The Quest for Redemption: Central European Jewish Thought in Joseph Roth's Works

Rares G. Piloiu

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The Quest for Redemption
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The Quest for Redemption: Central European Jewish Thought in Joseph Roth’s Works

By Rares G. Piloiu

Purdue University Press
West Lafayette, Indiana
The saint lives in the world. He does not reject it.
—Max Brod, *Paganism, Christianity, Judaism: A Confession of Faith*
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Avant-Propos

The argument for writing a study on Joseph Roth has first of all a personal motivation. I was born and raised in Eastern Europe, and my family roots reach into the multicultural world of the former Habsburg Empire, a world that constitutes the background for much of Roth’s work. Spending holidays with my mother’s side of the family in Transylvania, I grew accustomed to hearing a mélange of languages, including Romanian, Hungarian, and German, imperceptibly melting into each other as the need required in a harmonious coexistence of what later I understood to be the specificity of *Mitteleuropa*. I would not want to idealize this notion, whose historical avatars carry an ambiguous legacy, but I do want to draw on my personal interest for it, an interest stimulated in part by personal experience and in part by literary experience. Crossing the Carpathians each summer and winter had something ritualistic and purifying about it, and this was not simply due to the sacred nature of the religious holidays that marked my childhood visits into Transylvania or to the warmth of our family’s reunions. There was something objective about it that I could feel while still on the train, a type of permanence embedded in the mild rolling hills of the countryside, in the almost dull reappearance of similar towns and villages densely built around ancient church steeples, and in the obstinately slow rhythm in which everything seemed to move. For me, as for a Hans Castorp of another era and geographical location, crossing the Carpathians from the flatlands was like moving from an ugly and omnipresent history (it was, after all, Nicolae Ceausescu’s 1980s Romania) to a place outside of history, a magical realm under the rule of eternity. There, more powerful than history, tradition left its indelible mark on everything. Later in life as I read Roth’s novels of Austrian inspiration of the 1930s, I could almost immediately relate to his fascination with the permanence of the Habsburg world at a time when history had started to show its hideous and inhumane face. His recollection of the smells, sounds, and sights that repeated themselves in a dizzying kaleidoscope everywhere one went awoke in me similar feelings of familiarity and reassurance. If cultures have a spirit of their own that
defies politics, history, and territorial partitions, as the Hungarian Jewish writer György Konrád claims, then the spirit of Central Europe that Roth depicted in his writings was definitely the same one that marked some of my strongest childhood memories.

The image of Central Europe that emerges from the works of other authors who influenced me, such as Ingeborg Bachmann, Milan Kundera, and Peter Esterházy, is also, as I later learned, influenced significantly by Roth’s fiction. The indebtedness of many modern Central European writers (and not only European if one takes into consideration the admissions of Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee) to Roth’s nostalgic depiction of imperial Austria reinforced my curiosity about Roth, especially the fact that his work took on a distinct political meaning in the 1970s and 1980s. In the years succeeding the defeat of the Prague Spring of 1968, the phrase “Central European literature” represented an intellectual protest against a grim historical reality dictated by the stern partition of Europe between West and East. At the same time, the tragedy of Central Europe, which Kundera decried in his famous 1984 article, started to be associated with the tragedy of Central European Jews, of which the Austrian Joseph Roth was one. Kundera, but also Konrád, saw in the Central European Jewish cultural model the embodiment of everything Central Europe stood for: tolerance, tradition, moderation, and respect for culture and education. Reviving the memory of that Jewish world, a world vanished in the tumult of a murderous and impatient history, became synonymous with restoring the memory of that part of Europe that was too easily wiped out in the conflict between the western and the eastern parts of the continent. In the politically charged atmosphere of the 1980s, Central Europe even represented for some an alternative to the political divisions between East and West, the culture of peace and denuclearization, and the end of ideologies. I later realized that assigning Central Europe a quasi-utopian role, mediating between the spirit of the West (technology) and that of the East (ideology), was not a new trope. Roth had also depicted Habsburg Austria as well as the traditional life of Central European Jewry in utopian colors in order to create an alternative to what during the 1920s and 1930s appeared to be the irreconcilable forces confronting each other in Europe: on the one hand the bourgeois individualist model and on the other hand the fascist and communist collectivist one. Like many Jewish intellectuals of his time, Roth was interested in articulating an idea of redemption that allowed the Jewish identity and the modern human condition in general to reconcile themselves with a tragic history and even to sow the seeds of a future emancipation.
The search for redemption carried out by an entire generation of Central European Jewish intellectuals who came of age in the first quarter of the twentieth century represents one of the major paradigms within which modern Jewish intellectual history manifested itself. This search testifies to not only the historical difficulties encountered by European Jews at the time of a crucial moment in their history but also the synthetic power of their political imagination, their central locality within the German culture, and their revaluation of the Judaic religious heritage that their parents’ generation had almost forgotten. Roth dedicated his energy and literary imagination to developing this idea of redemption. In more than fifteen novels and countless journal articles, essays, and short stories he addresses some of the thorniest problems encountered by the modern individual, from political disillusionment to moral paralysis and from social estrangement to historical dissolution. For Roth, as for many members of his generation, the solution to even the most mundane problems lies in a profoundly moral, quasi-religious relation with the world, which he tries to reconstruct piece by piece starting from the negative consciousness of the redemptive dimension of human existence to its positive, unequivocal affirmation. His social, religious-existentialist, and historical novels reassert in one form or another the necessity for a reunification of Weltgeschichte and Heilsgeschichte, making redemption part of everyday existence and imparting to history the hope of spiritual deliverance. By revisiting the Chasidic tradition, Roth unites the apparently contradictory notions of tradition and innovation, faith and reason, salvation and history. It is through this synthesis made possible by the idea of redemption that one can comprehend Roth’s many paradoxes, including the coexistence of socialism and conservatism, of his radical individualism and collective traditionalism and of his anarchism and stoicism, which represent so many puzzles for numerous interpreters who often speak of Roth’s “contradictions,” “paradoxes,” and “ambivalence.”

