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Hugo Von Hofmannsthal: The Whole Difference
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INTRODUCTION

NO NOVELIST has better described the dissolution of the Hapsburg empire than Joseph Roth. Of course it did not collapse with a shudder at the death of the emperor and the end of the Great War, but had been rotting away for years, and the rot created its own luster, which Roth captured with an uncanny accuracy. He caught the rustling silks and sword hilts, the gutted nostalgia, the unwritten and impenetrable rules, the aimlessness and hollow laughter, the Prater and masquerades, the military maneuvers and opera boxes. He described it all as a dying candle, flickering, golden, consumed by the very liquid it had created.

I lived in the cheerful, carefree company of young aristocrats whose company, second only to that of artists, I loved best under the old Empire. With them I shared a skeptical frivolity, a melancholy curiosity, a wicked insouciance, and the pride of the doomed, all signs of the disintegration which at that time we still did not see coming. Above the ebullient glasses from which we drank, invisible Death was already crossing his bony hands. We swore without malice and blasphemed without thought. Alone and old, distant and at the same time turning into stone, but still close to us all and omnipresent in the great and brilliant pattern of the Empire, lived and ruled the old Emperor,

Franz Joseph. . . . Our wit and our frivolity came from hearts that were heavy with the feeling that we were dedicated to death, from a foolish pleasure in everything which asserted life.

Imperial Vienna during the *fin de siècle*—the city of Klimt and Mahler, Freud and Schnitzler, Kokoschka and Schoenberg—gave birth to the modern world astride a luxuriant grave. If one word could characterize what happened during that time it would be the word Hugo von Hofmannsthal once said best described the heart of his own work: *Verwandlung*, transformation, a moment when nostalgia and necessity collide, when the past is turned inside out and becomes a future that both repudiates and resembles what it has replaced, when we forget in order to change, and change in order to remember.

The best writers in a convulsive era may embody the chaos of their time or diagnose it. Hofmannsthal did neither. One can find violent hysteria and pathological intensity in, say, his play *Elektra*; one can find collage and disjunctive narration, and other tricks of modernism, elsewhere in his output. But Hofmannsthal did not care to be relevant. “In our time,” he once said, “too much fuss is made about our time.” He cared only to be timeless. He set out—the rarest and riskiest of ambitions—to be a classic, and all along was what might be called a radical traditionalist. The powerful imagination, he knew, is conservative. He saw his world as an arena where *das Gleitende*—a gliding, swirling—held sway, and he eventually construed his art as one that tried not to fix but to blend. One critic has rightly said that he did so “not by imposing law, but by revealing the hidden forms in which the parts of life are bound to each other.” This harmony was, in Hofmannsthal’s own words, “the ceremony of the whole.” He presided over it wearing a thin gold mask, from which shone a light that reflected in the meanest, darkest corners of life, and in the grandest.

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It would be difficult to name another writer who made such an astonishing debut as Hofmannsthal. To be sure, Keats and Rimbaud achieved an early perfection, but no one ever dazzled the wider world at such a young age. At the age of sixteen, he began publishing essays under the name “Loris” (his school did not permit students to publish anything under their own names), and soon after, poems of a shimmering elegance. Then, one day, a slender, beardless seventeen-year-old youth in short pants showed up at the Café Griensteidl, the coffeehouse where the young literati of Vienna gathered, and in a piping voice introduced himself. The influential critic Hermann Bahr was a regular, and remembered seeing a youth with

the profile of Dante, only a little softened and blurred, in more gentle, supple traits, as Watteau or Fragonard would have painted it, except for the nose with strong, rigid, motionless nostrils under the short, narrow brow, as if made of marble, so hard and decisive, topped by smooth bangs. Brown, merry, trusting eyes of a girl, in which there was something reflective, hopeful, and quizzical mixed in with a naïve coquetry, that kind that loves wry, sidelong glances; short, thick, shapeless lips, malicious and cruel, the bottom one turned inside out and hanging down so that one sees the gum. A fine, slender, pageboy body of gymnastic grace, flexible as a willow switch, and preferring to bend forward slightly in round lines, with the falling shoulders of those of sophisticated culture.

