

«NO TENGO POR OBJETIVO SER NI METAFÓRICO NI  
ALEGÓRICO»: HISTORIA, CONTRAHISTORIA Y  
ANTISEMITISMO EN *THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA* DE  
PHILIP ROTH

«IT IS NOT MY OBJECTIVE TO BE METAPHORIC OR  
ALLEGORICAL»: HISTORY, COUNTER-HISTORY, AND  
ANTISEMITISM IN PHILIP ROTH'S *THE PLOT AGAINST  
AMERICA*

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ABSTRACT

After Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004) came out he published «My Uchronia» (2004). Among other things, Roth explains that before reading Arthur M. Schlesinger's *A Life in the 20th Century* (2000) he «had no such novel in mind» (2017: 341). This autobiography made him think of what would have happened if Charles A. Lindbergh—the famous aviator and Nazism supporter—had won the 1940 elections instead of F.D. Roosevelt. In this essay, which abounds in the theme of antisemitism introduced in a previous paper (Sánchez Canales, 2021), I will focus on the factual figure of Lindbergh—and to a lesser extent that of his wife Anne Morrow—Roth's counter-versions of them, and key factual and counterfactual events depicted in the narrative. Through this comparative analysis I will attempt to show that Roth's fictional America is by no means something far-fetched.

**Key words:** Philip Roth, antisemitism, history/counter-history, Lindbergh, Roosevelt



## RESUMEN

Después de que *The Plot Against America* (2004) viera la luz, su autor Philip Roth publicó «My Uchronia» (2004). Entre otras cuestiones, Roth explica que antes de leer *A Life in the 20th Century* (2000) de Arthur M. Schlesinger, «no tenía una novela así en mente» (2017: 341). Esta autobiografía me hizo pensar en qué habría pasado si Charles A. Lindbergh—famoso aviador y pronazi—hubiera ganado las elecciones de 1940 en lugar de F.D. Roosevelt. En este ensayo, que ahonda en la cuestión del antisemitismo presentada en un artículo anterior (Sánchez Canales, 2021), nos centraremos en la figura real de Lindbergh —y en menor medida en la de su mujer Anne Morrow—, sus respectivas versiones ficticias, así como en hechos clave reales e inventados que aparecen en la novela. A través de este análisis comparado se intenta demostrar que la América ficticia de Roth no es ni mucho menos algo descabellado.

**Palabras clave:** Philip Roth, antisemitismo, historia/contrahistoria, Lindbergh, Roosevelt

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## INTRODUCCIÓN

This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Philip Roth's The Plot Against America* (2004), which concludes the tetralogy of the so-called «Philip Roth Books»—*The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1988), *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991), and *Operation Shylock* (1993). One key feature these four novels have in common is that they are semi-autobiographical depictions of the novelist.<sup>1</sup> A second major feature they share is that in these four books «there are two kinds of truth, 'historical truth' and 'narrative truth'» (Kauvar in Shostak, 2011: 143). In this respect, elsewhere I mentioned an interview granted by Aharon Appelfeld, where the Holocaust survivor and novelist wisely said that «I always felt that fiction was the way to the deepest truths» (Gourevitch 2018 qtd. Sánchez Canales, 2019: 9). The present essay, meant to be a tribute to the novelist in the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *The Plot Against America*, is a comparative analysis of not only the factual and counterfactual figure of Charles A. Lindbergh, the famous American aviator and Nazism supporter, as well as that of his wife Anne Morrow Lindbergh, but also of facts and alternate facts depicted in *Plot*. My aim is to show that, as Ivanova has rightly claimed, history «est une menace incontestable» (2010: 86). But first we should give a brief account of ways in which this novel has been analyzed.

To start with, it is convenient to remember that by the time *The Plot Against America* was published (September 30, 2004) the Bush Administration had already completed its first term in office. Inevitably, many reviewers established parallels between this Administration and the depiction made of the fictitious Lindbergh Administration. An example of this approach is Kellman (2008), who has read the story as a portrait of the Bush Administration's consolidation and abuse of power at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; another example is Scanlan (in McKinley 2021), who has looked at *Plot* as a war on terror with the Bush Administration in the background. At this point, it is timely to say that not long after the novel came out, Philip Roth published an essay entitled «My Uchronia» (2004) where he explicitly said that it would be a mistake to interpret his narrative in this light: «Some readers are going to want to take this book as a roman à clef to the present moment in America.

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of biographical aspects in these novels, consult Bailey (2021).

That would be a mistake. It is not my objective to be metaphoric or allegorical» (Roth, 2017: 342). A couple of paragraphs before the author of *Plot* had unambiguously stated that his narrative «is an exercise not in historical prediction but in historical speculation, sheer conjecture. History has the final say, and history did it otherwise» (342). In writing a story like *Plot* Roth says that he «hoped to be credible» (338).

Abounding in the idea of comparing the story with the first four years of the Bush Administration, I would add that numerous scholars have not only referred to many early reviewers' analysis of the novel in this respect, but they have also hastened to disagree with it to offer an alternative interpretation. To give just a few instances, Maurer (2011) prefers to read Roth's book as the novelist's reflection on an (imagined) national crisis; Morley (2008) has stayed away from the (counter)factual events described in the story and has opted for reflecting on the craft of storytelling; Shiffman (2009) looks at the narrative as Roth's way to alert about the dangers to which American history has been exposed; Siegel (2012), like Parrish (in Shostak 2011), approaches *Plot* as a counter-history which, however, is a true history that questions the identity of America as a nation. And finally, Toker (2013), who explores the concepts of «dystopia» and «allohistory», examines the term «prosthesis» as motif in the literal and figurative sense of the word.

