

## Radetzkmarsch

*J. Roth*

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I remember a filmed version of the novel being aired on Swedish television in the late 60's. It made quite an impression on me, and an impression that stayed, although I just could not remember any specific scenes save of the final one when the lieutenant gets killed in the trenches (actually he does not get killed leading his men into an attack, but suffers the fire of snipers as he tries to get a few buckets with water for his thirsty men during a retreat of the army). Anyway the lasting impression was that of an epic of a vanished empire, which must have intrigued me deeply. At the time costume dramas were not that common.

I must say that the book is a masterpiece, superior to most of what Roth has written. Roth was a very successful writer of feuilletons in his day, and did produce a lot of novellas in addition. They are characterized by a deft touch and give the impression of having been produced in haste. When it comes to the shorter pieces, their spontaneous nature works to their advantages. As Cicero remarked about his speeches at courts. They were meant for the moment and would not survive second readings after a nights sleep. Their rhetorical flourishes were intended as flushes to convince as they were delivered, not to stand up to a sustained scrutiny. The novellas tend to be a succession of brilliant flushes interspersed among less compelling material. The syntax does not always hang together, often it does not matter, but sometimes it confuses. One also gets the impression that he is not always there, that he has lost interest in the tale he is narrating, that he cheats and patches up. In 'Radetzkmarsch' none of those weaknesses are apparent. He seems to have disciplined himself and written with a concentrated passion, which usually were not the case. He seems to be engrossed in his material, and not distracted. The world he creates is one in which he also chooses to dwell.

The Austrian empire, as of 1867 the Austrian-Hungarian empire, was if anything an anachronism at the eve of the First World War. Yet, it was also in a sense ahead of its times. The basis of the Austrian empire was not nationality but dynasty. The family dynasty of the Habsburger, who had dominated European politics during the 16th and 17th century and then gone into a very slow decline, a fact hidden by the concomitantly faster decline of the Ottoman empire. The empire was multi-ethnic, thus had no cohesion based on nationality, which at the time was thought unnatural and only a century later realized as modern. It presented a mixture of the traditional and the modern. The pomp associated with the dynasty gave it a very feudal touch, while the government itself and its concerns with the citizens as citizens pointed to an enlightened age. Towards the empire Roth felt nostalgia, at least after its dissolution, and one may think of the novel as a tribute to it and the Habsburgian reign.

An epic cannot be presented systematically, if so it degenerates into a mere soap-opera. The secret is to present key scenes with sufficient evocative detail to stimulate the imagination of the reader in order to permit interpolations. Thus in Radetzkmarsch it is

sufficient to present a few carefully wrought vignettes., and let the reader do the rest of the work.

There are two main characters. The elder von Trotta, a civil servant, and his son Carl Joseph, an officer. They are of the nobility, but of a recent one. They were raised to this elated level of society through their ancestor at the battle of Solferino, where he saved the life of the emperor, who is still in charge, although the simultaneous father and grandfather is long since dead. His portrait though, painted at one time by an artist friend of the father back when he was still a very young man, survives and plays a very important symbolic role in the narrative. Any distinction that is their due, is due to their ancestor, and his example sets an almost impossible one for his descendants to live up to. He himself, the founder of the family was of rather modest progeny, stemming from a small Slovenian village, the name of which survives by being attached to their official name. They have come a long way. They do not speak any Slovenian, they owe their allegiance, not to any ethnic group, but as loyal and faithful subjects of the Habsburgian Dynasty and what it stands for, just as they owe their elevated status to the munificence of the the emperor, who in the incarnation of Franz Joseph has stayed the same all those years.

Although their position in society is to our eyes stilted not to say ridiculous, they do nevertheless command our sympathies. The father is stiff and reserved, unable to express any of his emotions he suppresses them instead, his collar going right up to his luxurious sideburns recalling those of the emperor himself. The son, on the other hand, is weak and sensitive, lacking even the resolve of his father. It is a family in decline. There are no women. The father lost his mother at a young age, as he did his wife, of which we learn almost nothing. The grandfather forbid his son to follow a military career, he himself being fed up with it. Consequently the son insisted that his son in turn pursued what was denied him. This is of course a disaster.

