

**FROM JOSEPH ROTH TO JOŽE HRADIL – IDENTITY AND ALTERITY IN AND
AFTER THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MONARCHY**

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*Abstract : The dominance of the Austrian Empire, of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy has marked Europe's history up to the present. In politics the Monarchy has functioned as a model to go against or one to follow, whereas in literature it has been a source of inspiration ever since. In our study we shall try to analyze and compare literary texts by Joseph Roth and Jože Hradil with respect to identity and alterity. Although the two authors are not contemporaries, to some extent they both write Monarchy literature. Roth's oeuvre offers us a first hand experience and insight into the Empire's affairs with Hradil's novel *Slike brez obrazov* (Pictures – Without Faces) to some extent continuing hi/story where Roth finishes. Roth's novels and short stories present the world of the Monarchy, the changes brought by World War I and the years preceding World War II. The plot of Hradil's family saga novel starts at the beginning of World War II in the narrator's childhood years and continues up to the present, encompassing the late 19th century through the rendering of his memories. Thus, we get a more complex picture of how the change of the different political systems has influenced identity in its relationship to alterity.*

Keywords: identity, alterity, Monarchy literature.

In our study we shall try to analyze and compare literary texts by Joseph Roth and Jože Hradil with respect to identity and alterity. We shall try to draw a picture of how the change of the different political systems has influenced identity in its relationship to alterity.

The existence and dominance of the Austrian Empire followed by that of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy have marked the history of Europe up to the present. Whereas in politics the Monarchy has functioned as a model to go against or one to follow, in literature it has constantly built a source of inspiration ever since. The authors we have chosen for our presentation, though not contemporaries, they both write to some extent Monarchy literature, that is literary texts written in/during about the Monarchy.

Joseph Roth's life and oeuvre prove that the author himself was, what we can call, a Universalist. He spoke Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, Russian, German and French, travelled all over the world, was familiar with most political systems and religions, keeping a universal outlook on the world, looking into people's hearts and seeing the simple folk struggle. Many of Roth's literary works reflect the idea of universality. Whereas the first novels are characterized by a deep feeling of homelessness and the search of the homeland (e.g. *Hotel Savoy* and *Die Rebellion/The Rebellion* - 1924, *Die Flucht ohne Ende/The Flight without End* – 1927, *Zipper und sein Vater/Zipper and his Father* – 1928, etc.), the latter focus on Judaism and the lost world of the Monarchy (e.g. *Hiob/Job* – 1930, *Radetzky marsch/Radetzky March* – 1932, *Der Antichrist/The Antichrist* – 1934, *Die Kapuzinergruft/The Emperor's Tomb* – 1938, etc.).

In the present study we are mainly interested in Roth's picture of the Monarchy, more precisely in the way people of different nationalities understood each other, and how this is rendered by the author. We are presented a nostalgic image of the Austro-Hungarian

Empire, which resembles a world without boundaries, where one could travel without needing a passport and feel home in every corner of it:

“My old home, the Monarchy, alone, was a great mansion with many doors and many chambers, for every condition of men. This mansion has been divided, split up, splintered. I have nothing more to seek for, there. I am used to living in a home, not in cabins.” (Roth 1986: 183)

The excerpt above shows the freedom of movement experienced within the Monarchy, as opposed to the restrictions once the Empire had been dissolved and the nation states built. A new map of Europe was created without asking *simple* men and women about the changes they were to experience, a fact, which is underlined by Hradil in his novel too.

In *Radetzky March* and *The Emperor's Tomb*, Roth's most popular novels, we can witness the decay of the Monarchy parallel with the weakening of the Trotta family. Three generations are presented to us: there is the grandfather, known as the Hero of Solferino, who was decorated by the Emperor himself for his bravery at war, there is his son who contrary to his own will, but following his father's wishes becomes a government employee, and finally, there is the grandson, Carl Joseph von Trotta, who becomes a soldier following in his famous forefather's footsteps. He dies at war, becoming a hero, yet, not in a traditional sense. He does not save the emperor, but his men from thirst; he is killed when trying to bring water to his battalion. His deed may be less heroic, but definitely more human.

