

**“IF I AM ELECTED DEVIL”:  
POLITICAL SATIRE AND PARODY  
IN PHILIP ROTH’S *OUR GANG***

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***Abstract:** Half a century after the book’s publication, this article will revisit Philip Roth’s 1971 *Our Gang*, a biting satire of American politics and policies under Richard Nixon’s presidency. It will focus on the writer’s masterful ventriloquizing of political discourse, which lies at the heart of the novel’s display of a disquietingly contemporaneous mixture of reckless ideology and public addresses, manipulative rhetoric and speech mannerisms, cynicism and newspeak. Via close contextual readings, the proposed analysis proves that *Our Gang* is far from dated and has not lost its relevance in time, remaining an intriguing, yet important piece in the Rothian corpus.*

***Keywords:** context, parody, politics, propaganda, rhetoric, satire.*

## **1. Introduction**

While unexpected global confrontations have mercilessly haunted the year 2022, going back to the literature that exposes the actual and potential extent of political evils and the ever-sinuous, if not outright cynical and hypocritical, discourses of world leaders, thirsty for domination and control, strikes as a most necessary endeavour. Published half a century ago, Philip Roth’s *Our Gang* triggered criticism and controversy even more than usually: this time, for what was considered by many as nothing but a rant, a rash and rather shallow attack against the White House administration of the time. As pointed out by Paul Krassner for *The Los Angeles Times*,

Roth’s growth seems best described by the slogan that came to the fore in the feminist revolution of the late 1960s and early ’70s: “The Personal Is Political.” “Our Gang”, his spoof of the Nixon administration – written in 1971 during the Vietnam War – was blatantly political; *Time* magazine called it a “manically scurrilous satire,” accusing Roth of being “extravagantly hostile”; the *New Republic* criticized him for making “no effort to disguise” the fact that his target was the president of the United States. [Actually, Roth was startlingly prophetic about the gang currently occupying the White House]. (Krassner 2005)

To Roth, it was never a matter of concealing his intentions. On the contrary, his book was an outspoken expression of moral outrage on the part of its author, who purposely resorted to oftentimes shocking and exaggerated language and scenery, in order to make his readers aware of the gravity of an unfolding national

situation he strongly disapproved of. In retrospect, his act of daring defiance towards a system in power may resemble yet another prophecy from a writer who, resorting to an array of literary tools, has made a point of exposing endemic social and institutional wrongs. Looking back on the (f)actual events of the Nixon era, the Watergate Scandal appears predictable and sheds a different light on this brief and intense work by Roth, which preceded it. Yet, the author's personal anguish and the ethical reasoning behind his unforgiving satirical piece are undeniable.

That empirical knowledge of American and world history has constantly informed Roth's writings is not an innovative discovery. Nevertheless, a comprehensive analysis of his rich and diverse career will emphasize contextual roots and connections which might have been obscured when certain works were published. Even in his darkest, most deliberately offensive or seemingly jocular approaches, the writer proves to be not just a keen observer of human nature and its discontents. He is also a dedicated, unflinching humanitarian, whose sense of (poetic) justice and reckless vigilante moves are inevitably triggered by his close observation of realities-in-the-making.

Claudia Roth Pierpont examines the writer's sudden, yet not surprising, decision to plunge into derision taken to extremes, meant to reveal what he perceived as the absurdly grotesque political environment and demeanours of a clearly-delineated point in historical time.

He had turned to political satire, he said, because of a single word: "Nixon". He was proud to say that his devout New Deal Democratic family had considered Nixon a crook some twenty years before the rest of the country caught on. When, in a single week in April 1971, the president granted leniency to Lieutenant William Calley, one day after Calley's conviction for the murder of twenty-two Vietnamese civilians at My Lai, and then released an anti-abortion statement proclaiming his "personal belief in the sanctity of human life," Roth could not resist writing an op-ed piece, which *The New York Times* rejected as "tasteless." Barbara Sproul, living with him in Woodstock at the time, tells me that she remembers him banging away on the typewriter and saying over and over, "Tasteless, I'll show them tasteless!" In a mere three months, he had completed the full-length anti-Nixon satire, *Our Gang*. (Pierpont 2013:71)

