**Self-ridiculing Nostalgia: Joseph Roth’s *Die Kapuzinergruft***

*Die Kapuzinergruft* is the last novel written by the Austrian-Jewish author Joseph Roth. The work was composed between 1936 and the summer of 1938, at a time when the alcoholic Roth--who had been living in Parisian exile since 1933--was suffering from a steady deterioration in his psychological state as he witnessed the rise of National Socialism with an increasing sense of despair. An important element of Roth’s public persona during these years were his ardent expressions of Habsburg nostalgia. In addition to the writer’s engagement in Austrian monarchist politics, he also composed articles which contrasted the barbaric German nationalism of contemporary times with a Habsburg past characterised by piety, respect for tradition and multi-ethnic toleration.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Affection for the Habsburg Empire also plays a prominent role in *Die Kapuzinergruft*, which is narrated by Franz Ferdinand Trotta, a relative of the central characters in Roth’s *Radetzkymarsch* (1932). *Die Kapuzinergruft* tells the story of Trotta’s life from shortly before the outbreak of World War One until the arrival of Hitler’s troops in Vienna. Trotta is a monarchist and a social conservative; his narrative begins with a deeply nostalgic portrait of his life before the war, goes on to lament the coming of the first Austrian Republic, and concludes with a failed attempt to seek refuge from the newly-arrived Nazis at the imperial crypt in Vienna. In addition to figuring in *Die Kapuzinergruft*, the *Anschluss* played an important role in its publication history: the novelwas completed in a hurry so that it could appear as a literary response to this event (Bijvoet and Rietra 143). As a result of this haste, the work is considerably shorter than originally planned, contains several plotting inconsistencies, and lacks the narrative finesse of *Radetzkymarsch* (Bijvoet and Rietra 161; Barker 153-4).

Another charge frequently levelled at the *Kapuzinergruft* is the excessively romanticized image of Austria’s imperial past it is said to convey. Indeed, the traditional--and still dominant-- interpretation of novel is that of a straightforward expression of unqualified Habsburg nostalgia. Andrew Barker, for example, writes of the “relentless mythologizing of the Habsburg Empire” in the novel (151), while Bernd Oei, sees in the work a reflection of Roth’s “schwindenden krititischen Abstand[es] . . . zur Habsburger Zeit” (147) and Adam Kozuchowski describes it as “one of Roth’s most nostalgic novels”(122). Such views have been challenged in recent years, however, by several valuable counter-nostalgic readings of the novel, all of which emphasize the distance between Roth and the nostalgic narrator of *Die Kapuzinergruft*.[[2]](#endnote-2) This article bridges the gap between these two interpretations, and argues that *Die Kapuzinergruft* in fact dramatizes Joseph Roth’s own internal conflict surrounding Habsburg nostalgia. As will be shown, the central role played by longing for the Habsburg past within the work’s narrative is used by Roth both to articulate and to problematize nostalgic standpoints that he himself felt drawn towards.

The term “nostalgia” is derived from the Greek words “nostos,” meaning a return home, and “algia,” which refers to a pain or longing.[[3]](#endnote-3) The basic etymological meaning of “nostalgia” is therefore a longing for home, although it is now generally understood to refer to a sentimental affection for a period in the past.[[4]](#endnote-4) The dangers associated with nostalgia--most notably a tendency to suppress negative aspects of the longed-for past and seek the restoration of retrogressive social and political relations--have received much scholarly attention over the last century.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, several theorists have also argued for a more differentiated understanding of the ways in which nostalgia can function. Svetlana Boym, for example, distinguishes between two contrasting tendencies within the broader phenomenon of nostalgia. One is “restorative nostalgia,” which succumbs to an idealised view of the past and seeks to recreate it in the present. The other is “reflective nostalgia,” which combines mourning for past times with an awareness of the unreliability of remembrance and is frequently ironic and humorous (41-55). In addition, a heartfelt defence of nostalgia has been developed by Peter Fritzsche, who argues that it has the potential to generate productive criticism of the present and to enable the apprehension of possibilities for the future (80).

Although the precise nature of Roth’s Habsburg nostalgia during the 1930s remains disputed, there can be little doubt of its existence. In addition to the affectionate recreation of the final decades of the Habsburg Empire in his celebrated novel *Radetzkymarsch* (1932) and the novella “Die Büste des Kaisers” (1934), the writer’s private expressions of fondness for the lost empire are also well documented (Lunzer 141-151). Such sentiments mirrored broader trends within Austrian society and the Austrian exile community. During the inter-war period, widespread attachment to a nostalgic view of Austria’s imperial past was reflected in the affectionate depictions of the Habsburg Empire found in much contemporary literature,[[6]](#endnote-6) and many historians, journalists and essay-writers saw in the multi-ethnic Empire a positive and distinctly Austrian alternative to contemporary nationalism.[[7]](#endnote-7) During the 1930s, the rise of National Socialism provoked an intensification of these nostalgic and legitimist tendencies. As a result, the Austrian monarchist movement developed from a marginal entity to a respectable political force; one consequence of this was the efforts made by Chancellor Schuschnigg to court the monarchist vote in order to bolster his own popular support amidst the growing pressure for political union with Germany.[[8]](#endnote-8) At the same time, Roth’s praise for the multi-ethnic character of Habsburg Empire was echoed by writers such as Franz Werfel, Stefan Zweig and Franz Theodor Csokor, who shared his interpretation of National Socialism as a horrific consequence of the nationalist tendencies that had shaped European politics since the nineteenth century (Magris 314-25).