This study is a revised, updated, and extended version of my doctoral thesis, written at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 2006. I am indebted to Professors Henry Sussman, Rodolphe Gasché, and Georg Iggers for their helpful guidance and continued encouragement. I also want to thank OhioLink for offering access to an unparalleled wealth of bibliographic sources and Otterbein University for its continued support of my research. This study is dedicated to my family for their love and devoted support.
Introduction

The Judaic Dimension of Redemption in Roth’s Work and a Brief Review of the Relevant Secondary Literature

While much is known about Roth’s complex relationship with the Jewish identity and with Judaism, little is known about his connection with the intellectual universe of the Central European Jews who came of age in the first decades of the twentieth century and who, although raised in assimilated middle-class families, grew increasingly disenchanted with the secular, rationalist, and individualist project of assimilation adopted by the Jews in the nineteenth century. Unlike their parents, these intellectuals returned to traditional—particularly Eastern—Judaic spirituality in order to find solutions to the deadlocks of not only modern Jewish identity but also modern subjectivity in general. The generation’s reawakened interest in Judaism and Jewish issues even led Martin Buber to talk of a “Jewish Renaissance” in the first half of the twentieth century, as Paul Mendes-Flohr points out (German Jews 57). Although a heterogeneous group politically and intellectually, “their thinking took shape around the Jewish (Kabbalistic) idea of tikkun, a polysemic term for redemption (Erlösung), restoration, reparation, reformation and the recovery of lost harmony” (Löwy 2). Michael Löwy refers to this generation as a “generation of dreamers and utopians” that includes figures as diverse as Gustav Landauer, Franz Kafka, Gershom Scholem, Georg Lukács, Martin Buber, Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, Ernst Toller, Ernst Bloch, Max Brod, and Leo Löwenthal. The present study articulates the nexus between Joseph Roth’s work and this generation’s preoccupation with the idea of redemption in order to demonstrate that Roth’s constant search for the restoration of a unified identity—individual or collective, Jewish or universal—is indebted to a rediscovered Judaic and, more specifically, Chasidic notion of redemption.
Placing Roth within a group of theoretical thinkers that included mostly philosophers but also theologians, sociologists, and literary critics is a bit problematic because of his avowed contempt for theory, especially for speculative thinking in the tradition of German idealist philosophy. Roth, the self-styled “practical” intellectual for whom writing was allegedly nothing more than a trade, preferred the company of like-minded people, including journalists, novelists, and historians. He avoided the theorists, intentionally overlooked their books, and in general did not appear to have too much time for lengthy speculations. In his busy, productive life Roth preferred the “Latin” clarity, the simple style, and the short and penetrating insight, so different from the German Dichtung tradition, and saw himself, in his critics’ words, as a “one-off in German literature,” as he declared in a 1927 letter to his French translator Félix Bertaux (Joseph Roth: A Life 105). Yet, Roth’s fiction and nonfiction alike use the guise of simplicity in order to arrive at a lofty, spiritual purpose. This purpose, rarely asserted as such, is hinted at throughout Roth’s entire work as the centerpiece around which revolve his social critique, his political convictions, his moral intuitions, and his meditations on history. It is the idea of redemption, which also attracted, albeit in a profoundly philosophical-speculative way, the other members of his generation. This intragenerational affinity for spiritual renovation, for a return to the religious roots of historical existence, and for the unification of the self and the world justifies Roth’s treatment alongside the other theorists of the idea of redemption.

This notion of redemption presents itself in Roth’s work as a solution to the profound crisis in which modernity—understood in a political, moral, and philosophical sense—plunged both the individual and society. Redemption promises the recovery of a long-forgotten meaningfulness by reuniting the religious and historical dimensions of existence, both in a private and communal sense. By revisiting the Judaic idea of salvation as a mystical conjunction of divine miraculous intervention and individual effort, Roth offers a counterbalance to the excessive reliance on human reason in defining the role of the individual in the modern world. At the same time, his view of redemption does not simply mark a return to the premodern ethos of collective religious traditions. It creates instead an original and unconventional way of thinking about restoring the lost unity with the world by imagining the inherited, collective traditions as a living organism that keeps itself open to the spontaneity of individual variations. In a world torn apart by the individualism of the liberal-bourgeois traditions and by the collectivism of the rising tide of ethic and social populisms, as the European world was in the interwar years, the political dimension of redemption sought
to arrive at an almost impossible synthesis of individual and collective as well as particular and universal identities. It is probably for this reason that although first formulated in the Central European intra-Jewish debates about the projects of assimilation and nation building, the idea of redemption acquires in Roth’s work a universal character, reinforced by the belief that the historical experience of the Jews was not singular and instead was prototypical for the entirety of humankind.

