As German as Kafka

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2.1 The authenticity paradox—Writing between identity and opposition

Early 2014, the (Czech-) German writer Maxim Biller caused a stir with a provocative contribution to *Die Zeit*. In his polemical essay ‘Letzte Ausfahrt Uckermarck’, he comes close to pronouncing the death of contemporary literature. Its deplorable state, Biller contends, is due to the notable absence of *Ruhestörer* who—as once did German-Jewish authors like Peter Weiss or Elias Canetti—disrupt the monotony that seems to pervade the German literary scene:

The absence of Jewish troublemakers is no good to our literature, which is growing increasingly introspective and therefore feeble and provincial. [...] German literature is like a terminally ill patient who has stopped seeing a doctor yet tells everyone that he is doing well.

[Die Abwesenheit der jüdischen Ruhestörer tut unserer Literatur nicht gut, sie wird immer selbstbezogen, dadurch kraftloser und provinzieller. [...] Die deutsche Literatur ist wie der todkranke Patient, der aufgehört hat, zum Arzt zu gehen, aber allen erzählt, dass es ihm gut geht.]
After the failed experiment of the ‘German-Jewish symbiosis’—“that century-old attempt to establish a new realistic tradition—literary and political—in romantic cultural backwater Germany [dieser hundert Jahre währende Versuch, im romantischen Krähwinkel Deutschland eine neue Tradition des Realismus—literarisch und politisch—zu etablieren]”—Biller now observes a stark contrast between the bland literary scene and the considerable sociocultural challenges brought on by immigration and integration. Despite that revolutionary potential, he can only witness an obsession with conformity that obstructs any critical intervention by new German citizens, too many of whom enter the public domain as “domesticated SPD politicians [domestizierte SPD-Politiker]” rather than as confident intellectuals and writers. Biller sees that same domestication reflected in the publications of minority writers who “very early on—often already in their debut, which is usually the wide open window into each author’s biography—adapt to the prevailing aesthetics [sich sehr früh—oft schon in ihrem Debüt, das normalerweise das weit offene Fenster zur Biografie eines jeden Autors ist—der herrschenden Ästhetik [...] anpassen].” And even when they do incorporate their biographies, autobiographical detail hardly ever drives the central conflict and is used only as “folklore or scenic garnish [Folklore oder szenische Beilage].” Resisting the “repressive tolerance [repressive Toleranz]” exercised by the German Literaturbetrieb, Biller makes a case for a collective voice of minority writers, pleading for a new realism undaunted by “the shitstorm [den Shitstorm]” of the German Kulturvolksfront—a realism authentic to the core that thwarts readers’ expectations, and which for this reason, paradoxically, will be appreciated even more.

Truly provocative about Biller’s argument—apart from his scathing criticism directed at individual writers—is the equation of the critical value of a text to its visible thematization and incorporation of cultural difference. Biller thus apparently defends the contested “burden of representation” that so many immigrant authors have struggled to shed, and which has gradually entered the awareness of scholarly critics as a particularly sensitive issue. Arguably, as enfant terrible of German letters, Biller’s primary intention was simply to cause a stir and incite the debate. Possibly, he even satirizes the exoticist desire of the German audience. Yet behind his intervention hides a more fundamental issue, as it revisits the crucial question that has informed the literary debate since the Romantic period, i.e. the question of the critical potential of art and of its social and political relevance. Do the arts constitute an autonomous, “de-humanized” sphere separated from political, economic, and social life—an art for art’s sake? Or should the arts on the contrary deliberately and critically engage with
the world? Intentionally or not, Biller reveals a field of extremes between which minority writers appear to move: between artistic integrity and conformity to readers’ expectations, and between strategic use of cultural difference and the resistance to be received in terms of that difference. Biller suggests that realism and the visibility of difference will revolutionize and vitalize German literature from within. What happens, though, when precisely that difference becomes incorporated into the reader’s horizon of expectations? Moreover, is it really only ‘ethnic realism’ that interrupts, subverts, or questions the assumptions and expectations of an audience? When does cultural difference become a marketing strategy—or worse, a commodity? In other words, Biller’s ‘authenticity’ argument is highly problematic in an aesthetic context. His defense of realism as the only literary mode ‘true’ to the writer’s background—the genre that “speaks in the simplest of terms […] about people, as they truly are [in den einfachsten Worten […] über die Menschen [spricht], wie sie wirklich sind]”—is at odds with the aesthetic nature of literature, which always involves mediation, artificiality, and performance to varying extents. Making claims about the ‘authenticity’ of minority writing thus inevitably invites a paradox. “[T]he dilemma of authenticity,” in Jonathan Culler’s words,

is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes. […] The authentic […] requires markers, but our notion of the authentic is the unmarked.11

The present chapter investigates this field of tension through the lens of the aesthete, focusing on two typical texts from the Wiener Moderne—Schnitzler’s Fräulein Else and Beer-Hofmann’s Der Tod Georgs—and two contemporary texts—Kermani’s Kurzmitteilung and Zaimoglu’s Liebesbrand. In Fräulein Else and Kurzmitteilung, the aesthete is a performer who attempts to fashion and sell him-/herself as an interesting personality, a beautiful image, a work of art. In both instances, this artistic self-fashioning is inspired by an assimilatory drive. The two aesthetes at first seem to embody a narrative of self-development and conformity to social convention. Having reached the limits of their radical autonomy, however, they see themselves confronted with the dead end of the assimilation process. The texts thus share a critique of radical assimilation, by presenting it as a process of self-aestheticization bordering on self-commodification. The second chapter section picks up where Fräulein Else and Kurzmitteilung leave
off—at the moment of the aesthete’s retreat from the world. In *Der Tod Georgs* and *Liebesbrand*, the protagonists’ aestheticism reveals itself as a “perceptive disorder.” Their distorted perception originates in their submission to idealism, in an everyday as well as a philosophical sense. In very different ways, the novels criticize idealism as an objectifying and essentializing view on reality and identity. The highly pictorial impressions of Beer-Hofmann’s aesthete—an outgrowth of his idealism—can be read as an investigation of the assimilated, secularized Jewish mind. In *Liebesbrand*, the (Western) obsession with the ‘original’ and the ‘authentic’ is exposed as an idealizing projection onto a reality that is in fact permanently unstable.

At first sight, the process of self-aestheticization described in the first section has little in common with the perceptive disorder described in the second. Yet either manifestation of aestheticism is based on a distorted reality principle. Aestheticism, in a formal definition, involves a specifically heightened form of literary ‘perception’ constituting a different ‘reality’ that is not immediately bound to the principles of reality. The world finds expression in images and concepts, in the most general sense through ‘attributions of meaning’ to the objects of the outer world that in themselves are neutral in meaning. Their ‘objective’ reproduction or representation is therefore impossible, since ‘reality’ is constituted in the first place by the perceiving subject. [...] Only the ‘reality principle’ [...] separates [...] perceiving subject and ‘objective’ reality. Aestheticism rather regards the world not as a field of activity, planning and action, but as an appearance, as an object of mere observation, as a ‘meaningful spectacle’ [...].


[^12^]
[^13^]
[^14^]
Aesthetes between identity and opposition

The aesthetes in the first section emerge as lead *actors* in that ‘spectacle’. Fashioning an image of themselves for others to behold, they actively disengage themselves from a reality principle based on “the requirements of knowledge, tradition, religion, morality, and physical laws [den Vorgaben des Wissens, der Tradition, der Religion, der Moral, und der physikalischen Gesetze].” In that respect, their aesthetic self-performance is informed by a narrative of assimilation, and vice versa. The (semi-) aesthetes in the second section are *spectators*, whose distorted perception leads either to the ‘mortification’ of reality or to idealizing projections. In both texts, the perceiving subject distorts ‘objective’ reality by submitting it to the order of his perceptive faculties. Aestheticism is not just a matter of indulgence in beauty, however; the suspension of the reality principle also carries a connotation of aesthetic opposition. The many variations of the aesthete discussed here illustrate that the ‘politics’ of art and literature do not always involve a truthful, ‘authentic’ correspondence to the writer’s biography, but that they reside precisely in its aesthetic, mediated, and anti-mimetic nature.

The fact that Kermani and Zaimoglu revisit the modernist theme of aestheticism suggests that they see themselves confronted with a dilemma not unlike the one Beer-Hofmann and Schnitzler were facing. The four texts at hand indeed bring into focus a comparable “aesthetic anxiety”—the authors’ dilemma between the allure of radical artistic autonomy as a refuge from the imperative of identity and, on the other hand, the concern over losing their social relevance as intellectuals. According to Carl Schorske’s influential diagnosis of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, modernism was the escapist response of a bourgeois elite to the failure of political liberalism. As a “political surrogate for a marginalized liberal bourgeoisie,” Viennese modernism was furthermore expressive of a profound crisis of the (Enlightened) individual. By the end of the nineteenth century, economic, social, and political modernizations had cast doubt on collective cultural identities, as well as on individual subjective identity. The liberal ideal of moral and scientific progress of humanity, embodied by the ‘rational man’, had started giving way to the more changeable, unstable *homo psychologicus*. The Enlightened individual, as a subject in a clear and stable relationship with the objective world, increasingly lost its significance as a reference point. Modernist art, and particularly aestheticism, reflected that ‘inward turn’ into radical subjectivity.

The failure of liberalism was significant especially to the assimilated Jews of Vienna. With *Bildung* as its prime vehicle, their assimilation had been inspired by notions of progress and self-improvement. But as anti-Semitism became more virulent and politically dominant with the election of Karl Lueger as
mayor in 1895, the liberal promise of integration and emancipation appeared to have reached a dead end. Modernist experiment, inspired by and responding to “the upsets caused in all respects of life by the ever more rapid modernization,” appeared particularly well-suited to address the Jewish predicament. “A refuge for Jews who remained nostalgically faithful to liberalism, even after its fall from power, was in Bildung and its privileged auxiliary, art, seen as a secular substitute for religion as a source of human values.” Indeed, the undeniably Jewish character of Viennese modernism—in terms of their contribution, not of some Jewish ‘essence’—can be considered an expression of their enhanced sensitivity to a climate of crisis, which affected their position as artists and as Jews:

Viennese aestheticism was not, of course, the prerogative of Jewish intellectuals. But it can be seen to assume a unique existential significance for them once it is interpreted as a reaction to the loss of political structures and of possible sociocultural identification, as throwing the individual back on certain refuges: beauty, introspection, dreams. It is then easy to see why these Jewish writers were in such a good position to go further than others in pursuing (and at the same time criticizing) the flight from the world and the denial of reality which is ‘art for art’s sake’. What we call Viennese modernity meant first living through a crisis of subjectivity, and then reacting against it.

Still, apart from the fact that a retreat into “the aesthetic garden” in itself constituted an oppositional response, the retreat never really offered a permanent or absolute refuge from political reality. Adding nuance to the dichotomy in Schorske’s thesis—political engagement versus modern art—Spector argues that aestheticism was untenable and ideological by nature:

[T]he idealized aesthetic moment of ‘Vienna 1900’ is best conceived not as a realm unto itself but rather as a thin ridge, like the ridge of a mountain range, which as soon as it is reached reveals a vast and radically different terrain before it. [...] The ridge of aestheticist culture is crossed as soon as it is reached in the sense that the ‘retreat into culture’ was always already ideological and instantly began to decay.
The modernist texts by Beer-Hofmann and Schnitzler highlight that temporary aspect of the aesthete’s retreat. Whereas Fräulein Else can be read as the birth of the aesthete—the protagonist moves towards the ‘ridge’ of aestheticism—Der Tod Georgs steers the aesthete back towards real life and his cultural heritage—having reached the ridge, the aesthete is already on his way down. The retreat from reality is indeed already a statement of opposition, but at the peak of aestheticism, the liberal assimilation narrative reaches its absolute limit.

In his discussion of the multiple identity crises of fin-de-siècle Vienna, Le Rider points out their ‘postmodern’ character. “The Viennese modernists may indeed have prefigured some of the great postmodern themes: the triumph and crisis of individualism; the nostalgia for a mythology capable of regenerating society […]; distrust of scientific and technological rationalism […];” and—especially relevant to the current chapter—“the questioning of the status of modern art, somewhere between elitism and democratization.”27 Although the label ‘postmodern’ itself may not fit their novels, Zaimoglu and Kermani revisit similar themes. Liebesbrand and Kurzmitteilung picture a crisis and a critique of Enlightened individualism and progress, embedded in reflections on the status of art and literature. Kermani does so in allusions to Walter Benjamin’s writings on the artwork; Zaimoglu by incorporating typically Romantic motifs. Furthermore, their texts can be read as “literary interventions”28 into a discursive climate of multiple crises as well. The profound cultural and subjective transformation that the era of “mobilized identities”29 has brought about, is reminiscent of “the (post)modern indeterminacy of identity”30 that characterized Viennese modernism. The almost frantic clinging to national and cultural identities today can be considered a response to the problematic construction of the self in relation to an increasingly decontextualized and deterritorialized social space. When “globalizing forces and pressures prise open local certainties, local forms of association, affiliation and feeling, local ways of dwelling […],”31 their impact is deeply personal, to the extent that individuals seem to lose control over life.32 In terms of selfhood and community, then, the identity crises today appear not that different from those faced by the modernists. By revisiting the aesthete, Zaimoglu and Kermani articulate their skepticism of radical assimilation from a contemporary perspective. The contrastive comparison of aestheticist themes across two time frames sheds light on how the Enlightened confidence that underpins assimilation narratives gives ground to a vulnerable individual in need of self-transcendence and community.
2.2  The aesthete’s retreat:  
Arthur Schnitzler’s *Fräulein Else* (1924) versus  
Navid Kermani’s *Kurzmitteilung* (2007)

The ‘value’ of cultural difference:  
Arthur Schnitzler and Navid Kermani

*Fräulein Else*, published in 1924, was conceived in a period marked by strong anti-Semitic responses to Schnitzler’s work. The origins of the novella can be traced back to the 1921 Viennese premiere of his erotically tinted play *Reigen.* The play elicited a scandal and was received by the anti-Semitic press as evidence of the author’s supposed “predilection for bordello themes, which, in turn, were interpreted as evidence of an uncanny business sense.” As the press continued its attack, the play even became the topic of a heated parliamentary debate. After a mob caused a riot in a theatre, Schnitzler eventually forbade all further performances after 1922. Schnitzler, “[t]rue to his lifelong apolitical habits, [...] did not react to external crisis by publicly confronting it.” Instead, he respond to the anti-Semitic reception of his work by reworking material and turning inward. Indeed, in *Fräulein Else*, Schnitzler appears to comment subtly on the impossible position of the Jewish author, whose work for some was ‘too Jewish’ but for others ‘not Jewish enough’.

*Kurzmitteilung* was published at a comparably tense moment. In the aftermath of the publication of the Mohammed cartoons in the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, the “emotive dyad” of ‘Islam’ versus ‘the West’ had resurfaced with renewed intensity in the German public debate. The image of Islam as a threat to Western values dominated the debate on the construction of mosques in Cologne (Kermani’s residence) and Berlin in 2006. For some, these were a sign of religious tolerance, for others evidence of the development of *Parallelgesellschaften*, and Germany’s “silent islamification [stille Islamisierung].” Kermani’s interventions in the debate are reminiscent of Edward Said’s diagnosis that Western media use the term ‘Islam’ as “part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam,” which barely corresponds to “the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam, with [...] its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures.” Like Said, Kermani calls for more nuance in the often polarizing debates:
Authors, speakers, and studio guests are ahead of me in that they seem to know exactly what Islam is. To me it is not so clear. When asked, for example, whether Islam is compatible with modernity, I cannot come up with a straight answer. Which modernity? is to be asked first of all. [...] The second question seems to be even more difficult to answer: Which Islam?

Without delivering pat answers, Kurzmitteilung comments on the position of religion in a (self-perceived) secularized society. In a reversed ‘orientalizing’ gesture, Kermani paints a highly ironic picture of Western secularism, unmasking it as a capitalist ‘religion’.

The pressure to stake a stand on political matters in an increasingly anti-Semitic environment had a particular effect on (the reception of) Schnitzler’s work (1862–1931). The idea that, as a writer, he had no adequate answer to the Jewish question shaped his approach to the few Jewish-themed texts he did write. Schnitzler appeared to represent the typical assimilated Jewish intellectual, unfettered by religious tradition or nostalgic sentiments about his family history, while showing little interest in the many paths of Jewish revival. Although his medical education paved the way for a bourgeois life among the acculturated Jews of Vienna, he chose not to become a doctor and to pursue a literary career instead. Still, Schnitzler never rejected his Jewishness, as his diary entries on anti-Semitism and on the many shades and variants of Jewish responses to it reflect. He saw little contradiction in the multiple facets of his identity: “I am a Jew, an Austrian, a German. It has to be that way, for I feel insulted in the name of the Jews, the Austrians, and the Germans when they say something horrible about any of the three. [Ich bin Jude, Österreicher, Deutscher. Es muss wohl so sein—denn beleidigt fühl ich mich im Namen des Judentums, des Österreichertums und des Deutschlands, wenn man einem von den Dreien was Schlimmes nachsagt.]”

Despite his obvious affiliation to the fatherland, Schnitzler was skeptical of determinate notions of (collective) identity. Unlike his friend Beer-Hofmann, he opposed both cultural and political Zionism, rejecting it as a questionable notion, “according to which someone who was born in a certain country, grew up there, is always employed there, should regard another country [...] also
emotionally as his actual homeland [nach der jemand, der in einem bestimmten Land geboren, dort aufgewachsen, dort dauernd tätig ist, ein anderes Land [...] auch gefühlsmäßig als seine eigentliche Heimat zu betrachten habe.” He felt that a deliberate personal commitment to the Jewish cause would be hard to reconcile with his Enlightened view on autonomy. With his “skeptical individualism” he sought to “reaffirm the autonomy of the inner self in an age of collectivist ideologies [...] which might threaten its integrity.”

Not surprisingly, Schnitzler was not known for taking an explicit stand on the position of Austrian Jews. His public silence does not imply, however, that the author was not interested in pressing political matters—as Gillman notes, “history had rendered that position obsolete.” Although a direct engagement with Jewish themes is largely absent from his extensive oeuvre, two of his works are directly concerned with Jewish themes: his debut novel *Der Weg ins Freie* (1908) and the play *Professor Bernhardi* (1912). Both texts offer a panoramic view of Viennese Jewish intellectual circles and its range of ideologies—from Jewish socialists, to Zionists, to “assimilatory geckos [assimilatorischen Gecken].” Yet even though these works portray the Jews in an increasingly hostile environment, Schnitzler’s apparent engagement with Jewish issues did not really convince his readers. According to Gillman, this was due to the fact that Schnitzler’s ‘Jewish’ texts “respond[ed] to the situation by offering anatomies of failure: works that on formal and thematic levels are all about a hopeless hybridity failing to cohere in the well-made story or political program.” Gillman further argues that Schnitzler went to great lengths “to frustrate the expectations of readers and viewers who expected a Jewish writer of Schnitzler’s prominence to take a stand [...].” In other words, the author was well aware of how critical pressure to engage with Jewish themes would affect the reception of his work. The choice to write about Jewish themes presented him with a dilemma. On the one hand, if he chose to withhold a clear political argument from his texts, they would be “vulnerable to cooptation by almost every ideological camp.” On the other hand, he was convinced that “the aesthetic criteria of successful dramatic art made it impossible for an overtly Jewish dramatist to succeed. Any and every representation of the Jewish question would be seen as polemical from the onset [...].”

So, while critics deemed him a public intellectual obligated to express an opinion on Jewish matters, Schnitzler himself found that political engagement and addressing cultural difference would compromise the integrity of his writing and his status as a skilled novelist. He felt that, either way, he would fail—as being too polemical, or not polemical enough. As I will illustrate, Fräulein Else—even if it is not an explicitly ‘Jewish’ text—evokes a similar artistic predicament, as well
as the artist’s desire to escape its pressure. I will do so in comparison to Kermani’s 
*Kurzmitteilung*, which explores the artistic ‘value’ of cultural difference against a contemporary background of consumer culture, culture industry, and Islam in a secularized society.

