

is there life after baseball?

philip roth's

The Great American Novel

thomas blues

Anxious to condemn and dismiss *The Great American Novel*, most commentators have placed summary judgment ahead of thorough analysis. I hope to demonstrate that Roth has transformed what in previous fictions had been an essentially personal theme into the revelation of a cultural crisis. I shall return to the matter of the personal theme at a later stage of this essay; the cultural crisis I refer to is the perverse disconnectedness of American life: more precisely, the perilous inability to make adequate connection and distinction between past and present. Once we begin to see how this theme orders the novel, we will understand the function of those apparently discordant elements—vicious or sick humor, grotesque characterization, random mixing of fiction and fact—that have so offended the critics. Roth has discovered his theme in what Jacques Barzun has identified as “the heart and mind of America”—baseball. Whoever would know that heart and mind, Barzun said, “had better learn baseball,” and whoever would understand *The Great American Novel* had better understand in particular the special beliefs and reassuring myths that the game has made available to Twentieth Century Americans.

As America underwent its strenuous metamorphosis from an agrarian and rural to an industrial and urban nation in the last third of the Nineteenth Century, baseball had already been a popular pastime for more than two generations; it had accrued conscious meanings as early as mid-century, when it was called the national game, “manly and hearty and free.”¹ Even as the game was organized by the new capitalism that was changing the face and values of the nation, it retained its strong associations with rural ideality and

democratic values. Organized baseball as we know it in the Twentieth Century was created by the economic machinery and motives that had created Standard Oil. But it was apotheosized as the purified essence of transcendent values that had little relation to the facts of its own history or the general facts of American life. Deliberately so: for baseball was preserved as something apart from actualities. The game can be traced back to an English import called Rounders, played in America at least as early as the Eighteenth Century. But in 1907 an official commission that included two United States Senators certified that the game was “invented” in 1839 by Abner Doubleday at Cooperstown, New York. In 1920, when the Black Sox scandal threatened major league baseball’s pristine image, the celebrated Red-baiter and one hundred percent American, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, was called in to clean up the game. The citizenry took it as a matter of course that horse racing, prizefighting and politics were dirty business, but they would not allow baseball to fall into the common muck of everyday life. In 1922, so that club owners could continue to own their players, to buy, sell, trade or release them as only they saw fit, the Supreme Court exempted organized baseball from the anti-trust laws. The players themselves were special heroes, not ordinary men with remarkable if perishable skills, but potential Immortals, for whom a Hall of Fame was created in 1939 to mark the centennial of baseball’s “invention.” Hall of Fame historian Ken Smith reveals the aptness of the Cooperstown site: “It was scarcely different from any other village, except, perhaps, in topography. But the tree-shaded streets, low and aged buildings surrounding a hublike park, and contented, patient townfolk, could be duplicated in every state of the great Union. Clothing . . . speech . . . tastes . . . politics . . . varying, perhaps, in other sections, but down deep in the roots of each lay the same fierce love of freedom and nation that made all such towns and villages basically identical.”²

Perhaps the most compelling reason for baseball’s apotheosis in our time is that for a full half century—from 1903, when the National League sealed its accommodation with the recently formed American League, to 1953, when the Boston Braves moved to Milwaukee—baseball didn’t change. In the actual world there were wars and a Great Depression. But whatever else happened, the “original” sixteen teams remained in place, and seemingly in time, always there, every spring. In the actual world there were Negroes, which you would never know if your range of awareness was bordered by the foul lines in a major league ball park, within which you might see an occasional American Indian, but never—until 1947—an American Black man. The forces that had transformed American life had created and seemingly perpetuated a simpler, bygone world, which in itself had become a substitute for memory.

