Tessa Roynon, *The Classical Tradition in Modern American Fiction*

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1 In *The Classical Tradition in Modern American Fiction*, Roynon examines the degree to which the classical allusiveness is embedded in the American novel. Her contribution is important because she performs an innovative reading of canonical and often-taught American novels. She builds on existing scholarship of American studies, reception studies and classical studies, contributing to the broader debates of modernism and postmodernism and also of the categorization of the American novel. Greek tragedy is often paired with American novelists' work, especially with the work of William Faulkner and Eugene O'Neal. Roynon's inspiration for this book came from her research on Cather's, Fitzgerald's, Faulkner's, Ellison's, Morrison's, Roth's and Robinson's intellectual formation. She has consulted archives to understand and then chronicle the nature and the extent to which each of these authors is familiar with classical literature. Roynon's experience in detecting allusions in ancient Greek and Roman literature as a reader and a teacher was also crucial. In addition, her project derives from her academic specialization in Classical Reception studies. She has turned to Reception Studies in order to comprehend how readers interact with Greek and Roman literature. Roynon's work builds on archival research in documenting the nature and extent of each author's own familiarity with classical literature and languages.

2 Roynon aims at tracing the allusions to ancient Greek and Roman culture in the work of Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Marilynne Robinson, Toni Cade Bambara and Percival Everett. She performs close readings on three key texts by each of these authors. She provides the opportunity to
readers to acquire a working knowledge of the classical tradition, even if they have not extensively studied the classics. In The Classical Tradition in Modern American Fiction, there are seven chapters in which Roynon builds on her argument about the ideological investment of Cather, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Ellison, Morrison, Roth, Robinson, Bambara and Everett in creating classical allusiveness in their novels. Exploring the ways in which the classical past has been mapped over time allows one to trace the avowal and disavowal of different identities. In the first chapter, “Willa Cather (1873–1946),” Roynon examines Cather’s twelve novels written between 1912 and 1940 and how they are in conversation with her earlier work. In chapter 2, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940), chapter 3, William Faulkner (1897–1962), chapter 4, Ralph Ellison (1913–94), chapter 5, Toni Morrison (1931–2019), chapter 6, Philip Roth (1933–2018) and chapter 7, Marilynne Robinson (1943–), Roynon explores the allusions of those authors’ American novels to antiquity. What is so interesting is how the themes portrayed in these novels have been appropriated from antiquity; that is the point of Reception Studies.

3 Roynon is preoccupied “with ‘connectivities’ and ‘agencies’- the ‘when, where, how, by whom and to whom, why and with what effects’ aspects of the relationships between ancient texts and their subsequent migrations, rewritings, re-drawings and re-thinkings” (Hardwick 16). She points out the diversity of modern American fiction’s classicism by exploring the connection between American literature and antiquity. More specifically, the American authors she examines use references to the ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptian cultures, in order to shed light on the representation of racial and/or ethnic politics and identities. Classical tradition is a political discourse. Classicism is never a neutral discourse therefore; intertextuality should be approached with skeptical scrutiny. There is always something else going on whether it is appropriation, inversion or accommodation.

4 What is more important in her contribution is that she renders the classics accessible to every reader, not just to an elite group. Roynon utilizes the classical tradition as a central element for both plot and characterization in modern American fiction. What is interesting in Roynon’s work is how the classical vision is used in the course of humanity and justice. Another great strength of the book is that Roynon explains how she picked the canonical genres of tragedy and drama and analyzes those that are thematically relevant to American culture.

5 Another key point of Roynon’s The Classical Tradition in Modern American Fiction is that she raises questions about classical reception. One of the big debates in classical reception studies is between the idea that that the classical tradition is the golden standard, continuing through history against the idea of classical reception being a study about engagement, appropriation and dialogue from an ideological and political perspective, ultimately debating the issues of our time. Classical reception studies are political in the sense that classicism is never neutral and intertextuality should be approached with skeptical scrutiny. Roynon shows that the classical tradition is an essential element of both plot and characterization in modern American fiction. It is innovative that Roynon decides to engage in this big ideological debate within the reception community in her book, as she truly questions whether one should be merely honoring the golden tradition, the classics or whether this tradition should reflect contemporary concerns against the background of this common cultural heritage. She concludes that there is not a real answer in whether modern American novels should
echo the values of the classic or whether they should focus on portraying contemporary issues.

Ultimately, Roynon sheds light on American literature by considering the connection between the epic and tragedy and how this link could compare to other strands of classical reception studies. She examines what creates an American engagement with classical tradition; in her opinion a combination and interplay of tragedy and the epic. Most importantly, she points out that the classical tradition particularly appeals to Black American novelists because they want equal access which is key to American studies. African-American novelists attempt to access the American tradition as everyone should have access to the classical tradition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY