

Classic Poetry Series

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

- poems -

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Hugo von Hofmannsthal(1 February 1874 – 15 July 1929)

Hugo Laurenz August Hofmann von Hofmannsthal, was an Austrian novelist, librettist, poet, dramatist, narrator, and essayist.

Early Life

Hofmannsthal was born in Landstraße, Vienna, the son of an upper-class Austrian mother, Anna Maria Josefa Fohleutner (1852–1904), and an Austrian–Italian bank manager, Hugo August Peter Hofmann, Edler von Hofmannsthal (1841–1915). His great-grandfather, Isaak Löw Hofmann, Edler von Hofmannsthal, from whom his family inherited the noble title "Edler von Hofmannsthal," was a Jewish merchant ennobled by the Austrian emperor. He began to write poems and plays from an early age. He met the German poet Stefan George at the age of seventeen and had several poems published in George's journal, *Blätter für die Kunst*. He studied law and later philology in Vienna but decided to devote himself to writing upon graduating in 1901. Along with Peter Altenberg and Arthur Schnitzler, he was a member of the avant garde group Young Vienna (Jung Wien).

Career

In 1900, Hofmannsthal met the composer Richard Strauss for the first time. He later wrote libretti for several of his operas, including *Elektra* (1909), *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912, rev. 1916), *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919), *Die ägyptische Helena* (1927), and *Arabella* (1933). In 1912 he adapted the 15th century English morality play *Everyman as Jedermann*, and Jean Sibelius (amongst others) wrote incidental music for it. The play later became a staple at the Salzburg Festival. During the First World War Hofmannsthal held a government post. He wrote speeches and articles supporting the war effort, and emphasizing the cultural tradition of Austria–Hungary. The end of the war spelled the end of the old monarchy in Austria; this was a blow from which the patriotic and conservative-minded Hofmannsthal never fully recovered. Nevertheless the years after the war were very productive ones for Hofmannsthal; he continued with his earlier literary projects, almost without a break. In 1920, Hofmannsthal, along with Max Reinhardt, founded the Salzburg Festival. His later plays revealed a growing interest in religious, particularly Roman Catholic, themes. Among his writings was a screenplay for a film version of *Der Rosenkavalier* (1925) directed by Robert

Wiene.

Personal life

In 1901, he married Gertrud (Gerty) Schlesinger, the daughter of a Viennese banker. Gerty, who was Jewish, converted to Christianity before their marriage. They settled in Rodaun, not far from Vienna, and had three children. On 13 July 1929, his son Franz committed suicide. Two days later, Hofmannsthal himself died of a stroke at Rodaun (now part of Liesing). He was buried wearing the habit of a Franciscan tertiary, as he had requested. In early 1929, his daughter Christiane, married German indologist, Heinrich Zimmer, who taught at University of Greifswald, Heidelberg University, and Balliol College, Oxford (1939–1940), before moving to New Rochelle, New York, to become a Visiting Lecturer in Philosophy at Columbia University. Heinrich Zimmer died in 1943.

Thought

On 18 October 1902, Hofmannsthal published a fictive letter in the Berlin Daily, Der Tag (The Day) titled simply "Ein Brief" ("A Letter"). It was purportedly written in 1603 by Philip, Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon. In this letter Chandos says that he has stopped writing because he has "lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently"; he has given up on the possibility of language to describe the world. This letter reflects the growing distrust of and dissatisfaction with language that so characterizes the Modern era, and Chandos's dissolving personality is not only individual but societal. Growing up the son of a wealthy merchant who was well connected with the major artists of the time, Hofmannsthal was raised in what Carl Schorske refers to as "the temple of art". This perfect setting for aesthetic isolation allowed Hofmannsthal the unique perspective of the privileged artist, but also allowed him to see that art had become a flattened documenting of humanity, which took our instincts and desires and framed them for viewing without acquiring any of the living, passionate elements. Because of this realization, Hofmannsthal's idea of the role of the artist began to take shape as someone who created works that would inspire or inflame the instinct, rather than merely preserving it in a creative form. He also began to think that the artist should not be someone isolated and left to his art, but rather a man of the world, immersed in both politics and art. Hofmannsthal saw in English culture the ideal setting for the artist. This was because the English simultaneously admired Admiral Nelson and John Milton, both war heroes and poets, while still maintaining a solid national identity. "In [Hofmannsthal's] view, the division between artist (writer) and man of action (politician, explorer, soldier) does not exist in England. Britain provides her

subjects with a common base of energy which functions as equilibrium, a force lacking in fragmented Germany" (Weiss). This singular and yet pragmatic identity must have appealed to Hofmannsthal to a certain degree due to the large scale fragmentation of Austria at the time, which was in the throes of radical nationalism and anti-Semitism, a nation in which the progressive artist and the progressive politician were growing more different and hostile to each other by the day.

