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TRAGIC INNOCENCE IN PHILIP ROTH'S *AMERICAN PASTORAL*

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Abstract: *American Pastoral* is not only an elegiac fictional biography, but an in-depth analysis of the demise of the American dream in the context of post-war social and cultural mutations. The loss of innocence echoes the tragic mythical Fall from Paradise and the novel's main characters, Seymour "Swede" Levov and his daughter, Merry, mirror this process in a complex and meaningful way.

Keywords: *innocence, tragedy, identity, the American Dream*

1. Introduction: The Book of Levov

Nathan Zuckerman, the auctorial alter-ego in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, writes the story of his childhood hero, Seymour Levov, a talented athlete whose fate dramatically depicts what Harold Bloom named *the Other Side of the American Dream*, that is *the American Nightmare* (Bloom 2009:XV). This brutal reversal changes the entire spectrum of values and meanings in Levov's life and his once fascinating aura of success turns into a mask of sorrow and stoic endurance.

Seymour was lovingly nicknamed "the Swede", and he was the Viking blonde, athletic son of a prosperous Jewish family that owned a business in the peaceful post-war New Jersey, Newark Maid Gloves. He was also the

Weekquahic High School idol who later married Miss New Jersey, had a daughter and lived a blessed life in the idyllic small town of Old Rimrock, until the day this ideal alignment of elements generated an implosion that left the Levovs devastated and hopeless. In 1968, amid the Vietnam War protests, Meredith, their beloved offspring, turned into a political fanatic and bombed the local post office, killed the doctor who happened to be around that morning, and became a fugitive and an outcast for five years. When she reemerges from seclusion and meets her father again, she is a starving Jain who refuses to bathe and breathes through a mask, for fear she might kill the bacteria on her skin and in the air around her.

Those were the years that marked the demise of the “Swede” version of the American Dream, his day by day defeat in the face of uncertainty and despair, the tragic loss of his pure energy and strong belief in the ultimate order of the world, the Fall of a genuinely innocent man from his Paradise.

“The powerful, the gorgeous, the lonely Swede, whom life had never made shrewd” (Roth 1998:79) – that would be a synthesis of Nathan Zuckerman’s elegiac vision of Seymour Levov’s heroic status. As a main coordinate of modern tragedy, innocence lies at the core of *hamartia*, the Aristotelian concept of tragic flaw that turns the hero’s destiny into misfortune, and involves another significant dimension of the intricate mechanism that causes the hero’s downfall – guilt.

The present paper will focus on the ways in which tragic innocence, along with its sources and consequences, mold the two main characters in Roth’s novel, Seymour “Swede” Levov and Meredith “Merry” Levov. Their metamorphoses provide a vast space for the exploration of both heavenly and

hellish dimensions, from an individual perspective and a collective one as well. All these processes reveal the particular nature of modern tragedy imagined by an author whose place is, as Bloom argues (2009:xv), on the Other Side, near Poe, T.S. Eliot, Faulkner and Pynchon. As Elaine Safer (2006:66) remarked, *American Pastoral* is “an elegy on the death of the American Dream”.

2. The Tragedy of Innocence

Following Leslie Fiedler’s (1952:298) idea that the American writer can be seen “as the recorder of the encounter of the dream of innocence and the fact of guilt”, Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (1963:211) state, even more clearly, that usually “tragedy is consummated when the dream of innocence is confronted by the fact of guilt, and acquiesces therein.” In order to fully grasp the meaning of this important observation on the nature of tragedy, we should mention that the meaning of innocence that is of interest here is directly connected to a negative revelation and a subsequent fall into the opposite realm, that of experience. The question at the basis of Swede’s drama targets his involvement in both his and Merry’s *fall* – what caused his daughter’s anger that she became a terrorist, where did he fail as a parent and, implicitly, as a human, to raise such a monster?

Simple as they may seem, these interrogations can be tackled from multiple perspectives, but the best vantage point is always at the root of all tragic events: a trauma. To Philip Roth, tragedy and trauma have kept most of their ancient, initial meanings intact. Tragedy arises when the individual is at the hands of a blind, often merciless fate, as the writer would later prove in his 2010 novel, *Nemesis*. On the other hand, *trauma* is the term that connected

