At Least Associated: *When She Was Good* and the Vietnam Years

Abstract: Over fifty years since its publication, the critical consensus appears to be to understand *When She Was Good* (1967) as something of a curiosity in Roth's oeuvre. But it is time for a reappraisal. This article reads the novel in relation to Roth's discussion of what he calls 'politicisation' in 'the Vietnam years, thus attempting to rehabilitate both the novel and its central character, Lucy Nelson.

The Vietnam years were the most "politicized" in my life. I spent my days during this war writing fiction, none of which on the face of it would appear to connect to politics (though there was a time when I at least associated the rhetoric employed by the heroine of *When She Was Good* to disguise from herself her vengeful destruction with the kind of language our government used when they spoke of "saving" the Vietnamese by means of systematic annihilation). But by being "politicized" I mean something more telling than writing about politics or even taking direct political action. I mean something akin to what ordinary citizens experience in countries like Czechoslovakia or Chile: a daily awareness of government as a coercive force, its continuous presence in one's thoughts as far more than just an institutionalized, imperfect system of necessary controls. In sharp contrast to Chileans or Czechs, we hadn't personally to fear for our safety and could be as outspoken as we liked, but this did not diminish the sense of living in a country with a government morally out of control and wholly in business for itself. [. . .] One even began to use the word "America" as though it were the name, not of the place where one had been raised and to which one had a strong spiritual attachment, but of a foreign invader that had conquered the country and with whom one refused, to the best and strength of one's ability, to collaborate. Suddenly America had turned into "them"–and with this sense of dispossession and powerlessness came the virulence of feeling and rhetoric that often characterized the anti–war movement. (*Reading*, 10–11)

The excerpt above is taken from an interview by Walter Mauro in 1974,[1] and comprises part of Roth's response to Mauro's questions (prompted by consideration of *Our Gang (1971)*) about when Roth had most intensely felt the "weight of political power as moral coercion" in his life and whether Roth believed "the element of the grotesque" to be the only way to counter such power (9). Roth's reference to *When She Was Good* is tangential to his lengthy response to these questions, but it is what primarily concerns me here. In fact, the manner in which Roth invokes this novel, published in 1967 to mixed responses (certainly not receiving either the praise or opprobrium of previous Roth texts until that point),[2] is oddly resonant with the point he makes. He brings up *When She Was Good* despite the topic of discussion

being, “on the face of it,” something else (a different novel). In fact, if (as I am already doing) Roth’s words are applied to his own excerpt, acknowledging that both politics and meaning can be found somewhere other than “on the face of it,” this entire passage has the potential to illuminate *When She Was Good* in ways which connect it to its ostensible subject, Roth’s ‘politicized’ experience in the “Vietnam years,” and beyond.

Describing such a connection, however, is far from simple, because “the Vietnam years” are certainly not the explicit subject of Roth’s novel, which focuses on the tragic life of Lucy Nelson and her midwestern family, particularly from around 1946 to the early 1950s. Critics, too, have found meaning in the novel beyond “the face of it” (that is, they argue that it does not simply chart the downfall of a young midwestern woman), and they have connected the novel to politics; notably, not to Vietnam, but to the politics of gender and ethnicity (usually prioritising one or the other). Critics have made primarily biographical readings of *When She Was Good*. It has been convincingly argued that its examination of its often cruelly, and / or misguidedly judgmental Gentile heroine may constitute a response to the judgmental critical responses Roth received to his early, radical representations of American Jews[3]: Debra Shostak hypothesises that the novel consists of Roth’s response to feeling “entrapment” and “obligation” regarding “fill[ing] the niche of ‘Jewish writer’” (113), while Nicole Peeler goes further, suggesting that the novel constitutes a moment when Roth “turns the table on his own critics. If they will insist he is immoral, then he will make the nature of morality his barbed intelligence” (21). Peeler’s argument is compelling yet possibly anachronistic; as she notes herself, *When She Was Good* is published before Irving Howe’s notorious castigation of Roth in 1972.[4]

It has also been suggested that the novel constitutes a response to, or working out, of Roth’s disastrous first marriage to Margaret Martinson Williams: Claudia Pierpont Roth asserts, not altogether convincingly, that the novel is about “the destruction of the soul of the

woman [Roth] felt had nearly destroyed him" (47). Relatedly, the novel also has a place, if embattled, in the long–standing critical debates about the presence and purpose of misogyny in Roth's work. Critics are divided (both in their own interpretations, and more broadly) regarding whether Lucy's story counters the frequent charge that Roth is misogynist. Mary Allen's chapter on *When She Was Good* is a compelling study in ambivalence; while arguing that Roth has sympathy for Lucy's circumstances, and understanding the novel as a sensitive exploration of men's fascination with the power of "good" women, something with destructive consequences for all (70), she concludes with the highly dubious claim that the novel illustrates Roth's "rage and disappointment with womankind," and without in any case fully exploring how and why such an attitude might be problematic (96). At the same time, however, she discusses Lucy in terms of her "bitchery" (75) and refers to her more than once as "frigid" (91, 93), in ways which suggest that a degree of internalized misogyny informs her own readings. Sam B. Girgus's claim that the novel shows how "becoming a man and achieving true sexual and personal liberation require a culture of freedom for women as well" is not dissimilar to Allen's, but he makes the (equally) highly dubious claim that Roth articulates a "feminist position before the movement gained national popularity and power" (153). (Like Peeler, he seems to find it useful to interpret the novel in light of historical events which follow its publication.) Pierpont Roth reports a more sympathetic attitude to Lucy from Roth, noting his claim that the novel attempts to understand "the suffering [. . .] behind the anger" (47). This perhaps suggests a modification of his thoughts above, even as it confirms that readers should consider what is not "on the face of it" in this novel.

