

Repetitive Routes and the Unraveling of a Linesman: Mapping the Railway in Gerhart Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel*

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Introduction

FRANCO MORETTI, A STANFORD digital humanist, asks in his work *Graphs, Maps, and Trees* (2005) “do maps *add* anything, to our knowledge of literature?” (35). In the case of German realism, the answer seems to be yes. Maps of all types allow researchers and readers alike to more effectively visualize the literary landscape, which enables them to understand nuances of individual texts and collections of texts that might otherwise be lost. This paper looks specifically at the railway space in Gerhart Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel* (1888) and is part of a larger academic project, “Mapping the Literary Railway (MLR),” developed by Professor Paul A. Youngman and a team of undergraduate digital humanities researchers including this author.¹ The goal of MLR is to provide visual interpretations of German-speaking realist authors' works that depict the most transformative technological advance of the 19th century – the railway. Works we have already mapped include: “Die Brück am Tay,” *Cécile*, *Effi Briest*, and now, *Bahnwärter Thiel*. These dynamic visualizations can change how readers and researchers interpret a novel. Inasmuch as readers can now actually see a facsimile of the transport space, they can go beyond merely reading scholarly interpretations of space and time in a work of literary fiction and interpret the texts in their own right as the maps allow. This paper's focus is a novella that concentrates on one section of train track, run many times by several different trains, and the common signalman who operates that space. *Thiel* contrasts with other longer texts we analyze in MLR that depict a broader network of transportation space and locations, as well as a more extensive slate of characters. In short, the map of *Thiel* reveals that the repetitive route depicted does two things: 1) it is representative of the psychological unraveling of the signalman and 2) demonstrates the repetitive nature of the rail routes act as an inescapable trap in this novella that is aptly subtitled: A Novellistic Study.

Moretti's work is central to the visualizations that lead us to our conclusions. After looking at previous scholarship which sought to create a listing of all published works in the UK during the 18th and 20th centuries, a national bibliography of sorts, Moretti notes that literary scholars have only read and analyzed a fraction of what is considered the published canon. He emphasizes that attempts to analyze all published texts would be both impossible and impractical: “A field this large cannot be understood stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases. Because it isn't a sum of individual cases: it's a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole” (4). We, too, take a systemic approach to our research. We look at the transport system in German realism overall, and also at the transport system in individual works, in this case *Thiel*. We care about specific individual train routes and occurrences, especially as they relate to plot development and the aesthetic of space and the railway as it is represented in the work in question, but we are also interested in how those routes form the rail network in the text.

¹Mapping the Literary Railway (<http://literaryrailway.academic.wlu.edu>) is an Omeka based Neatline Project. Omeka is a content management system aimed at exhibiting digital exhibits and Neatline is a humanities mapping tool Omeka plug-in developed by the Scholars' Lab at the University of Virginia.

While we map all the routes with an air of precision, we cannot emphasize strongly enough that the mapmaking process is not objective. There are always subjective choices to be made. Despite this subjectivity, the basic thesis of MLR still holds: when the reader or researcher is better able to visualize what the author depicts in terms of transport space, they can develop a more accurate understanding of the work in question, as well as offer more grounded explanations and interpretations. When all train travel and associated references are taken together, the conglomeration of material provides a richer, more systemic understanding of the fictional representation of the railway space. A “bird’s-eye view” of a map aids the reader and researcher inasmuch as they become more familiar with how even the remotest of geographic locations, ones that may be mentioned only in passing, help to establish the spatial framework for the text. With this view, we can better understand the fictional representation of the railway system, which was often based on actual rail routes, as a collective and the role it played in the German cultural imagination in the era of its inception and expansion.

The German historian and cultural studies scholar Wolfgang Schivelbusch published his systematic analysis of the railway, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, in 1977. In his third chapter “Railroad Space and Railroad Time,” he writes at length on the ‘annihilation of time and space,’ a concept first discussed in the British literary and political periodical *Quarterly Review* in 1839. The phrase, annihilation of space and time, accompanies most of the secondary literature that analyzes the early adoption and expansion of the railway. Before the creation and implementation of the railway, the fastest method of land travel was the stagecoach. A train could travel 20-30 miles per hour and, once the lines were established and coordinated, it was possible to travel vast distances in a relatively short amount of time. Specifically, “any given distance was covered in one-third of the customary time: temporally, that distance shrank to one-third of its former length” (Schivelbusch 34). It is difficult for the modern reader to conceive of how great an impact the railway had on temporal and spatial relations. This rapid transportation troubled many denizens of the nineteenth century and made them uneasy. Schivelbusch argues that once individuals no longer experienced exhaustion, either first-hand or second-hand, through say, watching a horse tire after a long day of travel, the perception of spatial distance was lost. In the modern era, most do not think about the physical distance of their daily commute unless their car is broken down, and they have many miles to cover on foot before their shift starts.

