

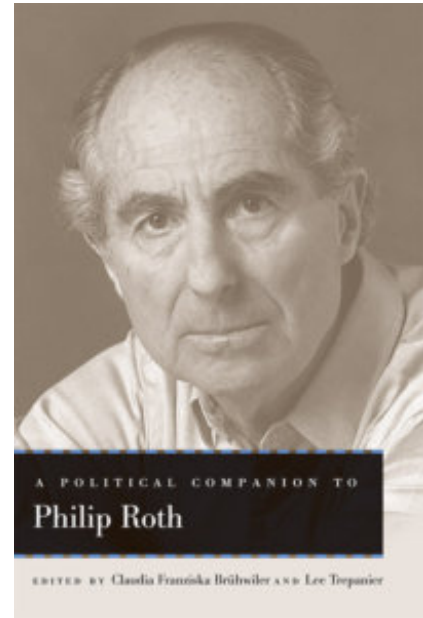
Serving His Tour as an “Exasperated Liberal and Indignant Citizen”: Philip Roth, a Public Intellectual?

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“I’m a novelist, but I’m not Émile Zola.”^{[1][2]}—One phrase that could already squash this article’s premise, namely that Philip Roth should be considered as a public intellectual, as part of a category of writers that became known thanks to Zola’s battle in defense of Alfred Dreyfus who had been unjustly convicted for treason in 1894. “I’m not Émile Zola,” thus Roth’s justification why he declined to get involved in the case of Kathy Boudin, a member of the Weather Underground who had been imprisoned for her role in a hold-up that had two policemen killed in 1981.^[3] Roth refuses the categorization as a public intellectual since he finds the term “pompous,” as if he were winding a laurel wreath for himself.^[4] Not feeling like another Zola and refusing others to bestow laurels on him, however, does not spare Roth from being perceived as a potential Zola. This perception is not only wishful thinking by the public and critics, but actually grounded in Roth’s writing and activities, particularly during the first part of his career.



As I have argued elsewhere,^[5] German-speaking media are particularly prone to treat Roth as a public intellectual, in that they tend to interview him on political issues and ask him about the responsibility of writers. While one can explain this line of interviewing away as a Germanic preoccupation, as a reflex of cultural critics and journalists in search of U.S. embodiments of Nobel laureates Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass, Roth once indeed took upon himself the role of a public intellectual by giving Eastern European a platform on our side of the Iron Curtain. Even earlier, he used literature in ways he claims to be incompatible with literature’s purpose, by mocking the presidency and unmasking its erstwhile incumbents. Moreover, he stood up for artistic freedom from the very outset of his writing life, which includes for him the right to defy any alleged political responsibility and keeping to moral standards imposed by certain parts of society. In other words, I would argue that Roth has reached out to the public either in the pages of his novels or personally to speak out as a writer-intellectual, although he would reject that very label. It seems that his experience of seeing literature, and particularly his own work, on trial, made Roth shy away from claiming a public purpose for either writers or their work as such.

In the following, I will first outline what is generally understood by a public intellectual and why Roth believes that writers should not strive to be known under such a category. I will then turn to his early battles in defense of artistic freedom and the right to provocation, which he claimed for his crusade against Richard Nixon as well. Finally, we will turn to his most public engagement, namely his support for dissident writers in Czechoslovakia.

Writers as Public Intellectuals—And the American Exception

When Roth claimed not to be Zola, he referred to the man who was first called an “intellectual,” though meant derogatorily. French novelist Maurice Barrès denounced those thinkers who joined forces with the writer Émile Zola in the Dreyfus Affair as “*intellectuels*.” In French diction, the term still does not require to be accompanied by the adjective “public,” as it had, from its coinage, a public connotation, rendering the English word usage pleonastic.[6] In the U.S. context, it was C. Wright Mills (1957) who first spoke of “public intellectuals,” a term which was finally popularized by historian Russell Jacoby (1987). True to the spirit of Zola and his followers, “public intellectuals” are “*engagés*,” thinkers who use their intellectual (and thus social) capital to get involved politically and express their ideas, beliefs, and convictions to a wide spectrum of the public.[7] In a normative reading, public intellectuals should act as “critical guardian[s] of humane and universal values”[8] and speak “the truth to power.”[9]

A particular subspecies of these treasured public intellectuals are Nobel Prize laureates, who enjoy increased public interest in spite of their oftentimes highly complex research that is usually unintelligible to the average news follower. Accordingly, Frédéric Lebaron describes the Nobel Prize as a “process of social construction of public intellectuals,”[10] since the laureates are suddenly exposed to public attention that reaches beyond their fields of expertise. The same applies to writers who receive this honor, as Edward Said observed astutely:

The easiest way of demonstrating that is simply to list the names of some recent Nobel Prize winners, then to allow each name to trigger in the mind an emblemized region, which in turn can be seen as a sort of platform or jumping-off point for that writer's subsequent activity as an intervention in debates taking place very far from the world of literature.[11]

Already the Dreyfus affair, in a sense the founding moment of the idea of publicly engaged intellectuals, shows that writers did and do act as public intellectuals irrespective of a Nobel award. For instance, in Central and Eastern Europe writer-intellectuals assumed high political offices such as Czechoslovakian President Vaclav Havel, who was at first primarily known as a playwright and dissident,[12] or Arpad Göncz, translator of John Updike's oeuvre and former President of Hungary.[13] In Germany, writers mainly became an immediate political force with Willy Brandt's ascendance to the post of the Chancellor. Once in power, he sought Günter Grass's advice and thus broke down the “traditionally asserted opposition between the life of the mind and the world of power.”[14] Yet we can already earlier in German history find writers who used their public exposure in support of political ideas, for instance playwright Bertolt Brecht or Thomas Mann.

