Mourning the "Greatest Generation": Myth and History in Philip Roth's "American Pastoral"
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In a 1973 interview about his satirical book *The Great American Novel*, Philip Roth describes the 1960s as a "demythologizing decade" in which "the very nature of American things yielded and collapsed overnight" ("Great American Novel" 90). A self-described member of the "most propagandized generation"—a product of World War II rhetoric, Cold War containment, and mass media—Roth at that point views the sixties in terms of a Cold War battle over the realm of the social *imaginaire*, a struggle between the benign national myth of itself that a great power prefers to perpetuate, and the relentlessly insidious, very nearly demonic reality…that will not give an inch in behalf of that idealized mythology. (90)

Over 20 years later, in the aftermath of the Cold War, Roth revisits this battleground in *American Pastoral*, at a time in popular culture when Roth's "most propagandized generation" has been elegiacally remythologized as members of Tom Brokaw's "the greatest generation." I would argue that in *American Pastoral*, Roth, in the guise of his alter ego Nathan Zuckerman, returns to a consideration of the sixties, but with a less satirical, more elegiac voice. At the center of *American Pastoral* is Swede Levov, the benevolent Jewish American liberal Roth describes as "fettered to history" (5) during the apogee of US Cold War hegemony—between World War II and the Vietnam War.¹ Roth pits Swede Levov as a true believer in "the benign national myth" of the American pastoral against his 16-
year-old daughter Merry, a militant radical who articulates what Roth describes as the “counterpastoral” impulse, the “demonic reality . . . that will not give an inch in behalf of that idealized mythology.” Encapsulating this struggle in a private family drama, Roth examines the assault against both historical and literary metanarratives that constitute the American mythic ideal, interrogating a consensus ideology reflected in a modernist vision of history and literary theory.

Critics have focused their readings of *American Pastoral* on its counterpastoral puzzle—that is, on the question that haunts Swede Levov: How did Merry become the “angriest kid in America” (279)? In pondering the cause for Merry’s left-wing militancy, some scholars read the novel as Roth’s implicit apology for his earlier liberal perspective, while others read it as his defense of that perspective. In their discussions of the novel, both Edward Alexander and Timothy Parrish invoke Irving Howe’s famous 1972 essay “Philip Roth Reconsidered,” in which Howe perceives Roth’s “attacks on middle-class suburbia” as pandering to “‘liberated’ suburban children” (79) and argues that Roth, denying himself a “vision of major possibilities” (72), has a “thin personal culture,” one that cannot fully access either his Jewish heritage or the “great sweep of democratic idealism and romanticism” of the “mainstream of American culture” (79). Despite his lifelong socialist commitments, Howe was at odds with the intellectual left of the sixties, criticizing those he saw as helping to perpetuate the excesses of the decade. According to the neoconservative Alexander, Roth in *American Pastoral* implicitly acknowledges the truth of Howe’s critique of the left, for Roth’s novel is “the existential realization of Howe’s criticism of the moral and political style of the New Left . . . of the sixties” (184), and Merry, the “chief villain,” is the “perfect embodiment” of the “leftist dabbler” who turn against their overly indulgent liberal parents, naïvely spout politically radical creeds, and succumb to their “fascination with violence.” Timothy Parrish cites Howe’s criticism of Roth’s “thin personal culture” but argues that the novel, through Zuckerman, explores “the deleterious consequences of forsaking one’s Jewish origins” (87). Both Alexander and Parrish perceive Roth/Zuckerman/Swede as revaluating their earlier liberal, “postmodern” stances, acknowledging both their liberal naïveté and the power of the father’s voice. According to Parrish, Merry, the “anarchic center of the novel” (91) and a “postmodern horror” (93), forces the Swede to confront the falsity of his assimilated self. Clearly, Parrish perceives the postmodern as a threat to stable cultural identities
rather than, as some have argued, an ethical challenge to master narratives. Thus, Parrish argues that Roth, reconsidering his earlier affirmation of the postmodern self over a Jewish identity, gives the last word to Lou Levov, representing the “law of the father” (96).

In contrast to Alexander and Parrish, Marshall Bruce Gentry not only sees Roth as preserving hope for assimilation as a larger goal but also sees the women—Dawn, Merry, and Marcia Umanhoff—as the true heroes in the tale, for they are the ones who challenge both the Levov males’ attempt to mold the women into conventional gender roles and their self-serving acceptance of the inequities of capitalism. Whereas Alexander sees the capitalistic success of the Newark Maid factory as an indictment of sixties leftist politics, Gentry argues that the factory represents an indictment of capitalistic injustices and exploitive labor practices that serve to profit the Levovs. In contrast to Parrish, Gentry argues that these recalcitrant women, along with Jessie Orcutt, who, in the novel’s final scene, attempts to poke Lou Levov’s eyes out, defy the “law of the father” that Parrish sees as delivering the last word.

