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THE KÜNSTLERPROBLEMATIK AND THE MEANING  
AND FUNCTION OF ART IN WORKS BY  
HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL AND THOMAS MANN

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BONNIE J. BROUGHTON

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THE *KÜNSTLERPROBLEMATIK* AND THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF ART  
IN WORKS BY HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL AND THOMAS MANN

By

Bonnie J      Broughton

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

### THE *KÜNSTLERPROBLEMATIK* AND THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF ART IN WORKS BY HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL AND THOMAS MANN

By

Bonnie J      Broughton

After Nietzsche's call for a rethinking of traditional values, questions about the nature and function of art, artists, and works of art became prominent under the label of Modernism in Western culture at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For German authors this attention to fundamental questions led to an artist's crisis, or *Künstlerproblematik*, which caused writers such as Hofmannsthal and Mann to use their writing for working through their doubts about the adequacy of human language to express experience as well as the question of how artists find inspiration and are then able to shape experience into expression.

Because of the difference between the organizing aspect of language and the unorganized vagueness of pre-articulated, felt experience, it was not and will never be possible to resolve the artist's crisis, but their work did enable them and also their readers to gain a deeper understanding of the issues involved, including why human beings find art so compelling.

## DEDICATION

To my long-suffering Master's committee members, Prof. Raimund Belgardt, Prof. Kurt Schild, Prof. Richard Peterson, and Prof. Heinz Dill (deceased), who stayed with me and believed in me through many years of existential adventures and crises. The academic and personal progress I have made in German Studies and in life in general would not have been possible without your inspiration and kind guidance.

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## INTRODUCTION

Literature, in forms both high and popular, has been part of the human story since the beginning of written language—one could even say that art, and literature specifically, is the human story. But *why* is literature so compelling for both authors and their audiences? Why do writers write, and why do readers read? These questions lead naturally to fundamental and long-debated issues about the meaning and function not only of literature, but of art itself in human society and ultimately to the relationship between art and life. In the case of literature this refers in general to the limits and possibilities of language and knowledge, and specifically to the relationship between words and the things that words are supposed to represent.

These questions have teased and tortured both philosophers and writers ever since they began to reflect on them, and satisfactory answers have eluded even the most inspired thinkers. The topic seems to be beyond the ability of the subjective human mind to grasp, even though its issues have been basic to human experience over our history. The difficulty seems to lie in the coincidence that the object to be understood is also the medium of understanding: language use is not only determined by thinking, thinking is itself shaped and limited by

language. The result is that whenever we would try to discover something about how language functions, we find ourselves subjectively stationed in the center of the issue already, and thus it becomes difficult to find the distance needed for a more objective perspective and understanding. Heidegger, at the beginning of the epilogue to his Origin of the Work of Art, states that "the foregoing reflections are concerned with the riddle of art, the riddle that art itself is. They are far from claiming to solve the riddle. The task is to see the riddle."<sup>1</sup> A clarified understanding of even the questions would be doing much, and that is exactly what this thesis will attempt to do, along with a consideration of the successes and failures of various attempts not just to "see" the riddle of art, but also to solve it.

In order to produce a firmer understanding of the "riddle", the following reflections will examine what is called in German the *Künstlerproblematik*, or artist's crisis, in which the nature and function of art, the artist, and the work of art became central themes of German literature in Early Modernism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will mainly focus on the different ways that

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<sup>1</sup> (Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings, David Farrell Krell, ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993) 83.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal in Ein Brief and Thomas Mann in Schwere Stunde, Der Tod in Venedig, and Tonio Kröger used depictions of writers who can't write in order to explore two main aspects of the artist's crisis: the language crisis of how artists cope--or do not cope--with the limits of their means, and the crisis of how individual artists themselves relate art to life and find inspiration, even though the classical notions about 'beauty' became critically problematic with the advent of Modernism.

An exhaustive treatment of this topic would also necessarily include writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Kafka, as well as a long list of Expressionist authors from Gottfried Benn to Kurt Schwitters, but a close examination of the sufferings and struggles of Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos and Mann's writers-in-crisis Gustav von Aschenbach and Tonio Kröger (among others) with their identity, their inspiration, and their means of expression, i.e., the word, will be sufficient for exploring these main aspects of the Modernist artist's crisis. The characters provided their creators not only the opportunity to explore these issues through their own writing, but also a way to work through and overcome their own artistic crises to a considerable extent. A close examination of these works in the context of each other and

also other works by the same and other authors will bring further light for a clearer understanding of the motivation behind Hofmannsthal's and Mann's use of the above mentioned characters.

However, these works also show that writers can never fully overcome the *Künstlerproblematik* as long as humankind depends on a language of words. In various forms, questions about the function and possibilities of art and artists must necessarily exist as long as artistic representation exists, and literature has so far survived all attempts to declare words to be useless or to find more effective means to replace words with other mediums such as color or music. In spite of all experiments within modernistic works, the word continued to be the medium of choice, if perhaps reluctantly so, even for word-skeptics such as Hofmannsthal who paradoxically wrote about his experience of the absolute inadequacy and powerlessness of words to truly express experience, and yet did so both powerfully and elegantly.

## 1. The Problem of Art in Modernism

The Modernist period may be described as the time from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until World War II in which the



relationship of art to life became problematic as never before. Modernism affected literature, painting, and music particularly forcefully in German culture, both singly and in combination.

Among philosophers who laid the foundation of German Modernism, none played a more influential role than Nietzsche, who called for an "absolute skepticism toward all inherited concepts"<sup>2</sup> and an *Umwertung*, or transvaluation of values, whether in politics, ethics, religion, or art. This attitude spread throughout the arts, and led to more than a reaction against the traditions and institutions of the past: instead of further building on or reacting to previous conventions, Modernism designated a revolutionary break from the past which was characterized by intense self-awareness and questioning about the possibilities and validity of the means and forms previously used by artists, even to the point of declaring *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) in France and the asocial and amoral abstraction and detachment of art from life. Art should have no function to make human beings morally better, and beauty is to be understood as only a subjective "effect".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and H.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968) 409.

<sup>3</sup> Gregor Streim, *Das 'Leben' in der Kunst: Untersuchungen zur Ästhetik des frühen Hofmannsthal* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1996) 30-32.

The most self-consciously active and provocative of these revolutionary artists became known as the *avant-garde*.

In contrast, in his Theory of the Avant-Garde, Peter Bürger describes Modernism and the avant-garde as beginning at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Aestheticism and its "pure" detachment from life and recognition of the consequent "lack of social impact" of such art. He poses that art at this time entered a "stage of self-criticism" and criticism of its role as an institution, a development which made an "objective understanding" of the past periods of art possible and which discovered the "progressive detachment of art from real life contexts" and thus also the need for artists to somehow "reintegrate art into the praxis of life."<sup>4</sup>

In Germany, Modernism developed in this more purposeful direction. Instead of simply declaring that art was empty except for subjective meaning, various artists and philosophers, above all Wagner and Nietzsche, developed the idea that modern life was infected by an excessive intellectualism which not only separated scholarship and art from life but was even hostile to it,<sup>5</sup> a trend that had begun with the emphasis by Socrates and Plato on form and

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 22-23.

<sup>5</sup> Reiss, Hans, The Writer's Task from Nietzsche to Brecht (London: The

on the intellect over the body. The task of the modern artist, then, was to find a way to reconcile art with life.

According to Nietzsche, the greatness and power that art had in the unity of life and art in the stage tragedies of Ancient Greece was lost after the *Kunsttriebe* of Dionysus and Apollo, i.e., irrationality and rationality, chaos and order, were divided from each other. He states in Die Geburt der Tragödie:

Im Gegensatz zu allen denen, welche beflissen sind, die Künste aus einem einzigen Prinzip, als dem notwendigen Lebensquell jedes Kunstwerks abzuleiten, halte ich den Blick auf jene beiden künstlerischen Gottheiten der Griechen, Apollo und Dionysus, geheftet und erkenne in ihnen die lebendigen und anschaulichen Repräsentanten zweier in ihren tiefsten Wesen und ihren höchsten Zielen verschiedenen Kunstwelten. Apollo steht vor mir, als der verklärende Genius des principii individuationis, durch den allein die Erlösung im Scheine wahrhaft zu erlangen ist: während unter dem mystischen Jubelruf des Dionysus der Bann der Individuation zersprengt wird und der Weg zu den Müttern des Seins, zu dem innersten Kern der Dinge offen liegt.<sup>6</sup>

Apollo represents the individual intellect, order, and harmony, and it triumphs over and gives form to the primordial, dream-filled, chaotic content of life--and of the individual unified with all life--in Dionysus. Apollo is the *logos* which appeals to reason and the intellect, and

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Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978) 14.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke in zwölf Bänden*, Bd. 1: Die Geburt der Tragödie, Der griechische Staat (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1964) 132.

Dionysus is intoxication and music which appeals to the emotions. Although Apollo would seem to be superior, this is not actually the case, as both are needed for art to truly relate to life, and Apollo is only the God of ordered semblance and appearance, while Dionysus is the God of life and creation itself.

Nietzsche further theorized as to why both are needed: their combination in art functions to make life bearable by presenting a beautified semblance of our "Existenz selbst der 'schlechtesten Welt'":

Hier zeigt sich das Dionysische, an dem Apollinischen gemessen, als die ewige und ursprüngliche Kunstgewalt, die überhaupt die ganze Welt der Erscheinung ins Dasein ruft: in deren Mitte ein neuer Verklärungsschein nötig wird, um die belebte Welt der Individuation im Leben festzuhalten. Könnten wir uns eine Menschwerdung der Dissonanz denken--und was ist sonst der Mensch? -- so würde diese Dissonanz, um leben zu können, eine herrliche Illusion brauchen, die ihr einen Schönheitsschleier über ihr ganzes Wesen decke. Dies ist die wahre Kunstabsicht des Apollo: in dessen Namen wir alle jene zahllosen Illusionen des schönen Scheins zusammenfassen, die in jedem Augenblick das Dasein überhaupt lebenswert machen und zum Erleben des nächsten Augenblicks drängen.<sup>7</sup>

However, since life is also only a "world of appearances": what great art shows us is also something *that* may be called "real" life:

Denn dass es im Leben wirklich so tragisch

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche 189-190.

zugeht, würde am wenigsten die Entstehung einer Kunstform erklären; wenn anders die Kunst nicht nur Nachahmung der Naturwirklichkeit, sondern gerade ein metaphysisches Supplement der Naturwirklichkeit ist, zu deren Überwindung neben sie gestellt. Der tragische Mythos, sofern er überhaupt zur Kunst gehört, nimmt auch vollen Anteil an dieser metaphysischen Verklärungsabsicht der Kunst überhaupt: was erklärt er aber, wenn er die Erscheinungswelt unter dem Bilde des leidenden Helden vorführt? Die "Realität" dieser Erscheinungswelt am wenigsten, denn er sagt uns gerade: "Seht hin! Seht genau hin! Dies ist eure Daseinsuhr!"<sup>8</sup>

But for some the modern skepticism over meaning and the "reality" of perception led not to a view of art as "metaphysical supplement" to reality, itself also "real", but to a *Wirklichkeitskrise* concerning the possibility of knowledge and meaning, and to an intense, even willful subjectivity in art. For instance, Gottfried Benn wrote that "there is no outer reality, there is only human consciousness, constantly building, modifying, building new worlds out of its own creativity."<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche's oft-quoted declaration of the "death of God" left meaning either up to the individual or else non-existent. According to Irving Howe, this view

cultivates, in Thomas Mann's phrase, "a sympathy for the abyss." It strips man of his systems of belief and his ideal claims, and then proposes the one uniquely modern style of salvation: a salvation of, by, and for the self. In modernist

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<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche 151.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in: Irving Howe, The Idea of the Modern (New York: Horizon Press, 1967) 15.

culture, the object perceived seems always on the verge of being swallowed up by the perceiving agent, and the act of perception in danger of being exalted to the substance of reality.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, in an era that included technological developments such as photography, art was no longer needed for objective realism; it was necessarily freed and even forced to explore previously unconsidered possibilities for depiction and expression.

This led to innovations which attempted to abandon traditional means and forms of aesthetic representation from the past and to experiment and shock with new forms and subjects, thus with the hope of also beginning an *Umwertung* of how to experience and understand art. Instead of aiming at realistic representation and meaning in a conventional sense through the intellect which is determined by, for example, verbal mediums such as words, art should reconnect to life by communicating in a more abstract, primitive way to the emotions or to a kind of pre-lingual, even subconscious level of understanding that appeals through multiple senses--and even across senses--through sound, color, light, form, and movement.

## 1 - 1. Modernism in Music, Painting, and Literature

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<sup>10</sup> Howe 14.

According to Christopher Butler, it is this "conceptual interrelationship between innovations" across the various forms of art that made Modernism revolutionary. In music, for example, Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern composed in twelve-tone note rows which ignored traditional notions of harmony and meaning. Schönberg also pioneered the *Speechstimme* technique of half-spoken singing. He composed an opera, Die glückliche Hand (1911), whose aim was "the utmost unreality" (i.e., anti-realism) and attempted the "renunciation of any conscious thought, any conventional plot":

The whole thing should have the effect (not of a dream) but of chords. Of music. It must never suggest symbols, or meaning, or thoughts, but simply the play of colors and forms. Just as music never drags a meaning around with it, at least not in the form in which it [music] manifests itself, even though meaning is inherent in its nature, so too this should simply be like sounds for the eye, and so far as I am concerned everyone is free to think or feel something similar to what he thinks or feels while writing music.<sup>11</sup>

Namely the reader, viewer, or listener is not expected to receive an objective communication, but should subjectively produce "something similar."

