"We want heavy cream and [Roth] gives us the two percent milk" (Up Society's Ass. Copper [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003], 42–43).
19. Reading Myself and Others, 60.
20. Ibid., 64.
22. Philip Roth, The Breast, from The Philip Roth Reader [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980], 480. All subsequent citations come from this edition and are provided parenthetically.
23. Reading Myself and Others, 57.
Debra Shostak discusses this aspect of The Breast at length, explaining that "Kepesh's transformed body literally represents the desire to understand what the self is, a desire that centers on distinguishing the subject from object, the male from the female, by way of the breast as both real object of gratification and signifier" ("Return to the Breast," 324).
25. Up Society's Ass. Copper, 94.

Plots against America: Language and the Comedy of Conspiracy in Philip Roth's Early Fiction
Derek Parker Royal

I actually think the American people can be made to believe anything. These people, after all, have their fantasies and fears and superstitions, just like anybody else, and you are not going to put anything over on them by simply addressing yourself to the real problems and pretending that the others don't exist just because they are imaginary.

—Trick E. Dixon, Our Gang

In the plot against America, Philip Roth imagines a pre-World War II nation in the throes of a Charles A. Lindbergh administration that appeases Fascist aggressors abroad and threatens the freedoms of citizens at home. In this alternate history, Lindbergh defeats Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election, signs nonaggression pacts with both Germany and Japan, and institutes various domestic programs designed to limit the visibility of minority cultures. Although readers are never privy to any discourse within Lindbergh's inner circle, a sense of conspiracy permeates the novel as the residents of Weequahic—the Jewish section of Newark in the 1930s and 1940s—feel they are being systematically dispossessed. The administration's new Office of American Absorption initiates "Just Folks," a volunteer work program that encourages city [Jewish] youth to spend their summers in the rural [non-Jewish] heartland, and the Homestead Act of 1942, a project to relocate urban [Jewish] families to free government land in "safer" regions throughout the country. The Weequahic families are fearful of their safety, and indeed, Roth frames his novel in that very mood. The narrator opens the novel with his disclosure, "Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear," and the
final chapter of the book, "Perpetual Fear," plays out the residents' worst nightmares. Taken in its entirety, The Plot Against America is an exercise in nationalistic paranoia, a text that demonstrates how semantic conspiracies, both overt and subtle, can destabilize our understanding of what it means to be a "true" American.

When it was published in fall 2004, a little more than a month before the presidential elections, reviewers were quick to point out the allegorical significance of the novel, reading it as Roth's not-so-veiled condemnation of the Bush Administration and its post-9/11 machinations of fear mongering. The terror that had framed Roth's alternate history, Jews' belief that forces within the White House had turned against them, was read as analogous to current Americans' ever-growing sense of dread—that the government's War on Terror was becoming a "conspiracy" against liberties at home and America's best interests abroad. Coming after the critical success of such historically minded novels as American Pastoral (1997) and The Human Stain (2000), The Plot Against America confirmed what many readers were beginning to feel about Roth: that he, rather late in his career, had finally forgone metafictional gamesmanship in order to become more engaged in American politics and history. Such a reading, however, rests on the assumption that Roth had ignored, or at least minimized, the significance of history and politics in his earlier fiction. Those familiar with Roth's oeuvre should know that this assumption is terribly myopic. While many of his more popular novels—for example, Portnoy's Complaint (1969), My Life as a Man (1974), The Ghost Writer (1979), and The Counterlife (1986)—may appear solipsistic or even artistically self-serving (or so the argument might go), several of his lesser-known works have indeed taken on history and contemporary politics, and aggressively so. Early fiction such as "On the Air" (1970), Our Gang (1971), The Great American Novel (1973), and the one-act play "The National Pastime" (1965) are similar to The Plot Against America in that they are predicated on plots of political subversion. Indeed, perhaps the time has come to revisit some of these earlier works, and to do so through the prism of The Plot Against America with its emphasis on history, conspiracy, and paranoia. However, in attempting to do so, one much keep in mind that what makes these previous works different from Roth's 2004 novel is the satire underlying the paranoia, or more specifically, the ways in which these early works combine comedy and conspiracy to in-vert our conceptions of reality. Roth's early conspiratorial narratives not only subvert our understandings of the cultural norm, but they also raise larger philosophical questions surrounding authenticity and its application to our political discourse.

