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Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

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The Role of the Visual Arts in the Construction of Collective Identity: Hofmannsthal, Dürer and Van Gogh

Abstract:

Briefe des Zurückgekehrten (Letters of a Man Who Returned) is a set of five fictional letters by the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal, which thematizes the Austro-Hungarian subject's destabilized sense of belonging at the turn of the twentieth century. In this text Hofmannsthal problematizes a straightforward nationalist idealization of the Austrian homeland by showing how one's national identity and sense of belonging are not only determined by one's historical context, but are also culturally constructed in various ways, one of which is through the visual arts. In two crucial turning points in this text, the letter writer confronts the instrumental role that the visual arts played in solidifying his sense of identity and perception of reality as a coherent whole. First, he recalls how his repeated exposure to Albrecht Dürer's copper engravings in his childhood shaped his sense of a collective identity that reaches beyond the boundaries of his immediate family. The rigidity of the depicted figures in these pictures points to the fact that Dürer's images gave form and permanence to the formless physical sensations and feelings of belonging that the narrator came to associate with his homeland. Second, he relates how, at the height of his alienation from his own homeland, an unexpected encounter with the paintings of Van Gogh renewed his perception of the world. His reflections on the power of Dürer's and Van Gogh's visual art push him toward a valuable reckoning: the letter writer gains insight into the role that visual culture and his own interpretive powers have in the construction and representation of a coherent reality, and by extension his sense of collective and individual identity. In *Letters of a Man Who Returned* Hofmannsthal shows that our conceptions of individual and collective identity are grounded in and shaped by artistic representations of the place and the culture to which we feel we belong. The aim of my paper is to unpack Hofmannsthal's critique of an essentialist understanding of identity through a close reading of this text.

Keywords: collective identity, visual art, *Heimat*, subjectivity, Austrian and German national identity

Briefe des Zurückgekehrten (Letters of a Man Who Returned) is a text by the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal, which thematizes the Austro-Hungarian subject's destabilized sense of belonging at the turn of the twentieth century. In this text Hofmannsthal problematizes a straightforward nationalist idealization of the Austrian homeland by showing how one's national identity and sense of belonging are not only determined by one's historical context, but are also culturally constructed in various ways, one of which is through the visual arts. In *Letters of One Who Has Returned* Hofmannsthal shows that our conceptions of individual and collective identity are grounded in and shaped by artistic representations of the place and the culture to which we feel we belong. The aim of my paper is to unpack Hofmannsthal's critique of an essentialist understanding of identity through a close reading of this text.

In five confessional letters, an anonymous businessman describes the disorienting experience of returning home after having led a nomadic existence for eighteen years, traveling around the world from Germany to North and South America, China, the East Indies, and New Zealand. Over the course of the first three letters, the narrator relates to his friend how he experienced an unexpected culture shock upon his return to modern-day Germany; in the final two letters, he then describes how his sense of estrangement from Germany intensified and manifested itself as a spiritual feeling of nausea caused by a crisis of perception. In two crucial turning points in this text, the letter writer confronts the instrumental role that the visual arts played in solidifying his sense of identity and perception of reality as a coherent whole. First, he recalls how his repeated exposure to Albrecht Dürer's copper engravings in his childhood shaped his sense of a collective identity that reaches beyond the boundaries of his immediate family. The rigidity of the depicted figures in these pictures points to the fact that Dürer's pictures gave form and permanence to the formless physical sensations and feelings of belonging that the narrator came to associate with his homeland. Second, he relates how, at the height of his alienation from his own homeland, an unexpected encounter with the paintings of Van Gogh renewed his perception of the world. His reflections on the power of Dürer's and Van Gogh's visual art push him toward a valuable reckoning: the letter writer gains insight into the role that visual culture and his own interpretive powers have in the construction and representation of a coherent reality, and by extension his sense of identity.

One Homeland or Many?

