Betrayed

I Married a Communist, by Philip Roth, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1998, 323 pp., $26.00

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"At any rate, all I can do with my story is tell it. And tell it. And tell it."-- *My Life as a Man*

I Married a Communist is the latest extraordinary work of fiction by the American novelist Philip Roth. Born in 1933 in Newark, New Jersey, Roth has published more than 20 works, including *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), *My Life as a Man* (1974), *Zuckerman Bound (A Trilogy and Epilogue)* (1985), *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) and *American Pastoral* (1997).

The most recent book tells the story of Ira Ringold, a Communist Party member brought down in the McCarthyite days of the early 1950s by his relationship with a well-known actress, Eve Frame. The details of Ira's political and moral destruction are recounted half a century later to the book's narrator, Nathan Zuckerman--Roth's favorite protagonist--by Murray Ringold, Ira's brother and Zuckerman's one-time high school teacher. Nathan knew Ira, through Murray, as a teenager.

Born poor in Newark to a cruel family, raised in a tough Italian neighborhood, Ira drops out of school and, immediately after Pearl Harbor, enlists in the army. A Stalinist steelworker, Johnny O'Day, recruits Ira to the Party while the two are working as soldier-stevedores on the docks in Iran. More or less accidentally, Ira becomes an actor (first portraying Abraham Lincoln at CIO functions), winding up on a popular, vaguely leftist radio program, *The Free and the Brave*, in the late 1940s.

The 16-year-old Nathan takes up with Ira against his father's wishes. "I discovered," he explains, "the sense of betrayal that comes of trying to find a surrogate father though you love your own." Meanwhile, even as the blacklist is closing in on Ira, his marriage to Eve is disintegrating. She is weak-willed and terrorized by her daughter from a previous marriage, Sylphid, a harpist. The girl is furious at her mother for her remarriage and desires nothing more than to punish her.

Murray tells Ira: "The menace to you isn't your public actions, the menace to you is your private life. It always was and it always will be." Ultimately, when Eve discovers Ira has been having an affair, she denounces him to a couple of witch-hunters and writes a tell-all book entitled *I Married a Communist*. Ira's radio career is finished; he ends up in rural New Jersey selling minerals to tourists, dying not long after his blacklisting. Eve comes to an unhappy end too. Discredited and abandoned by her spiteful daughter, she dies "in a drunken stupor" in a New York hotel in the early 1960s.

The book is remarkable in a number of ways. At one level, it is an account of the personal and social devastation wrought by the anticommunist witch-hunts. Roth is unrepentantly hostile to McCarthy and his ilk. Murray's description of Richard Nixon's funeral, for example, which the book's fictional McCarthyites attend, is marvelous:

"But the whole funeral of our thirty-seventh president was barely endurable," he says. After the performing of all the patriotic songs "designed to shut down people's thinking and produce a trance state," Murray continues: "Then the realists take command, the connoisseurs of deal making and deal breaking, masters of the most shameless ways of undoing an opponent, those for whom moral concerns must always come last, uttering all the well-known, unreal, sham-ridden cant about everything but the dead man's real passions. Clinton exalting Nixon for his 'remarkable journey' and, under the spell of his own sincerity, expressing hushed gratitude for all the 'wise counsel' Nixon had given him. Governor Pete Wilson assuring everyone that when most people think of Richard Nixon, they think of his 'towering intellect.' Dole and his flood of lachrymose clichés. 'Doctor' Kissinger, high-minded, profound, speaking in his most puffed-up unegoistical mode--and with all the cold authority of that voice dipped in sludge--quotes no less prestigious a tribute than Hamlet's for his murdered father to describe 'our gallant friend.' 'He was a man, take him for all, I shall not look upon his like again.'"

Throughout his career Roth has considered, among other problems, what it means to be a Jew. In this book, he touches upon a crucial issue: the Jews and socialism. Does he realize its implications and explosiveness? Probably not. In any event, as Roth's novel hints at, for a significant portion of poor and lower middle class Jews, as well as intellectuals, turning to the socialist movement earlier in this century, whatever the later consequences, was almost as natural as breathing. What seems to be a closed book for Roth, unfortunately, as for many other contemporary Jewish writers, is the part that this virtual identification of Jews and socialism played in the rise of *modern* anti-Semitism.

