

Roland Topor: The Outsider's Outsider

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Introduction to Roland Topor's The Tenant
(Centipede Press, 2006)

The literary world may be divided into two strikingly unequal groups: the insiders and the outsiders. By definition, the former are many and the latter are few. Of course, there is something of a spectrum along which a given writer could be placed, especially when we are faced with a career that falls into phases. Tolstoy is a useful example. During what is commonly viewed as a major phase, he produced *War and Peace* (1865-69) and *Anna Karenina* (1875-77). Titles that haunt the shelves of bookstores and academic curricula alike.

These are solidly insider productions, in that they deal with matters which are common, often dubbed as universal and easily comprehended. No reader need feel any estrangement in the world by hauling around one of these big books. Later in his life Tolstoy began to brood in an intense and to some extent pathological fashion over existential matters such as death, and whether or not human life had any discernible meaning. The works that emerged from this phase demonstrated that the one time classic of Russian literature had drifted a bit toward the outsider edge of the spectrum in question, although not to an alarming degree.

The troubled consciousness of the character Levin in *Anna Karenina* had merely moved from the margins of Tolstoy's mind and begun to take over entire works. By then, Tolstoy had experienced a severe depression and began to tout such ideas as sexual abstinence and non-resistance to evil. Someone immersed in *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) might very well want to keep his choice of reading material confidential, and be prepared to explain himself should his interest in this novella come to the attention of others. Nevertheless, this dichotomy between the insider and the outsider is not, broadly speaking, a dramatic issue with Tolstoy, even if the Russian author did speak of Shakespeare, the ultimate insider, with contempt as a craftsman of rather shallow works.

So the task of sharply distinguishing between literature's insiders and outsiders still remains. This may be approached by regarding the consciousness of a writer as it is betrayed by various aspects of his work, including verbal style, general tone of voice, assuming there is one that carries through a literary corpus, choices of subjects and themes, overt statements and manifestoes of intent, and so on. As any reader knows, there are wild variances in such things among others, particularly those of the modern era, making the process of sorting our two groups a seemingly impossible feat. Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, T.S. Eliot, Knute Hamsun, Herman Hesse.

Can you separate the insiders from the outsiders in this list of names? The brain reels when considering some of the better known works of these writers that first spring to mind, as they seem to express attitudes and sensibilities that are not exactly in the mainstream. Not common, universal, or easily comprehended. Not really on the inside of the ordinary world. Immediately we recall Hemingway's story *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, which ends with the mock prayer, "Our nada, who art in nada, nada be thy name." Or the trope of degenerate freaks in Faulkner's novels. And let us not forget the alienated title characters of Hamsun's *Hunger* and Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, as well as Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Sartre's *Nausea*, and the entire output of Beckett.

Fortunately the status of these notable authors, insider or outsider, has been provided for us by the Swedish committees who awarded each of the aforementioned figures a Nobel Prize in literature, which is annually given out, in the words of its eponymous originator, to authors who produce works of an idealistic tendency. But does the judgement of a body of Swedes really settle things for all of these authors? Are they to be classed as insiders by sole virtue of receiving some prize? Some would say yes, but not entirely because of the Nobel. Some would say no, despite the Nobel. Consequently the job is unfinished as far as what determines the consciousness of an author to be that of an insider or outsider. Not to mention how all of this relates to the ultimate point of this introduction, Roland Topor's *The Tenant*, as an exemplary work of one of the few, and not the many. As a specimen that expresses the consciousness of one of the great outsiders.

An efficient way to proceed would be to compare *The Tenant* with another short novel that substantially shares its theme, *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* (1926) by the Nobel prize-winning Luigi Pirandello. In itself, there is no big giveaway of an author's consciousness. What counts is how that theme is resolved.