I would argue that the novel supports both of these readings. Roth portrays the members of the “greatest generation” who were baffled by the demythologizing decade of the sixties with sympathy, but he also critiques the myths by which they lived and exposes their refusal to acknowledge how that very mythology might propagate the social and economic injustices that sixties radicals battled. American Pastoral is not Roth’s mea culpa, not an acknowledgment of Howe’s critique of the left. Rather, it is a defiant answer to Howe’s earlier charges that Roth cannot successfully access his own “thin personal culture” or establish “his relation to the mainstream of American culture, in its great sweep of democratic idealism and romanticism.” Articulating his own “vision of major possibilities,” Roth writes a novel drawing from this very “mainstream of American culture” with its “democratic idealism and romanticism” while making the central voices of that very American tradition Jewish American voices. Roth realizes that many from his Jewish American generation epitomize the ostensible fulfillment of the American dream. Yet for him the sixties usher in not a culmination of a consensus ideology but a rupture, an interrogation of the mythic basis of the American dream. Roth investigates why this vision of “democratic idealism and romanticism” goes awry, using as his vehicle the mythic tradition of the Great American Novel articulated in the academy of the fifties and early sixties.
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During the 1950s this literary tradition reached its academic ascen-
dancy in the “myth and symbol” school of American criticism. A product
of the fifties intellectual tradition, Roth has described his introduction to
“high art” in the academically inspired ideals of high modernism filtered
through the language of New Criticism: “I imagined fiction to be some-
thing like a religious calling, and literature a kind of sacrament” (“Great
American Novel” 78). Influenced by the pedagogical vision of the Great
Books curriculum of the Chicago School, Roth felt that the fifties were
a “decade when cultural, rather than political, loyalties divided the young
into the armies of the damned and blessed.” He found, however, that he
could not escape the social and political conflicts surrounding his work,
for some of his readers—especially his Jewish critics— refused to worship
at his high altar of art. These very conflicts, Roth notes, “yanked me,
screaming, out of the classroom; all one’s readers, it turned out, weren’t
New Critics sitting on their cans at Kenyon.”

Yet in American Pastoral, Roth invokes the New Criticism–based
language of such classic midcentury texts as Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin
Land (1950), R. W. B. Lewis’s The American Adam (1955), and Leo Marx’s
The Machine and the Garden (1964). Loosely designated as members of the
myth and symbol school, such Americanists as Smith, Lewis, and Marx
attempted to identify a common cultural tradition based on American
archetypes. Like their predecessor F.O. Mathiessen in American Renaissance
(1940), these writers postulated a common social narrative, legitimating
a lineage of national expression that made American literature American.
Although these writers situated their texts in historical and social pat-
terns, they, like many of their contemporary neoformalists, focused on the
transcendent nature of literature, incarnated in “the word”—the shared
cultural language of myths and symbols. Consequently, critics like Carolyn
Porter and Gerald Graff have noted the resulting ahistorical and apolitical
nature of these writers’ use of diverse cultural histories, which were at
times reductively conceived as organized around simple binary opposi-
tions (innocence and experience, the machine and the garden). Coupling
the yearning for myth with the denial of history, Graff cites Philip Rahv’s
1950s evaluation of the myth and symbol school:

“The cultism of myth,” Rahv added, betrays “the fear of history,”
and “is patently a revival of romantic longings and attitudes. . . . Now
myth, the appeal of which lies precisely in its archaism, promises
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...above all to heal the wounds of time. . . . Myth is reassuring in its stability, whereas history is that powerhouse of change which destroys custom and tradition in producing the future.”

(Graff, “American Criticism” 104, quoting Rahv 6)

Graff observes, “The link between modernism, New Criticism, and fifties political retreat has become a given of literary history.” Donald Pease, going even further, has viewed the myth and symbol school as part of the Cold War apparatus (23–24).6

In his novel, Roth draws from the key archetypal images in these myth and symbol works: Smith’s myth of the garden of the world, Lewis’s American Adam falling from innocence into experience, and Marx’s pastoral landscape vying against the threat of the industrial machine. In their works, these critics reinforced the exceptionalist vision of a Euro-American Adam entering the vast and “empty” American pastoral landscape in order to appropriate and invest the land with social and cultural meaning. Echoing both Genesis and Milton’s epic, Roth titles the novel’s three sections “Paradise Remembered,” “The Fall,” and “Paradise Lost.” Swede Levov is Roth’s Jewish American Adam who achieves “his version of paradise” in the guise of “the longed-for American pastoral” (86). Yet, as Roth warns, the “demonic reality” of the sixties would rupture the nation’s “idealized mythology” (78).

Foregrounding and interrogating the literary language of the myth and symbol school, Roth demonstrates that the American mythos is not a self-contained artifact, able to legitimize its hegemonic status by self-written rules. His characters reread American history, forced to see it not as a transcendent, utopic myth but as an ideological construct that foreshadows the demise of earlier stories of nationhood. Paradoxically, Roth writes a Pulitzer Prize-winning work in the mythic tradition of the “Great American Novel”—a tradition that romanticizes individuals such as Huck Finn and Jay Gatsby, who enact national conflict in the guise of an individual identity crisis—at the same time that he bears witness to the illusions inherent in the mythic foundations of such a tradition. In other words, he writes a Great American Novel for a postmodern age, in which he both invokes the country’s lingering mythic notions of nation-state and critiques these foundering narratives of cultural destiny. Ultimately he suggests that the very counterpastoral critique that would destroy the Swede’s pastoral mythology is actually a legacy of the myth itself.

