

Portrait of a Fascist: Identity and Independence in Joseph Roth's Das Spinnennetz (1923)

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In the fall of 1923, Austrian author Joseph Roth's novel *Das Spinnennetz*¹ appeared serially in the Viennese *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. In 30 staccato chapters, the fragmentary work details young German World War I veteran Theodor Lohse's descent into the nascent Nazi Party, 10 years before Hitler's appointment to the chancellery of Germany. Using the ambitious, narcissistic, and entirely unremarkable Lohse as shorthand for the embittered, post-World War I European man, Roth maps out the search for meaning, identity, and independence that drives people into the false promises of fascism, all with alarming accuracy and prescience. In the course of Lohse's indignant hunt for independence from the perceived shackles of Jews and women, he finds and joins the Nazi movement. And yet, by the end of the novel, he becomes ironically even more dependent on the women and Jews he sought to flee. Despite his growing power as a Nazi and his self-perception as a ruthless spider, he remains caught in a larger web and under the thumb of both individuals and the mass fascist movement at large. His search for power and independence is, ultimately, futile.

Das Spinnennetz begins shortly after Lieutenant Theodor Lohse's return home to Berlin after the First World War. Instead of fanfare, he is greeted by a begrudging mother and sisters, whom he must support through his job as a tutor in the house of the Jewish jeweler Herr Efrussi. After a drunken homosexual tryst with Prince Heinrich, whom he served under during the war, Lohse is inducted into the Party with orders to weed out communist groups. In a string of vengeful and maladroit events, Lohse kills his commanding Nazi officer, Detective Klitsche, joins the *Reichswehr*, becomes a salaried bureaucrat, quells labor and communist uprisings, garners fame within Germany through his firebrand newspaper articles, and, most importantly,

¹ *The Spider's Web* (1988). All subsequent English translations taken from *The Spider's Web and Zipper and His Father*, translated by John Hoare

both begins working intimately with the Jewish spy Benjamin Lenz and marries an upper-class woman, Elsa von Schlieffen, with ambition to rival his own.

Scholarship on *Das Spinnennetz* is scant. Roth's first novel, and not published in independent book form until 1967, the work is often overshadowed by the critically acclaimed *Radetzkymarsch* and *Juden auf Wanderschaft*. *Das Spinnennetz*, though perhaps canonically less seminal, is nonetheless a work of genius—if not in its own time, then unequivocally in hindsight. Theodor Lohse is not only an insightful case study in the seduction of Nazi fascism, but a proxy for the wider trends of Europe. In Roth's direct and clipped style, the intention to view Lohse through this perspective is clearly stated:

Wie liebte Benjamin Theodor, den gehaßten Europäer, Theodor: den feigen und grausamen, plumpen und tückischen, ehrgeizigen und unzulänglichen, geldgierigen und leichtsinnigen, den Klassenmenschen, den Gottlosen, Hochmütigen und Sklavischen, Getretenen, strebenden Theodor Lohse! Es war der europäische junge Mann: national und selbstsüchtig, ohne Glauben, ohne Treue, blutdürstig und beschränkt. Es war das junge Europa.² (Roth 99)

Theodor, here referred to by the spy Benjamin as the “Europäer” rather than as a German or any other identity marker, is indicative of prevailing post-war European sentiment. He is both contradictingly “geldgierig,” greedy for money, and “leichtsinnig,” frivolous, “hochmütig,” arrogant, and “sklavisch,” literally slavish. However, he is not only “the European,” he is “das junge Europa.” Roth, moving past personal qualities, postulates that the previously detailed is “der europäische junge Mann,” continuing to describe rising European fascists and fascism in all

² How Benjamin loved Theodor, the hated European, Theodor; the grim and cowardly, gross and cunning, ambitious and insatiable, greedy and frivolous, class-conscious, godless, overweening and servile, downtrodden and persistent Theodor Lohse! He was the young man of Europe: nationalistic and self-seeking, devoid of belief and of loyalty, bloodthirsty and blinkered. This was the new Europe (Roth 73).

but name, remaining in the structure of opposites and paradoxes. Theodor, and therefore Europe at large, is “national,” nationalistic, and yet “selbstsüchtig,” self-serving. Not only does this oppositional and contradictory form return within the metaphor of the spider, but establishing this premise of Theodor Lohse as proxy for viewing wider European trends, as well as fascism as a movement of opposing dynamics, sets the perspective for the rest of this essay.

