

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal 1944 essay “Der Tod des Ästheteten,” Richard Alewyn argues that Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s attitude toward aestheticism was an essentially consistent one. Hofmannsthal, he suggests, rejected aestheticism from the very start of his literary production: “[S]chon [. . .] im *Gestern* (1891), seinem dramatischen Erstling, [hat Hofmannsthal] das ‘schöne Leben’ in Frage gestellt” (Alewyn 67). Specifically, Alewyn asserts that the aestheticist figures in Hofmannsthal’s works ought to be regarded as manifestations of one part of the author, explaining, in the context of the one-act drama Der Tor und Der Tod: “Goethe ist gewiß Werther, aber er ist mehr als das, er ist der Dichter des *Werther*, der sich durch den *Werther* von dem Werther in sich befreit. So ist Hofmannsthal gewiß auch Claudio, aber er ist außerdem sein Dichter und – sein Richter” (Alewyn 66).

Alewyn, then, casts Hofmannsthal quite explicitly as one who essentially created these aestheticist figures in his early works in order to free himself of any latent sympathy for aestheticism. By identifying and externalizing the aestheticist potentiality within himself, Alewyn claims, Hofmannsthal was able to pass judgment upon it and thereby assert control over it. Hofmannsthal finds these aesthetes, he further explains, all guilty of the same offense: namely, of having wasted or not lived their lives. Again, in the context of Der Tor und der Tod, he elaborates: “‘Leben’ hat hier immer noch eine zweite Bedeutung, neben der vitalen eine moralische. Es handelt sich nicht nur um das Leben, das man ‘hat’ (oder nicht hat), sondern auch um das Leben, das man führt. In diesem Lichte aber ist ungelebtes Leben nicht nur ein Leiden, sondern auch eine Schuld” (Alewyn 71).

Alewyn's thesis has informed much of the subsequent criticism on the subject of aestheticism in Hofmannsthal's early works. Following Alewyn's lead, most commentators have assumed, first, that Hofmannsthal adopted an exclusively critical stance toward aestheticism. Second, these critics have also accepted and, in their own scholarship, reinforced the notion that aestheticism and ethics constitute two mutually exclusive, mutually antagonistic categories. This view implies that Hofmannsthal was obliged to choose between one of these two paths, and Alewyn's claim that he did just that from the very start of his career made this simple binary opposition all the easier to accept and promote.

In Das "Leben" in der Kunst: Untersuchungen zur Ästhetik des frühen Hofmannsthal (1996), Gregor Streim challenges this widely-held position. Streim explains that a great deal of misunderstanding regarding Hofmannsthal's early views on aestheticism arises from the mistaken conflation of aestheticism – toward which Hofmannsthal had what is more accurately described "ein ambivalentes Verhältnis" – with dilettantism (Streim 97). In other words, many of the views ascribed to Hofmannsthal concerning aestheticism apply instead to his conception of dilettantism, which for him was characterized by that ultimately unproductive and life-depriving excess of analytical thought under which each object of analysis dissolves: "Denn das Kennzeichen des Dilettantismus besteht für ihn ja gerade darin, daß das Feste und Bestehende vom analytischen Blick in einen kontinuierlichen Fluß unzusammenhängender Impressionen zerlegt wird" (Streim 123). To be certain, aestheticism carries with it the dangerous potential to define beauty in this way; that is, as "[eine] Schönheit, die in der reinen Impression besteht" (Streim 123). This approach

deprives life of reality and meaning: “Statt den wahrgenommenen Gegenstand zu beleben, mortifiziert [ästhetische Kontemplation] ihn” (Streim 123). However, Hofmannsthal understood aestheticism to be more than merely dilettantism: “Hofmannsthals ‘Aesthetismus’-Begriff [ist] sehr viel unbestimmter und vielschichtiger als sein Dilettantismus-Begriff” (Streim 98). The prevalent assumption that Hofmannsthal rejected aestheticism on moral grounds has, in other words, obscured the fact that Hofmannsthal saw both a positive and negative ethical potential inherent in aestheticism. “[E]r fühlt[e] sich dieser Tendenz zugehörig,” on the one hand, while on the other “versuch[te] [er] doch kritische Distanz zu ihr zu gewinnen” (Streim 97).

