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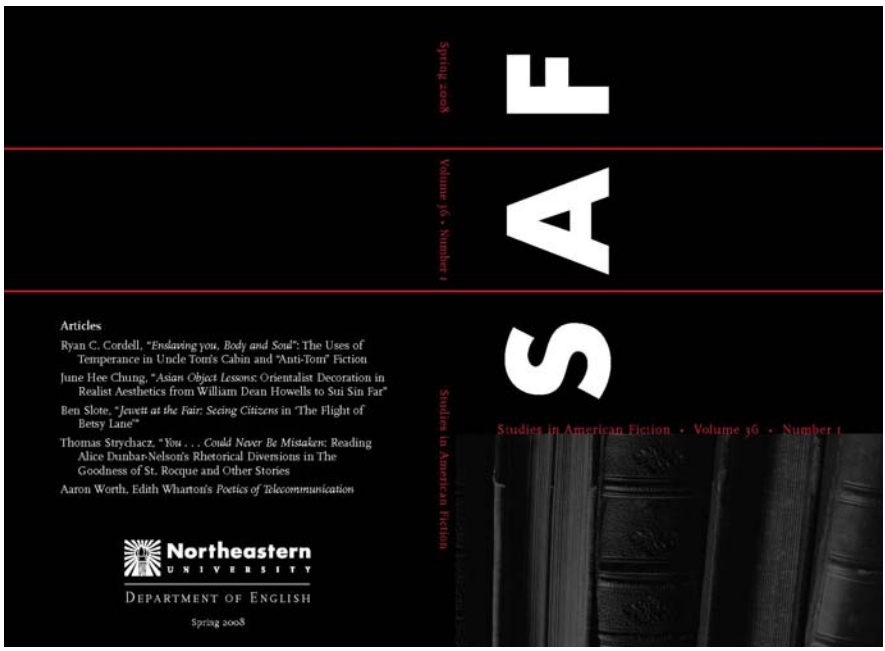

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Studies in American Fiction

Volume 35 Autumn 2007 Number 2

Jeffrey Severs, *"Get Your Map of America": Tempering Dystopia and Learning Topography in* The Plot Against America

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"GET YOUR MAP OF AMERICA": TEMPERING DYSTOPIA AND LEARNING TOPOGRAPHY IN *THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA*

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Ever since Neil Klugman speculated in the opening pages of *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) that the drive up to the hills of the Newark suburbs might bring one "closer to heaven," Philip Roth has made the frustration of longings for utopia one of his major themes.[1] Especially since his American trilogy, Roth's critics have been rightly preoccupied with his application of anti-utopian and anti-pastoral thinking to increasingly large swaths of American history, his critique of what Ross Posnock identifies as his characters' drive to "exist in a mythic yesteryear, creating a national fantasy."[2] The American trilogy critiques a postwar cast of, as Murray says in *I Married a Communist* (1998), "utopianists." These include believers in socialism like Murray's brother Ira, but also non-ideological dreamers like Ira's wife Eve, whose desire for the perfect home needs, according to Roth, "a dose of life's dung."[3] Swede Levov's hope for domestic stability in *American Pastoral* (1997) calls for a similar dose. Roth always insists on making messy experience overwhelm any attempt to retreat to an absolving locale: Faunia's dirty mop water and Les's violent mind give the lie to the "pure and peaceful" image, as *The Human Stain* (2000) ends, of a fisherman alone on a lake "constantly turning over its water atop an Arcadian mountain in America."[4]

But though (as Nathan Zuckerman emphatically concludes in *Communist*) "[t]here are no utopias" and (as his wife does in *The Counterlife*) "[t]he pastoral is not your genre," Roth has not developed in his work the seemingly most natural "counterlife" to utopia, a dystopian social order. His turn to the pogroms and pro-Nazi Lindbergh presidency of *The Plot Against America* (2004) does seem to signal such a deployment of the dystopian.[5] But it turns out that dystopia isn't Roth's genre either; some purity is mixed in with the dung. For all the "perpetual fear" it evinces, *The Plot*, in its concentration on familial strength and a resilient boyhood consciousness, depicts an unexpectedly limited and tempered dystopia, dwelling less on American Nazis and Jewish persecution than on the sentimental idealization of his childhood Newark as an "inviolate haven" that Roth

confessed to in *The Facts* (1988).[6] I argue here that Roth's neutralizing refusal to grant either utopian or dystopian extreme full sway leads him to a newly enriched interest in the simply topographical. *The Plot* mediates its dark materials of global conspiratorial plotting and race hatred by illuminating a child's more mundane and localized acts of plotting—his participatory mapping of his surroundings and his out-of-school "education" in how to regard the vast nation of which he knows himself to be a part but which he cannot fully fathom (101). Following on Roth's well-established interest in illiterates learning to read, young Philip undergoes an initiation into cartographic literacy, a term I borrow from historian of geography David Matless, who links it to the modern subject's mature conception of citizenship.[7] Engaging a dramatic political extreme of the sort his work has so often scrupulously avoided in depicting the U.S., Roth re-investigates the discursive means by which home links to homeland in the American mind.

