ISAAC HART

# Jewish Masterpiece: *American Pastoral*

## *Philip Roth's American Job*

EING Jewish does not weigh heavily on Seymour Levov, the broad-shouldered, blue-eyed, almost perfectly Americanized Jew at the center of *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth's tragic novel from 1997. Like the predecessors who ranked among what one critic called Roth's "Jewish centaurs" — fledgling Neil Klugman of "Goodbye, Columbus"; festering Alexander Portnoy of *Portnoy's Complaint*; Nathan Zuckerman, the alter-ego novelist, in the playfully metafictional Zuckerman Bound series published from 1979 to 1985 — Levov springs from Weequahic High School, in a densely Jewish section of Newark, around the end of World War II. Those men tended to share close variations of a warped, prodigiously neurotic personality — rating high on the charts of peevishness, bookishness, and libido — along

with more than a little of the author's biography. ("Don't invent, just remember" was the mantra, dosed with characteristic irony, that Roth claimed to follow while at work on a later opus.)

Together they formed an archetype, which invited one of the louder criticisms of Roth: his tendency to unspool similarly pitched battles of identity in book after book, decade after decade. Levov, a mythically goy-faced specimen, arrives as something of a rebuttal. No one else from Weequahic "possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov." They call him "the Swede."

Athletic, reserved, well-adjusted, decent: What an odd duck he is. Consider that, as a teenager, Portnoy harbors vain dreams of scrubbing away his Jewishness and passing under the name "Alton C. Peterson" (the *C* stands for *Christian*) to win over a girl. (What would he answer, he wonders gloomily, "when she asks about the middle of my face and what happened to it?") Zuckerman, Roth's longtime surrogate, dryly tells a friend, after she accuses him of trying to conceal being "a Newark Yid" in *Zuckerman Unbound*: "I'm afraid there are other distinguishing features."

Pitted against their own bodies, families, and identities, these distinctly Rothian figures were sometimes called "self-hating Jews," an epithet that can obscure the depth of their attachment. Roth dealt with Judaism most handily in its ethnic dimensions—appearance, folkways, patterns of speech, neighborhoods, communal and familial obligation—and so his Jews were "self-hating": When they disdained being Jewish, they were incapable, for reasons of fixed situation and physiognomy, of disclaiming it. (*Involuntarily committed* might have been a better term.) Such a dynamic nourished the rich, energetic, and hilarious identity crises that often seemed indivisible from Roth's brilliance as a writer and that helped make the intellectual-neurotic Jew a cultural icon.

With the Swede, Roth swerves, with crisp ambition, into portraying conventionality, and the embrace of it by a Jew who is uniquely unbound.

Armed with a fortune from Newark Maid, the family's glove factory, he stakes a claim to an 18th-century farmhouse in Old Rimrock, New Jersey, a wealthy, WASPy outlying suburb. Together with Dawn, his Irish-stock, beauty-queen wife, they set up a hobby cattle farm, where they raise Merry, their daughter and only child. What could go wrong? "She's post-Catholic, he's post-Jewish, together they're going to go out there to Old Rimrock to raise little post-toasties," Jerry Levov, the Swede's brother, summarizes decades later.

Jerry delivers that tidy line to Zuckerman — who narrates the book, back on the scene for the first time in a decade — toward the end of an elaborate frame narrative that sets the novel in motion. Contemplatively paced and studded with muscular, fulminating yarns that brim with staccato psychological import, *Pastoral* was the first installment in what would be called the America trilogy, and it was part of a late-career turn toward grander historical scope by Roth, perhaps intended to fill out a Nobel Prize résumé. (In vain, though *Pastoral* did score the '98 Pulitzer for fiction.) Levov is more static than the usual Roth hero, or at least he lacks the usual hang-ups. Using Zuckerman (who, having lately undergone prostate surgery, is more reluctant than usual to spill his own neuroses on the page) to tell the story allows Roth to put a layer between his pen and the Swede's considerably flatter mind, which doesn't have the old familiar pitted contours and byways.

"He loved America. Loved being an *American*," says Zuckerman. Few boxes go unchecked. We meet the Swede in high school, as a strapping three-sport letterman. Then he's a Marine, then a drill ser-

geant on Parris Island. Marries Miss New Jersey, 1949. ("A shiksa. Dawn Dwyer. He'd done it.") Takes over his father's business, signs paychecks for a small army of glovers. Moves out to Old Rimrock, into the pastoral authenticity of a 170-year-old stone house — about as old as the country — with beams carved of oak, on Arcady Hill Road. It had a Christmas tree. Pommard. Hoffritz knives.

In retrospect, Zuckerman goes on to assess, "he had tried all his life never to do the wrong thing." But even in Old Rimrock, the ferment of the 1960s trickles in, and teenaged Merry — first churlish, then combative, then explosive — gets carried away in the rougher currents of the New Left. Radicalized by the Vietnam War, she eventually goes postal, blowing a hole in their lives and running off into hiding. A related form of violence soon descends on the Newark Maid plant, and the Swede deserts the city entirely. (Manufacturing is offshored to Puerto Rico.) Years pass, filled with devastated searching, until the Swede, roused by a message from Merry's old comrade, finds his daughter, now a convert to Jainism, subsisting in a Newark slum near a highway overpass. She refuses to come home, and he cannot bring himself to compel her to.

