

## Hotel Savoy

*J.Roth*

January 1-2, 2015

The title may promise a story, maybe even a mystery, how many novels have not have been written focused say on the guests of a hotel, with the opportunity to present multiple threads of plots to be weaved together. But this is Roth and his ambition is very different. The setting is the aftermath of the First World War, and the narrator is returning, along with all the other returnees, from displacement and imprisonment in the east. His stay at the hotel is just temporary, hoping to get money from his uncle, so he can continue back home. But his uncle is not very forthcoming, he gives him a discarded suit, but is very careful about dispensing of any of his cash. He has no money. The narrator has no choice but to be grateful and accepting, and is in no hurry to continue. The hotel is gigantic. It consists of seven stories, and maybe a thousand different rooms. Everyone is there, the rich as well as the broke. The rich live in bigger rooms on the first floors with a lot of service, the poor higher up, in smaller rooms, and enjoy no service at all. Many of them lag behind in rent, and have no alternative but to pawn their belongings with the elder man Ignatz, who serves as the lift boy (and is later rumored to be the mysteriously absent owner with the Greek name). In one part of the hotel nude girls powdered white are dancing on a stage, with the rich industrialists sitting in the audience, occasionally bringing them to their tables, fondling their breasts.

Not much happens. The narrator falls in love with the girl above his room, but fails to pay her proper suite, and unhappy she runs away with his rival and cousin (the son of the misery uncle). A clown dies and is buried with his donkey taking part in the brief ceremony. An old friend of the narrator arrives and takes him under his wings getting both of them a job and thus some minor income, while they regularly eat at a soup kitchen. A certain Henry Bloomfield from 'Amerika' (and what is more glamorous than America in those days? One of the characters uses it repeatedly as an expression of enthusiastic approbation) arrives in order to visit the grave of his father the Jew Blumenfeld (there are of course a lot of Jews around, set props in any story by Roth) as well as investigating possible business ventures, the reason for which he is always surrounded by people with projects. This turns out to be a godsend for the narrator, who is hired as an additional secretary to vet the different proposals. Bloomfield eventually leaves after having dutifully shed tears at the grave of his father. He himself will be buried over there, and thus for his sons the old ties with the old country will be cut for ever. After his departure, the narrator gets an envelope from him containing a handsome honorarium. There is a strike, and further influxes of displaced people filling up the rest of the hotel as well as some nearby barracks. In the end there is a fire, Roth may have tired of his tale, and lets the entire hotel burn down. I guess the narrator now has no choice but to move on.

The novel is hardly realistic in execution, but rather gives the impression of being in the nature of some dream, in which characters appear mysteriously only to fade and go away, only to reappear again. It is an attempt to evoke the chaos after the war when

people are thrown to the winds and have to fend for themselves in circumstances where the usual bearings have been removed. In short it is fiction of a mild surrealism, and although not qualifying as the theatre of the absurd, it has something of its character. One may also think of it as a Grosz cartoon set to words.

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