

THE LORD CHANDOS LETTER

AND OTHER WRITINGS

HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL

Selected and translated from the German by
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my eyes. But I didn't know whether I was crying over the fate of my friend or over my dead love, these things were so tangled together. As I came to Anna's bed, I bent involuntarily over her. But my gaze hardened, because she seemed without mystery as she lay there, wrapped in her life that I could no longer love. And the evocative smell of verbena rose from her fine young hair, and with it my own life seemed to waft to me as though over an empty chasm, and I felt a strong homesickness, like children who have spent too much time in someone else's house. And I touched the hand of the woman who was no longer my lover to wake her up and take her down to the dead woman who lay downstairs, her pale face heavy with beauty and mystery.

(1896)

A LETTER

This is the letter written by Philipp, Lord Chandos, the younger son of the Earl of Bath, to Francis Bacon (later Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Albans), apologizing for his complete abandonment of literary activity.

IT IS KIND of you, dear friend, to ignore my silence of two years and write to me as you have done. To express your concern about me, your disquiet at what you see as the mental paralysis into which I have fallen, with such grace and humor—as only great people who know in their bones how dangerous life is and still have not lost hope can do—goes beyond kindness.

You conclude with Hippocrates' aphorism, *Qui gravi morbo correpti dolores non sentiunt, iis mens aegrotat*,* and express your belief that I need medicine not merely to cure my illness but to heighten my awareness of my inner state. I would like to give you the response that you deserve, I want to open myself up to you entirely, but I do not know how I am to set about it. I hardly know if I am still the person your precious letter is addressing. I am now twenty-six. Am I the same person as the nineteen-year-old who wrote *The New Paris*, *The Dream of Daphne*, *Epithalamium*—those pastorals, tottering under the weight of their grand words, which a great queen and a number of overindulgent lords and gentry are gracious enough to still remember? Am I the one who, at

*One who is suffering from a severe illness yet feels no pain is sick in mind.

twenty-three, among the stone arcades of the Grand Piazza of Venice, discovered in himself an edifice of Latin prose whose abstract plan and structure gladdened his heart more than the buildings of Palladio and Sansovino that rise out of the sea? And, supposing I am that person, though changed, could my unknowable self have lost all traces and scars of this product of my most strenuous thinking, so completely that the title of the little treatise looks back at me, strange and cold, from your letter here before me? So completely that I did not even perceive it right away as a familiar image made of words strung together, but was able to understand it only by taking it one word at a time, as though I had never seen this combination of Latin vocabulary? But in fact that was me and no one else, and there is rhetoric in these questions. Rhetoric is fine for women or the House of Commons, but its armamentarium, so overvalued by our time, is not equal to getting at the heart of things; and I will have to show you what is inside me—a freak, a foible, a mental illness, if you like—if you are to understand that the literary works which I am supposed to have ahead of me are separated from me by a gulf as unbridgeable as the ones behind me. And those I hesitate to call my own, so unfamiliar do they seem.

When you remind me of the various little projects I used to entertain during the days of such fine ardor that we spent together, I do not know which to admire more, the force of your goodwill or the incredible accuracy of your memory. It is true, I did want to give an account of the first years of the reign of our late glorious sovereign, Henry VIII! The notes left by my grandfather, the Duke of Exeter, on his negotiations with France and Portugal gave me something to build upon. And, in those happy, lively days, an awareness of form was flowing from Sallust to me, as though through conduits that had never been blocked—the kind of deep and true inner form of whose existence one can have no suspicion while still within the province of rhetorical tricks, which is no

longer just lending order to the material, because it permeates it, abolishes it, and creates poetry and truth all at once; a play of eternal forces, a thing as magnificent as music or algebra. That was the project dearest to me.

What is man, that he conceives projects!

And there were other projects I toyed with. Your kind letter brings these back too. They dance before me like miserable mosquitoes on a dim wall no longer illuminated by the bright sun of a happy time, each of them engorged with a drop of my blood.

I wanted to show that the fables and mythic tales which the ancients have handed down to us and in which painters and sculptors never cease to find mindless pleasure are the hieroglyphics of a secret, inexhaustible wisdom. I sometimes thought I felt its breath, as though coming from behind a veil.