At the heart of these five letters, the letter writer experiences a clash between his idealized conception of national identity and a more troubling, but also empowering understanding of the fluid, constructed nature of the modern individual's identity. The narrator's encounter with simpler, more authentic modes of existence abroad sets the stage for his

disillusionment upon returning to Germany. Back in his homeland, the question of what Germany is has become a self-conscious one for him:

This Germany in which I'm traveling around, dealing and transacting, eating with people, acting as the cosmopolitan businessman, as the foreign and worldly gentleman – where was I each time, when I claimed to be in the land, into which one enters through the mirror of memory; where *was* I in the moments, where only my body wandered amongst the Gauchos or amongst the Maori? Where *was* I? Now that this is Germany, [I see that] I wasn't in Germany. And still, I called it Germany.¹

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

So now I'm back again in Germany, on my way to Austria, and I can't tell how I feel. On the ship I came up with concepts and judgements in advance. I've lost my concepts in the face of reality over the past four months, and I don't know, what has taken their place: a split feeling of the present, an absent-minded stupor, an inner disorder, which borders on dissatisfaction – and almost for the first time in my life, I'm experiencing a feeling of my self forcing itself upon me.²

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

The letter writer applies the binary opposition between theoretical and experiential knowledge to his understanding of his homeland (*Heimat*). That is, there are two different understandings of the homeland at play in this text. On the one hand, there is the homeland as a nation-state; this is essentially a concept defined in legal and political terms, mapped onto a people within the confines of artificially imposed geographic boundaries. On the other hand, it is thought of as a place that is constituted through lived experience and through a people's organic dwelling in the land. I argue that this distinction between these two different types of homeland clarifies the letter writer's often confusing use of the term *Deutschland* (Germany) and *Österreich* (Austria). That is, he mentions that he is passing through Germany on the way to Austria, leading us to believe that his homeland must be Austria. And yet, he seems profoundly disturbed by the fact that he cannot identify with the Germans. He writes that he called the feeling of being at home during his travels abroad “Deutschland”: “As the things spoke to my soul, it was as if I were reading a colourful book of life, but the book was constantly about Germany.”³

Jacques Le Rider explains that even though Hofmannsthal's narrator is Austrian, he uses “Deutschland” synonymously with homeland (*Heimat*) because it designates the larger German cultural realm to which Austria belongs.⁴ I assert, therefore, that in the context of these letters, when the term “Deutschland” is used in a positive sense, it refers to the larger German *Kultur* nation, whereas when it is negatively charged, it refers to the Prussian-led nation-state. The letter writer tells his friend, “I made myself a concept of the Germans, and as I was heading toward the border via Wesel, [the concept was] pure within me: it was not completely the one, which the English had of us before [18]70.”⁵ Here the narrator, whose letter is dated 1901, refers to the fact that there are two different conceptions of Germany in circulation, namely a greater Germany, held together by a common language and culture, and the political nation-state that was founded in 1871. By contrast to the dual meaning of *Deutschland* the term *Österreich* is always positively charged and representative of a homeland that is organically constituted through a people's attachment to the land. The narrator's opposition between Germany and Austria anticipates Hofmannsthal's elliptical jottings from 1917, in which he describes Prussia as an artificial construct that requires a state to hold the people together. Austria, on the other hand, he describes as having developed organically into a historical fabric, which coheres through love of one's homeland (*Heimatliebe*).⁶

But why should it be that the narrator, as the self-identified businessman, should not feel more at home in a Germany that defines itself by its economic productivity? While the protagonist seems to be genuinely impressed by his contact with the Germans in their various professional specializations, who together promote greater economic growth, he is on another level also disturbed by what he sees. “Don't think,” he writes to his friend about modern Germany, “that I don't respect their achievements. But that the Germans work, the world is full of that: When I returned home, I expected to see how they live. And now I'm here, and I don't see how they live.”⁷ On the one hand, he sees a world of broadening connections, where formerly geographically remote areas are integrated through trade; indeed, his involvement in successful “Javanese-German negotiations”⁸ points to his own participation in this integrating process. Moreover, the needs of the modern industry require people to adopt specialized functions that bring them together with others from

outside the familiar circle of family, friends, and neighbors. On the other hand, the new connections that are formed through business relations create anomie and erode traditional values and social ties.