German philosopher Theodor Adorno, summarizing Gustave Le Bon’s work in *The Crowd*, states that masses are “largely de-individualized, irrational, easily influenced, prone to violent action and altogether of a regressive nature” (121). This is not only true for the masses and political mass movements portrayed in *Das Spinnennetz* but applies to the individual of Theodor Lohse as well. He is de-individualized in the sense that he is both a singular person as well as shorthand for the society around him, and that he desires to make his participation in a mass movement the keystone of his identity in order to gain power and renown. He is irrational, ambitious, unsightful, even murderous, and is altogether child-like in his lack of independence and self-reflection. In short, characteristics that prime him, and therefore post-war Europeans at large, to be seduced by fascist rhetoric.

Theodor Lohse’s boundless ambition is one of the main driving factors propelling his descent into fascism. It is described as an inherent trait, apparent from early childhood and something with nebulous origins, an undefined itch that “trieb ihn zu den Gipfeln, er sah sie nicht, kannte sie nicht, er konnte sie sich kaum vorstellen. In ihm schrie es: aufwärts, um ihn schrie es: aufwärts”³ (Roth 60). It is either impossible to describe, or Theodor, with his lack of personal insight, finds it impossible to place where this desire comes from. The most reflective he is shown to be about his explicitly characterized desire for vague success are his

³ drove him towards the heights, unseen, unknown, scarcely imaginable. Within him and about him, something cried: upwards (Roth 44).

reminiscences on his early wish for proximity to power, detailing how “Immer war es Theodors Bestreben gewesen, mit den Großen und Größten in irgendeinen Kontakt zu gelangen. Schon in der Schule hatte er es durch allerlei Dienst- und Ehrenerweisungen erreicht, daß ihn der Leiter in den Pausen mit irgendeinem persönlichen Auftrag begnadete”⁴ (Roth 28). As a child he was sycophantic and servile to the extreme, seeking to place himself in the good graces of teachers through self-serving gestures. There is no description of what his classmates thought of his obsequiousness—he cared, and continues to care, only about the meaning those with power can bestow on him and how he can further climb the social hierarchy.

In “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” Adorno offers insight into the reason Theodor’s ambition utilizes strategies of self-abasement and his desire for greatness through subservient relationships “mit den Großen und Größten.” Essentially attributing such leader-worship to narcissism, he writes, “by making the leader his ideal he loves himself, as it were, but gets rid of the stains of frustration and discontent which mar his picture of his own empirical self” (Adorno 126). Theodor’s ambition does not force him into a place of begrudging groveling in exchange for long-term payoff. Rather, Theodor joyfully sees his own false but beloved reflection in the teachers, and later, Nazi Party members, whom he allows to lord over him. He idolizes those in power to the extent that they are purer reflections of his own self-image, without the burden of knowing them intimately enough to recognize their own imperfections as well.

Theodor’s excessive and narcissistic fetishization of power figures plays out in the second chapter of *Das Spinnennetz*, where he reverts to his childhood habits of conflating

⁴ Theodor had always made an effort to come into contact with the high and mighty. Even in school, by means of all sorts of little services and demonstrations of respect, he had seen to it that the teacher would favour him with some personal task during break (Roth 20).

adjacency to power with individual worth. Upon hearing the name of Prince Heinrich from Dr. Trebitsch in Herr Efrussi's house, Theodor snaps out of his usual stupor and "mit dem Instinkt eines Mannes, der zufällig einem Prunkstück aus seiner verschütteten Vergangenheit begegnet und es mit rettend hastiger Gebärde an die Brust reißt, rief Theodor: 'Ich war Leutnant im Regiment Seiner Hoheit, des Prinzen Heinrich!'"⁵ (Roth 15). Like a man drowning, Theodor, as if by instinct, clings to his connection to Prince Heinrich in what is the first direct quote of the book. The first words he speaks are to impart unto others that he is impressive not by his own merit, but by casual connection to someone with a hereditary title. Theodor's inability to find inherent meaning and identity within himself, and his compulsion to bask in the glory of those he deems superior, betrays both his childlike emotional immaturity and his subsequent vulnerability to the seduction of the Nazi Party.

