

Alternative Histories: Philip Roth and *The Plot Against America*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Philip Roth's continual idea of "what if..." with a concentration on his novel The Plot Against America. Roth has always called himself a suppositional writer, though Roth, (who is Roth?) is a continual presence in his work (Zuckerman and Kepesh, for example, in other writerly personae). Nevertheless, this work makes us question various ideas about twentieth-century American history, not only in terms of the personal, but also in terms of ideas about nationality. This is a novel that is both comic and tragic and which makes us think about our position in the contemporary world of Central and East Europe. More importantly, it makes us think about what is happening in contemporary America. It also questions ideas about Roth as author.

KEYWORDS

American identity, American nationalism, Jewishness, anti-Semitism, dystopia, Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*

The plot in *The Plot Against America* (2004) is twofold, because it is first and foremost a plot against a specific group of Americans, but secondly it is also what one particular administration perceives as a home grown plot, what Charles Lindbergh unjustifiably believed was a conspiracy, against "Aryan" values. The plot is not against either an imperial, aggressively expansionist America or an America depicted as the land of liberty, but it is against America as an increasingly shaken, if mythical, utopia of tolerance, as in Emma Lazarus's words on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," where those "huddled masses" went into factories and sweat shops.

The perspective is that of a Jewish child and his family, the historical Roths transplanted into a parallel time, where Charles Lindbergh defeats Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election, thereby denying Roosevelt a third term in office, and shaking the foundations of American political life. To a degree, the novel can be taken as going into a world like that of the 1960s television series, *The Twilight Zone*, where life could be lived in parallel time zones. The last two words in the Lazarus quotation are apposite, because the words "breathe free" take a severe beating in the novel, not least because they signify certain changes that affect the structure of the environment in which the characters live.

Yet whilst the fictitious Lindbergh administration hovers ominously in the background, the real story in the novel centres on the totally assimilated, even secularised, and Americanised Roth family itself, the descendants of immigrants who identify completely with the country they inhabit and which the author presents to us as a genuinely American story, one in which the Roths will have to undergo familial conflict and external perils and will eventually come through the two years of the novel's time sequence battered and bruised, but survivors. Philip and his family know they are Jews, and that this threatens to set them apart. Earlier, before presidential changes, the father, Herman, rejects a promotion that would require moving to a gentile neighbourhood, an event that will have echoic effects later in the narrative, both on a personal level and in terms of Herman's co-workers at the Newark Metropolitan Life Insurance office (the idea of insurance works as a cruel joke, because insurance, or protection, is undermined,

even though everybody identifies themselves as Americans, and they are going to be plunged into insecurity). Driving out to see the area, to a place that can be ironically thought of as a false new found land, Philip's mother is anxious and doubtful, but Herman has done "everything he could to keep our spirits up" and gives "a lesson in elementary economics" regarding "the benefits of paying a mortgage over that of rent," an exercise in American finance that ends abruptly at a red light next to "a parklike drinking establishment":

"Sons of bitches!" my father said. "Fascist bastards!" and then the lights changed and we drove on in silence to look at the office building where he was about to get his chance to earn more than fifty dollars a week.

It was my brother who, when we went to bed that night, explained why my father had lost control and cursed aloud in front of his children: the homey acre of open-air merriment smack in the middle of town was called a beer-garden, the beer-garden had something to do with the German-American Bund, the German-American Bund had something to do with Hitler, and Hitler, as I hadn't been told, had everything to do with persecuting Jews.¹

This Saturday outing, on the Sabbath, it should be noted and pointing directly to the secular nature of this particular family, will have future consequences and will not only affect the Roths, but Herman's co-employees, who will be sent away from their natural environments and into the "wilderness" of the South-west, a geographical location that has been such a fascination for generations of many East coast urban writers, one that will be given a twist here in terms of ethnicity and race. Philip, his brother, Sandy, and his parents, "steeped in an American English that sounded more like the language spoken in Altoona or Binghamton than like the dialects famously spoken across the Hudson," revels in the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, and finds the bearded, yarmulke-wearing stranger, who sometimes turns up and goes door-to-door collecting donations to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, bewildering. "We'd already had a homeland for three generations [...] Our homeland was America."² The question that hovers over the text is an historical one, "What is an American?" but given a particularly twentieth-century slant. As Herman Roth says, when his wife comes to feel that they are aliens in the land of their birth, "They think we only think we're Americans. It is not up for discussion, Bess."³

