The Currency of Europe

Written and Illustrated America
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."

"[T]hese pieces reveal to me," wrote Roth in the introduction to his collection of essays, Reading Myself and Others (1967), 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 about between today could not be better described. (xi)

Unsurprisingly for a writer who has made such use of the unreliable narrator—in particular Roth's literary doppelgänger Nathan Zuckerman—"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 shuffling 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 the first-person account of the autobiographical novelist's attempt to write a new autobiographical novel. (xvi)

We should, of course, expect no less from an author whose Operation Shylock 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, not as a writer of fiction rather than as a philosopher or a social scientist he is, 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 novelist 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. 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 perhaps—who exist in both worlds. The trilogy is positively bursting with them: Joe DiMaggio, Saddam Hussein, Bill Clinton, Linda Lovelace, 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 seem 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 the fact 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. Tuint's baseball novels The Kid from Tomkinsville, Iron Duke, The Duke Decides, and Rookie of the Year (57). 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 in 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. (53)

Elsewhere in the texts, characters—especially Zuckerman—repeatedly 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. In Cole's novel, Zuckerman likens the central figure of The Human Stain—to Gustave Aschenbach from Thomas Mann's Death in Venice (1917) and Eve Frame, a protagonist of I Married A Communist, quotes Emily Dickinson to explain her love for Ira Ringold, the communist in question (56). Indeed, Roth's trilogy is a veritable library of references to other authors and other texts: Vogue magazine, The Daily News,
No evidence of handwriting or printing in this image.