

Der goldene Topf, 13th vigil:

Hoffman and I – Anselm is stuck in a love triangle and needs to make a decision – the dualism of artist and the bourgeois – Anselm's Apprenticeship/Journeyman Years - Hoffmann caught between Wilhelm and Amadeus – ambiguity as a lifestyle – creation is struggle – the writer in Atlantis.

1.

Not so long time ago, while digging deeper into the oeuvre of Gustave Flaubert, I came across his *Bibliomanie*, a tale he wrote at the tender age of 15, and I immediately found myself in familiar surroundings when finding Hoffmann in between every line of Flaubert: I considered myself at home. This would not have been the case a couple of years ago, as for a long time I could not relate to Hoffmann's writing at all. My encounter with his *Sandmann* in school did not leave too much of an impression on me (apart from the word *Automat*, which took on a new, mystical dimension in my mind), and also later tries with *Murr*, *Scuderie* and the *Serapionsbrüder* never lasted to the end: his names sounded mostly random and sometimes silly to me, his characters were far from reality and to me they seemed like puppets with long limbs and small heads (very similar to Hoffmann's drawing of Johannes Kreisler). There was always some feeling of discomfort with me and Hoffman; I had troubles understanding his mertiful position in the history of literature and finding him again and again in references to my favourite writers growing up – Poe, Pushkin, Baudelaire,..., I fell under the impression that (despite the broad success with audiences during his lifetime) Hoffmann was a writer's writer and coming to that conclusion, I had given up on becoming a fan.

Oddly it was another medium that lead me back to him. I heard of the existence of a DEFA movie called *Die Elixiere des Teufels* and already the name gave me a thrill, soon I found myself reading Hoffmann's text and although I tried hard I could not deny that there was some value added to Matthew Gregory Lewis's *Monk*, and I felt that it happened on the formal level of the text itself, on the level of words and I finally got a sense for the quality of Hoffmann, but it was a slow process for me and only during my latest reading the complex world and the style of Hoffmann fully opened up to me.

2.

Der goldene Topf, for me, is something real and highly Romantic in every way. On the first level, it tells the story of a misfit, who generally isn't hostile to the pleasures of a Philistine, but is a stranger to the world because of his clumsiness: his is failure in the outer world enables his way into the inner world, and opens new ways of synesthetic, poetic perception.

Unwittingly he stumbles into a *ménage à trois* and is all of a sudden not only caught between two girls but also between two worlds: the world of poetry and the world of reality. In the dualism of artist and the bourgeois, his problem of love is nothing less than a state of inner conflict, disunity and fragmentation.

While in the classic *Bildungsroman* in the tradition of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (which is often alluded to and which is kept in the readers mind during the whole novella as a possible ending) the inner turmoil between artistic and the bourgeois self, between Apollo and Dionysus, must end in a safe space with a settling, conciliatory momentum and the adaption of the individual to the norms of society; in a Romantic context the inner turmoil must cause outer turmoil and pose a treat to the square Philistine's world.

While Novalis already negates the *Bildungsroman's* traditional ending of the struggling poet finding 'his place' in society at an ordinary occupation in his *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*¹,

¹ The novel was known to Hoffmann; he used the same subject for his *Der Kampf der Sanger*.

Hoffmann takes it one (maybe radical) step further. While Novalis strives after a romanticizing of the everyday world and a “völlige Aufhebung des Realen im märchenhaften Ideal”², in Hoffmann's novella the two worlds co-exist and fantasy poses a constant threat to reality. While the Atlantis of Novalis is a social paradise and therefore can easily be put aside and dismissed as an utopian dream, Hoffmann's Atlantis is purely aesthetic³ and therefore a lurking impendence in and for all realms of the everyday world.

What is interesting about *Der goldene Topf* is the permanent permeability of the two worlds' borders. While some motives and characters are clearly associated with either one or the other⁴, and some cross the border temporarily (like Veronika), in the character of the Archivarius lies a beautiful and deep link between the two worlds. The fairy tale he tells at the beginning of the third Vigil turns out to be a part of its own frame. It is indeed an autobiographical story of the Lindhorst's past; the fairytale is part of its own prequel.⁵ This dualism of the inner and outer world, the fantastic and the real, the poet and bourgeois is a key conflict of Romanticism and, in a broader context, perhaps of literature or the modern novel itself.

