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Fritz von Herzmanovsky-Orlando. *The Tragic Demise of a Faithful Court Official*. Riverside, Calif.: Ariadne Press, 1997. 144 pp. \$14.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57241-035-0.

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Old Vienna Ad Absurdum

Fritz Herzmanovsky-Orlando (1877-1954) was an amateur, but not amateurish, author and graphic artist who retired as an architect in Vienna in 1917 for health reasons. He resettled in Meran (Merano) in South Tyrol, where he spent the rest of his life writing and drawing. His best-known work, *Der Gaulschreck im Rosennetz* (1928), a portrayal of the lower aristocracy in Vienna around 1830, is presented here as *The Tragic Demise of a Faithful Court Official* in a spirited and faithful translation by David A. Veeder, one of the very few American scholars working on this eccentric Austrian novelist and playwright.

The Tragic Demise of a Faithful Court Official is one of only two works that Herzmanovsky published in his lifetime, both in the twenties, but the noted Austrian writer Friedrich Torberg reintroduced him to the reading public in the late fifties by editing his collected works in four volumes. A further one-volume version of this edition and a two-volume paperback edition published in Germany in the early seventies by Ullstein testify to the author's continuing appeal, the reasons for which are clear after reading only one or two pages: Herzmanovsky is a funny, charming satirist with a bent for witty, often outrageous description and an ear for the sparkling vacuity of society conversation.

As Veeder notes in his afterword, Herzmanovsky considered this novel the first of an "Austrian Trilogy" that was to run from the early nineteenth century to the mid-1960s (p. 138). The other two novels, *Masquerade of the Spirits* and *Scoglio Pomo oder*

Rout am Fliegenden Hollaender (Scoglio Pomo, or Disaster on the Flying Dutchman), were not published by Herzmanovsky and have not been translated. They do appear in Torberg's edition, as well as in volumes 2 and 3 of the planned ten-volume edition of Herzmanovsky's works edited by the Brenner-Archiv that began to appear in the Residenz Verlag in 1983. *Der Gaulschreck im Rosennetz* appears in volume 1 of that edition (1983).

The Tragic Demise of a Faithful Court Official takes place during the reign of Francis I, sometime after the Congress of Vienna and apparently before Beethoven's death in 1827, for the composer is mentioned as being alive (p. 15). It tells the story of the Court Secretary Jaromir Edler von Eynhuf, who is employed by the Imperial Court Drum Depot and devoted to his position and his emperor with a single-minded intensity. For instance, although he is more attracted to Annerl Zisch, he would rather marry the daughter of the retired Court Dwarf Zumpi because of better social and professional prospects. Indeed, in spite of his tall, lanky figure, his secret dream has always been to be a Court Dwarf, so that he could be near the Emperor, "always having His illustrious attentive ear, always being permitted to cheer him up" (p. 41). Eynhuf's ultimate tribute to the monarch, however, will be a collection of baby teeth, "the largest and most complete in the entire Empire" (p. 11) arranged in a tableau in the form of a numeral commemorating the anniversary of the Emperor's accession to the throne.

This is where the plot gets underway, for Eynhuf needs one more tooth to complete his tableau. Having

determined that it must be an especially beautiful tooth from the momentarily most-celebrated diva of the Viennese stage, Miss Hoellteufel, he begins to plot how to gain possession of this prize. With advice from his friend Grosskopf he decides he must use the anonymity of the carnival mask to approach the actress—in fact, he must dress as a huge butterfly so that he can secretly issue his delicate request in the shelter of his wings. This absurd and expensive stratagem ends in disaster, including but not limited to the wind blowing the hapless butterfly down the street, startling the nags for hire, which lends the novel its catchy but obscure original title: “The Horse Spook in a Snare of Roses.” “Snare of Roses” refers to Miss Hoellteufel’s costume as a bouquet of roses, and to the fact that in the course of their brief encounter Eynhuf falls desperately in love with her. The rest of the novel relates how Eynhuf’s obsessive attempts to attain the actress lead him into the lower reaches of Viennese society, put him out of favor with his superiors, and ultimately send him on the run from the police. He finally meets a disgraceful end marked by horribly poetic justice.

