



TROUBLING NATIONHOOD PHILIP ROTH'S ALL-AMERICAN "NEW FRONTIER"

THEODORA TSIMPOUKI

University of Athens

Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) revolves around a Jewish character called the "Swede" who tries everything in his power to embrace the "benign national myth" and to achieve "his version of paradise" [ROTH 1985 : 90; ROTH 1997 : 86]. Yet, in the end, Roth's Swede fails to inhabit "the longed-for American pastoral," not because of cultural prejudices or lack of assimilationist impulse on his part but because of the implosion of the dream itself [ROTH 1997 : 86]. It is no more the ethnic subject's inadequacy to acculturation, insufficient Americanization or ethnic hostility that would thwart his ability to succeed. Rather it is Roth's Swede's idealistic confidence and unmitigated belief in the American nation which in the 1960s still drew from many of the same enduring themes of the frontier myth, as it was promoted by Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" and Theodore Roosevelt's epic work *The Winning of the West* that contributes to his defeat in the end.¹ In his 1893 seminal lecture "The Significance of the Frontier in American History,"² Turner argued that American history, culture, and

¹ I here focus on Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* among his many other writings because it had a strong impact on American political and cultural discourse of its age and continues to resonate even today. In it, Roosevelt identified the historical origins of the American race and traced how it became the greatest English-speaking race. For a discussion of Roosevelt's nation-building efforts and the difficulties in reconciling the civic tradition that welcomed all people irrespective of their nationality, race and religion and the racial tradition that advocated racial supremacy, see Gary Gerstle. See also Richard Slotkin's concise analysis of Roosevelt's Myth of the Frontier in his article "Nostalgia and Progress" as well as Leroy Dorsey and Rachel Harlow's insightful argument on Roosevelt's lingering influence in national character building in "We Want Americans."

² Turner delivered his paper to a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago on 12 July 1893. Since its publication, it has become one of the most influential essays of American history. Turner argued that the force of westward expansion forged the American character and, in his own words, "frontier" was

political institutions were significantly influenced by their continuous confrontation with the western frontier. With his own multivolume *The Winning of the West* (1885-1894) in the final stages of publication, Roosevelt considered that Turner's "frontier thesis" supplemented his own work. Indeed, as Richard Slotkin points out, "they saw themselves as sharing the most important assumptions: the belief that the frontier had been the most significant force in shaping national institutions and that mystical entity they both called 'national character'; and the belief that it was necessary for Americans to appreciate the frontier past" in order to meet the fin-de siècle crisis of democracy [SLOTKIN 1981 : 608]. In their effort to promote the distinctive nature of the American national character, both Turner and Roosevelt crafted visions of American nationhood that were steeped in the mythology of the frontier.

This essay argues that by foregrounding the Swede's naïve assumption of individual and national certainty, Roth challenges the myth of the American nation as a continuous narrative of national progress and exposes the ground of hierarchy and violence committed in the fulfillment of this nationhood. In other words, I am interested in showing how Roth addresses American nationhood as an imaginative social construct by attempting to uncover the discourses of territorial expansion and Americanization that framed nationalist imaginings in the turbulent 1960s. *American Pastoral*, I submit, exhibits a preoccupation with the cultural problematics of nationality as it was enacted and/or performed within the historical context of the Sixties. What was once, at the turn of the nineteenth century the urge to consolidate the essential terms of Americanism and cohesiveness of its social connections becomes, in the 1960s, an opportunity to question the collective fantasy of national unity and to expose the nation's contradictory gravitations toward exclusion and inclusion. Roth unravels the inconsistencies and contradictions underlying the 1960s rhetoric of hope for new frontiers that would enhance American national coherence at the same time that it endorsed US imperialist policies.

Without attempting to deny the historicity of the novel, I want to underline what Homi Bhabha calls the "temporality of representation" in the cultural construction of nationhood. In other words, rather than seeking to identify the "transparent linear equivalent" of the frontier or assimilation from the late nineteenth century to the late 1960s, I analyze the "metaphoric

defined as "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" [TURNER 1921 : Chapter I].

