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'Perpetual Fear': Repetition and Fantasy in *The Plot against America* by Philip Roth

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine antisemitism as a powerful notion in Philip Roth's *The Plot against America* and the way it is rooted in the "Perpetual Fear" leitmotif, an almost transparent literary transposition of Hannah Arendt's major tenet: "eternal anti-Semitism." It primarily targets repetition and fantasy as they are the stylistic devices it is associated with. By introducing antisemitism as the result of Charles Lindbergh's being fictitiously elected President of the USA, Roth boldly combines history and fiction, collective History and personal memory. He successfully undermines the myth of the American hero and gives this pseudo-political novel a personal twist due to the first person narration.

*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. (Plot 1)*

Fear certainly presides over the incipit of Philip Roth's *The Plot against America, a Novel*, published in 2004; the very first sentence literally encapsulates the whole narrative beginning with the word fear and

ending with a chapter entitled "Perpetual fear." As a matter of fact this forceful incipit gives the key to the novel's major thematic content (fear) as well as to the main narrative strategy: repetition, so systematic a repetition that it creates clusters of obsession. And it so happens that this hyperbolic, all-invading fear is made all the more powerful as it is still there, poisoning the narrator's present narration of his past memories. There is no paranoia, though, as some critics may have suggested. For what is this time-transcending "perpetual fear" directly connected with "Jews" if not a eu-

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phemistic reference to antisemitism?

Besides, “perpetual fear” indirectly recalls the “eternal antisemitism” doctrine that Hannah Arendt denounced as “giv[ing] the best possible alibi for all horrors” (Arendt 7) in her chapter about “Antisemitism as an outrage to common sense” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951, revised 1973). This is not to say that *The Plot Against America* is to be read as a theoretical essay on antisemitism or even a belated response to Arendt; it is to be read for what it is: a novel, and one of a most provocative kind, for sure, on the “what if” mode. What if America had gone fascist and elected an overtly antisemitic president? Let’s say that the result proves Arendt totally right: it’s “all horrors,” martial law, riots, massacres, pogroms and murder and there’s very little outcry from “ordinary” American citizens. Those that dare speak out, like Walter Winchell on the radio or F.D. Roosevelt, are silenced one way or another, temporarily “detained” in Roosevelt’s case or simply “murdered” like Winchell.

This “terrific political novel” (Paul Berman, *The New York Times Book Review*) which was published three years after the 9/11 tragic events did not raise the big controversy some of the critics announced, maybe because Roth made it perfectly clear in his “Postscript Note to the Reader” that “*The Plot Against America* [was] a work of fiction” (Plot 364). And the book was well received as such: “a fable of an alternative universe” (Berman), “a stunning work of political extrapolation” (Charles). To go on with the reception of the book, let’s mention that some critics pointed at a subtext about the Bush administration and the dangers of isolationism in American contemporary policies after the 9/11 events, which Roth repeatedly denied. And also a jarring note coming from Bill Kauffman (from *The American Conservative*) who denounced *The Plot* as “a repellent novel, bigoted and libelous of the dead, dripping with hatred of rural America, of Catholics, of any Middle

American who has ever dared stand against the war machine” (Kauffman 2004). Charles Lindbergh as the point of junction between fantasy and antisemitism in the Roth novel is precisely what the controversy originates in and feeds on. So Lindbergh as the illustration of the fiction and history (or “Counterhistory”) interplay in the novel will be discussed with special emphasis on his function in the building up of “the terror of the unforeseen.”

I. “THE TERROR OF THE UNFORESEEN” (*PLOT 113*): HISTORY OR COUNTERHISTORY?

The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides,

turning a disaster into an epic. (Plot 114)

That “disaster” is Lindbergh’s election as president; it is a major change in the narrator’s life (“A new life began for me. I’d watch my father fall apart, and I would never return to the same childhood” [Plot 113]) and a turning point in the collective history of America, referred to as “the unfolding of the unforeseen”: “And as Lindbergh’s election couldn’t have made clearer to me, the unfolding of the unforeseen was everything.” (Plot 113) The very notion of history becomes perverted: “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.” (Plot 113-14)

The disaster also means the fall of the father who is described by the narrator as the only one who could defeat the anti-Semites (“and the father who’d defiantly serenaded all those callow cafeteria anti-Semites in Washington was crying aloud with his mouth wide open— crying like both a baby abandoned and a man being tortured—” [Plot 113]) His fall is described

as regression, with the father hero reverting to childhood, and that notion of regression also applies to the metaphorical image of the Father of the Nation, a president gone wild, the one who wishes the Jews dead and uses his heroic image to promote anti-semitism or uses anti-semitism to promote his heroic image. The other result is the nation's reverting to savagery.