Navid Kermani (1967) was born of Iranian parents in Siegen, Germany. His interventions in the debate on ‘Islam versus Aufklärung’ have garnered him the status of well-respected public figure. In his fictional, academic, and journalistic writing, he consistently focuses on religion, which he approaches from a variety of perspectives. He has written on political issues in the Muslim world, Iran in particular, but also on the aesthetic perception of the Qur’an and, more recently, on Christian art. In his public role, he does not shy away from criticism, but when compared to, for instance, Zaimoglu’s characteristic anti-establishment strategy, Kermani adopts a more reconciliatory tone. The author, who had a seat on the Deutsche Islamkonferenz from 2006 until 2009, has revealed himself a staunch defender of interreligious tolerance and strongly encourages intercultural dialogue. In his essay collection *Wer ist Wir?* (2009), for instance, Kermani deplores “that the debate about multiculturalism is in fact a debate about Muslims—not with Muslims, by the way, but mainly about them [daß die Debatte um den Multikulturalismus faktisch eine Debatte über Muslime ist—übrigens nicht mit den Muslimen, sondern hauptsächlich über sie].” In his essays, Kermani’s personal experiences as a German Muslim convey an Enlightened perspective on religion in a (seemingly) secular society. In doing so, he confronts those voices that surfaced more strongly since September 11, 2001, which claim that Islamic and Western values are fundamentally incompatible. Kermani is, in other words, not reluctant to assume a representational role or to take a nuanced stand in a polarized debate. Still, it is important to note that he does so primarily as an academic: he does not speak only from personal experience but from a more distanced and critical perspective on Islam and religion as well.

As a writer of literary texts, on the other hand, he refuses to be pigeonholed as a ‘minority writer’. “My literature is German, period—as German as Kafka [...]. [Meine Literatur ist deutsch, Punkt, aus, basta—so deutsch wie Kafka [...].” Tracing his affinity to Kafka—“a German writer who is not German [einem deutschen Schriftsteller, der nicht deutsch [ist]],” yet whose “intellectual Heimat [...] is German literature [geistige Heimat [...] die deutsche Literatur [ist]]”—Kermani highlights the fact that ‘German’ literary history has always been characterized by cultural, linguistic, and geographical heterogeneity and, moreover, has shown itself “remarkably often recalcitrant to concepts such as nation, empire, fatherland [auffallend oft widerspenstig gegenüber Begriffen
wie Nation, Reich, Vaterland].” Similarly, as far as his fiction is concerned, he refuses to carry the burden of representation. In an interview for Die Zeit, a literary critic confronted Kermani with a question reminiscent of Biller’s provocation. She wonders why Kermani’s novel Sozusagen Paris (2016)—a story about “the very normal life in a goddamn German countryside village [das ganz normale Leben in einer scheißdeutschen Provinz],” to use Kermani’s own words—is so tedious. Furthermore, she denounces the metafictional aspect of the text, which is traversed by references to Marcel Proust and directs the reader’s attention to the construction of the literary manuscript: “Why this flirtation with the seal of authenticity? [Was soll die Koketterie mit dem Echtheitssiegel?]” Apparently, like Biller, the critic had different expectations about fiction by an author otherwise very much engaged with the relations between Islam and the West. The implied assumption that these issues should at least be reflected in his literary work once more illustrates the pressure to account for one’s cultural difference through fiction.

Schnitzler and Kermani address the ‘burden of representation’ and the ‘market value’ of cultural difference from a similar perspective. The aesthetes in Fräulein Else and Kurzmitteilung, who both fashion themselves as performers, represent a conflict between artistic ‘codes’: between an “aesthetics of opposition” that creates dissonance, and an “aesthetics of identity,” in which the artist’s code is the same as the audience’s. This artistic tension is traversed by narratives of assimilation and cultural difference. To Schnitzler’s aesthete, the burden of covert Jewishness aggravates the artistic conflict; Kermani’s aesthete fashions a palatable cultural difference, exploiting his Islamic background as a self-marketing strategy. By comparing these protagonists, I will illustrate how cultural difference—like the art object—is vulnerable to commodification and further complicates the already existing tension between artistic autonomy and resonance with the audience, which literature has to negotiate. Furthermore, I will argue that the aesthete, as the embodiment of Bildung, conveys a critique of radical assimilation: it merely leads to a dead end of “uselessly advanced self-development.” On a metanarrative level, the aesthete—especially Kermani’s—subverts exoticist projections on minority writing as being ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ and is, rather, a reminder of the essentially mediated and artificial nature of literature.
A conflict of codes: ‘aesthetics of opposition’ versus ‘aesthetics of identity’

_Fräulein Else_ consists of the interior monologue of the young, acculturated Jewish woman Else, whose integrity is compromised by her father’s financial difficulties. During a summer retreat with relatives at an Italian spa, Else receives a telegram from her mother, requesting her to approach one of the guests, the vicomte Dorsday, for a loan. Dorsday only accepts the financial transaction on the condition of Else’s service in return—to show herself naked in front of him. A considerable part of the novella pictures Else’s fretting about the social dilemma she faces: should she protect her father from disgrace by disgracing herself? Or should she resist social and familial pressure and instead give in to her surfacing longing to break through the façade of Viennese bourgeoisie? In a culmination of her mental distress and her desire to reveal herself as a performer, Else enters the hotel’s music room dressed in only a coat, undresses in front of the collected guests, and collapses, which the audience perceives as a bout of illness or hysteria. Once she returns to her room, she poisons herself, seemingly fatally, with a dose of barbiturate she has kept at her disposal, and which she has referred to before as an ideal means of escape. Else’s Jewish background is not evident at first sight, but can be inferred from the tension between her and Dorsday, a Jewish art dealer, and—in Else’s eyes—a parvenu. It is in their conflict that assimilatory and artistic/aestheticist narratives confront each other.

_Kurzmitteilung_ situates the I-narrator Dariusch against a backdrop of culture industry and increased anti-Islamic sentiment. Dariusch is a second-generation German-Iranian event manager—not quite an art dealer but a dealer in _Kultur_—who suffers from a deeply conflicted identity. He struggles to reconcile his position as a successful businessman with his Middle Eastern background, which he considers both an asset and an impediment to his well-manicured image: he claims residual identity as an Iranian Muslim, even though he is not an observant one; he seems very critical of misconstrued versions of Islam in the West but is, due to his profession, complicit in its commercialization. Dariusch has been commissioned to organize a farewell celebration for the Ford AG chairman Patrick Boger. His preparations are interrupted by a text message from his former colleague Korinna. She informs him about the sudden death of his contact at Ford, Maike Anfang, whom he has met only a couple of weeks before. This news coincides with the 7/7 bombings in London, which upsets Dariusch in an unexpected way, causing him to question his lifestyle and eliciting a desire for connection and spirituality. Remarkably, it does not lead him to rediscover
his Islamic background. Instead, under the guidance of Boger, he turns to a cultic movement that very much resembles the corporate and capitalist ‘religion’ Scientology.

Driving the conflict in both stories is a similar short message—a text message in Kurzmitteilung and a telegram in Fräulein Else. This apparently direct, quick, and effective means of communication in fact exposes a social context from which genuine connection is missing. Fräulein Else is well-known for its exposure of bourgeois false fronts and for painting a picture of “a society that has lost its immediacy and grown used to a degree of alienation.” Similarly, Dariusch represents the typical “network nomad,” “who swing[s] from contact to contact and project to project […] without insisting on a consistent self-image”—and who does not manage to establish any meaningful connection. In this light, the I-narration in both stories reflects the protagonists’ painful isolation, indicating that their individualistic, assimilatory narrative has reached its limits. Furthermore, as I will illustrate, the respective social contexts endorse performance and self-aestheticization. This manifests itself in Else’s acute awareness of how others perceive her and in her “self-dramatizing tendency:” to her, social interaction amounts to a theatrical performance. In Dariusch, that tendency is evident in slightly irritating self-justifications feeding the impression that the I-narrator consistently addresses an audience—which in fact he does: it turns out that the story is a book chapter addressed to Boger.

The short message, then, is a crucial narrative element, as it connects the stories to the larger question of artistic communication—of how the writer mediates a message to an audience. As I will illustrate, Kurzmitteilung and Fräulein Else revolve around a conflict between two literary codes as defined by literary theorist Jurij Lotman. “The perception of an artistic text,” he writes,

is always a struggle between audience and author […]. The audience takes in part of the text and then ‘finishes’ or ‘constructs’ the rest. […] [The author] outplays the artistic experience, aesthetic norms and prejudices of the reader, and thrusts his model of the world and concept of the structure of reality upon him. […] The reader, of course, is not passive; he has an interest in mastering the model that the artist presents to him.

Based on this relation between potentially conflicting interests, Lotman distinguishes two artistic codes: the “aesthetics of identity” and the “aesthetics of opposition.” The first presupposes the identity or near-identity of sender’s
and receiver’s codes. “[T]he rules of the author and of the audience are not one, but two phenomena in a state of mutual identity.” This implies, first of all, that a work of art is judged “according to its observation of certain rules,” and, secondly, that the work sets out to meet the audience’s expectations. The aesthetics of identity are characteristic of folkloristic, medieval, and classicist art. By contrast, the aesthetics of opposition, typical of Romanticism or the avant-gardes, involve those artistic systems that associate aesthetic worth with originality:

[Their] code is unknown to the audience before the act of artistic perception begins. [...] The author sets his own, original resolution, which he believes to be the truer one, in opposition to methods of modeling reality that are familiar to the reader. In the first instance the act of artistic perception involves simplification and generalization; here we are dealing with complication.

This does not imply that all rules are abandoned in the aesthetics of opposition. Rather, as Lotman puts it, the rules “must be established in the process of play.” This dynamic between artist’s and audience’s codes, as well as the mutual dependence of artist and onlooker, will prove useful in the interpretation of Else’s and Dariusch’s artistic self-fashioning and its traversal by assimilatory narratives.

Birth of the aesthete—“Bin nicht geschaffen für eine bürgerliche Existenz [...]”

Fräulein Else has often been read as a case study in hysteria and narcissism and the ‘pathology’ of Else’s mindset as the symptom of pervasive social determination. Others have focused on themes of voyeurism and surveillance as aspects of Viennese bourgeois culture. More recently, the Jewish context of the novella, as well as the Jewish setting of the story have come into the picture, while others have pointed out the significance of Else’s theatricality and self-dramatization. As I will argue, Else’s covert Jewishness is crucial in her “failed attempt at aesthetic self-fashioning.” By asserting herself as an aesthete—a combination of actor and artist—Else seeks to regain control over a situation in which she is at the mercy of social, erotic, and economic pressure—“I’m paralysed [Ich bin gelähmt].” (FE 59) The challenge to resist conformity and social convention is augmented by the fact that she must engage in a “double monitoring [...] as woman and as assimilated Jew.” Yet her self-aestheticization makes her complicit in her own commodification: she becomes an art object for male consumption and
As German as Kafka

Thus loses the agency that her performance initially affords her. Her dilemma—the choice between her father’s integrity or her own—thus entails a more fundamental conflict: between the emancipatory desire to assert herself and her own involvement in the erotic, economic, and Jewish-assimilatory narratives that determine her experience.

Else’s theatrical inclination is evident already in the opening scene. Her “autonomous monologue” offers insight into the privacy of her thoughts during social interaction. While it lends an air of veracity and transparency to her account, this “mimesis of consciousness” also reveals a discordance between what she is thinking and what she is saying. When she decides to leave a game of tennis with Paul and Cissy, their interaction is an example of conversational etiquette:

“Won’t you really play any more, Else?” “No, Paul, I can’t play any more—goodbye. Good-bye, gnädige Frau.” “But, Else, call me Frau Cissy—or better still, just Cissy.” “Good-bye, Frau Cissy.” “But why are you going already, Else? There are two whole hours before dinner.” “Please play your single with Paul, Frau Cissy. It’s really no fun playing with me to-day.” “Leave her alone, gnädige Frau, she’s in one of her moods to-day—As a matter of fact, Else, being in a bad mood is very becoming to you.—And your red jersey is still more so.” “I hope you’ll find me better-tempered in blue, Paul.”


Their brief conversation triggers Else’s thoughts, which reveal her ironic distance from the ‘reality’ of social conduct. This distance suggests that Else has not fully interiorized social convention, and that it requires her to play a role. Here, the bourgeois setting is exposed as theatrical, artificial, and inauthentic:
That was quite a good exit. I hope those two don’t think I’m jealous.—I’ll swear there’s something between Cousin Paul and Cissy Mohr. Nothing in the world troubles me less—Now I’ll turn round again and wave to them. Wave and smile. Do I look gracious now?—Oh Lord, they’re playing again. I really play better than Cissy Mohr, and Paul isn’t exactly a champion, but he looks nice—with his open collar and that naughty boy face. If only he weren’t so affected. You needn’t worry, Aunt Emma.

(FE 7–8)

The ambivalence of spielen in the opening sentence—playing tennis or acting—may not be evident at first. Else’s comments on the opening scene suggest, though, that she is indeed playing a role, as she directs her own performance. Her retreat from the game into the privacy of her own thoughts is an appropriate exit from the stage. Her dramaturgical self-address—‘Now I’ll turn round again’—betrays the calculation behind her cordiality. Furthermore, the denial of her attraction to Paul is addressed to an imaginary audience, ‘Aunt Emma.’ Else is profoundly aware of the appearances and emotional self-composure that govern bourgeois interaction—her bad temper, for instance, is reduced to a feature of her beauty, like the color of her sweater. Yet playing a role herself, she is suspicious of others’ artificiality as well. She mocks Cissy’s use of the word ‘Dinner’ instead of ‘Diner’ as “silly affectation [dumme Affektation]” (FE 14), and conversational etiquette as perfunctory and superfluous (FE 11), even though she continues to participate in any conversation. Else’s interior monologue thus reveals conflicting impulses. On the one hand, she is tired of ‘playing’ of keeping up appearances—‘I can’t play any more.’ On the other, her self-dramatization suggests that she still enjoys performing and being watched. Apparently, Else longs for a different kind of performance than required by her relatives. Her parents have been struggling with financial difficulties for years and have become skillful actors in a theater of bourgeois conventions:
It’s always been the same story for the last seven years—no, longer than that. Who’d think it to look at me? No one would think it to look at me, or Father either. [...] Mother’s really an artist. The dinner for fourteen people last New Year’s Day—incomprehensible. But my two pairs of evening gloves—there was a regular fuss about them. And when Rudi wanted three hundred gulden the other day Mother almost cried. And Father is always in good spirits. Always? No. Oh no. At the opera the other day at ‘Figaro’ his eyes—suddenly lost all expression—I was terrified. He seemed to become quite another person.

Her parents’ performance, and especially her mother’s ‘artistry’, involves a strategy of concealment. Tailoring their appearances to the expectations of their social circle, Else’s family inhabits a Scheinwirklichkeit, where the perception of their impending ruination—“such a scandal as there never was before [ein Skandal, wie er noch nicht da war]” (FE 19)—seems even more important than the ruination itself. Obsessed with the rules of bourgeois convention, Else’s parents are thus engaged in an aesthetic of identity from which Else wishes to dissociate herself. Resisting to be forced by her father into the role of beggar-woman, or by Dorsday into the role of erotic object, Else attempts to become an artist of (self-) exposure and self-expression instead.

Else’s penchant for role-playing seems at first inscribed into the same aesthetic of identity as her parents. The roles she imagines herself in are all expressions of social status: “I, the high-spirited one, the aristocrat, the Marchesa, the beggar girl, the swindler’s daughter! [I]ch die Hochgemüte, die Aristokratin, die Marchesa, die Bettlerin, die Tochter des Defraudanten].” (FE 29) Her performance seems closely entwined with a liberal-enlightened narrative of social advancement: “No other woman climbs as well as I do, no other has so much go. I’m a sporting girl. I ought to have been born in England, or a Countess. [...] I ought to have gone on the stage. [Keine klettert so gut wie ich, keine hat so viel Schneid,—sporting girl, in England hätte ich auf die Welt kommen sollen, oder als Gräfin. [...] Zur
Bühne hätte ich gehen sollen.]” (FE 29–30) The association between artist and social climber introduces a narrative of assimilation and covert Jewish identity that is not evident from the text at first. As Kelly Comfort argues, in reference to Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, Else is obviously not an artist in the traditional sense but can be considered one due to her construction of a stylized self. Nietzsche wonders whether “the delight in simulation, “the inner craving for a role and mask,” is “perhaps not only peculiar to the actor.” He assigns the actor’s attributes to larger groups of people—the lower classes, women, and Jews—for whom acting is enforced by societal standards. It is an acquired instinct of those

who had to survive under changing pressures and coercions, in deep dependency, who had to cut their coat according to the cloth, always adapting themselves again to new circumstances, who always had to change their mien and posture, until they learned gradually to turn their coat with every wind and thus virtually to become a coat [...].

Based on this argument, he likens the Jewish acculturation process to a theatrical performance. Jews are “the people who possess the art of adaptability par excellence,” and “one might see them virtually as a world-historical arrangement for the production of actors, a veritable breeding ground for actors.” Even if his reasoning may appear questionable due to its echoes of anti-Semitic suspicions about the invisible ‘Jewification’ of society, the parallel to Schnitzler’s novella is striking. Neither Else’s Jewishness nor Dorsday’s is mentioned explicitly, which ties in with their apparently complete assimilation. Yet from the dynamic between the two characters, especially from the assumptions on Else’s part, it can be inferred that the two are indeed assimilated Jews. As I will illustrate, their conflict of aesthetic codes leads to Else’s ultimate artistic failure and aestheticist retreat, picturing how the failure of a bourgeois aesthetic produces an aesthetic of opposition, which however remains vulnerable to stereotype and prejudice.

Else’s resistance to her parents’ aesthetic code is closely connected to her insufficient identification with the “ideal I of the ‘educated’ [Ideal-Ich des ‘Gebildeten’].” While she does seem to have developed a critical awareness regarding the false fronts of bourgeois society, she has become a commodity at the mercy of erotic and capitalist demands. Her education leaves her remarkably helpless, and proves of little help in solving her dilemma:
Why haven’t I learnt anything? Ok, I have learnt something! Who can say I haven’t learnt anything? I can play the piano; I know French, English and a little Italian; I’ve been to lectures on the history of art.—Ha, ha! And if I had learnt anything more practical, what good would it be to me now?

[Warum habe ich nichts gelernt? O, ich habe was gelernt! Wer darf sagen, daß ich nichts gelernt habe? Ich spiele Klavier, ich kann französisch, englisch, auch ein bißl italienisch, habe kunstgeschichtliche Vorlesungen besucht—Haha! Und wenn ich schon was Gescheiteres gelernt hätte, was hülfe es mir?] (FE 26)

Apparently, she does not acknowledge her education as a means of self-improvement; it does not enable “a reflected detachment, a practical knowledge of the world and thus sovereign disposition over relevant knowledge, emotional differentiation, moral competence and aesthetic tastes at the same time [eine reflektierte Distanznahme, ein praktisches Weltwissen und damit souveräne Verfügung über relevante Kenntnisse, Differenziertheit des Gefühls, moralische Kompetenz und ästhetischen Geschmack zugleich] [...].” In the conflict of aesthetic codes, Else’s indeed simplified notion of Bildung shares some characteristics with the aesthetics of identity as represented by her family. Bildung can be described as a process of “mimetic association” that enables “the connection of our ‘I’ with the world in the most general, most lively and most free mutual interaction.”

An individual uses his mimetic abilities to extend towards the unfamiliar and incorporate it into his world of images, sounds and imagination. Outer world thus becomes inner world. This transformation, which constitutes the education process, is accomplished through transmitting the outer world in pictures, and through adopting it into the inner image world of the individual. The power of imagination then connects these images with the person’s inner image world of memories, desires and other ideas.

The condition for Bildsamkeit is the subject’s mimetic capacity to creatively incorporate the image of the world and, in doing so, to experience “the difference of the outer world, its non-identity with his own world.” Else however mistakes that mimetic negotiation for meaningless imitation. Bildung then becomes nothing more than the equivalent of simple imitatio, a mimetic process that “degenerate[s] into mimicry [... with disregard for the creative strengths and
energies of the individual.” In other words, to Else, Bildung is inscribed into the aesthetic of identity represented by her parents: it is about the rules of convention and about avoiding dissonance.

Indicative of Else’s faulty appropriation of Bildung is her attitude towards bourgeois practices of literacy. Reading and writing are generally considered to foster emotional and cognitive sensibility and self-awareness.

The bourgeois self-practices of literacy enable a specifically internally oriented subject to come into existence. Focused in physical motor activity and the intellectual attention, elements of a cognitive and emotional, partly also imaginative ‘inner world’ emerge: through reflection—e.g. on biographical possibilities and moral dilemmas—self-observation and emotionally sensible inner experience.

That degree of self-reflection remains largely absent in Else. There is no mention of Else either writing or reading—except for her mother’s Expreßbrief. Although the inward orientation of her monologue may resemble the self-hermeneutic practice of diary-keeping, she in fact rejects that kind of self-observation: “Why am I reminiscing like this? I’m not writing my memoirs. I don’t even keep a diary like Bertha. [Wozu nachdenken, ich schreibe ja keine Memoiren. Nicht einmal ein Tagebuch wie die Bertha.]” (FE 10) Nor does she acknowledge the didactic and moral value in reading novels. In an attempt to evade a confrontation with Dorsday, Else thinks of approaching a friend for help, but she quickly rejects the option:

Couldn’t I go down now, at once, and speak to Dorsday before dinner? O, how horrible!—Paul, if you get me thirty thousand you can have anything you ask of me. That’s out of a novel. The noble daughter sells herself for her beloved father’s sake, and really rather enjoys it. B-r-r ! No, Paul, you can’t get me even for thirty thousand. Nobody can.
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At first sight, the comment ‘That’s out of a novel’ suggests that Else struggles with the “realism effect [Realismus-Effekt]” of bourgeois novels, which “[present] themselves as quasi-didactic examples of reflexive-moral actions and at the same time as mediators of a cognitive ‘knowledge of the world’ that tries to convey verbal intelligence and subjective sovereignty [[die]sich als quasi-didaktische Exempel reflexiv-moralischen Handelns [präsentieren] und zugleich als Vermittler eines kognitiven ‘Weltwissens’, das mundane Intelligibilität und subjektive Souveränität zu vermitteln versucht].” The source of Else’s irritation is that her life and inspiration seem to imitate art, and that she cannot come up with original solutions. She discards her ‘own’ idea not due to her desire to comply with a bourgeois moral code, but because the idea might have been affected a priori by that code. The authority of novels and Bildung alike, in Else’s eyes, interferes excessively with ‘real’ life and original thought. At the same time, Else imagines herself as a character in a fictional plot. In doing so, she embodies the aestheticist motto that “everything in the world exists to end up in a book,” and that art is “the supreme reality” and “life […] a mere mode of fiction.” Her self-dramatization reverses the supposed exemplarity of fiction: her own life provides the example; it is the work of art. In other words, her aestheticist inversion of the Realismuseffekt robs it of its didactic value. Else’s insufficient identification with the ideal of Bildung thus enables her to fashion a subversive aesthetic of her own. As I will discuss in more detail, it affords her the sense of agency that had been robbed from her by erotic and economic pressures.

The aesthete as ‘ästhetisch-ökonomische Doublette’

Whereas Else’s performance resists impending commodification, Dariusch’s self-fashioning is motivated by market logic entirely. His aestheticism is informed by an assimilatory drive as well, but unlike Else, whose Jewish identity remains covert, Dariusch fashions a palatable, salable version of cultural difference. A century apart, it seems that the value of cultural difference takes on different but equally critical hues: Schnitzler criticizes the persistence of cultural prejudice in the reception of art, while Kermani mocks the audience’s exoticist desire for ‘authentic’ difference.
Dariusch’s performance is not evident from some dramaturgical self-address but, rather, from the tone of self-justification that pervades his account. His personality elicits irritation, as reviewers have noticed as well: “Navid Kermani tells the story of a fundamentally disagreeable man [Navid Kermani erzählt die Geschichte eines gründlich unsympathischen Mannes],” of a “confirmed asshole [ausgemachtes Arschloch]” even, and the novel itself is the “annoying story of a successful loser [irritierend[e] Geschichte einer erfolgreichen Niete].” Of course, the (lacking) appeal of a character is hardly a critical criterion otherwise, but it is relevant in this case, as it is an immediate effect of his all too evident calculation and inauthenticity. In his address to the reader, he presents himself as a German with an Iranian background, and makes quite an effort of demonstrating his estrangement from his cultural and religious heritage. As a child, his Iranian identity felt natural to him, unlike today. Most likely, if he is a businessman in his thirties or early forties, the Iran of his childhood was that of the 1960s or 1970s, before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In other words, he was able to identify with the country when it still had a pro-Western government. He then curiously leaves out that his parents probably escaped the country, and that he was not allowed to return when in the 1980s Iranian universities were closed and ‘cleansed’ from un-Islamic influences. Instead, he emphasizes his status as a German citizen by mentioning that he was a conscript and, more importantly, depicts his ties to Iran as an affinity by choice. Jim Jordan describes Dariusch’s estrangement from his heritage as an “ironic denial” of his cultural identity, but it is not a denial per se. Rather, he seems to tailor his Iranian image to his German audience. His interest in Persian culture is limited to harmless elements that are interesting in an exoticist way—literature, music, mysticism. Additionally, if he wants to fashion his Iranian identity as an accessory to an otherwise bland German image, of course he must reject Islam as a restrictive or oppressive religion: “Islam has always annoyed me. For me it was all bigoted. Had it been freer, I could have imagined living in Iran. [Der Islam hat mich immer genervt. Für mich war das alles bigot. Wäre es freier gewesen, hätte ich mir vorstellen können, in Iran zu leben].” (KM 32) Whereas Else’s self-fashioning is an ambiguous and self-destructive act of resistance, in Kurzmitteilung it becomes an act of self-marketing adding greatly to the narrator’s excellence, though it eventually proves to be nothing but a sign of his conformation to capitalist demands.

The theme of commodified cultural identity is highlighted by Kermani’s allusions to Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the ‘Aura’ of the artwork. In the opening scene, Dariusch recalls his whereabouts at the moment he received Korinna’s text message about Maike Anfang’s death: the Catalan town Cadaqués.
His favorite retreat from German corporate life—located near Portbou, where Benjamin took his own life—serves as a spatial metaphor for his self-fashioning and image-building:

Picasso once had a house here, Dalí nearby, too, and something of their aura still floods the stone-paved streets [...]. The inhabitants, most of whom have moved here, carefully preserve the image of an artist’s village on the Mediterranean: with whitewashed, yet befittingly flaked off walls [...], with bulging flower boxes and picturesque handicraft, delicatessen and wine shops, with restaurants that reinvent their cuisine on chalkboards every day, and studios in which bareheaded painters draw equally broad strokes on the canvas with their windows wide open. I myself have succumbed to the aura such that it always draws me back to Cadaqués, even though it may hardly be more than a Disneyland for individualists.

The references to the aura recall Benjamin’s argument about art in the modern age. Benjamin argues that, as an effect of technological innovation, the aura of the artwork—its authority or originality—evaporates in the process of mass reproduction. The artwork loses the authenticity associated to “the here and now of the artwork—its unique existence at the place where it is. [...] The here and now of the original constitutes the notion of its authenticity [das Hier und Jetzt des Kunstwerks—sein einmaliges Dasein an dem Orte, an dem es sich befindet. [...] Das Hier und Jetzt des Originals macht den Begriff seiner Echtheit aus]"108. In Dariusch’s description of Cadaqués, however, ‘aura’ hardly involves originality; he rather describes a simulation of authenticity. The town owes its artistic image not to originality but precisely to a reproduction and exploitation of the ‘aura’ once attributed to Dalí’s or Picasso’s presence. Benjamin describes such cultivation
of semblance in terms of a shifting emphasis from *Kultwert* to *Ausstellungswert*. With its ‘befittingly flaked off’ walls, the town indeed cultivates an authenticity that is paradoxically artificial. Originality is reduced to a matter of blackboard advertising by restaurants that ‘reinvent’ their cuisine everyday. Conserving a template-like ‘image of an artist’s town’, the town has become an amusement park for the consumption of authenticity.

Dariusch personifies that same mechanism, as he incorporates the ‘aura’ of cultural difference into his self-marketing. Promoting his various qualifications in the field of mass-produced *Kultur*, he represents the contemporary aesthete as an “aesthetic-economic double [ästhetisch-ökonomische Doublette]”: an amalgamation of self-stylization, self-entrepreneurship, and explicit market orientation. As in *Fräulein Else*, the narrator’s self-fashioning is connected to the trope of the artist. Yet like Cadaqués, the town exploiting the aura of its former inhabitants, Dariusch merely rides the wave of other people’s artistry. As an event manager, his professionalism relies on borrowed creativity rather than personal genius. His second-hand creativity is to be distinguished from the types of artistry he recognizes in Korinna, though it is unclear to him whether she represents a Romantic aesthetic of creative genius, or one of imitation:

With my livelihood as an artist and the character of my life as a dandy, I accommodated her longing for the unconventional and the intellectually superior, of which it was unclear to me whether it arose from an inner impulse or was inspired by the role model of her chairman.

[Ihrer Sehnsucht nach Unkonventionellem und geistig Höherstehendem, von der mir nicht klar war, ob sie einem inneren Antrieb entsprang oder sich dem Vorbild ihres Vorstandsvorsitzendem verdankte, kam ich mit meiner Künstlerexistenz und dem Dandyhaften meines Lebens entgegen.] (KM 14)

Dariusch is, by his own admission, a radical aesthete. Whereas the other aesthetic codes contain a mimetic relation to either an example or to an inner urge, his artistry is entirely anti-mimetic—“Paying attention to style is part of my job [Auf den Stil zu achten, gehört zu meinem Beruf] [...]” (KM 40) He nurtures no other philosophy of life but the conviction that life is art, even though he can convince his colleagues otherwise:

Maike Anfang emphasized that my ideas and my way of thinking had impressed her, the philosophy of art being entangled with life and expressing itself without being articulated. [...] The emotion she put
into her words and eyes felt so genuine that for a few seconds I was about to believe in a philosophy of my own self-presentation. Then it occurred to me that in no other business could emotions be applied so effectively as in the communication and public relations department of an international enterprise.

[Maike Anfang sagte mit Nachdruck, daß meine Ideen und die Art meines Denkens sie beeindruckt hätten, die Philosophie einer Kunst, die mit dem Leben verschrankt sei und sich ausdrücke, ohne ausgesprochen zu werden. [...] Die Emotion, die sie in ihre wenigen Worte und in ihren Blick legte, wirkten so echt, daß ich für ein Paar Sekunden drauf und dran war, selbst an eine Philosophie meiner Präsentation zu glauben. Dann fiel mir ein, daß man Emotionen nirgendwo so perfekt anwenden dürfte wie im Geschäftsbereich Kommunikation und Öffentlichkeit eines internationalen Konzerns.] (KM 12–13; emphasis added)

The flicker of genuineness in Maike’s compliment is relegated immediately to the domain of networking strategy, which reveals more about himself than about Maike’s (in)sincerity: to Dariusch, authenticity is just a means of self-promotion. He likes to invite business partners to a bar that is pleasantly shocking in its authenticity—“shabby and honest, pure exoticism [schäbig und ehrlich, die reine Exotik] [...]” (KM 17) The ironic use of the authentic in a professional context is a crucial aspect of intertwining economic and creative requirements in so-called “cultural capitalism”—the “new syncretism of economy and forms of life,” in which “building and improving their relation is [...] at the heart of the capitalistic enterprise itself.”¹¹⁰ Schnitzler’s and Kermani’s aesthetes, then, are products of two quite different capitalist regimes—the first a family-based, bourgeois capitalism depending on strong family networks and commitments, the latter a cultural capitalism “characterized by the fact that it has incorporated the artistic critique [...] into its justifications.”¹¹¹ Indeed, Else’s performance is an act of resistance, no matter how futile. Dariusch on the other hand has internalized “the new capitalist spirit,” in which “authenticity and self-realization are promoted as motives for participation in economic life by the new capitalist justification regime itself.”¹¹² In these capitalist narratives, cultural difference thus acquires a different ‘value’. Dariusch exploits his Iranian identity in a capitalist aesthetic of identity, whereas Else’s hidden Jewishness thwarts her initially subversive aesthetic. In her confrontation with Dorsday, the convergence of artistic, erotic, and economic narratives is complicated by her assimilatory performance—a code of imitation at odds with her aesthetic of exposure.
“...und Talent habe ich auch keines”—The aesthete’s retreat

Due to her failure to internalize the bourgeois code, Else adopts a romantic aesthetic that relies on the “metaphor of an intransparent, irregular ‘depth’ in the ‘interior’ of the subject and of a Hinterwelt behind phenomena that remains concealed to rationality and perception and is ultimately uncontrollable [Metaphorik einer intransparenten, irregulären ‘Tiefe’ im ‘Innern’ des Subjekts und einer für Rationalität und Wahrnehmung nicht sichtbaren, letztlich unkontrollierbaren ‘Hinterwelt’ hinter den Erscheinungen].” Indeed, Else’s new aesthetic is centered around self-exposure: “[N]obody’ll suspect that there’s nothing under the coat but me, just me. [[K]ein Mensch wird ahnen, daß unter dem Mantel nichts ist, als ich, ich selber.]” (FE 105). Her desire to unveil affords her a means of self-expression, in which her appearance becomes an act of defiance against the erotic and economic narratives that threaten her autonomy: “Hereafter I stand on my own feet. I have pretty legs [...]. [Ich stelle mich jetzt auf meine eigenen Beine. Ich habe schöne Beine [...]].” (FE 83) Her act of exposure creates meaning—it is an exhibitionist performance through which she acquires a sense of self. Standing in front of a window, she imagines herself on a curtained stage:

I must turn on the light. It’s getting chilly. Shut the window. Blind down?—No need. There’s no one standing on the mountain over there with a telescope. Worse luck...


Her refusal to close the curtains signals her continued performance in front of an imagined audience, but her awareness of the fact that someone might be looking puts her in a slightly dominant position: to some extent, she reverses the power relation implicit in the voyeuristic act of seeing without being seen. Likewise, she transforms Dorsday’s indecent proposal into an opportunity to perform. After she requests the loan, he tells her “everything in the world has its price, and that anyone who gives away his money when he might get something in return for it is a consummate fool [dass alles auf der Welt seinen Preis hat und das einer, der sein Geld verschenkt, wenn er in der Lage ist, einen Gegenwert dafür zu bekommen, ein ausgemachter Narr ist].” (FE 58) When he tells her what he expects in return, Else hides her indignation: “Why don’t I smack his face? [...] He speaks as he would speak to a female slave. [Warum schlage ich ihm nicht ins Gesicht? [...] Wie zu einer Sklavin spricht er.]” (FE 58) Even so, in her impending ‘enslavement’
Else recognizes an artistic opportunity. Her unveiling will be a performance that reasserts her autonomy as a woman and as an artist. Her nakedness then will be a miscalculation, not a transaction, on the part of the men that objectify her: “I’ll never sell myself. I’ll give myself. [...] I’ll be a hussy, but not a prostitute. You have miscalculated, Herr von Dorsday. And so has Father. [Nie werde ich mich verkaufen. Ich schenke mich her. [...] Ein Luder will ich sein, aber nicht eine Dirne. Sie haben sich verrechnet, Herr von Dorsday. Und der Papa auch.]” (FE 65)

Else’s aesthetic revolt nevertheless treads a delicate line between self-assertion and self-commodification. Her aesthetic of opposition is not acknowledged by her main onlooker Dorsday, due to which Else is faced with “a threat to self-definition posed by the social definition by others [einer Bedrohung der Selbstdefinition durch die soziale Fremdfinition].” Else thus becomes “complicit in her own ‘feminization’” and her ensuing objectification. Dorsday’s own assimilatory performance draws Else’s act into an aesthetic of imitation that she intended to escape. His Jewish identity is never established as a fact but is insinuated by Else’s assessment of his appearance. She considers him her contender in “a struggle over visual effect” but is not convinced by his acting—“He talks like a bad actor. [Spricht wie ein schlechter Schauspieler.]” (FE 60) She identifies him as a Jewish parvenu right away: “He’s a social climber. [...] Dorsday! I’m sure your name used to be something else. [Schraubt sich künstlich hinauf. [...] Dorsday! Sie haben sicher einmal anders geheißen.]” (FE 13) Dorsday, in Else’s eyes, bears the marks of Jewish assimilation too conspicuously, making him a bad actor inscribed in the aesthetic of imitation she resents. Dorsday’s visible performance, however, unsettles her own act, reminding her that she, by contrast, keeps her Jewish background painstakingly hidden, even if she denies doing so:

[And the way he looks at me. No, Herr Dorsday, I’m not taken in by your smartness and your monocle and your title. You might just as well deal in old clothes as in old pictures.—But, Else, Else, what are you thinking of?—Oh, I can permit myself a remark like that. Nobody notices it in me. I’m positively blonde, a reddish blonde, and Rudi looks a regular aristocrat. Certainly one can notice it at once in Mother, at any rate in her speech, but not at all in Father. For that matter, let people notice it. I don’t deny it, and I’m sure Rudi doesn’t. Quite the contrary.

[Auch die Art, wie er mich ansieht. Nein, Herr Dorsday, ich glaube Ihnen Ihre Eleganz nicht und nicht Ihr Monokel und nicht Ihre Noblesse. Sie könnten ebensogut mit alten Kleidern handeln wie mit alten Bildern.—Aber Else! Else,
Dorsday is presented here as the embodiment of anti-Semitic stereotype, “the epitome of the lascivious Jewish businessman, obsessed with material possessions and money, devoid of ethical values and with a perverse, voyeuristic sexuality to boot.” In his attempt to justify his indecent proposal, he presents himself as a victim of his own desire (FE 56), which confirms the effect of Else’s self-feminizing act, while also hinting at his supposed insecure Jewish masculinity. As Susan C. Anderson argues, Dorsday’s voyeurism signals his attempt at reasserting the virility that, according to anti-Semitic stereotype, is lacking in Jewish men. Furthermore, compounding the stereotype, his sly business instinct as an art dealer contributes to Else’s objectification. Her nakedness becomes part of a financial transaction, and its value is assessed as if she were an image for sale.

Because of her own act, Else is painfully aware of both Dorsday’s assimilatory act as well as his “sharp eye [Scharfblick]” (FE 11). She is uncomfortable at its (erotic) intent, because it threatens to see through the effect of her performance and to confront her with her own hidden Jewishness. Dorsday is indeed not just her passive observer; he is Else’s threatening complement. His voyeurism matches Else’s desire for self-exposure; his economic notion of the aesthetic corresponds to Else’s unintentional self-commodification; his capitalist instinct is the socially acceptable version of her father’s Spielleidenschaft; moreover, his deceptive assimilation is an unwelcome reminder of what Else keeps hidden, despite her drive for exposure. Else’s disdain of Dorsday is not based on their difference but, rather, on their complementarity. He reminds her of what she may become when she complies with the same mimetic code: a bad actress in a theater of conformation and mimicry. In other words, the effect of Else’s self-fashioned subversive aesthetic is eliminated by an onlooker who reminds her of the assimilatory aspect of her performance. Her covert Jewishness thus inhibits her full identification with an aesthetic of self-exposure.