The question of “Sittlichkeit,” therefore, becomes a central one in the critical discussion of Hofmannsthal’s early aesthetic views. As Streim explains:

Die Frage nach der Bedeutung dieses Begriffs führt zum Kern der Debatte um die ästhetische Position des frühen Hofmannsthal. Denn [. . .] vor allem der Terminus Sittlichkeit w[ird] bis heute immer wieder als Beleg für die vermeintliche Ästhetizismus-Kritik des Autors herangezogen. Sie stützen das Bild des jungen Dichters, der sich frühzeitig vom Programm des “l’art pour l’art” distanziert und dieses – auch wenn er sich in seiner literarischen Produktion noch nicht ganz davon zu lösen vermag – mit moralischen Argumenten kritisiert. Dabei wird stillschweigend vorausgesetzt, dass Hofmannsthal mit dem Begriff “Ästhetismus” ein Programm der Formautonomie und mit dem Begriff Sittlichkeit ein Verantwortungsbewußtsein gegenüber der sozialen Gemeinschaft bezeichnet. Die Ausführungen zu Hofmannsthals Verständnis von Dilettantismus und “Ästhetismus” haben die Unzulänglichkeit einer solchen Interpretation gezeigt und statt dessen klar gemacht, daß er die Verbindung von “Kunst und Leben” als Akt der künstlerischen Wahrnehmung konzipiert. Dabei wurde erkennbar, daß Hofmannsthal unter dem “leeren Ästhetismus” eine rhetorische Instrumentalisierung der ästhetischen Mittel versteht, die die berausende Wirkung der “wahren” Kunst verfehlt. (Streim 122-123)

By interrogating and, ultimately, casting doubt upon an assumption which had informed Hofmannsthal criticism for several decades, Streim opened a crucial and necessary debate

on the meaning of aestheticism for Hofmannsthal. Critics could now ask whether Hofmannsthal's lifelong ethical concern was necessarily irreconcilable with his early fascination with aestheticism, or whether the rejection of aestheticism he voiced at times applied only to what he understood to be one *variant* of aestheticism, that "leer[er] Ästhetismus" which purposely excludes ethical concern from the creation of or appreciation of art.

In his book on Hofmannsthal and George, Jens Rieckmann takes Streim's argument a step further, pointing out that Hofmannsthal endorsed even some aestheticist views that had no ethical component at all. Hofmannsthal shared, he notes, many of George's opinions on the relationship between life and art, particularly as regards "d[ie] von George postulierte strikte Trennung von Kunst und Gesellschaft" (Rieckmann, Signifikanz 63). Rieckmann points out that Hofmannsthal preferred to regard humanity from a distance (a preference which Hofmannsthal expresses time and again in his personal correspondence and diaries). It is therefore hardly coincidental that this trait also happens to be a defining attribute of every one of the aestheticist figures in Hofmannsthal's early works: "Das 'gewöhnliche Leben' ließ sich nur aus der Distanz betrachtet ertragen, d.h. wie Desiderio, wie Andrea, wie Claudio, wie der Kaufmannssohn, brauchte Hofmannsthal 'die weise verhüllende Ferne' des ästhetischen Abstands, um sich mit dem Leben zu versöhnen" (Rieckmann, Signifikanz 68). The point Rieckmann makes here is a significant one, for if Alewyn's characterization of Hofmannsthal's attitude toward aestheticism were in fact accurate, one would reasonably expect to find, alongside a very early critical stance toward aestheticism, a concomitant enthusiasm for ordinary life, but one does not. Instead,

[w]eit davon entfernt, den Augenblick für gekommen zu halten, “in die Stadt hinabzusteigen,” also den hermetisch geschlossenen Raum der ästhetischen Existenz zu verlassen, war sein Standpunkt dem Desiderios verwandt, der die absolute Unvereinbarkeit zwischen der isolierten Existenz Tizians und seiner Schüler und dem auf Gemeinschaft basierenden Leben der Menschen in der Stadt behauptet. (Rieckmann, Signifikanz 63).