Not only does "the unfolding of the unforeseen" radically change personal and collective history, it also alters fiction, and, more specifically, the nature of the narrative. To use the author's distinction in the "Postscript Note to the Reader," Lindbergh's election as President is "where the historical fact ends and where historical imagining begins" (*Plot* 364). What is altered is the way history is represented, sometimes it is history, sometimes it looks like history but it is not. Sometimes it runs counter history — "Counterhistory" being a most Rothian notion if one remembers his 1986 novel entitled *The Counterlife*, a parallel which has often been made by the critics.

Roth's use of the fall as a repeated motif has one purpose, that of showing that "it can happen in America, too"; what is put to the fore is the hidden side of history, the sense of creeping anti-semitism suddenly given a chance to blaze and become "the nightmarish vision of America's anti-Semitic fury" (*Plot* 343) by a symbolic act like the election of an anti-semitic president.

Now the main question is centered on the imaginary nature of the blaze: would it mean then that the anti-semitism issue in this novel is totally invented, depending on an election that never took place? Certainly not, if one remembers the earlier episode in Washington, in which the Roth family had been the butt of "ordinary anti-semites". And then, is Lindbergh's anti-semitism invented, too? Not really, if we consider his 1941 (Des Moines) radio speech, which is partially quoted in the narrative itself and then reproduced in the "Note to the reader"

section whose precise function is to assess the historical truth. This speech shows him a true anti-semitite putting the blame on "The Jewish people" and "the Jewish race" and viciously attacking them: "We cannot allow the natural passions and prejudices of other peoples to lead our country to destruction." (*Plot* 13, 371) By having the fictional character speak the words of the historical figure, Roth blurs the frontier between fiction and history, or to paraphrase Roth, between "the historical fact" and "the historical imagining." This is a strategy of distortion and coincidence that he will use all along. History AND (not or) counterhistory at the same time, which might explain why this novel appears both "dreamlike [and] creepily plausible" (Yardley).

The Lindbergh character is a good illustration of this dual strategy: the aviator hero is turned into a puppet who keeps disappearing and reappearing in quite a puppet-like style, a temperamental man trapped in repetition, only capable of repetitive flying stunts and improbable landings:

Some six weeks later, on the Saturday before Labor Day, Lindbergh surprised the country by failing to appear at the Detroit Labor Day parade, where he had been scheduled to launch his campaign with a motorcade through the working-class heartland of isolationist America (and the anti-semitic stronghold of Father Coughlin and Henry Ford), and by arriving unannounced instead at the Long Island airfield from which his spectacular transatlantic flight had begun thirteen years before [...] But it wasn't the wealthy advocate of commercial aviation who was launching his campaign that day, nor was it the Lindbergh who had been decorated in Berlin by the Nazis, nor the Lindbergh who, in a na-

tionwide radio broadcast, had blamed overly influential Jews for attempting to drive the country into war, nor was it the stoical father of the infant kidnapped and killed by Bruno Hauptmann in 1932. It was rather the unknown airmail pilot who'd dared to do what had never been done by any aviator before him, the adored Lone Eagle, boyish and unspoiled still, despite the years of phenomenal fame. (*Plot 28-29*)