5
What the Swede never understands is how his pastoral vision of America could give birth to Merry's anger. His daughter, a stuttering self-styled revolutionary, verbally attacks his most sacred ideals and then blows his ideal world to smithereens when she bombs the Old Rimrock post office: she "transports him 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" (86). Ironically, what Roth terms the counterpastoral in his novel itself involves pastoral yearnings, and this is a paradox that the Swede can never quite comprehend: how did his version of the American pastoral dream give birth to the "American berserk"? As Frederick Karl has noted, some sixties radicals (for example certain members of the Black separatist, environmentalist, or antiwar movements) were motivated by a pastoral dream in their desire to transform or even withdraw from a technological, capitalistic civilization that they perceived as a tool for injustice and domination (43–44). While the Swede desires to build his pastoral within the confines of a US consensus ideology that celebrates the American dream—epitomized by the individual embracing a Puritan work ethic and climbing the ladder of capitalistic success—his daughter's strategy of pastoral disengagement aims to destroy that consensus ideology, ejecting her father out of his pastoral Eden into the "American berserk." Appropriating the rhetoric of the myth and symbol school, Roth investigates the ways that "benign national myth" helped to produce that "demonic reality" (78).

Like Lewis and Marx, Roth is interested in exploring the rhetoric of American identity through an overarching narrative, but his narrative foregrounds the disintegration of myths and symbols that purported to "heal the wounds of time." Yet Roth also expresses nostalgia for the mythic tradition associated with the classic Great American Novel. Initially, Nathan Zuckerman finds himself attracted to the illusion of myth and the "vision of innocence." Like The Great Gatsby's Nick Caraway, Zuckerman tries to understand the myth of nationhood through a representative American. But if the Swede is aligned with Jay Gatsby, he is a Gatsby who is viewed as the assimilated representative of, rather than the questionable interloper in, privileged America, eventually marrying his Daisy and being confronted by the consequences of his innocence. Zuckerman, who worshipped the older Swede during their adolescence, first conjures up an idealistic vision of the Swede from his childhood. The
legendary Swede, with his fair complexion and athletic prowess, embodies a “symbol of hope” to his Newark neighborhood:

through the Swede, the neighborhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world, the fantasy of sports fans everywhere: almost like Gentiles (as they imagined Gentiles), our families could forget the way things actually work and make an athletic performance the repository of all their hopes. (1–2)

The Swede incarnates a dream of *e pluribus unum*, the many becoming one, an assimilation that erases differences. Seymour Irving Levov becomes the Swede and later marries a beauty queen shiksa wife, prompting Zuckerman to state with admiration, “He’d done it” (15). In this chronicling of the Swede’s life as an American success story, Roth’s narrator renders history as a mythic vehicle for a teleological narrative, enacting not Rahv’s “powerhouse of change which destroys custom and tradition in producing the future” but a utopic Hegelian synthesis:

the anticipated American future that was simply to have unrolled out of the solid American past . . . out of each new generation’s breaking away from the parochialism a little further, out of the desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-American insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals. (85)

Zuckerman imagines post–World War II American identity as grounded in a coherent, autonomous self; and he believes that achieving such an ideal American identity demands the eradication of a Jewish past—or any ethnic past—that suggests difference. The Swede embraces the symbols of an American universalism without fully realizing that he is in fact embracing not a universal but a particular form of gentile identity.

When Zuckerman meets the Swede many years later, he imagines that the Swede has lived the charmed all-American dream, a man who has escaped “the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals.” As a consequence, he feels that the Swede has become a “human platitude” (23), a man of surfaces, “the embodiment of nothing” (39). He finds, however, that the Swede’s old self has been shattered by Merry’s bomb. To understand his mistake, Zuckerman takes
on the task of imaginatively exploring the Swede, and as he does so, he explores his concept of America. The Swede’s individual identity serves to reveal the nation’s collective identity—one that is shaped not by the ostensibly coherent narrative of manifest destiny but by the disruptive stutterings of history, reflected in Merry’s stuttering speech.

Zuckerman’s retelling of the Swede’s story is structured by the paradigm of tragic romance, highlighting the hero’s tragic fall from a privileged Edenic height—the Swede’s coherent assimilationist vision of America. This vision is defined by key American symbolic markers, especially the values of industrial capitalism, the ritual of sports, and the acquisition of a home. The Swede thus embraces three representative spaces:

The factory was a place I wanted to be from the time I was a boy. The ball field was a place I wanted to be from the time I started kindergarten. That this [his house in Old Rimrock] is a place where I want to be I knew the moment I laid eyes on it. . . . We own a piece of America. . . . (315)

He believes he has accumulated the visible signs of an American identity: success in business, sports, and home life. Calling his father’s place of worship, the synagogue, “foreign” and “unhealthy” (315), the Swede will invest these three signs of identity with spiritual significance.

The Swede’s success in his father’s glove factory represents not only the culminating step in the successful immigrant story but also the manifestation of a “virtuous capitalism.” For both the Swede and his father, who spiritualize labor, the glove business is more than an enactment of Karl Marx’s commodity production and labor exchange theory. The two men highlight the symbolic value of the glove and the glove business—linking the trade not with a high Fordist process of mass production but with a community of artisans, imbued with family traditions. The Swede proudly explains:

Most of the glove businesses have been family businesses. From father to son. Very traditional business. A product is a product to most manufacturers. The guy who makes them doesn’t know anything about them. The glove business isn’t like that. This business has a long, long history. (130)
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As Elizabeth Powers suggests, even the name of their business—Newark Maid glove factory—recalls “a pastoral economy, one based on the transmission of generational skills.” The Swede perceives the history of glovemaking as a dialectic process culminating, like his idealized family heritage, in the “utopia of rational existence”; “the root of humanity” is the “opposable thumb”: “It enables us to make tools and build cities and everything else” (131).