To the Roths, America is the set of constitutional and governmental checks and balances that allows them to live unmolested in Jewish neighbourhoods. What they share with their neighbours is not a particularly Jewish culture but simply a relief from the prejudice that, anywhere else, made them feel like outsiders. "It was work that identified and distinguished our neighbours for me far more than religion," Roth writes⁴ and there is a powerful sense that the neighbourhood and family depictions here are largely autobiographical. "Nobody in the neighbourhood had a beard or dressed in the antiquated Old World style or wore a skullcap either outside or in the houses."⁵

1 Roth, Philip, *The Plot Against America*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 10.

2 Roth, *The Plot*, 3.

3 Roth, *The Plot*, 256.

4 Roth, *The Plot*, 3.

5 Roth, *The Plot*, 3.

Philip Roth has often described himself as a “suppositional” novelist and a great deal of his writing practice has been initiated by a “what if?” *The Plot* examines an always threatened and never fully accomplished vision of shelter and respect for all, in which he has extended his conjectural devices into the domain of history, an extension which has allowed for a breadth in scope than had the earlier practices that constituted a large part of his writing. This venture into alternative history actually marked a new departure. Previous decades had, in fact, seen Roth experimenting with a variety of hypothetical positions: *what if* a decent Jewish boy were to extol the joys of masturbation? (*Portnoy’s Complaint*, 1969); *what if* a man could actually *become* a breast? (*The Breast*, 1973); *what if* Franz Kafka had made it to America and there lived on to become a New Jersey Hebrew teacher? (“‘I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting;’ or, Looking at Kafka,” in *Reading Myself and Others*, 1975); *what if* Anne Frank had survived and found out about the publication of her diary from a chance reading of *Time* magazine? (*The Ghost Writer*, 1979).

The alternative history novel has a well-defined ancestry, but one American predecessor can be singled out, Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* of 1935, in which Lewis, writing at a time when America had been in the Depression for six years, asks the question, what if an ambitious politician were to offer quick and easy solutions to the country’s problems, if he were to be elected president, and then shows his true colours by turning out to be a fascist dictator? *It Can’t Happen Here* is not a great book, certainly not in the league of Roth’s novel, but it does have certain points of attachment to *The Plot Against America*. Whilst Lewis fictionalises his characters, the presidential candidate, Buzz Windrip, and his ally, the popular radio preacher, Bishop Peter Paul Prang, are clearly based on two 1930s demagogues, Huey Long of Louisiana and Father Coughlin, the anti-Semitic Detroit broadcaster. In *The Plot*, Philip Roth does not fictionalise names; his characters are, for the most part, real historical personages – Lindbergh, Roosevelt, Burton K. Wheeler, Father Coughlin, even the Roth family itself – but certain elements connect with the Lewis version, whether Roth had read Lewis’s earlier alternative history or not. To start with, the historical Father Coughlin is mentioned for his anti-Semitic broadcasts, and the loyal Lindbergh supporter, Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, though very different to Bishop Peter Paul Prang, adds similar religious support and dimension to Lindbergh’s presidency. Yet here the obvious similarities end, because Lewis’s protagonist, Doremus Jessop, is a small-town newspaper editor in Vermont, who, having battled unsuccessfully against governmental censorship, is sent to a concentration camp, from which he escapes to Canada to organise missions back to the States for an underground resistance movement. *It Can’t Happen Here* deals with a public confrontation, where *The Plot* deals with localised and private reaction to external events.