Part-way through the tale, Murray tells Zuckerman: "Back in that era, there were a lot of angry Jewish guys around like Ira. Angry Jews all over America, fighting something or other.... Angry Jewish guys in Hollywood. Angry Jewish guys in the garment business. The lawyers, the angry Jewish guys in the courtroom. Everywhere. In the bakery line. At the ballpark. Angry Jewish guys in the Communist Party, guys who could be belligerent and antagonistic. Guys who could throw a punch, too. America was paradise for angry Jews. The shrinking Jew still existed, but you didn't have to be one if you didn't want to. My union. My union wasn't the teachers' union--it was the Union of Angry Jews."

His portrait of Ira Ringold rings true: a large, tough, charismatic and volatile man. The portrait is sympathetic, but by no means uncritical. Largely unread and untutored, Ira attempts to get by on his rage, energy and intuition. Roth's narrator describes an early stage performance: "Ira was onstage for a full hour as Lincoln, not only reciting or reading from speeches and documents but responding to audience questions about current political controversies in the guise of Abraham Lincoln.... Lincoln defending workers' rights. Lincoln vilifying Mississippi's Senator Bilbo. The union membership loved their stalwart autodidact's irresistible ventriloquism, his mishmash of Ringoldisms, O'Dayisms, Marxisms, and Lincolnisms ('Pour it on!' they shouted at bearded, black-haired Ira. 'Give 'em hell, Abe!') ... "

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Later Murray describes his brother's attachment to the Communist Party: "Ira obeyed every one-hundred-eighty-degree shift of policy. Ira swallowed the dialectical justification for Stalin's every villainy.... He managed to squelch his doubts and convince himself that his obedience to every last one of the party's twists and turns was helping to build a just and equitable society in America. His self-conception was of being virtuous. By and large I believe he was--another innocent guy co-opted into a system he didn't understand. Hard to believe that a man who put so much stock in his freedom could let that dogmatizing control his thinking. But my brother abased himself intellectually the same way they all did. Politically gullible. Morally gullible. Wouldn't face it. Shut their minds, the Iras, to the source of what they were selling and celebrating. Here was somebody whose greatest strength was his power to say no. Unafraid to say no and to say it into your face. Yet all he could ever say to the party was yes."

(This last point is not a small one. A considerable number of perennial 'nay-sayers,' free spirits, even anarchist-minded individuals ended up as docile Stalinists. The ease with which a certain type of American radical made his or her peace with the bureaucracy is a subject worthy of study.)

Roth is perceptive about the Stalinist milieu from a liberal or reformist point of view. Where he runs into difficulties, in my view, is when he is obliged by this outlook to make Ira's initial attraction to the Communist Party somehow illegitimate or tainted. The only truly artificial or unconvincing element of the book is the melodramatic revelation, made toward the end, that as an adolescent in Newark Ira murdered a man, an Italian anti-Semite, in a street fight. The reader is drawn into making a link between the protagonist's murderous violence and his political aspirations, i.e., there is the implication that anyone attracted to the prospect of social revolution must have a screw loose. ("His whole life had been looking for a way not to kill somebody.") Here the author's political prejudices, it seems to me, come into conflict with his art to the detriment of the latter. But such instances are relatively rare in his books.

I Married a Communist takes the form of a series of doomed relationships. Betrayal, in one form or another, or disillusionment is the product of nearly every one, with the possible exception of the deep connection between Murray and his brother. Nathan, the narrator, relates his eventual "disloyal" revolt against Ira's influence; he has, as mentioned, already rejected his father in favor of Ira; Ira breaks faith with Nathan by concealing his Communist Party membership and activity; Ira lets the ascetic, militant O'Day down by entering into the relationship with Eve and her bourgeois circle; O'Day, in turn, leaves Ira high and dry in his hour of need; Ira cheats on Eve with two women; one of them spills the beans to Eve; Eve, of course, most grandly and publicly, turns informer against Ira; her daughter sees Eve as someone "who abandoned her to the nannies, who betrayed her at every turn," and later walks out on her mother; and Murray, we discover (in another somewhat contrived twist), sacrificed his wife to his "civic pride" much later on by insisting they stay on in decaying Newark, where she is eventually murdered in a robbery.

