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Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*: Transgressive Historical Fiction

This paper discusses the ways in which the employment of specific narrative techniques and generic paradigms shapes the presentation of the historical reality of World War II in Philip Roth's 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*. It might seem that with regard to the narrative construction of history the book does not have much new to offer and relies on the achievements of what Linda Hutcheon has famously called postmodern historiographic metafiction (124-140). It uses the speculative mode, exploits the authorial figure, transcends generic conventions, revolves around historical reinterpretations, and questions political dogmas. However, as it is the case with all major works which have been recognized as milestones of historiographic metafiction, the novel quality of Roth's text does not depend on the mere application of particular narrative components, hardly original in themselves as they invariably and inevitably emanate from the existing aesthetic and ideological contexts, but rather on the unique combination of such components. In *The Plot Against America* the combination of fiction and history yields a certain transgressive effect, which has to do with the employment of the genre of alternate history. As Gavriel D. Rosenfeld points out, this genre has undergone a dynamic development since the end of World War II, more recently attracting the attention of mainstream writers and serious academics, with historians among them (6). Karen Hellekson claims that alternate histories can fulfill a practical function in historical studies because "they foreground the notion of cause and effect that is so important to historians when they construct the narrative" (16). Rosenfeld sees alternate history as a reflection of "the progressive discrediting of political ideologies in the West since 1945": "In insisting that everything in the past could have been different, in stressing the role of contingency in history, and in emphasizing the open-endedness of historical change, alternate history is inherently anti-deterministic" (6).

Admittedly, Rosenfeld recognizes the subversive potential of the genre which has helped to effect fundamental changes in the epistemological status of history. This paper highlights a different, though related, feature of alternate history, namely its transgressive character. Rather than seeing *The Plot Against America* as an example of literary subversion, understood as an ideological consequence of aesthetic activity, this paper

deals with the book's potential for transgression, defined in aesthetic terms as an instance of a radical violation of the established variants of representation. Thus, in *The Plot Against America* this violation entails an inclusion of the paradigm of alternate history into the novel's structure and a subsequent interference with this paradigm in such a way as to strengthen, in Rosenfeld's words, "a mimetic relationship to historical reality" (5). In essence, such an operation stands in opposition to the typical strategies of constructing the world presented in alternate history, as these strategies are anti-mimetic and result in estrangement, the defining feature of the genre.

Rosenfeld claims that alternate history is "inherently presentist" insofar as it "explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the state of the contemporary world." He distinguishes two major models of engaging the present in alternate history: fantasy and nightmare. The former envisions "the alternate past as superior to the real past and thereby typically expresses a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are today," whereas the latter depicts "the alternate past as inferior to the real past and thus usually articulates a sense of contentment with the contemporary status quo" (11). Symptomatically, both these modes of alluding to the present signify departures from it and, in the metanarrative domain, they establish a sort of safe distance between the reality known to and experienced by the reader and the reality constructed in the text. Roth's transgressive gesture consists in undermining the illusion of such a safe distance between the two separate realities. This is achieved by means of narrative solutions which conflate the reader's perspective with the narrator's. It can be inferred from Rosenfeld's description of the genre that in alternate history the present functions as a source of ideas and experiences, while it does not have a place in the narrative structure of the text. What makes the literary works representing this genre believable is the evidence of history, and not the intrusions of the present, hence the frequent inventions of documentary materials. *The Plot Against America* stands out as alternate history because it transcends a kind of self-containment which characterizes the narrative universes to be found in texts belonging to the genre. This self-containment has to do with the fact that the temporal development of the narrative cannot reach beyond the limit determined by the reader's experiential sphere. What Roth does in his novel is, precisely, encroach upon this sphere by creating a shared temporality for the reader and the author-narrator, "Philip Roth," and thus engaging the reader in more direct ways.

