



ROTH AFTER EIGHTY

Philip Roth and the American Literary Imagination

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Chapter Three

"A Human Being Lives Here"

Philip Roth on Scandals and the American Presidency

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In the Federalist Paper No. 51, James Madison observed that: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary" (67). In spite of our awareness that angels rarely tread on Earth, even less likely in the shape of politicians, the American presidency is often subject of unearthly expectations concerning the officeholder's character and personal conduct. As "the leader of the rituals of American democracy" (Rossiter 247), he reinforces the citizens' belief in the civil religious fabric of the country, demonstrating that there is more to statehood than political agreements and machinations.¹ In the eyes of the citizens, his representation of the country transcends the political connotations of the term:

The embodiment of the presidency enables the President to present an image of the people to itself: singular, united, with a common material form and a single will. The legislature presents an image of the people in itself: divided, comprising a great diversity, debating, doubting, driving, sometimes finding expression in common judgments and a common will (Norton 121).

Those who effectively personify the nation gain the admiration not only of the generation of their voters, but far beyond, and in select cases they become part of the country's civil religious inventory. The nation's first president thus quickly became one of the saints or demigods of American politics, as a Russian diplomat came to observe in 1813: "It is noteworthy that every American considers it his sacred duty to have a likeness of Washington in his home, just as we have images of God's saints" (Mitnick 59).

However, only few presidents have such a claim on eternity, while the vast majority resemble more the earthly sinners James Madison had at the back of

his mind. When humans err, the consequences can sometimes be grave; in the case of an erring president, they can be disastrous—and at times they cause scandals. “Scandal seems everywhere, inescapable,” Michael Schudson felt when he contemplated America’s political landscape (1231). While scandals are not a constant topos in presidential history, once they occur, they inevitably and lastingly taint a presidential legacy, possibly overshadowing any major achievements. “Scandal” broadly means an action or event “involving certain kinds of transgressions” which becomes “known to others” and is “sufficiently serious to elicit a public response” (Thompson 13).

The transgression as such is usually followed by attempts to conceal it which, once revealed, lead to public denunciation—the outcry of the public. The American public had to witness such presidential scandals time and again in the twentieth century, from Watergate to the Iran-Contra affair to Whitewater to a certain intern’s affair with a president. As in Shakespearean tragedies, Robert Watson has remarked, scandals let us witness the great fall from grace, often due to all-too-human failures (411). These incidents thus become part of the nation’s presidential gallery, yet seem to leave the desire for Madisonian angels unperturbed.

In his novels, Philip Roth observed, mocked, chastised, and recreated both sides of presidential scandals: on the one hand, he became a master of calling out the emperor for his new clothes, of unmasking those hiding behind status and tradition. On the other hand, he not only took political events as a starting point for his fiction to draw attention to those deeds and incidents that should have been considered scandalous for a long time, but also to unveil the bigotry of those shrieking “scandal!” in the first place. Consequently, he tackled two of the three types of political scandals identified by John B. Thompson (2000)—sex and power scandals, the unexplored third being financial scandals (90–115). However, as we will see in the following, Roth constantly changed mode and angle when contemplating presidential scandals: in a first instance, he used satire as his weapon against the Nixon Presidency, notably pre-Watergate; turning to the Clinton years, he directs the frustration at the presidential persecutors rather than the man in power; and, finally, he looks at the institution as such and asks the readers what might happen if all checks and balances fail.

TRICKY DICK’S COMEBACK: ROTH V. NIXON

Roth’s protagonists often reference what seem to be “ideal” presidents in their story-worlds, presidents who, in the characters’ eyes, came close to the angelic ideal Madison had declared unrealistic. As the son of a man who believed in “the sanctity of F. D. R. and the Democratic Party” (*Facts* 31), Roth

gave his key protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, a father who would be “famous for fanatical devotion. F. D. R. topped the list, followed by Mrs. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, David Ben-Gurion, and the authors of *Fiddler on the Roof*” (*Unbound* 190).

The same president would again be the ideal leader in *The Plot Against America* (2004), making his presence felt through the radio, giving each American the idea of being connected to him. Not only in the perception of Roth’s characters would Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945) be considered more than a great communicator, but also he would generally be remembered as a president who seemed to embody his message and thus be perceived as “authentic” (Norton 105). Though less frequently, Roth likewise thematized the country’s lasting admiration for Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), and he had one of his characters underline that there was more to presidential greatness than superficial images and appearances. Criticizing an actor who played Lincoln, he asked: “Always impersonating and never the real thing. Because he was tall, that made him Lincoln?” (*Communist* 288).

