Philip Roth and the narrow framework of postwar cultural life

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American fiction writer Philip Roth died May 22 at 85 from congestive heart failure. The author of more than 30 books, Roth retired from writing in 2010.

Among his best-known works are *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), *Letting Go* (1962), *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000).

Roth was born in Newark, New Jersey in March 1933 to a Jewish immigrant family. His father was an insurance broker. The future writer attended Bucknell University in Pennsylvania before pursuing graduate studies at the University of Chicago.

His novella *Goodbye, Columbus* introduced Roth and some of his concerns to the world. A middle-class Jewish boy who works in the Newark public library falls for a girl who attends Radcliffe College and comes from a wealthier, more assimilated Jewish family. The title refers to the attachment the girl's brother feels to his years at "all-American" Ohio State University. The narrator, in the end, decides this is not the world for him.

Roth worked over the character of postwar American life, particularly as it affected the Jewish middle class, again and again. He was unsparing in his satire of this world. Indeed, other stories in the collection published with *Goodbye, Columbus* earned him angry comments from the Jewish establishment. He was so sharply criticized during an appearance at Yeshiva University in New York in 1962 that he pledged never to write about Jewish characters again, a pledge he obviously did not keep.

Portnoy's Complaint made Roth a household name. The book takes the form of a monologue told to his psychiatrist by Alexander Portnoy, a young, mother-obsessed Jewish bachelor. Roth asserted that he chose the patient-therapist framework because it allowed him to "bring into my fiction the sort of intimate, shameful detail, and coarse, abusive language that… in another fictional environment would have struck me as pornographic, exhibitionistic, and nothing but obscene."

The frank treatment of sexual matters, including the officially "perverse," became one of Roth's trademarks. In *The Breast* (1972), taking its cue from Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the male protagonist, David Kepesh, becomes a 150-pound breast.

We noted some years ago: "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."

Roth possessed a verbal brilliance and breadth probably unsurpassed by any American novelist in the postwar period. He could be enormously, subversively funny. He mocked many sacred cows and poured cold water on many national myths. His treatment of his own foibles and those of his friends and lovers was often unsparing.

We also commented in that same piece: "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."

But a writer does not write under conditions of his choosing and artistic greatness is not something merely willed. Some periods are more favorable to genius than others. Roth grew up during the Cold War and the limitations of American intellectual life during that epoch also helped shape him, as much as he may have cursed and even kicked against its confines.

His so-called American Trilogy, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*, all published when the author was over 65, confirmed Roth's tremendous strengths and his genuine weaknesses, or the weaknesses, above all, of his social milieu. The first two books are worth considering, in the order we discussed them on the *World Socialist Web Site*, in a little detail.

I Married a Communist tells the story of Ira Ringold, a Communist Party member destroyed in the McCarthyite days of the early 1950s thanks to his relationship with a well-known actress, Eve Frame. When Eve discovers Ira is having an affair, she denounces him to a couple of witch-hunters and writes a tell-all book titled *I Married a Communist*. The novel is narrated by Murray Ringold, Ira's brother.

There are many remarkable elements to the book. Roth is unapologetic in his revulsion for the witch-hunters and their hangers-on. Murray's description of the funeral of Richard Nixon, for example, attended by the novel's fictional McCarthyites, is unforgettable.

"The whole funeral of our thirty-seventh president was barely endurable," Murray says. After the performing of all the patriotic songs "designed to shut down people's thinking and produce a trance state," he 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. [Bill] 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.' [Robert] Dole and

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his flood of lachrymose clichés. 'Doctor' [Henry] 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.'"

But there are difficulties with *I Married a Communist*. In a review in 1999, we noted that "Roth is perceptive about the Stalinist milieu from a liberal or reformist point of view. Where he runs into difficulties… 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."

The same issue came up in relation to the earlier *American Pastoral*, the story of an upper-middle class family from Newark, the Levovs, whose existence is shattered when teenage Merry Levov becomes a Weatherman-type terrorist and plants a bomb that kills an innocent bystander. There are many brilliant, telling details and sequences in the novel, but the novelist is incapable of creating a realistic left-wing terrorist, in the end, because of his social prejudices.

In 2016, at the time of the release of a film version of the novel, directed by Ewan McGregor, we made the following points, which perhaps sum up my contradictory feelings about Roth:

"For the most part, *American Pastoral* is a wonderfully written, rich, funny and deeply sad work. Roth is at the top of his game here. A host of characters make their appearance, and most of them receive humane and understanding treatment, even tenderness, when that is possible…

"Roth writes about many things, including amusingly/painfully about the difficulty of ever getting *other people* right: 'You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance, as untanklike as you can be, sans cannon and machine guns and steel plating half a foot thick; you come at them unmenacingly on your own ten toes instead of tearing up the turf with your caterpillar treads, take them on with an open mind, as equals, man to man, as we used to say, and yet you never fail to get them wrong. You might as well have the brain of a tank… And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of *other people*, which gets bled of the significance we think it has and takes on instead a significance that is ludicrous, so ill-equipped are we all to envision one another's interior workings and invisible aims? Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. Maybe the best thing would be to forget being right or wrong about people and just go along for the ride. But if you can do that—well, lucky you.'

"One might argue that Roth's novel is a profound book about nearly everything except its central subject, postwar American life.

