REVIEWS

"Literature on the Edge": Austro-Modernism of the Long War
Enikő Bollobás

Perloff, Marjorie. *Edge of Irony: Modernism in the Shadow of the Habsburg Empire*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2016. 204 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-05442-1. Hb. $23.98.

After her many books on American and European innovative poetic traditions, Marjorie Perloff published her multi-genre survey of Habsburg modernism, with individual chapters devoted to Karl Kraus, Joseph Roth, Robert Musil, Elias Canetti, Paul Celan, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, reading them all in the context of the lost empire. Perloff investigates a particular historical moment, "this terrible and poignant turn in European history" (xii), the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when individual artists, coming from different corners of the Empire, the historical and geographical "edges"—Bohemia (Mahler, Kraus), Galicia (Roth), Bukovina (Celan, Gregor von Rezzori), Brno (Musil), Prague (Franz Kafka), and Carinthia (Ingeborg Bachman)—found themselves scattered to the four winds, without the common cultural home they had taken for granted. Only one of her authors was born in Vienna, Wittgenstein, who was never a real insider either, and who later emigrated to England. Compared to the Frankfurt School or the Weimar writers, who have exerted a considerable influence on Anglo-American literary studies, this group is relatively little known, narrowly understood—rather misunderstood—at best, and misread most of the times. Yet, this "Austro-Jewish phenomenon" in "one of the most anti-Semitic periods of modern European history" and their "post-empire Austrian world" look "increasingly important for an understanding of our own artistic and cultural values a century later," as Perloff claims (xii-xiii).

Aimed at a non-Germanic audience, the book starts out by giving a historical background: of the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy, shrinking from a fifty million empire to a small republic of mere six million; of the provinces outside the cultural capital of Vienna—identified exclusively with Austria in Anglophone critical discourse—the multiethnic towns of the multiethnic empire, where most of the "provincial" writers received coeval labels, such as Czech/German/Jewish (Kafka), German/Austrian/Czech (Musil), Austrian/Romanian (Rezzori), Bulgarian/Austrian (Canetti), or Romanian/Ukrainian/Austrian (Celan). As the author emphasizes throughout, this postwar rupture was way more extreme for the citizens of

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Austria-Hungary than for those of Germany—who did not have to give up their identity—or for those of France or Great Britain—who did not have to alter their prewar geographic contours.

Perloff conveys the trauma of this sudden rupture by describing the experience of millions losing their national identities and the ensuing feeling of not belonging anywhere, resulting in choosing the most obvious state of being an outsider. With the tens of thousands of Eastern Jewish refugees pouring into Vienna, and "Jewish Vienna" being predominantly Socialist, anti-Semitism flared up in Catholic Austria—"Austrian anti-Semitism as the pathology of a defeated and humiliated people in need of a scapegoat" (17)—making the situation of assimilated Jews—whose families had, for generations, lived there and considered themselves simply Austrian, with Vienna their city—especially difficult. Suddenly, they found themselves longing for the lost pre-1918 cosmopolitan world of empire, and chose, for lack of other alternatives, exile.

Although fluent in several languages, their deeply rooted loyalty to German prevailed. With their moral dilemma about loyalty to German culture and language culminating after the *Anschluss* in 1938, these writers had to make their exiles definitive at this time, thereby cutting their last ties with Nazi occupied Austria: Wittgenstein and Canetti fled to England, Roth to Paris, and Musil to Zurich. Only Kraus and Celan did not emigrate: Kraus lived only until 1936, long enough to recognize that he had underestimated Nazi power, while Celan, trusting the Soviets to "protect" Bukovina, became a Holocaust witness in Romania.

This, then, is the historical, political, and cultural background—all parts of the long "Habsburg story" (18)—that explains the particular post-empire sensibility insisting on change (change of consciousness, primarily), resulting in a sensibility which Perloff describes as "ironic, satiric, darkly humorous, erotic—and often slightly mystical" (5). Moreover, Perloff insists, although this brand of European Modernism avoids formal experimentation usually associated with the avant-garde, the legacies of Austro-modernist writing—its absorption of diverse language registers, its fondness for aphorisms, paradox, and other modes of understanding informed by contradiction, as well as its "savage and grotesquely comic irony"—may well be more lasting than "the use of collage, the time shift, or the stream of consciousness" (7). As opposed to writers in the Weimar workshop for radical ideas, Austro-modernist writers developed a skepticism about government power, a disbelief in the elimination of war, or violence in general. Since they believed that "meaningful *change* could only be personal," the aim could only be, Perloff quotes Wittgenstein, "*to become a different person*" (15). Here, the

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philosopher's task is to launch a process of inquiry, and not to give definite answers; the writer's task is diagnosis, but, again, as process and not product. As such, they developed an impulse for "probing analysis of fundamental desires and principles" (13), as well as a mode of thinking and writing defined by irony as a sense of the absurd.

In the chapter launching the sections treating individual writers and works, Perloff discusses Kraus's *The Last Days of Mankind*, the first documentary drama ever, exhibiting the montage technique that brings together not only a variety of linguistic registers as used by different social classes, ethnicities, and professions, but also texts drawn from "manifestos, letters, picture postcards, and interviews" (20). Moreover, in order to expose what would later be known as "mediaspeak," Kraus includes "newspaper dispatches, editorials, public proclamations, minutes of political meetings" (20). As such, "high" (Shakespeare, Goethe) and "low" (cabaret song, vaudeville, puppet play, and operetta) come together to form a new blend, a strange hybrid that will be at once comic, hilarious, grotesque, and surreal—much like the post-empire world itself.

