

**“The Horror of Self-Reflection”:
Writing, Cancer, and Terrorism
in Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral***

Christopher Gair

This essay provides a re-reading of the relationship between Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997) and the canonical texts of the American Renaissance. It focuses on a selection of well known passages, to suggest the ways in which Roth borrows the form of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s work, the content of Herman Melville’s and the language of Walt Whitman’s. Rather than accepting the (until recently) conventional view of these artists as offering unifying definitions of a hermetically-sealed national identity, the essay reads *American Pastoral* as a re-enactment of the sense of crisis that permeates the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville, and argues that the conflict that Roth depicts tearing apart the post-World War II United States can be viewed as an inevitable consequence even of the more optimistic visions proffered by Whitman. Noting the manner in which Roth revisits the American Renaissance link of body and nation, the essay reads cancer as a metaphor for the condition of the nation in late-industrial America.

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel
that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no
calumny, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot
repair.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” (1836)

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” (1855)

Shadows present foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

—Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1855)

The 2007 publication of *Exit Ghost* appears to represent the final outing for Philip Roth’s master chronicler of American life, Nathan Zuckerman. Blighted not only by the incontinence and impotence that he has endured since undergoing surgery for prostate cancer, Zuckerman is now handicapped by an increasingly unreliable memory, a bitingly cruel impediment for a man whose sense of self is given meaning by the shaping of words into narrative. By 2004, when the book is staged, Zuckerman has long been living in semi-isolation in the Berkshires, in “a small house on a dirt road in the deep country” where he does not watch television, own a cell phone or a computer, and appears to have no knowledge of contemporary popular culture and little interest even in such seismic events as 9/11 (*Exit Ghost* 3).

While there is clearly much that could be said about *Exit Ghost* and Roth’s vision of the role of the author in the United States in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, my interest here lies in the retrospective light the novel casts on *American Pastoral* (1997), an earlier meditation on the relationship between the individual and terrorism. Significantly, in *Exit Ghost*, Zuckerman also reminds us of why he had decided to leave the city for good: he had been the victim of a series of death threats—that is, “the danger of fatal attack” (53). As a consequence of his move, he is “taken hold of” by “the habit of solitude” (58), a Thoreauvian gesture that sees Zuckerman rarely venturing even to the local village, let alone to New York. The reason for his relocation could also be read as suggestive of the basis for Zuckerman’s interest in terrorism at the time that *American Pastoral* was written, and contextualises his construction of a narrative that deals with the responses of individual and nation to events that disturb complacent notions of personal and national identity.

As the reference to Henry David Thoreau hints, such alignment of self and nation sees *American Pastoral* re-explore the classic trope of the American Renaissance, in which the (male) body and soul are equated with a United States that is represented as an equally organic entity. Several critics have called attention to the degree to which Roth alludes to and reinscribes both this and other elements of the American Renaissance in *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000), the three millennial novels that are generally viewed as a triptych.

Catherine Morley, Ross Posnock, David Brauner, and Derek Parker Royal have all focussed on the manner in which these books mark a relocation of Zuckerman from his position as a self-consciously Jewish American author to a writer combining an ongoing ethnic literary identity with efforts to subscribe to a “canonical” or “national” literary genealogy. Thus, they have stressed such factors as Zuckerman’s move to the sometime home of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville in the Berkshires, his name’s (Nathan) evocation of Hawthorne, the Emersonian elements of his use of nature and the ways in which central tropes redeploy Hawthorne’s own weight-laden symbols, especially the letter “A” worn by Hester Prynne. The key difference, for almost all these scholars, and one perhaps rooted in the feeling that America has reached the end of the industrial age that was still in its infancy when Walt Whitman was celebrating himself and all around, is that this body—despite initial indications to the contrary—is in decline, and forced to encounter a series of ever-deepening physical and spiritual crises. Morley is representative, therefore, when she claims that “Roth situates his writing within this tradition but simultaneously deconstructs a national canon which has perpetuated the notion of a certain attainable and singular ‘American-ness’” (86). For Morley, the point is linked to another key difference, since Roth’s “suffusion of this nineteenth-century tradition with a transnational consciousness ... works to challenge the idiom of nationalism” (88).¹

