Nagy commentary for Tales of Hoffmann film by Powell and Pressburger ch.6-29

ch.6
The Tale of Olympia starts here.

There is a visual index - or let us call it a “symbol” - of Hoffmann, as the pages turn. It is a seven-string lyre. {0:08} At this point, he is still “a young student.”

Frederic Ashton, the choreographer of the whole film, of the whole macro-narrative, is appropriately cast as a puppeteer in the micro-narrative of the Tale of Olympia; he is described as half human, half puppet {0:29}. Everything will be seen through the magic spectacles of opera - and, by extension, of the film itself. {0:33}

Spalanzani, the would-be “father” of Olympia, sings to her: “There, sleep in peace.” {1:18} Why is Olympia sleeping? The wording of the “father” implies that Olympia is dead. This theme of the dead or the unliving Olympia will keep recurring in the Tale of Olympia.

The couch on which Olympia is in her deep sleep has a decorative cockerel facing it. {1:9} We recall the cockerel as the weathervane in the Prologue, now pointing in one direction and now pointing in the opposite direction. In the macro-narrative, the cockerel is a visual index of the fickleness of love, of life itself.

Olympia is described by her “father” as a “heavenly sight” {2:33}. The name “Olympia” is relevant. It is as if she were made in Olympus, which is the abode of the immortal gods. In Homeric narrative, the place called Olympus is artificial precisely because it is exempt from death.

“In my heart I feel there is a measure.” {3:40} The romantic hero Hoffmann, seen here in his student days, is trying to be scientific rather than artistic when he first sees Olympia. He is trying to make his heart unbreakable by way of science. The artist thinks he is giving up his art of poetry and songmaking for the sake of science.

“She is there.” {3:48} Hoffmann is starting to fall in love with Olympia. Back in the Prologue, when he sang “she is there,” he sang about Stella in the song about Kleinzach, where he had suddenly switched or modulated from a comic story about a grotesque dwarf and his unrequited love for a fair damsel - into a tragic story about himself and his own unrequited love for Stella.

“How divinely fair.” {4:13} With these words, Hoffmann is deifying Olympia. Olympia has become a goddess for the romantic hero.

We see here a fusion of emotions: Hoffmann sings how “we” could “share in every joy and sorrow” {4:46-5:00}.
Hoffmann’s dreams “reflect” the light of dawn, that is, the “morn” {5:10}. The theme of “reflection” is pervasive in the macro-narrative.

ch.7

When we see Coppelius for the first time, he is introduced by the same musical tune that had introduced Lindorf in the Prologue. This tune is a variation on the theme of the same character in the macro-narrative, who is the Devil himself. And the Devil, in the form of Coppelius here, is played by the same performer as in the Prologue, Robert Helpmann, who plays the Devil in the form of Lindorf.

When Hoffmann first puts on the magic spectacles made by Coppelius and looks through them, he sees ideal forms instead of the stylized sketches that populate the set of the stage. He now sees two figures - (1) a winged Victory (= Nike in classical Greek terms) holding up a garland and (2) a dashing young lord about to draw his sword. {1:37}

“I have eyes people prize,
For hidden hearts are they appraising.” {1:51}

To “appraise” a heart is to find out whether it is real or not. Now the curtains part, and a beautiful damsel appears.

About the magic spectacles as “eyes,” Coppelius sings:

“A heart they can present
To those who’ve got none at all.” {1:58}.

The wording keeps coming back to the question: who has a heart and who is heartless?

The cockerel that looks over the couch where Olympia sleeps now comes alive when it is viewed through the magic spectacles. {2:12}

In this context, Coppelius continues...

“Would you try the heart of a woman?” {2:18}

That is, how do you “appraise” whether a woman has a heart or is heartless?

Coppelius boasts:

“I’ve eyes the heart appraising” {2:35}. 
It is as if his magic spectacles could distinguish what is real and what is not, what is natural and what is artificial.

When Hoffmann puts on the magic spectacles to view the sleeping Olympia, he exclaims:

“Gracious heavens. Power Divine.” {2:57}

ch.8

The “father” of Olympia is advised by Coppelius:

“Marry off Olympia now.” {1:36}

The sinister laughter of Coppelius is accompanied, once again, by the same tune that introduced the Devil in the Prologue. {1:51}

ch.9

The Muse says ironically to Hoffmann:

“At last we’ll see close to the pride of all his treasure.” {2:13}

When she says “his,” she is referring to the handiwork of the Devil, that is, of Coppelius. Her words are referring to the reality that she is about to see, not to the illusion that Hoffmann sees through his magic spectacles.

ch.10

When Olympia is finally presented to her public, Hoffmann says about her, while looking at her through the magical spectacles:

“Who sees her must adore her.” {0:51}

Once again, the romantic poet is deifying Olympia.