The Swede’s father, Lou Levov, apprehends history only within the context of the glove business; public history is subsumed into his private capitalist narrative. Thus World War II saved the democratic world along with the glove business, and the “glove man got rich” (346). The election of President Kennedy, which installed Jackie Kennedy with her pillbox hat and decorous gloves as a national fashion leader, reinvigorated the industry. But then Jackie’s gloved hands become anachronistic, signaling the loosening of society’s own grasp on a coherent socioeconomic metanarrative. Lou philosophically observes: “The assassination of John F. Kennedy and the arrival of the miniskirt, and together that was the death knell for the ladies’ dress glove” (349).

Symbolically, for the Swede and his father, production and reproduction are intertwined; their modes of glove production do not produce alienating and meaningless work, and familial reproduction should not produce alienated children. In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Max Weber suggests that one of the culminating signs of American capitalistic success is in the acquisition of an ideal home, and the Swede perceives his house in Old Rimrock to be that ideal. Located on Arcady Hill Road, his home represents his own American pastoral. In the US, however, the European pastoral ideal, rooted in Virgil’s bucolic visions of an unchanging Arcadia of shepherds and shepherdesses, has been transmuted by the capitalistic impetus. As Sarah Burns suggests, the American pastoral, shaped by Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian vision and principles of self-reliance, is “rooted in one fundamental concept: the ownership of property” (5). Foregrounding its spiritual over its material significance, the Swede, though, envisions the American pastoral as an embodiment of an ideal, a nostalgic yearning for a rural origin where one can recover an Edenic oneness. Such a vision of wholeness, in the end, proves illusory.

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:
But the Swede, rather like some frontiersman of old, would not be turned back. . . . Next to marrying Dawn Dyer, buying that house and the hundred acres and moving out to Old Rimrock was the most daring thing he had ever done. What was Mars to his father was America to him—he was settling Revolutionary New Jersey as if for the first time. Out in Old Rimrock, all of America lay at their door. . . . (310)

His journey reflects a basic tenet of American exceptionalist teleology—to expand “westward,” laying claim to land as part of manifest destiny and a national mission. Moreover, the Swede’s pastoral home represents a place of potential transcendent harmony, for they are going to live “thirty-five miles out beyond that resentment,” beyond divisive differences, beyond “anybody’s resentments” (310). In constructing his ideal home, the Swede believes that he has replicated the ideals of America; the family becomes a source not only of biological reproduction but also of the reproduction of ideology. A true believer, the Swede promotes the tenets of American liberalism based on universal acceptance:

Nobody dominates anybody anymore. That’s what the war was about. Our parents are not attuned to the possibilities, to the realities of the postwar world, where people can live in harmony, all sorts of people side by side no matter what their origins. This is a new generation and there is no need for that resentment stuff from anybody, them or us. And the upper class is nothing to be frightened of either. You know what you’re going to find once you know them? That they are just other people who want to get along. Let’s be intelligent about all this. (311)

Of course, as Charles Taylor has observed, a “blind” liberalism, promoting “universal, difference-blind principles,” ignores the fact that no homogenous mold is truly neutral, for such a “universal mold” inevitably reflects the values of a particular hegemonic culture, thus resulting in “a particularism masquerading as the universal” (43–44). Even the Swede notes that “living beyond” means moving into Old Rimrock, an upper-class Protestant enclave, the illusory sign for a “universal” American identity: “Let’s face it, they are America” (311).

Eventually the Swede discovers that he cannot escape divisive differences, even in his insulated pastoral enclave. His beloved 16-year-old
daughter Merry blows it up—"the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking" (86). As the Swede's brother Jerry sees it, "My brother thought he could take his family out of human confusion and into Old Rimrock and she put them right back in. . . . Good-bye Americana; hello, real time" (68–69). The Swede discovers that history does not represent the triumphant march of liberalism toward the "utopia of rational existence," but that history can stumble and even fall into absurdist tragedy: "He had been admitted into a mystery more bewildering even than Merry's stuttering: there was no fluency anywhere. It was all stuttering" (93). His vision of a history contained within the narrative of his mythic ideal—history as linear, teleological, and progressive—proves illusory, for history reveals itself as a complex network of economic, social, and political factors, a "mystery" full of "human confusion" and "stuttering."

Despite his bewilderment, the Swede feels compelled to search for the answer to the lesson of the bomb: "What is the grudge? What is the grievance? That was the central mystery: how did Merry get to be who she is?" (138). How did the Swede, described by his brother as a "liberal sweetheart of a father," "the philosopher-king of ordinary life," produce "the angriest kid in America" (279)? He wonders, "What could have wounded Merry?" (92).

Searching for the etiology of the wound, he continues questioning, looking for the original sin that propelled them out of the American pastoral into the American berserk: Was it her history of stuttering—the mark of imperfection in his little girl? Did her stuttering, this accident of speech, make her feel alienated from her all-too-perfect parents? Or was it his fault? He remembers an incident when he passionately kissed his daughter in response to her pleading that he kiss her as he "kissed mother." Fearing that he had crossed the line between fatherly affection and inappropriate conduct, he began to withdraw from her. Did this "parental misstep" (91) eject them out of Eden? Or was the origin of this wound communal? In marrying his Irish American wife and moving to Old Rimrock, did separate his daughter from Jewish roots? Or was this wound inflicted by larger historical forces? Did social history stutter its way into their lives—from Merry's first viewing of the Vietnamese monk's televised self-immolcation to her own clumsy attempts to rectify global injustice by local means? Interrogating private and public events, the Swede is desperately searching for a cause-and-effect narrative that will explain
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Merry’s actions as originating in some psychological or social trauma. In seeking to assign Merry’s political insurgency to a pathological cause, the Swede attempts to interpret her political actions as a sickness that may be cured.

