



THE MACHINE IN THE GARDEN STATE
JEWISH ENVIRONMENTALISM IN *AMERICAN PASTORAL*

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The canon of Jewish-American literature from the latter part of the twentieth century seems pretty far from the concerns of the environmental movement during the same period. When we think of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, and Philip Roth, for example, we think of an urban literature, a literature preoccupied with ethnic identity, assimilation, social history, politics, and in strong contrast to a literature of the land, of conservation, of resource management. Yet, as Lawrence Buell, one of the most influential theorists of the environmental studies movement has argued in *Writing for an Endangered World*,

design [...that is] the larger structure of thought and feeling of which the *ideal* is a part.[...] Much of the obscurity that surrounds the subject stems from the fact that we use the same word to refer to a wish-image of happiness and to literary compositions in their entirety—pastoral dreams and pastoral poems. [MARX 1964 : 24, emphasis in original]

Roth is clearly sensitive to this doubled meaning and the title of the novel should be taken to refer to both the Swede's "pastoral dream" and Zuckerman's "pastoral poem." Thus, if we read the novel as a kind of critique, it could be viewed as a critique of contemporary America or a critique of the genre of pastoral itself, which as a genre may prove insufficient to explain or account for certain emergent features of the cultural world in which Zuckerman is narrating his tale. Marx's subject is the overall design, the literary composition as a whole, and therefore he sees what might be viewed as a critique of pastoral "ideals" as part of pastoral "design"—he terms this "the *counterforce*" [25, emphasis in original]. Often this counterforce takes the shape of a locomotive: "It appears in the woods, suddenly shattering the harmony of the green hollow, like a presentiment of history bearing down on the American asylum" [27]. In Roth's version, this "counterforce," most obviously, takes shape as the bomb planted by Merry Levov, the Swede's troubled daughter, in the post office of Hamlin's general

store, a bomb which “transports him [the Swede] out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk” [ROTH 1997 : 86]. But Roth, too, like Marx, has an interest in the pastoral design. And in this sense, we find Roth taking an interest in the way literature shapes the world. What Roth calls the “counterpastoral” is both the “counterforce” within pastoral design and that which allows the reader to stand outside the pastoral design and note its shortcomings.

In fact, there have been a number of lucid critical efforts made in this direction, with an eye toward just this aspect of the complexity involved in pastoral. Andrew Gordon’s recent essay, for example, “The Critique of the Pastoral, Utopia, and the American Dream in *American Pastoral*,” suggests that within the pastoral tradition, Roth fits nicely as an

[...] antiutopian and antipastoralist who questions idealistic longings and validates perpetual struggle, complexity, and uncertainty in both life and art. Nevertheless, in *American Pastoral*, despite his demolition of the American dream, Roth paradoxically ends up clinging to certain pastoral ideals, contrasting the wonderful lost America of his Newark childhood in the 1940s to the fallen America of the 1960s and 1970s. [GORDON 2011 : 34]

Gordon uses the definition of Abrams and Empson for pastoral: “the traditional pastoral is ‘a deliberately conventional poem expressing an urban poet’s nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in idealized natural settings’” [34]. There are a number of problems that Gordon deals with in this essay. First of all, the idealized setting in Roth’s novel is not rural but urban. Also, as Gordon points out, “The central pastoral dream Swede Levov attempts to live out, however, is the immigrant dream of becoming a totally assimilated American by moving to a small town” [37-8].

Ross Posnock goes even further in addressing the dual nature of pastoral as both a dream and a poem, as he reads the novel as a critique of both the desire for an uncomplicated past and the wish to be free of that past. As he puts it:

But Roth is not calling for a return to roots; nor does Levov’s failure involve a betrayal of his “authentic” Jewishness. Rather, in his attenuated understanding of America and his fixation on assimilation, the Swede seals off both in his anachronistic, platitudinous fantasy of

America as a Revolutionary New Jersey colony of landed gentry.
[POSNOCK 2006 : 106-7]

Both Posnock and Gordon, however, even as they assess the critical impulse within Roth's pastoral, accept pastoral as fundamentally about a division between rural and urban, simple and complex, distinctions which fall apart once we look more closely at Roth's novel and its position within a discourse of Jewish counterpastoralism.¹