Roth's comparison of the haste with which Theodor declares his connection to the prince with the instinct to physically clutch a beloved item to one's chest exemplifies what Adorno describes as "the primitively narcissistic aspect of identification as an act of devouring, of making the beloved object part of oneself" (125). Within Roth's metaphor, Prince Heinrich is the *Prunkstück*, the showpiece, which is brought physically closer to the body in a gesture that not only affirms possession, but suggests cohesion, an attempt to make two entities indistinguishable by their physical union. Within this reading, Theodor's later sexual exploits with the prince, which otherwise seem entirely bewildering, begin to make sense on a psychological level.

Despite his own notions to the contrary, Theodor Lohse is quite unremarkable, but because of both his lack of insight and his inflated sense of ego, is unable to recognize his own mediocrity. His is an ordinary man who searches for those to blame for his lack of success

⁵ With the instinct of a man who comes by chance across a prize piece from his shattered past and clutches it hastily to his bosom, Theodor cried: "I was a lieutenant in the regiment of His Highness, Prince Heinrich!" (Roth 10-11).

instead of admitting he is subject to the whims of economic and social forces he has no control over. Due to this mindset, he becomes heavily embittered with his situation in life, and returns from the war complaining “Anders war das Leben in Zivil... Kein Streben nutzte, kein Fleiß erlebte seine Belohnung. Kein Vorgesetzter war, dessen Launen man erkunden, dessen Wünsche man erraten konnte. Alle waren Vorgesetzte... die Mütter sogar und die Schwestern auch. Alle hatten es leicht, am leichtesten die Glasers und Efrussis”⁶ (Roth 8). It’s not that he doesn’t work hard, Theodor seems to imply, it’s that his hard work simply isn’t rewarded. In other words, there is not as clearly defined of a hierarchy outside the military to flatter for personal gain. He resents that in the outside world, Jews, such the Glaser and Efrussi families, and women, such as his mother and sisters, can be “Vorgetsetzte”—his “superiors,” and/or have an effortlessly easy life. Instead of taking instruction from a military man who probably looked very much like him, he is forced to heed bequests as the tutor of a Jew and is financially beholden to his female family members. He liked the army because he was essentially taking orders from himself, who he views as the only acceptable person to have in charge.

This is one of the major reasons he joins one of the many paramilitary groups cropping up in the times of the Weimar Republic, and eventually the *Reichswehr* itself. He longs to belong to a group, for both a sense of superiority and meaning, but only the kind of group which won’t ignite a sense of indignity when giving orders. As Lohse is one who stands for more than himself, he is a symbol of “The men who could not find a place in postwar society,” and who “provided the seeds for a paramilitary culture and in this form plagued German politics for the next fourteen years” (Grant 39). It’s not a large jump to the conclusion that the same men who

⁶ Civilian life was different...No effort was of any use, no amount of hard work was rewarded. There was no superior whose mood one could divine or whose wishes one could foresee. Everybody was a superior... mothers and sisters too. Everyone had an easy life; the Glasers and the Efrussis the easiest of all (Roth 5).

longed for the structure and reassurance of volunteer militias after the war, filled with the same archetype of embittered and jilted veterans, would find the politics of grievance peddled by the Nazi Party, along with the affirmation of their perceived injustices, enticing.