Although his protagonists are susceptible to civil religious pathos and sentimentality, it is presidential failure and the public’s ignorance thereof that is a more attractive subject to Roth. But while in later examples he would use a more pensive and thoughtful tone when tackling this topic, his “presidential beginnings” were rather aggressive, for he turned to a genre he only rarely played with: “Why have I turned to political satire? In a word: Nixon,” Roth explained (*Reading* 41). Indeed, one could speak of satire as Roth’s weapon of choice, as he set out to write *Our Gang* (*Starring Tricky and His Friends*) (1971) “to destroy the protective armor of ‘dignity’ that shields anyone in an office as high and powerful as the Presidency” (*Reading* 40).

The closet drama derides President Richard M. Nixon (1917–1993) by caricaturing his mannerisms and uneasy rapport with people. Thinly disguised under the fictitious character Trick E. Dixon, Roth’s Nixon parades all the quirks of the president, from his obsessive hatred for “Jack Charisma” (59) and his related preoccupation with his perspiration, to his constant stressing of his lawyerly background by directly speaking of the “tradition in the courts of this land” (5) and of what “good lawyers” (6) should do, as well as minor rhetorical habits such as the constant usage of “now” to start sentences. We even get to relive one of the turning points in Nixon’s pre-presidential career, namely his successful attempt at holding onto his nomination for Vice President in the midst of a financial scandal, i.e., the so-called Checkers Speech in 1952.

Having Tricky first reminisce about the sympathy he gained by instrumentalizing the family spaniel Checkers, Roth then has him reveal his financial circumstances, the one moment in the famed speech Pat Nixon found the

hardest to bear in her husband's early career. Moreover, Roth surrounds Tricky with an entourage that is easily identifiable due to telling names, from the "Highbrow Coach" Henry Kissinger to "Vice-President What's-his-name" Spiro Agnew, and criticizes them as well for their involvement in the Nixon Administration. While one senses through the pages how much Nixon's persona irks Roth, the main stabs are directed at the president's sense of morality. The hypocrisy and lack of real convictions are shown as signs of a man who only wanted power for power's sake and failed to promote anything but his own career. Consequently, Roth has Tricky descend to hell at the end of the book. Comeback artist that he is, though, Tricky is not at the end of his wits and he runs for the last position of power open to him, the one of Satan. Thus he speaks to his "fellow Fallen" (185) and asks for their support, 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).

In a way, Roth sent Nixon to hell before the rest of the country wished him gone. As Roth explained proudly: "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 10). Roth seemed destined to become a satiric Cassandra and reveal the machinations of "the fine art of government lying" before they became apparent to others, not least the media (49). Published the same year in which the Pentagon Papers came to light, *Our Gang* suggests that there might be worse things to come, crying "scandal!" when everyone believed the wolves were at rest. The book's impact, though, was rather limited: Dwight MacDonald thoroughly enjoyed it, calling it "far-fetched, unfair, tasteless, disturbing, logical, coarse and very funny," but many felt that the obvious hatred and hyperbolic vitriol driving the narrative went too far to reach readers and provoke serious debate (Frick 140). Similarly, the man whom the accusing finger was pointed at seemed relatively unfazed by such artistic attacks, as we now know thanks to the taping system of the White House. When he learned from his aide H. R. Haldeman that a recently published satire vilified him, Nixon simply asked back whether the author was a Jew (Winkler).

With the Watergate conspiracy coming to light only two years after *Our Gang*, Roth had cause for triumph as incredulity took hold of a public that had only two years earlier re-elected Nixon with a landslide majority. Watergate meant for many citizens a loss of trust in the one political institution that was meant to represent the nation as such (Milkis 359–362). Roth's view of Nixon's character was suddenly shared by many more, who saw in the disgraced President a "hater" and "collector of lies" (Genovese 186). *Our Gang* had shown many facets of Nixon's public persona that were customarily referred to, starting with the anti-communist crusader and the trickster,

to his image as a comeback artist, to his stiffness.² But only in the wake of Watergate would he—from a Rothian perspective, finally—be recognized as a villain. In a way, Nixon's public unraveling was the definite end of pastoral accounts of American politics and history, as it showed that even the most revered political position would only ever be in the hands of sinning mortals whose actions could tarnish the office as such. With *Our Gang*, Roth had effectively revealed just that, the vulnerability of the Presidency as an institution (McCann 191–196), by showing how it could be held captive by forces unworthy of public trust.

Looking at Roth's literary reaction at the Watergate scandal, though, one senses an echo of the public disbelief and anger that he would have to watch the administration come to this and fulfill his earlier prophecy. Instead of gloating about Nixon's fall from grace, Roth's writer-protagonist Nathan Zuckerman follows Watergate on TV, expressing mainly anger with "our President's chicanery—the dummy gestures, the satanic sweating, the screwy dazzling lies" (*Anatomy* 10). At the same time, however, in his personal misery, Zuckerman "almost felt for him, the only other American he saw daily who seemed to be in as much trouble as he was" (10). Rather than feeling vindicated in their creator's early disdain for Nixon, Roth's characters long for their pre-Nixonian belief in the Presidency and the political system as such:

"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!" (*Pastoral* 299–300)

The Watergate scandal could not inspire Roth to further descend into the abyss of the Nixon years, but it would show him that the catharsis hoped for during the investigation was unattainable. The pastoral could not be restored, whether the "crook" was on the loose or not. What Roth did not foresee, though, is that Watergate would unleash a persecuting spirit directed not at abuses of consequence, but at general impurities in the White House, as Martin Genovese would observe (186–195).

AGAINST THE TYRANNY OF PROPRIETY: ROTH IN DEFENSE OF CLINTON

"Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it," Abraham Lincoln announced in Peoria, Illinois, in 1854 (54). The stains Lincoln made out on the republican robe stemmed from the persistent division

of antebellum America into a slaveholding South and a free North, a flaw in the country's moral fabric. While Lincoln's America faced a fateful moral decision that it needed to make, Roth's America (1990s) sought purification in realms that it should have neglected. Instead of tackling the country's more pressing issues, the public embarked on a crusade in the summer of 1998,

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. (*Stain* 2)

The man to suffer under said piety binge was President Bill Clinton, whose affair with intern Monica Lewinsky would taint the memory of his tenure, relegating other failures and actual achievements to the background. In Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), the presidential sex scandal is only of secondary interest, yet it serves as a foil underlying the main plot and as an example of public outrage being misdirected. The latter is the case when Nathan Zuckerman learns of his neighbor's alleged crime: professor of classics at a small liberal arts college, Coleman Silk is fired for asking whether absent students were "spooks," thus unwittingly insulting the African-American truants with a racist slur. As if that humiliation were not enough, he later experiences scorn and contempt for pursuing an affair with a considerably younger woman and finds himself victim of the same persecuting spirit taking possession of the Pharisees attacking Clinton.

In both cases, Zuckerman is disgusted by the public hypocrisy directed at the wrong "crimes." For Silk hid a secret far graver than verbal abuse or an affair with an unprivileged woman:

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. Such pathetic, such petty, such ridiculous transgressions, so much high school yammering to a man who, on his trajectory outward, had among other things, done what he'd done to his mother, to go there and, in behalf of his heroic conception of his life, to tell her, "it's over. This love affair is over. You're no longer my mother and never were". (335)

Silk committed a "virtual matricide" by denying his roots and passing America's color-line (Kral 104). Thanks to his fair complexion, he could shed his African-American identity and pass as a Jew, thus cutting the bonds with his family and heritage. His robe is soiled not for the reasons the public sees as his sins, but it is drenched in sentiments not completely dissimilar to those

cited by Lincoln in Peoria. If anything should scandalize anyone, Zuckerman seems to suggest, it is this betrayal of family and identity.

Similarly, it is not Clinton's marital infidelity that should stir the public. In that regard, Zuckerman would only want to remind his fellow citizens of the un-angelic nature of any of their leaders, making him wish for "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). We can therein read an exasperated echo of Alexander Portnoy who likewise felt tormented by the expectations of a label: "Jew Jew Jew Jew Jew! . . . Do me a favor, my people, and stick your suffering heritage up your suffering ass—I happen also to be a human being!" (*Portnoy* 76). The stains on the White House are, again, not due to the all too human failures of its main resident, for he has himself committed worse errors. In *I Married A Communist* (1998), one of the protagonists relates the circumstances of Nixon's funeral in 1994 during which "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" (278).

