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Adam Fallmerayer's Downfall

Analysis of Joseph Roth's novella *Fallmerayer the Stationmaster*

Abstract

The Austrian novelist Joseph Roth (1894-1939) is doubtless one of the most important and renowned authors of German language in the 20th century. Roth, a Jew by birth, was born and grew up in Brody/Galicia, today a region in Western Ukraine, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Double-Monarchy, a vast and ethnically manifold empire. The difficulty in holding together such a huge state by strong and upright leadership and by a nation holding up its ideals – best shown in Roth's novel *The Tale of the 1002nd Night* – make Joseph Roth's writing a congenial research object of the China-Germany Research program. Austria, as history proves, could not handle these problems successfully. What can a huge and ethnically diverse country as China learn from Austria's failure? Moreover, as Roth's novel *The Silent Prophet* shows, Roth was a severe critic of the Soviet-Union as it slipped into the terror of Stalinism in the late twenties. Roth's writing might include hints due to what human deficiencies the idea of communism could take such an unfavourable turn.

The work presented here is a condensed and translated version of my essay "Nothingness Is my Passion" treating the three Roth tales *April*, *The Blind Mirror* (both belonging to the first decade of the author's literary productivity) and *Fallmerayer the Stationmaster* (originally published in 1933). Here, only the last of these three texts can be treated – after a brief introduction into life and works of Joseph Roth. In the subsequent, more scientific part, typical elements of Roth's writing are revealed by analyzing the aforementioned story.

Following the procedure and methodology of my book *On Literature's Divine Assignment*, in the course of interpretation, I focus on religious motifs and topics used by the author, hereby discovering in what degree Roth, even in this apparent love-story, has dealt with religious issues to confirm my main thesis (also of the abovementioned book) that religion has been an essential element in Roth's writing of any era of his life. It is shown that *Fallmerayer the Stationmaster* can be read as falling-in-sin story whose hero for lack of faith or of religious foundations is drawn into a troublesome situation with tragic ending.

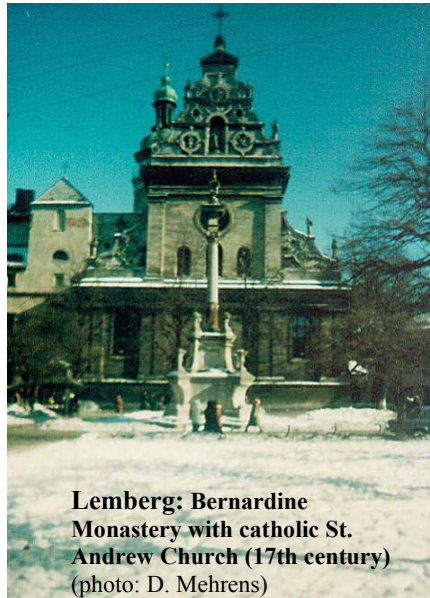
1. Life and works of Joseph Roth – an introduction

The Austrian journalist and novelist Joseph Roth, born in 1894 in Brody near Lemberg (today Ukrainian territory, then a city close to the Austrian-Russian border), deceased in Paris shortly before the outbreak of World War II, must be counted among the most outstanding and gifted German-writing authors of the 20th century. He started his career as journalist and novelist in the Austrian capital Vienna, but as a correspondent also went to many other European countries before finally fleeing from the Nazi regime to France, where he spent the rest of his life. The following survey of his life and works is taken from the English-written article by Pamela Saur, published on the World Wide Web by the Literary Encyclopaedia.

