Sublime Horror in the Tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann

Hamad Al-Rayes

The schizophrenic, the cyclothyme,
Pass from the droll to the sublime.
— Lawrence Durrell

Part 1: The Tales of Hoffmann

Hoffmann Who?
Reading the fantastical tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776–1822) implicates one in a period of immense cultural upheaval. In terms of bearing witness to the bursting forth of a new time, the impact of Hoffmann’s cohort in Berlin and Dresden on the self-understanding of modern subjectivity ranks with that of the Greeks in relation to the classical era. In Athens we find a first cohesive and self-aware expression of autonomous “self-institution” — to borrow Cornelius Castoriadis’s term — the unprecedented event of a human social formation consciously and

1 Lawrence Durrell and James Gifford, From the Elephant’s Back: Collected Essays & Travel Writings (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2015), 101.
deliberately setting forth the law out of itself. A similar drama of self-formation unfolds in the annals of German thought after the French Revolution, precipitating an obsession with questions of Bildung or formative cultural education. During these years of early romanticism, political self-institution seemed to coincide with the poetic ideal of giving birth to oneself, the cardinal struggle of the romantic persona, which in the midst of the collapse of a bygone order must reevaluate the underpinnings of its very existence and recreate its values and sensibility anew. With the consolidation of romanticism as an all-embracing cultural tendency, we find the contradictions of political self-institution casting their pall on the intimate caverns of the imagination, undermining the integrity of human experience at its innermost core. Hoffmann's writings find their key context in this historical situation.

It does not detract from Hoffmann's contribution to romantic aesthetics that he was not a philosopher but rather a storyteller and music critic. Although a contemporary of Immanuel Kant and a compatriot of Kant's Königsberg, Hoffmann was not concerned with the problems of transcendental idealism. From his letters, it is fair to assume that he attended some of Kant's local lectures. We know that he'd read Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling and was very much impressed by the work of some of Schelling's disciples in the natural sciences. A controversial though somewhat minor figure during his own lifetime, Hoffmann lived to see the commercial success of his own opera, Undine, and was in fact embraced by the luminaries of the age. Jean Paul, a doyen of German romantic letters, wrote the preface to Hoffmann's first collection of short stories, which included his pioneering tales of horror and the supernatural.

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also corresponded affably with Ludwig van Beethoven, otherwise not known for his conviviality. Yet Hoffmann’s gravestone puzzlingly lists excellence in his office as Councilor of the Court of Justice as his primary achievement. The next generation of artists, however, came to see Hoffmann with some reverence. Literary France, in particular, embraced the “fantastico,” as Théophile Gautier came to call him. Charles Baudelaire counted him among the “superior artists who have in them the necessary receptivity for absolute ideas,” indeed as “the man who until now has apprehended these ideas better than anyone else.” Honoré de Balzac named him “the poet of that which seems not to exist yet has life.” The reception of Hoffmann in European culture, despite conflicting assessments of the value of his contributions, turns on the otherworldly quality of his tales. The specific streak that distinguishes Hoffmann’s accomplishments from, say, the tales of the Thousand and One Nights, or even from such trailblazing genre classics as Horace Walpole’s 1764 The Castle of Otranto, is the preponderance of a sense of horror that accompanies an overpowering experience of sublimity, in a newfound world which sought to distance the supernatural from the circles of good society by consigning it to the playpen of a bygone, adolescent humanity.

The Romantic, the Philistine, the Spirit-Realm
Structurally, Hoffmann’s tales of terror typically involve a trinity of basic elements. The reader encounters: (1) a romantic artist attempting to navigate, (2) a philistine middle-class culture without ceding ground on his compulsive obsession with (3) the “spirit-realm,” a transcendent world which belies the aesthetic paltriness of everyday existence and which can only be accessed through the pursuit of art. The romantic of Hoffmann’s tales is defined less by his artistic skill or success than by his obsessive

7 Hoffmann, Musical Writings, 49.
longing for a transcendent reality that promises a break with the straitjacket of mundane existence. Carefully documenting their comfortable confusion of romantic fervor for artistic substance, Hoffmann tends to condemn these beautiful souls as dilettantes. The failed romantic artist is depicted by Hoffmann as an essentially ecstatic madman, only capable of recognizing himself on the backdrop of social norms that cannot tolerate his aesthetic worldview. The romantic is only at home in the transcendent spirit-realm, populated by the creations of the imagination. The spirit-realm, in turn, is not any less real than the “real” world surrounding the romantic. On the contrary, the “real” world is simply a thin veneer that conceals the higher “spiritual” order (the German word is “geistiger,” which can also be rendered as “spectral” or “ghostly”).

In contrast to the dilettante, the picture of the romantic that Hoffmann wants to champion is that of the artist who attempts to transform commonplace existence from within by investing it with the potencies of the romantic spirit-realm, instead of debasing the latter by treating it baldly as a refuge from daily life. Far from berating the artists of his day, Hoffmann chronicles the struggle of producing genuine (read: romantic) art in a culture virtually brought to a standstill by philistinism. The philistine acts as the polar opposite of the genuine romantic artist in Hoffmann’s tales. The ubiquity of the figure of the philistine in Hoffmann’s tales reflects the birth of this new social class during his own lifetime. The figure of the philistine peeks its head at every turn in Hoffmann’s tales, its features closely resembling those of the romantic dilettante. If the genuine romantic is the polar antagonist of the philistine, the romantic dilettante represents, by contrast, the flipside to the philistine’s superficiality. A typical example of the philistine is Klara from Hoffmann’s most renowned tale of horror, The Sandman (1817).

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pears in the novelette as the epitome of healthy common sense. She spares no effort in attempting to convince Nathanael, her fiancé and the main character of the story, that his visions of the fabled Sandman’s reappearance in his adult life have no footing in hard reality. For his part, Nathanael, a typically delusional Hoffmannian romantic, is certain that the monstrous folktale creature has already invaded his world, once in childhood in the guise of Coppelius, an old friend of the family, and again with increasing frequency in adulthood, in the guise of the mad peddler Coppola. Nathanael’s visions and mystifying interactions with Coppelius-Coppola ignite a series of events, including an unrequited love affair with an automaton named Olympia, that end in Nathanael’s succumbing to madness. What is unbearable to the aspiring romantic is not only the ubiquity of philistinism, exemplified by the rationalizations of Klara and her brother Lothar, but the unassailable character of the philistine’s pronouncements. The philistine is accused of feeling too much at home in the newly enfranchised middle class. Such comfortable adjustment to the typical demands of modern life (e.g., nuclear family, professional career, fiscal responsibility, etc.) is condemned by the romantic as superficial complacency. Yet in return, the aspiring romantic himself has little to offer beside his mad consumption by a world of imaginary relations. Hoffmann’s romantics are lost to a world that has been almost entirely co-opted by the philistine.

