The Plot Against America and Faceless Evil
By Oliver Principe-Beer

The most jarring moment in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* comes when the narrator, a Jewish boy of nine growing up in prewar Newark, New Jersey, dreams that his stamp collection has been marred with images of swastikas and the visage of Adolf Hitler (Roth, *The Plot Against America*, 73). In Roth's story, one of the greatest alternate history novels ever written, Franklin Roosevelt loses the 1936 election to Charles Lindbergh, the famous airman and infamous Nazi sympathizer. Lindbergh wins the presidency on a platform of xenophobic isolationism and latent antisemitism. For Phillip, the budding young philatelist, the events of the outside world may upset his family, but they do not impact him in a tangible way. Over the course of the novel, the spectre of Lindbergh's administration presses closer and closer until it worms its way into the dreams of a nine-year-old boy. The ineffable approach of American fascism in the novel is what makes its approach to villainy both so unique and so applicable to villainy in literature across the board.

Lindbergh, the primary antagonist of the book and catalyst of its events, shows up sparingly. His presence pervades the book but physically, the closest he ever gets to the main characters is when he flies the Spirit of St. Louis over their heads on a trip to Washington (116). As far as his radio and propaganda appearances, Lindbergh himself never says anything explicitly racist or antisemitic, and he never explicitly endorses anyone else in the book who does such things. This is a representation of a theme that Roth underscores again and again throughout the novel: villainy doesn't need to be explicit to exist. Even from his removed position in Washington, DC, the spectre of Lindbergh, and the unseen force of his villainy, has the power to tear the Roth family apart. The smothering presence of the new administration leads Alvin, Phillip's cousin, to volunteer in the Canadian Army to fight fascism abroad in a way he cannot fight it at home. When he loses his leg in combat, he immediately drops all his ideals and lives like a cynical inversion of his prewar life, pathetically resigning himself to the life of a peg-legged racketeer in Philadelphia (294). At the same time, Phillip's brother Sandy is a sensitive teenager with an artistic temperament. When a Lindbergh-sponsored program sends him to live with Kentucky tobacco farmers for a summer, he returns to New Jersey with Lindberghist sympathies, and he begins to call his working-class New Dealer parents "cowardly ghetto Jews"(193). Both of their situations are animated by a single driving force: anxiety. As the protagonist, Phillip Roth's fictional self states: "You had to be there to see what it looked like. They lived in a dream, and we lived in a nightmare" (76).

When trapped under an unofficially antisemitic regime lurching closer and closer to Lindbergh's ideological inspirations in Berlin, the characters behave like rats on a sinking ship. Both Alvin and Sandy, in their own respective climactic moments, end up physically fighting Phillip's father Herman, who serves as an avatar for the left-wing, urban Jews that Lindbergh builds a political career off of marginalizing, and brutalizing. Herman is also not free from this anxiety; far from it. He seriously considers receiving a gifted gun from his Italian immigrant neighbours, ultimately deciding against it (284). But Herman's New Deal moralism and his

ultimate rejection of this anxiety leaves him unable to defend himself or his family from Lindbergh, Lindbergh's opportunistic acolytes, or even each other. As Phillip himself says, "'Son, anything can happen to anyone," my father told me, 'but it usually doesn't'"(125). The most prominent opportunists in the book, Rabbi Bengelsdorf and his wife Evelyn, are the two principal villains of the novel. As opposed to the great and faceless Lindbergh, Bengelsdorf eats dinner with the family and his wife, Anna, is Phillip's aunt. Bengelsdorf, the Lindbergh administration's primary Jewish liaison, presents a complex view of villainy; he is not an external aggressor but an insider, a Jewish intellectual who rationalizes Lindbergh's actions and legitimizes the administration's increasingly antisemitic policies. His presence in the novel demonstrates how villainy can be multifaceted—sometimes arising from betrayal within the community rather than external oppression. This kind of antagonism creates a moral gray area, forcing characters like Philip's father, Herman Roth, to navigate the difficult terrain of resistance versus self-preservation. Lampshading his later ambitions, Rabbi Bengelsdorf tells Phillip a parable of Judah Benjamin, the Jewish vice president of the Confederate States (104). Bengelsdorf views him as a complex, flawed figure who ultimately improved the standing of American Jewry which is, to Bengelsdorf, the most noble aim (105). His opportunism is rooted in a lust for power, yes, but on some level, he's trying to shield his community from people like his boss. His wife, meanwhile, simply seeks to attach herself to fame, power, and respectability, going from a Newark schoolteacher to socializing with Joachim Von Ribbentrop, the Nazi Minister of Foreign Affairs in the White House over the course of the novel. When Roth presents the reader with the complex and nuanced reasons that the villainous characters closest to Phillip and his family have for their actions, it makes one question why every other Lindbergh supporter threw in their lot with him. *The Plot Against America* makes you question its villainy as much as it makes you despise it. As Walter Winchell, the firebrand radio host who acts as a voice of reason through the text asks: "And who's next, Mr. and Mrs. America, now that the Bill of Rights is no longer the law of the land and the racial haters are running the show (264)."

What does villainy add to a story? In *The Plot Against America*, it creates a face. It's Lindbergh's smiling blond visage, forcing the four walls of a Newark tenement apartment closer and closer together. It is the lid on a pot that keeps the steam inside until the water boils over. And yet all the while, it is terrible and remote, soaring through the sky while the Roths of the world are trapped on the ground. Villainy that can work its way into the dreams of a little boy is very much villainy worth writing about.

Work Cited

Roth, Phillip, *The Plot Against America*. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.