According to Philip Roth, American writers are hardly visible as public intellectuals. In an interview with a German journalist in 1983, he concurred that American writers only rarely spoke out publicly in comparison to their European colleagues, and explained this perceived reluctance as a question of tradition: “You have a famous example: Grass. And Böll as well. Here, this has no tradition. That the phone rings and a senator asked for my opinion: unimaginable. I would faint.”[15] Perhaps emboldened by the belief that his words

would not reach an American audience or playing with European beliefs of superiority, Roth later told the same interviewer that there might be yet another explanation why U.S. authors remained mute in the public realm: “This is an expression of our cultural limitations. It would not occur to anyone to ask a writer.”^[16] In yet another conversation with the German press, however, Roth conceded that it was less a problem of the media asking a writer, but rather of asking *an American* writer. Agreeing with novelist John Irving that the U.S. media criticize American writers fiercely when they express their opinion on politics, Roth modified his claim and pointed out that *The New York Times* indeed seeks the opinions of writers, though of European ones:

The Times asks European, but not American writers. For instance: when Bill Clinton had a few problems with an intern, I was hoping that someone in this country would call John Updike. He wrote brilliant books about sex and power, one could even say: he’s an authority in that field. It would have been obvious to let him write about the Lewinsky affair. Didn’t happen. Millions of words have been written about Monica Lewinsky—but not by any writers.^[17]

With lack of status come certain advantages, however; liberty, for instance, and the privilege of playing rather than arguing. In an interview with a Swedish newspaper, Roth suggested that what had made the American novel particularly successful and popular was this: “Writing that is uncontaminated by political propaganda—or even political responsibility.”^[18] Yet already in the next sentence, Roth lists the many, very political reasons that nourish an American writer’s imagination and constantly feed his or her stories:

Very little truthfulness anywhere, antagonism everywhere, so much calculated to disgust, the gigantic hypocrisies, no holding fierce passions at bay, the ordinary viciousness you can see just by pressing the remote, explosive weapons in the hands of creeps, the gloomy tabulation of unspeakable violent events, the unceasing despoliation of the biosphere for profit, surveillance overkill that will come back to haunt us, great concentrations of wealth financing the most undemocratic malevolents around, science illiterates still fighting the Scopes trial 89 years on, economic inequities the size of the Ritz, indebtedness on everyone’s tail, families not knowing how bad things can get, money being squeezed out of every last thing—that frenzy—and (by no means new) government hardly by the people through representative democracy but rather by the great financial interests, the old American plutocracy worse than ever.^[19]

In spite of his awareness of all these issues, Roth stubbornly claims to be nothing more than “an ordinary citizen,”^[20] only a writer and writers are, thus his lament, not important, since “Americans don’t read anymore”:^[21]

There are always exceptions, but nobody here would listen for even thirty seconds to what a writer has to say. Who is that anyway, people would wonder. There is no special respect for writers [. . .]. They have no greater moral authority than a plumber. [. . .] Yes, it is as if a plumber would suddenly make a statement about the state of the world, everyone would be astounded . . .^[22]

Contrary to Roth's statement, however, one of his later novels still provoked a discussion on his political views. Repeated interpretations of *The Plot Against America* (2004) as an allegory of the administration of George W. Bush even prompted Roth to write an article for *The New York Times* titled "The Story Behind *The Plot*" and to share his motivation for writing the novel. In an interview with Hermione Lee for *The New Yorker*, Philip Roth declared that he was "not out to make fiction into a political statement." He stressed that the novel was "neither an allegory nor a metaphor nor a didactic tract; *The Plot* is about what it is about, which isn't now but then" (The Story Behind). Roth's denial of any political intention behind his works is in unison with his belief that, with reference to Sinclair Lewis, "repeating . . . 'It can happen here,' does little to prevent 'it' from happening" (*Reading*, 207). By writing fiction, Roth claims not to assume any political responsibility, does not succumb to any political purpose, however much he might agree with it: "[H]owever much I may loathe anti-Semitism . . . my job in a work of fiction is not to offer consolation to Jewish sufferers or to mount an attack upon their persecutors" (*Reading*, 109).

In Roth's eyes, writers would misjudge their role if they delivered propaganda and supported a political cause in their writings. Or, to put it into the blunt words of Ernest Hemingway, as imagined by Roth in *The Great American Novel* (1973): "If I have a message, I send it Western Union" (46). Creating fiction should not serve a political idea, but rather only art, thus Roth's belief. The same claim is reiterated by one of Roth's characters, scholar Leo Glucksman, who is sought out by the ever-recurrent Nathan Zuckerman in *I Married a Communist* (1998). The novel is just as much about betrayal in the McCarthy era as it is about the coming of age of a writer, Zuckerman, who first has to find his voice. On this quest, Glucksman challenges, to put it euphemistically, one of the budding novelist's central premises of writing:[23]

Art is taking the right stand on everything? Art as the advocate of good things? Who taught you this? Who taught you art is slogans? Who taught you art is in the service of 'the people'? Art is in the service of art—otherwise there is no art worthy of anyone's attention. What is the motive for writing serious literature, Mr. Zuckerman? To disarm the enemies of price control? The motive for writing serious literature is to write serious literature (I Married, 218).

Roth would reiterate Glucksman's position, as we saw earlier, yet he learned at the outset of his writing life that some critics and readers did indeed expect art to be "the advocate of good things"—and they certainly did not want fiction to be turned into an artistic playground to mock stereotypes and take delight in offense, obscenity, and provocation.

"What Is Being Done to Silence this Man?"—Roth against Political Correctness

Roth experienced very early on what it meant to scandalize his readership, namely with one of his short stories, "Defender of the Faith," that was first published in the *New Yorker* and then reprinted in Roth's debut book, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). The short piece is set in the American military and depicts a Jewish sergeant struggling to reconcile his authority and duty with the appeals of his soldiers to their mutual religious background. His subordinates increasingly take advantage of his goodwill and seek different excuses to receive favorable treatment for ostensibly religious reasons. In the same collection of short stories, Roth also captures the extramarital affairs of an otherwise respectable Jewish

family father in his late fifties, and in yet another story he lets a young Jewish boy disrupt his Bar Mitzvah class to coerce his rabbi and other members of the community to declare themselves believers of Immaculate Conception and Jesus Christ.

