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**THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF LEVOV
ANNE BILL ORCUTT AND THE UNMAKING OF AMERICA
IN PHILIP ROTH'S *AMERICAN PASTORAL*¹**

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In the United States, we have a colloquialism that goes something like: “You had better get your house in order.” The statement’s interest lies first in its reference to domestic space as a metaphor for all things important in one’s life, and, second, in the implicit assumption that, until one’s own personal space is in order, then nothing else on a more global scale can possibly be put in order, either. The idiom remains so common in America not only because so many of its citizens invest so much in their homes, perceived as an exemplary case of personal property, but also because it has become a way of talking about the safety and unity of the United States as a country overall, perhaps most compellingly with the designation of the department of “Homeland Security” in the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. Recently, this connection between Americans’ love of the family home and the US homeland came full circle when, in a November 19, 2012 article for the *New York Times* entitled “Hillary’s Next Move,” Gail Collins reports then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as saying, in response to a question about life after her Cabinet position: “Maybe I’ll get a decorating show” and listing Home and Garden TV’s hit show “*Love It Or List It*” as one of her favorites [COLLINS 2012].

The image of the house, and its power, goes much farther and deeper back than the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, of course. The first historical referent for Americans’ talk about houses and order comes from June 16, 1858, in one of the most famous speeches Abraham Lincoln

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delivered—an address to a nation torn and on the brink of the American Civil War. According to his well-known remarks:

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. [LINCOLN 1858]

With these words, Abraham Lincoln simultaneously announced his candidacy for the US Senate and offered his scathing commentary on the recent ruling of the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott Case. Underlying the decision, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney argued, was the assumption that the nation's founding fathers believed blacks "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect" [TANEY 1857]. With the country divided on the question of slavery and the status of African Americans, Lincoln likened the United States, three years before the Civil War, to a divided house: drawing not only on its connotations with comfort, safety, and protection, but also on the language of architecture and engineering to suggest that a house cannot stand upon a flawed foundation.

Even as it foreshadowed the calamity to come, Lincoln's language of the divided house also looks back to Edgar Allan Poe's masterpiece, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839)—a story about a house that literally does fall to ruins in the end—at once a gothic romance, but also an allegory about the dark past of the founding of the US and its dependence upon the institution of slavery. The decade prior to the publication of Poe's story, for example, saw Nat Turner's revolt (1831); slavery debates at Lane Theological seminary, one of the first major public discussions on the subject (1834); a gag rule imposed two years later when the House of Representatives barred discussion of anti-slavery petitions; and, in 1839, the famous Amistad Case, a "freedom suit" that resulted when Africans, illegally sold into slavery, rebelled on board the Spanish Schooner named *La Amistad*.

After Lincoln, the figural connection between architecture and the legacy of slavery was maintained into the twentieth century. For instance, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*—a 1952 novel also invested in the question of civil rights, and arguably a text in part responsible for the birth of the civil rights movement in the next decade—features an architect in the figure of Peter Wheatstraw, an African American hipster who, when Invisible Man meets him, is carrying blueprints in the form of plans for a new future, and he says:

I got damn near enough to build me a house if I could live in a paper house like they do in Japan. I guess somebody done changed their plans [...] every once in a while they have to throw 'em out to make

place for the new plans" [ELLISON 1952 : 175]

With these words, one can't help but hear Ellison's disappointment in the direction of the country, one built on asserting the equality of mankind that had been quickly revised so as to exclude blacks. Says Wheatstraw moments later: "Folks is always making plans and changing 'em" [175]—underscoring a compulsion to change made necessary by a refusal to address the fundamental flaw in American society.

I begin with this recitation of architectural metaphors about the flawed, yet legitimate, promise of American democracy to understand more fully how Philip Roth's Vietnam fiction participates in a larger tradition of American self-critique. Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) also features an architect, a man with "designs" and "blueprints" for a new house. Bill Orcutt represents the legacy of Thomas Jefferson, the slaveholding third President of the United States perhaps best remembered for his statement in the Declaration of Independence that "All men are created equal," effectively overturning Aristotle's accepted philosophy regarding national leadership that "some men are marked out for subjection, others for rule" [WIENCEK 2012]. And just as Jefferson could simultaneously own slaves and argue brilliantly for their equality, Orcutt in this sense not only has been hired by the Swede's wife to "restore" her husband's beloved home in Rimrock, New Jersey, but also has his own plans to seduce the Swede's wife.

