

What the Hell Happened to our Smart Jewish Kids?

Writing to Bridge Generational Divides

in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*

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For Grampa

I wish you were able to read this

“What are we to do about this terribly significant business of other people”

(American Pastoral 35)

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Introduction

Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) is the story of Seymour "Swede" Levov, the "blue-eyed blond" born into the Jewish enclave of Weequahic NJ, and his tragic fall from grace induced by his daughter Merry's entanglement with anti-war activism (3). The book centers on the Swede, the father-figure who cannot understand his daughter's actions yet refuses to condemn her, despite the monstrous deeds she commits. But the novel is also the story of Nathan Zuckerman, the writer who once idolized the Swede, and who now narrates his destruction in a novel within a novel. Zuckerman once looked up to the Swede's ability to assimilate into WASP culture; "He'd invoked in me when I was a boy ... the strongest fantasy I had of being someone else" (88). Zuckerman is shocked when he discovers that the person on whom he had pinned his dream of assimilation and the "pastoral"—that rural, idyllic, quintessentially American life—had suffered so much. Learning of the Swede's story, Merry's actions, and the divorce that followed and effectively removed any chance of retaining this "pastoral" life, prompts Zuckerman to reexamine his assumptions. He is shocked by how his own perceptions of the Swede's life were so distant from actuality. This causes him to ponder whether he has gotten anyone right, even his own father. Nathan's relationship with his father fractured in Victor's old age, due to problems catalyzed by Nathan's writing. The realization that he has misunderstood the Swede offers the possibility that he may have misunderstood his father too, and the life of the Swede serves as an enticing narrative from which to examine the role of the father whose child has committed a serious transgression.

The fractured relationship between Nathan and (the now-deceased) Victor Zuckerman positions Nathan and Merry as kindred spirits, due to their shared opposition to their fathers' viewpoints and the actions they carry out that ensued in a distancing between parent and child.

Through his empathy with Merry, Zuckerman writes the story of a child who has committed the most monstrous sin, through the eyes of a father incapable of condemning his children. By narrativizing the life of the Swede this way, Zuckerman works through his own guilt for the sins against his father's values that he has committed. Zuckerman reimagines the conflict between himself and his father from the perspective of the father who wishes to be still with his transgressive child. Inhabiting the mind of the unangerable father, Zuckerman realizes the drawbacks of passivity, and incorporates a second father, Lou Levov, the second-generation American Jew, who can understand the actions of neither his son nor his grandson. The fractured family dynamic is contextualized within a larger pattern of generational division, where each generation has vastly different values than those that follow. Through writing about the Swede, Nathan works towards empathizing with his own father, finding Victor's anger to be rooted in differing values rather than any sort of hatred for Nathan. Roth's novel, and his entire career, is rooted in exploration of these generational divides within a diasporic people (American Jews), and the friction that is caused by the values of one generation rubbing up against the ideals of another. Through the story of the Swede *American Pastoral (AP)* suggests the possibility of writing as a means of working through these frictions.

To contextualize my interpretation of Roth's novel and the cultural origins against which he is writing (and rebelling), it is useful to define "diaspora." Paul Johnson finds several common traits inherent to diaspora:

- (1) the dispersion of a present group or of past ancestors from a place or places of origin to multiple new destinations; (2) some retained collective memory about the homeland from which the group is separated; (3) the maintenance of relations with the departed homeland, at least as an imagined community, which defines in significant ways the contemporary experience of the hostland; and (4) an ongoing experience of difference from the majority population in the place of settlement. (97)

For Jews, diaspora exists from the time of their expulsion from Israel in the early 1st century.

The Jewish people have been in diaspora ever since. Here in mid-twentieth-century New Jersey,

the world of Roth's novel, Jews remain distant from WASPs, the dominant population. (2)—“collective memory about a homeland”—and (3)—“relations with the homeland”—are manifested through associations to Israel, whether Zionist or not (the Swede and Zuckerman's aspiration for the “goyish wilderness” can be interpreted as a more metaphorical yearning for the homeland). For the Weequahic Jews, the “ongoing experience of difference” requires acting within the bounds of what is deemed acceptable by the populace:

Diasporas force the hand of religious discourses and actions. Formerly ‘natural’ or unspoken parts of the social environs and its quotidian routine, religious words and acts now are made objects of conscious selection. They must be planned, allotted space, deliberated, and settled upon. Which ideas and rituals must at all costs be recollected, retained, and revived? Which can be left aside? The criteria of inclusion may be uncertain, along with the authorities responsible for such decisions. For groups in exile or emigration, religion is reified when it is dislodged from its embedded, unspoken status in order to become a discrete object of contemplation and contest. (Paul Johnson 107).

For the Jews of Weequahic, the markedness Johnson mentions above derives from their religious practices. Those trying to move ahead—third and fourth generation immigrants born into diaspora—strive to distance themselves from the facets of their culture that distinguish themselves from the hegemonic (white) population. Religious practices and observances are easiest to drop (at least, easier than physical markers of difference). As successive generations become more and more assimilated, they deviate from these “religious words and acts”, and ties to their community.

Ellen Brodtkin makes a distinction between “ethnoracial assignment and ethnoracial identity,” the former refers to “popularly held classifications” and the latter “we construct...ourselves” (3). These are not constant and change over time. For Jews, identifying and being assigned “Jewish” becomes less prevalent over time. As a result, the Swede and Zuckerman have distinct ethnoracial identities from Lou, Victor, and the rest of the older generation. This accounts for the friction between generations and for Zuckerman's idolization of the Swede—he is assigned no ethnic identity, he is a post-diaspora, assimilated (at least from

Zuckerman's perspective) Jew. The ethnoracial identity Zuckerman desires to construct he sees in the Swede, whereas his parents are content with being Jewish.

I intend to examine the reasons beyond ethnoracial identity that Zuckerman is enticed by the Swede as a subject. From his youth, Zuckerman recalls the way the Swede made him feel, and is thrilled to be hearing from him. When the Swede returns into Zuckerman's life, he brings with him the idea to memorialize one's ancestors by requesting that Zuckerman help write a tribute to the Swede's father. Zuckerman is subsequently shocked when he learns the true story of the Swede's life—the story of what Merry did. His surprise comes less from the nature of the incident, but from how it deviated from Zuckerman's assumptions about the Swede's life. Zuckerman decides to write about the Swede, primarily, as I will argue, as a way to explore his own relationship with the father. Zuckerman explores the mind of the father whose child has committed the worst possible transgression, yet who refuses to condemn her. This forms a therapeutic working-through of Zuckerman's own encounters with the now-deceased Victor Zuckerman, who was angered by the Nathan's actions. In the process of writing the unangerable father, he condemns this quality of being insensible to anger or offense, as it leads to the Swede's downfall, and to chaos.

The latter part of the book explores the generational divides within the Levov family. If Zuckerman can contextualize the recurring parent/child fractures in both the Swede's life and his own as disagreements based on differing ethnoracial identities, then his own father's anger, and the pain that has stuck with him for so long, will be eased. He becomes able to empathize with his father by understanding that he cannot understand him, that his mindset was based on the values specific to his upbringing—the second generation of diaspora Jews in America. The

Swede narrative present in the text is an exploration into the guilt weighing on Zuckerman's mind.

