The Wounded Storyteller. The Traumatic Tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann. Translated by Jack Zipes and illustrated by Natalie Frank. Pp. 304. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023. Hb. £30. ISBN 9780300263190.

At the heart of E. T. A. Hoffmann's stories is an all-consuming need to be heard. Many of his protagonists, upon confiding their deepest-held fears or their most beautiful fantasies, find their cherished feelings summarily dismissed, often where they might reasonably have expected empathy: in their family circles. This is one major source of the 'trauma' to which Jack Zipes refers in the title of his collection of five translations, and it does not apply exclusively to the chief players in Hoffmann's dramatic narratives.

If Hoffmann's stories regularly feature traumatized subjects desperate for an outlet, they also place the act of narration front and centre, with narrators who repeatedly puncture the illusion to comment on their craft. The stories' open acknowledgement of their own fictionality is not particularly innovative: *Don Quixote*, to take a famous example of literary self-referentiality, long predates Hoffmann's tales. Hoffmann's narrators are striking not for their digressions on their art, but for their obsessive fear that they may never find a truly receptive audience. This goes well beyond the understandable authorial desire to be read. Take the narrator of 'The Sandman' (all translations are Zipes' unless otherwise stated): 'I felt immensely driven to tell you something about the disastrous life of Nathaniel. The miraculousness and strangeness of his life filled my entire soul, and for this very reason, my dear reader, I had to make you just as inclined to tolerate the uncanny, which is no small matter.' The storyteller's uncomfortable knowledge that he may be disbelieved; that merely by telling he becomes strange, is mirrored in his characters, who self-censor. Anselmus in 'The Golden Pot' feels relief that the more prosaic civil servants Paulman and Heerbrand are not around to witness his rhapsodic address to the mythical Serpentina; Marie in 'The

Nutcracker and the Mouse King' is mocked and censured by her family for her stories and so 'did not dare utter another word about all the wonderful adventures she had had'. Terrifyingly, the miner Elis in 'The Mines of Falun' tries to describe a wondrous world to his fiancée, but feels 'as if an unknown power was forcibly sealing his mouth'. Getting the stories out to the *right* people, and keeping those people attentive, becomes the decisive challenge. The reader becomes a therapeutic stand-in for missed personal connections.

Above all, Hoffmann's addresses to his readers raise the problem of translating one's own subjectivity to a 'foreign' recipient; in this sense foreignness can still exist within the same language, with rational scepticism taking the place of a language barrier. 'Do make an effort, generous reader, to believe what I am recounting', urges the narrator of 'The Golden Pot'. Reading these stories one after the other makes it clear: Hoffmann is all about translation of the self to a longed-for receptive other.

All this presents a creative linguistic challenge to an author, and consequently, to their translator too. It takes a particular skill, if not contrariness, to insist that readers must fully immerse themselves in a weird and wonderful world and then to continually dispel the illusion while urging the same readers to keep believing. But this is what Hoffmann's narrators do, as they tread the fine balance between Romanticism and Realism that ever threatens to tip too far in one direction. R. J. Hollingdale, an earlier translator of eight tales (*Tales of Hoffmann*, 1982), acknowledges the nature of this difficulty in his Introduction: Hoffmann set the pace of his writing perfectly to create and uphold tension, 'in the idiom, and above all at the tempo, of his own age'. Idiom, tempo, and, to add a third, German syntax, do not always translate easily for a gripping read in English. An additional challenge is the constant change in pace and style necessitated by the shifts between narration and reflection outlined above; Zipes mentions this in his prefatory material.

