

“THE CURSE NEVER FELL UPON OUR NATION TILL NOW”:

HISTORY AND FEAR IN PHILIP ROTH’S

*THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA*

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

MAY 2006

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chairperson, Dr. Laurie Porter, for her guidance, patience, and insight in this endeavor. Dr. Porter spent many hours working with me on this project, and I am eternally grateful for her encouragement and counsel. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Tim Morris and Dr. Ken Roemer, for providing helpful suggestions and guidance with my research. I also want to offer special thanks to Dr. Emory Estes for his unending encouragement and inspiration. I have the utmost respect for all of these professors.

I must also thank my wonderful wife, Rhonda, for her encouragement, patience, and love. Her support and enthusiasm have been a constant throughout my academic career, and I could not have done any of this without her. She is my hero.

I must also offer special thanks to my family and friends who have stood by me as I pursue my dreams. I am a very blessed man.

April 17, 2006

ABSTRACT

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*THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA*

Publication No. \_\_\_\_\_

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2006

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In *The Plot Against America*, Philip Roth questions the common perception of historic “inevitability” by creating a counter-factual history, placing himself and his childhood family into a fictional World War II America. Through the novel’s imaginary political and historical events, Roth’s alternate American history (in which Charles Lindbergh is President) creates a powerful sense of fear that permeates the novel. In this paper, I examine Roth’s use of history in *The Plot* by exploring the novel’s blurring of alternate history, dystopia, “imagined autobiography,” bildungsroman, and

Holocaust genres. I also examine how the narrator (literally/fictionally Roth) conducts in the novel a choir of competing narrative voices—part seven-year-old boy, part adult storyteller, part historian, part Jewish-American. Roth's use of competing discourses in *The Plot*, along with his blurring of historical/fictional boundaries, forces us (as readers) to consider/reconsider our own histories in a post-9/11 world.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Philip Roth may one day be recognized not only as one of America's finest novelists, but one of the great chroniclers of twentieth-century American history as well. Since the 1990s, Roth has become both a writer and a "professor" of the determinant power of history, stating in an interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur* that he considers himself to be "an American writer in ways that a plumber isn't an American plumber or a miner an American miner or a cardiologist an American cardiologist. Rather, what the heart is to the cardiologist, the coal to the miner, the kitchen sink to the plumber, America is to me" (*Reading Myself* 110). Though Roth's use of history can be seen in differing contexts throughout his canon, his most recent novel, *The Plot Against America*, is his most bold historical/fictional effort to date. In this work, Roth questions the common perception of historic "inevitability" (as he does in his "American Trilogy" novels) by creating a counter-factual history, fictionally placing himself and the family of his youth into a World War II America that historically never existed. This alternate world history that Roth creates (one which revolves around the newly-elected American President Charles Lindbergh) stirs up powerful emotions of fear, paranoia, and anger, particularly through the imaginary political and historical events in the novel. These emotions are not limited to the

characters alone, as the fear and anger that alternately resonate throughout the text seem to easily translate to the contemporary reader as well, somehow transcending and transforming our concepts of history and fiction.

In his novels of the last decade, Roth has taken certain liberties with American history relative to the role the past plays in the lives of his characters, and vice-versa, as well as forcing the reader to examine his/her own history—claiming in a recent *New York Times* article that “history claims everybody, whether they know it or not and whether they like it or not” (*Times* 6). The novels of Roth’s “American Trilogy” (*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain*) and his use of history in these works seem to have emerged from a moment of clarity late in his life—a moment he discussed in a BBC interview:

When I began these books I was sixty [...] so I’d been around a long time, and I could see my own country historically. And so I thought, what else do you know, and I said for god sakes, it’s right in front of you, it’s right in front of your nose. And there it was, of course. And I thought, treat ’98 as though it were ’48, treat ’98 as though it were ’68.

You see? See it, if you can, as history. (Royal xi)

One could argue that Roth takes this same approach to history in *The Plot*, treating the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century as though it were early 1940s war-time America. Though Roth’s protagonists from the trilogy novels and *The Plot* fictionally reside in times of historic significance, it is in this latest work that Roth compels us to re-think history and its significance by literally altering the past.



Roth's venture into the genre of alternative history seemingly came to him as innocently as the aforementioned "history epiphany." While reading the proofs of historian Arthur Schlesinger's autobiography in December 2000, Roth discovered the seed for his next novel:

I came upon a sentence in which Schlesinger notes that there were some Republican isolationists who wanted to run Lindbergh for president in 1940. That's all there was, that one sentence with its reference to Lindbergh and to a fact I'd not known. It made me think, "What if they had?" and I wrote the question in the margin. Between writing down that question and the fully evolved book there were three years of work, but that's how the idea came to me. (*Times* 1)

In *The Plot Against America*, Roth imagines how his family might have dealt with the terrifying events of a fascist America set between 1940 and 1942—the brief years of the fictionalized Charles Lindbergh administration. The novel, narrated by a seven-year-old "Philip Roth," begins with the horror of the 1940 election for American Jews: Franklin Roosevelt loses the presidency to Lindbergh in a landslide, converting the isolationist anti-Semitic aviation hero into the most powerful leader in the world, while at the same time fueling fear and anger in the Jewish American community, much like a "furnace that takes you and twists you like steel" (*Plot* 16). Lindbergh's political agenda is based on preserving "American democracy by preventing America from taking part in another world war" (30). And since, in the newly-elected President's mind, "Adolf Hitler has established himself as the world's greatest safeguard against the

spread of communism” (83), then citizens of the U.S. should rest comfortably in the “independent destiny for America” (84). Weeks after his inauguration, Lindbergh signs “an agreement” with Hitler solidifying peace between the U.S. and Germany, causing many Americans to celebrate that no young men from the U.S. would be fighting and dying; yet, as young Philip Roth (the narrator) states, “All the Jews could do was worry” (55).

Although Roth obscures the boundaries of history and fiction in *The Plot*, the actual plot of the novel revolves around the Roth family and the “perpetual fear” that they themselves and their Jewish American community must face in light of the new administration (1). As Philip “narrates” the counter-historical events of the book, which is essentially told from the point of view of an older man looking back at a time in his childhood, one observes the effects of fear taking hold of his family, especially in Philip’s father, Herman, as he curses the political headlines of the day. Herman’s emotional outbursts stem not only from the election of Lindbergh, but also from being blacklisted as a Jew on a family trip to the nation’s capital, and from his employer’s participation in Homestead 42, a government funded program that would send him and his family to Kentucky to work and live along with the other Jewish “homesteaders” from his company who are being “transferred” (207). Herman’s problems at home arise from his oldest son, Sandy, and his participation in Lindbergh’s “Just Folks,” a program similar to Homestead 42 in which the newly created Office of American Absorption sends mainly young Jewish boys to toil in the fields of mid-western states—separating and traumatizing Jewish American families. The Roth family, along with their fellow

Jewish neighbors, must also deal with the war directly coming home to them. Herman's nephew, Alvin, is forced to live with the Roths after having his leg blown off while choosing to fight with the Canadian forces in Germany. When Alvin is forced to share his room with Philip upon his return from the war, the reader observes the young protagonist growing up quickly, from being a seven-year-old, self-described "embryonic stamp collector" (1) to experiencing the childhood-altering event of watching his father break down after visiting Alvin and the other amputees in an army hospital (113). Philip's "personal" history has been altered, "never [to] return to the same childhood" again (114).

Though Roth has used the names "Philip Roth," and more simply "Roth," as a character and/or narrator before (*Operation Shylock, The Facts, Deception, Patrimony*), as well as writing under "assumed" names in what can be referred to as "imagined autobiography" (Zuckerman, Kepesh, and others), the writer chose to use the actual names of family members in *The Plot* in order to "bring his parents back from the grave" and "to imagine how they might have conducted themselves under the enormous pressure of a Jewish crisis such as they never really had to encounter as native-born New Jerseyans" (*Times 2*). Besides his father, Roth also uses his mother's and brother's real names (Bess and Sandy, respectively). The author stated in an October 2004 interview with writer John Freeman that he chose to use the names of his own family to "trick the reader, at a certain point in the reading, into believing it," almost forcing the reader "to forget that this was an invention" (3). However, some of the most "real" and richly imagined characters in *The Plot* are inventions, including his cousin Alvin, Rabbi

Bengelsdorf, and Philip's Aunt Evelyn. While the names of some of these "invented" characters may be creations, the relatives themselves may stem from Roth's own life more than he will admit or can remember. It is strongly suggested in a 1974 interview with Walter Mauro, which was later published in Roth's essay/interview collection, *Reading Myself and Others*, that Roth's own memories of the war establishes the groundwork for *The Plot*:

I worried over the welfare of older cousins who were off in the war zone, and wrote them long "newsy" letters to keep up their morale; I sat by the radio with my parents listening to Gabriel Heater every Sunday, hoping upon hope that he had good news that night. My entire clan—parents, aunts, uncles, cousins—were devout New Deal Democrats... (9-10)

Roth's depiction of his own childhood experience parallels that of young Philip's fictionalized family in *The Plot*, essentially presenting "what was" along side "what if's." By inserting part of his own family history into the novel, Roth invites readers to question their own pasts—with their own sets of facts and fictions—while at the same time, forcing readers to question their own futures as well.

#### *Current Criticism on The Plot*

Since Roth's *The Plot Against America* was published in October 2004, only a limited amount of scholarly writing has been published on the text; some of the early reviews and essays concerning the book are worth noting, however. According to the Philip Roth Society's current newsletter (Spring 2005), a majority of literary critics

“seem to still be wrestling with it [*The Plot Against America*],” with roughly half of Roth’s critics “putting *Plot* into the larger context of Roth’s career while the other half seem more concerned with reflecting how it interprets the presidency of George W. Bush in a broader light” (Kraus 10). One of the first critical reviews, Paul Berman’s *New York Times* book review (October 3, 2004) entitled “‘The Plot Against America’: What If It Happened Here?” compares Roth’s novel of an alternate history with a classic from the same genre, Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*. In this article, Berman is probably one of the first critics to compare some of the historical/fictional instances in Roth’s novel with certain contemporary events and actions of the current Bush administration, though he states that he believes that *The Plot Against America* “is not an allegorical tract about the present age” (5). Berman further states the *The Plot* is driven by the “anxious, ancestral, midnight fear of the American Jews [...] which is old, old, old” (9).

Another important critical review of the novel was written by Jonathan Yardley of *The Washington Post* (“The Plot Against America,” October 3, 2004), in which he states that with this novel, Roth has written “in some respects a parable for our times” (4). Rather than focusing his review on the possible political references from the work, Yardley focuses on Roth’s fictional adaptation of Charles Lindbergh as compared with the venerated aviator’s historical representations. However, Yardley emphasizes that “this is not a novel about Lindbergh (or Roosevelt, or Henry Ford, or Fiorello La Guardia, or any of the historical figures who appear in its pages) but a novel about America... [and] its susceptibility to demagoguery and anti-democratic impulses” (2).

In “American Friction: Philip Roth’s History Lessons,” Benjamin Anastas opens his examination of *The Plot* by quoting critic Lionel Trilling—placing Roth and his new novel at “the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet” (4).

Anastas states that he feels the novel “reveals more about its author’s politics, however laudable, than it does about American life”; but, in the same light, Roth’s book is a warning—stating that if we “lose the contradictions of the past, [then] you might find yourself, in the future, living in an America that you hardly recognize at all” (7).

