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THE FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF HOFFMANN'S *THE SANDMAN*

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Abstract. The English reception of *The Sandman* seems to begin with Walter Scott's overview of Hoffmann's writing in 1827. The first English translation of the novella was published in 1834. The text was abridged and appeared in *The Keepsake*, highlighting the name of the translator, Lord Albert Conyngham, rather than that of the author. The choice of words and phrases, along with the missing parts of the text, closes the door for the common sense and the rationalisations of the Enlightenment, leaving readers with Nathaniel's feverish imagination. Thus, the alignment with the literature of the supernatural that Coleridge had preferences for becomes even more pronounced. What is generally considered the first translation of *The Sandman*, Oxenford's translation for the collection *Tales from the German*, was published a decade later, in 1844. Comparing and contrasting the two versions of the text in English reveals the translators' diverging sensibilities.

Keywords: The Sandman; English translation; imagination and the supernatural; Coleridge; Romantic.

Prior to any translation of the novella into English, *The Sandman* seems to be introduced to English-language readers by Sir Walter Scott's review of Hoffmann's works. The piece was published in 1827 in the *Foreign Quarterly Review*. After a lengthy introduction on the topic of superstition in literature, the flights imagination, and the improbable in folk tales and romances, Scott declares this "fantastic mode of writing" unpopular with English writers, brings in Mary Shelley's anonymous publication of 1818 in order to assert that there "the interest of the work does not turn upon the marvellous creation of Frankenstein's monster", and proceeds with a sketch of Hoffmann's life meant to rationalise his oddities (Scott, 1827/1841, pp. 23 – 24). In the style of the day, there are extensive excerpts to illustrate the critic's point and he declares from early on that the author's imagination is "wild" (1827/1841, p. 46). But even if there are aspects of Hoffmann's writing that he approves of, Scott is genuinely shocked by *The Sandman*. His account of the story is

interrupted by the exclamation, "But we should be mad ourselves, were we to trace these ravings any further" (1827/1841, pp. 50 – 51). It would be an understatement to say that Scott did not recommend the novella to the English readers, and it is in the interest of reception to pin down his evaluation: "This wild and absurd story is in some measure redeemed by some traits in the character of Clara, whose firmness, plain good sense and frank affection are placed in agreeable contrast with the wild imagination, fanciful apprehensions, and extravagant affection of her crazy-pated admirer" (1827/1841, p. 51). Hoffmann commentators usually associate Clara with the common sense and the rationality characteristic of the Enlightenment, while Nathaniel is typically linked to the Romantic rebellion against the Age of reason. Surprisingly, Walter Scott, one of the emblems of Romanticism, appreciates the former and rejects the latter. He justifies his opinions by associating the tales with a diseased mind:

> They are not the visions of a poetical mind, they have scarcely even the seeming authenticity which the hallucinations of lunacy convey to the patient (…). In fact, the inspirations of Hoffmann so often resemble the ideas produced by the immoderate use of opium, that we cannot help considering his case as one requiring the assistance of medicine rather than criticism (…). (1827/1841, p. 51)

This is not the place to veer the discussion in the direction of Walter Scott's literary preferences – suffice it to say that he was an influential figure and this type of introduction did not do Hoffmann any favours.

To the best of my knowledge, the first translation of *The Sandman* was published in *The Keepsake* in 1834. *The Keepsake* was an annual, aimed at middle-class ladies, who would often buy it as a Christmas present or a birthday present (Robinson, 1990, pp. xii–xiii). The content varied but was tailored to appeal to a female readership and the exotic and the fantastical often went hand in hand. The editor chose *The Sandman* to open the volume but the name of the author was rather hushed. Instead, the translator's name was featured in the table of contents, Lord Albert Conyngham. This evokes the arrangement of the *Canterbury Tales* where the tale of the Knight is the first one because of his social status but, in all fairness, there are lords aplenty in the volume. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography* (under the entry for Albert Denison), Conyngham was educated at Eton, one of the most prestigious public schools in England, and assumed diplomatic-service jobs in German-speaking countries: he was appointed attaché at Berlin in 1824, was afterwards attaché at Vienna from 1825 to 1826, and secretary at Berlin from 1829 to 1831 (Boase, 1888, p. 351). Presumably, this is where his interest in Hoffmann would have originated. He was knighted by George IV in 1829, changed his surname to Denison in 1849 in order to inherit his uncle's wealth, and became the first Baron Londesborough with "an income of about 100,000*l*" (Boase, 1888, p. 351).

