

South Atlantic Modern Language Association

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *The Theatres of Consciousness* by Benjamin Bennett

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ever, it would have been helpful to indicate that the knowledge and esteem of German literature in the general audience declined sharply during this period. The enthusiastic preaching of German values by Germanists did not influence the general reading public until German modernism proved to be a fascinating phenomenon after World War I. Towards the end of the period under examination, the image of Germany and the Germans began to change: the stereotype of romantic Germany began to fade, and the stereotype of the coldly superior, amoral, and intellectual German began to emerge. Instead of *Gemütlichkeit*, *Unheimlichkeit* came to the fore — a cliché that was to be used for propaganda purposes in World War I.

It may be asking too much to demand a thorough discussion of the social and historical context in such a study; but it indicates the inherent potential of Tatum's approach and the possibilities for further studies along these lines. Some more analytical data about *Germanistik* as a profession would definitely have helped. The main complaint — if it should be perceived as such — remains, however, that the author, in his exhaustive survey of the material, fails to guide the reader as to the relative importance of the different items and data. It is all there; but the reader has to do the sifting.

Nevertheless, the material is of considerable value. Tatum is fair and perceptive; although not always historically apt in his evaluations, he is thorough in his presentation. The book is carefully printed and easy to use. This is a very helpful study in view of the neglected field of the history of textbook publishing and academic education. It also provides a rich source for reflection on today's canons of American *Germanistik*. It is, in short, a book of interest for everybody who toils in our precarious profession.

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□ *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: The Theatres of Consciousness*. By Benjamin Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 391 pp.

Benjamin Bennett's book on Hofmannsthal is proof that material progress and systematic regress are compatible. Though the book promotes a number of self-contradictory metaphysical propositions, it is laced with a rich array of original insights into Hofmannsthal's works and into theater in general.

Bennett divides his book into three parts. First, principles of lyric and drama: Bennett begins with a discussion of Hofmannsthal's (anti-Kleistian) affirmation of self-consciousness and language as the figures

by which one recognizes and realizes one's unity as well as one's limits. This first section includes excellent close readings of selected poems (in particular the "Terzinen" and "Reiselied") that focus on paradoxes and self-reflection. *Der Tor und der Tod* also receives detailed attention: Bennett argues that death's speech is ironic, that Claudio is not unique, that everyone struggles with the confusions of self-consciousness; moreover, death, being both objective and a hallucination, is in essence an objective hallucination or a manifestation to the audience of the paradoxes of theater and self-consciousness. Second, language and society: the middle section consists of various approaches to the Chandos letter and *Der Schwierige*. Chandos recognizes that intellectuals cannot have truth, while non-intellectuals cannot communicate the truth they have; Bennett suggests that Chandos overrides this dilemma by communicating this very truth ironically. *Der Schwierige* is approached by way of insightful reflections on missed meetings and the role of chance. In addition, the play is viewed as an attempt to overcome social petrification. Third, culture and collapse: the final section offers a helpful distinction between the allomantic and the social (as the allomantic combined with conscious will and action). It also contains an original analysis of the character "Vorwitz" in *Das Salzburger Große Welttheater* and a discussion of the play as serving the cultural function of unifying its Salzburg audience. Finally, Bennett sees in the first version of *Der Turm* a Nietzschean tragedy of intellect necessarily defeating itself and in the second version Hofmannsthal's own tragedy of becoming committed (and propagandistic) at the price of destroying his art.

This brief summary of a few of Bennett's major points cannot even approximate doing justice to the richly detailed and various close readings Bennett offers. Three partly overlapping concerns guide Bennett throughout his work: the paradoxical structures of consciousness and of Hofmannsthal's texts; theatricality and related issues of form, audience, and cultural context; and the idea that literature is inherently self-reflective. The questions elicited by these concerns are always interesting and Bennett's answers consistently thought-provoking. The book opens new insights into Hofmannsthal as well as into broader issues of consciousness, theatricality, and intersubjectivity.

There are three reservations I have concerning the text. First, in taking texts and ideas seriously for the present, one risks melting the horizon between text and reader. This is, of course, a hermeneutic issue difficult to solve, but one imagines that Bennett could have differentiated his voice from that of the text more frequently and clearly. This issue is particularly important when the reader longs for a more critical attitude toward some of Hofmannsthal's positions. Sec-

ond, the book is not easy to read. This may have to do with the difficulty of the issues or the interrelatedness of so many different ideas, which finds its stylistic corollary in Bennett's penchant for apposition. Nonetheless, many of the analyses are more elusive than appear necessary; this may limit the book's audience. Third, Bennett presents a number of contradictory positions. He argues, supposedly with Hofmannsthal, that contradictory truths are valid if they are expressed ironically (e.g., 61 and 313). It seems, however, that Bennett cannot say this without being ironic. If he is ironic, then the position no longer holds. If he is not ironic, then he has transgressed against the conditions of the position's truth. From this dilemma stem Bennett's frequent pragmatic contradictions, assertions that, however they are formulated, include a contradiction between the proposition itself and the conditions of the proposition's validity, as, for example, the claim that all truth is false (e.g., 57 and 97). Further, Bennett transforms Hofmannsthal into a decisionist who recognizes the absurdity of all positions but who has nonetheless the need to assert one. Yet, if everything is arbitrary and illusory, then our recognition that this is so must be illusory as well, rendering the very statement untrue or unleashing the possibility, which Hofmannsthal would have vehemently contested, that because nothing is true, everything is true. Interestingly, just as Bennett asserts that all truth is arbitrary and contradictory, his better self insists that he hopes to avoid contradictions (224).

One could praise Bennett's book with its own positive evaluative terms and call it absurd, arbitrary, disingenuous, contradictory, a joke, and a distortion, but the book, taken as a whole, is in fact brighter, clearer, more serious and insightful than many of the theories it purports to elevate.

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□ *The Verbal and Visual Art of Alfred Kubin*. By Phillip H. Rhein. Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1989. 179 pp.

A comprehensive presentation, in English, of the life and works of the celebrated artist Alfred Kubin has been long overdue. For almost the entire first half of the twentieth century, Kubin was one of the more controversial, productive, and appreciated book illustrators of our time. That he should now be the subject of a monograph written by the widely respected comparatist Phillip H. Rhein is certainly cause for anticipatory excitement.

The first half of the book is a descriptive analysis, divided into three