

auch bei uns gibt. Und ich denke, da muß man ansetzen, ein Bewußtsein zu schaffen, das das Unrecht, das darin liegt, erkennt, und zugleich aber auch Widerstandsformen zu schaffen. Dafür ist das Erzählen wieder wichtig, daß man sich austauscht, und dafür ist es wichtig, daß man Mächtige auch entlarven kann. Das Erzählen muß wie Sand im Getriebe sein. Und insofern interessieren mich auch gerade diese kleinen Sachen. Diese Frau, die in *Die Entdeckung der Currywurst* vorkommt, ist tatsächlich meine Großmutter. Die ganzen anderen Onkels haben fleißig ihren Militärdienst gemacht. Sie waren Offiziere in Rußland und haben mitgeholfen, daß Auschwitz weiter vertrieben werden konnte, das muß man so sagen. (Man sagte in Deutschland gern, die Offiziere, die haben nie mit dem Holocaust etwas zu tun gehabt. Hatten sie aber doch de facto.) Ausgerechnet eine Frau, diese Großmutter, eine sehr resolute Frau, hatte in Hamburg 1943 einem SS-Mann den Knüppel weggenommen, als der einen KZ-ler schlug, der die Trümmer aufräumen mußte. Und der Frau ist nichts passiert—also diesen Mut möchte ich beschreiben, im Alltag gegen Unmenschlichkeiten anzugehen.

Es ist ein bescheidenes Programm, ich weiß, aber ich denke mal, daß vielleicht daraus ein neues basisdemokratisches Selbstverständnis entstehen könnte. Man hat im Augenblick kein Modell, von dem man sagen könnte, "so müßte es sein." Aber was man machen kann—so verstehe ich meine Arbeit—ist wie ein Ethnologe durchs Land zu gehen, und diese Gesellschaft anzusehen und die Verhaltensformen dieser Menschen und auch die Formen, die sehr unmenschlich sind, möglichst genau zu beschreiben.

Cincinnati, den 20. April 1994

## Gather at the River

INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK ROTH

*Patrick Roth, born in 1953 in Freiburg, Germany, has lived in Los Angeles since 1975. He originally came to Los Angeles to attend film school, and film continues to play an important role in his artistic vision. Roth recently returned from a trip to Germany, during which he directed his stage play Kelly to much acclaim and full houses. He also read from his first two novels, Riverside (Subrkamp 1991) and Johnny Shines oder Die Wiedererweckung der Toten (Subrkamp 1993). Simply put, these novels deal with the "other side," be it the other side of an experience or the other side of ourselves. John Kluempers (University of California, Los Angeles) spoke with Roth about these novels and more.*

**Kluempers:** Your works are written in German and published by one of Germany's largest publishing houses; why then do you live in Los Angeles as opposed to Germany?

**Roth:** I need both. I need L.A. to withdraw in order to do my writing. When I'm in Germany I'm usually on a reading tour or directing plays.

**Kluempers:** And you were just in Germany last August . . .

**Roth:** I did a reading tour with *Riverside* and *Johnny Shines*. Then in October I started rehearsal on a theater piece of mine called *Kelly*. It's one of the three plays from the trilogy *Die Wachsamten*. It's a "love story," the account of a man who is condemned to die in the San Quentin gas chamber.

**Kluempers:** Do you plan to remain in L.A. indefinitely?

**Roth:** Probably for the next few years. I don't really see myself going back to Germany for good. I may want to live in Italy one day, or go back to France. There seems to be something about being in touch with another language, about being exiled in it, that somehow helps shape my spin on the German language.

**Kluempers:** Are there too many distractions in Germany?

**Roth:** Over there—I notice it every time—you’re swept up in this swirling poison cauldron of literature critics and authors, with “the public” or “public opinion” thrown in as spice. Everyone feeds on everyone else in this cauldron of politics. I’m sure there are a good number of people that thrive on it. To me it’s totally unchallenging. It does not help me with where I want to go as a writer. Yet the moment I return to L.A., all these German voices fall silent. No one around me speaks this language. The process of writing has begun and I have to almost drum it out of the ground, this language, regenerate it for myself. It’s as if I had to invent the language all over. And, with it, its own logic. The logic of language as it speaks. I’m told it’s not what you would consider “logical” in terms of “contemporary German prose,” it doesn’t “fit.” I don’t know what that means. The fact is I am apart from them, which is good and bad, but that’s certainly the way it is.

