

‘Der Gehalt soll überall für mich [...] aktuell sein’: the relevance of Hofmannsthal’s *Sprachskepsis* to his Choice of Genre

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Abstract

Of the variety of genres that Hofmannsthal (1875–1929) used throughout his literary career, three, lyric verse, the fictive letter and comedy, are associated with particular periods. The first is a product of what Hofmannsthal termed his *Jugendzeit*, the period which ended around the turn of the century. The fictive letter is a genre used by Hofmannsthal mainly, although not exclusively, during his late-twenties to mid-thirties, a transitional period during which Hofmannsthal was most troubled by *Sprachskepsis*, or doubt in the efficacy of language to express thought and abstract concepts, and doubted his own artistic ability. Hofmannsthal used comedy increasingly as he matured artistically, once he had come through this dark period. The article examines the relevance, during Hofmannsthal’s transitional and mature periods, of his *Sprachskepsis* to his use of genres that seem to be quite disparate by considering three works, *Ein Brief* and *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten*, both fictive letters dating from the first decade of the twentieth century, and *Der Schwierige*, a late comedy from the final decade of his life.

The article first considers the relevance of *Sprachskepsis*, a phenomenon associated with not just Hofmannsthal but others among his intellectual contemporaries in *fin-de-siècle* Austria, to Hofmannsthal’s personal philosophy and demonstrates that he regarded an inability to communicate as an issue that concerned not just the artist but any individual, since it impinged upon the ability of the individual to mature into a socially engaged adult or, in Hofmannsthal’s terminology, achieve *Existenz*. Using examples from the three different works, the article argues that Hofmannsthal uses the onset of *Sprachskepsis* as the indication that the protagonist in question is beginning to experience the transition from the solipsistic world of his youth and early adulthood, or *Praeexistenz*, to *Existenz*.

Comparing and contrasting the two genres, the article argues that they share a common characteristic, which may not be immediately apparent; they are both forms of conversation. This makes both genres particularly apt for a depiction of *Sprachskepsis*, since conversation is predicated on an ability to communicate, a skill which *Sprachskepsis* effectively impairs.

Hofmannsthal’s choice of comedy during his later years is readily explained. Hofmannsthal himself endorsed comedy as an effective medium in which to depict how the individual can

become socially engaged, not least because the convention, at least in classical comedy, that it concludes by uniting a pair of lovers who have been kept apart by a series of misunderstandings, chimed with Hofmannsthal's own observation that marriage, the union of two individuals, is a metaphor for the binding of the individual to Life by becoming socially engaged.

His choice of the fictive letter during a particularly difficult period of his literary development can be understood in the context of Freud's theories of psychology and psychoanalysis, in which Hofmannsthal was much interested. The fictive letter can be interpreted as a form of self-help therapy, as if Hofmannsthal were articulating his deeply felt and personal problems to a trusted confidant.

There is, therefore, a close relationship between Hofmannsthal's *Sprachskepsis* and the two genres in which he chose to express himself at different periods of his literary career.¹

Keywords: Hofmannsthal, *Sprachskepsis*, genre, fictive letter, comedy, *Existenz*, *Praeexistenz*



As a consequence of the so-called *Chandoskrise* [Chandos-crisis] that followed the publication in 1902 of *Ein Brief* [A Letter] by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), this fictional letter, also known as *Brief des Lord Chandos an Francis Bacon* [Lord Chandos' Letter to Francis Bacon], is seen as exemplifying *Sprachskepsis* or *Sprachproblematik*; that is to say, doubt in the efficacy of words to express thought and abstract concepts.² *Sprachskepsis* is a phenomenon associated with not only Hofmannsthal but also *fin-de-siècle* Austrian intellectuals in general, intellectuals such as Fritz Mauthner (1849–1923), the Austrian journalist and essayist, and the philosopher Ludwig von Wittgenstein (1889–1951).³

However, although an upsurge of interest in *Sprachproblematik* coincided with the turn of the century, this was not its first appearance in German literature. Thirty years earlier, Nietzsche

¹ This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).

² *Ein Brief* was first published in the Berlin paper *Ein Tag* in October 1902. The terms *Sprachskepsis* and *Sprachproblematik*, being terms of art, will be used without further translation.

³ Mauthner, who published his *Beiträge zur Kritik der Sprache* [Contributions to the critique of language] in 1901–2, maintained that language is an appropriate medium for communication in a social or artistic context but not for communicating truth and reality, since all language is metaphorical (Robinson, 2002: 165). His ideas and theories were taken up and developed by Wittgenstein, who, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* published in 1921, considers that all philosophy is, in essence, *Sprachkritik*, since thoughts can only be mediated through language, which not only 'dresses up' the original thought but has limited powers of expression. Robertson suggests that the idiosyncratic orthography and typography devised by Stefan George (1868–1933) for his poetry is another manifestation of *Sprachskepsis* (Robertson, 2002: 165).

(1844–1900) had raised the issue of *Sprachnot* [the inadequacy of language] in the course of his polemic against what he saw as German philistinism, in the four essays subsequently published together as *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* [Untimely Meditations]; in one of these he quoted Schopenhauer (1788–1860) when deploring the ‘*grenzenlose Dilapidation der deutschen Sprache der “Jetztzeit”*’ [the limitless deterioration of the German language of the “present day”]:

“Wenn dies so fortgeht”, sagt [Schopenhauer] einmal, “so wird man anno 1900 die deutschen Klassiker nicht mehr recht verstehen, indem man keine andere Sprache mehr kennen wird, als den Lumpen-Jargon der noblen ‘Jetztzeit’ — deren Grundcharakter Impotenz ist.”⁴

[“If this continues,” [Schopenhauer] says somewhere, “by 1900, people will no longer understand the German classics properly, since they will no longer know any language other than the ragged jargon of the elegant ‘present day’ — a language whose fundamental character is impotence.”]⁵

One might wonder how a writer can express himself, if he doubts what is, essentially, the raw material of his art. This article is concerned with not that question but with a more subtle effect of Hofmannsthal’s *Sprachskepsis* on his creativity: its possible influence on his choice of genre at different stages of his literary development. During his career, Hofmannsthal employed a variety of genres, ranging from the lyric poetry on which his precociously early reputation rested to the libretti written in collaboration with Richard Strauss, as well as the dramas of his mature work, including both fiction and much non-fiction — essays, critiques, monographs and other forms of writing. Of these, two proved, as this article will demonstrate, to be particularly appropriate vehicles for the *topos* of *Sprachskepsis*. These two genres are represented in this article by three works; comedy by *Der Schwierige* [The Difficult Man]; the fictive letter by *Ein Brief* and also *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* [The Letters from the Man who Returned].⁶ The choice of these works is not arbitrary. As shall be seen, they are all particularly relevant to the question of *Sprachskepsis*. They also enjoy other thematic links in common. Those between *Ein Brief* and *Der Schwierige* were drawn by Hofmannsthal himself and this article will show that there may be a closer thematic link between the comedy and *Die Briefe* than might at first appear.

