Chapter Five

Every Soul is its Own Betrayal Factory

Et tu, Brute

Julius Caesar

This popular phrase from Shakespeare’s play sums up in a nutshell the theme of betrayal. Julius Caesar utters these words at the moment of his assassination, when he realizes that he is betrayed by an unexpected person Brutus, his friend.

Professionals who are involved in teaching masterpieces, find betrayal at the heart of history. In world history, family history, or personal history, betrayal is a very big subject. The master story situation of The Bible is also betrayal. Roth has stated in I Married a Communist:


This theme of betrayal has become the focus for many works of fiction. Roth’s novels investigate ‘people in trouble’. His fictional landscapes are
littered with human wreckage. Rage, anxiety and melancholy are the dominant emotions that pervade his novels and all human impulses, even loyalty and affection tend to recede to the background. *I Married a Communist* is also about the culture of betrayal that prevailed in America in 1950s. The most quoted sentence in the novel is ‘Every soul is its own betrayal factory’. The entire novel centres round this. Betrayal can be due to various factors such as survival instinct, excitement, advancement or idealism. *I Married a Communist* takes the form of a series of doomed relationships. Betrayal in one form or another or disillusionment characterizes everyone in the novel.

The protagonist Ira Ringold is cheated by his wife, an actress who writes a hysterical and unfair book about him, slandering him and betraying his secrets. This creates a kind of parallel structure with Roth’s biography. The Newark story is another example of Roth’s hometown kids’ adventures among the beguilements and absurdities that await them in the larger world of post-war America.

The epigraph of the novel is from a Russian folksong ‘Dubinushka’, in the 1940s performed and recorded in Russian, by the Soviet Army Chorus and Band.

Many songs have I heard in my native land—

Songs of joy and sorrow.

But one of them was deeply engraved in my memory:

It’s the song of the common worker.
Murray describes this song as a ‘beautiful, a stirring, mournful, hymnlike folksong’ (74). Lorraine, Murray’s daughter and Ira listen to the song together and Ira would pretend to be the bass soloist, mouthing the incomprehensible words and making dramatic Russian gestures and Lorraine would mouth the incomprehensible words of the chorus.

Roth’s characters discover that the direction of life is towards incoherence. Their creator appears to believe that the direction of writing is towards coherence. Roth’s novels present a gallery of mysterious trouble makers who are in need of clarification. The puppeteer of Sabbath’s Theatre declares, ‘I am disorder’. He is full of rancid desire, his only source of authority and amusement is his own waywardness. In American Pastoral the protagonist’s daughter is chaos itself protesting the Vietnam War. Like the story of Swede Levov in American Pastoral, the events in I Married a Communist are imparted to Roth’s writer alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman. In I Married a Communist three protagonists of venemous revenge drama are all at the mercy of their escalating emotions. Ira Ringold- husband, Stalinist and radio star – is driven by several emotions, yet he never knows what they are or how they add up. His wife an ageing actress imposes the ‘magnitude of her misery’ on those around her. His stepdaughter provides a ‘first class education in the pleasures of spite’.

I Married a Communist is Roth’s twenty – third book and it follows the American Pastoral in the Zuckerman series. The novel deals with divorce, the
cold war and the McCarthy–era witch hunts. McCarthyism is the practice of making accusations, subversion or treason without proper regard for evidence. It also means the practice of making unfair allegations or using unfair investigative techniques, especially inorder to restrict or dissent political criticism. The term has its origins in the United States during the period known as the Second Red Scare. It is originally coined to criticize the anti communist pursuits of Republican U.S Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin.

In 1950s the McCarthian period revealed the most visible public face of cold war tensions which fueled fears of widespread communist subversion. McCarthy was noted for making claims that there were large numbers of communists and Soviet spies and sympathizers inside the United States federal government. His tactics and inability to substantiate his claims led him to be censured by the United States Senate.

