

---

Reading Trauma as an Extension of the Uncanny in Hofmannsthal's  
"Reitergeschichte"

DAYTON HENDERSON

---

*Es ist keine irdische Wirklichkeit, die der Wachtmeister durchbreitet, sondern eine innere Landschaft, die  
Landschaft seiner öden und verfabrlosten Seele.*

- Richard Alewyn

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's novella "Reitergeschichte" (1899) has stymied any definitive interpretation since its publication in the December 24<sup>th</sup> edition of *Neue Freie Presse*. Hofmannsthal wrote little about it in his notes, famously dismissing it as a *Schreibübung* to his editor (Schuster 462). He similarly described a frustrating, albeit auto-didactically important venture to his parents shortly before it first appeared: "Was ich gearbeitet hab, gehört der Katz, ist auch sehr wenig, aber ich mach mir wirklich gar nichts daraus, es wird schon auf einmal wieder kommen und mit der Zeit werd ich schon ein besseres Training bekommen" ("Briefchronik" 487). Hofmannsthal's pessimism about the text's stature within his own canon, coupled with hints of plagiarism leveled at him by Schnitzler, unsettled "Reitergeschichte's" positioning among his other early prose; its first entry into a sanctioned Hofmannsthal collection occurred only in 1905. Its second printing was not until 1920 (Ritter 218).

Yet, for a mere writing exercise, it continues to fascinate those who study Hofmannsthal's comprehensive literary, poetic, and dramatic output today.<sup>1</sup> Many have tried to answer the manifold questions that are raised by Wachtmeister Anton Lerch's actions on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 1848. These actions are a dialectic mixture of the benign and the brutal, and they abruptly lead to his execution at the hand of his own squadron commander. Unfortunately, however, no analysis has adequately described the true nature of what is, for Hofmannsthal's enigmatic protagonist, truly a psychological predicament.<sup>2</sup>

To describe it as such should not be surprising. As Fewster correctly observes, psychology influenced Hofmannsthal since he became aware of Freud's work in the early 1890s.<sup>3</sup> Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* (1903), for instance, is widely acknowledged as a dramatic case study whose genesis is rooted in Freud's *Studien über Hysterie* (1895). The curious behavior of Graf Hans Karl Bühl in *Der Schwierige* (1921),

---

meanwhile, is attributable to the traumatic aftershocks of experiencing a trench collapse during the Great War.

Following such examples, scholarship has often looked to Freud to find the key that unlocks the riddles of "Reitergeschichte." It is a novella filled with dream-like states, extremely subjective interlocation, and the appearance of as many as three ostensible *Doppelgänger*. These three facets have often been used to link the novella with Freud's work on the uncanny, which has perhaps been best articulated in Françoise Meltzer's article "Reiter- (Writer- Reader-) Geschichte." By focusing on the doubles and the occasionally dubious narration, Meltzer draws convincing parallels between Freud's analysis of "Der Sandmann" and her own deconstruction of "Reitergeschichte."<sup>4</sup> Many scholars have since followed her lead to elaborate on the role of the uncanny in the text.

This paper contends that the uncanny does alleviate some of the interpretive burden with which the reader is laden. However, it simultaneously proposes a new approach that builds upon the uncanny in order to further develop our understanding of the novella. Curiously, although the bulk of "Reitergeschichte" takes place between two particularly violent episodes of military action, the liminal effects of the battles on Wachtmeister Anton Lerch have hardly been explored. By reading the text through early psychoanalytical work on war neurosis, it becomes clear that the traumatic consequences of these battles overshadow the novella and that the passages often associated with the uncanny are also evidence of neurotic symptoms: the multiple *Doppelgänger* are dissociative projections that disable the shell-shocked soldier, while Lerch's projective dream state is the result of a past he cannot come to terms with. This *Träumerei* is notable for creating a subjective breach of an otherwise objective narration that displaces Lerch from the spatial/temporal continuity of the rest of the novella. Moreover, syntactic repetition throughout the text links the "real occurrences" of battle to the Wachtmeister's increasing debilitation. Each of these examples display a fixation with a violent past that undercuts any reading based exclusively on the uncanny.

Finally, rather than understanding this shift as a psychoanalytic "re-diagnosis" of the text, this analysis enables the reader to interrogate the overlaps between both theories, thereby exploring a rarely acknowledged discourse between trauma, war neurosis and the uncanny. Anthony Vidler posits in his book, *The Architectural Uncanny*: "On the surface an innocuous inquiry into the psychological dimensions of the literary uncanny, [Freud's] essay in fact precipitated the uncanny into the

more disturbing territory of the death drive [...] [T]he ‘uncanny’ seems to incorporate, albeit in an unstated form, many observations on the nature of anxiety and shock that he was unable to include in the more clinical studies of shell shock” (7). As a proleptic confirmation of this claim, Hofmannsthal’s “Reitergeschichte” validates Vidler’s idea that Freud’s conceptualization of war neurosis is linked to his work on the uncanny. By re-reading the novella as a site where the two diverge, we will finally be able to decipher the true source of Lerch’s undoing, and possibly help answer the lingering question posited by Richard Alewyn almost fifty years ago: “*Warum muss Anton Lerch sterben?*”<sup>5</sup> (79)?

