

“Roth Between the Wars”

*Right and Left*

Joseph Roth

Trans. Michael Hofmann

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by Jeff Bursey

Joseph Roth was born in 1894 to a Jewish family living in Brody, in Galicia, at that time part of the Hapsburg dominion. Before his birth his father deserted the family. This fissure in domestic life had a delayed parallel in the political world when the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a slowly crumbling institution, became an historical artifact, its death hastened by the First World War.

Roth invented several contradictory histories of his origins and early experiences, so it is unclear what role he served in the army. His homeland became more important towards the end of the 1920s when he compared the worsening situation in Germany to the suddenly brighter-looking Empire. In the preface to *The Tale of the 1002nd Night* (1939; translated in 1998) Michael Hofmann described Roth's love for the Dual Monarchy as a “memorial... spread over many sad and adoring novels...” Looking at this same event from a different perspective, Nadine Gordimer wrote that Roth's novels and novellas “are works in which are to be found the inevitability of conflicts that have arisen in what were once parts of Emperor Franz Josef's empire, following the collapse of another collective—the Soviet empire—in our time killing and setting in train an endless procession of the displaced homeless, desperate to cross frontiers.”

Roth's growing importance in European and Jewish culture has been recognized for some time—in an advertisement for Jewish Book Week celebrations in London in early March, he was described as “the great elegist of the cosmopolitan, tolerant and doomed culture” of the Empire—and by now much of his work has been translated into English, eleven published by Overlook Press alone. From roughly 1928 to his death he produced his most noteworthy books, including the acclaimed novels *Job* (1930) and *The Radetzky March* (1932). Roth worked as a journalist in Vienna and in Berlin but, unlike many journalists, his prose was not deadened by this training. His personal history—the abandonment by his father, the mental illness of his wife, his alcoholism, and exile—created and fed an anger which found its best expression in satirical writing, and also contributed to his death in Paris in 1939 at the early age of forty-five.

Returning soldiers (termed *Heimkehrer*) injured in the War and further damaged by a peace treaty viewed as shameful, beggars, cripples, drunkards, bankrupts in the recessionary Germany of the 1920s, as well as the ambitious, the venal, the fascists and the industrialists of the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany, parade through his fiction. The early works (1921-1928) are expressive of a mind sympathetic to socialism but not deeply committed to it or any political cause. They are considered “newspaper novels” not only because some were serialized, but because they were quickly written to comment on current events, and despite their occasional virtues, such as sharp political analysis and compact sentences skewering trends and inclinations, they are not satisfying on all levels. *Right and Left* (1929) is a cusp novel between the early and

mature periods. The lead character, Paul Bernheim, is another of Roth's 'heroes' from the War, drifting through the next decade, buoyed by money, with no purpose but to accumulate more without doing much work. In a different time and place he would have found a quiet cove as a backbench politician who would speak for his constituents as seldom as did Edward Gibbon, but Germany in the 1920s did not provide this haven.

Bernheim's shallow purposes and the initial financial and moral capital helping him to act on feeble impulses stem from both the behaviour of his middle-class Jewish parents and from a windfall, which Roth describes on the opening page:

"He was a grandson of a horse-trader who had saved up a small fortune, and the son of a banker who had forgotten how to save, but on whom fortune had smiled. Paul's father, Herr Felix Bernheim, went arrogantly through life, and had many enemies, although a normal measure of foolishness would have been enough to secure him the esteem of his fellow citizens. Instead, his exceptional good fortune aroused their envy. Then one day, as though fate intended to reduce them to complete despair, it presented him with a jackpot."

Paul's manners and disposition are irrevocably decided by this event, which occurs when he is twelve. His growing arrogance is evident in the classroom: "His posture betrayed the thought constantly going through his mind: My father could buy this place." Each whim is catered to, from books to art to trips, and his mediocre talents are assisted by tutors. As a result, Paul is considered a genius. When he goes to Oxford to study politics and history everyone is certain a great career is in the making. "And all the girls of marriageable age told each other: 'Paul's going to Oxford!' They referred to him as Paul, as all the middle class of the town did. He was their darling. It is the fate of attractive men everywhere to have strangers refer to them by their Christian names."

/11/ Soon after arriving in England, however, the War begins, and he is enlisted in his homeland's cavalry. He is an enthusiastic soldier, happy in his uniform, until he is turned away from the cavalry and is eventually deposited in the infantry. This is a sore point for Paul, further aggravated by the fact that his sister's husband is a cavalry officer. Denied his proper place, Paul writes pacifist tracts and joins with other dissidents in their magazines and at secret meetings. A bayonet in the cheek lands him in hospital, where he is when the War ends. He insists on wearing the uniform despite the Revolution that had broken out at war's end. "In his opinion a revolutionary Fatherland was no better than a defeated one." He is beaten up by once-fellow soldiers, and this places his name in the right-wing papers, where he is praised for his patriotism. The flirtation with rebellion is over.

