

# On the Chaos in Chandos: Hofmannsthal on Modernity's Threshold



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In 1902, Hugo von Hofmannsthal published “A Letter,” in which a certain Lord Chandos writes to Francis Bacon to “excuse himself” for his “complete abandonment of literary activity.”<sup>1</sup> It’s difficult to think of another short literary work in German that has received as much attention as this “founding text of literary high modernism.”<sup>2</sup> Often, “A Letter” is introduced by literary critics as a straightforward account of falling into a “profound state of speechlessness,” and many commentators repeat Chandos’s presentation of this state, as if this work of literature were nothing more than a description of a character’s breakdown.<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarship has avoided the once popular reading of “A Letter” as a “document” of Hofmannsthal’s biographical travails,

<sup>1</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings*, trans. Joel Rotenberg (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005), 117, translation modified. All further references to this translation will be made parenthetically within the text, with the German edition’s page number following the translation’s page number; the translation has occasionally been modified. The German text will be quoted from Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelbänden: Erzählungen, Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe; Reisen*, ed. Bernd Schoeller with Rudolf Hirsch (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979).

<sup>2</sup>This quotation is from Andreas Huyssen, “The Disturbance of Vision in Vienna Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 5.3 (1998), 36; there is a variation on this statement in Thomas A. Kovach, “Introduction: Hofmannsthal Today,” in Kovach, ed., *A Companion to the Works of Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), 16. Klaus Müller-Richter discusses the text’s continuous reception in “Der Chandos-Brief von Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Eindeutigkeit, Klassizität oder unbegrenzte Interpretation,” *Moderne Sprachen* 40:1 (January 1996), 73.

<sup>3</sup>The quoted phrase is from Katherine Arens, “Linguistic Skepticism: Towards a Productive Definition,” *Monatshefte* 74:2 (1982), 146. Arens’s use of the phrase is

but many critics still interpret Chandos's statements as if they recorded a real crisis.<sup>4</sup> They seem to imagine their task as a Chandos diagnosis. "This character, Lord Chandos, has been taken at his word, which has directed attention away from literary knowledge of the text," Rudolf Helmstetter writes, and readers, he continues, have "remained on the level of the character and his narcissistic self-deceptions and repeated his misjudgments with more or less empathy and emphasis."<sup>5</sup> What would it mean to pay attention to the literary aspect of "A Letter"? What would literary knowledge look like here?

To read "A Letter" as a literary work first requires taking Chandos at his word, retracing his presentation of his crisis, but this can only be a preface to another kind of reading, one that no longer respects the integrity of anyone's word. Chandos writes that he has "completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently [zusammenhängend] about anything at all" (121, 465). He can still do these things, just not coherently; there's no speechlessness here. His problems begin with an experience of "abstract words...disintegrat[ing] in my mouth like rotten mushrooms;" he feels an "inexplicable uneasiness even pronouncing the words 'spirit,' 'soul,' or 'body'" (121, 465). Words are no longer vehicles, but impediments. They are too corporeal to pronounce with confidence even the word "body." This crisis comes about as he works on a collection, to be titled *Nosce te ipsum*, of apophthegmata or aphorisms, which would have included quotations from Chandos's contemporaries as well as from ancient sources, including the "description" ("Beschreibung") of architectural works (119, 463).<sup>6</sup> This plan is made possible, according to Chandos, by his "drunken" vision of "all of existence as one grand unity" (120, 463–64). He feels this when he drinks fresh milk and when he takes in "sweet and foamy nourishment" from books. He insists on his mastery in these situations: some "tousled rustic" brings the milk to Chandos's hunting lodge, and the books belong to him and are read in his study (120, 464). In his

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ironic and sums up a tradition of reading "A Letter"; her interpretation focuses on the "productive" aspects of Chandos's and Hofmannsthal's linguistic crises. For an example of an interpretation of the story as testimony to speechlessness, see Claudio Magris, "Hofmannsthal e la 'Lettera di Lord Chandos': la ruggine dei segni," *Paragone* 294 (1974), 34.