Else’s final act—her public undressing, collapse, and self-poisoning—is her ultimate attempt at rescuing her artistic autonomy. Her unveiling in front of a wider audience, rather than just Dorsday, relieves her from the unbearable notion of being someone’s slave. As Comfort explains:
Whereas a sole spectator such as Dorsday likens the performance to prostitution, a public spectacle allows Else to justify her actions not only in moral but also in artistic terms. [...] In response to the predicament set in motion by her father and Dorsday’s various requests, Else stages the performance before a larger public [...] and thereby manages, at least in her own mind, to transform an economic exchange into an aesthetic act.120

She carries out her part of the deal with Dorsday but sets the stage on her own terms. By revealing herself in public, she heeds her desire for artistic self-expression. Her aesthetic revolt does not achieve a lasting effect, however, for it is reduced to illness, hysteria, and weakness. Once more, Else’s dependence on an audience that does not share her code makes her vulnerable to misinterpretation. She worries that even her ultimate act will be ‘confiscated’ by Dorsday: “But don’t imagine, for Heaven’s sake, that you, a miserable creature like you, have driven me to my death. [Aber bilden Sie sich dann um Gottes willen nicht ein, daß sie, elender Kerl, mich in den Tod getrieben haben.]” (FE 84)

In her final performance, both the code of imitation and the code of self-expression reach a dead end—as Else concludes: “I wasn’t made for a bourgeois existence, and I’ve no talent. [Bin nicht geschaffen für eine bürgerliche Existenz, und Talent habe ich auch keines.]” (FE 84). Yet by poisoning herself, she is able to switch artistic codes once more. Her (near-) death represents an aestheticist withdrawal from all linguistic, communicative codes. Finding no adequate, undistorted form of self-expression—“There’s not a word of truth in that. [Nicht ein Wort ist wahr.]” (FE 113)—Else’s monologue eventually dissolves into stream of consciousness, which reflects more than just her drug-induced confusion. Reaching a state of full self-immersion, her silent, passive body now fails to reach out to its audience (FE 128). In the end, Else loses all linguistic form, her final utterances no more than a string of half-formed words: “I’m flying... I’m dreaming... I’m asleep... I’m drea... drea—I’m fly...... [Ich fliege... ich träume... ich schlafe... ich trau... trau—ich flie......” (FE 136). In death, Else transitions to a purely pictorial code: she becomes an “inanimate object on display.”121 In an imaginary testament prefiguring her self-chosen death, Else dedicates her dead body as the ultimate artwork to the art dealer:

Herr von Dorsday shall have the right to see my body, my beautiful, naked maiden body. [...] You’re getting something for your money. There’s nothing in our contract about my still being alive. Oh no. It’s
not in writing anywhere. Well then—I bequeath a view of my body to the art dealer Dorsday.

[Herr von Dorsday hat das Recht, meinen Leichnam zu sehen. Meinen schönen nackten Mädchenleib. [...] Sie haben doch was für Ihr Geld. Daß ich noch lebendig sein muß, das steht nicht in unserem Kontrakt. O nein. Das steht nirgends geschrieben. Also den Anblick meines Leichnams vermache ich dem Kunsthändler Dorsday.] (FE 86)

By choosing her own death, she is able “to become both the aesthetic object that the art dealer demands and the commodity that her father needs.”

Although she becomes an object for male consumption, her retreat into a fully pictorial code still contains an element of resistance: she detects a flaw in Dorsday’s stipulations—‘Das steht nirgends geschrieben.’—and adapts an economic and erotic exchange to her own artistic needs.

Although the Jewish theme is not central to the novella at first sight, it is crucial in the confrontation of artistic codes that shapes Else’ tragedy. Her covert Jewish identity and her instrumentalization by the audience correspond to Schnitzler’s consideration that the absence of a Jewish theme leads to unwanted cooptation by ideological camps. Still, that does not imply that exposing her Jewishness would have rescued her artistic autonomy—on the contrary, it would have made her performance polemical from the start. The novella thus reflects the dilemma of the Jewish author who, like Else, seems to find no adequate communicative code to become a successful artist. Caught between an aesthetic of identity and an aesthetic of opposition, Else’s aestheticist retreat evokes the writer’s desire to escape the burden of representation.

**Between Publikumstauglichkeit and Avantgarde**

In Dariusch’s case, the aestheticist retreat represents the ultimate—and entirely intentional—conformation to the market. To Else, cultural difference, whether covert or not, has a devaluing effect on her performance. Dariusch, on the other hand, professionally active on a market that craves the ‘authenticity’ of the cultural Other, fashions his difference as an asset. Within the story, Dariusch may have lost the capacity for critique, but the protagonist nevertheless presents a highly ironic picture of Western secularism. By reversing the Orientalist gaze, Kermani exposes capitalism as the actual religion of the West.

As a representative of the culture industry, Dariusch, like Else, is positioned between two aesthetic codes—or so he likes to believe. In a double entendre in the opening pages, it becomes clear that, to the entrepreneur, ‘Kultur’ refers to
both the entertainment industry and his cultural difference. What appears to be one of the event manager’s self-promotional rants can also be read as a highly ironic comment on the ‘genuineness’ of the native informant and on the truism of intercultural ‘enrichment’:

I am famous for my intuition to win people over to culture, also and especially by broadening their horizons. In my experience, the audience does not just want to see the familiar, the well-tried—but you have to take them with you, spur them on, challenge them if you want to lead them to something new, something uncomfortable or even painful. They should not be left alone. I firmly believe that the balancing act between suitability for the public and the avant-garde is possible [...].

[Ich bin bekannt für mein Gespür, Menschen für die Kultur zu gewinnen, auch und gerade indem ich ihren Horizont erweitere. Meiner Erfahrung nach wollen die Zuschauer keineswegs nur das Gewohnte, Bewährte sehen—aber man muß sie mitnehmen, anstiften, herausfordern, will man sie zu etwas Neuem führen, etwas Unbequemem oder gar Schmerzhaftem. Man darf sie nicht allein lassen. Ich glaube fest daran, daß der Spagat zwischen Publikumstauglichkeit und Avantgarde möglich ist [...].] (KM 9)

Unlike Else, who fails to manage a such a balancing act, Dariusch is convinced that he can reconcile a ‘vanguard’ perspective with accessibility for a wide audience. He believes that his ‘authentic’ Oriental identity may answer to the audience’s desire to have its horizon of expectations challenged and expanded by ‘the Other’, thus equating cultural difference to artistic novelty. Yet in order to appeal to the Western market, Dariusch must tailor, aestheticize, and commercialize that difference. He thereby loses the presumed authenticity of the native informant. Indeed, as Frauke Matthes remarks, “a transnational heritage does not guarantee intercultural competence and awareness of cultural sensitivities.”124 Kermani’s unlikeable, calculating, and inauthentic protagonist thus ridicules exoticist projections onto the work of minority writers, who are expected to advocate their difference, though only in a recognizable and non-threatening way.

This mechanism becomes especially evident in Dariusch’s confounded relation to Islam. As it befits the aesthete, he fails to establish a clear cultural or religious identity. Moreover, his calculated self-presentation grows increasingly obvious, leaving the reader in doubt as to the veracity of his assertions about religion. He appears totally immersed in German culture and admits to lack the ambition to actively engage with his heritage.
I lacked the ambition of my Iranian or Turkish peers to study Islamic Studies in order to get to know my own culture, my identity! Admittedly, after graduating from high school I had been toying with the idea, but when I learned that I would have to learn Arabic for this, the matter was settled for me. The Persian course at the adult education center was sufficient as an excuse to continue to identify myself with something other than Germany.

[Mir fehlte der Ehrgeiz meiner iranischen oder türkischen Altersgenossen, Islamwissenschaft zu studieren, um die eigene Kultur, meine Identität! kennenzulernen. Zugegeben, nach dem Abitur hatte ich mit dem Gedanken gespielt, aber als ich erfuhr, daß ich dafür Arabisch lernen müßte, war die Angelegenheit für mich erledigt. Der Persischkurs an der Volkshochschule genügte als Ausrede, um mich weiterhin mit etwas anderem als Deutschland zu identifizieren.] (KM 47)

Referring to the Persian courses as ‘a sufficient excuse’, he suggests that he does not really feel the need to explore his identity; his Middle Eastern ‘expertise’ remains “a commitment thrust upon him.” Then, though, he suddenly turns to a coarse register that highlights his rejection of terrorism, while revealing a more fundamental aspect of his self-narration. He reproduces the many opinions in the public debate, as well as their simplifications:

No doubt about it, the boys who blow themselves up in London or wherever are totally nuts. Somewhere I had read an article explaining all this religious bullshit as a result of sexual frustration. That seemed plausible to me. They all have not fucked enough, I thought.


Dariusch’s ambivalence can be read as an attempt to fashion a tolerable, secularized version of ‘Islam’ — an alternative to the one disseminated by the media. Dariusch denounces their self-proclaimed expertise, fully aware of their pervasive influence on public opinion: “I can’t get that filth out of my head. [Ich bekomme den Dreck ja nicht aus meinem Kopf heraus.]” (KM 143) At the same time, however, he repeats their simplifying discourse on various occasions, with the purpose
of displacing the focus from ‘Muslims’ in general onto ‘Arab’—as opposed to Persian—fundamentalists. It helps him to separate a demonized version of Islam from the one that he believes is suitable for commercialization.  

His own ‘religion’ provides the example. He explains that, at times, he instinctively resorts to the ritual prayer recited by “we Shiites [wir Schiiten]” (KM 138). Still, to demonstrate his common ground with a secular audience, he claims that his prayer has no actual religious motivation. Religious custom simply serves his credibility as an Iranian German—it “comes comes in handy as proof of cultural identity […] without putting tolerance to the test with headscarves, prayer times, and other relics [kommt als Ausweis kultureller Identität immer gut aus […] ohne die Toleranz mit Kopftüchern, Gebetszeiten und anderen Rückständen auf die Probe zu stellen.]” (KM 138) Yet no matter how superficial his affinity with Islam or the Middle East, he does not shy away from exploiting it. When he is commissioned to organize a “festival of Middle Eastern cultures [Festival orientalischer Kulturen]” (KM 27), he admits he is on unfamiliar territory, and that he was chosen for the job because of his Middle Eastern ‘aura’, but he agrees to do it anyway, for financial reasons: “[There was] so much Islam since 9/11 that it could only be financially worthwhile to profile myself in the field. [[Es gab] seit 9/11 derart viel Islam, daß es sich finanziell nur lohnen konnte, mich auf dem Feld zu profilieren.]” (KM 33)

Dariusch exposes an ambivalence of Western society. Despite—or due to—its full submission to an apparently post-traditional and post-religious market logic, it remains intrigued by spirituality and ‘Otherness’, though only on the condition that it remains within secular limits. According to Jim Jordan, Dariusch’s conflicted German-Iranian identity is the result of a defective Herkunftsbevältigung, recognizing in Kermani’s novel “in part an exhortation to the second generation not to try to ignore real issues arising from their position and their family past.” Jordan argues “that Dariusch is intended as a cautionary tale […]: his subscription to a vapid, materialist, postmodern, post-ethnic and post-political lifestyle is only a postponement of his personal day of reckoning.” But Dariusch’s overall aestheticist disposition seems ironic rather than cautionary. He is not a moralistic device, nor a representation of impending identity crisis. Rather, Dariusch is a canvas of assumptions about the supposed incompatibility of ‘Islam’ and ‘modernity’—an argument paradoxically motivated by fear of its opposite, i.e. islamification and gradual submission to religion. On the most individual level, he illustrates what would happen if religion actually were fully compatible with capitalist culture—or ‘Islam’ and ‘die Moderne’. More significantly, though, Dariusch inverts an Orientalist gaze that, as Kermani argues in line with Edward
Said, has established a view on Islam as pure religious dogma: “The secular perception of the West excludes the Orient, which thus exemplarily becomes the locus of religion, where all cultural and political developments and events must be explained causally by religion. [Die säkulare Wahrnehmung des Westens nimmt den Orient aus, der so exemplarisch zum Ort der Religion wird, wo sämtliche kulturellen und politischen Entwicklungen und Ereignisse ursächlich mit dem Glauben begründet werden müssen.]” In a similar vein, Kermani denounces the “widespread German conflation of Middle Eastern cultures with Islam,” and especially its mediatized character, which “[…] which for some years now has ‘made’ people into Muslims [… die Menschen seit einigen Jahren zu Muslimen ‘macht’].” Reversing that secular gaze, Kermani’s protagonist suggests that, in the age of cultural capitalism, society and the professional market endorse self-stylization and self-promotion to the point of empty aestheticism. In full conformity with market logic, he must cater to that market’s exoticist interest in him as a representative of cultural difference and authenticity. A highly ironic product of colonial mimicry, Dariusch responds to “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.” It affords him a “double vision” that subverts the authority of the discourse he internalizes: the West devoutly adheres to secularism, opposing the religious dogma of Islam, but submits itself to an all-encompassing market logic.

Here, _Kurzmitteilung_ echoes another essay by Benjamin. In “Kapitalismus als Religion,” Benjamin catches sight of a fundamentally religious streak in capitalist culture, calling it “a pure cult religion [eine reine Kultreligion]” that does not revolve around dogma, theology, or absolution, but which consists of the continuous celebration of utilitarianism. Indeed, bewildered by his colleague’s unexpected death, Dariusch recognizes that religion may provide support in times of crisis (KM 138) and appears to go through a conversion process. Ironically, he does not convert to Islam but turns his back on the tradition altogether, finding it to be no more than a “piece of wood too little to keep himself above water [Stück Holz, das zu klein ist, um [s]ich über Wasser zu halten].” (KM 24) Instead, he turns to a _Kultreligion_ reminiscent of Scientology. In a final epistolary chapter, Dariusch addresses his manager as a mental coach. This letter is the only indication of his conversion and reveals the foregoing account as a cathartic confession, leading up to some inner transformation—“The text belongs to the person I no longer am. [Der Text gehört zu dem Menschen, der ich nicht mehr bin.]” (KM 148–9) However, given the cult’s emphasis on public relations and professional success, Dariusch’s conversion does not achieve moral or existential reform. Instead, he has submitted to a _Kultreligion_ that “crafts the process of
spiritual seeking into an act of capitalist consuming.” Dariusch proposes to publish and market the account of his existential ‘crisis’ (KM 148) and, like Else, wants his life to ‘end up in a book’. Whereas her retreat retains a moment of critique, though, Dariusch once more exploits his own life to his professional benefit, retreating into a substanceless aestheticism that aligns itself entirely to a capitalist logic.

Almost a century apart, Schnitzler’s and Kermani’s aesthetes reflect the burden of representation faced by the minority writer. The aesthete as an artist-performer introduces the pressures of the market and outlines the impact of cultural difference on the integrity of the artist. Else’s hidden Jewishness inhibits full identification with a code of artistic resistance; to Dariusch, ‘Middle-Easternness’ is just an interesting accessory to his well-manicured image. Although the two protagonists inhabit an environment of successful assimilation at first, that narrative soon expires into empty bourgeois performance, or in inauthentic, calculated conformity. Their aestheticist retreat, albeit with different implications in terms of artistic critique, represents the dead end of the Enlightened baseline of assimilation. The (semi-) aesthetes in the following chapter section respond to that failure. Heeding a need for self-transcendence, they discover the meaning of a reality that exists outside of the confines of their own mind.

2.3  The aesthete’s awakening:
Beer-Hofmann’s Der Tod Georgs (1900) versus Zaimoglu’s Liebesbrand (2008)

Jewish aesthete and romantic rebel: Richard Beer-Hofmann and Feridun Zaimoglu

Richard Beer-Hofmann (1866–1945) was born in Vienna to an assimilated Jewish bourgeois family of attorneys. They did not participate in Jewish community life, except for his paternal grandmother, who remained connected to the religious community. With a doctoral degree in law, Beer-Hofmann stood at the beginning of a typical bourgeois career, when he became acquainted with the writers of Jung Wien around 1890. He developed close friendships with Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who valued his meticulous criticism of their work. They encouraged him to start writing as well, even if it was never his intention. Writing in an intellectual climate influenced by
Freudian psychoanalysis, Machian empiriocriticism, and the *Sprachkrise* that affected contemporaries such as Fritz Mauthner and his friend Hofmannsthal, Beer-Hofmann developed a poetic language that reached beyond the limitations of realism.

Despite his family’s acculturation, and unlike many (Jewish) contemporaries, Beer-Hofmann was openly committed to his Jewish ancestry—the only “homo Judaicus” in the *Jung Wien* circle. He is often associated with Buber’s Cultural Zionism, due to his explicit commitment to a cultural Jewish identity without distinctly national elements. Yet his precise conception of Judaism has been up for debate. Some critics have pointed out his familiarity with Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat*, though they are quick to interpret his lack of outspoken commitment to Zionism as a sign of an anti-Zionist stance. Others have positively associated the author with Herzl, considering the two as “emblematic of a ‘conservative revolution’, which transformed their erstwhile aestheticist isolationism into a conscious profession of national identity.” As far as *Der Tod Georgs* is concerned, however, Beer-Hofmann’s exact notion of Judaism—a religion, a culture, a nation, or a sense of ancestral connection—remains undecided and, it seems, deliberately so. The author’s eagerness for modernist experiment allows him to articulate a sense of community that is not predicated on ‘institutionalized’ religion or nationality. His strikingly pictorial, anti-linear prose appears consistent with the reluctance towards fixated identities, which the open ending of the story reinforces.

During the early 1890s, Beer-Hofmann was “living the very Viennese life of the aesthete, styling his life as a work of art [...].” He engaged in a frivolous dandyism that Karl Kraus, in reference to (fellow) *Jung Wien* members and specifically Hermann Bahr, mocked as their habit “to imply genius through a lock of hair dangling over the brow [Genialität durch eine in die Stirne baumelnde Haarlocke anzudeuten],” and to remain “thoughtful” at all times about “beauty and the utmost precision of any pose [auf Schönheit und möglichste Exactheit einer jeden Pose bedacht].” Beer-Hofmann’s early novellas *Camelias* and *Das Kind*, both published in 1893, explore the aestheticism that the author epitomized at the time. Yet in these early texts, he already appears to introduce his doubts about the value of that lifestyle—a “narcissistic inward turn” of which he would grow increasingly critical. Around the middle of the 1890s, Beer-Hofmann experienced a profound personal crisis, now perceiving the persona of the aesthete as a shallow caricature and longing for a more genuine relation to the world, even if his work reflects a deliberate engagement with Jewish identity only after 1895. His own Jewish awakening—inspired by marriage and fatherhood, as
As German as Kafka

well as by the publication of Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat* (1896)—is reflected in *Der Tod Georgs* (1893–99).\(^{152}\)

Heeding a modernist impulse to break free from formal tradition, while thematically reverting to the author’s heritage, *Der Tod Georgs* is exemplary of a “backward-looking yet highly experimental” Viennese Jewish modernism, which “sought to invent a Jewish countertradition through aesthetic means.”\(^{153}\) Combining a death theme—fashionable around the turn of the century—\(^{154}\) with literary *Jugendstil*,\(^{155}\) *Der Tod Georgs* is a typically modern text. In fact, it is one of the very first German-language texts to experiment with techniques that would become central to the modern novel—interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and *erlebte Rede*.\(^{156}\) Beer-Hofmann’s originality extends to the unique interplay of two central themes—“that of the transcending of the deadly selfishness of aestheticism and the return to true life, and that of the return of the ‘Jewish mind’ to ‘the spirit of Jewishness.’”\(^{157}\) In strikingly ornamental associations, the novella relates the Jewish awakening of an aesthete with narcissistic tendencies—a ‘conversion’ reminiscent of the author’s own. *Der Tod Georgs* is at once representative and critical of aestheticism, exploring it to the point where it exhausts itself. The protagonist Paul suffers from a “perceptive disorder,”\(^{158}\) due to which “the perceiving subject constitutes his or her own reality and is not directly bound to the reality principle.”\(^{159}\) This worldview is thoroughly challenged by the death of his longtime friend Georg, the shock of which leads Paul to repudiate his dandyism. The aesthete’s crisis of meaning is described by Georg Lukács as the moment

\[
\text{when the soul, utterly exhausted in ever new but eternally repeated games, yearns for truth, for tangible, incontrovertible truth and begins to comprehend as a prison the nature of its ego to fuse everything within itself, to conform everything to itself.}
\]

\[
[wenn die Seele, gänzlich erschöpft in immer neuem, doch ewig wiederholten Spielen, sich nach Wahrheit sehnt, nach greifbarer, unumknotbarer Wahrheit und die alles in sich einschmelzende, an alles sich anpassende Art ihres Ichs als Kerker zu begreifen beginnt.]
\]

Such longed-for ‘truth’ arrives in Paul’s seemingly sudden awareness of his Jewish ancestry. In the concluding chapter, conspicuous references to a *Gesetz*, a *Volk*, and to the voice of blood convey Paul’s new intuition of his genealogy. The novella’s critique of aestheticism as narrow individualism is thus traversed by the “hidden dimension of a pathological study of the assimilated, secularized Jewish mind.”\(^{161}\)
Considering aestheticism as a ‘perceptive disorder’ that first leads to a withdrawal from the world, then to the birth of meaningful connection, Der Tod Georgs allows a comparison with Zaimoglu’s Liebesbrand. A century apart from Beer-Hofmann’s aesthete par excellence, Zaimoglu portrays a (semi-) aesthete who has rejected the capitalist world, only to be deceived by his recently discovered idealism and Romantic Sehnsucht. As does Beer-Hofmann, Zaimoglu depicts a perceptive and spiritual awakening, developing an imagery of ‘becoming’ and changeable identities that questions any claim to subjective autonomy or radical idealism. Der Tod Georgs and Liebesbrand thus pick up where the self-aestheticization of Schnitzler’s and Kermani’s protagonists left off: at the dead end of Enlightened assimilation.