In addition to reflecting wider trends, Roth’s nostalgia was also accompanied by an unusual degree of personal identification with the Habsburg Empire, which manifested itself in a range of eccentric behaviours. He repeatedly and mendaciously referred to himself as an officer of the imperial army, for example, a position he publicly renounced following the *Anschluss*,[[9]](#endnote-9)and it is widely reported that he wore trousers in the style of the imperial army uniform.[[10]](#endnote-10) The memoirs of his close friend Soma Morgenstern recall with amused bewilderment how the writer referred to his meetings with Otto von Habsburg as “Audienzen” (333), and he is known to have participated in bizarre monarchist gatherings, in which--according to one contemporary report--the participants “halten ein kompliziertes Zeremoniell ein, klopfen mit einem Stock auf, bevor sie etwas äußern, reden einander mit Titeln aus einer längst versunkenen Epoche an” (Weiskopf 589-90). This outlandish behaviour--which may be seen as evidence that Roth’s nostalgia conformed to the uncritical “restorative“ type identified by Boym--has also encouraged speculation about the psychological roots of the writer’s longing for the Habsburg past. One commonly-cited factor is Roth’s unusually pronounced need for a sense of belonging (Bance xxvi). This was in evidence throughout his adulthood, and may well have become more acute due to the precariousness of life in exile. Sydney Rosenfeld has pointed out that devotion to the multi-ethnic Habsburg past allowed Roth to imagine a home from which he, as a German-speaking Jew, was not excluded (89); while David Bronsen has argued that the writer’s close association with the monarchist movement in Paris granted him access to a collective identity (*Joseph Roth* 516). It has also been widely speculated that preoccupation with the monarchy offered the alcoholic and frequently despairing writer a much-needed escape from the horrors of National Socialist expansion and the insecurity of life in exile.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Roth’s letters from the final few years before his death in May 1939--the period during which he composed *Die Kapuzinergruft*--document his increasing mental fragility, and many commentators have concluded that the writer’s view of the Habsburg Empire became absurdly idealised during this period.[[12]](#endnote-12) Such assessments may appear to be supported by the publication of the writer’s most grandiose and sentimental articles about Austria’s imperial past within his “Schwarz-gelbes Tagebuch” column in the Austrian monarchist newspaper *Die Österreichische Post* early in 1939--articles, which in turn, may seem to corroborate readings of *Die Kapuzinergruft* as an unequivocal expression of “restorative” nostalgia. However, it is important to consider the circumstances under which Roth composed his ardently pro-Habsburg journalistic writing. It has been suggested, for example, that Roth’s presentation of the Austrian Empire in non-fiction prior to 1938 may have been influenced by his desire to win over other supporters to the monarchist cause in order to avert a Nazi takeover of Austria (Tonkin 169-170).[[13]](#endnote-13) Furthermore, even after 1938, the writer’s financial situation may have led him to present himself as more pro-Habsburg than he really was. Roth had been chronically short of funds since the Nazi ascent to power,[[14]](#endnote-14) and this problem became more acute after June 1935, when Philip van Alfen took over as director of the de Lange publishing house, and was much less receptive than his predecessor to Roth’s requests for advances.[[15]](#endnote-15) Roth’s letters from the final years of his life contain numerous complaints about his lack of money, and return repeatedly to the question of how he might secure new sources of income.[[16]](#endnote-16) During a period in which monarchist sentiment among Austrian opponents to National Socialism was strong, the financial benefits of maintaining a staunchly pro-Habsburg stance are demonstrated by a letter written by Roth to his French translator, Blanche Gidon, and her husband, in June 1937. In this piece of correspondence, the author reports that his articles “für die Monarchisten” had provided a significant proportion of his income the previous winter (*Briefe* 495). Money worries may well have been a factor in Roth’s anxiety that he was not perceived as a sufficiently ardent legitimist,[[17]](#endnote-17) as well as his successful request that the front cover of *Die Kapuzinergruft* be printed in the Habsburg colours of yellow and black (Bijvoet and Rietra 175).[[18]](#endnote-18)

Indications that--even during the final, desperate years of his life--Roth’s nostalgic identification with the Habsburg past did not consistently translate into an unqualified admiration for it, can be found in a variety of sources. The novel *Die Geschichte von der 1002. Nacht*,which Roth composed between 1935 and1938, was set in Vienna during the final decades of the nineteenth century, yet does not contain any expressions of Habsburg nostalgia. Instead, the work includes examples of corrupt officialdom and class-based exploitation, and features as one of its central characters a dim-witted and arrogant officer in the imperial army. Moreover, while to many of Roth’s acquaintances, the writer appeared utterly committed to the Austrian monarchist cause, several of those close to him were sceptical about the depth of his pro-Habsburg sentiment. The journalist Stefan Fingal, for example, who lived alongside Roth in the Hôtel de la Poste in 1938 and 1939, has recalled how the author repeatedly declared that he would have to emigrate again should the monarchy ever be restored.[[19]](#endnote-19) Martin Fuchs, one of the editors of the monarchist newspaper *Die Österreichische Post*, described Roth’s relationship with the monarchists as “mehr eine platonische als eine wirkliche Liebe,” founded principally on childhood memories and hopes of averting a Nazi annexation of Austria.[[20]](#endnote-20) And in the view of another friend, Rudolf Leonard, Roth “spielte die Rolle des Legitimisten, mit allen Erfordernissen des ernst genommenen Spiels. Jedenfalls habe ich ihn von seinem Legitimismus nie ohne ein mehr oder minder kleines Lächeln sprechen sehen.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

Such observations confer added credibility to the contra-nostalgic readings of *Die Kapuzinergruft* that have appeared in recent years. Perhaps the best-known of these is Kati Tonkin’s robust defence of the novel, which argues that Trotta’s character flaws and inconsistencies within his account expose him as an unreliable narrator, intended by Roth to expose the weaknesses of the Habsburg past and reproach Austrians for their political inertia (173-91).[[22]](#endnote-22) It is true that Tonkin’s notion that Roth blamed Austrian fatalism for the country’s political turmoil lacks corroboration within both the writer’s private correspondence and the numerous articles he wrote discussing the country’s recent past (185).[[23]](#endnote-23) However, other aspects of her interpretation pave the way for a more nuanced understanding of the novel. For example, she identifies within the text implied criticisms of the narrator that echo Roth’s presentation of the Habsburg ruling class in *Radetzkymarsch* (178), and should therefore be understood to mark Trotta’s perspective as severely limited. Also significant is her suggestion that the periodically melodramatic and sentimental tone of Trotta’s narration functions as a distancing device which alerts the reader to his tendency towards self-centredness and exaggerated self-pity (180).