Hofmannsthal’s inability, therefore, to identify with ordinary life both suggests a sympathy for the aestheticist world view and at the same time it helps to explain why Hofmannsthal would continue to maintain a certain degree of ambivalence toward the aestheticist ideal for the rest of his life. To wit: no critic disputes that Hofmannsthal became gradually more aware of aestheticism’s shortcomings over time. However, even after Hofmannsthal is commonly assumed to have broken decisively with aestheticism (generally assumed to have taken place during the years 1895-1896), “war seine Einstellung zum Ästhetizismus, zu dem, was er ‘das schöne Leben’ nannte, durchaus nicht so eindeutig ablehnend, wie [mehrere Beispiele aus seiner Korrespondenz] vermuten lassen” (Rieckmann, Signifikanz 67).

My dissertation is intended as another challenge to the notion that Hofmannsthal opposed aestheticism from the start. An analysis of Hofmannsthal’s reception of one of its chief exponents, Oscar Wilde, will help to shed more light on this complex issue. Hofmannsthal’s reception of Oscar Wilde was, as I will show, initially a very enthusiastic one. Hofmannsthal saw in Wilde both an affirmation of, as well as an intellectual justification for ideas on art and art criticism which he already held. I will further show that, far from being repelled by the ostensible immorality of Wilde’s theories on art, Hofmannsthal in fact admired Wildean aestheticism for its Platonic approach to morality, one which reaffirmed the connection between the contemplation of beauty and the

realization of the good. Only with the passage of time did Hofmannsthal's view of Wildean aestheticism (and of Wilde himself) become more critical. 1895 represents a turning point of sorts for Hofmannsthal, for in the spring of that year Wilde was tried and convicted for the commission of "acts of gross indecency," an event which, as Eugene Weber points out, "den jungen Hofmannsthal tief beeindruckte, ja man möchte sagen, erschütterte" due to his "tiefen Verständnis für Wildes menschliche und künstlerische Problematik" (Weber 106). It was during the trials that Hofmannsthal wrote Das Märchen der 672. Nacht, a work which, as I argue in Chapter 4, was written with the Wilde trials in mind. It was also during this year and the one that followed that one finds Hofmannsthal's most explicit denunciations of aestheticism, such as his oft-cited remark to Hermann Bahr that he could write "eine Menge [. . .] über 'die Sackgasse des Ästhetizismus'" (B I 206), or another one to Leopold von Andrian in which he declares: "Ich glaube, das schöne Leben verarmt einen" (HvH / LvA 64). While the significance of these comments should by no means be understated, they do not amount to a categorical rejection of aestheticism. As Rainer Emig has convincingly shown, even Hofmannsthal's 1905 essay on Wilde, "Sebastian Melmoth," reflects Hofmannsthal's "widersprüchliche Faszination" with Wilde (Emig 334); that is, despite its overall negative tone, the essay contains many indications of its author's sympathy "mit den Vorstellungen des Ästhetizismus" (Emig 341). Emig suggests that "Sebastian Melmoth" can and ought to be read psychoanalytically. Interpreted in this way, the accusations Hofmannsthal levels against Wilde, in particular, appear as implicit self-accusations that ultimately reveal "das Unterdrückte, Geleugnete und Verdrängte der Hofmannsthalschen Position" (Emig 342), characterized by "[eine] Ambivalenz [. . .], [die] beinahe zu einer ästhetischen wie

ideologischen Schizophrenie führt” (Emig 343). Emig concludes: “Vieles von dem, was Hofmannsthal Wilde [im Essay] vorwirft, könnte man ebenso Hofmannsthal selbst vorhalten” (Emig 343). In my dissertation, I trace Hofmannsthal’s avid interest in “die zentrale Figur des britischen *fin-de-siècle*” (Emig 340) to its beginning, in the summer of 1892, and follow its evolution up to and immediately following the Wilde trials of 1895.