During the McCarthy era, thousands of Americans were accused of being communists or communist sympathizers and became the subject of aggressive investigations. The primary targets of such suspicions were government employees, those in the entertainment industry, educators and union activists. Many people suffered loss of employment and destruction of their careers and some even suffered imprisonment. McCarthyism is a widespread social and cultural phenomenon that affected all levels of society and was the source of a great deal of debate and conflict in the United States.
At one level, it is an account of the personal and social devastation wrought by the anti-communist witch hunts. Roth is unrepentantly hostile to McCarthy and his ilk. Roth was in college when McCarthy appeared in the year 1950, when the Korean War started and the Soviets exploded an atomic bomb. Roth had some familiarity with the era personally because he was a politically very conscious youngster. Even his family members argued strenuously upon the matter and this made Roth concentrate on the McCarthy era. Ira Ringold is a giant of a man from Newark’s Italian First Ward. This milieu, Roth evokes with all the detail and colour that have lately been a feature of his imagination’s obsession with its origins. Spared a career in the Syndicate, Ira goes into the service during World War II. Working as an Army Stevedore offloading Lend-Lease equipment in Iran, he comes under the influence of a Marxist know-it-all and radical village explainer named Johnny O’ Day.

The contrast between the noble-sounding pieties and the self-interested society coming into being is a tragic aspect of this unhappy story. Ira enters into a disastrous marriage with silent movie star and three times divorcee Eve Frame. Their relationship is not perfect from the beginning due to the presence of her daughter Sylphid, the harpist. The girl is furious at her mother for her remarriage and desires to punish her. Ira is eventually brought down by McCarthyism, then by a terribly dysfunctional relationship with his wife and step daughter. Infidelity comes with marriage vows. The first lover is a flutist from London and a friend of Eve’s daughter Sylphid named Pamela Solomon, who has a sense of adventure and a youthful urge to cast off English decorum.
for American licentiousness. It doesn’t take much for her to vamp Ira. Shortly thereafter arthritic Ira is seduced by his Estonian masseuse, the gold toothed Helgi Parn, who is some years his senior.

Eve Frame is not cut out for Browder of Foster or Eros run amok. “A Spiritual woman with décolletage” (55) she has a distaste for the Jew who was insufficiently disguised. Murray recalls her to Nathan with a cruel and unsparing intelligence:

She could go along parallel to life for a long time. Not in life parallel to life. She could be quite convincing in that ultracivilized, ladylike role she’d chosen. The soft voice. The precise locution…. She knew all the moves, the benign smile, the dramatic reserve, all the delicate gestures. But then she’d veer off that parallel course of hers, the thing that looked so much like life, and there’d be an episode that could leave you spinning. (53)

Eve Frame’s career, when she married Ringold, got into an eclipse. She has a difficult relationship with her musically talented daughter, who in turn despises Ira and is adept at putting him down. The daughter is the offspring of Eve’s previous husband, a bisexual movieland prettyboy, who suited Eve’s confused ambitions earlier. Ira spend most of the marriage trying to persuade his wife to separate from her daughter, to give the girl and herself a chance by cutting the cord of codependency that stifles them. The girl, a compulsive eater, seems to detest the mother, and abuses her physically and mentally at home and
in public. Ira’s inability to get along with Sylphid, and Eve’s inability to free herself from her daughter’s anger, create the instability that soon wrecks their marriage. Ira tries to keep it going, if only as a protection against being blacklisted, since Eve is friendly with leading right-wing journalists. But his rage wins out and finds an answering anger in Eve when she discovers that Ira has been mildly unfaithful with a venal masseuse. In her vindictive mood, Eve is coaxed by her right wing pals to set her name to a bizarre concoction denouncing her husband as a Russian spy.

The various characters in the novel try to establish and fake their identities and finally have invalid identities forced upon them by others. Most of the narrative takes place in post World War II America, when a multitude of non-communists were falsely accused and identified as being communists. In this book, Roth touches upon a crucial issue: the Jews and Socialism. Anti-Semitism also finds its way into the plot. Roth’s Jewish characters face discrimination both politically and ethnically.