In “Der Artushof” or “The Court of Arthur” (1816), Traugott, an aspiring draughtsman, gets distracted from his business duties by copying figures from a mural of King Arthur’s fabled court. Traugott repeats Nathanael’s tragedy in The Sandman. He is set to marry Christina Roos, the Klara-esque character of this tale, who is the daughter of the protagonist’s business partner. The figure of the demonic artistic genius also makes an appearance, in the guise of “the old master” Herr Berklinger, himself of dubious footing in the real world (the narrator suggests that

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he is a doppelganger of one of the figures in the mural). The mural fulfills its romantic function by revealing itself to be a tunnel into the realm of spirits, seducing Traugott into a theater of fantasies. The setting of the Arthur murals right next to the practical realities of commercial life accentuates the former’s fantastical effects. His business partner’s nephew urges Traugott against the pursuit of an artistic career. Art’s proper function, so the nephew argues, is decorative:

Amusement — recreation after the serious business of life — is the delightful end and object of all artistic effort; and this is attained exactly in proportion as the productions of art are satisfactory. [...] It is only those who practice art on this principle who enjoy that comfort and prosperity which flies away forever from those who, against the true principles of things, look upon art as the primary object and highest aim of life.¹²

Here we have a concise formulation of the philistine aesthetic principle, deliberately articulated as an anti-romanticism. According to the philistine, “living” means “having plenty of money and no debts; eating and drinking of the best, and having a nice wife and children, with no grease spots on their Sunday clothes, etc.”¹³ This pushes Traugott to reevaluate his romantic inclinations. He dreads the prospect of returning to his office, where “pale faces sit behind shapeless desks, and nothing breaks the gloomy silence, buried in which everybody labors, but the turning of the leaves of big account-books, the jingle of money on the desks, and an occasional unintelligible word or two.”¹⁴ Traugott’s rejection of the prospect of a life organized around financial security reflects the intensity of his romantic passion. Spurning the aesthetic destitution of clerkdom, Traugott surrenders to the spell of the strange figures that begin to materi-

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¹² Ibid., 159–60.
¹³ Ibid., 160.
¹⁴ Ibid.
alize out of the mural, seeping into the crevices of his psychic life, and allows them to take charge of his artistic development which, unsurprisingly, leads him down a path of madness and dissolution.

In other instances, it seems as though the dreary world of the office is itself responsible for populating the sensitive soul’s world with figures conjured up from the spirit-realm. In “The Doubles” (1822), Deodatus encounters his own doppelganger. Despite the widespread belief that society has entered a “completely enlightened” age which has no room for “ruinous superstition,” Deodatus is convinced that the appearance of his doppelganger, Haberland, represents “a marvelous occurrence that his father had prophesied in dark, mysterious words,” with the result that upon meeting Haberland, Deodatus believes himself to be witnessing “a being who had so far been entangled in his life only as in a dream.” The typically Hoffmannian theme of the artist’s diminishing grip on reality is established, along with the ensuing blurring of the lines that separate the real from the fantastic. As in *The Sandman* and “The Court of Arthur,” the protagonist, Deodatus, is consumed by his fear of acting under the spell of dark forces. His doppelganger, Haberland, being a puppeteer, is also an incarnation of his fears. In Deodatus’s estimation, Haberland seems to have exerted a kind of supernatural influence from a magical distance, as if circling in on Deodatus’s psychic life until their fateful encounter in the forest, where Haberland attempts to slay his double.

*The Golden Pot* (1814) presents us with yet another variation on the fate of the romantic artist who takes up arms against philistinism. From the beginning, Anselmus, the protagonist, struggles to assimilate to the codes of conduct regulating middle-class life. He stumbles, stutters, and has a hard time keep-

16 Ibid., 235.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 14–92.
ing himself from rambling incoherently. At the same time, he undergoes a sublime encounter with the romantic realm of spirits via his apprenticeship with the old master, Archivarius Lindhorst. Soon, Anselmus finds himself entangled in an otherworldly battle between the Archivarius, who turns out to be a mythical salamander-king exiled from “primeval times” out of “the fairyland of Atlantis,” and his rival, the old witch Liese. Serpentina, one of the Archivarius’s three magical salamander-daughters, convinces Anselmus that he is one of the rare youth living “during [the] coarse age” who is able to resonate with the call of the fairyland daughters. His encounter with Serpentina engenders in Anselmus “an anticipatory vision of distant wondrous lands to which he can courageously soar when he has cast away the onerous lot of commonplace life.”

This story is not without its Klara-figure, who shows up in the guise of Veronica, Anselmus’s bride-to-be. An unflinching anti-Bovary, in the style of Hoffmann’s female philistines, Veronica hopes for nothing more than to be the wife of a Court Councilor (interestingly, one of Hoffmann’s professions in real life).

Anselmus’s increasingly frequent encounters with the spirit-realm drive Veronica further away from him until she opts for marrying Herr Heerbrand, the man who succeeds in securing the Court Councilor position originally meant for Anselmus. Faced by the dwindling prospects of a stable middle-class family life, Anselmus plunges deeper into the inverted world of Archivarius Lindhorst which, for all intents and purposes, has swallowed up the real world he used to inhabit. Unlike Nathanael from The Sandman, Anselmus willingly surrenders his life to the spirit-realm, “the inexpressible rapture of infinite longing” that had long plagued his romantic soul finally coming to rest in the glow of Serpentina’s eyes.

From his residence in Atlantis, freshly reconquered by the Archivarius, Anselmus lives entirely in a state of poetic ecstasy, fatally delivered from “the agony of

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20 Ibid., 66.
21 Ibid., 90.
infinite desire.”  They The novella ends with the Archivarius’s proclamation: “Is the bliss of Anselmus [in Atlantis] anything else but life in poetry, poetry where the sacred harmony of all things is revealed as the most profound secret of Nature?” This is an ambivalent statement, as what Anselmus had gained in poetic insight was purchased at the price of mad exile from everyday existence.

**Sehnsucht**

In a rare moment of self-disclosure, Hoffmann describes himself as “a poet or writer in whom the figures of everyday life are reflected in his inner romantic spirit-realm.” Beethoven, according to Hoffmann’s vision, embodies the artist who manages to journey into “the romantic spirit-realm” and return, if not unscathed then at least bearing aesthetic riches of unprecedented value. Yet, while Beethoven’s achievement may have been exceptional, the condition sparking his creative output was ubiquitous in the German cities of the early-nineteenth century. For Hoffmann, Beethoven only succeeds in exerting artistic control over a paradigmatically modern condition whose effects are felt, one way or another, by the philistine and the romantic dilettante alike. The effort which must be incessantly poured into shaping the work of art is itself spurred by the Sehnsucht, or infinite longing, which Hoffmann locates at the heart of romanticism.

In Hoffmann, this longing is often described as reaching out to a “spirit-realm” that remains ineluctably sublime, fundamentally transcending man’s grasp. In this sense, the spirit-realm functions as Hoffmann’s cipher for the central question that stamps the work of German philosophy from Kant onwards, namely, the question of the thing-in-itself. The connection between the unattainable spirit-realm and the philosophical Ding

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22 Ibid., 33.
23 Ibid., 92.
an Sich is evident in the musings of one of Hoffmann’s characters on the place of music in modern life:

But now music is expected to step right into everyday life, to come to grips with the world of phenomena [...]. Can one use sublime language to speak of ordinary things? Can music proclaim anything other than the wonders of that region from which it echoes across to us? Let the poet be prepared for daring flights to the distant realm of romanticism, for it is there that he will find the marvelous things that he should bring into our lives.25

The contrast is clear in Hoffmann’s repeated invocations of a transcendent realm standing against the everyday world of phenomena. The thirst for the sublime, for this is what the transcendent spirit-realm embodies, may be unfulfillable. But it is a thirst that can only be disavowed at the expense of an impoverished existence, which for Hoffmann’s romantics consisted in the domesticated, workaday life of the philistine city-dweller.

As Peter Bruning shows,26 the philistine’s dilettantism is not simply the efficient cause that occasions the artist to create in isolation. For Hoffmann, the romantic artist also struggles with the dilettante in himself. Johannes Kreisler, a crypto-autobiographical “character” who haunts the threshold between fact and fiction, is quoted as describing such longing as an “evil demon” which taunts him with an “indescribable restlessness which so often, since my earliest youth, has made me a stranger to myself [...] a wild, crazy longing for something which I seek outside myself in restless activity, although it is hidden within me, a dark mystery, a confused baffling dream of a paradise of the utmost contentment which even the dream cannot name, can only divine, and this idea plagues me with the torments of

25 Ibid., 196.
The torments of Tantalus, let it be remembered, are the wages of unsatisfied desire. Unsatisfied, if not unsatisfiable, desire marks the existential condition of Hoffmann’s romantics and goes a long way to illuminate the darker aspects of their behavior.

