

# Suffering as the Embodiment of the Sacred in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "A Letter" and "Tale of the 672nd Night"

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## Abstract

In Eric Gans's theoretical framework, the sacred may be seen as a ritualised re-enactment of the inaccessibility of the appetitive object. This set-up calls attention to more formalised situations in which the separation of the profane and the sacred are upheld. Drawing on the work of C. Jason Throop, as well as Gans, the present article attempts to trace the blurring of this distinction in terms of embodied suffering in two short stories by *fin de siècle* author Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Throop highlights the encounter with the sacred not only in terms of an experience of a limit or a zone of the unknowable, but also as a phenomenological transformation of aspect (what Wittgenstein called "aspect-dawning"). This experiential conversion in itself obscures a clear line of demarcation between the sacred and the profane. In Throop's words, the instants focused on are "moments in which the reality of our singularity, vulnerability, and finitude is made manifest. The seeds for such forms of phenomenological modification are also found in more mundane, profane, and everyday experiences. This includes everyday experiences of pain and suffering". The article analyses literary manifestations of phenomenological modifications that display the suffering of the lack of adequate language as manifestations of the sacred in the fiction of Hofmannsthal.

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"Such Stuff as Dreams"

Such stuff as dreaming is we mortals be,  
And every dream doth open wide its eyes  
Like a small child beneath a cherry tree,

Above whose top across the deepening skies  
The pale full-moon emerges for its flight.—

Not otherwise than so our dreams arise.

They live as a child that laughs, and to the sight  
Appear no smaller on their curving way  
Than the full-moon awakening on the night.

Our inmost self is open to their sway,  
As spirit hands in sealed chambers gleam  
They dwell in us and have their life away.

And three are one: the man, the thing, the dream.

(Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lyrical Poems* 36)

Christianity contains an almost primordial connection between suffering and the sacred. Perhaps most clearly as *imitatio Christi* in the form of *kenosis*, or even more markedly in the form of totally unjustified suffering. As for instance in Peter 1:19: "For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly" (ESV). In addition, the bond between suffering and sacrality may be extended into many other religions and cultures. As indicated by C. Jason Throop, anthropology has historically taken a broad interest in the phenomenon:

In anthropology, the sacred has long been viewed as a unique register of human existence that is at times intimately associated with human suffering in its various forms and manifestations. Often enfolded within such orientations to the potential sacredness of human suffering are associated moral experiences and ethical concerns. Whether understood in the context of painful rituals of initiation, in the light of pain-induced transformations in consciousness, in the context of particular salvational orientations to loss, illness, human finitude, and death, or in the tendency to view suffering as a means of sacrificing one's own desires for the benefit of one's ancestors, spirits, or deities, the link between suffering and the sacred has been well documented in anthropology and elsewhere [...]. (68)

Thus, since suffering is part of everyday existence, the sacred must also have the capacity to make itself known "outside" of more strictly manifested rituals or ceremonies. To Throop's enumeration one might add the category of existential suffering. Indeed, the seemingly absolutely causeless suffering might be that which most strongly evokes sacred experiences. This ambiguity or affective ambivalence of the experience itself has the immanent capacity to attract both scientific and artistic approaches. In what follows, such possible intersections of artistic expression and anthropology will be further explored.

In Eric Gans's originary hypothesis the sacred is introduced as the object in focus in the repetition of the originary event as ritual. In *The End of Culture*, Gans makes clear that as

“the system of exchange turns all worldly objects into profanely manipulable entities, the sacred acquires another world, invisible and yet more real than this one” (45). In presenting his argument Gans makes a reference to Durkheim and his school and their strong focus on primitive societies’ clear separation of the profane and the sacred. Throop, following Geertz, also problematizes Durkheim’s emphasis on the distinction and argues that “there are various intensities of sacred experience that may manifest within the bounds of various perspectives, religious, aesthetic, scientific, commonsense, or otherwise” (72). Gans’s minimal hypothesis too seems to be open to the possible perspective shifts in representations of the quotidian and experiences of the everyday itself. This is so because the profane and the sacred are seen as periphery and centre, thus allowing oscillations between the two positions. Gans draws attention to our full-blown commodity culture in which we may experience ritual as empty or meaningless, “the pejorative sense of the term reflecting our modern impatience with cultural institutions other than systems of representation *strictu sensu*” (*The End of Culture* 44). It is the intention below to follow Gans and Throop and focus on the shifts themselves from a commonsensical perspective to intensified experiences through which something of the more formal sacred object retains its power, even if the moment is temporary and the perspective shift may immediately be reversed.