In World War II, Ira became a dedicated follower of an idealized view of communism, campaigning for the rights of workers and minorities. The details of Ira’s political and moral destruction are recounted half a century later to the book’s narrator, Nathan Zuckerman by Murray Ringold, Ira’s brother. Nathan knew Ira, through Murray, as a teenager. Murray Ringold pours out a tale of woe to the aging rusticating Nathan Zuckerman in the Connecticut wilderness. Murray was once Zuckerman’s English teacher at Newark’s
Weequahic High School. At the age of ninety, he is a pilgrim to the Berkshire hideaway where Nathan has retreated to strip back to essentials and decontaminate himself of striving. Murray Ringold is infected with the past especially with the 1950s, a decade in which his kid brother Ira played a supporting role. The long dying fall of relationship takes place between 1948 and 1952, between Henry Wallace’s failed campaign for President under the banner of the Progressive party and the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The Ringold boys were orphans, the only Jews in a rough Italian neighborhood. A Stalinist steelworker, Johnny O’Day recruits Ira to the party while the two were working as soldier – stevedores on the docks in Iran. His sincerity and booming voice made him a radio actor, winding up on a popular vaguely leftist radio program, ‘The Free and the Brave’ in the late 1940s. It was a popular serial about the struggles of the common folk. Nathan was attracted to Ira’s physicality and argumentative nature and found in Iron Rinn a surrogate father, more serious and less politically compromising than his biological parent. Nathan recalls his own seduction by, infatuation with, and betrayal of Ira. He learns from Murray that it involved a reciprocal seduction. According to Murray, Nathan was the child that Ira never had the chance to become, smart, studious and beloved by his parents and the child Eve refused to have. Nathan saw Ira as the incarnation of Howard Fast’s *Citizen Tom Paine*, single-minded, heroic, revolutionary, audacious on behalf of his convictions, the man who said, ‘My only friend is the revolution’(25). Nathan recreates Ira idealistically in a vision that America could be reformed.
The progressive forces of the New Deal, the unions, and even the communist party would be able to continue the coalition that destroyed the Nazis and tamed the Japanese imperialists. They hope to create a country that fulfills a promise of equality for Blacks, guarantees protection for workers, and ends anti-Semitism. Murray remembers his brother as a foot soldier of the revolution of a righteous pontificator:

Ira swallowed the dialectical justification for Stalin’s every villainy. Ira backed Browder when Browder was their American messiah, and when Moscow pulled the plug and expelled Browder, and overnight Browder was a class collaborator and a social imperialist, Ira bought it all—backed Foster and the Foster line that America was on the road to Fascism. (181)

Ira Ringold had picked up his doctrinaire habits from an army buddy named Johnny O’Day who combined revolutionary asceticism with muscle and Marx. Ira is the most unreflective of all Roth’s characters—Swede Levov is Proust on comparison. He had come of age during the Popular Front, when the Moscow Party line was that communism was twentieth century Americanism. It was wholly consistent with the democratic sentiments of Tom Paine and Lincoln’s. Ira’s liberationist’s handbook is a prison house of language and when once, during a dinner party he berates the black maid about the Negro community’s failure to support Henry Wallace, the people pray for his fall. When Ira finally does go down, undermined by his own delusions, his
infidelities and by *I Married a Communist*, the book that his wife has had ghost written for the occasion, he is tragic in the Shakespearean mould. He is self betrayed by a blind and obstinate will. Like Othello he seems hopelessly stupid.

Johnny O’Day, a communist steelworker taught Ira how to read a book and how to write a letter and gave him an education in Marxism. He brought Ira into Communism and taught him about politics and its action. “He talked about the workingman. About things in general in the United States. The harm our government was doing to the workers” (35). Ira was called a nigger lover when he raised his voice against the derogatory remarks about Negroes. His reputation as a nigger lover turned truly dangerous for Ira when he wrote a letter to ‘Stars and Stripes’ complaining about the segregated units in the army and demanding integration. In the mess hall he was subjected to an anti-Semitic remark, calling ‘A nigger-loving Jew bastard’ (48). According to Walsh, Ira Ringold is a large, tough, charismatic and volatile man. Largely unread and untutored, Ira attempts to get by on his rage, energy and intuition. Roth’s narrator describes an early stage performance:

Ira was onstage for a full hour as Lincoln, not only reciting or reading from speeches and documents but responding to audience questions about current political controversies in the guise of Abraham Lincoln….Lincoln defending worker’s rights. Lincoln vilifying Mississippi’s Senator Bilbo. The union membership loved their stalwart autodidact’s irresistible ventriloquism, his
mishmash of Ringoldisms, O’Dayisms, Marxisms and Lincolnisms. (qtd. in Walsh)

Ira is not a menace to America. He is not a spy, but he is just as overbearing and naive ideologue. Not only in his shows but also in personal life, he champions the cause of the working class, the proletariat. He obeyed every one hundred eighty degree shift of policy. His intention was to help in building a just and equitable society in America. His self-conception was of being virtuous. Murray uses the traditional Jewish method of education whereas Ira goes the way of rage. Murray explains his brother’s violence:

Back in that era, there were a lot of angry Jewish guys around like Ira. Angry Jews all over America, fighting something or other. One of the privileges of being American and Jewish was that you could be angry in the world in Ira’s way, aggressive about your beliefs and leaving no insult unavenged….That’s one of the biggest things that America gave to the Jews—gave them their anger. (163)

America was paradise for angry Jews. Murray insists Nathan to write his next book ‘Angry Jews since World War Two’.

