

The Beauty of Art. Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Walter Pater revisited

Alice Bolterauer

University of Graz

1.

Towards the end of the 19th century, a discourse became particularly popular among the European intelligentsia – a discourse that combined an interest in historicism and the philosophy of history with a love of beauty and decoration: Renaissancism¹. “Renaissancism” means the creative imitation of the Renaissance era², where imitation often turns out to be a pure invention. Considering that “the” Renaissance does not exist as a uniform or homogeneous epoch, it is clear that Renaissancism is mainly based on the arbitrary selection of individual aspects that contribute to an imaginary Renaissance. It is pure fantasy and imagination.

While this interest in the Renaissance owes its concrete impetus to the important works on the Renaissance by Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche, the late-19th-century adoption of artistic and artificial Renaissancism can probably be explained by major social developments – above all by a fundamental feeling of dissatisfaction and by the desire to escape from the inadequate present time into a beautiful past³. In his essay on “Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit” (1947/48), Austrian writer Hermann Broch found the roots of the desire for beauty and aestheticization in the loss of values, in the “moral vacuum” (“Wertvakuum”). He interpreted the beautiful façade and pretty decorations as symptoms of ethical and moral impoverishment. The beautiful façade, the pretty ‘make-up’, is meant to

conceal the emptiness and meaninglessness of a society that has become hollow. Broch writes: “The nature of an epoch can usually be read from its architectural façade, and for the second half of the 19th century it is probably one of the most pathetic in world history; it was the epoch of eclecticism, of false Baroque, false Renaissance, false Gothic.” (111)

Many contemporaries recognized and ridiculed the fact that Renaissancism was not ‘true’, that it was often just a game or a pose. In his *Bilanz der Moderne*, Samuel Lublinski speaks condescendingly of the prevailing “Renaissance enthusiasm” and Julius Hart writes in his essay “Individualismus und Renaissance-Romantik” (published in 1899):

Das Mittelalter zu spielen haben sie aufgehört, nun spielen sie sechzehntes Jahrhundert [...]. Der bunte Faschingsreigen, der einst durch die Gassen Roms und in den vatikanischen Sälen des zehnten Leo tollte – Kardinal Bibbiena, der lüsterne Satyr, an der Spitze – zieht noch einmal am Ausgang dieses Jahrhunderts mit Becken und Schellen rasselnd vorüber. Gott Dionysos führt sie im bacchantischen Zug einher. (77)

We shall see later why the Renaissance in particular was used as a projection screen for moral and existential deficits, and why Renaissance costumes were considered so seductive and attractive. The fact is that almost all the great, and even the less important, authors of the late 19th century wrote Renaissance dramas, Renaissance novellas or Renaissance novels. Apart from Hofmannsthal’s Renaissance dramas, which will be discussed later, there is a flood of literature in the Renaissance style during this time. Oscar Wilde’s Renaissance plays *The Duchess of Padua* and *A Florentine Tragedy* were published in 1891 and 1908 respectively; Rainer Maria Rilke wrote his *Weißer Fürstin* in 1898, Gabriele D’Annunzio his *Gioconda* in 1899, Maurice Maeterlinck his *Monna Vanna* in 1902, Karl Vollmoeller his *Giulia* in 1905. It is noticeable that even authors who were less interested in history or less enthusiastic about the Renaissance were infected by “Renaissance fever” and felt “obliged” to follow the Renaissance fashion. Two famous examples are Arthur Schnitzler with his Renaissance drama *Der Schleier der Beatrice* (1901)⁴ and Thomas Mann⁵ with his drama *Fiorenza* (1905). The genre of the Renaissance epic extends from the early novellas of Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (*Das Amulett* from 1873 and *Die Hochzeit des Mönchs* from 1884) to Ricarda Huch’s story *Die Hugenottin* (1892) and finally to Heinrich Mann’s trilogy *Die Göttinnen*

oder *Die drei Romane der Herzogin von Assy* (1902). To these great and important examples of Renaissance fashion must be added a long list of secondary and tertiary works that are based on the fascination and horror of 'great names'. There are countless texts dedicated to Cesare Borgia, Ludovico Sforza or Savonarola. In 1893, Rudolf Lothar published his drama *Cäsar Borgia's Ende*, in 1899, Max Halbe's tragedy *Der Eroberer* appeared; in 1898, Wilhelm Weigand's published his Renaissance cycle (comprising the dramas *Tessa*, *Savonarola*, *Cesare Borgia* and *Lorenzino*); in 1904, Ludwig Fulda's drama *Novella d'Andrea* was performed, etc. Of course, there had always been literature about the Renaissance, and there always would be⁶, but around 1900 the Renaissance was used as a mirror to show the shortcomings of the present. Renaissance figures were thematized to illustrate 'modern', contemporary feelings, and the image of a fictitious Renaissance was utilized to imagine alternatives or solutions.

2.

