

Philip Roth and the Great American Nightmare

Samuel G. Freedman

In 1959, very early in his literary career, Philip Roth wrote a short story entitled “Eli, the Fanatic.” At the outset of the tale, nothing is fanatical about Eli, except his desire to fit in. He has ridden a law degree and the wave of postwar prosperity from working-class Newark into a leafy suburb up the slope of the Watchung Hills—the sort of suburb, the reader understands, that had barred Jews with restrictive covenants on home sales until the revelation of the Holocaust discredited the formal structures of American anti-Semitism. Even so, Eli feels that his station there is vulnerable. So when two survivors, one of them Hasidic, open a yeshiva out of a ramshackle home in what is supposed to be a residential neighborhood, Eli fears that their oddity will undermine his fragile new niche. He instructs the men in the importance of obeying zoning laws, and, when that doesn’t work, gives the Hasid one of his own business suits so that, at the very least, the stranger won’t attract quite so many stares as he walks down Main Street. In a final plot twist, the Hasid leaves a set of his own black garb on Eli’s porch. Eli, inexplicably drawn to it, puts on the clothes, whereupon he is committed to a lunatic asylum.

Nothing in Roth’s vast oeuvre serves as a more appropriate companion volume to his latest novel, *The Plot Against America*, than does “Eli, the Fanatic.” While his new book functions as tragedy (or at least near-tragedy), and the short story as farce, and while one is grand in its historical sweep

and the other narrowly cast, both works of fiction examine the anxiety of the American Jew: The fear that every hard-won advancement, every material and social comfort—indeed, every sign of genuine acceptance in this overwhelmingly Christian nation—can be wiped away with shocking suddenness. As Roth writes in the very first sentence of *The Plot Against America*, “Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear.”

That fixation on fear, a fear distinctly at odds with the reality of contemporary America, explains the phenomenon, both cultural and commercial, of Roth’s novel. In a nation largely disinclined to read serious literature except when clothed in Oprah Winfrey’s endorsement, *The Plot Against America* spent sixteen weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Indeed, more than merely penetrating the marketplace, the book informed the public discussion. These reactions have not greeted any of Roth’s novels in the nearly thirty years since *Portnoy’s Complaint*, his taboo-shattering reverie about liver, masturbation, and Jewish mothers, among other authorial obsessions. Even while the superb trilogy of novels that preceded, and in many ways anticipated, *The Plot Against America*—*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*—won Roth admiring reviews and major awards, they all garnered relatively modest sales.

Something other than literary excellence, then, has propelled the current juggernaut. Some critics attribute the book’s impact to a concern among Americans, and especially Jews, about the emergence of jihadist terrorism around the world. Others contend that the book serves as a deft and devastating parable of the America led by George W. Bush, who in their view is simultaneously an intolerant boob and a cunning, nascent dictator. While these two arguments have merit, I nonetheless think both miss the essential point. Whether by intent or accident, Roth’s novel speaks to a fundamental part of the American Jewish psyche: Insecurity. That the degree of insecurity in 2005 America bears virtually no relation to the actual degree of threat there does nothing to diminish the emotion’s salience.

To make sense of this seeming incongruity, one must look back into American Jewish history. Well before the Holocaust, American Jewry began to build its organizational structure around what might be called the “crisis model.” The Joint Distribution Committee, a prime example of how this model functioned, was founded to funnel aid to persecuted Jews in Ottoman territory. It served as a useful template for transcending the usual rifts between secular and religious, liberal and conservative, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. All factions could and did join in the cause of assisting endangered Jews abroad. At the outset, the crisis model operated from the premise that American Jews, with the tolerance and prosperity they enjoyed, were best prepared to rescue their fellow Jews. With the creation of the so-called “defense organizations” for American Jewry—the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and, more recently, the Simon Wiesenthal Center—the concern increasingly turned toward identifying and addressing threats to Jews on American soil.

In the years before World War II, of course, Jews did face formal barriers of anti-Semitism in the form of Ivy League admissions quotas, housing discrimination in exclusive suburbs, and blackballing by social clubs, to name a few. During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, white supremacists lumped Jews together with blacks as enemies and subjected Jewish communities to a campaign of violence. But what happens to the crisis model when domestic crises subside in both number and intensity? What happens to defense organizations when American Jews need little if any defending in their own country? What happens is the fetishizing of anti-Semitism: A self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing exaggeration of risk. Such a mentality affirms the self-interest of Jews who lack any foundation for their identity except the hatred of others. It motivates liberal Jews who inflate the Christian Right into a threat against their liberties. And it motivates moderate and conservative Jews who perceive every example of pro-Palestinian dogma on college campuses as an incipient pogrom.