The result was a piece that is as fast-paced and relentlessly witty, as it is fully disturbing. Indeed, little is Roth interested in taking precautions as to the identification of the real-life inspiration for the parodical characters he constructs. The list of names he provides is transparent and scourging, as well as furiously aimed at dislocating the readers' misplaced sensitivities. Radically departing from his previous, hilariously popular *Portnoy's Complaint*, the author's fifth novel revolves around the caricatural Trick E. Dixon and what stands out as his pitiful group of advisors and devout supporters (among whom the likes of the Highbrow Coach, a.k.a. Henry Kissinger, or Vice President-what's-his-name, a.k.a. Spiro Agnew). For the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, now discovering this rather overlooked or dismissed piece of the grand Rothian corpus, Ira Nadel's note on the (f)actual chronology is essential. It reestablishes the succession of events, as Roth's 1971 biting satire was not an echo of, but rather preceded and, potentially, foreshadowed the 1973 Watergate revelations, the VP's resignation in October 1973, and Nixon's 1974 impeachment and resignation. (cf. Nadel 2011:180)

Philip Roth's flagellation of Nixon's convoluted rhetoric, fallacious logic, narcissistic outbursts, contempt for what he took for a completely gullible

electorate did, indeed, paint an unmistakably realistic, though engrossing portrait of a controversial American President while he was still in office. Nowadays, media productions, such as the recent and hotly debated *Don't Look Up*, are part of a long series of artistic endeavours which have set out to dismantle the terrifying lack of substance of political leadership in the Third Millennium, somewhat, yet not essentially upgraded and modified from Roth's depicted Seventies. Writings like *Our Gang* challenge the readers' consciousness. As the analysis will demonstrate, the novel's (im)pertinence goes beyond criticizing the specific public figure it revolves around for inspiration. Prone to cyclic re-readings and reassessments, like much of the author's oeuvre, the book illustrates his outstanding perceptiveness and dedication to cultivating civic awareness, while faithfully and, inevitably, critically recording the moral decay of contemporary societies.

## 2. (De)Constructing respectability. An awakening

When discussing "Distinctive Features of Roth's Artistic Vision", John N. McDaniel (2003) proves to be one of the researchers who point out the writer's uncompromising reflection on and of the fickleness of private and public principles, values, and ideas as central to his significant body of work.

Roth's assault on the American experience – his exploration of moral fantasy, his concern for moral consciousness, his willingness to confront the grander social and political phenomena of our time – is, I think, the most significant aspect of his art. [...] Roth has demonstrated a willingness to explore the limits of his artistic creed with a deeply felt concern for man and society, a concern that is detectable beneath his ponderous realistic novels and his most vitriolic satire. It is that concern, I think, that leads Roth, in his most recent fiction, to employ some of the same artistic strategies that he has criticized in his fellow writers. *Our Gang*, for example, comes perilously close to substituting "life for art", a point that is emphasized by Roth's preface to the May, 1973, "Watergate Edition" of the novel [...] That much is frighteningly recognizable even in Roth's most recent fiction is, however, Roth's best defense against charges of inconsistency. (McDaniel 2003: 52-53)

On the one hand, the presidential discourse in *Our Gang* might strike the reader as far-fetched, inflated, and utterly farcical. On the other hand, the truly worrisome message it carries across, via pungent vocabulary and figures of speech, regards the stubborn opaqueness of members of the administration vis-a-vis anything that is foreign to their own petty interests, their seemingly growing ignorance and oblivion of the true nature and obligations of having been elected to the offices they treasure. Therefore, before moving on to a selection of illustrative passages from the novel per se, we must dwell on the background that triggered Roth's almost violent reaction to the troublesome waves of 20<sup>th</sup> century evolution in a U.S. society that appeared to be drifting away from its democratic tradition.