Zaimoglu (1964) has become one of the most ‘canonical’ voices of Turkish-German writing and one of the most celebrated contemporary German authors tout court. Born in Turkey, but raised and educated in Germany, he abandoned his studies in medicine and art in order to start writing and painting. A public figure as well, Zaimoglu balances his position as a literary author and as a (perceived) ‘native informant’ of the Turkish-German population. Zaimoglu first garnered critical attention—and the reputation of enfant terrible—with Kanak Sprak. 24 Mißtöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft (1995). With this collection of at times offensive voices of second- and third-generation Turkish-German youth, Zaimoglu propagates a Kanak counter-identity in opposition to bourgeois German self-definitions. Yet despite its staged character and its highly stylized use of Turkish-German slang, critics have unduly taken Zaimoglu for the Kanak spokesman of “a disaffected and discriminated constituency to which he belonged by virtue of his birth, and whose anger he was challenging.” Rather than a realistic testimonial, Zaimoglu’s “parodic ethnicisation” is about the creation of “a new language, a new way of experiencing and disrupting differences, rather than communicating and fixing them.” Zaimoglu has by now somewhat distanced himself from his beginnings as an agitator and from the text that won him the status of Sprachrohr. Still, its reception remains a prime example of the critical misconception that Zaimoglu continues to denounce, namely, how Turkish-German authors are forced into the role of Alibitürke, or are expected to exhibit a degree of “Salonradikalität”—a palatable, crowd-pleasing rebelliousness. He strongly resists being confined to a position of ‘authenticity’ that is, in fact, projected onto him. When for instance Kindlers Literatur Lexikon printed his entry as ‘Zaimoğlu’, including the diacritical mark he has abandoned, he mocks the undue emphasis on his ‘difference’ as a Turkish-German writer, as if his work solely reflected an ‘original’ Turkish (-German) experience: “I have
eliminated the breve [...]. In the entry to my person one attaches value, however, to faithfulness to the original. [Den Querbalken [...] habe ich abgeschafft. Im Eintrag zu meiner Person legt man jedoch Wert auf Originaltreue.]”

Even more demonstrative of the critical obsession with ‘authenticity’ and ‘originality’ is the controversy that ensued after Zaimoglu’s (alleged) plagiarism in his 2006 novel Leyla. An anonymous critic accused the author of having plagiarized a number of motifs and anecdotes from Özdamar’s novel Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei (1991)—like Leyla, the semi-fictional story of a girl’s youth in Turkey and subsequent emigration to Germany. In his defense, Zaimoglu presented the recordings of his mother’s memories, which were the inspiration for his novel. The fact that Zaimoglu “mounted this self-defence in terms of documentary evidence and in terms of stories’ oral, vernacular origins in real life—that is, in terms of ‘authenticity’, rather than in terms of the liberty of the imagination,” is telling. While it may have been wise to provide documentary evidence instead of invoking artistic liberty, it remains striking how critics—some academic, most journalistic—have treated the issue as a question of authenticity, as if a migrant writer’s fictional text “obeyed specific generic laws, which tied it to the witness of real bodies and citable voices, relating ascertainable facts about documented places and times.” Once again, it suggests that, for a writer perceived as a ‘native informant’, the value of his work is not accepted when not explicitly marked as authentic.

Since the 2000s, Zaimoglu has explored themes that tie in with the German Romantic tradition. Most of his protagonists have come in variations of the Romantic hero—

| highly educated and intelligent [...], out of key with his time, belated, discontented with modernity, with the ‘rationality’ and ‘Enlightenment’ underpinning consumer capitalism—a rebel against conformism—but a poet-dreamer rather than a social political activist, one who seeks to find an ineffable authenticity or truth in heterosexual love, sex, and travel or flight from the familiar. |

Although his “Romantic turn” has shifted focus away from the “discords from the social margins,” Zaimoglu continues to undermine the critical obsession with ‘authentic’ migrant writing. His engagement with the Romantic tradition might be read in terms of a chastened temper, or of artistic ‘maturation’, but to a limited extent only: an anti-establishment attitude and a “war on the German real” have remained the hallmarks of his writing. This Romantic register has
allowed him to voice more generalized criticism of German bourgeois society and European modernity. Zaimoglu indeed characterizes himself as the antithesis of Enlightenment, as someone who “could befriend certain moments of Counter-Enlightenment [[sich] mit gewissen Momenten der Gegenauflärung anfreunden kann].” Dismissing the ‘ludicrous’ notions of freedom and autonomy, he senses hubris hiding in intellectuality and *Fortschrittsgläube*:

[Modern man] believes he is at the zenith of human potential in terms of intelligence. He thinks that everything that existed before has progressed to this climax and is, so to speak, the grand apex of human potential. But these modern people only leave graves, for they believe that what has deceased and is abandoned, what is derelict, has only deserved to have been defeated.

Conversely, his skepticism extends to ideology and institutionalized religion. Just as he distrusts atheism—“essentially a stomach of modernity [im Grunde genommen ein Magen der Moderne]”—so too does he think of “the clerics, the zealots of faith [die Klerikalen, die Glaubenseiferer]” as the idiots of the modern world. The public debate on religion, he contends, is marked by unnecessary polarization and erroneous reifications on either side:

The reification of popular faith into publicly debated kitsch, namely complete secularization, and the reification of popular faith of the Church with a high priest as administrator of a legend at the head—both are lies. For there exists a fervent core.

Protecting this highly individualized ‘fervent core’ from being drowned out by a false modern binary is the driving force behind Zaimoglu’s romanticism.
When asked about his artistic motto, he offers two insights: “I do not want to betray that which is real. And I do not want to improve that which is good. [Das Echte will ich nicht verraten. Und das Gute will ich nicht verbessern.]” Valuing authentic self-expression over continuous self-improvement, Zaimoglu indeed advocates a distinctly romantic concept of art: “I do not think highly of size, of expansion, of self-realization. I think highly of self-effacement, in art, in literature. [Ich halte nichts von Größe, von Expansion, von Selbstverwirklichung. Ich halte viel von der Selbstauslöschung, in der Kunst, in der Literatur.]” He even declares himself a “staunch advocate of the rejection of reality [unbedingter Befürworter der Realitätsablehnung],” which bears resemblance to Beer-Hofmann’s more radical aestheticist retreat. Like Beer-Hofmann, Zaimoglu is skeptical of a reality governed by instrumental reason, leading him to seek out the intensity of experience that “a ‘culture’ perceived to be deformed by competitive consumer capitalism and the dictates of cold-hearted reason” fails to provide.

Especially *Liebesbrand* can be considered a “full-blown” experiment “in inventing a contemporary Romanticism for a future Europe.” The novel relates the love quest of David, who survives a bus accident in Turkey, and he follows Tyra, a German tourist who offered him first aid, on her travels through Germany, to Prague, and to Vienna. Even if Tyra rejects David, and he eventually resigns himself to it, the novel provides no resolution. As Littler remarks, the story is about “longing itself, and love’s transformative power” about “its unsettling of the integrity of identities.” Zaimoglu considers it his as yet most authentic publication—not in terms of biographical veracity but in terms “romantic expressive feeling [romantische[s] Ausdrucksgefühl].” His self-insertion into the Romantic tradition might be read in terms of an assimilatory desire to be included into the German canon. But looking closer, it really resembles a romantic rebellion against determinate identities—national, cultural, or religious, as well as against a deeply ingrained (German) idealism that lies at the core of the Western obsession with the ‘authentic’ and the ‘original’.

In *Liebesbrand*, Zaimoglu takes a more reflective approach to the game of (staged) authenticity he initiated in *Kanak Sprak*. Confronting claims of biographical authenticity with his own romantically inclined notion of authenticity, his focus on intense yet elusive *Sehnsucht* opposes the dual objectification he observes in European modernity: the reduction of reality by instrumental reason and capitalism, and the institutionalization of spiritual experience. The incorporation of romantic motifs in *Liebesbrand*—especially that of ‘burning passion’—shapes a worldview that is distinctly anti-idealistic. By the example of the protagonist who is blindly led by the idea of love, the novel
questions the essentializing nature of idealism, and its reductive effect on reality. As I will illustrate, the protagonist strives for the ‘ideal’ love, which renders him blind to everyday manifestations of love as a corporeal-affective, rather than a strictly (im)material, experience.

_Liebesbrand_ and _Der Tod Georgs_ are structured by a close entanglement of love and death themes representing the onset of an awakening. Confronted with two radical opposites—the vital intensity of love and the inevitability of death—the two protagonists are challenged to reassess their views and to discover new meanings and connections beyond the confinement of the aesthete’s mind. For Zaimoglu’s David, this implies a departure first from his capitalist worldview, then from his radical idealism; for Beer-Hofmann’s Paul, it means recalibrating his solipsistic surrender to association and superficial perception. Both novels thus picture how Enlightened autonomy yields to spirituality and longing for connection.

_Realtätsablehnung & experiences of finitude_

“Die Immanenz des Selbstbewuβtseins”

“Can a modern consciousness governed by chance associations find its way back from aesthetic detachment to ancestral Judaism?” Abigail Gillman aptly captures the premise of Beer-Hofmann’s novella, in which the author sets out to “divert the modernist impulse back towards the ethical.” This seems like an irresolvable question, since the aesthete’s mind, surrendered to sensations, seems divorced from objective reality:

How then should [the writer] consolidate chance occurrences into a teleological narrative? And in the case where the conclusion to this narrative (like that of any spiritual journey) is both unforeseen and somehow inevitable, how should he convey that the transformation is at once an outgrowth of the aesthete’s natural tendencies, as well as a wholly unexpected turning point, an _Erlebnis_ or epiphany?

Beer-Hofmann treats Paul’s spiritual awakening as a question of form, whereby seemingly disconnected images are layered onto each other and, in the process, acquire symbolic meaning. The rejection of linear narration and the use of interior monologue and _erlebte Rede_ convey a psychological change within the aesthete’s mind, rather than following a coherent logic. Indeed, with _Der Tod Georgs_,
Beer-Hofmann sought to finish off aestheticism from within, and “to bring the aesthete to an end by means of aestheticism itself [dem Ästheten mit den Mitteln des Ästhetentums ein Ende [zu bereiten]].”

The novella opens with a fairly uneventful frame narrative that starkly contrasts with the intricate, ornamental rendering of Paul’s dreams in the encapsulated stories. In four unequally proportioned chapters, Der Tod Georgs describes how the aesthete first withdraws from reality, surrenders to a dream reality, and then re-emerges in the frame narrative, which concludes several months after the initial scene. The story opens on the night when Georg has visited Paul in his summer home. From the only instance of dialogue in the novella, the reader indirectly learns of Georg’s visit—the event itself remains unnarrated. A seemingly insignificant interaction with some passerby already implies Paul’s desire to withdraw; he indicates that he is very tired and will not come outside for a walk. The window motif highlights his disconnection further. Whereas the dialogue above takes place through an open window, subsequent occurrences of the motif involve windows being closed or hidden behind curtains, signifying his disconnection. The motif interconnects several other meanings. The glass matches the transparency of his mind within the text but more significantly represents the aesthete’s “sterile interaction with reality,” which is “conceived of as a surface,” which I will address later. At this early point in the novella, the window alludes to Paul’s confinement within his own mind. Returning home after a walk, Paul is too tired to think, and at the mercy of association and sensory perception:

Then he lay there and still felt how well the cool pillows nestled into his heated neck. How moonlit the room was! And there on the wall was the black shadow of the window cross. Georg slept in there. The foliage of the lime tree in front of the window looked like a grid of black hearts.—What was that scent the wind carried through the open window? Did it come out of the garden? Or was it freshly mown meadows in the mountains?—He slept.

In an evocation of random impressions as he falls asleep, focalized narration gives way to free indirect speech. In this conclusion to the first chapter—the frame narrative—the window is still opened. Yet the window casts a dark shadow—a suggestion of confinement reinforced by the black grid of foliage: Paul’s reality is now limited to merely his impressions. Correspondingly, his mind is rendered in a Machian fashion, in which “any and all inherent principles of distinction and causality vanish.” Beer-Hofmann’s extensive use of formal innovation corresponds to the impressionistic atmosphere that Hermann Bahr diagnosed as characteristic of the modern *Zeitgeist*, and which Mach captured in his *Analyse der Empfindungen* (1900) as an all-encompassing suspension of distinctions, as “the physical and the psychological converge, elements and perceptions are one, the ego dissolves and everything is only an eternal flood, which seems to falter here, flows more hastily there [das Physikalische und das Psychologische rinnt zusammen, Element und Empfindung sind eins, das Ich löst sich auf und alles ist nur eine ewige Flut, die hier zu stocken scheint, dort eiliger fließt].”

There is, however, a paradoxical aspect to the impressionistic dissolution of the self. When the distinction between physical and psychological realms ceases to exist, consciousness becomes the sole reference point: “This immanence of self-consciousness is coupled with a high degree of individualization, which hardly leaves any room for overall coherence. [Diese Immanenz des Selbstbewußtseins verbindet sich mit einem Höchstmaß an Individualisierung, die kaum mehr einen Weg zu übergreifenden Zusammenhängen offenläßt.]” Indeed, on several occasions, Paul’s worldview is exposed as egocentric to the point of narcissism. After his spiritual awakening, he ponders his previous life as an aesthete and becomes aware of the radical isolation and self-referentiality of the lifestyle: “All around him he had laid loneliness, and inside it he had strayed like one who, lost in deserts, endlessly follows his own traces in circles. [Rings um sich hatte er Einsamkeiten gelegt, und in ihnen war er umhergeirrt wie einer, der, in Wüsten verloren, endlos im Kreise den eigenen Spuren folgt.]” (TG 203) To the radical aesthete, the aspects that define a conventional existence have lost their distinctive power: personal, causal, temporal, or spiritual relations have been sacrificed to the aesthete’s associative surface perception. Because he discerns no difference between present and past experience—indeed, he suffers from a kind of memory loss—the aesthete’s reality resembles a shadow theatre where vague memories emerge on the same surface as the lives surrounding him:
Deeds that had long since turned cold, from which only a dull glow, fading, dawned on the living throughout the centuries, he had approached with feverish hands, and still trembling destinies of living people, who surrounded him, walking the earth at the same time with him, he had kept away from him with defensively spreading fingers, until both—dead and living—equally far away from him, seemed to perform like shadows on the same stage.

[Längst kalt gewordene Thaten, von denen nur ein matter Schein, verblassend, durch Jahrhunderte zu den Lebenden herüberdämmerte, hatte er mit fiebernden Händen an sich herangerückt, und noch zuckende Schicksale lebendiger Menschen, die um ihn gedrängt, mit ihm zugleich die Erde traten, solange mit abwehrend sich spreizenden Fingern von sich ferne gehalten, bis Beides—Totes und Lebendiges—gleich weit von ihm, wie auf derselben Bühne, schattenhaft sich selbst zu spielen schien.] (TG 191)

The seeming contradiction, whereby the dissolving self ultimately becomes the center of its own universe, is characteristic of the Wiener Moderne. This conspicuous thematization of death in this period reflects the experience of increasing individualization and isolation at the time and articulates the ultimate failure of the ego in the simultaneous “absolute positioning of the ego and its farewell [Absolutsetzung des Ich und seine Verabschiedung].” The accompanying loss of metaphysical reference has as its consequence that, in a paradoxical way, the emphatically absolute subject sees itself exposed to transience and destruction. The Archimedean center of thought, the final bastion of transcendental idealism, suddenly proves to be phantasmagoric.

[[hat] zur Folge, daß in widersprüchlicher Weise das emphatisch absolut gesetzte Subjekt sich der Flüchtigkeit und Vernichtung preisgegeben sieht. Der archimedische Punkt des Denkens, die letzte Bastion des transcendentalen Idealismus, erweist sich plötzlich als Phantasmagorie.]

Similarly, in Der Tod Georgs, the lack of perceptive depth symbolizes the absolute reality of the aesthete’s mind, which exists disconnected from external sources of meaning. Paul’s confrontation with mortality—even if it takes place within a dream—elicits his transformation, marking the moment when the absolute self-foundation of consciousness reaches its limits. This failure is outlined in the second chapter, the opening scene of which features the same elements that closed
Aesthetes between identity and opposition

the preceding one where Paul fell asleep—the window, the trees, the foliage—the second chapter appears to be the simple continuation of the frame narrative (TG 16). While reiterating the state of Paul's confinement, the window motif now also marks the transition between layers of consciousness, introducing the reader to the all-encompassing reality of Paul's dream on the night of Georg’s death. The dream consists of Paul's lengthy reflections about a woman on her deathbed, whose presence is suggested first by “a soft protracted whimpering sound [ein leiser langgezogenen wimmernder Ton],” and then confirmed by the focalizer’s associations about the unnamed woman, “who had been laying dying downstairs for weeks [die unten seit Wochen sterbend lag].” (TG 16–7) Georg’s death remains unnarrated and is evoked metonymically by the dying woman instead. This obscures a causal relationship between Georg’s death and Paul’s (spiritual) awakening and ties in with Beer-Hofmann’s intention to depict a transformation within the aesthete’s mind—the emergence of (spiritual) meaning out of chance associations, rather than a causal or teleological process.

More importantly, Georg’s unnarrated death indicates the limitations of Paul’s self-absorbed state. It suggests that the solipsistic aesthete is unable to witness, let alone access, another person’s death without transcending himself, without becoming aware of his own mortality, and thereby undermining the absolute self-foundation of his mind. In this respect, Paul's dream constitutes an experience of finitude in the Nancian sense. His associations about the dying woman culminate in the rupture of the ‘immanence’ of his self-consciousness. In a concise summary of Nancy’s argument, Christopher Fynsk elucidates the estrangement of the modern individual from his own mortality:

[Part of the devastation wrought by the technical organization of advanced capitalist societies [...] lies in the isolation of the individual in its very death and thus the impoverishment of that which resists any appropriation or objectification. Death is an experience that a collectivity cannot make its work or its property, in the sense of something that would find its meaning in a value or cause transcending the individual. [...] There is a point at which death exposes a radical meaninglessness that cannot be subsumed. And when death presents itself as not ours, the very impossibility of representing its meaning suspends or breaches the possibility of self-presentation and exposes us to our finitude. [...] [T]his exposure is also an opening to community: outside ourselves, we first encounter the other.215}
The three fundamental characteristics of a Nancian experience of finitude—its resistance to appropriation and objectification; its exposure of radical meaninglessness; the impossibility of autonomous self-presentation—are indeed crucial elements in the aesthete's awakening. Paul's realization that mortality is both highly individualized and beyond objectification ruptures the confines of his mind. In his dream, the aesthete ponders his relationship to the woman on her deathbed. It appears to not have been a relationship between equals, but rather one of appropriation, as Paul has subjected her to his own worldview:

He took away her faith in a benevolent God who steered her destiny, and left her nothing but a consuming yearning for faith [...]. The more he took from her, the more she became his. Empty and unsteady she sank to him, for she believed in him [...].

