Downward is Heavenward

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Royee Zvi Atadgy

329911259

Advisor: William Kolbrener

כלפי מטה זה שמים

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לספרות אנגלית

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רועי צבי אטדגי

329911259

מנחה: וויליאם קולברנר

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Introduction |

My thesis, a novel set in Pennsylvania in the summer of 2018, follows five characters within two narratives: three are college friends from five years before the events of the novel. Their experiences in the present bookend the central narrative, the relationship between a follower and leader of an esoteric religious movement that contributes to the inciting incident of the novel—a bombing outside a local art museum.

Aims And General Description |

Downward is Heavenward is a novel that opens with a horrifying act set against the backdrop of a quiet, historic Pennsylvania setting. The narrator, who receives the news of a museum bombing while living in Vermont, spends the novel both grappling with how and why someone he knew intimately (and who is now on the run) could have committed such a violent act; what clues, if any, he might have had beforehand; and finally is moved to contemplate life's terrifying momentum and whether we ever really know the people close to us. The true story behind the bombing goes beyond what the characters first imagine when the narrator finds that his ex-girlfriend had joined an obscure organization years prior to the bombing.

Themes and subjects this novel will explore are: zealotry and identity, revenge and self-invention. The novel also considers the way history seems to function as an actor, and the inadequacy of human resolutions in the face of crisis.

Conceptual Background |

I spent the seven years prior to coming to Israel living in a small town outside of Philadelphia called West Chester. As the county seat in one of William Penn's original three counties, I was drawn—while living, working, studying, and writing there—to the rich history of this old American town the origins of which go back to the early 1700s. Because much of the farmland around West Chester has remained preserved (as well as the town itself), the place provides a window into a bygone America. In many ways, the town and the surrounding landscape have a presence of their own, with history speaking at all times, from all sides.

I became interested, then, in how to make history an actor. I took a specific folktale in the history of West Chester and began to connect it to my fictional act of terrorism that takes place some 240 years later. While the bombing is the inciting incident that opens the novel, it the perpetrator's life up until then that dominates the narrative. Moreover, the events lead the narrator to also reflect upon his own life up until the bombing, with the death of his mother the year prior.

The novel then serves as partly a meditation and appreciation for the history of the town and the county that I've come to call home.

The homecoming theme is in the foreground, as evidenced by the opening chapter entitled *You Can't Go Home Again*, a reference from a conversation between writers Thomas Wolfe and Ella Winter in which Winter tells Wolfe, "Don't you know you can't go home again?" Wolfe borrowed the phrase for his posthumously published novel of the same title, where the character, writer George Webber, tries to faithfully depict his hometown in a novel to the dismay and anger of what the residents think is a distorted and inaccurate portrayal of the town, leading them to send him menacing letters and death threats. It puts to question how reliable our memories are, and my narrator will grapple with that throughout.

This concept of a homecoming, or what it means to come home, was made classic by Homer's tale of Odysseus returning to Ithaca in *The Odyssey.* As the narrator returns to the town of West Chester, which holds all these memories, he thinks he can return to what the town and what the perpetrator once meant to him, giving him perspective and closure. Instead, he finds he can't control the actual events, and invents the story of how his ex was radicalized in an attempt to understand what's happened. Thus, moments of recognition in the novel gradually become moments of *mis*recognition, especially at the end. What *was* and what *is* are discordant. This has dire consequences throughout the novel, as dissociation from the events comes in the form of nostalgia, disbelief, and imagination. The novel progresses, grappling with the ultimate question of why the perpetrator commits the act and what happens next.

A partial list of fiction and non-fiction works that have acted as sorts of precursors to the writing of this novel include Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, Douglas R. Harper's *West Chester to 1865: That Elegant & Notorious Place*, E.G. Alderfer's *The Ephrata Commune: An Early American Counterculture*, Bruno Schulz's *The Cinnamon Shops*, Nicole Krauss's *Great House*, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History,* and Henry Seidel Canby's *The Brandywine*.

Tartt's *The Secret History* helped to confirm a value I first saw in *The Iliad* in telling the reader what would happen up front. I gravitated toward that when thinking of how to organize my own book. I introduce the explosive antagonist and what she's done in the opening sentences, leaving the reader to wonder *why?* The prologue in *The Secret History* begins with the narrator talking about Bunny's murder in the first line, turning a *whodunit* into a *whydunit* with sufficient force to propel the reader forward. It's an inverted mystery novel, alleviating the pressure of writing an end-focused a-ha! moment that satisfies.