Certainly, there are plenty of Gentiles among Roth's readers, too, for America is a country abundant in philo-Semites, many of them eager to prove their affinity by sharing retrospective grief at the Holocaust. But when one considers that Jews buy 20 percent of the hardcover books in America under ordinary circumstances, while forming just 2 percent of the population, it seems likely that they account for a majority of the 300,000 or so copies of *The Plot Against America* that have been sold. That's both a commercial bonanza *and* a communal phenomenon.

The *Plot Against America* starts with a fascinating "What if?" What if Charles Lindbergh, the aviation hero turned isolationist and Nazi sympathizer, had defeated Franklin D. Roosevelt in the election of 1940? What if he had soon thereafter signed non-aggression agreements with Germany and Japan? What if he had invited von Ribbentrop to the White House? And, what if he had set policies intended to disempower Jewish citizens?

With a master's hand, Roth inscribes the human toll of such an eventuality, personifying the consequences in the experiences of his own real-life family: Himself, his older brother Sandy, his mother Bess, and his father Herman. Lindbergh creates programs to isolate, resettle, and essentially de-Judaize Jews. In a devious manipulation of the melting-pot ideal, a Lindbergh initiative called "Just Folks" sends Jews, including Sandy Roth, to live with Christian families in the American heartland. Another endeavor, "Homestead 42," pressures companies to transfer Jewish breadwinners out of the cohesive (and thus potentially treasonous) urban enclaves like the Roths' Weequahic section of Newark. Herman Roth resists being moved, but he does lose his job as an insurance agent for Metropolitan Life. A neighboring mother and son, the Wishnows, are ordered to move to rural Kentucky.

Among the Roths' relatives, the reactions to Lindbergh vary dramatically. Young Philip's teenaged cousin Alvin heads to Canada to enlist in the

military and winds up losing a leg on the battleground in Europe. His Aunt Evelyn, meanwhile, willingly falls under the sway of a pretentious windbag of a rabbi with the exquisitely grandiloquent name Lionel Bengelsdorf. As one of Lindbergh's chief Jewish apologists, Bengelsdorf rises high in the president's Office of American Absorption. Even Sandy Roth returns from his stint on a tobacco farm so thrilled by his experience of outdoor labor and farmhouse meals, and so dismissive of Herman Roth's contempt for Lindbergh, that son and father soon come to blows.

Ultimately, the stakes grow far more severe. Anti-Jewish riots break out across America, claiming Mrs. Wishnow among the 122 fatalities, and the Jews of Weequahic desperately turn to their community's gangsters for self-defense. Martial law is declared in a dozen states. FDR is placed under house arrest. Walter Winchell, the leading public voice against Lindbergh, is assassinated. The United States declares war on Canada. "Well, like it or not," Bess Roth tells her husband at one point, "Lindbergh is teaching us what it is to be Jews.... We only think we're Americans."

Indeed, the aura that hovers over the increasingly frightening events is one of self-delusion, the seemingly mistaken belief that assimilation equals security. Describing Newark just before Lindbergh's election, Roth recalls the bearded stranger who knocked on his family's door every so often, collecting money for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. He goes on to write:

My parents would give me and Sandy a couple of coins to drop into his collection box, largess, I always thought, dispensed out of kindness so as not to hurt the feelings of a poor old man who, from one year to the next, seemed unable to get it through his head that we'd already had a homeland for three generations. I pledged allegiance to the flag of our homeland every morning at school. I sang of its marvels with my classmates at assembly programs. I eagerly observed its national holidays, and without giving a second thought to my affinity for the Fourth of July fireworks or the Thanksgiving turkey or the Decoration Day doubleheader. Our homeland was America.

Even after Lindbergh has been elected, Bengelsdorf similarly bloviates: “The Jews of America are unlike any other community of Jews in the history of the world. They have the greatest opportunity accorded to our people in modern times. The Jews of America can participate fully in the national life of their community. They no longer need to dwell apart, a pariah community, separated from the rest.”

Roth lets these words drip with irony. If anti-Semitism is the socialism of fools, as others have put it, then for the Jews in this novel, Americanism is the capitalism of idiots. Over the course of the book, even a collaborationist like Bengelsdorf learns this lesson, as the FBI seizes him for being “among the ringleaders of the Jewish conspiratorial plot against America.”

Roth goes to uncommon lengths to defend the accuracy of his fiction. For example, *The Plot Against America* includes a 37-page postscript that supplies biographies and timelines of the actual figures and events that appear in the novel. The roster includes such anti-Semitic rabble-rousers of the 1930s as Charles Coughlin and Gerald L.K. Smith, the Jew-hating auto magnate Henry Ford, and the isolationist senator from Montana, Burton Wheeler. The chief focus of the postscript is Lindbergh himself, and Roth certainly has the facts on his side in portraying him as a Nazi sympathizer: Roth reprints in full a speech Lindbergh gave in September 1941 entitled “Who Are the War Agitators?” Here Lindbergh identifies three: The British, FDR, and the Jews. He then invokes classic canards to describe the latter: “Capitalists,” “Communistic groups,” and “[Jewish] ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government.”