Instead of shunning the funeral or at least reminding the public of the moral shortcomings of the man to be put to his final rest, the honorable audience paid their respects and underlined how much the country owed the deceased leader. Even then-incumbent President Clinton commended Nixon for his "remarkable journey" and, under the spell of his own sincerity, express[ed] hushed gratitude for all the "wise counsel" Nixon had given him" (278). It seems that Clinton followed "Tricky Dick's" own wish, as the latter told his "fellow fallen" in *Our Gang* that it was "our whole lives that you should be judging here tonight" (200). The main irony of it all escaped Roth's observers, though. Without Watergate, some argue, Clinton would not have been punished as much for his adultery as he had been. In order to regain their faith in the White House, thus Genovese, voters changed their priorities: "The search for the pure, replaced the search for the capable. Personal virtue rose as the hunt for competence declined" (195). In other words, the search for the imaginary angels resumed.

PLOT AGAINST MYTHS:

ROTH'S VARIATION ON IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

Although *Our Gang* and *The Human Stain* depict presidents as being just human, as Zuckerman's dream of the Christo drape hanging from the White

House further accentuates, Roth does not attack the institution and the citizens' reverence of the presidency as such. Neither in the mode of satire nor with a presidential scandal as a backdrop does Roth suggest that the amount of power and trust granted to presidents is problematic *per se*, as rampant abuse can be counterbalanced by the political system and by alert citizens. Scandals thus assume one of the reassuring functions described by Thompson (2000), namely that their exposure ultimately confirms the citizens' trust in the State and in the institutions charged with its supervision (246). In other words, those who long for purity in government will feel vindicated and reassured in their ideals. However, in his novel *The Plot Against America* (2004), Roth does exactly the reverse—up to a point: he demonstrates that the presidency can, under certain circumstances, serve evil, unhindered. The novel is not in reaction to a presidential scandal; instead, it nearly provoked a scandal, as it cast in the role of the presiding evil none other than aviation hero Charles A. Lindbergh (1902–1974).

The Plot Against America is narrated from the perspective of seven-year-old "Philip Roth," modelled after his creator, who observes in 1940 how the changing political circumstances affect his small world and his family life in the Weequahic section of Newark. Philip's childhood idyll starts falling apart when Charles A. Lindbergh challenges the incumbent president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, the political idol of Philip's father. Lindbergh is not only revered for his bravado and pioneering spirit, but he is also known for his anti-Semitic views and sympathies for the German Nazi government. The prospect of a Lindbergh administration thus infuses Philip with fear—and with a feeling previously unknown to the child:

Lindbergh was the first famous living American whom I learned to hate—just as President Roosevelt was the first famous living American whom I was taught to love—and so his nomination by the Republicans to run against Roosevelt in 1940 assaulted, as nothing ever had 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. (7)

Lindbergh casts a spell over America, as his personality and the story of his achievements captures the public imagination and gives the citizens the kind of heroic figure they seek in a president. It is with ease that Lindbergh wins the presidency and starts transforming the country by setting up institutions that encourage companies to relegate their Jewish employees to regions of America where hardly any Jews have settled. Increasingly, citizens feel free to express openly their own anti-Semitic feelings, and Philip's family is not the only one that fears they may no longer have a future in the America

they had believed to know so well. The Lindbergh Administration seduces distinguished members of the Jewish community, as well as Philip's older brother, and they start promoting programs that encourage assimilation and, as a consequence, tear families apart. At the novel's climax, pogroms erupt in the Midwest, and the country Philip and his family once believed to be a safe haven becomes just as dangerous as the world of their ancestors had been.

In the course of events, the Roth family does not idly watch their world fall apart, but they constantly try to reassure themselves of the strength of the American system and its safeguards against presidential abuse. Philip, for instance, tries to hold onto the order presented by his collection of stamps. Thinking of his fellow stamp collector, Roosevelt, he can reenact the pastoral beginnings of "his" America through the icons depicted by the stamps that perpetuate a consensus of who and what citizens should hold dear. With the eventual loss of his collection, though, Philip loses his grip on US reality.

In the same vein, a democratic pilgrimage of the entire family is bound to fail. A trip to the memory landscape of Washington, D.C., should lift their spirits, but even young Philip senses more than mere pleasure as their motive: "Inadvertently, we had driven right to the heart of American history, and whether we knew it in so many words, it was American history, delineated in its most inspirational form, that we were counting on to protect us against Lindbergh" (58). In particular, father Herman Roth is desperate to have his sons appreciate the legacy of the Founding Fathers and the great presidents following in their footsteps, and he does not tire in contrasting their achievements with the atmosphere reigning in Lindbergh's America. Still, accompanied by a guide who appears at the Roths' side as if summoned, the family struggles to focus on the grandiosity of the National Mall. They are only rarely in the thrall of its pathos, for instance at the foot of Lincoln's statue: "What ordinarily passed for great just paled away, and there was no defense, for either an adult or a child, against the solemn atmosphere of hyperbole" (63). Yet even standing in view of the Gettysburg Address does not protect the Roths from the charged spirit surrounding them, as Herman is insulted as a "loudmouth Jew" after an altercation (65). Lindbergh's plane passing over them becomes a final reminder that D.C. is no longer in the hands of those they so deeply admire and that the system they had relied on had effectively failed them completely (71–72).