Roth's *American Pastoral* was also instrumental in deciding how to approach this novel. In that book, Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator, tells the story of Swede Levov—a high school athlete and American success story who experiences his downfall after a life of hard work. Swede's daughter Merry becomes radicalized during the Vietnam War era, joining a Weather Underground-type faction ready to use violent means to get their political message across. While the father-daughter element of the story was compelling, I thought about what it might be like to write a first-person narrator who once had an intimate relationship with just such a radicalized person. Bringing the storyteller precariously close to the events of the novel provided a good jumping-off point.

When constructing the bomber and her identity, I drew some influence from how Merry is presented. In Mark Shechner's essay titled *Roth's American Trilogy* collected in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth,* he explores the character of Merry Levov who goes from middle-class security to revolutionary to Jain. He articulates the larger themes I hope to get across in exploring how the bomber in my novel follows a similar track of indoctrination:

> "[Merry] runs through teenage infatuations and grows into an all-American cultist for whom terrorism is twentieth-century Americanism. What are we supposed to understand about this cloudburst of travail? What does Roth want us to know? Not only about Merry Levov and her multiple conversions away from the safety and security of Old Rimrock, but about the middle-class litany of shoulder to the wheel and slow and steady wins the race? Has Merry Levov seen through an elaborate ruse to the radical core of things—capitalist exploitation, white domination, American hegemony? Or has she herself been taken in by the monotonous platitudes of romantic revolutionism?" (Shechner 145-146).

Shape Of Project |

The novel will be divided up into thirds with chapters and will shift from the first-person narrator's perspective to an imagined third person perspective by the narrator that uses free indirect discourse to tell the perpetrator's story. The novel returns to first-person in the final chapters.

By using the narrative voice in this way, I can tell the story of the narrator and the perpetrator with equal force. Had I kept it entirely in first person, the narrator wouldn't be able to address the back-story of how the bomb plot is realized and what made the perpetrator carry it out. He was not there for any of it. He can only speculate, so I let him. I made the narrator a writer on purpose, so I can use his writer's impulse to invent against him by encouraging him to essentially make up the story behind the story. So while it is *his* invention, I as the author can assert control with the free indirect style, achieving a kind of third person. This allows me to widen the narrative aperture to encompass it all: the perpetrator's story, the cult, the folktale, the history—bookended by the narrator's state of mind as the present events of the novel unfold. It also raises questions about authorship, namely, who gets to tell the story? How does that affect the novel? The reader's interpretation? The relationship between the narrator and the bomber?

Aliki Varvogli discusses this sort of authorial intent in his scholarly article included in *Philip Roth Studies Vol. 3* titled *The Inscription of Terrorism: Philip Roth's American Pastoral:*

> "Although at first it might appear that the question of authorship is raised only in the novel's opening pages (before Zuckerman fades into the background), the exploration of the authorial role is continued into the main narrative and is dramatized in the Swede's relationship with his terrorist daughter. Zuckerman and Merry belong to different ontological spheres with the novel: the former imagines the latter, and in this relationship of empathy, affinity, and subjugation, Roth's interest in the meaning and importance of authorship is evident" (Varvogli 104).

The first third of the novel deals with narrator receiving the news of a museum bombing carried out by his college girlfriend near their old town. He comes home from his isolation in Vermont to West Chester and to his college friends, who are now married. The three try to reason how and why the bomber—with whom the narrator had a long and tumultuous relationship—could have done this. A bombing in an otherwise quiet, pastoral part of historic Pennsylvania. Being back in West Chester leads the narrator to reflect on his time there, his relationship with the bomber, his struggle with his father's acceptance of the relationship, and his mother's untimely death.

The second third of the novel deals with the head of an esoteric religious organization, and how the bomber is brought into the society after so much promise in her earlier life as a poet, equestrian, photographer, and painter. This section of the novel will also go into the nearly 240 year-old intergenerational conflict between two families who have lived in the area since before the American Revolution and how this leads to the bombing.

The final third of the novel returns to the present, where the lives of the married couple begin to unravel in the face of an accusation of sexual assault against the husband (a professor at the college) which leads to his losing his job.

As the manhunt for the bomber continues without resolution, and the relationship between his friends deteriorates, the narrator despairs and flees West Chester back to his quiet isolation in Vermont. There, he finds his cabin ransacked by the emaciated, befouled bomber who has found out where he has been living and greets him upon his arrival. The narrator must then decide whether to turn her in to the police or, in devotion to his memories of how things used to be, try to help her. The novel ends with the bomber stabbing him in the back with a fire poker as he is admiring a map of West Chester.

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