<sup>4</sup>Walter Jens calls "A Letter" a "document" in *Statt einer Literaturgeschichte* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), 61.

<sup>5</sup>Rudolf Helmstetter, "Entwendet: Hofmannsthals 'Chandos Brief,' die Rezeptionsgeschichte und die Sprachkrise," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 77:3 (September, 2003), 476. Helmstetter's reading closes with an emphasis on "A Letter" as a letter and a form of communication.

<sup>6</sup>For Hofmannsthal's use of Bacon's collection of apothegms, see H. Stefan Schultz, "Hofmannsthal and Bacon," *Comparative Literature* 13:1 (Winter 1961), 6–7.

experience of unity, "I had the intuition that everything was a symbol and every creature a key to another, and I felt I was surely the one who could take hold of each in turn and open as many of the others as would open [eine nach der andern bei der Krone zu packen und mit ihr so viele der andern aufzusperren, als sie aufsperrn könnte]" (120, 464). This is how he summarizes his intentions:

I wanted to open up [aufschließen] the fables and mythic tales which the ancients have handed down to us and in which painters and sculptors never cease to find mindless pleasure and show how they are the hieroglyphics of a secret, inexhaustible wisdom. (119, 463)

Chandos insists here on "opening up" things and himself and gaining access to insides and interiorities. But as he proceeds with his "encyclopedic" project, these putative hieroglyphs take on their own life and become "dizzying whirlpools which spin around and around and lead into the void," which is also a kind of inside (122, 466). He presents this change as a catastrophe, but his post-crisis situation is not all that different from his original state.<sup>7</sup> In this new relation to the world, "it is as if my body consisted entirely of enciphered messages [Chiffren] that opened everything up to me [die mir alles aufschließen]" (125, 469). But he can't understand this "everything." His "peculiar enchantment" resists words and reason: "I can no more present in rational language [ich könnte...ebensowenig in vernünftigen Worten darstellen...] what made up this harmony permeating me and the entire world, or how it made itself perceptible to me, than I can portray with any precision the inner movements of my intestines or the engorgement of my veins" (125, 469–70). The dream of his project seems to have been partially realized, as everything has been opened up to him, but he no longer seems to be the master. "A Letter" could be summarized as presenting a shift from one state, in which the world promises to be made of hieroglyphs, into another, in which Chandos becomes a cipher among ciphers without being able to represent in "rational language" himself or his new relations.<sup>8</sup>

Chandos breaks down when matter no longer gives way to his will, when he can no longer conceive of his project as simply entering and speaking through other bodies and texts.<sup>9</sup> His plan for an active, virile mastery of passive, feminized matter is undermined when he becomes a passive object overwhelmed by everyday objects and scenes. As an

<sup>7</sup>See Helmstetter, "Entwendet," 463.

<sup>8</sup>See Michael Morton, "Chandos and His Plans," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 62:3 (September 1988), 536.

<sup>9</sup>"I longed to enter into those naked, glistening bodies.... I wanted to disappear into them and speak out of them with their tongues" (119, 463).

example of his new state, he tells the story of how, hours after he has rats in his cellar poisoned, “this cellar opened up inside me [tut sich mir im Innern...auf], filled with the death throes of the pack of rats” (123, 467). “It was all in me,” he writes, and he recalls one detail in particular: that “a mother was there, whose dying young thrashed about her” (123–24, 468). This seems to be a mother rat, but Chandos just writes “mother,” perhaps because he can no longer clearly differentiate between humans and animals.

Chandos’s deconstitution allows him to enter into relations with others: with rats, famously, but also with Bacon. In the final sentence of “A Letter,” Chandos may write of his text as the “last letter I expect I will write to Francis Bacon,” but in the previous paragraph he writes of a future “language in which mute things speak to me and in which I will perhaps have something to say for myself someday when I am in the grave and must answer to an unknown judge” (128, 472). Chandos may no longer have faith in a certain kind of linguistic magic, but he still imagines another language with similar powers. Although he seems to have lost control, his tone remains that of a master: “among the many materials playing off each other, there are none I cannot flow into” (125, 469). And he writes his letter in an in-between language, which means that it should be read not only as a confession of inability and as yet another modernist “dream of finding that radically ‘other’ language, a dream which for too long has been celebrated as the core of modernist literature.”<sup>10</sup> It is something other than that; it demonstrates a new ability to write artificially, now, in the letter, in the manner of Bacon and others.<sup>11</sup> This is why “A Letter” can’t be read solely as a documentation of a past language crisis that is available to Chandos as an object of a narrative.

Rainer Nägele’s interpretation of “A Letter” focuses on Chandos’s desire to “overcome nonrelationality” and his lament about his loss of connection to the writers of antiquity and their ideas: “I could float around them and watch how they played off one another. But they had to do only with one another, and what was most profound, what was personal in my thinking was not part of their dance [das Tiefste, das Persönliche meines Denkens, blieb von ihren Reigen ausgeschlossen]” (122, 466). Nägele compares “A Letter” to Hofmannsthal’s early poems and shows how these texts are not the “expression of a

<sup>10</sup>Huysen, “The Disturbance of Vision,” 39.

<sup>11</sup>This point is made in Tobias Wilke, “Poetiken der idealen und der möglichen Sprache: Zu den intertextuellen Bezügen zwischen Novalis’ ‘Monolog’ und Hofmannsthal’s ‘Chandos-Brief,’” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 121:2 (2002), 263. On writing in “A Letter” see Uwe Steiner, *Die Zeit der Schrift, die Krise der Schrift und die Vergänglichkeit der Gleichnisse bei Hofmannsthal und Rilke* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1996), 22–26.

drunken unity of existence, but the expression of a search for such a unity.<sup>12</sup> “A Letter” stages this search, even as it seems to acknowledge the failure of linguistic means for overcoming distance. No magic, no rhetoric will allow Chandos to achieve this task or to speak in the future language that he imagines. But there is, perhaps, another way of writing that will allow him to approximate the lost and future languages. In the letter’s last paragraph, he writes of his text as an attempt to thank Bacon:

I would like, if it only were permitted me, to squeeze into the closing words of this, the last letter I expect I will write to Francis Bacon, all the love and gratitude, all the boundless admiration which I bear in my heart for the one who has done the most for my spirit—the foremost Englishman of my time—and which I will continue to bear in my heart until death makes it burst. (128, 472)

If indeed he were able to offer his thanks and love, this would allow him to bridge the gap that separates him from Bacon, and to write in a powerful way in this interregnum between magical languages. If the problem that arises from his crisis is the inability to reach into the depths of the world and present his findings, then such a speech act might offer a solution.<sup>13</sup> It would at least allow him to achieve the goal, mentioned at the beginning of the letter, of reaching inside and presenting himself: “I will have to show you what is inside me [mein Inneres]—a freak, a foible, a mental illness, if you like” (118, 462). For Chandos, this means showing his relation to rats as well as his gratitude. The task of presenting a lost unity that would encompass his identity and self-difference might be accomplished by crafting a felicitous performative letter.

The notion of performative speech is not a given for Hofmannsthal, who writes in a 1921 letter to Anton Wildgans that he conceives of “A Letter” as addressing the gap separating language and action:

This is a problem that has oft plagued me and made me anxious (in *Tor und Tod*, but most of all in Lord Chandos’s “Letter,” which you may be familiar with)—how do isolated individuals create a connection, via language, to society, and become hopelessly connected to it, whether or not they want to be? And further: how can a speaking person act—since speaking is already knowing and thus a way of moving beyond acting—this is my personal, eternal antinomy of speaking and acting, knowing and living, which won’t let me go.

