

# A Fascinating Case Study of Jewish-Irish Literary Connections

Review of Dan O'Brien, *Fine Meshwork. Philip Roth, Edna O'Brien, and Jewish-Irish Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2020)

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The more than thirty volumes of the Jewish American writer, Philip Roth (1933–2018), who would have been ninety this year, have inspired an overwhelming quantity of various critical views from the derogatory to the appreciative or even rhapsodising since his debut with *Goodbye, Columbus!* in 1959. Among the recent studies, there is an increasing number of comparative works, conveying and reinforcing assumptions about Roth's cosmopolitanism and textual connections with other cultures and literatures. Dan O'Brien's monograph, *Fine Meshwork: Philip Roth, Edna O'Brien, and Jewish-Irish Literature* is unique in that it analyses several novels by Roth in comparison with selected works of the Irish Edna O'Brien (1930–), a literary friend of his for over four decades. In the introduction to *Fine Meshwork*, Dan O'Brien is eager to explain why, strange as it seems at first glance, the Jewish American male author and the London-based Irish Catholic female writer can be the joint subject of his book. One of the links binding them is that both partake of diasporic existence and—as Dan O'Brien argues—living in between cultures, they have developed a transnational approach to transmitting the human experience in fiction. Their writings, the critic continues, favour heterogeneity

at the expense of “concepts of purity: religious purity, nationalist purity, racial purity, historical purity, and literary purity” by means of allusions, borrowings, and intertextuality which defy barriers of time and space, thus challenging conventionally established principles of canon building (6–9).

Dan O’Brien introduces the two authors by placing them into relevant contexts, and provides informative examples of the ways in which they supported each other over the years of their friendship. When Edna O’Brien published a volume of her selected short fiction in 1984 under the Yeatsian title *A Fanatic Heart*, Roth wrote a preface to it and, in turn, another collection of short fiction of hers, *The Love Object* (2013), Edna O’Brien dedicated to Roth, who then recommended her novel *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) on its cover as her masterpiece (56–58, 61). The main title of Dan O’Brien’s book, *Fine Meshwork*, is taken from Roth’s talk with the Irish writer, originally published in *The New York Times* and later included in Roth’s collected nonfiction: “I am struck, particularly in the stories of rural Ireland during the war years, by the vastness and precision of your recall. . . . The result is a fine piece of meshwork, a net of detail that enables you to contain all the longing and pain and remorse that surge through the fiction” (Roth, *Why Write?* 267). After Roth’s death, Edna O’Brien published an obituary in *faber*, calling him a “great comic literary conquistador” whose works inspire the use of a multiplicity of attributes for their characterisation. Indeed, in most of his novels, the absurd and the grotesque accompany the tragic and distressing, so pervasive in one of Roth’s avowed masters, Samuel Beckett. At the end of her obituary, Edna O’Brien recalls their final meeting and Roth’s last words to her on taking farewell: “You’re a valiant kid” (“The Great Comic Literary Conquistador”), which has certainly been true of both of them.

Chapters 2–6 in Dan O’Brien’s book identify parallels between selected works of the two writers, beginning with the debuting ones published only a year apart, *Goodbye Columbus* (1959), a volume of a novella and short stories, and *The Country Girls* (1960), a trilogy. The critic dwells on the mixed reception these brave works met with at that time because of their sincere approach to taboo subjects such as the contradictory experiences of Jewishness and the barriers to the free expression of female sexuality. Edna O’Brien’s trilogy, the critic contends, had many opponents, as it unmaskes the “hypocrisy of the Irish state” and exposes “women’s subordinate position in a patriarchal culture” (65, 68). In *Goodbye Columbus*, Dan O’Brien astutely pinpoints the scene in which the Jewish protagonist of the eponymous novella, Neil visits Saint Patrick Cathedral in New York and contemplates

his relationship with his girlfriend, Brenda as well as “his ambivalence toward the wealth and materiality of her family.” For Dan O’Brien, “[it] is noteworthy that this moment occurs in an Irish Catholic space, perhaps an acknowledgment that the Jewish leap into American affluence mimicked prior assimilative success” (87). Roth’s choice of the Irish name, Neil, cannot be accidental, either.

