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Uncanny Perspectives on Infinity

Broadly speaking, there have been two phases through which readings of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* have passed since its initial publication in 1919. The first might be described as a rather one-sided analytic monologue about literature in which the latter was treated primarily as a testing ground for and illustration of psychoanalytic theory.<sup>1</sup> The second was one of literary »talk back«, a particularly fertile moment in the 1970s and 80s associated with brilliant readings by people like Neil Hertz, Samuel Weber, Hélène Cixous, and Friedrich Kittler.<sup>2</sup>

This phase had a double ambition: first, to attend more closely to the nuances of the literary text in general and to Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* in particular. As has often been noted, Freud devotes special attention to this story even as he turns a blind eye to the various sideshows it stages and modes of indirection it deploys. The phase's other ambition, one largely indebted to Lacan's opening of psychoanalysis to the field of structural linguistics, was to arrive, through close readings, at a notion of castration generally less visible and thematically stable than that proposed by Freud. As Weber stresses, »it is not the visible figure of the castrating father that comprises the remarkable essence or non-essence of castration, but rather the glimpse of that almost-but-not-quite-nothing, a glance which is therefore itself almost blind, but not quite, for it »sees« the difference that reveals and conceals itself in the same movement« (Weber, p. 1122). According to this reading, what Freud misses through a focus on visible objects and stable thematic contents is the self-difference of the signifier, a *movement* of difference that can only be glimpsed indirectly, if at all.<sup>3</sup> Like the Minister's lynx eye in *The Purloined Letter*, what oblique glimpses and sidelong glances »see« are links in a signifying chain – values and intersubjective relations defined not

by their positive content but negatively by their interaction with the other terms of the system, with terms and subjects whose most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.

Keenly aware of the mistakes Freud makes in his reading of Hoffmann and cognizant of the allegation that he »has eyes only for the Sandman« (Weber, p. 1121), I would nevertheless propose a third phase of encounter with his text, one that does not so much take issue with his reading as allow itself to be guided instead by his errors and the unique story he tells. I will therefore not read Freud's account *against* Hoffmann's text or try to gauge its accuracy by comparing it to the original. Instead, I propose to treat it as a story in its own right, as a unique adaptation, double, or creative rewriting of Hoffmann. In short, in a context defined by the »wish to be original, the fear of plagiarism, [and] the rivalry among writers« (Hertz, p. 97), I would like to treat Freud's summary reproduction of the story as a kind of Doppelgänger of the so-called original, as a translation that, in purporting to pass itself off as a faithful rendering, proceeds surreptitiously to tell a very different story.

I hesitate, however, to use the word »story« insofar as it suggests the narration of a series of events unfolding over time. I hesitate because what seems above all to fascinate Freud is a certain suspension, dilation, and holding open of time. Such openings are associated with moments of reversibility, fatal symmetry, and *mise-en-abîme* structures of reflection. Here I am concerned above all with the question of repetition, a question that is posed primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of a return *in time*. What needs to be taken into account, however, are also those returns that *suspend* time, hold it open, and, in doing so, provide what Benjamin calls a »perspective on infinity«.

»Let two mirrors reflect each other«, he proposes in *The Arcades Project*. »Then Satan plays his favorite trick and opens here in his way (as his partner does in lovers' gazes) the perspective on infinity. Be it now divine, now satanic; Paris has a passion for mirror-like perspectives«. <sup>4</sup>

As is clear from this passage, the »infinity« onto which mutually reflecting mirrors open is viewed less as a time of transcendence, less as a time out of time, and more as an immanent gaping,

a moment out of time *in* time. Be it divine or demonic, a devilish trick or a trance in which lovers lose themselves, this perspective on infinity opens as a disorienting abyss, as an opening in time into which those taken in by the mirrors' allure ceaselessly fall. It is in this sense that one should perhaps understand Nathaniel's plunge to his death in Freud's account of *Der Sandmann*. As Cixous and Weber point out, Freud abridges and even misrepresents the story considerably at this point in order to bring the moment into focus. Leaving out of account all regard for Clara, all attention to side-pockets and sidelong glances, Freud emphasizes only a certain symmetry.

One day, [Nathaniel and Clara] are walking through the city market-place, over which the high tower of the Town Hall throws its huge shadow. On the girl's suggestion, they climb the tower, leaving her brother, who is walking with them, down below. From the top, Clara's attention is drawn to a curious object moving along the street. Nathaniel looks at this thing through Coppola's spy-glass [*durch Coppolas Perspektiv*], which he finds in his pocket, and falls into a new attack of madness. Shouting ›Spin about, wooden doll!‹ he tries to throw the girl into the gulf below. Her brother, brought to her side by her cries, rescues her and hastens down with her to safety. On the tower above, the madman rushes round, shrieking ›Ring of fire, spin about!‹ – and we know the origin of the words. Among the people who begin to gather below there comes forward the figure of the lawyer Coppelius, who has suddenly returned. We may suppose that it was his approach, seen through the spy-glass, which threw Nathaniel into his fit of madness. As the onlookers prepare to go up and overpower the madman, Coppelius laughs and says: ›Wait a bit; he'll come down of himself.‹ Nathaniel suddenly stands still, catches sight of Coppelius, and with a wild shriek ›Yes! ›Fine eyes – fine eyes!‹ [*Ja! Sköne Oke – Sköne Oke*] flings himself over the parapet. <sup>5</sup>

Nathaniel is driven mad by a certain sight. Yet it is not so much the sight of the lawyer Coppelius *per se* that gives him fits so much as seeing him through Coppola's eyes, through his spy-glass or *Perspektiv*. It is as though he were trapped in the very space opened