Bahr too had read Loris’s essays and been struck with wonder, thinking him a middle-aged writer, unknown but extraordinarily refined and wise. He was startled when the young Hofmannsthal stood before him, becoming famous. The boy was soon invited by Arthur Schnitzler to his apartment to read one of his verse plays. “I had the feeling,” Schnitzler recounted, “of having encountered a born genius for the first time in my life, and never again during my entire lifetime was I so over-

whelmed.” This was a time when the new German literature was making itself heard, the time of Gerhart Hauptmann, Stefan George, and Rainer Maria Rilke, of Stefan Zweig and Richard Beer-Hofmann. This was “Young Vienna” with its café society and its cosmopolitan manner, its rejection of a heavy-handed naturalism and its embrace of French symbolism. Hofmannsthal stunned them all. After that first reading, Schnitzler recalled,

After a few minutes we riveted our attention on him, and exchanged astonished, almost frightened glances. We had never heard verses of such perfection, such faultless plasticity, such musical feeling, from any living being, nor had we thought them possible since Goethe. But more wondrous than this unique mastery of form (which has never since been achieved by anyone else in the German language) was his knowledge of the world, which could only have come from a magical intuition in a youth whose days were spent sitting on a school bench.

Zweig was likewise astounded by Hofmannsthal, “in whom our youth saw not only its highest ambitions but also absolute poetic perfection come into being, in the person of one of its own age.”

Hugo von Hofmannsthal was born in Vienna on February 1, 1874. His father, also Hugo, was a successful bank director; his mother, Anna Maria Fohleutner, came from a wealthy Bavarian background. But the real source of the family’s prosperity was his paternal grandfather, a businessman with interests in silk and potash. Decades before Hofmannsthal was born, his father’s family had been ennobled and converted to Catholicism from Judaism, though a whiff of suspicion about his background lingered in the prominent salons he came to prefer, and even Hofmannsthal himself sometimes indulged casually in the anti-Semitism so common at that time. He studied law at the University of Vienna, but after his compulsory military service his interests turned to French literature and a possible

academic career. Drawn to the clarity and elegance of French culture, he wrote a doctoral dissertation on the poets of the *Pléiade* and a post-doctoral dissertation on Victor Hugo, but by 1901 had decided to pursue the life of a writer himself. Literary friendships blossomed and travel added to his store of impressions, but this was also a time of intense reading, of early publication, and of productions of plays that met with little public success.

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The reputation of Loris was such that the German poet Stefan George sought him out at the Griensteidl, trying to add another disciple to his circle of devotees, all of whom worshiped at the altar of symbolism. But George found that the young Hofmannsthal already knew the work of Swinburne and Pater, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Maeterlinck and d'Annunzio, and would be less of a protégé than a precocious partisan. During the 1890s Hofmannsthal wrote poems and verse plays that constituted an extraordinary lyrical outpouring and a brief one, and for some readers indelibly fixed the image of his gifts they thought he later betrayed by seeking other means of expression. But for Hofmannsthal, unlike the hieratic George, *Beauty and Truth*, from the beginning, were joined in a sense of artistic purpose—aesthetic intensity and moral passion. The invisible links between disparate aspects of experience and the unity of all are common themes in a symbolist poem, as the mysterious source of its inspiration can be its occasion. Hofmannsthal's poems too—their music largely lost in English versions that stumble to mimic the rare delicacies of the original—work by suggestion and insinuation, their epiphanies shrouded in metaphysical mists. Still, he insisted that the source of lyrical inspiration lay in empathy. "If we wish to find ourselves," he later wrote, "we must not descend into our own inwardness; it is outside that we are to be found, outside." The self is a translucent metaphor given shape by things beyond it, and the language of poetry is meant continually to transform us. "And from all its transforma-

tions, all its adventures, from all the abysses and gardens, poetry will bring back nothing more than the quivering breath of human feelings.”

