

The Politics and Literature of Unknowingness

Philip Roth's Our Gang and The Plot Against America

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“A novel,” observed Milan Kundera in a 1980 interview with Philip Roth, “does not assert anything; a novel searches and poses questions. . . . I don’t know which of my characters is right. I invent stories, confront one with another, and by this means I ask questions. The stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything. The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything. . . . The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude. In a world built on sacrosanct certainties the novel is dead.”¹ Much of what Roth himself has written and said about the reading and writing of fiction suggests that he shares Kundera’s view about the importance of literature’s interrogative function. Indeed, while acknowledging the significance of Franz Kafka’s work to the political protests in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, Roth nevertheless asserted that “whatever changes fiction may appear to inspire have usually to do with the goals of the reader and not the writer.”² His claim is not that literature leaves everything as it is but rather that the author’s role is not to advocate or pontificate but to problematize in the written world of the text, the people, places, and things of

the unwritten world in which that text is produced.³ Chekhov, Roth notes, “makes a distinction between ‘the solution of the problem and a correct presentation of the problem’—and adds, ‘only the latter is obligatory for the artist’” (*Reading*, 16). In any struggle between Chekhov and Norman Mailer—about whom, Roth observed in 1960, “he has become an actor in the cultural drama”—Roth would clearly side with the Russian (*Reading*, 170).

Paradoxically, however, politics and/or political readings of the author’s work have stalked Roth since the beginning of his career. He notes that the heroine of the ostensibly apolitical *When She Was Good*—written during what Roth called the most “politicized” years of his life—employed language that echoed, in its duplicity, that of the American government’s justification for its war in Vietnam (*Reading*, 10); and Derek Parker Royal argues that several of the author’s early and “lesser-known” works took on “history and contemporary politics, and aggressively so.”⁴ Among those works that Royal identifies as directly engaging with politics is, of course, Roth’s 1971 satire *Our Gang*, a ferocious attack on the person and administration of Richard M. Nixon. Likewise, many readers have understood Roth’s 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, depicting an alternate history in which the aviator Charles A. Lindbergh becomes the president of a quasi-fascist United States, to be the author’s commentary on the person and administration of another president—George W. Bush—whom Roth once reviled as “unfit to run a hardware store.”⁵

Drawing a distinction between “knowing” and “unknowing” texts and readings—between texts and readings that articulate a position and those that interrogate our practices—this essay considers what *Our Gang* and *The Plot Against America*, novels from either end of Roth’s career, might reveal about the potential role for literature in the democratic “political.”⁶ Despite Roth’s suggestion that the political impact of novels has little to do with the aims of the author, it will be argued that when those aims are interrogative or problematizing (what is here being called “unknowing”) rather than expressive of a specific position (what is here being called “knowing”), literature is likely to generate greater critical political reflection in the reader and, as such, to have a more positive impact upon democratic politics. This does not, of course, commit the essay to the view that this is Roth’s intention, simply to the idea that literature’s value to democracy lies in the potential cultivation of unknowingness in its audience rather than in the knowing

expression of preexisting political positions. In this, the argument stands in contrast to other, more dominant, theories of the relationship between literature and democracy. Unlike the “classical” account, it does not suggest that certain authors have special insight into human behavior that can only be made clear in a literary form, though it does not rule out such a possibility.⁷ Likewise, it does not claim that certain kinds of texts and readings can alert us to particular kinds of suffering that will lead its readers to be more aware of their biases, and thus, to be more tolerant about specific kinds of behaviors that they might otherwise find abhorrent, though, once again, it does not rule this out.⁸ Rather, it argues that literature’s value to democracy lies in the possibility that it might serve, in Arthur C. Danto’s words, to “transfigure the commonplace.”⁹ It might do so, it suggests, in ways that lead its readers to recognize the contingency and precariousness of their values—and those of the world around them—in ways that cultivate a critical attitude valuable to democratic politics, one outlined in the work of William Connolly and others.¹⁰ It offers, that is, the possibility of an ethos of openness and contingency appropriate to the democratic citizen.¹¹

The value of Philip Roth’s work to this exercise is to show how a commitment to unknowingness in the author might serve to cultivate the same in the reader. Likewise, it suggests that knowingness in the author is unlikely to generate unknowingness in an audience. Roth is, however, not just a hook on which to hang a theoretical discussion, for it will be suggested—though the argument does not rely on the veracity of this claim for its plausibility—that this commitment to cultivating unknowability in his readers is central to Roth’s work and that this work is successful as literature to the extent that he is able to achieve it. In this, the essay is an attempt to reflect upon both a long-standing debate about politics and literature and to identify the ways in which Roth’s work succeeds and sometimes fails as literature: goals that suggest that the democratic and the literary might ultimately be inseparable.

The essay proceeds, first, by setting out Roth’s distinction between knowing and unknowingness. It identifies the ways in which the written world of literature is, on Roth’s account, inadequate to capture the totality of the unwritten world, and it reflects his obvious frustration at attempts to conflate the former with the latter by seeking unwritten-world referents for his literary creations. At the heart of this objection, it suggests, is Roth’s commitment to unknowingness as a literary strategy. The essay then iden-

tifies the various literary devices that Roth employs toward achieving his goal. Second, suggesting that Roth's commitment to unknowingness is all but abandoned in his political satire of Richard Nixon, the essay argues that *Our Gang* is an example of knowing writing and that, as such, it fails both as literature and as a possible political intervention. It nevertheless suggests that the novel is an *instructive* failure, one that reveals much, not only about the failings of knowing literature but also about how and why unknowing literature might affect its audience in democratically productive ways. Turning to Roth's 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, the essay notes the ways in which this book, despite the author's protests, has also been subject to—politically motivated—knowing readings of the sort that Roth abhors. It nevertheless suggests that unlike with knowing writing, the blame for knowing reading cannot always be laid at the author's door. It identifies the ways in which the text embodies unknowingness and seeks to achieve this in its audience. The essay concludes by returning to the novel's opening line. Focusing on a hitherto overlooked aspect of its formulation that suggests, contrary to Roth's objections, that the novel offers the possibility of critical reflection on our contemporary polity, but not the critical parallel that is most often ascribed to it. In this, it suggests, *The Plot Against America* may ultimately be a deeply unknowing and deeply political text that demonstrates the connection between these two values.

Knowing and Unknowing Texts, Knowing and Unknowing Readings

In an interview concerning *The Great American Novel* where, in a typical act of narrative playfulness, Roth serves as his own interlocutor, the author praises the value of a certain kind of unknowingness by contrasting it with the notion that the unwritten world can be understood in its totality. "I don't claim to know," he writes, "what America is 'really like.' *Not* knowing, or no longer knowing for sure, is just what perplexes many of the people who live and work here and consider this country home. That is why I invented the paranoid fantasist Word Smith—the narrator who calls himself Smitty—to be (purportedly) the author of *The Great American Novel*. What he describes is what America is really like to one like him" (*Reading*, 79). To claim to know the world is, Roth suggests, to be a paranoid fantasist. Even as he makes this claim, however, Roth undercuts it by making the paranoid

fantasist an author, thereby destabilizing and making contingent his own authorial pronouncements on the world outside the text.¹² In this, perhaps, Roth embraces a certain kind of Socratic irony, one so thoroughgoing that it is never quite clear when he is being serious and when he is not. There are some for whom such an attitude bespeaks frivolity or frustration—Goethe is said to have observed that whoever could say when Socrates was being serious and when he was joking would be doing humanity a great service¹³—but for Roth, as for Socrates, it is a way of acknowledging the limitations on his own understanding. Indeed, the inability of the author to capture the totality of the unwritten world in the written world of the text is a persistent theme in Roth's work, both creative and critical. Speaking at Stanford in 1960, Roth observed that the “American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist” (*Reading*, 168).

