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Dorothea von Mücke: *The Seduction of the Occult and the Rise of the Fantastic Tale.*

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Dorothea von Mücke's latest book offers a detailed and erudite account of the fantastic tale from the late-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Von Mücke, Professor of German at Columbia University in New York, devotes most of the book to analyses of works by Tieck, Hoffmann, and von Arnim, though she also uses a comparative approach, including tales in French by Cazotte, Gautier, and Mérimée, as well as works by Edgar Allen Poe. Through her careful attention to both the texts and their historical contexts, the fantastic tale emerges as a new model for aesthetics and sexuality.

Von Mücke organizes each chapter around a constellation of two or three fantastic tales, and she analyzes each story in its entirety before proceeding to the next. The danger of this approach – especially with a genre as plot-dependent as the fantastic tale – is that one becomes mired in reconstructing the circumstances and events of each story. This book succumbs to that danger somewhat when it lingers overlong in its recounting of storylines. But von Mücke always advances her readings through close and insightful analyses and by taking full advantage of her approach: by treating the tales

individually, she lets them stand as a heterogeneous collection of texts. She refuses to anchor her sources in one set of extrinsic, historical references or bind them all to a single ideology. In short, she does not force the stories all to talk about the same thing. One finds instead the fantastic tale engaging a diverse range of contemporaneous discourses. Through analyses that lean both explicitly and implicitly on Foucault, von Mücke demonstrates how these tales comment on sexuality, madness, sovereignty, and nationhood, among other issues. For instance, she connects Hoffmann's literary interest in the psyche's fundamental obscurity with his juridical writings on accountability and *amentia occulta*, whereas she reads Achim von Arnim's "Isabella von Ägypten" as an expression of nationalist, anti-Napoleonic politics. The book's structure produces another, pragmatic advantage: scholars interested exclusively in a particular author or work can easily locate a self-contained reflection on their topic without needing to cobble it together from scattered references.

To its credit, the book balances von Mücke's choice of formally and thematically heterogeneous texts with a sustained argument; her read-

ings of individual tales do not become a series of scarcely related essays. Von Mücke investigates the fantastic tale as a product of its social and historical context, but she also investigates what it produces in that context. According to the book's central thesis, the genre of the fantastic tale introduces two novelties in the nineteenth century. First, it creates a new relationship between text and reader, one based on an aesthetics of shock. Second, it explores a new model of subjectivity and sexuality. This dual argument informs and connects the various readings.

For the first half of her argument – that the aesthetics of shock restructures the reader's relationship to fiction – von Mücke focuses on the main characteristic of the fantastic, namely, "its hesitation between two mutually incompatible approaches to reality" (246). At the heart of every fantastic tale is a confrontation with the enigmatic, the inexplicable. Here she follows Todorov's concept of fantastic literature: this encounter suspends the observer in doubt between the supernatural and mere hallucination. It puzzles, disorients, and destabilizes everyone involved, and von Mücke's point is that the reader belongs to that group of participants as much as the tale's narrator or characters. She writes of Tieck's theory of the marvelous, for example: "the shock arises from the protagonist's (and by extension the reader's) confrontation with a potentially supernatural, overpowering, and occult force..." (119). The parenthetical "by extension" serves as the argument's linchpin: the fantastic tale stages a relationship between an event and its observer, while it simultaneously shapes the reader's

relationship to the event. Hoffmann's "Der Elementargeist" best exemplifies this dynamic since its protagonist is not merely an observer but is himself a reader – of Cazotte's early fantastic tale *Le diable amoureux*. Thus, when Cazotte's tale becomes a "magic mirror" of the protagonist's life, Hoffmann's tale – by extension – becomes a magic mirror of the reader's relationship to fantastic fiction. The diegetic disorientation similarly disorients its reader.

In this respect, von Mücke's argument operates in the gray area between speech acts and reader-response theory. It describes the shock, on the one hand, as an effect of performative language, as the consequence of a successful speech act. On the other hand, it can describe that effect only by positing an identificatory affective response in the reader – bewilderment, dread, panic, and so on. The tale's aesthetic force, from this perspective, must be located in the reader's perception and parallel reaction to the text, rather than solely in the text itself. Von Mücke devotes significant attention to Poe's tales, but one wonders why she does not include his critical writings in this particular discussion. Poe's reflections on the necessity of a vivid and unified effect on the reader could provide further evidence of a new aesthetics of shock in the nineteenth century.