During the same decade, Hofmannsthal wrote a series of short verse dramas, beginning in 1891 with *Gestern (Yesterday)*, whose subject is the hedonistic musings of a Renaissance nobleman who is forced to confront his past. The dramatic force of the play is occluded, but its verse is gorgeous. The interplay of life and death, of pleasure and mortality is at the heart too of several similar playlets written during the following years: *Der Tod des Tizian (The Death of Titian, 1882)*, *Der Tor und der Tod (Death and the Fool, 1893)*, and *Alkestis (1893)*. Many other plays followed during these years: *Die Frau im Fenster (The Woman in the Window, 1897)*, *Das kleine Welttheater (The Little Theater of the World, 1897)*, *Der weiße Fächer (The White Fan, 1897)*, *Die Hochzeit der Sobeide (The Marriage of Sobeide, 1897)*, *Der Kaiser und die Hexe (The Emperor and the Witch, 1897)*, the “serious comedy” *Der Abenteurer und die Sängerin (The Adventurer and the Singer, 1898)*, and the five-act “fairy-tale tragedy” *Das Bergwerk zu Falun (The Mine at Falun, 1899)*. He later called them “speaking masks” or “operas without music.” The reviews were rarely favorable. The critics listened only for the lyric note, and then used it to fault the dramatic structure. They still yearned for the miraculous Loris, and often held it against Hofmannsthal that he himself felt the need to move beyond his early reputation. Sadly, this became a model for much of the critical reaction to his work over the entire course of his career, a mix of adulation and condescension.

This remarkable decade of the 1890s was a time too when Hofmannsthal made important literary and personal connections. Alfred Walter Heymel and Rudolf Alexander Schröder, founders of the publishing house Insel Verlag, became important to him, as did the lawyer and patron Eberhard von Bodenhausen, and Countess Ottonie Degenfeld, at whose Chateau Neubeuern he was often welcomed. Gerhart Hauptmann, Rudolf Borchardt, and Count Harry Kessler became friends,

along with the connoisseurs Helene and Alfred von Nostitz. On trips to Paris he befriended Auguste Rodin, Anatole France, and Maurice Maeterlinck. Though some people found him snobbish and irritable, his close friends thought him a generous, wise, and loyal man. His friend the painter Hans Schlessinger introduced Hofmannsthal to his sister Gertrude; after a five-year acquaintanceship Hugo and Gerty married in 1901, and he purchased a handsome *Schlösschen* in Rodaun, on the outskirts of Vienna. The marriage was close but never as intimate as several of his friendships. Though more recent commentators have generally concluded that Hofmannsthal was a repressed homosexual, the couple had three children: Christiane, born in 1902, Franz, a year later, and Raimund, in 1906.

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The “Chandos crisis” hit in 1902. Though clearly a work of prose fiction, “The Letter of Lord Chandos” has always and rightly been read as an autobiographical confession, one that dramatizes its author’s own “word-skepticism” and marks a decisive change of direction in his career. In the letter, Chandos writes to his friend Francis Bacon of “a peculiarity, a vice, a disease of my mind, if you like” that has rendered him incapable of writing. In the past he had “conceived the whole of existence as one great unit,” a continuum in which the smallest detail of nature or thought, history or culture had its place. All that has shattered. Abstractions turn to dust in his mouth, descriptions distort rather than clarify, opinions only induce doubt. “For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea. Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back—whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void.” The mute creatures of the world appeal to him, but he feels himself condemned to silence. Hofmannsthal himself later described this as “the situation of a mystic without mysticism,” and the allegory depicts his own impasse. He had arrived

at the limits of aestheticism and symbolism, which has exhausted him and dried up his impulse to continue as a poet. A literature divorced from life, all incantation and allure, is a dead end. It is a crisis that had been building for some years. In 1896 he had written to Stefan George of the question “whether I have any right whatever to allow words with which we denote values and judgments to pass my lips.” As Chandos writes, “To me, then, it is as though my body consists of nought but ciphers which give me the key to everything; or as if we could enter into a new and hopeful relationship with the whole of existence if only we begin to think with the heart.” That relationship, in the years ahead, having abandoned his lyrical isolation, Hofmannsthal sought in the drama and opera, in a public art, in the social context that restores language to the community. He moved from the mystical to the moral. He sought now what he could see as the basis of, say, religious rituals—the enactment of *Elementarerfahrungen*, or fundamental human experiences.