**Kluempers:** Do you think other modern writers approach language the same as you do?

**Roth:** I can’t really tell you. I greatly admire what Arno Schmidt did with the German language. Especially in his translations. There are some German Poe translations by Schmidt that come close—and sometimes surpass—the original.

**Kluempers:** Why did you choose the title *Riverside* for your first novel?

**Roth:** Every German somehow knows what “Riverside” means, seems to be able to “translate” it somehow. “River” is “Fluß” and “side” is “Seite.” That is exactly what the other side is, that’s how it always manages to attract you. The other side of a river, the river you cross in telling a story—or in listening to one, for that matter. The other side is discovered by seeing and projecting something familiar—the “translation” you somehow arrive at—onto the other side. You say: “Oh, I know what it means.” Just as if you said: “Oh, I know what it’ll look like over there.” If that were not possible, the other side would remain either invisible or totally foreign to you. Or it might

inject enough fear in you to keep you from ever crossing. But you see, we seem to find something of ourselves over there—the Germans find it in knowing or almost knowing what this “foreign” word, what “Riverside” means—and that’s what attracts us to the “other side.” This is the process described in the novel. I won’t go into the plot now—you know it’s a story that takes place in 37 A.D., a few miles east of Jerusalem in a cave in the Judaeen Desert—but Andreas and Tabas, the young men who have come to “interview” the leper in his cave, have arrived with a number of expectations. They reach the “other side” toward the end of that night, only to find that all their expectations were false. Totally false, but necessary. The expectations were what attracted them. It’s what made them “cross over.” Their talk with the old man becomes the river, it sweeps them up and takes them to the other side. And changes their world entirely.

**Kluempers:** Jesus and Judas are the two most important characters in your biblical tales. Why do you focus on them?

**Roth:** Judas, as I see him, is the anthropomorphization of the other side, that is, of the “other.” The major voyage that has to be undertaken—in both novels—is one of literally incorporating Judas and making him part of us again. They say, find a way to embrace the enemy, to approach him, to recognize him as a part of yourself—embrace this shadow figure. This is the big embrace in *Riverside*. Once the embrace has taken place, once it’s been told, the characters have taken the decisive step. And so has the reader. The thing you dreaded most is now a part of you. You realize it always was. That’s a major realization. You’re weakened by it at first, you’re still reeling—but that’s where I want you. This moment exists also in *Johnny Shines* when the legend of Jesus and Judas is told. When Jesus and Judas meet, one of them becomes conscious of what it will mean, the other runs away, not knowing what it meant. That’s why their encounter will have to be repeated. The “other” is Judas. Our Judas. If we push him away, then we’re running away with him, so to speak. Then we have not understood what he is all about.

**Kluempers:** In *Johnny Shines* you keep referring to a movie, an old western . . .

**Roth:** Yes, John Ford's last black and white western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. There is a parallel. John Wayne acts out some of James Stewart's shadow qualities. John Wayne uses the gun, Wayne is the one who shoots Valance, whereas Stewart suppresses all this. The movies are a great part of my life. I went to film school in L.A., wrote screenplays, and made some films. I have to be able to see what I write. My stories are told through "scenes," and the storyteller's eye often moves through the scene's landscape the way a moving camera would. I get a kick out of rethinking space in my mind. The description of someone pressing past a person who is standing in a doorway . . . imagine! You move across the threshold, you touch his side. . . . I describe this in a one-act play I wrote recently ("Magdalenen-Revolver"). Mary Magdalene moves past this unknown man who stands in the doorway to Christ's tomb. Describing it the way a "stationary camera" would won't do the job. You have to walk with her, move with her. Which is precisely the point. You move past this God, the God you don't recognize. You err. You make him turn around.

**Kluempers:** What was the reasoning behind the title of your most recent book, *Johnny Shines*?

**Roth:** When you hear his last name, "Shines," you see a shining, a brightness. But if you investigate the etymology of "shine," you discover that it contains the opposite. The "shi" in "shines" comes from "ski," as in the Greek word "skias." "Skias" means shadow. Here's the darkness hidden inside the brightness. The "other" is hidden in the familiar, the "everybody" I refer to as "Johnny."