The narrator is critical of the very mechanisms of integration in which he participates and by which modern collective identities are formed. This fracturing effect of the modern economy appears to be more obvious to the letter writer now that he has returned to a place he had thought of as his homeland (*Heimat*), and thus as a place of origin and belonging in a narrower, more traditional sense. However, instead of finding such an organic place of belonging, he finds a fragmented society in Imperial Germany, observing that the Germans have “civil relationships and aristocratic relationships and university circles and financial circles,” but that all of these relations lack “a true density of relationships [...] a community-building quality, that whole originary quality that lies in our hearts.”⁹ Thus, while the protagonist is himself involved in creating the sinews of the new nation, he pines for some lost organic wholeness.

Dürer's Engravings: Forming an Ur-Image of Austria

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

[...] in two weeks I will travel to Gebhartsstetten and can be fairly sure to find the running well with its peaceful date of 1776 in squiggly Theresian ciphers – there it will stand and swoosh at me, and the old, crooked walnut tree that was split by lightning, the one which of all the trees always got its leaves last, and which was the most willing to surrender to the winter, it will greet me in all its lopsidedness, and in its old age somehow give me a sign that it can recognize me and [recognize] that I am there again and that it is there, as always.¹⁰

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

The narrator emphasizes that his idea of *Heimat* was preceded by the physical *feeling* of inhabiting a particular landscape and climate. To convey the feeling of familiarity that he longs for but is failing to recapture in Germany, he describes a childhood experience that, to him, became representative of the idea of feeling at home. The narrator recalls how his feeling of home is anchored in a concrete experience of sensory aliveness that he had as a child in Austria: the taste of water “from the iron pipe,” the feeling of the mountain air sweeping over his face, and the smell of the “dusty country road” in the summer.¹¹ The feeling of being at home is thus defined by a very specific somatic experience of a particular geography and climate. Konrad Heumann explains that according to Hofmannsthal's phenomenology of natural conditions, feelings are to a certain degree always prefigured by environmental factors.¹² The physical memory of drinking cold water from the spring in upper Austria (*Oberösterreich*) lingers into his adulthood, so that as long as he was traveling in the Northern Hemisphere, the taste of a refreshing swig of cool water could suddenly transport him, in a moment that anticipates Proust, to the very fountain in Gebhartsstetten from which he drank as a child.¹³ The sudden moments in which the letter writer experienced his homeland even while traveling in foreign countries are structurally like epiphanic moments. They are experiences that are out of the subject's control and cannot be reproduced at will; they are fleeting experiences of immediacy, which the letter writer fails to relive upon his return to Imperial Germany. These reveries of a childhood connection to Austria that was once naïve and immediate of course present an idealized recollection – a fact, which the letter writer himself recognizes at some level.

As the narrator remembers his early childhood associations with Austria, he also recalls the important role that the visual arts had in solidifying the connection between the physical experience of his birthplace and the image of a greater homeland. In his third letter, he begins to muse about the effect that the art of Dürer had in shaping his lived connection to Austria. This reflection on Dürer's art offers the first small sign that the narrator is aware of the ways in which our experience of the world may be mediated through the products of culture. Fittingly, it is his father who introduces him and his siblings to Dürer, as if leading them through a rite of passage that initiates them in a cultural realm of experience.¹⁴

The letter writer describes how his father would often invite him and his siblings to look at a folder of Albrecht Dürer's engravings, which he kept in his private library in Gebhartsstetten:

'This is old Germany,' said my father and the word sounded almost eerie to me and I had to think of an old figure such as those in the pictures, and in order to show that I had learned geography and that I understood the world, I asked: 'Is there also a book, in which one can see old Austria?' Then my father said, 'This down here is probably Austria' (the library was in a tower, and down below lay the village and the hills and here and there small forests, which belonged to the communities and to individual farmers, and between the hills a winding stream and a white street, and in the distance the blue vineyards above the great, distant, darkening forests), 'and we are Austrians, but we are also Germans, and since the land always belongs to those who dwell on it, it is also Germany here.'¹⁵

Perhaps the first thing worth noting about this dense passage is that it hints at the deeper origins of the letter writer's prejudice against "culture" as the product of an educated, elite class, which he reveals more explicitly in the first letter. The protagonist's father reinforces a distinction between two competing ways of representing the world: the artistic and the conceptual. This distinction is not, however, drawn in a neutral fashion, as visual representation is given priority over the son's schoolbook knowledge of German and Austrian geography (as evidenced in the father's response to his son's question whether Dürer's images are also of old Austria). As Ethel Matala de Mazza points out, the protagonist is taught at an early age that the visual representation of reality is a superior medium for the authentication of his subjective experiences.¹⁶