He turned as well to the writing of fiction and essays. His early short stories are a prelude to the novel he launched in 1907, *Andreas*. Of all the projects left unfinished at the time of his death, this is to be most regretted. We have only eighty pages of the text—and a further fifty of notes—of what would have been one of the great examples of the tradition of the German Bildungsroman. His essays—they occupy nearly a third of his collected works—are in many ways the truest portrait of his mind. Their range is prodigious. There are literary portraits and studies. He writes on his travels. He writes on music and dance and painting, on his own work and that of the masters, on society and politics and culture. There is never a trace of strident ideology or of what he termed “the barrenness of concepts.” He prefers the impression to the thesis; he appreciates rather than analyzes. The obligations underlying the essays are invariably ethical and social, the consideration of man and the achievements that confer on him some measure of immortality.

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Like any true dramatist, Hofmannsthal was fascinated by the theater of ancient Greece, and during his career he translated or adapted work by Euripides, Sophocles, and Aristophanes. His two Sophocles plays, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1905) and *Oedipus, the King* (1907), are powerfully original versions of the most famous of classical dramas. It was Sophocles' *Elektra* that gave Hofmannsthal another of his triumphs. His version opened at Berlin's Kleines Theater on October 30, 1903, with Gertrud Eysolt in the leading role, in a production by Max Reinhardt. Soon after it opened, the composer Richard Strauss saw the play and immediately realized its potential for operatic treatment. Reinhardt's earlier production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* had fired his imagination, and when he saw *Elektra* on the stage he was already at work on his opera *Salome*. Once that opera premiered in 1906, Strauss wrote to Hofmannsthal for permission to set his play. The playwright set about trimming and adding new material in accordance with the composer's needs, and to his delight, Strauss called Hofmannsthal "a born librettist." Their opera opened at the Königliches Opernhaus in Dresden on January 25, 1909, and was an immediate, if controversial, success around the world. Its complex psychologizing cannot disguise its raw brutality. Its single act hurtles through a series of confrontations towards the fatal dance of triumph at its conclusion, as Elektra celebrates her brother Orestes' murder of their mother Clytemnestra in revenge for her killing of their father Agamemnon. The text is a delirious rhapsody of anguish and violence; the music erupts with demonic force.

Thus began the twentieth century's greatest collaboration of composer and librettist. Their instinctive ability to work together was hardly matched by their personal dealings, however. Over the quarter-century of their correspondence, Hofmannsthal most often started his letters with "Dear Dr. Strauss," and always signed them just "Hofmannsthal." Their meetings were even more difficult. To his friend Countess Ottonie Degenfeld he wrote in a 1911 letter: "The twenty-four hours with the Strausses were a long, continuous, horrible nightmare. These

boorish, half-insane, deathly strange people. Characters out of a dream—who are they?! How did I ever become involved with them?” Yet in another letter to her a year later: “Last night it was Strauss from eleven to midnight, and for the first time, I think I was able to *understand* him. . . . One must say he is truly a genius.” Hofmannsthal’s fastidiously elegant personality made it difficult for him to see beneath Strauss’s vulgar, abrasive manner, but each man sensed that the other brought strengths to a project neither could manage alone. In any case, we have their sublime operas, and their unprecedented success has meant that Hofmannsthal is now most famous—or perhaps *only* famous—as a librettist. For that very reason, and because his libretti are performed regularly on every opera stage around the world, this side of his work is proportionately underrepresented in this volume. Only the first of *Der Rosenkavalier*’s three acts is included here as a resplendent example of Hofmannsthal’s ability to create dramatic depths for his characters and musical opportunities for the composer.

The success of *Elektra* prompted discussions between the two men about their next project. Perhaps a comic opera based on Casanova’s exploits? Or a mythological fable based on one of Hofmannsthal’s favorite authors, Calderón? Maybe the French Revolution or Semiramis? But in February, 1909, he writes to Strauss: “I have spent three quiet afternoons here drafting the full and entirely original scenario for an opera, full of burlesque situations and characters, with lively action, pellucid almost like a pantomime.” The opera was to be *Der Rosenkavalier* (*The Cavalier of the Rose*), one of the most nearly perfect works in the history of opera, its score sumptuous, and its libretto a literary masterpiece of refinement whose sophisticated humor yields to poignant depths. At its center, the Marschallin, Princess Werdenberg (whose given name, Maria Theresa, is that of the Empress of Austria during whose reign the opera’s action is set), is a character of unending fascination who must renounce what she loves with the tender realization, “Easy is what we must be—holding and taking, holding and letting go.” Hofmannsthal surrounds her with a gallery of foils, from her impetuous lover