As early as *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Roth figures the knowledge of trees (or lack thereof) as a marker of Jewish difference. Portnoy's first visit to his college girlfriend's family home in Iowa is a move described by the narrator as "the most openly defiant act of my life: instead of going home for my first college vacation, I travel by train to Iowa, to spend Thanksgiving with The Pumpkin [the nickname Portnoy uses for Kay Campbell] and her parents" [ROTH 1969 : 219]. The great revelation of "being on the inside rather than the outside of these *goyische* curtains" emerges when Portnoy is confronted by the fact of "the name of the street upon which the Campbell house stands [...]. Elm. Where trees grow—which must be elms!" [222]. Portnoy accounts for his distance from the "*goyische*" world as a feature of his ignorance of trees, a product of his upbringing:

What I first see in a landscape isn't the flora, believe me—it's the fauna, the human opposition, who is screwing and who is getting

¹ Approaches to a re-writing of Jewish pastoral, but not in relation to Roth's *American Pastoral*, can be found in Karen Grumberg's article on pastoral in *Operation Shylock* and *The Counterlife*, which positions the story of pastoral in relation to Israel. Also, Sander Gilman's collection of essays *Jewish Frontiers* (2003) suggests a new way of mapping the history of Jewish migrations and identity formations. Gilman points out that both of the dominant models, whether that of Diaspora or Galut, have "formed the Jewish self-understanding of exile. The voluntary dispersion of the Jews ('Galut' or 'Golah') is articulated as inherently different from the involuntary exile of the Jews ('Diapora'). These two models exist simultaneously in Jewish history in the image of the uprooted and powerless Jews on the one hand, and rooted and empowered Jews on the other" [GILMAN 2003 : 4]. Gilman's critique of both of these models suggests a different spatial model for Jewish identity, that of the frontier, which would not "presuppose a model of center and periphery and condemn the periphery to remain marginal" [3]. When the Swede finds himself trying to persuade his daughter, Merry, that she can conduct her protests just as easily in the rural enclave of Old Rimrock, he falls into the binary of center-periphery. Gilman's critique shows how pervasive the center-periphery model has been for Jewish history and how it shapes various competing models of Jewish history.

screwed. Greenery I leave to the birds and the bees, they have their worries, I have mine. At home who knows the name of what grows from the pavement at the front of our house? It's a tree and that's it.
[222]²

Roth goes on to mine this comic vein for a few pages, mocking the urban, Jewish disdain for trees, but the serious point here is that in the revelation about the naming of Elm Street, Roth has presented the pastoral setting of Iowa as a coherent world, where language makes sense, where words and names are one and the same. This is another instance of what Portnoy has earlier referred to as "the full force of a simile," revealed when Mr. Campbell says that he has slept "Like a log" [221]. Language is used in a different way out in the country. The shepherd who roves the countryside, what John Milton in his pastoral elegy, "Lycidas," refers to as "the uncouth Swain," is able to be more authentic with his language because his being is closer to nature. Leo Marx describes these types of speakers as "impulsively dissociating themselves from the world of sophistication, Europe, ideas, learning, in a word, *the world*, and speaking in accents of rural ignorance" [MARX 1964 : 109, emphasis in original]. In the example from *Portnoy's Complaint*, the rustic shepherd is our urban sophisticate, so it's all turned upside down. Without rehearsing Roth's complex relationship to Jewish stereotyping throughout his career, I want to suggest that he relies on a stereotype of Jewish discomfort and unfamiliarity with nature to establish the parameters of the pastoral design as it delineates a number of his novels.

In *American Pastoral*, we get both sides of this stereotype. Lou Levov, the Swede's father and a prototypical Rothian patriarch, expresses a kind of reflexive antagonism to the concept of Seymour (the Swede) and Dawn moving out to rural Old Rimrock:

"Heat this place, cost you a fortune, and you'll still freeze to death. When it snows out here, Seymour, how are you going to get to the train? On these roads, you're not. What the hell does he need all that ground for anyway?" [ROTH 1997 : 309]

Like Alexander Portnoy before him, the Swede, "rather like some

² Roth explicitly refers back to this moment in the recent novel, *Indignation*, when he writes of Marcus Messner as he makes his way in the American heartland: "The scenic Winesburg campus, with its tall, shapely trees (I learned later from a girlfriend they were elms) and its ivy-covered brick quadrangles set picturesquely on a hill" [ROTH 2008 : 18].

