Hoffmann and Sterne:
Unmediated Parallels
In Narrative Method

LaURENCE STERNE and E. T. A. Hoffmann share a peculiarly distinguished fate in literary history. Critics readily acknowledge both authors’ prominence as odd giants of inventiveness and originality, each in his own way signaling the advent of literary modernity. But embarrassment and helplessness abound when it comes to formulating in what precisely their incomparable magnitude lies. The parallel in critical impasse may not be coincidental. “To date... nothing but a few commonplaces has been written about Sterne,” remarked Viktor Shklovsky in his pioneering 1921 essay on narrative technique in Tristram Shandy.¹ And Wayne Booth’s assessment of Sterne criticism in his Rhetoric of Fiction forty years later sounds no less discouraging: “Even the many recent critics who have granted [Tristram Shandy] its own kind of unity, making their way confidently through the windings and turnings, the seeming digressions that turn out to be ‘progressive,’ the involutions and superpositions of time schemes, have been unable to agree about what kind of work it really is.”² Similar aporia prevails among critics who try to come to terms with Hoffmann’s versatile artistic achievement, especially when they confront the elusive narrative virtuosity of his last novel, Kater Murr.³

³ For a listing of the handful of studies exclusively devoted to Kater Murr see the Bibliography in Robert S. Rosen's E. T. A. Hoffmanns 'Kater Murr'. Aufbauformen und Erzählsituationen (Bonn, 1970).

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unintentionally misleading attempt at interpretive clarification is perhaps best known to readers of Hoffmann criticism. In the sincere belief that he was performing a service for the public and improving on what he considered Hoffmann's disturbingly chaotic narrative structure, Müller simply separated the Kreisler parts from the Murr parts and published them individually as *Das Kreislerbuch* and *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr.*

Beyond marginal acknowledgement of the biographical details documenting Hoffmann's early familiarity and lifelong fascination with Sterne and occasional identification of a few Sternean traces in his works, Hoffmann scholarship has for more than 160 years virtually shunned the task of interpreting the considerable impact of the "English Rabelais" on the German romantic novelist and storyteller. In attempting to make up at least in part for this omission, I shall not offer yet another comparative study of influence or imitation. I do not regard Sterne as a precursor of Hoffmann, nor Hoffmann as a romantic reincarnation of Sterne. To locate Hoffmann in the company of the numerous Sterne imitators on the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German literary scene would be as futile as to claim that *Tristram Shandy* or *A Sentimental Journey* are mere "sources" for *Kater Murr* or, say, *Prinzessin Brambilla.* Instead, I shall try to suggest specific ways in which awareness and critical exploration of Hoffmann's indebtedness to Sterne can contribute to a reciprocal illumination of both novelists' craft and to an understanding of Hoffmann's art of narration in particular. For I am convinced that Leszek Kolakowski's insight into the nature of "philosophical" influence can be valid for literary interrelations as well: "In cases of philosophical 'influence' the active partner is not the one who exerts the influence, but the one on whom

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5 Most accessible in Friedrich Schnapp's recent editions of Hoffmann's three-volume *Briefwechsel* (Munich, 1967-69) and *Tagebücher* (Munich, 1971) and in the notes to the five-volume Winkler edition (Munich, 1960-65).


the influence is exerted. The reception of the past is not governed by some expansive force immanent in it, but rather by attempts of the present to find, in the past, stimuli which will help it discover the answers to its own present problems."8

There is little doubt as to Sterne's formative impact on Hoffmann's artistic temperament. Hoffmann's youthful, effusive correspondence with his friend Hippel is permeated with explicit Sternean references and stylistic eccentricities as well as obvious Shandyisms.9 The earliest extant literary product of the budding Gesamtkünstler novelist-painter is a brief, perhaps intentionally nonsensical "[Fragment eines humoristischen Aufsatzes]" of 1795, clearly inspired by Tristram Shandy.10 Identifiable Sterne passages alluded to in this fragment include a free reproduction of Tristram's graphic approximation of the flourish described in the air by Corporal Trim's stick in Book 9, Chapter 4, and details of Tristram's argumentation in Book 1, Chapter 21 (TS, pp. 604 and 71). Sterne's presence is not always so unmistakable in Hoffmann's narratives as it is in this early fragment. Here, for example, is a more oblique tribute to Sternean inspiration, skillfully integrated into the 1813 story Der Magnetiseur:

Ich [der alte Baron] übergehe alle die sonderbaren Auftritte, die ich mit meinem Freunde und Gebieter [dem dänischen Major] hatte, wenn er sogar an meinen kindischen Spielen teilnahm, und fleißig an der unüberwindlichen Festung mit bauen half, die ich in dem Garten nach den strengsten Regeln der Befestigungskunst anlegte... [HWW I, p. 146]

I think it is reasonable to assume that anyone familiar with Tristram Shandy would have little difficulty in detecting Hoffmann's allusion to Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim on the bowling green caught up in their favorite pastime, the endless reconstruction of the Duke of Marlborough's campaigns.

