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THE CAPACITY FOR WONDERMENT:
TRANSFORMATIONS AND TRANSFIGURATIONS OF THE
AESTHETE FIGURE IN SELECTED WORKS OF ENGLISH
AND GERMAN FICTION FROM 1891 TO 1927

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ABSTRACT

The thesis argues that, from the early nineteenth century onwards, primarily in response to the ever more assertive inroads of science, technology, and industrialisation, key thinkers and writers within British and German culture upheld the cardinal importance of art and the aesthetic. That reaction was the expression of and response to an urgent sense of cultural crisis. The thesis begins with an introduction that offers a brief historico-cultural survey of England, Germany, and Austria in the nineteenth century. There follows a lengthy chapter which summarises the theories of art advanced by both English and German thinkers from the Romantics to Pater and Nietzsche. The contention here is that aesthetic theory moves beyond the confines of the, as it were, technical discussion of a particular discipline and becomes, rather, the governing discourse for the expression of the central philosophical concerns of modernity. Chapter 3 then concentrates on two major figures whose oeuvre embraces, in both essayistic and narrative modes, the full range of epistemological and cognitive issues to do with aestheticism – Oscar Wilde and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Various chapters of detailed analysis follow which explore seven seminal texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, texts in which the theme of art is tested experimentally against the lived experience of a protagonist who provides the psychological, moral, social, and existential context for the aesthetic life. Chapter 4 concerns Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Chandos-Brief and explores a crisis of language that can be overcome only by the temporary fusion of subject and object in the revelatory moment of the epiphany. Chapter 5 investigates the ethical dimension of art as

presented by Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray. Chapter 6 looks at James Joyce's rendering of the aesthetic theories of Thomas Aquinas in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and its view of art as a means of spiritual and social liberation. Chapter 7 deals with aesthetic enjoyment as an anaesthetising rather than emancipating experience in Robert Musil's Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß. Chapter 8 presents Thomas Mann's Tonio Kröger and Der Tod in Venedig as explorations of the cognitive and ethical incompatibility of life and art. Chapter 9, finally, shows Virginia Woolf, in To the Lighthouse, expanding the focus of epiphanic experience from the artist to comprehend the multiple perceptions and creations of fiction as an inevitable part of human existence. The Conclusion continues the argument into the 1930s with a brief discussion of Walter Benjamin, who sees the forms of modern art as symptomatic of the health and sickness of the political culture of Europe as a whole.

THE CAPACITY FOR WONDERMENT

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- EB** Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Ein Brief', Gesammelte Werke: Erzählungen, erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen, ed. by Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), pp. 461-72
- DG** Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, ed. by Donald L. Lawler (New York: Norton, 1988)
- HKK** W. H. Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997)
- L** Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse, ed. by Stella Nichol (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)
- P** James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, ed. by Seamus Deane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992)
- R** Walter Pater, The Renaissance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)
- T** Robert Musil, Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978)
- TK** Thomas Mann, Tonio Kröger, ed. by John J. White and Ann White (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1996)
- TV** Thomas Mann, Der Tod in Venedig, ed. by T. J. Reed (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1996)

KEY TO PERIODICALS

BIS	<i>Browning Institute Studies</i>
CL	<i>Comparative Literature</i>
DVjs	<i>Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geisteswissenschaft</i>
FfMLS	<i>Forum for Modern Language Studies</i>
GLL	<i>German Life and Letters</i>
GQ	<i>German Quarterly</i>
GR	<i>Germanic Review</i>
HB	<i>Hofmannsthal-Blätter</i>
HF	<i>Hofmannsthal-Forschungen</i>
MAL	<i>Modern Austrian Literature</i>
MLR	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
NGS	<i>New German Studies</i>
OGS	<i>Oxford German Studies</i>
PL	<i>Philosophy and Literature</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
REL	<i>Review of English Literature</i>
VWQ	<i>Virginia Woolf Quarterly</i>
WW	<i>Wirkendes Wort</i>
YFS	<i>Yale French Studies</i>
ZfdPh	<i>Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie</i>

NOTE ON PLATES

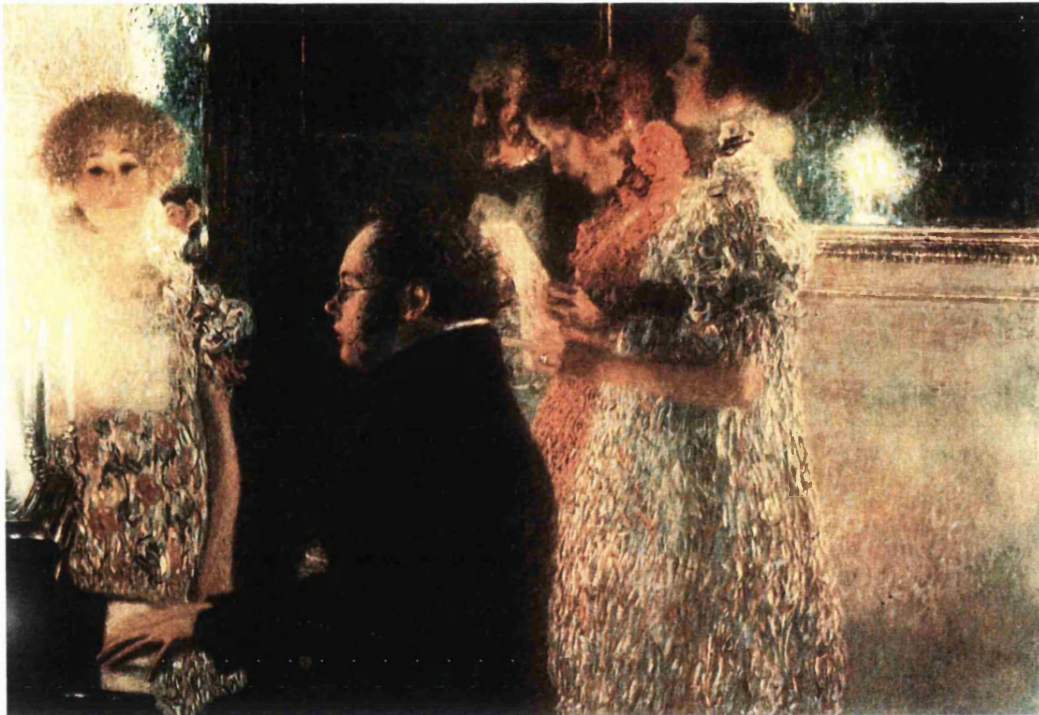
The following plates, 'Die Musik II' and 'Schubert am Klavier', are reproduced from Gottfried Fliedl, Gustav Klimt (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1994), pp. 46/7. Gustav Klimt was commissioned to produce the pictures as supraporte paintings for the Viennese palace of the industrialist Nikolaus Dumba, *Palais Dumba*, on the fashionable *Parkring*. 'Die Musik II' dates back to 1898, 'Schubert am Klavier' to 1899. The paintings were destroyed in a fire in 1945. 'Schubert am Klavier' is sometimes also referred to as 'Hausmusik'.

PLATE I



Die Musik II
(Music II, 1898)

PLATE II



Schubert am Klavier
(Schubert at the Piano, 1899)

FOREWORD

It is perhaps appropriate to begin with some indication of what this thesis does and does not claim to achieve. At its centre of attention are several works of modernist prose from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. All of them are 'classic' texts, in that all of them have received abundant critical attention. It has, therefore, not been my aspiration to offer revolutionary new readings of these texts, as that would hardly be possible. But I do, nevertheless, make two claims for my work. One is that I invite these texts to, as it were, listen to each other in a genuinely comparative enterprise, which, as far as I am aware, has not been done before. Secondly, I provide an extensive context for this interpretative procedure, one that draws attention to the richness and profundity of aesthetic theory in both Germany and England from the early nineteenth century on. It is, I hope, in this combination of both contextual and comparative reading that the contribution of my thesis resides.

I

INTRODUCTION

THE AESTHETE: ARTIST, DANDY, EVERYMAN

In his treatise 'Le peintre de la vie moderne', published in 1863, Charles Baudelaire defines the dandy-artist, the hybrid offspring of the Regency wit and the Romantic poet, in his dualistic existence as *observateur passionné* and *parfait flâneur*. The keen eye of the critic as artist, artist as critic, now finds itself transposed from the insulated work-place of the studio and the sheltered, synthesising playground of the salon into the heterogeneous crowds of the modern city.¹ With the Romantic's submissive empathy and the dandy's acute social vision replaced by a blend of analytical sensibility and detached voyeurism, Baudelaire likens his creation to a child or convalescent, a creature freshly discovering its surroundings following a glimpse of the oblivion and annihilation of the senses entailed in non-life or death.

For Baudelaire, the child and the convalescent are aesthetes eagerly sampling and compiling visions of beauty as instances of life and vitality. Their example serves to relativise the dictionary definition of the aesthete as 'professed admirer of beauty', behind which seems to lurk the popular spectre of the decadent dandy, an effeminate figure in love with pleasing surfaces, in combat with the ugly and offensive, fervently embracing an élitist life-style that is devoted to unique, exquisite ecstasies and the celebration of aesthetic objects that symbolise man's superiority over nature, of which Wilde's green carnation was but one illustrious instance.² Baudelaire's argument restores the

original meaning of the Greek word 'aisthetes' as 'one who perceives', with its relevance to the generality of human experience. Being entails constant exposure to sensory impression, permanent engagement in processes of perception, which provide the link between corporeal and intellectual existence and constitute the basis for subject-formation.

Ironically, by the end of the nineteenth century, the aesthete's origins in post-Enlightenment philosophy's rediscovery of the life of the body as a viable and legitimate counterpart to the life of the mind were all but forgotten. Instead, by that time, the English popular vision of the dandy had come, via the phenomena of Aestheticism and its much maligned sister movement Decadence, to equate aesthetics with unnatural longings and perverse bodily cravings, which seemed to reinforce the subject's imprisonment within the walls of sensory experience rather than highlight the potentially liberating impact of the aesthetic life.³ This misperception undermined the significance of aesthetics as a potentially subversive force within society which could seriously question the legitimacy of the status quo. As Terry Eagleton shows in his study The Ideology of the Aesthetic, Kantian aesthetic theory had laid the foundations for both the creation of an autonomous subject on the basis of the innate laws of the artwork and the ultimate enslavement of the individual through the aesthetisation of power, with the aesthetic acting simultaneously as 'the very secret prototype of human subjectivity in early capitalist society, and a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative and instrumentalist thought'.⁴ The present thesis aims to explore this dualism in its operation within selected seminal texts of the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century and identify those moments in which the

discourse moves beyond the confines of the symbolic to allow for the integrated articulation of what Julia Kristeva defines as pre-oedipal semiotic forces.⁵

As a result of its twofold potential, aesthetic theory, in the course of the nineteenth century, came to enjoy an increasingly schizophrenic existence. While the conservative powers of the Victorian age learned to use it as the 'ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order' by establishing and nurturing 'habits, pieties, sentiments and affections'⁶, part of the creative élite, themselves often condemned as aesthetes and/or decadent dandies, struggled to protect the realm of art against the ideals of utility and rational scientific thought by upholding the sovereignty of the artwork and thus, by extension, that of the artist and the observer. At the forefront of this conflict lay the question of the morality of art, its potential use as either a steadying or a destabilising agent within society, an antagonism which lasted well into the twentieth century and is as dominant in the 1891 edition of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray as in Virginia Woolf's novel To the Lighthouse, first published in 1927. As the two examples show, the foremost battlefield of art versus life proved to be a literature concerned with aesthetics in which the lines between so-called aesthetes and common recipients of sensory impression became more and more blurred.

In this thesis I will use and consider the concept of the aesthete in its broadest sense. The aesthetes discussed here come in many guises – they are artists, dandies, critics, aestheticians, or 'ordinary' human beings, and many of them fit more than one of these labels at a time. In the last analysis, all individuals are driven by the search for what can be broadly defined as beauty,

for forms that please the senses (be they compliant with conventional notions of beauty or moving against the grain of approved aesthetic standards). They are haunted by the quest for that seductive image which will bestow or confirm a unified sense of identity and selfhood, and have thus in common with the aesthete figure their most primary needs and promptings. The post-structuralist subject's urge to overcome, if only momentarily, the boundaries of difference set up by the break from the imaginary and the mother, and achieve a temporary symbiosis between the constructed self and the unknowable object is merely intensified in, but not restricted to, the aesthete:

Törleß' Vorliebe für gewisse Stimmungen war die erste Andeutung einer seelischen Entwicklung, die sich später als ein Talent des Staunens äußerte. Späterhin wurde er nämlich von einer eigentümlichen Fähigkeit geradezu beherrscht. Er war dann gezwungen, Ereignisse, Menschen, Dinge, ja sich selbst häufig so zu empfinden, daß er dabei das Gefühl sowohl einer unauflöslichen Unverständlichkeit als einer unerklärlichen, nie völlig zu rechtfertigenden Verwandtschaft hatte. Sie schienen ihm zum Greifen verständlich zu sein und sich doch nie restlos in Worte und Gedanken auflösen zu lassen. Zwischen den Ereignissen und seinem Ich, ja zwischen seinen eigenen Gefühlen und irgendeinem innersten Ich, das ihrem Verständnis begehrte, blieb immer eine Scheidelinie, die wie ein Horizont vor seinem Verlangen zurückwich je näher er ihr kam. Ja, je genauer er seine Empfindungen mit den Gedanken umfaßte, je bekannter sie ihm wurden,

desto fremder und unverständlicher schienen sie ihm gleichzeitig zu werden, so daß es nicht einmal mehr schien, als ob sie vor ihm zurückwichen, sondern als ob er selbst sich von ihnen entfernen würde, und doch die Einbildung, sich ihnen zu nähern, nicht abschütteln könnte.⁷

(T 25)

What Robert Musil describes here, in his first novel Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß, as a 'peculiar', characteristic 'ability', in fact, penetrates deeply into the terrain of common experience. Törleß's 'psychological development' towards a dualistic understanding of the world that fluctuates constantly between subjective and objective view-points, between feelings of affiliation and alienation, detachment and proximity, concerns humanity as a whole. His inability to deconstruct his experiences and feelings and digest them through rational thought processes where signifier and signified unite harmoniously, thereby eradicating all surplus meaning, signals a critical discontent with language, potentially insurgent doubts regarding its purpose as a vehicle of truth and a means of communication.

Törleß's desire ('Verlangen') to know the object results in the antithetical movements of increasing closeness and growing distance. His gradual recognition of the impossibility of ultimate knowledge proceeds from the external towards the world of the psyche, from a position of detached spectator of 'events', via the social being involved in an interaction with 'people', to the subject towering over inanimate 'things'. Finally, Törleß finds himself barred from ontological access to 'even himself'. The removal of the layers of consciousness does not, however, result in complete deconstruction,

as Törleß is eventually forced to differentiate 'between his own emotions and some innermost self'.

Once the chasm between sensory impression and feeling has opened up, Törleß is faced with infinite epistemological regression, in which a remnant of what he is forced to define as 'authentic' self fails to surrender to a positivist world-view which propagates sense-experience as the only source of knowledge. As a result, Törleß is inevitably thrown back onto a conception of the individual which must entail, or rather retrieve, a metaphysical component. The intimation of a world beyond that of material existence gives rise to the spectre of transcendent truths, which can be only intuitively known.

Törleß's fate mirrors that of many late-nineteenth-century thinkers and writers. Walter Pater's much evoked embrace of relativist, even positivist, thought jars with his hailing of the diaphanous type, whose quasi saintly repose is traced back to 'a happy gift of nature' (R 155). Thus, despite his active engagement in the decentering of the subject, his celebration of the fluid self as site without a focal point rather than a stabilised presence characterised by absolute attributes, Pater emerges ultimately as an essentialist. It is this elusive essentialism which must be held accountable for what Christopher Ricks condemns as 'a greed for fineness' – Pater's repressed reliance on inherent absolutes governing the individual provides the source for his preoccupation with the nuances, shades, tones, hues that are conveyed through language.⁸ It is by words like 'finer' and 'exact' that Pater attempts to delimit meaning and locate truth in difference.

In his essay on 'Oscar Wilde and Poststructuralism', Guy Willoughby argues that

Wilde's aesthetic project remains suggestive, because he himself consciously operated with an intellectual climate no more stable or assured than our own. If Matthew Arnold, with his espousal of the moral task and cultural value of literature, may stand as an F. R. Leavis of 1860s and 1870s, so Walter Pater represents a late Victorian Derrida or Foucault, a seductive champion of modish continental theories that undermined the liberal-humanist and organic tradition in English letters. (Of course, Pater and his disciples did not succeed; T. S. Eliot and the native conservatism of the literary establishment saw to that.)⁹

Although this simplified view of Pater's aesthetic fails to make a convincing claim for this *fin-de-siècle* aesthete's status as an unambiguous precursor of late-twentieth-century Poststructuralism, Willoughby's description of Wilde's synthesis of his conflicting sympathies for Arnold's and Pater's aesthetic projects offers a useful outline of the dilemma that dominates the connection between the critic or artist and society. According to Willoughby, Wilde

maintains, with Pater, that the shadowy simulacrum we call the individual is the source and site of critical apprehensions; but he argues, with Arnold, that authentic perceptions are fostered by a dynamic interplay of self and society, and that the critic's interest will concern his age¹⁰

and shape its consciousness. Wilde, and Pater, must posit a residue of stable self, a centre within the trajectory of experience, in order to allow for any kind of social and cultural reform. This need is fortified by a longing for stability and truth, as

it is apparent that Wilde is deeply attached to the old Romantic integrity and uniqueness of self; his energy throughout is directed towards perceiving consciousness as at once integrated and expansive, contained and yet porous; to fashion a oneness that allows for multiplicity as well.¹¹

The apparent binarism of conventionalised yet comforting permanence and untamed but hazardous mutability highlights the problem of liberated individualised living.

The question at the heart of the present thesis concerns the possible existence and nature of this 'integrity and uniqueness of self' as expounded in the seven selected texts. Can it ever be more than a receptacle of processed external impressions, an inborn void which the individual struggles to fill in the course of a lifetime? An innate gap that man is biologically predetermined to replenish and call 'self'? Or is man indeed endowed with a minute, yet pre-fashioned and inherent, core, which provides a stable starting-point for the process of self-fashioning and can be traced back to metaphysics or biology? This inquiry, Willoughby holds, 'is precisely our task today; to account, with a different vocabulary, for that indefinable sense of selfhood we feel in spite of Derrida's infinite deferral of the logos, Foucault's collapse of the subject, Kristeva's attack on the chauvinism of oneness.'¹²

Although this thesis never hopes to be able ‘to account for’ modern man’s steadfast attachment to the vision of an innate individuality, a task which, it seems to me, is best left to the geneticist or psychoanalyst (an opinion from which the reader will be able to gather something of my own personal views on this matter), the persistence of the notion of an absolute self in the face of scientific progress and the debunking of orthodox religion makes for a fascinating subject. The nineteenth century’s fixation on the aesthetic object, its ‘mystical positivism’ which, on the one hand, sought to erase all traces of the metaphysical, while at the same looking to locate absolute meaning in that very same commodity, effected a deification of all appearance based on a carefully balanced relation between the object and the observer.¹³

The title of my thesis is derived from Törleß’s ‘Talent des Staunens’, which in the two most recent translations has been rendered as a ‘strong sense of wonder’ and a ‘talent of astonishment’ respectively.¹⁴ Whilst the latter, Shaun Whiteside’s version, appears to me as possibly the most accurate transposition of Musil’s original, I have, to some extent no doubt driven by the desire to indulge in an overt act of misappropriation and mirror the subjects of my inquiry by transforming what I have borrowed from another author, so as to make it more ‘my own’, deviated from it, in order to utilise the connotations carried by the word ‘wonderment’ of not only ‘surprise’ but also anxious ‘awe’. To wonder means to be ‘surprised by’ as well as to be ‘curious about’ and to marvel at an object or event, to develop and nurture an inquisitiveness based on the ‘desire to know’. I have furthermore replaced ‘talent’ by ‘capacity’ in order to avoid the implication that this ability to feel amazement is reserved to a group of uniquely endowed and gifted individuals, thus following the author to be discussed here

last, Virginia Woolf, whose preoccupation with the sources and ramifications of aesthetic experience was, as I hope to be able to demonstrate, more inclusive than that of her male counterparts. This more comprehensive notion of aesthetic experience has particular urgency for my investigation of the role of art as a tool of psychological, and by that token social, emancipation, and mirrors Julia Kristeva's exposition of the post-oedipal individual's ability to tap the abandoned realm of the imaginary in a move away from the symbolic order, an act of at least partial liberation from ideology.

All human creativity relies, perhaps, on a 'Talent des Staunens'. The child's curiosity for the world around it enables it to understand and become part of it, although this feeling of amazement is, with the help of language, also, as a rule and necessity, rapidly tempered by socialisation, by familiarity and habit, a development which, albeit for different reasons, is endorsed as essential in the process of self-development by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.¹⁵ Once this process is completed, the individual can then revisit the childhood territory of wonderment by allowing art to break through this routine relationship and by alternately estranging and re-acquainting him or her with the object.

The artwork enables the individual to experience moments of profound distanciation without succumbing to the threat of a meaningless universe by guaranteeing the existence of a lawful, even though preferably unconventional, order within itself. In contrast, a moment of alienation which is not triggered by the construct of an artefact and during which the subject is taken unawares by the chaotic, overwhelming forces of immediate life, can have destructive consequences. This momentary disturbance is usually accompanied by a

breakdown of cognition and thus ultimately language, by which token it can imply radical solipsism.

This contrast has dominated aesthetic theory since Burke's eighteenth-century differentiation between the Sublime and the Beautiful. While the former is characterised by the concepts of infinity and vastness displayed by natural objects, and feelings of solitude and terror, which are only bearable when associated with a teleological religious world-view, the beautiful artwork presents the observer with a limited, carefully controlled and man-made point of reference which pleases by way of its neat organisation – this is important, as art can be used as a means of both communication and comfort, thus potentially counteracting the alienating forces of solipsism. However, with nineteenth-century Darwinism's questioning of the legitimacy of Christian faith, the overwhelming chaos and disorderliness pervading the universe and human life gave way to a paralysing pessimism, which found its expression in Nietzsche's binary notions of the Dionysian as the unconstrained force of drives and the Apollonian as life mediated and tamed by the illusion created by the artwork:

Die Erkenntnis tötet das Handeln, zum Handeln gehört das Umschleiertsein durch die Illusion – das ist die Hamletlehre, nicht jene wohlfeile Weisheit von einem Hans dem Träumer, der aus zuviel Reflexion, gleichsam aus einem Überschuß an Möglichkeiten, nicht zum Handeln kommt; nicht das Reflektieren, nein! – die wahre Erkenntnis, der Einblick in die grauenhafte Wahrheit überwiegt jedes zum Handeln

antreibende Motiv, bei Hamlet sowohl als auch
bei dem dionysischen Menschen.¹⁶

Once exposed to the Dionysian as pure life, as yet undigested, uncensored by art, Hamlet moves perilously close to the margins of insanity. Through his knowledge of his uncle's crime, Hamlet has become aware of the confusion underlying the universe and the fragility of human order, which violates all human law and, according to Nietzsche, is governed by the will to power, the individual's uncompromising drive to shape the world according to his or her own desires. Significantly, Hamlet attempts to overcome the monstrosity of this crushing insight by limiting its impact through artistic representation, by staging the crime as play in order to reproduce the unbelievable as drama, as perceptible phenomena to be grasped by reason. In doing so, he turns Dionysian truth into Apollonian fiction. As Nietzsche points out in Die Geburt der Tragödie, the manifestation of the Dionysian bedrock of human existence leaves the Elizabethan hero in a state of arrest which anticipates the modernist shock at the sight of an apathetic universe.

Upon realising, however, that the effect of the Apollonian representation of his father's death on the courtly audience has fallen short of the impact that the original, Dionysian, truth has made on his psyche, Hamlet turns to another way of unleashing his will to power; he substitutes the deed as life for the deed as art by physically confronting his father's murderer. Typically, this final preference for forceful action over romantic brooding is triggered by his identification with a conventional social ideal, the dutiful son as epitomised by Laertes. Hamlet's psychological redemption, his recovery from the vision of the Dionysian, can only come about through a return to social myths, to man-made

order, which, in Nietzschean terms, consists of lies and illusions mirroring those perpetuated by art, and as such draws indispensable limits to the boundlessness of the universe, which threatens mental health by reaching beyond the sphere of pure reason. As a consequence, Hamlet only succeeds in endowing his life with sense by fulfilling a social function. Moreover, his attempt to disclose the hypocrisy and corruption of the social world and thereby initiate a re-evaluation of values costs Hamlet his life, thus illustrating Nietzsche's belief expounded in Die Geburt der Tragödie that only in death can we overcome the vulnerability entailed in individuation and become part of a metaphysical oneness.

Unlike Hamlet, Nietzsche argues, the play's spectator is not overpowered by the manifestation of the Dionysian in Claudius (and Hamlet) because of the synthesis of the Dionysian with the Apollonian within the drama. As the Apollonian art of representation combines with Dionysian will to portray in beautiful forms, in Shakespeare's language, man's position as a pawn of an unidentifiable capricious power, 'das spielend Steine hin-und hersetzt und Sandhaufen aufbaut und wieder einwirft', we come to recognise the significance of death as a source of liberation from the chaos and unpredictability of life by choosing to partake of the ritualistic enactment of the destruction of the tragic hero, while at the same time remaining emotionally detached as part of the audience.¹⁷ The psychological trauma of Hamlet's confrontation with truth is replaced by aesthetic experience.

Nietzsche proceeds from this finding by declaring that the only efficient way of dealing with the disorderliness of everyday existence is by adopting an aesthetic distance and regarding the events of life as part of an arbitrarily

composed drama conducted and overseen by an indifferent authority. Yet even if one accepts his claim that the world is only justifiable as an aesthetic phenomenon, there remains the question as to how far aesthetic experience is communicable, as to what extent, in fact, it intensifies the chasm between the inner workings of the individual and the external world of phenomena. As Törleß's dilemma demonstrates, there appears to remain a gulf that separates his actions and even his emotions from a deeper, seemingly unknowable self, which language fails to grasp. There seems to be hidden within the individual an essence that still escapes the command of rational theory, an entity that, even in a godless universe, appears inextricably bound up with metaphysics and mysticism, and is traditionally summed up in the term 'soul', to which the reference to Törleß's 'seelische Entwicklung' points.

Although ever since the onset of modernity as a result of industrialisation, with its reliance on scientific discoveries and rational economics, Western society has seen a decline in orthodox religion, there has been a parallel ascendancy of the belief in an individual self that remains untouched by social conditioning and the parameters of reason. This counterdevelopment has its source in the tenets of modernism, which, in one way or another, aimed to recover a form of ontological and cognitive wholeness missing in the fragmenting capitalist present. Yet while modernist art sought to recover a universal, pure self, it is postmodernism which seems to admit and embrace the particularism and diversity of the individual psyche, a condition which continues to have a baffling effect on the seemingly integrated member of the bourgeoisie. Now that the quest for individualism has merged into and been taken over by mass culture, which links man's existence as consumer

with his desire for individual freedom, his hunger for liberty relies increasingly on taste as its sole outlet. The individual is thus directed towards consumerism as a way of standing out from the crowd and expressing that minute quantity within him/her which, he/she feels, fails to be integrated into society. Rather than allow it to rebel he/she appeases this seemingly foreign article of difference within by sublimating the hunger to which it gives rise.

Like Törléß the aesthete, all individuals are, to a variable extent, aware of 'some inmost self' that fails to gain complete access to and merge with the world outside it and which (post-)modern society tames by celebrating as the residue of some ineradicable individualism. The difference is a matter of degree – instead of treating the moments of aesthetic alienation as isolated instances, the aesthete figure remains forever conscious of the permanent abyss revealed in such moments of profound solipsism. What is more, rather than suppress this ability, the aesthete endeavours to cultivate it. What ordinary man might dismiss as a shortcoming, the aesthete eventually seeks to celebrate as a gift that ought to be nurtured and refined.

This difference in attitude, however, is further reinforced by its socio-political dimension, in that bourgeois man is regarded as first and foremost a consumer. Because successful assimilation to, and participation in, society depends on a deep acquaintance with it, modern middle-class man finds himself in fact discouraged from fostering his creativity by means other than the exercise of consumerist taste or an adventurous entrepreneurial spirit that furthers economic or scientific progress. The mass media seem to have reduced the question of how and where to live one's life to little more than a question of taste or so-called 'life-style', usually tied up with and embodied by a

tradable object. Western society's liberalism has had a strangely stifling effect on the individual by presenting him/her with a plethora of such possible life-styles, which may be at opposite ends of the spectrum yet appear all the same tried and tested and thus no longer imbued with any subversive meaning. The initially insurgent negation of one life-style implies but another life-style, which is soon transformed from being an alternative standpoint to an established norm. The original ideal's progression towards social acceptance depends heavily on recognition on the part of the media and consumer industries of its market-value, a movement in which politically charged questions such as homophobia or genetic engineering are channelled and tamed through the commercial propagation of gay pride or organic food. This aspect of modern existence is furthermore strengthened by an obsessive relationship with images, in which the simulacrum of reality, nurtured by the visual media, precedes any experience of it. Man's involvement in society appears claustrophobically guaranteed by an ethos of hyped pluralism, whether one strives for the life of a chief executive in London's City or that of a new age traveller on the coast of Devon.

The process that would finally result in this inability to elude social norms and prescribed forms of living has already been identified by the nineteenth-century movements of Aestheticism and Decadence, whose exponents formed part of an affluent, educated and increasingly disoriented middle-class. The aesthete's choice consumerism, his/her search for the unique beautiful object, registers a protest against the increasing vulgarisation of taste at the hands of mass culture and mass production during the high and late Victorian period. Similarly, the aesthete's quest for a decidedly

unproductive life-style highlights the loss of faith in material progress as concurrent with human, intellectual and spiritual, advancement. Such issues continue to haunt our contemporary culture.

MODEL AESTHETES: HOFMANNSTHAL AND CHANDOS

Before moving on to a brief historico-cultural survey of Britain and the German-speaking lands in the nineteenth century, I would first like to comment on one writer who seems, uncannily, both to summarise preceding discussions and to prefigure the explanations to come. I refer to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who seems largely to have escaped the attention of Anglo-Saxon literary scholars.

Of all the writers and theoreticians examined in this thesis, Hugo von Hofmannsthal is in many ways the least known. Yet I want to suggest that he is deeply symptomatic of the issues that haunt a European generation. The life of the aesthete, and that of its late-nineteenth-century version in particular, centres upon obsessions with appearances. Hofmannsthal's anglophilia, his juvenile passion for everything English, documented by Mary E. Gilbert and summed up in the sentence 'He behaved like an Englishman in francophile Vienna', reveals an aesthetic appreciation of, as well as distance from, a country he did not visit until four years before his death in 1929.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly therefore, his view was highly idealised, while at the same time revealing the aesthete's disregard for material reality. England, Gilbert suggests, became to Hofmannsthal what ancient Greece was to Walter Pater, Stefan George, and countless other artists: a locus defined by the perfect interdependence between art, society, and politics, and a place reconstructed and brought alive by the artefacts of the age.¹⁹ Similarly, Hofmannsthal's version of England was based on his familiarity with the country's creative output, its aesthetic phenomena rather than its socio-historical specificity.

Surrounding himself with the artistic representations of the culture, Hofmannsthal resembles Huysmans' Des Esseintes, who, faced by what he, on the basis of literature and art, identifies as types of English life while waiting in a Dieppe bar to cross the channel for the first time, realises that any acquaintance with the real thing would inevitably result in disappointment:

‘After all, what kind of aberration was this, that I should be tempted to renounce long-held convictions, and disdain the compliant fantasies of my mind, that I should, like some complete simpleton, have believed that a journey was necessary, or could hold novelty or interest?’²⁰

Des Esseintes realises that confrontation with external reality, with phenomena that have not been shaped by the artist's mind and are not presented through the agreeable forms of the beautiful object, renders control, and by this token truth, impossible.

To Hofmannsthal, fashions signified form, ways of expressing, indeed shaping, a personality that could be called one's own: ‘the young aristocrat, admired in Bohemian literary circles, was endeavouring to belong to “Society”, a society which was becoming more and more English. English manners, English furniture, English clothes, English forms of decorative art, and English sport were beginning to conquer the world. On the other hand this explanation will not of itself suffice. Hofmannsthal was also looking for a way of life suited to his temperament.’²¹ His early realisation that the overpowering forces of modern life, the potentially destructive impetus of its incoherent pluralities and disparate energies, could only be held at bay through resolute subject-

formation, resulted in his endeavour to construct a 'Centrumsgefühl', the sense of a centre, a firm grounding in life achieved through a circumspect selection and individual adaptation of precepts without any delusions with regard to their illusory nature:

Es handelt sich freilich immer nur darum ringsum den Grenzen des Gesichtskreises Potemkin'sche Dörfer aufzustellen, aber solche an die man selber glaubt. Und dazu gehört ein Centrumsgefühl, ein Gefühl von Herrschaftlichkeit und Abhängigkeit, ein starkes Spüren der Vergangenheit und der unendlichen Durchdringung aller Dinge und ein besonderes Glück, nämlich, daß die begegnenden Phänomene wie bei der Kartenschlägerin gutschymbolisch fallen, reich, vielsagend.²²

Hofmannsthal, it seems, thus placed the task of constructing a solid yet 'un-illusioned' identity, one that remains aware of its arbitrary nature and lack of external meaning, firmly in the individual's hands.

By rejecting what he calls the dream world of the Romantics ('wir sind zu kritisch um in einer Traumwelt zu leben, wie die Romantiker'), Hofmannsthal dismisses the possibility of an inborn essence, a core of individuality around which a stable subject could be constructed.²³ Because of this lack of an inherent personality which could withstand the baleful implication of a senseless universe, the individual must, Hofmannsthal concludes, endow life with meaning by moulding existence into significant form and building a carefully guarded realm into which only a limited selection of impressions can

gain access, while those refused entry must be ignored for the sake of permanence and sanity in accordance with the motto: *'il faut glisser la vie!'*.²⁴ The individual thus forever fluctuates between passive exposure to external influences and their utilisation as a means of active self-formation.

In his own choice of a blueprint for self-stylisation, Hofmannsthal decided on the less controversial of the two popular paradigms of late Victorian England, opting for the gentleman in preference to the dandy. His early taste for the air of integrity conveyed in the stoical 'deportment, self-control, the principle of *noblesse oblige*' over the, at times, excessive, unruly, anarchic pose of London's late-nineteenth-century dandy-artists was mirrored in his moral advocacy of Pater over Wilde, with the former's emphasis on the control and instrumentalisation of exterior phenomena shaping Hofmannsthal's notion of 'Centrumsgefühl'.²⁵ Yet by devoting so much conscious attention to the surfaces of social existence, Hofmannsthal was, at the same time, following the statutes for living expounded by Wilde by paying tribute to the aesthetic life and its concern to cultivate the material manifestations of spirit and mind.

As Gilbert shows, Hofmannsthal's embrace of the gentleman figure was triggered by his political tendencies, his belief in the artist's responsibility towards society, which gave rise to an intensifying involvement in socially conscious, socially didactic theatre that contrasted sharply with the lyrical dramas of his youth. However, it is important to note that Hofmannsthal's uneasy relationship with the figure of Wilde corresponds to the popular misjudgement of the dandy figure in general in the wake of the Queensberry trial. The social attitudes of the turn-of-the-century dandies were by no means limited to an apolitical stance expressed through a flamboyant disregard for

politics, as Wilde's own example shows. His socialist leanings provide only one of many instances of dandyism as a form of politico-cultural criticism and will be pertinent in my reading of The Picture of Dorian Gray. Hofmannsthal's idealised view of England's landed gentry, which found its expression in the figure of Lord Chandos, signals his recognition of the need for social patronage as opposed to what he identified, and condemned, as the distanced stance of the dandy.

To Hofmannsthal, the aristocratic gentleman represented the perfect marriage of cultivated style and moral responsibility, a model he sought to emulate through his intensive involvement as a preserver of Austrian culture after World War I.²⁶ Realising that a country's culture and intellectual heritage could not only never be considered in isolation from its current social manifestations but that the project of a *Kulturnation* as drawn up by Herder and the German Romantics a century earlier presented a potentially integrative design for post-war Austria, the poet endeavoured to combine nationalist conservatism with educated cosmopolitanism in an attempt to retain the albeit fragile sense of national identity located in the monarchical structure of the pre-1918 empire and utilise its unifying forces in the new republic.

While the political activism of Hofmannsthal's later years was to a great extent grounded in his embrace of the British model of nationalism, his deliberate mythologisation of England also offers a crucial *raison d'être* for my project. His adolescent affair with European Aestheticism and his conscious, even though in fact only partial, abandonment of it in the opening years of the twentieth century, serve to demonstrate both the affinities and the differences between the birth and reception of late-nineteenth-century Aestheticism, in its

manifold incarnations of Symbolism, Decadence, or Dandyism, in Britain and the German-speaking lands. Hofmannsthal's own version of aestheticism was deeply informed by his intimate familiarity with the work of the precursors of English aestheticism, most notably Keats and Browning, and these links have been aptly demonstrated by Patrick Bridgwater in his book on the Anglo-German Interactions in the Literature of the 1890s, and essays such as Eugene Weber's 'Hofmannsthal und Oscar Wilde', Michael Hamburger's 'Hofmannsthal's Debt to the English-speaking World', and Mary E. Gilbert's 'Hugo von Hofmannsthal and England', which I have already alluded to. I will also take the opportunity of exploring a number of individual essays which offer comparative analyses of the relationship between some of the authors or texts dealt with in my thesis and which, in many ways, have paved the way for it. The most crucial of these are Robert Vilain's "'Wer lügt, macht schlechte Metaphern": Hofmannsthals *Manche freilich...* and Walter Pater', and Theodore Ziolkowski's 'James Joyces Epiphanie und die Überwindung der empirischen Welt in der modernen deutschen Prosa'. What all these analyses make abundantly clear is that the issues of art and the aesthete, formed a powerful bond between English and German culture at the end of the nineteenth and in the beginning of the twentieth century. That interplay is the essential framework for the literary analyses which are at the centre of my work.

In this thesis, I want to offer contextual readings of seven seminal texts of European Aestheticism. Its national and international manifestations and interrelations through the movements of Symbolism, Dandyism, and Decadence have been thoroughly investigated in works such as Ellen Moers' The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm, Carl E. Schorske's Fin-de-siècle Vienna:

Politics and Culture, Alan Sinfield's The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Movement, and, most recently, Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken's Cultural Politics at the *Fin de siècle* and Leon Chai's Aestheticism: The Religion of Art in Post-Romantic Literature, and my thesis is profoundly indebted to these and other texts of cultural studies, without which its attempt at cross-referencing and cross-reading would not have been possible.

My aim, for reasons that I hope the coming pages will make clear, is specific rather than general. It is to attend to the stylistic and thematic particularities of seven major literary texts, texts in which the issue of art and the aesthetic receives psychologically specified expression in that an artist figure is created. Such detailed reading inevitably interlocks with the historical and cultural backgrounds that sparked the composition of the seven texts. Vienna's history in the late nineteenth century, for example, can be extracted from the biographies of her artists, of men as diverse as Hofmannsthal, Schnitzler, Klimt, and Mahler. They all were part of a movement that advocated innovation and the rejection of the past. The psychological sources and manifestations of this development are in turn well documented by contemporary thinkers as disparate as Ernst Mach, Otto Weininger, and Sigmund Freud, and this area has been thoroughly investigated by subsequent commentators such as Schorske, Peter Vergo, and Hartmut Scheible. Whilst I draw on their work and do not attempt to re-evaluate the cultural legacy bequeathed by Vienna to future generations, I do want to offer a very brief and selective comparison between *fin-de-siècle* Vienna and London. Vienna and London provide the main setting for four of our six authors, and the two cities

offer points of overlap and convergence by which the cultural and societal context of the artist's endeavour can be explored. The questions of cultural indebtedness and social responsibility inevitably throw up the issue of nationality. The present thesis is a comparative study in German and English literature, and at frequent points it will touch on – without ever resolving – the thorny question of literature's part in the definition of national identity. The implications are manifold.

Hofmannsthal, in the amazing richness of his European sensibility, has for example been identified with the supra-nationalism of the old Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and Musil with the intellectual brilliance of a culture irretrievably locked in political stagnation. The role of my chosen authors in the mythology of national culture is a potent one, but it will be only of secondary concern for me. At the heart of my project is the attempt to interpret the aesthete figure as instantiating a broad range of cognitive, psychological, and philosophical issues, and highlighting the difficulty of self-knowledge and self-definition.

Within that project the position of Virginia Woolf might seem a shade anomalous. Her exceptional standing within modernist fiction is habitually considered in relation with her position as a woman. Her versions of the epiphany, her 'moments of being', seem to provide an intuitive and spiritually more tolerant alternative to the Joycean interpretation of the object's *quidditas*. Without succumbing to the danger of labelling her work by declaring it the eternal *other* of femininity in constant opposition to the masculine rationality that is associated with modernism, the ethereal character of her literary revelations will here be taken to represent a remarkable counterpart to the

mysticism of Hofmannsthal. The interpretative links that are established in this thesis between the Ein Brief and To the Lighthouse thus disclose a number of affinities between Vienna and London.²⁷ It often appears that the influence of movements, writers and thinkers, such as British and German Romanticism, French Symbolism, Robert Browning, and Maurice Maeterlinck, on Hofmannsthal's work cannot be overestimated, and his pan-European heritage lies at the very centre of his aesthetic education. Although this thesis only partly accepts the generally proclaimed canonical importance of Ein Brief, which rests mainly on an overinterpretation of the text's autobiographical aspects, the fictitious letter can nonetheless be seen as a culminative statement on the crisis of consciousness dominating the work of the major Western European authors of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As such, the text occupies a central role within this thesis, and one of the very basic aims of my project is to encourage Ein Brief's initiation into the canon of modernist literature, where it could be read alongside firmly established works of Anglo-Saxon and European literature, just as it is here.

Whilst no scholar of modern German literature or Germanic cultural studies could seriously question Ein Brief's importance as a textual witness to the increasing political and artistic turbulence discernible in the half century preceding World War I, the text remains, together with Hofmannsthal's other works and indeed the author himself, widely unknown to Anglo-Saxon readers, students, and teachers of English literature, despite the positive reaction it habitually elicits upon exposure. And although interpreters such as Donald G. Daviau, Michael Hamburger, Thomas A. Kovach, H. Stefan Schultz, and Robert Vilain have contributed and continue to produce English language

studies of Ein Brief and Hofmannsthal's oeuvre in general, one is hard-pressed to find him mentioned within the context of Anglo-German comparative studies, with the notable exception of Patrick Bridgwater's published research. This is, of course, to a large extent due to the lack of Anglo-German comparative research into late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature in general, and this field will probably be forever overshadowed by Anglo-French and Franco-German comparative studies of Aestheticism, Symbolism, and Decadence. But while The Confusions of Young Törleß, Tonio Kröger, and Death in Venice are widely known and regarded as classics of European literature amongst English readers and scholars, it appears that the name Hofmannsthal will continue to be confused with that of E. T. A. Hoffmann for yet some time to come.

Hofmannsthal's elusiveness to the Anglo-Saxon public can be traced back to the cerebral and somewhat intangible nature of his writings, which do not necessarily make for entertaining reading. However, if the absence of a major work of fiction comparable to Musil's or Thomas Mann's novels and novellas precludes an easy entry into his oeuvre, Hofmannsthal's status as one of the foremost thinkers of the European *fin de siècle* is beyond doubt. As the present thesis hopes to show, his prose work alone offers points of convergence and illuminations of late-nineteenth-century European culture that succeed in breaking through the boundaries of significance founded in national identity. While comparative studies in literature should, in principle at least, warrant a liberal selection of texts regardless of temporal, geographical, or historical confines, the inclusion of Ein Brief alongside Hofmannsthal's critical thought does not require further justification, as both speak for themselves.

Thus, while the English critical tradition may still struggle with the idea of comparative literary studies as a domain of parallel contextual readings rather than one rooted in exercises in source-hunting and the demonstration of empirically viable influence, 'inter-disciplinary' scholars such as Patrick Bridgwater have begun to offer investigations into relations between English and German literature and culture which concentrate on the written word, thus rendering the question whether Wilde ever met or even as much as read Nietzsche one of secondary importance.

I therefore intend to use Ein Brief, and the Central European variant of late-nineteenth-century Aestheticism as a whole, as the basis for my comparative readings, whilst writing from the perspective of a scholar of English literature. That is to say that, rather than reproduce the multitudinous research into the Viennese *fin de siècle* for the benefit of Germanists, I wish to highlight the movement's usefulness as a means of illuminating the English-speaking texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I shall thus devote fewer pages to the Yellow Nineties, the Symbolist tradition, or a reading of Wilde's biography, than to a discussion of the implications of Aestheticism in the German-speaking lands for a whole generation. At the same time, however, I intend to present cross-readings which transcend the framework of particular local and national cultures. This procedure will, I hope, result in a network of references, whilst my readings of the seven texts themselves will be framed by Ein Brief at one end and To the Lighthouse at the other. By discussing the works in a non-chronological order I do not so much wish to move beyond a historicist interpretation but offer a reading whose meaning will be gradually revealed. By advancing from the egalitarian epiphanies of Lord Chandos to

Woolf's more all-encompassing view of the aesthetic as the realm of signification, I want to examine the aesthete's various embodiments as artist, dandy, down to the 'ordinary' individual. In my reading, I shall continuously refer back to Hofmannsthal as the prototype of the aesthete grounded in both everyday phenomena and high art, and to Ein Brief as the primary formulation of the aesthetic life.

At the same time as bearing witness to the profound importance assigned by *fin-de-siècle* writers to the questioning of creative authenticity, Ein Brief also offers an investigation into the philosophical issue of object-subject relations. Where human relationships as well as those between product and consumer appear disrupted by the alienating forces of capitalist society, issues of epistemology and cognition inevitably move into the foreground of discourse. Chandos's loss of self, his inability to know himself, leaves him investigating the foundation of the individual's relationship to its environment by looking at his perception of and inter-relation with inanimate objects. Unable to communicate through language, Chandos finds himself incapable of understanding and knowing the meaning of words and, as a consequence, cut off from human society. The pain occasioned by this breakdown is accompanied by a new child-like way of seeing that is as yet unspoilt by the abstract, often purely cognitive and thus inevitably numbing, aspects of speech and the written word. Chandos is thus transported back to the juvenile state of discovery which depends on 'the capacity of wonderment' explored in Musil's Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß.

Ein Brief thus provides the reader with a kind of back-dated vision that is able to illuminate the processes involved in the child's socialisation. At the

same time, however, as it celebrates this renewed, seemingly more authentic, way of seeing and feeling the world, it also reveals the horror at the moment when our uncritical dependence on language is no longer warranted and satisfied. With the lapse of language and communication comes the removal of cognitive certainties and its ordering faculty. The world appears as a chaos to which the self is both invariably exposed and from which it yet feels itself to be agonisingly excluded. Chandos experiences not so much infantile wholeness as the loneliness of the unsociable self that is deprived of the means of relying either on its mother or on the ability to differentiate between a stable, defined self and the chaotic and unruly other of its surroundings. All the same, the vision attained at the end of the text finds Chandos at 'the deepest seat of peace', a state of tranquil annihilation, which is mirrored by Mrs Ramsay's temporary retreat into the dark dome of selfhood, into which both feeling and thought fail to gain entry.²⁸

The dualism of light and darkness informs, to some extent, all of our texts, although none more so than Ein Brief and To the Lighthouse. Similarly, Hofmannsthal's representation of Elizabethan England as a point of reference for the aesthetic and social issues of early-twentieth-century Vienna and Western Europe as a whole is reflected in Woolf's assessment of the Georgian society of the 1920s, which she contrasts with what she identifies as her parents' Edwardian past, the transitional stage between Victorian culture and modernism. Each of our texts offers a historical exploration of consciousness and cognition. Significantly, however, the moments of insight submitted are not necessarily moments of clear perception. Rather, the texts seem to advocate an acceptance of ambiguity in the knowledge that absolute truth cannot be

attained. And because the complexity and multi-facetedness of modern bourgeois existence can be best expressed through the artwork that can claim freedom from social necessities, the central texts of modernist literature discussed here revolve around the issue of art and its redemptive powers. Hence the insistence on perspectivism or relativism encountered in Nietzsche and Pater.

Modernist literature's obsession with the moment testifies to its preoccupation with the issue of possible, that is socially knowable, freedom. The moments of vision described by the texts find the subject probing the boundaries of his/her independence by asserting the autonomy of his/her consciousness and imagination over the object. This process can result, on the one hand, in sympathy that inspires altruism and tolerance, as in the case of Woolf's moments of vision, and on the other, in egoism verging on tyranny, as in the case of Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray in Wilde's novel.

Moreover, the epiphanic moment also stands in clear opposition to the religion of progress embraced by modernity. Due to its solipsistic mode, the momentary vision induced by exposure to an object arrests progress and fleetingly re-centers reality in individual sensibility. It is in these moments that the individual is presented with the possibility of rejecting the ideological precepts of society by becoming aware of the relative nature of experience and reality. It is, paradoxically, in these instances of solipsism that the artwork can come to be employed as a tool of freedom.

KLIMT'S IMAGES OF MUSIC-MAKING: THE AESTHETE LIBERATED AND CONFINED

With the onset of industrialised imperialism and the social changes effected by the economic transformations of the nineteenth century, the question of the artist's responsibility towards society moved to the forefront of aesthetic discourse. The creative manifestations of medievalism, which was to a large extent the child of Romanticism and thus not only present within Victorian culture but also crucial for the exploration of national identity undertaken in the Austrian and the newly founded German Empire, sought to redefine the individual's relationship to the community. The Gothic Revival of the mid-century, inspired by the sociological insights of John Ruskin, rejected the detached neo-classicism of Georgian and Regency England and instead endeavoured to create a semblance of social unity by invoking through the neo-Gothic style the medieval craftsman's alleged incorporation within the creative project of ecclesiastical architecture. Similarly, the short-lived movement of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood used, under Ruskin's guidance, anti-classical images and techniques as a way of returning the visual arts to a purported pre-Renaissance tradition in which the artist, through religious and socially charged painting, aimed to mediate between the beauty of divine creation and the human observer. By setting these pious overtones against a highly arcane background based on works regarded by the artists as the classic authors of English literature, most notably Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Keats, the Brotherhood hoped to locate a sense of social unity within national culture.

In keeping with Germany's much evoked belatedness, it was not until post-1871 that the subject of *Kulturation* enjoyed a comeback, after suffering a near-fatal blow following the breakdown of the national designs of German Romanticism in Napoleonic and *Biedermeier* times and the failure of the 1848 Revolutions. Bismarck's empire thus witnessed the overdue emergence of the liberal *Bildungsbürgertum* as creators and upholders of national culture by way of an eager interest in historicism and the immortalisation of its artistic treasures through a network of national museums and concert halls and the support of the politicised press and mass literature. This development was mirrored by Austria's bourgeoisie, who, like Germany's, recognised the urgent need to reinforce its identity in the face of the now finally aborted vision of *Großdeutschland*, which it sought to satisfy by consolidating its economic and intellectual wealth through the urban modernism of the *Ringstraßenstil*.²⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, all three countries saw a decline and intensifying disintegration of the cultural-national enterprise, as the societies' intellectual avant-gardes began to endeavour to extricate art from the realm of imperialist politics. This process resulted in a revaluation of the artwork as social phenomenon and led to increased doubts regarding the need to vindicate art through the bestowal of an ethical and socially stabilising meaning. As the emphasis started to shift from the nation to smaller sections of society and came finally to rest in the individual, the purpose of artistic creativity within the context of the community received its reappraisal.

This reassessment was conducted predominantly by the artists themselves and permeated the popular art forms of the *fin de siècle*. Gustav Klimt's music panels, 'Musik II' and 'Schubert am Piano', also known as

'Hausmusik', were painted in the final years of the nineteenth century for the Viennese palace of Nikolaus Dumba, a patron of the arts, and exemplify two ways in which art can serve society.³⁰ In 'Hausmusik', art figures as an instrument of escapism, offering temporary shelter from the psychological battlefield of Eros and Thanatos by transporting the individual to an idyll of bourgeois aestheticism, in which Schubert, diminished into the Biedermeier artist *par excellence*, produces romantic harmonies on the piano whilst enshrined by warm candle light and feminine epitomes of tamed sexuality. In 'Musik II', on the other hand, art appears as an agency of liberation, and as such it can throw into relief the very forces which threaten civilisation and order by posing an antithesis to illusory impressionism and depicting in sharp detail the powerful sensuality of the tragic muse as *femme fatale* in the company of Dionysus' foster father, wise and carnal Silenus, and the monstrous Sphinx, both embodiments of the inseparability of the human and the animal, of reason and emotion.

In their stylistic differences, both paintings succeed in illustrating the morally forceful position of the artist. The artist presents fictions of life, offers interpretations of man's existence which can be either comforting and pleasing, when, for example, appearing under the guise of sweet yet sterile eroticism, or disturbing and yet potentially empowering, when striving to release our instincts from the paralysing grip of moral convention. The artist can choose either to deny or to represent the destructive yet wonderful incommensurability of life, the cruel truth. And, in his function as a creator of artistic representation, he has the means of doing the latter without destroying the subject-spectator in the process and condemning him to what Nietzsche identifies as Hamlet's fate.

We can acknowledge the Dionysian content of Klimt's 'Musik II' without losing the ability to appreciate the aesthetic significance of the painting, which makes the portrayal of the Dionysian possible in the first place. The veil of *maya* employed here by Klimt is the result of a careful balance of sensuous impressions with intellectual import; the sharp depiction of female stereotypes coexists with playful ornamentation and allegory. This artwork makes claims on our senses as well as our mental capacities by being a beautiful yet mystifying riddle, thus appearing inevitably subversive, especially when contrasted with its pendant 'Hausmusik', which seems to glorify male genius and order in the figure of the artist and the timid submission of the female onlookers. It is 'Musik II' which is suffused with light, while 'Hausmusik' appears dominated by a shrouding darkness, the illusion of security upheld by social convention. The figures' oneness, the merging of their shapes and the lack of clear outline is not a symbol of Dionysian flux and unity, as it is in the more characteristic groupings of Klimt's later period, such as 'Death and Life', but the representation of a cultural vacuum, an atmosphere of refined closure which aims to shut out the uncontrollable forces of life.³¹

In contrast, 'Musik II', with its thematic emphasis on the artistic medium rather than the individual artist, conveys a sense of vigorous aporia with personified Music hovering in the margins of a loosely defined space. Modernist in spirit, the painting proclaims the certainty of uncertainty overshadowing the new age; the serene smiles and self-confident wisdom of Silenus and the Sphinx coexist with their embodiment of dark animal forces, which escape the grip of reason and human understanding.

In keeping with the preoccupations of Klimt's age, the thematic orientations dominating the paintings' relationship are based on sexual difference. Although the female figures in 'Hausmusik', with their lustrous dresses and fresh physical beauty draw the beholder's attention, they still find themselves only on the perimeters of the centre occupied by their binary opposite. Whilst they appear to take up the larger portion of the canvas, it is, in fact, merely the out-sized puffiness of their robes which hides the fragile passivity of their bodies. Nor do they, contrary to first appearances, outnumber the men in the painting. We register the presence of a tall elderly male figure, the patriarch, his face set off against the black door which separates two large gold-rimmed mirrors situated in the upper left and right corners of the painting. He is positioned closely to the left of the two older female figures, with the three shapes forming a solid phalanx. He and his wife, the proudly and rather too self-consciously erect female figure in the foreground wearing a clearly visible wedding-ring, thus link up to flank their daughter protectively. She, on the other hand, looks absorbed in her singing, her head bowed, her eyes demurely focused on the sheet music. While the observer is granted a full view of the mother's body in profile, the daughter's shape is mostly concealed by the latter. Her repressed youthful passion is merely hinted at by the lurid orange colour of her dress and her fiery ginger hair. She, in turn, screens her father from the observer's eyes, who is left with the blurred outline of his stern facial feature.

Yet the father also forms part of a second triangle, completed by Schubert and the third male figure, whose disproportionately small reflection can be seen in the left-hand mirror. His tiny head with its youthful full hair rests awkwardly in the corner between the door and the neck and shoulders of the

third female figure. His body language mirrors that of the older daughter sandwiched between her parents, as he too stands with his eyes and head lowered towards an invisible music sheet, a position from which we seem able to determine his social position as the older daughter's fiancé or suitor. His physical closeness to the younger daughter underlines his status. He is the youngest of the three men, just as she is the youngest of the three women. His aspirations point towards the patriarch, whose example he hopes to follow by marrying the older daughter and thus become the head of his own family. Only when integrated into the bourgeois social unit will he be more than a reflection in his partner's paternal household. Similarly, his fiancé's body will be allowed to step out of her mother's shadow, once her sexuality, symbolised by the intense colour of the dress, has been tamed and socialised by the institution of marriage.

While the younger couple take their cue from their older counterparts, it is the younger daughter who appears appointed by Klimt to question the set-up. The only one of the six figures not to look towards the piano on the far left of the painting, she faces the observer full-front with a look of almost agonising inertia and resignation. Although practically the next in line to marry and follow in her sister's footsteps, rather than gaze expectedly at the bride, she appears in a state of limbo, a young girl in a flowery dress on the verge of womanhood staring at the beholder as though trying to elicit a reaction. Her natural role in the painting's composition would entail turning the pages of Schubert's music, but her association with the world of art could also reach far deeper. Together with the musician, she stands closest to the light shining forth from the candelabra placed on the piano. She appears, shrouded by the somewhat

excessively bright lights, illumined and radiant with an effulgent halo hovering above her hair. Too young to have entered society, she remains relatively unspoiled by social convention and her role as outsider still holds within it the possibility of subversive rebellion. Like the musician, she finds herself on the margins of society and thus still in possession of a substantial portion of original energy. Due to the frontal view of her face, moreover, her features stand out amongst the three women with an artless freshness that suggests an innocence related to notions of beauty and truth. Of the five family members, the prospective entrant included, she is consequently the one closest to the world of art.

In its use of triangular combinations, 'Hausmusik' portrays the intricate web of social relations. The three men, patriarch, fiancé, and Schubert, are aligned by their gender, and, with the outlines of their bodies mostly hidden, except for the musician's hands placed on the piano for the execution of his art, the focus is firmly on their heads and the commonplace perception of their sex as that sustained by rationality. Similarly, the women, mother, bride, and younger daughter, are thrown together by their fashionable hair-styles and costumes, which follow the dictum of social decency and through which their decorative as well social function is revealed – the neutral whiteness of the mother's dress and its black ribbons define her de-sexualised, or at least sexually tamed, status as a married woman, while her older daughter is permitted to attract her male lover with a crimson outfit that suggests desire and fertility and is meant to attract, capture and hold the male lover. The younger daughter finds herself on the threshold to maturity and thus somewhere between the, with regard to society, asexual position of her mother

and the sexually charged situation of her sister, as her white dress covered in red flower heads symbolises. She consequently forms a relational triangle with her mother and father on the one hand, and her sister and future brother-in-law on the other.

Naturally, and yet intriguingly, it is the figure of Schubert which occupies the centre and, simultaneously, demarcates the artist's exceptional standing within society. Schubert's black jacket merges with the impassable opaqueness of the door, which protects the occupants of the salon from the chaos of the outside world. As an invited intruder, an exile temporarily absolved from his banishment in bohemianism, the musician is allowed access into the bourgeois's world. In return, he offers his listeners a means of imposing order on the turbulent aspect of their psyche through art. As the Romantic composer and musician, he offers them an orderly, socially accepted outlet for their erotic drives and their emotional longings. The Viennese painter's domestication of the artist for the promotion of the exquisitely sublime, to be enjoyed by the middle classes in the security of their homes, points at otherworldliness, the yearning for an elevated harmony not to be found in the commonly mundane. Schubert and his female followers are portrayed as the embodiment of aesthetic stasis caused by controlled emotion which smothers action.

Born in 1797, Schubert spent his adult life in the conservative atmosphere of Restoration Europe, which, through repression and persecution, sought to recover from twenty-five years of political instability triggered by the French Revolution and the ensuing Napoleonic Wars, by attempting to re-consolidate dynastic rule and suppress the seeds of nationalism and liberalism scattered previously by the *code civil* and the ideals

of 1789. Since his untimely death preceded the revolutions of 1830 by two years, Schubert appears as the contemporary artist who seems to personify most completely the time of the *Biedermeier*, with its rejection of political activism and retreat into domesticity. His Austria was that of Fürst Metternich, censorship and the Holy Alliance's fight to regain and retain their superior status, the themes of his music dominated by German inwardness and existential *Angst*, the only means of expressing the burgher's feelings of disappointment and paralysis.

