

Whatever Happened to Coppelius? Antecedents and Design in Christina Stead's *The Salzburg Tales*

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No work of Christina Stead's has divided commentary more than *The Salzburg Tales*. Contemporary reviews were overwhelmingly positive, with the *Times Literary Supplement* saluting it as evidence of a "story-teller of profuse imagination [. . .] [and] unusual interest" (Geering 45) and the *New Yorker* claiming that the stories were "far better than the *Decameron*" (Rowley 156). Later critics, however, have been less certain of its merit and of the place it holds in her unfolding *oeuvre*. Although R. G. Geering maintained that Stead "never surpassed the sheer brilliance of this early volume" (45), Diana Brydon has adjudged its tales "accomplished but conventional," arguing that stylistically they "represent[ed] a dead end" and demanded the suppression of her disturbing, hallmark attribute: "the original critical intelligence that springs from her own experience as a woman" (47). Although other commentators have been more guarded, the fact that *The Salzburg Tales* is either ignored in monographs or given at best cursory treatment,¹ and that only one article has been devoted solely to it (Tracy) seem to confirm Brydon's judgment, and points to the difficulty of opening up the collection to coherent exegesis. Approaches to the *Salzburg Tales* have been further hampered by Stead's characteristic reticence about sources and intention. Hence, the knowledge that its forty-four tales were written at great speed to ensure the publication of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* has encouraged the assumption that *The Salzburg Tales* is a more superficial, opportunistic work than her later novels.² Yet there is little in the book itself to support this verdict. Undoubtedly, Stead used material to hand, but she spent a year so concertedly revising it that she felt at times her imaginative spark had gone (Rowley 147). Also, as her literary executor recently observed, Stead's "self-consciousness and artifice have been unduly discounted [. . .] the ways in which her writings simultaneously exploit and subvert the traditions and conventions available to her too little explored" (Harris 3). *The Salzburg Tales*

provides further evidence of both these contentions, as I hope to demonstrate by focusing on its initial story, "The Marionettist," which signals her immediate literary antecedents, hints at a range of ensuing preoccupations, and evokes a past imaginative realm that affords one measure of the existential slippages and social developments that have complicated received themes in a modern, increasingly psychoanalytical age.

In recasting the marionettist or puppeteer motif, Stead could draw on an extensive tradition that used the puppet theatre as a metaphor for commenting on human existence and authorship. European interest in puppets is traceable back to classical and medieval times, and flourished in Italy during the Renaissance. By then the puppet theatre was widespread, and most literatures have works that use its motifs memorably, such as *Vanity Fair* (1848), where the author presents himself as the manager of the forthcoming performance and introduces readers to his "famous little Becky Puppet" (Thackeray 6). But a century before Stead's birth (during the Golden Age of German letters) the literary exploration of the puppet theatre motifs was especially rich. In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's seminal *Bildungsroman Wilhelm Meister*, for example, precocious signs of Wilhelm's theatrical calling emerge when he flowers imaginatively on receiving a puppet theatre as a birthday present. Contemporaries were not slow to focus, in diverse ways, on further aspects and implications of puppetry. Heinrich von Kleist used it to produce a tantalisingly suggestive meditation on reflective and instinctual movement, and on the postlapsarian inferiority of a human race devoid of a sustaining centre of gravity in "*Über das Marionettentheater*" ("On the Puppet Theatre"); while the most influential fictional exploration of the puppet trope occurs in the writings of E. T. A. Hoffmann. Frequently his characters are likened to puppets whose strings are plucked by dark forces or an inscrutable fate, as conventional distinctions between inner and outer, self-projection and destiny, are confounded. In typically Hoffmannesque fashion, the mind of a heroine, undertaking an arduous walk, starts to fray with fatigue and hunger, so that when an old exhibitionist begins to bob up terrifyingly around her, "like a marionette," it is unclear whether he is an actual figure or an emanation from repressed sexual and paternal fears. This nightmarish, hallucinatory scene could have come from the pages of Hoffmann; tellingly, however, its source is Stead's *For Love Alone* (164–66).

