

Philip Roth's Suspicions

"Who is the celebrity, what is the price, what is the scandal? What transgression has the writer committed," she asks, "and not against the exigencies of literary aesthetics but against his or her daughter, son, mother, father, spouse, lover, friend, publisher, or pet?" Amy Bellette, in *Exit Ghost*

There is no sexual equality and there can be no sexual equality, certainly not one where the allotments are equal, the male quotient and the female quotient in perfect balance. There's no way to negotiate metrically this wild thing. It's not fifty-fifty like a business transaction. It's the chaos of eros we're talking about, the radical destabilization that is its excitement. David Kepesh, in *The Dying Animal*.

Perhaps it is best to remain obscure. Fame, pursued by many, has its perils. That is the thought inspired by reading *I Married a Communist*, the Philip Roth novel that I finished last summer. Published in 1998, the book came near the end of a cycle of books that reestablished his reputation as the foremost novelist in American. *I Married a Communist*, like *Sabbath's Theater*, *The Human Stain* and *American Pastoral*, furthered his study of notoriety but moved it out to a national level.

The book, along with *Pastoral* and *Human Stain*, is part of a trilogy documenting American life in the second half of the twentieth century. Regrettably, it is by far the least successful. The story is freighted with revenge motives that impair its effectiveness, and the convoluted narrative makes demands on the reader that are not really justified by the quality of the text. Claire Bloom, Roth's former wife, published *Leaving the Doll's House* in 1996, a volume of autobiography that includes the history of their courtship, marriage and divorce. Roth is presented in highly unflattering terms, and *I Married a Communist* offers an equally critical picture of Bloom.

Nasty and manipulative, prone to emotional breakdown, parsimonious—that is the image of Roth that appears in the Bloom memoir. The book attracted a lot of attention when it was published, and those who detested or envied Philip Roth found much to enjoy in it. A pre-publication excerpt appeared in *Vanity Fair*, and I seem to recall that Bloom was forbidden to give interviews before the number came out; the editors wanted nothing to diminish public interest in the piece. Her picture of Roth was taken to be accurate by many reviewers and readers, and I confess that I was among them; she writes in such a direct, plain-spoken style that it is easy to make assumptions that may not be justified. Claudia Pierpont, in *Roth Unbound*, a study of the author, says that Roth was "stunned" by his former wife's account and considered a lawsuit, rejecting the option only because of the time and energy the effort would take. Nevertheless, says Pierpont, "Bloom's indictment had a tremendous effect on Roth's reputation—perhaps more than anything since *Portnoy's Complaint*." That had been published nearly 30 years before. Roth also believes—according to Pierpont—that *Leaving the Doll's House* could not have been produced by his former wife; it is too badly written. Claire Bloom penned an earlier volume of autobiography, *The Limelight and After*, which Roth considers so clearly superior to the second that *Doll's House* could only have been ghosted. Others in the world of publishing and journalism, he believes, instigated and wrote the memoir and played a role in shaping its content as well. The book, in other words, reflects a carefully planned effort to discredit a public figure who offends the proponents of political correctness. But *I Married a Communist* does more than publicize the grievances of a marriage that ended so bitterly. Like *The Human Stain* and *Sabbath's Theater*, it examines the question of betrayal, standards of propriety asserted by certain groups and the attempted manipulation of public opinion. Acts of

disloyalty and betrayal are recorded in *American Pastoral*, but the subject is generally confined to the family of the doomed Swede Levov.

I Married a Communist reflects a central thread that appeared in much of Roth's work in the 1990s; he might agree with the term sexual McCarthyism, the language some analysts used to describe the assaults Bill Clinton attracted after his relations with Monica Lewinsky became public. Roth considers the topic in the early pages of *The Human Stain*, his best novel of the decade and perhaps his finest ever, published in 2000, and also in *Sabbath's Theater* (1994). These novels explore the public and media's eagerness to condemn sexual activity that falls short of an imaginary standard, established by whom is never quite clear, in what Roth calls "the ecstasy of sanctimony." In *I Married a Communist*, Roth has transposed the subject of betrayal to the plane of national politics and made it clear that he considers exposing "Communists" and "sexual transgressors" as equivalent forms of persecution.