-
1. Unsurprisingly, given his extensive list of publications on nineteenth-century American literature, Ross Posnock is the one critic to avoid such over-simplification of the complexities of the American Renaissance and of Philip Roth’s response to it. He is sensitive, for example, to the ways in which Roth, in “novel after novel” echoes Herman Melville’s moral exposé of the “fantasy of purity” and to the ties between the “moral and epistemological dimensions” of Roth and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s writing (“Purity and Danger” 86–87). Although Catherine Morley offers a traditional summary of the American Renaissance in her chapter on Roth, she demonstrates more awareness of its complexities and nuances earlier in her study, assessing the degree to which recent scholars have identified transnational themes alongside criticisms (rather than endorsements) of national myths (See Morley 37–45). I am not arguing, of course, that Roth is drawn to (and drawing upon) the American Renaissance to the exclusion of other literary genealogies. Most obviously, there are debts to John Milton, Homer, Marcel Proust and to a pastoral tradition wider than its localised instancing in mid-nineteenth-century New England and New York. In addition to these much cited examples—and once more in the light of *Exit Ghost’s* (2007) reiteration of Zuckerman’s youthful fascination with Joseph Conrad—it is tempting to turn detective and suggest that moments of grave seriousness in *American Pastoral* (1997) involve playful intertextual allusions. The ill-fated,

While there is no doubt that the canonical texts of the American Renaissance *were* often used in this manner by scholars shaping a founding American Studies paradigm at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s, the above attempts to view Roth as moving somehow beyond an American Renaissance that is defined as celebratory and unifying are highly problematic. A quick glance at some of the key themes and central texts of the mid-nineteenth century both illustrates a far more complex, fragmentary, anxious and (in a transnational sense) permeable canon and suggests the reasons why Roth should wish to proffer a reconsideration of them at the close of the millennium.² To begin with Ralph Waldo Emerson is to see how a writer rightly seen as the midwife at the birth of a national literary tradition simultaneously doubted the possibilities of a live birth. We should remember that Emerson's most famous early essays emerge from a sense of crisis: "Nature" (1836) begins with expressions of anxiety about contemporary abilities to see the world "face to face" and with bleak contrasts to the "original relationship to the universe" experienced in the past (Baym, ed. 1120); "The American Scholar" (1837) represents "Man ... metamorphosed into a thing, into many things," a reifying process with particularly damaging consequences for the artist, with "Man Thinking" transformed into the "bookworm" (Baym, ed. 1139, 1141); and "Self-Reliance" (1841) warns of the dangers of a society already becoming over-civilised, in which individuals are afraid to trust their own genius. While Zuckerman might initially be seen to fail one half of Emerson's call for self-trust, since—even if he places his ideas in the world in the form of his novels—his vision emerges in the solitude of his Berkshires retreat rather than in defiance of the world of the "mob," we should remember that his work has evidently reached beyond the "decorous and prudent" "rage of the cultivated classes" and has aroused his would be killer, the embodiment of what Emerson labels the "unintelligent brute force that lies at the bottom of society" (Baym, ed. 1167) and which will seek to hunt down and destroy the forms of hyper-developed selfhood that posit a challenge to *American* individualism.

exploited terrorist, Merry Levov, has a stutter reminiscent of that equally manipulated adolescent, Stevie, the simple-minded brother of Winnie Verloc, and his disintegration as an inadvertent suicide bomber foreshadows Merry's considerably slower loss of mind and body.

2. Alan Heimert suggests convincingly that the period 1848-51—that is, the moment when *Moby-Dick* (1851) and other quintessential American Renaissance texts were being composed—marked "the very months of America's profoundest political crisis" (506).

Three further examples—Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—serve to illustrate just what is at stake in Roth’s indebtedness to the American Renaissance. For now, I will stick to a handful of well known passages, to suggest the ways in which Roth borrows the form of Hawthorne’s work, the content of Melville’s and the language of Whitman’s. I should stress that this usage is, of course, considerably more blurred than such a straightforward division implies (and my reading here will involve some slippage between the divisions), but—given constraints of space here—it should suffice to illustrate the point. Following Hawthorne’s famous distinction in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), it would seem prudent to regard *American Pastoral* (along with *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*) as a “romance” rather than a “novel.” For Hawthorne, the Romance,

must [as a work of art] rigidly submit itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation. If he thinks fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen or enrich the shadows of the picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privilege here stated, and, especially, to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public. He can hardly be said, however, to commit a literary crime, even if he disregard this caution. (Baym, ed. 1494)

