

Emily Katz
LIT 7034x
Dr. Roskies
December 13, 1999

Anatevka Was Never Like This, Skip:
American Pastoral, *Tevye the Milkman*, and the Deathly Silence of the
Contemporary American-Jewish Hero

To the epigraphs Philip Roth displays at the beginning of *American Pastoral*, I propose the following addition: "In short, I was driving home...thinking about the whole miserable business and asking God all kinds of questions He kindly let me answer for myself." These prescient words come from *Tevye the Milkman*, the book that yanked the Jewish novel into adulthood and whose themes and questions still resonate. It's certainly possible to discuss a crushing (but wonderful) recent foray into modern Jewish fiction, *American Pastoral*, without referring to *Tevye the Milkman* at all. I can't, though; *Tevye* is, for me, the finest tool available for making sense of a book that asks so many questions and, rightly, leaves so many unanswered.

The affinity between the books is fairly straightforward. Alongside the matching fiction-within-a-fiction construction (and larger-than-life heroes), both exhibit similar preoccupations, to varying degrees, with two major concepts: the nature of Jewishness as viewed, in particular, through an individual Jew's relationship to the land; and the inexplicable breakdown of the Jewish family, especially as played out through generational confrontation. That said, it's the points of departure within the general similarities that are most illuminating to the comparison (and for our purposes, the Jew-in-nature tableau provides the clearest access to the books' contrasting expositions).

Working from the inside out – that is, starting with the story rather than the narration of the story – we detect a thematic dilemma in *American Pastoral* which parallels a primary meditation in Tevye: that of the solitary Jew in a rural landscape who is set apart from a nearby Jewish community. Tevye's reverence for the land is the primary component of this refrain. He effusively describes "how green and bright and warm and beautiful," his bucolic home is, with "such a blue sky above...such a green forest all around, such a good smell of pine trees, such a carpet of grass that the cows smile at you when they chew it," (86). How similar to the Seymour "Swede" Levov's New Jersey Eden in *American Pastoral*. Roth imagines his hero walking the five miles home from the general store in the days of his young married adulthood, and writes:

[H]e'd...stride all the way back, past the white pasture fences he loved, the rolling hay fields he loved, the corn fields, the turnip fields, the barns, the horses, the cows, the ponds, the streams, the springs, the falls...the meadows, the acres of woods he loved, until he reached the century-old maple trees he loved and the substantial old house he loved... (318)

Meanwhile, each man's homestead is the supreme manifestation of this at-one-ness with nature. The home is the threshold of earthly paradise, and each character's sense of self is bound up with this physical space. For Tevye and for Swede a home is, in the end, the locus of memory and longing; Tevye speaks for both when he states of his ramshackle house that he had "grown up in this place" (literally, in his case; figuratively, in Swede's case) and had "died a thousand deaths in it" (127). The Swede describes his rambling old manse on the hill as "the beloved first and only house," and it represents, from the first time he sees it, everything solid and idyllic about life in the country – "to a city boy" Roth writes, it is nothing less than "an architectural marvel" set back among the ancient trees (189).

Tevye's and Swede Levov's rustic universes are, however, essentially quite different. It is no accident that Tevye waxes poetic about his home when reminiscing about particular holidays; the seasonal cycle of nature is inextricable from the Jewish calendar for him. Tevye inscribes nature with Jewishness. As he describes the time after the High Holy Days:

It's a good time to stay home and relax a bit on the front stoop...each day is a gift.... The leaves are green...and the whole forest is looking its best, as if it were God's own sukkah.... It's here that He must celebrate the holiday, not in the city.... And at night you might think you were in Paradise, the sky such a deep blue and the stars twinkling.... Every Jew has his star...why, the whole sky is Jewish..."(65)

Tevye's bestowal of "Jewishness" upon the stars here is ironic, because a shooting star is a sign that someone's luck has run out—a condition that Tevye marks, with a wink and a sigh, as particularly Jewish. This irony enriches the panorama; he views the landscape as an encapsulation of the sorrow and the joy, both inescapable, of Jewish life.

As Roth imagines it, Swede's countryside is not only not Jewish; his coveting of the landscape as a boy and his life there as an adult are part of a deliberate progression away from the immigrant Jewish (urban) experience. Revisiting a telling passage about the young Swede's love-at-first-sight for what would later be his home as a grownup, we find that "the random designs of the stones said 'House' to him to him as not even the brick house on Keer Avenue did," suggesting that, however pleasant and whole his youth in Jewish Newark, such an experience never can define American domestic bliss as the house in Old Rimrock can (189). To settle in "Revolutionary New Jersey" is to conquer America, to slip away with someone else's birthright.