The anachronism of writing a novel in the 1920s about imaginary, insignificant events of the 1820s—this is not a historical novel in any strict sense—raises the question, particularly for subscribers to the HABSBURG list, whether this novel is of interest to historians. There are, after all, plenty of contemporary and historical accounts of Biedermeier Vienna. Still, this modest novel delivers a sense of life in the imperial and royal city before 1848 that is based not only on vivid imagination, but also on scrupulous historical inquiry. As Veeder writes, citing research by Hubert Reitterer and Susanna Kirschl-Goldberg: “Interestingly, as bizarre as much of Herzmanovsky’s picture of this Old Austria may seem to the reader, virtually every fantastic character, outlandish bureaucratic office, weird locale and strange historical event can be documented in fact” (p. 139).[1]

We are ushered into a world in which titles and rank mean everything, and therefore everyone has title and rank. We read of the “Royal and Imperial Supreme Candle-Snuffer Cleaner” (p. 2) and “Court Dwarf First Class,” which corresponds to the military rank of major (p. 5). At one point Eynhuf considers taking the job of Commander of the “Imperial Christmas Creche Watch,” which would entail three days of work per year and a summer residence, but “admittedly with few prospects for advancement” (p. 76). This is also a world hypersensitive to fads and fashions, where a popular confection that goes under the name “Bear’s Dung” inspires a competitor to come out with a (less successful!) knockoff

called “Chicken Doo-doo” (p. 17). Conversations about actresses and socialites seem more important than the occasional historical event that wedges its way into the busy awareness of this stratum of society that by virtue of birth has very little of importance to do, and lots of time to talk about it.

Particularly charming, but also informative, are the descriptions of Viennese locales and social habits. Upper-class apartments, a confectioner’s shop, the Christmas market, a carnival ball, various districts and suburbs, the Prater amusement park, and streets and cafes are described in some detail and in an affectionate tone that moves between the teasing and the sardonic. Behaviors like the fixation on music and theater, the composing of occasional verse, Sunday coffees, Imperial bureaucratic customs, the Biedermeier mania for collecting, amateur chamber music, customs at theaters and balls, and exaggerations of dress and address are all here. The world of the minor aristocracy is presented as a slightly daft, highly stylized, and ultimately trivial milieu.

Things become less trivial, however, as Eynhuf’s descent begins. The farcical but genial portrait of the leisure class of Biedermeier Vienna becomes a journey into gypsy shops, kitchens, back alleys, and brothels, as our hero seeks a love potion and cynically woos Hoellteufel’s chambermaid to get near her mistress. A date with the maid, which he cannot refuse, takes him on Pentecost Sunday to the Volksprater, which Herzmanovsky describes with wry humor but no condescension. Further class differences arise as Eynhuf and his fellow aristocrats have to share their world with the wealthy but boorish bourgeois entrepreneurs such as the “Smoked-Meat King” Wuerstl (pp. 64-65). While refraining from any sort of political statement, Herzmanovsky makes it clear that the petit bourgeois is the cake upon which the aristocracy and nouveaux riches have the privilege of leading their whipped-cream existence.

There are curious echoes of motifs we’ve seen elsewhere in Austrian literature, which indicates not influence, but the consistency of certain themes in Habsburg and Austrian society. Thus the pointless commemoration of the emperor’s anniversary recalls the Parallel Campaign in Robert Musil’s *Man Without Qualities*. The rescue of a young archduke as the ticket to social position (p. 40) is reminiscent of Trotta’s saving the emperor at Solferino in Joseph Roth’s *Radetzky March*. A bureaucrat publishes a monograph “Melancholy Observations of an Imperial Civil Servant on the Last Judgment and the Accompanying Loss in Fiscal Liquidation Fees” (p. 109),

whose financial response to Armageddon resonates with Jura Soyfer's *The End of the World*, where "the prospect of destruction proves to be the best boom for business yet." [2] Eynhuf's reaction to being bested by the bourgeois butcher Wuerstl (p. 78) resembles the paranoid desperation of Schnitzler's Lieutenant Gustl in his cloak-room struggle with a baker. A display of stuffed canaries that looks almost alive (p. 102) and the leitmotif of the baby-tooth collection would fit into Gerhard Roth's *Reise ins Innere von Wien* (Voyage to Innermost Vienna), which explores the generalized museum mentality of the Austrian capital. These resemblances do not place Herzmanovsky in the literary league of Schnitzler, Joseph Roth, or Musil, but they do place him in their social milieu and historical context.

Veeder's translation maintains the correct tone of hyperbole and near-hyperbole that Herzmanovsky uses to mock his characters' affectations, usually without crossing the line himself. The intentional rhetorical overuse of adjectives can easily get excessive, but here it merely adds to our amazement at this grotesquely self-indulgent world. Veeder maintains the sense of fun that is essential to Herzmanovsky's text, and he nearly always passes the test of a good translation: that it is convincing as literature in the target language.