Given that Hoffmann published story collections that have not yet been translated

wholesale, and that translators have instead tended to select thematically, putting together stories from different existing collections, it is worth pausing over Zipes' choices. He introduces his selection of five by way of a thesis proposing that Hoffmann, who suffered in family life, professional life, and ultimately from ill health, is himself the 'wounded storyteller'. There is a lot to be said for this, and pleasingly Zipes does not tend towards exclusively negative interpretations, but suggests that story-telling is a therapeutic remedy. His interest is mainly in childhood trauma, not unknown to Hoffmann, and here loosely defined to include the trauma of young people unsupported by parents (in two of the stories here, the main characters are into their twenties when we first encounter them). If the definition is a bit slack, it works well as a thread connecting the tales, which all to one degree or another focus on what happens to our wounded storytellers when they are listened to, and when they are not. In 'The Golden Pot', Anselmus is thought to be mad; in 'The Sandman', Nathaniel really does go mad; in 'The Nutcracker and the Mouse King', Marie is alienated from her family. Happily, the siblings in 'The Mystifying Child' have each other and that rarest of positive influences: a present father (until he isn't, but by then they have learned to communicate the power of the imagination to a once sceptical mother). In 'The Mines of Falun', however, the loss of his mother ruins Elis' ability fully to join a community or to speak meaningfully about his inner world, so that a romantic relationship is never truly possible. 'The Golden Pot' has been translated several times (e.g. Robertson, 1992; Wortsman, 2023), as have 'The Sandman' and 'The Nutcracker', the stories that made Hoffmann's name in English. The other two tales have not been entirely overlooked by translators, but they are essentially unknown to anglophone readers. It is heartening to find something different, particularly in such a lavishly illustrated, eye-catching edition which should attract new readers to Hoffmann.

Hoffmann's narrators take great pains to make troubled characters sympathetic to their

readers without ever tipping into sentimentality; when characters themselves threaten to go overboard, the narrator's irony prevents the reader from doing the same. Zipes sets out to keep the reader onside by modernizing the stories into standard American English. He also helpfully shortens sentences where needed, or changes a foreign or now outdated reference to something more recognizable. A good example is Anselmus' early soliloquy in 'The Golden Pot'. After a typical clumsy misstep dashes his hopes of modest celebrations on a public holiday, the student repairs to the riverbank to indulge in a litany of self-reproach that is both comical and sympathetic. The stakes are low: he misses out on a strong beer and the pleasure of young ladies' company for a few hours. But they are also high. For had things worked out otherwise, 'I would have been quite a different person.' This should be taken literally. In fact, it is the crux of Anselmus' story as he hovers been acceptance and censure in a modern Dresden obsessed by middle-class status and minor promotions within the state bureaucracy. In Hoffmann's German, this declaration is one clause in a long sentence listing the many ways in which the evening might have gone better. In Zipes' English it is a single sentence, a concise summing-up of our protagonist that instantly strikes a chord and sets him up as the perfect candidate for admission, or possibly escape, to an alternative mythical realm. Within the same monologue, Zipes has Anselmus complain, 'As a boy, I could never play hide-and-seek because I could never catch anyone.' This makes the text more accessible without running into anachronism; in the German Anselmus says he was never picked as 'Bohnen-König' (literally 'Bean King', in a game played as part of Twelfth Night celebrations). At such a charged moment, when readers' feelings need to be in a delicate balance between deep empathy and gentle mockery, it would be counter-productive to interrupt the effect by sending them on a search for historical context.

Elsewhere Zipes has a fine ear for lightly disrupting clichéd idiom, the better to convey a character's state of mind: 'His mother's death ripped Elis's heart in two.' This is a

twofold improvement on Hollingdale (‘The death of his mother had broken his heart’). First, it is closer to Hoffmann’s ‘Der Tod seiner Mutter zerreiße ihm das Herz.’ Second, it importantly establishes Elis’ alienation, since people will accept a typically broken heart but one violently torn asunder by the sad, but not tragic, passing of an aged woman. As Zipes senses another opportunity for telling brevity, rightly disregarding the original syntax, Elis is brutally told, ‘Old people die.’ Elis answers, ‘Ah, if only someone would believe in my gloom and agony! People just think I’m foolish. But all this is what is driving me out of the world.’ And when Elis first sees the mines in all their destructive horror, perfectly evoked in this translation, the blood does not freeze in his veins, it ‘curdles’, an altogether more visceral description. Thus, what may seem to be minor linguistic issues build up to become important indicators as to why Hoffmann’s characters set themselves so far apart. Zipes writes persuasively in his Introduction about Hoffmann’s ‘complete devotion to the make believe’ in the sense of making others believe; it is ‘a life-and-death matter’. His translation and selection capture this problem compellingly.

