

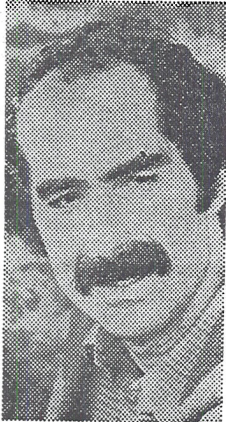
Books of The Times

The Limits of Roth's Satire

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

OUR GANG (Starring Tricky and His Friends).
By Philip Roth. 200 pages. Random House.
\$5.95.

Oddly enough, Philip Roth has neglected to include a disclaimer in his latest book, "Our Gang." Nowhere in its pages could I find any statement guaranteeing that the characters here represented are purely imaginary and that any resemblance to persons living, dead or otherwise is purely coincidental. This is most unusual in an imaginative work of this sort, in which a President and a Vice President appear, not to speak of a Secretary of Defense, a Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and a Mayor of New York. But then I guess it doesn't matter about the missing disclaimer. "Our Gang" isn't very realistic anyhow. I mean, I even had trouble understanding the internal logic of this book, let alone its bearing on the outside world. Take the opening chapter for instance, where Mr. Roth's hero, President Trick E. Dixon (what kind of silly name is that anyway?), comforts a troubled citizen. Tricky, you see, has recently come out four-square against the practice of abortion and in favor of the rights of the "yet unborn" (in a statement that is supposed to resemble something that someone—I forget who—actually uttered last April 3d in San Clemente, Calif.).



Jill Krementz

Philip Roth

Abortion at Mylai?

The troubled citizen in this chapter is worried because it has occurred to him that an alleged person called Lieutenant Calley (a character in the Roth story I find it extremely difficult to give credence to, by the way) may have committed an abortion by killing a pregnant woman at the Mylai massacre. Might not this possibility work to said Calley's disadvantage in the President's review of the lieutenant's appeal? Could Tricky really be objective in the light of his belief in the right to life of the "yet unborn"? the citizen wonders.

Tricky's answer is that for several reasons it is most unlikely that a violation of such sanctities of human life could have occurred at the massacre. And having once been a lawyer, he can make it all "perfectly clear." To begin with, even if such an alleged woman had been pregnant and tried to communicate the fact to Calley, the lieutenant would not have realized it because of his inability to understand Vietnamese. Second, if by chance she had been "showing," Calley probably assumed "in the heat of the moment . . . that she was just stout," since, considering the way these people go around in pajamas, it is not even possible to tell the men from the women, let alone the pregnant from the unpregnant.

And third, if in the unlikely event that she had succeeded in presenting herself to Calley as pregnant, it would "come down to this issue of 'abortion on demand,' which . . . is totally unacceptable to me, on the basis of my personal and religious beliefs," so that under such circumstances said woman would have been taking extraordinary risks anyway, and perhaps Calley should be cited for bravery for attempting a delicate operation under battlefield conditions.

Besides which; if, in reviewing Calley's appeal, Tricky were to discover "one shred" of evidence that he could not square with his "personal belief in the sanctity of human life, including the life of the yet unborn," he would "disqualify himself as a judge and pass the entire matter on to the Vice President."

All of which struck this reader as completely bewildering, since, according to Mr. Roth himself, there is no Vice President, only a "what's his name" who keeps popping up at sword swallows' conventions spouting alliterative nonsense. How could he judge the Calley case on its merits?

Improving on the Original

So it went for this reader throughout Mr. Roth's fantasy. I didn't understand how Tricky intended to implement his extension of the franchise to the yet unborn, even if he was right that they deserve it for "going through the most complex and difficult changes in form and structure . . . without waving signs for the camera and disrupting traffic and throwing paint and using foul language and dressing in outlandish clothes." I was perplexed by the way the F.B.I. had worked out a case against Tricky's assassin and pinpointed the murder weapon even before it had figured out who had killed him and how.

In fact, the only thing that really made any sense, inside the plot or out, was the final chapter where Tricky has gone to hell and is campaigning to be elected devil of all the fallen and leader of all the damned. And this part seemed plausible only because Mr. Roth has taken actual speeches that someone (I forget who) once made, and substituted words like "God of Peace" for "Communism" (as in "And that is why I say the time has come to stop appeasing the God of Peace"). Which makes this version of the speech considerably more plausible than the original.

It suddenly occurs to me that Mr. Roth intended some sort of satire with "Our Gang." But what leader of the American people can he possibly have had in mind? The present one? Hasn't Mr. Roth absorbed the message of Joe McGinniss' "The Selling of the President" that we are now governed by a package put together out of TV images and public-opinion polls? And isn't he confusing the present are of leadership with an idyllic past when leaders could afford to behave like reasonable men?

In other and more serious words: as funny and malicious as this satire is, it doesn't really touch the source of the folly that it is trying to ridicule. As Norman Mailer pointed out some time ago, there is even a limit to the humor of Nixon jokes.