The first and second chapters are an exposition of the remarkable congruence between Hofmannsthal’s and Wilde’s conceptions of both art and the artist. In the first chapter, I discuss Hofmannsthal’s initial enthusiastic response to Wilde’s Intentions (1891). With the aid of Hofmannsthal’s early diary entries, I show that Hofmannsthal had already developed consistent views on the subject of art and the artist which closely align with those Wilde puts forth in his book. Both writers identify what they regard as the prevailing spiritual and intellectual poverty in modern European culture, which they believed derived from and was reinforced by a purely scientific historicist ideology that confuses the accumulation of facts with cultural identity. This ideology leads to the neglect and atrophy of the individual soul, as well as the alienation of the individual from the culture he or she inhabits. Hofmannsthal and Wilde sought to address the modern crisis of individual and cultural fragmentation through a revaluation and recovery of the spirit in and through art. The individual soul, they argued, provided a much richer source for artistic production than life itself. Hofmannsthal elaborates on this notion in his first published essay, “Zur Physiologie der modernen Liebe” (1891), an essay I read alongside Intentions as representative of Hofmannsthal’s view that art should not seek to reveal reality, but instead seek to reveal the self. In the conclusion to the chapter, I explain why each writer believed that it was not the age that created the artist, as was (and is) so

commonly assumed, but rather the artist who creates the age, an idea which, on its surface, appears to justify the aesthetic artist's isolation from an uncomprehending public.

In the second chapter I focus on the narcissism which characterizes aestheticism: its roots, its methods and its aim. In this investigation, Hofmannsthal's essay "Maurice Barrès" (1891) serves as my primary text. In it, Hofmannsthal delivers a scathing indictment of modern cultural values, which seek to substitute the rote collection of scientific facts and observations for genuine understanding. The result, he explains, is that the younger generation experiences life as "ein Gewirre zusammenhangloser Erscheinungen": a chaos, in other words, that resists comprehension and appears completely devoid of meaning (RA I 118). Hofmannsthal suggests that the philosophy of life that is represented in Barrès' novel trilogy provides a possible resolution to this crisis: "Es lehrt leben" (RA I 119). The protagonist of these works is Philippe, an aesthete who subordinates life to the conditions of art in an effort to rediscover his inner unity amidst the chaos of reality, with the ultimate aim of arriving at what Hofmannsthal calls "Gnade," defined as "das Ausleben der Eigenart, der Besitz des Ich" (RA I 120). In order to establish the unity of his own ego – and with it, the unity of life itself – Philippe perceives reality in the form of symbols that reveal different elements of his own soul. In this way, he reduces the world to ephemeral, physical representations of immutable, abstract ideas, treating it as "eine ideologische Karte, ein Schlüssel der Analogie, der ihm sein Inneres deuten hilft" (RA I 124). Philippe regards each such symbol as part of the solution to the enigma of his soul, which, when solved, will allow him to achieve transcendence, "den erhabenen Egoismus, der alles umschließt" (RA I 125). I link this type of individual to Hofmannsthal's notion of "der heimliche Herr," a cryptic concept

