

## HOFMANNSTHAL AND AMERICA

*by Hanna B. Lewis*

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's attitude toward America and American culture carries on the Goethean tradition. He found freshness and hope for the future continuation of a European civilization that had been severely shaken by the first World War.<sup>1</sup> Prophetically enough, he even foresaw the role of the United States as prime champion of the West against the East. In 1929, only a few months before his death, Hofmannsthal wrote on the occasion of the opening of Columbia University's Deutsches Haus, "Dem ungeheuren Phänomen Asien steht heute ein doppeltes Europa gegenüber: diesseits und jenseits des Atlantischen Ozeans. Mögen Institute wie das Deutsche Haus der Columbia-Universität dazu beitragen, einen Hauptstrom europäischen Geistes, den deutschen, in die amerikanische Geistes- und Willenswelt einströmen zu machen und damit eine starke Gegenbewegung des amerikanischen Geistes auf uns herauszufordern" (P, IV, 520).<sup>2</sup>

Hofmannsthal interested himself in many facets of American culture as he did in the European: the dance, the motion picture, and naturally, the literature. Ruth St. Denis, the American dancer, became a friend of his and of his family, and in 1906, he wrote an article for *Die Zeit* about this "unvergleichliche Tänzerin" (P, II, 256). He planned and wrote the preliminary draft for a Hollywood movie scenario based on the life of Daniel Defoe. A year before his death, he was writing another scenario, this time for Lillian Gish, that was to take place in post-World-War-I Vienna. His collaborator in this enterprise was his son Raimund, who had just come back from Hollywood and whose tales of "dieser sonderbaren Welt"<sup>3</sup> greatly intrigued his father.

One of the features of the now defunct American periodical, *The Dial*, edited in the 1920's by poetess Marianne Moore, consisted of letters written from various world capitals by a prominent writer

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of that country. Hofmannsthal wrote a series of five "Vienna Letters" in the period from 1922 to 1924 to describe for readers of "einer amerikanischen Zeitschrift den europäischen Geisteszustand . . . was ich 'the main current' unseres künstlerischen Lebens nennen möchte, und das ist zweifellos, nach dem Zusammenbruch einer tausendjährigen politischen Situation, der Kampf dieser Stadt um ihren Rang als die künstlerische und geistige Hauptstadt Südosteuropas, der Kampf, den sie in der Sekunde selbst des Zusammenbruches mit der Sicherheit, mit der eine bedrohte Kreatur auf ihre letzten Reserven zurückgreift, aufgenommen hat und den sie ohne jeden Zweifel siegreich durchführt" (A, 276).<sup>4</sup>

Although he bravely defended the position of his Vienna as cultural capital of its corner of Europe, he admitted the emergence of New York as the new cultural capital of the world. Citing its attraction for Europeans, he wrote of "die allmähliche Durchdringung des amerikanischen Phantasielebens mit den subtilen und tiefwirkenden Traum-Toxinen der europäischen Phantasie, wie sie sich dadurch vollzieht, daß zunächst New York, Hauptstadt der Welt, wie es in einem gewissen Sinn durch den Krieg nun einmal geworden ist, allmählich alle jene Individuen magisch an sich zu ziehen beginnt, welche auf irgendeinem Gebiet Träger des europäischen Kunst- und Geistesleben sind" (A, 307-308).

Hofmannsthal first began reading American writers in 1892; in July, he lists "die Novellen von Poe und Scarlet Letter von Hapthorne [sic]"<sup>5</sup> among his vacation reading. *The Scarlet Letter* seems to have been his only exposure to Hawthorne.

Edgar Allan Poe made a deep impression on Hofmannsthal, as he did on so many European writers. Hofmannsthal had already read Poe's works at the age of eighteen and mentions him as an early influence upon himself (A, 237). He stated his opinion of Poe two years later after reading some of the poems and tales as one of "der großen Künstler, Artisten wäre besser, die einen unbegreiflich packen und einem sehr wenig geben: Chopin etc."<sup>6</sup> How extensive his Poe readings were over the years is difficult to determine. That he had read some of Poe's literary essays, which he considered similar to those of Kleist, is evident from a note he made in 1914 (A, 169).