David Farrell Krell insightfully points out that Schelling chose the word *Sehnsucht* to translate the Latin word *langueo*, which is the precise cognate of the English “languor.” Quoting Barthes, with the requisite apologies for the anachronism, Krell shines a light on the intended sense of “languor” at play in the romantic use of “die Sehnsucht”: “The Satyr says: I want my desire to be satisfied immediately. If I see a sleeping face, parted lips, an open hand, I want to be able to hurl myself upon them. This Satyr — figure of the Immediate — is the very contrary of the Languorous. In languor, I merely wait: ‘I knew no end to desiring you.’”

Infinite desire determines the romantic *Sehnsucht*. Hoffmann had read Schelling’s 1798 *On the World Soul*, coming under the spell of Schelling’s ideas of infinite longing and art’s superiority to the intellect as a means of communing with the absolute. Gotthilf Heinrich Schubert’s groundbreaking 1808 *Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaften* (*Insights from the Dark Side of Natural Science*), in which Schelling’s philosophy of nature is taken up and applied to the observations of a natural scientist, becomes a constant reference during the rest of Hoffmann’s career. Schelling’s influence shows itself in Schubert’s elaborate cosmogony, adapted to the realm of natural phenomena, according to which man’s gift of intellectual intuition, the immediate grasp of what is, has been compromised by modernity’s lapse into dualistic thinking. Such a gift, however,

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29 Roland Barthes, quoted in Krell, *The Tragic Absolute*, 86.
may still be found in some artists. The artist’s intellectual intuition allows him to restore the lost harmony between nature and spirit, if only aesthetically.

In Hoffmann’s *The Golden Pot*, we saw an example of the pernicious path this could have in store for an aspiring romantic, as Anselmus ends up living psychotically in a poetic fairyland. “The Mines of Falun” (1819), drawing directly from resources in Schubert’s work, suggests another fate for the romantic. Elis, the protagonist, is jaded with the sea-voyaging he had conducted for years with the East India Company, which, being a trade cartel, stands for the concerns of commercial culture, the same that preoccupy the dreaded philistine. As primarily engaged in the transportation of opium, the East India Company also stands for the ersatz transcendence promised by commercial culture. Elis encounters the spectral figure of a miner who directs him to the untapped depths of the human psyche. The mine, deep in the earth, is contrasted with the East India Company’s crisscrossing of the surface of the sea. The depth of artistic truth is pitted against the superficiality of the world of trade. The miner, predictably, leads Elis down a path of ecstatic visions and into a brush with madness, under the swinging axe of a higher truth. The encounter with the miner all but vanquishes Elis’s prospects of adjustment to good society. However, he is spared, in the most ambivalent sense of the word, by his engagement to Ulla, the respectable daughter of the man in charge of a local mining company. The reintegration of Elis into the fabric of good society calms Ulla’s fears about her betrothed, namely, “her fears that the threatening powers of the subterranean abyss, of which she had often heard the miners speak,” would overtake her fiancé. Her sense of relief proves short-lived, as Elis insists on going back to the mines to extract a magical gem for his bride-to-be as a wedding gift. The mine crashes down on

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33 Hoffmann, *Tales*, 170.
Elis and he never returns. Ulla finally gets to embrace her bridegroom, fifty years later, as his petrified corpse is dragged out from the depths. While *The Golden Pot*'s Anselmus takes refuge from marital bliss in the spirit-realm, Elis is only able to enter it as a dead man.

**Part 2: A Brief History of the Sublime**

*The Power of Imagination*

The origin of the tragic course of events suffered by Hoffmann's romantics is tied to the gambit thrown by an imagination that finds itself confined to an aesthetically impoverished existence. The new forms of life that sprouted across European cities during Hoffmann's lifetime, and against which Hoffmann's romantics react, represented the degeneration of the promise of the Enlightenment into the complacency and commonsense pragmatism of middle-class life. In describing the philosophical terrain within which Hoffmann wrote, biographer Hewett-Thayer remarks that it was dominated by a sort of “debased rationalism,” where the lofty eighteenth century Enlightenment ideals “in the course of time seemed to degenerate into a drab utilitarianism, a mere recipe for getting on in the world.”

An overweening confidence in so-called sound common sense eclipsed the rigorously critical commitments of the Age of Enlightenment, such that “the phrase ‘a healthy human understanding’ became widely current, coupled with the implication that it covered all man needed for success and happiness.”

The legitimation of such “debased rationalism” finds its enabling condition in the cultural and political conservative shift which swept through Prussia after the death of Frederick II in 1786. This seismic shift in social relations gave rise to the bureaucrat, who in turn granted the philistine, in one stroke, pro-

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35 Ibid.
fessional and social legitimacy. A bureaucratic machine rumbles at the base of Hoffmann's tales. The philistine is only possible in the same “functionally differentiated modernity” which spawns the need for the bureaucrat and in which semi-autonomous systems coexist in an increasingly fragmentary whole.  

This also yields the problems of art as an increasingly autonomous practice, abstracted from its erstwhile immersion in the religious sphere, problems that troubled the romantics to no end. The romantic raises the banner of art to subdue the philistine's insistence on the subordination of imagination to sound understanding. In championing the romantic imagination, whether defeated or triumphant, deformed or genuine, Hoffmann is drawing on a particular aesthetic tradition, to which we must now turn.

The Sublime at Bay (Burke)
Edmund Burke was the first to isolate the feeling of “delightful horror” as a fundamental element in the experience of the sublime. Exhuming the category from the writings of Longinus, for whom it designated the ecstatic frenzy that a rhetorician could rouse in an audience, for instance by the use of hyperbole, Burke drove home the connection between ecstatic effect and the sense of one's own finitude, limitation, and inevitable demise. Burke does not stray too far from the traditional association of sublimity with astonishment, although he emphasizes another affective element involved in the experience of the sublime. In his 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke writes:

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38 The phrase “delightful horror” is used by Dennis before Burke to describe the effect of the sublime on the imagination; cf. Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 125.

[I]f the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person [...] they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions.⁴⁰

The object of this sort of horror, Burke declares, is the sublime.⁴¹ Properly speaking, the sublime designates an aesthetic experience whose distinguishing mark is the terror aroused by the threat of violence. The sublime is that which is capable of occasioning, when at a safe distance, the feeling of horror and the perverse delight that accompanies it. The experience of the sublime is overwhelming because it confronts us with the persistent nearness of our own mortality in the face of overwhelming force or astounding magnitudes. Its capacity to shake us to the core derives from the fact that “the passions belonging to self-preservation,” according to Burke, “are the strongest of all the passions.”⁴² For its part, pleasure is reserved, in line with tradition, for the experience of the beautiful which, Burke writes, “is a name I shall apply to all such qualities in things as induce in us a sense of affection and tenderness, or some other passion the most nearly resembling these.”⁴³ On strength of this principal distinction between pain and pleasure, then, Burke distinguishes the ideas of the beautiful from that of the sublime, two ideas which have been “frequently confounded” and “indiscriminately applied to things greatly differing, and sometimes of natures directly opposite.”⁴⁴ With this act, Burke opens up the sublime as a genuine field of aesthetic investigation.

⁴⁰ Edmund Burke and James Thompson, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 136.
⁴¹ Ibid.
⁴² Ibid., 51.
⁴³ Ibid.
⁴⁴ Ibid., 1.
Burke treated one’s susceptibility to the sublime as something of a disease that must be kept at bay, prescribing exercise as a remedy for the overwhelming feelings it engenders. Surrender to feelings of this sort has long been seen as a sign of inferiority. The Earl of Shaftesbury writes that “astonishment is of all other passions the easiest raised in raw and unexperienced mankind,” among whom he counts not only children but “barbaric” peoples such as the “Indians,” whose “fine sights” count for him as little more than “enormous figures, various odd and glaring colors and whatever of that sort is amazingly beheld with a kind of horror and consternation.”

