

MOCKING THE MYTH: FROM PHILIP ROTH TO WORD SMITH

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Abstract: Often read together with *Our Gang* (1971) and equally dismissed as a minor and rather frivolous piece in Philip Roth's impressive body of work, *The Great American Novel* (1973) may well be the most intertextual of his writings. The proposed paper will provide insight into the ways in which Roth's farcical creativity, alongside his undeniable erudition, bring forth and challenge the (American) literary tradition and conventional approaches to (hi)storytelling. Given the rather limited critical attention the novel has received in the half-century since its publication, the main aim is to prompt a reconsideration of the status of this book in Roth's oeuvre.

Keywords: American Dream, American novel, farce, inventiveness, satire

1. Introduction

Philip Roth scholars looking into the author's complete works or researchers just beginning and wondering where to start efficiently might be surprised that his book entitled *The Great American Novel* (from now on, referred to as *GAN*) seems to have gone almost unnoticed. Compared to other titles in the writer's portfolio, which have brought him recognition from critics and readers alike, this piece was relatively quickly and, so far, irredeemably dismissed as ostentatious, labyrinthine, pretentious, offensive, immature, and hard to follow. Ira B. Nadel's 2011 *Philip Roth. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* is probably the only comprehensive compendium to offer it equal treatment with the rest of the author's works, providing a synopsis, a commentary, a list of characters and a brief set of bibliographical suggestions (most of them page-long reviews or succinct articles, written immediately after the publication of the book, between 1975 and 1978).

Only two of Nadel's selected sources refer to *GAN* alone: Bernard Rodgers' "*The Great American Novel* and the Great American Joke" and Ben Siegel's by now classicized "*The Myths of Summer: Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel**". The latter deplores the obtuseness of many early readers, who saw its choice of main topic (baseball) as "merely another calculated grasp at bestsellerdom" (Siegel 1978: 180), and pleads that "readers should respond with deeper understanding and sympathy than reviewers have evidenced thus far". (idem: 190) Two such attempts can be found in the M.A. theses by Thomas Lazenby (*Philip Roth: The Development of a Contemporary Satirist*, 1973) and David Thomas Holmberg (*Baseball and Literature: The Center Field Cannot Hold. Examining the Failure of the American Pastoral in Postwar Baseball Literature*, 2005).

The 2024 *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth*, edited by Aimee Pozorski and Maren Schaurer, includes Mike Witcombe's contribution, "Safe at Home? Philip Roth and Sports", which addresses *GAN*, among other novels under the same umbrella. However, *GAN* still does not benefit from its own extensive analysis, which is part of my motivation for reviving the readers' interest. While the sports-related part has been explored, my scrutiny concerns particularly the literariness that the novel's title, jocular as it may be, conjures up. Although he does not develop his investigation in this direction, beyond Roth's comic exuberance and extravagance in *GAN*, Siegel points out that

even here he strives again for a narrative in the classic American mode – at least one that deals with traditional values and lofty sentiments while laying bare the underlying greed and duplicity; what he wants, in other words, is to reveal some of the ways in which our myths and facts, our romantic fantasies and harsh realities mingle in the national mind. To this end, he focuses his comic vision on that most formidable and elusive chimera of all: The Great American Novel. (Siegel 1978:174)

Paradoxically (or just ironically) enough, the readers' attention has been drawn primarily to the book's engagement with baseball lore and the dissolution of the American Dream, and far less to Roth's provocative demonstrations of virtuosity in the twinned arts of reading and writing.

2. American fiction and fantasy: mocking vs. revisiting tradition

"CALL ME SMITTY. That's what everybody else called me" (Roth 1980: 8). *GAN* begins by echoing Herman Melville's famous opening to *Moby Dick* (2002). From this point onwards, the first-person narrator who takes over the convoluted story is Word Smith, an eighty-seven-year-old retiree, who recalls, in retrospect, what he sees as the tragic destiny of the Ruppert Mundys: a baseball team relocated from its stadium in 1943, to support embarkment preparations for American soldiers. As a former sportswriter who travelled along with the team, he claims insight into episodes amounting to a conspiracy against the Patriot League. He decides to put down the supposedly obliterated history of the Ruppert Mundys, which he sees as a victim, much like himself.