Pirandello's resolution displays the most pathetic and appalling symptoms of an idealistic tendency, while Topor's parades the anti-idealists position (read: craven, defeatist, twisted, miserablist, or whatever and negative modifier you choose, but read it in the best possible sense). The theme of *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* is explicitly that of the self, often capitalized, as a false invention of the brain. In contrast with the dogma of the many, as Pirandello's narrator Moscarda seems to observe, the self is no more than a flimsy format that we spontaneously invent in order to lend coherence and meaning to an existence that is actually chaotic and meaningless.

This is to assume that one considers it worthwhile even to bother characterizing these lives of ours, which are conspicuously insignificant when viewed from the outside, rather than from within. A perspective that is the source of all the deceptions and self-deceptions to which we are subject. While everyone has a body that we also recognize, only because we are occasionally forced to do so, that they are unstable, vulnerable and ultimately disposable phenomena. At the

same time we tend to believe, until we are forced by circumstances to question this belief that our selves are more sturdy, enduring and real than the degrading tissue in which they are encased.

The first notable exposure of this fact that was made in the 18th century by the Scottish philosopher David Hume. In *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*, Moscarda is initially made aware of his misperception of his self, and by extension of the entire world of forms, in which the self, often in quotes, maneuvers by a misperception he has made about his body. He thought his nose was evenly structured on its right and left sides until one day his wife points out to him that it is slightly lower on the left side than on the right. Being an incorrigibly pensive individual, Moscarda is troubled by his wife's remark. Being an intellectually honest person, he has to admit that it is true.

This revelation that he had misperceived this single point of his appearance leads Moscarda to investigate what other delusions he has been entertaining about his appearance and throughout his life. He finds many. After protracted self examination of his physical person, he comes to the conclusion that he is not who he thought he was. Now he believes he is an outsider to himself, a figment in the mirror that appears one way to him and other ways to other people. But there are further revelations to which Moscarda is condemned.

“I still believed this outsider was only one person. Only one for everybody as I thought I was only one for myself, but soon my horrible trauma became more complicated.” This occurs when our narrator makes, “the discovery of the hundred thousand Moscardas that I was, not only for the others but also for myself, all with this one name of Moscarda. Ugly to the point of cruelty all inside this poor body of mine, that was also one. One and alas no one.”

Fortunately for Moscarda, and lamentably for the reader, at least the reader who is an outsider, he comes to accept the bogus nature of everything he had conceived himself to be, and finds a oneness from outside rather than inside his body with all that exists. He no longer thinks but simply is. “This is the only way I can live now, to be reborn moment by moment, to prevent thought from working again inside me.” The last paragraph of the novel is an exaltation of his new state of existence. “The city is distant. From it, at times, in the Twilight calm, the sound of bells reaches me, but now I hear those bells no longer inside me but outside, rung for themselves and perhaps they quiver with joy in their humming hollowness, in a flying blue sky filled with hot sun, amid the shriek of the swallows, or in the cloudy wind heavy and high over their airy spires. To think of death, to pray, there are those who still have this need, and the bells become their voice. I no longer have this need because I die at every instant and I am reborn new and without memories, live and whole, no longer inside myself, but in everything outside.”

End of story. Things turn out alright for Moscarda. He is now an outsider who has been saved.

In this respect, he resembles the documented cases in which certain individuals, U.G. Krishnamurti, Suzanne Segal, among others, recover from what appears to have been a physiological trauma following which their thought processes shut down, disabling the cognitive mechanisms that produce a false sense of self. In these instances the individual who loses himself or herself is the better for it. But does anyone believe that Luigi Pirandello knew firsthand what it was like to be in such a state on a permanent basis, as opposed to simply imagining this happy ending with a decidedly idealistic tendency? Granted Pirandello was the genius of imagination for having conceived both the philosophical malady from which Moscarda suffered and the manner in which he was delivered from it. The only possible resolution for someone so afflicted, and the proper resolution for a painfully self-conscious audience of the modernist era. And yet it is not a resolution available to the reader who could follow Moscarda's progress toward salvation step by step and never be delivered to the land outside himself.