The “harp” that accompanies the song of Olympia is really a seven-string lyre, shaped like a swan in the act of singing a swan song. {2:23}

As we will see later when we read Plato, the swan is the sacred bird of Apollo, god of music, who presides over the Muses. The swan song has to do with a song of beauty and of death. The beauty and the death are simultaneous. The swan sings his most beautiful song at the moment of his death. Plato’s Socrates is fascinated with this theme, as we will see later when we read Plato.
Olympia’s song

I highlight these words sung by Olympia:

“Now all maidens’ hearts are ringing” {0:33}

Olympia continues:

“... with love.” {0:52}

We see here variations on the theme of the heart that is destined to be broken.

As the “father” sings in response:

“Broken hearts can soon recover” {3:13; again 3:33}

Hoffmann’s Muse, disguised as the boy Nicklaus, ridicules the “scales” of the song of Olympia. {0:07} As a real Muse, she is threatened by the virtuosity of the counterfeit Muse.

Hoffmann sings to Olympia: “Our hearts forevermore are one.” {1:16}

Romantic hero that he is, Hoffmann is obsessed with the theme of fusing his heart with the heart of his lady love.

“Joy ever springing ... from a heart’s tender replies.” {1:38}

The romantic hero is obsessively seeking reciprocation for his heart by the heart of Olympia, who must “reply” to his song with her own song, which he hopes is a genuine song reflecting the genuine emotion of love.

“Oh, may my dreaming in you reflect the morn.” {2:03}

So the dawn of sunrise is to be “reflected” in the beautiful image of Olympia as “dreamed” by Hoffmann through his magical spectacles.

Hoffmann sings “May clouds of glory streaming proclaim that love is born.” {2:20}

At the precise moment when he sings these words, something happens in the background: the seven-string lyre that we have seen there now suddenly morphs into a swan. {2:30}
As we will see later when we read Plato, the idea here is that the rigor mortis of the swan when he finishes singing his swan song and dies is a thing of beauty that looks like the seven-string lyre of Apollo. We see here a moment in the film *Tales of Hoffmann* where this classical idea is actually visualized.

Hoffmann sings, telling his Muse: “My love is requited.” {3:15}

How untrue. It is quite unrequited, as we will soon see.

Hoffmann continues, singing the words:

“Love divine.” {3:20}

But the Muse now makes a revelation to the poet Hoffmann: she wants to tell him about Olympia:

“That she is a dead thing.” {3:26}

“... Or never was alive.” {3:31}

But Hoffmann insists: “my love is requited.” {3:34}

“... My love, love divine.” {3:45}

The romantic hero sings to Olympia: “How the waltz sets our hearts a-beating.” {1:37}

“Now what the devil” - sings the chorus. {2:37}

Speak of the devil! Meanwhile, Olympia is dancing out of control and is about to break the magical spectacles of Hoffmann.

Out of control, Olympia has now danced off-stage, to meet her impending doom at the hands of the Devil, who is Coppelius. She is about to experience her own disintegration. She will be shattered. {3:59}

Meanwhile, Hoffmann has fallen down and has passed out. Unconscious, he is lying on the couch where Olympia had slept before. His dance with Olympia, who went out of control, has brought him to the verge of death.

“Is he dead?” - asks the Muse about Hoffmann. {0:01}
The “father” of Olympia replies:

“No. In falling only his glasses came to grief.” {0:03}

We now see a close-up of the shattered magical spectacles. {0:06}

An alarm is sounded about “the spectacle-maker.” {0:24}.

Olympia’s “father” cries out in terror: “Merciful gods, Olympia beware.” {0:26}.

Hoffmann echoes with his own words of terror and grief:

“Olympia beware.” {0:30}.

The “father” cries out:

“Now she has crashed.” {0:36}.

The disintegration of Olympia begins. She is getting shattered.