---

### Unpacking the Uncanny

---

To better understand the relationship between trauma and the uncanny, it is necessary to examine Freud’s understanding of both theories, and how each one illuminates important passages in Hofmannsthal’s novella. For Freud, the uncanny is most any frightening or foreboding experience, which is unsettling wholly through its unfamiliar familiarity. *Das Heimliche*, as Freud etymologically delineates, ultimately collapses upon itself so that its definition is synonymous with that of its complete opposite, *das Unheimliche*. The root of *das Heimliche* not only connotes a feeling of *home*, and the intimacy that it entails, but simultaneously refers to something hidden and secretive that cannot be known:

Also heimlich ist ein Wort, das seine Bedeutung nach einer Ambivalenz hin entwickelt, bis es endlich mit seinem Gegensatz unheimlich zusammenfällt. Unheimlich ist irgendwie eine Art von Heimlich. (234)

In an attempt to reconcile this paradox in which something is simultaneously foreign and well known, Freud turns to Schelling, who posits that the uncanny effect is more than the dialectical equivalent of its antonym. It is the result of a confrontation with a repressed memory in which the subject subconsciously recognizes the repressed object, and is therefore familiar to it without understanding why.<sup>6</sup> Schelling’s twist ultimately proves essential for Freud, who orients the remainder of the article around this elaborated tenet: “Unheimlich sei alles, was ein Geheimnis, im Verborgenen bleiben sollte und hervorgetreten ist” (232). Freud concludes that the presence of the stifled object disrupts the

---

context into which it appears, and that a fixation on the past occurs as a result. He integrates this argument into his Oedipal reading of Hoffmann's *Der Sandman*: the optician Coppola is a dubious re-embodiment of the lawyer Coppelius, the character responsible for both the protagonist's (Nathaniel) father's death and his own castration anxiety. Nathaniel later becomes certain that Coppola is actually Coppelius, and his inability to come to terms with his childhood trauma leads to an obsession that consumes and ultimately destroys him. In Freud's understanding of Hoffmann, the recurrence of the uncanny signifier propels the narrative towards shocking conclusions. The same might be said about Hofmannsthal's "Reitergeschichte."

Meltzer's claim that the uncanny is central to understanding the novella is partially so convincing because Anton Lerch is introduced into a situation that echoes both Schelling and Freud: he is confronted with the reminder of a repressed memory at the very moment he becomes "Reitergeschichte's" subject.<sup>7</sup> Dismounting from his horse and separating from the rest of the squadron for the first time, the Wachtmeister peers into a house and sees a woman he appears to know:

Indem aber dem Wachtmeister der Name der Frau einfiel und gleichzeitig eine Menge anderes: daß es die Witwe oder geschiedene Frau eines kroatischen Rechnungsunteroffiziers war, daß er mit ihr vor neun oder zehn Jahren in Wien in Gesellschaft eines anderen, ihres damaligen eigentlichen Liebhabers, einige Abende und halbe Nächte verbracht hatte, suchte er nun mit den Augen unter ihrer jetzigen Fülle die damalige üppig-magere Gestalt wieder hervorzuziehen. (41)

It takes a moment for Lerch to remember what to call the woman. He finally simply calls her "Vuic," a Slavic term that could mean both "wolf" and "whore" (Mauser 104). Her given name eludes him fully: "[...] diesen ihren Namen hatte er gewiß seit zehn Jahren nicht wieder in den Mund genommen und ihren Taufnamen vollständig vergessen" (42). The narrator is vague about who she might be. She may have been divorced or widowed. It may have been nine, perhaps ten years ago that he last saw her. We only know that these last meetings were seething with decadence: Lerch spent many late nights with her and another man. Hofmannsthal underscores their sexual and potentially tumultuous nature by insistently referring to the second man as the *eigentliche Liebhaber*.

Although vagueness marks the overarching description of his past with the woman, there is one moment of certainty: the narrator uses a telling adverb (*geniss*) to describe the last time Lerch addressed the Vuic. This is an interesting counterpoint for the entire paragraph in which it is embedded. The narrator confidently claims that Lerch has been unable to say the Vuic's name in ten years. Yet, his association with her could have lasted up to a year longer: “[dass] er mit ihr vor neun oder zehn Jahren in Wien in Gesellschaft eines anderen [...] eigene Abende und halbe Nächte verbracht hatte” (41). If Lerch interacted with the woman for up to a year after he was definitively last able to say her name, then the reader must infer there is an unknown reason for this silent treatment. The Vuic initiates a flood of memories, but as Lerch's past with her is revealed, the catalyst of his antagonism remains concealed. His simultaneous ability/inability to recall this woman points to her uncanniness, and Lerch is quickly consumed by the event.