Whether couched in the political concept of Utopia or considered in its moral-religious dimension, this particular idea of redemption is not the same as the Judaic idea of redemption and combines both religious and secular elements. Unlike traditional messianic thinking, it is not apocalyptic; that is, it does not promote a notion of redemption based on the obliteration of creation and the birth of an entirely new Kingdom of God. Instead, it is incorporated into creation in a manner that preserves its transcendent character but infuses it into history. In this manner, its secular, political, and moral aspects become an integral part of the redemptive process in which the humans play an active role. It is this notion of salvation in history and not outside of it that attracted both Roth and many of his contemporaries to the Chasidic idea of redemption and to Eastern Judaic spirituality in general. On the other hand, making redemption a historical event in which the individuals participate does not mean that salvation is a rational, planned, and guaranteed project. In that, it is different from what Northrop Frye calls a “rational” Utopia, one in which the mechanisms of salvation are rationally transparent, predictable, and clear. To the contrary, its occurrence is sudden and unpredictable. It is primarily an event in the logic of the transcendent realm; its arrival is transformative because the world of history and creation is delivered through it from its corrupt condition. Thus, the religious, mystical character of redemption is preserved. The individual, however much involved in the fashioning of one’s own salvation in history, cannot rely on morality and reason alone. He must resort to an attitude of religious beseeching of the Kingdom, to a hopeful expectation that it will come. The notion of redemption thus developed is simultaneously active and expectant: it motivates the individual to act in order to bring forth a promise made but not guaranteed.

Hence, the condition of possibility for redemption is the simultaneity of history and Utopia, of the real and the ideal. This unity, however, is dynamic and is relative to the individual ability to bring it into existence; in other words, it depends on the individual ability to transcend both the narrow confines of historical, rational existence and the chiliastic passion of the antihistorical eschaton. There is no possibility of redemption without the individual who takes up
this task under the commandment of a yearning for renovation that is inscribed in the very creation as the desire to improve, to seek betterment. Inspired by this view of salvation in the here and now, Roth and his contemporaries emphasize the importance of the present moment in assuming the redemptive condition. The present is crucial in linking up the inherited past and the desired future into a whole that uplifts historical existence to the transcendent realm, while also preserving its concrete, mundane form. As a result of this fusion, an exchange takes place between that which was inherited and that which is desired: we are not simply the passive receivers of a given past, just as we are not totally autonomous in regard to shaping our future however we want. Instead, we have the moral ability to infuse a redemptive expectation into what we inherit from the past while also informing our future expectation with the genetic makeup of the inherited past, so to speak. Thus for Roth, the order of redemption allows for a shift in understanding both the past and the future: instead of a passively inherited past and an actively desired future, it proposes a “desired” past shaped by the moral demand for redemption and an “inherited” future influenced by the legacy of the past.

Therefore, history acquires a unique status in the tradition of early twentieth-century Central European Jewish thinking, including in Roth’s own writing. This is because the concept of redemption places at its center the surpassing of the opposition between the restorative and prospective character of salvation, by virtue of which future deliverance is relative to a restitution of the past mediated through the values of the present. History, understood as the repository of the valuable tradition that needs to be actualized in the utopian hope for salvation, represents for Roth no longer a strictly descriptive science of irreversible events. Instead, it becomes intricately knit into the normative selection and modeling that the present requires in order to answer the demands expressed by its hope for future redemption. By not extricating salvation from history (as traditional utopians and mystics but also historians, albeit for the opposite reasons, have done) and instead making it into a principle of historical development thanks to its capacity to mobilize the individual toward the attainment of the promised renewal, redemption becomes for Roth synonymous with the temporal meaningfulness of human existence.

Roth’s quest for redemption is also a quest for a synthetic principle capable of harmonizing contradictory notions, such as history and Utopia, past and future, action and expectation, certainty and possibility. The space in which redemption unfolds, at the intersection of conceptually opposing terms, requires an unconventional understanding of notions such as individual and collective identity, or
society and history. It is a particularity of Roth’s own writing that certain realities take on both a historical, real but also figurative, allegorical sense. His use of certain literary loci, such as the East European Jew, Austria, or Germany, is often allegorical, symbolizing higher notions, such as salvation, memory, or damnation, but at the same time denotative, explicating historically concrete social and political situations. This bifocal perspective on reality can only be explained circularly: in building the conditions of possibility for surmounting the opposition between reality and imagination, Roth’s logic of redemption treats them already as the same thing. Because of its totalizing character, the idea of redemption has no moment of inception: it was always already there, acting retrospectively. One has to take a leap of faith in order to see it. It is probably for this reason that many critics have such a hard time placing Roth’s literary world in a temporal or narrative category: it is simultaneously “no longer” and “not yet,” actual and possible, historical and utopian, real and fictional.