The list of important key words used by the representatives of Renaissancism around 1900 is quite short and limited: power-seeking, autonomous individuality, immorality, unrestrained hedonism, wickedness. Renaissancist writers are not interested in the spectacular technical inventions of the Renaissance, nor in the humanist ideal of the "uomo universale", but they are fascinated by the image of the powerful man of violence and by the idea of immoral hedonism⁷. Kruft explains: "For the German poets of the turn of the century, the encounter with Italy was largely congruent with a Renaissance experience that, in the sense of compensating for one's own decadence and weakness, provided the framework for unlimited individualism, immorality and aestheticism." (89)

One reason for this one-sided view of the Renaissance is the work of Jacob Burckhardt, and the other reason is the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. With his essential study *The Culture of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), Jacob Burckhardt laid the foundations for the enthusiasm surrounding the Renaissance in the second half of the 19th century⁸. The book's publication history is quite interesting. While Burckhardt's Renaissance book had only four editions in the first twenty-five years of its publication (1860-1885), it went through six editions in the next twelve years (1896, 1897, 1899, 1901, 1904, 1908) (Rehm 49).

This popularity of Burckhardt's work illustrates the growing interest in the Renaissance as a cultural movement and in the Renaissance man as an admired alter ego of modern man. Although Burckhardt also describes social life with its religious and amorous behaviour, and does not forget the great role of scholars and humanists, he is particularly interested in the development of modern individuality. Burckhardt writes: "[...] man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such." (*Renaissance* 131) According to Burckhardt, the modern individual of the Renaissance is fundamentally different from the average man of the Middle Ages. Mental attitudes changed, as did attitudes to life. Because of the insecurity of the Italian states and growing cosmopolitanism, the 'modern' man, the Renaissance man, becomes a self-conscious and self-confident individual.

When "this impulse to the highest individual development is combined with a powerful and varied nature, that had mastered all the elements of the culture of the age" (*Renaissance* 137), then the man we call the "uomo universale" can appear. Leonardo da Vinci is considered the unsurpassed example of this. Burckhardt writes: "But in Italy at the time of the Renaissance, we find artists who created new and perfect works in every branch, and who also made the greatest impression as men. Others, outside of the arts they practiced, were masters of a wide circle of spiritual interests." (*Renaissance* 137)

It is quite easy to understand that this self-conscious and autonomous individual might no longer submit to general norms, but that he makes his own laws. The new individual has to prove his sovereignty in dealing with moral values. This is how the often mentioned immoral Renaissance man is created. The new individual decides for himself what is good and what is not⁹.

Burckhardt comprehensively sums up and illustrates the amorality, even nefariousness, of Renaissance politicians, demagogues and rulers. The "greatness" of the "great men" of the Renaissance is evident in the age's good as well as in its evil and vice. Buck comments on Burckhardt's "fascination" with "fearsome greatness":

If Burckhardt gave far more space to the descriptions of the great sinners than to the portraits of the "uomini universali", one can conclude that, in keeping with his view of the ambivalent character of the Italian, he saw the unbridled individualism that despised all morality as a constitutive element in the general image of the man in the Renaissance. (*Burckhardt* 11)

Indeed, the chapter devoted to Italy's most violent rulers and leaders – from the Pope to the Condottieri, from the Doge to the Spaniards – is not only at the beginning of Burckhardt's Renaissance book, it takes up almost a quarter of the entire study. Murder, treason and perjury are the order of the day. Poison, violence, blackmail, espionage, fraud, imprisonment, slander, etc. are the everyday means of gaining or maintaining power. Burckhardt's almost neutral reporting cannot hide a certain admiration for these brutal men.

But it took Friedrich Nietzsche's¹⁰ remarks to turn Burckhardt's fascination with "greatness beyond morality" into something like a programme for "an unrestrained life without discipline and responsibility" (Rehm 38). Nietzsche's plea for self-development implies the so-called "will to power" ("Wille zur Macht") and the liberation from all ethical or religious fetters¹¹. It is the "predatory man" ("Raubmensch") who comes closest to this ideal, and Cesare Borgia is its most famous representative. In his work *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Friedrich Nietzsche describes the character of the "predatory man":

Sagen wir es uns ohne Schonung, wie bisher jede höhere Cultur auf Erden angefangen hat! Menschen mit einer noch natürlichen Natur, Barbaren in jedem furchtbaren Verstande des Wortes, Raubmenschen, noch im Besitz ungebrochener Willenskräfte und Macht-Begierden, warfen sich auf schwächere, gesittetere, friedlichere, vielleicht handeltreibende oder viehzüchtende Rassen, oder auf alte mürbe Culturen, in denen eben die letzte Lebenskraft in glänzenden Feuerwerken von Geist und Verderbnis verflackerte. (183 / § 257)

And in the same work, with reference to Cesare Borgia, he states:

Man missversteht das Raubthier und den Raubmenschen (zum Beispiele Cesare Borgia) gründlich, man missversteht die ‚Natur‘, so lange man noch nach einer ‚Krankhaftigkeit‘ im Grunde dieser gesündesten aller tropischen Unthiere und Gewächse sucht, oder gar nach einer ihnen eingeborenen ‚Hölle‘ –: wie dies bisher fast alle Moralisten gethan haben. [...] Warum doch? Zu Gunsten der ‚gemässigten Zonen‘? Zu Gunsten der gemässigten Menschen? Der ‚Moralischen‘? Der Mittelmässigen? (99f / § 197).

Nietzsche's exuberant sentences¹² sometimes obscure the high ethical demands he sets – high demands for "true nobility, [...] responsibility and duty to oneself" (Rehm 38). Nietzsche's followers evoke through the

Renaissance and the Renaissance man an idea of power that they believe they themselves have lost. With the hypostasis of the Renaissance man as a “predator”, they conceal their own weakness, their egoism, their search for pleasure and strength¹³, and their longing for an inaccessible “greatness”. Burekhardt says: “Größe ist, was wir nicht sind.” (*Das Individuum und das Allgemeine* 275).

