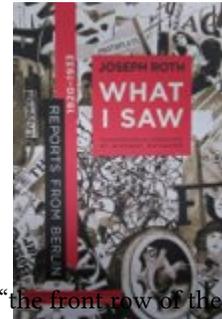


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph Roth. *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-1933*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. 227 pp. \$13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-32582-9.

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Perhaps more than any other historical period, the Weimar Republic tempts the historian with the possibility of a symptomatic reading. Scholars' assertions that those years mark an era where "our images [of] today come from," or merely the "madness from which we come," both count on and contribute to the mythological image of the Weimar Republic.[1] In many ways, this collection of short essays by Joseph Roth, a conscious contemporary of the Weimar period, is a series of negotiations with the myth of his time. *What I Saw* offers an assembly of reflections about 1920s Berlin, a city that was "a pendant and a totem" for these times (in the words of the translator, Michael Hoffmann, p. 12). The landscapes of Berlin are sardonically described by the author as pitiful symbols for modernity and modernization, for the dullness of human nature, the gloomy fate of the Jewish people, and the ridiculous character of politics in the first German democracy.

Joseph Roth's life story seems to be an emblem of his era. Born in the last decade of the nineteenth century to a Jewish family in Galicia, Roth started his studies at the University of Vienna in 1914 and was drafted to the Austro-Hungarian army before graduation. After the war ended in defeat, he moved to Berlin in 1920, fascinated by the city's mythological image. "You have to understand what Berlin meant to us," he wrote in retrospect, "Berlin was crazy, debauched, metropolitan ... futuristic" (p. 18). In 1923, the year in which he published his first novel, *The Spider's Web*, Roth started his association with the prestigious *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In this golden age of European journalism he continued his career, writing his insightful columns from Berlin, Paris, and the Soviet Union. After 1933, he lived in exile from Germany, similar to many of his German Jewish intellectual colleagues and friends whom he described (in one of the rare non-

ironical statements in this book) as "the front row of the defenders of Europe" (p. 208). A prolific and highly appreciated journalist during the 1920s, the author of several novels and short stories, Joseph Roth died in Paris in 1939 (he collapsed, presumably after hearing about the suicide of Ernst Toller in New York).

This book is an English translation of a collection of essays, edited by Michel Bienert in 1996, under the title *Joseph Roth in Berlin: Ein Lesebuch fuer Spaziergänger*. The translator did justice to the book by his removal of the subtitle, because Roth does not aspire to guide curious tourists in the paths of the city, but to tear the mask off the city's image and to reveal its reality. "I paint the portrait of the age," he writes to his editor (pp. 15-16), and this portrait is a subversive one, which runs against the grain of other descriptions of reality, mainly the "vast issues of world history as expressed in newspaper editorials" (p. 24). According to Roth, the newspapers, which created the image of reality, gave a distorted depiction of it: "anyone who reads their accounts and doesn't know the city would think there were Wild West-style shoot-outs between the various orators and poster campaigns," he wrote about the election of 1924, but, "[i]n fact it's not like that at all" (pp. 190-191).

In order to reveal the hidden reality of Berlin, Roth went to the mythological spheres of the city: the night clubs along Kurfürstendamm, the Reichstag, the UFA-Palast movie theater, the dive bars near Alexanderplatz, the "very large" department stores, and so forth. His essential technique is the ironical style he develops by means of alienation from his subject matter. This style facilitates a description of his fellow city dwellers as if they were a primitive, unknown tribe. "The grotesque spectacle of the hot room at night, containing sixteen naked

homeless people," he writes about nocturnal visitors to the steam baths in Admiral's Palace, "gives rise to a positively infernal range of interpretations" (p. 70). This sense of irony, which Paul Fussell ties to the experience of the First World War, is sharpened when Roth relates to the war.[2] Writing about the enthusiastic reception of Ludendorff in the Reichstag, he mentions that he and the general had fought on the same side. However, he continues, "no one gave me any medals or decorations, even though I lost as well" (pp. 196-197). For the author of these columns, alienation and the contrived lack of concern for the suffering of others and dreams are not a mere writing strategy but simply a reflection of Berliners' attitude in general. Today, he explains on one occasion, the people are essentially indifferent: they are "godless and republican" (p. 43). It is worth stressing, however, that Roth's sense of alienation is inverted among the victims of modern Weimar society: the imprisoned whores (pp. 60-61), the inmates of homeless shelters (pp. 63-68), and the anonymous dead of the city, whose pictures decorate the walls of police stations (pp. 80-82).