By casting Jews as common sinners or ridiculing repetitive Bar Mitzvah lessons, Roth had gone too far in the eyes of many Jewish readers, and had even betrayed his roots and community. One of his readers accused Roth to “have done as much harm” with a single story “as all the organized anti-Semitic organizations have done to make people believe that all Jews are cheats, liars, connivers.”^[24] A rabbi even wrote to the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, inquiring: “What is being done to silence this man? Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him” (*Reading*, 216). Finally, when Roth appeared in 1962 at Yeshiva University in New York to discuss his writing, he got to experience the full wrath of his community. During the questions and answers session, he tried to react calmly to accusations masked as questions like this one: “Mr. Roth, would you write the same stories you’ve written if you were living in Nazi Germany?” (*The Facts*, 127) As Roth explains in his playful attempt at autobiography, he could no longer hold back when he saw not only his own work, but literature as such on trial:

“You were brought up on anti-Semitic literature!” “Yes,” I hollered back, “and what is that?”—curious really to know what he meant. “English literature!” he cried. “English literature is anti-Semitic literature!” (*The Facts*, 129)

Roth had thus established the reputation of a “self-loathing Jew,” the author of anti-Semitic literature in service of goyshe prejudices. Even in Israel, readers took note of his peculiar storylines and characters, which dismayed a notable literary critic of *Haaretz*, Gershom Scholem. Scholem related in one of his articles in 1967 that one of his “hobbies is following anti-Semitic literature. On a recent trip abroad, one of them handed me Roth’s latest book and laughingly commented: ‘Perhaps this too belongs to your life-time interest.’ And, indeed, my friend was right.”^[25] Scholem’s remark predated the one novel that would catapult Roth to international limelight and bolster his reputation as a Jewish writer who is mainly preoccupied with his Judaism: *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969).

Although the incidents at Yeshiva University had disheartened Roth to the extent as to swear to “never write about Jews again” (*The Facts*, 129), he set off to create a character whose thoughts and troubles revolve around only two things—his insatiable sexual appetite and his Judaism. Alexander Portnoy is a young Jewish man living with his family in Newark where he tries to hide his constant lusting for shiksas from his domineering mother. At the same time, he seeks to free himself from the constant demands of his Jewish heritage, the expectations of his community to be just another good Jewish boy: “Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! It is coming out of my ears already, the saga of the suffering Jews! Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—I happen also to be a human being!” (*Portnoy’s Complaint*, 76).

Written as the confession of Portnoy to his psychoanalyst, the tale of his adolescent angsts and yearnings is explicit in language, without fear of obscenity and with a biting humor, all of which captivated thousands of readers. In the year of its publication, *Portnoy’s Complaint* stayed at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list for fourteen consecutive weeks.^[26] As Roth had to observe, however, the novel was “at once such a hit and such a scandal”

because “a novel in the guise of a confession was received and judged by any number of readers as a confession in the guise of a novel” (*Reading*, 218). Indeed, notable critics like Marie Syrkin and Irving Howe harshly criticized the novel for its depiction of Jews as well as for its obscenity.[27] *Haaretz* critic Scholem felt confirmed in his earlier judgment of Philip Roth’s oeuvre and described *Portnoy* as “the book for which all the anti-Semites have been praying.”[28] Scholem saw in the character of Alexander Portnoy an epitome of racist Jewish stereotypes, down to the obsession with the Gentile woman, the *shiksa*. He solemnly predicted that every Jew would have to pay for the book except for the author himself:

Here in the center of Roth’s revolting book . . . stands the loathsome figure whom the anti-Semites have conjured in their imagination and portrayed in their literature, and a Jewish author, a highly gifted if perverted artist, offers all the slogans which for them are priceless.[29]

In addition to his reputation as an enemy of his own religious community, Roth with time became labeled as a misogynist. Former Booker Prize juror Carmen Callil’s criticism of Roth is far from new, as already one of his earliest novels, *When She Was Good* (1967), was repeatedly brandished as misogynist for its unsympathetic depiction of the female protagonist,[30] who is the only female character at the center of a Rothian novel. Reviewers and literary scholars criticized Roth’s female characters as being too stereotypical, farcical, or sexualized, functioning mainly as props to male fantasies, decorative additions to an otherwise male-centered universe. Roth’s ex-wife, the British actress Claire Bloom, seemed to confirm this perception in her memoir *Leaving a Doll’s House* (1996), published, ironically, by Callil’s Virago Press. Bloom depicts a domineering and at times eccentric husband who gets caught up in his anxieties and would even sacrifice their relationship to his art. According to her account, Roth had originally planned to name the wife of his eponymous philandering hero in the short novel *Deception* (1990) “Claire,” but described the supposedly fictional Claire in a way that his actual wife considered insulting and revolting. He eventually dropped this reference for the publication of the book; still, their marriage ended 1994 in divorce.

Fittingly, *Deception* contains one of many examples of how Roth uses his own scandals, or the way critics and scholars try to turn his works into literary scandals, and how he enriches his fiction by playing with the arguments of his opponents. In bed with “Philip Roth,” the unnamed lover starts subjecting him to a trial, and accuses him of sexism and misogyny:

You are out of order! It is not for you to interrogate the court but to answer the questions of the court. You are charged with sexism, misogyny, woman abuse, slander of women, denigration of women, defamation of women, and ruthless seduction, crimes all carrying the most severe penalties. People like you are not treated kindly if found guilty, and for good reason. [. . .] Why did you publish books that cause women suffering? Didn’t you think that those writings could be used against us by our enemies? (109)

The defendant’s answer could be passed on to all of those critics of Philip Roth who constantly remind him of what is proper: “I can only reply that this self-styled equal-rights democracy has aims and objectives that are not mine as a writer” (109-110).