3.

“Decadence” is the key word. “Decadence” means “cultural decay, downfall”, and decadent literature of the late 19th century is characterized by “the ultimate refinement of psychological representation and a preference for difficult states of mind in [people’s] shadings and transitions.” (Wilpert 171).

In several essays on modern literature, Hugo von Hofmannsthal describes the lifestyle of these decadent aesthetes of the late 19th century. In his article on the English poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1892), he sums up the fragility and artificiality of the decadent way of life.

Sie gehen nicht von der Natur zur Kunst, sondern umgekehrt. Sie haben öfter Wachskerzen gesehen, die sich in einem venezianischen Glas spiegeln, als Sterne in einem stillen See. Eine purpurne Blüte auf braunem Moorboden wird sie an ein farbenleuchtendes Bild erinnern, einen Giorgione, der an einer braunen Eichentäfelung hängt. Ihnen wird das Leben erst lebendig, wenn es durch irgendeine Kunst hindurchgegangen ist. (*Swinburne* 143)

And in his essay on Gabriele D’Annunzio (1893), Hofmannsthal explicitly contrasts this detachment from reality and inability to deal with life with the vitality and ‘joie de vivre’ of Renaissance men.

Von den verblaßten Gobelins nieder winkt es mit schmalen weißen Händen und lächelt mit altklugen Quattrocento-Gesichtchen; [...] aus den prunkenden Betten der Borgia und der Vendramin hebt sich uns entgegen und ruft: „Wir hatten die stolze Liebe, die funkelnde Liebe; wir hatten die wundervolle Schwelgerei und den tiefen Schlaf; wir hatten das heiße Leben; wir hatten die süßen Früchte und die Trunkenheit, die ihr nicht kennt.“ (*D’Annunzio* 174)

While the decadent aesthetes and neurotics have nothing left but “frozen life, stale, barren reality, lame renunciation” (*D’Annunzio* 174), earlier

generations – and especially those in the Renaissance – had a powerful and strong-willed grasp of “life.”

Although Hofmannsthal pays homage to a more sensitive idea of the Renaissance from the very beginning, there are also traces of the “wicked”, energetic, strong-willed Renaissance man in his Renaissance dramas¹⁴. In the lyrical drama *Die Frau im Fenster* (1897), Hofmannsthal creates the figure of Messer Braccio, Dianora’s husband, whose face resembles the faces “in the old portraits of great gentlemen and captains of mercenaries” (*Frau im Fenster* 355). Messer Braccio represents the violent Renaissance man. Dianora’s wet nurse tells the story of a horse’s bite¹⁵ and how Messer Braccio makes the horse collapse; she also tells the story of an ambassador who is humiliated, abused and ultimately killed by Messer Braccio. Messer Braccio comes from a violent family. He and his brother are brutal. When his brother discovers the love affair between Dianora and Palla, and is unable to stop it, his rage turns toward the dog:

Dein Bruder aber [...] wurde blaß vor Zorn: da kam ein Hund, / ein großes dunkles
Windspiel hergegangen / und rieb den feinen Kopf an meiner Hand [...] da stieß
/ dein dummer Bruder mit gestrecktem Fuß / in Wut mit aller Kraft nach diesem
Hund, / nur weil er nicht mit einem harten Dolch / nach mir und meinem Liebsten
stoßen konnte. (*Frau im Fenster* 359)

At the centre of this Renaissance drama, however, is not the caricature of a Renaissance man who acts with the “certainty of a wild animal on the hunt” (*Frau im Fenster* 361), but the “woman in the window,” Dianora. The daughter of a condottiere herself, she is originally proud and self-confident, but she loses her self-confidence under the loving influence of Palla degli Albizzi. With curiosity and growing incomprehension, she observes the actions of others: the fear of the old neighbor who retires at nightfall, the young girls who go to the well. What constitutes life for them has lost its meaning for her. Her identity dissolves, depending only on momentary feelings, she is “without roots in real life” / “keine Wurzeln im Leben.” (*D’Annunzio* 175). This loss of vitality and viability¹⁶ goes hand in hand with an increasing ability to perceive nature and the soul.

Dann suchte ich im Laubengang nach Nestern / mit jungen Meisen: leiser als ein
Lufthauch / bog ich die schwanken Reben auseinander / und saß im bebenden
Gebüsch und fühlte / auf meinen Wangen, auf den Händen wandern, / unsäglich
langsam wandern mit den Stunden / die kleinen Flecken von erwärmtem Licht / und

schloß die Augen halb und konnt es fast / für Lippen nehmen, die so wanderten.
(*Frau im Fenster* 344)

Flora and fauna take on life and meaning for her. She paves the way for the little spider and imagines herself in a kind of pantheistic community.

Fiel' ich ins Wasser, mir wär wohl darin: / mit weichen, kühlen Armen fing's mich auf, / und zwischen schönen Lauben glitt' ich hin / mit halbem Licht und dunkelblauem Boden / und spielte mit den wunderlichen Tieren, / goldflossig und mit dumpfen guten Augen. (346)

It is one of Hofmannsthal's most frequently used metaphors: swimming and diving in water. This metaphor of swimming is often connected with the "epiphanic moment" when a person suddenly gains an insight into reality and a new understanding of himself. This spiritual event represents a sudden, very intense perception and it contrasts with the superficiality of people who live their life in a dull and gloomy way, who sleep "like the oysters doze" / "wie die Austern dämmern." (*Der Tod des Tizian* 254). It also contrasts with the typical Renaissance man, who always knows exactly who he is and what he wants to do. Hofmannsthal's vision of the Renaissance man is a different one: the vision of a fragile and insecure man in search of himself.