Dystopian fiction tends to "demonstrate the push and pull between utopian and dystopian perspectives," according to Erika Gottlieb's comparison of dystopias from democracies and totalitarian states between 1920 and 1991. "[E]ach dystopian society contains within it seeds of a utopian dream."[8] Kristan Kumar writes in a similar vein that anti-utopia and dystopia are "one side of a dialogue of the self with individuals who have been indelibly stamped with the utopian temperament."[9] Roth, an inveterate idealizer of the meaning of America but also a dogged critic of such idealization, seems to fit this psychological type, Gottlieb's "push and pull" of opposites correlating loosely with the "anti-myth[s]" of counterlives so many of his characters construct.[10] But Roth, in his disdain for the types of structural conventions full-scale dystopias impose, has often taken an approach to this issue more slyly mixed than grossly polarized.[11] For instance, Zuckerman's childhood vision of a grimy Jewish homeland, in *The Prague Orgy* (1985), typifies Roth's highly literate inversion of utopia's signs, of city's and country's places in its schema. Based on his ancestors' urban Europe rather than desert Palestine, Nathan's idiosyncratic Israel is, he excitedly says, "a used city, a broken city, a city so worn and grim that nobody else would even put in a bid." This city's economy, Nathan reports, would suffice on words, "mining and refining . . . *tons* of . . . stories."[12] So aware is Roth of utopian and dystopian conventions that he makes Zuckerman's dark pastoral flout every expected sign in favor of the sign only of itself, its own textuality. Such a maneuver is typical of a writer who undermines a work's affiliation with pastoral by naming the genre in its title (*American Pastoral*), a

writer who has studied and championed (in his "Writers from the Other Europe" series) many of the East European dystopianists Gottlieb examines.

It makes sense, then, that working under ostensible marks of dystopia—such as the swastika overlaying a U.S. stamp on *The Plot*'s cover—would cause Roth to be self-conscious (defensive, even) about this form's tradition and scope. He expressly disowns the term dystopia in a *New York Times* essay he wrote at the time of *The Plot*'s publication. "I had no literary models for reimagining the historical past," he claims there, saying he did not bother to reread *1984*. While Orwell, working on a "grand scale," "imagined a dystopia," Roth says he, working on a small one, "imagined a uchronia."[13] Uchronia— back-formed from utopia and meaning, literally, "non-time"— is a term of recent invention applied to works of counter-factual history that, like Roth's, follow out the implications of, for instance, the Confederacy winning the Civil War or the Nazis winning World War II.[14] But even here Roth has severely limited his book's generic associations: as uchronia, *The Plot* ends as more historical detour than historical change, with Lindbergh ousted, Roosevelt restored to the presidency, and the U.S. brought into the war, all by late 1942. Roth writes, somewhat unconvincingly, of the book's limited 1940–42 scope, "I am not pretending to be interested in those two years—I *am* interested in those two years." He says he was intent not "to illuminate the present through the past but illuminate the past through the past" (thereby also heading off associations of Lindbergh's America with George W. Bush's).[15] But Roth reminds readers too that the locale of the novel's experience is invented, if not the substance: "it didn't happen here. Though a lot of things that didn't happen here did happen elsewhere. The 'what if' in America was somebody else's reality."[16]

Roth's calculated statements about how far his novel goes in rerouting American history toward European catastrophe recalls his scrupulous earlier differentiations between European and American Jewries and Eastern and Western Blocs during the Cold War—differentiations that *The Plot* complicates in a new and bracing way. Roth has said that puzzling over the "disparity between [the] tragic dimension of Jewish life in Europe and the actualities of our daily lives as Jews in New Jersey" was a wellspring for his early writing.[17] A similar mental template appeared in the 1980s in Roth's courting and then careful discounting of what we might call a nightmare envy of the artist under totalitarianism, of the Soviet-oppressed writers he studied and the Nazi-oppressed ones he fictionalized. "Maybe if I were locked up again in a room somewhere and fed on rotten potatoes and clothed in rags

and terrified out of my wits, maybe then I could write a decent story for Mr. Lonoff!" Zuckerman's invented Anne Frank wonders in *The Ghost Writer* (1979), sublimating his own fear that, as shocking as his fiction may be to his Jewish elders, the "thinness of [his] imagination" will never match the moral power Anne wielded at such a young age in her *Diary*.[18] But Roth is careful, in both the full unfolding of *The Ghost Writer* and in interviews and essays, never to endorse a full-throated envy of Anne or the many East European writers he has heralded to the United States. Nathan finding Anne in a New England farmhouse and close to his own experience, for example, was really just the culminating index of his immaturity, parody of which saturates *The Ghost Writer*. On a more theoretical plane, Roth told *The Paris Review* in 1984, "The trivialization, in the West, of much that's deadly serious in the East is itself a subject, one requiring considerable imaginative ingenuity to transform into a compelling fiction." Here Roth delicately parses his awareness of the Czechs' greater political potential and his simultaneous reluctance to trade places with them—while, at the same time, flattering the domestic focus of many of his own books. "To do justice to a spiritual predicament that is not blatantly shocking and monstrously horrible, that does *not* elicit universal compassion, or occur . . . on the grandest scale of twentieth-century suffering—well, that's the lot that has fallen to those who write" in the U.S.[19]

The Plot, strangely, fulfills Roth's imperatives for both East and West, though not in any simple way. It *does* borrow from European Jewry "the grandest scale of twentieth-century suffering"; Roth situates us in time so that at every step we experience the dramatic irony that the fears these Jews are called "paranoid" for having are beginning to be realized fifty-fold in Europe (227). At the same time, with this monstrous history lurking, Roth still takes as his main task the rendering of the domestic, if not the "trivial." His anxiety over working on both scales is greater than his extra-textual explanations suggest. *The Plot* as a whole makes the difference between global and local an endemic meta-thematic concern. It reflects repeatedly (and anxiously) on the apparent mismatch between the large-scale national change-over the book proposes and the quite limited lens of a single family's experience through which it does so.

Reapplying his twenty-year-old theory of the American small "scale," in the *Times* essay Roth notes that, unlike Orwell, "my talent isn't for imagining events on the grand scale. . . . I imagined something small, really, small enough to be credible."[20] Herman Roth extends the idea when he says to his family in the book, "History is

everything that happens everywhere. . . . Even what happens in his house to an ordinary man—that'll be history too someday" (180). Philip's images often concur, routinely using military language for civilian settings: "no man's land" is an unfamiliar stretch of the neighborhood; his father's rescue of Seldon is "[h]is Guadalcanal . . . his Battle of the Bulge" (164, 355). And Roth surely delivers scenes that reverse battle- and home-front to make such metaphors ring true: Alvin's bloody fight with Herman in the living room leads Philip to sum up his author's method by saying that, in a house, "you usually scale down your movements, you scale down your speed, but here the scale of things was reversed and terrifying to behold" (295). But when his own tests (his own Guadalcanals) arise, Philip puts his father's principle of scaled-down history more desperately, saying as he runs away from home that he doesn't want "to be a boy on the grand scale, riding the crest of history. I wanted nothing to do with history. I wanted to be a boy on the smallest scale possible" (232–33). Like utopia, the small-scale self is a desire, not a fact; believing one can localize the significance of the self, with all of its larger affiliations, attempts to control embodied experience by spatial reduction. To see *The Plot*'s antidote to such thinking, we have to examine its subtle discourse on "unimaginable proportions" and other problems of scale, a word given literal significance through images of mapping (354).

From the cover of its hardback edition forward, *The Plot* asks us to consider issues that maps implicitly raise: cognitive ones of differences in scale, political ones of the imperial imposition of name and nation on landscape. On the front cover we see an image of the postage stamp from Philip's nightmare, with a swastika covering the drawing of river, trees, and rock-face in Yosemite—another pastoral Arcadia in America ruined (43) (see Figure 1). But the book's back is covered entirely by the same image of Yosemite, blown up to several times the size of the stamp and freed of not only the swastika but all official marks (see Figure 2). The juxtaposition reveals not just Nazism but "1¢," "U.S. Postage," and even "Yosemite" as overlays on river, trees, and rock—which, the implication seems to be, were present before this nation's names for them and will abide after this nation passes. Seeing the back, we can't help but think that Yosemite is hardly visible at all on the front, which seems in the context of Lindbergh's flights to offer a pun on our cliché for landscape seen out a plane's window: it's the size of a postage stamp. Some rightly-scaled relationship to the land that gets beneath even topography's representations is Roth's real quarry here, not simply an expunging of that dystopian

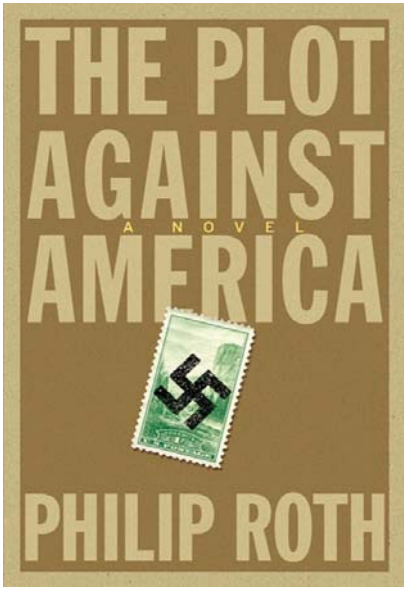

Figure 1: Front cover of *The Plot Against America*

Figure 2: Back cover

mark. Of course, the back's drawing is (as many a postmodern theory would remind us) merely another mediated image, the vision of a single artist. But on a Roth book it resonates with some of his much-discussed remarks on the kind of direct experience his work strives to untangle from culture's many names: for instance, Zuckerman's wish in *The Counterlife* to be a Jew who is "just the object itself, like a glass or an apple."[21] Sandy, we discover, may be the artist who can render such life-like experiences. But based on this reading of the covers we should sense his fall into Lindbergh sympathies long before it happens: he copies most of his prize-winning Arbor Day poster from Philip's stamp of the same, and neither come anywhere near any of the trees the day celebrates (Philip models for Sandy, but in the drawing—another distortion—he's black).[22] All this underscores too the fact that the Yosemite scene is a destination much farther west than any character travels in this East-centered novel. If he drew it, Sandy could only copy the back's scene from another source.

This is a paradox of home and travel central to *The Plot*, simultaneously Roth's most global book and his most provincial. His novels from the mid-1980s and early 1990s extensively used travel as a means of cultivating alienation from the self, countering familiarity with doppelgänger identities for his heroes. In *The Prague Orgy* (1985), *The Counterlife* (1986), and *Operation Shylock* (1993), trips and permanent moves to Czechoslovakia, England, and Israel provided sites off which to bounce Roth's abiding interest in Newark and New England. In these searches for a range of cosmopolitan models for being a modern Jew, Roth seemed to feel that diaspora had to be enacted in order to be understood.[23] *The Plot* insists, by comparison, on a limited territory: while it reveals Hitler's global conspiracy to keep the U.S. out of the war, its narrator stays in his neighborhood, aside from family trips (well before the worst events) to Union, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C. At the same time, *The Plot* is full of envoys or explorers who deliver reports back to the Roths and thereby to the reader: Alvin fighting in France, Sandy working for a summer in Kentucky, Evelyn visiting the Lindbergh White House, Seldon reporting by telephone from Kentucky, and Sandy and his father driving there to rescue him at the end. All these scenes of distance run in parallel to the book's presiding traveler-explorer, Lindbergh, and his criss-crossing of the country at postage-stamp distance to deliver speeches, never touching down on communities in any depth. (His policy of isolationism favors a similarly oblivious distancing from Europe.) We see extended scenes of Philip watching newsreels, and the radio, through which so much news of Lindbergh and the war arrives, is itself a kind of super-

sensory reporter-from-afar. The novel thus moves forward through worry about loved ones in remote places, stress caused by returned travelers' failures to re-adjust, and fear of hostile forces far away but still within one's country—as though Roth wishes to maintain history's true distance between Americans and the Holocaust even as he brings some of the suffering home. Some move is afoot beyond the paradoxes of distance that perplexed Zuckerman, who was compelled to narrate fully the suffering from which he was cut off, whether in his fevered reinvention of Amy Bellette as Anne Frank or his filling of huge gaps in the stories of Swede Levov and Coleman Silk.

Roth's canny move is to use a child's typical solipsism and naïveté to illuminate these states of felt distance from the spatially near and felt nearness to the spatially distant—qualities for Roth not of dystopian alienation but of his inflated terms for his own assimilation. In a 1981 interview he remarked that, in his childhood, the "Hudson River, separating New York from New Jersey, could as easily have been the channel separating England from France—the anthropological divide was nearly that great, at least for people in our social position." As he grew up, "I wanted to find out what the rest of 'America' was like. America in quotes—because it was still almost as much of an idea in my mind as it had been in Franz Kafka's."[24] *The Plot* may be the book where, more than twenty years later, Roth has found the perfect fictional means for capturing this exaggerated state of expatriate-at-home. For Roth portrays his seven-year-old self, in anticipation of all his important moments in the cellar and his identification with the legless Little Robert, as a low-level dweller—the exact opposite of the soaring Lindbergh, and thus capable of rendering (if he had to) only the crudest of traditional maps. Lindbergh's and Philip's perspectives in fact recapitulate two positions contemporary cartographic theorists identify in the history of mapping, the latter often critiquing the former: the summit views by a "seeing-man" who assumes his imperial possession of the landscape, and a walking mapping that favors close experience of a place over comprehensive vantages.[25] Philip's (in light of this) ironically-named street, "Summit Avenue," sits "at the crest of the neighborhood hill, an elevation as high as any in a port city that rarely rises a hundred feet above the level of the tidal salt marsh to the city's north and east" (2). "Looking west" from his bedroom he can see affluent suburbs ringing low-lying mountains, "the extreme edge of the known world—and about eight miles from our house," nowhere close to the Yosemite the cover promises (2). It is as though his 1940s Newark is 1490s Spain, in need of a Columbus to prove the earth's true contour.

In less allegorical terms, Roth develops Philip's attempts at mapping as the often ludic instinct of a child confronting the unknown on his own utilitarian scale and piece by piece—reading the world without consulting traditional maps as a guide. Early on Philip describes a game the neighborhood children play called "I Declare War," in which they draw a circle six feet wide, divide it into pie pieces representing European countries in the news, and bombard each other with a ball as a means of taking new territory (26). Yet this distortive, childish map is, in its way, no further from mimicking terrain (and no more useless) than the romanticized one on Philip's Lindbergh stamp, which he describes just one page before "I Declare War." On the two edges of its tiny space, beneath the *Spirit of St. Louis*, the stamp cartoonishly pictures "the coastline of North America, with the words 'New York' jutting out into the Atlantic," and "the coastlines of Ireland, Great Britain, and France, with the word 'Paris' at the end of a dotted arc" charting Lindbergh's historic flight (26). Roth links stamps to the "I Declare War" map (and to the cover image) by having the album, in Philip's swastika nightmare, fall from his hands at the spot where the game is played. The album opens on pages containing national park stamps, which, as Philip lists their precious names before revealing their new imprint, echo the pie parts of "I Declare War" (43).

A hobby, the stamps are also Philip's main source of learning about American places, history, and heroes (notably, in action that covers three years, we see not a single scene of the Roth children in school—though they do have a former college history teacher as their tour guide in Washington). Philip's actual loss of the album on his nighttime attempt to run away, when he is knocked to the ground by a horse, suggests that earthbound experience entails the loss of an attachment to these icons of person and place. The stamps are, in fact, just the leading edge of the novel's de-romanticizing of American history: Philip is linked to the past's local, anonymous many, to minutemen (he buys a musket-replica letter-opener at Mount Vernon [75]) and slaves (his running away draws mention of the Underground Railroad [232]). These are the heroes (particularly the latter, navigating in fright by the stars) the text subtly monumentalizes as Philip's stamp-world crumbles.