The attention of the analysis consists of two short stories by *fin de siècle* author Hugo von Hofmannsthal. In line with Throop, the investigation will probe into suffering as a site for perspective shift or phenomenological transformation. It is of importance to make note of these conversions’ relatedness to the uncanny. Highlighting the work of Taussig, Throop states that

Taussig views the sacred and the uncanny to be closely related. He sees a similar movement between everyday life and the everyday mysteries that potentially evoke sacred experiences. Shifts between mundane life and sacred experience are, Taussig argues, often subtle, supple, fleeting, and ephemeral. Such experiences arise within the bounds of the everyday, at the same time that they suggest palpable possibilities of an elsewhere breaking through its pale. (73)

In various ways Throop’s reading of Taussig relates to Hofmannsthal. In his famous short story “A letter,” published in 1902, Hofmannsthal anticipates the twentieth century’s philosophical concern with language as an insufficient tool when it comes to grasping certain aspects of reality. That unease foreshadows the post-structuralist branch (Barthes, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault) as well as the more logico-scientifically oriented tradition of analytic philosophy (Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Moore). Implicit is already the dilemma that language is one of the few instruments we have. Paradoxically, Hofmannsthal expresses the lamentations of malfunctioning language *in* language. The whole short story is steeped in the fictional form of a letter from Lord Chandos, the younger son of the Earl of Bath, to Francis Bacon as an explanation of why the former has completely renounced all literary

writing. Mundane everyday reality at times overwhelms the speaker with a forceful sense of presence that verges on the sacred.

It will not be easy for me to convey the substance of these good moments to you; words fail me once again. For what makes its presence felt to me at such times, filling any mundane object around me with a swelling tide of higher life as if it were a vessel, in fact has no name and is no doubt hardly nameable. I cannot expect you to understand me without an illustration, and I must ask you to forgive the silliness of my examples. A watering can, a harrow left in a field, a dog in the sun, a shabby churchyard, a cripple, a small farmhouse—any of these can become the vessel of my revelation. Any of these things and the thousand similar ones past which the eye ordinarily glides with natural indifference can at any moment—which I am completely unable to elicit—suddenly take on for me a sublime and moving aura which words seem too weak to describe. Even an absent object, clearly imagined, can inexplicably be chosen to be filled to the brim with this smoothly but steeply rising tide of heavenly feeling. (123)

Even if the signifying system seems to fail the speaker, the worldly objects are described as having the power to fill him with “a swelling tide of higher life” and “heavenly feeling.” It is precisely when language fails that objects transform into what could be described as sacred. This is so for two main reasons. Firstly, they resist the freely repetitive character of the representational realm. Secondly, they are still “real” while at the same time displaying something of their “otherworldly” ontology. The centre momentarily illuminates the periphery.

Furthermore, what is intimated is the phenomenological transformation itself. In Gans’s theory, language and representation are primary while ritual and the sacred are secondary. Nevertheless, taken together with the failure of language, the hypothesis would allow for the shift from the merely significant to the sacred in terms of the intangible sign. Throop draws attention to the energetics of this phenomenon.

The dynamic of shifting between experiences of the sacred and experiences of the profane, between the taken anew and taken for granted, of the now wondrous and previously unremarkable, is therefore a shift in our orientations to the world in which we are enmeshed. It is a transformation that we ourselves catch in the midst of its very unfolding. Experiences of the sacred are not only experiences of transformation that ensue in our confrontation with a limit or the unfamiliar. They arise within the experience of transformation itself. (79)

The central question is what may release such moments. Gans remarks that it is through modernity that we have begun to be able to get along without the sacred, that our “exchange-system has become at least conceivably capable of taking over the function, formerly carried out by religious institutions, of protecting the social order against the

dangers of desire" (*The End of Culture* 43). In terms of Hofmannsthal the sudden shifts seem to be causeless. Possibly they come out of the protagonist's suffering. He seems to suffer through an unbearable emptiness: "Apart from these strange chance events (which I hardly know whether to call mental or physical), I live a life of scarcely credible emptiness" (Hofmannsthal 125). The liminality between the mental and the physical is important. Albeit lacking a sense of the ritual, the events appear in the "real" world, strongly anchored in the realm of objectivity. This type of phenomenality requires an understanding of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conceptualisation of embodiment. The experience would occur neither in the subject nor in the world. "There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other" (Merleau-Ponty 138). Merleau-Ponty emphasises that there can be rapid shifts between the sensing and the sensed, but that ultimately they belong to the same phenomenon:

If one wants metaphors it would be better to say that the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse [...] as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases. (138)