Roth has written, concerning *The Plot Against America* that:

I had no literary models for reimagining the historical past. I was familiar with books that imagined a historical future, notably “1984,” but much as I admire “1984,” I didn’t bother to reread it. In “1984” – written in 1948 and published a year later – Orwell presupposes a gigantic historical catastrophe that renders his world unrecognizable. There were 20th-century models for such catastrophes in both Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia. But my talent isn’t for imagining events on the grand scale. I imagined something small, really, small enough to be credible, I hoped, that could easily have happened in an American presidential election in 1940, when the country was angrily divided between the

Republican isolationists, who, not without reason, wanted no part of a second European war – and who probably represented a slight majority of the populace – and the Democratic interventionists, who didn't necessarily want to go to war either but who believed that Hitler had to be stopped before he invaded and conquered England and Europe was entirely fascist and totally his.⁶ (Roth, *Essay*)

Perhaps George Orwell is not the best choice that Roth could have given as an example, because *1984* and *The Plot* are very different takes on events in the 1940s. Orwell projects trends, present to the time of writing, into the future, whereas Roth projects backwards and gives precise details of the period, 1940-1942. With *The Plot Against America*, the reader is asked to suspend disbelief in the actual skewing of an historical period and to consider something highly dramatic: that the United States could, under the right circumstances and under the influence of powerful demagogues, as in Lewis's book, degenerate into an explosion of violent rioting on the level of Nazi Germany's Kristallnacht. The narrative is sober, considered, and subdued, so that however speculative the "history," the threat is real:

[Wendell L.] Willkie wasn't the Republican to beat Roosevelt in '40 because Willkie was an interventionist himself. But if Lindbergh had run? With that boyish manly aura of his? With all that glamour and celebrity, with his being virtually the first great American hero to delight America's emerging entertainment society? And with his unshakeable isolationist convictions that committed him to keeping our country out of this horrible war? I don't think it's far-fetched to imagine the election outcome as I do in the book, to imagine Lindbergh's depriving Roosevelt of a third term. It was far-fetched for Orwell to imagine the world as he did, but he knew that. His book wasn't a prophecy.⁷

As Herman Roth asks rhetorically in the novel: "Because what's history? History is everything that happens everywhere. Even here in Newark. Even here on Summit Avenue."⁸ Can one be afraid of history, even on Summit Avenue? History cannot be what people fear, because what goes on historically has already taken place. What we fear is the unknown and as Michael Wood notes, "In a material sense it cannot be, since we fear, by definition, what has not happened yet. If it had happened, to adapt a line of Kafka's about belief in progress, it would not be an object of fear, but a source of experience. Yet feelings obviously have their history, and it would be a very thin account of the world that left them out."⁹ But, yes, the object of fear in the narrative is undoubtedly tempered by the fact that a much older "Philip Roth" narrates the events that have already been experienced by the child, *Philip Roth*, but it is the child, with his certainties

6 Roth, Philip, *Essay: The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America.'* *The New York Times*, accessed 14 April, 2010, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res>

7 Roth, *Essay*.

8 Roth, *The Plot*, 180.

9 Wood, Michael, "Just Folks," review of *The Plot Against America*, by Philip Roth, *The London Review of Books*, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n21/michael-wood/just-folks>

being continually undermined as the historical process proceeds, who is plunged into a relentless unknown, day by day and week by week.

It is his bewildered struggle to piece together the multifarious fragments that causes both the anxiety and the dread. It is to the credit of the older narrator that he can enter the child's mind and make the nightmare credible, because the narrative becomes an exploration of a human being in a disjointed world. It helps that we see things through the eyes of a child. The child, *in medias res*, is preoccupied by matters other than politics: his stamp collection, for instance; or how his mother's sister, Evelyn, one-time mistress and now wife to Rabbi Bengelsdorf, hidden in the cellar, will get through the night without access to a lavatory; or what to make of his repellantly fascinating cousin Alvin, who, having gone to Canada to join the army, has come home from the war in Europe minus a leg. But even the postage stamps the young Philip collects will lose their innocence, because Philip dreams that his iconic national park stamps have been obliterated by swastikas, and when the collection is eventually lost, anti-Semitism is directly to blame, for under the new Homestead 42 scheme, the Roths have been "selected" for relocation to Kentucky, and it is while running away in the middle of the night to avoid exile that Philip mislays his most treasured possession, his stamp album.