Among the most illuminating and amusing remarks in this book are the ones relating to modernization, or, better, rationalization of the public sphere in the Republic. See, for instance, his description of the department store's escalators, which "climb[ed] to merchandise on our behalf" (p. 121). This ironic look at "rational" consumer society calls attention to the similarities between Roth and some of Siegfried Kracauer's essays from these years—most notably, *The Salaried Masses*.^[3] Indeed, Roth often uses terminology similar to Kracauer's. For instance, his depiction of Berlin as "city-in-waiting" (p. 125), which recalls Kracauer's depiction of the city's people as "Those Who Wait."^[4]

In the short essay "The Resurrection," Roth sums up the crucial virtues of the accelerated process of modernization and the crises it bears. The story here is about Georg B., a convicted criminal set free in 1923 after fifty years in prison. Georg B. stands for the first time of his life in modern Berlin, and he cannot understand it: "The world had a completely new language" (p. 87). Roth did not spare any of the wrath he directed at this new world and its new languages: "the experience of this century mocks human laws," he claims, "[m]an, surrounded by machines, is compelled to become a machine himself" (p. 88). However, Roth is far from being naive and nostalgic for a pre-modern past. He does not think the experience in the past was more "authentic" or more natural: in the past, he admits, he had already mistaken a crematorium for a cabaret (p. 115). What he pities is not the lost of

authenticity but the loss of rules that helped to decipher the deception of the facade. In some cases he goes as far as canceling the duality between facade and essence altogether. In a somewhat postmodern note he states, "nothing is, everything claims to be" (p. 25).

Writing about the political arena of the Weimar Republic, Roth tends to mock both the Nationalists and the Communists, as he takes the stand of an apolitical observer. As such, he asserts, he cannot understand why "German politicians are so driven to make asses of themselves" (p. 196). He allows his left-wing sentiments to loom freely only in some extraordinary instances, such as his description of the assassinated minister Rathenau's home. In this favorable eulogy, Rathenau becomes a hero of a counter-Germany: in real Berlin "everyone is at odds with everyone else, people send one another furious looks" (p. 102); in Rathenau's Berlin, "a good man hears the lament of his brother from the depths" and helps him (p. 187). Rathenau was, according to Roth, first and foremost a victim of the young generation, the generation that grew up in the post-WWI reality in Germany. On several occasions in the book, Roth describes this generation with contempt and accusation: the undisciplined characters of those young Germans, and, moreover, their cultural and political preferences responsible for the poor state of Germany. This perception reaches its peak in a column from 1933, in which Roth, already in exile, blames German youth of committing "historical error" which led to the burning of the so-called "Jewish" books by the Nazis (p. 210).

"Historical error" was also made, according to an essay from 1929, by Jews who decided to leave for Palestine. Here Roth is sarcastic about Jews who left Europe only to be killed in a foreign land, not in a pogrom, "but [in an] honest-to-goodness battle" (p. 49). Written only four years before the rise of the National Socialist regime, these pages are read today not as a description of the shortsightedness of the Jews in Palestine, but rather of that of the author himself. *What I Saw* is, consequently, not simply a description of everyday experience in the Weimar Republic, but a reflection on the unconscious experience of its reality. Roth tries to represent a world that his readers do not "see" in their everyday lives, even though they meet with it on a regular basis. His reflections aim to look at the heart of the myth of Weimar's Berlin, and to understand the mechanism behind the visible reality. The first English translation of Roth's essays is thus an insightful collection and would be valuable for students as a general introduction to the breathtaking reality of the Weimar Republic and its various interpreters.

Notes

[1]. Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920's Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 8; Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 390.

[2]. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, University Press,

1975), p. 64.

[3]. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, trans. Quintin Hoare (New York: Verso, 1998).

[4]. Siegfried Cracauer, "Those Who Wait," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 129-138.

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