

Velichka D. Ivanova, ed. 2014. *Philip Roth and World Literature: Transatlantic Perspectives and Uneasy Passages*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press. 349 pp. ISBN: 978-1-60497-857-5.

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Several years ago the Philip Roth Society held an *International Roth Panel* at the American Literature Association in Boston, Massachusetts. Scholars from the US, Switzerland, Italy and Spain discussed transatlantic connections in Roth's fiction as well as the international reception of his works. In 2015, "Roth's transdisciplinary and transcultural appeal" was the focus of an entire conference, which took place at the Partium Christian University in Oradea, Romania. This international direction in Roth's scholarship comes as no surprise given the American author's long-time fascination with world literature, not only as a writer whose works often engage in intertextual dialogues with non-American texts but also as a reader, editor and a university lecturer. However, as Velichka Ivanova, the editor of the collection reviewed here, points out, the general reader still lacks "awareness of Roth's engagement with the traditions of world literature" (11). Although this collection might not influence popular notions of the American author in view of its academic character, there is no doubt that it constitutes an important and valuable contribution to Philip Roth studies.

The volume is divided into four parts which in turn consist of either three or four chapters each. Overall, the collection is balanced and well-structured, with the third section being the most coherent. In addition, the Further Reading list is bound to be useful to anyone interested in the comparative reading of Roth's fiction. Many scholars will appreciate Ivanova's detailed and well-researched introduction which reviews existing literature on Roth's (inter)national connections and foregrounds the need "to broaden even further the intersections and concepts through which comparisons can be made and sustained" (12). Although Roth's intertextual links have been tackled in numerous essays and a few book-length studies, the collection "represents the first entire volume comprising exclusively comparative studies" aimed at assessing the ways in which Roth "has responded to his precursors and contemporaries" (13). The volume's international character is reinforced by the choice of contributors from Europe, Canada, the US and Asia.

The organizing metaphor of the work is the notion of *transatlantic*: “a space of intersections and continuous back-and-forth crossing” (13). In adopting this liminal perspective, the contributors attempt to move beyond the practice of “influence-spotting” within Roth’s highly intertextual works to situate them instead in the realm of world literature, with the aim of “rethink[ing] established definitions of Roth’s literary identity as homogeneous and stable” (14). In most cases, this project is successfully accomplished. In accordance with the inclusive framework of the transatlantic, the first part of the collection, entitled “American Precursors,” studies interrelationships and dialogues between Roth’s *American Trilogy* novels and the works of canonical American authors and thinkers. Thus, in “Roth’s Economy of Living,” Matthew McKenzie Davis convincingly demonstrates how the fluid notion of “community” shapes the narrators’ perspectives in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854). Despite living apart from human dwellings, i.e., a community in the traditional sense of the word, Nathan Zuckerman and Thoreau’s narrator are nonetheless part of several communities with which they temporarily align themselves in order to tell the characters’ stories and instruct the reader. In doing so, they also question their own modes of living. *The Human Stain* is also the subject of Ann Basu’s intricate essay—“Spooking America with Ellison and Hawthorne”—which examines Roth’s take on American identity “in light of late-twentieth-century concerns about politics and race” (47) and in relation to the dominant *ghost presences* in the novel: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Ellison. Unpacking the ambivalent term *spooks* which sets in motion the action of *The Human Stain*, Basu demonstrates how the American author plays with deep-rooted notions of sexual purity and racial (in)visibility to question the “ideological myth of racial purity” as reflected not only in Coleman Silk’s story but also in the novel’s highly nuanced language (62).

The question of national identity is also the focus of Theodora Tsimpouki’s study, which draws a thought-provoking comparison between the treatment of American nationhood in Stephen Crane’s short story “The Blue Hotel” (1898) and Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997). By examining both works in the light of the discourse of American exceptionalism in the 1890s and 1960s respectively, “The Frontier, the Dreamer, and the Dream” shows that Crane and Roth not only problematize the dominant narrative of American nationhood in their corresponding contexts but also “uncover it as an imaginative social construct” (88).

The last essay in this section, Andy Connolly’s “Roth and the New York Intellectuals,” explores *I Married a Communist* (1998) in relation to Lionel Trilling’s and Philip Rahv’s ideas on the shape of the American novel. Drawing on Rahv’s proposition that American fiction should represent a balance between a highbrow intellectual tradition—*paleface*—and raw, emotional American writing which foregrounds the primacy of experience over culture—*redskin*—Connolly argues that while *I Married a Communist* engages with both traditions, Roth ultimately transgresses this synthetic literary model (107). The result is a unique form of

redface literature embodying “the turbulent interaction between the greater world of external facts and the inner machinations of the private authorial imagination in postwar American life” (120).