In painting, Vincent Van Gogh used bold strokes of color that seemed to "overpower the definition of

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold Schönberg, quoted in: Butler 87.

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold Schönberg, quoted in: Butler 87.



objects,"<sup>12</sup> according to Butler, and depict the world through his inner experience, and Pablo Picasso went even further with depictions that defied traditional uses of space, sometimes with a simultaneous view of an object or figure from more than one side, or else from multiple moments in time.

Wassily Kandinsky may be considered to be the most radically modernist painter by being the first to produce radically abstract, non-representational painting in 1910, emphasizing instead the basic elements of point, line, and color over realism. He also aggressively crossed the boundaries of artistic medium and meaning, often calling paintings "compositions", and extending himself beyond painting to writing a play in 1912 (one year after Schönberg's), Der gelbe Klang (The Yellow Sound), that had almost no words, but plenty of movement, light, color, and sound, plus a volume of woodcuts and poetry entitled Klänge (Sounds), and also various articles and books presenting his theories on the meaning and intensifying effect of combinations of color, movement, and sound.

In German literature at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the artist's crisis appeared as a challenge to tradition in

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Butler, Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900-1916 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 37.

two main forms: firstly in a *Sprachskepsis* or even a *Sprachkrise*--a skepticism and even crisis about the ability of art to convey experience through human language--and secondly in the questioning of Classical and Romantic ideas about the activity of artists themselves and the meaning of beauty and its role as a source of inspiration. The most extreme form of the former may be found in the Dadaists' avant-garde, irrational use of words, i.e. their *Lautgedichte* made of nonsense words which were meant to draw attention to the limits of language.

Similarly to Nietzsche, Fritz Mauthner in his Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache (1901-1903) expressed a radical skepticism about the limiting effect of language on human knowledge and the perception of experience. Language is a "Sprachschreck, ein Schrecken über das absurde Ungeheuer der Sprache" and a "Traumbuch der armen wortgläubigen Menschheit"<sup>13</sup>, an "elendes Erkenntniswerkzeug", that is "wertlos für unsere Erkenntnis der Wirklichkeit."<sup>14</sup> Later, in 1922, Ludwig Wittgenstein declared in his Tractatus logico-philosophicus that the tyrannical power of language makes knowledge of the world difficult because the

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<sup>13</sup> C.A.M.Noble, Sprachskepsis:über Dichtung der Modern (München: Edition Text u. Kritik, 1978) 24.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Eschenbach, "Fritz Mauthner und die Sprachkrise der Jahrhundertwende", Available <http://www.mauthner-gesellschaft.de/mauthner/fm/eschl.html>, May 2001.

*Erkenntnisproblem* is firstly a *Sprachproblem*.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Hugo von Hoffmannsthal's *Sprachkrise*

There are no known personal crises in Hofmannsthal's life that may be directly related to his preoccupation with the isolation of the artist and the artist's crisis in his writings. Even though it was sometimes assumed by contemporaries that he must have been going through a crisis of creativity that drew him to the figure of an artist who can't write, he himself was clearly able to overcome such an obstacle and write. One might rather say that he was suffering through a *Sprach- und Wirklichkeitskrise*, a crisis having to do with the mediating role of language in the perception and then communication of his experienced reality.<sup>16</sup>

His attention to the topic is perhaps due more to his personality and the spirit of the time in which he lived. Hofmannsthal was born in 1874 into a well-to-do family in Vienna during the winding down of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the rise of Bismarck's newly unified Germany. In 1873 the Viennese stock market had crashed, and the last

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<sup>15</sup> Noble, 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Mathias Mayer, Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Stuttgart; Weimar: Metzler, 1993) 1, and Hansgeorg Schmidt-Bergmann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Brief des Lord Chandos (Frankfurt am Main; Leipzig, 2000) 287.

quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw increasing insecurity and a general vacuum of values, resulting in feelings of dissatisfaction with the traditions of the past and in a ferment of political and economic ideas, even to the point of an end-time feeling and an anticipation of war. This of course was realized in the outbreak of World War I which also marked the final breakup of the Empire.

Hofmannsthal himself was a reflective, sensitive genius who began publishing poems at sixteen. A nervous, often depressed adult, he pondered on and reflected his times back to his world. Like Nietzsche, he feared that the valuelessness of *l'art pour l'art*, which was prominent not only in Paris but also in Vienna, could lead society into cultural decadence: the aesthete who creates beautiful effects but lacks the moral challenge of life and art is a stunted, lifeless artist and just an entertainer who neglects that art needs to have a further purpose or else it is empty.

However, as Reiss points out, the decadent condition of society would be due not only to the degradation of art to mere entertainment but also to the degeneration of life through language: if words are inadequate to their task, they are false and necessarily falsify everything expressed through them. Furthermore, thought is also suspect because

it too relies on language. Thus, our experience of reality, which is mediated by thought, is also unreliable and deceptive.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.1. Hofmannsthal and Modernism

Hofmannsthal may be said to have defined and established the modernist artist's crisis in German literature with his 1901/1902 work, Ein Brief, but he had already been reflecting on the meaning of Modernism and the crisis of artistic means for some years. In his essay Gabriele D'Annunzio (1893) he tries to explain his understanding of the new direction in literature as a turning away from an emphasis on the traditional devices of plot and character development, for which writers like Goethe and Shakespeare had been praised as geniuses, to instead a dissection of the subjective psychological states of individuals, their moods, their illusions, and in the world where science can analyze "reality" down to the atom, the analysis of even the smallest effects the world produces in them:

Was von Periode zu Periode in diesem geistigen Sinn "modern" ist, lässt sich leichter fühlen als definieren... Heute scheinen zwei Dinge "modern" zu sein: die Analyse des Lebens und die Flucht aus dem Leben. Gering ist die Freude an Handlung,

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<sup>17</sup> Reiss 50-54, 56, 66.

am Zusammenspiel der äußeren und inneren  
Lebensmächte, am Wilhelm-Meisterlichen  
Lebenlernen und am Shakespearischen Weltlauf. Man  
treibt Anatomie des eigenen Seelenlebens, oder  
man träumt. Reflexion oder Phantasie, Spiegelbild  
oder Traumbild. Modern sind alte Möbel und junge  
Nervositäten. Modern ist Paul Bourget und Buddha;  
das Zerschneiden von Atomen und das Ballspielen  
mit dem All; modern ist die Zergliederung einer  
Laune, eines Seufzers, eines Skrupels; und modern  
ist die instinktmäßige, fast somnambule Hingabe  
an jede Offenbarung des Schönen, an einen  
Farbenakkord, eine funkelnde Metapher, eine  
wundervolle Allegorie. (XI:149)<sup>18</sup>

These effects include not only impressions made by beauty  
and color, but also those produced by metaphor and  
allegory, i.e. words. But here, Hofmannsthal also goes  
beyond the traditional question of how and if art can  
relate to life to a consideration of how *life* can relate to  
life--"die Flucht aus dem Leben", which led him eventually,  
according to Reiss, to the question of the role of language  
in understanding and communicating the experience of these  
effects.

In a speech from 1896 entitled Poesie und Leben,  
Hofmannsthal was already expressing his doubts about words  
as adequate means for communication. Asked to give a talk  
about the current state of poetry, he gave an ironically  
long speech declaring that there was nothing he could say,  
because even names--simple signifiers--strike him as empty

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<sup>18</sup> All Hofmannsthal citations are from: Hugo von Hofmannsthal,

and worthless:

Ich müsste Ihnen allerdings verschweigen, dass mir die meisten Namen nichts, rein gar nichts sagen; ...dass ich ernsthaft erkannt zu haben glaube, dass man über die Künste überhaupt fast gar nicht reden soll, fast gar nicht reden kann, dass es nur das Unwesentliche und Wertlose an den Künsten ist, was sich der Beredung nicht durch sein stummes Wesen ganz von selber entzieht, und daß man desto schweigsamer wird, je tiefer man einmal in die Ingründe der Künste hineingekommen ist... (XI:260-261)

But this does not mean that the objects signified are themselves empty and worthless. Even if words themselves do not "speak" to him, outside objects, whether man-made or even nature itself, have a lively impact, even a Nietzschean *jasagen* to life and the many colors of its Apollo veil covering life's Dionysian chaos:

...Aber der Frühling draußen und die Stadt, in der wir leben, mit den vielen Kirchen und den vielen Gärten und den vielerlei Arten von Menschen, und das sonderbare, betrügerische, *jasagende* Element des Lebens kämen mir mit so vielen bunten Schleiern zu Hilfe, daß Sie glauben würden, ich habe mit Ihnen geopfert, wo ich gegen Sie geopfert habe, und mich loben würden.  
(XI:261)

Nevertheless, despite the intensity of effects, he still feels that between experience and expression there is necessarily an abyss of silence:

Alles Lob, das ich meinem Dichter spenden kann, wird Ihnen dürftig vorkommen; nur dünn und

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Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben. Bd. I: Gedichte, Lyrische Drama;  
Bd. XI: Prosa I; Bd. XII: Prosa II (Frankfurt am Main: S.Fischer: 1956)

schwach wird es über eine breite Kluft des Schweigens zu Ihnen hintönen. (XI:262)

The problem is the words themselves. They are merely a "weightless web" of sounds whose arrangement moves the hearer or reader to the remembrance of a fleeting psychological state:

Ich weiß nicht, ob Ihnen unter all dem ermüdenden Geschwätz von Individualität, Stil, Gesinnung, Stimmung und so fort nicht das Bewußtsein dafür abhanden gekommen ist, daß das Material der Poesie die Worte sind, daß ein Gedicht ein gewichtloses Gewebe aus Worten ist, die durch ihre Anordnung, ihren Klang und ihren Inhalt, indem sie die Erinnerung an Sichtbares und die Erinnerung an Hörbares mit dem Element der Bewegung verbinden, einen genau umschriebenen traumhaft deutlichen, flüchtigen Seelenzustand hervorrufen, den wir Stimmung nennen. (XI:263)

He depressingly states his opinion that there is no direct connection between art and life, nor between life and art. Words are impossibly lifeless. Nevertheless, words are all one has:

Die Worte sind alles, die Worte, mit denen man Geschehenes und Gehörtes zu einem neuen Dasein hervorrufen und nach inspirierten Gesetzen als in Bewegtes vorspiegeln kann. Es führt von der Poesie kein direkter Weg ins Leben, aus dem Leben keiner in die Poesie. Das Wort als Träger eines Lebensinhaltes und das traumhafte Bruderwort, welches in einem Gedicht stehen kann, streben auseinander und schweben fremd aneinander vorüber, wie die beiden Eimer eines Brunnens. Kein äußerliches Gesetz verbannt aus der Kunst alles Vernünfteln, alles Hadern mit dem Leben, jeden unmittelbaren Bezug auf das Leben und jede direkte Nachahmung des Lebens, sondern die einfache Unmöglichkeit: diese schweren Dinge



können dort ebenso wenig leben als eine Kuh in  
den Wipfeln der Bäume. (XI:263)

Following Nietzsche, Hofmannsthal saw the purpose of art as to appeal to the whole person by presenting a "unified" art as was supposed to exist in Ancient Greece. According to Reiss, he often quoted Robert Steele's dictum that "the whole man must move together", and thus the work of the poet as a "whole person" is to produce works whose value comes from the new combinations of words in a *form* that touches the relations between elements and emotions in the lives of the spectator, hearer, or reader as a whole person, and only then can the poet be said to create images that "turn life into words", and vice versa:<sup>19</sup>

...den Wert der Dichtung entscheidet nicht der Sinn (sonst wäre sie etwa Weisheit, Gelehrtheit), sondern die Form, das heißt durchaus nichts Äußerliches, sondern jenes tief Erregende in Maß und Klang, wodurch zu allen Zeiten die Ursprünglichen, die Meister sich von den Nachfahren, den Künstlern zweiter Ordnung unterschieden haben. (268)

Form is defined as an organization of the outward sound and mass of words. The understanding of the *Innigkeit* of words, however, cannot be given by the artist as long as the *Innigkeit* of life is not understood: words are something spiritual, hanging between "Gott und Geschöpf", and the best that the artist can do is to say not what something

is, but what it is not. Hofmannsthal ends the speech with this depressing statement: "Was das Meer ist, darum darf man am wenigsten die Fische fragen. Nur höchstens daß es nicht von Holz ist, erfährt man von ihnen." (XI:268)

## 2.2. The Artist's Language Crisis in Ein Brief

In Ein Brief, written in 1901 and published in 1902, Hofmannsthal uses a fictional character set in Renaissance England to work through his own beginning-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century Modernist struggles with the relationship--or rather the impossibility of the relationship--between vision, knowledge, and expression.