Shaftesbury’s low esteem of the sublime betrays the degree to which he is convinced of its dubious philosophical import. For Shaftesbury, a pioneer of aesthetics as an independent field of philosophical research, it is the contemplation of the beautiful that forms the pinnacle of aesthetic experience. Unlike the sublime, the beautiful exhibits “proportion,” “unity,” and “form,” “united all in general in one system” that is capable of igniting the most revealing insights of speculative thought.

Burke’s precarious flirtation with the sublime is likewise telling. Eager to explain its hold over the mind, he is equally quick to warn against its dangers and prescribe various means of warding it off.

In his reading of Burke’s aesthetics, Tom Furniss highlights “the peculiar danger of the threat [of the sublime] in Burke’s account,” namely, “that it cannot be unambiguously located — that it transgresses the threshold between inner and outer, subject and object, and might therefore be, disturbingly, already at work within the human (or political) body. What most threatens ‘the person’ [in the experience of the sublime] is not an external danger but ‘a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance’ already internal to the system.”

46 Ibid., 274.
Burke argues that because the sublime affords us an encounter with terror dissociated from the latter’s threat, it can engender “a sort of swelling and triumph that is extremely grateful to the human mind,” thereby reinforcing the bad habit of “the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates.” The anti-revolutionary connotations of Burke’s view should not be lost on the reader. The self-delusion described here overlaps with John Locke’s definition of “enthusiasm,” which Burke would later embrace in his tirade against the fanaticism of the French Revolution in the famous 1790 Reflections on the Revolution in France, widely considered a fundamental tract of modern conservatism.

Locke writes, “[t]his I take to be properly enthusiasm, which, though founded neither on reason nor divine revelation, but rising from the conceits of a warmed or overweening brain, works yet, where it once gets footing, more powerfully on the persuasions and actions of men, than either of those two, or both together.” Furniss isolates the following passage from Longinus as Burke’s point of reference: “the Mind is naturally elevated by the true Sublime, and so sensibly affected with its lively Strokes, that it swells in Transport and an inward Pride, as if what was only heard had been the Product of its own Invention.” Furniss goes on to draw a connection between such pronouncements on the sublime and Burke’s denunciation of the idea of radical autonomy as self-delusion, writing that “the threat [of the sublime object] becomes, or is analogous to, the rhetorical ‘terror’ instilled in us by ‘poets and orators’ and therefore enables a fantasy of the creative, originating self?” Already in Burke, then, we see the glimmers of a line connecting our delight in sublime horror with the marks of a repetition-compulsion. The latter is the prism through which Freud read The Sandman.

48 Burke, Philosophical Enquiry, 50.
50 Furniss, Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology, 23.
In his 1919 essay on “The Uncanny,” which involves an extended analysis of *The Sandman*, Freud reads in Nathanael’s infatuation with Olympia, the automaton mistaken for a woman, a sign of “the dominance in the unconscious mind of a ‘compulsion to repeat’ proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts — a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character.”

In Olympia, Nathanael is intrigued and terrified by his own unconscious libidinal life. Olympia personifies the repressions necessary for Nathanael’s ego to come to its own: “Olympia is, as it were, a dissociated complex of Nathanael’s which confronts him as a person, and Nathanael’s enslavement to this complex is expressed in his senseless obsessive love for Olympia.”

Such love, insofar as it is directed at a complex dissociated from one’s own self-image, is “narcissistic.” All advances motivated by this love are doomed. The automatic, repetitive aspect of the self must be kept at bay to ward off the specter of ego disintegration. Olympia operates as a cipher for the uncontrollable drives which exercise their dominion over the dark caverns of libidinal life, disrupting the noontide of the ego with their incessant encroachments.

Repetition-compulsion is the motor-force behind neurosis, a principal psychopathology of modern life, according to Freud. Throughout *The Sandman*, neurotic Nathanael struggles to fend off the sense that, at bottom, he is “the horrible plaything of dark powers.” Yet Nathanael cannot help being drawn to Olympia, the embodiment of heteronomy, by an inexplicable longing which stands behind his restless dissatisfaction with the values of middle-class life, as propounded (with irrefutable good sense) by his fiancée Klara. Ironically, Olympia the automaton

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52 Ibid., 232.
is literally a puppet whose strings are pulled by another. She is Nathanael’s nightmarish self-reflection. Nathanael’s longing, as is often the case with Hoffmann’s romantics, looks toward another reality. The desire for broaching an ecstatic reality, whose glimpses can only be caught through the turbid medium of the imagination (after healthy understanding’s conquest of everyday life), could only be achieved at the price of the destruction of the workday self.

Freud writes that “an uncanny effect is [...] produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes.” Both tropes are Hoffmannian staples, as we have seen. The desire to lose oneself in ecstasy signals a latent death wish, a longing to be enfolded into the libidinal ocean. The theory that Freud proposes in his analysis of The Sandman suggests that the feeling of the uncanny is engendered by the unsettling revelation that the self is inherently bound to a repetition-compulsion, such that the daylight of psychic life is contaminated by apparitions familiar yet utterly foreign, embodying Freud’s disassociative complexes. Perceptively, Freud links the inaccessible sublime pursued by the romantic with images deriving from a bygone era, possibilities which “we—or our primitive forefathers—once believed [...] were realities, and were convinced that they actually happened.” Freud adds that “nowadays we,” that is, we Enlightened moderns, “no longer believe in them, we have surmounted these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to cease upon any confirmation.” Contending with such episodes tests the self-certainty of Enlightened understanding. Hoffmann’s romantic characters, who dwell on and perversely relish these experiences, are for that reason incurable social misfits. What

53 Ibid., 244.
54 Ibid., 247.
55 Ibid.
gets repeated as uncanny is originally, prior to the consolidation of the ego, “something familiar that has been repressed.”

It belongs, as repressed, to the drives. A drive is emphatically an affair of the body. Even by Freud’s admission, a drive represents “an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things.” Behind the phantasmagoria plaguing Nathanael’s existence, the mechanism of the internal compulsion itself is the true sublime object of Nathanael’s horror, a vehicle of transcendence and annihilation, desired and feared at once.

It goes without saying that Burke did not resort to a psychoanalytic explanation when accounting for the mind’s attraction to the sublime. But he does not even allow himself an empirical explanation either, having repudiated the principle of association in aesthetics. Scandalously, Burke accounted for the feeling of the sublime through a strictly physiological explanation, resorting to a theory of direct physiological causation that jolts the mind with feelings of the beautiful or the sublime, depending on the encounter. This explanation has done more to heap ridicule on its author than to resolve any questions regarding the fixation exerted on us by things perceived as sublime.

The Sublime as Idea (Kant)
The question of the causes underlying the mind’s sublime delight in horror was left without a satisfying answer after Burke. Kant contradicted Burke precisely on the point of physiological immediacy. What lies behind sublime terror is, rather, a confused rational idea. The experience of the sublime may begin with the feeling of awe, but it ends with the tranquility of grasping the feared object as nothing but the presentation of an idea of reason.

56 Ibid.
58 Burke, Philosophical Enquiry, 130–31.
One reason why aesthetic judgments were important to Kant lies in their unique ability to assist in determining the legitimacy of attributing moral meaning to the world. We know from the first *Critique* that we are not justified in making theoretical—i.e., “scientific”—claims as to the three major questions that sound the depths of rational inquiry: What can I know, what ought I to do, and what may I hope? The limits of the first question are determined by metaphysics broadly construed: its transcendental critique (as in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) together with its positive claims in a metaphysics of nature (as in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*). The second and third questions are answered in a similar two-step by morality and religion. Curiously, questions pertaining to aesthetic judgment do not seem to seamlessly fit within the foregoing division. Aesthetic questions range over the various concerns of philosophy. This is because aesthetic judgments proper, that is, those that are philosophically significant, relate to all the foregoing concerns: the limits of theoretical, moral, and religious knowledge.

The crucible of theoretical, moral, and religious questions is revealed in the very way Kant sets up his aesthetic investigation in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Proper aesthetic judgments are reflective. Unlike “ordinary” attributive judgments, they determine a subjective feeling rather than an objective representation. When Kant is discussing the beautiful, his primary concern is not the determination of some object as beautiful. Such a task would require a sort of empirical tallying of attributes that, when present, would allow us to apply the label “beautiful” to a certain artwork. Such a tallying may not be impossible, but Kant dismisses it as a key to grasping the nature of beauty on account of the contingency of the results it would supply, as well as the fact that it is a deeply socially conditioned practice. *A posteriori* through and through, the procedure neither stems from nor produces necessary cognition. What sets an aesthetic judgment apart from a theoretical one is a difference in kind which requires that in the former we seek to determine a
subjective state, while in the latter we are determining an objec-
tive representation.

The primary concern of aesthetics for Kant is the extent
to which we are justified in associating a purportedly beauti-
ful experience with the feeling of pleasure that is aroused in
us at beholding a certain object. We are justified in seeing an
aesthetic experience as an experience of beauty when the har-
mony exhibited between the various elements in a composition
triggers a homologous interplay between the cognitive faculties
of imagination and understanding. The pleasure evoked by the
experience of beauty gives us a glimmer of how things would
stand were we living in a world where our purposes as free mor-
al agents were fulfilled. The ensuing harmony of the faculties
in such a world would serve as an index of the extent to which
rational human desires have been satisfied. The experience of
the beautiful thus conceived provides us with a symbol of what
it would be like to exist in a morally perfected condition, though
no kind of theoretical knowledge may justifiably prescribe what
such a condition might look like. Only once we discern that this
is the kind of pleasure that we have upon encountering an art-
work are we justified in calling the object corresponding to it
“beautiful.”

Contrast this with the sublime. The feeling of the sublime
presents the world as violent, chaotic, and incomprehensible.
To this extent, Kant’s conception coincides with Burke’s. But for
Kant, emphatically, no object may be called sublime, whereas we
may point to a variety of objects in the world that we deem beau-
tiful. The feeling of the sublime indexes not a property of objects
but a confusion of the mind: “We can say no more than that the
object is fit for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found
in the mind; for what is actually sublime cannot be contained in
any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason.”60 Those
things that we, mistakenly, call sublime, which overwhelm us so
and arouse the painful feelings of which Burke had spoken, are

60 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer
inherently formless representations—the limitlessness of the universe, the vastness of the ocean, the dark plunge at the end of a precipice. We describe them as sublime because they defy the figurative capacity of the imagination. Conceptually, Kant notes that these objects represent mathematical (quantitative) or dynamical (having to do with force) exaggerations beyond the limits of human comprehension. They therefore arouse our fear because they present the world as something entirely foreign to our understanding. Such a portrayal undermines the hope of moral perfectibility, intensifying the perceiver’s dread. The world now reveals itself as hostile to human purpose, paralyzing (“astonishing,” to recall Burke and Shaftesbury’s terms) intelligence and repudiating the meaningfulness we assign to human action. But Kant points out that, being the representation of something of infinite proportions or unlimited power, the sublime coincides in its attributes with the ideas of reason (i.e., God, world, and soul) which likewise frustrate theoretical comprehension by constantly leading the mind into aporias. Thus, the true sublime “objects,” which truly surpass our comprehension (mathematical) or threaten to obliterate our physical existence (dynamical), are those ideas of reason themselves. On the other hand, the objects we tend to call sublime (“the wide ocean, enraged by storms,” is Kant’s example) are “provoked and called to mind precisely by this inadequacy,” namely the inadequacy of any sensible form to present an idea of reason. The feeling of the sublime does not point to these objects. Rather, through them, or precisely through their inadequacy to present the sublime, “the mind is incited to abandon sensibility and to occupy itself with ideas that contain a higher purposiveness.”

Since the first two Critiques have shown that the proper grasp of these ideas of ultimate purpose (God, world, and soul) is a moral rather than theoretical task, what occupies the mind in the experience of the sublime, like the beautiful, boils down to a question of moral purposiveness. While beauty puts us in a

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
mind of how things would stand if moral purpose was fulfillable in the world, the sublime puts us in a mind of how things would look if human purpose existed in a world where it could never be fulfilled, a world altogether impervious to rational ends.

Kant transforms the terrain of aesthetic theory by anchoring questions of the beautiful and the sublime to problems of teleology. The philosophical significance of the sublime for Kant hinges on the capacity of reason to intervene in the experience of sublime horror by showing that what seems to be immeasurable or overwhelming to the imagination is in fact well within the grasp of reason, which knows how to relegate these questions to their proper domain as problems concerning the metaphysics of morals. Reason thus pacifies the shuddering imagination by restoring to the world its sense of meaning and conduciveness to human purpose, if only obliquely.

The Sublime as Demonic (Schiller)
In Kant we behold a “rediscovery of the imagination,” to borrow once again from Castoriadis. Kant was able to tie aesthetics to teleology by highlighting how aesthetic reactions are grounded on the interplay between the imagination and the “higher” cognitive faculties — understanding for the beautiful and reason for the sublime. With Kant, the imagination emerges as not merely a faculty that reproduces perceptions without their sensible matter but as a cognitively productive faculty on its own merit, constitutive rather than receptive. Romanticism, broadly construed, understood this. As the capacity to fundamentally give form to representation, the imagination is the actively figurative faculty, a sense preserved in the German Einbildungskraft. Eckart Förster writes that the imagination is “an activity without which there could be no combination and consequently no unity of consciousness,” since “it takes two elements which are isolated in themselves and forms (Bilden) something common

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which as such can become an object of consciousness.”64 Opting for the verb “to form” instead of “to picture” or “to imagine” as a translation of bild- in Einbildungskraft, we arrive at the imagination as an en-forming-power (Ein-bildungs-kraft), which is the sense tapped into by the romanticism of Schiller.

Schiller’s 1795 On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters65 opens with a survey of the damage inflicted upon man by life in the modern state with its “too intense life of the social instincts,” as De Quincey put it.66 The Letters also rehearse the clash between Enlightenment’s promise and its reality at the turn of the nineteenth century. Because of their distinct attention to the ways in which the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivity may be brought to bear on the contradictions of modern life, Schiller’s observations intersect with Hoffmann’s concerns and open a window onto the social dynamics that informed Hoffmann’s writings.

Despite the promises of the Enlightenment and the Revolution they inspired, Schiller found European culture torn between a revival of sheer superstition and a crude instrumentalism masquerading as the pinnacle of rationality. The Terror finishes this off for Schiller, the literary aristocrat, with the introduction of barbarism on an unimaginable scale. Surely there was something that the shockwaves of rational Enlightenment and political Revolution had not managed to transform. Premising his observations on the relationship that Kant had established between aesthetics and morality (teleology), Schiller offers the diagnosis that the moral capacities of the very actors who carried forth the work of social change fell tragically short of aspirations. The proper cultivation of man’s moral sense begins not with the propagation of moral doctrine but with cultivating

man’s sensitivity to moral ideas. Schiller, in a Kantian frame of mind, understood that the elevation of human sensibility must go through the reform of aesthetic judgment. The problems of the time could begin to find a cure with the cultivation, on a mass scale, of a sense for aesthetic beauty. The experience of beauty for Schiller is inexorably tied to a free-ranging kind of pleasure. This unique brand of aesthetic pleasure Schiller calls “play,” a state in which the distinction between work and enjoyment disappears, such that man acts unforced for the sake of his own enjoyment, and his enjoyment is synonymous with his activity as a moral actor in the world. For Schiller, this is precisely the sort of liberty which the French Revolution had promised, or, at any rate, the kind he persistently demanded from it. Leaving aside immediate social and political causes, such a vision was destined not to materialize, because man’s desire was not prepared to absorb the full spectrum of its precepts and accept their consequences. Beautiful art can have the morally transformative power of “educating” our desires by orienting them toward the satisfaction of the ideal of freedom as their ultimate end.