frontiersman of old, would not be turned back. What was impractical and ill-advised to his father was an act of bravery to him" [310]. But almost in the same breath, Roth makes it clear that this is not the frontier but the suburbs. The Swede explains to his father: "Stockbrokers take this train to work. Lawyers, businessmen who go into Manhattan. Wealthy people" [310]. Lou Levov's grievance is based on his discomfort with the sense of open land and nature, a discomfort identified as Jewish, and the Swede's response, his rebellion, is a sophisticated effort to overcome historical resentments and petty tribalism through an embrace of the pastoral.

As the novel closes, the Swede imagines Merry, now a Jain living in the most squalid part of Newark, making the same commute he himself had been making to and from downtown Newark:

[...] he all at once envisioned it—already back in the countryside, here in the lovely Morris County countryside that had been tamed over the centuries by ten American generations, back walking the hilly roads that were edged now, in September, with the red and burnt orange of devil's paintbrush, with a matted profusion of asters and goldenrod and Queen Anne's lace, an entangled bumper crop [...] all the flowers she had learned to identify and classify as a 4-H Club project and then on their walks together had taught him, a city boy, to recognize [...]. [419]

The passage continues with the invocation of a litany of plant species, all named, and Merry traversing the landscape, "feeling herself at one with nature" [419]. But, as the passage winds to a close, Merry's hatred for the pastoral surroundings takes hold, and by the end it is

[...] a landscape that for so long now has been bound up with the idea of solace, or beauty and sweetness and pleasure and peace, the ex-terrorist had come, quite on her own, back from Newark to all that she hated and did not want, to a coherent, harmonious world that she despised [...]. [420-421]

The Swede is a long way from Alexander Portnoy whose repertoire includes only oaks and elms, but he is still trapped within the limits of pastoral. In this sense, for Roth, Jewishness still limits the possibility of an authentic pastoral, a true connection to the land (this is the dynamic through which Gordon and Posnock have interpreted the novel as a counter or antipastoral). Put another way, if we assume that nature is to be found in the country and human history is to be found in the city, and we place Jews in

the city and non-Jews in the country, we will be stuck perpetuating a limited concept of pastoral.

The fact that Bill Orcutt is perhaps the least likable and most reprehensible character in *American Pastoral*, and also the one most associated with WASP sensibilities—the most “*goyische*” to refer back to Alexander Portnoy’s favored term—marks environmentalism as a decidedly suspect ideology. One of the very first things we learn about Orcutt is that he is a committed environmentalist:

As president of the local landmarks society, already established as the historical conscience of a new conservationist generation, Orcutt had been a leader in the losing battle to keep Interstate 287 from cutting through the historical center of Morristown and a victorious opponent of the jetport that would have destroyed the Great Swamp, just west of Chatham, and with it much of the county’s wildlife. [ROTH 1997: 300-301]

What to make of Orcutt’s environmentalism? From the point of view of the pastoral, we have the knife of technological progress (in this instance in the form of Interstate 287) cutting through the landscape.³ This language of pastoral and cutting evokes the often-quoted closing of *The Counterlife*:

Circumcision is everything that the pastoral is not and, to my mind, reinforces what the world is about, which isn’t strifeless unity. Quite convincingly, circumcision gives the lie to the womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory, the appealing idyll of living “naturally,” unencumbered by man-made ritual. [ROTH 1986 : 370]

And if we think of the “cut” in Morristown as a kind of circumcision, we find that religious distinctiveness emerges as an element of the pastoral. Bill Orcutt (his name links him to this moment, too) displaces the Swede, both in his affair with Dawn and in his building of the new house for him and Dawn to live in. But in another sense, what is being disrupted is the “historic” in Morristown. Orcutt is identified as an “environmentalist” twice more and in both instances it is obliquely connected to his non-Jewish identity: “Was that

³ Christopher Sellers’s important new book, *Crabgrass Crucible*, identifies the rise of the modern environmental movement in the post-World War II suburbs, in just the kinds of battles Orcutt is here associated with. Sellers defines the new environmentalism, it is “distinguished [...] from the older conservation movement, as well as from a mostly urban and earlier movement for public health [...] for how it posited threats to nonhuman nature and to human bodies side by side” [SELLERS 2012 : 7]. Sellers defines other features of this new environmentalism, as well.

why she was in heat over the sink—because of his inbred sense of entitlement? Or was it the laudable environmentalism?”, and then later, “The humane environmentalist and the calculating predator, protecting what he has by birthright and taking surreptitiously what he doesn’t have” [ROTH 1997 : 359, 383]. Orcutt is the opposite of Jewish in his connection to nature, and like Lou Levov, shows a kind of reflexive allegiance to his affiliation in the pastoral binary.