displacements," the "continual slippage into analogous" versions of these narratives, that "continually overlap in the act of writing the nation" [BHABHA 1999 : 292, 293]. One might rightly argue that in the late 1960s—the present time of Roth's novel³—the US was far from being a political-territorial entity seeking to forge or create a national identity. Nevertheless, despite the time that had elapsed, the discourses of both the "frontier" and "assimilation" were becoming increasingly salient, albeit altered in form. In the period following the Second World War, the vision of American national identity as based on cross-ethnic amalgamation, spatial and class mobility had become a key premise of the American Dream, especially after the historic passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 which marked the beginning of the latest era of mass immigration to the United States and reversed decades of exclusion and restrictive immigration. Yet, ironically the view of assimilation as linear progress explicitly linked to socioeconomic success, painfully coincided with the denouement of the concept itself in the late 1960s. Put another way, "[W]hen the notion of an Anglo-American core collapsed amid the turmoil of the 1960s, assimilation lost its allure" [KAZAL 1995 : 437]. Despite growing civil unrest, or perhaps because of it, mainstream culture continued to exert its influence toward total assimilation of minorities into a common founding Anglo-Saxon culture. *American Pastoral* tells the story of such a straightforward process of a third generation Jewish American, Seymour "Swede" Levov, who embraces an identity as an unhyphenated American following the prescribed stages of the acculturation process⁴ and, to a large extent, seeks to enact a nineteenth-century conception of the frontier, but whose adjustment to American life is shuttered under the explosive political and social upheavals of the 1960s, as a result of the nation's failure to live up to its ideal. More precisely, the Swede's demise is caused by his compulsive identification with a representative all American man, a self-imposed fantasy that does not allow

³ In fact, the Swede's story is an imaginary narrative embedded in Zuckerman's own narrative, which is based in the narrator's memories of his childhood idol. Roth has Zuckerman write down the Swede's life-story in the mid-nineties, thus, attempting a re-assessment of the sixties from the perspective of the nineties.

⁴ There are remarkable similarities between Levov's process of acculturation and the assimilation sequence as described by Milton Gordon in *Assimilation in American Life* (1964), of which "identificational assimilation"—i.e., a self-image as an unhyphenated American—was the end point of a process that began with cultural assimilation, proceeded through structural assimilation and intermarriage, and was accompanied by an absence of prejudice and discrimination in the "core society" [qtd in RUMBAUT 1999 : 173].

any space for slippages and ambiguities from the dominant narrative of the American national self. As Derek Parker Royal observes, the Swede is unable to admit “the ambiguity underlying the American project” [ROYAL 2005 : 202].

Historians and theorists of social science tend to agree that the apogee of the concept of assimilation occurred in the 1950s and early 1960s, as reflecting the need generated by the Second World War for national unity and the postwar tendency to see American history as a narrative of consensus rather than conflict [KAZAL 1995 : 437]. Moreover, America’s victory in the Second World War appeared to mark the triumph of democratic ideals at home and encouraged the expansion of American institutions and values to other parts of the world. The dramatic changes in demographic composition and socio-economic status as well as America’s changing global role had led to the need for a reconfiguration and a re-articulation of the hegemonic American national identity in the post-war context. Thus, Turner’s and Roosevelt’s frontier thesis extolling the benefits of horizontal mobility and economic opportunity was revived in post-Second World War America but was now translated as vertical mobility that enabled people of different nationalities, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds to Americanize.⁵ By extending the frontiers of culture to include more “inconceivable aliens” (to use Henry James’s phrase from *The American Scene*), more immigrants were now welcome to join the national body. In addition, Cold War anxieties and an endangered sense of democracy made the resurgence of the frontier spirit and the myth of territorial expansion all the more influential. The legacy of the frontier served once again as a narrative context for America’s military mobilization abroad and acts of imperial violence in Vietnam and elsewhere.⁶

As a matter of fact, the frontier rhetoric was powerfully reintroduced by J.F. Kennedy with his speech delivered on the occasion of accepting the nomination as the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate, setting the tone and the pace of “the challenging and revolutionary” decade, as

⁵ The revival I am referring to relates to the social applications of the frontier and not to academic scholarship which in mid-twentieth century “was becoming, if not a ruin, then certainly a relic of an earlier age” [NOBLES 1997 : 9]. See also Deborah L. Madsen’s “The West and Manifest Destiny.”

⁶ In his monograph *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin argues that in its mid-twentieth century versions, the frontier myth also helped lead America to the Vietnam War. Slotkin offers a thoughtful close reading of films and the way those fictions functioned in a dialogue with actual people in Vietnam.

Kennedy described the Sixties [BERNSTEIN 1991 : 5]. In his speech tellingly titled “The New Frontier,” the future president was asking Americans to perform their duty of defeating “enemies that threatened from without and within.”⁷ The “New Frontier” speech involved not only an escalating cold war, but also a burgeoning civil rights movement at home. Even “the uncharted areas of science and space” were re-territorialized as an American frontier. This permutability of the frontier idea reveals the extent to which by the 1960s it had become a metaphor and a “perpetual state of the American mind,” supplying Americans with an overarching sense of unity amid internal and external conflict [SPANOS 2007 : 47]. Turner himself must have envisioned this development when, along with the announcement of the closing of first period of American history as a result of the closing of the geographical frontier, he also prophesized its expansion, beyond the western boundary of the United States. America’s “contribution to the history of the human spirit,” Turner writes, “has been due to this nation’s peculiar