"Fear presides over these memories," the first sentence of *The Plot Against America* tells us, "a perpetual fear." But over which memories? Those situated in an imagined America or in a real one? Or in both? In recent years, Roth's books have been classified according to which particular narrator has been used. There are "Kepesh books" (*The Breast, The Professor of Desire, The Dying Animal*), "Zuckerman books" (nine of them), and the "Roth books" (*The Facts, Deception, Patrimony, Operation Shylock* and *The Plot Against America*). There are also other unclassifiable books, such as *Goodbye, Columbus, Portnoy's Complaint, Our Gang* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Perhaps very little can be made of such an arrangement, but there is, at one and the same time, both a deliberate division of interests and a sense of continuity being written out of very specific texts.

"I have always used the past as the basis for transformation, for, among other things, a kind of intricate explanation to myself of my world," Roth writes in a letter to his transgressive alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, at the beginning of *The Facts*,¹⁰ and "Zuckerman's intervention is part of Roth's long campaign against reading his fiction as a transcription of his life."¹¹ Zuckerman, though, is not particularly pleased to think that he might not be needed and attacks his creator, observing that Roth *qua* Roth makes the past boring in its quotidianness. Where is the turmoil and where are the tormenting struggles? "Because if there isn't a struggle, then it just doesn't seem like Philip Roth to me. It could be anybody, almost."¹² Roth obviously agrees most of the time over the nine-book sequence. "I am your permission," Zuckerman says, "your indiscretion, the key to disclosure,"¹³ though Zuckerman has had no central rôle in any of the later novels in which he is the narrator/protagonist, with the exception of *Exit Ghost*. As Michael Wood has written concerning the different groupings under Roth, Zuckerman, Kepesh, and so forth, "we need to remember that Roth's project is an explanation to himself, not of himself, and an explanation of his world, not his person."¹⁴

10 Roth, Philip, *The Facts*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), 4.

11 Dickstein, Morris, *Leopards in the Dark: The Transformation of American Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 222.

12 Roth, *The Facts*, 165.

13 Roth, *The Facts*, 161-2.

14 Wood, "Just Folks."

Recently, Roth has turned to the grim art of death and dying. In the work that has followed *The Plot Against America*, he has taken to dissecting the dark facts of the human condition. What has been central to Roth's arguments has been the way the enemies of freedom attempt to suppress liberty and the body's right to full expression. In *Everyman* (2006), we see the fate, failure, and death of friends, whilst in *Exit Ghost* (2007), Nathan Zuckerman is the victim of prostate cancer and all the indignities that are imposed on the (male) body. *The Humbling* (2009) continues this theme of endings by examining a classical actor abandoned by his talent and his muse, only to be left with a bewildered sense of finality. The novel before *The Humbling*, *Indignation* (2008), nevertheless, is concerned with early 1950s America, being set at the time of the Korean War, 1950 to 1953, and while death is uppermost (the reader finds that the protagonist is killed on a military map-numbered hill in Korea very early in the book), some of Roth's concerns with Americanness and the sense of time and place are given emphasis. If we want to observe Roth in historical mode, we have to turn to what has become known as *The American Trilogy*, namely, *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000).

All three books in the trilogy are narrated by Nathan Zuckerman, although he is very specifically the narrator of other characters' lives. If, in *American Pastoral*, the supposed subject is Seymour 'the Swede' Levov, attention is focused on the assimilation of immigrant Jews into the American experience, the effects of the 1960s student upheavals, and the Vietnam war, as these impact on one man's life (through the terrorism of his daughter, who plants a bomb in a post office and kills a man). The idea of an American "pastoral" suggests an eerie feeling that the "tranquillized Fifties," to steal Robert Lowell's phrase, was a time of American innocence and the Sixties changed everything irrevocably. This is belied by *I Married a Communist*, in which Roth takes as his starting point the McCarthy witch hunts, as they effect Ira Ringold, an old Popular Front supporter and radio star. In this novel, we are confronted by a claustrophobic fifties American scene, as Nathan Zuckerman probes the past in his conversations with his old schoolteacher, Ira Ringold's brother, Murray. Roth delves into contemporary history, using hysteria and paranoia, in order to explore the familiar Rothian themes of family betrayals, marital explosions, and madness. *The Human Stain*, with Zuckerman again acting as outside observer, concerns the "Jewish" Coleman Silk, who has been sacked from his professorship at Athena College for calling two non-attending students "spooks." The irony is set up immediately, because the word "spooks" has the double meaning of being both a derogatory term for African-Americans and a substitute for ghosts. The book reveals both Coleman Silk's origins (he is not Jewish, but a pale-skinned African-American) and his early environment (a black neighbourhood of Roth's beloved Newark), so that the novel examines concepts of race and history. In looking at Coleman Silk's accommodations and compromises, one sees Roth, as with the other two books in the trilogy, wrestling with aspects of America's past.