Why he should have been chosen as the subject of a painting commissioned by a wealthy bourgeois benefactor of the arts of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, a work produced by the Secessionist Klimt and paid for and enjoyed by the industrialist Nikolaus Dumba in his palais, may initially appear surprising. Yet, as Gottfried Friedl points out, the painting, with its use of the Impressionist style and disregard for authentic *Biedermeier* costumes, does not mark Klimt's return to historical genre painting, which dominated his apprenticeship and the beginning of his successful career with his ceiling paintings for the Burgtheater, before he rejected the possibility of unproblematic identification with idealised historicism and the cultural past.³² Instead, Klimt seems to endeavour to rescue Schubert from a period in which art was confined to homeliness and enjoyed on the restrictive and intimate scale of the family unit, into a time when the rising middle classes proclaimed their newly found confidence through their solidarity with the artist. Often of Jewish origins, they too started out as outsiders in Viennese society before growing into a class that could no longer be ignored. Finding themselves excluded from politics and government, which was still in the firm grip of the widely anti-Semitic aristocracy, these children

and beneficiaries of the industrialisation turned their attention to art as a sphere where they could exert influence and reveal their liberal tendencies. With their help, Vienna's artists began to form an inter-disciplinary circle which sought to separate itself from the tenets of conventionalised, state-funded art. The artists of the Viennese Secession would finally come to proclaim the motto of the new era: 'Der Zeit ihre Kunst, der Kunst ihre Freiheit' – 'to every age its art, to art its freedom'.³³

The significance of Klimt's transposition of Schubert into late-nineteenth-century Aestheticism is thus manifold – while, on the one hand, celebrating the new emancipation of the artist by representing art's repressive past, it also delivers Schubert posthumously from the shackles of the *Biedermeier* and that period's reactionary tastes in aesthetics and politics. However, it may also serve to question the freedom of the contemporary artist – although Schubert's compositional association with the external world, by way of his shape's merging with the solid black door, suggests the possibility of upsetting rather than reaffirming the ideals of the bourgeois, his position within the family group also implies claustrophobic oppression. He is at once worshipped and kept prisoner by his audience. We would do well to remember that, of all the great composers of Viennese classicism, Schubert, with his abundant production of songs, is the one most readily associated with the domestic realm, with home music making. At the same time, with his late song cycles 'Die schöne Müllerin' and 'Die Winterreise' he dismantles all notions of domesticity and homeliness. Both cycles play chillingly with intimations of despair and dereliction. That register of hopelessness is important. Put politically, one might say that the *Biedermeier* artist's inability to overcome the

confines of die-hard conservatism may be seen to mirror and anticipate the *fin-de-siècle* artist's ultimate powerlessness in the face of excessive capitalism and growing militarism triggered by the desire for imperialist expansion.

'Musik II', on the other hand, lacks a clear central focus. Instead, the stony figure of the crouching sphinx, which occupies almost the entire length of the right hand side, is balanced by the taller female figure on the left, whose shape stretches from the bottom to the top of the painting. The woman too appears to be stooping, yet instead of the calm, indifferent gaze of the sphinx, she faces the beholder with a look of anticipation mixed with bewilderment. She is Music, who promises gratification of the senses in the shape of the seductive female, the Dionysian muse, while she also offers an outlet for the creative impulse, symbolised by the Apollonian kithera, both of which can lead to knowledge and enlightenment as personified by Silenus and the Sphinx. However, the attainment of such a vision demands the exposure of the psyche to the intoxication of fierce impulses. Whereas here the symbolism and lack of a gravital centre precludes the fixation of significance, the very reclusiveness of 'Hausmusik', its denial of the larger context of society and life, draws attention to what is so carefully shut out.

**BEYOND THE ARTWORK:
THE AESTHETE IN *FIN-DE-SIÈCLE* LONDON AND VIENNA**

If Klimt in 'Musik II' offers one particular strand of the Schubert myth – the domesticated genius – he overlooks many other aspects, such as the composer's poverty. Klimt's Schubert is clearly not about to sell immortal songs for mere pittance. Particularly since the Italian Renaissance and its transformation of art into a commodity, artists have found themselves at the mercy of wealthy patrons, who regard the artwork as symbols of their own status, while at the same time enjoying a newly found confidence in their power as artistic genius. Although art thus found itself freed from the bonds of religious dogma, and instead obliged by the capitalist public's taste, it also instated the creative individual at the centre of artistic consciousness.

'At least no merchant traffics in my heart' sighs the 'Pictor Ignotus' in Robert Browning's poem of the same title, an unknown sixteenth-century painter in Florence, who watches his religious frescoes 'gently die', ignored because never seen and admired by the public.³⁴ The nineteenth century's romanticised view of the Renaissance artist as a victim of commercial and political influences often suppresses the possibility of anarchic forces pervading the artwork. Yet Browning's preoccupation with Renaissance art as an example of how artistic form and expression can act as an instrument of both individual freedom and social repression continued to dominate late-nineteenth-century debates on the function of art. His dramatic monologues both centre consciousness by forging an essence of selfhood within the artwork while at the same time exploding the myth of a stable identity. The constant interplay of conscious ascendancy and unregistered aporias that permeates the duke's

self-representation in 'My Last Duchess', for example, demonstrates the impossibility of fixed meaning in both Browning's poem and the fictitious portrait. Although the artist appears involuntarily implicated in Ferrara's spiritual and physical crime, which saw him subjugate and appropriate his wife as an aesthetic object, Frà Pandolf's painting itself conveys an instance of conscious selfhood in which the sitter's outward beauty communicates intelligent humanity. The poem relies on the artist's schizophrenic position as both a master endowed with the power to express and formulate selfhood as a subversive element and a mere servant unable to ensure the fruition and liberation of this personality beyond the sphere of the artwork.

Similarly, although mostly exempt from observing the inhibiting rules of Christian orthodoxy, the artists of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna were confronted instead by the demands and restrictions of their society, despite the outwardly liberal atmosphere of the city. When Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele died in 1918 of the same strain of influenza that claimed so many lives throughout the continent, their deaths coincided with the disappearance of the old European world, in which the aristocracy and the conservative upper classes had still been able to shut themselves off from the implications of modernity and the dawn of mass culture and industrialised urban society. The foundation of the Secessionist movement itself constituted a deliberate break with institutionalised art, which up until then had been in the firm grip of the two official guardians of the visual arts in the Austrian Empire, *Die Akademie der schönen Künste* and *Die Künstlerhausgenossenschaft*. By establishing their own exhibition sites, the group of dissident artists, led by Klimt, sought to emancipate themselves from the neo-classicist ideals of academic teaching

and its adherence to traditional historicism, which they thought incapable of accurately expressing their revised relationship between art and society.

As Carl E. Schorske explains, the Secessionist artists were driven by the urge for oedipal revolt, for a ritualistic separation from the traditions and values of their fathers, for regeneration and a sacred rebirth.³⁵ This movement in the visual arts was accompanied and supported by a parallel development in literature and criticism, spearheaded by Hermann Bahr. Late-nineteenth-century Vienna's much evoked *Kaffehauskultur* allowed for a cross-fertilisation between the arts as well as between sections of society, as creators and thinkers began to populate the more democratic meeting places of modern city life as opposed to the sheltered hothouse climate maintained in the salons of the privileged rich. As Robert Vilain explains with reference to Hofmannsthal's cautiously distanced frequentation of Josephine von Wertheimstein's salon, to which he, as the only one of Vienna's young poets, had gained access:³⁶

Too much devotion to the closed circle risked allowing dreams to encroach too far upon reality. Nevertheless, being exposed to new and wide-ranging thought was important in sustaining Hofmannsthal's interest in contemporary literature, and characteristically he was as aware of this kind of advantage as he was of the potentially claustrophobic effect of the social location in which it was offered.

The artist in Vienna at the turn of the century, therefore, was the product of innumerable tensions. He was socially integrated – yet into a social class that, although governing, was increasingly out of touch with the world it

governed. Aesthetic values were recognized and celebrated in his world, yet the high status of art gave society the unself-conscious irresponsibility of a spinning top, and to be caught in the spin was a dubious privilege.³⁷

Hofmannsthal's life-long fixation on the quest for an authentic life of action and involvement can be traced back to his ambiguous relationship to the world of his patrons, to which he was permitted on the basis of his educated wealthy middle-class background, as an antidote to the egalitarian microcosm of *Café Griensteidl*, where he was first initiated at the age of sixteen, on the merits of his talent.

Café Griensteidl, and its later replacement *Café Central*, acted as exchange centres of ideas and the stage for aesthetic and political debates, where theory merged with practice, where playwrights met and selected performers for their work and authors faced their intellectual readers, journalistic counterparts and critics. Furnished with recent editions of costly magazines and all of the current newspapers, which, due to strict licensing, were not freely obtainable at the time, the cafés provided the financially unstable with mental nourishment and the well-off with an opportunity to meet the impoverished genius on neutral ground.

Despite these overt manifestations of a homogeneous aestheticist movement, which lacked its social equivalent in late-nineteenth-century London, *fin-de-siècle* Vienna's creative class was not without its fragmentations and censors. The journalist and theatre critic Karl Kraus used the closure and subsequent demolition of *Café Griensteidl* in 1896 as an opportunity for passing satirical judgement on its choice selection of Austria's aesthetes. In

‘Die demolirte Literatur’ (‘The Demolished Literature’) he aimed to draw a parallel between the destruction of the favoured meeting-place and the devastation wrought on literature and art at the hands of the artistic establishment. Pointing at his society’s avaricious taste for quickly altering literary fashions, Kraus criticises Bahr for his relativist embrace of the newest trends, and affluent sons of the liberal bourgeoisie, such as Hofmannsthal and his close friend Leopold von Andrian, for their affected relationship with the arts, their appetite for moods and craving for the dandiacal life-style. Rejecting the majority of current literature and poetry as mere posing for the sake of an absolute aesthetisation of art at the expense of its close link with life, Kraus calls for a return to authenticity and the deliverance of literature from the instrumentalising grasp of feuilleton culture.

Like late Victorian London, Vienna was dominated by the ascendancy of the journalistic trade.³⁸ Prominent thinkers such as Kraus and Peter Altenberg mourned literature’s infestation by commercialism and the degradation of language at the hands of rising commercialism and advertising. They detected a notable descent into journalistic phrases and clichés, in which language became mere ornament, but a tool of yet another profitable industry, and condemned the infiltration of feuilleton pages by product promotions. One striking example of the possible political and social consequences of the uncomfortable marriage of the arts and the new phenomenon of market branding was the piqued complaint voiced by a shoe and grocery merchant in 1901, when his advertising slogan, which had been set in a catchy poem, appeared alongside Arthur Schnitzler’s short story ‘Leutnant Gustl’, now celebrated as the first great instance of stream of consciousness narrative in

literature. The outrage was directed against the literary work's critical evaluation of the military, which, as the entrepreneur rightly realised, would inevitably alienate his conservative clientele.

The multi-national Austrian Empire was the child of militarism and its preservation depended on the maintenance of this reactionary and largely aristocratic group's status quo, as well as the propagation of the notion of a uniform imperial culture. A consequence of this acutely felt artificiality of the moribund empire was its government's controversial attempt to save its artificial multi-lingual, multi-cultural state from disintegration by involving artists in the creation of a *Kunstvolk* as a surrogate for a unified national identity. The hostile reaction of conservative and anti-Semitic factions of society to Klimt's unconventional representations of what are held to be the three main achievements of Western European culture, Philosophy, Medicine, and Jurisprudence, in his 'faculty paintings' for Vienna University, marked a decisive clash between the regressive powers embodied in the fifty years of Kaiser Franz Josef's reign and the innovative forces of the artistic avant-garde, between the pagan relativist ethics of the Secession and orthodox conceptions of the arts and society as a whole.³⁹

The foundation of the *Wiener Werkstätte*, Vienna's answer to William Morris's *Arts and Crafts Movement*, had already announced the move away from institutionalised art and its use of historicism for the perpetuation of aristocratic hegemony. However, in Vienna even more poignantly so than in England, the union of aesthetics and practicality failed to escape the ramifications of art sponsored by business. It was once again Kraus who rejected the aesthetisation of life and the abasement of art into a prettification

of utilitarian objects, thus echoing the dismissal of Art Nouveau's use of playful ornamentation mounted by the successful architect Adolf Loos in his essay 'Ornament and Verbrechen' ('Ornament and Crime'). In the following quotation from an article which appeared in Kraus's magazine *Die Fackel* in 1909, he links the unrestrained spread of ornamentation in the visual arts with its analogous triumphant campaign in literature and journalism:

Die Verschweinerung des praktischen Lebens durch das Ornament, wie sie Adolf Loos nachgewiesen hat, entspricht jene [sic] Durchsetzung des Journalismus mit Geistelementen, die zu einer katastrophalen Verwirrung führt. Die Phrase ist das Ornament des Geistes.⁴⁰

This backlash against the increasingly bland aesthetisation of life would eventually result in the often stark expressionist art of Schiele and Kokoschka and the final rejection of art for art's sake by the Austrian Empire's cultural élite.

Even so, as my discussion of Hofmannsthal will exemplify, Vienna's reception of Aestheticism was characterised by profound unease from the start. As its leading representative, Hofmannsthal's reservations about the cult of beauty and art can be traced back to his earliest writings. Although the existence of a unified aesthetic movement embracing all the major art forms can be identified both in Vienna and in London, the impact of English letters was rather shortlived, as the enthusiastic welcome of the works and thinking of Pater and Wilde in 1892 by the likes of Hofmannsthal and Bahr soon gave way to a more distanced approach and a more critical perspective. This gradual

process of depreciation was cut short by the Queensberry trials three years later, as a result of which Hofmannsthal's image of Wilde became synonymous with that of the artist's life gone wrong.

Fin-de-siècle Austria's version aestheticism was as much a child of French and English influences as a result of the demystification of the human at the hands of the natural sciences, psychology, and philosophy conducted in Vienna, whose espousal of positivist world-views abolished any notion of a stable, to say nothing of a metaphysically grounded, subject. The Viennese philosopher Ernst Mach, for example, exposed the individual's incessant weaving of fictions as the inevitable basis of selfhood, without which man would succumb to madness due to a lack of order, without ever even crossing the threshold to individuality. This need, Mach holds, prevents us from recognising our world as what it really is – a purely coincidental conglomeration of sensory elements:

Das Ich ist so wenig absolut beständig als die Körper. Was wir am Tode so sehr fürchten, die Vernichtung der Beständigkeit, das tritt im Leben schon in reichlichem Maße ein. (...) Das dunkle Bild des Beständigen, welches sich nicht merklich ändert, wenn ein oder der andre Bestandteil ausfällt, scheint etwas für sich zu sein. Weil man jeden Bestandteil einzeln wegnehmen kann, ohne daß dies Bild aufhört, die Gesamtheit zu repräsentieren und wieder erkannt zu werden, meint man, man könnte alle wegnehmen und es bliebe noch etwas übrig. So entsteht in natürlicher Weise der anfangs imponierende, später aber als ungeheuerlich erkannte

philosophische Gedanke eines (von seiner
'Erscheinung' verschiedenen unerkennbaren)
Dinges an sich.⁴¹

The mere *sense* of a centre as a necessary crutch for subject-formation prevents the individual from acknowledging the absence of a metaphysical core within itself. Instead, it transfers the intimation of intrinsic selfhood onto the outside world, thus bestowing significance where there is only meaninglessness.

Mach's secularisation of the individual was mirrored in the works of Nietzsche, Freud, and Weininger, who, despite their essentially divergent views, contributed to the crisis of consciousness commonly identified in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. This unsettling effect was underlined by the rapid social expansion following the German *Gründerzeit* and the contradictory developments within the Austro-Hungarian Empire's political sphere and the imaginative space occupied by its avant-garde artists. As Peter Vergo and Carl E. Schorske, amongst others, show, multi-national, multi-racial, multi-lingual Austria was a land in which the centre could not hold, or, rather, one where a centre had never really existed in the first place. While the economic and intellectual success of the Jewish bourgeoisie added fuel to the populist politics of the capital's foremost fascists, such as Karl Lueger and Georg von Schönerer, and resulted in the anti-Semitic persecution of certain members of the creative élite, amongst them Klimt, Mahler, and Schönberg, other members of the artistic aristocracy still strove to convey a unified national identity. Leopold von Andrian's novella Der Garten der Erkenntnis, for instance, explores the difficulty of constructing a homogeneous version of selfhood in the

face of social, sexual, and epistemological disintegration, which led Vienna's intellectual high society to welcome the onset of World War I and its enforced substitution of the deed for the word as an opportunity for redefining and consolidating national identity.⁴²

While, as we have seen, some of the key English writers on art did have an impact on Austria, it remains broadly true that British culture hardly ever put as high a value on art as did Austria. Yet, even so, Britain was not untouched by the worship of art. The late Victorian crisis of consciousness, where it can be detected, appears to be anchored in the recognition of the inaptitude of economic stability as the long-term guarantor of national unity.⁴³ At the same time, the resurgence of Brummel's aesthete-cum-socialite in the guise of the New Dandy can be traced back to feelings of social stagnation and the aesthetic circles' exasperation with the propagation and apparent spread of democratic forces and its concurrent vulgarisation of beauty and taste.⁴⁴ As such, the aesthete as *fin-de-siècle* dandy is, just like his Georgian predecessor, the product of ennui. It is in this context important to recall the legacy of the dandy figure in England – not least because he was an example of stylishness finding favour in the highest ranks of society.

In Regency England, the dandy style stood for an amoral, superficial attitude towards life and the rejection of middle-class responsibilities in favour of aristocratic detachment, pedantically observed decorum, and a general decay in morals. The dandy's world revolved around stylish clothing, exaggerated toilettes, extravagant dinner-parties, the London season, the newest dances, horse racing and the Jockey Club. His social behaviour was characterised by capricious favouritism, dry wit, sang-froid, and reckless

‘cutting’ of those who, for one or another frivolous reason, had fallen from grace.

The most prominent dandy of the period was the commoner George Bryan Brummell, known as Beau Brummell. Educated at Eton and Oxford and endowed with an inherited income, Brummell enjoyed the Prince of Wales’s confidence and friendship before the latter became Prince Regent in 1811 and was forced to assume a more responsible public demeanour. This gesture was meant to allay the scepticism and contempt of his middle-class subjects, who disagreed with the aristocracy’s lavishness, most prolifically symbolised by the Brighton Pavilion, although the later George IV maintained his loyalty to the fashionable world throughout his life, declaring: ‘I care nothing for the mob but I do for the dandies!’⁴⁵ Having spent his fortune and exhausted his credit with shopkeepers and tailors, Brummell, like many of his fellow dandies, found himself forced to leave England for the continent in 1816, where he set up residence in Calais and was later made British consul at Caen, France, by the Duke of York. He died, utterly impoverished, in a charitable asylum. For all his insistence on an unfathomable metaphysics of style, the dandy too failed to escape the consequences of economic barrenness.

Brummell and his circle put particular emphasis on taste, fashion, refinement and *ton* and insisted on the exclusiveness of their world, which they maintained by patronising certain clubs that embraced the Whig movement, a loose grouping of liberals that advocated parliamentary restructuring and was responsible for the Reform Bill of 1832. The ‘party’ frequented the clubs of St James’s Street close to the Prince Regent’s London residence of Carlton House, most importantly *White’s*, with its bow window on the front façade from

which the most famous dandies watched the goings-on of fashionable London. Contact with the opposite sex was catered for by Almack's, whose patronesses bestowed tickets upon ambitious mothers anxious to secure a good match for their daughters at the weekly Wednesday Ball. By breeding within its own circle, London's fashionable society endeavoured to keep out the upstarts of their time, made rich by advancing industrialisation. With neither high birth nor wealth acting as guarantors of initiation into the world of the so-called 'exclusives', the dandies and their female pendants regarded high style, impeccable manners and exuberant unconventionality as the attributes necessary for precluding vulgar egalitarianism from entering their sphere. They answered notions of middle-class respectability with the worship of some indefinable chic excellence, a certain *je ne sais quoi*, an aesthetic core of selfhood.

The dandy's obsession with dress and appearance coupled with physical hyper-sensitivity and the rejection of all bodily exertion provoked the wit of the Regency Period's satirists and caricaturists, such as Cruikshank, at the same time as it raised questions about the sexual preferences of men like Brummell, who appeared largely indifferent to the female sex. Contrary to popular belief, however, Brummell's costume was masculine and marked by simplicity, restraint and an austere lack of extravagance. Rather than indulge in jewels, perfumes, frills, and colourful fabrics, Brummell limited himself to silk, cotton and leather, and the colours navy, black and white, and put the greatest emphasis on cleanliness, thus in fact revolutionising male dress.

Social historians usually attribute the emergence of the dandy phenomenon to the prolonged period of overseas wars under George III and

the boredom and frustration felt by the men left behind in Britain. With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 came the dandy's infiltration of Restoration France, as French aristocrats began to return from English exile and brought with them their dandified manners and a taste for anglomania. This cultural cross-fertilisation was reinforced by the resumption of tourism. Thus, while England witnessed an anti-dandiacal reaction which followed the death of George IV 1830 and was initiated by Carlyle, Thackeray, and *Fraser's Magazine*, France continued to embrace the dandy style. Baudelaire's vision of the dandy in 'Le peintre de la vie moderne', to which I have already referred at the beginning of this introduction, is characterised by outstanding sensibility and inherently good taste, which makes him the only suitable analyst of modern culture and society. His aim in life is to experience every kind of sensation, including that afforded by sinful beauty and crime. The dandy, then, returns in the late nineteenth century as a test-case for the place of art in society.

In her critique of *fin-de-siècle* society and its distortion of the dandy figure, Ellen Moers rejects both Yeats's romantic image of the aesthete as destitute poet excluded from a society governed by the cynical forces of mercantile ideals, as well as Holbrook Jackson's view of the age as one characterised by artistic and spiritual experimentation and optimism.⁴⁶ In line with later interpreters of the economic background to late Victorian society, Moers identifies increased commercialism, the emergence of an ever more powerful press, and the artist's need to survive in the market-place as the leading attributes of late-nineteenth-century London's creative scene and its underlying power relations.⁴⁷ While my thesis does not allow for even the most

generalised recapitulation of the plethora of texts devoted to the exploration of the relationship between British late-nineteenth-century art and the forces of capitalism, I would like to indicate a few possible contrasts and similarities between the sense of political and artistic identity pervading London's and Vienna's *fin-de-siècle* society respectively.

The most important point to note about late Victorian England as seen against the background of the Austrian multi-national empire is the markedly less acute awareness of the need to formulate a sense of national identity. While the English aristocracy may have seen itself coerced into a marriage of convenience with the stream of well-to-do Americans revisiting and reclaiming their mother country, their financial crisis lacked the element of intensified political impotence experienced by the Habsburg monarchy. Where Britain saw a partial abolition of social boundaries through a number of parliamentary moves such as the Catholic Emancipation Act, Austria's largely tolerant Jewish and Catholic intelligentsia saw a general polarisation of religious outlooks and suffered a growing backlash from Vienna's more and more popular and powerful anti-Semitic forces. The inability of the liberal bourgeois classes to contain and channel the reactionary and increasingly unruly energies of the urban proletariat accounts for their mostly unequivocal embrace of the prospect of international military confrontation, which they hoped would lead to an abreaction of overblown imperialist drives and a restructuring of society. Born out of Napoleonic oppression, German national identity came to rely once again on war as its most binding common denominator. The educated *Bürgertum's* feeling of inadequacy in the face of social upheaval's is shared by Hofmannsthal, Musil, and Thomas Mann.

Although British *fin-de-siècle* society too felt the touch of fragmenting and questioning energies, the possible consequences were, based on Britain's insular position and imperial self-confidence, perceived to be considerably less alarming than on the European continent.⁴⁸ In like manner, concerns regarding the potential weakening of the Anglican church and its status at the heart of the establishment due to an infiltration of Catholic forces, as exemplified by the Oxford Movement and the influence of Cardinal Newman, may have raised the spectre of French dominance and 'Papal Aggression', but they did not altogether manage to impair the 'national collective mentality operating "instinctively, without argument, almost without consciousness"', as Herbert F. Tucker observes quoting Matthew Arnold.⁴⁹ The question of national identity permeates the German works discussed in this thesis. So, of course, it does in the case of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Clearly Wilde's repressed and Joyce's problematic sense of Irishness forms a vital component of their aesthetics and creativity. Their sense of exile is part of their view of the fragmented nature of individuality as such. For the purpose of the present project it must suffice merely to register the poignant sense of national crisis shaping *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, which both derives from and manifests itself in the form of the contradictory forces of democratic commercialism and mass culture on the one hand and élitism and isolationist aesthetics on the other, a dichotomy that, to a lesser even though pronounced degree, also marks late Victorian London.

Rather than rely primarily on the impact of historical forces, however, the overall emphasis of my thesis will be on human consciousness as a conglomerate of external influences and internal energies, of social, political,

sexual, cultural, and aesthetic forces, and on the individual's struggle and varying ability to withstand and counter these powers through the articulation and preservation of a viable sense of original selfhood. This conflict is particularly well pronounced in the figure of the aesthete, whose heightened sensibility towards phenomena, and by this token exterior manipulation, and awareness of the restricted and ultimately deceitful nature of language render him/her especially mindful and critical of the idea and possible existence of a stable, unified self. The aesthete's instrumentalisation of art and the aesthetic life as a genuine alternative to the destabilising impact of life's inconsistency opens up the vision of a mode of being in which the individual, rather than surrender, can take control and make use of the multitude of sense data which confronts him/her. It is in art that the aesthete seeks to find an essence of individuality which can be both fluid and permanent, authentic and constructed.

NOTES

- ¹ For Baudelaire's definition of the *fin-de-siècle* dandy see Ellen Moers, The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960), Chapter XII.
- ² Wilde's use of the dyed flower as an emblem of his circle duly inspired a novel, Robert Hichen's The Green Carnation, which appeared in 1894 and portrayed the relationship between Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. The perversion of nature allegedly instantiated by the corruption of the carnation was seen to reflect the abnormality of the couple's association. See *ibid.*, p. 312.
- ³ Rather than provide an outline of the characteristics of and differences between Aestheticism and Decadence, I shall be referring to the issues entailed in the movements throughout my thesis by making use of the numerous studies devoted to the phenomena and linking them with my primary texts. For an invaluable introduction to Aestheticism and Decadence and a highly informative literature review see Linda Dowling, Aestheticism and Decadence: A Selective Annotated Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1978).
- ⁴ Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 9.
- ⁵ My understanding of Kristevian theory is based on her writing and the following studies: Anne-Marie Smith, Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable (London; Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1998), and John Lechte, Julia Kristeva (London: Routledge, 1990).

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- ⁶ Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic, p. 20.
- ⁷ 'Törless's love of particular moods was the first sign of a spiritual development that would later express itself as a talent for astonishment. Later, in fact, he was practically controlled by a peculiar ability. He was often forced to feel events, people, things, even himself, in such a way that he had a sense both of some mystery that could not be solved, and of some inexplicable affinity that could never quite be justified. They seemed palpably within reach of his understanding, and yet could never entirely be broken down into words and thoughts. Between events and himself, indeed, between his own emotions and some innermost self which craved that they be understood, there always remained a dividing line which retreated like a horizon from his yearning the closer he came to it. Indeed, the more precisely he circumscribed his sensations with his thoughts, the more familiar they became to him, the stranger and more incomprehensible he felt them to be, so that it no longer even seemed as though they were retreating from him and more as though he himself was moving away from them, while remaining unable to shake off the notion that he was coming closer to them.' Robert Musil, The Confusions of Young Törless, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p. 25.
- ⁸ Christopher Ricks, 'Walter Pater, Matthew Arnold and Misquotation', in The Force of Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 392.
- ⁹ Guy Willoughby, 'Oscar Wilde and Poststructuralism', *PL*, 14 (1989), p. 320.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 321.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Terry Eagleton, 'The Flight to the Real', in Cultural Politics at the Fin de siècle, ed. by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.15.
- ¹⁴ Compare Robert Musil, Young Törless, trans. by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 34, and Shaun Whiteside's translation (see Endnote 4 above), p. 25.
- ¹⁵ See Terry Eagleton's essay on Nietzsche's aesthetics in The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 253: 'The overman is artist and artefact, creature and creator in one, which is precisely not to suggest that he lets rip his spontaneous impulses. On the contrary, Nietzsche denounces the 'blind indulgence of an affect' as the cause of the greatest evils, and views greatness of character as a manly control of the instincts. The highest aesthetic condition is self-hegemony: after long, degrading labour of submission to moral law, the *Übermensch* will finally attain sovereignty over his sublimed appetites, realizing and reining them with all the nonchalance of the superbly confident artist cuffing his material into shape.'

Before the individual can transform himself into overman, he must first be transformed by post-Renaissance society: from savage man, the man of blind, barbaric impulses, into the humanist subject. And this mutation can only happen by way of reason. By dictating morality to the as yet undeveloped soul, society imposes form upon the human will, which would otherwise be lost in eternal chaos. In doing so, it initiates and encourages the suppression of the instincts within the individual, 'a fortunate Fall', since it enables the formation of a self-conscious psyche in the first place. Before becoming aware of the repressive rules to which we are exposed by society, we must first be shaped into a consciousness which can grasp the extent of its own imprisonment. Nietzsche's paradoxical view that the individual relies on humanist society for the ultimate achievement of personal hegemony reflects

Hegel's notion of the state as the necessary habitat of man. This ultimate triumph requires a dangerously high degree of self-consciousness, which would enable the individual to turn the spotlight on himself and recognise the shortcomings of his own existence to finally overcome it and become the overman. Hence Nietzsche's, at times, uncompromising élitism.

- ¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Geburt der Tragödie (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1987), p. 65.

'Knowledge kills action, to action belongs the veil of illusion – that is the lesson of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom of Hans the Dreamer, who fails to act because he reflects too much, as a result as it were of an excess of possibilities; not reflection, no! – but true knowledge, insight into the horrific truth, outweighs any motive leading to action, in Hamlet as well as in the Dionysian man.' Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, trans. by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 46.

- ¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Geburt der Tragödie, p. 181.

'arranging and scattering stones here and there, building and then trampling sand-hills'. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, p. 129.

- ¹⁸ Gilbert demonstrates that England's fascination for Hofmannsthal was not limited to 'the influence of English art and of English ideas; he included, in a broader sense, the English view of life in general. There is no doubt that the English mode of life made a strong impression on him in his youth, and that he tried to adopt it as his own. He behaved like an Englishman in francophile Vienna. This is confirmed in several details in his letters and his essays: he laid stress on the fact that he was acquainted with members of the British Embassy in Vienna; he played tennis rather ostentatiously, when the game had not yet become fashionable on the Continent. He was so well acquainted with English customs as to promise his friend Bahr English recipes. He alluded to the habit of sending Christmas-cards, he imitated English headings of letters and interspersed his own letters with English words.' Mary E. Gilbert, 'Hofmannsthal and England', *GLL*, I (1937), p. 190/200. Hofmannsthal's literary indebtedness to England will be discussed in closer detail in Chapter III.

- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

- ²⁰ Joris-Karl Huysmans, Against Nature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 114.

- ²¹ Mary E. Gilbert, 'Hofmannsthal and England', p. 191.

- ²² Quotation from Hofmannsthal's letter to Richard Beer-Hofmann (13 May 1895), partly reproduced in Hartmut Scheible, Literarischer Jugendstil in Wien (München; Zürich: Artemis, 1984), pp. 28/9.

'This, of course, is nothing else but the erection of Potemkin villages at the outskirts of one's vista, but ones which one really believes in. This requires the sense of a centre, a feeling of hegemony and dependency, a vivid awareness of the past and of the endless reciprocal penetration of all things, and a special kind of luck, namely one which makes the encountered phenomena resemble a fortune teller's cards that fall like positive symbols, rich, equivocal.' (My translation.)

- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

'we are too critical to be living in a dream world, like the Romantics.' (My translation.)

- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29. See also Joëlle Stoupy, "'Il faut glisser la vie...': Ein Zitat und seine Wandlungen im Werk Hugo von Hofmannsthals', *HB*, 39 (1989) pp. 9-41.

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- ²⁵ Mary E. Gilbert, 'Hofmannsthal and England', p. 190.
- ²⁶ See also the chapter on Hofmannsthal's 'Schöpferische Restauration' in Werner Volke, Hofmannsthal in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1967)
- ²⁷ I shall continue to refer to Hofmannsthal's fictitious letter as Ein Brief, which is not only the original title given by the author but one which best succeeds in expressing the incidental nature of the composition, as opposed to the over-determined connotations carried by the more popular 'Chandos-Brief' or 'Brief des Lord Chandos', which both reinforce the protagonist's imposed status as Hofmannsthal's alter ego and, by that token, the literary figurehead and martyr of the Viennese *fin de siècle*.
- ²⁸ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, The Lord Chandos Letter, trans. by Michael Hofmann (London: Syrens, 1995), p. 19.
- ²⁹ For analyses of German and Austrian culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century see, for example, Robin Lenman, John Osborne and Eda Sagarra, 'Imperial Germany: Towards the Commercialization of Culture', in German Cultural Studies: An Introduction, ed. by Rob Burns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 9-52, and Carl E. Schorske, Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961; repr. London: Vintage, 1981).
- ³⁰ See Plate I on p. 7 and Plate II on p. 8 of this thesis. 'Musik II' was painted in 1898, 'Schubert am Klavier' ('Schubert at the piano') in 1899. Both paintings were destroyed in a fire 1945. See also Carl E. Schorske, Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture (London: Vintage, 1981), pp. 220 ff.
- ³¹ Painted in 1916 and reproduced in Schorske, Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture, Plate IX.
- ³² Gottfried Fliedl, Gustav Klimt (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1994), pp. 46/7.
- ³³ Peter Vergo, Art in Vienna: 1898-1918 (London: Phaidon, 1975), p. 34
- ³⁴ Robert Browning, The Poems: Volume I, ed. by John Pettigrew (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 398.
- ³⁵ Carl E. Schorske, Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture, p. XXVI and Chapters IV & V.
- ³⁶ See also Werner Volke, Hofmannsthal in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten, pp. 46 ff.
- ³⁷ Robert Vilain, The Poetry of Hugo von Hofmannsthal and French Symbolism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 20/1.
- ³⁸ See, for example, Stephen Arata, '1897', in, A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture, ed. by Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 51-65.
- ³⁹ Carl E. Schorske, Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture, p. 236 ff.
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Dagmar Lorenz, Wiener Moderne (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), p. 165.
- 'The vulgarisation of practical life by the ornament, as demonstrated by Adolf Loos, corresponds to the infiltration of journalism by intellectual elements that lead to catastrophic confusion. The phrase is the ornament of the mind.' (My translation.)

⁴¹ Ernst Mach, 'Antimetaphysische Betrachtungen', excerpt quoted in Gotthart Wunberg, Die Wiener Moderne: Literatur, Kunst und Musik zwischen 1890 und 1910 (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), pp. 138/9.

'The "I" is as devoid of absolute stability as the body. What we fear so much in death, the annihilation of stability, already pervades life to a high degree. (...) The vague image of the stable, which does not change notably if one or the other component is removed, seems to have validity in itself. Because one can take each component away one by one without this image ceasing to represent the whole and being rendered unrecognisable, one is led to believe that one could take away all of them and that there would still be something left. Thus, naturally, is created the initially impressive but ultimately untenable philosophical concept of a *thing-in-itself* (that is different from its 'appearance').' (My translation.)

⁴² Leopold Andrian, Der Garten der Erkenntnis (Zürich: Manesse Verlag, 1990).

⁴³ See, for example, James Buzard, "'Then on the Shore of the Wide World": The Victorian Nation and its Others', and Stephen Arata, '1897', in A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture, ed. by Herbert F. Tucker, pp. 438-55 and pp. 51-65 respectively.

⁴⁴ Ellen Moers, The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm, Chapter XIII.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁶ See W. B. Yeats, 'The Tragic Generation: Wilde', in Modern Critical Views: Oscar Wilde (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), ed. by Harold Bloom, pp. 9-13, and Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties (1913; repr. Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1959). See also Linda Dowling, Aestheticism and Decadence: A Selective Annotated Bibliography.

⁴⁷ See, amongst others, Gene H. Bell-Villada, Art for Art's Sake & Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology & Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) and Regenia A. Gagnier, Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

⁴⁸ See James Buzard, "'Then on the Shore of the Wide World": The Victorian Nation and its Others', in A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture, ed. by Herbert F. Tucker, pp. 438-55.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 443/4.

II

**THE TRADITION OF THEORETICAL REFLECTION ON ART
IN ENGLAND AND GERMANY**

It is my contention that, in the course of the nineteenth century, German and English philosophers, intellectuals, critics, and writers came most urgently to think about, and to problematise, the issue of art. They were concerned to understand a number of things: the nature of the artwork itself; its relationship to its maker; its impact on the actual or notional public that would receive it. All these matters, as we shall see, will be at issue when we come to explore the seven literary texts that constitute the interpretative heartland of this thesis. Those texts did not emerge *ex nihilo*; rather, they partook of, and engaged with, a rich and complex tradition of aesthetic theory.

In the present chapter, I will be looking at a selection of texts, authors, as well as literary, philosophical, and political movements that anticipated and paved the way for the *fin de siècle*'s problematic stance towards the possibility of individual freedom through the pursuit of the aesthetic life. My brief survey of German and English aesthetic theory through the nineteenth century cannot, of course, be exhaustive, or produce a tidy definition of what constitutes the aesthetic. I am furthermore forced to leave out a considerable number of key texts and figures. But what I will endeavour to give is an analysis of what one might call the field of force within which the debate occurred. I shall do so by highlighting a range of issues that will inform the discussion of the literary texts that are my chief concern.

My selective sketch of nineteenth-century aesthetic theory starts with an analysis of one of the earliest texts of German Romanticism, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder's 'Das merkwürdige musikalische Leben des Tonkünstlers Joseph Berglinger', in which the manifold issues arising from the possible incompatibility of life and art are presented, as it were, *in nucleo*, and which prefigures the moral concerns regarding art formulated by England's foremost aesthete, Walter Pater, almost a century later. In the second part of the chapter, which is primarily concerned with Pater, I shall also discuss Hugo von Hofmannsthal's reception of Pater and Wilde as prefigurations of the aesthete as critic and the aesthete as dandy respectively.

FROM ENLIGHTENMENT TO *FIN-DE-SIÈCLE* AESTHETICS

'– aber *ihn* hatte der Himmel nun einmal so eingerichtet, daß er immer nach etwas *noch Höherem* trachtete; es genügte ihm nicht die bloße *Gesundheit* der Seele, und daß sie ihre ordentlichen Geschäfte auf Erden, als arbeiten und Gutes zu tun, verrichtete; – er wollte, daß sie auch in üppigem Übermute dahertanzen und zum Himmel, als zu ihrem Ursprunge, hinaufjauchzen sollte.'¹ (HKK 103/4)

Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder's protagonist, the inherently talented and sensitive musician and composer Joseph Berglinger, is one of the first expressions of the Romantic genius in Europe. The son of an impoverished and disillusioned local surgeon in southern Germany, Berglinger spends his childhood in daydreams and fantasies triggered by the enjoyment of music, by which he transcends the reality of his wretched circumstances. Desperate to escape the sobering influence of prosaic life, he refuses to adopt his father's philanthropic profession and seeks his fortune in an Episcopal town, where he learned to love church music during his childhood visits and subsequently trains as a musician. Yet, having become a successful composer at court, Berglinger comes to doubt the value of art, which, as he discovers, his aristocratic employers seem to regard no more highly than the profane entertainment offered by a game of cards. He begins to suspect and fear that by dedicating his life to art he could be worshipping a vain and selfish idol, while at the same time cruelly ignoring the suffering of the common man. Furthermore, having acquired the techniques necessary for his creativity, he realises that musical composition too is but an earthly construct and mourns the days of his youthful idealism, when music still appeared to him as a divine gift of ineffable nature. Berglinger's predicament is finally resolved when the pain and regret he experiences at his father's death inspire him to compose a

Passion, thus giving him the opportunity of translating his suffering into art. Having exhausted his potential in one masterpiece, Berglinger promptly succumbs to a nervous fever.

Berglinger's love for music amounts to a religion by which he strives to ennoble his life and escape the mundaneness of everyday existence. With his identity as one of the chosen revealed to him at an early age, he decides to live out this superiority by leaving his family and realising his vocation through Catholic patronage. Yet, having also felt from an early age the need to conceal and protect his gifted otherness,

sein Inneres schätzte er über alles und hielt es
vor andern heimlich und verborgen. So hält man
ein Schatzkästchen verborgen, zu welchem man
den Schlüssel niemanden in die Hände gibt,²
(HKK 105)

he later finds that the juvenile seeds of his bad conscience about art allow him no rest. Joseph begins to internalise the misgivings about art he encountered in his father, who despised all forms of artistic representation as fuelling the flames of uncontrolled desires and passions:

[Seine] Mißmutigkeit und das unbehagliche
Bewußtsein, daß er mit allen seinen tiefen
Gefühlen und seinem innigen Kunstsinn für die
Welt nichts nütze und weit weniger wirksam sei
als jeder Handwerksmann, nahm immer mehr zu.
Oft dachte er mit Wehmut an den reinen,
idealischen Enthusiasmus seiner Knabenzeit

zurück und daneben an seinen Vater, wie er sich
Mühe gegeben hatte, ihn zu einem Arzte zu
erziehen, daß er das Elend der Menschen
mindern, Unglückliche heilen und so der Welt
nützen sollte. Vielleicht wär's besser gewesen!
dachte er in manchen Stunden.³ (HKK 120)

Joseph's crisis stems from his disturbed relationship with his audience. With his listeners evidently unable to appreciate the spiritual impact of his music, which he regards as a means of pleasing God and striving towards heaven, the nurturing of his ethereal enthusiasm ('ätherischer Enthusiasmus') appears no longer vindicated. Joseph finds himself caught in the solipsistic vacuum of his artishood, which fails to inspire his aristocratic patrons with sympathy for the divine aspect of artistic creation. By regarding the artist as a mere tool rather than the creator of the divine sanctity of art, he is forced to diminish the validity of his artistic activity. Music to him becomes but a man-made replication of the possibilities of natural harmony (the physics of certain frequencies), and not a metaphysical, sympathetic correspondence with the human soul.

With his work limited to the public spheres occupied by the aristocratic ruling class, Berglinger's art fails to gain access to the appreciation of the common man and, by the same token, to establish a deeper connection between composer and listener. Berglinger's dilemma is thus both ethical and aesthetic – on the one hand, he renounces the utilisation of art as a mere addition to the aristocracy's plethora of entertainments, which declares the artist's spiritual input irrelevant, thus defining, in effect, the artwork as an object that has no value beyond that of being an amusement. At the same time, he longs for a vindication of his artistic endeavour through a form of social

functionality that would help to alleviate momentarily the suffering of the poor and thus be a valid creative and aesthetic counterpart to his father's strictly scientific rational contribution to society.

As a consequence of this predicament, Joseph comes to doubt both the social purpose and the autonomy of the artist and rejects the practical aspect of music, the processes of both composition and performance, as though the human execution of music were a sin and blasphemy in itself. Yet whilst belittling the role of the composer, he simultaneously struggles to assert the freedom of the artist, who, in his opinion, should not be forced to observe the demands of the patrons and the tastes of the public. He reflects in the following terms about the act of composition:

Ein dreifaches Unglück für die Musik, daß bei dieser Kunst gerade so eine Menge Hände nötig sind, damit das Werk nur existiert! Ich sammle und erhebe meine ganze Seele, um ein großes Werk zustande zu bringen; – und hundert empfindungslose und leere Köpfe reden mit ein und verlangen dieses und jenes.⁴ (HKK 117/8)

Berglinger finds himself torn between proud élitism on the one hand and a guilt-ridden affinity for utilitarianism, which were to become central issues for the artist of the Industrial Age, on the other. This ambivalent attitude towards art as either a device of the divine or a commodity within the cultural marketplace can be traced back to the author's own background.

Published in 1796, Wackenroder's collection of texts entitled Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders ('Confessions from

the Heart of an Art-loving Friar') is widely regarded as the earliest major work of German Romanticism, with the central story, Berglinger's tale, providing the first manifesto of *Empfindsamkeit* and devout inwardness. As such, it describes one of the main predicaments of the German Romantic artist, who seemed to be forever wavering between a sense of an exalted, almost priestly calling and the desire for general recognition within the world. Wackenroder's own modest, in fact mostly posthumous, publishing career was made possible by one example of the worldly artist, Ludwig Tieck. Their creative friendship delineates the first in a line of fruitful collaborations in German Romanticism, with the ambitious and outgoing Tieck, who descended from a line of craftsmen, complementing Wackenroder's more reclusive and shy personality. One year after his friend's death in 1798 at the age of only twenty-four, Tieck published Phantasien über die Kunst ('Fantasies on Art'), a collection of essays, stories and poems dedicated to the themes of art, to which both writers had made such substantial contributions that the question of single authentic authorship will probably remain forever unanswered.

In fact, Wackenroder had left behind a carefully formulated aesthetic and philosophical world-view, which was to have a major impact on Schopenhauer's approach to music and which anticipated the crisis of language experienced by late-nineteenth-century writers such as Hofmannsthal. At the heart of Wackenroder's convictions lies the equation of all sentiment with religion, which gives rise to a secularised pietism and the celebration of art as the richest source of emotion, in particular music and the symphony. Wackenroder praised instrumental music as the highest art form because of its abstention from all referentiality and its ability to reach the 'dark'

and 'mysterious' corners of every individual's soul and act as a medium of spiritual communion between minds, thus highlighting the inadequacy of language as a communicator of truth, which he regards as inferior to the expressive power of nature and the arts.

Moreover, Wackenroder insists on a holistic and harmonious world-view in which all is pervaded by God's spirit and in which artistic creation acts as the most divine of human endeavours by bringing forth the god-like within man. As a consequence, his aesthetic criticism precludes any comparison between artists and their work, treating each as an intensely personal manifestation of the godly spirit. Thus Dürer is praised for portraying the humanity within the soul of ordinary man, while Raphael's ideal vision is hailed for emphasising man's divine and ethereal side. As a consequence, Wackenroder effectively rejects the art critic in favour of the art lover, who regards the artist as saint and the life in art as a noble because saintly alternative to earthly existence, an ideal model which anticipates Pater's and Wilde's embrace of the passionate critic as imaginative celebrator of the artwork.

Born the son of a privy councillor of war and later first mayor of justice in Berlin, Wackenroder underwent a strict Prussian education which was meant to prepare him for a career in law. Against this Prussian background of enlightened Protestantism, he acquired during his university years in Bavaria a taste for the rituals of Catholicism and the expressive power of Renaissance and Baroque architecture, the visual arts and music as media of religious faith and human spirituality. He acknowledged Catholicism and the Holy Roman Empire as responsible for the flourishing of medieval and Renaissance art and became the first German Romantic writer to celebrate pre-Reformation

Germany. His 'art-loving monk' thus stands for a mystical life devoted to the aesthetics of religion and art, secluded from the demands and compromising conditions of external reality. In order to give voice to his pious medievalism, which inspired the German Nazarene group of artists, who in turn had a strong influence on the Pre-Raphaelites, he often reverts to a deliberately naïve style of writing that tends to strike the reader as an exercise in willed rather than attained simplicity.

The most poignant moments in 'Das merkwürdige musikalische Leben des Tonkünstlers Joseph Berglinger' are those dedicated to the description of art's power over life:

Ehe die Musik anbrach, war es ihm, wenn er so in dem gedrängten, leise murmelnden Gewimmel der Volksmenge stand, als wenn er das gewöhnliche und gemeine Leben der Menschen als einen großen Jahrmarkt unmelodisch durcheinander und um sich herum summen hörte; sein Kopf ward von leeren, irdischen Kleinigkeiten betäubt. Erwartungsvoll harrete er auf den ersten Ton der Instrumente; – und indem er nun aus der dumpfen Stille, mächtig und langgezogen, gleich dem Wehen eines Windes vom Himmel hervorbrach und die ganze Gewalt der Töne über seinem Haupte daherzog – da war es ihm, als wenn auf einmal seiner Seele große Flügel ausgespannt, als wenn er von einer dünnen Heide aufgehoben würde, der trübe Wolkenvorhang vor den sterblichen Augen verschwände und er zum lichten Himmel emporschwebte. Dann hielt er sich mit seinem

Körper still und unbeweglich und heftete die Augen unverrückt auf den Boden. Die Gegenwart versank vor ihm; sein Inneres war von allen irdischen Kleinigkeiten, welche der wahre Staub auf dem Glanze der Seele sind, gereinigt; die Musik durchdrang seine Nerven mit leisen Schauern und ließ, so wie sie wechselte, mannigfache Bilder vor ihm aufsteigen. So kam es ihm bei manchen frohen und herzerhebenden Gesängen zum lobe Gottes ganz deutlich vor, als wenn er den König David im langen königlichen Mantel, die Krone auf dem Haupt, vor der Bundeslade lobsingend hertanzen sähe; er sah sein ganzes Entzücken und alle seine Bewegungen, und das Herz hüpfte ihm in der Brust. Tausend schlafende Empfindungen in seinem Busen wurden losgerissen und bewegten sich wunderbar durcheinander. Ja bei manchen Stellen der Musik endlich schien ein besonderer Lichtstrahl in seine Seele zu fallen; es war ihm, als wenn er dabei auf einmal weit klüger würde und mit helleren Augen und einer gewissen erhabenen und ruhigen Wehmut auf die ganze wimmelnde Welt herabsähe.⁵ (HKK 105/6)

Clearly, at one level, this passage depicts an epiphany, a moment of revelation where music has transfiguring force that lifts the soul of the hearer away from the clutches of the mundane world. But at another level the epiphany is located in a particular rhetorical mode that dominates the passage. On three occasions the phrase 'es war ihm, als wenn' occurs, and generates a series of metaphorised statements held in the subjunctive mode. The epiphany represents perceptual otherness, but it is an otherness that may be

psychological rather than metaphysical. In this irresolution we are at the heart of the conflict that informs and quickens the Romantic view of art, one that grows ever stronger and more urgent in the course of the nineteenth century.

The present epiphany may be taken to describe a moment of intense fusion, a profoundly religious feeling of belonging, at the same time that it could be interpreted as an illustration of deeply felt solipsism and distance resulting from a liberation of repressed emotion thanks to the emancipating influence of the artwork. The insight afforded to the subject, regardless of the interpretation chosen, is one of detached wisdom which manifests itself in wistfulness. The artist's melancholy reaction to the revelation through the epiphany of the strife and anguish underlying ordinary existence will become a common feature of late-nineteenth-century texts centering upon the problem of the ethical implications dominating the aesthetic life. As will be seen, the trend will be one away from arrogant aloofness towards compassion and understanding. As such, the epiphanic moment will, in its most optimistic versions, come to stand for a secularised spirituality that aims to overcome the indifference and isolating constraints occasioned by solipsism.

The passage thus demonstrates the aesthete's ambivalent position towards life. His anxious resistance to the crowded, unmelodious, disorderly business of the common people reveals his desperate desire to ward off all encumbering urbane influences and his refusal to succumb to the profanities of human existence. At the same time, however, the experience of the epiphany itself, with its foundation in sensory impression, relies on this very engagement in humanity. As haughty contempt turns into resigned melancholy, Berglinger's position as a precursor of *fin-de-siècle* and early-twentieth-century literary

aesthetes such as Lord Chandos, Tonio Kröger, Stephen Dedalus, and Mrs Ramsay becomes apparent. Their attitude towards the common crowds was also to be dominated by an ever fluctuating mixture of disdain and fascination, distance and affinity, loathing and compassion, which resulted in an agonising bad conscience about art as endured and consequently overcome by Berglinger, and the various texts in which they appear are acutely occupied with questions of social responsibility and the moral implication of clear-sighted and highly privileged aloofness – whether that aloofness is formulated in aesthetic and intellectual or also in economic and political terms.

Characteristically, Berglinger's epiphany also comprises the sphere of politics and national identity, which was to constitute a, if not the, major focus of German Romanticism. Berglinger's vision of King David, the Biblical and historical figure of the artist-cum-statesman famed for his musical skills and his unification of the Jewish people, hints at the fragmented state of the German people at the end of the eighteenth century and the manifold German aristocratic dynasties' inability and unwillingness to work towards national union. As is often the case with the moments of insight encountered by Chandos, Stephen, Tonio, and Aschenbach, Berglinger's epiphany is based on logocentric history and intellectualised consciousness. Whilst rejecting the alleged profanity of worldly life, Berglinger simultaneously conjures up the image of an earthly sovereign traditionally seen as the epitome of a courageous and popular ruler, a splendid and pious leader and warrior. Thus, although it is, due to its non-referentiality, music which is upheld as the highest of the arts in Wackenroder's tale, the connection between life and art ultimately

fails to be severed completely. The aspiration is for a redemptive community – David's Jerusalem.

In fact, the story itself is ridden with allusions to the founder of the Judean House and the hope for a New Jerusalem. The Episcopal town which Joseph visits as a child and where he comes into first contact with music appears to him, upon his return as an exile, like God's city on earth.⁶

Wie er aber jene kleine Strecke auf dem Felde gegangen war und sich umsah, brachen ihm die hellen Tränen hervor. 'Soll ich noch umkehren?' dachte er. Aber er lief weiter, als wenn ihm die Fersen brennten, und weinte immerfort, und es ließ, als wollte er seinen Tränen entlaufen. So ging's nun durch manches fremde Dorf und manchen fremden Gesichtern vorbei: – der Anblick der fremden Welt gab ihm wieder Mut, und er fühlte sich frei und stark – er kam immer näher – und endlich – gütiger Himmel! welch Entzücken! – endlich sah er die Türme der herrlichen Stadt vor sich liegen. —⁷ (HKK 115)

Likewise, Berglinger's father, in his inability to control and nurture his children, who grow up like

Unkraut in einem verwilderten Garten. Josephs Schwestern waren teils kränklich, teils von schwachem Geiste und führten ein kläglich einsames Leben in ihrer dunklen kleinen Stube⁸ (HKK 104),

reflects David's impotence when it came to ruling his household and preventing his progeny's rebellion against him, which was a direct result of his adulterous relations with Batsheba. In like manner, old Berglinger's daughters fail to look after their sick father and leaves him to die in misery, which Joseph can only watch helplessly:

Seine Geschwister waren im betrübtesten
Zustande; zwei davon hatten schlecht gelebt und
waren entlaufen; die älteste, der er immer Geld
schickte, hatte das meiste vertan und den Vater
darben lassen; diesen sah er endlich vor seinen
Augen elendiglich sterben...⁹ (HKK 121)

Despite the eldest sister's betrayals and the general neglect of the father at the hands of his siblings, Joseph attempts to relieve their hardship before returning to the town of his Catholic patrons. In fact, the siblings' sins and shortcomings are traced back not to flaws in their characters but to the lack of an education that would encompass the metaphysical or even merely the physical aspects of life. This want in the girls' upbringing in turn originates in the father's adverse circumstances, which contrast disproportionately with his philanthropic outlook on life. Burdened with five daughters, an introspective and empty-headed seeming son and lacking a female homemaker, the father's only attention to his children consists in his endeavour to pass on to the male descendent the profession which has, in fact, destroyed his own life:

Er war ein emsiger und gewissenhafter Arzt, der
zeit seines Lebens an nichts als an der Kenntnis

der seltsamen Dinge, die im menschlichen Körper verborgen liegen, und an der weitläufigen Wissenschaft aller jammervollen menschlichen Gebrechen seine Lust gehabt hatte. Dieses eifrige Studium nun war ihm, wie es öfters zu geschehen pflegt, ein heimliches, nervenbetäubendes Gift geworden, das alle seine Adern durchdrang und viele klingende Saiten des menschlichen Busens bei ihm zernagte. Dazu kam der Mißmut über das Elend seiner Dürftigkeit und endlich das Alter. Alles dieses zehrte an der ursprünglichen Güte seines Gemüts; denn bei nicht starken Seelen geht alles, womit der Mensch zu schaffen hat, in sein Blut über und verwandelt sein Inneres, ohne daß er es selber weiß.¹⁰ (HKK 104)

In a contrasting analogy to his son, old Berglinger too devotes his life to the study of one of life's mysterious aspects, with the composer devoted to the analysis of metaphysics as exposed in the earthly construct of the artwork and the physician to the intricate labyrinths of human biology. The study of the body becomes an obsession with the latter, a perverted pleasure that delights in the examination of human frailties and diseases. Despite the overtly philanthropic overtones of his professional activities, his fascination with forms of human physicality assumes the nature of a freak show. His disregard for man's spirituality and the importance of emotions and aesthetics results in sin and punishment, the former committed against his children, the latter exercised by them.

Old Berglinger's ultimate transgression is one against life. By confining himself rigorously, and indiscriminately, to the material side of the human being he reduces man to a finely spun web of biological processes that lacks all ethereal input, a shortcoming which in turn results in his own spiritual disintegration. According to the text, which depicts the destruction of his soul in terms of physical death, his study exerts a nerve-deadening, poisonous, paralysing influence on his body and mind; it appears to drain him of all life and modifies 'sein Inneres', his soul, in a corrupting manner.

The doctor's loss of self as a result of his blind commitment to rationality at the cost of a more all-inclusive outlook on life, highlights the problems raised by Enlightenment's attention to reason at the expense of emotion and intuition. While the text aims to emphasise the risks entailed in Joseph's artishood and his engrossment in the ethereal side of existence, it carefully balances the composer's idealistic inadequacy with his father's materialist world-view. Synthesis between father and son, reason and emotion, is finally achieved through the elder's death, which leads Joseph to a fuller comprehension of human suffering, and therefore life, by experiencing anguish at first hand. In his grief, the material and the spiritual are finally allowed to meet. Devastated by the realisation that his father's decline could have been prevented by a combination of practical attention and sympathy, both are united in the dying hour in silent understanding for each others' fates.

It is at this point that Joseph's true position in life is revealed. Like his father, he is identified as a weak soul, suffering from a 'Nervenschwäche' (HKK 122), a nervous fragility manifesting itself in the physical complaint of feverish neurasthenia. The composer's demise quickly succeeds that of the doctor, and

both deaths appear to have been triggered by the exhaustion of professional and creative potential and a correlated, spiritual and mental, myopia. Joseph, the narrator concludes, may have been better suited to the enjoyment of art than its execution.

The relevance of Joseph Berglinger's story to the present thesis is manifold. The hero's emergence as an extraordinary and inexplicable manifestation of the Romantic genius out of adverse circumstances, a materially, mentally and spiritually impoverished family with no artistic inclination, anticipates the nineteenth century's fascination with the specimens of exceptionally high sensibility making their way in an intrinsically hostile world. The tale also combines the central issue of the intricate connection between money and art, high class patronage and the individual artist, with an examination of the artist's relationship with his audience. While the artwork is shown to fail to achieve functional value within the life of common man, who finds himself excluded from aesthetic enjoyment by both his seemingly underdeveloped consciousness and his practical circumstances, the very uselessness of the artefact within the world of power and leisure does not so much accentuate its autonomy as undermine its intellectual and moral value. Berglinger's disgust at what he interprets as the ineffectiveness of his art illustrates the artwork's inability to procure its *raison d'être* solely from its aesthetic substance.

The text also exhibits a characteristically schizophrenic attitude towards solipsism by stressing both the elevating and oddly ennobling aspects of the artist's isolated position within society and his pain at failing to enter into a relationship with mankind on the level of human equality. Berglinger's artistic

capacity is exposed as a source of intimations of belonging to an orderly metaphysical universe as well as of excruciating consciousness of the exclusion from basic human society, another discrepancy that will haunt Aestheticism's mythical and real-life protagonists and be compounded by the disappearance of orthodox religion.

The story of Joseph Berglinger prefigures a number of issues that will dominate the aesthetic theories of the nineteenth century as well as the discourse of Aestheticism. The text's covert advocacy of an aesthetic education, the notion that, in order to guarantee meaningful existence, bodily nourishment must be accompanied by the shaping of the intellect, which will not only encourage subject-formation but also facilitate social integration, occupies the centre of both Herder's and Schiller's theories of society and beauty, and highlights German philosophy's tendency to use the aesthetic as a political tool which pleases while it subjugates.

However, Wackenroder juxtaposes his vision of art as a life-enhancing element with an alleged life-destroying facet, the belief that artistic creation involves, and even requires, physical weakness and gradual disintegration. This view of art as inextricably linked to the (medical) patient, to the consumptive and moribund, now forms part of the myth of Romanticism, largely due to the untimely deaths of some of its exponents, such as Keats and Wackenroder himself. Yet, leaving aside the established stereotype of the Romantic poet, the concept reveals itself as strangely appropriate. The

passivity of the invalid provides an advantageous breeding ground for introspection and the replacement of material activity by imaginative thought, a point embraced by some later promoters of the dandy figure, most notably Baudelaire and Proust. The intimation of death afforded by illness, it seems, diminishes the force of the individual's inner drives whilst rendering him/her more receptive to external influences. It is at these moments of inertia, of physical exhaustion, that man is best equipped to merge with the object and momentarily exit the prison of selfhood and engage in intellectual activity that is free from the demands of the body. This surrendering of subjectivity concerns the Romantic concept of 'negative capability'.

By contrast, Nietzsche's theory of the connection between creativity and physical decline appears more ambiguous and was to dominate Thomas Mann's treatment of the life of the artist throughout his oeuvre. Whilst clearly believing that it 'does not seem possible to be an artist and not to be sick', Nietzsche also held that good health did not so much suggest the, to a large degree, uncontrollable absence of disease but the ability to overcome the fact of ill-health and compensate for one's suffering through artistic creation.¹¹ The artist's ability to overthrow the dominance of nature by countering biological obstacles through the intellect was for Nietzsche the highest manifestation of the will to power. Wackenroder's representation of the artist's life as somehow concomitant with physical disease is given a more idealistic treatment as Berglinger's death coincides with the creation of his masterpiece and, by this token, his artistic apotheosis. Old Berglinger's physical decline and that of the composer's siblings, on the other hand, are traced back to the physician's mental preoccupation with science at the expense of both physical and spiritual

well-being, which could be achieved through the aesthetic and have prevented the family's moral transgression and disintegration.

Since the advent of Kantian philosophy, one of the roles of aesthetics, tied up with its instrumentalisation as a pillar of bourgeois ideology, has been to provide a refuge from the demands of reason and common sense, on which society rests. The interest in retaining an irreducible fragment of selfhood which seems to escape the grip of socialising reason has been most profoundly explored by Romantic literature. In reaction to the Enlightenment's at times uncritical embrace and advocacy of rationality, Romanticism sought to rediscover the divine within the human subject and uphold artistic creation as a god-like activity. At the same time, neither German nor British exponents of Romanticism ever seemed seriously to question the necessity of reason in the maintenance of civilised society. Instead, they looked at the individual imagination as either a temporary sanctuary from or, at most, a means of enriching contemporary society.

Thinkers such as Schiller endorsed the role of the aesthetic as a means of using the human mind in its entirety by combining *Formtrieb* with *Stofftrieb* through the free play of the cognitive faculties of understanding and imagination, defined as the *Spieltrieb*. By perceiving beauty, the human being is thus made aware of purposeful harmony in the object which mirrors the divine substance within him/her. This awareness in turn transforms man into an autonomous creator, a demi-god able to overcome the fetters of necessity and create a form of scrupulously differentiated (and self-differentiating) rather than socially imposed morality. The ultimate purpose of Schillerian beauty and

aesthetic perception, however, is the creation of the *Vernunftstaat*, a state based on reason and the exploitation of aesthetics.

