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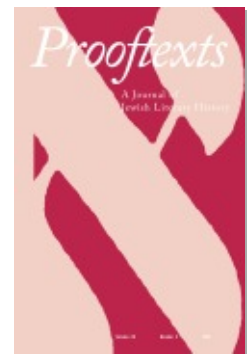
Survival in America: The Literary Nexus between Philip Roth's Holocaust Fiction and the Holocaust Memoirs of Primo Levi and Anne Frank

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Survival in America

The Literary Nexus between Philip Roth's Holocaust Fiction and the Holocaust Memoirs of Primo Levi and Anne Frank

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*This paper examines Philip Roth's most Holocaust-haunted novel: The Plot Against America. Through a comparative intertextual study of Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (published in the United States as *Survival in Auschwitz*), Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, and Roth's *Plot*—and through an analysis of the other references to Frank and Levi in Roth's writing—this article argues that *The Plot Against America* should be read considering the profound impact of these works on Roth. It further argues that *Plot* is not merely Roth's counterfactual novel about what America would have looked like in the early 1940s had a president who sympathized with the Third Reich assumed control of the United States government. It is Roth's imagined Holocaust memoir, the one which the contingencies of history spared him from having to write as an actual witness, but which he nonetheless chose to write after having been profoundly impacted by his friendship with (and profound esteem and empathy for the works of) Primo Levi.*

In *The Ghost Writer*, Philip Roth's alter ego Nathan Zuckerman famously imagines that Anne Frank survived the Holocaust, fled to America, and continued to live in hiding as "Amy Bellette" in the isolated Berkshires home of the reclusive writer E. I. Lonoff. After giving Frank and the Holocaust a darkly comic, highly inventive treatment, Roth continued to explore his perennially favorite subjects—Jewish

identity, Israel, the life of the writer, sex—while gradually expanding his artistic range to encompass everything from race and the American dream to illness, aging, and death. The Holocaust seemingly departed from Roth's writerly purview, but it would be a mistake to think that *The Ghost Writer* was the only work in which Roth addresses the Holocaust in a significant manner. In fact, a close reading of his fiction and nonfiction reveals that the Holocaust was a major subject, an important motif, or a powerful undercurrent in many of his works. Not only did Roth continue to address the Holocaust after *The Ghost Writer*, but Frank continued to appear in his work as well. Even a cursory reading of Roth's post-*Ghost Writer* work reveals that Frank, Primo Levi, and the Holocaust are the ghosts that continue to haunt his work, perhaps because Frank, Levi, and the Holocaust were uncanny yet very real apparitions that perpetually occupied his thoughts and his life.

Roth himself attests to the significance of the Holocaust in his Jewish consciousness:

I was born in 1933, the year Hitler came to power. . . . As a small child I heard on our living room radio the voices of Nazi Germany's Fhrer [*sic*] and America's Father Coughlin delivering their anti-Semitic rants. Fighting and winning the Second World War was the great national preoccupation from December 1941 to August 1945, the heart of my grade school years. The cold war and the anti-Communist crusade overshadowed my high school and college years as did the uncovering of the monstrous truth of the Holocaust . . .¹

The subject of the Holocaust in Roth's work has been addressed extensively by critics and scholars.² Michael Rothberg has argued that Roth's approach to the Holocaust is characterized by an attempt to underscore the remoteness of the Holocaust, portraying it as a singular event but one whose "singularity is precisely not American," and concentrating on "the division between European and American experiences."³ But it is difficult to make sense of Rothberg's contention when one considers how Roth, in his writings on the Holocaust such as the one quoted above, strove to convey a sense of the palpable proximity of the Holocaust to American Jews of his generation. Like Rothberg, Eric Sundquist argues that Roth's

concern with the Holocaust stems less from “the unbounded pain of the Shoah in its own right than the elusive significance of that pain for postwar American Jews.”⁴

I argue in this article that, while these views may be accurate descriptions of Roth’s approach to the Holocaust in the rest of his oeuvre, his approach to the Holocaust in *Plot* is precisely the opposite. Through the novel’s bridging of the European and American experiences, Roth underscores how *non*-remote and *non*-elusive the Holocaust was to American Jews of Roth’s generation. Moreover, I maintain that Roth’s usage of stylistic devices borrowed from Frank and Levi are his chosen literary methods of conveying his historiographical statement about the place of the Shoah in American Jewish life. Accordingly, this article contends that it was above all Levi and Frank who impacted Roth’s Holocaust-related writing in general, and *The Plot Against America* in particular. This is not to gainsay the impact that other writers—such as Hannah Arendt, Aharon Appelfeld, Bruno Schulz, Tadeusz Borowski, and Saul Bellow—had on Roth’s approach to the Holocaust; it is, though, to say that Levi and Frank are the two writers foremost in Roth’s mind in *Plot*.

In *Exit Ghost*, Roth fascinatingly connects Frank and Levi by putting these words in Bellette’s mouth:

“When Primo Levi killed himself everyone said it was because of his having been an inmate at Auschwitz, I thought it was because of his *writing* about Auschwitz, the labor of the last book, contemplating that horror with all that clarity. Getting up every morning to write that book would have killed anyone.” (Roth, *Exit Ghost*, 151).⁵

By linking Amy Bellette—who is inextricably linked in our minds and in Roth’s fiction to Anne Frank—with Levi and Auschwitz, Roth reminds us of the inextricable links between the Holocaust, Holocaust literature, and his own literary career, as well as between his own writing on the Holocaust and that of Levi and Frank.⁶

Roth clearly read Holocaust literature, and especially Anne Frank’s diary, closely and drew upon both the diary (and upon the person of Anne Frank herself) in his novels, but he also lent his active support to the publication and distribution of some of the most important works of Holocaust literature in the United States.⁷ Roth’s

support of Holocaust literature in the United States was never more evident than in his support of Levi's Holocaust memoir. Roth had long admired Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*. He considered it "a masterpiece for ten different reasons" and "one of the essential texts of the time," and he was disappointed that its title was changed in the American publication to *Survival in Auschwitz*.⁸ According to Marco Belpoliti, who edited the complete works of Levi, Levi is, among non-American writers, "lo scrittore che probabilmente Roth ha più ammirato" ("the writer that Roth likely admired most").⁹