The Swede's story, as narrated by Zuckerman, follows the quest to find a reason for Merry's actions. Born in Weequahic, he was a high school star athlete, briefly enrolling in the military before returning to New Jersey where he entered into his father's glove business:

In 1958, the Swede would himself become the young president of the company, commuting every morning down to Central Avenue from his home some thirty-odd miles west of Newark, out past the suburbs—a short range pioneer living on a hundred-acre farm on a back road in the sparsely habited hills beyond Morristown, in wealthy, rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey, a long way from the tannery floor where Grandfather Levov had begun in America. (14).

From here, the Swede's desire to transcend his Jewish immigrant roots is realized in his "marriage to Miss New Jersey...A shiksa, Dawn Dwyer" (15). The marriage produces that fateful daughter, Merry, who becomes entangled with anti-Vietnam War activists, and in an attempt to "bring the war home" bombs the village post office, taking the life of a local doctor with it. She disappears, and the Swede is left struggling to comprehend what happened, what went wrong, why she did what he did. Sometime later, he is met by a Merry double, Rita Cohen, who tries to manipulate the Swede into sleeping with her, testing the Swede's unwavering love for his daughter by promising that she will deliver money to Merry if he does. He refuses. Five years pass, and the Swede sits with the trauma of what has happened, until he finds out that Merry has been living in Newark. He visits her and is unable to be angry at her. He hears that she has killed three more people, but also that she has been raped, and it is only the latter that his mind obsesses on. He returns home to host a dinner party, an extended sequence that takes up a third of the novel, where his life collapses in front of his eyes. He learns that Dawn has been having an affair and is planning to leave him, and the novel closes on the dinner party in a chaotic scene—the total rupture of the "idyllic life" the Swede has built.

From this plot description, it is easy to see why the novel is interpreted as indicating Roth's "rightward turn" (Podhoretz). Many disagree with Roth's presentation of Merry as "grotesque, a caricature, the butt of the novel's joke" (Rubenstein 201). Some critics would characterize this lack of characterization as Roth's "imaginative failure" (Neelkantan 58). But the text is more than this summary and Merry is more than a realistic portrayal—it is metafictional. *AP* starts off with the story of the Swede from Zuckerman's perspective, and is told entirely from the perspective of Zuckerman, who himself is fascinated by the Swede. The narrative summarized above is one of Zuckerman's own devising, and a reading of the novel should incorporate this metafictional aspect. Metafiction involves acknowledgement of the text as a constructed work. A significant portion of the novel escalates towards Zuckerman's decision to write about the Swede, so much so that it cannot be ignored. To focus on the latter portion (that detailing of the life of the Swede as Zuckerman narrates it) would be taking it out of context. The novel is not simply the story of the Swede, but the story of the Swede as Zuckerman perceives him to be, and the Swede-portion of the text, the parts he focuses on and chooses to narrate, would thus reflect back on the anxieties and questions that Zuckerman himself is most intrigued by.

The question I desire to pose is such: Why does Zuckerman tell the story of the Swede? What is it that fascinates Zuckerman enough to motivate his spending so much time inhabiting the Swede's mind? And why does Roth use Zuckerman? Why is *AP* not simply the latter three-hundred pages of the book, telling the tale of the Swede unmediated by an additional narrator? Corina Lirca argues that Roth deploys Zuckerman to show "what making literature means" (*Philip Roth* 115-116). In each Zuckerman novel, his presence is used by Roth to depict some aspect of either the process of writing or demonstrate what writing is capable of. *AP* is no

exception; the Zuckerman portion is just as much a part of the novel as the Swede portion. The Swede's life contains echoes of Zuckerman's, since it is the life of the Swede as interpreted by Zuckerman. By featuring the figure of the writer revisiting someone from his past, *AP* suggests the potential of literature as a way of reliving the past, both to ease one's guilt (through the fantasy of the unangerable father) but also to empathize with those from a different generation. This has particular application to diasporic populations, whose ethnoracial identity changes from generation to generation. Writing becomes a way to understand that the anger shown by one's parents was rooted in the values of the older generation, not in personal hatred. Writing is simultaneously relieving and a tool of empathy.

The Importance of the Swede

At the beginning of *AP*, Zuckerman receives a letter from the Swede asking to meet with him. The narration details Zuckerman's reaction:

Had anyone else asked me if he could talk to me about a tribute he was writing to his father, I would have wished him luck and kept my nose out of it. But there were compelling reasons....The first was that *Swede Levov wants to meet me*....I had only to see his signature at the foot of the letter to be swamped by memories of him. (18).

Zuckerman, living a reclusive life, does not make a habit of helping others with their writing.

The Swede is clearly exceptional. To demonstrate why, Roth begins the novel with Zuckerman's nostalgic memory of the Swede:

The Swede. During the war years, when I was still a grade school boy, this was a magical name in our Newark neighborhood, even to adults just a generation removed from the city's old Prince Street ghetto and not yet so flawlessly Americanized as to be bowled over by the prowess of a high school athlete. The name was magical; so was the anomalous face. Of the few fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish public high school, none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov. (3).

Roth gestures towards the ideal of assimilation through the physical description of the Swede—both old-world European and Aryan—and describing the upward path of Newark Jews. The

Swede's manifestation of their desire to be unmarked, to have the appearance of a Viking—a face he wears as if it is detachable, artificial—appeals to all of the Weequahic Jews regardless of social class. Even those who are moving upwards have still have distinct ethnoracial assignments. The Swede represents the possibility of becoming “anomalous,” un-ethnic.

The Swede's appeal is not only in his appearance but his athletic prowess, and its ability to distract from the problems elsewhere in the world:

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 athletic performance the repository of all their hopes. Primarily, they could forget the war. (3-4)

The Swede functions not only as a repository for the hope of assimilation but as an anesthetic, a buffer from the horrors going on in the world. Roth uses “the war” euphemistically, as if the Weequahic Jews are trying to remove all mention of the Holocaust, the situation European Jews, their relatives and ancestors, are experiencing. The events across the ocean are tied to their ethnoracial assignment. The implication is that if they were all like the Swede, they would be safe from the Holocaust.

For Zuckerman specifically, the Swede represents what his life could be. He is impressed by the Swede's “talent for ‘being himself,’” “the capacity to be this strange engulfing force and yet to have a voice and a smile unsullied by even a flicker of superiority” (19). The Swede's affable nature is appealing towards the neurotic writer. Nathan's admiration for the Swede also derives from Zuckerman's own ethnoracial identity. He sees the Swede as the embodiment of becoming post-ethnic. Roth previously established Nathan's desire to become unencumbered by his ethnoracial assignment in *The Ghost Writer*, where the young Zuckerman visits an author he looks up to, I. E. Lonoff. Lonoff lives “‘in the country’—that is to say, in the *goyish* wilderness of birds and trees where America began and long ago had ended” (*Zuckerman Bound* 3). The

pastoral rural scene is intertwined with mythical notions of a nostalgic, “original” America, that Zuckerman desires to experience, but his ethnoracial identity prevents him—it is the domain of “goys”. Where Lonoff lives, Zuckerman sees “Purity. Serenity. Simplicity...Seclusion” (4). Unfettered by neither distractions nor reminders of his identity, he can blend in with the world where he is not marked as different, for he is one with nature. Zuckerman remarks: “I looked around and I thought, This is how I will live” (4).

While Nathan ends up living in that wilderness (taking over Lonoff’s house), he is still hindered by his ethnoracial assignment. *The Ghost Writer* recounts a burgeoning conflict between Nathan and his father, based around the latter’s stronger sense of Jewish ethnoracial identity and closer ties to his community. Nathan sees no such ties and is content to write about Jews without fearing the consequences. Mid-way through *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan is confronted by his father over a short story Nathan intends to publish. The story is based on an incident that happened within his extended family, one that Nathan believes to be good fodder for writing. Victor regards it, however, as selling out his community to a world that still gives Jews a distinct ethnoracial assignment. Victor asks his son to consider “what ordinary people will think when they read something like this story” (*Zuckerman Bound* 59). Victor contrasts their family with “ordinary people”—for his generation, Jews are marked, different, something that Nathan does not see, or tries not to see. Victor argues that the “story, as far as Gentiles are concerned. Is about one thing and one thing only...it is about kikes. Kikes and their love of money” (60). Victor, based on his experience, believes that writing from a Jew will be seen as “Jewish Writing.” Nathan, on the other hand, does not consider his ethnoracial identity to be Jewish; he wants to be considered a writer who happens to Jewish. For the older generation,

Jewishness precedes individual existence. Attempting to escape this bind, Nathan looks up to the Swede.

In Levov, Nathan sees a man who comes from the same upbringing as himself but is not trapped by his ethnoracial assignment. The Swede's actions will not be used to reflect back on Jews in the same way that Zuckerman's writing will be. For the young Jewish writer aiming for success but held back by the limitations his parents themselves—from their experience as second-generation American Jews—impose on him, the Swede represents freedom from constraint. He is the post-ethnic Jew:

The Jewishness that he wore so lightly as one of the tall, blond, athletic winners must have spoken to us too—in our idolizing the Swede and his unconscious oneness with America, I suppose there was a tinge of shame and self-rejection. Conflicting Jewish desires awakened by the sight of him were simultaneously becalmed by him; the contradiction in Jews who want to fit in and want to stand out, who insist they are different and insist they are no different, resolved itself in the triumphant spectacle of this Swede who was actually only another of our neighborhood Seymours...where was the Jew in him? You couldn't find it and yet you knew it was there. Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the crybaby in him? Where were the wayward temptations? No guile. No artifice. No Mischief. All that he had eliminated to achieve his perfection. No striving, no mischief. (20).

Zuckerman cannot find all of the characteristics he associates with Jews, that he himself holds. But the Swede represents the transcendence of all negative associations to his community that Zuckerman feels. The Swede represents the apex of what a Jew can be, while also being post/non-Jewish in his affect. He is successful in his ability to escape all the signifiers of "Jewishness." Levov is the handsome, goy-passing man who refuses to evidence any desire to reach that position. To strive to be post-Jewish is contradictory, for it involves trying to transcend the flaws you pretend don't exist, while being incredibly aware of their existence. Yet for Zuckerman the Swede is able to accomplish just that.

Roth situates the Swede's fame within the context of the Swede's immediate family, painting a picture of the Swede's father:

Mr Levov was one of those slum-reared Jewish fathers whose rough-hewn, undereducated perspective goaded a whole generation of striving, college-educated Jewish sons: a father for whom everything is an

unshakeable duty, for whom there is a right way and a wrong way and nothing in between, a father whose compound of ambitions, biases, and beliefs is so unruffled by careful thinking that he isn't as easy to escape from as he seems. Limited men with limitless energy; men quick to be friendly and quick to be fed up; men for whom the most serious thing in life is to keep going despite everything. And we were their sons. It was our job to love them. (11).

Roth attributes Lou Levov with a sharp, black-and-white moral outlook, and grounds that ideology within his upbringing, his low-income status; he is a second-generation immigrant, who works so that his children can live a better life. Born into a strongly assigned Jewish ethnicity, he lacks nuance; his beliefs are set in the ways he grew up. Zuckerman, narrating this section, sees an affinity between Lou and Victor Zuckerman: "It was our job to love them," implying a need to repay one's fathers for their devotion in your professional life. This description of the second-generation father could easily suit Victor Zuckerman, such that Nathan sees the distinction between himself and the Swede as lesser than the divide between their and their parents' generation. Zuckerman is attracted to the story of the Swede through their shared outlook on life which conflicted with their parents'.

The argument in *the Ghost Writer* derives from similar circumstances, where Victor Zuckerman cares more about what is "good for the Jews" than his son, who dreams of the pastoral and his own success. His desire is to live the life Lonoff lives, the dream embodied by the Swede, clashes with his parents' ties to the community. Nathan's parents, the older generation, like Lou Levov, "for whom there is a right way and a wrong way and nothing in between," see what Nathan is doing as the wrong way. Nathan chides himself as "naive" for assuming "an inexhaustible supply" of his parents' affection, believing that there is no point at which his writing will cause his parents so much harm, conflict with their values, that they will not forgive him. He is sorely mistaken.

The Bastard Child

In my argument, Nathan's desire to narrate the life of the Swede is induced by his affinity with the Swede's daughter, Merry. Nathan first hears about Merry when he runs into the Swede's brother Jerry at Nathan and Jerry's 45th High School reunion:

"His life was blown up by that bomb. The real victim of that bombing was him."

"What bomb?"

"Little Merry's darling bomb."

"I don't know what 'Merry's darling bomb' is."

"Meredith Levov. Seymour's daughter. The 'Rimrock Bomber' was Seymour's daughter. The high school kid who blew up the post office and killed the doctor. The kid who stopped the war in Vietnam by blowing up somebody out mailing a letter at five A.M. A doctor on his way to the hospital. Charming Child," he said in a voice that was all contempt and still didn't seem to contain the load of contempt and hatred that he felt. "Brought the war home to Lyndon Johnson by blowing up the post office in the general store ... Seymour was into quaint Americana. But the kid wasn't. He took the kid out of real time and she put him right back in. My brother thought he could take his family out of human confusion and into Old Rimrock, and she put them right back in." (68).

The truth of the Swede's life is laid out for Zuckerman, and it is shocking, not only due to Merry's actions, but for how much Jerry seems to blame the Swede's attempt to reach the "pastoral" as the cause. His sarcastic voice rings in a way that shows he has told this story many times before; it is a family legend that he has detached himself from enough to mock. He describes Merry as "the indigenous American berserk," a label that grounds her in a post-immigrant generation, that grew up in America and has only experienced the old country through stories mediated through several generations (86). The disaster is derived from her lack of ethnoracial identity, but her actions, in their opposition to the father's values, and in their complete and total destruction of her father's life, crudely mirror Zuckerman's own.

The generational conflict dramatized in *the Ghost Writer* and alluded to in *American Pastoral* detonates for Zuckerman in *Zuckerman Unbound*. Zuckerman deals with the consequences of his novel, *Carnovsky*, a shockingly profane and sexually explicit book, which commits all the crimes Victor Zuckerman feared from Nathan's earlier stories (and loosely

parallels Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*). If, as Lirca suggests, each Zuckerman novel deals with an aspect of the life of the writer, *the Ghost Writer* sets up the stakes of writing coming into conflict with one's family and origin (as well as dealing with meeting one's idols), and *Zuckerman Unbound* shows the consequences and drawbacks of success. His literary success has turned him into a household name, but Zuckerman has lost touch with his family. The climax of the book involves Nathan visiting Victor, who, on his deathbed, lets his son know how he feels. His last words, "barely audible, but painstakingly pronounced: 'Bastard'" (*Zuckerman Bound* 241). This dramatic enunciation consolidates Nathan's disownment from his family. There is no doubt as to who Victor is referring to, as Nathan narrates that it was said "into the eyes of his [Victor's] apostate son" (242). Nathan is described as a religious traitor, he has shunned his own people. His own actions, his writing that sold out his family—that ignored his ethnoracial assignment as a Jew in a goyish world—was too much for his parents. They are scandalized—the book exposed much of their personal life in a way that Nathan felt was sufficiently distanced, but his parents still felt reflected back on to them.

