

Drinking in Joseph Roth's Novels and Tales

"He was one of the most prodigious drinkers of his time,"¹ wrote Hermann Kesten of his friend Joseph Roth. Given to bouts of excessive drinking since 1917, Roth became increasingly a slave to alcohol after the commitment of his wife to an asylum for the insane in 1928.² Several detoxification attempts failed to cure him, not least because drinking provided him with more than merely a means of escaping personal problems and political anxieties. Remarkably, Roth appears to have achieved heightened intellectual lucidity through drink.³ Working hours not spent in his hotel room were spent at some coffeehouse table, where he would sit surrounded by his papers, plying himself with the alcohol without which he could not write in the end, but which did not impair the quality of even his last writings. One need not pursue at length here the story of alcohol in Roth's life. It is instructive, however, to examine the place of drinking in his works, for—especially from *Radetzky* (1932) onward⁴—alcohol provided him with an important literary theme.

Certainly, one can discern many broadly autobiographical features in Roth's works. Carl Joseph von Trotta (*Radetzky*), Captain Tarabas (*Tarabas*, 1934), Anselm Eibenschütz (*Das falsche Gewicht*, 1937), Captain Taittinger (*Die Geschichte von der 1002. Nacht*, 1939), and Andreas Kartak (*Die Legende vom heiligen Trinker*, 1939) may all be considered partial self portraits of Roth the drunkard. More illuminating than tracing autobiographical details, however, is to examine the treatment accorded drinking in Roth's works. The following discussion of the widely varied uses which he has made of this theme is intended as a tribute to Roth's storytelling abilities, which, though generally acclaimed, have tended in critical literature to take second place to biographical studies or studies of his social, political, and religious views.⁵

Scenes of drunkenness contribute substantially to local color in some of Roth's novels, particularly in those set in the North East corner of the Hapsburg Empire or in the Ukraine, like *Hotel Savoy* (1924), *Radetzky*, *Tarabas*, and *Das falsche Gewicht*. Officers drinking in their mess, drunken and brawling soldiers and peasants, Russian deserters in the border tavern, provincial nightclubs with their seedy, inebriated clientele, Graf Chojnicki's drinking parties, all of these help create the powerful impression that Roth conjures up of life on the frontier.

¹"Er war einer der gewaltigsten Trinker seiner Zeit." Hermann Kesten, *Meine Freunde die Poeten* (Vienna: Kindler, 1953), p. 174. All translations are mine.

²David Bronsen, *Joseph Roth: Eine Biographie* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1974), p. 173.

³See especially the testimony of Anton van Duinkerken, the Dutch essayist, historian, and writer, in Bronsen, p. 463.

⁴In Roth's letters, too, one can observe more frequent reference to his drinking problems from about 1932 onward—Joseph Roth, *Briefe 1911-39*, ed. Hermann Kesten (Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1970).

⁵See, however, Erika Wegner, "Die Gestaltung innerer Vorgänge in den Dichtungen Joseph Roths," Diss. Bonn 1964, which relates structural features (e.g. use of direct/indirect speech) to characters' spiritual states; Hugo Dittberner, "Über Joseph Roth," *Text und Kritik*, 4 (1974), 10-31, which discusses the influence of the feuilleton on the style of Roth's novels; Fritz Hackert, *Kulturpessimismus und Erzählform: Studien zu Joseph Roths Leben und Werk* (Berne: Lang, 1967), which classifies the content of Roth's works according to motifs; Hartmut Scheible, *Joseph Roth: Mit einem Essay über Gustave Flaubert* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), which interprets Roth's works through a close examination of language.

