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► **To cite this version:**

Stanislaw Fiszer. Literary Approach to the Decline of the Empires in Central and Eastern Europe. Science and World. International Scientific Journal, 2017, 1 (2), pp.80-84. <hal-02515025>

HAL Id: hal-02515025

<https://hal.science/hal-02515025v1>

Submitted on 23 Mar 2020

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Literary Approach to the Decline of the Empires in Central and Eastern Europe

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By way of introduction let me point out that a literary approach to the decline of the Empires in Central and Eastern Europe is different from the historical one. Even if some positivists and some Marxists considered works of fiction as historic documents reflecting reality, these ones differ from that ones. A literary work doesn't claim to be objective. By an original style each author tries to create his individual, sometimes tragic, sometimes comic vision of his times. But on the other hand, a literary work, even if by its nature is subjective, gives us the opportunity to see the age that the writer describes in a way that can also interest a historian. After all, a drama or a novel found in thousand years in the National Archives could be studied as a particular account of bygone days when people used to write and read books.

In this short paper I would like to look at the problem of the decline of the European Empires through several novels, such as *The Possessed* (1872) by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), *The Sleepwalkers* (1928-1932) by Hermann Broch (1886-1951), *The Man without Qualities* (1930-1942) by Robert Musil (1880-1942) and *The Radetzky March* (1932) by Joseph Roth (1894-1939). Continuing and parodying the tradition of the 19th century literary realism, all these novels are close by their form to a philosophical essay which treats of the world of decaying old values. Most of the aspects of the life in Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany in these masterpieces are based on historical facts and authors' own life

experience. What is more, writers' aim was to arrive at a synthesis between facts and their philosophical and political analysis.

The outstanding element of the Broch's *Sleepwalkers* is, for instance, the essay titled *The Disintegration of Values* which deals with the transformation of values in society theoretically. According to the author, sleepwalkers are people living between vanishing and emerging ethical systems, just as the somnambulist exists in a state between sleeping and walking. The trilogy portrays three representative cases of "loneliness of the I" which stems from the collapse of any sustaining system of value. Joachim von Pasenov, Prussian aristocrat, clings desperately to romantic values that are outmoded. The accountant August Esch seeks an escape into eroticism when he realizes that double entry bookkeeping cannot balance the ethical debits and credits in the turbulent society of prewar Germany. Only Huguenau, "the Realist", breaks with old values but his sole credo is an unscrupulous force.

The novels in question are also famous for the irony with which their authors display the Russian, Austrian and German societies shortly before the First World War. This irony results from the point of view adopted by the writers. They stress the point that a history written after the event can hardly make us realize that the actors were ignorant of the future; it is difficult to believe, for example, that the citizens of Austria-Hungary did not know their empire was about to fall, or that the archduke Francis Ferdinand was unaware of so notorious a fact as his assassination by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo. In other words, history can be explained after a sequence of events unfolds, but it cannot be predicted with any precision beforehand.

Thus, the irony of the novels in question is that their actors, just like the actors of history did not understand it and did not have a premonition, with a few exceptions, that their world would collapse. As Stefan Zweig

points out in his autobiography *The World of Yesterday*:

When I attempt to find a simple formula for the period in which I grow up, prior the First World War, I hope that I convey its fullness by calling it the Golden Age of Security. [...] There was as little belief in the possibility of such barbaric declines as wars between the peoples of Europe as there was in witches and ghosts (Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, Chapter 1 - The World of Security).

The Man without Qualities is the best fictional illustration of the blindness to contemporary events. The main character, a 32-year old mathematician named Ulrich, joins the so-called “Parallel Campaign” or “Collateral Campaign”, frantic preparations for a celebration in honor of 70 years of the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph’s reign. That same year, 1918, the German Emperor Wilhelm II would be ruler of his country for 30 years. This collateral coincidence lashes all the Austrian patriots into a fury of action to demonstrate Austria’s political, cultural and philosophical supremacy via a feast which will capture the minds of the Austrian Emperor’s subjects and people of the whole world for ever. On that account, many bright ideas and visions are discussed, such as the Austrian Year 1918, The World Year 1918, The Austrian Peace Year 1918, or The Austrian World Peace Year 1918. Nobody knows that 1918 will be the last year of the existence of Austria-Hungary, which Musil refers to by the playful name *Kakanien*.

Nobody knows it because, as I have said, history includes too much contingency, too many random and chaotic events to be understood and predicted. But on the other hand, the unpredictability of the Central and Eastern Europe’s evolution in the crucial years before 1914 resulted from the accumulation of contradictions in the region. All the novels in question are testimonials of conflicting ideologies.

Dostoevsky casts a satirical eye on both the left-wing idealists and the tsarist conservatives incapable of dealing with subversive extremism. *The Possessed* has five primary and many secondary ideological characters. Through their clashing philosophies, the novelist describes the political and moral chaos seen in the late 19th century Imperial Russia. “An unrestricted despotism”, as says Shigalev pointing out individualistic freedom, seems to be the unique solution in the world without God, unless it will be saved by faith in “the only god-bearing nation” which is “the Russian nation”, as says Shatov, the other hero of the novel, expressing in this way religion nationalism and messianism. But in spite of the apparent rationality of interminable and frantic discussions and disputes, all heroes seemed to be possessed by absurd and contradictory ideas that transform them in inconsistent and grotesque figures, alienate them and, finally, make them mad or dead from suicide, like Stavrogin, this incarnation of the forces of evil. In fact, possession by an idea is a common form of insanity which, according to Dostoevsky, dominated and perverted Russia of these times.