The conflict between generations, reified in *Carnovsky*, takes a great toll on Nathan, who is never let off the hook. After Victor's passing, Nathan's brother Henry confirms Victor's sentiment: "You killed him, Nathan. With that book. *Of Course* he said 'Bastard'. He'd seen it! He'd seen what you have done to him and mother in that book" (257). Henry denounces Nathan for his childlessness, which is the root of his empathy: "I know what it is to love a son and you don't, your selfish bastard, and you never will!" (258). The conclusion of the book presents Nathan Zuckerman as childless, unempathetic, traitorous to his community, ideologically opposed to the previous generation, cursed for committing a heinous transgression against his elder's values, and yearning for the pastoral, goyish life. Each of these individually would be

enough reason for him to desire to inhabit the Swede's mind. But it is upon learning of Merry's actions that he begins to narrate the Swede's life.

While Zuckerman shares a generation and the same intergenerational squabbles with the Swede, the transgression that was reified in *Carnovsky* aligns him more with Merry. Alike Varvogli argues that Zuckerman and Merry are united by an ideological link, Margaret Scanlan's notion of the "romantic belief in the power of marginalized persons to transform history" (Varvogli 106). From this identification, Zuckerman seeks to "imagine why the Swede failed to understand [Merry]" (104). Varvogli explains that by "placing so much emphasis on [Roth's] main character's unknowability and by repeating the fact that his protagonist is a man totally unlike him, Zuckerman implicitly admits the Swede's daughter, Merry, is far more knowable and comprehensible" (110). Given the similarity and identification with Merry, Zuckerman's rationale is grounded in attempt to understand the father. Varvogli compares Zuckerman's physical impairment to Merry's stutter as ways of "achieving a voice" (106). They both desire to have their voice heard; "the writer uses language in his attempt to be an agent of change, the inarticulate Merry resorts to bombing" (111).

While the differences are notable, I agree with Varvogli's claim that Nathan sees a kindred spirit in Merry. He has experienced being a transgressive child disowned by his family, although it is the Swede whose life until recently Zuckerman wanted to emulate. The Swede's failure to live the unethniced life in some way works to ease Zuckerman's regret. The most goyish Jew could not succeed, so what were the possibilities of Zuckerman succeeding? Zuckerman empathizes with Merry, he already understands what it is like to be that "bastard" child. Zuckerman narrativizes the Swede in order to understand what it is like from the other position, from the viewpoint of the father whose child has committed some horrible deed.

Carnovsky and Merry's bomb blew up the lives of each set of parents. From Merry's deed, Zuckerman abstracts the specifics of conflict between the assimilating father & the daughter who rejects his dream, and the father who does everything for his people & the son who strives for individual success, into a general conflict between different generations of Diasporic Jews. Given this context, the reason Zuckerman narrates the life of the Swede specifically is partially to inhabit and hence understand Victor—the reasons Victor was so angry at Nathan, and to potentially ease his guilt induced by Victor's death. He writes the father whose child has committed the worst possible sin, yet who is not angry. Mark Schechner links this reading of the text to Roth himself:

Did not Flaubert say, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi?" Could Roth not echo, "Merry Levov, c'est moi?" The book suddenly comes into focus as another act in the theater of rebellion and atonement that has been Roth's personal theater ever since he first found himself singled out as a literary terrorist. This drama would have been sharpened for Roth by the death of his father in 1987, which would have occasioned one last look at the entire business of how middle-class families with decent values produce resentful offspring like himself. (Schechner 146).

The real-life loss of the father adds weight to the argument—Roth estranged himself from family with *Portnoy's Complaint*. *AP* is about the writer-protagonist identifying with both the “terrorist” child and the father in order to reckon with the death of the father. To work through his father's death, Zuckerman begins with the realization that he may have misunderstood his father.

Getting people right

After meeting with Swede later in his life, then hearing Jerry detail Merry's impact on the Swede's life, Zuckerman is struck by how vastly incorrect his own assumptions about the Swede's life were. But the notion of having incorrect assumptions of someone first appears in the Swede's letter to Zuckerman:

I'm taking the liberty of proposing a meeting because of something I have been thinking about since my father died last year. He was ninety-six. He was his feisty, combative self right down to the end. That made it all the harder to see him go despite his advanced age.

I would like to talk about him and his life. I have been trying to write a tribute to him, to be published privately for friends, family, and business associates. Most everybody thought of my father as indestructible, a thick-skinned man on a short fuse. That was far from the truth. Not everyone knew how much he suffered because of the shocks that befell his loved ones. (18).

The Swede implies that writing is a way of solidifying or in some way representing the truth of someone's personality, laying the groundwork for Zuckerman to consider his own father. The incident with Merry is euphemistically referred to a "shock", but more significant is the contrast between how "most everyone thought" of Lou Levov, and the truth, creating a chasm between the two. This chasm who someone was and how they are perceived recurs with Zuckerman's assessment of the Swede, who he believes to be shallow: "Either there was a whole side to his personality that he was suppressing or that was as yet asleep or, more likely, there wasn't" (5).

For the Swede particularly, Zuckerman is confounded by the bland affect he presents:

What did he do for subjectivity? What was the Swede's subjectivity. There had to be its substratum. But its composition was unimaginable.

That was the second reason I answered his letter... There had to have been consciousness and there had to have been blight. Yet I could not picture the form taken by either, could not desimplify him even now: in the residuum of adolescent imagination I was still convinced that for the Swede it had to have been pain free all that way. (20)

Zuckerman is drawn towards working out the "subjectivity" of this persona he once admired, aiming to find out what goes on inside his head. As a writer, Zuckerman believes himself to be a decent judge of character and lambasts himself for being unable to understand the Swede. Roth ends the first chapter with Zuckerman stating what seems to be obvious; "You're craving depths that don't exist. This guy is the embodiment of nothing," before Zuckerman, narrating from the future, interjects, "I was wrong. Never more mistaken about anyone in my life" (39).

Simultaneously enticing the reader and setting up the soon-to-be-revealed story of the Swede, Roth writes from the perspective of the writer who is beating himself up for making assumptions about others. While meeting with the Swede, Zuckerman reflects on this process:

You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance, as untanklike as you can be, sans cannon and machine guns and steel plating half a foot thick; you come at them menacingly on your own ten toes instead of

tearing up the turf with your caterpillar treads, take them on with an open mind, as equals...and yet, you never fail to get them wrong. You might as well have the brain of a tank. You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again...what are we to do about this terribly significant business of *other people*, which gets bled of the significance we think it has and takes on instead a significance that is ludicrous, so ill-equipped are we all to envision one another's interior workings and invisible aims? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers to, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. (35).

In this beautifully written passage, Roth portrays the struggle in escaping literary solipsism, in the repeated attempts of "getting people right" that find a touchstone his meeting with the Swede. He posits the role of the writer as a contrast with the notion of "living" and concluding that he has been doing things wrong, spending too much time worrying about accuracy, and too little time finding the emotional truth of people.