In order to have Smith deliver this counterfactual narrative, Roth turns to baseball as a metaphoric representation of American society and politics, as it encapsulates their combination of idealism and competitiveness, irrepressible nostalgia and insatiable desire for upward mobility. He addresses the paradoxical nature and fragile status of the American Dream after the Second World War, analysing the fall of myths and the rise of dubious idols, as the Cold War, the Red Scare, the slide towards the Vietnam War succeed each other. Yet, behind the book's concern with ideology, rhetoric, religious frenzy and world domination, which grasp the reader's attention, its constant dialogue with America's literary icons and their canonic discourses and imagery are undeniable. Surprisingly, they have been mentioned by commentators rather than highlighted *per se*, which my present article succinctly attempts to remedy.

“Smitty” thrives on compulsive alliterations: in his case, symptoms of a disease, rather than a form of style. They take over important parts of his monologues and prove Roth’s prowess at wordplays. Quite early in the novel, the narrator invokes a 1936 fishing trip, where he presumably accompanied Hemingway. A drinking spree and a meeting with a “waitress with a degree in Literatoor from Vassar” (Roth 1980: 40) turn the notoriously moody writer to a subject that haunts and unnerves him: “always that year the conversation came around to the Great American Novel. Hem had it on his brain” (idem: 42). The ensuing dialogue allows Roth to throw in canonic names and works, via the woman’s required suggestions of what she, based on her studies, sees as potential candidates to the Great American Novel distinction. Predictably, they are all countered by a patronizing Hemingway.

The list comprises Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (“Book about catching a whale” – Roth 1980: 44), Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (“Book about a boy and a slave trying to run away from home. [...] Adventure story for kids.” – *ibid.*), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (“The book where the only one who has got any balls on him is the heroine” – idem: 46). Ruthless mockery follows from what sounds like a frustrated and neglected writer. By enumerating literary accomplishments that might cause the fictional Hemingway’s resentment, Roth compiles, in fact, a list of compulsory readings in American literature. The raging author screams out uncontrollably whatever titles he feels might jeopardize his own success, among which *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Sister Carrie*, *My Antonia*, *Ethan Frome* (cf. idem: 44).

He then moves on to names: an even more acute illustration of professional envy, which finally reveals the gist of the unanticipated problem. The end of the dialogue is particularly relevant, its self-centered irony revealing what America had offered as notable fiction thus far:

“What about our minor poet Francis Scott Fitzwhat’shisname? What about Wolfe and Dos and Faulkner! What about *The Sound and the Fury*, Vassar! A tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing – how’s that for the Great American Novel!”

“I never read it,” she whimpered.

“Of course you haven’t! You can’t! It’s unreadable unless you’re some God damn professor! You know why you can’t name the Great American Novel, Vassar?”

“No,” she moaned.

“Because it hasn’t been written yet! Because when it is it’ll be Papa who writes it and not some rummy sportswriter in his cute little cottage by the lake in the woods!” Whereupon a large fierce gull swooped down, its broad wings fluttering, and opened its hungry beak to cry at Ernest Hemingway, “Nevermore!” (Roth 1980: 47)

For the connoisseurs, the unnamed Edgar Allan Poe indirectly settles this dispute between Hemingway and his exasperated creative self, rather than his actual interlocutors: the literature student and the sportswriter who aspires to prove worthy of his outlandish name. “Papa” (Hemingway’s nickname) appears as the epitome of fierce competitiveness, which may lead to progress and pleasing outcomes, but may also have its drawbacks. The contemptuous attitude towards all rivals (which culminates with ridiculing Francis Scott Fitzgerald), the scornful comments on their achievements, the unwillingness to establish harmonious connections with a

tradition that includes, rather than excludes and marginalizes him, the savage need for a validation of exceptionalism rather than an acknowledgement of personal value are elements that mirror the fierce battle for the laurels of the Great American Novel.

Even more importantly, I believe that Roth's informed account of the general state and inner quarrels of American literature also functions as an analogy with the larger discontents of the American Dream and its supporting mentality. The intricate plot unfolds against a socio-historical background that witnesses the collapse of idealism while the nation wavers in its faith, confused and disappointed by the country's inability to find its balance and consonance in good will. This offers Roth the opportunity for meta- and inter-textual musings, which display his erudition and his preoccupation with the actual and symbolic deep strata of the American mind.

3. Sport and literature: a love (hi)story

GAN uses the baseball pretext to unleash the author's analytical spirit, but also to display his creativity. Playing upon his own engagement with and affection for both the best loved U.S. sport and American literature as a whole, Roth produces a bewildering satire, a conspiracy-ridden counter history. Beyond its denouncement of social conventions and the pressures of the unrealistic mythology they instate, it also chastises the inflexibility of expectations from fiction writing. As pointed out by Nadel (2011: 104), "with its arrogant and self-mocking title, plus making fun of such classics of American literature as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*, the novel is as much about literary conventions as it is about literary language. Comic inventiveness, as Roth himself claimed, is the book's redeeming value".

The major source of amusement lies in the gradual, detailed, sometimes overbearing revelation of the alleged communist infiltration of the Ruppert Mundys and the Patriot League. Beyond this surface level and its philosophical and ideological implications, the intertextual plays upon words and works make the story richer and, admittedly, more rewarding to write for its author. The literariness of the text and its intentional indebtedness to famous predecessors in form and style are undeniable. The reader will quickly notice Word Smith's affinity with 18th century narrators and the narrative techniques of Lawrence Sterne or Henry Fielding, reputed for digressions and one of *GAN*'s trademarks: chapter overviews.

Smith adds his own literary preferences and influences, as he meta-textually frames his stories and guides his audience into the lofty meanders of his writing: "Students of Literatoor (as Hem was wont to mispronounce it) will have recognized the debt that I owe to Mr. Hawthorne of Massachusetts. Yes, this prologue partly derives from reading that lengthy intro to his novel". (Roth 1980: 55) Looking at the baseball story he is determined to tell and the manner he chooses to lay it out, Smith acts like a critic who analyses his and others' pieces. He reconsiders and reorders the facts of life into a convenient narrative, while also reviewing his own fiction in context, and confessing his ultimate aim: authenticity. (cf. idem: 56)

Cross-referencing canonic works of early and modern American fiction is constant. Roth skillfully navigates through eras of resonant writing via his narrator's hallucinations and forced comparisons. Parody and pastiche become integral parts of

the manuscript that conjures up unexpected images and associations. Fact and fiction coalesce in Smith's mind and version of events, producing astonishing scenarios such as the following, wherein Mark Twain's legacy literally comes to life: "Since, admittedly, we are seeking out similitudes of all sorts twixt Twain's microcosm and mine, what about Huck Finn's sidekick, the runaway slave Nigger Jim? Who do you think he grew up to be anyway? Let me tell you if you haven't guessed: none other than the first Negro leaguer (according to today's paper) to be welcomed to the Hall of Fame". (Roth 1980: 59)

From Hester Prynne to Huck Finn and Captain Ahab as objects of theoretical observation, and their creators as subjects of admiration and mimicry, Smith offers an outline of what he calls "My precursors, my kinsmen" (idem: 55). Nadel identifies both the explicit and the more subtle, jocular intertextual underpinnings:

The Great American Novel is Roth's most convoluted and allusion-filled work, including references to American, European, and Eastern literature, as well as myths from around the world. The names of characters are more literary than individual [...] Mark Twain is the presiding literary spirit of the book as the quintessential teller of tall tales [...] In many ways, the novel is about American history as well as literature. (Nadel 2011: 109-110).

4. National (auto)biography and America's crisis of representation

The jocular, yet unsweetened combination of style and rhetoric is consistent throughout a novel that is relentlessly critical of social realities gone awry. Beyond Roth's well-known and playfully disguised militantism and moralism, one will notice that Roth's provocative, sometimes contested approach to facts via counterfactual narrative, is also fuelled by his enjoyment of toying with literary history and imagination. *GAN* features an intertextual gallop among symbolic discourses across cultures and ages. In his effort to weave the canvas of the complicated postwar era, the author borrows names, places, ideas and reworks them into an inauspicious fantasy that anticipates his darker *The Plot Against America* (2004) or *American Pastoral* (1997).