**Kluempers:** What's Johnny's character about?

**Roth:** Johnny Shines feels a great rage. A rage that comes out in his desire to break open coffins, to place his hands on the dead in front of the gathered mourners and command the dead to come to life. Most people say he's crazy or call him psychotic, but I sympathize with his rage, which may be nothing more than the great intensity with which he pursues his search for truth. In taking literally Jesus' command—reported in Matthew 10:8—to "raise the dead," he *has* to rage, for there is nothing in this world that seems to allow the dead to rise. Johnny has to rage because he wants another world. The only world he can

remember where such things were possible, within the realm of possibility, is the world he imagined when he was a child. When a world could be imagined, a possible world, where truth was so attainable, so graspable that it practically materialized before his eyes. This world is still alive in Johnny. It's dying alive. And Johnny's wish to resurrect others turns out to be a longing to resurrect himself.

**Kluempers:** Now you are working on the third book in the "Riverside-Johnny Shines" series. Did you always intend to write a trilogy?

**Roth:** As I was finishing *Riverside*, other images came to the fore and I knew I'd be working on them. When *Johnny Shines* took shape, I was sure there would be a third one. They're all looking at the same problem from different perspectives. One critic remarked that they're exclusively dealing with Matthew 10:8. That's not all wrong.

**Kluempers:** Are you a churchgoer?

**Roth:** No, I do not believe in organized religion. I don't want to be seen as proselytizing either, not for any one particular religion anyway. It's the process of discovery I'm interested in, of individuation, of self-discovery, you might say. But that "self" is not identical with the "ego." The metaphors I choose to describe this process are images from "my tree." My tree happens to be the Judeo-Christian tree, the culture I was born into.

**Kluempers:** Is that why miracles seem to be so significant to your stories?

**Roth:** "Miracle" seems like such a big word. I think Nietzsche once used the metaphor of the "slow arrow." These miracles—the ones I'm interested in—are such slow arrows. They don't really stop when they pierce you. They may initially wound you, may make you aware you've been hit, but in their slowness they make you forget they're inside, make you forget they're moving. They are patient in their run, they are sure of their goal. They will transfix and transform you by the time they're "through." All you see in my novels is that "moment of initial impact." You lose balance maybe, you never thought you could, but you're pulled in and become part of the target, find out

you've always been its very center. This moment of impact when everything changes, when the arrow has reached you, when the process begins, is what I'm interested in. A qualitative jump occurs here. It's the moment when the river is crossed, the other side has been reached. To give you an example, there are these pictures by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, a series he calls "Carceri" or "Prisons." In them you observe a world of archways and levels, you see archways beyond archways, vaults beyond vaults, level upon level, an almost Escher-like world, a labyrinth of prisons connected by stairs. And your eye follows these levels, scans them for awhile, and then, suddenly, you see it—it stuns you because you realized it so late—you see that one of these stairs swerves off, comes straight at you, vaults right into you, practically pushing past the frame-line to pull you into the frame. That's the moment of qualitative change. Everything has changed. That is the moment my novels try to build up to. This moment, if it's done right, has transformative power. It has an echo that lasts, something that seems to curve back on itself, something that spins you right back into the world you thought you just left. But now you reenter it differently, something has changed. The important thing is that until the very last moment you considered yourself outside, a mere observer. Now you're inside, *you* are the one who's observed. That can be at once wonderful and disturbing. A "miracle" is the becoming aware of the other, not as the one who sees, but as the one who is seen. *You* are the other. You're inside. You were asleep and now you're awake. This has to work on a language level, too. I resurrect new meaning from a word, from words that have been used and re-used, that have been stripped of meaning. I like for the reader to become aware of other meanings, forgotten ones, a meaning level that was dormant and comes alive with the last page. If one went back to the first page, one would find the same words again, but they would ring with a different meaning. Something that was forgotten and dead has come alive.

**Kluempers:** As a German, what do you think of Americans?

**Roth:** I've been living in L.A. almost half my life. What am I then? German? American? I don't think I'd be writing these books had I not lived here. America and Americans have shaped my themes, my views. All this of course had to merge with what I brought along

when I came here almost twenty years ago. My foundation, my language memory, my view of the spirit is "German." My car is "American." So is my view of the body, of things material. My view of the world. Of course you have to put these things in quotation marks. You'd have to imagine these German/American worlds of "spirit" and "matter" criss-crossed by bridges that are neither. Or maybe I'd better say they are both, both matter and spirit. These bridges are spanning the conflict, holding together the opposites. I live on these bridges, I thrive on them, and—to come back to your question—think very well of my neighbors on both sides.

**Kluempers:** Would you like to see your works translated into English?

**Roth:** Yes, but I wouldn't take the job. I'd be afraid to render a too literal translation from the German. These books need a translator who will give them his or her own language-spin in order to make them come "alive" in English. They're good stories. On that level alone they should work in any language.

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