Yet it is a long leap from Lindbergh’s odious political stance to a Lindbergh presidency. A novelist, of course, is free to take such liberties; a reader, however, needs to resist accepting those liberties as anything more than fanciful. In the actual campaign of 1940, for instance, the isolationist wing of the Republican Party could not even gain the nomination for president; Wendell Willkie, an interventionist, carried the GOP standard.

In the actual election of 1940, Roosevelt defeated Willkie in a landslide. All of this happened more than a year before Pearl Harbor, and at a time isolationists in Congress were fulminating against FDR's policies of sending material aid to Great Britain and reinstating the draft. There would have been plenty of opportunity for an anti-war majority in the United States to have voted FDR out of office, provided such a majority existed. Of course, it did not.

Rather than carry his invention through the war, which would have meant revising events on a global scale, Roth labors to splice his fictional events back into the historical record by bringing the Lindbergh presidency to an end. Yet the author has told us how stunningly popular the pro-Nazi president is. So Roth resorts to a very awkward, forced *deus ex machina*: In October 1942, as Lindbergh flies to Kentucky from Washington in *The Spirit of St. Louis*, the plane vanishes. Has he crashed? Been shot down? Defected to Germany? No one knows or ever finds out. Vice President Wheeler assumes control of the government and orders the arrest of Jewish and Democratic leaders, as well as the detention of the First Lady, Anne Morrow Lindbergh. She escapes, however, with the help of Secret Service agents, and on a radio broadcast calls for the release of political prisoners, the removal of Wheeler from office, and the holding of new elections. FDR wins, the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, the United States joins the Allies, and together they triumph. This happy ending comes so abruptly, and with such O. Henry contrivance, that it cannot possibly undo the emotional impact of all the preceding events, the indelible sense that, as an earlier book in a similar spirit put it, "It can happen here."

Why should this nightmare scenario hold such appeal for today's American Jews? Why should they feel that Philip's and Bengelsdorf's reveries, *sans* irony, accurately describe their situation? Can America really be harboring a hidden hatred for Jews when the intermarriage rate surpasses 40 percent, when a vanilla state with a large German

population (Wisconsin) elects two Jews as its senators, and when Jewish studies courses on college campuses attract large numbers of Gentiles, who in some instances form a majority of the class?

The answer is simple: Only because they are so secure in America can American Jews indulge in the perverse luxury of imagining themselves vulnerable. The fascination with *The Plot Against America*, I would argue, arises from the same part of the American Jewish mindset as does its fixation on the Holocaust. Certainly we ought not deny the significance of studying, remembering, and commemorating the Holocaust, yet at the same time we cannot ignore the disproportionate role Holocaust-consciousness plays in the identity of American Jews, especially in less religious communities. The proliferation of Holocaust monuments and museums and Holocaust studies classes, the expression of fears of a second Holocaust by such estimable writers as Nat Hentoff and Ron Rosenbaum—all of these bespeak the allure of victimization. In multi-cultural America, it seems, one's moral standing derives from one's suffering. The result, as the African American essayist Shelby Steele has put it, is that groups make the claim of victim status as a way of achieving virtue and avoiding the critical judgment of others. Affluent, educated, and powerful, American Jews are overdogs who long for the perquisites of underdogs. With his grimly brilliant reimagining of America in the early 1940s, Roth has supplied an irresistible victim fantasy.

That fantasy, as I mentioned, appeals to the Left and the Right alike. It lets Jews on the Left conflate the fictional Lindbergh with their actual foes among conservative Christians. One can reasonably oppose the religious Right on issues ranging from abortion to gay marriage to school prayer without needing to see it as an active threat to Jewish standing in America. The brouhaha over Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* offers a striking example of the distance between fear and reality. Without question, Gibson's film perpetuated the vilest anti-Jewish images from both the Gospels and the medieval passion plays. Still, multitudes of American Christians watched the film without rising to the Jew-hating bait that Gibson provided.

On American Jewry's other political flank, Roth's vision of pervasive, barely hidden anti-Semitism just waiting to be conjured into action by the right demagogue neatly fits the fear that college campuses have become free-fire zones against Jewish students and faculty. Each autumn, when a different university is the site of a major pro-Palestinian conference, there are Jewish calls for the entire event to be banned, as if Jewish sensibilities are too delicate to endure a few days of strident, overwrought, and hateful rhetoric. The effort spent inveigling against Middle East studies departments would be better spent raising money to endow professorships in Israel studies.

