

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Ernst Mach and a Trio of Austrian Writers: Hofmannsthal, Andrian, Musil

In 1928, Hugo von Hofmannsthal suggested in a final autobiographical jotting "Ad me ipsum" that three Austrian prose works shared something essential:

Verschiedene Momente meines Lebens auffangen und vor allem zeigen, was im Schatten ist. . . . Z. B. Epoche der Freundschaft mit Poldy [gemeint ist Leopold von Andrian] ("Kaufmannssohn" "Garten der Erkenntnis"; vgl. hierzu das zwölf Jahre spätere Buch "Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless"). Das Hauptproblem dieser sehr merkwürdigen Epoche liegt darin, daß Poldy vollständig (ich weniger vollständig, sondern ausweichend, indem ich eine Art Doppelleben führte) das Reale übersah: er suchte das Wesen der Dinge zu spüren—das andere Gesicht der Dinge beachtete er nicht, er wollte es absichtlich nicht beachten, für nichts ansehen (ähnlich kann der Zögling Törless das Gesicht der Dinge, wenn sie ferne sind, und das andere, wenn sie hart an uns sind, nicht übereinbringen).¹

Hofmannsthal's laconic observation encompassing his own *Märchen der 672. Nacht*, Andrian's *Der Garten der Erkenntnis* (both written in 1894-95), and Musil's *Törless* (composed between 1902-06) presents as much a puzzle as an insight.

The obvious similarities found in the three works are more superficial than instructive. Each novella concentrates on a self-sufficient, narcissistic, isolated youth who is to some extent nameless. But thorough reading and attention to the conclusions of the stories do not show uniformity of resolution. So what specifically led Hofmannsthal to juxtapose these three novellas? It is my contention that he intuited rather than admitted consciously how much he and his two fellow authors were influenced by the same theory of knowledge, the same epistemological tenets.

Not surprisingly it was that literary gadfly but perspicacious critic Hermann Bahr who first grasped the heart of the matter. His essays from 1890 to 1904 telling of the odyssey "Zur Überwindung des Naturalismus"² document the similarities between the thinking of mainstream Young Vienna writers and that of the physicist-philosopher Ernst Mach. Suffice it here to say, that Hofmannsthal and Andrian were the youngest members in the Café Griensteidl group that gathered informally around Bahr in the early 1890's, the first period of Young Vienna.

For his part, Musil was working on *Törless* a little over a decade later than the other two, at the time of Bahr's concluding essays on the road from Naturalism to Impressionism. His novel is judged an attempt to test the then very influential scientific and philosophical views of Mach. (In 1908, Musil even completed a doctoral thesis on Mach: *Beitrag zur Beurteilung der Lehren Machs*.) Musil hoped he had found in Mach's lectures a basis for belief in intelligible existence at a time when he was struggling in *Törless* with, among other concerns, the conflict between objective logic and subjective experience.

Hermann Bahr in two essays, "Das unrettbare Ich" and "Philosophie des Impressionismus," clearly draws the parallels between his own thinking and that of early Young Vienna in the arts and the philosophy of his fellow Austrian Mach in physics and psychology. Of import here is how Bahr summarizes Mach's *Analyse der Empfindungen*:

Alle Trennungen sind hier aufgehoben, 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, alles ist nur Bewegung von Farben, Tönen, Wärmen, Drücken, Räumen und Zeiten, die auf der anderen Seite, bei uns herüber, als Strimmungen, Gefühle und Willen erscheinen. . . . Ich habe aber seit Jahren nichts gelesen, dem ich sogleich leidenschaftlicher zugestimmt hätte, wahrhaft aufatmend und mit dem Gefühl, daß hier endlich offenbar wird, was wir alle längst dunkel bei uns geahnt haben. (p. 197, italics mine)

Gotthart Wunberg who first clarified part of the Bahr-Mach-Young Vienna relationship notes it is surprising that the influence of Mach had not been recognized earlier by the Young Vienna café discussants.³ But on his word, Bahr did finally recognize through reading Mach what it was that had been central though unformulated in his own thought and that of many in his Viennese circle of friends:

"Das Ich ist unrettbar." Es ist nur ein Name. Es ist nur eine Illusion. Es ist ein Behelf, den wir praktisch brauchen, um unsere Vorstellungen zu ordnen. Es gibt nichts als Verbindungen von Farben, Tönen, Wärmen, Drücken, Räumen, Zeiten, und an diese Verknüpfungen sind Stimmungen, Gefühle und Willen gebunden. . . . Das Ding ist nichts ausser dem Zusammenhange der Farben, Töne, Wärmen. Nur um uns vorläufig zu orientieren, sprechen wir von "Körpern" und sprechen vom "Ich." . . . Das Ich ist keine unveränderliche, bestimmte, scharf begrenzte Einheit. (pp. 190-1)

Bahr's paraphrasing of the articulate Mach is given here as a literary man's slant in interpreting what the physicist originally had written as arguments in the great scientific debate of the day between classical, representational physics and the school of presentational, naive realism.

But how do our three authors tie into all this? What proof is there for Mach's influence in their stories? The arguments in the case of Hofmannsthal are persuasive, but circumstantial; convincing textual proof can be found in Andrian's novella; textual, thematic and biographic evidence document the Musil-Mach connection.

That Hofmannsthal knew Mach's writings cannot be denied; as a student he felt it necessary to attend the philosopher's lectures in 1896 and made direct reference to him in his doctoral thesis soon after. In his jottings he even recognized that Mach's problems were similar to his own. However, whether Hofmannsthal was directly influenced by Mach earlier cannot be proved. In any case, there are some startling similarities found between Hofmannsthal's early notes and Mach's *Analyse der Empfindungen* (first edition, 1886).

Direct examples of "Machian" sensation are not present in Hofmannsthal's *Märchen* except for an unusually long catalog of precious perceptions right at the beginning. The ambivalence of Hofmannsthal's position quoted in the initial passage of this paper is substantiated immediately in the story. Even

though found in an allegorical tale, the list of sensations is disturbingly long. It could be interpreted as a parody of Mach's claim that the only reality is the knowledge of sensations. Hofmannsthal was unwilling to let go of "das Reale," a reality or duality existing beyond sensation. In the *Märchen* he betrays his inability to accept Mach's monism by following the list of beautiful impressions with the sobering thought of death. The constant angst and paranoia of the merchant's son certainly do not reflect an acceptance of the joyful Machian principle of harmony between the sensory sphere and personal consciousness.

Andrian's *Der Garten der Erkenntnis* is an example of "konsequenter Impressionismus," of Machian epistemology. The author, as Hofmannsthal noted, rejected duality. The willed denial of a reality lurking behind sensory perception was consistent with a major premise of Mach who scorned the urge to know "das Ding an sich" as an empty pursuit based upon a false premise. For Mach, if the subject is not present, "reality" disappears; for there is no antithesis between ego and world. Things, bodies themselves upon reflection are mere collections of fluctuating perceptions. An example from *Der Garten* may show this Machian notion more clearly. Ever since grade-school art class, we are taught to "know" that bodies of water are blue. Prince Erwin in traveling from Capua to Venice accepts the sea as it is: "Das Meer war immer anders: manchmal war es schwarz, manchmal golden und lapislazulifarbig, manchmal wie junger persischer Flieder, manchmal öde und weisslich und abends, wenn es im Osten lag, war es lichtrosa und lichtgrau, silbern and lila, aber wenn es im Westen lag, dunkel wie die Flammen" (pp. 51-2). One passage may not convince, but it must serve here as an example of a consistent approach. For Erwin the sea *was* as it *seemed*.

Erwin's search for knowledge is unusual, matching as it does the Machian concept of knowledge. Erwin keeps refining his notion of a longed-for *Offenbarung*, epiphany. From youth on he expects knowledge to manifest itself, to impinge on his senses; he does not seek a reality expressed in metaphysics or formulae. At one point Erwin and his mother shiver in recognition of the truth of what the youth has learned; there is no transcendent reality hiding behind appearances: "Wir sind allein, wir und unser Leben, und unsere Seele schafft unser Leben, aber unsere Seele ist nicht in uns allein" (p. 49). This is neither pantheism nor simple solipsism; it is an acceptance of "das unrettbare Ich."

Musil's doctoral thesis amounted to an exegesis on Mach's teachings. A case could be built up with quotations to demonstrate that earlier Törless who is described as lacking character (*Eigenschaften?*), is a Machian man. Like the merchant's son and Erwin, he is open to ever changing sensation and experience and thus prone to confusion and uncertainty (*Verwirrungen*) about everyday matters which others fail to question: "Dinge befremden [mich], die den anderen alltäglich erscheinen" (p. 89). But finally he accepts his condition: "Ich weiß, die Dinge sind die Dinge und werden es wohl immer bleiben; und ich werde sie wohl immer bald so, bald so ansehen" (pp. 137-8). Törless, who cannot accept metaphysical reality, in the end does find himself somewhat at peace with *his* perspective of a fluid reality: "Das Problem saß fest. Diese wechselnde seelische Perspektive je nach Ferne und Nähe, die er erlebt hatte. Dieser unfaßbare Zusammenhang, der den Ereignissen und Dingen je nach unserem Standpunkte plötzliche Werte gibt, die einander ganz unvergleichlich und fremd sind . . . Dies und alles andere—er sah es merkwürdig klar und rein—und klein" (p. 139).

Where has Hofmannsthal's observation in "Ad me ipsum" led? Three narcissistic youths, in quite distinctive works, assume an attitude toward life which Gerhart Baumann has noted is typical of many Austrian protagonists in literature: "Sie träumen mit Bewußtsein, erleiden das Zwiespältige in stets neuen Verhüllungen, die Selbstanalyse ist ihnen zur Gewohnheit geworden, das Reflektieren zum Beruf."⁴ But Mach, an Austrian physicist, developed a discomfoting, philosophical basis for this favored stance. What was in the shadows for Hofmannsthal during a remarkable period of his development was Mach's philosophical, epistemological views which disturbed the author. He was ultimately to resolve his problem in the *Chandosbrief* which Wunberg has so clearly shown was influenced by Mach even in descriptive detail. Andrian gave himself unreservedly to Mach's thought in *Der Garten* and then became a silent, real-life Chandos. Musil, influenced by Mach at the beginning of his writing career, was never able to exorcise himself completely of "das unrettbare Ich."

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NOTES

¹Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke: Aufzeichnungen* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1959), p. 244. Textual references for the three stories are: Leopold von Andrian, *Der Garten der Erkenntnis* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1970); Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Ausgewählte Werke II* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1957); Robert Musil, *Sämtliche Erzählungen* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1970).

²Quotations from Hermann Bahr's essays are from: *Hermann Bahr: Zur Überwindung des Naturalismus: Theoretische Schriften 1887-1904*, ausgewählt von Gotthart Wunberg (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1968).

³Gotthart Wunberg, *Der frühe Hofmannsthal: Schizophrenie als dichterische Struktur* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), pp. 25-26. Wunberg's study is marvelous in clearing the air of the "mysticism" and "preexistence" surrounding Hofmannsthal's Chandos crisis. In order to gain perspective, Wunberg argues a convincing case for Mach's influence upon Hofmannsthal (pp. 30-38) even though the evidence remains circumstantial.

⁴Gerhart Baumann, *Franz Grillparzer* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1966), p. 14.