

Svindleriets ädla konst

En idébiografi över Joseph Roth

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December 22-26, 2014

Joseph Roth was at some time of his life one of the most celebrated and well-paid journalists in the German speaking realm. Now, as far as he is remembered at all it is mostly for his 'Radetzkyarsch' a brilliant epic novel, which, however, is very far from being typical of his oeuvre in general, belonging more to his late nostalgic phase than to his early radical.

Roth was above else a *flaneur*[Spaziergänger] who walked the urban landscape and leisurely observed and reported. Not so much in a straightforward investigating manner pursuing factual 'reportage', as in a sketchy impressionistic manner and mood. He was the master of the so called *feuilleton* which commanded pride of place in the newspapers of the day. Dispensing with any traces of false modesty he proclaimed that it was not the leaders, nor the political commentaries and reports on domestic and foreign politics which attracted readers, but his pieces. He projected the image of the street wise reporter, cynical, down-to-earth and free of any illusions, able to discern subtle trends and illuminate hidden signs and meanings.

The author who has recently struggled with translations of Roth's often confused and contorted prose to intelligible Swedish, has felt it incumbent to present a selection of the mostly unknown Roth, which no doubt invariably led to a temptation to adduce a brief commentary on the writer himself. A commentary that swelled into a mini-biography, usurping most of the original space and relegated the original selection to an appendix. It is a mini-biography, not a regular one. It has no ambitions of being exhaustive, that would have demanded years of toil, no doubt to little avail, but to be, like Roth himself impressionistic; and rather than to plod through all the vicissitudes of a life, which even for a short one, could be rather formidable, he has decided to present not an account of living, but one of ideas. However, ideas disembodied from a living, throbbing context, tend to be rather dry. We all crave the human touch, so biographical sketches cannot be avoided and thus much of it nevertheless reads as a standard biography, how could it otherwise, when it addresses itself to a supposedly ignorant public in order to pique its interest and curiosity.

Roth is notoriously slippery to get a hold on. He makes up, teases and confuses the reader. Like every writer of fiction he pursues his duplicity with such verve and commitment, that he ends up believing it himself, and thus sweeping his audience along with him, because if it is something a reader looks forward to in a book, it is to be swept along, and thus he or she is more than willing to be deceived. In order to separate fact from fiction in his accounts of himself, especially those of his early years, would require a sustained forensic investigation, no doubt making any hopeful investigator returning in the end even more empty-handed than when starting out. The passing biographer, who wants

to get on with his own life, has no choice but to mine secondary sources, cross his fingers, dutifully formulating a caveat or two, and put it all down. Roth was Jewish, coming from the very east of the Austrian-Hungarian empire, consisting of marshy borderlands of no particular ancient imperial acquisition, giving a foretaste of the endless steppes to be found on the far Russian side. Barbaric maybe, but fully integrated in the imperial infra-structure. In short Roth stems from the periphery of western civilization, growing up in an environment filled with crooks, beggars, thieves, murderers, any kind of unsavory character, all swept up in an excitement of smuggling and trade. A hodgepodge of ethnic minorities thrown together. In short Europe with more than a touch of the Orient. This is all very colorful to the innocent eyes of Western urban dwellers, on whose footsteps the seeping riff-raff of the periphery sneak onto.

When the war started, Roth enlisted and supposedly saw some action, but it is not clear how much and of what kind? After the end of the war the world as he had known it was turned upside down, and a man had to fend for himself in a totally new playing field.