Joseph Roth, a German-speaking Jew, [...] also lived for several years in Berlin, where he wrote journalistic pieces and chronicles of his travels for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. One of many “exile writers” who fled the Nazi authorities and continued to write abroad, Roth moved to Paris in 1933. He died there on 27 May 1939, at only forty-five, of alcoholism and pneumonia. Roth had already established a name as a writer during the 1920s and early 1930s. His books were suppressed by the Nazis, but his reputation was revived by a 1956 edition of his works. Now considered a major Austrian writer, with virtually all of his writings available in recent English translations, he is best known for *Radetzky* [The *Radetzky March*, 1932], an historical “novel of decadence” that interweaves a nostalgic but not uncritical presentation of the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with the decline of the noble von Trotta family, seen through the story of a decadent protagonist. Also beloved is Roth’s “Jewish novel”, *Hiob* [*Job*, 1930], which centers on the sorrows and spiritual struggles of a poor Jewish couple in Russia, who must emigrate to America, and their children. The strengths of Roth’s fiction include well-developed settings, and a realism and fantasy, both worldly early and outspoken opponent of Roth, who had endorsed a vague man, came in his late years to of the Habsburg monarchy in to joining the Third Reich, and converted to Catholicism.

Roth, an only child, never knew merchant hospitalized for mental born. He experienced his fatherless dependence on his uncle as a community of Brody, and his mother was sometimes strained. and Vienna until the outbreak of served briefly before beginning his married Friederike Reichler in only a few happy years together permanently institutionalized for

to leave her behind when he emigrated, and she was put to death in 1940. In Paris, he continued to write and visit friends, and he lived at times with two different women during his last years, but he struggled financially and turned increasingly to alcohol to endure his unhappy situation.



Lemberg: Bernardine Monastery with catholic St. Andrew Church (17th century)
(photo: D. Mehrens)

historical perspective, unique combination of and otherworldly. An the Nazi movement, socialism as a young advocate the restoration Austria, as an alternative claimed to have

his father, a grain illness before he was state and financial disgrace in the Jewish relationship with his Roth studied at Lemberg World War I, in which he writing career. Roth 1922, but they enjoyed until she had to be schizophrenia. Roth had

Although common threads of style and theme connect them, Roth's fictional works can be divided into three phases: his early, more political and realistic works, emphasizing characters' difficulties in re-adjusting to life after World War I; his two major novels; and his late, more fantastic, moralistic, and spiritual novels and stories, written during his exile years. His six novels of the 1920s represent the anti-Expressionist realistic movement, *Neue Sachlichkeit* [New Factualism]. [...] Roth's "Jewish novel" *Job* signaled a clear shift away from realism in its "miraculous" conclusion: after many sorrows and losses, the pious Jew Mendel Singer, who has emigrated from Russia to America, is blessed by the sudden appearance of his long-lost son, always sickly and apparently retarded, who has become not only a healthy, successful man, but a talented musician. The novel portrays Jewish customs and daily life in the European *shtetl*, tracing events in a Jewish family in two hostile countries, along with Singer's spiritual odyssey, in which at one point he becomes a doubting Job.

Among Roth's major late works is the novella *Stationschef Fallmerayer* [*Fallmerayer the Stationmaster*, 1933], in which a railway accident causes an ordinary provincial railroad official to meet and fall in love with a beautiful Russian countess. [...] Like Stationmaster Fallmerayer, Eibenschütz, the protagonist of *Das falsche Gewicht* [*Weights and Measures*, 1937], is a government functionary in an isolated area who is visited by exotic love. At first a scrupulous weights and measures officer and husband, he falls in love with an alluring gypsy woman who brings about his moral and professional corruption. The novel ends with his dying vision of God giving an ambivalent judgment about the accuracy of his "weights and measures". [...]

In every decade since his death, critical studies, new editions, and translations of Roth have demonstrated his enduring appeal and high status as a major Austrian writer. Although *The Radetzky March* and *Job*, both of which have been made into successful films, have justifiably retained their status as Roth's major contributions, his other works have continued to attract readers, critics, and translators as well. Roth's own life story and the cultural, historical, religious and moral significance of his fiction is widely appreciated, along with his skillful writing style, suspenseful, imaginative, and engaging story-telling and creation of haunting moods and nuances of feeling.¹