that appears repeatedly in Hofmannsthal's early writings, both public and private. "Der heimliche Herr" is, as I show, a type of aesthete that takes part in human affairs, but at an emotional remove (very similar to the type which Gisa Briese-Neumann has described as the "active," as opposed to the "passive" aesthete).¹ This emotional detachment from humanity arises from the aesthete's sympathy for humanity as an ideal alongside a concomitant lack of sympathy for humanity as a reality. To illustrate this phenomenon, I compare Philippe's pitiless treatment of Bérénice to Dorian Gray's treatment of Sybil Vane. Both Dorian Gray and Philippe are able, on the one hand, to exhibit profound emotion for the suffering of fictional figures while, on the other, to feel no emotion at all for the suffering of actual human beings. The aesthete's need to regard humanity in an emotionally detached way results, I suggest, as much from the aesthete's love of the ideal as the aesthete's fear of "die Gefahr einer Banalisierung [der] Empfindungen durch ihre Realisation am Du" (Weinhold 125). Reading the semiautobiographical fragmentary narrative "Age of Innocence" (1891) alongside numerous contemporaneous remarks contained in Hofmannsthal's diaries and personal correspondence, I show that he considered social intimacy to be almost invariably a disappointment, an observation which also helps to explain the appeal for Hofmannsthal of the approach taken by "der heimliche Herr." Finally, I discuss the mask as the ideal means by which the aesthete is able to interact with humanity, providing a means of both revealing and concealing the self to and from others, as well as a medium by which the mystery of the self is revealed to the aesthete. All of these ideas figure prominently in Intentions, of course, suggesting that Hofmannsthal found in Wilde a kindred spirit who was able to understand his views

about his own identity as an artist as well as the personal difficulties he encountered in his attempt to comprehend and relate to humanity.

In the third chapter, I focus on the period from mid-1892 through early 1894, the time during which one finds Hofmannsthal's most express deliberation of Wilde's Intentions. I assert that Hofmannsthal initially embraced Wildean aestheticism as an alternative to the utilitarian moralism of his day, which, through its scientific approach to the betterment of the human condition, confused physical and spiritual well-being. In Intentions, Wilde advances the thesis that human beings cannot, on the basis of reason and observation alone, discern the ethical value of an action. By itself, he argues, the conscience is an inadequate guide to moral behavior which "must be merged in instinct before we become fine" (W 1024). By "instinct" Wilde means that actions cannot be rightly considered moral until the motivations that inform them have become unconscious. In this endeavor, Wilde believes, artistic beauty plays a central role. This theory of morals is one with deep Platonic roots. In this context, I discuss the Platonic dialogues "Symposium," "Phaedrus" and "Ion." In the "Symposium," Socrates establishes the connection between beauty and the good, and declares that one is never without the other, so that exposure to beauty will necessarily lead individuals to desire – albeit unconsciously – the good. In the "Phaedrus," Socrates teaches that individuals have lost their understanding of the soul and can only recover this understanding through anamnesis. For Socrates, this process is guided by reason, while for Wilde – who otherwise agrees with the Platonic notion of anamnesis as a path to recovery of the spirit – reason is no longer adequate, due to the omnipresent skepticism that typifies modern culture. It is, instead, artistic beauty that will lead individuals to rediscover the soul,

which he considers the single perfect guide to human ethics. In the “Ion,” Socrates describes the poet as being possessed by a divine madness and thus beyond reproach for the telling of falsehoods; on the contrary, Socrates identifies the poet as the instrument by which the divine spirit inspires individuals to act in accordance with the divine will. This is the explicitly moral argument Wilde advances in “The Decay of Lying,” where he proposes “lying with a moral purpose” as a means of moral improvement (W 990). To this end, he calls for a new mythology that will engender a restoration of faith (and with it, a reevaluation of the role of the spirit) in an age which, through its propensity for endless analysis, had become all too faithless. Hofmannsthal recognized the explicitly moral aim of Wilde’s theory, as suggested by an 1893 entry in his diary, where he observes: “Die Grundlage des Ästhetismus ist Sittlichkeit” (RA III 362), hardly the sort of remark one would expect from a writer who is commonly assumed to have rejected aestheticism for its ostensible lack of moral content.