To make matters clear from the onset of his ominous volume, the erudite Roth resorts to intertextuality, opening it with two relevant excerpts, one from Jonathan Swift's 1726 *A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* and the other from George Orwell's 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language". While Swift refers to false representation and lying ("so perfectly well understood and so universally practiced among human Creatures"), Orwell's featured passage connects political chaos to the decline of language and goes even further in terms of denunciation: "Political language [...] is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder

respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind". This statement provides a proper opening to Roth's own exploration of malignancy and decay.

The connection between the two fictional *mottos* – Orwell's and Swift's, and the story yet to unfold is established, inextricably, by a direct quote from Richard Nixon's April 3, 1971 address from San Clemente (the fictional counterpart of which becomes San Dementia). It makes the transition towards a succession of six chapters, which capture the abominable parallelism between political and human degradation, as well as the language of private and public presidential statements. Due to space limitations, this article will only address the first three of these chapters (i.e the book's first half), which create the necessary tension and suspense for the (anti)-climactic denouement.

The parallel comes as no surprise, considering that Nixon's real-life figure, which animates this fictionalization, was perceived as toxic and adrift quite early in his career.

It is worth noting that *Our Gang* was published before the full disclosure of government corruption in the Watergate scandal. Thus, Roth's growing disenchantment with President Nixon and American society may be traced to the Vietnam War and the upheavals of the 1960s. Describing the 1960s as "a demythologizing decade", Roth perceived the fighting in Southeast Asia and the Presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon as demonstrating a "counterhistory" to the patriotism upon which his generation was raised. Roth wrote, "The shock to the system was enormous - not least to those like myself who belong to what may have been the most propagandized generation of young people in American history, our high school and college years colored by the worst of the Cold War years - Berlin, Korea, Joe McCarthy; also the first American generation to bear the full brunt of the mass media and advertising." (Briley 2017:144)

While propaganda of all types may well have extended beyond the generation Roth represented and addressed, so has the appeal of his writing, echoing across decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The very ingeniousness of what seems to be rather a quick-paced novella than a full-grown novel is remarkable. The infamous Tricky E. Dixon makes his first appearance during an interview, or, rather, an interrogation by a citizen who is appalled by the My Lai massacre and tries to comprehend and expose the (lack of) logic behind it. While the citizen's irony is obvious from the very beginning of the verbal exchange ("Your conscience, Sir, is a marvel to us all" – Roth 1972: 1), Dixon's boasting rhetoric ("I'd rather be a one-term President" – *ibid.*), his cynically cultivated newspeak ("I am not going to interfere in the internal affairs of another country" – *ibid.*) and his fierce protection of personal interests trickle into the pages, where they will literally explode later on.

As the protagonist insists on using the resonance, wording, and overall appearance of honest and open-minded statements to mimic democratic behaviour and court the public opinion, he is presented as a living oxymoron, a contradiction in terms and actions. Pragmatics dismantles his discourse. Taken in isolation, many of his statements may sound proper and be exactly what the nation and the world might need to hear. The context, however, contradicts and ridicules them, and Philip Roth unforgivingly exposes the propagandist rift. The entire story projects an alternative scenario, deeply embedded in the context of the depicted age and, therefore, all the more believable. The *what ifs*, the counterfactual plotlines that Roth was to later master in *The Plot against America* are present in the citizen's attempt to reason with Dixon and urge him to confess his real beliefs.

The president, however, is too sly and experienced in dissimulation to fall into easy traps. The interview functions as a test for his abilities to digress and distract attention from the real issues of the war in Vietnam. Picking up on Nixon's actual speaking out for the rights of the unborn as proof of his respect for the inalienable right to life, Roth engages in a ventriloquizing charade, featuring Tricky E. Dixon and his advisors. Their lack of scruples and moral concerns is meant to emphasize, in an extreme manner, the absurdity of hypocritical public behaviour, which mimics righteousness to mask ruthless and treacherous backstage political moves. By means of exemplifying and magnifying a set of negative features that are easily identifiable in the public sphere, regardless of place and time, Roth is intent on disturbing the status quo of communities whose spirit of justice and self-protection seems to lie dormant.

