

# 'Lightning flashes of my burning memory'

Dissociation and trauma in a second-generation perpetrator novella  
by Thomas Lehr

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**ABSTRACT** • Thomas Lehr's novella *Frühling* (*Spring*, 2001) presents the last seconds of the fifty-year-old protagonist's life – between the moment he shoots himself and the advent of his death. As an adolescent he realised he was the child of a perpetrator father who conducted human experiments on inmates as a Nazi concentration camp doctor. Written in an extreme variant of autonomous inner monologue, the novella interlaces perceptions and memories without transition. The textual structure dissects these incidents, as the syntax is often destroyed by punctuation marks and irregular orthography. At one point, the first-person narrator chooses the formula 'lightning flashes of my burning memory', which aptly describes Lehr's poetic technique, reminiscent of traumatic flashback. This article argues that the protagonist undergoes residual experiences of dissociation as a result of his insurmountable entanglement in the guilt of the father. Thus, *Frühling* is a radical and disturbing literary treatment of trauma.

The novella *Frühling* is written in a radical, variant form of autonomous inner monologue, which employs the stream-of-consciousness technique. Concrete perceptions and memories from different life phases of the first-person narrator are interlaced unexpectedly. The awareness of imminent death triggers an extreme state of mind, a simultaneity of temporalities and levels of consciousness (cf. Herrmann 2008: 256). The novella's unusual construction refers to a tradition of earlier narrative texts, which were experimental for their time and also dealt with liminal subjects, the advance or experience of death, such as Ambrose Bierce's story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1891), Arthur Schnitzler's monologue novella *Lieutenant Gustl* (1900) or William Golding's novel *Pincher Martin* (1956). Lehr's novella *Frühling* comprises a striking temporal disproportionality: while the narrative time accounts for only thirty-nine seconds – or 131 pages – the narrated time covers thirty-nine years. Born in 1950, the protagonist is fifty years of age at the time of narration. The text recounts

a process that began at the age of eleven. Thus, a single experienced second reflects upon an entire year, although only in the form of momentary snapshots of situations and scenes. The thirty-nine seconds, narrated consecutively as book chapters and in the form of a countdown, are radically drawn out and thus intensified: 'With regard to narrative, past episodes are not recapitulated in the form of a classic flashback, but are instead relived homodiegetically, so to speak, virtually *in actu*' (Brandstädter 2007: 94).

The textual structure dissects the anachronistically shaped contents and incidents in that the syntax is hacked and destroyed by incorrect punctuation marks and sometimes intensely irregular orthography. Particularly striking in this regard is the use of full stops and colons in the middle of sentences, sometimes even in the middle of a word. Both are contrasting literary strategies, in that a colon functions grammatically as a conjunction and marks the following explanation of an issue, whereas a full stop creates, as a finite punctuation mark, something

that separates and divides. Mathias Brandstädter speaks of a 'consistently congruent moulded fracture of syntax and orthography, behind whose decay and neological reorganisation the more and more vivid contours of transcendent visions and transitional stations of reconciliatory healing gleam through', and which 'almost bears artistic traits' (Brandstädter 2007: 93–4). Lehr's writing is very dense and extremely pictorial, and thus exhibits an exposed literariness; such a foregrounding of the structures of mediation is a strategy often found in 'postmemorial' literature, usually aiming at a reflection of representability (cf. Hirsch 2012: 9). In some passages, Lehr's narrative also resembles linguistic strategies of modern poetry, in particular that of Paul Celan (for example his 'morphological enjambements', also using incorrect punctuation marks and word splits; cf. Tholen 2008: 219). At one point, the homodiegetic narrator chooses the expression 'lightning flashes of my burning memory' ('blitzlichtszenen meiner brennenden erinnerung'; Lehr 2001: 51)<sup>1</sup> as an analogy for his hallucinatory live review, which aptly describes this poetic technique, reminiscent of traumatic flashback.

The motif of his suicide, as well as the fact that the protagonist's death takes place during the narrative time, only gradually becomes recognisable while reading (corresponding to Golding's novel, narrated from the perspective of a drowned man). On the one hand, Lehr employs this experimental form in order to depict the phenomenon in which a person's entire life flashes before her eyes in a condensed form immediately before her death and, on the other hand, to enable a portrayal of the two existential traumas experienced by the protagonist at

the ages of eleven and fourteen. Furthermore, he may have chosen this high level of artificiality as a way of dealing with his socially tabooed topic (cf. Assmann 2006: 189): the lethal suffering of a child of a Nazi perpetrator, evoking pity and empathy. Since the protagonist approaches death during the narration, it remains open in the concluding scene as to whether his fragmented memories and re-experiencing of past events are depicted as such owing to the early traumatisation or to the gradual and irreversible loss of consciousness.