So baseball provided America with a reassuring sense of innocence, simplicity, permanence, with a pastoral myth and past that had

no relation to present realities. But as more than one cultural historian has said, and here I quote Jay Martin, "Americans have steadfastly denied whatever historical past they possessed because they have conclusively derived greater satisfactions from a mythical one." The rapid changes in American life, almost a constant and directionless acceleration, the newness of almost everything, caused Americans to seek out refuges from normal or "historic time," chiefly in what Martin calls "mythic substitutes" like baseball. As Martin says, "it was precisely by avoiding change that Americans preserved their sense of eternity."³

Nevertheless, what had seemed eternal, at least as far as baseball is concerned, began to dissolve in 1953, when the Braves abandoned Boston. Next year the St. Louis Browns showed up as the Baltimore Orioles and Connie Mack's Athletics appeared in Kansas City. In 1958 the Giants and Dodgers departed New York to join the rest of the country in California. The American League added two new teams in 1961, and by the end of the decade there were twenty-four major league ball clubs. About to become a contender for the first time in twenty-five years, the Washington Senators moved to Minnesota. They won the championship there while the new Senators became the capitol city's old joke. But only for a while; eventually the Senators set up shop somewhere in Texas. If a team lasted only a year or two in one place, it was shunted to a more attractive "market," demonstrating baseball's dependence on the TV audience rather than the ball-park fan. Major league baseball teams had become just another consumer product—sellable, moveable, dissolvable. Roger Angell, one of the best writers on baseball at work today, and an unabashed lover of the game itself, nevertheless warns us that baseball "is no longer a release from the harsh everyday American business world but its continuation and apotheosis. Those of us (fans and players alike) who return to the ball park in the belief that the game and the rules are unchanged—merely a continuation of what we have known and loved in the past—are deluding ourselves, perhaps foolishly, perhaps tragically."⁴

Some recent books on baseball reflect not only the sense of a difference between then and now, but reveal as well a desperate longing to preserve some fragments of the past: Lawrence Ritter's *The Glory of Their Times*, for example, a collection of the personal reminiscences of the few surviving old-time players (their voices are preserved on tape in the Hall of Fame); or Roger Kahn's *The Boys of Summer*, a moving remembrance of the Dodgers of the early 1950's, as well as a record of Kahn's deep and enduring shock over the removal of any trace of the team he had known and loved as boy and man: "The Dodgers deserted Brooklyn, wreckers swarmed into Ebbets Field and levelled the stands. Soil that had felt the spikes of Robinson and Reese was washed from the faces of mewling children. The New York *Herald Tribune* writhed, changed its face and collapsed. I covered a team that no longer exists in a demolished ball park for a newspaper that is dead."⁵

Kahn seeks some enduring link to an obliterated past, but Philip Roth in his book would much prefer to cut the ties that bind. He creates therefore a sort of counter-mythical beast, a third major league (many of the ingredients of which can be traced to actual elements of baseball history), to liberate us through laughter from the legends, heroes, pieties, above all, from the meanings that compel our desire to believe that nothing has ever changed, that our faith in baseball is well placed. As James M. Cox has said, laughter reduces the meaningful to the meaningless;⁶ laughter can expel the meanings that hold us to a time, a place, a belief, long after they have ceased to retain credibility in fact. Roth simply treats baseball's failure to live up to its symbolic and mythic dimensions as a ludicrous joke. He makes us laugh at and let go of what we have for so long needed, but can no longer afford to believe.

Thus the Patriot League and its most ludicrous team, the Port Ruppert (New Jersey) Mundys—a hilarious desecration of every statue in the baseball pantheon. There are, for example, the Mundy Brothers, who, upon inheriting the team from their father, old Glorious Mundy, grind it into a mess of pottage by selling off the stars and, when World War II comes along, leasing the ball park to the government as a military embarkation camp. Then there is the Mundys' venerable manager and off-season Christian missionary, Ulysses S. Fairsmith, who has successfully established baseball in Japan, but failed in Africa because he could not teach the natives—against all sacred tradition and custom—not to slide into first base. Fairsmith welcomes the Mundys' new status as permanent road team, for he believes that there is Meaning in their banishment, that God has chosen them to wander in the wilderness: "Through suffering . . . they shall find their purpose and their strength."⁷ As for the team, it is a rag-tag collection of old men, cripples, kids, even a midget and a dwarf. The Mundys not only lose 120 games in 1943, but their manager as well. Moments after the final game, in which his fourteen-year-old second baseman has attempted to stretch a double into a triple, becoming as a consequence the last humiliating out of the season, Mister Fairsmith gives up:

In the dugout, streaming tears, Nickname stood before Mister Fairsmith and tried to think of some sort of explanation for what he had just done.

