

Roth's Complaint

Joseph Roth: A Life in Letters

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
MICHAEL HOFMANN
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IT'S been a fatiguing haul for the least known of the three literary Roths. In 1931, Dorothy Thompson translated from the German Joseph Roth's *Job*. Despite its being scooped up by the Book-of-the-Month Club and by Hollywood soon after, Roth remained in the shadows. Geoffrey Dunlop's translation of Roth's masterpiece, *The Radetzky March*, appeared from the Viking Press in 1933, but the shadows on Roth stayed heavy here. It would take Peter and Alfred Mayer at Overlook Press in the 1980s, a half century after Roth's death in 1939, to rescue him from irrelevance. Michael Hofmann has continued the Mayers' magnanimous pursuit of Roth's canonization in *Joseph Roth: A Life in Letters*. As there is yet no English-language biography of Roth—one of the reasons his fame lags behind Philip's and Henry's—this book is the nearest we can get to knowing this man and writer warped by despair.

Hofmann, who has translated Roth's short fiction, journalism, and many of his 15 novels, makes a worthy Virgil through the inferno on display in these pages, offering

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ample footnotes and comprehensive, lyrical introductions to each of the book's four sections. In these letters, Roth doesn't divulge gossip or scandal or anything particularly personal (he barely wrote to lovers or family members). He gives us something much more important, and rare: a correspondence that actually corresponds, with fellow intellectuals, yes, but also with his own appalling era and the crooked timber of all humanity. He foretold much of what was to befall Europe: the poison of Hitlerism, the creeping menace to Jews, the vast and astonishing destruction.

In his preface to *The Collected Stories of Joseph Roth*, Hofmann wrote that "what some writers do by means of a gunshot, Roth does by a letter." The letter as bullet, the missive as missile—apt images when considering the life and character of Joseph Roth. Agitated and heartbroken over the election of Hindenburg as German president in 1925, Roth wrote from Paris (his adopted home) to Benno Reifenberg, editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, "I'm capable of shooting someone, or throwing bombs." In letter after letter, Roth proves himself a misanthrope and career curmudgeon at war with the unjust stipulations of existence. And who could blame him?

He was born Moses Joseph Roth in 1894, the only son of Orthodox Jews, in an armpit of Austria-Hungary called Brody, in Galicia (now Lviv, Ukraine). His father cracked up and vanished before his birth, and one could say that Roth had a lifelong obsession with father figures. (An early

novel is titled *Zipper and His Father*, and although *The Radetzky March* depicts the inevitable collapse of the Hapsburg Empire, it also just as beautifully emphasizes, à la Turgenev, the immortal trouble between fathers and sons.) Raised by a rabbi in Russian Poland, ashamed of his inauspicious origins, mortified by being an *Ostjude*, and hot for a newspaper career in the increasingly anti-Semitic capitals of Vienna and Berlin, Roth cast off the name Moses and then invented various apocryphal histories for himself, such as being a Gentile descendent of nobility. In 1922 he married Friedl Reichler, a Viennese beauty, and then mostly left her alone in hotel rooms as he traveled ceaselessly for newspaper assignments. She soon went insane, had to be committed, and was eventually euthanized by the Nazis.

Writing was Roth's breath and bread. Exiled, homeless, frequently forlorn, he was nevertheless a master of the feuilleton—a short, often didactic cultural column—and could produce a novel a year. He mailed so many indignant missives that one suspects he quite enjoyed having to do so. From 1920 to 1939—from Berlin and Paris, from Nice and Amsterdam—he sniped letters at competitive colleagues, incompetent newspaper editors, and fellow writers, and he often did so with every intention to maim while setting the record straight, requesting overdue payments, upholding his dignity, and kvetching about his abject penury: "I am miserable, industrious, poor, and abandoned," Roth told Reifenberg in 1926. He felt the world tilting toward hell, and not only for Jews, artists, and intellectuals, but for the whole of humankind. After National Socialism contaminated the Weimar Republic, life morphed into the horror Roth had all along divined in letters and journalism. "Europe is killing itself," he wrote in 1930. "The devil really is in the saddle." Three years

later his were among the books publicly incinerated by Hitler's vermin. "Where they burn books, they burn people," Heine had written a century earlier—a prophecy that could not have failed to haunt Roth.