One of Cynthia Ozick’s stories from the same period as *Portnoy’s Complaint* and Orcutt’s environmentalism elaborates the context of Roth’s Jewish counterpastoralism. Ozick’s “The Pagan Rabbi” begins with an epigraph from *The Ethics of the Fathers (Pirke Avot)*:

Rabbi Jacob said: “He who is walking along and studying, but then breaks off to remark, ‘How lovely is that tree!’ Or ‘How beautiful is that fallow field!’—Scripture regards such a one as having hurt his own being.” [OZICK 1966 : 3]

Ozick’s story neither affirms nor rejects this sentiment. It is the story of Rabbi Isaac Kornfeld, an eminent scholar of Mishnaic History, who has committed suicide by hanging himself in a public park in the Bronx. Kornfeld, it is revealed through the course of the story, has killed himself while engaged in the pursuit of Greek philosophy, paganism, tree-worship; ultimately he finds and falls in love with a tree-nymph, a dryad, who punishes him after he tries to fully possess her. Kornfeld has died the ultimate tree-hugger. Kornfeld’s diary, found after his death, includes a note with an excerpt from a well-known passage in Deuteronomy (12:3): “Ye shall utterly destroy all the places of the gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree” [16]. Paganism is here connected with worship of nature. Kornfeld stands for the failure of traditional Jewish culture to account for the very real import of the environment.

American Pastoral, as it edges away from a simple split between Jewish urbanism and non-Jewish nature worship, becomes a new kind of pastoral. I would posit, in fact, that Roth’s novel asks to be read as what Lawrence Buell, in *The Environmental Imagination*, calls “an environmentally oriented work” [BUELL 1995 : 7]. The first of Buell’s four defining “ingredients” for this particular genre of literature—one indebted to pastoral, but not wholly of it—is as follows: “The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” [7]. Buell takes the pastoral tradition and reimagines elements of it as environmental in a way that sets forth the

parameters of an emerging literary genre.⁴

In *American Pastoral*, Roth struggles to reconcile the Jewish antipastoralism with a shifting understanding of the relationship between human and natural history. We see this from the start of the novel. The first rendering of the pastoral can be found in the early section on John R. Tunis's baseball novel, *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, which Zuckerman tells us, "could as well have been called *The Lamb from Tomkinsville*, even *The Lamb from Tomkinsville Led to the Slaughter*" [ROTH 1997 : 8]. The connection between the innocence of childhood and the metaphors of the pastoral is underscored later in that paragraph where Dave Leonard, "veteran catcher [...] shepherds him through a no-hitter" [8]. Then, later, when the Swede finds Merry wandering under a bridge in Newark, "He was thinking instead that Mary Stoltz was not his daughter, for the simple reason that his daughter could not have absorbed so much pain. She was a kid from Old Rimrock, a privileged kid from paradise" [262]. The use of the word "kid" to link Merry to Roy Tucker, the so-called "kid from Tomkinsville," draws a line between the glove-making business at the center of the novel, reliant as it is on real kids, not metaphoric ones, and the conventions of pastoral, or to use Buell's formulation, human history and natural history.