According to the Swede, the house is an invaluable tribute not only to his own success in the country, but also to the country's very beginnings. As he reflects:

The stone house was not only engagingly ingenious-looking to his eyes—all that irregularity regularized, a jigsaw puzzle fitted patiently together into this square, solid thing to make a beautiful shelter—but it looked indestructible, an impregnable house that could never burn to the ground and that had probably been standing there since the century began. Primitive stones, rudimentary stones of the sort you would see scattered about among the trees if you took a long walk along the paths in Weequahic Park, and out there they were a house. He couldn't get over it. [ROTH 1997 : 190]

In other words, what the Swede values about his house could also be seen as a projection of what he values about his country: a "jigsaw puzzle" of people from all different religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds; an indestructible structure made up of many different pieces, but is nonetheless a unified whole.

Despite this house's apparent perfection, the Swede's wife wants Orcutt

both literally and ideologically to remake it in the wake of their daughter's revolutionary crimes in protest of the US involvement in Vietnam. Says the Swede, after learning of his wife's plans:

When he overheard her telling the architect, their neighbor Bill Orcutt, that she had always hated their house, the Swede was as stunned as if she were telling Orcutt she had always hated her husband. He went for a long walk [...] to keep reminding himself that it was the *house* she said she'd always hated. But even her meaning no more than that left him so miserable it took all his considerable powers of suppression to turn himself around and head home for lunch, where Dawn and Orcutt were to review with him Orcutt's first set of sketches. [189, emphasis in original]

The fact of Levov's house under renovation—underscored by the word “sketches,” which simultaneously refers to architectural drawings, on the one hand, and to the sketch as a literary genre, on the other hand—appears to allude to another founding US literary text, Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819) which also takes up the cultural memory of the United States, featuring such canonical American short stories as “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle.” But most compelling here is the fact that it is Levov's own dream home in Rimrock, the very home where had imagined himself to be Johnny Appleseed, a mythic “grass roots” American counterpart to Orcutt's lineage through Jefferson, that is apparently in need of some improvement [315].

However, as a decades-old newspaper clipping from the *Danville-Randolph Courier* suggests, Dawn at one time had “testified just how much she had loved the house, as well as everything else about their lives” and ultimately reveals in the same article that she “loves living in a 170-year old home, an environment which she says reflects the values of her family” [204]. On the one hand, and in retrospect, this declaration of living in 170-year old home seems rather hyperbolic, as maintaining such an old structure from year to year takes an immense amount of work—just as it takes an immense amount of work to keep a nation going, a nation in perpetual flux as a result of its founding ideals.

In this way, Levov's house is also “the house” in Lincoln's sense, and Poe's sense too, in that it is an “environment which [...] reflects the values of her family.” In the 1960s, as in the 1850s, there is a sense that the “American” house needs to be put in order, to be set right in keeping up the founding values, with no one in agreement over how that could be done. Levov likes the house the way it is; Dawn's infidelity to the house, by contrast, is as disturbing as the more conventional infidelity (with none other than Orcutt)

in her marriage. Such a tension seems to mirror the tension in the US during the revolutionary 1960s—the decade of the rise of the feminist movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the anti-Vietnam war movement, among many other counter institutional forces.

In *American Pastoral*, the voice to register the turmoil of the Vietnam era is Jerry Levov's, with whom Nathan becomes reacquainted after reuniting with Swede and hearing about his three grown sons and dedicated wife. Further, as David Brauner has argued, Jerry is a compelling voice of indignant judgment in the novel, as for him,

the disaster that befalls Seymour and his family [...] is retribution for Seymour's attempt to escape from his ethnic identity as a Jew and from the exigencies of American reality. [BRAUNER 2011 : 199]

Without downplaying the specifically Jewish aspects of *American Pastoral*, it is not until we hear the self-righteous speech of Jerry that we learn the ways in which the novel is really about the state of the US during the Vietnam War—particularly with Jerry's description of Merry as “the kid who stopped the war in Vietnam by blowing up somebody out mailing a letter at five A.M.” [ROTH 1997 : 68]. Jerry continues:

That was '68, back when the wild behavior was still new. People suddenly forced to make sense out of the madness. All that public display. The dropping of inhibitions. Authority powerless. The kids going crazy. Intimidating everybody. The adults don't know what to make of it, they don't know what to do. Is this an act? Is the 'revolution' real?" [ROTH 1997: 69]

Jerry's fragments are telling here—the disconnect and confusion of the late sixties, of which he speaks, become reinscribed in his disconnected speech patterns: Just as “people” are forced to “make sense out of the madness,” so, too, are we: How do we make sense of “the kids going crazy”? How do we address Merry's violent bomb—apparently an act of political protest, her right to free speech confused with a murderous, violent act? The bracketed reality of this revolution harkens back to the founding revolution—also a murderous and tumultuous moment in US history that resulted in a radical disconnect between its founding values and the way those values are carried out, a disconnect enacted by the fractional counting of slaves as persons.

