Roth, Philip: The Plot Against America
(2004)

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In many ways, The Plot Against America stands out as an anomaly within Philip Roth’s oeuvre, if not in substance, then at least in the degree to which he uses his various narrative devices. For instance, Roth has written alternate (or at least speculative) histories before, such as in The Ghost Writer (1979) or the story I’ve Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting; or, Looking at Kafka (1973), but never outside of the realm of a character’s imaginings. He has taken on very contemporary political issues beforemost notably his scathing rendering of Richard Nixon in Our Gang (1971) but not without the distancing mask of satire. And perhaps most significantly, The Plot Against America is one of the few works of fiction to be narrated or focalized through the perspective of a young boy. Not since the 1950s (e.g., The Conversion of the Jews in Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories or uncollected stories such as The Day It Snowed) has he chosen to write through the eyes of anyone younger than a college-bound teenager. It is this choice of a younger narrative voice, one unsure of the political levity of his times, that gives the novel its poignancy and a sense of historical urgency. Yet in other ways, The Plot Against America is representative of what the novelist has been doing over the past fifteen years. As he did in the American Trilogy (American Pastoral, 1997; I Married a Communist, 1998; and The Human Stain, 2000), Roth once again turns to twentieth-century American history as his narrative backdrop. And also as in the American Trilogy, he uses the historical moment of the narrative (in this case, the years immediately preceding America’s entry into World War II) to show how individuals define themselves by, while at the same time becoming hostages to, the many cultural and political forces that surround them. Yet what has made The Plot Against America such a significant and popular novelit has been Roth’s most commercially successful work since Portnoy’s Complaint (1969)is twofold: Roth’s willingness to take on and retextualize a heroic American icon, and the perceived relevance of the novel’s themes to its current and socio-political contexts.

In terms of the immediate critical response surrounding Roth’s book, what has received the most attention is its alternate historical premise. With its focus on the possibilities of a fascistic America, Roth’s novel follows in the tradition of such works as Jack London’s The Iron Heel (1908) and Sinclair Lewis’s It Can’t Happen Here (1935). In Roth’s version, the isolationist wing of the pre-war Republican Party, frustrated after eight years of political marginalization and resentful of FDR’s interventionist policies against Nazi Germany, nominates Charles Lindbergh...
over Wendell L. Wilkie for President of the United States in 1940. The enormously popular Lindbergh with full backing from the America First Committee, traveling around the country in his legendary Spirit of St. Louis, and campaigning under the slogan Vote for Lindbergh or Vote for War defeats FDR in a landslide. Within the first two years of his presidency, Lindbergh institutes a series of policies that are interpreted by many to reflect the rising tide of global fascism: signing nonaggression pacts with both Germany (the Iceland Understanding) and Japan (the Hawaii Understanding); creating Just Folks, a volunteer work program managed under the newly formed (and ominously titled) Office of American Absorption whose purpose is to introduction urban youth (read Jews) to the traditional ways of heartland life and instituting Homestead 42, legislation reminiscent of the Homestead Act of 1962, but in this instance a program designed to disperse and relocate inner-city ethnic Americans (again, read Jews) into rural regions of the country under the euphemistic goals of provid[ing] a challenging environment steeped in our country’s oldest traditions where parents and children can enrich their Americanness over the generations.

However, all of these alternate historical events, as provocative as they may be, are nothing more than a backdrop to the primary focus of the novel: Roth’s family. In *The Plot Against America*, Lindbergh’s presidency and its many ramifications are rarely the primary subject, but are instead filtered through the dialogue and conflicts among a young Philip Roth, his family, and their Jewish community in the Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey. As Roth does in his autobiographical tetralogy *The Facts* (1988), *Deception* (1990), *Patrimony* (1991), and *Operation Shylock* (1993) he uses Philip Roth as his protagonist, a fictional construct who nonetheless shares with the living author an almost identical physical appearance, demeanor, and background. In fact, in interviews given around the publication of the novel, Roth called his work a false memoir, one in which he integrates the true history of his life into the false chronicle of a Lindbergh administration. We could even call it a counterhistory, a point-counterpoint chronicle that calls to mind Roth’s postmodern tour de force, *The Counterlife* (1987), and what he refers to in that novel as a series of fictive propositions.

The action in *The Plot Against America* takes place over a period of young Philip’s life from June 1940, when he is a seven-year-old third grader, to October 1942. During this time, he and his family struggle to make sense of the events unfolding around them, circumstances that as Americanized Jews they would have never predicted to encounter. Along the way Philip’s older brother, Sandy, is willingly absorbed into the Just Folks program (and subsequently comes to appreciate both Lindbergh and pork products); a cousin, Alvin, runs off to Canada to serve in their commando forces and fight against Hitler, losing his left leg in the process; his Aunt Evelyn marries Rabbi Lionel Benglesdorf, a respected personage in the Office of American Absorption and self-deluded Jewish front for the Lindbergh administration’s anti-Semitic policies; and one of the family’s former neighbors dies in America’s first pogrom, sparked by the incendiary anti-Lindbergh rhetoric of journalist Walter Winchell, who, in 1942, becomes an early frontrunner for the 1944 Democratic Party nomination. It is the novel’s emphasis on family, especially as it relates to the historical premise of American anti-Semitism, that makes it one of Roth’s most consciously Jewish novels, one that defines American Jewishness (at least, for its
author, in the secular sense) while at the same time demystifying it as a mark of Otherness. In one of the book’s most significant passages, Roth says of the people who used to gather around his family’s table,

Their being Jews didn’t issue from the rabbinate or the synagogue or from their few formal religious practices . . . What they were was what they couldn’t get rid of what they couldn’t even begin to want to get rid of. Their being Jews issued from their being themselves, as did their being American. It was as it was, in the nature of things, as fundamental as having arteries and veins.