It is no surprise, therefore, that Roth has sought to resist knowing readings of his work, those that seek to make the written world of literature correspond directly to the unwritten world in which it is written.¹⁴ For even though Roth once declared that “every writer learns over a lifetime to be tolerant of the stupid inferences that are drawn from literature and the fantasies implausibly imposed upon it,” over the course of his career he has expressed differing levels of frustration over such readings.¹⁵ While he seemed merely bemused by the reader who admonished him for the depiction of his sister in *Portnoy's Complaint*—despite his not having a sister (*Reading*, 35)—Roth appeared far more frustrated by the reluctance of the website Wikipedia to correct an inaccuracy in its entry on *The Human Stain*. At stake was the assertion that the novel's central protagonist, Coleman Silk, was based upon the writer Anatole Broyard. Balking at this suggestion, Roth sought to correct the record but was told that he was not “a credible source” because the website required additional citations. In a letter to Wikipedia published in the *New Yorker*, Roth observed that novel writing is “for the novelist a game of let's pretend,” and was at pains to differentiate the life of Broyard from that of Silk. At the heart of his protest was Roth's account of his unknowingness.

Having outlined key details of the fictional Silk's biography, Roth

asked: “As for Anatole Broyard, was he ever in the Navy? The Army? Prison? Graduate school? The Communist Party? Did he have children? Had he ever been the innocent victim of institutional harassment? I had no idea. He and I barely knew each other.” Likewise, he noted, “I knew nothing of Anatole Broyard’s mistresses or, if he ever had any, who they were”; “I knew nothing at all of Broyard’s private life—of his family, parents, siblings, relatives, education, friendships, marriage, love affairs”; “I’ve never known, spoken to, or, to my knowledge, been in the company of a single member of Broyard’s family. I did not even know whether he had children.” Roth concluded the account of his unknowingness by contrasting it with what he did know:

I knew everything about Coleman Silk because I had invented him from scratch, just as in the five-year period before the 2000 publication of “The Human Stain” I had invented the puppeteer Mickey Sabbath of “Sabbath’s Theater” (1995), the glove manufacturer Swede Levov of “American Pastoral” (1997), and the brothers Ringold in “I Married a Communist” (1998), one a high-school English teacher and the other a star of radio in its heyday. Neither before nor after writing these books was I a puppeteer, a glove manufacturer, a high-school teacher, or a radio star.¹⁶

It is something of an irony, perhaps, that *The Human Stain* should precipitate this dispute given that a key incident in the novel—the use of the word “spooks”—turns on a knowing reading: one in which the speaker’s intent is ignored in favor of what the listeners “know” to be true. Indeed, that the most destructive act in the text—the anonymous letter sent to Coleman Silk by his antagonist Delphine Roux—is built upon a claim that “Everybody knows” further suggests Roth’s distaste for “knowingness.” As Royal observes: “This not knowing, the question mark that lies at the very center of being, is for Roth one of the indelible ‘stains’ of existence. And it is something that should never be denied.”¹⁷

Roth identifies a major source of literary knowingness in the conflation of author and characters. It takes two forms. First, in an assumption that the details of his or her characters’ lives are simply thinly veiled accounts of events in the author’s own. Second, in the view that one or more of the characters is a mouthpiece for the author’s opinions. In response to the

first, Roth's reply to the interviewer who asked him about the relationship between the death of Zuckerman's father to that of his own—Roth offered the interviewer his father's telephone number¹⁸—suggests the myriad of problems of the roman à clef assumption. His response to the second assumption is more complex. In a 2014 interview with the *New York Times*, Roth identified a question that “any number of” journalists “cannot seem to ignore,” that “goes something like this: ‘Do you still think such-and-such? Do you still believe so-and-so?’ and then they quote something spoken not by me but by a character in a book of mine.” In reply, Roth observed: “Whoever looks for the writer's thinking in the words and thoughts of his characters is looking in the wrong direction. Seeking out a writer's ‘thoughts’ violates the richness of the mixture that is the very hallmark of the novel.”¹⁹ Much earlier in his career, however, Roth offered a far less temperate and possibly more revealing rejoinder to such knowingness in response to Diana Trilling's review of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Addressing Trilling directly, Roth observed: “If I may, I'd like to distinguish for you between myself and ‘Mr. Roth,’ the character in your review who is identified as the ‘author of *Portnoy's Complaint*’” (*Reading*, 22). Roth seemed most offended by the suggestion that his novel was about “fortifying a position,” that he had offered “a farce with a thesis” (*Reading*, 26–27). “Obviously,” Roth noted, “I am not looking to be acquitted, as a person, of having some sort of view of things, nor would I hold that my fiction aspires to be a slice of life and nothing more. I am saying only that, as with any novelist, the presentation and the ‘position’ are inseparable, and I don't think a reader would be doing me (or even himself) justice if, for tendentious or polemical purposes, he were to divide the one into two, as you do with ‘Mr. Roth’” (*Reading*, 26). He concluded by seeking to undo Trilling's knowing conflation of himself with the ‘Mr. Roth’ she had constructed. “‘Mr. Roth's’ view of life,” he suggested, “is more hidden from certain readers in his wide audience than they imagine, more imbedded in parody, burlesque, slapstick, ridicule, insult, invective, lampoon, wisecrack, in nonsense, in levity, in play—in, that is, the methods and devices of Comedy, than their own view of life may enable them to realize” (*Reading*, 28). It is, perhaps, for this reason that Roth has so often sought to play with, and thereby destabilize, knowingness in his readers. His most persistent mechanism here is the use of multiple literary doppelgängers in, and across, texts.

“The habit of presenting the author as a fictional character in his own

books is,” writes Paul Berman, “an old trick of Roth’s, not to say a mania.”²⁰ In *Operation Shylock*, for example, the narrator, “Philip Roth,” encounters another “Philip Roth,” who may, or may not, be an imposter. Neither is, however, necessarily the “Philip Roth” who wrote the novel in which these other Roths appear. Likewise, there is “Philip Roth” the narrator of *The Plot Against America* who shares much, including many family members and a childhood residence, with the “Philip Roth” who wrote the text. So pervasive are Roth’s identity games that his publisher has taken to using the subheading “Roth Books” to refer to some—but not all—of the author’s tomes in the list of his works in his books. These include—the possibly ironically titled—*Deception* and *The Facts*. This game of literary cat and mouse is further complicated by the role of Roth’s frequent narrator, Nathan Zuckerman. Zuckerman shares many biographical details with his creator, and Roth’s publisher ascribes nine novels to him beginning with the tellingly titled *The Ghost Writer* and ending with the spirit’s departure in *Exit Ghost*.²¹ What Berman identifies as Roth’s mania may, however, be the author’s attempt to disrupt knowing readings: to undermine the certainty about what the text and/or the author might “mean.” It is in such uncertainty—such unknowing—that critical thinking begins. As such, Roth’s playfulness might show us how mistaken Goethe was to believe that the person who identified when Socrates was being serious and when he was joking would be doing humanity a great service.

In employing what Claudia Roth Pierpont identifies as *Maskenfreiheit*—“the freedom conferred by masks”²²—to destabilize his readers, and thus, knowing readings, Roth offers a further opportunity for literary-critical reflection: the potentially illuminating juxtaposition of written and unwritten worlds: one that is simply unavailable when the two worlds are conflated. In this, Roth’s work echoes that of Plato in *The Republic* or John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, where the creation of an alternate fictional reality—be it the Ideal City or the Original Position—creates the possibility of critical leverage on the structures and values of the reality in which it was created.²³ That such literary juxtapositions are not always successful is, of course, suggested by the many literal readings of *The Republic* that see Plato as a protototalitarian.²⁴ Indeed, it might be argued that Roth’s exploitation of the freedom conferred by masks simply serves to encourage those prone to knowing readings to conflate the various Philip Roths and other narrators in ways that prove self-defeating: that Roth might be thought to

bring the very knowing readings that he reviles upon himself.²⁵ In these circumstances, perhaps, Roth's protestations concerning the tendency of his readers to see his life and views in his novels and characters might be considered somewhat disingenuous. Indeed, when readers as sophisticated as John Updike and J. M. Coetzee see political purpose in Roth's writing,²⁶ it may be that the author's protestations about his belief that literature is unsuited to the task of changing the world should not be taken at face value: that knowing readings are more to his liking than he appears to suggest.²⁷ A further problem here is also that even though Roth has decried and played with knowing readings, he has also been guilty of knowing *writing*. One of the reasons why *The Human Stain* might be considered less successful, or at least less compelling, than the other two volumes in his American Trilogy is, perhaps, Roth's palpable anger at the sort of knowing readings practiced in the text.²⁸ Roth's knowing writing finds its fullest expression, however, in his 1971 novel, *Our Gang*, a text so deflated by knowing anger and purpose as to be incapable of producing anything but knowing responses.

Not So Tricky Dicky

In a volume dedicated to the work of, and thus likely to be read by scholars and devotees of a particular author, it is perhaps unwise to point out that one of that author's texts is a failure. *Our Gang* is, nevertheless, a failure on every level: it fails as literature, it fails as satire, it fails as comedy, and it even fails as agitprop. This is, no doubt, one of the reasons why it is the most overlooked text in Roth's canon, drawing remarkably little critical commentary and even less praise.²⁹ Calling the novel "demonstrably wretched," Jonathan Yardley identified much that is wrong with the text in two sentences. "*Our Gang* is," he wrote, "a satire of Richard Nixon and his administration, written before Watergate, during a period when Nixon had taken stands not to Roth's liking on abortion and other matters. It takes its epigraphs from Jonathan Swift and George Orwell, but the only resemblance it bears to the work of these writers is that it, too, is written in English."³⁰ Given that the aim of this essay is to praise Roth, not to bury him, it is perhaps necessary to note that although *Our Gang* is a failure, it is an instructive failure, one whose shortcomings reveal much about the strengths of Roth's other work, both as literature and as an engagement, intentional or otherwise, with the political.

In an interview aimed at assuaging concerns expressed by his publisher about the vulgarity of a text depicting Nixon's assassination,³¹ Roth argued that vulgarity is essential to satire, a genre whose goal is "to dislocate the reader and get him to view a familiar subject in ways he may be willing or unaccustomed" (*Reading*, 42). It is, however, precisely this possibility—Danto's "transfiguration of the commonplace"—that is destroyed by knowing reading. One of the reasons why *Our Gang* fails, both as literature and as a potential source of political-critical reflection, is that some of the key elements of Roth's other work aimed at disrupting knowing readings—such as narrative playfulness and manipulation of the written/unwritten-world distinction—are largely absent from this text.³² Certainly, there is never any doubt about the identity of the author of this work; his views of Richard Nixon; or his reasons for writing. "*Our Gang*," Roth asserted, "is out to destroy the protective armor of 'dignity' that shields any one in an office as high and powerful as the Presidency" (*Reading*, 40). In a remark that reveals much about both the knowingness of *Our Gang* and the sources of unknowingness in his other texts, Roth observes: "[A]side from the Nixon satire, I have never written anything determinedly and intentionally destructive. Polemical or blasphemous assault upon the powers that be has served me more as a *theme* than as an overriding purpose in my work" (*Reading*, 8). In *Our Gang*, by contrast, the theme of the novel is its very purpose.

Although it is always possible that knowing writing might—under certain circumstances³³—produce unknowing reading, the odds would seem to be against it: in the absence of any effective mechanisms of transfiguration, such texts can generally only invite "straight" readings.³⁴ As such, that Roth's stated aim of dislocating the reader and getting him or her to look differently at a familiar subject should be frustrated seems inevitable. Certainly, it is hard to imagine anybody coming away from the novel with a different attitude toward Nixon than they brought to it. Employing Socrates's distinction between the speaker who acts as a servant to his audience by giving them what they want, and the speaker who acts as physician by giving them what they need, the Roth of *Our Gang* clearly belongs to the former category.³⁵ It is no surprise, therefore, that the most charitable reading of the novel was offered by a former editor of the *Partisan Review*—and sometime Trotskyite—Dwight McDonald. "'Our Gang' is," he wrote, "a political satire that I found far-fetched, unfair, tasteless, disturbing, logical,

coarse and very funny—I laughed out loud 16 times and giggled internally a statistically unverifiable amount. In short, a masterpiece.”³⁶

Laughter is, of course, in the belly of the beholder: what some find uproariously funny leaves others cold. There is, nevertheless, a trait seemingly peculiar to Americans in which, upon hearing a humorous joke, remark, or anecdote, they observe, “That’s funny,” without ever laughing; as if they were committed to identifying rather than experiencing comedy.³⁷ This is, perhaps, what might be called “knowing laughter”—that which emerges from the confirmation of a preexisting belief rather than the reconfiguration of a worldview. This may be the way in which *Our Gang* is funny: conceptually funny, or funny in the abstract. Certainly there is something forced and peculiar about McDonald’s account of his *Our Gang* experience—one wonders whether he kept track of his guffaws with a pad and pencil or just totted them up in his head—and indeed, about the notion that his internal giggles were beyond statistical verification.³⁸ Till Kinzel, one of the few critics who seems to share McDonald’s view of the text, identifies: “Roth’s hilariously absurd choice of Denmark as an external enemy [that] is complemented by the equally absurd internal enemy in the form of the Boy Scouts of America under the pernicious influence of the baseball player Charles Curtis Flood.”³⁹ There is, nevertheless, something of E. B. White’s observation that dissecting a joke is like dissecting a frog—that neither survives the experience—about such analysis. Being told that, or why, something is funny is not the same thing as experiencing the transfiguring possibilities of a joke.⁴⁰

One of the main problems, then, with *Our Gang* is that it is a largely unfunny satire. One wonders, for example, what Christopher Buckley, among others, might have done with the same material. Many of the constituents of humor are present—ostensibly funny names, absurd situations, and buffoonish characters—yet these constituents never quite coalesce into a decent joke.⁴¹ As Roth notes, however, “[p]olitical satire isn’t writing that lasts. Though satire, by and large, deals with enduring social and political problems, its comic appeal lies in the use made of the situation of the moment . . . subtleties of wit and malice are wholly lost over the years” (*Reading*, 37). Roth’s defenders might argue that, devoid of its historical context, *Our Gang*’s humor inevitably falls flat. It is, nevertheless, hard to imagine the circumstances, historical or otherwise, in which the novel’s asinine nomenclature—“Mr. Asslick,” “Mr. Shrewd,” “Miss Char-

min’,” “Senator Joseph McCatastrophy,” “Governor George Wallow,” “Mr. Catch-Me-In-A-Contradiction,” and “Trick E. Dixon”—would be considered funny, let alone transfiguring of anybody’s experience as a reader or citizen. As Roth himself has acknowledged, the names in this novel are precisely the sort of one-to-one written- to unwritten-world referent that he denies and deplors elsewhere (*Reading*, 49). In this, one is, perhaps, forced to agree with Nixon’s chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, who called *Our Gang* “a very childish book.”⁴² Indeed, it is telling that one of the most common descriptions of the novel’s humor in *Our Gang* is “sophomoric.”⁴³ Even Roth’s friend and biographer, Claudia Roth Pierpont, suggests that the humor is “overextended and strained” and “too often suited to a frat night skit.”⁴⁴ Inadvertently, perhaps, Roth acknowledges just such a pedigree for *Our Gang*. “At Bucknell University, where I went to college and edited a literary magazine,” he observed in an interview concerning the novel, “I spent nearly as much time writing satire as I did trying to write fiction” (*Reading*, 43). Even more telling, perhaps, is Roth’s account of his earliest literary-political foray—a clear precursor to *Our Gang*—that he described as “a long angry free-verse poem about McCarthyism [written] for the college magazine” (*Reading*, 10).

A further problem with *Our Gang*, both as literature and as political satire, is, then, that the author’s views are not, as Roth had suggested in his response to Trilling, “hidden,” but all too clearly on show. Indeed, Trilling’s description of *Portnoy’s Complaint* as “a farce with a thesis” concerned with “fortifying a position” seems far more applicable to *Our Gang* than it does to *Portnoy*. Although Roth has decried authors who seek social or political change through their work or otherwise—“My own feeling is,” he writes, “that times are tough for a fiction writer when he takes to writing letters to his newspaper rather than those complicated, disguised letters to himself, which are stories” (*Reading*, 171)—*Our Gang* seems to seek precisely that. It a long, angry, free-verse poem about Nixon aimed at exposing the president’s many hypocrisies. It is telling, perhaps, that the novel, which took him only three months to complete, began as an op-ed for the *New York Times*.⁴⁵ In contrast to the unknowingness that is at the heart of much of Roth’s best work, *Our Gang* is stymied by its very knowingness and lack of innovation. Indeed, the text is so derivative—both as art and politics—that at times it amounts to little more than speaking cant to power.

In a fanciful monologue, later published under the title “The Lost Generation”—one that illustrates precisely the sort of comic touch *Our Gang* is missing—a young Woody Allen offered an account of his European adventures. “I remember,” he observed, “Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald came home from their wild New Year’s Eve party. It was April. Scott had just written *Great Expectations*. Gertrude Stein and I read it. We said it was a good book but there was no need to have written it because Charles Dickens had already written it. We laughed over it and Hemingway punched me in the mouth.”⁴⁶ Roth’s dubious achievement in *Our Gang* is, perhaps, equivalent to Fitzgerald’s in Allen’s musings: that which he seeks to achieve has already been done, and done better.⁴⁷ *Our Gang* is, for example, concerned with showing how Nixon, like many politicians, manipulates language for his own purposes.⁴⁸ This is, however, not a new theme in either fiction or political theory: the relationship between words and deeds was, for example, a key concern of Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*.⁴⁹ The problem with *Our Gang* is not that it should revisit such themes, but that it should do so in such a self-conscious and unoriginal way. Indeed, the weight of the author’s intent—signaled both by the epigraphs that precede the text and by the literary company into which he sought to place the novel following its publication—made the unknowingness that he claims to prize all but impossible to achieve. Roth, it might be argued, sought to achieve transfiguration through the justifications he offered for the novel rather than through the text itself: telling his audience how they should have reacted to his work rather than cultivating that reaction through his writing.

Immediately following the publication of *Our Gang*, Roth was at pains to situate it within a satirical literary-political tradition, one with, he argued, a considerable American pedigree (*Reading*, 37–38). In addition to the epigraphs from Jonathan Swift and George Orwell, Roth also identified H. L. Mencken, *The Satyricon*, the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, Laurel and Hardy, and Abbott and Costello as among the forebears of *Our Gang*. It is, to say the least, quite a pantheon of satirical and comedic greats, but Roth was not done. “Do you remember,” he asks, “Charlie Chaplin and Jack Oakie as Hitler and Mussolini in *The Great Dictator*? Well, in their performances there’s something, too, of the flavor I hoped to get into the more outlandish sections of *Our Gang*” (*Reading*, 40). Although Roth is not an author burdened by false modesty, this list

is, nevertheless, somewhat unusual for him in that it seeks to *tell* rather than to *show*. The author explained the perceived value of his artistry by borrowing the authority of much more inspired and far more influential works: few would, perhaps, associate the visual poetry and balletic grace of Chaplin's Hitler-and-Mussolini scene with the rather more strained achievement of *Our Gang*. Indeed, while Roth has repeatedly suggested that literature has no overarching social purpose—"Novels," he declared in a 1984 interview with the *Paris Review*, "provide readers with something to read. At their best writers change the *way* readers read. That seems to me the only realistic expectation" (*Reading*, 147)—he seemed compelled to explain his reasons for, and purposes in, writing *Our Gang* in a way that is largely anomalous in his career.⁵⁰ That he did so suggests that he was not trying to convey his concerns to the audience in the way that he argues authors should—by asking questions—but rather by telling them what he believes to be true. In this it is possible to see how the unknowingness that he prizes is a source of both literary creativity and critical political reflection: it is no coincidence, perhaps, that his most knowing text is also his worst.⁵¹

In her evaluation of the novel as somewhat less than successful, the always-sympathetic Pierpont suggests that with *Our Gang* Roth "was out of his element, which was writing novels about people with sometimes over scaled but always recognizable emotions."⁵² Milan Kundera's observation that novels are dead in a world of certainties may, however, offer a better explanation for Roth's failure in *Our Gang*. The very questioning that Roth claims to prize is entirely absent from the text. Indeed, even Roth's occasional ambivalence about this questioning aspect of his work—at times he hints at a belief in a more involved role for literature in the political⁵³—is absent from a text that might have provided an opportunity to explore, or embody, it. Knowingness wins the day to the detriment of both literature and politics: rather than offering up an alternate reality to generate critical reflection on a problematic political figure, Roth, as author and citizen, simply seems to embody in his work a mirror image of the loathing that he finds so problematic in the president.

It is against this background that the considerable achievement of *The Plot Against America* might best be judged. It is an achievement that reveals much about both Roth's method and literature's potential to transfigure the commonplace in politically productive ways.

The Plot Against Knowingness

The rich unknowingness of Roth's 2004 novel about a fictional Charles Lindbergh presidency is immediately evidenced by the fecundity of its title. Most obviously it could refer to the right-wing scheme depicted in the text and aimed at electing Lindbergh and subverting the American values of freedom, tolerance, and equality. It could also refer to a fictional story juxtaposed with an American reality—the contrasting of the written and unwritten worlds—that is at the heart of much literature and political thought. Others, however, have seen the novel as story aimed at protesting an American polity hijacked by a quasi-fascist cabal—under the nominal control of George W. Bush—that is echoed by Roth's fictional America. So rich in ambiguity and unknowingness is the title that only the definite article remains determinable. It is an unknowingness that also pervades the text. While the Roth of *Our Gang* simply asserts, for example, what it is to be American—everything that is contra Nixon⁵⁴—a key theme of Roth's *Plot* is the *question* of what it means to be American. Like their creator, the written-world Roths see themselves as Americans before they are Jews, while the policies of the Lindbergh administration may invert this view. The conflict engendered in the notion of American-ness by the programs with the Orwellian names “Just Folks,” “Homestead,” and “Good Neighbor” is embodied, most obviously, in the person of Philip's older brother Sandy, whose embrace of Lindbergh meant that he “was doing what was normal and patriotic all over America and aberrant and freakish only in his own home.”⁵⁵ The question for the reader is, perhaps, whether Philip or his brother best understands the nature of the Lindbergh regime.

As Roth noted in his remarks on *Our Gang*, the aim of satire is to “dislocate the reader,” to “get him to view a familiar subject in ways he may be willing or unaccustomed to” (*Reading*, 42). While genres other than satire may not *aim to* have a similar impact, it can often be their effect. There is no suggestion, of course, that *Plot* is a satire, even, perhaps, among those readers who see it as a commentary on the Bush administration.⁵⁶ Indeed, Roth identifies it as a “uchronia,” a hypothetical alternate timeline that is often used for critical effect.⁵⁷ Like satire though, uchronias seek to dislocate the reader as a precursor to critical reflection. As such it is telling that a persistent theme of *Plot* is that of forced homelessness: that which forces the previously comfortable to reconsider everything that they had

previously taken for granted.⁵⁸ Bess Roth, the narrator's mother, repeatedly expresses concerns that her children might "be obliged to relive her own circumscribed youth as a neighborhood outsider" (*Plot*, 9). Likewise, upon hearing the news that the Republican Party had chosen Lindbergh as their candidate for the presidency, Philip recounts how his neighbors spontaneously converged in the streets. "Entire families known to me previously only fully dressed in daytime clothing were," he observes, "wearing pajamas and nightdresses under their bathrobes and milling around in their slippers at dawn as if driven from their homes by an earthquake" (*Plot*, 16). Such is the experience of the Jews under Lindbergh, those who, Philip observes, had hitherto "retained no allegiance, sentimental or otherwise, to those Old World countries that we had never been welcome in and that we had no intention of ever returning to" (*Plot*, 17). The narrator—as a possible stand-in for all Jews—finds "assaulted, as nothing ever had been 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 with the world" (*Plot*, 7).

Tragedy, Martin Heidegger asserted, is a state of homelessness.⁵⁹ The sense of dislocation offered by tragic theater—that which recounted stories of a mythical and continually reworked and reimagined past—was the major source of critical political reflection in ancient Athens. As such, it might be argued that, just as Greek tragedy depicted such disorientation in its characters to cultivate the same in its audience as a source of democratic pedagogy,⁶⁰ Roth's narrative evasiveness and allusions to a world and history beyond the text of *The Plot Against America* might also seek to generate the same productive disorientation in his readers. Roth's uchronia offers several possible sources of ambiguity, disorientation, and potential unknowingness.