Octavian to the oafish Baron Ochs to the vacuous beauty Sophie, in order to dramatize the fate of desire. “Molière’s comedies, too,” he wrote in a 1927 postscript to the opera, “rest not so much on the characters themselves as on the relations of the often very typical figures to one another.” It is the tenuous fabric of relationships he explores so delicately. Though she isn’t a leading character in the events that unfold in the opera, the Marschallin is its central presence because she is wiser than all the others, can see what they cannot—the evanescence of human things. From the start, Hofmannsthal had urged Strauss to avoid a Wagnerian bluster, and to think instead of “an old-fashioned Viennese waltz, half honey-sweet, half shameless.” There is, of course, a certain measure of nostalgia at the heart of this comedy of manners, and coming as it did on the eve of the First World War, it has a valedictory air to it: one last look at a world of beguiling love and gentle loss. More to the point, maybe, is that the work’s similarity to Mozart’s *Nozze di Figaro* and Wagner’s *Meistersinger* give *Der Rosenkavalier* a rare place among the most humane works of art ever conceived.

Der Rosenkavalier premiered in Dresden in January, 1911, and quickly made its way to opera houses around the world. For their next project, Hofmannsthal concocted a two-act opera, consisting, first, of a prologue in which a troupe of comedians and a traveling opera company are told to combine their efforts at the evening’s fête, and then an “opera” in which the compromise—half high tragedy, half song-and-dance—is performed. *Ariadne auf Naxos*, which premiered in 1916, has transformation at its heart, not only in its mixing of genres but in the hearts of its main characters, where love dissolves misapprehensions and conquers death. What the opera is about, its librettist wrote, “is one of the straightforward and stupendous problems of life: fidelity; whether to hold fast to that which is lost, to cling to it even in death—or to live, to live on, to get on with it, to transform oneself.”

There were three subsequent opera collaborations (though Hofmannsthal also wrote ballet scenarios for Strauss). In 1919, their *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (*The Woman without a Shadow*) pre-

miered in Vienna. It was a story that had long preoccupied Hofmannsthal, and he also made a prose tale out of it. The score is Strauss at his most luxuriant, but critics have sometimes found the text murky. Hofmannsthal himself thought of this opera as their *Magic Flute*, to be put alongside *Der Rosenkavalier's* take on the *Marriage of Figaro*. But it seems less like a fairy tale and more like a dream, with dark surrealist touches and psychic enigmas. As would seem appropriate for an opera opening in the wake of the Great War, it urges the blessings of child-bearing, though its subtle meditation on married love is what gives it force for later audiences. One writer has indeed best described it as a “parable of the survival of mankind.” The emperor of the “South-Eastern Isles” will be turned to stone unless his empress gives him a child—which she cannot do because she lacks a shadow. In the company of her nurse, she descends to the world of humans and tries to bribe a dyer’s wife to sell her shadow. What ensues—the tale of these two couples and their trials—drew from Hofmannsthal a symbolic poetry that combined his love of Goethe and of eastern fantasies. (His early story “The Tale of Night Six Hundred and Seventy-Two,” though more naturalistic, is akin.) It took them a while to agree on a subject, but their next collaboration, *Die ägyptische Helena* (*The Egyptian Helen*), which did not premiere until 1928, is also about marriage, and an even stranger opera. It deals with an account from an alternative classical myth that Helen of Troy was not in fact abducted but was spirited safely away to Egypt awaiting Menelaus, while her phantom self cavorted in Troy. Hofmannsthal decided to give the story a further turn by having the sorceress Aithra cast a spell on Menelaus that causes him to think the guilty Helen innocent, and then to have him recognize and accept her. “Ewig eine, ewig neue!” (Ever the same, ever new!) Menelaus says of his wife. As before, the transforming power of memory and forgiveness is central to the opera. “Transformation is the life of life itself,” Hofmannsthal wrote, “the real mystery of nature as a creative force. Permanence is numbness and death. Whoever wants to live must surpass himself, must trans-