The recurrent themes in *I Married a Communist* are cruelty, betrayal and revenge spilling over into the public arena from their origins in Ira’s turbulent personal life. Betrayal is a word that crept into everyday use. During the Red
scare, it is betrayal that finally does Ira in. Not betrayal of his country as the
rumours would suggest, but betrayal of his marriage. When Eve finds out that
Ira has been having an affair, her first impulse is to seek revenge. Murray tells
about her revenge to Nathan Zuckerman, “Nothing so big in people and
nothing so small, nothing so audaciously creative in even the most ordinary as
the workings of revenge. And nothing so ruthlessly creative in even the most
refined of the refined as the workings of betrayal” (184).

Betrayals are of different kinds. The fundamental betrayal in the book is
Eve’s revealing to an anti-communist journalist with a lot of power that her
husband is not only a communist but she hands over documents to prove it. The
betrayal of Eve caused the fall of Ira. In the words of Star, the betrayal and the
rise and fall faced by Ira can be explained as:

Murray’s monologue and Nathan’s reminiscences combine to tell
the story of Ira’s rise and fall: his flight from Newark to the zinc
mines of western New Jersey; his conversion to communism
while serving in World War Two; his impersonation of the
gangly Abraham Lincoln at union events and his subsequent
employment on popular radio shows in New York city; his
marriage to the fading Hollywood actress Eve Frame, and the
dreadful combustion of that marriage in a series of mutual
betrayals that lead to the exposure of Ira’s party membership and
the publication of Eve’s tell-all memoir, entitled *I Married a Communist*. (2)

Everybody in the novel betrays. Nathan the narrator, relates his eventful disloyal revolt against Ira’s influence. He rejected his father in favour of Ira. Ira breaks faith with Nathan by concealing his communist party membership and activity. Ira lets the ascetic, militant Johnny O’Day down by entering into relationship with Eve and her bourgeois circle. O’Day in turn, leaves Ira in his hour of need. Ira cheats on Eve and Eve turns informer against Ira. Her daughter Sylphid sees Eve as someone who abandoned her to the nannies, who betrayed her at every turn. Walsh has rightly pointed out:

A child’s “betrayal” of a parent, like many acts of establishing one’s independence from previously dominant figures, is an entirely necessary and inevitable part of existence, traumatic as it may be to both parties. And betrayal in a love relationship is also part of life, even if it is distorted within the existing social set-up, with its official and hypocritical insistence on absolute fidelity and the sanctity of marriage vows. The betrayal of a mate to the FBI and the red-baiting mass media is of a different order of things. To make a sociological examination of the process Roth is considering, would involve taking a serious look at the rightward lurch of American liberalism in the post war period, with all its far-reaching consequences for the present moment. (3)
Like Ira, Eve is masked and inaccessible. His mask is the square-jawed face of the earnest proletarian, the mask of the lady, is that of the sea captain’s daughter. Eve Frame despises the Chava Fromkin in herself, the Jewish American princess from Brooklyn. She had gone to Hollywood not only to seek her fortune but to undergo the total history replacement. There she married a fellow actor, a silent film star with a pedigree named Carlton Pennington, a member of the Polo set who just happened to have more passion for boys than he did for her. As she becomes accepted in the white Anglo protestant world of mid twentieth century upper class America, she hides even from herself, her Jewish origins and develops real feelings of anti-Semitism. Murray describes Eve as ‘a pathologically embarrassed Jew’ (152).