Incessant epistolary rage usually reveals not courage but the pathetic meld of powerlessness and ennui. Forever on the road for reportage, Roth was rarely bored, and his rage is conveyed in the letters mainly as wounded bafflement. To friend and esteemed novelist Stefan Zweig he complained: "I'm just furious when my honor is impugned. Mr. [Victor] Gollancz [the British publisher] did that. He owes me an apology." Roth possessed a dire, nearly ignominious need to be heard, acknowledged, revered. This need swelled beyond what the average ego-strapped writer feels because Roth's delicate mental and physical composition was choked by the sociopolitical poison wafting through Eastern Europe. One of Roth's recurrent neuroses on display throughout these singular documents is a paranoia—a "morbid fear," he calls it—that his missives are not reaching their intended recipients. "My isolation is enormous, unendurable. I need a letter now and again," Roth writes, sounding rather like a death-row convict. And in a way, that's precisely what he was.

Roth's selfhood was murky at best and mendacious at worst, and he knew it, thus the pressing need throughout these letters to insist upon, to assert a personality. He was the outsider without fixed identity, without home or homeland, abiding on the periphery of cultures, ceaselessly inferior yet aspiring to greatness. When Saul Bellow's *Augie March* happens upon Trotsky in Mexico, he muses about the Russian's "exiled greatness, because an exile was a sign to me of persistence at the highest things." Roth was nothing if not persistent on the path to high things, but exile is no condi-

tion for the chronically disquieted. Hofmann says of Roth: "He is a Jew in Austria, an Austrian in Germany, a German in France." Every sick man is a scoundrel, as Dr. Johnson has it, but so is every homeless man. One must turn to Nietzsche in his later years to find another German-language writer of comparable wretchedness. Writing to Zweig from Berlin in 1930, Roth confessed, "All around me are suffering and death, and I could weep at my inability to find a little bit of goodness in myself."

And yet despite his persistent psycho-emotional squalor, Roth had abundant principle and zero tolerance for blather and bullying: He fulminated against writers who refused to denounce the Third Reich, and helped bring to Paris fellow refugees fleeing the carcinoma of Hitlerism. He was also frequently affectionate, generous with the little money he had, devoted, even joyful. In July of 1927 he sent a compassionate note to his comrade Bernard von Brentano, whose father had just died: "I am standing at your shoulder—now, and in every enterprise in which you should feel in danger or alone." When he first arrived in Paris in 1925, he experienced a bliss he had believed was only a rumor. To Reifenberg he wrote: "Paris is the capital of the world...you must come here. Whoever has not been here is only half human, and no sort of European. Paris is free, intellectual in the best sense.... Here everyone smiles at me." These are, he says, "the best days of my life." Hemingway felt much the same about Paris in that decade. Members of the Lost Generation were there enjoying their expat privileges, every one a not-lost king compared with Roth. How oddly enticing to imagine him at *Les Deux Magots* with Hemingway: both men penniless, both sublime stylists, death-obsessed, and already headed for suicide—one by

bottle, the other by double-barrel. And before their deaths: both fond of letters with fangs and of grudges that cut gullies through them.

If Roth's style generally lacks the aphoristic punch of that other essential Austrian journalist, Karl Kraus, he nevertheless had a predilection for unforgettable one-liners, and his letters are rife with them: "A shoemaker's heart is tougher than his soles"; "Tell me why a great writer isn't duty bound to accuse his country instead of praising it"; "Nothing is so exotic as a German"; "One shouldn't let heroes live"; "Above all, learn to speak less"; "In matters of health and money, prominent Jews are always a good idea"; "Jewish doctors are a sort of atonement for the crucifixion"; "If you don't live up to your own standards, no amount of compliments will help"; "There is nothing finer than being bribed." Part of the pleasure of reading Joseph Roth—the novels, stories, journalism, letters all—lies in his synthesis of an easily acquired street sapience with a hard-won erudition. He has a 19th-century aesthetic molested by 20th-century crimes, a dignified formalism perverted by an absurdist undertow. Modernity for Roth is a hideous prank played on us by the angel of history.

Roth's greatness resides in the abnormal ability to balance opposites: weakness with stamina, fatalism with hope, paradise with perdition. "He seems prepared to go anywhere, talk to anyone, write about anything in the most exhilarating way," Hofmann has written of him. That might appear an obvious essential, but many a writer has faltered for want of it. The 23-year-old Roth wrote this to his cousin Paula, about his prospects in the world: "The main thing is experience, intensity of feeling, tunneling into events." Not a bad bit of advice for a young writer looking to make himself into exactly the witness he would become. 