Hofmannsthal presents us with the figure of a certain Philipp Lord Chandos, younger son of the Earl of Bath, who writes a letter to Francis Bacon to try to explain and apologize for his inability to produce any kind of literary writing during the previous two years. Lord Chandos is a writer whose crisis begins after he had already achieved success and praise for his work while still a teenager, much like Hofmannsthal himself:

...bin denn ichs, der nun Sechszwanzigjährige,  
der mit neunzehn jenen "Neuen Paris", jenen  
"Traum der Daphne", jenes "Epithalamium"  
hinschrieb, diese unter dem Prunk ihrer Worte  
hintaumelnden Schäferspiele, deren eine

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<sup>19</sup> Reiss 56-59.

himmlische Königin und einige allzu nachsichtige  
Lords und Herren sich noch zu entsinnen gnädig  
genug sind? (XII:7)

His ability to produce and use words had been a wonder  
of talent and form, but now words seem so strange and  
foreign to him that it is as if he had never seen them  
before:

Und konnte ich... alle Spuren und Narben dieser  
Ausgeburts meines angespanntesten Denkens so  
völlig aus meinem unbegreiflichen Innern  
verlieren, daß mich in Ihrem Brief, ...der Titel,  
jenes kleinen Traktates fremd und kalt anstarrt,  
ja daß ich ihn nicht als ein geläufiges Bild  
zusammengefaßter Worte sogleich auffassen,  
sondern nur Wort für Wort verstehen konnte, als  
träten sie mir diese lateinischen Wörter, so  
verbunden, zum ersten Male vor's Auge? (XII:8)

He is suffering from a "sickness of his spirit" that  
shows him the impossibility of writing across a "bridgeless  
abyss". His writer's block had come as he was planning to  
write a history of King Henry VIII. His expectations were  
no less than to pour out a literary work that would be  
beyond a creative presentation of form, a creation of both  
poetry and truth itself and be as heartfelt as music, as  
perfect as mathematics, and true as life:

...Und aus dem Sallust floß in jenen glücklichen,  
belebten Tagen wie durch nie verstopfte Röhren  
die Erkenntnis der 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 Wahrheit zugleich, ein Widerspiel

ewiger Kräfte, ein Ding, herrlich wie Musik und Algebra. Dies war mein Lieblingsplan. (XII:9)

He had believed that he sensed in the fables and myths of ancient Greece and Rome the hieroglyphs of hidden truths about life, a "geheime, unerschöpfliche Weißheit"(XII:9) that had inspired other artists to paint and sculpt, and that could also inspire him to new achievements. He had pondered and longed to disappear into the antique world of both physical and intellectual inspiration, of both "die nackten, glänzenden Leiber" of the Sirens and the letters of Cicero and Julius Caesar and unite them in a Nietzschean fashion, then to return again with "Zungen", i.e., with the ability to articulate what he had experienced.

However, he then became so overcome by the experience that he could not communicate it. He has had a vision of life in which he saw all of nature as a unity in which there are no contradictions such as spirit and flesh, and every being in it as a "key" to the understanding of this whole, and himself in the middle of it. In this unity of reality, words became mere fragments that don't and can't hang together meaningfully. No wonder that he is unable to directly articulate this experience into language, either in thought or speech form:

Mein Fall ist, in Kürze, dieser: Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über

irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen. (XII:11)

Not only are words inadequate to express felt experience, Hofmannsthal gives a richly sense-affecting picture of how repulsive their inadequacy becomes. They are like decaying fungi, hopelessly formless, even if once useable, and now they are even disgusting as he tries to form them and feel them in his mouth.

...Ich empfand ein unerklärliches Unbehagen, die Worte "Geist", "Seele" oder "Körper" nur auszusprechen. ...sondern die abstrakten Worte, deren sich doch die Zunge naturgemäß bedienen muß, ...zerfielen mir im Munde wie modrige Pilze. (XII:11-12)

This crisis of expression then leads to a crisis about the ability to judge and to doubts about the certainty of knowledge in the world, until even his previous vision of unity crumbles into pieces, and the pieces into still smaller fragments:

Es gelang mir nicht mehr, sie 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. (XII:13)

He envisions an ultimate emptiness of words themselves, and they lose their connections to meaning and

even each other. They can do no more than mutely stare back at him like eyes when he confronts them. In this moment, language seems to him to be a formless abyss, leading to a lonely emptiness instead of a way to communicating meaning.

Unfortunately, the contemplation of the perfect harmonies of form in ancient Greece and Rome do not relieve this formless emptiness, but conjure up a picture of eyeless, lifeless statues in a garden, and leave him with a horrible feeling of loneliness. (XII:13) The words and the vision they represent, i.e., the "eyes" are gone, and communication is not possible.

However, when he overcomes and flees from this horrible state of lonely awareness he becomes himself an unnameable Dasein, a "being" who is ready to see life anew, although curiously not hardly any different from anyone else. But his artist's eyes then become overcome and he is again filled with a new way of seeing the world around him as a unity, even in single objects, and although he can hardly give his experience names, he nevertheless succeeds to describe it to a considerable extent by means of supposedly unreliable words:

...die Worte lassen mich wiederum im Stich. Denn es ist ja etwas völlig Unbenanntes und auch wohl kaum Benennbares, das in solchen Augenblicken,

irgendeine Erscheinung meiner alltäglichen  
Umgebung mit einer überschwellenden Flut höheren  
Lebens wie ein Gefäß erfüllend, mir sich  
ankündet.... Eine Gießkanne, eine auf dem Felde  
verlassene Egge, ein Hund in der Sonne, ein  
ärmlicher Kirchhof, ein Krüppel, ein kleines  
Bauernhaus, alles dies kann das Gefäß meiner  
Offenbarung werden. (XII:14)

It should be noted that the objects that are inspiring  
him as an artist, such as a watering can, a dog, a small  
farmhouse, a cripple, etc., are not perfect, beautiful  
platonic forms but the everyday objects of life--and death:  
after having poison spread for the rats in his cellar, the  
feeling of unity lets him see and feel their death  
struggles. This new vision also makes the life-and-death  
histories of ancient Greece and Rome come alive for him as  
if he were experiencing everything along with them, in a  
moment of both more and less than sympathy and empathy in  
which life and death, dreaming and waking run together  
(XII:15-16).

This vision is felt rather than thought. Mute objects  
are able to "speak" to him in a wordless but meaningful  
"language" of feeling that he somehow understands with his  
heart and that fills him with a feeling of seeing life in  
everything and a kind of divine love of unity with and for  
all things, alive or not, and his own body--or at least his  
heart--is composed of "ciphers" that unlock for him the

whole mystery of being:

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. Es erscheint mir  
alles, was meine verworrensten Gedanken berühren,  
etwas zu sein.... ich fühle ein entzückendes,  
schlechthin unendliches Widerspiel in mir und um  
mich, und es gibt unter den  
gegeneinanderspielenden Materien keine, in die  
ich nicht hinüberzufließen vermöchte. Es ist mir  
dann, als bestünde mein Körper aus lauter  
Chiffren, die mir alles aufschließen. Oder als  
könnten wir in ein neues, ahnungsvolles  
Verhältnis zum ganzen Dasein treten, wenn wir  
anfangen, mit dem Herzen zu denken. (XII:16-17)

The great irony of Ein Brief is that Hofmannsthal  
writes very powerfully and elegantly about the  
impossibility of writing, but a closer consideration shows  
that this is not a contradiction, as some maintain.<sup>20</sup>  
Knowledge is not the problem, nor is having a "vision"  
about life. The difficulty lies in how the artist--or  
anyone else--can cross the abyss and communicate his or her  
way of seeing life. The problem that depresses Hofmannsthal  
is not that one cannot write about something, but rather  
that the words themselves are potentially meaningless and  
useless because words express feelings that are mediated  
through thought, which in turn depends on language for its  
form, and thus both thought and expression necessarily lack



the richness and color of feeling.

Benjamin Bennett points out that "what Chandos had earlier *striven for* by intellect, he now *achieves* in the immediacy of experience," and claims that Hofmannsthal is asserting that there are two classes of people: those who can use their poetic vision and those who can't: the intellectual artist and the non-intellectual. Lord Chandos clearly belongs to the first group. The irony, according to Bennett, is that this poetic vision is something that aesthetes and "intellectuals strive for but can never attain," and that "the non-intellectual possesses *but can make no use of*," nor do they appreciate what they have, i.e., a "direct perception of the perfect wholeness of being." He then further states that Hofmannsthal "is concerned less with the agony of the intellectual than with the tragic discrepancy itself."<sup>21</sup>

The "agony of the intellectual" artist in crisis, along with the role of the everyday in the person and work of the artist, and the difference between artist and amateur as classes of people, are however central themes in various treatments of the *Künstlerproblematik* by Thomas Mann.

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Bennett 110.

<sup>21</sup> Bennett 111-113.

### 3. Thomas Mann and the Writer Who Can't Write

Thomas Mann also used the depiction of an artist in crisis in several of his works at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to explore the identity and problems of the artist and to overcome various doubts and concerns about art. His characters were often fictional but with semi-autobiographical elements, as with Tonio Kröger (1903) and Gustav von Aschenbach in Der Tod in Venedig (1912). In Schwere Stunde (1905), however, he presents a fictional treatment of a real writer whom he never names but is obviously Schiller. Mann uses this pillar of Classicism to explore his Modernist questions and to introduce the major motifs that he ponders at more length in the other texts.

For Mann, artists are people in life who "see" the world and themselves differently, and thus are necessarily lonely outsiders. They seek happiness but find inspiration in both extraordinary beauty and in ordinary objects, and also in both Eros and their own suffering, and these things are often connected and related somehow to their ability to create. Their need for self-understanding and for communicating their vision with others, however, can lead them instead into an abyss of formless feeling in which they are not able to produce.

### 3.1. The Artist in Crisis Defined: Schwere Stunde

The torment and frustration of a writer who can't write is familiar enough to anyone who has struggled with verbal expression, such as in Thomas Mann's imagining of Schiller in a middle-of-the-night writing crisis in Schwere Stunde<sup>22</sup>:

Er stand vom Schreibtisch auf, von seiner kleinen, gebrechlichen Schreibekommode, stand auf wie ein Verzweifelter und ging mit hängendem Kopfe in den entgegengesetzten Winkel des Zimmers zum Ofen... und schlechtes Wetter war über Jena seit Wochen, seit Wochen, das war richtig, ein miserables und hassenswertes Wetter, das man in allen Nerven spürte, wüst, finster und kalt, und der Dezemberwind heulte im Ofenrohr, verwahrlost und gottverlassen, daß es klang nach nächtiger Heide im Sturm und Irrsal und heillosem Gram der Seele. Aber gut war sie nicht, diese enge Gefangenschaft, nicht gut für die Gedanken und den Rhythmus des Blutes, aus dem die Gedanken kamen.... (418-419)

The burden of taking the unformed chaos of experience and expressing it in a communicable form is for him like imposing form on the sea, and yet it is at the same time a burden that, like the sea, is both horrible and irresistible:

Er stand am Ofen und blickte mit einem raschen und schmerzlich angestregten Blinzeln hinüber zu dem Werk, von dem er geflohen war, dieser Last, diesem Druck, dieser Gewissensqual, diesem Meer,

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<sup>22</sup> All citations are from: Thomas Mann, Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden, IX: Erzählungen (Berlin; Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1965)

das auszutrinken, dieser furchtbaren Aufgabe, die sein Stolz und sein Elend, sein Himmel und seine Verdammnis war. Es schleppte sich, es stockte, es stand--schon wieder, schon wieder! Das Wetter war schuld und sein Katarrh und seine Müdigkeit. Oder das Werk? Oder die Arbeit selbst? Die eine unglückselige und der Verzweiflung geweihte Empfängnis war? (418)

Such despair leads Mann's Schiller to an existential reflection about the source, process, purpose, and personal price of his writing, and he concludes that it is *Schmerz und Leiden* which fuels and feeds poetic *Leidenschaft* and which develops the ability to express what is experienced. Pain is not to be avoided, but a thing to be grateful for as a necessity for creation, i.e., a death out of which one creates life in art. Furthermore, it is both this struggle and this ability to name experience, i.e., put the experience into words, that combined together can save the artist from being overwhelmed by his or her vision:

Eine Nacht der flammenden Stimmung, da man auf einmal in einem genialisch leidenschaftlichen Lichte sah, was werden könnte, wenn man immer solcher Gnade genießen dürfte, mußte bezahlt werden mit einer Woche der Finsternis und der Lähmung... Der Schmerz... Wie das Wort ihm die Brust weitete! Er reckte sich auf, verschränkte die Arme; und sein Blick, unter den rötlichen, zusammenstehenden Brauen, beseelte sich mit schöner Klage. Man war noch nicht elend, ganz elend noch nicht, solange es möglich war, seinem Elend eine stolze und edle Benennung zu schenken. Eins war Not: Der gute Mut, seinem Leben große und schöne Namen zu geben! ...Glauben, an den Schmerz glauben können.... Das Talent selbst--war es nicht Schmerz? Und wenn das dort, das unselige

Werk, ihn Leiden machte, war es nicht in Ordnung  
so und fast schon ein gutes Zeichen? (421-422)

Amateur authors, i.e., those whose ability to bring  
form to their expression may come easier but ultimately may  
also be comparatively weak and ineffective, no matter how  
much or strongly they feel, do not experience this  
suffering as intensively as the developed artist:

Es hat noch niemals gesprudelt, und sein  
Misstrauen würde erst eigentlich beginnen, wenn  
er das täte. Nur bei Stümpern und Dilettanten  
sprudelt es, bei den Schnellzufriedenen und  
Unwissenden, die nicht unter dem Druck und der  
Zucht des Talents lebten. Denn das Talent, meine  
Herren und Damen dort unten, weithin im Parterre,  
das Talent ist nichts Leichtes, nichts  
Tändelndes, es ist nicht ohne weiteres ein  
Können. In der Wurzel ist es Bedürfnis, ein  
kritisches Wissen um das Ideal, eine  
Ungenügsamkeit, die sich ihr Können nicht  
ohne Qual erst schafft und steigert. Und den  
Größten, den Ungenügsamsten ist ihr Talent die  
schärfste Geißel. (422)

For Mann, the human quest for self-knowledge is  
eternal and leads to a search for the meaning of existence  
in general. This search is no less than the search for life  
itself, for knowledge of the self and knowledge of others,  
i.e., the world, and an understanding of the relationship  
between these opposing things. For developed artists, this  
is a more painful, painstaking search because they live  
more self-consciously and they try to create or rather re-  
create their understanding and impressions of life in an

expression that is a communicable form, but their experience may be more than the limits of the form can express.