Eve is embarrassed that she looked like a Jew and the cast of her face was subtly quite Jewish, all the physiognomic nuances Rebecca-like, the heroine Scott’s Ivanhoe. Ira tried to be an O’Day to Eve, but she was no Ira. Though Ira gave Eve a lecture on Jews from ‘The Social and Economic Origins of Anti-Semitism’. “There is nothing superior in being Jewish— and there is nothing inferior or degrading. You are Jewish and that’s it” (153), Eve never changed her hatred toward Jew. Murray describes Eve, “she hated what she was and she hated how she looked. Her own beauty was her own ugliness…. The indignation at having been born that way, the outrage of it, never left her” (160). This anger, this Jewish anti-Semitism in Eve was one of the reasons that made her to take revenge and betray Ira who had a strong belief in Jewish by writing a book against him entitled I Married a Communist. In her book, Ira is
portrayed as a fullfledged Soviet agent. Ira and Eve are bound together at first by a desperate sensuality, then by perplexity and deception, and finally by the logic of how to destroy the other. Murray says:

All those antagonisms and then the torrent of betrayal. Every soul its own betrayal factory. The pleasure of manifesting one’s latent power. The pleasure of dominating others, of destroying people who are your enemies. It’s a way to pay people back for a feeling of inferiority they arouse in you, of being put down by them, a feeling of frustration in your relationship with them. (262)

Roth in his book evokes complexity and tension about progressive and communist politics through Nathan’s views about Ira. Murray says that Ira is not a communist. Johnny O’Day agrees and sees Ira as worse because he wasn’t radical enough. O’Day tells Murray about Ira:

Your brother used the party to climb to his professional position, then he betrayed it…. Ira impersonates being a great man. The guy impersonates everything. He throws off one disguise and becomes something else…. He’s a fake and he’s a dope and he’s a traitor. Betrayed his revolutionary comrades and betrayed the working class (288).

Ira himself never admits to Nathan that he is a communist. Eve declares for sure he was a communist. Nathan knows that Communist Party members
were punished for their beliefs, but so too were union activists like Murray. Even innocent bystanders were not immune—Nathan lost his own scholarship because he was wrongly identified by the FBI as Ira’s relative.

From Murray’s perspective, Eve did not marry a communist, she married a man perpetually hungering after his life:

The bad ideas and the naive dreams. All his romances. His passion was to be someone he didn’t know how to be. He never discovered his life, Nathan. He looked for it everywhere in the zinc mine, in the record factory, in the fudge factory, in the labor union, in radical politics, in radio acting, in proletarian living, in bourgeois living, in marriage, in adultery, in savagery, in civilized society. He couldn’t find it anywhere. (319)

Roth commented on Ira’s contradictory nature that Ira was endlessly struggling to realize his passions and to escape his damage. He tried to change whatever and whoever he can to make the world accord with his utopian vision, and to do this he tried whatever is at hand. So he had tremendous appetite for life. Murray was a militant within the union and was caught up in the Red Scare both for that activism and his brother’s notoriety. In 1955, Murray was dismissed on the ruse of not cooperating with a HUAC committee, and was forced to take up selling vacuum cleaners while he fought for his re-instatement which he won some six years later. But he was not further radicalized by his dismissal or six-year struggle for re-instatement. Murray understood that the
anti-communist terror cleansed the unions of both radicals and activists. Murray’s sympathy for his brother’s commitment to social justice is clear and he applauds Ira’s activism. Murray is a social democrat who understands that the Red Scare was an attack on those values of equity and social justice. Ira is Roth’s stick to beat the old Stalinist Left, while Eve Frame is his stick to beat his ex-wife. Sylphid, who emerges as Iago, or rather as Goneril and Regan rolled into one, in a King Lear without Cordelia.

Sylphid Pennington is a Zaftig and ruthless young woman who refuses to leave the maternal nest so long as by staying she can make her mother wretched. She calls Ira ‘the Beast’ and accuses her mother of having destroyed her childhood by leaving Pennington, and recalls her father as kind hearted. Ira going to Sylphid’s room finds mother and her daughter in bed together:

Eve on her back screaming crying and Sylphid in her pajamas sitting astride her, also screaming and crying, her strong harpist’s hands pinning Eve’s shoulders to the bed…. Sylphid screaming, ‘Can’t you stand up to anyone? Won’t you once stand up for your own daughter against him? Won’t you be a mother ever? Ever? (174-175)