⁷ In his acceptance of the Democratic nomination, in Los Angeles, Kennedy evoked the frontier myth: “I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their own lives to build a new world here in the West. [...] They were determined to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from without and within. [...] Today some would say that those struggles are all over—that all the horizons have been explored—that all the battles have been won—that there is no longer an American frontier. But I trust that no one in this vast assemblage will agree with those sentiments. For the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won—and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960’s—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats. Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom promised our nation a new political and economic framework. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal promised security and succor to those in need. But the New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises, it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them. It appeals to their pride, not to their pocketbook—it holds out the promise of more sacrifice instead of more security. But I tell you the New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric—and those who prefer that course should not cast their votes for me regardless of party. But I believe the times demand new invention, innovation, imagination, decision. I am asking each of you to be pioneers on that New Frontier.” [KENNEDY, “The New Frontier,” Convention Acceptance Speech, 15 July 1960]

experience in extending its type of frontier into new regions" [TURNER 1921 : Preface]. Aware of the "closed frontier," Turner nevertheless emphasizes the significance of the frontier experience to the American national identity, when he foresees a second, more vigorous era of American history: "He would be a rash prophet," Turner concludes, "who would assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and unless this training has no effect upon people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise" [TURNER 1921 : Chapter I].

In Kennedy's "Turnerian" view of new frontiers, the 1960s hope for endless growth and renewal replaced Turner's familiar story of westward expansion. Taking into consideration that "[a]t the time of the presidential election of 1960, the political and cultural exponents of the dominant culture were afflicted by a deep anxiety over the health of the American body politic," Kennedy's identification of his administration as "the New Frontier" was intended, as William Spanos argues, to "capitalize on the persuasive power of the American exceptionalist myth of the frontier" [SPANOS 2007 : 48]. Thus, Kennedy's vision of a "new frontier" of the 1960s not only helped him get elected but added to the American myth a new dimension: following President Theodore Roosevelt's lead, Kennedy energized the nation with his rhetoric of a new political beginning by appealing to "one of the country's premier sacred stories—the Frontier Myth" [DORSEY 1996 : 44].⁸ As a matter of fact, Kennedy's call toward the American citizens "to be new pioneers on that New Frontier" [KENNEDY] was "ideologically strategic," designed to underscore the "crucial significance of the frontier spirit to the American national identity," and the confidence and self-renewing expansion the frontier enables [SPANOS 2007 : 47].

To be sure, throughout his recent oeuvre, Roth has been a forceful critic of

⁸ In this article, Dorsey refers in particular to Kennedy's establishing the Peace Corps, a force that would be made up of civilians who would volunteer their time and skills to travel to underdeveloped nations to assist them in any way they could. Kennedy succeeded in constructing a war myth for peaceful ends because he contextualized the narrative of war within the Frontier Myth. Thus, he "portrayed the Peace Corps' volunteers as the reincarnation of America's martial pioneers who now braved a new world of dangers in the pursuit of global welfare" [DORSEY 1996: 44].

such nationalist ideological strategies.⁹ As I will demonstrate, in *American Pastoral*, Roth unmasks underlying “ethnocentric pretensions” of assimilation which conflate the demand for “Anglo-conformity” with the pioneer ideals of radical individualism, self-reliance, and equality of opportunity that comprise the myth of the frontier [RUMBAUT 1999 : 172]. By delineating the rise and fall of the Swede, his straightforward all-American hero, Roth exposes the dangers that occur when the ideal and the ideological get wrapped up in cultural and national discourses. Though critics have explored *American Pastoral* in relation to the identity of the nation (situating the novel in a number of historical contexts and in particular the sixties) as well as the protagonist’s assimilationist impulse (in forsaking his ethnic identity), they have not focused on the highly symbolic “onomastic geography” of the book which provides a privileged perspective to address issues of nationhood right when the notion of a seamless and coherent, unchanging American national identity collapsed and identity politics were beginning amid the turmoil of the 1960s [MASIERO 2011 : 157]. In the remaining part of this essay, I will examine how assimilation and the frontier, these two mutually constitutive discourses, intertwine in Roth’s novel and provide the author with the opportunity to explore the myths that define Americanness and to challenge its fabricated national imaginings.