Commonly defined, "conspiracy" involves the agreement of two or more people toward devious or illegal goals. In a political sense, the word takes on a resonance of secrecy and subversion where established power is undermined, as through an assassination or coup d'état. One can read Roth's novels, metaphorically at least, as accomplices in an ongoing "political" conspiracy that challenges or unsettles not only literary discourse, but also power as established through language systems. In this sense, "plotting" as a narrative act—that is, arranging events through the mediating presence of a narrator—becomes synonymous with orchestrated plots (or conspiracies) against meaning—for example, what it means to be an American, what it means to be Jewish, what it means to be a man, and what it means to be "real." The way the story is told determines its "political" meaning, even if that meaning is diffuse or indeterminate. Many of Roth's narratives concern themes of linguistic ambiguity in one form or another, from the postmodern gymnastics found in The Counterlife and Operation Shylock (1993) to definitions of the "American Dream" as laid out in Goodbye, Columbus (1959) and American Pastoral. However, Roth deals more overtly with the instability of language as politically significant in many of his lesser-known, and critically ignored, or at least critically underrepresented, narratives from the 1960s and early 1970s.

It is here that we find the novelist preoccupied with conspiracy and linking it directly to our national language. What is more, we can call narratives such as "On the Air," Our Gang, and The Great American Novel experiments in "conspiratorial inversion," texts that undermine our political discourse through irony and farce, taking the reader in semantic directions that are totally unexpected. By so doing, Roth not only inverts our expectations of narrative progression, but he also confounds our understandings of America and nationhood.

As early as 1960, Roth was pondering the political and social significance of American fiction and its power to represent reality. He states in his quasi-manifesto, "Writing American Fiction," that the contemporary writer of fiction is at a loss to capture the sheer absurdity underlying American life, that today's author has "his hands full in trying to understand, de-
scribe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupifies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s one meager imagination. The actuality is continually outgoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.”

Roth then goes on to cite, among other examples, the case of Richard Nixon and his televised debate with John F. Kennedy. As a literary creation, he argues, the satiric construction of “Nixon” would certainly make sense—the sweating, the makeup, the stage-posturing—but as an actual public figure he seems unreal and unbelievable. The reality of the politician was “so fantastic, so weird and astonishing, that I found myself beginning to wish I had invented it. But then, of course, one need not have been a fiction writer to wish that someone had invented it, and that it was not real and with us.”

In making such an observation, Roth is not only describing the postmodern condition as he sees it, where our concepts of “the real” are called into question and linked to our penchant for fiction making. He is also mapping out a narrative strategy for his own novels, a program of writing that inverts the plausible and the fantastic and does so through the prism of comedy. The writer can only speak to his current historical moment, America in the immediate post-World War II years, by creating an imagined counter-text to the “reality” he sees, which in and of itself lacks serious credibility. Fiction, then, becomes the mirroring “lie” that gives truth to a “false” reality. Such an ironic inversion can belie our nationalistic rhetoric, for, as Roth asks, “is America, ha-ha, really any more than America, hoo-ray, stood upon its head?”

Eleven years later, Roth applied this formula to his own writing, focusing specifically on the political “invention” that, at least for a writer of fiction, was too good to be true. The Richard Nixon who debated JFK may have been an unlikely farce, but his absurdities paled in comparison to the Nixon who ascended into the presidency in the late 1960s. What is more, his actions had a conspiratorial ring to them, as Roth satirically demonstrates in Our Gang. Throughout the novel, Nixon’s fictional persona, President Trick E. Dixon, uses language as a way of manipulating the reality he wants to create, and he constantly reminds people throughout the text that he is, by training, a lawyer, a member of a profession known for its verbal flair and “liberties” with the truth. And so as not to leave any question as to Tricky’s [and Nixon’s] commitment to the truth, Roth inserts two telling epigraphs from Jonathan Swift and George Orwell, each highlighting the shiftiness of language, especially when used for political purposes. In so doing, he prepares the reader not only for the lies that Tricky perpetuates, but also for the rhetorical charades underlying our national discourse.