There are other scholars who have addressed the issue of antisemitism<sup>2</sup> through Roth's use of history and counter-history. A major theme of their studies is to reflect on the fact that past fascism can happen again not only in the present but also in the future. The evidence is that the story opens with the word «fear» (Roth, 2004: 1) and the concluding chapter is entitled «Perpetual Fear» (328-362). Among other critics, Gross (2010), Kaplan (in Shostak, 2011), Neelakantan (McKinley, 2021), who analyzes antisemitism as leitmotif, and Sánchez Canales (McKinley, 2021) have analyzed the likely probability of having antisemitism back again.

In this essay I will abound in the theme of antisemitism introduced in a previous paper (Sánchez Canales, 2021). To this purpose, as indicated above, I will focus on the factual figures of the pro-Nazi aviator Charles A. Lindbergh—and to a lesser extent that of his wife Anne Morrow—and Roth's counter-versions of them, as well as factual and counterfactual events depicted in the narrative. (For reasons of space other key figures of the time such as

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<sup>2</sup> As explained elsewhere (Sánchez Canales in McKinley, 2021: 249), «I follow Prager and Telushkin in the spelling 'antisemitism', who for their part have adopted this spelling proposed by the historian James Parker. He believes that '[t]he term [anti-Semitism] is a misnomer, of course, since it has nothing to do with Semites'. Apart from Prager and Telushkin (2016: 199), please also consult Volkman (1982: 8).

Henry Ford and the extreme right-wing Father Charles E. Coughlin will not be part of the present analysis.) A good reason to devote a significant part of my analysis to Lindbergh's biography is twofold: (1) because he is the central character in *Plot* until his sudden disappearance towards the end of the novel; and (2) because, as Roth openly says, before reading Arthur M. Schlesinger's autobiography *A Life in the 20th Century, Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950* (2000) he «had no such novel in mind» (Roth, 2017: 341). A few paragraphs before, he had pointed out that « [i]t made me think, 'What if they had?' and with a pen I noted the question in the margin» (336). This, according to Roth, is the genesis of his counter-history (see Sánchez Canales in McKinley, 2021: 247-248).

### THE LINDBERGH AS HISTORY AND COUNTER-HISTORY IN *THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA*

Do we have well-grounded reasons to distrust Roth's explanation about the genesis of his novel pointed out above? I fail to offer solid evidence to debunk what he says in his already cited «My Uchronia». Alternatively, I have preferred to make a comparative analysis of factual and counterfactual protagonists and events meant to shed further light on the issue of antisemitism.

As shown in his 2004 essay, Roth, who was reading Arthur M. Schlesinger's autobiography in December of 2000, was especially drawn to the events of the 1930s and 1940s described in his book. More specifically, his interest began to increase when he read about the young man's life and his travel to Europe, and his eventual return to Cambridge (MASS). It was then that Roth suddenly felt somehow identified with Schlesinger, although at that point the novelist was only a child and Schlesinger was a young man (Roth, 2017: 336). At the outset of «My Uchronia», he talks about his awareness of antisemitism embodied in public figures like John Ford, the car tycoon, the right-wing Father Charles Coughlin, and the pro-Nazi aviator Charles A. Lindbergh himself. Roth then points out that he «came upon a sentence in which Schlesinger remarks that there were some Republican isolationists who wanted to run Lindbergh for president in 1940» (336). The sentence that triggered him to write a novel like *Plot* seems to be this one: «Isolationist Republicans might join a new and more sinister Know-Nothing party under Lindbergh. Could Willkie rescue the Republican party from the Whig fate?» (Schlesinger, 2002: 259).

I mentioned at the end of the «Introduction» that Roth explicitly says that before reading this autobiography he «had no such novel in mind» (341). It is in this context that the novelist came up with the idea of writing a story like *Plot*. In effect, the plot of the novel—no pun intended here—revolves around Roth's «What if?» question, which led him to toy with the idea of writing an alternate narrative of the 1940 elections in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt would have been defeated by Charles Lindbergh, many American people's hero at the time and by then an open supporter of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. This section serves a double purpose: on the one hand, to show how the counterfactual narrative is built; on the other, to provide some key factual details from Susan Hertog's *Anne Morrow Lindbergh: Her Life* (1999) and from A. Scott Berg's *Lindbergh* (1998) which will help us better understand the Lindberghs' complex life.

The first important thing to say is that the novel opens with a reference to «a perpetual fear»—«Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear» (Roth 2004: 1)—a feeling that «dominates the counterfactual narrative» (Shostak, 2011: 111). This disquieting feeling pervades the rest of the two-year time span narrative which concludes with a chapter precisely entitled «Perpetual Fear» (Roth, 2004: 328-362). Narrated by a seven, eight and nine-year-old child named Philip Roth and written in journal form, *Plot* opens with a chapter provocatively titled «Vote for Lindbergh or Vote for War» (2004: 1-43). In «Vote for Lindbergh» this counter Philip Roth reflects on a childhood fear stemming from the counterfactual nomination for the presidency—and eventual counter-election—of the world-famous aviator Charles A. Lindbergh (see Sánchez Canales in McKinley, 2021: 246). The first change Roth makes is to replace the historical Republican nominee, Wendell Willkie, with the pro-Nazi aviator—and many people's hero—Charles A. Lindbergh. Interestingly, as pointed out in Alan Brinkley's biography of Roosevelt, «Willkie and Roosevelt quietly agreed not to make the war an issue in the campaign, although that proved a difficult agreement to keep» (2010: 71).