One of the more current assessments of *The Plot* comes from Roth critic Alan Cooper’s “It Can Happen Here, or All in the Family Values: Surviving *The Plot Against America*,” in which he contends that Roth’s newest novel is “not a polemic, but a beautifully crafted story of a family’s attempt to preserve its identity” (242). Cooper further examines Roth’s “reinvention” of not only Lindbergh in the novel, but the “audacious transmogrifications [in] his martyrdom of Walter Winchell,” the man who “indicted with staccato fury the remnants of Hitler’s underground establishment in America” (247). Cooper concludes that by “undergoing the fear-wracked education of Herman’s son, readers are drawn into terrors that can lurk behind the most friendly apple-pie-American smiles” (247).

Matthew S. Schweber, in his essay “Philip Roth’s Populist Nightmare,” believes that “the terrifying realism” in *The Plot* “comes straight out of America’s Romantic populist heritage,” born in the novel out of “President Lindbergh and his administration’s ethos—the heartland isolationism; rugged frontier individualism; plain-spoken, agrarian folk idolatry; [and] the conspiracy-mongering and related anti-

Semitism” (133). Schweber also addresses the novel as a contemporary fable, stating that “great fiction withstands the test of time precisely because it carries contemporary currency regardless of the era” (135). Schweber addresses a few modern-day parallels in the novel as well, comparing contemporary people and events (two examples: Pat Buchanan’s 1991 comments concerning Israel’s “beating the drum for war during the prelude to Desert Storm”; and Virginia Congressman James Moran’s statement that the United States would not have recently invaded Iraq if it “were it not for the Jewish community’s strong support for the war”) with how they parallel with the “conspirational tradition from which Lindbergh’s anti-Semitism emanates” (135).

One of the more recent critical essays involving *The Plot*, J. P. Steed’s “The Subversion of the Jews: Post-World War II Anxiety, Humor, and Identity in Woody Allen and Philip Roth,” argues that Allen and Roth are “the two most influential figures in the creation [...] or propagation—of this new identity of the Jew-as-neurotic” (146). Steed analyzes the sources of “these new anxieties—and their concomitant humor and identity,” stating that Roth’s early works “seemed to indicate that the new Jewish anxiety of the mid-twentieth-century [was] the result of a combination of overbearing parents, Jewish paranoia about being Jewish, and anti-Semitism”; however, with *The Plot Against America*, the author states that “the new anxiety is the result of all of the above in conjunction with the profound and pervasive phenomenon of Jewish [and American] assimilation” (159).

In one of the more interesting reactions to *The Plot*, T. Willard Hunter, the author of *The Spirit of Charles Lindbergh: Another Dimension*, presented a speech

entitled “Philip Roth’s Lindbergh: Not Who’s Right But What’s Right,” to the University Club of Claremont California on March 29, 2005, attacking Roth’s characterization of Lindbergh in the novel, stating that the aviation hero’s “stupid speech” that Roth includes in the book’s postscript, came out of a time when Lindbergh “was so worked up over America’s involvement in the war he was passionately against, that he went out of his head” (410). Hunter also states that “every time [Roth] boards a airplane to go somewhere and sign hate Lindbergh books, he can be thankful for this man who was responsible for starting up trans-continental air travel” (411).

Transcripts of the numerous interviews that Roth has done promoting the work have proven to be useful, as well, as he has been interviewed on both *The Today Show* and on NPR’s *Fresh Air*. The most interesting contribution from Roth himself concerning *The Plot Against America* (other than the novel itself, of course) was in a published essay in *The New York Times*. Printed days before the book’s release (September 19, 2004), Roth’s “The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*” discusses the origins of the novel and almost, in a sense, sets up his own preemptive strike against the critics who will surely attack his re-imaginings of American history, along with the political undertones of the work. Roth states in this essay that for readers to look at this novel as a “roman á clef,” to see it as a fictional indictment of the current Bush administration, “would be a mistake”; however, he ironically closes the essay by saying that he feels that America’s current president is “unfit to run a hardware store, let alone a nation like this one” (7).



Though Roth's book will continue to be debated as either "historical" fiction or modern parable for years to come, the purpose of *this* paper is to examine how Roth makes use of history in *The Plot Against America*, a work in which the writer historically (and counter-factually) approaches the origin of what Steven Milowitz refers to as the "concentrationary universe," a term depicting the "new Jewish world," one of fear and paranoia created from the ashes of the Holocaust. In order to better understand Roth's use of history, I will begin by conducting an in-depth look at Roth's "history of history," examining the role of history in the novels preceding his newest work, with special emphasis on the "Trilogy": *I Married a Communist*, *American Pastoral*, *The Human Stain*, and also *The Dying Animal*. I will also explore the methods in which Roth blurs the boundaries of genre in *The Plot*, as the novel crosses the lines between alternate history, dystopia, "imagined autobiography," bildungsroman, and Holocaust literature, and how this crossing of genre borders (according to Bakhtin) allows the novel to "read like fiction," but feel contemporaneous. I will conclude my textual analysis by examining Roth's narrative strategy in the novel, in which the narrator (literally/fictionally Roth himself), conducts the novel as a choir of competing voices—part seven-year-old boy, part adult storyteller, part historian, part Jewish-American.

Through close textual analysis, I hope to prove that Roth's *The Plot Against America* is much more than what some early critics have deemed a roman à clef, or as another "Washington novel." Roth's use of competing discourses, I believe, along with his blurring the lines of history and fiction in creating an alternate history, forces us to

consider/reconsider our own point in history, while also insisting that in our post-9/11 world, the aforementioned “concentrationary universe” of fear is no longer limited to Jews: it now applies to us all.

## CHAPTER 2

### ROTH'S AMERICAN HISTORY

By fictionally returning to his own childhood in *The Plot Against America*, Roth conveys the formative effect of World War II on his life and his writing. In a 1971 interview with Walter Mauro, Roth intimated that growing up in New Jersey during the war was the first period of his life in which he “most strongly felt political power as moral coercion,” though at that time “little was asked of an American schoolchild, other than his belief in the ‘war effort’” (*Reading Myself* 9). Much of the “perpetual fear” (*Plot* 328) that extends throughout *The Plot* originates from the writer’s own actual memories of living in Newark during America’s first weeks of involvement in the war—a time in which news of the war ruled the day:

I still remember my terror as a nine-year-old when, running in from playing on the street after school, I saw the banner headline  
CORREGIDOR FALLS on the evening paper in our doorway and  
understood that the United States actually could lose the war it had  
entered months before. (*The Facts* 20)

The anxiety that Roth and many other Americans experienced during the war originated from newspaper and radio reports, sources that contributed specifically to his own

childhood trauma. The author's fear of the enemy wartime "other" only magnified his own "homegrown" feelings of being the "other": Jews being looked down upon by an America which "opposed or resisted us—or condescended to us and rigorously excluded us—because we were Jews" (21). The uneasiness that encompassed Roth's childhood reverberates throughout both the actual and alternate histories of *The Plot*, forcing the reader to not only differentiate between which "history" is fact and which is fiction, but also to assess which "past" is more terrifying.

The importance of history to the novel can be recognized in Roth's inclusion of a historical postscript to *The Plot*, intended for those readers who wish to investigate "where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins" (364). Though Roth states in the postscript's opening that "*The Plot Against America* is a work of fiction," implying that the work should by no means be strictly considered a "historical novel" (364), the appendix itself, Roth's own chronological mini-tutorial concerning the major real-life historical figures in the novel, is a first for the writer—who has never provided an appendix, historical or otherwise, in any of his works. His purpose for including the postscript is to provide some historical credibility to the work and to the "historical characters" that he manipulates; but most importantly, Roth did not want the esteemed figures of World War II to act or "behave implausibly" in the novel. In Roth's own words, the postscript is "27 pages of the documentary evidence that underpins a historical unreality of 362 pages in the hope of establishing the book as something other than fabulous" (*Times* 6). Paul Berman states that Roth's historical addendum removes many of the thoughts of inconceivability in the novel, and that "the appendix, in its

dense facticity, also allows Roth [to present] his argument that every terrible thing he has imagined could, in fact, have happened here, and some of it did” (7).

In hopes of further reinforcing the historical plausibility of the novel and its characters, Roth’s inclusion in the postscript of documentation concerning Charles Lindbergh provides additional support to the aviator’s isolationist and anti-Semitic views presented in *The Plot*. Including Lindbergh’s “Who Are the War Agitators” speech from September 11, 1941, presents a historical example of an incident “that *did* happen here.” Lindbergh stated that:

Tolerance is a virtue that depends upon peace and strength. History shows that it cannot survive war and devastation. A few far-sighted Jewish people realize this and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not. Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government. (*Plot* appendix 387)

For Roth, Lindbergh’s own words serve as proof of the aviator’s anti-Semitic beliefs which are prominent in both of Roth’s “realities”: the real world that history creates and the alternate world of the author. Roth’s history-based postscript, literally leading up to *The Plot*’s final words, blurs the lines of American fact and fiction while simultaneously demonstrating the often horrific power of history.

According to scholar Bonnie Lyons, the quintessential themes of Jewish-American Literature are “history, time, memory and loss” (173), and though history stands out thematically in *The Plot*, the other three themes resonate in the novel due to

the effects of history. By examining Roth's utilization of history throughout his canon of work leading up to the present, we can better identify the other three themes of time, memory, and loss, and the sense of fear and betrayal that pervades the most recent edition to his body of work.

### *Roth's History of History*

Though *The Plot Against America* can be seen as the historical/counter-historical tour de force of Roth's canon, Derek Parker Royal states that "the project of America has been in the fiction from the very beginning" (ix). However, unlike a number of his later works, history has not always been in the forefront. In his first published collection, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), the title novella subtly presents a 1950s Jewish community in America in "a decade devoted to forgetfulness" (42) dealing with the assimilation of Jewish values and American ideals. In the 1970s, Roth turned from his psycho-sexual examinations of *Letting Go* and 1969's controversial *Portnoy's Complaint* to create an American political satire in *Our Gang* (1971), taking political aim at Richard Nixon in hopes of "destroy[ing] the protective armor of 'dignity' that shields anyone in an office as high and powerful as the Presidency" (*Reading* 40). Roth's following work, *The Great American Novel* (1973), presents a quasi-alternate history in the modern world of baseball. Much like the historically-based *The Plot Against America*, *The Great American Novel* "has its origins in something that we all recognize as *having taken place*"; however, Roth abandons the seriousness of his early works to create a fictional baseball universe in *The Great American Novel* that

contains “a level of bizarre clownish inventiveness similar to much of the ‘real’ American history” (*Reading* 80).

The seeds of Roth’s ability to blend/bend history into his fiction are seen most clearly in the works leading up to *The Plot Against America*—his American Trilogy and *The Dying Animal*. In these novels, Roth frames American post-war history by examining certain decades and events that were particularly volatile—in *American Pastoral*: the Vietnam War, along with allusions to World War II; *I Married a Communist*: the era of the McCarthy witch hunts; *The Human Stain*: the Clinton administration and the Lewinsky affair; and *The Dying Animal*: the Y2K fears of 1999—and in doing so, presents them as modern “American tragedies” (Lyons 125). In these works, as in *The Plot*, the male protagonists suffer from the often-violent impact of history upon their own personal lives, an event that either destroys them or forever alters their future.