He is the oxymoronic perpetual heropuppet: "Lindy flew down out of the sky in his famous plane, and it was 1927 all over again." (*Plot 30*) Yet, though undermined by repetition, heroism is not to be defeated that easily for Lindbergh is not only an aviator hero, he is the American icon par excellence, "—fearless Lindy, at once youthful and gravely mature, the rugged individualist, the legendary American man's man who gets the impossible done by relying solely on himself." (*Plot 30*) And iconicity is what creates illusion in America (and elsewhere), this the more mature Philip, the first-person narrator with a split narrative voice, perfectly knows. And so does Philip Roth, the author, who aims at showing the contaminating impact of antisemitic Lindbergh as an American icon nationwide ("Henry Ford, America First, the southern Democrats, or the isolationist Republicans, let alone Lindbergh [...] and the ordinary Americans," (*Plot 166*) which obviously includes the Roth family and more particularly, the Roth sons, Sandy and Philip, the narrator, who first introduces himself as "a stamp collector" (*Plot 1*).

II. STAMP OR STUMP? PARODIC REPETITION

From the moment I found out that Alvin was returning to Newark to convalesce in

our house, I would involuntarily envision Robert on his platform and wearing work gloves whenever I lay stiffly in the dark

trying to force myself to sleep: first my stamps covered with swastikas, then Little Robert, the living stump. (Plot 128)

The swastika-covered stamp appears right on the cover page, where it is closely related to the title, as the perfect illustration of representation (a stamp) corrupted by Nazism, and maybe as the epitome of what the whole novel is about: American Eden (Yosemite) blemished by the emblem of Nazism, or at least its stamp representation. This is made more explicit when the young narrator relates one of his most frightful and premonitory dreams at the end of the first chapter — a chapter trapped in the stamp motif as it were, but not strictly repeated. In his dream his 1932 Washington stamp series is both the same and different: "The colors were the same [...] but instead of a different portrait of Washington on each of the twelve stamps, the portraits were now the same and no longer of Washington but of Hitler." (*Plot 43*) And equally tainted is his 1934 National Parks stamp series: "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." (*Plot 43*) Almost all chapters contain references to Philip's stamps either in connection with his nightmare or the presidential icon until his album disappears.

Lindbergh's iconic power is related to the boys' hobbies, which are both centered on representation: stamp collecting for Philip and portrait sketching for his elder brother; and Lindbergh's power is strong, stronger than antisemitism, as reveal the "blue stamp" (the one which commemorated Lindbergh's 1927 transatlantic flight) that Philip "couldn't possibly tear and throw away" (*Plot 26*), and the Lindbergh

portraits ("Sandy's compositional masterwork of 1936" (*Plot 24*) that Sandy can't throw away either. And yet, both stamps and portraits have been altered: "something external had transformed the meaning of these drawings, making them into what they were not [...]" (*Plot 26*). It means that representation is turned into perverted illusion or has become an ironic parody—ironic because it is still powerful with those that are going to be its targeted victims, the Jews.

However, it is necessary to draw a line between the two brothers, who, though they might be both attracted to the iconic power of the president, are not equally fascinated by the man. Philip is a great supporter of Roosevelt all along whereas Sandy shows he is partial to Lindbergh from the very beginning, and not because of some brainwashing due to the "Just Folks" program he volunteered to participate in (*Plot 84*). His decision, supported by Aunt Evelyn and her new husband, Rabbi Bengelsdorf, one of Lindbergh's most active supporters ("the very rabbi who helped elect the president whose friend was Hitler" [*Plot 107*]) creates a major clash in the family, ideologically or politically separating the son from his father, who is not to be fooled by the "Office of American Absorption" new programs:

"Do you understand why Lindbergh wants to separate boys like you from their families and ship them out to the sticks? Do you have any idea what's behind this?"

"But this does not have anything to do with anti-Semitism, if that's what you think. You have one thing on your mind and one thing only. This is just a great opportunity, that's all." (*Plot 85*)

This extract from the father and son dialogue dramatizes a wider split in the fam-

ily and beyond, in the Jewish community, torn between the "rich Jews" and the others (*Plot 124*), between the enterprising Jews and the "Jews that are afraid of their shadows," between the "Ghetto Jews" (*Plot 193*) despised by Aunt Evelyn, and the modern "Jews of America" promoted by the same rabbi.

