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Right and wrong in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*

"What the hell is wrong with doing things right?"¹: Seymour Levov's angry question to his brother Jerry during their phone conversation in chapter 6 of *American Pastoral* epitomizes the central conundrum explored in the novel, where the words "right" and "wrong" recur with a frequency much above average. Of course, we are dealing here with very ubiquitous words, which can be adjectives, nouns, adverbs and verbs, and have a wide range of meanings. Even so, their repeated occurrences raise questions which are central to the interpretation of the novel, and this paper will examine some of the uses of the words and the links they develop with one another.

The first meaning of "right" listed in the *American Heritage Dictionary* is what could be called the "moral" one: "Conforming with or conformable to justice, law, or morality." Interestingly, this acceptation only comes second in the definition of "wrong": "Contrary to conscience, morality, or law; immoral or wicked. Unfair; unjust." Although Philip Roth is no moralist, and does not propose to answer our moral dilemmas,² this first meaning is nevertheless relevant to our study of the novel, since several characters exhibit strong concern with the question of moral decency. This is the case in particular for the generation of the Swede's and Dawn's fathers, who seem to have similar outlooks on the question: the initial characterization of Lou Levov's as "one of those slum-reared Jewish fathers [...], a father for whom everything is an unshakable duty, for whom there is a right way and a wrong way and nothing in between" (11) is symmetrically echoed at the end of the novel when Dawn describes her own father as "very conventional in terms of morality, [...] someone who is very caught up in issues of right and wrong and being punished for doing wrong and the prohibitions against sex," to which Lou answers, as expected: "I WOULDN'T DISAGREE WITH THAT" (392). The central question of the "rightness" or "wrongness" of terrorist action is raised in the novel, and pondered by several characters, as well as the "rightness" or "wrongness" of practicing and representing oral sex, which is one of the main subjects of conversation during the dinner party in the third part of the novel. In this "moral" sense, the two words function mostly as means of characterization: the characters are defined and define themselves by their "righteous" and even "self-righteous" stance—although the word "self-righteous" never appears in the novel—, an attitude which is clearly said to be "limited": the above quotation introducing Lou Levov ends with Nathan Zuckerman's summary comment: "Limited men with limitless energy" (11).

The novel indeed dramatizes the "limits" inherent in this narrowly moral vision of life, which excludes complexities and paradoxes. So when Mark Shechner defines Lou Levov as "the book's eccentric moral center",³ we can imagine that what he means by this oxymoronic expression is that Lou is the one who raises essential moral questions (for instance about work and about decency, whatever its definition), without providing what could be considered acceptable answers by the narrator, the author, and most readers. The end of the novel, in which Lou is superficially wounded with a fork after force-feeding one of

1. Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*, New York, Vintage, 1997, p. 275. Subsequent references to the novel will be given in the text within parentheses.

2. As Mark Shechner puts it: "Roth never stoops to answering big questions. Rather, he turns them over to a gang of talking heads who perform a Grosse Fugue of opinions." (Mark Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth*, Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2003, p. 156).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

his son's guests whose drinking he objects to, performs what can be called an act of poetic justice, by having the character punished through what constitutes the emblem of his pride, in other (French) words, a *fourchette*. The word and its acceptance in the field of glove-making are introduced in the novel quite early, and its meaning first explained to Nathan by the Swede when they meet at Vincent's: it is "[t]he part of the glove between the fingers. Those small oblong pieces between the fingers" (27). Interestingly, the word is similarly explained to Rita Cohen during her guided tour of Newark Maid (129), and recurs a third time a hundred pages later, as Seymour, waiting for his daughter in a forsaken street in Newark, reminisces about his apprenticeship to his father in his childhood: as Lou Levov tells his son, the *fourchette* is the test of the perfectly made glove:

When you're cutting a fourchette or a thumb or anything, you got to pull it straight. If you don't pull it straight, you're going to have a problem. If he pulled that fourchette crookedly on the bias, then when it's sewn together the finger is going to corkscrew just like this. That's what your mother is looking for. Because remember *and don't forget*—a Levov makes a glove that is *perfect*. (223, emphasis in original)

