

Written and Unwritten America

*Roth on Reading, Politics, and Theory*¹

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"At their best," declared Philip Roth in a 1984 interview with *The Paris Review*, "writers change the way readers read. That seems to me the only realistic expectation" (*Reading* 47). In so doing, Roth opposed himself to a newly resurgent school of political thought and analysis, one that seeks in literature a corrective to the excessive formalism of analytical thought or behavioral social science: a position summarized by Martha Nussbaum's observation that "storytelling and literary imagining are not opposed to [...] but can provide essential ingredients in a rational argument" (xiii). Building on, and undoubtedly influenced by, a "Political Turn" in literary criticism,² this "Literary Turn" in political thought and analysis seeks to read literature for political purposes, demonstrating the allegedly unique insights that literature can offer us as political theorists and social scientists. Such work has tended to focus on what Nussbaum called the "mainstream realist novel" (6), especially those "with social and political themes" (11).³ As such, Roth's recent American Trilogy of *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000), would seem to be ripe for the political picking. Each deals with a particular moment in America's recent political history: the violent radicalism of the 1960s, the McCarthyism of the 1950s, and the campus politics of the 1990s. Such a harvest might, however, be somewhat premature. Roth's work is predicated upon a distinction between what he calls the written and unwritten worlds. It is a distinction that he uses to great effect in almost all his fiction, but particularly so in his recent trilogy, and it is one that poses many problems for the way in which literature is currently utilized in political thought and analysis. This distinction explodes many of the pieties upon which much of the recent work on literature and politics is based, most obviously by problematizing the attempt to use literature as a source of evidence for claims about our non-fictional political life. Nevertheless, Roth's work is not entirely destructive for those of us who seek some sort of synthesis between the insights of literary and political analysis: identifying and incorporating Roth's important written

and *unwritten* worlds distinction into our work on literature and politics may allow us to think about the relationship in new and more plausible ways.⁴

"[T]hese pieces reveal to me," wrote Roth in the introduction to his collection of essays, *Reading Myself and Others*:

a continuing preoccupation with the relationship between the written and unwritten world. The simple distinction is borrowed from Paul Goodman. I find it more useful than the distinction between imagination and reality, or art and life, first because everyone can think through readily enough the clear-cut differences between the two, and second, because the worlds that I feel myself shuttling between every day couldn't be better described. (xiii)

Unsurprisingly for a writer who has made such use of the unreliable narrator—in particular Roth's literary doppelgänger Nathan Zuckerman⁵—there seems to be a certain amount of disingenuousness in this claim. Roth's suggestion that there are clear-cut differences between the two worlds belies his constant eliding of them as a literary method. As Martin Amis notes of Roth's 1974 work:

My Life as a Man begins with two autobiographical short stories, presented as the autobiographical work of an autobiographical novelist, about a young autobiographical writer. The rest of the book is a first-person account of the autobiographical novelist's attempt to write a new autobiographical novel. (286)

We should, of course, expect no less from an author whose *Operation Skylock* purported to be the non-fictional account of the author's encounter in Israel with a man claiming to be Philip Roth; or whose alleged autobiography *The Facts*, identifies certain events in his life that later became fiction. In his daily commute—shuttling between the written and unwritten worlds—Roth, it seems, often works from home.

The distinction then between the written and unwritten worlds is not as "clear-cut" as Roth suggests; indeed, Roth never gives a clear definition of the two, nor as a writer of fiction rather than as a philosopher or a social scientist is he, perhaps, expected to do so. I will therefore define the written world as the world of the text, and the *unwritten* world as the world in which that text is written. Even then, however, the distinction still seems somewhat murky. The written world is populated by what the narrator of the Trilogy, Nathan Zuckerman, calls "word people" (*Pastoral* 35), figures, such as Zuckerman himself, who exist only in the pages of the text; the *unwritten* world by figures such as you and I, "flesh people" who read the text.⁶ Needless to say, however, as part of his blurring of the *written/unwritten* world distinction, Roth identifies