### 3. Satire sans frontières

Roth's diversified arsenal of rhetorical tools and strategies aims to shatter indifference and routine. A press conference follows in Chapter 2: the questioner, Mr. Asslick, suggests a comparison between the San Dementia resident and Martin Luther King or even "the late Robert F. Charisma" (Roth 1972: 10), Kennedy's fictional equivalent, on the basis of the alleged battle for the rights of a discriminated minority. The President's shameless egocentrism and his uninterrupted string of logical fallacies prove as ridiculous as they are unnerving, while he emphasizes his superiority to King on account of "working within the Constitution" (Roth 1972: 11). Feigning innocence and humility, he is perfectly aware of his offensiveness and anticipates any possible retort. To counter it, he proclaims his version of events as the ultimate truth: "This is meant to be no criticism of Dr. King, but just a simple statement of fact". (ibid.)

Dixon rides the wave of civil and minority rights to pose as both a valiant warrior on behalf of his people in general ("I will not be intimidated by extremists or militants or violent fanatics" – ibid.) and, particularly, as a saviour of imperiled minorities ("Vice President What's-his-name was also unborn once, an unborn Greek-American, and proud to have been one" – Roth 1972: 16). While Roth has been known as infuriating to many by his constant denunciation of the shortcomings and exaggerations of the once noble ideology of political correctness, *Our Gang* provides a blunt exhibition of the monsters that the systematic distortion of good intentions may breed. After going as far as to acknowledge that even Democratic rivals, such as predecessor Lyin' B. Johnson, were once unborn and, therefore, according to his professed logic, entitled to recognition ("I have no doubt that he was an outstanding fetus down there in Texas before he came into public life" – idem: 17), Tricky Dixon takes his patronizing comments and his self-serving fabrications even further:

You just cannot imagine, for instance, the impact that this is going to have on the people in the under-developed countries. There are the Russians and the Chinese, who don't even allow adults to vote, and here we are in America, investing billions and billions of the taxpayers' dollars in a scientific project designed to extend the franchise to people who cannot see or talk or hear or even think, in the ordinary sense of the word. (Roth 1972: 19)

Following Dixon's tragic-comical explanation of the mechanisms by which embryos might be able to cast their votes is as fascinating as it is appalling: it blends ethics and electoral rights with economical lingo and haphazard attacks

against the United States' traditional competitors, if not enemies. This is exactly the kind of effect that Roth aims to create in the mind of the reader, who is bound to recognize a type of absurdity that is no longer – and has, in fact, never been – the apantage of fiction alone. Unabashedly mocking a world leader whom he presents as fervently articulating his devotion to creating “a world in which *everybody*, regardless of race, creed, or color, will be unborn” (Roth 1972: 23), Roth inscribes himself in the long line of satirists who have brought to their readers' attention, via various humoristic approaches, socio-political realities which might have otherwise been too inconvenient, embarrassing or, at times, even dangerous to point out.

Taking on political satire quite early in his career (“At Bucknell University, where I went to college and edited a literary magazine in the fifties, I devoted myself nearly as much to writing satire as I did to writing fiction” – Roth in Lelchuk 1971), the author places himself in the company of writers, journalists, entertainers who, in time, have sought and delivered the practically futile, yet morally lacerating and thought-provoking solutions which lay in their power: “Satiric retribution. Parodic justice” (ibid.). While retracing Roth's involvement with a literary genre which is, by definition, a tool of social criticism, intent on identifying and exhibiting private and public flaws and faux pas, Anne Margret Daniel outlines the writer's lineage and legacy. She offers a brief analysis of intertextual erudition, to be followed up on *à volonté*:

Roth writes this novel as a dramatist. *Our Gang* takes its name from Hal Roach's famous troop of scruffy and winsome kids whose keen social and slapstick humor has gladdened moviegoers' and televisionland hearts since 1922. *Our Gang* is the script for a paradoxical combination of a dismal television docudrama and scary sitcom set in the heart of the West Wing. Ridiculous petty universalizing and gross understatements are the premise for *Our Gang*'s humor, just as they are in the best-known portion of *Gulliver's Travels*, the voyage to Lilliput. Indeed, Irish literature inhabits *Our Gang* in interesting ways. “Tricky Holds a Press Conference” is full of reminders of Swift and is written in a style and tenor akin to Joyce's or Beckett's. The nonsensical back-and-forths between Didi and Gogo in *Waiting for Godot* and the senseless sexual harassments of Leopold Bloom in the courtroom scene during the *Circe* chapter of *Ulysses* are both very like this chapter of *Our Gang*. The naming is downright eighteenth-century, borrowed from the language of plays by Sheridan or Goldsmith: Fickle, Lard, Codger, Shrewd, Wallow, Hollow. (Daniel 2005: 61)

Intertextual or not, yet always humorous, satire habitually functions as a militant vehicle of social study, meant to provide insight into the entrails of the power games or questionable morals which it aims to counter. Roth shapes his as an incursion into the depths of a deranged individual – and, perhaps, loyal group – psyche, with a potential to grow, develop, and influence the collective imaginary of a nation, for better or for worse. What must be taken into account is the fact that the U.S. that he depicts and addresses has already been torn, confused, and disillusioned by the erratically violent transformations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and by the inherent frustrations caused by the unpredictability and unaccountability of public authorities within and without the country itself. As grounded as the novel is in the realities of a specific era in American history, it echoes preoccupations and practices that extend beyond national borders and (communication) strategies. One may rightfully conclude, then, that its relevance and belonging to the ever-valid Rothian canon are fully justified: “Chances are that *Our Gang* will indefinitely remain relevant, present and frightening”. (Daniel 2005: 61)

#### 4. Indignation vs. indifference. Behind the rhetorical curtains

The interplay between backstage episodes and Dixon's stepping up into the limelight is what calibrates the novel. The high-voltage public addresses are interspersed with insight into the President's private insecurity and paranoia, as well as into the plotting and scheming behind what eventually comes to the polished surface of largely broadcasted speeches. The very titles of the four chapters that have not been nominated so far are telling: "Tricky Has Another Crisis, or The Skull Session", "Tricky Addresses the Nation (The Famous 'Something Is Rotten In the State of Denmark' Speech)", "The Assassination of Tricky", and, last but not least, "On the Comeback Trail, or Tricky in Hell". As pointed out, this article addresses the first half of the novel(la), as it observes Tricky's ascent to full irresponsibility and descent into ultimate self-serviance.

In an essay entitled "What's So Funny about Richard Nixon? Vonnegut's *Jailbird* and the Limits of Comedy", Will Kaufman steps into the debate about the rehabilitation of Nixon's image after the Watergate Scandal. While outlining an entire host of satirical oeuvres of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he places Roth amidst the "comedical firepower that had been directed at Nixon" (Kaufman 2007: 623). He then efficiently captures the gist of the aforementioned chapters and the writer's move from the infuriation and embarrassment caused by Nixon's initial 1960 candidacy, to the practical condemnation of the President's first term in office.

Ten years later, with his amazement having hardened into contempt, Roth depicted a scheming President, Trick E. (Tricky) Dixon, in a host of bizarre scenarios: declaring himself a homosexual in order to evade charges of adultery, invading Denmark for its harbouring of an anti-Dixon critic, drowning naked like an aborted foetus in a huge plastic bag and challenging Satan for the presidency of Hell. Presented largely as a series of dialogues, monologues and mock news broadcasts, *Our Gang* is an extended burlesque that capitalizes on Nixon's verbal mannerisms for its immediate comic effect, but it also relies on a stretching of logic to ridiculous conclusions. (Kaufman 2007: 627)

While some embraced Roth's ethical stand, there were voices, as Kaufman (among others) points out, who viewed *Our Gang* as an ephemeral expression of indignation, rather than an accomplished artistic endeavour. Given the satire's inherent employment of wit, exaggeration, parody, and double meanings taken to extremes, alongside its implicit license to describe and release social tension via the open derision of what should, ideally, stand out as exemplary institutions and their top representatives, it is hardly surprising that Roth should have chosen it as his preferred literary vehicle, even if temporarily. The author's interview by Alan Lelchuk, "On Satirizing Presidents", emphasizes his well-documented acquaintance with the satirical tradition in general and in the United States as such. While he acknowledges the predecessors of his own attempts to appropriate and appease the genre and their legacy, Roth also proves aware of the extent to which such literary exercises can convey meaningful and lasting messages.