Roth’s first trilogy installment, *American Pastoral*, recalls the life of Nathan Zuckerman’s high school hero, Swede Levov, the Jewish all-American athlete whose perfect American life is destroyed by his teenage daughter’s involvement with the bombing of the local post office and general store, an event that shatters the world around him. Swede’s daughter, Merry, angered over the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War, joins a radical anti-war group bent on destroying all things “American,” or in other words, all things “Swede”—taking her father “out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the

indigenous American berserk” (*Pastoral* 86). Swede falls from his established life of American perfection—star athlete, father, successful businessman, husband to a former Miss New Jersey—all due to the literal “explosion” of 1960s wartime America. Zuckerman explains that the sudden terrorist blast that rocks the “quaint Americana” (68) of Old Rimrock, New Jersey is history, as “people think of history in the long term, but history, in fact, is a very sudden thing” (87). Swede’s daughter, the “Rimrock Bomber,” not only blows up the local post office, but she has “[brought] the war home to America” (76).

In his review of *American Pastoral*, Louis Menand states that “historical novels are about head-on collisions. They are about people who get blindsided by change” (88). Swede Levov is blindsided not only by his daughter’s actions and the explosive radicalism of the sixties, but by the perfidy of the promises of post-World War II America. Roth presents a pastoral image of American life being destroyed and the traumatic repercussions of history that give rise to the anxiety that ripples through the novel.

Sarah Kanowski believes that the thematic thread that runs through Roth’s trilogy is betrayal—not just at a personal or familial level, but also “at the core of national history” (123). Following *American Pastoral*, Roth replaces the pastoral image with its “sentiment of nostalgia” and supplants it with the “the impulse toward revenge” in *I Married a Communist*, a work in which he creates a “narrative of retribution—what happens after the Fall” (Shostak 249). Much like the previous novel, Nathan Zuckerman again narrates, though in this novel Murray Ringold, Zuckerman’s ninety-year old



friend and former English teacher, co-narrates the story, which follows the collapse of another of Zuckerman's heroes, Ira Ringold, Murray's brother. With Murray's help, Ira's life opens up to Zuckerman over the course of the novel, through what is essentially a conversation between the two men over the course of six days. We learn from their discussions that after fighting in World War II, Ira became involved in a labor union and subsequently began impersonating Abraham Lincoln at numerous work and union functions, often debating issues in his monologues from both Lincoln's time and his own period of the 1950s. Ira eventually creates and stars in his own radio show, *The Free and the Brave*, which reenacts historical events from American history. Fueled by his friendship with Communist father-figure Johnny O'Day, Ira becomes a rage-infested member of the Communist Party, believing "that America was on the road to fascism" (202). Ira's fall from celebrity is due in part to the demise of his marriage to movie star Eve Frame, whose book, entitled *I Married a Communist*, portrays Ira as "a Communist madman' who had 'assaulted and browbeaten her' with his Communist ideas" (*Married* 242). Historically, Ira's story falls into the same time period as "Henry Wallace's failed campaign for President under the banner of the Progressive Party and the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the anticommunist witch-hunt" (Shechner 175). In *I Married a Communist*, Roth presents his most tragic Shakespearean hero in Ira Ringold, whose downfall is his violent rage—his "whole life was an attempt to defuse the violent impulse" of his times (282). Roth suggests in Ira's story that we "have no excuse for finding betrayal anywhere but at the heart of history. History from top to bottom" (185).

As Roth explains in a May, 2000, interview with Charles McGrath, the trilogy incorporates “the historical moments in postwar American life that have had the greatest impact on my generation,” including the era of the McCarthy witch hunt, the Vietnam War, and finally *The Human Stain*’s period of the late 1990’s involving former President Clinton’s sex scandal and impeachment hearings (8). In the final trilogy novel, Roth continues to observe the effects of national history on the individual. Through Zuckerman’s guidance, we follow the life of Coleman Silk, a seventy-one year old college dean and classics professor, and his affair with a much younger illiterate cleaning woman, Faunia Farley—a story that parallels certain aspects of the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair, through the time of the Clinton impeachment hearings (both the affair and hearing are referenced in the novel). Silk, a light-colored black man who passes himself off to others as being both white and Jewish, is driven from his university teaching position due to his uttering the word “spooks” in class, referring to two absent students who he later discovers are black. Silk is thus abandoned by his peers and the university due to his supposedly racist remarks. Two years later, after leaving his teaching position, Silk’s affair with Faunia begins and a former colleague threatens to make public his relationship, stating in a letter to Silk that “everyone knows you’re sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age” (*Human* 38). The colleague’s efforts to ruin Silk’s reputation fail as Silk and Faunia are killed after being driven off the road by Faunia’s ex-husband, Les Farley, a psychotic Vietnam veteran who has been stalking the couple. The novel ends with Roth’s trilogy-narrating author, Nathan Zuckerman, chillingly questioning the war veteran/murderer about his life, and

the final scene is one of Roth's chilling and almost trademark American pastoral/anti-pastoral scenes: "Only rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one: a solitary man [Farley] on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that's constantly turning over its water atop an arcadian mountain in America" (361).

Transitioning from the historically-driven trilogy, Roth subtly places American history under a "millennial microscope" in *The Dying Animal*, a sexually-driven work which returns to the narrative of David Kepesh (narrator of *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*), who Roth says "takes a historical view of the development of what [Kepesh] calls his 'emancipated manhood,' and describes his sexual independence as a bequest of the 1960s" (Guardian 1). Kepesh's graphic and often-disturbing affair with young Consuela Castillo and their sexual encounters take center stage in the novel, but it is Roth's staging of America's response to the new millennia and to the Y2K scare that places *The Dying Animal* in its historical context. In the novel, the United States is poised and ready for a disaster of its own at the close of 1999, ready for "the Armageddon that we'd been waiting for since August 6, 1945" (144). Roth equates the millennium-ending fireworks celebrations to the overseas battles of World War II: "the light whirling over nighttime London more spectacular than the Blitz. And the Eiffel Tower shooting fire, a facsimile flame-throwing weapon such as Wernher von Braun might have designed for Hitler's annihilating arsenal" (144). In Kepesh's eyes, this spectacular fireworks scene is the only incredible event that occurs on a night that many

believed to be “the disaster of the end” (145); but the world does not end, and all of the American-driven Y2K hype and terror embarrassingly close the millennium.

Unlike *The Plot Against America*, the apocalyptic fear of *The Dying Animal* does not encompass the entire novel. History, as of midnight December 31, 1999, is, as Roth suggests in the trilogy, very abrupt. The fear that resonates from a post-9/11 reading of *The Dying Animal* stems from Roth’s eerily-accurate statement comparing the aforementioned fireworks to a modern-day terrorist offensive. The tragedy of 9/11 echoes through the scene of Kepesh watching the New Year’s fireworks over New York City on television, observing the “brilliance flaring across the time zones, and none ignited by bin Laden” (144). The theme of apocalyptic fear, originating from a fleeting appearance of history that arises in *The Dying Animal*, as well as in Roth’s trilogy, can be seen at the root of *The Plot Against America*—traumatically bridging the past with the present.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE STRATIFICATION OF GENRE IN *THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA*

Roth's detailed attention to actual World War II history in *The Plot Against America* could have easily placed the work into the category of "historical novel" if not for the author's alteration of the outcome of the 1940 election. Though Roth has written an alternate history (a term also referred to as "counter-historical" by historians) with *The Plot*, he has also created a novel that blurs the counter-historical generic boundaries with numerous other genres. Along with alternate history, *The Plot* also falls into the genre of bildungsroman, as we observe young Philip's brisk psychological and intellectual development over the two-year time span of the Roth family saga. Additionally, the fictional inclusion of "himself" and his family in the novel blurs the lines of autobiography and fiction in his work, an argument that has been debated and criticized among Rothian scholars since *Goodbye, Columbus*. Roth's creation of a fictional fascist America also blends into the novel the genre of dystopian literature, as the work examines the "cognitive maps of the historical situation by ways of imaginary societies that are even worse than those that lie outside their authors' and readers' doors" (*Scraps* xi). And though the Nazi gathering and annihilation of European Jews during World War II are only alluded to in the novel, Roth's depictions of "anti-Semitic

bundists” and potential pogroms in America places *The Plot* in the realm of Holocaust fiction as well.

The multiple generic layers in *The Plot Against America* provide what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as an “internal stratification” of language that is a unique attribute which is only possible in the novel (*Dialogic* 263). Bakhtin argues that the specific languages which each genre brings to the novel, when blended with other genres, stratify “the linguistic unity of the novel and further intensifies its speech diversity in fresh ways” (321). In the essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin states that the “ability” of the novel to incorporate multiple genres within itself produces a “body” of language that “represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, [and] between different socio-ideological groups in the present” (291). However, each genre is still able to maintain within the novel its “own structural integrity and independence, as well as [its] own linguistic stylistic peculiarities” (321).

In order to further understand the almost-tangible sense of fear that emanates in *The Plot*, examining each of the genres that seem to “arise” in the novel can further uncover how the work “utilizes these genres precisely because of their capacity, as well-worked-out forms, to assimilate *reality* in words” (*Dialogic* 321), a reality based in history but driven by fear. Although Bakhtin believes that “any genre could be included in the construction of the novel” (321), the genres that stratify the linguistic unity in *The Plot*—alternate history, dystopia, autobiography, bildungsroman, Holocaust—all deal with elements of time and history: from the grand scale of world history to one’s own

individual existence and past. The blurring of these generic boundaries in *The Plot Against America* compels the reader to question his/her own life history, ultimately creating an overriding sense of fear of what the present *could* be like, while simultaneously asking, “what *could* our future be like?”

#### *The Plot as Alternate History/Uchronia*

Though Roth’s venture into the realm of alternate history should be of little surprise to readers or scholars, numerous early critiques of *The Plot* questioned Roth’s choice of direction at this point in his career. Clive James states in his review of *The Plot* in *The Atlantic Monthly* that he finds Roth’s generic choice suspect, and that “for a writer blessed with eyes and ears to find real life fantastic in every detail, fantasy [in Roth’s case] is the wrong form” (144). Yet it is within Roth’s fantasy of a President Lindbergh and the counter-factual representation of World War II history in *The Plot* that readers are forced to question history on multiple levels: from the simple “what-if” questions of our daily lives to the bigger picture examinations of cultural and political events of our era. Such is the way of the alternate history, as counter-historical writers question pivotal events, tragedies, and upheavals spanning different time periods in history in order to reflect or express “our feelings about the *present*” (Rosenfeld 93).

Alternate historical novels and short stories seem to rise in number and in popularity in times of cultural and political unrest. According to Gavriel Rosenfeld, “Since 1945 [...] alternate histories on a variety of topics have rarely appeared in isolated fashion; but rather have usually emerged in waves during specific eras” (93).

The eras that Rosenfeld alludes to appear to be times of historical or political unrest and uncertainty:

As the United States entered a period of self-described decline in the 1970s, the function of alternate history changed from one of [post World War II] self-congratulation to self-critique. Significantly, the return of national self-confidence during the 1980s—especially after the end of the cold war in 1989—once more transformed the function of alternate histories from self-criticism back to self-congratulation. (95)

Within the last decade and a half, the alternate history has certainly gained more popularity in the literary world, with many works dealing with possible alternate World War II outcomes. One example is Robert Harris's World War II alternate history/detective novel, *Fatherland* (1992), in which Germany topples Russia and then comes to a peaceful understanding with the west; whereas the 1995 work, *1945*, by Newt Gingrich, William R. Forstchen, and Albert S. Hanser, analyzes the outcome of the war if Germany had not declared war on the United States after Pearl Harbor. Considering the post-9/11 trauma still reverberating through recent American history, it becomes clearer why Roth (considered by many to be one of America's most acerbic and fearless social and political critics) may have chosen to create a novel that questions history on so many levels.

