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THE END OF THE LINE

*Essays on Psychoanalysis
and the Sublime*

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6. FREUD AND THE SANDMAN

For my old age I have chosen the theme of death; I have stumbled on a remarkable notion based on my theory of the instincts, and now must read all kinds of things relevant to it, e.g. Schopenhauer, for the first time. But I am not fond of reading.

—Freud to Lou Andreas-Salomé, August 1919

“**I** INVENTED psychoanalysis because it had no literature,” Freud once remarked,¹ joking about what is now lugubriously known as the Burden of the Past or the Anxiety of Influence. “Literature,” of course, meant the writings of other investigators in his field—his predecessors, the contemporaries he saw as rivals, or more benignly, as disciples and colleagues—but we have only to let the word drift a bit, until “literature” means just “literature,” for the joke to become still more suggestive. That, at any rate, will be the drift of what follows: the question of “literary priority” and the concerns that cling to it (the wish to be original, the fear of plagiarism, the rivalry among writers) will be brought into touch with some topics commonly grouped under the rubric Psychoanalysis-and-Literature (the overlapping of the two fields, the rivalry between them, the power of one to interpret and neutralize the other). My chief text will be Freud’s essay “The Uncanny”²—in particular the reading he offers there of E. T. A. Hoffman’s story “The Sandman,” and the links he establishes between the sentiment of the uncanny and his newly elaborated the-

ory of the repetition compulsion—but I shall also be examining some recently published biographical material which suggests that the motifs of the uncanny, of repetition, and of literary priority were playing themselves out in Freud's relations with one of his younger colleagues at about the same time that he was bringing them into prominence in his writing. My hope is to quilt together these scraps of verbal material, each with a somewhat different feel to it—a work of fiction, a psychoanalytic account of its structure, the formulation of a metapsychological theory, some biographical anecdotes—and to comment on their power, collectively or when working at odds with one another, to fix and fascinate our attention.

Even the simple facts concerning the writing and publication of "The Uncanny" seem designed to raise questions about repetition. The essay came out in the fall of 1919, and a letter of Freud's (May 12, 1919) indicates that it was written in May of that year, or, rather, rewritten, for the letter speaks of his going back to an old manuscript that he had set aside, for how long isn't clear—perhaps as long as a dozen years. However old the manuscript, it is usually assumed that Freud was prompted to return to it by his reformulation, in March or April of 1919, of his understanding of the repetition compulsion, in the course of producing a first draft of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. I have seen no account of the contents of that draft, which may no longer exist, but it is customarily thought to have been a considerably less developed version of the text Freud finally published as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* late in 1920. That it contained a new and powerful theory of repetition is a safe guess, since that theory was available for publication in "The Uncanny," but scholars have also reasoned that it made no mention of the other remarkable notion included in the published version, Freud's postulation of the death instincts (18:3–4). That notion, it is assumed, was what Freud was working his way toward in the summer of 1919, when he wrote the letter quoted above, a letter which mentions the "theme of death" and a "theory of the instincts," but in which the compound noun *Todestriebe* does not appear; according to the editors of the *Standard Edition*, the death instinct is not men-

tioned as such until February 1920. An interval, then, is generally imagined, during which the theory of an autonomous compulsion to repeat existed in Freud's mind and on paper, as yet ungrounded in any more fundamental metapsychological explanation; and it was in that interval, and rather early on, that "The Uncanny" was rewritten.

If one then asks what relationship the essay bears to the theory it announces, the customary answer is that it represents an application of a general explanatory principle to a particular, though by no means central, case. "In the famous 'compulsion to repeat,'" Philip Rieff writes, "Freud found the concept that was to give unity and truth to an essay which, without such a transfusion of theory, would have remained a relatively pale piece of erudition."³ And that seems reasonable, until one looks more closely at the essay and at the theory. For the essay's "unity" is anything but patent—if it is there at all, it must be tracked down through a rambling and intriguingly oblique presentation⁴—and the theory of the compulsion to repeat is so strange that its explanatory power is not the first thing one is likely to respond to when one comes across it. The impulse to rewrite "The Uncanny" may have been Freud's wish to test the value of his theory, as Rieff suggests, but it might also have been his exclamatory response ("Unheimlich!") to the theory's strangeness.

If one follows the course of Freud's thinking about repetition, one finds him, in 1919, granting an oddly autonomous status, and an emphatic priority, to what had previously been thought of as a secondary and explainable element within the system of psychoanalytic theory.⁵ From the first, Freud was bound to attend to a variety of repeated and repeating phenomena—the recurrence of infantile material in dreams and in neurotic symptoms, the rehearsal of behavior patterns that came to be known as "acting out," the revivification and transference of unconscious wishes that a patient experienced in relation to his analyst, and so on. The word "repetition" could be used to designate all of these without purporting to explain why any of them should occur; that, Freud believed, was the task of his two interacting principles of mental

functioning—the pleasure principle, and its more sober partner, the reality principle. Even in 1914, when he wrote of a patient's "compulsion to repeat" certain forgotten, because repressed, material, the attribution of power implicit in the term "compulsion" was still relative and, above all, still explicable through reference to forces other than itself. In 1919, however, Freud felt obliged (compelled?) by certain new data to acknowledge the independence of the compulsion to repeat, and, for at least several months, to address himself to its apparently irreducible inexplicability. The repetition compulsion "itself"—or was it merely Freud's theory of repetition?—may then have seemed to its discoverer to have taken on an uncanny life of its own; indeed, the very uncertainty as to whether it was the force "itself" or its theoretical formulation that was claiming attention would contribute to the effect of strangeness.

How does one come to terms with a force that seems at once mobile and concealed in its operation? When, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud developed his more abstract conception of a compulsion to repeat and argued for the existence of "death instincts," the mythical *Triebe* (drives) underlying (constituting? informing?) the *Zwang* (compulsion), he was obliged to acknowledge that evidence for such an instinctive force was hard to find: the drive was, in his words, never "visible," it "eluded perception" except (he added in *Civilization and its Discontents* [21:120]) when it was "tinged or colored" by sexuality. The metaphor has been taken as a means of suggesting something about the nature of instinctual forces—that they were always encountered in some mixture with each other, never in a state of "purity." But, with only a slight shift of emphasis, it can also be read as a way of describing an epistemological difficulty: like certain substances that must be prepared before they can be examined under a microscope, it is only when stained that the death instinct can be brought into focus. Taken in this latter sense, the relation between the erotic instincts and the death instinct comes to sound very much like the relationship Freud described, elsewhere in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, between his own figurative language and the "bewildering and obscure processes" with which he was concerned.⁶

We need not feel greatly disturbed in judging our speculations upon the life and death instincts by the fact that so many bewildering and obscure processes occur in it—such as one instinct being driven out by another, or an instinct turning from an ego to an object, and so on. This is merely due to our being obliged to operate with the scientific terms, that is to say with the figurative language, peculiar to psychology (or, more precisely, to depth psychology). We could not otherwise describe the processes in question at all, and indeed we could not have become aware of them. [23:60]

Freud sees his figurative language as a means of lending color to what is otherwise imperceptible. We may wish, later, to question the appropriateness of this analogy, but for the moment let us accept it and explore its possible elaborations: can we press the point and say that the figures of psychoanalytic discourse are “like” the erotic instincts, color codings of a sort that allow one to trace the paths of concealed energy? Or, alternately, that the visible signs of desire are “like” figures of speech? The interest of these questions will become apparent when we rephrase them in the terms of “The Uncanny,” in which the invisible energies are thought of as those of the repetition compulsion, and the glimpses one gets of them are felt as disturbing and strange:

It must be explained that we are able to postulate the principle of a repetition-compulsion in the unconscious mind, based upon instinctual activity and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a principle powerful enough to overrule the pleasure-principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the tendencies of small children; a principle, too, which is responsible for a part of the course taken by the analysis of neurotic patients. Taken in all, the foregoing prepares us for the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner repetition-compulsion is perceived as uncanny. [17:238]

The feeling of the uncanny would seem to be generated by being reminded of the repetition compulsion, not by being reminded of whatever it is that is repeated. The becoming aware of the process is felt as eerie, not the becoming aware of some particular item in the

unconscious, once familiar, then repressed, now coming back into consciousness. Elsewhere in the essay, Freud seems to be saying something easier to understand. When he quotes Schelling's formulation: "Everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret yet comes to light" (17:224), or even when he describes the effect produced by "The Sandman" as bound up with the reactivation of a repressed infantile dread of castration it would seem to be the something-that-is-repeated that is the determining factor, not the reminder of compulsive repetition itself. Freud stresses the bolder and more puzzling hypothesis once more in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "It may be presumed that when people unfamiliar with analysis feel an obscure fear—a dread of rousing something that, so they feel, is better left sleeping—what they are afraid of is the emergence of this compulsion with its hint of possession by some daemonic power" (17:36). It is the emergence of the compulsion that they fear, as much as the reappearance of a particular fear or desire. It may seem like a quibble to dwell on this difference: surely the awareness of the process of repetition is inseparable from the awareness of something being repeated, for there can be no such thing as sheer repetition. Of course: repetition becomes "visible" when it is colored by something being repeated, which itself functions like vivid or heightened language, lending a kind of rhetorical consistency to what is otherwise quite literally unspeakable. Whatever it is that is repeated—an obsessive ritual, perhaps, or a bit of acting-out in relation to one's analyst—will, then, feel most compellingly uncanny when it is seen as *merely* coloring, that is, when it comes to seem most gratuitously rhetorical. So much for "people unfamiliar with analysis," or for patients recognizing the uncanny effects generated by the transference. But what of the investigator "obliged to operate with the scientific terms, that is to say with the figurative language, peculiar to depth psychology"? Mightn't he, too, experience effects of the uncanny at those moments when the figurativeness of his figurative language is brought home to him in some connection with the repetition compulsion? That is a question we shall return to after considering Freud's reading of "The Sandman."

II

I was most strongly compelled to tell you about Nathanael's disastrous life.

—Narrator of "The Sandman"

Freud offers, in fact, two readings of the story: the first is of its manifest surface, given in the form of a rapid, selective paraphrase of the plot, moving sequentially from the childhood recollections of the hero, Nathanael, on through his attacks of madness to his eventual suicide. The nursery tale of the Sandman who tears out children's eyes, the terror Nathanael experiences when the lawyer Coppelius threatens his own eyes, the death of Nathanael's father—these early experiences, and their subsequent reprise in slightly altered forms, with Coppola the optician standing in for Coppelius—these are the elements that Freud strings together with a minimum of interpretive comment, in the interest of showing that what is uncanny about the story is, as he puts it, "directly attached to the figure of the Sandman, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one's eyes." E. Jentsch, the psychologist whose 1906 article may have drawn Freud's attention to "The Sandman," had located the source of the uncanny in effects of intellectual uncertainty—doubts whether apparently inanimate beings are really alive, for example—but Freud is insistent in rejecting this notion. He grants that a kind of uncertainty is created in the reader in the opening pages of the story, uncertainty whether he is taken into a real world or a fantastic one of Hoffmann's own creation, but he argues that by the end of the story those doubts have been removed, and one is convinced "that Coppola the optician really is the lawyer Coppelius and thus also the Sandman." In other words, Nathanael's sense that he is "the horrible plaything of dark powers" is, within the fiction of the story, correct. "We are not supposed to be looking on at the products of a madman's imagination," Freud comments sardonically, "behind which we, with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth" (17:230).