Where Roth's fiction often tested American Jews by the standard of their various accommodations with their country, here he tests America by its projected treatment of the Jews. In earlier writings, Roth had attacked the belief in Jewish solidarity and tribal claims. A case in point is the story, "Defender of the Faith," in which the protagonist, Nathan Marx, an army sergeant and a war hero, has to confront a (Jewish) malingerer and coward in the character of the soldier, Sheldon Grossbart. Of much of Roth's fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, Morris Dickstein has observed that "Roth's response to his Jewish critics in such essays as "Writing About Jews" (1963) and "Imagining Jews" (1974) – both collected in *Reading Myself and Others* (1975) – is that these types really exist, that Jews are unduly sensitive to criticism, and finally, that previous Jewish writers, especially

[Bernard] Malamud and [Saul] Bellow, had erred in the opposite direction, portraying Jews as too spiritual, too asexual, too moral – always as victims rather than agents, never as the victimizers they can become.”¹⁵ With *The Plot*, Roth seems to have made an adjustment and to have explored the nature of what it is to be a particular type of American.

Roth has shifted his previously held position and suggests that liberal Jews may be truer Americans, more faithful to old ideas of tolerance than many gentiles have managed to be. This idea is appealing to the narrator of this novel, but he underscores its fragility by putting it into a child’s voice, where national dreams and childhood anxieties are mingled in what is described as a “childhood ailment,” where the child mourns the loss of the “peacetime illusion of an eternal, unhounded now.” From the child comes that perennial American struggle for the impossible return to innocence in the Garden of Eden. The nightmare mentioned above, whereby the young Philip envisions that his national park stamps have been defaced by swastikas, underlines and emphasises this corruption of national dreams. “Our incomparable American childhood was ended [...] though never would I be able to revive that unfazed sense of security first fostered in a little child by a big, protective republic and his ferociously responsible parents.”¹⁶ Much of the novel mixes the child Philip’s relatively ordinary boyhood experiences – adventures with a mischievous friend, Earl Axman, efforts to decipher the mysteries of the adult world, the slow revelation that his parents are, after all, mere human beings, even though they are the solid props of his world, and the trials of having to play unwillingly with a neighbour’s son and classmate, Seldon Wishnow, who will be exiled to Kentucky with his mother, Selma, when she, as one of Metropolitan Life Insurance’s agents, is relocated. It is Seldon who will be betrayed by Philip to his Aunt Evelyn at the Office of American Absorption, when Philip, under threat of the family’s own relocation to Kentucky, puts forward the names of mother and son; in consequence of his turning informer, it is the fatherless Seldon who will be orphaned after his mother is murdered during anti-Semitic riots. As an undercurrent, the hum of menace grows louder and louder, until the disaster stalking Philip’s America becomes indistinguishable from the routine disasters of growing up, and then suddenly eclipses them as history grinds forward.

America, for the seven-year-old Philip Roth of the start of the book represents safety: a “huge endowment of personal security that I had taken for granted as an American child of American parents in an American school in an American city in an America at peace with the world.”¹⁷ What robs him of this endowment is an election, and behind the election are sentences from a speech which the historical Charles Lindbergh gave to an America First Committee rally in 1941, offering his reasons for opposing those groups (“the British, the Jewish and the Roosevelt administration”), who were in favour of America joining the European war. The historical Lindbergh had received the Service Cross of the Golden Eagle in Berlin in 1938 and though, in his Madison Square Gardens speech, he said he did not condone “the persecution of the Jewish race in Germany,” he was concerned about the “danger to this country” represented by Jewish “ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government.” He went on to identify both the British and the Jews as “races” which he admired, but insisted that “they” had interests manifestly different from “ours.”