The next section will place these works in the context of Hofmannsthal’s literary development and discuss the relevance of his personal philosophy and concept of *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz* to his artistic development; the following section will examine the effect of

⁴ From the first essay, ‘David Strauss, der Bekenner und der Schriftsteller’, page 221.

⁵ Translations from German are my own. Verse quotations are rendered into prose. All quotations are only translated at their first appearance.

⁶ The titles will henceforth only be given in German, *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* being abbreviated to *Die Briefe*.

Sprachskepsis on each of the protagonists and the final section before the conclusion will compare and contrast both the two genres and the three texts.⁷

1. Background

1.1 Hofmannsthal's literary career

Writing to Max Pirker in 1921 (Aufzeichnungen 369–70), Hofmannsthal summarised his career as a dramatist by dividing it into three periods.⁸ The first of these, his '*lyrische subjektive Epoche* [lyrical-subjective epoch]', comprises his '*Jugend-oeuvre bis zirka 1899* [youthful work up to around 1899]'; the final one, which began around 1907, he describes as the '*Epoche, worin die Erfüllung traditioneller Forderung deutlich als Ziel hervortritt* [epoch in which the realisation of traditional demands clearly emerges as the aim]'; and the period in between these two is characterised as the one in which he sought the '*Anschluß an große Form* [connection to high form (of art)]', in other words, an experimental period. A few years earlier, Hofmannsthal had reviewed his literary career to date in *Ad me ipsum*, the self-analytical notes which he began around 1916. Under the heading '*Zur Darstellung meines Lebens* [As a description of my life]', he noted that his *Jünglingszeit* [youth] ended in 1899 and his *Gegenwart* [present] began 'around 1912' but made no comment on the intervening years (A: 232).

Der Schwierige, which Hofmannsthal began writing in earnest in 1917 and which was first performed in 1921, is thus a mature work from his third and final epoch as defined in his letter to Pinker or his *Gegenwart* according to his 'Darstellung meines Lebens'. *Ein Brief*, published in 1902, and *Die Briefe*, published in two instalments in 1907–08, are, on the other hand, both from that intermediate period which Hofmannsthal saw as one when he was still searching for a high form of art as far as his development as a dramatist was concerned, and in which he discerned nothing noteworthy in his general literary career.⁹ This is the decade described as a period which 'we think of as [...] one of deep withdrawal: of the most tormenting doubts on the part of Hofmannsthal about [...] the capacity of words *per se* to communicate' (Gilbert 1963: 31). These doubts were brought into the public domain by the publication of *Ein Brief*.

⁷ The terms *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz* are Hofmannsthal's own terms of art, for which there is no exact translation.

⁸ Aufzeichnungen, Gedichte und Lyrische Dramen, Prosa I, Prosa II. *Der Schwierige* and *Briefe 1900–1909* will henceforth be designated 'A', 'GLD', 'P1', 'P2', 'DS' and 'B' respectively.

⁹ The first three letters were first published in the Berlin paper *Morgen* in 1907 and the remaining two under the title 'Das Erlebnis des Sehens [The Experience of Seeing]' in *Kunst und Künstler* in 1908. The fifth letter, when published separately, is frequently given the title 'Farben [Colours]'.

1.2 Hofmannsthal and *Sprachskepsis*

Ein Brief was, however, neither the first manifestation nor the resolution of Hofmannsthal's *Sprachskepsis*. Requadt, who considers that Nietzsche must be counted as one of Hofmannsthal's forerunners in the matter of language criticism (1968: 41), observes that Hofmannsthal, born around the time that Nietzsche was publishing *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, 'kennt die Sprachnot seit seinen [d.h. Hofmannsthals] Anfängen und wird ihrer bis zuletzt nicht ledig [was aware of the inadequacy of language from his [Hofmannsthal's] earliest days and to the end was never free from it]' (1968: 40). Furthermore, the *Chandoskrise* was:

nichts Einmaliges und völlig Neues in Hofmannsthals Entwicklung, sondern die Verdichtung einer schon seit Jahren fälligen Entscheidung, die nun erst im Bereich des Sprachlichen akut wird, da die lyrische Schaffenskraft versiegt (Requadt 1968:52).

[neither an isolated nor a completely unprecedented incident in Hofmannsthal's development but the crystallisation of a long overdue decision, that was only then becoming acute as regards matters of language, as his facility to write lyric poetry declined.]

Hofmannsthal's lyric verse had come to the attention of literary Vienna in the early 1890s, particularly after Hermann Bahr had quoted two poems by 'Loris' in his essay 'Symbolisten' and declared that they exemplified Symbolism.¹⁰

[Das zweite Gedicht] enthält, rein und deutlich, den ganzen Symbolismus und es enthält nichts, das nicht Symbolismus wäre (Bahr, 1968:111).

[[The second poem] comprises, purely and clearly, complete Symbolism and nothing that would not be Symbolism.]

It is a moot point whether Hofmannsthal abandoned lyric verse as a result of a decline in his facility to write lyric poetry or because he became dissatisfied with the genre, perhaps as his latent *Sprachskepsis* began to surface. For whatever reason, his output in this genre decreased significantly towards the end of the decade. It may, therefore, not be entirely coincidental that in 1895, some seven years before the appearance of *Ein Brief*, Hofmannsthal deploras the overuse of words in *Eine Monographie* [A Monograph], an appreciation of the actor Friedrich Mitterwurzer (1844–1897):

Die Leute sind es nämlich müde, reden zu hören. Sie haben einen tiefen Ekel vor den Worten:
Denn die Worte haben sich vor die Dinge gestellt. Das Hörensagen hat die Welt verschluckt.

¹⁰ 'Loris' was one of the pseudonyms under which Hofmannsthal published while still a student at the Akademische Gymnasium in Vienna. Hermann Bahr (1863–1934) considered Symbolism to be the literary movement that would supplant Naturalism, as discussed in his collection of essays published under the title *Zur Überwindung des Naturalismus* [On the Overcoming of Naturalism], one of which was 'Symbolisten [Symbolists]', first published separately in 1892. The poems Bahr quoted are 'Die Töchter der Gärtnerin [The Gardener's Daughters]' and 'Mein Garten [My Garden]'.

[...] so ist eine verzweifelte Liebe zu allen Künsten erwacht, die schweigend ausgeübt werden: die Musik, das Tanzen [...] (P1:228.)¹¹

[People are indeed tired of listening to talk. They have a deep disgust of words, which have got in the way of things. Gossip has swallowed the world [...] and so, in despair, people have begun to prefer all arts, which are practised without the use of words [...]]