However, Hofmannsthal did not admire Intentions solely for its unique moral approach. Wildean aestheticism also seemed to offer a way out of the inertia which characterized his generation’s attempt to live life, as embodied in the dilettante. As Rieckmann has observed, virtually all of Hofmannsthal’s early essays address this problem:

Ein Leitmotiv verbindet nahezu all[e] [. . .] zwischen 1891 und 1893 entstandene Essays miteinander: das Motiv von der “Zweiseelenkrankheit” des modernen Menschen [. . .]. Als Symptome dieser Krankheit konstatiert Hofmannsthal die Sehnsucht seiner Generation nach der “verlorenen Naivetät” (RA I, 106), den Dilettantismus, verstanden als “Anempfindungsvermögen, Krankheit des Empfindungsvermögens” (RA I, 102). (Rieckmann, Aufbruch 103)²

In this chapter, I discuss one such essay, “Gabriele D’Annunzio” (1893), because it is here that Hofmannsthal elucidates the symptoms of the “Zweiseelenkrankheit” in the greatest detail. The younger generation, he explains, finds itself trapped between two poles, namely between “die Analyse des Lebens,” on the one hand, and “Flucht aus dem Leben” on the other (RA I 176). Consequently, “[m]an treibt Anatomie des eigenen Seelenlebens oder man träumt” (RA I 176). These two poles, moreover, are essentially two sides of one coin, as Wolfdietrich Rasch has pointed out. Rasch traces the phenomenon of the dilettante to

[e]ine unüberbrückbare Lebensferne [. . .]. Sie verbindet sich mit dem Zwang, jedes Erlebnis reflektierend zu zersetzen und die Lebenssubstanz durch Analyse aufzulösen. Dabei wird es nicht ganz deutlich, was Ursache und was Wirkung ist. Auch werden Erlebnisse in der Phantasie vorweggenommen und in ihr so erhöht, daß sie in der Wirklichkeit schal und enttäuschend werden. Absolute Unfähigkeit zu jeder Bindung an Menschen ist das entscheidende Kennzeichen dieser Lebensferne. (Rasch 552)

The dilettante’s flight from life (as manifested in the dilettante’s heightened propensity for *Anempfinden*), in other words, is reinforced by the propensity for analysis, and vice-versa. This phenomenon both results from and further aggravates the instability of the individual ego. In Intentions, Wilde suggests a way out of this vicious cycle, whereby the desire to understand life (the root of the need to analyze) is satisfied through the capacity for *Anempfinden*, which Wilde describes not as a sickness, but rather as a “gift” (W 1040).³

In the conclusion to the third chapter I show how Hofmannsthal, though sympathetic to Wildean aestheticism in principle, was increasingly troubled by some of its implications. In the 1894 essay “Philosophie des Metaphorischen,” he lays down the blueprints for a project of his own for which Intentions clearly provides the inspiration.

Though Hofmannsthal began the project, entitled “Dialoge über die Kunst,” it remained a fragment, a fact which itself attests to its author’s inability to reach a firm conclusion about the subject that is discussed therein: namely, artistic versus natural beauty. I examine this fragment, first published under the title “Juniabend im Volksgarten,” and show how this piece reflects Hofmannsthal’s admiration for, as well as reservations concerning Wilde. By adopting, like Wilde, the form of the Platonic dialogue and discussing the same subject Wilde explores at the beginning his first essay in Intentions, “The Decay of Lying,” Hofmannsthal betrays the deep impression Wilde has made upon him. At the same time, unlike the two figures in Wilde’s dialogue, the two speakers of Hofmannsthal’s piece are unable to reach agreement on the relation of art to nature, which, I suggest, alongside the fragmentary status of “Juniabend” itself, points to Hofmannsthal’s own inability to accept the tenets of Wildean aestheticism in their entirety.

Hofmannsthal’s inability to arrive at any firm conclusion regarding Wildean aestheticism has a moral component as well, but one which at this early stage remains very subtle. Its basis is indicated in an unpublished diary entry written shortly after he had read Intentions, where Hofmannsthal observes simply: “Oscar Wilde Intentions. [. . .] der sensitive Mörder” (HL), as if to ask himself whether the two traits could indeed coexist within a single individual. Again, he provides no answer. The remark is an allusion to the third essay of Wilde’s book, entitled “Pen, Pencil and Poison,” a monograph of the life of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, an art critic and serial murderer. In the essay, Wilde argues that “[o]ne can fancy an intense personality being created out of sin” (W 1007), and “[t]he fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose”

(W 1007), going even so far as to suggest that Wainewright's crimes had had a positive effect on his work. As with "Juniabend," Hofmannsthal expresses neither approval nor disapproval of Wilde's thesis, indicating that he himself has arrived at no firm conclusion regarding the supposed "absolute indifferen[ce] to fact" which Wilde had asserted as a necessary condition of art (W 978).