Zipes’ overture to modern readers is welcome, but at points it intersects with more traditional language in a way that breaks the illusion; precisely the opposite effect to that required. I find it unimaginable that the old hag who curses Anselmus with a dark prophecy would call him a ‘measly wimp’ (p. 2); Robertson’s faithfulness to the original (‘child of Satan’) is much preferable. Conversely, I quite enjoyed the moment in ‘The Mysterious Child’ when Felix dismisses his pampered cousin by calling him a ‘stupid jerk’ (p. 201) and refers to him behind his back as ‘Cousin Fancy Pants’ (p. 208). Felix’s dynamism marks his difference from his unnaturally disciplined relative, and these words feel appropriate for a child in his situation, who has been pricked by jealousy and implicitly censured for roughness. But it is a mistake to then let Felix refer to ‘my dear dog Sultan’ (p. 206), and for his sister to address him as ‘my good Felix!’ (p. 206). Mixed registers occasionally appear in

the same sentence, which is particularly jarring: ‘he chucked the doll into the lake without much ado’ (p. 210). On the subject of children, Zipes very pleasingly expands the imagined readership to make it more inclusive. In ‘The Nutcracker and the Mouse King’ Hoffmann’s narrator imagines a Fritz, a Theodor, or an Ernst among his possible audience; to this list Zipes adds a Heidi and a Gabby. A small step, but not insignificant.

I have a few isolated complaints. Hoffmann’s clever, concise description of Godfather Drosselmeier as ‘ein sehr künstlicher Mann’ in ‘The Nutcracker and the Mouse King’ is a translation conundrum. ‘Künstlich’ has, in older German, a sense of mastery, and Drosselmeier is a master of clockwork; there is the related sense of mastery of an art via the etymological link to ‘Kunst’. But it also means ‘artificial’, which sums up his perfect yet lifeless creations. We may also wish to be on our guard against Drosselmeier’s own artifice, as there is something foreboding about this patron who infiltrates the Stahlbaum family. It is simply not possible to capture all this ambivalence in English, but ‘their godfather was a very talented man’ (p. 130) fails to capture any of it. German syntax has occasionally defeated the translator, so that the main clause goes missing: ‘In this longing for an unknown *something*, a longing that hovered above you no matter where you were, like an airy dream with thin, transparent forms that melted away each time you tried to touch them, for you had no voice in the world about you’ (p. 21).

But the overall experience is one of pleasure. It is particularly rewarding to consider this work of art and marvel at its glossy pages while reading about Anselmus’ apprenticeship in the production of literature as a physical object: ‘the pens wrote exquisitely, and the wondrous ink flowed pliantly and jet black on the bright white parchment’. Materiality counts. Natalie Frank’s 200 illustrations, full-page and marginalia, likewise bring the reader closer to the beauty and, it must be said, terror, of Hoffmann’s imagination. The endpapers carry arresting images of women who turn out to be Veronica/Serpentina (‘The Golden Pot’)

at the front, and the mountain queen of Falun at the back. In both cases their gaze draws in the viewer's own whilst also redirecting it to another realm they can apparently see: they look rapt. Other pictures are appropriately disturbing, especially with childhood scenes, as the young Nathaniel is stalked by a shadow and a disembodied hand covers his mouth, and Marie's legs resemble those of a toddler, rendering her even younger than she is, just as the text has her beginning to indulge in romantic fantasies. Eyes, of course, are everywhere. Some of the images are bafflingly idiosyncratic, particularly the many drawings of animals unrelated to the content (what are two cockerels doing at the start of 'The Sandman'?). But with all their eccentric provocation, they complement Zipes' translations in urging us to participate in the creative, interpretive process. With Natalie Frank we see Hoffmann through another subjectivity. Put differently, we encounter a further translation. *The Wounded Storyteller* is bizarre and beautiful, and entirely Hoffmannesque.

JOANNA NEILLY

St Peter's College, Oxford