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The Media Myth of America

Joseph Roth's Hiob and Tarabas

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“Jetzt erscheint,” sagte ein Jude, der schon zweimal diese Fahrt mitgemacht hatte, zu Mendel Singer, “die Freiheitsstatue. Sie ist hunderteinundfünfzig Fuß hoch, im Innern hohl, man kann sie besteigen. [. . .] Solche Kunststücke macht man in Amerika.”

Man hatte ihm gesagt, daß Amerika God's own country hieß, daß es das Land Gottes war, wie einmal Palästina, und New York eigentlich the wonder city, die Stadt der Wunder, wie einmal Jerusalem.

Das Grammophon kann viele Wälzer spielen, aber auch Kol Nidre.

Joseph Roth, *Hiob* (S: 71, 76, 77)

The epigraphs to this essay are deliberately taken out of context. Anyone who has read Joseph Roth's 1930 novel *Hiob* would immediately point out that these statements are dripping with irony, even cynicism and contempt. For Mendel Singer, the protagonist of this novel whose suffering resembles that of the eponymous biblical figure Job, America is a place of indescribable misery, where episodes of personal, spiritual, and material loss come in quick and relentless succession. The apparent failure of Mendel Singer's American experience is often tied to the notion that America is for Joseph Roth a failed literary location: the settings are caricatured and false, the characters underdeveloped and flat, and the pervasive negative tone takes its toll on the novel. In short, the American experiment fails, both for Roth's characters and for Roth the writer.

This essay aims to revise our understanding of the role that America plays, both as a narrative setting and as a literary device, in Roth's fiction.¹ On

some level Roth's characters, most notably Mendel Singer, thrive in America: despite the suffering and loss they endure, this setting allows them to undergo a distinctly modern religious-aesthetic experience. Even the antihero of the 1934 novel *Tarabas*, who spends his time in New York lying, cheating, and committing violent crimes, must reckon with the life-changing prophecies he encounters there. Through recorded music, photography and film—modern, technological artforms whose visual and acoustic effects appear miraculous and which are thereby associated with religious awakening—Roth's East European transplants find their lost or absent Jewish faith restored. Artistic illusion is not simply deceptive and false; at crucial moments, it delivers unhappy characters from a miserable New York exile, both in the form of a physical return to Galicia and a renewed commitment to the Jewish faith. Though they ultimately leave America, the place proves to be an essential step in their spiritual transformation. Roth's "American novels"—which is to say, the novels set in part in America²—thus trace a geographical trajectory (Galicia—New York—Galicia) as well as a religious one. Far from presenting a purely negative picture of moral and religious decline, these novels offer a positive, or at least *possible*, model of Jewish existence in modernity.³

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to equate New York with faith lost and Galicia with faith gained and restored, for the seed of religious renewal is found in the technologically mediated artforms Roth's characters encounter in America. In other words, America is the condition of possibility of spiritual transformation and, as such, more a literary device than an actual place deserving of realistic representation. The mottos that introduced this essay cannot, therefore, be so easily dismissed. On the one hand, they express an ironic critique of America that is familiar from Roth's essays and articles—a facile, dismissive critique from a distance. On the other hand, they must be understood in the context of fictional works that experiment with America as a literary location, rather than simply speculate about America through fictional characters or expository writing. For Joseph Roth, America always remained an idea, but for a few of his fictional characters it became a reality—that is, a location to which they travel, a place where they try to settle down and live their lives.⁴ This literary experiment—the imaginative leap Roth makes from America as an idea to America as a setting—reveals an entirely different America, one marked by profound aesthetic experiences and imbued with transformative potential.⁵

Most critics have understood Roth's America as failure, both in the sense

that his characters cannot thrive there and in the sense that Roth's writing becomes flat and caricatured when he tries to describe it. This essay seeks to revise this view by arguing that America is an entirely new kind of literary place for Roth—neither a real location, nor a lost homeland, nor a biblical setting. These are the sites that readers are accustomed to encountering in Roth's writings—products either of journalistic reportage, Habsburg myth, or Jewish legend; indeed, critics often assume that anything outside of them cannot really be taken seriously. None of Roth's tried-and-true literary registers "fits" America, yet this makes it not a failure but rather virgin territory. One must ask why it is that America presses repeatedly on Roth's imagination even though he cannot describe it with means familiar to him from journalistic practice, Habsburg myth, or biblical allegory. Further, one must investigate the literary form and function that America acquires in his writing. This essay argues that Roth finds a particular *use* for America as a novelistic setting: the moment America becomes more than an object of critique and disdain, it emerges as a literary location that enables characters to undergo spiritual transformations. Roth uses the setting of America to develop a new literary register through which he can narrate stories of modern-day miracles, prophecies, and religious awakenings.

The first issue, then, is why Roth was so interested in America. Here history and personal biography are important factors. Vast numbers of East European Jews migrated westward in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many to the United States (Brenner 22). Roth was repeatedly urged by friends to do the same, and by the time of his death in 1939 he had made plans to visit the United States (Hughes 167n38). America was always present in his mind as an actual destination for countless East European Jews and as a possible destination for Roth himself, despite a deep-seated resistance to it. It is hardly surprising that in his oeuvre, in which travel and migration feature so prominently, America is frequently the goal, realized or not.

The second main issue is what kind of access to America Roth had, for this holds the key to understanding its literary function. Roth's main source of knowledge about America was the media—especially new media like film and radio but also print media like contemporary books and newspapers, where America and *Amerikanismus* featured prominently.⁶ Roth saw many Hollywood movies and wrote eighty or so articles that deal in some way with film—from individual movies to various aspects of the film industry—most often as an object of disdainful critique (Hughes 146). Roth's knowledge

about America derives from the media, so it is only natural that he describes it as a place of modern media (photographs, movies, gramophones, and so on). The negative side of this emerges in his image of America as superficial, false, and illusory. We are confronted with the ironic fact that the very conduit of information about America, new media, lies at the heart of Roth's rejection of it. But there is another side to Joseph Roth's America: when he places his characters there, it becomes a site of media-driven transformation. The miracles, prophecies, and spiritual awakenings his characters experience in (or as a result of their experiences in) America are inseparable from the modern artforms they encounter there. In a sense, Roth makes a "media myth" out of America, much as he forms biblical allegories out of Jewish existence in Galicia and a Habsburg myth out of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The precise operations of this new literary register, the media myth of America, will be the subject of this essay. I have suggested that Roth's America emerges out of certain literary, historical, and biographical constraints: it does not conform to any of his established literary registers; it is a crucial location in any narrative of twentieth-century East European Jewish migration; and it is a place that Roth accesses largely through modern media—films, photographs, and recorded music. What remains to be done is to analyze the American experience in Roth's novels. What happens to Roth's characters when they travel to America? What happens to them, more specifically, when they encounter typically American (that is, technological) works of art? America enables Roth to generate narratives of modern Jewish existence by thematizing and enacting the revelatory potential of artistic illusion. The point for him is not to reproduce some empirically verifiable version of America but to place it in a specific religious and geographical path that his characters traverse. By focusing on this trajectory, I hope to shift the terms of the debate away from the question of just how anti-American and antimodern Roth really was and toward an understanding of how the media myth of America enabled Roth to imagine new possibilities for Jewish existence in the modern world.