The beginning of Joseph Roth's literary productivity in the 1920s coincided with a difficult phase of European history: after World War I, Europe was in turmoil, and especially Germany was politically, economically and morally shaken. Many traditional foundations had been swept away by the war and the events brought about by it. Neither in Germany nor in Austria there was an emperor any more. Many of Roth's fellow writers, e.g. the Jewish novelist Franz Werfel, stated a menacing loss of moral values based on spreading materialism and nihilism², new intellectual standpoints based on 19th century philosophy and new scientific knowledge, rejecting any metaphysical explanation of the world and refusing to acknowledge any authority based upon the related theories. Authors like Roth stated this spiritual change and, as writers, warned of the disastrous consequences, which with the rise of the Nazi movement, for some perspicacious ones among them, as Roth was, were at hand. In his book *Der heilige Trinker* (*The Holy Drinker*), Géza von Cziffra, a

¹ Pamela Saur, "Roth, Joseph," *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 4 June 2004, found 16 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.litencyc.com>>.

² „Ich verabscheue unsagbar den allgemeinen Geisteszustand unserer modernen Welt, jenen religiösen Nihilismus, der als Erbschaft längst verschollener Eliten seit drei Menschenaltern das Gemeingut der Massen geworden ist.“ Cf. Franz Werfel, *Der veruntreute Himmel: Die Geschichte einer Magd*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Fischer, 1982) 278.

famous Hungarian movie director, has written down his memories of Joseph Roth, whose acquaintance he made in 1924 in Berlin, and quotes the following statement of the famous novelist, which can be regarded as sum of his convictions: “Humans have become unfaithful to the good, old Father-God and have created a new god, whose name is progress. They believe sectarianly in technology, in the increasing mechanization. This god, one day, will destroy us like Molech. The new scientific discoveries in the beginning seem to serve man, but one day they will cause his ruin.”³ The following chapter will give an analysis of Roth’s famous novella *Fallmerayer the Stationmaster*, originally published in Amsterdam in Roth’s first year in exile, 1933. Like in my book *On Literature’s Divine Assignment*⁴, I will try to reveal the story’s religious content by looking very closely at the text and, as a result, to elucidate the author’s intention.

2. *Fallmerayer the Stationmaster* – a religious tale

The title of this paper is partly inspired by the famous German movie *The Downfall* (2004) telling the story of Hitler’s last days. Joseph Roth was a writer never getting tired of warning about the horrible threat of the Nazi movement. His point-of-view was: if man forgets the commandments given to him on mount Sinai, he will give birth to infernal monsters and disastrous must be the consequences if such monsters came to be the rulers of a whole country or even the world.

While in his feuilletons Roth proved a very sharp critic, in content and expression, of the political phenomena of his world, in his novellas and short stories he often found other ways and other accesses to express the same bad feelings about what was going on in the society he was or had been part of. An example is *Fallmerayer the Stationmaster*, a marvellously written love-story with tragic ending. As it has been mentioned before, Roth, especially in his later years, from 1930 to 1939, in his fiction often used religion as a central topic making characters discuss religious issues (like the Austrian Count Chojnicki in his last novel *The Emperor’s Tomb*) or inserting religious themes and motifs in the course of storytelling. Unlike most novels written in Roth’s last decade, e.g. *Tarabas*,

³ Géza von Cziffra, *Der heilige Trinker* (Frankfurt/Berlin: Ullstein, 1989) 64 (quote trans. D. Mehrens).

⁴ Dietmar Mehrens, *Vom göttlichen Auftrag der Literatur: Die Romane Joseph Roths: Ein Kommentar* (Norderstedt: Libri BoD, 2000).

Confessions of a Murderer, or *Weights and Measures*, this story, at first sight, does not seem to include religion as an important issue. At first sight *Fallmerayer the Stationmaster* is just a tragic love-story using the events of World War I as dramatic, action-rising setting. The plot is briefly summed up:

After a terrible railway accident – which makes us think of Thomas Mann’s short-story of the same title, in German: “Das Eisenbahnglück” (1909) – the young stationmaster Fallmerayer, who feels a little bored by the mediocrity of his provincial existence two train hours from the sparkling capital Vienna, takes care of the beautiful Russian Countess Valevska and hosts her during one week in his home. After her recovery one week later, she travels home leaving behind a stationmaster stunned by her charm and beauty. But the World War helps Fallmerayer recuperate his lost love by having him sent close to Kiev, where the countess lives – alone for the moment since her husband is missing somewhere at the front. He visits her in the loneliness of the count’s manor, becomes and remains her lover, definitely forsaking his wife and two twin daughters. In the confusion of the last months of war, the couple can get away from Russia. They finally reach Monte Carlo, where the Count Valevski and his wife own a villa. A short period of apparently perfect happiness begins, the countess is pregnant with a baby, but everything ends very abruptly when her missing husband returns from war as helpless invalid. Fallmerayer leaves and – as the omniscient narrator reveals in the story’s last sentence – there has never been word from him again.

In the following I shall try to enlighten the slightly hidden religious content of the novella by revealing three tiny, but significant coordinates:

2.1 Adam

First of all, there is the main character’s first name: Adam. Adam, who is the origin of mankind and of original sin, led to his trespass by a woman, Eve. He is the one who loses God’s care and blessing by transgressing the elementary commandment. Choosing this first name with all its biblical connotations provides significant religious symbolism to the figure of the stationmaster. Even though the story told here may well represent an individual’s destiny, it is evident that the stationmaster’s movement out of God’s creational order by the sin of adultery (a sin, by the way, which the author in his own life struggled with importantly) must be considered as an exemplification of the incapability of man in

general to act according to the divine commandments. This thesis proves even more valid if we take a close look at other protagonists of Roth's narrative universe, such as Tarabas, Golubtschik, and in particular Anselm Eibenschütz from the novel *Weights and Measures*. The lexical root *fall* in Fallmerayer's last name additionally lets no doubt about the religious significance Roth has put into the protagonist's name. The German and the English term have the same meaning and can be interpreted as allusion to the act of falling in sin, and this means: to the central dogma of the biblical anthropology.

2.2 God's *malice*

Now the reader understands much better how Fallmerayer can have the idea of considering the monotonous and boring life, which obviously does not satisfy him, as *malice* of God (in German: "Bosheit Gottes") as it is said on the first page of the story. This is at least the impression the railway official gets when he witnesses the birth of his two daughters while, of course, he was expecting to have a son. Although in general we do not find much evidence that could help us see in Adam Fallmerayer a very godly man, here now he does see God at work, but in a malicious way since he thinks that fate is playing a trick on him. This is, like in the Adam of the Bible, the germ in which his disposition to sin is dwelling, being exactly the same as what the snake in the book of Genesis makes Adam and Eve believe: that the divine commandment cannot be anything but mere harassment or, to use Roth's term, mere *malice*.

Roth, a master of the paratactic style, evokes an atmosphere of monotony and dullness by his choice of words: "maßvoll", "bürgerliche Gewissenhaftigkeit", "brav", "beschränkt" (JRW III, 123⁵), and the colours "graublauer Dunst" or "grauweiße[r] Brei". The contrast to this provincial life is the beautiful, but distant South, some kind of paradise with "Meer, [...] Sonne, Freiheit und Glück" (JRW III, 124). The "unaufhörlich" (continually) ticking morse machine and the *figura etymologica* of the "regnenden Regen", which likewise falls down continually – the German word "unaufhörlich" is used three times in the same context (cf. JRW III, 124f.) – all contribute to make the stationmaster's dissatisfaction and (imagined) misfortune comprehensible. In addition, the extensive use of the German root "gewöhn-" ("ordinary", cf. JRW III, 123, 125) makes clear that any element of surprise or

⁵ In this paper, the abbreviation "JRW" is continually used for quotations from the German edition of Joseph Roth's works, followed by the number of the volume in Roman ciphers, followed by the page number. More details on the edition used here see in the literature list at the end of this essay.

extraordinary is completely absent in Fallmerayer's existence: he is an absolutely ordinary person whose imagination is hardly able to reckon on any change in his life (cf. JRW III, 125). This change, however, is not delayed and is even anticipated by "die unheimliche Stimme eines ungewöhnlichen Schicksals" (ibid.). This "scary voice of an extraordinary fate" is ambivalent: it can mean the upcoming train accident as well as the extraordinary, fateful and, above all, ruinous change that it means for Fallmerayer. For it is evident that his falling-in-sin, his Adam-like rebellion against the divine order of creation "maliciously" imposed on him, bases in the first encounter with the countess.