Our Gang is a Humpty-Dumpty world of contorted language, a text where political expediency dictates our national myths and serves as the parameters of “truth.” In the Trick E. Dixon administration, unborn fetuses are redefined as “disadvantaged” youths, “utterly without representation or a voice in our national government”; the Boy Scouts of America are perceived as revolutionaries, potential agents of “the most incredible upheaval in history”; Denmark becomes a “belligerent and expansionist . . . Pro-Pornography government,” a clear and present threat to our national security; and the president’s assassination is categorically denied because his schedule had “no plan on the part of the President or his advisers for him to die.” Throughout his political satire, Roth creates a series of semantic inversions whereby Tricky and his colleagues subvert common expectations and destabilize meaning. He does this by focusing on the pliancy of language as a political tool. Black becomes white and good becomes evil, if only it is worded in an effective way. By the end of the novel, when Tricky is consigned to everlasting Hell, he runs for the office of Devil against the incumbent Satan using the same rhetorical strategies he utilized when running for President of the United States. In Roth’s America it is the word, not “The Word,” that serves as the sacred text and determines meaning. This is most effectively (and humorously) demonstrated when the Reverend Billy Cupcake, a farcical send-up of evangelist Billy Graham, officiates at Tricky’s funeral and asks the congregation to refer to Webster’s dictionary, not the Bible, when eulogizing the murdered leader. In this scenario, language becomes the primary determinant of Tricky’s political legacy—and for Roth, the deconstructive force behind Nixon’s—when Reverend Cupcake pronounces Trick E. Dixon a truly “extraordinary leader,” and then incidentally points out that each word in that phrase can be found in Webster’s directly beneath both “extraneous” and “leader.” Through Reverend Cupcake’s humorous lexiconic juxtapositions—the ironic significance of which eludes him—Roth further underscores the slipperiness of language, demonstrating that meaning is unstable and reliant upon context. What for some might be an “extraordinary leader” could just as easily become for others an irrelevant dullard.

Duplicious language lies behind Tricky’s most devious
scheme in the novel, an overt act of conspiracy that undermines our most enduring cultural signifiers. Nothing says "all-American" more than the game of baseball, and in Our Gang Roth uses it, along with the Boy Scouts of America, as a site of national contestation. What is usually seen as the embodiment of our collective ideals, the "American pastoral" writ large, is turned into a plot to undermine those very principles. Roth accomplishes this inversion by linking baseball with race and questions of authenticity, and in so doing, he raises a central question found throughout his oeuvre: What does it mean to be a "true" American? As the novel opens, Tricky has just given a speech on abortion and the rights of the unborn, and in doing so, he inadvertently angers the morally straight Boy Scouts who hear in his speech an advocacy of fornication. To win back the approval, and the votes, of the American people, he decides to implicate Washington Senators outfielder Curt Flood in a plot to corrupt the scouts, who obviously look up to him as a sports hero. Tricky does this by linking Flood's recent "subversive" behavior—in 1970, the real-life Flood filed a $4.1 million lawsuit against Major League Baseball and Commissioner Bowie Kuhn, a case that eventually made its way to the Supreme Court—to his supposed ties to the "Pro-Pornography" government of Denmark, so as to deflect much of the criticism he had been receiving and create a scapegoat who just happens to be black. "Frankly," Tricky says to the nation in a televised address, "I do not know of a better way for our enemies to undermine the youth of this country, than to destroy this game of baseball and all it represents."

As many had done throughout history, especially those in a region for which Nixon devised his "Southern strategy," Tricky defines the black man as the corrupter of American innocence. Or put another way, he uses the language of miscegenation—in this instance threatening the "purity" of nation with the "stain" of race—as a plotting device.