America as Transitional Site

Soma Morgenstern's chronicle of his friendship with Joseph Roth contains several references to the novel *Hiob*, which emerge in the context of discussions with the great Viennese writer Robert Musil.⁷ Morgenstern recounts the following conversation:

Ich erinnere mich, daß Musil sich einmal lobend über Roth ausgesprochen hatte: “Ihr Freund Roth ist in einem seiner Bücher einmal ein Dichter.” “Wo?” fragte ich ihn. “In seinem *Hiob* fand ich eine dichterische Stelle. Wie der arme Mendel Singer seine Tochter engumschlungen mit einem Kosaken aus einem Getreidefeld herauskommen sieht, in seiner Bestürzung davonläuft und atemlos nach langem Lauf die Synagoge erreicht und dort betet—das ist der Einfall eines Dichters. “Ich finde den ganzen ersten Teil dieses Buches das Beste von Joseph Roth,” sagte ich ihm. “Solange die Familie in Rußland sitzt, ist er in seinem Element und ein Dichter.” (91)

Morgenstern and Musil seem to agree here that Roth’s writing is powerful and poetic when he describes the old country, specifically when he writes about religious life in Galicia. The implication is that the lyrical quality of Roth’s writing diminishes when he abandons this setting—which is to say, when his characters move to America. In other words, Roth and his characters are only truly at home and at their best in the Austro-Hungarian homeland. Sufficiently intrigued by this discussion, Musil asks Morgenstern to introduce him to Roth. Morgenstern describes the day that the three writers meet at the Café Museum in Vienna, where they discuss and critique various prominent contemporary intellectuals. When Musil leaves, Morgenstern continues his conversation with Roth:

Ich erzählte ihm, was Musil über Mendel Singer gesagt hatte, wie er seine Tochter mit dem Kosaken erwischt und davonläuft und so lange läuft, bis er ins Bethaus kommt und betet, und dann beschließt, nach Amerika auszuwandern. “Das ist der Einfall eines Dichters, hat er gesagt. So etwas gibt Musil für Romanschreiber selten zu.” “Das überschätzt der Goj,” sagte Roth. “So etwas fällt einem Juden leicht ein.” “Ich kenne echtere Juden als dich,” sagte ich, “die sogar jiddisch schreiben, nicht deutsch, und nicht auf jeder Seite solche Einfälle haben. Sei ihm nicht böse, daß er nur *eine* Stelle in deinem *Hiob* gefunden hat.” (95)

Roth is of course right to detect a slight in Musil’s awkward compliment—“Roth ist in *einem* seiner Bücher *einmal* ein Dichter”—but he is wrong to dismiss the remark entirely. The passage Musil praises in Roth’s novel is so striking because it is a moment of beauty, clarity, and religious awakening:

having agonized over the precarious situation of his family for months, Mendel Singer finally knows what to do. “Wir werden nach Amerika fahren,” he announces to his wife (47). Mendel comes to this decision neither through a practical assessment of circumstances nor through an evaluation of moral duties but through a night of sustained prayer:

Auf den Ofenbank schlief ein obdachloser Jude. Seine Atemzüge begleiteten und unterstützten Mendel Singers monotonen Gesang, der wie ein heißer Gesang in der Wüste war, verloren und vertraut mit dem Tode. Die eigene Stimme und der Atem des Schlafenden betäubten Mendel, vertrieben jeden Gedanken aus seinem Herzen, nichts mehr war er als ein Beter, die Worte gingen durch ihn den Weg zum Himmel, ein hohles Gefäß war er, ein Trichter. So betete er dem Morgen entgegen. (5: 47)

It is by emptying his mind of thoughts and desires and submitting his body to the act of prayer—its musical rhythms, verbal articulations, gestures, and movements—that Mendel Singer arrives at this realization.

Mendel’s transformation is at once aesthetic and religious—a kind of experience that is, by most critical accounts of Roth’s novel, no longer available to him in America, a place where artworks are superficial and empty and where religious practice and belief rapidly deteriorate.⁸ This is the image of America suggested in Roth’s 1927 book-length essay *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, presented in rich detail in *Hiob*, Roth’s so-called “jüdischster Roman” (Raffel 206), and confirmed in such pessimistic late works as his apocalyptic 1934 essay “Der Antichrist” (3: 563–665). It is, however, only a partial image, perhaps only a surface image of America that emerges in Roth’s writings from 1927 to 1934.⁹ Without denying that Roth’s America is, at times, a hellish, godless, technologized, and illusory anti-*Heimat*, I will demonstrate that it is also the setting for a distinctly modern religious-aesthetic experience, itself the condition of a return to Galicia and to righteous obedience to God. Thus the passage in *Hiob* that Morgenstern and Musil so admire—where song, prayer, and ritualized movement allow Mendel to receive a divine message—is not exclusive to the East European homeland. Such moments can happen in America, albeit under different circumstances and with very different consequences.

What is Joseph Roth’s America? It is above all a fictive location. Roth never set foot in America, even though substantial sections of numerous works, both fictional and essayistic, either refer to or are set in America. Linked, per-

haps, to this lack of firsthand knowledge about America are Roth's persistent descriptions of it as a transitional site: never a home, much less a *Heimat*, America is a place to which one travels and from which one returns. As a result it is responsible for a great deal of nostalgia and homesickness: Roth's New World transplants do not so much experience America as find a place to express their longing for another place—namely, the European homeland. Tellingly, there is a chapter of *Juden auf Wanderschaft* entitled “Die westlichen Ghettos,” which contains three sections, “Wien,” “Berlin,” and “Paris”; this is followed by a chapter called “Ein Jude geht nach America” (2: 827–902).¹⁰ Vienna, Berlin, and Paris are places where East European Jews *live*, and they are therefore simply named; America is a place to which they *go*, so it is designated from the outset as a destination. Roth chose to portray Jewish immigrants in the three European cities in which he spent most of his adult life (Vienna, Berlin, and Paris); additionally, he chose to depict not America, but the act of leaving for America. After all, though Roth had himself never been to America, he had seen many East European Jews set off for the New World. Correspondingly, most of this chapter of *Juden auf Wanderschaft* describes the process of leaving the European homeland: fantasies about freedom and wealth, plots to escape conscription, the acquisition of travel visas, the process of saving money, the purchase of tickets, and, finally, very briefly, the actual journey and arrival at Ellis Island in New York Harbor.

If *Juden auf Wanderschaft* is a text that anticipates America, a work rooted in the Old World but looking forward to the New World with anxious interest, the novels *Hiob* and *Tarabas* take an important step toward the actual America—not in the sense that Roth's portrayal is realistic but in the sense that America serves an actual location for his characters; in these works characters experience life in New York, even if temporarily. Though *Hiob* is set largely in America, Mendel Singer arrives there and immediately wants to return. For all the clarity and confidence of his decision to emigrate, he feels only loss, misery, and disorientation in his new home. In America, Mendel's family disintegrates, he is unable to perform his job as a teacher of religion, he falls into a life of idleness, his observance of Jewish ritual is increasingly compromised, and his faith in God grows ever weaker. Mendel is also plagued by regret: emigrating to America meant leaving behind his epileptic son Menuchim in the care of a local family in exchange for his house; convinced that Menuchim was too sick to travel but that the family had to leave for America in order to save the daughter Mirjam from a dissolute life (she was sneaking

out at night to have sex with a Cossak), Mendel committed this grave sin. He thus experiences America as a place of bitter defeat: “Amerika drang auf ihn, Amerika zerbrach ihn, Amerika zerschmetterte ihn” (5: 74). His only remaining wish is to return to Galicia for his death and burial.

The novel *Tarabas* begins in New York, with a scene of longing for the Russian homeland: “Das Heimweh trug Nikolaus Tarabas im Herzen. Er haßte New York, die hohen Häuser, die breiten Straßen und überhaupt alles, was Stein war. Und New York war eine eiserne Stadt” (5: 481). Tarabas was sent to America as punishment for a crime but seizes the first opportunity to flee: upon learning that war has broken out between Germany and Russia, he returns home to fight. There Tarabas establishes a new kind of existential *Heimat* in war, violent revolution, and tyrannical rule.

Der Krieg wurde seine Heimat. Der Krieg wurde seine große, blutige Heimat. Von einem Teil der Front zum anderen kam er. Er kam in friedliches Gebiet, setzte Dörfer in Brand, ließ die Trümmer kleiner und größerer Städte zurück, klagende Frauen, verwaiste Kinder, geschlagene, aufgehängte und ermordete Männer. (5: 501)

The last two-thirds of the novel takes place in the Galician village Koropta, which is part of the newly formed Poland and populated by soldiers, Ukrainian farmers, and Jews. Devastated by war, in the throes of want and poverty, and rife with ethnic and religious tension, Koropta is still more of a *Heimat* to Tarabas than New York ever was.

These novels confirm the image of America as a place of transit, a destination, and a point of departure—in a word, America as anti-*Heimat*. But in so doing they raise a peculiar question: why is New York a place to and from which *sinner*s travel? And more specifically, what does the cycle of transgression and repentance have to do with the trajectory Galicia—New York—Galicia? One answer is that New York is a kind of prison, a holding cell, in Roth’s fictions. Though Mendel Singer makes a conscious decision to emigrate, the novel’s discourse of inexorable fate suggests that there was no other choice for him: “Es war, als hätten sie, Deborah und Mendel, nicht freiwillig den Entschluß gefaßt, nach Amerika zu gehn, sondern als wäre Amerika über sie gekommen, über sie hergefallen” (5: 92). Tarabas is also compelled by an external force to leave home: his father orders him to go to New York as punishment for a political crime. The result of these transgressions and forced migrations is total misery—hence the image of America as a prison.

Clearly it is a place sinners go to be punished, but a closer analysis of these novels reveals that it is also a place where they experience spiritual renewal. New York is a transitional site because it is not a place where Roth's characters could ever form a life—or, more precisely, it is not a place where Roth could convincingly describe the formation of a life. Roth's New York does not strive for mimetic accuracy. Nor is his aim to idealize or villify New York, for that matter. Rather, for Roth New York is a setting that functions as a literary device—the necessary precondition for personal rehabilitation and transformation and the foundation for later scenes of religious-aesthetic delivery in both *Hiob* and *Tarabas*.

The Photograph and the Phonograph: Mendel Singer's Faith Regained

Like Job, Mendel Singer suffers and triumphs. In addition to feeling homesick and alienated in the unrelenting filth and noise of New York, Mendel's wife and son die, his daughter Mirjam goes mad, he discovers another son is MIA in Russia, and he loses all hope of ever seeing Menuchim again. Convinced that he is completely alone in the world, Mendel tries to sever the last relationship he has—to God—but stops short of burning the holy scriptures. At the nadir of his suffering, a friend reminds him of the story of Job: “Ihm ist Ähnliches geschehen wie dir. Er saß auf der nackten Erde, Asche auf dem Haupt, und seine Wunden taten ihm so weh, daß er sich wie ein Tier auf dem Boden wälzte. Auch er lästerte Gott. Und doch war es nur eine Prüfung gewesen” (5: 103). America is the site for Mendel's Job-like trial—seemingly senseless suffering at the hands of a higher power. But it also sets the scene for his Job-like triumph: he is rewarded with the appearance of Menuchim, who not only restores some wholeness to the shattered Singer family but also provides Mendel's ticket back home.

Menuchim's return seems to constitute the fulfillment of a prophecy and a miraculous occasion. Indeed, his restored health fulfills a decades-old prediction. Early in the novel, against Mendel's wishes and at considerable financial cost, Deborah brings the infant Menuchim to see a local Galician “Wunderrabbi,” who pronounces that Menuchim will be restored to health, but only after many years of suffering; he also warns Deborah not to abandon her son, even if he should seem to be an unbearable burden. The pious Mendel scoffs at this prediction: he refuses to believe not that Menuchim might

recover but that mortal actions can alter the will of God. This is the position of a deeply religious man: “Seine schlichte Frömmigkeit bedurfte keiner vermittelnden Gewalt zwischen Gott und Menschen” (5: 11). The novel seems to confirm this belief—Menuchim does recover, despite being abandoned—at the same time that it fulfills the rabbi’s prophecy. Menuchim is thus associated with the fulfillment of prophetic statements. Moreover, Menuchim’s re-entry into Mendel’s life has messianic overtones: he comes, like the prophet Elijah, during the Passover seder, as Mendel is sitting with neighbors and conducting the ritual feast. One might be led to believe that Menuchim’s health, wealth, and prophetic appearance comprise the “Wunder” of which the novel speaks (5: 136), the miraculous event that initiates Mendel’s return to religious belief and service to God. But the scene of Menuchim’s return, for all its apparent wonder and prophetic undertones, actually *follows* the true moment of awakening—a moment of technologically mediated aesthetic illusion. After all, why would Mendel, who has renounced God and abandoned religious practice, even accept an invitation to a Passover seder, if he has not already experienced a spiritual transformation?

The transformative experience Mendel undergoes before his reunion with Menuchim, the experience that in fact enables this reunion, is comparable to the scene of prayer that precedes his decision to go to America. Much like the rhythmic chanting that resembles “ein heißer Gesang in der gelben Wüste” (5: 47) and serves as a prelude to departure, Mendel is overcome by a powerful, even overwhelming, auditory experience. At once musical and religious, this experience is ushered in by a joyous melange of sounds that herald the war’s end: “das festliche Gedröhn der freudigen Welt [. . .], das Knallen der Feuerwerke und das Gelächter Zehntausender Menschen” (5: 111). At this moment Mendel decides, for the first time since his renunciation of life and God, to celebrate. Having seen others operate the gramophone in the store where he idles, he puts on a new record:

Mendel packte die oberste [Platte] aus, legte sie behutsam auf das Instrument, dachte eine Weile nach, um sich genau an die Hantierung zu erinnern, und setzte endlich die Nadel auf. Es räusperte sich der Apparat. Dann erklang das Lied. Es war Abend, Mendel stand im Finstern neben dem Grammophon und lauschte. Jeden Tag hatte er hier Lieder gehört, lustige und traurige, langsame und hurtige, dunkle und helle. Aber niemals war ein Lied wie dieses hier gewesen. Es

rann wie ein kleines Wässerchen und murmelte sachte, wurde groß wie das Meer und rauschte. “Die ganze Welt höre ich jetzt,” dachte Mendel. Wie ist es möglich, daß die ganze Welt auf so einer kleinen Platte eingraviert ist? Als sich eine kleine silberne Flöte einmischte und von nun an die samtenen Geigen nicht mehr verließ und wie ein getreuer schmaler Saum umrandete, begann Mendel zum erstenmal seit langer Zeit zu weinen. (5: 112)

Mendel discovers, after this intensely moving musical experience, that the song is called “Menuchims Lied.” This is a sad reminder of his long-lost son, who could neither speak nor sing, as well as a sign of his return—not only because the song bears his name but also because it is, he will later learn, in fact the musical creation of his son. It also recalls a song Mendel had sung to his infant son many years earlier, which contained a biblical phrase: “Er sang dazu ein altes Lied, ein sehr altes Lied: ‘Sprich es mir nach, Menuchim: “Am Anfang schuf Gott Himmel und Erde,” sprich es mir nach, Menuchim” (5: 108). The musical experience in New York reminds Mendel of the earlier, Galician incarnation of “Menuchims Lied,” which will prove prophetic in hindsight. Moreover, Mendel listens to the song sixteen times, fully absorbing each note and word through this repeated exposure. The scene thus closely resembles the earlier scene of somber and rote acoustic repetition, which was set in the homeland and was explicitly religious in nature, even if for Mendel the present experience seems to be a secular musical encounter with a merely symbolic connection to his personal life. *This* moment—a ritualized aesthetic experience of listening to the gramophone record, combined with a personal and religious memory of singing to his son—represents the turning point at which Mendel returns to work, family, friends, and God. Since Mendel does not yet know at this point that the Menuchim of “Menuchims Lied” is his own son, he reconnects to God not when he learns of Menuchim’s recovery and wealth but during this earlier musical encounter. Rather than knowledge or awareness of divine intervention, it is an aesthetic experience that reawakens Mendel to the presence of God in the world. “Menuchims Lied” is not a prophetic precursor to a miraculous event; it is itself the miracle of which the novel speaks.

