



Semantics of the Painted Image in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Tod des Tizian*

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Abstract Form theories in Hofmannsthal's aesthetic program aim at a reciprocal empowerment of life and art. Titian's last painting in *Tod des Tizian* (1892) has to express a concept of unity and totality of all living things. Most disciples are not able to understand this, as they can't get free of the model of existence of the aesthete, who rejects life, perceiving it as abandoned to chaos and disorder, but is incapable of replacing it with any other form because he exalts art as an object of mere idolatry, as a pure and simple instrument of defence from the pitfalls of life.

Keywords Hugo von Hofmannsthal · *Tod des Tizian* · Intermediality · Fin de siècle

In *Tod des Tizian* (1892), the second of the verse plays that form the basis of the precocious literary output of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the painted image and its verbal evocation carry out a rather relevant function of poetics. The supremacy of the visual senses in the characters' perceptive activity is already explicit from the introductory words spoken by the page, who illustrates his own state of aesthetic hypersensitivity by placing it in relation to the suggestion conjured up by "alte Bilder / Mit schönen Wappen, klingenden Devisen, / Bei denen mir so viel Gedanken kommen / Und eine Trunkenheit von fremden Dingen, / Daß mir zuweilen ist, als müßt ich weinen..." (von Hofmannsthal 1979, I, 247).¹ At the

¹ For an analysis of the prologue, cfr. Zanetti (2012).

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centre of this brief drama there is a climate of feverish expectancy, generated in Titian's disciples by the news that the master, now approaching death, has with enthusiastic determination set to work on a last painting; the subject is unknown and can only be confusedly reconstructed through the testimony of the girls who had been summoned as models. Although the subject and the details of the work remain obscure, this painting still has the effect of representing from a new perspective and, therefore, in a certain sense, invalidating, all Titian's previous production. Struck by a moment of enlightenment about the unity of all living things, Titian decides to revoke all his main works. The canvases that are then carried off to the pupils' circle (most likely *Baccanale degli Andrii* and *Venere di Urbino*) are in fact stigmatized as products of a formal culture lacking, in its superficial perfection, the vital spirit aroused by grasping the basic principles of being.

It is clear that we are here dealing with a theme deeply rooted in the aesthetic program of the young Hofmannsthal, in the hope of justifying the exercise of art through a spiritual bedrock that might recover the function of praxis without conforming with its fortuitous character, but by revealing its secret and non-perishable substance. The construction of totality is an issue that is repeatedly raised in his essays from the 1890s, in which Hofmannsthal denotes a sort of half-way term between the extremes of a pure and simple formalism (a long way from the reality of life) and of the phenomenology of existence applied to the mere probing of appearance and, as such, lacking any possible principle of necessity. In fact, in writing about Stefan George's *Bücher*, dated 1896, the merits of the work reviewed are identified in its dissociation from a typical bad habit of the "schlechte Bücher unserer Zeit", in other words the uncritical and indirect adhesion to a fortuitous cause: "eine lächerliche korybantenhafte Hingabe an das Vorderste, Augenblickliche hat sie diktiert. Zuchtlosigkeit ist ihr Antrieb, freudlose Anmaßung ihr merkwürdiges Kennzeichen" (von Hofmannsthal 1979, VIII, 215). Remaining faithful to the inflexible measure of impersonality typical of his own poetics, George succeeded in his objective of conquering life without negating it, whilst revealing its innermost unity: "dem Leben überlegen zu bleiben, den tiefsten Besitz nicht preiszugeben, mehr zu sein als die Erscheinungen" (von Hofmannsthal 1979, VIII, 218).