Another convincing parallel involves narrative strategy rather than straightforward resemblance in content, and concerns the narrators' conscious manipulation of their characters' actions. Once again, the

9 Cf. esp. Briefwechsel, ed. Schnapp, I, 47, 128, and 201.
10 E. T. A. Hoffmann, Schriften zur Musik. Nachlese, ed. Friedrich Schnapp (Munich, 1963), pp. 585-86. Hereafter references to Hoffmann's works will be cited from this edition (HWW). The key to the volume numbers is as follows:

HWW I: Fantasie-und Nachtstücke
HWW II: Die Elixiere des Tewels. Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr
HWW III: Die Serapions-Brüder
HWW IV: Späte Werke
HWW V: Schriften zur Musik. Nachlese
scene in *Tristram Shandy* is well known: in Chapter 5 of Book 5, Tristram describes in ample detail his mother’s pose as she eavesdrops outside the parlor door. For the next six chapters, during which Tristram digresses extensively, Mrs. Shandy is left in a somewhat uncomfortable bending position, as the reader is well aware. And, after a brief interjection—“I am a Turk if I had not as much forgot my mother, as if Nature had plaistered me up, and set me down naked upon the banks of the river Nile, without one.”—(*TS*, p. 367), she is not allowed to relax her pose for another two chapters: “Then, cried my mother, opening the door . . .” (*TS*, p. 370). The corresponding example comes from the ingenious story *Die Doppelgänger* (1821) where Hoffmann underscores the significance of the moment of confrontation between the two Doppelgänger figures by freezing the action into a sudden, almost cinematographic standstill, which he dissolves only at the beginning of the next chapter, after a digressive flashback (*HWW* IV, pp. 483 and 486).

Many more Sternean traces are scattered throughout Hoffmann’s works. Hoffmann’s last mention of Sterne occurs in the fourth volume of *Die Serapions-Brüder* (1821) in the course of the narrated discussion of Scott and the historical novel following the story “Der Zusammenhang der Dinge.” Though he praises Scott here, Hoffmann nevertheless misses in him “das Brillantfeuer des tiefen Humors, der aus Sternes und Swifts Werken hervorblitzt.” (*HWW* III, p. 925). Significantly enough, Hoffmann ascribes the same “Brillantfeuer des Humors” (*HWW* II, p. 417) to Johannes Kreisler in *Kater Murr*, the second volume of which he was completing at about that time.

Failure to discern direct points of contact in Hoffmann’s use of Sterne may be attributed to what Paul de Man calls the “pattern of consistent error,” that is the blindness of critics which “takes on the form of a recurrently aberrant pattern of interpretation with regard to a particular writer.”11 Hoffmann scholars have been notoriously guilty of such a pattern. For example, after Jean Paul wrote his seemingly benevolent, though more condescending than favorable, “Vorrede” to the *Fantasiestücke* in 1814 (*HWW* I, pp. 7-11), the direct influence of Jean Paul on the author of the collection in “Callots Manier” was assumed and has never been seriously contested. Instead, it was repeated as a critical commonplace, first by biased contemporary reviewers and then by subsequent commentators.12 Especially while Hoff-

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mann's popularity was rising Jean Paul himself welcomed every opportunity, public or private, to denounce Hoffmann unscrupulously as just another of his many imitators. Jean Paul's remarks from August 1821 exemplify his typically deprecatory tone which shows an undercurrent of jealousy and insecurity:


Given such a commentary, it is hardly surprising that under Jean Paul's gigantic shadow Hoffmann's stature has remained unrecognized. And, except for a few recent signs of awareness, Hoffmann's indebtedness to Sterne has not been noted as distinct from Jean Paul's supposedly mediating presence.14 Indeed, in standard critical practice joint references to Sterne and Hoffmann invariably mention Jean Paul. In dating Hoffmann's early "[Fragment eines humoristischen Aufsatzes]" in the Winkler edition, for example, the editor, Friedrich Schnapp, writes: "Die Abfassung des sichtlich durch Sterne und Jean Paul beeinflußten Stückes möchte ich in den Herbst 1795 verlegen" (HWW V, p. 932). Schnapp seems to take Jean Paul's influence for granted and proceeds to supply textual proof only for traces of Sterne.

