

Trentham, 18 August 2019

### **'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg': Pictures in Prose**

Henry Handel Richardson's 'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg' comprise two of her longest and most tightly woven stories. For the half hour or so that I will be discussing them today, I will be treating 'Life and Death of Peter'le Luthy' and 'The Professor's Experiment' as a complementary pair with common thematic and structural concerns. Several scattered pieces of evidence suggest that Henry Handel Richardson completed her 'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg' in London in or about 1916 from notes made during the period in which she lived in Strasbourg between October 1896 and April 1903.<sup>1</sup> A probable imaginative source for 'Peter'le' (here using Richardson's abbreviated title for 'Life and Death of 'Peter'le Luthy') is two entries in Richardson's diary for 1899 which correspond as an unsentimental record of a short and unnamed life. On 3 June, she wrote: 'went to see E.'s baby' (E. being her maid Eva); and a few weeks later on 25 June, 'went to see dead baby.'<sup>2</sup> Nothing more is known about

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<sup>1</sup> J.G. Robertson noted that Richardson completed the first sketch of a story named 'Richard'le' on 25 July 1910 (NLA MS 133/9/424). On 12 June 1916 Richardson referred to a work by this name in her diary (NLA MS 133/8/104). This was presumably an early iteration of 'Peter'le'.

Richardson claimed that both 'Life and Death of Peter'le Luthy' and 'The Professor's Experiment' were written during WWI from earlier notes ('Some Notes on My Books, *Virginia Quarterly* 1940 republished in *Southerly*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1963, p. 19).

Olga Roncoroni wrote that the stories were completed in London and were both early works. ('Places in which Henry Handel Richardson was living when Writing her various works' NLA MS 133/9/498).

<sup>2</sup> Henry Handel Richardson, 'Diary 1899' (NLA MS 133/8/3).

Richardson's experiences and observations in visiting her maid. The inspiration for the setting of 'The Professor's Experiment' was Richardson's own experience as the young wife of an academic in Strasbourg. Her letters to her sister and mother evidence the social obligation of a young Lector to his Professors. More specifically, she describes calling on a Professor (Emil Koepell) and his sister. There is no suggestion, however, that the relationship between Paulchen and Annemarie was modelled on that of Koepell and his sister.<sup>3</sup>

In reading the two stories together, it readily becomes apparent that for the most part, they form a diptych: hinged panels depicting separate, but related scenes. The notable divergence from this structure occurs where 'Peter'le' ends as if nothing has changed, but 'The Professor's Experiment' continues as a longer story towards Annemarie's thoughts of rebellion. This point of departure might have been part of the original plan for the stories, or might have been introduced as a later revision. The stories were published jointly for the first time under the heading 'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg' in *The End of a Childhood* in 1934.<sup>4</sup> Prior to that, they were published in separate volumes of *Good Housekeeping* (London). In June 1931, following on from the success of

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<sup>3</sup> October 1896, vol. I, nos. 7, 9, 11 and 12 in Henry Handel Richardson, *Henry Handel Richardson: The Letters*, Edited by Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele, 3 vols, Carlton South Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2000 (hereafter *Letters*).

<sup>4</sup> Published by Heinemann (London) and W. W. Norton (New York).

the omnibus edition of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1930), a slightly abridged version of 'Peter'le' appeared in serialised form (vol. 19, June 1931), and the following year in book form in *Twelve Best Short Stories from Good Housekeeping*. 'Peter'le' was published for a second time in 1931 alongside 'Mary Christina' in *Two Studies* — a beautiful limited edition booklet published by the Ulysses Press.<sup>5</sup> In 1933, with some diffidence, Richardson agreed to seize a moment of public interest following the death of her husband to have 'The Professor's Experiment' put forward for publication.<sup>6</sup> It was published by *Good Housekeeping* in October of that year (vol. 24). Possibly, the separation of the 'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg' in published form until 1934 was driven by Richardson's desire to reap the financial and profile-raising rewards of initial serial publication. Alternatively, it might have reflected her expressed dissatisfaction, at least in the later years, with 'The Professor's Experiment'. It is not clear when, if at any time after their completion and before reluctantly agreeing to arrange and publish her collected stories for *The End of a Childhood*, she had any expectation of the stories being published together.