American Pastoral opens by identifying the protagonist through his nickname—“the Swede”—a nickname “intrinsically” American as Masiero rightly points out, because “it adumbrates the historical dynamics of American cultural and national development” [158]. The persistent reference to this “old American nickname” [ROTH 1997 : 280]—with the protagonist’s “real” name, Seymour Levov, coming only in the last sentence of the first paragraph—indicates its “absolute dominance” which might be said to represent, according to Masiero, “the force of the protagonist’s American claim” [MASIERO 2011 : 157]. Roth’s Swede earns such an appellative because of his physical appearance: his fair complexion, blue eyes and blond hair, his “insentient Viking mask,” in short his Gentile-like characteristics set him apart from his peers and pave the way of his ethnic whitening [ROTH 1997 : 3]. This “household Apollo,” as the narrator calls him, wears his “Jewishness so lightly” [4, 20] that he has freed himself from all the “striving,” “ambivalence” and “doubleness” [GLASER 2011 : 52] which have preoccupied generations of Jewish Americans, and has thus achieved “an

⁹ I am referring in particular to Roth’s American Trilogy: *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000). See also ROYAL’s “Pastoral Dreams and National Identity.”

unconscious oneness with America" [ROTH 1997 : 20]. Roth's Swede, then, is portrayed as "the assimilated Jew who has successfully integrated into the American mainstream" [ROYAL 2011 : 51]. Assimilationist capacity, in the Swede's case, derives from the specifically visual means by which ethnic/racial identity is registered in the United States. Blond haired and blue eyed, as Velichka Ivanova among others has observed, the Swede "stood out among the typically dark-haired local Jew" of Newark [IVANOVA 2011 : 242]. His "misleading" appearance or, to use Zuckerman's terminology, his "isomorphism" to WASP America, provides him easy access to whiteness, removing at once all future social obstacles and cultural prejudices that might befall him if identified as Jew [ROTH 1997 : 89].¹⁰ Indeed, the narrator muses, the Swede "lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin," he "[l]oved being an American" [213, 206]. His aspiration toward assimilation may inform his unconditional embrace of everything that is America but at the same time it is motivated by his experience of his "Jewishness as a pathology of sorts" [GLASER 2011 : 51-52]. For example, the Swede feels uncomfortable inside a synagogue, believing it to be "foreign" and "unhealthy" [ROTH 1997 : 315]. His marriage to the Gentile beauty queen Dawn Dwyer and his decision to live in the Old Rimrock house provide further evidence of his desire to become an unhyphenated American, or to achieve identificational assimilation which includes intermarriage and adoption of American values. "Why shouldn't I be where I want to be? Why shouldn't I be with who I want to be? [...] That's what being an American is—isn't it?" asks the Swede [315].

What reverberates in the protagonist's vehement disavowal of Jewish identity is Teddy Roosevelt's uncompromising standard of monoculturalism: "There can be no 50-50 Americanism in this country," he stated. "There is room here for only 100 percent Americanism, only for those who are Americans and nothing else."¹¹ As a corollary to Roosevelt's calling

¹⁰ See GOLDBLATT on the whitening of Roth's Jews. Also, Roth's *The Human Stain* makes a strong case of the socio-economic concerns that motivate racial passing in the US.

¹¹ In fact, the quotation has been repeated with variations several times. The most straightforward usage comes from a speech made by Roosevelt as an attack upon what he considered a half-hearted conduct of the then-administration led by President Woodrow Wilson, during the First World War in Europe. The speech, made on 28 March 1918 at the Maine convention, is evocatively titled "Speed up the war and take thought for after the war" [ROOSEVELT 1918]. In his "Assimilation and Its Discontents," Rumbaut also refers to Roosevelt's plain formulation of "100 percent Americanism" as "no-nonsense coerciveness" [RUMBAUT 1999 : 172].

for Americanization was his belief that the frontier experience delivered the common man the chance to break with “the bondage of the past,” be it ethnic, racial or religious. Similarly, Turner argued for the frontier’s contribution to the production of a “composite nationality for the American people.” In his words: “In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race” [TURNER 1921 : Chapter 1]. Although *American Pastoral* was published exactly a century after the frontier’s closure, the myth of the frontier, I submit, is a key facet of Roth’s text. The importance of the frontier myth and its concomitant tropes (rugged individualism, strenuous masculinity, limitless possibilities of the American Dream, expansion of American values) as a subtext to the novel cannot be overstated.¹² Indeed, the heroic status attributed to the Swede by Zuckerman, the ritualistic fashion with which he acquires his nickname, his prodigious athleticism, his enthusiastic enlistment in the Second World War, his self-confident conquest of the sub-urban frontier and finally his anticlimactic end can be seen as Roth’s complex revisioning of the frontier myth, described by Slotkin as “the most important archetype underlying American mythology” [SLOTKIN 1973 : 10].