In *The Human Stain*, Coleman Silk, an aging classicist on the verge of retirement, is driven out of Athena College by an unjustified charge of racism. The story is told by Nathan Zuckerman, the novelist Roth created for a number of stories. First introduced in *The Ghost Writer* in 1979, Zuckerman has been living for years in exile from New York in a remote New England hamlet near the college. Coleman begins an affair with the 34-year-old Faunia Farley, impoverished and falsely thought to be illiterate. A marginal woman, a perfect heroine for the victim-manufacturing advocates of political correctness, Faunia takes odd jobs near the college, including part-time work as a janitor at the local post office. It is here that she meets Coleman Silk. Shortly after their affair begins, Coleman receives a poison-pen letter and the story begins to feel like a modern version of a Hawthorne tale. The one-sentence letter simply asserts:

"Everyone knows you're sexually exploiting an abused, illiterate woman half your age." Silk assumes the note was sent by a literature instructor at the college, a young Frenchwoman whom Silk himself had hired during the years when he was dean. The note presumes to speak with the intimidating voice and the unassailable moral weight of "the community," and when it fails to have the intended effect of separating the couple, another rumor is put into circulation. This one maintains that after causing an unwanted pregnancy, Silk coerced Faunia into having an abortion that led to a failed suicide attempt. The story is preposterous, and Silk is shocked to discover that even his children believe it. But there is worse to come. The couple are driven off a mountain road at the end of the novel and killed by Faunia's former husband, a crazed Viet Nam war veteran. Silk's detractors manufacture the myth that he was distracted by sexual fun he was having in the car with Faunia and responsible for the accident himself. Even the police believe some version of the story and decline to investigate further. The moral? An aggressive, angry, punitive group claiming to speak in the name of "community" sets a standard of acceptable conduct that it presumes is universal and attacks and discredits those who challenge it. Silk was "doing not what he seemed to be doing," says the narrator of the novel, mid-way through the story, when pressure is building on the former instructor to end his ties with Faunia, "but [should be] doing instead. . . what was deemed suitable by God only knows which of our moral philosophers. Barbara Walters? Joyce Brothers? William Bennett? *Dateline NBC*?" All sorts of facts—Coleman's true identity, Faunia's true identity, the cause of their deaths, the instigator of most of the rumors—are entirely lost in the poisonous miasma of public discussion.

Mickey Sabbath in *Sabbath's Theater* is an utter reprobate and will elicit far less sympathy than Silk from most readers. But he too is victimized in a brutal campaign against sexual activity that is intended to destroy him. Sabbath has a marginal position as an "adjunct

professor of puppet theater" at a small New England college; his real career is seducing college students and tape recording banal telephone sex talk. But one young woman involved with Sabbath records their conversations as well and deliberately leaves a tape of it in a library bathroom. Once public, the document creates the uproar it was expected to, but removing Sabbath from the campus is only the beginning of what his venomous critics have in mind. The tape, surreptitiously removed from the college's control, is set up on a telephone line—S-A-B-B-A-T-H—and anyone interested in the scandal can dial up the exchange and listen. The "ad hoc committee" publicizing Sabbath's transgressions notes on a message preceding the tape that the student--presumably a willing participant in the conversation, as well as in the affair--is "only the latest of a series of students whom Professor Sabbath has intimidated and victimized during the years" he was part of the faculty. Another "victim," in other words, who has been "intimidated" by a loutish, disregarded man who has thrown his life away chasing sexual possibilities. The method is punitive and the appeal nakedly prurient, to an extreme; but this is not the end of Sabbath's education. He learns on the final pages of the novel that his closest attachment, Drenka Balich, a sex-crazed woman married to a local innkeeper, kept a diary that documented her numerous affairs; she left it behind after dying of cancer. Discovered by her family, the father and son are humiliated and the various lovers exposed, a kind of posthumous revenge exacted on almost everyone.

I Married a Communist includes another discussion of betrayal, betrayal in fact is at the center of the story, and the story marks the reappearance of Nathan Zuckerman, now aged and still domiciled in that remote New England hamlet. He encounters Murray Ringold, a 90-year-old retired high school English teacher whom Nathan had as a boy in his native Newark; the older man comes to Athena in the summer of 1997 for an adult education program. Over a series

of evening discussions, Murray describes the history of his family and in especial detail that of his brother, Ira, the central figure of the novel, to whom Nathan had been very close as a boy growing up in the 1940s. Long dead by the time Nathan and Murray are reunited, Ira married a famous Jewish actress with two failed marriages behind her. She also has a daughter with musical aspirations to whom she is attached in a densely tangled relationship. The details describe Claire Bloom nearly exactly. The wife in the novel betrays the husband by publishing a memoir—*I Married a Communist*—that reveals his support of the Communist Party, an extremely serious charge to make in the early 1950s, the period in which much of the story is set. Ira's flourishing career in radio is brought to an end.