As events deteriorate, it becomes apparent that two desperate characters, sufferers in search of a torturer, expert tormentors in pursuit of a victim, have found each other out. Stone has rightly stated:
Each is capable of anything. To save her failing career, Eve Frame—who seems never to have forgiven herself for originating as Chava Fromkin in Flatbush, or her father for being a kosher butcher—decides to ingratiate herself with the coterie of useless backbiters she thinks of as her classy friends. With the Red Scare rising inches daily around the feet of everyone in show business, she tearfully exposes Ira’s radical past to a despicable, anti-Semitic socialite columnist, whose support she imagines may prove useful. The columnist, a Rothian study in WASP degeneracy, encourages her to write a self-promoting book, revealing not only Ira’s leftist predilections but accusing him of outright espionage. (40)

Each more or less deserving of what happens to them, the pair end by wreaking irreparable havoc on each other in an orgy of mutual violence and hatred that ruins them both. Ira betrayed Eve by having an affair with Pamela, Sylphid’s friend. Ira did not get anything that he expected from Eve. Instead Sylphid, Eve’s daughter was an obstacle for everything. Sylphid opposed Ira because he was the only person who treated Eve decently. Though Sylphid did not treat Eve as a mother, Eve gave more importance to Sylphid than Ira. This irritated Ira and made him to have an affair with another woman. This betrayal of Ira made Eve angry and she decided to take revenge against him. Ira gives vent to his anger against Eve, “why don’t I have children Because of you! Because of you and your greedy selfish fucking daughter!” (291). In the end,
Eve herself is undone as her book is exposed as having been ghost written. Eve herself is revealed to be a Jewish girl from Brownsville, not the sea captain’s daughter from New Bedford.

She is instigated by her friends Brogden and Katrina Van Tassel grant. In the book Eve declares that ‘as an American actress’ she has the ‘solemn responsibility to expose the extent of the communist grip on the broad casting industry’ and this must expose a man ‘I loved more than any man I have ever known’ (244).

Ira is portrayed as a sentimentalist who is viscerally and passionately indignant about the inherent inequalities and injustices of America. Roth chooses to explore the explosive violence that is central to the post war American experience. Beyond the glint of the knife in its passages of psychological dissection, the novel does a fine job conveying the feel of late 1940s style of American communism. The novel invokes the birth of media as cultural terrorism, and it is a pointed attack on blind devotion to a cause with noble ideals and corrupt practices.

Destiny plays a vital role throughout the novel and this can be understood from Yarde Buller that, “I Married a communist is an ambitious, well-crafted book in which the destinies of the state and the individual are delicately fused”(47). All this furious strong and star crossed destiny does not lead to revelation The novel is resolved in a vision of Nathan Zuckerman himself up in rural Connecticut on a starry night lying in his deck, looking up at
the stair, content to be depleted of his own stories. Contemplating the stars and their great hydrogen flares, he imagines a place where there is no betrayal.

The protagonists die. Eve in a drunken stupor in a Manhattan hotel room. Ira of heart failure in a Zinc town. Murray Ringold’s wife is murdered on the streets of Newark. Murray himself does not long outlast his disburdening to Nathan Zuckerman. It is the interplay of narrative voices which makes this a deep and fascinating book, and allows the author to develop his themes. Murray recounts his brother’s life in the ultra-rational, unsentimental voice of the pedagogue. He is Ira’s antithesis, and his searching, uncompromising prose lays bare the unconscious manias and cravings which explain his brother’s actions. Ira’s incapacity to know and control himself sends him blundering into two catastrophic unions, with communism and with Eve. Both are, according to Murray, symptomatic of a deep yearning for a home stemming from an unstable childhood. The determining action of Eve’s life too – the denunciation of Ira – is motivated by an irrational vengefulness, the reality of which she herself fails to understand. The absence of political freedom in McCarthyist America conceals a more disturbing and fundamental truth – the inherent slavery to their unconscious selves of the majority of the people who live there.

At the heart of this novel is not just Ira and his politics, but Murray’s turmoil in making sense of his brother’s short, disturbed life and Nathan’s struggle to impose an order on Murray’s world and his own memory of it. In retrospect, Nathan remains astounded at the depth and pervasiveness of the
witch hunts of the cold war, disturbed by the depth of immorality. Throughout the novel both Murray and Nathan consider Ira’s indignation at the inequities of the world. The past that visits Nathan, he converts into personal, classic tragedy. Ira, Murray and O’Day each in their own way, become victims. In the end, the novel’s central characters embrace a blend of classical and Shakespearean fatalism mixed with existential solipsism. They are loners and individualists who reject activism.