On hearing the news of his son's and later the emperor's death, the father also dies. Thus, the family's destiny is closely linked to that of the Monarchy. The Trottas cannot survive in a world where the rules have changed, where universality and unity have become part of the past. Within the Monarchy the Trottas identified themselves with the whole of the state apparatus, with the emperor himself who was regarded as God's representative and voice. Once the balance of forces had been tipped, they could no longer define identity in a universalist manner. New nation states were built and established on the idea of differing from others; identity could now only be grasped in opposition to alterity.

Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* defines nations as historical phenomena that replace great dynasties and religions. Among the criteria which characterize a nation, Anderson first lists the language its people speak. Second, a nation can be regarded as a collective subject travelling through history together. On this journey a nation becomes self-conscious and self-aware, drawing a line between the self and the other(s), whereby the other can also turn into an enemy. In this respect a nation is also discriminatory: the 'similar' are allies, the 'others' are excluded (1996: 9-17). This point of view emphasizes the voluntary, constructed and artificial character of the nation, presented as the projection of an ideology (Boia 2012: 15). The perspective has been reversed: it is not history that makes a nation, but vice versa, it is the nation, which will invent its history that is later going to be thought of as standing at its foundation (Boia 2012: 15). Concerning the language there is a change of perception too: a nation is not held together by the language its representatives share, but once established the nation imposes a standard version upon its members – e.g. at the time of the French Revolution in France half of the population spoke different dialects of French, or even other languages such as Italian or German (Boia 2012: 15-19). Thus,

language, religion, ethnic basis or history alone is not sufficient to hold a nation or a nation state together. A nation needs a voluntary act of creation coming from outside, a will to exist in order to survive. However, as products of history, but self-made at the same time, nation and nationalism can become obsolete as well, especially if they stick to their limitations and borders so ruthlessly.

A possible solution to solve the animosity between the self and the other, one nation and the other, and thus, to accept alterity and integrate it into one's own identity as offered by Roth would be to follow the example of the simple folk which despite the change of regimes, takes things as they come along, because the people have a strong belief in God's higher order. The protagonist of Roth's short story, *Die Büste des Kaisers/The Bust of the Emperor* (1935), Count Franz Xaver Morstin does not find a solution on the horizontal, but on the vertical level. The horizontal level is represented by history and is temporal, finite, whereas the vertical level is permanent and infinite. The vertical level also allows us to take an outer, more detached look at the happenings on the horizontal. If we strive towards the transcendental, vertical level, we shall perhaps become more aware of how things work on the horizontal as well, which in its turn should help us solve our economical and social problems. In this respect, nation states and/or monarchies should be regarded as constructions of the horizontal, historical level, which can be made use of to create a better world, where universality should win against limitations.¹

Hradil's novel *Slike brez obrazov/Pictures without Faces* follows the guidelines of both the present and the past as far as style is concerned. Similarly to Roth's *Radetzky March*, Hradil's novel can be read as an autobiographical family saga. It belongs to the tradition of writing a documentary-like prose characterized by poetic realism. Yet, this realism is that of the 21st century already: micro-stories become just as important as major ones, with outer happenings and inner changes determining each other.

The plot starts in Muraszombat, hometown of the author. Within 100 years the town has been part of five different countries, that is the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Slovenia. People living in this region could witness and experience the devastating effect of two extreme totalitarian regimes and that of several nationalisms. (e.g. The author-narrator's father was almost killed after World War I, because he and his companions had been singing Slovenian folk songs; the two youngest children in the family had been haunted by the picture of the corpses floating on the water until they grew up; the elder brother had to live with the image of wounded men falling out of the moving van and being crashed by the car coming from behind transporting the other patients.) As discussed previously by Roth, to be in the middle of the turmoil, in a liminal or border situation, which often determines the identity of social micro-communities, of ethnic groups and their members, one does not necessarily have to live at the frontier, or become a trespasser, because history has reset Europe's borders, without people ever having to leave their homeland, as we have already witnessed this in the 20th century several times (cf. Thomka 2009: 7).