Space was not merely annihilated or destroyed, but “one might say that [space and time] collided” (Schivelbusch 38). Schivelbusch points out that for many localities, their identity was often associated with the transportation space (38). If one were to consider modern air travel, the American Midwest, also known as “flyover country,” is the best modern example. It is impossible to process the vast distances that are covered on most flights. When individuals do not interact with the space around them, it is not possible for them to truly grasp the distance unless they must travel by less time-efficient means. The passengers on the various routes that pass by the signalman in *Bahnwärter Thiel*, for example, are incapable of processing the natural world around them; this fact stands in great contrast to Thiel, who is entirely aware of how the train interacts with space and nature – it is his livelihood. For the modern reader, where railway travel has been largely replaced by even faster travel (car and air), it is difficult to fully understand how perceptions of time and space were affected by the railway in the nineteenth century. We seek to aid readers by highlighting the transportation space and travel time with our maps. While the travel space may have been annihilated, the reader, using our project, is better equipped to piece that space back together and, hopefully, then able to interpret the text through a new lens.

Hauptmann and His Best-Known Novella

Before we begin our analysis of *Thiel*, some background on Hauptmann and his novella is in order. Hauptmann began his work as a writer in the mid-1880s starting first with novellas and then moving on to plays. *Bahnwärter Thiel* was one of his early works completed in 1888. The 1912

Nobel Prize winner for literature, Hauptmann was an accomplished dramatist whose work often drew on realist and naturalist points of emphasis. The one that concerns us is the realist emphasis on science and technology and particularly manifestations of science and technology as truth claims in realist texts. Warren R. Maurer writes in *Understanding Gerhart Hauptmann* that Hauptmann's adolescence was shaped by his father's abrupt change in occupation; his father would eventually operate a restaurant near the railway and therefore "the steam engine was for young Hauptmann the embodiment of an awe-inspiring, quasi-diabolical technology" (128) (emphasis added). And as J. M. van der Laan, a Germanist who focuses on technology in society and culture points out, *Thiel* and Hauptmann's other works such as *Die Weber* (1892) deal with the "contemporary technological milieu" (128). Hauptmann's only works, however, that deal explicitly with the railway are *Thiel* and his 1888 poem "Im Nachtzug."

Thiel focuses on a signalman, Franz Thiel, and three other named characters: Minna, his dead first wife, whose role is limited to visions; Tobias, Thiel's son who serves as an important plot device at the end of the novella but does not truly interact or participate with the reader; and Lene, his second wife. Thiel is the only character who interacts with the railway in any consistently meaningful way. For the purposes of MLR, his occupation as a signalman explains the presence of the railway but not what the railway represents. The small cast of characters and the size of the novella limit the overall interactions with the railway depicted on our map. When compared with longer, novelistic works with a wider variety of characters, the bird's eye view provided by our *Thiel* map looks less complex, but it is reflective of the novella form.

While length and character array are important aspects of a novella, there are other theorists that differentiate the novella from other literary forms. Indeed, the novella occupies a great deal of space in the German literary world and particularity in the realist movement. Theorists from Goethe (novellas contain an unheard of occurrence) to Ludwig Tieck (novellas have a clearly identifiable turning point) to Paul Heyse (novellas contain an identifiable symbol throughout) have speculated on the special nature of the novella, developing an entire school of novella theory. Many of these characteristics are evident in *Thiel*, and while this work is largely unfamiliar outside of German studies, it is widely celebrated as one of the most important examples of the novella form in the German tradition. Moreover, the form, as alluded to above, nicely suits the theme of the work and one sees this in the map. *Thiel* contains few characters and only one single line of action leading to Thiel's demise. The single route depicted on the map exemplifies the sparse nature of the plot and limited characterization. Unlike the novels we map like *Cecile and Effi Briest* in which the rail systems sprawl like the complicated arbor of a tree, the map of *Thiel* offers only the trunk of a tree. In short, the map reflects the tight, novella-like structure of the work.