It is no accident, then, that Roth has his Jeffersonian figure also figure as an architect of ironic, mutually contradictory aims; he is a part of the long legacy of nation building. And here it might be worth recalling the vexed and ambivalent relationship most contemporary Americans have with a leader like Jefferson. On the one hand, his language gave birth to a new form

of government in the United States. On the other hand, his values tell a more patrician story, one that seeks to uphold a system of slavery for financial reasons or to dispel Americans of African descent completely. According to a recent article by Henry Wienczek, for example:

The very existence of slavery in the era of the American Revolution presents a paradox, and we have largely been content to leave it at that, since a paradox can offer a comforting state of moral suspended animation. Jefferson animates the paradox. And by looking closely at Monticello, we can see the process by which he rationalized an abomination to the point where an absolute moral reversal was reached and he made slavery fit into America's national enterprise. [WIENCEK 2012]

In his Jeffersonian architect, who, like his ancestor, works both for and against his stated goals, with the constant inconstancy about which Wheatstraw complains, Roth coalesces Lincoln, Poe, and especially Ellison's interest in the fine lines differentiating free speech, riots, and revolution.

Although Roth is not fully representing the US history of slavery in *American Pastoral*, nor even the construction of racial identity, which he will eventually undermine in *The Human Stain*, he is nonetheless still invested in this question of civil and human rights as upheld within and by the United States. Couched now in terms of the conflict in Vietnam and the radical underground movement, Roth's architect—in the making and unmaking of the American dream house—raises questions about the foundation of America, the role of conflict within its walls, and the legacy of the egalitarian dream.

Nowhere is this idea more provocative than in an extended scene—a flashback—occurring just after Bill and Jessie Orcutt arrive at the dinner party that closes the novel, the very dinner functioning as the traditional “banquet” intended to conclude the traditional pastoral. The flashback recalls Bill's offer to take Dawn and the Swede on a Morristown country tour—an invitation Dawn tellingly declines. In the ten pages that follow, Orcutt is perpetually described not only in terms of his career as an architect, but also as a descendant of the Founders of the country. As the Swede recalls: “the mainspring of Orcutt's character [...] was knowing all too well just how far back he and his manners reached into the genteel past” [ROTH 1997 : 302]; “Family goes back to the Revolution” the Swede reminds Dawn afterward [304].

For me, the most telling moment though is the way in which the Swede summarizes his “tour” in terms of Orcutt's rendition of Morristown county:

It was a lesson in American history. John Quincy Adams. Andrew Jackson. Abraham Lincoln. Woodrow Wilson. His grandfather was a classmate of Woodrow Wilson's. At Princeton. He told me the class. I forget it now. Eighteen seventy-nine? I'm full of dates, Dawnie. He told me *everything*. And all we were doing was walking around a cemetery out back of a church at the top of a hill. It was something. It was *school*." [...] He'd paid all the attention he could, never stopped trying to keep straight in his mind the progress of the Orcutts through almost two centuries [...]. [306, emphasis in original]

The reference to "progress" here seems a bit misguided, as the entire setting of the tour is a graveyard. In fact, in the Levov family lore, Dawn refers to that day as "The Orcutt Family Cemetery Tour" [312]. Everyone of consequence is dead; Orcutt, in this way offers one model of the legacy of the US: the descendant of dead white guys who may have been well meaning, but who nonetheless excluded a great deal of American voices in their changing and re-changing of "plans." In fact, the Swede offers a counter-narrative to the Orcutt family; he likens himself with the outsider figure Johnny Appleseed, and, as one of the few Jewish Americans to buy exclusive property in Rimrock, Levov reflects on his accomplishment:

Next to marrying Dawn Dwyer, buying that house and the hundred acres and moving out to old Rimrock was the most daring thing he had ever done [...]. he was settling Revolutionary New Jersey for the very first time. [310]

Conversely, the biggest historical figure that Orcutt has a connection to is Thomas Jefferson. The Swede recalls Orcutt explaining his lineage on the cemetery tour in terms of the headstones they pass, one by one. When they arrive at the burial place of "[t]he first Morris County Orcutt," Bill says:

"Thomas. [...] Big supporter of Jefferson. Political appointment from Governor Bloomfield saved his life. Surrogate of Morris County. Master in chancery. Eventually county clerk. There he is. The sturdy, fecund patriarch." [305]

Not uncharacteristic of Swede, he responds by describing the information as "interesting at just the moment he found it all about as deadly as it could get" [305]. In fact, this *is* an "interesting" moment for the Swede, not only because of what he says to Dawn after the tour, but also because it is a lesson on the patriarchal lineage of Bill Orcutt, the architect, himself. When the Swede describes the lecture as "deadly," he appears to mean that it is incredibly boring; but that one word adjective also describes so much more about the roles of "sturdy, fecund patriarchs" in the United States, namely the deaths at their hands.

By this moment, with the pointed reference to “the patriarch,” it is difficult to discern who is contemporary “father” of the better “house.” Whose plan will or should win the day: Orcutt, the descendant of Jefferson who specializes in “the restoration of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century homes out in their moneyed quarter of Morris County”—who, in other words, serves as an allegory for upholding that outdated Jeffersonian line? Or is it the Swede, the “patchwork” citizen, whose very house is divided and threatened by the Vietnam War, despite (or perhaps, because of) his own revolutionary spirit—assimilating, as he does, Old Rimrock against all odds?

In fact, it is precisely here that we see the ways in which Merry (a self-professed revolutionary) has been blind to her own father’s revolution (his revolutionary status as juxtaposed with Orcutt’s retrograde affiliations with his own familial history), forcing us as readers to ask difficult questions about the nature of revolution itself: What are the limits of revolution? In precisely what cases are they traumatic? How does one begin anew on the shattered foundation of the old?

For me, it is the internal dissent of the Levov home—dissent that emerges out of the rubble of destruction—that speaks so profoundly. In addition to functioning as an ideal, or perhaps for that very reason, the literary concept of America—registered here as the Levov’s Rimrock family home—has always incorporated a rich tradition of internal dissent, pointing up the power of the ideal (freedom) by documenting how badly we have failed to uphold it. It’s thus easy to recognize *American Pastoral* as part of this tradition—one that reaches back through Ellison to Poe and Lincoln as well.

In considering closely the figure of the architect and the divided house in *American Pastoral*, this paper seeks to contribute to the scholarly conversation about the role cultural memory plays in our understanding of Roth’s later fiction. I have in mind here Till Kinzel who has argued that

in *American Pastoral* [Roth] creates a fiction that memorializes key periods of 20th century American history in such a way as to hold a mirror up not so much to nature as to what becomes of a certain kind of nature, i.e. the nature of America in the laboratory of fictionalized history. [KINZEL 2011 : 267]

In so doing, Kinzel also reads the figure of Old Rimrock, the Levov Family home, as “a relic of the founding period, having been erected in 1786, one year before the Constitution of the United States came into being” [271]. Yet it is precisely in this way, in harkening back to the founding structures of the US, that we can also see Roth as memorializing traumatic eighteenth and nineteenth century American history, key periods of America’s foundational

years.

I also wish to point up the significance of Roth's architect in relation to Ellison's in an attempt to reinforce a claim about Ellison's influence over Roth started by such noted scholars as Timothy Parrish, who invites us to read *The Human Stain* "as a reflection on the life and career of Ralph Ellison" [PARRISH 2012 : 29]. As Ellison's narrator discovers at the end of *Invisible Man*, and as Nathan Zuckerman reaffirms through his story of the Levovs in *American Pastoral*, the key to the American dream is to affirm the principles upon which the country was founded, but not the architects (in every sense of the word) themselves. Ellison asks:

Could he [the protagonist's grandfather] have meant—hell, he *must* have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence. [ELLISON 1952 : 574]

For Roth, too, the country was built upon worthy ideals, but it cannot stand unless united against the men who do the violence.

In that sense, maybe—as this essay's title suggests—I am not as much interested here in the fall of the house of Levov as I am the fall of the house of Orcutt: as the often interpreted final line of the novel asks: "And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?" [ROTH 1997 : 423]. The life of the Levovs tells the complicated story of upward mobility, the potential (and dangers) of the revolution of the youth, the messiness and chaos—the American berserk—associated with democracy at every level. By contrast, the genealogy of the Orcutts is relegated to the cemetery; it is the old guard, a dead past that has a skeleton in nearly every closet. While both houses are divided, we learn—to return to the opening pages of the novel—that the Swede's legacy persists in the form of three grown boys, each newly American in their own hopeful way.

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