There is a visual dimension to Mendel’s transformation as well, one also connected to modern forms of aesthetic reproduction. Shortly after hearing “Menuchims Lied,” Mendel learns that his neighbor Frisch has gone to hear

a performance by a group of European musicians. One of them, a man who calls himself Alexej Kossak, tells Frisch that he comes from the same village as Mendel Singer and would like to meet him. This Alexej Kossak, it turns out, is none other than Mendel's long-lost son Menuchim, but Mendel does not know this when Frisch shows him the concert program with his headshot.

“Ein schöner, junger Mann,” sagte Mendel. Er betrachtete die Fotografie. Obwohl das Bild abgenutzt war, das Papier schmutzig und das Porträt sich in hunderttausend winzige Moleküle aufzulösen schien, trat es lebendig aus dem Programm vor Mendels Augen. Er wollte es sofort zurückgeben, aber er behielt es und starrte darauf. Breit und weiß war die Stirn unter der Schwärze der Haare, wie ein glatter besonnener Stein. Die Augen waren groß und hell. Sie blickten Mendel Singer geradeaus an, er konnte sich nicht mehr von ihnen befreien. Sie machten ihn fröhlich und leicht, so glaubte Mendel. Ihre Klugheit sah er leuchten. Alt waren sie und jung zugleich. Alles wußten sie, die Welt spiegelte sich in ihnen. Es war Mendel Singer, als ob er beim Anblick dieser Augen selbst jünger würde, ein Jüngling wurde er, gar nichts wußte er. Alles mußte er von diesen Augen erfahren. Er hat sie schon gesehn, geträumt, als kleiner Junge. Vor Jahren, als er anfang, die Bibel zu lernen, waren es die Augen der Propheten. Männer, zu denen Gott selbst gesprochen hat, haben diese Augen. Alles wissen sie, nichts verraten sie, das Licht ist in ihnen. (5: 120)

Once again, a technical reproduction, this time visual rather than acoustic, initiates a religious transformation in Mendel; here again it is important to note that the experience is aesthetic before it is personal—Mendel is moved by the picture without knowing that the man pictured is his son. The visual impact of the photograph derives from its power to produce illusion—a static, two-dimensional image seems to come alive—but here illusion does not imply falseness or deception. Moreover, the photograph's effect does not derive from a too-perfect realism, as numerous factors (dirt, age, excessive use) compromise its mimetic qualities, but from a religious aura that derives from an optical effect. Perhaps the very combination of technical reproduction and the wear-and-tear of time are responsible for the almost magical quality of the image: it seems to point at once backward and forward and thus to transport Mendel to his youth, when he felt awe at God's wonders. The image restores him to an earlier stage of faith, one marked by the excitement, innocence, and

openness of youthful biblical study, and it returns him to his former belief in messianic knowledge, light, and delivery. Far from being deceived and damaged by this artistic illusion, Mendel's encounter with the ragged photograph sets him back on the path toward religious devotion: it initiates his rebirth into Judaism. Taken together, Menuchim's song and his visual likeness, phonography and photography serve as the basis for Mendel's return to Judaism.

This reading of Mendel's transformation via technologically mediated sounds and images presents an alternative to the more conventional understanding of Menuchim's appearance as a miraculous intervention, the messianic figure who brings Mendel's sufferings to an end and initiates his transformative return to religion, family, work, study, and so on (Frey 133). While the novel does employ the language and images of miracles, prophecy, and messianism, it does not present these as the basis of religious transformation. In other words, Roth's characters are not like biblical figures who repent and change their ways after witnessing God's miracles. The "Wunder" described in *Hiob* are testaments not to the power and will of God, but to the extraordinary impact of modern aesthetic experience. Witnessing *these* miracles—the poignant illusions generated by technologized artforms—initiates Mendel's return to God. America is not (or not only) the technological hell for Roth that critics claim it is. Precisely because of its association with new media and technology, America becomes the condition of possibility of religious transformation for a subset of Roth's fictional characters. Notwithstanding the vigorous critique of America that can be found in Roth's essays and articles, its hopeful, even redemptive function as a novelistic setting must be recognized. Given Roth's extensive commentary on Hollywood, movies, and the cinematic apparatus, this argument would not be complete without a consideration of the role of film in this new kind of modern miracle. For this, I turn to *Tarabas*.

The Cinematic Experience: *Tarabas's* Path to a Jewish God

Tarabas's miraculous transformation does not take place in New York, but a series of experiences there sets the stage for his personal brand of religious-aesthetic renewal. During what will turn out to be his last evening in town, *Tarabas* goes to the bar where his girlfriend Katharina works. On his way there he meets a fortune teller, who predicts, "Sie werden sündigen und büßen—alles noch auf Erden," (5: 484). Eager to make quick work of his fate, *Tarabas* instigates a barroom fight in which he inflicts a potentially fatal wound upon

the barkeeper and then roams the streets of New York in search of a policeman to whom he can confess his crime. In a perverse (and superstitious) attempt to be the master of a fate he deems inescapable, Tarabas decides to approach not the first but the third policeman he sees. However, before this can happen, he hears the voice of a newsboy announcing the outbreak of war in Europe. Convinced that this is yet another instance of fate calling, he decides to return home at once—to flee, again, rather than to repent: “Katharina, der Wirt und seine Missetat waren ausgelöscht und vergessen” (5: 491).

The psychic’s prophetic announcement establishes the terms of Tarabas’s future transformation, even if he is not yet ready to meet his fate. Back home Tarabas engages in acts of brutal warfare, terrorizes the Galician village he governs, and sanctions a deadly pogrom. The more he loses—family, lover, homeland, the war—the more he seems to want to destroy the world around him. It is only after he commits an arbitrary act of violence against a man of God that he decides to atone for his sins: Tarabas tears out the beard of a red-headed Jew, the synagogue assistant Schemarjah, whom he sees on the street one Sunday morning. This wild and vicious act is motivated by a double superstition of red-headed Jews and of encountering a Jew on a Sunday, both of which Tarabas, in his ignorance, regards as bad omens. It is moreover not only a crime (a physical assault) but also a religious transgression: Roth’s works repeatedly refer to the biblical injunction against shaving one’s beard followed by Orthodox Eastern Jewish men; to remove Schemarjah’s beard is to disgrace him before God.¹¹

Roth makes clear that *this* is the turning point in Tarabas’s life: after this act, he embraces his fate; this is the crime for which he must pay for the rest of his life. Tarabas immediately sets out on a life of wandering, day labor, and self-deprivation, giving away all but his most basic necessities and atoning his way into nonexistence. Why, one must ask, is this misdeed Tarabas’s true sin and not any of the previous attacks, rapes, or murders he has committed? He has had many unsuspecting, innocent, and helpless victims up to this point, but this is the first Jew—a pious, modest *Ostjude*—against whom he transgresses. Unbeknownst to Tarabas and the fortune teller who correctly predicts his destiny, it is a Jewish god who rules over his fate. This makes *Tarabas* a distinctly Jewish novel; indeed, it draws the worlds of *Tarabas* and *Hiob* into the same orbit.¹² Nikolaus Tarabas and Mendel Singer must endure the miseries of New York for the sake of a Jewish god. The cycle of religious experience they both complete in these narratives of prophecy, punishment, and repen-

tance share the trajectory Galicia—New York—Galicia. They come from and ultimately return to an East European homeland, but each character's stay in New York, no matter how miserable and temporary, is a crucial aspect of his religious development, indeed his service to a Jewish God.

