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Discipline Research

Banal Truths and Beautiful Lies

Dr Simon Lee-Price

Why do we cling to untruths? Truth is perhaps less a matter of facts than of feelings.

ABSTRACT:

Inspired by Freud's observation in 'The Wolf Man' that the truth is banal, this essay discusses Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Berman's creative use of the (mis)translated phrase from Marx, 'All that is solid melts into air', to illustrate the productive potential of misinterpreting words.

Introduction

The truth, so the saying goes, is often more prosaic. While the truth might set us free, it is just as likely to shatter our dreams, bust our myths and bring us crashing down to earth. If the truth can cause the undoing of self and world, is it any surprise when we turn away in denial? In this essay I will bring to light moments of antagonism between truth (and its cognates: faithfulness, veracity, authenticity and accuracy) and creative (self-)production in two canonical literary works, 'The Sandman' (1817) by E.T.A. Hoffmann and *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J.D. Salinger, and in an influential work of cultural criticism, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1982) by Marshall Berman. While this essay does not explicitly address contemporary cultural politics, the close reading approach it takes may be useful when analysing the appeal of fake news and conspiracy theories.

The inspiration for this essay occurred while I was reading Freud's famous case history, popularly known as 'The Wolf Man', first published in 1918. At several points in his elaborate analysis, Freud describes the originating experience behind his patient's neurotic symptoms and fantasies as something rather ordinary or banal. The best illustration is provided by the discussion of the patient's dream, from which the case history derives its somewhat misleading popular name. (As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 28) point out, the dream features not one wolf but several wolves).

In the dream, a child lies awake in bed during a winter night. Suddenly the window at the foot of the bed opens of its own accord and with terror the child sees sitting in the branches of a tree six or seven white wolves with long bushy tails and upright ears. The wolves remain motionless, staring at the child. The patient and dreamer, Sergius Pankejeff, who possessed some artistic talent, sketched a picture of this dream image, which Freud reproduced in the published case history. Pankejeff, who can be said to have made 'being a patient his true occupation and even his calling' (Weissberg, 2012, p. 165) remained in psychoanalysis for

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most of his life, selling paintings of the dream image, signing other paintings as 'Wolfsmann', and publishing a memoir in 1971 with the title *The Wolf-Man*. Pankejeff's dream has proved to be incredibly fecund, providing content for numerous creative works and the basis for an enduring artist persona. Yet this dream is somehow false, an imposter. It is a 'screen memory' which obscures what, according to Freud, the patient really saw. Ultimately the wolves gazing at the child from the branches of the tree stage the scopic dynamics of the 'primal scene': the patient, as a young child, has witnessed his parents having sex – something thoroughly 'Banales'/ banal and 'Alltägliches'/ commonplace, even if a *tergo*, says Freud (1947, p. 65).

Such an interpretation of symptoms and dreams which leads to the discovery of an Oedipal Complex can be readily criticised as an example of Freudian reductionism – although Freud's analysis in this case history is more searching and ambivalent than my short summary has suggested. I will not be primarily concerned with this problematic, even if the two literary texts I consider have been read by others in terms of the psychopathology of their protagonists. What I borrow from Freud's text for the argument in this essay is the dichotomy it draws, between, on the one side, banal truth or reality that is in some way constraining or even destructive, and, on the other, creative self-flourishing that entails denial or repression of these truths. This, I think, touches on something Slavoj Žižek has noted: 'If we come to know too much, we may lose our very being.' For Žižek, the self, or subject, is a product of misrecognition and 'to abolish the misrecognition means at the same time to abolish, to dissolve, the 'substance' which was supposed to hide itself behind the form-illusion of misrecognition' (Žižek, 2009, p. 73). The banal truths uncovered by psychoanalysis are in a certain sense lethal.

“Why do we cling to
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THE SANDMAN

Hoffmann's novella 'The Sandman' is typically read as depicting a conflict between Enlightenment and Romantic worldviews: that is, between an epistemology based on science and reason and one which privileges intuition, emotion, and the creative imagination. The latter epistemology is represented by the main protagonist Nathanael. Chronologically, the story begins in the childhood of Nathanael and with an account of an evening ritual. Nathanael's mother, in order to get her children to leave their father's study and go to their bed, is in the habit of saying: '*Nun Kinder! — zu Bette! zu Bette! der Sandmann kommt, ich merk' es schon.*'/ Now, children, to bed, to bed! The Sandman is coming. I sense it (Hoffmann, 2010, p. 5). Whenever she makes this announcement, Nathanael hears the sound of slow, heavy footsteps on the hallway stairs, which he takes to be the Sandman. On one occasion, the footsteps are particularly loud and this prompts Nathanael to ask his mother: '*Ei, Mama! wer ist denn der böse Sandmann, der uns immer von Papa fortreibt?*'/ O Mamma! but who is this evil Sandman who always drives us away from Papa? (p. 5). It is at this point that questions about truth and interpretation are introduced. Nathanael's mother replies:

'Es gibt keinen Sandmann, mein liebes Kind (...) wenn ich sage, der Sandmann kommt, so will das nur heißen, ihr seid schläfrig und könnt die Augen nicht offen behalten, als hätte man euch Sand hineingestreut.'/ There is no Sandman, my dear child (...) when I say the Sandman is coming, I only mean you are sleepy and can't keep your eyes open, as if somebody had sprinkled sand in them (p. 5).

What does Nathanael's mother really mean? Is there a Sandman or not? Nathanael has no doubts. He holds onto his original interpretation of the Sandman – he will not let his empirical Sandman be spirited away as a mere figure of speech. In defence of his world view, he questions his mother's integrity, not unlike a present-day conspiracy theorist:

Der Mutter Antwort befriedigte mich nicht, ja in meinem kindischen Gemüt entfaltete sich deutlich der Gedanke, daß die Mutter den Sandmann nur verleugne, damit wir uns vor ihm nicht fürchten sollten./ My mother's answer did not satisfy me. No, in my childish mind the idea grew that mother denied there was a Sandman so that we wouldn't be afraid (p. 5).

To confirm for himself the existence of the Sandman, Nathanael undertakes research. He questions an elderly woman who tells him about the Sandman of folklore, a birdlike creature who feeds the eyes of children

to its offspring. Nathanael derives pleasure from his research, which leads him far beyond his starting point and along the path of creative fantasy:

Der Sandmann hatte mich auf die Bahn des Wunderbaren, Abenteuerlichen gebracht, das so schon leicht im kindlichen Gemüt sich einnistet. Nichts war mir lieber, als schauerliche Geschichten von Kobolden, Hexen, Däumlingen u. s. w. zu hören oder zu lesen./ The Sandman led me along the path of wonder and adventure that is so tempting to the childish mind. I liked nothing better than to read or listen to spooky tales about kobolds, witches and thumb-sized men (p. 7).

Nathanael progresses from secondary to primary research and one evening conceals himself in his father's study hoping to observe the Sandman. The figure who enters the room turns out to be somebody already known to him, his father's friend, the lawyer Coppelius. What is significant is that up to this moment there has been no suspicion that Coppelius, *'der manchmal bei uns zu Mittage ißt.'* who sometimes joins us for lunch (p. 7), might be a candidate for the Sandman. Nathanael proceeds to give a detailed and horrific description of Coppelius in the light of his now being identified as the Sandman. It is as if Nathanael's nurtured belief in an empirical Sandman has altered his perception of people and the world.

This Sandman experience is recounted at the start of the narrative in a long letter written by Nathanael to a close friend. Nathanael, now a student, fears the Sandman from his childhood has reappeared in the guise of Giuseppe Coppola, a manufacturer of optical instruments. I will refrain from psychoanalysing Nathanael as a means of discovering what psychic needs the Sandman fulfils for him; all I want to point out is that Nathanael clings to his childhood belief in an empirical Sandman (or perhaps it clings to him) despite the efforts of his aptly named fiancée Klara to persuade him to accept a different view of events, one based on enlightened reason that would explain Coppelius/Coppola in terms of natural phenomena. Although (arguably) born of a misinterpretation of his mother's words, the magical Sandman has nevertheless become fundamental to Nathanael's understanding of himself and his world. If it is a false, fairy-tale belief, then it is not one he is prepared to give up. He habitually denounces as *'prosaisch'* prosaic those like Kara who with rational arguments try to persuade him from the path of wonder and adventure.

CATCHER IN THE RYE

Like Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' Salinger's novel *Catcher in the Rye* is named after a mental construct of the story's main protagonist, Holden Caulfield in the latter's case. The novel's title stems from Caulfield's misreading or misremembering of a line from Robert Burns's poem 'Comin thro' the Rye'. Caulfield first refers to this line while giving an account of his emotional breakdown in New York City, during which he had an encounter with a child. About the child he says: 'He was singing that song, "If a body catch a body coming through the rye"' (Salinger, 2010, p. 104). The use of the demonstrative pronoun 'that' suggests it is a song with which Caulfield and his audience are familiar. Yet, as we will see, the fidelity of Caulfield's recollection of what the child actually sang is open to question.