The results in the 1940 alternate elections are as follows: «Lindbergh got fifty-seven percent of the popular vote and, in an electoral sweep, carried forty-six states, losing only FDR's home state of New York and, by a mere two thousand votes, Maryland» (Roth 2004: 52). If we have a look at the results of the factual elections, Roosevelt won receiving 25 million votes, and Willkie got 22 million. In other words, the former received almost 55% of the votes to Willkie's 45% (see «FDR Campaigns for Re-election»). It is small wonder to little Philip and his brother Sandy that «the two-term president whose voice alone conveyed



mastery over the tumult of human affairs...well, that was unthinkable» (2004: 28; ellipsis in the original). To better understand how FDR felt in his race to his presidency against Willkie, «an attractive, energetic, charismatic figure» (Brinkley, 2010: 70), we can see what John Grafton, editor of *Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Great Speeches* (1999) says in the introduction to Roosevelt's «Third Inaugural Address»—Washington, D.C., January, 20, 1941 (1999: 101-104). When he refers to Wendell Willkie, he defines him as a moderate Republican—unlike Lindbergh, I would add; as for the other candidate, he explains that «FDR was uneasy about the outcome of the election, convinced at the end that he would win, but only by a narrow margin that might not give him a sufficient mandate for obtaining the increased aid to Britain and other nations then at war with the Nazis» (101). Two issues have drawn my attention here. First, if we take the results above into account, Roosevelt's analysis was accurate; and second, the word «democracy», the speech's leitmotif, contrasts with the fear that Lindbergh's counter-presidency provokes. Almost at the end of his address FDR says:

The destiny of America was proclaimed in words of prophecy by our first President in his first inaugural in 1789—words almost directed, it would seem, to this year of 1941: “The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered...deeply...finally, staked on the experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people” (Grafton, 1999: 104; ellipsis in the original).<sup>3</sup>

It has already been mentioned that Roth's «What if?» or counter-narrative starts when he replaces Willkie with Lindbergh, the eventual winner. The first effect the election of the aviator makes on the Roths' lives is acutely summarized in the narrator's reference to History: «The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic» (Roth, 2004: 114). In James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) twenty-two-year-old Stephen Dedalus tells Mr. Deasy, the head of the school where Joyce's alter ego works, that «history...is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake» (Joyce, 1993: 34; ellipsis added). Later in the novel the reader realizes that Stephen, who has given up on his Herculean effort to awake from that nightmare, has opted for a more pessimistic view of History which he has come to regard as a «[n]ightmare from which you will never awake» (132). Roth's approach to History does not seem to be very different to Joyce's.

The fear provoked by Lindbergh's election—and eventual victory over Roosevelt—contrasts with the feeling of security inspired by Roosevelt, who epitomizes peace and

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<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt's 1940s speeches (Grafton, 1999: 72-91) are especially recommended.

stability. We will have the opportunity to look at this below, where the historical and counterhistorical Lindbergh is analyzed in more detail.

For the time being it is enough to know that at the outset of the story Roth's alternate family is presented as a «happy family in 1940» (2004: 2). Life in his neighbourhood Weequahic—the factual Philip Roth's neighbourhood—was peaceful and stable in those days until «the Republicans nominated Lindbergh and everything changed» (5). This is the exact moment when the reader familiar with the historical event—the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) for a third term (Berg, 1998: 407)—begins to realize that the story told here will combine reality and fiction.<sup>4</sup>

Above I pointed out that one of Roth's major objectives was to sound «credible» (2017: 338). A big difficulty he needed overcome was to make the Lindberghs' and his fictitious family's lives run parallel. Among other parallels that he draws in these initial pages Roth points to Lindbergh's wife's first pregnancy and his mother's, the counter Philip's elder brother Sandy. Other than this, there is a particularly relevant factual event which will favour not only the Roths' sympathy toward the Lindberghs but also that of the American nation: a well-known traumatic experience the Lindberghs went through: their newly first-born son was kidnapped and found dead two months later and some miles away from the place where he disappeared (Roth, 2004: 6). In the «May 1930, Newark, New Jersey» entry of Susan Hertog's biography of Anne Morrow a detailed account of the Lindberghs' first-born child is given. Among others, the fact that «[w]ithin hours, the baby's birth was front-page news across the nation and the world» (Hertog, 1999: 134). And the next chapter—the «Tuesday, March 1, 1932» entry—covers the baby's abduction, «now twenty months old» (158). This is the key part of the report issued by 10:46 in the evening: «Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr., had been abducted from his crib in the Lindbergh home between 7:30 and 10:00 P.M. » (Hertog, 1999: 165). The rest of the entry is devoted, among other issues, to the investigation opened after the note left by the kidnapper(s) asking for \$50,000, not «a huge sum» (168) if it was an organized gang, but 1932 «was the darkest year of the Depression» (168), so it would have been a lot of money for a single kidnapper.<sup>5</sup> Keaton, the main investigator of the case, referred to this abduction as an «inside job» (174). Lindbergh, in parallel with the official investigation, took advantage of his connections with the underworld—Al Capone, in prison

<sup>4</sup> See Bailey (2021: 19-21) for a brief account of what Roth's life was like in Weequahic in those years.

<sup>5</sup> For an extended account of the Depression Years, Brinkley (2010), Roosevelt (1933) and Schlesinger (1958) are highly recommended.



at that time, had shown a keen interest in helping the Lindberghs find the kidnapper—and contacted Frank Costello, head of the Luciano family in New York. Through one of his men this mafioso said that «[t]he baby was dead...Tell Lindbergh not to pay the ransom. His words fell on deaf ears» (181; ellipsis added). Costello's words turned out to be prophetic because on May 12, close to two months and a half after the baby's abduction the Lindberghs were notified that their son's «decomposed body had been found an hour earlier, buried beneath dirt and leaves in the woodlands of Melrose, no more than five miles southeast of the Lindbergh home» (200). This is how this tragedy is narrated in *Plot*: «Some ten weeks later the decomposing body of the baby was discovered by chance in woods a few miles away. The baby had been either murdered or killed accidentally after being snatched from his crib...» (Roth, 2004: 6). Roth's narrator says that after this mournful event in the Lindberghs' lives—the «Crime of the Century»<sup>6</sup> (Berg, 1998: 7)—the aviator not only earned the American people's heart but also that «the boldness of the world's first transatlantic solo pilot...transformed him onto a martyred titan comparable to Lincoln» (Roth, 2004: 6). This issue will be taken up below when the counterfactual Lindbergh's disappearance is addressed.