The third chapter of *Fine Meshwork* examines the two writers’ use of the monologue form in their respective novels, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) by Roth and *Night* (1972) by Edna O’Brien. Again, neither of the two works enjoyed a smooth enough reception, which Dan O’Brien attributes to the fact that most critics paid attention to the explicit sexual openness of the novels, ignoring their “implicit politics” (89). Sexually charged Portnoy rebels against his upbringing by traditionalist Jewish parents according to restrictive rules, but this is only the surface. Digging deeper, Dan O’Brien states that Portnoy does not suffer from threats of anti-Semitism to his individuality like the previous generation any more, much rather from the misplaced defensive view of Jews “as paragons” and superior to Christians (91). The monological narration in Edna O’Brien’s *Night* is by the Irish Catholic Mary Hooligan, an ordinary middle-aged woman working in England, who calmly dwells on her transgressive sexual encounters and violations of conventional expectations of female behaviour. Comparably to what irritates Alex Portnoy, Mary recalls her childhood (in the poor post-independence Ireland of the 1930s) as an unpleasant time: “I don’t know anyone who hasn’t grown up in a madhouse, whose catechising hasn’t been Do this, Do that, Don’t do this, Do do it, I’ll cut the tongue out of you, How bloody dare you, D’you hear?” (O’Brien, *Night* 38). Dan O’Brien emphasises that, through Mary’s humiliating experiences, the novel offers a sharp critique of the dogmatic moral rigour of the Catholic Church which supported the exclusivist nationalist ideology of the new Irish state (105–107). As to their masters, both writers have been inspired by Joyce throughout their respective careers. Dan O’Brien thinks that “Roth draws on Leopold Bloom to confect Portnoy” and he finds Mary Hooligan’s speech reminiscent of Molly Bloom’s interior monologue (102–103). Part of this observation is questionable since Bloom and Portnoy differ quite a lot but Mary, raving in bed mainly about her sexual life at night, might be seen as modelled on Molly more convincingly.

In the fourth chapter, Edna O’Brien’s early memoir, *Mother Ireland* (1976), and Roth’s *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981) come under scrutiny. Although the latter is a novel, it is not too far from a memoir as its Jewish protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman,

the writer's alterego also keeps on inquiring into the forces that shape his own artistic identity. For Dan O'Brien, the Irish writer's influence on Roth is evidenced here by his construction of an Irish actress character called Caesara O'Shea, born in the picturesque West of Ireland like Edna O'Brien herself. Moreover, there is textual borrowing in Roth's novel from *Mother Ireland* in the use of a myth of origin about the Hebrew lady Caesara, who "set out with a flock of three men and fifty women, sailing through the Red Sea ... to Ireland, Isle of Destiny, ... Her people are the first to be interred there, the first in a long line of hardy Irish ghosts" (O'Brien, *Mother Ireland* 12). Dan O'Brien identifies Caesara under the name Cessair in Celtic mythology, granddaughter of Noah, and argues that this myth in a book about growing up in postcolonial Ireland underscores the heterogeneous sources of Irish culture due to various historical migrations, by which the writer challenges nationalist myths of Irishness as racially "monolithic" (117–118).

Roth's Caesara is built on the mythical figure in *Mother Ireland* and functions to address issues of race and ethnicity in 1970s America. The chapter considers parallels between Caesara and Alvin Pepler, a shadow figure of Zuckerman, who plagues him with questions and the story of his failed aspirations to become a writer. Pepler, Dan O'Brien contends, "is the embodiment of the white ethnic revival" and also its contradictory manifestations in the context of the "1970s fetishisation of ethnic identity" (124–125). Caesara plays leading roles in Hollywood-made films about the Irish, their sorrowful history and happier life in the New World, presenting a "studio-constructed identity" which ensures that "her appeal to American audiences appears to be as much ethnic as it is erotic" in Dan O'Brien's view, who adds that her "on-screen image symbolises how popular cultural products can manipulate history and cultivate myth" (127–128). Beside the figure of Caesara, *Zuckerman Unbound* abounds in references to Irish literature. A prominent example of this, Dan O'Brien notes, is Nathan and Caesara's discovery, on their first meeting, that both of them have read Richard Ellmann's monumental biography of James Joyce. The critic calls it "an unusual topic of flirtation" (121) but it may be seen as more than that: it suggests the absurdity of a close relationship between the ethnic groups the two characters represent, while also contributing to layers of the comic in Roth's novels. The impossibility of a lasting relationship between the two of them is intertextually underscored by Caesara quoting from Yeats's "Broken Dreams," a poem inspired by the poet's never consummated lifelong love for the actress-cum-revolutionary Maud Gonne, in her letter of farewell to Nathan. Dan O'Brien makes mention

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of Roth's other intertextual or paratextual borrowings from the Irish treasury, for example the inclusion of the entire text of Yeats's poem "Meru" in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995) and evoking implicit details of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* in *The Humbling* (2009).