If we follow this interpretation, we also tend to see a religious meaning in the expression "lost" (German "verlor") in the first lines of the novella where it is just simply said that Fallmerayer "lost his life". But why did he? How can we explain this given that we do not get any notice, within the text of the novella, of his decease? The term "lust" (German "Wollust"), considered as one of the seven deadly sins according to catholic teaching, enhances the impression of a falling-in-sin story being told here. Taking a look back from the ending of the story, we can plainly see that it is some kind of earthly paradise, which Fallmerayer loses, but what is even worse: he loses his life transcendentally or, in biblical terms, the eternal salvation of his soul (according to 1 Peter 1,9), caused by the deadly sin of lust. Not coincidentally "lust" is also the term used to describe the stationmaster's feelings when he goes to war by train. Actually, he does not only go to war, he rather approaches his love, the Countess Valevska, and this means: he approaches sin.

2.3 St. Prokop

After having discussed God's *malice* and revealed the double significance of the first name *Adam* we eventually have to point out a third religious coordinate, which enters the reader's focus in the shape of a holy man called St. Prokop. Hardly perceptible in the final part, the dénouement, of the novella the name of the saint is mentioned within the context of Count Valevski's miraculous comeback, which, in Fallmerayer's eyes, might be regarded as another form of divine "malice" or even mockery. St. Prokop's effigy is standing in the monastery of Prokroshni, which the count owes his salvation to.

But who is this St. Prokop? The catholic saint was born in A.D. 990 in the Bohemian city of Chotaun (today Chotaneck) and, as of 1030 lived as simple monk and eremite in the valley of the river Sazava south of Prague. During a hunt an influential duke called Ulrich

was led into his cave by a deer. Ulrich, impressed with Prokop's piety helped him found a Benedictine monastery. This happened in 1032 and Prokop became the abbot of the new property. According to a legend, Prokop mocked the Devil by using him as worker in front of his plough or as wheel on his chariot⁶ – a piece of information which might be essential to find out more about Roth's motive to refer to this historical catholic figure. Moreover, from his essay *The Antichrist* and characters as the satanic Lakatos in *Confessions of a Murderer*, we know about Roth's keen literary interest in the adversary of God. It is Christian belief that, by being tempted and seduced by sin and evil, a person moves into the dominion and control of the Devil. And this is exactly what happens to the former stationmaster. Roth, who was always attracted by superstition, also shows this by the superstitious behaviour of the two lovers in the casino (cf. JRW III, 142): they hope that, as the German proverb "Bad luck in games, good luck in love!" suggests, their misfortune as gamblers might be a proof, a guarantee even, for their happiness as lovers, as though they already felt the threat of their love, as though they had an indistinct fear that maybe a higher power, an eternal, judging authority might not allow that their happiness should last. And like a self-fulfilling prophecy this – and even worse – is what happens indeed. Fallmerayer's sin having led him on a disastrous, doomed wrong way – the adventurous flight through the whole continent may, even though it eventually succeeds, as well be seen as expression of a moral odyssey in the lives of the two lovers – he is finally subject to mockery. And this mockery is exactly what was expressed by the legend of the devil on the wheel of Prokop's chariot, to which Roth alludes. It is the forces of light, from Roth's catholic point-of-view to be represented by a saint as Prokop is, who will finally vanquish whereas for sinners, for slaves of evil and their masters nothing will be left but shame and defeat. Stating this, one may, as for biblical references intended by the author, not only think of Genesis 3, Adam and Eve and the expulsion from Paradise, but also of New Testament references, e.g. to Paul's letter to the Colossians, according to which Christ has "disarmed the powers and authorities" and "made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross"⁷; not to forget the famous fifth chapter of the book of Proverbs advising man not to surrender to the seduction of the "strange woman" (New International

⁶ Information on St. Prokop taken from: "Prokopius von Sázava (von Böhmen)," *Ökumenisches Heiligenlexikon*, found 9 Mar. 2005

<http://www.heiligenlexikon.de/index.htm?BiographienP/Prokopius_von_Sazava.htm>.