And yet Freud's second account of the story, offered in a long and stunningly condensed footnote (17:232-33), is precisely that: the sober truth detected behind the products of a madman's imagination, the latent substructure, or what Freud calls the "original arrangement" of the elements of the story. Here, instead of a line of narrative—the unfolding in time of Nathanael's fate—what Freud presents is a series of repeated structures arranged so as to display the forces within Nathanael's mind that generated them. The child's ambivalence toward his father splits that character into two figures, a loving father who is killed off and the threatening Coppelius who can be blamed for this violence, and this pairing is reproduced later in the characters of Spalanzani (the mechanic who is called the father of the doll Olympia) and Coppola (who destroys the doll). Linked to this is a series of triangular relationships, in which the Sandman blocks Nathanael's attempts at love, first in the form of Coppelius coming between Nathanael and his fiancée Klara, then in the form of Coppola taking Olympia away from Nathanael, finally once again as Coppelius, driving Nathanael to suicide just as he is about to marry Klara. The structures are accounted for dynamically, and the story is taken as illustrating, in Freud's words, "the psychological truth of the situation in which the young man, fixated upon his father by his castration-complex, is incapable of loving a woman." The footnote concludes with a glancing remark about Hoffmann's childhood, but it is clear that Freud is not interested in biographical speculation: indeed, his point is that the castration complex is not peculiar to Hoffmann but is universal, and because of this universality its veiled presence in the story is capable of creating the effect of the uncanny, of something that ought to have remained secret and yet comes to light.

Someone suspicious of psychoanalysis might find these two accounts contradictory, and argue that Freud cannot have it both ways—either the story is about Nathanael's being driven to suicide by an evil external power, the Sandman, or it is about the progressive deterioration of someone "fixated upon his father by his castration-complex"—but Freud would have no difficulty answering this objection. The two accounts, he would say, are linked to each

other as latent to manifest, the castration complex generates the fiction of the Sandman; the reader, even when he is most convinced of the reality of the Sandman, indeed especially when he is most convinced, senses as uncanny the imminent return of the repressed.

But a more interesting and, I think, more serious objection can be raised to Freud's reading of Hoffmann, and that is that Freud has over-stabilized his first account of the story, that there is, indeed, more cause for doubt and uncertainty as one moves through "The Sandman" than Freud allows. Looking back over his paraphrasing of the story we can see one way in which this over-stabilization has been accomplished. Freud retells the story, occasionally quoting from the text, but what is remarkable is that everything he includes within quotation marks has already appeared within quotation marks in "The Sandman": that is, he quotes nothing but dialogue, things already said by Nathanael or by some other character; the words of the narrator have completely disappeared, replaced by Freud's own, and we have the illusion of watching Nathanael's actions through a medium considerably more transparent than Hoffmann's text. For Hoffmann's narrative is anything but unobtrusive: it is, rather, vivid, shifty, and extravagant, full of assonance, verbal repetitions, literary allusions, and startling changes in the pace, the mood, and the quasi-musical dynamics of its unfolding. What is more, this narrative exuberance is, at certain moments, rendered thematically important within the story in ways that make Freud's decision to set it aside seem more puzzling. For it may be that what is unsettling, if not uncanny, about "The Sandman" is as much a function of its surface as of the depths it conceals.

Consider one such moment where narrative technique and thematic concerns are intertwined, a moment about which Freud has nothing to say. "The Sandman" opens as if it were going to be an epistolary novel: without introduction or interspersed commentary, we are offered the three letters headed simply "Nathanael to Lothar," "Klara to Nathanael," "Nathanael to Lothar."⁷ It is in the first of these that Nathanael describes his "dark forebodings of . . . impending doom," then interrupts himself to exclaim: "Oh, my dearest Lothar, how can I begin to make you realize, even vaguely,

that what happened a few days ago really could have so fatal and disruptive an effect on my life? If you were here you could see for yourself; but now you will certainly think I am a crazy man who sees ghosts . . ." (p. 137). The letter then goes on at length, describing his childhood, his terror of the Sandman, the death of his father, and his certainty at having recognized in Coppola his father's murderer, Coppelius. Two shorter letters are exchanged, then there is a slight spacing of the printed text, and a narrator emerges:

Gentle reader, nothing can be imagined that is stranger and more extraordinary than the fate which befell my poor friend, the young student Nathanael, which I have undertaken to relate to you. Have you, gentle reader, ever experienced anything that totally possessed your heart, your thoughts and your senses to the exclusion of all else? Everything seethed and roiled within you; heated blood surged through your veins and inflamed your cheeks. Your gaze was peculiar, as if seeking forms in empty space invisible to other eyes, and speech dissolved into gloomy sighs. Then your friends asked you "What is it, dear friend? What is the matter?" And wishing to describe the picture in your mind with all its vivid colors, the light and the shade, you struggle vainly to find words. But it seemed to you that you had to gather together all that had occurred—the wonderful, the magnificent, the heinous, the joyous, the ghastly—and express it in the very first word so that it would strike like lightning. Yet every word, everything within the realm of speech, seemed colorless, frigid, dead. [p. 148]

Somewhere along the way, the gentle reader is likely to realize that the torment he is being asked to imagine is not that of Nathanael, though it sounds so much like it, but rather that of the narrator faced with the problem of retelling Nathanael's story. Or, more specifically, faced with that classic problem of the Romantic writer: how to begin. On the next page the narrator mentions some possible opening lines he had tried and rejected, then adds: "There were no words I could find which were appropriate to describe, even in the most feeble way, the brilliant colors of my inner vision. I resolved not to begin at all. So, gentle reader, do accept the three letters, which my friend Lothar has been kind enough to communicate, as the outline of the picture to which I will endeavor to add ever more color as I continue the story" (p. 149).