In a late interview, Stead confesses to having a personal interest in puppets, though Hoffmann is not mentioned. The relevant segment begins with the author reiterating the claim that her fictional characters are based "on real people," because if invented "they're puppets"—a considerable simplification of her own creations which are often composite characters or based on authorial projections. The latter possibility, in fact, emerges when she confesses her attachment to a particular string-puppet of her own, Nello, fallen to pieces through use and deteriorating parts. To Stead, Nello had clearly become an alter ego:

The odd thing about puppets is that if you have a favorite puppet, and every puppeteer has one, this one is your soul. It's like an oracle that speaks to you [. . .] he was wonderful [. . .]. I got to like him so I used to ask him things and he would say the right thing. If I had a dilemma, he'd say, "Well, do this or that." I would listen for a while and he would give the right answer. Of course, it would be me, you know. Very fascinating, isn't it? Of course, it's what they call the unconscious. But I don't call it the unconscious. It's the more sensible part of yourself. (Lidoff 217–18)

Stead then recounts the life of a German puppeteer, met allegedly in New York, whose father was a toymaker and in whom the borders between life and puppets blur: "Big, tall fellow, he looks like a puppet himself, like a woodcut man"; and later he uses his miniature "family" as a passport to neutral Switzerland by showing the border guards "that puppets were people much more than puppets" (Lidoff 219). These reminiscences lead the interviewer to recall "The Marionettist," a putative link fended off by Stead:

Yes. That's odd because I didn't know anything about it [the life of a puppeteer] then. Ah, yes. Because in Salzburg there is a famous little puppet theatre, about the trolls who also live there in the mines [. . .]. And that was the first time I really saw puppets. That's why. (Lidoff 219)

In brief, the tale's anticipation of her later interest in puppets seems pure chance. Or is this rather an instance of pure disingenuousness on Stead's part? For although she might not have known anything about the mechanics of operating puppets, her initial story subtly evokes the legacy of Hoffmann, which doubtless was an important though unacknowledged factor in her later New York engagement with the puppet theatre.

Because many of its key concerns are conveyed covertly or by indirection, "The Marionettist" seems an unprepossessing opening to the tales recounted at Salzburg, as well as a story that continually raises expectations only to disappoint them. Most obviously, the title suggests that the principal character will be a puppeteer, the main action perhaps focussing on the puppet theatre or exploiting its established analogical dimension. Instead, a very ordinary tale of family desertion and reunion follows, with a naturalistic rather than a romantic or melodramatic denouement. James, a young sculptor of promise, leaves Salzburg on a scholarship to study in Vienna. There he fails to make a name for himself, marries Anna, a fellow student, and they have five children. The eldest, also named Anna, has a walking disability. Father begins to carve puppets for her amusement and uses them to dramatise a

vast repertoire of tales that he recounts at his daughters' bedsides, often becoming so lost in his narratives that he fails to notice that his offspring have fallen asleep. Eventually it is decided to harness these talents and make a living from puppet performances. After twelve years of marriage, James disappears with as little trace as had his brothers, Peter and Cornelius, from the parental home. His deserted family becomes a miniature matriarchy, supporting itself with the puppet theatre. Fifteen years later, James' return is equally unexpected. His second daughter has married William, a ventriloquist and woodcarver, who is in the middle of executing a puppet to represent Coppelius "in the 'Tales of Hoffmann'" (64). James has apparently hoped to be cared for in the bosom of his family. However, the reactions of his womenfolk indicate how out of step this notion is with reality. There is no longer a place for him in the puppet theatre; finances are no more than adequate to their present needs, and each must work for his keep. Daughter Anna, who has become "the man of the family," (66) offers to help James find work there in Vienna comparable with what he did as a sculptor-copyist in Verona. Feeling condescended to and superfluous, and seeing his failed pursuit of an artistic calling branded irresponsible behaviour and a virtual "tramp's progress," (68) James eventually leaves a family that was unable to receive him even under its roof. They never see him again. James returns to his parents' house in Salzburg, makes a living carving for tourists, and never mentions the intervening years to his mother, knowing full well "that she would think a marionette show a come-down for a sculptor" (69–70). A reader would be excused for wondering why, given the usual authorial imperative to grip an audience's imagination from the outset, Stead chose to begin not with a macabre, exotic or open-ended piece, but with a tale of a marionettist who is actually a hack sculptor, where the puppet theatre is virtually invisible, and where the events of this domestic drama are common and banal, its ending straightforward.

Secreted in the text is a cryptic, potential answer in the half-finished figure of Coppelius and the fantastic world of Hoffmann which Coppelius's presence conjures up. The only other reference to this puppet occurs when the returned prodigal makes a tour of inspection of his altered demesne:

He [James] climbed to the second floor where his workroom had been. All was cleaned up and put in one corner, while William's work-table, with the half-made "Coppelius" lying on it, stood in the centre of the room under a skylight. Then James went down to the theatre and they heard him pottering about. (68)

For a second moment Coppelius is spotlighted, and the difference acutely manifested between this lifeless, incomplete simulacrum and its ubiquitous, horror-enshrouded namesake in Hoffmann's story "The Sandman." There Coppelius is a

constant source of destabilising dread to the main protagonist Nathaniel. By a series of coincidences, his shadowy figure becomes identified in Nathaniel's mind with the sandman bogey invoked to frighten unruly children, then with the violent death of his father. Coppelius, too, is a shape-changer. In his next avatar as the Italian optician Coppola he fabricates lenses and life-like eyes or *occe*. A rational corrective to the terrible foreboding he inspires is offered by the well-intentioned Clara, who suggests that Coppelius is a projection or phantom of Nathaniel's ego. This possibility is strengthened when Nathaniel later falls in love with Professor Spalanzoni's "daughter," the automaton Olympia. His illusion, however, is rudely dispersed when Coppola, in the course of reclaiming Olympia's artificial eyes, carries off the clock-work doll; and it is a vision of Coppelius screeching "Ha! Lov-ely *occe!*" (Hoffmann 124) that pushes Nathaniel to plunge from a tower to his death.

Coppelius disappears from Hoffmann's narrative, as William's puppet does from *The Salzburg Tales*, but the predicaments he highlights remain. The major one concerns the status of individual perceptions. To what extent are they ever valid or objective? And if they are coloured by unconscious motives, are these promptings delusive or meaningful? The next story in *The Salzburg Tales*, "Guest of the Redshields," plays light-heartedly with these issues when the luxury unfolded corresponds precisely to a modern poet's needs, when its linguistic virtuosity seems a reflection of his own, and when the permeability of real and imagined categories is underscored at the end: "Nothing it is to me, if maître d'hôtel you be, or fiend or dream, or the three" (75). For other protagonists the stakes involved will be far more serious and potentially tragic, as in "Don Juan in the Arena," "In Doulcemer" and "The Triskelion." Also Stead, in the Lidoff interview, allowed subconscious promptings far greater truth content than does Clara, Hoffmann's spokesperson for enlightened, bourgeois normality. This verdict is frequently confirmed in her Salzburg stories, as when Giselda gazes at a mirror in a waking trance and predicts her future in shocking detail (186–88)—a scene that raises related questions of fate and the supernatural as surely as does Nathaniel's spooked reaction to Coppelius. Again Clara's is the voice of moderation and demystification:

Let me say straight out what it is I think: that all the ghastly and terrible things you spoke of took place only within you, and that the real outer world had little part in them. Old Coppelius may have been repulsive enough, but it was because he hated children that you children came to feel an actual revulsion for him. (Hoffmann 95)

For her, destiny is largely fabricated by each person—presentiments of evil fate are refractions of disruptive anxieties. Even if the possibility of an external, infernal power is conceded, she argues that its sway depends on finding an answering proclivity within the individual, else the mind "strengthened through living

cheerfully” can fight “an inimical influence” (Hoffmann 96). In short, according to Clara, each threatening phantom is ultimately a mirror-image of the self—which does not prevent “inimical influence” from triumphing in Nathaniel’s case. Finally Coppelius, whatever his origin, is identified pre-eminently with forces that attempt to change or to exercise direct sway over individual perception, whether in claiming the eyes of Olympia or of the child Nathaniel as his by right,³ or by producing a dumbfounding range of spectacles and perspective-altering telescopes (Hoffmann 109–10). In a book whose individual stories were revised as many as six or seven times (Rowley 147), Stead’s choice of Coppelius for the skylight-illuminated puppet, who momentarily holds centre stage, was hardly a coincidence, and implicitly evokes this constellation of vexed issues that recurs in the collection.

The other aspect of “The Sandman” which would presumably have struck a cord with her, is its relentless, satiric dissection of the bourgeois ideal of womankind. As the romantic triangle of Nathaniel, Olympia and Clara demonstrates, the conventional model of passive, subordinate, self-sacrificing woman answers the needs of blind egotism, which ultimately makes the puppet or automaton the preferred object of masculine desire. Repeatedly, Hoffmann’s tales show men finding their fondest dreams reflected in a mysterious female figure, whose pursuit involves the abandonment of a fiancée associated with normality and domesticity. In “The Artushof,” Traugott brusquely leaves Christina, the daughter of his business associate, to race to Italy in quest of Felizitas, his eternally ungraspable image of female and artistic perfection. Elias, too, in “The Mines of Falun” deserts his bride-to-be in favour of the fatal embrace of lode-bearing depths, personified by “the Queen.” These male habits of wish-projection and self-serving action are pushed to their logical extreme in “The Sandman.” There Nathaniel rejects his betrothed Clara, who is diminished in his eyes through her active intellectual and social involvement, in favour of a cold robot whom he mistakes for a flesh-and-blood woman. Irresistibly drawn to Olympia’s eyes, which seem to gaze back at him full of love and longing, he is free to read all that his heart desires into her every gesture or silence:

He sat beside Olympia with her hand in his and spoke passionately of his love in words incomprehensible to either of them. Yet she, perhaps, understood, for she gazed fixedly into his eyes and sighed time after time: “Ah, ah, ah!”—whereupon Nathaniel said: “O lovely, heavenly woman! O beam of light from the Promised Land of love! O heart in which my whole being is reflected!” and much more of the same, but Olympia merely sighed again and again: “Ah, ah!” (Hoffmann 114).

As Hoffmann’s tale demonstrates, the utter blindness of Olympia’s eyes has its counterpart in the wilful blindness of the hero: “‘O you glorious, profound nature,’ Nathaniel exclaimed when back in his room, ‘only you, you alone, understand

me completely” (Hoffmann 118). Their interaction as lovers provides a devastating commentary on a venerable category of romances, and on what, in women, most gains male applause. Yet, like most canonical literature, as Teresa notes in *For Love Alone*, it has little to say about actual female experience.

Never a slavish imitator, Stead assimilated selected elements of Hoffmann’s tale in “The Marionettist” and subsequent stories. Like him, she was drawn to multi-layered stories and arabesques; however, she usually avoided his unexplained, abrupt transitions between the ordinary and the fantastic, preferring narrative shifts that are linked to credibly charted mental states. This very absence of foregrounded logic in the original attracted Sigmund Freud, and presumably Stead was familiar with his notorious interpretation of Nathaniel’s motivation:

Why does Hoffmann bring the anxiety about the eyes into such intimate connection with the father’s death? And why does the Sand-Man always appear as a disturber of love? [. . .]. Elements in the story like these, and many others, seem arbitrary and meaningless so long as we deny all connection between fears about the eye and castration; but they become intelligible as soon as we replace the Sand-Man by the dreaded father at whose hands castration is expected. (Freud 231–32)

Stead, who could comment scathingly on Freud’s “ounce of truth” and the “pound of chicanery” of his followers (*Salzburg* 323),⁴ created different emphases by eliding the sandman-eyes association and by making family and communal life a central issue. Masculine impotence, too, assumes other forms in her story, and dreams correspond more to her interview description of them as the “sensible part” of each individual, often appearing in her tales as transparent vehicles for immediate, pressing concerns. The prelude to the marionette theme is sounded, for instance, when James’ mother dreams of her absent sons as destitute, falling “flat on their faces like empty clothes” (57). The symbolism, moreover, anticipates their largely empty roles, their significance being limited to providing a clarifying context for James’s disturbing actions.