Ira’s biography is a gripping tale, but it is hardly presented as one. The story is broken into pieces, drastically rearranged, and draped in layers of memory and digression and analysis. As the novel proceeds, the accelerating disaster of Ira’s life seems taking place on a stage far away. More immediate are the voices of the two aging narrators as they reckon with the troubles of the past and with their own mortality. The voices of the two eminently sane narrators establish an entirely different rhythm: their entwined monologues are digressive, lyrical, occasionally bitter and angry, more sober and ruminative. As a result, *I Married a Communist* is less the chronicle of a flawed American hero than a collage of narrative tones: wistful nostalgia for working-class Newark and a precocious boy’s anticipation of life; lurid, melodrama set in the intrigue-laden world of mid-century Manhattan’s cultural elite. The novel in short, is a kind of youthful hope, middle-aged passion and elderly stoicism. The book examines both the stirring idealism and the ruthless idiocy of mid-century Communism. Though the novel has no truck with serious political debate, it reproduces the excited sound of political indignation.
Many of the best passages evoke the inspirational rhetoric that united the Popular Front and wartime patriotism. Young Nathan is captivated by the idealism of ‘heroic suffering’ and ‘highly charged rhetorical flourishes,’ he finds in the writing of Howard Fast and Thomas Paine. He is also moved by the very same passages of ‘high demotic poetry’ from World War Two. The story is narrated by Murray from a great distance, four decades after the fact. As the drama escalates, the characters themselves become less arresting. Reflecting on the damages of that era, both Nathan and Murray are in a decidedly tragic mood. The language of youth is lyrical and hopeful, the language of middle age is tempestuous and full of rage, and the language of old age is austere and hard-edged. All human choices, Nathan observes, involve a necessary disloyalty. He believes that when betrayal is controlled on one side, betraying looms up somewhere else. He seeks refuge in the woods where he reflects on his withdrawal from life:

The place where you are stripped back to essentials, to which you return … to decontaminate and absolve yourself the striving. The place where you disrobe, the uniforms you’ve worn and the costumes you’ve gotten into, where you shed your batteredness and your resentment, your appeasement of the world and your defiance of the world, your manipulation of the world and its manhandling of you. (72)
Throughout the novel, both Nathan and Murray speak in twisting negatives and double negatives. Nathan finds that ‘ageing into decrepitude was not endurable and neither was the unfathomability of oblivion’ and Murray observes that ‘life can’t be impugned for any failure to trivialise people’. Ira, a communist partisan has ‘torn himself away from everything not his existence’.

At the end, all of these negations combine in Nathan’s contemplation and offers him a glimpse of the world at rest, stripped of its glories and its liabilities:

Neither the ideas of their era nor the expectations of our species were determining destiny. There are no longer mistakes for Eve or Ira to make. There is no betrayal. There is no idealism. There are no falsehoods. There is neither conscience nor its absence. There are no mothers and daughters, no fathers and stepfathers. There are no actors. There is no class struggle. There is no discrimination…that universe into which error does not obtrude.

(322-23)

A unique feature of the book is the precise geometry to the characters’ turbulent lives, ‘for every thought a counter-thought, for every urge a counter-urge’. Even in the midst of utter insanity, his narrators find that clarification remained a vital need. The American Jewish experience was psychologically and socially complex, hopeful, paradoxical and charged with ironies, insecurities and resentments. It’s idiom was an edgy, earthy irony not
altogether unsentimental and leavened with anger. Roth’s work seem possible to examine in the setting of the tradition from which it emerges.

Like the Southern writer, the American Jewish writer proceeded from a milieu that was then much more private and marginal. If Southerners chose to be remote and secretive, clinging to their separate history with a kind of mythic lyricism, Jewish writers faced an America that offered a liberty, equality and fraternity which were not invariably forthcoming. The persecution and prejudice of two continents loomed large in their folk tradition. One of the fascinations of *I Married a Communist* is its evocation of that lost interlude between the fall of Berlin and the Henry Wallace presidential campaign. Roth has clearly stated about his influences: “Norman Corwin, the radio writer was a great influence, and Norman and I have become friends over the last few years…there was something passionate in this radio writer, something deeply American in him” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Interview).