Generally, trauma is considered to be an overwhelming experience of a sudden, catastrophic or violent event that eluded (and continues to elude) comprehension. In psychoanalytic theory, trauma is understood as something that overwhelms the subject and questions its integrity, to the extent that it cannot be fully grasped as it is happening. The response to such an event or accident can take shape in an often delayed, uncontrollable appearance of intrusive phenomena such as flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations or other psychological symptoms that surface involuntarily. The traumatised person is haunted or even possessed by the experience and cannot find closure (cf. Caruth 1995: 4–5). The event is ever present and subject to continuous repetition. It can be neither completed – that is to say, lived through – nor fully repressed, and is therefore suffered time and time again: 'in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness' (*ibid.* 6). In other words, it is 'fully evident only in connection with another place and another time' (*ibid.* 8).

The amnesia and de-realisation inherent in trauma affects its representability. One central idiosyncrasy lies in the loss of the distinction between 'psychic temporality and linear chronological time' (Elsaesser 2001: 197) and that the very distinction seems suspended. Trauma theory thus occupies itself with the 'rival claims

1 The novella has been written and published in German. So far, only two of 39 chapters have been translated in a published version into English, indicated here by Lehr 2002. All other quotations from the novella, indicated here by Lehr 2001, are translations by the author.

of memory time and historical time and their respective relation to perception, to self-awareness and the subjectivity of media experience' (*ibid.*). According to Thomas Elsaesser the notion of trauma not only names 'the delay between an event and its (persistent, obsessive) return, but also a reversal of affect and meaning across this gap in time' (*ibid.*). Lehr's novella exhibits and intensifies such a destroyed diachronicity, heightened through the extreme situation of the successive loss of consciousness and dying.

The first traumatisation of the narrator Christian Rauch, now fifty years of age, took place when he returned with his elder brother Robert from a summer fishing expedition – emblematic for the novella as their lost innocence ('this single day of remembrance, this day in our childhood': Lehr 2001: 38) – and found his parents standing in the driveway with a stranger. The reader realises, whereas the boy did not understand anything at the time but was nevertheless massively disturbed, that the stranger was a former concentration-camp prisoner. Up to that day, the fact that their father was an SS member and a camp doctor during National Socialism, who carried out the most horrific medical experiments on prisoners (which the narrator also imagines in detail later in the text: *ibid.* 132), was hidden from the sons.

The man invading the illusory family idyll addressed the doctor with the capitalised words 'APPELL, HERR DOKTOR! APPELL!' (Lehr 2001: 116) – which echo repeatedly throughout the text. As the protagonist remembers decades later in a present-tense evocation, the man then 'slowly, without removing his gaze from our father, begins to take off his clothes, systematically, unassailably, stone-faced' (*ibid.*), and proceeds to stand 'immovably' for hours on the gravel path in front of the house, as he had also 'stood many nights, naked' (*ibid.* 118) back then in the camp. Christian and Robert understood the 'shocking and threatening of

the situation' (*ibid.* 39) instantaneously. The icy silence that prevailed between the parents and the stranger led them to feel something terrible was taking place. For the first-person narrator, this event was an irrevocable caesura that destroyed his childhood innocence, which is illustrated in a retrospective remark to his dead brother about 'how late, or how terribly early in human life at least, that only at the end of your and almost the end of my childhood everything was destroyed by the truth' (*ibid.* 64). In novella theory, this traumatic incidence is, in the truest sense of the Goethean wording, 'a peculiar and as yet unheard-of event' (cf. Tholen 2008: 209). This well-known genre definition of the novella is closely related to the idea of narrating something new but also plays with the ambiguity of the German adjective *unerhört* ('unheard of' but also 'incredible', 'outrageous'). Generally, the novella is characterised by a certain turning point (or inversion), an incidence or event that is both established and transformed through narration. Lehr refers to this genre convention and radicalises it by linking it to traumatisation.