German Romanticism adopted this interplay of aesthetic and moral thought as the basis for the future project of a Herderian *Kulturnation*, where British Romanticism's political motivations highlight a concern for the freedom of the individual irrespective of national identity.¹² While the latter's exponents represented the whole social spectrum of early-nineteenth-century Britain, from the aristocratic Byron and Shelley to the rural proletarian origins of John Clare, German Romanticism was centred in the educated middle-classes and their discontent with their lack of social and political influence. This led them to instrumentalise, and to a large extent debase, Herder's ideas of a protective yet liberal form of nationalism incorporated in the idea of *Volksgeist*, a national spirit which relies on an emphasis on language, the nation's distinctive and sacred possession, and the community of blood, *Blutsgemeinschaft*, as the guarantors of cultural integrity and progress and the foundation of a democratic society achieved through the education of the lower classes and the abolition of external authority.¹³

While the German Romantics embraced Herder's view of the German nation and its history, in particular his rehabilitation of the Middle Ages, and considered themselves fit to take on the educative mission envisioned by him, a mixture of political impracticality and personal opportunism soon caused them to deviate from Herder's egalitarian perspective. Novalis and Adam Müller elevated medieval society to the embodiment of an integral national character based on religious piety and reinforced by the system of estates and feudal society. Rather than reject all leadership, they celebrated the aristocratic ruler

as a benevolent patriarch and obedience as the single guarantor of social stability, thus discrediting Herder's positive notion of the family as a blueprint for social order. According to Müller the 'secret of government lies in obedience; the soul's craving for elevation in voluntary surrender; freedom in complete devotion to the fatherland'.¹⁴

A moderate version of the romantic trust in the integrative power of the monarchy can be detected in Hofmannsthal yearning for the old empire after the Great War; his belief in the restorative powers embodied in the idea of *Kulturnation* first emerges in 1912, the year he produced the introduction to Deutsche Erzähler, a collection of texts of German Romanticism. In his preface likens the oppressive might of Napoleonic power at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the imperialist threat perceived by Austria one hundred years later. Faced by the imminent collapse of Franz Josef's multinational empire, Hofmannsthal detects the danger of cultural disintegration and social anarchy, which accounts for a pronounced right-turn in his political ideas.

Similarly, German Romanticism's understanding of *Volksgeist* was marred by patriotic militarism, which was to a large extent triggered and abetted by the experience of French oppression and the Napoleonic wars. The *Völkerschlacht* ('Battle of the Nations') of Leipzig in October 1813, in which volunteers from the minor German states, together with Prussian, Austrian, and Russian armies, brought about a decisive victory over Napoleon, became a symbol of the unified forces of German nationalism and the individual's sacrifice for the sake of the nation. It was later commemorated in the Wartburg Festival of 1817 near Jena, where student fraternities also celebrated the fourth centenary of Luther's Reformation and demonstrated their aversion to the

European Restoration established at the Vienna Congress of 1815, which had failed to unite the German people under one nation-state. While the fraternities were censored and persecuted by the Metternich System for their liberalism and revolutionary ideas, their outlook was tinged with xenophobia (in particular towards the French), anti-Semitism, and aggression, which reached its climax with the murder of the Russian official and conservative publicist Kotzebue by the fraternity member Karl Ludwig Sand in 1819. The assassination led to the prohibition of the fraternities and the persecution of their members as demagogues by the *Karlsbader Beschlüsse*, while Sand's public execution rendered him a martyr for the national cause.

The German Romantics' notion of the German *Kulturstaat* was also characterised by pious mysticism and a reactionary insistence on tradition as the panacea for national as well as international discord. Whilst adopting Herder's view of folklore and folk tales as the most genuine expression of the (German) *Volksgeist*, thinkers such as Fichte, in his Reden an die deutsche Nation of 1807, glorified the German people as the bearers of a special world-historical and spiritual mission and elevated German as the purest original language of mankind, the *Ursprache*. In Deutsches Volkstum, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn admonished the German people to preserve their racial purity, while the poet Ernst Moritz Arndt, in his aptly entitled Catechism, praised love towards the fatherland as the highest form of religion and postulated an innate superiority of the German nation.

While Herder saw an egalitarian national community as the natural prerequisite for the individual's personal fulfilment and freedom, German Romantics tended to uphold the Lutheran tradition of obedience and

subordination to the aristocratic ruling classes and oppose the democratic forces of industrialisation. By glorifying war and upholding the legitimacy of god-given authority as instruments of national unity, they, in fact, reinforced the reactionary powers of the European Restoration. Thus, while Herder's notion of *Volksgeist* motivated the national liberation movements of the failed European revolutions of 1848/9 and had a major impact on Pan-Slavism, it was only through Bismarck's bellicose foreign policy that the German people finally achieved unity in 1871.

Thus, since the onset of Romanticism, the role of language within German culture has been inextricably linked with its political component, which promised national union and supremacy. In contrast, the political ideals of British Romanticism, inspired by the predicament of the American, French, and Irish people, managed to reach beyond the confines of its own national interests, while the proletarian sympathies of men such as Shelley outline a socialist element absent in the predominantly bourgeois interests of the German Romantics. The *Deutsche Romantik* movement is now widely recognised as having been to a larger extent motivated by the political agitation and aspirations of a disillusioned *Bildungsbürgertum* which craved social and political influence and whose descendents were to shape the cultural layout of the German and Austrian Empires at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Despite this profound contrast, by the end of the nineteenth century both German and English literature displays the phenomenon of the aesthete

locked in some strenuous debate with society. With the legality of the aristocracy's and organised religion's political status quo irretrievably damaged by the deconstruction of religious faith systems and Darwinian science, the visions of the sublime and the beautiful now revealed a gaping void where they previously had implied both a divine origin as well as a teleological destiny. This secularisation of the epiphany was, however, clearly initiated by the Romantic movement:

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high pilèd Books in charactery
Hold like rich garnerers the full ripen'd grain –
When I behold upon the night's starr'd face
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And feel that I may never live to trace
Their shadows with the magic hand of Chance:
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the fairy power
Of unreflecting Love: then on the Shore
Of the wide world I stand alone and think
Till Love and Fame to Nothingness do sink. –¹⁶

The peculiar fear of failure in art which dominates Keats's poem is a familiar feeling to the aesthete as artist. A superabundance of thought and emotion, of potentially intuitive knowledge, leaves the artist's mind 'teeming' with multitudinous possibilities of portraying and explaining the universe to less inspired and consequently less troubled 'brains'. But, more importantly, Keats's

poem is also about living out these drives through the creation of literature and through metaphysical love towards the earthly lover. Characteristically, the Romantic poet hopes to merge the holy with the profane. Worldly fame achieved through excellence in the literary sphere would join him with god-like predecessors such as Shakespeare, to whom Keats pays tribute through the sonnet form. Similarly, 'unreflecting love', that is feeling purged of all individual doubt, of all awareness of the fleetingness of human life and the capriciousness of human emotions, the kind of love embodied by the 'fair creature of an hour', would lift him to the level of the Platonic ideal, endowing him, once again, with an aspect of the god-like.

The poem is riddled with language suggestive of the mystery of life. Human activity, including poetry, appears inextricably linked with 'the night's starr'd face' and can be furthermore elevated to a metaphysical level, as the twofold allusion incapsulated in 'high romance' suggests. The 'huge cloudy symbols' could be taken to represent reflections of Plato's shadows, which make up human existence, which in turn is subject to supernatural 'Chance'. Keats's individual appears thus at the mercy of the 'magic hand' of fate in the realm of artistic creativity, and exposed to 'the fairy power' of human affections in the realm of love. In this divinely ruled universe, with death always looming in the background and threatening to put an end to all aspirations before any conclusions can be gathered and their result reaped as harvest, Keats's poet finds solace in the Kantian idea of the sublime by the delicious surrender to the power of god-given life.

The inference made in the last 2 ½ lines of the poem is thus also the premise on which its 11 ½ lines rest. Because life is both governed and given

meaning by the existence of the sublime, the intimation of a divine order, all pre-meditated human action towards truth is mere approximation, since the knowledge of ultimate truth is limited to the regions of the metaphysical. The individual is thus both subject to the metaphysical sphere as well as under its protection. The delightful surrender, the relinquishing of all human thought, is made possible and justifiable by the intuition of a non-human agent, some ultimate truth, implied by pantheistic nature. This ceasing of thought at the sight of the sublime renders it a version of the Keatsian swoon, the unambivalent submission to one's feelings of powerlessness.

Unlike Keats's speaker, the artists of the *fin de siècle* find themselves unable to succumb without resistance to intuitive feeling when confronted with the powerful vision of the sublime. While for the Keatsian poet the experience of a frantically busy mind finally surrendering to an inexplicable residue, a remnant of absolute truth, which ultimately governs man's lives, represents a natural concession to the early-nineteenth-century idea of the incommensurability of God's creation proclaimed by Kant, the late Victorian artists find the unfathomable nature of life irreconcilable with their humanist desire for individual freedom and insight. For theirs is a godless universe. If sensation, if sensory perception is all there is, if the enigma of the thing-in-itself no longer warrants the search for truth, because all and nothing is equally (un)true, and a single action can no longer be justified or dismissed by its moral value, the individual is left disorientated and bereft of certainty.

Once moral values are no longer based on and communicated by religious dogma, all action can appear meaningless and all knowledge impossible. The individual is inevitably forced to counteract the consequent

despair by the formulation of personal creeds as the sole alternative to suicide, be it actual physical self-destruction or the killing of one's soul through the hypocritical espousal of no longer justifiable conventions. As we shall see, even those late-nineteenth-personalities, such as Pater, who did not and could not entirely lose faith in an external agency, found themselves coerced by the positivist findings of the natural sciences and the socially uprooting results of industrialisation into creating their own beliefs by falling back upon aestheticism. When such *fin-de-siècle* men, somewhat inadvertently, managed to preserve their sense of the sublime by being unable to rid themselves of it, and others, such as Wilde, embraced the Hegelian ideal of a World Spirit driving men towards perfection and self-fulfilment, what they, in fact, seemed to be aspiring to was a world-view which relied solely on individual consciousness. The closest philosophy has come to formulate this attitude was in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which both radically erased and re-instated the thing-in-itself by relocating it in consciousness.

This twofold existence of being in but not really of the world accounts for the isolation experienced by the protagonists. The supposedly all-powerful subject is at once exposed to sensory impression and their very origin, since, as Pater holds, every impression, once perceived by the subject, becomes subjective, which accounts for 'the wall' around us as described by Pater in his 'Conclusion'. His 'science of subjectivity', as formulated in his 'Preface', on the other hand consists of an invitation of pseudo-scientific examination, by which he hopes to achieve a higher level of insight into aesthetic experience.

The nineteenth century witnessed a decisive revaluation of the relationship between morality and art. Where Kant upholds aesthetic experience as a possible, in fact the only, gateway to an intimation of the supersensible world, Schiller, impelled by his own social imprisonment and political persecution, was led to postulate the consumption and creation of art as an instrument of individual freedom and cultural integration. The importance of the aesthetic within the social and national project was carried further by the later followers of German Romantic Idealism, most notably Hegel and, albeit in terms of a very special advocacy, by Nietzsche.

In view of Nietzsche's undiminished popularity with our *fin de siècle's* and new century's critical discourse on aesthetics and the individual, a significance he seems forced to share only with Oscar Wilde and Walter Benjamin, any investigation into his ambiguous relationship with aestheticism appears destined to state merely the obvious.¹⁷ His proclamation of the death of God, his exaggerated, yet at the same time deeply sceptical, view of art as a the tool of self-becoming, his advocacy of personal fiction-making as the only truly un-repressive source of individual identity, his nihilistic morality, which upholds the intrinsic valueless of the universe while simultaneously pointing to the need for a set of individually chosen aesthetic parameters on which to found one's life – all of these characteristics carry the imprint of the *fin-de-siècle* artist's alienation from essentialist concepts of subjectivity.

Like Pater, Nietzsche reveals an obsession with the possibility of individual control over external influences, which he identifies and refers to simply as Nature. His acute awareness of man's relentless exposure to his existence as site, as a bundle of sensory receptors mixed with purely biological

drives aimed at self-preservation, encourage the philosopher to propagate a vision of man as a self-constructed presence without substance, a network of aesthetic values orbiting around a centre defined by lack rather than substance. In doing so, Nietzsche offers a seductive vindication for human existence by exalting the individual as inverted artist, fashioner of his own life. This self-creation entails a constant appropriation and remoulding of externally received values and their re-organisation according to the individual vision of self – and it is precisely here that one encounters a fundamental fissure in Nietzsche's thinking. If the individual is first to be transformed from barbarian into civilised being, only to reject all blindly accepted principles and thereby the myth of a closed self, what is it that triggers this transition from conformist bourgeois to triumphant *Übermensch*?

Whilst Pater cannot help but cling to the metaphysical entity of an inherent temperament and Hofmannsthal still upholds the necessity of speaking with a voice of one's own ('*der eigene Ton ist alles*'), thus perpetuating the notion of essentialist selfhood, Nietzsche declares the possibility of individual freedom to be based on a spontaneous abandonment of social conventions without suggesting a source, even a motivation, for this sudden dismissal of orthodox custom. If civilised man is but the product of imposed dogma, where should one look for the remnant of authentic consciousness which could bring about his rebellion?

Although this question must remain unanswered, the attraction of the Nietzschean overman cannot be denied. If all is but appearance and all appearance merely the expression of the will to power, the individual's conscious participation in this perpetual creative act through the use of form

must inevitably appear as the highest achievable level of emancipation, in which the mere *sense* of a centre can co-exist with the recognition of the absence of a metaphysical self. This control over one's instinctual drives mirrors the artist's command of the raw materials of life, which he fashions into significant form.

In his essay on 'Nietzsche, Modernity, Aestheticism', Alexander Nehamas elaborates Nietzsche's awareness of the impossibility of a non-normative, non-dogmatic standpoint.¹⁸ This 'conditional dogmatism', which reveals the necessarily political character of all style while at the same time absolving the artist and the individual from charges of indoctrination, is mirrored in Walter Pater's relativist attitude.

PATER

In his essay on Oscar Wilde's final mask, 'Sebastian Melmoth', written shortly after the publication of the German translation of 'De Profundis' and five years after the subject's death, Hugo von Hofmannsthal identifies a lack of decency, the tragic predilection towards sexual permissiveness, as the cause of Wilde's downfall. At the same time, Hofmannsthal fervently dismisses the public's apparent tendency to interpret Wilde's social ruin as the inevitable result of his existence as an 'aesthete':

Ein Ästhet! Damit ist gar nichts gesagt. Walter Pater war ein Ästhet, ein Mensch, der vom Genießen und Nachschaffen der Schönheit lebte, und er war dem Leben gegenüber voll Scheu und Zurückhaltung, voll Zucht. Ein Ästhet ist naturgemäß durch und durch voll Zucht. Oscar Wilde war voll tragischer Unzucht. Sein Ästhetizismus war etwas wie ein Krampf.¹⁹

What Hofmannsthal commends as Pater's respect for the powers of life, the acknowledgement of the tragic horror that, as he puts it, would finally pounce at Wilde out of the dark, Wilde himself condemned as cowardice, Pater's lack of courage to live out his homosexuality.²⁰

In view of the backlash against Aestheticism that followed the Queensberry trials both in England and on the European continent, it is not at all surprising to find Hofmannsthal pointing at Wilde's sexual practices as the source of his destruction. However, at the heart of Hofmannsthal's criticism lies

not so much the approval of the turn of the century's overt, even though all too often hypocritical, condemnation of homoeroticism. What the Austrian poet seems to take offence at primarily is Wilde's disregard for the rules that govern human society. He dismisses Wilde's constant challenging of the tenets of bourgeois community as an immoral rejection of life, which in Hofmannsthal's eyes, as I hope to be able to show in Chapter III, constituted a far greater, in fact the most forbidding, violation.

For the moment it must suffice to point at Hofmannsthal's interpretation of Wilde's fate and the source of his infamous and agonising end as rooted in the latter's inability to face the realities of life, the individual's irrevocable involvement in and dependence on society. Wilde's crime, Hofmannsthal's seems be saying, lay in his flight towards aestheticism, his instrumentalisation of the aesthetic life as a means of escapism, a way of opting out of the human collective:

Die Edelsteine, in denen [Wilde] vorgab mit Lust zu wühlen, waren wie gebrochene Augen, die erstarrt waren, weil sie den Anblick des Lebens nicht ertragen hatten. Er fühlte unaufhörlich die Drohung des Lebens auf sich. Das tragische Grauen umlagerte ihm fortwährend. Unablässig forderte er das Leben heraus. Er insultierte die Wirklichkeit. Und er fühlte, wie das Leben sich duckte, ihn aus dem Dunkel anzuspringen.²¹

According to Hofmannsthal, Wilde had knowingly provoked life and brought about his bad fortune by withdrawing into the aesthetic. Despite his apparent awareness of the binarisms underlying human existence, Wilde had attempted

to live a life of beauty without ugliness, pleasure without pain, which, Hofmannsthal holds, inevitably resulted in an incomplete, a soulless and dangerously ignorant existence.

Hofmannsthal's censure of Wilde is thus not so much grounded in the latter's pursuit of same-sex passion as in his indulgence in extreme emotions at the expense of a multi-faceted, self-conscious, and self-disciplined existence. But, this tendency, Hofmannsthal insists, is not an unfortunate mishap but an unavoidable outcome of Wilde's personality, which was governed by the fatal combination of the aesthete ('Ästhet') and the dandy ('Geck').²² Wilde's character and destiny are thus identical ('Oscar Wildes Wesen und Oscar Wildes Schicksal sind ganz und gar dasselbe.') – they are one, because the dandy's contemptuous neglect of the realities of life, of the implication of the social and human relations that reign over it, would eventually take the aesthete's devotion to beauty to an extreme and at the same time cancel out his capacity for selective moderation.²³

In short, Hofmannsthal identifies Wilde's deficiency as a wilful negligence of the ambivalence underlying life:

Man kann kein Ding ausschließen und keines für
so niedrig nehmen, daß es nicht eine sehr große
Macht sei. Es gibt, vom Standpunkt des Lebens
betrachtet, kein Ding, das 'dazu gehört'. Es ist
überall alles. Alles ist im Reigen.²⁴

This all-inclusiveness of life stands in acute opposition to the social and emotional exclusiveness sought by the dandy; it also mirrors the comprehensive aesthetisation of life through art aspired to by the aesthete.

These two contrasting visions correspond to Hofmannsthal's reception of the personalities of Pater and Wilde, of the ideal aesthete and the aesthete gone wrong.

Pater's adherence to moderation, his rejection of notorious fame and the possibility of fulfilled sexuality in favour of a peaceful, seemingly more comfortable social mode based on the Epicurean motto of 'getting through life unnoticed', clashes violently with the popular perception of Wilde as the late Victorian era's most notorious *enfant terrible*, who continuously challenged society and its parameters. As a consequence of this blind, irrational rebellion, Hofmannsthal concludes, Wilde misinterpreted the Queensberry crisis as his chance to oppose orthodox morality by action rather than words, and see justice done. However, rather than open the way to a Browningian moment of self-realisation, Hofmannsthal holds, his deliberate confrontation with Queensberry marked the climax of a reckless rebellion which could only result in self-destruction.

Wilde's determination to pursue the beautiful life at all costs represents in Hofmannsthal's eyes the worst extreme of aestheticism – or rather, it is no aestheticism at all. Like Pater, Hofmannsthal rejects the equation of aestheticism with sensationalism and hedonism, advocating instead what could be termed an ascetic aestheticism, a concept derived partly from the idealisation of the cloistered life favoured by Victorian medievalism. In his essay on 'The Pre-Raphaelites and the "Mood of the Cloister"' Herbert Sussman highlights Pater's idiosyncratic use and transformation of the revivalist notion of monastic discipline, which William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood celebrated as a path towards divinely inspired,

objective art.²⁵ As Sussman shows, Pater, on the other hand, in his essay on 'Aesthetic Poetry', identified the enclosed existence of the religious recluse as the perfect breeding ground for 'reverie, illusion, delirium', for a 'profounder' 'medievalism', which fostered subjective, self-conscious sensuality.²⁶ In the late nineteenth century, this alternative to the more conventional phenomenon of 'sacramental medievalism' was to provide an outlet for the sexual energies that threatened to overcome the individual 'through new literary and visual forms that evoke the flux of the inner life'.²⁷

However, on the whole, Sussman concludes, British artists failed to find appropriate, modern ways of expressing the changes governing *fin-de-siècle* society, as

in Victorian England, even in the later nineteenth century, the most powerful, the most avant-garde poets, painters, and critics are caught, trapped, in a discourse whose language is historicist and revivalist.²⁸

The somewhat arrested development of Britain's creative class stands in acute contrast to its French counterpart's work, such as Baudelaire's Fleurs du Mal, in which 'the erotic reveries are set in the poet's own voice and linked to the conditions of life in contemporary Paris'.²⁹ Yet, even though Pater himself may be accused of failing to provide adequate stylistic innovations and indulging instead in his own versions of historicism and revivalism, his concern lay nevertheless clearly with the elaboration of a new creative medium that could give signification to the spirit of the modern age.

In his essay on 'Style', which first appeared in 1889 in a collection of essays entitled Appreciations, Pater presents prose writing as the most appropriate means of combining reason with emotion by providing the modern imagination with an efficient linguistic structure. The text constitutes the aesthetician's most important theoretical work, paving the way for future scholars of aestheticism, most importantly Wilde and Hofmannsthal. Appealing to an intrinsic 'vision within', Pater calls for material reality and spiritual truth to be joined in the 'soul-fact' derived from the writer's particular 'sense of fact', which in turn depends on his unique 'soul'.³⁰ He thus posits an essentialist subject who is not only, to a greater degree at least, able to resist the overwhelming impact of sensory data and the forces of ideology and historical conditioning, but who contrives to translate his personal experience of the world's 'chaotic variety and complexity' into 'imaginative prose', which he transforms and makes his own.³¹

He does so through a unique method of selection which corresponds to his temperament. Significantly, Pater's emphasis here is on a scrupulous choice of language that will make the most of the single word:

Self-restraint, a skilful economy of means, *ascêsis*, that too has a beauty of its own; and for the reader supposed there will be an aesthetic satisfaction in that frugal closeness of style which makes the most of a word, in the exaction from every sentence of a precise relief, in the just spacing out of word to thought, in the logically filled space connected always with the delightful sense of difficulty overcome.³²

This difficulty, of course, stems from the constant influx of new impressions as well as the existing repository of inherited traditions inhabiting the writer's mind. In order to redefine a word's meaning and thereby revitalise and, as it were, modernise language, the author must first learn to deal with convention by abandoning it where necessary. Paradoxically in view of the kind of 'purple prose' commonly associated with Pater's own oeuvre, the result is a tight stylistic network which reinforces his belief in the existence of the 'right vocabulary' and, by this token, truth.

When making use of his particular artistic medium, the prose writer must know how to employ and alter conventional form – only then can he re-interpret tradition and produce the kind of complex writing that will not only express his own special sensibility but also the richness of the modern age:

For the material in which he works is no more a creation of his own than the sculptor's marble. Product of a myriad of various minds and contending tongues, compact of obscure and minute association, a language has its own abundant and often recondite laws, in the habitual and summary recognition of which scholarship consists. A writer, full of a matter he is before all things anxious to express, may think of those laws, the limitations of vocabulary, structure, and the like, as a restriction, but if a real artist will find in them an opportunity. His punctilious observance of the proprieties of his medium will diffuse through all he writes a general air of sensibility, of refined usage.³³

Pater's ambivalent attitude towards the intricate connection between matter and form is characteristic of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics and is particularly pronounced in his outlook on language as both the carrier imposed of law and the potential tool of individual freedom. Once the individual becomes aware of the man-made nature of language, he/she can shake off the fetters of preconceived dogma. At the same time, however, the subject depends on aesthetic models not only for his/her existence but as blueprints of artistic consciousness and sensibility. Pater's conception of art and aesthetic formulas thus, surprisingly perhaps, bears strong resemblance to Nietzsche's ambiguous perspective on artistic production and individual freedom. Form, both aestheticians seem to be saying, is both restrictive and liberating in that it enables subject-formation at the same as it undermines it. This problem lies at the forefront of the themes dominating the seven texts discussed in my thesis.

Finally, and this point constitutes perhaps the most important difference between the English thinker and the German philosopher, the reasons behind Pater's fervent promotion of 'imaginative prose' are, in the last analysis, grounded in a desire to overcome solipsism and nurture man's sense of communal belonging. By engaging with and endeavouring to decipher a writer's idiosyncratic (use of) style, the reader may be 'rewarded by a securer and more intimate grasp of the author's sense', and hence a better understanding of his particular personality.³⁴ Pater is thus not only concerned with finding adequate expression for the spirit of modernity but with enhancing communication between souls. The ultimate design underlying his theory of writing as documented in 'Style' is thus dominated by questions of social integration combined with the fulfilled self-development of the emancipated

subject. These views, however, go hand in hand with Pater's notion of the role of art in society.

As we have seen, focused consciousness and expression becomes the single most important aspect of a successful existence in Pater's writings, and although he declares manifold experience as the only valid source of knowledge and truth open to his contemporaries, in his analysis of a particular impression he insists on precision and accuracy. The 'Preface' to The Renaissance is an undisguised, even though somewhat half-hearted, attempt to place art criticism alongside the natural sciences of the nineteenth century:

And the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced. His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others. (R XXX)

This 'apology' for aesthetic criticism harks back to the empiricist tradition of philosophers such as Hume, whom Pater declared to be the source of his predilection for scepticism and relativism. Pater's faith in the possibility, and necessity, of shaping a personality by exposing it to sensory impressions, preferably to those incited by beauty, was also partly derived from the

Ruskinian ideal of an aesthetic education and later adopted by Wilde for his main theoretical work The Critic as Artist.

However, while Ruskin insisted on the ethical and democratic nature of aesthetics and their connection with a supernatural force, Pater failed to rid his supposedly irreligious view of art of an esoteric combination of metaphysics coupled with élitism. His emphasis on 'temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects' (R XXX) does not point at a skill that could be acquired by every subject. His frequent reference to 'instinct' in his essay on Winckelmann and, in his presentation of the 'diaphanous' type of humanity, to an element innate to a chosen few only, pinpoints a certain pessimism in Pater's attitude towards mankind's future and the modern age. He describes the diaphanous character as

a kind of prophecy of this repose and simplicity,
coming as it were *in the order of grace, not of
nature, by some happy gift, or accident of birth or
constitution*, showing that it is indeed within the
limits of man's destiny. (R 155; my italics)

Despite Pater's advocacy of individual self-determination and control of the potentially overwhelming impact of the material world and that of ideology, the attainment of that ultimate state of serenity lies beyond the subject's power, and we are thus returned to a metaphysical entity that blesses a few and ignores most others.

Moreover, unlike his older contemporary Ruskin, Pater insists on the human mind as the origin of all metaphysics. Pater's paganism rests on his belief in death, or rather the knowledge of death, as the driving force behind all

artistic creation. This 'pagan sentiment', this 'rush of home-sickness' is 'beset by notions of irresistible natural powers' (R 129), that is, man's exposure to the transience of life due to ultimately uncontrollable biological laws. Fortunately, however, this consciousness of the terror of life gave rise to the birth of religion, which in turn resulted not only in rituals but also in the first examples of artistic creation, since, according to Pater, thought can only be expressed through form:

While the ritual remains unchanged, the aesthetic element, only accidentally connected with it, expands with the freedom and mobility of the things of the intellect. Always, the fixed element is the religious observance; the fluid, the unfixed element is the myth, the religious conception. (R 130)

Man's need for metaphysical solace led partly to 'antinomian mysticism, its garments offered to the gods, its statues worn with kissing, its exaggerated superstitions for the vulgar only' (R 131); yet it also resulted in Hellenism:

The supreme Hellenic culture is a sharp edge of light across this gloom. (...) The Dorian worship of Apollo, rational, chastened, debonair, with his unbroken daylight, always opposed to the sad Chthonian divinities, is the aspiring element, by force and spring of which Greek religion sublimates itself. Out of Greek religion, under happy conditions, arises Greek art, to minister to human culture. It was the privilege of Greek religion to be

able to transform itself into an artistic ideal. (R
131)

At the centre of Pater's mission as an aesthetic critic lies his recognition of the human need for self-control; his encouragement of the individual to analyse his/her feelings and thereby know himself/herself represents a tool suited for the creation of a more serene, less painful, existence. The ability to anticipate and measure the impact that a particular experience will make or has already made on us, will enable us to deal with the opacity of modern life more efficiently. To understand one's feelings means to be in control of them; it is a power which mitigates the agonising turmoil of human existence. Moreover, Pater encourages the individual to take pleasure in every kind of emotion, a liberalism which must not, however, result in a swamping and consequent paralysis of the mind:

Every moment some form grows perfect in hand
or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is
choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or
insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real
and attractive to us, – for that moment only. (R
152)

Pater does not limit himself to beautiful objects but insists on the epiphanic potential of all. His exaltation of the human body, the charm of physical appearance and growth, mimics the union of body and spirit upheld by antiquity and revived by the Renaissance. Similarly, his use of the image of light

signifies enlightenment and lucid self-perception, a clarity lacking in the bustle of modern times.

Despite the emphasis on knowledge, however, Pater still holds that attention must be paid to 'experience itself' rather than 'the fruit of experience' (R 152). This is partly due to his fervent rejection of all dogma, of prescribed wisdom which more often than not serve to smother rather than release human energies. Even more importantly, it is the logical consequence of Pater's outlook on 'the pagan sadness' (R 130); all man can ever learn from experience is that life is transitory and flimsy, and the sooner he comes to terms with this fact, the sooner he can treat life as an aesthetic object. There is no other wisdom to be imparted.

Pater wants the individual to become aware of the fine web of human experiences which make up his own life as well as that beyond him – to rejoice in its complexity rather than succumb to its infinitely intricate and ultimately incomprehensible structure. The individual is to take comfort and delight in the multitudinous physical manifestations of life, the flux which dominates both its physical and spiritual aspects:

That clear, perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, under which we group them – a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it. This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways. (R 151)

Although man is invited to partake in this breathtaking vision of monism, he must at the same time be made aware of his radically solipsistic existence:

And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. (R 151)

Here Pater's text reaches its modernist climax by anticipating the crisis of language that many literary exponents of *fin-de-siècle* culture were to undergo, most notably Hofmannsthal. Although Pater's theory of the aesthetic owes much to Hegel's dialectics, such as his notion of the continuity of history and his classification of the various arts according to their appropriateness as expressive medium, the English thinker shuns the implications of German Romantic idealism and instead evokes the spectre of the Kantian thing-in-itself. Suddenly, Hegel's activist subject emerges robbed of his most powerful weapon, the mutual correspondence between idea and phenomenon, and the reader is thrown back upon the image of the Kant's isolated individual, who lacks the tools necessary to tear down 'the thick wall' (R 151) that separates him from his environment. At this juncture, Pater deprives himself of the comforting concept of the World Spirit, which Wilde conjures up so serenely at the end of 'The Critic as Artist'. Unlike his disciple, Pater decides to reject the comforts afforded by teleology.

Comfort can only be found in dignified existence, an existence ready to face all aspects of humanity and capable of achieving the right balance between thought and feeling:

In Greek thought (...) 'the lordship of the soul' is recognised; that lordship gives authority and divinity to human eyes and hands and feet; inanimate nature is thrown into the background. But just there Greek thought finds its happy limit; it has not yet become too inward; the mind has not yet learned to boast its independence of the flesh; the spirit has not yet absorbed everything with its emotions, nor reflected its own colour everywhere. It has indeed committed itself to a train of reflexion which must end in defiance of form, of all that is outward, in an exaggerated idealism. But the end is still distant; it has not yet plunged into the depths of religious mysticism. (R 132)

The result is an art in which the antagonistic forces of rest and motion are reconciled. This divine aspect of humanity is best conveyed by the medium of sculpture, which

unveils man in the repose of his unchanging characteristics. That white light purged from the angry, bloodlike stains of action and passion, reveals, not what is accidental in man, but the tranquil godship in him, as opposed to the restless accidents of life. The art of sculpture records the first naïve, unperplexed recognition of

man by himself; and it is a proof of the high artistic capacity of the Greeks, that they apprehended and remained true to these exquisite limitations, yet, in spite of them, gave to their creations a mobile, a vital, individuality. (R 137)

This state of 'simplicity' and 'repose' (R 155) should be the main goal of every individual, as Pater points out in 'Diaphaneité'; it represents the only means of overcoming the barrier between the self and the external world:

Simplicity in purpose and act is a kind of determinate expression in dexterous outline of one's personality. It is a kind of moral expressiveness; there is an intellectual triumph implied in it. Such a simplicity is characteristic of the repose of perfect intellectual culture. The artist and he who has treated life in the spirit of art desires only to be shown to the world as he really is; as he comes nearer and nearer to perfection, the veil of an outer life not simply expressive of the inward becomes thinner and thinner. (R 155)

Form and matter become one, and the individual finally does away with the need for as well as the inevitability of masks. Pater's emphasis on a dynamic stillness in art and its embodiment by the diaphanous type is reminiscent of Aquinas' notion of *quidditas*, which excites no desire and promotes good through beauty. As a consequence, Pater must reject Wilde both in his appearance as artist and as human being, as self-sufficiency becomes a

crucial characteristic of the ideal diaphanous type. The fusion of outward and inward envisioned in 'Diaphaneité' shows aestheticism at its most moral, without conjuring up the shadow of metaphysics. Rather than fly from life or violate social decorum, the diaphanous individual subverts convention by its mere existence, its juxtaposition of grace and indifference. 'But in this nature revolutionism is softened, harmonised, subdued by distance. It is the revolutionism of one who has slept a hundred years.' (R 157) Pater's diaphanous type echoes Schiller's notion of grace as something inborn rather than something to be obtained by a certain skill, while ordinary man can merely achieve a dignified existence, one in which the blows afforded by life are appreciated in their aesthetic value rather than succumbed to through adherence to dogma or the suicidal rejection of life altogether.

NOTES

¹ W.H. Wackenroder, 'Das merkwürdige musikalische Leben des Tonkünstlers Joseph Berglinger', in W.H. Wackenroder und Ludwig Tieck, Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997), pp. 103/4.

'(...) – but heaven had endowed him in such a way that he always aspired to something even higher; mere health of the soul did not satisfy him, and that it perform its ordinary functions on earth, such as working and doing good; – he also desired that it should dance about in exuberant high spirits and shout up to heaven, as if to its point of origin.' Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Confessions and Fantasies, translated and ed. by Mary Hurst Schubert (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), p. 147.

² '(...) he valued his own inner soul above all else and kept it concealed and hidden from others. One keeps a little treasure hidden in this way, whose key one entrusts to no other person's hand.' *Ibid.*, p. 148.

³ 'and his discontentedness and the uncomfortable feeling that, with all his deep feeling and his inner artistic sense, he was of no use to the world and far less effective than every craftsman, – increased every more and more. He frequently thought back melancholically to the pure, idealistic enthusiasm of his boyhood, and, along with this, to his father, how he had taken the trouble to educate him as a doctor, so that he might alleviate the misery of people, heal unfortunate ones, and in

this way be of use to the world. Perhaps it would have been better, he thought in many an hour.' *Ibid.*, p. 158.

- ⁴ 'A triple misfortune for music that, in this art, such a crowd of hands is necessary just so that the work exists! I concentrate and elevate my entire soul in order to create a great work; – and hundreds of insensitive and empty heads want to have their say and demand this and that.' *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- ⁵ 'Before the music started, when he was standing in the dense, softly murmuring crowd of people, it seemed to him as if he were hearing the ordinary and commonplace life of men, bustling unmelodiously amidst each other and all around him like a large annual fair; his brain became stupefied by empty, earthly trivialities. He expectantly awaited the first sound of the instruments; – and when it now broke forth out of the heavy stillness, mighty and sustained, like the blowing of a wind from heaven, and the full force of the sounds passed over his head, – then it seemed to him as if suddenly huge wings were stretched forth from his soul, as if he were being lifted up from a barren heath, the gloomy curtain of clouds disappearing before his mortal eyes, and he floating up to the luminous heaven. Then he kept his body quiet and motionless and fixed his eyes steadily upon the ground. The present faded away before him; his inner self was cleansed of all the earthly trivialities, which are the true dust on the lustre of the soul; the music penetrated his nerves with gentle tremors and, as it changed, it caused various pictures to rise up before him. Thus, during many gay and heart-lifting songs in praise of God, it very distinctly seemed to him as if he were seeing King David dance along in front of the Ark of the Covenant singing praises, in his long royal cloak, the crown upon his head; he observed his complete enchantment and all his movements and his heart beat within his breast. Thousands of dormant sensations were abruptly awakened in his heart and became marvelously intermingled. Indeed, at many a point in the music a particular beam of light seemed to fall into his soul; it seemed to him as if he suddenly became far more clever thereby and looked down upon the entire teeming world with sharper eyes and a certain exalted and peaceful melancholy.' *Ibid.*, pp. 148/9.
- ⁶ Here he once again mirrors David, who also encountered first success as a politician in foreign lands.
- ⁷ 'However, when he had gone a short stretch on the field and looked around, hot tears poured forth from him. Shall I turn around, he thought? But he ran further, as if his heels were burning, and wept continuously, and he ran as if he wanted to escape his tears. So it went through many and unfamiliar village and past many strange faces: – the sight of the strange world gave him courage again and he felt free and strong, – he came closer and closer – and, finally, – benevolent heaven! What rapture! – at last he saw the towers of the magnificent city lying before him. ---' Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, *Confessions and Fantasies*, p. 154.
- ⁸ 'The children of the old doctor grew up in his household like weeds in a neglected garden. Joseph's sisters were in part sickly, in part feeble-minded, and led a miserably lonely life in their dark little room.' *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- ⁹ 'His sisters were in the most miserable condition; two of them had lived disreputably and had run away; the eldest, to whom he had always sent money, had squandered most of it and had let the father starve; in the end he saw the latter die wretchedly before his eyes...' *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- ¹⁰ 'He was an industrious and conscientious doctor who, throughout his lifetime, had taken pleasure in nothing but in the knowledge of strange things which lie hidden within the human body and in the vast science of all woeful human infirmities and illnesses. As frequently tends to happen, this industrious studying had become for

him a secret, nerve-deadening poison, which penetrated all his veins and ate away at many resonant strings of the human heart within him. In addition, there was the despondency over the wretchedness of his poverty, and, finally, old age. All this gnawed at the original kindness of his spirit; for, in souls which are not strong, everything with which the human being has trouble passes over into his blood and transforms his inner self, without his knowing it.' *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹ Quoted from Der Wille zur Macht by Walter Kaufmann in Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 130. For Nietzsche and the link between art and ill-health see *ibid.*, pp. 128 ff.

¹² For my reading of British Romanticism see P. M. S. Dawson, 'Poetry in an Age of Revolution', in The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 48-73.

¹³ Despite this emphasis on the group, Herder pointed to individuation as the prerequisite of conscientious and critical citizenship and political autonomy. Anticipating the social theory of Nietzsche, he maintained that the individual had to reach beyond the state of a mere thinking being (*Besonnenheit*) and achieve a position of conscious awareness (*Besinnung*) through socially orientated education, which would enable him to unfold his genetic make-up and appreciate his relation to society and the universe as a whole. To do so, Herder believed that the working people (*Volk der Bürger*) had to undergo an instructional phase at the hands of the intelligentsia (*Volk der Gelehrsamkeit*), through which they would become mindful of their national history and cultural heritage, thus reaching a level of insight that would lead them to overcome their present state of degradation and guarantee self-determination and self-perfection. Once this process has been achieved, the intellectual elite would surrender their leadership and make way for the realisation of the *Volksgeist* in democracy and the fulfilment of its own humanity (*Humanität*), which he considered to be the telos of every nation. This goal could only be reached by a combination of education and intuition as the vital ingredients of national identity.

¹⁴ Quoted in F.M. Barnard, Herder's Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Nationalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 157.

¹⁵ See Bernhard Giesen and Kay Junge, Nationale und kulturelle Identität: Studien zur Entwicklung des kollektiven Bewußtseins in der Neuzeit (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 255-303.

This twentieth-century interpretation of German Romanticism invites the contrasting view of its British counterpart as one characterised by a particularist rather than unified interest in politics concerned with the destabilisation (rather than the foundation) of a middle-class establishment through the nurturing of religious tolerance and supra-national interests, as evidenced in the writings of Shelley and Byron. European Romanticism's aesthetics were furthermore influenced by its relative assessment of the growing importance of industrialisation. Where British Romantics identified its impact on the political and geographical landscape as having an incapacitating effect on the individual imagination, the German *Bildungsbürger* saw his intellectual superiority undermined even further by the social success of the mercantile middle classes.

¹⁶ John Keats, A Critical Edition of the Major Works, ed. by Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 168/9.

¹⁷ My short interpretation of Nietzschean aesthetics is based on the following secondary sources: Patrick Bridgwater, Nietzsche in Anglosaxony (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972); Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic

(Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990); Ivo Frenzel, Friedrich Nietzsche (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1966); Walter Kaufmann, Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974); Alexander Nehamas, 'Nietzsche, modernity, aestheticism', in The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche, ed. by Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 223-51; J. P. Stern, Nietzsche (Glasgow: Collins, 1978); Keith Thomas, ed., German Philosophers: Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Julian Young Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁸ Alexander Nehamas, 'Nietzsche, Modernity, Aestheticism', in The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche, ed. by Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 223-51.

¹⁹ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Sebastian Melmoth', in Gesammelte Werke: Reden und Aufsätze I, ed. by Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), pp. 342/3.

'An aesthete! This explains nothing. Walter Pater was an aesthete, a man who lived off the pleasure and reproduction of beauty, and his approach to life was full of awe and restraint, full of discipline. An aesthete is, by nature, a man of discipline, through and through. Oscar Wilde, however, was full of sexual indecency, tragic sexual indecency. His aestheticism was a little like a spasm.' (My translation.)

²⁰ Richard Ellmann, Oscar Wilde (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 50

²¹ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Sebastian Melmoth', in Gesammelte Werke: Reden und Aufsätze I, p. 343.

'The precious stones, in which [Wilde] pretended to be rummaging lustily, were like broken eyes that had become petrified, because they had been unable to endure the sight of life. All the time he felt the threat of life on him. The tragic horror always surrounded him. He challenged life constantly. He insulted reality. And he could feel how life was waiting to pounce at him out of the dark.' (My translation.)

²² *Ibid.*, p. 342.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

'Nothing can be excluded and dismissed as so inferior that it lacks a considerable power. There is, from the viewpoint of life, nothing that is "part of it". Everything is everywhere. Everything is coexistent.' (My translation.)

²⁵ Herbert Sussman, 'The Pre-Raphaelites and the "Mood of the Cloister"', *B/S*, 8 (1980), pp. 45-55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ 'Walter Pater, 'Style', Essays on Literature and Art ed. by Jennifer Uglow (London: Everyman, 1973), pp. 70-2.

Pater defines this 'specific personality' (*ibid.*, p. 72) as a 'scholarly', a 'male conscience' (*ibid.*, p. 73), although ironically Virginia Woolf was to become one of his most prolific followers (see Chapter IX).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

III

ARTISTS, CRITICS, AESTHETICIANS

Before passing to detailed consideration of the literary texts that thematise the artist or aesthete figure, I want to look briefly at the discursive statements of two of the major authors whose literary work I wish in due course to consider: Oscar Wilde and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. As we shall see, neither of them were unaware either of the tradition of aesthetic debate that proceeded them or of the theoretical force of their own literary (and specifically narrative) production.

They shared a tripartite existence as artists, critics, and aestheticians, which led them to investigate the nature, and not least the social function, of art and rendered them acutely sensitive to the output of their creative ancestors and contemporaries. While their artistic preoccupation with the aesthetic was, particularly in their early years, inextricably intertwined with their lives as aesthetes, their attitudes towards the aesthetic life were ambiguous and complex, as were their views on the connection between art and morality. This ambivalence is not only apparent in Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray and Hofmannsthal's Ein Brief; it also pervades both authors' essayistic oeuvres. In the present chapter, I shall thus, rather than attempt to offer an account of the Queensberry trials and Wilde's much-evoked social downfall, concentrate on his most complete discourse on art and life, 'The Critic as Artist', before moving on to Hofmannsthal's difficult relationship with the aesthetic as evidenced in his career, his essays and criticisms, and his early fictional writing.

WILDE

When Oscar Wilde declared art to be ‘a goddess whose mystery it is [the critic’s] province to intensify, and whose majesty it is his privilege to make more marvellous in the eyes of men’, he aimed to transform the tragic condition of human existence into the means of its own redemption.¹ For Wilde, only art can turn the painful flimsiness of life into a source of spiritual liberation by providing man with ever-changing sensuous and intellectual impressions, which are released through the medium of form. In doing so, it offers relief from the chaos of mundane life and the cruel whim of necessity. ‘There is no passion that we cannot feel, no pleasure that we may not gratify, and we can choose the time of our freedom also. Life! Life! Don’t let us go to life for our fulfilment or our experience. It is a thing narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance, and without that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament.’²

Wilde’s impassioned rejection of the inconsistency of life picks up where Pater’s ‘Conclusion’ left off, as, in Wildean terms, art not only gives ‘nothing but the highest quality to our moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake’ (R 153), it also allows us to exercise control over the threshold that separates us from the outside world. As we have seen, Pater, in fact, does not limit himself to art and creativity as the exclusive source of redemption, celebrating instead the instance of sensory impression, the ‘moment’ as such. It is left to his disciple, Wilde, to bring his theory to its apocalyptic climax by rejecting immediate experience in favour of its artistically digested equivalent.

For Wilde, art comes to replace orthodox faith as the comforting element in man's life while simultaneously promising stability without dogma. The volatile nature of true art, that is art as an end in itself, its delightful dependence on illusion, its rejection of realism and all doctrine that insists on an external pre-established truth, allows both the artist and the beholder to live out their intellectual and emotional playfulness, which Wilde believes to be shared by all men. Both can thus become free well-rounded individuals who find spiritual outlets in art, either by creating or interpreting it. Instead of succumbing to pre-established rules, the individual comes to enjoy freedom in controlled motion, the creative act unrepressed by static conventions.

While the Wildean artist appears essentially as the offspring of Nietzsche's glorification of artistic creation as the most sophisticated and 'un-illusioned' way of imposing one's will upon the flux of life, Wilde also develops this notion further by postulating the figure of the creative beholder of art, who not only enjoys the object but allows it to inspire him into new creation through the involvement of his own imagination. The critic hence comes to represent the most refined version of the autonomous subject, who no longer has to busy himself/herself with outward reality and instead can move straight to the more complex form of actuality embodied by the artwork – in creating the artefact, the artist has already endowed common existence with a higher sense of purpose by transforming it into a beautiful object.

By imposing his own personality on a particular piece of art the critic comes to personify Wilde's ideal of subjectivity that is free from all social pressure. The ultimate inferiority of the artwork to its interpreter reveals Wilde's idiosyncratic humanism, which rejects all forms of worship, other than that of

individualism, and insists on the man-made aspect of art as something which cannot be considered in isolation from the individual. Characteristically, however, it is the beholder rather than the creator who occupies the centre of Wilde's theory of art; his conscious embrace of Paterian relativism leads him to reject the idea of any stable meaning – even, or particularly, in art. By insisting on sensuous impression rather than moral content as the core of all artistic design, Wilde places the feeling individual above the inanimate artwork, whose existence depends both on its creator as well as its beholder. By celebrating the uncontrollable component of art's impact upon the individual, Wilde pronounces, if not the death of the artist, then at least his Joycean lingering somewhere beyond the artwork. The artist's subjective will thus makes way for the limitless variety of human emotion evoked by the artwork, which results in 'as many Hamlets as there are melancholies'.³

One should not, however, emphasise Wilde's celebration of individual sentiment without stressing his insistence on the vital importance of the critical faculty in the appreciation of art, by which he means reason – although he refuses to call it by its proper name, possibly in a desire to avoid associations with Kantian ethics and authority:

Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name. You spoke a little while ago of that fine spirit of choice and delicate instinct of selection by which the artist realises life for us, and gives to it a momentary perfection. Well, that spirit of choice, that subtle tact of omission, is really the critical faculty in one of its most characteristic moods, and no one who

does not possess this critical faculty can create anything at all in art.⁴

That he is, in fact, writing in the tradition of highly moral philosophers such as Schiller, is revealed in his preoccupation with the education of man as social being: 'the methods by which education should work [are] the development of temperament, the cultivation of taste, and the creation of the critical spirit'.⁵ In 'The Critic as Artist' as well as in the earlier lecture on 'The English Renaissance of Art', Wilde quotes Plato as the origin of aesthetic education which renders the individual soul susceptible to beauty by exposing it to beautiful objects from an early age:

Insensibly, and without knowing the reason why, he is to develop that real love of beauty which, as Plato is never weary of reminding us, is the true aim of education. By slow degrees there is to be engendered in him such a temperament as will lead him naturally and simply to choose the good in preference to the bad, and rejecting what is vulgar and discordant, to follow by fine instinctive taste all that possesses grace and charm and loveliness. (...) and so, when, later on, the critical and self-conscious spirit develops in him, he 'will recognise and salute it as a friend with whom his education has made him long familiar'.⁶

Although here Wilde still follows Ruskin's notion of morally ennobling beauty, the complex idea of consolation through introspection underlying 'The Critic as Artist' contrasts with the, at times, naïvely optimistic tone of the American

lecture, where Wilde's then still firm embrace of Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites led him to proclaim self-confidently that 'in years to come there will be nothing in any man's house which has not given delight to its maker and does not give delight to its user'.⁷ Wilde's élitist consciousness, however, soon forced him to realise that the common aesthetic object distributed into every home must inevitably turn into a symbol of conformity and lack of individual taste. More importantly, he abandoned Ruskin's trust in the association of creative joy and sensory reception as the guarantors of social stability, as Ruskinian and Pre-Raphaelite art took on an increasingly escapist nature based on an idealised vision of the Middle Ages.

By 1882, when Wilde was touring the United States, the Pre-Raphaelite school had arrived at a 'standstill', caught in the continuous reproduction of ethereal visions of beauty which could charm the senses but were incapable of inspiring the intellect, Wilde's 'critical spirit'.⁸ By contrast with the unearthly art created by Rossetti and Burne-Jones, the 'Modern Moral Subjects' of William Holman Hunt and Ford Madox Brown were highly didactic and moralistic paintings which clearly opposed any notion of art as an end in itself. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's origins lay in Ruskin's doctrine of the faithful observation and mimetic representation of natural detail, by which the artist could celebrate the glory of God's creation, a pictorial technique which clashes violently with Wilde's emphasis on the freedom of the arts. Rather than devote his time to the scientific investigation of natural objects, Wilde explains in 'The Critic as Artist', the individual must turn upon himself, because

we have merely touched the surface of the soul,
that is all. In one single ivory cell of the brain

there are stored away things more marvellous
and more terrible than [we] ever dreamed of.⁹

Yet this can only happen through the mind's interaction with art, which inspires the imagination and releases visions of man's inner self. To evaluate both external and internal impressions we need to exercise our critical spirit, thus setting off a process which will eventually result in knowledge of ourselves.

This insistence on the 'critical spirit' gives the lie to the charge of insipid aestheticism devoid of all social impact often falsely associated with the 1890s. Wilde's frequent references to Victorian Romanticism dominate 'The English Renaissance of Art' and unwittingly suggest a degree of aesthetic decadence apparent in the work and life-style of Pre-Raphaelites like Rossetti which was not to be surpassed by any member of the 1890s scene. As Timothy Hilton points out in his study of the Pre-Raphaelites, mid-nineteenth-century discourses on art theory, so deceptively clear and straightforward in thinkers like Ruskin, gave rise to the paradoxes pervading the work of Wilde and Beardsley.¹⁰

This revised sense of the artist's responsibility towards society also provides the basis for the Wildean critic's relation to his surroundings. The critic's role, in contrast with that of the average beholder of art, lies in extracting the most valuable aspects of the artist's work and presenting it by means of the highest art form, literature, to the, as yet, uncultivated public, who will receive an aesthetic education through exposure to sensuous impression, which in turn will awaken their sense of beauty and turn them into moral beings. This process will ultimately render all external authority superfluous, condemned at length in 'The Soul of Man under Socialism'. Wilde's critic comes to replace

Shelley's poet and philosopher as the legislator of mankind, thus joining Pater in his celebration of the critical modern mind.

Wilde shared with his mentor an acute sense of urgency when envisioning the demands which the 'modern world' will make upon the individual.¹¹ Rather than limit the variety and richness of human experience, they seek to present it with an appropriate outlet, which they identify as language. While Pater believes in the power of 'imaginative prose' as an expression of human complexity superior to the medium of poetry, which he believes to be suffering from its own formulaic nature, Wilde pinpoints the parallels between the movement of the mind and that of literature, which alone is capable of imitating the duality that governs the individual by showing us 'the body in its swiftness and the soul in its unrest'.¹² This sense of freedom, this playful, almost serene, expression of man's complexity through all art forms, whether through music or the written word, will later re-appear and be perfectly articulated in Joyce's epiphanic moment. In 'The Dead', for example, Aunt Julia's song thus offers her nephew Gabriel Conroy a glimpse of her human imagination, which is smothered but not defeated by her outward appearance as an old confused woman no longer quite in touch with the events surrounding her:

Her voice, strong and clear in tone, attacked with great spirit the runs which embellish the air and though she sang very rapidly she did not miss even the smallest of the grace notes. To follow the voice, without looking at the singer's face, was to feel and share the excitement of swift and secure flight.¹³

Joyce will thus finally overcome his predecessors' élitist outlook by revealing art's ability to expose the depths of any human imagination, even that seemingly suppressed by the strict rules of bourgeois existence.

Paving the way for Joyce's encompassing view, Pater and Wilde take the moral agitation of the 1880s and the *fin de siècle* respectively as an opportunity to release man from the grip of stifling doctrine, which, rather than acknowledging the diversity of the human mind, endeavours to control the individual by undermining his uniqueness:

The courts of the city of God are not open to us now. Its gates are guarded by Ignorance, and to pass them we have to surrender all that in our nature is most divine. It is enough that our fathers believed. They have exhausted the faith-faculty of the species. Their legacy to us is the scepticism of which they were afraid. Had they put it into words, it might not live within us as thought.¹⁴

There are several strands of influence visible in this passage. The notion of the divine within the human evokes the humanism of Browning's dramatic monologues concerned with the art of the Renaissance, in which he stresses the superiority of individual fulfilment over indiscriminating adherence to religious dogma. Moreover, Wilde's renewed vision of a second, more successful English Renaissance within the nineteenth century echoes Browning's advocacy of artistic activism in the name of spiritual enlightenment: 'We have got rid of what was bad. We have now to make what is beautiful.'¹⁵

However, despite Wilde's following of Browning's sceptical stance towards the possibility of authentic self-representation, which the latter questioned by the artificial setting of the dramatic monologues and which the younger artist sums up by one of his characteristic paradoxes ('Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.'), 'The Critic as Artist' presents its creator as a prototype of the all-round latter-day critic described by the author himself.¹⁶ It is thus a highly self-reflective text, which draws attention to itself by way of its use of the very modes of cultural critique which it means to put forward. Gilbert's brief prose rendering of the Divine Comedy becomes a late-nineteenth-century reading of the original and therefore a new work of art in itself, even though Wilde's use of Pater's 'purple prose' injures rather than exalts the original's aesthetic value.

More importantly, the essay fuses the various elements of Victorian historicism by, for example, combining the Ruskinian virtue of 'contemplation', inspired by medieval asceticism, with the Paterian virtue of 'sensation', which feeds on the sensuous nature of Renaissance art. Gilbert hence embodies the eclecticism favoured by the text; he becomes his own creation. Gilbert, or rather Wilde, somewhat over-stretches his praise of Browning as the poet of thought:

Incident and event were to him unreal or unmeaning. He made the soul the protagonist of life's tragedy, and looked on action as the one undramatic element of the play.¹⁷

Browning rejected aestheticism as fervently as he condemned prudent inaction as a way of evading the perils of immorality. His protagonists are faced with the challenge of their 'good minute' ('Two in the Campagna'), which allows them to attain their 'life's set prize' ('The Statue and the Bust') through which they realise the infinite (immortal, divine) aspect of their finite (mortal, human) nature.

In contrast, Wilde's rejection of positive action goes hand in hand with his denunciation of the activist spirit of nineteenth-century Britain at the height of industrialisation. Rather than advocate involvement in the turmoil of life's hazards, Wilde, in 'The Critic as Artist', aims to negate Victorian faith in active progress and scientific truth:

From the high tower of Thought we can look out
at the world. Calm, self-centred, and complete,
the aesthetic critic contemplates life, and no
arrow drawn at a venture can pierce between the
joints of his harness. He at least is safe. He has
discovered how to live.¹⁸

Situated on the vantage-point of knowledge and insight attained through exposure to artistic renderings of human impression and experience, Wilde's aesthetic critic refuses to adopt the role of Browning's 'soldier-saints', who overcome the struggle of life through love. Maybe the most significant idea offered to us by Wildean theory is the refusal to accept the strife involved in life as inevitable fact, as Ernest realises in the course of the dialogue:

It may, indeed, be that life is chaos, as you tell that it is; that its martyrdoms are mean and its heroisms ignoble; and that it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon, and through which common natures seek to realise their perfection.¹⁹

Once the artefact, created by man, becomes more true than external reality itself, we are no longer faced with the problem of the thing-in-itself and the limitations of subjectivity. In his acceptance of the world as aesthetic object without moral significance, which, in its existence, depends entirely on subjective vision, Wilde transforms the shortcomings of solipsism into a path towards the highest of insights:

That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul. It is more fascinating than history, as it is concerned simply with oneself. It is more delightful than philosophy, as its subject is concrete and not abstract, real and not vague. It is the only civilised form of autobiography, as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life; not with life's physical accidents of deeds or circumstance, but with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind.²⁰

The awareness that such a process can never result in objective self-knowledge nor objective knowledge of the aesthetic object, and that its main merit lies, in fact, not in the attainment of some external truth, but in the very artificiality of one's final self-portrait, in which every man becomes 'his own Boswell', distinguishes Wilde from his predecessors Arnold and Pater, who still believe in the possibility of disinterested insight.²¹ It is the very lack of authenticity in introspection on which the autonomy of the Wildean individual rests. This paradox represents the author's method of freeing man from the shackles of history, which requires constant revision in order to serve as a supportable inspiration for future generations:

The one duty we owe to history is to re-write it.
That is not the least of the tasks in store for the
critical spirit. When we have fully discovered the
scientific laws that govern life, we shall realise
that the one person who has more illusions than
the dreamer is the man of action.²²

Purposeful action demands faith in the existence of an underlying design that looks favourably on the endeavours of the individual. In order to act in accordance with established custom, man has to find his place in a whole man-made system of social goals and ethical ideals. What Wilde is arguing for, by contrast, is the idea that the individual can exist and act as a microcosm that is entirely self-created and yet more valid than any larger network of codes involving more than one individual. Nietzsche's recommendation to regard one's life as a piece of fiction which is in constant need of being rewritten allows us not only to perceive our own lives as works of art and thus appreciate

them as aesthetic objects, but it also promotes our sense of happiness, since this world view does not ask us to comply with superimposed rules.

‘Pleasure is Nature’s test, her sign of approval. When man is happy, he is in harmony with himself and his environment’²³ Wilde writes in ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’ and evokes Schiller’s vision of the aesthetic state as moral state, thus overcoming the immoralism implied in his embrace of life as Nietzschean self-creation. Acknowledging the connection of everyday beauty with goodness, so passionately stressed by Ruskin in his treatise on the nature of Gothic, Wilde advocates the use of decorative arts as a means of developing man’s imaginative faculty:

It is, of all our visible arts, the one art that creates in us both mood and temperament. Mere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways. The harmony that resides in the delicate proportions of lines and masses becomes mirrored in the mind. The repetitions of pattern give us rest. The marvels of design stir the imagination. In the mere loveliness of the materials employed there are latent elements of culture. (...) By its deliberate rejection of Nature as the ideal of beauty, as well as of the imitative method of the ordinary painter, decorative art not merely prepares the soul for the reception of true imaginative work, but develops in it that sense of form which is the basis of creative no less than of critical achievement.²⁴

This aesthetic education differs considerably from that proposed by Schiller. Where the German poet identifies the merit of the beautiful object in its ability to bring into free play the cognitive faculties of the understanding and the imagination, Wilde's notion of the development of taste appears far more vague. While, in Schiller's view, the aesthetic object intimates to the beholder the existence of a purposeful design underlying all human life and the possibility of human freedom through the exact balance of reason with the senses which will result in 'play', Wilde bases his argument purely on the artificial character of beautiful objects by virtue of which they distance themselves from rather than imitate nature. In Wilde's view, rather than paving the way to a perfect ideal, form represents the very foundation of human existence:

Form is everything. It is the secret of life. Find expression for a joy, and you intensify its ecstasy. (...) [It] is Form that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct, that unerring instinct that reveals to one all things under the conditions of beauty. Start with the worship of form, and there is no secret in art that will not be revealed to you, and remember that in criticism, as in creation, temperament is everything.²⁵

Like Schiller, Wilde aims to achieve a state of playfulness within the mind, which he considers to be the only appropriate way of existence for the individual thrown into the vortex of life. Just as Pater in his essay on 'Style' insists on the fluidity of modern prose as the only appropriate medium for

conveying the rich complexity of a personality, so Wilde refuses to arrest the individual in any kind of pre-established truth. In order to appreciate art fully, the individual must dive into the stream of sensuous impressions, which train his sense of beauty:

Art is a passion, and, in matters of art, Thought is inevitably coloured by emotion, and so is fluid rather than fixed, and, depending upon fine moods and exquisite moments, cannot be narrowed into the rigidity of a scientific formula or a theological dogma. It is to the soul that Art speaks, and the soul may be made the prisoner of the mind as well as of the body. (...) [It] is one's business in such matters to have preferences, and when one has preferences one ceases to be fair. (...) Each form of Art with which we come in contact dominates us for the moment to the exclusion of every other form. We must surrender ourselves absolutely to the work in question, whatever it may be, if we wish to gain its secret.²⁶

Despite the individual's seeming acquiescence in the force of the aesthetic object, the process is far from one-sided. It is the critic's role to absorb the aesthetic power of the work of art, only, however, to be able to select and distinguish between different levels of art, pass judgement on their cultural value and present them to the less educated public, which, by way of this selection, will develop its sense of beauty and self. In doing so, the critic mirrors the function of the artist, 'who accepts the facts of life, and yet

transforms them into shapes of beauty, makes them vehicles of pity or of awe, and shows their colour-element, and their wonder, and their true ethical import also, and builds out of them a world more real than reality itself, and of loftier and more noble import²⁷. In this definition (whether unwittingly or not) Wilde appears to be following his own call for cultural eclecticism. Not only does it evoke the theory of Aristotelian catharsis as well as Nietzsche's dissociation of the beholder from the artwork, it also raises the question of nihilism, which already threatened the German thinker's concept of beauty without ethical import. Once we have rid ourselves of the Kantian notion of an established design underlying all earthly existence, we are forced to ask ourselves how and why, in fact, we should and still can feel 'pity' and 'awe' when faced with artistic beauty, when we know that there the artistic sublime does not mirror a divine one but is a end in itself. This problem not only forms the basis for Wilde's novel but finds its embodiment in the triangular relationship dominating the book.