The Radetzky March is the topic of the chapter devoted to Roth, where Perloff gives not only historical context—explaining Field Marshal Joseph Radetzky's 1848 victory over the Italian armies in Piedmont, Austria-Hungary's last military triumph—but musical as well, emphasizing the celebratory optimism and melodic form, punctuated by waltz motifs of Johann Strauss's *The Radetzky March,* an all-time concert favorite, as providing the background for Roth's "gentle satire" (43). The novel is described as an ambivalent and complex "hall of mirrors" (44), conforming to a realism that is itself a form of irony. As an anti-bildungsroman, it submitted, Perloff notes, "the dying Habsburg Empire to trenchant critique" (46), especially its public media that never ceased to "correct" historical fact in order to uphold patriotism in its citizens. All this was done, and here lies the ultimate irony, by an Austrian Jew, who called himself a "patriotic Austrian" (41)—much like Wittgenstein enlisting to fight in World War I—who proclaimed his love of Austria in his letters to Stefan Zweig as late as 1933, and yet, who saw at that time very clearly the "tragedy of being a decent human being" (52-53), and whose books were among the first to be burned by the Nazis on *Kristallnacht*, November 1938.

Musil's *The Man without Qualities* gives a rather different picture of Vienna. Although the real time of the novel is, supposedly, 1913, Perloff places it, based on the postwar social changes presented and the general disembodied nature of Vienna, in the 1920s, when Musil was working on it. This double vision allows the reader to view the events from two perspectives,

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pre- and postwar, coupled, the author adds, "with an awareness of the possible, the contingent, the subjunctive" (76); coupled, moreover, with the "essayism" replacing plot, characterization, and setting, the ironic voice of the detached and disillusioned observer so characteristic throughout the long prose work. Yet, Musil is neither cynical nor pessimistic, but only realistic in drawing attention to the dangers of a totally laissez-faire attitude which, necessarily, lead to catastrophe; as Perloff quotes Musil, "like sleeping in the Pullman car of a train and being awakened only by the crash" (95).

Canetti's autobiography, *The Tongue Set Free*, focuses on the mother tongue and the problematic of the identity that mother, or lack of, tongue creates. For Canetti, this otherwise seamless relationship is far from simple or painless: while his parents indeed spoke German—to one another, mostly—he grew up in a Ladino/Bulgarian community. Multilingualism, in his case, destabilized his identity, leaving him with a conglomerate of "Habsburg identity paradigmatic of the lost or fractured identity of the modern individual" (Magris qtd. in Perloff 102). Moreover, Canetti's acquired languages were soon supplemented by English—the family moved to Manchester when he was six—further complicating his language-based identity. His never feeling at home in any language explains why Canetti's is ultimately the "language of the always already translated," as well as justifies his perpetual "writing in translation," which really becomes the cultural condition of "identity theft" (122, 123).

Celan, whom Perloff calls "the last Habsburg poet" (125), is read against the grain: not as a (or *the*) Holocaust poet, but as a love poet, memorializing his love affair with Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachman that was both traumatic and passionate, punctuated by misunderstanding, recriminations, and other "psychological roadblocks" (126). Both were psychologically damaged people, and both were exiles experiencing a "peculiar statelessness that had resulted . . . from the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire" (127). While a polyglot himself—knowing German, Romanian, French, Hebrew, and Russian at fourteen—it was the *Kultursprache* of German embracing this empire that Celan, a Holocaust survivor, held on to, insisting that it was the only thing that remained "reachable, close, and secure amid all losses" (128). As Perloff explains, however, his is a reconstructed language, a substitute one, with an invented grammar—a language beneath organic language used by human beings (129). It is this very peculiar reconstructed language that can carry the refusal to assert or take a stand, as well as his love lyric that is at once erotic and abstract—in short, the irony from the edges of history and geography.

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A discussion of Wittgenstein's attention to Christianity constitutes the final chapter of Perloff's book. Although baptized Catholic, true religion for the Austro-Jewish philosopher's family was culture: they hosted Brahms and Mahler, and owned Rodin statues and Klimt paintings. Acting on his famous imperative "*to turn into a different person*," Wittgenstein went through several self-transformations, first, enlisting in World War I as a patriotic German, then giving away his entire inheritance and becoming a schoolteacher, followed by his return to Cambridge in 1929, there toying with anti-Semitic ideas and having sexual liaisons with young men. His work bears marks of exile, of having to write in a language in which he was not quite at home. This never transparent language became the medium for the thoughts of the philosopher insisting on the importance of framing, and his refusal to produce a coherent logical treatise, but write, instead—like his fellow Austro-modernists—permanently unfinished "artworks" in short jumping and changing paragraphs.

Kraus's strange hybrid of registers, Roth's complex hall of mirrors with multiple reflections of the "real," Musil's closure-resisting "essayism" replacing narrative techniques, Canetti's Habsburg identity in conflict with his never feeling at home in any language, Celan's reconstructed language with an invented grammar, and Wittgenstein's many self-transformations forming the background to his consciousness of language—all these figure as manifestations of what Perloff calls "the edge of irony." They are all products of the years of the "Long War," 1914-1945, and of Austro-modernist literature, "a literature on the edge" (18).

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

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