15 Dickstein, *Leopards*, 217.

16 Roth, *The Plot*, 301.

17 Roth, *The Plot*, 7.

Races, they/them and *ours* are key words in the novel and gain momentum in the two years that one child goes from the ages seven to nine. Roth's subject, then, is what it means for some Americans to be picked out as aliens and to be relegated to the rôle of playing the Other within an Aryan American society.

"Of course no childhood is without its terrors, yet I wonder if I would have been a less frightened boy *if* [my italics] Lindbergh hadn't been president or if I hadn't been the offspring of Jews,"¹⁸ Philip relates in the second sentence of the book. There are no histrionics, with the narrative told in an understated manner, and this alternative history starts here with that middle 'if' and continues through casual notations of key events, such as "In June 1941, just six months after Lindbergh's inauguration," or "The November election hadn't even been close. Lindbergh got 57 per cent of the popular vote and, in an electoral sweep, carried 46 states."¹⁹ Soon after the inauguration, Lindbergh meets Hitler in Iceland and signs "an understanding" guaranteeing peaceful relations between Germany and the United States. Ten days later he signs another understanding with Japan. America is not going to fight a war it regards as not being its concern, and at home Lindbergh can devote himself to diminishing some of that noxious Jewish influence in the media and government.

The Roths understand the threat posed by Lindbergh, but each member of the family responds differently. Early on, there is a trip to see the sights of Washington, where the Roths find their pre-booked hotel room has become mysteriously unavailable during the visit. Herman believes this to be a blatant case of anti-Semitism, shouts, and says that this is a violation of the Gettysburg principle that "All men are created equal." His protests, however, embarrass Bess and silence their tour-guide, Mr Taylor, a former small-town history professor, who has fallen on hard times because of the Depression. Roth is capable of making what seem to be minute gestures at the history of America during this period, which accumulate and lead to much greater appraisals of American life. Already there is a pressure to pretend not to see what is going on. Further friction arises when, under the auspices of a scheme called "Just Folks", Philip's brother, Sandy, goes for the summer on a working holiday with a Kentucky tobacco farmer, Mr Mawhinney, which is supposed to provide a wholesome experience of the true American way. The novel itself thus becomes a testing of "American values" and what these mean:

It went without saying that Mr. Mawhinney was a Christian, a long-standing member of the great overpowering majority that fought the Revolution and founded the nation and conquered the wilderness and subjugated the Indian and enslaved the Negro and emancipated the Negro and segregated the Negro, one of the good, clean, hard-working Christian millions who settled the frontier, tilled the farms, built the cities, governed the states, sat in Congress, occupied the White House, amassed the wealth, possessed the land, owned the steel mills and the ball clubs and the railroads and the banks, even owned and oversaw the language, one of those unassailable Nordic and Anglo-Saxon Protestants who ran America and would always run it – generals, dignitaries, magnates, tycoons, the men who laid down the law and called

18 Roth, *The Plot*, 1.

19 Roth, *The Plot*, 44, 52.

the shots and read the riot act when they chose to – while my father, of course, was only a Jew.²⁰

A stereotype, to be sure, but Mawhinney, it turns out, does not quite fit the stereotypical rôle initially assigned him. Sandy admires him, which is a source of deep bitterness between him and his suspicious, worried father, and in time Mawhinney performs an act of extraordinary generosity for the Roth family. Sometimes stereotypes contain truths about people, but people, whether Jews or Gentiles are not stereotypes. If Lindbergh and his followers cannot see beyond them, then neither can Philip's loving, protective, energetic, irascible father. Roth makes it clear that nobody is immune to bias and misunderstanding.