An extension of the use of alcohol for local color is the symbolic function fulfilled by the smell of a certain liquor or by the special brand favored by individual characters. Roth's soldiers and peasants smell of schnapps (and tobacco or leather or soap) in *Tarabas*,⁶ *Die hundert Tage* (1935; II, 738), and *Hiob* (1930; II, 55). How familiarity with drink may be used for the purpose of characterization is illustrated perhaps most brilliantly through the figure of Captain Taittinger: "He did not know the exact value of money, but he knew for instance what a horse cost, or a uniform, or a barrel of Burgundy, or a keg of 'Napoleon.'" His monetary and moral irresponsibility is shown by his reaction to his friend Zenower's detailing of the miserable state of his (Taittinger's) finances: "'Utter bad luck!' said Taittinger, clapping his hands and ordering another two cognacs."⁸ When Zenower despairs: "'You are beyond help, my lord,'" Taittinger's response is to order a bottle of Bordeaux.

The sharing of wine or spirits as a gesture of hospitality or inter-communion occurs frequently in Roth, especially among his humbler characters. Before Mendel Singer of *Hiob* leaves for America, he accepts a drink of home-distilled schnapps from his neighbors (II, 69-70), while in *Der Leviathan* (1940) the symbolic value of a glass of schnapps is explicitly stated: ". . . once we have had a drink, all good and honest men are our brothers, and all warm-hearted women our sisters—and there is no difference between peasant and merchant, Jew and Christian . . ."¹⁰ In *Radetzkymarsch* the first ennobled Trotta occasionally longs for the *rakija* which he had once drunk with his lowly Slovene father (I, 13-14)—suggesting his yearning for contact with the common people. In *Die hundert Tage* Jan Wokurka celebrates Christmas in Paris in Polish style by drinking schnapps instead of wine (II, 738), while the purity and seriousness of his intentions toward Angelina are expressed in analogous symbolic terms. When he first offers her his protection, he warms up some wine with water to cheer and strengthen her (II, 730); and when she agrees to live with him, their "marriage" is celebrated with wine from a special carafe which Wokurka has brought with him from Poland (II, 735-36).

Symbols in Roth are occasionally repeated so that they assume the force of a leitmotif. In *Die Kapuzinergruft* the irresponsibility of the Austrian *jeunesse dorée* before 1914 is suggested through their devotion to merrymaking and drinking: "Over the glasses from which we drank so insolently, invisible death was already folding his bony hands."¹¹ These words occur again later, only slightly altered (I, 334, 336, 341). The profound sense of loneliness pervading *Radetzkymarsch* is emphasized through the two cognacs which its central figures drink after episodes concluding a devastating loss: Carl Joseph after his loveletters have been returned by Constable Slama (I, 53) and after bidding farewell to the widow of his friend Demant (I, 114), and the District Commissioner when he learns of his son's death (I, 301).

⁶Joseph Roth, *Werke* (3 vols.; Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1956), II, 196-97. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

⁷"Er kannte nicht genau den Wert des Geldes, aber er wußte zum Beispiel, was ein Pferd kostete, was eine Uniform, was ein Faß Burgunder, was ein Fäßchen 'Napoleon'" (I, 724).

⁸"'Lauter Pech!'—sagte Taittinger, klatschte in die Hände und bestellte noch zwei Kognaks" (I, 733).

⁹"'Ihnen ist nicht zu helfen, Herr Baron'" (I, 734).

¹⁰". . . wenn wir einmal getrunken haben, sind alle guten und redlichen Männer unsere Brüder, und alle lieben Frauen unsere Schwestern—und es gibt keinen Unterschied zwischen Bauer und Händler, Jud' und Christ . . ." (III, 126).

¹¹"Über den Gläsern aus denen wir übermütig tranken, kreuzte der unsichtbare Tod schon seine knochigen Hände" (I, 321).