In Roth's alternative scenario, the famous airman Charles A. Lindbergh is the presidential candidate of the Republican Party and wins the 1940 elections, having defeated Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was running for his third term as president of the United States. The new president, known for his admiration for Nazi Germany, advocates American isolationism and diametrically redefines the strategic aims of

American foreign policy, opposing his predecessor's interventionist doctrine. Moreover, Lindbergh begins to strengthen the ties between his government and the Nazi authorities: he signs a neutrality pact with Ribbentrop, and then invites the German minister to the White House. There is a surge of anti-Semitism, evidently inspired by the president, who had identified Jews as the main advocates of interventionist policy and accused them of sabotaging the vital political interests of the United States. Jews begin to fear that the American "Kristallnacht" is bound to happen. However, as if in an effort to appease the Jewish community, Lindbergh employs as his close advisor Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, "the religious leader of New Jersey Jewry" (34). The new administration launches the program of relocation, whose declared aim is to strengthen the integration of American society by way of resettling families from the urban East to the rural Midwest. As it turns out, the program embraces only Jewish families, therefore it is seen as an evident case of political repression, geared at segregation. In an act of discontent and defiance, the popular Jewish journalist Walter Winchell, the most outspoken critic of the new presidency, announces his decision to run in the next elections and to confront Lindbergh on the strictly political ground. Winchell embarks on a tour of the country, and he is assassinated during one of his public appearances. His death aggravates the existing antagonism: there is a series of protest marches against the president and, at the same time, a series of pogroms. In such tense circumstances, Lindbergh disappears, his plane never to be found. After a short, but stormy, period of the rule of Lindbergh's vice-president, Roosevelt returns to power and history returns to the course which we know from handbooks.

The historical account and the narrative line constitute mutual frameworks, and this connection is highlighted at the very beginning of the novel by the elaborate second sentence of the opening paragraph, inextricably binding pure invention (Lindbergh's presidency) with absolute fact (Roth's Jewishness): "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 re-imagines his childhood, returning to the time when he was between seven and nine years old and speculating about his parents' attitudes and decisions at the time of political terror. In essence, the story in *The Plot Against America* gradually reveals all sorts of divisions arising in the family as a result of the turbulent political situation. For example, Philip's elder brother Sandy, fascinated like so many others with Lindbergh's manliness, rebels against his father Herman and volunteers for the program for young boys from urban areas who work on farms for a period of time. On the other hand, Herman has to deal with his radically inclined nephew Alvin, who joins the Canadian army, fights on the European front, and finally returns severely wounded to his native New Jersey. There is also aunt

Evelyn, who marries Rabbi Bengelsdorf and whom, for that reason, Roth senior treats with utmost intolerance. Predictably enough, Evelyn becomes the most influential member of the family and arranges for Herman's family to be selected for the program of relocation, which has disastrous consequences for her relatives. Having refused to take an office in Kentucky, Philip's father loses his job in an insurance company. The family lives, as the title of the last chapter has it, in "perpetual fear." Despite the hopes for improvement after Lindbergh's disappearance and Roosevelt's reelection, the Roths are acutely aware that there have been too many wrongs that cannot be easily compensated for and that there is no guarantee that another Lindbergh will never appear in America again.

The complex literary status of *The Plot Against America* begins with the novel's place in Roth's output; namely, the book belongs among the so-called "Roth novels," which feature the protagonist named after the author. *The Plot Against America* is heretofore the latest addition to this set, rather than cycle, including the following earlier works: *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988), *Deception: A Novel* (1990), *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991), and *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993). These narratives constitute an important context for the analysis of the generic features of Roth's alternate history. The writer's concern with genre in all the "Roth novels" is evident in the use of subtitles, which purport to define the genre of individual works with greater or lesser precision. *The Plot Against America* is the only novel in the set without such a qualifying subtitle, essentially because this narrative evades all unequivocal literary classifications. However, this is quite in keeping with the generic logic—or rather the lack of it—underlying the "Roth novels" and pointing to the indeterminate nature of literary creation. The point is that the texts in this set utilize types of poetics which, in principle, stand in stark opposition: mimetism and anti-mimetism. Thus, *The Facts* and *Patrimony* are overtly autobiographical narratives, the former depicting the writer's childhood, youth, and his beginnings in the literary profession, the latter focusing on the last years of Herman Roth's life and exploring the complicated father-son relations. By contrast, *Deception*, the story of a young writer's love affair in London, with its manifest self-reflexivity, comes closest to a flirt with post-modernism, perhaps alongside *Counterlife* (1986) from the "Zuckerman novels." Finally, *Operation Shylock* is an authorial fantasy about the writer's trip to Israel to attend the trial of John Demjanjuk. There arises a question as to where *The Plot Against America* fits in such a polarized configuration. It seems that despite the whole metafictional content, *The Plot Against America* gravitates toward the mimetic autobiographical model, represented by *The Facts* and *Patrimony*. The powerful autobiographical illusion emerging from this completely fictitious narrative results from the presence of

a crucial element of the autobiographical convention, that is the recollection of childhood. Philippe Lejeune writes that although the memories of childhood are uncertain and discontinuous, at the same time they are “intense,” and this “intensity” guarantees truthfulness (242).