The second part of the collection envisions transatlantic connections between the American author and European literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Accordingly, in chapter five, entitled “Within a Year my Passion will Be Dead,” Gustavo Sánchez-Canales examines the influence of the notion of “romantic disillusionment,” as depicted in Anton Chekhov’s short stories, on Roth’s *The Professor of Desire* (1977). By setting the travails of Chekhov’s characters against David Kepesh’s persistent inability to reconcile his need for emotional balance with his instinctual drives, the critic demonstrates that Roth’s protagonist shares “Chekhov’s pessimistic vision of love,” which in turn makes him suffer romantic disillusionment himself (137). The remaining essays, both by Polish scholars, offer a fresh look at Roth’s most discussed work: *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). The strength of these studies lies in juxtaposing Roth’s classic with works that some readers may be unfamiliar with, but which are fascinating in their own right. Thus, Marta Mędrzak-Conway proposes in “Between Trieste and New York” a comparative reading of Roth’s novel and that of the Jewish-Italian author Italo Svevo. Although the question of whether *La Coscienza di Zeno* (1923) had an actual bearing on the character of Alexander Portnoy remains a matter of speculation, the scholar convincingly argues that both works not only share certain striking affinities but also pertain to a common transatlantic literary space, “the great Middle European Jewish literary tradition,” which expanded into post-war America through the writings of such authors as Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth himself (154). Taking his cue from Derek Parker Royal’s (2007, 23-24) oft-cited argument that Roth’s fiction calls for intertextual reading rather than a traditional analysis of literary influence, Marek Paryz recognizes in “My Whole Work Shrank” common sensibilities in Roth’s portrayal of Portnoy against his Jewish-American milieu and Witold Gombrowicz’s Polish character Joey in *Ferdydurke* (1937). As both characters struggle against the politics of standardization which their corresponding communities try to impose on them, they also seek to demarcate “a space for the self” through various performative acts as evidenced, among others, in their transgressive speech (160).

Given Roth’s well-known engagement with the Other Europe, it comes as no surprise that the third part of the collection is dedicated to “The Experience of Prague and Central Europe.” Importantly, the three essays diverge from the scholarly tendency to discuss Roth’s Eastern European connections in relation either to his literary father Franz Kafka or his Czech counterpart Milan Kundera, focusing instead on, to paraphrase Norman Ravvin, less-acknowledged presences in the American author’s literary microcosm (1997). This is clearly visible in Eitan Kensky’s “The Yiddish of Flaubert,” which argues that Roth’s Eastern European journey is in fact a journey into “the meanings of Jewish writing” (202) and Jewish literary tradition, whose tangible

outcome is *The Prague Orgy* (1985). Although Eric Sandberg's "Even the Faintest Imprint" acknowledges the importance of two familiar intertexts—Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* (1888) and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915)—it is not so much to scrutinize their literary influence on *The Prague Orgy* as to read the novel as a broader meditation on intertextuality not only between texts but also between readers and texts. This part of the collection concludes with David Rampton's essay which studies, as the title informs us, an "odd, tense kinship" between Philip Roth and his Czech friend and writer Ivan Klíma. Roth famously called Klíma his "principal reality instructor" (2002, 44), responsible for introducing him to cultural life in Czechoslovakia in the times of Soviet normalization. Yet in this essay Rampton is not interested in the way Klíma facilitated Roth's insight into dissident culture, but unfolds instead an important literary connection between both authors; a complex kinship which, though based on certain common traits, is in fact best revealed through difference.

The last section is devoted to analysis of miscellaneous literary passages between the works of Roth and "Western European and Contemporary World Literature." It starts with Velichka Ivanova's perceptive study "Philip Roth's Summoning of Everyman," which takes us back to the realm of medieval morality plays. In her discussion of Roth's *Everyman* (2006), Ivanova argues that the American author reinvents the medieval play thus "offer[ing] a creative response to the concerns of contemporary humanity," as filtered through the life story of his modern-day protagonist (251). In chapter twelve, "Dialogical and Monological Madness," Till Kinzel offers an interesting reading of a work which has received relatively little scholarly attention. Kinzel sees *Our Gang* (1971) in terms of a "hybrid novel" or an "orality play" which reveals a tight interdependence between language and power and which, despite being rooted in the context of twentieth-century American politics, harks back to European philosophic and literary traditions. In a similar vein, Aristi Trendel's erudite essay "Rebellion in *Sabbath's Theater*" posits that in the novel (1995) Roth created a figure of "the American Jewish male" gone "European" (271). The epithet "European" refers to Albert Camus's philosophical understanding of rebellion, and Trendel perceives Sabbath as a quintessential rebel who in repudiating every moral norm does in fact struggle against the inevitable absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence. In broader terms, the scholar argues that "[l]ike Camus, Roth calls for a renewed fidelity to true rebellion as a sort of methodological doubt that can accommodate the limits of thought" (284). The last piece in the collection symbolically closes the discussion on the transatlantic voices in Roth's fiction by bringing up a subject which has informed the author's later writing. Alice Hall's "Aging and Autobiography" discusses Roth's *Exit Ghost* (2007) alongside J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). This well-argued study shows how both works negotiate a complex interrelation between the writing process and physical and mental aging. Drawing attention to formal and content elements in both novels, Hall examines the ways in which Roth's and Coetzee's fiction

engage the notion of (auto)biography to produce a singular form of storytelling characterized by narrative richness, formal creativity and intertextual references.

To conclude, the collection lives up to the goals envisaged in Ivanova's introductory piece. In most essays, Roth's works are critically illuminated through encounter and comparison with American and non-American texts and authors. Although some works are discussed more than once, which means that the number of primary sources is relatively limited, these "bifocal" readings serve to bring out Roth's creative and formal ingenuity, providing fresh critical insights. Interestingly, the transatlantic encounters explored in the collection take place on a strictly male-to-male basis. While this is hardly a fault, it would be interesting to hear Roth's powerful voice contrasted with an equally strong female one. Nevertheless, the collection does justice to the novelist's personal culture and literary erudition, casting him as embedded in American tradition but also receptive to world literature. Simultaneously, the comparative method of analysis employed in the essays highlights the dialogic nature of the transatlantic literary space, suggesting new, inspiring ways of reading Roth beyond the customary category of Jewish-American writing.

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Received 21 February 2015

Revised version accepted 10 January 2016

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