Tarabas's New York experience contains not only the prophetic moment that determines his future course but also a hint of the redemptive moment to come: this takes the form of a key aesthetic experience conditioned by modern technology. After he visits the psychic and beats up Katharina's boss, Tarabas does not immediately hatch his plan to confess to the police and repent for his sins. First he goes to the movies. Again, this is not so much a choice as a matter of destiny, as far as the superstitious Tarabas is concerned: "Weil es Tarabas nun vorkam, daß dieses Theater vor ihm plötzlich auftauchte (und nicht, daß er davorgelangt war), nahm er es als ein Zeichen, kaufte eine Karte und betrat den finsternen Raum, geleitet von der gelblichen Lampe des Billetteurs" (5: 488). The first film he watches tells the story of an innocent man forced into a life of brutal crime in order to protect a helpless woman; condemned to death, he requests, as his last wish, to write the name of his lover, Evelyn, in his own blood on the wall of his prison cell. Tarabas, always on the lookout for signs and omens, immediately sees a connection between himself and this selfless hero as well as one between Katharina and Evelyn as demanding females who cause the demise of their devoted men. Then the next film begins: it recounts the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, to which Tarabas, again, intimately relates. He immediately becomes enraged against the traitorous Delilah and the oppressive Philistines, whom Tarabas hastily links to Katharina and the Americans. Convinced of his Samson-like power and near-invincibility, Tarabas decides *not* to submit to earthly justice, as the hero of the first film had done, but to bring it about of his own accord. Here, too, as in the case of Mendel listening to "Menuchim's Song," repeated exposure is essential to aesthetic experience: Tarabas stays to watch the double feature five times.

As in *Hiob*, we have a technologically mediated moment of prophecy that is immediately discredited and ridiculed: in *Hiob* this dismissal comes from Mendel, whose piety surpasses that of the superstitious rabbi, whereas in *Tarabas* it is suggested by the narrator, who frequently suggests the extent to which Tarabas overreads signs and injects his own personal fate into the fictions he encounters. The films he sees become surfaces onto which Tarabas can project his own problems and anxieties. While watching the second film, he wonders,

auf welche Weise es möglich ware, unter den gänzlich von den biblischen verschiedenen Amerikanischen Umständen an der Welt der Philister Rache zu nehmen, nach der Art des jüdischen Helden. Mußte es doch auch in New York Wunder geben wie im alten Lande Israel. (5: 489)

The novel's deep irony derives from the fact that this cinematic prophecy actually comes true—only not in the way that Tarabas imagines. He is in fact saved by a miraculous-seeming (though actually technological) intervention, much like Mendel is, though this does not bring joy and relief. Instead, this encounter with modern artforms allows Tarabas, eventually, to atone for his sins. Tarabas is thus wrong to think that he will follow the path of either filmic protagonist, for it is not the story or characters of cinema that lay the ground for his future redemption; his fantasy of spectacular revenge and freedom will not be realized. Instead, it is the cinematic medium itself, the “miracle” of image and movement created by light projected onto a surface, that will seal his fate. In New York, Tarabas is looking at film the wrong way, but he is right to suspect that his own destiny will be shaped by cinematic experience.

Tarabas's desperate search for signs and guidance is thus closely linked to the novel's climax—a scene, I will argue, that relies on techniques of cinematic projection—which is itself inextricable from Tarabas's assault on Schemarjah. Back in the small Galician village of Koropta, where postwar tensions between Jews and Christians are running high, a group of drunken soldiers enters the local tavern, run by the Jew Nathan Kristianpoller. After a soldier, Ramsin, draws lewd female figures on the wall of a room in the bar, the armed horde begins to shoot their guns at these images, an act of symbolic violence against women that recalls Tarabas's sexual crimes. More and more curious townspeople, mostly farmers, crowd into the small “Kammer” of Kristianpoller's inn to witness the event. The soldiers continue to fire at the drawings, and before long the plaster and paint on the wall start to crack and fall away. Suddenly they stop to stare in amazement: “vor den aufgerissenen Augen der Zuschauer vollzog sich ein wahrhaftiges Wunder: Auf dem rissigen Grunde der Wand, im tiefen, goldenen Abglanz der untergehenden Sonne, erschien an Stelle der zuchtlosen Bilder Ramsins das selige, süße Angesicht der Mutter Gottes” (5: 551). Sobered and moved by this surprising turn of events, the crowd breaks into a folk song called “Maria, du Süße.”

The irony of this moment runs deep: witness the sudden and all-too-

easy shift from drunken violence to reverent piety, from defacing women to adoring a woman, from gunshots to sweet song. Moreover, Maria is not only the name of the Christian mother of God but also the name of Tarabas's ex-girlfriend. He sleeps with Maria the night before he leaves for war and announces that he will marry her and then proceeds to rape the fourteen-year-old daughter of a farmer in a village he pillages; the following morning he tells her, never having asked her real name: "Du heißt Maria, von nun ab, so lange ich hierbleibe!" (5: 504). Of course, he leaves shortly thereafter. Maria, as far as Tarabas is concerned, is a name for all the women he mistreats and abandons—indeed, it is a kind of marker for his misogynistic, abusive, and mistrustful attitude toward women. When the other Maria, Jesus Christ's mother, suddenly appears in the old tavern, in image and song, Tarabas is forced to revise his view of *all* Marias. The contrast between Tarabas's violent, hateful, and destructive nature and his sudden display of piety is caricatured and comic on one level and entirely serious on another—for it is the first installment of a multimedia aesthetic experience that transforms Tarabas from a godless beast into a righteous and repentant man of God.