In April 1986, Roth went with his Italian friend Gaia Servadio to hear Levi deliver a talk at the Italian Cultural Institute in London.¹⁰ Servadio arranged a meeting between Roth and Levi following the talk, which went quite well; Roth found Levi to be a person suffused with "pathos" but also possessing a kind of "tranquility."¹¹ In September of that same year, in order to publicize a new US edition of Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Roth flew to Turin, where he had a probing, revelatory conversation with Levi about *Se questo è un uomo*.¹² The conversation, which also touched upon Levi's other books, has become so central in scholars' understanding of the great Italian writer that one of Levi's biographers has called it the best interview with Levi ever recorded.¹³ Levi "had become personally important to Roth" during that time, as Claudia Roth Pierpont reports, and Roth had become a "great admirer" of the Italian writer's books; after their conversation, the two quickly formed a close friendship that "went remarkably deep."¹⁴ According to Roth's biographer, the meeting with Levi had a profound personal and emotional effect upon Roth: "I felt the great good fortune of one who believes himself to have made a most extraordinary new friend for life," Roth later recounted.¹⁵ The meeting had a profound effect on Levi as well, who came to regard Roth with deep admiration.¹⁶ When Roth found out in April 1987 that Levi had taken his own life, Roth was utterly shocked, "weeping and distraught," and for a considerable time thereafter struggled with his own contemplations of suicide.¹⁷ According to one of Levi's biographers, Levi was quite happy with the interview, believing that Roth brought out dimensions of Levi's approach to writing about the Holocaust of which even Levi himself had theretofore been unaware.¹⁸

Roth lent his support not only to Levi's Holocaust memoir but to his other literary works as well. In his capacity as Distinguished Professor of Literature

at Hunter College, Roth taught a course informally referred to as a “Holocaust course,” in which he taught several of Levi’s books, including *I Sommersi e i Salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*).¹⁹ In his *New York Times* interview with Levi, he mentions with great admiration several of Levi’s other books, including *La chiave a stella* (*The Wrench*), *Il sistema periodico* (*The Periodic Table*), *La tregua* (*The Truce*), and *Se non ora, quando?* (*If Not Now, When?*).²⁰

Both Roth and Levi were Jewish writers who bristled at being identified as Jewish writers, but both were compelled—one by external compulsion, another by internal compulsion—to grapple with the greatest catastrophe to have ever befallen the Jewish people.²¹ Concerning that catastrophe, it was Levi who, perhaps more than any other Holocaust writer, may have colored, or at least bolstered, Roth’s view that luck was the predominant factor in surviving the catastrophe of the Holocaust. As Levi told Roth during their 1986 conversation: “As for survival . . . I insist that there was no general rule, except entering the camp in good health and knowing German. Barring this, luck dominated. . . . in my opinion sheer luck prevailed.”²² One indeed would be hard pressed to conclude that anything other than luck determined whether any individual European Jew, or, for that matter, any Jew anywhere in the world (as I will suggest below), survived World War II. The role of luck and happenstance in history—twentieth-century Jewish history in particular—is something Roth felt acutely, as is evident from his own writing on the Holocaust, and he appears to have become even more conscious of it after his conversation with Levi. Even during their 1986 conversation, Levi felt that Roth had understood him so well that, upon Roth’s departure, he was able to say, “Non so chi di noi sia il fratello maggiore e chi il minore” (“I do not know which one of us is the older brother and which is the younger one”).²³ And, although Roth met many Holocaust survivors during his life, he stated that no survivor affected him as much as Levi had.²⁴

Roth’s post-1986 writing indeed evinces a preoccupation with the fact that he and his family survived the Holocaust by the sheer happenstance of having been born on one side of the Atlantic Ocean rather than the other. Roth knew that Frank was only a few years older than he was when she went into hiding in the annex.²⁵ He was well aware that Anne was a literate, liberal, literature-loving, emerging young writer from a secular Jewish family with a gift for stringing sentences together, and that her literary talents were only beginning to manifest. In short, Anne, as he

sensed with Levi, was someone very much like himself. It may not be too farfetched to venture that Roth's fascination with Frank and Levi, his books' persistent preoccupation with the Holocaust, and his acute interest in his literary contemporaries who survived the Holocaust all reflect the fact that Roth was haunted by what would have happened had it been the Franks or Levis who were living in Newark in the 1930s and 40s and the Roths who were living in Amsterdam or Turin, rather than the other way around. Roth's writings are haunted by the fact that he and his family escaped the Holocaust not because of any special merit but simply because of where they were born. The figures who most haunt Roth are his true doppelgängers: not Nathan Zuckerman, and not even "Philip Roth" from *Operation Shylock*, but Anne Frank and Primo Levi. The reason they haunt his writing is clear; it is because of how similar their upbringings and literary interests were and how easily their positions could have been reversed by a few small twists of fate.²⁶

The combined effect of his books' preoccupation with the Holocaust, his awareness of the luck he and his family had in escaping the Holocaust, the ghost of Frank, and his academic activities as a teacher and supporter of Holocaust literature, and the impact of his meeting with Levi, lead me to posit that *The Plot Against America*, in which Roth and his family are "abruptly thrust back into the miserable struggle from which they had believed their families extricated by the providential migration of the generation before" (Roth, *Plot*, 17) is not merely Roth's counterfactual, alternate-history *Gedankenexperiment* about what would have happened had some of the effects of the Holocaust reached the shores of 1940s America.²⁷ Rather, *The Plot Against America* is Roth's Holocaust memoir—the Holocaust memoir that history, luck, and fate spared him from having to write as a witness, but which he nonetheless chose to write for literary and historiographical reasons of his own.

While one budding young writer who lived in Amsterdam rather than Newark put her writerly gifts into a Holocaust diary and another literary contemporary in Turin compiled his memories of Holocaust survival into a memoir, the nascent writer who lived in Newark in the 1930s and 1940s was freed from having to use his writerly gifts for these purposes. But this luck, this precarious fate, also meant that he was deprived of the literary opportunity to draw upon the greatest, most horrible, and most consequential subject in modern Jewish (and perhaps even human) history—the Holocaust—for his writing. *The Plot Against America* was Roth's

attempt to write as if fate *had* given him the awful curse (and literary blessing) of being able to write a first-hand account, as did his literary doubles in Amsterdam and Turin, of how he survived the Holocaust. One of the reasons that Roth's attempt at a fictionalized Holocaust survival account was so successful involves the way in which *The Plot Against America* concomitantly maps onto and evokes perhaps the most crucial component of American Jewish identity: Holocaust survivors' guilt, or an awareness that American Jews, Roth among them, were spared the horrors of the Holocaust not by any special merit but by the sheer luck of having been born on the western, rather than the eastern, side of the Atlantic Ocean.²⁸ Additionally, the effectiveness of Roth's *Plot* lies in how it also maps onto and draws upon some of the most well-known works of early Holocaust literature, especially those of Frank and Levi.