If it were so Pirandello would have invented the most effective cure the agonies of the human condition ever know. He would have solved every problem that we face as a species. But it isn't so. Pirandello imagined a fairytale resolution, as sure as if the prayer that Moscarda says he no longer needs were offered as a cure for his anguished state. A Deus Ex Machina for the moderns. His book is a shameful ruse, a make believe tale for children. This is what the literary insider offers.

In *The Tenant*, Roland Topor supplies the opposing view of the outsider. When Pirandello's character Moscarda describes his escalating perplexities about his identity as a horrible drama, these words appear as a mere formality, a perfunctory gesture that fails to convey the nightmarish quality of his situation. In *The Tenant* by contrast, Topor truly and affectingly dramatizes the horror of his non-hero Trelkovsky as he traverses the same nightmare terrain as his Italian counterpart. A pivotal passage in the novel begins with the following sentence: "At what precise moment, Trelkovsky asked himself, does an individual cease to be the person he and everyone else believes himself to be?"

A Slavic-named Parisian, Trelkovsky is an outsider and moves in the world outsiders are persecuted just as they are in the non-fictional world. While seeking a place to live in an apartment building he is made to feel like a nobody by the landlord Monsieur Zy and then by the other residents of this sinister place. By this method of exerting their menacing power Trelkovsky's persecutors can maintain their own delusional status as somebodies; real persons who are at home in the hell they have created for themselves. Anyone who was perceived to be outside of their group is fair game for their machinations, their routines for asserting their reality at the expense of all others. But they too are also nobodies. If they were not, their persecutions would not be required. They could pass their lives in a secure or uncaring condition with respect to their substance and value. However, as any good Buddhist or even Pirandello's Moscarda

could tell you, human beings have no more substance and value than anything else on this Earth. The failure to accept our place alongside both the mountains and the mold of this planet is the wellspring of the torments we inflict on one another.

As long as we deny another person or group the claim to be as right and real as we are, we may hold this dreamlike claim exclusively for ourselves. Thus, it is the duty of everyone to aggravate or instill a sense of nothingness, a feel of the absence of substances and value, within those who do not superficially resemble them.

Without being aware of it at a conscious level Trelkovsky experiences an epiphany about his neighbours at the midpoint of the novel. "The bastards," Trelkovsky raged, "the bastards. What the hell do they want? For everyone to roll over and play dead? And even that probably wouldn't be enough!" He is more right than he knows. But what they want above all is for everyone to roll over and play them. Martians. They were all martians. They were strangers on this planet, but they refuse to admit it. They played at being perfectly at home. He was no different; he belonged to their species, but for some unknown reason he had been banished from their company. They had no confidence in him. All they wanted from him was obedience to their incongruous rules and their ridiculous laws. Ridiculous only to him because he could never fathom their intricacy and their subtlety.

Trelkovsky's neighbors and everyone else he eventually sees cannot admit to themselves what he comes to realize: everybody is nobody, no one has the power to define themselves. Those more powerful than you will make that determination and you will stand mute within their courtroom. At first Trelkovsky is manipulated by others toward this knowledge. Finally he comes to embrace it, and cooperates zealously in his fate.

Interestingly *The Tenant* concludes with the same kind of leap beyond the known parameters of the everyday world as does *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*. Sadly for Trelkovsky it is a leap in the opposite direction. More accurately it is a leap that does not deliver Topor's protagonist from his horrible drama, but one that takes even further into the nightmare of nobodies. As an insider, Pirandello was under orders to provide helpful, ambiguous, or at least tolerable resolutions to the themes he developed in his work. Outfitted with an entirely different consciousness, the outsider must provide revolution in accord with his deviant vision.

For some time many of us have been respectfully allowed to hold a diversity of worldviews. However, the nature of worldview must be essentially affirmative and not craven, defeatist, twisted, miserablist, or whatever negative modifier you choose. These qualities may be valued by outsiders, few as they are, but the preponderant number insiders that compose humankind will not incorporate your ideas and attitudes into their philosophies and ideologies, national policies,

or fraternal bylaws. Both Pirandello and Topor were dealing with the same theme: to believe you are someone is to be insane.

The former writer ended his story with a portrait of a man who transcended both sanity and insanity by becoming the No One embedded in the novel's title. This resolution has already been deplored from the viewpoint of an admitted outsider as a phony and rather indecent imposture. An insider might say the same about the ending of Topor's novel, which implies a transcendence into a greater nightmare than the unfortunate Trelkovsky ever suspected. Which of these endings gains your favor as being truer to human experience will depend on who you are, or who you think you are. This is a very Pirandellian theme.

In conflict with Nobel Prize winners and other insiders, it is the tendency of the literary outsider to be non idealistic. He will not sign on to the programs of progress or lift a finger to sustain the status quo. The characters in his works, will gain nothing from their sufferings except the deformations that their pain has imprinted upon them. That is, should they survive at all, since the outsider is not skittish about depicting doom and death as the absurd lot of our lives.

Beckett's Malone may die, but the slogan for which the Irish genius is best known is "I can't go on, I'll go on." Going on is the theme of Beckett's novels and plays, and his characters manage to do it rather well. In the face of exhaustion, confusion and debris, his casts of outcasts remain unstoppable.

It is not difficult to imagine that Beckett dropped with a pen in his hand, whereas his more pessimistic acquaintance, the philosophical outsider E.M. Cioran had no regrets or qualms about ceasing to write. Cornered by his consciousness of the grim routine of existence, the outsider is driven to resolve the theme of going on as follows: "No one will go on, and in our inevitable going there is only gore without glory, madness and mayhem without salvation." The outsider is unconcerned with upholding the illusions of his neighbors, those insiders who force their world upon him. At least in the rare cases, when they are even aware of his existence. And should they become aware of the outsider, they will either actively persecute the one who does not share their peculiar delusions and allegiances, or undermine him with indifference. Nevertheless the outside may still endure in his niche, if only as an amusing freak. How else can one explain the shadowy and relatively marginal careers of a Schopenhauer, a Cioran, or a Topor?

Simultaneously bizarre and unsurprising that the works of Roland Topor, which also include the short novel *Joko's Anniversary* (1969) and a collection of the most morbid tales ever written have not been more enthusiastically received a superlative examples of horror fiction, at least among English-speaking aficionados of the genre. My only explanation for this oversight or prejudice is that even within the thematic zone of horror there are insiders and outsiders. When Stanley Kubrick was adapting Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) I remember reading an interview in which the movie director said that he thought I was an optimistic novel because the narrative presumed an afterlife, although he neglected to mention that the only evidence for the

afterlife in King's novel were the ghouls that haunted the Overlook Hotel. Possibly Kubrick did not put much thought into his answer to this question, or he was just having fun with the interviewer.

A more likely explanation is that he was an insider. Among commentators on horror, some consideration has been given to the question of whether or not this popular genre is inherently conservative. In other words, a form created largely by and for insiders. Of course popular novels and movies of any kind require by their very nature that their makers follow the orthodoxies of their society and the entertainment industry, which naturally, and with respect to the film business, was demanded for a time by governmental fiat, entails the punishment of malefactors and salvation for those with whom readers and moviegoers are intended to identify. These are just facts of popular culture and its attendant economics, which enforce a conservative outlook.

Obviously I'm using the word conservative in a sociological rather than a political sense. To my mind all societies are inherently conservative and all but the most marginal writers reflect this. For his short novel *The Stranger* (1942) and other works in which he developed the view of the absurdity of human life, Albert Camus may have seemed a degenerate bohemian or an anarcho-nihilist to some people, but to any outsider us only preaching the party line of his or any other time: we must content ourselves with all that is the world for the sake of the future. This is more or less the philosophy overtly conveyed in Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). We should not be astonished then that Camus was a recipient of the Nobel Prize.

For the record the full statement of what qualifies a writer to win the Nobel Prize is the production of the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency. Do The Tenant and Topor's other writings outstanding work? They do if you are one of the outsiders. And if you're not then why would you want to read them?