As Christian recounts, in the following years, Robert, three years older than the protagonist, secretly carried out research. He spoke with concentration-camp survivors and found out – without articulating it to his younger brother – about the concealed and suppressed perpetration and guilt of their father, who, in spite of his crimes, was able to continue practising as a doctor after the fall of the Nazi regime and to attain a good life. The first-person narrator addresses his dead brother in his inner monologue:

Did you know, do you know the. Answer?  
Had you already learned it from the man in:  
our garden, back then. Without. Asking I.  
Believe: not, Robert, but you went in search,  
you. Spoke with the inextinguishable ones,  
only to me you said: nothing, I was only  
fourteen. When you threw yourself in front of  
the train but

Now it is time together we cross the square  
walk out onto it again from the entrance  
so easily open the gate which swings on its  
hinges at eye level the iron writing recedes

R B E I T

C H T F R E

you walk in front of me, Robert, through  
the screaming emptiness of the present of this  
square in which all that can be seen is what we  
know... (Lehr 2002: 176)

In this death fantasy, occurring in the third-last second before his demise, Christian and Robert stride through the entrance gate of a concentration camp together, whose inscription 'Arbeit macht frei' ('Work sets you free') remains only partly legible. Owing to the arrangement of the letters and words and the fact of the swinging gate, the novella most likely refers to the gate to the Dachau camp, and not to the so-called 'Stammlager Auschwitz' (bearing the identical inscription at the gate but in one line and installed higher above the eye-line). When quoting the infamous inscription, Lehr creates a caesura in the textual flow: through missing vowels, which alienate the cynical Nazi maxim, and through the spacing of the letters, emphasising the cryptic words.

Time and space is blurred, that is the traumatic childhood event and the imagined visit to the concentration camp with his deceased brother. As the reader learns, the narrator actually visited a concentration-camp site later on, which is documented in a peculiar textual feature: the single word *Brausebad*, an older German term for 'shower', is printed in Gothic letters (*ibid.* 136), corresponding to the sign installed in Dachau in front of the entrance to the gas chamber (probably never used). However, of course, the uncanny shower sign also alludes to other Nazi concentration and extermination camps such as Auschwitz or Belzec, where it was affixed in order to deceive the inmates before their murder. When the word **Brausebad** appears in this

older typeface, associated nowadays strongly with Nazism, it is a highly disturbing 'intrusion of the real', as if the reader were literally in front of a gas chamber, here and now.

this is how the man in our garden stood,  
Robert, here at this spot, APPELL, even the  
dead had to be brought out, the sick, the dying,  
the new dead every morning, APPELL, Robert,  
in front of the barracks in the avenue of white  
poplars ... today only the two of us are on  
the square, today, on this sunny day but in the  
flicker of time thousands stand with shaven  
heads, in striped pants, thin shirts stiff with  
filth, in a winter night, until dawn breaks and  
new frozen bodies are dragged up from the  
ground: APPELL: I cannot see them, Robert, I  
only guess at them: thousands upon thousands  
and so many of them trusting in the future:  
in us, Robert, but I could. Only live my life  
and dream of: a stadium of final. Healing: of  
doctors with no touching. (Lehr 2002: 175)

As this quotation illustrates, past and present, real and imagined events and dialogues melt into one. The protagonist hallucinates about a camp situation where roll call is taking place 'today'. The presence of countless concentration camp inmates, standing still in their mute reproach, haunts the protagonist, emphasised through the iterated German word *Appell* ('roll call') written in small capitals.

In contrast to the protagonist, who continued to live his life day in, day out, Robert killed himself at the age of seventeen by throwing himself in front of a moving train – a deed which has been interpreted as an 'act of representative atonement' (Tholen 2008: 221). Christian was called to the scene of the accident – 'YOUR BROTHER A QUARTER OF AN HOUR AGO AT THE SOUTH STATION YOUR BIG BROTHER – ROBERT YOUR blood' (Lehr 2001: 80) – and had to witness how Robert's severed arm fell from the stretcher, where his body lay, covered with a

bloody cloth (cf. *ibid.* 80, 124). This is his second traumatisation, ‘Robert, at seventeen years of age dismembered of his own free will’ (*ibid.* 81). Lehr emphasises this shock through capital letters and the elimination of spaces between the words of the terrible message. More than thirty years later, the first-person narrator still reproaches his brother with the accusation, ‘you were not right to leave me alone’ (*ibid.*). However, he clearly blames his father for his brother’s death, whom he from then on split into two *personae* – the dead father and the living, hated ‘Dr. X’, crossed out by an anonymous letter: ‘Dr. X, who devoured my father on this day in the garden now also had you on his conscience’ (*ibid.* 126), he remarks to the deceased brother.