A comparative reading of Roth's *The Plot Against America*, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, and Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* reveals so many thematic and stylistic similarities that it appears Roth may have consciously drawn upon these works in composing his great work of historical Holocaust fiction. Like Levi's *Se questo*, Roth's *Plot* is an "upside-down Bildungsroman," a story of a boyhood that becomes increasingly reduced and restricted as the novel progresses.²⁹ As Levi did in *Se questo*, Roth in *Plot* eschews aesthetic exhibitionism in favor of plain, Hemingway-esque prose that cleaves closely (though not strictly) to the stylistic modality of concentration camp realism with which Roth, by virtue of having taught and closely read Levi, was intimately familiar. *Plot*, like *Se questo*—and unlike other Holocaust memoirs, such as Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*—contains consoling flash-forwards ("today, this very day in which I am sitting at the table and writing, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened") that let readers know young Philip—like young Primo—will make it home and will survive.³⁰

Also, like Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*, Roth's *Plot* contains allegorical characters, characters who are not fully fleshed out but who embody certain virtues. These include Philip's cousin Alvin, "the family's conscience" (Roth, *Plot*, 52) who exemplifies honor and integrity (at least in the first half of the novel) and who goes off to Canada—and subsequently on to Europe—to fight Hitler and the fascists; the nerdy, "solitary" Seldon Wishnow (Roth, *Plot*, 142), the pale, friendless,

cringe-inducing, stereotypical “loser” who throws like a girl (Roth, *Plot*, 141) and whom no boy would want to befriend but with whom Philip becomes inextricably entangled, much to Philip’s chagrin; and the supercilious scholarly Quisling Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, the “traitor” (Roth, *Plot*, 102) who, by endorsing Lindbergh’s presidential candidacy (Roth, *Plot*, 35) and “[k]oshering Lindbergh for the goyim” (Roth, *Plot*, 40), represents unseemly collaboration. But, as in Frank’s *Diary*, the most exemplary characters in Roth’s book are his parents, who personify a kind of small-scale heroism that, in the grand scheme of a canonical Jewish American writer’s life, is epically grand. Roth’s father is “the imprint of insane stoicism” (Roth, *Plot*, 358). His mother, whose “job was to hold [their] world together as calmly and as sensibly as she could” (Roth, *Plot*, 40), not only succeeds in this extremely trying task but—in a passage that epitomizes the book’s felicitous admixture of “moral beauty,” “horror,” and “comedy”³¹—even manages to save Seldon Wishnow as well (Roth, *Plot*, 331–36).

Roth even begins *The Plot Against America* in a loosely similar way to the manner in which Levi commences the narrative of his experience in Auschwitz, wherein we see both writers breaking briefly from the account (factual for Levi, fictional for Roth) of the torments they endured in the past to comment upon how even the recollections of those traumas torment them now, even in the present: “Fear presides over these memories,” Roth writes of his (fictional) experience of Holocaust survival in America. “[A] perpetual fear” (Roth, *Plot*, 1). Levi, recollecting his (factual) arrival in Auschwitz, writes, “il suo ricordo ancora mi percuote nei sogni” (“its memory still assaults me in my dreams”) (Levi, *Se questo*, 14). Additionally, the fact that Roth chose to set his fictional Holocaust memoir in his hometown of Newark, New Jersey, and the fact that he took great pains to discuss his and his family’s embeddedness—Roth uses the term “entrenched” (Roth, *Plot*, 239)—in New Jersey seem to be modeled on Roth’s observations on the extent to which Levi was also rooted quite deeply in his and his family’s hometown of Turin.³² Roth, like Levi, heightens his character’s experience of dislocation and disorientation during a time of trauma by making readers aware of just how deeply rooted the character had been in his community prior to his expulsion from it.

The thematic and stylistic similarities between *The Plot Against America* and *Diary of a Young Girl* are exceptionally striking as well. As in Frank’s *Diary*, Roth’s

Plot chronicles a young child's experience of the way a surreal political reality slowly envelops him and his family. Like Frank, young Roth evolves from an innocent, average young child into a scarred preadolescent who endures the trauma of a lost childhood. Like Anne, Philip is an ordinary child—albeit one with an incipient writerly awareness whose precocious literary gifts are beginning to manifest themselves—thrust into extraordinary circumstances.

There is a greater deal of autobiographical fact in *The Plot Against America* than perhaps any other Roth novel; only the other novels in which he wrote as Philip Roth (*Deception* and *Operation Shylock*) come close. (It is seemingly not a coincidence that these novels contain a greater amount of Holocaust and Anne Frank references than do most other Roth novels.) In *Plot*, all of Roth's immediate family members bear their real-life names, occupations, and the ages they would have been in the 1940s—which is not the case in Roth's Zuckerman novels, where Nathan (i.e., Philip) is the older brother, and Henry (i.e., Sandy) is the younger brother. In *Plot*, seven-year-old Philip is the younger brother, and twelve-year-old Sandy the older brother, as was the case in real life. The novel's most important development concerning Sandy—he is taken from New Jersey by the Lindbergh administration's "Office of American Absorption" and temporarily transplanted in rural Kentucky—conjures the way in which Anne's older sibling Margaret is called up by the Gestapo. Although both older siblings emerged unharmed from their brushes with sinister governmental agencies, these incidents are filled with foreboding, and they foreshadow darker events to come. Sandy's experience living on a Kentucky tobacco farm is obviously imagined, but many other details in *Plot* are factual representations of Roth's life growing up in Newark in the 1930s and 1940s; for instance, young Philip in *Plot* has a treasured stamp collection, as did the real Philip Roth while growing up.³³

The Plot Against America packs such an emotional punch due in part to the fact that much of it *is* fact. As Roth himself stated, he strived to keep *Plot* "as close to factual truth as I could," while striving to portray his family "as faithfully as I could—as though I were, in fact, writing nonfiction."³⁴ Moreover, the extensive twenty-seven page postscript that Roth appended to the novel—which includes a note to the reader detailing the many historical works Roth utilized in composing the novel, brief biographies and chronologies of the major historical figures

cited in the novel, and the actual antiwar speech delivered by Charles Lindbergh in 1941 that is alluded to in the novel—underscores this point.³⁵ *Plot* is also unique in Roth's oeuvre in that it contains a detailed table of contents, a feature much more common to nonfiction books than novels, which further underscores how *Plot* was Roth's attempt to write the fictional Holocaust memoir that history had spared him from writing but had compelled Levi to write. (*Se questo è un uomo* also contains a detailed table of contents.) *Plot*'s uniqueness is in large measure due to how closely it adheres to the realm of fact—to the facts of US history and the facts of the life of seven-to-nine-year-old Philip Roth—as well as to the literary conventions of nonfiction books.³⁶