There are two aspects of the original German that are unfortunately untranslatable: Viennese dialect and names, which usually have broad, satirical significance. Since American English lacks a dialect that is at once both (socially) upper-class and (grammatically) substandard, the delightful idiom of Eynhuf and his acquaintances is lost. I suppose one could have used an occasional British upper-class double negative to render this, but then it would have sounded like Wodehouse and not like Herzmanovsky, and the effect would still be missing. Veeder wisely does not translate the outlandish but always credible German names, but this means that their comic effect is lost. Hoellteufel, Zisch, Wuerstl, Grosskopf, Paradeyser, and von Unklar would not be convincing as Helldevil, Hiss, Weenie, Bighead, Tomayto, and Unclear, yet for better or worse their silliness is lost on the reader who knows little German.

On the other hand, the translator could have retained two instances of malapropism. "Kompletativisch" (sic) could have become something like "complentative" instead of the unexceptional "contemplative" (p. 23); and "Refmativisimus" (sic) might have been "rheumatiz" or "rheumaticism" instead of the correct "rheumatism" (p. 85). The word "bashkille" for "Bastille" (p. 17) is correctly

preserved as a demonstration of the historical illiteracy of the aristocrats, but it should have been capitalized so the reader could immediately catch the reference.

But these are just a few details in a fine translation. The following passage from the Carnival chapter shows how Veeder can handle the challenge of a bizarre plot, linguistic complexity, and a style that is almost, but not quite, overcome by stiltedness:

Laboriously the butterfly steered his way toward this gleaming sun [Hoellteufel] and was nearly at his destination. Then suddenly something terrible happened. From out of the throng of masks leaped the beautiful Helena Kollokotronis with her dark page-boy locks, her puckish charm attractively complementing the disguise of a silvery pretzel-boy, and abruptly jumped up and sat astride Eynhuf's shoulders before he could indignantly fend her off. Joyously shouting, she spurred him onward with her shimmering high heels and steered him delightedly around by the antennae. Behind him popped champagne corks, the clouds of perfume and bright flashing of jewels totally bewildering his senses" (p. 65).

Such broad humor does not take away from the novel's increasing seriousness, which ends in Eynhuf's death. Thus *The Tragic Demise* is something like a small-scale version of Alfred Kubin's *Die andere Seite* (The Other Side), where, however, the mounting grotesquery leaves the realm of humor and ends in a disturbing apocalyptic vision in an exotic anti-Shangri-La. Herzmanovsky is able to achieve his minor revelation without going any farther out of Vienna than Mariahilf, and it is correspondingly less shattering, but troublesome nonetheless. Another parallel between Herzmanovsky and his lifelong friend Kubin is the fact that both illustrated their own books. It is therefore too bad that only two of Herzmanovsky's amusing drawings appear in the translation, but reproducing the twenty-seven plates with sufficient quality would likely have made the book inordinately expensive. Also like Kubin's unique novel, Herzmanovsky's seems to convert most who read it into solid fans.

It should be noted that this translation is based on Torberg's edition, and it contains chapter titles that Torberg supplied. Susanna Kirschl-Goldberg has produced a version more faithful to Herzmanovsky's manuscripts, which restores some particularly extravagant language,[3] but this has remained a scholarly version, and Veeder was right to translate the much more familiar one.

Anyone who is at all interested in Vienna and the Habsburg Empire since Maria Theresa will at least enjoy this book, and probably learn something as well. Herzmanovsky's novel, through David Veeder's translation, offers a sense of physical and social detail that may be the next best thing to a movie filmed in the streets of pre-March Vienna. And for all its period atmosphere, the novel's plot, with its social climber who is so obsessed with one perceived advantage that he abandons all other advantages, could be transplanted without much modification into a script of the television situation comedy *Seinfeld* (except that its "tragic" ending would not lead very well into next week's episode). This is meant as a compliment to a book that is lively, funny, well plotted, and ultimately poignant, in addition to being historically interesting. It deserves its place in Ariadne's ever-growing Austrian translation series.

Notes:

[1]. See Hubert Reitterer, "Oesterreichische Geschichte im Werk von Fritz von Herzmanovsky-Orlando," *Oesterreich in Geschichte und Literatur* 30 (1986), pp. 275-284; Susanna Kirschl-Goldberg, "Fritz von Herzmanovsky-Orlando: Wien als Fiktion und Realitaet," *Literatur und Kritik*, pp.191-192 (1985), pp. 60-72.

[2]. Horst Jarka, "Introduction," *The Legacy of Jura Soyfer*, ed. and trans. by Horst Jarka (Montreal: Engendra Press, 1977), p. 29.

[3]. Susanna Kirschl-Goldberg, "Kommentar," *Der Gaulschreck im Rosennetz. Roman*, vol. 1 of Fritz von Herzmanovsky-Orlando, *Saemtliche Werke in zehn Baenden* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1983), pp. 143-233.

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