"Mugged by reality" became, around this time, a famous refrain of disillusionment, and Irving Kristol's phrase captures something of the arc of the Swede's life. (It does not appear in the novel.) But the thrust of the dictum was its sense of political awakening. The Swede does not take it up; haunted, searching, he never finds resolution. He absorbs the historical turns of the period's Jewish Americans — flight to the suburbs, economic advancement, assimilation, globalization — with little of the nascent neocons' canniness. And pages of imagined conversations with Angela Davis fail to move him in the other direction. He's left shattered.

The book's final section, subtitled "Paradise Lost," orbits around a dinner party, set during the heat of the Watergate hearings, that bursts into violence. The Swede is ambushed by news of Dawn's affair

with a baronial WASP he has dubbed “Mr. America.” The blow suggests that assimilation, taken to the extreme, is a fool’s game.

Has time borne this out? Post-ethnic assimilated Jews are, today, hardly news. The thrill that once simmered in the idea of WASPs giving way to Jews in the American heights has long since dried up; anyone who has taken a look at CEO lists or the East Hampton real estate market can see that this is an accomplished fact (if one that is provoking newly vocal resentment). And in many circles, the airing of concerns about intermarriage has subsided, shifting toward acceptance and embrace.

A bard of postwar liberalism, Roth possessed a genius for condensing and animating the unresolved core of the American order — the clash between public and private interest, individuality and group duty — in his drama and characters. For Zuckerman, for Portnoy, the game was comparatively well-defined, and the limits of assimilation were spelled out, most emblematically, by their very facial features. These constraints don’t bind the Swede, who is just about free to leave it all behind.

Each passing decade may bring an ever richer crop of Swede Levovs. But Roth suggests that what looks like stability and success, obtained through ultra-Americanization, is not as sustainable as it appears and that intergenerational upheaval is never far off.

Today’s Swede is not so hard to sketch. He enters middle age in high, perhaps higher, suburbia, living in an enormous new-build mansion, working in private equity where he squeezes cash out of the remaining Newark Maids of the world. His well-being is measured with full-body Prenuvo scans, his esteem assured by an accumulation of expensive vehicles, a Purple Label wardrobe, elite airline status, the reassuring weight of a metal Amex in his pocket. Highly competitive, he holds in his hands what he identifies as comfort and security, while maintaining vanishingly few of the staples that set

apart the lives of his ancestors. And Merry? Black-and-white keffiyeh wrapped around her shoulders, trust fund in her name, Jewish Voice for Peace reposted on her Instagram, residing in the Columbia encampment, the figure comes easily into view.

A classic feature of the domestic drama is to take the hot water that a secondary character, usually a family member, finds herself in and use it to turn up the heat on the central mover. (And Roth, it must be said, often formulated women characters as caricatures or little more than devices to push and prod his men.) The weight of the mortification, then, falls on the Swede. Before she cracks up, Merry takes her arguments to passionate extremes, only for the Swede, outstripped as a father, to fumble for anything more than bromides in response. Mugged by reality, his response is — *nothing*.

With his daughter gone and his wife set to move into a new house she's building with Mr. America, a glassy postmodern creation à la Philip Johnson, what will come of the Swede's well-planned patrimony? Who will inherit the Swede? Roth often took as his subject men who were in some permanent way at odds with their world and yet irrepressibly drawn into it. In *American Pastoral*, the limitations are gone, only to leave behind a husk.

And yet a book, with its simple characterizations and brutal moral themes, a mulishly conventional protagonist who does the right and propitious thing according to custom and yet cannot outrun the twisting knife of fate — *American Pastoral*, for what it leaves of Roth's familiar tones and types, is not at great variance with a much older Jewish textual tradition. This is Roth's swing at an American book of Job — a name he nods at in the opening pages — a formulation set in a largely post-religious, post-ethnic, capitalist culture, in which the

shepherded flock is the glove factory, the ordering force is American liberalism. Roth personally extolled this ideal more than once, in part because it fostered his life's freedoms and furnished the elements of his fiction, in the foundational tension between individual liberty and communal obligation, and the conflicts of identity and obligation that ensue.

But in a Roth story, faith and righteousness tend to mark the territory of fools and nuisances, due for their comeuppance. The Swede is a man who runs the table, makes the fullest possible embrace of his freedoms, thinks himself blameless and upright, fearing the American gods and shunning their evils. And where does it get him? "Perhaps they were sinning in their feasting" was Dostoevsky's gloss on Job. We get something similar in the Swede. Roth refrains from picking an ideological winner here. Instead—writing at a time, the late Nineties, that increasingly looks like the peak of confidence in the American order and the position of Jews in it, when popular writers saw fit to posit an "end of history" and that "the Jews had no greater enemy than themselves"—he reminds us that history is not neat and that it always has a loser. "He had tried all his life never to do the wrong thing," says Zuckerman, "and that was what he had done." ✴

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