What further lends *The Plot Against America* much of its pathos is how much it resembles *Diary of a Young Girl* in other respects (except, of course, for the fact that Philip and his family are not hiding in an attic). Like Anne, the eminently relatable “everygirl” who has crushes on boys and feuds with her mother, gossips, loves movie stars, and delights in learning her favorite subjects (while detesting the subjects she hates, like math), Philip is a regular, relatable “everyboy”: he has homework to do (Roth, *Plot*, 114), plays war games with rubber balls (Roth, *Plot*, 27, akin to the war games that Yurik and his brother play in *The Lead Soldiers*), goes to the movies (Roth, *Plot*, 349), partakes in various acts of boyhood mischief (Roth, *Plot*, 114–21), and delights in his favorite pastime, philately (a hobby which, in its capacities for visual stimulation and its potential for forging social bonds with other boys who share the same hobby, can be characterized as a mid-twentieth century equivalent to video games). We respond to Philip's youthfulness, his childishness, his pre-Portnoy innocence—his universality—much as we respond in a similar way to Anne's universal “everygirl” qualities when reading her *Diary*. (Indeed, Roth may have responded so strongly to Anne, as this article suggests, because he could so easily see himself in Anne's shoes, as a young, emerging writer with a ravenous hunger for books and an ardent intellectual curiosity for all things literary, artistic, and linguistic—nearly anything, that is, that could fall within the rubric of the Humanities.) Philip even follows the news the same way that Anne does: raptly, and exclusively on the radio. Our heartstrings are tugged far more forcefully by *Plot*'s innocent, endearingly childish Rothian protagonist than by most other Rothian protagonists, whose favorite pastimes, needless to say, no longer include stamp collecting.

Philip's stamps, in fact—perhaps somewhat analogous to Anne's interest in family photographs, as well as her hobby of diary-writing itself—function at once as a leitmotif and as a symbol in the novel. The story of his stamp collection is a narrative thread that runs through the first half of the novel (Roth, *Plot*, 21–22, 41, 57, 74, 78), and the eventual loss of his stamp collection (Roth, *Plot*, 235) represents the loss of his all-American boyhood innocence, snatched away from him by the eruption of history, in the form of a Nazi-sympathizing presidential administration apparently intent upon bringing some of Nazi Germany's antisemitic policies to America, within what had been his peaceful, unthreatened American childhood.

Philip's stamps not only bear literary symbolism; because of an important early passage in the novel—a dream in which Philip sees his national parks stamps smeared with swastikas, causing him to fall out of bed and wake up screaming (Roth, *Plot*, 43)—some of his stamps accrue iconographic significance as well.³⁷ No symbol is more representative of Nazism than the iconic swastika, and few places in America are more symbolic of “America the Beautiful”—“the cliffs, the woods, the rivers, the peaks, the geyser, the gorges, the granite coastline . . . the deep blue water and the high waterfalls . . . everything in America that was the bluest and the greenest and to be preserved forever in these pristine reservations” (Roth, *Plot*, 43)—than the national parks. That the nightmarish stamp of a sea-green Yosemite National Park smeared with a black swastika was the image chosen to be displayed on the book's otherwise bare brown cover is particularly suggestive; its iconographic import, coupled with the frightening symbolism ensconced in Philip's nightmare, indicate in a very vivid sense what this book is about: nothing less than the ugly historical reality of the Holocaust (nearly having) come to unspoiled, “pristine” America, with young Philip Roth caught up in the historical maelstrom.

Indeed, Roth's project in writing this novel seems to have been not only literary but historiographical. (It is telling that the major literary award won by *The Plot Against America* was not a traditional literary award such as the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, or the PEN/Faulkner Award—all of which Roth's novels have won—but the Society of American Historians Award.) Roth's aim in writing *Plot*, in addition to creating a great work of literary art, was apparently to make his audience more cognizant of historical contingency. As Philip Roth (the character) writes in *Plot*:

as Lindbergh's election couldn't have made clearer to me, the unfolding of the unforeseen was everything. Turned wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as "History," harmless history, where everything unexpected is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic (Roth, *Plot*, 113–14).

Key phrasings that Roth sprinkles throughout the novel—such as “[i]t can't happen here? My friends, it *is* happening here” (Roth, *Plot*, 305), and “history's next out-sized intrusion” (Roth, *Plot*, 184), which characterizes an invitation to join President Lindbergh at a state dinner with the German foreign minister—serve to further adumbrate the novel's implicit thesis: American Jews—living in what they believed to be an “autonomous fortress oceans away from the world's war zones” (Roth, *Plot*, 203) and even occasionally “imagin[ing] themselves and their children as native-born citizens of Paradise” (Roth, *Plot*, 245)—were spared this intrusion of history by luck and contingency, not by merit or providence.³⁸

All three characters likewise minimize their Jewishness. Frank's *Diary* shows us that she is not religiously observant. She proudly proclaims her Dutch patriotism, stresses how comfortable her acculturated parents had been during their prewar lives in Germany, and reports on the progress of her French and English lessons, effectively signaling to readers how *un*-Jewish she and her secular Jewish family are.³⁹ Levi likewise gives us hardly any indication that he is of Jewish descent, let alone that he was raised in a religious household, other than the fact that he happens to be “cittadino italiano di razza ebraica” (“an Italian citizen of the Hebrew race,” Levi, *Se questo*, 6; notice the primacy given to his status as an “cittadino italiano” first, and then “di razza ebraica” second).⁴⁰ *The Plot Against America* portrays Philip as a self-described “American child of American parents in an American school in an American city in an America at peace with the world” (Roth, *Plot*, 7) and likewise takes pains early and often to point out how wholesomely American and religiously unobservant he and his family and neighbors were, while avoiding mentioning the fact that his paternal grandfather and great-grandfather were both rabbis.⁴¹