But if the engravings serve to *reaffirm* the narrator's subjective experience, they also mediate and shape that experience. In other words, this underscores the importance of the symbolic cultural order in the construction of collective identity. Hofmannsthal alludes to this role by foregrounding the narrator's discussion of Dürer with a brief speculation on the possible need for some form of cultural education or *Bildung*: "perhaps one needs to possess an inner preparation, a cultural education (*Bildung*), in order to cope with this much divided world."¹⁷ This statement seems to be a direct allusion to the etymological connection between the words *Bild* (image) and *Bildung* (education). *Bilden* in German means to give form to something.¹⁸ Thus through the act of looking at Dürer's pictures an image of Austria was formed in the letter writer's mind.

The narrator writes that Dürer's images were like magic pages (*Zauberblätter*)¹⁹ because of the powerful impression they left on him:

How familiar and alien at the same time were these old pages to me; how abhorrent and dear at the same time! The people, the oxen, the horses appeared as though they were carved out of wood, and so also the folds in the clothing and the wrinkles in their faces. The tips of the houses, the squiggly mill creek, the rigid rocks and trees, so unreal and overly real. Sometimes I pestered my father to bring out the folder. And sometimes I couldn't be brought to look at even one more page and I ran away right in the middle of it and was scolded for it. Still today I could not say whether the memory of these black magic pages are dear and precious or hateful to me. But they affected me deeply; from them a power forced their way into me.²⁰

Once again the rural imagery, which the letter writer associates with a sense of rootedness, is important to his image of his homeland. But unlike his earlier description of the refreshing water fountain in Gebhartsstetten, the picture of his homeland is marked by rigidity, even grimness. The narrator tells us that Dürer's images of "the old Germany" appeared as though they were cut out of wood. The rigidity of the depicted figures in these pictures points to the fact that Dürer's pictures gave form and permanence to the formless physical sensations that the narrator came to associate with his homeland.

What is striking for anyone who has seen Dürer's copper engravings²¹ is that the narrator's description of them rings false. Based on the letter writer's description of these images, one would almost imagine that Dürer's art consists of quaint landscape pictures. However, Dürer's actual pictures are highly allegorical and symbolic; they are not naturalistic at all. The natural elements of Dürer's engravings ultimately serve the symbolic purpose of the images. Although one might say that the landscape and the garb worn by the figures in Dürer's pictures evoke medieval Germany, these elements are actually peripheral. While Ursula Renner explains that Hofmannsthal is not after an art historical interpretation of Dürer and Van Gogh's art²², I find that the difference between the narrator's description of Dürer's engravings and Dürer's actual pictures themselves is so glaring that it invites further analysis. I contend that this difference between the actual images and the description is important because it points to the fact that the act of looking at a work of art is not a matter of passive reception, but rather one of active interpretation. By extension it comes to show that whatever stability and unity the letter writer ascribes to his homeland requires the involvement of imagination and the mediation of a constructed symbolic order. The deep ambivalence the letter writer feels about Dürer's pictures, his fascination and strong aversion to them, betrays the narrator's first intimation of this unsettling fact.

The letter writer recalls that he came to see the age-old figures in Dürer's engravings as a sort of primordial image (*Urbild*) of his homeland and its people. He remembers that his childhood world came to be inhabited by the medieval figures depicted by Dürer, such that he started to feel as though they were living next to him in his daily life:

[B]ut unconsciously I populated the lonely places in the forest, the heap with the great blocks of stone, the half decomposed cloister behind the church with the shadow gestures of these overly real forefathers. The demeanour of those with the overly strong gestures, who were no longer there, still went together with the demeanour of those with whom I ate and drank and

climbed the pear tree and washed horses and [with whom I] went to church, just as the stories of robbers, hermits and bears went together with the landscape [...] All of it was in the old pictures as in reality before my eyes: but no rift gaped between them. That old world was more pious, more sublime, milder, bolder, lonelier. But paths led to it in the forest, in the starry night, at church.²³