Although the novel's dénouement re-establishes Lindbergh as a "good" American who had only turned to harsh methods under Nazi pressure, the fact remains that Roth had dared to cast an iconic figure as a source of evil. He put Lindbergh at the center of a plot that shows the alternative turns history could have taken. His story reveals the actual atmosphere of that time, namely the latent presence of anti-Semitism. As a so-called political scenario novel, or,

as Roth put it in an essay for the *New York Times*, “an exercise in historical imagination,” *The Plot* does not ask “what if?,” but outlines the answer to the question and, at times, shows that it could have happened here, as did Sinclair Lewis in one of the most famous examples of the genre, the novel *It Can't Happen Here* (1935). Roth thereby implies, as in the other novels discussed, that the scandal is not what did or did not happen, it is rather scandalous that we close our eyes to such realities. Our ignorance of inconvenient truths becomes evident in a review in *The American Conservative* by Bill Kaufmann, who criticized the novel as “bigoted and libelous of the dead, dripping with hatred of rural America, of Catholics, of any Middle American who has never dared stand against the war machine.”

While the latter reviewer felt scandalized by Roth's depiction of the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, other critics sensed a small scandal by reading *The Plot* as an allegory for the Administration of President George W. Bush. Allegories and *romans à clef* can often cloak or provoke a scandal as they show in an accusatory, yet secretive manner what is happening and where current events inevitably have to lead.³ This prompted Roth to write “The Story Behind *The Plot Against America*” in the *New York Times*, in which he refuted such allegations, yet not unambiguously. He ended his note mocking President George W. Bush, as “unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation like this one.” In other words, Roth again left the readers speculating whether his scenario novel was in fact a masked critique of recent events deemed scandalous by many, or whether it was indeed just an exercise in “historical imagination.” In any event, he succeeded in reminding his readers how both American present and history may be fraught with potential scandals that should, but rarely do make headlines.

CONCLUSION

When power leads men towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truth which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment. (John F. Kennedy, 1963)

Dedicating Amherst College Library to the memory of Robert Frost, President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) expressed greater hope in the powers of the arts and literature than Roth who would, in variations, stress that: “repeating . . . ‘It can happen here,’ does little to prevent ‘it’ from happening” (Reading 207). He may be right that it is hard to establish to what extent politicians are *ex ante* influenced by the arts and take cues from the realms of

imagination. He also had to see how *Our Gang* and other negative accounts, factual and artistic, of Nixon's presidency did not prevent his re-election or his hero's treatment at the time of his death.

Still, writers and artists have the ability to shape the legacies of presidents and bring to light inconvenient truths. These may not only include Roth's “sickening disappointment of finding in the seat of power neither reason, nor common sense, nor horse sense—and certainly not charity or courage” (Reading 193), but also mirror the voters' failure to honor truly virtuous leaders. The many *gates* we nowadays read of usually only amount to “kid stuff,” whereas the true scandals often remain at rest. Presidents may be performing, as Emmet John Hughes put it, for “two constituencies: the living citizens and future historians” (McDonald 439–440)—sometimes, however, we need writers like Philip Roth to remind both audience and officeholder of what they should stand up for.

NOTES

1. This chapter is based on a paper presented at Philip Roth Society's Roth@80 Conference on March 18, 2013, in Newark, New Jersey. I thank the organizers and editors David Gooblar and Aimee Pozorski for their comments and the opportunity to discuss my research with such a diverse round of Roth experts.
2. Since, to date, we have not seen a woman successfully claim the Presidency, I will use masculine pronouns throughout when I am speaking of US presidents in general.
3. Frick and Greenberg explore in their respective monographs the many public faces of Nixon, showing how his image constantly evolved, but some labels also stuck from the beginning.
4. The question whether *The Plot Against America* should be read in this manner was discussed by, among others, Brauner (192), Plax (77), and Safer (147).

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