Here the rhetorical inversion is twofold. Within the narrative itself, Tricky invalidates the pastoral allusions underlying baseball, positing sophistication and corruption where normally one would find simplicity and virtue. At the same time, and in a more significant move that contextuates current political events, Roth destabilizes the language upon which American exceptionalism has historically flourished. The great American pastime becomes an exercise in fraudulence. Roth plays out, in other words, the implications set forth in "Writing American Fiction," that the lines between fiction and political reality are not clearly drawn. Trick E. Dixon's self-serving narrative is built upon fictions that break down any distinctions between patriotism and betrayal, and through this process we as readers see Tricky's scheme against Curt Flood turn into a larger (and linguistic) plot against America. What is important here is that Roth performs this move by using the trope of conspiracy, the language of plots that becomes threatening to America within the context of the story, but on a broader satiric level is inverted to become the threat of America on a larger historical scale.

The ominous threat of America—as laid out in such texts as Our Gang and thirty-three years later in The Plot Against America—is also the theme of two shorter works from Roth's early career, the short story "On the Air" and the one-act play "The National Pastime." The former is a text that, surprising enough, has received little attention from critics. Coming on the heels of Portnoy's Complaint, it possesses the same exuberance, irreverence, and sheer chutzpa that defined the breakthrough novel that has come to define Roth's career. And it even goes Portnoy one better. As Alan Cooper has characterized "On the Air," it is "the most offensive piece Roth ever wrote."

It is the story of Milton Lippman, a small-time talent agent who, with his wife and young son, journeys to the Princeton residence of Albert Einstein with dreams of signing up the physicist as the Jewish answer to Albert Carlyle Mitchell, host of radio's The Answer Man. On the way, he and his family encounter several "all-American" characters, and in doing so find themselves threatened by forces beyond their control. They stop off at a small ice-cream parlor for an afternoon treat, but what first appears to be an innocent-enough-looking façade turns out to be a goyish saloon, complete with a bowling alley and antlered animals decorating the wall. In many ways, the décor and occupants of Scully's Tavern represent what could be called "middle America": the bar itself reminds Lippman of the famous radio show, Duffy's Tavern, America's beloved radio program; the bartender, Scully, is described as the epitome of health and strength, a "strongly built young man" and a "physical specimen"; the women in the bar, all of whom have their children with them in their Sunday finery, look like Kate Smith and even sing her songs, and the establishment relies on African Americans and Chinese immigrants to do the dirty work. Even the ice-cream parlor that they eventually find, after leaving the tavern, seems innocent enough. It is staffed by the actual nephew of the real Kate Smith, an energetic man who is characterized as a "young
baby-faced soda jerk" with a "thick thatch of strawlike hair across his forehead" and who smiles and "bubbles" before the Lippmans.  

Yet, through a series of conspiratorial inversions, Roth turns these seemingly "innocent" settings into an ordeal for Lippman, one that threatens his very life. Nothing is what it appears to be, and the "reality" of Lippman's world is called into question. Upon more closely examining the healthy barkeep, Lippman notices "bulbous, red, melting-looking" scarred flesh behind each of his ears. "How hideously disfigured this perfect specimen was," he ruminates.  

The innocently boisyh soda jerk has an ice-cream scoop in the place of one of his hands (and which, at one point, is shoved up the anus of the town's police chief). But what is more significant are the story's many references to appearances and what constitutes reality. Scully's isn't radio's beloved Duffy's Tavern; it "was no bullshit tavern from the radio, this was the real thing—only more so!" The ice-cream parlor, which at first seems like an actual Howard Johnson's—Lippman says to his son upon entering, "Well, this is the real thing, after all, isn't it?"—is one that serves flavors such as wool, tape, chalk, and newspaper. Characters who appeared first at Scully's Tavern transmogrify and reappear again at the ice-cream parlor, and individuals such as Scully and the town's police chief vacillate in their personalities, almost to the point of schizophrenia. Indeed, the entire [Christian] ensemble of the story seems to be conspiring in a plot against the [Jewish] Lippmans, especially when it comes to latter's attempts to make sense of the world. By the end of the family's adventures, the son is rendered unconscious (from licking the newspaper-flavored ice cream), the mother is thoroughly traumatized, and Lippman himself is held at gunpoint, accused of being un-American, forced to strip naked, and weigh his testicles on a scale to see if his are heavier than the police chief's. Much like The Plot Against America, "On the Air" demonstrates—albeit in a much more outrageous fashion—that the American Dream may be more of a nightmare than we would like to think, one where appearances are deceiving and our conceptions of reality and authenticity are constantly called into question.  