Today, over fifty years since its publication, the critical consensus appears to be to understand the novel as something of a curiosity or interesting experiment in Roth's oeuvre, undeserving of sustained attention. Its focus on a female protagonist and non–Jewish characters undoubtedly marks it at least superficially as a departure from Roth's signature

authorial concerns, summarized nicely by Timothy Parrish as an ability to "portray not just Jewish–American experience in all of its historical variety but to challenge in ways that are distinctly postmodern the meaning of identity altogether" (2). This critical consensus appears contrary to Roth's own understanding of his text. One has the impression, reading early interviews with Roth, that he believed *When She Was Good* had been insufficiently understood, sidelined by readers. A fascinating pattern emerges when considering how the novel is referenced. Interviewers do not often bring up the novel directly or ask Roth about it, but Roth brings it up himself for comparative purposes, as if to remind readers about its existence or, more specifically, to encourage them to read it in particular ways (more specifically still, to prompt readers to consider it as preoccupied with themes present in works published before and after it). This task, then, necessitates that Roth invoke the novel when the topics for discussion are "on the face of it" about other things. This is most visible in discussions of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), with Roth drawing parallels between Lucy Nelson and Alexander Portnoy as angry children railing destructively against their parents, even calling Lucy "very much [Portnoy's] soulmate." (*RMO*, 23)[5]

It is time for a reappraisal. *When She Was Good* is mentioned briefly in an episode of Lena Dunham's recent television series *Girls* (HBO, 2012–2017), with the main character, the aspiring writer Hannah Horvath (Dunham), opining that "'everyone acts like this book is Philip Roth being the worst but it's him being the best, and I know I'm not supposed to like him because he's misogynist and demeans women but I can't help it, I fucking love his writing.'"[6] (I have this episode to thank for my kindling my own interest in this novel.) It is no accident that Dunham chooses to reference *this* Roth novel in particular. Hannah finds a signed copy of the book on the shelves of a male writer she is visiting, who has a questionable reputation for his treatment of women. She has written a judgmental article about him; he gifts Hannah the book as they debate whether her attack on him was fair, and

the episode concludes with his manipulation of her. He ultimately succeeds in enjoining Hannah to lie down on his bed (she takes the book with her and holds it against her as she lies alongside her), where he exposes himself to her and she touches him. When she realises what she has done, and that he has deliberately ensnared her in the problematic, ambiguous sort of scenario she has written about, she throws the book away from her in disgust. A concern with coercion, consent, moral judgments, the politics of power between men and women, and the power of storytelling is shared by both the episode and the novel, implicitly making the case that *When She Was Good* is of relevance to twenty–first century America.

While I admire and agree with *Girls'* identification of the issues listed above as vital to Roth's novel, and endorse its case for the novel's importance, I want to extend its examination as well as the novel's critical reception by revisiting Roth's enigmatic comments, above, for the purposes of showing that this novel, too, can be understood in line with Roth's concerns as Parrish describes them. Firstly, I will show how and why it is valuable to understand the novel in relation to Roth's account of "politicization" in "the Vietnam years," and I claim that *When She Was Good* is concerned with the gaps between what people say and what they mean, as this pertains to both describing and shaping reality. The novel explores the violence (primarily psychological, but also literal), enacted when that gap is produced by the politics of American life in a particular historical moment (for example, governmental discourse in the Vietnam years), but it also examines how individuals desperately try to maintain such gaps in order to uphold the illusion of enacting values or narratives understood as "American" (Lucy and her grandfather, Willard Carroll, are the crucial exemplars here). Finally, I want to suggest that what Shostak calls the novel's "peculiar" narrative voice (115) employs the rhetoric of "resistance" Roth describes in the excerpt above, but in troubling and almost unreadably opaque (or highly indeterminate) ways which both critique and underscore the inequalities of power in American life, particularly in

relation to gender, race and ethnicity. My readings, too, have an additional aim, not "on the face of it," but worth bringing to the fore; to defend, or certainly call for further reconsideration, of Lucy Nelson and the novel. I am endeavoring to rehabilitate both to a certain extent, and countering the scholarly tendency to excoriate her in particular. Reviewers and scholars have perhaps been coerced by the "associations" generated by the novel's title, alluding to a poem by Longfellow, which insinuates that Lucy is "horrid."[7] Critics tend to find Lucy despicable or (and this is only a difference of degree) suggest that she deserves very little sympathy. However, it is possible, building on Roth's ambiguous remarks above, to formulate some new "associations" for her and for *When She Was Was Good.*