1.3 Hofmannsthal's philosophy of *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz*

However, Hofmannsthal's *Sprachskepsis* is not merely a concern about language in an artistic context. It is, rather, bound up with his personal philosophy which conceives life as, ideally, a progression from *Praeexistenz* to *Existenz*, Hofmannsthal's own terminology for, on the one hand, the solipsism and confidence of youth and early adulthood, and, on the other, the social consciousness of the mature adult. In *Ad me ipsum*, he describes this process of emerging from *Praeexistenz* and entering *Existenz* variously as: 'Verknüpfung mit dem Leben. Durchdringen aus der Praeexistenz zur Existenz [Connection with Life. Getting Through from Praeexistenz to Existenz]' (A: 214); 'Weg zum Leben [Way to Life]' (A: 217); 'Weg zum Sozialen [Way to the Socially Engaged]' (A: 217).¹²

The relevance of this philosophy to *Sprachskepsis* is that Hofmannsthal considered *Praeexistenz* to be a period during which words have a magical power to enchant and intoxicate hearers and readers alike. This power, exercised by the poet himself, is illustrated when, in the 1892 verse drama *Gestern* [Yesterday], Fortunio says to the protagonist, the young aesthete Andrea, 'Dein Wort hat uns berauscht und nicht der Wein [your word and not the wine intoxicated us]' (GLD: 154). There is also an earlier allusion to this 'Wort-magie [magic of words]' in the following couplet from 'Für mich ...' ['For me ...'], a poem from 1890 in ghasel form, in which the aesthetic poet describes his 'special power to conjure magical properties from the apparently ordinary outside world' (Vilain, 2000: 191), with particular reference to words:¹³

Das Wort, das Andern Scheidemünze ist,
Mir ist's der Bilderquell, der schimmernde reiche (GLD: 471)¹⁴

[The word, which is like small change to other people, / is to me the shimmering and rich source of images.]

¹¹ First published in *Die Zeit* under the 'Loris' byline.

¹² The English terminology will be used henceforth.

¹³ A ghasel is a verse form, originally found in Arab and Indian literature, in which the rhyme scheme is AA, BA, CA, DA etc. Each couplet must contain a complete thought. It was a popular verse form in nineteenth-century German literature, being used by, amongst others, Liliencron, Rückert and Heine as well as Hofmannsthal.

¹⁴ Hofmannsthal's use of the term 'Scheidemünze' for everyday talk anticipates a similar use of the term by Rilke in 1897, when he contrasts the poet's language with the 'Scheidemünze' and 'Tauschmittel des Alltags [everyday change]'. (Rainer Maria Rilke *Werke*, ed. Manfred Engel et al., 4 vols., Frankfurt and Leipzig: Insel, 1996. Vol IV, 54).

However, *Wort-magie* cannot be carried over into *Existenz*, as Hofmannsthal makes clear in this observation from *Ad me ipsum* in connection with another verse drama from the 1890s, *Der Kaiser und die Hexe* [The Emperor and the Witch].

[Der Kaiser] besteht in einer Verfehlung gegen die Wort-magie. Die magische Herrschaft über das Wort das Bild das Zeichen darf nicht aus der Prae-existenz in die Existenz hinübergenommen werden (A: 215-6).

[[The emperor] is mistaken as regards the magic of words. The magical power over the word, the image, the symbol may not be carried over from Praeexistenz into Existenz.]

Sprachskepsis, by indicating to the individual that he is beginning to doubt the power of the ‘magic of words’, is a sign that he needs consciously to make the transition from *Praeexistenz* to *Existenz*. In the context of this personal philosophy, the *Chandoskrise* marks the beginning of Hofmannsthal’s own journey from the one, epitomised by the lyrical-subjective work of his *Jünglingzeit*, to the other, when he was able to produce work in what he regarded as a high form of art. The *Sprachkrise* he experienced around the turn of the century was not simply a prolonged case of writer’s block but a crisis of style, necessary because ‘development out of his aesthetic *Praeexistenz* as a poet involved abandoning the “Wort-magie” of his early poems’ (Yates, 1966:6). Hofmannsthal needed to find, through a different style, the Way to Life which would enable him to escape from *Praeexistenz* and achieve *Existenz*. The constant central problem of Hofmannsthal’s work is founded on the opposition between these two concepts (Yates, 1966:4-5).

‘Getting Through from *Praeexistenz* to *Existenz*’ was therefore essential to Hofmannsthal not merely *qua* artist but more importantly *qua* individual. It is the role of speech as a prime social element and the concept of ‘Connection with Life’ which are the ‘threads’ to which Hofmannsthal refers in this note from *Ad me ipsum*:

—Es zielt auf die Rede als soziales Element, als *das* soziale Element—und so führen Fäden von hier zurück zu Claudio, nach vorne zu dem Lord Chandos des “Briefes” und zu dem “Schwierigen” (A: 231; added emphasis).

[—It is aimed as speech as social element, as the social element—and so threads lead from here back to Claudio and forward to Lord Chandos of the ‘Brief’ and to the ‘Schwierigen’.]

Claudio, the protagonist of *Der Tor und der Tod* [The Fool and Death], fails to achieve a ‘Connection with Life’, learning that his whole life has been nothing but an aesthetic experience only when Death claims him:¹⁵

Warum, du Tod,
Mußt du mich lehren erst das Leben sehen,
Nicht wie durch einen Schleier, wach und ganz,

¹⁵ *Der Tor und der Tod*, a verse drama, was first published in 1894.

Da etwas weckend, so vorübergehen (GLD: 219)?

[*Why, Death, / must you only now teach me to see Life / awake and complete instead of through a veil, / so that just as it wakes something in me, it passes me by?*]

2. Sprachskepsis and the protagonists

2.1 *Ein Brief*: Lord Chandos

Lord Chandos is a fictive early seventeenth-century young English nobleman and an established writer, who happens to be roughly the same age as Hofmannsthal was in 1902. Chandos is writing in response to an enquiry from Francis Bacon, his sometime mentor, who has expressed his concern that Chandos has published nothing for two years. His short answer is, ‘*Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen* (P2: 11) [I have completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently]’ — therefore he cannot write. He concludes with the gloomy prognosis, ‘*daß ich auch im kommenden und im folgenden und in allen Jahren dieses meines Lebens kein englisches und kein lateinisches Buch schreiben werde* (P2:19) [that I shall write a book neither in English nor in Latin in the coming, the following and all the years of this my life]’.

Thus far, one can appreciate why Hofmannsthal’s contemporaries, noting certain similarities between Chandos and his creator (their age and youthful success with a genre which they had suddenly abandoned), assumed that *Ein Brief* was a personal apologia, thinly disguised in an historical mask, for the sudden decline in Hofmannsthal’s lyric verse already discussed. Yet in a letter dated 16th January, 1903 to his friend Leopold von Andrian, Hofmannsthal insists that this was not his purpose; his prime object in writing *Ein Brief* was to recreate the style of the early seventeenth-century Bacon, whose *Essays* he had recently read (B:100).¹⁶ To make the work more than ‘*ein einziges bloß formales, costümiertes Totengespräch* [merely a stilted dialogue between corpses in fancy dress]’, the topic ‘*soll überall für mich und mir nahestehende aktuell sein* [must above all be topical for me and those close to me]’. However, it is clear from Hofmannsthal’s notes in *Ad me ipsum* that, with the benefit of hindsight as he developed his theory of *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz*, he rationalised *Ein Brief* in the light of his personal philosophy.