Roth's retort to Claire Bloom's memoir was, however, a little more, though not totally subtle. To the unassuming reader, the character of Eve Frame in *I Married A Communist* is just what narrator Nathan Zuckerman makes her out to be—a famous actress struggling with her Jewish roots who marries the novel's main character, radio-actor Ira Ringold, and who worships her highly musical daughter from a first, unhappy marriage. Hurt and embittered after yet another unsuccessful relationship, Frame aims to destroy Ringold after their divorce by denouncing him for his political affiliations—*I Married A Communist*, exclaims the title of her memoirs. If one reads the tale of Ira and Eve side by side with the one of Philip and Claire, it is inevitable to detect parallels, beginning with Eve's and Claire's profession, the musically gifted daughter who is hardly tolerated by her stepfather, up to the vengeful memoirs. *The Guardian* reviewer Linda Grant thus judged the novel as “a howl of rage about fact, which has bullishly usurped the self-appointed task of fiction to tell the truth”[31]—a scandal used to produce yet another, though indeed only minor, literary scandal. It probably did not have a great impact on Roth, at least not if we may assume that he faces and faced such criticism with the same presumptions as his writer-protagonist Zuckerman does. Earlier, in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), Roth had let his Nathan Zuckerman feel what it means to be considered a misogynist:

From what he'd read of the reviews in the feminist press, he could expect a picture of himself up in the post office, alongside the mug shot of the Marquis de Sade, once the militants took Washington and began guillotining the thousand top misogynists in the arts. He came off no better there than with the disapproving Jews. Worse. They had put him on the cover of one of their magazines. Why does this man hate women? (171)

While Roth's mockery of feminist critics was relatively tame and rare, the charges of anti-Semitism would become a recurring theme, not only in his autobiography *The Facts* (1988) and in his many non-fictional contributions collected in *Reading Myself and Others* (1976), but also in his fiction. He chose his constant literary companion or alter ego Nathan Zuckerman to project his own torments as a young writer accused of exploiting his family's stories and tarnishing the Jewish community's reputation. *The Ghost Writer* (1979) is Zuckerman's failed *Bildungsroman*, his quest to become a serious writer with the aide of his idol, reclusive writer E.I. Lonoff. During his stay with Lonoff, he reminisces about the struggles with his parents, particularly with his father, who felt insulted and ridiculed in one of his son's short stories. Echoing arguments Roth had heard after the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus*, a judge and friend of the family admonishes Zuckerman to consider the consequences for the Jewish community should his story ever get published. To help Zuckerman see the implications of his work, the judge sends him a questionnaire that lets one think of Roth's “trial” at New York's Yeshiva University:

1. If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would you have written such a story?

...

10. Can you honestly say there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or a Joseph Goebbels? (103-104)

As Roth further follows Zuckerman's life in subsequent novels, the reader learns that Zuckerman, very much like his creator, did not let himself be influenced by societal demands of propriety, but gains fame and notoriety as the author of a novel tellingly titled *Carnovsky*. In *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), the writer-protagonist shares how life changed for him after this giant success: "The only book that seemed to exist was his own. And whenever he tried to forget it, someone reminded him" (50). As Roth had said of many people's reaction to *Portnoy*, Zuckerman complained that his readers often mistook "impersonation for confession and were calling out to a character who lived in a book" (10). Zuckerman consequently received mail addressed not only to himself, but also to his fictional character "Gilbert Carnovsky" as well as letters "addressed simply to 'The Enemy of the Jews'" (58). Roth's readers thereby experience the paranoia of the haunted writer, the absurdness of certain claims and the farcical situations he undergoes simply because the written and the unwritten world merge for some of Zuckerman's/Roth's readers. At the same time, Zuckerman has to recognize how his family is suffering due to his success, being just as much victims of their son's literary scandal as he is. He pays for his fictional brazenness by being called "Bastard" (193) by his dying father. His brother Henry would finally erase any doubt that their father might not have intended to say what he did: "*Of course he said 'Bastard.'* He'd seen it! He'd seen what you had done to him and Mother in that book!" (217).

Following the buzz, scandal, and accusations, Zuckerman falls into depression and becomes increasingly wary of his individuality. The scandal and the subsequent illness seem to have a transforming effect on him: "Yes, illness had done it: Zuckerman had become Carnovsky. The journalists had known it all along" (*The Anatomy Lesson*, 102). Ironically, his personal crisis coincides with the Watergate hearings, which instill, for the only time, compassion in him for the dwindling President Nixon: "He almost felt for him, the only other American he saw daily who seemed to be in as much trouble as he was" (10). Zuckerman would in later novels set out to reclaim the dignity of Coleman Silk, defend Ira Ringold against the defamatory book by his wife, and rather explore the scandals of others rather than his own. In his last appearance in *Exit Ghost* (2007), Roth even lets him pass the chance to expose a scandalous truth about his one-time mentor, E.I. Lonoff. A young upcoming writer seeks in Zuckerman a mentor who would support his endeavor to write a Lonoff biography. Roth once let a writer envision the plight of a Lonoff biographer in *Deception*, mockingly dismissing the thought that a literary hermit like Lonoff might "in secret [have] the remissive history of Jean Genet" (*Deception*, 98), which let the biographer scorn the Lonoff family and its desire for a "pious monument" (98) to the deceased. Now, however, Zuckerman shows sympathy for similar wishes, in spite of reminders of his former self, that he, Zuckerman, had once also been brash and rash in his writing. Roth's alter ego is finally tired of scandals, even political ones:

I've served my tour as exasperated liberal and indignant citizen. . . . I don't wish to register an opinion, I don't want to express myself on "the issues"—I don't even want to know what they are. It no longer suits me to know, and what doesn't suit me, I expunge (*Exit Ghost*, 36-37).

Against the "Armor of Dignity": Satirizing Presidents

Before turning tired of "serving his tour as an exasperated liberal" citizen, Roth

experimented with satire, not only for the fun and to gain a feel for the genre, but also with actual political anger as a motivation. During his college years at Bucknell University, he headed the magazine *Et Cetera* and used it as a platform for his satiric exploits^[32] which would later find a more prominent readership. His irony-laden essay “Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue” (1957/1996) in the *Chicago Review* showed the satirical potential of a president’s quirks, with Roth taking delight in Dwight Eisenhower’s “chummy tone” in his good-night prayers, a means to unburden his presidential shoulders and pass the chances of failure to the Lord. But, as Roth stated in an interview, it was only in the sixties and seventies that he had found a truly compelling reason to try his hand at satire again: “Why have I turned to political satire? In a word: Nixon” (*Reading*, 41).

