

## “Memoir” as Counter-Narrative

Reimagining the Self in Roth’s *The Plot Against America*

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“To be a Jew is to be set apart from other men, it is also to be set apart from oneself.”

Albert Memmi, *Portrait of a Jew* (1962, 59).

### Abstract

Philip Roth’s 2004 novel *The Plot Against America* famously imagines what America might have been like had the aviator Charles Lindbergh, a Nazi sympathizer, won the 1940 election for President of the United States. That alternate history is focalized through the experiences of Roth as a young boy – or those that the author-as-character has conceived within this radically altered world, with the real-world Holocaust as backdrop. By identifying a genuine counter-historical *potentiality* – one that is grounded in actual anti-Semitic insecurities that prevailed at the time, even in the relatively tranquil American context – Roth’s counter-narrative reimagines his actual past by redefining the significance of his identity as a Jew. At the same time, rather than presenting a portrait of “the American Jewish experience” of the period by conceptualizing Jews and Jewish experience monolithically, Roth manages to embrace the complexities and ambiguities of his search for

self-definition, of which his Jewishness remains an enigmatic but essential part.

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Six months ago, when I wrote the first versions of this article, the "real" Philip Roth, the author, was still alive, and I imagined myself in dialogue – if not with him, exactly, then with the versions of him that populate his fiction and nonfiction. One such fiction, the 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, famously imagines what America might have been like had the aviator and would-be presidential candidate Charles Lindbergh, a Nazi sympathizer, won the 1940 election for President of the United States. That alternate history is focalized through the experiences of Roth as a young boy – or those that the author-as-character, "Philip," has imagined within this radically altered world. These surface details – often the primary focus of discussions of the novel – sometimes conceal some of the more poignant issues of identity, culture, and authorial voice that form its unspoken ideological core. Roth, of course, is known for creating characters that either playfully and ironically resemble him (the Zuckerman novels, particularly *The Counterlife*) or actually are identified by his own name (*Operation Shylock*). In *The Plot Against America*, though, the ironic distancing that was such a characteristic feature of his earlier work is largely absent. In its place, Roth the author appears to embrace both his identity as a Jew and a version of "Philip Roth" whose past and sensibility seem to largely mirror his own, or what they might have been had circumstances been different. Both of these identifications are precipitated by actual historical stories that are not directly his own, primarily from the Holocaust. One might say, along with Bryan Cheyette (2015, 165-66; 200-201), that Roth "appropriates" these traumatic events for his own purposes in ways that trivialize and domesticate them, and this risk is surely inherent to the project. It is critical, however, to recognize that Roth is not merely imagining an alternate history, or even just creating an opposing or speculative version of himself, but also identifying a genuine counter-historical *potentiality* – one that, as I will show, is grounded in actual anti-Semitic insecurities that prevailed at the time, even in the relatively tranquil American context. At the same time, rather than presenting a portrait of "the

American Jewish experience" of the period by conceptualizing Jews and Jewish experience monolithically (see Biale 1998 and Schreier 2015 for critiques of this tendency), Roth manages to embrace the complexities and ambiguities of his search for self-definition, of which his Jewishness remains an enigmatic but essential part.

### 1. Roth's imagined "idyllic" childhood

In many of Roth's works, one's Jewishness is shaped by the perception of others, in ways that highlight the "liminal border" (Biale, Galchinsky and Heschel 1998, 8) nature of Jewish-American identity – the sense of being "both inside and outside" (8) the mainstream of American society. In many respects, this dynamic also seems to be at work in *The Plot Against America*. While it is evident that "Roth" as a child (henceforth, "Philip") sees himself as a Jew, this appears to be negatively reinforced by the precarious position that Jews suddenly face shortly after the introductory pages of the novel, when the anti-Semitism of the candidate Lindbergh "assaulted, as nothing ever had before, that 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" (8). However, as I will show at some length, the conspicuous lack of irony in Roth's narrative, and the very clear identification of the author with the child protagonist version of him that lives through the alternative-historical oppression that Roth imagines, eliminates the sometimes subtle degrees of difference that can be found between the author and his other near-Roth protagonists. Indeed, the "Philip Roth" of *Plot* blurs these distinctions, and forces us, as readers, to reconcile his "experiences" with the *conceivable* treatment of American Jews during the late 1930s – had things gone differently than they actually did.