In the fourth chapter I argue that the events surrounding the three trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 forced Hofmannsthal to confront the moral implications of Wildean aestheticism.⁴ Yet even before these events took place, Hofmannsthal had begun to exhibit a greater degree of skepticism toward aestheticism as an ideology. In his private correspondence from this period Hofmannsthal increasingly underscores the artist's need to participate in life: in other words, to participate in the very ugliness and chaos of existence which the artist by nature finds so disagreeable. I also examine two similar essays published at the end of 1894 which show that Hofmannsthal's views on aestheticism had undergone a marked change over the preceding year and a half. In the first of those essays, "Walter Pater" (1894), Hofmannsthal expresses sympathy for aestheticism's aims; at the same time he sounds a clear warning against aestheticism as an ideology – which is to say, against aestheticism as a substitute for, or means of avoiding, the reality of life. Specifically, Hofmannsthal asserts that aestheticism becomes problematic at the point at which the aesthete begins to treat life itself as an illusion, as the raw material from which the artist creates beauty, and nothing more. The artist who approaches life in this way will come into contact with isolated instances of beauty in any number of forms; however, "d[ie] eine große unsägliche Schönheit des Daseins" will forever elude such an artist (RA I 197), for this highest of all beauty can only be known,

he asserts, to those who actively engage in life. Like the Pater essay, Hofmannsthal's second essay on D'Annunzio (1894) discusses the allure of aestheticism as a method, but warns of the danger of the aestheticism that is treated as a substitute for life. While expressing the highest admiration for the beauty of D'Annunzio's verse, Hofmannsthal suggests that the poet's works thus far have lacked "ein Allerletztes, Höchstes," namely "Offenbarung," a state which the individual is only able to attain through active participation in life (RA I 201). Here as well as in the Pater essay, Hofmannsthal takes issue with Wilde's suggestion that beauty in any form "shows us the whole fiery-colored world" (W 1030); that is, that the beauty found in art enables the individual to experience transcendence by granting the individual an impression of totality. The essay ends with a thesis that in light of later events would prove quite prophetic: life, Hofmannsthal warns here, does not tolerate its own exclusion, and will eventually punish those who seek to escape it.

In the fourth and final chapter, after briefly reviewing the events surrounding the Wilde trials, I turn to Hofmannsthal's Das Märchen der 672. Nacht in order to show how the trials mark a turning point in Hofmannsthal's attitude toward aestheticism. I argue here for a reading of the Märchen, a work which Hofmannsthal began shortly after the commencement of Wilde's lawsuit, as a story written with the Wilde trials in mind. In my analysis of the first half of the tale, I show how the *Kaufmannssohn's* detachment from the external world, his preoccupation with death and the realization of his homoerotic desire prefigure the terrible fate that awaits him. The discussion of the *Kaufmannssohn's* sexual desire is of particular importance here, for, as Emig has pointed out, "der Wilde-Skandal [ist] um [sic] dessen homosexuelle Aktivitäten auch in der deutschsprachigen

Rezeption britischer Literatur der Stolperstein, um nicht zu sagen das Unheimliche, um das sich die Aufnahme britischer Literatur wie auch die Distanzierung von ihr abspielt” (Emig 321). Hofmannsthal is no exception on this count, and in my interpretation of the Märchen I attempt to show how the *Kaufmannssohn* is judged for the realization of his homoerotic desire just as Wilde had been,⁵ referring periodically to Hofmannsthal’s own observations on the Märchen contained in Ad me ipsum. In addition, I show how Hofmannsthal links Wilde’s aestheticism to his homoeroticism through the portrayal of the protagonist’s relationship to his three female servants, each of whom represents, I argue, a different stage of the life cycle. The *Kaufmannssohn*’s amorous, exclusive relationship with the male servant, then, becomes for Hofmannsthal yet another way in which the protagonist seeks to escape the demands of life, and another reason for which life takes its revenge upon the aesthete.⁶