An emphasis on the gap between Roth and the narrator of *Die Kapuzinergruft* is also central to readings of the novel which see in it an expression of Roth’s reflective attitude towards the Habsburg past. Bettina Englmann, for example, argues that the unreliable narrator Trotta is deployed by Roth to explore the imperfect process of re-telling the past (259-79). More recently, Clemens Götze and Ilse Josepha Lazaroms have identified a number of passages within the novel that convey powerfully the irrecoverable condition of the Habsburg Empire, and thereby pass negative comment on Trotta’s myopic attachment to that era. Both Götze and Lazaroms attribute to Roth’s Habsburg nostalgia the reflective quality that is central to Boym’s typification of the phenomenon, and imply that Roth’s presentation of the Habsburg Empire and Habsburg nostalgia in *Die Kapuzinergruft* is consistent with Fritzsche’s ideas about the critical potential of nostalgia. (Götze 45-46; Lazaroms 62-64).

These works supply valuable insights into the status of Habsburg nostalgia within *Die Kapuzinergruft*. However, by focussing on the ways in which Roth’s understanding of the Habsburg past is more sophisticated than that of Trotta, such studies have overlooked the central role played by representations of extreme “restorative” Habsburg nostalgia within the novel, as well as the sympathy between the work’s nostalgic characters and its author. The importance of Trotta’s nostalgic mind-set to Roth’s conception of the work is strongly suggested both by two of the work’s early titles--*Der Mann ohne Paß oder ein Mensch sucht Österreich* and *Ein Mann sucht Österreich--*and by his deployment as the novel’s first-person narrator.[[24]](#endnote-24) Moreover, in addition to Trotta, *Die Kapuzinergruft*, includes two further characters---Count Chojnicki and his brother Josef--whose nostalgic rhetoric strongly resembles that of Roth. These three figures within the novel all display clear affinities with their author, which reinforce their relevance to Roth’s own experiences of nostalgia. Moreover, they are all depicted with a mixture of sympathy and implied criticism, which points towards their author’s conflicted position regarding “restorative” Habsburg nostalgia. As we will see, these characters are used by Roth both to give voice to nostalgic mind-sets, and to expose the ethical and perceptual weaknesses upon which those outlooks depend.

The novel’s most prominent Habsburg nostalgic is its narrator, Franz Ferdinand Trotta. The foregrounding of Trotta’s perspective within *Die Kapuzinergruft* has led to a tradition of interpretingthe work as essentially nostalgic in nature.[[25]](#endnote-25) Such readings are supported by the fact that long sections of Trotta’s narrative are free from signs of authorial irony, and that Trotta himself is in many respects a likeable character, who displays a benevolent attitude to those around him and is prone to bouts of disarming introspection (*Werke* 6: 304 and 310-11). It is also striking that, as many scholars have noted, Roth and his narrator share a number of distinctive sentiments. Trotta’s feeling that the collapse of the Habsburg Empire has left him bereft of a homeland (*Werke* 6: 303) is reminiscent of the acute sense of homelessness felt by Roth following the demolition of the Hôtel Foyot, where he had lived for most of his time in exile, in 1937, and the *Anschluss* in March 1938.[[26]](#endnote-26) Both men also look to the Habsburg past as a source of identity: where Roth repeatedly declared himself to be a lieutenant in the imperial army, Trotta, before revealing any information about his own biography, proudly recounts how his grandfather saved the Emperor’s life and his father tried to rescue the monarchy through his campaigns for political reform (*Werke* 6: 227-28). Trotta’s distaste for the emancipated behaviour of his wife, Elizabeth, following the collapse of the Empire (*Werke* 6: 301-01), echoes Roth’s opposition to modern gender roles; and, in an apparent reflection of the author’s anti-Prussian views of the mid-1930s onwards, the narrator frequently links the disagreeable characteristics of his father-in-law with the latter’s Prussian origins (*Werke* 6: 318-22).[[27]](#endnote-27)

Despite the privileged position given to Trotta’s perspective within the novel, it is clear that significant differences existed between his outlook and that of his author. Two important disparities that have been identified by critics are Roth’s superior understanding of the Habsburg Empire, and the contrast between Trotta’s political apathy during the inter-war period with Roth’s vigorous warnings about the dangers of National Socialism (Howes 160; Pauli 114). In addition, Englemann and Tonkin have demonstrated that the narrator’s perspective is periodically undermined by his own character flaws, as well as inconsistencies and stylistic defects within his account (Englemann 265-79; Tonkin 180).[[28]](#endnote-28) As we will see, the gentle irony generated by this type of narrative can be detected at numerous points within those sections of the book that express Trotta’s yearning for Austria’s Habsburg past, and serve to acknowledge the myopia and moral blindness that it depends on.

The manner in which the narration of *Die Kapuzinergruft* exposes the cognitive pitfalls of nostalgia, for example, is demonstrated by Trotta’s account of his relationship with his cousin, Joseph Branco, a Slovenian farmer and roast chestnut seller, and Branco’s friend Manes Reisiger, an orthodox Jew from Galicia. The story of their friendship plays a prominent role in the first half of the novel, and is closely related to both the narrator’s personal longing for a homeland and the wider phenomenon of Habsburg nostalgia during the inter-war period. For Trotta, Branco represents a link with his ancestral home of Sipolje, the loss of which (following its amalgamation with surrounding villages) he mourns in the opening passage of the novel. On the face of it, the friendship between the three men can be read as a straightforward literary counterpart to the celebration of the Empire’s supra-national character to be found in Roth’s newspaper articles of the 1930s. Trotta’s link with contemporary nostalgic tendencies is signalled by his name, Franz Ferdinand, which he shares with the Habsburg Archduke whom many pro-Habsburg historians writing in the inter-war period believe could have saved the Empire through his plans to grant greater autonomy to its many ethnic groups (Kozuchoswki 50). Indeed, the narrator’s name was given to him by his father, who shared the political aims of the crown prince, and who taught his son to love the Slavs of the Empire. In Trotta’s eyes, the inhabitants of the Habsburg crownlands are models of loyalty to the crown and the narrator rapidly develops strong feelings of kinship towards Reisiger and Branco. After the outbreak of World War One, Trotta arranges to be transferred from his Viennese regiment to that in which his friends were serving, because “ich wollte mit Joseph Branco zusammen sterben . . . meinem Vetter, dem Kastanienbrater und mit Manes Reisiger, dem Fiaker von Zlotograd, und nicht mit Walzertänzern” (*Werke* 6: 271).

Yet while Trotta’s account of the development of this friendship affirms the vision of multi-ethnic harmony propagated by much of Roth’s nostalgic journalism, it also contains numerous hints that this vision is based on distorted and romanticized perceptions. The first such indications come within the passage that sets the scene of the initial meeting between Trotta and his cousin after the Slovenian arrives at the narrator’s house early one morning:

Zum erstenmal, seit mehreren Jahren, sah ich den Morgen in meinem Haus, und ich bemerkte, dass er schön war. Das Dienstmädchen gefiel mir. Die Sonne gefiel mir. Der Gesang der Amseln gefiel mir. Er war golden wie die morgenliche Sonne. Selbst das Mädchen in Blau war golden wie die Sonne. Vor lauter Gold sah ich zuerst gar nicht den Gast, der mich erwartete. (*Werke* 6: 229)

Here, the paradoxical description of the servant girl in blue clothes being “golden wie die Sonne” provides a clear demonstration of the narrator’s romanticising tendencies. These are linked to Trotta’s inaccurate view of his cousin by the way in which the golden light of the sun initially prevents him from seeing Branco. The artificiality of the narrator’s account is further hinted at by the repetition of the same simple sentence structure (“Das Dienstmädchen gefiel mir. Die Sonne gefiel mir. Der Gesang der Amseln gefiel mir”), which generates a stylised effect reminiscent of non-realistic genres such as myths or fairy-tales. Sarah Fraiman has shown how Roth used a fairy-tale style to mark irony at other points within his works (38), and it is striking that similar series of repetitively-structured sentences occur later on in Trotta’s account of the cousins’ first meeting (*Werke* 6: 229-30).

During the same scene, the narrator’s sentimental admiration of the Slovenian becomes unmistakeable through his recollection that “es schien mir, als strömte die Sonne noch stärker in unser Vorzimmer” after he saw Branco smile for the first time, and in his embarrassment about his own pale complexion and tiredness when sitting next to his cousin, whom Trotta describes as “schwarz und südlich, heiter, wach und gesund”, in a café. The sight of the Slovenien drinking his soup without a spoon fills Trotta with awe, a reaction that reaches a humorous climax with a pompous dismissal of spoons as “lächerliche Geräte”:

Ganz diesem dampfenden Teller hingegeben, den er mit starken, schmalen Fingern hochgehoben hielt, bot er den Anblick eines Menschen, dessen Appetit eigentlich eine noble Regung ist, und der einen Löffel nur deshalb unberührt läßt, weil es ihm edler erscheint, unmittelbar aus dem Teller zu essen. Ja, während ich ihn so die Suppe schlürfen sah, erschien es mir beinahe rätselhaft, daß die Menschen überhaupt Löffel erfunden hatten, lächerliche Geräte. (*Werke* 6: 231)

Shortly afterwards, Trotta’s attachment to a nostalgic image of Slavs as inherently noble is shown to be stubbornly resistant to counter-evidence. When Branco notices Trotta admiring the beautiful watch-chain that had been passed down through several generations of his family, he offers to sell it to him, citing their family relationship as a reason for this unusual step.[[29]](#endnote-29) The narrator remarks that--due to his father’s influence--he had thought that “ein slovenischer Bauer viel zu edel sei, um sich überhaupt um Geld und Geldeswert zu kümmern.” However, it is worth noting that Trotta’s father is described as having “fast fanatische Augen“, indicative of obsession, and Branco’s subsequent behaviour reveals the flaws in his characterisation of Slovenians. Almost immediately after their first transaction, the chestnut-seller also offers to sell Trotta his watch, and readily agrees to the purchase of his jacket; in each case the narrative remarks upon the fact that Branco did not offer his cousin any change (*Werke* 6: 231-32). Yet although this determination to extract money from his cousin runs counter to Trotta’s expectations, the narrator neither reflects on this fact, nor does he appear to revise his image of Slovenians. Instead, he later includes “die slowenischen Maronibrater von Sipolje” in a list of crown-land inhabitants who willingly finance life in the Habsburg capital (*Werke* 6: 270).[[30]](#endnote-30)

Trotta’s sentimental attachment to his lost homeland appears to shape his subsequent attitude towards Branco, too, which is characterised by a strong emotional attachment combined with a limited knowledge of his cousin’s thoughts and feelings. It is noticeable, for example, that the narrator’s repeated assertions of the fondness he felt for his cousin are undercut by the absence of any indication that this sentiment was reciprocated. During the first world war, for example, the narrator anticipates his transfer to Branco and Reisiger’s regiment with five separate statements of the bond he felt with the two (*Werke* 6: 262-71).Yet when he is finally reunited with his friends, there is a stark contrast between his own excitement and his cousin’s observant calm:

Ich . . . machte mich daran, auch Joseph Branco zu umarmen. Ich selbst, auch ich, vergaß das Militär. Ich dachte nur noch an den Krieg, und ich rief vielleicht zehnmal hintereinander: “Ihr lebt, ihr lebt!” Und Joseph Branco bemerkte sofort meinen Ehering und wies stumm auf meinen Finger. (*Werke* 6: 286)

Further recognition of the ways in which nostalgic thought patterns can obscure perceptions of reality is contained within by Trotta’s account of his visit to Zlotograd, the home town of Manes Reisiger. The narrator’s description of his arrival there is dominated by observations about the similarity of public buildings in the town to those found elsewhere in the Empire. These remarks are heavily indebted to Roth’s nostalgic discourse. For one thing, they echo assertions made in the writer’s newspaper articles about the fundamental unity of the different regions and peoples within the Habsburg lands.[[31]](#endnote-31) More specifically, however, they also include sections that essentially re-work a passage from Roth’s 1934 story “Die Büste des Kaisers” (*Werke* 5: 656-57). In *Die Kapuzinergruft*, one of these sections includes a list of features shared by train stations in Vienna, Zlotograd and Sipolje which contains several items bordering on the unrealistic--for example the “gleiche Portier mit dem erhabenen Bauch,” the “gleiche blonde vollbusigen Kassierin,” and the “drei Fiaker” waiting outside (*Werke* 6: 250). This kind of exaggeration hints once more at the distorted nature of Trotta’s nostalgic memories.

The narrator’s sense that Zlotograd shared a fundamental unity with Vienna and Sipolje is accompanied by a shallow understanding of the town and its inhabitants. Shortly after relating his arrival in Zlotograd, Trotta remarks that the “Geist der alten Monarchie” meant that he soon felt as much as home there as he did in Vienna (*Werke* 6: 252-53). However, as Tonkin has convincingly argued, this profession of familiarity is undermined by the narrator’s lack of interest in the area’s poverty (he briefly comments on it, but does not reflect upon it further) preference for the company of officers from the ninth dragoon regiment, and decision to reside in the only hotel considered fitting for a European, despite an invitation to stay in Reisiger’s home (178). A misplaced sense of understanding also characterises Trotta’s attitudes towards Reisiger himself. One illustration of this is his unfounded claim that the Galician had already told him “alles, was wichtig war in seinem Leben” shortly after his arrival in Zlotograd (*Werke* 6: 251). His descriptions of Reisiger are heavily grounded in contemporary stereotypes about Eastern Jews being primitive: at one point, for example, he remarks that his new friend “erinnerte . . . an Urwald, Urmensch, Vorzeit” (*Werke* 6: 254). And a lack of genuine familiarity between the two men is suggested by the narrator’s habit of referring to him as “Der Fiaker, Manes Reisiger”, even while insisting that the Galician Jew is one of his closest friends.

Of course, Trotta differs from Branco and Reisiger not only in his geographical origins, but also in his social background. And early on in the novel, a series of passages that suggest the role of class privilege in generating his nostalgia for the Habsburg past also acknowledge the self-centredness and moral blindness upon which this nostalgia was based. Social hierarchy plays an important role in Roth’s portrayals of the Habsburg Empire within *Radetzkymarsch* and *Die Geschichte von der 1002. Nacht*, and an early draft of *Die Kapuzinergruft* makes explicit mention of the class divisions that limited Trotta’s knowledge of the lives led by his social inferiors (Bijvoet and Rietra 294-303).[[32]](#endnote-32) In the final version of the novel, the narrator’s favourable view of Austria’s lost empire is shown to be heavily influenced by his upper-class background. Prior to World War One, Trotta, along with his aristocratic friends, enjoyed a life of fashionable melancholy and carefree self-indulgence. As the narrator reminisces, “Sorglos waren wir damals alle” und “unser Leben war vor dem letzten Krieg idyllisch” (*Werke* 6: 248-49), observations which clearly refer to the lives of himself and other members of his social class. Indeed, at one point, the narrator even betrays a belief that the carefree and immoral existence of himself and his associates can be taken to represent those of all Habsburg subjects. In this sketch of the narrator’s life under Habsburg rule, the “wir” of the first sentence, which clearly refers to Trotta’s own social circle, flows seamlessly into an “uns” that appears to denote all inhabitants of the empire:

Wir schimpften fröhlich, wir lästerten sogar bedenklos. Einsam und alt, fern und gleichsam erstarrt, dennoch uns allen nahe und allgegenwärtig im großen, bunten Reich lebte und regierte der alte Kaiser Franz Joseph. (*Werke* 6: 233)

While no other characters express regret over the demise of the Empire, the loss of their idyllic life following the collapse of the Habsburg Empire is viewed as a great calamity by Trotta and his friends. This reaction is both underlined and seemingly parodied by the repetition of the melodramatic phrase ‘‘Der Tod kreuzte schon seine knochigen Hände über den Kelchen, aus denen wir tranken,” which appears--with minor variations--five times following descriptions of the carefree existence of Trotta and his peers during the pre-war period (*Werke* 6: 233, 247, 249, 253, 267-8).

The amorality that accompanies Trotta’s nostalgia for Imperial Austria is demonstrated by his light-hearted attitude towards its shortcomings. We have already seen how the poverty of Manes Reisiger and the countryside surrounding Zlotograd fails to make an impression on him (Tonkin 178), and at other points he mentions flaws of pre-war Austrian society in a tone of nonchalance or even approbation. His declaration that he had ceased to hate Jews because the “positiver Antisemitismus” of the nobility had spread to the lower social classes (*Werke* 6: 240), for example, reveals not only Trotta’s social snobbery but also a fundamental acceptance of anti-Semitic prejudice. And later on, we are told how Trotta’s friend Chojnicki was an expert in influencing imperial officials, using “Drohung, Gewaltanwendung, Tücke und Hinterlist.” Instead of expressing disapproval of these unscrupulous methods, Trotta fondly characterises them as “die Waffen einer alten, längst versunkenen Kulturwelt, eben unserer Welt” (*Werke* 6: 241-42). The humorous contrast within these reminiscences between Chojnicki’s ruthless techniques of persuasion and their wistful reception by the narrator, serves to highlight the ethical limitations of Trotta’s Habsburg nostalgia.