Thus, suffering would be neither in the body nor in the world but in both, making the mental-physical dichotomy the protagonist mentions redundant. As in "A Letter," it is rather an amalgamation of suffering and perception that heightens the mundane to a "mysterious, wordless, infinite rapture" (Hofmannsthal 126). Similarly, in Gans's hypothesis, the sacred object is simultaneously material and referentially connected to its "otherworldly" realm. What disappears in Hofmannsthal's rendering of the phenomenon is the signification practice that would regulate desire. This is of prominence in our attempts at a holistic interpretation of Chandos's predicaments. Firstly, the other world occurs in this one. Secondly, the bracketing of language and control of desire constitute the subject as an embodiment of the lack of control and agency. The everyday objects impinge on the protagonist, without him being able to stop the transformation's occurrence. Suffering seems to open the subject to the world in a specific way, obliterating commonsensical dichotomies and boundaries.

What demands attention presses on and disturbs the facility of free signification. In a sense, the secondary level of the originary scene encroaches on the primary level. Since language and desire are aborted, only the mute sacrality itself remains. Hofmannsthal's letter writer complains:

Where could you find pity or any comprehensible association of human ideas if on some other evening I find under a nut tree a half-full watering can that a gardener's boy has forgotten there, and this watering can and the water in it, dark from the shadow of the tree, and a water beetle sculling on the surface of the water from one dark shore to the other, this confluence of trivialities shoots through me from the roots of my hair to the

marrow of my toes with such a presence of the infinite that I want to bring out words, knowing that any words I found would vanquish those cherubim in which I do not believe? (124)

The nameless something, the intangible sign, that has the power to shoot through the protagonist does not depend on language or even the protagonist's religious belief. He does not believe in an otherworld in terms of personifications. The sacred appears as this world itself in embodied experience. The suffering that provides the scene for these appearances seems to be on a very fundamental level, but if we contrast Hofmannsthal's "A Letter" to another of his short stories, "Tale of the 672<sup>nd</sup> Night," it becomes clear that suffering and the aesthetics of everyday objects do not necessarily produce the effects displayed in "A Letter." In "Tale" there is a protagonist referred to as "the merchant's son" who suffers through some form of existential crisis that through a series of chance events eventually leads to his death (Hofmannsthal 15). He has a sudden experience of the physical objects in his residence:

His eyes were gradually opened to the way all the world's shapes and colors lived in his objects. He saw in the intricacy of their ornaments an enchanted image of the intricate wonders of the world. He discovered the forms of animals and the forms of flowers, and the gradual transition from one to the other—dolphins, lions and tulips, pearls and acanthus; he discovered the tension between the burden carried by columns and the resistance of the solid ground, and the upward and then downward striving of water; he discovered the bliss of movement and the exaltation of stillness—dancing and death; he discovered the colors of flowers and leaves, the colors of the coats of wild animals and the faces of people, the colors of precious stones, the color of the sea when it is stormy and then when it is calm and shining; and he discovered the moon and the stars, the crystal ball, the mystical circles sprouting wings of seraphim. For a long time he was drunk on this great, profound beauty that was his, and all his days were more beautiful and less empty among these objects, which were no longer dead and insignificant, but a great legacy, the divine work of all the generations.

Yet he felt the triviality of all these things along with their beauty. (Hofmannsthal 15-16)

We are presented with a plethora of form and color and yet we do not witness the same phenomenon as in "A Letter." First of all, the objects are possessions. They are commodities that the protagonist discovers as if anew. Secondly, the focus is solely on the aesthetic qualities of the appearances. "[E]nchanted image" is not identical to the sacred. In "A Letter" the objects press on with a different kind of urgency and the emphasis is not on their beauty per se. Aesthetics are potentially not absent from the sacred but they are not primary. Some form of phenomenological transformation must be involved but since the objects remain "trivial" we do not witness an identical type of possible conversion as we do