form himself: he has to forget. And yet all human merit is linked with permanence, unforgetfulness, constancy.” But the material lacks clarity and lightness; there are elves and eunuchs and a character called The Omniscient Seashell. It is not the author at his best, nor has the opera gained a secure foothold in the international repertory. Their final collaboration, *Arabella*, is a sad story. The composer’s final note to the librettist, sent on July 14, 1929, was in fact a telegram: “FIRST ACT EXCELLENT. MANY THANKS AND CONGRATULATIONS.” The very next day, Hofmannsthal suddenly died. When the opera finally premiered in Dresden in 1933, Strauss had set acts II and III as Hofmannsthal had left them in draft. Those acts would undoubtedly have been tighter if Hofmannsthal’s hand had gone over them again, but *Arabella* remains a transcendent opera, at once tender and wry, a witty take on romantic and sexual stereotypes and at the same time a heartbreaking excursion into the mysteries of love and fidelity. Hofmannsthal had cobbled his text together from a short story of his, “Lucidor,” and a fragment, *Der Fiaker als Graf* (*The Cabbie as Count*), and again displayed his uncanny ability to remake familiar material in wholly original ways. In fact, Hofmannsthal’s genius as an opera librettist consisted of his ability to plumb emotions while letting unspoken theatrical gestures—the presentation of a silver rose or of a glass of water—permit the music to carry the drama, and to make his characters out of a lyric poetry—unequaled on the opera stage before or since—suffused with exquisite detail and sweep.

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As the Great War staggered to an end during the autumn of 1918, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had already cracked apart and the Hapsburg monarchy crumbled. The Austrian Republic that emerged was weak, and the devastations of social and economic failure only compounded the ravages of war. Indeed, all of Europe, in the bickering power-grab that the Paris Peace Conference became, was further torn apart. Vindictive winners and embittered losers alike brandished a treacherous jingoism,

while the influenza pandemic killed off the weak who had somehow survived the war. The situation in Vienna was desperate. There was no food or fuel; looters with guns, escaped convicts, and starving prisoners of war roamed the freezing city streets. Women cut down the famed Vienna Woods for logs, and coffee was made from barley. If a family had jewelry it was sold on the black market, until inflation wiped out everyone's savings. Hofmannsthal (who had served in the army during the war in both military and diplomatic postings) and his family were hardly immune. In April, 1919, he wrote to a friend, "now even the horse meat, on which we have subsisted for the past year and a half, is no longer affordable and no longer available." Yet even in the midst of such suffering and humiliation, he was determined to salvage an ideal of European humanism. In 1877, a summer festival of music and drama was begun in Salzburg, but was discontinued because of the war. It was Hofmannsthal's idea to restore it. He joined with Richard Strauss and the great stage director Max Reinhardt, along with scenic designer Alfred Roller and conductor Fritz Schalk, to establish a reborn Salzburg Festival, which opened on August 22, 1920 with a performance on the Domplatz of Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann*, his 1911 adaptation of the early-sixteenth-century English morality play about faith and salvation, *Everyman*. The festival was meant to serve as a beacon to rally the cultural community shattered by nationalist conflict. Two years later, his play *Das Salzburger große Welttheater* (*The Salzburg Great Theater of the World*) again sought to use the traditions of cosmopolitan theatrical spectacle and indigenous moral inquiry—Goethe's *Faust* was his ideal—to make the old trope of the *theatrum mundi* (and Calderón's play *El Gran Teatro del Mundo*) a compelling vision of mankind's fate: "that the World erects a stage on which men enact the play of life in the roles allotted to them by God."

Earlier in his career, Hofmannsthal had turned to theater as the culmination of his aesthetic ambition to reach the widest possible audience, not for the sake of a vulgar popularity but because of his conviction that an all-encompassing art could counter the increasing fragmentation of civilization. The "lyri-

cal dramas” he wrote as a young man were a halting first step, but could not leap from page to stage. The Chandos Letter’s crisis concerning the limits of language can be seen in part as a frustration with a lyric mode too narrowly exquisite for anyone’s good. “In action, in deeds,” he wrote, “the enigmas of language are resolved.” The theater—the arena of actors and masks, of confrontation and magic, of *change*—was the ultimate platform for “the mystery of voluptuous transformation.” It is here that the self is “little more than a metaphor,” and that words transcend themselves as gesture. In his 1911 essay “On Pantomime,” he writes of the effect of the dancer or actor: “A pure gesture is like a pure thought that has been stripped even of the momentarily witty, the restrictedly individual, the grotesquely characteristic.” The whole point of conventions is that every action has a precedent, every self-important assertion is an echo. In the theater we see ourselves as creatures beyond the confines of selfhood, and participate in a process that is instinctively communal.

