

TOPIC PARALLELISM IN JOSEPH ROTH'S TEXT OF *HIOB. ROMAN EINES EINFACHEN MANNES*

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The recent revival of the concept of Central European cultural identity has induced a number of scholars to examine afresh the complex structure of sociopolitical and economic relationships of the multinational Habsburg Empire. It has also spurred a renewed interest in literary writings associated as a rule with staunch supporters of the monarchic status quo. Among these, Joseph Roth (1894–1939), one of the greatest modern Austrian authors, deserves a special attention, as his thought typifies the varied cultural components of which the imposing edifice of the Habsburg Empire had been constructed. It is both Roth's ethnic background and multilingual experiences that had left their imprint upon the writer's perception and reflection of reality in a work of art. Born to a Jewish family in Galicia, exposed to the influences of both Slavic and German cultures, Roth ultimately appears as a representative of what might be considered as Central European cultural identity.¹ Needless to say, this also entails all the extremes of ideological vacillations, ranging from anarchist and socialist convictions to the reactionary conservatism of ancien régime.

The delicate balance of heterogeneous ideational elements, as embedded in Roth's writings, indicates to what extent the author succeeded through the use of divergent prosodic means, in achieving a thematic unity of bipolar opposites. In order for the reader to understand and appreciate better the generative process of textual meaning, the present study aims at exploring the semantic function of parallel structures at the morphophonemic level as well as the topic parallelism with its semantic constraints as to the interpretative meaning of the text of *Hioh*.

Hioh. Roman eines einfachen Mannes was published in 1930 by Gustav Kiepenheuer in Berlin. It has been referred to as a crucial turning point in the author's *Weltanschauung* and, as a result, in his further writings.² In concrete terms, it means that Roth's political views became essentially conservative, tinted with the outmoded strain of promonarchic Catholicism. The novel of a

1 Frits Hackert, "Joseph Roth. Zur Biographie". In *DTVJ* 43 (1969): 161.

2 Helmut Famiira-Percsetich, *Die Erzählsituation in den Romanen Joseph Roths*. (Bern und Frankfurt am Main, Verlag Herbert Jang & CIE AG, 1971).

simple man, as *Hiob* is subtitled, stands in fact for a modern parable of the biblical story of Job, through which Roth attempted to tackle some of the spiritual, personal problems involving both the worsening political climate in Central Europe and the deteriorating mental condition of this wife. The story of *Hiob* is framed within the context of the two qualitatively opposite settings, the Jewish enclave of Galicia and that of New York. The dynamism of geographical mobility inevitably enhances the narrative speed with which the story about the poor Jewish school teacher of Zuchnow, Mendel Singer, is told. Unlike his biblical prototype, Mendel, the Galician Job, goes through the stations of mental and physical anguish together with his loved ones, in a progressive way, until he is left alone at the mercy of charity and alms, abandoned by good fortune.

The presence of other major protagonists in the text makes the distribution of the distinctive features of the meaning more proportional to the symbolic function of the plot. Each protagonist is endowed, as it were, with the creative potential to generate his or her own story which is, however, intrinsically related to the parabolic theme of Job. At the deeper level of morpho-phonemic relationships, the semantic function of the text is realized along the lines of the principle of equivalence, as defined by Roman Jakobson.³ Through the combination of various phonemic items, selected with a particular purpose in the author's mind, Roth's text in prose acquires complementary features of the poetic text. It becomes rhythmic, occasionally rhymed, and semantically concise as verse.

The following example from *Hiob* can serve here as a typical case in point. "Gott hatte seinen Lenden Fruchtbarkeit verliehen, seinem Herzen Gleichmut und seinen Händen Armut." This is how the narrator describes, in a rather succinct way, Mendel, the hero of the story. As to the phonological analysis, it ought to be apparent on close reading that the verbal clause, bracketed by the past participle of the verb "verleihen," contains a string of alliterative rhythmical components consisting of consonants /t/ and /l/. Moreover, the noun "Lenden" (the dative case plural) and the past participle "verliehen" are syntactically patterned as rhyme which is then extended into the concluding clause. This postpositional object clause shows the same alliterative meter, based on the progressive repetition of consonants /s/, /h/, and the syllabic cluster /mut/. The two nouns, "Gleichmut," and "Armut" function as couplets in verse. In other words, there is no doubt that the author employs in the text of *Hiob* the form of *verset*, derived from the Bible. It is, indeed, the surest way of establishing the aura of the mystical at the level of pragmatic perception.

3 Jacques Ehrmann, ed., *Structuralism*. (A Doubleday Anchor Original, 1970), 189.

The biblical style, evoked in Hiob, does not permeate the entire text, though. It is to be found mostly in association with the chief protagonist of the story, Mendel Singer. The other dramatic personae, especially Mendel's wife Deborah and his daughter Mirjam, i.e., the female protagonists, are portrayed in a complementary fashion through the use of more mundane stylistic devices. The mystical element as such is absent, and what remains instead is the sensual aspect of physical love. The functional contrast of the two sexes is carried on, as we shall see, to the syntactic structure of Hiob. While Mendel is characterized by the progressive parallelism of phonemic components, his daughter Mirjam, morally deviant, is defined through the use of inverse parallelism. "Ihr galt / das Lied / einer ganzen Sotnia! // Hundert Männer/ sangen/ ihr zu." As obvious, the dative case of the personal pronoun "sie" (ihr) is repeated so as to form both the beginning of the first sentence and the end of the second sentence. The middle segments of the two phrases contain the two semantic cognates, "das Lied" and the past form of the verb "singen." The Russian word "Sotnia" approximates the meaning of the German equivalent, "Hundert Männer." Expressed in a more schematic way, the pattern of inverse parallelism is based on the sequence: A / B / C // C / B / A.

Roth operates with a variety of poetic devices primarily to accentuate the qualitative difference between the two types of protagonists. Those shrouded in mystery of miracles and the ones who personify the carnal desire of the flesh. It is especially the Jewish protagonists of the story who are conspicuously marked by the presence or the absence of the spiritual dimension. The distinct opposition of the two contrastive agents of the textual meaning is further amplified by the use of the tradition al topos of nature introduction. However, Roth's is not a mere application of the medieval poetic canon. The distribution of nature symbols in Hiob proceeds strictly along the lines of binary opposition projected into the psychological makeup of contrastive characters. Therefore, nature symbols are essentially indicative of the spiritual state of the protagonist. As to their meaning, it is inevitably relative to the perspective from which various nature phenomena are interpreted by each respective protagonist. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the two major female protagonists, Deborah and Mirjam, mother and daughter, signify the absence of the spiritual element. Contrariwise, the chief male protagonists, Mendel and Menuchim, father and son, connote the presence of the spiritual. These two different conditions become identifiable through the use of contrastive images.

In Roth's symbolic system, one symbolic meaning is often composed of several lexical variants that might be in essence semantically contiguous, but not always. The following examples from the text of Hiob show how symbo-

lic meaning is sequentially generated in the process of employing lexical variants.

(A) Eines Morgens, im Sommer, erwachte sie früher als Mendel. Ein zwitschernder Sperling am Fensterbrett hatte sie gewacht. Noch lag sie sein Pfiff im Ohr, Erinnerung an Geträumtes, Glückliches, wie die Stimme eines Sonnenstrahls.⁴

(B) Und gar nichts geschah. Nur ein Sommermorgen brach an, nur Lerchen trillerten in unerreichbarer Ferne, nur Sonnenstrahlen zwängten sich mit heisser Gewalt durch die Ritzen der Läden⁵

(C) Der Sommer war träge und schweren Atems, und arm an Regen.⁶

In the above passages, summer functions as time designator standing for the dichotomized concept of love. One of its aspects represents the immanently sensual, whereas the other facet of love is ascribed the quality of translucent spirituality. In order for love to be conceived of as a synonym for the sensual desire, it has to be marked by the presence of rain. Consequently, the spiritual can be realized only under the auspices of the absence of rain. Hence both conditions require propitious nature phenomena. This much said, it comes as no surprise that Deborah's awakening on the summer day without rain could be interpreted as an annunciation of the spiritual state. The physical closeness of the chirping sparrow, contrasted in the next excerpt with larks warbling in the unattainable distance, reinforces the image of the spiritual. Indeed, the bird in its generic meaning also symbolizes love, very much like in troubadour poetry. And yet, Roth makes a qualitative distinction between the common, unnoticed bird such as the ubiquitous sparrow, and the special, frequently poeticized kind of the migratory lark. As if following in the footsteps of Franciscan humility, Roth chooses the sparrow as yet another lexical variant of symbolic spirituality. Quotation (A) relates how the sparrow interrupted Deborah's dreaming of the distant happiness. Quotation (B) brings the lark in the focus, and the "heat force" of the sun penetrating through cracks in the window shutters. Deborah feels oppressed by this indolent, inert atmosphere of the suffocating summer without rain. Indeed, the absence of rain in the summer is analogous to Deborah's procreative condition. Her womb is described as "trocken und fruchtlos," and her physical relationship with Mendel as "kurz wie Blitze, trockene Blitze am fernen sommerlichen Horizont."⁷

4 Joseph Roth, *Hiob. Roman eines einfachen Mannes* (Berlin: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1930), 32.