The point is not that a narrative persona is being elaborated with a character or "point of view" of his own—that would not be very interesting if it were the case, and it is not the case here; nor is it simply that Hoffmann is a supple and entertaining virtuoso of narrative. Rather, his virtuosity is productive of certain very specific and interesting effects, two of which I would like to examine in more detail.

To begin with, consider the structure of the story: Hoffmann's feint in the direction of epistolary fiction confers an odd status on those three opening letters. Like any supposedly documentary evidence embedded in a narrative, a greater degree of authenticity seems to be claimed for them, and the reader is inclined to go along with the illusion and accept them as underwriting the narrator's account. That would be so wherever the letters were placed; as it is, though, because the letters precede the appearance of the narrator, what he says of them has the effect of requiring the reader to make a funny retroactive adjustment, granting them a kind of documentary reality just as he is most strongly reminded both of their fictitiousness and, more important, of how badly the narrator seems to need them to initiate and impel his own writing. The effect is playful but nonetheless complex: in fact, its particular structural complexity—a temporal lag, which produces, retroactively, a situation in which a text cannot be characterized as unequivocally "real" or unequivocally "fictitious"—is remarkably close to that of Freud's own notion of the workings of what he termed *Nachträglichkeit* ("deferred action") in conferring meaning and pathogenic power on infantile experiences and fantasies.⁸ Nor is it simply the temporal structure of the opening pages of "The Sandman" that seems Freudian *avant la lettre*. The content of Nathanael's first letter—his account of the quasi-castration at the hands of Coppelius and of the subsequent trauma of his father's death—is precisely the sort of childhood material with which Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* was concerned.

But here an important difference is worth remarking. Freud looks to Nathanael's story—as it is presented in his letters—for the signs of his having revised an early traumatic experience, recasting it in the form of a primal scene and drawing it out into an explana-

tory narrative. The differences he discerns are between a hypothetical early version—some experience (real or fantasmatic) taken in by the child but numbly unassimilated at the time and hence unspeakable—and its subsequent expression in a reassuring, if lurid, form. The forces at play are a complex of Nathanael's wishes (for instance, his "death-wish against the father") that are repressed only to resurface, transformed and acceptably disguised in Nathanael's prose (for example, Coppelius' murder of the father). But while Hoffmann's story could offer Freud material for just such an account of the workings of *Nachträglichkeit*, it also adds an instance of its own of a similar revisionary process, one that is not so easily aligned with Freud's intrapsychic model. When the narrator retroactively produces Nathanael's letters, it is *his* ambivalent desire, not Nathanael's, that is being momentarily displayed: and, I should add, only momentarily, for a reader's interest in the narrator is allowed to fade rapidly; the rest of the story is recounted with practically no traces of his comically anguished self-consciousness. But for the length of the several paragraphs in which the narrator's desire to write occupies our attention, we are obliged to consider a compulsion that has been slightly dislocated, for it seems to be neither exactly exterior and demonic (in the sense that Nathanael imagines himself to be "the horrible plaything of dark powers") nor exactly inner and psychological (in the sense that Klara intends when she reassures Nathanael that "if there is a dark power . . . it must form inside us, form part of us, must be identical with ourselves"), but something else again.

This is not the only point in "The Sandman" where one is teased with the likeness between the unfolding of Nathanael's fate and the elaboration of a narrative, between the forces driving Nathanael and whatever is impelling the narrator. A similar effect is created by Hoffmann's choice and manipulation of diction. The story consistently presents the pathos (and, almost as often, the comedy) of the psychological/demonic in language that draws on the vocabulary and topics of Romantic aesthetics. It is as if Hoffmann had begun with the commonplace equation of poets, lovers, and madmen, and then clustered together fragmentary versions of that analogy so that the semantic overlapping and sheer accumulation of instances

would dazzle his readers, as Nathanael is dazzled by Coppola's display of eyeglasses: "Myriad eyes peered and blinked and stared up at Nathanael, who could not look away from the table, while Coppola continued putting down more and more eyeglasses; and flaming glances criss-crossed each other ever more wildly and shot their blood-red rays into Nathanael's breast" (p. 156).

If we are curious about the effect of such effects, there is no better place to start than with that image of the blood-red rays that shoot into Nathanael's breast: it turns out to be an element in a long series that includes the glowing grains of coal that Coppelius threatens to sprinkle on Nathanael's eyes, the "rays of the mysterious" that can't find their way into Klara's cold heart, that "very first word" that the narrator hoped would "strike like lightning," the music that flows into Klara's admirers when they look at her, penetrating them "to the very soul," Olympia's voice as she sings, that scorches Nathanael to *his* very soul, the bloody eyes that Spalanzani flings at Nathanael's breast, and so on. And this series itself is linked to another, one based on a combination of two aesthetic motifs—the conventional analogy between poetry and painting, and the linking of communication and perception to inscribing or imprinting: to convey in warm and penetrating language is to find words that color in the outlines. That was the narrator's hope in the passage I quoted above: the three authentic letters will serve as the "outline of the picture" to which he will "add ever more color" as the story goes on; it is linked to the mock-allegorical description of Klara in terms of paintings by Battoni and Ruisdael; to the fading of the colors in Nathanael's mental image of Coppelius; to Nathanael's contradictory insistence, earlier in the story, that the image of Coppelius was permanently imprinted on his memory; as well as to a similar play between the vividness and permanence of Nathanael's image of Klara and its subsequent fading when he falls in love with Olympia.