Pain and suffering are however not the only sources of artistic vision for Mann. The pain-producing search for life and knowledge is also more specifically the search for love, beauty, happiness, and the feeling of being alive. It is to know and be known, to see beauty and to be seen as beautiful, and to love and to be loved, whether by a single person in a close relationship or by an adoring public. Mann describes Schiller jealously praising his own greatness and ability to suffer as well as egotistically longing for and justifying the love of his readers by his struggle to produce:

Gekannt sein--gekannt und geliebt von den Völkern  
der Erde! Schwatzet von Ichsucht, die ihr nichts  
weiß von der Süßigkeit dieses Traumes und  
Dranges! Ichsüchtig ist alles Außerordentliche,  
sofern es leidet.  
...Denn tiefer noch, als diese Ichsucht, lebte  
das Bewußtsein, sich dennoch bei alldem im  
Dienste vor irgend etwas Hohem, ohne Verdienst  
freilich, sondern unter einer Notwendigkeit,  
uneigennützig zu verzehren und aufzuopfern. Und  
dies war seine Eifersucht Daß niemand größer  
werde als er, der nicht auch tiefer als er um  
dieses Hohe gelitten. (422-423)

Mann associates inspiration with Glück (happiness), which in Schiller's mind is connected with his wife who is sleeping all the while that Schiller himself is awake and

musings over the meaning, purpose, and use of his suffering. Feminine muses and happiness through women's love have long been seen as sources of creative inspiration for (mainly male) artists. As Goethe writes at the end of *Faust II*,

Das Unbeschreibliche,  
Hier wird's getan;  
das Ewigweibliche  
Zieht uns hinan. (12108-12111)<sup>23</sup>

And yet Schiller also feels what is yet another paradox of the artist's production according to Mann: it is his closeness to her that makes his inspiration possible, and yet his inspiration prevents closeness, because artists' privileged vision requires a certain distance, even a *Verfremdung* (to use Brecht's term) from humanity which necessarily separates them from others.

Mein Weib! Geliebte! Folgtest du meiner Sehnsucht  
und tratest du zu mir, mein Glück zu sein?.... Und  
ich darf nicht allzusehr dein, nie ganz in dir  
sein, um dessentwillen, was meine Sendung ist....  
(425)

Schiller's wife cannot share his suffering, because she belongs to a different, more everyday level of experience of the world. She is a worldly muse, not an otherworldly one, who nevertheless feeds him with transcendent inspiration; a mortal object for his love, who also loves him, and out of this love he creates the "music"

in his soul from which he then forms words. After looking at her, he is able to begin to write again:

Wer schuf, wie er, aus dem Nichts, aus der eigenen Brust? War nicht als Musik, als reines Urbild des Seins ein Gedicht in seiner Seele geboren, lange bevor es sich Gleichnis und Kleid aus der Welt der Erscheinungen lieh? Geschichte, Weltweisheit, Leidenschaft: Mittel und Vorwände, nicht mehr, für etwas, was wenig mit ihnen zu schaffen, was seine Heimat in orphischen Tiefen hatte. Worte, Begriffe: Tasten nur, die sein Künstlertum schlug, um ein verborgenes Saitenspiel klingen zu machen... (424)  
...er ging und ergriff die Feder....  
Nicht ins Chaos hinabsteigen, sich wenigstens nicht dort aufhalten! Sondern aus dem Chaos, welches die Fülle ist, ans Licht emporheben, was fähig und reif ist, Form zu gewinnen. Nicht grübeln! Arbeiten! Begrenzen, ausschalten, gestalten, fertig werden.... (425)

Words and putting feeling into form thus becomes the way of salvation out of the chaos and abyss of feeling.

As the artist learns to visit the chaotic sea of human experience, and then observe it from within long enough to gain experience, but then also finds the means and the talent to observe it from without, he or she will be able to express the "music" of life, however fragmentary, and achieve the sought-after goal, i.e., knowledge and even happiness:

Und es wurde fertig, das Leidenswerk. Es wurde vielleicht nicht gut, aber es wurde fertig. Und als es fertig war, siehe, da war es auch gut. Und

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<sup>23</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust: eine Tragödie, Erster und zweiter Teil (Munich: dtv, 1997) 351.



aus seiner Seele, aus Musik und Idee, rangen sich neue Werke hervor, klingende und schimmernde Gebilde, die in heiliger Form die unendliche Heimat wunderbar ahnen ließen, wie in der Muschel das Meer saust, dem sie entfischt ist.(425)

Thus we see that in this short (only nine pages) but intensive text, Thomas Mann uses the writer Friedrich Schiller to explore his own understanding of the fundamental issues connected with being an artist and producing art, a device which he also uses in Tonio Kröger and in Der Tod in Venedig, among other works. His Schiller can be said to be an epitome of the artist in crisis, according to Mann's understanding of it. He uses the negative figure of a writer who can't write to positively understand what artists are, and how they do what they do.

For Mann, genuinely talented artists are different from other people not only in their ability to see but also in their ability to express themselves. They see the world differently; namely, they observe themselves and humanity with a greater sense of distance, but they are also then able to express their vision back to the world in various degrees and fragmentary bits through various means of sense media and communication, whether visual or aural, in paintings, music, writing, etc. The "ordinary" person does not reflect to the same degree and depth because this observational distance is lacking or lesser, and the

ability to put expression into form is weaker and less precise.

Difference creates distance and separateness from the everyday world, and separateness causes the desire for belonging to the ordinary and everyday, in spite of its ultimate impossibility. This is also the cause of suffering for the artist, and the degree of difference potentially parallels the depth of pain. But this pain also creates the desire for knowledge of the self and the world as well as an understanding of this separateness. Thus difference and separateness are also the very thing that makes possible the artist's privileged perspective, and thus also the source of artistic satisfaction and achievement.

The need for inspiration leads not only to a search for knowledge, but also "beauty" of form, by which may be meant both the elegant simplicity of the ordinary as well as the purity of form. Thus, even works with "ugly" content may be nevertheless beautiful if their form is well-ordered.

This need and longing often involves a longing for love which is usually depicted as somehow impossible, and thus the source of even more deep suffering and inspiration. But this poses yet another question: why does the artist so often find love and beauty necessary for

inspiration? I propose that the following examples from Tonio Kröger and Der Tod in Venedig will show that it has a function that is directly related to the search for self-knowledge and knowledge of the world, and a connection between the artist's knowledge and the need to share this knowledge.

### 3.2. The Artist and Art That Lives: Tonio Kröger

The nature of the genuine artist and of artistic production is the central theme of Mann's 1905 short story Tonio Kröger. The story presents a writer who is the product of both the blond North and the dark South, with all the things these regions symbolize, much like Mann himself. It begins with his childhood and the events and personalities that influenced him, including his affection for a blond boy and an unrequited love for a blond girl in school. The story then moves to the studio of his painter-girlfriend Lisaweta in Munich where he discusses with her his musings about the nature of art and artists. It continues with his lonely journey to the North, including a trip to his childhood (in many senses,) and ends with his letters to Lisaweta about his experiences and further thoughts about art.

Tonio learns early as a teenager that he is different.

His darkness not only makes him look different from the others, he is different because he sees differently and has different interests. Unlike the other children, he is obsessed with literature, writes poetry, and he observes and reflects on the world from this perspective of difference which aids the development of his artist's eye. He also suffers wordlessly because of his love for blond, blue-eyed "normal" people like Hans and Inge who do not or cannot share his interests and vision. However it is this very suffering that is both the source of his inspiration and the thing that makes him confront and question the meaning of the world and himself in it--a process which also makes him happy:

Tonio sprach nicht. Er empfand Schmerz.  
...Die Sache war die, daß Tonio Hans Hansen liebte und schon vieles um ihn gelitten hatte. Wer am meisten liebt, ist der Unterlegene und muß leiden, --diese schlichte und harte Lehre hatte seine vierzehnjährige Seele bereits vom Leben entgegengenommen; und er war so geartet, daß er solche Erfahrungen wohl vermerkte, sie gleichsam innerlich aufschrieb und gewissermaßen seine Freude daran hatte... Auch war es so mit ihm bestellt, daß er solche Lehren weit wichtiger und interessanter achtete als die Kenntnisse, die man in der Schule aufnötigte, ja, daß er sich während der Unterrichtsstunden in den gotischen Klassengewölben meistens damit abgab, solche Einsichten bis auf Grund zu empfinden und völlig auszudenken. Und diese Beschäftigung bereitete ihm eine ganz ähnliche Genugtuung, wie wenn er mit seiner Geige [...] in seinem Zimmer umherging... (205-206)

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The blond Hans Hansen won't understand Schiller's Don Carlos, even if he does actually read it as Tonio hopes, but Tonio is also somehow content to leave him in the world of horse books that he prefers:

Hans würde Don Carlos lesen, und dann würden sie etwas miteinander haben, [...]vielleicht brachte er ihn noch dazu, Verse zu schreiben?... Nein, nein das wollte er nicht! Hans sollte nicht werden wie Tonio, sondern bleiben, wie er war, so hell und stark, wie alle ihn liebten und Tonio am meisten! Aber daß er Don Carlos las, würde trotzdem nicht schaden... Und Tonio ging durch das alte, untersetzte Tor, ging am Hafen entlang und die steile, zugige und nasse Giebelgasse hinauf zum Haus seiner Eltern. Damals lebte sein Herz; Sehnsucht war darin und schwermütiger Neid und ein klein wenig Verachtung und eine ganze keusche Seligkeit. (213)

As an adult, Tonio becomes an artist, and suffers, but realizes like Schiller in Schwere Stunde that suffering and "death" to an average existence are inspiration for art, because "gute Werke nur unter dem Druck eines schlimmen Lebens entstehen... wer lebt, nicht arbeitet, und daß man gestorben sein muß, um ganz ein Schaffender zu sein." (224)

He adopts the life of an artist wholeheartedly and dedicates himself to the power of the intellect and the word, a power which he holds for "die erhabenste auf Erden" because it permits him to have a vision of no less than humanity and the world, including himself, "enthroned" above "unbewußten und stummen Leben", and allows him to see

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beyond language:

Sie schärfte seinen Blick und ließ ihn die großen Wörter durchschauen, die der Menschen Busen blähen, sie erschloß ihm der Menschen Seelen und seine eigene, machte ihn hellsehend und zeigte ihm das Innere der Welt und alles Letzte, was hinter den Worten und Taten ist. (222)

Like Nietzsche, he feels that although his vision and talent set him apart from the rest of life and humanity, the joy that art brings is the only thing that makes life bearable:

Da kam, mit der Qual und dem Hochmut der Erkenntnis, die Einsamkeit, weil es im Kreise der Harmlosen mit dem fröhlich dunklen Sinn nicht litt.... Aber mehr und mehr versüßte sich ihm auch die Lust am Worte und der Form, denn er pflegte zu sagen (und hatte es auch bereits aufgeschrieben, daß die Erkenntnis der Seele allein unfehlbar trübsinnig machen würde, wenn nicht die Vergnügungen des Ausdrucks uns wach und munter erhielten.... (222)

As his girlfriend works at her painting, he muses aloud on the nature of art and artists: "Aber was ist der Künstler? Vor keiner Frage hat die Bequemlichkeit und Erkenntnisträgheit der Menschheit sich zäher erwiesen als vor dieser." (230) Artists need detachment from life and humanity in order to impose form on life and thus produce art, live-filled art, but they also need feelings and experience of life in order to have living content for their form. Tonio admits to Lisaweta that despite his differentness, he necessarily loves ordinary life because



he is a writer of literature, and so should any real  
artist:

Nicht als eine Vision von blutiger Größe und  
wilder Schönheit, nicht als das Ungewöhnliche  
stellt es uns Ungewöhnlichen sich dar; sondern  
das Normale, Wohlanständige und Liebenswürdige  
ist das Reich unserer Sehnsucht, ist das Leben in  
seiner verführerischen Banalität! Der ist noch  
lange kein Künstler, meine Liebe, dessen letzte  
und tiefste Schwärmerei das Raffinierte,  
Exzentrische und Satanische ist, der die  
Sehnsucht nicht kennt nach dem Harmlosen,  
Einfachen und Lebendigen, nach ein wenig  
Freundschaft, Hingebung, Vertraulichkeit und  
menschlichem Glück - die verstohlene und zehrende  
Sehnsucht, Lisaweta, nach den Wonnen der  
Gewöhnlichkeit! (235)

But artists also suffer from their vision--what Tonio  
calls "Erkenntnisekel" (knowledge-sickness): "der Zustand,  
in dem es dem Menschen genügt, eine Sache durchschauen, um  
sich bereits zum Sterben angewidert... zu fühlen." (233)

What the artist sees is sometimes too much. And thus words  
become the artists' way to relieve themselves of the burden  
of their vision and their feelings. (234)

Still stalled in his work by his ponderings about life  
and art and artists, Tonio decides to have a change of  
scene by traveling north to the city of his childhood and  
then beyond to Denmark. His strange experiences with trying  
to prove his identity to the authorities in his own  
hometown, where his home has been turned into a library and  
his only identification is his corrected manuscript of

text-in-progress, plus a coincidental confrontation with the sight of Hans and Inge, the blond, blue-eyed "ordinary" people he had adored in childhood, prompt him to write Lisaweta a letter filled with further observations on the nature of the artist's love of life, which he compares to the divine love for humanity mentioned in I Corinthians 13:

Ich stehe zwischen ywei Welten, bin in keiner daheim und habe es infolgedessen ein wenig schwer ...Ich bewundere die Stolzen und Kalten, die auf den Pfaden der großen, der dämonischen Schönheit abenteuernd und den „Menschen“ verachten, - aber ich beneide sie nicht. Denn wenn irgendetwas imstande ist, aus einem Literaten einen Dichter zu machen, so ist es diese meine Bürgerliebe zum Menschlichen, Lebendigen und Gewöhnlichen. Alle Wärme, alle Güte, aller Humor kommt aus ihr, und fast will mir scheinen, als sei sie jene Liebe selbst, von der geschrieben steht, daß einer mit Menschen- und Engelszungen reden könne und ohne sie doch nur ein tönendes Erz und eine klingende Schelle sei. (271)

Without this love of life, the artist's work is but lifeless, empty form.