I

When Roth's comments *are* explicitly about *When She Was Good* in the excerpt above, they are enigmatic. What does it mean that he "at least associated" Lucy's self–justifying language with that of the American government during "the Vietnam years" ? Roth further obfuscates the "association" by calling it into question in the act of proposing it, suggesting that the 'association' may have been short–lived: "there was a time." The task of teasing out this association is both assisted and hindered because Roth works with two different understandings of "politicized." Firstly, the term refers to the ways in which individuals are affected by and respond to major historical events (the focus here is specifically the Vietnam war, which prompts disingenuous governmental statements and anti–war activism in America). The second way Roth uses the term is related to the first, but more complex, with

'politicized' describing a form of experienced reality. Roth argues that the American government has become more than simply a system which works to regulate its citizens, supposedly in their interests, presumably through laws ("an institutionalized, imperfect system of necessary controls"). It has become (like the totalitarian governments of Czechoslovakia or Chile) much more intimately and sinisterly involved with citizens' lives ("a coercive force, its continuous presence in one's thoughts"). Roth suggests that the realities of "ordinary Americans" have been colonized by the government. His metaphor of the government as "foreign invader" is particularly resonant given American activities in Vietnam, implicitly making a further "association" between Americans and the Vietnamese (it might also, though, prompt additional associations with the Second World War). Crucially, though, if the government's "rhetoric" produces a sinister, politicized reality for "ordinary Americans," then rhetoric can also be wielded as resistance in response. Roth's contention that the word "America" can be made to describe not a place but a "foreign invader" suggests that words can be used to shape reality, to change meaning, revising what words like "America" refer to. What is at stake in the Vietnam years, in Roth's account, is a battle over how to describe and determine American reality and America itself, which might be alternatively understood as whose politicized rhetoric matters most.

How does this relate to Lucy Nelson? Initially, it seems that Roth means to argue that Lucy occupies a function analogous to the American government as he describes it–a traitorous, manipulative enemy within the ranks of her own family, someone whom, following Roth's logic, they should resist (Lucy, like the government, is a "foreign invader" with whom they should try not to "collaborate"). To an extent, this reading is supported by the novel, which describes Lucy's descent into probable madness and certain death following her ferocious attempts to force her husband to uphold the duties and responsibilities she believes he owes her, as a husband and a man. (She insists that he abandon any independent

dreams for his future, that his energies be focused solely on providing for her and their son, and that he remain with her to constitute at least the appearance of an ideal family, all in denial of the reality of their disintegrating marriage.) Tropes of warfare are employed to describe Lucy's attitude to her family and the wider world. Having learned that she is pregnant, on a visit to her grandparents' home, where she grew up, Lucy reflects that

> "For years they had complained that she had acted contemptuous of everything they said and did; for years they complained that she refused to let them give her a single word of advice; she lived among them like a stranger, like an enemy even, unfriendly, uncommunicative, nearly unapproachable. Well, could they say she was behaving like their enemy today? She had come home." (169)

Early in her marriage, she reflects that "She had fought and fought to get [Roy] to do his duty, and in the end he had done it" (193). Understanding Lucy's actions as having functions and effects similar to the government might suggest that their utterances share the same duplicity, a duplicity which is violent both in reported content (it cloaks acts of violence while insisting that good is being done) and in the act of utterance itself (its lie constitutes an assault on the American values of freedom and democracy which are supposedly being enacted). But there are other ways to understand this "association."

While it is incontestable that Lucy's behavior manifests itself as deeply disturbing bullying and cruelty, it can also be explained much more sympathetically as a consequence of the trauma she suffered as a child (Mary Allen and Ira Nadel, perhaps, are the critics who show most awareness of this). She has had to endure her father's drunken behavior, his violence towards her mother, her mother's tendency to either passively accept her husband's behavior or take up his defence, as well as the social stigma of belonging to a dysfunctional family. Lucy's life is marked by dispossession and powerlessness, corresponding more to the lived experiences which Roth argues prompted the anti–war movement, rather than the power of the American government (although Lucy's "feelings and rhetoric," unlike those of the

movement, receive no support). Her life is marked by a battle to construct her own reality in the face of others (usually men) who would coerce her into theirs. As a child, she is forced to abide by the problematic values of her grandfather. As a teenager, she is coerced into sex and falls pregnant before marriage to her eventual husband, Roy Bassart. Roy's reluctance to acknowledge the consequences of his actions, and his perpetual indecisiveness leave her again vulnerable to social disapproval, and entails that she must (for her own self–protection) frequently urge him to take action. Roth's comments about Lucy's language, then, describe her only at her worst, without accounting for why she behaves as she does, and obscure the gendered politics of Lucy's existence in 1940s and 1950s America.