Evidently Heine's perceptive claim for Hoffmann's sovereignty went unheeded. "Hoffmann ist ganz original," Heine remarked in one of his "Briefe aus Berlin." "Die, welche ihn Nachahmer von Jean Paul nennen, verstehen weder den einen noch den andern. Beider Dichtungen haben einen entgegengesetzten Charakter."15 However erratic Heine may have been in his critical assessments of other authors, this time he was correct. To be sure, Hoffmann knew Jean Paul's works intimately and, in spite of the tenuous nature of their personal contact,

sincerely admired the German Sterne. One could argue that many of the characteristic mannerisms Jean Paul absorbed or adopted directly from Sterne’s inexhaustible repertory of linguistic, stylistic, syntactical, and typographical antics Hoffmann himself assimilated only indirectly through Jean Paul. But the nature of Hoffmann’s conscious assimilation of the Sternean mode and narrative machinery is radically different from that of Jean Paul. Hoffmann felt a temperamental kinship toward the “English Rabelais” whom he saw as an acute observer of human folly whose view of the imperfect world seemed much like his own. But, more importantly, Hoffmann recognized in Sterne the superb craftsman of literary form. Far ahead of his time in critical acumen, Hoffmann perceived Sterne’s exemplary mastery of grand compositional design. Jean Paul’s attitude toward Sterne was quite another matter. Although infinitely more successful as a novelist than straightforward contemporary imitators of Sterne like Hippel, Jean Paul did not really penetrate the complex Sternean surface of stylistic eccentricity, sentimental pathos, and “humoristische Sinnlichkeit,” and failed to discern the underlying totality of Sterne’s epic form. Ultimately, Jean Paul did not transcend the self-imposed confines of his ingenious but overstrained semantic acrobatics, baroque accumulation of esoteric witticisms, and a pose of overconfident yet precarious rhetoric; and Hoffmann—in spite of his lifelong enthusiasm for Jean Paul’s works—must have been fully aware of these limitations.

Rather than press my iconoclastic argument any further I shall now turn to some salient points of tangency between Hoffmann and Sterne. For I believe that beyond the mere externalities which could well have been mediated by Jean Paul more fundamental and unmediated parallels can also be discerned. I shall concentrate on Tristram Shandy and Kater Murr, the two novels in which I consider the similarity in narrative form and epic tactics most striking.

It is well known that by entitling his novel Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr Hoffmann pays explicit tribute to Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. There is, however, more to the juxtaposition of the two titles than meets the eye. Just as in Sterne’s case the novel proves not to be what its title purports it to be—for “the life is largely that of Uncle Toby, and the opinions those of Walter Shandy; and Tristram is no gentleman in the modern sense of the word.”

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No matter how coherent, chronologically plausible, and linear Murr’s (hyphenated) “Lebens-Ansichten” may appear while narrated, they are almost as arbitrarily episodic and open-ended as the “fragmentarische Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler in zufälligen Makulaturblättern.” Though this phrase appears as a kind of subtitle in smaller print, Kreisler’s biography comprises more than two-thirds of the novel. Also, even a cursory reading of the Kreisler parts reveals that from the Kapellmeister’s lengthy outpourings and self-characterizations scattered throughout the book we learn just as much about his “Lebens-Ansichten” as we do about Murr’s “Biographie.” Nor should we fail to observe that Hoffmann injects yet another level of fictionality at the outset by identifying himself as the work’s editor. He thereby establishes an important ironic link between the mysterious authorial identity complex and the supposed role of chance (“zufällige Makulaturblätter”) in the composition of the novel. Hoffmann’s consciously ironic title provides a veiled structural description in miniature of the intriguing contrapuntal novelistic experiment about to unfold. Sterne’s intentional irony is similarly manifest in the implied contrast between the “Life and Opinions” in his title and the subsequent motto by Epictetus, reproduced on the title page in the original Greek: “It is not actions, but opinions concerning actions, which disturb men.”