Present-day descendants

Rodolphe von Hofmannsthal, great-grandson of Hugo, is married to Lady Frances von Hofmannsthal, née Armstrong-Jones, daughter of the 1st Earl of Snowdon (former husband of Princess Margaret, Countess of Snowdon) and his second wife, Lucy Mary Davies.

»works« Are Dead Rock

»Works« are dead rock, sprung from resounding chisel,
When the master is at work, chipping away at his living self.
»Works« announce the mind as pupas announce the butterfly:
»Look, it left me behind – lifeless – and fluttered away.«
»Works« are like reeds, Midas' whispering reeds,
Spreading secrets long after having ceased to be true.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Ariadne Auf Naxos

There is a land where all is pure,
And this land is called
The land of death.
Here nothing is pure.
All things suffer corruption.
But soon a herald will come.
Hermes is his name,
his winged wand rules all souls.
Like birds affrighted,
like withered leaves before him they fly.
O beautiful, peaceful god,
See, Ariadne waits.
Ah, from all pains and miseries
must my heart be purified;
then you will nod to me,
your steps will reach my cave,
on my eyes there falls a darkness,
on my heart you'll lay your hand.
In the regal festal garments
that my mother wove for me,
I will wrap my weary body,
and this cave will be my tomb.
But my soul in solemn silence
follows its new-made lord,
like a leaf by winds driven
downward falling, gladly following.
On my eyes there falls a darkness,
darkness too will fill my heart,
and within this cave my body
richly robed alone will lie.
It is you who will save me,
my captive soul freed of
this burden of being.
Lift it from me.
To you I will lose all myself
with you will Ariadne dwell.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Ballade Des Äußeren Lebens

Und Kinder wachsen auf mit tiefen Augen,
Die von nichts wissen, wachsen auf und sterben,
Und alle Menschen gehen ihre Wege.

Und süße Früchte werden aus den herben
Und fallen nachts wie tote Vögel nieder
Und liegen wenig Tage und verderben.

Und immer weht der Wind, und immer wieder
Vernehmen wir und reden viele Worte
Und spüren Lust und Müdigkeit der Glieder.

Und Straßen laufen durch das Gras, und Orte
Sind da und dort, voll Fackeln, Bäumen, Teichen,
Und drohende, und totenhaft verdorrte...

Wozu sind diese aufgebaut? und gleichen
Einander nie? und sind unzählig viele?
Was wechselt Lachen, Weinen und Erbleichen?

Was frommt das alles uns und diese Spiele,
Die wir doch groß und ewig einsam sind
Und wandernd nimmer suchen irgend Ziele?

Was frommts, dergleichen viel gesehen haben?
Und dennoch sagt der viel, der 'Abend' sagt,
Ein Wort, daraus Tiefsinn und Trauer rinnt

Wie schwerer Honig aus den hohlen Waben.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Besitz

Dann, erst dann komm ich zum Weiher,
Der in stiller Mittel spiegelt,
Mir des Gartens ganze Freude
Träumerisch vereint entriegelt.
Aber solche Vollbesitzes
Tiefe Blicke sind so selten!
Zwischen Finden und Verlieren
Müssen sie als göttlich gelten.
All in einem, Kern und Schale,
Dieses Glück gehört dem Traum...
Tief begreifen und besitzen!
Hat dies wo im Leben einen Raum?

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Canticum Canticorum Iv, 12-16

You are the garden locked,
Your childlike hands are waiting,
Your lips are without violence.
You are the fountain sealed,
Life's frozen threshold,
Tart and cold in ignorance.

Take wings, north wind,
Come, south wind, across the hills,
And blow through this grove!
Let all fragrances come awake,
Let life free itself
From sleep's frozen depth.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Creature Of The Flood Poem Of The Mussels

We are alone in the dark. You up there have lips, rolled-up leaves, hands entwined with rosy blood and bluish veins, we are alone and cannot touch. We live our life fully, our fate is to resist the waves, that is what we become, and triumph and pain color us as the reflection of fall and of the sun colors the waves there near the surfa

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Creatures Of Flame

We are all creatures of flame. The butterfly: the intensity of a short life and fragility become color. My death is like shadow, my life aquiver, a pulse in the light; I am so close to death it makes me proud, cruel and demonic.

Unmoved, I flutter from Helen's lips to Adonis' wound. I love my death, the flame, more than anything.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Der Schiffskoch, Ein Gefangener, Singt:

Weh, geschieden von den Meinigen,
Lieg ich hier seit vielen Wochen,
Ach und denen, die mich peinigen,
Muß ich Mahl- um Mahlzeit kochen.
Schöne purpurflossige Fische,
Die sie mir lebendig brachten,
Schauen aus gebrochenen Augen,
Sanfte Tiere muß ich schlachten.