On a smaller and more subdued scale, "The National Pastime" presents another American family at the mercy of conspiratorial powers, but this time the target is bourgeois sensibilities. In this little-known one-act play," a suburban family turns on its television set to watch a ball game, but what it sees is anything but the perennial reenactment of the national pastime. When the father, Al, turns on the television so that he and his twelve-year-old son, Gregory, can watch the ball game, he is shocked to find a couple in the throes of intercourse. The televised love-making is accompanied by Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concerto No. 2," and Al finds the same broadcast on all of the channels as he turns the dial. While Gregory is mesmerized by the spectacle, and the mother, Isabel, politely tries to find purpose and reason behind this aberration, Al suspects something more sinister. "I wouldn't doubt," he says, "but that we're in the middle of a nation-wide crisis." And an incredulous neighbor, Bradley, who comes over and watches the broadcast with them, sees it as the work of a national Other, stating, "I wouldn't want to stake my reputation, but I'll bet you it's foreign." Yet what is believed to be an influence from outside forces is actually an experiment perpetrated from the nation's capital. After the family witnesses the consummation of the intercourse, they see on the screen a scientist from the Penetrator Foundation in Washington, D.C., telling the television audience that what they have just seen is the first public demonstration of Penratat-O, "the new experimental project, designed by a team of physicists, electronic engineers, and qualified psychologists, to give you 'what you most want when you most want it.'" The television, in other words, reacts to the subconscious desires of its viewer—in this case, the adolescent Gregory—and displays whatever its audience wants. In this brief farce, Roth has given a double twist to manipulated plots. Not only is a citizen's own country responsible for what appears to be a conspiracy, but the individual himself is also implicated in the act. Once again, as in Our Gang and "On the Air," what appears to be "real" or "authentic" is nothing more than an experiment in communication and manipulation. What is more, it is significant that these efforts are contextualized within the aura of baseball, America's pastoral ideal and, as the title suggests, our "national pastime."  

Roth revisits the nexus of baseball and nationhood eight years later with the publication of The Great American Novel. In this conspiratorial tour de force—or, as Jay L. Halio rightly [and cleverly] puts it, "tour de farce"—Roth follows the exploits of the Ruppert Mundys, an ill-fated team of misfits and members of the now-forgotten Patriot League, a third league that had once rivaled the American and the National. Although his satirical subject matter is the great American pastime, he never sets out to
demythologize or deconstruct the game. On the contrary, his targets are the national ideals for which baseball has come to stand. As he states in a 1973 interview that he playfully conducted with himself, *The Great American Novel* was not written to ridicule 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.” In creating an outrageous countermythology of the great American sport, Roth deconstructs the myth of the American exceptionalism and exposes its many gaps and fissures, revealing the political hypocrisies, the social prejudices, and the ethnic-and gender-based stereotyping that unfortunately make up much of American history.

At the heart of this countermythology is conspiracy and its links to American identity, a theme that runs throughout the narrative. The owners of the Mundys “conspire” to sell off individual players of the once notable club and lease their ballpark to the government for military training, effectively creating a home team; the outrageously capitalistic antics of another Patriot League team owner, Frank Mazuma, are precipitated upon the Marxist-sounding idiom, “From each according to his stupidity, to each according to his greed,” and effectively undermine the game; the erratic trajectory of the Mundys’ pitcher’s infamous “pissball” (a baseball coated in urine) recalls that of the single bullet that supposedly killed John F. Kennedy; and the once legendary Patriot League player, Gil Gamesh, is exposed as a Soviet agent.