Perhaps, for the Swede, what is most puzzling about Merry’s anger is the gap between her rhetoric of rage and her benign experience. Having been raised in the arena of privilege and the language of liberal ideology, Merry should have represented the triumph of rational liberalism. Instead, with “total self-certainty,” she attacks its very “bourgeois” foundation (101). What the Swede does not understand is how his own form of the pastoral, embodied in liberal ideals, actually gives birth to Merry’s counterpastoral dissidence, a violent repudiation of her father’s economic and social vision of the pastoral. In his 1986 essay “Pastoralism in America,” Leo Marx notes that there is a difference between the rustic who lives the simple life of a shepherd and the modern man or woman who adopts the trappings of a “sentimentalized image of the simple, unworldly ‘common man’” (56). For the Swede and his wife, Old Rimrock represents that sentimentalized vision of the pastoral, but neither wishes to separate from the established capitalistic order that provides them with the means of purchasing their idyllic world. In contrast, Merry articulates her pastoral yearnings—to disengage herself from that social and economic world—by creating an adversarial enclave within the dominant social and economic system, attacking the materialism of a hegemonic culture that ignores the poverty and powerlessness of the disenfranchised. Marx perceives someone like Merry as an example of “privileged dissidents” (63) who place moral and social concerns above a materialism spurred by a consumer-oriented capitalistic order.

Merry moves outside the system, attacking the basis of middle-class values. After years of attempting to “solve” the problem of her stuttering, desperately attempting to follow the speech patterns of normative society, she angrily renounces “the appearance and allegiances of the good little girl” and “the ridiculous significance she had given to that stutter to meet the Rimrock expectations” (101). For the Swede, her radical vision is reified in the spectacle of her body:

the grasshopper child . . . all at once shot up, broke out, grew stout—she thickened across the back and the neck, stopped brushing her teeth and combing her hair; she ate almost nothing
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she was served at home but at school and out alone ate virtually all the time...so that almost overnight she became large, a large, loping slovenly sixteen-year old, nearly six feet tall, nicknamed by her schoolmates Ho Chi Levov. (100)

Transgressing the community’s norms concerning speech, body size, even cleanliness, Merry punctures the boundaries of the normative public sphere. Undaunted, the Swede, “not going to the extreme,” patiently sets “limits” for Merry, hoping that “the day will come when she will outgrow all this objecting to everything” (103). But once Merry transgresses the body politic by bombing the Old Rimrock post office—a signifier for both the Swede’s pastoral home and an intelligible system of communication—and by killing other human beings, she sets herself radically outside her father’s and liberalism’s limits of tolerance, which classically argues that the state should not intrude in private lives and private desires unless to protect others from harm.8

The Swede must confront the failure of his policy of containment. At one point he had imagined that he could prevent any infection of the family unit, the basic symbol of community:

you had only to carry out your duties strenuously and unflaggingly like a Levov and orderliness became a natural condition...the fluctuations predictable, the combat containable, the surprises satisfying, the continuous motion an undulation carrying you along with the utmost faith that tidal waves occur only off the coast of countries thousands and thousands of miles away. (413)

But like the US global policy of containment in the sixties, Swede’s local policy unravels. When George Kennan coined the term containmen in his seminal 1947 Foreign Policy article, he espoused a global policy of containing the Soviet Union, a policy that came to dominate US foreign affairs for the next 40 years. In his essay, Kennan describes the Soviet Union as an infectious body that the US must keep at bay. As Alan Nadel suggests, in the succeeding years the term containmen underwent a number of narrative interpretations, to the extent that it often generated contradictory strategies, becoming a “free-floating signifier” (101). This desire to contain communism took many forms, including the Vietnam War. Unable to keep the war “thousands and thousands of miles away,” the Swede finds that the combat, erupting in his business, in his home, is not containable.
He cannot control Merry’s “objecting to everything,” nor can he control her objectionable body. The Swede associates Merry’s obese body with political insurgency, suggesting that both push beyond the normative boundaries of social control, of social containment.

In her strident protests, Merry rips away at the American narratives of a liberal democracy, attempting to reveal to her bewildered father a story of American empire, colonization, and greedy capitalism. Shortly after Merry bombs the post office and disappears, the enigmatic Rita Cohen, claiming to be Merry’s representative, meets with the Swede and forces him to listen to her attacks on the capitalistic basis of his business. Angered, the Swede defends his business as a vehicle for good. After all, he employs the very individuals whom Merry and Rita so righteously regard as disenfranchised. Rita quickly returns, “I know what a plantation is, Mr. Legree—I mean Mr. Levov. I know what it means to run a plantation. You take good care of your niggers. Of course you do. It’s called paternal capitalism” (135). She relentlessly attacks him: “You know what I’ve come to realize about you kindly rich liberals who own the world? Nothing is further from your understanding than the nature of reality” (139).