Like a twisted fantasy, Theodor believes that Jews are responsible for his lack of distinction, an idea he finds echoed by the Nazis. And yet, after he finds himself well-off after some time in the high ranks of the Party, he feels this hatred ebbing, only to be renewed again when he finds himself asking his old employer, Herr Efrussi, for money:

[Theodor] instruierte, rüstete aus, bestrafte Feiglinge, belobte Mutige, ein kleiner Gott war er. Sich selbst übertraf er, längst war sein Glaube erschüttert, sein Haß geschwächt, seine Begeisterung ausgekühlt, er glaubte nur an sich, liebte sich selbst, begeisterte sich an seinen Taten. Er haßte nicht mehr die Efrussis und nicht mehr die Glasers... Groß war die Macht Efrussis, stärker war er als irgendein Theodor Lohse, man hörte niemals auf, sein Hauslehrer zu sein, sein Diener, sein Abhängiger. Und der alte Haß erwachte, schrie in Theodor: Blut, Blut, Judenblut!⁷ (Roth 54-55, 57)

Theodor reaches such heights of being a “kleiner Gott” that he ceases to have anyone to blame for his (lack of) misfortune. So enamored with himself and his own doings, he no longer has reason to believe he is being prevented from reaching the place in society he views as rightfully his, by Jews or otherwise. He has little reason to think of anyone except himself and his own accomplishments. However, after his money is stolen by Franziska, a spy, he finds himself in dire financial need and asks Herr Efrussi, his at this point former employer, for assistance. Efrussi,

⁷ [Theodor] instructed, equipped, punished cowards and praised the courageous. A little god was he. He had excelled himself. His faith was long since shattered, his hatred diminished, his enthusiasm cooled off. He believed only in himself, loved only himself and was enchanted only by his own doings. He no longer hated the Efrussis, nor did he hate the Glasers... Efrussi's power was great, he was stronger than any Theodor Lohse, one never ceased to be his house tutor, his servant, his dependant. And the old hatred awoke in Theodor, screamed inside him: blood, blood, Jews' blood (Roth 42)!

altogether portrayed as a highly pleasant and sympathetic man, agrees readily. Despite this lack of animosity in the interaction on the part of Efrussi, or maybe because of it, Theodor feels his old hatred awaken.

Theodor's bigotry is therefore contingent upon his perceived dependency. If he feels beholden to those he deems lesser, his hate reawakens; if he feels himself independent, he believes he has no reason to think of anyone but himself. The poignancy of this resentment is exemplified in the German—Theodor refers to himself now as Efrussi's "Abhängige." Theodor takes "Abhängigkeit," dependence, or literally, hanging off of, and turns it into a noun—his dependent, a person who hangs from another. The vocabulary Roth uses to describe Theodor in this moment makes the case for his independence, or at least the impression of independence, being pivotal to his ego and instrumental in cultivating hatred when Theodor perceives its absence.

Theodor's shallow and sporadic but intense hatred, as well as his long-simmering *ressentiment*, would be impossible to nurture were it not for his complete and deliberate lack of insight and critical thought. He holds both a hatred towards Jews and multiple friendships with Jewish men, a type of cognitive dissonance where hatred wins out, as "Alle Erfahrungen waren ausgelöscht. Er haßte ehrlich den inneren Feind, den Juden, den Pazifisten... Benjamin Lenz allein nahm Theodor aus. Er wußte nichts Genaues über Lenz. Aber er wollte auch nichts wissen. Er ordnete Benjamin Lenz unter seine Freunde, wie den jüdischen Journalisten Pisk"⁸ (Roth 141). Theodor is content in his psychological no man's land. He has no wish to dig further into his reasoning or feelings, or to analyze the why behind any of his actions, as that would threaten

⁸ All his experiences were erased. He honestly hated the enemy within, Jews, pacifists... Only about Benjamin Lenz did Theodor know nothing precise. Nor did he wish to. He numbered Benjamin among his friends, like the Jewish journalist, Pisk (Roth 104).

the sanctity of his worldview. He bases his opinions not on life experience—the generosity of his Jewish employer, the friendships he cherishes with Trebitsch and Pisk—but on surface-level feeling and reactionary instinct.