While there would be no justification for a typology of characters along the lines of drinker/non-drinker, there is no doubt that Roth's drinkers, for all their faults, are among his more sympathetic figures. The abstemious, on the other hand, may be unlikely, fanatical, and dangerous—like General Lakubeit in *Tarabas* (II, 189-91), Piotrak in *Das falsche Gewicht* (I, 507), or Andreas Pum at the beginning of *Die Rebellion* (1924). Roth is not beyond enjoying a joke at the expense of the temperate. In *Die Geschichte von der 1002. Nacht*, for instance, Professor Friedländer (an Orientalist) is convinced that Muslims never drink alcohol. Captain Taittinger knows better, however, for in two afternoons of socializing with the aide of the Shah of Persia he has learned more than Professor Friedländer discovered in a lifetime: "Professor Friedländer did not drink, you see. And that is what comes from not drinking . . ."12

It has been noted that in his writings Roth was a fatalist.¹³ His characters struggle in vain (if they struggle at all) to resist the destiny, benevolent or maleficent, which has been plotted out for them. Interestingly, alcohol is linked with the concept of fate in some of Roth's principal works—for instance, in *Tarabas*, where fate takes the form of a prophesy. A gypsy foretells that Nikolaus Tarabas will commit a murder, then expiate his sin and become a saint. It is remarkable that drunkenness plays a part at all ensuing highpoints of the story. Tarabas is drunk when he assaults a restaurant proprietor in New York. In the war to which he flees in Europe he indulges in enormous excesses of drinking. The pogrom which leads up to his "murder" of a poor Jew (he in fact pulls out his beard, causing him to become insane) is initiated by drunken soldiers. Tarabas, responsible for maintaining order among these men, is unable to perform his duties because he is drunk. Through drunkenness, then, he is unable to arrest his destiny; but that he should in fact fulfill it was divine will, as the innkeeper Kristianpoller expressly indicates (II, 228). Paradoxical though it may at first appear, Tarabas—as much as Andreas Kartak in *Die Legende vom heiligen Trinker*—is a sort of "divine drunkard."

Apart from Tarabas and Kartak, Roth's drunkards are pursued by a remorseless and malevolent fate. From the beginning of *Das falsche Gewicht*, for instance, Anselm Eibenschütz feels "that here, in Zlotogrod, his destiny would be fulfilled"¹⁴ and sees himself the victim of "an evil God."¹⁵ Eibenschütz has no freewill. Repeatedly, it is stressed that he acts unconsciously (I, 458, 272-73, 483, 484, 485, 497). He acts even against his will (I, 474)—as it in a dream, or (when sober) as if he were drunk. Drunkenness—though it hastens his ignominious death—is only a deepening of his constitutional passivity.

Alcohol is also a means of escaping loneliness and of temporarily forgetting the shame of the failure which haunts Trotta, Taittinger, Eibenschütz, and Tarabas. Yet here again it is associated with death, which is the ultimate station of all Roth's drunkards. Drunkenness is indeed a form of death, or

¹²"Der Professor Friedländer trank nämlich nicht. Und das kam davon, wenn man nicht trinkt . . ." (I, 645).

¹³This has been argued most eloquently by Anton Böhm, "Das große schwarze Gesetz. Notizen zu Joseph Roths Gesamtwerk," *Wort und Wahrheit* 14 (1959), 345-58. In real life, too, Roth displayed fatalistic attitudes. Not only was he superstitious, but he believed that his wife's insanity had been visited upon him as a sort of divine punishment. (See Bronsen, pp, 352, 383.)

¹⁴"daß sich hier, in Zlotogrod, sein Schicksal erfüllen sollte" (I, 437).

¹⁵"ein böser Gott" (I, 489).

more accurately of suicide,¹⁶ as is most clearly illustrated in *Die Geschichte von der 1002. Nacht*. Here Taittinger, who has ruined his military career, knows of only three means of obliterating the memory of his disgrace: the distractions of Vienna, intoxication, or suicide (I, 699-700). After trying the first two, he resorts in the end to the third solution and shoots himself.