<sup>12</sup>Rainer Nägele, “Die Sprachkrise und ihr dichterischer Ausdruck bei Hofmannsthal,” *German Quarterly* 43:4 (November, 1970), 726.

<sup>13</sup>On “A Letter” as an “inverted performative” and as a “dialogical act,” see Morton, “Chandos and His Plans,” 539.

Es ist das Problem das mich oft gequält u. beängstigt hat (schon im „Tor und Tod“, am stärksten in dem „Brief“ des Lord Chandos, den Sie vielleicht kennen)—wie kommt das einsame Individuum dazu, sich durch die Sprache mit der Gesellschaft zu verknüpfen, ja durch sie, ob es will oder nicht, rettungslos mit ihr verknüpft zu sein?—und weiterhin: wie kann der Sprechende noch handeln—da ja ein Sprechen schon Erkenntnis, also Aufhebung des Handelns ist—mein persönlicher mich nicht loslassender Aspekt der ewigen Antinomie von Sprechen und Tun, Erkennen u. Leben...<sup>14</sup>

Hofmannsthal criticism usually has him overcome this antinomy by his “Weg zum Sozialen,” his turn to more popular genres and to politics. An introduction to a recent anthology of essays on Hofmannsthal is exemplary of this perspective:

[T]here is no question that the crisis of language and cognition expressed by the fictional Lord Chandos reflects Hofmannsthal’s own experience of the limits of language as a tool to express reality, of the problematic nature of the external world and of the self. Nor is there any question that Hofmannsthal’s later career was to take a very different shape from his earlier career. Although he had continued to produce major works of lyric poetry and drama in 1899..., after 1899 he wrote no more lyric dramas, and only a small handful of poems. There are few instances in all literature of a writer abandoning the forms that had gained him fame, but Hofmannsthal did just that. Having recognized and criticized the alienation from life characterizing the Aestheticism that constituted the milieu of his earlier life and work, he was concerned henceforth to find what he called a “Weg zum Sozialen” in his writing.<sup>15</sup>

But “A Letter” already plays out this tension within itself and arrives at a preliminary conclusion, one that doesn’t require writing libretti. It shows how writing might already be social and a powerful form of acting.

Another Hofmannsthal letter supports the reading of “A Letter” as the account of Chandos’s attempt to speak performatively. Writing in 1902 to Fritz Mauthner, he compares “A Letter” to his dramatic fragment “Jupiter and Semele,” in which a woman demands that her lover, a poet, reveal himself to her completely, as a poet.<sup>16</sup> This poet’s

<sup>14</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, letter to Anton Wildgans, 14 February 1921, quoted in Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 31, ed. Ellen Ritter (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991), 296–97.

<sup>15</sup>Kovach, “Introduction: Hofmannsthal Today,” 4.

<sup>16</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, letter to Fritz Mauthner, 3 November 1902, quoted in Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 31, 286. All quotations from “Jupiter und Semele” are from Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Jupiter und Semele,” in Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelbänden: Dramen III*, ed. Bernd Schoeller with Rudolf Hirsch (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), 532–33. More materials related to “Jupiter und Semele” can be found in Hofmannsthal, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 18, 155–57.

interests seem aligned in many ways with Chandos's: "the poet's proper domain" in "Jupiter and Semele" is described by Hofmannsthal as "the relation of mind and body, idea and expression, human and animal (there have to be animals with which he has a very strong relationship; see *The Island of Doctor Moreau*)" ("das Verhältnis von Geist zu Körper, von Idee zum Ausdruck, Mensch zum Tier [es müssen Tiere vorkommen, zu denen er ein sehr starkes Verhältnis hat; conf. 'The Island of Doctor Moreau']"). The unnamed Semele-like figure feels that the poet is hiding part of himself, his poetic ability, from her: "the woman's train of thought: you pour your creative force out in another medium, in something that isn't me. It would be too much to possess you completely and at all times: but just once give yourself to me completely" ("Gedankengang der Frau: Du strömst in ein anderes Medium, als ich bin, Zeugungskraft aus. Immer dich ganz zu besitzen, wäre zu viel: aber einmal gib dich mir ganz"). The poet "warns" her not to make him show himself "completely," but she won't be dissuaded:

Train of thought in his answer: yes, I am able to give myself otherwise. To transform myself into such a powerful force of words that you would perish before it. Your very being would melt away and you'd be nothing but a puddle of slime, a pathetic reminder of a moment that you would never again rise to the heights of. Behold: when I utter the words "I" and "you," chaos breaks out.

Gedankengang seiner Antwort: Ja, ich vermag mich anders hinzugeben. In eine solche Wortgewalt mich zu verwandeln, vor der du vergehen müßtest. Dein Wesen würde hinschmelzen und du bliebest nichts als eine Kotlache, weinende Erinnerung an den einen Augenblick zu dem du nie mehr emporkommst. Denn sieh, indem ich ausspreche: Ich und Du, so bricht schon das Chaos herein.

They make a date for his self-revelation, and the Semele figure finds the poet consumed by the power of his own words: "she arrives, finds a flickering fire and him, overwhelmed, made insane, by the boundless magic of the simplest words that he emits: 'you—I'" ("Sie kommt hin, findet ein flackerndes Feuer und ihn, von dem grenzenlosen Zauber der einfachsten Worte, die er hervorstößt, 'Du—Ich,' überwältigt: wahnsinnig"). For Hofmannsthal, this chaotic result is exactly what the Semele figure wants. His sketch closes, like a fable, with this aphoristic statement: "Tragic foundational theme: the feminine wants to go where the feminine finds destruction" ("Tragisches Grundmotiv: Weibliches will hin, wo Weibliches Vernichtung findet").

It's possible to extend Hofmannsthal's brief comparison of "Jupiter and Semele" and "A Letter." One reading could cast Chandos as the

poet and Bacon as the lover. Bacon writes to Chandos to call him out of his isolation and “heighten” his “awareness” of his “inner state” (“den Zustand meines Innern”) and his sickness (117, 461). Like Semele, Bacon wants Chandos to reveal himself, if only to himself. Chandos replies reluctantly, just as the Jovian poet does, fearing the outbreak of violence from within. In another comparative reading, Chandos would be feminine and like the Semele character in his destructive demand for complete knowledge and self-revelation.

There is admittedly something Chandos-like about these interpretations that make texts into hieroglyphs that decode other hieroglyphic texts. If a shortcoming of many critical accounts of “A Letter” is their uncritical repetition of Chandos’s self-description, then an analogizing reading may just shift the mimetic register; it no longer repeats the character’s self-diagnosis, but it attempts to approximate the character’s hieroglyphic vision. And it may just slightly modify the autobiographical emphasis. This way of reading may not interpret “A Letter” as an expression of Hofmannsthal’s life, but it still relies on resonances within his oeuvre; the Hofmannsthal corpus fills the gap left by Hofmannsthal’s biography. Does this approach allow for “literary knowledge” of Hofmannsthal’s text? Is this the text’s literary aspect: its intertextuality and its minimal distance from the author’s life, a distance created in this interpretation by following suggestions from Hofmannsthal’s letters? Is the insistence on performativity literary? Have these slight changes in perspective really escaped a biographical interpretation of “A Letter” and a psychological portrait of a character? In any case, the comparison with “Jupiter and Semele” and the passages in Hofmannsthal’s letters may merely point to something that, in “A Letter,” really doesn’t need any more emphasis: Hofmannsthal’s interest in the power of language.