The Swede is appalled by Rita’s “childish clichés” (135). For him, she carelessly conflates liberal values with greed and criminality rather than with the programs that helped to usher in the Great Society and other social transformations of the sixties. As Marc Dollinger argues, many twentieth-century Jewish Americans, both in their successful use of capitalism to improve their material conditions and in their commitment to collective action to improve the lives of the disenfranchised, “proved instrumental” in the crafting of “social welfare programs” and “in the transformation of a modern American liberalism” (3). In such a vision, capitalism and liberalism, self-interest and tolerance, the sanctity of individual rights and private property and a representative government to protect civic rights, can work hand in hand as a vehicle for social mobility and civic equality. Many analysts have observed that liberalism became the twentieth century’s dominant ideology for many countries, and Immanuel Wallerstein has argued that liberalism’s apogee occurred between 1945 and 1968, “the era of US hegemony in the world-system” (2). Despite the fact that US conservatives often label liberalism a left-wing phenomenon that undermines fundamental social values, Wallerstein notes that liberalism “was never a doctrine of the Left: it was always the quintessential centrist doctrine” (1). At the heart of liberalism is its capacity to co-opt extremes,
positioning itself between reactionaries and revolutionaries as a defender of personal freedom. The Swede embraces this liberal ideology without recognizing that it does not necessarily provide liberty and justice for all. Indeed, critics have argued that liberalism, with its glorification of the autonomous individual, ideologically justifies capitalism’s pursuit of profit in the marketplace. Thus, such a society, built on a competitive system of self-interest, may in fact undermine communal obligations and values.

In light of the radical claims of both Merry and Rita, the Swede tentatively confronts his own complicity in the injustice they critique. At one point he imagines himself having heart-to-heart talks with black revolutionary Angela Davis, somehow feeling as though Davis could offer him an explanation for his daughter’s actions and serve as a means for discovering where she is. In the midst of one imaginary conversation, he tells Davis about his black employee Vicky, who stayed with him to defend his business during the Newark riots of 1967:

He tells Angela how, after the riots, after living under siege with Vicky at his side, he was determined to stand alone and not leave Newark and abandon his black employees. He does not, of course, tell her that he wouldn’t have hesitated—and wouldn’t still—to pick up and move were it not for his fear that, if he should join the exodus of business not yet burned down, Merry would at last have her airtight case against him. *Victimizing black people and the working class and the poor solely for self-gain, out of filthy greed!* (162–63)

But in the end, unable to relinquish his own pastoral vision, the Swede acknowledges that he was relieved when the governor sent in the National Guard to put down the riot and protect his investment, his property. He rejects Davis’s “idealistic slogans” in which “there was no reality, not a drop of it” (163). He determines that his daughter is not a brave revolutionary and rejects her counterpastoral vision, which has nothing to do with his ideals but “with dishonesty, criminality, megalomania, and insanity”:

Blind antagonism and an infantile desire to menace—*those* were her ideals. In search always of something to hate. Yes, it went way, way beyond her stuttering. That violent hatred of America was a disease unto itself. And he loved America. Loved being an American. (206)
In his pastoral vision, the Swede equates the idea of America with a capitalist-based liberal democracy, imagining that America is an arena that freely allows him to enact his individual desire, without recognizing how the state already “contains” him and others in its own regulatory—at times violent/violating—practices.

Embodying a number of national anxieties from communism to the Bomb to domestic chaos, Merry represents alterities that the system finds difficult to contain. When the Swede finally finds Merry in 1973, five years after the bombing of the Old Rimrock post office, he can barely recognize her. She has renounced the life of a violent revolutionary and embraced Jainism, an atheistical Indian philosophy whose practitioners advocate the ethical principle of nonviolence, often living its precepts to the extreme. Living in filth, Merry now fears hurting anyone or anything; she does not bathe in order “to do no harm to the water,” and she wears a dirty makeshift veil in order “to do no harm to the [air-borne] microscopic organisms” (232). Appalled, the Swede listens to his daughter as she tells him her story of the past five years: she was raped; she was responsible for the deaths of three more people; she lived with the destitute.

Now Merry’s body is not ungainly and fat but ascetically emaciated, symbolically embodying her renunciation of the profit motive as a basic means of existence. Merry stubbornly refuses to be appropriated by the body politic. In contrast to Merry, many sixties revolutionaries, in the past few decades, have found ways to return to the social body. Former radicals have become mainstream politicians, college professors, Wall Street investment bankers. Even urban guerrilla fighters who have returned to face prison sentences have found a way to return to mainstream society. In the first scenario, former revolutionaries merge within the system and, in the most ironic cases, become capitalist businessmen pursuing profit; the status quo enacts a narrative of conversion. The second scenario demonstrates that the system will not only survive but, through its prison narrative of containment, confession, and transformation, provides a means for once-intransigent individuals to be reintegrated into society, thus demonstrating the society’s tolerance. In these two social narratives, the society depicts the radicals as children who have finally grown up or who have finally been punished, reinforcing the state’s parental role.11

But Roth will not give the Swede and his daughter a fantasy of reconciliation. In some ways, the Swede finds the former vision of his violent daughter easier to acknowledge than a vision of his violated

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daughter—raped, destitute, living in filth. In these two pathologically unaccommodating forms—either as the violating revolutionary or as the violated ascetic—Merry has found a way to confound the very basis of the liberal consensus, refusing to be co-opted and subverting liberalism’s primary principles: tolerance and self-interest. Jerry muses: “Blaming yourself. Tolerant respect for every position. Sure it’s ‘liberal’—I know, a liberal father. But what does that mean? What is at the center of it? Always holding things together” (279). But here the center will not hold. Although liberal ideology may have produced Merry, it cannot co-opt or contain her. Merry’s extremism ultimately subverts the centrist optimism of her father’s ideology.