It is no wonder that he was attracted to opera. Though he always claimed he was unmusical, he knew that “song is marvelous because it tames what otherwise is nothing but the organ of our self-seeking, the human voice.” He was attracted as well to theater of various kinds. His verse plays are essentially dramatic monologues, closet dramas for reading, but he later began to try several different sorts of theater. “I want to dramatize everything that falls into my hand,” he wrote to Schnitzler, “even the correspondence of Schiller and Goethe, or the *Linzer Tagepost*.” He translated Otway’s *Venice Preserved*, adapted Molière and Calderón, and did brilliant versions of classic Greek plays. He tried symbolic fable in *The Mine at Falun*, and comedy in *Christina’s Journey Home*. And amidst all of his experimentation he was criticized by the press (even his part in *Der Rosenkavalier* was derided by the first reviewers) for not conforming to the image they had of him as a delicate aesthete, an unworldling, and for having abandoned a higher calling. What they couldn’t see is that he had embraced it.

In fact, one way Hofmannsthal occupied himself during the war—it was the instinct of a truly civilized man—was to work on a comedy. He began *Der Schwierige* in 1917. (The standard English translation of the title is *The Difficult Man*, though the French title, *L'Irrésolu*, may be a more accurate equivalent.) His portrait of the Man of Sensibility and of the fortunes of two hearts has all of the wit and tenderness a comedy of manners is meant to convey. His portrait of the Austrian aristocracy—its fatuity and nobility, indecisiveness and resignation—is as well an ironic commentary on the social and political state of affairs in a vanishing world. Comedy, like tragedy, depends upon choice. The “difficult” Hans Karl, because of the delicacy of his heart’s motives, is a man who cannot choose. The comedy, then, is prompted by a set of exquisite scruples and two women whom he loves. Emotional fulfillment is an outgrowth of moral maturity, and nuance has the force of fate. The difficulty characters have in understanding each other is a part of their misunderstanding themselves. “Manners,” Hofmannsthal once wrote, “are walls, disguised with mirrors.” Hans Karl is the man who sees all and can say nothing. When in Act II he tells Helen about the famous circus clown Furlani, he could be describing himself as a Chaplinesque artist:

He plays his role: the man who wants to understand everybody and help everybody and yet brings everything into the utmost confusion. He makes the silliest blunders, the gallery rocks with laughter, and yet he does it with such elegance, such discretion, that one realizes how much he respects himself and everything in the world. He makes a hash of everything; wherever he intervenes there’s a complete mess, and yet one wants to cry out: “He’s right, all the same!”

In the play, defying the usual path of comedy, the old order prevails, buttoned-up elegance upends brash youth. Still, this comedy, like most others, ends with a marriage, at once unexpected and inevitable, and the moral order puts uncertainty

and impulsiveness to rights—though our lovers are absent. As so often, Hofmannsthal invokes convention in order to transfigure it. Of course, as he himself noted, *The Difficult Man* descends directly from “The Letter of Lord Chandos,” and likewise addresses the dilemma of language’s limitations. But the playwright’s sparkling control makes of this *Konversationsstücke* an excursion into the language of the heart, like Jean Renoir’s *Rules of the Game*, where we discover, as the characters do, all the depths that lie in the bright, fragile surface of things.