The «Lindbergh case» had awakened American people's sympathy to the extent that, as Susan Hertog claims, «[t]he Lindbergh baby was a symbol of all that was good and innocent in America, and now he had been cruelly stolen» (1999: 175). (This is a major theme in Roth's fiction. *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain* (2000) are arguably the two novels where this issue is best addressed.)<sup>7</sup> Almost a year after a certain Bruno Hauptmann was arrested and accused of murder in a trial which took place in New Jersey. The trial «concluded in February 1935 with [his] conviction» (Roth, 2004: 6). This is the end of the «Lindbergh case» as is summarized in the novel. But who was Bruno Richard Hauptmann?

At the end of Chapter 15 revealingly entitled «Purgatory» (Hertog, 1999: 229-245) and datelined «January 1933, Englewood, New Jersey» it reads that «Bruno Richard Hauptmann, characterized by the press as a 'blond-haired, tight-lipped carpenter' and former German Army machine-gunner, was arrested at his home in the Bronx as a suspect in the kidnapping» (245). In the following chapter «The Arrest» (246-253) he is described as «a gentle man with good Christian values—a self-made success with an eye on the American Dream» (248). Hauptmann, an emigré from Germany in the early 1920s with a record in

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of the abduction of the Lindberghs' baby, please see Berg (1998: 236-275).

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of the devastating role History can play in the human being's life as approached in Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) and *American Pastoral* (1997), see for instance Sánchez Canales (2009; 2011).

kidnapping, had been «Lindbergh's public relations man» (250). In court «his lawyers' plea was insanity for their client» (253). Surprisingly, he had to be finally released because there was «[l]acking proof 'beyond a reasonable doubt' that Hauptmann was not in New Jersey on the day of the kidnapping» (253). One year later a new trial, described in «Testament» (254-270), took place. The accused was finally found guilty and sentenced to death: «He stepped quickly into the electric chair and his two spiritual advisers read to him from the Bible in German» on April 4, 1936 (288).<sup>8</sup>

In *Plot* it is said that «[f]ollowing the trial» (Roth, 2004: 6) the Lindberghs left America and moved to England. It is at this point that Roth begins to prepare his Lindbergh-based (counter)narrative. He points out that «from there, as a private citizen, Lindbergh began taking the trips to Nazi Germany that would transform him into a villain for most American Jews» (6). If we look at the chronology of events in Hertog's book, we see that this trip actually took place one year later as described in Chapter 19 «Crossing Over» (1999: 279-300). They set out « [i]n the early hours of December 22, 1935» (280). In this chapter this is how Hauptmann, the «gentle man with good Christian values» (248) has turned into the xenophobes' target: «Bruno Richard Hauptmann had become the xenophobes' symbol of the inferior, uneducated, and morally bankrupt 'aliens' who had flooded the American cities at the turn of the century; to the eugenics movement, the Lindberghs were martyrs» (281). The factual Lindberghs heard that Hauptmann had been executed when they were in England.

Apart from the already cited passage where Roth explains how from England Lindbergh visited Nazi Germany «as a private citizen», the novelist adds that

In the course of five visits, during which he was able to familiarize himself as first hand with the magnitude of the German war machine, he was ostentatiously entertained by Air Marshal Göring, he was ceremoniously decorated in the name of the Führer, and he expressed quite openly his high regard for Hitler, leader 'a great man'. And all this interest and admiration *after* Hitler's 1935 racial laws had denied Germany's Jews their civil, social, and property rights, nullified their citizenship, and forbidden intermarriage with Aryans (Roth, 2004: 6).

Continuing to draw on Hertog's and Berg's respective books will enable us to see that these references are historically documented.

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<sup>8</sup> For a more extended analysis of Bruno Richard Hauptmann, including his execution, please consult Berg (1998: 298-306, 307-335).

The first reference to Hitler in Hertog's biography of Anne Morrow is as early as March 7, 1935. This is how the biographer describes the scene:

That same day, March 7, Hitler stormed the Rhineland. While he hailed the act as a protest of the Franco-Soviet pact, it was a move calculated to test the Allied response. England, France, Belgium, Italy, and the League of Nations, though outraged, retreated in silence. Had they retaliated, Hitler later said he would surely have fallen. In point of fact, Hitler had only four brigades (Hertog, 1999: 287).

Susan Hertog shows the two radically different approaches to the war between the Germans and the Allies: one is embodied by Anne Morrow, who «took a pacifist view»; the other one, Lindbergh's, who «believed that war was an inevitable part of the cycle of life» (1999: 287). Ironically, in *Plot* the aviator's slogan for his counter-campaign turns into «Vote for Lindbergh or Vote for War» (Roth, 2004: 1-43). (See Brinkley, 2010: 71 above.) In this first chapter the counter Lindbergh is presented as «the Republican candidate touring Nazi Germany in 1938, culminating in the full-page picture of him, the notorious medal around his neck, shaking the hand of Hermann Göring, the Nazi leader second only to Hitler» (Roth, 2004: 18-19). Except for the fact that Lindbergh never went to Germany as the «Republican candidate», the rest of the explanation given in this passage happened. Given the circumstances, there is small wonder that *Plot's* leitmotif from that initial chapter to the end is «perpetual fear». We will further see how and why.

It is a well-known fact that Lindbergh went to Hitler's Berlin Olympic Games of 1936. It is difficult to over-rate the significance of the aviator's visit to such a relevant event for the Third Reich which was, to Hitler, like a major world showcase. This is how Susan Hertog explains it:

The presence of Charles Lindbergh on the eve of the Olympic Games would thrust Berlin onto the center stage. Lindbergh, Hitler agreed, would be permitted access to factories, research facilities, and combat units, with full government protection, if he promised to attend the opening ceremonies of the Olympics (Hertog, 1999: 291).