The difference in this case, I would suggest, is the degree to which Roth appears to *embrace* that identity. The window for readers to perceive this attitude is indeed small, and is quickly subsumed by the events of oppression that ensue shortly after the beginning of the novel. Roth begins with a description of a sort of domestic bliss: "We were a happy family in 1940," he writes. "My parents were outgoing, hospitable people, their friends culled from among my father's associates and from the women who along with my mother had helped to organize the Parent-Teacher

Association at newly built Chancellor Avenue School, where my brother and I were pupils. All were Jews" (2-3). The very mundanity of this description is significant in that it implies a degree of comfort among the members of this New Jersey Jewish community with their Jewishness. Of course, to an important extent, this self-perception is grounded in a degree of assimilation, with the features that define the community seemingly relying more on self-selection than on exclusion. "It was work that identified and distinguished our neighbors for me far more than religion. Nobody in the neighborhood had a beard or dressed in the antiquated Old World style or wore a skullcap either outdoors or in the houses I routinely floated through with my boyhood friends.... [H]ardly anyone in the vicinity spoke with an accent" (4). In this description, before the novel descends into the paroxysm of violence and oppression that occupy the rest of the novel's more than 400 pages, Roth establishes the ground of his identity as a Jew. It is difficult to tease out whether the character-narrator views himself more as a Jew or as an American – or if those two identities are interwoven so as to make them indistinguishable from each other. In any case, Roth-as-character appears to perceive his life at that time as one of comfort and security.

We find a startlingly similar dynamic in Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988), in which he recounts experiences of childhood tranquility, as well as specific references to the occasional precariousness of Jewish life during the 1930s and 1940s: "At home the biggest threat came from the Americans who opposed or resisted us – or condescended to us or rigorously excluded us – because we were Jews" (*Facts*, 20; see also 24). Yet, Roth's account in that work is made suspect – like so many of his fictions – through an amusing fictional device, in this case beginning the book with a letter to "Dear Zuckerman" and concluding the work with a reply from Zuckerman himself, who admonishes Roth the author (author-as-character?): "I've read the manuscript twice. Here is the candor you ask for: Don't publish – you are far better off writing about me than 'accurately' reporting your own life" (161). By contrast, Roth's 1987 "My Life as a Boy," the title of which echoes his 1974 novel *My Life as a Man*, presents very similar material – the pleasures of his childhood, the hostilities that he and other Jewish children faced from neighborhood bullies – yet without the veneer of irony

that creeps into *The Facts*. One might even call the *Times* piece "unironic," to use Cheyette's somewhat unflattering descriptor for *Plot* (Cheyette, 201). Indeed, as I have suggested, it is this absence of irony – whatever one may feel that this does to the literary quality of the works – that pervades both *The Plot Against America* and "My Life as a Boy," and which lends both a tone of unironic similarity.

Of course, as Timothy Parrish notes about the fictional "Philip Roth" of *Operation Shylock*, one must remember that "the character Philip Roth, though presented as if he were authentically Philip Roth, must also be seen as an impersonation" (Parrish, 5). I would suggest that remembering this distinction is less challenging than Parrish implies, since from the very first sentence of the narrative portion of the novel, the tone fairly drips with irony: "I learned about the other Philip Roth in January 1988, a few days after the New Year, when my cousin Apter telephoned me in New York to say that Israel radio had reported that I was in Jerusalem attending the trial of John Demjanjuk, the man alleged to be Ivan the Terrible of Treblinka" (*Shylock*, 17). Despite following a "Preface" that claims that material for the novel is drawn from the author's personal notebooks (13), the opening uncertainty surely alerts readers to the possible presence of subterfuge. Yet, while both *Shylock* and *Counterlife* effectively "contradict and counterimagine" (Shostak, 4) readers' perceptions of the *real* Roth, to the extent that "the narrative speaks in two voices" (Shostak, 4), there is very little sense that Roth is wrestling with versions of *himself* in *Plot*, as the young "Philip Roth" looks back fondly on the pleasures of childhood.

## 2. The Anti-Semitic Backdrop

Despite the apparent comfort that attends their assimilation, though, there are hints of underlying anxiety. Implicit in the statement that "Nobody in the neighborhood had a beard or dressed in the antiquated Old World style" and that "[H]ardly anyone in the vicinity spoke with an accent" is the presence, in living memory, of the Jewish immigrant past. That Roth makes this distinction suggests an expectation on the part of readers that such a distinction needs to be made – that his audience will wonder about the type of community that shaped an author who, growing up in 1930s New Jersey, was merely a stone's throw from the large concentration of second-generation American Jews living in New York City.