Moreover, in Hofmannsthal, this impulse towards a form supported by a sort of reciprocal empowerment of life and art takes on an eminently moral configuration in which it ends up rediscovering the specific duty of the aesthetic individual. Especially in the context of the great processes of modernization that involved European society between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the artist's formative potential could only take concrete form in the reunification of that which tends to separate itself irreversibly: Man and his style (according to the expression employed by Hofmannsthal himself in his essay on Maurice Barrès);² in other

² "Uns pflegt Glaube und Bildung, die den Glauben ersetzt, gleichmäßig zu fehlen. Ein Mittelpunkt fehlt, es fehlt die Form, der Stil. Das Leben ist uns ein Gewirre zusammenhangloser Erscheinungen; froh, eine tote Berufspflicht zu erfüllen, fragt keiner weiter. Erstarrte Formeln stehen bereit, durchs ganze Leben trägt uns der Strom des Überlieferten. Zufall nährt uns, Zufall lehrt uns; dankbar genießen wir, was Zufall bietet, entbehren klaglos, was Zufall entzieht. Wir denken die bequemen Gedanken der ändern und föhlens nicht, daß unser bestes Selbst allmählich abstirbt. Wir leben ein totes Leben. [...] Diesen Zustand

words, Man and a higher-level form that contains his entire existence and reveals his greater determination, without, however, suppressing the material details. Hence the controversy with regard to the model of existence of the aesthete, who rejects life, perceiving it as abandoned to chaos and disorder, and is incapable of replacing it with any other form because he exalts art as an object of mere idolatry, as a pure and simple instrument of defence from the pitfalls of life. This theme is widely documented in all Hofmannsthal's works, from the description of Claudio's sentimental desert in *Tor und der Tod* (1893) to the judgments regarding Gabriele D'Annunzio in the three essays, between 1893 and 1895, dedicated to the Italian writer; this theme also very strongly influences *Tod des Tizian*, where Titian's disciples seem to lapse into a condition of sterile and paralyzing dilettantism.

It is precisely the search for a footing outside the formal structure of the work of art that propels Hofmannsthal in the direction of a medial paradigm that is different from the verbal one. The pull towards general semantics of the aesthetic state, which Hofmannsthal attempts to observe with formulations of poetics based not on *techniques* of fictional coding, but on *praxis* of an existential character (e.g. "pre-existence", but also the utopia of a "thought from the heart" elaborated in *Chandos-Brief*, 1902), finds a mode of preferential articulation in the probing of expressive systems of lower-index denotation, such as painting and music. By the term totality Hofmannsthal generally implies a state that surpasses the level of verbal expression, since its superabundance of signs can only be adequately contained within a structure of semantization extended to the multiple fields of the *human*. The poet is evidently moving from a traditional conception of totality resulting from the correlation between general and particular, macrocosm and microcosm, he is operating in a system of romantic derivation that is already inclined to see, in the connection between the arts, a reinforced mode of elaboration of meaning.³ However, into this line of thinking, there inserts itself an unprejudiced tendency to grasp the semantic fecundity nestling in the pragmatics of human relations and activity, even when these have no connection to the sphere of the aesthetic.

In the *Letter from Lord Chandos* the situation of crisis evoked is intensified not only by the deterioration of the instruments of *aesthetic representation* of reality, but also, and above all, by the weakening of the subject's capacity to *understand comprehensively* reality itself, that is to say, to understand it as a unitary whole, in which every manifestation of the *human* is oriented towards an overall design. It is not by chance that, in this sense, the shortcomings of these capacities are juxtaposed to circumstances, such as a political speech or pedagogic talk in a familiar context;

Footnote 2 continued

nannten die heiligen Väter das Leben ohne Gnade, ein dürres, kahles und taubes Dasein, einen lebendigen Tod" (von Hofmannsthal 1979, VIII, 118–119).