Although the notion of redemption developed by Roth’s generation has not been addressed in a unitary fashion in the Roth scholarship, there are studies that touch on separate aspects of this problem. In her 1984 Von der Würde des Unscheinbaren: Sinnerfahrung bei Joseph Roth (On the Grandeur of the Inconspicuous: The Experience of Meaning in Joseph Roth’s Work), Esther Steinmann demonstrates the connection between Roth’s religious imagination and the Chasidic religious experience, an experience characterized by an ambiguous combination of conservative tradition and messianic expectation, but she relegates this aspect to Roth’s theological affinities with Judaism and not to a larger movement of Judaic renaissance rooted in the notion of renovation and redemption. Two decades later in 2004, Almuth Hammer analyzed in her study Erwählung erinnern: Literatur als Medium jüdischen Selbstverständnisses (Remembering Divine Election: Literature as a Medium of Jewish Self-Identity) the issue of Roth’s generation’s return to Judaic traditions, pointing out that this return should be interpreted not as an embrace of the actual Judaic traditions but instead as an interpretation of tradition in the context of modernity (“im Kontext der Moderne”) (208). However, Hammer fails to provide a detailed explanation of this process with convincing evidence drawn from Roth’s work itself, instead devoting most of her study to an analysis of the abstract dialectical relationship between modernity and tradition.

Although Roth’s messianic imagination and his interest in a religious reformulation of the idea of Utopia have been mentioned, albeit in passing, by some critics, such as Markus May and Bernd Oei, not all believe that Roth’s fiction points to a better world, a Utopia to be found either in fiction or at the end of all
times. Wolfgang Müller-Funk, for instance, argues that for Roth “Messianismus . . . eher fremd war” ‘Messianism was rather alien’ (Joseph Roth 195). Instead, Roth appears to these critics as a disenchanted, skeptical, and antiutopian writer for whom no other world is possible except in death or, ironically, in fiction, as Blanke, Hüppauf, and Butler argue. There are also interpreters who place Roth’s messianism in the context of his hostility toward the historical present and toward modernity in order to demonstrate that for Roth redemption is possible only through the negation of reality, “die Erlösung aus dem Exil der Geschichte” ‘the redemption from the exile of history’ (Sebald 91). The drive toward permanence, toward tradition, is understood by these interpreters as a push outside history and into the past. Even when redemption is anticipated as something yet to happen, it is often seen as a restoration of an old order, of a golden age, a “backward-looking Utopia” (rückwärts gewandte Utopie), as Martha Wörschnig, drawing on Ernst Bloch or possibly on a 1930 Stefan Zweig review of Roth’s novel Hiob (Job), memorably put it (90). However, what these critics fail to account for is Roth’s persistent interest in the future-oriented correction of the state of the modern world through a “here and now” solution. The pull of the mythical past is counterbalanced by a counterforce in the opposite direction, toward the future, the present acting like the fulcrum. As the present study demonstrates, this present is the time of redemption. Not only Roth but also other thinkers of his generation, such as Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Bloch, and Buber, have been equally captivated by the power of the present to offer solutions, echoing thus—in a secular fashion—the Chasidic idea of redemption as an event of everyday existence. It should be noted that Fritz Hackert is nonetheless one of the first critics to mention, although briefly, the tight connection between Roth’s religious imagination and his penchant toward fabulous writing and Chasidism.

Probably the critic who stands most closely to the present study is Claudio Magris, whose monograph Lontano da dove, widely available in its German translation as Weit von wo (Away from Where), elaborates most convincingly Roth’s connection with the Chasidic world and with Martin Buber’s philosophy. Magris emphasizes Roth’s constant dialogue with a Chasidic storytelling and mystical tradition, one that is fundamentally skeptical about history but also about the possibility of a final, firm absolution from history. In this respect, Magris argues, Roth comes close to Yiddish literature, which finds a refuge from history in tradition, in the world of the shtetl, albeit a fictional refuge. For Roth, the function of literature is to create a space in which both the organic connection with the traditional world and the fulfillment of the individual desire to exist in history coexist harmoniously, a space of ambivalence that opens up the realm of
possibilities beyond the constraints of place and time. Roth’s predilection for the parable, for a form of storytelling that transcends the coordinates of the fictional chronotope, stems, Magris contends, from his affinity with the Chasidic tale, whose role is to transfigure reality into the realm of the possible (267).

In Magris’s view, Roth’s indebtedness to Chasidism resides in his “geschichtsfeindliche, religiöse Individualismus” ‘antihistorical religious individualism’ (287). In this sense, even Roth’s emphasis on classicism and nobility are an expression of a typical Jewish rejection of history, which is always seen as a history of decay and of exile. This explains why the position outside of history, the melancholy contemplation, comes naturally to Roth, who consciously chooses “der Standpunkt ‘außerhalb’” ‘the “external” point of view’ or “der Standpunkt der Metageschichte des ‘Golus’, des jüdischen Exils” ‘the metahistorical point of view of the “Golus,” of the Jewish exile’ (91). From this position, the flow of history appears as a narrative of decay and defeat, similar to Benjamin’s view. Magris points out, however, that Roth does not either share or oppose Benjamin’s messianic impulse in his evaluation of history. If Utopia appears anywhere, it is in the form of the “Utopie einer Vergangenheit” ‘Utopia of a past’ that cannot replace the present anymore of a “Mythos des Nicht-mehr-Möglichen” ‘Myth of the no-longer-possible’ (20).