Sophocles' Oedipus to the vocabulary of psychoanalysis – a violent act generating a wound that would never completely heal, a background pain that can suddenly become the principle of disaster. In *American Pastoral*, Merry is the absurdly deformed descendant of a family defined by prosperity, progress and success, the bomber in a house of harmony, the angry, sloppy, overweight daughter of Dawn Dwyer, Miss New Jersey 1949, and the handsome, gentle Swede. The auctorial mind, voiced by Zuckerman, never fully discloses the cause of Merry's erratic behavior or the Swede's potential contribution to her catastrophic later choices, simply because there is an entire network of causality and reasons that made it all possible. There is, nevertheless, one important clue concerning the moment when a serious deviation might have occurred. As a baby, Merry cried constantly – "She entered the world screaming and the screaming did not stop." (Roth 1998:390) Then, she uttered something strange and unsettling:

I'm lonesome, she used to say to him when she was a tiny girl, and he could never figure out where she had picked up that word. Lonesome. As sad a word as you could hear out of a two-year-old's mouth. (Roth 1998:226)

Despite the unusual vocabulary, Merry would stutter, and her disrupted speech marked a disruption in her connection to reality, fuelling her frustration that she could be heard and understood with difficulty. The bomb she detonated carried a political message that was a subjective one, too. Merry tragically lost her innocence to the perverse language of fanaticism probably because she wanted to be heard and remembered once and for all. When language and

reason fail, it is typically replaced by violence and death – “she never stuttered when she was with the dynamite” (Roth 1998:259) and, as Timothy Parrish observed, the bombs “express the rage that the stutter concealed.” (Parrish 2000:92)

What makes this character whole and memorable is this particular trait – her genuine innocence, transformed, apparently without any logical justification, into the incomprehensible ethics of a murderous terrorist. If we are to explore the established cultural pattern determined by the tripartite structure of an age of innocence, followed by a Fall and the acute nostalgia of an irreversible golden time (the novel is divided accordingly, into three main parts- *Paradise Remembered*, *The Fall*, *Paradise Lost*, having Milton’s epic as the archetype), we must notice the fact that Merry’s infantile, yet very pertinent loneliness suggests a kind of inadaptability, a fundamental incapacity to fit in and act as required or expected. It’s not the Swede’s lack of parental skills to blame for Merry’s affiliation with the Weathermen Underground (their contradictory conversations about her going to New York are a sort of anecdotes of extreme “reasonable parenting”), but his and Dawn’s incapacity to react appropriately when the first warning signs of something going wrong appeared.

Merry’s inner crisis has everything to do with her identity, and while in search of her elusive self, she mirrored her own father’s dramatic identity quest – he was as unadapted and “lonesome” as she was, and his attempt to break free from the traditions of his Jewish family and marry a Catholic, a *shiksa*, turned out to be a mistake of great proportions. Merry had a “Catholic phase” and decorated her room with Christian symbols, an “Audrey Hepburn phase”, and

adored the Hollywood icon, but all these seemingly inoffensive steps to a coherent identity form “an uneasy mixture” that “paralyzes Swede even as it echoes his own life.” (Parrish 2000:91)

Swede’s guilt is divided into two main cells: the moment Merry watched a Buddhist monk’s self-immolation on TV and the quasi-incestuous kiss the girl once placed on his lips. The Electra complex cannot trigger psychosis on its own, but, nourished by an all-encompassing anger at all the perfection she was unable to adapt to, it makes her oscillate between the extremes of murder and self-annihilation. Her journey in search of identity ended when she became “someone who has ventured so far toward the outer edges of subjectivity that she finally chooses not to have a self at all.” (Parrish 2000:93)

The final collapse of the Swede’s relationship with his daughter (violently depicted in the scene where he vomits on her while exclaiming “who are you!”) is implied by the fact that he tries to connect Merry’s political extremism to “a pathological cause, [he] attempts to interpret her political actions as a sickness that may be cured.” (Kumamoto Stanley 2005) Merry could not be cured by a speech therapist, nor by a psychologist, because her stutter was only a symptom of her difficulty to adapt and ‘fit in’. She is both “the anarchic center of the novel” (Parrish 2000:91) and “the major disruption of the hero’s American Dream” (Safer 2006:87). But, at the same time, her innocence is genuinely tragic, primarily because her downfall occurred while she was a teenager and because it is deeply rooted in a severe identity crisis. Her father’s fall is, nevertheless, emblematic for the perils brought on by a less harmful plague – illusions.

