CHAPTER THREE

THE LAMENTATIONS OF AN “OLD JEW.”
THE ARTIST AS EXEMPLARY SUFFERER

My feet are forever wet.
Joseph Roth

Increasingly, in discussions about Jewish identity, a focus on suffering—in particular the trials and tribulations of the Jews in exile—is considered to be a self-defeating approach that undermines the creation of a stable identity. Especially in relation to post-Holocaust Jewish identity, critics have pointed out the dangers inherent in a self-identification that is primarily based on victimhood. Yet there are others who cling to the old idea of expulsion as divine punishment, as proof of the Jews’ special covenant with God. This view posits suffering as an essential part of the “Jewish fate.” In Christian discourse, too, a positive value is often placed on suffering. Susan Sontag has noted how in the West, as a result of its Christian legacy and what she calls the “paradigm of the Cross,” suffering is considered as a supreme token of depth. “For two thousand years,” she writes, “among Christians and Jews, it has been spiritually fashionable to be in pain.” This way of conceptualising suffering implies a strong connection between suffering and creation.

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1 “Ich habe ewig nasse Füße.” Roth, in a letter to Benno Reifenberg dated October 1926, Briefe, 99.
2 A recent critique of the Jewish focus on suffering or the idea of Jewish history as a “valley of tears” comes from Esther Benbassa in Suffering as Identity. The Jewish Paradigm. In Jewish history, Salo Baron was the first to counter the idea of a “lachrymose” history.
3 Benbassa, Suffering as Identity, 114.
4 “And why are we interested in the soul of the writer? Not because we are so interested in writers as such. But because of the insatiable modern preoccupation with psychology, the latest and most powerful legacy of the Christian tradition of introspection, opened up by Paul and Augustine, which equates the discovery of the self with the discovery of the suffering self. For the modern consciousness, the artist (replacing the saint) is the exemplary sufferer. And among artists, the writer, the man of words, is the person to whom we look to be able best to express his suffering. The writer is the exemplary sufferer because he has found both the deepest level of suffering and also a professional means to sublimate (in the literal, not the Freudian, sense of sublimate) his suffering.” Sontag, “The artist as exemplary sufferer,” 41–2.
Sontag argues that our contemporary interest in the tortured souls of writers and artists is a result of their close ties to human suffering. In our time, artists have replaced the saints of old as “exemplary sufferers.” No doubt a large part of Roth’s appeal can be found in his tragic life. Yet, even if Roth himself cultivated a conscious dialogue with the notion of suffering (in some ways, it even became his companion, when all else failed), it does not do him justice to equate suffering with intellectual depth, or to make a direct link between his tragic fate and his Jewish heritage. Instead, his immediate and frenzied responses to his personal hardship tell us something about the conditions in which he lived and wrote; the extent to which he felt the burden of history weighing on his ever-weaker shoulders.

Indeed, the narrowing horizon of Jewish life during the interwar years was a great concern for Roth, and he increasingly occupied himself with questions of divine justice and the purposes for the sufferings of man. The many elements of his personal, literary, and intellectual theodicy on suffering come together in his novel *Job. The Story of a Simple Man*, from 1930. In the process of writing the book, Roth identified with the biblical sufferer to such an extent that he actively took on the role of the “suffering Jew.” This was intricately tied to the loss of sanity, in particular that of his wife Friederike. The misery, guilt, and despair he felt about this became engrained in his soul, as important elements of his identity. As a man, Roth suffered, but as a writer, he sublimated his suffering into art.

**Exemplary Sufferers**

It has been said that in order to understand *galut*, or exile, we must return to the original *galut*, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In a similar way, my analysis of Roth’s dialogue

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5 The work of American cultural and literary historian Sander L. Gilman has been seminal in this respect. He has contributed greatly to the study of madness in Jewish history with such studies as *Seeing the Insane: A Cultural History of Psychiatric Illustration*, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, *The Visibility of the Jew in the Diaspora: Body Imagery and Its Cultural Context*, *Hysteria: A New History*, and *Jewish Frontiers: Essays on Bodies, Histories, and Identities*.

6 Sontag, “The artist as exemplary sufferer,” 42.

7 The view of the perennial and enforced exile of the Jews has been challenged in a recent book by Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*. See especially chapter 3, “The Invention of the Exile: Proselytism and Conversion,” 129–89.