On the other hand, Magris demonstrates how important life in the present and the joys of simple existence are for Roth, as if to counterbalance the drive outside of history into myth. This attitude finds its expression in the Chasidic pietas: “Freude anstatt des erlösenden Leids, Demut statt der titanischen Utopie” ‘Joy instead expiatory suffering, humility instead of titanic Utopia’ (179). Magris emphasizes the fact that Roth rejects the apocalyptical Messiah of the hereafter and embraces the “here and now” of everyday life in the destinies of the common people such as Mendel Singer of Hiob, who was a “simple man.” The redemptive act, Magris argues, is in the catharsis of storytelling itself, which unites the storyteller and the audience, as the Chasidic tradition suggests (180). He insists that Roth manages to achieve in the realm of literature the apparently impossible synthesis between the escape from the misery of history and the return to history as the inevitable condition of everyday humanity.

And yet for Magris, Roth’s search for redemption rests solely in the realm of literature. It is a fictional construct that is unavoidably bound to the melancholy of the absence of reality, a literary strategy to survive the disaster of history. However, given how complexly intertwined Roth’s notions of literature and reality are, it is hard to circumscribe Roth’s world entirely to the realm of the imagination. For him, the fictional world is real to the same extent that all reality
is just a fictional projection. His own empirical self-staging (*Selbstinszenierung*) bears testimony to the fact that he made a conscious effort to treat his created world as real, to bring it down to earth. For this reason, the idea of redemption needs to be considered in its capacity to reconcile these contradictions and provide a solution to the conflict between reality and fiction upon which Magris’s argument is predicated. By understanding that the idea of redemption as “restoration, reparation, reformation and the recovery of lost harmony,” as Löwy puts it (2), encompasses the entirety of life, possible and real, it becomes apparent that its aim is to surmount the conflicts between history and Utopia, object and subject, past and future. From the point of view of redemption, the conventional opposition between fiction and reality has no meaning, being simply the result of a corrupt, fallen consciousness in need of renovation.

Naturally, this does not mean that this idea of redemption always has a direct application in real life, although many of its proponents would argue differently. Especially in the field of politics, the idea of a “recovery of lost harmony” raises many questions about its ability to find a concrete expression but also to avoid any ideological contagions with the ideologies of radical renovation of human nature that shaped the fate of the twentieth century. For this reason, the present study often points out that some of Roth’s ideas indeed reside in the realm of the literary imagination. And yet, there is an immediate impact of the idea of redemption on reality and an appeal to the individual to alter one’s relationship with the world. The crucial point of the philosophy of redemption discussed here is the reenthronement of the individual moral mind in history. Whether we are talking about Utopia, salvation, justice, or memory, the thinkers analyzed here emphasize the importance of reuniting the individual with the world, of obtaining that “encounter,” that authentic relationship of which Buber speaks in *I and Thou*. And since any such deeper connection involves the “responsibility of an I for a You” (Buber, *I and Thou* 66), it follows that the individual must cease to delegate the responsibility for the world to ready-made, mechanistic categories of reason, politics, and religion and assume the moral responsibility for the world. Maybe this appeal to moral responsibility for the world is the practical message couched in the idea of redemption. Viewed in this light, Roth’s work can be interpreted as a guide to a better world, as a call to responsibility and moral wakefulness in a modern era of individual disengagement from tradition and from the “countenance of the You” (Buber, *I and Thou* 92).

It is the purpose of the present study to demonstrate that Roth’s idea of redemption is part of a larger generational effort to articulate a notion of redemption that can resolve the contradictions of modern consciousness and
bring about an eon of harmony in all realms of life: political, epistemological, moral-religious, and psychological. It is also characteristic of the members of this generation that they found inspiration for this idea of redemption in the Judaic, especially Chasidic, concept of religious salvation as a messianism of everyday existence. By using this notion of salvation, these thinkers are able to pose the possibility of a Utopia of the here and the now, to redeem history but also to let it continue, to find a middle way between the messianic end of history and the unavoidably historical dimension of human existence. In this sense, the present work demonstrates precisely how this synthesis takes shape in Roth’s work and how it relates to similar concepts formulated by other thinkers: Utopia, hope, redemption, this-worldly miracle.