Grasping for his memories, the Wachtmeister is confounded by his past. He unsuccessfully searches for physical markers on the Vuic whereby he may orient himself: “[Er] suchte nun mit den Augen unter ihrer jetzigen Fülle die damalige üppig-magere Gestalt wieder hervorzuziehen” (41). Almost evoking the “Terzinen über Vergänglichkeit,” the woman's physique performs the uncanny persistence of familiarity that is obstinately located in her currently unfamiliar shape. She is simultaneously the repressed, decadent woman from Vienna and the vaguely familiar person he meets in Milan. Instead of helping Lerch organize his memories, this duality ruptures Lerch's grasp on reality, causing the *Träumerei* that undoes him: “[D]er Gedanke an das bevorstehende erste Eintreten [...] war der Splitter im Fleisch, um den alles von Wünschen und Begierden schwärte” (43). The flesh-piercing splinter is an obvious reference to the Vuic as an uncanny object: it signifies her as a disruptive force from the past and indicates Lerch's fixation with her. However, this metaphor simultaneously initiates an important divergence from the uncanny and allows one to begin exploring the usefulness of trauma in understanding the narrative.

Freud's description of shock in “Jenseits des Lustprinzips” (1920) resonates remarkably well with Hofmannsthal's “Splitter.” In the essay's second chapter, Freud describes a parrying system that protects the subconscious from the multiple psychological dangers of modernity. The traumatic instant is anything that evades this defense system and pierces the *Unterbewusstsein*:

“Ich glaube, man darf den Versuch wagen, die gemeine traumatische Neurose als die Folge eines ausgiebigen Durchbruchs des

Reizschutzes aufzufassen" (221). Freud already used a similar framework to define neurosis in *Studien über Hysterie*, four years before "Reitergeschichte's" publication:

Wir müssen vielmehr behaupten, daß das psychische Trauma, respektive die Erinnerung an dasselbe, nach Art eines Fremdkörpers wirkt, welcher noch lange Zeit nach seinem Eindringen als gegenwärtig wirkendes Agens gelten muß [...]. (30)

Freud describes the traumatic trace with terms that echo the Vuic's uncanniness: it is both a *Fremdkörper*, as well as a *gegenwärtig wirkendes Agens*. The second descriptor is a consequence of the first. As the trauma is a foreign body, it remains unknown. It inherently refuses the assimilation or contextualization necessary for becoming non-traumatic memory traces. This refusal ensures that it retains a fixated present-ness located outside of the remembered past.

Walter Benjamin elaborates upon this model in detailing the difference between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. An occurrence is only experienced (*Erfahrung*) once its memory has successfully been integrated into a cohesive framework of reference. Trauma occurs as a result of the failure of this incorporation (608). As Kevin Newmark points out, Benjamin's experience (*Erfahrung*) "always consists in the coordination of individual elements within a larger pattern or tradition, such experience would be possible only where certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past" (236). What Hofmannsthal's "splinter in the flesh" highlights is actually a double disconnect from Lerch's "collective past," both of which are consequences of the encounter with the Vuic. Lerch finds himself detached from his history with the woman, and he struggles to master the uncanny experience of her appearance. Simultaneously, this encounter divorces him from his squadron, creating a narrative break that traumatizes Lerch through the remainder of the text. Understanding this second disconnect is significant for explaining "Reitergeschichte's" turn away from the uncanny.

Cathy Caruth notes that the traumatic memory fails to combine within a greater schematic chain because of an initial lack in apprehension: the splinter enters the flesh unseen and is only observed retroactively: "The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet

been fully known” (62). As Lerch departs from his squadron, he successfully emerges as “Reitergeschichte’s” subject, a moment that introduces a shift from the originally distanced narrative into Lerch’s personal point of view. In light of Newmark, this transformation is consequential because it separates Lerch’s new-found consciousness from the collective context of experiences that took place during that morning’s fighting. Lerch can never cognitively assimilate (*Erfahrung*) anything before the encounter with the Vuic, because he did not possess the privileged interiority necessary for such reflection until the moment he dismounted from his horse. Similar to Lacan’s mirror stage, this shift in perspective reduces everything that has already happened in the novella to an inaccessible, pre-subjective lacuna. Therefore, not only is Lerch physically removed from his squadron’s military conquests, he is psychically removed from them as well. The subsequent traumatic fixations on the morning’s battles are not, like the obsession with the Vuic, uncanny. Rather, they are Lerch’s attempts at mastering the violence he took part in (*Erlebnis*) but simultaneously *missed* as a consequence of not yet possessing the subjective privilege necessary for its processing.

---

### Reading the Doubles in “Reitergeschichte”

---

Ernst van Alphen implicitly observes the potential of reading trauma as an extension of the uncanny in the final chapter of his book *Caught By History*. Having moved into a house whose architect and previous owner was murdered in the Holocaust, van Alphen was acutely aware of the uncanny-effect of living somewhere so overshadowed by death. This feeling was the direct result of the lingering past within the house. Evoking Poe, he expresses this effect in superstitious terms: “One could say that the new inhabitant is unconsciously afraid that the house is haunted, that former occupants will return” (196). Van Alphen then elaborates upon the Freudian model in which the threat of the past elicits an uncanny effect: “The moment of uncanniness is based on the return of something that had been familiar but was projected onto something alien of exterior. The uncanny is threatening because one’s boundaries become lost” (ibid). He theorizes the uncanny loss of boundaries is dependant upon the investment of memory into spaces. It is in these spaces where his memories within the home coincide with the memories of those who lived there before him and who died

---

traumatically in the Holocaust. Van Alphen claims that the past does return through the intermingling of both memory sets. This erodes the boundaries of the independent memories, forcing him to experience the trauma of the house's past quasi-directly.<sup>8</sup> Van Alphen's ego dissociation blurs the distinction between the uncanny and trauma, and he only ends this experience by overcoming the rivalry between the two sets of memory traces and reasserting his individual boundaries.