The motto of one of Hofmannsthal's earliest poems, "Psyche" (1892), is taken from Poe's "Ulalume": "Psyche, my soul." The concept of the poet conversing with his soul is maintained, but Hofmannsthal eliminates the personal elements of love and hate which are the mainspring of Poe's lyric. Although Hofmannsthal's

Psyche is as aware as Poe's of the limitations of the poet's imagination in creating the world to his own desire, the lack of any deep involvement in a personal tragedy, the death of one's beloved, to occasion Hofmannsthal's appraisal as it had Poe's, deprives "Psyche" of the depth and fervor of "Ulalume." Hofmannsthal might have deliberately been avoiding what he considered to be excessive emotionalism in Poe—to be a "Künstler" rather than an "Artist." He shows instead that he is a precocious adolescent, not a mature suffering man. Only Poe's lyrical peculiarities have a marked influence on "Psyche." Hofmannsthal uses alliteration, repetition, assonance, and onomatopoeia. Unfortunately the lugubrious, sonorous, and repetitive style of Poe did not suit the more restrained Hofmannsthal; "Psyche" seems a not too fortunate combination of late Romanticism and the baroque style of the Pegnitz-Schäfer.

None of Hofmannsthal's other lyrics show any obvious Poe influence. He continued to admire Poe's verse and praised Richard Billinger's poem, "Der Mondsüchtige," in the last "Vienna Letter" by comparing its inspiration with that of the American's—"... jene mittlere Länge... die Edgar Poe liebte, er, der das Geheimnis der lyrischen Schönheit gekannt hat wie wenige" (A, 318). He recommended Poe to his friends. But the major effect of Poe's influence must be sought in Hofmannsthal's short stories.

Poe's tales of ratiocination did not make much of an impression on Hofmannsthal, but the tales of horror have much in common with certain of his stories, especially "Das Märchen der 672. Nacht" and the unfinished "Der goldene Apfel." At first reading, this seems farfetched, because of the difference between the Arabian Nights quality and the background of these stories and the obviously Gothic quality and background of the Poe stories, written for nineteenth century tastes. When one reads Hofmannsthal's comments on the qualities he finds significant in Poe, the similarities become more apparent: "Poe.—Es is sehr sonderbar, wenn einer in solch starren Dingen das Bild seiner Vision der Welt findet, da doch im Dasein alles gleitet und fließt. Und es ist selber charakteristisch" (A, 102).

In the essay, "Die Bühne als Traumbild" (1903), he again mentions Poe in connection with the theme of seeing beyond the reality of inanimate objects to a deeper meaning that can either frighten or illuminate the mind of the artist—an esthetic experience that can form or destroy him.

It is the oversensitive young man, the one who is destroyed by

such illumination, the esthete who is unable to reconcile art and life, who is the common figure in these stories of Poe and Hofmannsthal. In "Das Märchen der 672. Nacht," the hero has become more and more estranged from reality. He sees menace emanating from everyone and everything in his strange, nightmarish flight through the city (flight from nothing to nothing). His obsession with inanimate objects like coins and jewelry is akin to the disease of the hero of "Berenice" or the madness of Roderick Usher. He has the same "barely perceptible fissure" in his mind that inevitably widens and destroys him. The "perversity" of Poe's heroes, the lemming-like drive to destruction, whether because of monomania (like Egeus), disintegration of self (Roderick), or offended pride (Montresor) is demonstrated in Hofmannsthal's hero by his lack of involvement with life and his strange compulsion to be in some way punished for it.

"Der goldene Apfel" is a less familiar story but again an obsessive perversity drives the characters to their doom. The carpet merchant's repressed hatred for others, a result of his unhappy youth, and his fanatical devotion to his wife, cause him to center his obsession on the golden apple he has given to her, much as Egeus broods about Berenice's teeth. Others are equally bewitched by the apple and are doomed by it because of the flaws in their own characters. The notes left for the completion of the story foretell their fates: the merchant kills his wife and drowns himself; the child, who has stolen the apple to get a stronger person to uncover the well she is curious about, will drown in that well; the Negro, to whom the child gives the apple, is murdered for it. This story even has the (premature) entombing of a beautiful woman, a favorite theme of Poe's.