5 *Ibid.*, 34.

6 *Ibid.*, 36.

7 *Ibid.*, 32. Compare with the use of the Schoss symbol in G.E. Lessing's fable *Der Greis des Salomon*. "Ein ehrlicher Greis trug des Tages Last und Hitze, sein Feld mit eigener Hand zu pflügen und mit eigener Hand den reinen Samen in den lockern Schoss der willigen Erde zu streuen."

The reason being the birth of her last child, Menuchim. It is he, referred to as "a mighty cripple," who signals the actual end of the sensual element in Deborah's love. Her grief is portrayed through the nocturnal dimension of spiritual darkness:

Nacht war in ihrem Herzen, Kummer in jeder Freude gewesen, seit Menuchims Geburt. Alle Feste waren Qualen gewesen und alle Feiertage Trauertage. Es gab keinen Frühling und keinen Sommer. Winter heissen alle Jahreszeiten. Die Sonne ging auf, aber sie wärmte nicht.⁸

Deborah's spiritual anguish notwithstanding, she is not altogether deprived of the physical sensation. As the following example suggests, she perceives the presence of the sensual, although she remains unresponsive to its stimulus.

(A) Er [Sameschkin] bleibt stehen und stützt sich mit dem Ellenbogen auf Deborahs Schulter. Sie hat Angst, sich zu rühren, damit Sameschkin nicht hinfallt. Sameschkin wiegt gute siebenzig Kilo, sein ganzes Gewicht liegt jetzt im Ellenbogen, und dieser Ellenbogen liegt auf Deborahs Schulter.⁹

(B) Zum erstenmal ist ihr ein fremder Mann so nahe. Sie fürchtet sich, aber sie denkt ausgleich auch, daß sie schon alt ist, sie denkt an Mirjams Kosaken und wie lange sie Mendel nicht mehr berührt hat.¹⁰

(C) Die Sonne ist untergegangen. Der Wind kommt vom Westen, am Horizont sichten sich violette Wolken, morgen wird es regnen. Deborah denkt: morgen wird es regnen, und fühlt einen rheumatischen Schmerz im Knie, sie begrüßt ihn, den alten treuen Feind. Der Mensch wird alt! denkt sie. Die Frauen werden schneller alt als die Männer, Sameschkin ist genau so alt wie sie und noch älter. Mirjam ist jung, sie geht mit einem Kosaken.¹¹

In the passages quoted above, Deborah's image as a strong-willed woman resisting the love overtures of Sameschkin, the only significant Russian protagonist of the story, is juxtaposed with the promiscuous character of her daughter, Mirjam, who goes out with Cossacks. The feeling of nostalgia, and sorrow also surfaces in the text. The unfulfilled sensual desire of Deborah and the ongoing exploits of Mirjam with the Russian soldiers are contrasted through the masterful use of sentence patterns, and amplified by the presence of nature symbols. The prospect of rain portends conditions favorable to the sensual disposition of the young. For the elderly of Deborah's kind, the idea of rain, even if invocative of the sensual element, is devoid of the augural magic conveying physical pleasure. The two attributes of the sensual, pleasu-

8 Roth, Hiob, 133.

9 Ibid., 109.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 111.

re and pain, are thus merely complementary as to the meaning of the rain symbol.

Since it is especially Mirjam who is vulnerable to the stimulating, erotic effect of the rain symbol, it would seem rather important to examine the natural setting in which the game of passion becomes unfolded. In Galicia, the environment genial to the youthful encounter of the two sexes is the corn field and, occasionally, the forest. In other words, it is nothing more than a piece of bare ground, a piece of land that also connotes the idea of home. The earthly instinct in Mirjam discloses her affinity with Galicia, with Russia in large. She is not alienated from the concrete, tangible reality of home like the rest of the Jews in Zuchnow, including her father, Mendel Singer.

Fremd war ihnen die Erde, auf der sie standen, feindlich der Wald, der ihnen entgegenstarre, gehässig das Klaffen der Hunde, deren mißtrauisches Gehör sie weckt hatten und vertraut nur der Mond, der heute in dieser Welt geboren wurde wie im Lande der Väter¹²

[Mendel] fühlte sich matt, bekam Lust, sich auf den Boden zu legen, und hatte Angst vor der unbekanntem Erde und dem gefährvollen Gewürm, das sie höchstwahrscheinlich beherbergte.¹³

Mendel's estrangement from the land stands in stark contrast to Mirjam's and also to Russian Sameschkin's close relationship with the native soil. Seen from this perspective, Mirjam actually appears estranged from the Jewish tradition of the ultimate return to Israel.

Considering the complex and yet rather systematic distribution of contrastive symbolic functions in Hiob, it does correspond to the code of the text that the Russian element represents in the story the natural agent of bringing the Jewish element down to the earth. In this sense only does the Russian Sameschkin play a positive role in the process of removing Mendel's fear of the strange, foreign land. Due to a mere accident, when Sameschkin's wagon gets broken and the Russian peasant and the Jewish teacher have to spend the night together sitting and talking outdoors, Mendel begins to free himself from the spell of alienation. He is touched by Sameschkin's reproof:

"So beginnt deine Reise nach Amerika" — sagte Sameschkin. "Was fahrt ihr auch immer so viel in der Welt herum! Der Teufel schickt euch von einem Ort zum anderen. Unsereins bleibt, wo es geboren ist, und wenn Krieg ist, zieht man nach Japan!"¹⁴

12 Ibid., 98.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 127.

Mendel Singer schwieg. Er sass am Strassenrand, neben Sameschkin. Zum erstenmal in seinem Leben saß Mendel Singer auf der nackten Erde, mitten in der wilden Nacht, neben einem Bauern.¹⁵

In response, Mendel begins to cry, as he finally realizes that his family's escape to America means not only saving Mirjam from her Russian lovers, but also abandoning both his youngest, mentally retarded son, Menuchim, and his home.

Once the participation of the Russian element in the textual system of nature symbols is considered, even the Cossack lovers of Mirjam begin to assume a qualitatively different, more positive function. Accordingly, the sensual aspect of love cannot be straightforwardly classified as negative. Because it signifies in a metaphoric fashion, it is subject to polysemantic interpretation. That is to say, it is, as to its meaning, relative. Yet, there exists to each symbol an inherent context boundary which delimits the range of possible semantic variants. As in the next quotation, the rain symbol is distinctive of the erotic.

Mirjam hatte keine Zeit verlieren. Sie liebte Stepan. Er würde zurückbleiben. Sie liebte alle Männer, die Stürme brachen aus ihnen, ihre gewaltigen Hände zündeten dennoch sachte die Flammen im Herzen an. Stepan heißen die Männer, Iwan, Wsewolod. In Amerika gab es noch viel mehr Männer.¹⁶

It can be established through textual comparison that the masculine element of the sensual, as pertained to the two women protagonists, is described in terms of nature, as a storm (in association with Mirjam) and as a short, dry lightning (in connection with Deborah). That the two phenomena exhibit some common properties is taken for granted. What could be questioned, however, is the validity of the lexical variant of the bird symbol in the text.

The novel provides ample evidence suggesting that the lark symbol is meant to signify exclusively the maleness sought for by Mirjam. Migratory like the Russian soldiers, stationed in Galician Zuchnow, the lark is easily identified even by Mendel as a sign of the impending force of the sensual.

Millionen Lerchen trillerten über dem Haus, unter dem Himmel.¹⁷

At this moment Mendel becomes determined to leave Russia for America in order to prevent Mirjam from meeting the Cossacks. The hyperbolic "millions of larks," so much reminiscent of Gogolian style and of folk narrative, are topically parallel to the notion of "all the man" Mirjam loved.

This metaphoric correlation of the symbolic and the referential ceases to operate, however, as soon as the story changes its dramatic locale. In America, rather in New York City, the nature symbols functioning previously in

15 *Ibid.*, 128.

16 *Ibid.*, 113-14.

17 *Ibid.*, 106.

Russia, are either absent or semantically inverted, as the following examples indicate.

Es war Sommer. Das Ungeziefer in der Wohnung Mendel Singers vermehrte sich unaufhaltsam.¹⁸

Deborah erwacht, seufzt und sagt: "Es wird regnen! Es stinkt aus dem Kanal, mach die Fenster zu!"¹⁹

The New York summer no longer signifies the advent of love. It becomes the season of cockroach procreation infesting Mendel's apartment. Neither is Deborah awakened by the chirping of the sparrow. She smells the foul odor of the city sewage, and concludes that it will rain. The order of things, the sequence of natural reaction to natural phenomena has been destroyed in a manner analogous to Sameschkin's broken wagon heading back from Dubno where Mendel had to obtain emigration documents for the American voyage. Yet, with that difference that in New York the nature initiation, as Mendel experienced it, lost its effect. The loss is, in fact, the keyword of Mendel's tragedy. His eldest son Schemarjah — called Sam in America — dies in France fighting the Germans during World War I. Although he does not belong to the group of major protagonists, the news of his death has enough impact to kill Deborah. As Mirjam's exploits with American men became more intensive, she succumbed to their mental and physical demands, and had to be confined to an asylum. Ultimately, Mendel is left alone. Very much like the biblical Job, he is tried by God. Homeless and at the mercy of charity, he stands up against his God, rebelling against the undeserved lot. In short, the life in America represents the antithetic stage of the story's development. The final point of synthesis arrives with the miraculously cured Menuchim, who had become by now a world famous violinist. Having been left behind in Russia and adopted by a compassionate Russian couple, Menuchim exudes brilliance and physical beauty. He is to give a concert in New York and hopes to find out more about his father's whereabouts. The father and son are at last reunited, and the combination of chance and miracle induces the functioning of nature symbols. The sun again appears, "the first warm sun of this year" ("die erste warme Sonne dieses Jahres") and so does the ubiquitous bird. However, this time it is the black bird. And even the water symbol is not missing in the epilogue of the story. It is no more the rain. Now it is the image of the almost infinite, vast sea. The reconciliation of opposites has taken place through the reunion of the father and son.

The abnegation of binary oppositions, so deftly represented by the idea of androgyny, has an undeniable mythopoeic origin. It is also in this distant

18 Ibid., 192.

19 Ibid., 195.

past where the biblical story of Job has its vague beginning. The myth and its concomitant miracle are sacred. They are endowed with the spiritual that transcends the constraints of time and space. Hence they are in essence universal. The universal survives whereas the temporal, as signified in HioB by the sensual, must perish. That is why none of the female protagonists live, in the metaphoric sense of the word, to see the light of the miracle embodied in Menuchim. A reader more sympathetic to the course of woman's emancipation in the male-ruled society may remark that this is a harsh lot the woman protagonists are supposed to endure. Indeed, it is, but in myth, unlike in the fairy tale, the reign of justice happens to be slow, if ever present.

There is no reason to believe that Roth would not be aware of various inadequacies of the social systems he himself had to experience. By the same token, it ought to be taken for granted that he, like other converts to Catholicism, was quite familiar with the expedient role that parallel symbolic structures could play in a work of art. The fact that Roth has chosen the nature topic parallelism over other possible poetic devices bears to show that the problem of the symbiotic dependence between man and nature, of the urban technological progress antagonistic to natural spontaneity of life, as formulated, for example, by German expressionists, was not alien to him. On the contrary, Roth's close ties with such leading figures of Expressionism as Ernst Toller²⁰ show that his own writings could be influenced by avant-garde thought, regardless of his promonarchic sympathy.

DISTINCTIVE LEXICAL VARIANTS OF SYMBOLIC MEANINGS

+ Female

— Male

+ Rain

Sensual

—

Sun

+ Migratory Bird

— Nonmigratory Bird

+ Madness

— Miracle (Health)

+ Male

— Female

+ Sun

Spiritual — Rain

+ Nonmigratory Bird

— Migratory Bird

20 In 1939, Ernst Toller committed suicide in New York exile.

+ Miracle (Health)
— Madness

The markedness for the two groups of protagonists is as follows:

	+ Sensual
Female	+ Rain
Protagonists	+ Migratory Bird
	+ Madness

	+ Spiritual
Male	+ Sun
Protagonists	+ Nonmigratory Bird
	+ Miracle (Health)

It is not without interest that the markedness of the male and female protagonists in *Hiob* agrees in large measure with the mythopoeic value system of prototypical Judeo-Christian tradition. The episode about Adam and Eve, the biblical symbolism, in general, as well as its manifold more contemporary pragmatic derivatives, indicate that the extant system of symbolic forms remains productive.

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