A reading inspired by Chandos could go much farther. It could use “Jupiter and Semele” to unlock the secret of the name “Chandos,” whose origins a more sober interpretation might locate in historical documents from Bacon’s era.<sup>17</sup> This reading could argue that the “chaos” that the poet fears in “Jupiter and Semele” surfaces anagrammatically within “Chandos,” kept from appearing as itself only by the interpolation of “nd,” a fragment of the ordering conjunction “und.” Only two letters separate Chandos and pure chaos. This reading would correspond to Chandos’s experience of “isolated words” as “dizzying whirlpools” and of “ciphers” that take the place of “rational language” (122, 466; 125, 469). “Everything came to pieces, the pieces broke into more pieces, and nothing could be encompassed by one idea,”

<sup>17</sup>See Schultz, “Hofmannsthal and Bacon,” 12–13.



he writes (122, 466). The word breaks down, like a rotting corpse, but lives “in its multiplication” (“en se multipliant”) in letters and in other words.<sup>18</sup> His very name, according to this interpretation, could be heralded as evidence of his incoherency’s virtuosity; even the coherence of chronology would be broken down, as Chandos would become his own creator who picks the name “Chandos” to contain chaos while also staying close to it.

The stress on the name “Chandos” as the result of an aesthetic choice is a helpful reminder that “A Letter” is not Hofmannsthal’s letter; it is, instead, a story by Hofmannsthal that includes a letter but that is more than just a letter. There is a modest, unremarkable paragraph at the beginning of Hofmannsthal’s text, where Chandos’s letter is introduced by an unnamed narrator:

This is the letter written by Philipp, Lord Chandos, the younger son of the Earl of Bath, to Francis Bacon (later Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Albans), in order to excuse himself for his complete abandonment of literary activity [um sich...zu entschuldigen]. (117, 461)

In this first sentence, “A Letter” exceeds Chandos’s letter by placing it in a frame, which leaves a number of questions unanswered. Who is speaking in this preface? Is the letter being presented as part of Bacon’s archive, or Chandos’s? Was the letter ever sent? Was it received? Is it the end of a correspondence, as it promises to be, or the beginning of another type of relation?

But most important for the current reading is the preface’s presentation of the letter as an excuse. Although Chandos never presents his letter as an apology or even as a successful offering of gratitude, the preface does its best to encourage an interpretation of the letter as what J. L. Austin would call a “pure” or “explicit performative.”<sup>19</sup> In this excuse, if this is what it is, Chandos does more than just try to free himself from guilt and pay off a debt in a restricted economy. He spells out the reasons for his “abandonment,” and he revels not only in his expectation of a future language but in the shamelessly shameful exposition of his current existence, which is punctuated by quasi-feral moments in which he communicates with, or is penetrated by, things and animals. Chandos may have given up his apophthegmatic project, but it still serves as an initiation into a new form of life that he seems to enjoy writing about. Paul de Man makes clear how

<sup>18</sup>See Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres*, ed. Yves-Gérard Le Dantec (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 104.

<sup>19</sup>J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 30, 79–91.

pleasurable excuses like Chandos's can be. "The more there is to expose," de Man writes, "the more there is to be ashamed of; the more resistance to exposure, the more satisfying the scene, and, especially, the more satisfying and eloquent the belated revelation, in the later narrative, of the inability to reveal."<sup>20</sup> Beyond the gratification that may come from revealing his impotence, perhaps the primary reason for Chandos's satisfaction lies in the thought that this speech act, be it thanks or be it an apology, might bridge the gap that separates him from Bacon. If language can no longer be magic, then at least it can achieve more mundane effects, as the expression of thanks, as the offering of an excuse.

