



Roditi, Edouard (1910-1992)

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Poet, translator, literary and art critic, and short story writer, Edouard Roditi was associated with most of the twentieth-century's avant-garde literary movements from Surrealism to post-modernism. For more than sixty years, he produced such an astonishing variety of smart, lively, and moving poetry and prose that nobody objected when he dubbed himself "The Pharaoh of Eclecticism."

A member of several predominantly homosexual social circles, Roditi maintained friendships with literary and artistic figures ranging from Paul Bowles and Jean Cocteau to Paul Tchelitchew and Christian Dior.

His art and literary criticism held artists and writers to the very highest standards and insisted that intense but uncritical infatuation with flashy new trends could end in disappointment and heartbreak.

His Internationalist Birthright

Roditi was born in Paris on June 6, 1910. He was the beneficiary of a remarkably rich confluence of heritages--Jewish, German, Italian, French, Spanish, and Greek--and was truly international, both American and European. His father, Oscar, an Italian born in Constantinople, had become a United States citizen after his father emigrated to America and gained citizenship. Although Oscar's father had left the family behind in Europe, all the family in Europe became citizens when he did by virtue of the citizenship statutes in force at that time.

Roditi's mother, Violet, had an equally rich family history. She was born in France but became an English citizen in her youth. When she married Oscar, she too became a United States citizen. Roditi's parents held United States citizenship when he was born, but neither had set foot on American soil.

Early Education

In 1919, Roditi was enrolled in the Elstree School in Hertfordshire, England. By the age of 10, he was translating English poems into Latin, and by the age of 12 he had advanced to translations into Greek verse as well. His facility with languages, poetry, and translation was evident from an early age and it was nurtured by his family and his teachers. At the Elstree School he was encouraged to become a writer by none other than Joseph Conrad.

Roditi continued his education at Balliol College, Oxford, where he read Classics and was one of the founders of the Oxford University Poetry Society, but left without obtaining a degree.

At Oxford, Roditi had become interested in translating Saint-John Perse's epic poem *Anabase* (1924) from French into English. As he progressed with his translation, he discovered that T.S. Eliot was not only working on his own translation but controlled the English-language rights to the poem. Without further ado, Roditi, precocious and self-assured, began a correspondence with Eliot (who was then approaching 40) about the poem and the fine points of its translation.

Eliot was able to use Roditi's insights and advice in his eventual translation, published as *Anabasis* (1930). At one point during the course of their intense philosophical exchanges, Roditi was in London and stopped by Eliot's office at the publishing house of Faber and Faber. Later he gleefully recalled Eliot's shocked look when he realized that, as Roditi said, "he had been dealing with a kid." Eliot subsequently published some of Roditi's poetry in *The Criterion*, and their friendship endured until Eliot's death in 1965.

Roditi's talent was recognized early by other editors of eminent international literary journals. Eugene Jolas published his work, poetry and prose, in both English and French, in *transition*. Roditi, along with Charles Henri Ford and Paul Bowles, had the distinction of being among the youngest contributors to the magazine whose issues featured installments of James Joyce's *Work in Progress* (to be known eventually as *Finnegan's Wake*). Harriet Monroe also published his work in *Poetry*.

By 1928, when he was only 17, Roditi found himself a member in good standing of the loftiest avant-garde literary circles.

Surrealism and a Circle of Friends

Also in 1928, Roditi began his association with the French publishing house Editions du Sagittaire. The firm had published the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) by André Breton, chief theoretician and promoter of Surrealism, as well as other seminal works by Surrealist poet and novelist René Crevel and poet Robert Desnos. Fascinated by Breton's hope of bringing about a revolution of consciousness through an exploration of the intersection of dreams and reality, Roditi was drawn into the movement.

Literary and avant-garde Paris was a small world at that time, and certain gathering spots and salons played central roles in connecting people. For example, Maurice Sachs recorded in his diary that on a visit to the Galerie des Quatre Chemins one day in 1928 he had met a "whole new crowd of bright young men," including Roditi.

