

## Roditi, Edouard (1910–92)

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In his unpublished autobiography, Edouard Roditi describes his life in terms of a triple curse of being Jewish, epileptic, and homosexual. Perhaps a fourth quality ought to be added: that of being a polyglot through his complex heritage as well as personal inclination. Roditi lived a long life that would have been enough to fill in several biographies: Roditi the prodigy Surrealist and modernist poet writing in English and French, Roditi the art critic and historian, Roditi the Sephardic scholar, Roditi one of the pioneering generation of simultaneous interpreters at some of the most momentous conventions of the 20th century, and Roditi the translator and “literary mediator” (to use Sidney Rosenfeld’s apt term) between several generations, and nations, of artists and poets.

Edouard Roditi was born in Paris on June 6, 1910, in a well-off family he describes as upper-middle class, although most of their wealth was later lost in the Great Depression (and Roditi had to work for a living from a young age as a result). Roditi’s father and grandfather had emigrated from Constantinople and came from a prominent Sephardic background; his mother Violet was brought up in England. His father Oscar worked on the board of directors of the company that operated the Orient Express and was responsible for the associated accommodation infrastructure (e.g. helping to supervise the construction of the Pera Palace Hotel in Constantinople). The whole family were naturalized American citizens through Roditi’s grandfather.

Roditi’s multiple languages were a deeply ingrained part of his identity as a poet and a reason behind his motivation to write. These included French, English, Spanish and Ladino (he learned both from his grandmother), Greek and Latin, some Turkish, and German, which he learned in his twenties. He described himself as having Italian and Greek Jewish origins, and traced part of his family to the former Venetian concession in Istanbul. The family spoke English at home, which may have been why the young Roditi was sent to an English boarding school, the Elstree School in Hertfordshire, at the age of nine, later followed by Charterhouse School and Classics at Balliol College, Oxford. His classical English education left Roditi with a solid grounding in Latin and Ancient Greek (his first literary experiments consisted in translating English poetry into these languages) and an unpleasant association with all things English: he was shocked by the violence of his English classmates, which he claims prepared him for the century’s brutality in interpersonal relations. At Elstree, aged 11, Roditi met Joseph Conrad, who was a friend of his headmaster’s. Conrad first told him that with his linguistic gifts he ought to be a writer and encouraged him to write in other languages as well.

Having dropped out of Oxford after a year, however, Roditi moved back to Paris, where he quickly immersed himself in the literary circles of the day. Roditi’s translation of St. John Perse reached Eugene Jolas, T.S. Eliot, Adrienne Monnier and James Joyce, which quickly led to his acquaintance with most writers worth knowing in late-1920s Paris, American as well as French. Soon, Roditi became one of the youngest contributors to Eugene Jolas’ legendary little magazine *transition* at the age of 18 (from his *transition* days, Roditi maintained friendships with Paul Bowles and Charles Henri Ford, and a cordial relationship with the socially reticent Beckett). James Joyce selected him as a potential contributor to the

first critical volume on his *Work in Progress* (later *Finnegans Wake*), *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, but Roditi had to decline due to ill health, which plagued him throughout his life (his congenital epilepsy was only diagnosed in his late 40s, but he had to spend months recovering in Switzerland from a young age). T.S. Eliot, whom Roditi met in 1931 and whom he describes in an interview to *BOMB* as “sweet to the point of being an absolute saint” became another important influence. At this point, Roditi wrote poetry in two languages, French and English (much of it published in 1949 in *Poems 1928-49*). Notably, Eliot tried, with some success, to persuade the young poet to focus on one of his languages; Roditi chose English, though he later claimed to have continued writing in both languages, as well as, eventually, German.

As a writer, Roditi belongs to the generation of the younger modernists who experienced the movement’s formative influence early on in their careers but came into their own somewhat later. As a teen, he rubbed shoulders with Surrealists such as Robert Desnos and René Crevel, and published the first English Surrealist manifesto entitled “The New Reality” in *The Oxford Outlook* in 1929. While his literary beginnings were undoubtedly Surrealist (Roditi was, notably, partner in Editions du Sagittaire, which published André Breton’s Surrealist manifestos), he became disenchanted with practices such as automatic writing and soon drifted away; he nevertheless kept some ties with the movement with translations from Breton in 1946 and his own poetry collection *Emperor of Midnight* (1974). His literary career is inseparable from his friendships with writers and artists such as T.S. Eliot, Paul Goodman, Kenneth Rexroth, Léon-Paul Fargue, Pavel Tchelitchew, Alain Bosquet and Dylan Thomas, as well as connections with most of the notable writers of his time, from W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, William Carlos Williams, Robert Musil, or Paul Valéry to, somewhat comically, Marcel Proust whom he recalls crossing paths with once at his family doctor’s office. In the *BOMB* interview, Roditi calls himself “the oldest survivor” of the modernist American colony in Paris, “with the possible exception of Eugene Jolas’ widow.”