Although the above passage exemplifies Wilde's affinity to the Nietzschean idea of the world being only justified, and indeed bearable, as an aesthetic object free from all moral import other than the laws of beauty, neither Pater, as we have seen in the previous chapter, nor Wilde succeed in cleansing their theories of all that smacks of the abstract and the absolute. Whereas the idea of the eclectic and refined critic is an ideal which diminishes the impact of Wilde's nihilism and alerts us to the danger of stasis brought about by a new set of laws which will enslave the individual, Pater's faith in the possibility 'to see the object as it really is in itself' (R XXIX) requires a measure

of self-knowledge and perceptiveness which again can only be embodied in an unattainable ideal.

Even more importantly, whereas Wilde deliberately creates a distance between the reader and the speaker by presenting his thoughts in dialogue form, a method which results in a text that draws attention to itself and its own constructed as well as fictional nature by way of self-reflective exaggeration, Pater's fervent belief in the possibility of 'The right vocabulary!'²⁸ suggests a sense of stability which Wilde appears to reject openly throughout 'The Critic as Artist'. Through his paradoxical celebration of the limits of art and his rejection of realism, Wilde relinquishes the possibility of perfection, thus also avoiding the danger of sterile closure, which threatens to arrest the human mind in its playfulness and boundless creativity. This leads him to prefer

works that possess the subtle quality of suggestion, and seem to tell one that even from them there is an escape into a wider world. It is sometimes said that the tragedy of an artist's life is that he cannot realise his ideal. But the true tragedy that dogs the steps of most artists is that they realise their ideal too absolutely. For, when the ideal is realised, it is robbed of its wonder and its mystery, and becomes simply a new starting-point for an ideal that is other than itself. This is the reason why music is the perfect type of art. Music can never reveal its ultimate secret. This, also, is the explanation of the value of the limitations of art.²⁹

HOFMANNSTHAL

Dies ist der gefährlichste Beruf, der sich immer mit dem Schein des Sittlichen abgibt; er führt dazu, sich mit sittlichen Möglichkeiten zu begnügen.

Das Wissen um die Darstellbarkeit tröstet gegen die Überwältigung durch das Leben; das Wissen um das Leben tröstet über die Schattenhaftigkeit der Darstellung. So sind sie miteinander verbunden; dies wird eine schwache Begabung hinabziehen, eine starke emporziehen.³⁰

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's cosmopolitan absorption of cultural influences provides both a link with and a demarcation from his national and international fellow-artists and followers of *fin-de-siècle* Aestheticism. In his broad and eclectic use of artistic, literary, and historical points of reference he reveals aestheticism's delightful capacity for incorporating diverse, and often disparate, forms of artistic expression from manifold traditions, which strives to reach beyond the confines of current popular tastes and aims to be a means of self-exploration and self-cultivation as well as self-revelation. His very acute awareness of contemporaneous aesthetes' and aestheticians' interests, oeuvres, and personal destinies sets him apart from the more subjective and self-absorbed instrumentalisation of art and artistic biographies practised by men such as Pater. Hofmannsthal's life as artist was dominated by his desire to break through the boundaries of solipsism, a development that saw him move from the lyrical works of his youth to the didactic festival dramas of his final years. Moreover, in addition to the constant questioning and redefining of the role of the artist at the turn of the century, he allowed the spirit of the times to lead him into exploring the artist's place within and responsibility towards society.

Having risen to youthful fame amidst *fin-de-siècle* Vienna's bohemian community, Hofmannsthal strove to distance himself from the life-style and attitudes that render aestheticism the antithesis to the life of common men. His earliest writings are dominated by questions of the aesthete's and artist's moral accountability towards life. Rather than originating in socialist leanings in the vein of Wilde and Shaw, however, Hofmannsthal's obsession with the artist's status in society stems from his own intensely felt alertness to both the privileged and the oppressing aspects of the artist's spiritual existence. Hofmannsthal recognised in the aesthetic life the promise of both immense riches and paralysing barrenness – 'Ich glaube: das schöne Leben verarmt einen'.³¹ He insisted on the necessity of strict and continuous reference to life, 'der strenge Bezug auf das Leben', on the need for the artist's, the mystical aesthete's, expulsion from the sequestered temple of beauty on to the busy, chaotic streets peopled by ordinary men.³²

The social crisis experienced by the young wealthy *Bildungsbürger* in the face of established aristocratic rule is reminiscent of the circumstances that led to the first appearance of the Dandy figure during the latter days of George III and the Regency period.³³ The inability to enforce social reform coupled with the possibility of a leisurely life dedicated to beauty had left the Viennese bourgeoisie in a vacuum of apathy and inwardness.³⁴ Their fathers' economic achievements during the *Gründerjahre* permitted the heirs to turn their back on the pursuit of material success at the zenith of high industrialisation. Simultaneously, the painful commercial and social upheavals encountered after the financial crash in Germany and the Austrian Empire in the first half of the 1870s, which had been caused by feverish overspeculation and in which

Hofmannsthal's family lost the greater part of their inherited fortune, served to drive home the fragility of the bourgeoisie's position in the increasingly *laissez-faire* capitalist society.³⁵ Whilst members of the old ruling aristocracy could still, however materially impoverished, rely on their traditional standing as a safeguard of their influence and dignity, the rising entrepreneurial community had been afforded a discomfiting glimpse of the abyss waiting to receive them should their business activities hit a low.

Hofmannsthal's paternal great-grandfather had entered Vienna as a prosperous Jewish merchant from Prague and seen his son, the poet's grandfather, become a flourishing factory owner, marry an Italian heiress and discard the Jewish faith for his bride's Catholicism.³⁶ The next step towards social assimilation and professional ascent was made by Hofmannsthal's father, who substituted the more respectable occupation of lawyer and civil servant for the business of money-making, a decision inspired by the wish to eradicate all traces of original *Geldjudentum*. Hofmannsthal too would, initially at least, chose law as his field of study, yet more as a way of outwardly maintaining the family's hard-won social status than out of any real devotion to the profession. His humanist education at the *Wiener Akademische Gymnasium*, which had also nurtured the minds of Arthur Schnitzler and Peter Altenberg, ensured his acquaintance with the greats of German, Russian, French, and English literature, which in turn motivated him to try his hand at writing and resulted in the publication of the aptly entitled poem 'Frage' ('Question') in 1890 in a magazine on music and literature, when Hofmannsthal was only sixteen.³⁷

In an attempt both to romanticise and disguise his social position and age, which forbade him to make his work public whilst still a pupil, Hofmannsthal began his publishing career under the pseudonym 'Loris' and met with immediate success, which guaranteed his entree into the *Kaffeehauskultur* of the time and the intellectual patronage of cultural giants such as Bahr and Schnitzler. There, he quickly came to represent, in more ways than one, the new generation of artists and social critics. Steeped in erudite perspectivism and burdened by the prospect of a comfortable yet disoriented life in a vortex of valuelessness, Hofmannsthal vacillated between the promise of physical and spiritual beauty offered by the aesthetic life on the one hand and his concern about the potentially dangerous consequences of neglecting the social and national crises that loomed on the horizons of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the other. This duality of social conscience and aesthetic consciousness would dominate his work until his death in 1929.

Throughout his non-fictional work, Hofmannsthal comments on the role of modern literature and rigorously rejects its instrumentalisation for the purposes of sensationalism or indulgent self-expression. In his 1896 speech 'Poesie und Leben', he dismisses what he identifies as the current taste for the occasional poem ('Gelegenheitsgedicht') and dilettante writers' misuse of language as an outlet for private emotions, a means of relieving the burdens weighing down on the soul ('sich etwas von der Seele schreiben'). Pointing at recent autobiographical readings of Goethe's Die Leiden des jungen

Werther, he insists on the unbridgeable, and indeed desirable, gulf between art and life, literature and the everyday word, and registers mournfully the increasing dominance of emotion, that is sensationalism, over intellect and form:

Die Zersetzung des Geistigen in der Kunst ist in den letzten Jahrzehnten von den Philologen, den Zeitungsschreibern und den Scheindichtern gemeinsam betrieben worden.³⁸

Feeling alone does not suffice for the creation of literature; it cannot and must not serve as the foundation for literary endeavour. In order to give rise to pertinent writing, emotion must merge with, or maybe even be submerged in, the intellect. This, Hofmannsthal holds, is the purpose and prerogative of the artist.

Hofmannsthal's rejection of the naïve lyricism of unanalysed self-expression anticipates Joyce's later categorisation of literature into the three ascending stages of lyrical, epic, and finally the dramatic form. Joyce called the lyrical form 'the simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion, a rhythmical cry such as ages ago cheered on the man who pulled at the oar or dragged stones up a slope', uttered by someone who is 'more conscious of the instant of emotion than of himself as feeling emotion' (P 232).³⁹ Distance thus becomes the vital prerequisite of the poet's successful development towards first the epic form, where 'the artist prolongs and broods upon himself as the centre of an epical event', and eventually the dramatic form, where the artist at last 'assumes a proper and intangible aesthetic life' (P 232/3):

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak. (P 233)

Lord Chandos is thus, as I am hoping to show in the next chapter, the impersonalisation rather than a thinly disguised alter ego of Hofmannsthal.

Like Joyce, Hofmannsthal rejected feeling as a sufficient foundation for artistic creation. Rather than merely re-iterate the lyrical moods and modes of his Romantic predecessors, the modern poet must find his own language and overcome his influences by synthesising, reworking and finally improving upon them by exposing them to his own unique mind:

Der eigene Ton ist alles; wer den nicht hält,
begibt sich der inneren Freiheit, die erst das
Werk möglich machen kann. Der Mutigste und
Stärkste ist der, der seine Worte am freiesten zu
stellen vermag; denn es ist nichts so schwer, als
sie aus ihren festen, falschen Verbindungen zu
reißen. Eine neue und kühne Verbindung von
Worten ist das wundervollste Geschenk für die
Seelen und nichts Geringeres als ein Standbild
des Knaben Antinous oder eine große gewölbte
Pforte.⁴⁰

Convention and cliché must be abandoned in favour of sophisticated transformation of current literary language. Only the liberated artwork can speak to the soul and thereby contribute to the individual's gradual abandonment of the inherited, unreflected world-view shaped by habit and

orthodoxy in favour of more intuitive being, what Maeterlinck refers to as 'la conscience supérieure'.⁴¹ Like the English Renaissance philosopher Francis Bacon, Hofmannsthal calls for a reassessment of the *idola fori*, of conventional language that veils man's outlook on the rightful relation between personal emotions and the external world.⁴²

Hofmannsthal derived his notion of the unique tone mainly from Pater's insistence on the need for a personal style of writing, which alone is able to act as a source of truth:

And further, all beauty is in the long run only fineness of truth, or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within.⁴³

Pater's main concern lies with critical prose writing, which he believes to be the only medium capable of translating the richness and diversity of the modern world into art and language; Hofmannsthal, on the other hand, refers to 'Poesie' as an agency of truth and a higher reality, most directly so in his fictional 'Gespräch über Gedichte', which he wrote in 1903, one year after Ein Brief and his alleged final break with poetry. Yet, as Robert Vilain shows and as is evident from their critical writing, both are primarily interested in art as the expression and rendering of feeling into perceptible truth via the epiphanic moment.⁴⁴

Literary art, that is, like all art which is in any way imitative or reproductive of fact – form, or colour, or incident – is the representation of such fact as

connected with soul, of a specific personality, in its preferences, its volition and power.⁴⁵

Form and personality must merge to achieve a peculiar tone that will translate reality from within a unique and inimitable perspective. To his dismay, Hofmannsthal discovers the literature of his time to be turning towards pure personality accompanied by an increasing disregard for cast and structure, an anxiety which he voices in his essay on 'Gedichte von Stefan George':

Nur, da das Publikum überhaupt nicht mehr gewöhnt ist, daß in irgendeinem Ton zu ihm geredet wird, und völlig verlernt hat die Töne zu unterscheiden, so sei hier kurz gesagt, daß die in Rede stehenden Gedichte einen eigenen Ton haben, was in der Poesie und mutas mutandis in allen Künsten das einzige ist, worauf es ankommt und wodurch sich Etwas vom Nichts, das Wesentliche vom Scheinhaften, das Lebensfähige vom Totgeborenen unterscheidet.⁴⁶

Genuine tone and language require authentic feeling as their truth-basis. The subtle nuances of a complex, personalised, yet accessible, style come to mirror the flimsiness and constant fluctuation of sensory perception as well as intellectual outlook, the very things deplored by the *fin-de-siècle* philosopher Ernst Mach. The artist's refined understanding of the world combines with his capacity for intense feeling which he transfers onto the artwork:

Denn die künstlerische Kraft und das Weltgefühl eines Künstlers sind eins. An wem die Welt mit verworrenen Auspizien zerrt, wer sich nicht selbst gehört, der hat keine Gewalt, die Worte anders als scheinhaft und gemein zu setzen. Wer lügt macht schlechte Metaphern.⁴⁷

Artists must not only believe in but feel what they describe. They become prophets or intermediaries between man and spiritual reality by substantiating language in the name of experience, by substituting truth for illusion. To do so, the artist must break through the boundaries of convention. Yet these aesthetic considerations are accompanied by a profound sense of the artist's privileged position, as Robert Vilain shows in his essay on Pater and Hofmannsthal.⁴⁸

In 'Das Märchen der 672. Nacht', Hofmannsthal formulates the dangers and misconceptions entailed in the aesthetic life. The aesthete at the centre of the fairy-tale, the young, rich, beautiful and orphaned son of a merchant, is made to echo, according to research to a large extent deliberately, the character of Dorian Gray.⁴⁹ Hofmannsthal's story presents, like Andrian's Der Garten der Erkenntnis, a Central European version of the English dandy-aesthete's fate. With its increasingly claustrophobic, almost Kafkaesque atmosphere, the narrative lacks the delightful exuberance with which Wilde combines and makes use of the genres of the Gothic novel and Victorian crime fiction. Hofmannsthal's aesthete does not die as a result of an actual violation of an overt social dictum – where Dorian commits real, pre-meditated murder, killing a man who loves him, the merchant's son emerges as guilty of a much more subtle breach of the laws governing human existence. His transgression centres around a misinterpretation of life.

By choosing, or rather attempting, to opt out of society in favour of a life dedicated to the enjoyment of inanimate aesthetic objects, the merchant's son appears to follow the path of the most amoral of decadent heroes, Huysmans' Des Esseintes. However, where Des Esseintes' withdrawal from the network of human relationships and affections, other than those founded upon lust or servitude, appears total and rigorous, Hofmannsthal's aesthete fails to sever all ties with morally tinged emotion. While Des Esseintes merely uses and abuses other human beings as menials or objects of aesthetic, pseudo-scientific observation, the merchant's son comes to misread his servants' silent deference and resentful obedience as devoted tenderness.

Having grown tired of the life of his social circle at the age of twenty-five and as a result deserted it, he finds relief for his social ennui in the role of the uninvolved spectator of life who appreciates humanity only when confronted by it from a distance:

Er war aber keineswegs menschengleich,
vielmehr ging er gerne in den Straßen oder
öffentlichen Gärten spazieren und betrachtete die
Gesichter der Menschen.⁵⁰

Hofmannsthal's aesthete not only conforms to Baudelaire's conventionalised image of the dandy-aesthete as *observateur passionné* and *parfait flâneur*, he also exhibits the intoxicated appreciation of a supposed wholeness governing the universe which prefigures Lord Chandos's pre-lapsarian and misguided feeling of complete understanding of and complete oneness with the world:

Allmählich wurde er sehend dafür, wie alle Formen und Farben der Welt in seinen Geräten lebten. Er erkannte in den Ornamenten, die sich verschlingen, ein verzaubertes Bild der verschlungenen Wunder der Welt. (...) Er war für lange Zeit trunken von dieser großen, tiefsinnigen Schönheit, die ihm gehörte, und alle seine Tage bewegten sich schöner und minder leer unter diesen Geräten, die nichts Totes und Niedriges mehr waren, sondern ein großes Erbe, das göttliche Werk aller Geschlechter.⁵¹

Although Hofmannsthal seems to depict the aesthete as undergoing a process of enlightenment that enables him to see more clearly, his actual fate is highly ironised. His fastidious reliance on 'Geräte', his things, utensils, worldly belongings, in which he believes to recognise a unity that underlies the world, does not bring about an epiphany, as it will in the case of Lord Chandos, a vision in which the boundaries of solipsism are overcome and the observer is allowed to merge with the object.

Instead, the aesthete, in this instance, merely accepts an artistic representation of the universe that creates rather than echoes reality. In his contemplation of ornaments and architectural designs he overlooks the artificial character of the structures:

Er fand die Formen der Tiere und die Formen der Blumen und das Übergehen der Blumen in die Tiere; (...) er fand den Streit zwischen der Last der Säule und dem Widerstand des festen Grundes und das Streben alles Wassers nach aufwärts und wiederum nach abwärts.⁵²

By feeding off the counterfeit world of art, the merchant's son is encouraged to substitute the man-made rules of the artwork for those of nature without becoming aware of the limited validity of the precepts of the aesthetic. This misapprehension, unsurprisingly, results in his understanding of the world as a liberated yet orderly flux, the dance of opposing elements that appears both propitious and beautiful to behold. It is this development which leads the aesthete to misinterpret his own position within the world.

Never referred to by name, the aesthete is identified only as a merchant's son, an apt epithet which cleverly combines the two opposing spheres dealt with in the text. Inextricably rooted in his materialist status within society, the young man's aestheticism originates in his physical rather than spiritual heritage. While his collection of beautiful objects may well appear to him as 'the divine work of all generations', the choicest selection from past ages' artistic output, which now enables him to delight in a life that seems free of the implications of mundane everyday existence, the narrative gradually reveals the fierce and barbarous birthplace of the aesthete's riches. His manner of living life through the digested incidents absorbed and beautified in artworks is constantly ironised by the narrative. His study of 'the wars of a very great king of the past' ('die Kriege eines sehr großen Königs der Vergangenheit'), for example, is promptly interrupted by his inability to escape the oppressive presence of life embodied in his servants:⁵³

Manchmal mußte er mitten in der Beschreibung,
wie die Tausende Reiter der feindlichen Könige
schreiend ihre Pferde umwenden oder ihre
Kriegswagen den steilen Rand eines Flusses

hinabgerissen werden, plötzlich innehalten, denn er fühlte, ohne hinzusehen, daß die Augen seiner vier Diener auf ihn geheftet waren. Er wußte, ohne den Kopf zu heben, daß sie ihn ansahen, ohne ein Wort zu reden, jedes aus einem anderen Zimmer. Er kannte sie so gut. Er fühlte sie leben, stärker, eindringlicher, als er sich selbst leben fühlte.

The merchant's son intuitively grasps the connection between the aestheticised drama of the king's war and the life of the servants, without recognising the danger underlying his own social withdrawal. He uses his attendants not only as menials but also as a source of the intimation of what it feels like to be alive. Unprepared to become actively engaged in the lives of men, and thus create a life for himself, he aestheticises his surroundings in their entirety, without understanding that human beings are not as easy to know, and by this token to possess, as inanimate objects. Paradoxically, the aesthete's attempt at a life based purely on aesthetic perception results in his death, caused, in the last analysis, by the most absorbing of human emotions – compassion.

The merchant son's inability to escape the implications of his servants' presence highlights the danger that underlies the aesthetic life. He is not only the owner of beauty but also at its mercy. Threatened with losing his footman because of crime allegations made in a letter by a former employer, his first reaction is fear; the fear not merely of having to go without the prized possession but of having to relinquish this most devoted of attendants in shady and coarse circumstances:

Er las den Brief meherere Male und gestand sich, daß er bei dem Gedanken, seinen Diener auf eine so widerwärtige Weise zu verlieren, eine große Angst empfand. Je mehr er nachdachte. Desto erregter wurde er und desto weniger konnte er den Gedanken ertragen, eines dieser Wesen zu verlieren, mit denen er durch die Gewohnheit und andere geheime Mächte völlig zusammengewachsen war.⁵⁴

The aesthete's reaction is based on a bizarre mixture of greed and ingenuousness. As a proprietor he objects to the notion of having to give up an essential piece of his household to another man's claims. As an aesthete he cannot bear to yield to the brutal force of law which recognises that what appears beautiful may still be contaminated on the inside.

Yet even though, outwardly at least, the merchant son's indignation seems primarily directed at the superficial loss of a precious commodity that beautifies his existence, he does not fail to acknowledge the bewildering emotional bond between himself and his servants. This connection relies on as trivial a factor as 'habit' and some inexplicable 'secret power' that appears to tie him to these human beings. A stranger to the mysteries of life, the aesthete is unable to pinpoint the nature of the relationship with his servants. In the meditations that follow the arrival of the incriminating letter, he is perplexed by the thoughts and feelings this incident has given rise to:

Es war ihm, als wenn man seinen innersten Besitz beleidigt und bedroht hätte und ihn zwingen wollte, aus sich selber zu fliehen und zu verleugnen, was ihm lieb war. (...) Er begriff zum

erstenmal, was ihn als Knabe immer zum Zorn gereizt hatte, die angstvolle Liebe, mit der sein Vater an dem hing, was er erworben hatte, an den Reichtümern seines gewölbten Wahrenhauses, den schönen, gefühllosen Kindern seines Suchens und Sorgens, den geheimnisvollen Ausgeburten der undeutlichen tiefsten Wünschen seines Lebens.⁵⁵

His fear is fundamentally that of loss, and his decision to solve the dilemma is triggered by the anxious desire to avert the injury. There is no moral element to the aesthete's undertaking; just as he stops short of condemning his father for his obsessive adherence to his possessions, he fails to try to rationalise his own apprehension. In an attempt to preserve his present life-style, however, he inadvertently abandons it for active involvement and empathy.

It is sympathetic love rather than aesthetic pleasure that initiates this metaphorical journey towards life and consequently death. Significantly, the latter is the direct outcome of action triggered by the horror of life, not the passive appreciation of select beauty. The act itself originates in compassion and pity at the brutality underlying all existence, which the aesthete finds revealed in a random scene:

Das letzte Pferd in der Reihe war besonders stark und häßlich. Es suchte den Mann, der vor ihm kniete und den gewaschenen Huf trockenrieb, mit seinen großen Zähnen in die Schulter zu beißen. Der Mann hatte so hohle Wangen und einen so todestraurigen Ausdruck in den müden Augen, daß der Kaufmannssohn von

tiefe, bitterem Mitleid überwältigt wurde. Er wollte den Elenden durch ein Geschenk für den Augenblick aufheitern und griff in die Tasche nach Silbermünzen.⁵⁶

Characteristically, the merchant's son wants to ease the miserable situation with an impersonal gift of money rather than relieve the man's suffering with an immediate act of help. Whilst fishing for coins in his pocket, the aesthete is struck by the ugliness of the horse's facial expression and reminded of a man he once saw as a child:

Und er wußte, daß es das verzerrte Gesicht eines häßlichen armen Menschen war, den er ein einziges Mal im Laden seines Vaters gesehen hatte. Und daß das Gesicht von Angst verzerrt war, weil die Leute ihn bedrohten, weil er ein großes Goldstück hatte und nicht sagen wollte, wo er es erlangt hatte.⁵⁷

It is at this moment that he stoops to pick up a piece of jewellery that has fallen out of his pocket and is fatally struck by the horse. In his final breaths the aesthete denounces his life, because it has led him to such a hideous and miserable death, and

[diese] innere Wildheit verbrauchte seine letzte Kraft.⁵⁸

The merchant's son dies like Dorian Gray, with his face distorted in a repulsive and alien grimace which cruelly invalidates the obsession with beauty that has permeated his existence up to that point.

'Das Märchen der 672. Nacht' demonstrates that life and death can only be given moral significance through meaningful human relationships and that a complete withdrawal from human society into a totally aestheticised existence is not so much dangerous as impossible. It is dangerous precisely because it is impossible. Man/woman cannot escape his/her humanity by attempting to limit life to the sphere of inanimate objects and aesthetic pleasure. As a result of this belief, Hofmannsthal's insistence on the individual's foundation in the social, on the importance of the most basic social ideals and conventions, such as loyalty, sacrifice, compassion, and marriage, always outweighed his aestheticist heritage.⁵⁹ His scepticism towards the aesthetic life led him to embrace culture in its entirety, with all its artistic, creative, national, political, and religious implications. The aesthete in his writing is as a rule defined by the failure to use the innate capacity for wonderment for something other than solipsistic pleasure, the inability to recognise life as essentially social at all or only just when death is near at hand. Hofmannsthal himself defined 'Das Märchen der 672. Nacht' as the 'Gerichtstag des Ästhetizismus', 'the judgement day of aestheticism'.⁶⁰

At the same time, Hofmannsthal was troubled by the ramifications of the artistic sensibility. He viewed his own life as both privileged by intellectual and emotional insight and enriched by material beauty as well as lumbered by the social responsibility underlying the artist's existence. In the poem 'Manche freilich...' he elaborates on the aesthete-artist's exposure to the whole of

human destiny and his/her task of understanding and translating human consciousness through the artwork. The aesthete-artist's awareness of ordinary life and simultaneous ability to comprehend that which is not open to the senses make for a disconcerting dual existence as ordinary human being and elevated seer. At the heart of Hofmannsthal's aesthete-artist's life lies the difficult duty of resolving the dichotomy of being human and more than human.⁶¹

NOTES

- ¹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in Complete Works of Oscar Wilde (New York; London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 1130.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 1135.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 1131.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1118.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1146.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Oscar Wilde, 'The English Renaissance of Art', in Writing of the Nineties, ed. by Derek Stanford (London: Dent, 1971), pp. 20.
- ⁸ Timothy Hilton, The Pre-Raphaelites (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 189.
- ⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, p. 1151.
- ¹⁰ Similarly, Osbert Burdett in his book on The Beardsley Period (London: John Lane, 1925) exalts Beardsley himself as the greatest artist of his time who fully revealed the vision of evil underlying English society. According to Burdett, Beardsley's achievement lies in the sophisticated rendering of his critical insight through highly original drawings which both shocked and delighted through their subtle use of satire, the grotesque and the beautiful.
- ¹¹ Walter Pater, 'Style', Essays on Literature and Art, ed. by Jennifer Uglow (London: Everyman, 1973), p. 72.
- ¹² First quotation: *ibid.* Second quotation: Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, p. 1124.
- ¹³ James Joyce, 'The Dead', Dubliners, ed. by Terence Brown (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 193.
- ¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, p. 1137.

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- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1147.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1142.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1139.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1124.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1125.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1109.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 1147.
- ²³ Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', Complete Works of Oscar Wilde (New York; London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 53.
- ²⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, p. 1148.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1149.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1144.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1145.
- ²⁸ Walter Pater, 'Style', Essays on Literature and Art, p. 74.
- ²⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, pp. 1128/9.
- ³⁰ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Dichter und Leben', Gesammelte Werke: Reden und Aufsätze I: (1891-1913), ed. by Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), p. 235.
- 'This is the most dangerous kind of professions, that which is always concerned with the appearance of morality; it leads one to content oneself with moral possibilities.
- The awareness of the representability of life offers consolation for its overwhelming force; the awareness of life offers consolation for the shadowiness of the representation. They are thus connected; this will drag down a weak talent and elevate a strong one.' (My translation.)
- ³¹ Quotation from one of Hofmannsthal's letters, reproduced in Werner Volke, Hofmannsthal in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1967), p. 55.
- 'I believe: the beautiful life makes one poorer.' (My translation.)
- ³² 'Der Priesterzögling', in Sämtliche Werke, ed. by Rudolf Hirsch and others (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1975 –), XIX: Dramen 17, ed. by Ellen Ritter (1994), p. 44.
- ³³ Hofmannsthal, of course, was, strictly speaking, himself an aristocrat. His great-grandfather Isaak Löw Hofmann had been given the title 'Edler von Hofmannsthal' by the Austrian Emperor Ferdinand I in 1835. However, Hofmannsthal's family did not belong to the empire's ruling aristocracy. See also Werner Volke, Hofmannsthal in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten, p. 9.
- ³⁴ Broch, Hermann, Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit: Eine Studie (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1955)
- ³⁵ Werner Volke, Hofmannsthal in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten, pp. 12/3.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 8/9.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁸ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Poesie und Leben', Gesammelte Werke: Reden und Aufsätze I (1891-1913), p. 15.

'The disintegration of the intellect in art in recent decades has been driven by philologists in association with journalists and pseudo-poets.' (My translation.)

³⁹ See also Hugh Kenner, 'The *Portrait* in Perspective', in James Joyce: *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Morris Beja (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 125-50.

⁴⁰ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Poesie und Leben', Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Reden und Aufsätze I (1891-1913), p. 17.

'A characteristic tone is everything; those who cannot hold it deprive themselves of the inner freedom which makes the work possible in the first place. The bravest and strongest are those who are able to choose their words most freely; because nothing is more difficult than the attempt to tear them away from their fixed, false connections. A new and bold connection between words is the most wonderful present for the soul and not inferior to a statue of the boy Antinous or a great vaulted gate.' (My translation.)

⁴¹ Maurice Maeterlinck, Les trésor des humbles (Bruxelles: Edition Labor, 1986), p. 50.

⁴² For Bacon's influence on Hofmannsthal see Chapter IV.

⁴³ Walter Pater, 'Style', Essays on Literature and Art, p. 72.

⁴⁴ Robert Vilain, "'Wer lügt, macht schlechte Metaphern": Hofmannsthal's "Manche freilich..." and Walter Pater', *DVjs*, 65 (1991), pp. 717-754.

⁴⁵ Walter Pater, Essays on Literature and Art, p. 72.

⁴⁶ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Gedichte von Stefan George', Gesammelte Werke: Reden und Aufsätze I: 1891-1913, p. 214.

'However, because the audience is no longer accustomed to being addressed in a kind of tone and has completely forgotten how to differentiate between tones, let us note briefly that the poems in question have their own tone, which is the only important thing in poetry and hence in all of the arts; it is that which constitutes the difference between something and nothing, between the essential and the illusory, between that which is viable and that which is still-born.' (My translation.)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

'For the artist's artistic power and feeling for the world are one. Those torn between confused auspices, those who do not belong to themselves cannot help but choose the word in an allusive and common manner. Those who lie make bad metaphors.' (My translation.)

⁴⁸ Robert Vilain, "'Wer lügt, macht schlechte Metaphern": Hofmannsthal's "Manche freilich..." and Walter Pater'.

⁴⁹ For the connections between Wilde's novel and personal downfall and the conception of Hofmannsthal's fairy-tale, see Chapter V, which is devoted to The Picture on Dorian Gray.

⁵⁰ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Das Märchen der 672. Nacht', Gesammelte Werke: Erzählungen, erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen, ed. by Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), p. 45.

'Yet he was no means fearful of people, but enjoyed walking along the streets or in the public gardens and looking at people's faces.' (My translation.)

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46/7.

'With time he learned to see how all forms and colours lived in his things. He recognised in the entwined ornaments the enchanted image of the entwined miracles of the world. (...) He was for a long time intoxicated with this great, profound beauty, which was his, and all his days passed more beautifully and less emptily among those things, which were no longer dead or inferior but a great inheritance, the divine work of all generations.' (My translation.)

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45.

'He discovered the shapes of the animals and the shapes of the flowers and found that the flowers merged with the animals; (...) he found the conflict between the burden of the pillars and the resistance of the firm of ground and the striving of all water upward and again downward.' (My translation.)

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

'He read the letter several times and confessed to himself that the thought of losing his servant in such revolting circumstances inspired him with great fear. The more he thought about it, the more distraught he became and the less he could endure the idea of losing one of those creatures, with whom he had grown one through habit and other secret powers.' (My translation.)

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 52/3.

'He felt as though his most inner possession had been dishonoured and threatened and as though he was being forced to flee out of himself and disown that which he loved. (...) He realised for the first time what it was that had always angered him as a boy, the anxious love with which his father clung to what he had acquired, to the riches of his stores, the beautiful numb children of his pursuits and misgivings, the mysterious monsters of the vague and most profound desires of his life.' (My translation.)

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 60/1.

'The horse at the end of the row was particularly strong and ugly. With its big teeth it tried to bite the shoulder of the man who was kneeling in front of it and drying the newly cleansed horseshoe. The man's cheeks were so hollow and the look in his tired eyes so extremely sad that the merchant's son was overwhelmed by deep and bitter pity. He wanted to comfort the man for a moment by presenting him with a gift, and he reached for some silver coins in his pocket.'

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

'And he knew that it was the distorted face of an ugly poor man, whom he had seen once in his father's shop. And that the face was distorted with fear, because the people were threatening him, because he had a big gold coin and refused to say where he got it from.' (My translation.)

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

'And this inner wildness used up his last ounce of strength.' (My translation.)

⁵⁹ Werner Volke, *Hofmannsthal in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, p. 112.

⁶⁰ Hugo von Hofmannsthal quoted in the bibliography of *Gesammelte Werke: Erzählungen, erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen*, ed. by Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), p. 666.

⁶¹ This predicament also informs Hofmannsthal's concepts of 'Praeexistenz' and 'Triumph des Allomatischen' (Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Ad me ipsum', in Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben: 15 Bände, ed. by Herbert Steiner [Stockholm; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1945-1959], Aufzeichnungen (1959), pp. 213 & 218).

See also Judith Ryan, 'Die "allomatische" Lösung: Gespaltene Persönlichkeit und Konfiguration bei Hugo von Hofmannsthal', *DVjs*, 44 (1970), pp. 189-207.

IV

EIN BRIEF

'There is something between ourselves and our soul that nothing can penetrate; and there are moments, says Emerson, "in which we court suffering, in the hope that here at least we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth".¹

One century after Immanuel Kant's dethronement of reason from its position of absolute dominance commonly advocated by the Enlightenment, the thinkers of the European *fin de siècle* declared the individual self to be the smallest and irreducible unit of human existence. It was, they believed, an entity that was unknowable, an intrinsically humanised version of the Prussian philosopher's thing-in-itself. Thereby they confronted rational thought with a residue of individualism that could only be articulated in esoteric and emotive terms. By differentiating between the personal 'I', shaped and constituted by external influences, and an internal, inborn, inaccessible, and thus essentially metaphysical, core within man, late-nineteenth-century aestheticians such as Pater and Maeterlinck sought, it seems, to relativise the increasingly positivist, rationalist-materialist view of existence, which appeared to negate all possibility of spiritual truth.

The late-nineteenth-century phenomenon of European Aestheticism could thus be seen as the temporary climax of the process shaping post-Enlightenment aesthetics, which moved from a rediscovery of the body to the positing of a purely non-physical authority that could withstand and overcome, and ideally negotiate between, the corporeal senses and the mind. Although Kant's theory of aesthetics, by highlighting art's liberating and mediatory

function through the use of the beautiful, the sublime and aesthetic necessity, presented in many ways the crucial starting point for this development, its concurrent reliance on orthodox religion as the aesthetic's ultimate source and justification demanded a reinterpretation suitable for the age of high industrialism and post-Darwinism. Capitalism's relentless focus on the individual coupled with the natural sciences' discrediting of the scriptures and their account of man's evolution, had made it impossible for the educated intellectual to return to conventional metaphysics, while the increasing emphasis on material progress rendered the apparent lack of spirituality all the more apparent. This paradox rests at the heart of Aestheticism, which was as much a child of as a revolt against growing consumerism.²

As a consequence, Aestheticism boasts a multitude of metaphysical outlooks that shun the dualism of established religions with their traditional dependence on the asymmetrical relationship between man and an immaterial authority; instead, it attempts to limit the search for a reservoir of ultimate knowledge, and by this token integrity, to the individual human being. In doing so, *fin-de-siècle* aestheticians are habitually at pains to overcome the implications of empiricism, which regards man's consciousness purely as the result of sensory data received from material objects, a struggle that, as the contrasting examples of the Pater and Maeterlinck show, could take on quite opposite forms. While Walter Pater, England's foremost aesthete, tried his hand at personalised and highly eclectic versions of paganism, which, if not strictly private, nevertheless, in his life-time, failed to move beyond his own small Oxford circle and owe their popularisation mostly to their Wildean renditions, Maeterlinck looked initially, just as Hofmannsthal was to do later, to

the theatre as a platform for the unveiling of his spiritual ideals. His lyrical dramas of the 1890s were later to give way to the theatre of action, a journey which again mirrors that embarked on by Hofmannsthal.³ In his early dramas, however, Maeterlinck's emphasis is on a 'theatre of mood not movement', on atmospheric stasis in which the workings of the mystical 'pre-conscious' can be explored and which, with its Poe-esque style, medieval tone, and evocation of old romance, clashes with late-nineteenth-century European theatre's general preoccupation with social issues of the time as spearheaded by Hauptmann, Strindberg, and Ibsen.⁴

Maeterlinck's mysticism demonstrates the *fin de siècle*'s obsession with the discovery of sources of meaning and significance that could loosen the natural sciences' tight grip on truth. As a disciple of Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, Maeterlinck upheld the view that ultimate reality, that is non-physical, spiritual truth, could only be glimpsed in moments of ecstasy, and sought to defend faith against the dominance of reason. Rejecting contemporary theatre's exploration of society, politics, and culture as the origin of man's motivations, he was famed for his desire to illuminate 'the mystery in all human creatures, whose every act is regulated by far-off influences and obscurely rooted in things unexplained'.⁵ Moving through his personae of first poet then dramatist and finally philosopher, Maeterlinck came to formulate his ideas in a collection of essays entitled Le trésor des humbles (The Treasure of the Humble) first published in 1896.

In the fourth chapter of this influential book, entitled 'La morale mystique', he contrasts consciousness with an entity he identifies as soul and introduces as essential intuition, something that can merely be individually felt,

but not clearly defined, neither for the benefit of the individual self nor that of his fellows. The words man uses to describe these intimations are thus mere arbitrary form – they are approximations whose imperfect nature exposes man's inability to know the unknowable within himself. Even more importantly, by attempting to give form to what can only be intuitively known, man appears to reduce the value of this truth:

How strangely do we diminish a thing as soon as we try to express it in words! We believe we have dived down to the most unfathomable depths, and when we reappear on the surface, the drop of water that glistens on our trembling finger-tips no longer resembles the sea from which it came. We believe we have discovered a grotto that is stored with bewildering treasure; we come back to the light of day, and the gems we brought are false – mere pieces of glass – and yet does the treasure shine on, unceasingly in the darkness!⁶

Musil was to choose these words as the dark preamble to his first novel, Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß, leaving them to hover menacingly over the protagonist's fate, and thus, as we shall see later, precluding a complete resolution of the young man's confusions triggered by the gulf separating feeling and language.⁷

A reading of 'La morale mystique' in its entirety, however, makes Musil's choice of quotation appear like a misappropriation of Maeterlinck's work. Rather than positing the chasm between consciousness and soul as an irredeemable shortcoming of human existence, the symbolist poet detects the

dawn of man's spiritual emancipation. The text conjures up the image of a future in which men will live as a congenial community of souls guided by the innate and hence subtly felt principles of intuitive morality, thus rendering written, man-made law superfluous and circumventing the threat of dogma embodied in language itself.

With its teleological overtone and allusions to the imminent coming of a redeemer, 'La morale mystique' presents itself as a deeply religious text without reverting to ecclesiastic doctrine. Maeterlinck's vision of 'la troisième enceinte', man's transition into 'the third enclosure of being', resolves the antinomy of body and mind in an existence governed by mystical insight.⁸ The image of spiritual certainties as 'veiled queens' distances the text from patriarchal notions of theological precepts and introduces an element of playfulness combined with female spirituality that is not entirely unrelated to the *fin de siècle's* favourite figures of the *femme fatale* and the sphinx, an impression that is reinforced by the feminine gender of the French word 'l'âme'.⁹ Maeterlinck foresees the coming of an age in which man will be guided by the soul in enlightened self-rule and no longer by the external logic of consciousness dominated by the rules of necessity:

We are watched, we are under the strictest supervision, and it comes from elsewhere than the indulgent darknesses of each man's conscience! Perhaps the spiritual vases are less closely sealed now than in bygone days, perhaps more power has come to the waves of the sea within us?¹⁰

Conscience itself is rejected as the product of socially imposed ethics, which are undermined by their frequent coalition with social bigotry demonstrated by Maeterlinck through the stereotypical antithesis of the whore and the figures customarily admired by society, the philosopher, martyr, saint, and hero, and are to be replaced by intuitive knowledge and integrity. Maeterlinck splits soul from conscience by depicting it as both unconcerned and untarnished by sin:

She has not interfered, she was living her life
where the light fell on her, and it is this life only
that she can recall.¹¹

The metaphorical representation of soul and intuition as a sea of waves in continuous motion suggests the Heraclitan vortex of human existence as presented in the conclusion to Pater's essays on The Renaissance; however, where Maeterlinck emphasises the slow development towards a community of souls in which the solipsistic isolation entailed in individual existence will be overcome, Pater, as has been shown, encourages his readers to celebrate this very detachment by indulging in the uniqueness of each individual sensation. In contrast with Maeterlinck's mystical beliefs, Pater believed that the spiritual freedom entailed in unique singular sensations can only be momentary and should in fact be celebrated for its fleeting nature. Where Maeterlinck identifies intuitive emotion as a path towards an existence purely dominated by the soul, Pater upholds sensation as the only source of momentary truth in a life largely commanded by uncertainty and instability.

Maeterlinck's theory carries strong political and moral implications, although its somewhat naïve dependence on the ephemerality of life appears

to disallow the attribution of a revolutionary design. By insisting on the autonomy of the soul, on unformulated maxims which can only be felt, never articulated, Maeterlinck rejects the principles of society and religion and upholds man's intuitive faculty as the only source of truth. Whilst acknowledging the late-nineteenth-century notion of the death of God, he hastens to point out that the lack of faith in a supernatural authority has not resulted in the disappearance of spirituality. Rather, it allows the forces at work within the soul to make themselves more urgently felt and known on the surface of human consciousness:

I have said elsewhere that the souls of mankind seemed to be drawing nearer to each other, and even if this be not a statement that can be proved, it is none the less based upon deep-rooted, though obscure, convictions. It is indeed difficult to advance facts in its support, for facts are nothing but the laggards, the spies and camp followers of the great forces we cannot see. But surely there are moments when we seem to feel, more deeply than did our fathers before us, that we are not in the presence of ourselves alone. Neither those who believe in a God, nor those who disbelieve, are found to act in themselves as though they were sure of being alone.¹²

Rather than moral anarchy, the fading of the impact of religious dogma appears to encourage more immediate communication between individuals via the innate and untouchable entity of the soul, which bypasses the single consciousness with its reliance on and subordination to the material world. As

scientific and industrialist progress appears to come ever closer to the point of satiation, the world of the fathers and their trust in capitalist individualism fades more and more into the background. According to Maeterlinck, the removal of economic needs has paved the way for an existence in which man could devote his life to the understanding of others, to the overthrow of solipsism, a process which will result in a type of conscience superior to that encouraged by the tenets of current society. The belief in the potential of industrialised society to move beyond the confines of egoistic individualism nurtured by material progress and use scientific advancement as the foundation of an egalitarian community in which man could develop his personality mirrors the social theories propounded by, amongst others, Marx, Renan, and Wilde.¹³

The insight that material and externally visible stability can only be founded on illusion also dominates Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Ein Brief, which purports to be a letter written by the fictitious English aristocrat and poet Lord Chandos to the philosopher Francis Bacon in 1603. In the letter, Chandos identifies himself as a failed prodigy, a former poet and favourite at the Elizabethan court, who has, quite simply, lost the ability to express himself in words; they, and with them the social structures based on language, have lost all meaning to him. At the same time, Chandos has begun to experience moments of profound spiritual insight, in which his intellectual vigour and reason succumb to emotion caused by an empathetic union with perceived or imagined objects.

Hofmannsthal was later to define Chandos's predicament as the 'Situation des Mystikers ohne Mystik', that of a mystic exposed to the bewildering perceptions afforded by mysticism yet lacking the belief in the

existence of a supra-sensuous entity with whom one could aspire to achieve some kind of union.¹⁴ An ecstatic moment of self-surrender in which the object of contemplation does not promise as a reward for the pain entailed in self-loss the intimation of a higher truth must leave the individual stranded in a world without solid reality. According to Maeterlinck, the gradual abandonment of established faiths and their reliance on conventionalised material symbols as conveyors of meaning, a process he believed to be witnessing in the late nineteenth century, would finally result in a form of mystic morality that would render written and visualised law superfluous. The individual would eventually be set free from the shackles of a uniform 'code of morality' predicated on a combination of empirical fact and traditional metaphysics, in favour of a life based on the silent communication and understanding between souls where neither thought nor word exist.¹⁵

Inner and outer silence also characterise the mental and social state epitomised by Chandos. Unable to find solace or significance in philosophy or orthodox religion, he is forced to reject the parameters of society, in which the union of church and state has historically warranted the desire for a continuation of material progress and the preservation of the political status quo. And even though autobiographical readings of the text usually look upon it as an apologia for Chandos's, and by this token Hofmannsthal's, literary inactivity, the terms and tone of the letter make it a locus classicus of early-twentieth-century aestheticism. In fact, the paragraph dedicated to the numb *disbelief* with which Chandos encounters the notion of orthodox religion reveals a carefully balanced mixture of regret and relief, reverence and subversion:

Es möchte dem, der solchen Gesinnungen zugänglich ist, als der wohlangelegte Plan einer göttlichen Vorsehung erscheinen, daß mein Geist aus einer so aufgeschwollenen Anmaßung in dieses Äußerste von Kleinmut und Kraftlosigkeit zusammensinken mußte, welches nun die bleibende Verfassung meines Inneren ist. Aber dergleichen religiöse Auffassungen haben keine Kraft über mich; sie gehören zu den Spinnennetzen, durch welche meine Gedanken durchschießen, hinaus ins Leere, während so viele ihrer Gefährten dort hangenbleiben und zu einer Ruhe kommen. Mir haben sich die Geheimnisse des Glaubens zu einer erhabenen Allegorie verdichtet, die über den Feldern meines Lebens steht wie ein leuchtender Regenbogen, in einer stetigen Ferne, immer bereit, zurückzuweichen, wenn ich mir einfallen ließe, hinzueilen und mich in den Saum seines Mantels hüllen zu wollen.¹⁶ (EB 464)

The passage resonates with feigned deference and critical distance. It opens in the subjunctive which both introduces and immediately discredits the views of the orthodox believer by implying a sense of *Schadenfreude* at the sight of Chandos's presumed downfall that would ill-befit a follower of Christianity, with its promotion of compassion and humility, while an agency of divine providence dedicated to designing intricate pit-falls for its young devotees hints at an irate Old Testament God luring an unsuspecting Job. Chandos continues by dismissing religious dogma as 'spiders' webs', which both benevolently and threateningly break the fall of man's spiralling thoughts by cushioning them in

the tightly knit web of a pre-established world-view. The metaphor implies not so much a safety net as an abusive relationship of giving and taking, where the protégé is also the victim – orthodox religion, it seems, lives off, in fact owes its very existence to, the life-blood of its believers, whose imagination it calms like an anaesthetic, thus offering merely one form of rest ('zu *einer* Ruhe kommen'; my italics) rather than the ideal self-conscious repose made possible by a completely balanced and enlightened inner self. The paralysing effect of theological doctrines contrasts with the vigorous freedom implied by the word 'durchschießen', which in turn contradicts Chandos's protestations of extreme powerlessness and depression.

Chandos's nihilistic experience and seemingly involuntary embrace of the vacuum inhabited by absolute dissent presents a valid and preferable alternative to the literary density of established metaphysics. Despite its enticing colourfulness and aesthetic impact, the rainbow represents but another example of Hofmannsthal's notion of 'das Scheinhafte', which pervades both natural and man-made beauty and renders the artistic-aesthetic life so hazardous.¹⁷ The scriptures themselves are reduced to an elevated system of scholarly writings, which in its intricacy teasingly fails to provide comfort for those who have lost faith and appear to need it most. Chandos both bemoans and celebrates his inability to find refuge in religion – the image of the protective coat suggests both safety as well as a reassuring shield from the truth underlying human existence, an insight that he indulges in with anxious defiance. Life, he acknowledges, is in fact characterised by the emptiness beyond the web formed by man-made systems of thought, a nothingness that can be both destructive and liberating.

Rather than a decline into depression caused by the supposed recognition of the inefficiency of language as a source of perception, which Ein Brief is usually taken to demonstrate, the text offers an eloquent and intrinsically subversive alternative to conventional world-views and their output on ethics and morality.¹⁸ By declaring orthodox religion useless for the purpose of his letter and yet continuing his attempt to communicate to Bacon the nature of his crisis and its potential resolution, Chandos posits himself in a vacuum to which political and social truths have no access, a virtual *tabula rasa* of consciousness. Left only with his powers of sensory feeling and stripped of any meaningful sense of linguistic history and tradition, Chandos is forced to re-define himself within the context of his own experiences. His resolute dismissal of religious dogma exposes the regretful tone at the outset of the letter as purely the product of a good and thorough education, which has instilled in him a set of automatic responses and manners necessary for the execution of his position as a man of property and member of the English aristocracy.¹⁹ Hence he experiences

Mühe, die Starre meines Innern vor meiner Frau und vor meinen Leuten die Gleichgültigkeit zu verbergen, welche mir die Angelegenheiten des Besitzes einflößen. Die gute und strenge Erziehung, welche ich meinem seligen Vater verdanke, und die frühzeitige Gewöhnung, keine Stunde des Tages unausgefüllt zu lassen, sind es, scheint mir, allein, welche meinem Leben nach außen hin einen genügenden Halt und den meinem Stande und meiner Person angemessenen Anschein bewahren.²⁰ (EB 470)

Chandos's inclusion in society is warranted only by the perpetuation of his material status. His inability to share in the faiths and parameters of Elizabethan society reveals his reference to the 'heavenly Queen' as mere lip-service to a circle to which he once belonged.

By condemning what he identifies as the inflated arrogance of his youth, Chandos concurrently questions the validity of the markers of significance adhered to by Renaissance England's imperialist élite. Once hailed as an intellectual prodigy whose artistic achievement served to uphold and solemnise the achievement of the Elizabethan period, Chandos's cognitive crisis now leads him to renounce all literary activity. Despite the much-invoked loss of language which Chandos is usually believed to have suffered, the letter's emphasis is not so much on his inability to produce further works of literature as on his repudiation of his status as artist at Elizabeth's court. Chandos may well be able to execute all of the projects Bacon's calls to his mind, but in order to do so he would have to overcome the strong sense of insincerity which the formulaic language of power evokes in him, now that he has realised that ultimate reality cannot be come at with words.

Pater's somewhat unintentional alliance with the Kantian thing-in-itself, his undeclared insistence on an inborn spiritual faculty within man that must ultimately be identified as soul, is also pertinent in my reading of Hofmannsthal's Ein Brief in more than one way. It is mirrored in the oblique nature of what exactly triggers Chandos's existential crisis, as its sudden and unforeseen occurrence contradicts the aestheticist notion of external influences resulting in moods, which modify the individual. Secondly, but closely

connected to our first point, Pater's involuntary dependence on metaphysics helps to rescue Hofmannsthal from his alleged and often proclaimed alliance with Ernst Mach, while Hofmannsthal, at the same time, shares with Maeterlinck a belief in innate morality that is strictly separate from all conventional dogma and socio-religious rituals:

Hüten Sie sich vor allem, was eine Form hat, ob es der Katholizismus ist oder die sozialistischen Ideen. Man verfängt sich in Formen, sie sind entsetzliche Netze.²¹

Exposure to form, which attracts by presenting the individual with pre-established systems with which to organise the indefinite experience entailed in human existence, demands the presence of a pre-shaped personality that can withstand the alluring promise of what appear to be fixed, ascertained, and thus irresistible, truths.

Pater's diaphanous natures too are characterised by poised unconventionality, a state which Chandos appears to be moving towards by the end of the letter. They recognise themselves in the elements active outside them without succumbing to the restlessness of their perpetual motion. This attitude of distanced acceptance should not be confused with what, somewhat unfairly, has come to be known as the calculating cynicism of the Wildean dandy and is even often even identified with Wilde himself. The diaphanous type establishes bonds with the outside world, thus overcoming the incarcerated state of individual consciousness, without, however, allowing its unique temperament to be eradicated by the influence of imposed dogma.

Only by relating to the external world can man gain a sense of his own being, since he only knows himself to be alive through sensory perception. This, if you will, essence of self depends on a variable set of symbols and images:

Wollen wir uns finden, so dürfen wir nicht in unser Inneres hinabsteigen: draußen sind wir zu finden, draußen. Wie der wesenlose Regenbogen spannt sich unsere Seele über den unaufhaltsamen Sturz des Daseins. Wir besitzen unser Selbst nicht: von außen weht es uns an, es flieht uns für lange und kehrt uns in einem Hauch zurück. Zwar – unser 'Selbst'! Das Wort ist solch eine Metapher. Regungen kehren zurück, die schon einmal früher hier genistet haben. Und sind sies auch wirklich selber wieder? Ist es nicht vielmehr nur ihre Brut, die von einem dunklen Heimatgefühl hierher zurückgetrieben wird? Genug, etwas kehrt wieder. Und etwas begegnet sich in uns mit anderem. Wir sind nicht mehr als ein Taubenschlag.²²

In accordance with the main tenet of French Symbolism that re-encountered and re-lived moods represent the only consistency in human existence, Hofmannsthal's 'Gepräch über Gedichte' embraces poetry as the 'Zauberwort' contrasting everyday language by its ability to evoke feelings through their associated images. More importantly, however, symbolism highlights the possibility of formulating and creating original emblems that allow the individual's character to retain its original spirit, which would form the stabilising

backdrop to the relentless activity of change and vicissitude within the pigeon loft of human emotions.

Ein Brief occupies an exceptional position within the context of the group of texts discussed in this thesis; it is the only work to present its readers with a sense of closure, by which I do not mean to say that it precludes open and varied readings, but rather that it presents its protagonist at a final state of peace in stasis. Together with Virginia Woolf's novel To the Lighthouse, it describes aesthetic life as a valid alternative to conventional existence. There is an element of certainty in Chandos's apologetic and yet firm self-explication, a level of self-consciousness which is only matched by Lili Briscoe's assessment of her own existence as artist. Unlike Lili's, however, Chandos's creative crisis results in his abandonment of art and a shift towards exclusively spiritual existence, which only a superficial reading could dismiss as forced. He joins Dorian and Törleß by embracing aesthetic appreciation, yet without succumbing to the decadence detectable in the lives of the two dandies. Chandos thus realises most closely the life of the independent soul as described by Maeterlinck.

In its treatment by Hofmannsthal scholars and more general interpreters of the Viennese *fin de siècle*, Ein Brief has suffered from its close associations with the cultural background of its time. As the chapter on Hofmannsthal's role as a major representative of Viennese Aestheticism and late-nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist* has shown, Lord Chandos's creator represents the most

erudite and widely read of the writers discussed in the present thesis. Although as eclectic as Wilde in his choice of influences and contexts, his approach to sources appears less liberal, and as a result perhaps also less whimsical, and has given, and continues to give, rise to a plethora of learned secondary literature dedicated to the composition and background of Ein Brief. Eager to increase the text's significance, critics tend to instrumentalise it as a way of simplifying their reading of Hofmannsthal's literary career and furthermore historicise it by over-emphasising its importance as a document symptomatic of the decade leading up to World War One.

My reading of Ein Brief rejects the idea of the text as testimony to the breakdown of Hofmannsthal's poetic creativity. As has been shown in a number of more recent critiques, the letter cannot be confined to its autobiographical context. The most thorough re-interpretation has been presented by Rolf Tarot, who, by quoting one of Hofmannsthal's letters addressed to Leopold von Andrian, the author of Der Garten der Erkenntnis, reveals the actual impulse for the letter's conception, which is shown to be far more light-hearted and incidental in character than is usually assumed.²³

A closer look at the Hofmannsthal-Andrian correspondence, however, also exposes Hofmannsthal's own rather ambiguous, but in the light of his view of the relationship between life and art rather unsurprising, attitude towards Chandos's predicament. As the following excerpt from the letter to Andrian which was to introduce the new composition demonstrates, the biographical misreading of Ein Brief by even such a subtle critic as Richard Alewyn, whose essay 'Hofmannsthal's Wandlung' is largely responsible for establishing the work's post 1945 reputation as Hofmannsthal's sudden and irreparable break

with lyricism and poetry, is partly mirrored by the author's own confusion with regard to the text's intended function.²⁴

In this preparatory note, Hofmannsthal offers two reasons why he wishes his friend to read Ein Brief. Firstly, he argues that it represents the only complete composition among his recent writings, and, secondly, that it has profoundly personal relevance,

weil gerade dieser Arbeit, die keine dichterische ist, das Persönliche stark anhaftet und Du sie zum Teil wirst lesen können, wie einen von mir geschriebenen Brief, den Du auf dem Schreibtisch einer dritten Person gefunden hättest.

Mir ist nun einmal keine andere Art, mich auszusprechen gegeben, als die, deren Medium die Phantasie ist, und darum sehne ich mich ja ganz besonders nach dieser Production: um auch gegen die Menschen, mit denen ich mich innerlich so sehr, manchmal in abmüdender Weise, in endlosen inneren Gesprächen, beschäftige, nicht ganz stumm zu erscheinen. Könnte ich endlich etwas Größeres vollenden, so hoffe ich innigst, Du würdest darin meine Nähe und auch das, was uns verbindet, fühlen und Dir immer wieder daraus hervorrufen können.²⁵

Hofmannsthal's characterisation of the letter as 'nicht dichterisch' does not automatically mark Ein Brief as biographical, and therefore confessional, material. Rather, Hofmannsthal appears to be using the adjective in its old form, denoting a non-poetical composition, prose. Rather than endeavour to

present the Letter as a non-fictional, that is factual, text, his mention of 'Phantasie' in the following paragraph points to the fabricated and highly stylised nature of the work. Moreover, fantasy itself suggests imagination and a flight of fancy, which in this case is not restricted to the workings of the mind but released and communicated through language.

It has become a commonplace within research dedicated to *Ein Brief* to marvel at its articulacy and its superb stylistic richness, which so openly contradict both Chandos's protests regarding the loss of his literary powers as well as Hofmannsthal's own alleged crisis of language. However, as Rolf Tarot demonstrates, Renaissance literature, with its esteem for sophisticated wit and flights of fancy restricted by reason, differed substantially from our post-Romantic equation of poetry with lyricism and its striving for the ineffable. Consequently, Hofmannsthal's crisis must necessarily be regarded as extending far beyond language and in fact circumscribing the writer's life-long conflict with the rationalist image of a stable consciousness and its foundation in the written and spoken word.²⁶

What Rolf Tarot aptly calls a crisis of the *mythical* consciousness, thus departing from Gotthart Wunberg's more limited empiricist emphasis on a *general* crisis of consciousness ('Krise des Ich-Bewußtseins'), registers a rupture within the link between subject and object, a bond which depends on language as the means of communication.²⁷ As word and object fail to merge in the subject's mind, the hitherto known world becomes incomprehensible and alien. In his endeavour to highlight Hofmannsthal's embeddedness in the culture of Vienna at the turn of the century, Wunberg unwittingly undermines his argument by aligning Hofmannsthal rather too rashly and uncritically with

the empiricist Ernst Mach. In fact, whereas Mach's theory clearly involves sensory perception rather than intellectual reflection, Wunberg's reliance on the philosopher's work in his interpretation of Ein Brief remains unsubstantiated and unjustified. Chandos's famous lament,

Es zerfiel mir alles in Teile, die Teile wieder in
Teile, und nichts mehr ließ sich mit einem Begriff
umspannen²⁸ (EB 133/4),

does not concern the fragmentation and disintegration of sensory impressions into their elements in Mach's sense, but rather concerns solely the context of language. Chandos's metaphor of the microscope serves merely as an extended simile, a means of conveying his acute feeling of estrangement from men and their everyday actions, which can only be given meaning through language:

Mein Geist zwang mich, alle Dinge, die in einem
solchen Gespräch vorkamen, in einer
unheimlichen Nähe zu sehen: so wie ich einmal
in einem Vergrößerungsglas ein Stück von der
Haut meines kleinen Fingers gesehen hatte, das
einem Brachfeld mit Furchen und Höhlen glich,
so ging es mir nun mit den Menschen und
Handlungen. Es gelang mir nicht mehr, sie mit
dem vereinfachenden Blick der Gewohnheit zu
erfassen.²⁹ (EB 466)

Chandos can only arrive at a unified view of the world through immediate feeling, that is aesthetic perception, rather than retrospective thought.

One of the main concerns of Pater, Maeterlinck, and Hofmannsthal lies with communication and the isolation of the individual consciousness. Unsurprisingly therefore, man's state of loneliness in his emotional and intellectual existence also forms the basis of Hofmannsthal's note to Andrian that accompanied Ein Brief. Artistic creation as a medium for communicating with the outside world, as expression of fellow-feeling and shared destiny, lies at the heart of Hofmannsthal's desire to break out of his silent dialogues, his endless internal conversations ('in endlosen inneren Gesprächen') with the invisible other, by articulating his emotions through art.