2.1. A Life That Fits Like A Glove

By far one of the most intriguing characters in Roth's novel, Jerry Levov, the Swede's brother, a cardiac surgeon with strong opinions and bold attitudes is the one that inspired Nathan Zuckerman to write about the Swede's life. Growing up in the shadow of his brother's God-like aura, Jerry highlights the essence of Swede's drama in the same manner the ancient Greek chorus in a tragedy would play the role of a collective consciousness: "No reason for him to know anything about anything except gloves. Instead he is plagued with shame and uncertainty and pain for the rest of his life." (Roth 1998:68)

A self-made medical celebrity, Jerry is able to clearly distinguish between real success and illusion. His rants against Seymour's debilitating kindness and obsessive love for his daughter are counterpointed by Rita Cohen's sharp observation that the family business is, in fact, a sad metaphor of the Levovs' inability to see things in depth: "All you really fucking care about is skin. Ectoderm. Surface. But what's underneath, you don't have a clue." (Roth 1998:137) Rita Cohen was Merry's messenger and an anarchist of the cruelest kind; she lures Swede into a sexual dark corner and resuscitates his parental nightmare.

The glove is an unfortunate metaphor for Swede's flawless life-scenario, because, unlike the mobile, ever-changing hand, this man's existence is static, frozen in an impossible project, immobilized by stereotypes and clichés. The most harmful of them all proved to be the American Dream, an ideal that collided with the harsh realities of postwar American history and left those who believed in it in bitter dismay. Roth sums up the process:

The old intergenerational give-and-take of the country-that-used-to-be, when everyone knew his role and took the rules dead seriously, the acculturating back-and-forth that all of us here grew up with, the ritual postimmigrant struggle for success turning pathological in, of all places, the gentleman farmer's castle of our superordinary Swede. A guy stacked like a deck of cards for things to unfold entirely differently. In no way prepared for what is going to hit him. How could he, with all his carefully calibrated goodness, have known that the stakes of living obediently were so high? Obedience is embraced to lower the stakes. A beautiful wife. A beautiful house. Runs his business like a charm. Handles his handful of an old man well enough. He was really living it out, his version of paradise. This is how successful people live. They're good citizens. They feel lucky. They feel grateful. God is smiling down on them. There are problems, they adjust. (Roth 1998:86)

The dangers associated with illusion lurk behind a luminous, promising façade, and once the mechanism of tragedy has been activated, nothing can restore initial peace. In this case, being unprepared for tragedy rhymes with naïveté and ignorance, rather than innocence. There is, however, an intricate structure of elements that leaves one puzzled when confronted with the tragic. Roth's conclusion echoes the gloomy nature of most of his heroes encounter with the Moira:

And then everything changes and it becomes impossible. Nothing is smiling down on anybody. And who can adjust then? Here is someone not set up for life's working out poorly, let alone for the impossible. (Roth 1998:86)

For a clearer image of Swede's project of an ideal life, and implicitly, his version of the American Dream, it might be useful to go back to a moment of intense pastoral serenity, when the man first projected his earthly paradise:

He saw a large stone house with black shutters set on a rise back of some trees. A little girl was on a swing suspended from a low branch of one of those big trees, swinging herself high into the air, just as happy, he imagined, as a kid can be. It was the first house built of stone he'd ever seen, and to a city boy it was an architectural marvel. (Roth 1998:189)

The ethics of Swede Levov targets three symbolic nuclei of prosperity and success – a good business, a home and a spiritual place (religion had been replaced by sports, according to the modern frame of mind), a structure directly connectable to Georges Dumézil's (1985) theory of the three functions that needed to be fulfilled in Indo-European societies in order to maintain the unity and well-being of their community. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley (2005) called this the Swede's "coherent assimilationist vision of America", a vision "defined by key American symbolic markers, especially the values of industrial capitalism, the ritual of sports, and the acquisition of a home". An American Jew, the Swede aimed at gaining a new form of identity, one that did not emphasize tradition and genealogy, and the symbolic representation of this new, "clean" man was Johnny Appleseed, a legendary character who "wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a Protestant Christian – nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American.[...] No brains probably, but didn't need 'em — a great walker was all Johnny Appleseed needed to be. All physical joy." (Roth 1998:316) By identifying with Johnny Appleseed, Swede Levov

wanted to overcome the hardships of ethnic and religious identity, in fact longing for a status that involved no depth and no responsibility. “He wanted to have been born something more than a physical wonder” (Roth 1998:79) and this rare gift proved to be a terrible burden, because he did, in fact, find “a higher calling” (Roth 1998:79), but his inability to outgrow his banal idealism when faced with disaster was too big a challenge and he failed.

His effort to become something other than he is – meaning a Jew who wants to be an assimilated American – derives from a social ideology that shaped American identity in the past century – “the American belief in cultural transformation as an inherent social good.” (Parrish 2000:97) The question of identity is again a triad, as it aligns the real author (Roth), the fictional one (Zuckerman) and the fictional hero (Seymour Levov) in front of the harsh question of what it means to have Jewish origins in 20th century America .