In the days and weeks that follow the so-called "miracle" in Koropta—the surprise appearance of the virgin mother—pilgrims from neighboring towns and villages come to glimpse the wondrous image. It turns out that there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for it, which is that before Kristianpoller bought the tavern, it had been a small church. Though the image of Maria had already been painted over when he came into possession of the building, the townspeople are quick to accuse him of heresy and take revenge. The pogrom that ensues is described in shockingly gruesome detail. In one episode, a large crowd of Jews is gathered up as they exit the synagogue, threatened by armed soldiers, and beaten with whips. They are forced to enter Kristianpoller's tavern, kneel down, and pray before the image of Maria. As the terrified Jews obey this cruel command, the farmers and soldiers spit on them and force them to sing "Ave Maria"—another Maria song, of course, here perverted and turned into a tool of fear, torture, and violent disrespect toward the Jewish God. Significantly, the scene is infused with cinematic qualities. The enclosed space, repeatedly referred to as a "Kammer," is completely dark, save for two candles which "verbreiteten mehr Schatten als Helligkeit" (5: 555). The strange lighting has a peculiar effect on the image of Maria: "Oben im Dämmer, im ohnmächtigen und unbeständigen Licht der schwachen Flammen, schien das wunderbare, milde Antlitz der Madonna bald zu weinen, bald

tröstlich zu lächeln, zu leben, in einer überirdischen, erhabenen Wirklichkeit zu leben" (5: 555). What the novel describes here—the creation of a semblance of reality through the play of light and shadows in a darkened room—could serve as the very definition of the filmic medium. It is also the definition of a miracle: the creation of a supernatural, improbable, even impossible reality. The miracle of Koropta is not that the image of Maria is exposed (a mere accident, whatever the locals want to believe) but that she seems to come alive in the flickering candlelight of this quasi-*camera obscura*. The miracle, in other words, coincides with this accidental moment of filmic illusion. This climactic scene is thus a return to the cinematic omens Tarabas has encountered in New York. Much like what happens in the films he watched, with their stories of women who love, betray, and cause the downfall of their heroic male lovers, Tarabas witnesses the moving image of Maria, both mother of God and seductive traitress.¹³

Directly after this event Tarabas hatches a plan to kill Kristianpoller, which he does not realize; instead, in a moment of rage and desperation, he attacks Schemarjah, whose sole crime is to be outside at a time when Jews are forbidden from leaving their houses. (It should be noted that Schemarjah is otherwise a law-abiding citizen; he has only trespassed out of religious duty, since he feels compelled to bury Torah scrolls that were destroyed by fire in the local synagogue.) This act of personal and religious violence against a Jew performing a sacred duty is the act that finally spurs Tarabas to repent: he commits himself to a life of solitary wandering and deprivation, buries the red beard, and eventually seeks out Schemarjah to ask for forgiveness; upon his death, Tarabas leaves a small inheritance (his army pension) to his last victim. That Schemarjah plays such a crucial part in the fulfillment of Tarabas's fate—he is the victim of what proves to be Tarabas's most egregious sin and the beneficiary of Tarabas's only sincere attempt at atonement—indicates that Tarabas's religious transformation sets him on a path not only of righteousness but also of devotion to the Jewish God.

The plot sequence I have recounted here reveals the central role that cinematic experience plays in Tarabas's transformation. Tarabas's fate is announced in the films he watches in New York and sealed during his later cinematic experience in Kristianpoller's "Kammer." The "revelation" of Maria has a profound effect on all the inhabitants of Koropta, but they are deceived by the illusion: they think her appearance is a miracle, but it is actually just a movie. After all, the event takes place in a dark room with a limited light

source, which projects shadows on the wall and creates the illusion of movement. Tarabas might himself think it is a miracle, but his previous encounters with film in New York give him a special relationship to the illusion—in other words, he knows or feels on some level that a movie is not “just” a movie. In fact, the illusion of divine presence resonates so deeply within him that it spurs him to atone for a life of sin. Tarabas is transfixed and transformed by cinematic experience, much as Mendel was transfixed and transformed by phonography and photography.¹⁴ This religious-aesthetic experience confirms that New York was not merely a holding cell in which Tarabas continued his steady decline into crime but in fact contained the seed—a cinematic seed, as it were—of his fated religious trajectory: to sin, repent, and die serving the Jewish God. This sequence of events suggests that even if Tarabas perceives New York to be a kind of hell, his narrative fundamentally relies on what he experiences there, since the cinematic illusion that catalyzes his religious transformation is contingent on his earlier trip to the movies. America might be a miserable place in Roth’s imagination and in the minds of his characters, but as a literary setting it enables experiences that are essential for their spiritual development.

The American Experiment

“Menuchims Lied,” his picture in the concert program, and Maria’s moving image should be understood as transformative works of modern art: they inspire profound spiritual changes and are closely associated with techniques of mechanical reproduction. Their aesthetic effects allow Roth’s characters to complete the cycle of religious experience: to return to God in Mendel’s case and to atone for a grave sin in Tarabas’s. But why should aesthetic experience play such a central role in these narratives of sin, punishment, and redemption? And why are these works of art associated with America and modernity? Most importantly, perhaps, is the experience of religious transformation compromised, even undermined by the fact that it relies on artistic illusion?

The skepticism reflected in these questions is well founded, especially in light of Roth’s diatribes against the telephone, the gramophone, photography, and cinema. To take an extreme and humorous example, he dubbed Hollywood “Hölle-Wut” in “Der Antichrist,” a wild and bitter essay on the failings of modernity (3: 614). Even in a less cynical work like *Hiob*, artistic illusion is frequently the subject of mocking commentary—recall the description of the

Statue of Liberty: “hunderteinundfünfzig Fuß hoch, im Innern hohl” (5: 71). It is misleading to take these ironic and dismissive statements out of a context in which modern artworks are responsible for transformative aesthetic experiences. The point is not to deny the cynicism that Roth’s characters and narrators express toward America and its artforms but to examine the effects that unwitting encounters with cinema, photographs, and recorded music have on them. The experience of these artworks, which are associated with prophecy, revelation, atonement, and redemption—in a word, religious transformation—has been the subject of this essay. But what is the difference between artworks that deceive and degrade versus ones that edify and uplift the beholder? The answer lies in the nature of the illusion the work presents. Contrary to critics who argue that Roth’s journalistic tendencies and interest in documentary reportage reveal an ultimate commitment to realistic representation and a rejection of artistic illusion (e.g., Hughes 156–60), I suggest that modern media illusions can be the very source of religious (re)awakening.

Roth’s novels present America as a place of illusion, both in the sense of disillusionment and disappointment *and* in the sense of prophecy and transformation. New York is not a city but a cipher for a bold literary experiment that explores the revelatory potential of artistic illusion and thereby posits a possible mode of Jewish existence in modernity. For Roth’s characters, religious life in Galicia is no longer possible: the East European homeland witnesses the decline of traditional values (family, faith, learning) and the rise of personal vices (sex, alcohol, violence). By contrast, America is hardly the promised land, but neither is it simply another kind of hell. For Roth’s fictional characters who make the trip across the ocean, New York is a pedagogical prison (a workshop for crime and punishment, for sin and atonement), while for Roth the writer it is a literary testing ground. It is thus a trial or experiment in two senses. This is why it is misguided to try to deduce Roth’s opinion of America from his novelistic representation of it, even to ask how negative or positive his image of America really is. The salient issue is not to establish Roth’s judgment of a place to which he never went but to understand its heuristic function within a body of fiction.

America must be understood as a literary device that enables Roth’s characters to follow a certain geographical and religious trajectory—the departure from and return to the Galician homeland, which roughly corresponds to the rejection of and reunion with God. As such, it is a setting that affords him a certain kind of literary freedom—precisely because it is a crucial ele-

ment in many stories of twentieth-century East European migration, but one with which Roth is not familiar enough to describe firsthand and in which he is not invested enough to feel compelled to idealize. Roth finds a *use* for New York in his fictional world: even if it is highly compromised by the illusions of modernity, it becomes the only possibility for religious atonement in the face of the corrosion of traditional life. We might find Roth's depiction of New York hyperbolic and flat, but this is because we somehow still expect to find a recognizable version of the city lurking in his writing. Once we see that Roth's aim is not to represent New York as real or ideal, we can more easily accept that in his novels it comes to stand for a certain kind of religious-aesthetic experience that modernity makes possible.¹⁵ Thus it is less important to determine the truth or falseness of aesthetic illusions (or of miracles, for that matter) than to grasp their relationship to America as a condition of possibility of Jewish renewal in modernity.