Richardson's accounts of the *Good Housekeeping* publications reveal much of her thematic concerns within the stories. Inevitable tensions arose between

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<sup>5</sup> Alice M. Head (ed.), *Twelve Best Stories of Good Housekeeping*, London: Nicholson and Watson, 1932; *Two Studies*, London: Ulysses Press, 1931). Richardson was working with two different versions of 'Life and Death of Peter'le Luthy' at the same time for these separate publications.

<sup>6</sup> Richardson to Mary Kernot, 5 September 1933 (*Letters* vol. II, no. 839).

the popular magazine which sought as its 'first essential' that 'the reader shall be interested — not bored or puzzled or disgusted' and, on the other hand, the author who wished subtly to push her subject beyond the parameters of of 'polite society.'<sup>7</sup> It may in passing be observed that although *Good Housekeeping* was not a serious literary journal in the manner of *The English Review*, its contributors were serious writers, including John Galsworthy and Vera Brittain whose work appeared alongside 'Peter'le'.

In 1927 Richardson wrote to her friend Mary Kernot in Melbourne of an unpublished story of approximately 8,000 words: 'It is a tale of old Strasbourg, & for those who can read between the lines, treats of a subject that is not generally alluded to in polite society.'<sup>8</sup> This story was 'Life and Death of Peter'le Luthy'. Before turning to the issues of immorality or questionable behaviours which are evident in each of the 'Two Tales', I wish to explore a small, but important editorial change to her title which disturbed Richardson in the magazine publication of 'Peter'le in order to begin to understand her construction of the story as an ambiguous and multi-layered narrative. The typescript that Richardson provided to *Good Housekeeping* was entitled 'Life and Death of Peterle Luthy', and yet the published version was 'The Life and Death of Peterle Luthy'. Without the definite article, the title captures the

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<sup>7</sup> Alice M. Head, 'The Art of the Short Story', *Twelve Best Stories from Good Housekeeping*, London: Nicholson and Watson, 1932, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> 21 November 1927 (*Letters* vol. II, no. 407).

passing impact on the family of Peter'le's short existence. In this form, it reflects what the last line of the story spelled out in no uncertain terms: 'And before the sun went down that night, it was almost as though Peter'le had never been.' It is interesting that Richardson insisted this final sentence be removed for *Two Studies*. It perhaps was at odds with her technique of refusing explanation. Nevertheless, it was reinstated either accidentally or intentionally three years later in *The End of a Childhood*.

Richardson tried in various ways to clarify Peter'le's role within the broader story. Another such example was in response to *Good Housekeeping's* editorial substitution of her subtitle, 'An Interior' for 'A Little Gleam of Light Between Two Eternities'. In a letter to Jacob Schwartz of the Ulysses Bookshop, Richardson wrote: 'The flamboyant sub-title is the editor's own addition: mine was simply An Interior — to be taken in the style of the Dutch painters.'<sup>9</sup> In referring to the Dutch school of art, Richardson was also, via her non-fiction essay 'A Danish Poet' (1897), alluding to the novel *Fru Marie Grubbe: Interiors from the Seventeenth Century* (1876) by Jens Peter Jacobsen. In this essay, Richardson identified similarities between the novel and the Dutch genre painters.<sup>10</sup> These were artists such as Jan Steen and Gerard Dou whose work

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<sup>9</sup> 12 November 1931 (Letters vol. II, no. 655). Richardson omitted the subtitle in *The End of a Childhood*.

<sup>10</sup> First published in *Cosmopolis: An International Monthly Review*, vol. VIII, November 1897, pp. 346-58. Republished in Clive Probyn and Bruce Steele (eds), *J. P. Jacobsen | Niels Lyhne*, Translated from the Danish by Henry Handel Richardson, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2003, pp. 222-36.

was characterised by domestic interiors realistically delineated. On 22 December 1937, Richardson sent Oliver Stonor a postcard reproduction of 'The Harpiscord Lesson' by Steen from the Wallace Collection in London. In the same collection is another work by Steen titled 'Celebrating the Birth' which is characterised by chaotic behaviour and symbols of infidelity.<sup>11</sup> Typically such genre paintings depicted children with their guardians, usually mothers, actively involved in their everyday environments. The scenes were often complex and ambiguous expressions of morality in which the children functioned to comment on and reflect the behaviours and thoughts of the adults. As in 'Peter'le', the paintings were often less about the children than about the adults, even in instances where the title seemed to suggest that the child was to be the focus.<sup>12</sup> Richardson wrote to Jacob Schwartz about 'Peter'le': 'The theme is as much of the family as the child: the infant covers the incest.'<sup>13</sup> Peter'le's short life as represented through the detailed factual description, plot, and character 'covers' another narrative that is thematically and dramatically defined by incest.