Roth eyed Nixon’s rise to power early on with a mixture of fear and disgust. Having grown up as the son of an ardent New Dealer who believed in “the sanctity of F.D.R. and the Democratic Party” (*The Facts*, 31), Roth took pride in the fact that “Richard Nixon was known as a crook in our kitchen some twenty-odd years before this dawned on the majority of Americans as a real possibility” (*Reading*, 9-11). Roth saw in Nixon a man “transparently fraudulent, if not on the edge of mental disorder[,]” (11), whose changing viewpoints could not be explained reasonably. In fall 1971, Roth drafted a piece that was intended for the pages of the *New York Times*, which rejected it as “tasteless.”^[33] Therein, he marvelled how Nixon could be “positively gaga over his trip to Red China, as he used to call it[,]” and refer to the country as the People’s Republic of China “as easily as any Weatherman”: “Doesn’t he stand for *anything*? It turns out he isn’t even anti Communist. He never even believed in *that*” (41).

With his satirical closet drama *Our Gang* (1971), Roth thus set out “to destroy the protective armor of ‘dignity’ that shields anyone in an office as high and powerful as the Presidency” (40)—and thereby show the *New York Times* what “tasteless” really could amount to.^[34] Focusing on President Trick E. Dixon, the play does not only decry “the fine art of government lying” (49), but also the ineffectiveness of the President’s entourage and those believed to be primary watchdogs, namely the media. Even though it would be the media which, with some time-lag to Roth’s vitriolic play and only thanks to the tenacity of *The Washington Post*’s journalists,^[35] would unveil the illegal machinations in the Nixon administration, they are, in Roth’s eyes, only to be relied on “to cloud the issue and miss the point” (*ibid.*).

Roth lifts the curtain on Nixon’s character with an actual quote from April 3, 1971, which observers considered exemplary of the President’s struggles with language:

From personal and religious beliefs, I consider abortions an unacceptable form of population control. Furthermore, unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand, I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life—including the life of the yet unborn. For, surely, the unborn have rights also, recognized in law, recognized even in principles expounded by the United Nations (Our Gang, 2).

Our attention then turns to Tricky, as Dixon is henceforth only called, discussing the massacre of My Lai with a citizen who is troubled not by the deaths of the civilians, but by the possibility that one of them might have been a pregnant woman. In the exchange, Roth on the one hand condemns the bigotry and reverse morals he ascribes to Nixon and his

supporters. On the other hand, he incessantly spoofs Nixon's rhetoric, letting Tricky remind his interlocutor of his background as a lawyer, by directly speaking of the "tradition in the courts of this land" (5) and of what "good lawyers" (6) should do, as well as by introducing new absurd hypotheses and discussing their consequences. He carries his arguments for the rights of the unborn further in the next scene, a press conference populated by reporters with names that already convey the nature of their questions: Mr. Asslick, Mr. Daring, Mr. Fascinated...

Roth likewise graces Tricky's staff as well as Vice-President-What's-his-name, Spiro Agnew, with such telling names. As we encounter all the coaches in the third scene, Tricky is in the midst of a crisis, one to add to his *Six Hundred Crises*, as Roth renames Nixon's biographic book *Six Crises* (1962). None other than the Boy Scouts are rioting in the capital, because they have taken offence by what they took to be the President's propagation of intercourse. A serious situation, as Tricky reminds his staff: "Gentlemen, you can go to war without Congressional consent, you can ruin the economy and trample on the Bill of Rights, but you just do not violate the moral code of the Boy Scouts of America and expect to be reelected to the highest office in the land!" (28). The unusual riot and Dixon's earnest response ironically echo Clinton Rossiter's description of the President as someone expected "to go through some rather undignified paces by a people who think of him as a combination of scoutmaster, Delphic oracle, hero of the silver screen, and father of the multitudes" (247). Pondering on how to deal with the rioters and the public, the "spiritual coach" advocates a new version of the Checkers Speech, whereby he literally refers to Nixon's actual speech as Dwight D. Eisenhower's running mate.[36]

Meanwhile, the "political coach" is sure that the team has "used the truth some time or other in the past, too" (36), and the "highbrow coach," a caricature of Henry Kissinger, suggests blaming everything on a former baseball player. Incidentally, the latter has left the country for Copenhagen, the—as the highbrow coach puts it—"pornography capital of the world" (64), against which Tricky Dixon subsequently wages war. Roth lets Tricky hold his "Something is Rotten in the State of Denmark" speech (83), wherein he lets his anti-hero imitate structure and expressions from Nixon's Checkers Speech. Fortunately, Tricky cannot return to presidential business as usual, as he is assassinated in a bizarre manner in the penultimate chapter. Yet for a comeback artist of Dixon's/Nixon's quality, neither death nor the arrival in hell puts an end to his career: in his final appearance, he addresses his "fellow Fallen" (185) in hell and tries to oust Satan from his dominating position, for "despite my brief tenure in the 'White' House, I firmly believe that I was able to maintain and perpetuate all that was evil in American life when I came to power" (191).

With its escalations, absurd twists, and unrealistically one-dimensional characters, *Our Gang* is an over-the-top satire that some consider ineffective due to its exaggerations and hyperbolic nature:[37] its tone, thus the argument, turns too bitter, too vitriolic to remain humorous, pungent, and strike a chord. A reviewer with the *New York Times* considered the satire "far-fetched, unfair, tasteless, disturbing, logical, coarse and very funny—I laughed out loud 16 times and giggled internally a statistically unverifiable amount." [38] Nixon himself heard of *Our Gang* thanks to his Chief of Staff, Bob Haldeman, as could be later

learned thanks to the recordings from the White House. Upon hearing that a satire had been published that vilified him, Nixon simply asked back whether the author was a Jew.[39]

Yet I think the play does achieve its aim of destroying “the protective armor of ‘dignity’ that shields anyone in an office as high and powerful as the Presidency” (*Reading*, 40) and does not allow the reader to dismiss it as outlandish and irrelevant. It makes the reader wary by mimicking Nixon’s rhetorical ticks and his meandering way of speaking, which brings the fictional Tricky at times uncomfortably close to the original. Tricky’s still latent hatred for “Jack Charisma” (59) and his preoccupation with his perspiration are just two of many instances, apart from the character’s very name, when Roth blatantly points at Nixon. One might find Roth’s satirical methods crude and uninspired, a reminder of his predilection for the burlesque, yet they do not fail to leave a mark. Roth had Nixon descend to hell even prior to the publication of the Pentagon Papers. This gives the play not only a prophetic aftertaste and Roth a Cassandra-like status, but also underlines Roth’s notion that the actual scandal of Watergate was only the type of scandal the media understood as such, while it had missed the actual scandal all along: Nixon’s rise to power.