In the first instance, the narrator of *Plot* seems to be a version of a young Philip Roth. Much of what we see and hear in the text is filtered through his naivety: as such, readers cannot always be sure that they are seeing a full picture. Certainly young Philip is not always able to interrogate the stories that he is told by his parents in a way that would permit readers to see whether the things that they perceive are indeed so. There are, for example, hints in the text that Herman and Bess Roth might be overreacting to the threat of the Lindbergh's administration, that they are knowing readers of the social world primed, like Delphine Roux in *The Human Stain*, to perceive bias. Recounting the press coverage of his aunt's marriage

to the leader of American Jewry, young Philip recalls that the guest list “was surprisingly long and impressive, and I present it here to explain why I, for one, had to wonder if my parents and their Metropolitan friends weren’t completely out of touch with reality to imagine that any harm could befall them because of a government program being administered by a luminary of the stature of Rabbi Bengelsdorf” (*Plot*, 245–46). Likewise, trading on the unwritten-world status of the *New York Times* as the newspaper of record, the written-world *New York Times* observes that the polity has been marked by anti-Lindbergh “accusations so far-fetched that even a life-long Democrat may find himself feeling unexpected sympathy for the president” (*Plot*, 240). Indeed, this is but one of two editorials from the *Times* attacking the Roths’ great hero—Walter Winchell—a celebrity muckraker. The Winchell we see through the Roths’ eyes is speaking truth to power; the one that we catch glimpses of from other voices in the text is a scurrilous self-promoter, prone to weaving together gossip and rumor as means to public notoriety. That Winchell is the main source of the Roth’s information about the Lindbergh administration should, perhaps, give us pause as readers to wonder about the veracity of young Philip’s account.

The reader’s sense of uncertainty may also be cultivated by the Roths’ experiences of two different police officers during their trip to Washington, D.C. In the first instance, while looking upon the majesty of the Capitol Building, the Roths are approached by a motorcycle cop. “My mother,” Philip recounts, “enthralled only a moment earlier by the dwarfing majesty of the Capitol, immediately went pale, and her voice was so feeble when she tried to speak that she couldn’t be heard above the traffic” (*Plot*, 58). Like Bess Roth, perhaps, the reader expects the worst, certainly given much of what has seemed to precede this interaction. When the officer actually helps the family by holding up traffic before guiding them to their hotel, those expectations are possibly revealed to be misplaced. Just as the reader is getting comfortable, however, the uncertainty returns when Bess asks her husband, “But how do you know where he’s taking us?” (*Plot*, 58). It is an uncertainty compounded by the Roths’ second encounter with a police officer, the one who is called when Herman objects to the Roths’ eviction from their hotel. The unspoken assumption of the Roths, and, perhaps, of the reader, is that the Roths’ ejection is the product of anti-Semitism backed up, in this case, by the power of the state. “This policeman knows why we were evicted,” cries Herman. “He knows, the manager knows, everybody

in this lobby knows” (*Plot*, 70–71). That Herman Roth is right about the reason for their eviction from the hotel seems undeniable, and yet, his use of the phrase “everybody . . . knows” might cast doubt upon the certainty of the assumption. He had previously employed the phrase in his response to Rabbi Bengelsdorf’s endorsement of Lindbergh (*Plot*, 35). Given the history of that claim in the Roth canon, it may be that the reader is forced to question whether Herman Roth is a voice of reason in a wilderness of insanity, or a member of the group that Sandy calls “paranoid ghetto Jews” (*Plot*, 227).

Assuming, momentarily at least, that Herman Roth is right about the second cop, we see how the author juxtaposes two different versions of America: one in which the authority figures treat all men and women equally, and one in which they embody prejudice. Such juxtaposition is a common motif in the text. Most obviously, perhaps, there is the contrast between the ideals espoused by the text of the Gettysburg Address inscribed at the Lincoln Memorial, that which promises that “all men are created equal,” and the hostile interaction with the man who calls Herman Roth “a LOUDMOUTH JEW” (*Plot*, 65).⁶¹ In these moments the reader, like the characters, is unsure about which is the “true America,” or, if indeed, there is one. Ross Posnock argues that Roth encourages his readers to challenge “the inveterate American reflex to look through artifice to the (alleged) real, as if the two are neatly separable and antithetical. Roth, in short, seeks to challenge the cherished and abiding myth of the natural.”⁶²

It is, nevertheless, not always clear that Roth, the author of *The Plot Against America*, is as successful at achieving his goal of unknowingness as he is in other texts.⁶³ Many of the difficulties here seem to arise from the way in which Roth chooses to double his narrator in this novel. As has been noted, Roth makes frequent use of the literary doppelgänger, the doubled and sometimes even tripled narrator creating a polyphonic text in which it is difficult to take at face value almost anything anybody says: a perfect recipe for unknowingness. In *Plot*, however, Roth offers a doubling of the author, but one that may paradoxically serve to bolster rather than to undercut the narrator’s account. Roth makes clear that the story that is being recounted by an adult who is seeking to re-create the naivety he felt as a child. This, writes Ginevra Geraci, “is why the narrator’s voice can at times become ambiguous when older Philip steps in and the reader experiences a sudden transition in perspective from the supposedly naïve boy to the more experienced adult.”⁶⁴ What Geraci sees as a source of ambiguity is, however,

rather more likely to be a source of narrative knowingness in that it adds authority to the text, with the adult Philip possibly verifying the insights of the child and thereby undermining some of the unknowingness that the author seeks to achieve elsewhere in the text. This may, in part, be why *Plot* has produced so many knowing readings.

Discussing the origins of *The Plot Against America*, Roth noted that in December 2000 he was reading Arthur Schlesinger's autobiography when he came across a reference to a group of isolationists who sought to run Lindbergh for president in 1940. "It made me think," he later wrote, "'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."⁶⁵ This was, of course, prior to the inauguration of George W. Bush, and long before Bush—then something of an isolationist who argued against an expansive foreign policy in his debates with Al Gore—began the wars for which his administration will probably be remembered. It was before the Department of Homeland Security, the PATRIOT Act, covert surveillance of American citizens, and before the president famously appeared in a flight suit on the deck of the aircraft carrier the USS *Abraham Lincoln* to declare "Mission Accomplished" in Iraq. That the idea came to Roth before any of these events does not, of course, mean that they did not influence him, nor that they might not have consciously or unconsciously seeped into his text. The belief that they had and did was, nevertheless, a commonplace in the popular response to the novel.

In his review of *The Plot Against America* in the *Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley sought to put aside "the novel's subtext, which gives every appearance of being an attack on George W. Bush and his administration," but failed to do so, arguing:

That Roth has written *The Plot Against America* in some respects as a parable for our times seems to me inescapably and rather regrettably true. When the fictional Lindbergh flies around the country "to meet with the American people face-to-face and reassure them that every decision he made was designed solely to increase their security and guarantee their well-being," the post-9/11 rhetoric of George W. Bush is immediately called to mind, as is the image of Bush aboard the aircraft carrier when Roth describes the "young president in his famous aviator's windbreaker."⁶⁶

Likewise, responding to a suggestion, made by Ron Rosenbaum in the *New York Observer*, that Steven Spielberg should make a movie of the novel—albeit as a response to the perceived anti-Semitism of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*⁶⁷—Keith Gessen agreed, arguing: “But [Spielberg] must literalize Roth’s metaphors: ‘1940’ is actually 2001; ‘Lindbergh’ is, of course, W.; the craven antiwar lies of the America Firsters are in fact the craven pro-war lies of the American Enterprise Institute; and ‘American Jews,’ believers in the American Constitution and pursuers of the American Dream whose rights and protections are slowly stripped away by a hostile government and a mostly indifferent population, are, of course, Arab-Americans.”⁶⁸ Writing in the *Nation*, James Wolcott declared: “Set in the 1940s, *The Plot Against America* is nevertheless pure now, the sword-flash ferocity of *Sabbath’s Theater*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain* subsiding into deep foreboding, the taunting jack-o’-lantern grin of George W. Bush haunting the back of the mind as one consumes the pages.” Recognizing *Plot* as an artistic as well as a political achievement, Wolcott nevertheless subsumed the former under the latter. “Roth,” he wrote, “doesn’t make over-explicit the parallels between America’s fall to fascism under Lindbergh and Bush’s fear-based presidency. He doesn’t need to. The parallels are so richly implicit, they vibrate like harp strings, dissolving the distance between then and now, fact and fiction.”⁶⁹