Both Tristram Shandy and Kater Murr are novels about the impossibility of writing novels, particularly the impossibility of even beginning to write novels. In one of his most revealing authorial intrusions which voices the recurrent concern about how to begin, Kreisler’s “biographer” discourses on “das rhapsodische Wesen” and the inherently fragmentary nature of the novel as well as on the impossibility of adhering to a chronological sequence in the presentation (HWII, p. 336), thereby directly echoing a statement by Tristram in Chapter 13 of Book 1, who is similarly distressed about “this rhapsodical Work” and the difficulties of launching his narrative and properly introducing a certain character (TS, p. 35).

Hoffmann’s frequent musings on the appropriate way to commence his narratives—the celebrated remarks by the interposed narrator in Der Sandmann, Die Elixiere des Teufels, and Meister Floh as well as in Kater Murr—reflect an active attempt to transcend the restricting Horatian alternatives of ab ovo or in medias res by imaginative experimentation very much like Sterne’s.19 In Chapter 4 of Book 1 Tristram contemplates: “... right glad I am that I have begun the history of

19 See Norbert Miller, Der empfindsame Erzähler. Untersuchungen an Romananfängen des 18. Jahrhunderts (Munich, 1968). Miller takes the authorial intrusion in “Der Sandmann” as the point of departure for his outstanding study.

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myself in the way I have done; that I am able to go on tracing everything in it, as Horace says, *ab ovo,*" only to denounce his own method a few lines later: "for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived" (TS, pp. 7-8). In Tristram’s playfully conscious self-contradiction Hoffmann recognized a viable way to satisfy his own novelistic impulse. The first Murr installment, for example, is just as much a travesty of the Horatian *ab ovo* as the opening chapter of *Tristram Shandy,* while the beginnings *in medias res* of the Kreisler fragments confirm indebtedness to Sternean tactics also familiar from *A Sentimental Journey.* With this in mind it is hardly surprising that in the first Kreisler fragment Hoffmann incorporates into Meister Abraham’s first speech a modified and embellished version of an episode ("The Fragment. Paris") from *A Sentimental Journey,* attributed with intentional ambiguity by both Sterne and Hoffmann to Rabelais.20 But implanting this specifically Sternean detail into his own narrative is no simple montage on Hoffmann’s part. The unassuming reader is likely to overlook the double quotation marks around Meister Abraham’s first speech; only gradually and in retrospect does he realize that the pseudo-Rabelaisian passage so shrewdly integrated into a reported conversation between Abraham and Fürst Irenäus is in turn embedded in yet another conversation between Abraham and Kreisler. Thus Hoffmann has further refined Stern’s sophisticated narrative technique. The whole construction of the first Kreisler fragment anticipates the multi-layered vertical design that emerges from the Kreisler parts of the novel: essentially a complex circular pattern of dialogues.

The symbolic significance of Kreisler’s name is seminal for the interpretation of *Kater Murr.* Kreisler is no less obsessed by the semantic implications of his own name than is Walter Shandy by theorizing about Christian names in general and the impossibility of the name "Tristram" in particular. In one of the central dialogues between Kreisler and Rätin Benzon, Kreisler himself calls attention to compositional strategy, however, indirectly:

... betrachten Sie meinen schlichten Namen im gehörigen Licht ... sezieren Sie ihn mit dem grammatischen Anatomiermesser, immer herrlicher wird sich sein innerer Gehalt zeigen ... Sie können nicht weggucken von dem Worte Kreis, und der Himmel gebe, daß Sie denn gleich an die wonderbaren Kreise denken mögen, in denen sich unser ganzes Sein bewegt, und aus denen wir nicht herauskommen können, wir mögen es anstellen wie wir wollen. In diesen Kreisen krei- selt sich der Kreisler, und wohl mag es sein, daß er oft, ermißet von den Sprüngen des St. Veits-Tanzes, zu dem er gezwungen, rechgend mit der dunklen unerfor-

Kreisler here echoes a key statement made by Lothar—Hoffmann's theoretical mouthpiece in the conversational frame of *Die Serapions-Brüder*—who first formulates the Serapiontic principle:

> 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 Ahmungen, die sich nie zum deutlichen Bilde gestalten. [*HWW* III, p. 54]

These important passages substantiate Hoffmann's concern with the idea of circularity both as an ontological notion and a compositional strategy. Indeed, the Kreisler parts of *Kater Murr* offer a convincing novelistic demonstration of circular design. In terms of what little plot sequence there is the first Kreisler fragment actually belongs to the very end of the book and thus serves to complete the cycle of episodes, only to generate it anew. Circularity also proves to be the underlying principle governing the constellation of characters arranged around Kreisler. Each Kreisler fragment contains at least one revealing conversation; and it is through an elaborate scheme of conversations that the characters are linked to one another, through Kreisler, and to Kreisler. When viewed as a system of orbits with the characters rotating around the central Kreisler figure, the seemingly haphazard, confusing disarray of digressive episodes assumes structural and logical coherence. The narrative moves on a circular course by means of dialogic progression, from conversation to conversation, accompanied by frequently interposed authorial commentary. On the first orbit around him, Kreisler repeatedly encounters those characters closest to him, namely, Meister Abraham, Prinzessin Hedwiga, Julia, and Rätin Benzon. To the characters situated on the second, more distant orbit, Kreisler is linked only through the characters of the first orbit: to Chiara through Abraham, to Ettlinger through Hedwiga, to Prinz Hektor through Julia, and to Irenäus through Benzon. Further orbits conforming to the same pattern are also discernible; they comprise more removed if no less instrumental figures such as Severino, Fürstin Maria, Prinz Ignaz, and Pater Cyprianus. While each of the characters is conceived to illuminate—either by comparison or by contrast—a particular dimension of Kreisler's personality, the characters themselves also come alive as distinct individuals. That the interpersonal connections are always
charged with suspense attests to Hoffmann's supreme compositional skill.

The concept of circularity, so successfully translated into novelistic practice as a complex orbital pattern of character constellations in *Kater Murr* can also be found elsewhere in Hoffmann's works, most notably in the structural design of the two *Kreisleriana* collections and in *Prinzessin Brambilla*. For Sterne, too, circular movement—in terms of a central astronomical metaphor—seems to constitute the basic compositional strategy in *Tristram Shandy*. A close reading of Tristram's reflections in Chapters 14 and 22 of Book 1 yields helpful hints not only for the interpretation of Sterne's digressive technique but also for a better understanding of Hoffmann's double narrative design in *Kater Murr*:

... when a man sits down to write a history... he knows no more than his heels what lets and confounded hindrances he is to meet with in his way... if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid.

[TS, p. 36]

For in this long digression which I was accidentally led into, as in all my digressions (one only excepted) there is a masterstroke of digressive skill, the merit of which has all along, I fear, been overlooked by my reader,—not for want of penetration in him,—but because 'tis an excellence seldom looked for, or expected indeed, in a digression;—and it is this: That tho' my digressions are all fair, as you observe,—and that I fly off from what I am about, as far and as often too as any writer in *Great-Britain*; yet I constantly take care to order affairs so, that my main business does not stand still in my absence.

I was just going, for example, to have given you the great outlines of my uncle *Toby's* most whimsical character;—when my aunt *Dinah* and the coachman came a-cross us, and led us a vagary some millions of miles into the very heart of the planetary system: Notwithstanding all this you perceive that the drawing of my uncle *Toby's* character went on gently all the time;—not the great contours of it,—that was impossible,—but some familiar strokes and faint designations of it, were here and there touch'd in, as we went along, so that you are much better acquainted with my uncle *Toby* now than you was before.

By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too,—and at the same time.

This, Sir, is a very different story from that of the earth's moving round her axis, in her diurnal rotation, with her progress in her elliptick orbit which brings about the year, and constitutes that variety and vicissitude of seasons we enjoy;—though I own it suggested the thought,—as I believe the greatest of our boasted improvements and discoveries have come from some such trifling hints.

Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading;—take them out of this book for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them;—one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer;—he steps forth like a bridegroom,—bids All hail! brings in variety, and forbids the appetite to fail.
All the dexterity is in the good cookery and management of them, so as to be not only for the advantage of the reader, but also of the author, whose distress, in this matter, is truely pitiable: For, if he begins a digression,—from that moment, I observe, his whole work stands stock-still;——and if he goes on with his main work,—then there is an end of his digression.

——This is vile work.—For which reason, from the beginning of this, you see, I have constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with such intersections, and have so complicated and involved the digressive and progressive movements, one wheel within another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going;——and, what's more, it shall be kept a-going these forty years, if it pleases the fountain of health to bless me so long with life and good spirits. [TS, pp. 72-74]

According to Rainer Warning juxtaposition of Tristram's definition of digressions in Chapter 14 as "deviations from a straight line" (TS, p. 36) with the conspicuous metaphor he uses in Chapter 22 to compare the novel to the earth rotating around the sun reveals that the term "progression" in Chapter 22 (TS, p. 73) does not connote the "straight line" of Chapter 14, but rather a circular movement ("Kreisbewegung"). Analogously, the term "digression" in Chapter 22 does not mean "deviation from a straight line", but rather, as an astronomical concept, the apparent distance of an inferior planet from the sun. Thus "digression" proves to be identical with "progression." 21

The last paragraph of the excerpt from Chapter 22 fits the overall compositional design of Kater Murr rather closely. In particular, correspondence between Tristram's machine imagery and the mechanically inclined Meister Abraham's favorite pastime as master puppeteer manipulating the character constellations from behind the scenes seems to me unmistakable, even in the guise of an apparently innocent descriptive detail such as the following:

Meister Abraham verstand sich darauf, Kartonblätter so zuzuschneiden, daß, fand man auch aus dem Gewirre durchschnittner Flecke nicht das mindeste deutlich heraus, doch, hielt man ein Licht hinter das Blatt, in den auf die Wand geworf enen Schatten, sich die seltsamsten Gestalten in allerlei Gruppen bildeten. [HWW II, p. 370]

Essentially, Hoffmann like Sterne, aims at a fusion of two seemingly antithetical narrative strains. Both Sterne and Hoffmann strive for a semblance of what Friedrich Schlegel designated as "künstlich geordnete Verwirrung" or "gebildetes künstliches Chaos," 22 except that in executing his scheme Hoffmann appears even more daringly experi-

mental. In *Tristram Shandy*, the "digressive and progressive movements" are conflated into one sprawling narrative with the authorial voice continuously present in the foreground, involving the reader much of the time in the creative process through the device of conversational immediacy. As Tristram remarks in another famous passage:

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all;—so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. [TS, pp. 108-09]

The sustained illusion of overt fragmentariness in *Kater Murr*, on the other hand, carries a much greater—though calculated—risk of artistic failure. Here, with the Murr and Kreisler parts kept distinctly separate, everything depends on the two narrative strains gradually converging upon one another in the actively participating reader's mind. Hoffmann requires even more intensive involvement from his reader than does Sterne:

Ich meine, die Fantasie des Lesers oder Hörers soll nur ein paar etwas heftige Rucke erhalten und dann sich selbst beliebig fortschwingen. [HWW III, p. 354]

In other words, the reader's degree of willingness to consent to complicity with the author largely determines the ultimate success or failure of the narrative experiment.

On this more extensive comparative basis Sterne's intentionally ambiguous terminology becomes meaningful for Hoffmann's compositional technique in *Kater Murr*. The horizontal-linear, dynamic, and diachronic narrative flow of the Murr parts corresponds only deceptively to the idea of "progression" along a "straight line," just as the vertical-circular, static, and synchronic narrative *nunc stans* characteristic of the Kreisler parts seems only to substantiate the idea of "digression" as "deviation from a straight line." For both Sterne and Hoffmann, therefore, the “main business” is not to invent and realize a coherent plot, but—very much in congruence with the Epictetus motto—to present a configuration of memorable characters who continually assert their no less memorable opinions.

Fundamental to Hoffmann's manner of characterization in *Kater Murr* is the fruitful interpenetration of three rather divergent novelistic strategies familiar primarily from *Tristram Shandy*: Sterne's famous hobbyhorse metaphor, the use of the traditional concept of humors, and the superimposed confusion about authorial identity.

In his early essayistic dialogue on Sterne, Georg Lukács points to
the origin of the hobbyhorse metaphor in Ben Jonson's concept of "humour." Lukács' joint definition of Jonsonian "humour" and Sternean hobbyhorse is particularly illuminating in our context:

Die feststehende Eigenschaft des Menschen, die sich mit solcher Kraft durch alle seine Taten zieht, daß sie schon fast aufhört, seine Eigenschaft zu sein, daß der ganze Mensch nicht mehr anders wirkt, als wie wenn alle seine Lebensäußerungen nur Eigenschaften dieses "humours" wären. Eine Eigenschaft, die nicht der Mensch an sich trägt, sondern die den Menschen trägt.23

To be sure, the designation "Steckenpferd" occurs only once in Kater Murr—and then specifically applied to Kreisler (HWW II, p. 357)—but the Sternean "hobby-horsical" makeup of the other principal figures is clearly perceptible. There is, for example, Meister Abraham, impassioned creator of automatons and optical and acoustic effects; Rätin Benzon, intrigue-crazed manipulator of courtly affairs; Fürst Irenäus, obsessed by his incognito appearances which are cheerfully tolerated by his knowing subjects; Prinz Ignaz and his deranged fascination with porcelain cups and shooting down birds with cannons; Prinzessin Hedwiga's erotically overcharged "body electric"; Prinz Hektor, irresistible homme fatal and a Don Juan figure with a criminal past; and last but not least, tomcat Murr himself whose "ruling passion" is constantly to assert his inflated artist's ego as an "homme de lettres très renommé" (HWW II, p. 301).

Extreme one-sidedness is a most effective means of characterization for the humorous novelist. In the case of Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby, "hobby-horsical" warriors of vastly different cast, monomania generates supreme comicality. It also simultaneously exemplifies the improper balance of humors central to the Elizabethan theory of bodily fluids which is still current as a serious notion as well as something to be parodied in the works of both Sterne and Hoffmann. Just as Walter Shandy's desultory disquisitions and logocentric flights of fancy inevitably bypass Uncle Toby's strictly pedestrian and egocentric concerns, Hoffmann's juxtaposition of Kreisler—endowed with cholera in excess but not enough phlegm—and Murr—too much phlegm but not enough cholera24—can only result in contrast as reciprocal parody, a source of genuine humor in the novel.

Ultimately, however, it is the omnipresent, self-reflective authorial consciousness that lends structural coherence to the individual character constellations. By intentionally mystifying the reader through the in-

24 Cf. the opening of the first Kreisleriana collection, HWW I, p. 25.
vention of several plausible author figurations, most of whom are also participating characters, both Sterne and Hoffmann succeed in maintaining a spirited interaction among narrative machinery, characters, and reader. As Hans Eichner puts it, "In Tristram Shandy, Sterne not merely provides an ironic portrait of himself in Yorick, but this portrait of Stern's alter ego is drawn by an interposed narrator, Shandy, who in his role as narrator is also an alter ego of Sterne's." The authorial identity complex is similar in Kater Murr, though the underlying principle of circularity is made more conspicuous by an even more elaborate network of ambiguously interlaced identities. Hoffmann the author signs as the editor of the entire work. Murr is designated as the author of one of the two parts: a cat recommended to editor Hoffmann by a friend who may have been Kreisler himself. The other part of the book was supposedly written by Kreisler's unidentified biographer who displays an intimate knowledge of characters, events, and circumstances as if he were Meister Abraham himself. The cycle is completed when we recognize the basic identity of Abraham and Kreisler as antithetical alter egos of the only real author, E. T. A. Hoffmann.

To concentrate on the Kreisler parts of Kater Murr as I have done so far does not mean, of course, that I endorse Hans von Müller's arbitrary division of the novel into two separate books. Hoffmann's real tour de force is the remarkable integration of the two seemingly disconnected narratives, demonstrably inspired by Sterne's manner. But it must be conceded that in the Murr parts Sterne's presence is felt little, if at all. There is good reason for this: in the Murr portions of the novel Hoffmann creates an elaborate travesty of contemporary German novelistic practices. Moreover, I suspect that he not only pokes sophisticated fun at Goethe's Wilhelm Meister and Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde—this has been demonstrated before—but also parodies Jean Paul, subtly but deliberately. Indeed, I believe that virtually every individual Murr installment illustrates in one way or another what Hoffmann in his story "Das steinerne Herz" scornfully called "Jeanpaulisieren" (HWW I, p. 598).

The idea itself is not new. Critics have noticed two or three instances in the novel where Jean Paul's presence is unmistakable, but they have interpreted them as conscious imitation rather than parody. Even Hoffmann's gesture of sending a copy of the second volume of Kater

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Murr to Jean Paul shortly after its publication has been taken at face value as a moving tribute from the admiring disciple to the master. A careful reading of Hoffmann's accompanying letter of January 30, 1822, however, reveals that the following statement may be regarded as a sign of private revenge for Jean Paul's long-time hostile attitude:


In retrospect, Hoffmann's having sent Jean Paul only the second volume of Kater Murr makes good sense: most of the camouflaged parodic passages appear in the Murr parts of the first volume, a detail which could hardly have eluded the master in Bayreuth.