Because of Roditi's growing reputation in avant-garde Paris, Sylvia Beach invited him to a reading by Edith Sitwell at her bookstore Shakespeare and Company in 1929. Quite by accident, Roditi was sitting near Gertrude Stein, and on that evening she was accompanied by Pavel Tchelitchew, the Russian painter. Tchelitchew and Roditi hit it off and Roditi found himself being introduced to Stein, Sitwell, and Beach in a single evening.

A few days later, Roditi ran into René Crevel at a café in Montparnasse. With Crevel was Tchelitchew, who already knew many of Roditi's friends. That circle included Maurice Sachs, grandson of Georges Bizet, now known primarily as one in the long line of Jean Cocteau's lovers and secondarily as an agent of the Gestapo in Hamburg during World War II; Christian "Bebe" Berard, who would rise to fame as a designer of fantastic sets and décor for theater and film; and Christian Dior, then a salesman in an art gallery, but destined to become the designer behind haute couture's post-World War II "New Look."

Chance meetings had a way of turning into life-long friendships in the heady days of the late 1920s. Roditi and Tchelitchew remained close friends until the painter's death in 1956.

Also in the late 1920s, Paul Bowles, who would later become famous for his novels and short stories, including *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) and *Let It Come Down* (1952), wrote to Roditi to solicit contributions to the American literary journal *The Messenger*. Roditi sent poems and essays for consideration, and began a correspondence that went on for many years. Although the two young writers had never met at the time, their exchange was intimate, even flirtatious, and candid.

In May 1931, Bowles, then on a trip to Europe with his mentor and teacher Aaron Copland, wrote to Roditi, "Much as I should like to make love too much as you claim you do, I see no way even of beginning."

Always one to connect like-minded friends, Roditi wrote letters of introduction for Bowles to many of his circle, including Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender in Berlin. When he had lunch with the Englishmen, Bowles was not particularly impressed by Isherwood and Spender, who struck Bowles as indulging in English public school antics to put others in their place, but he found one of the other guests more agreeable: Jean Ross, the free-spirit who would inspire Isherwood's memorable portrait of Sally Bowles in the 1937 novella of the same name later incorporated into *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). It may be that Isherwood chose Sally's last name as the result of the lunch with Bowles.

When Roditi and Bowles finally did meet face to face in 1932 in London, Bowles recalls him as "tall, suave and polyglot." The two of them visited Roditi's father's large export-import office in Golden Square, where Bowles noted not only that the firm was international, but also that Roditi had spent time working for his father in its Hamburg branch.

During Roditi's time in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich, he witnessed first hand the ugliness of German anti-Semitism, an experience that led him to the study of Hebrew and ancient Jewish texts as an act of cultural memory. He would later write poems inspired by his Jewish heritage.

Bowles's first impression of the young Roditi is consistent with the self-portrait Roditi provided interviewers years later. When asked if he had ever encountered Jean Cocteau and André Gide as a young man, Roditi replied that he had met them only in passing, but that they both had come on to him. Roditi reminded his perhaps-skeptical questioners that he was considered quite good-looking at the time.

Surrealism and a Closer Look at André Breton

The period 1929 to 1935 marked the height of the Surrealist movement. Through his editorial position at Editions du Sagittaire Roditi stayed close to the center of Surrealism even as he moved between London, Paris, and Berlin and continued to widen his circle of friends and acquaintances.

In 1929, he published "The New Reality" in *The Oxford Outlook*, the first article in English about the Surrealist Manifesto and the movement. In 1935 Editions du Sagittaire published Roditi's first collection of verse, entitled *Poems for F*, a series of meditations on the nature of love directed to Roditi's married (male) lover.

Roditi was friends with René Crevel, the only homosexual member of the inner circle of the Surrealist movement, and was present when Crevel publicly broke with Breton and other Surrealists. As he worked more closely with Breton on editing an anthology, Roditi too would lose faith in the movement.

Despite admiring the poetry of Robert Desnos, Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928), and other genuinely innovative works, Roditi began to regard much of the later Surrealist work as bogus. Moreover, when Roditi was developing the outline of *The Anthology of Black Humor* (1940) with Breton, he realized that Breton's grasp of the concept of black humor was rudimentary at best and that the original list of writers that Breton proposed including in the anthology revealed huge gaps in his reading. Breton's biographer Mark Polizzotti has argued that Roditi "failed to see that Breton's 'erudition' was poetic intuition," but in any event the collaboration contributed to the younger man's disillusionment with the elder man and with Surrealism itself.

