

**Melodies of Melancholy**  
**Joseph Roth and the Idea of Belonging in Retrospect**  
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“ Oh – the whole world thinks in such tired, worn, traditional clichés. It never asks the wanderer where he’s going, only ever where he’s come from. And what matters to the wanderer is his destination, not his point of departure.”

‘Only the small things in life are important’, Joseph Roth once observed. It was this eye for human detail that characterised Roth’s journalistic pieces as well as his novels. Roth, who died, some days after hearing of the suicide of playwright Ernst Toller, of alcoholism and poverty in Paris in 1939, was born in the small Jewish town of Brody, ‘truly a liminal place of blurred borders and boundaries’, in 1894. At that time, his birthplace was still part of Galicia, at the easternmost edge of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and close to the Russian border (nowadays, Brody is part of the Ukraine). He spent the first nineteen years of his life amidst Yiddish-speaking Hasidic Jews – Roth himself spoke German – but he was equally accustomed to the German-speaking

town officials and soldiers, as well as to the many Slavic farmers and tradespeople speaking Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. This specific cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity made a lasting impression on Roth, and he would later invoke this aspect of his past as a lost utopia. Soon after the war ended, Roth moved to Berlin, where he began a successful career as a journalist – he was the best-paid journalist of his time, earning one mark per line. As a ‘newspaperman’, Roth wrote more than a thousand of his beloved feuilletons, as well as fifteen novels. Instead of a permanent residence, Roth preferred ‘the expensive impersonality of hotel rooms,’ in the same way ‘a monk may cherish his cell.’ The role of travel in his life is important in that, instead of a concrete sense of belonging to one place, the act of travel and of crossing borders provided Roth, not with an identity, but with a makeshift meaning, with a purpose in life. His exile in Paris after 1933 was the ironic conclusion to a life of restless wandering, except that this time, the incentive to move had not been his own, and it excluded a safe return.

Roth’s evocations of belonging can be analysed against the backdrop of the fragmenting condition of modernity – Roth wrote in the 1920s and 1930s – his epistemological doubts about ‘reality’, his insistence on the narrative truth of all ‘reality’, and, finally, his ideas on Jewish nationalism and the destiny of the wanderer. A quick glance at most research about Roth until now shows that it is based on two assumptions. First, the idea that Roth’s oeuvre can legitimately be divided into two phases, with his novel *Job* of 1930 marking the ‘change’ or radical shift in form and style, and second, an emphasis on Roth’s later career at the cost of his work of the 1920s and dominated by a discussion of what has been called his masterwork, the novel *The Radetzky March* of 1932. Consequently, Roth’s relationship to the Austro-Hungarian Empire has been perceived to be a theme of overriding importance, with possible distortions in its train. Jon Hughes, who wrote the first monologue on Roth to appear in English, stresses the fact that focusing upon any form of ‘national’ identity ‘in relation to a writer who frequently thematises the difficulties of binding individual identity to the fate of a nation’, is problematic. Instead, he argues that the theme and degree of Roth’s ‘Austrian-ness’ should be considered as only one aspect of a complex personality and a multi-dimensional writer. In relation to this, Roth’s

Jewishness should be considered as much a single theme as his perceived Austrian roots, because to label Roth primarily a Jew is 'to gloss over the complexities of identity formation' as well as to undermine his ties to 'secular and religious doubts.'

