Der Rosenkavalier and the Idea of Habsburg Austria

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In the composition of Der Rosenkavalier, Hofmannsthal and Strauss employed a wide range of dramatic and musical references. These dissolve a sense of fixed historical period and reflect the political culture of the Habsburgs, whose polyglot Empire could not call upon nineteenth-century theories of the nation-state to justify its authority.

In the history of modern Europe, the Habsburgs occupied a position that, as the twentieth century approached, became increasingly anomalous. In the decades after the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, nation-states of Europe came to base their legitimacy upon the myth that, through the state, political unity and racial identity were one and the same. Although nineteenth-century nationalism was often liberal in its origins, as the nation-state developed nationalism became exclusionary. The Habsburg state, however, could make no claim to national unity. Indeed, the empire that had been assembled by the Habsburg monarchy over several centuries of diplomacy, occasional military campaigns, and cannily arranged dynastic marriages, was the antithesis of the nation-state. A polyglot, multi-racial domain, the Habsburg Empire could only claim unity through carefully cultivating an image of the ruling family as the benign nurturers of their people. The Habsburgs presented themselves as guardians of the ethnic identity of all peoples in the Empire and, paradoxically, as the sole political entity capable of bringing peace and prosperity to the ever-incipient chaos of Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

History has not dealt kindly with the Habsburgs. Even before their political demise in 1918, they were regarded by their own subjects and foreigners alike as the vestige of an archaic dispensation, and not many voices could be heard rising to their defence after they had gone. Few mid-twentieth-century historians were prepared to concede that the inter-racial political and social complex assembled over the centuries by the
Habsburgs served to bring their subjects peace and prosperity. Only Edmund Crankshaw insisted that the peoples of central and southeastern Europe were more prosperous under imperial rule than they were later under the communists, and that Vienna, the Habsburg capital, far from being a city of languid and decadent decline was, at the start of the twentieth century, one of the world’s great intellectual centers (308-320). Now that communism has foundered, political scientists, scholars, journalists, and others have started to explore with some sympathy the viability of Habsburg notions of political unity and multi-racial coexistence.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, however, had few doubts about the value of such principles. Shortly before the First World War and through the 1920s, he wrote of the Habsburgs as a power capable of resisting the uniformity imposed by the modern state. He found the state created under their rule to have been “eines Gebildes von ungekünstelter Elastizität, aber eines Gebildes, eines wahren Organismus, durchströmt von der inneren Religion zu sich selbst, ohne welche keine Bindungen lebender Gewalten möglich sind” (Gesammelte Werke, Prosa III 406). The Habsburgs, he argued, embodied a pan-national spirit, incorporating the finest humanistic ideals, and they reminded the denizens of the impersonal modern western world of their origins in a common European culture. Hofmannsthal saw his own work as perpetuating Habsburg values, and he hoped it would contribute to the maintenance of the great European inheritance as a vital force.

Hofmannsthal’s turn to the Habsburgs, which became increasingly pronounced toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, has all the appearance of a reaction against the modernist revolution in Vienna that Crankshaw found so dynamic. Through the work of figures as various as Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, Karl Kraus, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gustav Klimt, Gustav Mahler, and the younger Hofmannsthal himself, Viennese artists and intellectuals had changed human beings’ very understanding of their nature. Through their work, people came to see themselves as secular creatures, driven by unconscious impulses and sublimated longings; canons

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1 ‘[…] a complex of unaffected elasticity, but a complex, a true organism, pulsating with its own inner religion without the likes of which no combination of living powers is possible’.