Schiller accused the new life of the city dweller of being morally corrupting insofar as it lulls the intellect into a false sense of security. An overconfidence in the rational planning of society also led to the degeneration of the promises of the Enlightenment into banal pragmatism and a superficial faith in the ultimately benevolent end of history. Hoffmann’s reasonable characters (Klara et al.) personify this commonsense pragmatism. Cocksure pragmatism and the relapse into superstition, together with the fanaticism that engendered the worst excesses of the Jacobins, can only be checked aesthetically according to Schiller. While cultivating the sensitivity to beauty presents moral ideals to the mind in the form of feeling, the sharpening of the mind’s awareness of the sublime is prone to curb moral excess, whether in the form of the pragmatist’s complacent faith in rational planning, the superstitious relapse into dogma as the solution to moral problems, or the revolutionary fervor that seeks to put society, once and for all, and by any means necessary, on the right
track. Aiming for the absolute cannot come at the expense of disavowing man’s inherent limitations. While aiming with every right toward the rational resolution of strife in human history, writes Schiller in “Concerning the Sublime” (1801), one must never at the same time lose sight of “the terrifying and magnificent spectacle of change destroying everything and re-creating it and then destroying it once again, a spectacle of ruin at times eating slowly at things, other times suddenly assaulting them. History,” he goes on, “provides ample examples of the pathetic picture of humanity wrestling with fate, a picture of the incessant flight of fortune, of confidence betrayed, injustice triumphant, and innocence violated.”

As mentioned already, Schiller argues that while the moral purpose of human existence cannot be conceptually articulated (say, in terms of a list of attributes that would specify its character), the mind can develop a sensitivity to the moral task ahead through aesthetic education, that is, by cultivating the mind’s sensitivity to beauty. However, in order not to be lost to the world in its own beautiful feelings, this aesthetic sensitivity to beauty must itself be checked. This is achieved by developing the mind’s sensitivity to the sublime, beauty’s terrible counterpart. In Schiller’s wake, the sublime, which Kant located above all in the grandeur of impersonal nature, takes on chillingly historical concreteness. We feel as if the roles were reversed and the sublime images of nature are oblique references to the horrors of history. The sublime expresses “necessity’s stern law,” symbolized by “the eternal infidelity of everything sensuous” to reason’s self-certainty. Schiller remarks that “the capacity for the sublime is one of the most glorious dispositions in human nature, deserving our respect due to its origin in the self-sufficient capacity to think and will” — that is, insofar as the sublime forces the capacity to think and will (theoretical and moral reasoning) to reckon with its necessary limitations in practice. Cultivating a

68 Ibid.
sense of the sublime is thus the necessary counterpart to the cultivation of the sense of the beautiful. “The beautiful renders itself deserving on account of the humaness in a human being, the sublime on account of the purely demonic in him.”69 The beautiful corresponds to one’s “humaness” because its dominion extends over the interplay of the faculties of the human mind. The harmonious interplay it evokes between intellect and sensibility is a symbol of moral freedom. The sublime on the other hand hurls the lot of human faculties into the unknown. Thus, while beauty affords us a pleasurable free play of the cognitive faculties, the sublime only offers us “ecstatic shuddering.”70

Hoffmann describes the fairyland in which Anselmus is lost in *The Golden Pot* as a region “full of glorious marvels, where both the highest rapture and deepest horror may be evoked.”71 Anselmus, for his part, is overwhelmed by “a feeling he had never before known, one he could not identify as either rapturous or painful.”72 In the novella, Hoffmann describes Anselmus’s experience of the sublime in terms that align with the exposition given above: “He felt that an ineffable something was awakening within his inmost soul and provoking that pain of rapture which is the longing that promises man the existence of a more exalted Being.”73 The sublime is expressive of “the purely demonic” in us, for Schiller, because it mediates between the profane and the divine, the earthly and the exalted, the mundane and the absolute.

Recall how Kant had argued that the feared object is not what we think is present before us in the experience of the sublime, but rather the speculative idea which the representation calls to mind. With Schiller, the sublime is neither the appearance nor the idea at work behind the appearance, but the fact of human limitation itself. Schiller’s characterization of the sublime encounter as demonic allows us to elicit a link between the metaphysics of aesthetic experience and psychoanalysis. The

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69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 74.
72 Ibid., 22.
73 Ibid., 33.
demonic is what haunts the borderline between man and God. Besides representing “the intervening stage between the human and the divine,” writes Harold Bloom, “daemonization” acts as a trope of “the principal Freudian defense, repression, the very active defense that produces or accumulates much of what Freud calls the Unconscious.” The sublime, repression, and the unconscious are tangled up in one and the same psychodynamic. For Schiller, the demonic which is encountered in the experience of the sublime is emphatically, if paradoxically, a human reality. On this reading, the demonic is not something to be excised or disowned; rather the demonic is the touchstone of which the soul must never lose sight, on pain of losing itself in the comforting reassurances of the beautiful. The demonic marks the human limit this-side of the absolute. Just what exists beyond the sublime threshold, if anything, is a question that cannot be answered in any clear-cut discourse, though an aesthetic symbol may be provided. Far from representing a contamination that must be exorcised, the demonic is an aspect that must be allowed to cohabitate the self. Hoffmann turns our attention to the varying fortunes of those whose destiny it is to embrace the demonic sublime or the “spirit-realm.”

Part 3: Hoffmann’s Aesthetics

*Symptom and Sublime*

The Kantian positing of the imagination as a creative and not merely reproductive faculty ushers in a line of thinking that seeks in aesthetics a source of insight into metaphysical truths. Despite Freud’s identification of a repetition-compulsion as the force that hurls Nathanael to his fate in *The Sandman*, the reason for Nathanael’s condition must be sought in an origin that exceeds the oedipal. Repetition-compulsion undermines linear time through the recurrence of symptoms, reenacting traumas that manage to circle back and dominate the present despite the passage of time. Hoffmann’s tales are rife with such instances.

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Anselmus has an “entire vision which he had once viewed as if in a heavenly trance” reemerge before his eyes “in the most vivid colors, as if he were looking upon it for the second time.”

Freud himself points to a host of instances depicting the return of the repressed in his analysis of *The Sandman*. Ursula Lawson notes that while “Nathanael recalls his experiences in chronological order, indicating a normal process of reflection,” his manner of relating these experiences to each other departs from the linear sequence of time, resembling rather “the product of a creative, if somewhat morbid, imagination of a highly sensitive child.”

A symptom bears a symbolic relation to what it signifies. Beneath the symptom there lies the symbol, where the psychodynamic and the speculative overlap. The salient features of Hoffmann’s tales speak to the psychological trauma being rooted in a more profound metaphysical malaise, a dissatisfaction with the import of our pronouncements on the ultimate nature of reality. The passage of time, historical time, precipitates this condition.

The earliest glimmers of romanticism, as presented by Friedrich Schlegel, are premised on such a profound consciousness of a transition into a new world-historical era. A historical sequence of events pries open a new time, reshaping the coordinates of subjectivity in the process. The turning point here is the French Revolution. Despite his ambivalence toward the Revolution, Hoffmann intensely lived its philosophical consequences. Having reviewed the dynamics of his tales and situated his work within the aesthetic tradition, we can turn now to Hoffmann’s own reflections on aesthetics. These are found chiefly in his musical writings, collected under the title of *Kreisleriana* (1819), in reference to his crypto-autobiographical character, the composer Johannes Kreisler. If Hoffmann had acknowledged the appearance on the historical scene of a new time, which places

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its unique set of demands on the artist, “the romantic” is Hoffmann’s hieroglyph of choice for the subject of this new time.