4.

This completely different approach to the Renaissance and Renaissancism reveals the influence of English Aestheticism¹⁷ and, in particular, of Walter Pater.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's relationship with England has been described and analysed again and again, albeit at long intervals: from the first study by Mary Gilbert (1937) to Michael Hamburger (1964) and Robert Vilain (2007). Sylvie Arlaud opened up the study for the whole of Viennese Modernism, although Hofmannsthal is also at the centre of her work. Ulrike Stamm devoted her dissertation specifically to Hofmannsthal's confrontation with Walter Pater¹⁸. Given Hofmannsthal's incredible erudition and his interest in all different cultures, the English influence is only one among many, but it is, according to Arlaud, "fundamental:" "There is no longer any doubt that the English reference is fundamental to Hofmannsthal's work" (29).

Although the ideas of English Aestheticism probably first reached Hofmannsthal through the works of Swinburne and Oscar Wilde, he found a particular intellectual and artistic convergence in the writings of John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Weiss writes: “Hugo von Hofmannsthal could well be regarded as the German counterpart to the two English writers, ‘completing the Ruskin-Pater-Hofmannsthal triumvirate’” (162). And Penrith Goff adds: “But of the English critics, it was Walter Pater who attracted Hofmannsthal most” (2).

Taking a detour via Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites and Pater, Renaissance art comes into focus, which, as Weinhold points out, becomes a “fictitious artefact” (241). “In Renaissancism, the vital, above all moral permissiveness of the historical Renaissance is combined with the unboundedness of the psyche of the weak decadent. This psyche has freed itself from the ideas of good and evil or true and false.” (240)

In English Renaissancism, it is not the homage to power that is of immediate importance, but the search for beauty. In his book on the Renaissance, Walter Pater speaks of “curiosity and the desire of beauty” (109), which Pater sees as the basic elements of Leonardo da Vinci’s art. The desired beauty is “a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh” (125). This beauty often emanates from a small thing, provoked by a detail – in the case of Leonardo da Vinci, Pater speaks of a woman’s smile or the movement of water (104). The task of the critic is to recognize this detail, to draw the reader’s attention to it, and to use it to explain the specificity of the artist in question – or rather: starting from this detail, the critic must try to make the specificity and uniqueness of the artist appear.

This process requires great sensitivity and brings the critic close to the creative artist himself. At the same time, this activity of empathy and interpretation is a highly individual and subjective one. The critic must analyse his own likes or dislikes:

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? (VIII)

Consequently, the critic will go in search of “powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations” (IX), and he will try to analyse and exhaust these aesthetic experiences. As the critic succeeds in deepening and diversifying

his sensibility, his aesthetic education increases (IX). Pater defines the ultimate goal of aesthetic education in the words of the French critic Sainte-Beuve: «De se borner à connaître de près les belles choses, et à s'en nourrir en exquis amateurs, en humanistes accomplis.» (X) In this search for aesthetic experiences, there must be no preference for an epoch or a current – “to him [to the critic, A.B.] all periods, types, schools of taste, are in themselves equal.” (X) If Pater turns to the art of the Renaissance, it is because this epoch is one of the most fortunate:

– it is an age productive in personalities, many-sided, centralized, complete. Here, artists and philosophers and those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen, do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air, and catch light and heat from each other's thoughts. There is a spirit of general elevation and enlightenment in which all alike communicate. (XIV)

As mentioned above, Walter Pater's writings are only one part of the English influence on Hofmannsthal, but obviously the most formative. Hofmannsthal expresses his enthusiasm for the English critic Pater in letters to his friends Leopold von Andrian, Hermann Bahr and Rudolf Kassner, and in his essay on Pater from 1894. Hofmannsthal divides his article on Walter Pater into three sections devoted to Pater's three major works: his study on the Renaissance, the *Imaginary Portraits* and *Marius the Epicurean*. According to Arlaud, each of Pater's works allows Hofmannsthal to explain a characteristic of Pater's writing and his philosophy. At the same time, Hofmannsthal uses Pater's approach and ideas as a mirror for his own literary work. Pater's study on the Renaissance focuses on the ability of the critic to illuminate an artist's work in its totality and unity. The *Imaginary Portraits* illuminate the relationship of artist and critic to the past, a theme of fundamental importance to Hofmannsthal and his colleagues and friends. With his use of “we” and “us”, Hofmannsthal joins the ranks of poets who are fascinated by the past:

Wir sind fast alle in der einen oder anderen Weise in eine durch das Medium der Künste angeschaute, stilisierte Vergangenheit verliebt. Es ist dies sozusagen unsere Art, in ideales, wenigstens in idealisiertes Leben verliebt zu sein. (*Pater* 196)

In his comments on Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, Hofmannsthal criticizes the vain attempt to translate an aesthetic attitude into “real” life. According to Hofmannsthal, Pater's book illustrates “die Unzulänglichkeit, sobald

man auf der ästhetischen Weltanschauung die ganze Lebensführung aufbauen wollte" (196).

