

## Stefan Zweig // Joseph Roth | The true homeland

I bought a new bookcase a few months ago.

When you organise a bookcase, you first have to decide on a method. So, I made piles of books, first in alphabetical order by author, then by category, then based on moments in my life, then by subject. I talked about this with several bibliophile friends – some of them even divide their collections by nationality. Agreed: each author is born in a specific place and becomes patrimony of the nation state that now includes that place. It is also clear that, in the academic world (and beyond), we talk about German literature, French literature, Italian, English, etc. It is also clear that one author can write novels, literary essays, philosophical essays, historical miniatures, etc.

As I contemplated this, I laid eyes on two “turrets” of books by two authors, with one book in the middle, separating them. The piles of Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth books were joined by a book, translated into Italian for Castelvechi with the wonderful title “L’amicizia è la vera patria” (Friendship is indeed true homeland), which features the epistolary exchange between the two between the two wars.

Besides where to place this particular text on my bookcase – easily resolvable by putting it in one author’s section or the other – I started to think about where I should place the books by these two authors themselves. Roth and Zweig have kept me company throughout these two complicated years, when (it’s true that we’ve all had more time to read) our beloved work has functioned only intermittently. So, I would like to keep them close on my bookcase.

Roth wrote many novels, as well as a wonderful travel diary for France, a series of articles about early fascist Italy, some essays, etc. Zweig also wrote several novels, was a very prolific historian, and wrote theatrical texts and various essays, in addition to his autobiography “The World of Yesterday”.

Both authors were born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Austria-Hungary: Zweig in the centre, in Vienna, and Roth in the far east, in modern-day Ukraine. Both (painfully) experienced the unravelling of the Empire. Both were of Jewish origin. Books by both Zweig and Roth ended up in the Nazis’ pyres. Both experienced exile. When Hitler became chancellor, Roth wrote to Zweig: “It will have become clear to you now that we are heading for a great catastrophe. Quite apart from our personal situations – our literary and material existence has been wrecked – we are headed for a new war. I wouldn’t give a hells for our prospects. The barbarians have taken over. Do not deceive yourself. Hell reigns<sup>1</sup>”. He moved to Paris immediately (he had previously been living between Vienna and Berlin), while Zweig chose London. Zweig stayed in Vienna for another year, but left about four years before Hitler’s annexation of Austria.

Cognizant of their lives, and the contents of their novels and essays, I couldn’t possibly organise my bookcase using nationality as a criterion. Zweig and Roth were steadfast Europeanists. They believed in a united society, but also, above all, they felt cosmopolitan. They had experienced a world without passports (and longed for it).

This group exhibit brings together what I’ve done inside and outside the gallery, and what I’ve read by Roth and Zweig, between 2020 and now. The exhibit will feature all the artists I’ve shared these last two seasons with – intense moments, in one way or another. I will send a bulletin of art and literature every two weeks, hoping it takes your mind off war bulletins for a moment.

Every two weeks, I will add an artist’s work to the exhibit, accompanied by excerpts from Roth and Zweig. We will undertake a journey leading us from the world of yesterday and today to the world of tomorrow, in the hopes that tomorrow, around the world, we will discuss culture, and no longer wars. Inspiring ourselves, maybe, about what criteria should be used to organise a bookcase.

Livorno, former City of Nations, 7 April 2022

Gian Marco Casini

<sup>1</sup>from Joseph Roth: A Life in Letters, New York 2012. (letter from mid-February, 1933)

Translated by Rachel Moland