While taking his topics very seriously and offering his readership solid food for thought, the author takes pleasure in mockery and mimicry, as he plays with genres to echo the great American fiction he converses with. Thus, his novel can be read as a lesson in intertextuality and literary ventriloquism, a piece of evidence as to its author's erudition and craftsmanship. For instance, Derek Parker Royal (2007: 25) notices in the introductory paragraphs of the chapters "the narrative precis reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Victorian novel form". One such example:

Containing as much of the history of the Patriot League as is necessary to acquaint the reader with its precarious condition at the beginning of the Second World War. The character of General Oakhart—soldier patriot, and President of the League. His great love for the rides of the game. His ambitions. By way of a contrast, the character of Gil Gamesh, the most sensational rookie pitcher of all time. His attitude toward authority and mankind in general. [...] The chapter is concluded with a dialogue between General Oakhart and Mister Fairsmith, containing a few surprises and disappointments for the General". (Roth 1980: 69)

As the plot develops (oftentimes contradicting such deceptively prescriptive ‘guidelines’), the coexistence of fact and fabrication anticipates today’s vivid fake news debates.

Hiding deeper, more consequential levels than the obvious sports-related one, *GAN* never ceases to surprise via its vast array of thematic concerns, which, if systematically addressed, could enrich the existing critical literature. The sinuous plotline is a pretext for one of Roth’s earliest investigations of the American mind in the context of crucial mid-20th century world events. According to Holmberg’s reading,

The Holocaust-pattern is clearly present in *The Great American Novel*, a past burrowing its way into the consciousness of the present. And the Holocaust-thematic is alive in the structure of the text. There are two truths, Smitty’s and the “real American history” (*Reading Myself and Others* 91). And both are somehow true and somehow false, facts rewritten to serve an agenda: Smitty’s nihilistic agenda of deconstruction and the American government’s agenda of ideologic myth-making. Its [the novel’s] deep involvement with its own historical context should not be underestimated. (Holmberg 2005: 46)

Considering Roth’s identified preoccupation with the Holocaust’s inception, development and horrendous aftermath, alongside the circumstances, discourses, and mentalities which led to unparalleled mass cruelty, one unsurprisingly encounters passages that illustrate the interweaving of History and histories, public confrontations and private dramas. The Mundys saga runs parallel to the Hitler regime. From the international to the domestic spheres, from the frontline of the war to the less important, though comparatively tense sports competitions, restlessness and mounting anxiety cause rhetorical questions: “Adolf Hitler, Franklin Roosevelt, Gil Gamesh. In the winter of ’33–’34, men and women and even little children, worried for the future of America, were talking about one or another, if not all three. What was the world coming to? What catastrophe would befall our country next?” (Roth 1980: 110)

One way to cope with such an ominous background and capture the general(ised) confusion is caricature. Much of the hilarious (and sometimes offensive) portrayal of individuals and situations in Word Smith’s story is meant to expose what he claims to be the truth. The blatant deformations of historical fact or the oscillation between verifiable data and fictionalisation stem from the sportswriter’s insatiable quest for restorative justice, which he believes he can obtain through his ostensibly different, fabricated insights into the rise and fall of the Rupper Mundys, its players, managers, supporters, and benefactors.

Preposterous as many presented episodes may sound, the aim of Roth’s satire lies beyond the case study that forms the axis of this novel. By capturing the absurdity of increasing uncertainty in an America no longer able to define its cardinal values, it addresses the crises of contemporaneity in mid- to late 20th century. Restlessness, paranoia, manipulation, the rise of Cold War obsessions and aggressive rhetoric are parts of a decaying whole that feeds Smith’s dystopian fantasy. Relativizing traditional ways of understanding social interaction, growth, balance, and wellbeing renders his narrative alternative plausible. Lazenby (1973: 52-53), for instance, rightfully points

out that, in his manic, (self)-delusional drive, “Smith is an intermediary buffoon between the subject matter and the reader. [...] His view is more that of the satirist than that of the comic character, because he is fiercer in his moral intentions; he demands that the truth be heard”.