“Yes, she is smashed.” {0:41}

Hoffmann can now see that her lady love is a thing, not a person, and that this thing can be disassembled like a machine, right in front of his eyes, now that he is no longer wearing the magic spectacles made for him by Coppelius. He is terrified as he reacts to the disintegration of this thing that he loved, which is not a person after all. What is most terrible for the romantic hero is that his lady love is in fact a machine, an automaton. He cries out in terror and grief:

“It’s automatic.” {1:01}

The chorus sings derisively, reacting with laughter to the terror and the grief of Hoffmann:

“Ha ha ha how too dramatic. His beloved’s automatic.” {1:13}

ch.16

The Tale of Giulietta starts here.

The visual index of Giulietta the courtesan is a mirror. {0:16}

The glass of this mirror will have to be broken in order to release the soul of Hoffmann. As we will see, the soul of Hoffmann will be imprisoned inside this mirror.

The Devil in the Tale of Olympia will be Dapertutto, which means in Italian: ‘he’s everywhere’. Once again, the actor who plays the rôle of the Devil is Robert Helpmann. He is described as
the “satanic master” of Olympia and as “a collector of souls” in the pages showing the characters that populate the Tale of Giulietta.

The visual index for Hoffmann, who is now “a man of the world,” is a key.

The character of Schlemil is described as having lost both his own shadow and his own soul.

When we first see Giulietta, her image is reflected in the shimmering waters of the canals of Venice. The reflection is also a refraction, as it were, of her image.

This is the setting for the most celebrated of all the tunes from Tales of Hoffmann, the Barcarolle. The Italian word barcarola refers to a kind of song sung by the gondoliers of Venice as they rhythmically stroke the waters with their single oar.

She sings:

“Memory fades…”

Hoffmann declares his immunity from ever falling in love with Giulietta, singing...

“A laugh in the heart has a song to inspire me.”

“When passion’s blazing fire in your heart is burning…”

That is the warning sign!

Later, the Muse warns Hoffmann:

“You be careful. The Devil’s very quick.”

Hoffmann replies:

“If I fall in love with her,

Then I shall deserve damnation.”

The devil steps out of the glass of the mirror, and we hear the same sinister tune that had introduced him in the Prologue and in the song of Olympia.
The Devil sings a song to a ring that has a beautiful diamond set in it. He tells it to “gleam,” that is, to “scintillate”:

“So gleam with desire” {0:06}

“Keen diamond the sunlight reflecting” {0:15}

“With splendor steal her heart” {0:30}

This theme, centering on the stealing of a woman’s heart, is the key to the whole Tale of Giulietta.

The Devil’s song continues:

“As the moths fly round a candle” {0:37}

“Woman does crave your fire” {0:42}

“Though ’tis death to admire” {0:50}

“They’re but staking their being” {0:56}

“But she forsakes her soul” {1:03 repeated 1:24}

The whole stanza is repeated, as we see Giulietta come under the spell of the Devil.

“So gleam with desire” {1:41}

“Keen diamond the sunlight reflecting” {1:48}

[Once again, we encounter the theme of reflection.]

“So gleam with desire” {1:54}

“And steal her heart” {1:58}

From here on, this last line is repeated again and again by the Devil. {1:58-2:59}. And I repeat that this theme, centering on the stealing of a woman’s heart, is the key to the whole Tale of Giulietta.

ch.19

The Devil sings to Giulietta:

“You allure the hearts of men...” {0:26}
Now the Devil wants to capture the reflection of Hoffmann, through the wiles of Giulietta. {0:52}

“Yes, his reflection.” {0:58}

The Devil asks Giulietta:

“Do you doubt the potent strength of those eyes?” {1:07}

When Giulietta deviously commands Hoffmann to leave her presence, “leave me to my sorrows,” the romantic poet’s resolve breaks instantaneously, and he sings:

“Leave you to your sorrows?

No, I love you.

Though I should die tomorrow.” {2:32}

After hearing further alluring words from Giulietta, the romantic hero sings his ultimate love song:

“O heaven O joy divine” {3:19}

“Illumines all around me” {3:25}

“Let music from the spheres” {3:29}

“Your voice has pierced my heart” {3:38}

[Once again, we encounter the theme of the wounded heart.]

