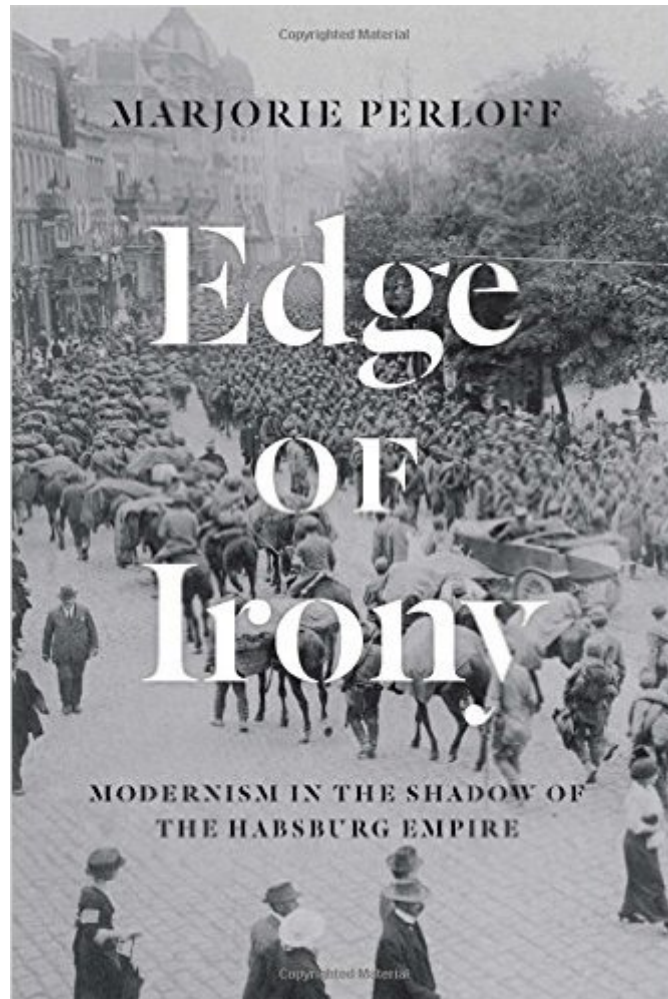


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Edge Of Irony: Modernism In The Shadow Of The Habsburg Empire



Synopsis

Among the brilliant writers and thinkers who emerged from the multicultural and multilingual world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were Joseph Roth, Robert Musil, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. For them, the trauma of World War I included the sudden loss of the geographical entity into which they had been born: in 1918, the empire was dissolved overnight, leaving Austria a small, fragile republic that would last only twenty years before being annexed by Hitler's Third Reich. In this major reconsideration of European modernism, Marjorie Perloff identifies and explores the aesthetic world that emerged from the rubble of Vienna and other former Habsburg territories "an *œAustro-Modernism* that produced a major body of drama, fiction, poetry, and autobiography. Perloff explores works ranging from Karl Kraus's drama *The Last Days of Mankind* and Elias Canetti's memoir *The Tongue Set Free* to Ludwig Wittgenstein's notebooks and Paul Celan's lyric poetry. Throughout, she shows that Austro-Modernist literature is characterized less by the formal and technical inventions of a modernism familiar to us in the work of *À* Joyce and Pound, Dada and Futurism, than by a radical irony beneath a seemingly conventional surface, an acute sense of exile, and a sensibility more erotic and quixotic than that of its German contemporaries. Skeptical and disillusioned, Austro-Modernism prefers to ask questions rather than formulate answers.

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Customer Reviews

Professor Perloff is bright, a gifted writer, and an expert on the literature and language arising out of

the smashed-up Dual Monarchy. This book is a collection of essays on the works of a few of the leading cultural figures of post-World War I southeastern Europe. Many are of Jewish heritage, but not all. They struggled with the the loss of a unifying state, one that had patched together numerous peoples; ones otherwise separated by language, religion, history, and culture. Bright people, they struggled to find meaning after the earthquake. This book will be enjoyed most by those who are interested in German language literature, the difficulties of translation, and the rich cultural history of Austria and its hinterlands.

Like Mrs. Perloff, I'm an Austrian American with a lifelong interest in Austrian cultural history and literature. Many works discussed in her book are known to me. But, of course, not all. For example, I was not aware of the friendship between Paul Ancel and Ingeborg Bachmann. And I'm repelled by the sentimentality of Josef Roth (who, in 1938, worked with my father on an Austrian refugee newspaper in Paris). Just one thing: the publisher should have done a better job of proofreading. John Kallir 15 West 72nd Street New York, NY 10023

Just when one thought there were no other "new modernists," Perloff's book arrives to tell us that modernism has yet another untold story, that of the specifically Austrian intellectual and artistic impact upon literature and culture. Irony emerges with the the clash, so deftly illustrated here, between the ideal and the real. Her selection of six featured writers (Krauss, Roth, Musil, Canetti, Celan, Wittgenstein) is evocative in itself: all were plagued by anti-Semitism (inner and outer) and two died by their own hand (Roth's alcoholism amounts to a suicide); the world Perloff opens up for us is both a magical world of "Vienna" before the War, when Jews were assimilating and became major drivers of culture in Austria, and a horrific world of exiles, deportments, and worse (for instance, Celan's parents were killed by the Nazis). Each of the writers come from "beyond the pale"--in the pre-war Austro-Hungarian empire, and from their small villages yearn and long for the magic of Vienna, its apparent acceptance of outsiders. They were soon gravely disappointed, almost overnight. Their writings emerge out of a polyglot, multicultural society that has rarely been seen in history--and the divisions, and complicated inner divisions, brought on by having no single "mother tongue." What is so special about this book is how elegantly and eloquently it describes subtle details, and allows each writer a space in this multi-lingual tour de force (we are treated to some stimulating readings of languages that have crossed and produced say the truly original aspect of Celan's poems, where he writes in German, but has to go through the language in an entirely new way. The sign of Wittgenstein hovers over all, and his embrace of "limits." The

through-line in this marvelously rich text is "how it is" and the "diagnosis" of culture each writer generates. This is a book that will easily stimulate those inclined to dig more deeply into Austrian modernism, how the mistakings of the common reader to make Freud or even Kafka a German, when in fact the former hailed from Moravia. The troubling mirror the book holds up to our times is telling: as we face floods of refugees around the world, her book is a nod to, like Wittgenstein's stated goals, "to be a better person," to constantly approach and diagnose the limits of our language.

I love the writings of Robert Musil; this book encompasses in its criticism the great European modernists, ie) Kafka, etc. Perhaps, I should mention that I am the man without qualities.

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