"Unser Dasein starrt von Büchern": Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Crisis of Authorship

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Abstract

This dissertation traces the development of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's attempts to find solutions to what he perceived to be the crisis of meaning in his time. I focus primarily on Hofmannsthal's fictional letters and poetological reflections from the post-lyrical phase of his career, also touching on his final drama and political speeches. In the 1990s semiotic, structuralist, and poststructuralist studies of Hofmannsthal's texts allowed critics to uncover the more radically modern dimension of his creative process and work, making possible a poetological turn in the scholarship, with critics becoming far more interested in the poetics and aesthetics of Hofmannsthal's writings. Thanks to this work, a very different image of Hofmannsthal has appeared – one that attempts to overcome the common prejudice against the author as an elitist and cultural conservative who was out of step with his time. This dissertation participates in the latest approach to Hofmannsthal's work inasmuch as it largely focuses on Hofmannsthal's self-reflexive poetological writings from the *Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe* and on the author's intermedial search for a language that can counteract the reification of language in a positivistic age. The central argument of this dissertation is that the crises of language, of perception, of experience and of identity that Hofmannsthal repeatedly represents in his work fundamentally express a crisis of authorship. Hofmannsthal's preoccupation with

these crises reflects his increasing uncertainty about the role of the poet in a modern democratic age, in which not only the social hierarchies but also the hierarchies of knowledge are leveled. I argue that Hofmannsthal radically destabilizes the role of the poet by questioning whether the poet has a necessary role in interpreting experience for the many. But I conclude by suggesting that in an effort to keep this question alive in an age of democratic skepticism about the poet's vocation, Hofmannsthal sees the need to reassert at a rhetorical level the poet's privileged position.

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Introduction

> "Hier auf dem Tisch, links und rechts, stauen sich immer Bücher auf. Es ist nicht zu übersehen, wo sie herkommen. Man räumt sie weg, verteilt sie in den Regalen, macht sie in den Reihen ihrer Brüder verschwinden, und gleich sind ihrer neue aufgestaut. Und so ist in den Zimmern fast aller Menschen. Man muß immer ihrer einige wegschieben, wo sonst nichts umherliegt, in den Eisenbahnen, in den Vorhallen der Hotels. Sie sind in Kürze: überall. Jenes unrealste aller Reiche, unheimlichste aller Phantasmata, die sogenannte Wirklichkeit, ist vollgepfropft mit ihnen. Unser Dasein starrt von Büchern."[1]

The above-cited passage is from Hofmannsthal's 1905 essay "Der Tisch mit den Büchern," in which he reflects upon the uncanny presence of books in the modern literate age. Books, Hofmannsthal observes, pile up on our desks and shelves at home; they lie around in train stations and hotel lobbies and clutter up our public spaces; they are simply everywhere. By calling reality "[j]enes unrealste aller Reiche, unheimlichste aller Phantasmata" stuffed with books, he emphasizes how in a positivistic culture of knowledge, the abstract realm of books has gained a greater reality than the sensory world we inhabit. Books have distanced us from the immediate experience of reality. They seem like an eminently personal or private means of accessing ideas, but also one that cuts the readers off from the concrete world around them, threatening to imprison them in their subjectivity. This separation from the world sends the readers on a quest to understand how they can reconnect. They ironically seek the answer in more books. The question for Hofmannsthal becomes: How can the writer, using his words, forge an immediate relationship with his or her audience?

This dissertation traces the development of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's attempts to find solutions to what he perceived to be the crisis of meaning in his time. I focus

[1] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Der Tisch mit den Büchern," in *GWRA I*, 337.

primarily on Hofmannsthal's fictional letters and poetological reflections from the post-lyrical phase of his career, also touching on his final drama and political speeches. The earliest scholarship on Hofmannsthal tends to be concentrated on the content, and less on the formal aspects of Hofmannsthal's work, with an emphasis on Hofmannsthal's critique of the aesthetic life in his early writing;[2] however, the direction of Hofmannsthal scholarship changed significantly in the 1970s, when Carl E. Schorske spearheaded a cultural studies approach to the study of fin-de-siècle Viennese art and literature, providing psycho-historical insights into the politics and culture of Vienna around 1900, which Schorske regarded as the birthplace of modernism.[3] In the 1970s and 80s, psychoanalytical studies of Hofmannsthal's work became dominant, opening up avenues of research into the structure of gender relations in Hofmannsthal's texts.[4] In addition, with the rise of reader-oriented literary criticism, the focus of Hofmannsthal scholarship shifted from the analysis of its substance to the study of how its reception has changed over time.[5]

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[2] Richard Alewyn, *Über Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958). See for example, Hinrich C. Seeba, *Kritik des ästhetischen Menschen. Hermeneutik und Moral in Hofmannsthals 'Der Tor und der Tod'* (Tübingen: Bad Homburg, 1970); Rolf Tarot, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Daseinsformen und dichterische Struktur* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1970).

[3] Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de.-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

[4] Michael Worbs, Nervenkunst: Literatur und Psychoanalyse im Wien der Jahrhundertwende (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1983); Marlies Janz, Marmorbilder: Weiblichkeit und Tod bei Clemens Brentano und Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Königstein: Athäneum Verlag, 1986); Waltraud Wiethölter, Hofmannsthal oder Die Geometrie des Subjekts: Psychostrukturelle und ikonographische Studien zum Prosawerk (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1990); Gotthart Wunberg, Der frühe Hofmannsthal: Schizophrenie als dichterische Struktur (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Verlag, 1972).

[5] Gotthart Wunberg, Hofmannsthal im Urteil seiner Kritiker: Dokumente zur Wirkungsgeschichte Hugo von Hofmannsthals in Deutschland (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Verlag, 1972).

In the 1990s semiotic, structuralist and poststructuralist studies of Hofmannsthal's texts allowed critics to uncover the more radically modern dimension of his creative process and work, making possible a poetological turn in the scholarship, with critics becoming far more interested in the poetics and aesthetics of Hofmannsthal's writings. Since the 1990s a very different image of Hofmannsthal has appeared – one that attempts to overcome the common prejudice against the author as an elitist and cultural conservative who was out of step with his time. Dangel-Pelloquin characterizes the scholarship of recent years in the following manner: Nicht mehr die existentiellen Themen seines Werkes, nicht die biographischen Bezüge, die psychohistorischen Konstellationen und schon gar nicht die kanonische Abgeschlossenheit der Werke interessieren, sondern Hofmannsthal wird in seiner pointiert modernen Ästhetik neu entdeckt und bewertet.[6] These poetological studies examine the transitions in Hofmannsthal's work from his lyrical poetry to prose and drama, exploring the author's attempts to transcend the limits of literary form. The scholarship is principally devoted to the study of Hofmannsthal's efforts to transcend the boundaries of language, through the medium of language itself, for the purpose of arriving at a language of the body, of gestures, and of colors and images, using opera, pantomime, dance, and film.[7] Recent studies examine how the author takes the language of signs from other media and arts and applies them to his work; with this shift in focus, it is no longer the early works by Hofmannsthal that are privileged, but rather the prose works from *Erfundende Gespräche*

[6] *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Neue Wege der Forschung*, ed. Elsbeth Dangel-Pelloquin (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 9.

[7] Ursula Renner, "Die Zauberschrift der Bilder": Bildende Kunst in Hofmannsthals Texten (Freiburg: Rombach Druck- und Verlagshaus, 2000); Sabine Schneider, Verheißung der Bilder: Das andere Medium in der Literatur um 1900 (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 2006); Heinz Hiebler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal und die Medienkultur der Moderne (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2003).

und Briefe that are of central interest today, because they are highly self-reflexive and overtly articulate Hofmannsthal's aesthetic position.

This dissertation participates in the latest approach to Hofmannsthal's work inasmuch as it largely focuses on Hofmannsthal's self-reflexive poetological writings from the *Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe* and on the author's intermedial search for a language that can counteract the reification of language in a positivistic age. The central argument of this dissertation is that the crises of language, of perception, of experience and of identity that Hofmannsthal repeatedly represents in his work fundamentally express a crisis of authorship. Hofmannsthal's preoccupation with these crises reflects his increasing uncertainty about the role of the poet in a modern democratic age, in which not only the social hierarchies but also the hierarchies of knowledge are leveled. I argue that in an effort to bolster the importance of the poet's role in society, Hofmannsthal conceptualizes language not as the writer's tool, but rather as the master of the poet; that is, he conceives of language not as a medium of the poet's self-expression, but rather the poet as the medium for the expression of language. He is thereby able to justify the privileged position of the writer as someone who has a higher awareness of the fact that it is not the subject that speaks language, but rather language that speaks the subject; the privilege of the poet thus lies in his ability to serve language by acting as its voice. Hofmannsthal, I suggest, was in search of a form that not only speaks *to* the people, but *speaks the people*. In this way, he can on the one hand ascribe a cultural leadership role to the poet, while at the same time presenting the poet as the servant of both language and the people that language speaks.

Hofmannsthal is faced here with a difficult problem, however: Can the privileged position of the poet ultimately be justified? In other words, if language speaks the poet, why does it not speak everyone? Why is the poet necessary at all? In this dissertation, I trace out Hofmannsthal's struggle with precisely this question. Hofmannsthal was driven by the desire to overcome the gulf between the writer and his society. I demonstrate how this concern is already present in his prewar texts and becomes more pronounced in his politically charged writing from the postwar years. I suggest that in his attempt to bridge this gap, Hofmannsthal turns to a quasi-religious conception of language, according to which language has the power to reveal being. I show that while Hofmannsthal's quasi-religious understanding of language is accompanied by doubt and ambivalence, as when he suppresses his doubt in his role as a public speaker in "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation," his insistence on the democratic unity between the poet and society paradoxically amounts to an authoritarian assertion. In my final chapter I show how this translates into a form of direct cultural-political speech that at once strives for more democratic dialogue, while taking the form of messianic prognostication.

Over the course of five chapters, I explore how the crisis of authorship is intrinsically connected to crises of language, of perception, and of both individual and collective identity. In the first chapter I analyze how the crisis of authorship is represented in "Ein Brief" as a search for the language of nature. I show how the *Chandos Letter* marks the beginning of a new poetic vision; in response to the language crisis, this text illustrates the idea that the writer's way out of the linguistic impasse is to assume a passive receptivity to the world of mute things. I argue that Hofmannsthal inverts the power relationship between the subject and nature: no longer is it the writer

who gives coherence and shape to the world through his work; rather, it is the world that speaks to the writer.

In my second chapter I analyze "Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten," which I read as providing an elaboration and deepening of the problem introduced in the *Chandos Letter*. I assert that the crisis experienced at the turn of the seventeenth century by one privileged individual, Lord Chandos, is portrayed in "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" as a more pervasive generational – and distinctly European – problem at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this text Hofmannsthal tries to bridge the gap between the poet and the ordinary person by making the narrator of this fictional letter a businessman who explicitly claims that he is not a cultured person. Hofmannsthal presents a letter writer whose return to his homeland triggers a crisis of perception. Once again, the path out of this crisis cannot be willed by the narrator, but presents itself through epiphanic moments. However, these privileged moments do not take place in nature as they did for Chandos, but rather, for the twentieth century individual, are triggered by *indirect* contact with nature, namely through the memory of nature experienced in childhood or abroad, or through the depiction of nature in modernist visual art. In this last category of experience, Hofmannsthal focuses specifically on the art of Van Gogh, which emphasizes the subjectivity of perception. Something that has not been acknowledged in the existing analyses of this text is that Hofmannsthal presents these epiphanic moments in an ironic light. The revitalizing effects of Van Gogh's art allows the protagonist to carry out his most successful business negotiation, and thus the encounter with art helps the narrator be of even more effective service to capitalism, which is one of the main causes of the alienation and rootlessness from which the narrator suffers. Thus, modernist art is

presented as that which allows the ordinary person to become aware of his presence in the world as a creative agent, but it is powerless to actually reverse the historical process that has led to the atomization of the individual.

Chapter three is an analysis of "Das Gespräch über Gedichte," Hofmannsthal's most explicit theoretical reflection on the power of poetic language, in particular the power of what he regards as the central element of poetry, namely the symbol. This fictional conversation is motivated by the following questions: What is the origin and function of poetic language? Does it have a special status distinguishing it from conceptual and everyday language? What does it communicate? The dominant argument in this text is that poetic language has a revelatory power that neither *Begriffssprache* nor *Alltagssprache* has. What it reveals is that the self is not an inner realm that is sealed to the outside world, but rather that it is permeable. What remains unanswered in this text is where poetic language comes from. I argue that in considering the content and the literary form of this text together, we can see that Hofmannsthal sheds doubt on his fictional character's claim that poetic language is perfectly distinct from both conceptual and everyday language. I contend that the dialogue form draws attention to the power differential between the two interlocutors, bringing to light how the claims made by the dominant voice about the purity and revelatory power of poetic language also represent, at an important yet less obvious level, an exercise in the art of persuasion.

Chapter four takes up Hofmannsthal's speech "Der Dichter und diese Zeit," in which he reflects upon the role of the poet in the age of rising media competition. Hofmannsthal observes two conspicuous trends in the reading culture of his time that reflect the widening gap between the poet and his society: While, on the one hand, public

regard and consumer demand for poetry and highbrow literature appear to be ever diminishing, on the other, the general public is gripped by an insatiable appetite for reading material. Hofmannsthal makes the strained argument that the mass consumption of reading material expresses the masses' unconscious yearning for poetry. Hofmannsthal argues that the poet exercises a secret "Führerschaft" because the literary writer is the only one who can truly satisfy the general public's unconscious thirst for poetic truths. While many critics acknowledge the importance of this text in Hofmannsthal's work, there are very few close readings of the text. In this chapter I analyze the various metaphors Hofmannsthal uses to convey the poet's secret cultural leadership. The poet is presented as someone who exercises leadership by acting as a servant to society; he is likened by turns to a beggar, to a chameleon, and to the perceptual organs of his time. I argue that Hofmannsthal reaches an impasse in his attempt to bridge the gulf between the poet and his time. In this speech he ultimately fails to provide a satisfying answer to the question of how it is that the anonymous poet and the anonymous reader can somehow find each other.

In chapter five I analyze two texts from Hofmannsthal's late work. In "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation" he offers a "solution" to the problem of anonymity that distances the poet from society. He reconceives the anonymous mass of readers as *das Volk* and the poet as the voice of the people. Hofmannsthal presents what he terms the seekers (the writers and thinkers of his time) as exercising their cultural leadership by searching for the unifying *Geist* of the German people. I examine the contradiction between the thesis he presents in "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation," on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the skepticism of his last play, *Der*

Turm, in which he expresses doubt in an inherent spiritual connection between the poet and "the people." I argue that the discrepancy between the certainty expressed in the public speech and the doubt expressed in the drama suggests that Hofmannsthal suppressed his doubts in the public speech. By suppressing his doubts in this way, Hofmannsthal risks playing the role of a false prophet.

Chapter 1: Nature and Language in Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief"

Hofmannsthal's image of words disintegrating in one's mouth like moldy mushrooms has become emblematic for the linguistic turn[8] that began to take shape in the early twentieth century, both in literary modernism and western philosophy, primarily through the reception of the ideas developed in the 1920s and beyond by Wittgenstein and Heidegger. However, as Wolfgang Riedel points out, when Hofmannsthal published "Brief des Lord Chandos" in the Berlin Newspaper *Der Tag,* it was not apparent that it would one day be regarded as the poetic Magna Carta of twentieth-century German literature.[9] While Hofmannsthal's contemporaries recognized it as a prose work of outstanding quality, it was not until after 1945 – when German literary critics began to rediscover literature from the turn of the century, i.e. from a time before the cultural catastrophe of the Third Reich – that it gained the status of a "Stiftungsurkunde" of literary modernism.[10] Since then, "Ein Brief" has been predominantly interpreted as capturing the essential "Sprachproblematik" of literary modernism, which Riedel describes as "der Sturz der Dichter aus dem Haus der Sprache."[11] However, he argues

[8] The term "linguistic turn" gained popular currency through Richard Rorty's 1967 anthology *The Linguistic Turn* in which the term is used to describe the turn toward linguistic philosophy. Rorty himself identified the Jewish Austrian philosopher Gustav Bergmann as the one who coined the phrase, "linguistic turn." See "Wittgenstein, Heidegger and the Reification of Language," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). I use the term in a general sense to refer to the turn away from a correspondence theory of language toward the idea that language is constitutive of thought and of our perception of reality. Within the German tradition, this idea was already taking shape in the writings of figures like Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835). For an informative summary see Cristina Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, translated by José Medina (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

[9] Wolfgang Riedel, "Homo Natura," in *Literarische Anthropologie um 1900* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 1.

[10] Riedel, "Homo Natura," 1.

[11] Riedel, "Homo Natura," 1-2.

that this dominant interpretation, which was prefigured by Fritz Mauthner and Gustav Landauer's reception of "Ein Brief," obscures Hofmannsthal's more important preoccupation in this text, namely the question of what constitutes life. Riedel contends, "Nicht die Sprache, beziehungsweise eine Sprachkrise, ist das Thema des Chandos-Briefes, sondern das *Leben*. […] Und man geht nicht zu weit, wenn man in Hofmannsthal selbst einen Schlüsselautor für die Konjunktion von Lebensphilosophie und Dichtung um 1900 erkennt."[12]

Riedel presents this interpretation of the *Chandos Letter* in the context of his broader investigation into literary conceptions of nature in a scientistic and technological age around the turn of the century. In a scientistic age, he observes, it is assumed that the literary writer cannot contribute to our knowledge of nature. However, he points out that this has not always been the assumption: Around 1800, literature, as the language of feeling, was also thought of as the language of nature. Schiller's theory of "sentimentalische Dichtung" was one of the most influential expressions of the idea that literature presents a utopian realm in which nature is not divided. That is, because literature speaks in the name of sensation (*aisthesis*), it also speaks in the name of nature. Conceived in such aesthetic terms, nature functions as a synonym for totality, and for the unity of subject and object, in a tradition stretching from Schiller to Joachim Ritter.[13] Joachim Ritter, for example, argues that nature emerges as landscape when it is perceived aesthetically. He promotes the view that the arts provide a counter-balance to the natural

[12] Riedel, "Homo Natura," 21.

[13] Riedel, "Homo Natura," XI-XII.

sciences by communicating the wholeness of nature rather than by breaking it down into its component parts.[14]

In this chapter I argue that Hofmannsthal does not strictly oppose the scientific and aesthetic perspectives, but instead presents them as dialectically linked. My argument consists of two main points: First, I argue that the first part of "Ein Brief" demonstrates how the artistic endeavor can be motivated by a drive for total comprehensibility, which is remarkably similar to the motivation of the natural sciences. I contend that this drive is the basis of the hubris for which Chandos is punished through the crisis of language and identity, leading him to the brink of nihilism. Second, I demonstrate that in the second half of "Ein Brief," Hofmannsthal offers a way out of a nihilistic existence through a different kind of aesthetic-poetic relationship to nature, which could be described as mystical. By portraying a writer who becomes utterly alienated from his craft, Hofmannsthal inverts Chandos' relationship to nature. No longer can the poet dominate nature by reducing it to a transparent system of symbolic meaning; instead he finds himself at the mercy of nature's sheer contingent force, which, in a manner of speaking, reveals the poet's aesthetic practice as itself a manifestation of that contingency. This portrait, I argue, poses a far-reaching challenge to the subject-centered understanding of the human being's relationship to nature.

I. Crisis as a Mythological Form of Punishment

The letter writer, Lord Chandos, is a 17th century English lord, and in this letter he responds to his friend Francis Bacon, who has been worried about the protagonist's two-

[14] Joachim Ritter, "Landschaft: Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft", in *Schriften der Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität zu Münster* (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1963), 7-32.

year-long silence. The *Chandos Letter* can be roughly divided into two parts: into Chandos' autobiographical portrayal of his life *before* and *during* his crisis. In the first part of "Ein Brief", Chandos describes his pre-crisis life as one marked by artistic productivity and he portrays himself as a genius, who was once able to reveal nature's true forms by articulating them in his literary works. In the second part of the letter, Chandos describes how his crisis has left him unable to think and speak coherently, which, in turn, causes him to feel confused and alienated from his daily life. He explains for the first time what his present condition actually is, stating, "Mein Fall ist in Kürze, dieser: Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen."[15] This inability to think and speak coherently has left him feeling confused and alienated from his daily life. It is as though he has been banished from the fullness of his former life, and more disturbingly, his former self. However, his life of crisis and alienation is punctuated by the occasional and fleeting mystical sense of a cosmic unity that is sometimes revealed to him not in language, but in actual, imagined, or recalled visions of the most mundane, everyday objects that Chandos encounters in an agrarian landscape. Finally, he declares that he will abandon his former writing career.

Lord Chandos explains that he is suffering from a "geistige Starrnis,"[16] the unknown cause of which takes the form of an invisible virus. Its malignant presence can only be detected through its effects, lack of vitality being one of the primary symptoms. Chandos feels depleted of energy; he says that his perpetual inner state since the

[15] *GWE*, 465.

[16] *GWE*, 461.

beginning of his crisis is one of "Kleinmut" and "Kraftlosigkeit."[17] Whereas Chandos, with his ambitious scholarly and artistic plans, had previously been an outwardly oriented person, he has now been reduced to the husk of the person he was before. He laments that he lives "ein Leben von kaum glaublicher Leere."[18] A general sense of meaninglessness appears to have spread "wie ein um sich fressender Rost."[19]

What is the cause of this crisis, this sudden feeling of emptiness? David Wellbery, offering one of the strongest interpretations of this aspect of the text, suggests that Chandos' "geistige Qualen"[20] have a mythological quality. He points out that the description of Chandos' inexplicable condition alludes to the divine punishment that Tantalus suffered,[21] and indeed, Hofmannsthal does draw a fairly explicit parallel between Tantalus' fate and that of Chandos.[22] However, there is nothing in Chandos' biography to suggest that he deserves a punishment as severe as the one Tantalus endured, which leads Wellbery to believe that Hofmannsthal was not only referring to the mythological figure, but also alluding to Schopenhauer's description, in the third book of his *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, of our normal life as the experience of a perpetual

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[17] *GWE*, 464.

[18] *GWE*, 470.

[19] *GWE*, 465.

[20] *GWE*, 461.

[21] David E. Wellbery, "Die Opfer-Vorstellung als Quelle der Faszination: Anmerkungen zum Chandos-Brief und zur frühen Poetik Hofmannsthals," in *Hofmannsthal-Jahrbuch zur europäischen Moderne* 11, eds. Gerhard Neumann, Ursula Renner, Günther Schnitzler, and Gotthart Wunberg (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2003), 281-310.

[22] "Aber, mein verehrter Freund, auch die irdischen Begriffe entziehen sich mir in der gleichen Weise. Wie soll ich es versuchen, Ihnen diese seltsamen geistigen Qualen zu schildern, dies Emporschnellen der Fruchtzweige über meinem ausgereckten Händen, dies Zurückweichen des murmelnden Wassers vor meinen dürstenden Lippen." *GWE*, 465.

unfulfillment akin to Tantalus' interminable yearning.[23] Schopenhauer evokes Tantalus' suffering for the rhetorical purpose of presenting it as a foil to the aesthetic state, in which the intellect is temporarily liberated from the "Zuchthausarbeit des Wollens."[24] Relieved from our attachment to the will, we are then able to contemplate our relation to the world as a will-less subject of knowledge. As Gregory Maertz explains, for Schopenhauer "knowledge then becomes pure perception, pure objectivity, pure repose."[25] Schopenhauer's description of the relationship between our normal state of unfulfilled yearning, on the one hand, and the temporary liberation from our miserable will through the experience of beauty, on the other, largely maps onto the depicted dynamics of Chandos' life.

Wellbery argues that the narrative logic of the movement from Chandos' blissfully productive life to his condition of "geistige Starrnis" does not suggest that Chandos is guilty of any moral transgressions, for which he would deserve to be punished. However, he suggests that if we are to attempt to make sense of Chandos' crisis in light of the parallel that Hofmannsthal draws between his protagonist and Tanatalus, then we have to seriously consider the possibility that Chandos' crisis might indeed be a form of punishment. Wellbery asserts that Chandos' transgression cannot be traced back to a

[23] "Darum nun, solange unser Bewußtsein von unserem Willen erfüllt ist, solange wir dem Drange der Wünsche, mit seinem steten Hoffen und Fürchten, hingegeben sind, solange wir Subjekte des Willens sind, wird uns nimmermehr dauerndes Glück, noch Ruhe. […] So liegt das Subjekt des Wollens beständig auf dem drehenden Rad des Ixion, schöpft immer im Siebe der Danaiden, ist der ewig schmachtende Tantalus." Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Freiherr von Lötneysen, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 280.

[24] Schopenhauer, 280.

[25] Gregory Maertz, "Romanticism and the idealization of the artist," in *Romantic Prose Fiction*, eds. Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel, and Bernard Dieterle (Philadephia: J. Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008), 51.

particular misdeed, but that when we examine the letter writer's description of his brilliant literary accomplishments and plans before his crisis, we find that he has in fact committed a poetological transgression. Chandos' poetic approach to the world was hubristically "ichbezogen," in the sense that he was attempting to incorporate all of nature into himself.[26] That he should then be struck by a crisis of language is consistent with mythological logic:

> die spezifische Form des Sprachverlustes wird durch die narratologische Hypothese erklärbar. Es ist nämlich ein Gesetz des mythisch-poetischen Rechts, daß die Strafe den Bestraften dort trifft, wo das Vergehen entstand. Mit Bezug auf Chandos kann das nur heißen: in der Zone des Oralen.[27]

Furthermore, Chandos' language crisis is not to be primarily understood as an expression of the turn-of-the-century *Sprach-* and *Begriffsskepsis* that can be traced back to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Mauthner, but that this crisis is to be seen in light of what Wellbery calls Hofmannsthal's "Poetik des Milchstroms" or "Laktopoetik."[28] Chandos commits the hubris of trying to recuperate an orally transmitted unity with nature (mother figure) in a post-infantile state, which renders this attempt incestuous: "Aber dieses Projekt ist als postinfantile Rekuperation des Phantasmas oral vermittelter Einheit mit der Mutter inzestuös, womit wir uns in einer Tradition tragischer Verschuldung befinden, die bekanntermaßen auf Tantalus zurückreicht."[29]

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[26] Wellbery, 291.

[27] Wellbery, 292.

[28] Wellbery, 291.

[29] Wellbery, 291.

Wellbery makes a compelling case for the idea that there is an element of punishment in Chandos' crisis, and I also agree that this punishment is not in response to any individual moral transgression on the part of Chandos. However, to deny that there is an individual element to Chandos' punishment is not to immediately conclude that his punishment belongs completely in the realm of an ahistorical mytho-poetic experience, especially as there is an undeniable historical aspect to the narrative of "Ein Brief," which should not be overlooked here. As Timo Günther points out, Hofmannsthal's fictional letter is addressed to the historical figure, Francis Bacon, who is considered to be the father of empiricism. By presenting Bacon as the addressee of Chandos' letter, Hofmannsthal presents an implicit critique of the positivistic, concept-driven approach to the world that developed through the emergence and dominance of the natural sciences in the modern era.[30] Bacon's science sought knowledge by making man the measure of all things. It forced nature to speak in a language of concepts that was comprehensible to human beings – a language that was intelligible precisely because human beings themselves created it. Günther argues that the *Chandos Letter* criticizes the scientific mania for the comprehensibility of the world – a mania that disenchants the world by eroding the sense of wonder and admiration that Hofmannsthal believed to be the key to truly understanding it.[31]

II. Chandos' Hubris: Reducing Nature to a Symbolic Language

Through the portrayal of Chandos' pre-crisis life, I argue, Hofmannsthal demonstrates that art, too, can be motivated by a mania for encyclopedic knowledge and

[30] Timo Günther, *Hofmannsthal: Ein Brief* (Berlin: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), 31.

[31] Günther, 31.

drive for domination, which is expressed through the reduction of nature to a symbolic language. In other words, Chandos' aesthetic approach to nature before his crisis is as subject-centered as Bacon's scientific method. I suggest that a close examination of Chandos' recollection of his blissful life before the onset of his crisis reflects his formerly narcissistic relationship to the world, which should lead us to ask whether his perpetual state of cosmic unity was perhaps illusory. I argue that the seed of the subject-object division, i.e. the cause of the feeling of alienation from which he suffers during his crisis, is already present in his pre-crisis life.

When Chandos gives an account of his existence before the onset of his crisis, he depicts himself as unselfconsciously integrated into nature and feeling at one with it:

> Mir erschien damals in einer Art von andauernder Trunkenheit das ganze Dasein als eine große Einheit: geistige und körperliche Welt schien mir keinen Gegensatz zu bilden, ebensowenig höfisches und tierisches Wesen, Kunst und Unkunst, Einsamkeit und Gesellschaft; in allem fühlte ich Natur, [...] und in aller Natur fühlte ich mich selber; wenn ich auf meiner Jagdhütte die schäumende laue Milch in mich hineintrank, die ein struppiger Mensch einer schönen, sanftäugigen Kuh aus dem Euter in einen Holzeimer niedermolk, so war mir das nichts anderes, als wenn ich, in der dem Fenster eingebauten Bank meines Studio sitzend, aus einem Folianten süße und schäumende Nahrung des Geistes in mich sog.[32]

Chandos presents nature as something that *appeared* to him as an all-encompassing unity, in which both the lowest and the highest expressions of life, both the physical and intellectual realms, cohere as an organic whole. In order to illustrate his Edenic relationship to nature, Chandos evokes a pastoral image of a peasant milking a gentle-eyed cow, and he equates his drinking of the fresh milk with the act of him sucking intellectual sustenance out of his books. This image of him drinking milk, in both literal and figurative senses, conveys the impression that he enjoyed a primal intimacy with

[32] *GWE*, 464.

nature. However, it should be noted that this bucolic portrait already includes an image of the subject-object division: Chandos is positioned by the window inside the hunter's lodge with a book, while the unkempt peasant and the cow are outside.

Furthermore, Chandos' description of his pre-crisis life is told from the perspective of his current state of crisis, and therefore we must take into account that this portrait of his former life is undoubtedly colored by this crisis. Indeed, there are a number of indications in the above-cited passage that betray Chandos' own doubt in the blissful cosmic unity of his recalled past. For instance, he explicitly describes his experience of this unity with the cosmos as an experience of "andauernder Trunkenheit," an ecstatic state in which everything is experienced in a heightened way. And the image of the beautiful, docile cow being milked by the peasant evokes the pastoral literary genre, in which nature is aestheticized and presented in an idealized manner for a privileged audience that does not know, or care to know, the grittier realities of actual rural life. Furthermore, Chandos repeatedly uses the expressions "mir erschien", "[es] schien mir", and "so war mir, als wenn"; the subjunctive mode points to an underlying uncertainty about whether or not the letter writer is accurately recalling the past. The recalled experiences *seemed* true to him at the time, but the very *seeming* represents a possible projection of an immediate, unalienated relationship to the world, which Chandos realizes that he lacks in the present. The question arises as to whether his past experience of cosmic unity was a reality or an illusion supported by a lack of self-consciousness about the otherness of nature. The "als wenn," then, points to the wedge that has been driven by his crisis not just between Chandos' past and present life, but also between his self (subject) and the world (object), as well as between language and meaning.

The deep inner division that Chandos feels in his life of crisis is not altogether absent in his pre-crisis life. Even while Chandos emphasizes that he felt no separation between the higher and lower realms of life, his description of the world in the passage cited above is still one that relies on the pairing of binary opposites: "geistige und körperliche Welt," "höfisches und tierisches Wesen," "Kunst und Unkunst," and "Einsamkeit und Gesellschaft." This list of oppositions is not arbitrary; instead, it points to the central tensions in Chandos' own life. When we consider the letter as a whole, we can see that Chandos describes his pre-crisis life as intellectual (*geistig*), courtly (*höfisch*), artistic (*Kunst*), and social (*Gesellschaft*), while his post-crisis life is portrayed as bodily (*körperlich*), almost bestial (*tierisch*) in the absence of an intellectual life, lacking in art (*Unkunst*), and marked by loneliness (*Einsamkeit*). Moreover, while Chandos describes his former cosmic unity with the world as though there had been no subject-object division, only a few lines below the above-cited passage, he portrays himself as the subject that seizes the world and gives it meaning:

> Das eine war wie das andere; keines gab dem andern weder an traumhafter überirdischer Natur, noch an leiblicher Gewalt nach, und so gings fort durch die ganze Breite des Lebens, rechter und linker Hand; überall war ich mitten drinnen, wurde nie ein Scheinhaftes gewahr: Oder es ahnte mir, alles wäre Gleichnis und jede Kreatur ein Schlüssel der andern, und ich fühlte mich wohl den, der imstande wäre, eine nach der andern bei der Krone zu packen und mit ihr so viele der andern aufzusperren, als sie aufsperren könnte.[33]

Chandos claims that he had an entirely organic, unselfconscious relationship to nature; nothing appeared as illusory or dreamlike to him. He portrays a world in which everything is in a harmonious, "natural" relationship with everything else. But by saying that he was everywhere "mitten drinnen," he actually underlines the fact that he perceived

[33] *GWE*, 464.

himself to be at the center of this harmonious order. This passage underlines the fact that Chandos drew narcissistic pleasure from his position of power as the subject who can unlock the secrets of nature (the object). As Günther points out, through the image of a key that can open the secrets of nature, Hofmannsthal takes up a common metaphor from western philosophical discourse. He observes that one can trace this image back to Bacon – and even further, to Parmenides; for the philosophers this key must be a conceptual, analytical key that can make the entire world comprehensible.[34] That Chandos' view of the world is essentially a conceptual one is reflected in his understanding of the natural order as a symbolic order, on the basis of which he can see all creatures as metaphors within this greater order. This passage, I argue, thus points to the seed of Chandos' crisis, which lies in the fact that he has been mistaking the system of symbols for nature itself – that is, assuming that the sign, which flows from the subject, is identical to the signified, or the object which it is meant to designate. His crisis arises, then, when he becomes conscious of this mistake: he realizes that human beings themselves are the originators of this symbolic order and he comes to recognize the arbitrariness and ungroundedness of this self-referential web of meaning.

In Chandos' description of his earlier literary projects it is apparent that he believed himself to be in communion with nature. He perceived the world as consisting of Platonic forms and structures to which he had direct access:

> Und aus dem Sallust floß in jenen glücklichen Tagen wie durch nie verstopfte Röhren die Erkenntnis der Form in mich herüber, jener tiefen, wahren, inneren Form, die jenseits des Geheges der rhetorischen Kunststücke erst geahnt werden kann, die, von welcher man nicht mehr sagen kann, daß sie das Stoffliche anordne, denn sie durchdringt es, sie hebt es auf und schafft Dichtung und

[34] Günther, 26-7.

> Wahrheit zugleich, ein Widerspiel ewiger Kräfte, ein Ding, herrlich wie Musik und Algebra.[35]

Chandos describes his pre-crisis life as a period in which learning came to him with ease, which is emphasized by the image of fluidity. He asserts that knowledge of the true forms *flowed* into him as through unclogged channels. In fact, this image resembles the one of Chandos drinking in his books like milk. The ease and fluidity that characterize Chandos' pre-crisis life stand in stark contrast to the "geistige Starrnis" that marks his life of crisis. However, I find that Chandos' former disposition toward life reveals a nihilistic tendency because the *Dasein* of the material world ("das Stoffliche") could only be meaningful to him because it was permeated and elevated by the eternal, super-sensible forms of the *Jenseits* that he believed to recognize in it. Furthermore, Chandos' description of his ambitious but unfinished literary projects, which included a portrayal of the early years of Henry VIII's reign, an interpretation of the fables and mythical tales of the ancients, and a collection of the brilliant maxims and reflections from classical and Italian works, reflects that he was once convinced that it was his task as a genius to reveal nature's beautiful inner forms by articulating them through humanist high culture.

Chandos indicates that his many literary accomplishments and plans were made in pursuit of self-knowledge. Before his crisis, Chandos had intended to put together an encyclopedic collection of classical and folk wisdom, which he would entitle "Nosce te ipsum."[36] In a sense, the title of the unfinished plan points to the irony of Chandos' predicament: in attempting to know himself, he reduced the world around him to the

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[35] *GWE*, 462.

[36] *GWE*, 463.

referent of his self; in other words, the world around him was regarded as a reflection of his own power to assign meaning to it. His plan for the encyclopedic collection of stories would then act as a reflective surface for himself, and the unfinished nature of his project seems to point to the impossibility of fulfilling the dictum, *nosce te ipsum*. I do not mean to suggest, however, that Hofmannsthal completely rejects the possibility of attaining self-knowledge; instead of rejecting this possibility outright, he shows that this quest can give rise to a self-interested, solipsistic relation to the world, and he depicts a protagonist who is forced, via his crisis, into a new, altered understanding of his earlier pursuit.

In fact, in trying to explain his crisis to Bacon, Chandos takes up the very task of self-knowledge that he claims to have abandoned. It is telling that he writes at the beginning of his letter, "Ich möchte Ihnen so antworten, wie Sie es um mich verdienen, möchte mich Ihnen ganz *aufschließen* und weiß nicht, wie ich mich dazu nehmen soll."[37] With the word "aufschließen" Chandos evokes the image of the key, the metaphor for knowledge that was discussed briefly above. Chandos is aware, however, that he cannot provide Bacon with a clear scientific diagnosis of his condition; instead, in his attempts to describe his crisis, he repeatedly resorts to evocative images, which offer a merely poetic grasp of his condition. Günther explains that the historical Bacon saw poetry and ancient fables as byproducts of a pre-rational inability to express thoughts and worldviews in abstract philosophical terms. Moreover, Bacon saw the *Bildhaftigkeit* of poetic language as primitive, accidental, or ornamental.[38] Günther contends that Hofmannsthal criticizes

[37] *GWE*, 461 (my italics).

[38] Günther, 24.

this Baconian view by presenting the reader with a figure who experiences the resistance of both the world and the self to conceptual understanding.

III. Chandos' Epiphanies

The second part of the *Chandos Letter*, I suggest, gestures at Chandos' new understanding of the quest for self-knowledge as one which leads to the humble recognition that life (including his own) is "flüssiger, glühender"[39] than words and concepts. After the onset of his crisis, Chandos feels completely estranged from his past literary accomplishments and the above-mentioned literary projects. He describes this alienation from his former life in topographical terms as a "brückenloser Abgrund"[40] that has opened up between his past and future work. In addition, he seems to have lost even a passive appreciation of high culture. For instance, when he attempts to find spiritual refuge in the works of the ancients, he cannot find comfort in their words; instead, they merely exacerbate his feeling of alienation and isolation. Chandos interestingly finds Plato's writing too poetic to offer him the sense of stability provided by the "Harmonie begrenzter und geordneter Begriffe"[41] found in the writings of Seneca and Cicero. However, even their thought fails to touch "das Tiefste, das Persönliche meines Denkens."[42] Chandos describes his sense of alienation in the following passage:

> 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

[39] *GWE*, 471.

[40] *GWE*, 462.

[41] *GWE*, 466-67.

[42] *GWE*, 466.

> 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.[43]

What is particularly striking about this description of his alienation from the abstract play of classical thought is that he again uses water imagery; this time, however, the fluidity is not a symbol of life, but rather is used to underscore the lifeless abstractness of the classical wisdom. He likens their thought to the playful movement of water in a decorative water fountain. The water in this fountain is disconnected from its natural source and redirected to produce a self-enclosed system of aesthetically pleasing movements.[44] Chandos further underscores the lifelessness he perceives in the thought of Cicero and Seneca by likening their philosophical ideas to a suffocating garden filled with "lauter augenlosen Statuen" that cannot return his gaze.

The last line in the above-cited passage, "ich flüchtete wieder ins Freie," is like a refrain in the second part of "Ein Brief." Repeatedly Chandos gets on his horse and rides out into the open. "Das Freie" is meant in the double sense of the open air outside and the sense of a space in which Chandos can feel liberated from his former life, which has become suffocating and lifeless to him. The potentially liberating space of "das Freie" is, however, also a threatening place. What is significant about "das Freie," outside the confines of Chandos' house, is that it is marked by a threatening sense of arbitrariness. That is, outside, Chandos perceives a world of particulars, which are not ordered by a

[43] *GWE*, 466-67.

[44] Similar water imagery can be found in "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten." For instance, there the letter writer contrasts the fresh cold water from the mountains running through a fountain to the water in the jar in his hotel room.

greater organizing principle.[45] Things do not hold together the way they once used to as eternal forms, and a radical sense of arbitrariness overwhelms Chandos, threatening to render his thinking and his perception of the world incoherent. However, it is precisely in those moments when the very arbitrariness of the space outside strikes Chandos in an idiosyncratic way that the objects around him seem most alive. Although Chandos claims that his post-crisis life is "geistlos" and "gedankenlos," it is in his *Gedankenlosigkeit*, while he is roaming in the countryside, that he can have the occasional, fleeting experience of what he calls "gute Augenblicke."[46]

I argue that these "gute Augenblicke" are epiphanic moments. These moments are not sublime in a strictly Kantian sense. That is, they are not triggered by the view of a majestic mountain range, or by the subject witnessing the terrifying display of nature's power in a hurricane, but instead these moments are experienced when the subject fleetingly encounters a terrifying, chaotic aliveness in the object of perception, which is beyond the limits of his reason and beyond his ability to adequately capture this experience in language.[47] In order to illustrate this experience, Chandos provides the following example:

> […] wenn ich an einem Abend unter einem Nußbaum eine halbvolle Gießkanne finde, die ein Gärtnerbursche dort vergessen hat, und wenn mich diese Gießkanne und das Wasser in ihr, das vom Schatten des Baumes finster ist, und ein Schwimmkäfer, der auf dem Spiegel dieses Wassers von einem dunklen Ufer zum andern rudert, wenn diese Zusammensetzung von Nichtigkeiten mich mit einer solchen Gegenwart des Unendlichen durchschauert, von den Wurzeln der Haare bis ins Mark der Fersen mich durchschauert, daß ich in Worte ausbrechen möchte,

[45] This is a nihilistic turn in a more traditional sense – no more God or the Absolute as the organizing principle.

[46] *GWE*, 467.

> von denen ich weiß, fände ich sie, so würden sie jene Cherubim, an die ich nicht glaube, niederzwingen […][48]

Chandos claims that he is overcome, in such moments, with a shiver that runs through his bones as he is suddenly overcome by the feeling of the "Gegenwart des Unendlichen." Of course this mention of infinity reminds us of Chandos' description of his pre-crisis life; however, during his crisis, the cosmic unity is only temporary and it is not experienced as an "andauerende Trunkenheit." Moreover, Chandos does not liken the relationship between himself and the infinite to a mother-infant relationship through milk imagery, as he does in his depiction of his pre-crisis life. Instead, the world appears during these "gute Augenblicke" as something completely *other* – as something that cannot be objectified and subsumed by the subject. In addition, Chandos perceives a vastness in the objects of his perception that is characteristic of the sublime. Although the perceived objects are not vast, empirically speaking, Chandos perceives an immensity in them. For instance, he describes a *Schwimmkäfer* floating on the surface of the water in the watering can. The water has been darkened by the shadow of a tree, creating an exaggerated sense of depth, and although the beetle is confined to a relatively small area within the "Gießkanne," Chandos conveys a sense of the vastness contained within this small space by observing that the beetle was attempting to row "von einem dunklen *Ufer* zum andern."[49] The word "Ufer" conveys a sense of immensity that one would not expect to find within the half-filled watering can.

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[48] *GWE*, 469.

[49] *GWE*, 469 (my italics).

Furthermore, it is important that the disparate objects mentioned above stand in arbitrary relation to one another. It is through coincidence that an idiosyncratic and unrepeatable relationship is formed between the *Nußbaum*, *Gießkanne*, *Schwimmkäfer* and Chandos. A series of coincidences – the coincidence of the gardener forgetting the watering can outside by the tree, of these objects catching Chandos' eye on his aimless early evening ride, of the shadow being cast from the tree onto the water in the can, and of Chandos seeing the beetle inside it – together produce a particular concatenation of circumstances that give rise to an epiphanic moment. The arbitrariness that structures this experience is underscored by the fact that the "gute Augenblick" takes place outside, in a natural environment over which the subject cannot exercise any control. Konrad Heumann observes that for Hofmannsthal the natural environment and its conditions – season, landscape, quality of air and of light – dictate our internal state. He argues that the environmental conditions are not merely evocative of certain feelings, but that they are directly involved in shaping our emotional state.[50] These fleeting moments in nature are for Chandos filled with an intense sense of aliveness, which almost resembles his inner state before the onset of his crisis: "Diese stummen und manchmal unbelebten Kreaturen heben sich mir mit einer solchen Fülle, einer solchen Gegenwart der Liebe entgegen, daß mein beglücktes Auge auch ringsum auf keinen toten Fleck zu fallen vermag."[51] But unlike in his pre-crisis life this so-called "Fülle" is one that is intensified precisely by its fleeting quality.

[50] Konrad Heumann, "'Stunde, Luft und Ort machen alles' Hofmannsthal's Phänomenologie der natürlichen Gegebenheiten," in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Neue Wege der Forschung*, ed. Elsbeth Dangel-Pelloquin (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchsgesellschaft, 2007), 123.

[51] *GWE*, 469.

There is an uncanny resemblance between the bucolic idyll that Chandos evokes in his portrayal of his pre-crisis life and the agrarian landscape within which he experiences the so-called "gute Augenblicke" during his crisis. Both in his life before and during his crisis, nature is charged with the potential for mystical revelation. But there is also an important difference between these scenes in nature. The epiphanic moments that sporadically burst through the grayness of Chandos' life of crisis do not result in a fusion between the subject and object. Instead, they point to the resistance of nature to the human attempt to order and dominate it. The enigmatic scene of the rats dying in the milk cellars exemplifies a moment in which Chandos encounters the violent revolt of nature against the attempt to sanitize it. In this scene Chandos is once again riding out aimlessly at dusk, when he is suddenly struck by the involuntary recollection of his order to have the rats in his milk cellars poisoned. The boundary between the space without and within is blurred in this scene. Chandos recalls:

> Da, wie ich im tiefen, aufgeworfenen Ackerboden Schritt reite, nichts Schlimmeres in meiner Nähe als eine aufgescheuchte Wachtelbrut und in der Ferne über den welligen Feldern die große sinkende Sonne, tut sich mir im Innern plötzlich dieser Keller auf, erfüllt mit dem Todeskampf dieses Volks von Ratten.[52]

His command to have the rats exterminated, which earlier had seemed to him like an innocuous housekeeping instruction to him, sets off a chain of disturbing images. The "tief[e], aufgeworfen[e] Ackerboden" evokes a visual image of Chandos' receptive state of mind, which is like the turned up soil in the field. Similarly, the startled "Wachtelbrut" that takes flight mirrors the spontaneous movement of his thought, and the sinking sun parallels the descent of his imagination into the depth of the milk cellar.

[52] *GWE*, 467.

Whereas the image of the flowing milk in the first part of the letter was associated with the fullness of Chandos' life, in the second part, Hofmannsthal connects the milk with poison and with a site of trauma. That is, through the furious, gruesome death throes of the rats in the milk cellar, Hofmannsthal crystallizes in a poetic image nature's revenge for the human attempt to scrub it clean. Nature haunts the human subject through the traumatic images of death and decay. It is once again important that this scene appears involuntarily before Chandos' mind's eye, because it stresses the ultimate lack of control that human beings have over nature, including their own. The juxtaposition of life and death, which is underscored through the contrast between milk and poison, as well as through the furious, panicked fight for survival, translates into the sense of aliveness that is simultaneously harrowing and exhilarating, and beyond the grasp of reason and language.

Wellbery is also struck by these objects of aesthetic contemplation and he notices the "Belanglosigkeit der Gegenstände"[53] that spark what Chandos calls "gute Augenblicke."[54] He explains that Schopenhauer introduced the idea that the aesthetic experience is unrelated to the cultural worth of the object that acts as the catalyst for the experience. Schopenhauer claimed, "so ist jedes Ding schön."[55] Thus, any random object can potentially be the object of an aesthetic experience. However, Wellbery points out that Hofmannsthal deviates from Schopenhauer's conception of the aesthetic object in the sense that, in "Ein Brief," it is not that a mundane object is only incidentally also the

[53] Wellbery, 284.

[54] *GWE*, 467.

[55] Schopenhauer, 298.

object of aesthetic contemplation, but rather the nondescript and discarded character of the object is the very quality that catalyzes the aesthetic experience.

While I agree with Wellbery's point here, I argue that the objects that give rise to Chandos' "gute Augenblicke" have more than their ordinariness in common. Seen together, the quotidian objects, which Chandos calls "stumme Kreaturen,"[56] evoke scenes of agrarian landscapes and agrarian life, and their concreteness gives expression to Chandos' melancholic longing for an immediate and direct connection to the land. Furthermore, in noticing "diese Zusammensetzung von Nichtigkeiten,"[57] he perceives the lower classes' humble way of life to which he had paid no attention before. Thus, Chandos develops a self-conscious, troubled relationship to his social role. He describes how in his vacuous life he managed to keep up appearances by attending to the maintenance of his estate. He writes, "Ich baue einen Flügel meines Hauses um und bringe es zustande, mich mit dem Architekten hie und da über die Fortschritte seiner Arbeit zu unterhalten."[58] However, he is inwardly stirred and distracted by his subjects' gritty lives, as he feels that their shabby dwellings and unrefined possessions can unexpectedly enchant him and even lead to epiphanic experiences:

> [I]ch bewirtschafte meine Güter, und meine Pächter und Beamten werden mich wohl etwas wortkarger, aber nicht ungütiger als früher finden. Keiner von ihnen, der mit abgezogener Mütze vor seiner Haustür steht, wenn ich abends vorüberreite, wird eine Ahnung haben, daß mein Blick, den er respektvoll aufzufangen gewohnt ist, mit stiller Sehnsucht über die morschen Bretter hinstreicht, unter denen er nach den Regenwürmern zum Angeln zu pflegen sucht, durchs enge, vergitterte Fenster in die dumpfe Stube taucht, wo in der Ecke das niedrige Bett mit bunten Laken immer auf einen zu warten scheint, der sterben

[56] *GWE*, 469.

[57] *GWE*, 469.

[58] *GWE*, 470.

> will, oder auf einen, der geboren werden soll; dass mein Auge lange an den häßlichen jungen Hunden hängt oder an der Katze, die geschmeidig zwischen Blumenscherben durchkriecht, und daß es unter all den ärmlichen und plumpen Gegenständen einer bäuerischen Lebensweise nach jenem einem sucht, dessen unscheinbare Form, dessen von niemand beachtetes Daliegen oder –lehnen, dessen stumme Wesenheit zur Quelle jenes rätselhaften, wortlosen, schrankenlosen Entzückens werden kann. Denn mein unbennantes seliges Gefühl wird eher aus einem fernen, einsamen Hirtenfeuer mir hervorbrechen als aus dem Anblick des gestirnten Himmels; eher aus dem Zirpen einer letzten, dem Tode nahen Grille, wenn schon der Herbstwind winterliche Wolken über die öden Felder hintreibt, als aus dem majestätischen Dröhnen der Orgel.[59]

Chandos' self is portrayed here as deeply divided. His public self is defined by his social class, which restricts him to participate only passively (through his gliding gaze) in the gritty life and work that sustains his estate. His private self, in contrast, longs to have the unalienated relationship that his workers appear to have with nature. The movement and direction of Chandos' gaze from the workers to the latticed window into the stuffy room, in the corner of which lies a bed where he imagines that one dies and one is born, parallel the direction of his yearning to be unselfconsciously anchored in a cycle of life that seems directly embedded in the land. In observing the lives of the peasants, Chandos comes to realize that nature does not lie waiting for us to force our shape upon it; rather, nature uses the human being, as he lives and acts in his everyday experience, to manifest itself. Chandos recognizes that it is not for the cultured observer of a higher class to reveal the beauty and richness of the "bäuerische Lebensweise;" it is rather that the peasants themselves, through the *Lebenswelt* that they inhabit, provide the field in which being is revealed.[60] As Chandos observes, it is in the "Daliegen oder – lehnen" of these

[59] *GWE*, 470-71.

[60] Jacques Le Rider observes that Hofmannsthal deconstructs the subject and allows it to reconstitute itself in a mystical impulse. According to him, Hofmannsthal called this conversion "mysticism without

mere things that these objects' mute being becomes the source of his "rätselhaften, wortlosen, schrankenlosen Entzückens."

However, one cannot help but notice that it is still Chandos' description that allows the field of being to emerge. In the above-cited passage Hofmannsthal points to an important shift in the artist's relationship to the world: While Chandos claims to have abandoned all of his former intellectual and artistic projects, it is clear that he still possesses an artistic sensibility, even after the onset of his crisis; however, this sensibility is no longer expressed through artistic *productivity*, but instead is redefined as a poetic *receptiveness* to the world of lived experience. Whereas the starry sky and the majestically droning organ point to an eternal *Jenseits*, the lonely "Hirtenfeuer" or the "Zirpen einer letzten, dem Tode nahen Grille" draw his attention to the *Diesseits*. And it is in his absorption in the ordinary, intimate, finite things of the here and now – the finitude of this realm being underscored by the fleetingness of the "Herbstwind" and "winterliche Wolken" – that Chandos experiences the immense and ineffable.

IV. Language Crisis and the Language of Nature

This shift in Chandos' artistic sensibility, however, threatens to silence the writer. No higher order resonates with him or allows him to gain a sense of stability. Chandos no longer has a universal standard by which he can make judgments, be they commonsensical, moral, or philosophical. As mentioned near the beginning of this chapter, Chandos himself summarizes his crisis with the following diagnosis: "Mein Fall ist, in Kürze, dieser: Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend

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God." *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de- Siècle Vienna*, trans. Rosemary Morris (New York: Continuum, 1994), 50.

etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen."[61] First, he finds that words like "Geist," "Seele," and "Körper"[62] make him uneasy. Then he discovers that he cannot even participate in common small talk that involves any amount of critical judgment. He laments, "die abstrakten Worte, deren sich doch die Zunge naturgemäß bedienen muß, um irgendwelches Urteil an den Tag zu geben, zerfielen mir im Munde wie modrige Pilze."[63] Finally, when Chandos catches his daughter in a childish lie, he is physically nauseated by the slipperiness of "die mir im Munde zuströmenden Begriffe" that bleed into each other, causing him to stammer and to become "bleich im Gesicht," so that he leaves his child in mid-sentence and storms out of the house. Chandos recalls that he recovered "erst zu Pferde, auf der einsamen Hutweide einen guten Galopp nehmend."[64] Once again he has to ride out into the open, where his mind is free to roam.

During his crisis, Chandos is bereft of his earlier certainty of the direct correspondence between language and world and he feels that language has become slippery:

> Es gelang mir nicht mehr, sie [alle Dinge, Menschen und ihre Handlungen] mit dem vereinfachenden Blick der Gewohnheit zu erfassen. Es zerfiel mir alles in Teile, die Teile wieder in Teile, und nichts mehr ließ sich mit einem Begriff umspannen. Die einzelnen Worte schwammen um mich; sie gerannen zu Augen, die mich anstarrten und in die ich wieder hineinstarren muß: Wirbel sind sie, in die hinabzusehen mich schwindelt, die sich unaufhaltsam drehen und durch die hindurch man ins Leere kommt.[65]

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[61] *GWE*, 465.

[62] *GWE*, 465.

[63] *GWE*, 465.

[64] *GWE*, 465.

[65] *GWE*, 466.

Not only does the world appear fragmented to Chandos, but words appear to be floating around him, unanchored in any corresponding material reality. Whereas language had once allowed him to grasp the world, he now finds himself confronting the groundlessness of words and statements. He suddenly feels that language resists him. He senses an otherness in it of which he had been previously unaware. It is as though language has its own will, which is indicated by his description of the words turning into eyes that stare at him. And when he stares back into these "eyes," he perceives them as vortices that spiral into a dizzying void.[66] The slipperiness of language also affects his general perception of the world, as Chandos explains that he is no longer able to see the world through the lens of habit. This inability is disturbing to him not only because it prevents him from relating socially to his neighbors through "common sense," but also because without a simplifying "Blick der Gewohnheit," the world emerges as a threatening chaos.

Paralleling Nietzsche's observations in "Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne," Chandos has become aware of the non-identity of language and world. In his essay, Nietzsche observes that human beings believe that they have a grasp of truth because they have become forgetful of the metaphoric nature of language. As Günther points out, in "Ein Brief" Hofmannsthal emphasizes the enigmatic quality of the world and "die Unmöglichkeit einer letztgültigen Entschlüsselung."[67] Günther asserts, "Der Versuch, das Buch der Welt, das Abc des Himmels und der Erde zu entziffern, hat zur

[66] Günther argues, "Da Sprache aber über den Welt*stoff* keine wahren Aussagen zu machen erlaubt und der Mangel an Wahrheit durch Technik kompensiert wurde, folgt daraus die skeptische Haltung, dass es zwischen Sprache und Welt keinerlei Verbindung und Vermittlung gebe. Wer aber, so Hofmannsthal, in der Sprache das Dinghafte sucht, der wird ins Leere greifen, nur Schall finden." Günther, 31.

[67] Günther, 27.

Folge, daß der Schlüssel sich in Figuren auflöst in Bilder und Symbole, das heißt er verwandelt sich in Poesie, geht auf in Dichtung."[68] Günther's observation is reminiscent of Nietzsche's critique of language. According to Nietzsche, words are metaphors for our sensory perceptions: "Ein Nervenreiz, zuerst übertragen in ein Bild! Erste Metapher. Das Bild wieder nachgeformt in einem Laut! Zweite Metapher. Und jedesmal vollständiges Überspringen der Sphäre, mitten hinein in eine ganz andre und neue."[69] In his essay Nietzsche points to the entirely subjective and arbitrary nature of our names for things, and he argues that the very existence of the different languages is evidence of the fact that we do not have adequate expressions for the "Ding an sich."[70] What words and concepts do stand for are the relations of things to human beings. Moreover, human beings have invented concepts to give themselves the illusion of control and domination of nature:

> Das Übersehen des Individuellen und Wirklichen gibt uns den Begriff, wie es uns auch die Form gibt, wohingegen die Natur keine Formen und Begriffe, also auch keine Gattungen kennt, sondern nur ein für uns unzugängliches und undefinierbares X. Denn auch unser Gegensatz von Individuum und Gattung ist anthropomorphisch und entstammt nicht dem Wesen der Dinge, wenn wir auch nicht zu sagen wagen, daß er ihm nicht entspricht: das wäre nämlich eine dogmatische Behauptung und als solche ebenso unerweislich wie ihr Gegenteil.[71]

According to Nietzsche nature is an inaccessible, indefinable X. The forms, concepts, and categories that we believe to discern in nature do not originate from it, but rather reflect our own tendency to anthropomorphize nature. Significantly, Nietzsche,

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[68] Günther, 26.

[69] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne," in *Nietzsches Werke in zwei Bänden*, ed. Gerhard Stenzel, vol. 2 (Salzburg: "Das Bergland Buch" Verlag, 1952), 1082.

[70] Nietzsche.

[71] Nietzsche, 1083-84.

however, does not make the *absolute* claim that our concepts do not point to the essence of things. In fact, he keeps the answer to this question in philosophical abeyance, claiming that it would be dogmatic to make an absolute claim on this matter. As he says above, "das wäre nämlich eine dogmatische Behauptung und als solche ebenso unerweislich wie ihr Gegenteil." Similarly, the *Sprachkrise* in "Ein Brief" is not a crisis that definitively points to the complete failure of language. After all, Chandos' claim that he is no longer capable of creating coherence through language stands in obvious contradiction to his act of using language in order to convey his *Sprachkrise*.

Nietzsche, however, does make the absolute claim that there is no identity between subject and object:

> denn zwischen zwei absolut verschiedenen Sphären, wie zwischen Subjekt und Objekt, gibt es keine Kausalität, keine Richtigkeit, keinen Ausdruck, sondern höchstens ein *ästhetisches* Verhalten, ich meine eine andeutende Übertragung, eine nachstammelnde Übersetzung in eine fremde Sprache: wozu es aber jedenfalls einer frei dichtenden und frei erfindenden Mittelsphäre und Mittelkraft bedarf.[72]

I argue that "Ein Brief" presents us with a figure who is becoming conscious of such a fundamentally aesthetic relationship to the world. In the twentieth century, Heidegger and others would make the step from Nietzsche's claim about the non-identity between subject and object to a more radical philosophy that questioned that subject-object distinction altogether. I contend that in Hofmannsthal's thought there are intimations of this more radical perspective. Although Chandos despairs of his lost confidence in language's power to unlock the secrets of being, I argue that he actually enters into a far more mystical relationship with his surroundings precisely because of his crisis. Chandos

[72] Nietzsche, 1087.

is on the cusp of a new relationship with nature. The reality is not so much that human beings can act on nature to reveal its secrets, but rather that nature reveals itself specifically through the acts and lives of human beings. Language is not, then, a tool used by the artist to reveal being, but rather the way being uses humans to manifest itself in history. To use Heidegger's phrase, "die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins."[73]

Chandos thus no longer actively creates art out of nature. Instead, he comes to the Heideggerian realization that human beings are the stewards of being. "Ein Brief," then, as much as it seems to hail an abdication of its author's former role as a steward of art and culture, in its very form and substance opens the door to a reformulation of that role. Hofmannsthal shows through the *Chandos Letter* that we reveal nature through our very activity of being in the world. The process of arriving at this realization involves a confrontation with our desire to name nature and to recognize that this impulse is itself an expression of nature, which remains enigmatic to us.

In this chapter, then, I have argued that Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" contrasts two different modes of experiencing nature: one in which nature is reduced to a symbolic language that carries meaning only through human interpretation, and another in which nature appears as something that resists such a reduction and is communicated to human beings in its wholeness, in fleeting, epiphanic moments. I have suggested, however, that these two different modes of experience are not self-sufficient and straightforwardly opposed to one another, but rather are linked.

Through the figure of Lord Chandos, Hofmannsthal presents a writer who experiences a crisis of meaning as he becomes conscious of the fact that the symbolic

[73] Martin Heidegger, *Über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1949), 5.

order, which he believed to be identical to the natural order, is groundless and merely self-referential. In other words, the language that is used to name nature, rather than bringing him closer to an understanding of the natural world, reflects the human desire to control and dominate it. Chandos' growing awareness of the otherness of nature is reflected in the transformation of his active, artistic productivity into a passive, aesthetic receptivity. The writer is no longer conceived as the one who assigns meaning to the world, but rather meaning is revealed to him through nature's mute language. Yet, through the very act of writing this letter, Chandos demonstrates his inextricable entanglement in the symbolic order, in spite of his desire to reject it.

Chapter 2: The Bourgeois Subject and Culture: "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten"

In 1907, five years after "Ein Brief," Hofmannsthal published "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten," another fictional letter, or rather a series of letters, in which the author presents a protagonist who is undergoing a crisis. While the crisis at the center of "Ein Brief" is the experience of one privileged individual at the turn of the seventeenth century, in "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" the crisis is representative of a generation-wide experience created by the conditions of European modernity at the turn of the twentieth century. Instead of a cultured, aristocratic figure who is connected to the leading intellectuals of his time, the writer of "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" is an anonymous businessman, who expressly, and almost proudly, declares that he is uncultured. While Lord Chandos and his friends represent those who shape and produce culture, in "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" the letter writer's anonymity points to a new egalitarian age. Even within this contrast, however, there is continuity between the *Chandos Letter* and the letter of the nameless letter writer here. In the *Chandos Letter* there is a rupture in the symbolic order, which challenges the very status of the elite steward of that culture and threatens the "organic" coherence of society; in "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" Hofmannsthal then shows the new social organization that seems to arise to fill in the void left by the erosion of the aristocratic cultural class. The new social order is explicitly egalitarian, capitalistic, and self-consciously uncultured. It no longer looks to the cultural artifacts of an aristocratic class to provide a sense of coherence; instead, it places its faith in the power of the self-made man—the individual who makes his own way, spurning the guidance of tradition and culture.

The broader effect of "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten," however, is to subvert the bourgeois self-understanding, demonstrating how this new social class finds its unity through a symbolic order that is all the more pervasive in its influence for going unremarked. This point is illustrated most powerfully through the narrator's encounter with the work of Van Gogh; the narrator enthusiastically embraces this art, but only on the assumption that it is his subjectivity that gives it its meaning. Hofmannsthal, however, provides indications that it is, on the contrary, Van Gogh's art that has shaped the narrator's bourgeois subjectivity. "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" explores how, in an age dominated by the concerns of a rising business class, cultural forms emerge which unify and preserve that class, precisely by sustaining the illusion of its independence from culture.

I. Der Zurückgekehrte

In "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten," Hofmannsthal begins his narrative where other homecoming stories tend to end, namely with the return home. In the German literary tradition, the wanderer—be it an adventurer, fool, artist, or thinker—has figured centrally in the Romantic imagination. Travel, the Romantics believed, was a necessary component of *Bildung*. Just like Goethe's Wilhelm Meister or Novalis' Heinrich von Ofterdingen, the protagonists of these Romantic *Bildungsromane* had to leave their homes to gather life experiences, to encounter untouched nature, to discover their artistic sensibilities, and ideally, to eventually return home with an enriched sense of self. However, these narratives of travel and *Bildung* did not always culminate in heroic self-realizations. In the mid-nineteenth century, Gottfried Keller, the Poetic-Realist, shows through his novel *Der grüne Heinrich* that the young man's journey can result in disillusionment. The

education away from home that is supposed to allow the protagonist to become a first-rate artist leads him to discover that he is merely a mediocre talent, and he returns home disillusioned and broke, ready to resign himself to a modest, stable life as a bureaucrat. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the figure of the wanderer becomes the object of nostalgia as the technology of travel develops and turns the folklore fantasy of the seven-league boots into reality. Thus, the contemplative traveler, who arduously covers vast distances on foot, is supplanted by the businessman, crisscrossing Europe by train, or by the urban flaneur, who self-consciously attempts to resist the speed of modern life by becoming an aimless wanderer within a bustling metropolis.

Instead of telling the story of a young protagonist who embarks on his journey to unfamiliar lands, "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" is about the return of a middle-aged traveler[74] whose adventures are already behind him. In five confessional letters, an anonymous businessman describes the disorienting experience of returning home after having led a nomadic existence for eighteen years, traveling around the world from Germany to North and South America, China, the East Indies, and New Zealand. Over the course of the first three letters, the narrator relates to his friend how he experienced an unexpected culture shock upon his return to modern-day Germany; in the final two letters, he then describes how his sense of estrangement from Germany intensified and manifested itself as a spiritual feeling of nausea caused by a crisis of perception. At the height of his crisis, the narrator encounters Van Gogh's paintings in an unknown little art

[74] The letter writer mentions in the first letter that he is in his forties: "Sind es die überschrittenen Vierzig, und ist auch in mir etwas schwerer und dumpfer geworden, so wie mein Körper, den ich in den Distrikten nie gespürt habe und nun – wenn das nicht eine angeflogene Hypochondrie ist – zu spüren anfange?" *GWE*, 544.

gallery, and the encounter with Van Gogh's vividly expressive artwork renews his sense of self and revitalizes his perception of the world.

II. The Bourgeois Subject and the Rejection of *Bildung*

The fictional author of these five letters represents a rising business class that defines itself against the refinements of a European cultured class. From the beginning, the letter writer identifies himself as a "Geschäftsmann," who lacks the refinements that distinguishes the cultural elite from the rest of society. He confesses, "Bildung, im europäischen, heutigen Sinne, habe ich nicht."[75] He opposes his "ungeschickte Sprache" to the "Kunstsprache" [76] of philosophy and literature. Reminding his friend of this fact, he says, "Du kennst mich gut genug, um zu wissen, daß ich bei meinem Leben nicht viel Zeit hatte, abstrakte oder theoretische Lebensweisheiten anzusammeln."[77] But while he admits to lacking abstract, theoretical insights into life, the narrator takes pride in his "praktische Erfahrung, aus den Gesichtern von Menschen oder aus dem, was sie nicht sagen, etwas abzunehmen."[78] This ability to read body language and to interpret unspoken signs allows him to anticipate and avert interpersonal problems that may stand in the way of business deals.[79] The letter writer perceives the elevated "Kunstsprache" of educated and cultured people to be an artificial language, whereas he sees his "ungeschickte Sprache" as a more authentic way of speaking. In trying to explain the

[75] *GWE*, 556.

[76] *GWE*, 547.

[77] *GWE*, 545.

[78] *GWE*, 545.

[79] *GWE*, 545.

ambivalent feeling that has been triggered upon his return to Germany, he reaches for the word "Existenzgefühl," but then quickly follows the use of this word with an apology:

> Du siehst, ich quäle mich zurück in den Gebrauch einer Kunstsprache, die mir in zwanzig Jahren fremd genug geworden ist. Aber muß ich wirklich kompliziert werden unter den Komplizierten? Ich möchte in mir selber blühn, und dies Europa könnt mich mir selber wegstehlen. So will ich es Dir lieber weitschweifig oder ungeschickt sagen und ihren Kunstworten ausweichen.[80]

He suggests that his twenty years abroad are not only causing him to have an outside perspective on his former home continent, but also that they have simplified and strengthened his sense of self, a self that is representative of a utility-maximizing, atomistic, capitalist individual. He is clearly suspicious of the complicated language of the cultured Europeans and prefers his "clumsy" language. Moreover, he privileges the language of the body as a more authentic expression of a person's inner state. From the perspective of the protagonist, to be "cultured" means to be conformist, affected, and unnecessarily complicated. He sees his own uncultured way of being as more natural, authentic, and true to his own self.

There are strong parallels between the *Chandos Letter* and "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten." The letter writer's observation that a refined literary and theoretical language has a distorting effect, and his privileging of a more primal, non-verbal language—be it body language or the language of colors—should remind us of the central opposition in the *Chandos Letter* between conceptual language and the language of nature. In both cases, this opposition is fed by an emerging age of discovery. In the *Chandos Letter*, the protagonist is reacting to the experimental methods of science pioneered by Bacon, which have established a new and adversarial relationship to nature

[80] *GWE*, 545.

(as expressed in Bacon's remark about "putting nature on the rack"). "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten," on the other hand, takes place in a nineteenth-century Europe that has already been thoroughly shaped by the Baconian revolution, but that has recently discovered a supposedly more organic way of relating to nature through an encounter with non-European peoples.

III. Encountering *Heimat* Abroad

Gunther Gebhard has described how the increased exploration of distant and exotic countries brought knowledge of and stories from foreign places to Europe, provoking self-conscious reflections on the nature of one's homeland. Gebhard tells us that a shift began to take place around 1800 in the conceptualization of *Heimat* from a geographically and legally defined idea to an abstracted, folklorized and aestheticized notion.[81] It is telling that the narrator of "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" finds the clearest expression of what it means to live an authentic and rooted existence in the words of a foreigner. He recounts an adage passed on to him by a Scot he once met during his travels: "The whole man must move at once."[82] He likens this simple piece of wisdom to an "Organ, das wir im inneren Ohr haben, den Knöchelchen oder kleinen beweglichen Kugeln: sie sagen uns, ob wir im Gleichgewicht sind oder nicht."[83] For the narrator, wholeness means "Wahrhaftigkeit" and "Menschlichkeit."[84] He explains that when he

[81] Gunther Gebhard, Oliver Geisler, and Steffen Schröter, *Heimat: Konturen und Konjunkturen* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), 14.

[82] *GWE*, 546.

[83] *GWE*, 546.

[84] *GWE*, 546.

sees this quality in people, he calls it "einen guten Zug," an unspoken bearing and disposition that signals wholeness:

> The whole man must move at once—wenn ich unter Amerikanern und dann später unter den südlichen Leuten in der Banda oriental, unter den Spaniern und Gauchos, und zuletzt unter Chinesen und Malaien, wenn mir da ein guter Zug vor die Augen trat, was ich einen guten Zug nenne, ein Etwas in der Haltung, das mir Respekt abnötigt und mehr als Respekt, ich weiß nicht wie, ich dies sagen soll, es mag der große Zug sein, den sie manchmal in ihren Geschäften haben, in den U.S. meine ich, diese fast wahnwitzig wilde und zugleich fast kühl besonnene "Hineingehen" für eine Sache, oder es mag ein gewisses partriarchalisches grand air sein, ein alter weißbärtiger Gaucho, wie er dasteht an der Tür seiner Estancia, so ganz er selbst [...] es mag auch etwas viel Unscheinbares sein, ein tierisches Hängen mit dem Blick am Zucken einer Angelschnur, ein Lauern mit der ganzen Seele, wie nur Malaien lauern können, denn es *kann* ein großer Zug darin liegen, wie einer fischt, und ein größerer Zug, als Du Dir möchtest träumen lassen, darin, wie ein farbiger Bettelmönch Dir die irdene Bettelschale hinhält—wenn etwas der Art mir unterkam, so dachte ich: Zuhause![85]

The narrator's understanding of wholeness is very much based on his idealization of a "primitive" or pre-modern way of life, which he claims he experienced in the United States, in South America, and in Asia. In a sense he orientalizes the very notion of wholeness inasmuch as he sees it manifested in the exotic, "primitive" other, who is not internally divided, but appears to be unselfconsciously himself, as he claims of the white-bearded gaucho, who is described as "ganz er selbst." What he values about the bearing of "whole" men is their ability to command respect, not through words, but simply through their uninhibited being. The men he portrays appear to be more fully themselves because there is no separation between their action and their being. They inhabit their place in the world without the sense that they are fulfilling an abstract professional role, or merely engaging in a specialized activity that finds its value only within a complex web of specialized relationships. The angler and the beggar perform tasks that serve their

[85] *GWE*, 546-47.

most primary and basic function, namely subsistence; the American entrepreneur approaches his business deals with a single-mindedness of someone who identifies with his task entirely. The Malay angler, furthermore, with his "tierisches Hängen," is likened to a predatory animal, as though the act of fishing were the expression of a powerful natural instinct.

IV. Two Germanies

The narrator's encounter with these simpler, more authentic modes of existence abroad sets the stage for his disillusionment upon returning to Germany. Back in his homeland, the question of Germany has become a self-conscious one for him:

> Dies Deutschland, in dem ich herumfahre, handle, abwickle, mit Leuten esse, den kosmopolitischen Geschäftsmann, den fremden, welterfahrenen Herrn agiere—wo *war* ich jedesmal, wenn ich in dem Land zu sein meinte, das man durch den Spiegel der Erinnerung betritt, wo *war* ich in den Augenblicken, wo nur mein Leib unter den Gauchos oder unter den Maoris herumwandelte? Wo *war* ich? Nun da dies Deutschland ist, so war ich nicht in Deutschland. Und dennoch, ich nannte es in mir Deutschland.[86]

While he was away from home he was able to call all experiences of wholeness "Deutschland"; however, once he is back in Germany, he discovers that he cannot encounter the so-called homeland with the immediacy he claims to have experienced abroad. From the beginning, the letter writer identifies the cause of his crisis of identity as the lack of correspondence between his "Begriff von den Deutschen"[87] and the experience of living amongst them. He describes this problem in the opening sentences of the first letter:

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[86] *GWE*, 548-49.

[87] *GWE*, 544.

> So bin ich nach achtzehn Jahren wieder in Deutschland, bin auf dem Weg nach Österreich, und weiss selbst nicht, wie mir zumut ist. Auf dem Schiff machte ich mir Begriffe, ich machte mir Urteile im voraus. Meine Begriffe sind mir über dem wirklichen Ansehen in diesen vier Monaten verlorengegangen, und ich weiß nicht, was an ihre Stelle getreten ist: ein zerspaltenes Gefühl von der Gegenwart, eine zerstreute Benommenheit, eine innere Unordnung, die nahe an Unzufriedenheit ist—und fast zum erstenmal im Leben widerfährt mirs, daß ein Gefühl von mir selbst sich aufdrängt.[88]

The narrator explicitly emphasizes the opposition between concepts and experience, concepts and "wirkliche[s] Ansehen," concepts and "Gefühle." Because the letter writer's sense of identity and belonging was based on his abstract idea of Germany, the fact that this idea does not map onto the actual experience of the country and its people is experienced as the loss of an inner stabilizing center, without which he feels unanchored, divided and strange to himself. And yet, it appears that this crisis of identity is at one level also productive for the narrator because his destabilized and eroded sense of belonging to a larger community has given rise to a much stronger awareness of his individual self.

The letter writer applies the binary opposition between theoretical and experiential knowledge to his understanding of *Heimat*. That is, there are two different understandings of the homeland at play in this text. On the one hand, there is the homeland as a nation-state; this is essentially a concept defined in legal and political terms, mapped onto a people within the confines of artificially imposed geographic boundaries. On the other hand, it is thought of as a place that is constituted through lived experience and through a people's organic dwelling in the land. I argue that this distinction between these two different types of homeland clarifies the letter writer's

[88] *GWE*, 544.

often confusing use of the term "Deutschland" and "Österreich." That is, he mentions that he is passing through Germany on the way to Austria, leading us to believe that his homeland must be Austria. And yet, he seems profoundly disturbed by the fact that he cannot identify with the Germans. He writes that he called the feeling of being at home during his travels abroad "Deutschland": "Indem die Dinge an meine Seele schlugen, so war mir, ich läse ein buntes Buch des Lebens, aber das Buch handelte immerfort von Deutschland."[89]

Jacques Le Rider explains that even though Hofmannsthal's narrator is Austrian, he uses "Deutschland" synonymously with *Heimat* because it designates the larger German cultural realm to which Austria belongs.[90] I assert, therefore, that in the context of these letters, when the term "Deutschland" is used in a positive sense, it refers to the larger German *Kulturnation*, whereas when it is negatively charged, it refers to the Prussian-led nation-state. The letter writer tells his friend, "Ich machte mir einen Begriff von den Deutschen, und noch als ich über die Wesel der Grenze zufuhr, hatte ich ihn ganz rein in mir: es war nicht völlig der, den die Engländer vor 70 von uns hatten."[91] Here the narrator, whose letter is dated 1901, refers to the fact that there are two different conceptions of Germany in circulation, namely a greater Germany, held together by a common language and culture, and the political nation-state that was founded in 1871. By contrast, to the dual meaning of "Deutschland," the term "Österreich" is always

[89] *GWE*, 547.

[90] See Jacques Le Rider's article, "Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the Austrian Idea of Central Europe," in *The Habsburg Legacy: National Identity in Historical Perspective*, ed. Ritchie Robertson and Edward Timms, *Austrian Studies* 5 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1994), 121-35.

[91] *GWE*, 544.

positively charged and representative of a homeland that is organically constituted through a people's attachment to the land.

The narrator's opposition between Germany and Austria anticipates Hofmannsthal's comparison between the Prussians and the Austrians in his 1917 piece "Preusse und Österreicher: ein Schema." In this short schematic piece, Hofmannsthal outlines the contrasting characteristics of Prussians and Austrians through the lens of three categories: "Im Ganzen," "Soziale Struktur," and "Der Einzelne." Not surprisingly, Hofmannsthal characterizes Austria more favorably than Germany. Hofmannsthal's elliptical jottings describe Prussia as an artificial construction that requires a state to hold the people together. Austria, on the other hand, is described as having developed organically into a historical fabric; rich in nature and land, it coheres through "Heimatliebe."[92] By listing "Tüchtigkeit," "Streberei," and "Disziplin" under the Prussian column, he aligns Germany with modern progress; the Austrians, on the other hand, are characterized by their attachment to tradition, their humanity, and their sociability – thus, they are characterized by their resistance to modern progress.[93]

Another linguistic clue to the narrator's relationship with modern-day Germany appears in his shifting use of the terms "us" and "them." The play of pronouns in his letters indicates that he wants to identify with the Germans, while feeling deeply ambivalent towards them. For instance, he writes to his friend, who is presumably also German: "Und nun bin ich seit vier Monaten unter *ihnen*, habe in Düsseldorf mit *ihren* Minenleuten gehandelt und in Berlin mit *ihren* Bankleuten, [...] habe mit Ämtern und

[92] *GWRA II*, 459.

[93] *GWRA II*, 459-61.

Behörden zu tun gehabt, *Eure* Eisen- und Maschinenleute, *Eure* kleinen und großen Herren gekostet—und weiß nicht, was ich sagen soll."[94] The impersonal nature of his interactions with the Germans, the repeated use of the third-person plural pronouns "ihnen" and "ihre," and the second-person plural possessive pronoun "eure" instead of the first-person plural pronoun "unsere," all underscore his alienation from the German people. He sees the German nation-state as an inorganic entity, formed largely as an economic union. This criticism is reflected in the above-cited passage, in which the people encountered in Imperial Germany are identified by their profession, and the cities are recognized by the industry or economic sector that are associated with them.

But why should it be that the narrator, as the self-identified businessman, should not feel more at home in a Germany that defines itself by its economic productivity? While the protagonist seems to be genuinely impressed by his contact with the Germans in their various professional specializations, who together promote greater economic growth, he is on another level also disturbed by what he sees. "Denke nicht," he writes his friend of modern Germany, "daß ich ihre Leistungen nicht achte. Aber daß die Deutschen arbeiten, davon ist die Welt voll: Da ich heimkam, dachte ich zu sehen, wie sie leben. Und ich bin da, und wie sie leben, sehe ich nicht."[95] On the one hand, he sees a world of broadening connections, where formerly geographically remote areas are integrated through trade; indeed, his involvement in successful "javanesisch-deutschen Negoziationen"[96] points to his own participation in this integrating process. Moreover,

[94] *GWE*, 544-5 (italics mine).

[95] *GWE*, 555.

[96] *GWE*, 545.

the needs of the modern industry require people to adopt specialized functions that bring them together with others from outside the familiar circle of family, friends, and neighbors. On the other hand, the new connections that are formed through business relations create anomie and erode traditional values and social ties.

This fracturing effect of the modern economy appears to be more obvious to the letter writer now that he has returned to a place he had thought of as *Heimat*, and thus as a place of origin and belonging in a narrower, more traditional sense. However, instead of finding such an organic place of belonging, he finds a fragmented society in Imperial Germany, observing that the Germans have "bürgerliche Verhältnisse und adelige Verhältnisse und Universitätskreise und Finanzkreise," but that all of these relations lack "eine wahre Dichtigkeit der Verhältnisse […] das Gemeinschaftbildende, all das Ursprüngliche davon, das was im Herzen sitzt."[97] Thus, while the protagonist is himself involved in creating the sinews of the new nation, he pines for some lost organic wholeness.[98]

V. Austria, Dürer and the Immediacy of Experience

This lost wholeness is embodied in the narrator's recollections of his childhood in Austria. In his imagination, Austria represents a place that is impervious to the passage of time and to modernization:

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[97] *GWE*, 556.

[98] The homecomer's critique of Germany echoes the condemning words of Hölderlin's Hyperion, who criticizes the Germans for being divided and alienated from themselves. He says, "ich kann kein Volk mir denken, das zerrißner wäre, wie die Deutschen. Handwerker siehst du, aber keine Menschen, Denker, aber keine Menschen, Priester, aber keine Menschen, Herrn und Knechte, Jungen und gesetzte Leute, aber keine Menschen […] ruhte nur nicht überall der Fluch der gottverlaßnen Unnatur auf solchem Volk." Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, 123. (Hyperion is, of course, contrasting the Germans with the Greeks.)

> in zwei Wochen fahre ich nach Gebhartsstetten und kann so ziemlich sicher sein, den Laufbrunnen wiederzufinden mit der friedlichen Jahreszahl 1776 in verschnörkelten theresianischen Chiffren—da wird er stehen und mich anrauschen, und der alte, schiefe vom Blitz gespaltenen Nußbaum, der immer am spätesten von allen Bäumen seiner Blätter bekam und am unwilligsten von allen sie dem Winter preisgab, der wird in all seiner Schiefheit und seinem Alter irgendwie ein Zeichen geben, daß er mich erkennt und daß ich nun wieder da bin und er da ist, wie immer.[99]

When he imagines his return to Gebhartsstetten, his childhood hometown, he expects to find everything as it was before. What stands out in this passage is the narrator's description of the year 1776 as a peaceful year. The "theresianischen Chiffren" inscribed into the water fountain indicate their origin in Maria Theresia's reign. The positive association that the protagonist has with this date suggests that the he considers the old imperial relationship as a peaceful and durable state of affairs, even while the paradigmatic bourgeois revolt against colonialism was taking place in America in 1776. This strange oversight points to the romanticism and fragility of his identification with the Habsburg Empire, which was already fracturing under the pressure of irrepressible anti-colonial forces around 1900 (the fictional date of his letter being 1901). The romanticization of *Heimat* is also reflected in the image of the age-old walnut tree, which evokes a sense of ageless rootedness, implying that *Heimat* is a place that has always already been there. Finally, the writer's expectation that the tree will greet him with a "Zeichen" of mute recognition reminds us of Lord Chandos' pining for an unmediated understanding between the subject and his environment, which he expresses in his dream of "eine Sprache, in welcher die stummen Dinge zu mir sprechen."[100]

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[99] *GWE*, 548.

[100] *GWE*, 472.

The narrator emphasizes that his idea of *Heimat* was preceded by the physical *feeling* of inhabiting a particular landscape and climate. To convey the feeling of familiarity that he longs for but is failing to recapture in Germany, he describes a childhood experience that, to him, became representative of the idea of feeling at home:

> Daß ich mich dir mit einem Beispiel ausdrücke, das freilich albern ist: es ist wie mit dem Wassertrinken am Brunnen. Du weißt, ich war als Kind fast immerfort in Oberösterreich auf dem Land, nach meinem zehnten Jahr dann nur mehr die Sommer. Aber sooft ich in Kassel während der Schulwinter oder sonst wohin ich mit meinen Eltern kam, einen Trunk Wassers tat—nicht wie man gleichgiltig bei der Mahlzeit trinkt, sondern wenn man erhitzt ist und vertrocknet und sich nach dem Wasser sehnt—so oft war ich auch, jedesmal für eines Blitzes Dauer, in meinem Oberösterreich, in Gebhartsstetten, an dem alten Laufbrunnen. Nicht: ich dachte daran—*war dort*, schmeckte in dem Wasser etwas von der eisernen Röhre, fühlte übers ganze Gesicht die Luft vom Gebirg her wehen und zugleich den Sommergeruch von der verstaubten Landstraße herüber—kurz, wie das zugeht, weiß ich nicht, aber ich habe es zu oft erlebt, um nicht daran zu glauben, und so gebe ich mich zufrieden. —Noch in New York und in St. Louis die kurze Zeit ging das mit mir, dann freilich in New Orleans schon und später noch weiter im Süden da verlor es sich: Luft und Wasser waren da zu sehr ein Verschiedenes von dem, was in Gebhartsstetten aus dem Rohr sprang und über den Zaun wehte—und Luft und Wasser sind große Herren und machen aus den Menschen, was sie wollen.[101]

The narrator recalls how his feeling of home is anchored in a concrete experience of sensory aliveness that he had as a child in Austria: the taste of water "von der eisernen Röhre," the feeling of the mountain air sweeping over his face, and the smell of the "verstaubte Landstraße" in the summer. The feeling of being at home is thus defined by a very specific somatic experience of a particular geography and climate. Konrad Heumann explains that according to Hofmannsthal's phenomenology of natural conditions, feelings

[101] *GWE*, 547-48.

are to a certain degree always prefigured by environmental factors.[102] The physical memory of drinking cold water from the spring in Oberösterreich lingers into his adulthood, so that as long as he was traveling in the Northern Hemisphere, the taste of a refreshing swig of cool water could suddenly transport him, in a moment that anticipates Proust, to the very fountain in Gebhartsstetten from which he drank as a child. The sudden moments in which the letter writer experienced *Heimat* even while traveling in foreign countries are structurally like epiphanic moments. They are experiences that are out of the subject's control and cannot be reproduced at will; they are fleeting experiences of immediacy, which the letter writer fails to relive upon his return to Imperial Germany.

These reveries of a childhood connection to Austria that was once naïve and immediate of course present an idealized recollection. This is a fact that the letter writer himself comes to recognize at some level. In his third letter, he begins to muse about the effect that the art of Dürer had in shaping his lived connection to Austria. This reflection on Dürer offers the first small sign that the narrator is aware of the ways in which our experience of the world may be mediated through the products of culture. Fittingly, it is his father who introduces him and his siblings to Dürer, as if leading them through a rite of passage that was meant to break their innocent childhood attachments. The letter writer describes how his father would often invite him and his siblings to look at a folder of Albrecht Dürer's engravings, which he kept in his private library in Gebhartsstetten:

[102] Konrad Heumann, "'Stunde, Luft und Ort machen alles' Hofmannsthal's Phänomenologie der natürlichen Gegebenheiten," in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Neue Wege der Forschung*, ed. by Elsbeth Dangel-Pelloquin (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchsgesellschaft, 2007), 122.

> "Dies ist das alte Deutschland," sagte mein Vater und das Wort klang mir fast schauerlich und ich mußte an einen alten Menschen denken, wie solche in den Bildern waren, und um zu zeigen, das ich Geographie gelernt hatte und die Welt begriff, fragte ich: "Gibt es auch ein Buch, wo man das alte Österreich drin sehen kann?" Da sagte mein Vater: "Dies hier unten ist wohl Österreich" (die Bibliothek war im Turmzimmer, und drunten lag das Dorf und die Hügel und da und dort die kleinen Wäldchen, die den Gemeinden und den einzelnen Bauern gehören, und zwischen den Hügeln der gewundene Fluß und die weiße Straße und in der Ferne die blauen Weinberge über den großen dunkelnden fernen Wäldern), und wir sind Österreicher, aber wir sind auch Deutsche, und da das Land immer zu den Menschen gehört, die darauf wohnen, so ist hier auch Deutschland.[103]

Perhaps the first thing worth noting about this dense passage is that it hints at the deeper origins of the letter writer's prejudice against "culture" as the product of an educated, elite class. The protagonist's father reinforces a distinction between two competing ways of representing the world: the artistic and the conceptual. This distinction is not, however, drawn in a neutral fashion, as visual representation is given priority over the son's schoolbook knowledge of German and Austrian geography (as evidenced in the father's response to his son's question whether Dürer's images are also of old Austria). As Ethel Matala de Mazza points out, the protagonist is taught at an early age that the visual representation of reality is a superior medium for the authentication of his subjective experiences.[104]

But if the engravings serve to *reaffirm* the narrator's subjective experience, they also mediate and shape that experience. In doing so, they reassert the distinctive role of the creative class whose activity creates the symbolic cultural order. Hofmannsthal alludes to this role by foregrounding the narrator's discussion of Dürer with a brief

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[103] *GWE*, 557.

[104] Matala de Mazza, Dichtung als Schau-Spiel: Zur Poetologie des jungen Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), 23.

speculation on the possible need for some form of cultural education or *Bildung*: "vielleicht muß man, um dieser vielgespaltenen Welt gerecht zu sein, eine innere Vorbereitung besitzen, eine Bildung."[105] The juxtaposition of these two themes points to an important etymological connection between the words *Bild* and *Bildung*. As Friedrich Kluge's dictionary of etymology states, "Die älteste Bedeutung [von *Bild*] ist 'Vorbild, Muster,' erst später überwiegt 'Abbild.'"[106] *Bilden* meant "gestalten, Form geben" in Old High German.[107] Susan Cocalis points out that in the dictionaries of Adelung and Campe the verb *bilden* denoted primarily: "1) Einem Körper seine äußere Gestalt geben, von Bild, so fern dasselbe ehedem Gestalt bedeutete […] 2) Die Gestalt einer Sache nachahmen, abbilden."[108] In 1807 Campe records a newer, figurative meaning: "Den Fähigkeiten des Geistes und Willens die gehörige Richtung geben."[109] Despite his pronouncements against *Bildung*, the narrator is himself the product of just such a process – only the education that he receives through his exposure to Dürer does not look anything like the elite cultural grooming that he has come to associate with *Bildung*. Rather than offering a little upper-class polish, Dürer's art has shaped the narrator at a much deeper level; it has provided him with an intimation, however inchoate, that both he and the Austrian culture that has shaped him are finite.

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[105] *GWE*, p. 556.

[106] Friedrich Kluge, *An Etymological Dictionary of the German Language,* trans. from the 4th German edition by John Francis Davis, (London: G. Bell, 1891), 84.

[107] Kluge, 85.

[108] Susan Cocalis, 400.

[109] Cocalis, 400.

The narrator writes that Dürer's images were like "Zauberblätter"[110] because of the powerful impression they left on him:

> Wie vertraut und fremd zugleich waren mir die alten Blätter, wie zuwider und wie lieb zugleich! Die Menschen, die Ochsen, die Pferde wie aus Holz geschnitzt, wie aus Holz die Falten ihrer Kleider, die Falten in ihren Gesichtern. Die spitzen Häuser, die geschnörkelten Mühlbäche, die starren Felsen und Bäume, so unwirklich und überwirklich. Manchmal quälte ich den Vater, er solle die Mappe bringen lassen. Und manchmal war ich nicht dazuzubringen, noch ein Blatt mehr zu sehen, lief mittendrin fort und wurde gescholten. Ich könnte es auch heute nicht sagen, ob mir die Erinnerung an diese schwarzen Zauberblätter lieb und kostbar oder verhaßt ist. Aber nahe gingen sie mir, in mich hinein drang eine Gewalt von ihnen.[111]

Once again the rural imagery, which the letter writer associates with a sense of rootedness, is important to his image of *Heimat*. But unlike his earlier description of the refreshing water fountain in Gebhartsstetten, the picture of his homeland is marked by rigidity, even grimness. The narrator tells us that Dürer's images of "das alte Deutschland" appeared as though they were cut out of wood.

What stands out in this passage is the narrator's reaction to Dürer's engravings; several questions arise here: Why did he perceive them to be both familiar and unfamiliar, unreal and overly real? What fascinated him about the depiction of such mundane and concrete subjects as faces, rocks, houses, oxen and horses? Why did he beg his father to show him these pictures, and then feel compelled to run away from them? Why does he still not know to this day whether the memory of his childhood encounter with Dürer's *Zauberblätter* are dear or hateful to him? I would argue that in the letter writer's recalled reactions to Dürer's art we find his first real admission that there is an

[110] *GWE*, 557.

[111] *GWE*, 556.

uncanny quality inherent in the idea of *Heimat*. That is, in recalling these images by Dürer, the narrator is confronted by the constructedness of his notion of *Heimat*. His childhood memories of *Heimat* in this instance do not support his earlier conception of *Heimat* as a realm that is impervious to change; instead, he senses that there is a gaping abyss underneath the stable ground he called *Heimat*. The world in which he lives is subject to the endless cycles of growth, decay and death; what stability and unity he perceives in it requires the involvement of imagination and the mediation of a constructed symbolic order.

Paradoxically, it is partly Dürer's skill at incorporating death into his art that gives this art whatever power it holds over death. The art is at one and the same time a reminder of the dark shadow that death casts over life and a consolation in the face of this fact. The narrator explains to us how his childhood world came to be inhabited by the medieval figures depicted by Dürer, such that he started to feel as though they were living next to him in his daily life:

> [A]ber unbewußt bevölkerte ich doch mit den Schattengebärden dieser überwirklichen Ahnen die einsamen Stellen im Walde, die Halde mit den großen Steinblöcken, den halbzerfallenen Kreuzgang hinter der Kirche, der viel älter war als die freundliche kleine Kirche selber [...] Das Gehaben jener mit den überstarken Gebärden, die nicht mehr da waren, ging doch zusammen mit dem Gehaben derer, mit denen ich aß und trank und in den Birnbaum stieg und die Pferde schwemmte und zur Kirche ging, so wie die alten Geschichten von Räubern, Einsiedlern und Bären zusammengingen mit der Landschaft [...] Es war alles anders in den alten Bildern als in der Wirklichkeit vor meinen Augen: aber es klaffte kein Riß dazwischen. Jene alte Welt war frömmer, erhabener, milder, kühner, einsamer. Aber im Wald, in der Sternennacht, in der Kirche führten Wege zu ihr.[112]

[112] *GWE*, 558.

The narrator tells us that he unconsciously *peopled* his reality with the ancestral figures he saw in Dürer's *Zauberblätter* so that he could sense their presence not only in lonely places marked by the passage of time, but also in the very gestures of those around him. Ironically, it is the dead who offer a sense of continuity with the past. Rather than simply serving to remind the narrator about the fleeting nature of life and all that is experienced therein, these ghostly images are part of an ersatz eternity, a changeless symbolic order that allows a vanished reality to inform and shape the present. They become a necessary part of our everyday cultural inheritance, however, precisely because we can never escape the awful fact of death, and must limit its dominance over our thoughts by containing its meaning within a finite series of representations. There is a profoundly existential dimension to culture in this portrait.

It is this existential dimension that perhaps explains why the nature of Dürer's influence has remained largely hidden from the narrator. Its power over his imagination lies partly in its effectiveness at masking death—at masking, then, the very nature of the fear that fuels the embrace of this art. And it is the same existential dimension that helps to explain why, in his later years, the narrator is ready to reflect more upon Dürer's influence: having been preoccupied throughout his adult life with the goals of bourgeois attainment, he is now confronted with questions about the significance of this life, whose end is perhaps finally coming into view. His unprompted, somewhat blustering, defense of his vocation in the first letter is perhaps an initial sign that the identity he had so unreflectively adopted in his earlier years has begun to unravel: it is an identity that can no longer be taken for granted and so now requires justification.

This observation helps to illuminate the narrator's growing antipathy to the idea of Germany: it is natural that an ambitious young businessman would readily identify with a newly minted empire in the throes of economic expansion; it is just as comprehensible, however, that an older businessman, experiencing a crisis of identity, might begin to question that empire, and even project his crisis onto it. As the Prussian state becomes more single-mindedly fixed on business success, the aims of the German *Kulturnation* are eclipsed. The narrator's childhood associations with Dürer take on a new life as the antithesis of all that the German nation now stands for. As part of the cultural bedrock of his development into a self-conscious adult, these childhood associations provide a fixed point against which he compares his reality in order to determine its authenticity or inauthenticity: "denn es lag in mir, daß ich das Wirkliche an etwas in mir messen mußte, und fast bewußtlos maß ich an jener schreckhaft erhabenen schwarzen Zauberwelt und strich alles an diesem Probierstein, ob es Gold wäre oder ein schlechter gelblicher Glimmer."[113] Convinced that Dürer's art captures an ineffable essence behind the surface of everyday life, the letter writer tests his experiences and observations about modern Germany against the "real" Germany portrayed by Dürer:

> Und vor den Richterstuhl dieser Kindereien, von denen ich im Innersten nicht loskam, schleppe ich das große Deutschland und die Deutschen des heutigen Tages, und sehe, daß sie mir nicht bestehen, und komme nicht darüber hinweg. Ich meinte, heimzufahren, und für immer, und nun weiß ich nicht, ob ich bleiben werde.[114]

The letter writer seems to admit to the irrationality of measuring Germany by the image and memory of his homeland that were formed in his childhood, and yet he concludes

[113] *GWE*, 559.

[114] *GWE*, 559.

that modern Germany, having failed to live up to his vision of what it *ought* to be, can no longer be his permanent and true homeland.

What Hofmannsthal presents in this text is not a sober theoretical analysis of what *Heimat* means, but rather the subjective and theoretically unarticulated experience of someone who is, in a deeply personal way, negotiating the difference between his unreal, ideal conception of *Heimat* and the incongruent reality. The gap between what he *wants* to see and what he *actually* sees is profoundly disturbing to him because it throws into doubt his entire understanding of the experiences he has had abroad, [115] and leaves him without a secure point of orientation now that he is back in Germany. Measured against his conception of wholeness, life in modern Germany seems inauthentic, and thus he repeatedly describes Germany as having a ghostly, spectral appearance. He confesses to his friend, "und in der Welt, in die ich da momentweise aus dem Eisenbahnfenster hineinschauen kann, da wohnt etwas—mich hat nie vor dem Tod gegraut, aber vor dem, was da wohnt, vor solchem Nichtleben grauts mich."[116] He describes the horror vacui in a number of different ways, including as "ein momentanes Schweben über dem Bodenlosen, dem Ewig-Leeren,"[117] or "wie ein Hauch, ein so unbeschreibliches Anwehen des ewigen Nichts, des ewigen Nirgends, ein Atem nicht des Todes, sondern des Nicht-Lebens."[118] The letter writer experiences this feeling of horror as a crisis of perception, explaining that his "böser Blick" is the result of "eine Art leise Vergiftung,

[115] The two decades he spent abroad represent roughly half of his lifetime, as he mentions in the first letter that he is in his early forties. See *GWE*, 544.

[116] *GWE*, 562.

[117] *GWE*, 561.

[118] *GWE*, 562.

eine schleichende Infektion" that afflicts those who have returned after a long absence, as he has.[119] In short, he believes that he is suffering from an "Übel europäischer Natur."[120]

VI. Van Gogh: Merging Artistic Production and Consumption

In the end, the antithesis that the letter writer draws between the authenticity of his childhood experience of Austria, on the one hand, and the inauthenticity of a modern-day, economically driven Germany, on the other, does not hold. His insistence that the historical reality that he confronts upon returning to Germany is somehow less real than his childhood memories of Dürer's art represents an unsustainable flight from the concrete conditions that exist in his time. Yet his nostalgic reflections on the power of Dürer's art do push him toward a valuable reckoning: the letter writer has come to some sort of awareness of the role that culture—its products or symbols—have in the construction and representation of a coherent reality. This realization informs the narrator's eventual conversion from self-proclaimed cultural philistine to earnest admirer of the art of Van Gogh.

By the end of the third letter, the protagonist gives up on his desire to find his old homeland in Germany or Austria, saying: "Und ich möchte in diesem Deutschland nicht sterben. Ich weiß, ich bin nicht alt und bin nicht krank—aber wo man nicht sterben möchte, dort soll man auch nicht leben."[121] And again he states resolutely: "Hier ist es nicht heimlich. Wie in einer großen ruhelosen freudlosen Herberge ist mir zumute. Wer möchte in einem Hotel sterben, wenn es nicht sein muß. […] Österreich will ich

[119] *GWE*, 562.

[120] *GWE*, 561.

[121] *GWE*, 560.

jedenfalls vorher noch einmal wiedersehen. Ich sage 'vorher,' denn ich denke schwerlich dort zu bleiben."[122] But as he abandons his search for *Heimat*, the protagonist's sense of disorientation intensifies and culminates in a crisis. The letter writer's inner chaos, however, is the very precondition for his inner renewal, and the visual arts play a central role in his response to his own mounting crisis. Hofmannsthal shows in the final two letters of "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" that the modern subject needs to find a new mode of perceiving the world in order to maintain his or her sense of vitality and creativity in the face of an increasingly fragmented world.

In the fourth letter the protagonist describes his encounter with Van Gogh's paintings as follows:

> Über die Malweise kann ich keine Auskunft geben: Du kennst wahrscheinlich fast alles, was gemacht wird, und ich habe, wie gesagt, seit zwanzig Jahren kein Bild gesehen. […] Diese [Bilder] da schienen mir in den ersten Augenblicken grell und unruhig, ganz roh, ganz sonderbar, ich mußte mich erst zurechtfinden, um überhaupt die ersten als Bild, als Einheit zu sehen—dann aber, dann sah ich, dann sah ich sie alle so, jedes einzelne, und alle zusammen, und die Natur in ihnen, und die menschliche Seelenkraft, die hier die Natur geformt hatte, und Baum und Strauch und Acker und Abhang, die da gemalt waren, noch das andre, das was hinter dem Gemalten war, das Eigentliche, das unbeschreiblich Schicksalhafte—, das alles sah ich so, daß ich das Gefühl meiner selbst an diese Bilder verlor, und mächtig wieder zurückbekam, und wieder verlor! Mein Lieber, um dessentwillen, was ich da sagen will, und niemals sagen werde, habe ich Dir diesen ganzen Brief geschrieben! Wie aber könnte ich etwas so Unfaßliches in Worte bringen, etwas so Plötzliches, so Starkes, so Unzerlegbares![123]

Unlike the engravings by Dürer, in which the subjects are depicted in an almost overly realistic fashion, in his viewing of Van Gogh's paintings, the protagonist at first perceives solely the bright colors, and only in a second perceptual step is he able to make out what

[122] *GWE*, 560.

[123] *GWE*, 564-65.

the paintings depict. The act of perceiving is experienced, then, as a creative act. Van Gogh's paintings appear to have a powerful effect on him because he approaches these paintings naively, without any prior knowledge of Van Gogh's art. As he mentions himself, it has been twenty years since he has last seen a painting. The letter writer's experience of Van Gogh's art is strongly reminiscent of the "gute Augenblicke" Chandos experiences. However, while the epiphanic moments in the *Chandos Letter* are triggered by unmediated encounters with nature, in "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" they are mediated by Van Gogh's paintings of rural landscapes much like the ones that Chandos describes.

Matala de Mazza suggests that Hofmannsthal presents Van Gogh's impressionistic art as paving the path away from the "längst selbst-referentiell gewordenen symbolischen Ordnung der Begriffskultur" toward a "schöpferische Vision."[124] The subject's visual encounter with the imaginary world of the visual arts, according to Matala de Mazza, liberates the creative potential in the subject because the painting or drawing has an immediate impact on the senses of the viewer, thereby allowing the individual to enjoy the creative potential of his own physical perception unfettered by concepts; whereas language exacerbates the fragmentation of the world, the visual arts are able to capture the simultaneity of things existing next to each other. While Matala de Mazza's account provides an important insight insofar as it emphasizes the intensely subjective form of representation made possible through Van Gogh's painting, it overstates the case somewhat. However direct and personal the appeal of this art, it does not operate outside of the realm of concepts and symbols entirely. Nor does it allow

[124] Matala de Mazza, 15.

the viewer to have an immediate subjective response to the world; rather, reality is still being represented through the intervention of a cultural mediator. It is worth noting that painting is supposed to communicate something immediate, whereas the written word always abstracts and mediates; interestingly, the narrator himself is only capable of writing about visual art, rather than producing it himself.

Because Van Gogh's art is meant to provide a profoundly subjective response to the world, it provides a fitting form of representation for a profoundly subject-oriented culture. It *apparently* allows the narrator to bridge the contradiction between, on the one hand, his sense of himself as a self-sufficient, bourgeois "individual," and on the other, his recent, existentially motivated reawakening to the role of culture in shaping the individual. In another manner of speaking, Van Gogh provides the necessary synthesis to resolve the unsustainable antithesis between the narrator's rootedness in the timeless Austria of Dürer and his involvement as a bourgeois individual in the distressingly ephemeral Germany of the present. If Dürer's art is that which conditions or allows an Austrian subjectivity to emerge, the meaning of Van Gogh's art, as Matala de Mazza contends, seems to lie in the reaction of an already formed subject. Understood in this way, the latter represents a challenge to the traditional hierarchy between the elite producers and the consumers of culture. The isolated subject that dominates in the socially fragmented age of the business transaction can thus, in theory, become the author of his or her own symbolic representations.

As stated earlier, however, there is a difficulty with this view of Van Gogh's art. It places far too much weight on the subjective reaction of the viewer and overlooks how that reaction is being manipulated or elicited, not just by Van Gogh but also by the

cultural traditions that informed his production. As Ursula Renner observes, Hofmannsthal, in a quasi-religious turn, conceives of the soul as a dynamically productive realm of dreams and images; in the search for new means of expressing the workings of the soul in language and the visual arts, however, he comes to the bitter recognition that the artist's subjective perceptions and aesthetic representations are always already prefigured and coded by cultural patterns. The question of tradition and cultural inheritance therefore stubbornly returns.[125]

Van Gogh's art, like Dürer's, plays a role in mediating the subjectivity of his audience. But whereas Dürer's art is at odds with the fragmented and mercenary character of modern Germany, Van Gogh's art apparently is not. It does not go too far to say that it exemplifies an art form that reinforces the identity of the bourgeois individual by representing his or her highly developed subjectivity in the symbolic realm of culture. Culture becomes a matter of "taste," something that lends dignity to the choices and habits of a consumer-self no longer animated by the notion of a greater communal good. It teaches the subject to find beauty in the lonely, the quotidian, the marginal, and thereby redeems or at least hides the fragmentation and alienation of modern society. Art aims not to shape or improve society, but rather to offer a reprieve from it and thereby to restore its ability to carry on in the same old patterns.

The lonely, quotidian subjects of Van Gogh's paintings not only remind us of the narrator's earlier description of Dürer's engravings, but also of the rural landscape that gave rise to Chandos' epiphanic moments: "Ein Sturzacker, eine mächtige Allee gegen den Abendhimmel, ein Hohlweg mit krummen Föhren, ein Stück Garten mit der

[125] Ursula Renner, *"Die Zauberschrift der Bilder": Bildende Kunst in Hofmannsthals Texten* (Freiburg in Breisgau: Rombach Druck- und Verlagshaus, 2000), 42.

Hinterwand eines Hauses, [...] ein kupfernes Becken und ein irdener Krug, ein paar Bauer um einen Tisch, Kartoffeln essend."[126] What is different about Van Gogh's depiction of these rural images is his use of strikingly vivid colors, which, instead of creating the kind of "zauberische Atmosphäre"[127] of Dürer's engravings, seem to convey the very essence of the represented objects as though they were "neugeboren aus dem furchtbaren Chaos des Nichtlebens," providing deliverance from the "fürchterlichen Zweifel an der Welt." [128] Whereas Dürer's work provides a reminder of death and at the same time consoles by tying us into a seemingly eternal, symbolic cultural order, Van Gogh's art revitalizes the objects of a fading culture, but on a new, highly subjective level, overpowering the shadow of death with brilliant colors and ushering in a world where meaning emerges in the private gaze of the individual.

Ultimately "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" testifies to Hofmannsthal's belief in the enduring relevance of a class of cultural producers in an increasingly individualistic and egalitarian age. The irony, however, is that in order to play an influential role they may have to produce an art that hides this very influence. Van Gogh's art accomplishes this by emphasizing the subjective nature of art itself. In this way, he allows the bourgeois subject to appropriate his art in a manner that does not challenge his self-perception and privileged social status. At the end of the narrator's fourth letter home, Hofmannsthal offers a final illustration of this new relationship between the artist and the bourgeois

[126] *GWE*, 565.

[127] *GWE*, 565.

[128] *GWE*, 565.

subject; in a brief postscript, the letter writer announces his intention to buy a Van Gogh—not to own it, he insists, but to preserve it, as a steward of culture.

Chapter 3: Poetic Language and Subjectivity in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Das Gespräch über Gedichte"

In this chapter I turn my attention to Hofmannsthal's essay "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" and show its linkages with earlier poetological essays from his lyrical period. Some scholars have seen in "Das Gespräch über Gedichte," published in 1903, an attempt to move beyond the language crisis that had preoccupied Hofmannsthal in "Ein Brief": they find in "Das Gespräch" evidence of a belief that poetic language is capable of producing an experience of transcendence wherein the boundaries of the self and other disappear. My examination of "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" challenges such a straightforward reading. After exploring a more conventional reading of Hofmannsthal's text, I go on to point out two ambiguities in it, which show that the question of whether or not poetic language can produce the effect of transcendence is an unresolved matter in this dialogue. The first of these ambiguities is embedded in the famous origin story of the symbol. I argue that it is never quite made clear where the human being's impulse for the symbolic sacrificial act comes from, therefore leaving the question unanswered as to whether the symbol is a product of the subject's own making, or whether it is indeed the result of a "unio mystica." The second ambiguity, I suggest, is produced by the dialogue form of this text. The use of *Alltagssprache* and *Begriffssprache* in order to discuss poetic language casts doubt on the assertions made by the dominant voice (Gabriel) that poetic language stands in strict opposition to everyday language and conceptual language. In the end, I suggest that the dialogue form of Hofmannsthal's poetological essay points to the fact that language, be it poetic or conceptual, is at an important level also a medium for the exercise of power.

I. The Permeable Self

It has often been noted that Hofmannsthal's conception of subjectivity was shaped by the empiricist psychology at the turn of the century that rejected the Cartesian conception of the self. Ernst Mach rejected a "beyond" of the empirical world and regarded even consciousness itself as merely an effect of sense impressions that change from moment to moment. In her seminal study of the new psychologies at the turn of the century and their influence on modernist writers, Judith Ryan points out that Hofmannsthal had "a decidedly empiricist beginning," and that in his later works after 1900, he increasingly saw "the fractured self as a problem that must be overcome."[129] While Ryan's analysis of Hofmannsthal's work is largely focused on his early poetry and lyrical drama, in this chapter I examine Hofmannsthal's fictional "Gespräch über Gedichte" from 1903 in order to examine his explicit poetological reflections on the implications of the empiricist conception of the self for the lyrical subject and the locus of meaning in poetry. I argue that by anchoring our subjectivity in the empirical world, Hofmannsthal shows that poetry can no longer be understood as self-expression, but is rather the expression of the sensory world through language. Rather than despairing over the loss of an *Ich-Substanz* that results from a Machian breakdown of the subject-object dualism, the dissolution of the self is presented here as a necessary condition for an "originary" perception of the world.

As the title suggests, "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" presents a conversation between two friends, Clemens and Gabriel, who read poems together and speak by turns casually, admiringly and critically about them. Their conversation is structured to a

[129] Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 115.

certain extent like a Socratic dialogue, in which Gabriel assumes the role of the teacher, who dialogically reveals and corrects his interlocutor's "common-sense" assumptions about the nature and purpose of poetry. The cited excerpts from poems by George, Hebbel, and Goethe serve as a springboard for Clemens' and Gabriel's associative reflections on the unique power of poetic language.

"Das Gespräch über Gedichte" begins very casually, but through the two interlocutors' spontaneous reactions to poetry, Hofmannsthal gestures right from the start at the central question that motivates their conversation, namely: What is expressed through poetry – our inner or our outer world? Gabriel and Clemens are in agreement that poetry captures *Gemüt*, the affective disposition of the soul. In reaction to one of the poems, Clemens says, "Es drückt einen grenzenlosen Zustand so einfach aus,"[130] to which Gabriel responds, "Das tun alle Gedichte, alle guten zum mindesten. Alle drücken sie einen Zustand des Gemütes aus. Da ist die Berechtigung ihrer Existenz."[131] Gabriel further distinguishes poetry from drama and narrative prose through its privileged ability to convey the emotional state of the soul; however, the two friends disagree over how our inner state, captured in poetry, is related to the outer world. Clemens believes that the reading of a poem is like an encounter between two inner worlds. When he listens to excerpts from Stefan George's poetry cycle *Das Jahr der Seele*, he is delighted by his ability to identify emotionally with the poetic imagery, observing, "Ich sehe eine Landschaft meiner Kindheit."[132] From Clemens' perspective, a poem expresses feelings

[130] *GWE*, 499.

[131] *GWE*, 500.

[132] *GWE*, 497.

that resonate with the reader's inner experience. For Gabriel, by contrast, poetry can evoke moods and feelings in the reader, not because these feelings are already in us, but because poetry carries them towards us. He responds to Clemens, saying:

> Diese Jahreszeiten, diese Landschaften sind nichts als die Träger des *Anderen*. Sind nicht die Gefühle, die Halbgefühle, alle die geheimsten und tiefsten Zustände unseres Inneren in der seltsamsten Weise einer Landschaft verflochten, mit einer Jahreszeit, mit einer Beschaffenheit der Luft, mit einem Hauch? [...] Wollen wir uns finden, so dürfen wir nicht in unser Inneres hinabsteigen: draußen sind wir zu finden, draußen.[133]

As Hans-Jürgen Schings points out, Gabriel's statement that we must look outside for our selves goes in direct opposition to the famous maxim by Novalis: "Nach Innen geht der geheimnisvolle Weg. In uns, oder nirgends ist die Ewigkeit mit ihren Welten, die Vergangenheit und die Zukunft. Die Außenwelt ist die Schattenwelt."[134] He suggests further that Gabriel's call to look outside inverts the famous Augustinian formula, "Geh nicht nach draußen, kehre in dich selbst zurück! Im inneren Menschen wohnt die Wahrheit."[135] Schings argues that Gabriel thus launches a revolt against a long philosophical tradition of conceiving of the self as something that can be reached through introspection. Moreover, he finds that Gabriel's position is reflective of the post-Cartesian philosophy of the subject promoted by the likes of Ernst Mach.[136]

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[133] *GWE*, 497.

[134] Novalis, Blüthenstaub §16, in Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs, vol 2, Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk. edited by Hans-Joachim Mähl, (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1978), 233.

[135] Hans-Jürgen Schings, "Lyrik des Hauchs: Zu Hofmannsthals 'Gespräch über Gedichte,'" in *Hofmannsthal Jahrbuch* 11 (2003): 318.

[136] Thomas Kovach argues that, under the influence of French Symbolism, Hofmannsthal turned away from the Innerlichkeit of nineteenth century German lyric to "a poetry of externality." *Hofmannsthal and Symbolism: Art and Life in the Work of a Modern Poet* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang), 88.

Building on Schings' observation, I argue that Hofmannsthal shows in this dialogue that there is no straightforward inside-outside dichotomy between the sensory world and our inner perception thereof. Conspicuously, the dialogue begins with an apparent opposition between a non-verbal empirical reality and a reality that emerges out of language. Gabriel says to Clemens, "Ich habe dir hier aufs Fenster einen Band Gedichte gelegt."[137] The placement of the book of poetry by the window points to a seeming outside-inside opposition; that is, while the window appears to open to an empirical outer world, the book of poetry seems to open to an inner world. However, such a straightforward dichotomy is quickly undermined, as the first poem that Gabriel reads to Clemens invites the reader outdoors into an autumnal park found inside Stefan George's poem. Hofmannsthal cites in its entirety the first three stanzas of the first poem from *Das Jahr der Seele*, which depicts the fall season:

> Komm in den totgesagten Park und schau:
> Der Schimmer ferner lächelnder Gestade
> Der reinen Wolken unverhofftes Blau
> Erhellt die Weiher und die bunten Pfade.
>
> Dort nimm das tiefe Gelb, das weiche Grau
> Von Birken und von Buchs: der Wind ist lau,
> Die späten Rosen welkten noch nicht ganz,
> Erlese, küsse sie und flicht den Kranz.
>
> Vergiß auch diese letzten Astern nicht,
> Den Purpur um die Ranken wilder Reben
> Und auch was übrig blieb vom grünen Leben
> Verwinde leicht im herbstlichen Gesicht.[138]

[137] *GWE,* 495.

[138] Hofmannsthal's text does not reproduce George's idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation.

The opening line reads: "Komm in den totgesagten Park und schau"; [139] with the intimate second person commands "komm" and "schau," the implicit lyrical subject invites us to come and see a world outside of ourselves, inasmuch as it is created by the poet's words, and into ourselves, insofar as the poem resonates with us. Thus, inside and outside are shown to be in dialectical relationship with each other. Even George's image of the autumnal park is used by Hofmannsthal to introduce the idea of a modern permeable subject: like the subject, the park is a porous border region that is at once a piece of external nature and an artificial world set up within and cut-off from nature. That is, while it is part of the outdoors, it is artificially and aesthetically set apart from it. Furthermore, if the park can be regarded as a metaphor for the self, as I suggest, then the self is not a hermetically enclosed place, but rather a place of encounter, which is implied in the series of second-person address in George's poem: komm, schau, nimm, erlese, küsse, vergiß, verwinde. The park in George's poem is not the only metaphor that Gabriel uses to underline the unsubstantial, permeable nature of the self; at another moment, he compares the self to a rainbow: "Wie der wesenlose Regenbogen spannt sich unsere Seele über den unaufhaltsamen Sturz des Daseins."[140] The rainbow has no substance of its own, but only exists through the interaction of light, water, and a perceiver. Moreover, throughout the conversation he suggests that the self is anchored in nothing more than a "Hauch" of feelings and sensations.

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[139] *GWE,* 495.

[140] *GWE*, 497.

Schings points out that Hofmannsthal did not take what he perceived as the "Zerstörung der Seele"[141] lightly, which perhaps explains the melancholic image of the autumnal park. However, when we look more closely at George's image of the park, we see that it is filled with vibrant colors; the intensity of the fall colors signals a vitality that is heightened by the closeness of death. While Hofmannsthal may have been personally troubled by the loss of a solid, coherent self, his character Gabriel emphasizes the poetic productivity of the dissolution of the Cartesian self.[142] It is through the breakdown of the Cartesian mind-body dualism that a new poetry can emerge, namely a poetry that can better capture the immediacy of our experiences. The second stanza of George's poem emphasizes the perception of colors in the park rather than shapes, which underlines the impressionist perception of the world.

Gabriel suggests that the reconceptualization of the self as a permeable entity allows poetry to undergo an important transformation: "Aber es ist wundervoll, wie diese Verfassung unseres Daseins der Poesie entgegenkommt: denn nun darf sie, statt in der engen Kammer unseres Herzens, in der ganzen ungeheuren, unerschöpflichen Natur wohnen."[143] He likens poetry to Ariel, a demiurge from Hebrew and Christian mysticism, who rules over the natural elements. Now poetry is liberated from the narrow chamber of the heart to inhabit freely what is her domain, namely the immeasurable expanse of nature:

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[141] Schings, 317. *GWRA III*, 379.

[142] Schings argues: "Nicht die Krise des 'unrettbaren Ich' oder die Tragödie des einsamen Ich ist die Folge, der poetische Gewinn vielmehr wird sichtbar: 'draußen sind wir zu finden, draußen.' Die Aufhebung des lyrischen Cartesianismus und Idealismus löst Gabriels Theorie des Gedichts erst die Zunge." Schings, 321.

[143] *GWE*, 498.

> Wie Ariel darf sie sich auf den Hügeln der heroischen purpurstrahlenden Wolken lagern und in den zitternden Wipfeln der Bäume nisten; sie darf sich vom wollüstigen Nachtwind hinschleifen lassen und sich auflösen in einen Nebelstreif, in dem feuchten Atem einer Grotte, in das flimmernde Licht eines einzelnen Sternes. Und aus allen ihren Verwandlungen, allen ihren Abenteuern, aus allen Abgründen und allen Gärten wird sie nichts anderes zurückbringen als den zitternden Hauch der menschlichen Gefühle.[144]

Again, Hofmannsthal uses imagery of wind, fog, breeze, and breath in order to convey both the force of life that inspires poetry and the intangible quality of the feelings that it brings back to the reader. The inside-outside relationship is again characterized by permeability and the origin of feeling appears to be located outside of the inner sanctum of the soul. Up to this point, Gabriel's understanding of subjectivity could be described as empiricist because he claims that our feelings, which are constitutive of the self, are inextricably linked to our physical experience of the world. He even insists that our "inner possessions" would disappear completely if they were not rooted in a thousand "Erdendinge."[145] For Gabriel, there seems to be no absolute consciousness that exists outside of the realm of perception.

Yet, while Gabriel tries to liberate the lyrical subjectivity from the narrow chamber of the heart, the self remains the site of experience and can neither be characterized as rationalist nor strictly empiricist. Experience does not amount to an imposition of the external world on a mind that is like Locke's piece of white paper.[146]

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[144] *GWE*, 498.

[145] *GWE*, 497.

[146] "Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience; in all that our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself." John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689)*,

Otherwise, how is it that feelings do not simply *pass through* the self, but are *recognized by* it? Gabriel describes the movement of feelings that the subject experiences as a return or homecoming:

> 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 ein Metapher. Regungen kehren zurück, die schon einmal früher genistet haben. Und sind sies [*sic*] 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.[147]

Gabriel clearly rejects an essentialist, rationalist idea of the self, when he says that the word "self" is nothing but a metaphor. And as Timo Günther points out, the sense of recognition evoked by the "returning" feelings is different from Plato's idea of anamnesis: the dark "Heimatgefühl" described here is not reflective of the subject's recognition of timeless ideas.[148] However, as much as Gabriel seems to question whether the feelings that gravitate toward the self can ever be recognized as being the same ones that were there before, he nonetheless repeatedly describes the movement of feelings that come together in the subject as a return.

What I am suggesting here, then, is that Gabriel vacillates in his conception of the self. While he is convinced that there is no distinct inside-outside, subject-object opposition, he is far from certain that the self is just a bundle of sense impressions. This uncertainty is betrayed by the vagueness of his language and by the impatience in his

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Book II, ch. 1, complete text found at Online Library of Liberty, accessed July 16, 2012, http://oll.libertyfund.org/.

[147] *GWE*, 497.

[148] Timo Günther, *Hofmannsthal: Ein Brief* (München: Fink, 2004), 46.

statement, "Genug, etwas kehrt wieder. Und etwas begegnet sich in uns mit anderem."[149] What is this "something" that returns? And what is this "other" that the "something" encounters? It is as though Gabriel is frustrated by his inability to find an adequate metaphor for the paradoxical condition that our self is made up of streams of ever-changing, arbitrary feelings that somehow still produce a sense of recognition in the subject. The term "etwas," used to describe the "returning" feelings, is so vague that it almost has the effect of effacing any image that comes to one's mind, thereby underlining the mysterious nature of the self. And yet, the quote above does not end in merely vague language, but with yet another metaphor for the self: the aviary. Katrin Scheffer points out that the aviary is Plato's metaphor for memory in his *Theaetetus*. She suggests that Hofmannsthal takes this classical metaphor and extends it into an image of the self as a spatial and temporal entity.[150] This spatial metaphor merely re-describes the mystery rather than offering an explanation that obviates the mystery: that birds flying in and out of a human-built house should explain how our species reasons surely appeared doubtful even to Plato.

II. Poetic Language as Site of Experience

For Gabriel the experiences that constitute the self are neither grounded in reason nor purely in the empirical world. Experience manifests itself in poetic language that is neither entirely rooted in the external nor internal world, but that for a moment somehow mediates or unifies these two realms. How is it that poetry can have this effect using mere

[149] Günther.

[150] Katrin Scheffer, Schwebende, webende Bilder: Strukturbildende Motive und Blickstrategien in Hugo von Hofmannsthals Prosaschriften (Marburg: Tectum Verlag Marburg, 2007), 278.

language? Thomas Kovach points out that while Hofmannsthal argued for a complete separation between poetic and ordinary language in "Poesie und Leben" (1896),[151] it became increasingly clear to him that this distinction would be problematic and that it could not hold, both because poetic language draws from the language of our everyday communication and because for Hofmannsthal poetry only has power insofar as it can affect the reader.[152] In the following passage from "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" it might seem as though Gabriel is making distinctions between poetic language, *Alltagssprache*, and conceptual language, but upon closer examination, the separation between these three types of languages is not all that clear:

> CLEMENS: Sie ist doch nicht ganz die Sprache, die Poesie. Sie ist vielleicht eine gesteigerte Sprache. Sie ist voll von Bildern und Symbolen Sie setzt eine Sache für die andere.
> GABRIEL: Welch ein häßlicher Gedanke! Sagst du das im Ernst? Niemals setzt die Poesie eine Sache für die andere, denn es ist gerade die Poesie, welche fieberhaft bestrebt ist, die Sache selbst zu setzen, mit einer ganz anderen Energie als die stumpfe Alltagssprache, mit einer ganz anderen Zauberkraft als die schwächliche Terminologie der Wissenschaft. Wenn die Poesie etwas tut, so ist es das: daß sie aus jedem Gebilde der Welt und des Traumes mit durstiger Gier sein Eigenstes, sein Wesenhaftestes herausschlürft, so wie jene Irrlichter in dem Märchen, die überall das Gold herauslecken.[153]

Gabriel obviously privileges poetic language because he believes that it possesses a completely different magical power than everyday speech or scientific language. And yet, what differentiates *Alltagssprache* and the terminology of science from poetic language is not that their words are drawn from an entirely different source, but rather

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[151] "Es führt von der Poesie kein direkter Weg ins Leben, aus dem Leben keiner in die Poesie." *GWRA I*, 16.

[152] Kovach, 142.

[153] *GWE*, 498-99.

that they are duller, weaker than poetic language. Reflected in Gabriel's conception of poetic language is the Nietzschean idea that all language is essentially metaphoric, but that we are forgetful of language's metaphoricity in our *Alltagssprache* and *Begriffssprache*. The real difference, then, lies in the *function* of poetic language. Through this exchange between Clemens and Gabriel, Hofmannsthal presents us with two opposed conceptions of what poetic language does. In suggesting that poetry speaks in images and symbols and that it substitutes one thing for another, Clemens voices a traditional understanding that poetic language is primarily decorative, and is in a sense a false way of speaking, because it disguises, in images, what it "actually" means. [154] Gabriel, on the other hand, rejects Clemens' substitution theory. He makes the curious assertion that poetry strives "die Sache selbst zu setzen."

In order to grasp this notion that poetic language does not substitute but rather gives us the things themselves, it is important to understand a shift in Hofmannsthal's thinking on the nature of metaphoric language. Ethel Matala de Mazza observes that there is a significant change in Hofmannsthal's conception of poetic language from his early lyrical phase to his post-lyrical period. She notes that in his short aphoristic sketch "Bildlicher Ausdruck," from 1897, Hofmannsthal characterizes all speech as "uneigentliches Reden" and then privileges poetry over *Alltagssprache* because it is the most conscious of its *Uneigentlichkeit*:

> Man hört nicht selten die Rede: ein Dichtwerk sei mit bildlichem Ausdruck geziert, reich an Bildern. Dies muß eine falsche Anschauung hervorrufen, als seien die Bilder – Metaphern – etwas allenfalls Entbehrliches, dem eigentlichen Stoff, aus welchem Gedichtetes besteht, äußerlich Aufgeheftetes. Vielmehr aber ist der uneigentliche, der bildliche Ausdruck Kern und Wesen aller Poesie: jede Dichtung ist durch und durch ein Gebilde aus uneigentlichen Ausdrücken. […]

[154] Matala de Mazza, 104.

> Mit der Sprache ist es nicht anders, nur sind es unter den Redenden die Dichter allein, die sich des Gleichnishaften er Sprache unaufhörlich bewußt bleiben.[155]

However, while Hofmannsthal argues in "Bildlicher Ausdruck" that metaphoric language (and for that matter, language in general) does not give us access to something "actual" that lies outside of language, in "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" his character Gabriel argues the opposite, namely that the metaphor is a "seinserschließend[es]" medium.[156] Metaphoric language is charged with the power of revealing the essence of things and therefore as triumphing over *Alltagssprache* and *Begriffssprache*. Gabriel's idea that poetic language has a revelatory power is incompatible with the notion that poetic language merely substitutes one thing (the "real" thing) with another (an "unreal" image). To Gabriel, then, signs in poetry have an irreducible quality. Metaphors, symbols, similes, and images are "Chiffren" that cannot be treated as a substitute for something else.[157] For example, when Clemens takes the figure of two swans from a poem by Hebbel and attempts to interpret their meaning, he is immediately interrupted by Gabriel:

> CLEMENS: Und diese Schwäne? Sie sind ein Symbol? Sie bedeuten –
> GABRIEL: Laß mich dich unterbrechen. Ja, sie bedeuten, aber sprich es nicht aus, was sie bedeuten: was immer du sagen wolltest, es wäre unrichtig. Sie bedeuten hier nichts als sich selber: Schwäne. Schwäne, aber freilich gesehen mit den Augen der Poesie, die jedes Ding jedesmal zum erstenmal sieht, die jedes Ding mit allen Wundern seines Daseins umgibt [...] Gesehen mit diesen Augen sind die Tiere die eigentlichen Hieroglyphen, sind sie lebendige geheimnisvolle Chiffren, mit denen Gott unaussprechliche Dinge in die Welt geschrieben hat. Glücklich der Dichter, das auch er diese göttlichen Chiffren in seine Schrift verweben darf –[158]

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[155] *GWRA I*, 234.

[156] Matala de Mazza, 106.

[157] Matala de Mazza, 107.

[158] *GWE*, 501.

Gabriel rejects the idea that symbols are simply a colorful way of dressing up ideas, and insists, therefore, that it would be wrong to reduce the swans from Hebbel's poem to their "meaning." For the swans to bear meaning, they have to stand in place of nothing but themselves. The magic of the poetic image lies in the fact that it is not a mere stand-in for an abstract idea; that is, the swans cannot be treated as a textual surplus, and the abstract, symbolic meaning cannot replace the literal, concrete meaning of the poetic image. Gabriel claims that through the eyes of poetry we see each thing each time for the first time. The pictures produced by poetic language thus present us with an "originary" vision of the world, restoring to the reader the sense of wonder that is the very precondition for his or her ability to perceive and decipher signs in the book of nature. Thus, poetic language is charged with a magical power through which it reveals the true nature of things. Moreover, poetry is not conceived as self-expression, but rather as an expression of the epiphanic moment in which the true essence of the world is revealed to the subject. As Margit Resch points out, what sets the poet apart from others for Hofmannsthal is his ability to translate this moment into words.[159]

It is precisely because Gabriel has an ontological conception of poetic language that he traces the origin of the symbol, the key element of poetry, back to a religious experience at the border between life and death and at the limit of the physical body. Curiously, the story with which Gabriel illustrates the revelatory power of the symbol is

[159] "Jeder Mensch kann zwar dazu ausersehen sein, für einen Moment einen Blick in die Tiefe der Dinge zu tun; aber erst die Fähigkeit, das aus diesem Erlebnis gewonnene Welt- und Ichverständnis in der Sprach zu bändigen, macht ihn zum Dichter.

Die Gewalt über das bezauberte Wort ist nach Hofmannsthal ein letztes Geschenk der Momente der Ekstase, oder wie der Dichter an einer Stelle sagt: "Es ist der Augenblick, an den das Produktive gebunden ist." *GWRA II*, 222.

not about the poetic use of language, but instead is a story in which the idea of the symbol as an abstract, linguistic operation of substitution is presented as a non-verbal, physical act of substitution: the sacrificial act. Gabriel provides the following reason for telling the story of the first animal sacrifice as the origin story of the symbol: "Aber ich möchte ein vom tiefsten Geist der Sprache geprägtes Wort erst von seiner Lehmkruste reinigen."[160] He asks Clemens to imagine a man who, based on a few sparse details from the story, appears to be a simple peasant, living in the country. This man was tortured by the feeling that the gods hated him, and he felt that he could satisfy their bloodlust only by killing himself. Intoxicated from fear and closeness to death, his hand runs half-unconsciously through the wool of a ram:

> Und dieses Tier, dieses Leben, dieses im Dunkel atmende, blutwarme, ihm so nah, so vertraut – auf einmal zuckte dem Tier das Messer in die Kehle, und das warme Blut rieselte zugleich an dem Vließ des Tieres und an der Brust, an den Armen des Menschen hinab: und einen Augenblick lang, während ein Laut des wollüstigen Triumphes aus seiner Kehle sich mit dem ersterbenden Stöhnen des Tieres mischte, muß er die Wollust gesteigerten Daseins für die erste Zuckung des Todes genommen haben: er muß einen Augenblick lang, in dem Tier gestorben sein, nur so konnte das Tier für ihn sterben. 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. – Das ist die Wurzel der Poesie.[161]

Gabriel explains that this first symbolic act would have had no meaning if the sacrificer himself had not literally died in the sacrificed animal for an instant. The symbolic act is thus not an act of substitution in which one thing stands in place of another, or where a sign stands in place of the real; rather, it is a moment in which the subject merges with

[160] *GWE*, 502.

[161] *GWE*, 503.

the object, and where the self experiences a dissolution in the object. In this example of the sacrificial act as the first symbolic act, the distinction between reality and representation collapses: when the subject momentarily merges with the sacrificed animal, the animal becomes the sign for the subject's own self. When we consider what has taken place on a non-verbal plane in linguistic terms, we can see that the opposition between the "eigentlich Gemeintem" and the "uneigentlich Gesagtem" no longer holds in the sacrificial act.[162] As Resch points out, the terms "metaphor," "symbol," "cipher," and "magic words" are used synonymously by Hofmannsthal because he does not understand them as mere figures of speech, but rather as terms that refer to the experience of a mystical "Einheitsgefühl" between the subject and object.[163] Resch argues that Gabriel tells the origin story of the symbol through the story of the sacrifice in order to illustrate that the symbol is not a mere rhetorical figure, but a *process* whereby the individual experiences a mystical "Einheitsgefühl."

David Wellbery suggests that this scenario of the first sacrifice, seen in the larger context of Hofmannsthal's oeuvre, is a "fantasy" that informs Hofmannsthal's understanding of poetry and aesthetics in an important way. In fact, he argues, "Es scheint eine Gesetzmäßigkeit des sich in Hofmannsthal Texten wiederholenden Opferszenarios zu sein, daß der kultische Opfervorgang nur dort explizit genannt wird, wo es, wie in dem 'Gespräch über Gedichte,' um die Erörtung ästhetischer Belange

[162] Matala de Mazza, 109.

[163] Margit Resch, *Das Symbol als Prozeß bei Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, (Regensburg: Verlag Anton Hain Meisenheim, Forum Academicum, 1980), 18ff.

geht."[164] Wellbery explains that Hofmannsthal's *Opferphantasie* is informed by *Lebensphilosophie* and the ethnological findings of his time, such as Frazer's *Golden Bough*. The function of Hofmannsthal's sacrificial poetology is "die Wiedergewinnung einer kulturellen Fundierung, die trotz der durchgängigen Relativität der Werte unabweisbare, weil aus dem Erlebnis des ästhetischen Opfers hervorgegangen 'Führerschaft' zu beanspruchen vermöchte."[165] More specifically in Hofmannsthal's texts, though, Wellbery finds that the author uses the fantasy of the sacrificial act in order to produce a sense of transcendence; in the moment when the sacrificial animal is killed, the subject experiences an "Erschütterung," which destroys the self's culturally mediated identity, and the subject is put in touch with an ineffable, overwhelming force. The "Zucken" mentioned in the passage quoted above is indicative of the subject's somatic experience of this aesthetic moment. The contraction of the body, followed by the stream of blood, points to the experience of a liquefaction, a streaming, as though the feeling of one's self were expanded beyond the limits of the body.[166] Wellbery argues that Hofmannsthal is not so much trying to represent the scenario of the sacrifice as he is attempting to find a mechanism that translates an affective reaction into a physical one. He finds that, through this move, Hofmannsthal celebrates the triumph of metaphysical life.

In contrast to Wellbery, Anna-Katharina Gisbertz argues that the sacrificial act does not result in the experience of transcendence. Gisbertz contends that the dissolution

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[164] David Wellbery, "Die Opfer-Vorstellung als Quelle der Faszination," in *Hofmannsthal-Jahrbuch* 11 (2003): 302.

[165] Wellbery, 306. Wellbery is relying here on Rene Girard's theory of the scapegoat.

[166] Wellbery, 309.

of the self, which leads to the experience of union with the world, is not an experience that the subject makes consciously. Instead, the experience is one that is registered in the body. She says that it is neither a subjective phantasm nor evidence for a metaphysical reality in the sense of a transcendental idea, but rather a physical experience through which authorship is born.[167] Thus, both Gisbertz and Wellbery point out the centrality of the bodily experience of the subject-object union that is effected by the sacrificial act; however, they disagree on whether or not this experience points to a transcendental reality or a concrete physical reality.

III. The Two Ambiguities of "Das Gespräch über Gedichte"

My aim here is not to establish the legitimacy of either Wellbery's or Gisbertz' interpretation; instead, I argue that these two different interpretations are made possible by Hofmannsthal's text because in Gabriel's story of the origin of the symbol, it is not at all clear where the site of the subject-object fusion experience is. There are two different levels of ambiguity that I want to point out: The first is the ambiguous origin of the symbol, while the second is of a meta-textual nature and has to do with the literary form of this text itself.

[167] "Es ist ein entscheidender Bestandteil dieser paradoxen Koinzidenz, dass sie nicht bewusst erfahren wird, sondern somatisch verankert ist, durch die Nerven 'lesbar' wird. Sie bildet folglich kein subjektives Phantasma und ist auch keine 'metaphysiche Wirklichkeit', etwa als transzendente Idee, sondern zeigt sich auf einer Erfahrungsebene, die im Leib verankert ist und durch ihn förmlich zur Geburt der Autorschaft führt. Sie kann genau in diesem Sinne auch als eine Stimmung bezeichnet werden, da sich in ihr ebenfalls Leben und Tod, Ich-Auflösung und Erlösung zu einer Einheit zusammenbinden." Anna-Katharina Gisbertz, *Stimmung – Leib – Sprache: Eine Konfiguration in der Wiener Moderne* (München: Wilhelm-Fink, 2009), 124.

1. The Origin of the Symbol

We may take Resch's analysis of the symbol in Hofmannsthal's work to help us understand the first of these ambiguities. She explains that Hofmannsthal was influenced by the legacy of Schiller's and Goethe's respective ideas regarding symbols. According to Schiller's theory of the symbol, the subject endows the object with symbolic meaning, whereas for Goethe, symbols are found in nature – the symbol is not *created* by the subject but is rather *uncovered* and *deciphered* by him. Resch finds that Hofmannsthal's conception of the symbol resembles that of the Romantics, who combined both Schiller and Goethe's theories: "Das Symbolische ist bei den Romantikern ein Element der Welt, das der menschliche Geist ihr zugesteht, um es ihr dann zu entwinden."[168] The Romantics were reacting to the disenchantment of the world resulting from the processes of modernity. Novalis described the problem in the following way: "Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte und finden immer nur Dinge."[169] In order to get around this predicament, reality had to be "romantisiert;" a magic power had to be ascribed to nature, that is, "dem Dinglichen muß die Möglichkeit einer Bedeutungssphäre gegeben werden."[170] Implicit in this Romantic conception of the symbol is a certain doubt that any inherent meaning may be inscribed in nature; therefore, the human subject is the one who gives meaning to nature by "romanticizing" it, and yet this process, as willful as it seems, is still conceived

[168] Resch, 27.

[169] Novalis, Blüthenstaub § 1, in *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs, vol. 2, Das philosophisch-theoretische Werk*, edited by Hans-Joachim Mähl (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1978), 227.

[170] Resch, 27.

as an uncovering of the "original" condition of nature, which once did communicate with human beings.[171]

In Hofmannsthal's text, a similar tension between doubt and belief in the world's inherent meaning can be found. This origin story of the symbol has received much commentary; however, critics tend to focus on the moment of the sacrifice, in which the subject and object merge, rather than on the part of the story that describes the conditions that cause the subject to make the sacrifice in the first place. It is, of course, often noted that the man in this story feels persecuted by the gods, but the fact that this feeling of persecution is triggered by the man's fear of nature is overlooked in the existing interpretations of this text. I argue that this fear of nature needs to be taken into account for us to fully appreciate the highly ambiguous origin of the symbol. At the beginning of his story of the first animal sacrifice, Gabriel describes the following scene:

> Mich dünkt, ich sehe den ersten, der opferte. Er fühlte, daß die Götter ihn haßten: daß sie die Wellen des Gießbaches und das Geröll der Berge in seine Acker schleuderten; daß sie mit der fürchterlichen Stille des Waldes sein Herz zerquetschen wollten, oder er fühlte, daß die gierige Seele eines Toten nachts mit dem Wind hereinkam und sich auf seine Brust setzte, dürstend nach Blut.[172]

It is an important detail that the man in this story believes that the gods' hatred of him is evidenced in the terrifying sights and sounds of nature, such as "die Wellen des Gießbaches und das Geröll der Berge." This passage highlights the man's animistic worldview: nature is not only terrifyingly alive to him, but is animated by furious divinities. The impulse for the sacrificial act originates both from a fear of death and from

[171] Kovach points out that "[t]he idea of objects of nature as hieroglyphs or chiffres of an ineffable underlying reality is familiar from Novalis, but it is also present in the Symbolists." *Hofmannsthal and Symbolism*, 149.

[172] *GWE*, 502.

the desire to gain control over a threatening, mysterious force: nature. In this sense, the origin story of the symbol is also a survival story; that is, it appears that the human being's will to live is manifested in his ability to create a non-literal relationship to the world.

But what does it mean to speak of a non-literal or literal relationship to the world? To have a "literal" connection means that we would relate to the world as animals do. That is, we would have an unselfconscious, unmediated relationship with it. But as the passage above points out, the man has a self-conscious relationship with it, and this is indicated by the fact that he does not only respond with fear to the threatening aspects of nature, but also *interprets* the sights and sounds of nature as signs and assigns meaning to what he sees and hears. This ability of the human being to interpret and to read meaning into his surrounding points to his alienated relationship to nature. Thus, self-consciousness both alienates the subject from nature and liberates him from having purely physical responses to it.

This is not to say, however, that Gabriel is celebrating the triumph of reason over the body through this story of the first animal sacrifice. In fact, the story emphasizes the fact that our consciousness is not ruled by rationality, but instead (and here we see the influences of psychoanalytical thought on Hofmannsthal) there is an unconscious drive that motivates our actions. The man reaches for the animal, for example, "halb unbewußt." But ultimately, the sacrificial act is not just indicative of the fact that the man succumbs to irrationality. On the contrary, the substitution of the animal for the subject's own life is a means by which the subject creatively gains some control over nature. And yet, the sacrificial act is *not* a rational act. It is not produced through clever scheming on the part

of the human being – unlike in the ancient myth about how the animal sacrifice originated from the human being's ability to fool the gods (thereby outsmarting them) by offering up animal parts instead of actual human flesh. Here, on the contrary, the subject is driven to make the sacrifice half unconsciously; there is part of the subject that does not really realize or understand what he is doing.

For this reason, the origin story of the sacrifice and the symbol is highly ambiguous. It remains unclear where the impulse for this act comes from, and similarly, it remains uncertain whether the symbol is the product of the poet's mind, or the product of his receptivity to nature's language. Gabriel's focus is not really the power of poetic language, but rather the power of poetic language is indicative of something even more mysterious and rudimentary, namely the *instinct* for survival and the drive towards meaning that allows human beings to substitute one thing for another. The scene of the sacrifice makes it clear that our relationship to the world is a highly ambivalent one: we fear nature, and we attempt to bring it under control by dominating it; meaning is wrested from the incoherence of life through a violent act. The story of the sacrifice is in a sense the story of our consciousness. The merging of the subject and object is violent and only fleeting, and what we have left once the sacrificial act is completed is a dead, bloody animal and our self-consciousness. Paradoxically, the subject's violent union with the object separates him from nature and in the moment of this separation, symbolic meaning emerges as the residue.

2. The Dialogical Form

The second ambiguity that I want to address is related to the form of Hofmannsthal's text. The scholarly literature on "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" largely neglects to address the connection between the dialogue form of this text and its content. Critics tend to regard Gabriel as Hofmannsthal's mouthpiece and read this essay as though it were a monologue. To be fair, the text lends itself to such a reading, because Gabriel's perspective clearly dominates the dialogue and, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Gabriel seems to play the role of a teacher who attempts to correct his interlocutor's "common-sense" understanding of poetry. That is, while this text is structured as a conversation between two people, in actuality it is closer to monological. For this reason, my own analysis has also focused primarily on Gabriel's utterances. However, we should not dismiss the fact that Hofmannsthal specifically chose the dialogue form for the poetological reflections in this text. In this section I point to two different functions that the dialogue serves. First, I claim that the dialogue form shows that the relationship between *Alltags*- and *Begriffssprache*, on the one hand, and poetic language, on the other, is not one of simple opposition, but rather is characterized by an interdependence. Second, I argue that only by taking into account the relationship between the form and content of "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" can we see the performative quality of this text. That is, not only do the characters in this dialogue model for us how reading is affective and subjective, as Simon Jander recently pointed out, but the dialogue is also an enactment of an open-ended way of *speaking* about poetry, which Hofmannsthal promotes not only in this text but also throughout his oeuvre.[173]

[173] Simon Jander, *Die Poetisierung des Essays: Rudolf Kassner, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gottfried Benn* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008).

In his study of Hofmannsthal's *Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe*, Simon Jander classifies Hofmannsthal's fictional dialogues as dialogue-essays, a genre of prose in Hofmannsthal's oeuvre the form of which has been largely understudied. Jander finds that most studies of Hofmannsthal's fictional dialogues tend to brush over the question of the dialogue form by simply referring to Hofmannsthal's own thesis that one cannot speak about poetry in a logical or explicitly analytical manner. He points out that there are as of yet very few studies of Hofmannsthal's imaginary conversations that closely examine the specific textual strategies that the form of the dialogue gives rise to. He argues that the dialogue form is a means by which Hofmannsthal poeticizes the essay, meaning that the author personalizes his reflections on art and literature by turning them into utterances made by fictional characters. Jander contends that the thematization of aesthetic experience is at the center of Hofmannsthal's *Erfundene Gespräche*, and that the dialogue form, allowing for a plurality of perspectives, enables Hofmannsthal to emphasize the subjective reception of art.

Jander traces the genre of dialogue-essays back to the 18th century, and identifies the Earl of Shaftesbury as a writer who greatly influenced the German essay tradition. He was one of the earliest writers to recognize the importance of the dialogue form as a medium for philosophical reflections. It was important to him that thought be expressed in a non-didactic, non-dogmatic form, and therefore regarded the dialogue as a promising form, since it lent itself to unsystematic reflections that could be left open-ended. By contrast, Gottsched is an Enlightenment thinker who opposed this use of the dialogue form, believing that reflections on science and art must be systematic, which is something

that the dialogue could not do.[174] Shaftesbury's influence, however, can be seen in Germany in the last decades of the 18th century, with an increased emphasis on figures and scenery, a plurality of perspectives, open-ended thought processes, and the foregrounded figure of the reader. Jander points out that while the epistolary form of writing was already popular in the 18th century, the letters and epistolary novels of this period are predominantly of a different character from the dialogues written by Lessing and Schlegel. Winckelmann's *Sendschreiben über die Gedanken*, Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen einer Reihe von Briefen* (1795), and Herder's *Humanitätsbriefe* (1792-97)[175] are examples of poeticized essays in a limited sense because they tend to be still more didactic and systematic. By comparison, Lessing's "Ernst und Falk" (1778-1780) and Friedrich Schlegel's "Gespräch über die Poesie" (1800) have a more pronounced fictional-poetic dimension. Around 1900, under the influence of Nietzsche, the self-reflexive character of the essay is radicalized, emphasizing the instability of the reflecting "I".[176]

"Das Gespräch über Gedichte" is one of many fictional dialogues that Hofmannsthal wrote. Mary Gilbert notes that Hofmannsthal wrote frequently in the form of imaginary letters and conversations between 1900 and 1908, a transitional period in which he moved away from writing lyric poetry, in favor of prose and tragedies. She says that Hofmannsthal was well aware of the literary tradition of philosophical and literary

[174] Jander, 51.

[175] Jander, 55.

[176] Jander, 63.

dialogues going back to Novalis. Echoing Richard Alewyn,[177] she observes, too, that his "predilection for this form seems to reflect one side of Hofmannthal's nature who, as all his friends testify, was the most wonderful of conversationalists. 'Gespräche' to him were a spiritual need and a great part of his thinking seems to have been done in this form."[178] Gilbert nevertheless finds it peculiar that there is a "preponderance of 'Gespräche' and 'Unterhaltungen'" during a phase of Hofmannsthal's career which was "inaugurated by the Lord Chandos letter" and in which one might have expected "deep withdrawal" from the author.[179] Yet as Gilbert rightly notes, Hofmannsthal "consistently chose 'Gespräche' and 'Unterhaltungen,' a form which entirely depends upon the demonstrable capability of the figure to communicate through words. For in these essays insight is not there *a priori*; it grows and deepens perceptibly in the give and take of sympathetic minds."[180]

How does Gilbert then explain the curious fact that Hofmannsthal frequently wrote in this social form of the fictional dialogue during a period of his career that is marked by a preoccupation with the language crisis? She argues that Hofmannsthal's fictional letters and dialogues "constitute an act of self-clarification"[181] and that they reflect a "thirst for reality," a move away from the irreality of *Präexistenz*.[182] This move

[177] Richard Alewyn observed that conversations for Hofmannsthal were of existential importance: "Er lebte nicht wie andere von Gesprächen, sondern im Gespräch. Das Gespräch war ihm nicht nur Mittel, es war geradezu die Form seiner Existenz." Richard Alewyn, "Unendliches Gespräch. Die Briefe Hugo von Hofmannsthals," *DNR* 65, no. 3/4 (1954): 539.

[178] Mary E. Gilbert, "Hofmannsthal's Essays, 1900-1908: A Poet in Transition," in *Hofmannsthal: Studies* (London: University of London Institute of Germanic Studies, 1963), 31.

[179] Gilbert, 31.

[180] Gilbert, 31.

[181] Gilbert, 44.

[182] Gilbert, 51.

is reflected in the choice of his speakers in the imaginary letters and conversations. With the exception of the Balzac dialogue, all of the interlocutors in the fictional dialogues are not experts. Hofmannsthal, thus, assigns the role of the creative critic to the "ordinary" reader. "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" is a good example of a text that presents the kind of critical reader Hofmannsthal had in mind. As noted briefly at the beginning of this chapter, this dialogue is written in a casual tone and the exchange is not between two experts, but between two well-read friends with strong poetic sensibilities. Gilbert characterizes the seemingly ordinary interlocutors of Hofmannsthal's dialogues as "reader-poets."[183] Her interpretation of Hofmannsthal's fictional dialogues is reflective of one of two dominant ways in which they have been understood: one is to regard them as Hofmannsthal's attempt to forge a "Weg ins Soziale,"[184] while the other is to see them as a continuation of Hofmannsthal's lyrical work, inasmuch as the focus is still on aesthetic experience and poetic subjectivity.[185]

While these two dominant understandings of Hofmannsthal's fictional dialogues are valuable, they are too polarized. As we have seen, "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" is

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[183] Gilbert, 32.

[184] Representatives of this interpretative camp are: Ernst-Otto Gerke. *Der Essay als Kunstform bei Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Lübeck: Mathiesen Verlag, 1970) 125; Mathias Mayer, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Stuttgart, 1993) 154; Hanna Weischedel, "Autor und Publikum. Bemerkungen zu Hofmannsthal's essayistischer Prosa," in *Festschrift für Klaus Ziegler*, eds. Eckehard Catholy and Winfried Hellmann (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1968) 302; Arno Scholl, *Hofmannsthals essayistische Prosa: Studien zur Entwicklung ihrer Form* (PhD diss. Johannes Gutenberg Universität, Mainz, 1958) 217; Mary E. Gilbert, "Hofmannsthal's Essays, 1900-1908: A Poet in Transition," in *Hofmansthal: Studies in Commemoration*, ed. F. Norman (London: University of London Institute of Germanic Studies, 1963), 44.

[185] Representatives of this camp: Richard Exner, "Zur Essayistik Hugo von Hofmannsthals," *Schweizer Monatshefte* 2 (1961): 188; Klaus Weissenberger, "Hofmannsthal's Entwicklung des Essays zur inneren Zwangsläufigkeit von Typologie und Form," in *'Wir sind aus solchem Zeug wie das zu träumen…'. Kritische Beiträge zu Hofmannsthals Werk*, ed. Joseph P. Strelka (Bern: Peter Lang, 1992), 103; Slawomir Lesniak, *Thomas Mann, Max Rychner, Hugo von Hofmannsthal und Rudolf Kassner: Eine Typologie essayistischer Formen* (Würzburg: Königshaus & Neumann, 2005).

more monological than dialogical. The two polarized readings arise from an attempt to isolate form from content. This approach is made possible by the text itself because the form and content of this dialogue seem to be distinct from one another. That is, the content, or the subject of the conversation, is the question of what poetry is and does; the form, i.e. the dialogue structure, does not seem to explicitly reflect this subject matter, but rather appears to serve the purpose of underscoring the interlocutors' associative and open-ended thought processes. I argue, however, that when these two seemingly independent aspects of the text are considered together, we can see that the text as a whole casts doubt on Gabriel's claim that poetic language is distinctly different both from the "stumpfe Alltagssprache" and from what he calls the "schwächliche Terminologie der Wissenschaft."[186] In the dialogue we have, on the one hand, the use of everyday and conceptual language in the exchange between Clemens and Gabriel, and on the other hand Gabriel's claim that everyday language and conceptual language are impoverished by comparison with the more powerful poetic language. What seems contradictory, however, is the fact that Gabriel has to resort to everyday language in order to make his case for the power of poetry. The dull everyday language is thus not so weak after all; in fact, it is a very powerful tool, with which Gabriel can transform Clemens' understanding of poetry. In other words, the powerful act of persuasion is performed through everyday language.

One could say that the difference between everyday and poetic language, implied by the dialogue as a whole, is that the former is used for communication and the latter is used for the renewal of our perception of the world. Gabriel suggests that poetry has the

[186] *GWE*, 499.

inverse effect of everyday language: whereas everyday language, in the process of mediating reality, objectifies experience and thus alienates us from it, poetic language effaces its mediating character and as a result makes us more aware of our immediate perception of the world. Gabriel suggests that poetry translates our feelings into words, which is something that any ordinary use of language cannot achieve.

Part of the problem with Gabriel's argument, however, is its vagueness. For instance, it remains unclear what the causal relationship between poetic language and our affective experience of reality is: Does the poetic use of words have the effect of *intensifying* our physical experience of reality? Or does poetry actually *produce* our physical sensation of the world? How is it that poetic language is better at communicating with our senses? Does Hofmannsthal actually distinguish that strictly between the two different languages in this dialogue?

Benjamin Bennett argues that Hofmannsthal ultimately does not distinguish strictly between poetry and everyday language. He suggests that the opposition between conceptual language, which supposedly fossilizes experience, and poetry, as a deeper form of communication, should actually be regarded as "merely a kind of poetic convention, a fruitful problem or tension, an opening of space for linguistic play."[187] Just as the language crisis is to a certain extent a trope or fashion in Hofmannsthal's time, so is the opposition between poetry and conceptual language. To understand this opposition as a trope does not mean that Hofmannsthal did not take this problem seriously, but it suggests that he likely aestheticized the tension between poetry and everyday language.

[187] Benjamin Bennett, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: The Theatres of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 28.

To complement and extend Bennett's observation, I would argue that the reason that the opposition between poetic, everyday and conceptual language is a fruitful figure of thought for Hofmannsthal is because it is a highly problematic opposition. How poetry, using words from ordinary language, can fleetingly restore a sense of sensory immediacy is ultimately unanswered by this text. Like Clemens, we are left to choose either to accept or to reject Gabriel's claims. In the absence of an explanation as to how it is that poetry can allow us to experience a cosmic unity,[188] we have to trust Gabriel's assertions about the magical powers of poetry. Even Gabriel's story of the symbolic act illustrates *that* we reach for symbols, and yet it does not explain *how* this works. The "how" remains a mystery. When we consider seriously the fact that Gabriel does not answer this question, what becomes increasingly apparent is the asymmetrical power relation between Gabriel and Clemens. The existing criticism on "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" largely fails to take into account how the two interlocutors' power relationship informs our understanding of this text as a whole. I argue that when we take the asymmetrical power relationship between Gabriel and Clemens into account, we can begin to see that Gabriel's claims about the unique status of poetry rest largely on his emphatic insistence that this is so, and on Clemens' acceptance of Gabriel's superior understanding of poetic language. Of course, Clemens directs the conversation in his own way by posing questions to Gabriel; however, on the whole he tends to defer to Gabriel's expertise.

I argue, therefore, that the character of Gabriel should not be understood as a mere mouthpiece for Hofmannsthal's own views, but rather as a figure whose claims about poetry should be met with a healthy dose of skepticism. Jost Schneider is among the few

[188] "[W]ir und die Welt sind nichts Verschiedenes." *GWE*, 503.

critics who make a similar point, and he does so through a biographical reading of Hofmannsthal's text. He argues that the author modeled Gabriel on Stefan George, of whose romantic-symbolist worship of poetry Hofmannsthal was wary. He believes that Gabriel's claims about poetry reflect a combination of "romantisch-ästhetizistischen Prädispositionen und symbolistisches Gestaltungswillen,"[189] reminiscent of Stefan George's conception of poetry. It is well established that George and Hofmannsthal had a very ambivalent relationship, in which Hofmannsthal ultimately rejected George's attempts to bring him into his literary circle.

Schneider draws attention to the fact that Hofmannsthal was highly aware of the fraught power dynamic in a prophet-disciple relationship. In his poem "Der Prophet," which was written in 1891, two days after George paid Hofmannsthal a visit in his apartment in Vienna,[190] the author depicts the sinister, seductive powers of a prophet figure:

> In einer Halle hat er mich empfangen
> Die rätselhaft mich ängstet mit Gewalt
> Von süßen Düften widerlich durchwallt.
> Da hängen fremde Vögel, bunte Schlangen.
>
> Das Thor fällt zu, des Lebens Laut verhallt
> Der Seele Athmen hemmt ein dumpfes Bangen
> Eine Zaubertrunk hält jeden Sinn befangen
> Und alles flüchtet, hilflos, ohne Halt.
>
> Er aber ist nicht wie er immer war,
> Sein Auge bannt und fremd ist Stirn und Haar.
> Von seinen Worten, den unscheinbar leisen
> Geht eine Herrschaft aus und ein Verführen
> Er macht die leere Luft beengend kreisen

[189] Jost Schneider, Alte und neue Sprechweisen: Untersuchungen zur Sprachthematik in den Gedichten Hugo von Hofmannsthals (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 136.

[190] *SW 2*, 287.

Und er kann tödten, ohne zu berühren.[191]

While the prophet is active and present here, the lyrical subject is passive and absent, appearing only twice, in the opening lines, in the form of the accusative personal pronoun. The lyrical subject is the direct object of the prophet's sinister, intangible influence and of the aggression exercised with his seemingly gentle words, which have the quality of a revolting sweet scent that invisibly permeates the air and closes in on the subject, suffocating him. Schneider interprets the last stanza as a characterization of a prophetic way of speaking, which is not only seductive and opaque but also circular and isolating, indicated by the shutting of the gate.[192] He argues that Hofmannsthal was criticizing George in this poem and that he continues to portray George in a similarly critical light through the figure of Gabriel in "Das Gespräch über Gedichte."[193] Schneider asserts that Hofmannsthal grew skeptical of the symbolist manner of speaking, which aimed to constitute a "Sondersprache," accessible only to the few, rather than to clarify language.[194]

While Schneider points us in the right direction, however, he does not examine in sufficient detail how it is that Gabriel's manner of speaking makes him resemble the prophet figure in Hofmannsthal's poem. I argue that it is possible to see, not just in *what* Gabriel says but also in *how* he communicates with Clemens, that there is an asymmetrical power relationship between them. For example, in the following exchange,

[191] *SW 2*, 61.

[192] Schneider, 135.

[193] Schneider, 136.

[194] Schneider, 140.

challenged by Clemens' very valid questioning of the origin story of the symbol, Gabriel responds not so much with further explanation, but rather with a rejection of Clemens' reaction:

> CLEMENS: Woher kommt ihnen diese Kraft? Wie konnte er in dem Tier sterben?
> GABRIEL: Davon, daß wir und die Welt nicht Verschiedenes sind.
> CLEMENS: Etwas Seltsames liegt in dem Gedanken, etwas Beunruhigendes.
> GABRIEL: Im Gegenteil, etwas unendlich Ruhevolles. Es ist das einzig Süße, einen Teil seiner Schwere abgegeben zu sehen; und wäre es nur für die mystische Frist eines Hauches. In unserem Leib ist das All dumpf zusammengedrückt: wie selig, sich tausendfach der furchtbaren Wucht zu entladen.
> CLEMENS: Und dennoch, ist mir, muß es Gedichte geben, die schön sind ohne diese schwüle Bezauberung.[195]

This exchange demonstrates Gabriel's exercise of power over Clemens, which is subtle, yet illustrates my point that Gabriel tends to *insist* on, rather than explain his understanding of, the power of poetic language. In this passage Gabriel simply dismisses Clemens' objection that there is something unsettling about the thought that we are one and the same as the world. Clemens' unease in response to Gabriel's suggestion that the symbol can trigger in us the experience of a *unio mystica* seems perfectly reasonable; after all, is there not something potentially threatening about the idea that the subject would be stripped of his individuality and identity in a moment of mystical union with the world? Rather than acknowledging that Clemens' reaction may be worth examining, Gabriel authoritatively *prescribes* how Clemens should feel about such a cosmic union, insisting that there is something infinitely peaceful in the idea that we could release the weight of the universe that is compressed in our bodies. Moreover, we should note here

[195] *GWE*, 503-4.

that there is something seductive about Gabriel's description of the magical power of poetry: he uses words like "Hauch" to underscore the intangible quality of this power.

It must be acknowledged, however, that Clemens is by no means a completely quiescent interlocutor. In this particular passage Clemens persists in voicing his skepticism. He questions whether there might not be poems that are beautiful without having the hazy effect of enchantment ("schwüle Bezauberung") that Gabriel sees as the virtue of poetic language. Clemens' question introduces a comparison between classical poetry, which appeals to the mind through "geformten Ideen," and modern poetry, which appeals to the soul:

> CLEMENS: [...] Antworte mir Gabriel, ist der geformte Gedanke nicht schön? Hat er nicht den Glanz des Lebens verzehnfacht in sich, wie die Perlen den feuchten Schimmer der nackten Hand in sich saugen und zehnfach widerstrahlen?
> GABRIEL: Ja, der Gedanke ist etwas Schönes und du hast so großes Recht, ihn der Perle und dem Edelstein zu vergleichen. Dieses beiden gleicht er, die schöner sind als alles Blühen und Leben, weil sie über das Blühen und Leben und Sterben hinaus sind. Und für eine junge Welt, die daliegt in Blindheit, ist er das Wunder der Wunder [...] wir aber sind reicher an Gedanken, als der endlose Meeresstrand an Muscheln. Was uns not tut, ist der Hauch.
> Wovon unsere Seele sich nährt, das ist das Gedicht, in welchem, wie im Sommerabendwind, der über die frischgemähten Wiesen streicht, zugleich ein Hauch von Tod und Leben zu uns herschwebt, eine Ahnung des Blühens, ein Schauder des Verwesens, ein Jetzt, ein Hier und zugleich ein Jenseits, ein ungeheueres Jenseits.[196]

Striking in Gabriel's response to Clemens here is his vitalist vocabulary. Gabriel picks up on Clemens' description of a more sober, classical form of poetry as like "pearls," and points out that this description aptly reflects the inorganic nature of a poetry that appeals to the mind. He then contrasts the metaphor of pearls and precious stones (which are common motifs for aestheticism) with organic metaphors, like "Sommerabendwind" and

[196] *GWE*, 506-7.

freshly mowed grass, which refer to a modern poetry that brings us closer to life. Gabriel describes the poetry that is better suited to the needs of modern times as ephemeral because it does not aim to capture unchanging truths but rather the transience of our feelings. The emphasis on the transience of life intensifies the experience of the present moment: "eine Ahnung des Blühens, ein Schauder des Verwesens, ein Jetzt, ein Hier und zugleich ein Jenseits."[197] Moreover, Gabriel historicizes the value of this kind of poetry. He argues that when the world was young, ideas could produce a sense of wonder, but the modern time is oversaturated with ideas. Thus, what the modern subject needs are not ideas and concepts, but rather poetry that fine-tunes our awareness of being in the world. He claims that we need poetry that can allow us to feel an intangible "Hauch" that can infuse the overly intellectual modern individual with a feeling of life.

Gabriel's observation about what ails the modern individual is insightful, and is reflective of a strain of cultural critique that is still current today. However, the claims he makes at the end of the dialogue about what such a poetry of feeling can achieve are hyperbolic. He overpromises what poetry can do:

> Das wirkliche Erlebnis der Seele, welche Worte möchten es ausdrücken, wenn nicht bezauberte! Ein Augenblick kommt und drückt aus tausenden und tausenden seinesgleichen den Saft heraus, in die Höhe der Vergangenheit dringt er ein und den tausenden von dunklen erstarrten Augenblicken, aus denen sie aufgebaut ist, entquillt ihr ganzes Licht: was niemals da war, nie sich gab, jetzt ist es da, jetzt gibt es sich, ist Gegenwart, mehr als Gegenwart; was niemals zusammen war, jetzt ist es zugleich, ist es beisammen, schmilzt ineinander die Glut, den Glanz und das Leben. [...] Daß es Zusammenstellungen von Worten gibt, aus welchen, wie der Funke aus dem geschlagenen dunklen Stein, die Landschaften der Seele hervorbrechen, die unermeßlich sind wie der gestirnte Himmel, Landschaften, die sich ausdehnen im Raum und in der Zeit, und deren Anblick abzuweiden in uns ein Sinn lebendig wird, der über alle Sinne ist. Und dennoch entstehen solche Gedichte...?[198]

[197] *GWE*, 507.

[198] *GWE*, 509.

This passage contains imagery of volcanic eruption. The thousands of petrified moments that represent our cumulative experiences in life are described like a pile of rocks that tower over us. Gabriel suggests with this imagery that there is glowing life within this mountain of fossilized experiences that is brought to eruption through poetry. He claims that such moments are rare because it is rare to come across a perfect poem that will produce this effect. However, such poems do exist, and their existence is cause for wonder. Once again, what lurks behind the description of the so-called "vollkommenen Gedichte"[199] is the fact that Gabriel is making prescriptive claims. In claiming that he knows what the true power of poetry is, he steps out of his role of a reader with a high sensibility for poetry, and takes on the role of the prophet, namely the prophet of the poet.

[199] *GWE*, 509.

Chapter 4: The Poet and Mass Readership in Hofmannsthal's Time

Hofmannsthal felt that he was part of an age oversaturated with culture and knowledge, and as we saw in "Ein Brief," he was critical of the idea that the world consists of signs that we cannot decipher until all the secrets of nature have been unlocked. Gerhard Neumann asserts that Hofmannsthal tried to counter the idea of the "Lesbarkeit der Welt" with a "Poetik des Nicht-Lesens."[200] In this chapter I explore the practical implications of this idea of the unreadability of the world through a study of Hofmannsthal's "Der Dichter und diese Zeit" (1906). In his own time Hofmannsthal was attacked by Karl Kraus, one of his harshest critics, for seeking refuge from life in art.[201] This one-sided view has been effectively countered by many thinkers, including Carl E. Schorske, who demonstrated that Hofmannsthal in fact recognized an urgent need for the poet to escape the temple of art and establish a connection to his society.[202] While I do not dispute that Hofmannsthal sought to create an art that could communicate with the people, I think it is questionable whether he ever succeeded in this task. The difficulty, as I argue in this chapter, is that Hofmannsthal wanted to retain the privileged position of the artist, but was never able to elaborate how the poet's unique perspective could be communicated to a people who, by his own conception, stood outside of such a

[200] Gerhard Neumann, "'Kunst des Nicht-lesens': Hofmannsthals Ästhetik des Flüchtigen," in *Hofmannsthal-Jahrbuch* 4 (1997): 232. Cf Hans Blumenberg's *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981).

[201] Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 16. Schorske cites Kraus *Die Fackel*, I (April 1899), 25, 27. Kraus calls Hofmannsthal "that gem-collector" who "flees from life and loves the things that beautify it."

[202] Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 16.

perspective. "Der Dichter und diese Zeit" gestures at this impasse but, I argue, never successfully articulates a way beyond it. His attempt to simultaneously broaden his audience's understanding of poetry by making it encompass all forms of writing, on the one hand, and to secure a special status for it, on the other, leads to an extremely ambiguous portrayal of the relationship between poet, reader, and literature.

I. Poetry and the Modern Reader

When Hofmannsthal submitted "Das Gespräch über Gedichte" for publication in September of 1903, he explained to Oscar Bie, the publisher of *Neue Rundschau*, that he broke off the dialogue at a point where it was about to turn to a discussion about the role of the reader. He told him that he intended to write a second part to this dialogue: "Dieses Thema, 'wer sind die, in denen das Gedicht lebt, durch die es durch die Zeit getragen wird,' will ich Ihnen wenn die lebhafte Stimmung für solche Prosa wiederkommt, zu einem eigenen Aufsatz ausarbeiten, welcher 'Der Leser' heißen wird und wofür ich viele Notizen habe."[203] Although Hofmannsthal did not end up writing this second part of "Das Gespräch über Gedichte," he continued to work on it between 1903 and 1908. His notes indicate that some of the thoughts he had for "Der Leser" were included in "Der Dichter und diese Zeit," in which he reflects more broadly on the relationship between the poet and the modern readership. In this essay Hofmannsthal provides a diagnosis of the poet's status in relation to the popular reading culture of his time; he argues that the declining status of the poet and of poetry is merely a surface phenomenon, beneath which one finds an intense but unconscious spiritual longing for poetry amongst the general reading public. Hofmannsthal observes that on the surface, the journalist, popular novelist,

[203] See "Das Gespräch über Gedichte," in *GWE*, 337.

scientist, and newspaper reporter appear to have marginalized the poet. The general public's thirst for literature seems to be driven by two desires: a desire for distraction, on the one hand, and a desire for more reality, on the other. The modern mass consumer of literature, he observes, assumes that the poet cannot satisfy either of these needs. However, Hofmannsthal argues that despite all outward signs to the contrary, the ordinary reader's "ungeheuere Krankheit […] des Lesens"[204] is indicative of "eine unstillbare Sehnsucht nach dem Genießen von Poesie."[205] However, Hofmannsthal recognizes that his argument may strike his audience as counter-intuitive:

> Dies muß Sie befremden und Sie sagen mir, daß in keiner früheren Zeit das Poetische eine so bescheidene Rolle gespielt hätte, als es in der Lektüre unsere Zeit spielt, wo es verschwindet unter der ungeheueren Masse dessen, was gelesen wird. Sie sagen mir, daß meine Behauptung vielleicht auf die Zuhörer der arabischen Märchenerzähler passe oder allenfalls auf [...] die Generation des Werther, doch sicherlich gerade am wenigsten auf unsere Zeit, die Zeit der wissenschaftlichen Handbücher, der Reallexika und der unzählbaren Zeitschriften, in denen für Poesie kein Raum ist.[206]

He acknowledges that reading as a contemplative act is an ideal that belongs to a distant, more tranquil time.[207] The modern readers Hofmannsthal has in mind in "Der Dichter und diese Zeit" are undiscriminating readers, mass-consumers of random books and print material: "Ich rede von denen die je nach der verschiedenen Stufe ihrer Kenntnisse ganz verschiedene Bücher lesen, ohne bestimmten Plan, unaufhörlich

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[204] *GWRA I*, 60.

[205] *GWRA I*, 60.

[206] *GWRA I*, 60-61.

[207] "Wir sind unendlich weit entfernt von dem ruhigen Liebhaber der schönen Literatur, von dem Amateur einer populären Wissenschaft, von dem Romanleser, dem Memoirenleser einer früheren, ruhigeren Zeit." *GWRA I*, 61.

wechselnd, selten in einem Buch lang ausruhend, getrieben von einer unausgesetzten, nie recht gestillten Sehnsucht."[208] Whereas Hofmannsthal's fictional readers in his other poetological essays read and hold their refined conversations about literature in private or public gardens, the mass consumer of literature portrayed in this essay reads in crowded, distracting public spaces like the omnibus.[209] In his typical fashion, Hofmannsthal seizes on a central image, the gesture of "das rastlose Wieder-aus-der-Hand-legen der Bücher,"[210] which for him crystallizes the characteristic disposition of the modern consumer of books.

Hofmannsthal's observations about the feverish reading habits at the turn of the 20th century echo the ones made by critics of the mass consumption of literature in the late 18th century. As Karin Littau points out, "Lesesucht" was a term commonly used in the 1780s and 1790s in German discussions about the phenomenon of bibliomania.[211] Thus, already a century before Hofmannsthal's time, anxieties were voiced about the excessive and speedy consumption of reading material, which critics found was resulting in unreflective reading habits and even physical strain. Littau says that the speed of reading picked up over the course of the 19th century, "as if readers were reproducing the speed of production in the speed of their own reading."[212] Critics worried that rather than

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[208] *GWRA I*, 61.

[209] *GWRA I*, 64.

[210] *GWRA I*, 61.

[211] Karin Littau, *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies and Bibliomania* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 42.

[212] Littau, 43.

sharpening the mind, the habit of reading purely for stimulation might be mentally enfeebling.[213]

In this regard, Hofmannsthal's observations about the unreflective reading habits of the masses are based on an already established cultural criticism. However, rather than simply disparaging the distractedness of modern readers, he argues that their insatiable appetite for literature is indicative of an unconscious yearning for enchantment, which is something only poetry can offer. Implicit in his argument is the idea that literature fills a spiritual vacuum that has resulted from the secularization of society. In other words, instead of looking to God as people did in an overtly religious past, the modern secularized individual looks to books for spiritual guidance: "Ich sehe beinahe als die Geste unserer Zeit den Menschen mit dem Buch in der Hand, wie der kniende Mensch mit gefaltenen Händen die Geste einer anderen Zeit war."[214] Thus, he sees the act of reaching for a book as replacing the religious ritual of prayer. But whereas the believer of the past could turn to the authority of the priest for an interpretation of God's will, the modern reader is both priest and believer in one. The leveled hierarchies of knowledge and the invisibility of cultural leaders has made the individual responsible for finding his own orientation:

> Waren sonst Priester, Berechtigte, Auserwählte die Hüter dieser Sitte, jener Kenntnis, so ruht dies alles jetzt potentiell in allen: wir könnten manches ins Leben werfen, wofern wir ganz zu uns selbst kämen…wir könnten dies und jenes wissen…wir könnten dies und jenes tun. Keine eleusinischen Weihen und keine sieben Sakramente helfen uns empor: in uns selber müssen wir uns in höheren Stand erheben, wo uns dies und jenes zu tun nicht mehr möglich, ja auch dies und jenes zu wissen nicht mehr möglich: dafür aber dies und jenes sichtbar, verknüpfbar, möglich, ja greifbar, was allen anderen verborgen. Dies alles geht

[213] Littau, 46.

[214] *GWRA I*, 61.

> lautlos vor sich und so wie zwischen den Dingen. Es fehlt in unserer Zeit den repräsentativen Dingen an Geist, und den geistigen an Relief.[215]

Hofmannsthal provides a relativistic characterization of the individualistic approach to what had been a hierarchy of knowledge, suggesting in very vague terms that some possibilities are gained while others are lost, without identifying exactly what these gains and losses are. Thus, the gestural character of Hofmannsthal's language in this essay has led some critics to characterize Hofmannsthal's position vis-à-vis modernity as relativistic, even provocatively progressive. For instance, Frank Wood suggests that the logical conclusion of the leveling described above is that there is nothing separating the reader from the poet.[216] By making the reader the poet, Hofmannsthal democratizes the figure of the poet, turning him into a capability in everyone, as opposed to conceiving of him as a genius who belongs to a class of people apart from the ordinary person.[217] However, based on the cited passage above, one can equally argue, to the contrary, that Hofmannsthal is emphasizing ordinary readers' lack of orientation, and that their task of raising themselves to a "höheren Stand" necessitates guidance from the poet, a figure who has a higher awareness of the forces shaping a time that is oversaturated with a heterogeneity of knowledge and lacking in "repräsentativen Dingen." I argue that

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[215] *GWRA I*, 57.

[216] Frank Wood, "Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Aesthetics: A Survey Based on the Prose Works. *PMLA* 55, no. 1 (March, 1940): 253-265.

[217] The notion that there is a poetic potential in everyone is a key idea in German Romanticism. Novalis believed that poets should not be regarded as a special guild: his fictional poet Klingsohr claims that poetry is "die eigenthümliche Handlungsweise des menschlichen Geistes. Dichtet und trachtet nicht jeder Mensch in jeder Minute?" Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* chapter 8, in *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, vol. 1, edited by Hans-Joachim Mähl (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1978), 335. Whereas Klingsohr's view is based on the idea that poetic creativity is incipient in everyone, Hofmannsthal confronts the challenge of a new more materialist form of modernity in which the ideal of "romanticizing" the world could no longer be entertained.

Hofmannsthal actually sees the priesthood of all believers as exacerbating the modern individual's sense that the world is fragmented and incoherent. While he attempts to democratize poetry by making it encompass all forms of writing, he resists blurring the line between poet and reader.

In one sense, Frank Wood is right to observe that Hofmannsthal presents a democratic conception of the poet. He points out that when "Der Dichter und diese Zeit" appeared in the *Neue Rundschau* in 1907, it "rightly caused a stir among those accustomed to hear poetry spoken of as the prerogative of the few, a sixth sense, so to speak, bestowed supernaturally."[218] He claims that the author refused "to draw any distinctions in a democratic, scientific age between one [intellectual] capacity and another."[219] Indeed, in the following passage, Hofmannsthal explicitly says that he considers it illiberal to draw strict distinctions between poets and non-poets, or between poetry and non-poetry:

> Am wenigsten wüßte ich ihn [den Begriff des Dichters] von vorne herein nach unten abzugrenzen, ja diese haarscharfe Absonderung des Dichters vom Nicht-Dichter erscheint mir gar nicht möglich. Ich würde mir sagen müssen, daß die Produkte von Menschen, die kaum Dichter zu nennen sind, manchmal nicht ganz des Dichterischen entbehren, und umgekehrt scheint mir zuweilen, das, was sehr hohe und unzweifelhafte Dichter geschaffen haben, nicht frei von undichterischen Elementen. Es scheint mir in diesen Dingen eine illiberale Auffassung nicht möglich und immer ziemlich nah am Lächerlichem.[220]

[218] Wood, 256.

[219] Wood, 256.

[220] *GWRA I*, 56.

Hofmannsthal indeed appears to present a liberal understanding of poetry. In this essay,[221] "Dichtung" is synonymous with literature in the broadest sense: everything from the highest form of literature to the daily newspaper is understood by this term. He even dismisses the distinction between the "Dichter" and "dem bloßen Schriftsteller" as an arrogant practice by those who produce literature.[222] By conceiving of poetry in this broad sense, Hofmannsthal secures the presence of the poet in all forms of literature. That is, the modern reader, regardless of whether he engages with highbrow or lowbrow literature, is in contact with the poet and exposed to poetry. Thus, Hofmannsthal aims to broaden the public's understanding of poetry in order to show that the poet is not a defunct or out-dated figure, but very much present in his time.

However, while Hofmannsthal claims that he does not seek to draw strict distinctions between poetry and all other forms of writing, or between the poet and the writer in a looser sense, he allows himself to expand these terms on the basis of a more conservative theory of literature. He presents this theory plainly in this essay, asserting that all writing descends directly from the great books of world literatures:

> Alles, was in einer Sprache geschrieben wird und, wagen wir das Wort, alles, was in ihr gedacht wird, deszendiert von den Produkten der wenigen, die jemals mit dieser Sprache schöpferisch geschaltet haben. Und alles, was man im breitesten und wahllosesten Sinn Literatur nennt, bis zum Operntextbuch der vierziger Jahre, bis hinunter zum Kolportageroman, alles deszendiert von den wenigen großen Büchern der Weltliteratur. Es ist eine erniedrigte, durch zuchtlose Mischungen bis zum Grotesken entstellte Deszendenz, aber es ist Deszendenz in direkter Linie.[223]

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[221] By contrast, in his earlier essay, "Poesie und Leben," Hofmannsthal does use the word "Poesie" in the narrow sense.

[222] *GWRA I*, 56.

[223] *GWRA I*, 63.

Hofmannsthal's expanded and democratized understanding of poetry is, thus, based on a hierarchical and essentialist understanding of literature. Rather than saying that all forms of writing have a value of their own, Hofmannsthal argues that even the lowest form of writing can be regarded as poetry because it carries within it the germ of the purest and highest form of literature. Thus, his "genetic" theory about the origins of all writing allows Hofmannsthal to remain confident that poetry will not be bastardized to the point where it loses its essence. Implicit in this theory is the idea that the continued existence and preservation of poetry is not dependent on the modern writer's creative powers. The writer is not so much considered to be the creator of literature, but rather conceived of as someone who can *channel* the world through the medium of language.

But while Hofmannsthal thus makes poetry largely independent of the writer's creative ability, he does not go so far as to claim that *anyone* can be the poet. There is a confusing tension in this essay between Hofmannsthal's culturally liberal and conservative impulses. His attempt to simultaneously broaden his audience's understanding of poetry (so as to distance it from any pedantic bourgeois conceptions of *Bildung*), on the one hand, and to secure a special status for it, on the other, leads to an extremely ambiguous portrayal of the relationship between poet, reader, and literature.

II. Models of Coherence: The Storyteller and the Poet

To more fully understand Hofmannsthal's view regarding the modern reader's unconscious longing for poetry, we must further examine the context in which he sets the relationship between poet, reader, and literature. Specifically, Hofmannsthal thinks that this relationship is anchored in a historical epoch that is marked by a fundamental

indeterminacy and lack of coherence. Part of the problem of even identifying the reader or the poet is that they are both anonymous and in a sense unknown to each other – as, indeed, people in general are in the modern age. By contrast to his own time, Hofmannsthal regards the Middle Ages as a time when there was a collective inner state that could be externalized in the form of monumental cathedrals; in the modern age, however, the interiority of modern individuals is so vast and so heterogeneous that it is no longer possible to agree upon representative metaphors for the innumerable inner realms that make up the fragmented modern society:

> Es ist das Wesen dieser Zeit, das nichts, was wirkliche Gewalt hat über die Menschen, sich metaphorisch nach außen ausspricht, sondern alles ins Innere genommen ist, während etwa die Zeit, die wir das Mittelalter nennen und deren Trümmer und Phantome in unsere hineinragen, alles, was sie in sich trug, zu einem ungeheuren Dom von Metaphern ausgebildet aus sich ins Freie emportrieb.[224]

Hofmannsthal sees this cleaving apart of the subjective from the objective sphere of reality as a central problem of modernity: human beings no longer find themselves – find their inwardness – represented in the forms of the material world. As a consequence of this separation of the inside and outside realms from each other, reality has taken on a spectral quality, as the visible phenomena of the time do not serve as reliable indicators of the forces that shape and determine the modern condition. Hofmannsthal, therefore, finds that the "Vieldeutigkeit" and "Unbestimmtheit"[225] of his time give reality itself an incoherent and even chimerical appearance.

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[224] *GWRA I*, 57.

[225] *GWRA I*, 60.

Given the indeterminate nature of his time, Hofmannsthal asks whether the poet still serves as a figure of cultural authority for the broader public. He says of his epoch, "Ein leiser chronischer Schwindel vibriert in ihr. Es ist in ihr vieles da, was nur wenigen sich ankündigt, und vieles nicht da, wovon viele glauben, es wäre da. So möchten sich die Dichter zuweilen fragen, ob sie da sind, ob sie für ihre Epoche denn irgend wirklich da sind."[226] Hofmannsthal's own answer to this question is, perhaps not surprisingly, yes; however, this is a qualified affirmation because he cannot deny that all the outward signs of his time indicate that the poet is no longer regarded as someone who can shed light on his historical period. He observes of the mass reader: "Aber die Sehnsucht dieser, möchte es scheinen, geht durchaus nicht auf den Dichter. Es ist der Mann der Wissenschaft, der diese Sehnsucht zu stillen vermag, oder für neunzig auf hundert unter ihnen der Journalist."[227] These readers are not after poetry, but rather are in search of "Zusammenstellungen realer Fakten."[228]

Walter Benjamin makes similar observations about the modern readership's tendency to value facts and journalistic writing over experiences that are transmitted in the form of stories. In his essay "Der Erzähler," Benjamin argues that storytelling is replaced altogether with a new form of communication, which he calls "information." Whereas the storyteller used to provide a sense of totality with his story, information is a form of communication that intensifies the sense of incoherence characteristic of the modern age. Information has its own distinct temporal structure, in the sense that it feeds

[226] *GWRA I*, 60.

[227] *GWRA I*, 61.

[228] *GWRA I*, 61.

on what is new and it is relevant for the present moment only: "Die Information hat ihren Lohn mit dem Augenblick dahin, in dem sie neu war. Sie lebt nur in diesem Augenblick, sie muß sich gänzlich an ihn ausliefern und ohne Zeit zu verlieren sich ihm erklären. Anders die Erzählung; sie verausgabt sich nicht."[229] Hofmannsthal similarly finds that the masses are suffering from a sense of incoherence and that by turning to journalism and science they are looking in the wrong place for a restoration of a coherent sense of reality.

An important difference, though, between Benjamin and Hofmannsthal is that Benjamin sees the disappearance of the storyteller as irreversible. In addition, Benjamin is willing to say what the storyteller's disappearance means for society; in his view, the dominance of information indicates that people no longer value accounts of lived experience and that modern people have a vastly diminished ability to communicate their own experiences. By contrast, Hofmannsthal is not willing to say that the poet has disappeared. While he recognizes that the poet has enjoyed greater respect and visibility in the past, he argues that the poet's invisibility in his time indicates that he exercises his influence at a subterranean level. Because the modern reader is inundated with journalistic and scientific reading material, his desire for enchantment has been buried in his unconscious. Most readers, Hofmannsthal argues, are not conscious of what they are *really* looking for; they have no "Übersicht" and lack the "Kraft der Zusammenfassung."[230] The only way in which the masses can express what is taking place inside of them is through the mute gesture of putting down an opened book and

[229] Walter Benjamin, "Der Erzähler," *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 2, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 445-46.

[230] *GWRA I*, 62.

picking up a new one. There is a strange sense in which the only truth that seems to be left for human beings to embrace is the truth that they are meaning-seeking creatures:

> Sie suchen immerfort etwas, was ihr Leben mit den Adern des großen Lebens verbände in einer zauberhaften Transfusion lebendigen Blutes. Sie suchen in den Büchern, was sie einst vor den rauchenden Altären suchten, eins in dämmernden von Sehnsucht nach oben gerissenen Kirchen. Sie suchen, was sie stärker als alles mit der Welt verknüpfe, und zugleich den Druck der Welt mit eins von ihnen nehme. […] Sie suchen in einem Wort, die ganze Bezauberung der Poesie.[231]

Once again, Hofmannsthal uses the image of religious ritual in order to capture the mysterious process by which poetry intensifies the experience of life. The atomistic individual seeks to be unified with the cosmos. And it is this experience of unity that Hofmannsthal believes poetry can restore to the reader. As Bernhard Böschenstein observes, in Hofmannsthal's essay "wird die Ästhetik des Fin de siècle, die Sprachmagie, in den Dienst einer religiösen Funktion gestellt, die nun aber, anders als in früheren Jahrhunderten, ihre repräsentative Fassade aufgegeben hat."[232] Poetry can provide a sense of coherence, not by linking things together logically, but by providing the reader with the feeling that he is part of a greater whole.

While both of Benjamin's storyteller and Hofmannsthal's poet offer their readers a feeling of coherence, they create this sense differently. That is, whereas the storyteller provides coherence by creating a narrative out of experience, the poet offers an intimation of wholeness by throwing into relief the polyvalence and flux of life communicated through intangible moods. Hofmannsthal's poet is someone who, in a sense, cannot string

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[231] *GWRA I*, 62.

[232] Bernhard Böschenstein, "Hofmannsthal und die Kunstreligion um 1900," in *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrungen der Jahrhundertwenden*, vol. 2, *Um 1900*, eds. Wolfgang Braungart, Gotthard Fuchs and Manfred Koch (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1998), 117.

together a narrative out of experience. The poet offers up images, rather than narratives, that capture the atmosphere of the present moment, and thereby intensifies the reader's *Daseinsgefühl* at an unconscious level. The poet does not give concrete form to the complex inner state of the modern individual, but he is someone who, through the magic of his language, can give the reader a revitalized sense of life, by revealing that the outer life of mundane activity and inner realm of inchoate feelings belong together; in other words, he provides an antidote to precisely the characteristic problem of the age, discussed above. Thus, the poet is a subject who can discern "die Ordnung der Dinge"[233] in a time when phenomena rest on what Hofmannsthal calls "Gleitendes."[234] However, it is important not to exaggerate or overestimate the opposition between the storyteller and the poet because, as we should recall from the discussed above, for Hofmannsthal there is a poetic element in everything that is written.

III. Metaphorical Conceptions of the Poet

Although Hofmannsthal insists that the poet has an important presence in modern times, it is difficult to tell whether he is ultimately elevating or diminishing the poet's role in society. Perhaps this is because, much as the poet offers images to capture the spirit of his age, in "Der Dichter und diese Zeit" Hofmannsthal offers a series of images to illuminate the nature of the poet, and these images do not cohere into one clear and unified picture. Indeed, I contend that the sheer variety of metaphors that Hofmannsthal uses to convey the role of the modern poet suggests that the author himself cannot quite explain the poet's powers. At times it appears that the poet is conceived of as a privileged

[233] *GWRA I*, 67.

[234] *GWRA I*, 60.

individual with an almost unnatural sensibility for the essence of his environment and his time. Elsewhere, Hofmannsthal describes the poet as a disembodied perceptual organ, and again at other times, he is likened to a chameleon-like creature, who adopts the colors of his surrounding. In the following section I examine the implications of these various metaphoric descriptions of the poet's place in the world.

First, Hofmannsthal portrays the poet as a genius who has his finger on the pulse of his time. An important source for Hofmannsthal's essay was Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Poet" (1844), and his copy of Emerson's text is heavily marked. Emerson's description of the poet as a representative subject who has the rare ability to translate the language of nature resonated with Hofmannsthal. He underlined the following passage from Emerson's essay:

> The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression. Notwithstanding this necessity to be published, adequate expression is rare. I know not how it is that we need an interpreter; but the great majority of men seem to be minors, who have not yet come into possession of their own, or mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature. [235]

Hofmannsthal noted next to this passage, "Menschen bedürfen eines Dolmetschers,"[236] which suggests that the poet is endowed with an ability that the ordinary person does not have. His characterization of the masses suggests that he regards them as minors, similar to Emerson. In fact, in "Der Tisch mit den Büchern," from 1905, he compares the modern reader, faced with an overwhelming variety of reading material, to a child distracted by the many different games that other children are playing in the

[235] *SW 33*, 494.

[236] *SW* 33, 494.

park.[237] But while he may compare the popular reading public to children, he does not present the poet as the rational adult who imparts lessons. In fact, he attempts to construct the poet as a passive figure, whose special capacity is to passively listen to and observe the world, and then translate into words what has been revealed to him. And yet, we may well ask how it can be considered a straightforward act of translation if the poet has produced coherence out of incoherence; it would seem that he must have added or transformed something, in order to have delivered up a new unity. Thus, while Hofmannsthal claims that he does not seek to distinguish between poets and non-poets, in the final analysis he does not democratize the figure of the poet but, on the contrary, portrays the poet as possessing a genius that he does not share with the ordinary person.

Furthermore, the poet's genius consists of his unique understanding of his time, and thus it is especially interesting to examine the poet's own relationship to temporality. He is described as a figure who dwells in the house of time: "Seltsam wohnt er im Haus der Zeit, unter der Stiege, wo alle an ihm vorüber müssen und keiner ihn achtet."[238] While the poet is subject to various transformations to his role and nature, brought about through the passage of time, there appears at the same time to be something enduring in the nature of the poet, which remains constant in all ages. In this sense, Hofmannsthal could be said to present both a diachronic and synchronic understanding of the poet. His historical account of the poet's transformed position in modern times involves a

[237] "Wir sind wie das Kind im Kinderpark, das seine Gouvernante verloren hat. Rechts sind Kinder, die spielen Kämmer-Vermieten und freuen sich, aber zu denen gehört es nicht. Links sind Kinder, die spielen Blindekuh und freuen sich, aber zu denen gehört es auch nicht. Und wegzulaufen getraut es sich nicht, das verlorene Kind, denn im Gebüsch wird es schon dämmerig, und den Wächter zu fragen getraut es sich noch weniger, da steht es und schaut hin, und seine Angst und Bangigkeit und die Spiel der anderen gehen in seinem Kopf immerfort durcheinander." *GWRA I,* 338.

[238] *GWRA I*, 66.

description of manifest historical changes that cover up the actual (or latent) meaning of the poet's changed position in society.

On the surface level, he explains, it appears that the Jena Romantics were the last to have recognized the poet's cultural leadership. He points out that they used the word "Genie" to describe "das dichterische Wesen."[239] However, he finds that they restricted the concept of the genius too much by limiting it to refer to artists or poets.[240] By contrast, he observes that the English have a far broader and grander understanding of the figure of the genius because they think of him as a man of action, a vital cultural leader.[241] He laments, "Dieses Wort 'Genie,' wenn man es in unseren Zeitungen findet, in den Nekrologen oder Würdigungen von toten Dichtern oder Philosophen, wo es das höchste Lob bedeuten soll, so erscheint es mir – ich meine auch dort, wo es an seinem Platz ist – undefinierbar dünn, würdelos, kraftlos."[242] In the German cultural realm of the twentieth century, however, the word "Dichter" evokes at most institutionalized "Bildungsgefühle."[243] What he believes is missing in the modern use of this word is a

[239] *GWRA I*, 58.

[240] "Denn sie dachten dabei keineswegs an das Genie der Tat und nie und nimmer hätten sie ihr Lieblingswort auf den angewandt, der vor allem würdig war, es zu tragen in seiner funkelndsten und unheimlichsten Bedeutung: auf Friedrich den Großen." *GWRA I*, 58.

[241] Hofmannsthal says the following about the English understanding of the genius: "Welchen lebensvollen und imponierenden Gebrauch macht der Engländer heute, und macht ihn seit sechs Generationen, von seinen 'man of genius.' Er schränkt ihn nicht auf seine Dichter ein; und doch haftet allen denen, von denen er ihn braucht, etwas Dichterisches an, ihnen oder ihren Schicksalen. Er bedenkt sich nicht, ihn auch auf einen Mann anzuwenden, der nicht von der allerseltensten geistigen Universalität ist. Aber es muß eine Gestalt sein, aus der etwas Außerordentliches hervorblitzt, etwas Unvergleichliches von Kühnheit von Glück, von Geisteskraft oder von Hingabe." *GWRA I*, 58. He names as examples of such men of genius Milton, Nelson, Lord Clive, Samuel Johnson, Byron, Warren Hastings, the younger Pitt, and Cecil Rhodes.

[242] *GWRA I*, 59.

[243] *GWRA I*, 58.

tone that indicates respect and trust: "ein Ton des Zutrauens und der freien ungekünstelten Ehrfurcht, eine Betonung dessen, was Männer an Männern am höchsten stellen müssen: Führerschaft."[244] Of course, the word "Führerschaft" has an ominous ring, especially in the post World War II context. However, Hofmannsthal does not argue that the poet commands the kind of respect that charismatic leaders like Friedrich der Große do; instead, he explains that the poet exercises his power from a much humbler place.

The poet is portrayed as someone who has a privileged perspective on life because he has no material stake in it. Unlike Lord Chandos, for instance, who is part of the landowning gentry, the poet in the 20th century has lost his social status and appears like an anonymous beggar. The modern poet lives an anonymous existence, which Hofmannsthal calls "[das] unerkannte Wohnen im eigenen Haus, unter der Stiege im Dunkel, bei den Hunden."[245] He likens the modern poet specifically to the figure of Holy Alexius from *Gesta Romanorum*, a prince who has returned home after many years of absence and, because he is not recognized by his family, is reduced to living like a beggar under the stairs to his own house. Thus, two things must be noted: First, the anonymous beggar is at the same time an aristocrat, who is simply not recognized as such; we might see in this metaphor, then, the poet's dispossession on the level of appearances, in a modern world which longs for poetry only unconsciously and no longer explicitly recognizes the importance of the poet. Second, it is precisely the anonymity from which the poet suffers which allows him to have an aesthetic perception of his environment that is marked by a certain kind of disinterest.

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[244] *GWRA I*, 59.

[245] *GWRA I*, 66.

Claudia Bamberg suggests that "Besitzlosigkeit" characterizes the modern poet.[246] What Bamberg overlooks, however, is that by depicting the poet as a beggar-prince Hofmannsthal makes the double move of bringing the poet closer to the ordinary person, while keeping him apart from the plebs through his aristocratic standing.[247] Thus, the poet may not command public respect and may live like a homeless pauper, yet his hidden aristocratic origin entitles him to a privileged hold on the world at least in another sense. That is, although Bamberg is right to observe that the modern poet, like Rilke's Malte, is someone who is "besitzlos" in a conventional sense, Hofmannsthal actually redefines the idea of *Besitz*. While describing the poet as a person with no right to property, Hofmannsthal repeatedly uses the verb "besitzen" to characterize the poet's hold on the world:

> [...] als ein Lebendiger gestoßen von der letzten Magd und gewiesen zu den Hunden; und ohne Amt in diesem Haus, ohne Dienst, ohne Recht, ohne Pflicht, als nur zu lungern und zu liegen und in sich dies alles auf einer unsichtbaren Waage abzuwiegen, dies alles besitzen wie niemals ein Hausherr sein Haus besitzt – denn besitzt der die Finsternis, die nachts auf der Stiege liegt, besitzt er die Frechheit des Koches, den Hochmut des Stallmeisters, die Seufzer der niedrigsten Magd? Er aber, der gespenstisch im Dunkeln liegt, besitzt alles dies; denn jedes

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[246] Claudia Bamberg, *Hofmannsthal: Der Dichter und die Dinge* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011), 63.

[247] Theodor Adorno found Hofmannsthal's claim to outsider status hypocritical. That is, Adorno asserts that Hofmannsthal never produced an outsider perspective through his writing because he was not genuinely bothered by the relationship between culture and economy: "Transzendenz zur Gesellschaft beansprucht auch Hofmannsthal, und der Gedanke an Outsidertum ist dem nicht fremd, der seine Society fingieren muß. Aber es ist ein konziliantes Outsidertum, zu verliebt in sich selber, um den anderen ernsthaft böse zu sein." Adorno then quotes Hofmannsthal, saying, "Ich hatte von der Kindheit an ein fieberhaftes Bestreben, dem Geist unserer verworrenen Epoche auf den verschiedensten Wegen, in den verschiedensten Verkleidungen beizukommen." Adorno passes the following judgment on Hofmannsthal's drive to encounter the spirit of his epoch in different disguises: "Der Trieb zur Verkleidung, in prästabilierter Harmonie auf der Erfordernisse des Marktes eingestimmt, ist der des Schauspielers." (Theodor Adorno, "George und Hofmannsthal: Zum Briefwechsel," in *Prismen, Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 249-50.

> von diesen ist eine offene Wunde an seiner Seele und glüht einmal als ein Karfunkelstein an seinem himmlischen Gewand.[248]

What the poet may lack, then, in material possessions and social rights, he makes up for in sensual possessions. He sees and hears all the unselfconscious activities that the owner of the house never gets to see.

The passage just cited lends itself in addition to a psychoanalytical reading inasmuch as the house can be regarded as a metaphor for human consciousness, where the movements within the murky unconscious (the gruff and disgruntled exchanges in the servants' quarters) are more telling than what happens on the conscious level (the master's quarters). Because the poet has no stakes and sees the activities inside the house from an unseen place, his perception is unobstructed by his own entanglement in inter-subjective relations. However, the Kantian idea that the aesthetic moment gives rise to an experience of detached pleasure does not quite map onto the modern poet's experience.[249] That is, while the poet's aesthetic experience is made possible by the fact that he cannot make social, political, or material claims, the pleasure that he draws from the aesthetic perception of his environment is not a detached, intellectual one. On the contrary, his response to the world turns out to be primarily physical and affective, and he grasps his surroundings through instinct rather than by means of the intellect. Thus although the poet is distanced from the world around him in the sense that he is not recognized and

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[248] *GWRA I*, 66-67.

[249] "Die objektive Zweckmäßigkeit kann nur vermittelst der Beziehung des Mannigfaltigen auf einen bestimmten Zweck, also nur durch einen Begriff erkannt werden. Hieraus allein schon erhellt, daß das Schöne, dessen Beurteilung eine bloß formale Zweckmäßigkeit, d.i. eine Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck, zum Grunde hat, von der Vorstellung des Guten ganz unabhängig sei, weil das letztere eine objektive Zweckmäßigkeit, d.i. die Beziehung des Gegenstandes auf einen bestimmten Zweck, voraussetzt." Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Heiner F. Klemme (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2006), 79.

integrated by others, his own mode of relation to the world is much more one of empathic connection and even identification; Hofmannsthal introduces further metaphors in order to develop this aspect of the poet's nature.

The poet has an immediate, almost animalistic, relation to the world. As Schorske points out, in his search for a way out of the hermetic temple of art, Hofmannsthal discovered instinct as a link to the outer world. He saw "art as the awakener of instinct."[250] To convey the poet's instinctual relationship to the world, Hofmannsthal likens the poet to a chameleon-like figure who takes on the colors of his surroundings:

> Er ist da und wechselt lautlos seine Stelle und ist nichts als Auge und Ohr und nimmt seine Farbe von den Dingen, auf denen er ruht. Er ist der Zuseher, nein, der versteckte Genosse, der lautlose Bruder aller Dinge, und das Wechseln seiner Farbe ist eine innige Qual: denn er leidet allen Dingen, und indem er in ihnen leidet, genießt er sie.[251]

By describing the poet as a creature that absorbs the colors of its environment, Hofmannsthal emphasizes that the mimetic process by which the poet relates to the world is not self-conscious but rather instinctual and almost automatic. Furthermore, he strips the poet of his individuality by presenting him as the perceptual organs of his time. That is, the poet's perceptions are not thought to be his own, but those of his time. Once again, however, we are reminded that the impersonal nature of the poet's perceptions do not result from an emotional detachment from the world. For this reason Hofmannsthal is not satisfied to describe the poet as a mere "Zuseher," but corrects himself and calls the poet instead "der versteckte Genosse" and "lautlose Bruder aller Dinge," who draws pleasure from his suffering. The poet's impersonal perceptions are thus grounded in empathy. This

[250] Schorske, 18.

[251] *GWRA I*, 67.

peculiar relationship to the world is not unlike Schopenhauer's idea that, at bottom, the self forms a unity with the world. Borrowing from the *Upanishads*, he called this unity *tat tvam asi*, meaning "You are that."[252] Thus, because the self and the cosmos form a unity, the suffering of the other is the suffering of the self. According to Hofmannsthal, the poet cannot help but suffer every feeling, reality, and fantasy that passes through him: "Dies Leidend-Genießen, dies ist der ganze Inhalt seines Lebens."[253] The poet's suffering and enjoyment, however, are not his own, for what he feels and perceives is simply reflective of the space and time that he inhabits.

A similar understanding of the poet's role is suggested by Hofmannsthal's comparison of the poet to the seismograph. Through this analogy Hofmannsthal conveys the idea that the poet's words are not merely subjective expressions:

> Er ist der Ort, an dem die Kräfte der Zeit einander auszugleichen verlangen. Er gleicht dem Seismographen, den jedes Beben, und wäre es auf Tausende von Meilen, in Vibrationen versetzt. Es ist nicht, daß er unaufhörlich an alle Dinge der Welt dächte. Aber sie denken an ihn. Sie sind in ihm, so beherrschen sie ihn. Seine dumpfen Stunden selbst, seine Depressionen, seine Verworrenheiten sind unpersönliche Zustände, sie gleichen den Zuckungen des Seismographen, und ein Blick, der tief genug wäre, könnte in ihnen Geheimnisvolleres lesen als in seinen Gedichten.[254]

The impersonal metaphors for the poet are striking. Hofmannsthal calls the poet the location where the forces of his time come together to find equilibrium. The comparison of the poet to the seismograph is especially revealing. First, by comparing the poet to a mechanical instrument, the author connects the poet's sensitivity to the world with the

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[252] Karl Albert, Lebensphilosophie. Von den Anfängen bei Nietzsche bis zu ihrer Kritik bei Lukacs (Freiburg, Breisgau: Verlag Karl Alber, 1995), 35.

[253] *GWRA I*, 67.

[254] *GWRA I*, 72.

notion of scientific accuracy. Second, the seismograph, like the poet, performs the act of reading and writing. The "writing" that the seismograph produces is an impersonal expression of the "reading" of the vibrations in the ground. Similarly, the poet's subjectivity is in essence impersonal because his being is like a sensor for his time; thus, poetry is not the projection of the poetic subject's feelings, but rather more like a record of the fluctuating movements of time. Significantly, the accuracy of the poet's reading of his time is not produced through an objective, scientific analysis of phenomena, but through a physical and an emotional sensitivity to his time.

Claudia Bamberg points out that the poet's hypersensitivity to every small detail in his environment recalls the realist projects of nineteenth-century writers like Gottfried Keller, Honoré de Balzac, and Adalbert Stifter, all of whom Hofmannsthal admired and also wrote about. The realists found it important to pay attention to every detail in their environment in order to reproduce, in their writing, an objective perspective on life. The question for them, as for Hofmannsthal, was: From what perspective can one have an accurate picture of reality? Bamberg remarks that they too conceived of the artist as an outsider, with this outsider perspective allowing the artist to have a privileged perspective on life. That is, the realist artist is someone who can have an objective perception of the order of things because he is, in one sense, at a remove from it. However, Bamberg observes that in Hofmannsthal's "Der Dichter und diese Zeit" the poet's dwelling place "unter der Stiege" positions him too close to the things around him for him to be able to have a distanced, objective perspective on them. For Hofmannsthal, then, relative to the realists, the poet's relationship to the world has shifted. That is, while the relationship between the artist and the world for a realist writer like Keller is one of "Distanzierung,"

for the poet in Hofmannsthal's "Der Dichter und diese Zeit" it is that of "Identifikation."[255]

Bamberg does not mention, however, another important difference between Keller and Hofmannsthal. While Keller captures the details of everyday life in order to shed light on the social and material conditions of life, for Hofmannsthal the details of reality are like hieroglyphs that symbolically point to the metaphysical ground of life. Thus, for Hofmannsthal the aim of literature is not to make the reader conscious of the problematic material conditions of his or her life, but rather to meet the spiritual needs of the modern individual by giving coherent form to the inarticulate existential feelings that the ordinary person struggles to externalize. Hofmannsthal argues that poets belong to the few "die zu leben vermögen in einer Luft, die von der Eiseskälte des unendlichen Raumes beleckt wird,"[256] but he finds that the many neither have the ability nor the desire to expose themselves to the "Frost der Ewigkeit."[257] They long for "die verknüpfenden Gefühle; die Weltgefühle, die Gedankengefühle,"[258] which he believes only the poet (and not the scientist) can provide. He reasons, "Denn Dichten, das Wort steht irgendwo in Hebbels Tagebüchern, Dichten heißt die Welt wie einen Mantel um sich schlagen und

[255] Bamberg, 67.

[256] *GWRA I*, 65.

[257] *GWRA I*, 65.

[258] *GWRA I*, 65.

sich wärmen."[259] And it is of this "Wärme," this feeling-thinking produced by poetry, that the masses want to partake.[260]

The idea that literature should primarily target the emotional life of the reader, however, is not without controversy; already Plato thought that poetry and art can be dangerous because of their ability to move people and produce strong emotions that prevent the audience from thinking critically and clearly.[261] But Hofmannsthal makes it clear that he is reacting against the surplus of reason, which he regards as the cause for the fragmentation of reality and the alienation from which the modern individual suffers. Hofmannsthal was not principally interested in resolving the contradictions of material existence, as, for instance, Marx was. From a Marxist perspective, Hofmannsthal's "solution" to the alienation of the individual appears far from satisfactory. Rather than using literature to heighten the working-class reader's awareness of the material and social inequalities that underpin his or her life, and thereby kindling the feelings of injustice that would move the reader to transform his or her reality through political action, literature as Hofmannsthal conceives it serves merely as a spiritual balm for the many who live as cogs in the wheels of the industrial economy.[262] However,

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[259] *GWRA I*, 65.

[260] "Und an dieser Wärme wollen sie teilhaben und darum sind es die Trümmer des Dichterischen, nach denen sie haschen, wo sie der Wissenschaft zu huldigen meinen; nach fühlendem Denken, denkendem Fühlen steht ihr Sinn, nach Vermittlung dessen, was die Wissenschaft in grandioser Entsagung als unvermittelbar hinnimmt. Sie aber suchen den Dichter und nennen ihn nicht." *GWRA I*, 65-66.

[261] Littau, 87.

[262] Interestingly, Siegfried Kracauer articulates a similar criticism in "Über Erfolgsbücher und ihr Publikum," one of the essays in *Das Ornament der Masse*, which was first published in 1927. He is highly critical of books that cater to the popular demand for emotional stimulation because he believes that it hinders the readers from thinking critically and simply makes them resigned to the status quo. He observes: "Der Mittelstand und überhaupt die verarmten Massen verlangen statt des teuren Abstandes Herz, das kostenfrei ist. Das *Gefühl* ist alles, wenn alles andere fehlt. Es vermenschlicht die Tragik, ohne sie

Hofmannsthal anticipates such criticism, saying, "Ich höre manchmal im Gespräch oder in einer Zeitung klagen, daß einzelnes, was des Schilderns wert wäre, von den Dichtern unserer Zeit nicht geschildert werde, z.B. die Inhalte mancher Industrien oder dergleichen."[263] He counters this criticism with the claim that the poet will be drawn to any form of life, including modern industries, wherein he perceives "die unendliche Symbolhaftigkeit der Materie."[264] He believes that the unique power and task of the poet is to communicate the symbolic dimension of material reality, wherein the interrelation of things ("Gewebe von Dingen") is revealed in a holistic manner. Thus, the poet's aim is not to isolate and focus on one aspect of modern life, but to show how the multiplicity of phenomena, be they material or imaginary, are like innumerable particles that cohere into a whole. Hofmannsthal reasons, "Denn ihm [dem Dichter] sind Menschen und Dinge und Gedanken und Träume völlig eins."[265] The poet in a sense does not reject the materiality of life, but rather converts it into something higher.[266]

IV. An Unanswered Question: Who Is the Reader?

The question remains, however, as to how exactly the poet can communicate his unique insights to the casual reader, who does not consciously recognize that his or her

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aufzuheben, und nebelt die Kritik ein, die der Konservierung überalteter Gehalte gefährlich werden könnte." Siegfried Kracauer, "Über Erfolgsbücher und ihr Publikum," in *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 72.

[263] *GWRA I*, 69-70.

[264] *GWRA I*, 70.

[265] *GWRA I*, 67.

[266] As Frank Wood points out, "Hofmannsthal inclines to invest sociological problems with a dress of orphic mysticism or orthodox Christianity," 261.

insatiable appetite for reading material is indicative of an unconscious longing for the enchantment of poetry. In this concluding section of this chapter, I demonstrate that while Hofmannsthal may offer analogies for the various ways in which one can think about the relationship between the modern poet and the reader, he ultimately provides only a negative understanding of how the poet and the reader relate to one another.

Hofmannsthal acknowledges that the relationship between the poet and the modern reader is irreversibly changed and that it needs to be understood within its own historical context. He speaks in vague terms, however, about how modernity has transformed the experiences of the poet, which in turn has changed the experience of the individual for whom the poet writes:

> Ein ungeheurer Prozeß hat das Erlebnis des Dichters neu geprägt und damit zugleich das Erlebnis jenes, um dessen Willen der Dichter da ist: des einzelnen. Der Dichter und der, für den Gedichtetes da ist, sie gleichen beide nicht mehr denselben Figuren aus irgendwelcher vergangenen Epoche. Ich will nicht sagen, wieweit sie mehr dem Priester und dem Gläubigen zu gleichen scheinen oder dem Geliebten und dem Liebenden nach dem Sinne Platons oder dem Zauberer und dem Bezauberten. Denn diese Vergleiche verdecken soviel als sie enthüllen von einem unfaßlichen Verhältnis, in dem die so verschiedenen Magien aller dieser Verhältnisse sich mischen mit noch anderen namenlosen Elementen, die dem heutigen Tag allein gehören.[267]

Hofmannsthal suggests that the relationship between the poet and the reader could be likened to the rapport between the priest and the believer, the lover and the beloved, or the magician and the enchanted, yet he states explicitly that he does not want to say to what extent these comparisons actually apply to the poet and the modern reader, because he ultimately perceives theirs to be a relationship that is in a state of flux, as too many nameless new elements have entered into it. These imperfect analogies nonetheless

[267] *GWRA I*, 76-77.

reflect the author's understanding of the conceptual shifts that the figure of the poet and the reader have undergone over the course of history. That is, the relationship between the magician and the enchanted can be regarded as figuratively referring to the pre-classical period; that between the lover and the beloved, the classical age; and that between the priest and the believer, the Christian era. As different as the above-mentioned relationships may be from one another, however, a dynamic common to all of them reflects how Hofmannsthal conceives of the connection between the reader and the poet: The reader, represented in the figures of the believer, the enchanted, and the beloved, seeks to understand forces that are beyond the realm of rational explanation. The poet, represented by the priest, the magician, and the lover, is regarded as someone with a unique understanding of these forces and with the ability to mediate them.

But whereas in the past these mysterious forces were thought to belong to an other-wordly sphere, in the modern era, Hofmannsthal sees them emanating from the *Diesseits*. It is the realm of everyday life, rapidly and radically transformed through the forces of modernity, that has become an enigma to the modern subject. Hofmannsthal calls modernity "ein ungeheurer Prozeß" that has changed the poet's experiences, and in turn those of his reader. That is, while in the past the poet was able to offer "in begriffliche Formeln gezogene Summe" of his time,[268] the kind of synthesis that the modern poet offers the reader does not immediately appear as a synthesis, because what he does is bring the reader face to face with the chaotic phenomenal flux that characterizes the modern age. The "order of things" that Hofmannsthal perceives in the phenomenal flux of his time is a secular order. The secular nature of his understanding

[268] *GWRA I*, 76.

becomes even more apparent when we compare his view to Emerson's, whose essay "The Poet," as mentioned earlier, informed Hofmannsthal's reflections in "Der Dichter und diese Zeit." We can see in the passage below that Emerson already found it necessary to address the question of how modern developments fit into the poet's worldview:

> Readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the bee-hive, or the spider's geometrical web. Nature adopts them very fast into her vital circles, and the gliding train of cars she loves like her own.[269]

In many ways, Hofmannsthal's belief that the poet perceives unity in the multiplicity of modern phenomena echoes the idea expressed by Emerson in the passage above. But whereas Emerson believed that this unity was guaranteed by a divine order, for Hofmannsthal the order of things originates from life itself. That is, Emerson's essentially religious interpretation of the origin of the cosmic unity is replaced by Hofmannsthal with a more thoroughly secular mystical understanding. As Wolfdietrich Rasch points out, many writers at the turn of the twentieth century turned to a kind of neo-mysticism, "eine säkularisierte, innenweltliche Mystik ohne Gott – präzise zu bezeichnen als Lebensmystik."[270]

Another important difference between the poet of the past and of Hofmannsthal's present is that the modern poet no longer appears to be the one acting upon the passive reader. As Hofmannsthal elaborates on the way in which reader and poet encounter one

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[269] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Annotated Emerson*, ed. David Mikics (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2012), 209.

[270] Wolfdietrich Rasch, "Aspekte der deutschen Literatur um 1900," in *Zur deutschen Literatur seit der Jahrhundertwende: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagungsbuchhandlung, 1967), 22.

another in modern times, it is the reader who, in a limited sense, at least, appears as active, and the poet as passive. Because in the modern age the poet's presence is textual and not physical – in other words, because the contact between the poet and the reader is mediated through books – in order to be present for his time, the poet depends on the reader to find him in books and thereby ensure his existence. Hofmannsthal describes this interdependence between the poet and the reader in the following way:

> Aber dies unfaßliche Verhältnis ist da. Das Buch ist da voll seiner Gewalt über die Seele, über die Sinne. [...] Das Buch ist da und in ihm der Inbegriff der Weisheiten und der Inbegriff der Verführung. Es liegt da und schweigt und redet und ist um soviel zweideutiger, gefährlicher, geheimnisvoller, als alles zweideutiger, gefährlicher, geheimnisvoller ist in dieser über alle Maßen unfaßlichen, dieser im höchsten Sinne poetischen Zeit. [...] Aber sie sind in der Hand eines jeden etwas anderes, und sie leben erst, wenn sie mit einer lebendigen Seele zusammenkommen. Sie reden nicht, sondern sie antworten, dies macht Dämonen aus ihnen.[271]

On the one hand, the author seems to acknowledge that in a highly literate age, the poet no longer has a physical presence and is instead embodied by the words on the printed page; on the other hand, he describes the book as though it were an oral phenomenon. That is, the book personifies the poet and it is described as though it were in an oral dialogue with the reader: in the passage just quoted, the book keeps silent and it speaks. The act of reading is described as a meeting between living souls.

However, while Hofmannsthal acknowledges that it is the reader who brings the book to speak, he resists making the reader the active producer of meaning. In fact, the last line of the above-cited passage indicates that the book speaks with an authority and an understanding of life that the reader does not have. He claims that books do not simply speak, but they "answer," like daemons from Greek mythology. Curiously, it is neither

[271] Rasch, 77.

because the words on the printed page have a life of their own, independent of the author, nor because each reader draws his own unique interpretation out of books, but rather because books channel the voice of the poet who reveals the ambiguity, the danger, and mystery of the modern epoch, that books are "zweideutiger, gefährlicher, geheimnisvoller" than ever before. Thus, although Hofmannsthal emphasizes that the poet needs the reader in order to be heard in his time, he still regards the reader as quite purely the *receiver* of the meaning written into the text by the author.

Moreover, not every reader is equipped to hear the voice of the poet. Hofmannsthal concedes in the concluding pages of his essay, "Ich kann nur für die reden, für die Gedichtetes da ist,"[272] and in the following paragraph he speaks of the individual "der das Erlebnis des Lesenden kennt."[273] But who are these individuals for whom poetry exists? Here we have arrived back at the question that Hofmannsthal himself asked in his description of his plan to write an essay entitled "Der Leser": "wer sind die, in denen das Gedicht lebt, durch die es durch die Zeit getragen wird"?[274] While Hofmannsthal claims, at the beginning of "Der Dichter und diese Zeit," that poetry lives in all those who yearn for enchantment, including the undiscriminating popular reader, in the concluding pages of his essay Hofmannsthal modifies his argument by presenting us with an ideal reader, who does not resemble the general, unreflective reading public; he asserts that poetry lives in those who, like the poet, have the disposition of a believer.[275]

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[272] Rasch, 79.

[273] Rasch, 80.

[274] *SW 31*, 337.

[275] "Ich sage "glauben" und ich sage es in einem tieferen Sinn, als in dem es, fürchte ich, in der Hast dieser ihrem Ende zustrebenden Rede zu Ihnen hinklingt. Ich meine es nicht als Sich-Verlieren in der

That is, like a religious believer, the reader of poetry, does not read for distraction or for information, but he is driven by a desire to share in an epiphanic vision of the cosmic connection between things.

This reader, Hofmannsthal claims, does not wait for a single great poet to emerge like a herald, but instead, is conscious that by exposing himself to a multiplicity of poetic visions, he is already participating, alongside many other anonymous readers, in the task of discerning coherence within the chaotic flux of his time.[276] Furthermore, this reader is capable of distinguishing between poetic and non-poetic books:

> Die einzige Unterscheidung, die [der Leser] fällt ist die zwischen dichterischen Büchern und den unzähligen anderen Büchern, den sonderbaren Geburten der Nachahmung und der Verworrenheit. Aber auch in ihnen noch ehrt er die Spur des dichterischen Geistes und die Möglichkeit, daß aus ihnen in ganz junge, ganz rohe Seelen ein Strahl sich senke.[277]

Clearly, this ideal reader is not part of the modern crowd of undiscerning readers that Hofmannsthal identified at the beginning of his essay. In the end, it no longer seems sufficient for the reader to have an unconscious yearning for poetry in order for the poet to exist in his time. The ideal reader knows to look for him consciously. What causes the

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phantastischen Bezauberung des Gedichteten, als ein Vergessen des eigenen Daseins über dem Buche, eine kurze und schale Faszination. Es ist das Gegenteil, was ich zu sagen meinte: ich dachte das Wort in der ganzen Tiefe seines Sinnes zu nehmen. In seiner vollen religiösen Bedeutung meine ich es: als ein Führwahrhalten und Ergriffensein in tiefster Seele, ein Ausruhen im Wirbel des Daseins." *GWRA I*, 78.

[276] "Denn in ihm und seinesgleichen, an tausend verborgenen Punkten vollzieht sich diese Synthese: und da er sich bewußt ist, die Zeit in sich zu tragen, einer zu sein wie alle, einer für alle, ein Mensch, ein einzelner und ein Symbol zugleich, so dünkt ihm, daß wo er trinkt, auch das Dürsten der Zeit sich stillen muß. Ja, indem er der Vision sich hingibt und zu glauben vermag an das, was ein Dichter ihn schauen läßt […] indem er an solchem innersten Gebilde der Zeit die Beglückung erlebt, sein Ich sich selber gleich zu fühlen und sicher zu schweben im Sturz des Daseins, entschwindet ihm der Begriff der Zeit und Zukunft geht ihm wie Vergangenheit in einzige Gegenwart herüber." *GWRA I*, 80-81.

[277] *GWRA I*, 80.

unconscious longing for poetry to be elevated to a conscious search, however, Hofmannsthal never makes quite clear.

In the next chapter I examine Hofmannsthal's problematic politicized answer to the question that he left unanswered in "Der Dichter und diese Zeit." In "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation," from 1927, Hofmannsthal provides a nationalist answer to the problem of anonymity that prevents the ordinary mass consumer of literature from recognizing the cultural *Führerschaft* of the poet. He does this by reconceptualizing the anonymous mass readers in nationalist terms, as constituting a *Volk*, and the literary writer as a genius figure who has an intuitive ability to find and give expression to the spirit of the nation.

Chapter 5: Hofmannsthal's Political Turn

"Der Dichter und diese Zeit" was Hofmannsthal's most sustained attempt to define theoretically a language with which the poet could speak to the many; ultimately, Hofmannsthal failed in this text to provide a satisfying way to bridge the gap between the transcendent and the everyday, the poet and his time. Although he then turned away from the task of theoretically defining the problem, however, he continued to be preoccupied with it. Hofmannsthal's reflections on the relationship between the poet and the people became politicized through the First World War, as he began to reconceive the anonymous readers as *das Volk* and the poet as a cultural-political leader. In this chapter I examine the conspicuous discrepancy between the hopeful cultural-political vision Hofmannsthal expresses, in his role as a public speaker, in "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation," on the one hand, and the nihilistic political vision he offers in his last drama, *Der Turm*, on the other. I argue that the contradiction presented by a juxtaposition of these two works communicates the author's profound doubts about the possibility that the poet and the people could form an organic unity. In this chapter I contend, furthermore, that Hofmannsthal risked playing the role of a false prophet by suppressing his doubts in his statements as a public intellectual.

I. The Seekers as Finders in "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation"

Hofmannsthal argues that language itself has a healing power and that it is the task of the writers and thinkers of the German nation, whom he calls "die Suchenden," to reveal the unifying *Geist* within the German language. In "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation," also known as the *Münchner Rede*, which he delivered at the University of München in 1927, Hofmannsthal returns to the question of the writer's role

in his time. This time, however, the experience of the First World War is evident in the background, and the search for coherence through literature has taken on a nationalistic coloring that it did not have in 1906, the year he published "Der Dichter und diese Zeit." In "Das Schrifttum als Geistiger Raum der Nation," the author argues that more than the geographic space that a people inhabit, it is the national language that binds people into a community.[278] He sees a people's language as an expression of the "Geist der Nation"[279] and believes that the written word plays an important role in the transmission of this national spirit.

As Oliver Tekolf points out, by "Nation" Hofmannsthal does not mean the German nation-state, but rather the German-language cultural realm, which includes Austria: "Mit *Nation* meint Hofmannsthal kein staatspolitisches Gebilde, sondern eine in der Sprache und der Literatur ("Schrifttum") verbundene Gemeinschaft."[280] While Hofmannsthal had already taken a very broad view of literature in "Der Dichter und diese Zeit," in the *Münchner Rede* he explains that he uses the word "Schrifttum" (the written word) because he believes that it better communicates that he is referring to all forms of writing:

> so reden wir vom Schrifttum und meinen damit nicht nur den Wust von Büchern, den heute kein einzelner mehr bewältig, sondern Aufzeichnungen aller Art, wie sie zwischen den Menschen hin und her gehen, den nur für einen oder wenige

[278] "Nicht durch unser Wohnen auf dem Heimatboden, nicht durch unsere leibliche Berührung in Handel und Wandel, sondern durch ein geistiges Anhangen vor allem sind wir zur Gemeinschaft verbunden. […] In einer Sprache finden wir uns zueinander, die völlig etwas anderes ist als das bloße natürliche Verständigungsmittel […] wir ahnen dahinter ein Etwas waltend, das wir den Geist der Nation zu nennen uns getrauen." *GWRA III*, 24.

[279] *GWRA III*, 24.

[280] Tekolf, 371; see also Nikolaus, 165-170 and Oswalt von Nostitz, "Zur Interpretation von Hofmannsthals Münchner Rede," in Für Rudolf Hirsch zum siebzigsten Geburtstag am 22. Dezember 1975 (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1975), 262.

> bestimmten Brief, die Denkschrift, desgleichen auch die Anekdote, das Schlagwort, das politische oder geistige Glaubensbekenntnis, wie es das Zeitungsblatt bringt, lauter Formen, die ja zuzeiten sehr wirksam werden können.[281]

He finds that the word "Literatur" is a divisive term, which immediately evokes a separation between the cultured and uncultured: "Das Wort Literatur bezeichnet wohl annähernd das gleiche, aber es ist uns zweideutiger in seinem Klang: der unglückliche Riß in unserem Volk zwischen Gebildeten und Ungebildeten tritt uns gleich ins Gefühl."[282] Hofmannsthal argues that the very separation between *Schrifttum* and *Literatur* is reflective of a dividedness in the German nation. He portrays France as a counter-model to Germany, arguing that it is possible to speak of literature in France without evoking a separation between the cultured and uncultured. In other words, there is no separation between *Schrifttum* and literature in France because all written expression of the French language is recognized by the French people as organically partaking in a well-established literary tradition, which communicates the coherent spirit of a unified people. Even the genius and individuality of the French writers does not separate them from this unity; the works that constitute the French literary tradition, according to Hofmannsthal, do not strive to stand apart from this tradition, but to be an expression of its evolution.[283] Significantly, the French literary tradition, which Hofmannsthal dates back to the Renaissance period, does not have a life apart from

[281] *GWRA III*, 24.

[282] *GWRA III*, 24.

[283] "Mode belebt die Tradition, Tradition adelt die Mode. Innerhalb solchen beharrenden Wechsels ist der Ehrgeiz nicht darauf gerichtet, abzustechen, sondern: die traditionellen Forderungen zu erfüllen. [...] Die Blüte dieser Tendenz ist die Sprachnorm, welche die Nation zusammenhält und innerhalb ihrer dem Spiel widerstreitender Tendenzen – der aristokratischen wie der nivellierenden, der revolutionären wie der konservativen – Raum gewährt." *GWRA III*, 25.

French social and political life, but rather is the very expression of the French socio-political reality. Thus, Hofmannsthal concludes:

> Die Literatur der Franzosen verbürgt ihnen ihre Wirklichkeit. Wo geglaubte Ganzheit des Daseins ist – nicht Zerrissenheit –, dort ist Wirklichkeit. Die Nation, durch ein unzerreißbares Gewebe des Sprachlich-Geistigen zusammengehalten, wird Glaubensgemeinschaft, in der das Ganze des natürlichen und kultürlichen Lebens einbeschlossen ist.[284]

But where Hofmannsthal sees unity and coherence in France, he sees disunity and incoherence in Germany. He asserts, "Wir haben eine Literatur im uneigentlichen, konventionellen Sinne, die aufzählbar, aber nicht wahrhaft repräsentativ noch traditionsbildend ist."[285] Instead of a true literary tradition, Hofmannsthal says, Germany's leading intellectuals and literary giants are lonely figures dispersed across vastly different regions of the country, making it difficult to identify them as a community. And yet, he believes that these writers do form a community of "Suchende," a term he borrows from Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, where Nietzsche opposes "die Suchenden" to the "Bildungsphilister."[286] These so-called seekers are brought together by their common search for the hidden spiritual unity of the German nation. They form a "Nation der Einzelnen."[287] They are those who reject the smug self-

[284] *GWRA III*, 27.

[285] *GWRA III,* 29.

[286] "[…] daß ich sie Suchende nenne, unter welchem Begriff er alles Hohe, Heldenhafte und auch ewig Problematische in der deutschen Geistigkeit zusammenfaßte und es gegenüberstellte allem Satten, Schlaffen, Matten, aber in der Schlaffheit Übermütigen und Selbstzufriedenen: dem deutschen Bildungsphilister." *GWRA III*, 30.

[287] *GWRA III*, 31.

satisfaction of the cultured German philistine, and for this reason, Hofmannsthal calls them "Träger der produktiven Anarchie."[288]

Hofmannsthal identifies two different types of seekers. He calls the first "[d]er schweifende, aus dem Chaos hervortretende Geistige, mit dem Anspruch auf Lehrerschaft und Führerschaft."[289] This type of seeker is a poet, but also "mehr Prophet als Dichter,"[290] who strives after "einer Umschöpfung seines Ich und damit einer Umschöpfung der Welt."[291] He does not seek to create a "Sprachnorm,"[292] but instead struggles through phases of "Sprachbezweiflung"[293] to get hold of the magic power of language. While this first type could be described as Dionysian, the second type of seeker is Apollonian. This second type is a scholar or scientist who passionately strives to bridge the gap between the pure sciences, "dies Weggebrochene vom Leben,"[294] and the human world.[295] Hofmannsthal sees both types of seeker as driven by hubris and heroism, which in this text are presented as admirable qualities. He concedes that the types he has

[288] *GWRA III*, 31.

[289] *GWRA III*, 32.

[290] *GWRA III*, 32.

[291] *GWRA III*, 33.

[292] *GWRA III*, 33.

[293] *GWRA III*, 33.

[294] *GWRA III*, 34.

[295] Severin Perrig points out that Hofmannsthal based his characterization of the seekers on writers and thinkers in his time: "In [den Suchenden] hat man Züge von Florens Christian Rang, Alfread Brust, Paul Ludwig Landsberg, Stefan George, Rudolf Pannwitz, Joseph Nadler, Max Weber, Aby Warburg, Karl Anton Rohan, Ernst Fuhrmann, Ludwig Derleth, Ludwig Klages und Rudolf Kassner gesehen. Kurz, eine breite Palette von Einzelgängern und Querdenkern verschiedenster politischer und gesellschaftlicher Couleur der 20er Jahre." Perrig, 201.

portrayed here are "nur Schatten und Schemen"[296] and that in reality there are thousands of such seekers of different ages and walks of life. These "Abseitigen, Ungekannten" are all working in the service of a "Geistesnot" and in this disparate group of seekers Hofmannsthal believes to recognize the "einzig mögliche deutsche Akademie."[297] He says that they are in character much like the early Romantics, but "[s]ehr strenge Zeichen der Männlichkeit"[298] have replaced the playful boyishness of the Romantics. Unlike their predecessors, they are driven by a strong sense of "Notwendigkeit"[299] and "Verantwortlichkeitssinn."[300]

As Karl Müller points out, the idea of wholeness is reconceived in the postwar years in terms of nation and *Volk*.[301] I argue that Hofmannsthal's desire to see wholeness where there is only fragmentation leads him to overlook the dangerous potential in the kind of nationalist cultural leadership he promotes. In particular, in the early twentieth century the idea of necessity and responsibility toward the nation fostered the kind of blind nationalism that led to the violence and the bloodshed in the First World War, while

[296] *GWRA III*, 35.

[297] *GWRA III*, 35.

[298] *GWRA III*, 39.

[299] *GWRA III*, 37.

[300] *GWRA III*, 39.

[301] Müller argues that Hofmannsthal's idea that poetry and creativity can counter "den unparadiesischen Weltzustand" does not change after the First World War. "Die Wahrnehmungsregistratur des Autors ist weit vor Beginn des Weltkrieges praktisch fertig, auch wenn sich seine Optik für die Konstituierungsfaktoren und Erscheingungsweisen der auf ihn hereinstürmenden Wirklichkeiten noch feinjustiert und differenziert. Seine auf die Kraft und die Funktion der Kunstproduktion und –rezeption konzentrierte Blickeinstellung, auf den einzelnen als Künstler und Kunst-Erlebenden, verschiebt sich zugunsten eines weit stärkeren Interesses an Fragen des Ganzen: des gemeinsam 'Bindenden,' des Volkes, Österreichs, der deutschen Nation, Europas. Müller, Karl. "Hugo von Hofmannsthals Zeit- und Kulturkritik seit dem Ersten Weltkrieg," in *Modernité de HofmannsthalAustriaca,* ed. Jacques Le Rider, special issue, *Austriaca*, no. 37 (December 1993): 199.

even greater atrocities were committed during the Second World War in the name of necessity. Evoking Addison's idea – "Als ein Ganzes muß der Mann sich regen"[302] – Hofmannsthal claims that to move as one is the goal of every nation. The modern seeker's task is to seize "das Ganze" with both hands in order to give the Germanic "weltlose Ich" a home; he calls this move a titanic beginning. He claims that what the seekers have learned is that life is nothing without "geglaubte Ganzheit."[303] To be only half-believing is to flee from life, as he claims the Romantics did.

Hofmannsthal believes that the seekers constitute the core of the nation. The seekers' task[304] is to absorb the multiplicity of seemingly unrelated phenomena, to take in the fragmented outer world, to recognize its inner coherence, and then to restore a vision of wholeness to the nation. [305] The seekers must carry out this work of synthesis with a religious sense of responsibility. He says that whereas the early Romantics squandered spiritual space and the *Bildungsphilister* narrowed it, the seekers see it as their task to secure the spiritual space of the nation: "In dieser Grundhaltung ist die Sicherung des geistigen Raumes antizipiert, wie in der romantischen Haltung die Vergeudung des Raumes, in der Haltung des Bildungsphilisters die Verengung des Raumes inbegriffen."[306] Although they have not arrived at their goal, those who seek have

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[302] *GWRA III*, 38.

[303] *GWRA III*, 39.

[304] It is worth noting that the task of the seekers is reminiscent of the task of the poet in "Der Dichter und diese Zeit," discussed in the previous chapter.

[305] "Hier bricht dieses einsame, auf sich gestellte Ich des titanisch Suchenden durch zur höchsten Gemeinschaft, indem es in sich einigt, was mit tausend Klüften ein seit Jahrhunderten nicht mehr zur Kultur gebundenes Volkstum spaltet. Hier werden diese Einzelnen zu Verbundenen, diese verstreuten wertlosen Individuen zum Kern der Nation." *GWRA III*, 40.

[306] *GWRA III*, 40.

projected points of orientation into the chaos, and when connected, they make up the blueprint of the spiritual space of the nation: "Was dieser synthesesuchende Geist erring […] das sind schon ins Chaos projizierte Punkte, deren Verbindungen den Grundriß jenes Geistraumes ergäben."[307]

Hofmannsthal concludes his talk by stating that the process that he describes here is "langsam und großartig."[308] He conceives of it as a "konservative Revolution,"[309] which he understands as a countermovement, internal to history, against two historical developments of the sixteenth century, namely the Renaissance and the Reformation. As Peter Kern points out, at first glance it is not obvious why Hofmannsthal would take issue with these two developments in western history. Kern suggests that this has to be understood against the backdrop of the contrast that Hofmannsthal draws between France and Germany. Whereas Hofmannsthal perceives in France a strong communal spirit that is held together by a "geglaubte Ganzheit," in Germany he sees an overdeveloped sense of individualism, causing the great seekers to lack a sense of community and to work in isolation and loneliness, despite being unified in one sense by their common task of seeking. However, with the notion of a conservative revolution, Hofmannsthal gestures toward a dialectical development in history, wherein the French sense of communal wholeness (which comes at the cost of often suppressing individual genius) represents the thesis, and the excessive German individualism represents the antithesis. Hofmannsthal

[307] *GWRA III*, 40.

[308] *GWRA III*, 40.

[309] *GWRA III*, 41.

foresees the realization of the synthesis in the German future, where this synthesis first takes place inside the seekers, who then work towards the realization of a higher unity.[310]

Much has been made of this invocation of a conservative revolution at the end of this speech, but as Perrig points out, this notion shows up only once in Hofmannsthal's entire oeuvre, and it is actually not the central idea even in this speech. Ernst Troeltsch, Thomas Mann, Karl Anton Rohan and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck all used this term in the early 1920s, and their respective understandings of this term varied greatly. Furthermore, Perrig dismisses Mohler's suggestion that the idea of the conservative revolution became "virulent" through Hofmannsthal's speech, pointing out that when one considers the reception of this speech in the author's time, it is not the conservative revolution but the ideas of the seekers that attracted the attention of Hofmannsthal's contemporaries.[311] Although there is a large body of scholarship that deals with the question of what the conservative revolution meant for Hofmannsthal, it has been established that the term "conservative revolution" is not a politically charged term for him, although – unfortunately for him – it was taken up by national socialists who, especially in the early years of their movement, sought to legitimize their own political views by invoking the words of well-known conservative thinkers and writers who preceded them.[312]

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[310] See Peter Christoph Kern, *Zur Gedankenwelt des späten Hofmannsthal: Die Idee einer schöpferischen Restauration* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1969), 95.

[311] Severin Perrig explains that the term "konservative Revolution" was not coined by Hofmannsthal: "Schließlich war Hofmannsthal auch nicht dessen Urheber, sondern vielmehr Thomas Mann, der den Begriff erstmalig 1921 in einem Aufsatz verwendet hat und ihn nebenbei auch in seinen Roman 'Der Zauberberg,' den Hofmannsthal möglicherweise sogar gelesen hatte, als Charakterisierung der Figur Naphtas einfließen ließ." Perrig, 198.

[312] Perrig, 199-200. See also Karl Müller who identifies the NS propagandist who used Hofmannsthal to support the NS cause.

In describing the task of the seekers as serving the conservative revolution, Hofmannsthal already identifies them as presenting solutions to the problem of cultural-political unity in the German people. I argue, therefore, that in his earnestness, Hofmannsthal presents a distorted understanding of Nietzsche's seekers. That is, in ascribing to the seekers a prophetic role, Hofmannsthal comes very close to turning the seekers into finders, a mistake of which Nietzsche accuses the *Bildungsphilister*:

> Was urteilt aber unsere Philisterbildung über diese Suchenden? Sie nimmt sie einfach als Findende und scheint zu vergessen, daß jene selbst sich nur als Suchende fühlten. Wir haben ja unsere Kultur, heißt es dann, denn wir haben ja unsere "Klassiker," das Fundament ist nicht nur da, nein auch der Bau steht schon auf ihm gegründet – wir selbst sind dieser Bau.[313]

According to Nietzsche, the culture-philistine mistakes the seekers for finders, allowing them to celebrate these finders as the "classics" of "die echte, ursprüngliche deutsche Kultur" that they claim to possess.[314] Of course there are important differences between Nietzsche's culture-philistine and Hofmannsthal. For instance, Hofmannsthal does not claim that the Germans have found a coherent culture; in fact, on the contrary, he underlines the fact that they are in search of cultural coherence and unity.[315] However, he nevertheless expresses excessive confidence in the so-called seekers' ability to find the unifying spirit of the nation, which is what leads him to liken them to prophets:

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[313] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1981), 18.

[314] Nietzsche, Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen, 17.

[315] One could argue that in his propagandistic writing from the wartime period and in his efforts to institutionalize a German-Austrian literary canon during and after the war, he does make the same mistake as Nietzsche's *Bildungsphilister*. See Hofmannsthal's "Deutsche Erzähler" (1912), "Österreichische Bibliothek" (1915-1916), "Bibliotheca Mundi" (1921), and "Deutsches Lesebuch" (1922), as well as his engagement in "Bremer Presse" (1922 forward) and "Neue Deutschen Beiträge" (1917-1922), and his work on the foundation and promotion of the Salzburger Festspiele.

> Deuter sind sie in ihren höchsten Augenblicken, Seher – das witternde, ahnende deutsche Wesen tritt in ihnen wieder hervor, witternd nach Urnatur im Menschen und in der Welt, deutend die Seelen und die Leiber, die Gesichter und die Geschichte, deutend die Siedlung und die Sitte, die Landschaft und den Stamm; Schriftleser, Handleser, Sternleser – und die Wucht der Erfahrung oder die Not der Jugend löst ihnen das Wort vom Munde, der Wirbel der Vielheit oder die Ergriffenheit vor dem Einzelnen.[316]

While admitting that this counter-type to the culture-philistine has a dangerously seductive side,[317] he does not doubt that the seeker will eventually produce the "Einheit" and "Gemeinschaft" that the world lacks.[318] Thus because of his overwhelming desire to find unity where there is fragmentation, Hofmannsthal makes the very mistake of which Nietzsche accuses the culture-philistine. The suspicion that Hofmannsthal once expressed vis-à-vis the prophet figure in his poem "Der Prophet"[319] does not apply to his own desire to speak in a prophetic voice.

This mistake on Hofmannsthal's part – the over-eager anticipation of, and faith in, an imminent unity – suggests that a fruitful contrast might be drawn between Hofmannsthal's "Suchenden" and another modern type, which Kracauer calls "die Wartenden." My intention is not to argue that there is a direct line of influence between these two authors, but rather to shed critical light on Hofmannsthal's seemingly unreserved belief that wholeness can be restored to the German "weltlose Ich." Although Kracauer's essay "Die Wartenden" was first published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* in

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[316] *GWRA III*, 36.

[317] "[E]r ist eine gefährliche hybride Natur, Liebender und Hassender und Lehrer und Verführer zugleich." *GWRA III*, 32.

[318] *GWRA III*, 40.

[319] See my discussion in chapter 3.

1922 (thus, five years before Hofmannsthal held his "Schrifttum" talk), both writers are responding to the uncertain cultural climate in the years after the end of the First World War.[320] Both the seekers and the *Wartenden* are responding to what they perceived to be a spiritual vacuum; the seeker, however, responds to it by finding meaning in nationalism, while the *Wartenden*, though he longs to fill the spiritual void, remains skeptical of the intellectual, religious, and aesthetic solutions that others around him have found. Those who wait suffer from a feeling of being chased out of a religious sphere, but at the same time they have lost the ability to believe in religious truths: they can at most *think* them, but cannot believe in them. Neither the purely scientific nor the religious worldview satisfies this type. They inhabit a "Zwischenreich" where "das Nicht-glauben-Können" is a source of inner torment.[321]

Like Hofmannsthal, Kracauer describes a time in which people are longing for the restoration of an order that has been lost through the processes of modernization; he emphasizes especially the loss of an order that was formerly held in place by the church. Without religion, however, the individual's "ich" has become separated from the "du," and the modern subject lives as an atomized being in a completely relativistic world. Kracauer observes, "Die Beziehungslosigkeiten zum Absoluten und die Vereinzelung prägen sich in einem auf die Spitze getriebenen *Relativismus* aus."[322] This heightened relativism is experienced as a crisis of meaning and as a fear of the void: "Horror vacui –

[320] Oliver Tekolf convincingly demonstrates that although Hofmannsthal does not mention the First World War in his *Schrifttum* speech, the way Hofmannsthal describes the soldiers in his wartime essays replicates almost verbatim how the seekers are characterized in this essay. See Tekolf, 386ff. See Hofmannsthal's "Aufbauen, nicht einreißen" (1915), "Geist der Karpathen" (1915), Aufzeichnungen zu Reden in Skandinavien" (1916).

[321] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 384.

[322] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 385.

der Schrecken vor der *Leere* beherrscht diese Menschen."[323] Kracauer says that he is less interested in discussing the historical factors that have led to the "Entleerung des uns umfangenden geistigen Raumes,"[324] but rather his intention is to examine the "Entfaltung der seelischen Lage"[325] in response to the horror vacui.

Although the disposition of Kracauer's *Wartenden* is almost the opposite of Hofmannsthal's seekers, they are characterized in very similar terms. That is, those who wait form a community not because they have consciously organized themselves into a group, but rather because they share a common disposition toward modern life. Like the seekers, they are lonely figures: "ihre Tage verbringen sie zumeist in der Einsamkeit der großen Städte, diese Gelehrten, Kaufleute, Ärzte, Rechtsanwälte, Studenten und Intellektuelle aller Art."[326] These people are "Schicksalsgefährten"[327] because they suffer from the same affliction: "das metaphysische Leiden an dem Mangel eines hohen Sinnes in der Welt, an ihrem Dasein im leeren Raum."[328]

Kracauer provides some examples of the different ways in which people have tried to find a unifying order to life. He identifies Georg Simmel as someone who, in his attempt to come to terms with the relativism of modern times, has raised the process of

[323] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 386.

[324] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 383.

[325] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 384.

[326] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 383.

[327] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 383.

[328] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 383.

life to a new absolute.[329] He calls Simmel's solution "eine Verzweiflungstat des Relativismus, der auf der Suche nach einem festen Grunde schließlich an das grund- und wurzellose Leben geriet und hiermit wiederum bei sich selber landete – oder auch nicht landete… "[330] Other solutions that people reach for include returning to church (which he finds is not what the thinking man tends to do), Marxist messianism, or in Stefan George's circle, these "Formgläubige" raise aesthetic form to a new absolute. Kracauer claims that those who wait are between the hardnosed skeptic and the "Kurzschluß-Mensch." The "short-circuit" person is someone who joins some religious group, not out of conviction, but because he would rather not face the void at all. This type is highly defensive of his religious belief because he does not quite understand it himself. The hardnosed skeptic, in contrast, embraces the loneliness that inevitably confronts the alienated individual who rejects all religious beliefs. His skepticism brings him to the point of hatred of those who are religious.

The *Wartenden*, providing a contrast to both of these types, are uncompromising in their own way because they refuse to be won over by either atheism or religion before they feel convinced to the core of their being. Kracauer says that the waiting of this type is a "zögerndes Geöffnetsein"[331]:

> Sagbar ist allenfalls u.a., daß es sich für die hier gemeinten Menschen um den Versuch handelt, den Schwerpunkt von dem theoretischen Ich auf das gesamtmenschliche Ich zu verlegen und aus der atomisierten unwirklichen Welt der gestaltlosen Kräfte und der des Sinnes baren Größen einzukehren in die Welt der *Wirklichkeit* und der von ihr umschlossenen Sphären.[332]

[329] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 385.

[330] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 385.

[331] Kracauer, "Die Wartenden," 392.

[332] Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse*, 118.

Seen in light of the different types of solutions that Kracauer sketches in this essay, Hofmannsthal's own way of dealing with the existential void appears to be a marriage of George's *Formgläubigkeit* and Simmel's "Verzweiflungstat" because he raises both art and life to a new absolute. Hofmannsthal's seekers ultimately lack what Kracauer's *Wartende* have, namely the courage to wait and to remain skeptical in the face of the seductive solutions touted by the many prophets in their time.[333]

II. Hofmannsthal's Doubts: *Der Turm*

Despite the apparent optimism of the *Münchner Rede*, critics point to Hofmannsthal's last drama *Der Turm*, a *Trauerspiel* in five acts, as an expression of doubt about the very vision of cultural leadership he presents in this speech. As Marcus Twellmann points out, both texts have as their central focus the connection between *Dichtertum* and *Führertum*. Whereas the idea of the poet as leader has a metaphoric quality in "Der Dichter und diese Zeit" and in "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation," in *Der Turm* the poet is literally conceived as a ruler. The drama is set in a legendary Polish kingdom "in der Atmosphäre dem siebzehnten [Jahrhundert] ähnlich,"[334] where King Basilius has his son, Sigismund, locked away in a tower because

[333] In his essay "Vom Erleben des Kriegs" (1915), Kracauer describes how an uncritical *Vaterlandsliebe* swept over the European nations at the outbreak of the First World War: "Wir haben uns im Laufe des Krieges daran gewöhnt, die Glut der Begeisterung, die Tapferkeit, die Opferwilligkeit, das Mitleiden, alle hohen Gedanken, die uns durchziehen, die freiwillige Unterordnung, die schwere dunkle Feiertagsstimmung unserer Seelen – wir haben uns daran gewöhnt, dies alles mit dem einen Namen der Vaterlandliebe zu bezeichnen. Niemals vielleicht waren die Menschen so wenig wie in diesen Zeiten zur Selbstbeobachtung, d.h. zur wirklichen Erfassung dessen, was in ihnen vorgeht, geneigt." *Siegfried Kracauer Werke* 5.1**:** 11.

[334] *GWD III*, 256.

it has been prophesied that the prince will overthrow him. The main drama revolves around the prince's unwitting involvement in a power struggle between King Basilius and those who rebel against him within his immediate service and the population at large. There are two different versions of the ending: In the first version, completed in 1925, Prince Sigismund, who has lived as a prisoner inside the tower for twenty-two years, astonishingly emerges as a capable political leader. He vanquishes the brutal renegade soldier, Olivier, who had attempted to seize power, and ultimately fulfills his destiny by preparing the way for a child king's peaceful and democratic rule. In the second ending, from 1927, Sigismund is neither willing to take up leadership nor to act as a political puppet; the play ends with Sigismund's assassination and the dawn of Olivier's violent dictatorship.

Der Turm has been interpreted as the dramatization of Hofmannsthal's personal struggle to define a politically meaningful role for the modern poet. The idea of the poet as political leader is not a far-fetched idea in the German context; the "Spiritualisierung des Reichsbegriffs"[335] was an idea that compensated for the unrealized German "Reich" in real political terms. Herder believed that national unity would be produced through *Bildung*, that is, through a unified literature and literary language. Schiller, carrying this idea a step further, claimed that precisely because the political realm was insecure, the German intellectual and spiritual "Reich" was all the stronger. Thus, the "Kulturnation" became the surrogate for the unrealized nation-state and the "Reich" stood for two

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[335] Twellmann, 214.

different realms: inner and outer nations.[336] While some, like Rudolf Borchardt, believed that the only true realization of the "Reich" could only be in the spiritual and intellectual realm, or in other words in the symbolic sphere, Hofmannsthal believed that the idea of the "Reich" could also find external realization. He wanted to find a "Form, eine neue deutsche Wirklichkeit an der die ganze Nation teilnehmen kann."[337] Twellmann points out that Borchardt's and Hofmannsthal's visions differ because Borchardt's understanding of the symbol is essentially Protestant, whereas Hofmannsthal's is Catholic: "Seinem katholisch geprägten Begriff des Symbolischen entsprechend bedeutet ihm 'Form' nicht ein Ideales, sondern dessen Verwirklichung."[338] Hofmannsthal's promotion of the realization of the nation in the "geistigen Raum" is an "Ontologisierung des Ersatzbegriffs."[339]

But while Hofmannsthal promoted the idea that the poet's responsibility was to take up cultural leadership, he kept his distance from Stefan George's vision of a "heilsame Diktatur" that he and those in his circle would one day exercise. Twellmann argues that Hofmannsthal subscribed to a different model of leadership. Unlike George, Hofmannsthal held the Romantic belief that the poet forms an organic unity with the people. Twellmann asserts, "Auf die organische Einheit der Künstler mit dem Volk, aus dem sie stammen, legt der Redner [Hofmannsthal] den Akzent, denn der Bindung zum

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[336] Twellmann, 214-15.

[337] *GWRA III*, 41.

[338] Twellmann, 215.

[339] Twellmann, 216. "Ontologisierung des Ersatzbegriffs" is the term Eberhard Lämmert uses his essay, "Der Dichterfürst," in *Dichtung, Sprache, Gesellschaft*. *Akten des IV. Germanisten-Kongresses. 1970 in Princeton*, eds.Viktor Lange and Hans-Gert Roloff (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Verlag, 1971), 444.

Volk verdankt die Kunst der 'Geistigen' ihre Legitimität."[340] Indeed, in his Beethoven speech of 1920, Hofmannsthal states, "Nichts war würdig an ihnen, zu bestehen, wofern sie sich abtrennen im Letzten von der Wesensart des Volkes."[341]

Hofmannsthal was not unaware, however, of the problematic aspects of this Romantic idea that the artist and the people form an organic unity.[342] As Jacques Le Rider points out, *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Der Schwierige* are examples of Hofmannsthal's self-conscious construction of tradition through montage technique.[343] After the demise of the existing traditional orders, Hofmannsthal assigns to the poet the responsibility of reinstating a new and binding symbolic order. He faces an irresolvable dilemma in his work, however. On the one hand, the author claims that the poet is organically linked to the people through the *Urkraft* of language.[344] This idea works as long as the poet is conceived as the steward of language and his creativity is seen as the manifestation of the power of language itself. On the other hand, Hofmannsthal wants to conceive of the poet as someone who can construct new realities with language, in which case the poet's language is no longer merely an expression of an already existing organic essence of the *Volk*, but instead it is a medium that the poet can manipulate and control.

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[340] Twellmann, 218.

[341] *GWRA II*, 83.

[342] Twellmann suggests that the idea that the poet gives voice to the essence of a people must have attracted Hofmannsthal to Josef Nadler's literary history. Twellmann, 219.

[343] Jacques Le Rider, Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Historismus und Moderne in der Literatur der Jahrhundertwende, trans. Leopold Federmair (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1997), 262.

[344] Twellmann, 222.

In fact, however, Hofmannsthal was not quite willing to explicitly acknowledge the fact that poetic or literary language is not immune to unethical political manipulation. This reluctance will become apparent through a more focused examination of the different types of cultural leadership Hofmannsthal himself modeled through the *Münchner Rede* and *Der Turm*. In the existing scholarship, the focus has been primarily on the thematic connection between the *Münchner Rede* and *Der Turm*; what has, in contrast, received little attention is the question of why it is that Hofmannsthal expressed doubts about the viability of a poet's political leadership in his drama but not in his public speeches. It may appear at first that the answer to this question is simple: As a public speaker, Hofmannsthal sought to inspire his audience and give them a sense of hope about the future, especially at a time when Germany and Austria were dealing with the devastating ramifications of their defeat in the First World War. Hofmannsthal felt that his speech must address the sense of cultural crisis that was a reality at the time. In a letter to Martin Buber from December 19th, 1926, Hofmannsthal writes:

> Halb durch Mißverständnisse ist eine Situation entstanden, in der ich es, ohne launisch oder schwierig zu erscheinen, nicht ablehnen kann, in München öffentlich zu sprechen. Man kann heute nicht über Literarisches sprechen, überhaupt nicht über "Specielles" dazu ist die Not und Unruhe zu groß. Also hab ich mir ein etwas weiträumiges Thema gewählt – zur Vorbereitung aber in alten Sachen herumgelesen, die mir durch ihre Verfasser nahe stehen, gelesen, so wie wenn ich mich mit diesen Abwesenden oder Todten unterhielte. Aus diesem Gemeinschaftsgefühl heraus will ich mir dann etwas aufzeichnen, das ich zu den Leuten rede – ohne jeden Wunsch das Individuelle oder Originale zu sagen – denn ein Wir scheint mir schöner als dieses zweifelhafte Ich.[345]

As much as Hofmannsthal seems to have felt reluctant to accept the speaking engagement with the Munich Goethe-Gesellschaft, he appears to have felt a sense of duty

[345] Hugo von Hofmannsthal-Martin Buber, *Briefe 1926-1928*, in *Die Neue Rundschau*, No. 73 (Frankfurt am Main 1962), 760.

to deliver a speech that addresses an audience affected by the "Not und Unruhe" of the postwar period. Hofmannsthal felt that it would be inappropriate to speak on a narrow literary topic and instead was compelled to address in more general terms the big questions concerning the cultural and political future of a people.

We can see in Hofmannsthal's letter to Buber that his ambition was to communicate the sense that the Germans have a community of writers and thinkers. It is evident in his letter to Willy Haas, written on the same day as his letter to Buber, how difficult he found the task of distilling a sense of "we" out of the multiplicity of highly complex and disparate works he was reading in preparation for his speech:

> Wenn man sich aber auf das furchtbare Gebiet des Nicht-speziellen, des Allgemeinen, unseres Zustandes, unserer Anarchie begibt – was sich dann noch sagen läßt, dies durchzudenken, das unbegrenzte Thema einigermaßen abzugrenzen, in sich eine Fühlung herzustellen mit den wichtigsten Zeitgenossen (die keineswegs, das versteht sich von selbst, die bekanntesten sind – im Gegenteil) doch eine Art von wir in sich zu constituieren [*sic*] so viele ungeheuer schwierige u. complexe [*sic*] Dinge andeutend berühren ohne sich auf sie einzulassen freilich, aber andererseits ohne zu dilettieren [...] nein, das ist eine monströse Arbeit...[346]

Hofmannsthal's personal correspondence indicates that the author wanted to synthesize the plurality of voices into a unified voice in order to establish a sense of collective identity amongst the leading German cultural figures. Oswalt von Nostitz observes that Hofmannsthal approached this speech with a sense of pedagogical and political responsibility to promote a vision of a multi-dimensional German nation in which the political and intellectual-spiritual dimensions do not form an opposition, but instead a

[346] Hugo von Hofmannsthal. *Ein Briefwechsel. Hugo von Hofmannsthal und Willy Haas* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1968), 71.

unity.[347] He argues that Hofmannsthal consciously distinguished between his role as a "Kulturpolitiker" and literary writer, and that for this reason the *Münchner Rede* needs to be understood in relation to the author's cultural-political activism rather than simply in relation to his purely literary work.[348] In particular, he insists that the theses presented in the speech cannot be simply interpreted as the meaning of Sigismund's parting words at the end of the first version of *Der Turm*;[349] he claims that Hofmannsthal consciously conceived of the speech as having a different function than the drama did, assigning a "Sonderstellung" to literary language, which he had disclaimed earlier:

> zwar nicht, um es in den elfenbeinernen Turm zu bannen, sondern weil er – darin ganz anders empfindend als Brecht und dessen Nachfolger – gerade die ungetrübte und unerschrockene, nicht durch politische und sonstige Tendenzen gehemmte Auseinandersetzung mit der Wirklichkeit als essentiell für die Entstehung seiner Dichtung ansah.[350]

While Nostitz concedes that the antinomy between the function of literary and non-literary language should not be exaggerated, he ultimately does not find this distinction problematic. For him the difference between Hofmannsthal's literary and non-literary texts is primarily determined by the difference in intention that motivates his writing. He believes that Hofmannsthal's speech was motivated by "didaktische oder auch kultur- und geistespolitische Intentionen,"[351] while the drama was written out of a

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[347] Oswalt von Nostitz, "Zur Interpretation von Hofmannsthals Münchner Rede," in *Für Rudolf Hirsch zum siebzigsten Geburtstag am 22. Dezember 1975* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag*, 1975*), 262.

[348] Nostitz, 262.

[349] Nostitz, 263.

[350] Nostitz, 263.

[351] Nostitz, 263.

sense of responsibility solely toward his creative vision: "Hier spricht nicht mehr ein an seine pädagogisch-politische Verantwortung gegenüber der 'Nation' Gebundener, sondern der nur seinem Ingenium verpflichtete Dichter, der auch vor dem Anblick der Gorgo nicht zurückscheut."[352]

Nostitz's explanation here is rather forced, however, and does not reflect the fact that in practice, Hofmannsthal, as one of the founders of the *Salzburger Festspiele*, used literary works too for didactic and cultural-political ends. Moreover, his conclusion implicitly suggests that Hofmannsthal's sense of pedagogical and political responsibility led him to hide from the audience of his public speech his true, unblinking vision of a frightening future. The question as to why Hofmannsthal might have felt the responsibility to suppress his doubts in his speech, and for that matter in the first version of *Der Turm,* ultimately remains unanswered by Nostitz.

In contrast to Nostitz, Rey argues that the contradictory cultural-political visions presented in *Der Turm* and the *Münchner Rede* cannot be explained by merely pointing to the fact that Hofmannsthal wrote the former from the perspective of a playwright and the latter from the perspective of a publicist: "Aber der Widerspruch, der hier zwischen tragischem Bekenntnis und politischem Aufruf besteht, ist nicht nur begründet in der verschiedenen Perspektive des Dichters und des Publizisten."[353] According to Rey, the speech and the drama present two alternative historical outcomes that Hofmannsthal envisioned resulting from the European crisis, namely "Regeneration echter Kultur oder

[352] Nostitz, 275.

[353] Rey, 278.

Absturz in die Barbarei der Gewaltherrschaft."[354] Thus, Rey sees the contradictory historical visions as an expression of the author's uncertainty about the future. Burckhardt's recollection of Hofmannsthal's anxiety about the power of his writing supports this interpretation: "Man kann in ein Klima, in eine Zeit geraten, die kein Gedeihen mehr zulassen. Es geht wie mit der Vegetation, mit der Fauna – ganze Reihen sterben aus. Das Wort, das gestern noch Zauberkraft hatte, fällt heute sinnlos zu Boden."[355] The dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire had shaken Hofmannsthal to the core and he struggled to fight against a creeping sense of resignation, which expressed itself less in the form of an abstract language skepticism (as in "Ein Brief"), but rather as doubt over whether his words could still find resonance in a fundamentally new historical epoch.

Rey finds that the darker tones in Hofmannsthal's late work have been obscured by a strong tendency in the scholarship to portray the author's oeuvre as following an organic, teleological development. This thesis can already be found in Josef Nadler's essay entitled "Hofmannsthals Ausklang," where he describes the author's life and creative work as "organischen Ablauf […] von Stufe zu Stufe wachsend bis zu dem sicheren Weltbesitz seines letzten Dramas."[356] Within this all too tidy biographical narrative, *Turm I* is regarded as the culmination of Hofmannsthal's entire work in a "sicheren Weltbesitz," while *Turm II* tends to be ignored.[357] Rey draws attention to the

[354] Rey, 278.

[355] Nostitz, 262; Carl J. Burckhardt, *Erinnerungen an Hofmannsthal* (München: Callwey Verlag, 1964) 49.

[356] Cited in Rey, 265.

[357] Rey, 265.

fact that in fact *Turm I* already betrays signs of doubt about the vision of the non-violent and morally pure leadership with which the play ends. First, Sigismund does not entirely find his way from his tower of interiority into the world of reality. Hofmannsthal conspicuously leaves out any scenes of direct military confrontation between Sigismund and his enemy, Olivier. Instead, Sigismund's confrontation with his foe is mediated by Olivier's gypsy lover, against whose magic spell and attack with a poisoned knife he is defenseless. Rey concludes, "Das Ringen auf dem Schlachtfeld tritt zurück vor dem Ringen mit den Dämonen."[358] Thus, the real political danger, namely the threat of an inhumane dictatorship, represented by Olivier in *Turm II*, is obscured in *Turm I* as concrete, political confrontations are replaced with a dream-like struggle. Moreover, Rey rightly observes that the appearance of the "Kinderkönig," who replaces Sigismund, the interim ruler, is an expression of eschatological hope. The fact that the drama jumps from a historical to a utopian temporal plane reflects Hofmannsthal's struggle to envision how a new harmonious political order could be realized.

The second ending of *Der Turm* presents a very bleak picture of a new order and a new model of political leadership. In *Turm II* the prince is a completely ineffectual political figure. His only defense against Olivier lies in his rejection of the here and now, which, however, leaves his people without hope of salvation from Olivier's violent tyranny. But it is not just the political vision that is dark; Hofmannsthal's understanding of the power of aesthetic media is almost nihilistic. While his poetological essays and cultural-political speeches promote the idea that art and poetic language possess the power to overcome the fragmentation of the world and restore a sense of wholeness to the

[358] Rey, 279.

alienated modern individual, in the final act of *Turm II*, Hofmannsthal demonstrates that the most basic building block of art, the sign (be it linguistic, pictorial or auditory) is also the medium of everyday communication. For this reason there is no sign that is pure and immune to manipulation for social and political ends. The end of this version of the drama reflects this idea through the manner in which Olivier manipulates signs in order to solidify his rule. I argue that the existing interpretations have overlooked the fact that Olivier not only represents a political figure but can also be seen as an artist, inasmuch as he understands and wields the magic power of symbols.

From Olivier's perspective all signs can be manipulated in order to distort or create a new reality. He understands that Sigismund's real power lies in the fact that the people still regard the prince as the physical embodiment of the symbol of legitimate political leadership. He takes advantage, therefore, of a fundamental problem of recognition that results from the physical and socio-political distance that lies between the people and the ruler. The common people's familiarity with the prince's face is based upon a poorly produced copperplate print that is in circulation amongst them. [359] For this reason Olivier is convinced that he can "discard" the real prince like a useless object and easily replace him with a double to serve as a puppet in order to legitimize his own rule. Olivier reveals his plan to Sigismund:

> Du wirst, wenn wir jetzt marschieren, auf einem Wagen fahren, und sie werden zu Tausenden herbeikommen und Heil rufen über dir, daß du deinen Vater vom Thron gejagt hast. Auf diese Weise wird das sprachlose Volk von uns durch eine Bilderschrift unterrichtet werden und die Herren werden Kopfunter in die Erde fahren.[360]

[359] *GWD III*, 466.

[360] *GWD III*, 464.

When Sigismund rejects Olivier's "proposal," Olivier does not try to force Sigismund into submission, but instead he tells his attendant to find Sigismund's lookalike:

> OLIVIER: Prägt euch sein Gesicht ein. Notiert euch im Kopf die Maße, wie er gebaut ist, die Haarfarbe, alles.
> ARON: Auf dem flachen Land geht sein Bild um, ein schlechter Kupferstich, und sie zünden Kerzen davor an wie vor einem Heiligenbild.
> OLIVIER: Ebendarum. Ich brauche einen Kerl, ähnlich ihm zum Verwechseln und der mir pariert wie der Handschuh an meiner Hand.
> ARON: Was brauchst du noch eine Konterfei, wenn du ihn selber hast?
> OLIVIER: Er selber ist nicht verwendbar.[361]

From Olivier's Machiavellian perspective there is no such thing as an "inborn" right to rule. Olivier's seizure of power thus marks the transition into the modern political era, in which the sovereign no longer represents divine will, but merely the secular will of the people. In other words, the will of the people is the new principle of legitimacy; this is an idea which evolves over the course of the nineteenth century and in Austria replaces the monarchical principle of legitimacy at the end of the First World War.[362] The dissolution of the monarchy involves a shift in the conceptual understanding of political representation. As Twellmann explains, "Die Abhängigkeit des Herrschers von der Akzeptanz der Beherrschten, wird zur anerkannten Voraussetzung demokratischer Stellvertretung."[363]

Through the figure of Olivier, Hofmannsthal presents the darker side of the democratic power structure. First, he shows that the abuse of power can still take place in

[361] *GWD III*, 466.

[362] Twellmann, 137.

[363] Twellmann, 137.

the name of the people. Olivier claims, "Denn ich und einige, wir haben uns aufgeopfert und nehmen dem Volk die Last des Regiments ab, damit es nicht schwindlich werde."[364] Hofmannsthal shows how the dictator can legitimize his rule by invoking the democratic principle. That is, he controls the people by maintaining that he is working in the service of those he rules.[365] Second, through Olivier's manipulation of the power of symbols, Hofmannsthal demonstrates that the religious dimension of politics is not simply eliminated through the secularization of political power. In the following exchange Sigismund questions Olivier's claim to power:

> SIGISMUND *mit Verachtung*: Wer ist das, der dir Macht gegeben hat, daß du sie unter andere austeilst?
> OLIVIER: Siehst du dieses eiserne Ding da in meiner Hand? So wie dies in meiner Hand ist und schlägt, so bin ich selbst in der Hand der Fatalität. Das, was jetzt vor dir steht, das hast du noch nicht gekannt. Was du bis jetzt gekannt hast, waren jesuitische Praktiken und Hokuspokus. Was aber jetzt dasteht, das ist die Wirklichkeit.[366]

When Olivier appears in the last act, he is dressed "ganz in Eisen und Leder […] eine kurze eiserne Keule in der Hand."[367] Olivier asserts that his power is entirely legitimized through the superior power of physical force and violence, relative to the religious and magical rituals on which monarchical power is based. However, brute

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[364] *GWD III*, 468.

[365] Carl Schmitt makes a very similar observation: "Im 18. Jahrhundert erscheint zum ersten Male in der Geschichte des christlichen Abendlandes ein Begriff der Diktatur, nach welchem der Diktator zwar Kommissar bleibt, aber infolge der Eigenart der nicht konstituierten, aber konstituierenden Gewalt des Volkes ein unmittelbarer Volkskommissar, ein Diktator, der auch seinem Auftraggeber diktiert, ohne aufzuhören, sich an ihm zu legitimieren." Cited in Twellmann, 148; Schmitt, *Die Diktatur: Von den Anfängen des modernen Souveränitätsgedankens bis zum proletarischen Klasenkampf* (München und Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1921).

[366] *GWD III*, 465.

[367] *GWD III*, 462.

physical force alone is not enough to secure Olivier's rule. He, too, depends upon the "Hokuspokus" of symbols because "das sprachlose Volk" still sees the physical king as evidence for the legitimacy of political leadership. As Twellmann explains, "Der Königskörper steht sichtbar für die Unität einer Kommunikationsgemeinschaft, die, selbst unsichtbar, erst in dieser Imago mit sich übereinkommt, die in ihrer Verkörperung sich selbst akklamiert und mit ihrem König ihre Einigkeit feiert."[368] Hofmannsthal shows how the magic power of symbols is indispensible for the stabilization of Olivier's control of the people. The word "Hokuspokus" stems from a denunciatory reformulation of the magic words spoken during the Christian communion, "Hoc est corpus meum," through which the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into Christ's flesh and blood is performed.[369] In the final act of the drama, the author depicts how modern political power that is supposed to be based on the will of the people still in fact depends on the residual power of the ceremonial religious rituals that were used to mark the pre-modern investiture of the king with divine power.

In the end, no sign is safe from Olivier's sinister manipulation. Not only does he plan to control the illiterate population through visual trickery, but he also leads Sigismund to his execution through auditory deception. As Olivier leaves Sigismund in his tower, he commands his sharpshooters to position themselves outside the prince's window. Sigismund is attracted to the window by the sound of anonymous voices, presumably the people, calling to him:

> STIMMEN: *außen* Sigismund! Bleibe bei uns! Harre aus bei uns, verlasse uns nicht!

[368] Twellmann, 142.

[369] Twellmann, 141.

SIGISMUND: Ich bin allein und sehne mich verbunden zu sein.
STIMMEN: Sigismund! Verlasse uns nicht!
ANTON: Recht komödiantisch gebärden sich die. Das sind keine ehrlichen Leute.
SIGISMUND: Ich will zum Fenster und mit meinen Gefreundeten reden, sie rufen mich.
Er geht langsam gegen das Fenster.[370]

In his longing to be connected to other human beings, Sigismund does not heed his servant Anton's suspicion of the crowd outside, but instead steps toward the window to get closer to the voices. However, these voices are not the voices of the *Volk*, but rather of a mob in Olivier's service, and when Sigismund finally appears before the window he is shot to death. As he dies, the prince commands Anton and his doctor, "Gebet Zeugnis, ich war da, wenngleich mich niemand gekannt hat."[371] This last command has a biblical ring, but unlike the figure of Jesus, the carpenter's son, who lived and worked miracles amongst the people, there is little to say about Sigismund's life and deeds. What would it mean for Anton and the doctor to pay witness to a life that never quite came into contact with the outside world?

Sigismund's Christ-like self-sacrifice is futile. No child king appears in this second ending; history no longer culminates in the fulfillment of a transcendent destiny. In this second ending of *Der Turm*, Hofmannsthal expresses in dramatic form fears and doubts that never surface in his *Münchner Rede*: What if, instead of an organic *Volk*, there are only anonymous crowds? What if the cultural leaders (the so-called seekers) are only driven by the will to power, and not by a genuine search for a unifying *Geist*? These doubts reflect Hofmannsthal's political conservatism and the threat that democracy

[370] *GWD III*, 468-69.

[371] *GDW III*, 469.

represented to him. Clemens Pornschlegel explains that Hofmannsthal rejected "die Auflösung des Absoluten im prozeduralen Spiel öffentlicher Meinungen."[372] He finds that Hofmannsthal's rejection of modern democratic rule, as expressed in the ideals of the French Revolution, is reflective of the apolitical conception of the nation in the German and Austrian cultural context, in which the idea of a unified national culture was accompanied by the suppression of its political realization.[373] He maintains that the second ending of *Der Turm* reflects that Hofmannsthal found it unthinkable that the idea of the *contrat social* and free *citoyens* could result in anything other than a nihilistic, lawless "Gewaltherrschaft."[374] Thus, in *Turm II* Olivier's claim to democratic governance is shown to be a mere pretense. Instead of a coherent people, Hofmannsthal presents a mob, and instead of the separation of law from power, he depicts a dictatorial seizure of power.

Twellmann argues that it is precisely because of Hofmannsthal's conservatism that the author was able to illuminate in his drama the aesthetic and theological dimensions of modern politics, which are often overlooked in theories of democracy:

> Sein Festhalten an einer autoritären und absolutistischen Form der Herrschaft ist offenkundig; daß er diese mystifiziert hat als einen "Zusammenklang gehorsamen Herrschens und freien Gehorsam," ebenso. Interessant ist nicht diese

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[372] Twellmann, 153. See Clemens Pornschlegel, "Bildungsindividualismus und Reichsidee: Zur Kritik der politischen Moderne bei Hugo von Hofmannsthal," in *Konzepte der Moderne*, ed. Gerhart von Graevenitz (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1999), 265.

[373] "Die Aporie, der Hofmannsthal in seinen (die politische Moderne zu überwinden suchenden) Gründungsversuchen eines neuen Europa und eines neuen Deutschland permanent begegnet, besteht darin, daß die Tradition der Bildung spätestens seit dem 18. Jahrhundert zwar eine nationale Einheit Deutschlands kulturell wirksam inszenierte – aber unter fortwährender Ausklammerung oder Verdrängung des politischen Moments, das den modernen Begriff der Nation allererst ausmacht (und ihn von den folkloristischen 'nationes' des alten Imperium unterscheidet)." Pornschlegel, "Bildungsindividualismus und Reichsidee," 267.

[374] Pornschlegel, 265.

> Politikverständnis als solches, sondern die Perspektive auf den Übergang zur Demokratie, die es eröffnet: Hofmannsthals Blick für die Ästhetik des politischen hat ihn ein Moment der Volksherrschaft erkennen lassen, über das die Theorie der Demokratie hinwegsieht.[375]

Twellmann thus finds that, as a witness of the belated political transition from Franz Josef's monarchical rule to the first Austrian Republic, Hofmannsthal expresses in *Der Turm* the permanence of the theological dimension in modern politics.[376]

Despite offering a more generous reading, what Twellmann's interpretation shares with Pornschlegel's is the assumption that Hofmannsthal's definitive political position can be gleaned by focusing solely on the second version of *Der Turm*. Surprisingly little attempt has been made, however, to explain why Hofmannsthal felt compelled to produce two different endings for the play. I suggest a partial answer lies in Rey's interpretation. He argues that even if Hofmannsthal appears to give up on the idea that *Geist* can be fulfilled in history through political action, this does not necessarily mean that the author completely abandons the eschatological hope expressed in *Turm I*. He finds that Sigismund continues to be carried by a messianic "Grundgefühl,"[377] and the second version of the ending is marked by the simultaneity of "Weltverbundenheit und Weltentfremdung des dichterischen Geistes."[378]

In Rey's portrait, then, Hofmannsthal emerges as being supremely ambivalent about Austria's future, inasmuch as he will neither confirm nor reject the messianic hopes

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[375] Twellmann, 153.

[376] Twellmann, 155.

[377] Rey, 279.

[378] Rey, 283.

that he explores in his writing. And yet, if one accepts Rey's analysis, a troubling problem emerges. Rey's interpretation seems convincing insofar as we only consider the evidence of Hofmannsthal's drama, but a difficulty emerges when we try to reconcile Rey's reading with Hofmannsthal's political speech. There we encounter a much less ambiguous message. While doubts still emerge from Hofmannsthal's words, the overall message in "Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation" is one of hope:

> Denn von Synthese aufsteigend zu Synthese, mit wahrhaft religioser [*sic*] Verantwortung beladen, nichts auslassend, nirgend zur Seite schlüpfend, nichts überspringend – muß ein so angespanntes Trachten, woanders der Genius der Nation es nicht im Stiche läßt, zu diesem Höchsten gelangen: daß der Geist Leben wird und Leben Geist, mit anderen Worten: zu der politischen Erfassung des Geistigen und der geistigen des Politischen, zur Bildung einer wahren Nation.[379]

In a blend of Hegelian and religious language, Hofmannsthal presents the striving of the seekers as the gradual realization of the cultural and political destiny of the hidden German *Kulturnation*. How is it that this expression of certainty can be reconciled with the much more ambiguous message of *Turm II*? One explanation presents itself when we consider Hofmannsthal's conception of the role of the cultural-political leader in the modern age as a seeker after truth who, through his quest, gives hope, meaning, and direction to the public at large. But if Hofmannsthal is playing this role in his political speech and yet is actually possessed of doubts he expresses in his play, is it not merely a false hope that he is offering to the people, and a dangerously elusive one at that? Through his invocation of a nebulous spirit, he promotes the chilling prospect of political action that must be resolute without knowing what it wants to achieve. Hofmannsthal's

[379] *GWRA III*, 40.

political speech leaves him open to the charge of being a false prophet, or at best a poseur. The charge is made all the more serious by the facts of Austria's later history.

Conclusion

Hofmannsthal's description of our existence as filled with and mediated by books may seem at first to be less relevant in our own day; books are actually piling up less and less as the physical storage of knowledge has shifted into the electronic realm. However, the culturally critical concerns that are raised in today's discussions about the societal impact of our media culture resonate strongly with the anxieties that Hofmannsthal expressed about the culture of knowledge in his time. The problem of the knowability of the world in the face of an overabundance of information, stories, concepts, and news not only persists but is exacerbated in our internet age. Hofmannsthal's metaphor for this problem, the image of an ever-increasing stack of books, no longer sufficiently captures the rapid proliferation of information in our time. In this age the producers of knowledge and culture do not constitute a separate social class unto themselves, as everyone can in principle be both producer and consumer of knowledge and of culture. With our instant access to a vast network of ideas and cultural products, it is extremely difficult to judge what might be worth knowing—while on the other hand, the very assumption that there might be some things more or less worth knowing than others already challenges to some extent the democratic principles upon which the internet is based.

"In der Dichter und diese Zeit" Hofmannsthal grappled with the question of what the democratization of literature and knowledge meant and, as I have pointed out, found himself unable to entirely embrace this cultural trend. He was deeply troubled by the growing relativism of his age, which he saw as the root cause of the incoherence and

indeterminacy of his time; yet he also knew that it is futile and narrow-minded to inflexibly cling to tradition and to an already eroded old order. He saw himself as belonging to a generation of *Spätgeborenen*, who had inherited nothing but "hübsche Möbel" and "überfeine Nerven,"[380] implying that for his generation the inherited traditions are meaningful almost exclusively in an ornamental sense, as without knowledge of the experiential dimension upon which these traditions are based, they have nothing but an aesthetic appeal. However, while Hofmannsthal is haunted by the sense that something valuable of the past has been lost and that his generation is therefore facing a crisis of meaning, he is also curious to investigate what replaces the old order and to know how meaning is being created and mediated through new symbols and a new generation of cultural producers.

In exploring the production of meaning in the field of literature, Hofmannsthal, like Walter Benjamin, observes that in a firmly established literate age, poetic knowledge (which Benjamin calls wisdom[381]), transmitted through literature, has become greatly devalued. In a scientific age, knowledge based on lived experience or on the creative imagination of the literary author is considered to be illusory and unreal compared to the concreteness of information based on empirical facts. Thus, while Hofmannsthal notes that modern readers have an insatiable appetite for reading material, their relationship to what they read, regardless of whether it is a newspaper article or a novel, has become predominantly instrumental. Although Hofmannsthal is deeply troubled by this cultural

[380] Hofmannsthal, "Gabriele d'Annunzio," *GWRA I*, 174.

[381] "Rat, in den Stoff gelebten Lebens eingewebt, ist Weisheit. Die Kunst der Erzählung neigt ihrem Ende zu, weil die epische Seite der Wahrheit, die Weisheit, ausstirbt." Walter Benjamin, "Der Erzähler," in Gesammelte Schriften II, 2, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 442.

trend, he recognizes in the voracious consumption of books and print material an unsatisfied longing to connect to the world in a way that restores a sense of wholeness and does not merely add to the incoherent collection of disconnected bits of information. He believes that the mad speed of unreflective cultural consumption indicates an unconscious yearning for the kind of enchantment and sense of wonder that can only be transmitted through poetry.[382]

For Hofmannsthal, poetic language is charged with the utopian potential to transgress the limits of the sayable and thereby resist instrumentalization. Poetic language resists explanation because it speaks in an enigmatic pictorial language that is meant to be irreducible. Hofmannsthal appealed to the image as a medium that would offer knowledge of the whole "all at once," as opposed to technical language in which meaning emerges in a linear fashion. In effect what Hofmannsthal was seeking was the paradox of a language of symbols that could, so to speak, mediate immediacy.

This desire for immediacy and wholeness may strike us today as naïve or even utopian, but in fact, our society is saturated with utopian aspirations for immediacy. In its contemporary incarnation these hopes are represented in the rather exaggerated claims that are made about the internet's potential to forge a new global community. Web gurus laud the transformative potential of social media and the democratization of knowledge: numbers are evinced to show that, in sheer numbers, the Facebook community now surpasses the population of most nations; campaigns are launched online to bring African warlords to justice. For its proponents, the potential of the new internet-based communication networks apparently knows no bounds.

[382] It should be remembered that Hofmannsthal uses the word "poetry" interchangeably with "literature."

Underlying this phenomenon is a new relationship between the public and the symbolic order. Gone is the hierarchy between the producers and the consumers of knowledge and culture; instead, knowledge is said to be the direct reflection of the individual's subjectivity: news is increasingly produced by the amateur journalist, who aggregates stories and packages them as opinion pieces; the role of the pundit is eclipsed by a proliferation of blogs, amateur publications and discussion threads; Youtube sensations spring up overnight and increasingly replace other forms of entertainment. All of this happens in a medium celebrated for its richness, which combines auditory and visual, text-based and image-based messages, creating an immersive experience meant to reproduce the quality of social presence.

Critics of the media culture in the internet age echo the skepticism that Hofmannsthal expressed in the *Chandos Letter* about the ability of language to point outside of itself. From the skeptic's perspective, the internet has become an echo chamber; rather than opening us up to different people around the world, it cuts us off. Online social groups that are completely built on choice no longer bring us into contact with a concrete community that challenges us to adapt to it. The risk is that we are actually trying to avoid otherness altogether, until the only voice one hears is one's own. What is unique about Hofmannsthal's analysis is that it is offered in a dramatic reconstruction that speaks to us at an affective level. In other words, he communicates the loss of poetry through poetry itself.

Besides warning of the social fragmentation, atomization, and alienation entrained by increasingly popularized forms of communication, however, Hofmannsthal's writings also alert us to a different but related danger—a risk that Hofmannsthal perhaps did not

see clearly enough himself. In an age such as ours, the temptation may arise to seek a new cultural leader who will promise to unify the scattered voices.

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