The former teacher tells Nathan at one point: "To me it seems likely that more acts of personal betrayal were tellingly perpetrated in America in the decade after the war--say, between '46 and '56--than in any other period in our history.... Eve's behavior fell well within the routine informer practices of the era." He goes on: "When before had betrayal ever been so destigmatized and rewarded in this country? It was everywhere during those years, the accessible transgression, the *permissible* transgression that any American could commit. Not only does the pleasure of betrayal replace the prohibition, but you transgress without giving up your moral authority. You retain your purity at the same time as you are patriotically betraying ... "

Earlier Roth has Murray say that every soul is "its own betrayal factory. For whatever reason: survival, excitement, advancement, idealism. For the sake of the damage that can be done, the pain that can be inflicted. For the cruelty in it. For the *pleasure* in it. The pleasure of manifesting one's latent power. The pleasure of dominating others, of destroying people who are your enemies. You're surprising them. Isn't that the pleasure of betrayal?"

Much of this is very perceptive. Treachery, as a category of social behavior, is not an insignificant historical problem and certainly not in the United States, where a large portion of the intelligentsia halfway through the century abandoned its opposition to the status quo and climbed on board. Nor is it coincidental, speaking more generally, that one of the critical texts of the socialist movement in the twentieth century is entitled *The Revolution Betrayed*. The conditions under which human beings turn against ideas and people they have been devoted to for years--"this specifically modern malady," according to André Breton, worthy of "a truly clinical study"--deserve to be considered. I'm not certain Roth's somewhat casual lumping together of different varieties of "betrayal" really does the trick, as colorful and vivid, and no doubt deeply felt, as it is.

A child's "betrayal" of a parent, like many acts of establishing one's independence from previously dominant figures, is an entirely necessary and inevitable part of existence, traumatic as it may be to both parties. And betrayal in a love relationship is also part of life, even if it is distorted within the existing social set-up, with its official and hypocritical insistence on absolute fidelity and the sanctity of marriage vows. The betrayal of a mate to the FBI and the red-baiting mass media is of a different order of things. To make a sociological examination of the process Roth is considering would involve taking a serious look at the rightward lurch of American liberalism in the postwar period, with all its far-reaching consequences for the present moment. But that is not, of course, the novelist's task.

I Married a Communist is a book about a Communist and also a marriage. Roth pays tribute to both themes. Ira and Eve are a mismatch from the beginning. He is "dazzled" by her, this lonely, lovely actress, married unhappily three times, a "beautiful woman with pathos and a story to tell. A spiritual woman with décolletage. Who better to activate his protective mechanism?," Murray comments. What did she see in him? "Outwardly, a pure, gangling giant with huge hands, who'd been a factory worker ... Pretty appealing, those guys. It's hard to believe something that raw can be tender too. Tender rawness, the goodness of a big rough guy--all that stuff. Irresistible to her."

They fall in love. But a few things stand in their way. Ira's political views, and his tactlessness in expressing them, threaten to create difficulties for them and their careers. Also, Eve--although born Chava Fromkin in Brooklyn--hates Jews, at least "standard-issue" Jews. Perhaps most significantly, there is daughter Sylphid, enraged at her mother and at Ira because he is the first man "who ever treated her [Eve] decently." As Murray explains, "Ira demands respect from Sylphid for her mother and believes he's going to get it. But that is just the demand that Sylphid cannot forgive. As long as she can boss her mother around she can have everything she wants, which makes Ira an obstacle right off." And Eve cannot resist Sylphid.

The daughter comes between Ira and Eve, ordering her mother, for example, to have an abortion ("If you ever, ever try that again, I'll strangle the little idiot in its crib!"). Ira starts an affair, hoping to get from his new love "everything he thought he was getting from Eve when he got Sylphid instead." Of course everything goes up in smoke. All the fantasies Ira and Eve have about each other, this "overvaluation of the sex object," the transference onto the other of all sorts of needs that can never be fulfilled, accumulate and create an unbearable personal crisis worsened by a difficult political situation. Eve goes running to tell all; Ira cracks up.

There's something else. Roth writes very well about Zuckerman's break from his father as a teenager, a recurring theme in the author's novels. The rupture takes the form of Nathan's decision to pay Ira a week-long visit at

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his cabin in rural New Jersey, essentially, although not formally, against his father's wishes. Dr. Zuckerman, a chiropodist, suspects Ira is a CP member, although when he confronts the latter, Ringold denies it. The narrator reveals that years later the older man would tell Nathan's girlfriends and eventually his wives that "'We lost Nathan when he was sixteen' ... By which he meant that all my mistakes in life had flowed from that precipitate departure of mine. He was right, too. If it weren't for my mistakes I'd still be at home sitting on the front stoop."