Merry confounds her father. The social narratives she offers him do not allow his parental role as a mediator between his illusory visions of an infantalized Merry and a Merry prepared to take on her prescribed social roles. Eventually he realizes that he cannot control or protect her, for “she is unprotectable. . . . It’s all unendurable. The awfulness of her terrible autonomy” (272). The Swede, in fact, is so repulsed by Merry—who “is a human mess stinking of human waste”—that he uncontrollably spews vomit on her and, at her pleading, leaves her room, fleeing from the “smell of no coherence . . . the smell of all she’s become” (265). In the Swede’s confused and visceral reaction to Merry, he collapses her body “stinking of human waste” with the “awfulness of her autonomy” and the “smell of no coherence.” He can no longer hope that she will “outgrow all this objecting to everything” as though her dissidence were a result of a stage of adolescent physical development, for he cannot deny that her material body is tied to her autonomy, a will separate from his paternal will. Merry, in her gross physicality and stark autonomy, has no place in the Swede’s pastoral vision of the world, so he reduces her to the “smell of no coherence,” from which he flees.12

In the context of the Swede’s tragic fall and “the incomprehensibility of [his] suffering,” Roth clearly links the Swede to both Sophocles’s Oedipus and the Biblical Job. But while Oedipus has an epiphanic moment of reversal and revelation, and Job can rely on an all-powerful if incomprehensible God, the Swede is left with “the worst lesson that life can teach—that it makes no sense” (81). Merry has shaken the very foundation of his belief system; and that, Jerry argues, is precisely her purpose: “That’s what she’s been blasting away at—that façade. All your fucking norms. Take a good look at what she did to your norms” (275):
Seeing so much so fast. And how stoical he had always been in his ability not to see, how prodigious had been his powers to regularize. But in the three extra killings he had been confronted by something impossible to regularize, even for him. . . . And the instrument of this unblinding is Merry. The daughter has made her father see. And perhaps this was all she had ever wanted to do. She has given him sight, the sight to see clear through to that which will never be regularized, to see what you can't see and don't see and won't see until three is added to one to get four.

(418)

But what kind of legacy does Merry’s “unblinding” leave her parents? Merry’s mother decides to have a facelift, build a new house, and accept a new lover, seeking to erase Merry from her past and retreating into innocence: “She thinks our catastrophe is over and so she is going to bury the past and start anew—face, house, husband, all new” (366). The Swede ultimately opts for living a dual life—preserving the appearance of normality with his new wife and family “for the sake of their naive wholeness” (81): “Stoically he suppresses his horror. He learns to live behind a mask. A lifetime experiment in endurance. A performance over a ruin. Swede Levov lives a double life.” Neither parent, thus, finds a way to come to terms with the ideological challenge embodied by Merry. Instead, each resorts to a nostalgic search for a “mid-century innocence” that never existed.

At the end of the millennium, Roth wants to eulogize “the greatest generation.” Yet unlike such idealizing eulogizers as Tom Brokaw, he lives with the legacy of the counterpastoral impulse, a legacy in which grand metanarratives—both historical and literary—are held suspect. As Sacvan Bercovitch suggests, we live in a literary age not of consensus, as exemplified in the myth and symbol school, but of dissensus, as exemplified by pluralism and contestation (Rites 353–76). Consensus—epitomized in the Swede’s yearning for oneness and sameness—has given way to theories of difference, rupturing a consensus ideology reflected in modernist visions of history and literary theory.

Bercovitch, however, also argues that American ideology continues to provide powerful cultural symbols of identity and cohesion (355). Although Roth may critique US nationalist myths, he also demonstrates the difficulty of abandoning them. Donald Pease may claim that we live
in a postnationalist and post-Americanist age, but American mythologies continue to be very resilient. Merry may function in counterhegemonic and counterpastoral ways, but the Swede ultimately views his daughter, and not himself or the US, as guilty of infantile omnipotence. Merry ruptures his pastoral dream and betrays his innocent vision, and she refuses to be co-opted by her father's ideology, but her parents' American pastoral in some ways nonetheless persists: Merry is forgotten by her mother and repressed by her father. We may very well ask if these responses are also representative of a nationalistic pastoral politics that tenaciously holds on to myths of US Adamic identity and the exigency of a triumphant cultural destiny in a post-Fordist age of postmodern rupture. Writing his novel at the end of a millennium in which the wounds of history remain open, Roth recognizes, as Rahv suggests, that myth, in its "revival of romantic longings," promises an all-too-seductive alternative to a disruptive history. Yet the very staggerings of history, the demonic reality of the counterpastoral, play a necessary role in unmasking the illusive coherence of national myths. If the Swede's life represents the classical tragic romance of not only the "greatest generation" but also of the US, then Roth's Great American Novel tells a cautionary tale in which "pastoral innocence" provides the means of perpetuating rather than challenging "the benign national myth" and, ultimately, of escaping rather than confronting the burden of history.

Notes
1. In an interview with Charles McGrath, Roth describes American Pastoral, I Married a Communist, and The Human Stain as a "thematic trilogy, dealing with the historical moments in postwar American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation" (8). He started writing American Pastoral at the end of the Vietnam War, which was "the most shattering national event of [his] adulthood," but could not progress beyond Merry's bombing. Only 20 years later, when he could use Zuckerman as a "mediating consciousness," evoking the Swede in mythic terms as his boyhood idol, was he able to complete the novel.