One may notice a certain resemblance between the narrator and the author, although Smith is not Roth’s habitual type of alter-ego, like Nathan Zuckerman or David Kepesh, in some of his most celebrated novels. The employment of unconventional storytelling by both to draw attention to issues they consider important may be regarded as a creative transformation of the mature writer, an outlet for his vexation with the evolution of the public scene. In *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth recollects his ingenious vengeance against pigeonholing by various reviewers, which he achieved in *GAN*: “In an odd way [...] I set myself the goal of becoming the writer some Jewish critics had been telling me I was all along: irresponsible, conscienceless, unserious.” (Roth 2013: 70) Remembering the motivation he drew from Melville, who he knew referred to his *Moby Dick* as wicked, he goes on to explain: „No matter how hard I tried I could never really hope to be wicked; but perhaps, if I worked long and hard and diligently, I could be frivolous. And what could be more frivolous, in my own estimation, than writing a novel about sports?” (ibid.)

GAN is the evident, practical answer to this rhetorical question. To provide it, Roth does not only revisit and rewrite portions of classical texts. Underneath Word Smith’s apparently chaotic, unreliable, and disjointed narrative, Roth places traditional structures, methods, paradigms, to support the mock-anarchy of postmodern fragmentariness. The same appetite for stylistic fusion inspires the frequent encounters between highbrow and unsophisticated references, the descent of elitist literary ancestry among the masses of a new type of agora. The great American novel and the great American sport coexist in a post-World War II American Dream that becomes increasingly vulnerable and permeable.

The novel is an intertextual tour de force that incorporates in its narrative fabric not only Melville and Hawthorne, but also Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, the *Book of Exodus*, *The Odyssey*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Song of Roland*. Also featured are such pop culture texts as the headline format from the *Sporting News*, the slogan on the *Wheaties* breakfast cereal, the *Warren Report*, and the film *The Pride of the Yankees*, as well as Egyptian, Hindu, Norse, and Greek mythologies. (Nadel 2011: 110)

The afore-quoted enumeration is simultaneously telling and selective. Roth’s determination for his characters’ background and discourse to be as inclusive and diverse as possible is farther-reaching than this list, while clearly attesting to its relevance. Although disguised as the narrative bewilderment of a retired reporter who dreams of ranking among the top American novelists of all times, Roth’s erudition and deep immersion in the everyday existence and consciousness of the American middle-class are equally impressive and entertaining. On the one hand, Smith seems obsessed with joining the noble circles of the literary high class. He incessantly thinks of himself in comparison with its members and projects his delusions of grandeur

upon the debatable heroes he applauds, whose pompous portrayals resonate his own: “G-a-m-e-s-h.” “First name?” “Gil. G as in Gorgeous. I as in Illustrious. L as in Larger-than-life”. (Roth 1980: 91)

On the other hand, this new kind of V.I.P. is not built on perfection or immutable standards. Gil Gamesh, the brilliant, yet rebellious baseball star, is punished for his behaviour. In sports fans’ eyes, however, his tantrums, immodesty, infidelities and betrayals of other people or causes are excused by his exceptionalism. His appurtenance to the new popular culture pantheon surrounds him with an intangible aura, and *GAN*’s acknowledgement of the rise of pop culture influence in the U.S. is remarkable. Similarly to other Rothian novels, the book incorporates in-depth commentaries or mere allusions to the media, advertising, sports or fashion environments, blending the newspaper columnist’s style with the exquisiteness of fiction-writing as art.

It is, therefore, evident that the novel’s so-called frivolousness is in fact a demonstration of planning and predetermination. Roth’s engagement with humour, irony, satire, all facets of the broad comedic genre, is paralleled by his confessed passion for experiment and entertainment for entertainment’s sake. “The redeeming value is not social or cultural reform, or moral instruction, but *comic inventiveness*. [...] ‘Satyric’, suggesting the sheer pleasure of exploring the anarchic and the unsocialized, is more like it.” (Roth 2013: 62) While the author intentionally downplays his profounder intentions, he emphasizes the playfulness behind his stylistic, grammatical, lexical inventions. The list seems inexhaustible. Suffice it to exemplify by a celebrity of the hypothetical baseball league, whose name epitomizes the game: John Baal.