In Stead’s tale, Hoffmann’s informing sense of individuals as puppets in the hands of an incomprehensible fate is firmly anchored psychologically, and modern-day versions of Clara take control of their own destiny. Her protagonists must shoulder responsibility for their decisions, and reactions to the family afford a touchstone of moral depth. James, far from being the victim of dark, enigmatic agents, is shown to succumb to innate restlessness, shared with his siblings, and to the fatal allure of artistic vocation. He is also entirely self-serving. Acting like a puppeteer, he treats those around him as if they were figures passively complying with his script, and treats different locations as scenes that he can open and close

at will. His levity is reflected in his art (“I’m only good for busts or for comic subjects”) and in his brothers’ behaviour (65). Nor is he alone in attempting to set characters dancing as it suits him. Within “The Marionettist” is a further story entitled “The Pot of Gold”—not based on Hoffmann’s famous tale of that name, but a simpler anecdote in which two brothers judge aright, and successfully manipulate, the reactions of a third: “we knew you would be overcome by temptation, and we wanted to let you down lightly” (60). Though harmless in this instance, that stratagem is in keeping with “the devious and horrid ways [in which] they had come by their good fortune” (60). Their story is offered as a potential parallel to that of James and his brothers, and the narrator comments open-endedly that James’ wife “had some sort of prejudice against it” (61). An alternate standard of behaviour is offered by the women of the story. James’ mother is a nurturing, all-pardoning, traditional figure, who already belongs to a former time. His own wife and daughters have been forced by male desertion—which is a given, though rarely an issue, in Hoffmann—to become self-reliant. Upon returning home, James reveals a lack of consideration and conceit worthy of Nathaniel, but finds himself dealing with women no longer prepared to act the part of tame marionettes, or unthinking, unfeeling automatons ready to do his bidding. Instead, they offer what kinship and a sense of duty, qualified by his own deeds, demands, what economic circumstances permit and, unlike him, they show a readiness to adjust their plans to accommodate the needs of others. Implicitly, “The Marionettist” adumbrates the advent of a female regulated order, which pays due weight to human relations as well as the domestic sphere, and which has no room for haughty male individualism or its theatrical surrogate proudly presented by James: “the *pas seul* I used to make the demon king do” (64).

Ultimately, James himself appears a hapless puppet, lacking alike self-control and genuine talent. Even in the midst of ingratiating himself with his womanfolk, he discloses culpable instability and self-centredness: “So I became a real ne’er-do-weel [. . .] ran after a girl or two—there was one in the street just now, who is she? with the face of a medallion, a large bosom [. . .] wagged her tail at me [. . .] pretty girl” (65). His life-course is summed up presciently by four exemplary pieces that got him through his sculpture examination but now grace only the auditorium of the puppet theatre:

There was a gypsy-girl dancing—she had the face of Anna, the art-student. Then there was a wrestler overcome by a boa-constrictor, the bust of a middle-aged man with a nondescript face and fourth, a piece, called “The One-man Band,” which showed a laughing lout, in circus clothes, with a top hat on his head, and his instruments and his monkey beside him. (59)