The second time the line is mentioned is during a long, emotionally charged conversation between Caulfield and his precocious younger sister. At one point, she challenges him to name one thing he likes and after several failed attempts he finally tells her not just what he likes, but more fundamentally, what he would 'like to be', and this with direct reference to the questionable line from Burns. His sister immediately interrupts him and provides the correct version of the line: 'It's "If a body meet a body coming through the rye"' (p. 155). Caulfield is dismissive of this fact. For him, what matters is the imagery evoked by the substitution of 'catch' for 'meet':

'I thought it was "If a body catch a body," I said. 'Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around —nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy' (p. 156).

The seemingly innocuous adverb 'Anyway' is used to hold at bay the constraining truth and open space for the flow of powerful associations which give Caulfield his stake in the world. The truth, the actual words of Burns, would be destructive of this. In his 'crazy' fantasy of identification, 'the only thing he'd like to be', the

revealingly named *Holden Caulfield* holds onto to his untruth, just as he holds onto an idealization of childhood. Who could persuade him to let go of so much?

I have discussed so far a certain propensity to misinterpret words or at least prematurely rule out alternative equally valid interpretations. In both 'The Sandman' and *Catcher in the Rye*, the narrators tenaciously hold on to an early formed and linguistically derived belief in the face of contrary evidence. This belief is generative: in each case words give birth to a fantastical figure, after which the work itself is named. The work itself is a material demonstration of what a false belief can create. I now want to apply these conjectures about truth and creative (mis)interpretation to the choice of words in a non-fiction text.

GAINED IN TRANSLATION

Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, first published in 1982, owes the evocative first half of its title to a phrase from *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). This is no trivial borrowing. The phrase appears multiple times in Berman's text and provides Berman with a fertile metaphor for interpreting and responding to the social, political and cultural complexities of late capitalism. For Berman Marx's image has, among other things, 'cosmic scope and visionary grandeur . . . compressed and dramatic power [and] vaguely apocalyptic undertones'.

What is remarkable is that Berman uses a phrase, taken from the standard 1888 English translation of *The Communist Manifesto* by Samuel Moore, as if it reproduced the very words of Marx. Berman actually introduces the phrase by stating: 'the closer we get to what Marx actually said . . .' (Berman, 1988, p. 89). Whereas in other parts of the text Berman discusses translation and provides the German original, when it comes to this most pivotal phrase, there is no acknowledgment of the German original. We might suspect Berman (or his editors) of desiring to keep the true Marx out of sight. Could the reason be that the words in the English translation which supply the driving force of Berman's 'dialectical modernism' ('solid', 'melts', 'air') were never penned by Marx?

In an essay also called 'All that is Solid Melts into Air', which was begun several years before the book and reworked as a chapter for a subsequent book published more than a decade later, Berman does provide the German words: '*Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft*' (Berman, 1999, p. 98). Other translators before and after Moore have attempted to render this evocative phrase in English. The offerings range from the modest first translation in 1850 by Helen Macfarlane: 'Everything fixed and stable vanishes' (Marx, 2015, p. 263) to the extravagantly pedantic: 'Everything that firmly exists and all the elements of the society of orders evaporate' (Sperber, 2013, p. 170). Berman makes no mention of other possible translations, ones which might exclude the three words he so prizes. Yet it is apparent Berman can read German and he feels required to state that the English rendition he uses stems from 'Marx's friend Samuel Moore' who 'translated freely, but not outrageously' (Berman, 1999, p. 98). The framing of Moore as 'Marx's friend' adds legitimacy and authority to the translation. Even though Marx had died five years before the translation was completed, as a friend, Moore can be depended on to be faithful to the spirit of Marx in his choice of words and imagery. The need to deny the translation is outrageous suggests that such an accusation might be brought. And some authors are indeed critical of Moore's creative licence. Peter Beilharz (2005, p. 30) calls it 'notorious . . . [a] 'mistranslation, or at best a symbolic expansion of Marx's humbler prose'. Jonathan Sperber (2013, p. 170) also judges it a 'mistranslation'. Not unlike the student Nathanael clinging to his childhood bedtime Sandman or Holden Caulfield holding on to a misheard fragment of a ballad, Berman too resists, in his own way, alternative interpretations which are closer to the truth. In each of these three cases a humble, banal, or prosaic alternative, threatens to collapse a mighty structure.

I have to stop at this point without coming to an end. What I have tried to sketch in this essay, using three distinct contexts, literature, psychoanalysis and Marxist cultural politics, is how truth in certain respects functions as a constraint on creativity and is thus to be evaded or denied. It is through misinterpretation, mishearing and mistranslation that Nathanael, Holden Caulfield and Marshall Berman articulate their worldviews and, in the first two cases, give purpose to their lives. Even when untruths are exposed as such, it does not follow they will be abandoned. When our very substance is at stake, we can, like Holden Caulfield, keep on believing *anyway*.

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