Zuckerman's realization, prompted by his encounter with the Swede, that he is not as good as judging people as he previously thought, allows him to re-evaluate his perceptions of other people. Zuckerman is beginning to realize that the judgements he has made over his life were impulsive and inaccurate. Getting to the heart of another person is difficult, and even those closest to us are hard to know. From this understanding, Zuckerman becomes aware of the possibility that he may have completely misinterpreted his own father. Zuckerman is forced to reckon with the memory of his own father at his high school reunion when he runs into Ira Posner, someone he didn't remember, but someone who clearly remembers him: "'Your father meant a lot to me,' Ira said. 'Did he?' I asked. 'In the few moments I spent with him in my life I felt better about myself than the entire life I spent with my own father.'" (54). Zuckerman is surprised how his perceptions of his father completely misalign with Posner's: how Ira could have a separate experience with Victor Zuckerman that Nathan never experienced. Zuckerman ponders this conundrum:

And still I had no idea who Ira was or what he was talking about, because, as much as I was remembering that day of all that had once happened, far more was so beyond recall that it might never have happened, regardless of how many Ira Posners stood face to face with me attesting otherwise....It was one of those things that get torn out of you and thrust into oblivion just because they didn't matter enough. And yet what I had missed completely took root in Ira and changed his life...So you don't have to look much further than Ira and me to see why we go through life with a generalized sense that everybody is wrong except us. And since we don't just forget things because they don't matter but also forget things because they matter too much—because each of us remembers and forgets in a pattern whose labyrinthine windings are an identification mark no less distinctive than a fingerprint—it's no wonder that the shards of reality one person will cherish as a biography can seem to someone else who, say, happened to have eaten some ten thousand dinners at the very same kitchen table, to be a willful excursion into mythomania. (55).

The notion of “getting people wrong” convinces Zuckerman that he has gotten his father wrong, his observations are only human, and there is so much he wasn't privy to in life. This opens up the possibility of writing, of metafiction, for Zuckerman to understand his Diasporic identity and the character that was Victor Zuckerman. Victor is the root of the trauma Nathan suffers since *Carnovsky* of being blamed for Victor's death and being disowned. The possibility that he has gotten him wrong suggests there may be more than just anger between father and son, but something more nuanced.

Writing to Reimagine

Zuckerman, who once adored the Swede, finds an affinity with the Swede's transgressive child, as noted above, once he realizes that he has been getting people wrong all his life. He is filled with the memory of his father, and his own trauma of being the “bastard” child, trauma resulting from transgressions stemming from the conflict between his ethnoracial assignment and his literary aspirations. But why does this necessitate narrating the Swede? After the reunion, Zuckerman describes having an unrelenting urge to write: “Around three A.M., I left my bed and went to my desk, my head vibrant with the static of elaborated thought” (45). Zuckerman elaborates that his desire to narrate the Swede derives from the chasm between the hope Zuckerman put in the Swede and the reality of the Swede's life:

To wish oneself into another's glory, as boy or as man, is an impossibility, untenable on psychological grounds if you are a writer, and on aesthetic grounds if you are. To embrace your hero in his destruction, however—to let your hero's life occur within you when everything is trying to diminish him, to imagine yourself into his bad luck, to implicate yourself not in his mindless ascendancy, when he is the fixed point of your adulation, but in the bewilderment of his tragic fall—well, that's worth thinking about. (88).

Part of the appeal of writing is due to the dramatic collapse of his life, the “fall”, which Roth makes clear occurs on a metatextual level through the novel's section titles; “Paradise Remembered,” “The Fall,” and “Paradise Lost” (paradise being the Swede's “pastoral” life) giving the Swede's narrative Miltonian allusions to evoke the epic nature of his intimate tragedy.

Zuckerman is also interested in the Swede's story for the way it intertwines with his identity as a third-generation immigrant. When thinking about the Swede's life, and the tragedy that he believes it to be, he frets: “And then the loss of the daughter, the fourth American generation, a daughter on the run who was to have been the perfected image of himself as he had been the perfected image of his father, and his father the perfected image of his father's father” (85-6). The ascendancy of American Jews is construed as a linear path towards success, each generation improving upon the last. Seen this way, the tragedy of Merry (and Zuckerman, the other “bastard” child) is that she broke this chain. The act of writing of the Swede is engagement the construction of ethnoracial identity and the cultural expectations for diaspora communities, as well as a way for Zuckerman to reimagine his own father and work through his past.

Derek Parker Royal advocates for a metafictional approach to Roth's work, arguing that we should use a “postmodern lens” in reading it ...” that problematizes more traditional (two-dimensional and linear) notions of literary influence” (*Roth* 24). He cites Patricia Waugh, an influential scholar in the field of metafiction: “Fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” Waugh (2), cited by Royal (26). The use of a writer as protagonist noticeably draws attention to the text as a piece of writing, and thus the role of

writing can be called into question. Roth is writing a tale of Zuckerman writing about his idol whose father has just died, in order to reckon with his (Zuckerman's) own father, which Roth is writing in response to the death of Roth's father. The potential of metafiction is to provide a layer of refractions where the issues on the writer's mind can be addressed indirectly, through the mediation of another narrator. The anxieties and questions that have been suppressed—for Zuckerman, the guilt weighing on him since the death of his father—can be explored and worked through in writing.

The moment when Zuckerman decides to create a narrative for the Swede, Roth describes the process as an intense, all-consuming effort:

I would think about the Swede for six, eight, sometimes ten hours at a stretch, exchange my solitude for his, inhabit this person least like myself, disappear into him, day and night try to take the measure of a person of apparent blankness and innocence and simplicity, chart his collapse. (74).

He is excited by the possibility of someone so different (although as I have established, similar in their hopes), but makes no claim to accuracy, to getting the Swede right: "I was working with traces; of course essentials of what he was to Jerry were gone, expunging from my portraits things I was ignorant of or I didn't want" (76). The writing is thus not intended to be a perfect account of the Swede's life, but one curtailed to what fascinates Zuckerman. Alike Varvogli construes the meta-narrative of the novel as Roth's attempt to "speak of the writer's desire to create order within, make sense of, or bestow meaning on the world, both within and outside of his own fictions" (104). Andrew Bennett, however, argues this lack of knowledge is a strength. He describes the role of the author as "not to know—and therefore to imagine" (215). The author writes as a way of "'knowing' but knowing also that you do not know" (216). The purpose of writing is "not in order to resolve it [ignorance] but instead to counter the deadly, indeed potentially totalitarian other fiction of omniscience, of knowing" (217). For Bennett, we cannot

know other people, but Zuckerman writes because he has now realized that, and he writes to figure out what it is to not know.

My reading of the novel—that Zuckerman writes about the Swede to re-examine the argument Zuckerman had with his father—is supported by Andy Connolly, who argues that Zuckerman, by inhabiting the Swede, acquires “a mask that allows him to feign an act of self-removal from the text” (66). This “mode of ventriloquism allows Zuckerman to imaginatively explore the possible hidden meanings lurking beneath his protagonist’s seemingly plain and ordinary existence...the Swede serves as the mask by which Zuckerman both obscures and reveals his act of narrative masking” (66). The metafictional element of the narrative works to disclose what Zuckerman is thinking without him revealing it directly—by hiding himself in the Swede, Zuckerman reveals the anxieties and guilt that he has been repressing (they were not stated outright in the first portion of the novel). Writing is construed as a tool to engage with the issues that are being repressed.