Despite Surrealism's alleged freedom from the shackles of bourgeois constraints, its founder Breton was fiercely anti-homosexual. This attitude was a key factor in Crevel's break with Breton, and it no doubt

played a role in Roditi's souring on Breton as well.

Roditi, ever the wry observer, remained a source of delicious anecdotes about Breton, especially after his death. He observed to Polizzotti that Breton's wives were so feminine as to be reminiscent of female impersonators. He also noted Breton's own ambiguous affect; though large and stolid, he had an effeminate air about him. Roditi reported that when he and a companion ran into Breton on a New York City street in the 1940s, the companion asked, "Who was that drag queen?"

Residence in the United States

Although Roditi had first visited the United States in 1929 for a few months and returned for a few more weeks in 1933, it was not until 1937 that he finally set up residence in the country where he held citizenship.

He enrolled at the University of Chicago to further his study of Romance languages. He received an undergraduate degree from Chicago in 1939, and then continued graduate studies at the University of California at Berkeley. At the University of Chicago he met his great friend Paul Goodman, later known as a fierce and articulate social critic and writer of homoerotic stories and novels.

When the United States entered World War II, Roditi became one of the first recruits of the Voice of America, the propaganda arm of the Office of Wartime Information that produced radio programs to be broadcast to Nazi-occupied Europe. By March 1942, the New York office of the Voice of America French language group included not only Roditi, but also Claude Levi-Strauss, Klaus Mann, Yul Brynner, Julien Green, André Maurois, and even André Breton.

Despite Breton's ongoing and notoriously disparaging attitude toward homosexuals, Roditi was chosen to translate a collection of Breton's poetry into English and Charles Henri Ford of View Press was granted the honor of publishing *Young Cherry Trees Secured against Hares* (1946), the first appearance of Breton's work in English.

Post-War Transitions

After the end of World War II, Roditi's civil service career as a translator and interpreter continued. In 1945, he worked at the United Nations Charter Conference in San Francisco; in 1946, he returned to Europe with the Department of the Army to serve as an interpreter at the Nuremberg war crimes trials. He was moved to Berlin after that assignment for more interpreting work with the Department of the Army.

In 1950, however, Roditi became the object of harassment and persecution during the witch hunts inspired by Senator Joseph McCarthy and was fired as "a security risk." At first, the authorities tried to label him a Communist; when that charge would not stick, they fired him on the grounds of homosexuality.

Roditi returned to the United States briefly in 1950, but was unable to find a job. Returning to France, he worked for international agencies. The U.S. government, however, continued to demand updates on Roditi from the French government.

In 1958 the French became so annoyed with the U.S. demands and the cost of responding to them that they decided to expel Roditi; luckily, that plan collapsed due to bureaucratic technicalities. Settled in Paris, with occasional sojourns to other places, the poet, despite being blacklisted by the U.S. government, saw his career as an interpreter and translator flourish with assignments from UNESCO and the European Common Market.

Regrouping for the Future

Roditi established Paris as his home base in 1954 and lived in the city of his birth as a non-resident alien until the end of his life. If Surrealism provided him a model for artistic exploration and innovation as a young man, psychotherapy provided a means of self-exploration in his middle age.

Roditi spoke candidly with Winston Leyland in 1975 about the importance of psychotherapy in examining and coming to terms with his life and choices. Over the course of his therapy, Roditi determined that his series of difficult and destructive relationships (among them, one lasting eight years with a tortured and gifted poet in denial about his gayness, and another lasting four years with a man who ultimately tried to murder him) stemmed from his "fear of loneliness and the drive to seek partners rather at random, without being too wise in one's choices."

In addition, Roditi questioned through therapy whether there was any connection between what he characterized as the passivity of being a victim of epileptic spells and the self-described masochistic passivity of his sexuality. The unblinking analysis of his central psychological issues and concerns brought him, he related to Leyland, to a place where he could "live perfectly happily without a partner, without any fear of loneliness."