Roth’s Ambivalence, Its Critical Reception, and Some Observations of Methodological Nature

Writing a critical study devoted to Joseph Roth’s work is, from the very beginning, an uphill battle. It is as if the work itself resists any attempts at clear-cut categorizations and conceptualizations, in spite of the fact that it remains accessible to a wide readership. As literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki once humorously remarked, “Ob er [Roth] es wollte oder nicht: Er hat es seinen Lesern immer leicht- und seinen Interpreten oft schwergemacht” ‘Whether he [Roth] intended it or not, he always made it easy for his readers and hard for his critics’ (“Die besten Romane von Joseph Roth”). A possible explanation for this interpretative difficulty might reside with Roth’s own hostility toward literary criticism and theory in general, although he himself penned many literary reviews in the German-language press of the interwar years. As Soma Morgenstern recalls in his book of memoirs Joseph Roth’s Flucht und Ende: Erinnerungen (Joseph Roth’s Flight and End: Memoirs), Roth was from very early on dismissive of Lukács’s Theory of the Novel, of which he said he could read only two pages, and of Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch’s philosophy, which to him seemed too “German” (80). How Roth conceived of literature is somewhat difficult to gauge, but based on a 1935 letter to his friend and compatriot Stefan Zweig, one might argue that writing was for Roth a very practical undertaking: “Writing is a terrestrial thing, and, from a ‘metaphysical’ vantage point, is in no way different from shoemaking” (Joseph Roth: A Life 433). As for reading literature, Roth did not make a secret out the fact that he did not see much point in it, especially for a writer. According to Géza von Cziffra’s memoir Der heilige Trinker: Erinnerungen an Joseph Roth (The Holy Drinker: Memories
Introduction

of Joseph Roth), when asked about his literary tastes, Roth often quoted Karl Kraus’s aphorism “Ein Dichter, der liest, ist wie ein Kellner, der ißt” ‘a writer who reads is like a waiter who eats’ (105).

And yet Roth consumed literature, reviewed it in the press of the time (he lived on the income from his journalism most of his adult life), and had clear opinions about what he liked and disliked. His admiration for French literature is well known, as exemplified by his opinion of Marcel Proust: “Bei Marcel Proust ist mir der Knopf aufgegangen” ‘I had a revelation with Marcel Proust’ (Morgenstern 103), while his dislike of German literature is also well documented. An illustration of this is provided by Morgenstern himself, who recalls in his memoir the details of the encounter between Roth and another great Austrian writer, Robert Musil. When Musil expressed admiration for the novel Hiob and for the authenticity of the main character, Mendel Singer, Roth replied caustically that this might be impressive for a “goy” such as Musil, not a Jew such as himself. As for his opinion of Musil, Roth quickly dismissed him as a “German” writer, too abstract and convoluted. How can the contradiction between Roth the practical writer who—allegedly—did not read other writers and Roth the corrosive and opinionated critic be explained? And how can we explain the fact that even Roth’s harsh judgments changed depending on mood or context, as Morgenstern remembers: “Roth [ist] der einzige Schriftsteller . . . der jedem Gespräch über Literatur ausweicht, aber gern über Schriftsteller spricht und von einem zum andern Mal vergißt, wie er sie einschätzt” ‘Roth [is] the only writer . . . who avoids any talk about literature but likes to talk about writers and forgets his opinion of them from one time to another’ (81)? Critics have provided various, often conflicting explanations, but that is not uncommon for anyone undertaking an interpretation of Roth’s work. These are just several instances of what many commentators have called Roth’s structural “inconsistency” or “ambivalence,” which is why any attempt at a systematical analysis of his work is bound to a partial, often relative validity. It is also the case with the present study. As Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler beautifully concludes in his analysis of Roth’s reception in the literary history and with an allusion to Roth’s study Juden auf Wanderschaft (The Wandering Jews), “Roths Werk ist in keinem Kapitel daheim; es ist auf der Wanderschaft” ‘Roth’s work does not reside in any chapter; it is on the move’ (Schmidt-Dengler 32). But the difficulty of obtaining a unitary picture of Roth’s work is not necessarily an inconvenience. The fact that it “resists interpretation” (“sich der Greifbarkeit entzieht”) can be seen as a source of continued creativity and fresh explanations, “always compelling to new interpretations” (“immer zu neuer Formulierung zwingt”) (Schmidt-Dengler 32).
The lack of critical consensus is augmented in Roth’s case by the author’s sinuous intellectual and historical trajectory and by his own ambiguous self-positioning in multiple contexts. The question “who was the real Joseph Roth?” is often and justifiably asked by a critical audience accustomed to modern, clear-cut, and unequivocal national, political, and religious identities, an audience for whom hybrid or context-bound identities are highly uncommon. Was Roth the Galician Jew, the German socialist, the Austrian legitimist, or the Catholic thinker? But this ambiguity cannot be said to be the result of temporal distance alone. To his contemporaries Roth was a puzzle as well, as demonstrated by the famous episode of Roth’s funeral when, as David Bronsen explains in his seminal *Joseph Roth: Eine Biographie (Joseph Roth: A Biography)*, Roth’s friends gathered to pay their final respects: the monarchists and the communists, the Jews and the Catholics, each one claiming Roth as one of their own (602). There is plenty of evidence that Roth was aware of this ambiguity and that he even intentionally cultivated it. Whether he did it for artistic effect or indeed as the result of a form of self-understanding that transcended the traditional categories of the self is another matter of debate among the critics. Roth’s own 1926 self-description as “a Frenchman from the East, a Humanist, a rationalist with religion, a Catholic with a Jewish intelligence, an actual revolutionary” bears testimony to the multiple facets of his identity, an identity that simultaneously puzzles and stimulates the imagination (*Joseph Roth: A Life* 88).