The unmatched Delft cups and saucers at the beginning of 'The Professor's Experiment' are perhaps another allusion to the Dutch genre paintings of the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.tripimprover.com/blog/celebrating-the-birth-by-jan-steen>

<sup>12</sup> May Frances Durantini, *The Child in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> 23 November 1931 (*Letters* vol. II, no. 667).

seventeenth century and to Jacobsen's 1897 novel. Delftware often displayed the types of landscapes described by Richardson in her essay on Jacobsen and which she rendered in the shifting scenes of Strasbourg in 'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg'. Delftware was also found in some Dutch genre paintings,<sup>14</sup> and delft tiles were a feature of the opening segment of *Fru Marie Grubbe*. The small and seemingly insignificant detail of the unmatched delftware within the strictly ordered environment of 'The Professor's Experiment' might, like the subtitle of 'Peter'le', be a direction to the informed reader to look for covert narratives of disruption and fragility running through the text.

The editor at *Good Housekeeping* perhaps was alert to potential readings of incest in 'Life and Death of Peter'le Luthy'. At four significant points in the narrative, the editor substituted the word Stepfather for Father. In 1933, this same magazine sought to impose its moral standard on 'The Professor's Experiment' by increasing Elsa's age from twenty-four to thirty years, thereby reducing the age difference between her and the forty-seven-year old Professor. Illustrations were yet another way in which the magazine sought to influence its readers' interpretations of the stories. In her own copy of *Good Housekeeping's* 'Peter'le', Richardson drew a line through the illustrations. She

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.aronson.com/delftware-in-seventeenth-century-paintings/>

commented that the illustrations to 'The Professor's Experiment' made Elsa to 'look like a stout hag of at least 50.'<sup>15</sup>

In 1934 the publication of *The End of a Childhood* was an opportunity for Richardson to re-present and reframe the two stories as companion pieces. She corrected many of the changes and mistakes made in the *Good Housekeeping* magazine publications.<sup>16</sup> In 'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg' she offers contrasting visions of domestic life in Strasbourg during the German period (1871-1918). The stories are divided geographically, socially, and psychologically by their respective conceptions of the town. Yet, in each story there an acknowledgement via a minor character that these worlds are not totally separate. In 'Peter'le', this is through the figure of the Councillor of Justice who lets a room in the house; and in 'The Professor's Experiment', it is through the first maid, Marthe. 'Peter'le' is set in the the older and poorer parts of the town; in 'The Professor's Experiment' the home is in the more affluent modern quarter with its centre the University. The comparisons and contrasts between the stories are numerous. Taking Henriette's homeward journey with Peter'le and Paulchen's outward journey away from Annemarie as an example, we can see how Richardson echoes the language in each story.

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<sup>15</sup> Richardson to Kernot, 25 December 1933 (*Letters* vol. II, no. 858).

<sup>16</sup> These included the restoration of descriptive passages which were removed to fit *Good Housekeeping's* word length requirement. Richardson also used the opportunity to rectify the magazine's conflation of the characters of Marthe and Mathilda for a single character named Marthe.



The phrase 'Her way led her' in 'Peter'le' mirrors the phrase 'His way led him' in 'The Professor's Experiment'. The pathways taken by the characters provide a literal and symbolic dichotomy of experience. Henriette struggles to walk the uneven cobbled streets and the winding roads which take her through colourful, varied and busy parts of Strasbourg. She pauses at points to observe without introspection. Paulchen's journey to the town park with its manmade reproductions of the natural world is colourless, ordered, and lacking activity and history. For Paulchen, the park is a safe place for him to dissect the form and content of the letter from Elsa. He only briefly takes in his surrounds before turning inward to contemplate the arrangements and consequences of his engagement. These distinct behaviours reflect their relative states of mind: Henriette longs for escape and release and Paulchen desires the comfort of his closed and ordered world. Yet, there is reason to believe that these hopes and desires will not be realised. Henriette's journey home with Peter'le ends with a symbol of seduction and danger: the poisonous oleander plant. Paulchen's journey is marked by a symbol of freedom and of passion: the call of the nightingales and the 'hot and scented' mass of roses. The parallel and opposing elements of the stories continue until the respective deaths of Peter'le and Herr Braun.