It is not hard to realize that this single event was only the beginning of Lindbergh's collaboration with Hitler in the years to come. However, at this point we should not overlook a crucial event in Lindbergh's life. On July 22, 1939, that is ten days before the inauguration of the Olympic Games, Charles and Anne flew to Cologne (Germany). Hertog's description

is enlightening: «In deference to Charles's demand for privacy, neither Hitler nor Goering was present when the Lindberghs landed» (1999: 291). The fact that they were received by several officials and few spectators does not diminish the figure of Lindbergh in Hitler's eyes because «no matter how visionary that future was, Adolf Hitler was certain that Charles Lindbergh personified it» (293). If Hitler was thrilled to have the aviator as his honoured guest, Lindbergh was not less excited than the Führer: the idea expressed in the sentence «he expressed quite openly his high regard for Hitler, leader 'a great man'» (Roth, 2004: 6, 369) is also present in Scott Berg's biography of the aviator (1998: 362) and in Hertog's biography of Anne Morrow (1999: 300).

The Führer was not the only one who had great expectations about the American aviator. His second, Hermann Göring, «delighted with Charles's Swedish roots, could not have been a more willing host» (Hertog, 1999: 295). But not only this. When as said above Roth writes that Lindbergh «was able to familiarize himself as first hand with the magnitude of the German war machine» (2004: 6) and that «he was ostentatiously entertained by Air Marshal Göring» (6), the novelist has not fabricated anything at all. Among other things, he is referring to the fact that Göring not only permitted Lindbergh to see an elite Luftwaffe group, but he could also fly a JU-52 (see Hertog 1999: 295). A. Scott Berg covers the Lindbergh-Göring encounter (1998: 359-361). After visiting the facilities this is what the aviator said: «I have never been more impressed than I was with the aviation organizations I saw in Germany. I believe that the experimental laboratories which are being constructed will undoubtedly contribute very greatly to the progress of aviation throughout the world» (361).

And we reach another major moment in Lindbergh's life during the Berlin Olympics: Lindbergh's award «in the name of the Führer» (Roth, 2004: 6). Chapter 22 of Hertog's book, entitled «The Cross Eagle» (1999: 321-337) is entirely dedicated to this event. The chapter opens with a picture of Hermann Göring with Anne Morrow and Charles Lindbergh in Berlin, 1938 (1999: 321). We should bear in mind that this was the Lindberghs' second visit to Berlin, scheduled two years after the Olympic Games. Hertog says that the aviator «was eager to take a political stand» (1999: 323), and his wife «came to believe that Charles was right» (323). As regards Lindbergh's approach to the Third Reich, Anne Morrow's biographer explicitly says that «Charles saw the Third Reich as the embodiment of his values: science and technology harnessed for the preservation of a superior race, physically able and morally pure» (Hertog, 1999: 324). And she adds: «While Charles valued

democracy in the abstract, he had come to believe that its freedoms were not worth the price. Social and political equality, together with an ungoverned press, had produced a climate of moral degeneracy that had permitted the murder of his infant son» (324). And the biographer concludes in a categorical way: «Charles, Germany under Hitler was a nation of true manhood—virility and purpose. The strong central leadership of a fascist state was the only hope for restoring a moral world order» (324).<sup>9</sup>

It is in this context that we can more clearly understand Lindbergh's factual Des Moines speech, analyzed in «Antisemitism in *The Plot Against America*» below. But before addressing it, I will focus now on the (in)famous Göring-Lindbergh encounter concluding with the bestowal of the Cross Eagle on the aviator, apparently not a villain in the United States yet: «In 1938, he was still the untarnished hero of the technological age, as well as a world-renowned expert on aviation» (Hertog, 1999: 336).

The Göring-Lindbergh encounter, meant to honour both personalities, took place during an official dinner held at the American Embassy in Berlin (October 18, 1938). Lindbergh was approached by Hitler's right-hand person, who told him «*Im Namen des Fuehrens*» (Hertog, 1999: 336; italics in the original)—«in the name of the Führer» (Roth, 2004: 6). After addressing Lindbergh in German, Göring decorated him with a golden medallion with four swastikas which read «Dienst Kreuz des Orden von Deutschen Adler mit dem Stern.» This medal was the second highest in rank bestowed on foreigners for service to the Reich (see Hertog, 1999: 336-337). In *Plot* there is not only an explicit reference to Lindbergh's encounters with Göring, but also to the aviator's view of Germany as «the world's 'most interesting nation'» and to Hitler as «a great man» (Roth, 2004: 6).<sup>10</sup>

To conclude the analysis of this section, I will refer to the above-mentioned reference to Hitler's 1935 racial laws in *Plot*. Once again, I will resort to Hertog's book. In this case, to Chapter 23 «Broken Glass» (1999: 338-348)—«November 9, 1938, 'Kristallnacht', Germany»—where a detailed account of the November 9, 1938 «anti-Jewish demonstrations» is given. Heinrich Himmler, later known for his leading role in the design of the Holocaust, announced that nothing would be done to stop those demonstrations. In the aftermath of that horrendous event Lindbergh expressed his «outrage» (Hertog, 1999: 341) for what had happened the day before. However, at the same time «[s]ince receiving the

<sup>9</sup> See Berg's chapter «The Great Debate» (1998: 384-432) for a detailed explanation about Lindbergh's approach—i.e. opposition—to war.

<sup>10</sup> Consult Berg (1998: 361-362) for a brief account of the Lindbergh-Göring encounter.

German Cross, Lindbergh's ties to Germany had tightened» (341). On November 12, three days after the *Kristallnacht* pogrom, world media saw Lindbergh in different ways. Among others, the British press thought the aviator might be a German spy; as for the American press, there were numerous American journalists who had reported demands that he should return the medal (342). The pressure was especially high in America to the extent that President Roosevelt decided to «purge the State Department of all pro-German influence» (343-344). It was at that moment that Truman Smith, the American attaché in Germany, saw that his career was over (344). By late 1938 Roosevelt had no doubt that America would have to go to war, which in his case entailed abandoning his policy of neutrality. It is in light of this fact that the slogan of the aviator's counter-campaign «Vote for Lindbergh or Vote for War» (Roth, 2004: 1-43) is better understood.