[Er nahm ihr den Glauben an einen gütigen Gott der ihr Schicksal lenkte, und ließ ihr nichts als verzehrende Sehnsucht nach Glauben [...].] Je mehr er ihr nahm, desto mehr ward sie sein. Leer und haltlos sank sie ihm zu, denn an ihn glaubte sie [...].] (TG 27–8)

Having robbed her of her beliefs, he feels “that he owes her [dass er ihr etwas zu geben schulde].” Yet what he offers her in return is merely his own aestheticist reverence of “the beauty of everyday things [die Schönheit alltäglicher Dinge].” (TG 28) At the moment of her death, however, Paul witnesses how, despite her submission to him before, she now rejects him, focusing on her very private, “important business: she was about to die [wichtiges Geschäft: Sie hatte zu sterben].” (TG 91) Paul is not allowed to partake in her dying, let alone to appropriate the moment:

Gradually she seemed to elude his authority. [...] She looked at him, then she seemed to turn her gaze from him contemptuously. He felt like a deceiver; the deal was about immeasurable things, and his beggar’s wares should have value to her? She was dying; she had to leave everything alive behind—and he wanted to comfort her with childish caresses? He felt ashamed.

[Langsam schien sie seiner Herrschaft zu entgleiten. [...] Sie sah ihn an, dann schien sie verächtlich ihren Blick von ihm zu wenden. Wie ein Betrüger kam er sich vor; um Unermessliches ging der Handel, und seine Bettelwaare sollte Werth für sie haben? Sie starb; von allem Lebendigen musste sie weg—and mit kindischem Liebkosen wollte er sie trösten? Er empfand Scham.] (TG 90–2)
The economic terminology here—‘Geschäft’ , ‘Handel’ , ‘Bettelwaare’, ‘Werth’—emphasizes the fact that the woman’s death resists commodification or appropriation. Indeed, Paul feels ashamed—an affect stemming from an ethical rather than an aesthetic realm of experience, which marks the onset of his awakening and return to Judaism. The deathbed scene is thus an illustration of how “the individual Dasein first knows community when it experiences the impossibility of communion or immanence […] before the dead other.” The rupture of immanence is once more highlighted by the window motif. Sitting near the deathbed, Paul notices children outside who are looking in. Angrily he waves his fist at them, forgetting about the window between them, and shatters the glass at the same moment of the woman’s death: “The shattering of the broken glass and the children’s crying made the voice of the old attendant yell: ‘Jesus—the woman is dying’. He stood there breathing heavily; his clenched fist full of piercing glass shards […]. [Durch das Klirren der Scherben und das Schreien der Kinder gellte die Stimme der alten Wärterin: “Jesus—die Frau stirbt!” Er stand schweratmend da; seine geballte Faust fühlte er voll schneidender Glassplitter […]].” (TG 95) The now shattered window, symbol of Paul’s indirect engagement with the world, now signifies his the opening up of his self-consciousness towards the discovery of external meaning: “He was wide awake now, so well-rested! [[E]r war jetzt so wach, so ausgeschlafen!]” (TG 97) The narrative experiment of erlebte Rede and interior monologue that conjures the totality of consciousness now comes to a halt, “where consciousness encounters the inaccessible [wo das Bewußtsein an das Nicht-Verfügbare stößt].” This experience of finitude announces a rejection of the idealism on which Paul’s absolute consciousness was founded. As Pfeiffer concludes:

The absolute selfoundation of consciousness […] has failed. Thus [Beer-Hofmann] repeats in explicit form the attempt that the early Romantics had already embarked upon, and which led them to renounce the philosophy of German idealism. That is, the attempt to found subjectivity in the gesture of pure self-reflexivity proved unfeasible to the early Romantics […]. They arrived at the realization that selfhood could not be founded upon immanent consciousness […].

Frühromantikern [...] als undurchführbar. Sie gelangen zu der Überzeugung, daß sich Selbstsein nicht bewußtseinsimmanent begründen lasse [...].]218

The subsequent chapters picture how Paul gradually overcomes the enclosure of his thoughts and impressions and eventually finds the source of his existence outside of his mind: in his Jewish ancestry. In the third chapter, Paul travels by train to Georg’s funeral; his coffin accompanies him in a freight car. The motif of train travel highlights that the aesthete’s associative mind is returning to the ‘right track’—devoid of “anything coincidental and capricious [alles Zufällige und Launenhafte],” it reassures him “to be sliding towards his destination on anchored iron rails [auf eisernen festgebetteten Schienen seinem Ziele zuzugleiten.]” (TG 111) In other words, the train ride “encompass[es] his entire being in its motion, it signifies an existential change of state.”219 During his journey, Paul looks out the window, watching the landscape passing by. Yet his perception is rendered less impressionistically than before—he now seems more reflective, as if coming down from the ridge of aestheticism. In his reflections on Georg’s death, Paul becomes increasingly aware of the temporal depth of existence, becoming aware that the meaning of life is found not at resting places, nor in the collection of fulfilled wishes and achievements (TG 113–4), but in the “acceptance of life as duration.”220 Inside that acceptance, there is no room for narcissistic self-examination:

Or did he belong to those who knew that their lives flowed and that water did not stand still to see itself? And who knew that it could not be contained in pitchers to stare into the captured flood and tell it, ‘You are my life.’

[Oder war er von denen, die wussten, dass ihr Leben floss, und das Wasser nicht stillstand, um sich selber zu besehen? Und die wussten, dass man es nicht in Krüge fassen konnte, um in die gefangene Fluth zu starren und ihr zu sagen: “Du bist mein Leben.”] (TG 114)

With that acceptance comes his awareness of an age-old “hidden thought [verborgenes Denken]” (TG114) that informs the present and “infiltrates (and unites) phyical and mental life.”221 This awareness will enable Paul to acknowledge a transcendent God, as well as the structuring principle he refers to as Gesetz and Gerechtigkeit. Now, he sees things clearly, no longer in a flurry of impressions:

The distance did not swim in a haze; in sure lines it distinguished itself from the clouds [...] The way it separated and staggered, he recognized
the coherence. He understood what surrounded him as if he overlooked it from a distance. [...] [He was able] to grasp the silent will of the landscape through which he walked, and its law in the quiet clearing light of autumn.

[Die Fernen schwammen nicht im Dunst; in sicheren Linien schieden sie sich von Wolken. [...] Wie es sich sonderte und stufte, erkannte er die Zusammenhänge. Was ihn umgab, begriff er so, als übersähe er es aus der Ferne. [...] [Er vermochte] im stillen klärenden Licht des Herbstes den stummen Willen der Landschaft zu erfassen, durch die er schritt, und ihr Gesetz.] (TG 170)

Sehnsucht and the inverted Philister

Beer-Hofmann’s aesthete transitions from radical impressionistic subjectivity—an outgrowth of idealism—to the acknowledgement of a reality beyond the visible. A similar (Romantic) resistance to idealism can be found in Zaimoglu’s Liebesbrand, a novel featuring “flagrant breaches of modern rationalist propriety.”222 The two novels criticize idealism from different perspectives. Der Tod Georgs outlines the limits of philosophical idealism—in short, the theory that ‘reality’ is founded on human consciousness or reason. Liebesbrand adopts the more everyday notion of idealism, as the practice of adopting and living by ideals. In both novels, either form of idealism is criticized as a problematic reduction of reality. In Beer-Hofmann’s text, it leads to the solipsistic rejection of any external source of meaning. Likewise, Zaimoglu’s “rage against the real”223 supports a critique of both materialistic and idealistic world views. The protagonist David undergoes a transformation not unlike the aesthete Paul’s: in the wake of a near-death experience, he becomes receptive to a reality beyond the objectifiable. Still, the perceptive transformations described in each novel do not parallel each other entirely. Whereas Der Tod Georgs describes the protagonist’s gradual rediscovery of his forgotten (Jewish) ancestry, and thus his ‘cure’ from a perceptive disorder, the near-death experience in Zaimoglu first introduces that disorder. The protagonist’s Romantic focus on intensity of experience—emotional, erotic, religious, or sublime—indeed rejects a rationalist appropriation of reality. But at the same time, that new focus leads to an equally problematic submission, that is, to idealizing projections onto material, corporeal reality.

Like Der Tod Georgs, Liebesbrand involves a perceptive transformation elicited by a confrontation with mortality. The narrator is a 38-year-old German of Turkish origin who—like Kermani’s Dariusch—appears to have adopted a ‘westernized’, capitalist, and secularized lifestyle. His success on the stock
exchange has allowed him to retire early and seems to have grown estranged from his Turkish relations in Germany. His success allows him to settle a family dispute in Turkey by financial intervention, which he mocks as “a very civilized solution [eine sehr zivilisierte [Lösung]].” (LB 22) David considers himself an example of successful assimilation into German society. When confronted with the remark “but you are not a German [doch kein Deutscher],” he responds: “Sure, I just came in a little later... [Doch, ich bin eben etwas später dazugekommen...]” (LB 94) He prides himself for his distinct lack of Lebensanschauung. Like Beer-Hofmann’s aesthete, he is suspicious of any kind of unifying narrative and incapable of detecting underlying patterns of meaning: “I was skeptical of all the wisdoms of life, not because they were lacking in truth, but because I got out of step immediately when I tried to remember them as great truths. [[I]ch war skeptisch gegenüber allen Lebensweisheiten, nicht etwa, weil sie der Wahrheit entbehrten, sondern weil ich sofort aus dem Tritt kam, wenn ich versuchte, sie mir als große Wahrheiten zu merken.]” (LB 47) Unlike the aesthete, however, David describes himself as someone who has no affinity with the arts whatsoever: “I wanted nothing to do with the arts and much less with artists [...] [Ich wollte von Kunst nichts wissen und viel weniger von Künstlern [...]].” (LB 116) ; “I myself was well versed in the art of bursting beauty in a single stroke. [[I]ch selbst kannte mich in der Kunst aus, die Schönheit mit einem Handstreich zum Platzen zu bringen.]” (LB 98) David’s ‘anti-aestheticism’, reminiscent of the Romantics’ Philister,224 is thoroughly challenged when he barely escapes from a bus crash in Turkey—an experience of finitude he describes in both religious and medical terms:

When one dies—just before the thread is cut—the nerves transmit millions of impulses, and perhaps that impulse explosion is purgatory, the little hell before entering the great paradise. I was not prepared, I was afraid.

[Wenn man stirbt—kurz bevor der Faden reißt—, leiten die Nerven Millionen von Impulsen weiter, und vielleicht ist diese Impulseexplosion das Fegefeuer, die kleine Hölle vor dem Eintritt in das große Paradies. Ich war nicht darauf vorbereitet, ich hatte Angst.] (LB 5)

The combination of two seemingly incompatible registers—death as a neurological versus a purgatorial event—introduces the ambivalent focus of the novel. It resists a completely secular worldview, while pointing to the ambiguous nature of spiritual experiences, which are presented as the “intimation of another world,” but are also “mistrusted as fraudulent superstition.”225
David's near-death experience arouses his acute sensitivity to the sublime. The hospital where he is treated for his injuries functions as a liminal space where the narrator is stripped of his previous lifestyle; his possessions, except for his indispensable mobile phone, have been lost in the crash (LB 14). The hospital is described as “a realm of dividing curtains and small chambers [ein Reich der Trennvorhänge und kleinen Kammern]” (LB 33) where reality may hide from the eye, which alludes to David's impending perceptive transformation. At this stage of his narrative it is not yet clear what his awakening entails exactly, but it is evident that he has grown suspicious of his former lifestyle. Previously, he was preoccupied with the question of earning more money (LB 23); now, he finds himself humbled by questions of fate and truth, and catches himself looking for wisdom in his fellow patients' words—"Perhaps I ought to show my good intentions and listen to the men, perhaps there was a truth hidden in their words [...] [Vielleicht sollte ich meinen guten Willen zeigen und den Männern lauschen, vielleicht verbarg sich in ihren Worten eine Wahrheit [...].]" (LB 27) David's hospital stay thus recalibrates the “laws of reality [Gesetze der Realität]” (LB 34) as he knows them: his materialism encounters idealism, and his Enlightened sense encounters Romantic sensibility. David befriends a group of patients who refer to each other by the name of their ailments or the cause of their wounds—“Liver [Leber],” “Bruise [Bluterguß],” “Knife [Messer],” “Rib [Rippe].” Their remarkable name-giving alludes to the essentializing mechanisms criticized throughout the novel and first and foremost indicates the “all too embodied,” corporeal business in the hospital: their convalescence. Yet their medical conditions are not their actual concern, as all are preoccupied with love and with adoration of one of the doctors. Quick to observe the absence of a wedding ring on David's finger, they assume that he is a contender in their contest for the doctor's affection. In a hypothetical counterargument that should convince them of his lack of interest, David exaggerates his modern, anti-romantic world view:

I knew the sparks of lighters, but no burning of love in my heart, I was corrupted in the West, I was a thoroughly degenerate man of the Occident, and I had no idea of the tradition of the Middle Eastern worship of women [...].

[[Ich kannte Feuerzeugfunken, aber keinen Liebesbrand im Herzen, ich war im Westen verdorben, ich war ein durch und durch degenerierter Mann des Abendlandes, und von der Tradition der orientalischen Frauenanbetung hatte ich keine Ahnung [...]]. (LB 31)
Likewise, the concept of the soul is to him unfamiliar; his view is limited to the material world: “Soul? The soul is my nails, my teeth, my hair. I am matter, and matter perishes. [Seele? Seele sind meine Nägel, sind meine Zähne, sind meine Haare. Ich bin Stoff, und der Stoff verdirbt.]” (LB 43)

But this Enlightened confidence in the material world soon starts showing cracks. The peculiar name-giving at the hospital also alludes to the fragility of bodily boundaries that accompanies David’s budding Sehnsucht. Feeling “unprotected [ungeschützt]” (LB 14) after the accident, he wonders whether his new propensity to get hurt or ill is perhaps related to Turkey itself, as if in this the country he “attracted evil glances [böse Blicke auf [s]ich zog]” and “curses seemed to unfold their full effect [Flüche ihre volle Wirkkraft zu entfalten [schiienen]].” (LB 32–33) Yet he soon realizes that indeed “his era of mercy is over [die Zeit der Verschonung vorbei war].” (LB 191) David’s physical vulnerability symbolizes his new worldview, characterized by his receptiveness to an immaterial world that defies “the sovereignty of money and law [Herrschaft des Geldes und des Gesetzes],” and by his alertness to “signs from people who witnessed a different power at work, whose confidence had a different source [Zeichen von Menschen, die eine andere Kraft wirken sahen, deren Vertrauen eine andere Quelle kannte].” (LB 90) At times, that sensitivity ties in with the Platonic notion that the tangible world is merely a shadowy manifestation of the essences and ideals it represents.

In the hospital, the distant sounds of a lament cause him to wonder: “Did I see what I wanted to see, or did I see the shadow of that which always withdraws and hides itself? [[S]ah ich, was ich sehen wollte, oder sah ich den Schatten dessen, das sich stets entzieht und verbirgt?]” (LB 44) This perceptual doubt—this “beautiful blurring [schöne Trübung]” (LB 44)—manifests itself more acutely in a strong melancholy desire to uncover a more meaningful connection to the world. It is an exemplary Romantic experience, described in terms of mystery, darkness, and indefinite longing:

We walked past a place of worship that was lit up unearthly beautifully, and I heard a curious sound, it sounded like rainwater collecting in the roof gutter and flowing down the drainpipe, how much I would have liked to uncover the mystery, but in this darkness I could not strike out on my own, after the accident it was impossible for me. Suddenly I felt a great yearning, I longed for something that would make me greater and happier.
Aesthetes between identity and opposition

[Wir gingen an einem Gotteshaus vorbei, das überirdisch schön erleuchtet war, und ich lauschte einem seltsamen Geräusch, es hörte sich an wie Regenwasser, das sich in der Dachrinne sammelt und das Fallrohr herunterströmt, wie gerne wäre ich dem Geheimnis auf die Spur gekommen, doch ich konnte in dieser Dunkelheit nicht eigene Wege gehen, nach dem Unfall war es mir unmöglich. Plötzlich verspürte ich eine große Sehnsucht, ich sehnte mich nach etwas, das mich größer und glücklicher machen sollte [...].] (LB 43)

Whereas before he defined his own body in materialistic terms, his Romantic inclination now makes him acutely aware of the soullessness of pure matter. The eerie image of dismembered mannequins in a shop window—“naked and dressed dolls [nackte und angezogene Puppen],” “their dismantled limbs on the floor [die abmontierten Glieder auf dem Boden],” “their hard plastic torsos on wooden stools [die Hartplastikrümpfe [...] auf Holzkrücken] (LB 44)—contrasts strongly with David’s description of yearning for meaning and unity beyond the material world.230

At this point, David’s awareness of the sublime corresponds to a Platonic or Kantian idealism.231 However, the narrator also associates the notion of ideals and essences to deception and fraudulence. Roaming the streets with his hospital friends, David indeed surmises that nothing is exactly as it seems, and that the derelict streets and run-down façades might in fact be false fronts for the dwellings of “renegade gypsy princes, robber lords expelled from the family, who send their children to beg and steal but feign modest living conditions [abtrünnige Zigeunerfürsten, von der Großfamilie verstoßene Räuberherren, die ihre Kinder zum Betteln und Klauen losschicken, aber bescheidene Verhältnisse vortäuschen].” (LB 44) In a similar vein, the narrator is suspicious of his new sensitivity, mistrusting it as merely an “illusion of perspective [Illusion von Perspektive]” (LB 71), which, he assumes, distorts his view of reality—“over and over again a fairytale dream image lay itself onto everyday scenes [immer wieder legte sich ein Märchentraumbild auf die Alltagsszenen] [...]” (LB 70)

Thus playing with the unclear boundary between Schein und Sein, Zaimoglu sets the scene for a critique of idealism and its essentializing tendency. While David’s new, distinctly Romantic vulnerability implies a rejection of reality as pure matter, the idealistic alternative, as I will argue, expires in his futile quest for the ideal of love as well. If David resembled the Philister before—“a person without intellectual needs [ein Mensch ohne geistige Bedürfnisse],” whose most defining trait is “that ideals do not grant him any diversion [daß Idealitäten ihm keine Unterhaltung gewähren],” and who therefore, “in order to evade tedium, needs realities [um der Langenweile zu entgehen, stets der Realitäten
—he has now become its inversion: an idealist who has lost sight of the reality in front of him. Renouncing strict idealism and strict materialism alike, Zaimoglu focuses instead on the transformative potential of love as a corporeal-affective experience. This particular focus, as I will illustrate, allows the author to imagine identity in terms of a “capacity to become” rather than a fixed set of characteristics. In this light, his Romantic references are not likely an indication of Zaimoglu’s desired absorption into a ‘German’ canon. Rather, the novel is a subtle critique of a (Western) obsession with defining the ‘original’, the ‘authentic’, the ‘essence’ of people, nationalities, or cultures.

Aesthetics of becoming—The ambivalent rhetoric of blood

Beer-Hofmann’s and Zaimoglu’s protagonists do not suffer from the same aesthetic ‘disorder’. Whereas depth of vision is absent in the former, it is excessively present in the latter. Both views are, however, presented as outgrowths of idealism—either in terms of fully congruent being and consciousness (Beer-Hofmann) or in terms of a radical counterreaction to soulless materialism (Zaimoglu). As I will illustrate, both novels criticize idealism as an objectifying worldview, producing static and ‘mortified’ images of reality. In both cases, this view is surmounted by a dynamic of ‘becoming’: a labyrinthine movement that subverts the aesthete’s ‘mortifying’ gaze in Der Tod Georgs and an ‘ordinary’ love experience that consists of fleeting moments of self-transcendence. Correspondingly, both texts propose a notion of identity not in terms of a permanent ‘being’ but of a continuous ‘becoming’ that resists static representation. As Nancy writes, “identity never comes to be; it never identifies itself, even as an infinite projection, because it is already there [...].”