### 3.3. The Artist and Eros in the Word: Der Tod in Venedig

Thomas Mann further explores the nature of inspiration in Der Tod in Venedig (1912) by illustrating the decline and death of the writer Gustav von Aschenbach as he attempts to overcome his writer's block and is confronted by his imbalance as an artist. This imbalance is due to a Nietzschean overemphasis on order, cool intellect and

Apollo, i.e., the things that have trained his talent for form and a suppression of life and earthly feeling, i.e. Dionysus. His attempt to overcome this imbalance by awakening Eros in his ordered life, and then also in his writing, will lead to losing himself mentally and eventually to his contracting of cholera and his physical degradation and destruction.

Like Mann himself, Gustav von Aschenbach is a writer whom society has praised as a master of language, his phrasing and word choice earning his works a pedestal position in the schools as examples of writing. He is a man who is used to expressing himself through words and has been praised and honored for his talent and perfection of form.

As a young artist he had been rash and lively, and he had cynically questioned the meaning of art itself:

Er hatte dem Geiste gefrönt, mit der Erkenntnis  
Raubbau getrieben, Saatfrucht vermahlen,  
Geheimnisse preisgegeben, das Talent verdächtigt,  
die Kunst verraten... durch seine Zynismen über  
das fragwürdige Wesen der Kunst, des Künstlertums  
selbst in Atem gehalten. (465-466)

But as a mature artist he had learned to put "sympathy with the abyss" of feeling behind him and concentrate on producing art distinguished by dignity, mastery of form, and a care with phrasing that eventually earned him the

noble addition of "von" to his name and put his works on mandatory academic reading lists:

War es eine geistige Folge dieser "Wiedergeburt", dieser neuen Würde und Strenge, daß man um dieselbe Zeit ein fast übermäßiges Erstarken seines Schönheitssinnes beobachtete, jene adelige Reinheit, Einfachheit und Ebenmäßigkeit der Formgebung, welche seinen Produktion fortan ein so sinnfälliges, ja gewolltes Gepräge des Meisterlichkeit und Klassizität verlieh? (466-467)

As the story begins, however, his inability to find inspiration and to write, plus a mysterious and symbol-laden, sensuous dream, lead him to decide to travel south to Venice for a change of scene, the opposite direction of Tonio Kröger. However, this journey also turns out to be an experience that challenges his identity as an artist, although toward death instead of toward life. But where Tonio Kröger survives and finds himself on his trip, Aschenbach loses himself as a man and as an artist and dies.

At his hotel in Venice he sees a Polish mother and her children, among whom is an unusually pretty boy named Tadzio. Aschenbach is struck by the statue-like physical perfection of the boy, and finds himself more and more out of control in his need to follow the boy around Venice in order to observe his beauty, feel love for him, and be inspired by this love. Aschenbach even lets himself be

talked into dying his hair and wearing makeup and more youthful clothing in the hopes of being pleasing to his object, something his former sense of dignity would have never allowed.

Nevertheless, in spite of his feelings he cannot bring himself to speak with the boy nor have any real contact except glances. He is in the grip of an infatuation such that even when he knows that Venice is hiding from the tourists the fact that cholera is spreading, he does not warn the others as he can neither bear the thought that Tadzio's family might leave nor can he leave himself, even to save his life, as long as Tadzio is still there.

His justification for his actions is that this exposure to beauty will put "Eros in the word" and not only enable him to write, but even inspire him to produce works which will surpass what he had previously achieved by incorporating thought into feeling and feeling into thought:

Und zwar ging sein Verlangen dahin, in Tadzios Gegenwart zu arbeiten, beim Schreiben den Wuchs des Knaben zum Muster zu nehmen, seinen Stil den Linien dieses Körpers folgen zu lassen, der ihm göttlich schien, und seine Schönheit ins Geistige zu tragen, wie der Adler einst den troischen Hirten zum Äther trug. Nie hatte er die Lust des Wortes süßer empfunden, nie so gewusst, daß Eros im Worte sei, wie während der gefährlich köstlichen Stunden, in denen er, an seinem rohen Tische unter dem Schattentuch, im Angesicht des

Idols und die Music seiner Stimme im Ohr...  
Sonderbare Stunden! Sonderbar entnervende Mühe!  
Seltsam zeugender Verkehr des Geistes mit einem  
Körper! Als Aschenbach seine Arbeit verwahrte und  
vom Strande aufbrach, fühlte er sich erschöpft,  
ja zerrüttet, und ihm war, als ob sein Gewissen  
wie nach einer Ausschweifung Klage führe. (504-  
505)

But as a lifelong devotee of perfection of form he is  
overwhelmed by his inability to bring order to his passion:  
he gives in to his feelings and follows the boy and his  
family around Venice, helpless to stop himself, until he  
eventually contracts cholera--perhaps from decaying,  
infested strawberries, symbolic of the decay of both  
Aschenbach and Venice itself. He has another dream which is  
literally an orgy of Dionysian symbolism, after which he  
acknowledges and gives in to his loss of Apollo, and he  
dies later while sitting on the beach, observing Tadzio,  
and daydreaming--or perhaps hallucinating--about Plato's  
dialog with Phaedrus about the dangers of the abyss of  
feeling for the artist. He has spent his life in art, but  
both he and his art have lost their connection to life and  
they cannot regain balance.

Christopher Butler points out that Der Tod in Venedig  
is a modernist work not only because of its Expressionist  
emphasis on psychological states and its presentation of a  
Nietzschean confrontation between Dionysus and Apollo, but

also because of Mann's use of ambiguity of voice and hidden quotation, such as in the Plato conversations, which Mann slightly reworks for his own purposes. Which ideas are Plato's and which are Aschenbach's own thoughts is sometimes not clear. It "dramatizes the divided consciousness" by having the "self split off from its 'own' voice, and the language of citation takes over."<sup>24</sup> Aschenbach can't even find words of his own.

Of course, Hofmannsthal and Mann were not the only writers to pursue the language and inspiration issues of the *Künstlerproblematik*. Lord Chandos could have penned this poem by Ernst Stadler:

In einem alten Buche stieß ich auf ein Wort, das  
traf mich wie ein Schlag und brennt durch meine  
Tage fort:  
Und wenn ich mich an trübe Lust vergebe,  
Schein, Lug und Spiel zu mir anstatt des Wesens  
hebe,  
Als wäre Dunkles klar, als wenn nicht Leben  
tausend wild verschlossene Tore trüge,  
Und Dinge fasse, deren Sein mich niemals  
aufgewühlt,  
Wenn mich willkommner Traum mit Sammethänden  
streicht,  
Und Tag und Wirklichkeit von mir entweicht,  
Der Welt entfremdet, fremd dem tiefsten Ich,  
Dann steht das Wort mir auf: Mensch, werde  
wesentlich!<sup>25</sup>

And Gustav von Aschenbach might as well have written Stadler's poem "Form ist Wollust" during his struggle to

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<sup>24</sup> Butler 98-99.

balance order and feeling:

Form und Riegel mußten erst zerspringen,  
Welt durch aufgeschlossene Röhren dringen:  
Form ist Wollust, Friede, himmlisches  
Genügen,  
Doch mich reißt es, Ackerschollen  
umzupflügen.  
Form will mich verschnüren und verengen,  
Doch will ich mein Sein in alle Weiten  
drängen -  
Form ist klare Härte ohn' Erbarmen,  
Doch mich reibt es zu den Dumpfen, zu den  
Armen,  
Und in grenzenlosem Michverschenken  
Will mich Leben mit Erfüllung tränken.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Modern and Postmodern Alternatives to the Word

Language orders and gives form to feeling, and it makes thought and communicative expression possible. However, other mediums, such as music or color or movement, are also able to communicate and be expressive, and are more directly communicative than words alone. This fact was not overlooked by modern artists, and some tried to reinforce or strengthen their art by employing multiple forms. Others attempted to even replace words with other media.

##### 4.1. Music and Words

Music is perhaps the first means that comes to mind

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<sup>25</sup> Dietrich Bode, ed., Gedichte des Expressionismus (Stuttgart: Reclam,



when thinking about alternative ways to communicate. The power of music as a tool to affect people has been acknowledged and warned against since at least the time of Socrates, and today some music forms such as rap are blamed for youth violence and immorality and even the corruption of society in general. Much myth and mystery surrounds the power of music, and objectively one can only observe that it does somehow touch people more directly in ways that words, or words alone, do not.

#### 4.1.1. Wagner and the Multi-Medium Gesamtkunstwerk

One of Nietzsche's inspirations for his theories of art was, of course, the composer Richard Wagner.

Wagner had hoped to revolutionize the opera stage with his *Gesamtkunstwerke* in which he was composer, librettist, and stage director, presenting Germanic myths in a way he believed would make art again a "medium of life" and thus restore the function of stage art that had been developed in ancient Greece but lost by the time of modern, "decadent" society.<sup>27</sup> Music and words would support each other and the result would be a more affecting, effective work. As he states in Art and Revolution:

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1966) 44.

<sup>26</sup> Bode 46.

<sup>27</sup> Streim 37.

The deeds of Gods and men, their sufferings, their delights, as they,--in all solemnity and glee, as eternal rhythm, as eternal harmony of every motion and of all creation,--lay disclosed in Apollo himself; here they became actual and true. For all that in them moved and lived, as it moved and lived in the beholders, here found its perfect expression; where eye and ear, as soul and heart, lifelike and actual, seized and perceived all, and saw all in spirit and in body revealed; so that the imagination need no longer vex itself with the attempt to conjure up the image. Such a tragedy-day was a Feast of the God; for here the god spoke clearly and intelligibly forth, and the poet, as high-priest, stood real and embodied in his artwork, led the measures of the dance, raised voices to a choir, and in ringing words proclaimed the utterances of godlike wisdom.

Such was the Grecian work of art; such their god Apollo, incarnated in actual, living art; such was the Grecian people in its highest truth and beauty.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.1.2. Benjamin Britten's Opera Death in Venice

The difference between music and words as mediums may be illustrated by Britten's musical setting of Thomas Mann's Der Tod in Venedig. As already mentioned, Mann was famous for his extraordinary use of language and choice of words, and his novella is a deep, complex, multi-layered work, and thus any attempt to write an opera based on it would seem to somehow disfigure the story or possibly result in a quite different work. But I think that it is a

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<sup>28</sup> Wagner, Richard, The Artwork of the Future and Other Works, trans. William Ashton Ellis. (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) 33.

testament to Britten's talent that the more familiar you are with Mann's novella and the music forms that Britten employs, the more you can appreciate and marvel at this operatic setting of it.

The addition of music in the opera Death in Venice brings a richness and directness to Thomas Mann's story that the text alone cannot produce, and yet also manages to stay very true to Mann. The novella is expressionistic in that it emphasizes the psychological states and disintegration of the main character, and it has a plot that mostly concerns his reactions and self-analysis. Much of the action in the story consists of the articulated and unspoken feelings, longings, and experiences within Aschenbach's own mind, and in the opera these are often conveyed through wordless passages of music. Furthermore, Britten's smaller orchestra sound and sparse orchestration conveys the solitariness of Aschenbach's lonely thoughts.

Because Mann depicts Venice as a complex, deceptive place, dissonance and "tonal ambiguity",<sup>29</sup> with polytonal and semitonal<sup>30</sup> harmonies fit its musical description very well--something that words could not begin to accomplish.

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<sup>29</sup> Eric Roseberry, "Tonal Ambiguity in Death in Venice: A Symphonic View" in: Donald Mitchell, ed., Death in Venice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 86.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1979) 531.



