

HOFFMANNSTAHL, LYRIC DRAMATIST

BY OLIVER S. ARATA

VON Hofmannstahl is the pioneer of the symbolic movement. He has written numerous dramas and poems, but *Death and the Fool* is undoubtedly his finest literary achievement. I quote from the script upon the book's cover, wherein may be found more truth than fiction: "Beaudelaire awakened symbolism, Poe gave to it a sublime fearlessness, Wilde endowed it with beauty, Hofmannstahl gave it melody." "*Death and the Fool* is the work of a poet whom God endowed with the song of a nightingale. It is drama of intense feeling, a philosophy symbolized. It is the voice of life speaking through the lips of death—the voice of nature reclaiming the victims of decadence from their melancholic fate."

Yes, he has given the symbolic school its marvelous melody. He has accomplished more than that, he has perfected symbolism in poetry. He is truly a finished word-artist. His phrases are indeed "of remarkable personality, and are ever pregnant with meaning and of piercing sweetness. The perfection of his rhymes never palls, but at all times is suited to the crest of feeling embodied, verse gliding into verse, as wave overtaking wave."

In *Death and the Fool*, Claudio is shown alone, soliloquizing upon the world, its cities, its joys and its sorrows, its wickedness and its virtues. Then he laments. The note is very tragic.

He turns to the chest.

Ye cups, upon whose cool refreshing rim
Full many lips in rapture rare have hung,
Ye ancient lutes, whose twanging strings have sung
To man oppressed of woe, and solaced him,
Ah, could ye weave your magic spell o'er me
How glad your willing prisoner I should be,
Ye wooden, and ye brazen shields of old,
With strange devices half concealed, half bold,

Ye cherubs, griffons, fauns, and toads,
Fantastic birds, and fruit of jungle weird,
Intoxicating things, and to be feared,
Were born of some deep human heart's emotion,
Are progeny of palpitating moods,
Washed upward by the mighty wave of ocean;
And as the net the fish, so form imprisoned ye.
In vain, alas, in vain, I followed ye,
Your charms as fetters have I felt.
And though like masks in turn I donned your souls
That quivered so with life, and in them dwelt,
Nor life, nor hearts, nor world of me were visioned,
Held by these as a swarm of motes imprisoned;
While harpies, cold, repellent, guarded e'er
Each cool, refreshing spring's sweet blossoms fair.
The artificial so completely bound me
That dead mine eyes looked on the golden sun,
And deaf mine ears were to the world around me.
The mystic curse forever on my head,
Ne'er conscious quite, ne'er quite my senses lost,
To live my life e'en as a book that read
Is understood but half, while for the rest the brain
Gropes in the somber realms of life and gropes in vain.
And all that pleased, and all that made me sad,
It seemed as though no meaning of itself it had.
Nay, this was naught but future life's foreseeing,
A hollow picture of completer being.
In sorrows and in love I battled ever
'Gainst shadows, all my sense bewildered quite,
Employed my instincts but exhausted never,
And vaguely dreamed that day would follow night.
I turned and looked upon this life
Wherein no race was ever won by speed,
And bravery is not speed, an aid in strife,
Where sorrows sadden not nor joys make glad,
Where senseless answers senseless questions breed.
Entangled dreams rise in the harrowed mind,
And chance rules all, the hour, wave, and wind.
So painfully astute and mortified
In wearied pride, with disappointment faint,
I lie deep buried here without complaint.

Within these walls, this town do I abide;
 The people, too, have ceased to give me heed,
 They've found that I am commonplace indeed.

It reminds one of Hamlet's soliloquy. It is a masterly piece of dramatic philosophy. Among the work of contemporary dramatists I think that it stands alone.

Claudio's valet comes rushing into the room, frightened like a child that is being chased by imaginary goblins. Claudio asks for the reason of his uncanny fright. After much coaxing, he learns from the servant the cause of his terror.

THE VALET

Your pardon, sir, I do not know;
 It seems an army of uncanny folk.

* * * * *

They're sitting in the garden even now,
 Upon the sandstone figure of Apollo some,
 A pair are hidden in the shadows there
 Beneath the fountain, one is on the Sphinx.
 The yew tree hides him, you can't see him now.

After the servant has departed, he hears the mournful strains of a violin that gradually comes closer, until its throbbing notes seem to be in the adjoining room.

CLAUDIO

Music?

Rare music, too, that speaks unto the soul!
 The fellow's nonsense has bewitched me quite,
 Methinks no human hand e'er culled
 Such tones from out a violin.

In further soliloquy he urges the music to sing on, "and stir my sluggish soul unto its source!" When he stands at the window Death softly draws the curtain aside and enters. Claudio, as Death eyes him, draws back in extreme terror.

CLAUDIO

Why does such senseless fear the joy displace
 With which ere now I did thy notes attend?
 Whence comes this spasm as I view thy face?
 What binds my heart? What draws my hair on end?
 Begone! Thou art the Death! What wouldst thou here?
 I am afeared! Begone! My voice fails me!

(He sinks to the floor).

DEATH

Arise! Cast this hereditary fear from thee!
 I am no gruesome thing, no skeleton.
 From Venus I'm descended, Dionysos' son,
 The god of Souls before thee thou dost see.
 When thou through summer shadows going,
 Has seen a leaf borne through the gilded air,
 'Tis then my breath hath touched thee, thou unknowing,
 That dreamlike doth all ripened things ensnare
 Whenever overflowing feelings fill
 The trembling soul with flood of warmth and light,
 Whene'er in momentary thrill
 The vast Unknown is brought before thy sight,
 And thou surrend'ring to the wheel of fate
 Dost look upon the world as thine estate;
 In every truly solemn hour
 That made thine earthly form to quiver,
 I touched thy soul's foundation ever,
 With sacred, with mysterious power.