Roditi was proud to see his relationships with some old lovers grow and deepen because of the hard-won new attitude he achieved through therapy. He also found that he could ultimately say, ". . . every day I thank God for having made me a Jew and a homosexual."

Literary Legacy

Roditi was the author or editor of over 25 volumes of poetry, fiction, and criticism, with close to 2,000 individual publications of poetry, fiction, translation, art criticism, and reviews. He wrote in both French and English, spoke seven languages fluently and translated from more than ten. His English translations of French, German, Spanish, Danish, and Turkish poetry and prose are especially prized.

Roditi's early poetry grew out of the same literary traditions that nurtured Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, and Charles Baudelaire. With dream-like shifts of focus between lush imagery and virtuoso use of language, he explored the yearnings of young love or the symbolic power of re-imagined mythic figures such as Samson in poems that captured the attention of the avant-garde.

The early work seduces and dazzles readers to this day for the same reasons, to be sure, but Roditi's thematic interests deepened as he investigated intellectual traditions from the Old Testament and confronted the anti-Semitism he had seen in Germany. In particular, "Three Hebrew Elegies" (1941)--sad, fierce, and compassionate--shows the shift in Roditi's thinking that age and experience brought. From that point on, Roditi's work concentrated primarily on Jewish devotional themes and the universal desire to find ideal love.

His poetry was always experimental, yet Roditi wrote with intelligibility foremost in mind. More than anything, he wanted his work to be understood, not misinterpreted, even if intellectual fashions of the time favored opaqueness over clarity. Obscurity for obscurity's sake ran counter to everything he held sacred in art and poetry. Roditi's late poetry and prose poems testify to his faithfulness to the principle of clarity.

Roditi served as art critic for the French journal *L'Arche* for over 30 years; during his time in Berlin from 1947 to 1950, he founded the literary journal *Das Lot* with German poet Alexander Koval and French poet Alain Bosquet.

His astonishingly varied output included *Oscar Wilde* (1947), a critical study that placed Wilde in the

tradition of experimental visionary dandies such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Arthur Rimbaud. The study, which rescued Wilde from easy dismissal as a joke and a scandal, helped resuscitate the writer's reputation.

Other volumes include *Poems: 1928-1948* (1949), a collection of early visionary and Surrealist poetry; *Dialogues on Art* (1960), *More Dialogues on Art* (1984), and *Dialogues: Conversations with European Artists at Mid-Century* (1990), a series of meditations and conversations on the work of such visual artists as Max Ernst, Joan Miro, Tchelitchew, Léonor Fini, and Giorgio Morandi that explore the origins of the artists' visions, problems, aims, and beliefs; *Magellan of the Pacific* (1972), a biography of the Portuguese explorer who was the first to circumnavigate the globe; *The Delights of Turkey: Twenty Tales* (1974), a collection of retold or reinvented folk tales, some of which first appeared in *Playboy* magazine; and two volumes reflecting his Jewish heritage: *Thrice Chosen: Poems on Jewish Themes* (1974) and *The Journal of an Apprentice Cabbalist* (1991).

Two particular quotes from his critical essays epitomize his literary goals: "The writer has a moral responsibility to cut through the lies"; and "Poetry should . . . express, in the limited and fixed terms of language, all that the poet perceives, however obscurely, of the infinite forces of the universe, translated by him into finite symbols which are reflections in the mirror of his mind and of his diction."

Since Roditi held his contemporaries to the same high standards he set for himself, he was often involved in heated aesthetic arguments. John Bernard Myers, who ran the prestigious Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York from the 1950s to the 1970s, described Roditi as a person who attacked everyone, regardless of school or affiliation. Roditi, however, saw himself as decrying a destructive cult of personality.

He believed that the obsession with "celebrities" was driving contemporary visual and literary art toward mediocrity. With regard to the visual arts, he lamented the rise of outsized and outrageous works, especially installation art; as for literary trends, he railed against media's focus on writers' messy lives at the expense of serious attention to their work.

Roditi did not care that people might be offended by his sometimes harsh judgments: he believed that he had earned the right to express his opinions and he felt he could back them up with his scholarship.

When he died in Paris on May 10, 1992, Roditi was working on his memoirs. Reportedly consisting of four large volumes, they remain unpublished.

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