The images and allusions that go to make up these series occur often enough and in sufficiently different tonalities—lyrical, melodramatic, ironic, and more—so that their most immediate effect is to create the sense of excess I mentioned, felt sometimes as fatefully enigmatic and burdensome, sometimes as the token of the story-

teller's exuberant virtuosity. But this appearance of compulsive or haphazard plurality is slightly misleading, for the series is organized in other ways as well, so as to produce a particular configuration of the themes of power, duration, and what could be called the desire for representation. Briefly we could say that the interaction of any pair of characters in "The Sandman" is figured less as an exchange of meaningful signs (conversation, gestures, letters, and so on) than as a passage of energy between them, sometimes benign, sometimes baneful (warm glances, penetrating words, scorching missiles) and that the effectiveness of such "communication" ought to be measurable by its power to leave a lasting mark. If we take this as a characteristically Gothic rendering of experience, we can see that Hoffmann has complicated this model in at least four respects. (1) He offers conflicting accounts of the source of energy that circulates throughout the story, impelling characters into action or expression: is it a creation of the self, or does it come beaming in from some exterior point? Is the tale psychological or demonic? (2) He insists now on the lasting colors or inscriptions left by these exchanges of energy, now on the odd impermanence of those same marks. (3) He blurs the boundaries between the fields where such marking goes on, the fields of action and expression, of primary event and subsequent representation. And (4) he links the wish to make a mark, the wish for the power to produce durable representations, to the uncertainties generated by (1), (2), and (3). For example, the fading of "the ugly image of Coppelius" in Nathanael's imagination leads him "to make his gloomy presentiment that Coppelius would destroy his happiness the subject of a poem." As a result of Hoffmann's manipulations a reader is made to feel, confusedly, that Nathanael's life, his writings, the narrator's story-telling, Hoffmann's writing and the reader's own fascinated acquiescence in it, are all impelled by the same energy, and impelled precisely, to represent that energy, to color its barely discerned outlines, to oblige it, if possible, to leave an unfading mark. Nathanael's letters, of course, qualify as such an attempt on his part, but the poem I have just alluded to is a still more condensed instance of this desire for representation. It is an episode which is best approached once again by way of Freud's reading of the story.

At the story's end, when Nathanael, in a frenzy, is about to leap

from a tower to his death, he is heard shrieking, "Ring of fire! Whirl about!" This is one of the passages Freud quotes, adding that these are "words whose origin we know" (17:229). He is alluding to his own retelling of an earlier episode: "Nathanael succumbs to a fresh attack of madness, and in his delirium his recollection of his father's death is mingled with this new experience. He cries, 'Faster—faster—faster—rings of fire—rings of fire—Whirl about—rings of fire—round and round! . . .'" That is, Freud is tracing the origins of these words from the suicide scene back through the earlier moment of Nathanael's madness to the initiating childhood trauma. But, oddly enough, if we look back to those early scenes for the "ring of fire" (the expression translates the word *Feuerkreis*—an unusual one in German) we find none. There is certainly fire, and a sort of semicircular hearth where Nathanael is tormented, but no *Feuerkreis*. The origin of the word turns out to be elsewhere, in a passage Freud ignores, the poem Nathanael composes and reads to Klara:

Finally it occurred to him to make his gloomy presentiment that Coppelius would destroy his happiness the subject of a poem. He portrayed himself and Klara as united in true love but plagued by some dark hand that occasionally intruded into their lives, snatching away incipient joy. Finally, as they stood at the altar, the sinister Coppelius appeared and touched Klara's lovely eyes, which sprang into Nathanael's own breast, burning and scorching like bleeding sparks. Then Coppelius grabbed him and flung him into a blazing circle of fire which spun around with the speed of a whirlwind and, with a rush, carried him away. The awesome noise was like a hurricane furiously whipping up the waves so that they rose up like white-headed black giants in a raging inferno. But through this savage tumult he could hear Klara's voice: "Can't you see me, dear one? Coppelius has deceived you. That which burned in your breast was not my eyes. Those were fiery drops of your own heart's blood. Look at me. I have still got my own eyes." Nathanael thought: "It is Klara: I am hers forever." Then, it was as though this thought had grasped the fiery circle and forced it to stop turning, while the raging noise died away in the black abyss. Nathanael looked into Klara's eyes; but it was death that, with Klara's eyes, looked upon him kindly. While Nathanael was composing his poem he was very calm and serene; he reworked and polished every line and, since he had fettered himself with meter, he did not pause until everything in the poem was perfect and

euphonious. But when it was finally completed and he read the poem aloud to himself, he was stricken with fear and a wild horror and he cried out "Whose horrible voice is this?" Soon, however, he once more came to understand that it was really nothing more than a very successful poem. [pp. 152-53]

