

The New Criterion

Books

February 2009

Instants in a looking-glass

by [Eric Ormsby](#)

A review of *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, edited by J. D. McClatchy.

For a poet who claimed that the uncanny perfection of his youthful lyrics reflected a sort of timeless Platonic “pre-existence,” Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929) was much obsessed by the fleeting moment. The theme was hardly novel; it had dominated German poetry since the Baroque. But to the astonished habitués of Vienna’s Café Griensteidl, where the adolescent Hofmannsthal first appeared in 1891—still in short pants and chaperoned by his father—the effect of these consummately polished, world-weary verses on schoolboy lips was electrifying. Arthur Schnitzler, hardly given to swooning enthusiasm, later wrote of this startling apparition, then known only under the precious *nom de plume* “Loris,”

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.

The effect was enhanced by Loris’s striking physical beauty, which turned certain observers, such as the now-forgotten critic Hermann Bahr, into little more than slavering voyeurs (Bahr was especially taken by the youthful Hofmannsthal’s “strong, rigid, motionless nostrils,” of all things, as well as by the “naïve coquetry” of his “brown, merry, trusting eyes of a girl.”) In fin de siècle Vienna, lechery, like literature, came with generous dollops of *Schlag*.

In his eloquent introduction to *The Whole Difference*, J. D. McClatchy recounts those, and other, episodes from what might be called the Hofmannsthal legend.^[1] That legend, while true enough, is also strangely misleading; its persistence may account for the curious obscurity in which Hofmannsthal’s literary reputation continues to languish. For most English readers, he is still known chiefly as Richard Strauss’s librettist, with *Elektra* of 1903 and *Der Rosenkavalier* of 1911 generally considered his masterpieces. But from 1891 until his decisive renunciation of lyric poetry a decade later, Hofmannsthal’s reputation rested on his verse; indeed, the slim body of his early work—little more than fifty pages in all—represents some of the greatest poetry of its period, and at least five or six of those precocious poems still stand among the most beautiful and accomplished verse in the German language.

For many of his admirers, however, his subsequent career—devoted to theater, novels, stories, and fables, and most especially to the essay, which he brought to an unprecedented level of elegance in German—signals not merely an inexplicable decline but a defection, a betrayal, a sell-out. Unlike, say, Rimbaud, who abandoned poetry for honest gun-running, or Keats, who had the grace to die young, Hofmannsthal became a *Wunderkind* turned respectable. It was unpardonable that the elfin and glittering Loris should end up as a popular dramatist and prolific *feuilletoniste* and then presume

to establish himself in a rickety Baroque palace outside Vienna as a staunch and conventional *père de famille*. The fact that his wife Gerty was originally Jewish—she converted to Catholicism upon marriage—and that he himself had Jewish ancestry exposed him to crude anti-Semitic taunts that persisted throughout his career and continued long after his death, resurfacing in Germany as recently as 1973.

McClatchy's splendid selection should lay the absurd charges of "defection" permanently to rest. In his celebrated "Letter of Lord Chandos" of 1902, Hofmannsthal gave an account of sorts of his repudiation of the lyrical. *The Whole Difference* demonstrates the amazing range of Hofmannsthal's literary achievement, from the earliest verse to the later essays, stories, plays, and aphorisms. The compilation contains the merest fraction of his output (the German critical edition runs to over thirty volumes), but it suffices to establish him as one of the commanding figures of twentieth-century European literature. As T. S. Eliot, who admired him, noted in his preface to an earlier selection, only Yeats and Paul Claudel can be considered his peers in the realm of modern verse drama—it probably wasn't modesty but simple honesty which kept Eliot from including himself—and yet, that was only one of the genres which Hofmannsthal brought to perfection.

The present selection draws heavily on the superb three-volume set which Princeton University Press began publishing over fifty years ago in its Bollingen Series, with one volume devoted to *Selected Prose* (1952), introduced by the novelist Hermann Broch, another to the *Poems and Verse Plays* (1961), with Eliot's preface, and a third to *Selected Plays and Libretti* (1963), the latter two edited by the English poet and translator Michael Hamburger. This set, now long out-of-print, remains the best introduction to Hofmannsthal's work in English; not only were the translations uniformly excellent, but also the German texts were given *en face* for the verse. McClatchy's selection includes some of the best of those earlier translations: "The Letter of Lord Chandos," the incomparable essays on Balzac, Shakespeare, and Oscar Wilde; the entire first act of *Der Rosenkavalier*; two evocative memoirs ("Moments in Greece" and "A Memory of Beautiful Days"); and an (all-too-brief) selection of aphorisms from *The Book of Friends*, one of Hofmannsthal's finest and most characteristic works. None of the verse drama is included, but two major plays, *The Difficult Man* of 1921, a comedy (and easily Hofmannsthal's greatest theatrical accomplishment), and the flawed but compelling second version of *The Tower*, the tragedy completed two years before his death, round off the volume.

