against a dramatic pitch-black cover. The old-fashioned black-and-white picture suggests that this so-called "pastoral" is a tale about the past and about destruction. The oscillation of meaning triggered by the book's cover creates irony in the sense defined by Linda Hutcheon: it engages the reader in a communicative relation. It is both inclusive and differential for it carries two simultaneous and mutually cancelling meanings. From the very first contact with the text, the reader is aware that she will have to constantly switch between the American idyll and the American tragedy.

"Paradise Remembered" is the title of the first section of the book. The seemingly nostalgic narrator Nathan Zuckerman recounts his admiration for the Swede, the local American Jewish community's Apollo. However, while we may sometimes perceive the voice of the narrator as imbued with nostalgia, the narrative he constructs is not nostalgic from start to finish.

Nathan Zuckerman holds his own turbulent feelings at an ironic distance. His speech glorifying the fifties, for example, was not composed for the forty-fifth high-school reunion, was not delivered at the reunion, but was written “only *after* the reunion,” when, we may suppose, he was already thinking about working on the book [ROTH 1997 : 44, emphasis in original]. Roth even italicized the adverb in case an absent-minded reader inadvertently misses it.

The narrator is self-ironic and skeptical, but his hero, the Swede, does not have even “a drop of wit or irony” [5]. The lack of wit or irony constitutes an important difference between the two voices the reader hears in the book: the voice of the deluded Seymour Levov and the voice of the narrator. Zuckerman is a self-conscious writer, not a naïve dreamer. He acknowledges that his nostalgic recreation of the past is enacted through conscious means, by craft. As a writer, Zuckerman dreams a novel, that is, a work of art, whereas his hero dreams a life. Self-conscious and self-critical, Zuckerman resorts to irony in order to counter the sentimental pathos of his childhood memories.

Irony is intrinsic to the art of fiction. In his essay “What is Irony?” Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera argues that “[t]he novelist’s relation to his characters is never satirical; it is ironic.” Kundera insists on an important difference between satire and irony. “Satire is a thesis art,” he declares, it is “sure of its own truth” [KUNDERA 1996 : 202]. Whereas

Irony means: none of the assertions found in a novel can be taken by itself, each of them stands in a complex and contradictory juxtaposition with other assertions, other situations, other gestures, other ideas, other events. Only a slow reading, twice and many times over, can bring out all the *ironic connections* inside a novel, without which the novel remains uncomprehended. [203, emphasis in original]

Naturally, every passionate critic, scholar, or reader, dreams of fully comprehending the work, but this dream is an illusion. And yet, even if we know that it is a scholar’s utopia to try to bring out “all the ironic connections” in a narrative, Kundera’s invitation applies to Roth’s novel as well. *American Pastoral* should be read slowly, many times over, and each new reading will enact new connections, alternative ways of perceiving the characters’ behavior and ideology, and will elicit new meanings. For the scope of this essay, the interrogation of Roth’s art as an ironist will focus on three key moments in the narrative: Rita Cohen’s visit to the Newark Maid factory, the ironic emergence of other voices in the third-person narration

focalized through Seymour Levov, and the shift between the levels of enunciation that occurs in the final sentence of the novel.

Dramatic irony

A “tiny, bone-white girl who looked half Merry’s age but claimed to be some six years older, a Miss Rita Cohen” arrives at the factory. Rita is described as Seymour Levov sees her: she is not an adult, but a child, even a baby: she has a “bland baby face.” She is “so tiny, so young, so ineffectual-looking” that Levov could hardly imagine she is a doctoral student, “let alone the provocateur who was Merry’s mentor in world revolution” [ROTH 1997 : 117]. The third-person narrator immediately tells us who Levov’s young visitor is, but Levov himself remains ignorant. Roth delays the revelation of Rita’s identity, letting Levov spill over in talk while Rita enjoys herself heartily, “warmly smiling over at him” [120]. The successful businessman delights and relishes in talking trade, whereas the third-person narrator muses about Rita’s decision to postpone the revelation. Maybe she says nothing because she wants to “size him up first,” or, perhaps, she wants to “better enjoy toying with him,” or “[m]aybe she just enjoyed the power” [118]. The reader, too, is given all the time she needs to size up Levov: his pleasure of being an authority on the glove trade, his being “touched by—and attracted by” Rita’s thoroughness, his fatherly identification of Rita with his daughter Merry [120]. Indeed, in his elation, the factory owner becomes pathetically loquacious, puts his arm around his visitor and begins calling her “honey,” only to discover, after hours spent together, that the diligent student is in fact Merry’s mentor in world revolution.