In many ways, then, Roth’s *American Pastoral* can be read as a trenchant critique of the latent ideological power that discourses of ethnic assimilation and the frontier continue to have in shaping national collective imaginings. To begin with, Derek Parker Royal is right to contend that critical “unremitting emphasis” on the story of the Swede to the exclusion of the novel’s narrator “neglects the exercise of fictionalizing that Roth, through Zuckerman, attempts to foreground” [ROYAL 2011 : 49]. Not only the novel gains in narrative complexity when the Swede’s life is seen as fiction crafted by Zuckerman but, also, the protagonist’s fictive centrality foregrounds Zuckerman’s efforts to explore collective formations arising through elusive central characters. The fictive barriers that surround Roth’s Swede take on added significance when they are related to the writerly role of Nathan Zuckerman and his attempts to script a unified narrative of the nation. To

¹² Sandra Kumamoto Stanley has pointed out Roth’s use of the key archetypal images of Henry Nash Smith’s myth of the garden of the world (*Virgin Land*, 1950), R.W.B. Lewis’s American Adam falling from innocence into experience (*The American Adam*, 1955), and Leo Marx’s pastoral landscape vying against the threat of the industrial machine (*The Machine and the Garden*, 1964). However, what is not mentioned in this analysis is the overarching image of the frontier which, as this article wishes to demonstrate, has shaped the rhetoric of American identity and is consistently invoked in *American Pastoral*.

the extent that the Swede is a fictional recreation, whose subjectivity the writer of the “realistic chronicle” fails to grasp and whose “interior life” is “unknown and unknowable,” a cohesive and comprehensive national identity cannot be supported on a sociocultural level either [ROTH 1997 : 80]. Paradoxically but appropriately, the causes and effects of the Swede’s tragedy are invested with indeterminacy, with Zuckerman insistently underlying the provisionality of his narrative using qualifiers such as “perhaps” and “maybe” [80]. Nevertheless, the Swede remains the site at which Zuckerman attempts to assemble narratives of American national continuity.¹³

The rhetoric of assimilation, the frontier and national destiny are questioned by Roth, in yet another way: plotting the Swede’s extraordinary athlete’s body and talent as an imaginative template for the culture’s national imaginings of American exceptionalism and imperialism. In an 1899 speech, Teddy Roosevelt advocated the doctrine of “the strenuous life,” by which he meant a return to “manly” virtues of the nation’s frontier past in order to confront the forces threatening to overwhelm America [ROOSEVELT 1899]. As Dorsey and Harlow claim, “[t]o his readers, the message was simple: embrace immigration and remember the lessons of the frontier experience that so shaped settlers of early America” [DORSEY & HARLOW 2003 : 58]. Half a century later Americans still labored under a surprisingly similar anxiety. The model of masculine behavior which gave emphasis to physically vigorous and principled life proved to be a longstanding, recurring feature of the discourse of the nation and is frequently articulated at the level of the cultural unconscious, in literature, popular culture as well as the public arena.¹⁴ Richard Slotkin and Leroy Dorsey, among others, have pointed out the enduring influence of the mythic frontier and its heroic frontiersmen to

¹³ See ANSU & NEELAKANTAN, for an analysis of the Swede’s indeterminacy as reflecting a challenge of the conventions of literary realism.

¹⁴ In his seminal book *Manhood in America*, Michael Kimmel explores the meaning of manhood in American history, tracing the evolution from the Self-Made man of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to confirmations of manhood in the arenas of sport and leisure in the first decades of the twentieth century to the “contemporary crisis of masculinity.” American manhood, he claims, is deeply entangled within American history. It registers the changes in American society at the same time that it promotes an ideal which is, by definition, unattainable. As Kimmel explains, the history of American manhood is “less about what boys and men actually did than about what they were told they were supposed to do, feel, and think and what happened in response to those prescriptions” [KIMMEL 1996 : 10].

American political culture. Thus, it has been argued that Roosevelt's mythic framing of national manhood greatly affected not only late nineteenth century US foreign policy but the nation's contemporary domestic and international policy, as well.¹⁵ Similarly, scholars document a resurgent preoccupation with masculinity during the early Cold War period, which adapted to the imperatives of the period and eventually led to an intensified involvement in Vietnam.¹⁶ For his part, in his handling of the Swede, Roth explores the parameters of the doctrine of "the strenuous life" and its relation to a national manhood metaphor in several ways: first, he grants his protagonist athletic skills (Swede excels at football, baseball, and basketball) to bring him as close to a "trademark American" as possible [HOBBS 2010 : 76]. As David Brauner argues, Seymour's sporting prowess "conforms to a Jewish stereotype of WASP values" at the same time as it "defies the anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew as physically frail and cowardly" [BRAUNER 2004 : 70]. Second, Debra Shostak seems right in her assertion that the Swede's heroic status is implicitly juxtaposed to and aims to distract his elders from what was happening to Jews in Europe.¹⁷ Setting the Swede as a

¹⁵ In his article "Theodore Roosevelt, 'The Strenuous Life,'" Dorsey maintains that by "invoking romanticized accounts of the pioneers' strength and virtuous personal character," Roosevelt responded to his concerns about the domestication of the Western frontier, mass immigration, growing materialism and foreign aggression [DORSEY 2008 : 1]. Amy Kaplan, too, in her *Anarchy of Empire*, analyses how the fate of American masculinity paralleled national culture's imperial turn during the 1890s.