The second half of her argument – that the fantastic tale explores a new model of subjectivity and sexuality – focuses on the workings of desire. In the fantastic tale, desire becomes difficult to articulate or comprehend; pleasure becomes difficult to attain. The book traces the emergence of a problematic sexuality through nu-

merous tales. It explores, for instance, Alvarro's desire for Biondetta in *Le diable amoureux*, which blurs gender roles; Emil's desire for his beautiful neighbor in Tieck's "Liebeszauber," which evinces an evil, irrational undercurrent; and the narrator's persistent desire for his deceased bride in Poe's "Ligeia." On von Mücke's view, these depictions of mysterious and irrational desires reflect a broader cultural transition. In the early-nineteenth century, faith in a knowable psyche and in open, transparent communication gives way to uncertainty, to an awareness of obscurity, otherness, and perversion. But once again, the fantastic tale is not merely an inert window onto its historical context. Von Mücke argues that the model of subjectivity and sexuality found in the fantastic tale is ahead of its time, that it has more in common with twentieth-century notions of subjectivity than it does with the thinking of its day. In fact, she reads these unconscious, irrational desires as a kind of psychoanalysis *avant la lettre*. It is the fantastic tale's model of subjectivity and sexuality, "which almost a hundred years later informs the psychoanalytical understanding of a polymorphously perverse human sexuality" (98). Of course, von Mücke is not the first to find an affinity between Romantic tales and the categories of psychoanalysis. She incorporates this fact, however, into her argument: the numerous psychoanalytic readings of these works demonstrate just how much psychoanalytic thought owes to the genre of the fantastic tale. Literature – the fantastic tale in particular – is the object of psychoanalysis precisely

because it contributes to the development of psychoanalysis.

The arguments about aesthetics and sexuality are ultimately two sides of the same coin. Von Mücke locates in the shocking encounter a moment of seduction and sexualization. In this model, the unsettling effect of shock becomes a source of potential pleasure. It is described in sensual categories of impact, intensity, and stimulation. If the standard model of pleasure was one of equilibrium and control, the fantastic tale depicts pleasure as a matter of abandoning oneself and ceding control to an obscure force. Von Mücke thus coins the phrase "seduction through shock" to indicate the imbrication of aesthetics and sexuality. The best support for this linkage of shock and seduction, pleasure and pain, comes through her analysis of Emil's seduction in "Liebeszauber," as well as her reading of various shocking, sexualizing scenes in Hoffmann's "Das Fräulein von Scuderi": the prenatal transmission of desire to Cardillac from his mother, Brusson's desperate contacts with Scuderi, and Scuderi's attempt to persuade the king. In each case, the shocking encounter both disorients and seduces, so that the argument of aesthetic effect flows directly into that of sexuality. And through sexuality, the argument returns to the reader: just as the characters give themselves over to the pleasure of overwhelming sensory excitation, so does the reader. For von Mücke, seduction is a force that extends beyond the tale's diegetic frame.

This interest in the intersection of genre, aesthetics, and sexuality continues a research program that von Mücke has pursued for some time

now. Her previous book, *Virtue and the Veil of Illusion* (Stanford, 1991), also explores how the emergence of new literary genres – the epistolary novel, bourgeois tragedy, and the Bildungsroman, for example – participates in forming new types of subjectivity.

One aspect of the fantastic tale that receives relatively little attention in von Mücke's analysis is its hermeneutic dimension. The summaries of these tales reveal how often they revolve around mysterious, enigmatic, indeed inexplicable events. The argument here centers on how those shocking events disorient and stimulate their observers, but one might well wonder about the hermeneutic, investigative response that such disorientation usually elicits. That is, if the fantastic tale destabilizes the observer's position, does that observer not naturally want to reclaim a stable position, to explain away the inexplicable? It is, after all, not without reason that, in addition to mysterious encounters, these stories frequently include detectives, inspectors, and others who simply want to solve the mysteries that confront them.

Take Tieck's "Der blonde Eckbert" as an example. The story's central shock occurs when Walther utters the name, Strohman, that Bertha could not recall. His revelation certainly disorients Bertha, but she responds by trying to reorient herself, by piecing together clues. She begins to examine every insignificant detail and to pour over Walther's words and gestures in her mind. She sets out like a detective to solve the mystery of how he could know this repressed name. The reader encounters a similar mystery in Hoffmann's

"Die Automate" when the automaton responds to people with an astonishing knowledge of their private lives. One immediately wants to discover *how* it knows so much. In Hoffmann's story, the two protagonists decide, in fact, "to approach Professor X and perhaps finally to solve the enigma that had such a deep impact on Ferdinand's life..." (144).

Von Mücke wants to read forward from the fantastic tale to Freud, and this hermeneutic dimension might afford her another way to do so. She does a fine job demonstrating how the tales' depictions of sexuality and desire anticipate the Freudian model. But she could also accomplish this move through her other argument, that of a new relationship between text and reader. The disorientation that one encounters in the fantastic tale produces a culture of close reading, akin to what Paul Ricouer calls a "hermeneutics of suspicion." When the characters in these stories get suspicious, they begin to interrogate words and attend to small details. In short, they become hermeneuts. Thus, one could argue that psychoanalysis inherits from the fantastic tale not only a new model of the psyche but also a new model of analysis, a new attention to suspicious modes of reading.

It is probably unfair to fault a book as wide-ranging as this one for not pursuing yet another line of inquiry, and this reviewer's minor quibbles should not detract from von Mücke's achievement. She has produced an excellent and informative piece of scholarship. Her readings of the individual tales along with her reflections on their generic innovations are among the best available in English today. Von Mücke's book

deserves a prominent place in the bibliography of anyone studying the fantastic tale or the changing notions of sexuality in the nineteenth century.