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The Mirror of Laughter: Mediation, Self-Reflection, and Healing in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Princess Brambilla*

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E.T.A. Hoffmann's capriccio *Princess Brambilla* explores a narrative realm of liminality and metamorphosis that reveals the fundamental instability of our most basic epistemological distinctions. Set during the irreverent days of the Roman carnival, *Brambilla* delights in a disorienting chaos of masks, costumes, dream images and hallucinations as Hoffmann pulls all the stops in a fantastical narrative of extraordinary complexity. The text unfolds a carnivalesque universe that – in the spirit of Early German Romantic irony – plays with the inescapable mediatory “distortions” brought about by the structures of human consciousness itself. Just as the carnival is a ritual of life-affirming renewal, Hoffmann's self-reflexive narrative, too, is a story of change and healing, in which the self comes to understand that it has no access to a stable and unmediated self-knowledge. If this moment of insight initially appears as a near-psychotic threat to the very basis of identity, the laughter it triggers is ultimately a laughter of liberation. The self, now reconstituted in the mirror of laughter, the textual movement of meta-narrative irony, comes to embrace itself as a process of continuous change, a recognition that then allows it to be made whole in the mediatory gaze of another.

In his editorial preface to *Princess Brambilla*, his 1820 *Capriccio in the Style of Jacques Callot*, E.T.A. Hoffmann warns his readers in advance that *Brambilla* is not “a book for people who like to take everything seriously and gravely.” To approach it with such seriousness would be a “misunderstanding,” and in order to truly appreciate the text in front of her the reader should be “willing and ready to forgo seriousness for a few hours and surrender to the bold and capricious sport of a hobgoblin who is perhaps often overimpudent” (113).¹ *Brambilla* is thus introduced as pure entertainment, a mere caprice; the reader is asked to surrender to a spirit of the fantastic, to suspend the critical desire to analyze, and to make way for the pleasures of pure enjoyment. Any attempt to take the text other than on its own “impudent” terms, to look for seriousness behind its overt jest would be to miss its point.

And yet, in the immediately following paragraph, the editor recalls “that remark of Carlo Gozzi ... to the effect that a whole arsenal of absurdities and ghost parades will not suffice to breathe a soul into a fairy tale, for such is achieved only by a profound motivation [*tiefen Grund*] and by a guiding idea drawn from some philosophical view or other of life” (113–14).² Now it would seem that the opposite approach to the one previously suggested is the right way to read what is to follow: to understand the “soul” of *Brambilla*, to read for its “spirit,” rather than its “letter,” to put it in the preferred terms of Romantic hermeneutics, one would need to read for the

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"profound motivation" producing the "capricious sport" of the text and hence to see the seriousness mediated by its apparent jest.

It would be a mistake to attempt to resolve this contradiction, by claiming, say, that Hoffmann's text reveals the ultimate seriousness of its fantastical play,³ or that it aims to vindicate comedy by demonstrating its superiority over tragedy, even though Giglio Fava, Hoffmann's hero, will undergo a transformation over the course of the text from a mediocre tragedian to a brilliant comic actor in the style of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. For Hoffmann holds, both in *Brambilla* and more explicitly in his 1819 *Strange Sufferings of a Theatre Director* that both seriousness and jest, tragedy and comedy stem from one and the same source: the irony that "lies deep in human nature" (Hoffmann, *Nachtstücke* 452). The envisioned ideal reader of *Brambilla* would thus be one who could follow both reading strategies simultaneously, who could accept that the text is to be taken as both jest and seriousness at the same time, someone, in other words, who would be able to read the text neither unreflectively, as a mere empty "parade" of fantastical apparitions, nor allegorically, as a coded message whose true meaning, to be unlocked with the right interpretative key, could be found somewhere beyond or below its surface, but *ironically*, as an inverted, laughter-inducing mirror that reflects reflection and reveals all such binary distinctions as mere illusions. Such an ironic perspective would require one to not simply to tolerate and sustain but to relish the dizziness and the intellectual vertigo that result from being unable to tell apart jest and seriousness.