Since categorically the genre of alternate history (also referred to as alternative histories, alternate universes, uchronias, and allohistoricals) is considered by some scholars to be a sub-genre of science fiction—an area of literature that Roth's work



(until now) can hardly be aligned with, one could argue that Roth's novel should be categorized more as "fantasy." However, many science fiction critics believe that science fiction as a genre is itself historically based. Darko Suvin states in his book, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, that in order to grasp the underlying motives in science fiction, the reader must understand that the foundations of the genre are "constituted by history and evaluated in history," making science fiction impossible to exist "without a sense of history and its possibilities" (45). And it is within this sense of history and its possibilities that alternate histories, including *The Plot Against America*, reside.

The problems of interpreting science fiction, then, must seemingly apply to alternative histories as well. Thomas Moylan states in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* that

sf [science fiction] is often misunderstood as bearing a direct, unmediated relationship to the author's empirical reality, regarded simply as "metaphorical" (worse yet, "mythic") retelling of the present moment. Or at the other extreme, sf is too readily regarded as a form of futuro-logical analysis of things to come. Contrary to these unmediated engagements with the present, serious sf, with all the richness that fiction can muster, pursues a more complex engagement that enters into a dialectical negotiation of the historical tension that was, what is, and what is coming to be. (25)

Moylan's understanding of the interpretive problems with science fiction parallels the current debates in criticism of Roth's novel (i.e., Is *The Plot* an analysis of the current

social and political state of America? Is he saying that Jewish life could have been worse in America? Or should the novel be read as a warning for the future?) More important, however, is Moylan's idea of the "engagement" between the science fiction and historical genres and how this engagement touches on Bakhtin's theories concerning the novel—where the "dialectical negotiation" that Moylan describes arises from what Bakhtin denotes as the novel's polyphonic and heteroglossic narrative capabilities. The stratification of language from the blurring of genres allows a novel, like *The Plot*, to generate questions concerning the past, present, and future.

According to Karen Hellekson, alternate history texts "change the present by transforming the past" (4); and, as a genre

[The alternate history] speculates about such topics as the nature of time and linearity, the past's link to the present, the present's link to the future, and the role of individuals in the history-making process.

Alternate histories question the nature of history and of causality; they question accepted notions of time and space; they rupture linear movement; and they make readers rethink their world and how it has become what it has. (*Refiguring* 4-5)

Interestingly, if we apply Hellekson's definition of the functionality of the alternate history genre to not only *The Plot*, but also to Roth's American Trilogy, it is possible to claim that Roth's "toying" with history over the last decade does not take such a sharp turn from his previous works to the alternate world of *The Plot* after all; instead his writing seems to take on a gradual progression toward a counter-historical work, one in

which the author himself momentarily controls history. Roth's aforementioned idea of examining "'98 as though it were '48" with *I Married a Communist*, as well as reexamining the present by way of pivotal historical moments in America's past in *American Pastoral* and *Human Stain*, shows his questioning "the past's link to the present" as well as "accepted notions of time and space" (Hellekson 10). But most importantly, Roth takes to task the nature of history and of causality in the trilogy and *The Plot*, examining history's ability to "blindsides" by revisiting and "toying" with the past.

*The Plot Against America* falls to a certain degree into one of the most popular scenarios in alternate historical works—a World War II in which a Nazi triumph or domination prevails in some fashion—with either certain military battles or, at the very least the war itself, acting as the novel's "point of convergence" in which a "pivotal event of world historical importance" sets the stage for the writer's historical alterations (Rosenfeld 94). As Paul Berman noted in his *New York Times* review, Roth's depiction of a fascist state in a Lindbergh-led America compares with Sinclair Lewis's 1935 alternate history *It Can't Happen Here*, a work that in his day Lewis hoped would bring about an awareness to pre-World War II Americans of possible future political and social terrors. Roth acknowledges Lewis in *The Plot* by including Lewis's real-life wife, Dorothy Thompson, in the novel, who is thrown out of a 1939 Bund rally "for exercising what she called her 'constitutional right to laugh at ridiculous statements in a public hall" (*Plot* 177). Roth also alludes to *It Can't Happen Here* in the eulogy for the fallen leader of the anti-Lindbergh movement, Walter Winchell, by having Mayor

Fiorello La Guardia ask, “It can’t happen here? My friends, it *is* happening here” (305). *The Plot Against America* and *It Can’t Happen Here* are also linked by the timing of each book’s publication, in the fact that both novels were released immediately prior to pre-wartime or wartime American presidential elections (1936 and 2004, respectively)— both times of history when the country and the world were in turmoil.

Although *It Can’t Happen Here* takes place between the years of 1936-1939, and *The Plot* in the years 1941-1943, both novels revolve around an election loss by President Roosevelt and the ensuing “pattern of European fascism” which then pervades the United States: “political and economic dictatorship, restriction of civil liberties,” and eventual attempts to establish concentration camps on American soil (Tanner 59). However, the biggest difference between the two novels stems from each author’s use of time and space. Lewis’s 1935 narrative was intended as an actual warning of an impending fascist America in the coming years, forcing the reader to imagine a future dystopian world; in *The Plot*, however, Roth (as narrator) is looking back in time as an older man to what Hellekson refers to as a “nexus” or changed event (the election of Lindbergh), giving the *The Plot* characteristics of a “true alternate history”: a story which Hellekson defines as taking place during and after a “post-nexus” event, resulting “in a radically changed world” (*Alternate* 7).

Another counter-factual work comparable with both *The Plot* and *It Can’t Happen Here* is Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which examines the aftershocks of a Nazi victory from the viewpoint of the 1960s, depicting an America that has been occupied since the end of World War II: with Japan ruling the west coast

and Germany controlling the eastern half of the country. Much like in *The Plot* and *It Can't Happen Here*, President Roosevelt becomes a non-factor in *The Man in the High Castle*; however, in Dick's alternate world, Roosevelt does not lose an election, but instead is assassinated in the early 1930s. Whereas *The Plot* focuses mainly on the plight of the Roth family and the New Jersey neighborhood in which they live, Dick's novel produces a more graphic picture of a post-war dystopian world. One of the more frightening effects of the war in Dick's novel is that the entire continent of Africa is wiped off the map, and is uninhabited due to the Nazi development and deployment of the atomic bomb. Unlike *The Plot*, however, Dick's alternate history looks back at "the ramifications of a changed historical event [or events] years after the nexus event itself" (*Alternate* 63), with Dick focusing more on the effects than the causes of history. Roth *does* indeed provide a detailed historical account of the effects of the novel's nexus event during the two-year span of the story; however, the focus of *The Plot* is historical determinism; or in Roth's words, how "history claims everybody" (*Times* 6). By basing the entire novel around a single "nexus" event—the election of Charles Lindbergh—Roth bestows in *The Plot* an example of history's contingent "domino-like" effect as a powerful force as Philip tries to come to terms with history:

And as Lindbergh's election couldn't have made clearer to me, the unfolding of the unseen was everything. Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as 'History,' 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... (*Plot* 113-4)

Roth's examination of the unforeseeable power of history, seen within the author's manipulation of time and use of actual history, creates in *The Plot* the novel's "chronotope," what Bakhtin terms as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (*Forms* 84). Within *The Plot*, time itself "exists" in three forms (or on three different planes/dimensions) within its chronotope: "real-time," which is the "present" time of the narrator; "novel-time," or the period in which the action of the novel occurs; and of particular importance to *The Plot*, an element of "adventure-time," Bakhtin's idea of time in which "time is entirely composed of contingency" and "controlled by one force—*chance*" (94). One can argue that the conditions of uncertainty in adventure-time, which Bakhtin defines as "the time of the Greek romance [...] in which simultaneity, random contingency, [and] miraculous coincidence [...] play a key role" (Morson 378), are synonymous with history in *The Plot*, the "nonhuman force" that "take[s] all the initiative" in the novel instead of the heroes (95); thus, the "unfolding of the unseen" that Roth refers to in *The Plot* can be seen as not only the force of history, but time itself.

According to Bakhtin, the chronotope "defines genre and genre distinctions, [because] in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time" (*Dialogic* 85). Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson explain that for Bakhtin "each genre possesses a specific *field* that determines the *parameters* of events" in the novel, and that "to study the field is to study the chronotope" (370). The chronotope, or field, created by Roth in

*The Plot* is the counter-historical world of World War II, placing the work primarily in the genre of alternate history; however, Roth's constraints concerning time in *The Plot* bring about questions concerning the novel's generic categorization. Unlike most alternate histories in which the novel is based in its entirety within the author's counter-world creation, as Roth's novel closes it is moving toward a "returning" to what could be termed as "actual historical time" and actual history, as America and the world seem to be drifting toward what we deem as "known" history. For example, in *The Plot*, Franklin Roosevelt does return for a third term as president in November, 1942 (instead of 1940, as he does in real history), after Mrs. Lindbergh calls for a new election upon the disappearance of her husband. Also in the work, Pearl Harbor *is* attacked by the Japanese, though the bombing occurs in December of 1942, not 1941. The novel's return to true history can also be seen in Roth's alluding to President Roosevelt having later died in office in 1945 "weeks before the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany to the Allies" (*Plot* 327), just as "real" history recalls. Philip's comparison of the assassination of Walter Winchell to the shooting of Robert Kennedy in 1968, a future historical event far outside the time constraints of the story, further supports the dissolving of the "alternate" part of history in the novel into "historical" time, as "Roth's history" turns/returns to "textbook history" (272).

From these examples, America returns (though awkwardly) back to what Roth describes as "what we schoolchildren studied as 'History'" (*Plot* 114), allowing the chronotope of *The Plot* to dissolve from the time and space of the Lindbergh-created American dystopia into a new chronotope of "actual" or "true" history; or, in other

words, history as we now know it. Roth's morphing of time from the alternate history into "true" history forces the novel to lean away from the characteristics of alternate- or counter-historical genres and more toward what we should deem as a literal "uchronian" genre, a term that is often used as a synonym for alternate historical stories. Since the term's literal translation is "no time" or a "non-time," I argue here that in the case of *The Plot*, that uchronia must also be used (in its most literal definition) in classifying the novel's genre. Although *The Plot* inception is in an alternate historical time (or field), ultimately the alternate world itself "dissolves" and "resolves" back into real history—creating what one could describe as a "bubble" in history in which time and history (the chronotope) *exist* for a brief time, then weave back into the history and time of the "real" world, allowing history to return to "textbook" or "harmless history"—a concept of history that Roth, over the course of his last few works, finds so difficult to accept (*Plot* 113). Roth's "uchronian bubble," or chronotope, formed in the novel forces us, as readers, to understand that history *was* and *is* never "inevitable" and above all, should never dissolve and be forgotten—echoing Walter Benjamin's warning that "for every image of the past that is not recognized *by the present* as one of its own concerns [...] threatens to disappear irretrievably" (247).