Feeling represents the most, or rather the only, immediate tool of communication in Ein Brief, as it does in Hofmannsthal's world-view in general. Since words are mere substitutions for unmediated being and are therefore open to misinterpretation (a notion which Hofmannsthal must have found only too acutely confirmed by Andrian's unsympathetic response to Ein Brief), sensory impressions, immediate aesthetic stimuli, signify the only path to man's temporary release from constant exposure to isolated consciousness. Yet even then it fails to rid itself of its one-sidedness. Empathy with a fellow-being may result in the momentary suspense of solipsistic existence, but man lacks the means of ensuring that, or even knowing whether or to what extent, his feelings are reciprocated or understood. His only option is the constant attempt to relate his feelings to his other by using the symbolist method of translating mood into language, a struggle which lies at the heart of Hofmannsthal's emphasis on Ein Brief as a means of strengthening his bonds with Andrian.

That the success of such an attempt cannot be guaranteed is shown in the friend's rather cold reaction, which demonstrates the capricious relationship between language and meaning:

Ich möchte nur erwähnen, daß die dichterische Einkleidung, das Versetzen in die Englische Vergangenheit, mich nicht angenehm berührte – da Dir doch die Absicht, Dein Substrat auf eigentlich dichterische Art zu verwandeln, fern lag, wäre, so scheint es mir, ein schlichter Bericht das passendste und auch wirkungsvollste gewesen – und gerade da sichs um ein Selbstbekenntnis handelt, war mir der historische Flitter eher peinlich.³⁰

Andrian seems to be advocating here pure un-stylised confessional prose as a tool of sincerity and authenticity, which Hofmannsthal so fervently rejects in the 'Poesie und Leben' lecture of 1896. Moreover, Andrian's dislike of the English Renaissance setting reveals the extent of his misreading. Rather than serve as mere trumpery, the text's historical background not so much enriches but constitutes the manner of the work by defining an essential aspect of its style. Consequently, Hofmannsthal could not have done justice to the problem dealt with in Ein Brief, had he simply transferred his own predicament with regard to the phenomenological character of all forms of existence. Unlike Chandos, Hofmannsthal did not continue his life by merely tolerating the burden of everyday existence and losing himself in temporary epiphanic ecstasy. In fact, and this point may appear self-evident but deserves a mention in view of secondary literature's inclination towards biographical readings, Hofmannsthal

would not have been in the position of composing Ein Brief, which requires him to distance himself from his subject-matter, unless he had already analysed and overcome his own version of the crisis. The nucleus of Ein Brief, if not the style and format, seems to originate from a casual impulse, a fleeting moment of inspiration, rather than careful deliberation, as Hofmannsthal's response to von Andrian's rather unenthusiastic reaction to the text shows:

Von dem was Du tadelnd bemerkst will ich nur eines mit einem Einwand aufnehmen. Nämlich daß Du sagst, ich hätte mich zu diesen Geständnissen oder Reflexionen nicht einer historischen Maske bedienen, sondern sie direct vorbringen sollen. Ich ging aber wirklich vom entgegengesetzten Punkt aus. Ich blätterte im August öfter in den Essays von Bacon, fand die Intimität dieser Epoche reizvoll, träumte mich in die Art und Weise hinein wie diese Leute des XVIten Jahrhunderts die Antike empfanden, bekam Lust etwas in diesem Sprechton zu machen und der Gehalt, den ich, um nicht kalt zu wirken, einem eigenen Inneren Erlebnis, einer lebendigen Erfahrung entleihen mußte, kam dazu. (...) ... aber wenn Du mich wieder heißen wolltest, diesen Gehalt direct zu geben, so ginge für mich aller Anreiz zu dieser Arbeit verloren – der starke Reiz für mich ist, vergangene Zeiten nicht ganz tot sein zu lassen, oder fernes Fremdes als nah verwandt spüren zu machen.³¹

The element of playfulness introduced by Hofmannsthal by no means undermines, in fact it accentuates, the composition's significance. The poet's

passion for the art of the English Renaissance serves as a foil to his impassioned attitude towards life as well his role as an artist. Hofmannsthal's references to intimacy, dreaming, and desire reveal an intense feeling for all aspects of human existence. Chandos's surrender to the fragmentation undergone by language within his mind certainly has its roots in Hofmannsthal's own experience, which, however, does not necessarily equal the climactic and apocalyptic one of Chandos. In Hofmannsthal's letter to Andrian, there is no mention of a crisis of language, although the vivid personal experience hinted at must, at some point at least, certainly have involved a temporary rupture in the poet's relationship between his writing and the external world.

Ein Brief represents a possibility based on a what-if supposition, which could not have occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, for, after all, as a post-Romantic, Hofmannsthal was in the possession of lyrical language with which he could have expressed his emotions and given form to whatever vision his imagination presented to him. The deeper problem lies therefore elsewhere, beyond the realms of poetic expression alone. This is indicated within Hofmannsthal's letter to Andrian, where he presents the friend with his plan to write further fictions based on historical figures, including an imaginary conversation between Balzac and Hammer-Purgstall, 'das einzige, welches nicht über litterarische oder Artistenprobleme hinausgeht'.³² Hofmannsthal thus clearly conceived Ein Brief as the reflection of a dilemma firmly rooted in human life in general rather than restricted to the artistic psyche – the arbitrary nature and inefficiency of language as man's crucial tool of communication

while, on another level, it offers an assessment of the limitations of poetry and lyricism.

Hofmannsthal composed 'Das Gespräch über Gedichte' in 1903, one year after Ein Brief, and the two texts appear intimately related. Both are fictions intended as expressions of Hofmannsthal's attitude towards poetry and language, towards life and the individual. Read in their mutual context, they contradict the supposition of Hofmannsthal's alleged rigorous rejection of language as a possible vehicle of truth. Although the quotation given above may at first glance appear to verify Gotthart Wunberg's linking of the writer with the contemporary philosopher Ernst Mach, Hofmannsthal's oeuvre cannot be regarded as anti-metaphysical in nature.³³ Although Hofmannsthal mirrors Mach in his refusal to consider body and mind in separation and thus consequently in his embrace of a monistic world-view, even a randomly selected sample of Hofmannsthal's writing will suffice to contradict the claim that, like Mach, he believed in sensation as the exclusive source of reality.

The difficulty in aligning Mach and Hofmannsthal presents itself in the question of morality. Hofmannsthal was anxious to distance himself from the relative nature of all existence, from a *laissez-faire*, an anything-goes attitude with regard to purpose and behaviour. Similarly, Wunberg may be right in pointing out that both Bacon and Mach saw human sensations as composed by elements, which can be separated and investigated, but he errs as to their intentions. Whereas Mach emphasises the amoral state of the individual consciousness, which is constituted by complex groupings of sensations, Bacon's empiricist approach means to abolish superstition by allowing man to control nature and thus fulfil his God-given purpose. Unlike Mach, Bacon

strictly differentiated between body and mind, thus promoting the dominance of reason over feeling and fleshly desires, in accordance with the beliefs of Christianity. Mach, on the other hand, regards man's ability and need to impose order on his sensations – which do not merely influence but constitute his self – as the only source of significance. Like Nietzsche, he promotes memory as a means of creating ever-changing fictions of personality. However, whereas Nietzsche considers fiction-making a sign of man's potential eminence, Mach reduces it to a necessary tool of sanity. Mach's view of the individual as prisoner of his own sensations thus remains unredeemed.

Wunberg insists on Ein Brief's dual importance as the document of a crisis permeating both *Sprache* and *Bewußtsein*. Moreover, he interprets Hofmannsthal's choice of Bacon as addressee as proof that Chandos's problem must not only be in some way related to the philosopher's subject of study but can, and even must, also be expected to be met with sympathy by the designated reader. This view is again contradicted by Ralf Tarot's reading of the fictional letter, in which he highlights the didactic nature of English Renaissance poetry. The use of amplification and conceit combined with the strict observance of decorum left little room for the fantastical facets of the human psyche in the poetry approved of by Bacon. An exercise of reason rather than feeling, this type of poetry delighted by its articulacy and choice of diction rather than its personal import. At the same, however, as the following passage from Bacon's 'The Advancement of Learning' shows, its extravagant nature showed the world as perceived by the individual mind, which was allowed to succumb to its own imaginings and flights of fancy within the bounds of moral propriety:

The use of Feigned History [i.e. poetry] hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the kind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it: the world being in proportion inferior to the soul... So as it appeareth that poesy serveth and conferreth to magnanimity, morality, and to delectation. And therefore it was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shews of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things.³⁴

According to Bacon, poetry disregards the true 'nature of things', that is visible material reality, by extending its activity to the realm of the human soul, which tends to look beyond the surface of appearances. Rather than praising poetry, Bacon seems to tolerate it merely as a source of moderated flattery addressed to the human mind, a type of text that shows things as they are perceived and interpreted by individual personalities rather than as they really are in the positivistic world-view. By paying tribute to man's god-like power of creativity, the imagination, poetry elevates man, thus freeing him temporarily from the grip of reason. Yet there can be no doubt as to Bacon's vindication of reason to 'buckle and bow the mind'. Ultimately, however, he believes in the human self's ability to achieve self-understanding. His humanism confirmed his belief in man's ability to achieve ultimate knowledge of nature and thereby himself. Influenced by his thoughts on the relation of science and literature, English poetry of the eighteenth century served as merely decorative reflection of the

external world, affording pleasure by its ingenuity and the level of craftsmanship displayed. English Romanticism represents a reaction against the empiricism of Locke and Newton, as poets like Blake and Coleridge endeavoured to recover the human spirit as an entity independent of the mechanisms of the human body.³⁵ They thus reinstated soul and intuition in what they regarded as their proper superior place.

Chandos's longing for lyrical expression can thus be taken to be directly opposed to Bacon's plea for the supremacy of reason. At the same time, Wunberg is right to point to Hofmannsthal's renunciation of the *idola fori*, of conventional language, as a legacy of his reading of Bacon, who rejected the words' powerful reign over the understanding, which stand as a barrier between man and the thing-in-itself by simplifying and imposing order on the mind, thus preventing the individual from defining the external world by way of its faculty of reason. In Bacon's view, the tradition of language, of words and their pre-determined meaning handed down from generation to generation, encourages the human mind to stagnate in inactivity and become adverse to analytical thought. In his view, they thus prevent man from recognising the thing-in-itself.

Rather than in natural sciences, Hofmannsthal's deeply felt need for a re-invention of language is rooted in his Paterian belief in the need for individuality and originality as a means of fulfilled existence. In his speech 'Poesie und Leben', Hofmannsthal argues for the autonomy of poetry as a language separate from that of everyday life:

Die Worte sind alles, die Worte, mit denen man
Geschehenes und Gehörtes zu einem neuen

Dasein hervorrufen und nach inspirierten Gesetzen als ein Bewegtes vorspiegeln kann. Es führt von der Poesie kein direkter Weg ins Leben, aus dem Leben keiner in die Poesie. Das Wort als Träger eines Lebensinhaltes und das traumhafte Bruderwort, welches in einem Gedicht stehen kann, streben auseinander und schweben fremd aneinander vorüber, wie die beiden Eimer eines Brunnens.³⁶

According to Hofmannsthal, poetry must convey temporary states of elevated existence rather than the vexing banalities or tragic occurrences of life as portrayed by the realist mode. The finest of these 'moments of being', to borrow Virginia Woolf's phrase, are the epiphanic visions experienced by Chandos, as he loses himself in a perceived object. These are moments of grace, as Gabriel explains in 'Das Gespräch über Gedichte':

Daß das Tier für ihn sterben konnte, wurde ein großes Mysterium, eine große geheimnisvolle Wahrheit. Das Tier starb hinfort den symbolischen Opfertod. Aber alles ruhte darauf, daß auch er in dem Tier gestorben war, einen Augenblick lang. Daß sich sein Dasein, für die Dauer eines Atemzugs, in dem fremden Dasein aufgelöst hatte.³⁷

Chandos lacks, or believes himself to be lacking, the language with which he could express his vision of the dying rats. He requires symbols which could carry the secret of his soul and thus alleviate his loneliness. At the same time, the rats themselves mirror his own despair, as he finds himself trapped in a

state of mind that he is unable to articulate. Devoid of pertinent language, Chandos is thus left to anthropomorphise the vermin's destruction and violate the code of Renaissance literature even further.

Ein Brief describes a man's loss of order and structure, which necessarily manifest themselves in the form of words. Language is the organising tool of human life and society, and by failing to connect words with meanings, that is objects with their man-made names, Chandos resigns himself to an existence of 'kaum glaublicher Leere' (EB 470), which he transcends momentarily by epiphanic visions. Chandos vacillates between two extremes, which are in fact closely related. His inner rigidity ('die Starre meines Innern', EB 470) in everyday life parallels his involuntary refuge in the vortex of feverish thoughts, which lead him to peace in stasis rather than mere emptiness:

Es ist mir dann, als geriete ich selber in Gärung,
würfe Blasen auf, wallte und funkelte. Und das
Ganze ist eine Art fieberisches Denken, aber
Denken in einem Material, das unmittelbarer,
flüssiger, glühender ist als Worte. Es sind
gleichfalls Wirbel, aber solche, die nicht wie die
Wirbel der Sprache ins Bodenlose zu führen
scheinen, sondern irgendwie in mich selber und
in den tiefsten Schoß des Friedens.³⁸ (EB 471)

Despite the letter's heart-felt rejection of abstract thought, this end-state can only be described by an abstract term like peace, since giving it shape and form through words would mean limiting it by turning it into dogma, into a state of achievable being rather than intuitive non-being.

What marks Ein Brief as a crucial text of Western culture is its adamant adherence to the self as the central entity of every human being. Chandos's holism, his self-recognition in all aspects of life, in the spiritual as well as the physical, in art as well as in non-art, nature, enables him to feel himself, to transcend the borders between inner and outer world: 'und in aller Natur fühlte ich mich selber' (EB 464).³⁹ Chandos is a lyricist without lyrical expression, since in his empathy with nature he achieves Keats's ideal state of negative capability, thus spiritually overcoming the formal restraints of pre-Romantic poetry.⁴⁰ However, although Chandos's supposed inability to transpose his experiences into suitable language coupled with his belief in the possibility of another kind of language, convey the promise of a lyrical age, in which the divine within the human, man's infinite nature, will make itself known to all of mankind, Hofmannsthal's choice of historical perspective leads us to doubt the realisation of this enterprise, whose merits are rendered dubious when viewed within the framework of aestheticist theory.

Chandos's actual achievement consists in his ability to forget himself, rather than know himself, by projecting himself into nature, or, to be more precise, by surrendering his conscious personality, his ego, to his environment. Isolated from, and by this token relieved of, the illusory faith in the existence of a true meaning of words, his life begins to centre upon the good moments, 'die guten Augenblicke', in which his subjectivity merges with a physical object. Shut off from language, Chandos reverts to sensory impression as a source of significance. He thus masters his loneliness through passive self-surrender:

Eine Gießkanne, eine auf dem Felde verlassene Egge, ein Hund in der Sonne, ein ärmlicher Kirchhof, ein Krüppel, ein kleines Bauernhaus, alles dies kann das Gefäß meiner Offenbarung werden. Jeder dieser Gegenstände und die tausend anderen ähnlichen, über die sonst ein Auge mit selbstverständlicher Gleichgültigkeit hinweggleitet, kann für mich plötzlich in einem Moment, den herbeizuführen auf keine Weise in meiner Gewalt steht, ein erhabenes und rührendes Gepräge annehmen, das auszudrücken mir alle Worte zu arm scheinen. Ja, es kann auch die bestimmte Vorstellung eines abwesenden Gegenstandes sein, dem die unbegreifliche Auserwählung zuteil wird, mit jener sanft und jäh steigenden Flut göttlichen Gefühles bis an den Rand gefüllt zu werden.⁴¹ (EB 467)

This intuition of grandeur anticipates the importance that Romanticism was to assign to the imagination as the tool by which man can transcend his mortal state. The Romantic poet was to expose the beauty of the human soul to his fellow-beings, an act of shaping society that Chandos cannot partake in due to the absence of an appropriate medium. At the same time, of course, the letter itself represents a piece of literary vision and invention, which shows Chandos in the process of unwittingly creating an instrument for expressing his insights. What seems more important here than the anachronistic portrayal of personalised suffering in prose and the acknowledgement of the symbolist belief in mood evoked through words, is the element of compassion. By recognising himself in his surroundings, in dumb things, Chandos projects his revised notion of Renaissance humanism into the world at large. The

abandonment of the ego comes to evoke consolation by placing the individual within a related rather than a hostile environment.

Like Stephen Dedalus, Chandos is overwhelmed by the sheer presence of an object, by its *whatness*, its *quidditas*. Although the epiphanies are often triggered by man-made objects, such as a watering can or harrow, or, in Stephen's case, a clock or even words themselves, the evoked feeling is one of greatness in humility. Rather than being contrived and meant to impress like the intellectual games engaged in by Seneca and Cicero, they carry a grace of simplicity, whereas literature misleads by its artfulness, its lack of authenticity:

An dieser Harmonie begrenzter und geordneter Begriffe hoffte ich zu gesunden. Aber ich konnte nicht zu ihnen herüber. Diese Begriffe, ich verstand sie wohl: ich sah ihr wundervolles Verhältnisspiel vor mir aufsteigen wie herrliche Wasserkünste, die mit goldenen Bällen spielen. Ich konnte sie umschweben und sehen, wie sie zueinander spielten; aber sie hatten es nur miteinander zu tun, und das Tiefste, das Persönliche meines Denkens, blieb von ihrem Reigen ausgeschlossen. Es überkam mich unter ihnen das Gefühl furchtbarer Einsamkeit; mir war zumut wie einem, der in einem Garten mit lauter augenlosen Statuen eingesperrt wäre; ich flüchtete wieder ins freie.⁴² (EB 467)

Paradoxically, it is by passively observing the external world of visible objects rather than by engaging in intellectual exercises that Chandos manages to bridge the gulf between thought and soul, while philosophy, history, and even

literature, the most man-orientated form of self-expression, fail to do so. Renaissance poetry itself was but a means of sophisticated manipulation, a means of teaching by delighting, a tool of order, of systemisation, a clever device of indoctrination by way of rhythm and imagery. It is therefore not surprising to find Chandos breaking the strict limits of decorum by choosing the desperate struggle of poisoned rats as an object of his imagination, and, even more importantly, by endowing the animals with human attributes:

Ich sage Ihnen, mein Freund, dieses trug ich in
mir und das brennende Karthago zugleich; aber
es war mehr, es wahr göttlicher, tierischer; und
es war Gegenwart, die vollste erhabenste
Gegenwart.⁴³ (EB 468)

All the same, the rats' fight is, quite crucially, but an imagined one. Whereas the destruction of Alba Longa is only available through an artistic mediator, another self, the suffering of the rats is made visible by Chandos himself, by his self, mediated by his imagination. Since empathy and compassion are not possible without imagination, which enables the isolated individual to visualise and feel the joy or pain of other beings, man's inventive faculty becomes an inescapable component of man's humanity – and this drive towards invention is nothing other than the creative drive itself.

According to Hofmannsthal, successful artistic creation is impossible without compassion. Stephen Dedalus can only identify his artistic, political and personal mission by identifying with the world he so much despises first. He can overcome his self-pitying verse-making by projecting himself into the external world, by exposing himself to it. As we have already seen,

Hofmannsthal declares that 'es führt von der Poesie kein direkter Weg ins Leben, aus dem Leben keiner in die Poesie'. However, man's every intellectual endeavour is nourished by the deeply felt need to make sense of human suffering, to recognise a pattern in this suffering and thus impose order on the apparent chaos. This entails a process of identification, necessary to make Nietzschean *Selbstüberwindung* possible in the first place. The portrayal of beauty in suffering, of dignity in the grotesque, thus becomes the redeeming aspect of all art, which must concern itself with the eternal recurrence of identical human emotions in this universe.

This is very different from Mach, who declared the death of the individual self due to the instability of this world: 'Aus den Empfindungen baut sich das Subjekt auf, welches dann allerdings wieder auf die Empfindungen reagiert.'⁴⁴ A rigid, an unchanging 'I' cannot be salvaged it can only be constructed by way of memory, by our custom of imposing order on our experiences and shaping them into a narrative, our own history. Yet what he does not see is that art can afford comfort from this knowledge and succeed in insisting on the existence of the individual soul. Klimt's painting of 'Death and Life' shows a colourful group of children, the young and the old united in a flux of entangled bodies and separated, even though threatened, by skull-faced death. The beauty and serenity of the painted individuals contrasts with the disgustingly gratified look of death awaiting its new victims. Yet the integrity of the painted men and women is not undermined by their pre-determined end. Klimt's painting exemplifies that what can be salvaged is the glory of life itself, and this compassionate and dignified presentation could only be arrived at

through empathy. Hence Hofmannsthal's fervent insistence following his description of the rats:

Vergeben Sie mir diese Schilderung, denken Sie aber nicht, daß es Mitleid war, was mich erfüllte. Das dürfen Sie ja nicht denken, sonst hätte ich mein Beispiel sehr undeschickt gewählt. Es war viel mehr und viel weniger als Mitleid: ein ungeheures Anteilnehmen, ein Hinüberfließen in jene Geschöpfe oder ein Fühlen, daß ein Fluidum des Lebens und Todes, des Traumes und Wachens für einen Augenblick in sie hinübergeflossen ist – von woher?⁴⁵ (EB 468)

This question must remain unanswered, because it requires metaphysical treatment, which would undermine the emotive, intuitive, maybe even instinctual, nature of the vision. What is important here is Chandos's decision to refrain from passing judgements, from evaluating the scene in terms of its moral connotations. This is why his response is motivated *by both less and more than compassion*. Similarly, Stephen merely observes the graceful sadness in his siblings' existence, and the same moral disinterestedness marks the recognition of his own life's nature. Chandos and Stephen both bear witness to the power of life:

The snares of the world were its ways of sin. He would fall. He had not yet fallen but he would fall silently, in an instant. Not to fall was too hard, too hard: and he felt the silent lapse of the soul, as it would be at some instant to come, falling, falling

but not yet fallen, still unfallen but about to fall. (P
175)

The seeming passivity underlying the occurrences of epiphanic vision mirrors the inevitability of the individual's fall and subsequent suffering.

Despite their similar insights, Chandos lacks the language to join Stephen in giving form to their visions through words. Or rather, Chandos lacks the self-confidence to do so, since he is backed by no tradition, no history of free imaginative poetry. Moreover, he is too self-consciously aware of the eternal surplus of vision over language. Intimidated by the realisation that no word-picture can ever match the grandness of life as perceived by his imagination, he retreats into passive existence – and into peace. By losing his self in epiphanic visions, Chandos appears to come close to nirvana, a state of no feeling and no consciousness. Hence maybe his resigned and humble bearing towards Bacon. Implicitly he realises that artistic creation essentially requires the ability to differentiate between the super-ego (Chandos conditioned self-discipline which drives him to fulfil his domestic duties) his unconscious (which manifests itself in the vision of life) and his ego (which he loses in this vision). Unlike Stephen, Chandos arrives at moments of complete peace and unity, where he accepts and transcends the humbling consciousness of the at once grand and ridiculous nature of this world. Chandos's seemingly inevitable impotence thus renders him a disciple of Pater, who lives only for sensory impressions without transforming them into universal visions. He becomes an aesthete united with the external world, and, like Pater, troubled by the knowledge of death. His life becomes all feeling based on non-dogmatic form.

NOTES

- ¹ Maurice Maeterlinck, The Treasure of the Humble, English translation by Alfred Sutro (London: George Allen, 1897), p. 62. French original: Les trésor des humbles (Bruxelles: Edition Labor, 1886), p. 45. The original was first published in 1896.
- ² On the relation between aestheticism and consumerism see, for example, Gene H. Bell-Villada, Art for Art's Sake & Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology & Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).
- ³ See Ashley Dukes, Modern Dramatists. (New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1912), pp. 242-54.
- ⁴ A. B. Walkley, 'Introduction' to Maurice Maeterlinck, The Treasure of the Humble, pp. xii/xiii.
- ⁵ A. B. Walkley, 'Introduction' to Maurice Maeterlinck, The Treasure of the Humble xi.
- ⁶ Maurice Maeterlinck, The Treasure of the Humble, p. 62. (French original: p. 45.)
- ⁷ By rejecting language as a possible medium for feeling, Maeterlinck sidesteps the threat of firmly inscribed dogma that would inevitably undermine the hegemony of the individual. At the same time, he is forced to entrust the communication of his beliefs to language.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71. (French original: p.49.)
- ⁹ The same is true of the German word for soul, 'die Seele'. However, Maeterlinck's feminine depiction of the soul rests mainly on its personification as a young woman, which leads the English translator to refer to it by the feminine pronoun: 'What would happen, let us say, if our soul were suddenly to take visible shape, and were compelled to advance into the midst of her assembled sisters, stripped of all her veils, but laden with her most secret thoughts, and dragging behind her the most mysterious, inexplicable acts of her life? (...) Would she, like a bashful maiden, cloak beneath her long hair the numberless sins of the flesh?' Maurice Maeterlinck, The Treasure of the Humble, p. 64. (French original: p. 46)
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71. (French original: p. 49.)
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62. (French original: p. 46.)
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 61/2. (French original: pp. 45/6.)
- ¹³ For the parallels between Renan and Wilde see Brian Nicholas, 'Two Nineteenth Century Utopias: The Influence of Renan's "L'Avenir de la Science" on Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism*', *MLR*, 59 (1964), pp. 361-70.
- ¹⁴ Hugo von Hofmannsthal 'Ad me ipsum', in Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben: 15 Bände, ed. by Herbert Steiner (Stockholm, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1945-1959), Aufzeichnungen (1959), pp. 215.
- ¹⁵ Maurice Maeterlinck, The Treasure of the Humble, p. 63. (French original: p. 47.)
- ¹⁶ 'To someone susceptible to such thoughts, it may appear as the well-conceived plan of a divine providence that my mind should have been obliged to shrink from such swollen arrogance into the extreme of despondency and impotence that is now its lasting condition. But such religious conceits have no power over me; they belong to

those spiders' webs through which my thoughts go speeding off into emptiness, whereas so many of their fellows are caught in them, and come to rest. For me, the mysteries of belief have taken the form of a lofty allegory, which hangs over the fields of my life like a shining rainbow, at a constant distance, always ready to withdraw, in case I should suddenly be inclined to run to it and wrap myself in the hem of its coat.' Hugo von Hofmannsthal, The Lord Chandos Letter, trans. by Michael Hofmann (London: Syrens, 1995), pp. 8/9.

Although, purely from a translator's point of view, I disagree with the rendering of 'religiöse Auffassungen' as 'religious conceits', the German word 'Auffassung' meaning quite simply 'view' or 'conception' in the figurative mode, the English word 'conceit' carries connotations implying vanity, fanciful ideas, which connect nicely with the affectation of style encouraged by Renaissance literature. The translation thus supports my reading of the paragraph. However, it should be pointed out that 'Auffassung' is a fairly neutral word referring to subjective personal opinion and attitudes and cannot have been intended by Hofmannsthal to suggest any of the meanings implied by the English word 'conceit'. Similarly, the word 'erhaben' can mean 'solemn', 'awe-inspiring', 'sublime' as well as 'above all criticism' and does not have the connotations of self-consciousness, self-deceit, and even arrogance implied by the English word 'lofty'. Yet, as before, Hofmann's choice of word coincides with my interpretation.

¹⁷ See Chapter III, p. 150.

¹⁸ See, for example, Mathias Mayer, Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), pp. 166-9, and Dagmar Lorenz, Wiener Moderne (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), pp. 150-4. Both Mayer and Lorenz conclude their short introductions to Ein Brief with an emphasis on Hofmannsthal's supposed rejection of language as an instrument of truth.

¹⁹ Lord Chandos's personality is clearly informed by Hofmannsthal's conscious embrace of and admiration for the strong element of self-control and dignified demeanour he associates with the type of the English gentleman, a measure of reserve he found to be sorely lacking in Wilde.

²⁰ '[I] find it difficult to conceal from my wife the deadness that is inside me, and from my household my indifference to the business of ownership. The good, strict upbringing I owe my late father, and my old habit of leaving no hour of the day without occupation, alone, it seems to me, give my life the appearance of stability, and the demeanour suited to my estate and person.' The Lord Chandos Letter, p. 17.

²¹ Hugo von Hofmannsthal in a letter to Ria Schmuylow-Classen (13/04/1898), quoted in Rolf Tarot, Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Daseinsformen und dichterische Struktur (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1970), p. 382.

'Beware of all that has a form, whether it be Catholicism or socialist ideas. One gets entangled in forms, they are awful nets. –' (My translation.)

²² Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Das Gespräch über Gedichte', Gesammelte Werke: Erzählungen, erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen, ed. by Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979)

- ²⁴ Richard Alewyn, 'Hofmannsthals Wandlung', in Über Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), pp. 161-179. The essay dates back to 1949.

Alewyn links Hofmannsthal's alleged 'metamorphosis' with Wilde's downfall, which he sees as the outcome of aestheticism's one-sided alliance with the life of art and beauty and its fight against society, a misconception which the present thesis hopes to assuage. Written in reference to Hofmannsthal's 'Sebastian Melmoth' essay of 1905 and the story Das Märchen der 672. Nacht, which, although in fact composed in 1895 prior to the Wilde trial (see Patrick Bridgwater, Anglo-German Interactions in the Literature of the 1890s [Oxford: Legenda, 1999], p. 53), Alewyn interprets as Hofmannsthal's attempt to come to terms with the repercussion of Wilde's crimes, the essay offers a short and anecdotal yet thorough and incisive interpretation of Hofmannsthal's view of the complex relationship between life and art and the implications of artistic and individual accountability. As such it represents an essential introduction to Ein Brief, which it in fact refers to only once, but not without triggering an avalanche of subsequent biographical readings: 'So hat er [Hofmannsthal] um die Jahrhundertwende mit einem plötzlichen Entschluß sein Jugendwerk mitten im Zuge abgebrochen – der *Brief* des Lord Chandos gibt darüber Rechenschaft – um ein Leben und Dichten auf einer anderen Ebene mit anderen Mitteln wieder aufzunehmen.' (p. 174). ('And thus he suddenly decided to cut short the work of his youth around the turn of the century – which is accounted for by Lord Chandos's *Brief* – in order to resume life and composition on a different level with different tools.' My translation.)

- ²⁵ Walter Perl, ed., Hugo von Hofmannsthal und Leopold von Andrian: Briefwechsel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1968), p. 157.

'I would just like to mention that the poetic clothing, the transposition into the English past, made me feel uneasy – seeing that you did not intend to transform your material in a proper poetic manner, I believe a simple report would have been the most appropriate and effective choice – and particularly since this is really a confession I was rather embarrassed by the historical flitter. – (My translation.)

- ²⁶ Rolf Tarot, 'Die Krise des mythischen Bewußtseins und der "Brief" des Lord Chandos', in Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Daseinsformen und dichterische Struktur, pp. 360-83.

- ²⁷ Gotthart Wunberg, Der frühe Hofmannsthal: Schizophrenie als dichterische Struktur (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), pp. 11/2.

- ²⁸ 'Everything fell into pieces in front of me, the pieces into more pieces, and nothing could be contained in a single concept anymore.' The Lord Chandos Letter, p. 11.

- ²⁹ 'I was compelled to view everything that came up in such a conversation as from an awful proximity: the way that I had once seen a piece of skin on my little finger under a magnifying-glass to look like a field with furrows and hollows, so it was now with men and their actions. I was no longer able to grasp them through the simplifying regard of habit.' The Lord Chandos Letter, p. 11.

- ³⁰ Walter Perl, ed., Hugo von Hofmannsthal und Leopold von Andrian: Briefwechsel, p. 158.

'Because it is precisely this work, which is not a poetic one, that is a profoundly personal one and because you will be able to read partly like a letter written by me, which you've come across lying on the desk of a third party. I have after all no other way of expressing myself than that which fantasy as its medium, which is why I long so specifically for this product: so as not to appear entirely silent to those, with

whom I hold endless conversation within, sometimes in a devastatingly tiring manner. Were I able to complete a major work, I hope you would feel in it my closeness to you and that which binds us together and be able to conjure me up from it again and again.' (My translation.)

³¹ Walter Perl, ed., Hugo von Hofmannsthal und Leopold von Andrian: Briefwechsel, pp. 161/2.

'Of your criticisms I only want to object to one. Namely your saying that I should not have used a historical mask for these confessions or reflexions but should have uttered them directly instead. However, I in fact set out from the opposite point. I was browsing through Bacon's essays in August, found the intimacy of the period appealing, dreamed myself into the way in which those people of the sixteenth century perceived antiquity, felt like doing something in this tone of voice, and the contents, which I had to borrow from one of my own inner events, a living experience, in order to avoid sounding indifferent, were simply added to it. But if you were to ask me to convey the contents directly, the task would lose all its appeal for me – the strong lure for me lies raising past times from their death or making the distant and alien to feel as though closely related.' (My translation.)

³² *Ibid.*, p. 161. 'the only one which does not go beyond literary or artistic problems.' (My translation.)

³³ Gotthart Wunberg, Der frühe Hofmannsthal: Schizophrenie als dichterische Struktur

³⁴ Francis Bacon, A Critical Edition of the Major Works, ed. by Brian Vickers (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 186/7.

³⁵ See Maurice Bowra, The Romantic Imagination (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

'Words are everything, the words by which one can endow heard and seen events with new life and present them as living form in accordance with inspired laws. There's no direct path from poetry to life, none from life to poetry. The word as vehicle of life's purpose and its brother, the dream-like word which can be found in a poem, move away from one another and float as aliens past each other, like the buckets of a well.' (My translation.)

³⁷ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'Das Gespräch über Gedichte', Gesammelte Werke: Erzählungen, erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen, pp. 502/3.

'The animal's ability to die for him became a great mystery, a great and secret truth. The animal died a symbolic sacrificial death. But everything depended on his having died through the animal, for one moment. That his life, for the moment of a breath, had been resolved in an alien life.' (My translation.)

³⁸ 'Then it seems that I myself am in ferment, bubbling, simmering, sparkling. And the whole thing is a kind of fevered thinking, but thinking in a medium which is more immediate, more fluid and glowing than words. It is like a whirlpool again, but not like those of language that lead into bottomless emptiness, but somehow into myself, and the deepest seat of peace.' The Lord Chandos Letter, p. 19.

³⁹ 'and in all Nature I felt myself' The Lord Chandos Letter, p. 8

⁴⁰ See also Rolf Tarot, 'Die Krise des mythischen Bewußtseins und der "Brief" des Lord Chandos', in Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Daseinsformen und dichterische Struktur, pp. 360-83.

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- ⁴¹ 'A watering-can, a harrow left abandoned in a field, a dog in the sun, a poor churchyard, a cripple, a small farmhouse, any one of these can become a vessel for my revelations. Each of them, and a thousand others like them, things which otherwise the eye passes over with natural indifference, can suddenly take on for me in a moment, which I am quite incapable of producing of my own will, an exalted and moving appearance, to express which all words seem to me inadequate. Yes, it can even be the fixed imagining of an absent object on which this inexplicable choice may fall, and this is then filled to the brim with a gently and abruptly rising tide of divine feeling.' The Lord Chandos Letter, p. 13.
- ⁴² 'I hoped to cure myself with that harmony of limited and orderly concepts. But I was unable to reach them. Their concepts I could well understand: rising before my eyes like majestic fountains with golden balls, I saw the wonderful play of their equivalences. I could float around them and see how they played together; but they were only concerned with each other, and the deepest, most individual part of my thought was excluded from their dance. In their company I was overcome by a feeling of terrible solitude; I felt like someone who had been locked into a garden full of eyeless statues; I fled back into the open.' The Lord Chandos Letter, pp. 11/2.
- ⁴³ 'I tell you, my friend, this was in my mind, and the burning of Carthage as well; but it was more, it was more godlike, more bestial; and it was present, fully and exaltedly present.' The Lord Chandos Letter, p. 14.
- ⁴⁴ Dagmar Lorenz, Wiener Moderne (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), p. 143.
- ⁴⁵ 'Forgive me this description, don't think, however, that what I felt was pity. If you were to think that, then I would have chosen my example very badly. It was much more and much less than pity: a terrible empathy, a flowing across into those creatures, or a feeling that a fluid of life and death, of dreaming and waking, had flowed into them for a moment – from where?' The Lord Chandos Letter, pp. 14/5.

V

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

Where Ein Brief is concerned with the recurrence of ‘good minutes’, which, rather than insist on positive Browningian action, encourage the subject to merge impassively with an object of compassion that fails to boast the moral significance conventionally bestowed on art by (Elizabethan) society, Oscar Wilde’s novel The Picture of Dorian Gray hinges on an instance of insight that, in its negative repercussions, reveals itself as a re-enactment of man’s mythical fall. Dorian’s spiritual development is cut short by one thoughtless moment induced by man’s fundamental anxiety – the fear of death. The strand of plot concerned with the protagonist’s spiritual growth thus concludes with the third chapter, after which Dorian’s life appears to follow a preordained course, leaving the text to chronicle the widening gulf between his undiminished physical beauty and his depraved existence mirrored by the portrait, until judgement is finally passed.

Before I move on to my interpretation of Wilde’s most popular prose work in the context of the aesthetic as a tool of freedom and the source of a stable, unified self, I want first to consider the text’s position as a groundbreaking discourse on ‘male identity’ and ‘male homoerotic desire’.¹ Although I agree with the findings of commentators such as Ed Cohen and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who pinpoint the centrality of the male body within the narrative and the latter’s importance for subsequent formulations of gay consciousness, I would like to resist a reading that is limited to the fastidious decoding of the novel’s presumed subtext.² As Alan Sinfield shows in his

investigation into the gradual emergence of concepts of queerness during the nineteenth and twentieth century, The Picture of Dorian Gray gives voice to the beginnings of an as yet not fully articulated gay culture and aesthetic, 'a new possibility, exploring a new kind of sensibility'.³ The novel, Sinfield holds, 'is helping to constitute just those terms in which we might wish, subsequently, to read it'.⁴ It thus, rather than merely operate within them, to a large extent generates those terms.

Although a society's definition and use of the aesthetic is largely mirrored in its sexual mores, Wilde's novel, I believe, should be considered within the varied and inclusive context of the cultural influences and literary traditions from which it is derived. In contrast to Ed Cohen, therefore, my main aim is not to trace the existence of a gay subculture at the end of the Victorian era as a way of substantiating the text's articulation of same-sex passion outside the sensationalist confines of Wilde's own life.⁵ For this, there are two reasons.

Firstly, and particularly in view of the novel's exploitation at the Queensberry trials as a testimony to Wilde's own dissipation, I am unsure how far a reading of Dorian Gray has to remain close to the author's biographical background.⁶ Ever since the trials, critics and readers have to come to the text as Wilde's uncanny prefigurement of his own downfall triggered by his traumatic relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, and Dorian Gray has never managed to shake off the implications of its author's defamation. More significantly, Wilde's fall from grace and its enactment in the trial inspired a number of creative followers and observers of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism to

understand the text as a confirmation of the dangers besetting the aesthetic life.

As I have already pointed out, Wilde's fate played a crucial role in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's troubled relationship with the late-nineteenth-century movement of *l'art pour l'art*. A fortnight after Queensberry's acquittal and Wilde's immediate arrest on 5th April 1895, Hofmannsthal started work on 'Das Märchen der 672. Nacht', a fairy-tale, the genre so favoured by Wilde, in which he exemplifies the hazards of an existence dedicated solely to beauty and aesthetic pleasure and oblivious to the true demands and realities of a life anchored in human relationships.⁷ The formal and thematic parallels between Dorian Gray and Hofmannsthal's short story serve to reinforce the horror and inevitability of the narratives' denouements, both of which describe the death of an aesthete caused by his disregard for the social network of emotional co-dependence and mutual responsibility necessitated by human existence.⁸ As Patrick Bridgwater demonstrates, Hofmannsthal saw Wilde's novel as 'surprisingly reminiscent of the outlook of his own artistic circle. When he went on to reject the idea of art for art's sake and the notion that "no artist has ethical sympathies", he was reacting against the Preface to Dorian Gray, in which Wilde had used this phrase. For Hofmannsthal, as for Thomas Mann, Dorian Gray was the most challenging of Wilde's works.'⁹

Secondly, as Ed Cohen himself points out, Dorian Gray plays with two opposing Victorian 'models of masculinity' – 'the traditional bourgeois representations of appropriate male behaviour' and the 'sphere of art and leisure in which male friendships assume primary importance and in which traditional male values (industry, earnestness, morality), are abjured in favour

of the aesthetic'.¹⁰ While these archetypes owe their existence to a sexual discourse in which conventional gender roles are questioned and re-defined, they essentially echo and maintain the, by that point well established, distinction between the assiduous bourgeois male and the dandy, his idle, (often *faux*-)aristocratic counterpart. This differentiation generates a number of binarisms, such as industry and indolence, work and pleasure, rationality and feeling, logic and intuition, life and art, all of which can be traced back to, as well as summed up by, the contrast between the masculine and the feminine. Beginning with the emergence of Romanticism and its opposition to the unyielding supremacy of reason nurtured by the Enlightenment, Alan Sinfield holds, 'the modern conception of poetry developed as the alternative ethos within the dominant nineteenth century, middle-class ideology of utilitarianism and political economy, the market and empire'.¹¹ It was the realm of art and the imagination which came to be used as a counterweight to these masculine virtues, which resulted in the association of the aesthetic with the feminine, and by this token effeminacy:

The idea of the aesthetic as effeminate is grounded in the fact that literature, and poetry especially, has, since the time of the Romantics, been in a state of conflict around imputations that there is something intrinsically feminine in its constitution.¹²

Probably the most evident reason why 'a hint of effeminacy lurks around many male writers' is art's, and particularly literature's, necessary, and from the nineteenth century onwards increased, crossing of social boundaries and

identity markers.¹³ The artist's position as outsider allows for a blurring of fixed identities which includes and reaches deep into the domain of gender politics. Sinfield presents three examples of how this circumstance problematised art's status and condition within society. To begin with, art could be relegated to the sphere of the frivolous, the world of play. Or it could be incorporated into and instrumentalised by the powers dominating politics, economy and social class relations. Finally, it could be declared autonomous and marginalised, banished from the interplay of economic, political, and social relations.¹⁴

I would like to take Sinfield's argument further by defining the first two potential loci of art as those of conventional femininity (the realm of domesticated pleasure and emotion, of childlike play and spontaneity) and standardised masculinity (the realm of logic, reason and economic progress). The third habitat of the aesthetic both combines and moves beyond those two spheres – its element of femininity is not confined to socialised and biological gender identities while its masculine aspects deploy rationality as the tool for the kind of creativity that is primarily devoted to the expression of individuality, the latter being again located outside the boundaries of orthodox sexual markers. We have thus once more arrived at the fundamental opposition between reason and emotion, which must combine in order to make possible the full development of personality and individual freedom in a state of aestheticised androgyny.

However, as Sinfield indicates, 'middle-class dissidence' used the arts as a way of upholding the humanist values of spiritual, non-materialist identity, the soul, without necessarily wishing to opt out or condemn the concepts of bourgeois mobility and prosperity.¹⁵ As a consequence, artists such as

Browning strove to maintain an equilibrium between the masculine/rational and feminine/poetic aspects in their work, in order to escape the implications of effeminacy and its connotations of unhealthiness and decadence, while the Pre-Raphaelites and before them the early Tennyson cultivated a 'delicacy of expression' and 'exquisite sensations and evocations of feminine experience' which 'bespoke a critique of a brutally purposeful ideology of utilitarianism, political economy and machinery' that, together with the influence of the French Symbolists, paved the way for the supremacy of decadence in some of the English literature of the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹⁶

The late Victorian period also saw a channelling and separation of effeminate tendencies into the movements dedicated to aestheticism and decadence respectively. Where the aesthete Pater combined more or less veiled allusions to homosexuality with a celebration of the uncorrupt state of Hellenic art in his writings, its 'sexless mode', decadence too lingered 'on the brink of homosexuality' – effeminacy, according to Sinfield, 'was still flexible, with the potential to refute homosexuality, as well as to imply it', often, in fact, attesting to the aesthete's success as a heterosexual seducer, as someone perfectly attuned to the feminine psyche. The charge of degeneracy as put forward by Max Nordau's 1893 text Entartung and seemingly evidenced by works such as Huysmans' Novel A Rebours, was still mainly directed towards aristocratic virtues of indolence and its detachment from the healthy, (re-) productive and commercially viable forces of society.¹⁷

Wilde's Dorian Gray, I believe, testifies to both, indeed all, of these strands. At the heart of the novel, therefore, lies not so much the question of the sexual extent of Basil and Dorian's and Dorian and Henry's relationship but

the socially insurgent force underlying their versions of masculinity and understanding of physical and spiritual excellence. As Martin Swales says with reference to the homoerotic overtones governing Thomas Mann's Der Tod in Venedig, beauty

is the one absolute that is perceivable by the senses. When man encounters the Beautiful he is visited almost by a shock recognition that he has come face to face with an intimation of his higher spiritual destiny. Yet beauty is a subversive value: the very fact that the senses are involved in its perception means that man's excited response may be not spiritual but sensual. The higher love may, on examination, prove to be nothing more than a sexual infatuation. And this is true particularly of homoerotic experience. Because a homosexual attraction cannot lead to physical creation, to procreation, it may promise the higher creativity of the mind, of art. Yet equally the homoerotic can be the source of furtive, degraded and degrading relationships.¹⁸

Whether the same-sex passions hinted at in Wilde's text are in fact consummated is thus only of secondary importance. More significantly, the narrative seems to suggest that sexual allure, and its fulfilment, must be accompanied by a transcendental component, by the kind of emotional intelligence that allows both the source and the target of corporeal passion to move beyond the confines of aesthetic surrender or objectification. Otherwise, there is little to differentiate Dorian as the human aesthetic object from the

commodities of capitalist existence. Homoerotic desire as an alternative to conventional and biologically useful, that is procreative, sexuality can be either a cul-de-sac of emotional signification or, when attended by love, the most anti-utilitarian manifestation of human consciousness. Dorian Gray particularises these two possibilities underlying same-sex desire through Henry's and Basil's treatment of Dorian respectively.

In combining Basil Hallward's pressing attitudes towards art and the artist with Lord Henry Wotton's cynical outlook on what he considers the most distanced and therefore the most successful mode of living, Dorian Gray acts as something of a charter of late-nineteenth-century Aestheticism and its sister movement Decadence. In its basic heterogeneity, the text incorporates key literary and social issues of its time, which accounts for its appearance as an unsettled compound of viewpoints and styles and its frequent difficulty in negotiating between content and form. Ellen Moers identifies three different blueprints at work in the narrative – the fashionable novel, the novel of supernatural melodrama and the novel of decadence – and the narrative is clearly fettered by its crammed generic untidiness, which gives rise to an incoherent text.¹⁹ Its style comes to echo the stifling and overly materialistic surroundings dominating Dorian's life. Dorian's lack of individualism, his dependence on outward action and the material world as a source of sense stimulation, expose him as a slave to style without content rather than the

autonomous being liberated by art, whose case Wilde so fervently pleads in 'The Soul of Man under Socialism'.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is in many ways Oscar Wilde's anti-*Bildungsroman*, his rebellion against nineteenth-century literature's propagation of the conventionalised ideal of individual growth founded upon intellectual insight, economic progress, and orthodox morality. As Jan B. Gordon observes, in his novel

Wilde inverts some of the traditional features of the nineteenth century developmental novel: the maturation of the parent-less hero; his assumption of a viable religious attitude; and the recognition of identity within a vocation.²⁰

Dorian's life is depicted as submerged in the ideal realm of art, which comes to overrule the precepts dominating the middle classes.

At the same time, however, Wilde's famous declaration that

Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry
what the world thinks of me: Dorian what I would
like to be – in other ages perhaps²¹

gives the lie to what has been widely perceived as his exuberant dandyism and instead relocates his concern within the province of the artist's work and life. While his rejection of bourgeois practicality and its appendage of philistine taste may have led him to embrace the 'uselessness and amorality' of the aristocracy, the leisure class of his day, the character of Lord Henry Wotton

typifies the moral bankruptcy and political impotence of the upper-class dandy.²² Although, at first glance, both Basil and Henry appear as beacons of individualised, non-conformist ethics, the latter's initial manipulation and final misjudgement of Dorian reveals the extent of his spiritual frigidity and, by that token, social insignificance.

Henry Wotton is neither amoral nor immoral. His morality is firmly rooted in and solidified by his social position, to which he contributes little more than acquiescence. He is the middle-aged man-about-town whose life is characterised by his pained awareness of lost youth and the fearful unwillingness to venture beyond the confines of his designated social stratum:

Mere shadows of the arrogant heroes of the Regency, the *fin de siècle* dandies survived on the bounty of good-natured women or (more often) the sufferance of ill-natured women. Their effeminacy was a weakness, not an embellishment; their allegiance turned to the aesthetic fringe, not the ruling aristocracy; their sphere reduced itself to the problematic domain of pathology, leaving the glory of an ideal far behind. In the final analysis, their dandyism was a handful of mannerisms retrieved from the past.²³

According to Ellen Moers, the dandy's social meaningfulness, based largely on anarchic jocosity and avant-garde self-stylisation, had, by the end of the nineteenth century, mutated into prosaic re-enactments of an overtly parasitic life-style supported by obsolete platitudes. As the self-fashioned effeminacy/androgyny of the male maverick came to be replaced by the

politically more urgent concerns of the New Woman, which had already begun to occupy the imagination of the media and the public, the dandy's importance as both a firm member and staunch critic of the establishment faded.

Both Moers and Sinfield contradict the notion that the fictional dandy's homosexual leanings were clearly articulated or indeed more than a feeble protest against his economic dependency on the increasingly powerful female, whom he was forced to lure as the effeminate ladies' man. Henry's character indeed conforms in many ways to the image of the hackneyed and both spiritually and commercially impotent husband. Moreover, his eventual failure to grasp Dorian's dilemma and the extent of his human failure signifies not so much cruelty as a philistine inflexibility of perception. Henry himself is a believer, and his creed is that of rightful social divisions and, paradoxically, social decorum.

Unlike Dorian, who dives into the underworld of the London slums and its poor and spiritually impoverished members, Henry never steps beyond the boundaries of his social territory. He himself lacks the courage to undertake the project of active self-becoming and instead makes extensive use of his social sphere's self-protective mechanism of hypocrisy. This is the only extreme he allows himself to indulge in. Confronted by Dorian's claim to have murdered Basil, he exclaims:

'I would say, my dear fellow, that you were posing for a character that doesn't suit you. All crime is vulgar, just as all vulgarity is a crime. It is not in you, Dorian, to commit a murder. I am sorry if I hurt your vanity by saying so, but I assure you it is true. Crime belongs exclusively to the lower

orders. I don't blame them in the smallest degree.
I should fancy that crime was to them what art is
to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary
sensations.' (DG 162)

Dorian's monstrous end, his refusal to acknowledge that his portrait contains not only his conscience but also his soul, and that in order to destroy it, he must kill his physical self too, reveals his inability to analyse and rectify his life by deciding 'to be good'. If Basil Hallward is Dorian's super-ego, his un(der)developed middle-class persona with a true sense of right and wrong, then the painting itself represents his historical self which would enable him to gain access to his memory and arrive at a semblance of individual knowledge and wisdom.

The seeds of destruction are latent in Dorian even on that June morning, ready to ripen as soon as their bearer frees himself of his faculty for sympathy, and with their fruition they preclude all spiritual growth. Dorian is mistaken in calling the portrait 'the painting of a sorrow, / A face without a heart' (DG 163) during his last meeting with Henry, and this final judgement on the cause of his life's predicament reveals the extent of his blindness. The painting is nothing if not the externalisation of Dorian's heart, the seat of his humanity, whose role it is to temper man's intellect and instincts with sympathy, the ability to feel pity for or partake in the joy of his fellow-beings. By dissociating himself from his portrait Dorian loses access to his emotions and is left to rely solely on sensation. He thus renders himself isolated from society and mankind.

The extent to which sympathy, or rather the lack of it, serves as the centre of Wilde's fable, becomes apparent in the climactic scene describing Basil's discovery of Dorian's terrible secret:

It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror came. Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away. The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful. (DG 122)

With this recognition, triggered by the horrible vision of Dorian's changed image on canvas, Basil unwittingly frees himself from his responsibility for Dorian's plight. Yet, despite his disgust, he does not turn away from his former protégé, but instead expresses Christian compassion for man's tendency to side with evil and do wrong. By showing Basil in prayer for Dorian, Wilde pays tribute to a worldly construct, which he seems so at pains to deconstruct in the course of the novel, primarily through the solemn declarations delivered by Lord Wotton's character:

'The aim of life is self-development. To realise one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to one's self. Of course they are charitable. They feed the hungry, and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve, and are naked. Courage has gone out of our race. Perhaps we never really had it. The terror of

society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion – these are the two things that govern us.’ (DG 20)

Although Henry’s words may still be echoing in the readers’ ears, Basil’s gesture of prayer represents the only redemptive moment within the novel; it is its only manifestation of empathy. Moreover, it presents the reader with an act of freedom, the one truly emancipated deed. Basil cannot be dismissed as a man who simply succumbs to the ‘terror of society’, the rules of conformity. The various references to his excursions abroad and the darkness surrounding his private life suggest his dissociation from common society. Basil’s position as outsider thus endows his act of praying with an unconventional character; it becomes the expression of Basil’s individualism: ‘When man has realised Individualism, he will also realise sympathy and exercise it freely and spontaneously.’²⁴

Henry’s aesthetist theories voiced during his first meeting with Dorian (quoted above) also echo, somewhat uneasily, Wilde’s earlier essay on ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’. By presenting the aristocrat as the organ of some of his most valid views on the shortcomings of Victorian society, Wilde undermines the force of these comments on society. Like the other two members of the novel’s tragic trinity, Henry is characterised by blindness. Henry is unable to fathom the true nature of the monster he created. Like Basil, he imposes his own fictions on Dorian’s character, attributing a personality to the youth that is derived from the, here clearly barren, soil of art rather than from life itself. Dorian may be allowed to ruin the reputation of Henry’s own

sister but not to undermine the vacuous vision that his mentor has created for him, a world which decrees that all pleasure must be aesthetic.

At the same time, Dorian is only partly wrong in blaming Basil, rather than Henry, for his spiritual downfall. Although it is the painted portrait which reveals to him the splendour of his beauty and thus gives birth to his vanity, Dorian's metamorphosis on that morning in June could not come about in Henry's absence. Dorian is in many ways a victim of art, and even more importantly, he is a victim of man's drive towards creating fictions, their endless activity of imposing order on their outside world as a way of coming to terms with it. By cutting himself off from his heart and soul, which also encapsulate his experiences and memories, Dorian renders himself incapable of exercising such control over his own life. His devil's pact is an outcome of immaturity, the fruit of his first glimpse of death.

It appears inappropriate, but not at all surprising, that both Basil and Henry should praise Dorian's 'personality' in their initial encounters with the youth, for what strikes the readers most in their first encounter with Dorian is his complete lack of character, of anything determinate but his physical appearance. Both Basil and Henry jealously project their own ideals onto this blank canvas, which they fill with their own idealised selves. Where Basil sees Pre-Raphaelite innocence and divine grace, Ruskin's beauty of nature as an expression of boundless divinity, Henry detects the promise of Nietzschean self-fashioning, the potential limitlessness of the individual. Both see in Dorian a union of matter and spirit, but whereas Basil cherishes the Platonic ideal of internal grace expressed through the mortal body, Henry feels drawn to the sensuality of Dorian's appearance as an expression of his as yet unrestricted

instincts and impulses. To him Dorian represents ideal man before civilised society's castration of his human greatness:

'But the bravest man amongst us is afraid of himself. The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. Nothing remains then but the recollection of a pleasure, or the luxury of a regret. The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.' (DG 20)

According to Henry, man's only path towards redemption lies in an absolute denial of self-restriction, which can only result in neuroses. All the same, Henry is not an advocate of sordid decadence. Rather, like Basil, he aims to give content to beautiful form – and like Basil he succeeds. But whereas Basil's influence is restricted to the domain of art, the creation of a spiritually expressive portrait that, rather than mirror, misrepresents and thereby elevates the sitter's personality, Henry treats life itself as art by using Dorian as his creative material. In doing so he finds that talking to Dorian is

like playing on a violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow.... There was something terribly enthralling in the exercise of influence. No other activity was like it. To project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it

tarry there for a moment; to hear one's own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth: to convey one's temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume: there was a real joy in that – perhaps the most satisfying joy left to us in an age so limited and vulgar as our own, an age grossly carnal in its pleasure, and grossly common in its aims.... (DG 33)

In an age of materialistic abundance and mass-produced objects, Henry chooses to work with the most exclusive of substances – the human spirit. As a consequence, the opening chapters of the novel show the birth of a soul followed promptly by its death.

In his enthusiastic embrace of 'New Hedonism' and its refusal to seek guidance from 'the fruits of experience', Henry exhibits a degree of wisdom and nonchalance, a versatile ability to adapt to circumstances, that is the result of moral orthodoxy rather than knowledge acquired through practice. Only with the hindsight of his own past as observer can Henry succeed in his improvised seduction of Dorian, which takes advantage of a man's innate frailty by exalting his putative omnipotence. Lord Henry Wotton thus embodies Wilde's critique of both Victorian society and the *fin-de-siècle* dandy figure. Henry's character gives voice to the principles of the 'New Hedonism', which effectively undermine the dogma of nineteenth-century utilitarianism and social orthodoxy, but Dorian's fate, which is largely the outcome of Henry's authority, shows the beliefs of the aesthete-cum-fop to be equally untenable.

Basil Hallward (supported by the two truly innocent victims Sybil Vane and her brother) occupies the only ethically tenable position within the novel's group of characters, yet his goodness and moral integrity are cruelly compromised by his impotence. As Dorian's first mentor, he naïvely fails to fashion Dorian according to his virtuous bourgeois ideals by remaining enthralled by Dorian as an aesthetic object. Basil's violation of the youth consists in exposing him to the power of his own beauty without providing him first with the ethical shield of self-protection. As a consequence, he inadvertently allows Henry to encounter Dorian in the vulnerable state of unmitigated vanity, which the dandy decides to abuse at once. Basil's artistic conscience should have forced him to endow the beautiful shape with moral content, but instead he eschews this obligation by egoistically indulging in Dorian's value as an object of art. His awareness of the danger that Henry's presence poses to the youth's innocence makes his failure all the more poignant; 'unconscious of the silence' (DG 21) between Dorian and Henry, he completes the painting without realising that its perfection depends on Dorian's novel state of imperfection. 'I don't know what Harry has been saying to you, but he has certainly made you have the most wonderful expression. I suppose he has been paying compliments.' (DG 21)

Basil stands for the Pre-Raphaelite artist in his refusal to take an active part in the fashioning of society. His love of beauty aligns him with the Epicureanism of Walter Pater in his wish to go through life unnoticed. This circumstance, of course, renders him useless to the voyeuristic passion of dandiacal circles. More importantly, it exposes Dorian to the Mephistophelian grip of Henry's immoral fantasies. Henry misuses Dorian as a weapon in his

half-hearted fight against the inanity of contemporary society, while at the same time cautiously distancing himself from this rather one-sided battle, which he chooses to follow as a mere spectator:

‘As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all.’ (DG 166)

Henry substitutes art for life, with Dorian as his creation. Life for Henry is only bearable when it allows him to take refuge in aesthetic pleasure. He is the scientist of Pater’s ‘Preface’ to The Renaissance, who analyses and dissects human emotions as a counter-action to the Victorian belief in the natural sciences and in their eventual ability to release man from every burden of nature. ‘Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing... A New Hedonism – that is what our century wants.’ (DG 23)

Henry initiates Dorian’s fall, by making him aware of both the power and the transience of his beauty. Henry’s own single weakness is revealed only in the penultimate chapter of the novel, when he refuses to talk of death. This horror of death mirrors Pater’s attitude towards human mortality as the only thing not worth knowing and experiencing. According to Pater, death is the ultimate source of human creativity, man’s existence a continuous struggle to overcome the fear entailed in this knowledge through artistic creation and myth-making. To Pater, as to Henry, death means the annihilation of the

senses, and therefore the disappearance of man's sole purpose of being. Wilde seems to relish Henry's role as the tempter of humanity, a genius with language and wit. Significantly, Dorian fails to grasp the intellectual character of Henry's stance in respect of human existence, and Henry succeeds in his conquest, because to Dorian his words resemble music:

Music had stirred him like that. Music had troubled him many times. But music was not articulate. It was not a new world, but rather another chaos, that it created in us. Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of flute. Mere words! Was there anything as real as words? (DG 21)

We are reminded of Hofmannsthal's qualms about the power of language:

Hüten Sie sich vor allem, was eine Form hat, ob es der Katholizismus ist oder die sozialistischen Ideen. Man verfängt sich in Formen, sie sind entsetzliche Netze.²⁵

Wilde has Henry appear as a latter-day Lucifer, a rebellious angel who tempts with words but fails to grasp the moral impact of the actions his influence may provoke. Henry's dogma is particularly dangerous because it is both flattering and engaging; Dorian acts both as its recipient and its centre.

By imposing shape on Dorian, Henry awakens the young man's conscience, and a mere caprice, a first, unmediated moment of painful recognition, results in Dorian's awful fate. Wilde's pessimism expresses itself by emphasising man's disposition towards evil defiance:

He was dimly conscious that entirely fresh influences were at work within him. Yet they seemed to have come really from himself. (...) Yes; there had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood. He understood them now. Life suddenly became fiery-coloured to him. It seemed to him that he had been walking in fire. Why had he not known it? (DG 21)

The world-view expressed here is a curious mixture of empiricism and determinism; whether we decide to treat this section of the text as the classic coming-out scene or not, the governing idea seems to be that Dorian's transformation is at once accidental and inevitable. Hence maybe Basil's only half-hearted, strangely resigned attempt to prevent Henry from stirring Dorian into consciousness. The painter appears to regard his sitter as blessed by nature; he does not, however, mistake him for one of Pater's chosen souls, who enrich the world by way of their inborn values. Despite his air of naïveté, Basil seems strangely conscious of Dorian's existence as consisting entirely in his physical beauty.

