

Philip Roth Society Meeting in Switzerland: “Philip Roth: Across Cultures, across Disciplines”

Held at the University of St.Gallen, June 13–14, 2014



“What was wrong with Brenda Patimkin’s nose?”—If ever a single phrase could summarize intellectual and other joys of a conference, yet at the same time demonstrate how culture and politics can affect the reader, it was that question: Velichka Ivanova, working in France but hailing from Bulgaria, introduced the conference participants in the closing roundtable on “International Roth” to the way *Goodbye, Columbus* was taught in her home country in the communist era. The roundtable, completed by Ira Nadel (USA/Canada) and Enikő Maior (Romania/Hungary), indeed provided a (preliminarily) last impression of how much the conference held in historic St.Gallen fulfilled the promise of exploring Philip Roth’s oeuvre across cultures. Apart from the diversity of the speakers themselves, having travelled from

places like Warsaw, Frankfurt, New York, or Bozeman, Montana, several panels discussed how Roth’s work relates to works from world literature, ranging from less-known intertexts such as Kafka’s *Amerika*, introduced by Mike Witcombe, to Singer’s *The Family Carnovsky*, analyzed by Christopher Erwin Koy. Naturally, the woes of translations also had to be addressed, both in the papers by Pia Masiero and Steven Sampson as well as in conversations during breaks. Andreas Martin Widmann’s keynote address “Shop Talk Fantasies or: Looking at Roth from Both Sides” likewise touched on the question of translation, albeit from a different perspective. His talk artistically interweaved the question of a writer’s inspiration, the allure of the market, and the future of literature written in German.

In addition to covering Roth across cultures, the conference was, from its very outset, a conversation across disciplines. Roth’s struggles with the body, its frailty and failings were a recurring theme in several papers, and most notably in our president’s opening address as well. Aimee Pozorski analyzed how cancer in women has become a preoccupation in American popular culture and how Roth as well has repeatedly cast female characters as cancer patients, mostly defying the victim stereotypes. [On a side note, Aimee’s keynote already opened the cross-cultural dialogue: after the talk, an audience member approached me and asked, “Wasn’t this a very American perspective?”] The interdisciplinary dialogue was further enriched by, among others, philosophic approaches to Roth’s work, as suggested by Michael Festl and Valérie Roberge, or by David Brauner’s and Ira Nadel’s artistic lens on Roth, the latter being in a sense these talks provided a continuation of the art tour across the University campus enjoyed by some participants prior to the conference beginning.

Papers, panels, and captivating presentations are one part that brings joy to a conference, but often the time spent together “in-between” is just as refreshing and rewarding. Apart from the art walk and an informal reception prior to the conference, the participants got together for dinners, including a, for tourists mandatory, fondue evening, and got to know more about each other’s work during the many climbs up and down St.Gallen’s numerous staircases, taking in the views of *Säntis* mountain and the staples of the Cathedral, once at the center of the town’s famous Abbey. “There are worse places than Switzerland[,]” Nathan Zuckerman tells his brother in *The Counterlife*—but, actually, given the conversation- and controversy-loving group that had gathered for our conference, place was not much of a concern.

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