At one of the crucial moments in the narrative, the capriccio's main protagonist, formerly Giglio Fava, now the prince Ciapperi – a transformation about which I will say more shortly – remarks that he suffers "from an eye disorder which I brought on myself by wearing glasses too early. Something must have become disarranged in my retina, because unfortunately I see everything upside down most of the time, and thus it comes about that the most serious things often seem uncommonly funny to me, and contrariwise, the funniest things often seem uncommonly serious to me. This often causes me horrible suffering and such vertigo that I can hardly stand upright" (235). To anyone familiar with Early German Romantic irony, Fava's/Ciapperi's "eye disorder" will recall Friedrich Schlegel's remark about Socratic irony in his critical fragment #108. "It is a very good sign," Schlegel suggests here, "when the harmonious bores are at a loss as to how they should take this constant self-parody and continually believe and disbelief anew, until they grow dizzy and take for seriousness what is fun and for fun what is serious" (13).⁴ As long as one believes that a given act of communication needs to be taken either as serious or as spoken in jest, not realizing, as Schlegel puts it in the same fragment, "the impossibility and the necessity of a complete communication," the ironist's disorienting refusal to make clear distinctions can only cause "horrible suffering." But such disorientation is at least better than sheer blindness, and Giglio's/Ciapperi's recognition of his "eye disorder" signals that his recovery is not far off. All that is needed to effect it, he has been told by his "medical advisor," the *ciarlatano* Celionati, is "frequent and vigorous exercise." True irony, like Pascal's faith, is a matter of continuous practice, and for that, Hoffmann's *Princess Brambilla* provides ample opportunity.

Once it can be experienced without suffering, the dizzying ironic perspective – "true humor," as one of the characters in Hoffmann's text will call it – is liberating rather than crippling, for it allows the self not to take itself too seriously and to break out of its narcissistic prison. Irony, as Schlegel points out, again in critical fragment #108, "is the freest of all licences, for by its means one transcends oneself; and yet it

is also the most lawful, for it is absolutely necessary" (13). German Romantic irony is "absolutely necessary," not only because the structure of Schlegel's fragment demands it, but because it arises – via Fichte's transcendental idealism – from a recognition of the inescapability of mediation. Since the self can only grasp itself and the world it produces in the hall of mirrors of its own consciousness, mediation, and the distortion, the "eye disorder" it creates, is the precondition of all subjectivity. Since those glasses, as it were, cannot be removed, as Kleist would discover so devastatingly through reading Kant, irony at least makes sure that their presence is recognized. Through self-parody, the self can then go beyond its limiting and limited empirical incarnations, which no longer have any defining reality; it can transcend itself, knowing of course that any other position it might take up will be equally mediated, and it can thus experience itself as a process of constant change and redefinition. It is free to invent itself, free to improvise.

Yet this freedom, Schlegel's irony, Hoffmann's true humor, must remain forever incomprehensible to anyone who still believes that they know nothing more intimately and directly – without mediation – than their own interiority. To quote from Schlegel's fragment one more time: "To whoever hasn't got it [irony], it will remain a mystery, even after the most open confession" (13). How then can a self be brought to observe its own blind-spot, its narcissistic and utterly un-ironic conviction that it remains identical to itself over time, that it may carry a mask but is not itself one in turn? How in other words can a self lose its high seriousness, ultimately its most ridiculous feature, and realize that it is a product rather than a stable originator? How can it become self-aware, self-ironic, and how can it hence change? This question, too, Hoffmann's text – which is much more than simply a literary illustration of Romantic irony – sets out to engage.

At this point, an attempt at a summary of Hoffmann's complex text, reductive and unsatisfactory as it must remain, is in order: *Princess Brambilla* tells the story of a young Roman couple, the actor Giglio Fava and the seamstress Giacinta Soardi, or rather, it tells the story of the couple's transformation, for Hoffmann's is a liminal narrative, concerned with change and the in-between, not so much with points of departure and goals to be reached.⁵ The brief opening and closing scenes of the capriccio provide the most rudimentary, perfunctory, and openly conventional of narrative frames: in the first chapter, we find Giglio and Giacinta engaged and living in relative poverty; at the fairy-tale ending of the text, at which the capriccio arrives with one of the narrative jump-cuts Hoffmann employs so masterfully, they have been married for a year (the events of which, just as much as the wedding, are not part of the narrative), are prosperous, still as passionately in love as they were at their wedding day, and both now acclaimed and successful actors in a *Commedia dell'Arte* troupe. Yes, Hoffmann's narrative insists, love and marriage are compatible, as are an artist's life in the theatre and bourgeois economic success and stability – at least in the literary form of a Romantic fairy tale such a narrative can be posited.⁶ The overwhelming bulk of Hoffmann's narrative, 107 of its 123 pages, is concerned with the metamorphosis that takes place between these two stages and which develops during the three irreverent days of the Roman carnival. During this time of carnivalesque inversions and collapsing of binaries and social hierarchies, Giglio and Giacinta – secretly guided by the *ciarlatano* Celionati, a trickster figure and ambiguous master of ceremonies, who is ultimately also a stand-in for the author figure – leave their old identities behind and embrace the disorienting chaos of masks, costumes, dream images and hallucinations in order to recognize both themselves and each other, first as the Princess Brambilla

and the Prince Ciapperi and then again in these guises as Giglio Fava and Giacinta Soardi. While we catch glimpses of Giacinta, who, it is clear, undergoes her own process of metamorphosis, the focus of the narrative is on Giglio, a vain, self-involved tragic actor, who plays the lead roles in productions of classical Italian tragedies that bore the audience to tears, not least because Giglio, as we find out later from one of the theater's patrons, always only plays himself. Wont to throw himself into worn-out melodramatic poses in real life just as much as on stage and known to spend his little money on expensive hair gel and sweets, Giglio is a tough case indeed, and the cure of his debilitating narcissism requires drastic interventions: near madness and an induced state of psychosis, characterized by extended hallucinations, and an utter inability to distinguish dreams and fictions from reality, are necessary to make him realize his "eye disorder" and to finally come back to his renewed senses.⁷

The realm of the carnival in which the couple's transformation takes place is also the realm of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, for the *Commedia* was customarily performed at the carnival, and its traditional masks – Truffaldino, Pantalon, Brighella, Smeraldina, and many others – are among the most popular costumes in the Roman carnival. The masks and grotesque costumes of the *Commedia*, specifically as they are portrayed in the etchings of Jacques Callot, are the germ of Hoffmann's capriccio itself, which thus, in a formal mirroring, enters the world that gave birth to it. Moreover, in a particularly tight formal fit, the free improvisational character of the *Commedia* also matches one of the generic requirements of the capriccio, which must artfully present itself as an unpremeditated and unmediated spontaneous act of improvisation, an unscripted outpouring of the author's or artist's imagination.⁸ Hoffmann's narrative is carefully constructed to present itself as if issued magically from eight etchings by Callot, selected from the latter's series *Balli di Sfessania*. At Hoffmann's request, the Berlin engraver Carl Friedrich Thiele turned these etchings into eight copperplate engravings that accompany each of the eight chapters of *Princess Brambilla*, and which are referred to and developed like visual nuclei in an extended act of *ekphrasis* in Hoffmann's narrative.⁹ And as all these "improvisational" aesthetic structures are ultimately used to explore the inner developments of a self in transformation, which find their literary expression in only seemingly outward narrative actions and events ("the human spirit is itself the most wonderful fairy tale that can possibly be" [173], as Hoffmann's narrator remarks in one of his many poetological and meta-narrative asides), they then also work together to demonstrate what we may take to be one of Hoffmann's points, i.e. that subjectivity, if it is to remain alive, must be conceived as a continual process, a flow that nevertheless remains under control of a conscious part of the self, a state that can hence be likened to the processes of theatrical improvisation. To stay within the theatrical metaphor that drives Hoffmann's text: as an actor merely lending her own idiosyncrasies to prescribed and pre-scripted roles, the self is incapable of development and essentially dead – it can only ever play itself – even if those roles and scripts change from one piece to another. The subject's true, evasive nature, its life as perpetual flux can only express itself in the freedom of improvisation, a freedom that depends on the actor's willingness to become the character she is to impersonate and to let go of her own ego, while observing herself and remaining in partial control of that very process. Before Giglio Fava can regain such conscious control of subconscious flow in Hoffmann's ideal of theatrical play, however, he will feel himself rather disturbingly the plaything of higher powers; he is a puppet to Celionati's will, and the charlatan directs his actions as if by invisible strings – at no point, it seems, is Fava less free than during the liberating process that

is to deliver him to the text's fairy-tale ending. At the same time, the fact that also *Brambilla's* improvisations are aesthetically mediated and complexly scripted to the extreme – even the elements of the *Commedia* become part of the text in already aestheticized form, mediated through the work of Callot and Gozzi – is thus only the necessary ironic refraction that characterizes true humor: without a text there is no improvisation, and the improviser may not take herself too seriously either, for real freedom does not lie in naïveté, but in the second-order reflection that is irony.

As if to underscore this point, the characters' roles in Hoffmann's text are not just doubled but tripled, for in a true stroke of genius, Giglio and Giacinta are not only *Brambilla* and *Chiapperi*, but also King Ophioch and Queen Liris, the royal couple in a story within the story, a fairy tale within the fairy tale, the myth of the land *Urdargarten*, which is told by Celionati in the Caffè Grecco to a group of German artists who have taken residence in Rome. This myth, too, I can only retell here in rather rudimentary fashion: King Ophioch is imprisoned in a deep melancholy for which no remedy can be found. The cause for this melancholy, we learn, is both metaphysical and ontological: Ophioch, who used to have inklings of a possible communication with the natural world, now feels disconnected from nature because of the workings of a "dark, terrible demon" (163). In a final attempt to help, the king's advisors decide on marriage as a cure: Ophioch is married to Liris, the princess of a neighboring kingdom, who spends her days in continual laughter. Her laughter, however, is a rather superficial reflex; she laughs at everything and hence for no particular reason, and her unreflective mirth is only an additional source of pain for Ophioch. Both Ophioch and Liris, who fall into a deep sleep while contemplating the words "Thought destroyed intuition" (166), are ultimately cured by the magus Hermod by means of a prism that liquifies and turns into a clear, silvery spring, the *Urdarquelle*.¹⁰ Ophioch and Liris are instantly awakened by the creation of the spring and hurry over to look at it:

And now as they perceived the gleaming blue sky, the bushes, the trees, the flowers, the whole of Nature, and their very selves in inverted reflection in the infinite depths, it was as if dark veils rolled up. A splendid new world full of life and joy became clear before their eyes, and with the recognition of that world there was kindled within their hearts a rapture they had never known and never dreamed of before. Long did they gaze, and then they rose, looked at one another, and *laughed* – for one must term 'laughter' the physical expression of innermost satisfaction as well as of joy at the victory of the spirit's inner strength. (168)

In the moment of true spontaneous laughter, the moment of spirit's victory, the self, through contemplating its inverted reflection *and* the gaze of another in a reflexive medium is thus able to go beyond itself and to awake in a moment of recognition. Ophioch and Liris form two halves of one and the same self, which is now made whole in a moment of double mediation. The movement of the preface is repeated in this healing and transformative moment of reflection and mediation: both melancholy – at home in the ruins of allegory, to follow Walter Benjamin – and unreflective mirth (superficial jest) are transformed into the knowing humor of irony, in a moment of laughter that is the deep physical expression of spiritual victory and the healing of a narcissistically wounded self.¹¹ The reading strategy recommended by Hoffmann's preface is hence performed in the process of healing represented in the narrative itself, and healing in Hoffmann's text, in fact, *is* that very process of reading and reflective mediation.

The German painter Franz Reinhold, representative of the group of Celionati's listeners, then ironically reads Celionati's fairy tale as an allegory of irony:

[I]f I have understood you aright, the Urdar Spring whereby the inhabitants of the land Urdargarten were made happy was none other than what we Germans call humor, that wonderful power of thought born of the most profound contemplation of Nature and capable of creating its own ironic double, in whose odd tomfooleries [Faxen] it recognizes its own tomfooleries and – I retain the impudent word – the tomfooleries of all Being here below and takes its delight in them. (170)

Such doubling and healing tomfooleries are indeed the essence of Hoffmann's text, and the myth of *Urdargarten* thus appropriately also doubles itself in Hoffmann's narrative. Its continuation – precipitated by another crisis following the death of Ophioch and Liris – is told in the world of the carnival by the magician Ruffiamonte, a friend of Celionati's, and overheard by Giglio, who finds himself – impossibly but necessarily – a central actor in the myth. This second part ultimately leads to a repetition of the mirror-scene, in which now Giglio and Giacinta recognize themselves in a moment of joyous laughter, bringing their transformation to a close and uniting all three narrative levels in one moment.