### *The Plot as Dystopia*

Although Roth's detailed account of actual history plays a major role in creating the uchronian-chronotope in the novel, it is the author's alteration of the 1940 presidential election that creates the Roth family's dystopian America, one which



“opens in the midst of a social ‘elsewhere’ that appears to be far worse than any in the ‘real’ world” (*Scraps* xiii). Jane Donawerth states that “the borders of both utopia and dystopia as genres are not rigid, but permeable; [and that] these forms absorb the characteristics of other genres” (29). Thus, the dystopian genre of *The Plot* blends/absorbs the counter-factual representation of history as creating a climate of fear for Jewish-Americans in World War II New Jersey.

The shockwaves of the 1940 Lindbergh election victory in *The Plot* reverberated through the community of Weequahic, New Jersey, creating a nightmarish world in which “American” would slowly be stripped from the title “Jewish-American.” President Lindbergh declares that the goal of the United States is to stay out of the war, and that the one group pushing for war is “the Jewish race [...] a group constituting less than three percent of the population” (13). The words and actions of the new president send Jewish-Americans literally in all directions; many flee to Canada, while others remain in the United States only to be subject to anti-Semitic government programs such as “Just Folks” and “Homestead 42,” each program promoted as a “re-location” effort for Jewish families. In the eyes of the Roths and their neighbors, these policies are established to literally separate and destroy the Jewish family, and those who attempt to stop such wrongs, such as Walter Winchell, are attacked and killed. “America’s first pogrom” occurs during the riots in Detroit after Winchell’s assassination, as the United States quickly turns into a fascist, dystopian nation (266).

In the introductory chapter, “Dystopia and Histories,” from *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan discuss the “specific formal strategies” of dystopian texts, stating that “[the story] usually begins directly in the terrible new world” and this causes “cognitive estrangement [to be] at first forestalled by the immediacy and normality of the location” (5). Roth immediately establishes in *The Plot* within its opening paragraph the protagonist’s hellish childhood world and those people who were immediately affected:

Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear. Of course no childhood is without its terrors, yet I wonder if I would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn’t been president or if I hadn’t been the offspring of Jews. (1)

Roth’s introductory sentences are multi-functional in establishing the cause of the dystopian scenario (the nexus election event), while at once presenting the narrative voice of the novel (that of someone reflecting on their childhood), while at the same time creating a commonality with the reader by alluding to one of the narrator’s childhood fears. In the next two pages, Roth is quick to provide the “normality” of the story’s location by presenting Philip’s family—his father, mother, and brother Sandy—along with depictions of his all-Jewish neighborhood in Weequahic: a small, tight-knit society that is “identified and distinguished” by the occupations of the parents of each family “far more than religion” (3). It is from within the Roths’ “happy family” (4) and their Jewish community that the dystopian elements begin to surface in *The Plot*, as their “normal” life as Jewish-Americans begins to crumble with the Republican

nomination of Lindbergh for president in 1938, an act that for young Philip “assaulted [...] 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 at peace with the world” (7). For Jews in America, a vote for Lindbergh translates into a nightmarish state—a world of anti-Semitism, pogroms and uncertainty.

According to Baccolini and Moylan, “language is a key weapon of the reigning dystopian power structure” (5-6); and Roth presents Lindbergh, in both the text of the novel and its postscript, as a figure of both fiction and reality/history—making Lindbergh’s words, both the fictional and actual statements in the novel more frightening. Roth establishes in his portrayal of Lindbergh as both nominee and president as a man of few words; and yet, it is the president’s radio speeches that create the dystopian world of the Roth family and their Jewish-American community. In *The Plot*, Lindbergh’s campaign-launching speech is only forty-one words in length, but in it he states that the election is “not between Charles A. Lindbergh and Franklin Roosevelt. It’s between Lindbergh and war” (30); thus, Lindbergh draws a proverbial “line in the sand” concerning the war, forcing the citizens of the country to be confronted by the power structure that could soon hold office. It is from this declaration of Lindbergh’s presidential nomination that American Jews, led by the outspoken radio commentator Walter Winchell, along with the efforts of New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia, begin to resist the impending Jewish nightmare through “verbal confrontation” (Baccolini 6). The Jewish-American community in *The Plot*, in a move characteristic of most dystopian literature, attempts to take “control over the means of

language, representation, memory, and interpellation” in order to move “the dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change the society” (6).

The disappearance of Lindbergh at the end of the novel, combined with the story’s return to “normal” history, raises questions concerning whether the novel moves toward a hopeful or utopian world in the end. Though most dystopian texts display the worst of possible worlds throughout the story, some works “affiliate with a eutopian tendency as they maintain a horizon of hope (or at least invite readings that do)” (Baccolini 6). Considering the after-effects of Lindbergh’s reign, particularly in the Roth family and their neighbors the Wishnows, life for Jewish-Americans will never be able to return to the level of normalcy or “American pastoral” setting that they may have lived in before. Yet, Roth’s closing of the dystopian nightmare and “returning to actual history” at the end of *The Plot* could be his own projection of how those who are tragically and directly affected by the events of history *never* forget; but it is the victims, in time, that tend to be forgotten.

### *The Plot as Autobiography/Bildungsroman*

Critics have argued for years over the fictional/autobiographical qualities of Roth’s works, and with each passing novel the writer continues to blur the boundaries of these genres. Debra Shostak writes that throughout his canon “Roth’s gestures toward the autobiographical create peculiar tensions within the novel as well as in the reader-text relationship” and that this “entanglement” with readers concerning authorial

truth/fiction stem from accusations early in his career of “anti-Semitism and self-hatred after the appearance of *Goodbye, Columbus*” (*Countertexts* 159). After listening to these accusations after the publication of his first novel, Roth defended himself and his writing in the essay “Writing about Jews,” a piece born out of numerous speeches in which the author takes to task actual letters (mostly from rabbis) sent to him concerning the story. With his most recent work, however, Roth seems to have felt the need to instead go on the offensive—publishing prior to the novel’s release the *New York Times* essay “The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*”, an article in which the writer explains the genesis of the book and the role that his novel “family” plays in the story. In the essay, Roth attempts to distinguish between fact and fiction concerning his family in the text as he tries in the novel to “restore [his parents] to what they were at the height of their powers in their late 30’s,” while admitting that his brother, Sandy, is more fictionalized and is “portrayed less faithfully,” as Roth had “to manipulate him a bit for the sake of the story” (*Times* 2). Thus, Roth’s “offensive” approach in the *Times* to clarify fact from fiction does little to further clarify the boundaries concerning the autobiographical/fictional elements in *The Plot*.

In attempting to distinguish between autobiography and fiction, Shostak states that the most apparent characteristic in Roth’s works in creating a sense that the text is autobiographical is his “repeated use of first-person narration, a device conventionally intended to heighten verisimilitude by lending the authority of experience to the voice that narrates it as eyewitness and participant” (168). Roth’s use of first-person in *The Plot* configures the narrative voice of an older man, an older “Philip,” looking back at

the horrors of his childhood (the narrative structure of the novel will be discussed in detail in the following chapter). Just as important to contributing to the autobiographical aspects of *The Plot* is Roth's choice of setting, centering the novel inside the author's childhood second-floor flat on Summit Avenue in Weequahic, New Jersey.

Unlike with past novels, Roth has been more forthcoming in interviews concerning the autobiographical elements that he draws from in *The Plot*. In a radio interview with *Fresh Air*'s Terry Gross, Roth stated that during the writing process of the novel, he returned to visit the house and neighborhood he grew up in for the first time in sixty years, and that upon arriving "I went upstairs and I walked around the flat and I didn't want to leave" (*Fresh Air* 6). Undoubtedly, revisiting a section of his own personal history had an emotional impact on Roth, and his "return home" seemingly contributed to the first pages of the novel, as he describes his actual/fictional home in an "ordinary" Jewish American neighborhood, with "a tree-lined street of frame wooden houses with red-brick stoops, each stoop topped with a gable roof and fronted by a tiny yard boxed in with a low-cut hedge" (*Plot* 2). The house itself plays an important role in the novel, as the Roth family and their home are later literally torn apart due to a violent confrontation between Herman and his nephew Alvin, a fight that literally "brings home" the war, as well as the destruction of the Jewish family, as an "airless, gag-inducing slaughterhouse smell" arises from the house (296).

Buried deep beneath the Roth-family house lies one of the novel's chronotopic motifs: the basement. Bakhtin refers to chronotopic motifs as "events or locales" that "remember their past and carry the aura" of earlier genres into newer ones (Morson

374). Bakhtin uses as an example in “Discourse in the Novel” the “chronotope of the threshold,” a chronotope employed by Dostoevsky which is “highly charged with emotion and value” (*Dialogic* 248) in which “the threshold’s aura, evidently acquired in life as well as in literature, is one of ‘crisis and break in life’” (Morson 375). In *The Plot*, Roth creates a “chronotope of the underground” (i.e., cellar, bunker, tomb), particularly with his references to the basement in the novel, invoking both real-life and wartime images of fear and death. Though in actual history, having access to a “storm cellar” or basement became a concern for Americans during World War II and in the years following, according to one historian “it didn’t take a rocket scientist to realize that Hiroshima’s destruction could someday be visited on Boston, Los Angeles, or a hundred other ground zeroes” (Watson 1).

During the 1930s and 1940s, cellars became a stamp of fear on the landscape of America. Roth himself discussed in an interview the fear of his own childhood basement, a place of fear and dread “that I had to go [to] often” and upon returning decades later, he stated that finally “I thought I was old enough by now [to see the basement] and that I could take it” (*Fresh Air* 6). In *The Plot*, Roth taps into these childhood fears of the cellar, which young Philip (the narrator) describes as “a ghoulish realm apart,” reminiscent of “Hades, Cerebus, and the river Styx” (*Plot* 139). Though the cellar walls were stained “in every hue of the excremental rainbow,” Philip’s biggest fear comes from the spirits he imagined living down there, “those who were already dead—my two grandfathers, my mother’s mother, and the aunt and uncle who once constituted Alvin’s family” (139-40). Philip’s fear of the cellar and all it represents

contributes to the mounting fear generated throughout the course of the novel, but on a much smaller, personal scale. Roth's big picture—the fear of Lindbergh, Hitler, anti-Semitism, and the war—combined with the childhood terrors of Philip, rise to the point where the older narrator states repeatedly in the final chapter, “the fear was everywhere” (328).

The fear that permeates the autobiographical aspects of *The Plot* creates yet another level of fear, forcing the reader to identify with the fears of his/her own childhood. Bakhtin believes that the biographical element of a novel, which is constructed “precisely on the basic and typical aspects of any life course” (*Speech Genres* 17) provides the story with the ability to produce reality “because of the [novel's] link with historical time and with the epoch” (18). The autobiographical/realistic elements of young Philip's two-year-long childhood nightmare contributes to *The Plot* being read as a bildungsroman, as the novel's young Jewish narrator is quickly educated to the terrors of his dystopian world—gradually being forced by the power of history to emerge from his childhood into the early stages of manhood.

For young Philip, time and the historical effects of *his* time—Lindbergh, war, anti-Semitism—alter his youthful existence to the point where “he emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself” (*Speech Genres* 23). In the bildungsroman, or “novel of education,” Bakhtin writes that “time is introduced into man, enters into his very image, changing in a fundamental way the significance of all aspects of his life and destiny” (21). Roth's Philip is portrayed as an



average Jewish-American child in the opening of the story, a Roosevelt-inspired stamp collector who, along with his philatelist friend Earl Axman, would steal money from his parents in order to “follow Christians” out of downtown Newark—a game they would play in order to see where adult Christian men would go after work (*Plot* 116). Against their mother’s wishes, Philip and his friends also play the street game, “I Declare War,” in which a person shouts out to declare war on a country, “sometimes even shouting ‘America’,” and pummeling the other “countries” by hitting the other participants with a rubber ball (27). The reality of war soon becomes all too “real” for Philip as his cousin Alvin’s return from battle, one of the experiences that triggers the end of Philip’s innocence.