“No idea can arise in us without its hieroglyph,” writes the anonymous author of “Johannes Kreisler’s Certificate of Apprenticeship.”78 “Idea” here, as in Kant and Schiller, signifies those cognitions which cannot be successfully expressed in discursive propositions. The hieroglyph, while unable to yield a clear and distinct enumeration of properties, provides us with the next best thing, “a vague approximation of what we have distantly heard.”79 Writing alongside Schlegel, who fabricates the romantic as a realm where the novel problems of art may be explored in terms unknown to classical criticism, Hoffmann depicts the plight of the romantic in terms of the acute awareness of a subjectivity grappling with an unprecedented, thus essentially alienating, historical condition.

At the beginning of his literary career, the essence of the romantic was contained for Hoffmann in “absolute” or purely instrumental music.80 All art tends toward absolute music for the early Hoffmann. Music opens up the gates of the sublime, the higher reality, the spiritual kingdom which is not of this world. What places the crown and scepter in the hands of absolute music is its impermeability to mundane representation. Later in his career, when Hoffmann makes place for other artforms to share the pedestal, we find them still determined by the condition of music. The anonymous author of “Johannes Kreisler’s Certificate of Apprenticeship” addresses Kreisler: “What appears to be chiefly necessary has already become part of you. You have sharpened your faculty of hearing to such an extent that now and then you perceive the voice of the poet hidden within you […] and really cannot believe that it is only you speaking and no one else.”81 Absolute music, like poetry, depends on an art of hearing. The other arts, while no longer subordinated to music,

78 Hoffmann, E.T.A. Hoffman’s Musical Writings, 164.
79 Ibid., 165.
nonetheless strive to the condition of absolute music. Neither plastic nor verbal, absolute music surpasses sculpture, painting, and prose by its ability to express itself directly in the medium of sound, described as the medium of an ecstatic experience with its threat of self-dissolution (“you perceive the voice of the poet hidden within you […] and really cannot believe it is only you speaking and no one else”). In the same text, music is described as channeling “sublime,” “gentle spirit-voices.”

The mature Hoffmann abandons his fanaticism for pure music and begins describing aesthetic experience as hinging on a synesthetic expression of “total effect.”

Anachronistically, we may add that by language what Hoffmann had in mind was not simply a system of written and verbal signs but an expansive semiotic edifice, a total signifying system combining sound and sight, tone, figure, and word. The effects of such a synesthetic “language” are described by Hoffmann-Kreisler in “Extremely Random Thoughts” as arising in “a state of delirium” where “the congruity of colors, sounds, and fragrances” is revealed. To Schiller’s beautiful artwork, which triggers a harmonious interplay between the mind and the senses, symbolic of the attainment of the moral ideal, Hoffmann seeks to counterpose an ideal of sublimity in art. According to Hoffmann’s sublime ideal, genuine romantic art presents us with “the mysterious language of a distant spirit-realm, its wonderful accents resounding in our souls and awakening a higher, intenser awareness” through which “the emotions vie with each other in dazzling array, and then sink back in an inexpressible longing that fills our breast.”

In the foregoing passage, a crucial difference transpires between Hoffmann’s and Schiller’s aesthetics of the sublime. Faithfully Kantian, Schiller’s analysis demands a clean distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. The definitive Hoff-

82 Ibid., 162, 163.
83 Ibid., 105.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 196.
männian stance submits that we cannot presume such a distinction to exist. Each instance of beauty turns, of its own accord, into an instance of the sublime.

The wording of the quoted passage is instructive. At first, “all the emotions vie with each other in dazzling array,” recalling Schiller’s free play of the faculties in the experience of beauty; and then “they sink back in an inexpressible longing that fills our breast.” The experience of the beautiful cannot, for Hoffmann, be isolated from the experience of the sublime. What bars beauty from sustaining the free play of the faculties is that, for Hoffmann, beauty can no longer be anchored in any sort of moral certainty. This is why, without denying the moral-teleological possibilities of art, Hoffmann stakes much more on art’s capacity to express man’s longing for such all-binding absolutes, the *Sehnsucht* for the infinite. Hoffmann’s is a world where Kantian aesthetics finds itself unmoored in the absence of a morally binding, universally valid categorical imperative. Sublimity, then, cannot be construed as the other pole of aesthetic experience, at odds with beauty, as the tradition from Burke to Schiller presented it. Rather Hoffmann’s sublime is a moment of the beautiful, destined to arrive with irreversible necessity. The romantics of his tales are at first lured by the experience of beauty that ends up spelling their demise. Hoffmann thus throws a different gambit to the romantic artist. While Schiller exhorts artists to fill the world with beautiful creations, Hoffmann foresees the inherently tragic nature of such a mission. If aesthetic education seeks to infuse the ordinary with the sublime, or to diffuse the sublime into the ordinary, the danger, or price, of such a task will be madness, the dissolution of the self. Hoffmann does not disagree with Schiller, or Kant for that matter, insofar as a teleological abyss opens up in Europe after the collapse of the *ancien régime* and the authority of the Church. However, “the magical power of poetic truth” can have a transformative effect, for only he [the genuine, romantic artist] can bring before our eyes the wonderful apparitions of the spirit-realm; carried on his wings we soar across the abyss that separates us
from it, and soon at home in that strange land we accept the miracles that are seen to take place as natural consequences of the influence of higher natures on our lives. Then we experience all the powerfully stirring sensations that fill us now with horror and fear, now with utter bliss.86

The pursuit of the beautiful is a risky affair. The artist, in his pursuit of beauty, is hounded by the demonic sublime, which threatens ego-death. In the “romantic dimension,” on the other hand, “language is raised to a higher power, or rather (since it is part of that distant realm of music) takes the form of song.”87

The key to this transformation of language into a system of synesthetic signification, however, is now tied to an “inner poetic relationship or poetic truth that might kindle music into life.”88 Whether it is poetry that kindles music into life or music which imbues poetry with its inimitable vigor, Hoffmann’s stance is unmistakable: whatever the artistic means, the task of genuine (read: romantic) art is to risk the horrors of the spirit-realm and channel the hieroglyphs of the latter into art.

*Beethoven*

Among the host of feckless romantics that populates Hoffmann’s writings, it is two musicians who manage to tower above the distinct misery that only an artistic vocation can deliver. Hoffmann depicts them both as trans-human, demonic figures. We have already encountered some of the fictional Johannes Kreisler’s pronouncements on art. As for Beethoven, his success is not merely due to the fact that he boldly trespasses into the transcendent. All of Hoffmann’s romantics court the abyss. Rather, Beethoven is emblematic because, like Orpheus, he enters the realm of shadows and manages to come back demonically transfigured, if not altogether triumphant. At the hands of Beethoven, music turns into “the most romantic of all the arts, one might almost

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86 Ibid., 196.
87 Ibid., 197.
88 Ibid., 200.
say the only really romantic art, for its sole object is the expression of the infinite.”89 Beethoven’s role in this transformation of music consists in laying down the bridge between the mundane world and the romantic spirit-world, in the same way that “the lyre of Orpheus opens the doors of Orkus,” the underworld.

More than any other work, it is the Fifth Symphony that solidifies Beethoven’s quasi-mythical status according to Hoffmann. In his influential 1810 review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, republished in 1814 as “Beethoven’s Instrumental Music,” Hoffmann locates Beethoven’s genius in his capacity to compose a genuinely self-originating piece of instrumental music. The review presents the Fifth Symphony as an epoch-defining work of art on account of its portrayal of the drama of self-formation so fundamental to the romantic imaginary. Beethoven’s feat, in other words, consists in constructing an elaborate symphonic edifice by working through the inner relationships that tie together the three notes which announce the beginning of the first movement, the so-called, mistakenly, “fate knocking at the door,” rather than adhering to the formal prescriptions of symphonic composition in the tradition of Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Hoffmann portrays the development of the Fifth Symphony as organically urged on by the natural momentum of its humble beginnings.90 Invoking the arch-romantic opposition between the mechanical and the organic, Hoffmann writes of how Beethoven “scatters the good old rules in disorder whenever it happens to please him in the momentary excitement of his creative imagination,” all the while retaining an “inner, underlying organic structure” that can never be appreciated by “aesthetic mechanicians.”

