Joseph Roth’s Radetzkymarsch as a Historical Novel

Joseph Roth’s Radetzkymarsch has frequently been interpreted as a historical novel, particularly in the terms suggested by Georg Lukács. Rather than considering its relation to history per se, this paper focuses on the novel’s relationship to the context of the Austrian ‘Zeitroman’ about the Habsburg Army. The return of the army in peace-time as a subject for fiction in the late 1920s, a phenomenon that constitutes a counterpoint to the wave of novels about the military experiences of the First World War, forms a backdrop to the self-conscious use of genre clichés in Radetzkymarsch. Closer attention to textual motifs and internal references to the fictive status of the narrative reveals a differentiated view of notions of historical and fictional truthfulness. The very unreliability of Roth’s narrator is part of a complex series of strategies that undermine categorical distinctions between one kind of story and another. As the narrator puts it, there may be much truth even in bad books.

Joseph Roth’s preface to the newspaper serialisation of Radetzkymarsch is typical of his later period in its mixture of nostalgic regret for the passing of empire and critical comment on the culture of the inter-war years. He begins with an outright declaration of love: “Ich habe es geliebt, dieses Vaterland, das mir erlaubte, ein Patriot und ein Weltbürger zugleich zu sein, ein Österreicher und ein Deutscher unter allen österreichischen Völkern.” The text moves on through personal recollections of standing guard at Emperor Franz Joseph’s funeral procession in Vienna in 1916 to a complaint at the judgment of history: “Denn auf eine äußerst sorglose Weise überläßt sie [die Weltgeschichte] gelegentlich das Urteil über die alte österreichisch-ungarische Monarchie dem Kino, der Tonfilmoperette und den lächerlichen Verkündern der landläufigen Schablonenweisheiten.” The preface concludes with Roth’s definition of the writer’s task in respect to history: “Aus dem Vergehen, dem Verwehenden das Merkwürdige und zugleich das Menschlich-Bezeichnende festzuhalten ist die Pflicht des Schriftstellers. Er hat die erhabene und bescheidene Aufgabe, die privaten Schicksale aufzuklauben, welche die Geschichte fallen läßt...

In the copious critical literature on Radetzkymarsch much emphasis has been placed upon the novel’s ‘truthfulness’ and ‘accuracy’ as a historical

Contemporaries were well aware that the novel was no comfortable idealisation. Positive reviews in left-wing newspapers, including a substantial extract printed in the Viennese *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, and guarded responses from Austrian monarchists make it plain that critical elements in Roth’s ‘Bekenntnis zur österreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie’ were not overlooked.

This article will argue that the novel’s relation to fiction, in particular to fictions on the theme of the Habsburg Army, should be equally important in any assessment. One contemporary writer was uncomplimentary about *Radetzkymarsch* as fiction. Robert Musil delivered a succinct judgment: “Es ist ein sehr hübsch geschriebener Kasernenroman.”

It is worth considering Musil’s harsh verdict in relation to the clichéd portrayals in popular culture that Roth saw as poor vehicles for historical assessment. In the period prior to World War I, Austrian fiction on the theme of the Habsburg Army can be divided into three main groups. Firstly, and perhaps best known, were the incongruously named *Militär-humoresken*. These were short feuilleton pieces, originating in the military weeklies of the 1870s, and usually written by serving or former officers. Although many of these texts comprise light, humorous anecdotes, the context of their publication (the feuilleton space ‘unter dem Strich’) also permitted sentimental mood pieces of a more sombre nature. Much of the material in such texts drew on the routine of military life. The founding father and inspiration for much of this writing was Carl Baron Torresani (1846-1907), whose first novel *Aus der schönen wilden Lieutenantszeit* (1889) was followed by two volumes of short stories on military themes – *Schwarzgelbe Reitergeschichten* (1889) and *Ibi Ubi* (1893) and an autobiography *Von der Wasser- bis zur Feuertaufe* (1900). Torresani’s brand of dashing, aristocratic stories was often satirical, with a self-deprecating glance at the naïveté of young officers and the excesses of the pre-reform army of the 1850s and 1860s. His tales were also frequently sentimental and, far from glorifying the Habsburg officer’s lifestyle, more often than not gave voice to genuine grievances.

Torresani’s aristocratic background

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5 In an otherwise excellent article Alfred Doppler describes Torresani’s work as full of “erbaulich-heroische Ereignisse und Anekdoten”. This is perhaps true of his autobio-