"The book simply doesn't add up. Merry as a character doesn't add up. It's not good enough to make her 'the monster daughter, 'the angry, rebarbative spitting-out daughter.' The Swede [her father] complacently imagines that he can pick up and leave Newark and live in the semi-countryside, with his beauty queen wife, and raise a perfect child, and that everything will go on like that forever. Instead, according to Roth, 'the daughter and the decade [the 1960s]' end up 'blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking.' The daughter 'transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counter pastoral—into the indigenous American berserk.'

"The Swede is 'our Kennedy,' a man 'whose discontents were barely known to himself,' a man awakened 'in middle age to the horror of self-reflection. All that normalcy interrupted by murder.' However, it is never entirely clear whether the Swede, in some sense, 'deserves' his fate, because he is so deluded and misguided about life, or whether he has simply been unfortunate enough to spawn a psychopath.

"In any event, what is this 'indigenous American berserk'? Roth won't agree of course, but what seem to him entirely mad acts of individual violence are nothing more, in the end, than particular expressions of the savagery of social relations as a whole in America. The 'most democratic republic' has always generated the most ruthless class struggle, and features a ruling elite that is essentially criminal from head to toe. It is official, everyday, state-sponsored and state-organized violence that powerfully communicates itself and sways the most vulnerable members of American society.

"The novel passes lightly over the bloody Newark riot of July 1967, which lasted for six days and brought the National Guard onto the city's streets. The upheaval is largely seen from the standpoint of the small businessman who fears his windows will be smashed. Roth has the right to adopt whatever point of view he likes, but can he see no connection between the ferocity of the riot, whether he 'approves' of it or not, and the general state of American society? (Or was this simply more of the 'American berserk'?) Was the turmoil an aberration, a 'race riot'—or an expression, occurring in one of the most economically devastated industrial cities, of the real state of things in the country? And social inequality is far deeper and economic decline far more advanced today than in 1967.

"Roth waxes indignant at Merry 'the murderer.' His attitude toward her is extreme, almost violent. Her actions in the novel are certainly indefensible. But the Weather Underground and similar organizations, disoriented and politically bankrupt, managed to kill a handful of people (including several of their own members) over half a dozen years. The US government and military, on the other hand, murdered 3 million to 4 million Vietnamese and wounded or maimed millions more; destroyed countless villages and communities in massacres such as the one in My Lai; dropped 8 million tons of bombs (more than twice the amount dropped on Europe and Asia in World War II); used 20 million gallons of herbicide, including Agent Orange; shot napalm, which generates temperatures of 1,500°F to 2,200°F, from flame-throwers …

"Roth, born in 1933, was shaped by the Cold War, anti-communism, illusions in American democracy and economic might more than he may realize. He did not permit himself in writing *American Pastoral* to come nearly close enough to the anger and shame that masses of young people in particular felt about the unspeakable crimes committed in their names—and, yes, some did nearly go mad over it.

"Sadly, Roth took the easy way out in his often remarkable novel and turned Merry into a one-dimensional madwoman. This was Roth's 'bit of the [liberal-]philistine's tail.'"

In the end, liberal anti-communism, even of the most perceptive and radical variety, as in Roth's case, proved too narrow a basis for examining society in the US in a sufficiently penetrating manner. The artist needed to be able to reject the entire social order, a possibility that was dangerously closed off by the devil's bargain American liberalism entered into during the postwar period, in the name of opposing "Soviet totalitarianism," with

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the most sinister representatives of imperialism.

Roth's falling back on sex, sex again and sex once more, on largely interpersonal warfare, the obsession with "berserk" elements in everyday life, the intense and articulate ferocity directed toward secondary and even tertiary problems, all of this is the result of a writer hemmed in, above all, by objective social and intellectual circumstances.

It was not to Roth's credit—though no great surprise—that he described himself in 2009 as "an Obama supporter" and suggested that the new president was "doing the best he can." It was particularly unpleasant, and Roth at his least trenchant or convincing, that he further asserted that Obama's miserable, self-serving memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, was "well-done, very persuasive and memorable." Obama awarded Roth the National Humanities Medal in a ceremony at the White House in March 2011.

Roth maintained his intransigence on various moral and intellectual questions. He had no use for the nostrums of identity politics and came under fire in recent decades from this quarter, as he had from prominent Jewish figures early in his career. He was absurdly accused of being a misogynist because he lay into his female characters as much as he did his males. Roth was not one to be seduced by the mythology that the female of the species is born without sin. His women characters are capable of the greatest and most luxuriant emotional terrorism and treachery.

When an interviewer asked him about the misogyny charge in 2014, Roth replied presciently that the accusation, although absurd, was "not necessarily a harmless amusement." He continued, "In some quarters, 'misogynist' is now a word used almost as laxly as was 'Communist' by the McCarthyite right in the 1950s—and for very like the same purpose."

Summing up his view of the political and economic landscape, Roth pointed to "very little truthfulness anywhere, antagonism everywhere, so much calculated to disgust, the gigantic hypocrisies, no holding fierce passions at bay, the ordinary viciousness you can see just by pressing the remote, explosive weapons in the hands of creeps, the gloomy tabulation of unspeakable violent events, the unceasing despoliation of the biosphere for profit, surveillance overkill that will come back to haunt us, great concentrations of wealth financing the most undemocratic malevolents around, science illiterates still fighting the Scopes trial 89 years on, economic inequities the size of the Ritz, indebtedness on everyone's tail, families not knowing how bad things can get, money being squeezed out of every last thing—that frenzy—and (by no means new) government hardly by the people through representative democracy but rather by the great financial interests, the old American plutocracy worse than ever."

Roth's best novels will endure.

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