Of course, it is also too easy to say that Roth's America is pure fiction and thus a pure literary construct. Even if Roth had no firsthand knowledge of America, the fact that it was filtered to him through books, newspaper articles, movies, photographs, and music meant that it must have functioned as a kind of "semiotic construct" (Simons). The political situation in Austria and Germany also made it a constant presence, and a potential destination, for Roth. After all, America was the place to which many of Roth's friends and colleagues were fleeing in the early 1930s, precisely the years when Roth was writing his "Jewish novels." We must therefore take seriously the fact that America is the imagined destination for a number of his Jewish characters, unlike, for example, Palestine: Zionism, the Jewish state, and return to Israel simply do not figure in Roth's literary works (Raffel 26).¹⁶ Apparently America can be functionalized for literary purposes, whereas Palestine cannot. This observation about Roth's fiction forces us to see that America is not an arbitrary location; instead, it names a place that is recognizable to all readers, loaded with cultural baggage (associations, stereotypes, prejudices, hopes), but also an open testing ground. Taking Roth's America seriously thus involves acknowledging its prominence and recurrence as an idea and a place in his writing as well as recognizing its literary function in the context of a body of work that seeks to represent a modern version of religious-aesthetic transformation.

These features of Roth's America—that it is both an unavoidable presence in his works and a place to which he has no direct access—go a long way

in explaining its “experimental” status. Many critics have picked up on this idea, calling *Hiob* a turning point in Roth’s oeuvre, but they have disagreed on why this is the case. For some it has come down to what one values in the novel, its realism or its mythic dimension.¹⁷ When Morgenstern calls *Hiob* the work of a “Dichter,” he is placing a premium on the novel’s power to evoke a lost Galicia, the milieu of the *Ostjuden*. In other words, he reads Roth’s characterization of Galicia as a chronicle about a former world, one whose greatest virtue is its accurate presentation of a past time and a distant place. For Morgenstern, then, Roth is a great and truly *modernist* writer because he can infuse literature with a journalistic sensibility.¹⁸ Musil also admires the novel’s beautiful and poetic invocation of a bygone world of religious tradition, rural life, and inward meditation, but for him the value of this depiction lies in its mythic power. For him Roth is a “Dichter” when his writing enters the unreal, even mystical realm of legend. Whether it takes the form of nostalgic recreations of the collapsed dual monarchy (most prominent in Claudio Magris’s argument about the “Habsburg myth”) or the appropriation of biblical stories (for instance *Hiob*’s reworkings of the stories of Job, Moses, and Joseph [see Raffel (228–30); Sternburg (376); Schwienhorst-Schönberger]), the mythic aspect of Roth’s novels, according to many critics, defines his particular brand of modernist writing. To summarize: Morgenstern’s reaction is part of a strand of criticism that attaches great importance to Roth’s journalistic sensibility and plays down the novel’s unlikely plot twists and stylized, one-dimensional characters; Musil’s reaction is part of the opposite critical tendency, which values Roth’s masterful invocation of myth, legend, and allegory to produce a kind of baroque modernism.¹⁹

If critics have identified three comfort zones for Roth—realism and reportage, Jewish legend, and the Habsburg myth—where can we plug America in? It is not surprising that America is doomed to fail according to this literary scheme. Roth cannot portray it realistically since he never went there,²⁰ and it is simply unassimilable to biblical and Habsburg mythology. America has no logical place in Roth’s literary repertoire, yet it is an undeniable and necessary presence in his fictional work. This has led many critics to dismiss Roth’s America and thus to ignore the transformative experiences his characters have there. In this essay, I have proposed another view: New York is a highly fraught and promising location in Roth’s literary world, precisely because it is both part of his trajectory for the migrating Jews of the twentieth century *and* inaccessible to him through the literary conventions and tech-

niques that seem to govern his works; America thus plays a crucial role in Roth's fictions as a site that enables Jewish life in modernity. Again, one can compare the American and Zionist dreams here: readers of Roth's fiction can easily ignore the question of a Jewish state, given that Palestine does not figure in his literary imagination, but America cannot be ignored, because Roth himself travels there in his novels, and yet neither realism nor myth offers him a way of writing about it. Describing the literary experiments that Roth undertakes in an effort to access this foreign yet inescapable place has been the task of this essay.

Rather than dismiss America, I have tried to explore how Roth faced the challenge of writing America. He treated it as a transitional, provisional, and experimental location for his characters to explore; America offered a site for religious-aesthetic transformation and thereby allowed him to imagine a possible form of Jewish renewal in and through modernity. As such, Roth's America actually forms the basis of a new literary register, distinct from the documentary-realist, mythic-nostalgic, and biblical-allegorical modes that so many critics have identified in his writing. Roth boldly experiments with America: he makes it a literary testing ground, a site for exploring the transformative potential of technological artforms. This explains why Roth could critique precisely these new media (phonography, photography, and cinema) in his reportage but use his novels as a place to explore the productive illusions they engender. Indeed, because Roth does not simply represent these modern artforms but assigns them an essential role in the fraught but exciting process of religious renewal in the New World, they form the basis of what I have called Roth's media myth of America.

In the end, all of Roth's American exiles die or return to Galicia,²¹ but before they leave New York they learn the crucial lesson that aesthetic illusions cannot easily be dismissed, for their effects are anything but superficial and unreal. Technological reproduction, new media, modern art—these are the mechanisms and phenomena that generate illusions that can be deceptive, false, and dehumanizing but also uplifting and even redemptive. The challenge of life in New York is not that it is always a dirty and miserable hell but that the illusions it offers up are unpredictable and ambivalent. Roth puts his characters through trials and ordeals in New York, exposing them to the dangers and promises of an unknown but unavoidable place. Significantly, Roth's course as a writer parallels theirs: he must endure the thrilling uncertainty of writing about an unfamiliar location, in an experimental mode, with un-

foreseeable outcomes. This is why it is less important to determine once and for all whether America and all its associations—modernity, technology, illusions—are good or bad, true or false, redemptive or damning, than it is to see how they enable Roth to try out a new mode of writing based in neither realism nor nostalgia. This literary experiment, which produces the media myth of America, allows Roth to imagine a possible future for the Jews of Eastern Europe in a time of increasing personal and political crisis. He conducts the experiment between 1930 and 1934, the years leading up to and including the beginning of his own exile in France. In Roth’s case, the experience of exile and the imagination of exile diverge sharply: we will not learn very much about Roth’s time in France by reading about Mendel Singer’s or Nikolaus Tarabas’s experiences in New York. The hellish fantasies he concocts do, however, tell us a great deal about the hopes Roth harbored for the renewal of Jewish life and faith under the conditions of modernity.

Notes

1. Frey’s study of Roth’s image of America focuses on what he calls the “amerikanische Katastrophe” (101), including Roth’s “radical rejection” of photography and film, new media closely associated with America (81).

2. Critics have tended to focus on the critique of America that Roth sets forth in his journalism and essays; this essay will instead be based on the idea of America in Roth’s fiction. The essay considers only those novels that are set at least in part in America, since the central concern is the role that America plays as a *literary setting*, and not as a mere idea, in Roth’s fiction.

3. My central claim goes against every reading of *Hiob* that I have encountered, all of which stress that for Roth America is a miserable and godless place that leaves no hope for religious renewal. Critics are thus left with the impression that the story’s ending is a “surprise” (for instance, Kühlmann 386; Müller-Funk, *Joseph Roth* 129), whereas if one takes Mendel Singer’s wondrous encounters with recorded music and technologically reproduced images seriously, one sees that Roth in fact paves the way for the happy ending.