The twenties made up the high-point of his professional life, and hence of his life as such. He was writing successfully for the papers, first in Vienna, later on in Berlin. In Vienna he found himself at home, not so much in Berlin, but this was the place to be in the post-war German speaking world, during the heady decadent days of the dysfunctional Weimar Republic, or so we are being told. This was also the period of the supposedly radical Roth, 'der Rote Roth'. What more appropriate garment to don during this wild and supposedly nihilistic period, with the promise and the threat of Bolshevism just around the corner? It all came to an end in 1933 and Roth had to go into exile, and what more congenial place to spend it than in Paris? Such a contrast to the drabness of Berlin. But of course the rise of Nazism meant that he was effectively barred from deriving a living from his writing for a German public. He had been accustomed to living in style on a lavish budget, now he had to eke out his living precariously, begging from his friends, pleading with his publishers. He had, as the saying goes, burned his candle at both ends. His personal health had never been a top priority, his drinking had solidified and turned into clinical alcoholism, which undercut not only his health, but eventually also his ability to work. It became more and more difficult to conclude his writing projects, as opposed to conceive of them. There was no lessening of inventiveness, only of discipline and sustainment. In addition to the problems of health and finance, there were emotional traumas. His first wife went insane, and there would follow, as one would not only suspect but eagerly expect, a succession of affairs, entanglements, the intermittent matrimonial commitment. In summary we have here the proverbial case of the romantic fate of an independent man of letters, and an intellectual to boot, living in turbulent times, from hand to mouth, touching maybe millions of readers, in a way which is hard to fathom nowadays, when bestsellerdom only rarely intersects with serious reading.

The author contrasts two Roths. The red and radical of the 20's, and the more nostalgic and conservative of (supposedly?) the 30's. It is not clear to what extent those are merely aspects of a more complicated whole, or whether we are actually witnessing a transformation of one into another of two incompatible world views. And if so, what brought it about, and more precisely how did the latter Roth really differ from the earlier? As indicated, opinions, especially political, and even world views, may be like garments in

which to pose, until you tire of them. The 20's was a decade of post-war disillusion and hence an invitation to indulge in decadence, but also a time of optimism. Of having escaped a catastrophe and making the world safe, if not just for democracy but more importantly for progress, giving a license to sweep away anything that stood in the way. It was the decade of nascent fascism, a phenomenon which intrigued Roth more than anything else, and whose nourishing soil he loved to unearth in his contemporary reporting and fictional writing alike. As to the latter one is invariably drawn to 'der Spinnennetz'¹. The thirties were different. It proved the triumph of reaction, or so we say. The revolutionary fervor had spent itself, also in the Soviet Union where the period of five year plans, forced industrialization and collectivization, mass starvation and rigged trials terrorizing the thin layer of the political elite, commenced. It proved the defeat of idealistic radicalism, if not of idealism itself, be it of a more sombre kind. This must have affected Roth deeply, forcing him to draw on deeper resources. The seductive simplifications of radical propaganda had run its course, which of course did not inure a man to the seductions of alternatives, such as the deeper meaning of tradition. Roth came to mourn the passing of the impossible Austro-Hungarian empire, especially as its German rump at the end of his life, became attached to a new kind of empire. For all its ridicule and faults, it had stood for moderation and tolerance, multi-culturalism and globalization, transcending the categories of nationalism. It would take another fifty years before those sentiments met with wider appreciation, not only among the nostalgists. As a consequence he wrote his best book under its influence. It is a book very different from the hasty, not to say feverish, concoctions he normally had produced. It is a true epic, even if it cannot compete with the leisurely flow of a 'War and Peace'. Tolstoy may have thought of war but lived in peace, while with Roth it was more or less the opposite. Given the chaotic circumstances of his life, it is a miracle that he managed an epic at all. If anything it testifies not only to a basic professionalism but also to the kind of passion, we romantically expect our best writers to be possessed by.

Roth died young, at the eve of the great release and catastrophe which he would consequently be spared, even if he may to some extent have predicted not only its occurrence, which was to many a foregone conclusion, but its consequences. Decades of abuse had weakened his body, a bout of drinking proved to be the final *coup de grace*,

The short selection of the author's translations of Roth's writing in the appendix, gives a fair taste of his breadth as writer, touching on most of the classical genres. Poetry, satire, travel reportage, everyday reflection, didactic and instructive texts, aborted fiction², and of course some samples of private correspondence.

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¹ In which, the author points out, Hitler makes his first appearance in a work of fiction, already in 1923

² His one attempt at a historical novel, namely on the return of Napoleon, turned out to be seriously flawed