plenty of people whose existence spans this distinction—the semi-fictional perhaps⁷—who exist in both worlds. The trilogy is positively bursting with them: Joe DiMaggio, Saddam Hussein, Bill Clinton, Linda Lovelace,⁸ Jim Morrison, Charles Lindbergh, Jack Kennedy, Linda Tripp, Paul Robeson, Richard Nixon, Jack Benny, Eleanor Roosevelt, Nancy Reagan, Spiro Agnew, Betty Ford, Albert Einstein, and Nelson Mandela, to name but a few. Indeed, it is but one of many areas of overlap between the two worlds that Roth employs for literary purposes, and which seems to provide the justification for the recent turn to literature as a source of insight into the unwritten world in which we live. The events of the written world of Roth's trilogy parallel, for example, events in the unwritten world: the inner-city riots of the 1960s, the communist witch hunt of the 1950s, the impeachment trial of President Clinton, and so on. As such, they help create the impression that these "word people" are just like "flesh people," sharing and shaped by the same common history.

Such "word people" also exhibit similar patterns of behavior to "flesh people." Particularly telling in the trilogy is that the "word people" of the written world are seen to make sense of their world through other texts, in much the same way that "flesh people"—including those of us engaged in political thought and analysis through literature—do in the unwritten one. Roth calls Kafka's novels *The Castle* and *The Trial*, "ways of knowing the world" (*Reading* 155), and attributes a similar approach to characters in his texts. In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman tells us that his perception of the novel's central figure—Seymour Levov, a.k.a. the Swede—was shaped by John R. Tunis's baseball novels *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, *Iron Duke*, *The Duke Decides*, and *Rookie of the Year* (7). In *I Married A Communist*, the aging Zuckerman says of his younger self:

My idealism (and my idea of man) was being constructed along parallel lines, one fed by novels about baseball champions who won their games the hard way [...] and the other by novels about heroic Americans who fought against tyranny and injustice, champions for liberty for America and for all mankind. (25)

Elsewhere in the texts, characters—especially Zuckerman—routinely invoke other texts to illustrate their discussions or to make sense of the world. Zuckerman explicitly compares himself to another "word person" Marcel, the narrator of Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*Pastoral* 47);⁹ Coleman Silk—the central figure of *The Human Stain*—to Gustave Aschenbach from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (171); and Eve Frame, a protagonist of *I Married A Communist*, quotes Emily Dickinson to explain her love for Ira Ringold, the communist in question (59). Indeed, Roth's trilogy is a veritable library of references to other authors and other texts: *Vogue* magazine, *The Daily News*,

Star-Ledger, *The Stars & Stripes*, *Citizen Tom Paine*, *Young Jefferson*, *Looking Backward*, *The Red and the Black*, *Partisan Review*, *The Communist Manifesto*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and Plato's *Republic*, as well as works by Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky, Thoreau, Milan Kundera, and Arthur Miller. Additionally there are texts whose existence is confined to the written world of the trilogy: texts including Coleman Silk's *Spooks*; Katrina Grant's romance novels; and most vexingly for the written and unwritten world distinction, texts called *I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain*, written by characters in Roth's texts of the same name.

Roth's literary work then builds on, and incorporates, the suggestion that literature—the written world—is one of the ways in which we inhabitants of the unwritten world make sense of it and engage with other “flesh people.” It is clear that as “ways of knowing the world,” novels differ from the more abstract categories of behavioralism¹⁸ and analytical philosophy. Whatever Roth's characters are—these “word people”—they are not the “deontological selves,” “rational actors” and “utility maximizers” so beloved of analytical thought and social science. This difference seems to be the impetus for those who turn to literature for insights about the unwritten world that are allegedly unavailable elsewhere. Indeed, the claim that the written world of literature can fundamentally affect our view of the unwritten world in which we live is central to the political work of both Martha Nussbaum in *Poetic Justice* and Richard Rorty in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. Both suggest that the dialectical experience of reading can change us as people, and Roth's world reflects this as a number of characters identify texts that fundamentally shaped their world-view. Zuckerman, for example, recounts the effects of the Tunis novels on his younger self. “I was ten,” he writes “and I had never read anything like it. The cruelty of life. The injustice of it. I could not believe it” (*Pastoral* 9).

Against this background then, Roth's claim that the only realistic expectation of literature is that it will make us better readers seems somewhat modest, or even disingenuous. His work seems to suggest that literature gives us a way of making sense of our lives, that it is a resource for critical personal insight and even social change. Indeed, Roth himself identifies the moment in 1967, during a conference in Prague organized by Czech intellectuals around the themes of Kafka's work, when the discussion of the texts became what he calls “a stepping stone to Dubček's reform government and the Prague Spring of 1968” (*Reading* 155), suggesting that literature can, on his account, inspire not just political analysis, but also political action.

Typically, however, the Roth who reverses himself in literature—most aggressively in the death and resurrection of Nathan Zuckerman in *The Counter-life*—both gives us this incentive to utilize literature in political thought and analysis, and then he takes it back. It is, perhaps, the retraction that is most worth paying attention to in our attempts to incorporate literature into politi-

cal thought and analysis for it warns us to be wary of the easy conflation of these two worlds. Central to this retraction is Roth's ongoing concern with interpretation, both in the texts of the trilogy, and in his own stated observations on the political uses of literature. In the case of the Prague Spring, Roth declares "that whatever changes fiction may appear to inspire have usually to do with the goals of the reader and not the writer" (*Reading* 155). This is a persistent theme of the trilogy. Most obviously we see it in *The Human Stain* in the case of Coleman Silk, an African American college professor who has passed as white for almost all his adult life. Silk is forced to resign from his job when a number of African American students take offense at his use of the word "spooks" to describe people absent from the class. Silk reminds his accusers that the primary meaning of the word is that of ghost or specter, to which one of them replies, "But Dean Silk, that is not the way it was taken. Let me read to you the second dictionary meaning. '2. Disparaging. A Negro.' That's the way it was taken" (84). The whole tragic novel turns on this beating of words and texts into shapes for political purposes.¹² It is fitting and telling that in a series of books so stocked with other texts, that reading should be such a persistent, recurrent and revealing theme. It is no coincidence that one of the least attractive figures in *The Human Stain*, Delphine Roux, is characterized as an "over-reader," whereas one of the most sympathetic, Faunia Farley, claims—for reasons of her own—not to be able to read at all. Those readers, such as Merry Levov of *Pastoral*, and Ira Ringold of *Communist*, who seem incapable of separating their reading from their politics, seem to perish in part because of this inability to separate them. Both read to confirm what they already know or believe to be true, and as such they perhaps serve as a warning to those of us who might seek to do the same: to use the written world as evidence for claims about the unwritten world. For as Roth makes clear in the trilogy and elsewhere, there are obvious differences between the two worlds that make this maneuver, at best, highly problematic.

In a 1960 speech entitled "Writing American Fiction," Roth—having not yet drawn his distinction between the written and unwritten worlds—discussed the difference between American fiction and American reality. It was, he said:

Simply this: that the American writer [. . .] has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. [. . .] The actuality is continually outdoing our talents and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (*Reading* 168)

His point perhaps is that there is a gap between what the unwritten world produces, and the ability of the author to capture it in any meaningful way. That all the author can do is to simplify and to misrepresent this reality is another

persistent theme of the trilogy. "Writing," declares Zuckerman "turns you into somebody who's always wrong" (*Pastoral* 63). Much of the text of *American Pastoral* is Zuckerman's attempts to write about—to make sense of—the Swede. "[D]espite these efforts and more to uncover what I could about the Swede," writes Zuckerman, "I would have been willing to admit that my Swede was not the primary Swede" (76). Over and over again Zuckerman tells us, often with explicit reversals, of the ways in which his speculations were wrong or misplaced. He tells us he was wrong about the Swede, wrong about the death of Coleman Silk, and wrong about the life of Ira Ringold. Things we thought we knew as readers earlier in the texts are taken-back, reversed or qualified. In a typically multilayered way, Roth's literary doppelganger reveals the inadequacies of the fictive process: its over-simplifications and the dissimilarities between the written and unwritten world. There is, of course, something of an irony in this: the use of the written world to discuss the very inadequacies of the written as a way of understanding the unwritten world. In this instance, at least, it is fairly clear that Zuckerman and Roth share similar views. Writing about the author Bernard Malamud, Roth declares:

Even when Malamud writes a book about baseball, *The Natural*, it is not baseball as it is played in Yankee stadium but a wild, wacky game, where a player who is instructed to knock the cover off the ball promptly steps up to the plate and does just that [. . .] It is [. . .] our introduction to a world, which is by no means a replica of our own. There are really things called baseball players, of course, and really things called Jews, but there much of the similarity ends. [. . .] They are Malamud's invention, a metaphor of sorts to stand for certain possibilities and promises. (*Reading* 174)

In his identification of these metaphors of promise and possibility in a world "which is by no means a replica of our own," Roth is concerned with the ways in which the written world is different from the unwritten world, a difference captured by his comments about the comedian Lenny Bruce. "I recognize and admire in him [. . .] that joining of the precise social observation with extravagant and dreamlike fantasy" (*Reading* 17).

It is, nevertheless, precisely the "extravagant and dreamlike fantasy" aspects of the written world that makes it an often unreliable source of information for those of us engaged in political thought and analysis in, and of, the unwritten world. The similarities between the two tempt us into making spurious one-to-one connections that Roth's work reminds us that we would be best to avoid, even as he plays with the distinction for literary purposes. That we should nevertheless only *flirt* with, as opposed to succumbing to, the temptation to conflate the two worlds is, nevertheless, one of Roth's perennial themes. Writing in 1974, Roth recalls the letter he received from a woman in New Jer-

sey following the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*. The woman claimed to have gone to school with Roth's sister and lambasted the author for the portrait he had painted of her in that novel. "Since, unlike Alexander Portnoy, I happen never to have had a sister, I assumed" wrote Roth, "it was some other Jewish Athena with a tendency to gain weight to whom my correspondent was alluding" (*Reading* 35). Roth is not, however, always so magnanimous about this tendency—particularly acute in his case it seems—of his readers to confuse him with the characters in his texts. In a response to Diana Trilling's review of *Portnoy*, Roth distinguishes between two "Mr. Roths": what might be termed the "word person" of her review, and the "flesh person" who wrote the book. Of the second he declared: "May I suggest that perhaps 'Mr. Roth's' view of life is more hidden from certain readers in his wide audience than they imagine, more imbedded in parody, burlesque, slapstick, ridicule, insult, invective, lampoon, wisecrack, in nonsense, in levity, in play—in, that is, the methods of Comedy, than their own view of life may enable them to realize" (*Reading* 28). This is not, however, simply the pique of a wounded artist; there is an important distinction between these two worlds that gets to the heart, perhaps, of the problem of much of the recent work on literature and politics. Roth captures this distinction in his homily about the father calling out a warning to his winter-sport-pursuing son:

"Oh, watch it sonny"—the father calls after him—"you're skating on thin ice!" Whereupon the rebellious and adventurous son in hot pursuit of the desirable exotic calls back, "Oh, you dope, Daddy, that's only an expression," already, you see, a major in English. "It's only an expression"—even as the ice begins to groan and give beneath his eighty-odd pounds. (*Reading* 30)

These two worlds are worlds of consequences and justifications, and Roth's homily captures the potential problems in confusing the two worlds and their appropriate sets of justifications and consequences. The standards of justification for a good reading of the written world are obviously quite different from the standards of justification for a good argument in the unwritten world: that a reading is interesting, creative, or thought-provoking is often a sufficient justification for its existence; an argument requires a stronger standard of justification and a broader spectrum of agreement on its plausibility. The reason for this difference is precisely that the potential consequences are so much greater in the unwritten world than they are in the written. There is clearly more at stake in the question of whether poverty causes crime than in whether or not, say, Heathcliff is a murderer.¹² Roth captures this important difference in all three books of the trilogy, but especially so in *The Human Stain*: what might be a playful or interesting reading of the word "spooks" in the realm of written

world studies and standards has significant and haunting consequences for Coleman Silk outside of it. The same is true for Merry Levov and Ira Ringold. Those who can avoid such readings in Roth's work generally avoid such dreadful fates. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Roth so persistently "bares the device" by drawing attention to the fictive nature of his work.

This "baring the device" takes many forms. Most obviously, Zuckerman's previous history as an unreliable narrator who is prone to reversing himself reminds us that we cannot always trust his account of events. Zuckerman constantly reminds us that he is a writer—"I'm Zuckerman the author" (*Pastoral* 16) he tells us—even as we know that he is the creation of another author, Philip Roth, another semi-fictional character whom we know that we cannot always trust to tell us what is happening in an unadorned style.¹³ This author-irony reminds us that what we are reading is always going to be a partial perspective. This is, perhaps, further brought home to us in the final pages of *I Married a Communist*, where, having heard the story fourth hand—Ira's brother Murray recounts Ira's versions of events to Zuckerman, who is Roth's creation—we become so caught up in the tale of Ira Ringold, his film star wife and their travails, that we forget about Murray. We are shocked then to find out on page 386, some seven pages before the end of the book, that Murray's wife Doris was brutally murdered. Amidst the political turmoil and high drama we have only seen Murray as a way to uncover the details of Ira's life. His wife's senseless and violent death reminds us perhaps of the way in which the narrative is shaped by an author to exclude details that we might otherwise find interesting or relevant to the questions we are investigating through literature. Similarly, the use of foreshadowing—Zuckerman tells us, for example, of Coleman's Silk's death long before it happens—and of other authorial devices and interventions, reminds us that we are reading a narrative, rather than a simple recounting of events that we can trust to draw our own conclusions: that a novel is invariably an account shaped for particular purposes and effects, rather than simply raw data to be used for analysis. This further reminds us, perhaps, of the contingency of our own reading: one that doubles the contingency and partiality of the written perspective. This constant "baring of the device" reminds us that we cannot simply read off experiences in the written world, shaped as they are by a myriad of concerns—artistic, ironic, sometimes even political—as evidence for claims in the unwritten world. Not least because as Roth notes—in the written world, in Ira and Eve's differing reactions to Arthur Miller's novel *Focus*, and in the unwritten world, in the reactions to Kafka that produced the Prague Spring—different readers can draw different experiences and meanings from the same text. Nevertheless, these constant reminders that these two worlds exist might create a useful dissonance for us as political analysts, theorists, and social scientists. As we hold in our hands texts

called *I Married A Communist* and *The Human Stain*, texts written by Philip Roth¹⁴ and read about other texts of the same name that are *not* the texts that we are reading, we should perhaps be reminded that artifacts in the written world are not the same as artifacts in the unwritten world, and that as such we should be suspicious about treating them as such. The temptation to do so, and then the reminder that we should not, create perhaps that space of discomfort in which thinking occurs, and it is in this—rather than as a source of evidence for overly strong causal or political claims—that literature is most useful for us in our attempts to make sense of our own unwritten world through the written worlds of literature.

In this spirit, it only remains for me to “bare my own device.” Clearly, none of this argument turns on the reading of Roth’s work offered here. I do think that Roth’s work is consistent with this account of it and, furthermore, that this reading would probably not meet with the author’s disapproval. Nevertheless, that I think Roth’s work is consistent with my account does not make my methodological claims true, nor does it make my claims any more plausible, even though this “capturing” of authors or texts in support of specific claims seems to be a central move in the current work on literature and politics. The argument presented here must ultimately stand or fall on its own merits. Consistent with my claims, Roth’s work has merely been used as a space in which to explore these issues, for this is the freedom that the written world grants us as thinkers and analysts. In order to make those claims plausible in the unwritten world, however, we—like Roth—must shuttle between the two, putting the worlds in dialogue, but ultimately judging our claims by the standard appropriate to the world in which they are made. As Roth notes: “Chekhov makes a distinction between ‘the solution of the problem and a correct presentation of the problem’ and adds ‘only the latter is obligatory for the artist’” (*Reading* 16).¹⁵ The obligation of political thinkers and social scientists is, perhaps, somewhat different.