Could the terrible phantom Death, the unknown thing of the after life be better described, and his history explained? Then Claudio begs to be reprieved:

But surely I have time and much to spare.
 Behold, the leaf ere from the branch 'tis freed
 With all the sap of life hath been imbued,
 I've not had that! I have not lived, Indeed!

He tells Death that his days onward have passed. "I stood at life's gate, longingly, delicious apprehension in my heart." He declares "that he has not lived, that he has not loved. That his time is not ripe." He promises Death, should he free him, that he would live and not exist. This could be called an allegory of the man wallowing in wealth, idleness and sin, who wants to be freed on his deathbed, but with all his fortune the scythe of Death still takes him.

Death takes his fiddle and plays a few weird notes. The image of Claudio's mother appears. She tells how she watched over him when he was a boy, how she kept him from harm. Now, when he grew to manhood she waited anxiously for his coming at night, after his evenings of debauchery and fornication. How she dusted the house and cared for him. Then Claudio, realizing that he had lost a dear friend, exclaims:

Mother!

DEATH

"Thou canst not call her back."

Grim Death, not taking heed of Claudio's deep and true repentance, plays a simple folk-melody. A young girl appears.

THE GIRL

'Twas beautiful! Don't you think of it more?
 'Tis true, you hurt me deeply, deeply,
 But then, what is it that does not end in pain?
 The happy days I've seen are very few,
 And these, they were as good as any dream.
 The flowers at the window, my own flowers,
 The little joggling spinet, there the clothespress,
 In which I laid away your letters, and
 What little gifts you brought me . . . all these things—
 Don't laugh at me—grew beautiful again,
 And talked to me with living, loving lips,
 When rain on sultry summer evening fell,
 And we stood at the window . . . Oh, the fragrance
 Of the humid trees! . . . All that is gone!
 And now is dead all that was living then,
 Lies buried in our sweet love's grave.
 Ah, but 'twas beautiful, and you're to blame
 For all its beauty. Then you cast me off,
 Threw me aside, unthinking, cruel, as
 A child, of playing wearied, drops his flowers.
 Ah, God, I did have naught to hold you!

Then a man enters. He is of Claudio's age. He accuses him of being a trifter. He, Claudio, who claimed to be his boon companion, had embittered the man's heart against his sweetheart, the woman who came into their path.

THE MAN

And satiated, then, to me you flung
 The puppet, all defaced her image was
 In you with surfeit, terribly disfigured,
 Of all her wondrous charm she was denuded,
 Her feature senseless, and her living hair
 Hung dead; you threw a specter to me,
 With your vile art to brutish nothingness
 You analyzed her sweet and subtle charm.
 For this, at last, I hated you, e'en as

In dim foreboding I had always hated,
And I avoided you.

Then Destiny

At last my shattered spirit blessed and placed
Once more an aim and will within my heart,
Which was not quite dead to all good endeavor
Despite your poisonous proximity,
Aye, for a lofty purpose, Destiny
Drove me back to seek Death through this mur'drous blade,
Which flung me down into a wayside ditch.
There lying, I by slow degrees decayed,
For reasons which you could not comprehend;
And still was thrice more blessed than you, who ne'er
Was aught to one, nor any aught to you.

Exit.

CLAUDIO

Was aught to one, nor any aught to me.
Slowly rising.
As on the stage a poor comedian
In answer to his cue comes, speaks his part,
And goes indifferent toward all thing, dull,
The sound of his own voice doth leave him cold,
Nor have his hollow tones aught power to move,
So I have gone upon the stage of life,
Have walked across it, void of power and worth.
Why did this hap to me? Thou, Death, oh, why
Didst thou first have to teach me life to see,
No longer thru a veil, alert and whole,
Here walking somewhat, and thus passing on?
And wherefore is it with such exalted presage
Of things of life, the childish spirit cleft,
That when those things at last have come to pass
But empty thrills of memory are left?
Why sings for us no magic violin,
Wherein the mystic spirit world's revealed
That buried lies each human breast within,
As blossoms buried 'neath the mountain slide?
Could I be with thee, and hear but thee,
Unthwarted by aught petty mystery!
I can! Grant unto me as thou hast said,

Be thou my life, Death, since my life was dead,
 What forced me, who neither state affirm,
 To call thee Death, and t'other life to term?
 More living life than all life ever held
 Thou dost confine within one little hour.
 With earthly phantoms from my brain dispelled,
 I give myself unto thy mystic power.
He sinks dead at Death's feet.

DEATH

Slowly passing out, shaking his head.
 How wonderful these humans are, indeed,
 Who do explain the inexplicable,
 And what was never writ, they read;
 The intricate they, subjugating, blind,
 And through eternal darkness paths they find.

He goes out through the middle door, his last words are faintly audible. The room remains quiet. Through the window Death, drawing his bow across the strings, is seen to pass, immediately behind him follow the Mother, the Girl, and a figure closely resembling Claudio.

What a beautiful thing it is. Yet, it is life. It happens every day. It is human nature. There is in this poetical drama the divinity and warning of Dante, on life, after the Reaper has plucked his harvest; the lyrical sweetness of Tennyson; the searching spirit of Browning; the dramatic ability and truthfulness to human nature of Shakespeare. Von Hofmannstahl is the composite of these authors. Besides, he has a trifle of Oscar Wilde in his nature. O, for more dramas and books of such moral caliber and tone! They would sanctify, to a marvelous degree, the sinful erring world.

Of course, by translation from the original the work loses much of its naive power and beauty.