The conflicting, contrary situation of Venice is implied by the mixed meters of the overture, often changing at each bar: 5/4 - 4/4 - 6/4 - 5/4 - 4/4 - 5/4 - 2/4 - 4/4 - 6/4 - 5/4 - 3/4 - 4/4 - 2/4...<sup>31</sup> Throughout the piece Britten slips in and out of traditional tonality, sometimes employing Schönberg's twelve-tone row technique. Also, there is often no key signature, and sometimes he mixes modes,<sup>32</sup> with the orchestral line in one key and the vocal line in another.

The multi-medium influence of Wagner and Modernism is shown by the importance of the orchestra vs. text in telling the story, the frequent blur between aria and recitative, and the use of leitmotifs instead of verbal descriptions representing various people, things, places and emotions that are important to the piece, e.g. "Tadzio", "plague", Venice ("La Serenissima"), "longing" and "canker". The "canker" motif is a *basso ostinato*, repeating itself over and over again in order to convey Aschenbach's increasingly obsessive and deteriorating state of mind as he follows the Polish family around Venice. Later in the story, all the notes of the Tadzio motif are

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<sup>31</sup> Britten 35-37.

<sup>32</sup> Evans 533.

played at once as a tone cluster in order to indicate Aschenbach's panic that Tadzio might leave the area.

Furthermore, there is the *Gesamtkunstwerk*-like addition of visuals, in this case dance. To reinforce the other elements and to emphasize the differentness and heightened grace of Tadzio and his family, they are all portrayed by dancers rather than singers. To still further emphasize their separateness from Aschenbach, Britten uses the Western equivalent of a Balinese gamelan-tuned percussion orchestra to play their motifs, and "Tadzio" is even based on a Balinese mode. By thus casting ballet dancers in main roles, Britten raised dance in opera from a kind of sideshow "to a new formal, dramatic and expressive status".<sup>33</sup> This Eastern element also serves to give (what is to Western ears) an aura of exotic beauty, separate and rare, which was precisely the effect he wanted to achieve.

Britten also excels at other musical effects in the opera. We hear impressions not only of the bells of Venice's churches, but also the rowing of the gondolas, the lilt of their movement and the little waves lapping against them. We hear the gentle little breezes (a woodwind motif of two chords) and the oppressive, plague-filled wind (with

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<sup>33</sup> Mervyn Cooke, "Britten and the Gamelan: Balinese Influence in Death in Venice" in: Mitchell 115, 119, 121.

tuba). We even hear the snipping of the hotel barber's scissors in mincing woodwind notes.

But Britten's musically descriptive talent goes even further than effects and impressions and feelings; sometimes music even replaces the words from the novella. To those familiar with the text, hearing the orchestral introduction to Aschenbach's Dionysian nightmare at the end of the story is to also hear the words of the correlative passage in the narrative: "In dieser Nacht hatte er einen furchtbaren Traum..."<sup>34</sup>

There are other things that the music can automatically convey or emphasize. For instance, the common function of the death figures is hinted at in the book by certain described features that they may share, like red hair or a red tie, or a skull-like face. In the opera, these features are visually evident, and furthermore these figures are all sung by the same person. Also, the songs of the strolling players are only briefly described in the novella; in the opera, they can be fully realized, with lyrics that comment on Aschenbach's personal crisis. ("For you, forgotten honor, work and duty.... How shall I save my soul?")<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Mann 528.

<sup>35</sup> Britten 201.

In 1971, Britten himself was facing a life threatening heart condition and he began looking for one last big role to write for the tenor Peter Pears, who had been his friend, colleague, and companion since 1937, and for whom he had written many of his works.<sup>36</sup> Britten and his chosen librettist, Myfanwy Piper, acquired the rights to the story<sup>37</sup> and together they received permission and total support from Mann's family: Mann's son Golo even wrote back that the writer used to say that if anyone were to set his novel Dr. Faustus to music, it should be Britten.<sup>38</sup> Thus he began to compose the opera in October of 1971, and despite other commitments and deteriorating health, finished the score just before Christmas of 1972.

The critics were on the whole very impressed. One wrote, "Benjamin Britten, consistently perverse in his choice of opera subjects, has once again proved to be impossible. Thomas Mann's Death in Venice, a complicated and intense story, an artist's inner monologue, lacking conversation, lacking plot, has against all odds become a great opera. Britten has turned it into one of the richest and deepest of operatic character studies."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Rosamund Strode, "A Death in Venice Chronicle" in: Mitchell 26.

<sup>37</sup> Strode 29-30.

<sup>38</sup> Strode 26.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Greenfield, The Guardian (16 June 1973) in: Mitchell 198.



Sadly, despite the effective use of both music and text, it has not become a popular opera, and apart from a few productions to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its premieres in England and the United States, it has been largely unknown outside of the English-speaking world.

#### 4.2. Color

Language orders and gives form to thought, and as with music, some artists have suggested color as a more direct medium of communication that could even possibly replace words.

##### 4.2.1. Hofmannsthal: Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten

In Hofmannsthal's Ein Brief, color is included in his vision of a total unity of all things, even if not in a form as to be able to distinguish between colors. Immediately following his description of the transformation of words into *modrige Pilze* he describes the transformation of his speech into colors so overwhelming that they make him nauseous as he tries to talk to his little daughter:

...und dabei die mir im Munde zuströmenden  
Begriffe plötzlich eine solche schillernde  
Färbung annahmen und so ineinander überflossen,  
daß ich den Satz, so gut es ging, zu Ende  
haspelnd, so wie wenn mir unwohl wäre und auch  
tatsächlich bleich im Gesicht und mit heftigen  
Druck auf der Stirn, das Kind allein ließ, die

Tür mir zuschlug und mich erst zu Pferde...  
wieder einigermaßen herstellte. (XII:12)

Hofmannsthal wrote Ein Brief in 1902, and later returned to the idea of color as a form of communication in 1907 with another fictional letter, the Briefe des Zurückgekehrten, incidentally five years before Kandinsky published his theories about color in Über das Geistige in der Kunst.

Here Hofmannsthal offers the mental progression not of an author, but of a businessman who is returning to Germany after an absence of 18 years. But like Chandos, he is undergoing an existential crisis of knowledge and language, in which his knowledge is divided against itself, and he complains that he cannot find the words to explain what he has experienced:

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 ersten Mal im Leben widerfährt mirs, daß  
ein Gefühl von mir selbst sich aufdrängt.  
(XII:279)

Again like Chandos, he is writing to a friend to explain the kind of sickness he feels, sparked by the contemplation of an exhibition of paintings by Van Gogh. The things that makes the biggest impression on him are the

colors, which let loose a feeling of understanding of the  
"Beings" he sees:

Aber was sind Farben, wofern nicht das innerste  
Leben der Gegenstände in ihnen hervorbricht! Und  
dieses innerste Leben war da, Baum und Stein und  
Mauer und Holzweg gaben ihr Innerstes von sich,  
gleichsam entgegen warfen sie es mir, aber nicht  
die Wollust und Harmonie ihres schönen stummen  
Lebens, wie sie mir vorzeiten manchmal aus alten  
Bildern, wie eine zauberische Atmosphäre  
entgegenfloß: nein, nur die Wucht des Daseins,  
das wütende, von Unglaublichkeit umstarrte Wunder  
ihres Daseins fiel mir meine Seele an...  
(XII:303)

He sees Beings in all things, natural and man-made:

jeder Baum, jeder Streif gelben oder grünlichen  
Feldes, jeder Zaun, jeder in den Steinhügel  
gerissene Hohlweg, ein Wesen der zinnerne Krug,  
die irdene Schüssel, der Tisch, der plumpe Sessel  
- sich mir wie neugeboren aus dem furchtbaren  
Chaos des Nichtlebens, aus dem Abgrund der  
Wesenlosigkeit entgegenhob, daß ich fühlte, nein,  
daß ich wußte, wie jedes dieser Dinge, dieser  
Geschöpfe aus einem fürchterlichen Zweifel an der  
Welt herausgeboren war... (XII:303-304)

And much like Chandos, the vision of these Beings leads to  
further visions, but now the Beings are seen in an  
explosion of color in a unity of the abyss and the heights  
of both inside and outside of himself:

Und nun konnte ich, von Bild zu Bild, ein Etwas  
fühlen, konnte das Untereinander, das Miteinander  
der Gebilde fühlen, wie ihr innerstes Leben in  
der Farbe vorbrach und wie die Farben eine um die  
andern alle trug, und konnte in dem allem ein  
Herz spüren, die Seele dessen, der das gemacht  
hatte, der mit dieser Vision sich selbst  
antwortete auf den Starrkrampf der

fürchterlichsten Zweifel, konnte fühlen, konnte durchblicken, konnte genießen Abgründe und Gipfel Außen und Innen... (XII:304)

The man tries to find the words to further describe the effect that color now has for him. It forms him and his ideas, it drives him to communicate his vision with others, it could even be called love: "Es schwebt mir um diese Dinge etwas mir selber Unerklärliches, etwas wie Liebe - kann es Liebe geben zum Gestaltlosen, zum Wesenlosen?" (XII:306)

The color of the waves at sea show him not only the world but also himself, i.e., his own whole life, past present and future. Color is a wordless language, superior to music, that renews our souls. Color is also the "brother" of pain, that draws him into eternity. (XII:309-310)

Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten tries to pick up where the Chandos Brief leaves off, but it doesn't make the situation of artist really any clearer. "Color" is simply declared to be the "answer" to the question of how the mind would "think" before language imposes form.

#### 4.3. Music, Color, Light and Movement Combined: Kandinsky's Der gelbe Klang

Wassily Kandinsky is most famous for his paintings,

and is generally considered to be the pioneer of non-representational painting. He was also an original art theorist. However, he tried a more concrete attempt to use color to communicate on a higher level than just words in his "stage composition" Der gelbe Klang, written in 1909-1910 and published in 1912. This play consists of an introduction and six scenes, or "pictures", in which the movement of color, light, sound, and objects on the stage are intended to all combine in order to make a strong, coordinated impression. The only words are not dialog in any traditional sense, unless one counts Picture 2, in which a man says to a child, "Schweigen!!" Otherwise words seem to be unconnected to context or sense, or are even deliberately contradictory. In the introduction, disembodied voices proclaim behind the stage, "Steinharte Träume" and "Finsteres Licht bei dem... sonnigsten... Tag".<sup>40</sup>

There is also a lack of accessible symbolism, unless one counts the last scene which ends the piece with a giant man extending his arms until he forms a cross, after which the stage goes dark.

Der gelbe Klang was intended to demonstrate

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<sup>40</sup> Denkler, Horst. Einakter und kleine Dramen des Expressionismus (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1968) 55.

Kandinsky's theories of art and the possibilities of various artistic mediums. But instead of entirely dismissing words (as he nevertheless largely does on the stage,) he proposed that all mediums can be used together in combination because they all have the same goal, i.e., "die Verfeinerung der Seele" through "Erkenntnis" produced by art which is understood through "innere Vibrationen".<sup>41</sup> Kandinsky preferred to refer to words as "Buchstaben", which emphasized their symbolic nature for him as "Wesen mit innerem Leben" and thus also meaning and purpose, if also not in a traditional sense.<sup>42</sup>

As a work, Der gelbe Klang exists today more on the page than on the stage. Despite Kandinsky's theories about the power of combined mediums, it remains almost too inaccessible to produce for the theater. Hofmannsthal's Briefe des Zurückgekehrten are also relatively unknown. Unfortunately, both of the attempts to overcome the shortcomings of the word have been mostly neglected and forgotten.

#### 4.4. Words Used in New Ways

Some Modernist (and later) authors tried to continue

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<sup>41</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, "Über Bühnenkomposition" in: Der Blaue Reiter (Munich: Piper, 1967) 190-191.

<sup>42</sup> Kandinsky, "Über die Formfrage" in: Der Blaue Reiter, 157-158.

to use words, but only indirectly or less directly as carriers of meaning.

#### 4.4.1. Dadaism: Words as Sounds to Be Felt

The Expressionist subjectivity and experimentation with language produced a movement in Zurich called Dadaism which attempted to reduce words to mere sounds. "Verses without words" were intended to overcome language "ruined by journalism" by tapping the inner magic of words: "Man ziehe sich in die innerste Alchemie des Wortes zurück, man gebe auch das Wort noch preis, und bewahre so der Dichtung ihren letzten heiligsten Bezirk."<sup>43</sup> Sometimes Dada poetry readings were accompanied by performances of dance.

Probably the most famous example of a Dada poem is this *Lautgedicht* by Hugo Ball:

##### Karawane

jolifanto bambla o falli bambla  
großgiga m'pfa habla horem  
egiga goramen  
higo bloiko russula huju  
hollaka hollala  
anlogo bung  
blago bung blago bung  
bosso fataka  
ü üü ü  
schampa wulla wussa olobo  
hej tatta gorem  
eschige zunbada  
wulubu ssubudu uluwu ssubudu

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<sup>43</sup> Bode 220.

tumba ba-umf  
kusa gauma  
ba - umf<sup>44</sup>

Other than the title, "Caravan", and perhaps the first word which reminds one of "elephant", the other "words" are chosen for their sound and rhythm effects.