I remember this project. What sensual and spiritual desire it originated in, I do not know—I longed to enter into those naked, glistening bodies, those sirens and dryads, Narcissus and Proteus, Perseus and Actaeon, the same way a hunted deer longs to wade into the water. I wanted to disappear into them and speak out of them with their tongues. I wanted. I wanted all sorts of other things. I planned to put together a collection of maxims like Julius Caesar's—you remember that Cicero mentions it in one of his letters. My plan here was to assemble the most remarkable utterances which I had collected during my travels in my dealings with the learned men and clever women of our time, with exceptional individuals from among the general public, and with the cultivated and distinguished. In this way I wished to combine beautiful classical and Italian aphorisms and reflections with whatever else I had run across in the way of intellectual baubles in books, manuscripts, and conversation, and also to include particularly beautiful festivals and pageants, strange crimes and cases of dementia, descriptions of the greatest and oddest buildings in the Netherlands, France, and Italy, and much

more. But the work as a whole was to be entitled *Nosce te ipsum.**

To put it briefly, I lived at that time in a kind of continuous inebriation and saw all of existence as one great unity. The mental world did not seem to me to be opposed to the physical; likewise the courtly and the bestial, art and barbarism, solitude and society. I felt nature in all of it, in the aberrations of insanity just as much as in the most refined subtleties of a Spanish ceremonial, in the crudities of young peasants no less than in the loveliest allegory. And in all of nature I felt myself. To me there was no difference between drinking warm foaming milk which a tousled rustic at my hunting lodge had squeezed into a wooden bucket from the udder of a fine, mild-eyed cow, and drinking in sweet and frothy spiritual nourishment from an old book as I sat in the window seat of my study. The one was like the other. Neither was inferior to the other, either in its intangible spirituality or in its physical power. And so it went throughout the entire sweep of life all around me; everywhere I was in the midst of it, I never noticed anything false. At other times I had the intuition that everything was symbolism and every creature a key to all the others, and I felt I was surely the one who could take hold of each in turn and unlock as many of the others as would open. Thus the title which I had planned to give that encyclopedic book.

To someone susceptible to such notions, it may appear to be the well-conceived plan of a divine providence that my soul had to sink from such puffed-up arrogance to this extremity of faintheartedness and exhaustion which is now my permanent inner state. But such religious ideas have no power over me. They belong to the cobwebs through which my thoughts pass as they shoot into the void, but upon which so many others are snagged and remain. For me the mysteries

* Know yourself.

of faith have boiled down to a grand allegory which stands over the fields of my life like a shining rainbow, at a constant remove, always ready to recede in case I think of running up and wrapping myself in the hem of its cloak.

But, dear friend, worldly ideas too are retreating from me in the same way. How shall I describe these strange spiritual torments, the boughs of fruit snatched from my outstretched hands, the murmuring water shrinking from my parched lips?

In brief, this is my case: I have completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all.

First I gradually lost the ability, when discussing relatively elevated or general topics, to utter words normally used by everyone with unhesitating fluency. I felt an inexplicable uneasiness in even pronouncing the words "spirit," "soul," or "body." I found myself profoundly unable to produce an opinion on affairs of court, events in Parliament, what have you. And not out of any kind of scruples—you know my candor, which borders on thoughtlessness. Rather, the abstract words which the tongue must enlist as a matter of course in order to bring out an opinion disintegrated in my mouth like rotten mushrooms. It happened to me that, when I wanted to scold my four-year-old daughter, Katharina Pompilia, for a childish lie she had told and impress upon her the necessity of always telling the truth, the ideas flowing into my mouth suddenly took on such iridescent hues and merged into each other to such a degree that I had to make an effort to sputter to the end of my sentence, as if I had fallen ill. I actually turned pale and, feeling an intense pressure on my forehead, left the child, slammed the door behind me, and did not recover somewhat until I was riding at a good gallop over secluded pastureland.