What makes Roth so remarkable, among other things, is that he can write this although one knows that he is quite hostile to the Communist Party and everything it stood for. A lesser writer, possessed with his convictions, would have his character lament the decision to go off with a man whose ideology he now finds odious. There are at least two elements to this. Roth has sufficient empathy and the extraordinary artistic skill to put himself in another's shoes and recreate that individual's emotional and intellectual make-up. In addition, he has a firm belief in the power and the inevitability of error, a belief that may be somewhat one-sided, but which nonetheless has a keen dialectical edge to it.

In one of the book's final sequences Nathan and Murray have the following exchange. Murray says, "'Eve didn't marry a Communist; she married a man perpetually hungering after his life. That's what enraged him and confused him and that's what ruined him: he could never construct one that fit. The enormous wrongness of this guy's effort. But one's errors always rise to the surface, don't they?' 'It's all error,' I said. 'Isn't that what you've been telling me? There's only error. *There's* the heart of the world. Nobody finds his life. That *is* life.'"

Whether one subscribes to this doctrine or not, it is a far cry from the bland and complacent pablum that makes up a great many of the official cultural objects currently on offer.

What's also striking is Roth's obstinate, perhaps heroic (and certainly exceptional at this moment in history) refusal to draw his characters and their difficulties according to a formula. He has throughout his career written about men and women tormenting one another and provided the psychological and to a certain extent sociological conditions underlying the torment, without for a second extracting any of its sting and madness. His "explanations" are not at the same time apologies or comforting pledges that things will get better. In his best writing one grasps, or has the possibility of grasping why these people are doing these things to one another (and perhaps why *we* act in this way), but none of the *actual experience*, as lived and felt, is removed, nor is its unresolved character. This is a rare accomplishment.

Having said that, I feel the need to add that it's no easy matter to recount a substantial personal and social history in the same work. Roth has done this in both of his last two books; *American Pastoral* being the other. The novelist pays something of a price. The reader's divided attention almost inevitably weakens the impact of the individual drama. This means that Ira and Eve never quite take on the tragi-comic dimensions of some of Roth's other characters. Indeed it could be argued that Murray and Nathan, the book's *two* narrators, are its most clearly delineated figures. At any rate, the book is so superior to most of what is currently being written that I don't feel like quibbling.

Tolstoy said it is very difficult to tell the truth. Roth is a well-recognized and well-known, but not a fashionable artist. He can't be--he writes with too much detail and depth, he digs too deep into the problems that are staring him in the face, he bothers too much about things, he takes his work too seriously. In his books one can see that novelists have, despite everything, actually learned something over the course of the twentieth century, have advanced the art of prose-writing.

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, *My Life as a Man*, *The Professor of Desire*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, *The Counterlife*, *Sabbath's Theater* and indeed virtually all of his works, Roth has worked on some of the principal discontents and dilemmas of our time. He has written about relations within families and between the sexes, about America, about the Jews; about the contradiction between the infinity of desire and the finiteness of relationships; about freedom and repression; about the conflict between the desire to lead a serious, high-minded life and all that propels one toward the untrammeled and the sensual.

Let's put it this way. Roth takes on ambiguity head-to-head, as an equal. He doesn't disdain it, like the superficial, nor make a meal of it, as the fashionable do. He traces the logic of the illogical and the catastrophic, particularly in emotional and sexual relations, with the seriousness and remorselessness of a Hardy or a Dreiser.

I'm less and less convinced that one ought to judge an artist primarily or even substantially by the social views he or she espouses. A great many factors go into the formation of such views, many of them outside the control of the individual artist. But the artist *does* have responsibility for the honesty and integrity of his or her approach to life and art, for the continual reworking of themes and language or materials, for the maintenance of that level of dissatisfaction and restlessness, transmitted to a reader, that contributes to giving a work meaning and value. I'm moved by Roth's efforts.

For a complete list of works, see Philip Roth research homepage: http://omni.cc.purdue.edu/~royald/roth.htm

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