When the new regime decides to start with the children and under the auspices of the newly-formed Office of American Absorption sets up the "Just Folks" scheme, Roth is able to use his substantial satirical abilities to describe the programme: Jewish children are taken from the cities and spend a summer in the American heartland, getting to know hay and farm animals and eating quantities of "bacon, ham, pork chops and sausage." This would not be a Roth novel if the OAA did not come to be directed by one of his insufferable rabbis, in this case the fluent and imposing Lionel Bengelsdorf, the arch-collaborator, a man absorbed by an all-consuming arrogance. This puts Herman at odds with such supposedly educated Jews like Rabbi Bengelsdorf, renowned for his public speaking, horsemanship and "several books of inspirational poetry routinely given as gifts to bar mitzvah boys and newlyweds."²¹

Bengelsdorf is a marvellous creation, part object lesson in the perils of collaboration and part meticulous parody of self-important men everywhere: "'Newark has the best drinking water in the world,' the rabbi said, and said it as he would say everything, with deep consideration."²² For Bengelsdorf there is no resemblance between Lindbergh's programmes and what is happening in Germany. There is an uneasy mixture of cold calculation and self-aggrandisement in the man's accommodation to the views and policies of Lindbergh. "The Nuremberg Laws," Rabbi Bengelsdorf says, "deprived Jews of their civil rights and did everything to exclude them from membership in their nation. What I have encouraged President Lindbergh to do is to initiate programmes inviting Jews to enter as far into the national life as they like."²³ Bengelsdorf, of course, is blind to the realities of the situation in which he has placed the Jewish community. In what Bengelsdorf means by integrating there is a thread which suggests that people like the Roths are not part of a national life, so that his idea of entering national life would result in a fall into Gentile life, thereby forcing an ethnic group into becoming silent and invisible. Bengelsdorf's policy is not the harshest form of persecution, but it certainly means that more aggressive measures can ensue, because Jews are going to be relocated from city to country, and the sardonically entitled "Good Neighbor Project" introduces "non-Jewish residents into predominantly Jewish neighbourhoods."

When the pro-war journalist and gossip columnist, Walter Winchell, decides in 1942 to run for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, race riots unfurl in Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati and St Louis, "the century's worst anti-Semitic rioting

20 Roth, *The Plot*, 93-94.

21 Roth, *The Plot*, 33.

22 Roth, *The Plot*, 102.

23 Roth, *The Plot*, 111.

outside Nazi Germany"²⁴ Winchell is assassinated in Kentucky, Lindbergh disappears, and the Japanese invade Pearl Harbor, a year late, according to the historical calendar. Earlier, the isolationists had won and it is their contention that the war was being fought for the Jews and incited by them. With Winchell's assassination, however, the novel's history rejoins our own, and the fictional Philip Roth begins to live his non-fictional author's life.

The question that hovers over this abrupt swing from counter-history to history concerns the sudden fall from the counterfactual fictional world of the novel into one more closely allied to 1940s America and, for that matter, the pre-sixties historical world of *The American Trilogy*. It could be seen as a weakness, but this is to miss the point: Roth is telling the reader something about what he thinks is "Americanness" and what it should mean to live a life in that country. *What is an American?* is a question that has wracked the intelligences of American writers from the beginning and its exploration has been an important thread in the literature. Roth puts together the stories of the shaken Jewish family and an America that cannot see what is happening to it, a country that is, to a great extent, not shaken enough. The small scale of these lives almost allows us to miss the large scale of the threat. History is not only what happens to everybody, and not only the narrative of their fear; it is also seen from another angle, the way shocks and surprises become almost inaudible to the participants. America, except for places like Summit Street, is taken over by Lindbergh's landslide victory, but "by the day after [...] everybody seemed to understand everything,"²⁵ so that complacency quickly sets in. And what is studied in schools, Roth says, is "harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic."²⁶ For this very reason, *The Plot against America* repudiates the epic dimensions that often pertain to broad-stroke historical studies and the exaggerated proportions given to top-down national history, in which the *everyday* can be all but sublimated. The disaster in *The Plot*, Roth is saying, is what happens to ordinary people. Whilst he may perhaps protest too much about this, what with much contemporary historiography eschewing the epic sweep, it remains that the novel, historical or counter-historical, is able to focus its narrative attention on those whose lives are affected by everything that is unexpected and where the "terror of the unforeseen" can be explored.