There is no term in English for what French critics call a *mise en abyme*—a casting into the abyss—but the effect itself is familiar enough: an illusion of infinite regress can be created by a writer or painter by incorporating within his own work a work that duplicates in miniature the larger structure, setting up an apparently unending metonymic series. This *mise en abyme* simulates wildly uncontrollable repetition, and it is just that, I believe, that is imaged here in the whirling *Feuerkreis*, carrying Nathanael into the black abyss. Earlier in the story, the narrator had dreamed of creating images whose coloring was so deep and intense that "the multifarious crowd of living shapes" would sweep his audience away until they saw themselves in the midst of the scene that had issued from his soul. The *Feuerkreis* in Nathanael's poem is the demonic complement to the narrator's literary ambitions—and not only the narrator's: the unobtrusive fluidity with which Hoffmann's prose sweeps the reader into the scene (although not into the text) of Nathanael's poem ("He portrayed himself . . .") and then out again ("Nathanael looked into Klara's eyes; but it was death that, with Klara's eyes, looked upon him kindly. While Nathanael was composing his poem . . .") sets up an indeterminate play between Coppélius' victim and someone expressing a grandiose wish for rhetorical power, for a power that would capture and represent the energies figured in the *Feuerkreis* itself.⁹

The poem, then—more accurately, the prose that stands in for the poem—demands to be read in two quite different ways. One, which I have referred to as the psychological/demonic, is entirely compatible with Freud's reading of the story as a whole, and in this respect his choosing to ignore the poem is unimportant: it could be easily enough assimilated to his description of both the manifest and the latent structure of the story. The Oedipal anxiety associated with Coppélius, the allusions to bleeding eyes, the final image of Klara as death—Freud could explain all these elements and string

the episode onto the narrative thread he constructs leading from Nathanael's childhood to his suicide. In another reading, however, a reading I shall label—somewhat willfully—the literary, the poem resists any attempts to situate it in the temporal structures implicit in either of Freud's accounts (that is, in either the fantastic sequential narrative of Nathanael's being driven to his death by the Sandman, or in its psychoanalytic reconstruction as the story of Nathanael's progressive insanity). In this literary reading, Nathanael's writings about his fate—his letters, his poem—are linked to the fading of the image of Coppelius, to the narrator's impulsive wish to tell Nathanael's story and, beyond this, to Hoffmann's own work on "The Sandman." But these instances cannot be organized chronologically or in any genetic fashion—only in a banal metaphor can we speak of Hoffmann as Nathanael's "father" (though we can properly, in Freud's scheme, speak of Coppelius as a figure of the father), and just as the question of Oedipal priority no longer applies, so the possibility of seeing in Nathanael's writing about himself an example of narcissistic regression (a diagnosis applicable, within Freud's framework, to his falling in love with Olympia) is equally irrelevant. My point is not that Freud's reading should yield to this other scheme, but rather that a sign of the story's power—what makes it an instance of Romantic irony at its most unsettling or, if you like, of the uncanny—is its availability to both these schemes, its shifting between the registers of the psychological/demonic and the literary, thereby dramatizing the differences as well as the complicities between the two.¹⁰ When Freud turns aside from these more literary aspects of the story he is making a legitimate interpretive move, but it has the effect of domesticating the story precisely by emphasizing its dark, demonic side.

III

The professor of poetry and rhetoric took a pinch of snuff, snapped the lid shut, cleared his throat, and solemnly declared: "Most honorable ladies and gentlemen, do you not see the point of it all? It is all an allegory, an extended metaphor."

FREUD AND THE SANDMAN

But many honorable gentlemen were not reassured by this. The story of the automaton had very deeply impressed them, and a horrible distrust of human figures in general arose.

—Narrator of "The Sandman"

The claims I have been making for Hoffmann's well-known levity and extravagance may seem beside the point, and I can imagine someone objecting to my characterizing those aspects of the story—its rhetorical range, its shifting narrative modes and frameworks—as "unsettling." They may indeed produce a sort of pleasurable dizziness, like a roller-coaster ride, but surely their effects are not of the same order of emotional seriousness as what Freud's analysis disclosed? So the objection might run: Hoffmann's bizarre playfulness would seem considerably less important than "the theme of the Sandman who tears out children's eyes," a theme, as Freud pointed out, that draws its intensity from the "peculiarly violent and obscure emotion" excited by the "threat of being castrated." Given that intensity, given the concealed power of that threat, does the counteremphasis I have been placing on "The Sandman" as literature represent a serious qualification of Freud's critique?

I would like to meet that objection, and take up the question of emotional seriousness, in a roundabout way, by first setting another narrative down in juxtaposition with "The Sandman" and with Freud's retelling of it. What I shall offer is a summary of a book by Paul Roazen, published several years ago, called *Brother Animal: The Story of Freud and Tausk*,¹¹ an account of Freud's relationship with one of his followers. Roazen's book has provoked a good deal of criticism, much of it justifiable: his analysis of his material is sometimes naïve, and his writing is often thin and overexcited (he is given to saying things like "These three brilliant people were playing with human dynamite"). But the book's documentation seems to have been done carefully, and it is possible to verify the accuracy of much of his material in other collections of letters and journals.¹² Roazen's story is of interest here for two reasons: first, its dénouement takes place during the early months of 1919, just before Freud set to work on *Beyond the Pleasure Princi-*

ple and "The Uncanny," and, second, because, although Roazen never alludes to Hoffmann's story, his own tale comes out sounding remarkably like it, with Tausk playing the part of Nathanael and Freud in the role of the Sandman. The story goes like this:

In 1912, Lou Andreas-Salomé, the friend of Nietzsche and of Rilke, came to Vienna to learn about psychoanalysis. Freud seems to have welcomed her into his circle, which by then included Victor Tausk, whom she was to characterize as both the most loyal and the most intellectually impressive of Freud's disciples. She was invited to attend what had become the traditional Wednesday meetings of the Psychoanalytic Society and to sit in on Freud's and Tausk's courses of lectures. The journal she kept that year—partly gossip, partly recorded discussions, public and private, about psychoanalytic theory—has been published, along with her correspondence with Freud. From this material Roazen has been able to postulate, convincingly I think, a triangular relationship among Freud, Tausk, and Lou Salomé. Her journals record long conversations with Tausk, and their editor takes it as common knowledge that she became his mistress for some months; they also record talks with Freud about what the two of them came to refer to as "the Tausk-problem," that is, about Tausk's complicated feelings of rivalry with Freud and Freud's reciprocal uneasiness. Toward the end of the following summer there is a long journal entry analyzing Tausk's character, seeing him as repetitively placing himself in the role of the thwarted son vis-à-vis Freud, and, "as if by thought-transference . . . always busy with the same thing as Freud, never taking one step aside to make room for himself" (pp. 166-67).