Zuckerman learns this as peck from the deceased central character’s older brother, Murray Ringold, whom he meets at a summer college course for the elderly in rural New England. For pages and pages the young Zuckerman quotes Murray’s reminiscences. Roth has a habit of not paying too much attention to the controlling devices of his narrative. He lets this one slide a bit too. The fact is that, as usual, the virtuoso riffs, anecdotes, and insights that move the story distract from any minor fissures in the narrative structure.
The novel ends with gorgeous prose, feverish notes and rancour. Rancour is the fuel that has drawn Roth’s writing. “I Married a Communist is all prose and rancor blended in a fine, clear vitriol, every phrase measured by the millititer, by the drop by the atom. Writing well is the best revenge” (Parrish).

The waves of indignation sweep through the novel. Johnny O’ Day fulminates at Ira Ringold, Ira fulminates at anyone in earshot, Sylphid fulminates at her mother, her mother fulminates at Ira, Murray Ringold fulminates for six nights at Nathan in the latter’s Connecticut retreat and Nathan passes it on to is raw, unedited a steamroller of woe.

*I Married a Communist* is the most quotable on the subjects of lying, betrayal, revenge, recrimination, power language, pretense on talk itself. A wilderness of miscalculations, it is a forest of epigrams. This visionary novel in its imaginative exposure of illusions, is perhaps Roth’s greatest accomplishment. It is a bitter, often funny, always engrossing story that wonderfully evokes a time and a place in our common past. Idealism and hypocrisies of the postwar period are brilliantly resurrected.

*I Married a Communist* tells above all that Philip Roth is very much a writer, every bit as contemporary and vital as he was when he began. Enlightened reconciliation to the world of the possible can never be detected in his novels. Philip Roth remains as edgy, as furious, as funny, and as dangerous
as he was forty years ago. Nathan Zuckerman thinks of his life as a long speech that he has heard since memory began. He recalls:

I have been hearing it for as long as I can remember: how to think, how not to think how to behave, how not to behave, whom to loathe and whom to admire, what to embrace and when to escape, what is rapturous, what is murderous, what is laudable, what is shallow what is sinister, what is shit and how to remain pure in soul. (222)

The cacophony of these voices bear down not only on Nathan Zuckerman but also on the readers. Zuckerman looks back on his life and he feels that the book of his life is a book of voices. As Cheyette has stated:

Only Roth could begin the pull off a novel that is, for the most part, an extended monologue by a subdued nonagenarian. But the voices in this work are not nearly as various or as many-sided as they might have been. Both Murray and Ira are characterized by the necessary repression of their violent selves, and so they remain unfocused when compared with the authorial rage driving the narrative. Oddly disconcerting figures, such as Leo Glucksman, make the occasional appearance to show the possibilities of turning this story on its head. But contrary voices, such as these, are frequently evoked. Roth seems so determined to personalize the McCarthyite period that he loses sight of the
imaginative pleasures of writing against the grain of his main characters. The result is a predictable tale of disloyal and deranged womanhood and debunked and demythologized menfolk. With a little more artfulness, this book might have let in the “chaos” which Glucksman rightly thinks to distinguish literature from propaganda. (2)


The analysis of this chapter has helped the investigator to arrive at the ways in which the dangerous emotion betrayal, shatter the lives of characters entangled in familial relationships. Betrayal also leads to its concurrent resultant revenge. When the twin emotions combine together, the minds of the characters upsurge with anger thereby making them inhuman. Roth drives home the idea that the post war world has created a hostile climate where a balanced attitude towards life seems to be totally lacking. The same idea is also enshrined in the poetry of T.S.Eliot. His poem *The Wasteland* presents a bleak aspect of European after the Second world war. The futility and the sterile
existence of the inhabitants of the wasteland made the poet lament about the fate of the inhabitants of the post war era.

The next chapter analyses *Everyman*. The protagonist leads a meaningless existence devoid of spiritual and moral values. His only concern is the maintenance of his physique and enjoyment of worldly pleasures. The chapter is an attempt to delineate ‘the Life and Death of male body’ as Roth himself describes his hero. The chapter is titled ‘Old Age isn’t a Battle, it’s a Massacre’. The hero of the novel is face to face with the inevitability of Death which puts him in a precarious position. Hence he describes old age as a massacare.
Works Cited