The unity of the symphony, Hoffmann notes, owes less to any formal strictness than to “the inner relationship of the themes with one another which produces that unity which alone is able

to hold the listener in one mood.” Such unity is revealed, for example, in the “more subtle relationship [that] shows itself merely in the spiritual connection of one theme with another.” In Beethoven’s music we are exposed to “mysterious premonitions,” “magic combinations” from which “a world of visions,” even a “circle of mystical visions,” may be constructed. These visions and premonitions are subjective, to be sure, but their binding power stems from the fact that, like the phantasmagoria scattered across Hoffmann’s tales, they are no less active and indeed at work in the very depths of one’s lived reality. These are depths that are destined to remain out of reach were it not for the aesthetic experience, which plumbs them through the “sublime and noble language” of music’s hieroglyph. More than anything else, however, it was the holism of Beethoven’s music that impressed Hoffmann. The holistic nature of the Fifth was embodied in its self-referential character, its development of its themes out of the four humble notes with which it begins. Indeed, Hoffmann underscores the defining holism of Beethoven’s symphony by resorting to the same seed analogy that came to be a staple of romantic self-understanding. The part-whole relationship defining the Fifth Symphony can only be captured by “the deeper glance” which is able to discern in it not a sequence of felicitously arranged accidents but “the beautiful tree with leaves, blossoms, and fruit growing from one germinating seed.”

Despite its seemingly disorderly veneer, on account of its breaking with tradition, “this very organization of the whole work as well as the constant reappearances of the motives and harmonic effects, following closely on one another, intensify to the highest degree that feeling of inexpressible longing.” What holds the work together, rather than a readily discernible formal coherence in line with tradition, is the work’s own inner “connecting links,” “the constant allusions to the main theme,” “the contrapuntal interweavings that bind the work together.” The product is a piece of music that gives the illusion of pulling itself

91 Hoffmann, “Beethoven’s Instrumental Music,” 129.
92 Ibid., 130.
up by its own bootstraps, fulfilling the romantic ideal of self-origination.

*Feuerkreis*

Curiously, in the midst of his Beethoven review, Hoffmann introduces his own fictional-autobiographical character, the Kapellmeister Kreisler, “before whose piano I am now sitting and writing” (!), as the person who “brought it home to me most clearly that we should honor only that which is inspired and that everything else comes from evil.”93 The aesthetic commitments I attempted to trace in Hoffmann’s tales and musical writings converge in the figure of Johannes Kreisler. Understanding Kreisler’s significance in Hoffmann’s work will thus round off my account of the latter’s aesthetics.

Hoffmann collected the musical writings of the apocryphal Kreisler in a cycle of essays entitled *Kreisleriana* (1819).94 The *Kreisleriana* begins with a declaration of the anonymous origins of Johannes Kreisler. The first line reads: “Where is he from? Nobody knows. Who were his parents? It is not known. Whose pupil is he?” and so on. The collection ends, remarkably, with an essay entitled “Johannes Kreisler’s Certificate of Apprenticeship,” seemingly written anonymously, in the third person, yet signed, unnervingly, with Kreisler’s own name. It is as if the “Certificate of Apprenticeship” was awarded by origin-less Kreisler to himself. Taken as a whole, the essay cycle *Kreisleriana* thus bears witness to Kreisler’s embodiment of the romantic ideal of self-origination.

The trials and tribulations of Johannes Kreisler, as set forth by Hoffmann, must be read as a hieroglyph of the destiny of the genuine romantic artist as Hoffmann envisioned it. While the *Kreisleriana* introduces us to Kreisler’s music criticism, Hoffmann’s final novel, whose full title is *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr, Together with a Fragmentary Biography of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler on Random Sheets of Waste Pa-

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93 Ibid.
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per (1822), offers us a closer look at the condition of the mad composer. In Tomcat Murr, Kreisler gives a different account of his family origins, as he mentions his father’s abandoning of his family and his mother’s early death, but this account leaves Kreisler’s youth and upbringing shrouded in mystery. At the end of the day, it is the symbolism of Kreisler’s character that clues us in on Hoffmann’s deepest aesthetic commitments. Tomcat Murr contains a scene where Kreisler explains his name to his benefactress, Madame Benzon:

No, there’s no getting away from the word Kreis, meaning a circle, and Heaven send that it immediately puts you in mind of those wonderful circles in which our entire existence moves and from which we cannot escape, do what we may. A Kreisler circulates in these circles, and very likely, weary of the leaps and bounds of the St. Vitus’s dance he is obliged to perform, and at odds with the dark, inscrutable power which delineated those circles, he often longs to break out more than a stomach constitutionally weak anyway will allow.

Here Kreisler identifies himself, as a romantic artist, with the intimation of a necessity of fate at work in man’s lower depths. The longing for the infinite is depicted here as compulsively circular. Honoring such infinite longing constitutes the terrifying pilgrimage to Orkus which the romantic must endure. I have argued that the decision to take up such a fateful vocation as a cartographer of the absolute has little to do with circumstantial biographical details, whether Hoffmann’s or Kreisler’s, and rather concerns a fundamental metaphysical malaise that gives rise to the infinite, longing characteristic of the romantic mindset. It is the same malaise that compels the romantic to draw

95 Hoffmann, The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr, 74.
96 A reference to Sydenham’s Chorea disease, which used to be known as St. Vitus’s Dance, on account of its inducing a dancing mania in children. St. Vitus is the patron saint of dance.
97 Ibid., 49.
nearer to the sublime spirit-realm which threatens the artist’s own destruction.

In fact, Hoffmann uses variants of the German Kreis (circle), from which Kreisler’s name is derived, when describing the destructive trials endured by the romantic protagonists of his tales. Particularly revealing is the repeated mention of a “circle of fire” (Feuerkreis) in some of Hoffmann’s most influential works. In *The Golden Pot*, a witch attempts to conjure up Anselmus by using her cat to create a “circle of fire” on the ground. In *The Sandman*, Nathanael’s delusions are described as a “fiery circle” that never stops turning. In the throes of his fatal collapse at the end of the tale, we find Nathanael “leaping up in the air and shouting, ‘Circle of fire! Whirl round, circle of fire! Whirl round!’” Commenting on Hoffmann’s usage of “Feuerkreis,” Neil Hertz notes that “the expression [is] an unusual one in German.” Hertz then offers a reading whereby Hoffmann’s description of the romantic’s repetition-compulsion functions as “what French critics call a mise en abyme — a casting into the abyss,” which gives “an illusion of infinite regress.” The romantic artist aims to “capture and represent the energies figured in the Feuerkreis itself,” accounting for the romantic’s perverse pursuit of the destructive sublime. “This mise en abyme,” Hertz continues, “simulates wildly uncontrollable repetition, and it is just that, I believe, that is imaged [sic] here in the whirling Feuerkreis, carrying Nathanael into the black abyss.”

The circle of fire is a prime hieroglyph of Hoffmann’s aesthetics. So forceful are the equivalences that Hoffmann draws between fire and the effacement of oppositions that Bachelard identifies a “Hoffmann Complex,” whereby “[m]adness and in-

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99 Ibid., 109.
100 Ibid., 125.
102 Ibid., 112.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
toxication, reason and enjoyment, are constantly presented in combination.” The major opposition effaced by Hoffmann’s aesthetics is that of the beautiful and the sublime. In viewing the sublime as a terminal moment of the beautiful, Hoffmann paints the romantic artist as someone who is willing to risk the horrors of madness for the sake of bringing the transcendent fire of the spirit-realm closer to man’s impoverished existence.

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Bibliography