The tale of Swede Levov initially appears to be unpromising material for such a Romance: when Zuckerman meets him for dinner in 1995, in response to the Swede’s letter asking for help in writing a tribute to his recently deceased father, he finds it impossible to penetrate a stupefying blandness, where “all that rose to the surface was more surface” (23). Indeed, Zuckerman admits as much, stating that “the guy cannot be cracked by thinking. That’s the mystery of his mystery” (30), “I could not decide whether that blankness of his was like snow covering something or snow covering nothing” (37) and “[t]his guy is the embodiment of nothing” (39). Nevertheless, *American Pastoral* is a book that strives to unearth “the truth of the human heart” and one in which Zuckerman is happy to acknowledge his own enriching of the shadows of the story he narrates.

Were it not for one final point, it could well be argued that the claims for the Romance laid out by Hawthorne could equally be applied to almost all fiction genres, since most would profess to be articulating some kind of epistemological “truth.” *American Pastoral*, however, bears an uncanny formal resemblance to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne’s most famous work, and the one which most obviously engages with the relationship of America’s past to its present and the role of the author-artist in (for Hawthorne) the 1640s and 1840s. Hawthorne, of course, is drawn to the tale of Hester Prynne through a combination of frustration with his life as a customs house officer (surrounded by characters as apparently depthless as the Swede), historical curiosity and moral sympathy. It is the coupling of Surveyor Pue’s brief account of the facts of Hester’s life with the “sensation ... as of burning heat” (Baym, ed. 1369) that Hawthorne feels when he places the ancient letter “A” against his chest that prompts him to imagine and create his own tale. Likewise, it is the fragments of the Swede’s life revealed by his brother Jerry when he encounters Zuckerman at their class reunion—recounted across a few pages near the start of *American Pastoral*—that, when paired with the emotional reaction that Zuckerman feels when he dances to Johnny Mercer’s 1940s hit, “Dreams,” triggers not only the realisation that he has been entirely wrong about the Swede, but also the decision to recreate his life story through a Hawthornesque act of imagination, in which Zuckerman tries “to take the measure of a person of apparent blankness and innocence and simplicity, chart his collapse, make of him, as time wore on, the most important figure of my life” (74). Akin to Hawthorne, who establishes not only his own, personal, affinity with Hester, but also the degree to which her tale of alienation resonates with the wider experiences of artists two centuries later, Zuckerman looks to the (more recent) past as a way of explaining the American present and the author’s role within it at a moment of personal and national crisis. And, like Hawthorne, Zuckerman begins his tale with an account of how he came to inhabit the margins of American social life and how this marginalisation—for both, a step involving a combination of personal choice and enforcement by others, since Hawthorne is fired from his job and Zuckerman is threatened by a crazed reader—is the enabling condition for the creation of the fictions that follow. Finally, once Hawthorne and Zuckerman have discovered the fragments of their tales, they both become invisible, versions of Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” able to “see all” (Baym, ed. 1112), but doing nothing to remind the reader of their presence as creators of a fictional world.

But while Hawthorne provides the formal model for *American Pastoral*, it is Melville who offers a fuller precursor of its themes. While Morley and Brauner suggest that the American Renaissance is characterised by the “normative nationalist paradigms of the pastoral” (Morley 87), Melville should surely be seen as the supreme example of an American author working to deconstruct these paradigms. Although, again, this is not the place to develop the point at length, we should recall that Melville’s now hyper-canonical masterpiece, *Moby-Dick* (1851) was conceived and written in the aftermath of revolutions across Europe, the United States’ annexation of Texas, the California gold rush, the Clay Compromise, the Fugitive Slave Law and the rapid acceleration of the American industrial revolution. This convergence of local, national and international crises is represented elliptically by Melville in a book that (despite the claims of early Americanists such as Richard Chase) refuses to provide simple models of nationhood. Instead, as befits a work by an author whose knowledge of international literatures and history is almost as impressive as Roth’s, Melville generates a transnational universe aboard the *Pequod*, in which the three mates and their harpooners represent the national and international intersections of American economic imperialism and a crew of “mariners, renegades and castaways” (*Moby-Dick* 114) from around the globe resist the nationalising efforts of the officer class.³

Melville’s response to the notion that the pastoral represents some kind of unshakable nationalist paradigm is equally sceptical. *Pierre, or, the Ambiguities* (1852) is the American literary text that most overtly anticipates the “counterpastoral” (*American Pastoral* 86) central themes of