Roth’s unleashed creativity does not stop at onomastics, the quite spectacular surface level. Surprises are scattered across the pages, waiting to be discovered by the curious reader. The counter-history that Word Smith insists on unravelling is a concoction of conspiracy, manipulation, indoctrination, ideologization that overthrows any traditional expectation from the perspective of the narrative, as well as of any established mythology’s. The book presents the United States’ 1930s-1960s as a timeframe for the accelerated dissolution of many romanticized idea(l)s about itself and its place in the world: an overarching topic in the Rothian oeuvre. Under such circumstances, Smith seems to argue that sport, literature and even religion still rank among the important cohesive elements of the society. At the same time, they are skillfully employed by Roth-the-author as tools in his act of deconstructing an American (folk)lore that no longer stands.

5. Historical vs. hysterical

Claudia Roth Pierpont, major Roth scholar and interviewer, points out that the author’s love of baseball and books were comparable: in his childhood, the all-American sport was “one of the uncorruptedly mythic things still going on in the country” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 76). She goes on to point out that, by consequence, “*The Great American Novel* is a sprawling, cheerful, wearying, sometimes funny, ultimately headache-inducing farce, a book that at least

one male, sports-loving writer I know – Scott Raab of *Esquire* – considers an overlooked masterpiece [...]” (ibid.)

Toying with the traditional American narrative of success in literary, socio-cultural and political senses, Roth produces what grows into a farce by accumulation. The revisionist history of an alleged governmental conspiracy against one of the nation’s favourite recreation activities blends fact and fiction with the fanaticism of a narrative consciousness that pretends to be awake and aware but is, in fact, delusional to the brink of paranoia. The entire plotline involving Gil Gamesh’ four years of subversive study in Moscow and his defection back to the United States, where he is suspected of acting as a communist agent, stands out as a combination of fantasy with psychosis: the perfect pretext for Roth to explore the full potential of the ludicrous, the nonsensical, the risible.

For instance: beyond its activities (minutely, yet detachedly described), the invented International Lenin School of Subversion, Hatred, Infiltration, and Terror (with its cartoonish acronym SHIT) echoes the terminology of the non-fictitious Red Scare and its closely associated House Un-American Activities Committee, a laughingstock for the outraged Roth in several of his writings. The American anti-communist fear of betrayal and espionage makes even asinine scenarios plausible, as demonstrated with aplomb by pages upon pages of conspiracy-driven private and public discourses. An example of ideological ventriloquism that will resonate with experienced readers can be found in an eerie, though standardized, reference letter for Gil Gamesh:

To Whom It May Concern: This is to affirm that Gil Gamesh was formerly employed under a variety of aliases by the Kakoola Citizens Action Committee for Americanism and the Kakoola Council to Keep America Free in doing investigative and research work. [...] I have no hesitation in recommending him for any type work in which a thorough knowledge of Communism and Communist methods is necessary. He made an excellent witness in executive session of the statewide Citizens Action Committee for Americanism [...] Yours very truly, Wm. McWiley, President, Kakoola CACA, Legal Director, Kakoola KAF. (Roth 1980: 437)

The cacophony and the puns are evidently intended. So is Roth’s derision of the transformation of a justified concern for the United States into a rudimentary witch-hunt. Conveniently, Smith’s penchant for exaggeration, fabrication, distortion, false appropriation or identification makes such buffoonery unobjectionable in context. The narrator’s megalomania and misplaced affinities go so far that he compares himself to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, whose fate he believes he shares. He sees his baseball-related delirium as a form of bravery and resistance similar to Solzhenitsyn’s, who he claims was persecuted because “his version of Russian history happens not to correspond with the version that is promulgated by the powers-that-be over there. In short, he refuses to accept lies for truth and myth for reality”. (Roth 1980: 509).

While this interpretation may seem legitimate, Roth plays with his narrator’s mind to produce the uncanny continuation, as Smith attempts to persuade Mao Tze-tung to publish his so-called novel. He claims to empathize with Solzhenitsyn based

on a commonality of spirit vis-a-vis dissidence, proclaiming himself an outcast-with-a-cause from a society in denial: "Because I have written a historical novel that does not accord with the American history with which they brainwash our little children in the schools. I say 'historical', doubtless they would say 'hysterical.'" (ibid.). The confrontation of literary freedom with censorship, alongside the agonizing prospect of communist infiltration in the U.S., which appears to loom even over the world of sports, were particularly sensitive issues when the novel was published, given the rise of the Iron Curtain and the widening rift between the Western World and the Soviet Union.