During the war Paul is injured in a knife fight with a Cossack named Nikita Bezborodko. One consequence of this is that he becomes cowardly, and his nerves, which were never strong, will not allow him to be decisive or meet opposition with determination. Bezborodko never reappears, but he remains a psychological nemesis. With the introduction into the narrative of Nikolai Brandeis, half-Jewish, born into a German settlement in Ukraine, a black marketeer whose success and role in Germany increase each year, the reader is presented with what Paul could never be, despite his weak efforts: a re-made man. "I'm ten people! I was a teacher, student, farmer, Tsarist, murderer and traitor... Because today's Nikolai Brandeis was born just two weeks ago." Brandeis is implacable, but not ambitious for material success. Paul is unable to counter his fear of the man or his influence. Banker's son, soldier, rebel, false patriot, Paul

firmly belongs to the conservative world of banking. Yet in poverty-stricken Germany he, like others, is attracted to the underworld, which Brandeis began in but from which he rose, thanks to gambling and the sale of cloth, to the disgust of the established plutocracy whose money comes out of chemicals and armaments.

This moving from right to left and back again has its parallel in the less-developed story of Theodor, Paul's younger brother, a fascist given a job on a democratic paper Brandeis owns. Germany's political turmoil is partially described through this underdeveloped character who represents the rampant frustration and desperation felt by almost all the citizenry, where beliefs and loyalties are shed or assumed in order to survive in a sinking economy.

In 1922, Roth's fellow Austro-Hungarian, Robert Musil—who was scathing about the Empire, especially in his unfinished and unfinishable novel *The Man Without Qualities*—considered that the condition of Germany was not solely a result of the War and its aftermath, but also sprang from the character of its inhabitants:

“For the past ten years we have doubtless been making world history in the most strident fashion, but without actually being able to see it. We haven't really changed much—a little presumptuous before, a little hung over afterwards. First we were bustling good citizens, then we became murderers, killers, thieves, arsonists, and the like, but without really experiencing anything. Is there any doubt about this? Life goes on just as before, only a little more feebly, with a touch of the invalid's caution; the effect of the war was more festive than Dionysian, and the revolution has taken its seat in parliament. So we have been many things, but we haven't changed; we have seen a lot and perceived nothing.”

As mentioned, *Right and Left* (1929) is a transitional work. Gordimer says it was “written with bared teeth, sparing no one.” This is true, except that the teeth are not set into a firm enough jaw. The characterizations of Brandeis and Theodor are somewhat sketchy, with more told than shown, and Brandeis' rise is difficult to believe. Occasional patches read as if Roth, in his fury to place on paper what most bothered him, didn't care to integrate his material sufficiently. Of the three parts, this is most evident in section two. But there is no denying the ability of Roth to express his anger when scenes are carefully set up, as in this instance from the first section, where Paul and an acquaintance are having dinner while Paul considers a business move:

“Everything here confirmed his hopes. The conscientiousness of the waiter and the optimistic gleam of the lamps, the diners plying knife and fork, the healthy complexion of the ladies, even the cripples begging outside the door, and the freezing policeman who shooed them away, and who seemed not like an official of the state, but an employee of the diners... The cigarette girl offered herself along with a packet of Amenophis cork filters, and it was wonderful to know one had enough money for 365 nights of cigarette girl. Soon he would have enough money for years of the wives of dye manufacturers. There they sat, the poison-gas moguls, and one was almost their equal. Did they have an inkling of the fact that, compared to them, one was a pauper? No! They had not! Nor was one a pauper. One was simply on the way up, not yet arrived.”

Contempt leaps off the page. In the end, Paul marries the daughter of a chemicals magnate, thanks in part to Brandeis, and his fortune is assured. He can now sit with the giants of industry.

Elie Wiesel discerned a prophetic streak in Roth. "Fiction contains an element of prophecy. Joseph Roth foresaw the total and totalitarian catastrophe that occurred after he died." Roth's growing affection for the Austro-Hungarian Empire was set against his abiding hatred of Hitler, and in the early 1930s his style matched his nostalgic vision. *Right and Left*, despite its deficiencies, is good preparation for his more accomplished novels, and is a lasting evocation of a country between wars.

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