Understanding Roth's remarks as constructing any analogy between Lucy and the American government in the Vietnam era, then, do not correspond to the reality of Lucy's lived experience. It is possible, of course, that analogy is not what Roth has in mind when discussing an "association" between the "kind of language" used by both. As noted, Roth's own "rhetoric" in his discussion is complex (and indeed, his version of reality in the Vietnam years is questionable, as will be discussed later). His claims that "on the face of it" his works "do not connect to politics" leaves open the possibility that his works nonetheless *do* relate to politics in other ways. And they generate a conundrum; if it is duplicitous and reprehensible that the pronouncements of Lucy and the American government mean something other than what they say (irrespective of content), what is at stake if Roth's novel may be engaged in something similar? Why is the recreating of reality as resistance (using the word "America" to refer not to a place but to a foreign invader) acceptable, while the ways Lucy and the government use language to describe reality is not? To answer this question is to consider Roth's "association" further by connecting *When She Was Good* to the Vietnam years.

The novel is published in 1967, during the "Vietnam years." While it is difficult to determine a point in history from which the novel is narrated, it is likely that this is from a

period beyond 1962, the latest date definitively cited in the novel, and closer to 1967. The novel's first part recounts a tumultuous period in Lucy's family history, tumult in no small part contributed to by Lucy herself, up to and beyond the time of her death. Events are recounted largely from the perspective of her grandfather, Willard Carroll, as he waits at the gravestones of Lucy and his sister Ginny in 1954. His pause at the gravestones marks a detour from his primary aim, collecting Lucy's father from the bus station, an important act marking Whitey's return to the family. (Lucy's father is a recovering alcoholic whose behavior caused significant tensions in Willard's home, where he lived with his wife and daughter. He has been twice turned out of the house by Lucy, and it is clear that her absence is a significant feature in enabling his return.) This first part is unclear regarding important dates, for example the precise year of Lucy's death, although it can be inferred that if in 1954, Whitey is "nearly five years gone and Lucy dead" (37) she dies perhaps around 1953, aged around twenty–two, given that she expels Whitey from the family home when she is eighteen. Although the bulk of this section is comprized of Willard's reflections in 1954, at the gravestone site, it is stated of Willard's house that "in 1962 the sidewalk had to be replaced, a whacking expense for a man now on a government pension" (6), indicating that the narrative is told from a point in time beyond 1954, and additionally from a perspective that is not Willard's. While it often seems as if readers are privy to Willard's interior monologue, there are moments (like this) when it becomes clear that the story is told by an unspecified narrator, using indirect discourse. The narrator claims that "to this very day" (6), Willard still adeptly makes any repairs needed in his house, suggesting that readers in the late sixties would be likely to read this as referring to their near–present moment.

This matters because while the novel's content may not be "the Vietnam years", its narrative may be influenced by their "rhetoric". Christian Apply and Alexander Bloom argue that the "key explanation" for the length of the war was "the enormous weight policy

makers put on maintaining national and personal 'credibility'. Once committed to waging war in Vietnam, Johnson and Nixon believed that even if they could not achieve a victory, they must, at all costs, avoid a defeat" (52). They also note that "Over time, however, the vast disparity between official claims and historical reality became ever clearer. The result was a 'credibility gap'–the growing awareness of U.S. citizens of the distance between what policy makers said about the war and the battlefield realities. Opposition to the war expanded as a growing number of Americans came to believe that their leaders were not merely sugarcoating the war news, but blatantly lying about the nature and success of American intervention" (53). The narrative voice of *When She Was Good* is one which is cognizant of this "credibility gap," that distance between what is said and what is meant. The voice exploits that gap in its own utterances, as will be explored later. The novel's narrative explores how individuals negotiate, or become aware of, the gap between what they say and the realities of their lives. Roth's remarks about governmental discourse, then, enact a kind of sleight of hand because they are on the face of it solely applicable to Lucy. In fact, *When She Was Good* is a study in the "coercive force" of rhetoric as wielded by numerous individuals in the text, but primarily Lucy, Willard and the narrator. Such rhetoric "politicizes" their lives, and the act of reading the novel itself. Just as Willard's visit to the gravestones is not simply a detour from his purpose of picking up Whitey at the bus station, this novel is not simply (or at all) an authorial detour from Roth's preoccupations with Jewish masculinity in America (and so I disagree with Shostak's claim that the novel has "exactly nothing" to do with "the performance of Jewish identity" (115).

Lucy, then, lives as if there is no "credibility gap" produced by her own utterances, and when she is ultimately forced to confront that gap, her death suggests she cannot live in a new reality. Her behavior and fate are usually discussed in terms of a final, fatal unmasking and exposure; in Roth's terms, her frequent contentions that she is "right" or

"good" or merely urging others to take up their responsibilities are revealed as insincere "rhetoric," far from reality. Her final disintegration into madness and death is prompted by her mother's declaration that Lucy has always *wanted* to see her father in jail (259), suggesting that Lucy takes pleasure in his flaws and failures because they confirm her fixed idea of him. In a melodramatic, hallucinatory dream sequence near the end of the novel, she fantasizes (or recalls?) being on a Catholic school retreat and confessing to a priest that she wishes her father dead (286). Her strongest desire is to escape her past, by changing the reality of her present circumstances. One reason why Lucy cannot embrace Catholicism is because it encourages the continuation of the past through suffering (Lucy "hated suffering as much as she hated those who made her suffer, and always would" (82)), but also because it prioritizes the afterlife and Lucy believes that "There is no next life" (83). She imagines saying that "This is what there is, Father Damrosch. This! Now!" (83). This belief explains the ferocity with which Lucy tries to forge a reality which suits her. Again, Roth's association of Lucy with the American government perhaps erases the fact that, in comparison to its dogged insistence on a particular version of reality (one relying on American exceptionalism and triumphalism) she is prepared to envision alternative realities. For example, she entertains opposing interpretations which account for Ellie's striking up a friendship with her. Lucy discovers that Ellie, too, Ellie, too, has a family secret in which an erring man and a telephone figure (her father is having affairs), but unlike Lucy, Ellie takes no action based on her knowledge. Lucy speculates that Ellie has been drawn to her because of her past, but is undecided about whether this is something she should feel ashamed about, of whether it means Ellie admires her (133). Lucy is less unyielding than critics often suggest. Her insistence throughout her life on being "right," that she has "nothing to be forgiven for and nothing to confess" (81), is countered by an abundance of evidence that Lucy feels guilt and shame, that she believes people think she is inferior, and that she perceives herself to be the

object of gossip and disapproval not only because of her father but because of her own actions. Lucy believes that her friends at school talk about her, her anger at this bringing a classmate to tears (75). She believes that Ellie Sowerby's mother despises her (90), and throughout her marriage and relationship with Roy she constantly suspects his family of putting ideas in his head to turn him against her (156, 209). There is evidence that Lucy is paranoid (she seriously considers recording a family conversation so there is evidence that it was Roy's idea to have a second child (248–9)), but there is also evidence that her anxieties are well–founded.

Lucy wants to record her disclosure to Roy's family that she is pregnant again because she thinks that everyone suspects that she seduced Roy, when, by her account, it was the other way around (294). We are told that Lucy first consents to sex with Roy because she is desperate to trust him (110); indeed, Roy repeatedly entreats that she do so, in a lengthy, unpleasant sequence (100–110) in which, as Pierpont Roth notes, he engages in "part wheedling and part bullying" (47) Lucy into sex under circumstances which, at times, are close to attempted rape. His "trust me" is a red flag to readers, however, because it has been revealed previously that this is a line one of his army buddies advises as effective in seducing young women (62). Indeed, Roy's coercive behavior appears to be sanctioned as simply constituting a strategy available to heterosexual men in pursuit of sex, and has received little critical discussion (in a rare yet problematic exception, Jay L. Halio does give some attention to these scenes, but finds them predominantly comic because they describe the travails of a "normal young man" in a pre–pill era (51). Lucy's coercive behavior, though, is not sanctioned. Nonetheless, Lucy is correct to wonder about whether Roy is being fed ideas by others, because he does have a tendency to present the words of others as his own; while Lucy is not shown direct evidence of this, readers are (68). Her anxieties about whether she can trust the words of others and whether others will trust her are, therefore, sound, even if

some of her thoughts (the recording) are bizarre. They indicate that she has some awareness of the "credibility gap" as it applies to others, if not herself.

That Lucy entertains the notion of recording a family conversation also lends weight to the jeering schoolboy comparison (association) of her with "'Gang Busters'" and "'J. Edgar Hoover'" (84). The comparison may render Lucy absurd, mocking her telephone call to the police and suggesting that she fantasizes having the control and power Hoover has over those who did not have the "correct" American values and were potential threats to domestic order and security. This does indeed set up an "association" between national and local politics in a manner which conceivably strengthens the notion of an analogous "association" between Lucy and the government. But it is hard not to suspect that such associations are made particularly objectionable because of what they imply about a women's desire to control. If the control Lucy attempts to exert over her husband is experienced as monstrous, by him and others in her life (Julian Sowerby, with repulsion, calls her a "'ball–breaker'" (277)), the degree of Lucy's power is also perceived as monstrous in Roth's "association." Comparing Lucy's *language* to that of the American government comes close to equating their *power,* a troubling consequence of Roth's claims. That is, the "association" between Lucy and the government renders Lucy monstrous because it can be read as suggesting she aspires to the government's power (surely figured masculine, as "force", and "foreign invader"); Lucy wishes to transgress norms of gendered behavior by assuming a power to coercively control which is primarily reserved for men.