3. Michael Paul Rogin offers the most detailed and incisive reading of *Moby-Dick*’s relation to the political crises of the period. In addition, he develops an argument, first suggested by Heimert, pointing out that the harpooners on the *Pequod* are members of the three races exploited by American sectional interests in the nineteenth century. Stubb, who speaks in the Western idiom, has an Indian for his squire; Flask, a diminutive Southerner, perches on the Negro Daggoo’s shoulders, just as the Southern economy rested on the labours of black slaves; and Starbuck, the ship’s owners’ representative, and loyal to New England codes, has a native from the Pacific isles to harpoon his whales. It was precisely this sectional, racial division of labour which promoted capitalist development and political harmony in the first half of the nineteenth century, and it was the breakdown of such a relationship that ultimately led to the American Civil War (Rogin 102–51). For a reading of *Moby-Dick* that anticipates the transnational turn of recent scholarship, see James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: Herman Melville and the World We Live In*.

American Pastoral in its systematic deconstruction of the notion that the pastoral can ever offer a sustainable and viable model of national identity.⁴ *Pierre*'s opening chapters represent an earlier version of the world that Swede Levov attempts to establish in Old Rimrock and Pierre's naïve, youthful oneness with the natural world foreshadows the Swede's fantasies of Johnny Appleseed traversing the country in a narrative that transcends religious or racial grounds. But, in the same way that the forces of history intrude upon the Swede's fantasy, Pierre is forced to confront the artificiality of the "natural" order by the discovery of Isabel, his dark-complexioned and previously unknown half-sister, in a narrative twist that would seem to allegorise the presence of miscegenation and slavery in the United States and the—for Melville, as for many other writers at the time—inexorable slide toward Civil War. Pierre's later wanderings through a dystopian metropolis when—as a writer of what are viewed as unacceptable narratives about the cosmos—he is hounded from respectable society, also bear strong resemblance to the representations of post-industrial Newark in *American Pastoral* and to Roth's own examinations of the struggles of the radical author to be heard at moments of national strife. Indeed, Geoff Ward's suggestion that, "it is clear from the outset that whatever happens to Pierre is going to be awful," his reminders about the "opposition between the cloying pastoral of Saddle Meadows ... and the city of dreadful night to which [Pierre] travels" and, most tellingly, his observation that "*Pierre* is, among other things, a warning about the power of tropes to shape life" (80, 82) could all be applied directly to *American Pastoral*. Roth even echoes the hints of incest that characterise Pierre's relationships with his mother and with Isabel when the Swede kisses Merry's "stammering mouth with the passion that she had been asking him for all month long while knowing only obscurely what she was asking for" (91).

Walt Whitman—at least, the Whitman of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855—would seem, initially, to pose more of a problem of alignment with *American Pastoral*. Whereas the Melville of the 1850s is a

4. It is also possible to trace the presence of Edgar Allan Poe in this element of *American Pastoral*. To cite but one example, note the manner in which the enigmatic "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) is reinscribed by Roth as an overt form of national nightmare, "the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American beserk" (86).

figure consumed by the tragic qualities of American life and the slide toward civil conflict, Whitman represents himself as *the* national poet, able, as he puts it in "Song of Myself," to traverse boundaries and "contain multitudes" within a body-state celebrated for its capacity for self-contradiction (Baym, ed. 2253). While there are certainly moments of doubt, even in the 1855 text, *Leaves of Grass* (and especially the poem later named "Song of Myself") is essentially an inventory of the nation's rich and varied resources. In contrast, there is little sense of national celebration in *American Pastoral*: thus, when Zuckerman tells of the Swede's "flawlessly Americanized" appearance and adopts a Whitmanesque coupling of self and nation to suggest the Swede's "unconscious oneness with America" (3, 20), most readers are likely to be alert—even at this early stage in the narrative—to the ironies of the descriptions.