Hauptmann's masterly novella takes place on one specific train track – a route that connects Berlin to Frankfurt an der Oder. More specifically, the setting is an isolated part of a forest on the outskirts of Berlin where Thiel has a small dwelling that he uses to carry out his daily duties. As a common signalman, Thiel has worked diligently on this one specific line for more than 10 years. His first wife, Minna, dies during the birth of their son Tobias. Shortly thereafter he decides, for the boy's sake, he must remarry. He marries Lene, an aggressive woman, large in stature, who is the polar opposite of his first wife. Lene and Thiel have another son, who remains unnamed throughout the novella. In the middle of one workday, Thiel unexpectedly stops by his home where he observes Lene abusing Tobias. He then capitulates to Lene's will and invites the entire family to his rail hut. It is after he sees the abuse that his psychological deterioration begins apace. Lene has long desired to accompany Thiel to work because there is a tillable field along the line. On arrival, he leaves Lene and the children to go about his business. At one point, he observes a train stopping suddenly on the track and discovers that Lene accidentally lost track of Tobias, who was fatally injured. Thiel is devastated by the loss of his firstborn son and his psychological unraveling continues at an even faster, and this time lethal, pace. Thiel bludgeons Lene to death and cuts his infant child's throat. After this attack, he goes back to the train tracks near his hut and after a

lengthy search by the authorities he is taken into custody and eventually conveyed to an asylum.

The Railway in Thiel

From our short summary of the text, one can see that the railway is the backbone of the novella. Indeed, our map lists twelve specific examples in this short work. These include identifiable train routes, but also noteworthy activity at or near the railway. Almost the entirety of the novella is mapped through these twelve instances. For example, Thiel's rail hut is located beside the train tracks and serves as a necessary hub to facilitate his occupation, as well as a shrine to his late wife. His hut, while initially his own refuge from Lene and a chapel to Minna, becomes the site of trauma as the last place Tobias was alive and a temporary resting spot once he was declared dead. Similarly, our map includes instances of accidents affecting Thiel because these accidents underscore the all-encompassing nature of his occupation as a means to support his family, and how, at times, it has been detrimental to his overall health. Ultimately, it is at the end of the novella, when he is sitting on the railroad track that his psychological break has manifested itself completely. In the following sections, we highlight the most salient instances of interaction on the railway and analyze them specifically and then the network as a whole.

The Express Train during a Storm

Thiel is at his hut during a massive storm and is afraid that the storm will prove so loud that it will prevent him from hearing the signal. He scurries outside to realize that the alarm is only just beginning to sound. It is then that he sees an apparition of his wife Minna appear along the tracks, but the Minna he sees wears rags and appears haggard and ill. As the train comes into view, the ghostly Minna is still on the track. Thiel almost signals the train to stop but he was unsuccessful and the train roars by him and his hut – Minna is gone. After the physical storm dissipates, Thiel's emotional storm seems to subside and he walks the track and aimlessly tightens the occasional bolt on his section of track to pass the time. And it is the description of this event that shows how Hauptmann intertwines the natural and the technological – even the supernatural in this instance. The railway and all things associated with it are described with nature imagery. The wires of the telegraph are like the “web of a gigantic spider” (67). The tracks begin to “glow like fiery snakes” (67). Then the train arrives with “panting and roaring,” and the earth shakes (67). Hauptmann then essentially repeats the same scene two pages later when the storm arrives. He writes, “A roaring and thundering filled Thiel's ear... the whole atmosphere was overflowing, booming, shaking, and roaring... The windows rattled, the earth quaked” (70-71). This latter scene depicting the storm is so similar to the arrival of the train that it is easy to imagine that Hauptmann meant to show the reader the inextricability of nature and technology.

The Silesian Express-Train

Once the family joins Thiel at his hut for an outing, Tobias accompanies Thiel on a walk along the tracks. Thiel is pleased by his son's interest in the passing trains. Tobias is left under Lene's supervision and suddenly, a train begins to brake suddenly. It is then that Thiel realizes that there is dark mass – his son Tobias – underneath the train. Thiel's earlier satisfaction is replaced with horror. He is not allowed to leave his duties and Lene is forced to go with an injured Tobias on the Silesian Express. After the train departs, the psychological unraveling that began with the death of his first wife spins out of control. Thiel imagines that Tobias is on the next train, but as it passes by him, he correctly foresees a badly injured Tobias. Thiel contemplates murdering his other, infant son and after a moment he comes to his senses and stops himself from choking the baby to death. In short, the train, which operates as a metaphorical representation of Thiel's psyche, kills the brightest spot in his otherwise dreary and monotonous life. As such, in Thiel's mind he is responsible for the death of Tobias.