However, the most significant instance of conspiracy in *The Great American Novel* resides in the novel’s narration. The story of the hapless Rupert Mundys is told by sportswriter Word Smith, or Smitty. He sets the stage for the novel’s historical critique in that he is keenly aware of the fictions, rhetorical and otherwise, upon which the game is based. He, more than anyone, understands that baseball is not the all-American sport that it professes to be—a temporary escape from the cutthroat, violent, and hectic world of commercial concerns, where the timeless and tranquil nature of the game allows both players and spectators to connect in a shared community of fair play—but a business enterprise based solely upon economic and political interests. This is demonstrated early in the novel when Smitty, along with his fellow geriatrics, make a Chaucer-like pilgrimage to Cooperstown for the Hall of Fame elections. When Commissioneer Bowie Kuhn comes out to announce the results of the elections, he does not admit that “the BWAA was a cheat and a fraud and disgrace for having failed to announce [Smitty’s] vote submitted for Luke Gofannon of the extinguished Patriot League.” Instead, ironically enough, he states that nobody received enough votes to be elected and that this was an indication of the integrity of the institution. “The integrity of the institution,” Smitty incredulously repeats. “Next they will be talking about the maganismity of the Mafia and the blessing of the Bomb. They will use alliteration for anything these days, but most of all for lies.” Much as Tricky does in *Our Gang*, many of the characters in *The Great American Novel* use words to create a fiction that appears more believable than reality.

This emphasis on language as a masking, or a “plotting,” device is central to Smitty’s role as a narrator. As his name suggests, he goes to great lengths to define himself through words and possesses an almost maniacal affinity for alliteration. The significane of language, and its manipulative powers, is also inextricably linked to the game of baseball. Through his words, Smitty creates an alternative or counterhistory of baseball that does not coincide with the one readers believe to be true (similar to the ways that Roth creates his alternate history in *The Plot Against America*). Through his narrative conduit, Roth intermingles the fictitious elements of his story—the existence of the Patriot League and its ultimate demise—along with actual historical figures and events. This rhetorical move, in many ways, brings to mind the debate between Roland Agni and Isaac Ellis over the Jewish Wheaties. Having scientifically formulated a version of the cereal that ensures athletic success, Isaac quarrels with Roland over which brand of Wheaties is “real.” The ball player argues that eating the enhanced cereal and being assured of winning would be like throwing a game, to which Isaac counters that winning is what Wheaties is all about. Roland replies:

“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’!”

This comic inversion of authenticity, one that smacks of conspiracy, is what defines much of Smitty’s (deconstructed) history of baseball. More to the point, the slippery usage of language
calls into question the narrator’s ability to capture the “true” essence of the sport. Such problems recall General Oakhart’s suspicions of radio broadcast ballgames: “you could not begin to communicate through words, either printed or spoken, what this game was all about.”

Roth not only presents this linguistic ambiguity within the body of his tale, he invests it within the narration itself. Smitty is a narrator who is both believable and unreliable. On the one hand, he sincerely longs for the glory days of the Patriot League. His description of Luke Gofannon, his recollection of the Mundys’ previous owner, the legendary Glorious Mundy, as well as his general obsession with the league’s recognition in the Hall of Fame, all suggest as much. At the same time, the aging sports writer is generally seen as nothing more than a curmudgeonly and delusional kook. In his insistence on pursuing “the truth,” Smitty has more or less exiled himself from the baseball community and is no longer able to write its history. As such, he becomes disengaged from the “reality” of the sport and is left with no other alternative than to ask Chairman Mao to publish his book.

Of course, Roth is having it both ways here. When Smitty writes to the Communist Chinese leader, he bemoans the fact that American publishers refuse to handle his mad text, curiously enough entitled The Great American Novel. But a book by the same name is what sits in the reader’s hands, and seen in this way the novel both is and isn’t there. The reader is left to ask: Which is the real “Great American Novel”? In this narrative move, Roth has himself engaged in an act of “conspiratorial” inversion, taking us in one direction while at the same time undermining our expectations of which narrative direction to go. Such mischievousness helps to explain the many references to those whom Smitty calls “my precursors, my kinsmen,”—Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, writers known for their double meaning, misleading commentary, and romantic irony. This attitude is further demonstrated by a self-conscious recognition of the composition, or the constructedness, of the text. Through Smitty, Roth playfully foregrounds the constructed nature of his own novel, and he does so by borrowing from a variety of rhetorical conventions: realistic reportage, brief chapter summarizations reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Victorian novel, collections of letters, newspaper editorials, official committee transcripts, government reports, and timelines that speed the reader through the action (indeed, almost all of Chapter 7 is nothing more than a pastiche of styles). What Roth is suggesting here is that, just like the history created by his precarious narrator, the pastoral myths of baseball are nothing more than a “conspiracy” of constructed fictions. And, by association, so are the ideals of America. We see this at the end of the novel, where many of the Patriot League’s best defining figures—Angela Whittington Trust, Frank Mazuma, and the great Gil Games—are actually Soviet spies. Baseball, America’s great national pastime, is, much like the television in “The National Pastime,” under manipulation by forces both from without and from within.