More significant, perhaps, is the sense that this explanation of his background exudes a somewhat rehearsed quality, as though Roth has honed this definition of his identity over a lifetime of public incomprehension and dissatisfaction with his notion of what it means to be Jew. Indeed, the portrayal of a decidedly assimilated Jewish community is perhaps less innocent of motive than it might seem, for Roth, in setting up a tension between “ordinary Americans” who also happen to be Jewish, on the one hand, and Jews who happen to be American, is preparing us to recognize that, in the eyes of an anti-Semite, this is a distinction without a difference. Roth has examined this tension before in “Eli, the Fanatic,” in which the intolerance of an assimilated Jewish community that seeks to uproot the traditional “greenhorns” (2006, 191) who have moved nearby stems, in part, from their terror in being *re-identified* as Other, out of a genuine sense of insecurity in being associated with them (see Sklar 2013; Aarons 2007). A similar dynamic is seen in *The Plot Against America*, in light of the Lindbergh administration’s policy called “Homestead 42” (243-248), which aims to relocate Jews from metropolitan regions, where they tended to live in larger communities, to distant rural areas where individual families would be essentially isolated from other Jews. While such a relocation scheme lacks the brutal sense of imprisonment and dispossession that accompanied the relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II, the parallels between the sentiments that lay behind that action and Homestead 42 are difficult to avoid.

Within the Jewish community of the novel, support for this program is limited mainly to prominent Jews who are less subject to relocation. These supporters do everything possible to separate themselves from their immigrant past, and to avoid being noticed *as Jews* by the society at large, in the belief that the resistance of Jews to relocation will inflame the prejudices of ordinary Americans (322). Yet, as Sander Gilman points out “even as one distances oneself from this aspect of oneself, there is always the voice of the power group saying, Under the skin you are really like them anyhow” (3). This theme is reiterated frequently in *The Plot Against America*, but never more directly than when Roth’s mother says, “Well, like it or not, Lindbergh is teaching us what it means to be Jews” (*Plot*, 305).

Roth indeed reminds us of the conspicuous presence of those who would “teach us what it means to be Jews” at the time – the

external forces that sought to impose an outsider status, whether or not one considered oneself Other. The most prominent, of course, is the figure of Lindbergh, whose transatlantic flight in 1927 had made him an internationally famous, “charismatic” (Dunn 2013, 46) figure. A decade later, Lindbergh had parlayed his fame into prominence as a political spokesman. Most conspicuously, he was an ardent advocate for isolationism, even in the face of Nazi aggression (47). More egregiously, according to historian Susan Dunn, “he was also reviving the centuries-old anti-Semitic myth of Jews as stateless foreigners, members of an international conspiratorial clique with no roots in the ‘soil’ and interested only in ‘transportable’ paper wealth” (2013, 47-48). Thus, while it is of course impossible to estimate the impact that a Lindbergh presidency, had he actually run, might have had on the treatment of American Jews at the time, Roth’s speculative extrapolation draws from a well of highly visible sentiment that prevailed at the time. Indeed, the rampant anti-Semitism, unleashed by the popular Lindbergh, makes the events in the novel that mirror those in Europe – the Kristallnacht-like looting (317), the pogrom-like brutality (318, 357-

359), the wild accusations of child blood-letting (376-377) – seem plausible. Roth relies on readers’ belief that “it can’t happen here” by lulling them into believing that it won’t happen there. The discriminatory actions of the government for most of the novel are vile, racist, anti-Semitic, but not on the order of the historical Nazi regime. Yet, towards the end of the novel, Roth shows how tensions and acts of discrimination can escalate. We see this also in perhaps the most openly anti-Semitic group portrayed in the novel, the German-American Bund, whose rally of twenty-two thousand people in Madison Square Garden in New York – described in animated detail in the novel (see, for instance, 209-211) – is based directly on an actual historical event. Gordon F. Sanders conveys the impact that that display of ideological vitriol had at the time: “That rally, the largest such conclave in U.S. history, shocked Americans at the time...This was America. New York City. For Americans wondering whether it could happen here, the Bund rally provided the awful answer” (Sanders 2017). It is inconceivable that an event that was so blatantly anti-Semitic, in such a prominent, nearby New York venue, would have escaped the notice of Roth’s actual par-

ents, nor would it have failed to stir their concerns as Jews. Roth's fictional father, in fact, takes his sons to Bund rallies, so that they will be able to recognize the nature of the threat that they face.