Murray Ringold reports that Eve Frame, Ira's wife, had cultivated the acquaintance of Katrina Van Tassel Grant—the odd name borrows from the Washington Irving tale--and Bryden Grant, New Yorkers with political and social ambitions. Prominent in the machinery of popular culture in post-war America, the wife produced bestselling romances and the husband, modeled somewhat on Walter Winchell, had a radio program and a newspaper column devoted to gossip. Roth also makes him a descendent, oddly enough, of Ulysses S. Grant, commanding columns of newsprint instead of soldiers and cannon. The Grants acquire Ira Ringold's diaries from his wife, coercing her, she later claims, and revenging themselves for a torrent of abuse they had received from Ira years before. They put the material into a column first and have enough left over to help the wife produce a memoir exposing her husband's support of the Party. (Eve Frame married a communist; her granddaughter's generation would say I married a pedophile, or a sexual predator, or a bigamist, or a closet gay.)

This is Murray Ringold's comment on the human propensity for betrayal. But the context in the novel concerns not sexual conduct but offering names to the government in the age of

McCarthy. After offering this disquisition, Murray asserts that "more acts of betrayal were tellingly perpetrated in this country than in any other period in our history."

Every soul 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.

Malice, envy, and ambition come together in both the Red Scare of the fifties and in sexual scandals of later decades. (This is not to say that domestic Communists were not a danger during the Stalin era, or that acts of sexual harassment should be disregarded.) Roth believes that the issues are different but share essential characteristics. The Grants exploit the politics of exposure to launch the husband's political career; he enters the House of Representatives from a district in Dutchess County and holds the seat for 22 years. His first assignment is on the House Un-American Activities Committee. The wife becomes a Washington hostess, organizing dinners and their seating arrangements, deciding who should be seated next to whom, exerting malevolent social authority over climbers in the capitol—"the sheer cannibal vigor of her taste for supremacy" is the language Roth employs to describe her. From a practical perspective, neither of the Grants seems to have done much that was useful in their years in Washington other than appease their taste for power.

"I think of the McCarthy era," ruminates Murray Ringold, in one of his evening discussions with Zuckerman, "as inaugurating the postwar triumph of gossip as the unifying credo of the world's oldest democratic republic. In Gossip we Trust. . . . McCarthyism as the beginning not just of serious politics but of serious *everything* as entertainment to amuse the mass audience. McCarthyism is the flowering of the American unthinking that is now everywhere."

The Grants achieve their goal of expanded social and political power. But Eve Frame is destroyed along with her husband by the unpredictable dynamics of journalism. The FBI and newspapers in New Jersey and New York gather loose talk in Ira's old neighborhoods, offering former neighbors the chance to add scurrilous details to the record. But the left-wing press is soon mobilized in Ira's defense and begins to investigate his wife. She had concealed her origins as a little girl from Brooklyn raised by an impoverished Jewish family, changing her name from Chava Fromkin. She also withheld from her biography the story of her brief marriage to "an ex-sailor she'd run off with at sixteen," as Murray describes matters. Other details come out, some factual, many not, and as reporters—"these savage intellects," as Murray calls them—dig into the story, the more remote from reality it becomes. Ira is transformed by the press from a committed Communist into an observant Jew under attack by a wife who sought to conceal her Jewish origins and the "scandalous" details of her past. The story of their marriage becomes more confused the more it is written about, and Murray declares that "to find anything anywhere of the ugly truth that *was* the story of Ira and Eve, you would have needed a microscope." The author's claim is that a vengeful party initiating a scandal is equivalent to an aggressive nation unleashing a war. "The public machine she set in motion," Murray asserts, "does not always go in the direction one wants. It takes its own direction." The fortunes of war are attributed to the Fates or the Furies, but the agents managing the direction of a scandal are far less significant—reporters. "Once the human tragedy has been completed," Murray Ringold tells Nathan, near the end of the text, "it gets turned over to the journalists who banalize everything into entertainment."

Murray Ringold adds, "the moment you start this public machine, no other end is possible except catastrophe for everyone." How could it be otherwise? Reporters rush into print fragments of a complicated story that are minimally understood and make little sense outside of a

larger complex. Much of what passes for "information" is material they share among themselves, second- or third-hand information that acquires credibility on the strength of repetition. This is what it means to acquire fame and have your private life handed over to the media. ("It isn't the gossip that offends you," says a minor character Saul Bellow's *More Die of Heartbreak* who has been the object of press attention. "It's the stupid mismanagement of the facts." Bellow would know.)

Eve Frame and Ira Ringold are both ultimately discredited by the machinery of publicity, finishing their lives in obscurity. Eve dies prematurely young of alcoholism in a third-rate residential hotel in New York, and Ira follows her a few years later, having exiled himself to a "shack" in northern New Jersey where he earns a few dollars selling worthless stones to tourists visiting a coal mine.