This dissolution and mastery of the ego provides another segue that connects "Reitergeschichte," the uncanny and trauma. Beginning with the return of Coppelius in the form of Coppola in "Der Sandmann," Freud devotes multiple readings to the uncanniness of the *Doppelgänger*. Each time Freud analyzes the phenomenon, he defines it as a division of the ego: "[...] so daß man an seinem Ich irre wird oder das fremde Ich an die Stelle des eigenen versetzt, also Ich-Verdoppelung, Ich-Teilung, Ich-Vertauschung" ("Das Unheimliche" 246). Similar to van Alphen's haunted house, the ego doubles itself by projecting its own image into a foreign space. Freud argues this projection is charged with protecting the ego from death: "Denn der Doppelgänger war ursprünglich eine Versicherung gegen den Untergang des Ichs [...] Die Schöpfung einer solchen Verdopplung zur Abwehr gegen die Vernichtung [...]" (247). This definition is problematic in light of "Reitergeschichte." There are at least three occasions within the novella in which Lerch's own boundaries dissolve and he is confronted with his double. However, these three *Doppelgänger* are, at best, somewhat sinister. At worst they are openly antagonistic. It is unclear how they fit into their uncanny mold. The first *Doppelgänger* appears in a mirror in the Vuic's bedroom:

[W]ährend seinem scharfen Blick noch gleichzeitig in einem Pfeilerspiegel die Gegenwand des Zimmers sich verriet, ausgefüllt von einem großen, weißen Bette und einer Tapetentür, durch welche sich ein beleibter, vollständig rasierter älterer Mann im Augenblicke zurückzog (41).

Although the large man looks nothing like Lerch, his status as his double should not be discounted. Robertson observes the importance of mirrors throughout Hofmannsthal's early work in staging projective confrontations occurring within the subject: "Literal mirrors in Hofmannsthal's early works [...] are usually the means by which one part of the self confronts another part [...] what Hofmannsthal's mirror-

gazers see is themselves or an aspect of themselves in disguised form” (324). The first double’s significance becomes apparent in its dominance of Lerch’s ensuing, overwhelming dream state (*Träumerei*):

Seitwärts der Rottenkolonne, einen nicht mehr frischen Schritt reitend, unter der schweren metallischen Glut des Himmels, den Blick in der mitwandernden Staubwolke verfangen, lebte sich der Wachtmeister immer mehr in das Zimmer mit den Mahagonimöbeln und den Basilikumtöpfen hinein und zugleich in eine Zivilatmosphäre, durch welche doch das Kriegsmäßige durchschimmerte [...]. Der rasierte, beleibte Mann, der durch die Tapetentür verschwunden war, ein Mittelding zwischen geistlichem und pensioniertem Kammerdiener, spielte darin eine bedeutende Rolle, fast mehr noch als das schöne breite Bett und die feine weiße Haut der Vuic. (42)

The second double appears shortly before Lerch returns to his squadron. This is the clearest reference to a *Doppelgänger*, for it resembles Lerch not only in uniform and movement, but it also rides the same horse:

[...] [er] bemerkte jenseits der Steinbrücke und beiläufig in gleicher Entfernung von dieser, als wie er sich selbst befand, einen Reiter des eigenen Regiments auf sich zukommen, und zwar einen Wachtmeister, und zwar auf einem Braunen mit weißgestiefelten Vorderbeinen. Da er nun wohl wußte, daß sich in der ganzen Schwadron kein solches Pferd befand, ausgenommen dasjenige, auf welchem er selbst in diesem Augenblick saß, er das Gesicht des anderen Reiters aber immer noch nicht erkennen konnte, so trieb er ungeduldig sein Pferd sogar mit den Sporen zu einem sehr lebhaften Trab an [...] und nun, indem die beiden Pferde, jedes von seiner Seite her, im gleichen Augenblick, jedes mit dem gleichen weißgestiefelten Vorfuß die Brücke betraten, der Wachtmeister mit stierem Blick in der Erscheinung sich selber erkennend [...] die rechte Hand mit ausgespreizten Fingern gegen das Wesen vorstreckte,

---

worauf die Gestalt, gleichfalls parierend, und die Rechte erhebend, plötzlich nicht da war [...]. (45)

The third meeting with his *Doppelgänger* occurs in battle and ends with Lerch finally disposing of it with a timely saber through the mouth:

Der Offizier riss ihn herum, wendete dem Wachtmeister ein junges, sehr bleiches Gesicht und die Mündung einer Pistole zu, als ihm ein Säbel in den Mund fuhr, in dessen kleiner Spitze die Wucht eines galoppierenden Pferdes zusammengedrängt war. (46)

Although he appears in a domestic setting, the first *Doppelgänger* is marked by violence: “[Er] wuchs zu einer schwammigen Riesengestalt, der man an zwanzig Stellen Spundlöcher in den Leib schlagen und statt Blut Gold abzapfen konnte” (42). The second *Doppelgänger* endangers Lerch by leading him directly into battle, and the third *Doppelgänger* attempts to kill him with a pistol, foreshadowing his actual death at the hands of Baron Ronfrano. Ultimately, there are too many differences between the *Doppelgänger* to claim any single ego is projecting itself onto its environment. The shaved man is symbolically irreconcilable with the soldier, and materializing in the bedroom mirror is not the same as appearing on the battlefield. Although the uncanny is effective in describing the role of the *Vuic* and points to the causes (an *Ich-Teilung*) of the three *Doppelgänger*, it is unable to account for these differences in the apparitions. The traumatic model, however, provides an alternative framework for approaching the *Doppelgänger*.

---

### Extending the Uncanny Model

---

In 1919 an international conference of psychoanalysts was convened to discuss an epidemic afflicting thousands of soldiers. As Freud notes in his introduction to the published proceedings, shell shock (*Kriegsneurose*) was the direct result of a neurotic ego-conflict. It was a battle between two selves, an *Ich-Spaltung*. He described the ego-split in nearly the same terms as the uncanny:

Die Kriegsneurosen sind, soweit sie sich durch besondere Eigenheiten von den banalen Neurosen der

---

---

Friedenszeit unterscheiden, aufzufassen, als traumatische Neurosen, die durch einen Ichkonflikt ermöglicht oder begünstigt worden sind. (5)

Although the *Ichkonflikt* echoes the terms Freud used to describe the cause of the uncanny double, the neurotic dissociation caused by war was far more complex. Freud described a more elaborate ego split, in which different selves performed different functions. In order for the individual to partake in the barbarism of war, a separate, war ego must be created that is capable of fulfilling deeds that in peacetime would be unthinkable. The manifestations of neurotic symptoms (shell shock) only become evident when the peace ego, aware of the danger presented to it in a wartime situation, undermines the dangerous intentions of the war ego by physically debilitating the soldier. Thus, according to Freud, the physical manifestation of trauma is an attempt by the peacetime ego to prevent the body from coming into harm's way:

[E]r [der Ichkonflikt] spielt sich zwischen dem alten friedlichen und dem neuen kriegesischen Ich des Soldaten ab, und wird akut, sobald dem Friedens-Ich vor Augen gerückt wird, wie sehr es Gefahr läuft, durch die Wagnisse seines neugebildeten parasitischen Doppelgängers ums Leben gebracht zu werden. Man kann ebensowohl sagen, das alte Ich schütze sich durch die Flucht in die traumatische Neurose gegen die Lebensgefahr. (5)

This new distinction explains the discrepancies in the manifestations of Lerch's *Doppelgänger*: they perform alternating roles as the peacetime and wartime egos. This reassessment makes it possible to take into account the locale of the Doubles, as well as their visual appearances, in a fashion that is not possible through a reductive reading of the uncanny. The shaved man that Lerch sees in the mirror is a projection of himself into the domestic sphere. This projection reflects his subconscious desires to escape the danger of battle. Mollenhauer correctly posits that Lerch views this image in opposition to his position as soldier: “[...] [E]r [möchte] im Unterbewusstsein – und nur dort – lieber die Rolle des Rasierten als die des Kavalleriewachtmeisters spielen” (294). This statement stresses the exclusive nature of the two roles. What Freud highlights is their mutual antagonism. Lerch can either be the shaved man, or he can be a soldier. However, his desires to be one undermine

---

his ability to be the other. Indeed, shortly after seeing the shaved man, Lerch finds himself nearly frozen, unable to rejoin his squadron: "Sein Pferd ging schwer und schob die Hinterbeine mühsam unter, wie wenn sie von Blei wären" (46). The Freudian antagonism debilitates Lerch once his peacetime ego's projection appears in the mirror, and Lerch is unable to fight as long as he remains under its spell.

Freud's self-preservation through self-debilitation is evidenced further as Lerch enters the small village outside Milan. Again, Hofmannsthal relies on the horse to demonstrate Lerch's inability to act:

[Er] fühlte aber in der Gangart seines Pferdes eine so unbeschreibliche Schwere, ein solches Nichtvorwärtskommen [...] und ihm war, als hätte er eine unmessbare Zeit mit dem Durchreiten des widerwärtigen Dorfes verbracht. (45)