There are two other motifs which I discuss at length in my reading of the Märchen. One is that of the aesthete’s need to withdraw from the public, which, as I show with reference to Hofmannsthal’s 1893 essay “Algernon Charles Swinburne,” was a reservation Hofmannsthal had harbored about aestheticism for some time. The second motif is that of the aesthete who, in the state of self-imposed seclusion from life, grows weak and is no longer able to function within it. I show how, through his own insistence upon keeping life at a distance, the *Kaufmannssohn* remains completely unprepared for what he encounters in the city (which serves here, as it does in Der Tod des Tizian, as a metaphor for life) and is in this way reduced to the status of a helpless child: impulsive, uncomprehending and highly vulnerable.

Finally, I discuss Hofmannsthal's essay on Wilde, "Sebastian Melmoth" (1905), in which Hofmannsthal suggests that the truth of Wilde's being never changed but instead became externally manifest over time. I link this essay back to the Märchen and show how Hofmannsthal had thematized this notion in his depiction of the *Kaufmannssohn*, who falls victim, in the end, to his own futile attempt to escape life and to impose his own conditions upon it, leading to a blurring of the boundaries that separate reality and illusion. While Hofmannsthal's essay reads on the surface as a rejection of Wilde and of the theory of art which he embodied, the piece still leaves open the possibility of a positive aestheticism: to wit, "Melmoth" does not amount to a categorical rejection of aestheticism. Instead, by redefining aestheticism in the essay, Hofmannsthal is able, at long last, to come to terms with it.

My dissertation will help to elucidate the complexities of the early Hofmannsthal's relationship to aestheticism and show the deep debt he owes to Wilde in particular, both as an important figure who helped to shape his understanding of aestheticism, as well as one who made him aware, through the example of his own social repudiation, of its definite limitations.

¹ See Briese-Neumann 257-258 for further discussion of passive versus active aestheticism.

² In this dissertation, I discuss ten of the eighteen essays Hofmannsthal published between 1891 and 1894. The only other essay I which address is the one Hofmannsthal dedicated to Oscar Wilde in 1905. I have limited my selection of essays to those that are most relevant to my topic, limiting my survey to those which, in my view, best convey to the reader the evolution of Hofmannsthal's thoughts on aestheticism.

³ See W 1040-1041: "And yet, while in the sphere of practical and external life [Heredity] has robbed energy of its freedom and activity of its choice, in the subjective sphere, where the soul is at work, it comes to us, this terrible shadow, with many gifts in its hands, gifts of strange temperaments and subtle susceptibilities, gifts of wild ardours and chill moods of indifference, complex multiform gifts of thoughts that are at variance with each other, and passions that war against themselves. And so, it is not our own life

that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual, created for our service, and entering into us for our joy.”

⁴As Alewyn points out, the judgment passed upon Wilde was widely considered to represent society’s rejection of the notion of *l’art pour l’art*: “[M]an [betrachtete] den Fall Wilde nicht als Einzelfall. Ob man es nun begrüßte oder beklagte, man sah in dem Gestürzten eine ganze Richtung bloßgestellt und gedemütigt” (Alewyn 161).

⁵As Hans Richard Brittnacher has noted: “Einem auf Integration, Mäßigung und Triebverzicht verpflichteten Konzept der Literatur galten die zentripetalen Kräfte als suspekt” (Brittnacher 36).

⁶As Brittnacher has pointed out, in reference to Hofmannsthal’s perception of Wilde: “Hofmannsthal kann den erotischen Eskapismus Wildes nur als Flucht vor dem Opfer deuten” (Brittnacher 40).