Even if the Swede muses with pride, at one point, that he owns the trees in his yard—"it was more astonishing to him that he owned trees than

that he owned factories," Roth writes – it is his neighbor Bill Orcutt, American blue-blood and first-class jerk, who really owns the trees of Morris County: his ancestors are feeding them, after all (325). Orcutt, and the cemetery where his hoary progenitors are buried, are synecdoches for the goyish landscape. He can "spin out ancestors forever," pointing to this crumbling grave and that, trotting out the whole history of America – white Anglo-Saxon Protestant America, that is – as it has engraved its features on the hills and forests of old New Jersey (306).

Orcutt's environmental activism (battling to save historic Morristown from highways and a local lake from "devastation by pollutants,") appears vaguely suspect, a counterpart to his unsportsmanlike behavior toward our hero in the neighborhood football games (301). He subtly conveys to Swede an air of petulant entitlement (and we soon see just how far this desire to possess the surrounding terrain extends). Although it chafes against everything he must believe about his vista, his country, Swede senses in Orcutt's smug sunniness a warning reminder of "just who [Orcutt] was," and just who Seymour Levov of Newark never was and never may be (306).

Tevye was born to the landscape; it has always reflected the rhythm of his life, intertwined as it is with his family, his livelihood, his God. Sholem Aleichem finds in Tevye as a distillation of essential Jewishness, locating it in an attitude toward God, a way of speaking and remembering, a loyalty to the land. Never in the course of the novel does Tevye ever set foot in a synagogue or speak to a rabbi, and he and his family live outside the local shtetl; it's just the way things are, and, as far as he's concerned, always have been.

Swede, however, was born and raised in a city, in an entirely Jewish milieu. According to the logic of the immigrant dream of American success,

the greatest gift a family can bestow on its children is the opportunity to push further and higher into American society. So although, as Roth writes, Swede's father was a man "for whom everything is an unshakable duty, for whom there is a right way and a wrong way and nothing in between" the primary lesson he passes on to his son, stripped down to its core, is the all-American mantra: How do you get anywhere or anything? "You work at it"—and that's that(11; 221). Swede's a good guy, a good American, and it appears, for a long time, that all he ever needed to know about life he learned on the sports field and in the glove factory.

Tevye (if asked) might forgive Swede his aversion to the synagogue and his puzzlement over his father's High Holy Judaism, and even condone his Johnny Appleseed fantasies. But what would he make of his pilgrimage to the countryside, a terra incognita fragrant with the promise of belonging? How seductive, and how empty, we knowingly grumble. But which American among us can resolutely censor Swede Levov, raised to succeed and succeed and succeed, for the simple desire to shed specificity in his effortless trajectory toward all-American-guyness?

There is a deep rift between Tevye's and Swede's relationship to land and home. Tevye's devotion to the good earth clearly reflects his creator's Zionist yearnings. Roth's take on the American Eden is harder to intuit. Roth suggests, on the one hand, the foolhardiness of blaming Swede for internalizing his father's and grandfather's dreams; on the other hand, he encourages fits of finger-waving, and his brother Jerry is the supreme mouthpiece for this point of view. His shattering response to Swede, who has finally met with his long-lost daughter Merry five years after she bombed their town's general store and disappeared, says it all:

What are you? Do you know? What you are is you're always trying to smooth everything over.... What you are is always complacent.... The one who abides everything patiently. The one with the ultimate decorum. The boy who never breaks the code. Whatever society dictates, you do... You think you know what a man is? You have no *idea* what a man is. You think you know what a daughter is? You have no *idea* what a daughter is. You think you know what this country is? You have no idea what this country is. You have a false image of *everything*. (274, 276).

When something goes as horribly awry as Swede's life does, when his daughter, who he has provided for and protected and cherished, inexplicably becomes a murderous political terrorist, the audience wants a reason. But what kind of morality tale is this? Does Swede Levov deserve this misery any more than Tevye deserves the sorrow he reaps from his daughters? Must he pay this price just for believing in an illusion, along with the rest of his generation, and for nearly succeeding in basking his world in its glow?