In principle, this early essay on Pater already reveals Hofmannsthal's mixed attitude towards aestheticism in general. He is fascinated by the forced awareness of art and artificiality, but on the other hand he rejects the refusal of life and denounces the aesthete's debt to life¹⁹. Despite all this, Pater's importance is undisputed. Pater would later play an important role in Hofmannsthal's separation from Stefan George²⁰. Still later, after World War I, Hofmannsthal would break with Pater's understanding of art and his image of the Renaissance²¹.

5.

Many aspects of Pater's writings were an inspiration for the authors of Young Vienna: Walter Pater's concept of beauty, his view of sensitive empathy with the work of art and the critic's re-creation of art, Pater's revaluation of the Renaissance as an epoch with "this intimate alliance with mind, this participation in the best thoughts which that age produced" (Pater XIV). Additionally, other considerations of Pater had a stimulating effect on the authors of Viennese Modernism and on Hofmannsthal in particular – for example the question of the relationship to the past. For the authors of Viennese Modernism, the past is never something to be shaken off and discarded; on the contrary, a special characteristic of Viennese Modernism is that it refers to cultural and artistic traditions in a variety of ways, reinterprets and changes them, but also reflects on them as an inescapable basis²². Walter Pater provides the appropriate legitimacy when he points out, for example, how the Pre-Raphaelites measured their art against the art of the early Renaissance and presented their art as having passed through another art of the past. The question of imitation or even plagiarism is linked to this question of the past and the living relationship with it. How "epigonal" can an author of "modernity" be? Where does simple imitation end and re-creation begin?

Especially for Hofmannsthal, the relationship between tradition and modernity remained an essential challenge. Besides the many adaptations and translations he made, he was the author of a new "Electra", a new "Oedipus", a new "Everyman." His reflection was on the question of how one can be part of tradition without being overwhelmed by history²³.

And last but not least, the question of the creative confrontation with the past, with tradition and culture, is linked to the justification of the title “poeta doctus.” Of course, Hofmannsthal is a ‘poeta doctus’, but it goes without saying that he succeeds as few others do in articulating the tensions, crises and upheavals of his time, and is thus a “modernist.”

A second aspect concerns the rejection of any form of identity that Walter Pater formulates in the epilogue to his Renaissance book. These statements were considered so spectacular and immoral that Pater deleted them from the second edition of his book, only to include them again in the third edition. Similar to Ernst Mach’s *Analyse der Empfindungen*²⁴, Pater claims that everything in life is subject to change, that things and principles change, that our physical and psychic existence is in constant flux. Each object dissolves into a multitude of impressions and sensations. “But when reflection begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence: the cohesive force seems suspended like a trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer.” (235)

And just as every thing, every person, every feeling and every principle is subject to change, so, too, analysis and interpretation are dependent on time and are therefore arbitrary and ephemeral. The only thing one can do to counter the arbitrariness of fleeting sensations is to try to extract as many ecstatic states of consciousness as possible from this stream of fleeting sensory impressions. It is in pure aestheticism, in *l’art pour l’art*, that this is most easily done.

For our one chance lies in expanding that interval [of our life], in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion – that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake. (238f)

The third important point of Pater’s influence on Viennese Modernism and on Hofmannsthal lies in his commitment to *l’art pour l’art*, to aestheticism. Hofmannsthal’s ambivalence towards the programme of *l’art pour l’art* has already been mentioned in the essays on D’Annunzio, Swinburne and Pater. He was fascinated by the virtuosity of the established references,

the interpenetration of different arts and the refinement of aesthetic taste. However, he remained sceptical of all attempts to use aesthetics as a basis for life. In numerous texts, Hofmannsthal addressed the theme of the “guilt” or the “debt” of the aesthete – most clearly in the *Märchen der 672. Nacht*, where the handsome merchant’s son pays for his “escape” into the world of beauty and artificiality with a meaningless and ugly death.

Let us conclude with a brief look at two of Hofmannsthal’s Renaissance dramas in which these aspects bear fruit.

6.

First, there is the short Renaissance play *Gestern*. Written in 1891, probably before Hofmannsthal’s intensive study of Walter Pater²⁵, it shows why Pater could have become so important to Hofmannsthal. *Gestern* presents the Renaissance man Andrea as a modern “man for the moment” à la Pater, who rejects any form of identity²⁶. He knows that his ego consists only of fleeting impressions and sensations that do not last. That is why he has decided to live only for today, for today’s impulses. He does not want his actions or decisions to be dictated by a forgotten yesterday or an uncertain tomorrow. The maxim of his actions is to wrest from the stream of fleeting impressions the maximum of “animating,” invigorating experiences, and to give himself entirely to the idea of the moment. The “truth” of the moment is more important than any ethical or moral consideration. He can even accept “sin” as long as it is “true” and “real.” He is annoyed by his childhood friend Marsilio, who comes to remind him of the plans they had together when they were young, and he scares away the architect who wants to realize his plans in enduring marble. Choosing a suitable shore location for a new jetty gives him a terrible headache. “Mich zu entschließen, ist mir unerträglich.” (227)²⁷