Roth himself dealt with the core of the issue in an interview that he gave to a Swedish newspaper in the spring of 2014 that was republished in *The New York Times*. The subject involves the analogy between the Red Scare in the 1950s and the writers and scholars who challenged the standards of political correctness in the 1980s and 1990s. Here is Roth rebutting accusations of misogyny while claiming kinship with the victims of McCarthy:

It is my comic fate to be the writer these traducers have decided I am not. They practice a rather commonplace form of social control: You are not what you think you are. You are what we think you are. You are what we choose for you to be. Well, welcome to the subjective human race. *The imposition of a cause's idea of reality on a writer's idea of reality can only mistakenly be called 'reading.'* [Italics mine.] And in the case at hand, it is not necessarily a harmless amusement. 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.

Has he been attacked in a manner comparable to those who were tagged with a charge of party membership or sympathy in the early phase of the Cold War? The analogy does not seem

to me out of place. Soviet Communism was a threat to the security of the country, and those identified with its cause often drew the attention of the nation's security services, including the FBI and police departments; people were known to lose their jobs for no justifiable reason. In *I Married a Communist*, Murray Ringold, refusing to testify before the House Un-American Committee, loses his position as a high school teacher for a few years and becomes a vacuum cleaner salesman. Today, claims of misogyny and opposition to political correctness will not draw the attention of the police, but they can wreck a person's opportunities for university employment or work in certain fields of journalism. If they are directed at a writer, his chances of publication are definitely affected. Roth may term the experience "comic" in the interview I cited, but I doubt that he enjoyed having his self-image usurped and assumptions about the meaning of his work taken over by critics promoting a political agenda.

Perhaps it goes without saying that the novel, which I've only briefly described, is over-plotted and needlessly intricate. I can think of only one other writer who has aroused more antagonism than Roth, and that would be Saul Bellow. Roth's early detractors were readers and rabbis antagonized by his descriptions of Jewish families in the stories he produced at the beginning of his career. More recently, feminists have objected to his depiction of women; he is not "fair-minded" or balanced. Roth, in other words, knows a great deal about public obloquy. But his account in *I Married a Communist* of the lives of people in the movies and radio is not very persuasive, and neither is his rendering of their enemies who move on to glory in Washington. I also found his description of the dynamics of journalism a bit pat. As an exploration of treachery and abuse, *Communist* is far surpassed by *The Human Stain* and *Sabbath's Theater*. Too much of the narrative is carried by lengthy chunks of Murray Ringold's monologue, and I am not certain that the age of McCarthy, though it overlapped with the rise of

TV, inaugurated the conversion of politics and "the news" into entertainment. That seems to me a more recent phenomenon, a product of the last three decades or so.

Still, there are some excellent passages in the book, and I found enough material to justify laboring through the text. Murray's description of Richard Nixon's televised funeral in 1994 is extremely acute. Bob Hope is seated next to James Baker, the former secretary of state, and a notorious Arab arms dealer next to Nixon's brother, Donald. Henry Kissinger, speaking with "the cold authority of a voice dipped in sludge," needs a classy reference for his eulogy, but quotes instead an inappropriate passage from *Hamlet*. Spiro Agnew sits impassively with "his conscienceless Mob face."

Another very effective section of the book comes near the middle, when a young Nathan Zuckerman arrives in Chicago in August 1950 to begin his undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago. (Roth acquired an M.A. degree from the university in the late 1950s.) One of his instructors is Leo Glucksman, who asserts what I assume is the author's artistic credo. "Politics is the great generalizer," Leo tells the young student, "and literature is the great particularizer, and not only are they in inverse relationship to each other—they are in an *antagonistic* relationship." Some months after the semester begins, Nathan takes a commuter train to East Chicago, Indiana, and as I read through the text and admired its details, I thought that only a local familiar with South Chicago and the adjoining region could render the ineffable dreariness of the working-class towns and neighborhoods as effectively as Nathan does. Their very names—Hegewisch, Gary, Hammond, others—evoke for me the profound tedium and aesthetic plague, the blighted human lives, of working-class America (admittedly uglier and more violent today than it was in 1950). These are the steel and manufacturing villages that run along the southern rim of Lake Michigan, binding Illinois to Indiana, in what once was a vast

industrial and grain-handling complex, the concentrated power of the Midwest, as Nathan calls it. The grain elevators are still there, but the industrial part of it disappeared decades ago; entire factories have been dismantled. Zuckerman is on his way to meet Johnny O'Day, a rough, hardened Communist organizer Ira met in the U.S. Army during the war, now recruiting party members from the steelworkers who are toiling for Inland Steel, Jones Laughlin, Union Carbide. He experiences what most of us would consider a lonely and chilling austerity, "a Communist laborer dwelling alone in a room in East Chicago under a sixty-watt bulb." His room is neat but has the bare minimum of furnishings, and Nathan tells the reader that "I had a sense not so much of everything's having been torn away from O'Day except this existence but, worse, of O'Day having, almost sinisterly, torn *himself* away from everything that was not this existence." Needless to say, O'Day forms the antithesis of the life offered by Glucksman and other instructors at the university.

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