The recurrence of the word "fourchette"⁴ and its association with doing things "right," or "straight," not "crookedly," makes it an objective correlative for Lou Levov's moral self-righteousness, based on his rigorous work ethic, which backfires on him when Jesse Orcutt, fed up with his strawberry-rhubarb pie and his interfering solicitude, strikes him in the face with her fork, barely missing his eyes. The irony is compounded when we discover that the word *fourchette* also designates "the fold of skin at the posterior edge of the vulva" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), thus reinforcing the association between glove and female sex which is made explicit in the scenes between Seymour and Rita Cohen. In chapter 4, Rita teasingly uses the vocabulary of glove making to which the Swede has initiated her to refer to her "cunt" as a "size four. In a ladies' size that's as small as cunts come. Anything smaller is a child's. [...] Always the first time stick it in slowly" (145-46), quoting back at him the very words he used when he measured her hand (124) and gave her the finished pair of gloves: "Slowly, slowly... always the first time draw them on slowly" (132). Lou Levov is thus symbolically wounded by what represents both his pride and what he abominates, the two subjects which have dominated the conversation during dinner.

The novel concludes, shortly afterwards, with two questions—"And what is wrong with their life? What on earth is less reprehensible than the life of the Levovs?" (423). Lou Levov's narrow moral complacency is perhaps what is "wrong" with his life, although refraining from answering these questions is ultimately the only moral attitude the novel proposes to its readers.

If the two patriarchs in the novel seem to have a clear picture of what "morality" is, this conception appears to be more uncertain for the next generation. Indeed, the first, "moral" meaning of right and wrong is closely linked to another one, which has to do with social acceptability: in that sense, "right" is defined as "Fitting, proper, or appropriate", and "wrong" as "Not fitting or suitable; inappropriate or improper." The proximity of the two meanings points at the hypocrisy of the upper middle class characters at the dinner party, for whom morality is often equated with doing what is acceptable in their social milieu, in

4. There are at least two other occurrences of the word: p. 28, as Nathan wishes the conversation was back from the Swede's children "to the fourchettes and the details of how to get a good glove done" and p. 224, when Lou Levov has his son rehearse his glove-maker's catechism: "Six fourchettes, two thumbs, two trunks."

other words the “norms” and “decorum” at which Jerry Levov rages during his phone conversation with his brother at the end of chapter 6. Theirs is a watered down morality, which cannot sustain them in any way. In his review of the novel, Louis Menand defined them as “morally spineless” and considers the whole dinner party as “the exposure of their inner decay”,⁵ which becomes apparent when the conventions which rule their lives are destroyed at the end of the dinner party by Jessie’s act.

This “exposure of the moral decay” of the upper middle class makes the Swede’s efforts towards integration seem all the more absurd: Seymour want to “fit” in his Morris County neighbourhood, to become part of the “puzzle” of American society, without heeding his father’s warning that the peaceful façade of affluent country life hides fierce social prejudices. Although punished for his interfering ways, Lou Levov represents a form of morality which has to do with the American work ethic, and is not presented in a negative way in the novel: in fact, glove-making compares favourably with Dawn’s vocation as a cattle breeder or Orcutt’s artistry. The long pages (p. 119-132 and 219-225, in particular) devoted to the manufacture of gloves betray a form of fascination for the intricacy of the well-made thing, and a love of work well-done. This might be the reason why the episode about Jerry making a coat out of hamster skins is introduced in the novel, to emphasize the importance for his father of doing things “right,” or, as he says, “*properly*” (33, italics in original), a fact which only becomes annoying because it is obsessive and does not allow for the complexities of human life. In this sense, Lou Levov and several other characters in the novel are what Sherwood Anderson called “grotesques” in his preface to *Winesburg, Ohio*, precisely called “the Book of the Grotesque”. Anderson imagines a tale about an old writer telling about the beginning of the world when people had thoughts, which made up various truths. It was only when people started to stick to one truth and to exclude the others that they became grotesque: “It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.”⁶ It is more Lou Levov’s exclusive passion for his work and his family that makes him a grotesque than his love of work well done, which he also transmitted to his son. In the same way, Merry’s and Rita’s extremist ideas are grotesque, because they don’t allow for the complexity of the human life and mind, and thus become, in Anderson’s words “falsehoods”. The novel dramatizes the way truths turn into falsehoods, hence the difficulty for the reader to find his way in this “moral maze,” and the comparative ease with which different critics have reached widely diverging conclusions from the same elements.