¹⁶ See K.A. Cuordileone's *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*. Although Cuordileone points to the uniqueness of the "cold war cult of masculine toughness" and cautions readers not to make "easy comparisons to other eras, past or present," the characteristics the critic signals out as comprising "the fixation on manhood," that is "masculine virility, courage, will, and individuality" [238], echo Roosevelt's "The Strenuous Life." More importantly, the critic makes numerous comparisons between Kennedy and Roosevelt and their respective endorsement of masculinist and nationalist ideology. She states f. ex. that "like Roosevelt, Kennedy sought to overcome physical ailment and placed uncommon emphasis on physical fitness, vigor, heroism and virility throughout his career. Kennedy echoed the Rough Rider president's glorification of the strenuous life, adapting it to the imperatives of a cold war world" [CUORDILEONE 2005 : 202]. John Michael, also, examines how Kennedy's public representation (particularly in his political memoir, "Profiles in Courage") "addressed anxieties about manly courage and national union in a moment of terrifying global challenges" [MICHAEL 2012 : 424].

¹⁷ Shostak suggests that the Swede "gives American Jews license to repress their knowledge of what was happening to the European Jews. If they can forget themselves as Jews, they can forget the image of docile, feminized Jewish man who,

paradigm of national manhood reinforces national ideology, much in need in historical times of uncertainty. And finally, but more importantly for the purposes of this essay, the Swede's athleticism invokes the legacy of the pioneer frontiersman as it was touted by Roosevelt. Leroy Dorsey reminds us that the frontier myth basically "features violent action between stalwart heroes and untamed forces as the means to achieve progress" [DORSEY 1996 : 46]. Dorsey, citing Slotkin, tells us how Roosevelt was a proponent of the benefits of athleticism, believing that it built character. In an effort to overcome the all-consuming late-nineteenth century preoccupation with physical virility that ensued from the loss of the frontier and the days of diminished wilderness, and when not promoting imperialist expansion, Roosevelt tried to extend the "doctrine of the strenuous life" to manly out-of-door sports.¹⁸ Roth appropriates the overarching violence associated with the frontier myth by insistently having Seymour's athletic achievements compared with descriptions of wartime engagements. A volunteer with the Marine Corps, Seymour resembles the frontiersmen in their physical endeavors, heroism and their willingness to sacrifice. Though he is never engaged in actual combat, Seymour nevertheless becomes "the embodiment of the strength, the resolve, the emboldened valor that would prevail to return our high school's servicemen home unscathed from Midway, Salerno, Cherbourg, the Solomons, the Aleutians, Tarawa" [ROTH 1997 : 5]. If athletic endeavors serve as a surrogate for wilderness warfare, it is no accident, then, that the "old American nickname" is "proclaimed by a gym teacher" and "bequeathed" to him in a gym. Like a warrior caught "in action," Seymour impresses Doc Ward with his ability to score baskets. It is that moment that the gym teacher "christen[s]" him "Swede Levov" [207]. The gym, then, becomes the threshold he must cross in order to be initiated into American life, into which, like a frontiersman, he will have to be "wandering deeper and deeper" from then on [207]. This new name which he carries "like an invisible passport," however, also affects his notion of the right way to

in failing to resist gentile oppression, troubles their own self-image" [SHOSTAK 2004 : 101].

¹⁸ See DORSEY, "The Strenuous Life;" SLOTKIN, "Nostalgia and Progress." Of course, the fin-de-siècle "crisis of masculinity" that men experienced is the result of many more changes in American society, among which are women's organized entrance into the public sphere and the loss of economic independence occasioned by the rise of corporations and the new working class that included large numbers of immigrants. Theodore Roosevelt, however, explicitly molded his public image to virile huntsman to take advantage of this all-consuming preoccupation with vitality and virility.

evolve into “a large, smooth optimistic American” [207]. The Swede’s youthful “aloofness, his seeming passivity” turns into a “golden gift of responsibility” in adulthood [5]. Assuming the responsibilities of an all-American man, exhibiting a “mature-seeming sobriety” is what his brother, Jerry, considers his fatal attraction [4]. Yet, for the Swede who wishes to become the model WASP citizen and never to shrink from his obligations, it is imperative to follow not what his heart desires but what he believes is a proper and manly conduct “right in the American grain” [31].