In the fifth chapter of his monograph, Dan O'Brien reads outstanding works by the two writers, fruits of their most productive years, the 1990s, which delve deeply into the entangled connections of historical events, complex social issues and personal lives. Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) and Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997), grounded as they are in twentieth-century Irish and American contexts, show the shared influence of William Faulkner in terms of exploring "racial identity and hidden histories" (135), the critic claims. In *House of Splendid Isolation*, the setting is the Republic of Ireland where the past visiting on the present (the 1980s) appears in the form of illegal paramilitary activities in Northern Ireland, which remained part of the United Kingdom following the Treaty between Britain and Ireland in 1921. The female protagonist of the novel is Josie O'Meara, widow of an alcoholic farmer who abused her physically. Her memories of him attest the connection between patriarchal misuse of power and extreme republicanism; he was hiding weapons of the IRA which cost him his life. In the present, Josie discovers that a young IRA man, McGreevy, is hiding in her house from the authorities. Obviously a terrorist, yet he is portrayed as an intelligent man who serves the cause of certain principles taking their roots in the troubled history of the country. Dan O'Brien convincingly argues that in spite of the huge difference between them in terms of gender and politics, the two protagonists of *House of Splendid Isolation* learn to communicate with and become able to understand the "other" (147).

Roth's *American Pastoral* focuses on Seymour Levov, nicknamed "the Swede," the descendant of Jewish immigrants from Sweden. As a young man, he seemed to be the incarnation of the American Dream: he was a successful sportsman, assimilated to white American culture by becoming a prosperous factory owner, married a Christian woman, with whom he had a daughter he adored. However, his sudden death in his 60s shocks the writer Nathan Zuckermann, a one-time schoolmate, who tries to understand this catastrophe by investigating what transpired during the years which led to the Swede's divorce from his first wife and remarriage. The most important piece of information he gains is that the Swede's daughter, Merry (Meredith) became a terrorist while protesting against the American war in Vietnam and fled from her parents' home. Dan O'Brien argues that "[t]he entire

novel becomes a meditation on the possible causes of Merry's actions: her stutter, the incestuous kiss [from her father in childhood], ... her parents's intermarriage, her secret baptism, or simply a sign of history's inexplicability, a rejection of clear-cut cause and effect" (155). The novel closes without a solution to this conundrum. As in Faulkner, the root of the problems represented in the book, Dan O'Brien proposes, lies in the "racial and sexual tensions" that tore the fiction of "consensus America ... asunder" (155).

The title of Edna O'Brien's novel, *House of Splendid Isolation*, is obviously ironical. "Splendid isolation" was the term used for the decision of nineteenth-century Britain not to make alliances with and isolate itself from other countries, while "house" often functioned as a metonymy of Ireland in literary texts. Josie's house and, by extension, the Republic of Ireland could never really separate itself from the Troubles in the North as shown by her fate of being shot dead by the authorities who mistook her for the IRA man in hiding. As Roth's novel progresses, the irony of the title, *American Pastoral*, gradually surfaces in its reference to an innocent land that America has never been, except in the mind of people such as the Swede, who tried to isolate themselves from the problematic undercurrents of their society. Here, Dan O'Brien finds a parallel to the house image referring to historical unrest in the Irish novel: with his first wife, Dawn, the Swede moved into a late-eighteenth-century big stone house, the foundations of which were probably built by slave labour (161). Concerning sexual tensions and gender, the critic pinpoints the Swede's failure to notice that his love of the old house was hardly shared by Dawn who felt it confining and decided to escape from both the house and her myopic husband, her "narrative ... symbolising the growing consciousness of women in the 1960s and 1970s to the gendered societal structures previously so pervasive as to be near invisible" (163). Dawn's story, looked at through an outsider's lens warrants such a reading, in spite of the fact that Roth himself did not care about feminist approaches.