³ In the essay entitled *Philosophie des Metaphorischen* (1894), which is a review of the homonymous book by Alfred Biese, Hofmannsthal defines the condition of readiness to comprehend the character of interrelationship of all that exists as the "seltsam vibrierender Zustand, in welchem die Metapher zu uns kommt, über uns kommt in Schauer, Blitz und Sturm: diese plötzliche blitzartige Erleuchtung, in der wir einen Augenblick lang den großen Weltzusammenhang ahnen, schauernd die Gegenwart der Idee spüren, dieser ganze mystische Vorgang, der uns die Metapher leuchtend und real hinterläßt, wie Götter in den Häusern der Sterblichen funkelnde Geschenke als Pfänder ihrer Gegenwart hinterlassen" (von Hofmannsthal 1979, VIII, 192).

here the use of the verbal medium appears deprived of any potential aesthetic intent, and, in addition, intuition of a recovery of those impaired faculties is engendered when in contact with still mainly desemanticized forms of objectivity, as in the celebrated passage dedicated to several objects casually glimpsed in a field and from which the subject anticipates a surge of knowledge regarding the secret nature of things.⁴ In *Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* (1907) this skill in blending form and praxis, and in discovering how far each of these will allow the other to emerge into the light more incisively, takes on a fully culturological character, since the *eye* in *Returnee*, introduced as a businessman generally inclined towards a conception of existence in the aesthetic sense, endeavours to understand relations of form in fields as far-removed as possible from art, as long as there is that condition of happy *sprezzatura* that he defines as “guter Zug”:

The whole man must move at once—wenn ich unter Amerikanern und dann später unter den südlichen Leuten in der Banda oriental, unter den Spaniern und Gauchos, und zuletzt unter Chinesen und Malaïen, wenn mir da ein guter Zug vor die Augen trat, was ich einen guten Zug nenne, ein Etwas in der Haltung, das mir Respekt abnötigt und mehr als Respekt, ich weiß nicht, wie ich dies sagen soll, es mag der große Zug sein, den sie manchmal in ihren Geschäften haben, in den US meine ich, dieses fast wahnwitzig wilde und zugleich fast kühl besonnene »Hineingehen« für eine Sache, oder es mag ein gewisses patriarchalisches grand air sein, ein alter weißbärtiger Gaucho, wie er dasteht an der Tür seiner Estancia, so ganz er selbst, und wie er einen empfängt, und wie seine starken Teufel von Söhnen von den Pferden springen und ihm parieren, [...] wenn etwas der Art mir unterkam, so dachte ich: Zuhause! (von Hofmannsthal 1979, VII, 546–547).

The subject seems interested in a model of material totality capable of rendering itself visible not so much in the achievements of those individuals possessing it, as in their system of sign language, in the equilibrium and self-control that filters out from their sensitive presence in the world.⁵ The holistic paradigm announced by the introductory proposal, which the *Returnee* claims to have heard from a fellow patient in the hospital in Montevideo (“einer von denen, die weit gekommen wären”. von Hofmannsthal 1979, VII, 546), demands to be applied in a real and personal dimension, linking with Man’s capacity to appear as if in a state of complete alignment with himself, a state of compact and sealed-up self-referencing. The ‘je ne sais quoi’ that holds together the overshadowed construction of totality in *Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* is a principle of formal capacity that cannot be codified, but is recognizable intuitively in the conduct of whoever possesses it, like a sort of mark of reinforced humanity.

This condition of perfect mastery of style (which is here coupled with the tradition of the *courtier*, but is linked elsewhere to other typologies such as that of the gentleman) presupposes a supreme level of reticence and linguistic restraint, since it is based on a strategy of aplomb and control of one’s passions, which aspires to manifest itself directly through its effects, without recourse to mediation.⁶ The

⁴ For the ample spectrum of imaginal typologies implicated in *Brief* cfr. Schneider (2003).

⁵ Regarding *Briefe des Zurückgekehrten* cfr. Renner (2000, 387 ss.) and Schneider (2006, 221 ss.).