Ornamentation—Mortifikation—the labyrinth

To contemporary critics of Der Tod Georgs, the transition from a modernist poetics of association to a determinate anchoring in Judaism was remarkable, if not implausible. The novella was regarded as flawed due to its ambiguous conclusion and due to a “disagreeable effect [arising] from prose drawn too taut between its prodigious lyricality and the demands of a sequential narrative.” In a letter to Beer-Hofmann, Schnitzler too expresses his reservations. Comparing the text to a precious jewel, he finds fault not with its pictorial character and not even with the apparent lack of purpose of the images. What strikes him is “a cheeky scam [ein frecher Schwindel]” in the final chapter that involves a sudden change of register—“You sit down at another organ, as it were, which also sounds
wonderful—but that does not prove anything. [Sie setzen sich sozusagen an eine andre Orgel, die auch herrlich klingt—aber das beweist nichts.] Schnitzler's remarks—and those of later critics—refer to the improbable shift from an aesthetic to an ethical dimension and are based on the consideration that “a genuine conversion would mandate a shift from the controls of impressionistic feeling (Stimmung) to those of cognitive understanding (Erkenntnis).” Because the text fails to make an explicit reference to Judaism and does not seem to leave the focalizer’s perspective, Paul’s conversion could be interpreted as yet another Stimmung, as aestheticism in the guise of spirituality. His seemingly abrupt awakening, however, is carefully prepared throughout the text. What may seem like profuse imagery, useless to the sequence of the story, is in fact crucial to Paul’s non-linear and non-teleological transformation.

The pictoriality of Der Tod Georgs is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it illustrates the effects of the aesthete’s perceptive disorder. It is an outgrowth of his idealism: the rich imagery “is symptomatic of the solipsism of the aesthete who turns all beings and all things into ornaments subject to the decrees of his sovereign preferences [...].” On a second reading, though, the seemingly inconsequential images acquire symbolic character. When the single images are layered over each other, they create a depth of meaning that was not there at first.

Under the aesthete’s gaze, reality is robbed from its conventional dimensions resulting in one-dimensional and timeless images reminiscent of Jugendstil art. The object of aesthetic observation here is subordinate entirely to the observer’s subjectivity and senses—a reification process diagnosed by Rainer Hank as “Mortifikation.” In the first chapter, for instance, as Paul goes out for a short walk, he encounters a woman who strikes him as vaguely familiar. Under his gaze, her presence loses all semblance of life; she morphs into an icon to behold, reminding him of “pictures [...] in which archangels in steel gold-inlaid armor push their sword before them into the ground [Bilder [...], auf denen Erzengel in stählernem goldtauschiertem Panzer ihr Schwert vor sich hin in den Boden stemmten].” And indeed, the woman is described in painting terminology:

The deep shadow of the forest and then strayed sunbeams tinged her cheeks and her slightly wavy hair. In the dusty corners of an antique shop stood statuettes of saints who resembled her; her cheeks seemed to have the matte luster of light wood—only on her lips was a pale red, like light cursory overpainting. The hair seemed dark; incense smoke, laying itself heavily in the braids, and the flame of sacred colorful candles, burning fragrantly in wall sconces, had blackened it.
As German as Kafka

In the aesthete’s impressions, the woman is situated not in the foreground of, but on the same surface as the trees and the rays of light. The painting references furthermore suggest that her hair and her facial features derive color from their surroundings, and that the woman lacks substance of her own. Her appearance is measured against icons and statues, rather than the other way around: not the icons are evaluated for their lifelikeness; it is the woman who is scrutinized for her pictorial, iconic likeness. The ‘mortifying’ gaze of the aesthete renders reality and life as timeless ornaments, an Erstarrung articulating the aesthete's desire to stall aging, a yearning for an eternal present: “The death of life marks the beginning of art—the prerequisite for the artistic surmounting of mortality. [Der Tod des Lebens wird zum Anfang der Kunst—zur Voraussetzung einer künstlerischen Überwindung der Vergänglichkeit.]”

However, the string of such still, meaningless images is wound in such a way that their stillness yields to a return of meaning. By elevating imagery and leitmotifs to key elements of narration, Beer-Hofmann refuses a sequential representation of Paul’s psychological growth. His “narrative counterstrategy [erzählerische Gegenstrategie]” consists of a central leitmotif: the labyrinth. The spatial metaphor condenses into a single image the thematic and narrative layers of the novella. It represents a non-linear movement with a teleology of its own, symbolizing the intricate pattern of the aesthete’s consciousness, as well as the trajectory of the recovery of meaning:

Their lives ran in winding labyrinthine paths, curiously chained to the lives of others. What seemed like a wrong track led to the destination; what seemed to meander aimlessly and capriciously was integrated into intricate forms, like the artistically conceived, gold-knitted arabesques on the white silk of prayer curtains.

[In gewundenen labyrinthischen Wegen lief ihr Leben, mit dem Anderer seltsam verkettet. Was einem Irrweg glich, führte ans Ziel; was sich planlos launenhaft zu winden schien, fügte sich in vielverschlungene Formen, wie die]
The labyrinth simulates the static dynamism of the aesthete’s consciousness, in which the stillness of *Jugendstil* imagery competes with impressionistic association. At first, it seems to invite the wandering mind to meander between images, evoking a continuous movement lacking linear progress. At the same time, the structure compels the mind in a certain direction and, upon its return, forces the mind to revisit familiar images and associative paths. Every time a motif is encountered again, it accumulates meaning. While the horizontal linearity of narrated time remains minimal, the vertical dimension of leitmotivic layering acquires symbolic intensity.

For instance, the lake motif featured in the dream sequence of the second chapter illustrates how initially static ornamentation produces depth of meaning. At first, the lake is simply a part of Paul’s view from the window—a man looks outside, perhaps in contemplation, or in search of comfort by beauty, and by chance catches sight of a still life in nature:

Through a large side window hot light came in. He leaned on the glowing railing and looked out forlornly. Where the glaring green of the treetops ended, the reflecting lake lay still. The mountains at its edges grew black into its depths and reached new heights there, the rich blue sky lay deep below and, flashing, at the bottom the white-blinding sun.

It is only in retrospect, as the motif keeps evolving, that the symbolism of the lake becomes evident as a prefiguration of Paul’s awakening. At this point, the lake illustrates the aesthete’s ‘mortifying’ gaze. The perfect stillness of the water betrays the absence of life below the flawless mirror-like surface, obliterating the distinction between reality and illusory reflection. The blinding reflection of the sun as well as the saturated, impenetrable blue of the water prevent from assessing the depth of the lake; in fact, bottom and surface of the lake seem to coincide. The lake image thus symbolizes the aesthete’s refusal to distinguish illusion from
reality, as well as his spiritual Bodenlosigkeit. The position of the lake furthermore emphasizes the aesthete’s isolation from reality. The lake escapes the confines of his focalization, as the narrative lens extends beyond the visual scope of a person who is merely looking out the window. It reaches beyond treetops and foliage, even though Paul is located at such a distance that he cannot distinguish individual trees anymore, only their dissolving into ‘shimmering green.’ The shift outside of his scope of vision suggests that the lake refers to a truth that, for the moment, is out of reach.

In the course of the dream sequence, the image undergoes slight yet significant alterations. Following an almost verbatim repetition of the image above, the lake is suddenly located “[o]nly a few steps away from [Paul] [[n]ur wenige Schritte weit von [Paul]].” The water starts rippling with “air bubbles gleaming [s]ilver [[s]ilbern glänzende Luftblasen]” and bursting the surface; then it settles again—“then the surface became smooth again, settled and revealing nothing of the depth underneath [dann glättete sich wieder der Spiegel und nichts verriet unter der beruhigten Fläche die Tiefe.” (TG 66) Near the end of the dream, the image is revisited, extended and adjusted, so as to illustrate Paul’s completed, though still subconscious, transformation. At this point, the lake is at a walking distance from his window. He can now measure its proximity by a strip of grass sloping into the water’s edge, suggesting that it has become an accessible reality. The rippling water now suspends Paul’s illusion, revealing the depth of the lake:

A silver flash tore the picture apart; a fish had surged up, […]. […] He saw how the clear sea bottom was flat for another stretch, and then slowly sank to the depth between slightly swaying dark water plants. […] The earlier image was lost; his eyes no longer understood how to see only the dark water surface mirroring the mountains and the sky and the sun.

[Ein silbernes Blitzen zerriss das Bild; ein Fisch war emporgeschnellt, […]. […] Er sah, wie der lichte Seeboden noch eine Strecke flach verlief, und dan zwischen leicht schwankenden dunklen Wasserpflanzen sich langsam zur Tiefe senkte. […] Das frühere Bild war verloren; seine Augen verstanden es nicht mehr, nur die dunkle Fläche des Wassers zu sehen, die spiegelnd die Berge und Himmel und Sonne in sich fing.] (TG 86–8)
The aesthete has recovered from his perceptive disorder as the result of an associative process taking place within his mind. The labyrinthine structure of the narrative thus counteracts the aesthete’s ‘mortifying’ gaze. It accommodates the wandering mind but eventually compels it into one of only two directions—either towards its core, to a culmination of aestheticism, or to its exit, to the real world. The improbable shift from modernist association towards an ethical awakening thus takes place by virtue of association itself—indeed, what may seem to lead to a dead end in fact leads towards a goal. Still, as I will illustrate later on, Paul’s awakening remains highly ambiguous, as the labyrinthine imagery of ‘becoming’ is markedly at odds with a deterministic rhetoric of blood introduced in the final chapter.

**Against monuments—“the crossing of love”**

Concerned with ideas and ideals rather than tangible realities, the inverted *Philister* may not have a ‘mortifying’ gaze like the aesthete’s. Yet on several occasions, David’s new idealism reveals itself as equally distorting. His gaze resembles an idealizing projection, which his friend Messer prefiguratively warns about in the hospital: “Wir dürfen die Wirklichkeit nicht nach unserem Wunschtraum formen.” (LB 42) In his quest for love David remains (partially) blind to the relevance of that motto: while striving for the idealized Tyra, he fails to acknowledge his everyday intimacy with Jarmila. His ‘idealizing’ disorder is exposed in the contrast between these two types of love. Furthermore, the intricate game of *Sein* and *Schein* extends his distorting view to questions of cultural and national identity. Driven by romantic Sehnsucht, David’s quest for love takes him on travels through Central Europe. His movement is interspersed with images of statues and monuments capturing his attention. As instances of the infinite projection of meaning, they are similar to the ornaments in *Der Tod Georgs*—not in terms of a lack of meaning, but in that they conjure a deceptive sense of permanence that does not correspond to a changeable reality. Just as the ‘mortified’ ornaments in *Der Tod Georgs* evoke the illusion of an eternal present, so too do the stony representations of (Czech) history simulate an eternal past with an unchanging meaning. However, David’s quest brings to light the continual ‘becoming’ of meaning and reality. David’s ‘disorder’ can thus be read as a subtle critique of idealism as an unduly essentializing gesture, which translates to a (Western) obsession with determining and representing the pure idea(l), the essence, the original.
David’s idealizing perception is relevant first in the context of national allegiances and cultural memory. On his Central European quest, he finds himself confronted with the anti-idealistic worldview of his tour guide Jarmila. Their conversations are interspersed with Jarmila’s (rehearsed) tirades about recent Czech history and with allusions to the ‘German’ cooptation of ‘Czech’ culture—to “our Kafka, who has become their Kafka [unser Kafka, der ihr Kafka geworden ist].” (LB 214) Reluctant to ascribe a static, permanent significance to external phenomena, she strongly resists essentializing notions of culture and nationality. This becomes evident at first when David—still taken with his intimation of a hidden reality—asks about the meaning of her name. She responds: “Please break that habit. Jarmila means Jarmila. This name has no inner power... [G]ewöhn’ es dir bitte ab, Jarmila heißt Jarmila. In diesem Namen steckt keine innere Macht...” (LB 204) In the same vein, she angrily corrects David when he enquires about ‘the Czech soul’:

I had asked her about the Czech soul and had encountered bewilderment, what was that supposed to be? she had exclaimed, you Germans are so obsessed with the assumption of a core, a being, an inner force, you become suspicious when another people has simply had enough of the history invoked by all the occupying forces, we Czechs have often fought, mostly unsuccessfully, and we have given up revolting immediately and fiercely, we wait, and perhaps that is why we are considered reserved people. It was curious to hear these words from the mouth of a Czech woman, if I had been asked about the nature of the Germans, I would have shown myself similarly rude.

[Ich hatte sie nach der tschechischen Seele gefragt und war auf Unverständnis gestoßen, was sollte das sein? hatte sie ausgerufen, ihr Deutschen seid derart versessen darauf, einen Kern, ein Wesen, eine innere Macht zu vermuten, ihr werdet mißstrauisch, wenn ein anderes Volk einfach genug hat von der Geschichte, auf die sich alle Besatzer berufen, wir Tschechen haben uns oft geschlagen, meist erfolglos, und wir haben es aufgegeben, sofort und heftig aufzubegehren, wir warten ab, und vielleicht deshalb gelten wir als reservierte Menschen. Es war seltsam, diese Worte aus dem Munde einer Tschechin zu hören, hätte man mich nach dem Wesen der Deutschen gefragt, hätte ich mich ähnlich unwirsch gezeigt.] (LB 203–4)

Resisting the reduction of reality and history to a nation’s ‘soul’, Jarmila points out to David (albeit in rather generalizing terms about Germans and Czechs) that current appearances are the result of an evolving historical process, rather
than the expression of an eternal inner force. Opposing the idea of an inner truth that remains unaffected by expressive forms, she simply rejects the notions of authenticity and originality—echoing Zaimoglu’s criticism of the orientalizing/exoticizing reception of migrant writing. During a monologue by Jarmila, David notices “that she had deleted the original and had presented her own version [[dass] sie [...] das Original gestrichen und ihre eigene Fassung dargeboten [hatte]].” (LB 215) Her conviction that expressive form shapes meaning, rather than simply articulating it, becomes evident when she shows David a slightly obscene sculpture situated above one of the doors of St. Jacob’s Church in Brno. It features “a man showing his exposed bottom, at last no saint and no hero, I liked it, and so did many other tourists [einen Mann, der seinen entblößten Hintern zeigte, endlich kein Heiliger und kein Held, es gefiel mir, und es gefiel auch vielen anderen Touristen [...]].” (LB 222) As the story goes, it is the result of a vengeful sculptor, but in a sarcastic tone Jarmila mocks the onlooking tourists and David as people who willingly let themselves be tricked into ‘buying’ the story behind the sculpture: “[B]ut here as well, there is a secret and true story that you would like to hear about immediately, no? [[A]ber auch hier gibt es eine geheime und wahre Geschichte, die du jetzt und sofort hören möchtest, oder nicht?]” (LB 223) Unaware of her mocking emphasis on the ‘secret truth’, David is indeed eager to hear it. He does not understand her, though, and remains blind to the ambiguity of the sculpture:

When you take a second and third look at the little man, [...] you discover that his body hides the female, so up there you see... Is that what you call... a love act?
You could, but it sounds a bit technical.
Skillful love is also perfect technique, she said.
What was I supposed to say to her, I looked at her, I looked up again, and although I tried hard, I was not able to recognize the concealed woman [...].

[Wenn man auf das Männchen einen zweiten und dritten Blick wirft, fuhr sie fort, entdeckt man, daß es mit seinem Körper das Weibchen verdeckt, dort oben sieht man also... Sagt man das... Liebesakt?
Kann man, aber es klingt etwas technisch.
Gekonnte Liebe ist auch perfekte Technik, sagte sie.
Was sollte ich ihr darauf erwidern, ich schaute sie an, ich schaute wieder hoch, und obwohl ich mir Mühe gab, gelang es mir nicht, die verdeckte Frau zu erkennen [...].] (LB 223)
It is telling that Jarmila shows him a sculpture evoking a love act—as opposed to an idea—and, moreover, a sculpture that conveys a different meaning once the onlooker’s perspective changes. In other words, its ‘truth’ does not exist independently from its formal expression; it is in fact technical and, most of all, corporeal. As I will illustrate, Jarmila’s suspicion of the idea shapes her ‘common’ love affair with David. Furthermore, it informs the tour guide’s mockery of tourism as an obsession with the original story—even if it clearly involves commodified or framed authenticity and is as such entangled in the authenticity paradox mentioned earlier.

Jarmila’s concentration on the tangible and changeable nature of reality corresponds to a suspicion of static representation that permeates the novel, especially with regard to the monuments adorning the Czech squares and cities. “Frozen in directional gestures [[I]n Gesten der Richtungsweisung eingefroren],” (LB 231) they are deceptive ‘signposts’ in a permanently evolving reality. For instance, a highly contested monument commemorating the victims of the communist regime is criticized “because of the sense of false reverence it elicits, artificially arresting the flow of life”:

It was said that the people of Prague had stormed it, [...] they wanted to forget about perpetrators and victims. Just forget—what was wrong with no longer dealing with the wrong, leaden times? The old men in short trousers made serious faces, some held their arms close to their sides and looked like a saluting soldier, the monuments only made us citizens freeze in our movements, break off our conversations and experience a sanctity of the moment that was lying and fraudulent.

[Es hieß, die Prager wären dagegen Sturm gelaufen, [...] sie wollten Täter und Opfer vergessen. Einfach vergessen—was war falsch daran, sich nicht länger mit der falschen bleiernen Zeit zu beschäftigen? Die alten Männer in kurzen Hosen machten ernste Gesichter, manch einer hielt die Arme eng an den Seiten und sah aus wie ein salutierender Soldat, die Denkmäler brachten uns Bürger nur dazu, in unseren Bewegungen zu erstarren, unsere Gespräche abzubrechen und ein Gefühl von Heiligkeit des Augenblicks zu bekommen, die erlogen und erschwindelt war.] (LB 271)

The enforced ‘sanctity of the moment’—once again mocked by way of tourists in short trousers—conjures an illusion of unchanging national and cultural identification. The monument supports “pedagogical narratives of nation” and a ritual interpretation of the Czech past. By overlaying that narrative with
a mockery of tourism, Zaimoglu criticizes the nation as an idealistic projection that pays little attention to the intricacies and nuances of present reality. National identification, as the excerpt above implies, is the result of a projection of meaning, of a misguided desire for authenticity that affects the tourist’s and the idealist’s gaze alike. Whereas static imagery conjures the illusion of an eternal present in Der Tod Georgs, it simulates the illusory permanence of the past in Liebesbrand.

Yet David’s new idealism especially affects his notion of love. His new intimation of a reality beyond the visible is closely tied to his near-death experience and to the Sehnsucht it has aroused. Shortly after the accident, he is offered water by Tyra, a German woman who appears as a guardian angel to the injured David. During their brief exchange, David notices a silver ring on her right hand but not much else. The memory of her ring, as well as a hair clip she loses at the crash site, are all David is left with as the woman leaves in her car with German license plate. Upon his return to Germany, David traces the woman to Nienburg. He finds out that she is enrolled for a PhD in history at the University of Göttingen and then follows her on a research trip to Prague. While he chases an idealized woman through Central Europe, though, it is the other woman who keeps him company—the Czech tour guide Jarmila. The contrast between the two women illuminates David’s distorted view of love and reality.

Zaimoglu’s engagement with romantic motifs of love can be illustrated in reference to Nancy, whose notion of love ties in with his non-identitarian concept of community. In the essay “Shattered Love,” he argues against the notion of love as a ‘communion of souls,’ or even as a mutual complementation and enrichment. Rather, love reveals the fundamental interrelatedness of human beings, even when (or especially when) they conceive themselves as absolute individuals. Love marks the moment when the singular plural being recognizes itself as being ‘outside of itself’: “Love […] is once again an experience of finite transcendence: the subject finds itself in love, beyond itself.” As an “act of transcendence,” love does not rely on the presumed pre-existence of autonomous individuals:

[T]he transcendence of love does not go from the singular being toward the other, toward the outside. It is not the singular being that puts itself outside itself: it is the other, and in the other it is not the subject’s identity that operates this movement or this touch.