Roazen's next focal point is the winter of 1918-19, when Tausk, after serving in the army and managing, nevertheless, to write a number of psychoanalytic papers, had returned to Vienna. He asked Freud to take him on as a patient but Freud refused; instead Tausk entered analysis with a younger and less distinguished colleague, Helene Deutsch, who was already, as it happened, several months into her own training analysis with Freud. Roazen's recent interviews with Deutsch convinced him that Freud's motives for refusing Tausk were bound up with fears of plagiarism: Freud spoke of Tausk's making an "uncanny" impression on him, of the

impossible complications that would result if Tausk became his patient, for he (Tausk) would be likely to imagine that ideas he had picked up in his hours with Freud were actually his own, and so on. Roazen is rather incautiously willing to attribute motives, but, whatever Freud's motives, Roazen is right to see this newly constituted pattern—of Tausk spending five hours a week with Deutsch while Deutsch was engaged in a similarly intensive analysis with Freud—as a repetition of the earlier triangle, with Deutsch this time substituted for Lou Andreas-Salomé.

This arrangement lasted for about three months; then (again according to Deutsch) the analytic hours began to interpenetrate—Tausk would talk to her mostly about Freud and she, in turn, found herself drawn into talking more and more about Tausk to Freud. Freud finally (in March 1919) moved to break out of the triangle, insisting that Deutsch choose between continuing as his patient or continuing as Tausk's analyst. Roazen interprets this as coercive, no choice at all, given what Freud knew to be Deutsch's investment in her work with him. However that may have been, Tausk's analysis was terminated immediately. Three months later, on the eve of his marriage, he killed himself, leaving a note for Freud full of expressions of gratitude and respect.

Roazen's story may not be as well told as Hoffmann's, but it exercises some of the same lurid fascination and holds out some of the same teasingly uncertain possibilities for interpretation, all the more so when one considers the number of ways the story is intertwined chronologically and thematically with what we know to have been Freud's theoretical concerns in 1919. Roazen speculates on the coincidence of Tausk's suicide (in July) and Freud's "simultaneous . . . explicit postulation of an instinct of primitive destructiveness." As he points out, the letter in which Freud reports Tausk's death to Lou Salomé is also the letter in which he mentions the "theme of death" and writes of having "stumbled on a remarkable notion based on my theory of the instincts"—"the very same letter," as Roazen characteristically writes; and if we would dissociate ourselves from that particular tone, it is less easy to deny the feeling of being intrigued that underlies it. "Could Tausk have been acting out Freud's newest, or even just barely burgeoning, idea?"

Roazen asks. "Or perhaps the notion of a death instinct represented another way for Freud to deny any responsibility for Tausk's suicide?" (p. 143). Well, we know the notion of a death instinct represents considerably more than that in the economy of Freud's thought, and we may find it easier, at this point, to pull free: there is nothing like a reductive interpretation to break the spell of a fascinating anecdote. But let me invoke that spell once more, this time with another series of apparent coincidences, which I think can lead to some more interesting conclusions.

Freud's removing himself from a triangular relation with Tausk and Deutsch (for whatever reasons, with whatever motives) coincides with his beginning work on the first draft of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that is, on the text in which he first formulates a puzzling theory of repetition. In the interval between the conception of that theory and its working-out in terms of the death instinct, he turns back to a manuscript on the uncanny and rewrites it, proposing "the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner repetition-compulsion is perceived as uncanny," and delineating, as an instance of the activity of that compulsion, a sequence of triangular relations in "The Sandman"—*Coppeliuss/Nathanael/Klara* followed by its parodic repetition *Coppola/Nathanael/Olympia*. Here again, one may begin to feel the pull of the interpreter's temptation: can we superimpose Roazen's sequence of triangles (*Freud/Tausk/Salomé*, *Freud/Tausk/Deutsch*) on Freud's? And if we think we can—or wish we could—what then? Can we make a story out of it? Might we not feel "most strongly compelled" to do so, to arrange these elements in temporal and causal sequences? For example, could we say that the theory of repetition Freud worked out in March 1919 followed close upon—was a consequence of—his realization that he was once again caught in a certain relationship to Tausk? Could we add that Freud was bound to perceive that relation as uncanny—not quite literary, but no longer quite real, either, the workings of the compulsion glimpsed "through" an awareness of something-being-repeated? Could we go on to suggest that it was this experience of a repetitive triangular relationship that underwrites his analysis of "The Sandman" in May? That is, that the glimpse of his relationship to Tausk has the same "documentary"

status vis-à-vis Freud's retelling of "The Sandman" that Nathanael's letters have for Hoffmann's narrator, that it serves as both a source of energy and a quasi-fictional pretext for writing?

Suppose this were the story one put together. Mightn't one then, like Nathanael crying out "Whose voice is this?" after he had finished his poem, still feel impelled to ask: *Whose story is this?* Is it one's own? Is it Roazen's? Is it Hoffmann's? Is it *The Story of Freud and Tausk* "as told to" Paul Roazen, chiefly by Helene Deutsch?