Philip’s emergence from childhood begins with seeing his father cry upon his return from visiting Alvin in a Montreal hospital, a moment Philip describes as “a childhood milestone, when another’s tears are more unbearable to take than your own” (*Plot* 113). Philip’s childhood is forever altered by his father’s collapse, as well as when Alvin comes to live with the Roths and must share a room with Philip. The young boy becomes enamored with caring for Alvin’s leg, which was blown off in battle, leaving only a stump below the knee. In an attempt to learn how to wrap and care for his cousin’s wound, Philip tries to dress his own leg, and in doing so has a scab from Alvin’s stump stick to him. Philip is horrified; the contact with the scab mentally puts him “out way beyond what [he] could deal with” (138), causing him to run to the cellar where he becomes ill. To Philip, the scab and the stump are more than reminders of the mutilation of his cousin; in Roth’s own words, “the stump is the war [...] the stump is

politics [...] the stump is Lindbergh. It's everything" (*Fresh Air* 6). Both the stump and the scab become a part of Philip for the duration of the novel.

Although *The Plot's* narrator continues throughout the novel to psychologically and emotionally transform from a young boy to a more educated young man of the world, Philip's coming of age becomes more apparent when placed alongside Philip's friend, Seldon Wishnow, who suffers the greatest losses in the story. For Roth, creating the Wishnow family was "the deepest reward in the writing" of the novel; the plight of the young Jewish family "lends the story its pathos" (*Times* 2). Philip is partially responsible for the tragedy that befalls Seldon, the pest-like downstairs neighbor who actually saves Philip's life after he is kicked in the head by a horse. Philip becomes burdened by Seldon and his family being "shipped off" to the Midwest as part of Homestead 42. Due to Philip's discussion with his Aunt Evelyn concerning Lindbergh's relocation program, the Wishnow's are sent away instead of the Roths, creating yet another turning point in Philip's life. Upon returning to Weequahic after his mother is murdered, Seldon replaces Philip's two previous roommates (Alvin first, then his Aunt Evelyn), in sharing a room with the youngest Roth as "the person in the twin bed next to mine shattered by the malicious indignities of Lindbergh's America" (*Plot* 362). The reader is left at the story's end with a transformed Philip, a boy whose journey and indoctrination with history has left him both wiser and more compassionate, as he refers to Seldon as the new "stump." However, unlike with his previous roommates, Philip is not just a caregiver for Seldon, he is "the prosthesis" for his friend (362), filling a void that history created.

### *The Plot as Holocaust Literature*

In most post-war Jewish literature, the dust and remnants of the Holocaust seem to permeate the texts, creating a Jewish “identity that is forever inseparable from the experience of the Holocaust” (Alexander 126). Steven Milowitz states that the Holocaust has always played a role in Roth’s fiction, mainly in the portrayal of survivors: from the diner owner’s “number on his forearm” in *Letting Go*, to Zuckerman’s creation of a Holocaust-surviving Anne Frank in the character of Amy Bellette in *The Ghost Writer* (149). However, Milowitz argues that in Roth’s work the Holocaust does not appear in the text to “jar shamelessly at emotions,” but rather he “pursues a Medusa-method in his writing about the Holocaust. The giant beast is always there in reflection, in gaps and association” (155). *The Plot Against America* may be Roth’s finest example of Holocaust literature, as the horror of the Jewish European Holocaust arises in the gaps of Lindbergh’s America and lingers throughout the story of the Roth family.

Roth presents numerous characteristics in *The Plot* of the advent of Holocaust-like conditions in the United States, from the gathering of and resettling of Jewish families with the Homestead 42 act, to the “Just Folks” suburban assemblies of Jewish children, to the Bund meetings at Madison Square Garden in which members stated this country’s own “Jewish problem”: the need to “KEEP AMERICA OUT OF THE JEWISH WAR” (*Plot* 177). The riots that break out in Detroit give America “its first large-scale pogrom, one modeled on the ‘spontaneous demonstrations’ against

Germany's Jews known as *Kristallnacht*, 'the Night of Broken Glass,' an event that is "justified" in the *Detroit Times* as an "unfortunate but inevitable" event in American history (266). Herman Roth lectures Philip's older brother, Sandy, about the "henchmen" of the Holocaust, telling his son that "you know nothing about von Ribbentrop, you know nothing about Göring, you know nothing about Goebbels and Himmler and Hess—but I *do* know" (192). In the story, it is later revealed that Himmler's involvement with Just Folks and Homestead 42 were part of his directive "to inaugurate in America a systemic process of marginalization that will lead [to] the total disappearance of the Jewish population, their appurtenances, and the property" (324).

For years, many post-World War II Jewish-American writers avoided writing about or even alluding to the Holocaust out of respect for the some six million victims. Roth's intermittent references to the Holocaust and America's Holocaust-like conditions in his works should not be misinterpreted as quiescence: "the suggestion that we act willingly now the way certain Jews, in horror, grief, and shock, were forced to act then, provokes in me an outrage equaled only by my disbelief" (Milowitz 12). Roth compares his allusions and references to the Holocaust to the way he believes many contemporary Jews and Jewish-American writers approach the tragedy:

I think for a Jewish American writer there's not the same impetus, or, oddly, even the necessity, that there is for a Christian American [writer] to take the Holocaust up so nakedly as a subject. [The Holocaust] works through Jewish lives less visibly and in less spectacular ways. And that's the way I prefer to deal with it in fiction. For most reflective American

Jews, I would think, it's simply there, hidden, submerged, emerging, disappearing, unforgotten. You don't make use of it—it makes use of you. (*Reading Myself* 118)

One of the more haunting images in the novel involves young Philip's nightmare about his stamp collection, a scene that seemingly ties the horrors of the alternate/dystopian world with the developing Holocaust-like atmosphere of the story. In his dream, Philip is chased while walking to his friend Earl's house and drops his stamp collection "at the very spot on the sidewalk where we regularly played 'I Declare War'" (*Plot* 42-3). As he checks the condition of his stamps, he realizes that his set of ten 1934 National Park stamps have all been "stained" by a black swastika printed across them, an image that haunts the boy throughout the story. The image of one of Philip's swastika-emblazoned stamps, which appears on the American cover of *The Plot Against America*, was banned upon its release in Germany—the swastika replaced by a large black "X" over the stamp on the cover. Obviously, the horror and fear generated from the Holocaust-like conditions in the novel do not only *seem* real, because historically, the memories and fear are still very real.

The intertwining of genres in *The Plot*—the fragmenting of Roth's pseudo-autobiographical childhood with the coming-of-age tale of the protagonist, combined with the melding of a historical America with a dystopian alternative world, along with an undercurrent of Holocaust-born terror and trauma beneath it all—exploits what Bakhtin refers to as the novel's "generic potentials" ("Discourse 391). Genres

themselves are formed as “results of a historical process, resembl[ing] a patchwork rather than a preconceived design” (Morson 292), and the stratification of the language of these genres “upon entering the novel establishes its own special order within it, [becomes] a unique artistic system, which orchestrates the intentional theme of the author” (299). The generic patchwork makeup of *The Plot* generates a thematic climate in which “fear is everywhere,” as the permeability and interaction of the genres creates a sense of fear and terror at every level of the story, from the personal to the political, from the historical to the fictional. The genres that arise from the depths of *The Plot* create for the contemporaneous reader a radical fictional vision of the past which seems familiar, and a dystopian history that never happened that raises questions about the present.

## CHAPTER 4

### VOICES OF HISTORY: ROTH'S POLYPHONIC NARRATIVE

Much like the numerous permeable genres found in *The Plot Against America*, Roth's narrative voice in the novel possesses a number of likewise permeable "voices," creating a "polyphonic" choir in which the different voices move in and out of the one central narrative voice. The basic narrative strategy employed by Philip Roth (the writer) in *The Plot* is told from the point of view of an older "Philip Roth," the first-person narrator, who relates the story of the fictionalized seven-year-old "Philip Roth," the story's protagonist. On one level, the permeable voices in *The Plot* endowed with the name "Philip Roth"—the voice of the young protagonist and the voice of the older narrator—possess on their own the ability to compete with one another, moving in and out of the story; thus, the narrative voice of "Philip" is itself stratified, consisting of "vocal" or "narrative layers" that emerge throughout the text, much like the linguistic and generic qualities that Bakhtin attributes to the novel. However, on another level, the voice of Philip as narrator can be read as possessing two centrally competing voices: the dominant narrative voice of the older Philip as the reflective adult storyteller, and the voice of "Philip the historian," or "a voice" of history. Both voices, the narrator and the

historian, “sound within a single consciousness” throughout the story, and in doing so “they become, as it were, reciprocally permeable” (*Problems* 239).

Though the multiple voices of “Philip” come into contact, overlap, and rise and fall with the voice of the “historian,” other characters, such as the Roths’ Washington D.C. tour guide, Taylor, produce a form of “double-voiced discourse,” a term Bakhtin uses not to describe the “author-created” dialogues between characters in the novel, but a novelistic area “in the hybridized [...] dialogized, heteroglossia of the author’s own voice” (Morson 326) in which “a dialogue is played out between the author and his characters” (*Dialectic* 320). In order to further understand the “multi-voicedness” that occurs in *The Plot*, examining the interaction of the competing voices, especially the permeating “voices of history,” can further uncover how Roth’s stratification of language and voices still form a single narrative “consciousness” in the novel.

Roth’s exploitation of narrative structures in his works has become a much-touted characteristic of his fiction, from the numerous “assumed” names of narrators such as “David Kepesh” and “Nathan Zuckerman,” to the narrating “Roths” of the writer’s supposed “autobiographical” works such as *Patrimony* and *The Facts*, to the counter-narratives of alternative existences examined in *The Counterlife*. In other works, Roth allows the narrative voice to seamlessly transfer from one narrator to another. For instance, the central narrative voice of Nathan Zuckerman in *American Pastoral* disappears early on in the story shortly after he discovers that his hero Swede Levov is dead. Roth then allows the storytelling duties of the novel to shift to a third-person narrator who reveals the rest of Levov’s story. In contrast, Zuckerman remains



in the novel in *I Married a Communist*, but acts more as “a passive recipient” than a narrator through much of the novel due to the “exhaustive capitulation” of Murray Ringold, the brother of protagonist Ira Ringold, and his attempt at relating *his* side of Ira’s story (Shostak 237).

In *The Plot Against America*, however, Roth maintains throughout the story the first-person narrative of an “older Philip” who relates both the story of the Roth family, which fills the foreground of the novel, and the “historical” happenings of the story, events ranging in scale from the local anti-Semitic-related neighborhood rioting in Weequahic, to the United States government’s establishment of a state of martial law after President Lindbergh’s disappearance. In the text itself, Roth (as author) often alternates between sections of the Roths’ domestic drama and scenes of “national historical events,” with each chapter often presenting long passages of the accounts of the family, followed by sections of “textbook history,” or what the older Philip refers to in the novel as the kind of history “we [as] schoolchildren studied” (*Plot* 114). In the chapter entitled “Bad Days,” Roth (through the voice of the “older Philip”) recalls in the first section of the chapter the collapse of the Roth family, which climaxes with the fistfight of Herman and Alvin, literally destroying a section of the family’s home. This “family” narrative section is then followed by a direct shift to the “historical” developments of the novel’s given time, stories “drawn from the archives of Newark’s Newsreel Theater,” in which eleven days of news is presented in newspaper-form in the text of the novel with each installment relaying pseudo-historical events such as the

death and funeral of Walter Winchell and the White House's reaction to the disappearance of President Lindbergh.

