

Poetics of the Hieroglyph:
Allegory and Media in E.T.A. Hoffmann's Fantastic

by

Andrew Kirwin
Class of 2009

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters
and with Departmental Honors in German Studies

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the loving care and support my parents have given me, not only during the difficult hours working on this thesis, but throughout my freshman year, my sophomore year, my junior year, and now that it is coming to such an abrupt end I can hardly write it—my senior year here at Wesleyan. They have always been on at my side even at a distance of two hours from campus. Of course I cannot leave out my lovely sister whom I love dearly and who is a bit farther away, in China. She is the best I could ask for in a sister.

Aside from family, I would like to express my utmost gratitude to my thesis adviser Ulrich Plass, who has always been extremely helpful and supportive, and was an excellent source of ideas during our brainstorming sessions. He is without a doubt someone Hoffmann would call “ein geistreicher Mann von Witz und Verstand.” I also want to thank all of my other wonderful professors for their enthusiasm and skill, and for exposing me to some great literature.

I cannot leave out all my friends, those I live with and those who have worked on their theses with me. Taking breaks at dawn, watching the sun rise from Indian Hill, and going on bleary-eyed trips to get snacks are the things that I’ll look back on fondly from the time of thesis writing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION _____	2
CHAPTER I - <i>Der goldne Topf</i> _____	9
1. The Letter and the Spirit _____	13
2. The Erotics of Comprehension: Anselmus Seduced toward the Spirit _____	22
3. Material Mystification: Moving Back Toward the Letter _____	29
4. Writing and Reading _____	41
5. Allegory and Metafiction _____	50
6. Conclusion _____	57
CHAPTER II - <i>Der Einsiedler Serapion</i> _____	67
1. “Die Duplizität des Seins” _____	70
2. The Fragility of Serapion’s Wahnwelt _____	79
3. Speech and Text _____	84
4. Frame Narrative _____	96
5. Conclusion _____	99
CONCLUSION _____	102
WORKS CITED _____	106
1. Primary Sources _____	106
2. Secondary Sources _____	106

INTRODUCTION



“Er blieb sich gern selbst ein Rätsel, vor dessen Auflösung er sich stets fürchtete, und auch von mir verlangte er, dass ich es als seine heilige, unauflösbare Hieroglyphe betrachten möchte.”¹

E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) preferred to be considered an indecipherable hieroglyph—at least according to his publisher and biographer Friedrich Kunz, who was annoyed at the personal distance Hoffmann kept from those who were not his closest intimates. For this reason, Hoffmann sought the company of actors. His desire to mystify, to be immune to all attempts to pin him down made him feel right at home in their company, where he could stage a mixture of sincerity and play that always left it unclear where his true self ended and the assumed role began.² He was proud of his ability to keep the ironic distance intact, reflecting on, manipulating, or annihilating himself from a position above himself: “Ironie über mich selbst,” he

¹ Schnapp, Friedrich, ed. *E.T.A. Hoffmann in Aufzeichnungen seiner Freunde*. München: Winkler, 1974. 206. Quoted in Safranski, Rüdiger. *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Eine Biographie*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992. 242.

² Safranski 242

wrote in his diary, “—ungefähr wie im Shakespeare, wo die Menschen um ihr offnes Grab tanzen.”³ Of all the professional roles Hoffmann played—be it government officer, painter, caricature artist, musician, or music reviewer—that of literary author gave him the most room to cultivate his playful detachment. In this light, Kunz’s use of the image of the hieroglyph is apt, since Hoffmann often inscribed himself as a character into stories that seem at first to be the delightful play of pictographic caricatures, but when inspected closely, maintain a certain impenetrable aspect.

As one of the founders of fantastic literature, E.T.A. Hoffmann’s significance for figures such as Nodier, Balzac, Baudelaire, and Poe is well established, but it took until the latter half of the 20th century for Hoffmann’s reputation among critics (with the exception of some in France) to improve beyond that of a popular author of ghost stories.⁴ His experiments with an early form of realism were ignored, along with his invention of the “reality fairy tale” [*Wirklichkeitsmärchen*] and the psychological depth and psycho-symbolic⁵ elements in his work. Critical evaluation of Hoffmann rose with the Expressionist proclivities of scholars in the 1920’s,⁶ and gained momentum when Marxist scholars headed by Georg Lukács⁷ praised Hoffmann’s realism and his sharp-eyed critique of bourgeois philistinism. Then,

³ “Self-irony—like in Shakespeare, were the people dance around their open grave.” Safranski 246.

⁴ See the discussion of Hoffmann’s reception in Germany, France, and Russia in Woodgate, Kenneth B. *Das Phantastische bei E.T.A. Hoffmann*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999. 78-106.

⁵ Freud’s study *Das Unheimliche* (1919), which investigated Hoffmann’s story *Der Sandmann* (1816), inaugurated the psychoanalytic interest in Hoffmann’s, and has had an enduring influence on critical discourse on that particular work.

⁶ Harich, Walter. *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Das Leben eines Künstlers*. 2. vols. Berlin: Reiss, 1920.

⁷ Lukács, Georg. *Skizze einer Geschichte der neueren deutschen Literatur*. Berlin: Aufbau, 1958.

under the influence of an existentialist school of criticism, Wulf Segebrecht⁸ and Hans-Georg Werner⁹ approached Hoffmann's work with an eye for its ontological and autobiographical complexities, respectively. Today critics find something distinctly modernist, and even postmodernist,¹⁰ in Hoffmann's fiction, and they now need little convincing that he belongs in the upper echelons of the literary canon.

Of particular interest to me is Hoffmann's representation of artist figures, the characters that are often a reflection of his own artistic struggle. The narratives tend to follow a pattern: artists are confronted with hostile forces from without and within, and must overcome them not through a direct confrontation, but by sidestepping into a separate world created by their art. Yet the success of this venture is always undermined by the very irony it took for the artist to detach from the external world—irony understood here in the Romantic sense, as an aesthetic and philosophical principle rather than a rhetorical trope. Hoffmann's representation of the artist figure then becomes a skeptical reflection on the limits of art. This thesis focuses on literary artist figures from two stories in an attempt to describe the way Hoffmann exploits the unique possibilities of literary language to create an allegorical commentary on the process of literary production. What this commentary "says," the meaning it appears to prescribe for itself, is that literary texts enable one to transcend the

⁸ Segebrecht, Wulf. *Autobiographie und Dichtung: Eine Studie zum Werk E.T.A. Hoffmanns*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1967.

⁹ Werner, Hans Georg. *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Darstellung und Deutung der Wirklichkeit im dichterischen Werk*. Weimar: Arion Verlag, 1962.

¹⁰ For an explicitly deconstructionist study of Hoffmann's entire oeuvre, see Momberger, Manfred. *Sonne und Punsch: Die Dissemination des romantischen Kunstbegriffs bei E.T.A. Hoffmann*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1986. See also Kremer, Detlef. *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Erzählungen und Romane*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1999.

confines of mimetic reality and exist in an alternate, hermetic universe. What this commentary “does” is destroy that universe by uncovering its banal, material foundations in mimetic reality. The destruction is not complete, however, and what remains is enough to cast doubt on the priority of the mimetic and its claims to autonomy. Out of this there emerges a dialectic in which both worlds are annihilated and yet preserved. In order to best describe the structure of Hoffmann’s allegorical commentary and how it achieves clarity despite its self-reflexive oppositions, I will use the “close reading” method in a sustained, descriptive way, with the aim of bringing out the richness and detail of the symbolism and of making it fit a coherent interpretive framework. The framework is narrow, focusing on the theme of language and media, at the expense of a vast amount of content in the works, but my hope is that it produces new and unorthodox perspectives on the text. By making the analysis heavily detailed and descriptive, I aim to make it possible even for readers with little or no knowledge of the works to be able to judge if my conclusions are tenable. I regret, however, not being able to include English translations of the passages from Hoffmann’s work, although the German theorists and critics quoted here are translated in the footnotes.

The first part consists of a reading of Hoffmann’s breakthrough work, the “reality fairy tale” *Der goldne Topf* (*The Golden Pot*, 1814),¹¹ which represents in an oblique, allegorical manner the initiation of a young student into the wonders of

¹¹ Hoffmann, E.T.A. *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden* (6 vols.). *Fantasiestücke, Werke 1814*. Vol. 2/1 (1993). Ed. Hartmut Steinecke and Wulf Segebrecht (with Gerhard Allroggen, Friedhelm Auhuber, Hartmut Mangold, and Ursula Segebrecht). Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985-2003. Abbreviated here in the standard way: *HSW II/1*. English Translations by Robertson, Ritchie. *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

poetry. In an attempt to untangle and lend coherence to the web of symbols presented there, which some commentators call—somewhat justifiably—the “free-play of the signifier,”¹² I employ a conceptual framework consisting of the binary opposition “letter” and spirit” introduced by the apostle Paul in the New Testament. I explore the implications of the letter and spirit dichotomy as a distinction between writing and speech, as well as between literal and spiritual or figurative meaning. These two oppositions, which have been reinforced consistently in Western linguistic thought since Plato, are pushed by Hoffmann toward their outer limits in *Der goldne Topf*, where they nullify one another and yet persevere in their autonomy. While the student Anselmus copies out manuscripts, his understanding of them moves from the written letter to sound, to literal, and finally to spiritual meaning, and yet the language in which they are written devolves from alphabetic to hieroglyphic, and finally to non-signifying object. Meanwhile, a struggle for interpretive control of the story, enacted in a battle scene between a “spirit prince” and a witch (associated with the letter) over the golden pot, the eponymous symbol of the story, enacts the metafictional dialectic between two interpretations, the literal and the figurative, whose antagonism constitutes the irony of the tale. The two interpretations remain autonomous from beginning to end—Anselmus as transcendent poet and Anselmus as suicidal secretary—and yet they depend on one another for their coherence. In the face of these conflicting polarities, Hoffmann reaches for an alternative form of representation: enigmatic Egyptian hieroglyphs that blur the line between signifier and signified. Hieroglyphs are associated implicitly with allegory in Hoffmann, and I attempt to show that Hoffmann’s approach realizes the allegorical form as conceived

¹² Momberger 134

by Walter Benjamin, and more recently, by a scholar of postmodern art, Craig Owens. Both agree that allegorical representation is essentially similar to hieroglyphic writing, as both are forms of expression that use visual signs to stand for concepts. And as Owens points out, the suppression of the allegorical form in favor of the symbol is related to the suppression of writing in favor of speech. Hoffmann was writing at a time when the allegory was quite out of fashion, among the Classicists as well as the Romantics. Against these thinkers, he was reinventing the allegorical form for the modern era, creating, as he called it, a fairy tale “aus der neueren Zeit.”

I continue from the place *Der goldne Topf* left off—at the poet’s momentary attainment of literary paradise and his simultaneous death—to an analysis of a crucial story from Hoffmann’s later work, *Der Einsiedler Serapion* (*The Hermit Serapion*, 1821), which portrays the poet’s attempt at sustained life in literary paradise. The mad hermit Serapion has retreated from civilization and is supposed to have attained a tranquil reconciliation of outer and inner worlds, existing in a self-created universe that is beyond textual representation. His flight from civilization represents a rejection of the deadening effects of print culture on literature. In his fancified reality, he invents original poetry and communes with other authors through speech, imagined speech, or a direct perception of the poetic content that is unmediated by any form of language. The process by which Serapion creates his own works is held up by many Hoffmann critics as the model for Hoffmann’s poetological program, not just for the collection of stories in which Serapion figures as a paradigmatic character, but for Hoffmann’s entire oeuvre. My analysis attempts to show that even this programmatic figure, who represents an ideal toward which all literary artists should strive, is

undermined as an impossible fiction by the subtext of the story and the discourse of the gathered friends who analyze it in the frame narrative. The rejection of print technology is no longer feasible in the age when literature exists only as print. Serapion's form of poetry is a distant, antiquated paradigm toward which Hoffmann can only express a nostalgic longing by recreating him in a fictional world heavily mediated through several narrative layers.

CHAPTER I - *Der goldne Topf*

Awkward, clumsy Anselmus takes a job copying manuscripts for an archivist who is rumored to practice alchemy and other occult arts. Sitting in Privy Archivist Lindhorst's study, and using the finest India ink, Anselmus painstakingly copies out texts in foreign languages. It is a mechanical function in the service of a state bureaucrat who expects punctuality, loyalty, and precision from his employee. The task involves no conscious reflection on the meaning of the texts and no thought beyond that required for the reproduction of every ink mark in its original shape on the page. And yet, it is through the humdrum work of copying that Anselmus begins to understand the texts, commune with a feminine muse, learn the language of "Nature," and gain access to the mythical poetic realm of Atlantis. Interpreters of the tale therefore have to reconcile these two notions: Anselmus as copyist and Anselmus as consummate Romantic artist in a paradise of *Poesie*. A complete dismissal of the allegorical interpretation of Anselmus' apprenticeship as a poetic *Bildung* would be imprudent, since it is offered explicitly in the last words of the story. Lindhorst's question echoes in the reader's mind: "Ist denn überhaupt des Anselmus Seligkeit etwas anderes, als das Leben in der Poesie...?"¹³

If Lindhorst is supposed to "to engender poetic creativity in Anselmus – to bring about a higher and more productive form of life than Anselmus' previous one,"¹⁴ why does he make Anselmus perform a mindless task that seems antithetical

¹³ "Is Anselmus' bliss anything other than life in Poesy...?" Tr. A.K. *HSW III/I* 321

¹⁴ Negus, Kenneth. *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Other World: The Romantic Author and his New Mythology*. University of Pennsylvania Studies in Germanic Languages and

to poetic creativity? As can be expected given the enormous amount of scholarship on Hoffmann in the last fifty years, several solutions have been offered to this interpretive problem, when it was not ignored or shrugged off as another example of Hoffmann's ironic play. One possibility would be to read Anselmus' copying as the intertextual practices of imitation, stealing, quoting, and "borrowing" that occur so often during the poet's assimilation of tradition. The weakness of such a reading is that it ignores the exactness of reproduction required from Anselmus—"ein falscher Strich," says the archivist, "oder was der Himmel verhüten möge, ein Tintenleck auf das Original gespritzt stürzt Sie ins Unglück."¹⁵ If his activity is to represent the poet drawing upon influences, Anselmus seems more involved in thoroughly plagiarizing a complete work than coming up with an original synthesis of literary tradition. Another line of thought treats Anselmus' copying as a creative act. Wolfgang Preisendanz believes Anselmus to be the author of the texts he is supposedly copying.¹⁶ The interesting and paradoxical nature of Anselmus's activity is that it is open to an opposite but equally convincing interpretation. The case can be made just as persuasively for Anselmus as a "reader" and interpreter of another poet's work, as I will attempt to show.

Although he does not stick to one thesis on Anselmus' activity but combines many separate lines of thought, Friedrich Kittler offers a virtuosic interpretation that treats the copying scenes as the realization of a new paradigm in German children's education around 1800, in which reading and writing were taught orally by the

Literatures. Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1965. 60.

¹⁵ *HSW II/1* 286

¹⁶ Preisendanz, Wolfgang. "Humor als dichterische Einbildungskraft: Studien zur Erzählkunst des poetischen Realismus." *Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur und der schönen Künste*, 1 (1963): 97.

mother, whose erotic influence on the child was put to good use by the bureaucratic state. Anselmus's work is an "unconscious transcription from the Mother's Mouth,"¹⁷ the primal source of all poetic discourse in 1800. The state hovers behind all poetic discourse, "bureaucrats and poets are thus two complementary sides of a single coin,"¹⁸ with the "small but decisive difference" being the primacy of orality in the poet's discourse in contrast to the literacy of the bureaucrat's. Poets served the state with the "fundamental function of establishing connecting circuits between the system and population"¹⁹ in oral channels that went deeper than the literate channels of the bureaucracy. Finally, according to Kittler, Hoffmann's story itself has a socializing and integrating function: "Poetry and bureaucracy can be depicted in Poetry as united because the description of this unity recruits more poet-bureaucrats."²⁰ Kittler's ideas give historical coherence to Anselmus's activity, and open up numerous avenues for *goldner Topf* exegesis based on the oral-literal opposition, but only at the expense of the conflict between literal and allegorical significance that inheres in Anselmus's activity. By attempting to resolve the contradiction between copying and creating and to show that Hoffmann is expressing inherent affinities between bureaucrat and poet, Kittler defuses somewhat the irony of the story.

Before the release of Kittler's influential book, L.C. Nygaard's keen focus on the theme of language in *Der goldne Topf* had already touched on the New Testament dichotomy of "letter" and "spirit," that is so essential to understanding the

¹⁷ Kittler, Friedrich A. *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*. Tr. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. 101.

¹⁸ Kittler 98

¹⁹ Kittler 100

²⁰ Kittler 104

significance of Anselmus' activity.²¹ Nygaard was the first to recognize that Anselmus was working on manuscripts that went further and further back into what contemporary theorists speculated was the origin of spoken and written language. At these origins, she believed, one would discover the spirit that lies behind the letter: "Both Anselmus and the narrator are attempting to work backward from "Buchstabe" to "Geist," from the dead letter to the living spirit that once infused it. The whole story can be interpreted in terms of this dichotomy."²² After this suggestion, Nygaard only makes a very cursory attempt to articulate such an interpretation. Her central thesis is that Hoffmann was attempting to reinvigorate a stagnated literary language he had inherited from his Romantic forebears, and that Anselmus' work reflects Hoffmann's struggle. Her study therefore consists mostly in a stylistic and idiomatic analysis of the language used in the discourse of *Der goldne Topf*. Nygaard operates with a somewhat vaguely defined notion of "spirit," by which she means something like expressive power or sincerity: "The eloquent phrases and elaborate verbal arabesques of the standard Romantic dialect flow readily enough from [Hoffmann's] pen, but as Cramer and others have observed, they fail to carry conviction." More precisely defined concepts could have led to a fruitful rhetorical and figurative analysis of the story. Nygaard does not attempt to explain the futility of Anselmus' search for what she calls "spirit." I will incorporate Nygaard's groundbreaking but underdeveloped insight and Kittler's focus on media as the foundation for a new interpretation of the story.

²¹ Nygaard, Loisa C. "Anselmus as Amanuensis: The Motif of Copying in Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf*." Seminar 19 (1983): 79-104. See also: Oesterle, Günter. *Arabeske, Schrift und Poesie in E.T.A. Hoffmanns Kunstmärchen Der goldne Topf*. Athenäum: Jahrbuch für Romantik 1 (1993): 69-107.

²² Nygaard 97

Any reading of Anselmus' activity that smoothes over the difficulties of the copying allegory will rob it of its resonance as a symbol whose dialectic structure echoes in manifold forms throughout the story. My goal in this chapter is to show that the narrative contains an essential antagonism between the letter and the spirit, understood as an opposition of the literal and the figurative *and* of the written and spoken word, that is manifested on multiple levels and contained in abbreviated form in the Anselmus' activity of copying manuscripts. The antagonism is not a mere incongruity or difference, but a polar opposition. Anselmus is a secretary copying manuscripts, while in the figurative sense he is supposed to be an aspiring poet learning to write and produce original works. Although his activities cannot be explained without the figurative interpretation, it must deny the literal in order for it to be comprehensible. Both readings are necessary but mutually exclusive, and the sharper the incompatibility between them, the stronger the irony.

1. The Letter and the Spirit

The long history engagement with the bible in Western thought produced a notion of language that was strongly influenced by Christian dualisms of body and soul, material and spiritual, visible and invisible.²³ The linguistic sign was split into signifier and signified, the former denigrated and the latter raised to high importance.

²³ See the discussion in Assmann, A. and J. Assmann. *Hieroglyphen: Stationen einer anderen Abendländischen Grammatologie*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003. 267-303.

For example, in baroque treatises on emblems, the picture was compared to a body and the meaning it evoked was called its soul.²⁴ In modern linguistic theory, it was this glorification of the signified at the expense of the signifier in Western thought that made thinkers like Derrida react with the perjorative label “logocentrism,” which I do not attempt to discuss here. Let me begin instead with the notorious passage in 2 Corinthians where Paul, in trying to reinterpret the law of the Old Testament without undermining its authority, urges the Corinthians to see the “Spirit of the living God” as free from the confines of the written word:

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.²⁵

Paul’s conception of the spirit has served as the foundation for looser conceptions of biblical meaning—not only in the Old Testament—and was read by many exegetes as a license to far-reaching figurative or “spiritual” interpretations. When the word of God is no longer contained in ink but written on human hearts, it exists as a dynamic new entity, capable of transformation in the hands of inspired human interpreters. The notion of a Spirit external to the text, of which the text is an imperfect manifestation, rang true for thinkers inspired by Platonic philosophy. Paul’s letter-spirit separation helped Neoplatonists such as Philo and Origen invigorate the tradition of biblical exegesis by using the bible as a springboard from which to leap to higher and more

²⁴ Assmann 267

²⁵ 2 Cor. 3: 2-6. New Revised Standard Edition.

spiritual meanings than might appear on the surface of the text.²⁶

This letter-spirit opposition exists at the level of meaning, but it also has implications at the level of media. The letter is written, visual, and static, while the spirit is spoken, auditory, and changing. Writing is always an imperfect representation of speech, losing out on the extra cues given by intonation and gesture.²⁷ The written word is “dead” in the sense that it is no longer attached to any body making an utterance who can be held accountable for the things it says. It is static in the sense that once something is written down, it continues to say the same thing, whether true or false, for as long as it is around. The unresponsiveness, unaccountability, and deadness of the written word led Plato to express serious reservations about writing in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Seventh Letter*.²⁸ As far as the Christian tradition is concerned, Paul’s dictum moved the holy text into oral discourse; the gospel is given life, made present, and transmitted by human beings involved in the act of preaching, of speech.²⁹ Without speech, the letter is nothing but a dead sign.

The letter-spirit opposition can therefore be conceived in two ways: either between “lower” and “higher” levels of meaning or between the linguistic media of writing and speech. Both senses of the opposition are intimately related. Just as literal meaning is the basic foundation, the “signifier,” that points to a higher signified meaning, letters are the basic foundation, the “signifiers,” that point to sound. There

²⁶ Grant, R.M. *The Letter and the Spirit*. London: S.P.C.K., 1957. 50-51.

²⁷ See the discussion in Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge, 1988. 102-3.

²⁸ Havelock, Erich A. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 1963. 287.

²⁹ See the discussion of Paul’s dictum in the context of Romanticism in Harshbarger, Scott. “The Oral Dimension of Romantic Rhetoric.” *Rhetorical Traditions*. Ed. Bialostosky, Don H. and Needham, Lawrence D. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. 199-213.

are other affinities between them. In the written medium language is preserved and stays constant over time, just as literal meaning is, ostensibly, a more stable and unchanging perspective on the text. The oral medium is highly contextual (the written being torn from its context) and temporally limited, just as a figurative meaning can vary and depends on a specific social and epistemological context for its field of reference, in which implications are understood but not stated explicitly. The medial and the meaning-related aspects of the letter-spirit dichotomy each come into play in *Der goldne Topf* and reveal parallel lines of development.

The polemic against the dead letter or sign, which surfaces in Hoffmann, belongs to the discourse of German Romantics whose literary tradition he absorbed (and transformed). As a visual thing devoid of sonic properties, the letter was contrasted with the beauty of song and music. Language needed to be invested with musical beauty in order to avoid the deadness of the letter. Speech had to become song, song music. The Weimar Classicist Karl Philipp Moritz, mentor to two of Hoffmann's major Romantic influences, Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853) and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (1773-1798), wrote in the novel *Andreas Hartknopf* (1785):

Der Buchstabe tödtet, aber der Geist macht lebendig. [Andreas'] Studium aber ging darauf, die Musik zur eigentlichen Sprache der Empfindungen zu machen, wozu sich die artikulirten Töne nicht so wohl schicken, als die unartikulirten, die das Ganze nicht erst zerstückten, um es dann wieder zusammenzufassen, sondern die es gleich, so wie es ist, ganz und in seiner Fülle zu lassen. Mit der Musik verband er aber auch die Dichtkunst im hohen Grade – und nahm seine Zuflucht oft zu ihr, wenn er kranke Seelen heilte. O dann flossen die Worte im metrischen Silbenfall, wie Balsam von seinen Lippen.³⁰

The “Geist” that is being contrasted to the “Buchstabe” here is clearly the spirit of

³⁰ Moritz, Karl Philipp. *Andreas Hartknopf*. Ditzingen: Philipp Reclam, 2001. 133–4.

music, acting on poetry through metric rhythm. Besides Tieck and Wackroder, Hoffmann owed an enormous debt to the work of Novalis (1772-1801). Novalis writes succinctly in *Der König und die Königin*:

Ist das Zeichen nicht ein schönes Bild, oder ein Gesang, so ist
 Änhänglichkeit an Zeichen die verkehrteste aller Neigungen.³¹

Once again, there is the opposition of sign to music and the valuation of music at the expense of the sign. Hoffmann himself rarely gave his views explicitly on the discourse of letter vs. spirit, but it can be seen surfacing in the *Kreisleriana*, which belong like *Der goldne Topf* to Hoffmann's *Fantasiestücke* (1814) collection. Hoffmann offers an insight on language and music through the voice of his alter ego the *Kapellmeister* Johannes Kreisler:

Bei der individualisierten Sprache waltet solch' innige Verbindung zwischen Ton und Wort, daß kein Gedanke in uns sich ohne seine Hieroglyphe—(den Buchstaben der Schrift) erzeugt, die Musik bleibt allgemeine Sprache der Natur, in wunderbaren geheimnisvollen Anklängen spricht sie zu uns, vergeblich ringen wir darnach, diese in Zeichen festzubannen, und jenes künstliche Anreihen der Hieroglyphe erhält uns nur die Andeutung dessen, was wir erlasucht.³²

Here we find elements of the Romantic polemic against the letter as well as a longing to grasp the spirit behind the letter, which is auditory, oral (nature “spricht”), and musical. Unlike in *Der goldne Topf* (as I will discuss later), the hieroglyph is conflated here with phonetic letters, but only in the attempt to express the futility of capturing music, “language of nature” in any kind of written medium. As Hoffmann

³¹ Novalis. “Glauben und Liebe oder Der König und Die Königin.” *Theorie der Romantik*. Ed. Herbert Uerlings. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam, 2000. 315.

³² *HSW II/1* 454

observes, the intimate link between sound and written word, “Ton und Wort,” in the literate individual’s consciousness is such that it is difficult to conceive of any sound without its written counterpart. This is inevitable in a literate mind, according to linguistic theorist Walter Ong: “though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever. A literate person, asked to think of the word ‘nevertheless,’ will normally (and I strongly suspect always) have some image, a least vague, of the spelled-out word...”.³³ But for Hoffmann, the automatic equation of written word and sound in the literate individual’s consciousness misrepresents what is inevitably an imprecise, incomplete relation, since there is not an easy correspondence between writing and sound that makes the exact preservation of sound in writing possible.

The opposition of music to writing is an important theme in the work of Hoffmann, who spent most of his life trying to become a successful musician and composed a vast amount of music.³⁴ In fact, he never aspired to be a grand literary author but saw writing, at least initially, as a side project to support his high musical ambitions. He also thought and wrote extensively about music, beginning his public literary career in 1809 by writing music reviews for the *Allgemeine Musikalischen Zeitung*,³⁵ and long after his death, he serves today as an eloquent spokesman for Romantic musical aesthetics.³⁶ In this light, it is not surprising how conscious he was of the loss that occurs in going from one medium to the next—be it from speech or from music to writing—which takes on harmful proportions in the case of musical

³³ Ong 12

³⁴ Safranski 232

³⁵ Safranski 197

³⁶ See the discussion in Chapin, Keith. “Lost in Quotation: the Nuances behind E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Programmatic Statements.” *19th-Century Music* 30.1 (2006): 44-64. 44.

notation. Many interpretations of the same written piece are produced in theoretically infinite musical performances. The perpetually approximate status of written music explains Hoffmann's preoccupation with the written-oral discrepancy in literary language. Hoffmann's unique perspective on the letter-spirit dichotomy that fascinated Romantics is due to his musical expertise, and it is here, also, that a more intimate link between the medial and meaning-related aspects of the dichotomy comes to the fore. In music, a different "interpretation" of a piece means an adjustment of sonic elements which alter the tone and, as it were, the emotional meaning or content of the piece. The performative and non-semantic qualities of music make obvious the incompleteness of the written transcription, and by extension, written language. Hoffmann's consciousness of this incompleteness leads to an impulse to abandon written representation altogether and exist in an immediate, direct relation to music and other art forms. The essential experience of art for him, based on the model of music, is something beyond language and writing. He idealizes musical artist figures such as the mysterious Ritter Gluck from the first story of the *Fantasiestücke*, who plays astonishing new variations of Christoph Willibald Gluck's compositions while staring at completely blank paper: "Alles dieses," Ritter Gluck ironically concludes, "habe ich *geschrieben*, als ich aus dem Reich der Träume kam" (my emph.).³⁷ He has not, in fact, written the music anywhere. As this and the above passage indicate, Gluck's, Kreisler's—and with them, Hoffmann's—desire to preserve the spiritual force of sound is accompanied by the knowledge that complete preservation in writing is impossible.

³⁷ *HSW II/I* 30

The polemic against the letter takes an interesting turn in *Der goldne Topf*, where Anselmus' ultimate goal, whether he is conscious of it or not, is to learn "the language of nature," whose medium is sound. This language will transport him to paradise--"das Leben in der Poesie," as the archivist says. The language of nature is fundamentally musical and sonic, but it must be accessed through signs written on parchment manuscripts in foreign languages. Anselmus must learn to forget the visual nature of the written letters and focus only on their sounds and meaning, to copy in an almost unconscious dream-like state, in order to reach his goal.

At first the "letter" dominates Anselmus' copying work. Since the Arabic alphabet is foreign to Anselmus, he does not attach sounds to the letters he writes. For now, all signification is absent from his work, which is "literal" in the most radical sense of the adjective: he produces letters that signify to him no sound, no words, and no meaning. They exist for him only as physical phenomena, the shapes of which he stores briefly in his mind for the time it takes to get them down on paper. As the narrative progresses, Anselmus's understanding of the manuscripts departs from this foundation of literality and ascends to increasingly spiritual planes of significance: to sound, to literal meaning and finally to symbolic meaning. At the same time, the language in which the manuscripts are written changes, getting closer to the earliest forms of human language, as speculated in Hoffmann's day: from Arabic to Indian—both phonetic writing systems—to Egyptian hieroglyphic language, and finally to non-signifying objects. The historical regression of linguistic form ends in meaninglessness, the time before language, where the split between signified and signifier ends.

The Romantic polemic against the letter seems relatively consistent throughout *Der goldne Topf*, but it in fact becomes complicated when confronted with a contrary Romantic tendency: the fascination with hieroglyphs. I will discuss hieroglyphs and their relation to German Romanticism in more detail later on. Suffice it to say that unlike arbitrary alphabetic letters, whose highly practical function is to dissolve into sound as quickly as possible before the reader's eyes,³⁸ hieroglyphs draw attention to themselves as signs and visual objects. When they are incomprehensible—as the Egyptian ones in fact were for Romantics until 1822—hieroglyphs are nothing but a bad drawing. Hieroglyphs are in essence just what the Romantics hated: a dead letter. To fetishize them and become entranced by the sacred aura that surrounded them would mean having an “Anhänglichkeit an Zeichen,” supposedly “die verkehrteste aller Neigungen,”—yet that is exactly what the Romantics did. And true to the Romantic tendency, Hoffmann places hieroglyphs on a pedestal in *Der goldne Topf*. Anselmus must stay entranced by the hieroglyphs despite their incomprehensibility, in order to reach the land of *Poesie*. When he recognizes them for what they are—dead, incomprehensible marks—he stays trapped in banal reality. Only by keeping faith in the sacred power of the hieroglyphs to mean something, by attempting to imagine, despite the impossibility of the task, what the hieroglyphs once meant, can he ascend to poetic paradise. Yet what he imagines them to mean must, of course, come from his own self and not some outside power. When Anselmus finally understands the meaning of the hieroglyphs, it turns out to be just a reflection of his own inner desires.

³⁸ Assmann 262

2. *The Erotics of Comprehension: Anselmus Seduced toward the Spirit*

After sitting alone copying for some time, Anselmus is astounded by the speed at which he is able to work. Upon hearing a mysterious voice, he begins miraculously to understand the text he copies, the unfamiliar characters on the parchment become “more and more understandable,” while he listens to the voice that makes comprehension possible. The voice is that of Anselmus’ ethereal sweetheart, Serpentina the snake-girl, who plays roles that alternate in the narrative between the archivist’s marriageable daughter, Anselmus’ hallucinatory serpentine muse, and a mystical poetic force or *Prinzip*. Her prosaic *Doppelgänger* in Dresden reality is Veronika, the bourgeois girl bent on marrying Anselmus and seeing him rise to the high bureaucratic office of Court Councillor. Serpentina offers him an alternative to such a prosaic career, and, as a temptress from the mythic realm of Atlantis, motivates Anselmus’ final ascension into that realm, a heaven of *Poesie*. She first appears to him with her two sister snakes in a synesthetic hallucination on Ascension Day while he sits underneath an elder tree smoking a pipe in the first chapter or “vigil,” as they are called. The hallucination is notably preceded by a plaintive soliloquy from Anselmus, which begins like this::

...finster vor sich hinblickend, blies der Student Anselmus die Dampfwolken in die Luft und sein Unmut wurde endlich laut, indem er sprach: “Wahr ist es doch...”³⁹

³⁹ *HSW II/I* 231

While his speech may not be involuntary, his passivity is already suggested at the grammatical level: “sein Unmut wurde endlich laut...” He later expresses his disdain for "Selbstredner," those who speak to themselves (he believes "Satan schwatze aus ihnen"⁴⁰), so there must be a power affecting him here that is beyond his control. This passivity in Anselmus' *Selbstreden* evolves further during Serpentina's second appearance, which takes place at Anselmus' first copying session and catalyzes his understanding of the text he is working with:

...es war, als flüstere aus dem innersten Gemüte eine Stimme in vernehmlichen Worten: Ach! könntest du denn das vollbringen, wenn du *Sie* nicht in Sinn and Gedanken trügest, wenn du nicht an *Sie*, an ihre Liebe glaubest?—Da wehte es in leisen, leisen, lispelnden Krystallklängen durch das Zimmer: ich bin dir nahe—nahe—nahe!—ich helfe dir!—sei mutig—sei standhaft, lieber Anselmus!—ich mühe mich mit dir, damit du mein werdest! und so wie er voll innern Entzückens die Töne vernahm, wurden ihm immer verständlicher die unbekanntenen Zeichen—er durfte kaum mehr hineinblicken in das Original—ja es war, als stünden schon wie in blasser Schrift die Zeichen auf dem Pergament, und er dürfe sie nur mit geübter Hand schwarz überziehen.⁴¹

Anselmus's *Selbstreden* went from speech seemingly directed by his active will during the first encounter with Serpentina, to mysterious but unambiguously passive speech during the first copying scene. This passage enacts the alienation of the subject from its “inner voice” during the experience of reading. Anselmus's inner voice first seems (note the subjunctive) to become audible and external. He experiences it passively as an other who is addressing him in the second person and referring to Serpentina in the third person. Then the voice is explicitly externalized as it rings throughout the room, refers to itself as *ich*, and takes on Serpentina's identity.

Though he could not have guessed it during the first hallucination and has only an

⁴⁰ *HSW II/I 237*

⁴¹ *HSW II/I 274*

inkling of it now, Serpentina's voice is Anselmus's externalized inner voice: "...so lebt und webt doch in meinem Innern die liebliche Serpentina."⁴² Hers is the voice of the text manifested as perceived sound, making possible the comprehension of the Arabic characters. At the same moment that Anselmus hears her voice, the characters become understandable. This is reminiscent of what occurs during the act of silent reading: the inner voice takes on another's identity, becoming alien and seemingly external to the subject. It is no accident, then, that this coincides with Anselmus's increasing "understanding" of the text, because he is now able to grasp the auditory significance of the letters and experience the text as a voice. The musical *Krystallklängen* mixed with Serpentina's voice inaugurate his auditory understanding. He no longer looks at the original and instead takes his cues from the voice mysteriously conjured by the text rather than the text itself. This kind of reading forgets the materiality and the "literal" nature of the written word and becomes involved solely in the voice signified by the series of phonetic characters. When the mechanical chore of visually discerning letters is automatic enough to be submerged as an unconscious process and ignored, the reader's consciousness is held in the grip of imagined sound. The "mind's ear" that once perceived the familiar discourse of a proper inner voice is now delivered over to an alienated inner voice, made up of the sounds represented on the page that guide and control a passive consciousness.

That was the first step in the movement toward the spiritual: written letter to sound. The next step, from sound to meaning, occurs later when Anselmus is copying another manuscript.

⁴² *HSW II/1 276*

Der Student Anselmus wunderbar gestärkt durch dies Tönen und Leuchten richtete immer fester und fester Sinn und Gedanken auf die Überschrift der Pergamentrolle, und bald fühlte er wie aus dem Innersten heraus, daß die Zeichen nichts anders bedeuten könnten als die Worte: Von der Vermählung des Salamanders mit der grünen Schlange. –Da ertönte ein starker Dreiklang heller Krystallglocken—“Anselmus, lieber Anselmus,” wehte ihm zu aus den Blättern...⁴³

The moment of comprehension occurs when a feeling emerges from his “Innersten,” just as a voice had during the copying of the previous manuscript, and when the sounds of crystal bells inaugurate Serpentina’s voice (Anselmus’ externalized inner voice), which calls to him, appropriately, “aus den Blättern,” out of the leaf-pages. The meaning of the title becomes clear when Serpentina makes her presence known through sound. It is in fact Serpentina who is the source of meaning and of the text to be copied; she slithers out of the tree to tell Anselmus “Alles und Jedes aus tiefem Gemüte, aus tiefer Seele haarklein zu erzählen...”⁴⁴ the complete story of her and her father’s origin in Atlantis. The mythical story she is telling is already written down in the original manuscript, but without her, the manuscript is nothing but dead letters to Anselmus. Serpentina is the oral and semantic spirit that vitalizes the letters with sound and meaning.

Serpentina represents the spirit in the sense of sound and speech *and* that of figurative significance. Not only because she is the source of meaning, but because she is mysteriously doubled, Serpentina is a symbol for symbol itself. As trite as this may sound, there are a number of indications in the copying scene that reinforce her status as such in the ongoing metafictional commentary of *Der goldne Topf*. Rather than being only a symbol proper, (like the biblical serpent), which would refer to a

⁴³ HSW II/I 287

⁴⁴ HSW II/I 288

concept that exists abstractly in an interpretive realm outside the context of the narrative, Serpentina has a double aspect *within* the context of the narrative.

Anselmus takes a closer look at her and sees a lovely young lady, who nonetheless retains many snake-like attributes as she wraps herself around him and he feels her all too thin waist. He is attempting to understand, to “grasp” a symbol. It is undecidable here whether Serpentina is animal or human:

...da war es ja ein liebliches herrliches Mädchen, die mit den dunkelblauen Augen, wie sie in seinem Innern lebten, voll unaussprechlicher Sehnsucht ihn anschauend, ihm entgegenschwebte. Die Blätter schienen sich herabzulassen und auszudehnen, überall sproßten Stacheln aus den Stämmen, aber Serpentina wand und schlängelte sich geschickt durch, indem sie ihr flatterndes, wie in schillernden Farben glänzendes Gewand nach sich zog.
(287)

Anselmus is attempting to interpret and understand symbolic signs on a manuscript, just as he is trying to make advances on the seductive Serpentina double aspect in this scene, appearing simultaneously as mythical snake and prosaic bourgeois girl, manifests the sublation of meaning-maker and meaning, signified and signifier, that, as I will show, Anselmus’s written work is approaching. While he copies hieroglyphs, Serpentina’s voice is both source and manifestation, cause and effect of the text. The two notions of “spirit,” both as auditory language and figurative meaning, combine in the figure of Serpentina. As a seductive serpent, she is of course taken from the serpent in Genesis who seduces Adam to sin with the promise of knowledge. Hoffmann understood well what knowledge was in the biblical sense. Anselmus’s erotic embrace of Serpentina consummates his comprehension of her as a symbol, her double significance as mythical snake and prosaic bourgeois daughter. She is

designated a “Gestalt,”⁴⁵ a figure with both a literal human reality and a tempting, serpentine, metaphorical meaning—as Wordsworth puts it in his *Dream of the Arab*, “of these was neither / and was both at once.”⁴⁶ Anselmus is filled with the pleasure of understanding as he listens to her meanings, all the while terrified that he may fail to understand her and have her slip away:

Dem Anselmus war es, als sei er von der holden lieblichen Gestalt so ganz und gar umschlungen und umwunden, daß er sich nur mit ihr regen und bewegen könne, und als sei es nur der Schlag ihres Pulses, der durch seine Fibern und Nerven zitterte; er horchte auf jedes ihrer Worte, das bis in sein Innerstes erklang und wie ein leuchtender Strahl die Wonne des Himmels in ihm entzündete. Er hatte den Arm um ihren schlanker als schlanken Leib gelegt, aber der schillernde glänzende Stoff ihres Gewandes war so glatt, so schlüpfrig, daß es ihm schien, als könne sie, sich ihm schnell entwindend, unaufhaltsam entschlüpfen, und er erbebte bei dem Gedanken.⁴⁷

J. Hillis Miller’s analysis of poetic symbol in Wordsworth applies with equal validity in her case: “Of these was neither and was both at once—in dream as in the language of poetry nothing is its solid self. It is neither what it is nor the thing whose name or whose image displaces it, but is both at once, and so is nothing but the oscillation or interchange between them...”⁴⁸

The step from literal to figurative comprehension occurs when Anselmus, after plunging off a library shelf into Serpentina’s embrace, finally reaches Atlantis in the last vigil. He enters the mythic world represented on the manuscript paper, passing, so to speak, “through” the ink marks, past written representation, and into the world

⁴⁵ *HSW II/1* 288

⁴⁶ Wordsworth, William. “The Prelude,” Part V, ll. 122-5.

⁴⁷ *HSW II/1* 288

⁴⁸ Miller, J. Hillis. *The Problem of Poetic Form in Wordsworth’s Dream of the Arab*. In: Young, Robert. *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1981. 255.

represented there. When he heard the myth being told before, he could not understand the significance of the manifold symbols from the natural world that are contained in it. Now he learns their significance, and *Serpentina* is once again the cause of his understanding. Upon arrival, the natural world speaks to him and explains what it means while praising *Anselmus* for his ability to understand:

Die goldnen Strahlen brennen in glühenden Tönen: wir sind Feuer von der Liebe entzündet. Der Duft ist die Sehnsucht, aber Feuer das Verlangen, und wohnen wir nicht in Deiner Brust? Wir sind ja Dein eigen! — Es rischeln und rauschen die dunklen Büsche — die hohen Bäume: Komme zu uns! — Glücklicher! — Geliebter! Feuer ist das Verlangen, aber Hoffnung unser kühler Schatten. Wir umsäuseln liebend Dein Haupt, denn Du verstehst uns, weil die Liebe in Deiner Brust wohnt. — Die Quellen und Bäche plätschern und sprudeln: Geliebter, wandle nicht so schnell vorüber, schau in unser Kristall — Dein Bild wohnt in uns, das wir liebend bewahren, denn Du hast uns verstanden! — Im Jubelchor zwitschern und singen bunte Vöglein: Höre uns, höre uns, wir sind die Freude, die Wonne, das Entzücken der Liebe!⁴⁹

Elements of the natural world take on higher meanings that become comprehensible to *Anselmus*: fire is longing, tree shadows are hope, birds are the joy of love. His realization—the key to understanding the *Atlantis* myth—is that the symbols stand for aspects of his own self. Once invested with symbolic significance, the natural world becomes a reflection of *Anselmus*' inner world—this is what the elements mean when they say “wohnen wir nicht in deiner Brust? Wir sind ja dein Eigen!” The reflective “crystal” water goes as far as to assert explicitly that it represents this very correspondence between natural and inner world. The water houses *Anselmus*' image: “Dein Bild wohnt in uns, das wir liebend bewahren, denn Du hast uns verstanden!” That is to say, because he has understood the meaning of the water, it contains his image. He has understood that nature is a reflection of himself.

⁴⁹ *HSW II/I* 319

3. *Material Mystification: Moving Back Toward the Letter*

Anselmus' comprehension progresses from ink marks to sound to meaning, but the language devolves from phonetics to hieroglyphics to no language at all. As mentioned, the first text Anselmus copies is written in Arabic, an alphabetic language. It is less clear what the language of the second text is, although it is certain that the script technology is regressing. The archivist announces that Anselmus will be copying out the Bhagavad Gita,⁵⁰ the sacred Sanskrit text that was translated into German by Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) in 1808. According to the theories of Hoffmann's day on the origins of language, the *Ursprache* out of which all European languages developed was to be found in India rather than Egypt, as was originally thought.⁵¹ Anselmus is moving farther away from northern Europe and into "the Orient," as it was conceived by Romantics such as Novalis and F. Schlegel: the setting for a primordial mythic paradise. In his travels to India, Schlegel longed to find a perfect religion, a longing that was of great influence upon his interest and study of Sanskrit.⁵² He wrote with enthusiasm to Ludwig Tieck: "Hier ist eigentlich die Quelle aller Sprachen, aller Gedanken, und Gedicht des menschlichen Geistes; alles, alles stammt aus Indien ohne Ausnahme."⁵³

⁵⁰ *HSW II/1* 285

⁵¹ Oesterle 61

⁵² Willson, A. Leslie. *A Mythical Image: The ideal of India in German Romanticism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1964. 91.

⁵³ Schlegel, Friedrich. Letter of 15 September 1803, written in Paris. *Ludwig Tieck und die Brüder Schlegel: Briefe*. Ed. E. Lohner. Munich: Winkler, 1972, pp. 135-6. Quoted in: Nygaard 80.

What the text turns out to be is slightly different from the Sanskrit text promised by the archivist. Rather than a fully phonetic language like Sanskrit, Anselmus finds something that resembles a hieroglyphic language. Egypt and India seem to be conflated here for the sake of introducing hieroglyphics into the narrative. Both countries suggest “the Orient,” a term used to describe the Atlantis myth⁵⁴ and details like the archivist’s damask robe, the indoor palm trees, and the exotic birds all make the study into an “oriental” setting. There is even some discursive play on the historic regression in linguistic form: the archivist removes a leaf [*Blatt*] from one of the palm trees in the azure blue room, and it turns out to be a page [*Blatt*] of a manuscript.⁵⁵ The wordplay between the meanings “leaf” and “page” signal a backward etymological movement that retraces the evolution of language to its roots. It is shift to more and more direct relations between signifier and signified, before the word took on its new, metonymic meaning in “page.” This backward movement occurs in the language of the manuscripts, which go from phonetic to hieroglyphic:

Anselmus wunderte sich nicht wenig über die seltsam verschlungenen Zeichen, und bei dem Anblick der vielen Pünktchen, Striche und Züge und Schnörkel, die bald Pflanzen, bald Moose, bald Tiergestalten darzustellen schienen, wollte ihm beinahe der Mut sinken, alles so genau nachmalen zu können. Er geriet darüber in tiefe Gedanken. »Mut gefaßt, junger Mensch!« rief der Archivarius, »hast Du bewährten Glauben und wahre Liebe, so hilft Dir Serpentina!«⁵⁶

The plants, mosses and animal figures that Anselmus believes he can discern in the writing are not the signified objects of the pictorial hieroglyphs. Nor do they represent sounds. According to the slightly erroneous thinking during Hoffmann’s time, rather

⁵⁴ *HSW II/1* 246

⁵⁵ *HSW II/1* 286

⁵⁶ *HSW II/1* 286

than a phonetic sign like an alphabetically spelled word, hieroglyphs bore a symbolic relation to some divine, enigmatic secret, and avoided phonetic representation and the sound of words.⁵⁷

Egyptian hieroglyphs fascinated Romantics and continued to mystify thinkers in Hoffmann's generation until they were finally deciphered by Jean-Francois Champollion in 1822, the year Hoffmann died.⁵⁸ During Hoffmann's life, hieroglyphs always retained an aura of mystic sacredness about them that was due partly to their incomprehensibility and partly to a slight misunderstanding of them.⁵⁹ Instead of signs with a phonetic function, they were seen by influential thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) as signs that were meant to contain divine secrets concealed in cryptic form. In actuality, they have phonetic and non-phonetic elements, and consist of a combination of pictographs (pictured object), ideographs (picture pointing to a concept), and rebuses (picture representing a word and everything it sounds like, for example, a picture of a bee to represent the verb "to be").⁶⁰ According to Aleida Assmann, the myth surrounding hieroglyphs persisted from the Renaissance until their decipherment: "die bildlichen Erscheinungen und ihre Konfigurationen bergen einen verborgenen Sinn, der ihnen *natürlicherweise* zukommt. Hieroglyphen werden aufgefaßt als eine geheimnisvolles göttliche Schrift, die in Kreaturen codiert und so alt und unveränderlich wie die Welt selbst."⁶¹

Hieroglyphs were a natural language, stemming from divine authority and so were

⁵⁷ Dieckmann, Liselotte. "The Metaphor of Hieroglyphics in German Romanticism." *Comparative Literature* 7.4 (1955): 306.

⁵⁸ Dieckmann 306

⁵⁹ Dieckmann 307

⁶⁰ Ong 42

⁶¹ Assmann 269

not arbitrary like alphabetic letters. As an alternative to the Western alphabet, and originating in exotic Egypt, hieroglyphs represented, according to Assmann, a way out of the Christian dichotomies of body and soul, words and meaning, that had a hold on conceptions of language, because in the Romantic idea of the enigmatic hieroglyph, it is unclear where the material form ends and the spiritual meaning begins.⁶²

The modern idea of the hieroglyph had begun as early as the Renaissance when Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*, a work of late antiquity, was discovered in 1419. Renaissance humanists Horapollo, whom Herder often cited, gave detailed explanations of the religious and philosophical meanings of a very specific type of hieroglyph, the so-called "enigmatic hieroglyphs" that indeed served hieratic purposes and were meant to contain religious meanings.⁶³ Although he missed the hieroglyph's relation to the Egyptian language, Herder influenced Novalis and Schlegel with his notion of the hieroglyph as a spiritual symbol, and with his use of the hieroglyph as a metaphor for Nature.⁶⁴ Herder, according to the scholar Liselotte Dieckmann, "provided the generation of the romanticists with a wealth of enthusiastic thoughts, images, and feelings-one of the foremost being the idea that nature is a symbol and a hieroglyph of God."⁶⁵ Schlegel saw myth itself in terms of the hieroglyph, observing that myth is "ein hieroglyphischer Ausdruck der umgebenden Natur in dieser Verklärung von Phantasie und Liebe."⁶⁶

⁶² Assmann 268

⁶³ Dieckmann 309

⁶⁴ Dieckmann 310-312

⁶⁵ Dieckmann 310

⁶⁶ Friedrich Schlegel, "Rede über die Mythologie." *Theorie der Romantik*. Stuttgart:

Hoffmann was an admirer especially of Novalis and was influenced heavily by his writing. The Atlantis myth in *Der goldne Topf*, it has been noted, bears an uncanny resemblance to Novalis' *Märchen* from *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*.⁶⁷ In *Die Lehrlinge*, which has an Egyptian setting, Novalis has this to say about hieroglyphs:

Mannichfache Wege gehen die Menschen. Wer sie verfolgt und vergleicht, wird wunderliche Figuren entstehen sehn; Figuren, die zu jener großen Chifferschrift zu gehören scheinen, die man überall, auf Flügeln, Eierschalen, in Wolken, im Schnee ... erblickt. In ihnen ahndet man den Schlüssel dieser Wunderschrift, die Sprachlehre derselben, allein die Ahndung will sich selbst in keine feste Formen fügen, und scheint kein höherer Schlüssel werden zu wollen... Nicht lange darauf sprach einer: Keiner Erklärung bedarf die heilige Schrift. Wer wahrhaft spricht, ist des ewigen Lebens voll, und wunderbar verwandt mit echten Geheimnissen dünkt uns seine Schrift, denn sie ist ein Akkord aus des Weltalls Symphonie.⁶⁸

Hoffmann uses the hieroglyph metaphor in *Der goldne Topf* in a similar way, to depict nature as a collection of mystical signs that contain but conceal a higher meaning. But the metafictional complexity of the tale transforms the hieroglyph into more than just a metaphor. When Anselmus enters Atlantis, the world of the myth, he becomes a character in a story depicted on a hieroglyphic manuscript. In Atlantis, he is surrounded by natural signs with hieroglyphic meanings. The metaphor of the hieroglyph for nature thus becomes literal. Anselmus' comprehension of the meanings of the natural symbols in Atlantis is the culmination of his comprehension of the hieroglyphic manuscripts in the copying room.

Phillip Reclam, 2000. 318.

⁶⁷ Kremer, Detlef. *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Erzählungen und Romane*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1999. 18.

⁶⁸ Novalis. *Werke, Tagebücher, und Briefe*. Ed. Hans-Henrik Krummacher, Herbert Meyer and Bernhard Zeller. Stuttgart, 1947. Quoted in: Dieckmann 312.

Anselmus copies out the manuscript while listening to the “Kristallklänge” that “radiate” like light and smelling the pleasant aromas he encountered during his first synesthetic, hallucinatory experience under the elder tree with Serpentina in the first vigil. Then, as now, musical tones emanate from Anselmus’ natural surroundings, speak to him in an as yet indecipherable language—*die Sprache der Natur*. The synesthesia of the language of nature in Anselmus’ hallucinations and in Atlantis itself is abundantly evident. While natural phenomena stimulate and excites all Anselmus’ senses during the Serpentina scenes, only through sound does nature begin to make itself understandable to him. Günter Oesterle’s study of the Romantic fascination with hieroglyphs shows how they represented the possibility of a synesthetic sign that evoked sound, fire, and electricity.⁶⁹ Experiments by the acoustic theoretician and inventor of musical instruments Ernst Chladni (1756-1827) yielded the *Klangfigur*, which was the pattern made by sand on a surface that was made to vibrate using a bow. The physicist and early electrochemist Johann Wilhelm Ritter (1776-1810) supplemented Chladni’s *Klangfigur* with the *Feuerschrift* that allegedly harnessed the natural power of fire as the source of life and was an “elemental signature of nature.”⁷⁰ As Oesterle puts it, “die Entdeckung der Klang und Lichtfiguren ermöglicht der romantischen Kunst die Verbindung von Sprach- und Naturchiffre einerseits und die Vermittlung der Künste durch Synästhesien andererseits.”⁷¹ These forms of *chiffre* promised a kind of intensified sign that harnessed all the senses as they signified. They also reflected the conviction that

⁶⁹ Oesterle, Günter. “Arabeske, Schrift und Poesie in E.T.A. Hoffmanns Künstmärchen ‘Der goldne Topf’.” *Athenäum, Jahrbuch für Romantik* 1 (1991): 60-107.

⁷⁰ Oesterle 66

⁷¹ Oesterle 68

certain written figures are not arbitrary but have emerged from nature and have a “natural” connection to their meaning in the outside world.

As I have said, the shift toward hieroglyph is accompanied by a shift toward orality as Serpentina’s voice makes visual attention to the text increasingly unnecessary. The parallel relation of these movements is no accident, as there is a structural analogy between a hieroglyphic mode of representation and onomatopoeia, the originary force behind Serpentina. Pictographic hieroglyph is to writing as onomatopoeia is to speech, since in both cases, the signifier is an imitation of the signified. Serpentina’s appearance is inaugurated by onomatopoeic “sinnverwirrende Rede”⁷² from the slithering snake sisters. They seem to whisper in the trees:

Zwischen durch — zwischen ein — zwischen Zweigen, zwischen
 schwellenden Blüten, schwingen, schlängeln, schlingen wir uns —
 Schwesterlein — Schwesterlein, schwinde dich im Schimmer — schnell,
 schnell herauf — herab — Abendsonne schießt Strahlen, zischelt der
 Abendwind — raschelt der Abendwind — raschelt der Tau — Blüten singen
 — rühren wie Zünglein, singen wir mit Blüten und Zweigen — Sterne bald
 glänzen — müssen herab — zwischen durch, zwischen ein schlängeln,
 schlingen, schwingen wir uns Schwesterlein.⁷³

Onomatopoeia, like hieroglyph, may be an interesting, exotic mode of expression, but it is quite limited. As we have seen, there is a divergence between the increasing meaning Anselmus is able to comprehend as he approaches the poetic realm of Atlantis and the decreasing power of language. Hieroglyphs may have been used by Egyptian priests to express divine secrets, but as a mode of written communication, they are powerless. Eric Havelock notes in his theory of primary orality: “the

⁷² *HSW II/I 233*

⁷³ *HSW II/I 233*

Egyptian society in which the earliest types of hieroglyphic occur could scarcely use them for written communication, in any meaningful sense of the term.”⁷⁴

Havelock means, of course, a utilitarian kind of writing and not *Poesie*.

Looked at through this lens, the hieroglyphs are dead marks. And they become this way for Anselmus, too, when he has a sudden change of attitude in the 9th vigil. This change happens on two implicitly related levels: that of linguistic media and that of sexuality. He begins to want more than just a spiritual relationship with Serpentina—he longs to consummate his desire with her literal, worldly, fleshly counterpart. He gives in to the influence of the witch, who, as I will show thoroughly in section five, is a symbol for the “letter” in both senses I have used. Under the witch’s spell, he becomes more and more attracted to bourgeois Veronika, a real corporeal girl, and begins even to doubt the existence of Serpentina, whose voice, the oral and semantic spirit behind the letter of the manuscripts, no longer rings in his ears. Staring into the metal mirror fashioned by the witch, Anselmus attains a lucid rational consciousness (as the chapter heading proclaims, Anselmus “[gelangte] zu eigener Vernunft”⁷⁵), with no room for the phantasms of his previous state of inspiration, which now seem nothing but the figments of his dreams.:

Da war es dem Anselmus, als beginne ein Kampf in seinem Innern — Gedanken — Bilder — blitzten hervor und vergingen wieder — der Archivarius Lindhorst — Serpentina — die grüne Schlange — endlich wurde es ruhiger und alles Verworrene fügte und gestaltete sich zum deutlichen Bewußtsein. Ihm wurde es nun klar, daß er nur beständig an Veronika gedacht, ja daß die Gestalt, welche ihm gestern in dem blauen Zimmer erschienen, auch eben Veronika gewesen und daß die phantastische Sage von der

⁷⁴ Havelock, Eric A. *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. 65.

⁷⁵ *HSW II/1* 294

Vermählung des Salamanders mit der grünen Schlange ja nur von ihm geschrieben, keineswegs ihm aber erzählt worden sei.⁷⁶

The witch's metal mirror reveals to him a prosaic reality with Veronika, in opposition to the reflective surface of the archivist's golden pot that tempted him with the image of Serpentina's blue eyes in the sixth vigil. As Anselmus turns from Serpentina to Veronika, linguistic media are being related to love and sexuality: writing to the body, and speech to the sublimated, spiritualized essence of a loved one. The above "Kampf in seinem Innern" ends with the victory of writing, and thus the body. Anselmus now sees himself as nothing more than a copyist reproducing ink marks, and believes Serpentina's legend existed only in the written rather than the oral medium. Serpentina herself is replaced by prosaic Veronika, whom he resolves to marry.

It follows that in this state of mind, Anselmus loses faith that the hieroglyphs can be comprehensible. For the rational bureaucrat, blurring the lines between signifier and signified, leads to the disappearance of meaning, not its creation. When there is nothing beyond the signifier to which it points, when it points only to itself, the signifier is meaningless and "spirit"-less—a dead letter. This is evident when Anselmus sits down for the last time to copy roll of parchment that now appears utterly mystifying:

[Anselmus] setzte sich an den Tisch um die Kopie des Manuskripts zu beginnen, das der Archivarius wie gewöhnlich vor ihm ausgebreitet. Aber er sah auf der Pergamentrolle so viele sonderbare krause Züge und Schnörkel durcheinander, die ohne dem Auge einen einzigen Ruhepunkt zu geben den Blick verwirrten, daß es ihm beinahe unmöglich schien das Alles genau nachzumalen. Ja bei dem Überblick des Ganzen schien das Pergament nur ein bunt geaderter Marmor oder ein mit Moosen durchsprenkelter Stein.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ *HSW II/1* 295-6

⁷⁷ *HSW II/1* 301

Anselmus' revived rationality allows him to see the parchment only as a text-object, and what is interesting in this passage is the kind of object it becomes in Anselmus' eyes. The "bunt geaderter Marmor" and "mit Moosen durchsprengelter Stein," are the simulacra of the marble columns and the mossy steps found later in Atlantis; in order to reach Serpentina in Atlantis' marvelous temple in the very last scene of the story, Anselmus ascends "den bunten Marmor, die wunderbaren bemoosten Stufen."⁷⁸ The parchment thus becomes ruins, broken remnants from a mythic landscape Anselmus can no longer piece together and resurrect in his imagination. Serpentina's silence in this scene reflects the disappearance of sound and meaning. This is the ironic but inevitable climax of Anselmus' backward regression toward the origins of written language, which promised to invest the letter with its original spirit but fulfilled its promise by becoming nothing but the dead letter. Like his counterpart clerk, Bartleby, from Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Anselmus has ended up in the "Dead Letter Office," the bureaucratic realm of messages that never reach their recipients. He has not yet reached the poetic realm of Atlantis, whose *lingua franca* is the *Sprache der Natur*.

Faced with an uncopiable manuscript, Anselmus commits a transgression as he spills ink on the original. His crime is the denial of the spirit—the ethereal, voice-constituted, metaphorical Serpentina—in favor of bodily pleasures promised by the material world of prosaic Veronika, the world of the letter. The sexual undertone in the "Tintenklecks" that spills on the "ausgebreite[s] Original"⁷⁹ is not incidental. A

⁷⁸ HSW II/I 320

⁷⁹ HSW II/I 301

(writing) material climax is the inevitable effect of reducing Serpentina to her corporeal counterpart and attempting physical contact with Veronika. Serpentina's kiss that burned on Anselmus' lips after waking "wie aus einem Traume" in the previous vigil whets his appetite for the real thing. He begins to treat Serpentina, the poetic figure, as an illusory projection of the girl he really wants. Veronika is capable of delivering the gratification he seeks in Dresden reality: "als er nun die Veronika den ganzen Tag über schauen und wohl manchen verstohlenen Blick, manchen zärtlichen Händedruck zu erhalten, ja wohl gar einen Kuß zu erobern hoffte."⁸⁰ Even his once fantastic dreams have been invaded by her mundane but irresistible presence. Just before going to the archivists, his desire is almost satiated in a dream where Veronika "hauchte einen Kuß auf seine Lippen."⁸¹ The kiss is what *awakens* him from the dream, having a sobering effect on his formerly abstract passion, signaling a return to physical reality. For Hoffmann, desire can never be consummated in the ethereal realm of the imagination, it can only persist as a kind of sublime *Sehnsucht* (see chapter II, part 3 of this thesis: "Speech and Text"). Erotic longing is still connected here to the longing to understand and to "grasp," which is what is needed in order to retain the sacred aura of the hieroglyphs. When Anselmus no longer tries to grasp Serpentina, but focuses on her counterpart Veronika, he directs his desires at actually attainable, graspable, worldly, fleshly things, and sees letters and bodies only as such. He is being a good, marriageable bourgeois and an effective bureaucrat. But the archivist's library is not like any other bureaucratic office. It is a poetic school, and in order to do his job here, he needs to forget literality altogether. So when

⁸⁰ *HSW II/I* 296-7

⁸¹ *HSW II/I* 300

Anselmus sits down to copy the manuscript, it has become nothing but an incomprehensible collection of objects signifying nothing. He botches the copying job and is punished for the crime.

As punishment for the ink stain, he is strangled to unconsciousness by a giant transparent snake (not *Serpentina*, but the witch's metamorphosed form) and awakens trapped in a glass bottle on a shelf in Lindhorst's library. The witch's cryptic prophecy in the first scene, "ins Krystall bald dein Fall!" is fulfilled:

Er konnte kein Glied regen; aber seine Gedanken schlugen an das Glas, ihn im mißtönenden Klange betäubend und er vernahm statt der Worte, die der Geist sonst aus dem Innern gesprochen, nur das dumpfe Brausen des Wahnsinns.⁸²

Anselmus has already reached language's radical origin and surpassed it; the result is non-referentiality and non-language. Anselmus has lost the ability to communicate and even to speak with his "inner voice," isolated as he is in the confines his solipsistic consciousness, represented by the glass bottle on the archivist's shelf. Hemmed in by incomprehensible foreign books on either side, he is imprisoned, so to speak, by the letter. His thoughts "schlugen an das Glas," incapable of expression, and the result is the "dumpfe[s] Brausen" of madness, the isolation and solipsism of a poet without language.

⁸² *HSW II/I* 303

4. *Writing and Reading*

Up to this point I have argued that Serpentina's voice was the inner voice of a reader, who slowly progresses up levels of understanding until he can interpret the text before him and grasp the significance and the "spirit" behind it. I have also suggested that the copying theme is indeed susceptible to an opposite and complementary interpretation: Anselmus is a *writer* and is authoring the texts he seems to unconsciously produce. Copying incorporates both reading and writing in the same simultaneous and automatic action. If *Der goldne Topf* is an allegory for the transportive power of interpretive, fantastic reading, it is just as easily an allegory for creative writing. Anselmus seems to attend passively to Serpentina's voice, but the traditional figurative sense cannot be ignored in which the inspired poet "listens" to an imagined or inner muse, and transcribes what is heard. Two processes converge as he copies and two opposing directions between signifier and signified are embodied at once in the act. To write is to find the signifiers for thoughts, and to read is to find the signified thoughts behind the signifiers. An "oscillation and interchange" between these two activities, which constitute the literal and the figurative dimension of the story as a whole, is enacted by the copying allegory; if Anselmus' copying is nothing but the unconscious transcription of another's work, he is a secretary reading. But if his copying stands for the inspired transcription of his muse's voice, he is a poet writing.

The tale's ironic complexity reaches new heights when the interchange of writing and reading, epitomized in Anselmus' copying, is enacted at a higher self-reflexive level in the main narrative. The notorious seventh vigil is told partly in the

second person—the narrator invites the reader right into the story. It is a stormy night, and Veronica is bent over the cauldron with the witch next to her. Says the narrator:

Ich wollte, daß du, günstiger Leser! am drei und zwangsten September auf der Reise nach Dresen begriffen gewesen wärest...Unwillkürlich springst du aus dem Wagen und rennst einige Schritte vorwärts. Nun siehst du deutlich das schlanke holde Mädchen, die im weißen dünnen Nachtgewande bei dem Kessel kniet...⁸³

You the reader, he goes on to say, have the urge to shoot the witch dead with a pistol and rescue fair Veronika. Hoffmann takes this moment of apostrophe to an extreme; it is not only an address to the reader, but an involvement of the reader in the narrative as a character. As in all apostrophes to the reader, Hoffmann pretends the absent reader is present and in oral dialogue with him. But he goes a step farther in pretending the reader is present in the fictional world of the story. As Walter Ong observes,⁸⁴ the apostrophe is less common today than in Romantic texts, which self-consciously attempted to revive the sense of a conversation between author and reader. To a 20th century reader, apostrophes are embarrassing in a way that they were not for readers during the Romantic period.⁸⁵

However embarrassed the reader may be at this sudden apostrophe, the feeling of participation in the story bears an uncanny resemblance to Anselmus' textual involvement with Serpentina. The text is the channel through which he is supposed to reach his love-object, both in understanding and capturing her meanings, reading and writing. Short of forcing his readers to copy out the text of *Der goldne Topf* by hand,

⁸³ *HSW II/1* 279

⁸⁴ Ong 162

⁸⁵ Ong 162

this is as close as Hoffmann gets to putting us in Anselmus' shoes. Just as Anselmus longs for his hallucinated muse to become a material reality, the reader is offered a related object of lust. The reader's foray into the scene is motivated by an erotic attraction to Veronika similar to Anselmus' poetic lusting after Serpentina. The analogy between fictional realities is consistent: the Dresden world containing Veronika is to the reader as the mythical realm of Atlantis containing Serpentina is to Anselmus. The reader's fantasy, perhaps hallucinated like Anselmus' (although this can be expected only of very susceptible readers), ends in an abrupt modulation back to the subjunctive, with a reminder that the narrator is determining what we imagine and can withhold all the information he pleases:

Der Postillion stieß schmetternd in sein Horn, die Alte kugelte um in ihren Sud hinein und alles war mit einemmal verschwunden in dickem Qualm. Ob du das Mädchen, das du nun mit recht innigem Verlangen in der Finsternis suchtest, gefunden hättest, mag ich nicht behaupten...⁸⁶

An opposite and complementary entrance into the fictional world of Dresden is performed by the narrator in the twelfth and last vigil, making the text of *Der goldne Topf* a site of "interchange" between author and reader, like the manuscripts Anselmus is writing-reading. The narrator steps out from behind the curtain to confess to the reader his helpless inability to describe Atlantis, and more importantly, to compare his melancholy with that of Anselmus. He thereby aligns himself with Anselmus and suggests that he and Anselmus are performing the same function, that of a literary writer.

⁸⁶ *HSW II/I* 280

Wie fühlte ich recht in der Tiefe des Gemüts die hohe Seligkeit des Studenten Anselmus, der mit der holden Serpentina innigst verbunden, nun nach dem geheimnisvollen wunderbaren Reiche gezogen war, das er für die Heimat erkannte, nach der sich seine von seltsamen Ahnungen erfüllte Brust schon so lange gesehnt. Aber in diesem Gefühl, in dem Streben, dir günstiger Leser all' die Herrlichkeiten, von denen der Anselmus umgeben, auch nur einigermaßen in Worten anzudeuten und als ich nun die Mattigkeit jedes Ausdrucks, den ich eronnen, mit Widerwillen wahrnahm, da erregte mir meine dürftige Umgebung, meine Befangenheit in den Armseligkeiten des kleinlichen Lebens ein recht quälendes Mißbehagen. Ich schlich wie im Traum umher, kurz ich geriet in jenen Zustand des Studenten Anselmus, den ich dir, günstiger Leser! in der vierten Vigilie beschrieben. Ich härmte mich recht ab, wenn ich die elf Vigilien, die ich glücklich zu stande gebracht, durchlief und nun dachte, daß es mir wohl niemals vergönnt sein werde die zwölfte als Schlußstein hinzuzufügen, denn so oft ich mich zur Nachtzeit hinsetzte, um das Werk zu vollenden, war es, als hielten mir recht tückische Geister (es mochten wohl Verwandte — vielleicht Cousins germains der getöteten Hexe sein) ein glänzend poliertes Metall vor, in dem ich mein Ich erblickte, blaß, übernächtigt und melancholisch, wie der Registrator Heerbrand nach dem Punschrausch und nach allerlei Phrasen haschend um ein nie geschautes Eldorado zu malen. — Da warf ich denn die Feder hin und eilte ins Bette um wenigstens von dem glücklichen Anselmus und der holden Serpentina zu träumen.⁸⁷

The witch's metal mirror reflects the narrator's image, just as it had Anselmus' in Veronika's parlor, and what he glimpses is the same: a bureaucrat. By comparing himself to Registrator Heerbrand, the narrator is calling himself a dilettante, imprisoned by the "letter," and incapable of creative imagination. When Heerbrand dreams, all he sees, literally, are letters: "So ist mir," Heerbrand had said in the second vigil, "in der Tat selbst einmal Nachmittags beim Kaffee in einem solchen Hinbrüten, dem eigentlichen Moment körperlicher und geistiger Verdauung, die Lage eines verlorenen Aktenstücks wie durch Inspiration eingefallen, und nur noch gestern tanzte auf gleiche Weise eine herrliche große lateinische Frakturschrift vor meinen hellen offenen Augen umher."⁸⁸ The narrator gives himself over to self doubt by

⁸⁷ *HSW II/I* 315-316

⁸⁸ *HSW II/I* 240

comparing himself to well-meaning but hopelessly pedantic Heerbrand; perhaps, he is saying, it is not the failure of language as a limited system, but the failure of his own creative imagination to produce the last scene of Anselmus' happiness in Atlantis. It may be a "*nie geschautes Eldorado*" (my emphasis), and the narrator may be, like Heerbrand, capable only of envisioning powerless letters rather than the things they are meant to represent. Here we can see the question of cause and effect, the interchange of reading and writing, returning once more. Does the narrator's inability to find signifiers for his thoughts reflect the absence of his thoughts, or do the absence of signifiers for his thoughts prevent their expression? This is the same unanswerable question at the heart of Anselmus' copying activity, where finding signifiers for the inner voice was rendered indistinguishable from comprehending the signified voice behind the preexisting signifiers. There is not a definite answer to this ambiguity, despite Nygaard's conviction that the *real* reason for the narrator's failure is not the "Mattigkeit jedes Ausdrucks," but that the "Eldorado" is "nie geschaut." According to Nygaard, the narrator "portrays himself as someone who is working from an intensely conceived inner vision in an effort to find the proper language to convey it, whereas in point of fact the opposite is the case: the narrator, again like his hero in his copying of Lindhorst's manuscripts, is working backward from the words to try to rediscover the vision...".⁸⁹ Nygaard misses the point of the ambiguity in the copying activity, namely to question the boundary between the two processes in the act of artistic production. The poet is both the source and auditor of the poetic voice, creative writer and copier. While the poet has a degree of agency and choice, the signs the poet chooses are also determined by the conventions and available possibilities in a given

⁸⁹ Nygaard 102

linguistic system of relations.⁹⁰ What Nygaard might call a “naïve” reading of the narrator’s helplessness is valid as her “skeptical” reading.

The abundant parallels of the narrator’s situation to that of Anselmus before he reached Atlantis reflect their comparable status as authors. Like Anselmus in his glass bottle, trapped with thoughts that are incapable of expression, the narrator is paralyzed by the limits of the written word, the “Mattigkeit jedes Ausdrucks” for what he sees in the mind’s eye. The linguistic isolation results in a “Befangenheit” in everyday existence and a longing to escape into the fantastic realm he envisions. The narrator requires from his language in order to write the last vigil, the “Schlußstein” of the work. For the last vigil, meant to depict the “Rittergut” in Atlantis—the estate in the world of fantasy Anselmus has produced—must simultaneously *be* and *represent* the poetic work Anselmus has written. The story he transcribes from his muse must, at the end, retell *Der goldne Topf*; the salamander is exiled to earth until he marries off his serpentine daughters, and Anselmus’ story, from his first encounter with Serpentina to their final ascension and marriage in the realm of Atlantis, will be the last episode of the mythical narrative he is writing.

The reason for the narrator’s helplessness is that he is asking too much of language. In order to fulfill the task laid out by the logic of the story’s progression, he would have to describe Anselmus’ experience in Atlantis with the same words Anselmus uses to transport himself there. Every word of the scene’s discourse would have to also *be* what it is describing, since Anselmus is writing the myth into which he enters as a character. The narrator is now put in the position in which Anselmus

⁹⁰ See Culler, Jonathan. *In Pursuit of Signs*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981. 29-43.

had been after language had become non-referential and thus no longer a language. The result is confinement in a solipsistic dream world, a glass bottle, so to speak, of one's own thoughts, without the words to express them.

How does the narrator get out of this bind? He performs the same feat as Anselmus, writing himself into the fictional world of his own making. This changes the equation, since the narrator does not have to describe Anselmus' experience in Atlantis directly, but can instead describe *himself* envisioning Anselmus in Atlantis. He escapes the textual problem by moving beyond text into visionary hallucination. Through vision, he perceives the fictional world into which Anselmus has written himself, and transcribes the vision. As it turns out, the narrator inhabits a loft in Dresden, right above the azure palm tree room, and is invited down by the archivist—“Wollen sie daher die die Zwölfte Vigilie schreiben, so steigen Sie die verdammten fünf Treppen hinunter...”—to enjoy a cup of inspiring spirits with the archivist. The staircase, of course, separates symbolically the metafictional from the fictional.

Once in a state of intoxication after having imbibed the spirit of *Geisterfürst* Lindhorst, who quite literally leapt into a flaming cup of punch, the narrator has a vision of Anselmus' poetic apotheosis in Atlantis. The narrator's vision is described in a passage that blurs a second interfictional boundary. The quotation marks around the previous two installments of the Atlantis myth, told by Serpentina and the Archivist, bracketed them and excluded them from the Dresden reality, which could thus preserve its consistency during those scenes. Now the narrator moves seamlessly, without quotation marks or even phrases like “and this is what I saw...”, from tasting the punch to a transcription of his vision:

...ohne Scheu kostete ich, die Flamme leise weghauchend, von dem Getränk—
es war köstlich!

Rühren sich nicht in sanftem säuseln und Rauschen die smaragdnen
Blätter der Palmbäume wie vom Hauch des Morgenwindes geliebkoset? ...
immer blendender häuft sich Strahl auf Strahl, bis in hellem Sonnenglanze sich
der unabsehbare Hain aufschließt in dem ich den Anselmus erblicke.⁹¹

The seamlessness of the transition is also effected semantically by the ambiguity of the location of the palm trees, which are in the azure room *and* in Atlantis. Only after re-reading the first sentence of the transcribed vision does one realize they were Atlantic palms “all along.” The narrator is in the room hallucinating Anselmus and in the Atlantic grove watching Anselmus. He is both a banal drunkard and akin to the biblical God from Genesis walking in the garden of Eden to look for Adam.⁹² By chasing Anselmus from Dresden to Atlantis, the narrator has transgressed two interfictional boundaries, but the transgressions are concealed from the reader through deft rhetorical ambiguities that function like a magician distracting the audience’s gaze toward an unimportant movement while he performs a trick.

Even the status of the text describing Anselmus in Atlantis is ambiguous. Like Anselmus, the narrator finds the transcription of his vision awaiting him on the table afterwards. The description of Atlantis beginning with “Rühren sich nicht...” must have been the text of this transcription all along, since it is written in the present tense, whereas the narration before and after is in the past tense. There is a narrator placing the transcription in between two past tense paragraphs, as well as a narrator-character inhabiting Dresden. The narrator, hanging as he is between three realities, is

⁹¹ *HSW II/I* 318-19

⁹² Gen 3:8-11. New Revised Standard Edition.

watching Anselmus undergo the same *Entrückung* into a fictional world of his own making that he himself achieves.

The last event in the narrator's vision in the twelfth vigil involves a masterful sleight of hand

Da erhebt Anselmus das Haupt wie vom Strahlenglanz der Verklärung umflossen. — Sind es Blicke? — sind es Worte? — ist es Gesang? — Vernehmlich klingt es mir: “Serpentina! — der Glaube an Dich, die Liebe hat mir das Innerste der Natur erschlossen! ...”⁹³

This last transcribed communication from Atlantis could be glances, words, or song—the medium is unknown to the narrator. The source of it is also unknown. It seems to be Anselmus, although he is not described as opening his mouth and remains transfigured like Jesus, fulfilling the destiny laid out for him on Ascension Day in the first vigil. But one must not forget the presence of the narrator, who is in the grove as well as in the copying room, vicariously experiencing Anselmus' apotheosis, and who is the one perceiving the voice (“vernehmlich klingt es *mir*” (my emphasis)). Just as earlier in the copying room, Anselmus' voice seemed to turn into Serpentina's and vice versa, the source of this voice, if we can call it that, hangs masterfully in the balance between the narrator and Anselmus. It is neither and both at once, the poetic voice of which the poet is the source and listener.

⁹³ *HSW II/I* 320

5. *Allegory and Metafiction*

Der goldne Topf is a self-reflexive tale full of symbolism that refers back to itself. This aspect of the tale is always mentioned by critics, but the specific symbols I am about to interpret have yet to be integrated into a fuller description of the story's self-reflexive structure. Like the natural elements of Atlantis, which explain their meanings to Anselmus, *Der goldne Topf* appears to explain, through allegory, how it is to be interpreted. The story can be read as a commentary, presented allegorically, on the literary work that Anselmus is writing. This means, of course, a commentary on itself. The duel between the witch and the spirit prince, fought before Anselmus' eyes on the floor of the library enacts the antagonism between literal and figurative—the letter and the spirit—that constitutes the irony of the tale, with each side represented by a character. The battle is thus an allegory for the irony contained in the tale itself. The essential incompatibility between literal and figurative interpretations, the sharp ironic contrast between Anselmus as poet and Anselmus as secretary makes interpretation vacillate between two mutually exclusive meanings. In the end, one side seems to emerge victorious, just as the larger narrative seems—but only at first glance—to signal one interpretation over the other. For his part, Anselmus the wordless poet can only be a passive spectator to this frenzied battle that throws up symbols and signifiers from a variety of literary genres without any initially apparent coherence. The one thread that unites these images is the letter-spirit antagonism, which reflects the ironic opposition of the two interpretive possibilities. Anselmus is the author watching the irony of his tale spin out of control.

Lindhorst's title in Atlantis, *Geisterfürst*, makes his association with the "spirit" explicit. Like Serpentina, he is both a mythical animal (fire salamander) and a prosaic human (bureaucrat), for this scene, however, he remains firmly in his mythical aspect. Despite being a somewhat supernatural creature herself, the witch embodies prosaic literality in opposition to *Poesie* and symbolism. She is the obstacle between Anselmus and his poetic education with Lindhorst, a projection of the crippling self-doubt of the burgeoning poet that can be cured only by a belief in Serpentina, the muse and poetic figure. To prevent his entry at the Lindhorst's door, she transforms into a giant transparent snake, Serpentina's empty opposite, in the second vigil and strangles Anselmus into unconsciousness. The giant snake reappears to strangle him once more after he spills ink on the manuscript, and is thus the agent of his imprisonment in the glass bottle. It was the witch, after all, who prophesized his "Fall ins Krystall." As we have seen, under the influence of the witch's "satanische Künste," Anselmus begins to disbelieve in Serpentina and come up with rational explanations for Serpentina's fantastic appearance that negate her double aspect and reduce her to a human body.

Through a complex of recurring motifs, the details of her genealogy and her feline companion, the witch is associated with writing materials and literality itself. Her origin can be traced back to the black dragon, brother of the metals in the earth,⁹⁴ from Serpentina's creation myth. The dragon is born of a granite rock and flies out to bring the flaming, frenzied lily, who "im unendlichen Raum herumschwärmte,"⁹⁵ back *down to earth* where he keeps her prisoner. The opposition of earth and air, and

⁹⁴ *HSW II/I* 246

⁹⁵ *HSW II/I* 246

of metal and fire that runs through the story begins in this myth, and corresponds intimately with the letter-spirit opposition. Veronika—the literal, earthly aspect of Serpentina—is shown to Anselmus in the witch’s metal mirror. The witch’s favorite hiding place is a coffee can, and since coffee is enjoyed frequently by the bureaucratic characters, the beverage becomes a symbol of bourgeois philistinism as opposed to the poetic *Rausch* inspired by punch. The witch “hat ihr Dasein der Liebe einer solchen aus dem Fittig des Drachen herabgestäubten Feder zu einer Runkrübe zu verdanken.”⁹⁶ Her birth by a black *feather* already establishes the connection between the witch and writing materials; recall that Anselmus arms himself with “wohlgespitzten Rabenfedern”⁹⁷ before setting off to work for the archivist. The only other time the word “Rabe” occurs in the text is at the witch’s house, where the animal counts among her pets.⁹⁸ Her favorite pet is of course the black cat, her familiar spirit (or “Cousin germain”⁹⁹ as Veronika calls it in her affected bourgeois manner). During the battle scene with Lindhorst, the cat springs out of an *inkwell* on the desk. To complete the triad of writing materials, the witch covers herself in a garment of *parchment* before taking on the spirit prince: “dann fuhr sie in Kreisen umher und große Folianten stürzten herab, aus denen riß sie Pergamentblätter, und diese im künstlichen Gefüge schnell zusammenheftend und auf den Leib ziehend, war sie bald wie in einen seltsamen bunten Schuppenharnisch gekleidet.”¹⁰⁰ The last association she has with the written word is in its visual aspect, in opposition to the

⁹⁶ *HSW II/1* 292

⁹⁷ *HSW II/1* 268

⁹⁸ *HSW II/1* 265

⁹⁹ *HSW II/1* 299

¹⁰⁰ *HSW II/1* 306

spoken word and Serpentina's auditory nature. The witch shares "Katzenaugen"¹⁰¹ with her familiar, and throughout the story, Lindhorst's parrot threatens to hack out the cat's eyes with its beak. Since it can speak, of course, the parrot stands for the spoken word, and when it succeeds in blinding the cat during the battle scene, this is the last victory of the oral over the written medium: "hackte er ihm mit dem scharfen Schnabel die glühenden Augen aus, daß der brennende Gischt herausspritzte,"¹⁰² the spirit over the letter.

More than just a duel over media, it plays out the act of interpretation in which the literal and the figurative are at odds. The spirit prince is armed with lilies, which give life to the witch's dead clods of earth. "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life"—this describes the entire battle. When the lilies touch the witch's parchment armor, they fall down in ashes (the letter killeth), but when the witch throws clumps of earth from the golden pot at the spirit prince, as soon as the earth touches his damask robe, flowers sprout from it (the spirit giveth life).¹⁰³

The object they are fighting for, the golden pot, appears to be nothing other than the eponymous symbol of the tale itself, which is not accidentally titled *Der goldne Topf*. The witch's victory would mean a literal appropriation of the story, the spirit prince's would mean an allegorical transformation of it, and the antagonism between the two, as we have said, reflects the irony of the tale's undecidable, mutually exclusive interpretations. The golden pot, a triumphant poetic achievement, is Anselmus' reward after the arduous task of writing. There is even a moment during his employment at the archivist's when the identity of the golden pot with the written

¹⁰¹ *HSW II/1* 264

¹⁰² *HSW II/1* 308

¹⁰³ *HSW II/1* 307

work he produces is made explicit. The archivist changes Anselmus' workplace and invites him to copy the new, hieroglyphic manuscript in the azure blue room where the golden pot is kept, but "der Porphyrtisch mit dem goldenen Topf war verschwunden, statt dessen stand ein mit violetter Samt behangener Tisch, auf dem die dem Anselmus bekannten Schreibmaterialien befandlich, in der Mitte des Zimmers und ein eben so beschlagener Lehnstuhl vor demselben."¹⁰⁴ The golden pot on a pedestal becomes writing materials on a desk. The equation of the two is no accident; only through the act of writing can Anselmus produce his trophy, the golden pot that is the finished monument of his newly acquired artistry, and the tale that, as mentioned above, contains himself as a character. The metafictional function of Hoffmann's golden pot, containing itself like an infinite Russian doll, bears a resemblance to John Donne's "well wrought urn" of *The Canonization*, Thomas Gray's "storied urn" of *Elegy Written in a Church Courtyard*, and Keats' Grecian urn in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, all of which, as the critic Cleanth Brooks famously and persuasively argues, are symbols for the poems that contain them.¹⁰⁵

The spirit prince defeats the witch and Anselmus plunges from the bottle into Serpentina's embrace. Together they move to a *Rittergut* in Atlantis owned by Lindhorst. Does this mean the tale is already prescribing an allegorical interpretation of itself in which Anselmus, dutiful secretary, stands for a poet who transcends his prosaic surroundings by producing a work of art? It is appropriate that Lindhorst, who played the role of the "spirit" in the duel, seems to suggest as much in the very last lines of the story: "Ist denn überhaupt des Anselmus Seligkeit etwas anderes als das

¹⁰⁴ *HSW II/1* 285

¹⁰⁵ Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well Wrought Urn*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947, pp. 3-21, 105-123, 151-166.

Leben in der Poesie...?“¹⁰⁶ However, the text contains a hint that Anselmus’ life of *Poesie* in Atlantis is made possible by his actual death in Dresden.¹⁰⁷ While trapped in the glass bottle, Anselmus has two neighbors, also students who have been punished for a similar mistake. They seem to harbor the illusion that they are freely moving about in Dresden—although it is unclear whether or not this is an illusion, and whether Anselmus is the one hallucinating that he is in the bottle. They ask Anselmus why he is standing on the bridge, staring transfixed into the water of the Elbe river. Since Anselmus has previously manifested the suicidal impulse to jump into the Elbe, this suggests that while he thinks he is breaking free of the crystal bottle and diving off the shelf into Serpentina’s embrace, in Dresden reality, he is plunging into the river where he drowns. The meandering, snaking Elbe is Serpentina’s sinister underbelly. Anselmus’ death is at once the necessary condition and the ironic negation of the heavenly apotheosis he achieves in Atlantis. In order to enter completely a fictional realm of his own making, Anselmus ceases to exist in his own reality. As a text-object, the written myth is a dead monument, a golden urn, as it were, preserving Anselmus’ memory. As Walter Ong is fond of saying: “Every written work is its author’s own epitaph...the paradox lies in the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ *HSW II/1*, 321.

¹⁰⁷ See McGlathery, James M.. “The Suicide Motif in ETA Hoffmann's ‘Der goldne Topf’”

Monatshefte für deutschen Unterricht, deutsche Sprache und Literatur 58 (1966): 115-23.

¹⁰⁸ Ong 81

Anselmus is resurrected only when the narrator engages in a “reading” that is at the same time a “writing” of the manuscript in front of him. His activity is thus identical to that of Anselmus. The content of the scene that emerges from the narrator’s vision is pure allegory. Dispensing altogether with what had always been the pretense of mimetic realism, the narrator renders Atlantis using the same mythical iconography that Serpentina and Lindhorst had used in their genealogical stories. It is a sacred ceremony (a marriage, after all) in which every prop and action takes on a higher significance: Anselmus ascends the marble stairs of the temple—Serpentina emerges with the golden pot—they embrace and the natural world rejoices around them. Allegory is the language of Atlantis. Allegorical signs are both its content and the method of its representation. While he was mystified by the Atlantis myth and the synesthetic messages he perceived underneath the elder tree, he now understands the language of nature, and every element of the natural world declares to him what it signifies. Let us take another look at the narrator’s vision:

Glühende Hyazinthen und Tulpianen und Rosen erheben ihre schönen Häupter und ihre Düfte rufen in gar lieblichen Lauten dem Glücklichen zu: wandle, wandle unter uns, Geliebter, der Du uns verstehst — unser Duft ist die Sehnsucht der Liebe — wir lieben Dich und sind Dein immerdar! — Die goldnen Strahlen brennen in glühenden Tönen: wir sind Feuer von der Liebe entzündet. Der Duft ist die Sehnsucht, aber Feuer das Verlangen, und wohnen wir nicht in Deiner Brust? Wir sind ja Dein eigen! — Es rischeln und rauschen die dunklen Büsche — die hohen Bäume: Komme zu uns! — Glücklicher! — Geliebter! Feuer ist das Verlangen, aber Hoffnung unser kühler Schatten. Wir umsäuseln liebend Dein Haupt, denn Du verstehst uns, weil die Liebe in Deiner Brust wohnt. — Die Quellen und Bäche plätschern und sprudeln: Geliebter, wandle nicht so schnell vorüber, schaue in unser Kristall — Dein Bild wohnt in uns, das wir liebend bewahren, denn Du hast uns verstanden! — Im Jubelchor zwitschern und singen bunte Vöglein: Höre uns, höre uns, wir sind die Freude, die Wonne, das Entzücken der Liebe! — Aber sehnsuchtsvoll schaut Anselmus nach dem herrlichen Tempel, der sich in weiter Ferne erhebt.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ *HSW II/I* 319

Anselmus has reached the oral “spirit” behind the written letter, which is also the figurative significance behind the literal significance of each symbol. That, as we have seen, is the content of the vision at a literal level. On the allegorical level, Anselmus has written a successful work of literature, and communes with his muse in a self-created mythical universe. The golden pot stands for the work of literature, and even it contains another metaphor within it: “[Serpentina] trägt den goldenen Topf, aus dem eine herrliche Lilie entsprossen.”¹¹⁰ This flower, the product of their marriage, is another poetic figure. Recall that the witch had been throwing soil from the golden pot at the archivist during their duel, and lilies sprang from the soil when it touched the archivist’s robe. The lily sprang from soil that stood for the letter that “killeth.” As in the battle, in Atlantis the soil of literal significance gives rise to a lily of figurative significance, this time contained in the pot.

6. Conclusion

The “letter and spirit” pair, in the two senses used here, contains and reflects the related oppositions that Hoffmann renders in a violently polarized and somewhat exaggerated manner: material and ethereal, fleshly and divine, bureaucrat and poet, writing and music/speech, death and transcendence. Even the historical circumstances of Hoffmann’s composition of the tale reflect its radical structural dualism. The contrasting worlds of Atlantis and Dresden are both contained in the peaceful world

¹¹⁰ *HSW II/1* 320

of a story Hoffmann was writing while he was living in the war-torn world of 1813 Dresden. A battle was literally raging between Napoleon and the Russo-Prussian alliance for control of the city, while Hoffmann sat in his *Dachstübchen* surrounded by the figments of his fairy-tale fancy. Hoffmann's 19 Aug. 1813 letter to his publisher reads:

In keiner als dieser düstern verhängnisvollen Zeit, wo man seine Existenz von Tage zu Tage fristet und ihrer nicht froh wird, hat mich das Schreiben so angesprochen—es ist, als schlosse sich mir ein wunderbares Reich auf, das aus meinem Innern hervorgehend und sich gestaltend mich dem Drange des Äußern entrückte—Mich beschäftigt... vorzüglich ein *Märchen*.¹¹¹

It is difficult to say to what extent the historical moment affected Hoffmann's aesthetic methodology, since he continued to use similar techniques in his other works, composed in less violent times. One thing is sure: the tendency in Hoffmann is clearly not to strive for balance, moderation, "rounded-out" character, or understated emotion, but to accentuate opposing forces and push them apart into their most potent forms. Anselmus is seduced by the serpent toward the poetic and the spiritual, while at the same time writing in a language that regresses more and more toward insignificance until it is reduced to an incomprehensible sign that must be reinvested with an aura of sacredness in order to be revived. The tale can only end with the archivist's question, to which there are two radically conflicting answers: either yes, Anselmus has written himself into a paradise of *Poesie*, or no, he has drowned himself in the Elbe. Far from an attempt to reconcile the Christian dualisms I alluded to earlier, Hoffmann seems to be deeply enmeshed in them, while at the same time

¹¹¹ Safranski 312

longing for an alternative form of representation like the exotic hieroglyph which, as Assmann says, represents “das Paradoxon eines zugleich sinnlichen und spirituellen Zeichens, bei dem es nicht entscheidbar ist, was Außen und was Innen ist, wo die materielle Hülle aufhört und die geistige Substanz beginnt. Die Hieroglyphe ist ein holistisches Zeichen, das die Logik der dualen Zeichenstruktur samt der damit verbundenen Werthierarchie sprengt.”¹¹² Hieroglyphs, as was thought at least until their decoding, represented an in-between sign, existing as both the representation and source of some divine secret, reflecting and prescribing the structure of nature itself. Like Anselmus, whose goal is to learn a poetic language, the language of nature, Hoffmann is experimenting with forms of literary representation. The result is a rarefied kind of allegory, which incidentally, I have argued is the language of nature that Anselmus finally deciphers in Atlantis. There is an affinity between allegory and hieroglyph, just as there is a continuity between Anselmus’ interpreting the hieroglyphs in the archivist’s office and his interpreting the natural elements in Atlantis. In his discussion of allegory in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*,¹¹³ Walter Benjamin notes the connection with hieroglyphs, which Schopenhauer had perceived before him. He quotes Schopenhauer’s *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* §50 as follows:

Wenn nun der Zweck aller Kunst Mittheilung der aufgefaßten Idee ist...; wenn ferner das Ausgehen vom Begriff in der Kunst verwerflich ist, so werden wir es nicht billigen können, wenn man ein Kunstwerk absichtlich und eingeständlich zum Ausdruck eines Begriffes bestimmt: dieses ist der Fall in der Allegorie... Wenn also ein allegorisches Bild auch Kunstwerth

¹¹² Assmann 268

¹¹³ Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1/1. Ed. Tiedemann, Rolf and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974. English translations will be from Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Tr. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1998.

hat, so ist dieser von dem, was es als Allegorie leistet, ganz gesondert und unabhängig: ein solches Kunstwerk dient zweien Zwecken zugleich, nämlich dem Ausdruck eines Begriffes und dem Ausdruck einer Idee: nur letzterer kann Kunstzweck seyn; der andere ist ein fremder Zweck, die spielende Ergötzlichkeit, ein Bild zugleich den Dienst einer Inschrift, als *Hieroglyphe*, leisten zu lassen...Zwar kann ein allegorisches Bild auch gerade in dieser Eigenschaft lebhaften Eindruck auf das Gemüth hervorbringen: dasselbe würde dann aber, unter gleichen Umständen, auch eine Inschrift wirken. Z.B. wenn in dem Gemüth eines Menschen der Wunsch nach Ruhm dauernd und fest gewurzelt ist...und dieser tritt nun vor den Genius des Ruhmes [von Annibale Carracci] mit seinen Lordbeerkronen; so wird sein ganzes Gemüth dadurch angeregt und seine Kraft zur Thätigkeit aufgerufen: aber dasselbe würde auch geschehen, wenn er plötzlich das Wort "Rühm" groß und deutlich an der Wand erblickte.¹¹⁴ (my emphasis)

According to Benjamin, Schopenhauer is right to align allegory with hieroglyph and thus with writing, but his perfunctory dismissal of both represents an "untenable," "modern," "neo-classical prejudice," where allegory and hieroglyph are simply "modes of designation."¹¹⁵ This is writing in the utilitarian, bureaucratic sense. Even Privy Archivist Lindhorst, the bureaucrat who suggests at the end that we read the whole thing as an allegory for poetic transcendence, expresses the modern prejudice

¹¹⁴ "If starting from a concept is objectionable in art, then we shall not be able to approve, when a work of art is intentionally and avowedly chosen to express a concept; this is the case in *allegory*...When therefore, an allegorical picture also has artistic value, this is quite separate from and independent of what it achieves as allegory. Such a work of art serves two purposes simultaneously, namely the expression of a concept and the expression of an Idea. Only the latter can be the aim of art; the other is a foreign aim, namely the trifling amusement of carving a picture to serve at the same time as an inscription, as a *hieroglyphic*...It is true that an allegorical picture can in just this quality produce a vivid impression on the mind and feelings; but under the same circumstances even an inscription would have the same effect. For instance, if the desire for fame is firmly and permanently rooted in a man's mind...and if he now stands before the *Genius of Fame* [by Annibale Carracci] with its laurel crowns, then his whole mind is thus excited, and his powers are called into activity. But the same thing would also happen if he suddenly saw the word "fame" in large clear letters on the wall" (my emphasis). Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, I, 50. Quoted in Benjamin 338/162.

¹¹⁵ "untenable," Benjamin 338-9/162

when he seems to insist in an earlier scene *against* considering the Atlantis myth an allegory:

“Ja, lacht nur recht herzlich,” fuhr der Archivarius Lindhorst fort, “euch mag wohl das, was ich freilich nur in ganz dürftigen Zügen erzählt habe, unsinnig und toll vorkommen, aber es ist dessen unerachtet nichts weniger als ungereimt oder auch nur allegorisch gemeint, sondern buchstäblich wahr.”¹¹⁶ (my emphasis)

Lindhorst is telling us to read literally the love story of Prince Phosphorus and the lily, who gives birth to a snake, who marries a fire salamander. His statement is clearly ironic, and gains a larger significance when seen in historical context; Hoffmann was writing at a time when allegory was decidedly out of fashion, just as it is, at least nominally, now. He is reintroducing an antiquated form of expression. Goethe—also a poet-bureaucrat like Lindhorst (and, ironically—but only very ironically, Hoffmann)—continued to be a looming authoritative presence in mainstream literary opinion despite the rebellious attitudes of the Romantic group. And he did not see allegory as worthy of much attention:

Es ist ein großer Unterschied, ob der Dichter zum Allgemeinen das Besondere sucht oder im Besonderen das Allgemeine schaut. Aus jener Art entsteht Allegorie, wo das Besondere nur als Beispiel, als Exempel des Allgemeinen gilt; die letztere aber ist die Natur der Poesie: sie spricht ein Besonderes aus, ohne ans Allgemeine zu denken oder darauf hinzuweisen. Wer nun dieses Besondere lebendig faßt, erhält zugleich das Allgemeine mit, ohne es gewahr zu werden, oder erst spät.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ *HSW III* 248

¹¹⁷ “There is a great difference between a poet’s seeking the particular from the general and his seeing the general in the particular. The former gives rise to allegory, where the particular serves only as an instance or example of the general; the latter, however, is the true nature of poetry: the expression of the particular without any thought of, or reference to, the general. Whoever grasps the particular in all its vitality also grasps the general, without being aware of it, or only becoming aware of it at a

The opposition Goethe sets up between allegory and symbol, at the expense of the former, was also shared by the Romantic generation. His idea that symbol existed in an autonomous world of its own, while allegory functioned as a mere pointer to a concept, inspired Novalis to write of the ideal image: "Bild - nicht Allegorie, nicht Symbol eines Fremden: Symbol von sich selbst."¹¹⁸ Schelling defined the terminology in almost the same way: "diejenige Darstellung, in welcher das Allgemeine das Besondere bedeutet, ist Schematismus. Diejenige Darstellung, aber, in welcher das Besondere das Allgemeine bedeutet, [. . .] ist allegorisch. Die Synthesis dieser beiden, [. . .] wo beide absolut eines sind, ist das Symbolische."¹¹⁹

Against all these thinkers, Hoffmann was reinventing the allegory for the modern age. The subtitle to *Der goldne Topf*, "ein Märchen aus der neueren Zeit"¹²⁰ already indicates the position Hoffman is taking between old and new literary modes. This is the essence of allegory, as Craig Owens puts it: "A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present-these are [allegory's] two most fundamental impulses."¹²¹ It is uncanny how well Owens' theory of

later stage." Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Samtliche Werke*, XXXVIII, *Schriften zur Literatur*, 3. 261. Quoted in Benjamin 338/161.

¹¹⁸ "Image: not allegory, not symbol of an other: symbol of itself." Tr. A.K. Novalis. *Schriften*. Ed. Kluckhohn, Paul and Richard Samuel, W. Kohlhammer, vol. II, p. 562, Fragment 185. Quoted in Dickson, Scheila. "E.T.A. Hoffmann: Mind, Mythology, and Meaning." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 32.3 (1996): 251-263.

¹¹⁹ "The representation in which the general signifies the particular is schematism. But the representation in which the particular signifies the general is allegorical. The synthesis of these two, where both are one absolutely, is the symbolic." Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph. "Philosophie der Kunst (aus dem handschriftlichen Nachlaß)." I, 5. 407. Quoted in Dickson 257.

¹²⁰ *HSW III* 229

¹²¹ Owens, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism." *October* 12 (1980): 67-86.

allegory, which draws heavily on Benjamin's work and was developed in order to describe postmodern art, illuminates *Der goldne Topf*. He starts with the idea of textual commentary, and then posits allegory as a textual commentary of itself that replaces traditional meaning with new meaning:

Let us say for the moment that allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another; the Old Testament, for example, becomes allegorical when it is read as a prefiguration of the New. This provisional description—which is not a definition—accounts for both allegory's origin in commentary and exegesis, as well as its continued affinity with them; as Northrop Frye indicates, the allegorical work tends to prescribe the direction of its own commentary. It is this metatextual aspect that is invoked whenever allegory is attacked as interpretation merely appended post facto to a work, a rhetorical ornament or flourish. Still, as Frye contends, "genuine allegory is a structural element in literature; it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone." In allegorical structure, then, one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest. ... Conceived in this way, allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning. *I am interested, however, in what occurs when this relationship takes place within works of art, when it describes their structure. Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other (allos = other + agoreuei = to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. This is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance.*¹²²

As an allegorist, Hoffmann does not restore an original meaning to—for instance—the biblical serpent, but adds another meaning: the muse who seduces him, not toward sin and fleshly desires (that is Veronika's role), but toward heavenly and ethereal joys. And I have argued that *Der goldne Topf* contains a commentary on itself, prescribing its own interpretation. The *Märchen* is a palimpsest, to use Owens'

¹²² Owens 69 (my emphasis)

idea: a text written on parchment over an old one which has been scraped off, but is still visible with modern multispectral technology. The Atlantis myth is the faded fragment of a traditional form with a narrative commentary superimposed upon it: that of Dresden, where Anselmus pursues his poetic education. The natural elements found in Atlantis are simultaneously reflected *and* prescribed in the hieroglyphs Anselmus is trying to decipher in the copying room. Even the parchment he is working with appears to him for a moment to be the ruins of an Atlantic temple. The duel between the letter and spirit, feather-born witch and spirit prince, over possession and thus interpretive appropriation of the golden pot, *Der goldne Topf*, ends in the triumph of the spiritual or figurative significance of the tale, articulated (albeit with intensely undecidable irony) in the final line by the spirit-prince. Finally, Anselmus' struggle to learn the language of nature, and his momentary linguistic impasse represented by entrapment in a glass bottle, reflect the narrator's and Hoffmann's struggle to find the correct language to describe their artistic vision. The language they find is that of allegory, which uses graphic signs and so represents a special kind of writing. Craig Owens continues:

If allegory is identified as a supplement, then it is also aligned with writing, insofar as writing is conceived as supplementary to speech. It is of course within the same philosophic tradition which subordinates writing to speech that allegory is subordinated to the symbol. It might be demonstrated, from another perspective, that the suppression of allegory is identical with the suppression of writing. For allegory, whether visual or verbal, is essentially a form of script—this is the basis for Walter Benjamin's treatment of it in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: "At one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing."¹²³

¹²³ Owens 84

Despite the seeming triumph of the oral spirit over the written letter when the squawking parrot pecks out the eyes of the inky-black cat, the subtext of the tale is that everything is put in motion by Anselmus', the narrators', and Hoffmann's writing. Nothing is constituted orally in Hoffmann; no fictional creation emerges without it having been written down. Benjamin adds that in allegory,

Schrift verklärt sich im Laute nicht; vielmehr bleibt dessen Welt ganz selbstgenugsam auf die Entfaltung ihrer eigenen Wucht bedacht. Schrift und Laut stehen in hochgespannter Polarität einander gegenüber. Ihr Verhältnis begründet eine Dialektik, in deren Licht der 'Schwulst' als durch und durch planvolle, konstruktive Sprachgeberde rechtfertigt. Die Wahrheit zu sagen, fällt diese Ansicht der Sache, als der reichsten und glücklichsten eine, dem, der die Quellenschriften aufgeschlossen vornimmt, in den Schoß. Nur wo ein Schwindel vor der Tiefe ihres Abgrunds die Kraft des forschenden Durchdenkens überwog, konnte der Schwulst zum Popanz der epigonalen Stilistik werden. Die Kluft zwischen bedeutendem Schriftbild und berauschem Sprachlaut nötigt, wie das gefestete Massiv der Wortbedeutung in ihr aufgerissen wird, den blick in die Sprachtiefe.¹²⁴

Benjamin's term "Schwulst"—bombast—for the allegory appears in *Der goldne Topf* within a strikingly similar context. When Registrar Heerbrand hears the Atlantis myth, he calls it "Schwulst,"¹²⁵—and that is precisely what it is, but as Benjamin says, it is justified in the light of a dialectic of writing and sound, letter and spirit in *Der*

¹²⁴ "Writing does not achieve transcendence by being voiced; rather does the world of written language remain self-sufficient and intent on the display of its own substance. Written language and sound confront each other in tense polarity. The relationship between them gives rise to a dialectic, in the light of which 'bombast' is justified as a as a consistently purposeful and constructive linguistic gesture...the division between signifying written language and intoxicating spoken language opens up a gulf in the solid massif of verbal meaning and forces the gaze into the depths of language."

Benjamin 377/201.

¹²⁵ *HSW II/I* 248

goldne Topf that ends in a sublation where both are preserved and yet negated.

Anselmus transcends his literal death only by circumscribing a hieroglyphic heaven for himself on parchment paper, and at the moment of death, Anselmus can hear nature's hieroglyphs speak to him. The temptation is too strong to resist adding: it is only in the year Hoffmann dies that the Egyptian hieroglyphs are deciphered.

CHAPTER II - *Der Einsiedler Serapion*

By writing himself into the myth, Anselmus dies and is reborn into a new fictional life of his own creation that can only be gestured at allegorically. We are not shown what a poet's "Leben in der Poesie" would be like, except in an obliquely symbolic fashion. The curtain falls on Anselmus' unmoving, transfigured face. What could happen after that? Hoffmann lets his narrator admit reluctantly that a life in Poesie is an unsustainable life: "in wenigen Minuten bin ich selbst aus diesem schönen Saal, der noch lange kein Rittergut in Atlantis ist, versetzt in mein Dachstübchen."¹²⁶ As if in response to this unsatisfying conclusion, the hermit in Hoffmann's *Der Einsiedler Serapion* represents an attempt at sustained life in Poesie. As the first story of Hoffmann's late collection *Die Serapionsbrüder* (4 vols., 1819-21),¹²⁷ it begins in a sense where *Der goldne Topf* left off: at the poet's entrance into his own self-created universe. Like Anselmus, the hermit Serapion has undergone his own kind of death to the world and now lives alone in the forest, inhabiting a tranquil self-made paradise of phantasms.

Der Einsiedler Serapion is given critical attention chiefly in order to untangle and describe Hoffmann's poetological program, dubbed the "Serapionic principle" by a character in the frame narrative that connects the stories. The hermit Serapion is

¹²⁶ HSW II/I 321

¹²⁷ Hoffmann, E.T.A. *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden* (6 vols.). *Die Serapionsbrüder*. Vol. 4 (2001). Ed. Hartmut Steinecke and Wulf Segebrecht (with Gerhard Allroggen, Friedhelm Auhuber, Hartmut Mangold, and Ursula Segebrecht). Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985-2003. Abbreviated here as *HSW IV*.

proclaimed by critics to be Hoffmann's paradigm of the ideal Romantic artist.¹²⁸ A closer reading yields ambiguities in Serapion's ideal status and a different view of his programmatic significance. I argue that *Der Einsiedler Serapion* suggests, above all, the impossibility of the harmonized, undifferentiated relation of text, speech and vision, of literature and sensory life that the hermit pretends to have achieved. Serapion's apparently easygoing *Heiterkeit* is the façade that hides an underlying bad faith driven by the consciousness of his fantasies as self-generated and the constant struggle required to maintain their coherence in the face of an intruding, contradictory external world. Serapion cannot shut out the "real" world completely; instead, he must continue a difficult relation with it to reconcile it with his fixed idea, the content of which is formed by Christian saint legends. Serapion's condition gains a *Universalitätsanspruch* within Hoffmann's oeuvre only when it is seen to express the impossibility of the ideal of a complete inner existence, sealed off from the world of people and technology. On a linguistic level, Serapion's flight from civilization is an escape from the technology of the written and printed word, yet texts are the hidden precondition of his fancified consciousness. The satisfying reconciliation of book-fed imagination and prosaic reality turns out to be an impossible fiction.

After bidding his gathered friends to uncork a bottle of wine, the *Serapionsbruder* Cyprian begins the story of an adventure he had years ago. Wandering in the forest without a guide, he loses his way about two hours from the

¹²⁸ See Brown, Hilda. *E.T.A. Hoffmann and the Serapiontic Principle: Critique and Creativity*. New York: Camden House, 2006. See also Horn, Eva. "Die Versuchung des Heiligen Serapion: Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wahnsinn bei E.T.A. Hoffmann." *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 76.2 (2002): 214-228.

southern German city of B*** (almost certainly Bamberg¹²⁹). He comes across a wild-haired hermit sitting on a rock, apparently conversing with imaginary men. The hermit flees, angry at the interruption. Cyprian later learns that the hermit is from high nobility, educated, witty, and possessing the finest poetic talents. He has been in and out of a mental institution, but his mind seems untroubled—aside from the fixed idea that he is the legendary saint Serapion, who was tortured and executed by the Roman Emperor Decius in 249 CE. Cyprian is intrigued, studies some psychiatric literature on insanity (Pinel, Reil), and goes back into the forest intending to “cure” Serapion of his madness by persuading him to renounce the delusion. Without success; the hermit treats Cyprian as the insane party, making a number of cogent arguments compelling Cyprian to concede that there is no way to prove whether the forest around Bamberg or the Theban desert is the true “reality.” Cyprian is surprised that Serapion does not seem to suffer at all from his delusional existence. On the contrary, Serapion is constantly delighted by the figments of his fancy. He receives visits from literary and religious titans of history: Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, Hilarion, and St. Anthony. Sitting at the top of a nearby mountain, gazing at the distant towers of Alexandria, he envisions fantastic events that become the subject of his stories. Cyprian is struck by the quality of the stories Serapion tells: “Alle Gestalten traten mit einer plastischen Ründung, mit einem glühenden Leben hervor, daß man fortgerissen, bestrickt von magischer Gewalt wie im Traum daran glauben mußte, daß Serapion alles selbst wirklich von seinem Berge erschaut.”¹³⁰ After a brief period of

¹²⁹ See Segebrecht, Wulf. *Autobiographie und Dichtung: Eine Studie zum Werk E.T.A. Hoffmanns*. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967. 133.

¹³⁰ *HSW IV* 34

friendship Cyprian leaves the hermit. He returns three years later to find Serapion dead in his hut, arms folded peacefully on his breast.

1. “Die Duplizität des Seins”

In this brief introductory story, Hoffmann treats a familiar theme of his, the division of reality between the subject’s internal (fantastic) and external (perceptual) world, with an important new accent. Serapion has succeeded, so it seems, in transgressing the division and remaining beyond it. This is the apparently fortunate consequence of his *idée fixe*. As Henriett Lindner observes,¹³¹ such an overtly positive representation of madness appears only Hoffmann’s later works (1818-1822), and there only occasionally. What the mad characters in Hoffmann’s earlier work (1814-1818) share is a horrific feeling that they are living on the boundary between two opposed worlds, and that they are passive victims of a higher power batting them back and forth between these worlds. Nathanael (*Der Sandmann*), Theodor (*Das öde Haus*), Medardus (*Elixiere des Teufels*), Anselmus (*Der goldne Topf*), Ferdinand (*Die Automate*), and at times even Hoffmann’s alter ego Johannes Kreisler (*Kreisleriana*), to name just a few, are subject to these often torturous oscillations.

Limited narrative focalization that centers on the characters’ subjective experience leads in the earlier work to a carefully balanced ambiguity for both character *and* reader about which of these worlds—fantastic or mimetic-realistic—is

¹³¹ Lindner, Henriett. “Schnöde Kunststücke gefallener Geister”: *E.T.A. Hoffmanns Werk im Kontext der zeitgenössischen Seelenkunde*. Hamburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001. 269.

the “true,” ontologically prior world of the story. All we know is what the characters know, and if they are unsure what kind of world they inhabit, so are we. At the level of textual discourse, Hoffmann’s ambiguous wordings sustain the balancing act. Take, for example, a famous passage from *Der goldne Topf*, where Anselmus watches his human mentor undergo an apparent—or, of course, a real—transformation:

Der Archivarius hatte dem Studenten Anselmus ein kleines Fläschchen mit einem goldgelben Likör gegeben und nun schritt er rasch von dannen, so daß er in der tiefen Dämmerung, die unterdessen eingebrochen, mehr in das Tal hinabzuschweben als zu gehen schien. Schon war er in der Nähe des Koselschen Gartens, da setzte sich der Wind in den weiten Überrock und trieb die Schöße auseinander, daß sie wie ein Paar große Flügel in den Lüften flatterten und es dem Studenten Anselmus, der verwunderungsvoll dem Archivarius nachsah, vorkam, als breite ein großer Vogel die Fittiche aus zum raschen Fluge. — Wie der Student nun so in die Dämmerung hineinstarrte, da erhob sich mit krächzendem Geschrei ein weißgrauer Geier hoch in die Lüfte und er merkte nun wohl, daß das weiße Geflatter, das er noch immer für den davonschreitenden Archivarius gehalten, schon eben der Geier gewesen sein müsse, unerachtet er nicht begreifen konnte, wo denn der Archivarius mit einem Male hingeschwunden.¹³²

The reader wonders with Anselmus whether the archivist and the vulture are separate beings, or whether the archivist has really metamorphosed. The “als ob” and “wie” formulations, as well Anselmus’ retrospective reinterpretation (“schon eben der Geier gewesen sein müsse”) that is still uncertain (“unerachtet er nicht begreifen konnte...”), give the event its deliberately undecidable character. Tzvetan Todorov calls this hesitation on the part of the reader the essential feature of the fantastic genre.¹³³ Says Todorov: “‘*I nearly reached the point of believing*’: that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would

¹³² HSW III/I 257

¹³³ Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic*. Tr. Richard Howard. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975.

lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life.”¹³⁴ If the reader knew it was a supernatural world, he or she could rest easy and approach Hoffmann’s story as a conventional *Märchen*, suspending disbelief of supernatural occurrences. What the reader is dealing with, however, is an original Hoffmann invention: the *Wirklichkeitsmärchen*, as it is called by critics,¹³⁵ or “ein Märchen aus der neueren Zeit”¹³⁶ as Hoffmann puts it. For every supernatural event, a rational explanation is offered—and at the same time, shown to be a bit implausible—that would reintegrate the event into the mimetic, “realistic” world we recognize as our own. The thing Anselmus thought was the archivist was actually a vulture all along... or was it?

It is quite appropriate that Todorov draws on Hoffmann in order to define the critical term “fantastic,” since the use of the word was first surfaced as a generic category in France in the late 1820s to describe Hoffmann’s fiction.¹³⁷ It seems that the origin of the fantastic genre can be traced back to Hoffmann’s desire to involve the reader in a kind of “participatory poetics,” to use Walter Ong’s term,¹³⁸ that conceals the material textuality of the story and attempts to dissolve the barrier between reader reality and fictional reality. Recall the reader’s entrance into *Der goldne Topf* in the notorious seventh vigil. Also, recall the implication that the reader is to marry the third of the archivist’s daughters and ascend to Atlantis with them. Because it brings the reader in close sympathy with the character, the effect Todorov

¹³⁴ Todorov 26

¹³⁵ Wührl, Paul Wolfgang. “Zur Poetologie des Wirklichkeitsmärchens.” *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Der goldne Topf, Erläuterungen und Dokumente*. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam, 2004. 105-109.

¹³⁶ *HSW II/I* 229

¹³⁷ Woodgate, Kenneth B. *Das Phantastische bei E.T.A. Hoffmann*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999. 15.

¹³⁸ Ong 67

calls *hésitation*, executed magnificently in the above passage, is yet another of Hoffmann's techniques for engaging the reader in a seemingly unmediated fictional universe.

The story *Der Einsiedler Serapion* is different. Here the reader can be relatively sure that Bamberg reality is the stable fictional world, while for Serapion, the division between perception and imagination is not a problem. Reality is no longer a choice between two mutually exclusive versions, but forms a seamless continuity. Serapion recognizes components of the Bamberg world such as Cyprian, yet on the other hand, his illusions are lasting and coherent, always occupying his visual field: the Theban desert in which he imagines himself to be, the faint view of Alexandria's towers in the distance, and hallucinations of distinguished literary figures from the past.

Serapion's mental status can be described in the following way: his mind no longer distinguishes between perceived phenomena and the products of his imagination; all belong to one reality, all are equally "real." He is certain that his phantom interlocutors and his inspired visions belong to the same reality as visitors such as Cyprian. When this conviction is challenged, Serapion responds by arguing that the faculties concerned with perception and imagination come from the same source, subsumed under one entity he calls *Geist*, which can be translated as "mind," with overtones of "spirit" and "imagination":

Viele haben ... gemeint, ich bilde mir nur ein, das vor mir im äußern Leben wirklich sich ereignen zu sehen, was sich nur als Geburt meines Geistes, meiner Phantasie gestalte. Ich halte dies nun für eine der spitzfindigsten Albernheiten, die es geben kann. Ist es nicht der Geist allein, der das, was sich um uns her begibt in Raum und Zeit, zu erfassen vermag? – Ja was hört, was sieht, was fühlt in uns? – vielleicht

die toten Maschinen die wir Auge – Ohr – Hand etc. nennen und nicht der Geist? – Gestaltet sich nun etwa der Geist seine in Raum und Zeit bedingte Welt im Innern auf eigne Hand und überläßt jene Funktionen einem andern uns inwohnenden Prinzip? – Wie ungereimt! Ist es nun also der Geist allein, der die Begebenheit vor uns erfaßt, so hat sich das auch wirklich begeben was er dafür anerkennt.¹³⁹

The classification of perception as a species of imagination was not uncommon in Romantic conceptions of the mind, and can be traced in the philosophies of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), to a greater extent, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854), all the way to the English Romantic poets Coleridge and Wordsworth.¹⁴⁰ Hoffmann is known to have made a careful study of some of Schelling's work,¹⁴¹ which positioned *Einbildungskraft* as the mediator between self and world. Serapion's notion of perception corresponds quite closely, however, to Wordsworth's notion of the dual imagination described in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The "primary imagination" Wordsworth holds to be "the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."¹⁴² According to the poet, perception is a fundamentally imaginative and creative act; the physical organs of perception perform their functions, but the *prime* agent of perception is not a mechanistic organ. It is a "living power," a force that creates in a manner analogous to divine creation. The "secondary imagination," on the other hand, is closer to the notion of imagination which is contrasted to perception in everyday usage; the secondary

¹³⁹ HSW IV 34

¹⁴⁰ See the discussion of *Einbildungskraft* in Fichte and Schelling and Coleridge in: Engell, James. *The Creative Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. 306-309.

¹⁴¹ Brown 49

¹⁴² Wordsworth 477

“dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify.”¹⁴³ It incorporates the conscious and active processes of the imagination, it “struggles” toward its end rather than passively receiving sense-data. What is most important for Wordsworth is that both types of imagination are really the same kind of entity: “the secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation.”¹⁴⁴ For Serapion, the line between primary and secondary has become blurred to the point where he no longer distinguishes between the products of either. Without the sensation of doing so, he is able to slide seamlessly between two worlds, one self-created and the other imposed on him from the outside. His mind is selective about what perceptions are ignored or incorporated into the illusion; his is “the mighty world / Of eye, and ear,--both what they half create, / And what perceive.”¹⁴⁵ He ignores the trees of the forest, seeing only a desert landscape, but responds to Cyprian and others from the town who happen by his hut, engaging them in conversation. When discoursing rationally with Cyprian, he is able to defend the internal consistency of his imagined world, but his relativization of the “real” world vis-à-vis the imagined extends beyond a mere intellectual understanding; it is an irrational “given,” present and manifest in the workings of his consciousness.

While most of the *Serapionsbrüder* express wonder at the hermit’s altered state of consciousness, Lothar, the most skeptical in the group, treats Serapion’s condition as woefully lacking:

¹⁴³ Wordsworth 477-8

¹⁴⁴ Wordsworth 477

¹⁴⁵ Wordsworth 482

Dein Einsiedler, mein Cyprianus, war ein wahrhafter Dichter, er hatte das wirklich geschaut was er verkündete, und deshalb ergriff seine Rede Herz und Gemüt. – Armer Serapion, worin bestand dein Wahnsinn anders, als daß irgendein feindlicher Stern dir die Erkenntnis der Duplizität geraubt hatte, von der eigentlich allein unser irdisches Sein bedingt ist. Es gibt eine innere Welt, und die geistige Kraft, sie in voller Klarheit, in dem vollendetsten Glanze des regesten Lebens zu schauen, aber es ist unser irdisches Erbteil, daß eben die Außenwelt in der wir eingeschachtet, als der Hebel wirkt, der jene Kraft in Bewegung setzt. Die innern Erscheinungen gehen auf in dem Kreise, den die äußeren um uns bilden und den der Geist nur zu überfliegen vermag in dunklen geheimnisvollen Ahnungen, die sich nie zum deutlichen Bilde gestalten. Aber du, o mein Einsiedler! statuiertest keine Außenwelt, du sahst den versteckten Hebel nicht, die auf dein Inneres einwirkende Kraft; und wenn du mit grauenhaftem Scharfsinn behauptetest, daß es nur der Geist sei, der sehe, höre, fühle, der Tat und Begebenheit fasse, und daß also auch sich wirklich das begeben was er dafür anerkenne, so vergaßest du, daß die Außenwelt den in den Körper gebannten Geist zu jenen Funktionen der Wahrnehmung zwingt nach Willkür. Dein Leben, lieber Anachoret, war ein steter Traum, aus dem du in dem Jenseits gewiß nicht schmerzlich erwachtest.¹⁴⁶

Some critics¹⁴⁷ see Lothar's reservations as Hoffmann's and so treat Serapion as an artist *manqué* who is blind to, as Lothar puts it, the "Duplizität" of existence and so cannot represent Hoffmann's real artistic program, which seeks to combine elements of both the supernatural and mimetic. Yet Serapion has not renounced the external world entirely and retreated into his imaginative *Wahnwelt*. He is not always dreaming with open eyes or seeing things that are completely divorced from reality. His ability to tend a garden, live independently and converse with Cyprian shows that he perceives and responds to external stimuli. For Serapion, the "versteckten Hebel," by which the external world forces him to acknowledge itself, still functions. It is only that he makes no distinction between its products and those of his own

¹⁴⁶ HSW IV 68

¹⁴⁷ See Werner, Hans Georg. *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Darstellung und Deutung der Wirklichkeit im dichterischen Werk*. Weimar: Arion Verlag, 1962. 38-52. See also Segebrecht 134.

imagination. From the *goldner Topf* passage quoted above, it appears that Serapion's relativization of both realities is in fact consistent with the way Hoffmann writes. In order to continue, the reader must suspend the decision about which reality is real, and accept the continued coexistence of both worlds. Through the uncertainty of sustained *hésitation*, Hoffmann draws the reader into Serapion's state of consciousness. Serapion is Hoffmann's ideal reader.

At the same time, Hoffmann appears to set up Serapion as a model of the ideal poetic artist—as Hilda Brown puts it, a “*potenziert Kreisler*”¹⁴⁸--whose aesthetic technique is formulated as a principle. Hoffmann's oft cited *Serapiontisches Prinzip* is articulated explicitly only once, during a conversation between the gathered group of storytelling friends. Lothar explicitly elevates the principle to an aesthetic doctrine which is to be followed by the group:

Jeder prüfe wohl, ob er auch wirklich das geschaut, was er zu verkünden unternommen, ehe er es wagt laut damit zu werden. Wenigstens strebe jeder recht ernstlich darnach, das Bild, das ihm im Innern aufgegangen recht zu erfassen mit allen seinen Gestalten, Farben, Lichtern und Schatten, und dann, wenn er sich recht entzündet davon fühlt, die Darstellung ins äußere Leben [zu] tragen. So muß unser Verein auf tüchtige Grundpfeiler gestützt dauern und für jeden von uns allen sich gar erquicklich gestalten. Der Einsiedler Serapion sei unser Schutzpatron, er lasse seine Sehergabe über uns walten, seiner Regel wollen wir folgen, als getreue Serapions-Brüder! ... sprechen wir von dem Serapiontischem Prinzip! Was haltet ihr davon?¹⁴⁹

Images and events appear before the artist as they do for Serapion on his mountain—as vividly to the mind's eye as they would to the physical eye—before the artist attempts to represent them in language. Lothar draws on the—as he says—“*altes, bis*

¹⁴⁸ Brown 39

¹⁴⁹ *HSW IV* 69

zum Überdruß wiederholtes”¹⁵⁰ cliché of the poet as a seer, possessing a *Sehergabe*, to divide the process of literary production into two stages: seeing and representing. The seeing stage is given high precedence and is the only stage described in any detail by the principle; poets produce mediocre works if they have not fully grasped (“erfassen”) their subject matter in a visionary internal space, “im Innern.” It is a space beyond media, where objects present themselves immediately in all their color and detail before the poet, who perceives them with the age-old “mind’s eye.”

A characteristically Romantic aesthetic of looking beyond the limits of the medium is being reinforced here programmatically. Manfred Momberger, in his analysis of Wackenroder’s art criticism, describes the Romantic “gaze” as follows: “Der Blick geht gar nicht mehr auf die Leinwand, sondern gleichsam durch sie hindurch, um das Wesen der Darstellung selbst zu erfassen, das sich jeglicher äußerlichen Repräsentation entzieht. Das ist der romantische Blick...”.¹⁵¹ This seems to be the kind of “inneres Schauen,” prior to all medial representation, Hoffmann is striving for with the Serapiontic principle. Lothar’s concentration on sight at the expense of the other five senses and his use of the vocabulary of visual art imply a relation to subject matter similar to the painter’s—but language, the medium of Serapion’s distinct art, is not mentioned in the Serapiontic principle. The represented object is to be sought underneath the linguistic “surface,” while language itself is ignored as a self-evident externality, flowing naturally from the poet once he is “entzündet” by envisioned images. The Serapiontic principle is a literary method that ignores the acts of writing and reading literature. As a poet, Serapion does not write—

¹⁵⁰ *HSW IV 67*

¹⁵¹ Momberger 26

he speaks. As a consumer of fiction, Serapion is no longer active—he neither reads nor listens. Elevating such a character as Serapion to the status of an ideal poet is a gesture tinged by both the irony of idealizing an impossibility, and the longing after Serapion’s direct, non-mediated, non-linguistic experience of fiction.

2. *The Fragility of Serapion’s Wahnwelt*

Serapion appears to be in a serene and cheerful state of mind, having attained spiritual *Heiterkeit*. He leads, as he says, “ein heitres ruhiges mit Gott versöhntes Leben.”¹⁵² The achievement of this state of existence was intensely difficult, Serapion intimates. In order to enter a paradise created by the mind, Serapion had to renounce the reality of Bamberg which meant making a radical break from normal consciousness. Seeing himself as a martyr in the tradition of Christian saint legends, Serapion remembers the moment of departure from his previous existence as the event of his martyrdom. He was tortured, his limbs dislocated and his body thrown off a high cliff, but he survives miraculously. Suffering and torturous trials are the precondition for the serene life: “Nur nach überstandem Märtyrertum geht ein solches Leben im Innern auf.”¹⁵³

The narrative Serapion gives of his life raises questions about his mental status that bring us to a paradox. The text tiptoes carefully around an important ambiguity: whether Serapion achieves and maintains this “heightened” consciousness by any effort of the will, or whether he is a passive subject to his fantasies, held

¹⁵² *HSW IV* 31

¹⁵³ *HSW IV* 31

captive by hallucinations. The two possibilities are mutually exclusive, but seem to coexist in the figure of the hermit. All we know is that Graf P** led a happy life, was loved by all, and had a successful career as a diplomat before suddenly disappearing from town and emerging later convinced he was the hermit Serapion. From this evidence alone, it does not seem likely that Serapion's madness is a "coping device," as the critic Hilda Brown puts it, or a "solution for dealing with the strains and pressures of everyday life."¹⁵⁴ Brown sees his martyrdom as a "*chiffre* for a serious life crisis," which does not line up with the facts of Graf P**'s narrative. Brown hints at but does not articulate a better interpretation: that the historical Serapion's death is reinterpreted by Graf P** as a renunciation of normal life; by assuming Serapion's identity, Graf P** appropriates and reinterprets his martyrdom as a death *to the world* and *to worldliness*. Similar to Anselmus' suicide and subsequent fictional rebirth, it is the moment when Graf P** dies and the holy hermit Serapion's life begins.

The causes of Graf P**'s "death" remain mysterious, as does the extent of active will in his break from normal consciousness. He claims not to remember anything that occurred before his martyrdom, adding that "die ewige Macht" has cast a veil over this part of his memory.¹⁵⁵ Without naming God explicitly, he assigns control of his memory, fate, and perceptions to a higher power, presenting himself as a passive subject. He finds it ridiculous that Cyprian would try to "cure" him from insanity by dissuading him with rational arguments. If it were possible to cure people by dissuasion, he argues, there would no longer be any madmen on earth, since men

¹⁵⁴ *HSW IV* 41

¹⁵⁵ *HSW IV* 32

could “gebieten über die geistige Kraft die nicht sein Eigentum [ist].”¹⁵⁶ The human *Geist*, which creates all objects of perception, is only “anvertrautes Gut der höhern Macht.”¹⁵⁷ This higher power is responsible for Serapion’s martyrdom and continued life thereafter. It would seem that Serapion views himself only as a victim of torture and attempted execution, to whom the higher power has given just compensation in the form of pleasant visions that are passively received by his *Geist*.

Yet his claim is contradicted by several moments in the text. While Serapion’s story of martyrdom implies passivity, his self-styling as a Christian ascetic recluse implies an active struggle to maintain the coherence of his illusion, which he equates with his sanity, and fend off those who would attempt to “cure” him. If Serapion had as much faith in the reality of his visions as he claims, there would be no need to debate with those who would expose them as unreal. When Cyprian describes the case studies he has read of patients with fixed ideas, Serapion shows evidence of an inner struggle: “Serapion hörte mich schweigend an, er schien den Nachdruck meiner Worte zu fühlen und in tiefem Nachdenken mit sich selbst zu kämpfen.”¹⁵⁸ Cyprian’s rational argumentation and use of contemporary psychiatric science represent a threat to Serapion’s cheerful existence among learned phantoms. Serapion sees Cyprian—and others who have tried a “talking cure” on Serapion—as a *Qualgeist* sent by Satan to tempt him to madness, just as St. Anthony was tormented by demons who were tempting him to sin. Serapion betrays a degree of active involvement in the construction of his illusion when he senses that Cyprian’s arguments are a threat. If

¹⁵⁶ *HSW IV* 30. This point was lifted straight from a similar argument in Johann Christian Reil’s *Rhapsodien* (*HSW IV* 1266).

¹⁵⁷ *HSW IV* 30

¹⁵⁸ *HSW IV* 29

Serapion's experience of the world were really as he portrays it, that is to say, if he were always already a passive recipient of visions that are as real as perceptions, there would be no danger that he could be convinced to adopt a skeptical attitude toward these visions—there would be no way to distinguish them from “normal” perceptions. Serapion declares at the beginning of their dispute that he will defeat Cyprian “mit Ihren eigenen Waffen... das heißt mit den Waffen der Vernunft.”¹⁵⁹ By acknowledging Cyprian's weapons to be those of reason, Serapion undermines the foundation of his own self-created world, the world in which Cyprian is the madman. Now that Serapion has entered into rational discourse with Cyprian, he has already transcended his own insanity by reflecting on the possibility that he may indeed be insane. With this step alone, Cyprian has succeeded partially in throwing his enlightening “Lichtstrahl” into “Serapions verfinsterten Geist.” Cyprian compels Serapion to use the vocabulary of psychiatric science and to think in terms of fixed ideas. Even if Serapion appropriates this vocabulary in order to apply it to Cyprian's mental status, Serapion has already entered a self-reflexive domain beyond immanent madness.

Beneath his façade of serenity, Serapion is anguished, and necessarily so, for he is operating in bad faith. The “höhere Erkenntnis” Serapion claims to have achieved after his martyrdom emerges as a falsehood; the supposed unity of perception and imagination breaks down in the text. Cyprian admires “die Konsequenz seiner Narrheit” and “sein methodischer Wahnsinn,” but upon closer inspection, Serapion's illusions reveal themselves to be fragile and unstable. Despite his attempts to remove himself from external stimuli and withdraw, Serapion is confronted with a stranger

¹⁵⁹ *HSW IV* 30

and must somehow incorporate him into the illusion. Serapion cannot successfully flee from the world, nor can he block out unwanted perceptions, since to do so would require knowledge of what he is blocking, and therefore to not “block” it at all. Serapion’s claim to an easy, straightforward relation to the world, un-anguished and undivided between *Innenwelt* and *Außenwelt*, falls apart when confronted with an outside force. Instead of ignoring perceptions, he is forced reinterpret them; instead of letting meaning emerge from the “text” of sensory experience, he ignores the given data and imposes its own narrative and its own images. He sees Cyprian first as a visitor asking for advice from the wise monk,¹⁶⁰ then as a “vom Teufel angetriebenen ... Widersacher,”¹⁶¹ and finally, as a curious admirer surprised to find Serapion happy rather than tortured, as is conventional, by his ascetic existence.¹⁶² The external world is incorporated into the fantasy in an attempt to preserve it as a coherent and self-contained system—interpretation is a consciousness-stabilizing activity for Serapion.

Cyprian’s presence brings to the surface the latent problem in Serapion’s *Wahnwelt*: the world of the Theban desert is *not* experienced by Serapion as a “given,” equivalent to perceived reality, but must be created and re-created in every waking moment through an effort of the secondary imagination, to return to Wordsworth’s categories—the faculty that “struggles.” First there is the event of perception; then there is a modification, a meaning-giving and visual “interpretation” of perceived images that draws on remembered textual narratives. No fantasy occurs

¹⁶⁰ *HSW IV* 34

¹⁶¹ *HSW IV* 30

¹⁶² *HSW IV* 32

ex nihilo, and the pressing demands of sense data, the “[Außenwelts] versteckten Hebel” cannot be ignored.

3. *Speech and Text*

The Serapiontic principle requires throwing away all the material trappings of poetry, the dead text, ink and paper, and concentrating on the world of interior consciousness that is then brought to life externally through speech. Yet behind all this, suppressed and hidden, are the texts that made Serapion’s interiority possible. Serapion’s claim is that he now passively receives visions created *ex nihilo*, but of course they cannot be anything but reworkings of lived experience and old texts. Although there is not a book to be found at Serapion’s hermitage, his *idée fixe* based on reading the lives of saints, hermits, and martyrs that he absorbed before retreating into the wilderness. Everything that happens to him must be made to fit these narratives, which are never mentioned explicitly, although attempts have been made by critics such as Eva Horn to piece them together.¹⁶³ They form the content of his illusion, similar to the way chivalric tales form the content of Don Quixote’s fantasies. Quixote seems at first to be an apt parallel, since he engages in the same kind of willful self-delusion as Serapion, “reading” windmills as giants, ordinary country girls as exotic princesses, and a barber’s basin as a knight’s helmet. When Quixote’s dream world is given an unanswerable challenge, he adopts an attitude similar to

¹⁶³ See Horn, Eva. “Die Versuchung des Heiligen Serapion: Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wahnsinn bei E.T.A. Hoffmann.” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 76.2 (2002): 214-228.

Serapion, claiming that evil magicians have changed the giants into windmills. Quixote's evil magicians have become Serapion's "böse Widersacher."¹⁶⁴ Both heroes' dream worlds have contagious power; Quixote is able to convince Sancho Panza to adopt the illusion by promising him material rewards from the adventure, while Serapion tempts Cyprian to become a hermit by promising him serenity, a life of the mind, and a "mit Gott versöhntes Leben." But unlike the teeming books in Quixote's library that are given so much attention in that novel, the sources for Serapion's fantasies are not mentioned anywhere in *Der Einsiedler Serapion*. This is a significant omission. Serapion's hermitage involves a flight from civilization, from normative views of sanity, but also from the technology of writing and print. I argue that Hoffmann's aesthetic of Serapiontic madness can be seen as a reaction against the changes that poetry incurs when it is written down, and also against changes to the status of literature that occurred at the onset of print and the popularization of printed literature in Hoffmann's time.

Serapion's textless life of the mind is made possible by texts. In this respect he represents a position similar to Plato's. Published in 1963, Erich A. Havelock's groundbreaking *Preface to Plato* showed how the beginnings of Greek philosophy were tied with the restructuring of thought brought about by literacy.¹⁶⁵ When Plato excluded poets from his Republic, he was actually rejecting the "associative, paratactic, oral-style"¹⁶⁶ thinking encouraged by the memorization of oral Homeric poetry and replacing it with keen analysis and dissection of the world (and of thought itself) made possible by the interiorization of writing in the Greek psyche. When

¹⁶⁴ *HSW IV* 28

¹⁶⁵ Havelock, Erich A. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 1963.

¹⁶⁶ Havelock 184

knowledge is no longer stored in mnemonic formulas but in a written text, according to Havelock's thesis, the mind is freed for more original and more abstract thought.¹⁶⁷

Yet interestingly enough, Plato, like Serapion, prefers speech to writing. Writing pretends to establish outside the mind what in reality can only be in the mind. Plato's polemic against writing in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Seventh Letter* paints it as a mechanical, inhuman way of processing knowledge that is unresponsive to questions.¹⁶⁸ Real speech and thought, unlike that represented on paper, always exist essentially in the context of a give-and-take between *real persons*. Thus Plato preferred to convey his ideas by staging a dialogue and moving dialectically. Serapion's "disputatios"--as Brown styles them--with Hilarion and Cyprian are based on a neo-classicist tradition that goes back to Plato. But of course, as Walter Ong says, "although Plato's thought is couched in dialogue form, its exquisite precision is due to the effects of writing on the noetic processes, for the dialogues are in fact written texts."¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, "the exquisitely analytic oral disputations in medieval universities [enacted by Serapion, A.K.] ... were the work of minds honed by writing texts and by reading and commenting on texts, orally and in writing."¹⁷⁰ What is more, the precise, analytic style of Serapion's philosophizing is not only a result of his text-trained mind, but of the fact that *Der Einsiedler Serapion* is a written composition, allowing for analytic reflection on Hoffmann's part, free from the intruding lifeworld of oral discourse. As Jack Goody showed,¹⁷¹ "backward scanning," or looking over

¹⁶⁷ Havelock 208

¹⁶⁸ Havelock 208-9

¹⁶⁹ Ong 105

¹⁷⁰ Ong 105

¹⁷¹ Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977. 128. Cited in Ong 104.

what one has already written, makes it possible to eliminate inconsistencies and to choose between words with reflective selectivity, “investing thought and words with new discriminatory power.”¹⁷²

Serapion’s programmatic significance for Hoffmann’s tales does not lie in his role as a philosopher but as a poet, and he indeed prefers the oral style of performance just as much in poetry as in philosophy. Serapion represents a throwback to the “participatory poetics,” as Ong puts it, of oral poetry, but with the sensibilities of a mind trained by literacy. He receives visits from Dante and Petrarch, no longer reading their work, but hearing it from them personally. This means taking poetry that was created by literates and by the power of his insane imagination, bringing it to life under the conditions of orality. Serapion’s madness gives him the best of both worlds: the warm, personal, interactive character of “oral literature”¹⁷³ with the precision, detail, and vivid evocativeness of written literature. His own work manifests the vivid precision of literacy, as is evident in Cyprian’s astonished description: “Alle Gestalten traten mit einer plastischen Ründung, mit einem glühenden Leben hervor, daß man fortgerissen, bestrickt von magischer Gewalt wie im Traum daran glauben mußte, daß Serapion alles selbst wirklich von seinem Berge erschaut.” Serapion invents impromptu compositions that seem as if he had composed them on paper first. In the same way, *Die Serapionsbrüder*, Hoffmann’s collection of written stories which obviously benefit from the advantages of the written medium, are imagined as a series of oral performances.

¹⁷² Ong 104

¹⁷³ A monstrous term that has yet to be replaced. See Ch. 1 entitled “*Did you say oral literature?*” Ong 10.

There is of course nothing new in framing written stories as oral performances in gathered company, and thus reproducing the conditions of pre-literate oral poetry. Ever since Plato's *Symposium*, authors have done so. Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are two famous literary examples. Hoffmann's historical moment is different, however, and shaped by the widespread dissemination of *printed* popular literature. Safranski reports that between 1750 and 1800, the number of people who could read in Germany doubled.¹⁷⁴ By 1800, it was approximately 25% of the population. Responding to the growing market, the printing presses rolled out 2500 new novels between 1790 and 1800, which was as much as in the previous fifty years taken together. According to Ong, the age of Romanticism marked the time when print was fully "interiorized," by which he means print technology changed the structure of consciousness, the "noetic economy," as writing had millennia before.¹⁷⁵ The sense that the written word represented an utterance, spoken at some point by a real person, was dying out: "In this new world [the world of print, A.K.], the book was less like an utterance, and more like a thing. Manuscript culture had preserved a feeling for a book as a kind of utterance, an occurrence in the course of conversation, rather than as an object." A manuscript is written directly in the author's hand, and so was once connected to an author's body. In the age of print, what once were once personal utterances now become disembodied objects. This objectification of the machine-made book provoked an objectification of intellectual content and its

¹⁷⁴ Safranski 52

¹⁷⁵ Ong 153

transformation into property: “Print created a new sense of the private ownership of words...typography had made the word into a commodity.”¹⁷⁶

The hermit Serapion represents a reaction against the deadening and objectifying forces of print culture. Serapion resurrects the utterance and the body attached to the utterance. He speaks and listens to the ghosts of the dead poets Dante and Ariosto, rather than dealing with their textual remains. Like a true religious recluse, Serapion lives in isolation from the fetishized objects of earthly desire. He knows no text-objects or commodities, only the people, ideas, and stories they attempt to represent. This leads to a conception even of history as a personal narrative. Cyprian voices his astonishment at Serapion’s knowledge of history, which reaches beyond that of any known historical work. He replies with a smile, “daß wohl freilich kein Historiker in der Welt das alles so genau wissen könne, als er, der es ja aus dem Munde der handelnden Personen selbst hätte, die ihn besucht.” Like the stories he hears from authors and witnesses to history long dead, Serapion’s own stories, existing as they do in the realm of sound, are too transient to be treated as objects, parceled off and sold.

In accordance with the oral and performative antithesis to print represented by the hermit, characters in the frame narrative tell stories in the context of a society of friends, with the casualness, spirit of improvisation, tolerance for error and fragmentariness that goes along with oral discourse. They are not stories that are supposed to be finished, closed, and ready for the presses, but live, protean entities susceptible to direct criticism from real people and capable of change in response to the exigencies of the moment. The characters are not afraid to give a negative opinion

¹⁷⁶ Ong 131

of a work (e.g. *Rat Krespel*), nor do they hesitate to share a work in progress (*Die Automate*).

Serapion's flight from text objects and intellectual property reveals another aspect of his claims to programmatic significance in Hoffmann's oeuvre. It has become a commonplace of Hoffmann criticism¹⁷⁷ to laud his "intertextuality," the way he alludes to and borrows from a stunning array of sources from a variety of discourses, including psychiatric medicine, magnetism and mesmerism, music, theatre, Romantic Idealist philosophy, and many others. Hoffmann's irreverence for the commercialized fetishization of texts manifested itself in this borrowing. It also manifests itself in a kind of irreverence for his own writing. As Safranski notices, Hoffmann would publish anything, good or bad, that had ever come from his plume, resulting in a wide range of quality in the extant works. Even after Hoffmann had become popular and enjoyed a large readership, publishers would sometimes reject works he submitted which were obviously second rate.¹⁷⁸ Hoffmann expresses the same irreverence for the text object when he presents his autobiographical novel, *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr* (1821), as papers accidentally included in the autobiography of a tomcat who was using them to blot ink from his own manuscript and forgot to leave them out of the stack before publishing the whole thing.

The non-textual, enchanting orality of Serapion's art is the key to his significance as a programmatic figure. The listener is captivated, "fortgerissen, bestrickt von magischer Gewalt wie im Traum," lulled into a dream-like state in which he identifies in the strongest sense with the poet. Images emerge in Cyprian's

¹⁷⁷ On Hoffmann's intertextuality, see Dickson 258-60.

¹⁷⁸ Safranski 278

consciousness as they had in Serapion's, and for the moment they are united in a bond of solidarity, made possible by the oral mode of discourse. As can be seen in his numerous addresses to the reader, Hoffmann's fiction strives to imitate the conditions of orality, with the consciousness of the impossibility of the task. He attempts to capture in print the warm, personal, oral mode of storytelling, as can be seen in the many works, even those not in *Die Serapionsbrüder* (eg. *Das Öde Haus*, *Das Sanctus*, the numerous interpolated narratives in *Kater Murr* and *Die Elixiere des Teufels*, and many more) that are presented as spontaneous oral performances by fictional characters.

As a result of this emphasis on the personal and intimate in oral performance, it is no surprise that speech with written quality is eroticized in Hoffmann. As in the case of Anselmus' entrancement by Serpentina, there are moments in Hoffmann's fiction when this oral bond takes a sexual turn, and the recited work of art becomes the object of channeled carnal desires that can never be fulfilled except in an aesthetic catharsis. It is the *male's* artwork that unites them, the female love object being reduced to the status of an instrument through which the male's artistic creations are performed or on which they are projected. Female figures become idealized automatons, like Olimpia in *Der Sandmann*, on whom Nathanael projects his fantastic delusions. She is the mute, robotic audience that Nathanael must imagine is appreciating his work. Or they become oracles locked away in closets, like Meister Abraham's invisible girl in *Kater Murr*, and the hidden singer in *Das Sanctus*, whose voice returns only after hearing the men in the room tell an inspiring tale. Taboo forbids bodily consummation, so desire is redirected at the artwork itself as the male

admires narcissistically the products of his own *Geist*, recited or sung by the female. For Hoffmann, art is the avoidance of bodily transgressions by channeling sexual impulses to aesthetic ends.

Hoffmann's own love for Julia Marc, whom he gave singing lessons over the course of two years in Bamberg,¹⁷⁹ was probably the model for these scenes in his literary work. She was thirteen years of age when she began the lessons. The record is not entirely clear about whether she returned his affections or showed any preference for him at all. She claims "ich weiß es noch, wie damals gerade mein geängstetes Gemüt am innigsten sich zu ihm wandte," while Hoffmann's publisher and biographer Carl Friedrich Kunz reports that she didn't show the slightest interest, being so young and inexperienced.¹⁸⁰ What we know for certain from numerous entries in Hoffmann's diary is that with her beauty and musical talent, she drove Hoffmann to the fear of losing his sanity. As a married man twenty years her senior, Hoffmann knew his love was doomed, but like so many of his insane characters, he felt helpless, in control of a power stronger than himself. The diary entry about Julia for 6 Jan. 1811 reads in part "...gespannt bis zu Ideen des Wahnsinns, die mir oft kommen. Warum denke ich schlafend und wachend so oft an den Wahnsinn?" and several days later, "Ktch – Ktch – Ktch!!!! [code for Julia] exalziert bis zum Wahnsinn."¹⁸¹ When Hoffmann substitutes "die Kunst" for "Ktch" in one entry—according to biographer Rüdiger Safranski, in order to throw his wife off the scent¹⁸²—the underlying implication is too accurate to be unintended. During this

¹⁷⁹ Safranski 243-253

¹⁸⁰ Safranski 246

¹⁸¹ Safranski 244

¹⁸² Safranski 245

period of frustration, the only happy moments for Hoffmann were in the duets they sung together,¹⁸³ and it is these moments Hoffmann seems to point to over and over again in his literary work, using several different art forms aside from music to bring lovers into a chaste union. One cannot help but read a passage from the Kreisler biography in *Kater Murr*, which describes a duet performed by Kreisler (Hoffmann's alter ego) and the character Julia, as a memory of these moments:

Kreisler, keines Wortes mächtig, saß am Flügel, schlug die ersten Akkorde des Duetts an, wie von einem seltsamen Rausch betört und befangen. Julia begann: "Ah che mi manca l'anima in si fatal momento" – Es ist nötig zu sagen, daß die Worte dieses Duetts nach gewöhnlicher italienischer Weise ganz einfach die Trennung eines liebenden Paares aussprachen, daß auf momento natürlicherweise sento und tormento gereimt war, und daß es, wie in hundert andern Duetten ähnlicher Art, auch nicht an dem Abbi pietade o cielo und an der pena di morir fehlte. Kreisler hatte indessen diese Worte in der höchsten Aufregung des Gemüts mit einer Inbrunst komponiert, die beim Vortrage jeden, dem der Himmel nur passable Ohren gegeben, unwiderstehlich hinreißen mußte. Das Duett war den leidenschaftlichsten dieser Art an die Seite zu stellen und, da Kreisler nur nach dem höchsten Ausdruck des Moments und nicht darnach strebte, was eben ganz ruhig und bequem von der Sängerin aufzufassen, in der Intonation ziemlich schwer geraten. So kam es, daß Julia schüchtern, mit beinahe ungewisser Stimme begann und daß Kreisler eben nicht viel besser eintrat. Bald erhoben sich aber beide Stimmen auf den Wellen des Gesanges wie schimmernde Schwäne und wollten bald mit rauschendem Flügelschlag emporsteigen zu dem golden strahlenden Gewölk, bald in süßer Liebesumarmung sterbend untergehen in dem brausenden Strom der Akkorde, bis tief aufatmende Seufzer den nahen Tod verkündeten und das letzte Addio in dem Schrei des wilden Schmerzes wie ein blutiger Springquell herausstürzte aus der zerrissenen Brust.¹⁸⁴

Beneath Hoffmann's irony there is always a glimmer of truth. The wild, frenzied language and jibes at the music's quality belie the sincerity of the personal connection that is indispensable to Hoffmann's conception of artistic performance. On the other

¹⁸³ Safranski 244

¹⁸⁴ *HSW V* 132

hand, at its worst, art can be just the pretext to get closer to the love object. The monk Medardus from the grim novel *Die Elixiere des Teufels* (2 vols., 1815, 1816) can be seen as Kreisler's sinister *Doppelgänger* who fails to sublimate his urges and suffers the consequences. A talented preacher with a gift for entrancing audiences with his rhetoric, Medardus also bears a family curse that sends him on a killing spree and almost causes him to sexually violate a young girl whom he loves. Compare the above passage to its dark side below:

Endlich fiel ich darauf, mit ihr zu beten: denn im Gebet strömt feuriger die Glut der Andacht, und die geheimsten Regungen werden wach und erheben sich wie auf brausenden Wellen und strecken ihre Polypenarme aus, um das Unbekannte zu fassen, das die unnennbare Sehnsucht stillen soll, von der die Brust zerrissen. *Dann mag das Irdische, sich wie Himmlisches verkündend, keck dem aufgeregten Gemüt entgentreten und im höchsten Genuß schon hienieden die Erfüllung des Überschwenglichen verheißten*; die bewußtlose Leidenschaft wird getäuscht, und das Streben nach dem Heiligen, Überirdischen wird gebrochen in dem namenlosen, nie gekannten Entzücken irdischer Begierde. – *Selbst darin, daß sie von mir verfaßte Gebete nachsprechen sollte, glaubte ich Vorteile für meine verräterische Absichten zu finden.* – Es war dem so! – Denn neben mir kniend, mit zum Himmel gewandtem Blick meine Gebete nachsprechend, färbten höher sich ihre Wangen, und ihr Busen wallte auf und nieder. – Da nahm ich wie im Eifer des Gebets ihre Hände und drückte sie an meine Brust, ich war ihr so nahe, daß ich die Wärme ihres Körpers fühlte, ihre losgelösten Locken hingen über meine Schulter; ich war außer mir vor rasender Begierde, ich umschlang sie mit wildem Verlangen, schon brannten meine Küsse auf ihrem Munde, auf ihrem Busen, da wand sie sich mit einem durchdringenden Schrei aus meinen Armen; ich hatte nicht Kraft, sie zu halten, es war, als strahle ein Blitz herab, mich zerschmetternd! – Sie entfloß rasch in das Nebenzimmer...¹⁸⁵ (my emphasis)

Just as the oral recitation of the work pretends to be something it is not, that is, ignores its written aspect, the piety of the spoken prayers belie their origin in sexual

¹⁸⁵ *HSW II/II* 156

drives. Rather than sublimating his earthly desires, the prayers composed by Medardus serve only to arouse lust in Aurelie by leading her to confuse sexual feeling with pious feeling. Desire is transmitted through the repetition of sounds controlled by the male, and unlike the chaste, artistic union achieved by Julia and Kreisler through music, the undercurrent of sexual drives is exposed in *Die Elixiere* as the basis for personal, auditory experience of art.

The association of writing materials with the flesh and body, and speech with piety and the spirit, becomes clear when Medardus is contrasted to Serapion. Unlike Medardus, who composes on paper, Serapion has no writing materials and also no fleshly objects of desire to distract him. He exists in the realm of speech and vision, of the signified rather than the signifier. It is for this reason that Horn's characterization of *Der Einsiedler Serapion* as an early form of Foucault's "fantastique de bibliothèque" misses the mark slightly, but in a way that reveals a significant aspect of the story. It is the very absence of texts that constitute Serapion's ideal but impossible status. Horn conceives of Serapion's *Wahnwelt* as a "Phantasie aus dem Geist der Bücher und des Archivs,"¹⁸⁶ similar to Foucault's reading of Flaubert's *La tentation de Sainte-Antoine*, a passage of which (following Kittler) she quotes as follows:

Possibly, Flaubert was responding to an experience of the fantastic which was singularly modern and relatively unknown before his time, to the discovery of a new imaginative space in the nineteenth century. This domain of phantasms is no longer the night, the sleep of reason, or the uncertain void that stands before desire, but, on the contrary, wakefulness, untiring attention, zealous erudition, and constant vigilance. Henceforth, the visionary experience arises from the black and white surface of printed signs, from the closed and dusty volume that opens with a flight of forgotten words; fantasies

¹⁸⁶ Horn 214

are carefully deployed in the hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds. The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp. The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart, nor is it found among the incongruities of nature; it evolves from the accuracy of knowledge, and its treasures lie dormant in documents.¹⁸⁷

Significantly, none of the “visionary experience[s]” in *Der Einsiedler Serapion* can be said to “emerge from the black and white surface of printed signs”: neither Serapion’s experiences from the top of mountain, nor Cyprian’s experiences listening to Serapion, nor Cyprian’s friend’s experiences listening to him in the frame narrative. The last two cases are accompanied by oral storytelling, and the first by no media whatsoever. Texts are shunned as immaterial to the real essence of poetry.

4. *Frame Narrative*

Hoffmann achieves an ironic and critical view of Serapion through metafictional distance that explicitly places the fictionality and impossibility of Serapion’s existence in the spotlight. The unmediated and oral relation to poetry that Serapion represents is no longer possible in a print culture, and accordingly, the hermit’s story is enveloped and obscured in multiple external narrative shells, the outer one consisting of a *printed* text: *Die Serapionsbrüder*. At one level, there is the preface written by one of Hoffmann’s personas, the “Herausgeber” of the collection, at another, the narrator of the frame narrative, and at a third, Cyprian’s verbally related tale *Der Einsiedler Serapion*. Inside of it all, at the most internal level, we find

¹⁸⁷ Horn 216

Serapion's stories, to which the reader has no access; Cyprian speaks of them in glowing terms, but he can only "point" to them without reproducing them for his listeners. They are the lacunae at the center of the layered narratives. There is good reason for this omission: Hoffmann is asking the reader to imagine story told orally, without a written text, and outside of written source materials. With knowing irony, he is asking the impossible. No written literature can convey the effect of an oral story, and no story lacks source materials. As I have discussed and will continue to show, Serapion represents an ideal but unattainable figure of the artist-reader; the omission is a deliberate signal of the unattainable nature of his art. The ambiguities in Serapion's idyllic existence within Cyprian's story have been treated already, but, going up one level in the layers of narrative, there are still more meanings hidden in the Serapion-brothers' discussion of the story.

In no other work by Hoffmann does the ironic negation of his stories' apparent messages reach the intensity it does in the connecting frame narrative of the *Serapionsbrüder* collection. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyphonic narration can be readily applied to it; "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices..."¹⁸⁸ take apart and criticize *Der Einsiedler Serapion* after its being told by Cyprian. Any opinion voiced by one of the friends is relativized by a conflicting view from another, and no definitive position on the reception of the story is agreed upon. Ottmar's response, which comes immediately after Cyprian finishes, is of a mocking incredulity that collapses the tone of eerie mystery set by the narrative. In one stroke he raises doubts

¹⁸⁸ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984. 13.

as to the facticity of the story (presented by Cyprian as fact) and mentions the book that Cyprian was writing at time he had supposedly met Serapion, a book that “auf den tiefsten katholischen Mystizismus basiert.” There can be no doubt that this is a reference to Hoffmann’s *Die Elixiere des Teufels*, as Cyprian’s description makes clear. Through the figure of Cyprian, Hoffmann is remembering the feverish state in which he wrote that novel.

“Gewiß,” continues Ottmar, “spukte damals der höchste Serapionismus in dir.”¹⁸⁹ Here a crucial moment happens in the text. Cyprian agrees: “Gewiß...freilich regte mich der Umgang mit dem Anachoreten dazu an.”¹⁹⁰ Ottmar had implied that Cyprian’s story was nonfactual (within the world of the frame narrative), and the terms “Serapionismus” and “Umgang mit dem Anachoreten,” are open to a similar sort of interpretation. Cyprian is saying that many years ago, during the time that he was writing the book (representing Hoffmann’s *Elixiere*), he adopted, to speak, the role of the hermit and acquired his visionary abilities. Cyprian himself was laboring under a delusion, enclosed in a *Wahnwelt*, under the influence of “der höchste Serapionismus.” Not only the content of the book, but the events narrated in the story *Der Einsiedler Serapion* were a hallucination undergone by Cyprian, whose mind, as we know, was filled to the brim with “Mönchen, Klöstern, Einsiedlern, Heiligen...”.

The boundaries of the story contract into the mind of Cyprian, “engesachtelt” there, rather than extending into the world of the frame narrative. Serapion is a figment of Cyprian’s fancy, just as the poet Ariosto, with whom Serapion discussed the question of perception and imagination, was a figment of

¹⁸⁹ *HSW IV 68*

¹⁹⁰ *HSW IV 68*

Serapion's fancy. Cyprian has thus achieved the kind of identity with Serapion that he alluded to during the telling of Serapion's novellas—they become narrative *Doppelgänger*. “Eben gestern,” Serapion said, “sprach Ariost von den Gebilden seiner Fantasie und meinte, er habe im Innern Gestalten und Begebenheiten geschaffen, die niemals in Raum und Zeit existierten. Ich bestritt, daß dies möglich, und er mußte mir einräumen, daß es nur Mangel höherer Erkenntnis sei, wenn der Dichter alles, was er vermöge seiner besonderen Sehergabe vor sich in vollem Leben erschaue, in den engen Raum seines Gehirns einschachteln wolle.”¹⁹¹ Cyprian took the advice of the hallucinated Serapion, not confining his visions to the narrow “space” of his brain, but treating them as real, and narrating them to his friends years later. The distance of time embellishes the vision with the accidents of remembrance.

Hoffmann puts many levels of narrative distance between himself as author and Serapion as an unattainable ideal. Serapion's experience of art is the fantasy of a fantasy of fantasy. Unmediated to him by language, it is heavily mediated to the reader by multiple oral narratives which are mediated again by printed language. The end effect is a distant longing for an anachronistic ideal, along with a consciousness of the impossibility of its manifestation.

5. *Conclusion*

Serapion does have a certain overarching significance for the rest of Hoffmann's oeuvre, but it does not lie in his supposed authority as an exemplar for

¹⁹¹ *HSW IV 43*

readers and artists. The detachment and irony with which Hoffmann treats the character Serapion shows that he is lamenting the impossibility of Serapion's immediate, oral experience of poetry that constitutes *his* "Leben in der Poesie." The preposition "in" has two meanings in the archivist's formulation: a life of enjoying and producing works of poetry on the one hand, and on the other hand, life as a fictional character. Serapion's fictive existence, highlighted especially by Ottmar in the frame narrative, is just that: a lie, an anachronistic impossibility.

Serapion's madness appears to allow him an "unmediated" experience of fiction, where the written text, the spoken word, and the struggle of the unifying secondary imagination are all absent. Even within Cyprian's telling of the story, internal inconsistencies emerge that undermine Serapion's artistic authority. As we have seen, the ambiguity as to whether Serapion's fantasies are sustained by a conscious will or overwhelm his passive mind avoids and so calls attention to the problem of belief as will. Once Serapion acknowledges his world as self-constructed, he negates its claim to reality through the implicit recognition of a world outside that must be ignored or incorporated into the self-constructed world. His seeming tranquility belies an anguish that results from the consciousness of his fantasy's fictionality and the uncertainty inherent in the task of interpreting the world according to fictional structures. His "höhere Erkenntnis" does not lead to an unproblematic, seamless continuity between imagination and perception, but rather a fragile state kept barely in balance by a withdrawal from civilization.

Most significantly, the figure of Serapion is debunked in the frame narrative and given a far-off smallness, surrounded by the haze of fiction, memory, media, and

the distance of narrative layers. He proves in the end to be an invention of Cyprian's imagination, pieced together from the research he was working for a book that turns out to be one of Hoffmann's novels. So Hoffmann's vision attempts to identify with Serapion's vision through several pairs of fictional eyes. His gaze tries to see through the multiple surfaces of language but sees only language. Serapion's stories remain untold, his visions unseen.

CONCLUSION

It is my hope that the reader leaves with a sense of why Hoffmann is considered an outstanding figure in the literature of the 19th century and continues to be relevant today. The concentrated self-reflexivity in his work that led him to write his magnum opus, *Der goldne Topf*, as an allegorical commentary on the process of literary production, and that led him to a self-consciously ironic articulation of his poetological program through the figure of Serapion, takes the Romantic principle of irony and develops it to its far limits within literary works. Given the ongoing debate about Hoffmann's position in the Romantic movement,¹⁹² it should be noted that his work surpasses the ironic, self-reflexive involutions of his Romantic forebears. Even Friedrich Schlegel, father of Romantic irony as an aesthetic principle, did not conceive of the self-reflexive element in a work as its sole center of gravity,¹⁹³ toward which all symbolism points, as I hope to have shown is the case in *Der goldne Topf*. In this light, it may be too hasty to assume¹⁹⁴ that Hoffmann fits the standard profile of a Romantic author. Hoffmann remains firmly situated in Romantic aesthetic discourse, but by driving Romantic principles to their extreme until they fall apart, he engages in a critique of Romanticism. Manfred Momberger formulates it best when

¹⁹²See Kremer 45-51. See also Woodgate 136-8. See also Segebrecht, Wulf. *Die Kunst der Phantasie: E.T.A. Hoffmann's Leben und Werk*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2004.

¹⁹³On the relation of Hoffmann to F. Schlegel's notion of irony, see Röder, Birgit. *A Study of the Major Novellas of E.T.A. Hoffmann*. Rochester New York: Camden House, 2003. 10-17.

¹⁹⁴As Horn does (Horn 216).

he writes that Hoffmann's work represents an extreme phase of Romanticism, "wo die romantische Apotheose des Unendlichen im Werk zerfällt."¹⁹⁵

By looking at Hoffmann's work through the lenses of media and language, I hope to have succeeded in identifying the self-reflexive structure of a variety of symbols in Hoffmann's masterpiece fairy tale that have gone unnoticed by commentators, despite the enormous amount of scholarship on the tale in past years. Commentators have pointed out that the tale contains self-reflexive elements such as the manuscript Anselmus is copying and the narrator's vision scene,¹⁹⁶ but they rarely identify further symbolism within the tale, such as the battle between the witch and spirit prince for possession of the golden pot, that point to a more complete interpretation of the tale as a commentary on itself. Only through the lens of media and the letter-spirit dichotomy, which Nygaard noticed but did not elaborate on, do these elements emerge: Serpentina's voice as Anselmus' inner voice, the squawking parrot of orality and the inky black cat of literacy, the curious but apt association of sexuality with linguistic media (bodies with writing and sublimated "love" with speech), and finally, the transformation of the hieroglyph from sign to natural element in Atlantis.

Which brings me to the next point: I have argued that Hoffmann looks at hieroglyph as an alternative to the letter-spirit dichotomy which until the twentieth century had a hold on linguistic theories.¹⁹⁷ He did so only because he was immersed in the Romantic fascination with them, but because hieroglyphs promise the fulfillment of his ideal of art beyond representation: an immediate, untranscribable

¹⁹⁵ Momberger 159

¹⁹⁶ See Segebrecht 205. See also Kremer 30.

¹⁹⁷ Assmann 266-8

experience of art. As I have noted, Hoffmann was pained by the loss that takes place in representing something in material form, such as music in writing. He longed for a language of holistic signs represented by enigmatic hieroglyphs, who stood for a unity between signifier and signified since, as Assmann notes, it is never clear with hieroglyphs (in the Romantic conception) where the material shell ends and the spiritual substance begins. By opposing the holistic hieroglyph to the strict separation of letter and spirit that is manifested in Romantic polemics against the “letter” or “sign,” Hoffmann brought two contradictory Romantic discourses into dialogue. Out of this he made an allegory in which the apotheosis of the poet consists in a resolution of the letter-spirit dichotomy in which nature’s elements and Anselmus’ inner world merge so as to make them both signifier and signified of one another. Yet this all occurs in a poetic paradise that is determined by material signs written on parchment paper in a bureaucrat’s reality. While seeming to posit a world beyond the material text, the tale ends through an ironic annihilation of that world. Hoffmann elaborates on this theme through the programmatic character Serapion, whose flight from material existence into a self-created world is a rejection of what seems to be the deadening effects of the technologies of writing and print on literature, which for him is something that comes alive in his mind and in his words. Serapion is the Plato of the age of print, rejecting the new technology for preserving language, and yet depending on it for his form of consciousness (and indeed for his very existence). Even in a tale that explicitly gives itself the function of stating programmatically Hoffmann’s ideal poetic principle, the ideal is undermined as an antiquated impossibility. Serapion’s programmatic significance is more negative than positive: it

defines the limits of art, since by seeing Serapion's existence as impossible, one loses the illusion that there can ever be art beyond representation. Serapion's function is the same as Anselmus,' who was transformed into a mute allegorical sign when he reached Atlantis: to show the absurdity and unreality of unmediated art.

If Craig Owens is right that the impulse shared by postmodernists is an allegorical one—in the sense that Benjamin defines allegory—then Hoffmann's work can be counted as an early predecessor to postmodernism, since it returns to allegorical forms of representation at a time when these forms were discredited and subordinated to the symbol. In light of Hoffmann's allegories for literary production, the notion of postmodernism, advanced by thinkers such as Jean François Lyotard,¹⁹⁸ as an ahistorical tendency, gains more ground. Above all it is Hoffmann's longing to preserve the mythic past, whether that of fairy tale tradition or Christian legend, and redeem it for the present by supplementing an ironic commentary from the modern world—for Hoffmann, that of ultrarational bureaucratic philistinism—that aligns him with later allegorists such as Kafka and Borges.¹⁹⁹ Although many would find it alarming designate them “allegorists” rather than writers of modern “parables” or “fables,” this may have to do more with the surviving neoclassical and Romantic prejudice against allegory that Hoffmann was among the first to subvert. Hoffmann's revival of the allegorical form is continuing today; to read *Der goldne Topf* now is not to gaze deeply into an unfathomable past as allegorists do—reading Hoffmann, one has the sense that his methods suit the current postmodern disposition.

¹⁹⁸ Lyotard, Jean-François. “Defining the Postmodern.” Ed. Dering, Simon. *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

¹⁹⁹ For a discussion of Kafka as an allegorist, see Fletcher, Angus. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964. 174. For Borges as an allegorist, see Owens 67-70.

WORKS CITED

1. *Primary Sources*

- Hoffmann, E.T.A. *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden* (6 vols.). Ed. Hartmut Steinecke and Wulf Segebrecht (with Gerhard Allroggen, Friedhelm Auhuber, Hartmut Mangold, and Ursula Segebrecht). Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985-2003.
 - i. *Fantasiestücke, Werke 1814*. Vol. 2/1 (1993). Abbreviated here as *HSW II/1*.
 - ii. *Die Elixiere des Teufels, Werke 1814-1816*. Vol. 2/2 (1988). Abbreviated here as *HSW II/II*.
 - iii. *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr, Werke 1820-1821*. Vol. 5 (1992). Abbreviated here as *HSW V*.
 - iv. *Die Serapionsbrüder*. Vol. 4 (2001). Abbreviated here as *HSW IV*.

2. *Secondary Sources*

- Assmann, A. and J. Assmann. *Hieroglyphen: Stationen einer anderen Abendländischen Grammatologie*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well Wrought Urn*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947.
- Brown, Hilda. *E.T.A. Hoffmann and the Serapiontic Principle: Critique and Creativity*. New York: Camden House, 2006.
- Culler, Jonathan. *In Pursuit of Signs*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.

- Derrida, Jacques. "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy." *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: 1982. 250.
- Dieckmann, Liselotte. "The Metaphor of Hieroglyphics in German Romanticism." *Comparative Literature* 7.4 (1955): 304-322.
- Engell, James. *The Creative Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Fletcher, Angus. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964. 174.
- Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Grant, R.M. *The Letter and the Spirit*. London: S.P.C.K., 1957. 50-51.
- Harshbarger, Scott. "The Oral Dimension of Romantic Rhetoric." *Rhetorical Traditions and British Romantic Literature*. Ed. Bialostosky, Don H. and Needham, Lawrence D. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. 199-213.
- Havelock, Eric A. *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Havelock, Erich A. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 1963.
- Horn, Eva. "Die Versuchung des Heiligen Serapion: Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Wahnsinn bei E.T.A. Hoffmann." *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 76.2 (2002): 214-228.
- James M. McGlathery, "The Suicide Motif in ETA Hoffmann's 'Der goldne Topf.'" *Monatshefte für deutschen Unterricht, deutsche Sprache und Literatur* 58 (1966): 115-2.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*. Tr. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Kremer, Detlef. *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Erzählungen und Romane*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1999.
- Lindner, Henriett. "Schnöde Kunststücke gefallener Geister": *E.T.A. Hoffmanns Werk im Kontext der zeitgenössischen Seelenkunde*. Hamburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001.

- Lohner, E., ed. *Ludwig Tieck und die Brüder Schlegel: Briefe*. Munich: Winkler, 1972.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "The Problem of Poetic Form in Wordsworth's Dream of the Arab." *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1981.
- Momberger, Manfred. *Sonne und Punsch: Die Dissemination des romantischen Kunstbegriffs bei E.T.A. Hoffmann*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1986.
- Moritz, Karl Philipp. *Andreas Hartknopf*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2001. 133–4.
- Negus, Kenneth. *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Other World: The Romantic Author and his 'New Mythology'*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1965.
- Novalis. *Werke, Tagebücher, und Briefe*. Ed. Hans-Henrik Krümmacher, Herbert Meyer and Bernhard Zeller. Stuttgart, 1987.
- Nygaard, Loisa C. "Anselmus as Amanuensis: The Motif of Copying in Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf*." *Seminar* 19 (1983): 79-104.
- Oesterle, Günter. *Arabeske, Schrift und Poesie in E.T.A. Hoffmanns Kunstmärchen Der goldne Topf*. Athenäum: Jahrbuch für Romantik 1 (1993): 69-107.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Preisendanz, Wolfgang. "Humor als dichterische Einbildungskraft: Studien zur Erzählkunst des poetischen Realismus." *Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur und der schönen Künste*, 1 (1963): 90-127.
- Röder, Birgit. *A Study of the Major Novellas of E.T.A. Hoffmann*. Rochester New York: Camden House, 2003.
- Safranski, Rüdiger. *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Eine Biographie*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992.
- Segebrecht, Wulf. *Autobiographie und Dichtung: Eine Studie zum Werk E.T.A. Hoffmanns*. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967.
- Segebrecht, Wulf. *Die Kunst der Phantasie: E.T.A. Hoffmann's Leben und Werk*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2004.

- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic*. Tr. Richard Howard. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975.
- Travis, Peter W. "Chaucer's Heliotropes and the Poetics of Metaphor." *Speculum*, 72.2 (1997): 399-427.
- Uerlings, Herbert, ed. *Theorie der Romantik*. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam, 2000.
- Werner, Hans Georg. *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Darstellung und Deutung der Wirklichkeit im dichterischen Werk*. Weimar: Arion Verlag, 1962.
- Willson, A. Leslie. *A Mythical Image: The ideal of India in German Romanticism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1964.
- Woodgate, Kenneth B. *Das Phantastische bei E.T.A. Hoffmann*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Wühl, Paul Wolfgang. "Zur Poetologie des Wirklichkeitsmärchens." *E.T.A. Hoffmann: Der goldne Topf, Erläuterungen und Dokumente*. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam, 2004. 105-109.