Radetzkmarsch brings together the themes of drunkenness and fatalism in a more satisfactorily complex manner than perhaps any other of these novels. Carl Joseph von Trotta is, typically, the victim of a "stupid, iron law."¹⁷ His father has committed him to a military career for which he is unsuited and to which only alcohol can reconcile him. The connection between alcohol and an ineluctable fate is indicated also through the figure of Dr. Demant. A reluctant soldier, like Trotta, Demant is killed in a duel fought over a meaningless *point d'honneur*. Formerly a non-drinker, he wishes before his death that he had learned to drink schnapps earlier, since it might have eased his acceptance of the army and of his wife's infidelities (I, 96). That the destiny which has been preordained for Carl Joseph, and whose concomitant is alcohol, is senseless and absurd, is suggested, too, through the figure of the painter Moser. One learns little about Moser except that he and Carl Joseph's father came from similar backgrounds, and that the one became a drunkard and the other a responsible civil servant. No reason is given for Moser's alcoholism; it is an autonomous affliction. Moser is a contrapuntal figure to Carl Joseph; their fates run mysteriously parallel and entwine near the end of the novel when they meet and drink together in Vienna.

Radetzkmarsch establishes a symbolic connection between the decline of the Trottas and the disintegration of the Hapsburg Empire. Drunkenness is at once the symptom and the cause of Carl Joseph's powerlessness to save himself. Appropriately, then, the event which heralds the end of the Empire—the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand—is introduced into the novel against a background of drunken revelry. The news breaks in upon a scene of unparalleled drunkenness at a regimental dinner. While some officers are unable to act in their dejection and stupor, others perform a grotesque dance of death to the music of the Funeral March played at top speed by the orchestra. "Everyone was drunk";¹⁸ no one is capable of restoring order and preventing the destruction of the Empire.

Andreas Kartak, in *Die Legende vom heiligen Trinker*, is an alcoholic down-and-out who sleeps under the bridges of the Seine—unless, as in the story, he unexpectedly comes into money. The work's fairy-tale atmosphere makes the reader suspend his disbelief and, like Andreas, accept as miracles the unlikely occurrences which bring him temporary solvency. The story has ironic overtones, to be sure, so that one cannot regard Andreas as a "usual" saint.¹⁹ What distinguishes him from other men is his belief in wonders. The culminating wonder, as he is dying, is his vision (which is real for *him*) of St. Teresa,

¹⁶Roth's friends interpreted his alcoholism as a form of suicide; see Friedrich Torberg, "Kleines Requiem für Joseph Roth," *Forum* 1, No. 9 (1954), p. 28, and Irmgard Keun, "Begegnung in der Emigration," in *Joseph Roth: Leben und Werk*, ed. Hermann Linden (Cologne: Kiepenheuer, 1949), p. 61.

¹⁷"stupides, eisernes Gesetz" (I, 100). See also I, 91, 191.

¹⁸"Alle waren betrunken" (I, 282).

¹⁹Hermann Kesten (pp. 187-96) goes too far in regarding Roth's attitude as destructively ironic throughout. Bronsen (p. 584) correctly credits Andreas with the saintly virtues of *spes*, *fides*, and *caritas*, while denying him the moral virtues of *justitia*, *prudencia*, *fortitudo*, and *temperantia*.

through which he may be said to have a share in divine grace. *Die Legende vom heiligen Trinker* is Roth's most optimistic work, and it is significant that its optimism is associated with Andreas's alcoholism. Andreas's critical faculties have been impaired by drink. He experiences reality through an alcoholic haze, so that events which may admit of rational explanation are interpreted as miracles. The hostile fate which pursues Trotta, Taittinger, and Eibenschütz is suspended here. Undoubtedly, *Die Legende vom heiligen Trinker* (completed only a few weeks before Roth's death) is a product of wishful thinking. It links alcohol with a grace which its author himself never knew and ends with a prayer: "God grant us all, us drinkers, such an easy and beautiful death."²⁰

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²⁰"Gebe Gott uns allen, uns Trinkern, einen so leichten und so schönen Tod!" (III, 178).