Rita’s first visit to Seymour Levov’s factory provides a typical example of dramatic irony. This kind of irony is the device of giving the reader information about the situation of the character in a particular moment of the action that the character him/herself is not aware of. The term “dramatic irony” is widely used in literary studies but, according to some critics, it is more appropriate for the theater. In her article “*Ironie dramatique ou ironie cognitive?*” Catherine Grisé recommends the use of a more appropriate term for the analysis of narrative fiction. She proposes the term of “cognitive irony” [GRISÉ 1990 : 355].

The presence of a well-informed observer is essential to the functioning of cognitive irony. In an internally focalized narrative, despite the imposed viewpoint of the character, the narrative instance remains independent and is not limited to the perceptions of the focal character. The reader shares the

narrator's superior knowledge and enjoys the ironic effects when the character is mocked.

Cognitive (or dramatic) irony has three stages—installation, exploitation, and resolution. [355]. The first stage consists in providing the reader information that the character ignores. Thus, to prepare the ironic scene of Rita Cohen's first visit to Levov's factory, the narrator reveals from the outset precisely what Levov "had not known": that Rita Cohen "had undertaken some fancy footwork [...] so as to elude the surveillance" of the FBI [ROTH 1997 : 117]. Levov "should have recognized immediately who she was," the narrator explains, but he believes Rita to be a student doing research on Newark's leather industry [117]. The narrative exploits the suspense created by the contrast between the character's ignorance and the reader's awareness until the final stage—the resolution—when, "very softly," Rita reveals who she is. Seymour is the target of irony in this scene, but irony has a double-sided edge. In fact, Rita is not spared the narrator's mockery. "Never seen anything made?" asks Seymour. Rita's response is astonishing: "Saw my mother make a cake when I was a kid" [124]. It is ironic that Rita preaches world revolution and the suppression of capitalist exploitation, but has never seen anything being fabricated. She has no understanding and no knowledge of the reality of life outside the manifestos she reads.

Rita Cohen is a typical representative of the 1960s leftists. In his Harvard lectures titled *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (1998), political philosopher Richard Rorty points out that during the sixties, the leftists in America were convinced that they lived in a violent, inhuman, and corrupt country. Like Rita Cohen, they skipped lightly over all practical questions. "They seemed to be suggesting that once we were rid of both bureaucrats and entrepreneurs, 'the people' would know how to handle" the society and the economy, he observes [RORTY 1998 : 103]. Militants like Rita Cohen and Merry Levov fight against the establishment, but their acute political conscience does not lead them to support good causes. Their criticism fails to take creative form. Rita Cohen, Merry Levov, and Marsha Umanoff at the end of the novel, ridicule everything. Busy to overturn the nice façade of the present, they have no time and no intention to think a better future. We cannot univoqually identify the author's position, but it seems to me that, through these characters, Roth suggests that ferocious opposition to the principles and realities of American democracy is just as harmful as Seymour Levov's delusion of perfect existence. Both signal lack of discernment and lack of imagination.

Dialogic confrontation

Critics have pointed out that the novelist narrator in *American Pastoral* disappears from the stage early in the novel. "After page 89, the reader loses any awareness of Nathan Zuckerman and is swept by the saga of the Swede," Derek Parker Royal observes, and she concludes that "[t]he narrator never returns to contextualize his story or to sum up things" [ROYAL 2001 : 7]. However, the novelist narrator Nathan Zuckerman is far from being invisible. Even if the narration in the second and third sections of the book (from p. 89 onward) is focalized through the character of Seymour Levov, the creator of the fictional world is still Zuckerman. After page 89, Roth uses free indirect discourse to transcribe the inner trial of Seymour Levov. Ross Posnock points out that the controlling sensibility in the narrative is the Swede's "kitschy Americana perspective" which results from Roth's "immanent method that requires Nathan's effacement" [POSNOCK 2006 : 110-111]. Further, in her essay "Nothing is impersonally perceived," Pia Masiero demonstrates that the narrator Zuckerman is far from being invisible. She argues that "Zuckerman's authorial glosses do not maximize the distance between his perception and knowledge and the Swede's but, aim at implicating the reader in the Swede's logic and in his existential predicament" [MASIERO 2011 : 186]. According to Masiero, Zuckerman "yields to the Swede's perspective and seems never reluctant to countenance the appropriateness of his hero's reactions (self-delusion included)" [187].