"Reitergeschichte" (1898) again shows, in the figure of the sergeant, the perfect representative of the man who has been attacked by the imp of the perverse; he cannot give up his horse because he has been subconsciously looking for death all day. He perversely forces the captain to kill him for his stubborn, obsessive insubordination. The dark and stormy beginnings of the fragment, "Dämmerung und nächtliches Gewitter" (1911), still seem to echo the Poe influence. As late as 1912, in the notes for *Andreas*, a reference to the "imp of the perverse" (E, 225) appears.

Hofmannsthal used some lines from Poe's "The Coliseum" in an unpublished note, "Über Lyrik" (1903), to defend the writing of his Greek dramas. Particularly he intended it as a "Verteidigung der *Elektra*." These lines are:

Not all our power is gone—not all our fame—  
 Not all the magic of our high renown—  
 Not all the wonder that encircles us—  
 Not all the mysteries that in us lie—  
 . . . . .

Prophetic sounds and loud, arise forever,  
 From us, and from all Ruin, unto the wise, . . .<sup>7</sup>

Other individual stories read include "The Island of the Fay," from which he took the motto for the incomplete, unpublished play, *Der Park* (1906), "In Truth the man who would behold aright the glory of God on earth must in solitude behold that glory."<sup>8</sup> Over some undated notes for "Unterhaltungen über literarische Gegenstände" is another quotation from Poe, "The mathematics afford no more absolute demonstration than the sentiment of his arts yields the artist."

The other American poet who made a deep impression on Hofmannsthal was Walt Whitman. He considered Whitman a genius, "ein Individuum . . . durch den . . . sich die nordamerikanische Nation und ihre Größe. . . dokumentiert" (A, 169 [April, 1914]). He admired the "Strom seiner flutenden hymnischen Gedanken" and felt that Whitman represented the modern artist at his peak. In the third "Vienna Letter," he expresses his admiration of the American, especially the latter's "Pluralität in die Breite," his "planetarische(n) Kontemporaneität" (A, 299).

Whitman's poetry, which penetrates the "Geheimnis des Individuums," is not so distant from Hofmannsthal's desire to unite the individual with the world. Although the form of Whitman's unconventional verse is far from Hofmannsthal's generally conservative observance of traditional patterns of poetry, the extension of ego in his early poems, particularly in "Manche freilich" and "Terzinen über Vergänglichkeit," was expressed for him in a more subjective way by Whitman. Michael Hamburger, in his report on Hofmannsthal's library, indicates the many places that the latter annotated about 1915 in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. These annotations indicate Hofmannsthal's attitude toward the American poet.<sup>9</sup>

All three quotations from Whitman in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* were underlined by Hofmannsthal. He must have agreed with James's assessment of Whitman as being "of the genuine line of prophets."<sup>10</sup> A loose piece of paper with notes for "Dämmerung und nächtliches Gewitter" was found among the pages of *Leaves of Grass*.

The minor American poet, William Ellery Channing, whose



chief claims to fame are his kinship with the founder of Unitarianism and his friendships with Emerson and Thoreau, wrote a line, "If my bark sinks, 'tis to another sea," in an obscure poem, "A Poet's Hope,"<sup>11</sup> which Hofmannsthal found particularly suitable for succinctly expressing his own idea of "Verwandlung." He quotes it several times in notes from 1895 on, and in a letter to Richard Strauss, applies it to the theme of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, writing that "Für Elektra blieb nichts als der Tod; hier aber ist das Thema weitergeführt. Auch Ariadne wähnt sich an den Tod dahinzugeben; da 'sinkt ihr Kahn und sinkt zu neuen Meeren'. Dies ist Verwandlung, das Wunder aller Wunder, das eigentliche Geheimnis der Liebe" (P, IV, 139). Curtius cites Herbert Steiner as connecting this idea to the cave scenes in *Das Bergwerk zu Falun* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.<sup>12</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson is mentioned only twice in Hofmannsthal's published works, once in a "Vienna Letter" (A, 286) as one of the directive influences on Rudolf Kassner's *Die Mystik, die Künstler und das Leben*, and once in a note for *Leda und der Schwan*: "Masken sind alle Wesen, dahinter der Gott."<sup>13</sup> However, in the unpublished papers, there is an undated sheet headed "Bemerkungen über Emerson," probably intended as the basis of an essay on the American, which points to a far more extensive knowledge of him. Two of the more penetrating comments read, ". . .ein großes Sich zu Hause fühlen weht unmittelbar hervor" and "Das Schicksal, ja, die menschliche Gestalt wird als Hülse strebender Kraft empfunden."