The other prominent Habsburg nostalgic in *Die Kapuzinergruft* is Trotta’s friend, Count Chojnicki, who has also been identified by several critics as Roth’s mouthpiece within the novel*.*[[33]](#endnote-33)Such readings of Chojnicki are based on the way in which the broad pro-Habsburg thrust of his politics encompasses several more specific views expressed in Roth’s journalistic work. The Count not only shares his author’s passionate dislike of nationalism, for example, but also echoes the explanation given by Roth’s newspaper articles for the collapse of the empire, namely that pan-German agitation was to blame for the spread of dissatisfaction within essentially loyal non-German ethnic groups (*Werke* 6: 315). In some respects, Chojnicki enjoys a privileged status within the novel. He will already be known to readers familiar with *Radetzkymarsch*, in which his superior understanding of social and political processes enabled him to predict accurately the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, and this wisdom appears to be reflected in the high regard in which he is held by Trotta and his friends (*Werke* 6: 247). It is also noticeable that Chojnicki shares a number of distinguishing characteristics with his author: both men come from Galicia, live in a hotel, are unusually friendly to servants, and have an impractical tendency both to accumulate debts, and give away money.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Given the undeniable sympathy between Roth and Chojnicki, it is noteworthy that Chojnicki’s affection for his Habsburg homeland—like that of Trotta-- is accompanied by irrationality, distorted perceptions and moral weakness. During the years before World War One, for example, when the Empire was already facing the threat of disintegration, the Galician Chojnicki--like Trotta--displays a romantic attitude towards its crownland inhabitants that is shown to be both obsessive and irrational. This becomes apparent early on in the novel, when Chojnicki’s friend Festetics remarks on the enthusiasm of Slovenians for celebrating the Kaiser’s birthday, despite the repression they suffer at the hands of the Hungarians. The Count responds to this with vehement praise for the supranational character of the Empire, and a vigorous comparison between the loyalty of crown-land inhabitants and the nationalist tendencies of German-speaking Austrians:

“In dieser Monarchie”, erwiderte Graf Chojnicki, er war der älteste unter uns, “ist nichts merkwürdig. Ohne unsere Regierungstrottel” (er liebte starke Ausdrücke) “wäre ganz gewiß auch dem äußerlichen Anschein nach gar nichts merkwürdig. Ich will damit sagen, daß das sogenannte Merkwürdige für Österreich-Ungarn das Selbstverständliche ist. Ich will zugleich damit auch sagen, daß nur diesem verrückten Europa der Nationalstaaten und der Nationalismen das Selbstverständliche sonderbar erscheint. Freilich sind es die Slowenen, die polnischen und ruthenischen Galizianer, die Kaftanjuden aus Boryslaw, die Pferdehändler aus der Bacska, die Moslems aus Sarajevo, die Maronibrater aus Mostar, die “Gott erhalte” singen. Aber die deutschen Studenten aus Brünn und Eger, die Zahnärzte, Apotheker, Friseurgehilfen, Kunstphotografen aus Linz, Graz, Knittelfeld, die Kröpfe aus den Alpentälern, sie alle singen “Die Wacht am Rhein.” (*Werke* 6: 234-25)

Such sentiments are extremely close to those found in Roth’s newspaper articles, but the presentation and positioning of Chojnicki’s statements serve to undermine their seriousness. The count’s protracted and overwrought speech ignores the point made by Festetics--the loyalty of Slovenians despite Hungarian oppression--and, as a result, his focus on the dichotomy between his supranational ideals and German nationalism appears to be the result of a personal obsession. The opacity of his thought processes is suggested by the clumsy abstraction of the first few sentences, which are made harder to follow due to the narrator’s interruptions; and the comment that Chojnicki “liebte starke Ausdrücke” both underlines the eccentricity of his expression and reinforces the irrational and overexcited impression he makes. His efforts to produce exalted rhetoric are subsequently undermined by the ungainly repetition of “Ich will damit sagen” and “Ich will zugleich damit auch sagen” at the beginning of consecutive sentences; and an amusing contrast is generated by the combining of his lofty tone with the listings of mundane occupations and geographical locations associated with German nationalists.

Shortly afterwards, Chojnicki’s romantic attitudes towards inhabitants of the Habsburg crownlands are parodied more forcefully within the account of Manes Reisiger’s first visit to Vienna. Reisiger’s purpose in Vienna is to secure a free conservatory place for his piano-playing son. After being asked for help in this endeavour, the Galician Chojnicki confidently pronounces his faith in young Reisiger’s talent on the basis of seemingly irrelevant personal details:

Der Vater heißt Manes und ist ein Fiaker, wie Sie mir eben erzählen. Der Sohn heißt Ephraim, und all dies genügt mir vollkommen. Ich bin von dem Talent des Jungen ganz überzeugt. Ich weiß so was, dank meinem sechsten Sinn. Meine galizischen Juden können alles. (*Werke* 6: 243)

The Count’s professed familiarity with this group is exposed as delusion when he delivers a vehement and lengthy explanation that Galician Jews never say thank-you shortly before Manes arrives to express his gratitude for Chojnicki’s help. Instead of acknowledging this contradiction, the Galician Count triumphantly concludes “Ich habe Ihnen gleich gesagt: so sind unsere Juden” (*Werke* 6: 246).

As is the case for Trotta, Chojnicki’s attachment to a deluded and romanticised view of the inhabitants of the Habsburg crownlands is accompanied by a feeling of nostalgia for the lost Empire that is unmistakeably grounded in self-interest. Following the collapse of Austria-Hungary, it is the Count who delivers the novel’s most substantial reflection on the lost Empire, and these thoughts are introduced by an absurd and theatrical display of self-pity. For, when the narrator sees Chojnicki for the first time after the war, the Count announces that he has shaved off his moustache “damit ich wie mein Diener aussehe,” and then sketches out the implications of his change in status:

Ich bin mein eigener Lakai. Ich öffne mir selber die Tür. Ich putze mir selbst die Stiefel. Ich klingle, wenn ich was brauche, und komme selbst herein. Herr Grafen befehlen? – Zigaretten! Hierauf schicke ich mich in die Tabak-Trafik. (*Werke* 6: 314)

Chojnicki’s subsequent laments over the new political order contain no further reasons to regret the demise of the Empire, which leaves the reader to assume that his sorrow stems primarily from his own decline in status and wealth. This impression is reinforced by the narrator’s reminder only pages later of the loss of ‘Stand und Rang und Namen’ that all his friends had suffered (*Werke* 6: 316).