The use of the autobiographical convention influences the construction of the historical context. Roth smoothly combines the self-narrative with the historical account, treating the former as a sort of legitimization for the latter. Interestingly, unlike E.L. Doctorow, who in his fiction often places historical figures and invented characters side by side, Roth reserves for the people known from history a distinct narrative level and a distinct discourse, thus marking the distance which is inevitable in the study of the past. The historical part of the novel has a documentary value, as it contains excerpts from or summaries of speeches and written documents, not necessarily real. Roth emphasizes the dramatic aspect of the historical account by placing the turning-point sequence—from Lindbergh’s disappearance to Roosevelt’s re-election—in it, and not in the self-narrative. The autobiographical part testifies to the conditions of living in the epoch. Roth supplements *The Plot Against America* with a bibliography relevant for the subject of the book, biographical notes on all major historical characters introduced in the narrative, the transcript of Lindbergh’s infamous speech “Who Are the War Agitators?,” and finally a short passage from A. Scott Berg’s biography of Lindbergh, published in 1998 (364-391). Such a supplement refers the reader to sources enabling the verification of Roth’s story, and in this way, paradoxically, it provides the background knowledge that allows one to appreciate Roth’s sophisticated reinvention of history. The modification of facts is limited to the years 1940-1942, which constitute the time of action. Andrew S. Gross comments on the implications of such a construction of time:

The novel’s counterfactual structure offers... an inverted center, representing on the one hand a terrible fascist episode in the United States, but on the other hand going to great lengths to integrate this episode into actual history, and even into the life of someone named ‘Philip Roth.’ We don’t need to confuse author and narrator to see that the story would have had a very different significance had the narrator been named Zuckerman... It would have also had a different significance had the Lindbergh episode changed the course of history.... The book is perhaps most surprising in its reassertion of normalcy: even if it *had* happened here, things would not be so different. (“It Might Have Happened Here”)¹

¹ I wish to thank Andy Gross for allowing me to read his manuscript.

The presence of the limiting temporal framework is crucial for increasing the credibility of Roth's alternate history in that it endows the author-narrator and the reader with the privilege of hindsight. Both the reader and the author-narrator know that the pessimistic scenario, foreshadowed by the events in the novel, did not come true. The knowledge shared with the author-narrator makes the reader, as it were, more concerned with the book's central problem and more sensitive to the text's suggestiveness. Therefore, if the reader responds to the novel with disturbance or in any other emotional way, his reaction lends further credence to Roth's invention.

The reader's presumed involvement would have far lesser significance if it had not been for the existence of the temporal dimension shared by the author-narrator and the reader. This common temporality is implied most strikingly in the following allusion to the assassination of Robert Kennedy:

What made the death of Walter Winchell worthy of instantaneous nationwide coverage wasn't only that his unorthodox campaign had touched off the country's worst anti-Semitic rioting outside Nazi Germany, but that the murder of a mere candidate for the presidency was unprecedented in America. Though Presidents Lincoln and Garfield had been shot and killed in the second half of the nineteenth century and McKinley at the start of the twentieth, and though in 1933 FDR had survived an assassination attempt that had instead taken the life of his Democratic supporter Chicago's Mayor Cermack, it wasn't until twenty six years after Winchell's assassination that a second presidential candidate would be gunned down – that was New York's Democratic senator Robert Kennedy, fatally shot in the head after winning his party's California primary on Tuesday, June 4, 1968. (272)

This passage is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, it establishes the time of narration as "after 1968"; accordingly, this single flash-forward punctures the temporal plane delimited by the time of action and opens a space for the reader to occupy as the author-narrator's contemporary. Secondly, the passage illustrates the dynamics of contextualization which defies the standard logic of historical thinking. Apparently, the only possible historical sequence where an earlier event precedes a later one is retained here, however, in functional terms, as an instantly recognizable analogy, the death of Robert Kennedy, that is the later event, constitutes a point of reference for what—in the novel—happened earlier. Thus, the death of Walter Winchell and the assassination of Robert Kennedy become mutual contexts. Another example of a flash-forward is less ostensible, but no less revealing:

As everyone knows, President Lindbergh was not found or heard from again, though stories circulated throughout the war and for a decade afterward, along with the rumors about other prominent missing persons of that turbulent era, like Martin Bormann, Hitler's private secretary, who was thought to have eluded the Allied armies by escaping to Juan Peron's Argentina—but who most likely perished during the last days of Nazi Berlin—and Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat whose distribution of Swedish passports saved some twenty thousand Hungarian Jews from extermination by the Nazis, although he himself disappeared, probably into a Soviet jail, when the Russians occupied Budapest in 1945. Among the dwindling number of Lindbergh conspiracy scholars, reports on clues and sightings have continued to appear in intermittently published newsletters devoted to speculation on the unexplained fate of America's thirty-third president. (320-312)

Unlike the reference to Kennedy, this interference with the temporal development determined by the time of action is very subtle, and at the same time very intricate, as it works on several different levels of association. Thus, in the beginning Roth establishes a contemporary perspective of looking at events by evoking the present common knowledge; the phrase "as everyone knows" tells everything in this respect. Then he mentions Bormann and Wallenberg, both of whom vanished in mysterious circumstances in or around 1945. Admittedly, such allusions perfectly suit a narrative set at the time of World War II; the fact remains, however, that the year 1945 is outside the primary temporal structure. Last but not least, the author-narrator writes about "Lindbergh conspiracy scholars," pointing to a particular practice in the post-war study of history. Of course, conspiracy theories were not an invention of the twentieth century, but it was in the second half of that century that they gained popularity because the circumstances of so many dramatic events since World War II could not be fully explained. The skepticism underlying late-twentieth-century methods of historical investigation helps to shape the author-narrator's perspective. Ironically enough, Roth's reliance on speculation in *The Plot Against America* suggests his affinity with "conspiracy scholars."

The existence of the common ground for the reader and the author-narrator is strengthened by the possible correspondences between the events depicted in *The Plot Against America* and the events that were taking place in the United States and in the world around the time of the novel's publication. As Rosenfeld observes: "[m]ost likely, Roth wanted his novel to serve as a warning about the contemporary dangers facing America in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the war in Iraq" (155-156). Indeed, Rosenfeld is not the only critic to believe that "[i]n portraying the United States becoming a fascist-

like state under the administration of an ill-qualified, naïve, incompetent president, Roth offers a not-so-thinly veiled critique of the United States under the administration of President George Bush” (Rosenfeld 156). However, as Michael Rothberg argues, this political and historical correspondence involves a kind of reversal of situations and their consequences insofar as the novel shows the disastrous results of the isolationist policy, while the recent developments in American foreign affairs, in a dramatic way, reveal the traps of interventionism. The critic concludes that “[s]uch provocative reversals... frustrate attempts to draw too straight a line between the novel and any given political context.” To further substantiate his point about the ambiguity of the political interpretation of *The Plot Against America*, Rothberg adds that the “evocation of anti-semitism gone wild might be read... as an indirect indictment of the contemporary resurgence of right-wing Christianity in American public life” (64). The critic implies a certain elusive quality of Roth’s strategies of contextualization. It seems that this elusiveness is the resort available to the writer who wishes to defy somehow—with his limited means—what he calls in the book “history’s... outsized intrusion[s]” (184).

Roth himself is ambivalent on the issue of alleged contextual similarities. On the one hand, in his essay “The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*,” he dissuades the readers from searching for political clues hidden in the text:

Some readers are going to want to take this book as a roman a clef to the present moment in America. That would be a mistake. I set out to do exactly what I’ve done: reconstruct the years 1940-42 as they might have been if Lindbergh, instead of Roosevelt, had been elected president in the 1940 election. I am not pretending to be interested in those two years—I am interested in those two years.

On the other hand, in conclusion he offers a predictably harsh judgment of George W. Bush:

And now Aristophanes, who surely must be God, has given us George W. Bush, a man unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation like this one, and who has merely reaffirmed for me the maxim that informed the writing of all these books and that makes our lives as Americans as precarious as anyone else’s: all the assurances are provisional, even here in a 200-year-old democracy. We are ambushed, even as free Americans in a powerful republic armed to the teeth, by the unpredictability that is history.