For the child narrator, though, this presents a perplexing question: How would they know that I am Jewish? This question is never overtly stated, yet we follow the progress of his gradual realization that the features of his Jewishness that he fondly identifies at the beginning of the novel are supplemented by more revealing physical markers that, as the violence escalates, turn him and his family into targets. Philip remarks, as though observing it for the first time, "It was then that I realized...that my mother looked Jewish. Her hair, her nose, her eyes – my mother looked *unmistakably* Jewish. But then so must I, who so strongly resembled her. I hadn't known" (160). Indeed, this sense of never being able to fully escape one's identity involves the recognition of a two-fold sense of oneself: how I see myself, and how others see me. In *Portrait of a Jew*, the Tunisian postcolonial philosopher Albert Memmi draws this distinction in a way that will be useful to our analyzing further the world in which Roth lived, as well as the one that he has created in order to contest or counter that historical narrative. "That moment always comes," writes Memmi, "when you stop not thinking about it, when you understand what it means, over and above the legal and categorical boundaries, what it implies for the details and the direction of life, and you end by admitting: so then, I am a Jew. I am a Jew to myself, I am a Jew to other men" (Memmi, 26). This epiphany ("that moment always comes"), as Memmi articulates it, presents for the individual the realization of his or her otherness, as defined by others as much as by oneself. Naturally, this realization would have occurred to the historical Roth at some point, yet it would be a mistake to regard that recognition as possessing the same existential force – the same existential *dread* – given the increasingly precarious context in which the fictional "Philip" arrives at his realization. Yet, in light of the considerable stirrings of anti-Semitism that *did* exist in America at the time, it is difficult to conclude, with Cheyette, that Roth's imagined extension of Nazism "appropriates a traumatic history (especially European-Jewish suffering) within the boundaries of the United States" (165-166). I would suggest, rather, that as a Jewish "outsider" within a potentially hostile America, Roth taps into a degree of identification with

the victims of the Holocaust. While one may debate the degree to which this rises to the level of what Christina Fuhr terms “vicarious group trauma” (Fuhr 2016), Roth nevertheless rhetorically projects to audiences his own empathy (Keen 2007, 140) for the experiences of the European Jewish martyrs of his generation – but to what end?

### 3. Counter-Narration as Self-Definition

In Roth’s immersion in the trauma described above – and, by extension, the experience of the Holocaust – we find two strategies at work that are closely related, but different conceptually and in operation. The first of these seems quite natural to a work of alternative *history*, in that by definition such histories call into question or at least disturb our confidence in the events provided by the histories that have been handed down to us. In this “polemical” sense, Roth’s novel works as a form of *counter-history*, the “aim [of which] is the distortion of the adversary’s self-image, of his identity, through the deconstruction of his memory” (Funkenstein 1993, 36). This “memory” is the “dominant cultural narrative” (Andrews 2004, 1), which, in this case, views the status of American Jews during the 1930s as one of security and acceptance, in stark contrast with the insecurity and rejection of European Jews during the same period. Historian Amos Funkenstein points to the pernicious potential in many counter-histories, the most glaring of which are the continuing attempts to deny the reality of the Holocaust (Funkenstein 1993, 44-48). Such examples, historically indefensible and morally abhorrent, give pause to anyone who, in the present era of “fake news,” values historical accuracy over polemics. Nevertheless, there is a submerged story beneath the “establishment history” (Biale 1982, 7) that Roth attempts to bring to the surface: the *perception* of the actual, lived experience of American Jews at the time. Roth implicitly “contests” (Abbott 2008, 175-192) this view in ways that challenge the certainty of that history, and thereby deconstructs the components of the narratives through which that history, in part, is told. In this way, the counter-historical element in the novel does not reside in the fact that it represents an alternative history, but in what it says about the period in which the supposedly known history took place.