### ANTISEMITISM IN *THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA*

To recapitulate, the Lindberghs left America a couple of years after their baby's abduction and murder. They moved to England and from there they travelled several times to Germany, where they strengthened their ties with Hitler. Once the chronology and counter-chronology of some key facts enumerated so far has been completed, we should go back to *Plot* to look at the alternate story written after turning Lindbergh into the Republican candidate, the one who eventually defeated F.D. Roosevelt. This means that almost five years after leaving America, the Lindberghs returned «to resume their family life in America in April 1939» (Roth, 2004: 12). In «My Uchronia» Roth explains the essence of his novel: «reconstruct the years 1940-42 as they might have been if Lindbergh and not Willkie had been the Republican nominee and Lindbergh instead of Roosevelt had been elected president in the 1940 election» (2017: 342).

Dated «June 1940-October 1940» (Roth, 2004: 1-43), Chapter One of *Plot* basically covers the campaign of the 1940 elections. In this chapter the aviator is not just a private citizen with a keen interest in politics; he is also the nominee for the Republican party and eventually winner.

On the night of the elections seven-year-old Philip and his elder brother Sandy went to bed before the victory of Lindbergh, described as «the lean, tall, handsome hero, a lithe, athletic-looking man not yet forty years old» (Roth, 2004: 15), was announced.



Conventioneers began «to cry ‘Lindy! Lindy! Lindy!’ for thirty glorious minutes, and without interruption from the chair» (15). (In 1927 the real Lindbergh had flown his *Spirit of St. Louis* to Mexico City, where his admirers welcomed him «shouting ‘Viva Lindbergh’, and ‘Bravo, Lindy’» (Hertog, 1999: 28). Significantly, during the factual campaign «Lindy for President» had been often heard (Kaplan in Shostak, 2011: 118-119). Below we will go back to this historical event.) At the end of the scene of Lindbergh’s counter-campaign the winner of the convention is introduced as «surely no less loyal to the principles of American democracy than an admirer of Adolf Hitler» (Roth, 2004: 16). Like Philip Roth, we can be sure by now that if the aviator had run for the presidency and won the elections, this would have been a plausible scenario.

Abounding in Lindbergh’s counter-campaign there is a particularly surprising detail: his slogan «Vote for Lindbergh or Vote for War», viewed as «a highly symbolic nightmare which dramatizes young Philip’s worst fear—his beloved America is Nazified» (Maurer, 2011: 55), has made me think about a particularly disquieting passage in Hertog’s book. At the end of Chapter 27 «Saint of the Midnight Wild» (1999: 385-397), where several aspects of Lindbergh’s phobias and phobias are analyzed in detail, Anne Morrow’s biographer explicitly says that «[n]o matter what his intentions, his condemnation of the Jews was the anti-Semitism of Hitler’s Reich» (397) and she adds that «I would prefer to see this country at war» (397). Seen in this light it is difficult not to perceive a dose of sarcasm in that perverse alternate slogan. However, by 1939 «Lindbergh [who] was convinced that the world was tumbling toward chaos...only hoped it was not too late to avert a major war» (Berg, 1998: 386; ellipsis added). And then the aviator’s biographer adds that «for that would ‘be more likely to destroy Western civilization than to solve either our problems or those of European nations’» (386).

Without a doubt, the most significant scene of Lindbergh’s two-year fictitious presidency is his (in)famous inflammatory speech delivered at a Des Moines America First rally on September 11, 1941. We should not ignore that Roth did not modify a single word of it. What he did, however, was change the date to make it fit into the story. His counter Lindbergh delivered the speech in 1940, not in 1941 as the factual Lindbergh did. By now the reader knows that there is no exaggeration in the narrator’s words about Lindbergh’s opinion about the Jewish people: «Lindbergh’s not mentioning the Jews was to them a trick and no more, the initiation of a campaign of deceit intended both to shut us up and to catch

us off guard. ‘Hitler in America!’ the neighbors cried. ‘Fascism in America! Storm troopers in America!’» (Roth, 2004: 17).

The transcript of the factual Des Moines speech—a speech which incites hate towards the Jews—is included in its entirety in the «Postscript» (Roth, 2004: 385-390). There is a small part reproduced not only in the Postscript (387-388) but also at the outset of the novel.

A few far-sighted Jewish people realize this and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not... We cannot blame them for looking out for what they believe to be their own interests, but we must also look out for ours. We cannot allow the natural passions and prejudices of other peoples to lead our country to destruction (Roth, 2004: 13; ellipsis in the original; 2004: 387-388; no ellipsis here).

In what is one of the most anti-Semitic references in the speech, the narrator points out that «Lindbergh’s contention that the Jews’ ‘greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our modern pictures, our press, our radio, and our government’» (Roth, 2004: 14).

It is very enlightening to see how the actual Des Moines speech took place. Leaving aside the fact that Lindbergh never became President of America, the aviator, who «was surrounded by armed police» (Hertog, 1999: 395), not only said that «...the Jews were not Americans but had only self-serving allegiances»; he also claimed that «[t]hey were dangerous to the survival of the body politic—an alien race deserving of public condemnation» (396). The crowd attending the speech began to cry Roosevelt’s name—up to eleven times were heard—which contrasts with the cries of «Lindy! Lindy! Lindy!» in *Plot*. Hertog concludes her explanation pointing out that «[t]his speech in Des Moines was the final step in his public disgrace» (396). In this way, the ambivalent hero-villain image many people might have had of him disappeared—like the counter Lindbergh—and just his figure of villain would remain. Once again it does not give the impression that Roth is wrong when he points out that «Lindbergh as a socio-political force in the 1930s and ‘40s was distinguished not solely by his isolationism but by his racist attitude towards Jews» (2017: 339). Regarding Lindbergh’s attitude towards the Jews I would like to say one more thing. In July 1941 General Robert S. Wood had asked the aviator to condemn totalitarianism. In this way, the general was contributing to silencing the campaign that Lindbergh was a Nazi supporter. The well-known

theatre impresario Billy Rose<sup>11</sup> had sent a telegram enumerating some of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. This is what the telegram said:

IF YOU ARE WILLING TO CONDEMN HITLER AND HIS GANG AND THEIR UNSPEAKABLE BARBARITIES...I WILL ENGAGE MADISON SQUARE GARDEN AT MY EXPENSE AND GIVE YOU AN OPPORTUNITY TO AIR YOUR VIEWS. MY ONLY CONDITION IS THAT THE PUBLIC MELTING DOWN OR HAMMERING OUT OF SHAPE OF YOUR NAZI MEDAL BE MADE A FEATURE OF THE RALLY (Berg, 1998: 424; ellipsis added; capital letters in the original).