By highlighting the quotidian, Roth’s cautionary tale of ethnic intolerance transcends its immediate premise and directly links Jewish identity to the larger American project.

One of the things that make *The Plot Against America* so striking is Roth’s handling not only of American history, but of America’s heroic icons, most obviously Charles Lindbergh (who, in real life, was a member of the America First Committee, did receive the Iron Cross from Herman Göring, and did give a speech in 1941 calling American Jews, along with those in the Roosevelt administration, warmongers). This isn’t the kind of alternate history found in much science fiction, where the emphasis is placed on the political events themselves, where grand characters march across the pages and immovable forces slowly unfold the text of history. In this novel, Roth is concerned with how American subjects, individuals as well as political ideas, have been given iconic status through a variety of texts: newspaper accounts, cinematic newsreels, gossip columns, history textbooks, congressional legislation, and literary narrative. Roth indirectly demonstrates how constructed these identities are by retextualizing American history and, more specifically, the Norman Rockwellesque ideal of American identity as embodied in Charles A. Lindbergh. In much the same way he does in earlier novels such as *The Ghost Writer* and *The Counterlife*, where the thematic emphasis is placed on postmodern constructions of the individual subject, Roth in his alternate history focuses on the text of the self except here, the contingency of identity is places on the larger national stage. Coming as it does after the historical sweep of the American Trilogy, Roth’s narrative thrust in *The Plot Against America* could not be otherwise.

What is also significant is the ways in which *The Plot Against America* forces readers to question assumptions of literary genre. Just as it is difficult to place *The Facts* (1988, an autobiography including elements of fiction) and *Operation Shylock* (1993, a novel parading as autobiographical confession) into any neat generic category, so too are readers stymied by the more recent novel’s uncomfortable, or at least unlikely, mixture of narrative assumptions: a realistic novel in the guise of a memoir, functioning within a traditionally science fiction mode, containing biographical chronologies as well as historical documentation. Through its play within these narrative forms, *The Plot Against America* brings together many of the novelistic tendencies found throughout his work. It combines the emphasis on postmodern identity and genre strategies found in such works as *The Counterlife* and the autobiographical tetralogy, and the historical significations that underlie the *American Trilogy*. In other words, it reads as an effective attempt at bringing
together many of the major tendencies that have defined Roth’s fiction over the past twenty years.

By directly linking postmodern assumptions of identity (individual, collective, and generic) to a profound awareness of historical contingency, Roth has written what the scholar Linda Hutcheon has termed historiographic metafiction, a type of writing that is not only highly aware of itself as constructed narrative, but one that also foregrounds the fictional qualities of historical representation. Read in this way, The Plot Against America raises the question of our ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. If historical discourse shares many of the same characteristics as novelistic discourse, then narrative, defined in its broadest sense, can be interpreted as both an aesthetic and a political act a plotting, in other words. While one could argue that historiographic metafiction is nothing new to Roth’s writing after all, Operation Shylock and American Pastoral are nothing if not historical fictions keenly aware of themselves as constructed narratives never before has Philip Roth demonstrated with such intensity the discursive nature of historical narrative as he does in The Plot Against America. And it is here where the novel finds its significance as a example of science fiction. What better narrative mode than alternate history, a specific form of science fiction writing, to foreground the interplay between historical fact and narrative fabulation. The underlying premise of the novel is that Lindbergh’s candidacy could have happened given the right circumstances. And while historical possibility is a characteristic of all alternate narratives, no matter how farfetched, Roth gives an added twist to his novel by infusing the merely possible with the actually happened, and does so in a highly effective autobiographical manner.

Also notable, given the novel’s popularity, are the ways in which readers have tended to approach The Plot Against America as a roman à clef of current events (e.g., the unlikeliness of the George W. Bush presidency, the 9/11 attacks, the Patriot Act and its restrictions of civil liberties). But Roth himself has warned against such a reading. His goal, as he bluntly stated in the New York Times Book Review immediately preceding the novel’s publication, was merely to 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. Yet how much are we to believe the author when, in the same New York Times Book Review essay, he blasts the current president as a man unfit to run a hardware store let a long a nation like this one, and who brackets The Plot Against America with the phrase perpetual fear (in the first sentence of the novel and the title of the last chapter)an ambiguous emotional state that in many ways defines our post-9/11 world?

Perhaps Philip Roth, well-known for his mischievous and labyrinthine textual play between fact and fiction, is wanting it both ways. After all, this is the same author who once declared in an interview that Sheer Playfulness and Deadly Seriousness are my two closest friends. Such a narrative stance, one that holds out for multiple possibilities of tone and interpretation, brings to mind the kind of ambiguity found in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Henry James, and William Faulkneran august literary lineage, and one with which Roth is finding himself ever more closely associated.