The Count’s description of life as his own servant is rapidly followed by another humorous sequence which pivots on the irrationality and alarming emotional volatility that accompanies his Habsburg nostalgia. For, after bemoaning the new political order, Chojnicki falls silent for a while before banging his fist on the table and shouting accusations at his visitor, whom he believes to have contributed to the rise of German nationalism. When Trotta protests that his family originates from Slovenia, Chojnicki enacts an even more dramatic transition between apparent reflection and cartoon-like aggression, first apologising quietly before crying out suddenly, “Einen Sudetendeutschen her . . . und ich erwürge ihn!--Gehn wir, suchen wir ihn auf!” (*Werke* 6: 315). Here, Chojnicki’s determination to confront a Sudeten German recalls the Sudetenland historians criticised by Roth in his journalism for their promotion of German nationalism (*Werke* 3: 719). And indeed, a German historian from Suddetenland is found shortly afterward by the Count, who cries out “Gott strafe die Sudeten” and runs towards him with clenched fists. An impression of lunatic rage is given by the description of how his mouth foamed and his eyes became bloodshot while his friends held him back, but the weak invective of “Markomannische Quadratschädel!” (*Werke* 6: 316) he hurls at the peak of his anger underlines the absurdity of his outburst.

The final nostalgic character in *Die Kapuzinergruft* who shows significant affinities with Roth is Count Chojnicki’s brother, Josef, a patient at the Steinhof lunatic asylum outside Vienna.[[35]](#endnote-35) In addition to bearing the same first name as his author, Josef Chojnicki, like his brother, shares Roth’s passionate admiration for the supranational character of the Habsburg monarchy and scorn for German nationalism.[[36]](#endnote-36) During his first appearance, which comes towards the end of the novel, Josef Chojnicki is lauded by his brother for his political acumen, after which the Count proceeds to cite a lengthy political pronouncement made by Josef that is extremely similar in content and tone to those found in Roth’s nostalgic journalism. Indeed, this speech contains two re-workings of phrases used in a 1935 newspaper article by Roth. While the journalistic piece proclaims that “Der österreichische Gedanke ist kein ‘patriotischer’ sondern beinahe ein religiöser,” Josef makes the extreme statement that “Österreich ist eine Religion,” and whereas Roth’s article describes Austria as “*der allererste deutsche und übernationale und christliche Staat*” (*Werke* 3: 674), Josef employs the non-existent word “Übernation” to declare the country “die einzige Übernation, die in der Welt existiert hat” (*Werke* 6: 337). It is unclear whether these exaggerations were intended by Roth to ironize Chojnicki’s words; however, their extreme similarity with the author’s own nostalgic rhetoric is striking.

Josef Chojnicki’s other appearance in the novel comes within the narrator’s account of his visit to Steinhof, and can be read as an admission by Roth of the illusions and irrationality that underpinned the Habsburg nostalgia to which he himself was drawn. Josef’s situation as a patient in a lunatic asylum recalls the mental fragility that Joseph Roth frequently complained of in letters during the final years of his life; and the fact that he is held in solitary confinement (despite, we are told, not displaying any violent tendencies) can be seen as a metaphor for the sense of isolation regularly mentioned by Roth in his correspondence of the mid to late 1930s (*Briefe* 443-528). Within the Steinhof scene, Josef’s delusions are shown to be inextricably bound up with his enthusiasm for the Habsburg past. His shaky grasp on reality is revealed by his claim to have been charged with protecting the Habsburg crown at Steinhof, now “die Haupt- und Residenzstadt von Österreich,” and the opacity of his mental processes is strongly suggested by the description of how he subsequently “begann . . . unverständliches Zeug zu reden.” Finally, a potent image of the desperate and absurd self-deception involved in attempts to hold on to the Habsburg past is generated by the report that, since entering Steinhof, Josef had been knitting “mit unermüdlichem Eifer” a sock that, for him, represents the Habsburg monarchy: “‘Ich stricke die Monarchie’, sagte er von Zeit zu Zeit” (*Werke* 6: 338).

The three major nostalgic characters in *Die Kapuzinergruft--*Franz Ferdinand Trotta, Count Chojnicki and Josef Chojnicki--all display an attitude towards the Habsburg Empire that conforms to the “restorative” variety of nostalgia identified by Svetlana Boym: they share an intense and uncritical longing for Austria’s past that prevents them from accepting the country’s post-imperial present. The appeal that such nostalgic perspectives held for Roth is indicated not only by their dominant position within the novel, but also by the sympathy with which the nostalgic characters are portrayed, as well as the personal affinities they share with their author, and the fact that their specific pro-Habsburg views and rhetoric overlap substantially with those of their author. At the same time, however, the novel clearly reveals the perceptual and ethical pitfalls of these nostalgic mind-sets, and thereby demonstrates Roth’s awareness of them too. As a result, it is evident that the nostalgic characters in *Die Kapuzinergruft* do not function as straightforward mouthpieces for their author’s longing for Austria’s Habsburg past.