For all McClatchy's care and devotion in putting this selection together, there are a few lapses. The verse drama *The Death of Titian* appeared in 1892, not 1882 (when its author was only eight years old!) and the epigraph from *Der Rosenkavalier* garbles the German original (it should read *ertragt*, not the impossible *entragt*). More seriously, in his otherwise beautiful translation of the "Ballad of the Outer Life," perhaps Hofmannsthal's most famous poem, McClatchy leaves out a word in the second stanza to unfortunate effect; his version reads:

And bitter fruit will ripen by and by
And at night dead birds fall to the ground
And for a few days rot where they lie.

The second line should read "And at night *like* dead birds fall to the ground" ("Und fallen nachts wie tote Vögel nieder"); a heap of rotting birds is a bit too pungent even for Hofmannsthalian melancholy.

In his introduction, McClatchy glosses over issues which cry out for further comment. He remarks, for example, that the poet "sometimes indulged casually in the anti-Semitism so common at the time." Hofmannsthal himself had Jewish ancestry, which he freely acknowledged, but it didn't prevent him from indulging more than "casually" in shocking outbursts of anti-Semitic sentiment, most of it too coarse to quote. In part, this was sheer snobbery, especially with respect to eastern

European Jews, but even in conversation, he could be quite malicious in deriding and mimicking Jewish “littérateurs.” (The whole ghastly matter is detailed in Ulrich Weinzierl’s *Hofmannsthal: Skizzen zu seinem Bild*, published in 2005.)

Elsewhere, McClatchy states that “more recent commentators have generally concluded that Hofmannsthal was a repressed homosexual,” but these commentators are not named and no evidence is provided. In fact, for those who think such matters important, Hofmannsthal’s “sexual orientation” remains an impossibly vexed issue. His close friend Harry Graf Kessler, who was homosexual, was puzzled by Hofmannsthal’s behavior towards women: He was an eternally charming flirt who nevertheless remained emotionally aloof. He was no womanizer, and, yet he could sustain a liaison of “spiritual adultery” with the Countess Ottonie Degenfeld-Schonburg for some two decades. In his “Venezianisches Kryptogramm” of 1985, the late W. G. Sebald could only conclude that neither of the two sexual alternatives appealed to Hofmannsthal; a third, sadly enough, was not on offer. Finally, McClatchy remarks that it was “odd but appropriate” that Hofmannsthal should be buried in a Franciscan habit. What was odd about it? He was a born Catholic and belonged to a minor Franciscan order.

The Whole Difference does contain some fresh material. McClatchy includes the somber early short story, “The Tale of Night Six Hundred and Seventy-two,” in Michael Henry Heim’s translation; in this bizarre little tale, turn-of-the-century Vienna undergoes an “Arabian Nights” transformation. It’s a pity that McClatchy couldn’t have found space to include Hofmannsthal’s marvelous 1906 essay, “Tausendundeine Nacht.” Like Borges, Hofmannsthal was fascinated, and inspired, by the dream world of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

That dream world was, in a fundamental sense, Hofmannsthal’s native realm. It’s no accident that whenever he wishes to invoke reality most powerfully, he has recourse to dream. Calderón’s play *La vida es sueño*, which haunted him (and on which he based *The Tower*), was his key text in this respect. The dream world wasn’t an alternative world—it was this world. And it was governed by a single principle, at once steadfast and unpredictable: the possibility of transformation.

For Hofmannsthal, it was simplistic to say that things are never what they seem; rather, things both are what they seem and not what they seem. Hofmannsthal’s mature work revolves around what he termed the play between *Sein* and *Schein*, the actual and the apparent, and “reality” is to be found in their correlation, not in their severance; appearance and reality do not cancel each other out: each supports the other.

In *The Tower*, Sigismund is not simply a cast-off prince raised as a wild beast; he is—like all of us—beast and prince at once. Hofmannsthal’s younger friend Carl J. Burckhardt, the Swiss diplomat and historian, reported that a Portuguese acquaintance once asked him after glimpsing the poet, “Who was that gentleman whom you were sitting with at the opera yesterday?” and went on to remark, “He looked like a banished king from our country.” Burckhardt replied that “Hofmannsthal was completely at home in more forms of being than any other contemporary I’ve ever met.”