In his 1973 self-conducted interview—another example of a “plot” undermining authenticity, this time staged against the reader—Roth comments on his narrator and his self-ironizing critique of America:

By attributing the book to Smitty, I intended, among other things, to call into question the novel’s “truthfulness”—to mock any claim the book might appear to make to be delivering up the answer—though in no way is this meant to discredit the book itself. The idea is simply to move off the question “What is America really like?” and on to the kind of fantasy (or rewriting of history) that a question so troublesome and difficult has tended of late to inspire.

The emphasis here is not on discovering the essence of America (or baseball, for that matter) but on the “fantasy” of the ideal, an alternative reimagining that underscores the manner in which narratives, or histories, are created. Roth goes on to reveal in his mock interview that his novel was an attempt “to establish a passageway from the imaginary that comes to seem real to the real that comes to seem imaginary, a continuum between the credible incredible and the incredible credible.” This narrative impulse anticipates, in many ways, what we find thirty-one years later in The Plot Against America. In that text, Roth creates an alternate history so real that it does not seem “alternate” at all. Reading the experiences of the [fictional] Roth family, one could almost believe that Lindbergh did indeed win the 1940 presidential election. He creates an America that never really existed, but one that actually could have, given the right circumstances. Put bluntly, he writes of America while refusing to pin down its “true” essence. In The Great American Novel, Roth never claims to know what America is “really like.” Instead, he invests his narrative energies into “not knowing,” a phrase that
in its negative signification suggests a complete opening up of fictional possibility and becomes the basis for much of his writing. "Not knowing, or no longer knowing for sure, is just what perplexes many," he asserts during his self-conducted interview. "That, if I may say so, is why I invented that paranoid fantasist Word Smith ... to be [purportedly] the author of The Great American Novel. What he describes is what America is really like to one like him." In other words, it is never the real America that we see through the words of Smitty, but it is nonetheless one whose possible reading is drawn out through plotting—in both senses of the word—and conspiracy.

The paranoia of Smitty anticipates the "perpetual fear" we will find in The Plot Against America. Indeed, many of Roth's early works set the stage for what is arguably the high point of his career, the fiction that he produced during the 1990s and on into the next millennium. In reading such later works, we would do well to see them not as departures from his early experimental days—when he produced what many see as ill-defined and problematic minor texts—but the kinsmen of those very fictions that have lately fallen out of favor with many of Roth's critics. The Plot Against America is a fruitful starting point to revisit such neglected (and even uninvestigated) works such as Our Gang, The Great American Novel, "On the Air," and "The National Pastime," and doing so through the prism of comedy and conspiracy. Contextualizing its fictions in this way, readers will not only be able to see the trajectory of Roth's career from a more informed vantage point, but they may even begin to see plots they never knew existed.

Notes

1. Alternate histories, a subgenre of speculative or science fiction, are premised on a trajectory of events that diverge from actual recorded history. As such, Roth's 2004 novel could be categorized as "science fiction," or better yet, "speculative fiction." Indeed, The Plot Against America won the 2005 Sidewise Award for Alternate History.

2. The literary scene was so abuzz about the contemporary political contexts that Roth felt impelled to write an explanatory essay as to the genesis of the novel. It would be a mistake, he said, "to take this book as a roman à clef to the present moment in America," and then explained in detail how he was doing nothing more than engaging in speculative narrative play. But then in true Rothian fashion, he concluded the piece with a counterclaim that undermined his previous disclaimer, calling George W. Bush, "a man unfit to run a hardware store let alone a nation like this one, and who has merely reaffirmed for me the maxim that informed the writing of all these books and that makes our lives as Americans as precarious as anyone else's." ("The Story behind The Plot Against America," New York Times Book Review, September 19, 2004, 12.)