In the scene at Zuckerman’s high school reunion, Roth shows us the Swede breaking through into Zuckerman’s consciousness, describing the Swede’s intrusion into Zuckerman’s mind mid-conversation with an old flame: “looking at Joy...but who I was thinking of was the Swede” (79). A few pages later the Swede reappears:

“I was thinking again of the Swede...all that normalcy interrupted by murder...the disruption of the anticipated American future that was simply to have unrolled out of the solid American past, out of each generation getting smarter—smarter for knowing the inadequacies and limitations of the generations before—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-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals” (85)

This time his resonance is tied into his ethnoracial identity and assignment, and the linear ascendancy expected of him returns as a measure for what he “could” be—completely assimilated and free from remnants of diaspora culture—as opposed to the tragic fall that he

exhibits. The enticing aspect of the Swede is exclusively relevant to his diasporic group: his fall would not be as tragic were he an assimilated, “goyish” WASP, with no cultural expectations holding him back. Right before Zuckerman enters the Swede’s consciousness, Roth writes “In earnest, right then and there, while swaying with Joy to that out-of-date music, I began to try to work out for myself what exactly had shaped a destiny unlike any imagined” (87). On the surface, he is intrigued by the “what” of the Swede’s fall, but deeper, his reactions to the events that befell him, in order to understand the mind of Victor Zuckerman.

The Unangerable Father

Zuckerman’s urge to explore the mind of the Swede leans towards the therapeutic as he narrativizes the story of the child who has committed a far more transgressive crime than his through the mind of the father who refuses to become angry at her. At the reunion, Jerry states that in response to any abuse, “Seymour just took it and took it” (7). Jerry shames the Swede’s response to Merry’s bomb: “if he had half a brain, he would have been enraged by this kid and estranged from this kid long ago” (71). Zuckerman internalizes this subdued temper as an inalienable aspect of the Swede, repeating it to himself:

It is Jerry’s theory that the Swede is nice, that is to say passive, that is to say trying always to do the right thing, a socially controlled character who doesn’t burst out, doesn’t yield to rage ever. Will not have the angry quality as his liability, so doesn’t get it as an asset either. (72).

Zuckerman understands the simultaneous advantage and curse this quality provides yet seeks to use that for his own benefit. Timothy Parrish argues that, “by refusing to interfere with his daughter’s decision, Zuckerman imagines a father capable of accepting his child’s every transformation—even its most extreme” (Parrish 95). There is a therapeutic aspect in inhabiting the mind of the Swede, the “Jewish father who will never call his child ‘bastard’” (Parrish 95).

Much of the book involves Zuckerman working through the concept of the unangerable father as a means of easing his guilt. First, the Swede questions: “what went wrong with Merry” (Roth 92). The Swede strives to find an answer, but even the most transgressive crime he himself committed, an incestuous kiss with Merry, is insufficient to explain her actions; “How could a kiss make someone into a criminal” (92). Uncertain of the cause for her militancy (this is before the bomb, but during her engagement with anti-war activism), he resolves to maintain a connection: “I’ll keep talking to her. The important thing is not to abandon her and not to capitulate to her” (103). Zuckerman continues narrating the Swede, moving between first and third person: “and so, hopeless as it seemed, he talked, he listened, he was reasonable; endless as the struggle seemed, he remained patient” (104). The middle section of the book, titled “the Fall,” deals with the Swede’s way of coping with the aftermath of the bomb. The section title suggests that his inability to become angry and disown his daughter, not the bomb itself, is the cause of his downfall. If inanger was the Swede’s flaw, then Zuckerman moves one step closer to coming to terms with his own father’s anger.

After the bomb, the Swede is visited by the Merry-double figure of Rita Cohen. Potentially a figment of the Swede’s imagination, she embodies the Swede’s desire to escape from the trauma caused by Merry’s bomb. When Cohen visits the factory, the Swede finds himself talking constantly:

Momentarily it was then again—nothing blown up, nothing ruined. As a family they still flew the flight of the immigrant rocket, the upward, unbroken immigrant trajectory from slave-driven great-grandfather to self-driven grandfather to self-confident, accomplished, independent father to the highest high flier of them all, the fourth-generation child for whom America was to be heaven itself. No wonder he couldn't shut up. It was impossible to shut up. The Swede was giving in to the ordinary human wish to live once again in the past—to spend a self-deluding, harmless few moments back in the wholesome striving of the past, when the family endured by a truth in no way grounded in abetting destruction but in eluding and outlasting destruction. (122)

Cohen provides the Swede with an outlet to revive the fantasy, embodied in the tannery, of success via ascendancy through the boundaries set by diaspora Jews—working in, or maybe even

owning, the same factory his father was—as if the “immigrant rocket” had not been exploded by Merry. The Swede, taking pride in the glove factory, evokes his own father: “He heard himself telling her (while simultaneously hearing his father telling her)” (124). Playing the role his father—the second-generation Levov—played only makes him desire to relive the feeling of being a parent, and his brief sojourn from worried father into proud business-owner is short-lived:

This is called a polishing machine and this is called a stretcher and you are called honey and I am called Daddy and this is called living and the other is called dying and this is called madness and this is called mourning and this is called hell, pure hell, and you have to have strong ties to be able to stick it out, this is called trying-to-go-on-as-though-nothing-has-happened and this is called paying-the-full-price-but-in-God’s-name-for-what, this is called wanting-to-be-dead-and-wanting-to-find-her-and-to-kill-her-and-to-save-her-from-whatever-she-is-going-through-wherever-on-earth-she-may-be-at-this-moment, this unbridled outpouring is called blotting-out-everything. (130).

He tries to forget the incident that had occurred, but the Swede (as portrayed by Zuckerman) is unable to remove the concern for Merry from his mind.

Zuckerman continually describes the Swede’s inability to forego his parental affection for the “berserk” daughter. On the news he hears of “three midtown buildings bombed simultaneously at about one forty-A.M.,” and his response is to think, “the torso’s not hers! Merry is alive!” (150). This repeated desire to seek out Merry leads to the Swede’s mind becoming plagued by “tyrannical obsessions, stifled inclinations, superstitious expectations, horrible imaginings, fantasy conversations, unanswerable questions” (173). The Swede unravels, in Zuckerman’s account, due to his inability to disown his daughter, and thus distance himself from Merry’s abhorrent actions. This suggests that Zuckerman now understands that Victor Zuckerman’s actions were necessary to survive the transgressions Nathan had committed.

Zuckerman, realizing that the Swede’s fractured mental state is due to his passivity, begins to narrate the Swede with doubts about the utility of his placidity:

Nor could he say he hated his daughter for what she had done—if he could! If only, instead of living chaotically in the world where she wasn't and in the world where she once was and in the world where she might now be, he could come to hate her enough not to care anything about her world, then *or* now....If only *he* could say, "I hate that child! I never want to see her again!" and then go ahead, disown her, forevermore despise and reject her and the vision for which she was willing, if not to kill, then to cruelly abandon her own family, a vision having nothing whatsoever to do with "ideals" but with dishonesty, criminality, megalomania, and insanity. (206).

Here, the Swede fights his urge to remain calm. Instead of becoming angry begins to posit alternate mentalities for Merry, halfheartedly ascribing to her evil motivation. The Swede finally reckons with Merry's actions during their reunion in Newark. Roth phrases the Swede's encounter with his wayward child in a way that highlights Merry's rebellion from her Jewish upbringing, starting the chapter with the short but direct line: "She had become a Jain" (232). He then contextualizes her actions within Merry's disruption of the "immigrant rocket:"

Three generations. All of them growing. The working. The saving. The success. Three generations in raptures over America. Three generations of becoming one with a people. And now with the fourth it had all come to nothing. The total vandalization of their world. (237).