"I don't know, sir," he said, shrugging. "I guess you could say I gambled."

"Thirty-one runs behind in the ninth . . . and you say . . . you say you *gambled*? My God," moaned Mister Fairsmith, "my God, why has thou forsaken me?" and rolling off his rocker, died on the floor of the visitors' dugout. (314)

We get some sense here of the general strategy of Roth's humor, the reduction of baseball to the level of farce in an attempt to laugh its

meanings out of existence. Even the death of the Patriot League is devoid of dignity. It simply collapses into the irrational fantasies of American life, victim of a Red scare and witch-hunt engineered by a double agent of the Kremlin and the rival American and National leagues. Some Port Ruppert players are made the scapegoats, the "Mundy Thirteen." Other players throughout the league are named as communists or communist dupes. The league suspends operations, embarrassed franchise cities change their names, apartment complexes and highways soon obliterate all traces of the old ball parks.

Roth refuses to allow even the possibility of a tragic or pathetic dimension to soften his ruthless demolition of the Mundys and the Patriot League. As we know, heart-rending legends have leavened even the seamiest aspects of historical baseball. We may recall Shoeless Joe Jackson, who, after confessing his role in the fixing of the 1919 World Series, hangs his head in speechless shame when confronted by the desolate newsboy on the courthouse steps: "Say it ain't so, Joe." The parallel scene in Roth's baseball book finds a tearful midget emerging from the crowd to utter the same words to O.K. Okatur, the Mundys' dwarf pitcher and one of the Mundy Thirteen:

"Say it ain't so, O.K.!"

"It ain't you little asshole!" replied Okatur. (369)

But there is much more to *The Great American Novel* than an exuberant hail, farewell and be damned to baseball. As the book urges our release of the game, it compels us to recognize that we refuse to surrender its meanings. To maintain our belief in an eternal, ordered, unvarying universe, we will surrender knowledge and memory, will continue to see and believe in what no longer exists. It has been difficult for some readers to follow this argument of the novel because, I think, they have been put off by the very strategy Roth employs to develop it—his mixing of factual and fictional materials, his giving over of the story to an obvious madman. In short, critics have been offended by Roth's violations of certain comforting conventions. Thus we have Morris Dickstein's representative comment, that Roth has taken apart "the well-made novel" and substituted "nothing but the absurdist joke, the formless tirade, the cry in the dark."⁸

Dickstein's reaction is generated by Roth's failure to give us those foundations of historical credibility which most writers who locate fictions in historical contexts provide. They help us believe that their stories could have occurred in worlds that really existed. Thomas Berger's Jack Crabb, 111 years old in 1953, could have been present at the Battle of Little Big Horn; and Ernest Gaines's Jane Pittman could have been born a slave and survived to participate in the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960's. No doubt Roth's narrator, eighty-seven years old in the early 1970's, could have lived through the golden years, the decline and collapse of the Patriot League. But just as we know there was a Civil War and Custer's Last Stand, we know there

never was a third major league in annual World Series competition with the American and National Leagues, no such team as the Mundys, no communist conspiracies and certainly no Luke Gofannon, a major leaguer with a higher lifetime batting average than the immortal Ty Cobb's. Furthermore, Jack Crabb's and Jane Pittman's narratives are framed within the commentaries of sane and serious "editors" who have "recorded" their stories. But Roth, by asking us to accept a jumbled mixture of the historically true and the patently false, a story told by a raving maniac, seems intent upon destroying the imaginative credibility of his novel, which, as Richard Gilman sees it, he has managed to do. "A tale such as this," Gilman writes, "if it is to be the creation of a usable myth or of a myth about myth-making, has to unfold within a counter-world, a mock universe in which what exists and takes place has all the plausibility of actual history, but with a grand indifference to history, which is, after all, only factual."⁹