3. Here I differ from Elaine R. Safer in that I do not see the comic overtones in The Plot Against America, at least in ways that can be unambiguously labeled as such. Any "humor" generated in this novel is fleeting at best, entirely undermined by the fear that consumes the narrative. The irony underlying Lindbergh's presidency has more in common with the science fiction subgenre of alternate history than it does with farce. For a brief discussion of comedy in The Plot Against America, see Safer, Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 152–54 and 156–57.

4. By saying "critically ignored," I do not mean to imply that works such as Our Gang and The Great American Novel are no longer explored in the scholarly press. They are occasionally, but the attention that they receive is paltry at best, a sporadic tip-of-the-hat to the more experimental and uneven early career of Roth that helped set the stage for his later phase. Indeed, critical attention toward such works as Operation Shylock, American Pastoral, and The Human Stain has all but overshadowed any new readings of Roth's earlier works.


6. Ibid., 168.

7. Ibid., 172.

8. Swift's quote is from part 4 of Gulliver's Travels, "A Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," where the narrator recalls his talk with his Master on the nature of verbal representation and human's "Faculty of Lying." The Orwell epigraph, from the 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," reveals Roth's intentions perfectly: "Political language... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."


10. Ibid., 181–82.

11. Ibid., 102.


14. It may be no accident that Lippman's first name is the middle name of the story's author. Given Lippman's offensiveness and manic behavior, one may not be too off base in reading him as an example of Roth's comedic self-deprecation.
16. Ibid., 28.
17. Ibid., 25.
18. Ibid., 23. Notice the joke on "only more so." What could be more "real" than real! Here, as throughout the story, Roth is using comedic rhetoric to throw open our understanding of authenticity.
19. Ibid., 28.
20. To my knowledge, there is no reference to this play anywhere in all of Roth scholarship. In fact, many readers may be surprised to learn that Roth ever published a work of drama. While there are drafts of several unfinished plays and screenplays in the Roth Papers housed at the Library of Congress, "The National Pastime" is Roth's only published work of drama.
22. Ibid., 55. One is reminded of Tricky's villainization of Denmark in *Our Gang*.
23. Ibid., 56.
27. Ibid., 24.
28. Ibid., 302.
29. Ibid., 90.
30. Ibid., 400.
31. Roth will create the same narratological conundrum twenty years later in *Operation Shylock*, just another example of how the earlier works can be best read through the lens of his later fiction.
32. Ibid., 37.
34. Ibid., 80.
35. Ibid., 79.

The Myths of Summer:
Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel*
Ben Siegel

Any careful discussion today of contemporary writing must point up the vigorous attempts by American novelists to reduce to fiction this nation’s recent social confusions and anxieties. Their frenetic efforts help explain why in postwar years the American novel has taken on a new or different look. For the "serious" works written since World War II resemble less and less those straightforward chronicles of national life that an earlier generation of Americans read as undergraduate and graduate students—those by, for example, Anderson, Lewis, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Wolfe, Faulkner, and Steinbeck. Those novels [a few by Faulkner perhaps excepted], whatever their merits or demerits, were direct, realistic narratives of people whom a reader could recognize and accept or reject. The readers who wanted the ambiguous or even the "nonmeaning" could turn to poetry—to the poems of, among others, Pound, Eliot, and Stevens.

They need no longer do so. Now, a reader may find as much of the complex and grotesque and irrational in fiction. For America's novelists [Michael Chabon and Nathan Englander, for instance], like those abroad, have found life here so baffling and unreal that they have felt the need to give freer and freer rein to their imaginations and rhetoric. Not surprisingly, therefore, these writers, in order to capture this society's present confusions, rely increasingly on fantasy and fable, on imaginative excess and adventurous form or technique; employing a style that tends to the "cool, farcical, zany, and slapstick," they concentrate on the thinness of line between dream and reality, fancy and fact, comedy and pathos. The imaginative and stylistic complexities confronting these writers, as Geoffrey Wolff points out, are formidable indeed. "The comic imagination," he writes, "seems to have been corroded by that American 'reality.' In a