The Gravel Train & The Berlin Express-Train

After the accident, Thiel reaches the tracks as a gravel train slows its approach; the narrator remarks that the various workers on the track were looking at him with concern and began to whisper as they saw him. As he walks to the last wagon, he sees a lifeless Tobias and a distraught Lene. Thiel can no longer contain himself and collapses beside the track; the gravel workers then take an unconscious Thiel back to his home with a sobbing Lene and infant in tow. When the men return with Tobias' body, which had been left at Thiel's rail hut, the house door is ajar and further inspection reveals that Thiel's family was killed. Thiel is finally located the next morning at the exact section of track where Tobias was killed. All attempts to communicate with him are met with difficulty and he violently resists being removed from the track. A policeman supervises Thiel's transportation to a detention center and, ultimately, to the insane asylum. It is fitting that Thiel's emotional unraveling occurred at the spot where he first connected with Tobias and where he spent the majority of his career.

Analysis

Beyond these individual instances, it is necessary to view the railway network in totality, specifically using the methodology of MLR, to better understand the text. When one zooms out, the train routes depicted in the novella offer the reader the opportunity to conceptualize the vast distances covered by the trains that pass by Thiel and his hut. Thiel is a small part of a much larger railway network - he is seemingly insignificant. Zooming in, however, this map view of the rail network also shows that for Thiel, every train seems as if it is the next train for he never interacts with the passengers or any of the rail workers on the specific routes - the only possible way for him to differentiate the various trains. In other words, the sheer monotony offers no real change in function, only grating repetition. However, even this notion of a static life filled with inevitable repetition changes when tragedy strikes and Thiel's young son, Tobias, is killed in an accident in which he is run over by a train and thrown back and forth much like a child's rubber ball. Moreover, Thiel literally stops the monotony by sitting on the tracks at the very end of the novella and refusing to move.

While technology is certainly an important theme, it is what provides the protagonist with an occupation, the matter of concern is not *that* technology dehumanized Thiel - we disagree with Van der Laan's characterization - but specifically *how* his particular role as a linesman working a monotonous job, caused a very human reaction, a psychological break. Van der Laan argues that Hauptmann's work "subtly exposes the impact of technology on human life" (128). We agree with this initial assessment to a degree. However, we take issue when van der Laan continues with his implied easy separation of the human from the technological: "Thiel is consequently unable to humanize the circumstances, in this case technological, in which he finds himself. Nor can he conceive for himself the necessary 'radical reality' which would preserve and protect his own humanity" (131). Thiel, the simple signalman, does not need to humanize his experiences with the railway; his experiences are indeed human. Before the incidents at the end of the novella, there is no indication that Thiel lacks an ability to process or humanize. In fact, his most human responses (longing for his first wife and the emotional breakdown after Tobias's death) happen either at his rail hut or shortly after interacting with those spaces.

Van der Laan, building on the earlier scholarship of Edgar Platen, suggests that Thiel's identity as a railroad crossing attendant is so technological that it deprives the linesman from his humanity: "A cog on a wheel cannot rebel against the wheel of which it is a part. He has become a function of the technology he serves. He has been absorbed into technology and in the process lost his humanity" (133). Yes, Thiel is a small part of a larger machine, a necessary cog, but he found meaning in his work. The problem with the railway does not lie in the fact that Thiel was a linesman, the problem is the result of the railway serving as a representation of the intersection of isolation, repetition, and emotional trauma.

Van der Laan's analysis results in an attempt to separate technology and nature. He notes in his article that other scholars have tied the emotional demise of Thiel to the interconnected nature of technology and nature (128). We agree with this analysis but reject attempts to starkly delineate the natural and the technological or even the human and the technological. One sees this conglomeration in the way Hauptmann combines metaphors to describe technology and nature utilizing the same vocabulary, as we describe in *The Express Train during a Storm* above. Such a conflation demonstrates the new relationship between the railway and the existing landscape – the natural and human is inextricably intertwined with the technological. One is not dominated by the other; they are parts of a greater whole. Hauptmann purposefully uses similar language to show that this intertwining is, at the same time, quite natural, for lack of a better word. Of one particular instance of Hauptmann's language, Youngman writes in *Black Devil and Iron Angel*, "this storm scene is so similar to the arrival of the train that it is difficult not to conclude that Hauptmann meant to imply the train, a human invention, is nevertheless an extension of nature not very different from the storm" (125). Humans must deal with both nature and technology and exist because of both. Similarly, human beings must be wary of both technology and nature because we are incapable of fully controlling both.