The student siren metamorphoses into a force of relentless constriction; the middle-aged nonentity predicts the self-critical perception that presumably impelled him to follow a showy, Bohemian career, to renounce communal ties to become a “One-man Band.” In a theatrical space dominated by emblems of four key moments of his life, he is logically its chief exhibit, a puppet to his own drives and inner “oracle,”⁵ much as Stead depicted herself playing both puppeteer and Nello. Later, James attempts to mitigate his shortcomings by reading them in terms of an archetypal story that pits the individual against an unfair destiny or dull bourgeois incomprehension: “Begin rather with the Fall of Adam” (67). His version of events, however, falls on deaf ears, and his spouse caustically anticipates his next threadbare excuse: “A sculptor, running away at the bidding of his good genius!” (67). These internalised models of heroic male struggle are as outmoded as the forms of art and family with which he is aligned. At best this artist was a copyist—and then with only a limited repertoire, unable to recast the classics—or the producer of forms that others would animate or dress to good effect. Officially he is still the patriarch of the family: he automatically sits at one end of the table, and both home and theatre are in his name; despite his having lost control of them. Stead’s tale belongs to a different world than Hoffmann’s, one where female agency and independence are not only imaginable, but achievable too.

The ferocious “Sandman” critique of male self-love and delusive projections, which is recast here in a less confrontational register, is diversely refracted in appropriate, ensuing contexts. Yet, so complete is the assimilation and refunctioning of Hoffmann’s legacy, as in “The Marionettist,” that he is at most a spectral presence, or thematic ancestor, in imaginatively independent works. Nathaniel, for example, first sees Olympia through a gap in the curtain that covers a glass door; later “the window of his room gave directly on to the room in which Olympia often sat alone,” statue-like, “for hours on end” (Hoffmann 108). In Stead’s “Poor Anna,” the roles are reversed. Anna, a fifteen-year-old returned from a girl’s school, is smitten by a young officer in the house opposite, who “spent hours in the morning and afternoon and evening, dressing and undressing, polishing, blowing, brushing, trimming, burnishing” (*Salzburg* 468). In fact, so great is the time passed primping at the mirror that the narrator surmises his face must be imprinted on it. Anna can gaze at him to her heart’s content from behind a curtain, or openly, until he extinguishes her ardour by threatening to expose himself. This vanity motif intersects with that of the puppet or automaton when the narrator concludes: “He gave me the impression of one of these wooden soldiers, so stiff and high-coloured, who stand at the gates of toy castles” (470). A more complex instance occurs in “The Gold Bride,” where an obsessive young man has a gold statue made of his gorgeous wife, Zelis, who also enflames the desire of his rich cousin, Ferdinand. Ferdinand’s unwelcome advances prompt her suicide, whereupon her statue becomes the object of both men’s infatuation. Gradually their obsession

attributes life to it and reduces them to yellowing immobility, except for movement in their white eyes (106). In a final twist worthy of Hoffmann or his contemporary Joseph von Eichendorff,⁶ the statue actually assumes traits of animation and miraculously joins her spouse in a sealed coffin. Ostensibly a story about love conquering all, it recalls the perverse fixation of Nathaniel on female beauty, no matter how lifeless or inarticulate, and merges a contemporary awareness of the reification and commodification of individuals with echoes of forbidden, idolatrous worship of golden or graven images. Although no specific motif from “The Sandman” recurs in either tale, a thematic line of descent is discernible, as well as a comparable insistence on the suspension of reader disbelief, or as the deceased Zelis implores her son: “put out the light which discountenances miracles” (109).