Like exploding bombs, the effects and import of the war more darkly resound through *Der Turm* (*The Tower*), the five-act play that preoccupied Hofmannsthal during his final years and, in his words, dramatized “the irruption of the forces of chaos into an order no longer upheld and supported by the power of the spirit.” Once again, he took his inspiration from Calderón, this time from his celebrated play *La Vida es Sueño* (*Life Is a Dream*), first published in 1636, though any reader of both plays can see how far Hofmannsthal developed the material beyond its source. Set in the killing fields of seventeenth-century Poland, the story concerns its king, Basilius, who has imprisoned his son and heir, Sigismund, and kept him since birth living like a wild animal in a filthy tower dungeon, for fear of a prophecy that this son will rise up in rebellion against his father and destroy the kingdom. This tower, in the author’s words, is “the hub of the world’s injustice; here horrible injustice begets ceaselessly new monsters, as carrion breeds flies,” but it is only the center of a world itself brutalized by anarchy, mob riot, corruption, and murder. And in the midst of chaos crouches the young man of Christ-like virtue and spiritual authority, chained in his cage.

A doctor, sent to minister to the now grown Sigismund in his misery, persuades the tower’s governor, Julian, to release his prisoner and brings him to the king, who, frightened by the political unrest abroad in the land and wracked by his guilty conscience, decides the youth must either be freed or killed. When they meet, Sigismund’s natural regality is evident, and to

test it the king commands that he kill Julian; instead he strikes the king and declares himself ruler. He is subdued, though, and the king is revived. He orders Sigismund be returned to his prison, but that is delayed by the roar of peasants praying for the appearance of a “beggar king” who will lead them into a new age. The rebellious mob storms the tower, but Sigismund will not be tempted by the power Julian offers him. When he leaves the tower, he declares, he will leave in glory. The mob wants Julian killed and Sigismund as their leader, but he refuses, his gaze turned mysteriously inward. News comes of an army of orphan children on the march, led by a Children’s King. Dreams, visions, gypsy poison, plots and counterplots all ensue. Sigismund, doing battle against the rebels, insists he will create a new order to transcend the bloody and debased world of the court, but collapses in death, poisoned but unafraid. The Children’s King, proclaiming Sigismund’s divinity, takes up his sword and marches into the future.

For all the mysticism and majesty of its poetic allegory, Hofmannsthal knew that the last act of the play was theatrically flawed, and he rewrote it. His second version—the version included in this volume—is darker, and eliminates the possibility of any future deliverance. It seems more than coincidental that in the same year this version of the play was published, *Mein Kampf* also appeared. The play moves starkly towards its terrible ending, and as he dies Sigismund whispers, “Bear witness, I was here, though no one has known me.” Its eerie spiritual power undeniable, *The Tower* is an apocalyptic play enacted on a titanic stage and lit by flashes of lightning.

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In the last years, though he traveled and wrote, Hofmannsthal complained of nervous exhaustion and depression, and suffered from hardening of the arteries. His dreams for a “conservative Revolution” and a culturally unified Europe were in tatters. On July 13, 1929, his eldest son Franz shot himself. The suicide shocked Hofmannsthal and his wife, and two days later,

as they were dressing to leave home for the funeral and he had just put on his hat, he complained of feeling dizzy. His wife led him to a chair in his study and asked if he wanted her to loosen his collar. She could not understand his garbled reply and his face had gone aslant. She struggled to help him to the sofa, where he died of the stroke he had just suffered. He was only fifty-five years old. On July 18th, then, both son and father were buried. Hofmannsthal's friend Count Harry Kessler—with whom, years earlier, he had worked up the plot of *Der Rosenkavalier* and toured Greece—came to Rodaun for the funeral. By this time, though, thousands of other mourners had converged on the tiny town and, as Kessler wrote in his diary, “by now any vestige of funereal sobriety had been replaced by a feeling of participation, under sweltering conditions, in some sort of *Kermesse* spectacle. For a moment, as I scattered earth over it, I glimpsed the coffin in its vault. With that of the son who shot himself immediately below, it struck me how thin and frail it seemed. . . . With Hofmannsthal a whole chapter of German culture has been carried to the grave.” He had asked to be buried in the habit of a Franciscan friar. It was an odd but appropriate gesture. The range and splendor of his work have rarely been equaled, yet he was humble before the tasks and traditions of his art. He had schooled himself to avoid life, and in the end embraced it. He was raised “early ripened and tender and sad,” and grew to create work that shed both light and darkness. As his Marschallin muses, “It’s all a mystery, so much is mysterious. And we are here to endure it. And in the How, there lies the whole difference—”

—J. D. McClatchy