We meet the young cadet as he visits his father in the provincial town of W. The father relates to him by submitting him to a weekly examination. Nevertheless his memories of those visits reside fondly in his mind and are intermixed with the heady music of the Radetzkmarsch that serve as a Leitmotif for the novel and in which the essence of the Habsburgian realm, with its military rhythm and sunny, operetta style, *Lebensanschau*. As still a young teenager he is seduced by an older woman married to an subordinate to his father. Typically he elevates the abuse he has been submitted to as a love affair imagining himself to have had been in love with her, and consequently he is devastated when the father a few years later casually informs him on a trip to Vienna, that she has died in childbirth. He is then forced to pay his respects to the widower, and also to receive a package of the letters he has written to her. There is a connected scene with him and his father drinking brandy at the local coffee-house, with the rain relentlessly bearing down outside, and being berated by the latter not to drink such cheap brandy. When he is assigned to a cavalry regiment later he makes the only true friendship he would ever make in his life, befriending a Jewish regimental doctor, unhappily married to an unfaithful woman earning him the scorn of his father-in-law. Through no fault of his, our poor cavalry lieutenant involves his friend in a situation that can only be resolved through a duel between the friend and another officer, and as a result the friend dies (along with his opponent). Once again, our young man is devastated, and failing to get a posting close to the Slovenian village of his

ancestors, he gets sent to a godforsaken garrison in small town close to the Russian border, supposedly based on Roths own hometown. Having resigned from the cavalry he has now, as a means of penitence, joined the infantry of much less status (although his famous grandfather at Solferino was part of the footfolk<sup>1</sup>) being assigned to a *Jäger* battalion, on the other hand he never was a good rider, nevertheless bringing his horse along as a remainder of his former status. Here he befriends an eccentric landowner of Slavic progeny, who during a visit of the father, much to the consternation of the latter, prophecies the end of the world, at least the Habsburgian world. Our young lieutenant learns to drink the local 'Neunziger' a strong alcoholic brew that affords a numbing consolation, and although he does not succumb to gambling he gets involved with fellow officers whose debts he is prevailed upon to make good. This will in the end necessitate the selling of his horse to the rich landowner. Through the latter he is also led to his final downfall. Set to accompany yet another older woman, looking for young flesh to mollify her own dread of aging and death, he is once again seduced and feels it incumbent on himself to love her. A liaison follows, which every other weekend takes him out from the barracks to which he otherwise is confined and allows him a precarious sense of happiness at the price of incurring huge debts. He is not able to meet his financial obligations, and they are too big even to be handled by his father, who sees no other solution than to demand an audience with the emperor himself to save the honor of the von Trotta family, so intimately connected to the imperial well-being. Being so convinced of the righteousness of his quest, he overcomes all practical difficulties and manages within a day or two to get personal access to Franz Joseph himself. Everything is settled, the honor of the family is restored. And the young von Trotta can finally resign from the army, something he has always wanted to do, but when he finally takes the step he cannot suppress a certain emotion of nostalgia and fear, as it has been, for better or for worse, his whole life. His sojourn as a civilian turns out to be short. The archduke is assassinated, and soon the First World War is a fact and out of duty he returns, only to meet his death in a senseless mission that cannot be seen as anything but suicidal. The news of his death shatters his father who dies a few years later, days after the death of the emperor. This, in short, comprises the plot of the novel.

But an epic novel is more than just its plot, it indicates a larger world than that necessary to allow the plot to unfold. There are scenes which do not really carry the course of action further but are in the nature of digressions but as such of intrinsic worth, enhancing further the illusion of the reader that we are presented with real slices of life. One such scene is the death of the old servant Jacques, inherited from the hero of Solferino. The old man is one morning unable to see to it that the usual routines are maintained, the civil servant a man of serious and inflexible habit, is seriously disturbed. He finds the old man in his bed suffering from a fever, a doctor is called for, and pneumonia is diagnosed but given the advanced age of the patient much hope cannot be given. A canary is flying around in the apartment, happily twittering, while the window is opened, and the fresh summer air is let in, much to the joy of the old man, who seem to be in no distress. Later on he rallies, gets up and starts to polish the boots of his master, and as readers, along with the master himself, we start to hope. But as is not so uncommon, death just being

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<sup>1</sup> The words actually exists in English, an archaic translation of the German 'fussvolk' cf 'fotfolk' in Swedish.

preceded by a temporary diversion from its inevitable course when its victim acquiesces finding peace and a short burst of energy welling forth, only to make its final move. With the death of old Jacques, the last living tie with the old man and ancestor is cut. One may see in this scene some further symbolic representation of the theme of the novel, or just the joyful working out of the implicit fruits of an imagination deeply stirred. The explanation being what it may, the presence of such scenes lift the novel from merely being clever and interesting to a masterpiece that moves you. The canary itself will long survive the death of its owner, and when the father and civil servant himself feels the end coming he asks for it.

Another scene of no consequence really for the action is that of the emperor inspecting the troops before a maneuver. It gives the author the opportunity to look at the emperor close up, and present him as a kind but befuddled old man, no doubt hampered by senility. In the scene depicting the audience, which, however important to the sequence of events, nevertheless gains its importance mainly for once again presenting the emperor, this time emphasizing his resemblance with the older van Trotta. In fact Roth presents them as two brothers, one being the mirror image of the other, their different positions in society, merely being due to a series of accidents. The writing seems at this stage to sin against all the rules of what may be considered good and sophisticated writing, nevertheless it succeeds beautifully, making it, like most of the scenes in the book, stand out, imprinting itself indelibly in the readers memory.

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