In the early 1930s, Roditi spent some time as a student in Berlin. The intended goal of the stay was to learn the language; unintentionally, it also introduced Roditi, who had never suspected “that [he] was, though not by upbringing, education or religion, still a Jew in the eyes of most anti-Semites” (Brown), to Nazi ideology and ultimately to his own Jewish heritage; notably, in 1932 he befriended the Cabbalist Ariel Bension, then in hospital with terminal cancer. T.S. Eliot, who helped wean him away from Surrealism and introduced him to English metaphysical poets, provided an additional stimulus. Roditi considered his Jewish identity a choice, since his maternal grandmother was his only non-Jewish grandparent, and he was therefore not a Jew by the Jewish law. In 1931, he published *The Journal of an Apprentice Cabbalist: Prelude to a Vita Nuova*; several poems exploring Jewish themes were written from 1930s onwards, and later published as *Thrice Chosen: Poems on Jewish Themes* in 1981 (in “Avenue des Champs Elysées,” the poet identifies with the prisoners of concentration camps “where they must die of being Jews”). For several years, Roditi was the poetry editor for the journal *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*. Ammiel Alcalay relates that, at the time of his death, he and Roditi were planning a magisterial two-volume anthology of some 400 Sephardic and Mizrahi authors.

After a year in London, Roditi emigrated to the US, where he enrolled at the University of Chicago (where he got his B.A. in 1939), followed by stints as a graduate fellow at the University of California, Berkeley and an instructor at University of Kansas City, Missouri. In 1941, Roditi embarked on a wartime and post-war career in the civil service, first at the French Desk of the United States Office of War Information until 1945, and later at the

Department of State. This last position led to Roditi's posting as a simultaneous interpreter first at the Nuremberg trials, and then at the charter meeting of the United Nations in San Francisco, and a distinguished career as one of the pioneering freelance interpreters of that generation. This was his main source of income for many years, alongside regular publications in periodicals from *Poetry* to *L'Arche* (where he served as art critic for over 30 years).

A parallel career as a literary translator started with his first-ever publication in *transition*, a poem by Léon-Paul Fargue. Other notable translations of poetry include rendering André Breton, Alfred Jarry and Raymond Roussel into English (his translations of Breton and Jarry were the first to appear in English), as well as French versions of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Stephen Spender and translations of Jewish poetry from several languages. His translations into German included Fernando Pessoa (with Paul Celan), Constantine Cavafy and stories by Ambrose Bierce. In 1936, he collaborated with Maurice Sachs in translating two novels by Ronald Firbank. He also published translations from the Dutch, French, German, and Turkish, including Albert Memmi's *The Pillar of Salt* (1956), Ernest Namenyi's *The Essence of Jewish Art* (1960), and Yumus Emre's *The Wandering Fool* (1984). His translation of Yashar Kemal's *Mehmed, My Hawk* (1961), completed in collaboration with his cousin (the author's wife), is still in print today. While stationed in post-war Berlin, Roditi founded and edited, together with Alexander Koval and Alain Bosquet, the journal *Das Lot*, which became an important literary voice in Germany in 1947-52, notably with its translations of contemporary American authors.

Roditi's first ambition was to be an artist, and he first started writing as something that was easier to conceal from his sceptically-minded father, who forbade him to draw or paint at home. Much of his later work did, indeed, revolve around the study of art, which earned him a formidable reputation as an art critic and historian. Roditi's interviews with artists published as *Dialogues on Art* (1961), *More Dialogues on Art* (1984), and *Dialogues: Conversations with European Artists at Mid-Century* (1990), are particularly well-known; much of his extensive archive on Jewish artists and painters in Paris is currently housed at the Leo Baeck Institute. Notably, Roditi also contributed greatly to the increasing awareness of Turkish culture and art in the West, through his book of short stories *The Delights of Turkey* as well as helping artists and writers, and promoting their work.

An outspoken homosexual and the author of *De l'homosexualité* (1961), Roditi was open about his own experiences (notably, in lyrical poetry, e.g. his 1986 volume *Orphic Love*) and enjoyed a tacit reputation for his one-night affair with Federico García Lorca in 1929. His sexual orientation, of which he became aware in his late teens after a number of liaisons with women, and his contacts may have been among the reasons behind his discharge from US civil service as a security risk in 1950, as well as later problems with French authorities: his Paris phone was tapped in 1954, and in 1958 he received an expulsion order from France (rescinded in 1960). In an interview, Roditi related the importance of psychotherapy in his coming to terms with a series of complex and sometimes abusive relationships in his life. In 1990, Roditi's partner committed the rape of a young female visitor in the writer's apartment, involving him in the subsequent police investigation.

Roditi's legacy includes several critical studies, including an influential book on Oscar Wilde (1947), a biography of Magellan (1972), and essays on Proust, Rimbaud, Pessoa, and Cavafy. Almost until his death, he taught at US universities, most regularly at Bard College in New York; other teaching included San Francisco State University (1966), University of

California, Santa Cruz (1970), and UCLA (1989). Since 1954, Roditi shared his time between his main Paris residence and, increasingly, the Middle East and North Africa, especially Tangiers. He died from injuries sustained in a motoring accident in Cadiz on the 10th of May, 1992, aged 81.

### **Further Reading:**

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Rosenfeld, Sidney. "Edouard Roditi as Literary Mediator," *Books Abroad* 46, no. 3 (Summer, 1972), pp. 412-415

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Most of Roditi's archive, including his unpublished autobiography *The Age of Improvidence*, is housed at the Charles E. Young Research Library of UCLA. Smaller collections include IMEC, the Humanities Research Center at UT Austin, and Leo Baeck Institute in Paris (available online at <https://archive.org>); some papers were acquired by Michael Neal in 1999.