⁶ Cfr. Austin (1981, 71–81) and Coghlan (1985).

search for a code of totality that might render the return to Wilhelmine Germany more bearable for the subject of *Letters*, ends most coherently in the discovery of painting and, in particular, the encounter with the hyper-connotative semantics of Vincent van Gogh's paintings. Contemplation of the paintings is liberated from their fictional character and introduced into a declaredly existential perspective; they end up carrying out a therapeutic role, in a relationship which to Hofmannsthal must seem to represent close continuity with the ethical nature of his conception of poetics. The effect aroused in the onlooker on discovering van Gogh clearly responds to the issue raised in *Letter from Lord Chandos*: the need for a non-verbal form capable of illustrating the mysterious, dynamic continuity that the subject feels between himself and the objects bordering along his perceptive horizon.⁷ The wonderful description of the psychic disturbance brought about by the painted landscape is, in reality, the story of sudden spiritual healing:

Wie kann ich es Dir nahebringen, daß hier jedes Wesen – *ein Wesen* jeder Baum, jeder Streif gelben oder grünlichen Feldes, jeder Zaun, jeder in den Steinhügel gerissene Hohlweg, ein Wesen der zinnerne Krug, die irdene Schüssel, der Tisch, der plumpe Sessel – sich mir wie neugeboren aus dem furchtbaren Chaos des Nichtlebens, aus dem Abgrund der Wesenlosigkeit entgegenhob, daß ich fühlte, nein, daß ich wußte, wie jedes dieser Dinge, dieser Geschöpfe aus einem fürchterlichen Zweifel an der Welt herausgeboren war und nun mit seinem Dasein einen gräßlichen Schlund, gähnendes Nichts, für immer verdeckte! Wie kann ich es Dir nur zur Hälfte nahebringen, wie mir diese Sprache in die Seele redete, die mir die gigantische Rechtfertigung der seltsamsten unauflösbarsten Zustände meines Innern hinwarf, mich mit eins begreifen machte, was ich in unerträglicher Dumpfheit zu fühlen kaum ertragen konnte, und was ich doch, wie sehr fühlte ich das, aus mir nicht mehr herausreißen konnte – und hier gab eine unbekannte Seele von unfäßbarer Stärke mir Antwort, mit einer Welt mir Antwort! (von Hofmannsthal 1979, VII, 565–566).

The fictional image, with its deliberate reduction in points of reference, settles in the psyche of whoever contemplates it as a medium for ensuring the existence of a circular relationship between the individual and the world; thus, it positions itself right in the centre of that conception of poetics based on the conciliation and reciprocal innervation of art and life that had dominated Hofmannsthal's output ever since his very first works.

In *Tod des Tizian* the dying master is evidently sustained by this very ideal. According to the testimony of Gianino (the young aesthete and bearer of a candid instinct for truth unimaginable to the other pupils), the statement with which Titian bursts into ecstatic enthusiasm in setting his hand to his last painting (“Es lebt der große Pan”, von Hofmannsthal 1979, I, 250), aims to indicate, as the principal element for legitimizing supreme style, possession of intuitive enlightenment regarding the character of totality of everything that exists; at the same time, it also seeks to introduce the non-verbal semantics of the painted image as a medium electively destined to render this enlightenment effective.

⁷ Cfr. Bamberg (2011, 263–279).

Titian's depiction of stylistic sovereignty cuts across his depiction of the charismatic sovereignty that he exercises in the small community of followers gathered together under his guidance. This aspect also targets Hofmannsthal's interest in practical and ethical elements concerned with aesthetic existence, since it involves the sociability of the primacy held of verbal expression, but on the de-structured and polysemic code of communication through by a great artist. By testing a model of communication based on the master's suggestive power and charismatic conditioning of his pupils, the author evidently intends to put to the test a paradigm of non-linear semiotic relations, based not on the formalized code sign-language.

The creation of a restricted but solid group of companions sharing a common conception of art, responds, moreover, to an exceedingly widespread trend in the sociology of symbolic forms between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, when the circle establishes itself as a system of protest and reaction with regard to processes of transformation in collective living at the threshold of Modernity. As with *Tod des Tizian*, Hofmannsthal had recently personally experienced the force and also the destructive potential of a system of discipleship founded on suggestive persuasion promoted by an individual equipped with elements of distinction and determined to use them in authoritarian fashion.