There is a similarly sweeping and—superficially, at least—progressive vision of the America of the mid-1940s in another paragraph from near the start of the novel: Roth's listing of "auto workers, coal workers, transit workers, maritime workers, steel workers" demanding rectification of the nation's—by now, undemocratically unequal—prosperity mirrors Whitman's habitual enthusiastic naming of the types of American labourer; the claim that "Everything was in motion" again seems to echo the manner in which the lines of "Song of Myself" characteristically represent people in action; while the paragraph's concluding vision of "Americans . . . en masse, everyone in it together" (40) borrows Whitman's own appropriation of the French in order to reiterate both Whitman's assertion in his 1855 Preface that a "superior breed . . . the gangs of kosmos and prophets *en masse*," "finding their inspiration in real objects today" (Baym, ed. 2208) will construct a democratic utopia and Whitman's stress in "Song of Myself" on the notion that "En-Masse" is a "word of the modern" (Baym, ed. 2226). And yet, Zuckerman's idealised memories of his adolescence suggest that, even then, there was "an undercurrent of anxiety" beneath a world "bright with industriousness." Furthermore, despite invitations to extrapolate to wider national moods, there are reminders that these are descriptions of a Jewish community retaining a "generalized mistrust of the Gentile World" (41), while the narrator, recounting this history from the perspective of half a century's distance, is all too aware of what had been happening to Jews in Europe shortly before the scenes he describes.

The parallels between Whitman's and Roth's approach are also evident in the depiction of the novel's central character. For Zuckerman, there seems little doubt that the young Swede performed a heroic function for his

local community in ways that assumed epic, national proportions. Where Whitman would come to represent Abraham Lincoln as the symbol of possibility—of containing the nation’s multitudes—lamenting his assassination as a sign of the cleaving of that ideal, Zuckerman sees the Swede as “our Kennedy,” “another man of glamour exuding American meaning” and links Kennedy’s death and Levov’s “destruction” by the “sliver off the comet of the American chaos [that] had come loose and spun all the way out to Old Rimrock” (83). The Swede’s awakening to emotional turmoil, just like his later “belated discovery of what it means to be not healthy but sick, to be not strong but weak,” to be “[b]etrayed all at once by a wonderful body that had furnished him with assurance and had constituted the bulk of his assurance over others” (29) represent metonymic versions of Zuckerman’s bleak vision of the nation laid low by political corruption (Watergate), internal conflict over race, Vietnam and intergenerational battles over what—if anything—“America” should be. Where Whitman—at least, before the Civil War and Lincoln’s death—could construct an imaginary America in verse that served as symbolic compensation for the conflicts that were threatening to split the nation, Zuckerman redeploys Whitman’s alignment of the individual and the nation as a means of depicting their mutual, symbiotic state of dis-ease. Whitman’s tropes of democracy, selfhood and nation are systematically inverted by Zuckerman in a rewriting of American (literary) history that tells a story of national and personal decline and disillusion.⁵

While Zuckerman’s representations of Swede Levov and the American nation reformulate Whitman’s central trope, repeatedly distorting it to proffer a bleak lament for a disintegrating body-state, these are by no means the only way in which *Leaves of Grass* is referenced in *American Pastoral*. To conclude this piece, I will look at one further instance of this process, assessing the manner in which the rhythms and language of Whitman’s verse—which he sees, of course, as those of the people, and labels “the dialects of common sense” (Baym, ed. 2208)—are subsequently turned against “America” from within. I will then offer a few brief comments on the manner in which Roth modifies Whitman and Emerson’s conception of

5. The fact that Walt Whitman is the most optimistic of the core writers of the American Renaissance (also including Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Melville) famously selected by F.O. Matthiessen means that his relationship to Roth is potentially closer to the model laid out by Morley than is true for the others. As such, it is strange that she does no more than mention him briefly.

the place of the author in the United States in order to accommodate the specific historical crises of national identity that he considers in *American Pastoral*.

When the Swede visits his fugitive daughter in her hovel set amidst the "rubble, the garbage, the debris" of the streets off Newark's McCarter Highway, he is drawn to a "series of index cards positioned just about where she once used to venerate, over her Old Rimrock bed, magazine photos of Audrey Hepburn." The cards contain five vows of purity:

I renounce all killing of living beings, whether subtile or gross,
whether movable or immovable.

I renounce all vices of lying speech arising from anger, or greed,
or fear, or mirth.

I renounce all taking of anything not given, either in a village, or
a town, or a wood, either of little or much, or small or great, or
living or lifeless things.

I renounce all sexual pleasures, either with gods, or men, or animals.