In a long flashback immediately before the Swede finds Merry in Newark, the Swede remembers his father instructing him in the ways of the glove making industry:

"Feel this," he'd say to the Swede once they were safely back in the car, and the child would crease a delicate kidskin as he'd seen his father do, finger the fineness appreciatively, the velvet texture of the skin's close, tight grain. "That's leather," his father told him. "What makes kidskin so delicate, Seymour?" "I don't know." "Well, what is a kid?" "A baby goat." "Right. And what does he eat?" "Milk?" "Right. And because all the animal has eaten is milk, that's what makes the grain smooth and beautiful. Look at the pores of this skin with a magnifying glass and they're so fine you can't even see 'em. But the kid starts eating grass, that skin's a different story. The goat eats grass and the skin is like sandpaper. The finest leather for a formal glove is what, Seymour?" "Kid." [220-221, emphasis in original]

The shift from mother's milk to grass might be thought of as the move from

⁴ Along these same lines, Roth's most recent novel, *Nemesis* (2010), with its pervasive heat and spreading disease, might be read as a novel of climate change, a subset of Buell's genre outlined in Tobias Menely's essay "'The Present Obfuscation': Cowper's *Task* and the Time of Climate Change."

the domestic, natural space of the family to the wider world of history. This is an alternative narrative to the circumcision antipastoral at the end of *The Counterlife*, where the particular and the historic marks the individual as a way to separate from the purely innocent state of naturalness. More than that, if we go back to the human “kids” in this novel: the one from Tomkinsville and the one from Old Rimrock, we can ask the same question as Lou asks about the goat—“what does he eat?” Personal fate—the primary question in this novel—gets answered here in terms of a specific environmentalist notion of the relation between human history and natural history.

In the multi-layered Newark through which Zuckerman transports the Swede, the pastoral design clearly shows the mapping of history on nature. The Swede recalls driving in Newark to pick up piecework with his father as a child:

[...] the massive railroad viaduct remained brokenly within view [...] a child susceptible to his environment even then [...]. The manmade horizon, the brutal cut in the body of the giant city—it felt as though they were entering the shadow world of hell, when all the boy was seeing was the railroad’s answer to the populist crusade to hoist the tracks above the grade crossings so as to end the crashes and the pedestrian carnage. [220]

The counterforce to the pastoral—the history of construction, dislocation, “cutting,” is here figured onto the landscape of the antipastoral Newark. Like the building of Interstate 287, one man’s history is another man’s nature, whether in Newark or Morris County.

In the novel’s opening pages, when we learn about the origin of the Swede’s glove business, we are told of his grandfather, that he got a job

[...] in the Nuttman Street tannery of the patent-leather tycoon T.P. Howell, then *the* name in the city’s oldest and biggest industry, the tanning and manufacture of leather goods. The most important thing in making leather is water—skins spinning in big drums of water, drums spewing out befouled water, pipes gushing with cool and hot water, hundreds of thousands of gallons of water. If there’s soft water, good water, you can make beer and you can make leather, and Newark made both—big breweries, big tanneries, and for the immigrant, lots of wet, smelly, crushing work. [11, emphasis in original]

Over and over, Roth emphasizes the interconnections between the country and the city, between history and nature. In Orcutt’s tour of the region, we

learn that Morris County has a “meandering spine of old iron mines” and all manner of industrial scars and relics from the “the nineteenth century, when iron was king,” as well as a “the powder company plant in Kenvil that made dynamite for the mines, and then, for the First World War, made TNT” [302]. The very name of the County, we learn, has a kind of originary association for the Swede with the “Morris Canal”: “In the Swede’s young mind, the ‘Morris’ in Morris Canal never connected with Morris County—a place that seemed as remote as Nebraska back then—but with his father’s enterprising oldest brother, Morris” [303]. Merry doesn’t need to bring history to the country, for it’s already there in the form of the bomb factories. And the Swede does not need to learn the names of the trees, but rather of his uncle.

In Ozick’s story, the urban and Jewish pastoral dream becomes a suicidal madness. Isaac Kornfeld’s soul tells him that “the taste of the Law exceeds clear water” [OZICK 1966 : 36]. We might consider Merry’s Jainism as a similar kind of suicidal ultra-pastoralism, designated as a clear and coherent value system marked by its renunciation of the world. Her reading has “led her to leave behind forever the Judeo-Christian tradition and find her way to the supreme ethical imperative of *ahimsa*, the systematic reverence for life and the commitment to harm no living being” [ROTH 1997 : 262, emphasis in original]. Yet Merry’s actions and retreat from those actions are but one element of the overall pastoral design of this novel, a design capacious enough to incorporate a new type of pastoral, one paradoxically enabled by a Jewish urbanism. By demonstrating the connection between “urban and outback landscapes” [BUELL 2001 : 8], Roth has reshaped pastoral design as a genre that places Jewish urbanism within the tradition of environmental studies.

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