It was work that identified and distinguished our neighbors for me far more than religion. Nobody in the neighborhood had a beard or dressed in the antiquated Old World style or wore a skullcap. . . . At the newsstand out front of the corner candy store, ten times more customers bought the *Racing Form* than the Yiddish daily, the *Forvertz*. . . . I pledged allegiance to the flag of *our homeland* every morning at school. I sang of its marvels with my classmates at assembly programs. I eagerly observed its national holidays, and without giving a second thought to my affinity for the Fourth of July fireworks or the Thanksgiving turkey or the Decoration Day double-header. *Our homeland was America* (Roth, *Plot*, 3, 4, 5, emphases added).⁴²

The Roths of Newark, like the Franks of Amsterdam and the Levis of Turin, are not the stereotypical, oft-caricatured Yiddish-speaking skullcap-wearing Jews of Eastern Europe eagerly awaiting a messianic redemption that will lift them out of their exilic condition and deliver them back into the biblical Promised Land; they are secular, assimilated Jews entirely at home in the life and culture of the secular West. They are Jews for whom Americanness is as intrinsic to their identity as Jewishness: “Their being Jews issued from their being themselves, as did their being American. It was as it was, in the nature of things, as fundamental as having arteries and veins” (Roth, *Plot*, 220). That they are nonetheless swept up in the horrors of the Holocaust makes their tragic—or, in the case of *The Plot Against America*, their near-tragic—story all the more poignant.

Lastly, what may be most remarkable from a literary standpoint about *The Plot Against America* is how *unliterary* it is. Outside of a few cleverly crafted metaphors, the book contains hardly any of the usual literary flourishes that ordinarily pepper Roth’s prose: skillful use of assonance and wordplay; long, undulating sentences; plentiful intertextual allusions to Shakespeare, Kafka, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and Flaubert. The apparent lack of artistry in *The Plot Against America*, I posit, is in fact a poetics of simplicity whose simpler, more brusque writing style conceals the artistry with which it was crafted.⁴³ It is a prose that appears designed to mimic the artistically simpler, unselfconscious literary style of *Diary of a Young Girl* as well as the clear, simple, factual report-style prose of *Se questo é un uomo*. Frank wrote

the vast majority of her diary without a “literary conscious,” without possessing the self-awareness that she was a “writer” writing a literary text.⁴⁴ Roth likewise wrote *Plot* with an artistically simpler, pared-down style that attempts to mimic the “language of witness” with which Levi had written *Se questo*, the language in which a Roth who had not yet developed a writerly consciousness would have written had America been governed by a pro-Nazi regime during the 1940s and had he been writing an account of his experiences shortly after that time.⁴⁵ As Uri Orlev did in *The Lead Soldiers*, Roth in *Plot* impersonates a child—namely, himself, as a seven-to-nine-year-old boy. (This additional fact makes *Plot* stand out in Roth’s oeuvre as one of his only novels to tell a story from the perspective of a character who is not the same—or approximately the same—age as was Roth at the time of the book’s composition.) The work of the novel, in Roth’s own words, entailed an attempt to “put me in touch . . . with the kind of little boy I myself was, because I’ve tried to portray him faithfully too.”⁴⁶ Roth, like Orlev, is extraordinarily effective at (re)creating for us the inner world of a preadolescent boy⁴⁷ who, unaware that he is about to be entangled in a grand, nightmarish historical drama, is still mostly preoccupied with typical boyhood concerns: his homework, his games with his friends, his fear of ghosts hiding in the basement, and his favorite pastime. Roth’s stamp-collecting hobby is suffused with a symbolism that becomes iconographic in the most literal sense of the term given the book’s striking cover design, as well as through the significance the narrative itself ascribes to this image as an *ominous pavor nocturnus* that continues to haunt young Philip after the experience of the initial vision (see Roth, *Plot*, 128). Along these lines, it is worth noting that, when Roth first met Levi, he was struck by the way Levi, then sixty-seven, still resembled to him a ten-year-old boy: “In his body, as in his face, you see—as you don’t in most men—the face and the body of the boy that he was.”⁴⁸

Moreover, Roth learned from Levi personally that the optimal way to write Holocaust literature is not with the highly literary, mortifyingly florid prose style Curzio Malaparte employed in *Kaputt* (1944), but in the spare, no-nonsense prose style Levi employed in *Se questo*. As Levi told Roth in their 1986 conversation, “my model (or, if you prefer, my style) was that of the “weekly report” commonly used in factories: it must be precise, concise, and written in a language comprehensible to everybody. . . . And certainly not written in scientific jargon.”⁴⁹ In the

same conversation, Levi also conceded that his subsequent work was much more “self-conscious” and “more methodical, more literary, the language much more profoundly elaborated” than *Se questo*’s unselfconscious, less literary, less linguistically stylized manner of narration.⁵⁰ This simple, sober, unvarnished prose style of *Se questo*—precise, concise, and written in a language and in an unembellished style that would be comprehensible to everybody, free from Shakespeare and Chekhov references and mostly devoid of the long, meandering, Flaubertian sentences Roth can oftentimes be so fond of in his other novels—is precisely the prose style Roth employs in *Plot*. Like the model, or style, Levi employs in *Se questo*, the style Roth employs in *Plot* allows him to tell a most difficult story in a most uncomplicated manner, thereby allowing the story to reach an even wider range of readers than the typically small cadre of the population that reads literary fiction.

After reading *The Plot Against America* in light of Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl* and Primo Levi’s *Se questo é un uomo*, and after understanding the significance of Levi’s impact upon Roth, it is evident that when Roth set out to write his own work of Holocaust literature in the early 2000s, he appears to have drawn heavily not only from the *Diary* but especially from *Se questo*. His incisive understanding of these books and his profound identification with these fellow Jewish writers, one of whom he knew personally, enabled Roth to accomplish what was perhaps the greatest literary feat of his career: writing not only Philip Roth’s Holocaust memoir, but writing in the voice of Philip the preadolescent boy—as the person he was before he became Philip Roth—and doing so in a prose style far closer to Levi’s clinical manner of writing in *Se questo* than anything Roth had ever written up to that point in his career. It was a feat he may never have been able to accomplish—nor perhaps even motivated to undertake—had he never encountered Anne Frank and Primo Levi.⁵¹

NOTES

This article has its origins in a research paper that I wrote for David Roskies’s “The Making of Holocaust Literature” course at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in the fall of 2016. I would like to thank Professor Roskies for his comments on that paper, for encouraging me to continue developing that initial paper into a journal article, and for his support of my work in Jewish literary studies.