Chandos’ problem is not simply an artistic one; it is also, and primarily, a social one. His *Sprachkrise* first became apparent as an inability not to write but to discourse on any topic, elevated or commonplace. He became incapable of pronouncing certain words, especially those denoting abstract concepts, which seemed to crumble in his mouth ‘*wie modrige Pilze* [like

¹⁶ Extracts from the letter are quoted both by Tarot (1970: 360, 362) and Gilbert (1963: 29).

mouldy mushrooms]'. This inability gradually spread like a '*fressender Rost* [corrosive rust]' so that he now finds social conversation unbearable, since he considers it to consist of nothing but formulaic trivialities about local worthies, and so he discharges his quotidian obligations in connection with the management of his estates in a manner that borders on the taciturn.

To add to his wretchedness, books, especially the classics to which he turns for comfort, no longer communicate anything to him, because he finds himself constantly sucked into a vain analysis of the individual words into which the texts fragment. Words, the medium whereby Chandos, like Hofmannsthal, once charmed his readers, now have an hypnotic power over him, becoming like:

Augen, die mich ansstarrten 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 (P2: 13).

[eyes, which stared at me and into which I must stare back: they are whirlpools; to look into them makes me giddy; round and round they turn without ceasing; through them you come into a void.]

Chandos contrasts his present unhappy state with '*Damals* [Then]', his years of early manhood, when not only did he enjoy mastery over words but also felt as though he were at one with a vast cosmos:

mir erschien [...] in einer Art von andauernder Trunkenheit das ganze Dasein als eine große Einheit; in allem fühlte ich Natur (P2:10).

[all existence seemed to me [...], in a kind of permanent intoxication, like a great unity; I felt Nature in all.]

If Hofmannsthal's concept of *Existenz* and *Praeexistenz* is applied to Chandos, it is clear that, having left behind his solipsistic *Praeexistenz*, he now needs to find the 'Way to Life' which will lead him to *Existenz* but is being prevented from doing so by his *Sprachskepsis*. In order to achieve mature social consciousness, Chandos must be able to connect with other people; this necessitates an ability to communicate, which in turn necessitates faith in language. Chandos' *Sprachskepsis* is limiting him not only as an artist but also as an individual, because he is unable to communicate with people except superficially.

Chandos faces the prospect of a lifelong '*Anstand des Schweigens* [decency of silence]'.¹⁷ The dreariness of a life in which he can no longer even think coherently is relieved only by

¹⁷ See for example:

Die Intro-version als Weg in die Existenz. (Der mystische Weg.) [...] Chandos-brief. Die Situation des Mystikers ohne Mystik. [...] der Anstand des Schweigens als Resultat (A:215).
[Introversion as the way to Existenz (the mystic way.) [...] The Chandos letter. [...] The situation of the mystic without mystique. [...] the result, the decency of silence.]

moments which he is unable to explain other than in terms of a mystic or quasi-religious experience but which he finds intensely invigorating.¹⁸ They are moments when he experiences an overwhelming empathy with commonplace objects around him, animate and inanimate, which seem to be communicating wordlessly with him. If Chandos is to write again, it can only be in the language of these mute things, but, he sadly concludes, that is unlikely to happen this side of the grave.¹⁹

2.2 *Die Briefe des Zurückgekehrten: the Zurückgekehrter*²⁰

Perhaps Hofmannsthal was partially motivated to return to the topic of *Sprachskepsis* in order to correct the impression that *Ein Brief* was simply the expression of a personal problem affecting him as an artist. Be this as it may, given that he, as already discussed, made no distinction between artist and non-artist, it is unsurprising that, when he does return to the theme five years later in *Die Briefe*, he makes it clear that the problem is neither confined to the artist nor to a bygone age. The Zurückgekehrter (being anonymous, he is a cipher for every man) is both contemporary (the five letters are dated April/May 1901) and, although not without culture, not a man of letters.²¹

Like Chandos, the Zurückgekehrter, who is returning to Austria via Germany after an absence of eighteen years, is increasingly troubled by a sense of being unable to communicate with the people he meets, in contrast to the ease with which he was able to converse with anyone he met the world over during his travels. This he attributes to a lack in his German contemporaries of both precision in what they say, as if they are thinking about too much at the same time, and what Heine terms ‘non-verbal communication’ skills, expression, gesture, tone of voice:

Wo soll ich eines Menschen Wesen suchen, wenn nicht in seinem Gesicht, in seiner Rede, in seinen Gebärden? Meiner Seele, in ihren Gesichtern, ihren Gebärden, ihren Reden find ich die gegenwärtigen Deutschen nicht (P2: 287).

[Where should I look for the essence of a person, if not in his face, his talk, his gestures? Upon my soul, I find the Germans of today in neither their faces, nor their gestures, nor their talk.]

Hofmannsthal’s concept of the ‘*Anstand des Schweigens*’ is echoed by Wittgenstein in his foreword to the *Tractatus* when he observes that ‘[...] wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen [...] one must remain silent with regard to that about which one cannot speak.’

¹⁸ In *Ad me ipsum*, Hofmannsthal refers to such episodes as ‘Momente der Erhöhung’ (A:216), which roughly equates to Joyce’s ‘moments of epiphany’.

¹⁹ ‘[...] eine Sprache, in welcher die stummen Dinge zu weilen zu mir sprechen [...] a language, in which mute things from time to time speak to me] (P2:20)’.

²⁰ Since the protagonist of *Die Briefe* is anonymous, I shall refer to him as ‘the Zurückgekehrter’.

²¹ According to Gilbert (1963:30 fn. 6), the Zurückgekehrter is ‘a composite figure, embodying moods, experiences and reactions of Hofmannsthal as well as of his friends [...]’. He admits to having passed forty, so is somewhat older than Hofmannsthal was in 1907/8.

The Zurückgekehrter's *Sprachskepsis* can again be interpreted as coinciding with the transition from *Praeexistenz* (in this case the long absence abroad) to *Existenz*. He also has an experience like Chandos' 'moments of epiphany' when he chances upon an exhibition of paintings by Van Gogh and is overwhelmed by the artist's ability to capture the essence of the objects he depicts. He describes the paintings in words which echo Hofmannsthal's own when he wrote in his *Tagebuch* in 1904:

Über Farbe: [...] Bleistiftstriche so wie Worte: [...] Das grenzenlos Relative der Farbe: jede Farbe existiert nur durch ihre Nachbarschaft (A:138).

[About colour: [...] Marks of a pencil like words: [...] The limitless relativity of colour: each colour exists only through its surroundings.]

In between 'dem dumpfen rohen Menschen, der nichts von dem allen spürt, und dem mit gebildeter Seele, der hier entziffert und liest, wo ich nur die Zeichen anstaune [the dull, uncultured person, who feels nothing about all of this and the one with an educated soul, who deciphers and reads the symbols at which I only wonder]' (P2:309), the Zurückgekehrter sees colour, with its raw power, as a medium for communication that does not entail the use of words and whereby he can experience the transcendental:²²

Warum, wenn nicht die Farben eine Sprache sind, in der das Wortlose, das Ewige, das Ungeheure sich hergibt, eine Sprache, erhabener als die Töne, weil sie wie eine Ewigkeitsflamme unmittelbar hervorschlägt aus den stummen Dasein und uns die Seele erneuert (P2:308).