He cannot understand his friends, who have very precise ideas about their tastes and desires. “Oh, wie ich sie beneide um ihr Wollen!” (228) In his effort to live according to his moods, Andrea pursues the idea of being authentic and truthful. Whenever his mood changes, he will take down his friend’s painting, for instance, or hate his girlfriend’s dress, which he loved yesterday. “Das Gestern lügt und nur das Heut ist wahr!” (218) For him, “loyalty” is a chimera and self-deception. Loyalty would unduly bind a yesterday that is no longer valid to the only valid today, and it would

also create the illusion of a constant identity that does not exist: “Wer lehrte uns, den Namen ‚Seele‘ geben / Dem Beieinandersein von tausend Leben?” (223)

However, this construct of a non-committal game of sensations and impressions, from which no stable ego emerges, collapses the moment Andrea learns of his girlfriend Arlette’s infidelity. Only “yesterday” she betrayed him with his best friend. And although Andrea had previously devalued “yesterday” and only wanted to accept “today,” this famous “today” has now been destroyed by “yesterday.” The past reaches into the present and Andrea realizes: “Es ist, so lang wir wissen, daß es war.” (242) Hedonistic impressionism proves unprofitable and must be paid for with suffering - “Tränen ersticken seine Stimme” (243) is the final stage direction²⁸.

Some of the issues outlined in *Gestern* reappear in Hofmannsthal’s later works²⁹ – for example, in the one-act play that is considered a prime example of Hofmannsthal’s Renaissancism: *Der Tod des Tizian* (1892).

From the outset, the play is subordinated to the primacy of artistic beauty. Like Pater’s *Renaissance*, it offers “a theory of living centered around the experience of art and beauty” (Teukolsky). The person, who introduces the play and delivers the prologue, outlines the aesthetic framework in which the play takes place. The person explains that the play only shows “the melting of un-lived things” / “den Schmelz der ungelebten Dinge” (248); it is set beyond real life and it is not as beautiful as “Lieder, die das Volk im Sommer singt, / Wie hübsche Frauen, wie ein Kind, das lacht.” (248) The whole work presents itself as “art squared” – art that consists only of art and whose subject is art. From the very beginning the question of art is omnipresent. The speaker is both page and actor, and the figure is mirrored three times – once in the historical figure of the Infante, then in the figure of the poet. Speaking about art and at the same time creating art, the characters are themselves art figures thinking about art.

The performing characters in the play are all students of Titian. They lie on cushions and carpets on the terrace of Titian’s villa, which is surrounded by high trellises that protect the villa and its inhabitants from the outside world. These students of Titian are aesthetes. They are surrounded by a world of beauty. They feed on the words of the dead poets and renounce the challenges of everyday life. “Das macht so schön die halbverwehten Klänge, / So schön die dunklen Worte toter Dichter / Und alle Dinge, denen wir

entsagen.” (254) They celebrate the beauty of their way of life and their art³⁰, and meet the world ‘out there’ partly with condescension, partly with envy. Their thoughts oscillate between quiet fascination and instinctive rejection. Gianino’s and Desiderio’s monologues about the city “resting down below” / “wie sie drunten ruht” (253) demonstrate their inability to come to terms with real life. Gianino evokes an ambivalent idea of “life” between hatred and power. “Wohl schlief die Stadt: es wacht der Rausch, die Qual, / Der Haß, der Geist, das Blut: das Leben wacht. / Das Leben, das lebendige, allmächtige –.” (253). Desiderio, on the other hand, notes the division between ordinary people, who have no understanding of art, and the true artist, who lives only for his art and through his art. “Und was die Ferne weise dir verhüllt, / Ist ekelhaft und trüb und schal erfüllt / Von Wesen, die die Schönheit nicht erkennen / Und ihre Welt mit unsern Worten nennen ...” (253).

Only the artist’s sensibility – what Pater calls “the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (*Renaissance X*) – can capture and communicate the true concept of “beauty. In Gianino’s nocturnal experience, nature and art come together as a means of discovering the deeper meaning of life.

Mir wars, als ginge durch die blaue Nacht, / Die atmende, ein rätselhaftes Rufen. / Und nirgends war ein Schlaf in der Natur. / Mit Atemholen tief und feuchten Lippen, / So lag sie, horchend in das große Dunkel, / Und lauschte auf geheimer Dinge Spur. (251)

Aesthetic education enables a deeper understanding of the world and of reality. Only art can transform reality into a ‘higher’ reality. In Gianino’s experience at night, the flute of a marble statue begins to sing, swans become naiads and the scent of aloe reminds him of the scent of women’s hair. Inanimate things begin to live and everything is interwoven with everything else.

A subtle sense of eroticism and homoeroticism hangs over everything. Titian’s students are all men³¹ and their relationships are full of affection and tenderness. Tizianello plays with Gianino’s hair and his breathing is ‘close’ to Gianino’s (251). Celebrating beauty and tenderness, they reject the demands society places on the ‘hard’ man. They are aesthetes in the wake of Walter Pater. Teukolsky explains:

The aesthete [in the sense of Pater] also stands out for his effeminate masculinity, apparent in his languid and unmanly posture. The signature pose of aestheticism was passive, dreamy, and reclining, a pose performed in resistance to the mainstream

masculinist values of progress, work, and arduous labor. Pater's Renaissance made male passivity into a virtue.