Stille Tiere muß ich schlachten,
Schöne Früchte muß ich schälen
Und für sie, die mich verachten,
Feurige Gewürze wählen.
Und wie ich gebeugt beim Licht in
Süß- und scharfen Düften wühle,
Steigen auf ins Herz der Freiheit
Ungeheure Gefühle!
Weh, geschieden von den Meinigen,
Lieg ich hier seit wieviel Wochen!
Ach und denen, die mich peinigen,
Muß ich Mahl- um Mahlzeit kochen!

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Die Beiden

Sie trug den Becher in der Hand -
Ihr Kinn und Mund glich seinem Rand -,
So leicht und sicher war ihr Gang,
Kein Tropfen aus dem Becher sprang.
So leicht und fest war seine Hand:
Er ritt auf einem jungen Pferde,
Und mit nachlässiger Gebärde
Erzwang er, daß es zitternd stand.
Jedoch, wenn er aus ihrer Hand
Den leichten Becher nehmen sollte,
So war es beiden allzu schwer:
Denn beide bebten sie so sehr,
Daß keine Hand die andre fand
Und dunkler Wein am Boden rollte.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Erfahrung

Ich kann so gut verstehen die ungetreuen Frauen,
So gut, mir ist, als könnt' ich in ihre Seelen schauen.
Ich seh um ihre Stirnen die stumme Klage schweben,
Die Qual am langen, leeren, am lebenleeren Leben;
Ich seh in ihren Augen die Lust, sich aufzugeben,
Im Unergründlichen, Verbotenen zu beben,
Die Lust am Spiel, die Lust, das Letzte einzusetzen,
Die Lust am Sieg und Rausch, am Trügen und Verletzen.
Ich seh ihr Lächeln und die heimlichen, die Tränen,
Das rätselhafte Suchen, das ruhelose Sehnen.
Ich fühle, wie sie's drängt zu törichten Entschlüssen,
Wie sie die Augen schließen, und wie sie quälen müssen;
Wie sie für jedes Morgen ein jedes Heut' begraben,
Und wie sie nicht verstehen, wenn sie getötet haben.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Erlebnis

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Experience

The valley of dusk was filled

With a silver-grey fragrance, like the moon

Seeping through clouds. But it wasn't night.

The silver-grey fragrance of the dark valley

Caused my sleepy thoughts to blur,

And silently I sank into the weaving,

Transparent sea and left my life.

What wonderful flowers there were,

With dark chalices glowing! A maze of plants

Through which a yellow-red light,

as if from topazes, glowed in warm streams. All

Was filled with a deep swelling

Of melancholy music. And this I knew,

Even though I could not fathom it, but I knew:

This was death. Death turned music,

With an immense longing, sweet and glowing darkly,

Brother to deepest melancholy.

And yet:

A nameless homesickness for life kept crying

Mutely in my soul, crying as someone

On board a big ocean vessel would cry, a ship, driven
By gigantic yellow sails, passing by the city,
His city, at night in dark-blue water. There he sees
The lanes, hears the rushing of the fountains, smells
The scent of the lilac bushes, sees himself,
A child, standing on the shore, with a child's eyes,
Fearful, with tears welling up, sees
Through the open window the light in his room
But the big ship carries him along,
Gliding away on dark-blue water soundlessly,
Driven by gigantic yellow sails of strange shape.
Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Im Grünen Zu Singen

War der Himmel trüb und schwer,
Waren einsam wir so sehr,
Voneinander abgeschnitten!
Aber das ist nun nicht mehr:
Lüfte fließen hin und her;
Und die ganze Welt inmitten
Glänzt, als ob sie gläsern wär.
Sterne kamen aufgegangen,
Flimmern mein - und deinen Wangen,
Und sie wissens auch:
Stark und stärker wird ihr Prangen;
Und wir atmen mit Verlangen,
Liegen selig wie gefangen,
Spüren eins des andern Hauch.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

King Cophetua

The crown falls out of his indolent hand; the crown that is his beautiful city of Arles with its high walls and ponds and square paved dams, with the large Roman arena and a great number of black bulls, with the church of St. Trophime and the Alyscams, with the little yellow houses at night with whores pale as candle wax behind small windows in narrow back streets, with the street corners and river banks attached to the intimations of his childhood, and his favorite diseases: fever and the shivers, and the rivers, once so precious to him, in the distance between rocky mountains under a black and yellow evening sky, and all the statues he loved for no reason, and distant views from the arena tower, and a dim idea of the pains of others, all that drops out of his hand and leaves him entirely alone.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Kleine Erinnerungen

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Remembered

Your little sister

Has tossed her

Untied hair forward

Like a living veil,

Like a fragrant hedge,

And peers, with such eyes!