As for Musil, he is ironical about the lack of political and administrative unity of the dual Austria-Hungarian monarchy:

By its constitution - he observes - it was liberal, but the system of government was clerical. The system of government was clerical, but the general attitude to life was liberal. Before the law all citizens were equal, but not everyone, of course, was a citizen (Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, vol. 1: A Sort of Introduction, Chapter 8 - Kakanien).

In *The Radetzky March* Joseph Roth attributes this lack of unity to the loss of sentimental attachment to the Austria-Hungarian monarchy despite the Emperor’s attempts to consolidate his state by ennobling the members of its elite class. When the Emperor Franz Joseph is saved at the

battle of Solferino in 1850 by a young lieutenant Trotta of Slavonic and peasant origin, he knights him. But the newly created Baron Trotta and his descendants, officers in the imperial army and high-ranking civil servants, forced to join a new social class, never feel comfortable in it. The third Baron Trotta, encouraged by his father to join cavalry, serves in various parts of the empire, drinking and gambling because there are no wars to fight. The only brave deed of the officer consists in saving the Emperor's portrait from destruction in a brothel. In this way history turns into its parody. After his involvement in the brutal suppression of a local workers' uprising the lieutenant Trotta lost his last illusions. This is why Roth shows us that the government's policies relying on the support of multi-ethnic imperial elites has finally backfired.

Both Roth and Musil ascribe the decline of Austria-Hungary by the late 19th century to the growth of the national consciousness of the Empire's ethnic minorities. One of the Trottas, the prefect in Moravia, gets annoyed about this process, which however followed naturally from the expanding range of the national cultures to which these regional groups were most closely aligned. These cultures were a substitute for a common "Austrianism" transmitting "superior" culture to the empire's elite through the medium of German. At the same time nationalism becoming a sort of religion was a surrogate for imperial syncretism. According to the Count Chojnicki from *Radetzky March* "One has no longer faith in God. People go no longer to Church. They meet in national groups". It would not be forgotten that nationalism coexisted with socialist internationalism. The image of the striking workers who sing "The Internationale" in the Roth's novel is the most evident example of the class struggle in Central and Eastern Europe at that time.

In the novels in question nationalism and social radicalism are two principal tendencies which conflict with imperial syncretism. But, over

and above that, these tendencies interacting under social pressure are constantly mixing. That's what creates an impression of a general confusion. As a matter of fact, all the writers show societies marked by strife, radical change and disorientation close to chaos. Talking about imperial politics relative to nationalities Musil asserts that the authorities sometimes repressed them, sometimes yielded to them alienating German speaking elites and fostering willy-nilly the irredentism of the ethnic minorities. These ones, by the way, wavered between the idea of the whole independence, autonomy and federalism, as the compromise between conservative and liberal governmental politics. On the other hand, the question as to whether socialists should embrace national goals divided them: some were against, others for national separatism. In the event, the national mix in Central and Eastern Europe proved so much a help as a hindrance to the emergence of a clear-cut socialist idea. In search of masses' support the Church of Rome, the bedrock of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, frequently encouraged nationalists and compromised with Dmowski's (1864-1939) Polish National League based on social Darwinist views of the national struggle for existence.

The emergence of mass movements challenged imperial syncretism from the left as well as from the right. Old and new, traditionalism and progressivism met and intermingled in every sphere. "The contemporary epoch - as Musil observes - was endowed with a great number of ideas and each idea [...] with an opposite one" (Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, Chapter 85). This partly explains why the novelists finally bring their characters to the zero point of values, a state when old values have disappeared and the new ones have not been created yet. Stavrogin in *The Possessed*, Esch in *The Sleepwalkers*, Ulrich in *The Man without Qualities*, the Trottas in *The Radetzky March* sum up the main characteristics of a deeply ambivalent society, whose ambivalence

resulted from a violent clash and muddling of opposites on the economical, political and intellectual plane. The Central and Eastern Europe nations had begun to speak but their ultimate allegiance was as unclear as unclear were their ideas. According to the writers, more than anything else this fact accounts for the extreme unpredictability of social and political evolution of the three Empires before the First World War.

When the novelists in question, except Dostoevsky, were writing their masterpieces in the nineteen thirties they knew the outcome of this evolution. Some of them, in particular Musil, Roth and Zweig, in spite of the irony with which they describe Austria-Hungary seem to look back nostalgically to the supranational and multicultural, indeed even cosmopolitan Empire. At the same time, they are fascinated by the period prior to the First World War. On the one hand it is characterized by the decline of the monarchy, on the other hand by the political and social effervescence and by the ferment of ideas, the period when nations for a long time under a rigid traditional system, were slowly building up a compressed energy which at last broke its bonds. But before it happened, before the triumphant nationalisms were succeeded by totalitarianisms, of which Pyotr Verkhovensky portrayed by Dostoevsky and Huguenau portrayed by Broch, these value-free men are harbingers, each issue seemed yet possible. We can compare this historical situation to the phase transition on the edge of chaos, in which an event of apparently little importance could have large and in practice unpredictable effects.

Trying to foresee the evolution of Central and Eastern Europe of our times we are in the same position as the characters of the novels which we have talked about. Probably the perspective of history, in particular this one of Empires' and post-Empires' history, can enable us to see more clearly what events and what activities have permanent importance. From this point of view three concepts: "imperial syncretism", "religious

nationalism” and “European universalism” are very interesting working hypothesis to carry out research on this part of the world. In my opinion, what can help us is not only the attempt to see contemporary events in their historical setting but also to imagine them as they will appear when they are in the past. But the fact remains that each historical situation is different and, as Musil points out, in history so many circumstances of a small and accidental nature are relevant that no broad and simple uniformities are possible. And what is more, sometimes the tendencies of social and political evolution, which seemed quite marginal and irrelevant become important in the course of time and determine the future.