Part of our wariness lies in repetitive nature of both technology and nature. In *Thiel*, there is no difference between storms and trains - they come and go in a seemingly endless loop. Our maps show the arrival of the latter quite clearly. If one zooms out on our map, there appears to be a thick line between Berlin and Frankfurt an der Oder (see figure 3). Zooming in slightly more reveals that thick line to be a series of individual runs that frame Thiel's life (figure 4). It is not that the train has created a type of psychological prison preventing Thiel from interacting normally with the world, but rather it is that Hauptmann uses the train as a reflection of Thiel's mental state. As pointed out above, Hauptmann employs natural metaphors to describe technology and technological metaphors to describe nature. His use of the repetitive railway runs is similar to the latter – it is a metaphorical representation of a fundamentally human condition. Indeed, it is a metaphor that makes sense because technology, too, is also very much a part of what it is to be human.

The critic Eric Downing dives deeply into the role of repetition in realism. In *Double Exposures: Repetition and Realism in Nineteenth-century German Fiction*, he writes that there are three modes of repetition: repression, repetition compulsion, and death drive. Our research is most concerned with the second mode: repetition compulsion: Downing builds on Freud's early contributions to this discussion. Downing cites Freud, "to repeat the repressed material as a present experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as a piece of the past" (16). We see two instances of this. First, Thiel has visions of his first wife Minna carrying a bloody rag, and during these visions, he is most definitely experiencing his dead wife in the present. Such an experience is also precisely what happens to Thiel after the accident involving Tobias. Instead of thinking of his son's accident as something that had already occurred, Thiel takes that moment of his dying son and applies it to his experience with a local train: "Tobias must be on it. The closer it came, the more blurred the images grew before Thiel's eyes. Finally, he saw only the battered child with the bloody mouth" (83). Could Tobias have been on this train? Possibly, but the more important part is that Thiel was envisioning the condition of his son not as a past event but something that was happening in the present. Thiel's experiences with repetition compulsion highlight the layered uses of repetition in Hauptmann's novella. Indeed, repetition, as Barbara Johnstone suggests, can "be a basic ordering principle that is reassuring," or it can be the stuff of Sisyphean or Promethean nightmares (10). Thiel experiences the latter.

With the above analysis in mind, the question remains: What does Hauptmann's novella mean when one considers interpretations of this classic novella? The *Thiel* map reveals that Thiel and his hut are the focal points of this novella and that every train, as pointed out above, seems to be the next train for Thiel. He literally stands by as the trains pass, his position never really changing.

MLR provides insights that only visualizations can offer. For example, modern readers who are unfamiliar with the German landscape may not understand the importance of certain locations in the context of German history and will understand the space in a similar way to the nineteenth-century reader. If the reader is more acquainted with the landscape, he or she will see the trains rolling through the hills and meadows, not just in their mind but also through an annotated map with additional context. More, our mapping project demonstrates one of our interpretations of the text, that the individual train runs are not differentiable to Thiel. The varying train routes, whether an express train, a passenger train, or a gravel train, frame his existence, and it is only when tragedy strikes that the trains are forced to stop completely and occupy an unannihilated space. Such space is a rehabilitated version of Schivelbusch's space that had been destroyed by the railway. In the immediate aftermath of Tobias's injury, the passengers on the train can no longer see the train as just a means of transportation, but rather, they realize that the train can also be ruinous. After the train grinds to a sudden halt and the passengers look out the window, they see devastation – not necessarily as a manifestation of some diabolical technology, but as the result of any other deadly aspect of nature like a violent storm. While his occupation is supposed to facilitate travel, when Thiel sits on the tracks, once again another train is forced to slow down and enter in a new time and space as a common signalman is escorted away and eventually conveyed to an asylum. Thiel once again breaks away from the monotonous linesman life; the repetitive train routes with their indistinguishable features no longer matter. These instances of the trains stopping on the tracks represent his psychological unraveling.

Without the use of the online mapping software used in MLR, readers unfamiliar with German literature or geography are likely to miss the intersection of the railway and its role as a catalyst in destroying Thiel. Public transportation has served as a foundational component of German culture and its modern accessibility hides its origins. The railway was built almost literally on the backs of individuals like Thiel; a map allows for concrete visualization of Thiel's everyday life. One sees that his existence is dependent on the function of a system that dehumanized him. There is much misfortune in *Bahnwärter Thiel* and most of the tragic events take place on the railway, much to the dismay of the characters in the *Thiel* universe. Our map clarifies the repetition in Thiel's life, thereby showing the reader the nature of the transport space in his world and offers another explanation of the impetus for his psychological breakdown.

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