Basil's apparent artistic self-absorption throws a threatening shadow on aestheticism's religion of art. Its dangers are revealed in the frequent references to music as the source of a character's moral downfall. Wilde seems

to adopt the Schopenhauerian view of music as representative of the movements of the will; whenever a character is allowed to be absorbed and lose themselves in music, the result is disastrous, as the temptingly musical effect of Henry's words on Dorian exemplifies. Similarly Henry's wife steps beyond the limits of social acceptability by eloping with a man who plays Chopin, instead of merely embarking on an affair. Likewise, Alan Campbell's youthful relationship with Dorian Gray revolved around their mutual love of music.

In a reversal of roles, Henry, in his final meeting with Dorian, succumbs to the lure of this unique art form:

'How lovely that thing you are playing is! I wonder did Chopin write it at Majorca, with the sea weeping round the villa, and the salt spray dashing against the panes? It is marvellously romantic. What a blessing it is that there is one art left to us that is not imitative! Don't stop. I want music tonight. It seems to me that you are the young Apollo, and that I am Marsyas listening to you.' (DG 164)

Henry's final encounter with Dorian is dominated by mood rather than thought, and it is this Dionysian element of deceptive harmony which has caused Dorian's rejection of his humanity in the first place. Only an already-fashioned, only a strong mind can be exposed to the ecstasy of music without losing a sense of external reality. It is therefore particularly ironic that Henry should identify Dorian with Apollo, since Dorian does not manage to merge form and content at any moment in his life. To him all is sensation, rather than Paterian

impression. Dorian has not been shaped into a rounded consciousness through the exposure to human plight in the guise of worldly objects. As a consequence he fails at the universal project of self-development.

Man can only give form and sense to his life by looking back upon it in an attempt to make it cohere, and this is an endeavour precluded by Dorian's split existence as both human being and artwork. He cannot regard his life as part of art, simply because he has already dissociated himself from his soul. Dorian's existence is thus the accumulation of sensuous impressions, unpremeditated and capricious. In contrast to Dorian's passiveness, which he only overcomes through violent acts of (self-)destruction, Henry's life is dominated by constant myth-making, a shaping of reality by words. He is alive because he is able to imagine Chopin at the piano or Basil drowned in the Seine. His vision of the world depends not so much on his cynicism as on his romantic indulgence in memories of beauty. He is capable of both scorning and rejecting humanity by exposing social man's inevitable reliance on hypocrisy as a tool of everyday life, at the same that he is able to elevate the individual by clothing him in borrowed artistic visions. Thus the spared Hetty becomes Tennyson's Lady of Shalott or Millais's drowning Ophelia. Henry's autonomy is therefore based on the illusion of art, which he exploits and administers by the shortcomings of the mundane. This ability is not only nourished but relies on emotive, empathetic memory, a faculty lost to Dorian:

Besides, Dorian, don't deceive yourself. Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion

has its dream. You may fancy yourself safe, and think yourself strong. But a chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it, a line from a forgotten poem that you had come across again, a cadence from a piece of music that you had ceased to play – I tell you, Dorian, it is on things like these that our lives depend. (DG 165)

It is at this late stage of the novel that Henry's true attitude towards human existence is allowed to emerge. Despite his apparent emphasis on control, on a mode of living that is defined by distanced appreciation and detached aestheticism, Henry is finally driven to acknowledge the inevitability and indeed necessity of beauty as an intrinsic force that escapes the individual's authority. However, by excluding not only the aesthetic in its non-artistic, that is natural, manifestations but also beauty's other, the deformed, the grotesque, Henry reveals his misapprehension of the nature of life, which depends on a constant and, where possible, balanced interplay of binarisms. As the fatal rupture of Dorian's persona shows, the beautiful and the foul must go hand in hand and, where separated by force, will eventually reunite.

Isobel Murray links the story of Dorian Gray with Pater's Marius the Epicurean and Gaston de Latour; in her view, all three books concern themselves primarily with the development of the soul rather than the plot in which the protagonists find themselves entangled, so that 'what action there is in [the novel] tends to be ritualistic, inevitable and even symmetrical: the most obvious example of this is the interchange of knives, portraits and bodies'.²⁶ It is not at all surprising to discover the exchange of material objects to be at the

heart of this seminal text of decadence writing. All the same, Murray seems to overstate her point, since Dorian's entirely negative and immoral activities are intended to clash violently with the attitude of detached observer adopted by Henry Wotton. Where Dorian lives an amoral life, Henry merely thinks it. Henry's refusal to participate actively in life results in his inability even to imagine Dorian's engagement in brutal and hideous crimes. Ultimately, he is exposed as just another man blinded by Dorian's physical beauty. In any event, in The Picture of Dorian Gray beauty is seen as destructive; art, while it may seem to heighten life, in fact sullies it. As we shall see, Wilde's text is not the only one to be driven by a bad conscience about art.

In the last analysis, Wilde's novel reveals the realms of life and art to be incompatible. It verifies Hofmannsthal's claim that there is 'no direct path from poetry to life, none from life to poetry. The word as vehicle of life's purpose and its brother, the dream-like word which can be found in a poem, move away from one another and float as aliens past each other, like the buckets of a well'.²⁷ Life and art can only combine when the latter is made to relinquish its demand for absolute beauty and perfect representation. Jan B. Gordon is thus correct in concluding that Sybil Vane 'is able to mimic a passion only as long as she does not feel it; social involvement destroys the realm of ideal art'.²⁸

NOTES

¹ Ed Cohen, 'Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation', *PMLA*, 102 (1987), p. 805.

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Some Binarisms (II): Wilde, Nietzsche, and the Sentimental Relations of the Male Body', in Epistemology of the Closet (San Diego New York; London: Harcourt Brace, 1990)

³ Alan Sinfield, The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Movement (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994)

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁵ See Ed Cohen, 'Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation', p. 805: 'That Wilde's novel encodes traces of male homoerotic desire seems to be ubiquitously, though tacitly affirmed. Why this general affirmation exists has never been addressed. To understand how "everyone knows" what lurks behind Wilde's manifestly straight language (i.e., without descending to a crude biographical explanation), we must examine the ways that Wilde's novel moves both with and athwart the late Victorian ideological practices that naturalized male heterosexuality.'

⁶ See Richard Ellmann, Oscar Wilde (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) pp. 415-17.

⁷ See also my brief interpretation of the text in Chapter III, pp. 150-9.

⁸ For the events that led to Hofmannsthal's conception of 'Das Märchen der 672. Nacht' and the textual connections between Dorian Gray and the fairy-tale see Eugene Weber, 'Hofmannsthal und Oscar Wilde', *HF*, 1 (1971), pp. 104-6.

⁹ Patrick Bridgwater, Anglo-German Interactions in the Literature of the 1890s (Oxford: Legenda, 1999), p. 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 805.

¹¹ Alan Sinfield, The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Movement, p. 85.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 85/6. I am here both heavily borrowing from and modifying Alan Sinfield's text and I would therefore, for the sake of clarity, like to quote from the relevant passage:

'How was poetry to be defined in relation to those powerful concepts [i.e. those of politics and economy]? Three approaches emerged: relegation, incorporation and marginalization. Many people were inclined, simply, to dismiss poetry as frivolous; in the perspective of making the world run efficiently, it seemed a trivial concern (this is relegation). Others demanded that it should sing the progress of trade and manufacturing (incorporation). The third idea, which generally won out, was that poetry should ascend into an autonomous, visionary realm, allegedly above the ideology of utilitarianism and political economy, the market and empire, in which exquisite personal sensations and spiritual intuitions might be expressed. I call this third idea *marginalization* because, although it asserts for poetry a transcendent (non-political) status, it is at the expense of quarantining it from the main concerns of economic and political life.'

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-98.

¹⁸ Martin Swales, A Student's Guide to Thomas Mann (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 41.

¹⁹ Ellen Moers, The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960), pp. 302/3.

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- ²⁰ Jan B. Gordon, "Parody as Initiation": The Sad Education of Dorian Gray', *Criticism*, 9 (1967), p. 355.
- ²¹ From Wilde's letter to Ralph Payne, postmarked 12 February 1894 and reproduced in The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rubert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 585.
- ²² Alan Sinfield, The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Movement, p. 98.
- ²³ Ellen Moers, The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm, p. 314.
- ²⁴ Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', in Complete Works of Oscar Wilde (New York; London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 50.
- ²⁵ Hugo von Hofmannsthal in a letter to Ria Schmujlow-Classen (13/04/1898), quoted in Rolf Tarot, Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Daseinsformen und dichterische Struktur (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1970), p. 382.
- 'Beware of all that has a form, whether it be Catholicism or socialist ideas. One gets entangled in forms, they are awful nets. –' (My translation.)
- ²⁶ Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. xvi.
- ²⁷ See Chapter III, p. 192.
- ²⁸ Jan B. Gordon, "Parody as Initiation": The Sad Education of Dorian Gray', p. 357.

VI

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN

Aquinas was always conscious of the possibility of a pleasure which was pure and disinterested. He identified it with the pleasure produced by the apprehension of beauty in objects. Disinterested pleasure means pleasure which is its own end, which is not connected with the satisfaction of animal needs or with utility. An embryonic form of such pleasure already exists in play. What is play? It is an activity whose end is its own fulfilment, and which causes a psychic relief necessary for our biological rhythms. 'The activity of play,' Aquinas writes, 'are not aimed at some extrinsic end, but aim rather at the well-being of the player.' (...)

Pure, disinterested contemplation is similar to play, because it is an end in itself. It also resembles play in that it is not a response to some compulsion rooted in the exigencies of life, but is rather a higher activity appropriate to a spiritual creature.¹

Haben wir uns hingegen dem Genuss echter Schönheit hingegeben, so sind wir in einem solchen Augenblick unsrer leidenden und tätigen Kräfte in gleichem Grad Meister, und mit gleicher Leichtigkeit werden wir uns zum Ernst und zum Spiele, zur Ruhe und zur Bewegung, zur Nachgiebigkeit und zum Widerstand, zum abstrakten Denken und zur Anschauung wenden.

Diese hohe Gleichmütigkeit und Freiheit des Geistes, mit Kraft und Rüstigkeit verbunden, ist die Stimmung, in der uns ein echtes Kunstwerk entlassen soll, und es gibt keinen sicherem Probestein der wahren ästhetischen Güte.²

The dilemma inherent in the individual's problematic reliance on culture as the source of subject-formation, as both the nurturer and the prison-guard of man's capacity for wonderment, finds rich and weighty expression in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Like Mann's Tonio Kröger and Death in Venice, the text incorporates generalised visions of human sensibility within a project devoted to the exploration of the artistic psyche at the turn of the nineteenth century. The result is a narrative characterised by the see-saw of, on the one hand, material, sensory entrapment and, on the other, its rebellious rejection by way of a newly formulated theory of redemptive perception.

As in the case of Pater, Joyce's aesthetics are dictated by the recognition of man's fundamental need for control, achievable only through the appropriate deciphering of the 'changeless laws of life'.³ Joyce's Nietzschean assertiveness does not shy away from the question of disinterested seeing. Where Tonio Kröger's existence as artist is, as we shall see, marked by a painfully ambiguous, highly ironised awareness of the potential futility of the creative endeavour in the face of the bourgeoisie's ideological stability and materialist productivity, Joyce upholds the importance of the artist's isolation from his public, its political attitudes and aesthetic tastes, to which he is encouraged to maintain a relationship of distanced superiority. Adopting the Shelleyan view of the artist as the unacknowledged legislator of mankind, he situates himself within the tradition of artishood as a tool of cognitive design.

A Portrait describes the occurrence of a brilliant mind born into adverse circumstances yet equipped with an innate ability to rise above them. Like Pater's ingenious prototypes, Stephen Dedalus displays a level of insight denied to his environment. Although the reader is presented with the linear development of his mind and the processes that lead to his first creative endeavours, the origin of his power remains obscure – it seems to be what Pater calls an 'instinct' (R 141). Yet Stephen's personality is neither 'unerring' (R 141) nor does he benefit from the 'happy gift of nature' (R 155) which would enable him to emulate Pater's diaphanous type and lead a life of 'simplicity' and 'repose' (R 155). Although Stephen's critical view and sharp evaluation of the social, political, and intellectual conditions he finds himself subjected to meet Pater's ideal of critical distantiation, his tentative progress in the process of transforming these contingencies and their impact on his own individual

situation means that he falls short of the serene, enlightened figure envisioned by Pater.

In fact, as comparative analyses of Stephen Hero, the novel's earlier version, demonstrate, the later Stephen represents in many ways a satirical revisiting of Joyce's previous, more idealised self-figuration.⁴ The text thus also offers a critical approach to the artist in self-imposed exile and his precarious oscillation between inflated self-importance on the one hand and humble awareness of the artist's ethical responsibility on the other. Although the novel is primarily concerned with the formation of a unique artistic consciousness, and is by this token a *Künstlerroman*, a substantial part of its appeal can be traced back to its generic identity as a *Bildungsroman* documenting the complex energies of erratic juvenility. During his journey towards maturity, Stephen's most prolific characteristic becomes that of mute resistance; when depicted in the company of his family and fellows, his attitude is typically that of silence. A Portrait is, on a very basic level, primarily a novel concerned with adolescence, which again in turn is characterised by obstinacy, a somewhat inevitable alienation from adult, and therefore social life itself, a setting which naturally encourages the instrumentalisation of the capacity for wonderment as a means of aesthetic reinterpretation and individualist appropriation.

Thus, as is the case with Tonio Kröger, Stephen's introverted sulkiness forms a vital part of the larger cultural and social project. While his childhood is dominated by the discovery of language, its layers and limits of signification, youthful experience encourages him to distrust language in its spoken form. Stephen comes to reject the day-to-day tongue of authority, whether it be based on the seductive and carefully constructed ideology of the church, or

evidenced by the irrational utterings of his parents. He identifies the common, popular word as a threat to his innate supremacy.

This finding is underlined by Stephen's distinction between an oral and a literary tradition of language and illustrated by his first experimentations with writing as described at the outset of Stephen Hero. Mirroring Bacon's critical approach to the *idola fori*, the idols of the market-place, Stephen comes to recognise the word's status as an essentially empty shell harbouring imposed meaning rather than an metaphysical source of signification:

Stephen laid down his doctrine very positively and insisted on the importance of what he called the literary tradition. 'Words, he said, have a certain value in the market-place – a debased value.' Words are simply receptacles for human thought: in the literary tradition they receive more valuable thoughts than they receive in the market-place.⁵

Stephen's embrace of literature as the 'more veritably human tradition' thus signals his advocacy of language as a tool of consciousness rather than the perpetuation of adopted dogma, because people 'seemed to him strangely ignorant of the value of the words they used so glibly'.⁶

Like Chandos, Stephen renounces the articulated word for its slippery intangibility, its ability to conceal and at the same time perpetuate meaning. His politically tinged misgivings about language as an instrument of stifling convention are complemented by an élitist desire to restore and preserve the importance of language as a conveyor of aesthetic values. Consequently,

towards the end of the novel, Stephen's verbal encounters are largely limited to theoretical debates on philosophy, theology, and art, in which he succeeds in presenting and defending his convictions by the means of cerebral rhetoric. However, on a more mundane level, language fails him, and his meeting with a flower-girl demonstrates the extent of his isolation:

A hand was laid on his arm and a young voice cried:

— Ah, gentleman, your own girl, sir! The first handsel today, gentleman. But that lovely bunch. Will you, gentleman!

The blue flowers which she lifted towards him and her young blue eyes seemed to him at that instant images of guilelessness; and he halted till the image had vanished and he saw only her ragged dress and damp coarse hair and hoydenish face.

— Do, gentleman! Don't forget your own girl, sir!

— I have no money, said Stephen.

— But them lovely ones, will you sir? Only a penny.

— Did you hear what I said? asked Stephen, bending towards her. I told you I had no money. I tell you again now.

— Well, sure you will some day, sir, please God, the girl answered after an instant.

— Possibly, said Stephen, but I don't think it likely.

He left her quickly, fearing that her intimacy might turn into gibing and wishing to be out of the way before she offered her ware to

another, a tourist from England or a student of Trinity. Grafton Street, along which he walked, prolonged that moment of discouraged poverty.
(P 198/9)

This instance of sexual, economic, and political humiliation is framed by Stephen's reflections on Davin's story of the peasant woman and her position as a 'type of her race and his own' (P 198), and his dejected musings on the connection of financial and spiritual destitution in the history of Ireland, a correlation symbolised by the modest reburial of the eighteenth-century Irish revolutionary Wolfe Tone, which Stephen himself attended with his father. In contrast to his confrontation with the flower-girl, Stephen's vision of the peasant woman and recollection of Tone's burial benefit aesthetically from their temporal belatedness. Rather than endeavour to unveil the significance of the young woman's misery, he flees the scene in a state of irritation and anxiety, refusing to draw up direct parallels between his view of the Irish condition and his embarrassed inability to communicate with an actual human instance of the nation's predicament.

Stephen struggles to come to terms with the problem of life as unmediated experience. His epiphanic visions are thus as much a source of aesthetic liberation as spiritual incarceration. While his momentary perception of the girl and the flowers as symbols of innocence and artlessness affords him a fleeting moment of aesthetic pleasure, it clashes violently with the materialist reality against which the episode is constructed – as the idealised concept, inspired by the earlier vision of the chimerical peasant woman, gives way to the visualised distress of the impoverished youth, the futility and impotence of

Stephen's aesthetic and intellectual capabilities in the face of material reality become apparent.

The flower-girl episode thus illustrates the ambiguous role of the artist's imagination. Stephen's mental image of the peasant woman as 'a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness', a 'woman without guile' (P 198) expresses his romanticised perception of Ireland as a place governed by enigmatic and portentous darkness just like his consciousness and soul. Crucially, Stephen needs to wrestle and come to terms with his national and cultural backgrounds, which in many ways contrast one another. His character is thus depicted as continuously vacillating between the possibilities of involvement and solitude. However, in the last analysis, Stephen's notions of conscious self-isolation and determined self-formation are based on illusions which he uses and needs to probe; and in the process he becomes aware of the boundaries delimiting his existence as artist and human being.

Stephen's progress towards social withdrawal as an artistic end-state is accelerated towards the end of A Portrait and concludes with his disembodied presence in his diary entries, with his character reduced to a state of pure consciousness. However, Chapter V not only chronicles his inability to participate in life in a manner that would not undermine his artistic status, but highlights the impossibility of escape from the moulds and implications of cultural oppression. Thus, while the chapter opens with a mock-realist glimpse

of Dedalus family life, which Stephen has now learned to face with a degree of serenity, the balance of ironic involvement and determined rejection soon becomes unsettled:

– Well, it's a poor case, [his mother] said, when a university student is so dirty that his mother has to wash him.

– But it gives you pleasure, said Stephen calmly.

(...)

– Is your lazy bitch of a brother gone yet?

– Yes, father,

– Sure?

– Yes, father.

– Hm!

The girl came back making signs to him to be quick and go out quietly by the back. Stephen laughed and said:

– He has a curious idea of genders if he thinks a bitch is masculine.

– Ah, it's a scandalous shame for you, Stephen, said his mother, and you'll live to rue the day you set your foot in that place. I know how it has changed you.

– Good morning, everybody, said Stephen, smiling and kissing the tips of his fingers in adieu.

(P 189)

Stephen's position as an exile within his own family, an aesthete stranded in an environment that bespeaks material, spiritual, and intellectual inadequacy, has here reached its climax. Yet, while Stephen clearly relishes his role as the

suave and debonair rebel, he fails to overcome the oppressive nature of his surroundings:

The lane behind the terrace was waterlogged and as he went it down slowly, choosing his steps amid heaps of rubbish, he heard a mad nun screeching in the nuns' madhouse beyond the wall.

– Jesus! O Jesus! Jesus! (P 189)

The lunatic nun's cry, with its connotation of sexual repression, threatens to undermine his detached pose. The scream is both linguistically apt and inarticulate at the same time. It could denote both the ecstasy of a sexual vision, the bride of Christ crying out to her groom, or the despair of insanity in the face of a bigoted system.

Stephen's reaction is illustrative of the novel's preoccupations. He first establishes a connection between his parents' inferior situation and the nun's hysteria, as both seem the result of a lack of restraint and self-control. The father's entrepreneurial failures emerge as just punishment for his boastful and domineering nature and are furthermore aggravated by his number of offspring. While his parents are thus branded by a lack of sexual temperance, the nun's predicament appears to be the result of either sexual transgression or oppression. Stephen thus links and rejects all three:

He shook the sound out of his ears by an angry toss of his head and hurried on, stumbling through the mouldering offal, his heart already bitten by an ache of loathing and bitterness. His

father's whistle, his mother's mutterings, the screech of an unseen maniac were to him now so many voices offending and threatening to humble the pride of his youth. He drove their echoes even out of his heart with an execration; but, as he walked down the avenue and felt the grey morning light falling about him and through the dripping trees and smelt the strange wild smell of the wet leaves and bark, his soul was loosed of her miseries.

The rainladen trees of the avenue evoked in him, as always, memories of the girls and women in the plays of Gerhart Hauptmann; and the memory of their pale sorrows and the fragrance falling from the wet branches mingled in the mood of quiet joy. His morning walk across the city had begun, and he foreknew that as he passed the sloblands of Fairview he would think of the cloistral silverveined prose of Newman. (P 189/90)

Stephen's customary evocation of literary figures and landscapes provides a counter-world to the real-life squalor of his own city. It is both derivative and self-fashioned, for, although the pieces of literature have been handed down to him through a chain of cultural exchange, in its choices and associations Stephen's mind appears entirely autonomous. His aesthetic and cultural consciousness, at which he has arrived through a process of autonomous selection based on individual taste, enables him to map out in advance his emotional landscape. By finding refuge in a network of aesthetic associations which are of his own making, Stephen is able to 'foreknow' the workings of his

mind and spirit. His use of art and the aesthetic is thus both intrinsically escapist and encouragingly empowering.

The world Stephen substitutes for the disorder of his surroundings is that of beauty. Although his taste is highly eclectic, the stylised visions of life he indulges in are in fact escapist and conventional. They act as antinomies to the mundane appearances and occupations of external reality.⁷ Hauptmann's frail and comely female figures juxtapose the fiercely sexual nature of Mrs Dedalus' existence. Similarly, Newman's mystical aesthetics offer an alternative to the stifling reality of the nuns' existence, while Calvacanti's emphasis on emotion contrasts with worldly commercialism. The reference to Ibsen's final play When We Dead Awaken, however, pierces through the rigidity of these binarisms, as it aspires to reconcile the conflicting demands of art and life.

At the centre of Stephen's artistic development lies first the acceptance followed by the rejection of the shackles of language. As Seamus Deane rightly points out, 'part of the meaning of this programmed journey to the university, with all its attendant associations, is its privacy. Stephen is creating an imaginative world that runs parallel to the actual world he inhabits'.⁸ But Stephen's conflict is not merely with vulgar reality or despotic law – Stephen's, like Chandos's, is a crisis of language and perception.

Consequently, Stephen's literary theory advocates the gradual disappearance of the artist 'within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails' (P 233). His embrace of the dramatic as the highest art form enables him to create a maximum distance between himself and the fashioned object. His aim is the creation of 'impersonal' art:

The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalises itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. (P_233)

In the move from individual 'personality' to 'life' at large, the artist's 'human imagination' acts as a medium. Only the successful artwork allows its creator to retreat from it. While the artist remains silent, art acts out its purpose. Hence Stephen's manifesto, delivered in his conversation with Cranly, which concludes the novel's third person narrative:

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning. (P 268/9)

The silence Stephen is referring to here is that of the son, the citizen, the worshipper. Determined to abandon the modes of protest and sermonising, he chooses art, rather than active involvement in religion, politics or family life, as a way of modifying wanting conditions. By adding physical distance (exile) to

the refusal to participate in intellectual and emotional life (silence), he is left with artistic creation (cunning) as his only means of expression.

The notion of the cunning artist is of course also a reference to the 'old artificer' (P 276), the mythical Daedalus, who used his art to return from exile. Stephen's reversal of the myth indicates his alienation from his homeland. The world of aesthetics comes to replace Ireland as Stephen's geographical place of origin. If the aesthetic moment represents the highest attainable level of freedom, Stephen's future as artist will indeed be marked by liberation. Stephen Dedalus labours to fashion himself on the Nietzschean hero:

Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the
millionth time the reality of experience and to
forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated
conscience of my race... Old father, old artificer,
stand me now and ever in good stead. (P 275/6)

This pledge to action, which will come to be ironised by Stephen himself in the 'Proteus' chapter of Ulysses, reveals the multiple layers of reference established in the course of the novel. The pathos of determination coupled with the Wagnerian image of the 'smithy' is united with the 'soul', which at the end of this sensuous, dynamic text evokes the sublime nature of the human psyche. Joyce embarks on a study of his young protagonist's discovery of life, during which he is exposed to the sounds, sights and tactile impressions of his immediate surroundings as well as the texts and myths of his cultural heritage. Instead of passively internalising these data, Stephen is portrayed as involved in the constant process of revising and analysing his memory, thus exercising

personality as censorship. This leads to the watchful appropriation of traditions rather than their indiscriminate acceptance or rejection.

Through his art, his urge to create by expressing himself in literature, Stephen enjoys an intimation of the grandeur of the human soul. Characteristically, he chooses to shape his own myth by combining his inherited Catholicism with the paganism of his literary education. The Third Person, the communicative link between the Father and the Son, comes to represent the connection between Daedalus and Icarus. It thus completes Stephen's project of self-origination. Stephen's final appeal to the 'Old father, old artificer' is an artistic fusion of the crucified Christ's prayers and the fervent aspiration of Icarus to follow in his father's footsteps and build his own labyrinth.

This Dionysian audacity of the mind is later channelled and challenged by the secularised concept of the Thomist epiphany, which allows the artist not only to detect truth in the phenomenal, but also, potentially, to be of service to the community. In reviewing his identity markers, Stephen clearly rejects some in favour of others, giving preference to those of a more liberal political nature. His following of Shelley, however, as one of the unacknowledged legislators of mankind is justified both on a subjective level by the romantic poet's fervent atheism as well as the objective level as a philosopher of the aesthetic. Stephen thus turns from consumer to critic and judge – aesthetic pleasure unites with reason. Stephen's eclecticism, the process of cultural selection in which he cites and argues with the absent exponents of philosophical or artistic thought describes the conscious construction of a reality, the insight that

culture and tradition are to the same degree true or false as immediate phenomena; in the Nietzschean sense all of these are illusions and lies.

Stephen's creative project thus embodies a number of strands. One has ultimately to do with compassion, and it is here that Stephen overcomes the disturbing and antisocial implications of indulgent solipsism. Significantly, Stephen's most important epiphany does not concern a man-made, precisely delineated object but a group of his human beings, his siblings, in whom he comes to recognise and acknowledge the pain underlying human existence:

He was listening with pain of spirit to the overtone of weariness behind their frail fresh innocent voices. Even before they set out on life's journey they seemed weary already of the way.

He heard the choir of the voices echoed and multiplied through an endless reverberation of the choirs of endless generations of children; and heard in all the echoes an echo also of the recurring note of weariness and pain. All seemed weary of life even before entering upon it. And he remembered that Newman had heard this note also in the broken lines of Virgil *giving utterance, like the voice of Nature herself, to that pain and weariness yet hope of better things which has been the experience of her children in every time.*
(P 177)

Stephen's ability to view his siblings' suffering within the wider context of life signals art's ability to break through the confines of solipsism. He comes to the acknowledgement and realisation of the nature of his siblings' predicament

through the dual path of essential intuition and artistic conditioning. It is Stephen's aesthetic education coupled with his innate capacity for compassion will allows him both to be stirred by and to find solace in the unversality of the children's suffering. Although he is as yet unable to articulate his feelings or give indivual articulation to his siblings' plight, which is why the passage must inevitably evolve into and end in a quotation rather than Stephen's own authentic voice, the implicit recognition of the extent to which Newman's earlier appreciation of that same pain has paved the way for his enlightenment opens the way to socially meaningful artistic creation.

Significantly, the passage is both embedded in yet also highly critical of Stephen's religious roots and identity. While finding consolation in the network of aestheticised ecclesiastical references signalled by Newman and Virgil, Stephen's cultural context also renders him tacitly aware of the role religious dogma in the children's social degradation and unhappiness. The incident thus comes to figure as one of the major motives for his rejection of priesthood and eventual embrace of artishood. One can compare this episode with a turning-point in a classic text of early modernism, Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles; the process which leads the heroine to take over responsibility for her siblings' life. Significantly, Tess's contemplation results in the decision to rejoin Alec and thus improve her siblings' economic prospects, if not save their lives:

They all became silent; with the impressibility of their age they were ready to burst into tears at the picture of finality she had conjured up, though all the day hitherto they had

been rejoicing in the idea of a new place. Tess changed the subject.

‘Sing to me, dears,’ she said.

‘What shall we sing?’

‘Anything you know. I don’t mind.’

There was a momentary pause; it was broken, first, by one little tentative note; then a second voice strengthened it, and a third and a fourth chimed in in unison, with words they had learnt at Sunday school —

Here we suffer grief and pain

Here we meet to part again;

In heaven we part no more

The four sang on with the phlegmatic passivity of persons who had long ago settled the question, and there being no mistake about it, felt that further thought was not required. With features strained hard to enunciate the syllables they continued to regard the centre of the flickering fire, the notes of the youngest straying over into pauses of the rest.

Tess turned from them, and went to the window again. Darkness had now fallen without, but she put her face to the pane as though to peer into the gloom. It was really to hide her pain. If she could only believe what the children were singing; if she were only sure, how different all would now be; how confidently she would leave them to Providence and their future kingdom! But, in default of that, it behoved her to do something; to be their Providence; for to Tess, as to not a

few millions of others, there was ghastly satire in
the poet's lines —

Not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come.

To her and her like, birth itself was an ordeal of
degrading personal compulsion, whose
gratuitousness nothing in the result seemed to
justify, and at best could only palliate.⁹

Tess's realisation results in her moral and spiritual self-sacrifice, which sees her re-join her former oppressor and the source of her personal suffering. Significantly, her decision is triggered by her perception of the gulf between aestheticised religious dogma and life's dependence on economic and material fact. Her aesthetic appreciation of the children's song proves insufficient to balance out her loss of faith, which results in her degrading economic enslavement for the sake of securing her family's material well-being. Unlike Stephen, Tess has no artistic-cultural background to fall back on that could afford her solace for the cruel inadequacy of her and her siblings' position. All she is able to make out from the words of the song, whose language she ultimately distrusts, is the discrepancy between the envisioned beauty of life after death and the brutal injustice of their present situation.

Although this insight is potentially empowering and liberating, it nevertheless results in the girl's self-abandonment and subjugation. Paradoxically, her cynical and calculating act of relinquishing her physical self to Alec in order to alleviate her family's material hardship not only originates in her altruistic spirit, which largely derives from her sceptical approach to

orthodox religious principles, it in itself is based on another inferred set of rules, which give Alec, her first (and only) physical lover, precedence over Angel, whom she married in a Christian ceremony. Tess's world is thus ridden with and shaped by the opposing series of beliefs that dominated the late nineteenth century. Importantly for our present argument, she is unable to merge and understand these conflicting philosophies through symbiotic interpretation. Instead she is torn between them, which leaves her to reassert and express herself in a thoroughly self-destructive act, Alec's murder.

In contrast to Tess's actions, Stephen rejects the possibility of improving his siblings' fate through an active attempt at financial success and an economically viable social standing. In accordance with his position as recipient and interpreter of sense stimuli, he, rather than decide to accept the offer of joining the seminary and train as a priest, quietly rejoices in the comfort offered by Cardinal Newman's words. Articulated and aestheticised suffering, he realises, breaks through the confines of passive endurance and becomes a lasting source of succour and encouragement. It is this insight which triggers his decision to become an artist.

As the comparison between the two quoted passages shows, Stephen's aesthetic background is not only the source of his self-fashioning but offers a valid argument in favour of the selfishness underlying individualised artishood. Rather than devote his life to the pursuit of commercial achievement, Stephen realises that he can and will serve his society better by allowing his artistic consciousness to come to practical fruition. His passivity is thus ultimately misleading. His creative project represents in fact a valid alternative to both the studied detachment of the aesthete-dandy and the conventional involvement in

society embarked on by 'ordinary', more mundane individuals, and it is based on a kind of non-judgemental sympathy, an eclecticism of response, a fine balance between movement and rest. According to Stephen, this undertaking can only be realised through the life of the artist, a life dedicated to aesthetic perception:

The radiance of which [Aquinas] speaks is the scholastic 'quidditas', the 'whatness' of a thing. (NB: Not a kind of supernatural 'thing in itself'). This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the esthetic image is first conceived in his imagination. The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal. The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like to that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley's, called the enchantment of the heart. (P 231)

Stephen's apprehension of his siblings' suffering through the beauty of their song thus effects both a union with and complete separation from the scene. The instant of aesthetic perception is both sympathetic and critical and brings about a temporary release from the individual's solipsistic entrapment. Like Chandos, Stephen briefly unites with the aesthetic object, yet unlike Chandos,

this *fin-de-siècle* aesthete has the means to translate his vision through artistic creation.

In its final message, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a highly moral text, which utilises the discourse of aestheticism as a means of re-examining the individual's potential for sovereign self-becoming coupled with the possibility of creating socially significant art. In line with what is perhaps the most ethical of aestheticist texts, Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, Joyce's novel reinforces the validity of the subject's self-government, which is both highly egotistical yet in its self-centred focus convincingly humanist. Stephen's search for artistic independence is thus ultimately driven by the Christian concept of love, which encompasses both the self and the other. By acknowledging the need for his own self-seeking subject-formation, Stephen simultaneously endorses the spiritual and intellectual development of others.

In contrast with Wilde's novel, in *A Portrait* the 'very permanence of art' no longer 'mocks its creator who must endure the world's flux'.¹⁰ Here the gulf separating life and art is finally bridged through the creation of a character who learns to use artistic and cultural influences autonomously. Joyce's application of Thomist aesthetics relocates the epiphanic moment in the individual, who is no longer forced to succumb passively to the force of sensory stimuli issuing forth from the aesthetic object.¹¹ Even more importantly, the aesthetic object itself is no longer bound by conventional standards of beauty:

He crossed the bridge over the stream of the Tolka and turned his eyes coldly for an instant towards the faded blue shrine of the Blessed Virgin which stood foulwise on a pole in the

middle of a hamshaped encampment of poor cottages. (P 176)

Joyce's aesthete-artist is chronicler and creator in one. His position as artist and human being manifests itself in the liberal attempt to represent the truth of life and its enticingly incongruous and yet strangely rhythmical chaos. Deeply rooted in *fin-de-siècle* debate on the merits of *l'art pour l'art*, Joyce aims at a look at human existence that is less prejudiced even it does not claim to be objective. As the epiphanic moment quoted above shows, the author of A Portrait no longer feels compelled to make excuses for the novel's preoccupation with worldly subjects. Where Chandos embarrassingly acknowledges the inadequacy of the objects of his aesthetic vision – the rats, the furrow, the watering can – Joyce revels in the revealing charm of everyday articles, thus tacitly confirming the truth that all aesthetic theory is ultimately political. This, if you will, re-politicisation of the aesthetic, its return to its origins as a tool of culture, also results in the emancipating re-appropriation of the past:

Crossing Stephen's, that is, my green, remembered that his countryman and not mine had invented what Cranly the other night called our religion. A quartet of them, soldiers of the ninetyseventh infantry regiment, sat at the foot of the cross and tossed up dice for the overcoat of the crucified. (P 271)

It is the epiphanic moment which allows the author to leave the passage uncommented, as form and content competently merge. While the underlying

message of A Portrait, just like that of Tonio Kröger, appears to suffer from the magnitude of the creative design embraced by the protagonist but never confirmed by the text itself, the artistic promise described in Joyce's novel is fulfilled in this particular epiphany, in which the creator of art is no longer forced to elaborate the point but can leave the aesthetic moment to speak for itself.

At the same, A Portrait is, like the other texts discussed in this thesis, dominated by a sceptical towards language. Stephen's Nietzschean manifesto of spiritual and artistic originality echoes Hamlet's initial refusal to conform to the petrified order of the Danish court:

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe
whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or
my church: and I will try to express myself in
some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as
wholly as I can, using for my defence the only
arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and
cunning. (P 268/9)

In questioning the values of his society Stephen tries to shake off the very chains by which convention imprisons the individual – he doubts the authenticity of language (as does Hamlet). His notion that his identity is imposed on him rather than taken on by him is expressed in the use of the passive which diverts responsibility from him to the word itself ('whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church'). The idea of life as war, an act of painful becoming and self-individualisation, even of self-stylisation, shows Stephen's action mirroring Nietzschean thinking.

Yet, in a way that Nietzsche never quite manages, Joyce dramatises both the quest and the obstacles ranged against it. Zarathustra does not have to cope with institutions (church, school, family). Stephen does. This has to do with the realism that informs Joyce's text. And the explanations vouchsafed to Stephen shine with particular intensity because they are hard won. By contrast, Zarathustra exults in the experience of hardness; but we are not shown that hardness.

NOTES

- ¹ Umberto Eco, The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 17.
- ² Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters, ed. and trans. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), Letter 22, p.153. English translation, p. 153: 'If, by contrast we have surrendered to the enjoyment of genuine beauty, we are at such a moment master in equal degree of our passive and of our active powers, and we shall with equal ease turn to seriousness or to play, to repose or to movement, to compliance or to resistance, to the discursions of abstract thought or to the direct contemplation of phenomena. This lofty equanimity and freedom of the spirit, combined with power and vigour, is the mood in which a genuine work of art should release us, and there is no more certain touchstone of true aesthetic excellence.'
- ³ James Joyce, 'Drama and Life', in Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing, ed. by Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- ⁴ See, for example, Wayne C. Booth, 'The Problem of Distance in the Portrait', in Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook, ed. by Morris Beja (London: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 188-207.
- ⁵ James Joyce, Stephen Hero, ed. by John J. Slocum and Herbert Cahoon (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1959), p. 27.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26. See also Jacques Aubert, The Aesthetics of James Joyce (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 114/5.
- ⁷ My interpretation of the references is based on the notes to the novel provided by Seamus Deane in James Joyce, The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), pp. 306/7.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Thomas Hardy, Tess of the D'Urbervilles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 440/1.
- ¹⁰ Jan B. Gordon, "'Parody as Initiation": The Sad Education of Dorian Gray', *Criticism*, 9 (1967), p. 357.

¹¹ See Maurice Beebe, 'Joyce and Aquinas: The Theory of Aesthetics', in *Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook*, pp. 151-71.

VII

DIE VERWIRRUNGEN DES ZÖGLINGS TÖRLESS

In essence, Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß is about the profound psychological and epistemological crisis that derives from the experience of puberty, and on this all critics seem to agree. My own view, however, differs from critical orthodoxy in several ways. First, I see the text as centrally concerned with failure. Törleß fails to respond to Basini's needs and offer of affection with anything remotely resembling sympathy or human understanding. There is, in this sense, an unmistakable thematic of moral inadequacy at the very centre of Musil's tale. Moreover, although Törleß does derive from his experience critical insights into the failings of institutions, into social hypocrisy, he makes nothing of these insights. In the last analysis, he responds not with critique or subversion but simply with a kind of world-weary acknowledgement. Moreover, he fails to put his undoubted artistic sensitivity to any kind of creative use. Musil's text concerns, then, a three-fold failure: moral, social, and creative.

The second aspect of my departure from received critical opinion derives from my conviction that Musil's attitude to his protagonist is ultimately highly critical; it is one that, in other words, perceives Törleß's failings as such – and offers no redemptive consolation. The novel refuses to present adulthood as a solution. Rather, it portrays Törleß's clash with and subsequent opting out of human community in favour of escapism through art. Thus, even though the novel itself is often regarded as Musil's prophetic analysis of the workings behind the dictatorships of the twentieth century, Törleß fails to use his

sensitive imagination creatively as a tool of social emancipation. Instead, the glimpse of the adult Törleß offered reveals a hybrid of the Epicurean dandy and the quasi-dutiful bourgeois.

In Törleß, as in Dorian Gray, the focus of the aesthete's attention seems to be, once again, on a human figure. In his preoccupation with the boundary between 'Wahnsinn und Geradsinn', madness and rationality, Musil portrays the profound change brought about by a traumatic encounter with the human being as experimental and, by implication, aesthetic object, here, at first glance at least, represented by Basini.¹ This confrontation leaves Törleß with a sense of human frailty and fallibility, which lacks the positive impact experienced by the upper middle class protagonist in Musil's short stories 'Tonka'. Where in the latter, the main character feels his life enriched by a love affair with a sexually promiscuous yet spiritually noble maid servant, which thereby makes him sensitive and sympathetic to the way of life of her class, Törleß seeks solace in élitist oblivion.²

The relationship placed at the centre of the novel is thus an intrinsically negative, and, both for Törleß and the reader, a rather sobering experience. Törleß's fascination for Basini is not grounded in purely aesthetic or even sexual attraction. For Törleß, Basini represents a deviation from the norms of late-nineteenth-century life, from social decorum and decency, an aberration which he believes should render Basini's inclusion in bourgeois society impossible. But to his surprise, Törleß finds that, rather than expel Basini from their circle, the social microcosm defined by his boarding school fellows struggles to integrate and even use the offender while keeping potential damage to a minimum. The crisis triggered by his coming in contact with

Basini's violation of the established social law pushes Törleß towards a temporary loss of faith in the seemingly straightforward rationality embraced by the adult world. In fact, Törleß comes to recognise that rationality not only tolerates but necessitates irrationality. He finds the implausibility that seems to surround the use of negative and infinite numbers in mathematics, and which he takes to parallel the absurdity of Basini's existence, to be cancelled out by the positive results arrived at through their use. His clash with Basini is thus his first disturbing acquaintance with that which (outwardly) makes no sense.

There is, of course, another and even more significant analogy between Basini and mathematics' use of negative and infinite numbers. The numbers have to be thought of as existing – although they can never materialise. Similarly, Basini's depravity is innate, concealed in his psyche. Although his baseness manifests itself in his deeds, the reason for Basini's vice remains concealed. Quite literally, Törleß cannot see the cause of Basini's debasement. We find ourselves here, once again but more explicitly so than in the previously discussed texts, on Freudian terrain. Without launching into a psychoanalytic discussion of Basini's character, it will suffice to point out the connection between his psychological condition, regardless of the causes of his perversion and neuroses, and the emotional life of Törleß's society as a whole. The major source of Törleß's confusion appears to be the association between the crudeness of Basini's actions and character and the secrets of the adult world, between the world of Törleß's parents with their outward life of moral day-to-day solidity and the hidden, nocturnal depravity of bourgeois life implied in the couple's sexual relationship.

Törleß, like Musil's short story 'Tonka' and Joyce's Portrait, concerns itself with the loss of innocence. It is a re-enactment of the mythical Fall, in which the individual becomes cruelly acquainted with the dark and enigmatic, implicitly sinful, side of life. However, rather than use the protagonist's newly-found insight as a starting-point for his transition from confused and rebellious adolescence to enlightened adulthood, as a departure from and rejection of the old and familiar, Musil insists that his protagonist will emerge from his juvenile crisis into a condition of strenuously maintained, fastidious paralysis. He shows Törleß's final acceptance of the binary oppositions dominating the existence of his social class: 'Er wußte nun zwischen Tag und Nacht zu scheiden' (T 140).³ We find no aesthetic, artistic or ethical manifesto at the end of Törleß. We are, however, afforded a glimpse of Törleß's future which at first glance reveals that, instead of artistic creativity, his sensitivity results in a withdrawal from the world of immediate sensory impression. The adult Törleß, in the Wildean sense of the critic, can only acknowledge life in the digested and mediated form of the artwork. He is thus exposed as a consumer rather than a creator of art. In true dandiacal style, he is wholly unconcerned with morals and devotes his personal life to the growth of his soul,

das Wachstum der Seele, des Geistes, oder wie
immer man das benennen mag, was hier und da
durch einen Gedanken zwischen den Worten
eines Buches oder vor den verschlossenen
Lippen eines Bildes in uns gemehrt wird⁴ (T 111),

a process triggered by significant form, a development beyond the grasp of language, meaning, and rationality.

Because of his intense awareness of language and its limited powers, if not impotence, within the field of the deeply rooted desire, Törleß, at the end, maintains his state of silence in the knowledge that the life and experiences of the soul cannot be articulated rationally but can only be translated metaphorically and symbolically by art. In spite of his ability to express himself logically both vis-à-vis Reiting and Beineberg as well as the committee of teachers investigating the events and his subsequent disappearance, Törleß never really attempts to articulate his crisis, since he knows that, in keeping with Maeterlinck's motto presented at the novel's opening, the profundity of his experience cannot be expressed in language: 'How strangely do we diminish a thing as soon as we try to express it in words!'.⁵ The false stones and pieces of glass are not only mere fragments of the original impression, they are also its vulgarisation. Once translated into factual, rational language, Törleß's involvement with Basini comes to appear as a sordid and insignificant encounter between two adolescent boys, to whom, only partly due to their circumstances, homoeroticism offers the only outlet for their problematic spiritual and physical attraction.

As a consequence of his association with Basini, Törleß, in the closing scene of the novel, is aware of the libido and its hold over the individual; he is reunited with his mother, who, by way of her sexuality, is now linked, in his mind, to the rest of womankind. At last, Törleß appears to have pierced through the hitherto mysterious existence of his parents and that of the adult world as a whole:

Als sie zum Bahnhof hinausfuhren, lag
rechts von ihnen der kleine Wald mit dem Hause

Boženas. Er sah so unbedeutend und harmlos aus, ein verstaubtes Geranke von Weiden und Erlen.

Törleß erinnerte sich da, wie unvorstellbar ihm damals das Leben seiner Eltern gewesen war. Und er betrachtete verstohlen von der Seite seine Mutter.

‘Was willst du, mein Kind?’

‘Nichts, Mama, ich dachte nur eben etwas.’

Und er prüfte den leise parfümierten Geruch, der aus der Taille seiner Mutter aufstieg.⁶ (T 140)

Törleß’s reaction to this new and final realisation is in keeping with the requirements of his social class; it is characterised by silence. His innate awareness of the need to conform by leaving things unsaid shows him well-equipped for his later involvement in late-nineteenth, early-twentieth-century bourgeois life, in which the animal-like within the human is merely hinted at and sublimated by the use of conventional emblems. Thus, the mother’s perfume rising from her waist presents us with an image that is both highly sensual and reassuringly decorous. It stands for standardised, socialised femininity, which has come to replace the natural smell of the body and thereby conceals all traces of carnal animality, embodied by both Božena, as the more common cliché of the whore, as well as Basini.

At the same time, this silence highlights the complexity of Törleß’s, and by this token the individual’s, experience as a whole. Instinctual needs cannot be continuously articulated since their acknowledgement through language would render an existence in rationality impossible. The recesses of man’s

psyche, the novel seems to declare, can only be allowed to be spotlighted on the psychoanalyst's couch, and even then all enunciation is mere approximation. The translation of emotional experience into art is therefore the most adequate way of giving substance to the unutterable, as art offers a variety of formats that can support rather than undermine its contents while simultaneously providing an appropriate distance to everyday life through the aesthetic mode.

The intricate relation of life to language aside, on a most superficial level of course, Törleß is concerned with a young boy's first sexual experience and his sense of the mystery of his parents' sensuality. Törleß's initial lack of insight is expressed through the binarism of day and night:

Jede Nacht bedeutete für ihn ein Nichts, ein Grab, ein Ausgelöschtwerden. Das Vermögen, sich jeden Tag schlafen zu legen, ohne sich darüber Gedanken zu machen, hatte er noch nicht erlernt.

Deswegen hatte er immer etwas dahinter vermutet, das man ihm verberge. Die Nächte erschienen ihm wie dunkle Tore zu geheimnisvollen Freuden, die man ihm verheimlicht hatte, so daß sein Leben leer und unglücklich blieb. (T 34)

But the contrast of day and night not only stands for clarity versus opacity, repression versus sexual activity; night-time also denotes a suspension of reason, the temporary supremacy of feeling over the intellect. Törleß's speechlessness ('Wortlosigkeit' T 139), his realisation that the feverish emotions and dreams he is subject to at night cannot and must not be verbalised, does not merely signalise his acceptance of social etiquette, where such matters are not spoken of. It also shows his recognition that, while in philosophical and cognitive terms, the two spheres may overlap, in terms of practical social behaviour, they have to be kept separate:

Er wußte nun zwischen Tag und Nacht zu scheiden; – er hatte es eigentlich immer gewußt, und nur ein schwerer Traum war verwischend über diese Grenzen hingeflutet, und er schämte sich dieser Verwirrung: aber die Erinnerung, daß es anders sein kann, daß es feine, leicht verlöschbare Grenzen rings um den Menschen gibt, daß fiebernde Träume um die Seele schleichen, die festen Mauern zernagen und unheimliche Gassen aufreißen, – auch diese Erinnerung hatte sich tief in ihn gesenkt und strahlte blasse Schatten aus.⁷ (T 139)

The image of the shadow points towards a resolute limitation of the glaring light of reason and logic. The mention of 'soul', furthermore, confirms the novel's psychological and philosophical, in a word, spiritual, dimension. Characteristically, Musil suggests that Törleß's awareness of the difference between day and night had been there all along – an innate, instinctive

alertness to the boundaries between the intellect on the one hand and the imagination fired by the inaccessible and dangerous elements of the human psyche as well as by sensual longings on the other.

Critics tend to concentrate on Törleß's extraordinary exhibition of sensitivity, which more often than not inspires them to jump to the, as I believe, unfounded conclusion, that Törleß in fact spends his adult life in active artisthood. This misunderstanding originates in the following passage, which I have already touched upon in the Introduction:

Törleß Vorliebe für *gewisse* Stimmungen war die erste Andeutung einer seelischen Entwicklung, die sich später als *ein Talent des Staunens* äußerte. Späterhin wurde er nämlich von einer *eigentümlichen* Fähigkeit geradezu beherrscht. Er war dann gezwungen, Ereignisse, Menschen, Dinge, ja sich selbst häufig so zu empfinden, daß er dabei das Gefühl sowohl einer unauflöslchen Unverständlichkeit als einer unerklärlichen, nie völlig zu rechtfertigen Verwandtschaft hatte. Sie schienen ihm zum Greifen verständlich zu sein und sich doch nie restlos in Worte und Gedanken auflösen zu lassen. Zwischen den Ereignissen und seinem Ich, ja zwischen seinen eigenen Gefühlen und irgendeinem innersten Ich, das ihrem Verständnis begehrte, blieb immer eine Scheidelinie, die wie ein Horizont vor seinem Verlangen zurückwich je näher er ihr kam.⁸ (T 25; my italics)

In its ephemeral flimsiness and uncertainty of expression, which is most poignantly conveyed by the adjective 'fürchterlich' repeated frequently throughout the novel, the excerpt conveys all the characteristics of Törleß's uncertain, complex subjectivity. At issue are the emotional swings caused by an object within the psyche, rather than on the actual object of admiration itself and its transformation by the individual imagination. Rather than with the process of creation and the gradual maturity of the artistic consciousness, Musil's concern is with the boundaries of consciousness and the feelings evoked by external phenomena.

At the same time, however, the epiphanies, those moments of wonder during which Törleß appears to perceive every object, including himself, as new and oddly alien, are accompanied by intimations of intense empathy, an overpowering sense of affinity. These encounters mirror those of Lord Chandos, for whom words and thoughts also fail to encompass the experience in its entirety. And since there is nowhere in Musil's novel the implication that Törleß attempts to transpose these incidents through creative writing or any other art form, he (like Chandos) belongs in the ranks of the non-artists. While we have already investigated the reasons for Chandos's retreat from artistic activity, which were, at least superficially, due to the absence of an adequate, freely imaginative, style of writing, Törleß's final status as a post-Romantic aesthete rather than artist appears puzzling. Yet, we have also already established that Ein Brief is by no means a denunciation of Renaissance poetry and that its final indication points to the inadequacy and obsolescence of Romantic poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century. While Chandos's problem revolves around the lack of pertinent means of communicating his

experiences, Hofmannsthal's concern was with the search for original, creative, particularised language.

But Hofmannsthal's quest was not limited to himself as an artist. At the heart of his inquiry lies the question whether or to what extent spiritual experience can ever be verbalised or communicated by art forms other than literature. And here we find the decisive connection with Törleß, as well as with the writings of Pater and Maeterlinck. Like Chandos, Törleß feels both intensely close to and yet painfully distanced from the object of his observation. Like Chandos, he has the ability to perceive things afresh, thus putting aside all preconceived ideas handed down by society. This re-acquaintance with the object is both highly stimulating and profoundly disturbing, as it destroys all inherited familiarity with the external world. Yet, this gift for amazement ('Talent des Staunens' T 25), the ability to re-interpret the world, is an essential feature, even a prerequisite of the successful artist, whom it endows with the power to highlight the significant aspects of events and objects, instead of merely reproducing their superficial meaning.

Even so, Törleß does not become an artist. In this sense, Musil's novel exhibits a register of dry detachment. Although endowed with an artistic sensibility, Törleß satisfies himself with a Paterian furthering of his soul through the appreciation of art. Having learned to distinguish between the external social world and the internal sphere of his psyche, Törleß comes to acknowledge the solipsism which determines all individual experience:

So als ob eine unsichtbare Grenze um den Menschen gezogen wäre. Was sich außerhalb vorbereitet und von ferne herannaht, ist wie ein

nebliges Meer voll riesenhafter, wechselnder Gestalten; was an ihn herantritt, Handlung wird, an seinem Leben sich stößt, ist klar und klein, von menschlichen Dimensionen und menschlichen Linien. Und zwischen dem Leben, das man lebt, und dem, das man fühlt, ahnt, von ferne sieht, liegt wie ein enges Tor die unsichtbare Grenze, in dem sich die Bilder der Ereignisse zusammendrücken müssen, um in den Menschen einzugehen.⁹ (T 106)

Both Musil and Pater convey a deep sense of the discrepancy between the shared facticity of the external object and the subjective transformation of that object in the act of human perception: each 'one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world' (R 151). It is through his experiences with Basini that Törleß becomes acutely aware of this eternal confinement:

Zwischen den Ereignissen und seinem Ich, ja zwischen seinen eigenen Gefühlen und irgendeinem innersten Ich, das nach ihrem Verständnis begehrte, blieb immer eine Scheidelinie, die wie ein Horizont vor seinem Verlangen zurückwich, je näher er ihr kam.¹⁰ (T 25)

Musil's protagonist finds himself not only separated from external events but from his own feelings, which even his 'most inner self' fails to grasp. The revealingly clumsy use of the superlative successfully conveys the impossibility of transposing man's spiritual domain, his soul, into art. And yet we rely on

events exterior to our esoteric self for becoming aware of that irreducible element within us in the first place.

Both Pater and Musil seem to stress our dependence on phenomena, on the external stimulation of our senses, in our quest to develop a consciousness of self. Simultaneously, the world itself only exists because we feel and perceive it – we are because we feel. Musil's and Pater's aesthetics are thus closer to Rousseau's definition of life as emotion than to the Cartesian equation of individual existence with thought. The individual is identified as an essentially isolated entity, which can merely feel, never fully know itself to be. Man's objective must thus be the union with other isolated beings, be they human, animal, or inanimate, through sensory impression.

This achieved oneness, however, does not imply a denial of the intellect. In his bodily surrender to Basini, Törleß experiences an eruptive recognition of the power of language. Words suddenly take on a life of their own:

Während Basini sprach, während der Sekunden
des Zweifels und Überlegens, war er wieder wie
ein tiefgrünes Meer über seine Sinne gesunken.
Nur Basinis bewegliche Worte leuchteten
darinnen auf wie das Blinken silberner
Fischchen.¹¹ (T 107)

The crisis of language can, it seems, be overcome by recourse to its sensory meaning, its effect on the individual's senses. The individual is then given the opportunity of dismantling the deceptive stability of words, and finally becoming one with felt, rather than intellectually processed, meaning. Language can thus

change from a form of social conditioning into a key to man's freedom and self-consciousness – it does so in the case of Stephen, but not in the case of Törleß. Where Stephen can become gradually aware of the imposed character of all language as used by social institutions such as the Catholic Church or the British Empire, the world of Törleß's boarding-school appears oddly de-institutionalised. The members of staff are only glimpsed towards the end of the novel, when the maths and theology teachers are made to come across as naïvely unaware rather than calculating and authoritative. Musil presents the socialising, conditioning aspect of language as a given. Consequently, the dialogue within the novel is, with one exception, logical, following reason throughout. This is particularly striking in the case of Törleß's statements, which seem to contradict his spiritual confusion as described by the narrator.

It is Basini who disregards the boundaries of rational speech in his declaration of love:

Doch Basini bettelte: 'Oh, sei nicht wieder so! So wie du ist keiner. Sie verachten mich nicht so wie du; sie tun dies nur scheinbar, damit sie dann desto anders sein können. Aber du? Gerade du...?! ... Du bist jünger als ich, wenn du auch stärker bist; ... wir sind beide jünger als die anderen; ... du bist nicht so roh ... wir sind beide jünger als die anderen; ... du bist nicht so roh und prahlerisch wie sie; du bist sanft; ... ich liebe dich ...!' ¹² (T 107)

Despite his struggle to rationalise his love for Törleß by presenting him with various reasons for its existence, the characteristic use of punctuation, usually

reserved for the narrator's communication of Törleß's bewilderment, highlights Basini's own spiritual turmoil. Unsurprisingly, the argument itself fails to convince Törleß – it is the interplay of Basini's words with his physical presence which triggers his surrender:

Noch immer hielt er seine Arme gegen Basini's Körper gestemmt. Aber auf ihnen lag es wie eine feuchte, schwere Wärme; ihre Muskeln erschlafften; er vergaß ihrer Nur wenn ihn ein neues der zuckenden Worte traf, wachte er auf, weil er plötzlich fühlte, – wie etwas schrecklich Unfaßbares, – daß eben – wie im Traum – seine Hände Basini näher gezogen hatten.¹³ (T 107)

The dance of Basini's words is a mockery of Törleß's reason, which fails to master the intellectual significance of sensuality. This leads to the abandonment and breakdown of language: 'Da suchte Törleß keine Worte mehr. Die Sinnlichkeit, die sich nach und nach aus den einzelnen Augenblicken der Verzweiflung in ihn gestohlen hatte, war jetzt zu ihrer vollen Größe erwacht' (T 108).¹⁴

Having so far accepted language as part of his environment, Törleß must now (re-)discover words and their meanings. Language has been imposed on him in the Lacanian sense of the inevitable integration into the symbolic order. Contrary to Stephen, Törleß does not associate specific words with particular feelings or sensory impressions; he thus cannot become a 'successful' artist. His imagination is not stirred to genuine creativity. Instead, he uses his insight into the workings of his mind as a means of retreating from

the false rationality necessary for a correctly functioning mundane everyday life into an inner world devoted to the 'Wachstum der Seele' (T 111), the growth of the soul.

Musil defined his novel as a record of the foundation of self-awareness, 'Gründung eines Selbstbewußtseins', and here one should note the double meaning of the German Selbstbewußtsein as 'consciousness of' the self as well as 'confidence in' the self.¹⁵ Having gained access to the knowledge that the life of one's psyche can indeed be fully, if only momentarily, felt, Törleß can soon abandon the base gratification of Basini's physical subjugation and sublimate his desires through the surrogate aesthetic experience offered by the arts. Through such an experience, Törleß can enjoy the 'fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness' (R 153) and he can do so without having to do battle with language in order to make his inner life communicable.

Rather than continue his, as he now realises, vain search for adequate linguistic representations of his emotion, Törleß allows his insight to remain unexpressed and accepts the incongruity of feeling and language. The narrative of Törleß is a demonstration, a dramatisation of the opening quotation from Maeterlinck, which not only prefaces but in fact rules over Musil's narrative in its entirety. Maeterlinck's resigned wisdom casts a shadow of anxiety over Musil's creation. Musil not only establishes the inadequacy of language as a medium of psychological insight at the outset of his text, he sustains a particular form of linguistic indeterminacy, which at times may strike

the reader as mannered. Elisabeth Stopp, in her essay concerned with the relation of content and form in Törleß, commends Musil's frequent use of the dash for creating space for 'Gedankenpausen', brief interludes in which the narrative is suspended in favour of open-ended, unformulated thought.¹⁶ The following quotation exemplifies this recurrent practice.

Er wartete auf irgend etwas, so wie er vor diesen
Bildern immer auf etwas gewartet hatte, das sich
nie ereignete. Worauf...?... Auf etwas
Überraschendes¹⁷ (etc. T 17)

In my view, however, such passages weaken, rather than reinforce, the expressivity of Musil's text. At one level, they are close to the indirection and uncertainty of Törleß's self-understanding. Yet often, even though the punctuation seems to imply a flight of thought or emotion on the part of the protagonist, Musil leaves it to the reader to fill the gaps where a stream-of-consciousness approach would have seemed more suitable. Yet at the same time these omissions also serve to intensify the significance of the protagonist's bewilderment. His inner turmoil remains, in the last analysis, existential, despite the novel's overtones of an essentially adolescent crisis. Far from being limited to a schoolboy's experiences, the breakdown of language in the face of overwhelming spiritual bafflement appears to threaten mankind as a whole. Thus Törleß's fate, in keeping with Maeterlinck's remark, is made to demonstrate the possible outcome of the cleft between rational language and spiritual life. Törleß appears struck dumb by the power of emotion, which he does not believe to be communicable.

The failure of language provides an ironic framework for the narrative, which finds its climax in Törleß's paradoxically articulate protestations of his inability to express his thoughts. Despite the other boys' teasing remarks about his 'romantic' character, Törleß does not become a poet and act as a medium of human experience and an interpreter of external phenomena, as Stephen will. In his Paterian adherence to art for art's sake, the knowledge he gains from his moments of ecstasy is, as we have seen, profoundly esoteric. In accordance with Pater's notion of the artwork as the mirror of a multitude of private experiences, which can only be understood by the individual sufferer, Musil rejects the universalism of modernism – the true significance of Törleß's actual experience and transformation triggered by his encounter with Basini all but escapes our knowledge.