Titian's students stay unproductive and passive in their aesthetic seclusion. Their future remains uncertain and pessimistic. Only the great artist Titian himself was able to give things 'meaning' and 'soul'. "Er hat den Wolken, die vorüberschweben, / Den wesenlosen, einen Sinn gegeben: / Der blassen, weißen, schleierhaftes Dehnen / Gedeutet in ein blasses, süßes Sehnen; / [...] Sie haben Seele, haben Sinn durch ihn." (255) Without him and his power, his students will certainly freeze like the inanimate statues they admire.

The true artist, however, can recognize the true essence of things. He captures in his art the deeper meaning of reality.

But even the master Titian himself, at the moment of his death, recognizes the limits of his life as an artist. He "who creates life" / "der das Leben schafft" (249) now condemns his previous works as stale and meaningless. Quite now, he paints for the last time, he is completely obsessed with one last painting in which he is trying to unite art and life. He sends for his previous paintings "The Great Bacchanal" and "Venus with the Flowers" and cries: "The great Pan is alive." Once again, he wants to live his whole life and let it flow into his art. Venus, Coquetry and The Veiled Image at Sais are to be included in the new and final painting.

But Titian dies and the painting is not finished. The conflict between the beauty of art and the ugliness of life remains unresolved. Thus, the play *Der Tod des Tizian*, which can be read as a manifesto of aestheticism, explores the fascination of an aesthetic lifestyle, its challenges, its risks and also its aporias.

7.

The Renaissancism of Viennese Modernism in general – and that of Hugo von Hofmannsthal in particular – is characterized by its forced sensibility, nervousness and aestheticization. This peculiarity of Viennese Renaissancism is largely due to the influence of English aestheticism, that is the influence of John Ruskin, Oscar Wilde, Algernon Charles Swinburne, the Pre-Raphaelites and Walter Pater³².

Hofmannsthal's Renaissance dramas of the 1890s are characterized not by the image of the vigorous, often brutal Renaissance man, but by

the search for beauty and art as described by Walter Pater in his study of the Renaissance. The image of the unrestrained “predatory man”, as portrayed by Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche, either does not appear at all in these plays or appears only as a negative foil. No Cesare Borgia, no Savonarola and no Ezzelino provide their charm in the Viennese Renaissance plays; instead, they feature subtle images of fleeting sensations and momentary experiences. Following Charles Baudelaire’s definition of modernity as “temporary”, “vanishing” and “accidental” (301), Hofmannsthal’s Renaissance dramas can be considered highly modern dramas. The focus is on sensitive modern people who suffer from their time. Very often they are artists or people interested in art and beauty, people who despair of both their ego and their art. The plots of these dramas resemble scenarios from the Renaissance, but from a fictional Renaissance that serves more as a mirror than a historical background. Hofmannsthal thus creates original works of art that derive their legitimacy from their reference to the past. He presents an art that has undergone criticism and reflects on itself. The Renaissance, itself characterized by its references to antiquity, is the ideal medium for this reflection on art.

Of course, it is an art that performs the Renaissance and shows that it is a performance. The mask is lifted. The empathy is related to the past and turned back to the present. What emerges are wonderfully light structures, fragrant like soap bubbles and yet full of pain about epigonism and the dissolution of the ego and about the limits of *l’art pour l’art*.



- 1 “Renaissancism thus forms an overarching discourse [in the second half of the 19th century, A.B.] that even its own aporias cannot call into question.” (Althaus, Fauser 12) All translations into English are my own.
- 2 In his 1985 dissertation, Gerd Uekermann gives a comprehensive overview of the development and the spread of Renaissancism and its expression in literature. “Around 1900, the educated public became particularly interested in the cultural history of Renaissance Italy, which found expression in study trips to Rome and especially Florence, in special exhibitions, in a large number of popular science textbooks and, last but not least, in the literary treatment of relevant materials and figures.” (40)
- 3 “It was an expression of a radical alienation from the historical present of the time, which was experienced as reified and uncontrollable in its political, social and economic constellation, and a consequence of the bankruptcy of traditional spiritual and above all ethical ideas and values, that the individual withdrew into himself and made the self-sufficient, limitless and at the same time disoriented experiences of his own psyche the only and final standard.” (Weinhold 239)
- 4 Wolfgang Sabler points out that Schnitzler’s *Schleier der Beatrice* was written precisely at the “beginning of a true Renaissance fashion in the theatre”. (63)
- 5 For Hanno-Walter Kruft, *Fiorenza* is Thomas Mann’s “only homage” to fashionable Renaissancism. Mann’s critical comments on Renaissancism are numerous - for example in *Tonio Kröger*. (91)
- 6 Think of Stendhal’s *La chartreuse de Parme* (1839) or Victor Hugo’s *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833) – Klabund’s *Borgia* (1928) or Werner Bergengruen’s *Der Großtyrann und das Gericht* (1935). Here, however, the references to the Renaissance are placed in a different context and have a different function.
- 7 Even in 1906 Richard Strauss wrote in a letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal: „Haben Sie einen schönen Renaissancestoff für mich? So ein ganz wilder Cesare Borgia oder Savonarola wäre das Ziel meiner Sehnsucht!“ (Kruft 89)
- 8 No other work “had a comparable influence on the development of the historical concept of the Renaissance” (Buck, Burckhardt 5), and so “Burckhardt ‘nolens volens’ belonged, together with Walter Pater, Gobineau and Nietzsche, to the intellectual fathers of a fashionable Renaissance cult, of ‘Renaissancism’.” (Buck, Introduction 2)