It is a very popular commonplace in the *Hoffmann-Forschung*, but in that context it is worth taking a look at the author's life for just a moment (in rare cases I think that the exposure of parallels to the author's life can be useful, but only if they are not considered the end of the interpretation but a way leading somewhere else), and find a man caught between art and business, between music and jurisprudence, at first choosing the latter for reasons of reason but never giving up the former and keeping his bockhorns for good.⁶ Hoffmann becomes a manic creator, handling his bread-and-butter-job during the daytime and drawing, composing and writing at night.⁷ In 1809 at 33 years of age he changes his middle name from the Prussian Wilhelm to the Mozartian Amadeus. The borders between these two worlds of Wilhelm and Amadeus bear the same permeability mentioned above: in jag, in exhilaration, in ecstasy they can be crossed, by Hoffmann himself as well as by his characters.

3.

This permeability is subject to a high expansion throughout all formal aspects of the novel. Like with all good works of art, the content is reflected in (and produced by) its form. This starts with the mixing of perspectives and semantic structures in the indexes of the single Vigils, and extends to a heterogetic narrator suddenly entering the story in Vigil 6 and becoming homodiegetic.

Both of these strategies add to the structure of the whole novella questioning the hermetic border between fantasy and reality, the internal self and the outer world, dream and reality, but there is another more significant stylistic device accompanying the reader through the whole novel: Hoffmann's highly ambiguous, polysemous writing style. His very normal everyday sentences can mean something dark or Romantic at closer examination. Hoffmann masters this style of writing like no other before and like only Kafka after him. (Scholars have yet to agree on whether Kafka was a heavy reader of Hoffmann, but I personally am very sure he was.) True writers use words that bear more than one meaning in a special context to add another semantic level, and their sentences can mean multiple things, and when it comes to

² Peter: Braun Kommentar zu E.T.A. Hoffmanns *Der goldene Topf*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2002, S.121.

³ Ibid.

⁴ E.g., Konrektor Paulmann and Registrator Heerbrand, who revealingly don't have first names but get their individual attributes from their profession.

⁵ This passage already dismisses all psychoanalytical or exclusivity symbolic interpretations of the fairy world.

⁶ Some scholars see the duality of Hoffmann's character reflected in the initials of *The Golden Pot's* protagonists Anselm and Heeresbrand: ‚A‘ and ‚H‘ represent Amadeus Hoffmann.

⁷ Vigil, the names of the chapters are references to work during nighttime.

the following dangerous encounter with a snake in a beautiful paragraph at the end of the second Vigil, one can not be sure whether the fight will end with Anselmus' death or with his *petite mort*:

Die Klingelschnur senkte sich hinab und wurde zur weißen durchsichtigen Riesenschlange, die umwand und drückte ihn fester und fester ihr Gewinde schnürte zusammen, daß die mürben zermalnten Glieder knackend zerbröckelten, und sein Blut aus den Adern spritzte, eindringend in den durchsichtigen Leib der Schlange und ihn rot färbend. - Töte mich, töte mich!⁸

At other passages the ambiguity is not so obvious, but close reading reveals pursuits and hints to the struggle of the artist, the struggle of creation. It seems as if Hoffmann is addressing this to himself – motivating himself to believe in his creation and to believe in his ability to create – when he lets the snake whisper to Anselmus and tell him to believe in her (“glaube – glaube – glaube an uns”).

I find the struggle of a writer (or an artist in general) referenced in multiple passages (apart from the obvious subplot with the narrator). If one takes a closer look at Anselm's initiation process in the house of the Archivarius Lindhorst, one can find examples of writing that suddenly looks puerile when presented to a master, of magic that springs from words, of the sudden understanding of formerly illegible signs and of a writing process on the verge of lunacy. These are situations very well known to aspiring writers and Anselm's whole learning process he undergoes with Lindhorst can be read as a poetic-romantic metamorphosis from writer to wordsmith.

At some point in Hoffmann's life, one of the two worlds he and his protagonists are caught between becomes rampant and destroys the other. In his *Meister Flo* he mimics the real Ministerialdirektor Kamptz (a senior policeman) with his fictional protagonist Knarrpanti to an extent that granted him many professional and juristic problems, which ultimately destroyed his civil existence and – according to some scholars – lead his body to the early grave. But while Hoffmann's material form went one way, his spirit and his works of art might just have gone the other way, to Atlantis or to the place of the writer: above the clouds, above the crowds, where the sounds are original, infinite skills create miracles....

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works cited in this essay:

Braun, Peter: Kommentar zu E.T.A. Hoffmanns *Der goldene Topf*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2002.

Hoffmann, E.T.A.: *Der goldene Topf. Ein Märchen aus der neuen Zeit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2002.

⁸ E.T.A. Hoffmann: *Der goldene Topf. Ein Märchen aus der neuen Zeit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2002, S. 25.