The story "Hodl" in *Tevye the Milkman* provides a good point of comparison with Swede's plight, for in this story Tevye too loses an intelligent daughter whose zeal for revolution (and in this case, for a revolutionary husband) outweighs her commitment to her family. And, in the end, Tevye's response to Hodl's intractable sense of duty is strikingly similar to Swede's after encountering Merry-the-Jain in her decrepit room in a derelict Newark neighborhood. "I ask you," says Tevye, "what's a father to do with such a child? He either scolds her, you say, or spans her, or gives her an earful she'll remember. But...it happens to be my opinion that anger is the worst sin in the book" (66). About Swede, battling Merry's insanity in a war for her soul, Roth writes: "He tried to let reason rise once again to the surface.... What does a reasonable man say next? What does a reasonable, responsible father say if he is able still to feel intact as a father?" (249).

As tempting as it is to blame Swede's assimilated life, his intermarriage, and his waffling over Merry's religious upbringing as the root of all his troubles, we find that Tevye, whose Jewishness apparently runs so pure, natural, and deep, has beaten him to the tragedy of incompatible generational worldviews. Tevye has a false image of *nothing*, and yet he loses that which is most precious, again and again. Chava marrying a gentile villager is not the same as blowing up a general store and killing Dr. Fred Conlon, of course, but Tevye, raising his daughters with his own rock-solid sense of identity, is no better able to control his children than the Swede, who "raised a child neither Catholic nor Jew, who instead was first a stutterer, then a killer, then a Jain" (386). And, Roth might point out, Swede Levov is as good an American as Tevye is a Jew.

Reading *American Pastoral* against *Tevye the Dairyman* underscores an emptiness in modern American life; Viewing the former through the latter's lens exposes a vacuum which the narrative structures of the novels themselves, more even than the heroes' personal tragedies, lays bare. While both authors employ an alter-ego writer figure who turns the spotlight on a protagonist whose life quickly becomes the focus of the work, the stories are told in profoundly different ways.

Tevye is a series of monologues, comprised of layers of dialogue. The "dialogue" here is actually Tevye alone recounting other characters' words in various situations; he creates an entire world through the act of speaking, of using his own memory and voice. In *The Meaning of Yiddish*, Benjamin Harshav expertly captures the structural complexity of the work, crucial for understanding the critical resources denied the protagonist of *American Pastoral*. He writes of *Tevye*:

An incident is presented not through a realistic description but through talk about talk about it, in the course of which the incident itself and the ways of talking about it are linked to the metaphysical questions of human existence which preoccupy our hero and are conveyed in the manner of Yiddish folklore...and with metadiscourse about the ways of talking about such things.

(106)

It is, in the end, through communication itself – through both a facility in addressing God and a genius for retelling his own story – that Tevye creates meaning out of the void.

The metatragedy of *American Pastoral*, then, is that Roth's alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, has to reimagine the character's story himself; Swede Levov is, in *Tevye* terms, almost completely voiceless. Zuckerman and Levov have exactly one chance to make a connection and fail absolutely – an opportunity missed that Zuckerman later blames on his own impatient assumption that the disappointingly calm, amiable Swede (whose letter suggesting a rendezvous had tempted our writer to imagine a cache of suffering to be revealed) was "the embodiment of nothing" (35).

Zuckerman is left to piece together the Swede's tragic story from the bones of Jerry Levov's tale, the flesh of his own imagination, and the elusive ghost of Swede himself. It is a project that Zuckerman compels himself to undertake, but which will be forever shadowed by the "real story" that died with his protagonist, whom Zuckerman failed to meet halfway. As Roth poignantly asks:

Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do...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? (35)

Of course, Tevye is as much a fiction as Seymour "Swede" Levov. The point is that, in the terms of the earlier novel, Swede is trapped in a story that he doesn't understand and that he isn't even telling.

While Sholem Aleichem grants redemption to Tevye and the art of Yiddish storytelling, Philip Roth withholds salvation from his latter-day American-Jewish hero while simultaneously deflating the narrative of the American dream. The great American recipe for happiness, two parts hard work and one part innocent goodwill, is apparently not enough to remedy heartbreak or quell spiritual famine. "God doesn't tell a man what He thinks, and a Jew had better believe that He knows what He's up to," Tevye warns Sholem Aleichem at the beginning of his first tale. According to Philip Roth, the modern Jewish hero has not only relinquished God, but has lost the ability to make sense of his own story.