It is in these instances of putative narratorial self-effacement and empathetic identification with the character that the so-called dual-voice hypothesis seems most compelling. According to Boris Uspenskij, in sentences of free indirect discourse, and some sentences of indirect discourse, "the voice of the narrator is combined with that of the character or superimposed on it. The ideology of the deluded character does not coincide with the skepticism of the undeluded narrator, even if, on the phraseological level, their perspectives merge" [USPENSKIJ 1973 : 102-105]. Such instances of free indirect discourse are vehicles of irony.

As we have seen, Levov's first encounter with Rita is ironic because of the contrast between Seymour's blindness and the narrator's knowledge of the situation. The scene is recounted from the point of view of the Swede, and the voice of the narrator espouses his voice. However, the specific terms the narrator uses and his astute handling of typographical style may show that in fact his attitude is different. If, in the end the "utterly insignificant *pebble*" Rita Cohen overpowers the "gentle giant" whom the narrator describes as a "conservatively dressed success story six feet three inches tall and worth

millions,” irony is not only situational, but also verbal [ROTH 1997 : 133-134, 281, emphasis in original]. The voice of the narrator carefully distances itself from the voice of the main character.

The narrator ironically resorts to the perspective of other characters (Jerry Levov, Rita Cohen), who are not the usual focalizing characters and who perceive Seymour Levov in quite a different light. For example, when, seen through the eyes of Rita Cohen, Seymour Levov appears as a “success story six feet three inches tall,” her ironic contempt coexists with her awe. As we have seen, ironic meaning involves “a simultaneous perception” of different interpretations [HUTCHEON 1994 : 66]. In this way, by occasional altering of internal focalization through the single male protagonist, the narrative encodes ironic meaning which some critics fail to perceive. Dale Peck is extremely sensitive to the physical description of Rita, whom he sees as inferior to Swede, and asks: “Why does her size disqualify her from possessing power?” Peck accuses Roth of misogyny, because according to the way they are portrayed, “Rita Cohen and Merry Levov ought not to have the power they do because they are not physically strong enough to wield it, and they are not physically strong enough to wield it because they are girls” [PECK 1997 : 23]. In these instances, however, the target of irony is the male protagonist. In his interview with French essayist Alain Finkielkraut, Roth explains: “what I wanted to do in my book was to oppose Seymour Levov to a Nemesis whom, we could easily imagine, he would resist and crush without the slightest difficulty [ROTH 2000 : 113].⁴ It is ironic that Seymour Levov becomes the prey to such a tiny woman.

The apparently silent narrator skillfully dons the lenses of secondary characters in order to render Seymour ridiculous. In addition, another voice reveals, untamed, through direct speech, quite a different meaning hidden in Swede’s sweetness. Later in the novel, Rita Cohen exhibits herself during her second encounter with Seymour and taunts him by parroting some of the phrases he had used during her visit to the factory. David Brauner analyzes this scene and concludes that

[...] by transposing Seymour’s words from the apparently innocent context of the glove fitting into the context of sexual seduction, Rita highlights not only the latent sexual content of their earlier conversation [...] but also the pedophilic and incestuous desires that

⁴ « [c]e que je voulais, dans mon livre, c’était opposer Seymour Levov à une Némésis à laquelle on imaginerait qu’il pourrait absolument résister et écraser sans problème ». [My translation]

were implicit in Seymour's unconscious identification of her with Merry [BRAUNER 2007 : 165].

Rita's transposition of Seymour Levov's speech into the contrasting context of pornography and incest is not the only means of creating irony. The oscillation between the voices and perspectives of the secondary characters produces an ironic effect, too. For example, the quotation of direct speech and the quoted monologue (literal transcription of the thought of a character) include degrees of dissonance which are determined by the context or implied by the contents of the citation. The interaction between the voices of the protagonist, the secondary characters, and the narrator is rendered explicit by various features which include evaluative markers; deixis (contextual information: grammatical person, tense, time, place); specific word choices, syntax, and typography.