William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is one of the most demonstrable American influences on Hofmannsthal. It is easy to see why the James book, a series of lectures delivered by the American philosopher-psychologist at Edinburgh in 1901-1902, would interest the Austrian poet, who had been, and was to be, always intrigued by psychological works, of which a large number from various countries were found in his library.

James used a new system of studying religion from an objective, scientific, analytical, medical standpoint rather than a mystical or philosophic one. To him, conversion, repentance, saintliness, and the like were phenomena to be considered empirically. To support his conclusions, he cited hundreds of anecdotes and quotations from and about such oddly assorted people as St. John of the Cross and Mary Baker Eddy, Walt Whitman and Aristotle. Another facet of the book that appealed to Hofmannsthal was James's obviously sound knowledge of the German mystics, philosophers,

and poets from Seuse to Nietzsche, as well as his analysis of the English poets Hofmannsthal knew, among them, Swinburne and Tennyson. James's book is the frankest analysis of religious experience from the psychological, physical, and esthetic standpoint written up to its time and is today still an interesting and important book.

According to notes found by Hamburger in the Hofmannsthal-owned edition of James, Hofmannsthal read various lectures from 1908 ("als ich geistig und körperlich krank war"<sup>14</sup>) to 1917. The most significant note is one that Richard Alewyn also mentions in his essay on *Andreas*, "Andreas und die 'wunderbare Freundin'": "Roman. Seelenverfassung Andreas' (Haus der Witwe) (223 ff.) Trust in our dreams and faith in the Providence of God, all have their sources in the onrush of our sanguine impulses and in that sense of the exceedingness of the possible over the real."<sup>15</sup>

Hamburger also notes that a footnote by James about Robert Lyde forms the basis for one of the Captain's speeches in *Cristinas Heimreise*. Robert Lyde was an English sailor who felt that God had personally helped him during a fight at sea (by reminding him of a knife in his pocket) and had thus saved his life. James quotes him as of a "more primitive style of religious thought"<sup>16</sup> in regard to God's direct intervention in answer to a personal prayer. In the Captain's speech, Hofmannsthal similarly describes a fight at sea and God's intervention on his behalf. He thus depicts the Captain as a primitive, simple, and utterly sincere religious thinker, whose honesty and naiveté stand in sharp contrast to the sophistication and cynicism of Florindo.

Hofmannsthal also quotes James in the notes for his "Andenken Eberhard von Bodenhausens" (1927). Writing of Bodenhausen's doubts about the existence of God, when World War I broke out, he first cites Dostoevski and then adds, "W. James äußerte sich noch schärfer: er würde einen solchen Gott [one who would permit such suffering] unter keinen Umständen für einen Gott anerkennen" (A, 251). An undated, unpublished note written sometime in the last decade of Hofmannsthal's life mentions the "'Varieties' für 'Der dunkle Bruder,'" an unfinished play.

Another American psychologist whose writings determined a character in a Hofmannsthal work was the physician, Morton Prince. Alewyn, in his *Andreas* essay, shows the influence of Prince's *Disassociation of a Personality* on the Hofmannsthal novel. The book by Prince treats a problem that has again become popular in our era with such books as Shirley Jackson's *The Bird's Nest*

(New York, 1954) and the motion picture, *The Three Faces of Eve*, as well as innumerable tabloid stories. This is the problem of the person with a complete type of schizophrenia that permits a multiple number of personalities so distinct that each one is an ego in its own right; the body of the subject merely happens to be inhabited by more than one person.