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

This observation helps to illuminate the narrator's growing antipathy to the idea of Germany: it is natural that an ambitious young businessman would readily identify with a newly minted empire in the throes of economic expansion; it is just as comprehensible, however, that an older businessman, experiencing a crisis of identity, might begin to question that empire, and even project his crisis onto it. As the Prussian state becomes more single-mindedly fixed on business success, the aims of the German *Kultur* are eclipsed. The narrator's childhood associations with Dürer take on a new life as the antithesis of all that the German nation now stands for. As part of the cultural bedrock of his development into a self-conscious adult, these childhood associations provide a fixed point against which he compares his reality in order to determine its authenticity or inauthenticity: "for I felt deep inside that I had to measure the real against something in me, and almost unconsciously I measured everything against that terrifying, sublime, black, magical world and I rubbed everything against this touchstone, to see if it were gold or a false yellow mica."²⁴ Convinced that Dürer's art captures an ineffable essence behind the surface of everyday life, the letter writer tests his experiences and observations about modern Germany against the "real" Germany portrayed by Dürer. When modern Germany does not pass the test, he declares, "I thought I was returning home, and for ever, and now I don't know whether I will stay or not."²⁵ The letter writer seems to admit to the irrationality of measuring Germany by the image and memory of his homeland that were formed in his childhood, and yet he concludes that modern Germany, having failed to live up to his vision of what it *ought* to be, can no longer be his permanent and true homeland.

What Hofmannsthal presents in this text is not a sober theoretical analysis of what homeland means, but rather the subjective and theoretically unarticulated experience of someone who is, in a deeply personal way, negotiating the difference between his unreal, ideal conception of *Heimat* and the incongruent reality. The gap between what he *wants* to see and what he *actually* sees is profoundly disturbing to him because it leaves him without a secure point of orientation now that he is back in Germany. Measured against his conception of wholeness, life in modern Germany seems inauthentic, and thus he repeatedly describes Germany as having a ghostly, spectral appearance. He confesses to his friend, "and something dwells in the world, into which I gaze through the train window – I have never been terrified of death, but I was terrified of what dwells out there, such non-living [*Nichtleben*] terrifies me."²⁶ He describes the *horror vacui* in a number of different ways, including as "a momentary floating above the groundlessness, above an eternal void"²⁷ or "like a puff of air, such an indescribable blowing-at-you of the eternal nothing, of the eternal nowhere, a breath not of death, but of not-life."²⁸ The letter writer experiences this feeling of horror as a crisis of perception, explaining that his "dark view" is the result of "a sort of quiet poisoning, a creeping infection" that afflicts those who have returned after a long absence, as he has.²⁹ In short, he believes that he is suffering from an "affliction of a European nature."³⁰

Van Gogh's Paintings and the Creative Act of Seeing

In the end, the antithesis that the letter writer draws between the authenticity of his childhood experience of Austria, on the one hand, and the inauthenticity of a modern-day, economically driven Germany, on the other, does not hold. His insistence that the historical reality that he confronts upon returning to Germany is somehow less real than his childhood memories represents an unsustainable flight from the concrete conditions that exist in his time, as well as from his inkling that his earliest associations with "real" Germany were constructed. Yet his nostalgic reflections on the power of Dürer's art do push him toward a valuable reckoning: the letter writer has become aware of the role that culture – particularly visual culture – has in the construction and representation of a collective identity. This realization paves the way for a final step in the development of his self-understanding, when he encounters the work of Van Gogh.

By the end of the third letter, the protagonist gives up on his desire to find his old homeland in Germany or Austria, saying: "And I don't want to die in this Germany. I know that I'm not old and am not sick – but where one does not want to die, there one should not live either."³¹ And again he states resolutely: "It's not like home here. To me it is like a great, restless, joyless lodging house. Who wants to die in a hotel, if it's not necessary. [...] I definitely want to see Austria again first. I say 'first' because I hardly have the intention of staying there."³² But as he abandons his search for his

homeland, the protagonist's sense of disorientation intensifies and culminates in a crisis. The letter writer's inner chaos, however, is the very precondition for his inner renewal, and Van Gogh's art plays a central role in his response to his own mounting crisis. Hofmannsthal shows in the final two letters of "Briefe des Zurückgekehrten" that the modern subject needs to find a new, creative mode of perceiving the world.