Typography plays an important role in the emergence of ironic meaning. Indeed, typography is far more than just letters on a page. In much the same way that the tone of voice can alter a message, typography adds meaning to the words. An example of the use of different character style is in Dawn's interview with Lou Levov, Seymour's father. The confrontation takes several pages [ROTH 1997 : 391-400]. The father's authoritative voice is inscribed in capital letters whereas Dawn's responses are in normal characters. Only the Father asks the questions whereas Dawn is obliged to give the right answers. Indeed, Lou Levov, undisturbed, leads the Inquisition from beginning to end. In the ruthless conclusion he masterfully reduces the young woman to an inanimate image before he dismisses her: "MISS DWYER, YOU ARE PRETTY AS A PICTURE. [...] I THANK YOU FOR COMING TO MY OFFICE. THANK YOU AND GOOD-BYE [399].

During the exchange, Lou Levov conveniently erases Dawn's personality and acknowledges her beauty, but Dawn resists his objectification and bravely asserts her identity in the end: "I'm not a picture, Mr. Levov. I'm myself. I'm Mary Dawn Dwyer of Elizabeth, New Jersey" [400]. However, the Swede's father will always see her as a beautiful doll, one in a series, just like his younger son Jerry's four wives: "She's a doll, she's a sweetheart, she's my girl..." [38]. Lou Levov is very fond of and very protective of the young women in the family. However, if critics like Timothy Parrish have declared that *American Pastoral* asserts "the law of the father," the graphic overtone of Dawn's conference with Lou invites another perspective. The reader has the possibility to "switch" from the assertion of Lou's unquestioned authority and wisdom to an ironic awareness of his tyranny.

But Dawn is not spared an ironic vengeance either. In the example cited in a previous essay, I pointed out that Roth's graphic representation of speech and consciousness creates an ironic effect whose victim is now Dawn [IVANOVA 2011 : 252]. In this paragraph, Dawn recounts her stay in pastoral Switzerland. Without the narrator's guidance, Seymour's consciousness evokes the exchange he had with Sheila just before the dessert [ROTH 1997 : 379]. Dawn's direct speech in the present tense is framed by quotation marks. The dialogue between Seymour and Sheila simultaneously surfaces in Seymour's mind, represented in italics for Sheila and normal characters for him:

"When they come down from the high mountain pastures they come down in a line, the leading cow the first one." *What if she went on to kill somebody else? Isn't that a bit of a responsibility? She did, you know. She killed three more people. What do you think of that? Don't say these things just to torture me. I'm telling you something! She killed three more people! You could have prevented that! You're torturing me. You're trying to torture me. She killed three more people!* "And all the people, all the children, the girls and the women who had been milking all summer would come in beautiful clothes [...]"'. [ROTH 1997 : 414, emphasis in original]

The exchange occurs during the novel's final scene—the dinner at the Levovs' in September 1973. Dawn has already had her face-lift and has started an affair with her neighbor Bill Orcutt. The passage cited above shows her vanity and her capacity to obliterate the memory of her child. Her selfish account of the stay in pastoral Switzerland dramatically clashes with Seymour's painful knowledge of Merry's four victims. Typography, too, creates the confrontation of voices that sets in motion the oscillations of ironic meaning.

Reader implication

The last paragraph of the novel illustrates the shift between the levels of enunciation which involves the reader in a communicative act. I cite it in its entirety:

Yes, the breach had been pounded in their fortification, even out *here* in secure Old Rimrock, *and now* that it was opened it would not be closed again. They'll never recover. *Everything is against them, everyone and everything that does not like their life. All the voices from without, condemning and rejecting their life!*

And what is wrong with their life? What on earth *is* less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs? [423, emphasis mine]

Quite surprisingly for a contemporary work of fiction, the italicized sentences assert a definitive statement full of negative evaluation: "Everything is against them, [...] condemning and rejecting their life!" Having reached the end of the book, the reader does not take these declarations at face value. A critical, informed reader remains suspicious of such an overt interpretation of the Levovs' story because, the reader knows, contemporary fiction does not engage in moral judgments. Instead of dismissing *American Pastoral* as a *roman à thèse*, the analysis will focus on the sudden temporal shift in the sentence preceding the last one and on the very last sentence itself, which, for me, remains an open question.