Philip's father in the novel would insist that having a Jewish style of life, distinguishable or not, was one way of being a loyal American and Roth himself has an eloquent paragraph in which the Jews of Newark and elsewhere represent the right of people to go on being who they think they are:

Their being Jews didn't issue from the rabbinate or the synagogue or from their few formal religious practices. [...] Their being Jews didn't even issue from on high. [...] These were Jews who needed no large terms of reference, no profession of faith or doctrinal creed, in order to be Jews, and they certainly needed no other language – they had one, their native tongue. [...] Neither was their being Jews a mishap or a misfortune or an achievement. [...] What they were was what they couldn't get rid of – what

24 Roth, *The Plot*, 272.

25 Roth, *The Plot*, 53.

26 Roth, *The Plot*, 114.

they couldn't even begin to want to get rid of. Their being Jews issued from their being themselves, as did their being American. It was as it was, in the nature of things, as fundamental as having arteries and veins, and they never manifested the slightest desire to change it or deny it, regardless of the consequences.²⁷

The context is the relocation of Mr Roth's colleagues in the insurance company, and his own stubborn insistence on staying where he is, even to the point of leaving his job and going to labour every night at the vegetable market for his brother, Monty. The situation of the "offspring" of these Jews is no doubt less fixed historically, and what is admirable about this paragraph is its detailed respect and its refusal of nostalgia. The plot against America is a plot against *these* Americans. It is also against thousands of other Americans, who are like these Jews because they are different, different from being Jewish-American and different from each other.

The pursuit of happiness may be a chimera, but the right not to be forced to get rid of what one cannot even begin to want to get rid of should surely be available to everyone. If we return to Roth's comments on Orwell and *The Plot Against America*, he notes that *1984*, "was a futuristic horror story containing, of course, a political warning. Orwell imagined a huge change in the future with horrendous consequences for everyone; I tried to imagine a small change in the past with horrendous consequences for a relative few. He imagined a dystopia, I imagined a uchronia."²⁸ Like Sinclair Lewis, with his arguments about the rise of a fascist dictator, Roth's *The Plot Against America* concedes that the rise of an anti-Semitic regime is possible, even in the United States; it is not his Jewishness that spurs Herman Roth's defiance of that system, but his belief in being an American, his very *Americanness*. Roth has not strayed so far from his old ways after all.

The novel's hero is really Herman Roth, an insurance salesman who lacks the killer instincts of his entrepreneurial brothers:

While we remained rent-paying tenants in a five-room second-story flat in Newark, the uncles in the wholesale produce business lived in the Jewish section of suburban Maplewood, where each owned a large, white, shuttered Colonial with a green lawn out front and a polished Cadillac in the garage. For good or bad, the exalted egoism of an Abe Steinheim or an Uncle Monty or a Rabbi Bengelsdorf [...] was not the makeup of my father, nor was there the slightest longing for supremacy, and so through personal pride was a driving force and his blend of fortitude and combativeness was heavily fueled, like theirs, by the grievances attending his origins as an impoverished kid other kids called a kike, it was enough for him to make something (rather than everything) of himself and to do so without wrecking the lives around him.²⁹

This leaves him more vulnerable to the anti-Semitic machinations of the government, and sometimes the book feels like a defence of him to a younger version of Roth who mistakenly saw Herman as weak. The uncles, like Monty, and other Jewish

27 Roth, *The Plot*, 220.

28 Roth, *Essay*.

29 Roth, *The Plot*, 123.

businessmen in *The Plot Against America* are full of lion-like roaring and jokes and gestures, portraying a dynamism that the modest, hard-working Herman is portrayed as lacking and which might make him appear to be dull, yet Roth's argument here is that ordinary and superficially unprepossessing people are the truly solid majority. The nightmare of the Lindbergh presidency becomes, for Roth the novelist, a way of applying a brutal pressure to his father and mother, an experiment that reveals, in extremis, their true worth. At the moment of greatest crisis, each of them is called upon to act, and each shows the clarity of genuine courage, mobilized by their most deeply held ideals. To insist on a place in this country no matter what the "nature of things" might be, is, for Herman Roth, and eventually for his son Philip, to be American.

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