Nancy’s non-identitarian notion of love implies that it never complements one being with another; it does not respond to a lack, nor to an abundance. In fact, it “frustrates the simple opposition between economy and noneconomy.” “Love
is precisely [...] that which brings an end to the dichotomy between the love in which I lose myself without reserve and the love in which I recuperate myself, to the opposition between gift and property.” A similar non-identitarian view informs Zaimoglu’s approach in Liebesbrand. By opposing an everyday, fleeting experience of love to a proprietary, idealizing notion, Zaimoglu formulates an alternative to the enforced ‘sanctity of the moment’ associated with national identification.

The highly educated Tyra represents an unattainable ideal, leaving David in the position of “emasculated romantic [entmannter Romantiker]” (LB 54)—submissive and pleading for her attention. In this respect, David emerges as the reversal of Beer-Hofmann’s aesthete, whose ‘love’ for the unnamed woman in his dream consists of his ‘mortifying’ appropriation of her life and views. David, by contrast, is willing to sacrifice any of his customs and ‘beliefs’ to attain his ideal—“For your sake, I would even go to a natural history museum on a Sunday, a nightmare [...]. [Ich würde dir zuliebe an einem Sonntag sogar in ein Naturkundemuseum gehen, ein Alptraum [...] ]” (LB 79) Remarkably, in the hospital, David is about to warn his friend Messer about the improbability of a loving relationship between two such extremes—if one person represents the absolute ideal, the other is reduced to a complement on the opposite end of the scale: “[S]he was a woman of learning, of culture, a lily of purity, but he was a large unshaven zero, a quite simple-minded creature on the periphery of life and love. [S]ie war eine Studierte, eine Kultivierte, eine Lilie der Reinheit, er aber war eine große unrasierte Null, eine recht einfältige Kreatur in der Peripherie des Lebens und der Liebe.” (LB 31) Oblivious to his own advice, David ends up chasing his own ideal, but he can only ever seem to experience his love through partial images and objects imbued with desire: “I have begun yearning for you, I know it is stupid, but your hands. But your special ring. But your voice. Your business woman’s suit [I]ch habe angefangen, mich nach dir zu sehnen, ich weiß, es ist dumm, aber deine Hände. Aber dein besonderer Ring. Aber deine Stimme. Dein Geschäftsfrauenkostüm.” (LB 79) His fetishistic reverence suggests that the totality of his ideal remains out of reach. Mistaking the absolute idea(l) of love for reality, David cannot help feeling like an impostor unworthy of Tyra’s attention:

How do you recognize an idiot? He would not listen, he was hooked on an idea, and in his dreams he saw the image of the woman who ridiculed him in reality. [...] I was a man who disguised himself as a tourist to cover up his delusions of love, and the idiocy of my deception could not remain hidden from her.
The actual deceit taking place here is not his attempt to hide his obsession, but rather the Liebeswahn itself: it is merely his wishful idea projected onto reality. Nancy’s distinction between desire and love fittingly describes David’s illusion. Considering himself to be the lesser part of an incomplete relationship, David espouses a proprietary notion of love. Yet as Nancy argues, “love is at once the promise of completion—but a promise always disappearing—and the threat of decomposition, always imminent.”

This is why desire is not love. Desire lacks its object—which is the subject—and lacks it while appropriating it to itself (or rather, it appropriates it to itself while lacking it. Desire [...] is foreign to love because it sublates, be it negatively, the logic of fulfillment. Desire is self extending towards its end—but love does not extend, nor does it extend itself toward an end.

If Tyra represents the ultimate end of David’s desire—and, in Nancian terms, the extension to his own self—Jarmila stands for the resistance to such appropriation and for a moment of self-transcendence for David. As his tour guide, she accompanies David on his journey, rather than directing him towards his goal—Tyra. Her guidance offers an alternative kind of love and, subsequently, an alternative approach to reality. David’s initial request about her role as a guide—“Just be my seeing-eye dog, please. [...]e ich einfach nur mein Blindenhund, bitte.” (LB 178)—thus becomes relevant to more than just his visit to Prague.

Indeed, Jarmila reveals herself as far more in touch with reality, representing an anti-idealistic notion of reality, both in the philosophical and in the everyday sense. An actress as well, Jarmila proves highly sensitive to the tension between Sein and Schein. Wenn she suddenly changes her mind after having invited David to her bed, her justification reveals how she measures wishful dream against reality, carefully assessing their compatibility:
[S]he was certainly not erratic, she just wanted to separate true from false, and sometimes it happened that her wish came true, but she looked at it, then she looked as one looks at fingerprints on the glass plate, and then undid her wish.

[[S]ie war ganz sicher nicht sprunghaft, sie wollte nur wahr von falsch trennen, und manchmal kam es vor, daß sich ihr Wunsch erfüllte, doch sie sah es sich an, sie schaute dann, wie man Fingerabdrücke auf der Glasplatte ansieht, und machte ihren Wunsch rückgängig.] (LB 230)

Her reaction suggests that the fulfillment of desire may not lead to a desirable reality. Instead, she defends an anti-idealistic view of life and love, in which hopes and desires are not allied with projections: “You hope without seeing. You expect without trusting your eyes. You confess, full of fear and without understanding. [Man hofft, ohne zu sehen. Man erwartet, ohne seinen Augen zu trauen. Man bekennt, voller Angst und ohne zu erkennen.]” (LB 227) This notion of love is reminiscent of what Nancy refers to as “the crossing of love.” It strikes beyond one’s volition, and exposes the limits of one’s ostensible autonomy: “Love arrives, it comes, or else it is not love. But it is thus that it endlessly goes elsewhere than to ‘me’ who would receive it: its coming is only a departure for the other, its departure only the coming of the other.” This notion of love describes David and Jarmila’s budding affair. It seems to happen by accident, without them even realizing it, as an everyday kiss on the cheek grows inadvertently intimate—“I missed her cheek and kissed her on the neck, it was an oversight, but at that moment it was beyond my powers to enlighten her about the misunderstanding. [[Ich verfehlte] ihre Wange und küßte sie auf den Hals, es war ein Versehen, es ging aber in diesem Moment über meine Kräfte, sie über das Mißverständnis aufzuklären.]” (LB 209) Indeed, love happens to them without presenting itself as such. Even before they become actual lovers, they sleep together in an innocent yet intimate way, to which there is a sense of ordinariness—it happens without being questioned:

I was not surprised [...] that she slipped under my cover and lay half on top of me, and because we were ashamed, we were content with just smelling each other’s skin, she fell asleep in my embrace and with my hand on her breast.

[[E]s wunderte mich [...] nicht, daß sie unter meine Decke schlüpfte und halb auf mir lag, und weil wir schamvoll waren, begnügten wir uns damit, an der
Haut des anderen zu riechen, sie schlief ein in meiner Umarmung und mit meiner Hand auf ihrer Brust.] (LB 232)

The apparent simplicity of their bond stands in stark contrast to David's and Tyra's relationship. Their lovemaking resembles warfare—a battle of appropriation, where her “attack of deliberate ferocity [Anfall von überlegter Wildheit]” (LB 103) is met with his desire to possess: “Fight and war in bed, she loved to be possessed, and I wanted to be possessed by her. [Kampf und Krieg im Bett, sie liebte es, besessen zu sein, und ich wollte von ihr besessen sein.]” (LB 105–6) This battle, from a Nancian perspective, is evidence of two people longing to be appropriated as objects of desire, seeking to restore and complete themselves. Ordinary love on the other hand—the one that does not heed an external, absolute idea of love—comes gradually, by unpredictable strokes. “What characterizes [the] endless forms [of love] is nothing more than its éclats; it has no other essence.” Its sense of fulfillment does not come with conquering an ideal, but it arrives in fleeting moments. As opposed to the contrived ‘sanctity of the moment’ enforced by monuments, common love makes David aware of a flow of life. When he makes love to Jarmila for the first time, it happens unexpectedly—not as the result of desire, nor even as the result of subjective agency. Having been rejected by Tyra briefly before, he suddenly finds himself in bed with Jarmila, unaware of how he got there:

It’s over, she said, it’s over, I said, and why was I in her arms, one woman had left me, one woman touched me, touched my eyelids, licked my lip groove, and why were we both naked, one woman had not let herself be tamed by all those words, [...] one woman left me, one woman found me [...].

[Es ist vorbei, sagte sie, es ist vorbei, sagte ich, und wieso lag ich in ihren Armen, eine Frau hatte mich verlassen, eine Frau faßte mich an, berührte meine Lider, leckte meine Lippenmulde, und wieso waren wir beide nackt, eine Frau hatte sich durch all die vielen Worte nicht zähmen lassen, [...] eine Frau verließ mich, eine Frau fand mich [...]]. (LB 282)

Indeed, in Nancy’s words, David is first presented with ‘the unfulfillment of love’—his ideal proves unattainable—yet at the same time he is ‘offered its actual advent’ in the arms of another woman. In a five-page long sentence of paratactic association (LB 282–6), their lovemaking is described as a jumble of fleeting thoughts and impressions, over which David has no control. This passage marks
a moment of self-transcendence for David, who is, for now, not concerned with his ideal but with reality as it takes shape in front of him, with him. Whereas his affair with Tyra is marked by self-involved desire and ‘the extension of the self’, the ordinary one with Jarmila allows him to witness a corporeal reality that takes him over, rather than the other way around.

Der Tod Georgs and Liebesbrand bring into focus the moment when idealism, as an outgrowth of radical autonomy and ‘the assimilated mind’, starts to lose its hold on reality. Both novels implicitly criticize idealism as leading to a reification of reality. At the same time, they explore how to overcome that ‘mortified’ stasis and to respond to a need for self-transcendence. They imagine identity in terms of a capacity to become, rather than a state of being. Still, the ‘awakening’ of both the aesthete and the inverted Philister leads to an open ending, which casts doubt on the probability of their transformation. In Der Tod Georgs, the unexpected introduction of a (racial) rhetoric of blood appears at odds with the imagery of ‘becoming’ developed throughout the text. Likewise, Liebesbrand leaves the reader in uncertainty as to whether the protagonist has effectively overcome his perceptive disorder and acknowledges the reality of ‘ordinary’ love. However, from a comparison of the blood motifs in each novel, that lack of closure reveals itself to be consistent with the protagonists’ emerging sense of community, as well as with a resistance against determinate identities conveyed by each novel.

The ambivalent rhetoric of blood
Zaimoglu’s engagement with the Romantic tradition puts him in an interesting position as a German author. As Hofmann remarks on Zaimoglu’s “Romantic rebellion,” there is an ironic aspect to the cliché that Zaimoglu’s writings strike readers as ‘Middle Eastern’, for he draws on a tradition which has apparently become unfamiliar to many Germans. “What German critics and readers think they recognize as a strangeness, an alien, exotic and extravagant quality, is a neglected facet of their own culture which Zaimoglu invites them to rediscover.” Hofmann draws on Şenocak’s argument that postwar German culture has favored objectivity and realism over romanticism, as the latter is almost invariably associated with nationalism—and thus the catastrophe of Nazism. Immigrant writers, Hofmann argues, have been able to approach and appropriate Romantic traditions far more freely, disassociating them from dangerous ideology. In Liebesbrand, the Romantic echoes have indeed been disengaged from the dangers of collectivism. The intimacy between Jarmila and David, marked by ‘the crossing of love’, acquires a more universal character when she persuades him to accompany
her to the hospital to donate blood plasma. After the procedure, David feels as if he has been robbed of an essence—“They have just taken something from us. [Sie haben uns gerade etwas abgenommen.]” (LB 262) Jarmila, on the other hand, feels enriched. Although a regular plasma donor, she is not motivated by the money but by the sense of connection it affords her: “My plasma is needed. It flows in the veins of other people. In this way I acquire kinship. […] Blood makes relatives. [Mein Plasma wird gebraucht. Es fließt in den Adern anderer Menschen. Auf diese Weise bekomme ich Verwandtschaft. […] Blut macht Verwandte.]” (LB 263) Jarmila establishes an artificial, “nonfilial yet organic connectedness”267 that does not involve the kind of family trouble that David had to settle. She single-handedly creates a sense of kinship that ignores, even subverts, the racial overtones usually associated with the rhetoric of blood. Redefining the traditional connection between blood and kinship, Zaimoglu transposes the non-identitarian aspect of their ‘ordinary’ love to a notion of community that resembles Nancy’s ‘inoperative community’. The same “Verwandtschaft without obligation”268 informs the lack of closure of the novel. Although ultimately rejected by Tyra, David’s quest does not seem to have reached a conclusion. In the final phone conversation with Jarmila—a very banal one, which fits their ordinary love—David appears intent on continuing his journey: “I have finished with everything, I said. […] See you very soon, Jarmila said and hung up. Then, in the cutting cold wind—I should go. [Ich habe mit allem abgeschlossen, sagte ich. […] Bis ganz bald, sagte Jarmila und legte auf. Dann, im schneidend kalten Wind—ich sollte gehen.]” (LB 375) The reader is left to wonder whether David flees the banality of love he shares with Jarmila in order to continue his quest for the ideal love. Still, these final lines contain a note of optimism. Closure would imply the standstill that was revealed as suspicious before. Instead, David continues to be driven by Sehnsucht, which means that he remains receptive to the ‘crossing of love’. The fact that he is not inclined to stay for Jarmila’s sake, with whom he remains connected over the phone, ties in with their kinship without obligation. 

Der Tod Georgs concludes in similar ambiguity, due to the remarkable insertion of a blood narrative in the final chapter in which the aesthete recovers his Jewish ancestry. Apparently awakened from the aestheticist illusion, Paul is now aware of a signifying dimension behind the ornament that reality had become. Whereas he lived in the illusion of an eternal present before, he now acknowledges his genealogical connectedness, extending his existence into the past and the future:
Unveiled [...] a realization stared at him. His thoughts had grasped whatever he disregarded otherwise and, growing up from them, they had taken root backwards into the past, and ranked far into the future for what was to come.

[Unverhüllt [...] sah eine Erkenntnis ihn an. Gleichgültiges das er sonst über-sah, hatten seine Gedanken umklammert, und daran emporwuchernd, schlugen sie nach rückwärts Wurzeln in Vergangenes, und rankten zu Kommendem weit in die Zukunft.] (TG 201–2; emphasis added)

This distinctly organic image of rootedness contrasts with the static ornamentation that suffused the aesthete’s world before. Yet in the light of Paul’s gradual rediscovery of meaning, which occurred as a cognitive, psychological, or in any case associative process, it is remarkable—if not problematic—that his turn to Judaism is presented in the language of Blutverwandtschaft:269

And behind them all a people, not begging for mercy, struggling to obtain the blessing of their God; wandering through the seas, not held back by deserts, and always so filled with the feeling of the righteous God as the blood flowing in their veins [...]. [...] And of their blood he was as well.

[Und hinter ihnen allen ein Volk, um Gnaden nicht bettelnd, im Kampf den Segen seines Gottes sich erringend; durch Meere wandernd, von Wüsten nicht aufgehalten, und immer vom Fühlen des gerechten Gottes so durchströmt, wie vom Blut in ihren Adern [...]. [...] Und von ihrem Blute war auch er.] (TG 215–7; emphasis added)

Whereas the process of Paul’s awakening pictures identity as changeable, the rhetoric of blood “amounts to the statement that, even for Jews who know it not, Jewishness is an inalienable part of the self.”270 In fact, Paul himself ponders the question if this blood kinship is indeed an essential part of himself or just a fleeting thought: “What sign had been given to him that this was not transient in him [...], that he could feel confident that—like the blood in his veins—it always belonged to him, and only to him? [Welches Zeichen war ihm denn gegeben, dass dies nicht vergänglich in ihm war [...], dass er sich dessen sicher fühlen durfte, dass es—wie das Blut in seinen Adern—immer ihm, und nur ihm gehörte?]” (TG 214–5) What Paul seems to have recovered, indefinitely, is a sense of ancestry and “a ‘national energy’ hidden deep within the modern individual.”271 Yet the abrupt transition from a cognitive process to the essentializing determinacy of
blood raises the question which aspects are more significant in the formation of identity: are they cultural, intellectual, social, or—as the unexpected blood motif suggests—exclusively racial? Moreover, as Gillman notes, from a narrative perspective, would not the elaborate dream sequence and the very act of regaining self-knowledge be rendered useless, if the novella concluded with the assertion that “identity is finally a matter of one’s blood heritage?” Beer-Hofmann withholds a clear answer to that question. In doing so, he casts doubt not just over the protagonist’s awakening but over the plausibility of an essentialist identity as well. The real focus of the novella thus remains on the subjective, idiosyncratic nature of spiritual awakening itself, not on the specific (cultural, religious, ideological) nature of its outcome. In fact, Paul appears indecisive about the affirmation of his Jewishness (and not simply because the word ‘Jewish’ is never mentioned). Reluctant to “finish the thought [den Gedanken [...] zu Ende denken]” (TG 219) about what his transformation means exactly, Paul leaves the Schönbrunn park and joins a group of workmen, whose fatigue reminds the reader of the wandering people mentioned above. Paul seems to question his belonging but joins them anyway:

They spoke to each other in a foreign language that Paul did not understand. He was too tired to go any faster and pass them. Slowly he walked behind them, unconsciously falling into the heavy rhythm of their steps. How dense the fog was and how far the city was! But through all the tiredness Paul felt peace and security. As if a strong hand lay soothing and guiding him on his right; as if he felt its strong pulse. But what he felt was only the beating of his own blood.

The concluding lines once more emphasize the ambivalence of the rhetoric of blood. While Paul seems to have found a sense of calm and assurance, he is still unable to see clearly through the fog. Even though he joins the group of workers, he does not speak their language. Yet most significantly, the ‘aber’ in the final sentence seems to convey an objection to the preceding images of
Blutverwandtschaft, which is reinforced by the irrealis mood in the preceding sentence: Paul’s sense of community might be “a self-made fiction;” he might not have overcome the immanence of his own mind. What he feels, might be nothing more than the beating of his own heart, not that of a community. As Le Rider concludes: “Tomorrow, perhaps, Paul will no longer hear that ‘voice of blood’ so clearly. His sense of a Jewish identity remains, irremediably, fragile.”

The ambivalent rhetoric of blood in Liebesbrand and Der Tod Georgs thus demonstrates a reluctance to subscribe to collectivist or individualist notions of identity. Both novels articulate a wavering confidence in absolute autonomy and idealism, but despite the arising need for self-transcendence, the authors remain skeptical of collectivism and essentialism. Instead, the anti-mimetic pictoriality of Beer-Hofmann’s text and Zaimoglu’s Romantic anti-idealism carve out a space for indeterminate and constantly evolving identities.

Conclusion

Art’s asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society. [...] Art keeps itself alive through its social force of resistance; unless it reifies itself, it becomes a commodity. Its contribution to society is not communication with it but rather something extremely mediated: It is resistance in which, by virtue of inner-aesthetic development, social development is reproduced without being imitated.

Theodor Adorno’s view on the critical potential of art reads like the opposite of Biller’s defense of realism as the truly oppositional mode for migrant writing. Yet Adorno’s statement might very well serve as the motto of the four aesthetes described here. Fräulein Else demonstrates exactly how art must reify itself in resistance to commodification. Indeed, Schnitzler’s novella owes its oppositional aspect not to its reference to social reality, but rather to a conflict of aesthetic codes explored within the text. Kermani’s aesthete is a negative confirmation of Adorno’s view, representing the commodified art object tailored to social expectations. The critical aspect of these texts becomes especially evident on a metafictional level, as they share a critique of assimilation as a process of self-aestheticization leading to self-commodification. Beer-Hofmann’s and Zaimoglu’s (semi-) aesthetes are illustrations of the extremely mediated resistance
of literary texts. Tracing the aesthete’s ‘conversion’ from idealistic individualism to tentative forms of community, both novels oppose determinate notions of identity, indeed ‘by virtue of an inner-aesthetic development’, by fashioning an imagery of becoming that resists fixation. These variations of the aesthete show that the oppositional character of minority writing does not necessarily reside in the explicit thematization of identity issues but precisely in its aesthetic and anti-mimetic nature. Through the lens of the aesthete, the comparison of these four texts has firstly brought into focus the dead end of assimilation narratives and, secondly, an underlying pattern whereby this dead end may give way to the imagination of fleeting forms of community that resist the embrace of collective identities.