In the paragraph cited above, the italics draw attention to the deictics "here" and "now," to the present tense, the future tense, the copula "and" and the exclamation "yes." It will be interesting to attempt to determine whom these marks refer to.

Up to this point, the narrative has consistently been put in the past tense. The deictics "here" and "now" doubtless refer to the context of its production—Zuckerman's writing of his book. The final question, too, is in the present tense. The use of the present tense places the observer in the ever-present instant of experience through reading. Since the reader is both interpreter of the text and dramatized as a character to whom the question is addressed, ultimately it depends on each individual reader to decide whether the Levovs' world is wrong and why.

The deictic "now" in the sentence "and now that it was opened it would not be closed again" sparks a controversy since it can be read in two opposite ways. On the one hand, if "now" is understood as an adverb, it refers to the present moment of Zuckerman's writing and the reader's reception. In this case, the hypothesis is correct—the text seeks to involve the reader in its production and interpretation. On the other hand, if "now" is understood as a conjunction meaning "as a consequence," the meaning would be "and as a consequence" of the fact that the breach "was opened, it would not be closed again," inscribing a sense of causality that coheres with the definitive rejection of Levovs' world that immediately follows: "They'll never recover. Everything is against them." Again, such a definitive assertion seems at odds with the novel's aporetic structure—Zuckerman's continuous questioning of the truth of Swede's life which eventually sparks a novel; the Swede's own constant self-questioning which only ends with his death. For

this reason, the hypothesis will ignore the second alternative and will focus on the other elements: the use of the present and future tense, the copula, and the exclamation.

The two readings of “now” are very distinct. The reader may first understand it in the “as a consequence...” way because of the past tense in that sentence (“was opened,” “would not be closed”). The reader is then the passive receiver of the narrator’s explicit condemnation of the Levovs. But “would not be” shifts into the future, and the next sentence even more so—“they’ll never recover,” and so does seem to shift into an engagement with the reader.⁵ The two possibilities coexist and call the reader’s attention, thus offering an illustration of Linda Hutcheon’s observation that ironic meaning is relational, simultaneously inclusive and differential. Understood as an adverb, “now” implies a shift to the reader’s present tense, and emphasizes the reader’s crucial role in the emergence of ironic meaning.

Narration is an act of communication between the producer of the narrative—the narrator, and its recipient—the narratee. *American Pastoral* does not construct an individual narratee with specific characteristics that would distinguish him or her from the individual reader. Since the narratee is undetermined, any individual reader can take his/her place. Unlike the narrator Nathan Zuckerman, the narratee in *American Pastoral* has no voice, otherwise s/he would have been represented as a character. S/he is rather “an ear” listening to the story of Swede’s American pastoral.

The text does not intend to give an answer to the final question, but, by shifting between the levels of enunciation, seeks to involve the reader in a dialogue with the work. The participation of the reader as a physical being is required to activate the dynamic play of the perspectives and ideologies of all the instances of the text. By interpellating the narratee/reader, the final question seeks to make her leave the comfortable position of passive contemplation and abandon her preconceived opinion about the work. The reader should accept “the *stance* of having no fixed position” that Debra Shostak insists upon in her monograph *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives* (2004). Shostak explains that Roth’s novel does not “argue for a single position among the competing voices it transcribes, thereby offering the reader a vantage point from which to judge the fictive events,” but rather, it represents “a collection of mutually ironizing and self-canceling voices” [SHOSTAK 2004 : 7].

American Pastoral is an ironic narrative for a subtle reason. Describing irony,

⁵ I owe these observations to Ben Railton.

Milan Kundera observes: “the more attentively we read a novel, the more impossible the answer, because the novel is, by definition, the ironic art: its ‘truth’ is concealed, undeclared, undeclarable” [KUNDERA 1998 : 134]. *American Pastoral*, too, does not deliver a moral judgment about the Levovs’ life; the book’s appeal lies in its ironic indecision. This essay aims to demonstrate that any claim to a definitive interpretation of the novel should be dismissed in favor of a dynamic communication of different narrative perspectives and points of view, the narratee’s/reader’s included. If my own approach as a reader puts into play an ironic perspective, in proposing such a perspective I lay no claim on closure. Such a stance finds support from Roth himself who declared in an interview with David Remnick that “[i]t is difficult to come to grips with a mature, intelligent, adult novel” [REMNICK 2006 : 119].

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