Hoffmann continues:

“A fervent eager flame” {3:42}

“_consumes my every part” {3:48}

“Your glances kindle mine” {3:53}

“And tongues of fire surround me” {4:0}

“They burn as the stars in the skies” {4:06}

“And I feel with my love ablaze” {4:11}
“The breath of your passion that plays” {4:16}
“On my mouth and on my eyes” {4:22}
“The breath of your passion” {4:31}
“Of that passion that plays” {4:36}
“On my mouth” {4:41}
“And on my eyes” {4:50}
“O heaven O joy divine” {4:59}
“Illumines all around me” {5:04}
“Your glances kindle mine” {5:10}
“And tongues of fire” {5:15}
“And tongues of fire surround me.” {5:39}

ch.20

Now Giulietta performs the ultimate temptation of the romantic hero:

“This reflection close to mine” {0:20}
“It is for that I pray” {0:25}

Hoffmann asks:

“What? My reflection? What do you mean?” {0:32}

Giulietta replies...

“This... When it is wiped away...” {0:36}
“And when the glass is clean, unimpaired” {0:44}
“Straightaway in my heart it shall stay” {0:49}

Hoffmann asks:

“In your heart?” {0:50}
Giulietta replies:

“In my heart, 'Tis I 'Tis I for this am pleading” {0:55}

“Or else do I abjure” {0:58}

He asks:

“You are sure?” {1:00}

She replies:

“I am sure. Whether heedless or heeding, I’m yours, I’m sure” {1:104}

They sing together:

“Though the night” {1:08}

“Though the night be dying” {1:12}

“May the day, the day endure” {1:18}

“Though the night, though the night be dying” {1:20}

“May the day endure.” {1:25}

“Though the night be dying, may the day endure” {1:52}

At this point, Hoffmann’s reflection disappears in the mirror.

Schlemil enters, and Giulietta warns Hoffmann:

“He’s got my key.” {2:30}

She adds:

“I love you.” {2:31}

The Devil approaches Hoffmann and says to him:

“You’re looking very pale, sir.” {2:42}

When Hoffmann acts surprised, the Devil continues:

“Well, look for yourself.” {2:49}
Hoffmann looks into the mirror of Giulietta, and, not seeing his reflection, he cries out in terror and grief:


When he is looking into the mirror, Hoffmann is really looking straight into the eye of the camera. It is as if he had lost his reflection within the viewing eye of the spectators of the opera. We see here a most striking visual effect achieved through the medium of filmmaking.

The Muse, knowing who is the cause of Hoffmann’s terror and the grief, says about Giulietta:

“She may know.” {3:06}

At this point, the chorus sings derisively, laughing at the terror and the grief of the romantic hero:

“Ha ha ha ha. Look at his dismay.” {3:12}

_Behind the red curtain, we see the mask of tragedy._ {3:16}

The Muse urges Hoffmann:

“Oh, come, let’s get away. Or you have lost your soul.” {3:20}

But he says:

“No. No. I love her. I love her.” {3:27}

ch.21

In his sorrow, Hoffmann sings:

“I may hate. Yet I am still adoring.” {1:11}

“Though death were mine from her a kiss I pray.” {1:18}

_Heading for a gondola that is waiting for them, Schlemil and Hoffmann descend the steps that leads to the deadly bark and prepare for a duel to the death. As they embark, we experience one of the most striking visual effects of the film._

The chorus sings

“...to bear you far away... away” {2:47}
Schlemil is killed by Hoffmann in their duel, and the Devil seizes the key of Schlemil, giving it to Hoffmann {4:29}

We see here a clear sign that the Devil is really an accomplice of Hoffmann. He is saving him. Not that he wants to save Hoffmann from damnation. Rather, the Devil wants to save the romantic for another tale still to come. He is postponing the pleasure or “delight” that he gets from setting up the romantic hero for damnation.

As Schlemil loses consciousness and is drifting off into death, the focus on his image becomes blurred. {4:48}

Hoffmann runs off with the key, hoping to open his way into the boudoir of Giulietta. {5:12}

He now breaks the glass of the mirror in which his reflection had been imprisoned - and he thus wins back his reflection as well as his soul. The shattering of the glass is the deciding moment. {6:15}

At the end of the Tale of Giulietta, we see the shattered image of Hoffmann reflected in the shattered glass of the mirror. This breaking of the glass is correlated, as we will see in the Tale of Antonia, with the breaking of his heart.

When he is looking into the shattered glass of the mirror, Hoffmann is looking straight into the eye of the camera. This is by now the second time we see this striking visual effect achieved through the medium of filmmaking. This time, it is as if the shattering of the glass has caused shattering of the viewing eye of the spectators of the opera.

ch.22

The Tale of Antonia starts here.