In the aforementioned examples, the narrative "voice" of older Philip and the "voice" of history are textually-separated, exchanging places throughout the novel while at the same time providing the reader with both the Roths' story and its corresponding events in history. Philip's narrative, as both "storyteller" and "historian" are, on the surface, the two dominant competing voices in the narrative, each melding a sense of "personal" history with "national" history. However, in many instances in the novel, the voice of Philip and his historian voice seem to entangle, often making it difficult to differentiate between the two "voices." In the following abbreviated example, young Philip (as narrated from the point of view of the older Philip) sneaks off to the Newsreel Theater by himself in hopes of seeing his Aunt Evelyn in the film footage of a White House banquet. Roth's (the author's) narrative depiction of Philip's mischievous journey competes with the "voice" of history, as the boy's account weaves back and forth with the images that appear on the screen:

A great excitement came over me, not only because of my having pulled off something that was not expected of me, but because enveloped by the fumes of the hundreds of cigarettes and the extravagant odor of the five-cent cigars, I felt deep in the virile magic of a boy masquerading as a man among men.

British land on Madagascar to take over French naval base.

Pierre Laval, chief of Vichy French government, denounces British move as “acts of aggression.”

RAF bombs Stuttgart third consecutive night [...]

And there! Aunt Evelyn, Rabbi Bengelsdorf—past the marine guards, through the doorway, and gone! [...]

When the show was over and the lights went up, a uniformed usher was standing in the aisle motioning with his flashlight.

“You,” he said. “You come with me.” (*Plot* 199-201)

Many times in the novel, as in this example, “history” rises in the narrative voice, seemingly taking it over, and then slowly the narrating voice returns to the voice of the older Philip and his family’s story. At times, these competing voices become almost indistinguishable, creating in the narrative what Bakhtin refers to as “double-voiced discourse,” which by incorporating heteroglossia into the novel, allows the text to express “authorial intentions but in a refracted way” in which a single voice or speech “serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author (*Dialectic* 324). Bakhtin further states that

in such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they—as it were—know about each other (just as two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structured in this

mutual knowledge of each other); it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other. (324)

In *The Plot*, the voice of Taylor, the Washington D.C. tour guide that the Roths encounter during their family vacation, serves as one example of double-voiced discourse. In the story the family is approached by Taylor, a professional guide who offers to drive the family around to the major monuments and museums, who eventually convinces the family that he could save them both time and money on their visit. In their encounters with Taylor, the members of the Roth family converse minimally with him, spending most of their time listening as he reveals highly-detailed accounts concerning both the nation's capitol and American history; in one moment, he reveals that Washington D.C. "alone was developed solely to provide a home for the national government" (*Plot* 61), and in another instance that the "four-cent nineteen hundred and two stamp [...] is the first stamp ever to show an American woman" (74). It becomes apparent that Taylor's rhetoric is encyclopedic in nature, a stark contrast to that of his clients. Whereas the dialogue of Philip's father, Herman, is emotionally-driven (as it is throughout most of the story), to the one point where he exclaims at the Lincoln Memorial to everyone around him that "now that our great ally is Adolf Hitler—why [the White House] now think[s] they can get away with anything" (65), Taylor continues to reel off textbook-quality history, unfazed by Herman's emotional and political outbursts.

Though Taylor occasionally participates in dialogue with the other Roth-family characters, his speech is itself double-voiced, as his voice presents two voices that are

dialogically related—the character’s own voice, used in “conversation” with the Roths, combined with a voice of chronicled or “textbook” history. Roth’s intention with the character of Taylor in the novel is apparently to provide historical information, whether in past or recent history, in an almost encyclopedic verbal format in an unbiased tone. Taylor never responds to any of Herman’s comments about President Lindbergh and his policies; as “a voice of history past,” Taylor can never take a side, never argue with or against the past, his voice dialogically representing the “textbook” history, the historical narrative, which Roth (as author) alters and exploits in the novel.

Bakhtinian scholar, David Lodge, states that the “stylization” subcategory of “double-voiced discourse,” of which Taylor’s dialogue or “voice” would qualify, “occurs when the writer borrows another’s discourse and uses it for his own purposes—with the same general intention as the original, but in the process casting ‘a slight shadow of objectification over it’” (227). In the character of Taylor, Roth borrows the examples of actual “history,” or “what we [as] schoolchildren studied as ‘History,’ harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable” (*Plot* 114) and gives it a “voice,” which in the context of the novel ultimately creates an alternate history *within* the alternate history that Roth has created.

The often-rising voice of “history” in *The Plot* and its competing narrative voice of the older Philip possess, within their own respective voices, other layers or “stratified voices,” creating in the novel what could be termed as a “polyphonic” narrative. As mentioned earlier, the narrative voice of the older Philip both permeates and competes with the voice of the younger Philip, which is the voice that “contributes to the grim

humor in the novel” (Safer 157). Whereas the older Philip’s voice more or less provides the structural and chronological happenings of the story, the voice of the younger Philip often rises out of the “adult” voice to ease for the reader the often-nightmarish “realities” of the family. While on a bus ride to visit his Aunt Evelyn in the midst of his family falling apart, the younger Philip uncomfortably sits across from two nuns, stating that he was “simultaneously hoping and dreading that [he’d] overhear them say something in Catholic. Alas, they were silent, praying [he] supposed, and no less spellbinding for doing it on a bus” (*Plot* 211). Yet, for whatever grim humor young Philip brings to the novel, “fear becomes his central emotion” (Safer 157), as he tries to remove himself from his “Jewishness” by running away to the Catholic orphanage, exclaiming that “I wanted nothing to do with history. I wanted to be a boy on the smallest scale possible. I wanted to be an orphan” (*Plot* 223). Though the voice of the younger Philip brings a level of dark humor to the story, the young boy ultimately wants to escape history, both on the personal level and the national—the “voice” of history that “claims us all.”

By creating the dueling voices of the older and younger “Philip Roth” in the novel, Philip Roth, the author, is obviously trying to create a greater sense of realism in an “unreal” novelistic setting, hoping to blur the line of author/narrator. R.B. Kershner writes about this author/narrator relationship, stating that “...our judgment about the degree of reliability of a narrator is based on the *distance* that the novel implies between the narrator and the author” (121). Though the multiple “Philip Roths” establish a greater sense of reliability than if the author had chosen different narrative/character

names, it should also be acknowledged that “to some extent, of course, every characterized narrator is unreliable, because a perfectly objective presentation of events is impossible” (121). Bakhtin further addresses the author/narrator relationship by stating that the author/creator

represents the world either from the point of view of the hero participating in the represented event, or from the point of view of a narrator, or from that of an assumed author or—finally—without utilizing any intermediary at all he can deliver the story directly from himself as the author pure and simple (in direct authorial discourse). But even in the last instance he can represent the temporal-spatial world and its events only as if he had seen and observed them himself, only as if he were an omnipresent witness to them. (*Dialogic* 256)

Roth creates a narrative structure based around the voice of “Philip” in which the narrator essentially performs not one but all of the tasks that Bakhtin describes above. First, the point of view of the younger Philip, the protagonist or “hero” who we are to believe is the same voice of the narrator separated by time and history, participates in the events in the novel and acts “in conversation” with the “older” Philip. Secondly, Roth himself can also be thought of as the “assumed author” since he places himself fictionally by name in the text; while one can also argue that Roth tries to impart “direct authorial discourse” through his use of the “autobiographical” and historical elements in the story as well, in hopes of creating a world as realistic as “if he had seen and observed them himself” (256). However, this is not to imply that Roth, the author, is

part of the fictional world he has created; but instead by using his own name in the novel he is merely trying to enhance the level of realism in both a story and a history that never happened. By complicating the basic narrative structure of the novel, Roth blurs the boundaries that separate author/narrator and autobiographical fact/fiction in the story, which creates a greater sense of chaos, ultimately forcing the reader to question what is factual and what is fictional—a mystery which contributes to the novel’s undercurrent of fear.

The voices of the narrative in *The Plot* are matched by the stratified layers of history—a voice that permeates all aspects of the novel, from the blurring of the alternate historical/dystopian genres, to the chronotopic motifs, to the double-voiced characters. Yet, within this large-scale “voice” of history, the voice of the assimilated Jewish American is a constant “thread” that runs throughout the narrative and the novel. This “voice” of the Jewish American is itself double-voiced, a voice that converses and competes with other “Jewish” voices in *The Plot*, such as the fictional Rabbi Bengelsdorf, while also combating the voices of anti-Semitism that move in and out of the text: whether it be the unnamed anti-Semitic voices of characters that directly harass the Roth family in Washington D.C., or the fictional and even-more-appalling actual historic words of Charles Lindbergh. The assimilated Jewish American voice at times seems to also compete with itself, as Jewish values clash with the ideals of America.

Roth’s questioning of Jewish American identity in his works is hardly new. Beginning with his first published novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth has continued to examine in his works the anxieties and problems brought about by American Jewish



assimilation. Most recently, in *American Pastoral*, Roth's novel follows the assimilation of Swede Levov, the blonde Jewish American athlete who identifies himself with Johnny Appleseed, because he "wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a Protestant Christian—nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American" (316). For the Swede, the Edenic qualities of America collapse in the battle with his own "Jewishness" in the story as his daughter, Merry, rejects not only her parents and her Jewish heritage, but her country as well, stating that "for her, being an American was loathing America" (213). These same issues of identity and assimilation run through the fabric of *The Plot*, especially through the voice and character of Philip, as he watches his family and his own identity perish alongside the ideals of his country.

The "voice of the Jew" that permeates *The Plot Against America* has caused some critics to write that the story is Roth's "most Jewish work" in its examination of the plight and demise of the Jewish family. The government establishment of the Office of American Absorption, Homestead 42, the Just Folks programs, and the ensuing riots beginning in Detroit—all attempts at separating and destroying the Jewish American family—create in the novel for young Philip and his family "a nightmarish vision of America's anti-Semitic fury roaring eastward through the pipeline of [highway] 22 and surging from 22 into Liberty Avenue and pouring from Liberty avenue straight into our Summit Avenue alleyway and on up our back stairs like waters of a flood" (*Plot* 343). Roth relates in the novel that the larger "voice of the Jew" that arises in the text stems from this war-time generation of Jewish Americans, a people that

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, whose vernacular expressiveness they wielded effortlessly and, whether at the card table or while making a sales pitch, with the easygoing command of the indigenous population. Their being Jews issued from their being themselves, as did their being American. (*Plot 220*)

For young Philip, the Jewish “native tongue” or “voice” is one of the factors that has contributed to the demise of Jews in America, causing him at one point to question the origins of anti-Semitism in the world in an attempt to make sense of the current state of things for Jews in World War II America, as he thinks to himself that

This then was the culmination of our quest—Jesus Christ, who by their [Christians] reasoning was everything and who by my reasoning had fucked everything up: because if it weren’t for Christ there wouldn’t be Christians, and if it weren’t for Christians there wouldn’t be anti-Semitism, and if it weren’t for anti-Semitism there wouldn’t be Hitler, and if it weren’t for Hitler Lindbergh would never be president, and if Lindbergh weren’t President... (*Plot 120*)

Philip’s simplistic yet deterministic view of history links his “Jewish voice” to the then-horrific existence of the “American voice” in the novel—a voice that has turned to one of fascism and dwindling civil liberties; a voice of pogroms and riots, a voice of chaos and fear. The American ideals that Jewish Americans held so dear for

themselves and their families disappear when Lindbergh takes over the White House, causing Philip early on in the story to question everything he understood as “American.” He states that as a Jew, the aviation hero’s nomination by the Republican Party “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 in the world” (*Plot 7*). Philip’s vision of a secure America becomes more tainted in Washington D.C. as anti-Semitic insults are aimed at the family from passersby, followed by his family’s eviction from their hotel. Herman’s depiction of their experience in the nation’s capitol echoes the voice of the “alien” Jew in America: the American Lindbergh supporters “live in a dream, and we [Jews] live in a nightmare” (76).