Through the lens of Theodor's own self-importance, self-reflection and awareness would not only threaten how he understands the world around him but would be "resented as a narcissistic loss and elicit rage. It accounts for the violent reaction of all fascists against what they deem *zersetzend*, that which debunks their own stubbornly maintained values, and it also explains the hostility of prejudiced persons against any kind of introspection" (Adorno 130). Changing a strongly held opinion would be akin to admitting fault, an impossibility for a narcissist such as Theodor who believes his thoughts and feelings are the purest form of truth. Humility is a necessary character trait for introspection, which starts with a question that the self-obsessed are incapable of—"what if I'm wrong?" Theodor's fear of this question and the havoc it would wreak on his carefully constructed life drive him to purposefully march forward in his aims without further thought. As he explicitly states in chapter 14, "Überlegung schwächt Entschlüsse"⁹ (Roth 84). Because of his purposeful lack of reflection, he is capable of guiltlessly reveling in his resentment of perceived dependency. This includes not only financial dependence on Jews, but sexual dependence on women and social dependence on Prince Heinrich as well.

Besides his resentment towards his mother and sisters for their lack of adoration and his familial obligation to them, Theodor consider himself dependent on the whims of women who are the keepers of the sexual gratification he desires. Theodor, almost hungrily, notices how "Frauen, mit einer süßen, lockenden Musik in den wiegenden Hüften, gingen an ihm vorbei, unerreichbar, und er war doch geschaffen, sie zu besitzen. Als Leutnant hätte er sie besessen,

⁹ Reflection weakens decision (Roth 62).

alle, auch die junge Frau Efrussi, die zweite Gattin des Juweliers”¹⁰ (Roth 10). Women are things to “besitzen,” to possess, a word which in its past participle form, “besessen,” also means to be obsessed. He resents women, specifically beautiful women, because possessing one would grant him a certain social meaning and a sexual gratification, and yet he feels they are unreachable in his current standing. As a lieutenant, such women would’ve served as accessories indicative of status, that he was worthy to possess such beauty. It doesn’t matter Jewish or not—he lusts primarily after Herr Efrussi’s young and beautiful wife—as in his mind, women are first and foremost status symbols, then everything else.

Wilhelm Reich explains in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* how this sexual frustration can lead to subjugation not by women, but by a fascist regime: “The wretchedness of his material and sexual situation is so overshadowed by the exalting idea of belonging to a master race and having a brilliant führer that, as time goes on, he ceases to realize how completely he has sunk to a position of insignificant, blind allegiance” (63). Exactly in this way, Theodor seeks refuge from his rejection by the opposite sex, as well as originally pitiful financial standing, by clinging to the idea that he is inherently superior due to his race and his devotion to higher powers in many forms. However, Reich also describes the futility in Theodor’s actions, who ends up walking a circular path in his quest to go from subjugated to subjugator.

Perhaps subconsciously fleeing from the illusory shackles of the women around him, Theodor sleeps with Prince Heinrich, whose regiment he served in during the war. After drinking together at a bar, Theodor rides in the prince’s car back to his home where “So nahe saßen sie beieinander, ihre Schenkel berührten sich, und der Prinz hielt Theodors Hand und drückte sie.

¹⁰ Women, with the sweet rhythm of their swaying hips, passed by him, unattainable, but he was still on fire to possess them. He would have them all, as a lieutenant, even young Frau Efrussi, the jeweller’s second wife (Roth 7).

Und auf einmal war Theodor nackt und der Prinz Heinrich ebenfalls”¹¹ (Roth 18). After fawning over the majesty of the prince the entire night, Theodor consummates the idolatry in an act that lacks an explicitly shown thought process. To say he is conflicted after the fact however is an understatement. Theodor attempts complete repression of the night before, and yet recognizes the important social connection made. He resents the prince for having placed him in such a submissive position and yet relishes the intimate proximity to royalty. Embroiled in contradictions, he has, as Reich describes it, the fascist mentality “of the ‘little man,’ who is enslaved and craves authority and is at the same time rebellious” (xv). Theodor does not grapple with this duality of character for long. He decides to repress his actions as best he can and climb the social ladder, using a contact through the prince, Dr. Trebitsch, to join the Nazi Party. He uses his dependency on the prince to segue not to a place of independence, but to a more tolerable dependency.