At the height of the letter writer's identity crisis, the protagonist happens upon a small gallery, where he sees the paintings of Van Gogh. He describes this encounter as follows:

There were in all about sixty paintings, middle-sized and small, a few portraits, otherwise mostly landscapes [...] At first sight these here seemed to me loud and restless, quite crude, quite strange; in order to see the first of them as pictures at all as a unity, I had to prepare myself – but then, then I saw, then I saw them all thus, each single one, and all together, and Nature in them, and the strength of the human soul, which here had transformed Nature, and tree and bush and field and slope which were painted here, and also that other strength, that which was behind the paint, the essence, that indescribable sense of fate – all this I saw, so that I lost the sensation of myself to these pictures, and got it powerfully, and lost it again! My dear friend, on account of this, what I'm trying to say and never will be able to say, I have written you this whole letter! But how could I put into words something so incomprehensible, something so sudden, so powerful, so indivisible! I could obtain photographs of the pictures and send them to you, but what could they give you – what could the pictures themselves give you of the impression they made upon me, which is probably something completely personal, a secret between my destiny, the paintings, and me.³³

In his viewing of Van Gogh's paintings, the protagonist first notices the painter's strange artistic style and only in a second perceptual step is he able to make out what the paintings depict. He immediately sees the artwork as the unique self-expression of an individual and he is conscious of his own sensory participation in the production of coherent pictures. Ethel Matala de Mazza suggests that Hofmannsthal presents Van Gogh's impressionistic art as paving the path away from the "symbolic order of a conceptually-based culture, which has long since become self-referential," toward a "creative vision."³⁴ The subject's visual encounter with the imaginary world of the visual arts, according to Matala de Mazza, liberates the creative potential in the subject because the painting has an immediate impact on the senses of the viewer, thereby allowing the individual to enjoy the creative potential of his own physical perception unfettered by concepts; whereas language exacerbates the fragmentation of the world, the visual arts are able to capture the simultaneity of things existing next to each other.

While Matala de Mazza's account provides an important insight insofar as it emphasizes the intensely subjective form of representation made possible through Van Gogh's painting, it overstates the case somewhat. First of all, the sense of immediacy, suddenness, sense of wholeness is still being mediated through the work of art. Secondly, and more importantly, the meaning of the artwork itself is mediated through the interpretive creativity of the subject and therefore does not operate entirely outside of the realm of concepts and symbols. As Ursula Renner observes, Hofmannsthal, in a quasi-religious turn, conceives of the soul as a dynamically productive realm of dreams and images; in the search for new means of expressing the workings of the soul in language and the visual arts, however, he comes to the bitter recognition that the artist's subjective perceptions and aesthetic representations are always already prefigured and coded by cultural patterns. The question of tradition and cultural inheritance therefore stubbornly returns.³⁵

Thus, while Van Gogh's art ushers in a new mode of seeing, he is still working within a broader European tradition and contributing to the European cultural inheritance of future generations. It is therefore no coincidence that the letter writer's description of Van Gogh's art is strangely reminiscent of his portrayal of Dürer's engravings. In Van Gogh's art he sees a "freshly ploughed field, a great avenue against the evening sky, a gorge with crooked fir-trees, a garden plot with the rear wall of a house, a farm cart with scraggy horses on a pasture, a copper bowl and an earthenware jug, a few peasants round a table eating potatoes [...]"³⁶Significantly, however, the elements that constitute the background in Dürer's pictures (such as landscape and peasants), are the central subjects of Van Gogh's paintings. Moreover, while the form of the objects in Dürer's engravings are clearly outlined in stark black lines, in Van Gogh's art form is created with vivid colours. The letter writer feels that the striking colours in Van Gogh's art convey the very essence of the represented objects, as though they were "new-born from the terrible chaos of not-life."³⁷Whereas the realism in Dürer's pictures obscures the viewer's involvement in the production of meaning, Van Gogh's art affirms and encourages this involvement. Because Van Gogh's art is meant to provide a profoundly subjective response to the world, it provides a fitting form of representation for a profoundly subject-oriented culture. Van Gogh provides the necessary synthesis to resolve the unsustainable antithesis between the narrator's rootedness in the seemingly unchanging Germany and Austria of Dürer and his involvement in the distressingly ephemeral Germany of the present. There is a suggestion in the text that the letter writer is starting to reconceptualize his understanding of collective identity. In a postscript to the letter in which he writes about the revitalizing encounter with Van Gogh's paintings, the letter writer concludes that this artist, of whom he has never heard before, must be of his generation, saying "[s]omething in me compels me to believe that he is of my generation."³⁸ The letter writer thus gives up on his earlier essentialist notion of an originary and timeless national identity, which is displaced by a recognition that his generation has the agency to create its own historically grounded collective identity.