The shadow of Coppélius falls more explicitly on “The Mirror,” a story that plays on the concept of reflection as both cognitive and mirroring action. It unfolds around three reflecting surfaces: an observatory that is also a home, where the telescope is the *genus loci* and the father, like Nathaniel’s, receives “secretive visitors” (181), a large mirror linked with baleful visions, and a pond that eventually subsumes it. Above the mirror is Coppélius’ avatar, “‘The Violin Master’ or ‘Metternich’” (180), a knot of acanthus leaves that assumes specific forms to particular observers. This imaginary Metternich glides easily into the dreams of the siblings and, as psychic and objective realms merge, into their lives as a figure of ill-omen associated, as in “The Sandman,” with death and the disruption of love. Stead’s debt to Hoffmann is for ideas and imaginative stimulation, rather than routine details, but she does leave occasional traces of acknowledgement. Her Metternich is dressed like Coppélius in old-fashioned attire; the eccentric trio of violinists who play at Giselda’s wedding could have stepped straight out of the German’s writings, along with the young musician who retorts, “No, so wide awake that I saw an ape sitting and grinning on top of every note” (185);⁷ among the familiar subjects represented in copies of prints attached to the attic doors is “King Cophetua,” which reads like a playful amalgam of Coppélius and Coppola. Entwined amidst these fully assimilated motifs are numerous folk myths, complicated dreams and an informing recognition of the subjective, necessarily limited nature of knowledge and perception that produces a chorus of different identifications of Metternich’s human counterpart (189–90), and provides many occasions for bravura descriptions of scenes and protagonists.

The Salzburg Tales, then, affords ample evidence that Stead excelled in reworking inherited material, which is precisely where her mundane sculptor failed, and selected stories may be seen metaphorically as completing the figure of Coppélius left half-finished in “The Marionettist.” That puppet not only serves as tacit recognition of Hoffmann’s influential legacy, but also marks the distance travelled beyond it. For, although little distinguished the narrow, ancient streets of Bamberg (where the German composed many of his best known works) from those of

Salzburg's old town in Stead's day, intellectually there had been a massive shift. Devilish forces, witches and fairies still peopled the popular imagination in the Romantic's time: Arnim and Brentano were able to make their standard compilation of folksongs, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the brothers Grimm their miscellany of cruel and timeless fairytales. Yet Friedrich von Schiller was already lamenting the departure of immortal beings in *Wallenstein* and Keats, another author fascinated with the difference between appearance and reality, how even the "awful rainbow" had been transcribed:

In the dull catalogue of common things.
 Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
 Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
 Empty the haunted air, and gnomèd mine-
 Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
 The tender-personed Lamia melt into a shade.
 (Keats, "Lamia" lines 233–38)

By the 1930s, the former theatre of inherited deities was resonately hollow; its otherworldly cast was re-envisaged definitively in terms of natural or psychic forces—although the "gnomèd mine" still flourished in the puppet troupe of Salzburg, as Stead remembered fondly decades later. The challenge that the Australian apparently set herself, first notably in the visionary sequences of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, then in her kaleidoscopic collection of tales, was to reanimate lost narratives and return mysterious depths to fiction: to reinstate, in short, the novelist as the supreme puppeteer. There was no point, however, in trying to return to the uncanny realm of Hoffmann, no matter how enticing; the future belonged instead, as "The Marionettist" suggests, to those who could refashion Coppélius, or the diverse, fantastic achievements of the European imagination of which he is a fitting representative.

Thus was born an art based on creative variation and reconfiguration, both in individual tales and the collection as a whole.⁸ Clearly, Stead revelled in the inventive licence sanctioned by a publisher's request for a companion piece to her account of ordinary hardship in Sydney—especially after years of galling antipodean coercion and disempowerment, like that suffered by her surrogate Viola, in "an honest city, where the 'Decameron' is forbidden, and England's colonial history is expurgated for the school books" (*Salzburg* 465). Chaucer and Boccaccio provided her with a form adaptable to the types and imperatives of the 1930s, and Salzburg provided a setting steeped in Catholic moral tradition as well as securely nestled within the German-speaking world of a major mentor: Hoffmann. With a rich memory and a select library of reference books to draw on,⁹ Stead had ample story-lines and themes to embellish imaginatively, in keeping with the truism:

“you surely don’t imagine that all talents have to invent everything new: they are buds grafted on the old stock of invention” (163). The resulting works are refreshingly free of crude didacticism. Infatuation, for example, is not the prerogative of a single sex. Anna succumbs to it, as do men near Zelis, though in general males in her stories are far more liable to excess. Certainly a social conscience emerges in some tales, such as “The Divine Avenger,” or in its conceit that, if all evil doers were shipped off to a distant planet, “the brighter spirits” among those remaining would still “set out resolutely on the old path to perdition” (208). So, too, does Stead’s past, whether in James embarking on the “ocean of story” to his offspring, as did David Stead to his daughter, or in the occasional surfacing of engrained atheism, as when the Centenarist remarks acerbically: “they came together from every part of the world, and they were as God makes the good: halt, lame, blind, syphilitic, leprous, demented, epileptic, paralysed, hunch-backed” (320). But in 1934, the imperative to entertain still predominated. There would be time in the next novel, *House of All Nations* (1938), to revisit seriously her concern with reality and illusion, using delusory appearances as a metaphor for the edifice of capitalism, and a dubious bank and its mercurial director as symbols of a doomed system. Nevertheless, the Salzburg tales are far more than the work of an imitator and, at times dazzling, ventriloquist (Brydon 44). Not content simply to allow “the tradition’s old voices to speak through her,” Stead refashioned them, as her use of Hoffmann shows, to give her own slant on contemporary and timeless preoccupations, and to introduce herself to the reading world as an exceptionally gifted, new author, “in manner mild, reserved and exquisite, but in mind, passionate, thinking by analogy, and fantastic” (*Salzburg* 400).

Endnotes

1. It is completely ignored by Pender, Sheridan and Stern, mentioned in passing by Petersen, and the approach of other monographs, assuming it to be a miscellany like *The Decameron* or *The Canterbury Tales*, is to trace in the tales occasional thematic links with her later novels or preoccupations.
2. The British publisher Peter Davies made the precondition for bringing out *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* the receipt of a further manuscript, whose publication would serve as a curtain-raiser to Stead’s already completed novel. She had a manuscript which had been rejected by Angus & Robertson with her, but allegedly lost it in Paris. Nevertheless, she confessed to having rewritten three of its stories for *The Salzburg Tales*: “On the Road,” “Morpeth Tower” and “The Triskelion” (Stead, *Ocean* 498). While she worked in a bank in Paris, she “wrote a story every first day of a pair, finishing it and putting in the connective tissue the second day; the third day starting another story” (Stead, *Ocean* 501)—not, as has been claimed, “at the rate of two a day” (Gribble 21).
3. When Nathaniel, as a child, becomes the forbidden witness of the secret

- alchemy experiments being carried out by his father and Coppelius, the dark sorcerer demands his eyes (Hoffmann 91).
4. This attack on practitioners of psychoanalysis, those “self-elected Daniels of a ghostly world” (323), is attributed to the Centenarist, a narrator whose views generally have authorial endorsement. For evidence of Stead’s knowledge of Freud’s heavily-gendered reading of traditional symbols by the time she wrote *The Salzburg Tales* see Lidoff 119–21.
 5. Stead projects this “oracle” on Nello (Lidoff 217), and Teresa discovers it after experiencing a supreme moment of passion with Girton at Oxford (Stead, *For Love Alone* 490).
 6. Joseph von Eichendorff’s most famous story is of course “*Das Marmorbild*” (“The Marble Statue”) which deals with the coming to life of a cold statue.
 7. Fantastic musician figures are a recurring feature of his work, and the creative exuberance of Hoffmann and his characters found sometimes an outlet in doodling, like Traugott in “The Artushof” (Hoffmann 129).
 8. This idea, already embodied in the example of Mozart’s compositions during the introduction to Salzburg, is later expanded with the imprematur of Croce who “says correctly that the distinguishing mark of genius is the intensity of composition, the compression of ideas, the multifold functions forced out of a single symbol, the irrepressible flowering of variations, the continual gushing of themes” (*Salzburg* 178).
 9. “I [. . .] collect some few very good purely professional books [. . .] [on] idioms [. . .] proverbial wisdom, homely similes and the like [. . .] [and on] the great eternal themes of literature [. . .]. I have books which enumerate and comment upon all the plots possible in literature” (Stead, “Letter to Nadine Mendelson, c. 1937,” *Web of Friendship* 81).

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