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Shylock the Jew, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, declares that "the curse never fell upon our nation till now" (50), seemingly accepting that the "Jewish nation" of his time, with its own curse of anti-Semitism and fear, was finally being felt and recognized by himself and all other Jews. Shylock's words echo through *The Plot Against America*, as the assimilated Jewish American nation that the Roth family belongs to is held captive by the curse of fear within what was supposed to be its own American democratic nation. The America that Roth presents in the story, as well as in his trilogy, is itself cursed by "the collision of private life with national history" (Kanowski 120). It is an America in which the Roth family in *The Plot*, the Levovs of *American Pastoral*, Ira Ringold in *I Married a Communist*, and Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain* are all forced to become "strangers in a strange land" in which the disasters of history are "suffered without foreknowledge, without preparation, by [Jews] whose American expectations, though neither innocent nor delusional, were for something very different from what they got" (*Times* 7).

It would seem for Roth that one of the biggest nightmares in America is the societal view that assumes that the events of history, no matter if good or evil, appear in retrospect to have been inevitable. In *The Plot*, Roth analyzes this viewpoint of the

inevitability of history by altering the 1940 presidential election, which in the story creates a dystopian America. The election of Lindbergh, as Roth suggests, was never inevitable, but is made to appear that way in hindsight. The myth of historical inevitability provides a more agreeable way for most people to view history; in other words, a “textbook” presentation of history removes any elements of uncertainty, making history look simplistic. In his works, Roth attempts to prove that history is deterministic, with each historic event being “the *inevitable* consequence of *antecedent* states of affairs,” a philosophy reflected in Tom Moylan’s discussion of dystopian literature:

Another lesson is that whatever bad times are upon us have been produced by systemic conditions and human choices that preceded the present moment—but also that such conditions can be changed only by remembering that process and organizing against it. One of the dangers of the official and popular responses to an event like 11 September is therefore the erasure of memory of such root causes—an erasure intensified by the ideological work of the political apparatus. It lies, however, within the remit of dystopian narrative to challenge the closure and thus to reopen society, and history. (241)

My intent in this paper has been to examine how Roth “reopens” history in *The Plot Against America* by unearthing the novel’s many generic layers and polyphonic voices that create the seemingly contemporaneous fear that arises from the text. Roth’s creation of an alternate America, a dystopian vision of a fascist World War II America,

constructs a sense of fear through its historical/fictional cognitive dissonance, a sense of anxiety that arises from *The Plot*'s ability to force the reader to question the inconsistencies of what is history and what is fiction in the text. Roth further complicates the reader's ability to determine fact from fiction within the story by constructing a pseudo-autobiographical narrative and setting based on his own childhood. The references in the novel to Holocaust-like conditions within Roth's dystopian world brings for the first time a sense of "concentrationary fear" to America, a "Jewish fear" that Steven Milowitz refers to as the "unintelligible and uninterpretable fear rooted in history, ambiguous and menacing" (2).

In examining the complex narrative structure of *The Plot*, the double-voiced "Philip," along with the novel's competing polyphonic voices, I have offered many examples of how, for Roth, the rising voices of history often place the protagonist into "a state of fictive uncertainty about his own identity: about how much [he is] the Jew, [and] how much [he is] the Newark child trying to hold on to or repair to the myths of his own earliest security" (Cooper 3). The security that young Philip tries to maintain is taken away by what the author deems as the "'sudden thing' that is history," specifically American history, that clashes and distorts with the boy's understanding of what it means to be a Jewish American (Shostak 233). Many questions of identity and Jewish American assimilation are portrayed individually in the Roth family: Herman's immovable stance concerning his Constitutional rights as an American; the internal struggles of Philip's mother, Bess, and her desire to move to Canada in order to be with other Jewish families; Sandy's direct rebuking of his Jewish heritage and his naïve and

rebellious devotion to the Lindbergh administration and the “Just Folks” program; and young Philip, who at one point in the story decides that being Jewish is not worth the pain and suffering he has seen in his family, opting to run away to a Catholic orphanage “to resist a disaster our family and our friends could no longer elude and might not survive” (*Plot* 232). For each member of the family, an “ambiguous and menacing” sense of fear is created by his/her own loss of both personal and national security.

What Roth has created in *The Plot* is a novel in the same vein as his American Trilogy—a work that examines and refracts current history, a talent that Berman refers to as Roth’s ability to “simply run his eye across the modern horizon and [gather] in the sights,” and place it within another section of time and space (5). In other words, Roth explores in his works how from “the chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of inspiration), emerge the reflected and created chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text)” (*Dialogic* 253). Roth’s counter-factual chronotope in *The Plot* taps into an all-encompassing sense of *fear*—an important aspect of the novel that most critics have failed to analyze.

The uncertainty of our own post-9/11 times, combined with the Holocaust-like America and competing voices of history, youth, Judaism, and Americanism that surface from the text, contributes to the pronounced contemporaneous feeling of “fear” in reading *The Plot*. Since *American Pastoral*, Roth has continued to examine the cultural milieu in which he writes by placing his novels in other “chronotopes” in American history that, on some level, profoundly affected the writer in his real life. In *The Plot*, Roth (either intentionally or unintentionally) encapsulates the intense fear and

paranoia that most of the United States felt on September 11, 2001, the historic tragedy that occurred within the creative “three years of work” that Roth spent on the novel (*Times* 6). Although there are no references to these tragedies in *The Plot Against America*, the title of the novel itself rings of a September 11 newspaper headline. Roth does re-create in the novel an overwhelming level of fear, a “fear that was everywhere,” an emotion that Americans experienced in real life in the days and weeks that followed these horrific events. In an interview on *The Today Show* shortly after the book’s release, Roth alludes to the fear that encompasses the novel and its influence on the post-9/11 reader:

I think many people who seem to be responding to this book, in ways they haven’t responded necessarily to previous books of mine, may be grasping hold of it now because the atmosphere of fear in the book touches something that’s alive in their experience now. (*Today* 3)

Roth captures this level of fear in *The Plot Against America*, while seemingly proposing that the concentrationary fear and its “*altered universe* that is born as a result of unprecedented evil” is no longer limited to just Jews—it is now, after the 9/11 nightmare, a feeling of fear and powerlessness that all Americans are cursed with as well (Milowitz 2). The novel recreates a fear that for Jews is as old as time itself, while for those of us currently “living in the history” of a post-September 11 America, it is a fear that is still all too new. The traumatic effects of history are most apparent in Philip’s narrative in the final chapter, as he addresses the sense of vulnerability that he



and his family and their fellow Jewish Americans feel in October, 1942, a passage which sounds eerily like September, 2001:

The fear was everywhere, the *look* was everywhere, in the eyes of our protectors especially, the look that comes in the split second after you have locked the door and realize you don't have the key. We had never before observed the adults all helplessly thinking the same thoughts. The strongest among them did their best to be calm and brave and to sound realistic when they told us that our worries would soon be over and the regular round of life restored, but when they turned on the news they were devastated... (*Plot* 329)

Roth in effect reopens the voices of history in *The Plot Against America* to examine “what the [current] times have produced” (Baccolini 238). As noted earlier, many critics are still questioning both the fictional and historical merits of *The Plot Against America*, asking where this novel fits into Roth's corpus of work as a post-American Trilogy novel, while others question the allegorical aspects of the novel and the story's possible interpretive ties to the presidency of George W. Bush, an approach to the novel that Roth himself stated in *The New York Times* “would be a mistake” (5). Roth does present numerous scenes in the story that echo “real” events in recent American history, as Ross Douthat recognizes in his review of the novel in *Policy Review*, stating that

there are too many echoes and resonances for Roth to plead writerly innocence—too many easy parallels between Lindbergh in his airplane

and Bush in his flight suit; between the fiction of an evil, manipulative vice president from a western state (in Roth's novel, it is Burton K. Wheeler, an isolationist senator from Montana) and the liberal caricature of Dick Cheney. (78)

Paul Berman cites these same comparisons in *The New York Times*, stating that in the novel

Roth shows us President Lindbergh in his aviator's gear, speaking in a plain style—and you would have to be pretty dimwitted not to recall our current president, striding around the carrier Abraham Lincoln in his own flying attire, delivering his 'Mission Accomplished' speech. (4)

The comparisons of the novel's fictional situations with actual recent historical events appear to go beyond any Lindbergh/Bush comparisons, as Berman also alludes in his article to the “cloyingly named ‘Just Folks’ program” in the novel, and how it parallels the current and “equally cloying Patriot Act and the hardships of immigrants from Muslim countries in the last few years, not to mention the unfortunate fate of the Geneva Conventions of War, and sundry other worrisome aspects of our present predicament” (4). In the end, Berman does, however, concede that *The Plot* “is not an allegorical tract about the present age, with each scene or character corresponding to events of our time” (5).

*The Plot Against America* is not, as Berman states, an allegorical tract of our current historical/political situation; however, the contemporaneous analogies that Berman alludes to display Roth's ability to present what Bakhtin describes as the

novel's ability (as a genre) to reveal "authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (*Dialectic* 324), as Roth's historical refractions concerning the Bush administration appear to be the author's "toying" with both history and the reader's historical sensibilities in the text—refracting history through what one might call a "shattered" piece of glass.

Because only a few scholarly articles have been published concerning *The Plot Against America*, the future direction for scholarship concerning this most recent Roth novel is still wide open. I feel that in this paper I have merely scratched the surface in examining Roth's use of history in *The Plot*; a more complete analysis of the role of history throughout Roth's entire canon is not only possible but I think, with the May 2006 release of his newest work, *Everyman*, it is necessary. Some scholars may be tempted to question the political rhetoric, both fictional and historical, that infiltrates *The Plot*, or they may examine from a "true" historical standpoint the author's interpretations of the "actual" historical characters in the story.

However, the one aspect of *The Plot* that I believe should be addressed by future scholars is the role of anti-Semitism in the story, along with an exploration of the voices of racism and hatred that compete in the text (the possibility of *The Plot* dealing with *actual* anti-Semitism in America has been dismissed by many of the early reviewers). Considering the numerous examinations of "real" post-9/11 anti-Semitism now in print, from Abraham H. Foxman's book, *Never Again?* to Bernard Lewis's recent article published in *The American Scholar* entitled "The New Anti-Semitism," in which he redefines modern Jewish hatred as being based on the "accusation[s] of cosmic, satanic

evil attributed to Jews” (27), Roth’s novel could be examined as a work that contributes to our understanding of the problems that modern-day Jews have in America and throughout the world.

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