- 1 Philip Roth, "The Story behind 'The Plot Against America,'" *New York Times*, September 19, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/books/review/the-story-behind-the-plot-against-america.html>.
- 2 See, e.g., Lily Corwin, "Exit Shoah: Amy Bellette and Fading Cultural Memory in *Exit Ghost*," *Philip Roth Studies* 9, no. 2 (2013): 77–83; Eric J. Sundquist, "Philip Roth's Holocaust," *Hopkins Review* 5, no. 2 (2012): 226–56; and Michael Rothberg, "Roth and the Holocaust," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. Timothy Parrish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 52–67.
- 3 Rothberg, "Roth and the Holocaust," 53 and 54, respectively.
- 4 Sundquist, "Philip Roth's Holocaust," 226–56.
- 5 All citations of this work are to Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost* (New York: Vintage, 2007). Anthony Wexler, "Philip Roth and the 'End of the Holocaust,'" *Philip Roth Studies* 17, no. 1 (2021): 76–91 has recently argued that the presence of Levi looms particularly large in *Exit Ghost*. He reads *Exit Ghost* through the prism of Levi's *I sommersi e i salvati* (which is referenced explicitly in Roth, *Exit Ghost*, 151). He also discusses Roth's references to Levi in *Patrimony* and *Operation Shylock* (78–79, 83–90, and 89 n. 9). Even more recently, Francesco Samarini, "This Speaks Volumes about How Deeply I Know the Human Soul': Philip Roth and Primo Levi," *Philip Roth Studies* 17, no. 2 (2021): 45, 52, 62 has argued that Levi's presence in Roth's writing began to loom even larger after Levi's suicide in 1987—"only after his death can Levi become a ghost" (50)—a thesis that would appear to be corroborated by the way Levi haunts *Exit Ghost*. This article expands on the studies by Wexler and Samarini by revealing the especially significant presence of Levi in *Plot*.
- 6 On the link between Bellette and Frank, note that Bellette herself reminds us in *The Ghost Writer*: "you told me—do you recall?—that I bore 'some resemblance to Anne Frank'"; see Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 156. Corwin, "Exit Shoah," 77–83 argues that the fading presence of Frank in *Exit Ghost* (in contradistinction to her much more dynamic presence in *Ghost Writer*) suggests that Roth may have been attempting to reflect the fading place of the Holocaust in American cultural memory. This claim, however, would seem to be belied by Roth's sustained and alarming treatment of the still very vivid place of the Holocaust in American cultural memory in *Plot*. Regarding the links between the Holocaust, Holocaust literature, and Roth's own literary career, his final book, *Nemesis*, asks "[w]hy does He set one person down in Nazi-occupied Europe with a rifle in his hands, and the other in the Indian Hill dining lodge in

- front of a plate of macaroni and cheese?"; see Philip Roth, *Nemesis* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 154. This statement appropriately, if eerily, caps the career of a writer whose birth coincided with Hitler's ascension to power in Germany and whose first published work of fiction, the short story "The Conversion of the Jews," features a janitor whose arm bears a tattooed concentration camp number.
- 7 On his close reading of Frank, see Claudia Roth Pierpont, *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 115–18. Debra Shostak, *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Couterlives* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 123–25 has shown that Roth's fascination with Frank extends as far back as the early 1970s.
 - 8 Nicholas Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 10. Direct quotes from Blake Bailey, *Philip Roth: The Biography* (New York: Norton, 2021), 486, and Ira Nadel, *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 343, respectively.
 - 9 Marco Belpoliti, "Roth e le tre interviste a Primo Levi," *Doppiozero*, May 30, 2018. Translations from Italian in this article are mine unless otherwise noted.
 - 10 Bailey, *Philip Roth*, 486 and Nadel, *Philip Roth*, 343–44.
 - 11 Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi. Una Vita*, trans. Eleonora Gallitelli (Milan: UTET, 2017), 460, quotes 480.
 - 12 Roth visited Italy several other times in his life; not only is it featured frequently and prominently in his fiction, but it had an important place in his personal life as well. See Nadel, *Philip Roth*, 130.
 - 13 Carole Angier, *Il doppio legame. Vita di Primo Levi*, trans. Valentina Ricci (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), 662.
 - 14 Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 163.
 - 15 Bailey, *Philip Roth*, 487.
 - 16 Berel Lang, *Primo Levi: The Matter of a Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 69.
 - 17 Nadel, *Philip Roth*, 343 and Bailey, *Philip Roth*, 489. Roth made suicide a minor but noteworthy motif in *Plot*. See Bailey, *Philip Roth*, 168–69 on Mr. Wishnow's suicide and Philip's fears that his father, terrified of the Third Reich gaining a foothold in America, would soon follow Mr. Wishnow's lead.
 - 18 Angier, *Il doppio legame*, 671.

- 19 Roth details these facts in *Patrimony*, 209–10, and they are confirmed in Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 163, 165. (*Roth Unbound*, unlike *Patrimony*, mentions that Roth teaches Levi's books.)
- 20 Philip Roth, "A Conversation with Primo Levi by Philip Roth," in *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi (New York: Touchstone, 1986): 175, 176, 178, 181 (*The Wrench*), 177, 178, 183 (*The Periodic Table*), 182 (*The Truce*), and 185 (*If Not Now, When?*). Roth's support of Levi extended to his private interactions with his fellow writers. After John Updike had written Roth a note about Woody Allen's 1989 film *Crimes and Misdemeanors* in which Updike expressed a positive attitude toward the film, Roth wrote Updike back to castigate the film for what, in his view, was the way in which it carried out a "desecration of the memory of Primo Levi," a moral and literary crime that sent him "into a fury that won't quite subside." See Bailey, *Philip Roth*, 574. On Roth's relationship (and on his literary relationship in particular) with Levi, see Samarini, "This Speaks Volumes," 45–67.
- 21 Lang, *Primo Levi*, 100. Despite Levi's reluctance to identify as a Jewish writer, pronounced Jewish themes and subject matter are discernable in several of his works. See Vania De Luca, *Tra Giobbe e i buchi neri. Le radici ebraiche dell'opera di Primo Levi* (Napoli: Istituto Geografico Editoriale Italiano, 1991). Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi ou la tragédie d'un optimiste* (Paris: Editions Jean-Claude Lattès, 1996), 128 has also argued that, despite his initial reluctance concerning the description "Jewish writer," Levi eventually accepted it.
- 22 Roth, "Conversation," 180.
- 23 Philip Roth, *Patrimony* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 211. Alan Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 4, believes that Levi uttered this statement in recognition of Roth's profound understanding of Holocaust literature in particular, and of other personal and literary qualities he sensed that both writers shared.
- 24 Roth, *Patrimony*, 211, where he also recounts how witnessing present-day instances of bartering reminds him of the bartering in the Lager as described by Levi in *Se questo* (219).
- 25 Roth also was most likely aware that one of his foremost literary influences, Franz Kafka, would almost certainly have died in a concentration camp (as did Kafka's three sisters) had he not died young.
- 26 Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 57 maintains that, in Roth's view, the American Jew's double