The split is exemplified in contrasting pairs, like the Sandy and Alvin (his cousin) pair, respectively pro and anti Lindbergh. Alvin is the father's true hero when he decides to join the Canadian army to fight against the Fascists, but there's no idealization of the character; the one character who actively resists the Fascists is "no more than a stump" (*Plot 127*) and "rotten smell" when he returns from War. The stump, which is the title to the Fourth fourth chapter, becomes the emblem of War as rot, and, incidentally, a challenge to the narrator's understanding: "The stump was something else. 'Broken down' means that the end of the stump goes bad: it opens up, it cracks, it gets infected" (*Plot 135*). Then Philip makes it his own in fancy, and manages to tame his fear of it by transforming it into an icon, "a featureless animal, something on which Sandy, with just a few well-placed strokes, could have crayoned eyes, a nose, a mouth, teeth, and ears, and turned it into the likeness of a rat" (*Plot 136*). The stump becomes the icon of loss: "What I saw was what the word 'stump' describes: the blunt remembrance of something whole that belonged there and once had been there" (*Plot 136*). And beyond, it is the icon of Jewishness in America or what it means to be a Jew when your identity is only defined in the negative—best summed up in: "What they were was what they couldn't get rid of—what they couldn't even begin to want to get rid of" (*Plot 220*). Like the stump.

Significantly, the stump image is what the novel closes on, when Seldon, the Jewish boy whose Jewish mother was murdered by Klansmen in the riots after their relocation there (directly due to "the Home-

stead 42 program” and more indirectly to Philip who wanted to get rid of the boy), comes to live with the Roth family:

And Seldon took over where Alvin and Aunt Evelyn had left off— as the person in the twin bed next to mine shattered by the malicious indignities of Lindbergh’s America. There was no stump for me to take care this time. The boy himself was the stump, and until he was taken to live with his mother’s married sister in Brooklyn ten years later, I was the prosthesis. (*Plot* 362)

Seldon as the stump comes to be the image of loss, embodying the Jewish fate in that nightmarish antisemitic America; he is the boy who lost his mother in the hands of the Antisemites, as Alvin lost his leg in the War against the Fascists. The loss, then, is part and parcel of the strategy of repetition, but the recurrent twin bed motif somehow breaks the repetition. The Alvin-Sandy pair couldn’t share a room: “But how possibly could Sandy, who was now working for Lindbergh, share a room with someone who had lost his leg going to war against Lindbergh’s Nazi friends” (*Plot* 133) but the Seldon-Philip pair can. And the healer is the same: Philip, except that this time, the healer is the indirect perpetrator, the one who sent Seldon and his mother to Kentucky! But Philip is also the one who lost his stamps—loss “like- and utterly unlike- losing a leg” (*Plot* 235), and found a new stump to heal.

This is a very clever ending which puts to the fore the self-promoted image of little Philip as potential healer to the Jewish victims of antisemitism, and a most provocative ending, too, from the part of a writer who has so often been accused of self-hatred by his own community.

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But where does the book end really? The narrative abruptly ends in the middle of the penultimate chapter “Bad days” on page 301: “But then it was over. The nightmare was over. Lindbergh was gone.” End of narrative, end of childhood, end of Alvin’s stump. But this is not the end of the book. What follows is a diary extracted from the archives of Newark’s Newsreel Theater, the transcription of history until Friday, October 16, 1942. What is the purpose of the final chapter entitled “Perpetual Fear,” considering that it duplicates the archives? Is it to be considered as a mere aesthetic exercise in repetition?

The archive section for Monday, October 12, 1942 (*Plot* 312-13), featuring the antisemitic riots in America, provide the “counterhistorical” context to Seldon’s mother’s death, while giving clues to the understanding of the narrative, some of its key issues like “the eternal Antisemitism,” and even its title “the Jewish conspirational plot against America.” The ultimate chapter, “Perpetual Fear,” which also takes place in October 1942, being centered on the climactic events that happened on Monday, October 12, 1942, is both the same and different: the boy’s personal history differs from the “counterHistory” in the sense that it ultimately restores what, according to Hannah Arendt, “the eternal Antisemitism” doctrine contributes to suppressing: moral responsibility.

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