The fact that Christian fundamentally and continuously negates his father distinguishes this story from the so-called *Väterliteratur* (‘father literature’), a specific literary genre that arose in Germany and Austria in the 1970s, in which authors deal with their fathers, and in the more narrow sense, with their Nazi past. Such autobiographic narratives as Peter Henisch’s *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters* (1979), Sigfrid Gauch’s *Vaterspuren* (1979), Bernward Vesper’s *Die Reise* (1979) or Christoph Meckel’s *Suchbild. Über meinen Vater* (1980), that explicitly treat the highly problematic father–son relation (cf. Brandstädter 2010, Reidy 2012), are considered precursors for the huge wave of German family and ‘generational’ narratives from the 1990s to the present day. Contrary to the mostly autobiographic genre of *Väterliteratur*, Lehr’s fictional protagonist does not deal with his father on an explicit level. Nevertheless, the narrative has to be read as a counter-model to this subjective, partly lachrymose tradition.

At first, as one can deduce from the fragmentarily surfacing memories and recapitulations, the ‘perpetrator son’ (Heimböckel 2008: 212) seems to lead a normal life. At the time of narration, he is a successful married pharmacist with an adult son who is professionally

following in his footsteps. At a large pharmacological congress that he visits with his wife and son, however, he has a seizure – an incident that remains largely shrouded in mystery (cf. Lehr 2001: 59).

The protagonist’s suicide, committed together with his lover Gucia, a Polish woman who is working as a prostitute and is afflicted by terminal cancer, seems to follow shortly after this seizure. Gucia’s mother suffered in two Nazi concentration camps, where she was forced into prostitution (Lehr 2001: 106, 138) – ‘the whole of Poland was a grave for her, you say, and: i am also a grave’ (*ibid.* 104), the text reads about the two women. Christian and Gucia commit their double suicide in mimesis of the double self-shooting of German poet Heinrich von Kleist and his female companion, the critically ill Henriette Vogel, in 1811 (cf. *ibid.* 114). At the same time, with regard to the male part, it is presented as a mediate result of the traumatisation and guilt complex associated with the father’s perpetration. This background comes to the fore when the narrator interweaves the fate of Gucia’s mother, the paradigmatic Polish victim, with an imaginary encounter with his father, the paradigmatic German perpetrator (the reader assumes that both spent time in the Dachau concentration camp; everything else, however, remains unclear):

imagine the day on which. Our parents met,  
Gucia, for two seconds. An almost young cold  
doctor. Your mother who. Escaped from hell  
into ruin it may be a day as warm. As today  
and. Through the window in front of the dis-  
pensary their. Eyes meet over a. Goldfish bowl  
into which a flake of ash. Sails, Gucia, nothing  
helps. Us any more. (Lehr 2001: 106)

In Christian’s fantasy, their parents’ gazes meet at the same time a ‘flake of ash’ drifts down. That which seems like a poetic image – reminiscent of Celan’s early poem ‘Schwarze Flocken’

(‘Black Flakes’, 1944) – can factually be deciphered *pars pro toto* as the omnipresent process of the cremation of bodies in the concentration camps. This condensed verbal visualisation also demonstrates the impossibility of any encounter between victim and perpetrator taking place on an equal footing, which the protagonist presumably attempts to vicariously compensate for in his relationship with Gucia.

Overall, the novella suggests three psychodynamic reactions to the two childhood traumata the protagonist had to suffer: firstly, a belittling of the father, secondly, an identification with the victims and the dead brother, and, thirdly, overwhelming feelings of self-destruction, which ultimately result in suicide. Owing to the experimental narrative structure, however, the text only insinuates these three reactive factors, and their following discussion is inevitably a result of a reconstructive reading.

Christian’s discrediting of his father is only manifested once within the text, which is caused by the fact that he renounced his parents after the suicide of his brother and symbolically killed them (cf. Lehr 2001: 80). Conversely, the narrator states about himself and his brother, ‘we two the fanatic orphans of Dr. X who buried our parents alive within us so that they could not murder us but they still managed it anyway’ (*ibid.* 128–9). In this passage it is of note that the protagonist sees both parents as guilty parties, not just his father as an explicit perpetrator, but also his mother as a knowing bystander, ‘who drank silent white stains into: the confused map. Of her brain’ (*ibid.* 123) and who drowned her former complicity and her grief regarding the suicide of her eldest son in alcohol and died prematurely.

At least in looking back on the situation, the protagonist discredits his father in the event from his childhood with the naked stranger. He perceives him as weak and powerless; the son even states that the father ‘disappeared’ as he stood there so inactively, and complains about

the ‘anger of a little bespectacled dog, dragging miserably at his leash’ (*ibid.* 117), and thus powerfully diminishes him through his choice of words. From a child’s perspective, the father could not protect his sons from the hostile entity invading the familial idyll because it shook the patriarch’s own identity to its very core. Consequently, the father was no longer a point of reference for the narrator’s identity, in stark contrast to the idealised older brother; Christian saw himself as his ‘smaller shadow’ (*ibid.* 38) during his childhood and still continues to carry out imaginary dialogues with him, more than thirty years after his death:

I may have become completely unrecognisable for you and. It cannot be! Hell, Robert, the same. Polar sea in which: our father is swimming if. I could go to you, Robert, like walking into a mirror that shows something different. In the past if I could go to you, finally, Robert, I was. For myself nothing but a shadow and shame: person. (Lehr 2001: 58f.)

These enigmatic sentences – strategically preventing the events from becoming fully ‘legible’ by way of erroneously placed punctuation marks – reveal a narcissistic identification with Robert, whom the narrator continuously sees in (and like) a mirror.

However, this brother imago is psychodynamically related to an identification with concentration-camp prisoners, although not explicitly with the victims of Nazi human experiments. One example of this projection can be seen in the identification with the personified survivor who stood in the parental garden with the father:

They stood so close together, as if they wanted to dance, and what both appalled and calmed me was how similar they looked: bald-headed, bespectacled, gaunt men with hard facial features. They could have been brothers, Robert,

like us or like the dead fish in the net on your bike's luggage rack. The stranger the younger one like me. (Lehr 2001: 40)

As a manifestation of his symptoms, the first-person narrator continuously forms such analogies and (twofold) symbiotic identifications with a range of different people – with his wife, his Polish lover, his son, his brother, the intruding stranger and with the victims of concentration camps. A fusion of his brother Robert and his son Konstantin may also be mentioned here (cf. Lehr 2001: 78). It is conspicuous that the narrator identifies with so many people whilst fully negating his father.

In Christian's visions of death, there are phantasies that seem to amalgamate his current identity with concentration camps victims. For example, in the extensive description of a surreal, collective scene of divestment at the pharmacology congress, interwoven with a camp experience – 'were there not suddenly: Arms, hands. (Emaciated, distorted with pain, concave, appallingly pale, hollow-cheeked, beard-stubbed) faces of very different: humans between those. Perfumed bodies' (*ibid.* 85), or the following suicidal fantasy of consolidation with the brother, whom he at one point describes as his 'death twin' (*ibid.* 80):

before the fences and the watchtowers covered with pyramid roofs ... we see: lawn the soft green strip before the ditch onto which they lured prisoners to say they shot them escaping into the dandelions which bloom here i'm running now, Robert, i'm running after you (Lehr 2002: 177)

In this passage, the narrator imagines dying in unity with his brother as camp prisoners, creating a vision of escape and self-sacrifice, a solitary attempt to atone for the guilt of the father. It is not clear whether the chosen imagery is based on his own experiences or rather on a

collective 'postmemorial' constellation, since the pyramid watchtower roofs and the green strip next to the fences at Auschwitz and other camps have become widely circulated holocaust icons, especially through the film industry.

Christian even addresses his actual death companion in an exaggerated impression of a camp prisoner: 'Gucia, people like us were once called "muselmänner"' (Lehr 2001: 112). In the concentration camps, the German term *Muselmann* ('Muslim' or 'Mussulman') was used for an inmate who was giving up and had been given up by his comrades, a person between life and death (cf. Améry 1980: 9; Levi 1989: 83–4). Lehr's protagonist also calls Guacia, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, 'my muselwoman' (Lehr 2001: 112), and thus identifies emphatically with this death-bound, liminal state.

As already mentioned, Christian disowned his parents after his brother's suicide and left home at the age of fourteen. As an adult, he not only took on the pharmaceutical operations of his father-in-law, but also their family name, which has the expressive name 'Rauch' ('Smoke'), 'in which I disappeared' (Lehr 2001: 61), as the assumption of his new identity is ambiguously described. The narrator's desire that 'as much of me as possible has disappeared in it and only smoke remains' (*ibid.* 63) alludes unmistakably to an identification with the millions of Jews murdered in the gas chambers and the cremation of their corpses.

The text suggests that the first-person protagonist underwent residual experiences of dissociation – because of his insurmountable entanglement in the guilt of the father and his disturbed state as a result of the early suicide of his brother – which ultimately led to his death wish. 'Who sees the inner being bent double like a worm' (Lehr 2001: 108), he asks aptly at one point. The notion of a 'fractured or shattered self' as a result of traumatising is often found in autobiographic narratives and such a psychic dissociation can be 'causally linked to

unresolved traumatic memories' (cf. Staniloiu and Markowitsch 2012: 109–10). In psychology, dissociative disorders are considered 'disturbances of the integrated organisation of memory, perception, consciousness, identity or emotion' (*ibid.* 110), which closely corresponds to the disposition Lehr displays in his text. Furthermore, Christian's identity is based on the depressive effect of shame as the basis for his personality, which manifests in the quoted formula of 'a shadow and shame: person'. Shame is 'at its deepest layer, the ever-deepening conviction of one's *unlovability*' (Wurmser 1981: 92). In the case of Lehr's protagonist, this feeling is rooted in the negated infantile dependency and in an inevitable involvement in his family's history. Lehr's novella is a depiction of an outwardly successful man in both his private and his business life, who has inwardly remained a disturbed, unviable, libidinal dependent child. His suicide wish is made plausible as the result of the over-identification with the deeds of the emotionally split-off father figure, but also as a wish for the restoration of the symbiotic unity with the dead brother (which is imagined in intense, sometimes tawdry images of salvation and paradise).

The second-generation narrator has been confronted as a youth with atrocious, fascistically motivated violence that he neither experienced first-hand nor carried out himself, but whose perpetrator was his father, a fact which he continuously but unsuccessfully attempts to suppress. Psychoanalytically, we are thus dealing with a 'type of identification with a story that does not belong to the generation of the child but rather took place before his time' (Bohleber 1998: 262). The parent generation of the German post-war children is marked through their inability to mourn: through a far-reaching and continuous denial of the incidences of the Third Reich. The existential 'feelings of guilt and shame over the Nazi past' generally lead to a 'de-realisation of the Nazi period' and to a lack

of a consideration of the sufferings of the victims (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1975: 4, 16, 24). This collective and negating type of repression has a fatal impact on the second generation.

The topic of siblings, children, grandchildren or other close relatives of perpetrators has rarely been treated in post-war German literature (one example would be Martin Walser's drama *Der schwarze Schwam*, 1964), owing to its tabooed topic, but has turned into a more and more prominent theme in recent decades. One may mention a number of heterogeneous prose works here, such as Bernhard Schlink's novel *Der Vorleser* (1995), Peter Schneider's narrative *Vati* (1996), Tanja Dückers's novel *Himmelskörper* (2003), Uwe Timm's autobiographical account *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003) or Dagmar Leupold's autobiographic text *Nach den Kriegen. Roman eines Lebens* (2004). Since the turn of the millennium, there has also been a fast-growing body of research literature in literary studies on this topic (cf. Pinfold 2001; Blasberg 2002; Heimböckel 2008; Hermann 2008, 2010; Till 2009; Eigler 2010; Kamińska 2010; Schmitz 2009, 2010, 2011; Welsh 2012; Hanitzsch 2013; Pinfold 2015; Benthien 2016). Most of these publications deal with particular works – often in a comparative mode – that are less experimental and radical than Lehr's novella. Therefore, their insights differ, although several of them argue from the perspective of transgenerational traumata as well. Studies by historians, psychologists and journalists have likewise demonstrated the fatal, long-lasting impact of transgenerational shame and guilt on the micro-level, especially in the case of Nazi perpetrators within one's own family (cf. Müller-Hohagen 1994, Welzer *et al.* 2005, Senfft 2016). The composure for the psyche of the second generation, the children of Nazi parents, obviously is the strongest:

The examination of the children of the perpetrator generation showed that the mental mechanisms of the transgenerational transfer



of historic traumatisation are structurally similar to those of the victim generation. The children of perpetrators also become the bearers of a secret that derives from the pact of silence, which they, however, suspect and subconsciously assume in identification with it. But they are different secrets, and it is a very different story here that – through silencing – speechlessly but tyrannically invades the psychological reality of the children. (Bohleber 1998: 259)

Even though the ‘mental mechanisms’ of transgenerational transference of a victim or perpetrator constellation may correspond on an individual or familial level to a certain extent, as the psychoanalyst Werner Bohleber claims, they of course do not correspond on a societal level, on the level of public discourse (cf. Welsh 2006: 3f.).

Bohleber depicts the clinical case study of a man whose father was also an SS doctor involved in human experimentation. The similarities with the novella are distinct to such an extent that one may speculate if Lehr perhaps knew of the article, which appeared in a much-discussed edited German volume entitled *Die dunkle Spur der Vergangenheit* (*The Dark Trace of the Past*) three years before the publication of the novella. For example, Bohleber claims that his patient ‘has no sense of his lifetime’, that he is missing ‘a feeling of personal completion’, that he complains of ‘a deficient feeling of continuity’ or that ‘he actually consists of nothing but fragments’ (Bohleber 1998: 264). However, the psychoanalyst determines that his patient has protected the integrity of his father at the expense of the development of his own personality. The patient was connected to his Nazi parents by an ‘indissoluble band’ (*ibid.* 269) that he was unable to release himself from. Bohleber remarks: ‘Patients of the second generation, whose parents were involved in Nazi crimes, are thus at danger of having their pasts de-realised’ (*ibid.*

271). Such a de-realisation can also be found in Lehr’s novella, namely in one of the few passages in which the father–son relationship is actually broached and where the protagonist makes a remark about himself that he ‘became nearly. As invisible: as Dr. X. whom. I hardly Sensed anymore’ (Lehr 2001: 123–4).

In psychoanalysis, a pathological subconscious transgenerational approximation and identification is called ‘telescoping’ (cf. Faimberg 2005). The term recalls the early debate surrounding somatic traumata, where the collision and interlocking of railway cars, which end in train accidents, was referred to as such (cf. Weigel 1999: 65). On the level of the unconscious, psychic telescoping results in the drawing towards one another and even the questioning of the separability and linear succession of generations and the ‘limits of an individual biography and the psychic apparatus of an individual’ (*ibid.*, cf. Welsh 2006: 4–5). Telescoping may result in a transgenerational traumatisation. In Germany, a global traumatisation resulting from the unbearable shame and guilt was also the latent disposition of the post-war decades:

The shame connected with the German name from then on was a matter of collective identity. The trauma of 1945 resulted, not only from ruin and rape, death and defeat, but also from the sudden loss of self-respect and moral integrity. ... The triumphant notion of a German *Kultur* nation was replaced by the traumatising disclosure of the Holocaust: the nation that gave birth to a prodigious *Weltliteratur* had procreated also the unspeakable and inconceivable horror of the extermination camps. (Giesen 2004: 120)

Lehr constructs the fictive story of a son discovering the personal guilt and crimes of his father. Owing to an inability to communicate, however – a ‘post-war coalition of silence’ (Giesen 2004: 121) – the protagonist never

really investigates what his father did but, on the contrary, leaves home and denies communication with his parents. The novella exemplifies how the immense, enigmatic and even ‘mythical’ paternal guilt leads to global over-identification with the concentration-camp victims and their unbearable suffering on the side of the son, although in part also to an inflated sense of self-pity. Moreover, surreal fantasies of collective healing and the recovery of all sick people – the closing of their wounds and burns, even the reintegration of maimed and dismembered bodies – intersect the text (cf., i.e., Lehr 2001: 99). The protagonist analogises his own profession as ‘doctors without Touching’ (*ibid.* 131, *passim*), and thus implies that he has chosen his profession of a pharmacologist in order to work in a related professional field to that of his father but without being able to cause physical pain.

In spite of his attempts to lead a normal life, the ‘wound’ (Lehr 2001: 42) – the English translation of the Greek word *trauma* – of not knowing any details of his father’s deeds and his adopted and incomprehensible guilt, remains threatening. The text suggests that Christian Rauch ultimately takes his own life because of this unending horror: ‘what | i did not want to know, Robert: has become an abyss in me which has swallowed me alive over more than thirty years implacably’ (Lehr 2002: 179), one reads on one of the last pages of the novella. ■

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