Much more central to the heart of the novel is the second, epistemological meaning of the term, in which “right” means “In accordance with fact, reason, or truth; correct,” whereas what is “wrong” is “Not in conformity with fact or truth; incorrect or erroneous.” The narrator Nathan Zuckerman is indeed obsessed with “this terribly significant business of *other people*” (35, emphasis in original), and the impossibility of getting to know another person’s subjectivity. Being a writer, Nathan aims at getting as close as possible to “the truth of the human heart” (to borrow Hawthorne’s formula), but finds his enterprise repeatedly defeated by his fellow human beings’ unaccountable behaviour. Neither is he the only one

5. Louis Menand, “The Irony and the Ecstasy. Philip Roth and the Jewish Atlantis”, *New Yorker*, Vol. LXXIII, No. 12, May 19, 1997, p 93.

6. Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, Penguin Classics, 1976 [1919], p. 24.

who is puzzled with the question: as Nathan tries to achieve an understanding of the Swede's personality, so is the Swede tortured by the mystery which his daughter confronts him with: how could such perfect parents have begotten such a monster? The two questions are at the heart of the narration, and are what propels the discourse of the novel forward.

In the first part of the novel, until Nathan Zuckerman "disappears" into the Swede, his mention of getting the situation or the character of the Swede "wrong" recurs with obsessive regularity, often at strategic moments in the narrative: after the Swede's letter inviting "Skip" Zuckerman for lunch in New-York, the narrator's expectations of being made privy to his former idol's secret troubles prove wrong as soon as he meets his host, and the words "I was wrong" are isolated in a one-line-paragraph after a typographical blank, giving them maximum visibility. Similarly, chapter 1 ends on the narrator's musings after this meeting, and his abrupt dismissal of his own conclusions:

Why bestow on him all this thinking? Why the appetite to know this guy? [...] There's nothing here but what you're looking at. He's all about being looked at. He always was. He is not faking all this virginity. You're craving depths that don't exist. The guy is the embodiment of nothing.

I was wrong. Never more mistaken about anyone in my life. (38-39)

Nathan thus gives narrative prominence to his errors of judgment, which constitute an important part of his discourse. In fact, in his dialogue with Jerry Levov at their 45th high school reunion, he elaborates on the fact and turns it into the essence of writing fiction: to Jerry's comment about his own situation—he's a cardiologist—that "The operating room turns you into somebody who's never wrong. Much like writing" Nathan replies:

"Writing turns you into somebody who's always wrong. The illusion that you may get it right someday is the perversity that draws you on. What else could? As pathological phenomena go, it doesn't *completely* wreck your life." (63)

Being wrong is thus shown to be the impulse behind fiction writing: the novel is propelled by successive errors of judgment which are partially righted before turning into further error, a situation which reflects the general condition of mankind locked in mutual misunderstanding:

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 [...], and yet you never fail to get them wrong. [...]. 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 about the meeting and you get them all wrong again. [...] The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all 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. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. (35)

In the same way, the second part of the narrative, in which Nathan tries to imaginatively reconstruct Seymour Levov's personality after his death, shows the latter repeatedly erring in his judgment of others: not only is his life dominated, after his daughter's terrorist act, by

the vain quest for an explanation of her action, each successive attempt at identifying the origin of her “trouble” proving as unsatisfactory as the others, but he is also shown regularly making errors in his appreciation of other people’s motivations, behaviours or circumstances. According to his brother Jerry, Seymour Levov “is a guy who had cognitive *problems*,” (75, italics in original) and in a fantasized scene in which Nathan imagines that he has shown him his manuscript, he strongly criticizes the narrator’s characterization of his whole family, and in particular his granting his brother “a mind, awareness” (75).

Yet Nathan’s narrative *does* suggest the Swede’s “cognitive problems,” in spite of his insistence on his “Thinker” bookends (7 and 9) and on the fact that he played baseball “thinking” (16). In numerous episodes he repeatedly fails to understand the people around him: the whole of Rita’s visit to Newark Maid at the beginning of chapter 4, for instance, makes for ironic reading, since the narrator forewarns the reader of her real identity before the character discovers it. In the same way, Seymour’s understanding and appreciation of his wife often appear faulty. One of his “errors” is his conviction that she would win the Miss America pageant: “But he was wrong. Miss Arizona won” (185). Here again, the words are placed at the beginning of a paragraph, giving them greater visibility, as they are also after a long passage in which the Swede reflects about his wife’s face lift as the ultimate stage of her downfall: “He was totally wrong” (188). Even when the protagonist’s erring judgment is not signalled as directly, narrative irony underlines his faulty understanding of his wife. Such formulas as “Understanding all too well...” (192) usually hint at the exact contrary: his insistence that his wife’s reasons for hating their house are due to the traces of Merry’s presence in it are belied by the narrator’s evocation, in the following pages, of Dawn’s own childhood dreams, which show that her indifference to their family home has other origins. His “cognitive problems” are never so obvious as at the end of the novel, which aligns page after page of musings which all prove wrong: Jerry did not denounce Merry after his brother’s phone call, neither will Sheila and Shelly Saltzman, and Merry has not come back as he fancies: “The Swede understood instantaneously what was happening. Merry had appeared in her veil!” (419). The pages that follow are pure “fiction,” as hallucinated by the Swede, and end on Lou’s death when confronted with his lunatic granddaughter. The reality of the situation is less melodramatic, and Lou Levov, as we learn in the first pages of the novel, survived his “tiny wounds” by more than twenty years.

