

THE THEME OF *LIEBESWAHN* IN THE NOVELLAS OF E.T.A.  
HOFFMANN

For: Prof, Nabbe

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Here we find the association between love and insanity connected once more with the realm of the magical. But where does this "zauberische Wahnsinn" come from? As Donna Anna clearly states it emerges from within the creator of the work of art. Is the *Liebeswahn* then a purely subjective phenomenon? The answer to this is relative, relative that is to the point in time and space from which this emotional state is perceived. Like any form of insanity, it is a subjective experience which can, on the other hand, be viewed objectively by the person observing the phenomenon. Much like music, or any art form for that matter, *Liebeswahn* can be experienced individually or observed and studied objectively and collectively. And like love, music in its most extreme moments can invoke a form of insanity. As Hoffman himself shows in Die Fermante:

Die Bewunderung des Publikums ging ueber in eine Art von Wahnsinn (Hoffmann 1988, 40)

A similar incident can be found in Hoffmann's Die Automate. After listening to the singing of a woman, the narrator describes his emotions:

Wie soll ich es denn anfangen, dir das nie genannte, nie geahnte Gefuehl anzudeuten... . Wenn die ganz eigentuemliche, nie gehoerte Melodie - ach, es war ja die tiefe wonnevolle Schwermut, der inbruenstigen Liebe selbst-...dann fuehlte ich, wie ein unnennbares Entzuecken mein Innerstes durchbebt, wie der Schmerz der unendlichen Sehnsucht meine Brust frampfhafte zusammenzog...wie mein Selbst unterging in namenloser, himmlischer Wollust (Hoffmann 1958, 87)

The public, here listening to the songs of the two sisters, experiences a moment of ecstasy that is at times extreme enough for Hoffmann to label it as a form of insanity. Thus, when studying the concept of *Liebeswahn* in Hoffmann's works it is helpful to look at those passages that concern themselves with the effect of music on the psyche of

the individual for, in both cases the transformation within the persona of the individual(s) is of a similar nature.

Having somewhat deviated from the subject at hand let us return to the main focus of this section, namely the connection between love and insanity, the *Liebeswahn*. An important clue as to the nature of the phenomenon is found in another section of Don Juan. Here, attempting to understand the nature of Don Juan's obsession, Hoffmann, through his narrator muses:

Es gibt auf Erden wohl nichts, was den Menschen in seiner innigsten Natur so hinaufsteigert als die Liebe; sie ist es, die so geheimnissvoll und so gewaltig wirkend, die innersten Elemente des Daseins zerstoert und verklaert; was Wunder also, dass Don Juan in der Liebe die Sehnsucht, die seine Brust zerreist, zu stillen hoffte... . In Don Juan's Gemueht kam durch des Erzfeindes [the devil] List der Gedanke, dass durch die Liebe, durch den Genuss des Weibes schon auf Erden das erfuehlt werden koenne, was bloss als himmlische Verheissung in unserer Brust wahnt und eben jene unendliche Sehnsucht ist, die uns mit dem Ueberirdischen in unmittelbaren Rapport setzt. (Hoffmann 1988, 66-67)

This passage is crucial to the understand of the theme under discussion, for here a number of elements that are a part of the *Liebeswahn* composite can be extracted. First, we can in the opening part of the quote rediscover the connection between love and irrationality. Second, the connection between this type of love and the realm of the dark and magical is made again -- hence the association with the devil. Third, and perhaps most importantly, this passage highlights a notable element not yet discussed, namely the connection between love and the *Ueberirdische*. Similar to Novalis in *Hymnen an die Nacht* Hoffmann argues that love, if intense enough, allows the ' I ' to transgress the boundaries of everyday reality and to pass into a metaphysical realm often equated with the domain of God or the Gods. *Liebeswahn*, at its most extreme, can thus be viewed as one more important tool by which the individual can liberate the ' I ', albeit for only a

brief time. This, then, could explain why this particular theme occurs in almost a *leitmotif* fashion throughout Hoffmann's works.

That this is indeed the case can be shown by citing further examples of *Liebeswahn* as they occur in some more of Hoffmann's novellas.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in Doge und Dogaressa the young Antonio, after having given the Dogaressa the bouquet of flowers is being described as feeling the following:

... aber in der unsaeglichen Himmelswonne des Augenblicks fasste ihn wie mit gluehenden Armen der brennende Schmerz hoffnungsloser Liebe. - Sinnlos- rasend vor Verlangen- Entzuecken - Qual, ergriff er die Hand der Dogaressa-... (Hoffmann 1958, 217)

A similar occurrence can be found in Hoffmann's Die Abendteuer der Silvesternacht for here Erasmus, the man without a mirror image, "warf sich wie im Wahnsinn vor Giulietta nieder ... und rief: >> Ja, du bist es, dich habe ich geliebt immerdan, dich, du Engelbild >> "(Hoffmann 1958, 120)

And later on:

Feuerstrahlen durchblitzten ihn, in rasender Liebeswut drueckte er die Geliebte an sich und rief:>> Nein, ich lasse dich nicht, und sollte ich untergehen im schmachvollsten Verderben.>> (Hoffmann 1958, 123)

These are but a few of the many passage that contain variations of the *Liebeswahn* motif. What has become clear by now is that for Hoffmann the love between man and woman is fraught with danger once it passes the norm: passion has a blinding effect which puts its victims in physical and psychological danger<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, with Hoffmann the majority of the victims of *Liebeswahn* or *Liebeswut* are males, although speculation as to why this is so will not be entertained here. What should be noted,

- 1 The stories chosen for this part of the essay were picked at random. No attempt has been made to choose example that would fit the main thesis of this paper. This, in turn, strengthens the argument that the theme under discussion is not an isolated occurrence, but rather forms an important element within the collective works of Hoffmann.
- 2 Erasmus, for example, has to flee Italy after he murders a man in a fit of jealousy. Antonio, on the other hand, makes a death defying leap in order to deliver flowers to his loved one.

however, is that far from being isolated passages, the reoccurrence of *Liebeswahn* in its various permutations are of sufficient frequency to be categorized as one of the important themes within Hoffmann's works.

## **Conclusion**

Within a broader discussion of insanity and melancholy in German romantic literature, the concept of *Liebeswahn* plays only a minor, supporting, role. Nevertheless, due to its realty-transcendent quality and its combination of two important romantic themes, that is love and insanity, it deserves serious consideration when examining works of that era. Using examples from Hoffmann's works, I have shown that the concept itself is well documented, and thus supportable. It remains to be seen whether similar examples can be extracted from the writings of other Germans romanticists. Once other incidents are documented, a more encompassing study would be in order.

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