Törleß is a profoundly atmospheric novel and its self-conscious reflection of French Symbolism highlights the importance of personal resonances in our reading of the text. With its subtle, yet highly problematic, social criticism, the text goes on to substitute aesthetic experience for rational education as the guiding light in Törleß's life. Throughout the novel, Musil exposes the laws of the adult world as hypocritical and, indeed, confusing. Božena's tactless revelations about Beineberg's mother unveil to Törleß the omnipresence of sexuality within the social universe:

Er hatte damals plötzlich an seine Mutter denken müssen, und dies hielt nun fest und war nicht loszubekommen. Es war ihm nur so durch die Grenzen des Bewußtseins geschossen – blitzschnell oder undeutlich weit – am Rande – nur wie im Fluge gesehen – kaum ein Gedanke

zu nennen. Und hastig war darauf eine Reihe von Fragen gefolgt, die es verdecken sollten: 'Was ist es, es ermöglicht, daß diese Božena ihre niedrige Existenz an die meiner Mutter heranrücken kann? Daß sich in der Enge desselben Gedankens an herandrängt? Warum berührt sie nicht mit der Stirn die Erde, wenn sie schon von ihr sprechen muß? Warum ist es nicht wie durch einen Abgrund zum Ausdruck gebracht, daß hier gar keine Gemeinsamkeit besteht? Denn, wie ist es doch? Diese Weib ist für mich ein Knäuel aller geschlechtlichen Begehrlichkeiten; und meine Mutter ein Geschöpf, das bisher in wolkenloser Entfernung, klar und ohne Tiefen, wie ein Gestirn jenseits alles Begehrens durch mein Leben wandelte...'

Aber alle diese Fragen waren nicht das Eigentliche. Berührten es kaum. Sie waren etwas Sekundäres; etwas, das Törleß erst nachträglich eingefallen war. Sie verfälschten sich nur, weil keine das Rechte bezeichnete. Sie waren nur Ausflüchte, Umschreibungen der Tatsache, daß vorbewußt, plötzlich, instinktiv ein seelischer Zusammenhang gegeben war, der sie vor dem Entstehen schon in bösem Sinne beantwortet hatte.¹⁸ (T 33)

Törleß's reluctant acquaintance with Božena only reinforces what has been noted by and coded in his soul long before. The 'pre-conscious' awareness of his mother's sexuality is eventually, and very crudely, formulated by the whore, through which the opposed positions of the two women are qualified and relativised. Törleß is forced to realise that just as Božena embodies aspects of

his mother's exalted femininity, such as nurturing and attractiveness, his mother too, through her sexuality, incorporates elements of the prostitute.

The stylised symbolisation of womankind by way of the remote, untarnished mother and the animalistic, disillusioned whore Božena (whose name is derived from the Slavonic word for 'God'), represent fictions of femininity as seen through the eyes of an alienated male adolescent. In their embodiment of mind and body respectively, the two women provide points of reference for the interpretation of Törleß's split personality, which can, it seems, only be united through the physical experience with Basini. Törleß comes to acknowledge the blurred boundaries between day and night, the mother and the whore, although the novel's final scene shows him reinforcing the fabricated clear-cut contrast between the two ('Er wußte nun zwischen Tag und Nacht zu scheiden; – er hatte es eigentlich immer gewußt'; T 140), because without this distinction life for Törleß within his parents' social class would be impossible.¹⁹

Theodore Ziolkowski identifies Törleß's 'Himmel!' adventure as his moment of epiphanic enlightenment. Yet, in my view, Törleß's central crisis, which ends in his surrender to sexual passion, originates in his failure to assign limits to this boundless vision by means of reason and language. Similarly, Stephen must first learn how to see, how to analyse and extract the intellectual content of an aesthetic experience without being overpowered by the impact of the emotion evoked. Törleß's inability to grasp and come to terms with Basini's violation of a seemingly insurmountable order throws him into a turmoil similar to Stephen's silent Paterian swoon in the arms of a prostitute. Although Törleß does not become an artist, Theodore Ziolkowski draws attention to Joyce's

mention of Stephen Hero's 'infant sense of wonder' in order to support the view of artistic parallels between Stephen and Törleß – however, Stephen's wonderment is creative, Törleß's is not – a point that is neglected by Ziolkowski.²⁰

This is what Franz Kuna, one of the few critics to recognise Musil's final ironisation of his young hero, has to say about Törleß:

The narrator indicates that Törleß subsequently becomes one of those aesthetes who find reassurance in giving allegiance to the law and settled public morals, since this absolves them from all coarse thoughts, from anything spiritually suspect. But the memory that there was a delicate and fragile envelope about each human being, that fevered dreams prowled threateningly round the soul, has lodged deep in Törleß's consciousness. He cannot suppress his boredom whenever he is expected to show a personal interest in particular workings of the law and morality. His sole interest is in the development of his own incommensurable soul.²¹

The tendency of critics to fail to acknowledge Törleß's metamorphosis into a middle-class aesthete seems to stem largely from Musil's diary reference to the sadists Beineberg and Reiting as miniature precursors of the fascist dictators of the 1930s, 'die heutigen Diktatoren in nucleo'.²² However, Törleß cannot so easily be claimed as a redeemer of the educated bourgeoisie's blindness towards worldly politics. Quite the contrary:

Törleß wurde später, nachdem er die Ereignisse seiner Jugend überwunden hatte, ein junger Mann von sehr feinem und empfindsamen Geiste: Er zählte dann zu jenen ästhetisch-intellektuellen Naturen, welchen die Beachtung der Gesetze und wohl auch teilweise der öffentlichen Moral eine Beruhigung gewährt, weil sie dadurch enthoben sind, über etwas Grobes, von dem feineren seelischen Geschehen Weitabliegendes nachdenken zu müssen, die aber eine gelangweilte Unempfindlichkeit mit dieser großen äußeren, ein wenig ironischen Korrektheit verbinden, sobald man ein persönlicheres Interesse von ihnen verlangt. Denn dieses wirklich sie selbst ergreifende Interesse sammelt sich bei ihnen einzig auf das Wachstum der Seele, des Geistes, oder wie immer man das benennen mag, was hie und da durch einen Gedanken zwischen den Worten eines Buches oder vor den verschlossenen Lippen eines Bildes in uns gemehrt wird; was manchmal erwacht, wenn irgendeine einsame, eigenwillige Melodie von uns fortgeht und – ins Ferne schreitend – mit fremden Bewegungen an dem dünnen, roten faden zerrt, unseres Blutes, den sie hinter sich herzieht; das aber immer verschwunden ist, wenn wir Akten schreiben, Maschinen bauen, in den Zirkus gehen oder den hundert anderen ähnlichen Beschäftigungen folgen.²³ (T 111/2)

Here we see Musil the mundane scientist in conflict with Musil the romantic artist, the realist at war with the visionary, who recognises the individual's need

for 'something' beyond reason and Kant's categorical imperatives. The juxtaposition of masterly poeticism and sincere pathos with cynical dismissiveness and caustic irony seems to tear a wound in the hitherto smoothly melancholy body of the text. As Törleß's favour with his creator dwindles, the protagonist is singled out once more as one of the chosen few who fail to put their vision to social use.

It is as though, if we looked closely enough, we could recognise the figure of the grown up Törleß standing in the shadows surrounding Klimt's escapist scene of Schubert at the piano. Törleß will come to stand for the pragmatic version of Nietzsche's much-hated, much-loved Romantic hero, who, rather than acknowledge or succumb to the nausea with which our untidy world inspires him, finds relief by seeking refuge in art from the ugliness and baseness permeating human existence, the only real threat to aesthetic isolation being the paralysing stupor of *ennui*. Rather than use art as a means of stimulating his instincts, and thereby ascending from the level of the humanist subject to join the élite group dominated by the *Übermensch*, Törleß indulges in the sensuousness of the passive consumer. His arrogance, which will come to express itself by the aesthetic rather than moral disgust dominating his judgement of human perversion, is anticipated in the confrontation with his teachers, to whom he fails to formulate his experiences in articulate language.

His actual failure, however, which emerges in the course of the interrogation, consists not so much in the inability to find an appropriate, that is Apollonian, metaphor for his Dionysian insight. It is his failure to be stirred to pity by the tragic state of his fellow men, as exemplified by Basini at one level, and the maths and the theology teacher at another. Although the scene bears

strong resemblance to the forthright satirical exposure at work in the teachers' meeting in Wedekind's 1890s play Frühlingserwachen, the blinkered demeanour of spiritual and intellectual superiority displayed by Törleß's teachers represents Musil's condemnation of the military school's lack of cultural education, which, as we shall see, is to a large extent responsible for Törleß's spiritual suffering.

More significantly, Törleß's encounter with Basini renders unnecessary the need to surrender to the implications of the infinite as symbolised by the limitless blue sky or the infinite numbers. Having exposed the dualism of stale rationality and feverish emotion, of the law of reason versus the needs of the body, Törleß comes to understand that these two aspects of human nature are not only inextricably linked but also in constant dialogue and conflict with one another. As a consequence, he rejects both absolute morality and unrestrained corporeality in favour of the life of the soul:

Diesen Menschen [wie Törleß] sind also die Gegenstände, welche nur ihre moralische Korrektheit herausfordern, höchst gleichgültig. Törleß bereute daher auch nie in seinem späteren Leben das damals Geschehene. Seine Bedürfnisse waren so einseitig schöngeistig zugeschärft, daß es, wenn man ihm etwa eine ganz ähnliche Geschichte von den Ausschweifungen eines Wüstlings erzählt hätte, gewiß völlig außerhalb des Gesichtskreises gelegen wäre, seine Entrüstung gegen das Geschehene zu richten. Er hätte einen solchen Menschen gewissermaßen nicht deswegen verachtet, weil er ein Wüstling, sondern weil er

nichts Besseres ist; nicht wegen seiner Ausschweifungen, sondern wegen des Seelenzustandes, der ihn diese begehen läßt; weil er dumm ist, oder weil seinem Verstande die seelischen Gegengewichte fehlen....immer nur wegen des traurigen, beraubten, enkräfteten Anblicks den er bietet.²⁴ (T 112)

Törleß's moral relativism is a result of his focus on what he identifies as the spiritually beautiful. He despises those who allow themselves to give in to physical excess, whether it be sexual, and by that token morally suspect, or manifested in common, socially overt addictions, simply because of their blind emphasis on the cravings of the body and their disregard for the needs of the sensitive soul:

Und er hätte ihn gleicherweise verachtet, ob nun sein Laster in geschlechtlichen Ausschweifungen oder in zwanghaft entartetem Zigarettenrauchen oder Alkoholgenuß bestünde.²⁵ (T 112)

Törleß approves of actions and objects in which physicality is made to observe the rules of beauty, by which man's instinctual powers are channelled, tamed and finally expressed through form. Whilst condemning corporeal unruliness, the individual's helpless submission to bodily cravings, he too indulges in excessiveness, an overpronounced desire for control. His conspicuous devotion to the aesthetic coupled with his refusal to participate actively in the network of human society defines his existence as a *Schöngeist*, again a highly ambiguous word. The German word 'Geist' can mean both mind and spirit, and

combined with adjective 'schön', beautiful, it can refer both to an intuitive longing for beauty as well as its intellectual and analytical pursuit. Hence Musil's ambivalent allusion to Törleß's exclusive interest in 'das Wachstum der Seele, des Geistes, oder wie immer man das benennen mag', the growth of the soul, the spirit/mind, or whatever one might want to call it.

Törleß comes to use the aesthetic as an instrument for his mental and emotional development, between which he fails to differentiate. Where his childhood was dominated by the intimation of the dark, irrational side of human nature that originates in sexuality, his adult life revolves around his self-imposed aesthetic education, through which he explores and relishes the connection between desire and art:

Und wie allen dermaßen auf die Steigerung ausschließlich ihrer Geistigkeit konzentrierten Menschen bedeutete auch ihm das bloße Vorhandensein schwüler und exzessiver Regungen noch wenig. Er liebte es damit zu rechnen, daß die Fähigkeit zu genießen, die künstlerischen Talente, das ganze verfeinerte Seelenleben ein Zierat sei, an dem man sich leicht verletze. Er betrachtete es als etwas Unumgängliches, daß ein Mensch von reichem und beweglichem Innenleben Augenblicke habe, um die andere nicht wissen dürfen, und Erinnerungen, die er in geheimen Fächern verwahrt. Und er verlangte von ihm nur, daß er nachträglich sich ihrer mit Feinheit zu bedienen verstehe.²⁶ (T 112)

According to the scholastic as well spiritual position of the maths and the theology teacher, the sublime vision of boundlessness should inspire the pupil with respect and humility, as it illustrates the inability of pure reason to understand the mysteries of the universe. Törleß escapes such indoctrination by the adult intellect, only to join Beineberg and Reiting in a diabolical trio of anti-Christian defiance instead. He rejects the Kantian prop of practical reason, the guarantor of civilisation and humanistic society. In so doing he exposes the complicated web of fictions and illusions by which social order is upheld as described Beineberg:

'Diese Erwachsenen und ganz Gescheiten haben sich da vollständig in ein Netz eingesponnen, eine Masche stützt die andere, so daß das ganze Wunder wie natürlich aussieht; wo aber die erste Masche steckt, durch die alles gehalten wird, weiß kein Mensch.¹²⁷ (T 82)

The image resonates with echoes of the individual's subordination. Like Chandos's web of language, the image suggests security, control, as well as indoctrination, the tyranny of language and ideas. As there is no religion and sense of origin, the subject is left with the acute awareness of the randomness of human existence. The tapestry of rules could unravel at any moment, and Beineberg and Reiting are indeed pulling at the strings by testing the boundaries of human control while simultaneously operating within the context of adult rules.

Although the boys' triple denial of Christianity seems to initiate the process of re-evaluation of values, none of the three protagonists is on the Nietzschean highway towards *Übermenschlichkeit*. Rather, through the characters of Beineberg and Reiting Musil demonstrates the dangers threatening society once the individual succeeds in withdrawing from the social project of turning barbaric man into the humanistic subject. Less disconcertingly, Törleß also fails to be seduced into action by the vision of the Dionysian and the will to power. Rather than striving to express, to substantialise his own will and life forces, Törleß allows himself to be anaesthetised by art into the dualistic existence as theoretical man in every-day life of bourgeois society and leisured aesthete (a, if you will, *Feierabendästhet*), who believes that he is enriching and nourishing his soul by beautiful images. He has arrived at a point of stasis and blissful resignation:

'Jetzt ist es vorüber. Ich weiß, daß ich mich doch geirrt habe. Ich fürchte nichts mehr. Ich weiß: die Dinge sind die Dinge und werden es wohl immer bleiben; und ich werde sie wohl immer bald so, bald so ansehen: Bald mit den Augen des Verstandes, bald mit den anderen Und ich werde nicht mehr versuchen, dies miteinander zu vergleichen'²⁸ (T 138)

Fear, it seems, can only be overcome through the passive acceptance of the binarisms governing human existence.

As Franz Kuna rightly points out, Törleß is obsessed with the unbridgeable gap between, to make use of Freudian terminology, his ego and

his unconscious. This gulf, however, is widened by the narrative's lack of differentiation between Törleß's ego and his super-ego. Whereas in the Portrait, Stephen's exposure to moral indoctrination, be it ecclesiastical or Irish nationalist, depicts him in an intensifying struggle with very visible, almost tangible enemies, Törleß's demon lurks somewhere in the shadows, which are both a characteristic part of the romanticised imagery and mood of the novel and an intimation of the power of institutions (the school, the church). Musil's professed lack of interest in realism, his scientifically inspired wish to move quickly from A to B, his self-proclamation as *monsieur le vivisecteur*, an analytical, highly cerebral mind preoccupied with abstract thought rather than circumstantial detail, leaves us in considerable uncertainty about the 'true' identity or personality of the protagonist.²⁹

Yet here lies the crux of Törleß. In the absence of an aesthetic education ('Diese Illusion, dieser Trick zugunsten der Entwicklung fehlte im Institute.' T 13) that would allow Törleß to find an outlet in fictive emotions, that is, without the possibility of identification with a literary or mythical figures, Törleß finds himself thrown back upon his as yet unformed self, which is pure sensibility almost untouched by form.³⁰

Es schien damals, daß er überhaupt keinen
Charakter habe.³¹ (T 13)

Törleß represents in a number of ways an antithesis to Stephen's biography, by showing the consequences of the inability of self-stylisation in a world without fictions, in a world which fails to offer role models to the developing psyche. Hence everything is uncertain, fragmented, ambiguous, and opaque – it lacks

the focus provided by role (or other kinds of) models: 'In Wirklichkeit war es aber etwas viel Unbestimmteres und Zusammengesetzteres' (T9).³²

Törleß's *Kadettenschule* is a diminutive version of hierarchical political system in which every class is a state in itself. It is a universe lacking the equivalents to Stephen's icons of popular culture, be they of a religious (Christian God), political (Parnell), literary (Byron), or fictional (Count Monte Christo) nature. It represents a piece of the Austrian macrososm of sober positivism mingled with the mild bourgeois version of bohemian decadence, yet cleansed of all cultural aesthetic images, with which the boys will come into contact upon entering adult society, as Musil's final vision of Törleß as art consumer illustrates. Karl Corino, in his retracing of the factual background of the novel, stresses the literary metamorphosis which the 'k.u.k. Militär-Oberrealschule zu Mährisch-Weißkirchen' undergoes at Musil's pen, from a "Strafkolonie in ein geistliches Institut..., das die ideale Folie für seine Geschichte von Barbarei und säkularisierter Seelen-Problematik in Maeterlincks Gefolge bildet".³³ Corino is right to point to Musil's stylisation of the school as the merely expressive background of a spiritual void, in contrast to its function as the embodiment of military severity in Rilke's short-story 'Die Turnstunde'.³⁴ In his meticulous avoidance of naturalistic minutiae, Musil deliberately prevents the reader from practising pseudo-scientific psychology in the search for the motivation at work behind Beineberg's and Reiting's barbarity. Why a certain feeling is evoked is less relevant than how that feeling manifests itself.

In comparing *Törleß* and *Portrait*, we cannot help but register Joyce's ability to make Stephen's surroundings come alive, such as through the

repeated mention of the 'swish of the soutane', which enables us to participate in Stephen's sensory and aesthetic experiences. Even more importantly, these empirical facts save Joyce from straying into unfounded absolutes, which can only result in vagueness as exemplified in the passage on Törleß's constant yet unanalysed sense of amazement at the discrepancy of feeling and intellect quoted above. To borrow Eliot's terms, Joyce offers us 'objective correlatives' where Musil leaves us with conventional and yet, or rather therefore, not definable ideals such as 'Einsamkeit', 'Staunen', 'Gefühl', which are common to all men and must thus be exemplified to be fully grasped. It is in this sense that Törleß appears as an unknown character, where the equally fictional character Stephen manages to involve the reader in a relationship of constant alienation followed by re-familiarisation followed by renewed alienation.

This process is expressed in Stephen's constantly changing reactions to a set of established memories. By contrast Musil presents the reader with a piece of absolute memory, in the light, or rather shadow, of which Törleß interprets his own melancholy:

'Höre, Beineberg,' sprach Törleß, ohne sich zurückzuwenden, 'es muß während des Dämmerns immer einige Augenblicke geben, die ganz eigener Art sind. So oft ich es beobachte, kehrt mir dieselbe Erinnerung wieder. Ich war noch sehr klein, als ich um diese Stunde einmal im Walde spielte. Das Dienstmädchen hatte sich entfernt; ich wußte das nicht und glaubte es in meiner Nähe zu empfinden. Plötzlich zwang mich etwas aufzusehen. Ich fühlte, daß ich allein sei. Es war plötzlich so still. Und als ich um mich

blickte, war mir, als stünden die Bäume
schweigend im Kreise und sähen mir zu. Ich
weinte; ich fühlte mich so verlassen von den
Großen, den leblosen Geschöpfen preisgegeben
.... Was ist das? Ich fühle es oft wieder. Dieses
plötzliche Schweigen, das wie eine Sprache ist,
die wir nicht hören?'³⁵ (T 23/4)

The Gothic mood dominating Törleß's iterated experience anticipates the menacing atmosphere of the red chamber. At the same time, the matter-of-factness of his tone, his sober decidedness in making his friend listen appears somewhat out of character. This exception in Musil's portrayal of the boy, however, demonstrates the author's determination to concentrate on the essentials, which are 'the confusions rather than certainties' occupying Törleß's mind. Although this clearly demonstrates the artist's decision to move away from nineteenth-century realism, it also appears oddly old-fashioned, and one is again reminded of the traditional gothic novel's relentless preoccupation with atmospheric (institutional) sensationalism. The projection of human characteristics on to non-human objects pinpoints Törleß's tendency towards pathetic fallacy and exposes his victimisation by his own uncontrolled imagination. Yet these parallels, suggestive as they are, do not capture the whole of Musil's artistic mission; maybe a more accurate link can be made with Thomas Hardy's definition of the novel as an 'impression, not an argument'.³⁶ Perhaps, after all, the centre of gravity of Musil's Törleß is to be found in the troubled mental condition of the protagonist – and not in his battle with (school or parental) authority.

At the same time, the rare specimen of Törleß's linguistic representation quoted above shows his tendency to what Nietzsche defines as a Socratic attitudes towards those aspects of life which in fact escape rationalisation, an approach which insists not only on the interpretable nature of the world, but also on its surrender to the seemingly irresistible power of reason and inability to escape the clarifying potential of language. In spite of the intensity of his aesthetic experience, Törleß fails to meet the Keatsian ideal of *negative capability*, achieving instead only an ethos of profound fastidiousness. It is only in his confrontation with Basini that Törleß becomes aware of the limits of reason in the relation to the vehement endurance of instinct exemplified in Basini as well as Törleß himself. A symptom of this delusion is his Kafkaesque tendency to think of a machine or a system rather than a supernatural being as the source of the ultimate incomprehensibility of life:

‘Das Unendliche!’ (...) irgend jemand hatte es einst erfunden. (...) Es kam wie eine Tollheit über Törleß, Dinge, Vorgänge und Menschen als etwas Doppelsinniges zu empfinden. Als etwas, das durch die Kraft irgendwelcher Erfinder an ein harmloses, erklärendes Wort gefesselt war, und als etwas ganz Fremdes, das jeden Augenblick sich davon loszureißen drohte.³⁷ (T 63/4)

Törleß will eventually learn to resist analysing and attempting to find a new mediation between language and reality.

Törleß's childhood experience is an existentialist nightmare of forlorn inwardness, in which the protagonist is faced by an indifferent universe, where,

in order to survive, he must overcome the threat of nihilism, and accept the tenets and contradictions of adult life, which he compensates for though his aestheticised, non-social, life. In the last analysis, therefore, Törleß is exposed as a fastidious aesthete, a man detached from life, disclaiming all moral imperatives. Although Törleß's tentative, experimental relationship to experience makes him alive to that which does and to that which could exist, and although this characteristic reveals his affinity with Stephen, his artistic potential remains unfulfilled. This failure, it seems, can be traced back to the cultural vacuum in which his education and formative years are played out. Törleß merely mirrors this sterility – he does not and indeed cannot overcome the implications of his upbringing, with its emphasis on the compliant acceptance rather than critical articulation of life's irrational and in the last instance unfathomable aspects.

NOTES

¹ Robert Musil, 'Die Entdeckung der Familie (11. April 1926)', Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften II: Aus dem Nachlaß, ed. by Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978), p. 2024.

² The relationship leaves a small warm shadow on his splendid life, an intimation of the fragility of humanity: 'Und vieles fiel ihm seither ein, das ihn etwas besser machte als andere, weil auf seinem glänzenden Leben ein kleiner warmer Schatten lag.' (Robert Musil, 'Tonka', in Drei Frauen [Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1978], p. 85.)

³ 'He was now able to tell between night and day.' The Confusions of Young Törless, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p. 159.

⁴ 'the growth of their own soul, their own spirit or whatever we might choose to call that thing within us which is increased, now and then, by a thought between the words of a book or the sealed lips of a painting' The Confusions of Young Törless, pp. 126/7.

⁵ See Chapter IV, Endnote 8.

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- ⁶ 'When they set off for the station, the little wood with Božena's house lay on the right. It looked so insignificant and harmless, a dusty thicket of willow and alder.

Törleß remembered how unimaginable his parents' life had been. And he stole a glance at his mother.

"What is it, my son?"

"Nothing, Mama, I was just thinking about something."

And he breathed in the faintly perfumed fragrance rising from his mother's waist.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 160.

- ⁷ 'He was now able to tell day from night – in fact he had always been able to, and only a massive dream had washed away those boundaries with its flooding tide, and he was ashamed of that confusion. But the memory that things can be otherwise, that there are fine boundaries around human beings, easily erased, that feverish dreams creep around the soul, gnawing away at solid walls and opening up strange alley-ways – that memory too had sunk deep within him and cast pale shadows.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 160.

- ⁸ 'Törless's love of particular moods was the first sign of a spiritual development that would later express itself as a talent for astonishment. Later, in fact, he was practically controlled by a peculiar ability. He was often forced to feel events, people, things, even himself, in such a way that he had a sense both of some mystery that could not be solved, and of some inexplicable affinity that could never quite be justified. They seemed palpably within reach of his understanding, and yet could never entirely be broken down into words and thoughts. Between events and himself, indeed, between his own emotions and some innermost self which craved that they be understood, there always remained a dividing line which retreated like a horizon from his yearning the closer he came to it. Indeed, the more precisely he circumscribed his sensations with his thoughts, the more familiar they became to him, the stranger and more incomprehensible he felt them to be, so that it no longer even seemed as though they were retreating from him and more as though he himself was moving away from them, while remaining unable to shake off the notion that that he was coming closer to them.' Robert Musil, The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 25.

- ⁹ 'It is as though an invisible frontier has been drawn around each human being. Something that has been prepared elsewhere and which approaches from afar, is like a misty sea full of giant, changing forms; what approaches the person, becomes action, impacts against one's life, is small and distinct, with human dimensions and human features. And between the life that is lived and the life that is felt, sensed and seen from a long way off, that invisible frontier lies like a narrow door, through which the images of events must cram themselves together in order to enter the human being.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 120.

- ¹⁰ 'Between events and himself, indeed, between his own emotions and some innermost self which craved that they be understood, there always remained a dividing line which retreated like a horizon from his yearning the closer he came to it.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 25.

- ¹¹ 'While Basini was speaking, during the seconds of doubt and reflection, once more something like a deep, green sea had fallen over his senses. Only Basini's vivid words shone out in it, like the flashing of tiny, silver fish.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 121.

- ¹² 'But Basini pleaded. "Oh, don't be like that again! There isn't anyone like you. They don't despise me like you do; they only pretend to, so that they can be different again afterwards. And you? You of all people...?...You're even younger than I am, although you're stronger. We're both younger than the others... You're not as coarse

and boastful as they are...you're gentle...I love you...!" The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 121.

- ¹³ 'He still held his arms pressed against Basini's body. Something lay upon them like a moist, heavy warmth; their muscles slackened; he forgot them ... Only when some new, twitching word reached him did he wake up because he suddenly felt – like something terribly intangible – that just now, as in a dream, his hands had drawn Basini closer.' The Confusions of Young Törless, pp. 121/2.
- ¹⁴ 'Then Törless stopped searching for words. The sensuality which had been gradually seeping into him from his isolated moments of despair had now reached its full extent.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 122.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Robert Minder 'Kadettenhaus, Gruppendynamik und Stilwandel von Wildenbruch bis Rilke und Musil', Kultur und Literatur in Deutschland und Frankreich: Fünf Essays (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1962), p. 82.
- ¹⁶ Elizabeth Stopp, 'Musil's "Törleß": Content and Form', *MLR*, 63 (1968), p. 115
- ¹⁷ 'He was waiting for something, just as he had always waited, when looking at such paintings, for something that had never been. For what ...? ... For something surprising' (etc.) The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 15.
- ¹⁸ 'At that moment he had suddenly found himself thinking of his own mother, and that thought had taken hold of him and would not be shifted. It had just shot through the boundaries of his consciousness – as fast as lightning or too distant to be distinguished – on the edge – as if seen in flight – it could barely be called a thought. And a series of questions had rapidly followed, in an attempt to cover it over: "How can this Božena compare her vile existence to that of my mother? How can she rub shoulders with her within the confines of a single thought? Why does she not touch her forehead to the ground merely to speak of her? Why is she not forced to admit, as though separated by a great abyss, that they have nothing in common? For what is the true state of affairs? This woman is, for me, a tangle of everything that is sexually desirable; and my mother is a creature who has until now walked through my life at a cloudless distance, and clear and without depth, like a star beyond all desire."
But these questions were not the core of the matter. They barely touched it. They were something secondary; something that had occurred to Törless only in retrospect. They proliferated only because none of them identified the question at hand. They were only excuses, paraphrases of the fact that on the preconscious level, suddenly, instinctively, there was a spiritual connection that had given them all a disagreeable answer.' The Confusions of Young Törless, pp. 33/4.
- ¹⁹ 'He was now able to tell day from night – in fact he had always been able to' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 160.
- ²⁰ See Theodore Ziolkowski, 'James Joyces Epiphanie und die Überwindung der empirischen Welt in der modernen Prosa', *DVjs*, 35 (1961), p. 610. Elizabeth Stopp seems to confirm Ziolkowski's reading.
- ²¹ Franz Kuna, 'The Janus-faced Novel: Conrad, Musil, Kafka, Mann', in Modernism: 1890-1930, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 448.
- ²² Quoted in Matthias Luserke, Robert Musil (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), p. 26.
- ²³ 'Later, once he had overcome the events of his youth, Törless became a young man with a very fine and sensitive mind. He became one of those aesthetic and intellectual characters upon whom respect for the law and, to some extent, for public morals, has a calming effect, relieving them of the need to think about anything

coarse and remote from the finer things of the soul; but who, when asked to declare a more personal interest in the objects of morality and law, bring to their grandiose outward show of correctness, with its hints of irony, a certain bored insensitivity. Because the interest which really does move them is focused solely upon the growth of their own soul, their own spirit or whatever me might choose to call that thing within us which is increased, now and then, by a thought between the words of a book or the sealed lips of a painting; that thing which sometimes awakens when some lonely, wilful melody drifts away from us and, as it disappears into the distance, tugs strangely at the thin scarlet thread of our blood which it trails behind it; but which has always vanished whenever we write up our files, manufacture machines, go to the circus or pursue a hundred similar occupations.' The Confusions of Young Törless, pp. 126/7.

Please note that the German original refers merely to the growth of *the* soul, *the* spirit, rather than 'their own soul, their own spirit', as rendered in Shaun Whiteside's translation.

- ²⁴ 'Such people, then, are extremely indifferent to any objects that challenge only their moral correctness. So, even later in life, Törless never felt any remorse for what had happened in those days. His needs had become so keenly and one-sidedly aesthetic that, had he been told a similar tale of a lecher's debaucheries, it would never have occurred to him to voice his outrage at such behaviour. Such a person would have warranted his contempt not for being a lecher, but for being nothing better than that; not for his debaucheries, but for the state of mind that allowed him to commit them; because he was stupid or because his intelligence lacked any spiritual counterweights – always, in short, because of the sad, deprived and pathetic prospect that he presented.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 127.
- ²⁵ 'And, similarly, he would have despised him whether his vice had consisted in sexual debaucheries or in compulsive and degenerate drinking or cigarette-smoking.' *Ibid*.
- ²⁶ 'And like everyone whose sole concern is the intensification of his mental abilities, the mere presence of torrid and excessive impulses meant little to him. He liked to think that the capacity for enjoyment, artistic talents, the highly refined spiritual life, was a piece of jewellery upon which one could easily injure oneself. He thought it inevitable that someone with a rich and active inner life would have certain moments about which other people could know nothing, and memories that he kept in secret drawers. And of such a person he asked only that he should how to make refined use of those moments later in life.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 127.
- ²⁷ 'These grown-ups and clever people have completely spun themselves into a web, one stitch supporting the next, so that the whole miracle looks entirely natural; but no one knows where the first stitch is, the one that holds everything up.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 91.
- ²⁸ 'Now that is past. I know that I was indeed mistaken. I'm not afraid of anything any more. I know: things are things and will remain so for ever; and no doubt I will see them now one way, now another. Now with the eyes of reason, now with those other eyes...And I will no longer try to compare the two...' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 157.
- ²⁹ David S. Luft, Musil and the Crisis of European Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 42.
- ³⁰ 'This illusion, that trick favouring personal development, was missing from the institute.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 10.
- ³¹ 'It seemed at the time as though he had no character whatsoever.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 10.

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- ³² 'But actually it was something much more vague and complex.' The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 5.
- ³³ Karl Corino, 'Törleß ignotus', *text + kritik*, Nr.21/22 (1968), p. 20.
- ³⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Die Turnstunde', Erzählungen (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1992), pp. 428-34.
- ³⁵ 'Listen Beineberg,' said Törless, without turning around, 'there are always a few moments at dusk that are unlike anything else. However I observe it, the same memory returns to me. It was once when I was very small, in the woods, at this time of day. The nursemaid had wandered off; I didn't know, and thought I could still sense her nearby. Suddenly something forced me to look up. I felt I was alone. It was suddenly so still. And when I looked around, it was as though the trees were standing silent in a circle, watching me. I cried; I felt to abandoned by the grown-ups, at the mercy of inanimate beings What is that? It often comes back to me. What is that sudden silence that is like a language we can't hear? The Confusions of Young Törless, p. 23.
- ³⁶ Thomas Hardy's to 'Preface' to Tess of the d'Urbervilles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 38.
- ³⁷ "'Infinity! (...) someone must have invented it once. (...) It came upon Törless like a madness, experiencing objects, processes and people as things with ambiguous meaning. As something fettered by some inventor's power to a harmless, explanatory word, and as something wholly alien that seemed at every moment to threaten to break its bonds.' The Confusions of Young Törless, pp. 69/70.

VIII

TONIO KRÖGER & DER TOD IN VENEDIG

In his best known and most admired stories Tonio Kröger and Der Tod in Venedig, Thomas Mann explores the artist's bad conscience about art. Both narratives suggests that artistic creation and the life of the artist are incompatible, even hostile, to bourgeois existence, and the protagonists, who are both writers, find themselves forced to adopt a defence mechanism against the morally suspect nature of their existence. While Tonio Kröger's path is dominated by an acute awareness of his status as outsider and the socially paralysing rather than life-affirming impact of his aesthetic sensibility, which he eventually decides to counteract by celebrating human nature as manifested in the *Bürger's* life, Gustav von Aschenbach seeks to acknowledge and sustain the moral order by an ethos of almost unrelenting self-discipline and isolation. But his undignified end, which contrasts with the optimism of Tonio's creative manifesto expressed in his letter to Lisaweta, exposes the extent of his delusion. And, as we shall see, the relationship between the two characters is rather more complex than this contrast might imply.

Part III of Tonio Kröger describes the protagonist's embrace and subsequent rejection of aestheticism as a life devoted to carnal sin and a kind of sensuality that is devoid of spiritual and moral significance:

Aber da sein Herz ohne Liebe war, so geriet er in Abenteuer des Fleisches, stieg tief hinab in Wollust und heiße Schuld und litt unsäglich dabei. (...)

Ein Ekel und Haß gegen die Sinne erfaßte ihn und ein Lechzen nach Reinheit und wohlanständigen Frieden, während er doch die Luft der Kunst atmete, die laue und süße, durchschwängerte Luft eines beständigen Frühlings, in der es treibt und braut und keimt in heimlicher Zeugungswonne.¹ (TK 16)

The sphere of artistic creation is here most emphatically linked with sensuous pleasure and moral dissipation – and, it seems, consequently condemned. Yet this denunciation is not entirely convincing, as the text contradicts itself with its own lush imagery. Behind the overtones of sexual debauchery associated with spring air, which is also that of art, there is the notion of regeneration and new life – and what else is artistic creation if not the conception and generation of, if not life itself, at least its image? Furthermore, the creative process brings about a renovation of the artist's mind, which is energised by its own imagination. By casting aside sensuous pleasure, Tonio appears to deprive himself of one kind of active life open to him, that of life in art. He must therefore look to compensate for his detachment from life, which he eventually does by articulating his love for the common exponents of bourgeois existence. The closing cadence of the *Novelle* offers a justification of the kind of art that is in communion with ordinary, practical living.

Yet, as in the case of Aschenbach, Mann seems both to endorse and question the protagonist's choice. Tonio's vacillation between the sharp

extremes of 'eisiger Geistigkeit und verzehrender Sinnenglut' (TK 16), appears highly ironised, as either mode of living fails to strike the reader as ultimately workable.² Moreover, neither will guarantee the life of purity and respectable peace which he longs for. In fact, the path to such a life seems forever closed to Tonio, who resents the senses because he believes them to threaten his bourgeois tranquillity, and yet craves this tranquillity with his very body, as Mann's use of the highly sensuous and rather vulgar verb 'lechzen' reveals.

Mann handles his protagonist's dilemma in Part III of Tonio Kröger with a high measure of bathos and critique. Tonio's exhaustion, which finally brings about a weakening of his bodily health, seems to result from a mixture of sexual promiscuity, a kind of post-coital melancholia, and conventionalised guilt. Mann ironises Tonio's philosophical notion of artisthood as sick and depraved, which dominates his meeting with Lisaweta, by hinting at the corporeal and rather mundane source of Tonio's depression. The questionable nature underlying the aesthetic temperament is, however, already anticipated in the young Tonio's admiration for the healthiness and natural agility of Hans and Inge. The two characters represent male and female versions of complete social integration, which contrasts with the introspective inwardness pursued by Tonio.

I use the word 'pursued', because, even though Tonio's adolescent consciousness appears to suffer under his innate otherness, the implications of his exclusion from the socially commonplace is never allowed to gather full tragic potential, which is again another aspect of Mann's use of irony. All of the characters in Tonio Kröger, and none more so than the eponymous anti-hero himself, represent highly simplified social archetypes, which in turn are

anchored in various literary traditions. The text thus forecasts its own conclusion; as Martin Swales points out, by the end of the narrative 'Tonio has – literally and metaphorically – come full circle'.³ Tonio's fate is not only deeply embedded in the late-nineteenth-century discourse of aesthetics and aestheticism but takes its cue from classic examples of the genres *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman*, such as Rousseau's Confessions and Keller's Der Grüne Heinrich, although it is characteristic of the *fin de siècle*'s revised theory of subjectivity that Mann does not decide to dedicate an entire novel to the evolution of one particular artist.

Tonio Kröger in many ways reiterates and plays with the ideas and images of European Aestheticism without attempting to resolve their underlying conundrum or overcome their implied conventionality. Equipped with the passport of his artistic sensibility, Tonio is allowed, it seems, to find temporary refuge in sinful (homo)erotic adventures as an almost ritualistic part of his coming-of-age, and, in view of the firmly established place of (at least a hint of) same-sex passion as a vital ingredient in male aestheticist texts, one is hard-pressed to find evidence for some critics' claims regarding the purported connection between his sexuality and his position, or rather pose, of a 'criminal'.⁴ Mann endows his character with a mock-notoriety that serves to reinforce his conformist nature, and we do well to remember that Tonio's artistic existence in the bohemian quarters of Munich appears eccentric only when considered from the stand-point of the hard-working petty bourgeois. By contrast, the German *Großbürger* steeped in *fin-de-siècle* culture would have found little to object to and become indignant about in Tonio, as his persona is

firmly rooted in the orderly and highly aestheticised background of socially integrated artishood.⁵

Tonio's disgust with the life of the body mirrors Törleß's rejection of physical dissipation of any kind as a manifestation of a lack of mental restraint and self-control; for both, in the manner of the dandy, sensual intemperance denotes a lack of taste, and both denounce it in favour of a sharpening of their aesthetic sensibility:

Aber in dem Maße, wie seine Gesundheit geschwächt war, verschärfte sich seine Künstlerschaft, ward wählerisch, erlesen, kostbar, fein reizbar gegen das Banale und aufs höchste empfindlich in Fragen des Taktes und Geschmacks.⁶ (TK 16)

Törleß wurde später, nachdem er die Ereignisse seiner Jugend überwunden hatte, ein junger Mann von sehr feinem und empfindsamem Geiste. (...) Seine Bedürfnisse waren so einseitig schöngeistig zugescharft, daß es, wenn man ihm etwa eine ganz ähnliche Geschichte von den Ausschweifungen eines Wüstlings erzählt hätte, gewiß völlig außerhalb des Gesichtskreises gelegen wäre, seine Entrüstung gegen das Geschehene zu richten. Er hätte einen solchen Menschen gewissermaßen nicht deswegen verachtet, weil er ein Wüstling, sondern weil er nichts Besseres ist; nicht wegen seiner Ausschweifungen, sondern wegen des Seelenzustandes, der ihn diese begehen läßt; weil er dumm ist, oder weil seinem Verstande die

seelischen Gegengewichte fehlen...: immer nur also wegen des traurigen, beraubten, entkräfteten Anblickes, den er bietet. Und er hätt ihn gleicherweise verachtet, ob nun sein Laster in geschlechtlichen Ausschweifungen oder in zwanghaft entartetem Zigarettenrauchen oder Alkoholgenuß bestünde.⁷ (T 111/2)

Thus, it seems, Törleß would despise Tonio for indulging in physical dissipation on the grounds of aesthetic unworthiness rather than a lack of moral integrity. Despite the overt similarity between their respective development – both experience the pleasures of the flesh only to abandon them for the sake of the aesthetic translated into the calculated modes of art – Tonio's bodily transgressions do not have the impact of Törleß's encounter with Basini. Rather, Mann presents Tonio's involvement in the life of the dandy as a geographic and cultural inevitability; having deserted the world of the morally self-contained *Hansestadt*, Tonio, Mann suggests, once let loose in the big cities of the south, unleashes the passionate side of his nature which he inherited from his mother. In Mann's oeuvre, the south stands for the life of passionate art and the senses, of unbridled emotions, which clash violently with the northern patrician's adherence to convention and tendency towards introspection and melancholia.

That the linking of bohemianism with physical depravity ought to be taken with a pinch of salt can be seen from the narrator's ironised description of Tonio's predicament,

[ein] Ekel und Haß gegen die Sinne erfaßte ihn und ein Lechzen nach Reinheit und wohlstandigen Frieden, während er *doch* die Luft der Kunst atmete, die laue und süße, durchschwängerte Luft eines beständigen Frühlings, in der es treibt und braut und keimt in heimlicher Zeugungswonne⁸ (TK 16; my italics),

as well as his handling of Tonio's meeting with Lisaweta in Part IV. There, the text offers an instance of the emancipation of the sexes, which highlights the positive impact of artistic liberalism on life. It is a glimpse into the bohemian world as experienced by Ibsen's Oswald Alving, a world in which the responsible use of freedom creates a more humane environment than moral bigotry can vouchsafe.⁹ The narrator's allusions to Tonio's sensuous escapades are thus not a condemnation of the life of the artist; they are merely invocations of the middle-classes' clichéd perception of that life, a warped view that is also ingrained in Tonio himself and that he fails to shake off. It is this prejudice, the notion of the problematic relationship between the creative artist and decent humane living, which, paradoxically, brings about Tonio's fame and triggers his decision to become a professionally and morally conscientious creator:

Als er zum ersten Male hervortrat, wurde unter denen, die es anging, viel Beifall und Freude laut, denn es war ein wertvoll gearbeitetes Ding, was er geliefert hatte, voll Humor und Kenntnis des Leidens. (...) [Denn] der schmerzlichen Gründlichkeit seiner Erfahrungen gesellte sich ein seltener, zäh ausharrender und ehrsüchtiger

Fleiß, der im Kampf mit der wählerischen
Reizbarkeit seines Geschmacks unter heftigen
Qualen ungewöhnliche Werke entstehen ließ.¹⁰
(TK 16)

Tonio's insight into the humour and suffering pervading human life, his awareness of its comic and destitute/derelict aspects, stems from his childhood experiences as an outsider, a hybrid inhabitant of an exotic and an ordinary world. This, it seems, is the source of his artistic sensibility. However, coming at this stage of the narrative with its strong ironic emphasis on Tonio's sexual recklessness, the gravity of his suffering itself is made to seem questionable. The text not only over-emphasises the thoroughness of Tonio's experience ('der schmerzlichen Gründlichkeit seiner Erfahrungen') but couples it with 'zäh ausharrender und ehrsüchtiger Fleiß', with its Puritan-Prussian overtones of industrious resilience, which is at war 'mit der wählerischen Reizbarkeit seines Geschmacks', the nervous nature of the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete.

This mock-heroic rendering of Tonio's artistic activity, which creates 'unter heftigen Qualen ungewöhnliche Werke', reaches its climax in the final sentence of Part III:

Er arbeitete stumm, abgeschlossen, unsichtbar
und voller Verachtung für jene Kleinen, denen
das Talent ein geselliger Schmuck war, die, ob
sie nun arm oder reich waren, wild und
abgerissen einhergingen oder mit persönlichen
Krawatten Luxus trieben, in erster Linie glücklich,
liebenswürdig und künstlerisch zu leben bedacht
waren, unwissend darüber, daß gute Werke nur

unter dem Druck eines schlimmen Lebens
entstehen, daß, wer lebt, nicht arbeitet, und daß
man gestorben sein muß, um ganz ein
Schaffender zu sein.¹¹ (TK 16/7)

Tonio's insistence on social decorum to which all individual self-stylisation and freedom of self-expression through outward appearance must be sacrificed may be his rejection of dandy-like posturing, of pretending to be something or someone one is not. However, his main concern is not so much authenticity as rigorous self-denial. He condemns those artists who aim to combine happiness, love, and artistic creation, although, as we have already seen, joy, sympathy and being worthy of receiving love (which is the literal meaning of the German 'liebenswürdig') are inextricably linked in theories of art and its purpose. Instead, he advocates the death of the creator, thus bringing forth a paradox which seems both insoluble and detrimental to art.

Characteristically, Tonio denies his fellow artists, and, it would seem, his fellow beings, the freedom of play, of individual self-representation irrespective of convention. His conservatism mirrors that of Aschenbach.

Could the figure of Gustav von Aschenbach have sprung forth from Tonio Kröger's imagination? Tonio's obsession with the artist's existence as a sick, even criminal, alternative to bourgeois life appears to manifest itself in Aschenbach's fate. In the course of the novella, the famous writer, admired and honoured by an entire nation, is exposed as a man who is unable to escape his

fleshly impulses, the inevitable flip side of physical beauty, which is in this instance embodied by Tadzio.

Der Tod in Venedig relies on Mann's insight into the motivations which govern the protagonist's mind, and this hold on human truth is expressed through a mixture of pathos and cynicism. Aschenbach's end is both comic and destitute, because he dies as a depraved man who has joined the ranks of the grotesque figures marking his path to and throughout Venice. Mann translates Aschenbach's inner disintegration through the power of the mind and the word,

der Macht des Geistes und des Wortes, die
lächelnd über dem unbewußten und stummen
Leben thront (TV 15),

which is, at the same time, both Aschenbach's and Tonio's artistic tool:¹²

Sie schärfte seinen Blick und ließ ihn die großen
Wörter durchschauen, die der Menschen Busen
blähen, sie erschloß ihm der Menschen Seelen
und seine eigene, machte ihn hellsehend und
zeigte ihm das Innere der Welt und alles Letzte,
was hinter den Worten und Taten ist. Was er
aber sah, war dies: Komik und Elend – Komik
und Elend.¹³ (TV 15)

But it is this very insight that Aschenbach, with his unexamined adherence to the ethos of form, lacks and which brings about his down downfall. Unlike Tonio, he fails to find a balanced attitude towards beauty, and it is this which makes his downfall inevitable.

Significantly, Aschenbach's search for tangible beauty is triggered by his encounter with the personification of death. Caught while staring at the stranger who stands outside a chapel of rest, he realises

daß jener seinen Blick erwiderte, und zwar so kriegerisch, so gerade ins Auge hinein, so offenkundig gesonnen, die Sache aufs Äußerste zu treiben und den Blick des andern zum Abzug zu zwingen, daß Aschenbach, peinlich berührt, sich abwandte und einen Gang die Zäune entlang begann, mit dem beiläufigen Entschluß, des Menschen nicht weiter achtzuhaben. Er hatte ihn in der nächsten Minute vergessen.¹⁴ (TV 64)

This reminder of the transitoriness of life is quite different from the 'Künstlerfurcht, nicht fertig zu werden' (TV 65), 'his artist's fear of not finishing his task' cited as Aschenbach's anxious preoccupation two paragraphs later.¹⁵ Aschenbach's fear that his body 'may cease to be' before his talent has been crowned and exhausted in one masterpiece not only echoes Keats's poem and the Romantic perception of the mind as superior to and yet unfairly at the mercy of the body – here, as in Törleß, we are again faced with the German notion of duty, which contrasts powerfully with the Anglo-French idea of the dandy. In fact, Aschenbach's story is reminiscent of Wackenroder's 'Das merkwürdige musikalische Leben des Tonkünstlers Joseph Berglinger', in which the hero also reaches his creative climax upon the death of his father. Inspired by his painful emotions to write a passion, he finally achieves the desired level of authenticity in art by translating his feelings into an artwork. A similar process and connection between life and art seems to occur when

Aschenbach writes his last piece in the presence and consciousness of Tazio's beauty, as we shall see later.

Before this point can be reached, Aschenbach must persuade himself to escape from the powerful grip of duty. His hostile ('kriegerisch') meeting with death, its awkwardness described as the embarrassing outcome of breached etiquette, leaves him 'peinlich berührt', partly due to the impertinence seemingly exposed on his side, but more importantly because it implies the isolation and pointlessness of his present life. Thus, although Mann assures us (not a little ironically) that the stranger is immediately forgotten (because man could not live with the constant consciousness of death), the incident sets off a thought process in which Aschenbach's mind struggles to rationalise his emotions and finally succeeds:

Mochte nun aber das Wandererhafte in der Erscheinung des Fremden auf seine Einbildungskraft gewirkt haben oder sonst irgendein physischer oder seelischer Einfluß im Spiele sein: eine seltsame Ausweitung seines Innern ward ihm ganz überraschend bewußt, eine Art schweifender Unruhe, ein jugendlich durstiges Verlangen in die Ferne, ein Gefühl, so lebhaft, so neu oder doch so längst entwöhnt und verlernt, daß er, die Hände auf dem Rücken und den Blick auf den Boden, gefesselt stehenblieb, um die Empfindung auf Wesen und Ziel zu prüfen.¹⁶ (TV 64)

We are at once reminded of Pater's Preface to The Renaissance – but rather than merely understand the nature ('Wesen') of the emotion, Aschenbach

endeavours to know its aim and purpose ('Ziel') so as to be able to disarm it. Mann likens the protagonist's relationship with his emotions as a kind of warfare. The stirrings of the Dionysian alluded to in the passage above are later on identified as a revenge wreaked by feeling for the neglect and repression it has suffered to make Aschenbach's disciplined creative work possible. Rather than acknowledge the infinity of his emotional life, Aschenbach learned in his youth to sacrifice feeling to the desire for perfection. By concentrating on 'Ungenügsamkeit' (TV 66), on what he perceives as the inadequacy of his creation, by condemning the lack of precision pervading his work, by, in short, refusing to accept art as an approximation, which must allow for playfulness, flexibility, and creativity in interpretation as well as composition, Aschenbach has lost the ability to appreciate the pleasure afforded by pertinent form, just as he has renounced other forms of pleasure:

Rächte sich nun also die geknechtete
Empfindung, indem sie ihn verließ, indem sie
seine Kunst fürder zu tragen und zu beflügeln
sich weigerte und alle Lust, alles Entzücken an
der Form und am Ausdruck mit sich
hinwegnahm?¹⁷ (TV 67)

For Tonio the curse inherent in the artistic temperament is one that decrees detachment from life; and that detachment is defined in both cognitive and moral terms. Cognitively, Tonio finds himself compelled to see through (and thereby devalue) life; morally, he is constantly detached from any

condition of relatedness. And both these conditions are painful to him. Tonio is oddly conscious from an early age of the Nietzschean idea that insight kills action ('die Erkenntnis tötet das Handeln'); the adolescent Tonio feels himself unable, as well as unwilling, to join in the life of his fellows. Tonio Kröger, like Dorian Gray, alludes to the *Bildungsroman*, in which the development and trials of the protagonist are hinted at rather than exemplified. Even so, his becoming an artist is described as an inevitable outcome of his youth, because it enables him to live out and partake in a multitude of possible life-styles, and therefore lives, 'mit dem heimlichen Bewußtsein, daß es im Grunde lauter Unmöglichkeiten seien' (TK 14).¹⁸

Tonio Kröger's life rests on a paradox: the truth that there is no truth. His ability to see through others is exemplified at the beginning of the novella in a paragraph which also serves to underline his innate integrity:

Dieses, daß er ein Heft mit selbstgeschriebenen Versen besaß, war durch sein eigenes Verschulden bekannt geworden und schadete ihm sehr, bei seinen Mitschülern sowohl wie bei seinen Lehrern. Dem Sohne des Konsuls Krögers schien es einerseits, als sei es dumm und gemein, daran Anstoß zu nehmen, und er verachtete dafür die Mitschüler wie die Lehrer, deren schlechte Manieren ihn obendrein abstießen und deren persönliche Schwächen er seltsam eindringlich durchschaute. Andererseits aber empfand er selbst es als ausschweifend und eigentlich ungehörig, Verse zu machen, und mußte all denen gewissermaßen recht geben, die es für eine befremdende Beschäftigung hielten.

Allein das vermochte ihn nicht, davon
abzulassen...¹⁹ (TK 3)

This passage shows Tonio probing the limits of society and trying to get to grips with his own ambivalent nature, without destroying the seeds of his vocation. Mann presents Tonio's parents as the origins of his paradoxical temperament. With the bourgeois father on the one hand and his free-spirited mother on the other, Tonio Kröger is destined to a life of not-belonging. This is not a matter of choice. Because of his intelligence, his inborn ability to grasp the complexity of life, Tonio perceives the validity and the limitation of both his parents' life-styles. He experiences conventional upper middle-class life as a source of both restriction and harmony, symbolised in the social habit of dancing. The superficialities of everyday existence appear to him as the guarantors of an orderly and happy emotional life: 'Wie ordentlich und einverstanden mit allem und jedermann sie sich fühlen müssen! Das muß gut sein...' (TK 4).²⁰

Unlike Aschenbach, Tonio is not attracted by beauty but by the delights originating in ordinariness, 'den Wonnen der Gewöhnlichkeit' (TK 52), the bliss and innocent ecstasies entailed in bourgeois everyday existence, which he refers to in his letter to Lisaweta. Of course, the ordinary life described in Tonio Kröger is only ordinary in as far as it is middle-class, since Mann refuses to extend his thematisation of social life to embrace a depiction of the actual misery pervading the lower classes of the then recently industrialised Germany. When Tonio devotes his literary life to the comic side of as well as the misery pervading human existence, he must be dealing with the ridiculous aspect of social conventions and human aspirations as well as the transience of

everything human, good or bad. Thanks to his attraction to Hans and Inge, Tonio experiences the beauty and the sad flimsiness of human emotions, which enable him to recognise the unstable character of all existence. Consequently, in Chapter III, the young artist appears as something of a nihilist, although his main characteristics, a sense of humour combined with the knowledge of suffering, hint at the presence of charity and compassion, which Tonio will eventually exalt in his letter to Lisaweta. Both these virtues, however, originate in love, which awakens the heart and makes one come alive, 'denn er wußte, daß sie reich und lebendig mache, und er sehnte sich, reich und lebendig zu sein, statt in Gelassenheit etwas Ganzes zu schmieden' (TK 9).²¹

Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Tonio is preoccupied with the formation of his soul and personality. However, Tonio's view of society, unlike Stephen's, is tinged by sentimentality and idealisation, by his urgently felt need to belong, which prompts him to revisit his hometown and redefine his position as an exile. Despite his vivid intellect, his main motivation is 'Sehnsucht', a longing to belong. Yet, at the same time, he can only describe the misery and comedy of life by being excluded from it, by observing it from a distance. In doing so, he must abstain from fervent emotion, which would blur his view of his objects. As a result, Mann's protagonist cannot be Paterian aesthete and Joycean artist in one.

Pater describes artistic creation as motivated by a 'rush of homesickness' (R 129), as the result of man's knowledge of death and the transience of everything human. By detaching himself from humanity without turning away from the ordinary, Tonio's art pays tribute to the beauty of human

emotion without turning to metaphysics. Tonio's final and crucial insight consists in the recognition of the need for love in artistic creation:

Denn wenn irgend etwas imstande ist, aus einem
Literaten einen Dichter zu machen, so ist es
diese meine Bürgerliebe zum Menschlichen,
Lebendigen und Gewöhnlichen.²² (TK 52)

Tonio thus finds redemption by identifying his only means of successfully participating in human existence without denying his artistic intellect and insight. His letter to Lisaweta gives voice to the feelings of a human being rather than just an artist or an aspiring *Übermensch*.

The most modern aspect of Tonio Kröger must be its refusal to give in to a desire for closure. The basic paradox in Tonio's personality remains unresolved, but it also comes to be appreciated as a source of fulfilment, and even the source of an art that does connect. The ending of Der Tod in Venedig, on the other hand, presents the reader with reaffirmation of the conventional judgements that the text seems at pains to undermine. Aschenbach's art will be esteemed by the bourgeois aestheticist public without gaining insight into the immoral nature of his work. Although Aschenbach dedicates his life to formal beauty, he is not regarded as an aesthete because he invests form with a kind of professional and moral afflatus. That the narrator disapproves of Aschenbach's standing in society becomes apparent his description of the artist's mature work:

Seltsame Zusammenhänge! War es eine geistige
Folge dieser 'Wiedergeburt', dieser neuen Würde

und Strenge, daß man um dieselbe Zeit ein fast übermäßiges Erstarken seines Schönheitssinnes beobachtete, jene adelige Reinheit, Einfachheit und Ebenmäßigkeit der Formgebung, welche seinen Produkten fortan ein so sinnfälliges, ja gewolltes Gepräge der Meisterlichkeit und Klassizität verlieh?²³ (TV 74)

The reference to 'productions', to carefully manufactured objects dominated by form rather than content, points at Aschenbach's complete rejection of analysis in favour of external beauty of language. This revelation comes disguised in the narrator's, and in part perhaps the public's, cautious questioning of the moral legitimacy of Aschenbach's decision:

Aber moralische Entschlossenheit jenseits des Wissens, der auflösenden und hemmenden Erkenntnis, – bedeutet sie nicht wiederum eine Vereinfachung, eine sittliche Vereinfältigung der Welt und der Seele und also auch ein Erstarken zum Bösen, Verbotenen, zum sittlich Unmöglichem? Und hat Form nicht zweierlei Gesicht? Ist sie nicht sittlich und unsittlich zugleich, – sittlich als Ergebnis und Ausdruck der Zucht, unsittlich aber und selbst widersittlich, sofern sie von Natur eine moralische Gleichgültigkeit in sich schließt, ja wesentlich bestrebt ist, das Moralische unter ihr stolzes und unumschränktes Szepter zu beugen?

Wie dem auch sei! Eine Entwicklung ist ein Schicksal...²⁴ (TV 74/5)

This half-hearted condemnation of morally disinterested devotion to beauty anticipates Aschenbach's eventual inability to resist the attraction of Tadzio's appearance.

Mann presents Tadzio as a two-faced Janus-figure who guards the entrance to Aschenbach's Dionysian experience and his death in emotional derangement. Aschenbach lacks insight into the dual nature of all life, 'der auflösenden und hemmenden Erkenntnis', an insight that is disintegrating because it reveals the lack of any truth and stability, and inhibiting because it should prevent the individual from using a false, self-constructed truth to fill the void left behind by the abolition of all truth. It is therefore not the figure of Tadzio who is responsible for Aschenbach's downfall but rather Aschenbach himself, by blindly replacing one extreme with another, by moving from a problematic reading of the world to an uncritical celebration of beauty and form regardless of its moral implications.

Instead of assuming an overtly moralistic tone, Mann illustrates the dangers of Tadzio's amoral, possibly immoral, beauty by turning the novella itself into an over-refined object, in which paradoxically philosophical concepts and mythological allusions describe the carnal aspect of Aschenbach's *Sehnsucht*. Like Tonio, Aschenbach lacks conventional religion, yet unlike Tonio, he fails to resist the temptation to succumb to a partly inherited and partly self-created cult of beauty. All the same, his death seems to signify permanence rather than transience – by sublimating his passion through the texts of Greek philosophy and mythology, the novella closes with an ambivalent image of Aschenbach's apotheosis, which marks the climax of his delusion but also offers an intimation of the sublime.

In Tonio Kröger we once again encounter the artist as prodigy. His sensibility is presented as inborn, a dominant characteristic resulting from the dichotomy that governs his parents' personalities and makes his social exclusion seem inevitable. His adolescent toils appear as the punishment for his father's unconventional choice of a wife, which ends in the merchant family's decline and final collapse. The mother, aptly named Consuelo, represents the one aspect of the father which fails to conform to the rigour of social etiquette:

Mein Vater, wissen Sie, war ein nordisches Temperament: betrachtsam, gründlich, korrekt aus Puritanismus und zur Wehmut geneigt; meine Mutter von unbestimmt exotischen Blut, schön, sinnlich, naiv, zugleich fahrlässig und leidenschaftlich und von einer impulsiven Liederlichkeit.²⁵ (TK 51)

The father's tendency towards Wehmut, melancholia, which seems to clash so violently with the diligence and self-control prescribed by northern Puritanism, both confirms the cliché of Protestant introspection ('betrachtsam') at the same time as it explains the allure of the mother's southern otherness. Her artistic and passionate disposition provides a 'consolation' for the sober reality of late-nineteenth-century capitalism. And yet her impulsiveness and aesthetic appreciation fail to prevent her husband's death, who dies shortly after his

mother, the head of the family. Thereafter Consuelo returns to her origins, both geographically and spiritually:

Tonio's Mutter jedoch, seine schöne, feurige Mutter, die so wunderbar den Flügel and die Mandoline spielte und der alles ganz einerlei war, vermählte sich nach Jahresfrist aufs neue, und zwar mit einem Musiker, einem Virtuosen mit italienischen Namen, dem sie in blaue Fernen folgte.²⁶ (TK 15)

Consuelo's effortless return from the northern life of the *Bürger* to the life of bohemianism reveals the strength of her existence as aesthete, which has remained unspoilt by her exposure to middle-class utilitarianism and rationality. In contrast, Tonio's father, following his mother's death, seems to feel bereft of any justification for his bourgeois existence, which both his wife and his son reject. Thus, there appears to have been no infiltration of the father's character by Consuelo's personality. She enters the society of her husband's *Hansestadt* as an outcast only to rejoin her people once the marital bonds have been dissolved. Moreover, she not only manages to retain her identity as aesthete-artist, but passes it on as an inheritance to her son, who finds himself forever lost to the world of sober middle-class practicality and diligence.