From the very beginning of the discussion, Roth shows his undeterred realism, when he addresses exactly the rather limited scope and endurance of the satirical genre. He, thus, emphasizes the fact that, by default, it encapsulates the spirit of particular times and events, despite its deeper, oftentimes humanitarian nature.

Political satire isn't a kind of writing that lasts. Though satirists by and large deal with enduring social and political problems, their comic appeal lies in the use they make of the situation at that moment. It's unlikely that reading even the very best satiric works of another era we feel anything like the glee or the outrage experienced by a contemporary audience. Subtleties of wit and malice are wholly lost over the years, and we're left to enjoy the broadest, least time-bound aspects of the work, and to hunt through footnotes in order to make connections and draw inferences that are the teeth and claws of this kind of writing. (Roth in Lelchuk 1971)

It is, therefore, obvious that not only was Philip Roth cognizant of the genre-based limitations of *Our Gang*, but also willing to inscribe more into it than his mere frustration with momentary political actions and figures. By pushing the limits of linguistic and ideological decency, he points to the apparently limitless debasement of morals, style, and narrative in what should be the realm of diplomacy, equilibrium, and harmonious cooperation, to the best interests of individual citizens and nations at large. Tricky's entire Chapter 3 conversation with his political and spiritual coaches, in the White House underground locker room, revolves around his need to achieve credibility and the lengths to which he is willing to go to secure a second presidential term. The discussion about the possibility of posing as either homosexual or impotent to offset the Boy Scouts of America's accusation that, as a supporter of the rights of the unborn, he is implicitly in favour of sexual intercourse, is both ludicrous and indicative of the protagonist's duplicity and thirst for power.

When faced with charges as preposterous as his public statements, he does not simply refute them. He rather thinks of how to reinvent himself and to readjust his public persona, so as to resonate with electoral preferences. His political agenda is evidently dictated by his personal stakes and Roth rejoices in imagining a brainstorming session upon the matter of fornication:

TRICKY: Suppose I spoke from HEW, with the Surgeon General at my side, and he read a medical report stating that I am not now, nor have I ever been in the past, capable of performing coitus.

SPIRITUAL COACH: Mr. President, at the risk of being politically naive again, you *are* the father of two children ... that is, if that means anything, in this context [...]

TRICKY: But why can't we just say they were adopted? (Roth 1972: 36-37)

Apart from the sheer irrationality and foolishness that such working premises are designed to embody, the chapter excels in its portrayal of dishonesty as a manipulative and evil art. When the Highbrow Coach comes up with the idea that the best solution to any problem is finding a suitable scapegoat to "pin the rap" (Roth 1972: 51), forging a conspiracy does not strike anyone in Dixon's circle as either unlikely or condemnable. Therefore, suggestions are made, arguments as superficial as the circumstances require are thrown into the conversation, and a decision by consensus is reached, after long episodes of lobbying and negotiation. Although intentionally used and abused, the critical media itself comes under heavy scrutiny for its "irresponsible sensationalism" (Roth 1972: 49). Control and self-control stand out as keys to political success, alongside the reliance upon "the wonderful indifference of the American people" (ibid.). The outcome will flourish in the next section of the book, which comprises a notorious address to the nation. It offers Roth ample opportunities to exploit



his mimicry skills and to sketch out what is supposed to rank among the country's all-time favourite presidential addresses, which I will analyze in a different study. Throughout the imaginary, yet not unimaginable conversation, the writer wastes no occasion to belittle the figure of the protagonist, who avidly feeds himself on the aggrandizement of his virtues, while practically disproving every single one of them. Blindsided by the unforgiving parody of Nixon, its tone, abruptness, and (dis)similarities with reality, many readers may have overlooked passages of unrestrained comic genius, unworthy of criticism for their lack of subtlety, which is, in fact, the apantage of satire. For instance, the misspelling of Jimi Hendrix's first name as Jimmy brings about a succulent piece of self-apologetic, self-canonizing discourse, as Dixon is caught up in his incessantly sanctimonious game of saving face:

I am certain, if I know the great majority of good, hard-working colored people in this country, that the time I just took from my pressing duties as President of the United States and Leader of the Free World to correct a single letter in one of their names would not have gone unnoticed and unappreciated. Call me a dreamer; call me a believer in humanity; call me, as the song has it, a cockeyed optimist; and be sure to call me a big man too, for admitting to my error; but I am sure that they would understand just how difficult a problem this is for us to solve, given the kinds of ways they spell those names of theirs, and I think they would have that wonderful wisdom, such as comes to people who work in menial occupations, to realize that a job of these proportions is not going to be completed overnight, and that consequently we are not about to be bullied into spelling their names correctly by marches or demonstrations or mule trains parked on the White House lawn. (Roth 1972: 82-83)

While the President pretends to be preoccupied with and respectful of issues of African American cultural specificity, the entire *we vs. they* rhetoric he articulates, wrapped in his self-sufficient blend of pompousness and superiority, is masterfully crafted by Roth to create the cardinal opposite effect. Within a matter of sentences, the protagonist goes from a presumably affable and intently subservient position to the vilification of an enemy who is spontaneously constructed. Moreover, it is also projected against a historical background of resistance and exploitation, the unnamed, but ubiquitous elements of which spring onto the page with the force of repressed racial sentiment and frustration.

Although a marginal episode, which does not occupy, *de facto*, an important place in the plot, the passage seems to fulfill the same role that many parenthetical comments and side-actions do in the Rothian body of work: it draws attention to alternative angles and additional plotlines, which might extend the exploration even further, deepening the magnitude of the revelations and subtly pointing out aspects that deserve further investigation and interpretation. As such, it falls into place with the satirical undertaking, multiplying the obvious meanings and supplementing the possible readings. In Ira Nadel's words,

The satire is part of a tradition of political satire in America, which includes James Russell Lowell's verse satires found in *The Biglow Papers* from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the work of H. L. Menckem in the early 20<sup>th</sup>. Like those writers, Roth is also and properly ferocious. In *Our Gang*, he debases Nixon's style, parodying his discourse and thought in the manner of a *farceur*. (Nadel 2011: 184)

## 5. Conclusion

By being fully partisan and relentlessly critical, Roth presents the ruthlessness of ideological battles via a polarization that holds up an unflattering mirror to 20<sup>th</sup>-century societies at large, not just the American one in particular. Turning the ritualistic, performative entrails of political discourse inside out, the writer exposes the ethical underpinnings of communal existence, and the overarching, never-ending confrontation between solid moral values and their permeability to corruption and manipulation.

My reading has, thus, hopefully completed and complemented the views of critics such as Till Kinzel and their belief that “*Our Gang* deserves to be read in a more universal way” (Kinzel 2014: 264), as the evils of demagoguery still plague and plunder the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A known supporter of pluralism and the polyphony of opinions, devoted to exploring subtleties and nuances, Roth produces a rather atypical work. Little is left to the readers’ imagination or interpretation and the *reductio ad absurdum* operates as an efficient persuasive mechanism. He creates a believable tyrant figure via the exploration of discursive loopholes and crevasses and capitalizes on verisimilitude to stir the type of (de)constructive emotion that is essential to ethical, if not literal, revolutions. In an oxymoronic manner, disgust and disapproval breed awareness, opposition, and condemnation: that is the message that endures across the decades out of this underrated, yet most powerful, Rothian period piece.

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