But this affliction gradually broadened, like spreading rust. Even in simple, informal conversation, all the opinions which are ordinarily offered casually and with the sureness of a sleepwalker became so fraught with difficulties that I had to

stop participating in these conversations at all. It filled me with inexplicable fury (I concealed it just barely and with effort) to hear such things as: This matter turned out well or badly for this person or that; Sheriff N. is a bad person, Clergyman T. is good; we ought to feel sorry for Farmer M., his sons are throwing their money away; someone else is to be envied because his daughters are thrifty; one family is coming up in the world, another is on the way down. All of this seemed to me as unprovable, as false, as full of holes as could be. My mind forced me to see everything that came up in these conversations as terrifyingly close to me. Once I saw through a magnifying glass that an area of skin on my little finger looked like an open field with furrows and hollows. That was how it was for me now with people and their affairs. I could no longer grasp them with the simplifying gaze of habit. Everything came to pieces, the pieces broke into more pieces, and nothing could be encompassed by one idea. Isolated words swam about me; they turned into eyes that stared at me and into which I had to stare back, dizzying whirlpools which spun around and around and led into the void.

I tried to rescue myself from this state by entering the spiritual world of antiquity. Plato I avoided—I dreaded his metaphorical fancy. Most of all it was my intent to follow Seneca and Cicero. I hoped to heal myself with their harmony of well-defined and orderly ideas. But I could not find my way to them. I understood these ideas well—I saw their marvelous interplay rise up before me like golden spheres bobbing on magnificent fountains. I could float around them and watch how they played off one another. But they had to do only with one another, and what was most profound, what was personal in my thinking was not a part of their dance. A feeling of terrible loneliness came over me while I was among them. I felt like someone locked in a garden full of eyeless statuary, and I rushed to get out again.

Since then I have led an existence which I fear you could hardly imagine, so inanely, so unconsciously has it been proceeding. Yet it is not too different from that of my neighbors, my relatives, and most of the landed gentry of this kingdom, and it is not entirely without happy and stirring moments. 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. Recently, for example, I had a generous amount of rat poison spread in the milk cellars of one of my dairy farms. I went out riding toward evening, thinking no more about the matter, as you might imagine. As I rode at a walk over deep, tilled farmland—nothing more significant in the vicinity than a startled covey of quail, the great setting sun off in the distance above the convex fields—suddenly this cellar unrolled inside me, filled with the death throes of the pack of rats. It was all there. The cool and musty cellar air, full of the sharp, sweetish smell of the poison, and the shrilling of the death cries echoing against mildewed walls. Those convulsed clumps of powerlessness, those desperations colliding with one another in confusion. The frantic search for ways out. The cold glares of

fury when two meet at a blocked crevice. But why am I searching again for words, which I have sworn off! My friend, do you remember Livy's wonderful description of the hours before the destruction of Alba Longa? The people wandering through the streets that they will never see again... saying good-bye to the rocks on the ground. I tell you, my friend, this was in me, and Carthage in flames too; but it was more than that, it was more divine, more bestial—and it was the present, the fullest, most sublime present. A mother was there, whose dying young thrashed about her. But she was not looking at those in their death agonies, or at the unyielding stone walls, but off into space, or through space into the infinite, and gnashing her teeth as she looked! If there was a slave standing near Niobe in helpless fright as she turned to stone, he must have gone through what I went through when the soul of this beast I saw within me bared its teeth to its dreadful fate.

Forgive this description, but do not think it was pity that I felt. If you think so, my example was poorly chosen. It was much more and much less than pity—a vast empathy, a streaming across into those creatures, or a feeling that a flux of life and death, of dreaming and waking, had streamed into them for an instant (from where?). 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? And then I turn away from this place in silence? And, when I see this nut tree weeks later, I go by with a cautious sidelong glance because I

do not wish to frighten off the feeling of the marvelous remaining in the air around its trunk, to drive away the tremors of the supernatural still pulsating through the shrubbery in that place? At those moments an insignificant creature, a dog, a rat, a beetle, a stunted apple tree, a cart path winding over the hill, a moss-covered stone mean more to me than the most beautiful, most abandoned lover ever did on the happiest night. These mute and sometimes inanimate beings rise up before me with such a plenitude, such a presence of love that my joyful eye finds nothing dead anywhere. Everything seems to mean something, everything that exists, everything I can remember, everything in the most muddled of my thoughts. Even my own heaviness, the usual dullness of my brain, seems to mean something: I feel a blissful and utterly eternal interplay in me and around me, and amid the to-and-fro there is nothing into which I cannot merge. Then it is as if my body consisted entirely of coded messages revealing everything to me. Or as if we could enter into a new, momentous relationship with all of existence if we began to think with our hearts. But when this strange bewitchment stops, I am unable to say anything about it; I can no more express in rational language what made up this harmony permeating me and the entire world, or how it made itself perceptible to me, than I can describe with any precision the inner movements of my intestines or the engorgement of my veins.