Watergate itself would not inspire Roth to focus yet again on the hated president, but Nixon would continue to haunt the pages of Roth’s novels, though mainly through the lens of the media. For instance in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), Roth’s writer-protagonist Nathan Zuckerman follows Watergate on TV, “our President’s chicanery—the dummy gestures, the satanic sweating, the screwy dazzling lies” (10). Nixon would also bring back the political reflexes of Zuckerman senior, the man “famous for fanatical devotion” (*Zuckerman Unbound*, 1981, 190) for Liberal icons. As mother Zuckerman reports: “Mr. Metz . . . says Daddy seems to follow perfectly. He can tell by how angry he gets whenever he hears Nixon’s name” (104). And, in *American Pastoral* (1997), Nixon would be to Roth’s Lou Levov an outlet, a reason to let go of decorum:

“That skunk!” the Swede’s father said bitterly. “That miserable fascist dog!” and out of him, with terrifying force, poured a tirade of abuse, vitriol about the president of the United States [. . .]. Get Nixon. Get the bastard in some way. Get Nixon and all will be well. If we can just tar and feather Nixon, America will be America again, without everything loathsome and lawless that’s crept in, without all the violence and malice and madness and hate. Put him in a cage, cage the crook, and we’ll have our great country back the way it was! (299-300)

In contrast to his character Lou Levov, Roth did not need Nixon as an excuse to abandon propriety, as he had repeatedly bathed his work in alleged obscenity. But for him, Nixon was likewise liberating in that the despised presidential figure not only gave Roth the needed material to experiment with satire and the grotesque, but also by serving as a counter-figure to the idealized and revered Franklin Delano Roosevelt, another constant political point of reference in his works.

Against Kafkaesk Nightmares: Eastern Europe—and America

In only a few instances, Roth left the confines of fiction to reflect on political issues and acted in the manner of a public intellectual, though maybe a bit more discreetly than others. What led him to political engagement was a literary obsession, namely the desire to see the hometown of one of his idols, Franz Kafka. Already his first visit to Prague in 1972 turned into more than a writer's pilgrimage, for his then-partner, Barbara Sproul, established contacts with political dissidents in the country, acting on behalf of Amnesty International.^[40] Getting a sense for the oppressive political circumstances and their effect on Czechoslovakian writers, Roth would later no longer be just the cover for his partner's human rights engagement and started organizing financial aid for authors through PEN.^[41]

While the financial flow to Prague petered out in 1977, when PEN no longer wanted to focus solely on Czechoslovakian dissident-writers, Roth embarked on an additional support project that lasted from 1974 until the end of the Cold War. For *Penguin*, he edited the series "Writers from the Other Europe" (*Shop Talk*, 78) which featured many of the artists he had met in Prague, such as Ivan Klíma, as well as writers he desired to get greater attention, for instance Bruno Schulz whom he even referenced in *The Prague Orgy* (1985). Roth thus gave Eastern European authors, some of whom had not been translated to English before, a prominent platform to present their writing to an English-speaking readership that could hardly imagine the risks these writers took in pursuit of their calling. Roth kept visiting his colleagues until he was denied a visa in 1976 and had to depend on couriers to stay in touch with them and to get manuscripts across the border (*Shop Talk*, 44). In addition to editing the series for *Penguin*, he then also reflected on his Prague experience in the Zuckerman novel *The Prague Orgy*, which gives the reader an impression of the limitations on an artistic life in a country in which one half "is employed spying on the other half" (33). The story of Zuckerman wandering around Prague in search of a lost manuscript further shows how literature can gain a different status under a totalitarian regime that leads to a situation in which "nothing goes and everything matters; here everything goes and nothing matters" (*Shop Talk*, 53). As Zuckerman observes:

Here where the literary culture is held hostage, the art of narration flourishes by mouth. In Prague, stories aren't simply stories; it's what they have instead of life. [...] Storytelling is the form their resistance has taken against the coercion of the powers-that-be (The Prague Orgy, 64).

Roth would later use his influence once more to help a writer abroad, when Congolese novelist Emmanuel Dongala and his wife were unable to escape the civil war ravaging their country. Thanks to Roth's intervention, President Bill Clinton made sure that they would be granted a visa to come to the United States.^[42] Ironically, Clinton himself would also receive moral support of a special kind from Roth. Although he does not appear as a character in *The Human Stain* (2000), he and his much-debated extramarital affair is on the reader's mind throughout the novel, as Roth reflects the President's predicament and society's hypocrisy. The actual focus, though, is on a character inspired by Roth's longtime friend Professor Melvin Tumin:^[43] Coleman Silk, a professor of classics at a fictional Liberal Arts college, Athena.

"Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?" (*Human Stain*, 6). The double-meaning of the term "spooks" leads to the allegation of racism—the ghosts he was looking for are African-American students. Silk becomes the victim of political

correctness enforced at the expense of common sense. After his wife's death, he finds consolation in an affair with Faunia Farley, one of the College's janitors and in her mid-thirties, who is married to a violent and traumatized Vietnam veteran. This relationship seems to give rise to yet another minor scandal, as Silk receives an anonymous letter that he can attribute to his prim former colleague, a female French professor: "Everyone knows[.]" her note reads, "you're sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age" (38).

Coleman Silk becomes the victim of "the persecuting spirit" (2), as Roth's narrator Zuckerman calls it in reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne. The puritans agonizing Silk are the same that turn the summer of 1998 into

. . . the summer of an enormous piety binge, a purity binge, when terrorism—which had replaced communism as the prevailing threat to the country's security—was succeeded by cocksucking, and a virile, youthful middle-aged president and a brash, smitten twenty-one-year-old employee carrying on in the Oval Office like two teenage kids in a parking lot revived America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony (The Human Stain, 2).