If Lucy's cruel behavior is analyzed, it is usually done so in simplified terms (Lucy is angry at her father and all men). In fact, Lucy is trying to lead a life which is respectable, which she hopes will make those around her perceive her as blameless, and which will erase the shame she feels about her family and her past. She does not desire power as an end in itself, but as a means towards achieving the perfect (because normative) middle

class family. Lucy is not trying to challenge the status quo. She is trying to replicate it, to conform to it. She is trying, in fact, to do much as her grandfather Willard has done, to become an "ordinary American." But while Willard's departure from his family (literal and ideological) aligns him with narratives of the American Dream and masculine independence, Lucy's behavior and values enable her to be read as a transgressor or traitor against her family and norms of white, middle class behavior. She appears to accept and indeed, privilege male authority, ignoring her mother's statement that she had an abortion because she wanted one, intent instead on believing that her father coerced her because "'You're the man!'" (183). While Girgus claims that Lucy's fantasy that she and her son will live in a world "without men" marks her as a "radical feminist" (151), this is not the articulation of Lucy's deepest, ultimate desire. Rather, it is a sign of her total desperation, born of her realization that nobody who will help her (302). Her most fervent desire, rather, is revealed when she considers having a second child and wonders if her marriage is finally happy and "She could become–herself!" (25). Lucy reflects further, "Herself! But what would that be like? What was she even like?–that real Lucy, who never had a chance to be?" (250). Fascinatingly, Lucy imagines flowers in the hospital and growing her hair to her waist, imagery which perhaps associates her, anachronistically, with the anti–war movement, hippie aesthetics and women's liberation narratives of the 1960s, a decade she is not allowed to reach (but which the narrator has). Lucy, then, is not permitted to discover her "real" self (even if that only means meeting her society's expectations for women), partly through her own limitations, but substantially because her world will not allow her.

Perhaps one of the most glaring critical misreadings in the few articles offering sustained readings of *When She Was Good* is to understand Lucy as orienting herself primarily in position to her parents. Her efforts to fashion Roy in the mode of her ideal husband and father are understood as a means of compensating for her own father's failures

(Halio argues that the trauma Lucy suffers due to her father's behavior means that she "develops a mistrust of men that turns into hate" (60)); Shostak notes that she is trying to distance herself from her mother (114). While valid, these readings overlook the fact that Lucy's grandfather Willard plays at least as important a role in her life as her father does, and perhaps only a slightly less damaging one (tellingly, she calls him "Daddy Will," and her father is resentful of the authority she grants to Willard and withholds from himself (172)). Indeed, Willard's insistence on making Lucy conform to his reality (one with its own very visible credibility gap) causes suffering to them both.

Willard is a modest exemplar of the successful American Dream (he moved west as a young man, owns his own home, and has a respectable job and standing in his community). He is kind and paternalistic, particularly towards women (he rescues his sister and daughter from difficult circumstances and offers them shelter in his home). His "dream" (expressed in the novel's opening sentence and the first detail readers learn about him) is "Not to be rich, not to be famous, not to be mighty, not even to be happy, but to be civilized" (3). As enacted by Willard, this amounts to a dogged commitment to respectability and the *appearance* of particular American values which, from Lucy's perspective, has a number of negative consequences. Willard dislikes confrontation, and appears unable to take action which may be perceived as corrective or punishing, with the result that tensions and injustices in his household go unchecked and unresolved. This is nowhere more visible than in his apparent tolerance of Whitey's behavior. The defining moment of Lucy's life (certainly for her, her family, and possibly her wider community) is her decision, aged ten, to call the police on her father. She does this on a night when he returns home, drunk, and behaves intimidatingly to her mother. After this event, Willard has a conversation with Lucy in which he tries to impress upon her the error of her action. Despite it being clear that Lucy has called the police because she believes Willard will not help her (21), he insists that she should have left it to

him to resolve the problem, and that their family are "'civilized people'" who "'are able to settle our own arguments, and handle our own affairs'" (22). He reminds her that they are both "'in good standing in the community,'" suggesting that he believes maintaining this good standing to be more important than taking action to protect Whitey's daughter and wife from his behavior.

In fairness to Willard, it is vital to note that his attachment to being "civilized" results from his own formative childhood experiences. His father was an angry and unkind man, and Willard has defined himself against him, much as Lucy, in her direct speech and actions, is defining herself against Willard's passivity. Additionally, Willard has learned a brutal lesson: aged seven, witnessing his sister's inability to recover from scarlet fever, he "had his first terrifying inkling that there were in the universe forces even more immune to his charm, even more remote from his desires, even more estranged from human need and feeling, than his own father" (5). Of Ginny's illness, he learns that "nothing was to be done" (4), a frightening knowledge he applies to people generally, informing his belief that people (and, perhaps, their fates) cannot be altered. When Lucy's marriage is in crisis, she rails at Willard for thinking that "people can't help it! They just have their faults and weaknesses that they are born with – Oh, you!" (258). Lucy's fate, though, exposes that Willard's need to be "civilized" and his repeated refrain that he is not God (21, 39, 259) are *also* merely "rhetoric" which disguises his apprehension of a different reality. Like Lucy's declarations, they disguise truths Willard cannot face, namely that he doubts some of his choices and actions. His reflections at Lucy's gravestone reveal that he fears his own powerlessness, and wonders if he should have acted differently.

Most compellingly, despite Lucy's (and critics') sole fixation with *her* goodness (or lack of), Willard is *also* concerned with his goodness. His reflective recollections at the gravestones culminate in his plaintive insistence to himself that "'All I did was good!'" (38).