The Levovs are forever forgone from any hope of assimilation—construed as the end goal of economic success—due to the actions of Merry, again aligning her with Zuckerman, inciting the anxiety he has been holding in since *Carnovsky*. But instead of anger, the Swede displays confusion: "I do not understand. Merry, I do not understand. How did you get from Lyndon Johnson to this? How do you get from point A to point Z, where there is no point of contact at all? Merry, it does not hang together." (245). Even though she encourages his hatred, saying, "I am the abomination. Abhor me," he refuses to lower his parental love, fretting over her physical condition— "Just look at what you've done to yourself—you are going to die if you keep this up" (248-9). Yet this inability to be angry threatens his ability as a parent: "What does a reasonable, responsible father say if he is able still to feel intact as a father?" (249). By refusing to put his child in her place, he threatens his own position as a parent.

Upon hearing that she was responsible for three more deaths, the Swede's only refuge is denial, saying to Merry: "You could not have done it" (264). The fact is so incomprehensible, the Swede's denial moves towards action, as in an effort to prove Merry's innocence (and thus his own), he sees the only solution is that this person is an imposter:

It was the end of all understanding. There was no way for understanding to be there anymore, even though he knew violence to be inhuman and futile and understanding—talking sense to each other for however long it took to bring about accord—all there was that could achieve a lasting result. The father who could never use force on his child, for whom force was the embodiment of moral bankruptcy, pried open her mouth and with his fingers took hold her tongue. One of her front teeth was missing, one of her beautiful teeth. That proved it wasn't Merry. (265)

His inability to become angry and to disown "Merry" turns into a violent desire to prove that Merry's violence could not have come from his loins, despite the aggressive motion he now performs. He is desperate for evidence proving Merry's and his own innocence and will go to extreme measures to uncover it. What he finds is a physical difference from his memory of Merry, which is enough to momentarily give the illusion that he is not responsible.

After leaving, he is overcome by emotion and lowers his guard, admitting that "this was his daughter, and she was unknowable. This murderer is mine." Yet all the Swede "could think of was the two times she had been raped" (266). He desires to play the caring parent overtakes at every turn the impulse to be the requisite stern one. Even when Jerry tries to convince the Swede to "admit that there is something very personal about you that she hates...admit that she's a monster, Seymour" he refuses, retreating back into the comforting fantasy that "none of this is true" (280, 281). He is unable to reconcile the actions the child has committed with his inability to become angered by her and recedes into unreality. The fantasy of the all-forgiving father is just that—a fantasy. Zuckerman's foray into the inangerable father shows the impossibility of such a position—the Swede's failure is that he thought he could be inangerable—and works towards understanding Victor's anger towards Nathan. The Swede-narrative, in its final section,

moves towards exploring the reasons why Victor was so angered by Nathan's writing, and perhaps too why, like the Swede, Victor made his child's crime a reflection on himself rather than separating the child's action from the parent's control.

Generational Divide

Zuckerman imbues Lou Levov—the second father figure in the narrative—with similarities to Victor Zuckerman as an attempt to move beyond the fallacy of the ideal father as the inangerable one. The Swede has lost his paternal authority due to his inability to condemn Merry, and the narrative now passes the mantle of exemplary fatherhood to Lou. Like Victor Zuckerman, Lou Levov writes “letters to the [Watergate] committee members” (286). The grilling Zuckerman endured in *Ghost Story* about his short story returns in the form of an inquisition of the Swede's Catholic wife Dawn by Lou, concerned about his Jewish son marrying a Catholic. Lou Levov and Victor Zuckerman are portrayed now as the voices of Jewish authority—the upholders of diaspora culture. The traumatic death of Victor is re-envisioned by the Swede when he fantasizes about Merry reappearing, confessing “the murder of four,” and foresees Lou “dropped dead” by the news (369). This again aligns Zuckerman's actions with Merry's, but posits the Swede as an intermediary, who is able to foresee the damage done. But unlike Zuckerman's, Merry's actions are violence not specific to their Jewish community. Merry's “berserk” crime is unethniced, but within the context of 60s counter-culture. To examine the clash between Nathan and Victor, the narrative delves into a discussion of the generational divide within diaspora Jews.

This emergence of Zuckerman's guilt from an initial state of resentment over Victor's death emerges through similarities between Lou Levov and Victor Zuckerman. Lou and Merry

are similar in their political passion (as opposed to the Swede's apathy)—this point of comparison between the two adds contrast to their differences. Roth describes one of Lou's politically inspired outbursts as such: "It is as though in his uncensored hatred of Nixon, Lou Levov is merely mimicking his grand-daughter's vituperous loathing of LBJ" (299). While their outbursts are similar, their boundaries of acceptable discourse deviates. When Merry compares president Johnson to Hitler, Lou lambasts her: "you forget what Hitler did to the Jews, Merry dear. You weren't born then, so you don't remember" (288). Lou has lived through more turbulent times for Jews and has more hesitance—he maintains allegiances to those who have been good to the Jews when antisemitism was at its peak. When Merry states that "ful-ful-fulbright is a racist", Lou is angry because "she had slandered one of his heroes who'd stood up to Joe McCarthy" (290, 291). His allegiances lie with those who have stood with the Jewish people, whereas Merry's allegiances are towards what she sees as just. The anger Merry holds is not too different from Lou's, but the times she grew up in are different. These different times are first introduced by Jerry who, when describing Merry to Zuckerman contextualizes her actions:

That was '68, back when the wild behaviour was still new. People suddenly forced to make sense of madness. All that public display. The dropping of inhibitions. Authority powerless. The kids going crazy. Intimidating everybody. The adults don't know what to make of it, they don't know what to do. Is this an act? It's one thing to listen to rock-and-roll music too loud, but it's another to jump the line and throw a bomb. (69).

Merry's bombing is set against a background of turbulent change, youth doing crazy things. It seems possible that her actions were simply an adaptation of the same attitude Lou had. The child is not so different, but the times, the generations, are vastly distinct.

The theme of generational divide is integrated into the plot: "At dinner the conversation was about Watergate and about *Deep Throat*. Except for the Swede's parents and the Orcutts, everybody at the table had been to see the X-rated movie" (344). Lou is shocked by the film's

subject matter, the popularity of something he considers indecent. The boundaries of moral taste change from generation to generation:

Deep Throat had never been the real subject anyway. Boiling away beneath *Deep Throat* was the far more disgusting and transgressive subject of Merry, of Sheila, of Shelly, of Orcutt and Dawn, of wantonness and betrayal and deception, of treachery and disunity among neighbors and friends, the subject of cruelty. The mockery of human integrity, every ethical obligation destroyed—that was the subject here tonight! (380)

The argument spans every “transgressive subject,” including *Carnovsky*. Zuckerman dramatizes the debate between his father and his own generation, abstracting the specific clash between Nathan and Victor to the same one between Merry and her elders, and between different generations about an explicit movie. By doing this, the argument between father and child becomes one between generations but has specific relevance to Diaspora Jews. Under these circumstances, Carnovsky becomes just another object of debate.

Diaspora Roots

The Swede’s clash with both his father and his daughter, and Nathan Zuckerman’s with Victor Zuckerman, are all grounded in generational differences, but, as has been noted, these are differences specifically deriving from their differing ethnoracial identities. Each subsequent generation of American Jews, and of other diaspora groups, has a different experience; culture and history of the time they grew up in have a profound effect upon ethnoracial identity. Ellen Brodtkin, in her study of racial identity *How Jews Became White Folks*, writes about the second generation of Jewish Americans (Victor/Lou’s generation) from her perspective

(Swede/Nathan’s generation):

The execution of the Rosenberg’s and the Nazi Holocaust had left their indelible mark on our parents. They were all children of immigrants who grew up in New York in the 1920s and 1930s which was the high tide of American anti-Semitism, a time when Jews were not assigned to the white side of the American racial binary....We, their children, grew up as white, middle class suburbanites, unaffected by the barriers that kept our parents out of certain jobs and neighborhoods. Their collective alarm connected us in a powerful way to the pervasive anti-Semitic environment that stigmatized them racially, but it was not the world in which we spent most of our time. (2).