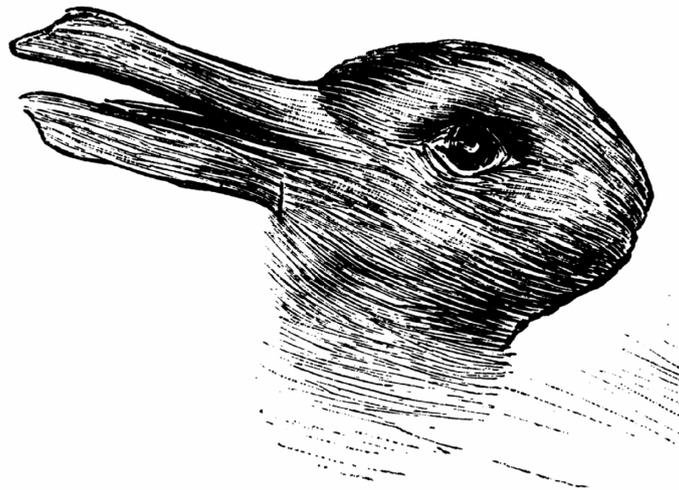
in “A Letter.” However, the “Tale” contains something similar but which is more clearly suffused in suffering and the uncanny. This can also be linked to Merleau-Ponty, but it has got more to do with visual narcissism. As explained by the French phenomenologist:

[S]ince the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity—which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism: not to see in the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits, but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. (139)

What the merchant’s son sees then is himself in the objects, since “[f]or a long time he was drunk on this great, profound beauty *that was his*” (Hofmannsthal 16; emphasis added). Lord Chandos, on the other hand, suffers the stark thereness of the objects. “A Letter” highlights the opposite phenomenon, since the everyday objects manifest themselves as the contrary to the speaker’s belongings. He cannot even possess them by means of language. In their autonomy they draw attention to the something/nothing of the scene’s centre. At one point in “Tale” the protagonist is struck by the beauty of a young relative of his housekeeper: “The incomparable beauty of her eyelids and lips moved him, and the torpid, joyless movements of her lovely body were to him the enigmatic language of an inaccessible and wonderful world” (Hofmannsthal 18). The language drawn attention to is still some form of aesthetic harmony of physical phenomena. This would be captured by Merleau-Ponty’s concept of embodiment, but we cannot discern the sacred. The “Tale” is saturated with anxiety and uncanny experiences in a life that gradually spins out of control. On one occasion, the protagonist feels a “terrible apprehensiveness [...] a mortal fear of the inescapability of life” (Hofmannsthal 20). This existential *cul-de-sac* ends up in the death of the merchant’s son after he has accidentally been kicked by a horse. The uncanny is revealed as not being identical to the sacred.

We have seen that Hofmannsthal intuitively explores the phenomenology of the sacred. In “A Letter” the embodied experiences draw attention to phenomenological transformation as well as conforming to Gans’s idea of the sacred as centre and the profane as periphery. The oscillations between these extremes occur on the hither side of representational language. A fundamental suffering appears as a site for such occurrences. However, we do not witness a full-blown religious conversion in which the protagonist stares into the face of God and then is released. The affectivity rather points to the human as suffering the lack of an all-encompassing language and a totalising cognition. In addition, we have seen that such phenomena are very close to the embodied experiences of aesthetic connoisseurship, but that they are not the same. In Gans’s theory, “The Letter” exhibits encounters with the

intangible sign. In terms of Throop's focus on phenomenological transformations, in the shifts from periphery to centre, we witness the sacred as potentiality. The philosophical ground for these subtle and supple transformations may perhaps best be illustrated by Joseph Jastrow's duck-rabbit (also used by Wittgenstein and displayed in Throop 78), in which we see exactly the same configuration of black pen strokes on white paper, but we can shift between the perception of two different objects.



The shortcomings of language draw attention to fundamental levels of experience in which the sacred persists. Paradoxically, the muteness of sacrality is by Hofmannsthal still described as a language. As put by Kieran Stewart: "The paradox, then, at the very least, is that the only way we can know an 'object' is to infer, modify, and observe it through the mediation of language" (12). The congenial similarities between Hofmannsthal's fiction and Gans's theory become clear within the concept of the paradox:

Paradox is a structure of language; it cannot be conceived without the sign. But neither can the sign be conceived without paradox [...] The sign that is in the world represents the world it is in; the sign that stands above the world remains within the world of the sign. (*Signs of Paradox* 35)

It is that the language in which I might have been granted the opportunity not only to write but also to think is not Latin or English, or Italian, or Spanish, but a language of which I know not one word, a language in which mute things speak to me and in which I will perhaps have something to say for myself someday when I am dead and standing before an unknown judge. (Hofmannsthal 127-28)

The paradoxicality of a mute language in Hofmannsthal mirrors the centrality of the paradox in Gans's theory. The sign's linguistic and epistemological shortcomings contain exhilarating phenomenological transformations that consolidate the centrality of the sacred in the Austrian author's work and potentially in all human culture. To suffer through the most

trivial everyday experiences opens up the space that may or may not be empty, but which nevertheless emits an energy that transcends sign systems, and again paradoxically, it was precisely the opening up of this space that gave birth to the sign itself.

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