Lucy is dead when the novel's action begins, already consigned to history, causing Peeler to claim that "Lucy dies defeated. In fact, the novel begins with Lucy already defeated" (14). But her words do live on. Her preoccupation with "goodness" haunts Willard and ensures that she does, for him, truly function in line with Roth's conception of the government as "coercive force," taking up residence in the mind of an ordinary American. In distress about being separated from her son, Lucy tells Willard that "'You are an impotent and helpless man. You always were and you still are, and if it weren't for you, none of this might have begun in the first place'" (291). Her remarks are hurtful and disproportionate in their allocation of blame, but partially correct. The last readers see of Willard is his reconnection with Whitey at the station, at which point the angry insults and accusations Willard wishes to utter remain unsaid. Instead he politely asks Whitey how he is doing (40), suggesting that Lucy's fate will not effect any material change in Willard, or her family's arrangements. Her version of reality may haunt him, but his version of reality endures, even affecting the novel's reception. The critical insistence on reading Lucy (and *only* Lucy) as "bad" means that the content of her speech is ignored (both in the novel and in critical responses to it), and with it her interpretation of reality, the possible justice of some of her accusations, the legitimacy of her anger.

II

Roth's interview response is problematic in its own description of reality in the Vietnam years because it hypothesizes an America with only one central division–between the government, or "them," and "ordinary Americans" (not stated but implicitly, "us"). This assumes a unified response from all Americans towards the language and actions of the government, and it does not examine the differences in lived American experiences (perhaps surprising, given Roth's focus on Jewish identity and experience). His excerpt moves from

personal discussion ("I"), to imagining a homogenous group of Americans to which he belongs ("we", "our"). But his subsequent reference to "one," is much more slippery, enacting a simultaneous identification and distance from those who would resist the government by revising what the word "America" means. This position (that of the elusive "one" who resists by using rhetoric which may distort reality) is occupied by the narrative voice of *When She Was Good* (and although I am wary of such a claim, this *might* mean that its narrator can be "associated" with Roth). Indeed, the "one" in Roth's excerpt has undergone a seismic shift; America is not longer the solid ground under one's feet, the ally with whom the values of the "one" were aligned ("the place where one had been raised and to which one had a strong spiritual attachment"), but more like an enemy (the "foreign invader", "them"). For Roth, the Vietnam years illustrate that if the government can work to articulate false descriptions of reality, then resistance can be enacted by articulating new configurations of one's relation to the nation and of identity itself in response (America is transformed from place to person); indeed, this might be what facilitates the construction of *When She Was Good*, and what the novel explores.

It is useful to compare the narrative structure of *When She Was Good* with that of *American Pastoral* (1997). It can be easy to forget that the purported thoughts of its central character, the Swede, childhood friend of Nathan Zuckerman, are actually constructed by Zuckerman himself, and are only ever Zuckerman's imaginings of what the Swede might be thinking or saying (similarly perhaps, we are only ever learning what the narrator chooses to tell us about Lucy, Roy or Willard, the three characters whose thoughts are revealed via free indirect discourse). A significant difference is that there is no named narrator or stated narrative aims in *When She Was Good*, which appears, overall, to be attempting to approximate omniscient narration. Shostak is correct to note the "peculiar" narrative voice of the novel, and her claim that its indirect discourse creates "distance between the narrator and

the characters who expose their limitations through their discourse" (115) is extremely valuable, but there is more to say here. The effect of no named narrator is to make the narrative voice strangely disembodied and elusive, as if there is a reluctance to own or be answerable to its utterances. The only hints about its identity are found in the subtle suggestion that the narrative voice enunciates a position which is masculine and heterosexual, and from a position from within the Liberty Center community, appearing to have detailed knowledge of its inhabitants. More than this, the narrator imagines speaking to an audience which shares its views, illustrated by the following remarkable parenthetical comment in which Roy's evaluations of young women are in turn evaluated and approved by the narrator:

> [May Littlefield, or "Monkey"] was small and had dark bangs, and for a short girl she had a terrific figure (which you really couldn't say was the case with Beverley Collison, whom in his bitterness Roy had come to characterise, *and not unjustly,* as "flat as a board") (60, my emphasis).