[Why, if colours are not a language, in which that without words, the eternal, the immense reveals itself, a language more refined than sounds, because it immediately flares up from mute existence like an eternal flame and renews our soul.]

Just as Chandos' moments of empathy with mute things will not help him to make a 'Connection with Life', neither will the Zurückgekehrter's 'language more refined than sounds' — painting may well bring the relief he needs from moments when he experiences a sense of extreme dislocation from his surroundings but it will not of itself reconnect him to his social obligations. The fifth letter, though, ends with no indication as to whether, and if so how, this will change in the future.

However, it is possible that Hofmannsthal may not have intended this to be the final word. Gilbert suggests, 'based on information of H. Steiner' that 'the letters were to be continued and were to end with the marriage of the correspondent, thus being modelled on the structure of the

²² The first exhibition of Van Gogh's work in Vienna, before he became widely known, was held in 1906, sixteen years after his death. The fourth and fifth letters were first published in 1908. Coincidentally, Rilke had discovered the paintings of Cézanne the year before and described the experience in a series of letters written between June and November 1907 to Clara Rilke (Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Schriften' *Werke (Band 4)* M. Engel, U. Fulleborn, H. Nalewski & H. Stahl, eds. (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag 1996) pp. 594–636).

“Bildingsroman” (Gilbert, 1963:33).²³ If Steiner’s information is correct, the intended conclusion, namely the marriage of the protagonist, would, as shall be seen, reinforce thematic links between *Die Briefe* and *Der Schwierige*, a prototype of which, coincidentally, Hofmannsthal began around July, 1908, not long after the publication of the fourth and fifth letters.²⁴

2.3 *Der Schwierige*: Hans Karl Bühl

The second chance that Death denied Claudio is granted to Hans Karl, the eponymous *Schwierige*, after a near-fatal incident in a First World War trench gives him pause for thought:

Die Genesung ist so ein merkwürdiger Zustand. Darin ist mir die ganze Welt wiedergekommen, wie etwas Reines, Neues und dabei so Selbstverständliches. Ich hab’ da auf einmal ausdenken können, was das ist: ein Mensch. Und wie das sein muß: zwei Menschen, die ihr Leben aufeinanderlegen und werden wie *ein* Mensch (DS, II,14: 86 – original emphasis).

[*Convalescence is such a strange condition. While I was convalescing, the whole world came back to me like something pure and new and at the same time so obvious. All at once, I was able to think about what it is: a person. And how it must be: two people, who bind their lives together and become like one person.*]

In Hans Karl, Hofmannsthal presents an individual whose *Sprachskepsis* is such that he is convinced:

daß es unmöglich ist, den Mund aufzumachen, ohne die heillosesten Konfusionen anzurichten (DS, III,13: 114).

[*that it’s impossible to open one’s mouth without causing the most terrible confusion.*]

Hans Karl has earned his soubriquet as a result of his extreme reluctance to commit himself to any social engagement. This, as he explains to Cresence when trying to avoid making an appearance at Altenwyl’s soirée, is because he is so acutely sensitive to nuances that could give rise to these confusions:

²³ Steiner was the editor of the edition of the *Gesammelte Werke* cited in the Bibliography. Gilbert does not formally cite the source of this information but notes that, at the time of writing, 1963, she had been unable to follow up this information in detail (1963:33 fn. 18). The following statement concerning *Die Briefe* is made in the ‘Anmerkung’ in ‘Prosa II’: ‘*Die nicht fortgeführten (und bisher nie zusammen veröffentlichten) “Briefe des Zurückgekehrten” wurden wohl 1907 geschrieben [the ‘Letters of the Man who Returned’, which were not continued (and until now have not been published together), were probably written in 1907]*’ (P2: 386). However, the ‘Chronik zum Leben und Werk’ on the Hofmannsthal Gesellschaft website suggests that the letters were written between June and August 1906. Possibly since the publication of ‘Prosa II’ in 1959, Steiner had discovered evidence that the letters were written earlier than he had at first supposed and the reference to them in a letter to his father a year after this earlier supposed date of composition (see further section 3 and footnote 31) suggested that Hofmannsthal still regarded *Die Briefe* as ‘work in progress’ in 1907.

²⁴ See Norton’s examination of the genesis of *Der Schwierige*, which Hofmannsthal developed from sketches for a play to be called *Die Mißverständnisse*. Material ‘which apparently related to ‘Der Schwierige’ [...] in a folder of unpublished notes dated “Ab Juli 1908” is amongst Hofmannsthal’s *Nachlaß*. Norton observes that ‘although fragmentarily expressed, the ideas of the sketch are unmistakably allied with key words, concepts and characters in *Der Schwierige*’ (Norton, 1964: 98).

Mir können über eine Dummheit die Tränen in die Augen kommen – oder es wird mir heiß vor Gene über eine ganze Kleinigkeit, über eine Nuance, die kein Mensch merkt, oder es passiert mir, daß ich ganz laut sag', was ich mir denk' – das sind doch unmögliche Zustände', um unter Leut' zu gehen (DS, I,3: 19).

[*Something stupid can make tears come to my eyes – or some triviality, a nuance that no one else notices, makes me blush with embarrassment, or it happens that I actually say out loud what I'm thinking – in these circumstances, it's impossible to mix with people.*]

His reluctance to speak even extends to his obligations in society; he has yet to make his maiden speech in the *Herrenhaus*, despite taking his seat there some eighteen months earlier.²⁵

The misunderstandings and confusions he deplors are caused because most people in his social circle fail to notice conflicts between verbal and non-verbal communications. Like the Zurückgekehrter, Hans Karl is adept at interpreting the language of gesture and expression, even intonation; he is aware of the 'Nuance, die kein Mensch merkt'. This language, being spontaneous 'proves capable of expressing innermost feelings' as opposed to verbal communication, which is 'intentional but unreliable' (Heine 1983:408). Hans Karl considers spoken words, the stuff of verbal communication, to be an impediment to understanding; one learns more about people by looking at than listening to them:

ich versteh' mich selbst viel schlechter, wenn ich red', als wenn ich still bin. [...] es is halt etwas, was ich draußen begreifen gelernt habe: daß in den Gesichtern der Menschen etwas geschrieben steht (DS, II,14:84).²⁶

[*I understand myself far worse when I'm talking than when I keep quiet. [...] it's something that I learned to grasp out there (i.e. while at the Front): that something is written in men's faces.*]

Hans Karl's sensitivity to non-verbal communication explains his fascination with the clown Furlani, a consummate mime artist. This in turn recalls Hofmannsthal's reference to the arts, 'die schweigend ausgeübt werden', in *Eine Monographie*.

Er spielt seine Rolle: er ist der, der alle begreifen, der allen helfen möchte und dabei alles in größte Konfusion bringt. [...] das, was der Furlani macht, ist noch um eine ganze Stufe höher, als was alle andern tun. [...] Er aber tut scheinbar nichts mit Absicht – er geht immer auf die Absicht der andern ein (DS, II,1: 59).