The text of *American Pastoral* is thus partly made up of fictions upon fictions: the narrative pact we are offered towards the end of part I consists in accepting Nathan’s fantasized version of the Swede, on the promise that it will explain the character’s strange attitude during their shared meal at Vincent’s in May 1995, a few months before his death. This first level of fiction is compounded with a second level in which we witness the way the Swede fictionalizes his life, turning himself, among other things, into a reincarnation of Johnny Appleseed. Paradoxically, it is partly through showing the character’s invention of himself that Nathan Zuckerman manages to build a convincing portrait of his childhood hero with “cognitive problems,” and to suggest the central drama of his life. The link between “being wrong” and “doing wrong” is indeed clearly signalled in several passages: it is often because he is mistaken about people, and above all about himself, that the Swede is led to do “the wrong thing,” as for instance at the end of his interview with Rita in the New York hotel:

There was so much emotion in him, so much uncertainty, so much inclination and counterinclination, he was bursting so with impulse and counterimpulse that he could no

longer tell which of them had drawn the line that he would not pass over. All his thinking seemed to be taking place in a foreign language, but still he knew enough not to pass over the line. [...]

Faced with something he could not name, he had done everything wrong. (147).

What he cannot name is his own inner impulse, “the beast in the bag” in Jerry’s words, which he refuses to “let out” and to assume. Being cognitively wrong when his whole existence is devoted to doing “the right thing,”—whether in his work or in his family life—, to fitting nicely into a new environment which ultimately rejects him, is the source of the Swede’s tragedy, as exposed by Nathan in the narrative of *American Pastoral*.

If writing, as Nathan suggests, has to do with being wrong, so does reading. In fact, Nathan’s approach of the Swede in the first part of the novel closely mimics the process of reading: on the basis of the information that he has (his childhood memories of the Swede, the letter inviting him for lunch, etc.), he forms expectations about the man’s situation and motives, which the developing situation either confirms or proves wrong, leading him to correct mistakes and to emit new hypotheses. This process recalls Wolfgang Iser’s definition of reading: “the reader’s communication with the text is a dynamic process of self-correction, as he formulates signifieds which he must then continually modify” (Iser, 67).⁷ Reading, thus, is also very much concerned with being wrong. According to Bertrand Gervais, literary reading must accept error as one of its processes:

Il devient donc important d’observer la lecture « sous l’angle de ses ratés, de ses dysfonctionnements, de ses errements » [Richard Saint-Gelais], qui non seulement permettent de la comprendre en termes de processus et non de résultats, mais encore l’inscrivent dans une réflexivité qui aboutit à une meilleure compréhension et du texte et de ses propres mécanismes. S’ouvre avec la reconnaissance de l’erreur une « situation où le lecteur lui-même se demande jusqu’à quel point sa lecture ne serait pas erratique, qui se demande, surtout, sur la base de quel critère il pourrait bien résoudre pareille question, et donc déterminer ce que serait une lecture “juste” » [*ibid.*].⁸

It is because he has failed to correctly “read” the Swede in his final meeting that Nathan decides to write his story, to produce a “right” reading, or at least one which proposes a coherent version of the man, which makes a “rigorous guess,” as Nathan muses after the completion of his manuscript:

[...] whether that meant my conception of the Swede was any more fallacious than the conception held by Jerry (which he wasn’t likely to see as in any way fallacious); whether the Swede and his family came to life in me any less truthfully than in his brother—well, who knows? Who *can* know? When it comes to illuminating someone with the Swede’s opacity, to understanding those regular guys everybody likes and who go about more or

7. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 67.