But the effects of speech acts are not always mundane. In the letter's second paragraph, Chandos explains the motivation behind his letter: "I would like to give you *the response that you deserve* [wie Sie es um mich verdienen], I want to open myself up to you entirely [ich... möchte mich Ihnen ganz aufschließen], but I do not know how I am to set about it" (117, 461, emphasis added). The appearance here of yet another "opening up" calls attention to itself. Isn't this what caused all the trouble for Chandos? He wanted the world to open up to him, and it did, thereby taking from him the ability to speak coherently. In "Jupiter and Semele," this act unleashes destruction. It might, in this letter, induce a similar crisis in Bacon. It might be a form of potlatch, meant to drive Bacon mad and reduce him to silence.<sup>21</sup> Chandos's letter, read in this way, can no longer be viewed as an innocent thank-you note or as a report given by one well-meaning friend to another. Just as the words "Ich und Du" call up chaos in "Jupiter and Semele," Chandos's address may have disastrous results, and his long silence, for which he excuses himself, may have been hesitation before this act.

Readers of "A Letter" should not assume good will and friendliness in Chandos and Bacon's relationship. What could be more aggressive than inquiring of a writer why he hasn't written and whether, by the way, he might be mentally ill? What kind of response does this "deserve"? In its first publication in a book, "A Letter" appeared with "Tale of the 672<sup>nd</sup> Night," "Cavalry Story," and "An Incident in the Life of Marshall de Bassompierre," all of which present a world far removed from the warmth and sincerity that most readers seem

<sup>20</sup>Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 286. On excuses, see also J.L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175–204.

<sup>21</sup>On madness and potlatch, see Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 34–70.

to imagine in "A Letter."<sup>22</sup> Robbery, plague, summary execution, threatening Doppelgänger: these are the central events and figures in Hofmannsthal's contemporaneous texts, the ones he meant to be read along with "A Letter." Letters aren't friendly in these stories. In "An Incident...", they are erotic inquires. In "Tale of the 672<sup>nd</sup> Night," the isolated merchant's son receives a letter in which his faithful servant is accused of an unspeakable crime; this letter propels the son into the city, where he meets a gruesome end.<sup>23</sup> And in his contemporaneous poems, Hofmannsthal presents a tension between linguistic magic and a world of "ugliness and vulgarity."<sup>24</sup>

These other texts don't determine the reading of "A Letter," which may just as well have been meant to offer some respite at the end of a collection of disturbing stories. But these associations should give pause to any reading that would ignore the *Wortgewalt*, the power and violence of words, at the center of "A Letter" and its contemporaneous texts. Chandos's letter may be an attempt to write performatively, to offer an excessive and overwhelming gift. Like many other texts on "modernity's threshold," Hofmannsthal's registers "writing experiences" that "point to Semele's fate."<sup>25</sup> These are the moments when the rats come in, when an *Innere* is turned inside out and guts show up where interiority might have been expected. This is not the threshold to modernity, but the threshold of modernity, one that appears in many modern and contemporary texts as a threat and a promise. In Chandos's letter, Semele's fate looms in his proposal of another way of reading and writing, one that is at once anagrammatic and performative, one that pays attention to materiality, incoherency, and violence. The literary aspect of "A Letter" is not a stable condition, but a tension between its psychological character portrait and at least two movements away from it: the momentary falling back from psychology into a reading that only sees letters; and the attempt to overstep psychology and become some kind of action. There can be literary knowledge of "A Letter" only for those who read like Chandos and not just about him, who recognize his desire for a performative language and emulate his attention to the letter.

<sup>22</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Das Märchen der 672. Nacht und andere Erzählungen* (Vienna: Wiener Verlag, 1905).

<sup>23</sup>See Bernhard Dotzler, "Beschreibung eines Briefes: Zum handlungsauslösenden Moment in Hugo von Hofmannsthals 'Märchen der 672. Nacht,'" *Hofmannsthal-Forschungen* 8 (1985): 49–54.

<sup>24</sup>Nägele, "Die Sprachkrise," 724.

<sup>25</sup>Rainer Nägele, *Lesarten der Moderne* (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 1998), 15. In this way, it is similar to Antonin Artaud's *Correspondence with Jacques Rivière* and the epistolary moments in *Pèse-nerfs* and other Artaud texts.