4. One novel that seems to feature America is the 1928 *Zipper und sein Vater* (4: 501–607). The novel contains an interesting critique of various aspects of the film industry (for example, Hollywood and stardom), which is closely associated with America. Nevertheless, this novel does not play into my analysis, simply because America remains an idea, not a reality, in it: though we learn that Zipper’s wife Erna eventually goes to America, the novel itself never “goes” there. America is an object of speculation for Roth’s characters, much as it was for Roth.

5. It would be fascinating to consider Kafka’s unfinished novel *Der Verschollene* (published 1927) alongside Roth’s novels about East European Jewish suffering and redemption

in America. Kafka, like Roth, offers an entirely fictional and imagined account of America, which also functions more like an anti-Heimat than an alternative home. His protagonist, Karl Roßmann, is restless, searching, and without orientation. While the planned ending of *Der Verschollene* is disputed (would Roßmann have died or returned home?), it is quite clear that Kafka would not have had him experience any kind of religious awakening or transformation. Still, one can discover Jewish themes, including messianism and Zionism, in Kafka's America novel.

6. The role of *Amerikanismus* in early-twentieth-century German-speaking culture should not be underestimated (see, for example, Kaes et al., ch. 15). This phenomenon, I contend, is most interesting when judged neither according to a standard of truth (did the Germans have an accurate sense of America?) nor by the valence of its depictions (did the Germans have a positive or negative view of America?), but rather by the imaginative work that producing an image and discourse of America did for German culture and society.

7. Roth and Morgenstern were both Galician-born Jews who met in Vienna during their student years in the mid-1910s. They both returned to Galicia during the war and then settled again in Vienna where they worked as journalists, mostly for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, for the next two decades, with frequent stints in Berlin, Paris, and elsewhere. Around the time of the *Anschluss*, they both left for France. Roth died in Paris in 1939, and Morgenstern, having survived internments in several French camps, escaped to America in 1941. Morgenstern's autobiographical work *Joseph Roths Flucht und Ende* recounts their friendship.

8. On the degradation of aesthetic experience in *Hiob*, see Raffel's reading of the "Freiheitsstatue" (219–20) and of the gramophone and cinema (23). On religious decline in the novel as a function of Americanization, see Frey 125–33. Magris's reading of *Hiob* in *Weit von wo* set the standard for many subsequent readings of Roth's portrayals of the "Desintegration des Heimkehrers in den Westen" (28).

9. Hughes offers a subtle reading of *Der Antichrist* that urges us to consider the work as a serious reflection on technological modernity, despite its dismissive, hateful, and at times offensive tone and content (153–58).

10. The last chapter is entitled "Die Lage der Juden in Sowjetrußland" (2: 886–91). While Roth never resided in the Soviet Union, he did tour the country for five months in 1926 while producing a series of articles for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Though Saur notes that Roth never went to America, she also claims that the "diverse cultural realms [in Roth's novels] largely mirror the settings found in Roth's own biography" (11). But America, precisely because Roth had no firsthand knowledge of it, has a fundamentally different status in Roth's oeuvre than places like Galicia, Poland, and the Soviet Union.

11. In *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, Roth writes: "Die meisten frommen Juden verurteilen einen Mann aufs schärfste, der sich den Bart rasieren läßt—wie überhaupt das rasierte Gesicht das deutliche Merkmal für den Abfall vom Glauben darstellt" (2: 841–42). This can be contrasted with "Tempeljuden, das heißt: guterzogene, glattrasierte Herren in Gehrocken und Zylindern" (2: 838). In *Hiob*, when Mendel sees one of his older sons for the first time in America (he emigrated before the rest of the family), the absence of his beard is a sign of this fall from belief: "sein Angesicht war glatt wie ein nobler Grabstein" (5: 72). I am indebted to Raffel for these references (220–21).

12. While Heimerl identifies certain Jewish themes in her analysis of religious motives and narratives in *Tarabas* (for example her reading of “Heimatlosigkeit” [279]), she does not explain why Tarabas’s crime against a *Jew*—rather than, say, a crime against a lover, a soldier, or an American—functions as the turning point in his behavior. She is primarily interested in the serial nature of his sins and with the biblical models for this narrative (274–75, 280–81).

13. Tarabas feels deeply betrayed by his fiancée Maria, even though it is he who abuses, abandons, and cheats on her. Her highest act of treason (because it is both sexual and ethnic/national/political), according to Tarabas, is to leave town and marry a German soldier while Tarabas is off at war. Considering the extremely high standards of loyalty to which Tarabas holds Maria (and women in general), it is no surprise that he feels personally touched by the story of Samson and Delilah.

14. Roth is known for his scathing remarks on cinema, beginning in the mid-1920s. For a careful study of Roth’s attitude toward film, especially as expressed in his reportage, see Hughes (ch. 6). Though Hughes wants to argue against the received notion that Roth “simply shifted from a positive to a negative position” on film in the 1920s (146), he too focuses on Roth’s critique of cinema and identifies a positive moment only in Roth’s comments on documentary films (146–51). See also Müller-Funk, *Joseph Roth* (114–20).

15. Raffel, too, recognizes that America is at least partly redeemed through art. For her the key issue is not aesthetic experience but rather the figure of the artist. She takes Menuchim to be an example of “good assimilation” (as opposed to Mendel’s “bad assimilation”), since he becomes a successful artist in America (229).

16. Roth did write critically about Zionism, especially in *Juden auf Wanderschaft* (2: 830–31, 834–37, 842–43) and the 1934 essay “Der Segen des ewigen Juden” (3: 527–32), even if he never imagined Jewish life in Palestine for his fictional characters. Morgenstern recounts discussions of Zionism with Roth (9, 13–16, 29–31). For Müller-Funk, Roth’s rejection of Zionism is part and parcel of his critique of modernity, which is why he sees the role of technology and modern media in Roth’s Jewish novels as purely negative (*Joseph Roth* 122–25; “Mit einem e” 95).

17. Roth himself saw *Hiob* as a turning point (Sternburg 373), and numerous critics have adopted this view (Tonkin 1–15). Magris argues that it represents a new phase of Roth’s works in which he returns to the Galicia of his youth (*Habsburgische Mythos* 255–56), not in order to present it accurately but precisely to endow it with mythical, idealized qualities (*Weit von wo* 19–22). Sternburg thinks the novel is a definitive step away from “Neue Sachlichkeit” (376). Raffel notes a split in the scholarship between treating the novel as a “Legende und Mysterienspiel” and acknowledging its realism and historical nature (204–5). She privileges its historical veracity, but nevertheless attends closely the biblical dimension of the novel (228–30). Similarly, Müller-Funk treats Roth as a writer who employs myths in the service of realistic, historical description in *Hiob* and *Leviathan* (“Landnahme und Schiffbruch” 33, 44–47). Köhlmann somewhat polemically emphasizes its realism over and against its mythic status (see 377).

18. Morgenstern explains to Musil that the reason he cannot appreciate Roth’s writing fully is that he has not read his journalism. Musil dismisses the suggestion, asserting that there cannot possibly be anything “great” about reportage. For Morgenstern, Roth’s reportage is the source and essence of his greatness as a writer (97–98).

19. Nervik discusses Roth's Galicia in terms of its realist and mythic dimensions (135–38).

20. Though he never made it to America, Roth warmed up to the idea in the last two years of his life and even planned to attend the PEN Congress in New York in May 1939, but he died before he could go (Hughes 167n38).

21. The posthumously published novella *Leviathan* (1940) adheres to this model as well: the main character sets off for Canada but never arrives (6: 544–74).

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