With the second game he describes at length, Philip matures, beginning a movement toward on-the-ground, experiential mapping that mirrors in miniature Sandy's and Alvin's journeys. This is his game, with Earl Axman, of "Following Christians," where the boys pick out seeming Christians on the street and follow them, on foot and by bus, sometimes to their front doors. The game seems like Roth's (again,

small-scale) allegory of the trope of the Wandering Jew. It is rebellion (their parents don't know about it) without its usual companion of self-assurance and self-ownership, a learning of direction without any control over it. Still, sounding Lindbergh-like, Philip romanticizes his mapping ability, reducing the world (as with "I Declare War") to the scale of his limited explorations. When he sees a bus, "all I could think about was being on board; the whole of the outside world had become a bus the way for a boy in South Dakota it was a pony—the pony that carries him to the limits of permissible flight" (117). Strangely (to the summit-type mapper at least), Philip takes the vehicle that grants him only random views of Newark's routes as not only all of Newark but all of the world; what a horse eventually does to his own plan to run away reinforces the sense that the vision is folly. Roth has often presented episodes of playing Christian as a way of interrogating and reinforcing Jewish identity, and here he sets up Philip's planned escape to the nuns' orphanage and Boys' Town by placing before him, on a journey downtown with Earl, the Christian symbol par excellence: a Christmas tree. True to a child's viewpoint, Philip cannot get over the height; the book's term for vast numbers of population and space is always a physical figure on an overwhelming scale. This particular figure presents the same issue of sizing trees that the cover introduced. The Christmas tree is forty feet tall, a giant metal one hanging on a building is eighty, "while I," Philip says, "was barely four and a half feet tall" (118). As a topographical rather than a dystopian novel, *The Plot* reports this scene as one of mathematics, not menace. For while the Bund and Klansmen lurk in many parts of *The Plot*, Philip's ordeals ask him not to overcome hate and violence directly but, in consonance with Roth's mismatching of large theme and small materials, mentally to square his known home with a larger homeland of America.

That isn't only a child's problem. Roth writes of his choice of narrators that he had to "somehow" combine the retrospective adult with the 1940s child, "the mediating intelligence that sees the general, and"—in a good description of the solipsism I have been examining—"the child's brain that degeneralizes the general, that cannot see outside the child's own life."[26] Thus Roth abandons his usual anti-pastoral tactic of indicting his adult narrators for nostalgic views of their childhood, as he did to himself by letting Zuckerman have the last cynical word in *The Facts*. But in *The Plot* I would say Roth's new narratorial difficulty is really a rhetorical strategy, since his ambition is to model dynamically felt American citizenship on a child's coming to terms, for the first time, with the "general" world into which he fits. The key

lies in engaging with one's largest-scale identity, American citizen, without feeling over-generalized in the process, all the while maintaining connection to bonds near-at-hand—not an easy task, even for adults.

In Washington, seeing the Capitol building for the first time as his parents struggle with navigating by map, Philip says with a child's incredulousness, "[T]here appeared before us the biggest white thing I had ever seen" (57). But in this setting his parents become infantilized too: Bess feels "the dwarfing majesty of the Capitol," and their guide tells the whole family to "prepare . . . to be overwhelmed" by the Lincoln Memorial (58, 63). They all are: "[T]here was no defense, for either an adult or a child, against the solemn atmosphere of hyperbole" (63). "Hyperbole" is an undermining word choice here, suggesting their feelings are disproportionate to the experience. And, read closely, the Washington scenes contain one of Roth's patented critiques of the notion that one has found the pastoral garden, here represented as a tendency to inflate the monumental's power beyond that of the fleshly and historical. Philip, seeing the Capitol, goes in the space of a paragraph from a child's wordlessness ("biggest white thing") to a similarly naïve (if more adult) claim that they have "driven right to the very heart of American history" (58). In Lincoln's face he sees "the most hallowed possible amalgamation—the face of God and the face of America all in one," and from the memorial's top step he has a Lindberghian summit experience, taking in the tree-lined reflecting pool and the Washington Monument as "the most beautiful panorama I'd ever seen, a patriotic paradise, the American Garden of Eden." This breathless account is, in reality, just as obscured by national markings as the scene to which the pool alludes, Yosemite on the cover's stamp (the rock face stands in for the Washington Monument) (63, 66). Proving that Roth is examining types of relating to nationhood rather than one boy's view, Herman Roth is the one who speaks most loudly in this section for an icon-based view of history and citizenship—his own stamp-world. He idealistically insists that his rights derive directly from this single American locale and its engraved words: when confronted with an anti-Semitic hotel staff he reminds them "of the words in the Gettysburg Address," "carved" in the Lincoln Memorial, that ensure his family equal treatment (69).

The education in civics and exclusion that Philip begins in Washington cannot be completed there; the book has to replace his vista conception of government-designed American pastoral with meanings more local and more embodied—he too needs a "dose of life's dung," which comes from his cellar ordeals, from Alvin's terrifying

stump, and from the attention to the ground, the Weequahic ground, both represent. Chapter 6, "Their Country," replays the Washington scenes of anti-Semitism on a more horrific scale: there the Roths were displaced from their hotel, likely because they were Jews, pleas to the nation's laws doing no good; now more recently enacted laws seek to transfer them to Kentucky as part of the "Homestead 42" initiative. The two sections show Roth making parallel scalar mismatches: Philip thought he underwent "raptures of patriotism" in what seemed like the seat and origin of his homeland, finding greenery to confirm the good feeling (66). But when his home is threatened by a move out into the unknown ranges, to parts of the homeland that are decidedly not home, he reacts by newly appreciating ecstasies more near and dear. "How could a street as modest as ours induce such rapture just because it glittered with rain?" he wonders while watching a storm from the window after the family discusses the move (207). The image is one of many in Roth's work of renewal and rebirth, but for this to be a true re-bonding with his home landscape Philip must engage with it more directly—and it must be remade according to Roth's dystopian utopian imagery. In a scene that recalls Henry Roth's gutter images in *Call It Sleep* (a key intertext for *The Plot*), Philip goes outside and finds kids having a good time