I renounce all attachments, whether little or much, small or great,
living or lifeless; neither shall I myself form such attachments, nor
cause others to do so, nor consent to their doing so. (239)

Avoiding the temptation to update D.H. Lawrence's comments on what Walt would have written if he had known Charlie Chaplin and apply them to Hepburn, I want to call attention to the Whitmanesque qualities of these lines. When read in sequence, the cards read like free verse and deploy a formal strategy used again and again in "Song of Myself," through which structure is imposed by a word or phrase repeated at the opening of each line. Rather than conforming to formal meter, Whitman allows a line to run until the description of a given image or concept has been completed. He then progresses to the next line and image, reiterating the opening words of the previous passage.⁶ But this is just the start of the relationship: the ordering of the vows does not immediately invert Whitman's version of the self; instead, it constructs a narrative that involves a growing sense of detachment from that vision. Thus (even where the *act* of renunciation is not one that Whitman would consider), the opening statement is not only phrased in the language of "Song of Myself," with a series of sub-clauses seeking to preclude any omission or confusion, but also echoes Whitman's own respect for all forms of life. The second and third vows, too, seem to endorse Whitman's vision of

6. See, for example, "Song of Myself" ll. 824-30 or 1063-69 in Baym, ed. 2237, 2245.

the purity of democratic practice—this is how he envisages his ideal America, in which poets have replaced presidents as shapers of thought and behaviour. Vow four is the first to upend “Song of Myself,” not only in its renunciation of the sexual pleasure that is the cornerstone of Whitman’s celebration of the body, but also in its distinctions between human beings and gods. Finally, where *Leaves of Grass* is built upon attachments between Americans, irrespective of class, creed or colour, Merry’s fifth vow marks an absolute rejection of such union. This final act of renunciation—in which the possibility of human cooperation in any form is repudiated—seems to mark a shift that rejects the key trope of Whitman’s verse (the self/nation binary) and posits an alternative that leads to self-annihilation and (in the improbable event that it is universally adopted) the death of the country itself.

Merry’s manifesto offers one further inversion of the aims of American Renaissance (and many other) writers, in that it marks a self-conscious act of disengagement from the obligation to intervene in debates about the nation. Merry’s own intervention had, of course, been the bombing of Old Rimrock’s post office at a moment where—as Alike Varvogli has pointed out—her stutter represented “the inability to articulate her rage against her country” (111). For Varvogli, Merry’s impediment aligns her with Zuckerman, who is impotent and incontinent following surgery for prostate cancer. Both are seen as “powerless, a fact metaphorically expressed through the ways in which their bodies fail them” (111). Neither the terrorist nor the artist is able to effect meaningful change on a nation that is now ruled in such a manner as to marginalise the voices of the people.

Varvogli makes a powerful case for the link, going so far as to suggest that Merry is the true protagonist of *American Pastoral*. Yet, Zuckerman insists that his primary focus is the story of Swede Levov and that his narrative involves dissolving the differences between them, effectively thinking as he imagines Levov would do. Physically, their declines are virtually identical—both suffer from prostate cancer and the disease represents the fall not only of powerful men, but also of a global superpower. Where Whitman is the poet of body and soul, Roth splits these categories in two, allowing the Swede’s body (but also his imagination) and Zuckerman’s imagination (but also, of course, his body) to represent the fall of America, in which the extremes of the pastoral myth pursued by Levov and the deconstruction of that myth by the artist are swept to the margins of history.

Roth wrote *American Pastoral* at a moment before 9/11 and at a time when terrorism still seemed to be—largely—a domestic affair. As such, it

makes sense that he should revisit the moment of sixties radicalism as a way of exploring contemporary American life. But equally pertinent in this context is the way that he deploys a version of the American Renaissance text as illustration of how America is threatened with destruction from within. Once more the analogy between the human body and the nation is essential to this representation. Where Whitman celebrates both, however, Zuckerman’s contemplation of the medical and—implicitly—the metaphorical meanings of “cancer” as a vehicle of potential annihilation is enacted in a manner that highlights their doubling. Cancer is defined on *Wordnet* as “any malignant growth or tumor caused by abnormal and uncontrolled cell division; it may spread to other parts of the body through the lymphatic system or the blood stream” (Miller). The key point is that the “uncontrolled cell division” comes from *within*, replacing healthy cells with “abnormal” ones, which then spread to contaminate and—in the worst case—destroy the host body. This is what happens to the Swede and (although not fatally) Zuckerman. Merry Levov is also part of the American “body,” a contented child with a normal interest in animals and film stars, yet she also becomes one cell in the “abnormal” division—part of an equally hard to control “American chaos” (83)—that attacks its host in places (here, Old Rimrock) far away from its original manifestation. The supreme irony is that Merry Levov is the inevitable product of Whitman’s vision of an infinitely expandable nation—sooner or later, the body is bound to create its own malignant growth, killing the healthy cells that surround it, whether these are the actual victims of her bombs or the longer-term casualties of her actions, such as Swede Levov. Likewise, her vows of purity, while apparently offering a “renunciation” of her earlier actions, are in fact an extension of them, representing a symbolically murderous twist to Whitman’s language of democratic freedom that, as we have seen, seeks to preclude the forms of human empathy upon which Whitman’s America depends.