2. Parrish seems to equate the postmodern with anarchy, a relativistic and contingent morality, and the destruction of a stable cultural self and history; others, such as Linda Hutcheon, have argued for the political and ethical dimensions of the postmodern.
3. Roth has described his own early politics as rooted in his family’s identity as New Deal Democrats, early establishing a strong sympathy for the struggling working class. His support of values associated with the left certainly placed him at odds early in his career with Norman Podhoretz’s neoconservative Commentary, which published Howe’s essay. In such works as Our Gang, lampooning the Nixon years, and “Ethnic Pop and Native Corn,” critiquing the Bush-Quayle campaign strategy, Roth has leveled his satire at the Republican right. He is suspicious, however, of any government that resorts to “immoral coercion”; for example, he describes the Johnson/Nixon Vietnam War years as a heightened politicized period when he felt the “government as a coercive force” (“Writing” 87). More recently, he has critiqued the coercive forces of both left and right in such works as I Married a Communist.

4. See Gerald Graff’s Professing Literature and Giles Gunn’s The Culture of Criticism for the historical context of the “myth and symbol” school.

5. Alan Cooper discusses the ways that Roth has appropriated Jewish American literary, social, and political material for his fiction and documents Roth’s often controversial relationship with the Jewish American community.

6. The myth and symbol school’s desire to transcend social categories and experiences with the use of autonomous symbols reflected the New Critical view of the autonomy of literature that saw the self-contained artifact as separated from the political sphere. Graff points out that since the midsixties, critics have challenged this view, and “virtually every phase of American literature has been reinterpreted in political terms” (“American Criticism” 109).

Giles Gunn has offered a helpful corrective to such assessments, noting that the critics associated with the myth and symbol school often incorporated revisionist self-critiques in their theories, evaluating their own “blindness and insight” (160). Gunn argues that writers such as Smith, Lewis, and Marx were not imposing monolithic patterns on American literature but exploring and evaluating how a given myth—whether Smith’s garden, Lewis’s Adam, or Marx’s pastoralism—intersected with Americans in a particular place and time. Nevertheless, it is clear that in their respective quests for a rhetoric of American identity, these writers attempted to synthesize representative works into a mythic narrative, emphasizing a romantic tragic vision of American literary studies. As Rahv maintains, “the cultism of myth” revives “romantic longings and attitudes,” promising “to heal the wounds of time.” For instance, although in The American Adam Lewis acknowledges that “the vision of innocence and the claim of newness were almost perilously misleading” (9), he also argues that

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without the illusion [of the freedom from the past], we are conscious, no longer of tradition, but simply and coldly of the burden of history. And without the vision [of innocence], we are left, not with a mature tragic spirit, but merely with a sterile awareness of evil uninvigorated by a sense of loss.  

And Marx notes that the recurrent metaphor of the machine—embODYING the conflict between pastoral conventions and an industrialized world—“discloses that our inherited symbols of order and beauty have been divested of meaning” (*Machine* 364). In order to “heal the wounds of time,” Lewis constructs a necessary fiction of innocence and freedom to transcend the “burden of history”; Marx mourns the loss of pastoral “symbol[s] of reconciliation” (364), urging society to imagine new symbols. In searching for a native American mythology, these critics formulated a literary mythic tradition based on an illusory origin and a narrative of loss. In the sixties, the nature of America’s social origins and social narratives would both be challenged.

7. In describing the “ideal home,” Weber is actually making a statement about the pragmatic foundation of the middle-class home for the Puritans. Rather than a house highlighting feudal excess and conspicuous consumption, these Protestants “approved the rational and utilitarian uses of wealth which were willed by God for the needs of the individual and community” (171). Interestingly, Dawn, the Swede’s wife, attempts to escape the frivolous image of herself as a beauty queen and adopts the role of “gentlewoman farmer/cattle owner,” desiring that others see her as a pragmatic worker rather than a decorative wife.

8. Liberalism’s relationship to the state has always been complex. For instance, in the US some liberals perceive of the government as a neutral framework for allowing diverse individuals to pursue their own goals. Classical liberals and libertarians, for instance, defend free markets and call for as little state interference as possible. In contrast, so-called welfare liberals or liberal egalitarians call for the state to regulate institutions to ensure equality not only of opportunity but of the distribution of resources.

9. Dollinger examines the development of Jewish American liberalism from 1933 to 1975, highlighting the role of Jewish activists in the crafting of social welfare programs. Liberalism offered Jews a “vision of a pluralist democracy that demanded social and political inclusion” (4). In the sixties, many liberal Jews faced a crisis when confronted with a more militant brand of liberalism, one that allowed for affirmative action and recognized that the social mobility that operated so successfully for some groups did not work for others.
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10. Myra Jehlen has argued that Europe’s ideal liberalism, as derived from Reformation and Enlightenment notions of individual autonomy defended by natural inalienable rights, of the sanctity of private property as it fulfills individual self-possession, and of representative government as an ideal social order implied by such self-possessive individualism (5) constitutes the founding principles of America: “the elsewhere embattled ideal of liberal individualism established itself in America as simply a description of things not only as they are but as they manifestly need to be.”

11. These two social readings also support the interpretations of conservative thinkers such as Robert Bork, who has depicted the sixties as an adolescent-dominated liberal era in which liberal intellectuals insisting on the rights of the individual risked destroying social and religious frameworks, and, in striving for equality of outcomes rather than opportunity, plunged the country into chaos.

12. William Cohen notes that “labeling something filthy is a viscerally powerful means of excluding it” (ix).

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