[*He plays this role, the man who wants to understand everyone, to help everyone and in so doing, brings everything into the utmost confusion. [...] what Furlani does goes a full notch higher than what other clowns do. [...] He doesn't seem to do anything for his own purpose — he always takes notice of other people's intentions.*]

Hans Karl's *Sprachskepsis*, however, goes beyond a reluctance to make conversation. In his opinion:

²⁵ The *Herrenhaus* was the Upper Chamber of Parliament (equivalent to the House of Lords) in Habsburg Austria. Hans Karl does have an ulterior motive for avoiding the Altenwyl's soirée. He is anxious to avoid Altenwyl, who is determined to get him to speak in a debate 'über Völkerversöhnung und über das Zusammenleben der Nationen [over international reconciliation and the co-existence of nations]'

²⁶ Cf. the Zurückgekehrter's exclamation, 'Meiner Seele, [...]' (P2 287)', quoted earlier in 2.2.

alles, was man ausspricht, ist indezent. Das simple Faktum, daß man etwas ausspricht, ist indezent (DS, III,13: 118).

[*everything that you say out loud is indecent. The simple fact that you say something out loud is indecent.*]

There is a passing allusion to this ‘impropriety’ of putting thought into words in the quotation from the scene in Act I with Cresence above; ‘*oder es passiert mir, daß ich ganz laut sag, was ich mir denk*’. It is more than a mistrust of language *per se*; it is an abhorrence of the act of speech itself. Hans Karl’s attitude to speech is negative. His *Sprachproblematik* differs from Chandos’ in quality; the former is a ‘crisis of “speech acts”’, the latter a ‘crisis of language *per se*’ (Guidry 1982: 306). The attitudes of the two protagonists to their *Sprachproblematik* also differ. Hans Karl’s condemnation of the speech act is absolute; he admits no concessions. Chandos’ problem is only with the languages known to him. He at least concedes the possibility that there may be another language which is capable of truly expressing what he wants to say, the one in which mute things speak to him from time to time (P2: 20), even if he doubts that he will ever learn it.

Consciously choosing the ‘seemliness’ of silence is an easy option which merely avoids the ‘indecent’ of speech; it does not address the issue proactively and will achieve nothing; ‘Self-effacing criticism is no more a foundation for social interaction than self-centred loquacity’ (Guidry 1982: 306). Helene understands this, when, in response to Hans Karl’s comment, ‘[*d*as Reden basiert auf einer indezenten Selbstüberschätzung [talking is based on an indecent overestimation of one’s worth]’, she observes, ‘[*w*enn alle Menschen wüßten, wie unwichtig sie sind, würde keiner den Mund aufmachen [if we all knew how unimportant we are, no one would open his mouth]’ (DS, II,14: 82).

Despite his years, Hans Karl still has a childlike quality that endears him to all, even the women whom he lightly abandons after a brief flirtation and who need ‘*viel contenance dazu oder ein bißl Gewöhnlichkeit, um Ihre Freundin zu bleiben* [to be able to put a brave face on it or just get used to it, if they are to remain your friends]’:

HANS KARL Wenn Sie mich so sehen, dann bin ich Ihnen ja direkt unsympathisch!
HELENE Gar nicht. Sie sind charmant. Sie sind bei all dem wie ein Kind (DS, II,14:
83).²⁷

[HANS KARL *If you see me like that, I must be thoroughly disagreeable to you!*

²⁷ However, Helene’s observation is an unwelcome reminder to Hans Karl of the growing discrepancy between his biological and moral ages, as his rejoinder indicates:

Wie ein Kind? Und dabei bin ich nahezu ein alter Mensch. Das ist doch ein *horreur*. (DS, II,14:
83)
[*Like a child? And yet I’m nearly an old man. That’s a horreur.*]

HELENE *Not at all. You are charming. Despite all that, you are like a child.]*

This indicates that, to some degree, Hans Karl is still living in his youthful *Praeexistenz* from which, like Chandos and the *Zurückgekehrter*, he has begun to emerge, but has not yet discovered the ‘Way to Life’ that will lead to *Existenz*. If he is to achieve *Existenz* and with it the social responsibilities of a mature adult, he needs to overcome his reluctance to commit, which extends also to personal relationships — approaching forty, he is still a bachelor. His predicament is that, unless he can find a way of doing so, his *Sprachskepsis* notwithstanding, he will remain trapped like Chandos and the *Zurückgekehrter* in the uncharted marches between *Praeexistenz* and *Existenz*, with nothing to comfort him except moments like those when he was ‘draußen’ and felt as though Helene were very close to him.

The possible way out shown to Hans Karl comes with Helene’s bold declaration of her love for and willingness to commit herself to him. Marriage, which would necessitate his committing himself to a long-term relationship, is a state which Hans Karl has so far studiously avoided. But marriage, for Hofmannsthal, is a step towards achieving a ‘Connection with Life’ precisely because it entails this commitment, which in turn requires learning how to communicate with another individual so that the two become one, as Hans Karl contemplated when convalescing.²⁸ It is this role of marriage in helping the individual to achieve a ‘Connection with Life’ that would provide an additional thematic link between *Der Schwierige* and *Die Briefe* had Hofmannsthal continued the latter and concluded them with the marriage of the *Zurückgekehrter* as discussed earlier in section 2.2.

However, there is no instantaneous transformation. With almost his final words and having just inveighed against people whose overweening sense of self-worth prevents them from grasping that everything that they utter is indecent, Hans Karl declares:

Aber es ist die letzte Soirée, auf der Sie mich erscheinen sieht (DS, III,13: 115).²⁹

[*But this is the last soirée you’ll see me at.*]

3. Comparisons and contrasts

Apart from a common theme, an inability to communicate, the three works share two characteristics that may not be immediately apparent. First, they are all works of fiction. That this point has not always been recognised, at least as regards *Ein Brief*, has been to the detriment

²⁸ ‘*Verknüpfung mit der Welt durch Verknüpfung zweier Individuen* [Connection with the world through the joining of two individuals]’ (A: 222). See also Hans Karl’s observation that ‘[d]ie Genesung ist so ein merkwürdiger Zustand’ from *Der Schwierige*, (II,14: 86), quoted earlier in this section.

²⁹ And he is still determined not to speak in the *Herrenhaus*, despite Helene’s assurance that he will only have to outline the principal points.

of our understanding of that work, so argues Tarot (Tarot 1970: 360 *et seq.*) He insists that Hofmannsthal's twin aims, on the one hand, to write on a topic that currently engaged him and, on the other, to create what is, effectively, a work of historical fiction, need not be mutually exclusive. In his opinion, *Ein Brief* has been misunderstood as an essay, hence non-fiction, as a result of the erroneous assumption of Hofmannsthal's contemporaries, that *Ein Brief* was Hofmannsthal's personal apologia for his abandoning lyric verse, an error which the editors of the *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelgaben* compounded when they consigned *Ein Brief* to one of the four volumes of 'Prosa', which, in this edition, comprise mainly Hofmannsthal's non-fiction prose (Tarot 1970: 361).³⁰

This argument applies as well to *Die Briefe*, which is also included in 'Prosa II' but which Hofmannsthal clearly regarded as fiction, as is evidenced by his reference to the work as 'eine Art Novelle in Briefen [a kind of novella in letters]' in a letter to his father dated 17th July, 1907 (B. 283).³¹ That Hofmannsthal conceived *Ein Brief* as a work of fiction is evidenced by his project, outlined in the letter to von Andrian referred to on page 36, to publish a collection of fictitious letters and imaginary conversations, of which *Ein Brief* would be one, under the title 'Erfundene Gespräche und Gedichte [Fictitious Conversations and Poems]'.³²

³⁰ Hofmannsthal's fiction in this edition is contained in the one volume 'Die Erzählungen'. The editors of the later *Kritische Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1975–2006) have included *Ein Brief* and *Die Briefe*, with other 'Gespräche und Briefe', in Volume XXXI entitled 'Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe', published in 1991. This suggests that they agreed with Tarot.