According to Hofmannsthal's diary in 1907, he first heard of the book by Prince at the Princess Marie von Thurn and Taxis,' at a time when he was just beginning *Andreas* (A, 157). He discussed it in a later letter to the Princess. A copy of the book in a 1906 edition was in his library with voluminous notes for *Andreas* in the margins. Alewyn shows that not only *Andreas*, but other works of Hofmannsthal also, present characters with "split personalities" (like the heroine of *Lucidor*) or have diametrically opposed characters that form a whole (like Elektra-Chrysothemis or Ariadne-Zerbinetta).

Eugene O'Neill was the only contemporary American writer to arouse any sustained interest in Hofmannsthal, although an unpublished list of books does bear the name of Anita Loos. Several of O'Neill's plays were found in the Hofmannsthal library. Although there is no provable influence of either writer upon the other, the similarities were so strong (and were to remain so even after Hofmannsthal died in 1929 and O'Neill was still writing) that it is strange that no one except Hofmannsthal himself seems to have discerned them. O'Neill's earlier plays were the only ones Hofmannsthal could have been acquainted with; all his comments concern them.

The O'Neill play Hofmannsthal knew best was *The Hairy Ape*. He comments on it in his third "Vienna Letter." It is the main character Yank, the stoker aboard an ocean liner, who fascinated Hofmannsthal. He himself had used the figure of a stoker to represent the poet in his 1902 essay, "über Charaktere im Roman und im Drama," long before O'Neill was to use the same image in 1921 for the man who does not fit into a well-regulated society and who keenly realizes his alienation. Franz Kafka uses the stoker as the dominant figure in the first chapter of *Der Verschollene (Amerika)*, "Der Heizer."

It was not of one of his own essays, however, that Hofmannsthal was reminded when he read the O'Neill play, but rather of the Job-like character of the Beggar in *Das große Welttheater*, whom he felt to be a brother to Yank. He saw in both of them the urgent need "irgendwohin zu gehören (to belong)" (A, 296). He con-



sidered that although O'Neill lets Yank find the place where he belongs in the crushing embrace of the gorilla at the zoo, that this is a relatively optimistic solution in contrast to those of most European Expressionists, whose characters never find their place, even in death. In another comment about the relationship of the Beggar and Yank, he wrote, concerning *Das Welttheater*: "Das Neue ist die Gestalt des Bettlers. Der aktive Bettler anstatt des passiven. Eine Zeitgestalt, die Drohung des Chaos. So 'The Hairy Ape' eine optimistische Antwort,—meine Antwort war nicht pessimistisch sondern religiös. Wie der Bettler die Axt hebt, rührt ihn die Liebe an" (A, 202).

To a modern reader, Hofmannsthal's interpretation of O'Neill's conception of Yank's role seems subjective rather than accurate. Yank is a man who has lost his harmony with nature and has not established a new one with modern civilization. Even his spurious sense of empathy with technology and the machine has been destroyed; he has nothing to replace it with. He really does not "belong"—he can never belong and his death is a mocking, despairing solution. Surely, O'Neill's answer is not "optimistic," but extremely pessimistic. It is difficult to understand how Hofmannsthal can equate Yank's death with that of his own Beggar's—who has realized his own place in God's scheme by the transfiguring power of love, and for whom death is a heavenly reward for earthly suffering.

In 1923, Hofmannsthal wrote an essay, "Eugene O'Neill," for the American periodical, *The Freeman*. Here he recounted his first encounter with O'Neill's plays in 1922, when, upon recommendation from a spectator at the Salzburg Festival, he read *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones*, and a little later, *Anna Christie*. He was much impressed by the young American's strength and clarity, but felt he had much to learn, especially in the use of dialogue.

Hofmannsthal considered O'Neill's dialogue too "motorisch." He himself felt that the best dramatic dialogue was a balance between the staticism of a purely didactic playwright and the excessive dynamism of Sardou and Sudermann. Ideally achieved by Shakespeare, such dialogue eliminates the necessity for character descriptions and elaborate stage directions. To him, O'Neill's dialogue lacked the subtlety European dramatists, Strindberg and Ibsen in particular, had achieved in their development of characters and plot through dialogue. Hofmannsthal's final judgment was extremely favorable, however.