Between 1891 and 1892 one of the most notorious episodes characteristic of the whole of fin-de-siècle Europe took place in Vienna, when Stefan George, 4 years older and already engaged in the constitution of the primitive structure of the *Kreis*, had made Hofmannsthal the object of such a pressing and aggressive recruitment campaign that it aroused his suspicion and eventually led to a firm rebuttal.⁸ The equivocal and problematic character of the relationship with George, who in any case did not hamper Hofmannsthal's regular contribution to the first issues of «Blätter für die Kunst», is substantiated by the poet's tendency to see the danger, in aesthetic existence, of a shortfall of sociability that is incompatible with the universal/human nature of art. In the play, Titian's disciples seem paralyzed by the prospect of losing their master and allocate a merely exorcistic consideration to the form, whilst focusing an expectation of distinction on it, aimed at deactivating the danger that they feel emanating from material existence (their distancing from the city, achieved by concentrating all school activities in a house in the country, is several times thematized during the play).⁹ The reduction in formative tasks as part of aesthetic existence and

⁸ For hints of the relationship with George in *Tod des Tizian* cfr. Böschenstein (1995).

⁹ For example, in the teaching that Desiderio tries to impart to Gianino, putting him on his guard against the ugliness and vulgarity that would dominate the anti-aesthetic environment of the city: "Siehst du die Stadt, wie jetzt sie drunten ruht? / Gehüllt in Duft und goldne Abendglut / Und rosig helles Gelb und helles Grau, / Zu ihren Füßen schwarzer Schatten Blau, / In Schönheit lockend, feuchtverklärter Reinheit? / Allein in diesem Duft, dem ahnungsvollen, / Da wohnt die Häßlichkeit und die Gemeinheit, / Und bei den Tieren wohnen dort die Tollen; / Und was die Ferne weise dir verhüllt, / Ist ekelhaft und trüb und schal erfüllt / Von Wesen, die die Schönheit nicht erkennen / Und ihre Welt mit unsren Worten nennen... / Denn unsre Wonne oder unsre Pein / Hat mit der ihren nur das Wort gemein... / Und liegen wir in tiefem Schlaf befangen, / So gleicht der unsre ihrem Schläfe nicht: / Da schlafen Purpurblüten, goldne Schlangen, / Da schläft ein Berg, in dem Titanen hämmern— / Sie aber schlafen, wie die Austern dämmern" (von Hofmannsthal 1979, I, 253–254). For the position of the disciples cfr. Schneider (2006, 186 ss.).

the subordination of a passive relationship with a supreme individual, reduce the pupils to the angst of an epigonal condition. Their deprived spiritual condition, which is reflected in their incapacity to experience life and art in a relationship of organic continuity, renders the survival of the master's doctrine beyond death impossible; in other words it will not survive beyond the limitations of the individual and personal relationship.

From this perspective, Gianino is the key character in the whole work, since he is the only one of the companions that does not waste his life cultivating the residual sense of superiority generated in the group by Titian's presence, and appears to be beleaguered by imaginal fantasies that are fully coherent with the flashes of illumination that suggest to the master his final painting. The long interlude taken up by the story of the vision experienced by Gianino during a nocturnal vigil at Titian's bedside, hints at the content of the painting to which the artist will devote his final hours; at the same time it prepares the interpretative framework required to clarify its significance, integrating the meagre clues that will be provided by the three female models in the final scene. The words of the young disciple shape a composition of a Dionysian character, based around the depiction of nature pervaded by an orgiastic reawakening of vitality. This primitive roaming energy does not bring about a slump in the formal cohesion of the image evoked by the boy, since Gianino's vision coalesces around a solidly structured unity; in fact it inclines towards stability of a monumental order that powerfully brings to mind the paintings of Arnold Böcklin, omnipresent author in the figurative culture of modern-day poets. To mention but two of the many possible examples, Stefan George dedicated to Böcklin a lyric poem of a programmatic character, inserted in the section *Zeitgedichte* of *Siebenter Ring* (1907), and Hofmannsthal himself earmarked a revised version of *Tod des Tizian*, which was performed on the occasion of a commemoration for the painter held in Munich in February 1901.¹⁰ The most ideologically marked feature of the fantasy overshadowed by the character, however, coincides with the elaboration of a visual link between the world of nature, to which images developed in the first part of the monologue pertain, and the world of the city, in which Gianino's imagination finds its ultimate fulfillment.¹¹ Setting his presentiment of the higher unity of existence¹² in the realm of the metropolis, the disciple impulsively by-passes the reservations espoused by the other pupils regarding the sociability of the concept of poetics applied in the group and begins to outline the universal/human curvature that characterizes Titian's final painting.