Not only this. Harold Ickes, Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior, wrote in his diary: «He has now made it clear to the whole country that he still clings to the German decoration» (Berg, 1998: 424). A. Scott Berg finishes his description saying that «The Great Debate was deteriorating into a more simplistic question, one which became the title of a pamphlet distributed by Birkhead's Friends of Democracy: 'Is Lindbergh a Nazi?'" (1998: 424). We will see it below. For the time being the moment to address the counter Lindbergh's disappearance has come.

Lindbergh's sudden counterfactual disappearance in October of 1942 while he was flying his *Spirit of St. Louis* is probably inspired by a real event. Between December 13 and 14, 1927 Lindbergh made the non-stop flight between Washington D.C. and Mexico City. The flight had gone according to plan until there was a technical problem while Lindbergh was flying over Tampico, Mexico City. This problem not only caused a 75-minute delay, but the Mexican control tower lost contact with the plane for a few minutes. This is how Susan Hertog describes that tense situation:

The escort planes disappeared over the mountains, and a dead silence enveloped the crowd. Suddenly, a soldier pushed through the lines and ran to the grandson. [Mexico's] President Calles listened to him, then rose to the microphone. The sighting had been false, he said. What had passed was the oil plane. *There was no sign* of the *Spirit of St. Louis*. He begged his patience (Hertog, 1999: 22; emphasis added).<sup>12</sup>

As in the case of the Des Moines speech, Roth changed the date of a factual event to make it fit into his story. But here there was a second manipulated fact: Lindbergh's

<sup>11</sup> Saul Bellow's *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989) is a novella loosely based on this impresario's famous initiative to help thousands of Jews escape from Nazi Europe and bring them to America in the early 1940s.

<sup>12</sup> For an extended account of this famous episode in Lindbergh's life, see Berg (1998: 90-131).

temporary disappearance turns out to be permanent in *Plot*. In this way, since the aviator's election two years before America has been, as perceived through the eyes of seven- to nine-year-old Philip Roth, a nightmarish parenthesis in American democracy.<sup>13</sup> It is small wonder that «Lindbergh was the first famous living American whom I learned to hate» (Roth, 2004: 7), little Philip confesses, something which clashes with his feelings towards President Roosevelt, «the first famous living American whom I was taught to love» (7). The way in which Roth uses the verb forms in both constructions is very revealing. When he refers to the child's hate of Lindbergh, the verb is in the active voice; conversely, when he talks about his alter ego's love for Roosevelt, the verb is in its passive voice.

With the counter-election of F.D. Roosevelt in November of 1942 the whole narrative seems to disappear like Lindbergh himself. However, this is just an apparent circumstance because fear is still present in American people's lives. As regards the interrelation between the «Postscript» and the «Alternate history», rather than being «sentimental and vulnerable» (Shiffman, 2009: 72), I firmly believe that through his Postscript «Roth encourages the reader to examine how he fictionalized history and to ponder the possibility of his inventions» (Kellman, 2008: 115).

There are two more aspects of the Lindberghs' respective final years which deserve our attention. First, Charles A. Lindbergh never disappeared flying his *Spirit of St. Louis*. In the early 1970 she had been diagnosed with lymphatic cancer and by 1973 he knew he was dying. He dedicated his remaining time to writing his memoirs and to visiting his children and grandchildren until he passed away in 1974. (By the way, twenty twenty-four marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death.)<sup>14</sup> As far as his widow Anne Morrow is concerned, she decided to live in Darien—a region between Colombia and Panama—«surrounded by her birds» (Hertog, 1999: 474). She was far from wasting her time: she not only paid frequent visits to her children and grandchildren in France, Vermont, Montana, and Washington but she also got round to publishing a third and a fourth volume of letters and diaries (1976 and 1980, respectively). In 1989 she granted an interview to Susan Hertog. Entitled «August, 1989, Switzerland» (1999: 475-481), this is the book's coda where the biographer explains that she met her biographee in that country for the first time in 1989. Anne Morrow died in 2001, that is a couple of years after the publication of her biography. This is what really happened

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<sup>13</sup> See Roosevelt's address «Dagger in the Back» (Grafton, 1999: 72-77) given on June 10, 1940 at the University of Virginia. (His son was among the law school graduates.) «Democracy» was the leitmotif used throughout the address.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed explanation of Lindbergh's final years, consult Berg (1998: 549-560).

to her and to her husband. What Roth tells about the Lindberghs at the end of his novel follows.