Of course, Roth’s novel is not “history,” counter- or otherwise. To the extent that Roth is contesting anything, therefore, it would be

more appropriate to view this work as a form of counter-*narration*. The aims in this genre are similar to the counter-history, in that it provides an outlet for marginalized peoples to wrest control of the ways their stories are told. As Funkenstein points out, not all history is in narrative form (32), yet narratives – in contrast with artifacts or philosophical argument – are arguably the form in which the significance and meaning of ideas can be communicated most resonantly (see Nussbaum 1990, 3-53). Indeed, although Roth builds his alternative history on a foundation of established and verifiable fact, the novel is first and foremost a fictional narrative, one constructed to communicate the ideas that we have discussed above, particularly the examination of his Jewish identity. If Roth’s exploration of his own Jewishness is instructive, it is in his wrestling with the nature of that identity, and in his refusal to allow others to define it – a countering, if you will, of the master narrative (Bamberg 2004, 359-361) that anti-Semites would have the populace at large believe can be pinned to a narrow set of deplorable characteristics. When, during the height of the anti-Jewish violence, “Philip” imagines running away from the community of Jews in New Jersey to an Omaha, Nebraska, nearly devoid of Jews, he sees this as a way of also shedding his Jewishness, of losing the negative features by which Jews were identified. “Not that I’d identify myself as Jewish once I reached Omaha. I’d say – speaking aloud at long last – that I didn’t know what I was or who. That I was nothing and nobody – just a boy and nothing more...” (417). This is the closest that Roth comes in *Plot* to imagining an alternative self, a “counterlife,” and it is certainly easy to see why the creator of multiple Philip Roths might entertain this possibility: As “Philip” contemplates the possibility of abandoning his identity, the anticipation of relief from having to be Jewish is palpable. Yet, in keeping with what Cheyette considers a repeated theme in Roth’s late work, “the replacement of pastoral innocence (in its many forms) by an overwhelming sense of Holocaust-inflected suffering and anguish (201), Philip eventually opts not to flee, and with that decision Roth reminds us that neither he nor anyone else can escape from his or her own identity.

In this regard, the experience of *New York Times* editor Jonathan Weisman is instructive, and may serve as a cautionary contemporary reminder of the reaches of virulent anti-Semitism. In his recent

(2018) book (*(((Semitism))) Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump*, Weisman describes how, as a secular Jew, he gave little thought to his identity until he was targeted on Twitter by alt-right trolls: "What I didn't know was that I had unwittingly exposed what was known in the alt-right as 'echoes,' those three parentheses that practitioners of online harassment wrapped around Jewish-sounding names on social media" (Weisman 2018, 8). As a result, he was "swarmed" with messages and images, including "the Nazi iconography of the shiftless, hooknosed Jew" (8), "an image of the gates of Auschwitz" (8), "Holocaust denial" (9), and other harrowing forms of abuse. For Weisman, as for "Philip Roth," to recognize oneself as a Jew is at least partly a byproduct of acknowledging how others view him. As dire as that self-recognition may be, within the context of the "Holocaust-inflected" world of *The Plot Against America*, I am reluctant to view the novel as "overwhelmingly" one of "suffering and anguish," as Cheyette suggests. By deciding instead to challenge that master narrative by the simple decision to reexamine his identity, Roth has simultaneously taken on the more daunting task of defining what it means to be a Jew, both then and now. Indeed, the pressure imposed by the Lindbergh regime on the Jews of *The Plot Against America* brings to the surface some of the elements of Otherness, grounded originally in an *immigrant* self-definition, that subtly haunt the more assimilated Jewish population of today. Parrish, in "Roth and Ethnic Identity," articulates this tension perceptively: "[I]f Roth's Jews are 'American' in the way that they conceive the fluidity of their cultural identity, they are also 'American' in their insistence that without a prior ethnic cultural identity with which to invent themselves they would have no identity at all" (Parrish 2007, 3). Thus, even though there are compelling reasons for moving on from a "normative" Jewish (literary) identity grounded in the immigrant roots of the American Jewish population, as Benjamin Schreier contends (2015, 8), it is also impossible to conceptualize the Jewish experience in the United States without also recognizing how the travails of immigration and assimilation, ingrained in the consciousness of Jews, shaped the varieties of Jewish identity in America, despite the distance that they have traveled from those immigrant origins. Moreover, it is this recognition of being but one step removed, as it were, from the precariousness of that prior existence that seems to

constitute the larger ethical urgency of Roth's novel: Rather than a platitude – "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt," as Jews remind themselves at Passover each year – Roth suggests the roots of a more stable form of solidarity with oppressed peoples everywhere than the simple conviction that it is "right." Beyond conventional moral obligation, Roth appeals to a deep-rooted sense in Jews' own experience of being the stranger.

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