While the nation seems to delight in its disgust and finger-pointing, Zuckerman is alienated and appalled by the purifying zest around him and dreams "of a mammoth banner, draped Dadaistically like a Christo wrapping from one end of the White House to the other and bearing the legend A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE" (3). The actual scandal, however, would only be revealed to Zuckerman after Silk's burial, namely that he was of African American descent and had denied his roots, committing a virtual matricide. "His crime exceeded anything and everything they wanted to lay on him. He said 'spooks,' he has a girlfriend half his age—it's all kid stuff" (355)

Such is also Zuckerman's—and, we may infer, Roth's—assessment of Clinton's "crime" against propriety: kid stuff, an assessment emphasized by his comparison of the adulterous President and his intern to "two teenagers in a parking lot" (2). Again, the media are only to be trusted "to cloud the issue and miss the point" (*Reading*, 49) by focusing on the incidental rather than the substantial. As in the case of Silk, we find Clinton's true crime elsewhere, indeed, even in a part of Roth's American Trilogy preceding *The Human Stain* and linking him to Richard Nixon. Murray Ringold, one of the central characters of *I Married Communist* (1998) and a survivor of the Red Scare era, relates to Nathan Zuckerman how he watched Nixon's funeral in 1994. Disgustedly, Ringold recalls each scene shown on television, each scene and each speaker:

Then the realists take command, the connoisseurs of deal making and deal breaking, masters of the most shameless ways of undoing an opponent, those for whom moral concerns must always come last, uttering all the well-known, unreal, sham-ridden cant about everything but the dead man's real passions. Clinton exalting Nixon for his "remarkable journey" and, under the spell of his own sincerity, expressing hushed gratitude for all the 'wise counsel' Nixon had given him (278).

In his final speech in hell, *Our Gang's* Tricky Dick tells his “fellow fallen” that it is “our whole lives that you should be judging here tonight” (200)—thus claimed Clinton to do in Nixon’s case, as David Greenberg (2003) pointed out. Yet Bill Clinton’s verdict was, in Zuckerman’s reading, unjust. In both Silk’s and Clinton’s cases it is not what guardians of public morals and propriety label as scandalous that infuriates Zuckerman, it is rather society’s sanctimony and blindness to the actual crime that disgust him. Silk committed a virtual matricide by cutting all ties to his family; Clinton cried over the nation’s loss of Nixon, against his better judgment. The purity binge of 1998 is for Roth and his narrator Zuckerman only the point of departure to uncover America’s actual crimes: its history of race relations, its obsession with purity and propriety, the resulting hypocrisy.

Conclusion: Declining the Laurels . . . to Little Effect

Philip Roth has still not received the Nobel Prize, the award that forces even the most reluctant intellectuals into the public. Whether he will receive it one day, is up to the committee in Stockholm, in which he has little faith—to a French journalist he marveled that his turn might come once a writer from the Trobriand Island had been honored.[44] Irrespective of any awards, Roth will remain on the radar of those seeking a critical voice who speaks as bluntly on American affairs as he does defend artistic freedom. Roth may think this only to be the case in Europe, where cultural critics further such intuitions by claiming that it “is now easier to find on the newsstands of *la France profonde* than in the convenience-store equivalents of the American heartland.”[45] Having chronicled America’s plights in the 20th Century, unmasked the country’s lies, but also highlighted those traits that set it apart from Europe, Roth will, though *nolens volens*, retain an important place in the country’s cultural and political conscience.

Notes

[1] An earlier draft of this chapter was presented at the American Political Science Association’s Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. in 2014, as part of the panel “The Artist as Public Intellectual and Political Leader” that was sponsored by the McConnell Center. I thank Prof. Lee Trepanier for the invitation and I am indebted to all the panel participants for their valuable comments, in particular to discussant Prof. Rebecca LeMoine.

[2] Claudia Roth Pierpoint, *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2013), 225.

[3] Elizabeth Kolbert portrayed Kathy Boudin in 2001 for the *New Yorker*, providing insight into Boudin’s initiation to far-left terrorism, her actual involvement in the hold-up, and her later atonement by improving the lot of HIV-positive prisoners. See Kolbert, “The Prisoner,” *The New Yorker*, July 16, 2001, 44-57. Her defense team thought that Roth might be sympathetic to her cause due to the way *American Pastoral* discussed the Weather Underground.

[4] Anthony Palou, “Philip Roth chez lui,” *Le Figaro*, Oct. 8, 2009, 40.

[5] Claudia Franziska Brühwiler, “A Reluctant Public Intellectual: Philip Roth in the German-speaking Media.” *Philip Roth Studies* 10, no.1 (2014). The article includes general observations on public intellectuals that are covered here as well, and focuses on the way

Roth is portrayed in German-speaking media.

[6] Edward W. Said, "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals," in *The Public Intellectual*, ed. Helen Small (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publisher, 2002), 22; Eleanor Townsley, "The Public Intellectual Trope in the United States," *The American Sociologist* (2006): 39; Susan Rubin Suleiman, "The Literary Significance of the Dreyfus Affair," in *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth, and Justice*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1987), 120.

[7] Jonathon Lane, "Loyalty, Democracy and the Public Intellectual," *Minerva* 43 (2005): 74; Pascal Ory and Jean-François Sirinelli, *Les intellectuels en France: De l'affaire Dreyfus à nos jours*, 3 ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2002), 10.

[8] Matthew A. Kemp, "French Intellectuals and the Iraq War," *Modern & Contemporary France* 17, no. 2 (2009): 199.

[9] Said, "The Role," 25.

[10] Frédéric Lebaron, "'Nobel' Economists as Public Intellectuals: The Circulation of Symbolic Capital," *International Journal of Contemporary Sociology* 43, no. 1 (2006): 88.

[11] Said, "The Role," 25.

[12] The situation in post-Cold War Czechoslovakia even led Roth to ask: "Have there ever before been so many translators, novelists, and poets at the head of anything other than the PEN club?" (*Shop Talk*, 46)

[13] Wolf Lepenies, *Aufstieg und Fall der Intellektuellen in Europa* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Campus Verlag, 1992), 54.