Still, this ambiguity might have been more easily bypassed by literary criticism had it been simply a question of personal identity and not so interlocked with Roth’s literary work. But Roth stands out through the original (and almost postmodern) interweaving of private life, social persona, and auctorial self, as Peter Wilhelm Jansen points out: “Bei kaum einem anderen Romancier dieses Jahrhunderts sind Leben und Werk so eng mit einander verflochten, so dicht verzahnt” ‘There is no other [twentieth-century] novelist for whom life and work are so closely intertwined, so tightly interlocked’ (“Weltbezug und Erzählhaltung” 21). Moreover, the complex interconnections between Roth’s fiction, journalism, and essayistic nonfiction make it doubly difficult to draw conclusions about realities that inhabit multiple, often shifting registers. First of all, as Reinhard Baumgart observes, “fast alles, was er geschrieben hat, ob Reisebericht, Polemik oder erzählende Prosa, bleibt immer durchsichtig auf den, der schreibt” ‘the author [Roth] remains visible in almost everything he wrote, whether travel report, polemic, or narrative prose’ (“Drei Ansichten” 330). There is an intentional presence of Roth’s personal voice in almost everything he writes, and the reason for this is that he sees literature in a very practical sense, as a tool used by
the author to touch, to entertain, but also to awaken the moral instincts of the reader. Not only does Roth’s personal voice speak often in his fiction, breaking down the barriers between author and narrator, but this voice itself is also somehow “fictionalized,” staged, so that the author himself becomes in a way another character. According to Thomas Bauer, Roth selects which auctorial voice he makes present in his fiction depending on which self-identification he chooses: “Wenn man Roth liest, liest man, wie er sich in das, was er schreibt, einmischt und welches Konzept von Persönlichkeit er einmischt.” ‘In reading Roth, one reads how he interferes with what he writes and what concept of personality he mixes in’ (445).

In addition to allowing his personal voice and biographical details to transpire in his fiction, Roth also “fictionalizes” his own life to the point where reality becomes hardly distinguishable from story. In this sense, Steinmann is right to argue that “Roth [sah] auch sein eigenes Leben als Legende, in dem Dichtung und Wahrheit, Fiktion und Wirklichkeit ununterscheidbar ineinanderflossen” ‘Roth saw his own life as a legend as well, in which literature and truth, fiction and reality undistinguishably coalesced’ (“... ein Mann von Ehre” 59). As his biographer David Bronsen points out, Roth’s own autobiographical accounts were a mix of fiction and reality in the sense that Roth always tried to create partially fictive narratives around his life, origins, and family. He tried to cast himself as a character in his own life, so to speak, which explains why some aspects of his biography are not clear to this day. There exist several accounts, sometimes contradictory, that testify to the author’s mythomaniacal tendencies (Joseph Roth: Eine Biographie 487). As Hermann Linden writes,


Joseph Roth wore many masks in life. He liked to act as a realist, as a skeptic, even as an arrogant cynic. We also saw him first quite on the left, then on the right, then as monarchist, temporarily even under the spell of Catholicism, wearing the mask of humility and traditionalism, and at the end of his life we see him once again wearing the mask of the beginning.
While many agree that Roth wore many masks, the question about the justification of his masquerading still remains a matter of dispute. Is it, as Katharina Ochse points out, the expression of Roth’s own ambiguous dealing with his identity as a Jew living in an anti-Semitic environment? Or is it an instance of creativity that stretches beyond the literary realm, as is suggested through Jansen’s idea of “autofiction” (Autofiktion), according to which Roth creates a fictional universe that he subsequently assumes to be real? Jansen explains this process as a form of fictional identity constitution that bears in turn upon the constitution of fiction itself, since “die Erfüllung des Ich . . . nicht tatsächlich sein kann und nur möglich ist im Fiktiven” ‘the fulfillment of the ego . . . cannot happen in reality and is possible only in the fictional world’ (“Der autofiktive Erzähler” 372). For Wolfgang Müller-Funk, the existence of a circularity between Roth’s biography and his fiction brings evidence to his work being autoreferential (“selbstbezüglich”) rather than mimetic (“mimetisch”) (Joseph Roth 30). As a result of this autoreferentiality, there is no clear distinction between fictional and nonfictional reality, which explains why for Roth literary concepts such as documentary writing and fictional writing (Dichtung) have no meaning. By rejecting the categories of literary theory, the distinctions between author and narrator, between objective reality and created reality, Roth reaffirms in the 1929 article “Es lebe der Dichter!” (“Long live the writer!”) the pragmatic nature of literature: “Es gibt kein ‘Gesetz,’ keine ‘Norm,’ keine ‘Regel.’ Es gibt nur schlechte Autoren und gute” ‘There is no “law,” no “norm,” no “rule.” There are only bad and good authors’ (Werke 3: 46).

The implications of Roth’s original conception of fictional and empirical reality are also felt in the circularity of his fictional and nonfictional writing. If all observation of reality is already fictionalized, then all fiction bears in it a close connection with observable reality; it is, so to speak, documentary, argues Roth in “Es lebe der Dichter!”: “Auch ‘erfinden’ heißt ‘beobachten’, gesteigertes ‘Finden’. Es lebe der Dichter! Er ist immer ‘dokumentarisch’!” ‘Also “to invent” means “to observe,” augmented “discovery.” Long live the writer! He is always “documentary”!’ (Werke 3: 46). As a result Roth takes great liberties with his journalistic, essayistic, and fictional writing, which he understands as a unitary endeavor or, in Jürgen Heizmann’s words, as “das eine, einzige Buch, das seinen gesamten Kosmos enthält” ‘the one, the only book, that contains his entire cosmos’ (Joseph Roth 11). Ideas, characters, themes, situations, and sometimes entire sentences appear to migrate from nonfiction to fiction and then back into nonfiction but half fictionalized (Ochse 11). Words that belong to the reporter Roth appear in the mouths of his characters in the novels. As Reinhard Baumgart
points out, “der Aggregatzustand ‘Fiktion’ lässt sich von dem Aggregatzustand ‘Feuilleton’ oder ‘Reportage’ in Roth’s Prosa durchaus nicht klar unterscheiden” ‘in Roth’s prose, the state of aggregation “fiction” is in no way clearly distinguishable from the state of aggregation “feuilleton” or “reportage”’ (Auferstehung 44). The vast continuity in Austrian themes, characters, and issues among Roth’s fictional works has even prompted Herman Kesten to refer to a veritable “comédie autrichienne” (101) similar to Balzac’s comédie humaine. And yet in spite of these commonalities, Roth does not create a consistent whole, a fictional-documentary world without fissure. The characters may share the same names and the situations may seem identical from one work to another, but often a closer inspection reveals inconsistencies that question the very assumption of continuity or sameness. Roth frequently undermines realities that he himself creates, continuously challenging the reader’s preconceived notions of identity, temporality, and causality. As Scheible observes, “der Konstruktion seiner ‘comédie humaine’ vermeidet Roth Erstarrung durch Eindeutigkeit” ‘in the construction of his “comédie humaine,” Roth avoids the immobility brought by unambiguousness’ (Joseph Roth: Mit einem Essay 86).

Roth’s ambivalent notion of identity is structural to his writing, for which reason his work does not lend itself very easily to categorizations or interpretations that employ the standard categories of the narrative discourse or genre theory. Categories such as author, narrator, and character, person and persona, or reality and fiction are ambiguously merged and constantly undermined, forcing the interpreter into constantly new territories. The novels lead to the feuilletons, the feuilletons to the biography, and the biography to letters and journalism and finally back to the novels. As Irmgard Wirtz notes, since the opposition between reality and fiction is not a point of departure in the interpretation of Roth’s work, one should adopt a dialogical model of explanation, one that sees all the distinctive elements in a dialogue and relationship of mutual influence. She finds this approach particularly useful in the analysis of the relationship between Roth’s early reports and his late historical fiction (118). The present study engages with Roth’s work in a similar fashion. It makes use of various elements of his writings, including his novels, short stories, correspondence, reportage, polemics, reviews, and newspaper commentaries, in order to shed a new light on his fictional work. In doing this, it treats these elements as part of a literary whole that is, however, unstable and in constant need of contextual interpretation. This instability accounts for the methodological liberties that this study takes in the holistic treatment of Roth’s fiction, nonfiction, and correspondence.
The present study is structured into five chapters: the first chapter, devoted to Roth’s pivotal preoccupation with the idea of redemption in the context of a wider generational return to Judaism among the secular Jewish intellectuals of his time and focused mainly on his nonfictional writings; the second chapter, focused on the major early novels written before *Job* (*Perlefter*, written in 1929, is not treated here); the third chapter, devoted to Roth’s fiction of direct religious inspiration; the fourth chapter, which explores Roth’s fiction of historical inspiration; and the fifth chapter, dealing with the particular case of the novel *The Tale of the 1002nd Night*. The idea of redemption is analyzed through its negative manifestations in the early novels; in its positive, explicit form in the late ones; and in its ironic form in the novel *The Tale of the 1002nd Night*. This study does not follow the stylistic convention of using the gender-neutral pronominal construction “he/she” for the simple reason that it may get in the way of comprehending an often abstract and difficult content. As a nonnative English speaker, I consider the use of the generic pronoun “he” less awkward, with the mention that the choice of “he” is purely conventional, being interchangeable with “she.” For the most important sources in German I used existing translations when available, whereas for the sources of secondary importance and for those for which no translation is available I used my own translation.

Notes

1. “In such utopias the guide explains the structure of the society and thereby the significance of the behavior being observed. Hence, the behavior of society is presented as rationally motivated” (Frye, “Varieties” 323–47).
2. Unless otherwise noted, the translations from the original foreign language belong to the author.
3. *Perlefter* is not only unfinished but is also reconstructed from Roth’s Nachlass. As Rosenfeld points out, the novel, first published in 1978, was reconstructed like a jigsaw puzzle from various fragments. For this reason, it lacks unity and reads more like an exercise in the technique of the literary portrait. Although Rosenfeld dismisses it as a “lusterless book” (*Understanding* 37), the portraits of the two main protagonists, Perlefter and Bidak, are wonderfully chiseled and can easily fit into any of Roth’s major works.