Perhaps scholars have overlooked the existence of this translation because of the absence of the author's name. It is only when one gets to the beginning of the

tale that one can read: "The Sandman. Translated from the German of Hoffman" (Hoffmann, 1834, p. 1). What remains under wraps is that the text is abridged – another argument to disregard it as a translation – but no one would know before they read it, and once they have read it, they would not be able to ignore it. Most probably it was abridged due to publisher policies. Mary Shelley complained in a letter to her friend Mrs. Gisborne that when contributing to *The Keepsake*, she was constantly under pressure to trim her writing down:

> As the merit lies in the beauty of the details, I do not see how it could be cut down to *one quarter* of its present length, which is as long as any tale printed in an annual. When I write for them, I am worried to death to make my things shorter and shorter, till I fancy people think ideas can be conveyed by intuition, and that it is a superstition to consider words necessary for their expression. (Shelley, 1944, p. 97; 11th June 1835)

It is intriguing to trace how Hoffmann's translator managed the task of compressing *The Sandman*. To establish the omissions, the 1834 translation is compared against the 1844 translation. The 1844 translation, usually cited as the first one in English, was done by John Oxenford and published in a collection called *Tales from the German*. In a commemorative essay about the almost forgotten literary figure of the Victorian period, Meredith Donaldson and Randall Donaldson praise his translations:

> Sparked by a keen interest in Germany and its literature, Oxenford made significant and often innovative contributions to the English public's increasing awareness of German literature and culture. His many translations rendered the original German accurately and presented the texts in a comprehensible, well-formulated English style. (Donaldson & Donaldson, 2024, p. 63)

In the case of *The Sandman*, the language is not as smooth as the language of translations in the last century or so but its accuracy of representation is a reliable point of reference when discussing Conyngham's version.

The novella opens with three letters – from Nathaniel to his friend Lothario (Lothaire in 1844), from Clara to Nathaniel and, once again, from Nathaniel to Lothario.[1] The first omission is part of Clara's letter, in which she tries to persuade him out of his beliefs. Her Stoic attitude towards the challenges of life advises a mental workout that will solve the problem: "Now, if we have a mind, which is sufficiently firm, sufficiently strengthened by the joy of life, always to recognise this strange enemy as such, and calmly to follow the path of our own inclination and calling, then the dark power will fail in its attempt to gain a form that shall be a reflection of ourselves" (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 147). If readers can readily associate this with the Age of reason, her next formula is rather Miltonic and, by extension, Byronic: "It is the phantom of our own selves, the close relationship with which, and its deep operation on our mind, casts us into hell or transports us into heaven" (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 148). Because of the omission, the ambivalence is eliminated from Conyngham's

text, and Clara's character, praised by Walter Scott, starts slipping away. Judging by Clara's letter (to be precise, the text that the two translations share), the phrasing of the 1834 version makes the heroine slightly more empathetic than the 1844 version: "It is not improbable that his own imprudence occasioned his death, and that Coppelius was not to blame" (Hoffmann, 1834, p. 12) strikes the reader as that little bit more obliging than "Your father, no doubt, occasioned his own death, by some act of carelessness of which Coppelius was completely guiltless" (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 147). The reasonable adult is once more in vogue in the Victorian period and Oxenford's heroine illustrates that perfectly. Intriguingly, it is Conyngham's translation that appears to be closer to the original in this case.

The next important omission comes immediately after the third letter and has to do with the deliberations of the narrator, who debates narrative strategies in the style of Tristram Shandy and closes off this missing section with the declaration that "nothing is stranger and madder than actual life; which the poet can only catch in the form of a dull reflection in a dimly polished mirror" (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 150). The implication that the horrors of life surpass Gothic fiction is certainly made by others, Jane Austen for one, a much more grounded author than Hoffmann. The Platonic nuance that the reflection of reality does not have much intrinsic value drives a wedge between the sensibilities of the writer and his narrator. Finally, the fleeting reference to "through a glass darkly", which emphasises the imperfect understanding of reality, makes the narrator's position rather ambivalent: is his portrait-painting that different from the production of a poet? In this segment, omitted by Conyngham, Oxenford uses the word "uncanny" for the first time in his translation, with three more to come – some eighty years before the publication of Freud's essay in English linked the concept with Hoffmann's novella – but for Oxenford it is not a consistent rendering of Hoffmann's "*unheimlich*".