Rather than continue a reading in this vein, however, I am going to focus on the topic mentioned earlier of covert narratives running through the ‘Two Tales of Old Strasbourg’. These narratives are played out in both stories through the theme of incest, and more specifically still in Oedipal-type relationships. We know that Richardson had a keen interest in the writings of Freud.<sup>17</sup> In 1912 Freud’s student, Otto Rank published in German *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation*.<sup>18</sup> Although there is no evidence that Richardson read this book, there is a high likelihood that she would have come across it through her husband’s scholarly work on German and Scandinavian Literature or otherwise in pursuit of her own literary interests.<sup>19</sup> Many of the texts discussed by Rank are known to have been read by Richardson, including the novel which she translated from the Danish, Jen Peter Jacobsen’s *Niels Lyhne* (1896).

In ‘Peter’le’, Willi’s likeness to the stepfather through his blonde hair and blue eyes hints at a forbidden sexual encounter between Henriette and her stepfather. If we wish to push the limits of Freud’s ideas in the text, we could find three-year-old Willi’s open affection for Henriette and her encouragement

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<sup>17</sup> Although Freud did not mention the Oedipus complex by name until 1910 in ‘A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men’ (Contributions to the Psychology of Love I), the ideas had earlier appeared in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1910) and the case history of the ‘Rat Man’ (1909).

<sup>18</sup> English translation by Gregory C. Richter, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

<sup>19</sup> John George Robertson (1867-1933), Professor of German Language and Literature, The University of London (1903-1933).

of it to be a mimicking the Oedipal phase of development.<sup>20</sup> Peter'le's blue eyes like those of his older brother mirror those of the stepfather, and not those of the 'blackeyed Italian overseer.' The relationship between Henriette, her stepfather and her mother is typical of a symbolic Oedipal triangle. When her mother overhears a jealous quarrel between Henriette and her stepfather, she knowingly declares: 'Ah! It's me that ought to go. Yes, if I were out of the way!' Instead of entering into a rivalry with Henriette, she largely resolves this Oedipal drama by absenting herself from the situation in the home. An exception to this occurs when the family gathers around Mamsell Mimi, and its members temporarily assume their conventional and acceptable roles.

'Life and Death of Peter'le Luthy' does not, like some of the other works identified by Rank concerning the step-parent including Friedrich Schiller's 'Don Carlos', contain the strong language of desire. Instead, the relationship between Henriette and her stepfather is only ever told through suggestion. Presumably, the overriding reason for Richardson making the father figure a stepfather was to conceal the incest for the sake of her publishers' and readers' sensitivities. Although the relationship with the stepfather does not literally constitute incest, the stepfather does act as a substitute for the absent

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<sup>20</sup> See Rank, p. 24.

father. As in *Don Carlos*, the symbolic incest is brought to light by reference to the step-parent as the parent.

In 'The Professor's Experiment', two types of Oedipal dramas are played out. The first triangle involves, the Professor, his sister (Annemarie), and his new wife (Elsa); and the second involves Elsa, her father (Herr Braun), and her husband (the Professor). Although sibling incest does not conform to the original model of the Oedipus complex as defined by Freud, Otto Rank defines it as a 'second edition' in which the sibling is the substitute for the repressed impulses of the original Oedipus complex. The Sibling complex, according to Rank, is 'less impeded and more lasting [in] manner' than the traditional Oedipal relationship.<sup>21</sup> Annemarie refuses to give Paulchen the same space to play out his relationship as Henriette's mother afforded her and the stepfather. Richardson was well acquainted with many of the works surveyed by Rank to demonstrate his theory of the Sibling complex in literature. These included works by Goethe, Schiller, and Wagner.<sup>22</sup>

There is no indication or suggestion that the incest theme in the relationship between Paulchen and Annemarie is anything more than symbolic. Portrayals of the relationship are characterised varyingly as child / mother and husband /

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<sup>21</sup> Rank, p. 363.