The recognition of the unpredictable course of history is precisely where Roth’s alternative scenario and his view of the present-day America converge. The writer even

quotes from his own novel in order to articulate his point with greater emphasis (113-114). In other words, in the authorial commentary, Roth does the very thing that he tries to prevent others from doing: he draws implicit analogies where analogies should not be made. Of course, unlike the readers and critics whose intentions Roth anticipates and whom he thus disarms, he himself does not compare two political realities, but uses them as illustrations of the general nature of the historical process. In consequence, he treats the invented and the existing evidence with equal seriousness, provoking the comparisons which he openly denies.

In *The Plot Against America*, there is a paradoxical balance between the falseness of events and the truth of feelings. In her discussion of the novel, Hana Wirth-Nesher poses the question: “What is achieved in a fictional autobiography that cannot be achieved by historical writing?,” and offers the following answer:

History aims to determine what happened, to ascertain the facts, and then to write a story that is the result of interpreting and evaluating those facts. Fiction aims to give us the truth of lived experience, the truth of emotional and psychological affect, rather than a cool appraisal of past events. In other words, what is lost in history is uncertainty, whether it is personal history in autobiography or group history. (170)

The use of alternate history allows Roth to magnify the dilemmas faced and anxieties experienced by American Jews at the time of World War II and, subsequently, to diagnose them in their entire complexity. The manifest falseness of the text is inextricable from the profundity of insight. The author-narrator uses himself as an example of the overwhelming influence of the circumstances which remained beyond his comprehension as a boy. Young Philip’s nightmares, anxieties, and obsessive or compulsive behaviors reflect the way American Jews feel about the new, extremely tense situation in which they found themselves after Lindbergh’s election. The self-narrative in *The Plot Against America* reads like a record of gloomy fantasies and erratic behaviors. For instance, in his dream Philip is terrified to “discover” that the stamps in his favorite set depicting the American national parks—one might say national treasures—have been marked with big swastikas: “across the cliffs, the woods, the rivers, the peaks, the geysers, the gorges, the granite coastline... across everything in America that was the bluest and the greenest and the whitest and to be preserved forever in these pristine reservations, was printed a black swastika” (43). This is a well-known episode, since it inspired the graphic design that appears on the covers of most of the editions of *The Plot Against America*: the stamp with a view of the Yosemite Park and a swastika dominating the whole picture. The national parks represent the haven of childhood fantasies, while

the swastika signifies a brutal intrusion upon this imaginary realm. Symptomatically, young Philip loses his invaluable stamp collection while sleepwalking. It is not only nightmares that evade the controlling force of consciousness, but also compulsive behaviors. One of the boy's favorite activities becomes following strangers and learning about their secrets, as if most people around him wished to fulfill various devilish plans. Such a way of spending time apparently bespeaks of a sort of paranoid tendency in the child. Apart from that, Philip steals clothes from one of his friends, even though he does not have any use for them. The common denominator for all these peculiarities is fear, the main subject of the book, stated directly in the opening sentence: "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear" (1). Timothy Parrish further describes this fear as "[t]he fear of being orphaned – being evacuated from your parents and thus your history."

The method of writing about history in such a way as to make intense personal experience authenticate false historical material is the narrative feature which connects *The Plot Against America* to Roth's earlier novel *The Ghost Writer* (1979). In this book, Nathan Zuckerman overhears the secret conversation between E.I. Lonoff, whom he considers the greatest living Jewish American writer, and his secretary Amy Bellette, claiming that she is Anne Frank. The circumstances of Zuckerman's discovery have a rather preposterous aura: he hears voices coming from the room above his bedroom, climbs onto the desk and perches on its edge, having stepped onto a pile of books to be able to put his ear to the ceiling. In a sense, the revelation comes to him as a reward for the acrobatic exercise he has performed. In any case, he is so deeply moved by Amy's sacrilegious usurpation that he finally begins to care about the tragedy of Jews during the war, something that the men of authority in his family and community could never persuade him to pay heed to. *The Ghost Writer* is not just "a parody of the cult of Anne Frank," as Efraim Sicher describes the novel (109), it is an insight into the emergence and persistence of phantoms. In *The Plot Against America* Roth goes much further and calls phantoms into life. The blatant historical fantasy thus reveals its power of illumination.

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