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- ¹Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* [*Letters of a Man Who Returned*] in *Gesammelte Werke: Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen*, ed. Bernd Schoeller, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1979), 548-49 (hereafter cited in notes as *GWE*). (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.)
- ²*Ibid.*, 544.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 547.
- ⁴ See Jacques Le Rider's article, "Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the Austrian Idea of Central Europe," in *The Habsburg Legacy: National Identity in Historical Perspective*, ed. Ritchie Robertson and Edward Timms, *Austrian Studies* 5 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1994), 121-35.
- ⁵*GWE*, 544.
- ⁶Hofmannsthal, "Preuße und Österreicher: Ein Schema," *Gesammelte Werke: Reden und Aufsätze II*, ed. Bernd Schoeller, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1979), 459-61.
- ⁷*GWE*, 555.
- ⁸*Ibid.*, 545.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 556.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, 548.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, 547-48.
- ¹² Konrad Heumann, "'Stunde, Luft und Ort machen alles' Hofmannsthal's Phänomenologie der natürlichen Gegebenheiten," in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Neue Wege der Forschung*, ed. by Elsbeth Dangel-Pelloquin (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 122.
- ¹³*GWE*, 547-48.
- ¹⁴ Ursula Renner, "Die Zauberschrift der Bilder": *Bildende Kunst in Hofmannsthals Texten* (Freiburg in Breisgau: Rombach Druck- und Verlagshaus, 2000), 398.
- ¹⁵*GWE*, 557.
- ¹⁶ Matala de Mazza, *Dichtung als Schau-Spiel: Zur Poetologie des jungen Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), 23.
- ¹⁷*GWE*, 556.
- ¹⁸ Friedrich Kluge, *An Etymological Dictionary of the German Language*, trans. from the 4th German edition by John Francis Davis, (London: G. Bell, 1891), 84.
- ¹⁹*GWE*, 557.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 556.
- ²¹ The engravings that the letter writer refers to are Dürer's *The Sea Monster* (*Das Meereswunder*) and *Saint Jerome in His Study* (*Der heilige Hieronymus im Gehäus*).
- ²² Ursula Renner, "Die Zauberschrift der Bilder": *Bildende Kunst in Hofmannsthals Texten* (Freiburg in Breisgau: Rombach Druck- und Verlagshaus, 2000), 401.
- ²³*GWE*, 558.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, 559.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, 559.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, 562.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*, 561.
- ²⁸*Ibid.*, 562.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, 562.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*, 561.
- ³¹*Ibid.*, 560.
- ³²*Ibid.*, 560.
- ³³ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Colours*, in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Selected Prose*, trans. Mary Hottinger and Tania & James Stern (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1952), 147. (*Colours* consists of the last two letters of *Letters of a Man Who Returned*.)
- ³⁴ Matala de Mazza, *Dichtung als Schau-Spiel*, 15.
- ³⁵ Renner, *Bildende Kunst*, 42.
- ³⁶ Hofmannsthal, *Colours*, 147.
- ³⁷*GWE*, 565.
- ³⁸ Hofmannsthal, *Colours*, 147.

Bio-note:

Hang-Sun Kim is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor with the German Department at the University of Toronto. She received her MA in Germanic Languages and Literatures from the University of Toronto and completed her doctoral work at Harvard in 2012. Her dissertation examines Hugo von Hofmannsthal's literary representation of the crisis of authorship at the turn of the 20th century. Focusing on Hofmannsthal's fictional prose and poetological reflections, it explores the slippery relationship between the author and the medium of his art, the origin of the symbol, and the status of literature in an age of ever-growing media competition. Her current research interests include foreign language pedagogy, turn-of-the-century Vienna, philosophy of language, philosophy of aesthetics, and contemporary translingual literature by transcultural German-language authors.