> dropping Popsicle sticks into the gutters and watching them cascade over the iron grate into the gurgling sewer along with the natural detritus shaken by the storm from the locust trees and the swirl of candy wrappers, beetles, bottle caps, earthworms, cigarette butts, and, mysteriously, inexplicably, predictably, the single mucilaginous rubber. (208–9)

This is the cover image's stream, trees, and phallic rock remade once more, but as a dirty birth canal—a utopia on the order of the "used" and "broken" city into which Zuckerman remade Israel, with the condom as the ultimate sign of experience's unidealized aftermath. This is firm ground on which to stake a claim to home's power and learn that presidents do not have god-like control: "I would not be driven by the United States government from a street whose very gutters gushed with the elixir of life" (209).

More telling resonances between local landscape and Washington come in the scene, ten pages later, of the Weequahic Jews governing themselves. At a meeting, hosted by his parents, of families concerned with Lindbergh's initiatives, an adult-sounding Philip contemplates that the neighbors' Jewish identity "didn't issue" from their rabbi, "from on high," or any other "large terms of reference" (like

those he engaged in Washington) (220). We are again in the zone of Roth's tautological language of the self as simply body, as unwritten-on landscape: "What they were was what they couldn't get rid of—what they couldn't even begin to want to get rid of. Their being Jews issued from their being themselves, as did their being American," which, while not official, is "as fundamental as having arteries and veins" (220). This is the daily, highly localized alternative to feeling American when looking at the Washington Monument; these Jews make ideas of citizenship and "being American" fit in the small space and limited views of Summit Avenue.

But how to make such local scales for citizenship work when one tries to project community and empathy across nations and across oceans, as the Holocaust has made it necessary for Jews worldwide to do? Later scenes present the challenge of going from Weequahic Jew to American Jew when community members disperse across the country, raising too the more massive problem Roth mentioned in his *Times* essay: connecting—but still differentiating—American Jews and European Jews as fellow sufferers. Let me close by analyzing three such scenes, each featuring traditional maps that illustrate the uneasy expansion of Philip's vistas. As moments of rebirth, each is overseen by one of his two key mother figures in the text; and each turns on Philip's abandonment of the text's helpless, parentless Jewish child, Seldon. The first comes when Philip visits his aunt Evelyn's office, on the walls of which hang a map of New Jersey and one of the 48 states, for her use in planning the Homestead 42 relocation of Jewish families. Eyeing New Jersey, Philip notes that he was taught in school to see the state's shape as "an Indian chief's profile. . . . That was how I saw it then, and how I continue to see it; along with the five senses, a child of my background had a sixth sense in those days, the geographic sense, the sharp sense of where he lived and who and what surrounded him" (212). The personalizing mnemonic of the Indian profile, its continuity sixty years later, and the repeated word "sense" tell us we are in the realm of self-centered, bodily knowledge that Roth prizes; but (as real Indian chiefs' displacement from New Jersey suggests) here that experience meets a kind of political test. Philip doesn't totally fathom that, when a plan sees families from such a distance that they appear as pins on a map, his language of "sharp" feeling can be easily stolen: Rabbi Bengelsdorf blusters in disproportionately local terms about Hitler's European victims, "Yes, I am a Jew, and as a Jew I feel their suffering with a familial sharpness. But I am an American born and raised." (39). Prior to his epiphanies about Jewish community and the sewer, the scene at Evelyn's office is a test of Philip's mapping powers

that he fails: rather than being, like the adult Jews, "what [he] couldn't get rid of," Philip ends up unwittingly casting off his "shadow" by selling him out, implicitly asking Evelyn to send Seldon and his mother to Kentucky too (220, 221).

The second map scene, more harrowing, shows the traumatic consequences of that act. At the moment real violence against Jews begins, with *Kristallnacht*-like rioting and Winchell's assassination in Kentucky, Philip's mother, sensing danger to the Wishnows, says to Philip, "'Get me the map. Get your map of America'" (275). Her dropping of "me" and her change from article to possessive shift the focus to Philip's personal relationship to the map (her words also underscore the map as an alternative to the call to arms, two pages earlier, by the Jewish teenage police: "'Go get your bats! The war is on!'" [273]). Roth loads this moment with markers of the auto-didacticism he often celebrates. Since the black boy braved the lions and the white staff in *Goodbye, Columbus* to get to his beloved "heart" books, libraries in Roth have been key grounds for the young individual to work out assimilation and inclusion on his own terms.[27] The Roth family's shelf from which Philip retrieves the map is not so much a "library" (though Philip calls it that) as it is a shrine to American rights, history, and, as importantly, language: shelved between brass George Washington bookends bought at Mount Vernon are only an encyclopedia set (containing the fold-out map), a dictionary, and "a leather-bound copy of the United States Constitution" (275). Back at the telephone table Philip notes "a framed copper engraving replicating the Declaration of Independence" on the wall (275). These shrines improve on the Lincoln Memorial by making the engravings of history a daily presence at home; but as with the earlier suggestion that Jews derive their Jewishness not from a rabbi but from the language and streets they share, so here does Roth imply that these all-encompassing rights become attenuated when the people they protect are far removed from the communities that give the rights meaning and traction. It's as though, too, Roth has created for his childhood a moment where learning about Holocaust suffering from the distance of America began. We can easily imagine Bess Roth searching another map a few years later for the location of Dachau or Auschwitz, beginning the massive reconstruction of the suffering of worldwide Jews that weighs on postwar Jewish writers of all nations. The map is a centerpiece of the small-scale version of this ordeal here, and Philip's cartographic maturation is comically underscored by Seldon, who, oblivious to the pogrom and understanding distance and diaspora not at all, tells Philip it sounds like he is "just

down the block" (278).

The final map scene involves that same encyclopedia map, but also a less traditional act of co-mapping that Roth finally settles on as an ideal relationship to American vastness. The scene makes *The Plot* into a more significant landmark in Roth's career than it might otherwise be, briefly taking a step beyond the Faulknerian reconstructions and inventions Zuckerman quietly assembled throughout the American trilogy. Worried over Herman's and Sandy's progress back from Kentucky with Seldon, Bess tracks their trip on the map, "which she spread across the dining room table to look at whenever her anxiety overtook her" (359). Sandy is doing the same on a road map in the car, and that shared action points to this passage's expansion of the opening invocation of "[f]ear" far beyond Philip's consciousness—all over the American landscape, in fact (1). A climactic paragraph uses the word "frightened" seven times; that single word acts like a guide to the trip, the perspective from which to view it all—the nation remapped to the true north of fear. Sandy

> admitted to having been frightened just about all the time: frightened when they passed through cities where Ku Klux Klansmen had to be lying in wait for any Jew foolhardy enough to be driving through, but no less frightened when they were out beyond the ominous cities, beyond the faded billboards and the tiny filling stations and the last of the shacks where the poorest of people in their threadbare clothes lived—dilapidated timber shacks that Sandy rendered meticulously . . . —and into what my father called "the wilds." Frightened, said Sandy, speeding past the cows and the horses and the barns and the silos without another car in sight, frightened making hairpin turns up in the mountains without either a shoulder or a guardrail at the side of the road, and frightened when the paved road turned to gravel and the forest closed around them as though they were Lewis and Clark. And especially frightened because our car had no radio, and they didn't know whether the killing of Jews had stopped or whether they might be driving right into the thick of the country's murderous rage against people like us. (360)

A final set of explorer-heroes, Lewis and Clark, are scaled down to size, and through association Philip becomes somewhat like Jefferson back in Washington, accepting drawings and data that would be the basis for all future American maps and accounts of the western landscape, as names like Yosemite National Park were appended to pastoral vistas. Sandy the explorer, instead of narrating his story with a

map, draws "from memory his boyhood masterpiece—the illustrated history of their great descent into the hard American world" (360). That "descent" is Philip's epiphanies of cellar and sewer writ large. The disorder of the passage's repeated "and's" speaks to Sandy's overwhelmed consciousness, finding his way (like his brother) through proximity rather than another's directions. Finally, the brothers' co-production of this travelogue—Philip describing from sixty-year-old memories the pictures his brother drew from memory—recalls Nathan's and Henry's co-editing, so to speak, of *The Counterlife*, a book dissatisfied with inhabiting only one perspective. Philip's and Sandy's collective book (a worthy addition to the Roth family library) replaces newsreels and copied Arbor Day stamps; it tells us too why Roth had the map's graphics folded in with the encyclopedia's words in the first place. Their book-map suggests that the crux of personalized American cartography is, rather than comprehending from a distance, melding one's own direct experience with attentive, compassionate listening and imaginative verbal recreation of what others report. That learning at a distance is vital to not just the novelist's life but any life in a vast nation, where affiliations can shift with every new locale.

Saul Bellow called the well-traveled hero of his *bildungsroman*, Augie March, a "Columbus of those near-at-hand."[28] Roth, who quoted that phrase to conclude his glowing essay on the novel in 2001, has centered *The Plot* on a character likewise charged with re-discovering America on his own intimate, self-centered terms, always favoring the near over the far away.[29] But Roth's greater skepticism of triumphal assimilation like Augie's ("I am an American, Chicago-born") requires that he take metaphors of exploration and discovery more literally, constructing for his protagonist a series of mapping experiences based in intuitive play and difficult education.[30] The book tries to put in his hands (and the reader's) an untraditional map that chimes with an emphasis on felt experience and delegitimates the kind of Romantic attachment to fatherland that underwrites the Nazi threat. It is perhaps not coincidental that Roth chose for his author photo on *The Plot*'s back flap a picture of himself posed before a map—notably, a "Street and House Number Map of Newark," a map on the smallest available scale. For his new interest in topography allows Roth to construct a map of fear in the U.S. on his own terms. In doing so he adds to his anti-utopian *oeuvre* a novel that balances dystopia with honest idealization of home and homeland, centered on one boy's personal plotting.

Notes

[1] Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959; New York: Bantam, 1969), 6.