In the sixth and final chapter of his book, Dan O'Brien selects from the two authors' novels of the new century, aiming to show that, in these, both reinforce their earlier interest in racial and social traumas while extending them toward the expression of solidarity with those of other groups or nations. The respective plots of the books, Dan O'Brien continues, present "complex, unresolved parables of hospitality and hostility, concord and discord" (167–168). As a primary example, in *The Plot Against America* (2004) by Roth, the critic highlights the writer's sinister vision of an anti-Semitic government ruling America in the 1940s and its ambitions

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to administer exclusion of and large-scale discrimination against minorities, which imagined politics turn ethnic groups into enemies of one another and instill divisive tensions into ordinary family lives as well. With some stretching of the theme, Dan O'Brien argues that the plight of the American Jews in the novel "brings a fresh perspective to the real predicament for African Americans living under southern segregation and northern bias" (172). Roth's last novel, *Nemesis* (2010), is also set in the years of Second World War, and its characters also experience fear and suffer from unpredictability; yet, the cause is different: an imagined, quickly spreading epidemic of polio. Regarding the theme, Dan O'Brien is right to say that *Nemesis* works as a "companion piece" to *The Plot Against America* (196), also because it represents ethnic tensions. Moreover, it reaches back, I suggest, to *American Pastoral* in that, just before the epidemic hits them, Jewish children and their teachers in a summer camp entertain themselves with the impersonation of Indians and the mimicry of their culture, which can be seen as another literary manifestation of hidden histories of and uncomfortable truths about American treatment of the natives.

By Edna O'Brien, *The Light of Evening* (2006) and *The Little Red Chairs* (2015) are discussed in the same chapter of *Fine Meshwork*. In both novels, solidarity with other peoples features on an international scale. The action of *The Little Red Chairs* is set in several locations, including Coonoila, a village in the west of Ireland, London, then Sarajevo, focal point of the 1992–1995 Bosnian War, and, finally, the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Like *The Plot Against America*, Dan O'Brien says, *The Little Red Chairs* dismantles "the boundaries between the political and the personal" (193–194) and also includes a historical character, in this case Radovan Karadžić, first president of the Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who was found guilty of multiple criminal acts and responsible for massive genocide. *The Little Red Chairs* introduces him as a fugitive arriving in Coonoila, then describes his arrest and finally his trial. However, the strongest emphasis is not on Karadžić but on a range of characters in search of a new home, because they had to leave their country of birth, escaping prosecution and violence. At the program, celebrating his 80th birthday in 2013, Roth gave a talk entitled "The Ruthless Intimacy of Fiction," which offers a kind of writer's creed: "... it is from the force of its uncompromising attentiveness, from its *physicalness*, that the realistic novel, the insatiable realistic novel with its multitude of realities, derives its ruthless intimacy" (Roth, *Why Write?* 393). Edna O'Brien's choice of title for *The Little Red Chairs*, written shortly after the above quoted speech, exemplifies the symbolic importance

of the physical: 11,541 red chairs, among them 643 small ones for children can be seen placed in the long main street of Sarajevo, in memory of those who died during the siege of the city.

All in all, one can agree with Dan O'Brien's conclusion that a basic similarity between the two writers can be grasped in their ambition to represent inner conflicts which function as prisms to show and interpret trends in the larger world through them. Like many other comparative studies, the author of *Fine Meshwork* selects from the writers' works for the purpose of elaborating on common points. As a result of this approach, major novels may have only a marginal presence in the analyses, as it happens, for instance, to *The Human Stain* (2000) in this study. A shortcoming of Dan O'Brien's book is that its focus remains chiefly thematic and character-centred, paying less attention to artistic strategies such as shifting viewpoints and manipulations of structure, with which Philip Roth and Edna O'Brien intertwine fact and fiction, the "real" and the imagined in their novels. Nevertheless, this monograph deserves praise for its range of new ideas in relation to the works it discusses as well as for the inspiration its readers can take from it to read about, or even pursue in new studies, other literary fruits of the "Jewish-Irish" consciousness and experience.

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