This "tell" might engender more thoroughgoing caution regarding the narrator's remarks, given the tale of Lucy's mistreatment by men which is recounted by the novel. But there are other asides which may constitute more powerful political critique. For example, Willard's enchantment with the new town he settles in is described as follows: "Liberty Center! Oh, sweet name!At least for him, for he was indeed free at last of that terrible tyranny of cruel men and cruel nature" (6). The casual "at least for him" may constitute a reminder that Willard's white, male, Christian identity may guarantee a freedoms in America which are not extended to all. The discussion of the acts of household repair Willard completes concludes with the remark "and all this to maintain the comfort of those who live with him yet, but the dignity of all too, such as it is" (7). This may be simply an allusion to Willard's modest home, or a more barbed commentary about the ways in which his family affairs have been conducted and the ways in which members of the household have not lived up to Willard's "civilized" ideal. The Sowerby and Bassart family discussion of African Americans,

including their assumption that African Americans are responsible for crime and Roy's disapproval of inter–racial relationships, appears to mock all the participants (Roy's parents for their naivety about city life, Ellie's flippant ignorance of the realities of raced experience) and it exposes them all as prejudiced (243–244). (Roy's disparaging and homophobic remarks about his art teacher *may* function in the same way, mocking Roy and showing his narrow worldview, but they may not, too; they are simply reported by the narrator, who in so doing may implicitly endorse them.) These incidents highlight the fact that there are American lives and identities which are excluded, intentionally or otherwise, from the novel's midwestern community and the fact of this exclusion might test the reality and values its residents espouse. And it is the narrative voice which is responsible for this highlighting.

Girgus notes that in this novel "Roth speaks through foreign faces in an alien voice" (Girgus 1989: 145), but this is misleading. Girgus's reading relies on knowing the identity of the author outside the text (that is, that Roth identifies as Jewish), something which does have bearing, and rightly, on how critics read this novel–but perhaps it need not, or not in the way Girgus describes. What is more accurate and important is that *When She Was Good* has a narrative voice which resists being categorized either in terms of its identity or its politics. While its characters are not Jewish, the same confident statement cannot actually be made about the narrative voice (the narrator does seem to have intimate knowledge of the inhabitants of Liberty Center, but does that mean we should assume the narrator is Gentile?). This is also, it should be stated, not an assertion that the narrator "is" Jewish, or "is" Roth. Shostak makes the excellent point that the ways in which women are represented in Roth's work (even, perhaps, at their most objectified and reductive) may actually function as a critique of misogynist attitudes, because this exposes the anxieties and limitations of the male perspectives which offer them (Shostak, in Parrish: 112). It seems surprising that critics have not arrived at a similar view about the narrative voice in *When She Was Good*; does this

not approximate, or assume without identifying with, or parody, or deliberately resist (the text allows for all), the position of the WASP omniscient narrator? Does it not do any or all these things in order to highlight the limitations of this position, so that the sense of something lacking or artificial which critics often detect in this novel (usually read as a failure of Roth's imagination to capture midwesterners) is precisely the point? Shostak comes close to realising this, even speculating that Roth could "possibly not" have constructed "such a narrative of literary naturalism with a Jewish cast of characters" (Shostak 2004: 116), but this is to assume that *When She Was Good* does constitute a work of literary naturalism; and given its peculiar, unidentifiable narrative voice, narrating from and exploiting its indeterminate temporal moment (recall the very 1960s image of the "real Lucy" with long hair), it may not.

The ambiguous narrative voice raises the difficulty of interpreting utterance without knowing more about its utterer, or at the very least, questions the relationship between the two. The narrative voice additionally employs the "kind of rhetoric" Lucy does (that is, it makes use of sarcasm and irony to question the statements of others, although unlike Lucy, the narrative voice's elusiveness indicates awareness that its own utterances can be called into question). As such, it reveals Roth's "association" between Lucy and the American government to be highly complex, even undecidable (after all, even Roth makes contrary statements about Lucy and maintains a certain distance from his "association"; "there was a time"). It also, perhaps most discomfitingly, makes clear that Roth's remarks about the "politicization" of reality are not exclusive to "the Vietnam years." The fact that such politicization is explored via Willard, born in the early twentieth century, illustrates this. But Lucy's resistance to Willard's attitudes and her fate, as well as the possible moments of cultural critique raised by the narrative voice's little "tells," raise the question of whether the "credibility gap" has not always been integral for the survival of American national narratives

(about the American Dream, equality, freedom and democracy) throughout American history. The Vietnam years, then, according to Roth, are a watershed moment for considering the "politicisation" of reality and rhetoric, the battle over whose descriptions of America matter. But this claim is really only valid on the face of it, as indicated by the palpable sense that life remains unchanged in Liberty Center following the death of Lucy Nelson.

NOTES

1. This interview, "Writing and the Powers That Be" occupies an important place in *Reading Myself and Others* – following Roth's notes in the Acknowledgements, it would seem to have taken place in 1974. It is the first interview in this collection, which gives the impression of it having taken place earlier, although the book does not organize its interviews and essays chronologically and some are published in the 1960s.
2. For a useful general discussion of critical responses to *When She Was Good* upon its publication, see Pierpont Roth 2007, 57–51.
3. Roth addresses these critical responses in his fiction (most notably perhaps, in the Zuckerman novels *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), but also in his critical essay "Writing About Jews" (1963).
4. Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," *Commentary*, Dec 1972: 69–77.
5. *Reading Myself and Others* contains a number of interviews in its first section in which *When She Was Good* is invoked by Roth in this comparative way.
6. See *Girls* S6 E3, "American Bitch."
7. Most people encounter the poem in adapted form, as a nursery rhyme, but it originates in a nineteenth century poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, concerning the discipline of a disobedient girl child.

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