According to the narrator, there was a shocking discovery in an October 14, 1942 entry, «a front-page *Chicago Tribune* article, datelined Berlin, reports that the twelve-year old son of President and Mrs. Lindbergh—the child believed to have been kidnapped and murdered in New Jersey in 1932—has been reunited with his father at Berchtesgaden after having been rescued by the Nazis from a dungeon in Kraków, Poland...» (Roth, 2004: 315). As this note claims, since his disappearance in the last decade «blood was drawn from the captive boy to be used in the ritual preparation of the community's Passover matzohs» (315). The narrator says that it is «a story just as nutty today as when it was first concocted by anti-Semitic maniacs five hundred years ago» (315). The note concludes saying, «[h]ow it must please the Führer to be poisoning our country with this sinister nonsense» (316-317). The references to «the ritual preparation of the community's Passover matzohs» and to «a story...concocted by anti-Semitic maniacs five hundred years ago» are connected with «Jew-hating» legends. Forged more than half a millennium ago, such legends reached their zenith with the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a pamphlet originally—and anonymously—published in Czarist Russia in 1903. In essence, this libel advocates the idea that a world Jewish conspiracy had been plotted meant for global domination.<sup>15</sup>

Another entry I would not like to overlook is one dated on October 16, 1942, where the reporter alludes to Lindbergh's wife's alleged mental insanity: she is thought «to be a mental patient in the care of Army psychiatrists—she has been straightjacketed and held prisoner for nearly twenty-four hours» (Roth, 2004: 317). The note concludes that the First Lady «is no cyclone, yet the undertaking is extraordinary and she shows no fear» (318). Do both entries deserve further comment?

## CONCLUSION

The present essay, an analysis of the factual and counterfactual Lindberghs in *The Plot Against America*, has attempted to demonstrate that, despite the numerous alternate facts

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<sup>15</sup> Consult Sánchez Canales (2006: 56-57; 2008: 8) for an analysis of the matzoh-based «Beilis Case» (1913) in Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* (1966); for a book-length study of the same topic, see Beilis (1926) and Samuel (1966), among others.

given in the novel, the danger of an America as the one depicted is plausible. (The factual account of the aviator's life provided above seems to prove it.) This is why I completely agree with Gross when he says that «Roth's counter-historical novel re-inserts the 'unexpected' and 'the terror of the unforeseen' into history by drawing attention to historical anti-Semitism» (Gross 2010: 419).<sup>16</sup> We can safely say then that inventing a fascist America is a way to consider different historical possibilities, which entails looking at actual and imagined events. Bearing this idea in mind will help us not underestimate the importance of counter-history in the narrative, an issue that several critics have underscored. For instance, to Siegel, *Plot* is a counter-history which can be interpreted «as a true history that challenges and supplements our notion of American identity of actual events that comprises its factual history» (2012: 131). Siegel's claim goes along the lines of Sokoloff (2006: 312), who refers to the novel as «deeply engaged with history». And finally, I would also like to point out that «despite his counterfactual premises, Roth's *Plot Against America* in the end does not deny history» (Parrish in Shostak, 2011: 159). The most obvious evidence is Roth's 27-page «Postscript», analyzed in «Antisemitism in *The Plot Against America*». It is clear to me that he would not have bothered doing this work if he had not regarded it as an essential part of his novel.

As shown in the «Introduction», it is understandable to establish parallels between the date of the Des Moines speech—9/11 of 1940 in the novel, and 1941 in reality—and the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers occurred exactly 60 years later. However, as mentioned above, Roth openly affirms that it would be a mistake to approach his novel as a roman à clef to post-9/11 America. Among other reasons, he did not aim at «illuminating the present through the past but illuminating the past through the past» (Roth, 2017: 343). To illustrate this idea, once again I will draw on Susan Hertog's and A. Scott Berg's respective books.

In first place, Susan Hertog explains that after the Des Moines speech both Democrats and Republicans from all walks of life had «charg[ed] him with anti-Semitism and Nazism» (Hertog, 1999: 396). Exactly one week later, on September 18, Lindbergh, who had been supported by a few members of America First «admiring his courage on 'the Jewish Problem'...met with the committee, debating its public response for eight hours» (396; ellipsis added). On September 26 they released a statement which «denied that Lindbergh and his fellow members were anti-Semitic. It blamed the interventionists for raising the issue

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<sup>16</sup> For a brief account of this issue, see for instance Sánchez Canales (in McKinley 2021: 246-249).



of race, and it invited Jews to join the ranks» (396). Schlesinger explains that «[i]n a letter to the *New York Herald Tribune*, I asked how a man like Oswald Garrison Villard, the grandson of the greatest abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, could possibly stay on the American First Committee after the Lindbergh Speech» (2002: 257). This is what Garrison's grandson answered: «Lindbergh blundered badly, but is, I am convinced, not anti semitic (*sic*). Much of what he said about the Jewish situation is true, but had better be left unsaid'. So felt many America Firsters» (257). Oswald G. Villard is clearly one of those who had supported Lindbergh right to the end.

In second place, it is worth looking at how Charles Lindbergh's biographer addresses the thorny issue of the aviator's (in)famous medal. At one point A. Scott Berg says that a majority of Americans wanted Lindbergh to return it. What Lindbergh wrote in his diary follows:

It seems to me that the returning of decorations which were given in times of peace, and as a gesture of friendship, can have no constructive effect. If I were to return the German medal, it seems to me that it would be an unnecessary insult. Even if war develops between us, I can see no gain in indulging in a spitting contest before the war begins (1998: 381).

At this point two final questions come to mind: first, is it possible to believe Lindbergh's sincerity after all we know about him? And second, did Roth have well-grounded reasons to fear that an America like the one depicted in *Plot* would have been possible?

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## SOBRE EL AUTOR

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Gustavo Sánchez Canales es profesor titular de Filología inglesa por la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM). Actualmente trabaja como profesor de lengua y literatura infantil en inglés en la Facultad de Formación de Profesorado y Educación de la UAM. De su docencia universitaria anterior cabe destacar su trabajo como profesor de literatura inglesa y estadounidense en el Departamento de Filología inglesa II de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM) y de traducción, de cultura británica y norteamericana e inglés para los negocios en la Facultad de Traducción e Interpretación Cluny I.S.E.I.T. En cuanto a su investigación, por un lado, trabaja en el área de literatura judeoamericana contemporánea en la que ha publicado artículos y capítulos de libro sobre escritores como Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Michael Chabon, Allegra Goodman y Cynthia Ozick, entre otros; por otro lado, también dedica parte de su tiempo a investigar sobre la literatura infantil en lengua inglesa, y sobre la escritura académica en inglés como segunda lengua.

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