While a number of critics on the left were all too eager to see in *Plot* an allegory for the first Bush term, many on the right also chose to underplay the literary aspects of the novel in favor of a political reading of the text and/or the Left’s response to it. The conservative commentator Diana West identified those who read the text as an allegory for post-September 2001 politics as belonging to “a Left blinded by its hatred of President Bush,” who “read about a fantasy-fascist in the White House who persecutes the Jewish minority, and, instead of yelling ‘Claptrap!’ they call for George W. Bush’s head on an electoral platter.”⁷⁰ Demonstrating a combination of literary sensitivity and an acute lack of self-awareness, Stephen Schwartz of the *Weekly Standard* noted that “it was doubtless foreordained that certain reviewers would try to read into Roth’s latest novel something completely absent from its pages . . . [but] [o]ne can no more link Roth’s new book with the politics of the reelected president than with the corruption of President Harding, or, for that matter, the mystery of the Easter Island statues,” before suggesting that “one could draw much more apt comparisons between the stagey

heroics of Lindbergh and John F. Kerry's ludicrous posturing at the Democratic convention, or between the corporation-bashing legal careers of Burton K. Wheeler and John Edwards."⁷¹ Bill Kaufman, on the other hand, writing in the *American Conservative*, offered a typically unexpected and iconoclastic take on the novel. "Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*," he observed, "is the novel that a neoconservative would write, if a neoconservative could write a novel." It was, he said, possibly "meant to serve as the writing sample in Roth's application for a speechwriter job in the Bush administration." For Kaufman, Roth's novel bespoke an elite-driven, war-mongering, interventionist foreign policy that ignored the massive human cost of America's intervention in World War II. "Campaigning in 'the remotest rural counties,' Lindbergh wins in a landslide," writes Kaufman, "the Republicans take Congress, and the threat of peace, no conscription, and full enjoyment of the Bill of Rights darkens the Rothian sky. To young Philip's parents, America is good only insofar as it sends its sons to die in foreign lands." "Unwashed Americans," he continues, "who live in places like North Dakota or Minnesota or Montana, mean harm to the Roths; their reluctance to send their sons to transatlantic graves is presented as a particularly insidious symptom of anti-Semitism." Mixing his aesthetic with political concerns—he suggests that Roth is "mediocrity . . . at the typewriter" who writes in "sodden clichés," "*Time-Life* prose," and offers "not a felicitous sentence," "spark of wit or a single subversive thought"—Kaufman concludes: "This is 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. All that is left, I suppose, is for the author to collect his Presidential Medal of Freedom."⁷²

That the novel should produce such a plethora of knowing readings might suggest that *Plot* fails in the same way as *Our Gang*. Certainly there seem to be a number of readers who have come away from the text with little more than the knowing politics that they brought to it. For many of these readers there appears to have been very little disorientation or transfiguration, literary or political. For these readers, novels appear to have political messages, and reading is the process of discerning the author's views and celebrating, or condemning, them to the extent that they agree with their own political outlook. It might be argued, however, that such readings reveal more about the reader than they do about the text.⁷³ While it has been suggested that Roth himself might be held responsible for the

knowing readings of *Our Gang*—precisely because the text offered little opportunity for anything else—his culpability for such readings of *The Plot Against America* is much less clear. Many other readers showed themselves sensitive to the ambiguities of the text, noting the ways in which it tempted the reader into the sort of conflation of worlds evidenced by politically motivated critics from both sides of the aisle, but which ultimately frustrated such readings in productive ways.

Although some wished to ascribe to Paul Berman the sort of reading outlined by James Wolcott, Berman's take on *The Plot Against America* was rather more subtle and revealing of how unknowing texts might offer their readers an opportunity for critical reflection. "Not once," writes Berman, "does Roth glance at events of the present day, not even with a sly wink. Still, after you have had a chance to inhabit his landscape for a while and overhear the arguments about war and fascism and the Jews, 'The Plot Against America' begins to rock almost violently in your lap—as if a second novel, something from our own time, had been locked inside and was banging furiously on the walls, trying to get out." As for the parallels between the written and unwritten worlds, writes Berman, "I have my opinions on these matters, and so does everyone else, and so does Philip Roth, I imagine. But Roth has kept his opinions to himself. 'The Plot Against America' is not an allegorical tract about the present age, with each scene or character corresponding to events of our own time."⁷⁴ Likewise, Michiko Kakutani, though somewhat dismissive of the book, notes unknowingness in the text that some of its more strident champions and critics seem to have missed. "'The Plot Against America'" she writes, "is a novel that can be read, in the current Bush era, as either a warning about the dangers of isolationism or a warning about the dangers of the Patriot Act and the threat to civil liberties."⁷⁵

That different readers can take different things from the same text is, of course, no surprise. That so many readers should take so many—often diametrically opposed—readings from the same text suggests, however, that the text in question is rather more unknowing than knowing. This is, perhaps, what makes it such a fecund source of political debate and discussion, even if the former—at least—is simply the shrill exchange of previously held position statements. While there will always be knowing readers about whom an author can do little, there are others for whom the text will offer the possibility of critical reflection. Certainly, some readers might

come away from the text more sensitive to state encroachment upon their civil rights in a time of emergency; others to the way in which politicians twist language to their own advantage; others still to prejudice; and some to the politics of political demagoguery. Nevertheless, it may be that if Roth has any intent at all in his texts, it is to cultivate in his readers the same sense of unknowingness that fuels his art. This unknowingness may be the most political product of all: cultivating in the reader the possibility of an attitude and ethos appropriate to democratic politics.

Plots Against Dogma

Roth, it has been argued, employs multiple devices in *The Plot Against America* to offer a narrative that he also undercuts. While this undercutting is not as thoroughgoing as in say, *The Counterlife* or *Operation Shylock*, there are sufficient moments in the text to suggest that what Philip the narrator perceives may not be what—or all that—is going on. Likewise, Roth the author juxtaposes worlds, most obviously by offering an appendix to the book that includes, among other things, “A Note to the Reader.” “*The Plot Against America*,” Roth observes there, “is a work of fiction. This postscript is intended as a reference for readers interested in tracking where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins” (*Plot*, 364). Indeed, he also offers “A True Chronology of the Major Figures,” an account of “Other Historical Figures in the Work,” and “Some Documentation.” Rather like a magician explaining his trick, Roth seems keen to ensure that the reader engage in the desired juxtaposition. Neither world is, the comparison suggests, complete: certainly Roth’s final account of the unwritten-world Lindbergh is somewhat truncated.⁷⁶ Additionally, Lindbergh’s disappearance from the text—though possibly a little too narratively convenient—leaves readers wondering as to the president’s real motives. The reader must weigh the story of an anti-Semite intent on putting his views into political practice against the story of man blackmailed by a Nazi regime holding his kidnapped son hostage. It is, however, in the very first line of the novel that the unknowingness so beneficial to democratic politics is most clearly signaled.

“Fear presides over these memories,” writes the adult Philip, “a perpetual fear” (*Plot*, 1). An underexamined question is, perhaps, why it is fear “*presides over*” the memories, as opposed to, say, “permeating” them. This difference suggests that it is not the child who is afraid but rather the

adult.⁷⁷ If this is indeed the case, it raises the question of why, or of what, the narrator is afraid. A number of critics—such as Paul Berman—have identified Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* as a forerunner to Roth's text. Roth himself alludes to the novel in Mayor La Guardia's eulogy for Walter Winchell (*Plot*, 305). In the *New York Times*, Roth asserted that the "American triumph is that . . . it didn't happen here." "Why it didn't happen," he noted, "is another book, one about how lucky we Americans are."⁷⁸ It is, perhaps, such observations that lead Bill Kauffman to declare that "*The Plot Against America* is the sort of novel a bootlicking author might write to curry favor with a totalitarian government. The author puts a fictive gloss over the officially sanctioned history. Thank God things happened as they did! The alternative to the regime was madness, chaos, murder."⁷⁹ There is, Kauffman argues, a smugness about America and its values underpinning the text. Although Roth—who, Pierpont tells us, displayed a flag from the balcony of his apartment following the 2001 attacks on New York City—has articulated what might be called a "Clintonian" version of patriotism, one in which what is wrong with America can be fixed with what is right with America,⁸⁰ Kaufman could not be more wrong about the alleged complacency of Roth's novel. Roth says of *Plot* that his point is not "that this can happen and will happen; rather, it's that at the moment when it should have happened, it did not happen."⁸¹ This is not complacency, it is history, but *Plot* suggests that it could have been otherwise. Roth identifies what he calls "the maxim that informed the writing" of the book, one "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."⁸² As such, the novel is driven by the unknowingness of what Roth calls "the relentless unforeseen."