Sworn in under Detective Klitsche, who Theodor later murders after a series of perceived slights, Theodor dons Nazi adornments to both stand out as exceptional and yet express his belonging to an in-group. “Er kleidete sich neu, jetzt trug er einen hellbraunen Anzug, einen sanft grünlich karierten und ein kleines, goldenes Hakenkreuz in einer quergestreiften, seidenen Krawatte,” indicating his love both of the trappings of sophistication and the physical markers of group belonging¹² (Roth 40). His highest goal is to be the greatest among equals, the *primus inter pares*, receiving independent commendation but possessing an identity dependent on group membership. This forces a dissonance and reflects simultaneously the irony of the situation at

¹¹ They sat side by side, so close to each other that their calves touched and the Prince was holding Theodor’s hand and squeezing it. And all at once Theodor was naked and so was Prince Heinrich (Roth 12).

¹² Nowadays he wore a light brown suit, or a pale green check, with a small gold swastika pin in a silk tie with diagonal stripes (Roth 29).

large: in his quest for independence from Jews and women by joining the Nazi Party, he becomes even more ensnared by the selfsame come the end of the novel.

Having reached what he deems a sufficient station to marry well, Theodor Lohse marries a member of the bourgeoisie, Elsa von Schlieffen. Intending to parade her as an adornment indicating his wealth and social standing, he instead is the one unknowingly at her mercy as an ambitious woman in her own right. She molds Theodor after her own image, planning from the beginning that “Eine v. Schlieffen heiratete einen Bürgerlichen nur, weil sie hofft, daß er es zu den höchsten Stellen im Staate bringen kann. Dazu gehörte vor allem Beredsamkeit. Und sie brachte Theodor zum Sprechen”¹³ (Roth 141). Not only is Theodor dependent on Elsa as his ticket to upper class life and as a source of knowledge on affluent culture—he relies on her to be the brains of his operation. He is the mouthpiece, but she “brachte Theodor zum Sprechen.” Elsa runs his schedule, enforces his ideas in their social circles, and coaches him in loquaciousness.

In the domestic sphere, Elsa also ensures the continuing completion of Theodor’s household tasks. He “aß immer Speisen, die er ersehnte, ohne von ihnen zu sprechen. Er fand seine Kleider gebürstet, seine Hose gebügelt, alle Knöpfe an den Hemden; kein Papier vermißte er, seine Waffen lagen geordnet – er liebte die Waffen –, und seine Pistole putzte Elsa. Auch sie liebte Schießwaffen”¹⁴ (Roth 140). These actions have several aims. First, establishing Theodor’s physical dependence on Elsa’s labor, in addition to being socially indebted to her. Second, demonstrating Elsa’s active support of the fascist cause through the devotional act of cleaning Theodor’s pistol (while cooking, sewing, and ironing would be typical of a 1920s homemaker,

¹³ A von Schlieffen only married a commoner because she hoped that he would be able to achieve the highest government offices. This required, above all, eloquence. And she taught Theodor to speak (Roth 104).

