

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Hugo von Hofmansthal

The Life of Hugo von Hofmansthal. Hugo Von Hofmansthal (1874-1929) was an Austrian novelist, librettist, poet, and dramatist, who came to believe strongly in the writer's need to be significantly absorbed in his society, and who accordingly was widely known in his home world of Vienna. His father was an Austrian-Italian banker, and his mother came from an old and distinguished Viennese family. His great grandfather was a Jewish merchant, prominent in Vienna, who was ennobled by the Austrian Emperor.

Student and early creative life in Vienna. At an early age Hofmansthal was active writing poems, and at 17 he made the acquaintance of Stefan George, and published poems in George's *Blaetter fuer die Kunst, Art Journal*. (Characteristically enough he refused George's invitation to membership in George's Kreis, anxious not to adopt a servant/master relationship to the great man.) Hofmansthal studied Law and Philosophy at the University of Vienna, but on graduation, in 1901, he chose to take the direction of poetry—which his financial situation permitted. He settled into Viennese avant garde creative circles, joining the Young Vienna group, in which he enjoyed the partnership of the Viennese dramatist, Arthur Schnitzler.

Hugo von Hofmansthal, a literary life. Hugo von Hofmansthal met the composer Richard Strauss for the first time in 1901, and formed a working relationship with him, as the Romantic fabulist E.T.A. Hoffman had formed such a relationship with the great composers of his day. (Libretti for a number of superb opera dramas were generated by Hofmansthal and Strauss: we note *Elektra*, perhaps the best and best known, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Ariadne on Naxos*. In 1912 Hofmansthal adapted into German the 15th century English mystery play, *Everyman*—which is still performed annually at the Salzburg Festival. We can easily imagine that, during the years following WW I, Hofmansthal was writing continuously, in several genres: but he was also taking his part in society, in the way, he thought, the poet should. During the War he supported a pro-Government position, and grew increasingly conservative and supportive of the Austro Hungarian Empire. His disappointment, at the outcome of the war, was predictably great, and the Weimar Republic little solace. Nonetheless, von Hofmansthal continued with an intense regime of writing and directing. In 1920, with the director Max Reinhardt, von Hofmansthal founded the Salzburg Festival of the arts, which flourishes to our day.

Hugo von Hofmansthal in later life. Hugo von Hofmansthal married in 1901, his Jewish wife having converted to Christianity, and von Hofmansthal having grown deeper in his appreciation of Roman Catholicism as he advanced in his own imaginative work. Three children were born to the marriage; von Hofmansthal's son Franz, committed suicide, and two days later von Hofmansthal himself died of a stroke. He was buried in the habit of a Franciscan tertiary.

The character of the work. A couple of examples will suffice. In 1902 von Hofmansthal published his fictive letter, 'Ein Brief,' 'A Letter,' purportedly written by the English nobleman Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon, in the 16th century. This fascinating letter allows von Hofmansthal to elaborate his own ideas about the crisis of language, as a means to encountering the world, and the inherent loneliness of the person who tries to reach the world through language. The Bildungsroman *Andreas or the United* (1912) consists of two parts: the first, set on an Alpine farm, features Andreas mystically identifying with the extremes of good and evil; the second part, set in Venice, displays Andreas in love with a split personality woman whom he tries, it seems in vain, to reunite into one person through love. Von Hofmansthal probes deeply into imagination and its psychological depths.

Reading

Primary source reading

McClatchy, J.P., ed. *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmanstahl*, 2008.

Secondary source reading

Broch, Hermann; trans. Michael Pitnam, *Hugo von Hofmanstahl and his Time: The European Imagination, 1860-1920*, 1984.

Further reading

Schorske, Carol, *Fin-de-siecle Vienna. Politics and Culture*, 1980.

Original language reading

Mayer, Mathias, *Hugo von Hofmannstahl*, 1993.

Suggested paper topics

Look into the Chandos letter of Hoffmanstahl. Why is this discussion set centuries in the past, in England? What point is Hofmanstahl making here? Is the issue primarily the nature of human beings lost in the loneliness of their own private language?

Read *Andreas* or *The United*, and discuss Hofmanstahl's perceptions into serious mental illness. Does he show a technical understanding of the psychoanalysis which was a major trend in the Vienna of Hofmanstahl's time?

Excerpt www.poemhunter.com/hugo-von-hofmannsthal/

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