"Turned wrong way round," the adult Philip declares in *Plot*, "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, turning a disaster into an epic" (*Plot*, 113–14). It is a claim that echoes and is echoed by recent works of democratic theory, most obviously, perhaps, Bonnie Honig's *Emergency Politics*, which draws attention to the contingency of that we take for granted. "Our moral clarity regarding identities or forms of life that were once but are no longer excluded is a product of political victories" writes Honig; "victorious political actors *created* post hoc the clarity we now credit with having spurred them on to victory ex

ante.”⁸³ “Things,” Honig suggests, “could have gone another way. They may yet do so.”⁸⁴ This is, perhaps, the awareness of precariousness and provisionality generated by Roth’s “what if?” Indeed, it might be argued that this “what if?” is the suppressed term in almost all political thought.

In this, the unknowingness that Roth depicts in his written world is potentially transferred to his readers in the unwritten. This not only alerts them to the possibility that while *it*—in this case, fascism, but which could be all manner of catastrophes—didn’t happen here, it still could, but it also provides them with an awareness of their own contingency, one that might help them prevent or deal with such an event. “But history,” as Roth notes, embracing the unknown, “has the final say.”⁸⁵

Notes

1. Philip Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer, His Colleagues, and Their Work* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 100.

2. Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 155; hereafter cited parenthetically as *Reading*.

3. Roth borrows the term “written and unwritten worlds” from Paul Goodman, *ibid.*, xiii. For further discussion of this distinction, see Simon Stow, “Written and Unwritten America: Roth on Reading, Politics, and Theory,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 24 (2003): 77–87.

4. Derek Parker Royal, “Plots Against America: Language and the Comedy of Conspiracy in Philip Roth’s Early Fiction,” in *Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as a Comic Writer*, ed. Ben Siegel and Jay L. Halio (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010), 118.

5. Philip Roth, “The Story behind *The Plot Against America*,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/books/review/19ROTHL.html?pagewanted=all&module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C%7B%21%22%3A%22RI%3A5%22%7D&_r=0.

6. The term “the political” is drawn from the work of Chantal Mouffe. “‘The political,’” she writes, “refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. It is a dimension that can never be eradicated. ‘Politics,’ on the other hand, refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seeks to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting, since they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’” (Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically* [London: Verso, 2013], 2–3).

7. See, for example, Joseph H. Lane Jr. “The Stark Regime and American

Democracy: A Political Interpretation of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*," *American Political Science Review*, 95, no. 4 (2001): 811–28.

8. See, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995); and Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For an insightful discussion of these arguments, see Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

9. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

10. See, for example, William Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and William Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). This is not, it should be noted, an argument for ethical criticism of the sort identified by Wayne C. Booth. Booth is concerned with the ways in which texts might be said to be good or bad. The argument here is concerned less with categorizing than with identifying how texts might work to political or theoretical effect.

11. See, for example, the excellent discussion in Ella Myers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

12. Indeed, “paranoid fantasist” might serve as another name for Roth’s chosen profession. That “Smitty” is only “purportedly” an author further emphasizes the point.

13. Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 7.

14. The desire to reduce literary texts by denying their creativity is, perhaps, akin to the “deflationary tendency” in political theory identified by J. Peter Euben. For Euben, who borrows the term from Peter Dews, this “deflationary tendency” is evident in political theory that ignores the imaginative aspects of epic thought in favor of “thin” theories of social and political life (see Euben, *Platonic Noise* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003], 33–34).

15. Daniel Sandstrom, “My Life as a Writer: Interview with Philip Roth,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/books/review/my-life-as-a-writer.html?_r=0.

16. Philip Roth, “An Open Letter to Wikipedia,” *New Yorker*, September 6, 2012, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/an-open-letter-to-wikipedia.

17. Derek Parker Royal, “Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*,” in *Philip Roth: New Perspectives on an American Author*, ed. Royal (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2005), 194.

18. Claudia Roth Pierpont, *Roth Unbound. A Writer and His Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 127.

19. Sandstrom, “My Life as a Writer.”

20. Paul Berman, “Review: *The Plot Against America*,” *New York Times*, Octo-

ber 3, 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/10/03/books/review/03BERMAN.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&.

21. As Claudia Franziska Brühwiler notes, Roth was keen to reiterate his non-polemical stance in press interviews following the release of *Exit Ghost*. He was not, he said, “out to make fiction into a political statement. Rather, I’m out to do what fiction and only fiction does: to portray in a sustained narrative those who did make political statements” (Brühwiler, “Political Awakenings: Political Initiation in *The Plot Against America*,” *Transatlantica* 2 [2007]: 3).

22. Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 112.

23. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971). In this, literature and the literary aspects of political thought might be thought to show us something in a weaker sense of the verb “to show”—the way a car dealer or a Realtor might “show” us other options that make us reflect critically upon our initial choices—rather than in the stronger sense more associated with knowing accounts of the author and the text in which either or both “show” us in the sense of an evidentiary proof for something believed to be true. For a further discussion of this distinction, see Simon Stow, *Republic of Readers? The Literary Turn in Political Thought and Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

24. See, for example, Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). For less knowing, and thus more compelling, readings of Plato, see Danielle Allen, *What Plato Wrote* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); and John Seery, *Political Returns: Irony in Politics and Theory, from Plato to the Antinuclear Movement* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990).

25. Not least, perhaps, because he has often made it clear that he expects so little of the reading public. Roth complained to Claudia Roth Pierpont that people in New York only wish to discuss movies. Similarly, in his interview with Sandstrom in the *New York Times* he celebrates “the fact that writers really don’t mean a goddamn thing to nine-tenths of the population doesn’t hurt. It’s inebriating” (Sandstrom, “My Life as a Writer”).

26. Updike says that Roth sees “the act of writing as a means of really reshaping the world to your liking” (Mick Brown, “John Updike: Descent of Man,” *Daily Telegraph*, October 26, 2008, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/donotmigrate/3562574/John-Updike-descent-of-man.html). While J. M. Coetzee says of *The Plot Against America*, “Roth has not concocted this lengthy fantasy of an America in thrall to the Nazis simply as a literary exercise” (Coetzee, “What Philip Knew,” *New York Review of Books*, November 18, 2004, www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2004/nov/18/what-philip-knew/).

27. Certainly the long history of pronouncements by multiple different Philip Roths makes any simple statement of the author’s aims and views deeply problematic.

28. As far as overreading is concerned, it is perhaps telling that knowing readings are ascribed to the least attractive characters in the text and that one of the most sympathetic characters in the text, Faunia Farley, pretends not to be able to read at all (Stow, "Written and Unwritten America," 81).

29. The critical response, or lack thereof, to *Our Gang* is nicely summarized in Till Kinzel, "Philip Roth's *Our Gang*, the Politics of Intertextuality and the Complexities of Cultural Memory," *Philip Roth Studies*, 9, no. 1 (2013): 15–25.

30. Jonathan Yardley, review, "PHILIP ROTH *Novels & Stories, 1959–1962*, *Library of America*. 913 pp. \$35. *PHILIP ROTH Novels 1967–1972*, *Library of America*. 671 pp. \$35," *Washington Post*, August 28, 2005, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/25/AR2005082501470.html.

31. In a footnote to the interview "On *Our Gang*," Roth notes: "My remarks here grew out of a lengthy conversation I had with a Random House executive who in 1971 was uneasy about publishing *Our Gang*. He objected to the book principally on grounds of taste; he also wondered if it might not be politically counterproductive—that is, if one could imagine it having any political effect at all. Since there would doubtless be other readers who would share the publisher's point of view, I asked Alan Lelchuk . . . if he would help me extend my thoughts on the subjects or satire, Nixon, and *Our Gang*" (*Reading*, 37). Among those who were offended by *Our Gang* were Nixon and his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman. Haldeman said of the book, it's "a ridiculous book. It's sickening"; "It's sick, you know, a perverted kind of thing," while his boss was moved to observe of Roth: "He's a horrible moral leper" (Jon Wiener, "When Nixon Asked Haldeman about Philip Roth," *L.A. Review of Books*, January 26, 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/nixon-asked-haldeman-philip-roth>).

32. Margaret Anne Daniel argues otherwise, but I can see no evidence for this claim (Daniel, "Philip Roth, MVP: *Our Gang*, *The Breast*, and *The Great American Novel*," in *Philip Roth: New Perspectives*, 60).

33. I am, however, not sure I can think of any.

34. The alternative to "straight" readings is suggested by Eric Naiman in his *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

35. Plato, *Gorgias*.

36. Dwight McDonald, "Our Gang," *New York Times*, November 7, 1971, www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-gang.html.

37. I was reminded of this by Amy C. Oakes, author of the highly regarded, but unfunny, *Diversionsary War: Domestic Unrest and International Conflict* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

38. I suspect that, at the mean, or even at the median, most people don't find statistics that funny.

39. Kinzel, "Philip Roth's *Our Gang*," 23.

40. See Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

41. I will admit to laughing, once, at the following passage. “‘But Secretary Lard was seen weeping as he left Walter Reed today. Surely that suggests that President Dixon is dead.’ ‘Not necessarily. It could just as well mean that he’s alive’” (Philip Roth, *Our Gang* [New York: Vintage, 2009], 143). Keeping track of my guffaws was not, therefore, particularly difficult.

42. Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 73.

43. See, for example, J. D. Bloom qtd. in Kinzel, “Philip Roth’s *Our Gang*,” 19; and Yardley, review of “PHILIP ROTH.”

44. Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 72.

45. *Ibid.*, 71. The op-ed was—equally tellingly—rejected.

46. Woody Allen, *The Illustrated Woody Allen Reader*, ed. Linda Sunshine (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 152–53.

47. If, as Roth suggests, satire is “the imaginative flowering of the primitive urge to knock somebody’s block off,” then it may be that bad satire is similarly deserving of a punch in the mouth from Ernest Hemingway (*Reading*, 46).

48. Indeed, Nixon’s “Justice in the Streets” initiative finds its linguistic echo in Lindbergh’s “Just Folks” program in *The Plot Against America*.

49. See, for example, James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions, Reconstitutions, of Language Character and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

50. Roth has, to be sure, given many interviews in which he discusses his works, but when pushed to ascribe a particular purpose to any given text, he always demurs. Not so with *Our Gang*.

51. Roth’s willingness to blame his audience for the failure of the text further suggests a decidedly knowing self-righteousness in the author that he claims to deplore in others. “In Roth’s own view,” notes Till Kinzel, “the reception of his book had suffered from a particular feature of the then American cultural memory,” their lack of awareness a pre–Civil War tradition of eviscerating political satire (Kinzel, “Philip Roth’s *Our Gang*,” 18–19). Indeed, Roth suggests that the potential audience for his novel was insufficiently primed for its appearance. “Another reason,” he notes, “Americans might not realize satirical writing once flourished here is that there’s hardly any around today” (*Reading*, 38).

52. Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 72.

53. While denying the power of literature to effect social change, Roth nevertheless identifies a number of texts that have. “Even Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*,” he notes, “which just toys with the idea of parricide, has been known to cause audiences in Ireland to riot” (*Reading*, 50).

54. Roth’s opinions of Nixon’s un-American qualities, made manifest in *Our*

Gang, are expressed most clearly in his 1974 interview published as “Writing and the Powers That Be” (*Reading*, 11).

55. Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2004), 184; hereafter cited parenthetically.

56. Joan Acocella disagrees (see her “Philip Roth’s ‘The Plot Against America,’” *New Yorker*, September 20, 2004, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/09/20/040920crbo_books?currentPage=all).

57. Roth, “The Story Behind.”

58. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* is, perhaps, the most compelling recent example of this literary theme.

59. Neil Curtis, “Tragedy and Politics,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 33, no. 7 (2007): 860–79.

60. See John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds., *Nothing to with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

61. That the Gettysburg Address itself offers such a juxtaposition, of the promise of equality embodied in the Declaration of Independence with the failure of the Constitution to offer the same, adds further resonance to this juxtaposition (see Simon Stow, “Pericles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero: Tragedy, Patriotism, and Public Mourning,” *American Political Science Review*, 101, no. 2 [2007]: 195–208).

62. See Ginevra Geraci, “The Sense of an Ending: Alternative History in Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*,” *Philip Roth Studies*, 7, no. 2 (2011): 200.

63. If this is, indeed, his goal. It does not have to be for this argument to work.

64. Geraci, “The Sense of an Ending,” 200.

65. Roth, “The Story Behind.”

66. Jonathan Yardley, “Homeland Insecurity,” *Washington Post*, October 3, 2004, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A63751-2004Sep30.html.

67. Ron Rosenbaum, “We Married a Fascist,” *New York Observer*, June 21, 2004, <http://observer.com/2004/06/we-married-a-fascist/>.

68. Keith Gessen, “His Jewish Problem,” *New York Magazine*, September 27, 2004. <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/reviews/9902/index2.html>.

69. James Wolcott, “The Counter Life,” *Nation*, November 4, 2004, www.thenation.com/article/counter-life?page=0,2.

70. Diana West, “The Unnerving ‘Plot,’” *Townhall*, October 11, 2004, http://townhall.com/columnists/dianawest/2004/10/11/the_unnerving_plot.

71. Stephen Schwartz, “American Gothic,” *Weekly Standard*, November 29, 2004, www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Protected/Articles/000/000/004/936eumjm.asp?page=3.

72. Bill Kaufman, “Heil to the Chief,” *American Conservative*, September 27, 2004, www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/heil-to-the-chief/.

73. Thus, for example, the Amazon.com reviewer who declared “THE PLOT

AGAINST AMERICA actually incites the very anti-semitism it condemns,” might be thought to have revealed more about him or herself than he or she intended (http://amazon.com/Plot-Against-America-Philip-Roth/productreviews/1400079497/ref=cm_cr_dp_qt_hist_one?ie=UTF8&filterBy=addOneStar&showViewpoints=0).

74. Berman, “Review.”

75. Michiko Kakutani, “A Pro-Nazi President, a Family Feeling the Effects,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/09/21/books/21kaku.html. It is, perhaps, telling that in an article that otherwise offers a fine overview of the various responses to *The Plot Against America*, Steven G. Kellman irons out some of the nuances in the reviews he cites. Indeed, because Kakutani notes that *Plot* can be read in more than one way, Kellman suggests that she has “hedged her bets” rather than offered a complex view of a complex text (Kellman, “It Is Happening Here: *The Plot Against America* and the Political Moment,” *Philip Roth Studies*, 4, no. 2 [2008]: 113–23).

76. There is no mention, for example, of the aviator’s other families in Germany and Switzerland, at least the first of which was known to the public prior to the publication of *Plot*. Such details confirm, perhaps, Roth’s claim that reality is constantly throwing up figures that might not be believed were they to appear in fiction (“Lindbergh Fathered ‘Two Families,’” bbc.co.uk, November 29, 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3249472.stm>; and Penelope Gree, “But Enough About Them,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/04/17/garden/17lindbergh.html?pagewanted=all).

77. A now archaic meaning of “to preside,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “to play,” as in a piano or other instrument. It might not be too much to suggest that the narrator is playing (with) his memories to produce an experience in the reader.

78. Roth, “The Story Behind.”

79. Kauffman, “Heil to the Chief.”

80. As is suggested by Pierpont’s account of Roth’s debates with Harold Pinter (Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 158–59).

81. Roth, “The Story Behind.”

82. *Ibid.*

83. Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 47.

84. *Ibid.*, 49.

85. Roth, “The Story Behind.”