[14] Frank Brunssen, "'Speak Out!'—Günter Grass as an International Intellectual," *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 15, no. 3 (2007): 325

[15] Volker Hage, *Philip Roth: Bücher und Begegnungen* (München: Hanser, 2008), 20. My translation. Original passage: „Sie haben doch ein berühmtes Beispiel: Grass. Und Böll ja auch. Das hat bei uns keine Tradition. Dass bei mir das Telefon klingelt und ein Senator mich um meine Meinung bittet: unvorstellbar. Ich würde vor Schreck umfallen.“

[16] Hage, *Philip Roth*, 55. My translation. Original passage: „Das ist Ausdruck unserer kulturellen Beschränktheit. Einen Schriftsteller zu fragen, fällt hier einfach niemandem ein.“

[17] Martin Scholz, "Ich bin nicht mehr so verrückt," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Oct. 12, 2009, <http://www.fr-online.de>. My translation. Original passage: „Die Times fragt Europäer, aber keine amerikanischen Schriftsteller. Ein Beispiel: Als Bill Clinton ein paar Probleme mit einer Praktikantin hatte, hoffte ich, dass irgendjemand in diesem Land mal bei John Updike anrufen würde. Er hat brillante Bücher über Sex und Macht geschrieben, man könnte sagen: Er war die Autorität auf diesem Gebiet. Da hätte es doch nahe gelegen, ihn über die Lewinsky-Affäre schreiben zu lassen. Ist nicht passiert. Es wurden Millionen Wörter über Monica Lewinsky geschrieben – aber nicht von Schriftstellern.“

- [18] Daniel Sandstrom, My Life as a Writer, "New York Times, March 2, 2014, accessed August 1, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/books/review/my-life-as-a-writer.html?_r=0.
- [19] Daniel Sandstrom, My Life as a Writer, "New York Times, March 2, 2014, accessed August 1, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/books/review/my-life-as-a-writer.html?_r=0.
- [20] Nils Minkmar, "Der Tag, als Philip Roth anrief," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* Aug. 7, 2005, 2.
- [21] Martin Scholz, "Ich kann den Hass auf Amerika nicht ernst nehmen," *Frankfurter Rundschau* Oct. 15, 2005. Also published in *Der Standard*, Oct. 7, 2005, <http://derstandard.at>. My translation. Original passage: „Die Amerikaner lesen gar nichts mehr.“
- [22] Minkmar, "Der Tag," 2. My translation. Original passage: „ Es gibt immer Ausnahmen, aber hier würde niemand auch nur dreissig Sekunden hinhören, was ein Schriftsteller zu wagen hat. Wer ist denn der, würde man fragen. Es gibt keinen besonderen Respekt für Schriftsteller, keiner versteht, was sie genau machen. Sie haben keine grössere moralische Autorität als der Klempner. [...] Ja, es ist, als würde der Klempner plötzlich Statements zur Weltlage abgeben, da würden sich auch alle wundern...“ Clearly, Roth could not envisage the rise of a plumber during the presidential race in 2008.
- [23] I have covered Roth's perception of the relationship between literature and politics more extensively and with a detailed discussion of Gluckman's position in *Political Initiation in the Novels of Philip Roth* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 41-54.
- [24] David Gooblar, *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), 13.
- [25] Yitzhak Laor, "Von Exodus bis Operation Shylock: Wer ist Philip Roth in Israel?/From Exodus to Operation Shylock: Who Is Philip Roth in Israel?" *Du* 740 (2003): 78.
- [26] Gooblar, *Major Phases*, 33.
- [27] Zucker (2008, 33-37) gives an overview of the many criticisms *Portnoy's Complaint* provoked.
- [28] Alan Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, (Albany: State University of New York Press), 110.
- [29] Cooper, *Philip Roth*, 110.
- [30] Nicole Peeler, "The Woman of Ressentiment in *When She Was Good*," *Philip Roth Studies* 6, no. 1 (2010): 31
- [31] Linda Grant, "The Wrath of Roth," *TheGuardian.com*, Oct. 3, 1998.
- [32] Roth Pierpoint, *Roth Unbound*, 23.
- [33] Roth Pierpoint, *Roth Unbound*, 71.

[34] Roth Pierpoint, *Roth Unbound*, 71.

[35] See, for instance, Greenberg (2003, 158-162) and Thompson (2000, 200-210).

[36] Richard Nixon held the Checkers Speech on September 23, 1952 on NBC. He therein defended himself against allegations of corruption that had been raised by a *New York Post* article on September 18. The article alleged that some Nixon supporters had established a private fund to cover his expenses (see, for instance, Greenberg 2000). “Checkers” refers to the “little cocker spaniel dog” sent from a “man down in Texas” for the Nixon kids (Nixon 1952).

[37] Daniel Frick, *Reinventing Richard Nixon: A Cultural History of an American Obsession* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

[38] Dwight McDonald, “Our Gang,” *New York Times* Nov. 7, 1971, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-gang.html>.

[39] Willi Winkler, “Lebenslänglich,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* April 23, 2011, 3. This was also picked up by the French press: Emmanuel Hecht, “N le maudit,” *L’Express*, April 16, 2014, 92; Marion Cocquet, “Quand Philip Roth mettait Nixon en rage,” *LePoint.fr*, Jan. 31, 2014, via factiva.

[40] Roth Pierpoint, *Roth Unbound*, 86.

[41] Roth Pierpoint, *Roth Unbound*, 91-92.

[42] Roth Pierpoint, *Roth Unbound*, 235.

[43] Philip Roth, “An Open Letter to Wikipedia,” *The New Yorker* Sept. 12, 2012. <http://www.newyorker.com>

[44] “Philip Roth : ‘Je sais que la mort vient’,” *Le Point*, Sept. 27, 2012, 108-112; via factiva.

[45] Charles Holdefer, “France and American Literature,” *World Literature Today* 77, no. 2 (2003), 2; via factiva.

Available is the introduction to A Political Companion to Philip Roth with the following chapters: “The Politics and Literature of Unknowingness: Philip Roth’s *Our Gang* and *The Plot Against America*”; and “Four Pathologies and a State of Sanity: Political Philosophy and Philip Roth on the Individual in Society”; also see the introduction to Andy Connolly’s Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition and Lee Trepanier’s essays, “The Paradoxes of the Body in *Everyman*, *Nemesis*, and *The Humbling*” and “What Can Philip Roth Tell Us About Politics Today.”

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