Lerch's failure to gauge the amount of time he spends entering and leaving this tiny village is as significant as his neurotic impotence. The narrator describes this time as immeasurable, establishing a disconnect between the actual time spent in the village and Lerch's own perception of how long he was there. Interestingly, Janet delineated two different types of memory attributed to shell shock: *narrative memory*, and *traumatic memory*. Narrative memory is capable of telling the past, whereas traumatic memory is capable only of repeating the past. Van der Kolk and van der Hart elaborate Janet's framework of traumatic memory, claiming that events, when remembered, are often recounted in a fashion implying that they last a lot longer than they really did: "[T]raumatic memory takes too long: in Irene's case, it took her three to four hours to tell this story. When she was finally able to tell her tale, it took her only half a minute" (163). As they observe, traumatic memory describes the very disparity between perceived time and actual time Lerch spends in the village. Ultimately, Mauser views the entire village as a projection of Lerch's psyche:

Wenn es zutrifft, dass es die Aufregung "seiner Einbildung" ist, die ihm das Dorf traumähnlich erscheinen lässt, liegt die Schlussfolgerung nahe, dass die Figuren, denen er begegnet, Spiegelungen seiner selbst sind, d. h. einer bestimmten Sphäre seines Ich. (105)

The *Doppelgänger*-like “reflections of himself” combine with Lerch’s physical debilitation to give the most provoking example of the extent to which Lerch is affected by his vision of the shaved man. At this juncture, everything he encounters is simultaneously a signifier of his subconscious turmoil and a repetitive fixation of previous occurrences within the text.<sup>9</sup>

---

### Splinters of the Past

---

Re-ascribing the roles of the *Doppelgänger* provides a compelling argument for employing trauma theory as well as the uncanny to understand “Reitergeschichte.” This argument is reinforced, however, through a closer reading of the contexts in which each apparition appears. Each occurrence of a *Doppelgänger* in the second and third part of the novella is embedded in a form of morpho-syntactic repetition that evokes the battle sequences that dominate the text’s beginning. This structurally binds Lerch’s dreams and projections with the violence from which they are borne. As the psychic residue of battle reasserts its presence long after the actual events have taken place, their destructive traces become more evident.

The morning of the 22 July, 1848, was calm.<sup>10</sup> Hofmannsthal’s narrator describes the first engagements of the *Streifkommando* with a detached, paratactic style. However, events quickly accelerate. After an initial encounter, the squadron happens upon a seemingly innocuous man:

Eine halbe Stunde später hob die Schwadron einen Mann auf, der in der Tracht eines Bergamasken vorüberging und durch sein allzu harmloses und unscheinbares Auftreten verdächtig wurde. Der Mann trug im Rockfutter eingenäht die wichtigsten Detailpläne, die Errichtung von Freikorps in den Giudikarien und deren Kooperation mit der piemontesischen Armee betreffend. (39)

Immediately after taking him captive, the squadron captures more prisoners:

---

[...] siebenundzwanzig neue Gefangenen meldeten sich als neapolitanische Freischaren unter päpstlichen Offizieren (40).

Hofmannsthal's removed interlocutor nearly masks the significance of these encounters with his objective indifference. However, their importance is obvious when examining Lerch's consuming fantasies about his first *Doppelgänger*, the shaved man:

Der Rasierte nahm bald die Stelle eines vertraulich behandelten, etwas unterwürfigen Freundes ein [...] war piemontesischer Vertrauter, päpstlicher Koch, Kuppler, Besitzer verdächtiger Häuser mit dunklen Gartensälen für politische Zusammenkünfte, und wuchs zu einer schwammigen Riesengestalt [...]. (42)

The adjectives *piemontesisch*, *päpstlich*, and *verdächtig* are nearly incomprehensible when not read against the previous citations. Their re-occurrence, however, inextricably binds Lerch's participation in the battle to the appearance of his first *Doppelgänger*.<sup>11</sup> Hofmannsthal points clearly at the original source of the debilitating psychic state introduced by his ego projection.

The morning's skirmishes provide a second compelling example of this textual linkage. In between encounters with the enemy, the squadron happens upon a herd of cattle:

[...] eine Herde Vieh [fiel] in die Hand. Unmittelbar nachher stellte sich ihm [dem Streifkommando] ein starker feindlicher Trupp entgegen und beschoss die Avantgarde von einer Friedhofsmauer aus. (39)

This encounter with the cattle near a cemetery parallels the occurrences that immediately precede the appearance of the second *Doppelgänger*:

Denn hier sperrte eine Kuh den Weg, die ein Bursche mit gespanntem Strick zur Schlachtbank zerzte [...] Er [Lerch] hatte nun das letzte Haus des Dorfes hinter sich und konnte, zwischen zwei niedrigen, abgebröckelten Mauern reitend, jenseits einer alten einbogigen Steinbrücke über einen anscheinend trockenen Graben den weiteren Verlauf des Weges absehen [...] (44)

The allusion to the cattle is clear, but the more inscrutable link is dependent upon *Graben's* multi-valency. *Der Graben* in the second passage is a ditch, but the word's root, *Grab*, can also mean "grave" (i.e. *das Grab*). The relationship to the location of the first occurrence, i.e. a *Friedhofsmauer* (cemetery wall), and the appearance of the second *Doppelgänger* (*über einen anscheinend trockenem Graben*) is therefore unmistakable.

The context surrounding the third, and final, *Doppelgänger* is the most enigmatic. This reading does not focus on the soldier Lerch encounters, but rather his horse, the *Eisenschimmel*. The horse's importance is clear: Lerch dies because he refuses to give it up on the command of his officer. However, what is less evident is how this rare horse reiterates the tactically superfluous conquest of Milan. The narrator pauses to describe the sky twice in the unnecessary sacking of this city; he vividly describes a "stählern funkeln den Himmel" (43), and shortly thereafter he reports a "metallische Glut des Himmels" (44). The paradigmatic similarities of *Stahl* (steel) and *Eisen* (iron), as well as the morphological similarities between *Himmel* and (*s*)*himmel* again link both passages and conjoin Lerch's fixation with his horse to the moments before encountering his first double.

After the final battle, Lerch reconvenes with his squadron, but he does not reintegrate into it. By this time, his traumatic state renders him nearly catatonic and he appears unable to comprehend his own impending death. On the surface, he is unable to move, except for a few facial twitches, yet he rages within himself. Lerch is disabled through the neurotic split of his ego. Yet, ironically, this ego split which Freud conceives as a self-preservation technique contributes directly to his death. To answer Richard Allewyn's question: Lerch dies because he is incapable of mastering his trauma.<sup>12</sup> Wunberg skirts this assertion when he claims that the source of Lerch's death is his inability to accept the *schizophrenic* division of his ego: "weil er seine Ich-Spaltung nicht akzeptiert" (67). However, he fails to root the problem in a traumatic disorder caused by the violence of military engagement. The unsettling encounter with a repressed element of his past consumes him to the point that he is completely unable to act. The more his consciousness collapses into itself, the less he is able to function as a viable portion of the squadron to which he belongs.

---

## Conclusion

---

This paper offers a proleptic stance that examines Hofmannsthal's "Reitergeschichte" within the combined discourse of trauma and war neurosis. Using the uncanny to analyze the obvious internal conflicts that plague Anton Lerch throughout the novella is partially effective, but ultimately unsatisfying. There is far too much evidence that the source of Lerch's downfall lies not only in his encounter with the uncanny *Vuic*, but rather from symptoms resulting from a different traumatic event. This essay argues that the events on the battlefield, and their liminal textual reiteration, have the cumulative effect of eliciting devastating symptoms from Lerch. The text itself exhibits symptoms of trauma, and provides itself as a conduit that mediates unexplored similarities between the uncanny and war neurosis. By examining Hofmannsthal's intuitive interplay of the two, a greater appreciation of this unique work can be garnered while allowing the reader to understand the causes of Lerch's actions on that fateful June day in 1848.

*University of California, Berkeley*

---

## Notes

---

- <sup>1</sup> Martin Stern notes the text's uniqueness among Hofmannsthal's works as the source of this continuing fascination: "Der Text selber fällt innerhalb des Hofmannsthalschen Prosa-Ceuvres aus dem Rahmen. Er wirkt komponierter und konstruierter als die meisten anderen" (41).
  - <sup>2</sup> Richard Gray correctly argues that Hofmannsthal's "Reitergeschichte" is a psychic narrative in which the conflicts of the character's psychological interior dominate the narrative, sometimes to the point of being projected onto the environment outside of the character (473).
  - <sup>3</sup> "The presence in his library of early editions of Freud's works [...] provides further testimony to Hofmannsthal's interest in the symbolic expression of intimate problems [...] Both men agreed at least that the inner life reveals itself obliquely in dreams and fiction" (Fewster 297).
  - <sup>4</sup> See Meltzer for an in-depth reading of "Reitergeschichte" as such: "The word which perhaps best describes 'Reitergeschichte' is *uncanny – das Unheimliche* [...] Freud's interest in ["Der Sandmann"] is exactly that which intrigues us about the Hofmannsthal tale: the repeated vision of various *Doppelgänger*; the uncanny quality of the story's atmosphere, matched by variations in style and tone; the protagonists abrupt death, which jars the reader out of the trance-like nightmare into which the story had plunged him" (40).
-

<sup>5</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> This preemptively extrapolates upon Freud's location of the fear of the uncanny within a mere uncertain recognizance of a past occurrence: "[...] das Unheimliche sei jene Art des Schreckhaften, welche auf das Altbekannte, Längstvertraute zurückgeht" ("Das Unheimliche" 231).

<sup>7</sup> Mauser accurately points to the beginning of the "Vuic episode" as the moment in which Lerch becomes the novella's subject. At this point, the previously objective narrator begins describing everything through Lerch's own "strengem Blick." The effects of this shift in perspective are tremendous in foregrounding Lerch's psychological state, and it is a perspective that is retained throughout the story until Lerch is executed, at which point the original style of interlocation resumes (103).

<sup>8</sup> Derrida makes similar remarks about the uncanny in "La Double Séance:" "We will be unceasingly drawn back by the paradoxes of the double and repetition, the effacement of the limit between 'imagination' and 'reality', the 'symbol' and the 'symbolized' [...]" This "effacement of the limit(s)" that Derrida demarcates resembles van Alphen's supposition that the uncanny is dependent upon the loss of boundaries (249).