Crucially for the reader's take-away, Conyngham omits the portrayal of Clara and the interaction between her and Nathaniel on his visit home. This is where she is described as "not by any means (…) beautiful" but adored by architects and painters and poets (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 151). It is there that the two characters are represented in a binary opposition: her previously-mentioned letter is "sensible", she is "clear-headed", to her mysticism is "in the highest degree repugnant"; he is gloomy, believes that "man, although he might think himself free, only served for the cruel sport of dark powers" and deterministically claims that "it is foolish to think that we do anything in art and science according to our own independent will" (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 152). Still in this part, missing in Conyngham's rendition, they become "mentally more and more estranged" and the culmination comes with him reading her his poem that she pleads should be thrown into the fire because it is "mad, senseless, insane stuff", which provokes him to call her an "inanimate, accursed automaton" (Hoffmann, 1844, pp. 153, 154). Finally, a duel between Nathaniel and Lothario nearly takes place in the omitted segment, narrowly prevented by Clara's intervention.

With all those paragraphs made redundant by Conyngham, the direction of the plot does not change but the missing details would make any reader relying on Walter Scott's appreciation of Clara wonder what he might have based it on. Beyond the tentative reflex that the female voice is somewhat muffled in the abridged version, there is the awareness that the voice of reason and common sense is subdued at the expense of traumatised volatility. Trauma goes back to the unsolicited encounter with Coppelius, which event is intact in the two translations. When the advocate visits Nathaniel's father, he urges his host with these words: "'*Auf! – zum Werk*', *rief dieser mit heiserer, schnarrender Stimme und warf den Rock ab*" (Hoffmann, 2004). Conyngham's choice here, "'Come! To our work', cried the monster", invites a couple comments (Hoffmann, 1834, p. 7). It seems to echo Byron's *Manfred*, where the hero exclaims twice, "Now to my task" and "But – to my task" (Byron, 1997, I.i.; II.ii.). It is the syntactic structure and the scanning rather than the actual words that evoke Byron. Very similarly Oxenford has opted for "'Now to our work!' cried the latter" (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 144). Thus, in terms of Byron, or shall I say Milton, for the phrase originated in his *Comus* and was borrowed by the Romantic poet to signal an active rearrangement of reality, the translators are on the same page. But is the reader's experience the same? I would argue that it is not. Largely, it is the use of the word "monster" that may be held responsible: the potential association with *Frankenstein* is too close to the readers of the day to miss out on. Mary Shelley's novel was revised and published for the third time in 1831, theatrical performances and metaphorical references in the press kept it alive, and she herself was mentioned as "the author of *Frankenstein*" on the pages of that very volume of *The Keepsake*, where her tale *The Mortal Immortal* was printed. Certainly, Oxenford does not shy away from the word "monster": it appears twice in Nathaniel's first letter and again in Clara's letter, three times overall versus the three occurrences in Conyngham's translation. And yet, none of the other instances in either text evokes literary associations, they strike the reader as mundane usage.

A little bit later in Hoffmann's narrative, young Nathaniel's presence in his father's study is detected and he is seized by Coppelius, who investigates his "mechanism" and experiments with possible alterations. Whose model is superior? – God's or Coppelius's? In Conyngham's translation there can be no two opinions about it:

> He then again seized me with such violence that my joints cracked; and almost dislocating my hands and feet, he first placed them in one agonizing position, and then twisted them into another. "They work not now so well – they did better as they were," muttered Coppelius, in a harsh and hissing whisper; and again he turned them in a contrary and unnatural direction. A cramp thrilled through me, darkness descended on my brain, and I felt no more. (Hoffmann, 1834, p. 8)