It has become commonplace to state that sometime around 1902, Hofmannsthal suffered a severe crisis which led to his renunciation of lyric poetry; that he was torn between “word-mysticism” and “word-scepticism” (the terms are Broch’s); that he confronted a devastating gulf between words and things; and that this paralyzing crisis underlay “The Letter of Lord Chandos” with its fierce repudiation not only of poetry but even of language itself. The “Letter” has been presented as a crucial document in the evolution of our modern sensibility, a break with Romantic conceptions, a harbinger of contemporary *Angst*, etc., etc. Such claptrap is best dismissed with that excellent German expletive *Quatsch!* (Baloney!).

Despite his exalted claims of spiritual aphasia, Lord Chandos expresses himself throughout the

“Letter” with admirable felicity; his choice of words is precise, his rhetorical flourishes exquisitely poised. Moreover, because he longs to think “in a medium more immediate, more liquid, more glowing than words,” he rejects the possibility of ever writing again,

because the language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither Latin nor English, neither Italian nor Spanish, but a language none of whose words is known to me, a language in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge.

Has sheer hubris ever been expressed with more apparent piety?

There is, of course, more to the “Letter” than this. Hofmannsthal did suffer the loss of that vital “identification” with things—what Keats called “negative capability”—which he considered essential to the creation of lyric poetry, and obviously it grieved him. But as it stands, the “Letter” constitutes a powerful indictment of a certain conception of poetry as a prophetic instrument capable of abolishing the gap between words and the things they signify; for, as Hofmannsthal would later note, poetry must always return to us “the breath of human feelings.” In his almost clinical description of Lord Chandos’s derangement, Hofmannsthal may have had in mind the tragic fate of Friedrich Hölderlin, a poet he revered, who believed that his long madness was a divine punishment for poetic hubris, for having been “a false priest.”

Hofmannsthal knew that false priest all too well. News of his debut at the Café Griensteidl drew the attention of the great German poet Stefan George, a predatory Platonist of the clammiest sort, who soon made his way to Vienna. Their encounter—George aggressively wooing and Hofmannsthal in terrified retreat—would have been comical, the stuff of a Nestroy farce, had it not had such momentous consequences for the younger poet’s later development. “As a Gymnasium student I can hardly trade punches *mit einem Verrückten* (with a lunatic),” he wrote to a friend, and he asked his father to intervene. On January 14, 1892, the elder Hofmannsthal sent George a true “Viennese letter,” at once steely and oozing with unction. The breach marked the beginnings of Hofmannsthal’s disenchantment with the rigid aestheticism of George and his circle. He would later say of George, “He left out too much.”

The first of Hofmannsthal’s exquisite “Terzinen,” translated by McClatchy as “Stanzas in Terza Rima,” begins:

On my cheek I still can feel their breath:
How can it be these days that seem so near
Are gone, forever gone, and lost to death?

In “Sebastian Melmoth,” his sublime essay on Oscar Wilde, Hofmannsthal noted that “there is something lyrical about the dress of a whore and something commonplace about the emotions of a lyric poet.” For all their grace, the “Stanzas” express a commonplace. Compare the way in which Hofmannsthal would treat the same commonplace in *Der Rosenkavalier*, some fifteen years later, long after he had supposedly forsaken the lyric. In the first act, the Marschallin is gazing into her mirror and says,

Where is she now? Might as well look for the snows of yesteryear!
It’s easily said, but can it really be true
That I was that little Resi
And that it’s I who will one day be the old woman?

And she continues:

How can such a thing happen?

Why does the good God arrange it so?
When I am the same person.

This is transience in the flesh. It is no annunciation from “pre-existence.” It is what we all undergo. And the fact that it is uttered in simple language, the everyday words of men and women everywhere, only heightens its impact. We are instants in a looking-glass, changing even as we gaze. The Marschallin may get up at night to stop the clocks but they move on anyway, and their inexorable movement is registered upon our faces. The fact that, as Hofmannsthal put it in an aphorism (not included here), “there is something in us which is above and behind all ages and plays with all ages,” does not arrest this most intimate of transformations. At around the same time that Hofmannsthal was engaging with a different form of poetry, a public poetry drawn from the “comedy” of life itself, the great Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig was scribbling the final two words of his *Star of Redemption*, which he completed in the very trenches which would bring Hofmannsthal’s world to an end. They were *ins Leben*, “into life.” For Hofmannsthal too, that was the only transformation which counted in the end.

Notes

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1. *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, edited by J. D. McClatchy; Princeton University Press, 520 pages, \$35. [Go back to the text.](#)

Eric Ormsby's latest book is *Ghazali* (Oneworld).

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 27 February 2009, on page 66

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