If we read *American Pastoral* through the canonical texts of the American Renaissance, there is one final twist to the narrative. Merry Levov has not brought about the collapse of the country, although another form of the self-destruction of democracy is being enacted through the televised coverage of the Watergate hearings that are being beamed (again, cancerously) into almost every American home. But, amidst the “chaos,” Zuckerman ends the novel with a note of thickly veiled hope, in which the laughter of the literature professor, Marcia Umanoff, at the idea that America is “going rapidly under” is tempered by Lou Levov’s good fortune

at not losing his sight when he is attacked by Jessie Orcutt. The scene reminds us that Zuckerman—like Whitman—empathises with all his characters, even where (as with Lou and Marcia here or the Swede and Merry repeatedly) their views of the nation are diametrically opposed. In “Nature,” Emerson writes that “[i]n the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calumny, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair” (Baym, ed. 1112). “Disgrace and calumny” are everywhere at this moment, with Lou believing that “[d]eviancy prevailed” (422), but the stress on spared vision, far from the city and at the conclusion of a narrative in which Zuckerman himself has (after the introductory pages) become Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” (Baym, ed. 1112), being nothing, but seeing all, suggests that there is still hope. Like Emerson, who tempers his fears about the decline of America with a reason for optimism in the ability to see, Roth/Zuckerman does not conclude with the account of the old man’s death. Instead, in a book whose protagonist’s name (Seymour) offers an aural pun on Zuckerman’s understanding of the role of the author in American life, this stress on the continued power of sight (while probably not recognized as such by Lou Levov) metonymically suggests the ability of the writer to sustain his position as “transparent eyeball” claiming the ability to “see all”—and write about it.

*University of Glasgow
United Kingdom*

Works Cited

- Baym, Nina, Gen. Ed. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007.
- Brauner, David. *Philip Roth*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.
- Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. 1957. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “The American Scholar.” 1837. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 1138–51.
- . “Nature.” 1836. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 1110–38.
- . “Self-Reliance.” 1841. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 1163–80.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables: A Romance*. 1851. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 1493–95.

- . *The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 1352–1493.
- Heimert, Alan. “*Moby-Dick* and American Political Symbolism.” *American Quarterly* 15 (1963): 498–534.
- James, C.L.R. *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. Dartmouth: University Press of New Hampshire, 2001.
- Matthiessen, F.O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. 1941. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Melville, Herman. “Benito Cereno.” 1855. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 2405–61.
- . *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale*. 1851. New York: Hendricks House, 1952.
- . *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1852.
- Miller, George A. (Director). *Wordnet: a Lexical Database for the English Language*. (<http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=cancer>).
- Morley, Catherine. *The Quest for Epic in Contemporary American Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 2009.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. “The Masque of the Red Death.” 1842. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 1585–89.
- Posnock, Ross. *Philip Roth’s Hard Truth: The Art of Immaturity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- . “Purity and Danger: On Philip Roth.” *Raritan* 21.2 (2001): 85–101.
- Rogin, Michael Paul. *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983.
- Roth, Philip. *American Pastoral*. 1997. London: Vintage, 1998.
- . *Exit Ghost*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2007.
- . *I Married a Communist*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1998.
- . *The Human Stain*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2000.
- Royal, Derek Parker. “Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*.” *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*. Ed. Derek Parker Royal. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. 185–207.
- Varvogli, Aliko. “The Inscription of Terrorism: Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*.” *Philip Roth Studies* 3.2 (2007): 101–13.
- Ward, Geoff. *The Writing of America: Literature and Cultural Identity from the Puritans to the Present*. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2002.
- Whitman, Walt. Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. 1855. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 2195–2209.
- . “Song of Myself.” 1855. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. 7th ed. Vol. B. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 2210–54.