8. Bertrand Gervais, *Lecture littéraire et explorations en littérature américaine*, Montréal, XYZ éditeur, 1998, p. 30.

less incognito, it's up for grabs, it seems to me, as to whose guess is more rigorous than whose. (77)⁹

The novel presents a “reading” of the Swede’s subjectivity, which is not, as Nathan originally thought, an open book written on the “insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born [...] as Seymour Irving Levov” (3), but a palimpsest of contradictory discourses which have to be patiently uncovered. Yet there is no final “revelation,” since, as the Swede reflects after he has torn off his daughter’s veil, there’s always another “veil” behind the one you lift: “The veil was off, but behind the veil there was another veil. Isn’t there always?” (266). Seymour’s ponderings about his daughter parallel Nathan’s ponderings about him, and the reader’s own ponderings when faced with this disturbing novel which refuses to answer all the questions it raises, and in particular the two concluding ones.

Yet it is precisely this which constitutes Nathan’s answer: as quoted above, being wrong, i.e. not having the “right answer” is being alive, to which he adds: “Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you.” (35). Of course, the questions raised at the end of the novel are of a different nature, pointing to the “moral” errors of the characters rather than to “cognitive” mistakes, as in the above quotation, yet Nathan’s statement remains valid too, in that it asks us to refrain from reductive moral judgments which would put an end to the free play of interpretation which is the life of the literary text.

So perhaps *American Pastoral* does teach the reader a lesson after all, asking him to read looking not for answers, but for questions, and to accept his errors as part of the reading process. In an interview Philip Roth conducted with Milan Kundera, the latter insists on the novel’s “questioning” function:

A novel does not assert anything; a novel searches and poses questions. [...]. The stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything. The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything. [...] The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude. In a world built on sacrosanct certainties the novel is dead. [...] all over the world people nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than to ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties.¹⁰

If there is a target to Roth’s criticism in *American Pastoral*, it is the “foolishness of human certainties” as exemplified by most of the characters in the novel—Lou Levov, Merry Levov, Marcia Umanoff, Rita Cohen among others—, rather than their “morality.” Like Kundera’s,

9. This passage, although placed early in the novel, provides the “end framing” whose absence many critics have remarked on: the frame narrative explaining Nathan’s reasons for writing the Swede’s story, which makes up most of the first part of the novel, until the middle of chapter 3, does not reappear at the end of the novel, leaving the reader at a loss and the novel open-ended. The second section of chapter 3 (p. 74-77) can be said to fulfil that function. In terms of the temporal structure of the novel, it is indeed the last “event” of the “plot”: a prolepsis inserted between Jerry’s departure from the 45th reunion and Nathan’s conversation with Joy Helpert, it is situated some time in late 1996, after the completion of the manuscript. As a reflexion on interpretation, it gives the reader “instructions” on how to read the novel. However we can notice that like the real ending of the novel, it includes more questions than answers. Both endings thus ask questions about right and wrong, in the moral sense for the actual ending, in the epistemological sense for this “inner” conclusion.

10. Philip Roth, *Shop Talk. A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*, New York, Vintage, 2002, p. 100.

Philip Roth's novel is "a polyphony in which various stories mutually explain, illumine, complement one another",¹¹ without excluding any. Our readings of the novel, like Nathan's reading of Seymour Levov, need not reach a definitive and absolute "truth" to be valid. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle proposes in *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, a "just" interpretation is one which takes into account the rules of the language-game which the work constitutes, which aims at producing this "rigorous guess" which is consistent with the various discourses present in the text. Nathan's "up for grabs" reflection above might seem to suggest "the absolute relativism of the 'anything goes'"¹² conception of interpretation, yet his notion that the reader's/writer's guess has to be "rigorous" excludes this absolute relativism, and agrees with Lecercle's proposition. What the novel offers its readers is an ethics of reading—which returns us to the original, "moral" meaning of right and wrong—in terms of a contract. Nathan's contract with the reader, the rules of the language game which he instigates in his text, are made explicit when he transports himself from the ballroom of the 45th high school reunion to Deal, New Jersey. "Justice is contractual truth, that is truth-within-a-language-game."¹³ Interpretations can vary, but their rightness is contingent on respecting the terms of the contract between author and reader, mediated by the text. The two concluding questions thus need to remain unanswered, to keep readers wondering about what has destroyed the American dream, what has turned the American Pastoral into "Paradise Lost."

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11. *Ibid.* p. 98

12. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, London, Macmillan Press, 1999, p. 233.

13. *Ibid.* p. 237.