³¹ The letter to Hofmannsthal's father is cited by Gilbert, (1963: 33). In contrast to *Ein Brief* and *Die Briefe*, the unfinished *Brief des letzten Contarin* [Letter of the last Contarini] is treated as fiction and therefore included in the volume 'Die Erzählungen' (pp. 87–95) in the *Gesammelte Werke*. Fragments and versions of this work were amongst Hofmannsthal's *Nachlaß* and first published in 1929 in *Berührung der Sphären*. They are believed to date from a period prior to 1914 and some may be as early as 1902/3. (Gilbert, 1963: 50, fn. 52).

³² The project was never realised as envisaged, although most of the planned 'letters' and 'conversations' referred to in the letter were written. The 'Gespräch zwischen einem Menschen wie Bui und einem alten klugen mit Europa wohl vertrauten Japaner [conversation between someone like Bui and an elderly Japanese gentleman well acquainted with Europe]' was realised in 1902 as 'Gespräch zwischen einem jungen Europäer und einem japanischen Edelmann [Conversation between a young European and a Japanese nobleman]'. A conversation between Balzac and Hammer-Purgstall, 'das einzige, welches nicht über literarische und Artistenprobleme hinausgeht [the only one which is not concerned with literary and artistic problems]' was published (in the December 1902 issue of *Die Neue Freie Presse*) under the title 'Über Charaktere im Roman und im Drama (ein imaginäres Gespräch) [About characters in novels and drama (an imaginary conversation)]' and is included in Prosa II (pp. 32–47). The 'Abschiedsbrief A. de Vignys an den Kronprinzen Max von Bayern [Farewell letter from A. de Vigny to the Crown Prince Max of Bavaria]' was also written in 1902, as were some of the anticipated 'antike Briefe [ancient letters]' (*Die Briefe des Paulus Silentianus* [Letters of Paulus Silentianus]) and a 'Gespräch zwischen einem einfachen Mensch und einem Schauspieler [conversation between a simple person and an actor]' (*Der Schauspieler*). Only the 'Brief des letzten Contarin, der, bettlerarm, eine Rente ablehnt [letter of the last Contarini, who, poor as a beggar, refuses a pension' remained unfinished (see footnote 31). It looks as though the project was another of Hofmannsthal's 'works in progress', since in 1904, he notes in his *Tagebuch*: 'Ferner entworfen eine Anzahl "Briefe des kaiserlichen Verwandten Gallienus" (A: 134) [sketched further a number of "letters of the emperor's relative Gallienus"]'.

Secondly, the two genres represented are both forms of conversation. Comedy, as all drama, comprises a series of conversations, whether between several characters (dialogue) or one character and either himself or the audience (monologue). Is not an exchange of letters also, in effect, a ‘conversation’, albeit one in which communication is not instantaneous because it is between parties, writer and intended recipient, who are separated both spatially and temporally?

The significance of conversation in the context of *Sprachskepsis* is that it is a form, ‘which entirely depends on the capability of the figures to communicate with *words*’ (Gilbert 1963: 31 – added emphasis).³³ As the summaries of the three works have demonstrated, they are all concerned with the inability of the protagonist to communicate with other people through the *spoken* word, i.e. conversation.³⁴

Despite this, however, the two genres are clearly quite disparate. The fictive letter, a type of first-person narrative, is mediated through (and only through) the *written* word; comedy, an audio-visual art form, through the *spoken* word (which includes tone of voice) and spectacle (which includes gesture and facial expression).

This basic difference between the two genres is reflected in their language. That of *Der Schwierige*, with a simple sentence structure, ellipsis, hesitations, parataxis, colloquialisms, fashionable jargon, abbreviations, etc., reflects the rhythm, syntax and lexis of everyday speech, in this case a contemporary Viennese *Alltagssprache* peppered with *au courant* French expressions. As has already been noted, Hofmannsthal intended the language of *Ein Brief* to be archaic; that of *Die Briefe*, while contemporary, is literary. None of the letters gives the appearance of having been dashed off spontaneously; their language is polished and honed, the sentence structure complex.

This highlights the apparent paradox of *Ein Brief*. Despite his conviction that he will never write again except in the unknown language of ‘mute things’, Chandos is clearly not incapable of creating prose that is both lucid and poetic. The answer is that, whilst he lacks neither artistic

³³ Gilbert makes this observation in the context of her discussion of six imaginary ‘Gespräche’ and ‘Unterhaltungen’ which Hofmannsthal wrote between 1902 and 1905, but it is equally valid for drama and no less for a letter, which is written in order to communicate something.

³⁴ However, the written word is no less susceptible to being misconstrued. Hans Karl is discomfited by the construction put on his last letter to Antoinette by her and by Agathe:

HANS KARL: Aber so habe ich mich doch gar nicht ausgedrückt. Das waren doch niemals meine Gedanken!

AGATHE: Aber das war der Sinn davon (DS, I,6: 28).

[HANS KARL: *But I never expressed myself like that. Those were never my thoughts!*

AGATHE: *But that was the sense of it.*]

inspiration nor the ability to formulate an aesthetic style of language, he dismisses his writing as nothing but *'l'art pour l'art'*, exquisite form without essential meaning; internal reality must henceforth take precedence over external appearance. The same is, although to a lesser extent, true of the *Zurückgekehrter*, who despite his frequently expressed concern that he can no longer express himself clearly, writes both cogently and expressively.

In both *Ein Brief* and *Die Briefe* the voice of the writer/narrator never changes. The reader is, as it were, eavesdropping on one side of a particularly intimate conversation, in which the writer/narrator describes subjectively how he has been affected by his problems of communication and his moments of epiphany. In *Der Schwierige*, on the other hand, the spectator hears both sides of the conversation as it happens and, by watching the action on stage, is able to witness the effect of Hans Karl's reluctance to commit his thoughts to words, the misunderstandings against which he rails and the non-verbal communications of which Hans Karl is so acutely aware.³⁵

Hofmannsthal's reasons for choosing comedy as a medium for the discussion of *Sprachskepsis* are clear. All drama, being a series of conversations between the characters, requires an ability on their part to communicate. Comedy, by making use of misunderstandings, double-entendres and the like for effect, illustrates the absence of communication. It is, therefore, an extremely effective medium for a more complex treatment of the problems of *Sprachskepsis* in a social context.