Roth's work has often been described as anomalous or anachronistic, an interpretation based on his later, more 'nostalgic' novels. Hughes, instead, has demonstrated that Roth may very well be considered a modern writer, in the sense that his responses to the contemporary world were often ambivalent – a modern characteristic in itself – and that, in fact, the modern experience is central to his writing. The price that Roth, along with his contemporaries, had to pay for modernity, in the words of Marshall Berman, was that culture and identity, 'for so long invariable from the cradle to the grave,' no longer constituted existential certainties. The idea of modernity, conceived of in numerous fragmentary ways, lost 'the capacity to organize and give meaning to people's lives.' Roth's work can be understood as an attempt to make sense of this conflict-ridden, fast changing and unstable modern world. The effects of the process of fragmentation are visible, for instance, in the incompleteness of Roth's early characters, whose 'flawed' existence is a result of the world they inhabit. Hughes argues that Roth's later novels, in which he expresses an existential doubt about contemporary reality, should not be read as a rejection of this modern world in favour of a 'nostalgically recreated past', but that these invocations are the logical consequence of his doubts 'about the possibility of mediating 'reality' in literature at all.' Roth wrote against the assumption that language can adequately mirror the world, and as such he rejected the realist – in the philosophical sense – assertion that there are 'universals', absolute abstract values to which language directly refers. In his work, narrativity constitutes a reality of its own. Whereas the debate about Roth's use of language has focused upon the proposition that his work should be seen as the expression of a 'crisis of language,' of a pessimistic capitulation in the face of 'reality' as the result of an inability to cope with the present – a proposition intensified by Roth's own tragic final few years, as well as the frequency with which death occurs in his later novels – the despair of Roth's characters should not be equated with a desperate narrative. Indeed, as Hughes has noted, 'given that language can only ever mirror reality imperfectly, the creation of an

alternative, purely linguistic reality could be said to be a logical consequence.’ Concerning the role of observer, the process of ‘putting oneself into one’s writing’ is crucial to Roth’s work. It incorporates ‘a philosophy of observation and perception in which fluidity, movement, and interpretation are constantly emphasised.’ This stems from a clear existential viewpoint concerning the relation between empirically experienced reality and its textual documentation – Roth did not consider observation complete without the emotional and psychological immersion of the observer. ‘Inner truth’, and not historical ‘fact’, was the sole criterion for the validity of his work. These ‘truths’ were relative but valid in a particular context. It is this part of Roth’s thinking that anticipates certain aspects of recent postmodern theories of ‘metafiction’, of a writing self-consciously aware that it must ‘lie’, for the world can never be directly represented, and so it is possible only to represent ‘the discourses of that world.’

Hughes understands Roth’s responses to modern fragmentation as attempts to ‘rediscover the security, wholeness, and contentment of childhood, the period which many, after the fragmenting trauma of the war, looked back on with conscious nostalgia as a period of blissful, ignorant peace.’ Whereas Roth shared the skepticism of a damaged generation that had lost the innocence of childhood, I would ask whether his evocations of other worlds and places were really driven by a search for wholeness. Were they not, perhaps, born out of a sad acceptance of contemporary existence as split at the roots, just like the figure of the eternal wanderer carried more truth and relevance to him than the one firmly settled – whether it be in a city, a country, or a faith? Because, Roth seems to say, even the Jews who settled in the West and subscribed to an assimilated life in their new countries were not free from their uprooted heritage. Physical and mental wandering became the permanent condition of the Jews in Europe, a restless wandering intensified after Hitler’s rise to power and the Nuremberg laws of 1933. ‘They stay, and at the same time they wander: It’s a kind of contortionism of which only the most desperate prisoners are capable. It is the prison of the Jews.’ This wandering, then, is ‘a tribulation that is appropriate to all Jews, and to all others besides. Lest we forget that nothing in this world endures, not even a home; and that our life is short, shorter even than the life

of the elephant, the crocodile, and the crow. Even the parrots outlive us.’ It is exactly in this eerie anticipation of rootlessness as a permanent condition for all that I see in Roth an early embodiment of contemporary postmodern philosophy’s most unsettling ‘truths.’