The testimonies of the young girls who have just emerged from the master's studio do not provide an overall picture of the subject painted; reconstructing the

¹⁰ With regard to the Böcklinian weave in *Tod des Tizian*, cfr. Renner (2000, 161–176).

¹¹ Cfr. Foucart (2003).

¹² "Ich war in halbem Traum bis dort gegangen, / Wo man die Stadt sieht, wie sie drunten ruht, [...] / Da aber hab ich plötzlich viel gefühlt: / Ich ahnt in ihrem steinern stillen Schweigen, / Vom blauen Strom der Nacht emporgespült, / Des roten Bluts bacchantisch wilden Reigen, / Um ihre Dächer sah ich Phosphor glimmen, / Den Widerschein geheimer Dinge schwimmen. / Und schwindelnd überkams mich auf einmal: / Wohl schlief die Stadt: es wacht der Rausch, die Qual, / Der Haß, der Geist, das Blut: das Leben wacht. / Das Leben, das lebendige, allmächtige – / Man kann es haben und doch sein vergessen!..." (von Hofmannsthal 1979, I, 253).

way in which Titian dressed up and positioned each of the models, this does however consent one to infer quite clearly the aesthetic goal that governs the composition of the image. The allegorical arrangement linked to the presence of Venus, who is portrayed with conventional attributes, is subjected to a shift of focus by the enigmatic depiction alongside her of the god Pan, who takes on the hyper-symbolic form of a blindfolded marionette, clutched in the hands of one of the models. The fact that it is the girl herself who unhesitatingly provides an interpretation for the figurine, in accordance with the artist's wishes ("Denn diese Puppe ist der große Pan, / Ein Gott, / Der das Geheimnis ist von allem Leben. / Den halt ich in den Armen wie ein Kind. / Doch ringsum fühl ich rätselhaftes Weben, / Und mich verwirrt der laue Abendwind", von Hofmannsthal 1979, I, 258), shifts interest in the scene from the plane of allegorical decoding to that of co-operation and symbolic re-creation. The power of the image, and its actual motivation, are not subordinated to comprehension of its narrative logic, but rather to the pragmatic sharing of its existential meaning, which clearly alludes to the Dionysian intuition of the profound totality of being.¹³ The sightlessness inflicted on the marionette Pan thus alludes to the need to preserve this affirmation from contact with the contingency of chance circumstances and, instead, to direct it towards an appreciation of the fundamental laws of existence, which at the approach of Titian's death, leads us back, via the mediation of one of the girls, to the ever constant rhythm of the building-up and dismantling of forms.¹⁴

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¹³ Brandstetter (2000) talked of a theatricalization of the image in the final scene of the play. Cfr. also Baróti (2003).

¹⁴ "Im bläulich bebenden schwarzgrünen Hain / Am weißen Strand will er begraben sein: / Wo dichtverschlungen viele Pflanzen stehen, / Gedankenlos im Werden und Vergehen. / Und alle Dinge ihrer selbst vergessen, / Und wo am Meere, das sich träumend regt, / Der leise Puls des stummen Lebens schlägt" (von Hofmannsthal 1979, I, 258). According to Pickerodt (1968, 23–33) the link between Titian's intuition and his imminent death places the wisdom contents implicit in the vision of the unity of everything, in an irremediably subjective and non-socializable sphere; this is linked to direct communication between the master and his pupils and can no longer be tapped in his absence.

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