These poems, consisting of apparently nonsense words, had combinations of sounds which were to produce an effect on the hearer as opposed to appealing directly to the hearer's intellect. But as with Kandinsky's stage work, they are charming curiosities rather than "meaningful" pieces, because their effect is vague and their inspirational value is just as unable to be articulated. Bode reminds us of Pinthus's critique that the wordplay of the Expressionists went from a transvaluation of sense to nonsense: "Man begann, die Um-Wirklichkeit zur Un-Wirklichkeit aufzulösen."<sup>45</sup>

#### 4.4.2. Words as Fragments of Feeling and Meaning: Arno Schmidt's Leviathan

Arno Schmidt's first published stories appeared in 1949 and his writings reflect his personal postwar pessimism and modernist preoccupation with the connection

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<sup>44</sup> Bode 201-202.

<sup>45</sup> Bode 10.



between language and art. Because of his eclecticism as an author he cannot be simply categorized. Arising at a time between Modernism and Postmodernism, he never claimed to be an Avantgardist, but preferred to think of himself as a Tradionalist linked to his favorite authors from German Romanticism and the Enlightenment; he was however more experimental and progressive. His stories sometimes have a subjective, creative bizarreness which would link him more to Romanticists like E.T.A. Hoffmann than to Thomas Mann. According to Wolfgang Albrecht, Schmidt has to rather be seen as "beides, Traditionalist und Modernist", although recent scholarship has preferred to label him as a Postmodernist.<sup>46</sup>

He had been a soldier in WWII and afterwards basically shut himself off from the world to write subjective and sometimes deeply depressed works that are notorious examples of obfuscation. He developed what he called his "Etym" theory to explain how basic meanings are offered symbolically to the reader through words, and he practiced this theory with a fragmentary phrasing style which presented words in a way intended to appeal in a stronger and more direct way to both the intellect and to the emotions. Thus his texts are not so much read as felt or

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<sup>46</sup> Wolfgang Albrecht, Arno Schmidt (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1998) 113-114.

experienced. His frequent and seemingly chaotic use of color, symbolism, and indirect references to other works (of mostly German literature) are intended to reach beyond intellectual understanding and touch the reader's memory and feelings directly. In short, he presents works which leave much organizational work up to the reader.

A comparison with the opening lines of Tonio Kröger shows the difference in how words are handled by these two authors. Mann begins the work with a rather direct although poetic description of Tonio's bland world, which will then contrast later with the intense colors of Tonio's mind:

Die Wintersonne stand nur als armer Schein,  
milchig und matt hinter Wolkenschichten über der  
engen Stadt. Naß und zugig war's in den  
giebeligen Gassen, und manchmal fiel eine Art von  
weichem Hagel, nicht Eis, nicht Schnee.<sup>47</sup>

The world that Mann presents is symbolic, but does not ever leave the realm of recognizably objective references.

Schmidt, at the end of his post-WWII (1949) short story Leviathan, presents a description of a winter sun that does not make objective sense but yet reflects the senselessness of the hopeless situation that his characters are in. After the bombing of Dresden at the end of the war, an unnamed soldier and his girlfriend are fleeing from the front in an old, rusted, barely working train which will

eventually hang over the precipice of a cliff where a bridge had been bombed out. They will have no choice but to stay in the train or else jump together to their deaths, which is Schmidt's pessimistic analogy to the situation of Germany as a whole at the end of the war. As they are preparing to jump, the soldier first throws out ahead of them the journal that he had been keeping of their escape. This further symbolizes the situation of the artist: words cannot help them anymore, but the author throws them out into the world, not knowing who will find them, nor what will be made of them.

Ende

Wir werden in die grobrote bereifte Tür treten. Goldig geschleiert wird die Teufels-Winter-Sonne lauern, weisrosa und ballkalt. Sie wird das Kinn vorschieben und bengelhaft den Mund spitzen, die Hüften zum Schwung heben. Starr werde ich den Arm um sie legen. Da schlenkere ich das Heft voran: flieg. Fetzen.<sup>48</sup>

The characters are sometimes only indicated by "we" and "she" and "I", and stand literally on a border between life and death, and between the expressible and the inexpressible. Mention of color and new or invented word combinations create the need for the reader to feel a way to meaning ("golden... the devil's winter sun... white-pink and ball-cold"), and sentence fragments of just one word

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<sup>47</sup> Mann 528.

are meant to cause the reader to fill in the rest with non-verbal meaning ("fly. Shreds.")

However, just as with the more experimental modernist authors, Schmidt's readership is also very limited, and for many critics his impact is also not in the works themselves but in the experimental nature of them.

#### 5. Why Have Alternatives to the Word Failed? Some Words in Defense of Words

Alternatives to written verbal expression have had very little lasting or far-reaching success in improving on or replacing the use of words. Arno Schmidt's fragmentary style is at best an acquired taste that has often put him at the fringe of both critical and popular reception, although he has some devoted fans. Kandinsky's experiment with the stage, Der gelbe Klang, has almost never been produced, but remains ironically a curiosity to read along with his theories of art and communication. The rare performances of Britten's opera Death in Venice receive both critical acclaim and receptive audiences--especially if they are already Britten fans--but here, music is not used instead of words, but rather as an addition to and

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<sup>48</sup> Arno Schmidt, Werke, Bd.1 (Zurich: Arno Schmidt Stiftung in Haffmans Verlag, 1987) 54.

support of Mann's text.

Arranged sounds such as music, and visual phenomena such as color, light, and movement, as well as other phenomena perceived directly through the physical senses such as taste, touch, and smell, are necessarily directly pre-verbal human experiences, as opposed to experiences mediated by thought and therefore language in the intellect. Being direct, they must by definition affect us and our emotions sooner and more deeply than words which must first be received by the eye or the ear and then understood in some form by human intellect before they can affect us with meaning beyond their sound or their appearance on the page. But that is not the same as to say that words are *ineffective* as a medium of communication; only that they are necessarily by nature not as direct. Words organize and shape feeling and experience in ways that make our feelings and experiences *useful* and *communicable* to ourselves and others, and this mediated usefulness is often more effective for communication than unmediated and vague feeling.

The great paradox of the writer's crisis is, as noted earlier, that the authors discussed here present their readers with written depictions of writers who can't write, and they do so with a very eloquent use of the very medium,

i.e., words, which they are claiming to be inadequate for the expression of experience.

This is a paradox because both of these opposing views are true in some degree. Experience is indeed felt before it is articulated into human language, and what is felt is non-verbal. But on the other hand, many authors have also found it possible to use human language to describe their emotions and thus convey these non-verbal experiences very effectively and affectingly, such that they produce or reproduce intense reactions and feelings of identification and empathy in the reader. And for Hofmannsthal and Mann, using words had this function: to put feeling into form became the way to save themselves from the non-articulation and the lonely retention of their experiences.

Additionally, the future can be said to be made possible in that events are created or at least possible to influence because of words. Plans have to be actively communicated between people if they want to affect the course of events before they happen, or even to make things happen in the first place. First the word in one mind, then the word in other minds, and then the implementation.

There is furthermore something about articulating one's experience into words that makes experience seem more objectively real, as if writing about subjective experience

establishes it in the objective world of others, and as if human lives have to be recorded and passed on to others in order to have meaning and influence in a society. It is as if words themselves have a creative power. Thus a forgotten, unrecorded experience or a forgotten life can be said to have less meaning and existence for humanity as a whole than a fictitious life, even though the latter exists only by means of words in the minds of readers.

This idea is not limited to German literature at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One need only remember the effect that Goethe's Die Leiden des jungen Werther had on the readers of its time to see that this is so: young men began dressing like Werther and killing themselves over unrequited love as he did after reading it.

Nor is it limited to Germany: recently I had the great fortune to work at Jena University in Germany when one of Canada's foremost living writers, Robert Kroetsch, spent a semester there as a guest professor. As a living, working writer, his views about his craft were especially fascinating, and he liked to say that "real life is nothing without fiction," because "it is fiction that makes us real. We haven't got an identity until someone tells our stories."

## 6. The Artist's Crisis Before Modernism

Coming as it did at the beginning of Modernism and Expressionism, Ein Brief posed questions about the very heart and the source of our ideas about what art is. If, however, this work by Hofmannsthal is considered to signal the beginning of Modernist questioning about the artist's vision, as well as the inadequacy of language to convey what the artist perceives to minds who do not see as the artist does, it is certainly not the first appearance of this topic in literature.

As already stated, the basic questions that became central with Modernism have existed since the beginning of human history. Already in ancient Greece and in biblical times the words and the use of language were either doubted or mythified because of their potentials and limits.

### 6.1. The Bible: The Word as Creative Logos and Parable

In the Bible, language, naming, and the concept of the word have divine power. A word from God is all that is needed to create the earth, the universe, and every living thing in it. In fact, this notion of the essential creative power of words goes even further: God the Creator is described as the *Logos*, the "word" itself:

In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was



with God, and the Word was God, and he was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:1-5, New King James Version)

The limits of words are also a feature of language use in the Bible. In the New Testament Jesus uses parables with their symbolism and analogies to present spiritual lessons, as the depth of the truths he is trying to teach make direct appeals to intellect not possible.

## 6.2. Ancient Greece: Plato's Republic and Symposium

Plato's parable of the cave in The Republic expresses despair about the ability of language to represent reality in even more extremely than Hofmannsthal. For Plato, not just language but all knowledge is potentially deceptive because of the limits of not only human knowledge and language, but also the ability of the human mind to grasp and understand the fullness of reality. To try to illustrate this point he uses a parable of prisoners who are in a cave, chained and sitting so that they all observe a shadow play on a wall which they all assume to be the form and limit of experience, i.e., reality. The shadows of course are not "real", in the sense of being the immediate source of experience, but only an effect, namely

they reflect real happenings but are only a result of actions elsewhere. The artist is the privileged person who has somehow become free enough from the chains to move about, see the real actions behind the shadow play, and even leave the darkness of the cave for the light above which is blinding at first, and who then attempts to communicate back to the others what he or she has seen. However, the experience of the people in chains is too limited to fully understand what the artist is trying to represent, even though the capability to become just as enlightened exists in everyone. Thus the meaning of the artist's works is mysterious at best if not incredible and misleading.<sup>49</sup>

Plato also discusses the topic of art in the Symposium, but here he has Socrates discussing the nature of love and its role in the creation of art:

Love is so wise a poet that he can make another the same; at least everyone becomes a poet whom Love touches, everyone who before that had no "music in is soul". This we may fittingly use as a proof that Love is a god poet or active maker in practically all the creations of the fine arts; for what one has not or knows not, one can neither give to another nor teach another. Now take the making of all living things; who will dispute that they are the clever work of Love, by which all living things are made and begotten? And craftsmanship in the arts; don't we know that

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<sup>49</sup> Plato, Great Dialogs of Plato, trans. W.D. Rouse (New York; London: Penguin Books, 1984) 312-317.

where this god is teacher, art turns out noble and illustrious, but where there is no touch of Love, it is all in the dark?<sup>50</sup>

Echoing the words of John, love is seen as the creative force behind all living things, but here also as the force behind the creation of all living art.

Love itself is actually the "love for the beautiful,"<sup>51</sup> and so:

[t]here in life and there alone, my dear Socrates . . . is life worth living for man while he contemplates Beauty itself. (106)

Thus, artists, among others, seek inspiration and love in beauty--however they define it--as a force of creation for both life and art, and the artist loves life by seeing beauty in it which intensifies the desire to understand both self and other and to feel untied to the other and share this understanding.

This concept of love can perhaps be understood in less abstract ways. Society in general and other people individually function as mirrors that reflect back to us images (whether accurate or not) of who we (and they) are. Love makes relationships between people closer and thus it intensifies the mirror's potential for learning about oneself and about others, as well as about what one is

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<sup>50</sup> Plato 92.

<sup>51</sup> Plato 99.

capable of and about what the world is.

Love also turns other people, other things, and even oneself into objects of beauty, and this then brings happiness in the intensified contemplation of them. It also makes one feel more alive and self-aware. Thus love inspires on an existential level as both a confirmation of existence and a intensifier of vision, whether or not it is returned or realized, and these things are essential to the vision that produces art.

Love therefore creates art and "music" in the pre-verbal, unformed, felt, experiencing of life. The artist's problem and burden is how to take this wordless feeling and put it into living words--or notes or pictures, depending on the artistic form. Living art is then art that loves life in all its aspects, including anything "real": the banal and the everyday, and even ugliness and death are made "beautiful" when formed by art, since beauty could be said under Modernism to have been liberated from traditional views, no longer meaning beautiful content but redefined to refer to either subjective opinion or else the effectiveness or well-formedness of the work.

## 7. Phenomenological Explanations: Heidegger

Heidegger, inheriting Nietzsche's Modernist views,

also concerned himself with language as a basic feature of Being, as well as with the relationship between language and art. Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes began as a lecture in Freiburg, and was published with added material in 1956. In it he attempts to discover the "origin", or rather essence of art, artists, and works of art. This thesis began with a quote from the epilog to this text that states that understanding even the questions around the nature of art would be doing much. In the course of the book, he dissects not just the problem of art but also attempts to solve it.

Like Hofmannsthal's protagonist in Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten, Heidegger is inspired by a painting by Van Gogh. Specifically, he chooses the example of a peasant woman's shoes in a picture. He states that a work of art is first of all a "thing", and as a work of art the picture of the shoes satisfy his three modes for defining "thingness": they are a "bearer of traits", the "unity of a manifold of sensations", and they are "formed matter".<sup>52</sup>

Even though only a picture of a physical thing, the work is itself a thing and the painting of the shoes presents us with no less than "truth", and art itself is "truth setting itself to work," because art "discloses" the essence of a thing that we already know. Thus, the work of

art is not a reproduction of a thing, but a thing itself that also reveals the essence of the thing itself.<sup>53</sup>

When we see artworks, they "speak" to us and take us suddenly "somewhere else",<sup>54</sup> namely they create a "world", in which the work of art rises up into a lighted focus by being presented. Thus art is a projection or a presentation, not a representation, according to Heidegger. Beauty is the "light" or "shining" in the work (181), and language, as a means of pointing to and naming of things, is the first projection of a thing.

The problem with language, as he states in The Way to Language (Unterwegs zur Sprache) is that we are necessarily in the middle of it. To understand it we would have to be able to create some distance from it. (389)

Curiously, he declares that while lived experience is the source of both artistic creation and art appreciation, it is also "the element in which art dies." (204) Perhaps he is referring to the abyss of feeling that Thomas Mann warns of. Furthermore, he states that beauty is not related to form, but it is inseparable from truth as part of the light of truth. (206) This, however, sounds more akin to classical notions which equated the Beautiful with the Good

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<sup>52</sup> Heidegger 156

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger 161-162.

<sup>54</sup> Heidegger 161.

and the True, which Nietzsche has dismissed with the declaration that truth is ugly.

## CONCLUSION

In any literate human society, there are members who possess talent in varying degrees for creating and presenting verbal pictures of human life in some of its many aspects. Some of them may even feel personally driven to write, no matter what else they do in their lives. Likewise there are members, i.e., readers, who feel drawn to read what others or they themselves have written. These facts of human existence are evidence that there is something about both the production and the consumption of writing that feeds something essential in human beings. Even beyond the biblical saying that people do not "live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4), they seem to also live and hunger for words themselves from other humans; they live for communication and they crave stories of others' lives as well as wanting to tell others of their own lives, no matter how simply or insufficiently: Primitive peoples produce cave drawings to record their experiences, and children take great delight in their simple depictions of the people, places, objects, and events in their world.

Furthermore, young children often unrelentingly beg adults to read stories to them, and every year adults spend billions of dollars going to see the latest movies or renting films to view on their televisions at home.

It should thus be no surprise that society watchers often complain that too many children and adults addictively spend too much of their time amusing themselves with the fictional lives that television and the movies offer for public entertainment, instead of actively living out their own lives, and predict the negative effects that this produces, such as passivity and unrealistic expectations in life. Experts continually debate as to how much of the deviant behavior of children and adults can be traced back to the examples of violence and mental cruelty they have been exposed to in entertainment media and sensational news stories. And yet, there is no evidence that people will give up their fascination with stories, in spite of all the warnings by societal watchdogs.

People crave not just words, but also other forms of artistic media that represent aspects of human existence and experience, such as music, and even shape their own identity and sense of what is important in life by means of it. From people who can't carry a tune, but who nevertheless sing in the shower, to teenagers who seem to



find their music to be the most important and interesting thing in their lives, music has a long-observed but still not generally fully understood power. Actors, singers, writers, and other providers of verbal and musical entertainment are idolized such that not just their fictive lives but also their real lives become the object of obsessive interest by society.

This need and fascination for stories and communication is also evidenced by the fact that isolation and deprivation of communication and verbal stimulation is used as punishment, whether individually as a way to show hurt in a relationship, institutionally in a prison, or even in the form of denying a child access to television or playing with friends for a time as a disciplinary action. Isolation and lack of contact with others is considered to be one of the worst fates possible for human beings, and humans fear it so greatly that they sometimes go to counter-productive and self-destructive lengths to avoid it.

And so there is something about visual, aural, and verbal representations of life that attracts and fascinates audiences of many sorts, whether as readers, viewers, or hearers, that makes them seek it out, even if they do not lack for people with whom they can communicate.

Simply stated, people need art and crave presentations of life, whether in high forms such as literature or in popular entertainment forms such as film, even if they do not understand why. They also need to express themselves through artistic media, whether in the simple self-expression of using words to tell a story to another person or in the more sophisticated composition of a novel, a painting, a play or an opera. In short, people need to express themselves and further to communicate and exchange ideas and feelings with others regarding themselves and their experience in the world. And in order to communicate, they need a medium.

Art exists because it is humanity's way of telling its story. It is its way of observing and reflecting on its situation and its possibilities. Artists single out and focus their attention on some aspect of their subjective experience present it as an object for others' subjective attention.

The work of art presents not necessarily what the artist intends, but is a real symbol whose truth value for the audience depends on the audience itself, and so can be more "true" than life for some people, depending on their ability to find meaning in the symbol. Thus, the more a work can relate to humanity as a whole, for example by

using everyday objects or handling basic themes such as identity and death, the more life and greatness a work may achieve.

Why is art so compelling? Because of its function to present symbols of life, both artist and audience are driven to art by the love of knowledge, i.e. the desire to know the self and the non-self, namely the world, and also the love of life itself, expressed in the desire to experience life and to create new life and experience, something made possible by the creative aspect of literature.

Artists are those whose ability to create from perspective of distance from life enables them to see differently, and whose talent to form their experience into a communicative medium allows them to present their vision. They also have a need to do so, because love inspires by giving them a heightened ability to focus, intensify, and sharpen their attention on some aspect of life and then urges them to share with others. Thus, love is here understood as either Chandos's wordless feeling of oneness with life and creation, or as the longing to become one with creation, expressed by Aschenbach's love for Tadzio or Tonio Kröger's love for Hans and Inge. Audiences are drawn to art because of the same longing to see life and be

closer to it and be more actively alive.

Why do artists use words, in spite of their inherent problems as a medium for presenting meaning? Because we have no real substitute for the precision, variety, and efficacy of words to present ideas and communicate feelings to others. The artists of German Modernism show that despite the gap between language and experience, words are ultimately not replaceable, and art risks failure in communication when words are either ignored or used as mere sounds.

Can artists ever solve their crisis? After Nietzsche set into motion the overthrow of traditional ways of thinking about art, artists in all media, including painting, music, and literature, began to explore fundamental questions about the relationship between art and life, and their possibilities and limits of representation in their respective medium. His call for a transvaluation of values undermined the faith in accepted traditions of the past and beliefs about art and its nature, production, and function in society. For many writers of the time this questioning led to a crisis that left some doubting their ability to express themselves at all. And yet, by exploring and explaining their problem in words, i.e., the very means that are in question, these

authors showed that words, although imperfect, can indeed be useful and effective as a means of communication, even for communicating the imperfectness of words, provided that the reader or listener already has some reference to make the words meaningful. Words are not only useful, they make most of communication itself possible, because they give form to feeling.

Is art life, or is life art? This question can be settled with a simple "yes!" Art is a kind of creation, but a man-made object, as opposed to nature-made. It is both "true" and "false", because art is an interpretation and presentation of some limited aspect of life, and because it is an interpretation, it is more or less objectively "true"--and false. It is misleading, i.e., false, while it sometimes manipulates real elements in ways that do not show the real connections and consequences of real motivations and actions.

However, whether true or false, and no matter what the specific topic of a work, there is always some aspect, some incident, some possibly real element from human experience which is displayed, dissected, reflected upon, readjusted, and/or reacted to in any text, both objectively and subjectively, which allows a text to become accessible to its readers. Both author and reader accompany the

characters of a story through their subjective experiences, and their fictional lives become examples of the possibilities in "real" life. The reader necessarily brings an additional subjectivity to each text by interpreting and reacting to the characters' lives through the limits and/or richness of his or her own life experiences. Thus, irrespective of the intentions and the depth of private self-reflectiveness on the part of the author, it is the attitudes and interpretations of the reader that will make the author's art a lesson in life whenever relating with the reader's own life.

We observe other lives, real and fictional, and find them amusing, irritating, heroic, tragic, interesting, or boring, and so by judging we evaluate them consciously or subconsciously for what larger lessons we can learn from them about humankind and the way the world works. Jean-Paul Sartre, while emphasizing the essential subjectivity of experience, allowed for objectivity in only one instance: although "Man is choice", i.e., life is necessarily made up of a continuation of choices about how to act, and in making these choices, each subjective individual provides an example of choice universally for others. Thus, literature with its fictional examples of other lives provides examples of life for the reader to evaluate and

then accept or reject for him- or herself.

The question, "What is art?", is associated with Modernism, but does not originate with it. In various forms and in various ways, the nature, limitations, fascinations, and even dangers of art and specifically literature have been formally investigated by humankind at least as far back as Plato and the ancient Greeks.

Nor is this topic limited to the past. It can even be at the heart of a postmodern work or even a popular recent motion picture: it was the central theme of the 1998 film "Shakespeare in Love" which won 7 Oscars in 1999, including Best Picture, although the entertainment value of the film took precedence over any abstract considerations of the nature of art.

The film begins by presenting a Shakespeare who can only write when he has a love interest to inspire him. His writer's block is therefore used to explore the connection between art and life, and inspiration and love, and how they all interrelate. Additionally, the screenplay has Queen Elizabeth pose a question, in the form of a wager in order to make it even more suspenseful, as to whether the true nature of love can be presented on the stage, namely can art truly be alive and convincing, i.e., present life. Of course, since Shakespeare's primary art form was drama,

a successful presentation also depends on the actors, but the question remains no less valid.

In German literature, this basic question became related to other questions about how artists become inspired, and the possibility or impossibility of language for communicating this inspiration, resulting in a concept known as the *Künstlerproblematik*, or artist crisis, which became a central feature of Modernism. For some authors, such as Thomas Mann and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, it even became an ongoing theme of their work. Thus, Hofmannsthal and Mann, are saved from their own abyss of wordless feeling by writing about Lord Chandos, Tonio Kröger, and Gustav von Aschenbach. These stories also show that the search by both writer and reader for keys to "know thyself" is a part of the human condition and thus will necessarily continue as long as there is human life.

It should come as no surprise that writers have sometimes made this *Künstlerproblematik* itself the subject of their works. A writer draws from anything and everything that goes through his or her mind, and thus it is only to be expected that writers will sometimes include their reflections on the nature and purpose of their own literary activity, and by extension on art in general. German works such as Ein Brief and Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten by



Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Schwere Stunde, Tonio Kröger, and Der Tod in Venedig by Thomas Mann provide us with fascinating explorations into the nature of art and its relationship to life by portraying writers who *can't* produce and then who struggle to understand why this is so.

In each of these three cases, life itself is both the inspiration for and the hindrance to producing art. Writers who *can't* write suffer from more than writer's block or procrastination: it is rather because of an imbalance or breakdown in either their experience, their inspiration, or their ability to express themselves in language media such as words: sometimes they are experiencing either too little or too much of life to express themselves adequately in words, which are in themselves too weak sometimes to express what the human mind may also be too small to grasp, but sometimes it is the recognition of the gap between experience and expression that silences them. Through the not-so-silent sufferings of the artists depicted, these works show that art, as expressions of life, no matter how fragmentary and incomplete, is a valid and fruitful means for pursuing the eternal human quest for self-knowledge and the eternal desire to depict, dissect, and understand the great riddle and mystery of human existence. This explains its fascination and its necessity for both producer and

consumer whether in high or in popular forms. Furthermore, art will always necessarily remain a fragmentary and incomplete picture of life, no matter how insightful the vision of the artist, because works are necessarily also limited both to their media, as well as to the vision of the artist and the limits of his or her talent and experience. In short, *Künstler* are forever doomed to their *Problematik*: even though art has a function and a purpose, its goal can never fully be reached. Art can never give us a total picture for understanding or experiencing life: no artist's vision and no reader's understanding is equal to more than a fragmentary piece of the whole of life, the universe, and the interrelations of all things. Thus even those whose talent for expression may somewhat more correlate with their depth of experience must forever remain ultimately unsatisfied, and thus never free of the *Künstlerproblematik*. The limitations of production, i.e., of human vision and also of artistic medium, guarantee that artists will never fully be able to express life (i.e., produce art) in more than a fragmentary way, and thus the quest to understand life through art will never be ultimately satisfied.

In the end it is no new, Modernist discovery to find that words are ultimately unsatisfactory for communicating

artistic vision about the essence and meaning of the whole of human experience. No medium that imposes form on "unformed" experience can ever truly communicate to another person what something *feels* like.

Nevertheless, people will neither give up producing art nor seeking it, because life and art are necessarily bound together: people not only want to feel that they are alive, they also want to express to themselves and others what they experience. The form that a human being imposes on experience in order to express it and understand it thus also forms and creates that person's world, or at least the sense or meaning it has for that person. So, to put into form something of human experience is to create art or to make life art and to make art that "lives", whether or not one shares this art with another.

One of Hofmannsthal's first published poems declares the world to be but an "eternal poem" and each person a subjective "verse" who creates the world for themselves:

Was ist die Welt? Ein ewiges Gedicht,  
Daraus der Geist der Gottheit strahlt und glüht,  
Daraus der Wein der Weisheit schäumt und sprüht,  
Daraus der Laut der Liebe zu uns spricht

Und jedes Menschen wechselndes Gemüt,  
Ein Strahl ists, der aus dieser Sonne bricht,  
Ein Vers, der sich an tausend andere flicht,  
Der unbemerkt verhallt, verlischt, verblüht.

Und doch auch eine Welt für sich allein,

Voll süß-geheimer, nievernommner Töne,  
Begabt mit eigner, unentweihter Schöne,

Und keines Andern Nachhall, Widerschein.  
Und wenn du gar zu lesen drin verstündest,  
Ein Buch, das du im Leben nicht ergründest.  
(I:467)

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