Through a fragrant veil,

Through a dark hedge ...

How sweet it is to only

Think of such little things.

Fruits have ripened

On all the longing branches

In your nightly garden,

Chinese lanterns like red fruits

Sway and illuminate

The longing branches

Rustled by the night wind

In your little garden ...

How sweet it is to only

Think of such little things.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Terzinen Über Vergänglichkeit - Erste Terzine

Noch spür ich ihren Atem auf den Wangen:
Wie kann das sein, dass diese nahen Tage
Fort sind, für immer fort, und ganz vergangen?
Dies ist ein Ding, das keiner voll aussinnt,
Und viel zu grauenvoll, als dass man klage:
Dass alles gleitet und vorüberrinnt
Und dass mein eignes Ich, durch nichts gehemmt,
Herüberglitt aus einem kleinen Kind
Mir wie ein Hund unheimlich stumm und fremd.
Dann: dass ich auch vor hundert Jahren war
Und meine Ahnen, die im Totenhemd,
Mit mir verwandt sind wie mein eignes Haar,
So eins mit mir als wie mein eignes Haar.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

The Gardener's Daughters

One fills the large Delft jugs,
Painted with blue dragons and birds,
With a loose sheaf of bright flowers:
Among them jasmine, ripe roses unfolding,
Dahlias, carnations and narcissus...
Tall daisies, lilac umbels and snowball
Dance above them, and
Stalks, silvery down and panicles sway...
A fragrant bacchanal...
The other with pale thin fingers picks
Long-stemmed rigid orchids,
Two or three for a narrow vase...
Rising up with fading colors,
With long styles, strange and winding,
With purple threads and garish dots,
With violet brown panther spots
And lurking, seductive chalices
Wanting to kill...

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

The Rose And The Desk

I know that flowers never fall out of open windows by themselves. Especially not at night. But that's beside the point. Anyway, the red rose suddenly lay before my black patent leather shoes in the white snow covering the street. The rose was very dark, like velvet, still slender, not yet unfolded, and without fragrance because of the cold. I took it with me, put it in a small Japanese vase on my desk and went to bed.

I woke up soon afterwards. There was a dim light in the room, not from the moon but from the stars. Inhaling, I felt the perfume of the now warm rose drift over and overheard a whispered conversation. The china rose on the old Viennese ink set was dropping remarks about something. »He doesn't have any taste, any style left,« it said, »not a trace of taste.« Meaning me. »Or else he couldn't possibly have put something like that next to me.« Meaning the live rose.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Unendliche Zeit

Wirklich, bist du zu schwach, dich der seeliger, Zeit zu erinnern?
Über dem dunkelnden Tal zogen die Sterne herauf,
Wir aber standen im Schatten und bebten. Die risige Ulme
Schüttelte sich wie im Traum, warf einen Schauer herab
Lärmender Tropfen ins Gras: Es war keine Stunde vergangen
Seit jenem Regen! Und mir schien es unendliche Zeit.
Denn dem Erlebenden dehnt sich das Leben: es tun sich lautlos
Klüfte unendlichen Traums zwischen zwei Blicken ihm auf:
In mich hätte ich gesogen dein zwanzigjähriges Dasein
-War mir, indessen der Baum noch sein Tropfen behielt.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Vorfrühling

Es läuft der Frühlingswind
Durch kahle Alleen,
Seltsame Dinge sind
In seinem Wehn.
Er hat sich gewiegt,
Wo Weinen war,
Und hat sich geschmiegt
In zerrüttetes Haar.
Er schüttelte nieder
Akazienblüten
Und kühlte die Glieder,
Die atmend glühten.
Lippen im Lachen
Hat er berührt,
Die weichen und wachen
Fluren durchspürt.
Er glitt durch die Flöte,
Als schluchzender Schrei,
An dämmernder Röte
Flog er vorbei.
Er flog mit Schweigen
Durch flüsternde Zimmer
Und löschte im Neigen
Der Ampel Schimmer.
Es läuft der Frühlingswind
Durch kahle Alleen,
Seltsame Dinge sind
In seinem Wehn.
Durch die glatten
Kahlen Alleen
Treibt sein Wehn
Blasse Schatten
Und den Duft,
Den er gebracht,
Von wo er gekommen
Seit gestern Nacht.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Written In A Copy Of 'Yesterday'

Thoughts are apples on the tree,
Not meant for anyone in particular,
But they end up belonging
To the one who takes them.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal