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Author(s): Lorna Martens

Source: *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter, 1987), pp. 38-51

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the American Association of Teachers of German

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/407157>

Accessed: 18-06-2018 14:55 UTC

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LORNA MARTENS  
*Yale University*

## The Theme of the Repressed Memory in Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*

Wenn Sie von meiner Phantasie absehen, die einen günstig Gesinnten zu allgemeiner Überschätzung verführen kann, so bleibt beiläufig der Typus dessen, was unsere Gymnasien in Wien mit gutem Erfolg absolviert. Vielleicht ein etwas weiterer Gesichtskreis, durch einen glücklich gefundenen mannigfaltigen Verkehr erworben. Daraus abgeleitet vielleicht ein gewisser historischer Sinn, das heißt eine gewisse Keckheit, die Dinge höchst unhistorisch anzuschauen, Fernes auf Nahes, Kleines auf Großes zu beziehen und in einem starken Glauben ans Menschliche in allem Vergangenen etwas schlechterdings Be-greifliches aufzuspüren.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, letter to Harry  
Gomperz, 25 July 1895

Verwandlung ist Leben des Lebens, ist das eigentliche My-sterium der schöpfenden Natur; Beharren ist Erstarren und Tod. Wer leben will, der muß über sich selber hinwegkommen, muß sich verwandeln: er muß vergessen. Und dennoch ist ans Beharren, ans Nichtvergessen, an die Treue alle mens-chliche Würde geknüpft. Dies ist einer von den abgrundtiefen Widersprüchen, über denen das Dasein aufgebaut ist, wie der delphische Tempel über seinem bodenlosen Erdsplatt. Man hat mir nachgewiesen, daß ich mein ganzes Leben lang über das ewige Geheimnis dieses Widerspruchs mich zu erstaunen nicht aufhöre.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, letter on *Ariadne  
auf Naxos* to Richard Strauss, 1912

Critics have long assumed the influence of Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud's *Studien über Hysterie* on *Elektra*.<sup>1</sup> It is known that Hofmannsthal had the first edition of *Studien über Hysterie* (as well as Freud's *Die Traumdeutung*) in his personal library.<sup>2</sup> Since Bernd Urban's 1978 study *Hofmannsthal*,

*Freud und die Psychoanalyse*, we even know what passages in these works are marked.<sup>3</sup> We do not know exactly when Hofmannsthal read *Studien über Hysterie*; however, he asked his friend Hermann Bahr, in a letter that critics believe was written in 1903 while he was working on *Elektra*, whether he could borrow the work: "Können Sie mir eventuell nur für einige Tage das Buch von Freud und Breuer über Heilung der Hysterie durch Freimachen einer unterdrückten Erinnerung leihen (schicken?)"<sup>4</sup> And Hofmannsthal himself later stated, in response to a critic's inquiry, that *Studien über Hysterie* was one of two works he "leafed" in while working on *Elektra*.<sup>5</sup>

The catalyst for Hofmannsthal's interest in psychopathology seems to have been Bahr. The *Elektra* plan first crystallized, Hofmannsthal said in a letter to Otto Brahm, in May 1903, during a conversation he had with Bahr and the actress who later played Elektra, Gertrud Eysoldt. Previously, his plan had only been vague.<sup>6</sup> In the same period in which Hofmannsthal was working on *Elektra*, i. e., in 1902 and 1903, Bahr himself wrote his *Dialog vom Tragischen*, a study in which he spoke of the "hysteria" of the Greeks and referred explicitly to "jene beiden Ärzte" Breuer and Freud. Bahr began working on the Freudian-Aristotelian part of *Dialog vom Tragischen* in 1902. In the back of his "Merkbuch" for 1902, summarizing what he did during the year, he writes, "Gearbeitet an meinem Dialog über das Tragische: Aristoteles, Freud."<sup>7</sup> He notes further that he read Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra*. A 1902 notebook, "Credo II," contains notes for the part of the *Dialog* involving Freud—Bahr speaks of "die 'Rache' der unterdrückten Affekte"—while a diary entry of April 8-9 mentions his "Beschäftigung mit den Katharsis-Fragen." In the same period, he was a frequent visitor of Hofmannsthal's in Rodaun. Bahr finished the entire dialogue in the spring of 1903, and, as we know from a letter Bahr wrote to Hofmannsthal on 19 July 1903 thanking him for his comments, Hofmannsthal had read *Dialog vom Tragischen* by that date, that is, just before his period of intensive work on *Elektra*.

There are several striking parallels between *Dialog vom Tragischen* and *Elektra*: 1. Bahr applies Breuer's and Freud's main ideas, on repression as the cause of hysteria and abreaction as its cure, to Greek tragedy. (I shall argue that Hofmannsthal applies the same ideas in *Elektra*.) 2. Bahr connects Breuer's and Freud's idea that the repression of a traumatic memory is pathogenic to Nietzsche's celebration of the dionysian and his denunciation of repressive "Bildung." (The influence of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* on *Elektra* is obvious.) 3. Bahr speaks peripherally of the untragic nature of Goethe. (This was Hofmannsthal's own idea; since 1901 he had carried around with him the notion that Goethe was incapable of writing tragedy, and the first inspiration for *Elektra*, which came in September 1901, involved writing something contrary to *Iphigenie*, "etwas worauf das Wort nicht passe: 'dieses gräcisierende Produkt erschien nun beim erneuten Lesen verteuftelt human.'"<sup>8</sup>) These parallels between *Elektra* and *Dialog vom Tragischen*, Hofmannsthal's frequent contact with Bahr, and last but not least his enthusiastic

response to *Dialog vom Tragischen*, which he finds has a personal application to himself,<sup>9</sup> all speak for the hypothesis that Hofmannsthal read *Studien über Hysterie* and discussed with Bahr all of the ideas about Greek tragedy listed above between spring 1902 and summer 1903, so that the first idea, namely Bahr's application of Breuer's and Freud's ideas to Greek tragedy, has, like the second and third, its parallel in *Elektra*.

The evidence thus supports the claim that Hofmannsthal drew on *Studien über Hysterie* for *Elektra*; it draws a fairly tight circle without, however, affording definitive information about the nature and extent of the borrowing. The question remains in what way and to what degree Breuer and Freud's work left its mark on the play. Here we have no page of Hofmannsthal's own notes, such as Alewyn found linking the novel *Andreas* to Morton Prince's *The Disassociation of a Personality*, that document exactly what Hofmannsthal borrowed.<sup>10</sup>

Critics who have written on the influence of *Studien über Hysterie* on *Elektra* have perceived this influence to lie in the hysterical behavior of the female figures. Indeed, a remark of Bahr's documents that Elektra was meant to suggest a hysteric: he wrote to Hofmannsthal in 1904, referring to Gertrud Eysoldt, "Ihren einen Ton, den Hysterischen, haben Sie ihr in der Elektra wunderbar gebracht." Politzer, who goes farthest with this line of interpretation, finds that Elektra, Klytämnestra, and Chrysothemis are all hysterics.<sup>11</sup> Worps believes that the play is a monodrama centered around the figure of Elektra and that Hofmannsthal modeled Elektra on Breuer's patient Anna O.<sup>12</sup> I find this interpretation plausible, as will become evident in my discussion below. I am not, however, convinced by Worps's defense of Elektra against Urban's argument that she is an imperfect hysteric. Urban makes the point that Elektra, unlike Breuer's and Freud's hysterics, *remembers* the trauma instead of repressing it. Worps's response naturalizes Elektra precariously as an Anna O.-style hysteric with a split personality at the expense of her most striking characteristic: her precise, vivid, obsessive recall of her father's murder.

While both Elektra and Klytämnestra exhibit hysterical behavior patterns, as I shall discuss in more detail later, it seems to me that the parallels between Hofmannsthal's play and Breuer and Freud's work are neither exhausted by nor even most significantly located in this type of resemblance. Rather, one of the central themes in *Elektra* is memory, and Hofmannsthal develops this theme in peculiar conformity to Breuer's and Freud's conception of the pathogenic memory. "Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences," Breuer and Freud write. I shall argue that Hofmannsthal ingeniously constructs his play around Breuer's and Freud's theory of the repressed memory and the psychoanalytic cure — which is the doctors' principal original contribution to the study of hysteria.

In the introductory essay to the *Studien*, the joint authors propose the following theory of hysteria: the memory of a trauma lodges itself in the

psyche like a foreign body; hysteria results; the patient is then cured when the analyst brings the memory to light. The literary attractiveness of this theory is manifest. It enacts a three-act drama of illness and cure that is homologous to the three-part structure of initial (naive or false) order—disorder—final, enhanced order on which innumerable literary plots are based. The theme of the past coming back to trouble present happiness is also a literary and philosophical topos, found wherever presentness is invested with value, and thus especially in post-Romantic works—works that were formative for the fin de siècle—in which immediacy is nostalgically mourned as lost innocence or exalted as a constantly threatened possession. Perhaps the most striking example is found in Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, which begins with a remarkable polemic against memory as the true cause of human misery. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hofmannsthal should have adopted the concept of the pathological memory not only as a fashionable psychological topic, but also as an eminently workable literary theme.

To judge from the textual evidence in *Elektra*, Hofmannsthal perceived parallels between the theory of the repressed memory and the psychoanalytic cure and the ancient theme of guilt and retribution in his Greek source. Breuer's and Freud's theory varies a structure on which a primitive conception of justice, the conception of justice that informs the Elektra legend, is based. According to this conception, a misdeed causes a wrong that can be righted, effaced from the memory of the injured party, only when the criminal has been adequately punished. Breuer himself noted the parallel and ascribed the human "instinct for revenge" to what he saw as a fundamental psychological law, the need to "abreact" excess excitation.<sup>13</sup> In the blood-for-blood system of justice as in Breuer's and Freud's theory of trauma and abreaction, an original order is unsettled by an act of violence, and order is restored only when a similar act of violence is performed against the "foreign body" or criminal.

There are exact parallels in *Elektra* to Breuer's and Freud's theories of the pathogenic memory and the psychoanalytic cure as well as numerous less precise, more impressionistic parallels between the two works. Not surprisingly, the clearest allusions to these theories occur in the parts of the dialogue where Hofmannsthal diverges most decisively from his Greek source: in the characterization of Klytämnestra; in Klytämnestra's dream, which Elektra recounts and claims credit for having sent her; in the long interview between mother and daughter that is the dramatic high point of the play; and in the finale where Elektra dances and dies. I shall begin by pointing out these parallels and then go on to discuss Hofmannsthal's specifically literary mise-en-scène of the psychological theories.

*Elektra* gives the impression of an economy, even a poverty of means. In this compressed one-act play, where the atmosphere of hostility and nervous tension present at the outset boils up rapidly into open conflict

before resolving in a brief catharsis, we find an obsessive, pounding repetition of a few motifs, which virtually saturate the dialogue: the motifs of the animal, of blood, of the eye, the gaze, hands, water. Yet these few motifs ripple off into associations whose borders are nowhere fixed. The omnipresent animal motif, for example, which sets the play in sharp contrast to Goethe's "humane" *Iphigenie*, is on everyone's tongue—allusions to wildcats, snakes, flies, dogs pervade the dialogue and the stage directions. No character is spared the comparison with animals, and animals, in turn, suggest every conceivable association: thus the dog cluster within the animal motif suggests fidelity, mistreatment, and hunting when applied to Elektra, servility or degraded behavior when applied to the servants, Klytämnestra, or Chrysothemis.

The principal characters are even more densely and diversely constructed. Under one optic they seem barely able to hold together over the psychological undertow. Under another, they appear as complex, overdetermined symbolic entities with which Hofmannsthal engages various fields of reference. This symbolic, multidimensional use of character may be understood as Hofmannsthal's answer to an intellectual climate dominated by Nietzsche, Mach, and French psychology, in which the self appeared *démodé*. Hofmannsthal himself in an essay of 1903 pronounced the self a "metaphor."<sup>14</sup> Thus the characters in *Elektra* are not "characters"—a concept that Bahr too disgustedly rejects as out of date in his *Dialog vom Tragischen*<sup>15</sup>—but symbolic figures with more than one referent, vehicles charged with a diverse freight of meanings. Klytämnestra, for example, at once incorporates the nervous behavior of a hysteric and the sophisticated poses of a fin-de-siècle aesthete—an identification that provides almost a comical touch in this otherwise dark, brooding play.

Supported by Hofmannsthal's own commentaries on the play, critics have tended to interpret the principal characters as contrasting pairs. Thus Elektra and Klytämnestra are seen to represent the past versus the present, Elektra and Chrysothemis being versus becoming, and Elektra and Orest words versus deeds.<sup>16</sup> The themes that link the play to Breuer's and Freud's work, those of the traumatic memory, hysteria, and the cure, also lend themselves to discussion in terms of complementary character pairs.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Hofmannsthal's play is the interdependence of the Elektra and Klytämnestra figures, an interdependence not present in the Greek source. This interdependence is alluded to several times in the dialogue. Elektra says to her mother, "Mir geht zu Herzen, was auch dir zu Herzen geht"; "Dann träumst du nimmermehr, dann brauche ich nicht mehr zu träumen"; and most notably, "Ich weiß nicht, wie ich jemals sterben sollte—als daran, daß du stürbest."<sup>17</sup> Their interdependence is then demonstrated by the fact that Elektra mysteriously dies after Klytämnestra is killed, as if her function had thereby somehow been fulfilled. The two women resemble interlocking circles: each one seems to be a part of

the other as well as an entity in her own right. I shall argue that each woman represents a part of the other's psyche. Specifically, each personifies the memory of the trauma, the murder of Agamemnon, for the other.

In *Klytämnestra* Hofmannsthal plainly wished to portray a hysteric. Her behavior bears striking resemblance to that of Breuer's and Freud's most dramatic patient, Anna O., in her "second condition." She comes on stage barely able to keep her eyes open, supporting herself on a walking stick and a confidante, which suggests hysterical paralysis. She complains of confusion, dizziness, hallucinations, and evil dreams. She laments that she is at the mercy of others' language, which she is incapable of countering with words of her own (one of Anna O.'s most striking symptoms was her loss of language), and she hallucinates a snake (Anna O.'s most persistent and dramatic hallucination was of a snake). Hysteria, as Hofmannsthal was no doubt well aware, is frequently misdiagnosed: thus we learn that some believe *Klytämnestra* to be physically ill, while others think that she is possessed by the devil. But *Klytämnestra*'s most important qualification as a hysteric is that she is suffering from a repressed memory. Breuer and Freud write that hysteria is caused by the memory of a trauma ("das veranlassende Trauma"), which is lodged in the psyche like a foreign body ("Fremdkörper"). It is, however, wholly absent from normal consciousness: "Diese Erlebnisse fehlen dem Gedächtnisse der Kranken in ihrem gewöhnlichen psychischen Zustande völlig."<sup>18</sup> *Klytämnestra* is suffering from a traumatic memory, albeit a self-caused one—namely, the murder of Agamemnon. She has repressed her own role in the murder. She gives the following account:

Da stand er und da  
stand ich und dort Ägisth, und aus den Augen  
die Blicke trafen sich: da war es doch  
noch nicht geschehn! und dann veränderte  
sich deines Vaters Blick im Sterben so  
langsam und gräßlich, aber immer noch  
in meinem hängend—und da wars geschehn:  
dazwischen ist kein Raum! Erst wars vorher,  
dann wars vorbei—dazwischen hab ich nichts  
getan. (p. 206)

*Klytämnestra* remembers a before and an after, but precisely at the crucial point, when she swung the axe and killed Agamemnon, "there was no space." How could Hofmannsthal have stated more obviously that *Klytämnestra* is suffering from a repressed memory?

As the repudiated, maltreated daughter, *Elektra* embodies *Klytämnestra*'s repressed memory, the portion of her psyche that she refuses to acknowledge. *Elektra* is memory incarnate. Critics have pointed out that in her imagination, time has contracted into two points: the moment of her father's murder, which she constantly recalls, and a future moment when the murder will be avenged, which she persistently anticipates. The sole

purpose of her existence is to keep alive the memory of the murder and to agitate for revenge.<sup>19</sup> Thus her death at the end of the play is easily explained: once Orest has killed Klytämnestra, the living memory of Agamemnon's murder has no further function. Elektra's specific role as the "foreign body" or pathogenic kernel lodged in Klytämnestra's mind becomes evident in the dramatic climax of the play, the interview between mother and daughter. Confronted with her daughter, Klytämnestra starts to babble unmotivatedly about the deed, as if the repressed had returned, even though Elektra did not provoke her by alluding to "die Tat":

Taten! Wir und Taten!  
Was das für Worte sind. Bin ich denn noch,  
die es getan? Und wenn! getan, getan!  
Getan! was wirfst du mir da für ein Wort  
in meine Zähne! (p. 206)

It is characteristic of a repressed memory that it does not fade gradually, but rather preserves its original freshness until it is expelled. Breuer and Freud write: "Jene Erinnerungen, welche zu Veranlassungen hysterischer Phänomene geworden sind, haben sich in wunderbarer Frische und mit ihrer vollen Affektbetonung durch lange Zeit erhalten." Thus Elektra recalls her father's murder with all the freshness of an event that just occurred, or as Klytämnestra says, "Du redest von alten Dingen so, wie wenn sie gestern geschehen wären" (p. 202). Breuer and Freud add, "Die pathogen gewordenen Vorstellungen haben sich darum so frisch und affektkräftig erhalten, weil ihnen die normale Usur durch Abreagieren . . . versagt ist."<sup>20</sup> If Elektra remembers her father's death vividly and with undiminished affect, it is because the trauma was never, to use Breuer's and Freud's term, "ab-reacted," that is, the murder was not avenged. Critics have often commented on Elektra's peculiar inability to act, to perform the act of revenge herself. They concur that her role exhausts itself in talking. Elektra's role as a repressed memory explains both her inability to act and her loquaciousness. The very definition of a repressed memory, according to Breuer's and Freud's theory, is that action, or abreaction, is denied to it. Instead, the memory festers and causes psychic disturbance (thus Elektra claims credit for sending Klytämnestra an evil dream), and above all, it "speaks" through the symptom. Elektra's outbursts cannot be seen as the cathartic speech of the patient, for they do not relieve her: they are not at all the equivalent of the deed. Rather, her speeches are the perpetual crying out and reminding of the symptom. "*Schweig und tanze*" (p. 233, ital. mine), she will say after Orest has murdered Klytämnestra and Ägisth.

While Elektra embodies the memory Klytämnestra has repressed, Klytämnestra herself, as the murderess of Agamemnon, quite literally personifies the memory of the trauma for Elektra. This memory must be extirpated—that is, Klytämnestra must be killed—for Elektra to rest. E. M. Butler has remarked that in their interview, mother and daughter appear like a hysterical



patient and a Viennese analyst.<sup>21</sup> This interpretation, which is suggested by the dialogue itself (“Sie redet wie ein Arzt” [p. 199], says Klytämnestra of Elektra) is not incompatible with the interpretation of Elektra as Klytämnestra’s repressed memory, given the hermeneutic complicity of the memory with the doctor that Freud’s text suggests. Elektra appears as the caricature of the domineering psychoanalyst who tries to goad the resisting patient into admitting what the analyst knows and the patient is reluctant to speak out. She maneuvers her mother, who beseeches her for a cure, toward speaking of the repressed memory and—her main objective—naming the secret sacrificial animal, who is of course Klytämnestra herself. Finally she shrieks an accusation—the solution to the riddle—in her mother’s face. She thus anticipates the moment of the “cure” when she, the analyst, will vanquish the patient’s resistance, and when her discourse, the analyst’s discourse, will prevail over the patient’s: “und nun liest du mit starrem Aug das ungeheure Wort . . . und da hab ich mit meinem stummen Dastehn dein letztes Wort zunicht gemacht!” (p. 210).

But the most significant parallel between Elektra and the doctors who invented psychoanalysis occurs in Elektra’s vision of the “cure.” Elektra articulates this vision twice, once when she describes the dream she sent Klytämnestra and once at the end and climax of their face-to-face interview. Let us here look only at the briefer dream version. (The interview version, in accordance with its purpose of terrorizing Klytämnestra psychologically, is swollen with details of how Klytämnestra will suffer before meeting her bloody fate, which are not relevant to our present purpose.) Elektra says:

Ich liege  
und hör die Schritte dessen, der sie sucht.  
Ich hör ihn durch die Zimmer gehn, ich hör ihn  
den Vorhang von dem Bette heben: schreiend  
entspringt sie, aber er ist hinterdrein:  
hinab die Treppen durch Gewölbe hin,  
Gewölbe und Gewölbe geht die Jagd.  
Es ist viel finsterer als Nacht, viel stiller  
und finstrer als im Grab, sie keucht und taumelt  
im Dunkel hin, doch er ist hinterdrein:  
die Fackel schwingt er links und rechts das Beil.  
Und ich bin wie ein Hund an ihrer Ferse:  
will sie in eine Höhle, spring ich sie  
von seitwärts an, so treiben wir sie fort,  
bis eine Mauer alles sperrt, und dort  
im tiefsten Dunkel, doch ich seh ihn wohl,  
ein Schatten, und doch Glieder und das Weiße  
von einem Auge doch, da sitzt der Vater:  
er achtets nicht und doch muß es geschehn:  
vor seinen Füßen drücken wir sie hin,  
da fällt das Beil! (p. 197-98)

What inspires Elektra to fantasize this particular scenario of revenge? It has no parallel in Sophocles’ *Electra*. Rather, Hofmannsthal uses it to replace

Clytemnestra's premonitory dream in Sophocles' tragedy, which is entirely different in content and is not sent by Elektra. I would suggest that Hofmannsthal drew his inspiration from Breuer's and Freud's work. The central elements of the psychoanalytic cure as described by Breuer and Freud are here. One of their fundamental metaphors is inside versus outside, or dark versus light: the analyst, in search of the memory of the trauma, must penetrate into "the dark," that is, the second, split-off consciousness, or region of the mind that contains the pathogenic kernel, and bring it "to light."<sup>22</sup> Thus Klytämnestra must be pursued *into* the palace and killed *inside*; Ägisth will also be killed inside.<sup>23</sup> In Elektra's vision Orestes will illuminate the dark interior with a torch, and in the action itself Elektra will similarly want to light Ägisth's way into the palace: "Erlaubst du, /daß ich voran dir leuchte?" (p. 231). In his concluding essay to the *Studien über Hysterie*, Freud introduces a number of implicit metaphors whose general effect is to cast the analyst as a hero and the analyst's task as an adventure. One such implicit metaphor describes the mind as a labyrinth. Freud speaks of the zigzagging path and the logical thread the analyst must follow. Theseus-like, the analyst follows "die verschlungensten Wege," "aus oberflächlichen in tiefe Schichten und zurück, doch im allgemeinen von der Peripherie her zum zentralen Kerne." He penetrates into ever-darker areas: "Gewöhnlich wird die Arbeit zunächst um so dunkler und schwieriger, je tiefer man in das vorhin beschriebene, geschichtete psychische Gebilde eindringt." His objective is to bring this darkness to light: "Hat man sich aber einmal bis zum Kerne durchgearbeitet, so wird es Licht."<sup>24</sup> In Hofmannsthal's text we find similar images: Orest the avenger, wielding his torch, pursues Klytämnestra through dark subterranean passages in the palace, as if into the inner recesses of the mind. If Klytämnestra tries to duck off to one side, Elektra, dog-like, jumps at her sideways (the zigzag path). Finally, what should be at the end of the chase? In "deepest darkness," where one can go no further, is dead Agamemnon—i.e., the repressed memory in person. Just as the analyst would want to return to the precise cause of the hysteria, to bring the buried trauma to light, Elektra wants Klytämnestra to be slaughtered at the feet of dead Agamemnon. It is difficult to explain this detail of her fantasy without recourse to the analogy from Breuer and Freud. Another of Freud's implicit metaphors describes the mind as a mine or an archaeological site. He repeatedly uses the word "Schicht," and he says that the analyst may bury ("verschütten") things by accident.<sup>25</sup> Elektra's bizarre act of digging out the axe used to murder Agamemnon as the fitting instrument with which to enact her revenge—of symbolically unearthing the repressed memory, which is as fresh and potent as ever—engages the same metaphor.

The relation of Elektra to Chrysothemis has often been described as one of being versus becoming, not least by Hofmannsthal himself.<sup>26</sup> Chrysothemis wishes to live in the present, to lead a woman's life, to marry and have children, to participate in the ongoing cycle of reproduction, unburdened by

memories of the past. Elektra is like her negative image on all of these counts. She is revolted by sexuality (and, as Politzer points out, sex-obsessed: she sees sexuality as a horrible thing, everywhere). Fixated on the past, she perceives in her surroundings only an endless reproduction of the bloodshed (the only reproduction that interests her). Her only version of the female cycle is a daily period at sunset that she devotes to mourning for her dead father. In contrast to Chrysothemis, Elektra herself takes on the aspect of a hysteric. Elektra too recalls certain features of Anna O.'s story, which must have left a deep impression on Hofmannsthal: Anna O., also traumatized by the death of her beloved father, appeared asexual to Breuer, spent a certain phase of her illness reliving the past, and had periodic attacks of her "second condition" for a few hours daily around sunset. But Elektra and Chrysothemis seem to be related primarily through their reference to Nietzsche rather than to Freud. Here the borrowing strikes me as direct. The influence of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* on Hofmannsthal's play has been frequently remarked, notably in Hofmannsthal's nonclassicistic, "dionysian" rewriting of the Greek tragedy.<sup>27</sup> Elektra's maenadic dance at the end of the play certainly bears the stamp of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. But Hofmannsthal's allusions to Nietzsche's popular *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* have passed unnoticed. "Kannst du nicht vergessen?" demands Chrysothemis of Elektra. Elektra retorts, "Vergessen? Was! bin ich ein Tier? vergessen? . . . ich bin kein Vieh, ich kann nicht vergessen" (p. 195). This interchange echoes the famous opening of *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, "Betrachte die Herde," with which Nietzsche initiates a comparison between the happy animal, which forgets, and his less fortunate fellow-creature man, who remembers: "Der Mensch sagt 'ich erinnere mich' und beneidet das Tier, welches sofort vergißt."<sup>28</sup> The purpose of this polemic against memory is, ultimately, to encourage German youth not to orient itself on the learning of bygone days and emulate foreign cultures but, rather, to develop its own immediate relationship to life. Chrysothemis, who unlike Sophocles' Chrysothemis represents a serious philosophical position, approximates a young person according to Nietzsche's prescription. In *Elektra*, despite her illness, Hofmannsthal gives voice to an equally serious counterposition, namely, the position of a human being who, unlike the "happy animal," cannot forget a heinous crime.<sup>29</sup>

Hofmannsthal's achievement in *Elektra* is to bring several fields of reference into suggestive association: the system of retributive justice from Greek tragedy; Breuer's and Freud's conception that memory causes illness, familiar also from Nietzsche; and the existential and ethical issue of our proper relationship to temporality, the past, and change. As we have seen, Breuer's and Freud's theory of the traumatic memory and the psychoanalytic cure has the same underlying structure as the primitive conception of justice that informs the *Elektra* legend. By juxtaposing two topics that have the same tripartite, circular structure, Hofmannsthal displays the analogy between a

system of justice that demands blood for blood and the extirpation of the pathological memory in the psychoanalytic cure. He also creates an ideal space in which to air a philosophical and ethical issue dear to his own heart, or, as one critic puts it, "What is to him life's deepest moral dilemma: the problem of reconciling the need to remember with the need to forget."<sup>30</sup> He stages a confrontation between memory as a defining characteristic of humanness, as one of the bases of our ethical system, and as a faculty that undermines our happiness and health.

This philosophical issue is ultimately left unresolved. It is obvious that Chrysothemis' standpoint, that "Bleiben ist nirgends," to speak with Rilke, is inescapably correct and that Hofmannsthal endorses it here as he does more explicitly in other works. We cannot cling to the past, embodied by filthy, degraded Elektra. Hofmannsthal duplicates the polarization of past and present in *Studien über Hysterie* and, like Breuer and Freud, condemns this polarization inasmuch as the retention of the past obstructs becoming. As in Breuer and Freud, the past is subordinated to the present as the area of highest concern, and the underlying ideal is continuity, a fading of the past into the present. The play's values are anchored in vitalism. *Elektra* builds up toward its dionysian finale, where a blaze of torches—meant to signify not the light of reason, but the flame of life—greet the news that Klytämnestra and Ägisth are dead and where Elektra herself dances and dies. Yet Hofmannsthal assigns humanness to Elektra's point of view, remembrance. For despite Hofmannsthal's flirtation with memory as a psychopathological phenomenon, he is also concerned with memory as an ethical category, as a faculty that helps guarantee morality and justice. The memory of an old evil must be got rid of properly, by righting the wrong that caused it. As we know, Hofmannsthal conceived his play, whose imagery is drenched with sexuality and violence, and which takes place at night, as a counterpart to Goethe's light-flooded *Iphigenie*. In contrast to Goethe, Hofmannsthal insists on closing the circle of retribution, on punishing the evildoers, before life can blossom once again.

The principal wit in the drama lies in the way Hofmannsthal combines far-flung subjects, the ancient with the ultramodern, and subjects that lie against each other's grain, in the sense that Greek tragedy accords a positive, Breuer and Freud a negative value to remembrance. Ingenious, too, is the way in which Hofmannsthal artfully links the fields of reference in a carefully constructed symbolic structure. We have seen how he uses the technique of overdetermination in creating the main female characters. He also links blood-for-blood justice with modern notions of psychopathology by emphasizing homologous images. One such image, which makes its presence felt chiefly between the lines, is the circle. Revenge-obsessed Elektra is determined to "close the circle" ["den Kreis schließen"] of crime and retribution. Hofmannsthal stresses the idea: in her perfectionistic fanaticism, Elektra wants the crime against her father to be reversed *exactly*, to the point that

Klytämnestra and Ägisth should be killed with the same axe they used to kill Agamemnon. This *perfect* circle corresponds to the circle of the psychoanalytic cure, where the analyst strives to return to and extirpate the precise cause of the hysteria, the memory of the trauma. Justice can be done, health can be restored, catharsis can be achieved only if the act that created the imbalance is annulled by another, similar act. Hofmannsthal's indebtedness to Breuer and Freud in his adaptation of Greek tragedy is less surprising when one considers these authors' indebtedness to Aristotle's *Poetics*. The analogy between the conception of justice that informs Greek tragedy and the psychoanalytic conception of health is written between the lines of their "Vorläufige Mitteilung," in the introduction of the term "cathartic": "Die Reaktion des Geschädigten auf das Trauma hat eigentlich nur dann eine völlig 'kathartische' Wirkung, wenn sie eine adäquate Reaktion ist, wie die Rache."<sup>31</sup> In Hofmannsthal's drama the "perfect circle" of revenge has its counterpart in the *cycle* of becoming, the animal cycle of birth, procreation, and death in which Chrysothemis is so anxious to participate and which Elektra judges despicable.

Female sexuality links the circle-cycle motifs with another image Hofmannsthal uses to suggest parallels between his various fields of reference: the image of the dark, enclosed space. We have seen that Hofmannsthal gives concrete spatial form to the notion of the split-off second consciousness in the subterranean regions of the palace, where Elektra envisions Orest chasing Klytämnestra back to the darkest recesses where dead Agamemnon sits. These subterranean regions also suggest a tomb or grave; Hofmannsthal exploits an analogy that exists as a potential extension of Freud's archaeological metaphor in his concluding essay of the *Studien*. But Hofmannsthal's most ingenious idea is to equate, in Elektra's words about Klytämnestra, the womb and the grave. Elektra cries, "So bin ich ja aus meines Vaters Grab/herausgekrochen, hab gespielt in Windeln/auf meines Vaters Richtig-statt!" (p. 200). With this final permutation of the dark enclosed space, with the womb, Hofmannsthal takes us back to the etymological origin of the word "hysteria," and thus back to the topic of psychoanalysis.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> E.g., E. M. Butler, "Hofmannsthal's (sic!) 'Elektra': A Graeco-Freudian Myth," *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 2 (1938-39), 164-75; Liselotte Dieckmann, "The Dancing Elektra," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 2 (1960), 3-16; Gerhart Baumann, "Hugo von Hofmannsthal: 'Elektra,'" *Wege der Forschung*, vol. 183, ed. Sibylle Bauer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968; first pub. 1959); Michael Hamburger, *Hofmannsthal. Three Essays*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972—the essay "Plays and Libretti" was first published in 1963). Hamburger believes that "Freud, at most, was one of Hofmannsthal's many diverse guides" to depth psychology (p. 86). The longest studies to date are Heinz Politzer's "Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 'Elektra': Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Psychopathologie," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift*, 47 (1973), 95-119, and Michael Worbs, *Nervenkunst* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), pp. 259-95. Worbs's study stands out

for presenting a wealth of interesting new material on Hofmannsthal's relationship to Freud, including the Freud circle's reaction to *Elektra* and other works by Hofmannsthal.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hamburger, "Hofmannsthals Bibliothek," *Euphorion*, 55 (1955), 27.

<sup>3</sup> (Frankfurt: Lang, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Briefe 1900-1909* (Wien: Bermann-Fischer Verlag, 1937), p. 142. Henceforth this volume of the letters will be referred to as B II. Hofmannsthal goes on to say that he wants to consult the work in connection with *Das Leben ein Traum*. The editors of *Briefe II* place the undated letter in the period Nov. 1903-May 1904, but both Richard Alewyn, *Über Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), p. 190, note 45, and Urban, pp. 30, 141, note 183, assume that it was written a year earlier. Urban, p. 17, believes that Hofmannsthal read *Studien über Hysterie* about seven years after it was first published.

<sup>5</sup> B II, 384.

<sup>6</sup> B II, 125.

<sup>7</sup> Worp's assumption, p. 140, that Bahr's "Auseinandersetzung mit der Psychoanalyse" started in 1903 is therefore incorrect. Bahr's "Notizbuch" entry for 13 April 1902 contains a list of psychiatric titles, including works by Bernheim, Charcot, and Janet. This "Merkbuch" and "Notizbuch" and all other unpublished Bahr materials that I cite are found in the Theatersammlung of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

<sup>8</sup> Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden: Reden und Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1980), III, 452.

<sup>9</sup> B II, 128-29.

<sup>10</sup> See the chapter "Andreas und die 'Wunderbare Freundin': Zur Fortsetzung von Hofmannsthals Roman-Fragment und ihrer psychiatrischen Quelle," in Richard Alewyn, *Über Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958).

<sup>11</sup> In *Elektra* herself Politzer sees, above all, repressed eroticism and incestuous wishes as evidence of hysteria (he is thinking of Jung's "Elektra complex," and ingeniously finds evidence of it in Hofmannsthal's play). He also finds that Elektra's behavior manifests Charcot's four phases of the hysterical attack as Breuer and Freud list them in *Studien über Hysterie*. Urban, p. 37, gives a reasonable critique of this interpretation of Politzer's, pointing out in which ways Elektra diverges from a hysteric as well as conforming to one. According to Politzer, Klytämnestra's hysteria is bound up with her suffering from a "verdrängte Tat" (p. 108). Politzer's diagnosis of hysteria in Chrysothemis appears not so well founded.

<sup>12</sup> *Nervenkunst*, pp. 280-87.

<sup>13</sup> *Studien über Hysterie* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1970), p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> "Das Gespräch über Gedichte," *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden: Erzählungen, Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979), p. 497. This is perhaps the sense in which we can understand his later commentaries on *Elektra* in which he persistently stresses that the play questions the concept of the individual. In a diary entry of 1905, Hofmannsthal writes, "In der 'Elektra' wird das Individuum in der empirischen Weise aufgelöst, indem eben der Inhalt seines Lebens es von innen her zersprengt, wie das sich zu Eis umbildende Wasser einen irdenen Krug" (*Reden und Aufsätze* III, 461). In "Aufzeichnungen zu Reden in Skandinavien" (1916), he repeats, "Der Persönlichkeitsbegriff in Frage gestellt" (*Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden: Reden und Aufsätze* [Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979], II, 31).

<sup>15</sup> *Dialog vom Tragischen* (Berlin: Fischer, 1904), pp. 59-61, 68-75.

<sup>16</sup> E. g., Walter Jens, *Hofmannsthal und die Griechen* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1955), pp. 61, 57-58, 65-66; Gerhart Baumann, "Hugo von Hofmannsthals 'Elektra'" (first pub. 1959), in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, ed. Sibylle Bauer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), pp. 285-87, 277, 293-94; William H. Rey, *Weltentzweiung und Weltversöhnung in Hofmannsthals griechischen Dramen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), pp. 68-73, 91-95. Hans-Joachim Newiger, "Hofmannsthals *Elektra* und die griechische Tragödie," *Arcadia*, 4 (1969), 153-57, tries to break down these hard-and-fast oppositions.

<sup>17</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden: Dramen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979), II, 200, 210, 200. Further references to this edition of *Elektra* will be given in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studien über Hysterie* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979), pp. 7, 12.

<sup>19</sup> E. g., Jens, p. 57; Baumann, p. 276; Wolfgang Nehring, *Die Tat bei Hofmannsthal* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1966), pp. 37, 52, 75-76, 93.

- <sup>20</sup> *Studien über Hysterie*, pp. 12, 13.
- <sup>21</sup> Butler, p. 169.
- <sup>22</sup> *Studien über Hysterie*, e.g., p. 10.
- <sup>23</sup> The theme of dying inside is present in Sophocles' *Electra*: Orestes insists that Aegisthus must die in the same place where he slew Agamemnon. The motifs of the torch and the chase were added by Hofmannsthal.
- <sup>24</sup> *Studien über Hysterie*, pp. 233, 241.
- <sup>25</sup> *Studien über Hysterie*, pp. 232-38, 236.
- <sup>26</sup> *Reden und Aufsätze* III, 603.
- <sup>27</sup> E.g., Butler, pp. 165-67, Rey, p. 34.
- <sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke in zwölf Bänden* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kroner, 1964), II, 101-02.
- <sup>29</sup> Hofmannsthal himself did not subscribe to Nietzsche's view that memory and too great a respect for the past were responsible for the deficiencies of present-day culture. He writes in a diary entry of 29 June 1902: "Über einige Vorteile der Lektüre älterer Bücher. Furchtbare Folge der die Gegenwart erfüllenden Gedächtnislosigkeit: die Urteilslosigkeit über Leistungen, ja über Qualitäten" (*Reden und Aufsätze* III, 436).
- <sup>30</sup> David H. Miles, *Hofmannsthal's Novel Andreas: Memory and Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 67.
- <sup>31</sup> *Studien über Hysterie*, p. 11. Bahr also saw the analogy at once and was quick to exploit it; he writes that the Greeks invented tragedy in order to "abreact" their hysteria through catharsis (*Dialog vom Tragischen*, pp. 23-24).



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The Max Kade German-American Document and Research Center  
2080 Wescoe Hall  
The University of Kansas  
Lawrence, Kansas 66045