Apart from these strange chance events (which I hardly know whether to call mental or physical), I live a life of scarcely credible emptiness. I have trouble concealing from my wife how hard my heart has become and from the people working for me how bored I am by the affairs of the estate. It seems to me that the good, strict upbringing for which I have my late father to thank and my long-standing habit of leaving no hour in the day unoccupied are the only things giving my life a semblance of acceptable stability and maintaining an appearance appropriate to my position and my person.

I am renovating one wing of my house and find myself able to have a chat with the architect now and then about the progress of his work. I manage my properties, and my tenants and staff will very likely find me somewhat more taciturn but no less generous than before. As they stand with their caps off in front of their doors when I ride by in the evening, none of them will have an inkling that my gaze, which they are accustomed to meeting with respect, is passing with silent longing over the rotten boards under which they hunt for earthworms to use for bait, and ducking through the narrow, barred window into the dismal room in whose corner a low bed with colorful sheets always seems to be waiting for someone to die or be born; that my eye is lingering for a long time on the ugly puppies or the cats slinking lithely between flowerpots, and searching among all the shabby and crude objects of a rough life for that one whose unprepossessing form, whose unnoticed presence lying on or leaning against something, whose mute existence can become the source of that mysterious, wordless, infinite rapture. For my nameless joyful feeling will come not from contemplating the starry sky but more likely from a lonely shepherd's fire in the distance; from the stridulation of the last dying cricket as autumn winds are already driving wintry clouds over the empty fields, not the majestic rumbling of an organ. And sometimes I compare myself in my thoughts with Crassus, the orator. The story is that he grew so inordinately fond of a tame eel, a dull, mute, red-eyed fish in his ornamental pond, that it became the talk of the town; and when Domitius disparaged him in the Senate for shedding tears over the death of this fish, wishing to portray him as something of a fool, Crassus replied: "When my fish died, I did what you did not when your first wife died, or your second."

I do not know how often this Crassus with his eel has hurtled across the centuries into my mind as a reflection of myself. His response to Domitius is not the reason, however.

That brought the ones who laughed onto his side, so that the substance of the thing was diffused into a witticism. But that substance is what cuts me to the quick, and it would have been no different even if Domitius had wept bitterly and with the most sincere distress over his wives. There would still have been Crassus, crying over his eel. And an inexpressible something forces me to think about this figure—whose ludicrousness and contemptibility I see so perfectly in the middle of a Senate running the world and discussing deadly serious business—in a way that seems completely foolish to me as soon as I try to express it in words.

The image of Crassus is sometimes in my brain at night, like a splinter with everything around it a throbbing, boiling infection. Then it is as if I myself were beginning to ferment, to foam, seethe, and give off sparks. And the whole thing is a kind of feverish thinking, but thinking in a medium more direct, fluid, and passionate than words. It has whirlpools too, but ones which seem to lead not into the abyss as whirlpools of language do but into myself in some way, and into the lap of the most profound peace.

Dear friend, I have tried your patience too much with this lengthy description of an inexplicable state which ordinarily remains bottled up within me.

You were kind enough to express your regret that no more books by me have been arriving "to make up for the loss of our companionship." When I read that, I knew—not without a pang—that I would write no books either in English or in Latin in the coming year, the years after that, or in all the years of this life of mine. There is only one reason for this, a strange and embarrassing one; I leave it to your infinite intellectual superiority to give it a place among what to your clear eyes is an orderly array of mental and physical phenomena. 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.

I had wanted, had it only been permitted me, to squeeze into the closing words of this, the last letter I expect I will write to Francis Bacon, all the love and gratitude, all the boundless admiration which I bear in my heart for the one who has done the most for my spirit—the foremost Englishman of my time—and which I will continue to bear in my heart until death bursts it.

August 22, AD 1603

Phi. Chandos

(1902)