

Jewish Historical Studies

Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

Review:

“Something Dreadful and Grand”: American Literature and the Irish-Jewish Unconscious, Stephen Watt

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How to cite: Bornstein, G. “*Something Dreadful and Grand*”: American Literature and the Irish-Jewish Unconscious, Stephan Watt.’ *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2017, 49(1): 21, pp. 246-248. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2017v49.061>

Published: 30 March 2018

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal’s standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

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“Something Dreadful and Grand”: *American Literature and the Irish-Jewish Unconscious*, Stephen Watt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), ISBN: 978-0-190-22795-1, pp. 257, \$78.00.

In an epigraph to the Brendan Behan section of his book, Stephen Watt cites Ulick O'Connor's remark that “New York humor is and was largely an Irish-Jewish creation” (p. 173). Less positively, John Dos Passos's bigoted character Uncle Jeff Herf in *Manhattan Transfer* complains that “New York is no longer what it used to be. . . . City's overrun with kikes and low Irish” (p. 29). Taken together, the two remarks display a radical ambivalence about Jewish-Irish connections for which Watt, a well-known scholar of Irish and American drama, borrows Zygmunt Bauman's term “allo-Semitism” to denote a radical ambivalence towards Jews and coins the corresponding term “allo-Hibernianism” to describe a parallel ambivalence towards Irish people. A further coinage invokes “the circum-Atlantic world” to denote northern transatlantic interactions between Ireland and England, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other. As such examples suggest, Watt's fondness for unusual terms related to theory of the last fifty years can sometimes render his argument hard to follow: those who enjoy such theories will welcome them, but others may be less enthusiastic.

Unsurprisingly, Watt's book does not aim at comprehensive overall narrative, but it does pursue its argument through five more or less chronologically arranged chapters featuring mostly drama. The first and most theoretical one sets up the overall argument of the book as tracing the “Irish-Jewish unconscious” through the last two centuries with its ambivalences (signified by the prefix “allo-”). The theory-inflected narrative does not have time for detailed readings (those come later), but still could do more with works like the Irish poet Paul Muldoon's *Moy Sand and Gravel* or the Irish Jew David Marcus's punningly titled *Oughtobiography*. The second chapter, “The Cultural Work of Immigrant Melodrama”, examines Stage Jews, adaptations of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Anzia Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements*, Mike Gold's one-act play *Money*, and Dion Boucicault's melodrama *The Colleen Bawn* along with earlier plays: Zangwill's *The Melting Pot* and the Irish-American novelist James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan trilogy; Farrell himself later strongly defended Israel. A special feature is attention to immigrants in the works of John

Howard Lawson, especially his *Processional: A Jazz Symphony of American Life in Four Acts* (1925). The list itself is something of a hodge-podge, which could use more justification than Watt gives it, perhaps even a little more factuality. The author terms certain plays “popular”, for instance, but never tells us exactly how popular.

The following chapters sweep through a variety of mostly stage works, starting with portrayals by Kate Bateman of the title role of *Leah, the Forsaken* (1863) and of *Shylock* by Henry Irving in the 1870s and 1880s, and leading to adaptations of George du Maurier’s novel *Trilby* in the 1890s. Bateman’s portrayal precipitated the cult of the “Belle Juive” culminating in the work of Sarah Bernhardt, who played Leah in French. Perhaps incongruously, the chapter ends with *The Count of Monte Cristo* as played by James O’Neill (father of the famous playwright Eugene). The narrative in the fourth chapter opens with a humorous exchange between the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw and the Welsh-born Lawrence Langner in which they each accuse the other of being a “Sheeny”; it then leaps to twentieth-century American drama and foregrounds works by three Jewish-American playwrights – Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets, and Arthur Miller. Watt names the final chapter “The New Wandering Rocks” after the famous tenth chapter of Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* with its nineteen short vignettes. Watt’s cast of characters includes Brendan Behan and his encounter with Borscht Belt comedy, Harold Pinter’s play *The Birthday Party* with its Irish-Jewish pairing of McCann and Goldberg, Hollywood gangster films, Bernard McLaverty’s *Cal and Grace Notes*, and glances at Brian Friel (*Philadelphia, Here I Come!*) and Gish Jen (*Mona in the Promised Land* and *Who’s Irish?*).

A book like this one resists falling into orthodox literary history but still could use more justification for its choices than it provides. Principally, one wonders why only drama, particularly when novels like those by James Joyce or Gish Jen somehow make their way in. And if drama, why these subjects in particular but not, say, more on films, where Irish-Jewish concoctions like “The Cohens and the Kellys” series once appeared regularly? And even works by the authors that are included raise questions. For example, Watt constructs a detailed discussion of what he describes as Arthur Miller’s “often-ignored one-act play *A Memory of Two Mondays*” (p. 145) but offers nothing at all on his better-known and more discussed drama on the Holocaust, *Incident at Vichy*, set in a Nazi railway station where Jews are identified to be sent East to work or to extermination camps. Moreover, given the author’s penchant for rhetoric associated with theory

of the last half-century, remarks about “the ruthlessness of capitalism” or “critique of capitalism” stud the narrative, without any mention of the forty to sixty million estimated deaths deliberately caused by the socialist regimes of Stalin in Europe or Mao in Asia.

Yet despite such lapses, “*Something Dreadful and Grand*” does make an important contribution. Once ethnic studies firmly rooted themselves in the academy, they began reaching out to note homologies both positive and negative with studies of other groups. Watt’s book belongs with some others that he cites, including Declan Kiberd’s *Ulysses and Us* or my own *The Colors of Zion: Blacks, Jews, and Irish*. Among those which appeared too recently for him to include, Alison Kibler’s *Censoring Racial Ridicule: Irish, Jewish, and African American Struggles over Race and Representation, 1890–1930* stands out. As Watt writes at the end of his book, “at the dawn of a new millennium, the American story – and the circum-North Atlantic story as well – however changed, continues to be one of immigration, diaspora, textual circulation, and uncanny affinity”. He continues, “if the Jews and Irish played significant roles in creating nineteenth-century theater, American popular music during the Tin Pan Alley era, modern drama, and nightclub comedy, they still influence the narrative of immigration today” (p. 200).

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