[2] Ross Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 28. Other examples of the already extensive commentary on the theme of pastoral in the trilogy include Posnock's reading of "fantasies of purity" in *The Human Stain*, "Purity and Danger: On Philip Roth," *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 21, no.2 (Fall 2001), 92; Elizabeth Powers' brief but precise reading of "pastoral economy" in *American Pastoral* in her review of *American Pastoral*, *World Literature Today* 72, no.1 (Winter 1998), 136; and Sandra Kumamoto Stanley's shrewd placement of Roth's highly self-conscious approaches to pastoral and "counterpastoral" in the context of the myth and symbol school of American studies ascendant in the 1950s, when Roth received his university education ("Mourning the 'Greatest Generation': Myth and History in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 51, no.1 (2005), 1–24.

[3] Roth, *I Married a Communist* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 65, 179.

[4] Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 361.

[5] *I Married a Communist*, 322. Roth, *The Counterlife* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 317.

[6] "Perpetual Fear" is the title of the novel's last chapter. See Roth, *The Plot Against America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), hereafter cited parenthetically. For "inviolate haven" see Roth, *The Facts* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 14. Critics have contended with the mixed moods of *The Plot* in terms other than the utopian and dystopian: Elaine Safer regards the book as exemplary of Roth's impulse to "counter[] distress with comedy, nightmarish episode with farce" (Safer, *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth* [Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2006], 152), while Posnock notes that "[e]ven while *The Plot Against America* is not a happy book, it does exude a certain mellowness of reconciliation" (*Philip Roth's Rude Truth*, 31).

[7] David Matless, "The Uses of Cartographic Literacy: Mapping, Survey and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Britain," in *Mappings* ed. Denis Cosgrove (London: Reaktion, 1999), 194. Matless claims that cartographic literacy—a knowledge of maps—is "a basic form of citizenship . . . whereby people could know their place—in all senses of that term."

[8] Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 2001), 8.

[9] Kristan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 124.

[10] *The Counterlife*, 147.

[11] In a maneuver with broad connections to my reading of the utopian dystopian Roth, Stanley deftly argues that opposition to pastoral and attempts to destroy its mythology (Roth's term is "counterpastoral") are "actually a legacy of the myth [of pastoral] itself"—and thus there is no simple counter-move, as Swede Levov finds in puzzling over his daughter's hatred for him. See Stanley, 6. Debra Shostak notes a similar upending of "binary opposition" in *The Counterlife*, in spite of the pairing of real life and mythological narrative implied in the term. Roth undermines his own terminology through the course of the book; "Zuckerman (and the reader) should be so lucky as to have just two possible narratives to choose from," Shostak writes. See "Philip Roth's Fictions of Self-Exposure," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 19, no. 1 (2000), 38, n. 28.

[12] Roth, *The Prague Orgy*, in *Zuckerman Bound* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 760–61.

[13] Roth, "The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America,'" "*New York Times* Sunday Book Review" (September 19, 2004), 10.

[14] For a good overview of uchronia fiction see the website "Uchronia: The Alternate History List" at www.uchronia.net. Famous examples include Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* and Robert Harris's *Fatherland*.

[15] "The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America,'" 10. Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* review is exemplary of the "buzz" surrounding *The Plot's* assumed politics: "'The Plot Against America' 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." See "A Pro-Nazi President, A Family Feeling The Effects," *New York Times*, September 21, 2004, sec. E:1. Frank Rich wrote of *The Plot* at the time of its publication in terms of the war in Iraq: "[Y]ou can't read it without imagining how the combustible elements of our own home front might ignite if the present moment does not hold." See Rich, "President Lindbergh in 2004," "*New York Times* Arts and Leisure," September 26, 2004, 1, 18.

[16] "The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America,'" 10.

[17] *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Searles (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1992), 128.

[18] Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (1979; New York: Vintage, 1995), 137.

[19] Roth, "Interview with *The Paris Review*," in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 145.

[20] "The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America,'" 10.

[21] *The Counterlife*, 324.

[22] The text as a whole, commenting on the theme of "uprooting" and avoiding becoming a "stump," shows Philip resisting his identification with trees (209, 362). He tries to dismiss Seldon (whose name, in another allusion to the cover, means "willow valley") and gives away to the poor boy (before stealing them back) his green shirt and brown pants—leaves and trunk? The Roth home is said to contain a lot of "forest green" (102). Also, the name of the bad boy who leads Philip to chase Christians sounds like a tree-cutter's: Earl Axman.

[23] Roth has said that in *The Counterlife*—which has maps of its three locales (Newark, London, Jerusalem) on its Vintage paperback cover—he "was interested in the impact of place on people." See *Conversations with Philip Roth*, 199. *The Plot* seems like a book interested as well in the impact of people on place, on how place is perceived and understood. In an essay in broad sympathy with my claim that *The Plot* makes Philip exist in between the local and the national, Derek Parker Royal claims that *The Counterlife* is structured "geographically," suggesting that its chapters, each titled after a place, should be seen in relation to the indeterminate zone, in between countries, of "Aloft," the middle chapter. See "Postmodern Jewish Identity in Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no.2 (Summer 2002), 434.

[24] *Conversations with Philip Roth*, 125.

[25] "Seeing-man" is the term Mary Louise Pratt uses for European explorers in the West throughout history. See *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 126. For alternative maps and theorization of highly localized relationships to place, see Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 75–82.

[26] "The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America,'" 10.

[27] *Goodbye, Columbus*, 24.

[28] Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953; New York: Penguin, 1996), 534.

[29] Roth, "Rereading Saul Bellow," in *Shop Talk* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 143.

[30] Bellow, 3.