O'Neill's dramas continued to run in paths similar to those of

Hofmannsthal. He was to use Freudian psychology to interpret the Oresteia in *Mourning Becomes Electra* just as Hofmannsthal had done in his *Elektra*. O'Neill's use of masks in *The Great God Brown* would have intrigued Hofmannsthal, who first wanted to call his own dramatic monologues "speaking masks." And the American's *Lazarus Laughed* is a Christ-centered play very similar in many respects to *Der Turm*.

Hofmannsthal's attitude toward America and her writers was a realistic cosmopolitan one. Unlike his younger contemporaries, e.g., Kafka and Bertolt Brecht, he saw America not as a mythical country, a land of gangsters or infinite promise, but as an extension of Europe. He read American writers because he was interested in a particular writer, not because that author was an American. As a result, his readings in American literature are spotty and arbitrary. The partiality toward the aphoristic, shown so clearly in his *Buch der Freunde*, is characteristic of much of his knowledge of American writers. In their works, as in other literary sources, he discovered quotations that seemed particularly apt to him and which could be used as departure points for the development of a whole philosophic concept. He missed some of the best literature and discovered some of the most obscure. But his acceptance of this literature on its own merits, his disregard for its nationality, is a relatively novel and commendable approach.

#### NOTES

1. Certain aspects of American influences on Hofmannsthal have been discussed in articles about his attitude toward English literature (Mary Gilbert, "Hofmannsthal and England," *German Life and Letters*, I [1937], 183 ff.), his library (Michael Hamburger, "Hofmannsthals Bibliothek. Ein Bericht," *Euphorion*, LV [1961], 15-76), and his concept of European culture (Arnold Bergsträsser, *Hofmannsthal und der europäische Gedanke* [Kiel, 1951]). American influences in individual Hofmannsthal works have been discussed in conjunction with studies on these works as references in this article indicate. But a separate study of Hofmannsthal's relationship with America has not been previously done.

2. Hofmannsthal's works are referred to by the following abbreviations in the text: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben* (Frankfurt am Main, 1946 ff.).

*Gedichte und lyrische Dramen*: GLD

*Prosa*: P

*Erzählungen*: E

*Aufzeichnungen*: A

All unpublished material is in the Hofmannsthal Collection at the Freies Deutsches Hochstift in Frankfurt am Main and was made available to me with the kind permission of Mr. Raimund von Hofmannsthal.

3. Helmut A. Fiechtner, "Der Briefwechsel Hofmannsthal-Redlich," *Wort in der Zeit*, II (1956), 414.
4. The letters appeared in the following issues of *The Dial*: LXXIII (1922), 206-214, 425-433; LXXIV (1923), 281-288; LXXV (1923), 270-277; LXXVI (1924), 529-534. Kenneth Burke, who also translated two other Hofmannsthal selections in LXXIII, presumably translated the letters into English.
5. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Briefe 1890-1901* (Berlin, 1935), p. 50. Whether the error in the spelling of Hawthorne's name is that of Hofmannsthal or the editor or the printer of the letters is not established.
6. Hofmannsthal, *Briefe*, p. 97.
7. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Works* (New York, 1902), VII, 57.
8. Poe, II, 194.
9. Michael Hamburger, "Hofmannsthals Bibliothek. Ein Bericht," *Euphorion*, LV (1961), 51.
10. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1958), p. 83.
11. William Ellery Channing, "A Poet's Hope," *Poems* (Boston, 1843), p. 100.
12. Ernest Robert Curtius, "Glossen zu Hofmannsthal," *Die neue Rundschau*, LXV (1954), 535-536.
13. Martin Stern, "Hofmannsthals erstes Lustspielfragment," *Die neue Rundschau*, LXX (1959), 463-498.
14. Hamburger, p. 29.
15. Richard Alewyn, *Über Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Göttingen, 1958), p. 140.
16. James, p. 357.