In the cast of new characters, we note especially Antonia the singer and Crespel, the overprotective father of Antonia. And there is Dr. Miracle, who is the new incarnation of the Devil and is played, once again, by Robert Helpmann.

The action takes place “on a Greek island.” {0:55}

The opening song of Antonia focuses on the words...

“All in vain,

Dead leaves are falling,

All in vain,
All in vain,
Heart of mine.” {2:42 / 3:57}

ch.23
Hoffmann, arriving, discovers the score for “Heart of mine.” {1:00}
Antonia sees Hoffmann and sings to him:
“I knew within my heart
A love like yours would never never fail me.” {1:33}
He replies:
“My heart has told me too.” {1:38}
But something troubles Hoffmann, and he confesses it to Antonia. It is about her music...
“You love it too much.” {3:01}
Antonia asks:
“Do I love you because of music, or music because of you?” {3:15}
We are starting to discover here that Antonia, not Hoffmann, is the ultimate romantic hero of this opera.
As Hoffmann and Antonia sing together their song...
“How sweet is the song of love ...” {6:43}
... she experiences a momentary heart seizure, which is a premonition of the total heartbreak to come.

ch.24
Dr. Miracle seizes control of Antonia, and we see her falling down into a mysterious space, into unconsciousness. But she has really only fallen to the floor. {5:52}

ch.25
Hoffmann tries to persuade Antonia to be forgetful
“of success and of glory.” {1:03}

Antonia understands that her tears are in vain...

“For I will never sing again.” {3:30}

But she will sing, and her singing will kill her.

ch.26

The tune that signals the presence of the Devil has sounded again. Now Dr. Miracle sings:

“You will never sing again.” {0:18}

These provoking words will be the ultimate temptation for Antonia to sing again, to sing until her heart bursts.

Antonia tries to resist:

“For fame cannot rival the calm that invites me to the home of my heart’s delight.” {2:45}

Antonia hopes that the spirit of her dead mother can save her from the temptation of singing till her heart bursts.

ch.27

But now Dr. Miracle possesses the soul of the dead mother. He now owns the mother’s voice:

“Now remember well
That ’tis her voice speaks through mine.” {0:18}

We see refractions of the burning image of the Devil playing on the violin as Antonia’s voice fuses with her mother’s voice. {3:59}

Antonia sings:

“I seize on this joy all-defying,

Ever flaming, how it sears my eyes,

Ever flaming, ever flaming

How it sears, how it sears my eyes.” {4:22}
As she sings, Antonia ascends to a satanically glowing stage of fame and success. She is ready for her final song.

She follows her mother through a birch forest, and then they reach a circle of fire:

“And then my soul shall mount the skies.” {5:01}

“And then and then my soul shall mount the skies.” {5:32}

We see here a reference to Dante’s immortal wording Verso il cielo ‘toward the sky’.

With these words, she collapses and dies. Her heart has burst. Hoffmann arrives on the scene at that precise moment {5:51}.

Hoffmann cries out in terror and grief, just as he had cried out in terror and grief when he had arrived on the scene at the precise moment of the disintegration of Olympia.

ch.28

With the death of Antonia, the Muse now disappears behind theater curtains that have been drawn apart for her stage exit; then the curtains are drawn back together, and the Muse disappears forever behind them {0:05}. Then Dr. Miracle unmask d himself, revealing that he is Lindorf, who unmask d himself, revealing that he is Dapertutto, who unmask d himself, revealing that he is Coppelius. And the three lady loves of Hoffmann fuse into one lady love and are then again refracted into three lady loves. And now there are four. Is one of them Stella? Then they are fused again into one. The curtain drops.

ch.29

The eye of the camera returns for a last look, from overhead, at the students who have been listening to the three Tales of Hoffmann. Stella rushes down the stairs of Luther’s Tavern, ready for her assignation with Hoffmann. But Hoffmann just stares ahead blankly, in a drunken stupor. He keels over, and Lindorf walks off with Stella.

The students sing again and again:

“Pour out the wine, for drinking is divine.” {2:06}

The eye of the camera shifts to Sir Thomas Beecham, who conducts the last strains of the students’ song, and then he slams down the conductor’s baton. The performance has ended. And the composition has therefore ended as well. So the lettering “The End” can now give closure. The lettering appears over the book of the opera, which is now slammed shut.