The experience of living through those horrors gave them sharp ties to the community which were not reciprocated in their offspring, who in turn went on to produce a fourth generation of Americans (Merry) completely divorced from their ethnic group. Brodtkin describes her family's changing attitude to their ethnic group:

My sons, who did not grow up in a Jewish milieu, tell me they don't really think of themselves as Jewish but as generic whites. When I asked my parents, Sylvia and Jack Brodtkin, what they thought of that, they both gave me a funny look. "We're Jewish" (Brodtkin 3).

Ethnoracial identity becomes less Jewish, more assimilated, for each subsequent generation. The "immigrant rocket" is not just towards success, but assimilation, de-ethnicization. Nathan Zuckerman and the Swede are less Jewish (per their own identities and how the world sees them) than Lou and Victor. Merry has almost no Jewish identity at all.

After the reunion, Zuckerman, filled with nostalgic thoughts, writes a faux speech, as if to be delivered at the reunion. In it, he details the generational divide as he sees it:

The shift was not slight between the generations and there was plenty to argue about: the ideas of the world they wouldn't give up; the rules they worshiped, for us rendered all but toothless by the passage of just a couple of decades of American time; those uncertainties that were theirs and not ours. The question of how free of them we might dare to be was ongoing, an internal debate, ambivalent and exasperated. What was most cramping in their point of view a few of us did find the audacity to strain against. (41)

Zuckerman observes these tensions, these different identities, but is unable to fully express them without writing in a depersonalized way—either through this lofty, general, tone or through the Swede. He is aware of his own actions being euphemistically ascribed to the idea of "plenty to argue about" but is unable to reconcile that with the damning words his father had said to him. Zuckerman is limited by these tensions but knows deep down that his father doesn't hate him, only that Nathan pushed against the values that Victor, from his own ethnoracial identity, held so strongly.

In the Swede narrative, Zuckerman dramatizes the third generation of American Jews' waning ethnoracial identity. The Swede, the one who is not given an ethnoracial assignment of

“Jewish” sees no ties to claiming “Jewish” as an identity: “Judaism means nothing” (314). Levitt, in her discussion of diaspora populations, writes that “the children of immigrants are not likely to engage in their ancestral homes with the same intensity and frequency as their parents” (1225-6). Engaging with the notion of the homeland, embodied in Jewish rites and rituals, is not appealing to either the Swede nor Zuckerman, who see nothing to gain in sticking within their community.

For his generation, the Swede sees new horizons:

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 (311).

For the Swede, the “postwar” world holds the promise of the pastoral: “I want to see the *land*. I want to see the streams running everywhere. I want to see the cows and the horses” (308). The pastoral life is Eden-esque, untouched by human hands, and unreachable for Jews.

The final section of the book, titled “Paradise Lost,” demonstrates the collapse of the Pastoral dream. After the Swede’s fantasy is shattered, his inability to become angered leads to his inability to grapple with the reality of the situation, and the life he has built for himself becomes an unreality. The Swede, now amongst goys, feels suddenly Jewish. He narrates his contrast to the “goyish,” Waspy, historied, American Orcutt:

“He couldn’t remember ever in his life feeling more like his father—not like his father’s son but like his *father*—than he did marching around the graves of those Orcutts. His family couldn’t compete with Orcutt’s when it came to ancestors—they would have run out of ancestors in about two minutes. As soon as you got back earlier than Newark, back to the old country, no one knew anything. Earlier than Newark, they didn’t know their names or anything about them, how anyone made a living, let alone whom they’d voted for. But Orcutt could spin out ancestors forever. Every rung into America for the Levov’s there was another rung to attain; this guy was *there*.” (306)

While Zuckerman and the Swede see themselves climbing higher, on the “immigrant rocket” towards assimilation, Orcutt is from those who are already there. He has not even had to think about his ethnoracial identity, and yet Orcutt’s presence forces the Swede to consider his identity against his will. The diasporic pastoral is not yet achievable because of the people represented by

Orcutt, who, both in his cuckholding of the Swede and his storied family, disrupt the dream of the Swede's life. Through the medium of the Swede, Zuckerman realizes that his whole notion of striving to be post-Jewish was impossible.

Conclusion

Through narrating the story of the Swede, Zuckerman is able to verbalize thoughts that he is unable to directly confront, namely, the anxiety caused by Victor's disownment of Nathan after *Carnovsky*. He first leans into the fantasy of the unangerable father but finds that the Swede's lack of anger leads to more destruction. The novel concludes in a sense of chaos emanating from the Swede's poor decisions due to his inability to become the stern father that is sometimes necessary. The Swede, seeing his dinner party descend into violence—Lou stabbed in the eye—Orcutt and Dawn planning to leave him—has a realization: “The old system that made order doesn't work anymore. All that was left was his fear and astonishment, but now concealed by nothing.” (422). What he (both the Swede and Zuckerman narrating through him) realizes is that the rules that were set up by the older generation are not relevant to the new generation, but also that all the appearances he had kept up, all of his own declarations to never get angry, are no longer relevant. The scene before him shows the utter failure his life and ideals, the life of the unethnic, placid father, third generation American Jew, has tried to live, has collapsed. This is the man that Zuckerman looked up to, and all that Zuckerman hoped as a child comes crashing down around the Swede. But the Swede's inability to be angry justifies Victor Zuckerman's anger. By not being angry, the Swede is unable to take control of his life. By being angry, Victor Zuckerman is able to keep some control of his, and by falling back on the Jewish identity that has supported him throughout his life. While imagining the unangerable father as a way of

easing Nathan's guilt fails, it works to help understand Victor, while also causing him to realize that he cannot understand him. The generational differences are too vast, but through writing he is able to grapple with the generational differences that led to their disagreement. He can re-examine the clash as between differing ethnoracial identities. Parrish cites the novel's ending as a "surrender" to "the Jewish father" where, "after years of writing art that rebels against the father and the version of Jewish identity he represents, Zuckerman's narrative performances give way" (98). Coming to terms with his father's ire through the collapse of the unangerable one, he reinstates the stern figure of the father, having determined his purpose. Zuckerman's surrender comes as a peace treaty—he is no longer the transgressive young kid, but an older man himself, and determined to write/right the wrongs of his past. In writing the narrative of the Swede, he can address the trauma he has been trying to suppress and stop blaming himself for the death of his father.

We can read from this not only Zuckerman's surrender to his father and his father's values, but Roth's too. As a novel about the father's death, the theme of writing as a way of working through death becomes paramount. Literature is a way of discussing what is difficult to say directly and exploring the issues around differing ethnoracial identities. Philip Roth is often thought of as a sex-obsessed masculine figure obsolete in today's literary environment; this reading suggests him to be still relevant as a writer of diaspora, exploring the ways in which parents and their children have different identities and the struggles diaspora children have communicating with their parents. Roth proposes writing as a way of working through those differences. His legacy is that of a diasporic writer, using writing to as a means of escaping his own mind and explore the minds of others. It is a way of realizing that your father's anger and disappointment are not out of spite. He just grew up in a different time.

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