NOTES

1. This paper was completed with the assistance of a Faculty Summer Research Grant from The College of William and Mary. Earlier versions were presented at the Western Political Science Association meeting in Denver, Colorado, 28–30 March 2003; at the American Literature Association conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 22–25 May 2003; and at the American Political Science Association meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 28–31 August 2003. The author wishes to thank Fred Dolan, Caroline Hanley, Kip Kantelo, Lisa King, Robyn Marasco, Dean Mathiowetz, Eric Naiman, Andrew Norris, Derek Parker Royal, Joel Schwartz, George Shulman, Angela Simms, and Shannon Stimson for their comments on earlier drafts.

2. See, for example, the work of Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Eagleton declares: "There is [...] no need to drag politics into literary theory: it has been there from the beginning" (169).

3. This approach is by no means confined to Nussbaum. See, for example, the work of Joseph H. Lane Jr. in the *American Political Science Review*.

4. For those unfamiliar with the way in which social scientists and political philosophers currently utilize literature in their work, I would point to the Nussbaum and Lane pieces as being illustrative of a method that I consider to be problematic. Both rest upon a set of claims about what the novels being read "show" us about the politics of the society in which they were written. That is to say, they use evidence from the world of fiction to support claims about the politics of the world in which that fiction was written. That Lane's paper was awarded the prize for the best paper presented in the "Politics and Literature" section of the American Political Science Association meeting in 1999 suggests that this approach is endemic to the discipline. It is this approach which Roth's work shows to be both attractive and ultimately flawed.

5. Indeed, Zuckerman's incontinence and impotence in the trilogy suggest that he is so unreliable that he can no longer even trust himself.

6. Though I recognize, of course, that the "I" of this text is somewhat different from the "I" who just wrote this sentence, illustrating the oftentimes blurry distinction between the written and unwritten worlds.

7. This category was suggested to me by my good friend Matthew Rudolph.

8. Linda Lovelace, mentioned in *American Pastoral*, is a particularly interesting example, given that she is more famous under her stage name than under her given name, Linda Boreman. As such she is almost doubly semi-fictional.

9. What is delightful about this is that Zuckerman, a "word person," compares himself to Marcel, another "word person," leaving us to consider Zuckerman's relationship to Roth just as we consider Marcel's relationship to Proust.

10. Coming into vogue in the 1950s, behavioralism (not psychology "behaviorism") started as a response to institutional approaches to political science. It suggested that more about politics could be understood by looking at the actions of individuals and groups of political actors than by the traditional focus on laws and constitutions. As the field has developed, it has become increasingly quantitative in its approach.

11. It is perhaps one of the reasons why this novel is less successful—in a literary sense—than the previous two in the trilogy. Roth's apparent anger at this kind of reading pervades the book and makes the sense of play that derives from moving between the two worlds less rewarding. This point was suggested to me, in part, by Eric Naiman of the University of California–Berkeley.

12. See John Sutherland, *Is Heathcliff A Murderer? Puzzles in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, and *Who Betrays Elizabeth Bennet? Further Puzzles in Classic Fiction*. These are, nevertheless, wonderful books for exploring the written worlds of these authors' texts.

13. As Benjamin Hedin points out in his wonderful paper, "The Uncollected Short

Fiction of Philip Roth," presented at the American Literature Association Conference, Cambridge, Massachusetts (25 May 2003). Roth's first appearance in his own fiction occurs in a piece entitled "The Kind of Person I Am" from *The New Yorker* 29 November, 1958.

14. Though interestingly they are listed as "Zuckerman Books" inside the cover of later editions.

15. See also *The Human Stain*, where Zuckerman says dancing with Coleman Silk "made the proper presentation of his secret my problem to solve" (45).

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