

I. *John Rodker: Life and Writing*

John Rodker was born 18 December 1894 in Manchester, England, with the name Simon Solomon, the son of David Rodker and Leah Rodker (*née* Jacobson). In a Statuary Declaration dated 26 July 1929, Rodker stated that “My father originally came from Poland and as ‘Rodker’ was a Polish name he adopted for a time the name of Solomon . . . but I have as long as I can remember been known as John Rodker” (John Rodker Papers, HRC).

When Rodker was six years old his father, who ran a corset shop, moved the family to Whitechapel in London’s East End. As a young man, Rodker focused his interests on languages, poetry, and art. He excelled at languages, but was largely self-educated; “his father did not have a library full of classics,” Ezra Pound wrote of Rodker’s background to the publisher Margaret Anderson, “but he will learn” (Pound / *Little Review* 63).² By 1911 Rodker had made important friendships with Joseph Leftwich, Isaac Rosenberg and Stephen Winsten—all three of whom would become artists and writers. The small circle of friends, known as “the Whitechapel boys,” spent their free time together encouraging and critiquing each other’s work and discussing the artists and poets they admired most.³ Other early friends included the artists David Bomberg and Mark Gertler.

Rodker’s career as a writer began when in 1912 he published two poems in the *New Age*—his earliest piece was “A Slice of Life.”⁴ The

2. EP to Margaret Anderson, 11 June 1917, editor of the *Little Review*; Pound predicts JR’s future success.

3. See Joseph Cohen, *Journey to the Trenches, the Life of Isaac Rosenberg*. New York: Basic Books, 1975: 33–53. Cohen describes the activities of the group as related in Leftwich’s unpublished diary.

4. Appearing in the *New Age* (27 June 1912, p. 211) “A Slice of Life” was mistakenly

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following spring his essay on the Whitechapel theatre scene appeared in *Poetry and Drama*.⁵ Through the mid 1920s, Rodker's poems continued appearing in little magazines, such as *The Egoist*, the *New Age*, and *Poetry*, and in the twenty years that followed his first appearance in print, he published dozens of poems, three novels, and many essays and reviews.

In the years preceding World War I, Rodker's connection with the emerging movements in art and literature, such as Futurism and Vorticism, in many ways determined the course of his future literary activities. Rodker identified with the avant-garde artists and writers of the pre-war period and supported their aesthetic ideals in his own writing. In May 1914 *The Dial Monthly* ran his essay, "The 'New' Movement in Art," in which Rodker defended the new art against accusations of "chicanery," and quoted extensively from Filippo Marinetti's Futurist manifesto of 1909.⁶ Rodker further felt that the function of his own poetry "was to shock," a belief that the *Dial* article emphasized: "The essential elements of our poetry are audacity and revolt" (*CP* vii; and 'New' Movement 184). The article included the artwork of David Bomberg and Edward Wadsworth, both of whom would collaborate with Rodker at the Ovid Press.

As a poet, Rodker said that his impulse was to upset traditional expectations; he admired the French symbolists, who strongly influenced his early verse—just as they influenced that of T.S. Eliot (*CP* vii). Rodker explained in the preface to his *Collected Poems* "how much influenced [he] was by the French Poetry of 1850–1910," and that he "first came to poetry through [the French] language" (*CP* vii). His interest in these writers would remain important, and he went on to publish the letters,

credited to Norman Fitzroy Webb, an error corrected by the editor in the July 18 number; the poem also appears in Rodker's *Poems* (1914). His second poem, "After Reading *Dorian Gray*" (*New Age*, 7 Nov 1912, p. 20), was not otherwise republished.

5. "The Theatre in Whitechapel" *Poetry and Drama*, March 1913 (1:1 43–4).

6. The article appeared in *The Dial Monthly* (London), May 1914: 184–88.

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poetry, and prose of Charles Baudelaire and, in his own translation, the *Lay of Maldoror* by the Comte de Lautréamont.⁷

Attracted to the leaders of the Vorticist movement, such as Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Wyndham Lewis, and Ezra Pound, Rodker would go on to publish their work at the Ovid Press and defend their aesthetic credo. The Vorticist group, organized around the publication of Lewis's magazine *Blast* (1914–15), sought to distinguish itself from the more conservative group of artists associated with Roger Fry and his Omega workshop. Although Rodker had connections among writers with middle and upper class backgrounds, such as his friend R.C. Trevelyan,⁸ his strongest associations were with artists of the avant-garde. The cover art of his first published book, *Poems* (1914), reproduces his friend David Bomberg's Vorticist drawing *The Dancer*, reflecting Rodker's aesthetic values at this time.

Shortly after his *Poems* appeared, he began to gain the attention of other writers and editors. In the foreword to the October 1915 issue of *Others, a Magazine of the New Verse*, edited by Ezra Pound and dedicated to Rodker, Pound wrote, "I first came across [Rodker's] work during my informal connection with *The Egoist* and promptly rejected it. Later he sent me his 'London Night' and in this series of poems I discerned, or believed that I discerned, the stray gleams of individuality" (Pound *Others*, Foreword).⁹ Rodker's individuality stood him in good stead with Pound and their contemporaries, unfortunately his rise in the world of letters coincided with that of the First World War.

7. Rodker issued the Comte de Lautréamont's *The Lay of Maldoror* (1922) and Charles Baudelaire's Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs Du Mal ; Petits Poèmes En Prose ; Les Paradis Artificiels* (1925) under the Casanova Society imprint and *The Letters of Charles Baudelaire to His Mother, 1833–1866* (1928) under his John Rodker, Publisher imprint.

8. The poet Robert Calverley Trevelyan (1872–1951), the brother of MP and pacifist C.P. Trevelyan (1870–1958). R.C. Trevelyan translated *The Idylls of Theocritus* (1925), published under Rodker's Casanova Society imprint.

9. Foreword to the Choric School, by Ezra Pound, *Others*, Oct 1915. "London Night" was first published in *Poetry*, Dec 1914.