Moreover, the Swede’s comparison to Kennedy is apt on several ways. First, there is the similarity of crossing the boundaries of religious identity, thus pointing to the fact that “assimilation in America is national rather than religious” [MICHAELS 1995 : 25]. Second, it underlines the resonance and power of the vision of masculinity that Kennedy personified. The style of Kennedy and his New Frontiersmen—of which the Swede aspires to be a perfect model—was “distinctly and resolutely masculine” [CUORDILEONE 2005 : 169]. According to Winfried Fluck, it is Kennedy’s successful production of his public image as an embodiment of manly vigor and heroic courage, his combination of “youthfulness,” “forceful masculinity” and “unselfish idealism,” that have captured the cultural imaginary [FLUCK 2007 : 287]. Finally, if the Swede’s body—through Kennedy—relates to a symbolic national body, then much of the Swede’s appeal to his community lay in invoking the promise Kennedy had given “that he could remake the nation, and by extension the nation’s men, in his own potent self-image” [CUORDILEONE 2005 : 170]. Adulation and reverence for the Swede was based on the community’s presumption of their hero’s power to shape the self-image not only of their community but of the nation as a whole. Later, the Swede’s physical decline and eventual death from prostate cancer is linked metaphorically to the national body ravaged by domestic social disorder and fragmented by the Vietnam War [BASU 2011 : 80].

Once the “decidedly un-Jewish ‘Swed-ish’ identity” his name invokes is assigned to him, the Swede commits himself to achieving authentic Americanness, to living out the seamless unfolding of the cherished national narrative of “wholesale self-reinvention” [GLASER 2011 : 53; SHOSTAK 2011 : 3]. In this regard, the Swede’s celebration of such pioneer figures as Johnny Appleseed, “a hero of endurance”¹⁹ and creative action, prefigures his

¹⁹ “Johnny Appleseed. A Pioneer Hero.” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. Nov. 1871. Web. 18 Dec. 2012. <<http://mason.gmu.edu/~drwillia/apple/ja2.html>>.

unswerving decision to take up his father's glove factory. "[S]trong as an ox" and determined to succeed, he takes charge of the family business whose harsh beginnings coincided with the "closing" of the frontier in 1891 and the influx of immigrant laborers and entrepreneurs in the city instead of living off the land [ROTH 1997 : 52].²⁰

Another goal the Swede sets out to achieve is to purchase a hundred-acre farm in Morris County with an eighteenth-century house built in it. Many critics have pointed out to the capacity of the house "to convey class mobility and national identity" [GLASER 2011 : 55]. At the same time, the description of the house and Dawn's farm evoke images of settlers establishing homesteads and farms through their own hard labor and determination, conquering the wilderness for the advancement of progress: "But the Swede, rather like some frontiersman of old, would not be turned back [...] What was Mars to his father was *America* to him [...] Out in Old Rimrock, all of America lay at their door" [ROTH 1997 : 310, emphasis in original]. Besides depicting the American landscape as moored in the past (with references to Washington and revolutionary New Jersey), the Swede literally enacts the frontier expectation that access to land would advance the immigrants' integration process and would affect their attainment of American ideals. Obviously, the Swede's frontier describes an ideal, embodied in the landscape, recalling in this manner historical periods when the nation could count upon the abundance of western land and unlimited opportunity. As a matter of fact, as Sandra Kumamoto Stanley argues, Roth "highlights the role of Old Rimrock as not only a private but also a national ideal, for the Swede is an entrepreneurial pioneer on a New World errand" [STANLEY 2005 : 9]. "His journey," the critic goes on to say, reflects "a basic tenet of American exceptionalist teleology—to expand 'westward,' laying claim to land as part of manifest destiny and a national mission" [10]. In a way, then, the Swede's pastoral domesticity relies on declaring his feeling "at home" in the nation and affirming possession of the national "homeland" without addressing the long and problematic history of

²⁰ Characteristically, the harsh conditions of the glove business are reminiscent of the equally harsh conditions of the frontier, while descriptions of the workingmen invoke the frontier's backwoodsmen: "thousands and thousands of hanging skins raised the temperature in the low-ceilinged dry room to a hundred and twenty degrees [...] Where brutish workingmen, heavily aproned armed with hooks and staves, dragging and pushing overloaded wagons, wringing and hanging waterlogged skins, were driven like animals through the laborious storm that was a twelve-hour shift" [ROTH 1997 : 11-12].

economic and social inequalities or the nation's violent interventions abroad. His coherent assimilationist vision of America, fixed as it is upon a dominant, unified representation of American society, fails to acknowledge the conflicts and tensions inherent in the societal structure that violently invade the national text.²¹ For example, Roth's Swede treats his beloved daughter's stuttering as a pathological rupture in normative speech which needs to be cured. Likewise, hard as he tries, he is unable to decipher the mystery of Merry's blowing up the Old Rimrock post office. He wonders: "What could have wounded Merry?" [ROTH 1997 : 92]. His answers include self-incrimination and the trauma of watching the Vietnamese monk's televised self-immolation. Yet, "his search for the etiology of the wound," as Stanley would have it, doesn't go deep enough to interrogate the dominant assumption that flourished in US national narrative in the sixties—namely, that the sixties ushered in the culmination of the ideology of American exceptionalism and its providentially ordained mission to fight the evil empire in the name of the free world [STANLEY 2005 : 11]. If President McKinley's "benevolent assimilation" proclamation and subsequent annexation of the Philippines (also referred to as the first Vietnam War, 1899-1902) could be said to signal the advent of the nation's imperialist ambitions,²² six decades later, Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, sought to capitalize on the frontier rhetoric by implementing the domestic and foreign programs of the "New Frontier," which aimed to respond to the equally daunting international and domestic crises of the period. But the Swede seems unwilling or unable to resist essentialist conceptualizations of "Americanness," even at a time when the specific prototype of American identity was under attack. If he is a prisoner to anything, then, it is to his blind adherence to the triumphalist postwar national narrative which left uncontested every antagonistic presence (like Merry) and rendered