for his generation was the European Jew, whom contingency compelled to suffer the trials and tortures that history, for whatever reason, spared the American Jew. This article in several respects extends this argument one step further, arguing that Roth perceived his own doubles to be Levi and Frank, and that *Plot* was his attempt to unify these dualistic aspects of his Jewish consciousness—the historically fortunate American Jewish writer and the very-nearly-could-have-been European Jewish writer—within a single novel.

- 27 All citations of this work refer to Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (New York: Vintage, 2004).
- 28 Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 273 has observed that *The Plot Against America* is “clearly responsive to Roth’s sore awareness of having grown up safe in America, at a time when Jewish children in Europe were suffering and dying, an awareness that runs from his earliest stories right through *The Ghost Writer*.” In Roth’s *Shop Talk*, a collection of “conversations with and essays about writers he admires,” Pierpont notes that “it is remarkable how many of its long, thoughtful discussions about history and literature are with people, or about people, whose counterlives he might have led: Primo Levi . . . Aharon Appelfeld . . . Ivan Klíma . . . Bruno Schulz.” Roth “cannot escape his sense of astonishing luck at having lived the childhood that he lived and his feeling for those who were not so lucky” (275). Accordingly, Guido Furci, “Parlons travail. Déplacement et resémantisation de l’écriture, dans la lignée de Primo Levi et Aharon Appelfeld,” *TRANS-. Revue de littérature générale et comparée* (2021): 6 argues persuasively that Roth was motivated to publish *Shop Talk* primarily on account of his encounters with Appelfeld and Levi. Roth’s acknowledgment of his sheer luck in having been on the left (rather than right) side of the Atlantic in the 1930s is evident in his work as early as *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). Additionally, as Rothberg, “Roth and the Holocaust,” 52 has noted, the presence of the Holocaust has been at the very least a “submerged” theme in Roth’s fiction since the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959).
- 29 Critics have termed Holocaust memoirs such as Levi’s *Se questo* and Elie Wiesel’s *La nuit* as “anti-*Bildungsromans*” or “*Bildungsromans* in reverse”; see, e.g., Lynn M. Gunzberg, “Down among the Dead Men: Levi and Dante in Hell,” *Modern Language Studies* 56, no. 1 (1986):11. I prefer the term “upside-down *Bildungsroman*,” which I have adapted from the concept of “unsettling the *Bildungsroman*” introduced by Stella Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women’s Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 28. Bolaki describes narratives dealing with trauma as literary works that “may

turn the autobiographical project upside down, capturing an unbecoming,” and “question patterns of development central to the Anglo-American canon of the *Bildungsroman*.” Bolaki applies this description to Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* and *At the Bottom of the River*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, some of the works of Audre Lorde, and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, but it can equally be applied to Levi’s *Se questo*. Cf. Daniel R. Schwarz, *Reading the Modern European Novel since 1900* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 159, who describes Imre Kertész’s semiautobiographical Holocaust novel *Fatelessness* as “a traditional *Bildungsroman*, except here . . . [e]verything Georg knows is turned upside down.”

- 30 See, e.g., Roth, *Plot*, 1, 139, 214; cf. Primo Levi, *Se questo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014) 14, 104, 152, and esp. 100: “[o]ggi, questo vero oggi in cui io sto seduto a un tavolo e scrivo, io stesso non sono convinto che queste cose sono realmente accadute.”
- 31 Direct quotes from Joan Acocella, “Counterlives: Philip Roth’s ‘The Plot Against America,’” *New Yorker*, September 20, 2004, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/09/20/counterlives>.
- 32 See Roth, “Conversation” 177, which notes Levi’s profound “communal interconnectedness” to Turin, and Angier, *Il doppio legame*, 51, on Roth’s wonder over how Levi—other than his year in Auschwitz—had never lived anywhere else other than Torino. Levi’s rootedness to his home functions as a significant motif in *Se questo*, often, as observed by Robert S. C. Gordon, “How Much Home Does a Person Need?: Primo Levi and the Ethics of Home,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 19 (2001): 217–18 “in explicit and anxious contrast with the more familiar motif of deportation and Jewish suffering” that characterized the Jewish diasporic exile and figures as “a locus of profound ethical and narrative value” in Levi’s work. On Roth’s own embeddedness, note that he, for example, provides us with an excursus about his mother’s upbringing in nearby Elizabeth, New Jersey (Roth, *Plot*, 8–9), a brief description of the Newark school he and his brother attended (*Plot*, 2), a reference to the New Jersey hospital in which he was born (*Plot*, 160), and his mother’s declaration that “[o]ur families are here. Our lifelong friends are here. The children’s friends are here. We have lived in peace and harmony here all of our lives” (*Plot*, 206).
- 33 Roth, *Patrimony*, 29. It is interesting to note that another important early Holocaust novel, Uri Orlev’s *The Lead Soldiers*, features young boys for whom stamp collecting also plays an important role. While Philip of *The Plot Against America* was prematurely deprived of his stamp collection, Yurik of *The Lead Soldiers* willingly

- parts with his. See Uri Orlev, *The Lead Soldiers*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Taplinger, 1980), 75, 132 and 135–36 (Yurik selling his stamp collection). For a valuable analysis of the significance of stamps in *Plot*, see Joshua Kotzin, “The Pilot Against America: Stamps, Airmail, and History in *The Plot Against America*,” *Philip Roth Studies* 9, no. 2 (2013): 45–55.
- 34 Roth, “Story.”
- 35 This is something exceptional in Roth’s oeuvre, as he himself noted: “No other book of mine carries behind it anything resembling this caboose.” See Roth, “Story.”
- 36 The extent to which Roth admired Levi for, among other things, Levi’s commitment to factuality and his attachment to the real world (which was assisted by Levi’s work in his chemical factory), is well known. See, e.g., Carole Angier, *Il doppio legame. Vita di Primo Levi*, trans. Valentina Ricci (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), 488. *Plot* may also be viewed, then, as Roth’s attempt to ground a novel of his in the real world of facts and history in a similar manner to the way in which the subject of his great literary admiration, Levi, was able to ground not only his writing but his life and work in the realm of hard facts.
- 37 Dreams—rather unusual in a Roth novel—are also an important motif in *Plot* (see *Plot*, 43), as they are in *Se questo* (53–54, 131–32). This is also true of nightmares; Levi reported being tormented by nightmares during his year in the Lager. See Ferdinando Camon, *Conversazione con Primo Levi. Se c’è Auschwitz, può esserci Dio?* (Milan: Guanda, 2014), 54, who discusses the connection between dreams and trauma.
- 38 After reaching this conclusion about the book’s apparent aims, I learned that this was indeed very much what Roth had on his mind when he wrote the novel. In his 2004 *New York Times* essay about the novel, Roth wrote that the meaning of the book lies in its portrayal of just “[h]ow lucky we Americans are” that “it didn’t happen here,” because “a lot of things that didn’t happen here did happen elsewhere. . . . in the 30’s there were many of the seeds for its happening here, but it didn’t.” Secondly, Roth wrote that the book should be read as a lurid illustration of the way in which “all assurances are provisional, even here in a 200-year-old democracy. We are ambushed, even as free Americans in a powerful republic armed to the teeth, by *the unpredictability that is history*” (Roth, “Story,” emphasis mine). What this article adds to this awareness through its intertextual study of Roth’s *Plot*, Frank’s *Diary*, and Levi’s *Se questo*, is a new discovery regarding the precise literary interlocutors with which Roth constructed his fortune-averted survival memoir.
- 39 As Roth himself observed in a letter to Jack Miles relaying his thoughts about the *Diary* after having reread it in 1977 in preparation for writing *The Ghost Writer*,

if Anne had had a more recognizably Jewish childhood, “a shtetl or ghetto child, with Isaac Singer’s childhood, I doubt that her diary would have meant so much to Christians, or for that matter, even to Jews in great numbers.” Roth noted how her “languages to be learned” are French and English—not Yiddish—and how her “pet’ subject is Greek and Roman mythology” and concluded that “she is far more Jewish to us than she was to herself” (Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 117).

- 40 All references are to Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2018).
- 41 Bailey, *Philip Roth*, 10.
- 42 See also *Plot*, 160, which refers to the Weequahic, New Jersey neighborhood houses of his childhood neighborhood as “our houses,” and 145, where he conceals the image of King George VI on the Canadian medal gifted to him by his cousin Alvin so that no one would “question my loyalty to the United States.”
- 43 After making this observation about the novel’s prose style independently, I subsequently learned that Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 276 had made a similar judgment about its literary style, assessing it as “quick, supple, and unshowy.” That this must have been a deliberate artistic choice on Roth’s part (also an independent judgment of mine) is also affirmed by Pierpont, who recounts that Roth’s notes on the novel contain the instructions “[s]horten the sentences” and “relax the language.” Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 276. Although many readers may have also reached these judgments about Roth’s prose style in *Plot*, this article adds to the conversation the insight that Roth’s prose style in *Plot* is so effective not just because it is simple compared to his other work but because it is modeled upon the simple style of Frank’s *Diary* and, in particular, upon Levi’s factual-report style in *Se questo*. We cannot gain a full appreciation for what Roth is attempting, in literary or historiographical terms, without reading *Plot* in the context of these two works.
- 44 Frank later amended portions of the *Diary* when she learned that the Dutch prime minister intended to collect the wartime writings of Dutch men and women and publish them after the war, but even the amended portions were written without the kind of consciousness possessed by those who write with the intent to publish.
- 45 For “language of witness,” see Stanislaw G. Pugliese, ed., *The Legacy of Primo Levi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11. Lucíola Freitas de Macêdo, “Testemunho, extimidade ea escrita de Primo Levi,” *Revista de Letras* (2012): 56, 52 also argues compellingly that Levi’s clear, simple prose style in *Se questo*, as I argue here regarding Roth’s simpler prose style in *Plot*, must be understood in the context of, and as a product of, Levi’s uncontrollable need (“uma necessidade incontrolável”) to find an adequate language through which to testify (“de

testemunhar”) about what he witnessed in Auschwitz, not only from a literary perspective but also from moral, political, and civic perspectives. It is important to keep in mind, however, as chronicled by Philippe Mesnard, *Primo Levi. Le passage d'un témoin* (Paris: Editions Fayard, 2011), that one of the paradoxes of Levi’s literature and life is that he was far more than a mere witness.

- 46 Roth, “Story.”
- 47 As reported by Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 275, “Roth’s notes about the book contain the admonition ‘Read Huck Finn.’”
- 48 Roth, “Conversation,” 176.
- 49 Roth, “Conversation,” 181. The question of what literary language Levi would employ in writing about his experience in Auschwitz was not a simple one. As discussed by Michael Tager, “Primo Levi and the Language of Witness,” *Criticism* 35, no. 2 (1993): 265–88, the quandary of how to write about the Holocaust—the problem of “finding language to bear witness to events he found incredible”—preoccupied Levi throughout his work, much as it did most other Holocaust memoirists. It is important, then, to see Levi’s choice to write *Se questo* in the style of a weekly report and Roth’s choice to write *Plot* in the style of a nonfiction memoir as conscious and carefully considered, given that they could have chosen to employ other, less strictly realistic, and nonfictional styles (as did Holocaust writers such as Paul Celan) to write about the Holocaust. This should inform our understanding not only of these books but also of why it was important for Roth to hew closer to Levi’s literary style in *Se questo* than to Roth’s typical fictional style of *The Ghost Writer*, *The Counterlife*, and his other great works of fiction. On the differences between Celan and Levi when it comes to the literary style of their Holocaust writing, see Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 54. On Levi’s scientific prose style in *Se questo*, see also Gabriel Motola, “Primo Levi: The Language of the Scientist,” *Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (1991): 203–10 and Risa Sodi, “A New Harsh Language: Primo Levi’s Holocaust Rhetoric,” *Italian Culture* 14, no. 1 (1996): 261–80.
- 50 Roth, “Conversation,” 183.
- 51 *Plot* is not the only late Roth novel influenced by Levi; according to John F. Knowles, “Philip Roth and the Struggle of Modern Fiction” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2020), 248–51, Levi’s fiction, especially *The Monkey’s Wrench*, was a significant influence on *American Pastoral*.