<sup>22</sup> Including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-1814), Johann Friedrich Schiller's *Die Braut von Messina* (the second part of *Die Räuber*, 1781), and Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* (1856). See Rank, pp. 363, 412-85, 536.

wife. At Annemarie's tears over Paulchen's engagement to Elsa we are told, 'He outdid himself in expostulation and supplication, knowing all the shame an erring son knows, when he sees his mother's tears flow' (Richardson changed the word 'man' for 'son' in her revised typescript of 1933). Annemarie's use of the diminutive 'Paulchen', renders the Professor, like the infant Peter'le, childlike. She asserts that it is her provision of maternal caution and care that allowed for his career progression from merchant's office to Professor of Comparative Philology at the University.

Annemarie's reaction to the engagement is also like that of a jilted lover: 'Have I failed in any way in my duty? Have I left anything undone?' And later: 'How did I fail to satisfy you? — I who would have given the skin off my bones to serve you?' Annemarie's technique for resolving the Oedipal type drama is to refuse 'to yield her place' as his symbolic wife. In response to Annemarie's reprimands the Professor offers to break off his engagement to Elsa, but Annemarie refuses to allow him to bear the indignity and social humiliation that this would create. Instead she works to ensure that Elsa is the outsider in the new family arrangement. She denies Elsa's dreams of performing the wifely duties of decorating the house, cooking, and sometimes even helping the Professor with his work. Likewise, Annemarie asserts that she, rather than

Elsa, is the one to attend the coffee-parties of the wives of the academics. Elsa learns never to challenge the older woman's rule.

The Professor, however, desires the one thing Annemarie cannot provide for him: a family such as his academic colleagues have with 'knots of thriving children at their heels'. He dreams of obedient sons to look up to him. The juxtaposition here with Henriette's fatherless sons is evident. It is not until Elsa becomes pregnant that Annemarie acknowledges and respects her position as wife and mother-to-be. Annemarie's inability to provide this role allows the opening for Elsa to exert power, and thereby to resolve this Oedipal triangle.

*Good Housekeeping* was alert to another symbolic incest relationship which plays out in the story between the forty-seven-year old Professor and twenty-four-year old Elsa. In response to the magazine changing Elsa's age to thirty, Richardson wrote: 'it entirely spoilt my point'.<sup>23</sup> The point, of course, was that the Professor was old enough to be Elsa's father. This is reinforced in Elsa feeling the Professor's gaze on her to be fatherly in nature. *Good Housekeeping* did not alter the other symbolic father-daughter incest relationship in the story between Elsa and Herr Braun. Herr Braun's jokes are deliberately ambiguous.

For example:

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<sup>23</sup> Richardson to Kernot, 25 December 1933 (*Letters*, vol. II, no. 858).

—Then, on reaching home, Elsa would fling her arms round her father's neck and hug and kiss him.

“There, there, snailkin!” said Herr Braun, and laughed and laughed.

“Practising on poor old pa, what? Well, well! He must take what he can get, while he can get it.”

Here we are reminded that Freud identifies one of the sites in which the forbidden Oedipal wish manifests itself is in the realm of jokes. Herr Braun's death should have made way for an unchallenged partnership between the Professor and his expecting wife, but Elsa loses all strength and inspiration to continue. Both she and, shortly afterward, the infant die. The story does not end with a reversion to the earlier order. An enlightened Annemarie is hatching plans of revolution. The Professor's experiment of marriage, unlike Peter'le's short life, has caused a radical change to the domestic relationships with which the story began.

At the end of these readings, we can see that beyond the subjects of their respective titles, Richardson's employment of impersonal and detached narration, and her use of symbolism in the manner of Jacobsen and the Dutch genre artists open up the stories to unexpected interpretations. The baby Peter'le can be seen as the subject of 'Life and Death of Peter'le Luthy' or as present for the purpose of casting a light on the behaviours of the adults around him. Similarly, 'The Professor's Experiment' can be read as a story of

the Professor's marriage to Elsa and its subsequent effect on his domestic environment, or the marriage might function to illuminate the existing dysfunction of the family relationships. *Good Housekeeping* was never going to censor completely the questionable nature of the relationships within 'Peter'le' and 'The Professor's Experiment' with the switching of a few words or the imposition of illustrations. Richardson's artistry is much more complicated and ambiguous than to be restricted to a single reading. A success of her 'Two Tales of Old Strasbourg' is that they remain open to polite and impolite readers alike.