²¹ Though Stanley quite rightly notes that Roth challenges the literary language of the myth and symbol school, it is not so much the literary tradition that is the author's target but the societal structures themselves. Roth's criticism involves the society's need to construct a coherent national ideology during the apogee of American Cold War hegemony, an embodiment of which is the Swede.

²² The decision by American policymakers to annex the Philippines was not without domestic controversy. As vice-president (1900) under William McKinley and later as President (1901), Theodore Roosevelt had played a crucial role in the war against the Philippines and its annexation. While he believed the nation's expansionist policies to be a test of America's honor, national unity, and strength, Roosevelt attacked his opponents as weak, unpatriotic, and unwilling to perform America's "manly" duties.

meaningless every competing claim or narrative of dissent.²³ Thus, by subscribing uncritically to a single-stranded ideological narrative, the Swede is incapable of understanding what turned his ideal America “into the indigenous American berserk” [ROTH 1997: 86]. Viewed from this perspective, *American Pastoral* explores the discursive formation of American national identity, arising in the collision of the overlapping narratives of assimilation and the frontier, and challenges the processes by which it sustains its hegemonic force. As Stanley succinctly puts it, Roth demonstrates that “the American mythos is not a self-contained artifact, able to legitimize its hegemonic status by self-written rules” but “an ideological construct” that neutralizes, eliminates and flattens out inconsistencies of nationhood [STANLEY 2005: 5].

As I hope to have shown, Roth’s *American Pastoral* not only registers the dominant narrative of American nationhood or expresses anxieties about it, but also uncovers it as an imaginative social construct. The 1960s was a period of unheard of dissent and social unrest which the official national culture strove to contain and control by attempting to impose an assimilationist mentality at home and promote the frontier ethos abroad. The emphasis given by Roth to the discourses of assimilation and the frontier raises in relief the historical “crisis” of the national psyche in the 1960s. Although the assimilative and expansionist force of the frontier has regularly and persistently informed dominant American political ideology and culture, a crucial difference separates the sixties from earlier periods, according to William Spanos. I shall quote him at length, because his rich ability to show the correlation between the rhetoric of the frontier, foreign practice, and national identity sheds light to what I have attempted to explore:

Whereas the benignity of the exceptionalist errand was rarely questioned in the past, no doubt because the logic of exceptionalism was in process but unfulfilled, the errand in the Vietnam wilderness inadvertently produced a counterhistory. In the face of an enemy that refused to be answerable to the military imperatives of the American

²³ In his blind effort to construe a coherent vision of society, the Swede is guilty of the privilege of ignorance of “how the other half lives,” until Merry forces him to see it. Debra Shostak’s remark that, before settling on *American Pastoral*, Roth was contemplating on using Jacob Riis’s title as his own seems very interesting if one takes into consideration that it was Theodore Roosevelt who joined Riis’s lone battle on tenement conditions, child labor and other abuses of lower-class urban life.

narrative, America, confident in the righteousness of its transcendently ordained global errand, pursued the inexorable logical economy of exceptionalism to its self-destructive fulfillment. [...] In undertaking this ruthless intervention in precisely the terms of the discourse and practice of the frontier, it also bore witness to the historical continuity of the murderous violence informing the logic of America's mission from the Puritan errand in the New England wilderness to the American errand in the wilderness of Vietnam. [SPANOS 2007 : 49]

What is postulated here is that American expansionism, wrapped in the discourses of the frontier and assimilation and their embedded promise of a new life, has solidified into a national mythology, and seems firmly entrenched in the national psyche. Writing in the 1990s, in the wake of the first Gulf War, Roth has provided a pointed critique of America's powerful exceptionalist self-image that has become central to the formation of the nation and, during times of transformation and crisis, comes to the surface as a complacent nationalism and an aggressive foreign policy. One can readily concur with these writers and maintain with Richard Slotkin that "myths [of exceptionalism] reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living" [SLOTKIN 1973 : 5]. Or, agree with Winfried Fluck that, in the final analysis, what still holds American society together, its "essential glue, still largely untarnished, is the idea of American exceptionalism" [FLUCK 2012].

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