To the degree that such questions still solicit us and still resist solution, we are kept in a state somewhere between "emotional seriousness" and literary forepleasure, conscious of vacillating between literature and "nonfiction," our sense of repetition-at-work colored in with the lurid shades of aggression, madness, and violent death. At such moments we can say we are experiencing the uncanny; we might just as well say we are puzzled by a question of literary priority.

IV

I am not fond of reading.

—Freud to Lou Andreas-Salomé

I invented psychoanalysis because it had no literature.

—Freud to Helene Deutsch

The Anxiety of Influence: when Roazen describes the tensions between Freud and Tausk as generated by fears of plagiarism, he takes his place among an increasing number of American critics who put Freud's Oedipal model to work accounting for the relations among writers. There is evidence enough in Freud's own texts to suggest that he was not immune to such anxieties. At the beginning of "The Uncanny," for example, he apologetically introduces what he calls "this present modest contribution of mine," confessing that he could not—because of the restrictions imposed on him by the war—make "a very thorough examination of the bibliography, especially the foreign literature" (17:219–29) so that, he goes

on, his "paper is presented to the reader without any claim of priority." *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, too, opens with a firm announcement that "priority and originality are not among the aims that psycho-analysis sets itself" (18:7), but some sixty pages later we come across a qualm about originality expressed at an intriguing point in the argument, and in an odd verbal formula. Freud is about to move from his discussion of the compulsion to repeat to a concept he hopes will help explain its relation to the rest of his theory, the concept of the death instinct, and he begins his paragraph with a question: "But how is the predicate of being instinctual related to the compulsion to repeat?" He then produces, italicized for emphasis, a preliminary statement: "*It seems that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things,*" a sentence to which he appends the following footnote: "I have no doubt that similar notions as to the nature of the 'instincts' have already been put forward repeatedly" (18:36). It is the word "repeatedly" that is striking; here the twinge about priority seems in some relation to Freud's subject matter: it is as if, at the very moment of grounding the repetition compulsion in a theory he hoped would have biological validity, he was drawn to gesture once more to the ungroundable nature of repetition.¹²

A similar instance can be found in the case history of the "Wolf Man," where Freud again is engaged with questions of origins and their subsequent rehearsals. This time what is at stake is the degree of reality to be attributed to the primal scene and the limit of the effects of *Nachträglichkeit* in constituting, retroactively, that scene's importance and meaning. Freud had revised his first draft of the case so as to counter the rival claims of Jung and Adler, and, after arguing his own reconsidered position carefully and at length, he adds this testy footnote:

I admit that this is the most ticklish question in the whole domain of psychoanalysis. I did not require the contributions of Adler and Jung to induce me to consider the matter with a critical eye, and to bear in mind the possibility that what analysis puts forward as being forgotten experiences of childhood (and of improbably early childhood) may on the contrary be based upon phantasies brought about upon occasions occurring late in life On the contrary,

no doubt has troubled me more; no other uncertainty has been more decisive in holding me back from publishing my conclusions. I was the first—a point to which none of my opponents have referred—to recognize the part played by phantasies in symptom formation and also the phantasying-back of late impressions into childhood and their sexualization after the event. (see *Traumdeutung*, First Edition, 1900 . . . and “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” 1908) [17:103]

Whatever anxiety Freud may be imagined to have felt about his own originality, then, may not be exactly illusory, but displaced. These passages suggest that more fundamental “doubts” and “uncertainties”—doubts about the grasp any figurative language has on first principles, especially when the principles include a principle of repetition—may be at work generating the anxiety that is then acted out in the register of literary priority. The specificity of that range of wishes and fears—the wish to be original, the fear of plagiarizing or of being plagiarized—would act to structure and render more manageable, in however melodramatic a fashion, the more indeterminate affect associated with repetition, marking or coloring it, conferring “visibility” on the forces of repetition and at the same time disguising the activity of those forces from the subject himself.

But here, I think, I should turn back to the doubts I mentioned earlier, doubts about the appropriateness of the compound analogy I proposed between that-which-is-repeated, coloring matter, and figurative language. All three, I suggested, could be thought of as means of representing processes and energies that might otherwise go unnoticed. But this model seems unsatisfactory and wishful in at least two ways. First, it depends upon the notion of a real pre-existent force (call it sheer repetition, the death instinct, or whatever) that is merely rendered more *discernible* by that-which-is-repeated, or by the lurid colors of the erotic, or by some helpful figure of speech; and, it suggests that the workings of figurative language (like acting-out or coloring-in) do indeed have the effect of rendering that force “visible.” But we know that the relation between figurative language and what it figures cannot be adequately grasped in metaphors of vision; and we might well doubt that the forces of repetition can be isolated—even ideally—from that-

which-is-repeated. The wishfulness inherent in the model is not simply in its isolating the *forces* of repetition from their representations, but in its seeking to isolate the *question* of repetition from the question of figurative language itself. But suppose, as Gilles Deleuze has suggested,¹⁴ that implicit in Freud's theory of repetition is the discovery that these two questions are impossible to disentangle, that in trying to come to terms with the repetition compulsion one discovers that the irreducible figurativeness of one's language is indistinguishable from the ungrounded and apparently inexplicable notion of the compulsion itself. At such moments the wish to put aside the question of figurative language might assert itself as a counterforce to one's most powerful apprehension of the compulsion to repeat, and it might take the form it does in Freud's reading of "The Sandman," the form of a wish to find "no literature" there.