The parody begins with the series of hilarious "Vorreden," an effective takeoff on a typical mannerism of Jean Paul. Given Hoffmann's ironic stance, I think it would not be too farfetched to say that Jean Paul Richter figures behind the rhetoric of the following passage from Murr's first preface:

Werde, kann ich bestehen vor dem strengen Richterstuhl der Kritik? Doch ihr seid es, ihr fühlenden Seelen, ihr rein kindlichen Gemüter, ihr mir verwandten treuen Herzen, ja ihr seid es, für die ich schrieb, und eine einzige schöne Träne in eurem Auge wird mich trösten, wird die Wunde heilen, die der kalte Tadel unempfindlicher Rezensenten mir schlug! [HWW II, p. 300]

And our suspicion that Hoffmann never really forgave Jean Paul for that condescending "Vorrede" to the Fantasiestücke seems to be confirmed by the postscript to Murr's "unterdrücktes Vorwort":

N.S. Das ist zu arg!—Auch das Vorwort des Autors, welches unterdrückt werden sollte, ist abgedruckt!—Es bleibt nichts übrig, als den günstigen Leser zu bitten, daß er dem schriftstellerischen Kater den etwas stolzen Ton dieses Vorworts nicht zu hoch anrechnen, und bedenken möge, daß, wenn manche wehmütige Vorrede irgendeines andern empfindsamen Autors in die wahre Sprache der innigen Herzensmeinung übersetzt werden sollte, es nicht viel anders herauskommen würde. [HWW II, p. 302]

The best known parodistic passage is, of course, the most obvious one. Murr narrates his first encounter with Miesmies—love at first sight—by borrowing almost verbatim the overly sentimental love scene between Albano and Linda from Jean Paul's Titan (1803). True to his own inimitable diction, Hoffmann's Murr only changes "Mensch" to "Kater":

27Briefwechsel, II, 359.
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE


Since Hoffmann's own beloved cat was called Murr, no critic so far has inquired into the possibility of a more literary origin for the erudite animal's name. Not surprisingly, in the "Vor-Geschichte oder Vor- Kapitel" of Jean Paul's Leben Fibels (1811) reference is made to a certain Christian Gottlieb von Murr (1733-1811), author of Chiro- grapha personarum celebrium and a learned dealer in old books from Augsburg. Amusingly enough, the name Murr appears in the immediate vicinity of the word "Katze": just the sort of scurrilous interplay of incongruities that would have appealed to Hoffmann's imagination.28 When we now remember the dubious loyalty of Kater Murr's patronizing friend Pudel Ponto and the fact that Ponto was also the name of Jean Paul's poodle another ingeniously veiled parodistic connection emerges: Jean Paul as Pudel Ponto? The startling association becomes even more plausible when we consider the keen character sketch of Ponto given by Murr's other friend Kater Muzius:

Ja das ist es eben darin liegt es eben, der gute Ponto! —Der stutzerische, super- kluge, narrenhafte, stolze Heuchler, der sich Eurer annahmen, weil er gerade nichts Besseres zu tun wußte, weil es ihn gerade belustigte, der, suchtet Ihr ihn auf in seinen Assembleen und Koterien, Euch gar nicht wiedererkennen, ja Euch, weil Ihr nicht seinesgleichen seid, herausbeilien würde! der gute Ponto der statt Euch einzuführen in das wahre Weltleben, Euch unterhielt mit albernen, menschlichen Geschichten! [HWW 2, p. 487]

Perhaps it implies a tacit value judgment on Hoffmann's part that the many traces of Jean Paul in his works rarely transcend the confines of a parodistic context. Even certain compositional resemblances, particularly between Kater Murr and Jean Paul's Des Feldpredigers Schmelsle Reise nach Fläz (1809) and Leben Fibels (1811), amount to little more than superficial correspondences in montage technique. Sterne's formative impact on Hoffmann's narrative practice, on the other hand, was considerably more profound and deserves serious critical attention. We know that Thomas Mann, a lifelong admirer of both Sterne and Hoffmann, turned to Kater Murr as "Begleitlektüre"

while working on *Doktor Faustus*. There is enough indication, I believe, that during the composition of *Kater Murr* Hoffmann profited even more significantly from one of his favorite authors, Laurence Sterne, especially from *Tristram Shandy*. The inspiration drawn from Sterne's spirit and manner contributed to a unique epic creation bearing an imprint unmistakably Hoffmann's own.

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