<sup>9</sup> Steinlein reads every occurrence in the village as a repetition of that which preceded it: "[Es] steht in einem Wiederholungs- bzw. gegenbildlichen Entsprechungsverhältnis zu Sequenz I [...]" (211).

<sup>10</sup> Benno von Wiese describes the disconnect between the early morning battle reports and what was to follow perfectly: "Niemand würde zu Beginn der Erzählung auf den Gedanken kommen, daß sich diese skizzen- und zeichenhaft dargestellte Kriegswelt, die etwas unbekümmert Frisches und reizvoll Abenteuerliches hat, schon wenige Seiten später immer eindringlicher in eine Symbolzone des Todes verwandeln wird. Wie sollte das auch sein!" (289)

<sup>11</sup> Gray notes some of these "intra-textual" repetitions as well. However, he connects their occurrence to an expression of Lerch's burgeoning desire of rebellion (482).

<sup>12</sup> Exner observes a similar lack of mastery: "Sämtliche Konflikte in der Erzählung werden nicht bewältigt; ihre Kontrahenten werden (sit venia verbo) vergewaltigt" (50).

---

## Works Cited

---

- Alewyn, Richard. *Über Hugo von Hofmannsthal*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Über Eigene Motive bei Baudelaire." *Gesammelte Schriften*. Eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser. Vol. 1.2. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1974. 605-55.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative & History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Derrida, Jacques. "La Double Séance." *La Dissemination*. Paris: Seuil, 1972.
- Exner, Richard. "Ordnung und Chaos in Hofmannsthals Reitergeschichte." *Im Dialog mit der Moderne*. Eds. Roland Jost and Hansgeorg Schmidt-Bergman. Frankfurt a. M.: Athenäum, 1986. 46-59.
- Fewster, Colin J. "Hofmannsthal's Reitergeschichte: Baron Rofrano and the Anxieties of a Writer." *Seminar. A Journal of German Studies* 32.1 (1996): 293-305.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Das Unheimliche." *Werke aus den Jahren 1917-1920*. Vol. XII of *Gesammelte Werke*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer TB, 1999. 227-68.
-

- 
- . "Einleitung." *Psycho-Analysis and War Neurosis*. New York: International Psychoanalytical Press, 1921.
- . "Jenseits des Lustprinzips." *Das Ich und das Es*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer TB, 1996. 191-250.
- Freud, Sigmund, and Josef Breuer. *Studien über Hysterie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer TB, 1991.
- Gray, Richard. "The Hermeneutic(k) of the Psychic Narrative. Freud's 'Das Unheimliche' and Hofmannsthal's 'Reitergeschichte.'" *The German Quarterly* 62.4 (1989): 473-89.
- Hofmannsthal, Hugo von. "Reitergeschichte." *Erzählungen I*. Ed. Ellen Ritter. Vol. 28 of *Sämtliche Werke*. Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1975. 37-48.
- Hugo von Hofmannsthal. *Briefchronik*. Ed. Martin Schmid. 2 vols. Vol. 1. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003.
- Mausser, Wolfram. *Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Konfliktbewältigung und Werkstruktur. Eine psychosozialologische Interpretation*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1977.
- Meltzer, Françoise. "Reiter- (Writer- Reader-) Geschichte." *Monatshefte* 77.1 (1985): 38-46.
- Mollenhauer, Peter. "Wahrnehmung und Wirklichkeitsbewusstsein in Hofmannsthal's Reitergeschichte." *The German Quarterly* 50.3 (1977): 283-97.
- Newmark, Kevin. "Traumatic Poetry. Charles Baudelaire and the Shock of Poetry." *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995. 236-55.
- "Reitergeschichte. Varianten." *Erzählungen I*. Ed. Ellen Ritter. Vol. 28 of *Sämtliche Werke*. Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1975. 217-22.
- Robertson, Richie. "The Dual Structure of Hofmannsthal's Reitergeschichte." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 14 (1978).
- Schuster, Gerhard, ed. *Hugo Von Hofmannsthal. Briefwechsel mit dem Insel-Verlag*. Frankfurt a. M., 1985.
- Steinlein, Rüdiger. "Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Reitergeschichte. Versuch einer struktural-psychoanalytischen Lektüre." *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie* 110.2 (1991): 208-30.
- Stern, Martin. "Die verschwiegene Hälfte von Hofmannsthal's 'Reitergeschichte.'" *Im Dialog mit der Moderne*. Eds. Roland Jost and Hansgeorg Schmidt-Bergman. Frankfurt a. M.: Athenäum, 1986. 41-5.
- van Alphen, Ernst. *Caught by History. Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory*. Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1995.
- van der Kolk, Bessel, and Onno van der Hart. "The Intrusive Past. The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." *Trauma. Explorations of Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995. 158-82.
- Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992.
- von Wiese, Benno. *Die Deutsche Novelle von Goethe bis Kafka*. 2 vols. Vol. 1. Düsseldorf: August Bagel Verlag, 1956.
- Wunberg, Gotthart. *Der frühe Hofmannsthal. Schizophrenie als dichterische Struktur*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1965.
-