*The Wandering Jews*, Roth’s 1927 account of the complexities of European Jewish culture before the Holocaust swallowed it up, was written with the hope ‘to persuade the Jews and non-Jews of Western Europe to grasp the tragedy of the Eastern Jews,’ as well as to point out the poignant reality of assimilated Jews in the West, a fate far worse, perhaps, than that of their Eastern cousins, because they had ‘forgotten how to wander, how to suffer, and how to pray.’ Roth’s interest in refugees and displaced persons – Jews and others – in the aftermath of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the redrawing of national frontiers following the Versailles Treaty of 1919, found expression in his sympathies with the dispossessed ‘guests on this earth’, as he called them. The Jews in Roth’s account are a most individual people – not only heterogeneous, but at times almost incompatible. The, in his own words, Jewish ‘problem’ is thus analysed through highly individual, adoring portraits. The solution, however, was more problematic – it neither lay in Zionism or Westward migration, nor in communism or the total abandonment of Jewishness as opted for by some assimilated Jews in Western Europe. Roth identified the difficult relationship between the Jewish intellectual – as *the* representative of European culture – and the complicated ties to the German nation that housed him. Perhaps Roth’s comment that Jewish writers have never felt at home in the German nation could be related to his views on the Jewish homeland in general. Whereas the idea of a Jewish nation had come to be a priority on the Zionist agenda, Roth contradicted this desire by decrying all nationalism (he later defined it as the driving force that brought about the disintegration of the Habsburg Monarchy) and insisted that the Jews, ‘having outlived their period of national homeland two thousand years ago,’ were rejecting their own universalism by aping the nationalism of others. To Roth, Zionism and nationhood were by ‘their nature’ Western ideals, even if what they aspired towards may not have been. The idea of Jewish nationalism was based on the will of several million people to form a ‘nation’, even if, Roth said, nothing of the kind had existed

before. They were the willing victims of an idea, and, despite being far removed from the language, culture and religion of their forefathers, they claimed membership of the 'Jewish nation' on the basis of their will and their race. It was an idea alive in Eastern Jews, he wrote, even if they were half-assimilated to the ways and habits of the West. This call for nationhood, from Jews and others, should be understood in the context of the idea of 'national self-determination,' the battle cry across Europe after 1918 – one Western meaning of nationalism being, one may add, its supposed capacity to convey happiness to its people. In the following period, Jews constituted a 'national minority' in many countries, and, Roth writes, 'they compensated for the lack of any 'soil' to call their own in Europe by aspiring to a home in Palestine. They had always lived in exile anyway. Now they became a nation in exile.' The poignant irony in this is that they began to agitate for rights and freedoms as a nation 'before they had been accorded even the most basic ones as humans.' In other words, Jews were forced to become a 'nation' because of the nationalism of others. However, Roth argues, by pressing their entitlement to 'national rights', Jews renounced far more important claims than would ever be gained by reaching official nationhood. Were they not, having been a 'people' for over three thousand years, 'a far bigger thing altogether than a European-style national minority'? Were they not, indeed, 'more than a 'nation' in the European sense'? 'Because actually,' Roth writes, 'the world isn't made up of 'nations' and fatherlands, that want only to preserve their cultural distinctions, and only if it means not sacrificing a single human life. Fatherlands and nations want much more, or much less: They have vested interests that insist on sacrifices. They set up a series of 'fronts' in order to secure the 'hinterland' that is their real objective. Given all the millennial grief of the Jews, they still had one consolation: the fact that they *didn't* have such a fatherland. If there can ever be such a thing as a just history, surely the Jews will be given great credit for holding on to their common sense in not having had a fatherland at a time when the whole world launched itself into patriotic madness.' However, in the nationalist fever of the times, Roth argues, if one must be patriotic, then at least let it be for a country of one's own. But, when he said that 'we are all fragments of ourselves because we have lost our homeland,' it was the Habsburg Empire, or, to be more precise, the town of Brody, he was referring to.

In his short story *The Bust of the Emperor*, Roth's narrator exclaims: 'the unnatural excess of world history has also ruined my personal pleasure in what I called home. Now, everywhere around me they speak of their new fatherland. And they think of me as *déraciné*. I have always been. Oh, there once was a fatherland, a real one, which is to say one for orphaned nationals, the only possible fatherland! And that was the old monarchy. Now I am a homeless man who has lost the true home of the eternal wanderer.' His biographer David Bronsen puts forward an interesting argument about Roth's sense of belonging that is based on what he calls the 'double consciousness' of being both a Jew and an Austrian. The mutually exclusive identification as a 'typically' Austrian writer with elegiac devotion to the emperor Franz Joseph, and a Galician Jew dedicated to the Jewish predicament of eternal rootlessness, produced, in Bronsen's words, a 'split' in Roth's identity that expressed itself in a fractured sense of self, his political views, his religious orientation, and his way of life. The divergence between his own assimilatory practices and his insistence on the traditions of Eastern Jewry (not for himself, but for others) signifies one of the many paradoxes that characterises Roth's thoughts on belonging. Only after its demise did the Habsburg Monarchy come to signify the homeland he had lost and whose return he longed for throughout his life. By the end of his life, for instance, he was involved in a campaign to restore the Catholic Habsburg Monarchy, where the individual, he wrote in *Flight Without End*, 'was more important than nationality.' However, I believe it is important to remember that the 'Austrian-ness' ascribed to Roth as it functions in the construction of his identity as well as in the 'lost' homeland for which he longed, refers to the Austria that was part of the Habsburg Monarchy, and not, in the words of Bronsen, to the 'small alpine republic which measured less than one-eighth the size and population of the defunct Monarchy.' 'What is left for Roth,' writes his translator Michael Hofmann, 'is the destiny of the wanderer.' Or, in Roth's own words, Eastern Jews, including himself, have 'no home anywhere, but their graves may be found in every cemetery.' During his short life, Roth invested belief in Judaism, as the separate presence of Jews scattered throughout Europe, in the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, and, oddly enough, towards the end of his life, in Christianity. All these were instances of something

supranational, something containing multitudes, not exclusive and not ideal, and something whose time, ultimately, was already gone.

Describing a visit to a Yiddish theatre in Paris in the 1920s, Roth observed the crying and wailing of both actors and audience when the Russian songs and dances were put on. 'If it had just been the actors,' he wrote, 'it would have been kitschy. But when the audience cried, too, it was genuinely sad. Jews are easily moved – I knew that. But I didn't know they could be moved by homesickness.' Even though Roth never mentions his own Jewishness in this book, *The Wandering Jews*, one is left to wonder whether this homesickness applies as much to him as it does to the audience. Whereas Robert Musil's reaction to a crumbling imperial Vienna was a sense of great alienation, Roth wrote with a premonition of how much worse things could get. His way out, that is, towards the past, Richard Eder writes in a *Times* review of December 2000, may seem romantic, but it was 'the romance of a dreamer who knows he is on the point of waking, and in a place much worse than where he fell asleep.' Roth the wanderer and impoverished exile was as well situated to idealise the Eastern Jew's simplicity, as he was to see harsh truths of the west. He lived suspended between the two – which to us is a reminder of how important it is to live within the contradictions such feelings produce. For Roth, it was the contradiction of being deeply attached to almost all that he satirised - the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, the military code, imperial order and its supranationalist pretensions – and of being nostalgic of the world represented by the Eastern Jew. Underneath his nostalgic wanderings into the glories of the Habsburg Empire and Christianity lay, perhaps, the feeling of broken faith. His passionate call to witness this faith breaking under the pressures of war and civilisation seems to imply that war isn't necessary to break our faith – only civilisations are. In his struggle with the question of belonging, Roth represents in his own fragile body a life and existence with contradictions that has become an epistemological truth and condition of our own postmodern times. The fact that he was never able to wholeheartedly succumb to one belief system or ideology, and instead lived with irreconcilable contradictions in his historical present, is the great strength of his life and work, and, furthermore, I believe, the only truthful option left to us.

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