¹⁴ He was always served his favorite dishes, without having mentioned them. He found his clothes brushed, his trousers pressed, no buttons missing from his shirts. No papers went astray, his weapons were in their proper places – he loved weapons – and Elsa cleaned his pistol. She, too, loved firearms (Roth 103).

this particular activity stands out as above and beyond common expectation). Third, underscoring the importance of daily routine to reinforcing political ideology:

The lower middle class bedroom suite, which the 'rabble' buys as soon as he has the means...the "decent" suit of clothes for "proper" dance steps and a thousand other "banalities" have an incomparably greater reactionary influence when repeated whereas factory work and revolutionary leaflets have only a brief day after day than thousands of revolutionary rallies and leaflets can ever hope to counterbalance. Narrow conservative life exercises a continuous influence, penetrates every facet of everyday life. (Reich 69)

Elsa therefore serves as a larger societal reinforcement of fascist ideals, ensuring Theodor comes home to an orderly house, hot meals, pristine weapons, and well-maintained standards for the perfect Nazi home. With their union, Theodor has become a part of the long-standing civil structures held in place not by fleeting political ideology, but by wider ingrained conservative culture and social pressure. Their marriage and Elsa's unfaltering dedication, as well as the children they will undoubtedly have, ensure the continuation of their fascist ideology through the reinforcement of daily routine.

Even more so than Elsa, Theodor lives his life at the behest of the spy, Benjamin Lenz. Lenz is a Jew from Lodz, who "haßte Europa, Christentum, Juden, Monarchen, Republiken, Philosophie, Parteien, Ideale, Nationen" and "gab die Rolle eines Menschen, dessen Verstand gerade noch zur Erkenntnis seiner eigenen Beschränktheit ausreicht. Und er wartete"¹⁵ (Roth 88). Lenz is portrayed as infinitely more cunning than Lohse. The selfish rogue type, Lenz is completely driven by what is best for himself. His motivations are clear and his path forward is of his own making. While it might seem antisemitic to seemingly confirm Nazi paranoia with a

¹⁵ hated Europe, Christianity, Jewry, Monarchy, Republics, Philosophy, Political Parties, Ideas and Nations...He played the part of a man whose intelligence is just sufficient to grasp his own limitations. And he waited (Roth 64).

Jew behind the scenes pulling the strings, I instead read Lenz' cunning as a cathartic wish on behalf of the Jewish author that Jews actually had this power Lenz possesses to control those who seek to oppress. However, Lenz is not portrayed as garnering such control to the benefit of Jews. On the contrary—he lists “Juden” next to “Europa” and “Christentum” as hated concepts. In a section titled “Jewish Self-Hatred,” Avner Falk writes in *Anti-Semitism: A History and Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Hatred*, “On the collective level, a minority group in a given society that is repeatedly told that it is bad, that is rejected and persecuted, may also develop a collective group self that is bad and negative” (53-54). Lenz believes he, as an individual Jew, is not bad, but Jewishness as a concept, this collective group self Falk describes, is worthy of scorn. Foils, this blindness to experience mirrored by Theodor. Convictions only through not thinking. Lenz, keen and contemptuous, sets Theodor up with his wife, publicizes his accomplishments, procures his bureaucratic job, and uses him as a tool for his own gain. And, “er wartete,” assuming the patient posture of a spider.

In Theodor's futile search to be both his own master and a joyful comrade, he believes himself to be the spider, spinning his web of plans and contacts. To some extent, he does have a web of his own. He does garner fame, marry up, and have people to order around. But his wife, and to a larger extent Benjamin Lenz, also weave plots of their own, which overlap and ensnare Theodor without his knowledge. The German title, *Das Spinnenetz*, holds within it three English translations. The one we have, *The Spider's Web*, implies a singular spider. Is it Theodor, perhaps meant ironically? Is it Lenz? Or does the singular web belong to Nazi fascism at large? But this is not all the German title conveys. “Spinnennetz” can also be translated as spiders' web, plural spiders, multiple people pulling the strings, or simply, spiderweb, meaning that no one can

be in charge, and all are somehow interconnected and entangled by the mass movement surrounding them.

The last chapters of *Das Spinnennetz* were published in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* on November 6th, 1923, three days before Hitler's attempted overthrow of the German government in Munich, the Beer Hall Putsch. Though it received little acclaim in its time, Roth's ability to sense the coming political tides is in hindsight nothing short of genius. Through this work, Roth shows not only what kind of person would fly willingly into the web of fascism, but the inherent contradiction, and ultimate futility, of turning to a mass fascist movement for individual meaning.

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