In addition, the convention that comedy, or at least classical comedy, must conclude with the uniting of a pair of lovers, usually the hero and heroine, after a series of misunderstandings, reversals and sundry complications, ties in neatly with Hofmannsthal's solution to Hans Karl's predicament, as already discussed. Small wonder, then, that comedy, of all drama forms, was for Hofmannsthal the one in which he could most effectively depict a character finding the 'Way to the Socially Engaged', as is suggested by this somewhat elliptic note in *Ad me ipsum*:

Das erreichte Soziale: die Komödien (A: 226 – original emphasis).

[*The socially engaged attained: the comedies*].

As previously discussed, both the fictive letters date from a period during which, by his own estimation, Hofmannsthal was still experimenting with drama and which was 'one of deep

³⁵ A strict but sensitive observance of the stage directions, particularly those indicating silence, is, therefore, crucial to a successful performance of *Der Schwierige*. This explains why the first performance of the play was in Munich, not Vienna. Hofmannsthal doubted that any Austrian actor of the day was skilled enough to take on the role of Hans Karl, which was, therefore, played by the German actor, Gustav Waldau, 'the only actor capable, in Hofmannsthal's view, of playing the title part', at the first performance in November 1921 and again at the first performance in Vienna in 1924' (Yates, 1966: 20).

withdrawal' (Gilbert 1963: 31). The fact that, despite starting the prototype of *Der Schwierige* not long after finishing *Die Briefe*, he abandoned the project and waited nearly ten years before taking it up again, suggests that Hofmannsthal was not yet ready to use drama as a medium for a discussion of the topic, perhaps because the problem was still one that affected him too personally and for which he had not yet worked out a solution. The intimacy of a letter may have seemed more appropriate.

Gilbert seems to suggest that Hofmannsthal's problems during this period may be attributable, at least in part, to a psychological cause when she comments that:

It is true that at this juncture Hofmannsthal could not bring himself to employ the 'Ich-Form' for experiences which he makes his figures discuss. He could no longer bring himself to make the simple statement which had become an extremely difficult statement: 'I communicate. I respond to the world around me. I am a poet.' (Gilbert, 1963: 33)

Hofmannsthal himself makes a similar implication, with regard both to Chandos, who does not gainsay the suggestion that he is more in need of medicine '*um [s]einen Sinn für den Zustand [s]eines Innern zu schärfen* [in order to sharpen up his awareness of the state of his inner being]' (P2:7), and the *Zurückgekehrter*, who more than once refers to his problem as a '*Krise eines inneren Übefindens* [a crisis of an inner sense of unease]' (P2: 208).

The influence of Freudian psychology on Hofmannsthal's work is well documented.³⁶ He uses Freudian terminology in *Ad me ipsum* and clearly had more than a passing acquaintance with the works on psycho-analysis that Freud published from the 1890s on, since, in an undated letter to Bahr, Hofmannsthal asks if he may borrow a specific book by Freud and Breuer.³⁷ This was *Studien in Hysterie* (published in 1895) the first edition of which, together with Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* (published in 1900), was in his personal library (Hamburger 1961:27). Having regard to this, I suggest that the medium of a letter might commend itself as a means of

³⁶ See, for example, Martens.

³⁷ '*Können Sie mir eventuell nur für einige Tage das Buch von Freud und Breuer über Heilung der Hysterie durch Freimachung einer unterdrückten Erinnerung leihen (schicken)? [...] Ich weiß, daß ich darin Dinge finden werde, die mich im Leben ein Traum sehr fördern müssen [...]* [could you possibly lend (send) me, only for a few days, the book by Freud and Breuer about curing hysteria through the releasing of a suppressed memory? I know that I'll find material in it, which is bound to help me with 'Life is a Dream']' (B:142 — quoted by Wood (1940: 254 fn. 4). The editors date the letter between November 1903 and May 1904 but it may well have been written a year earlier (Martens, 1987: 50, note 4). The fact that he asks for a specific book suggests that Hofmannsthal was already familiar with Freud's writings. For the use of Freudian terminology in *Ad me ipsum*, see, for example, '*das Ich* [Ego]' (A:213 & 216) and '*das Über-ich* [Super-ego]' (A: 213 & 219). However, Hofmannsthal's interest in psychology goes back earlier; his reading matter in July 1892 included the first volume of Stanislaw Przybyszewski's *Zur Psychologie des Individuums* which had just been published (Vilain, 2000: 208, quoting Eugene Weber, 'A Chronology of Hofmannsthal's Poems', *Euphorion* 63 (1969), 284–328). The reference to '*Leben ein Traum*' is to Calderón's play *La vida es sueño*, published in 1636 or 1637. This was the inspiration for Hofmannsthal's tragedy *Der Turm* [The Tower] (1920–27), a project which he began in the early 1900s.

therapy to someone who wanted to examine his own deep-seated problem without recourse to the psycho-analyst's couch.

A letter, as discussed, is a form of conversation between writer and reader. Since the parties to this conversation are separated spatially and temporally and communication is not instantaneous, the writer may feel encouraged to express himself more freely and more intimately than would be the case, were the parties in each other's presence, particularly if the intended recipient is someone who has the writer's interests at heart. The 'conversations' in both of the works discussed have the appearance of being intensely private, since the letters are addressed to a particular person to whom the writer confides intimate concerns and experiences. The fictive letter was therefore an appropriate form for Hofmannsthal to choose in order to discuss a personal problem.

4. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that not only do the three works discussed stem from different periods of Hofmannsthal's literary career but also that during these periods the effect on him of his *Sprachskepsis* differed: the fictive letters date from his third decade, the period when he was troubled most acutely by a *Sprachkrise* and even doubted his own ability as a poet; the comedy from the final decade of his life, by which time he had developed his personal philosophy of *Praeexistenz* and *Existenz* and saw *Sprachskepsis* as part of the necessary transition from one to the other. Hofmannsthal's reasons for his choice of different genres in which to give expression to *Sprachskepsis* can be postulated as follows. During the years when his *Sprachskepsis* was most troubling, Hofmannsthal found the fictive letter the ideal medium for an intimate, subjective treatment of the subject. He would never be entirely free from *Sprachskepsis* but, as he matured both artistically and personally and assimilated *Sprachskepsis* into his personal philosophy, he came to regard comedy as the ideal medium for a complex, objective treatment of *Sprachskepsis*, not least because the convention of the 'happy end' chimed well with his personal philosophy of making the 'Connection with Life'. At least as far as the three works discussed in this article are concerned, therefore, Hofmannsthal's *Sprachskepsis* was, arguably, an important factor which influenced his choice of genre.

What is beyond doubt is that, unlike Chandos, Hofmannsthal did not, in consequence of his *Sprachskepsis*, abandon creative writing, as his considerable *oeuvre* published after *Ein Brief* or left unpublished at his death testifies.³⁸

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³⁸ In addition to some eleven plays and seven libretti, Hofmannsthal published after 1902 a vast quantity of essays on a wide variety of topics. He was also a prolific letter writer and 'the most wonderful of conversationalists' (Gilbert, 1963: 31).

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