As narrative levels, variations and repetitions thus double and mediate each other in a fantastical *mise en abîme*, the narrative inevitably opens up towards the reader, and the text itself becomes a mirror in which she can see her own inverted image and the tomfooleries of her own self and thought – writing the structures of an aesthetic subjectivity, the text allows us to read our own.¹² In this sense, Hoffmann's text is akin to Brambilla's coach, the windows of which are mirrors, so that whoever tries to see the princess always only sees their own reflection. Whoever can break the initial narcissism of this moment of interpretation in order to embrace the dizzying play of ironic doubling such a mirror produces – in whomever the text induces a "Selbst-thätigkeit," a self-activity, as Fichte and the Early German Romantics would have called it – may find themselves again in a moment of joyous recognition and spontaneous, healing laughter.

Notes

1. Here and in most cases throughout this essay I have slightly modified Charles E. Passage's 1971 translation of Hoffmann's text.
2. Hoffmann refers to the eighteenth-century Italian dramatist Carlo Gozzi, whose fairy-tale comedy "The Love of the Three Oranges" ("L'amore delle tre melarance") is one of the central intertexts of *Brambilla*. For an account of Gozzi's theatre and its relation to the *Commedia dell'Arte*, see Starobinski, "Ironie et Melancolie (I)," for Hoffmann's debt to and development of Gozzi's play, see "Ironie et Melancolie (II)."
3. For such a solution to the paradox of the preface, a solution that ultimately defuses the productive tensions of Hoffmann's text, see Slessarev.
4. Peter Firchow's translation of Schlegel's fragment, too, is throughout slightly modified.
5. For an illuminating analysis of the liminality of Hoffmann's text, see Wellbery.
6. The (subversive) dialogue of Hoffmann's text with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is obvious, but there is no space here to develop it in any detail. For an account of the textual parallels see both Wellbery and Neumann. Goethe's *Roman Carnival* is another important intertext of *Brambilla*, and for Hoffmann's and Goethe's quite different perspectives on the carnival, see Hiepkko. For an account of the carnivalesque in Hoffmann's capriccio more generally, see Kremer.
7. David Wellbery draws attention to the fact that all the elements both Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner list as typical for rites of passage, from grotesque masks to markings of the body and a suspension of temporality, find an exact correlation in Hoffmann's story. Wellbery confesses his ignorance about the sources of Hoffmann's uncanny ethnological knowledge and suggests the need for an academic study investigating the findings of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century ethnologists to which Hoffmann could have had access.

In response to Wellbery's amazement I would argue that Hoffmann draws his knowledge from the carnivalesque tradition of which *Brambilla* forms part, so that an investigation of *Brambilla*'s literary and artistic intertexts and the cultural traditions that inform them has the greatest chance of explaining Hoffmann's seemingly "clairvoyant ethnological insight" (326).

8. For a multi-faceted look at the genre of the capriccio, see Peureux; for Callot and Hoffmann as "practitioners" of the genre see Frédérique Toudoire-Surlapierre's piece in the collection. Callot's well-known importance for Hoffmann need not be stressed here.
9. While earlier editors often excised Thiele's engravings from the text, deeming them inessential, their centrality to Hoffmann's narrative is no longer a matter of serious debate. Hartmut Steinecke's and Gerhard Allroggen's most recent edition of *Brambilla* in vol. 3 of the *Complete Works* presents both Thiele's engravings and all of Callot's original etchings (see Hoffmann, *Nachtstücke*, Bildteil, VII–XXVI). While Thiele's engravings are currently not available in digital form on the Web, Callot's *Balli di Sfessania* are accessible on-line. For excellent reproductions of all 24 plates in high resolution see [http://www.herner.hu/daniel/szinhaszhu/Jacques Callot \(1592–1635\)–Balli di Sfessania \(plates\)/](http://www.herner.hu/daniel/szinhaszhu/Jacques%20Callot%20(1592-1635)-Balli%20di%20Sfessania%20(plates)/). For a discussion of Callot's etchings, Thiele's engravings, and their role in the genesis of Hoffmann's text, see the editorial comments in Hoffmann, *Nachtstücke* 1147–52. For a discussion of the changes made by Thiele, all of which were suggested by Hoffmann himself, see also Neumann.
10. The quote, as well as other elements of Hoffmann's myth, is derived from Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert's 1808 *Perspectives from the Nightside of Science* [*Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaft*], a book of popular nature philosophy that was of major importance for Hoffmann.
11. Hoffmann's healing laughter thus stands in direct opposition to the satanic laughter of damnation that envelops the melancholy allegorist at the close of Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.
12. For a discussion of *Brambilla* as a self-reflexive performance of aesthetic subjectivity, see Wellbery.

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