- 9 See Althaus.
- 10 For Nietzsche's Renaissancism, see especially Rehm and Riedl, *Nietzsches Renaissance*.
- 11 "The theme of the Renaissance is to be understood as a kind of Bengal fire that Nietzsche lights to illuminate what he believes to be the close intertwining of 'metaphysical' knowledge and 'Christian' morality, with reference to the 'inversion' of these values." (Farulli 54)
- 12 Sommer writes: "Cesare Borgia, the epitome of the violent Renaissance man, becomes in Nietzsche's late writings the prime example of the immoralist who ruthlessly acts out his will to power. Even the metaphor of the predator, which Nietzsche likes to apply to him, is already topical in the characterization of Cesare Borgia." (328f)
- 13 "If we now consider the various literary manifestations of the Renaissance man round 1900 in the context of the time, the dialectic of glorification of life and weakness of will in the 'age of nervousness' is particularly striking." (Riedl, *Renaissancemenschen* 77)
- 14 In a later play, *Das gerettete Venedig* (1904), Hofmannsthal paints a picture of a corrupt Renaissance state dominated by corruption, hypocrisy and arbitrariness: „[...] dies Geschlecht von Schurken, / gebläht von Hochmut, tückisch, ohne Herz, / für die ein anständiger Mensch nichts andres / als ihrer Füße Polster ist! die Hunde, / die nur mit diesem Stichwort: 'ehrenwert' / uns arme Teufel, mit dem ganzen Blendwerk / von Ehr und Treue und Gesetzhlichkeit, / wohin sie wollen, an der Nase führen [...].“ (*Das gerettete Venedig* 264)
- 15 Mayer points out that Hofmannsthal's horse bite often served as a sign of "instinctive nature" (40).
- 16 In her study, Ulrike Weinhold convincingly explains how the Renaissance woman Dianora is a reflection of the aesthete and how she reflects his aporia.
- 17 It goes without saying that Belgian-French symbolism (Baudelaire, Maeterlinck and others) also had a major influence on the aestheticism of Young Vienna.
- 18 Walter Pater's influence on Hofmannsthal is not only related to his preoccupation with the Renaissance, but also to the questions of memory, artistic experience, antiquity, music etc. Ulrike Stamm examines all these aspects in detail.
- 19 "The aesthete's feeling of loneliness, his asocial and amoral egoism, which destroys himself and others (Claudio, Anatol), as well as the fragility of the artificially created relationships, characterize the problem of the aesthete, which the young Viennese repeatedly reflected on." (Lorenz 70)
- 20 "When Hofmannsthal aligned himself with the concepts of the English critic, he replaced the master Stefan George with the English aesthete who was perhaps closest to him: Walter Pater." (Arlaud 166)

- 21 It was only after the First World War, with the return to Austria's Baroque heritage, that Hofmannsthal rejected any similarity between Viennese Modernism and the Renaissance. (Arlaud 71)
- 22 Emil Brix summarized this complex understanding of "modernity" in the term "ambivalence theory". (Brix 139-140)
- 23 "In this, he [Hofmannsthal] echoes Walter Pater's conception of the need to establish a link between the past and the present when recreating the past." (Arlaud 198)
- 24 Ernst Mach's *Analyse der Empfindungen*, first published in Prague in 1885 and famous for the sentence "Das Ich ist unrettbar", owes some fundamental reflections to Walter Pater.
- 25 On 6 August 1894, Hofmannsthal wrote to Hermann Bahr: „Mein großer neuer, sehr wichtiger Fund, ein wichtiges Element der Zeit ... ist der englische große Kunstkritiker Walter Pater.“ (Quoted from Goff 2) It is not possible to determine exactly when Hofmannsthal became acquainted with the writings of Walter Pater.
- 26 Schienke says that "this turning to the old, better times should itself be seen as a reflex of the modern subject seeking for a foothold in its action (but also in its lecture)." (170)
- 27 This recalls Robert Musil's "man without qualities" Ulrich, who faces a similar dilemma and ultimately leaves the design of his small castle to his suppliers and craftsmen.
- 28 "The problem constellation of impressionism, aestheticism and historical duration is thus already articulated in the first dramatic work, without a solution being achieved here," writes Pickerodt (22).
- 29 Mayer writes: "The 'bacteriology of the soul' [...] established with this early work [...] proves at the same time to be the embryo of the entire work." (33f.)
- 30 Their "life is second-hand, conveyed through Titian's art and teaching." (Pickerodt 25).
- 31 Teukolsky points out that in Walter Pater's Renaissance book "female figures appear mostly as subjects within artworks, such as the *Mona Lisa*, and their rendering is so odd and idiosyncratic as to empty them out as human agents, making them appear as purely symbolic or poetic figures." (7) The same applies to the play *Der Tod des Tizian*.
- 32 Rilke and Schnitzler also wrote Renaissance dramas; the dandy books of Richard von Schaukal and Franz Blei are obviously in the tradition of Castiglione's *Cortegiano*; Rudolf Kassner wrote a book on English poets; Karl Kraus published a translation of Ruskin's lectures in his review *Die Fackel*; Rudolf Borchardt translated Dante and compiled an anthology of Renaissance poetry; Hermann Bahr published essays under the title *Renaissance* (1897); Leopold von Andrian and Hofmannsthal discussed Walter Pater in their letters, etc.



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