Roth wants us to see the limitation of "plausibility," which may only serve our preconceptions. He wants us to understand that we will refuse any fact that cannot be assimilated into our system of belief. Roth himself provides a partial view of what he had in mind in writing the book, as he speaks of those calamitous events of the 1960's, beginning with the first Kennedy assassination, that *de*-mythologized American life: "much that had previously been considered in my own brief life time to be disgraceful and disgusting forced itself upon the national consciousness, loathsome or not . . . what was imagined to be indestructible, impermeable, in the very nature of American things, yielded and collapsed overnight."¹⁰ So Roth turned to the subject of baseball, not to demythologize the game, but "to dramatize the struggle between the benign national myth of itself that a great power prefers to perpetuate, and the relentlessly insidious, very nearly demonic reality . . . that will not give an inch in behalf of that idealized mythology."¹¹

But the novel itself yields a deeper issue, that there is no conflict between myth and demythologizing fact, that whenever "demonic reality" destroys a myth, the destruction goes unnoticed, and life goes on as if nothing had changed. To be sure, the conflict seethes in the consciousnesses of the protagonists of Roth's prior fictions—the young men who have discovered that their childhoods have failed dismally to prepare them to become adult Americans, which in Roth's vocabulary means the freedom to stop denying the self repressed in childhood, to get what everybody else is getting. In the case of Neil Klugman of *Goodbye, Columbus* that means gathering up the goodies under the sporting goods tree; to the notorious Alexander Portnoy it means letting loose his sexual fantasies upon the *shishes* of America. The wonder and the terror of their young manhood is not that they can't do it, but that they can! Nobody to deny them, they call upon their childhoods to deny themselves, or to make their indulgences as guilt-ridden and self-wounding as possible. For they discover they still in-

habit the innocent, protected boundaries of childhood, even though they know they don't exist anymore. Witness Portnoy: "I'm a child of the forties, of network radio, of eight teams to a league and forty-eight states to a country."¹² As Mark Shechner puts it in his thoughtful analysis of Roth's fiction, "every character of Roth's seems to be stuck with this obligation, to satisfy deep-seated but contrary needs at once; to grow up *and* to regress; to let go *and* hold on; to be autonomous *and* dependent."¹³ The consequences of the conflict are isolation and impotence, but only for Roth's protagonists. The rest of the world seems to manage by a simple process of blissful unawareness. Thus Portnoy's astonishment to discover the prosperity of his boyhood pals, neither of whom had mothers who prepared them "hot tomato soup for lunch on freezing afternoons":

Smolka, who swam in the pool at Olympic Park, he's alive *too*? And a professor at Princeton *noch*? . . . I will not believe it! I mean down in my *kishkas*, in my deep emotions and my old beliefs, down beneath the me who knows very well that of course Smolka and Mandel continue to enjoy the ranch houses and the professional opportunities available to men on this planet, I simply cannot believe in the survival, let alone the middle-class success, of these two bad boys. Why, they're supposed to be in jail—or the gutter. They didn't do their homework, damn it! Smolka used to cheat off me in Spanish, and Mandel didn't even give enough of a shit to bother to do that, and as for washing their hands before eating . . . Don't you understand, these two boys are supposed to be dead!¹⁴

I referred at the outset to Roth's personal theme, personal in the sense that these victims of childhood are keenly aware that the joke is squarely on themselves. Portnoy's complaint is articulated through expressions of self-mockery: his guilty fears that his sexual proclivities will be exposed in tabloid headlines, his awareness that his sufferings make him a comic butt: "is *this* human misery? I thought it was going to be loftier! *Dignified* suffering! *Meaningful* suffering—something perhaps along the line of Abraham Lincoln. Tragedy, not farce!"¹⁵ But in *The Great American Novel* Roth attempts to turn the joke around, to challenge the reader's "old beliefs" and his emotional commitments to them. That is why he employs a narrator whose story reminds us that our perceptions of the national game are derived from empty myths.