Consider the recent documentary *Columbia Unbecoming*, which charges several Middle East studies professors at the university where I teach with humiliating and insulting Jewish and Israeli students. I am perfectly willing to be persuaded by the facts that these abuses of faculty privilege have taken place. And, if so, they should result in punishment. But the farther one gets from the campus that the film concerns, the more *Columbia Unbecoming* has been understood as having a far more sweeping message: Columbia is hostile to Jews, Columbia is anti-Semitic, Columbia is a place where no Jewish student could feel safe. One cursory look at the strong and visible Jewish presence on the campus should settle the question. Yet if you believe that tolerance for Jews is merely illusory, then *The Plot Against America* nourishes the delusion that Columbia University in 2005 could become the University of Heidelberg in 1939, or at least the American equivalent of Concordia in Canada.

Again, none of these concerns about anti-Semitism lack a foundation in history. All have arisen during a period of existential threat to Jews—and Americans—by radical Islam. The widespread anti-Semitism in Europe, masquerading as anti-Zionism, is real, repugnant, and dangerous. But is it impossible to differentiate France from America? Is it justifiable to see, in Roth's novel, a plausible version of the present?

I wonder, though, if the American Jews who tether their own dire imaginings to Roth's bleak novel have read him quite closely enough. It seems to me that Roth cannot bring himself fully to endorse his own fictional premise. I say this not because of the unconvincing climax, but because of several narrative set-pieces that describe the friendship and protection various righteous Gentile neighbors offer the fictional Roth family. The plot against America, it becomes clear, is not a Jewish plot, but Lindbergh's plot, and because it runs so profoundly counter to the prevailing nature of American society, it cannot in the end succeed.

What Roth has actually accomplished—and it is an immense literary achievement, indeed—is to make palpable for American readers the paralysis, anxiety, helplessness, betrayal, and fleeting, ill-fated resistance of European Jewry, particularly German Jewry, during the 1930s and 1940s. By setting all the events in a familiar American context, while holding fast to eternal truths of human nature and Jewish character, Roth has given us, all these decades later and a continent away, an acute answer to the terrible lingering questions of the Holocaust. Why didn't more Jews flee? Why didn't more Jews fight? Why didn't they see the doom descending until it was too late?

In trying to answer these questions, or simply in trying to pay homage to the murdered millions, American Jewish artists have generally employed realism and naturalism. One senses them measuring their inventions against the actualities, whether the newsreels that first shocked American audiences in the mid-1940s or the memoirs of survivors by writers like Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi. Whether in the television miniseries *Holocaust* or the film *Schindler's List*, artists have equated accurate visual recreation with seriousness of intent. Thus the actor Adrien Brody starved himself down to skeletal proportions for his title role in *The Pianist*.

Some of these efforts, like Sidney Lumet's film *The Pawnbroker*, have stood the test of time. Others, like the television movie *Playing For Time*

and the novel and film *Sophie's Choice*, took offensive liberties in trying to universalize the Holocaust—the former by casting Palestinian cheerleader Vanessa Redgrave as a concentration camp inmate, the latter by presenting a Polish Catholic as the main victim of the Nazis and her postwar American Jewish boyfriend as her chief persecutor. Whatever the artistic result, all shared an aesthetic of documentary-style accuracy.

But what if fiction cannot possibly match reality (as Roth himself once posited)? What if radically abandoning the effort at historical fidelity might allow for greater emotional truth? Such was the brilliance of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, in which he set the transcript of his survivor father's testimony in a comic-book format, portraying the Jews as mice fleeing from the German cats. *The Plot Against America* operates in a similar way, using not realism but the *simulation* of realism to transform Lindbergh's America into a parable of Hitler's Germany.

That point has been lost, I fear, on those American Jews who wish to anoint themselves with victimhood by reading Roth at face value. Were the Christian Right or the pro-Palestinian professoriate truly to represent a major challenge to the Jewish place in American society, no Jew would be so eager to play the victim. Real victims want anything but to be victims. Real victims see not moral stature but mortal threat in their victimhood.

When Philip Roth wrote "Eli, the Fanatic," less than fifteen years after the Holocaust and within memory of a period of potent domestic anti-Semitism, he skewered American Jews for their fear of being turned upon by the Gentiles around them. With *The Plot Against America*, written after several generations of astonishing Jewish progress and acceptance in the United States, he has, perhaps unwittingly, ratified that same anachronistic fear.

Samuel G. Freedman teaches at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. His book Jew Versus Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry (Simon & Schuster, 2000) won the National Jewish Book Award.