The original model is superior to later versions of it and the rendition points to the organic unity that the Romantics celebrate. Human attempts to produce artefacts cannot measure up to the divine output ("Tools were made, & born were hands, /

Every Farmer Understands"[2]) and Coppelius admits the faultlessness of Nathaniel's make. By contrast, Oxenford's translation does justice to the instability of the German text and the focus is no longer on the perfection of the original creation:

> And then he seized me so forcibly that my joints cracked, and screwed off my hands and feet, and then put them on again, one here and the other there. "Every thing is not right here! – As good as it was – the old one has understood it!" So did Coppelius say, in a hissing, lisping tone, but all around me became black and dark, a sudden cramp darted through my bones and nerves – and I lost all feeling. (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 144)

The wording echoes the principle of mechanical philosophy according to which the human body is "a machine made by the hands of God" and the verb form "screwed off" reinforces a pre-romantic mechanistic allusion (Descartes, 1989, p. 60). In both translations of the scene, the story line stays on the same track but because the connotations are different, I would argue that Conyngham seems to inscribe Hoffmann's novella more successfully into the English Romantic tradition than Oxenford does.

Conyngham is also the one to feature the attribute "visionary" with regard to Nathaniel six times, whereas in the full-text version it only appears twice. The word is charged because it goes back to Blake's visions and to Wordsworth's "visionary gleam": in the twentieth century it was used by literary critic Harold Bloom to signify the English Romantics as "the visionary company". Similarly loaded is the word "imagination", which does not make an appearance in 1844 but is used three times in the abridged version. The first example is in Clara's letter and it is attached to Nathaniel: "I will freely confess to you, that, in my opinion, all the horrors which you speak of have their origin in your own imagination, and that the external world has very little to do with them" (Hoffmann, 1834, p. 11). If "A Vision of the Last Judgment" is anything to go by, Blake would have replied to the accusation: "Mental things are alone real" (Gilchrist, 1863, p. 176). Then, in Nathaniel's second letter to Lothario, the hero refers to what Clara has written and uses the same word. The third example is from his own point of view but interiorises her opinion of the diseased creative powers of his mind: "Nathaniel became more composed, and thinking of Clara, persuaded himself that the fantasy which had come over him had originated in his own morbid imagination, and that in all probability this Coppola was a very respectable mechanician and optician" (Hoffmann, 1834, p. 17). An equally popular label for creative powers is the word "fancy", which both translators make use of. With Conyngham the noun is used self-referentially by Nathaniel to denote the imagination: "still in my fancy he continued a fearful spectre, and an object of horror", "I could not wholly reconcile myself to the existence of the monster which my fancy had created" (Hoffmann, 1834, p. 4). The meaning in Oxenford's usage is the same, it even parades as a verb on one occasion (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 140), but we do get this association with Clara as

well: “Clara had the vivid fancy of a cheerful, unembarrassed child; a deep, tender, feminine disposition; an acute, clever understanding” (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 151). This example obfuscates the reader’s understanding of “fancy”: if Nathaniel and Clara both possess it, is it really “imagination”?

It was Coleridge who made a theoretical distinction between “imagination” and “fancy” in his *Biographia Literaria* in 1817 but it did not stick, so people went on using the words synonymously. He is also the poet who links the imagination to the supernatural:

> In this idea originated the plan of the LYRICAL BALLADS; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. (Coleridge, 2014, p. 208)

Hoffmann followed the same formula of weaving the threads of human nature and the supernatural in *The Sandman*. Interestingly, his novella was published in the same year, in which Coleridge had his poem *Kubla Khan* printed. In the latter, readers sense the supernatural, particularly memorable with the image of “a woman wailing for her demon lover”, and they can clearly see and appreciate the inscribed Romantic poet with his visions and meditations. Ursula Mahlendorf argues that this is what Hoffmann does as well, that his tale is a fictional psycho-biography of a Romantic poet:

> Hoffmann reveals remarkable insight into what makes an artist. As the first psychologist of creativity, he offers, in the brief compass of the novella, a concise and penetrating psychology of artist and art. His insights come to constitute the romantic portrait of the artist and the romantic theory of creation. It is a view which recurs with somewhat different accents in Nietzsche, in Thomas and Heinrich Mann and in Freud. (Mahlendorf, 1975, p. 237)

Her reading is entirely in the tradition of psychoanalysis and she draws attention to the meaning of “Nathanael” echoing the meaning of “Theodor” (Hoffmann’s second name) to propose that the choice of name “establishes a parallel between himself and the other artist” (1975, p. 236).

If the meaning of “supernatural” refers to “things that cannot be explained by science” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), the moment that stands out in Hoffmann’s text is that finale, which challenges psychological interpretations and allows the reader to share Nathaniel’s perception of evil as objectively existing out there in the world. In Conyngham’s translation, this is how it goes:

> Some persons were about to ascend the stairs to secure the madman: Coppelius laughed as he said, “Ha, ha! – wait, wait! – he will come down of his own accord”: and he looked up like the rest, and fixed his eyes on Nathaniel. On a sudden, the maniac stood as though petrified; he then leant over, and gazing on Coppelius with

> a piercing cry of "Ha! beautiful eyes! beautiful eyes!" sprang over the railing. (Hoffmann, 1834, p. 29)

In this use of "gazing on", readers can detect Dr Johnson's definition of 1755, according to which the verb means "to look intently and earnestly; to look with eagerness" (Johnson, 1755/2021). Thus, it is easy to assume that Nathaniel knows that Coppelius is there – he has become aware of his presence because the latter's eyes are fixed on him – so he leans forward "gazing on" his antagonist. Does this mean that Nathaniel owns his decision? Jumping down appears to be his choice, it might indeed be intentional and active, but it is very much reminiscent of the opening scene in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*: "He holds him with his glittering eye – /The Wedding-Guest stood still, /And listens like a three years' child: /The Mariner hath his will" (Coleridge, 1921, p. 187, lines 13 – 16). As the clarification "and fixed his eyes on Nathaniel" is absent from the German original, it is not unlikely for Conyngham to have added it because of his awareness of the situation in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Later on, in Coleridge's ballad, the Wedding guest addresses the Mariner with "I fear thee and thy glittering eye" (1921, p.196, line 228), which in the context of *The Sandman* reflects Nathaniel's fear and is verbally detectable in Conyngham's translation of the scene with Coppola and his eyewear:

> He continued to produce more and more glasses, till the whole table sparkled and *glittered* in a strange manner; a thousand eyes seemed to wink, glisten, and stare at Nathaniel. He was unable to withdraw his own from the table, and Coppola still drew more from his pockets, and wildly and more wildly did the flaming glances cross and shoot their blood-red rays into Nathaniel's breast. (Hoffmann, 1834, p. 16, emphasis added)

In other words, two diametrically opposed interpretations are possible: some might say that Nathaniel is defiant and in control of the situation, while others would argue that he is zombified and Coppelius has his will. In Oxenford's translation everything is much more straightforward:

> Some wished to ascend and secure the madman, but Coppelius laughed, saying, "Ha, ha, – only wait – he will soon come down of his own accord," and looked up like the rest. Nathaniel suddenly stood still as if petrified; he stooped down, perceived Coppelius, and yelling out, "Ah, pretty eyes – pretty eyes!" – he sprang over the railing. (Hoffmann, 1844, p. 165)

Here committing suicide seems the involuntary reaction to a stimulus: Nathaniel passively perceives Coppelius's presence and jumps impulsively upon noticing him. Oxenford's version of the text unequivocally takes us back to the deterministic mysticism that the character champions earlier.

Hoffmann is included in *Tales from the German* with three of his shorter texts and in the opinion of the translators "in all these stories it will be observed that Hoffmann's purpose is to point out the ill-effect of a morbid desire after an

imaginary world, and a distaste for realities" (Hoffmann, 1844, p. xii). Such an evaluation suggests that the point of view of the narrator is mapped onto the author and that the Romantic disposition is perceived as flawed. Inevitably, this seeps through Oxenford's English translation. Little is known about Conyngham's literary preferences but on account of *The Sandman* it is safe to assume that he must have been on the same page with the editor of *The Keepsake*, Frederic Mansel Reynolds, whose contributors included major figures of what is now considered the Romantic literary canon.

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NOTES

1. The names of the characters in the novella follow the choices of the two translators.
2. Blake, "Auguries of Innocence".

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