Instead, Roth’s depiction of these figures enabled him to fictionalize nostalgic standpoints to which he felt attracted, while at the same time acknowledging the moral and intellectual weaknesses these views entailed. The inner conflict suggested by this approach can be seen as a continuation of the writer’s lifelong tendency to switch between conflicting roles and professed ideological allegiances (Bronsen, *Joseph Roth* 600-01). David Bronsen has convincingly linked this apparently compulsive role-playing to what he terms Roth’s “double consciousness,” a “fractured sense of self” rooted in the tension between the writer’s *shtetl* roots and the anti-Semitic Austrian mainstream into which he desired to become accepted (“The Jew in Search of a Fatherland” 54-57). The presentation of nostalgic characters within *Die Kapuzinergruft* indicates that this “double consciousness” also extended to his view of Austria’s Habsburg past during the final, desperate, years of his life. The creation of a nostalgic narrative that is periodically ruptured by passages exposing nostalgic thought processes and behaviour to ridicule, enables the author to dramatize a deep-rooted and unresolved inner conflict surrounding Habsburg nostalgia. As a result, *Die Kapuzinergruft* is a moving document of Roth’s inability to reconcile the solace he apparently found in adopting the role of an ardent “restorative” Habsburg nostalgic, with the awareness that this meant succumbing to a sentimental and distorted view of the past.

1. For examples of such articles, see Roth, *Werke* 3: 721-25, 742-51 and 774-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Tonkin 167-9, Lazaroms 54-65 and Götze 28-46. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a detailed history of nostalgia, see Boym 3-39. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The twelfth edition of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines nostalgia as “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past” (977). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a brief sketch of these contributions, see Fritzsche 63-64. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a concise discussion of the trends that characterised the literary portrayal of the Habsburg Empire during this period, see Magris 285-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For a detailed account of such writings, see Kozuchowski 23-107. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For an informative account of the development and influence of Austrian legitimism during this period, see Holmes 91-109. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See, for example, the account of Anton van Duinkerken quoted in Bronsen, *Joseph Roth* 265, and Roth’s letter of 13 July 1934 to Stefan Zweig (352). The article in which Roth renounces his military title is reprinted in his collected works (3: 803-04). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See, for example, the reminiscences of Hermann Kesten quoted in Bronsen, *Joseph Roth* 241, and those of Blanche Gideon and Karl Rezlaw quoted in Lunzer, 82 and 151 respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Pauli 186-87; Zelewitz 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Bronsen, *Joseph Roth* 482; Rosenfeld 55 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Earlier, similar considerations appear to have led Roth to write positively about the Austrian *Ständestaat* in his newspaper articles while expressing considerable distrust towards the Austro-fascism in his private correspondence (Lunzer 130-31). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Although some non-German publishers managed--at least temporarily--to sell works in the third Reich by authors who were banned there, Roth refused on principle to allow his publishers to attempt this (Lunzer 68). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Madeleine Rietra’s introduction to the letters between Joseph Roth and the de Lange and Querido publishing houses gives a vivid account of how the writer’s desperation to secure income determined his relationship with the two publishers. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For examples of such letters from the period between 1936 and 1938,see *Briefe* 453, 485, 501-02 and 522. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Briefe* 430; *Werke* 6: 673-74 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. A picture and description of the front cover can be found in Eckert and Berthold (471). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Fingal’s 1953 letter to the research student Senta Ziedler, which is reprinted in Lunzer (195-96). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See David Bronsen’s notes from his interview with Fuchs, which are reprinted in Lunzer, (140-42). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. These remarks are taken from Leonard’s reminiscences, which are reprinted in Eckert and Berthold (372). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Pauli makes a similar argument about the wider significance of Trotta’s indifference towards political developments within the First Austrian Republic (114). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Also questionable is Tonkin’s suggestion that Roth’s monarchism was contingent on his belief that a Habsburg restoration was only way to prevent the Nazi annexation of the country (169-70): in fact, Roth maintained his staunch support for monarchism even after the *Anschluss* had taken place. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Götze also points to these factors as evidence for Roth’s interest in the psychology of Trotta as a man who has lost his homeland (29), but his analysis of the novel concentrates on the various levels on which it communicates the death of the Habsburg myth (28-46). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See, for example, Magris 311-313, Barker 151and Rosenfeld 84-85.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Roth’s 1938 article “Rast angesichts der Zerstörung” (*Werke* 3: 813-15), which describes the destruction of the Hôtel Foyot, is a powerful testimony to the writer’s sense of homelessness. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Roth’s article “Brief an eine schöne Frau im langen Kleid” (*Werke* 3: 296-99) argues passionately for the retention of traditional gender roles. For examples of pieces in which Roth identifies National Socialism as a product of specifically Prussian traditions, see *Werke* 3: 543-45 and 557-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. It is extremely unlikely that these stylistic flaws were the result of unintentional clumsiness on the part of Roth. The author’s enduring sensitivity to poor style in other writers is demonstrated by his detailed complaint to the *Österreichische Post* in early 1939 about the German in one of its articles (Lunzer 159); and the two other works he completed during the last three years of his life, *Die Geschichte von der 1002. Nacht* and *Die Legende vom heiligen Trinker* have been widely praised for their stylistic finesse. Indeed, *Die Geschichte von der 1002. Nacht* repeatedly ridicules the inappropriate use of language by its main character, Baron Taitlinger. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. As Geoffrey C. Howes has argued, the importance attached by Franz Ferdinand to acquiring trappings of Slovenian peasantry from Branco also demonstrates the superficiality of his commitment to the supranational empire (160). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Englemann has convincingly argued that Trotta’s sentimental view of Branco and Reisiger’s supposed commitment to the Habsburg Empire was intended by Roth to expose his narrator’s shallow understanding of social and ethnic relations (271). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See, for example, “Dreimal Österreich” (*Werke* 3: 774-80) and “Totenmesse” (*Werke* 3: 795-98). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. This early draft is reprinted in Bijvoet and Rietra 294-303. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See, for example, Doppler 95 and Oie 151 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Bronsen, *Joseph Roth* 460-61; Lunzer 14, 17 and 83; Morgenstern 100-01 and 167; Roth, *Werke* 6: 242-44, 330, 337).

    35 Roth’s wife, Friederike, who suffered from schizophrenia, was a patient at Steinhof from December 1933 until her murder by in the Nazis in 1940.

    36 Götze also sees Josef Chojnicki as Roth’s alter ego, but he interprets the character’s Habsburg nostalgia in a more positive and utopian manner.

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35. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)