As ominous predictions and conspiracy theories abounded, transparency in public discourse was increasingly harder to accomplish. The confusion of common people, regular citizens facing conflicting notions and altered realities, is perceptively captured by Roth, who, as usual, includes diverse and divergent voices in the comprehensive chorus of Americanness that his work foregrounds. In this sense, although the parallelism has not been clearly indicated by the Roth scholarship, the atmosphere of *GAN* resembles, or rather anticipates that in *I Married a Communist*, the dramatic odyssey of Ira Ringold, activist and media personality. One gets insight into the 'hysterical' perspective of those who deplore the fall of capitalism and blame camouflaged communist assaults for the envisaged catastrophic outcomes for the nation and its symbols.

They are going to take over the free enterprise system itself. How? By installing spies as presidents of great companies, and saboteurs as chairmen of the board! Mark my word, the day will come when in the guise of an American capitalist, a friend of Big Business and a member of the Republican Party, a Communist will run for President of the United States. And if he is elected, he will ring down the curtain on the American tragedy. (Roth 1980: 364)

Contrary to this hastily propagated anxiety, there are voices who denounce it as irrelevant and extreme, pinpointing the lack of information and proof for many ideas circulating in a public space that becomes polluted to an almost unbearable level of toxicity. "I refuse to participate in this lunatic comedy in which American baseball players who could not locate Russia on a map of the world - who could not locate the world on a map of the world - denounce themselves and their teammates as Communist spies out of fear and intimidation and howling ignorance". (Roth 1980: 501) The various types of positionings and discourses behind them become clearly discernible in such passages. So does Roth's determination to use his text, humorous and disconcerting as it may be, to expose deeper fundamental truths about the workings of the American mind and its vulnerability to manipulation, based on precarious knowledge or education, romantic innocence or mere lack of access to reliable sources.

As prefigured earlier, the social and cultural obscurantism of the counter-climactic counternarratives the novel provocatively puts forth, the propagation of falsehoods and the adulation of improbable idols are boldly associated by Roth with religious frenzy. The novel captures baseball's quasi-mystical appeal to its fanbase, as sports and religion are purposely connected in addresses to devotees in times of war:

“He began by reminding them that even as they were playing their baseball games on the road, American boys were bleeding to death in jungles halfway around the globe, and being blown to bits in the vast, uninhabited skies. [...] Then he reminded them of the sufferings of Our Lord.” (idem: 186).

Such parallelisms between baseball and religion are inserted into the characters’ public speeches and stand out as indispensable to the description of the American mind’s need for exemplariness and (spiritual) guidance. As Holmberg points out,

His [Roth’s] vision of America by way of baseball reveals the sport as so integrated into the national consciousness that, like apple pie and Elvis Presley, baseball becomes part of the unquestioned facade of the American consciousness. But even more than most institutionalized American symbols, the idealized model of baseball suggests a sacred national relic and, in the realm of religion, becomes a secularized Church of America. (Holmberg 2005: 38)

6. Conclusion

The representation of baseball in mystical terms is recurrent throughout the novel and might easily constitute the topic of a separate study on fanaticism, since “baseball is this country’s religion” (Roth 1980: 130). For the time being, however, the point about *The Great American Novel*’s complexity, inventiveness and ensuing intellectual stimulation has been sufficiently amply illustrated to invite further readings.

Although not having reached the highest point of his career yet at the time the novel was published, Roth delivers an intoxicating, thought and laughter provoking *mise en abyme* of the American experience and some of its 20th century conundrums. He puts his wordsmith abilities on generous display, showcasing his scholarly knowledge of American literature and the practical artistry of his own writing, in conversation with and contemplation of the remarkable works of others. He thus invites further comparative, contextualized interpretations of the textual and metatextual divertissement he proposes, alongside its underlying critical and philosophical strata.

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