¹ Excerpt taken and slightly revised from Mihály Vilma – *Myths of the Nation in Joseph Roth's Die Büste des Kaisers [The Bust of the Emperor]* in Philosophical and Humanistic Postmodern Views. International Scientific Conference 2012. Logos. Universality. Mentality. Education. Novelty. Section: Philosophy and Humanistic Sciences, Iasi: Lumen, 2012, p. 421-429.

The novel consists of two parts: In the first one we have Jurij, the child narrating the events, in the second Jurij, the grown-up. Both times retrospective narration is dominant with memories and the process of remembering playing an important role. The method, through which we are shown collective experience from the viewpoint of one single narrator, is that of not marking dialogues in the traditional way. The voices of the invoked characters are written in italics and appear in the section of the person who is next in the line to tell their memories. Thus, we are often confronted with the texts of three or four narrators built upon each other.

In the first part the child's position, i.e. assuming stereotypes without reflection, is questioned. Jurij believes everything the papers write, yet, his friend Bagi, who stands next to him, always opts for another variant. The two boys are totally different. While Jurij's family is rich, his Hungarian father is the assistant of the Countess, Bagi's parents are poor Slovenians who would never kiss Countess Zichy's hand. Jurij loves Germans and considers Jews his enemy, so Bagi tells him that the vet who also teaches Jurij how to play tennis is of Jewish origin himself. Bagi supports the Russian army and dreams of Pan-Slavism. These contradictions, however, as a sign of childhood innocence, cannot overshadow their friendship. We get the feeling, as if we were reading a parable about how contradictory opinions should not affect the friendship between neighbours. The slowly awakening mind of the 6-10 year-old child turns into the clashing point of the artificially made collective identity, which quite often appears to be the opposite of micro-identity, of the family's and individual's self-understanding.

In this first part the author makes sure that he stays firm on his position condemning exclusiveness. He tracks the events until the end of the war and the establishment of the new structure of the society. In the process the child narrator's thinking becomes more mature and subtle. In a world defined by contradictory ideologies, it is hard to remain humane. The father's destiny is an example, just as that of the big brother, Vladimir. (e.g. The Hungarian father decides to stay in his Slovenian bride's homeland when after World War I, the Mura region becomes part of Hungary. He hides and protects a Serbian university lecturer. When Tito's partisans become leaders, he is imprisoned. Jurij, similarly to his brother, bearing a Slavic name rebelling, he joins the Hungarian troops. He is wounded by the Soviets and taken hostage; eventually he takes their side and returns home with them. Since the Partisans back home make it impossible for him to get along, he is forced to move to Austria.)

Jurij, the grown-up, is interested in the story of his aunts who were assimilated by Hungarians. Once again we can witness the processes of integration and discrimination, willing and forced assimilation through individual destinies and personal stories: some members of the family emigrate, others stay at home. There is Gizella, for example, Jurij's cousin, whose mother is a Slovenian catholic woman, her father a Hungarian Jew. Gizella's daughter is a Hungarian catholic, who married a Hungarian Jew. Together they immigrate to Canada where they encourage old Gizella to learn English and switch languages. Before dying, feeling rootless, Gizella cuts out the faces of the lost family members from the pictures. These pictures without faces, which have become the book cover, are metaphors of the loss of identity. Still there is hope, since at the end of the novel, we have a beautiful,

conclusive picture, that of a chain of holding hands which we can interpret as an expression of Albert-László Barabási's network-theory, symbolizing humanity and universal peace.

In conclusion we can say that although Roth and Hradil were not contemporaries, to some extent they both wrote Monarchy-literature. They both stem from peripheral areas of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, from families of mixed nationalities. Roth oeuvre offers us a first hand experience of and insight into the Empire's affairs with Hradil's novel sort of continuing *hi/story* where Roth finishes. Roth's novels and short stories present the world of the Monarchy, the changes brought by World War I and the years preceding World War II. The plot of Hradil's family saga starts at the beginning of World War II, in the narrator's childhood and continues up to the present, encompassing the late 19th century through the rendering of his memories.

Both authors underline the importance of identity embedded in universality. Roth achieves this through revoking the lost world of the Monarchy in a somewhat nostalgic way, while Hradil uses images of the human chain which holds together all that is different.

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