

***American Anti-Pastoral. Brookside, New Jersey and the Garden State of Philip Roth*****Thomas Gustafson****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2024****208 pages****ISBN: 9781978838024****DOI: [10.14713/njs.v11i1.383](https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v11i1.383)**

Thomas Gustafson's *American Anti-Pastoral* retraces Philip Roth's steps in the historical unincorporated community of Brookside, New Jersey, which inspired the fictional Old Rimrock, the setting of his most notorious novel *American Pastoral* (1997). The main strength of the book is the author's perspective on the subject. Born and raised in Brookside, Gustafson combines his first-hand experience as a local with his expertise as an historian, offering an in-depth regionalist and historical reconstruction that not only provides new insights into the novelist's research materials but also broadens the scholarship of Roth Studies from a fresh perspective.

The book is divided into three parts, echoing both the structure of the 1997 book and that of the epic poem by Roth's fellow New Jerseyan William Carlos Williams (4). Part I, "Dismal Harmony," aims at providing an historical overview of Brookside, a neighborhood that is part of Mendham Township. One unique feature that distinguishes Brookside from other parts of the city is that "there is no delivery of mail: Brooksidiers pick up their mail from the post office" (11). This minor detail reveals the pivotal role of a public building and helps us understand why Merry Levov's infamous bombing profoundly shook the community. Furthermore, East Main Street, where the post office stands to this day, is the setting of "The Grandest Little Parade in America," which has taken place here every Fourth of July since 1923. Brookside becomes the "Indigenous American Berserk" (*AP* 86), as Roth himself defines it, for it has become—also thanks to the 1997 novel—a place where American history encounters the mythology of the American dream and simultaneously reveals their inner contradictions. On the one hand, Brookside is deeply connected to the very beginnings of the nation, since Washington's headquarters during the American Revolution were located just 4.5 miles from the center of Old Rimrock (23). On the other hand, Seymour Levov escapes from the berserk of Newark's riots of 1967 and finds refuge in a pastoral

spot within the Garden State of New Jersey. The end of Part I shows how this fictional attempt at escaping the industrial town perfectly mirrors the endemic transformation that actually happened in the neighborhood: Brookside started as an industrial site that later became a suburban “walled garden,” whose trajectory is accurately described by Gustafson through reports and photographs.

Part II, biblically titled “Babel,” goes deeper into the history around the loss of the Paradise determined by Merry’s political views against the Vietnam War and, especially, against President Lyndon B. Johnson. Gustafson reads this particular conflict, the entirety of the 1960s, and their depiction in the 1997 novel as crucial in debunking many American myths, such as that of the frontier and that of the pastoral. This “dialectic of mythologizing and demythologizing” (53) reaches its peak moment during the Vietnam War, both historically and fictionally. And Brookside, disguised in the fictional Old Rimrock, becomes the catalyst of this cultural upheaval. Starting from these premises, Gustafson sheds new light on some characters in the book who contribute to giving an historical perspective on Old Rimrock. During one of his football games organized in his backyard, Bill Orcutt traces an historical tour of Morris County and its deindustrialization that happened between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth—a pivotal moment that affected not only Morris County but also other major cities in New Jersey (57). The character of Bucky Robinson, on the other hand, gives the Swede a reality check on Jewish history in the Garden State. Once again, Gustafson lays out an accurate outline on the history and demographics of a one-of-a-kind county in New Jersey that, as Roth masterfully proved, was the landing place of the Jewish diaspora from Newark, of which Seymour Levov is at once one of the pioneers and victims.

The last part of the book, “Pentecost Remembered and Lost,” deals with the history of Brookside after the 1960s, and—in terms of the fictional timeline of the novel—after the fall of the Swede. The starting point is the illusion of historylessness of the place, emphasized by the whiteness of its population. As Gustafson claims, “[a]gainst the current of history, Brookside preserves for the future a past that never was, clamoring in harmony to seal the garden against a

berserk outside of its walls and ‘satanic’ industry within its own past” (87–88). Thanks to this idyll, Seymour Levov could find in Old Rimrock a refuge from his origins and religion, a place where he would not have to face resentment (90). In reality, the inhabitants of this Eden not far from the industrialized rest of New Jersey fought to keep it safe from external threats: the author remembers vividly the NIMBY protests in the 1990s against the construction of a new prison in Morris Township. This successful protest, and the unwillingness to build new commerce, contributes to this day to keep Brookside a preserved space, a garden world out of history and time. However, just like in every idyllic tale, not everyone wants to be a part of it nor accept its contradictions. Unlike her father, Merry wishes to escape Eden and embrace Babel (125), and Philip Roth, with *American Pastoral*, successfully manages to give a voice to this inherent struggle that characterizes novels that revolve around the suburbs, which, in Gustafson’s words, is “the new place for the old story of America: the immigrant story, the story of exodus, the story of the pursuit of happiness and liberty roadblocked by racism, the story of mixing and merging in the borderlands and of collisions in the crossroads” (135).

Thanks to these premises, *American Anti-Pastoral* enters by right into the research line that investigates the importance of New Jersey for an author who reflected at length on the cultural relevance of the American setting and historical landscape. If Michael Kimmage’s *In History’s Grip: Philip Roth’s Newark Trilogy* (2012) demonstrated the importance of Newark in Roth’s fiction as a broader reflection on America itself, then Thomas Gustafson’s 2024 book builds his arguments from the same premises, but he applies them for the community of Brookside and does so successfully and brilliantly.

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