Mann's and Tonio's presentation of the parents is of course highly stylised, as the two are only shown as a function of Tonio's consciousness. Consuelo appears as a foreign aesthetic object imported into strange surroundings, 'weil der Vater sie sich einstmals von ganz unten auf der Landkarte heraufgeholt hatte' (TK 4).²⁷ The use of the reflexive pronoun 'sich'

together with the verb 'heraufholen' carries imperialist connotation – Consuelo appears as latter-day noble savage, who has still retained her spontaneity by being as yet untainted by civilised society. The action suggested by the verb also hints at volatile behaviour, a barely thought-through step, which will have devastating consequences for the Krögers' future.

In both Tonio Kröger and Tod in Venedig, as in much of his other writing, Mann thematises the foreign, the non-national, the other as a source of the protagonist's downfall. The existence of the other, of course, depends predominantly on appearance, on form and style other than that accepted by convention as legitimate. This circumstance inevitably problematises the status of the aesthetic. If life is only bearable through the aesthetic, then it is also rendered infinitely more dangerous by it. Because it is the exotic, the unknown, that catches the attention of our senses, it is also more likely to capture our imagination. Conventionalised beauty, on the other hand, has already been tamed and processed, made accessible by local artists. For this very reason, however, it is also confined and restrictive. It limits our imagination by presenting us with known and established symbols.

In this respect, Aschenbach and Tonio move in opposite directions. While the former finds himself captivated by Tadzio's beauty because it implies the unbridled freedom of a kind of beauty which is both capricious, foreign, and threatening, and yet which, improbably and self-deceivingly, he can identify with serene classical perfection, young Kröger identifies the blond and cheerful appearance of Hans Hansen with a sense of belonging and orderliness.

NOTES

- ¹ 'But because his heart was dead and no love in it, he fell into carnal adventures, far into the hot guilty depths of sensuality, although such experiences cost him intense suffering. (...)
He was seized by revulsion, by a hatred of the senses, by a craving for purity and decency and peace of mind; and yet he was breathing the atmosphere of art, the mild, sweet, heavily fragrant air of a continual spring in which everything sprouts and burgeons and germinates in mysterious procreative delight. Thomas Mann, Death in Venice and Other Stories, translated and with an introduction by David Luke (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 154.
- ² 'icy intellectuality' and 'devouring feverish lust'. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- ³ Martin W. Swales, A Student's Guide to Thomas Mann (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 31
- ⁴ An outstanding example of this phenomenon is Heinrich Detering's article 'Der Litterat als Abenteurer': *Tonio Kröger zwischen Dorian Gray und Der Tod in Venedig*, *Forum Homosexualität und Literatur*, 14 (1992), pp. 5-22. Detering claims that Tonio, as the artist as adventurer, mirrors Lord Henry Wotton's persona of artist and homosexual, concluding: 'Mir scheint, daß der englische Roman eine nie offen genannte Vorlage für Thomas Manns Text abgegeben hat.' (*Ibid.*, p. 8) As I hope I have been able to show in my chapter on The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wotton is neither an artist nor is his active involvement in same-sex passion supported by textual evidence. Most importantly, homoeroticism forms only one and a rather unsubtle part of the moral shadiness pervading the novel. While there can be no doubt that Mann would have been aware and influenced by Wilde's oeuvre and the Queensberry trials, the reason why the novel has, before Detering's essay, never been identified as a blueprint for Tonio Kröger is that it clearly was not.
- ⁵ The German term 'Lebenskünstler', which means literally an 'artist off/in life' and which today sounds rather old-fashioned and is no longer popular in colloquial German usage, denotes a personality who contrives to make the best of any given situation, to juggle life's advantages and adversities in a playful, serene manner, a character who treats life as a creative adventure, in short as art. To some extent, the epithet coincides with the Nietzschean/Wildean idea of looking upon one's life as an artwork in the eternal process of becoming. Traditionally, however, the joyful equanimity of the *Lebenskünstler* is accompanied by financial poverty and an unsettled social position, which arouses suspicion in the *Bürger*, who objects to the 'life-artist's' slovenly life-style. (The *Lebenskünstler* does in fact often have to revert to petty crime in order to make ends meet.) In this respect, the archetypal *fin-de-siècle* bohemian is in many ways also a *Lebenskünstler*, and although Mann does not use the term in the novella, it seems to me to circumscribe the spectre of social disrepute so feared by Tonio and be implied in the term 'Litterat'. (However, it is important to note that the term *Lebenskünstler* by itself does not automatically signal an actual artist. The character of Felix Krull is thus a *Hochstapler*, that is a conman, and by this token also a *Lebenskünstler*.)
- ⁶ 'But as his health suffered, so his artistry grew more refined: it became fastidious, exquisite, rich, subtle, intolerant of banality and hyper-sensitive in matters of tact and taste.' Thomas Mann, Death in Venice and Other Stories, p. 154.

⁷ 'Later, once he had overcome the events of his youth, Törless became a young man with a very fine and sensitive mind. (...) His needs had become so keenly and one-sidedly aesthetic that, had been told a very similar tale of lecher's debaucheries, it would never have occurred to him to voice his outrage at such behaviour. Such a person would have warranted his contempt not for being a lecher, but for being nothing better than that; not for his debaucheries, but for the state of mind that allowed him to commit them; because he was stupid or because his intelligence lacked any spiritual counterweights – always, in short, because of the sad, deprived and pathetic prospect that he presented. And, similarly, he would have despised him whether his vice had consisted in sexual debaucheries or compulsive and degenerate drinking or cigarette-smoking.' Robert Musil, The Confusions of Young Törless, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), pp. 126/7.

⁸ See Endnote 1 above.

⁹ See the following excerpt from a conversation between Oswald and Pastor Manders in Ghosts, in which the former describes the family life of unmarried artists:

'OSWALD. Let me tell you something, sir, I have been a regular Sunday guest in one or two of these irregular households –

MANDERS. On Sundays!

OSWALD. Yes, that's the day when one's meant to enjoy oneself. But I have never heard an offensive word there, far less ever witnessed anything which could be called immoral. No; do you know when and where I have encountered immorality in artistic circles?

MANDERS. No, I don't, thank heaven.

OSWALD. Well, I shall tell you. I have encountered it when one or another of our model husbands and fathers came down there to look around a little on their own – and did the artists the honour of visiting them in their humble bistros. Then we learned a few things. Those gentlemen were able to tell us about places and things of which we had never dreamed.'

Henrik Ibsen, Plays: One, ed. and trans. by Michael Meyer (London: Methuen Drama, 1989), p. 47.

¹⁰ 'His first publication was received by the competent critics with considerable acclaim and appreciation, for it was a well-made piece of work, full of humour and the knowledge of suffering. (...) for the profound painfulness of his experience of life was allied to a rare capacity for hard, ambitious, unremitting toil; and of his perseverance, joined in anguished combat with his fastidiously sensitive taste, works of quite unusual quality were born.' Death in Venice and Other Stories, pp. 154/5.

¹¹ 'He worked in silence, in invisible privacy, for he utterly despised those minor hacks who treated their talent as a social ornament – who, whether they were poor or rich, whether they affected an unkempt and shabby appearance or sumptuous individualistic neckwear, aimed above all else at living happily, charmingly and artistically, little suspecting that good work is brought forth only under the pressure of a bad life, that living and working are incompatible and that one must have died if one is to be wholly a creator.' *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹² 'the power of the intellect and words, a power that sits smilingly enthroned above mere inarticulate, unconscious life' *Ibid.*, p. 153.

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- ¹³ 'He surrendered himself utterly to that power which he felt to be the sublimest power on earth, to the service of which he felt called and which promised him honour and renown: the power of the intellect and words, a power that sits smilingly enthroned above mere inarticulate, unconscious life. He surrendered to it with youthful passion, and it rewarded him with all that it has to give, while inexorably exacting its full price in return.' *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ 'that his gaze was being returned: the man was in fact staring at him so aggressively, so straight in the eye, with so evident an intention to make an issue of the matter and outstare him, that Aschenbach turned away in disagreeable embarrassment and began to stroll along the fence, casually resolving to take no further notice of the fellow. A minute later he had put him out of his mind.' *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- ¹⁶ 'But whether his imagination had been stirred by the stranger's intinerant appearance, or whether some other physical or psychological influence was at work, he now became conscious, to his complete surprise, of an extraordinary expansion of his inner self, a kind of roving restlessness, a youthful craving for far-off places, a feeling so new or at least so long unaccustomed and forgotten that he stood as if rooted, with his hands clasped behind his back and his eyes to the ground, trying to ascertain the nature and purport of his emotion.' *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- ¹⁷ 'Could it be that the enslaved emotion was now avenging itself by deserting him, by refusing from now on to bear up his art on its wings, by taking with it all his joy in words, all his appetite for the beauty of form?' *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- ¹⁸ 'privately aware that none of them was possible at all...' *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ¹⁹ 'The fact that he possessed a notebook full of poems written by himself had by his own fault become public knowledge, and it very adversely affected his reputation both with his schoolmates and with the masters. Consul Kröger's son on the one hand thought disapproval stupid and contemptible, and consequently despised his fellow pupils as well as his teachers, whose ill-bred behaviour in any case repelled him and whose personal weaknesses had not escaped his uncommonly penetrating eye. But on the other hand he himself felt that there was something extravagant and really improper about writing poetry, and in a certain sense he could not help agreeing with all those who considered it a very odd occupation. Nevertheless this did not prevent him from continuing to write...' *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- ²⁰ 'How decent they must feel, how at peace with everything and everyone! It must be good to be like that... But what is the matter with me, and what will come of it all?' *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- ²¹ 'for he knew that it would enrich him and make him more fully alive – and he longed to be enriched and more fully alive, rather than to recollect things in tranquillity and forge them into a whole' *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- I disagree with David Luke's rendering of 'statt in Gelassenheit etwas Ganzes zu schmieden' as 'rather than to recollect things in tranquillity and forge them into a whole', because the Wordsworthian overtones make for an overinterpretation of the original. It should read: 'rather than calmly forging something whole'.
- ²² "For is there is anything that can turn a *littérateur* into a true writer, then it is this bourgeois love of mine for the human and the living and the ordinary." *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- ²³ 'How strange these associations! Was it an intellectual consequence of this 'rebirth', of this new dignity and rigour, that, at about the same time, his sense of beauty was

observed to undergo an almost excessive resurgence, that his style took on the noble purity, simplicity and symmetry that were set upon all his subsequent works that so evident and evidently intentional stamp of the classical master?' *Ibid.*, p. 207.

- ²⁴ 'And yet: moral resoluteness at the far side of knowledge, achieved in despite of all corrosive and inhibiting insight – of the world and of human psychology, and thus also a resurgence of energies that are evil, forbidden, morally impossible? And is form not two-faced? Is it not at one and the same time moral and immoral inasmuch as it harbours within itself an innate moral indifference, and indeed essentially strives for nothing less than to bend morality under its proud and absolute sceptre? Be that as it may! A development is a destiny (...)' *Ibid.*, p. 207.

- ²⁵ "My father, as you know, was of a northern temperament: contemplative, thorough, puritanically correct, and inclined to melancholy. My mother was of a vaguely exotic extraction, beautiful, sensuous, naïve, both reckless and passionate, and given to impulsive, rather disreputable behaviour." *Ibid.*, p. 194.

- ²⁶ 'But Tonio's mother, his beautiful fiery mother who played the piano and the mandolin so enchantingly and to whom nothing really mattered, got married again a year later – to a musician, a virtuoso with an Italian name, with whom she departed to live under far-off blue skies.' *Ibid.*, p. 153.

- ²⁷ 'his father having in days gone by fetched her up as his bride-to-be from somewhere right at bottom of the map'. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

IX

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

The possibility of fixed selfhood and autonomous subject-formation lies at the heart of Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse. The necessity of an anti-humanist reading of the novel suggests itself urgently to those who wish to do justice to the complex question of Woolf's identity as woman, artist, bourgeois. It is precisely because of the novel's, and the author's, problematic standing within the English literary tradition, that the text lends itself to the present discussion and facilitates my exploration of the aesthetic as affirming both the fragility and the value of the individual self. Despite gay studies' ongoing reappraisal of figures such as Wilde and Pater as more or less consciously subversive exponents of homoerotic sensibilities, Woolf's treatment at the hands of both the male-dominated literary establishment as well as feminist schools of criticism highlights the divergent views of aesthetic perception as, on the one hand, a product of culturally created influences or, on the other, as anchored in the individual psyche.¹

Toril Moi's response to Elaine Showalter's discussion of Woolf's feminist attitudes in A Literature of Their Own offers an indispensable outline of feminists critics' reception of the novelist's approach to sexual binary oppositions within the interrelated contexts of subjectivity and androgyny.² Moi objects to Showalter's inability to acknowledge Woolf's critiques of women's social position, A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas, as valid contributions to the feminist struggle towards an emancipation from orthodox understandings of female identity. Dismissing Woolf's blurring of sexual

boundaries as a flight from the realities dominating the sexual politics of her time, Showalter declares her use of the theme of bisexuality as

inhuman. Whatever else one may say of androgyny, it represents and escapes from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness. Her ideal artist mystically transcends sex, or has none.³

While the reliance on androgynous figurations of the subject may indeed challenge social reality and its ties with orthodox dogma, Showalter, because of her adherence to the liberal-humanist ideal, which upholds the notion of the essentialist subject, in the last analysis argues in terms of unexamined categories of femininity and masculinity:

One could imagine another approach to androgyny, however, through total immersion in individual experience, with all its restrictions of sex and anger and fear and chaos. *A thorough understanding of what it means, in every respect, to be a woman, could lead the artist to an understanding of what it means to be a man.* This revelation would not be realized in any mystical way; it would result from daring to face and express what is unique, even if unpleasant, or taboo, or destructive, in one's own experience, and thus it would speak to the secret heart in all people. (My italics.)⁴

I think it is important and useful to note Showalter's apparently inadvertent reliance on essentialist concepts of the self. Whilst dismissing Woolf's allegedly apolitical vision of sexual identity as 'utopian', Showalter slips into the language of ontologising discourse whilst at the same time advocating the abandonment to conventional identity markers.⁵ The realisation of Showalter's proposal would inevitably be limited to a recording of individual female experience in a male-dominated environment. Whilst such a form of literature may encompass not only the negative experience of female suppression and inequality, but also biologically and socially determined prerogatives of womanhood, such as motherhood and the, partly mythical, superior status of female sensitivity, its ultimate success with regard to the feminist project would depend on the existence of a 'secret heart in all people', the presence of an irreducible core of selfhood shared by both women and men.⁶

As Moi rightly points out, Showalter succumbs to the conventional view of sexuality as determined by both material and conceptual binary opposites. If an exhaustive knowledge of what it means to be a woman revealed the same level of insight into male existence, this investigation's dependence on difference would inevitably be dominated by a positive-negative relationship of thesis and antithesis, a see-saw of experience. Showalter's apparent belief in the possibility of absolute knowledge, of the perfect perception of womanhood and its truthful translation into language, reveals a trust in a holistic world-view which completely overlooks the limitations of the literary artwork. Furthermore, since no single sensation can be taken to be limited to either sex, Showalter's structuralist position appears questionable, while her advocacy of 'total immersion in individual experience' echoes patriarchal concepts of femininity

as founded on and characterised by passivity.⁷ All individual experience taps one pool accessible to both man and woman, a spectrum in which the experience of pain, suffering, or injustice can be triggered by a range of factors, such as sexism or material or social exclusion, which in theory and practice are not restricted to one sex. Similarly, aesthetic experience itself requires a level of surrender to the phenomenon which, as the previous chapters have aimed to show, marks the life of the aesthete and the sensitive consciousness and is not restricted to the female domain. Yet despite its apparent fallacy grounded in its reliance on traditional historicist-realist representations of femininity and masculinity, Showalter's text, at the same time, serves to highlight the dangers of élitist fastidiousness permeating Woolf work. Significantly for my thesis, these hazards can be traced back to the intricate association between style and content. As Showalter unwittingly demonstrates, the subject's ability 'to face and express' experience does not imply any power over the historical, political, or social forces that have given rise to this experience. In this respect, and in contrast to Showalter's view, Woolf's writing is dominated by the possibility of exerting control over the externally received phenomenon. The importance of this major theme manifests itself in the central role occupied by the possibility of liberated consciousness.

One thinks of Woolf's essay on American fiction, also referred to by Showalter, in which she reveals her perception of individual consciousness as an inhibiting rather than enhancing element in the artist's life by comparing the American writer's dilemma with that of the female author:

Women writers have to meet many of the same problems that beset Americans. They too are

conscious of their peculiarities as a sex; apt to suspect insolence, quick to avenge grievances, eager to shape an art of their own. In both cases all kinds of consciousness – consciousness of self, of race, of sex, of civilization – which have nothing to do with art, have got between them and the paper, with results that are, on the surface at least, unfortunate.⁸

The passage immediately places Woolf within the nineteenth-century tradition of *l'art pour l'art*. Shying away from the implications of the politically motivated artwork, Woolf posits an ideal form of artistic consciousness in which the markers identifying the socially formed subject are submerged in a zero degree of writing. She goes on to demand a 'better prose' in which the author would 'use all words impartially', thus echoing Hofmannsthal's anxious and ambiguous attitude towards the dominance of personality in modern fiction.⁹ Woolf continues, however, with an endorsement of the subjective writing she has just rejected by appealing to its capacity for unconventionality. She finds herself

forced to own (as some women writers also make us own) that to come fresh to the world, to turn a new angle to the light, it is so great an achievement that for its own sake we can pardon the bitterness, the self-consciousness, the angularity which inevitably go with it.¹⁰

Woolf counters her own horror at the instrumentalisation of art for the purpose of political or sexual partisanship with the recognition of the extent to which

original perception relies on subjective opinion. This dichotomy once again mirrors Hofmannsthal's view of the relationship between life and art as expounded in 'Poesie und Leben', where he, on the one hand, upholds the separateness of poetic language and the everyday word while, at the same time, acknowledging individual experience as the source of the unique tone, that is style, to be developed by the successful writer.

As we have seen, Hofmannsthal, like Woolf, failed to resolve the conundrum posed by the intricate relationship between life and art. By insisting on the artist's necessary involvement in and dependence on life, Hofmannsthal exposes the fragile position of the creative individual, who is expected to both feed on and abstain from the insights afforded by mundane experience. Woolf and Hofmannsthal expect the artist to operate both within and outside the ordinary world, to maintain a schizophrenic existence ridden with emotional turmoil as exemplified through Mann's protagonists Tonio Kröger and Gustav von Aschenbach. The artist's ability to place himself at a remote distance from orthodox experience and perspectives suggests once again the presence of an unaccountable factor that constitutes the difference between the artist and the everyman.

Yet Woolf and Hofmannsthal also acknowledge the infiltration of everyday life by the predicaments of subjectivity, which, as the epiphanic climaxes of To the Lighthouse and Ein Brief suggest, can only be resolved and overcome through a radical surrender of subjectivity. Paradoxically and significantly, however, this state is self-imposed and based on the subject's memory and imagination. As we shall see, the momentary, trance-like relinquishment of personality as undergone, indeed actively induced, by

Chandos and Mrs Ramsay represents an inward-looking epiphany, a non-revelation which for once enables the individual to exercise complete control over experience.

Unsurprisingly therefore, Showalter's dismissal of Woolf's notion of feminine experience based on the novelist's own definition of life in the essay entitled 'Modern Fiction' highlights not so much the topics dominating late-twentieth-century feminism, but takes us back the issues at the heart of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism:

[It] is not surprising to recognise in Virginia Woolf's memorable definition of life: 'a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end', another metaphor of uterine withdrawal and containment. Woolf's fictional record of the perceptions of this state describes consciousness as passive receptivity; 'The mind receives a myriad of impressions... an incessant shower of innumerable atoms.'¹¹

While it is true that Woolf's female characters, with the exception of Lily, are seldom portrayed as involved in actions that lie beyond the feminine sphere of house-keeping, a social role mainly defined by imposed conventions, the inner dialogues lying at the forefront of her novels belie Showalter's equation of Woolfian consciousness as 'passive receptivity'. Woolf's main protagonists participate in a continuous inner discourse concerned with the possibility of liberated subjectivity. Indeed, Mrs Ramsay's moment of deepest self-surrender, in which she becomes but 'a wedge of darkness' (L 70), is cut short by a

momentary abandonment to orthodox, in this case religious, dogma, which is immediately followed by the sudden outburst of a differentiated consciousness that struggles to rid itself of the shackles of ideology:

Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example. And it would lift up on it some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind like that – ‘Children don’t forget, children don’t forget’ – ‘ which she would repeat and began adding to it, It will end, It will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord.

But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. (L 70)

Mrs Ramsay is taken by surprise and frustrated by how easily meaningless platitudes originating in established doctrines can penetrate significant, individualised language and thought. Importantly, Mrs Ramsay does not hear the phrase ‘We are in the hands of the Lord’ – it no longer needs to be imposed on her physical being in order to impact on her thinking, because it has long put down roots in her socialised consciousness. Woolf thus takes the aestheticism’s preoccupation with the individual’s relentless exposure to sensory impression a step further; it is no longer merely corporeal reality that undermines the subject’s stability.

At the same time, and again in harmony with the beliefs of late-nineteenth-century aestheticians such as Pater, Woolf juxtaposes the force of institutionalised tradition carried and reinforced by linguistic truisms with an element of individual authenticity. Hence Mrs Ramsay's indignation at 'insincerity slipping in among the truths' (L 71), the latter derived from the momentary amalgamation of subject and object:

It as odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one
leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams,
flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they become
one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt
an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that
long steady light) as for oneself. (L 70)

Even though, the passage seems to be saying, the self depends for its existence on its reflection in the aesthetic object, the frequent, rhythmical repetition of 'one' suggests the validity of fluid yet at the same time closely defined subject. It seems as though the individual must conjure up his/her essence by empathising with an aesthetic object on which he/she can bestow a kind of selfish, senseless love.

Thus, although the individual's life is characterised by the reception of sensory data, consciousness itself is grounded in a finely balanced relationship between action and passivity. What Showalter in the passage below identifies as Woolf's victimisation of women, in fact denotes a basic condition of mankind:

In one sense, Woolf's female aesthetic is an extension of her view of women's social role: receptivity to the point of self-destruction, creative synthesis to the point of exhaustion and sterility. In To the Lighthouse, for example, Mrs Ramsay spends herself in repeated orgasms of sympathy: 'There was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent.' Similarly, Woolf herself was drained and spent at the conclusion of each novel.(...) The free-flowing empathy of woman seeks its own ecstatic extinction. For Mrs Ramsay, death is a mode of self-assertion. Refined to its essences, abstracted from its physicality and anger, denied any action, Woolf vision of womanhood is as deadly as it is disembodied. The ultimate room of one's own is the grave.¹²

On a very basic level, the above quotation demonstrates the fundamental difference between Woolf and the other authors discussed in this thesis, one which appears to render my discussion of To the Lighthouse particularly problematic. Because Woolf is generally taken to be writing from a woman's point of view, it seems impossible, in fact not even permissible, to interpret her work as a general statement on the plight of mankind and the solipsistic incarceration experienced by the individual. However, as I hope the preceding chapters have shown, the aesthete's exposure to sensory impression, which simultaneously demands, makes possible, and complicates subject-formation, denotes a common condition of humanity and is merely intensified in the fate of the artist. Mrs Ramsay's character represents a variation on the theme of the solipsistic subject torn between personal and ideological aesthetics.

The question of identity forms the basis of To the Lighthouse. Woolf's intentionally limited focus on the Ramsay family, which forces us to evaluate them on the grounds of a spatially and temporarily tightly defined excerpt from their everyday life, highlights the problem of truth and knowledge within the social setting. The scenes and impressions offered are rendered indirectly through the eyes of those watching the family. Lily's preoccupation with the right way of knowing people, of appreciating their personality, ends in her realisation that people only exist in our limited visions of them:

How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives which were people. (L 58)

Who are we when people don't 'think us'? Do we have to be thought (of) by others, defined by them? Do we need to allow others to impose fictions upon us in order to be and feel alive? These are the key philosophical issues raised by the novel.

Because the engagement with others leaves the self forever unsatisfied, and involves, more often than not, random entanglement rather than balanced recognition, the self's treatment of others becomes inevitably

egotistical. Because it needs others to define itself, at the same time as it is unable to do justice to the vastness of a single personality, people become important only once the self is confronted by their presence:

Half one's notions of other people were, after all,
grotesque. They served private purposes of one's
own. (L 214)

Woolf herself seems to embrace this distorted aspect, the incongruity of this vision, as her fictional encounter with Mrs Brown demonstrates:

The impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning. What was it composed of – that overwhelming and peculiar impression? Myriads of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd one's head on such occasions; one sees the person, one sees Mrs Brown at the centre of all sorts of different scenes.¹³

It is the object as Mrs Brown who takes centre-stage now. The observer finds herself overcome by the woman's aura, which exudes a life, an existence made up of a multitude of complex attitudes and inter-relations.

Similarly, Lily's critical evaluation of her view of Mr Tansley emerges as part of her final vision of Mrs Ramsay and renders its importance all the more acute. In her endeavour to do justice to Mrs Ramsay's personality beyond her death, even though, as she herself realises, the dead are at our mercy, Lily momentarily overcomes this egoism. By summoning up her feelings about Mrs Ramsay and translating these sensations into the vision of the ghost as well as,

more abstractly, onto her painting, she temporarily overcomes the loneliness entailed in all human life, which ends only in death, in Mr Ramsay's 'we perished each alone'.

The triumphant self-satisfaction and agonising isolation of aesthetic experience lies at the centre of the seven major texts discussed in this thesis. Dorian becomes Henry's beautiful pawn, through which the latter enacts his own fantasies without endangering himself. Basini serves as a means of opening up the sensuous side of Törleß's personality, which will enable him to live the life of the aesthete and, thanks to the measured enjoyment of art, ignore the puzzling incongruities of human existence. Wilde and Musil thus present us with the worst possible outcomes of aestheticism – sinful death or insipid complacency. The responsibility of the artist towards the aesthetic object becomes an issue in Tonio Kröger and The Portrait, where the need for sympathy with other human reaches beyond the sphere of the ego. All the same, this ethical outlook still appears within the bounds of the need for self-fulfilment, of a purposeful life.

However, it is Hofmannsthal and Woolf who come closest to disinterested seeing, which they both identify as temporary peace, a respite from the tormenting transience and seclusion of individual existence. Both Hofmannsthal's Ein Brief and Woolf's To the Lighthouse relocate aestheticism in immediate life, and thus away from the construct of the artwork. Of course, by presenting Lily's vision of Mrs Ramsay or Lord Chandos's vision of the dying rats, both authors create new works of art, thus making authenticity doubtful. Yet in doing so they solve the problem of identity, albeit only for an instant.

Chandos and Lily are puzzled by the limitless range of possible variations of selfhood open to them. Simultaneously burdened and relieved by the identities they find imposed on them by their environments, they wish to merge with another object and thereby shed the responsibility of their own existence. Lily feels both frustrated and protected by her outward existence as a spinster, because it denies her the possibility of action at the same time that it absolves her from the need to act. The notion of 'the ineffectiveness of action' and 'the supremacy of thought' (L 213) pervades not only Lily and Mr Carmichael, but also Chandos, Henry Wotton and Törleß. It is, at least theoretically, rejected by Tonio and Stephen. Lily overcomes inaction by her evocation of Mrs Ramsay's ghost, her attempt to see her from all possible angles and sum her up in one complex vision, which significantly shows her sitting peacefully in the window. The open window is a symbol of Mrs Ramsay's readiness to expose herself to the impressions made by people as well as by inanimate objects. She sees, and her whole life is one vision. At the same time, the impregnability and isolation of the building represents the individual's solipsistic existence that depends on the eyes, the windows, and the senses for communication with the outside world.

Mrs Ramsay is object and subject in one. Conscious of her beauty, although this form of consciousness too emerges only momentarily, she herself doubts the ethical value of her outward appearance, and the reader is invited to do the same. Is Mrs Ramsay's beauty an incentive to moral goodness or merely a source of aesthetic pleasure? Does Mr Tansley's wish to carry her bag, to do something for her, signify merely the wish to ingratiate himself or does it reveal the authentic desire to do good? Woolf seems to consider this

issue as both unfathomable and irrelevant. Even though Mrs Ramsay's charitable work may be triggered by the longing to embrace or encompass a social role which reaches beyond that of her family circle, the fact of her action, the physical and spiritual deed, cannot be denied its moral dimension. Altruism and vanity appear as the two sides of the same coin, making Mrs Ramsay feel suspected and suspect herself that

this desire to give, to help, was vanity. For her own self-satisfaction was it that she wished so instinctively to help, to give, that people might say of her, 'O Mrs Ramsay! Dear Mrs Ramsay ... Mrs Ramsay, of course!' and need her and send for her and admire her? Was it not secretly that she wanted, and therefore when Mr Carmichael shrank away from her, as he did at this moment, making off to some corner where he did acrostics endlessly, she did not feel merely snubbed back in her instinct, but made aware of the pettiness of some part of her, and of human relations, how flawed they are, how despicable, how self-seeking, at their best. (L 47/8)

Woolf's text seems to imply that all action is 'self-seeking', and thereby it debates with a number of issues at work in the Victorian concern to define and defend charity on the one hand and in the aestheticist repudiation of action as a simplification of reflectivity on the other. Yet inaction too is problematic – that inaction by virtue of which Mrs Ramsay believes she will be able to find herself. In 'The Window', Mrs Ramsay appears as a Bergsonian figure, conscious of a life-force underlying her consciousness:

When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. (...) Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless. There were places she had not seen; the Indian plains; she felt herself pushing aside the thick leather curtain of a church in Rome. This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. (...) There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one ever rest..., but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity. (...) Often she found herself sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example. (L 69/70)

In true aestheticist mode, Mrs Ramsay identifies this state, this passive diving into oneself, as a 'mood' (L 70). To the Lighthouse is a novel about seeing and light, vision and translucency, which may act as sources of revelation – but the text is also acutely aware of the characters' relentless exposure to sensory impressions caused by all kinds of material objects, which undermines a possible communion of souls. Rather than force herself to react, Mrs Ramsay plunges into her imagination, which, significantly enough, is dark. Showing a Paterian appreciation for beauty and pain in everyday life, Mrs Ramsay identifies retirement into oneself with nothingness. By indulging in non-active,

abstracted thought, she liberates herself from all the distortions and limitations of herself that originate in the inadequacy of human relationships. But that liberation also entails a loss; it is bought at the price of contracting out of human relatedness. Similarly, Chandos escapes the inadequacy of language by empathising with Crassus' empathy with his muraena:

Es ist mir dann, als geriete ich selber in Gärung,
würfe Blasen auf, wallte und funkelte. Und das
Ganze ist eine Art fieberisches Denken, aber
Denken in einem Material, das unmittelbarer,
flüssiger, glühender ist als Worte. Es sind
gleichfalls Wirbel, aber solche, die nicht wie die
Wirbel der Sprache ins Bodenlose zu führen
scheinen, sondern irgendwie in mich selber und
in den tiefsten Schoß des Friedens.¹⁴ (EB 471)

Spiritually paralysed and only active in everyday outward life, Chandos finds refuge in imaginary movement. Similarly, Mrs Ramsay substitutes complete rest and stillness for the hectic activity she exposes herself to in her family life.

As this parallel shows, Mrs Ramsay rejects the thought of a stable, authentic self, other than a dark plain which we share with others. On the other hand, her decision to serve her family and husband emerges as an active choice made out of love, not only for her husband, but for mankind on the whole. She knows that in order to live within a community, she must define herself and suffer others to define her. She therefore idealises her husband, and her own role in his efforts to explain the world, out of a need to endow existence with meaning:

How could any Lord have made this world? She asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that.
(L 71)

By choosing to act despite this knowledge, Mrs Ramsay joins the artists Stephen and Tonio, and her domesticity, her social creativity, as William Bankes recognises at the sight of her and James in the window reading fairy-tales, keeps 'the reign of chaos subdued' (L 54). This image of mother and child encapsulates what G. E. Moore defines as the intrinsically good: the pleasure of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects. But Mrs Ramsay's goodness is inextricably linked with the peace she feels when she becomes the 'wedge of darkness', when she succumbs to nothingness. This annihilation of personality and identity mirrors Chandos's retirement into 'the deepest seat of peace' (EB 19). Such refinement and tranquillity may, of course, largely depend on a condition of economic well-being (neither Chandos nor Mrs Ramsay are exactly impoverished). But even so, the privileged being, which accords with a privileged life-style, is also inclusive, is also morally and socially generous.

Because the Ramsays and their surroundings are to a great extent modelled on real-life people and events, the Stephen family and their circle of

friends, the novel calls for a re-examination of the relation between reason and emotion. Woolf's desire to do artistic justice to her parents as well as overcome past traumas by working through her childhood experiences accounts for the intricate, almost impregnable personalities in the novel. No longer are we presented with one single aesthete figure; there is no single character in the position to reject the mundane aspects of life in favour of beauty. Rather, every character appears entangled in the struggle between aesthetic involvement and intellectual detachment, or, alternatively, aesthetic detachment and intellectual involvement. The division between Mr and Mrs Ramsay is therefore not purely one of reason and emotion, intellect and intuition. Both are aesthetes in the broader sense of the word – both enjoy epiphanic visions of beauty in everyday life, although one more consciously than the other.

Maybe even more importantly for our purpose, Virginia Woolf's novel is also the only one of the texts discussed here to give beauty an authentic, human voice by providing insight into Mrs Ramsay's subjectivity. Here, the relationship between the object of beauty and its beholder is marked by an idiosyncratic mixture of distance and alliance. The physical closeness created by the characters' circumstances, their temporary co-habitation, makes the need for imposing fictions on the beautiful object, in this case Mrs Ramsay, both more pressing and less constrained, because physical proximity produces 'that overwhelming and peculiar impression' which makes objective evaluation impossible.¹⁵ Where Tonio Kröger enables its readers to see through and beyond the construct of the text, which places Tonio at an unlikely distance to his parents, so that they seem forever reduced to one-dimensional extrapolations of feeling and mind, types that serve as a foil to, as well as an

extension of, the main protagonist's ambivalent attitude towards bourgeois convention and flamboyant artistic life, Woolf's style accounts for a more naturalistic representation, which renders the symbolism pervading the text all the more poignant.

Doubting the authenticity of his intellect-driven life, and troubled by the worldly demands of fame and recognition, Mr Ramsay seeks refuge in the primeval scenes of motherhood without gaining actual access to the intimate circle formed by James and Mrs Ramsay. But this exclusion, it seems, is both deliberate and welcome. Mr Ramsay's existence is characterised by distance and withdrawal, by the reluctance to face life directly and fathom its meaning through active involvement rather than the removed apparatus of intellectual debate. He uses the image of James and Mrs Ramsay as a source of aesthetic pleasure, one which, however, also carries ethical relevance. Like the protagonist in Hofmannsthal's 'Das Märchen der 672. Nacht', Mr Ramsay indulges in the perusal of literature as a substitute for real emotions. Anxious to avoid outbursts of feelings triggered by participation in family life, Mr Ramsay gives vent to his emotions through the disengaged medium of the literary artwork.

If we accept that the sense of aestheticism dominant in the other texts entails either decadent pleasure, as in The Picture of Dorian Gray, Der Tod in Venedig, and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, or the study of life's tragedies firmly controlled and digested by the artwork, as in Tonio Kröger and again Joyce's Portrait, Mr Ramsay's exuberant, even violent, reactions to his reading of literature suggest affiliation with Tonio and Stephen, since, like them, he seems at pains to evade reality. This manifests itself in his substitution of

the life of fiction for that of his family. Consequently, he appears as a blind man in a novel which so much depends on the visual examination of Mrs Ramsay's physical and spiritual beauty. Mr Ramsay's character combines the intellectual man, the rational philosopher, with the pleasure-seeking escapist aesthete. It is to Mrs Ramsay that her husband appears as a symbol of mind and intellect, of the need to interrogate the origin of human grief, which, as she herself experiences and is acutely aware of, has its source in the relation of subject and object. She thus appears to fathom the significance of her husband's work more deeply than he or his admirers ever could; she reveres him as a hero and warrior, where Lily, Mr Bankes and often the reader too see merely a capricious old man tyrannising his dependants. Mr and Mrs Ramsay assign roles to one another. His work as rationalist metaphysician and its necessary isolation seems to entitle him to the luxurious privacy of literature, where he can take in human happiness and catastrophe through the ordered medium of art and philosophy, rather than seek involvement in the existence of his family.

As Virginia Hyman shows, Mr Ramsay represents in many and significant ways a metamorphosis of Woolf's father, the Victorian thinker Leslie Stephen.¹⁶ In his philosophical work The Science of Ethics, published in 1882, the year of Woolf's birth, Stephen advocates the retention of intellectual objectivity, which must not be compromised by man's wish and willingness to merge with others as a means of overcoming the distressing isolation entailed in solipsism. This plea against empathy inevitably appears as anathema to the aesthete's cause, yet for Stephen it seems the only guarantor of ethically and intellectually conceived altruism. Only by facing and sensitising oneself to physical reality, to both the cruelty delineated by man's exposure to the

material world and the spiritual implications of man's corporal separation from his fellows, can thinking beings hope to further humanist progress. As a child of the British tradition of Utilitarianism, Leslie Stephen accepted the need for sacrificing individual happiness for the sake of the good of the group as a *fait accompli*, an insuperable duty.

Whilst rejecting empathy as an instrument of escapism and wishful-thinking, Leslie Stephen, at the same time, promoted a sensitive approach to others as the principal tool of philanthropy, as 'the highest emotional, intellectual and moral state'.¹⁷ He thus defined man's relationship to his fellows as dependent on a balanced attitude of intellect and emotion, which, while resulting in social awareness and resolute action as a remedy of social conditions, was not accompanied by the loss of the self in the other. Stephen was thus predominantly concerned with the practical aspects of life and rejected the validity of the search for abstract truth. Mr Ramsay's obsession with getting from A to Z, with reaching ultimate knowledge, would represent to Stephen a chase for hypothetical perfection that is both unattainable and, more importantly, undesirable. For him, life consists of an infinite process of unbalancing and rebalancing the relationship between reason and feeling, which he found to be inextricably intertwined:

Reason and feeling are, according to me, bound together in an inseparable unity. Every act of choice is a struggle between passions involving more or less reasoning, but not resolvable into an emotionless process.¹⁸

Consequently, it is sympathy rather than empathy which holds the key to the individual's understanding of others, which by this token implies usefulness, since 'unselfishness is developed as the intellect becomes capable of contemplating the happiness of others'.¹⁹

Leslie Stephen's theory is relevant to my thesis, because it appears to reject empathy for its overpowering and, eventually, incapacitating hold over the individual. As such, it calls into question the social merits of the epiphany, which, as we have observed in the previous chapters, has the capability of both transposing the individual to the centre of life as well as of marginalising him or her. But Leslie Stephen is no crude empiricist. By exploring the possibility and concurrent necessity of an equilibrium between reason and intuition, he not only unwittingly acknowledges the twentieth-century association of the conscious and the unconscious, he also, in advocating the nurturing of altruistic thought through adequate training of the intuitive faculties, takes up Schiller's and Wilde's notion of an aesthetic education. His definition of intuition as the 'power of detecting new qualities and new relations between phenomena' points at the possibility of individual order and freedom.²⁰ Rather than bewail the otherness of the other, Stephen celebrates individual difference as an, albeit ultimately somewhat anarchic, safeguard against fixed and pre-established laws, a means by which man can shape his life in a distinctive manner.

In fact, as Hyman's essay reveals, Woolf's own concept of the individual life as a web of influences, memories, and experiences, owes much to Leslie Stephen's definition of the individual as 'a microcosm as complex as the world which is mirrored in his mind', a spiritual and physical being made up of ever

shifting emphases that depend as much on its given make-up as on external influences from his social other.²¹ The single organism of the individual thus finds itself impacting on, as well as being affected by, the larger organism of the society he/she constitutes a part of. According to Stephen, this organic unity exists not only in the individual, the family and society, but also in the artwork, where the fulfilment of aesthetic needs corresponds to the observance of social requirements within the community. Consequently, Hyman rightly concludes, Woolf's allows Mrs Ramsay's 'social actions' as hostess, mother, wife, to mirror Lily's 'aesthetic actions' as artist, and their preoccupation with organising and balancing the various components of the social group and the painting respectively results in acts of intense creativity.

In To the Lighthouse, the problematic juxtaposition of rationality and feeling, which we have noticed in so many of the aesthete figures that have concerned us, thus finds its embodiment in Mr and Mrs Ramsay. In them, we encounter two personalities each of which is divided between, on the one hand, the urge to live out and express one's feelings, and, on the other, the painful acknowledgement of the need to exercise rational, discursive control over sensory emotion. By this, I do not mean to reinforce the, admittedly tempting, view embraced by some of the novel's critics – in my opinion, Mr and Mrs Ramsay cannot, however broadly, be divided into personifications of masculine reason and feminine empathy.²² To begin with, Woolf herself fervently rejected the creation of characters as types, as single binary oppositions, an attitude one finds confirmed in much of her non-fictional writing, in particular the essays 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' and 'The Leaning Tower'. To interpret Mrs Ramsay as pure benevolent intuition and Mr Ramsay as tyrannical rationality would

serve, as I am hoping to show, to undermine the novel's profound intricacy designed to mirror the heterogeneous nature of consciousness.

The character of Mrs Ramsay acts as a central intersection point of multiple perceptions, which are imaginative rather than literal-minded. Instead of seeking to re-enact the dandy-aesthete's detachment from the ordinary world, Woolf explores the density and complexity of ordinary perceptual processes in the awareness of the absence of absolute meaning. Mrs Ramsay too is both an absence and a presence, and Woolf's text exemplifies the extent to which we all depend on the construction, the creation of personality as a way of making sense of the other, and thus the world in general. The bewildering nature of this undertaking is particularly pronounced in the characters of Lily and Mrs Ramsay, who struggle to pinpoint their similarities and their differences by imposing fictions on one another. At the same time, their often contradictory and disconcertingly indefinite understanding of their own selves renders them aware of the relative falseness of their perception of others. Both are acutely aware of themselves as sites, which leads them to celebrate the infiniteness and indistinct limitlessness of consciousness through either the withdrawal into the self (Mrs Ramsay as a dark dome of selfhood) or the representation of the self through the intuitive means of art (Lily's painting of Mrs Ramsay).

By pursuing her vision of Mrs Ramsay following the latter's death, Lily is afforded an intimation of the elder woman's personality that is more accurate than it could ever have been in life. With 'all her faculties in a trance, frozen over superficially but moving underneath with extreme speed' (L 218), Lily

arrives at a mystical understanding of Mrs Ramsay's being, as she strives to transfer this recognition onto the artwork:

Her mood was coming back to her. One must keep on looking without for a second relaxing the intensity of emotion, the determination not to be put off, not to be bamboozled. One must hold the scene – so – in a vice and let nothing come in and spoil it. One wanted, she thought, to be on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy. The problem might be solved after all. Ah, but what had happened? Some wave of white went over the window pane. The air must have stirred some flounce in the room. Her heart leapt at her and seized her and tortured her.

'Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!' she cried, feeling the old horror come back – to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still? And then, quietly, as if she refrained, that too became part of ordinary experience, was on a level with the chair, with the table. Mrs. Ramsay – it was part of her perfect goodness to Lily – sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, casting her shadow on the step. There she sat.

And as if she had something she must share, yet could hardly leave her easel, so full her mind was of what she was thinking, of what she was seeing, Lily went past Mr. Carmichael holding her brush to the edge of the lawn. Where

was that boat now? Mr. Ramsay? She wanted him. (L 219)

In this epiphanic moment, Lily joins Lord Chandos and Stephen Dedalus by being 'on a level with ordinary experience'. The term 'ordinary experience', of course, points at yet another absolute, a zero degree of perception in which the subject, for a brief moment, contemplates its objects indiscriminately, without prejudice. However, Woolf's depiction of the epiphany departs from those featured in Ein Brief and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by emphasising the interplay of deliberate study of and involuntary exposure to the object within the artistic subject's mind. Lily arrives at her vision through a fine balance of will and surrender. As an artist, she conjures up an image of Mrs Ramsay that corresponds to her spiritual picture of the friend by concentrating on the inanimate object which symbolises Mrs Ramsay both through physical association in life and metaphorical correspondence beyond death – the window. This comes about through a resolute focus of attention:

One must keep on looking without for a second relaxing the intensity of emotion, the determination not to be put off, not to be bamboozled. One must hold the scene...

Yet at the same time, as an aesthete, Lily allows herself to be taken over by the power of the sensory data, which she nonetheless interprets in a flexible manner. She knows that the 'air must have stirred some flounce in the room', that, according to the laws of logic, Mrs Ramsay cannot be sitting in the window, but she does not permit material reality to limit her scope as intuitive

artist, to undermine her capacity for wonderment, which is crucial for her existence as a creative being. She counters the power of reason by giving free reign to her emotion:

The air must have stirred some flounce in the room. Her heart leapt at her and seized her and tortured her.

Lily is determined not to yield physical fact, not to let it weaken her ability to comprehend Mrs Ramsay by grasping the nature of her being completely. Ironically, this can only happen once the object of her meditations is no longer a corporal presence, since in life Lily's notion of Mrs Ramsay was subject to continuous change brought about by the latter's multi-faceted character and to some extent contradictory existence as a freely thinking and feeling spirit on the one hand and a closely defined social being on the other – a mother, a wife, a home-maker, living and operating in Edwardian England.

Because of this disparity, because Mrs Ramsay was, in life, a constant source of diverse impressions, Lily could never arrive at a stable, momentary vision of her before death. Mrs Ramsay as aesthetic object was constantly slipping through her fingers:

One wanted fifty eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought. Among them, must be one that was stone blind to her beauty. One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking,

sitting silent in the window alone; which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. (L 214)

Significantly, Woolf refrains from suggesting that a person can, like an inanimate object, be justly grasped in a moment of complete empathy based on immediate contemplation. In fact, none of the texts discussed in this thesis propose this to be possible; the individual cannot be comprehended and defined through direct observation in an epiphanic moment without damage to the wonderful complexity of his/her being. Unlike the insentient article, whose *whatness* is accessible to the senses, the human other can only be known in absence.²³ Whenever one of the texts describes a human mind in the process of summing up another, the result is controlling, calculating, and unfair.

The most obvious instances of the individual's propensity to violate the other through reductionist definition and the disastrous consequences these actions can carry, occur, as we have seen, in The Picture of Dorian Gray. A similar misperception lies at the heart of Gabriel's oppressive, de-humanising categorisation of his wife as an aesthetic symbol in 'The Dead', Tonio Kröger's consciously one-sided vision of Hans and Inge as the embodiments of bourgeois serenity, and Gustav von Aschenbach's naïve idealisation of Tadzio. In contrast, Törleß's eventual surrender to Basini implies his tacit acknowledgement of the incommensurability of the human psyche, as feelings of biased repulsion give way to sensual abandonment, while Joseph Berglinger can only posthumously arrive at a more adequate appreciation of his father, which inspires him to translate his emotions into an artwork. However, it is To

the Lighthouse which most thoroughly communicates the various aspects and definitions involved in man's perception of the other as material and spiritual object.

Even though equally aware of the problematic issue underlying the possibility of unbiased and complete knowledge of the other, of the inability to fathom and comprehend the thing-in-itself, Lily, unlike Chandos, is in control of her aesthetic vision, and, despite the strong impact of the object, she remains mindful of the arbitrary, coincidental nature of the scene that is presenting itself to her:

Suddenly the window at which she was looking was lightened by some light stuff behind it. At last then somebody had come into the drawing-room; somebody was sitting in the chair. For heaven's sake, she prayed, let them sit still and not come floundering out to talk to her. Mercifully, whoever it was stayed still inside; had settled by some stroke of luck so as to throw an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step. It altered the composition of the picture a little. It was interesting. It might be useful. (L 218)

Woolf demonstrates the way in which the artist's position as mystic and artisan can enhance his/her position during the attempt to give expression to another human temperament. Instead of seeking to stabilise her vision of Mrs Ramsay by arresting her image through the means of the visual artefact, Lily allows the elder woman's personality to permeate and dominate the painting freely, indiscriminately, through abstract, non-representative technique. She knows

the outcome of her artistic project to be deeply private, idiosyncratic, and thus largely inaccessible to an observer other than herself, yet her awareness of the fleetingness of her vision, and by this token the transient significance of the painting, does not undermine the impact of her achievement. Her concluding thought ('I have had my vision'; L 227) is both an end and a beginning, yet the painting itself has already succumbed to the fleeting nature of the epiphany. It has already been taken over by time, which continuously undermines the gravity of the visionary moment. For, in the last analysis, the epiphany remains firmly rooted in the ephemeral psyche of the individual, which is cruelly and unmitigatedly subject to temporal and spatial changes.

At the same time, however, Woolf endows the painter's accomplishment with further significance through the parallel developments at work in Cam's changing perception of her father. Like Lily, who during her vision of Mrs Ramsay finds herself spiritually drawn to Mr. Ramsay ('Where was that boat now? Mr. Ramsay? She wanted him.'), Cam shakes off the partisan image of her father as tyrant and grasps the incommensurable nature of his being:

Still her father read, and James looked at him and she looked at him, and they vowed that they would fight tyranny to the death, and he went on reading quite unconscious of what they thought. It was thus he escaped, she thought. Yes, with his great forehead and his great nose, holding his little mottled book firmly in front of him, he escaped. You might try to lay hands on him, but then like a bird, he spread his wings, he floated off to settle out of your reach somewhere far

away on some desolate stump. She gazed at the immense expanse of the sea. The island had grown so small that it scarcely looked like a leaf any longer. It looked like the top of a rock which some big wave would cover. Yet in its frailty were all those paths, those terraces, those bedrooms – all those innumerable things. But as, just before sleep, things simplify themselves so that only one of all the myriad details has power to assert itself, so, she felt, looking drowsily at the island, all those paths and terraces and bedrooms were fading and disappearing, and nothing was left but a pale blue censer swinging rhythmically this way and that across her mind. It was a hanging garden; it was a valley, full of birds, and flowers and antelopes... She was falling asleep. (L 221)

The sympathetic moment is again warranted by the recognition of the common fate of man. By arriving at an understanding of her father's use of literature as a tool of escapism, Cam comes to see that the patriarch's life too is dominated by feelings of fear, loneliness, uncertainty, and frustration. Characteristically, this insight occurs in a sleep-like, half-conscious state of mind, in which sensory impressions are allowed to invade the mind without encumbrance, as reason passively withdraws. This link between Cam, the ordinary recipient of sensory data, and Lily, the aesthete-artist, is particularly significant because it demonstrates how in Woolf's novel all three figures, the aesthete, the artist, and the everyman, partake of the same pool of common experience. Thus, even though Cam lacks the creative tools to translate her vision of Mr. Ramsay into an artwork, in the way that Lily does with relation to Mrs Ramsay, her

imaginative powers and intelligence too can arrive at a multiform and complex vision of her father. In thus joining the aesthete, the artist, and the everyman, Woolf, I believe, achieves a more all-inclusive treatment of the aesthetic experience.

NOTES

- ¹ See Thomas Jackson Rice, Virginia Woolf: A Guide to Research (New York; London: Garland, 1984) and Laura Marcus, 'Woolf Feminism and Feminism's Woolf', in The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf, ed. by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 209-44.
- ² See Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing (London: Virago, 1978) and Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London and New York: Methuen, 1985). Both essays on Woolf are reprinted with an introduction in Mary Eagleton, ed., Feminist Literary Criticism (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 24-52.
- ³ Mary Eagleton, ed., Feminist Literary Criticism, p. 31.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Showalter's thesis vacillates uneasily between versions of individual self-containment and collective consciousness. All experience is, or is at least perceived as, unique, and it is this solipsism which makes a unified effort to explode the fetters of ideology so improbable in the first place. It is in times of war and social upheaval that supposedly humanist values such as love towards one's child or sexual partner are likely to undermine the possibility of political revolt by encouraging the biological instinct that advocates the preservation of the individual physical self and that of one's kin. Moreover, sympathy with the plight of others, as suggested by Showalter's reference to a transcendental seat of human experience, is habitually achieved through a simplified and culturally determined rendering of experience by means of the aesthetic. Consequently, the suggestion that a truthful individualist version of womanhood could be produced for the benefit of mankind as a whole without the perpetuation of old doctrines or the establishment of new ones appears highly impracticable.
- ⁷ By this I mean that, while the scope physical experience may be rooted in the individual male/female body and its biological limitations, sensation itself is too subjective a phenomenon to be automatically excluded from or included in the range of perceptions open to the individual. Thus, while the physical experience of bodily union with the child may be confined to the female body, the subjective feeling underlying the union with the child can also be experienced by the father, although here the spiritual connection is not supported by materialist fact. The mother can only claim to feel closer to the child. The feeling itself, however, cannot be assessed objectively and can only be communicated in purely figurative terms. This view is in

line with the French feminist notion of femininity as not confined to the female sex. According to Kristeva, the male artist is as likely to be able to tap into pre-Oedipal experience via the semiotic and thus undermine the reign of the symbolic as the female artist.

⁸ The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume IV: 1925-28, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1994), p. 271.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Mary Eagleton, ed., Feminist Literary Criticism, p. 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹³ Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', A Woman's Essays, ed. by Rachel Bowlby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 74.

¹⁴ 'Then it seems that I myself am in ferment, bubbling, simmering, sparkling. And the whole thing is a kind of fevered thinking, but thinking in a medium which is more immediate, more fluid and glowing than words. It is like a whirlpool again, but not like those of language that lead into bottomless emptiness, but somehow into myself, and the deepest seat of peace.' Hugo von Hofmannsthal, The Lord Chandos Letter, p. 19.

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', A Woman's Essays, p. 74.

¹⁶ Virginia R. Hyman, 'The Metamorphosis of Leslie Stephen: "Those are the pearls that were his eyes"', *VWQ*, 2 (1975), pp. 48-65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁸ Stephen quoted *ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁹ Stephen quoted *ibid.*, pp. 53/54.

²⁰ Stephen quoted *ibid.*, p 54.

²¹ Stephen quoted *ibid.*, p 55.

²² See Thomas Jackson Rice, Virginia Woolf: A Guide to Research (New York; London: Garland, 1984)

²³ This question is further complicated when the object is neither insentient nor human, but it should suffice here to note that whenever an animal is perceived as a feeling being, the resulting image is largely determined by anthropomorphism.

X

CONCLUSION

All of the artworks discussed in this thesis, the seven major texts as well as the literary and visual artefacts I have touched upon in passing, offer variations on the theme of art as a force that can abet or counteract, intensify or mitigate, the implications of solipsism. At the close of my investigation, I would thus like to draw attention to the two texts in which, I believe, the lure of solitude and isolation entailed in the inherent artistic temperament is overcome most fully.

At the end of their respective narratives, Tonio Kröger and Stephen Dedalus decide to try and bridge the gulf between their lives as artists and the life of the 'ordinary man' by using their creative tools to throw into relief the multi-facetedness of human existence. In their forceful, heart-felt manifestos, they pledge their existence as artists and men to the attentive observation and aesthetic reproduction of mundane life in its cultural, social, and political conditions, through which they hope to be able to particularise its meaning and, even more importantly, elaborate the element of grandeur underlying human relationships, the basic yet redemptive emotion of compassionate empathy – a spiritual capacity that is both firmly anchored within the individual yet whose purpose lies clearly beyond the realms of solipsism. Rather than devote themselves to the aesthetic life, they endeavour to move beyond the nineteenth-century stereotypes of the aesthete, the artist, and the dandy, and pursue an alternative mode of creative existence that is not only morally conscious but lies beyond the tenets of conventionalised aestheticism.

However, even though the artistic declarations at the close of Tonio Kröger and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man provide climactic endings to two narratives which in their essence concern themselves with the tortuous processes of the aesthete-artist's self-becoming, their promise hinges and depends on the efficacy of the very medium whose validity underwent such pointed scrutiny in the course of the nineteenth century – language and the written word. By simultaneously articulating and celebrating their distance to life, Tonio and Stephen signal their arrival at the acceptance of their particular fates, which are founded upon their pronounced aesthetic sensibility and their innate otherness, their particular artistic temperament so extolled by the aestheticians Pater, Wilde, and Hofmannsthal. Yet their aesthetic and cultural projects are not allowed to materialise within the course of the narrative. Although both texts conclude on a Dionysian note – the vow to action – , their ultimate interest is with Apollonian form – the word.

This paradox, I think, not only encapsulates the *fin-de-siècle* artist's schizophrenic vacillation between exile and belonging, aloofness and involvement; it is, in these two instances, most adequately resolved and overcome. Of the aesthetes discussed in the course of this thesis, Tonio and Stephen come closest to Hofmannsthal's image of the ideal artist, who becomes emotionally involved in, even pays tribute to, yet still maintains a critical distance from life. Both characters emerge as spiritually generous human beings without compromising their artistic integrity. This, as we have seen, the artistic individual can only achieve through the foundation of a 'Centrumsgefühl' that remains aware of the wonderful flux of life, the maturation of a sense of inward stability that does not imply cynical withdrawal. Stephen

and Tonio both manage to combine these two opposite aspects within their personalities by consciously developing an identity as artists without relinquishing their links with humanity. The goals of their creative designs are thus both selfish and altruistic; they correspond to an internal, self-seeking need that can only be satisfied through comprehensive reference to the outside world.

Tonio's existential horror at being unable to partake in and contribute to the life of the ordinary man and the community stems from his strongly felt dependence on the latter for his work. It stems from a lack of alliance, where Stephen's use of his environment is based on his desire to create distance by working through his personal experiences and revolutionising his nation's art. Where Stephen aims at freedom and independence, Tonio thus longs for involvement and vindication. Both want to act as a medium of aesthetic perception, but while Stephen strives to appropriate and transform the object, Tonio wants to be submerged by it. The catalyst for their creativity is the epiphanic moment.

In short, both Stephen and Törleß direct their lives towards the articulation of a cultural consciousness that lacks an aesthetic voice, in these instances the Irish people and the German *Großbürger*. Their final representations of the life of their original, that is non-artistic, social class will not be dispassionate but imbued with their subjective attitudes towards it. However, they will also benefit from the kind of sympathy they themselves detect and wish to celebrate within those communities, at the same time as they will wish to mirror life's discrepancy and man's fallacy. The specific nature and manifestation of these artistic intentions is not fully explored in Tonio

Kröger and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. But both works end with a subtle narrative modulation by which the text we are reading becomes part of the artistic credo that is promulgated. Tonio Kröger concludes with a promise that echoes, in Tonio's own words, an analysis that has been given of his selfhood by the narrator at the end of the first section. And increasingly in A Portrait the use of free indirect speech as a narrative mode points to the possibility that Stephen will be not just the theme of the portrait but the maker of future portraits. 'Ich werde Besseres machen' (TK 52), Tonio promises. That promise was redeemed by his creator, Thomas Mann, in Buddenbrooks; and a similar redemption is Joyce's 'The Dead'.

What, then, of our other aesthetes? Törleß too realises that the world of aestheticism alone cannot guarantee successful living, but his inability to face and work through the implications of life's complexity sees him opt for a double-life of bourgeois submission on the one hand and aesthetic pleasure on the other, while Dorian never finds himself confronted by the necessity of deciding between the two worlds but is instead, with the loss of his soul, irrevocably sucked into an existence governed by obsolete models of dandyism. Törleß and Dorian differ from Stephen and Tonio in their lack of an artistic calling, and their lives seem burdened rather than blessed with an aesthetic sensibility that fails to find an appropriate outlet. As Aschenbach's example shows, however, the combination of creative talent and aesthetic awareness alone cannot vouchsafe the aesthete-artist's healthy integration within society.

I have already explored the thematic parallels between Ein Brief and To the Lighthouse and their similar treatment of the epiphanic moment, and, in social terms at least, the message emerging from both texts is rather

pessimistic. The individual, it seems, is forever subject to misinterpretation, both of and by his/her social other. As a consequence, both works declare the artwork that speaks with an authentic voice to have little power within, yet be desperately needed by, society. In both texts, creativity becomes relegated to the private sphere, hardly managing to assert its significance beyond the soul of its creator. Lily's painting would thus 'be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed' (L 225).

There is no one stable understanding of art in its relations to life that emerges from our texts. But what all of them have in common is a sense of the overwhelming importance of art. Art matters; and it matters in larger terms than might at first be apparent. That is to say: what is at stake is not just a creative artist's fascination with his or her own problems. Rather, art and all the various issues – cultural, social, psychological, philosophical – that attend upon it are the barometer that registers the conditions on and of human beings in the modern world. To that centrality, a key text published nine years after Woolf's To the Lighthouse, in a considerably changed political and cultural environment, bears witness. That text is Walter Benjamin's essay 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', with its central notion that the commerce between art and modern politics defines the health or sickness of the society at large. Many of Benjamin's individual interpretations may not have stood the test of time. But the field of force within which his argument is sustained is arguably unsurpassed in that it offers both a symptomatology and a diagnosis of modern culture. To that all-important interpretative and evaluative project I venture to suggest that all my texts contribute at every turn.

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