⁷ Colossians 2:15.

Version uses the more explicit term “adulteress”) in order to escape the verdict proclaimed in the last two verses of the chapter: “The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast. He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly.”⁸

Fallmerayer’s lot could not be summed up in better terms. The former stationmaster due to his *folly* ends tragically. Indeed, one cannot help having the impression that he appears more as the betrayed husband than the betrayed husband himself. Like a deserting soldier he leaves the place of his humiliating defeat as fast as possible. The fact that he will never see his child can be considered as even worse *malice* of the fate or of the actual power in control of his life than the two daughters he was so dissatisfied with. His defeat is complete because he loses everything: the woman he loves, his child, his happiness. And of course, he cannot possibly return home. His former existence has long ago definitely been left behind (cf. JRW III, 142). In the beginning, the omniscient narrator has let us know that his existence would probably never have become splendid, maybe not even satisfying; however, especially when we look at the title of this tale, it seems to have been Fallmerayer’s genuine destination. The life he revolted against now, as we know the outcome of his rebellion, must be considered as the place he was destined for.

The story’s ending reveals the narrator’s remark in the tenth chapter that Fallmerayer eventually saw himself on the top of his happiness and of his life (cf. JRW III, 141) as tragic irony. The reader now knows how terribly the hero, in his rather optimistic thinking and reasoning, is mistaken. After all, this novella tells nothing but the story of a man who is constantly misguided, who is permanently wrong in his choices because he has himself blinded by the ecstatic uproar of feelings. The result is a ruin no one can ever wish for.

From the beginning of Roth’s tale we can conclude that there has not been any way out, that there has been no salvation for the former stationmaster. The loss of existence mentioned there can, in the light of the three religious coordinates, which the author placed in his text and which to reveal was the aim of this short analysis, be understood as the expulsion from the paradise of a God-given order due to the invasion of sin. Fallmerayer’s particular tragedy thus is that he failed to acknowledge this order as good; indeed he was unable to acknowledge it as good since, different from Adam in the Bible, to his mind an

⁸ Proverbs 5:22-23. All biblical quotes in this passage except “strange woman” (taken from King James Version) follow the New International Version.

order subjectively judged better in fact existed. The failure, the total collapse of this existence, which he felt to be the better, happier one, of an existence *east of Eden*, as it is, proves the absolute dependency of man from God's benediction; for the latter is what Fallmerayer ultimately lacked most.

3. Conclusion

And this is Joseph Roth's reply to a world of dissolving values and ethics, a time, as Roth's compatriot Franz Werfel wrote in his novel *Embezzled Heaven* (1939), in which religious nihilism is spreading everywhere. His protagonist, Fallmerayer, like many other heroes in Roth's epic universe, for lack of clear religious foundations is unable to resist the temptation to sin caused by extraordinary fateful encounters. Comfort and correction by faith in God for all those characters is no way to face the challenges of life. Therefore their attempt to lead a happy life fails. Modern man lets the void of nihilism take the place of the values and moral convictions based on religion, and this is, so we could sum up Roth's message, a safe road to perdition.

What is being exemplified by the fate of individuals (the protagonists of the author's novels and novellas) is not less true for the societies and nations, which they constitute. In his last novel, *The Emperor's Tomb*, the author let one of his main characters speak of religion as "form-giver" and "form-keeper" in a feeble world (cf. JRW II, 885). In a speech on the superstitious belief in progress given in 1938, Roth spoke of two essential counterforces against the "barbarism" of the Nazi government: besides a sovereign government always aiming at the people's benefit and welfare, he thought of the foundations of faith, which, as ethic corrective against the seduction of evil opening the door for crime and barbarism, he judged indispensable and which, therefore, the intellectual and political elite of any country should highly esteem.

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