Word Smith, the octogenarian ex-sportswriter, dying of heart disease in a home for the destitute aged, has set himself the task of writing "a historical novel that does not accord with the American history with which they brainwash our little children in the schools" (this in a letter to Mao Tse-tung, proposing that his manuscript, which no American publisher will touch, be published in the People's Republic of China). The letter to Mao also includes an affirmation of Word Smith's "impassioned belief" in art . . . "not for its own sake, or

for the sake of national pride or personal renown, but art for the sake of the record, an art that reclaims what is and was from those whose every word is a falsification and a betrayal of the truth" (380-81).

But how can we learn anything about "what is and was" from a version of history we know is and was not? The answer lies as much in the fact that no one will believe Word Smith's story, as it does in the story itself. How can anyone accept it, in an age which preserves itself by insisting that its myths are not supposed to have any relation to reality? Consider, for example, Word Smith's recounting of Mr. Fairsmith's once celebrated protest against the introduction of night baseball, in which he recapitulates his belief in

"the Almighty Creator, Whose presence . . . I do feel in every park around the league, on those golden days of sweet, cheerful spring, hot plenteous summer, and bountiful and benevolent autumn, when physically strong and morally sound young men do sport in seriousness beneath the sun, as did the two in Eden, before the Serpent and the Fall. Daytime baseball is nothing less than a reminder of Eden in the time of innocence and joy; and too, an intimation of that which is yet to come. For what is a ball park, but that place wherein Americans may gather to worship the beauty of God's earth, the skill and strength of His children, and the holiness of His commandment to order and obedience. For such are the twin rocks upon which all sport is founded. And woe unto him, I say, who would assemble our players and our fans beneath the feeble, artificial light of godless science!" (87)

Printed in Sunday newspapers around the country, Mr. Fairsmith's pieties are clipped out and framed on the walls of countless homes; the assembled owners murmur their "amens," then authorize night games. A nation inured to irrelevant and manufactured myth can only be troubled when there is a danger that it might be true. Thus Roland Agni's agitation when Isaac Ellis offers him the means to transform the Mundys from hopeless bunglers into winners, real champions. Slip "Jewish Wheaties" into the cereal bowls of his teammates?

"But — but, if I feed the boys these Wheaties — is that what you want me to do?"

"Exactly! Every morning, just a little sprinkle!"

"And we win — ?"

"Yes! You win!"

"But — that'd be like throwin' a game."

"Like *what*?"

"Like throwin' it. I mean, we'd be winnin' when we're supposed to be losin' — and that's wrong. That's illegal!"

"Throwing a game, Roland, is *losing* when you're supposed to be *winning*. Winning instead of losing is what you're *supposed* to do!"

"But not by eatin' Wheaties!"

"Precisely by eating Wheaties! That's the whole *idea* of Wheaties!"

"But that's *real* Wheaties! And they don't make you do it anyway!"

"Then how can they be 'real' Wheaties, if they don't do what they're supposed to do?"

"That's what *makes* them 'real!'" (286-87)

Word Smith is a pariah, a crazy old man, because he tries to sell his own version of Jewish Wheaties, to disturb our complacent illusions, our contentment with ephemeral and shoddy beliefs. His demented vision, his crazy history of the Patriot League, teaches us that we cannot live without our wanted meanings of the past, that we will brook no interference from the facts. We know, deep down, have known it all along, that the history of the Patriot League is a true history of baseball, just as surely as we know that any honest fiction tells us some unbearable truth about ourselves in bearable form. Roth severely tests the limits of fiction in this novel, not only to show us that we have disconnected ourselves from the past, but to demonstrate how readily we will reject that knowledge. "'Have you no honor,'" shouts Word Smith, "'Have you no conscience? Can you just take the past and flush it away, like so much shit?'" (18). The answer, of course, is yes. What else can we do once the laughter poops out, incapable as we are of living in a meaningless world, but content to find our meanings in empty myths? As Ernest Becker says in *The Denial of Death*, we cannot tolerate reality, "we always rely on something that transcends us, some system of ideas and powers in which we are embedded and which support us. This power is not always obvious. It need not be overtly a god or openly a stronger person, but it can be the power of an all-absorbing activity, a passion, a dedication to a game, a way of life, that like a comfortable web keeps a person buoyed up and ignorant of himself."¹⁶

Still, there is a price to be paid for abandoning the truth. A past that cannot compel, direct or limit the present, that cannot guide us into the future, is a past that keeps us from seeing, understanding or even caring about where we are now, or where we are going. "Let me prophesy," says Word Smith:

What began in '46 with the obliteration of the Patriot League will not end until the planet itself has gone the way of the . . . Ruppert Mundys, and me; until each and every one of you is gone like the sperm whale and the great Luke Gofannon, gone without leaving a trace! Only read your daily papers, fans—every day news of another stream, another town, another species biting the dust . . . very soon now whole continents will be cancelled out like stamps . . . and that will be it, fans, as far as the landmass goes. A brand new ball game.

Only where is it going to be played? Under the lights on the dark side of the Moon? Will Walter O'Malley with his feel for the future really move the Dodgers to Mars? (44)

At one point in his true history of the Patriot League, Word Smith recalls the horrified reaction of the League President to the latest abominable innovation—the radio broadcasting of ball games:

To General Oakhart, needless to say, the idea that people could sit in their living rooms or in their cars listening to an announcer describe a game being played miles and miles away was positively infuriating. Why, the game might just as well not be happening, for all they knew! The whole thing might even be a hoax, a joke. (88)

What would the General say now, if he could see us sitting in front of television sets, watching the Montreal Expos and the Houston Astros playing baseball in a television studio called the Astrodome on a surface made out of plastic? Would he understand that it's better than nothing?

If, in Word Smith's mind, fake mythologies will not do, Philip Roth knows they will have to do, for modern man lacks the imagination to make myth from reality. The only alternative to sentimental nostalgia is Word Smith's madness. And that is why, I suspect, Roth refuses to provide his narrator/"author" with the comforting credibility of an "editor," of historical plausibility. Roth must know that he can let only a part of himself be Word Smith, or the word-smith, the truth teller whose truths set him apart from a world that cannot bear to know that anything has changed. The word-smith has to stand alone; to join him is to join his madness, his isolation in a world without meanings.

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notes

1. Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York, 1960), 31. Throughout my discussion of the history of organized baseball, I am much indebted to this detailed work, and to the second volume, *Baseball: The Golden Age* (New York, 1971).
2. Ken Smith, *Baseball's Hall of Fame* (New York, 1952), 5. Ellipses Smith's.
3. Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1865-1914* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1967), 85-86.
4. Roger Angell, *Five Seasons: A Baseball Companion* (New York, 1977), 251.
5. Roger Kahn, *The Boys of Summer* (New York, 1973, reprint, New York, 1973), xviii.
6. James M. Cox, "Humor and America: The Southwestern Bear Hunt, Mrs. Stowe, and Mark Twain," *Sewanee Review*, 83 (Fall 1975), 601.
7. Philip Roth, *The Great American Novel* (New York, 1973), 91. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text.
8. Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York, 1977), 100.
9. Richard Gilman, "The Great American Novel," *Partisan Review*, 40, 3 (1973), 468.
10. Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York, 1975), 87-88.
11. *Reading Myself and Others*, 89-90.
12. Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York, 1969), 235.
13. Mark Shechner, "Philip Roth," *Partisan Review*, 41, 3 (1971), 420.
14. *Portnoy's Complaint*, 176.
15. *Portnoy's Complaint*, 251.
16. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, 1973), 55.