The Swede’s American pastoral is a farfetched Paradise that is too banal and unrealistic to last. It is “an embodiment of an ideal, a nostalgic yearning for a rural origin where one can recover an Edenic oneness. Such a vision, in the end, proves illusory.” (Kumamoto Stanley 2005) The incongruence resides at the basic level of life, at the intersection of his capitalist ethics with his idyllic countryside utopia. Incompatibilities of this kind can only result in sheer disillusionment.

2.2. Innocence, Immaturity, Illusion

We have come to the point where a most significant problem needs to be addressed. Is this character’s emblematic innocence a different kind of candidness, one pertaining to the realm of illusion and naïveté? The Swede’s

projections, ingenuous, yet inauthentic, are the main reason he is rendered helpless in front of a catastrophe of considerable proportions such as Merry's horrid deeds. She was the central element of his ideal representation, "the little girl on a swing" (Roth 1998:189) and, once she grew up to be a terrorist, the whole edifice crumbled, ruining Swede's life. Pastoral innocence is a flat representation, a banal cliché that only imitates an ideal, involving "concealment, pretense, artificiality, inauthenticity." (Rubin-Dorsky 2003:224) The opposition between Swede's dreamed-of pastoral and the nightmare he lands in, the *counterpastoral*, is clearly drawn by Merry's radical actions, and Roth tries to give us the right measure of "the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral", or what he calls "the indigenous American berserk" (Roth 1998:86). To her, the father "embodies that mixture of American exceptionalism and cultural imperialism that made the war against Vietnam possible. (Parrish 2000:97)

"The fall" is a logical consequence of the pastoral pursue of purity and innocence – "purity is a doomed project, for it is blind to our fallen epistemological condition." (Posnock 2006:85) Purity freezes, while error is a condition of movement and evolution. It is important to stress that, while he does not lose his faith (the Swede marries again and has children with his second wife), he must have shifted from innocence to experience, therefore from immaturity to a more solid identity.

The Swede's pastoral projections are a natural response to the collective ideal that he embodies in his Jewish neighborhood. As "the neighborhood talisman" (Shechner 2007:143), Swede feels the pressure associated with his remarkable status. Nevertheless, his position turns out to be paradoxical,

because, in addition to the ‘noblesse oblige’ that accompanies his successes, other factors become decisive along the way. The political and economic changes in post-war American society cannot be neglected when it comes to the pressure of history. In the same tragic manner, but in a metaphorical way at the level of the collective, social imaginary, the Swede becomes a scapegoat in his community, the bearer of a different type of “ills” – illusions. His innocence is quite different from a tragic hero’s, and does not evoke the archetypal matrix of the fallen innocent the way Merry does. Roth’s irony in naming his heroine “Merry” seems to sabotage Swede’s pastoral and utopian projections, but, at the same time, it laments the disintegration of a stereotype that had the authority of a national trademark – the American Dream. In his analysis of the phenomenon, Frederic Carpenter reiterates its initial definition, as it was given by J.T. Adams in 1931: “that dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world.” (Carpenter 1955:5)

Incongruence and illusion seem to establish the parameters of Swede Levov’s “fall” from his Paradise, but they generate a far greater tension in Philip Roth’s work. The trilogy that starts with *American Pastoral* (1997) – followed by *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000) – reflects “three historical occurrences that fundamentally damaged American society after the Second World War” (Safer 2006:79), namely the Vietnam War and the subsequent rebellions of the ’60, McCarthy’s politics in the ’50s, and the ebullition of Political Correctness in the ’80s and ’90s. This process was labeled by critics as “America’s repeated loss of innocence” (Safer 2006) and, if looked at from this angle, history is mirrored by individual destiny in a way

that accurately shows man's humble stature when faced with cosmic forces, destiny, or their modern equivalent, history.

3. Conclusion

In *American Pastoral*, the tragic dimension of innocence can be explored in relation with the two main characters, Seymour Levov and his daughter, Merry. The theme of innocence favors a wider perspective of central themes in the novel such as the pastoral or the American Dream and it reveals some of their less obvious nuances. A closer investigation of the issue of tragic innocence also exposes the complex meaning it bears when connected to the two characters in question here. Both characters are, in different manners and with different consequences, 'crushed' by history (the modern, but the similarly vengeful equivalent of destiny), yet Merry's displacement from the center of her father's pastoral American Dream and her evolution into a fanatic and a bomber give the novel its real tragic dimension.

The final question of the novel – “and what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?” (Roth 1998:423) – might find its answer if one takes a deeper look at the intricate web of illusions that created the family.

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