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Reader Response and Authorial Strategies:
E.T.A. Hoffmann's View from Des Vetters Eckfenster

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The short prose work Des Vetters Eckfenster does not belong to the better known and more popular works by E.T.A. Hoffmann. Neither the reader of the early nineteenth century nor the contemporary reader of German literature has been particularly attracted to the story. However, since George Ellinger took notice of the story,1 Hoffmann scholars have allotted an unproportionally large — relative to the general reader interest — amount of attention to this curious anomaly in Hoffmann's writing. Particularly in recent years, literary critics have turned more frequently to this vignette-like depiction of the ailing writer's observations of the marketplace below his corner window. Some perceive in this short prose piece a precursor of nineteenth-century realism, either of German "poetic realism" or of a broader European "critical realism." Others maintain that the significant break from the Hoffmannesque mode of writing lies not so much in the style of prose, but rather in the author's understanding of aesthetic experience and the preconditions for poetic inspiration.4 In response to these interpretations, other scholars have argued that Des Vetters Eckfenster demonstrates that up until the very end Hoffmann retained faith in the mode of literary production ("Arbeitsweise") that characterizes his work as a whole.5

This opposition to the notion that one had discovered a new side to Hoffmann boasts formidable support. Wulf Segebrecht has shown quite convincingly that Des Vetters Eckfenster confirms Hoffmann's allegiance to both the "Callot manner" of depiction and the principle of narrative expounded in the Serapions-Brüder. According to Segebrecht, the tendency to see in Des Vetters Eckfenster a radical shift toward realism stems from the false view that in his writing Hoffmann exalts the inner world of poetic creation at the expense...
of a devalued “real” world. As Segebrecht, and others, have pointed out, the focus in Hoffmann’s works is not so much on the romantic vision itself as on the creative process and the critical perspective it opens up to the reality of everyday life. Thus neither the realistic narrative style of Des Vetters Eckfenster nor the cousin’s account of creative vision seems to constitute a radical departure from the earlier Hoffmann.

Still, the kernel of the story, the cousin’s discovery of a new way of seeing at the corner window, suggests some kind of shift in aesthetics. The autobiographical nature of the story also indicates that the aesthetic discovery in the story has repercussions for Hoffmann’s view of his own work as writer. The central figure of Des Vetters Eckfenster, an invalid writer, bears unavoidable resemblance to Hoffmann at the time the story was written. At the beginning of 1822 Hoffmann’s illness had taken a turn for the worse, to the point that he was confined to a wheelchair. In the first half of April, after the progressing nerve disorder had deprived him of the use of his hands, he dictated Des Vetters Eckfenster. The invalid writer of the story, like Hoffmann at the time, is able neither to walk nor write and can bear only small portions of the most digestible foods. The location of his corner apartment, opposite the theater at the Berlin Gendarmenmarkt, is identical to that of Hoffmann’s apartment at Taubenstraße 31 in which he resided from 1814 until his death in June 1822.

As Segebrecht has shown, Hoffmann’s writing always had a central autobiographical thrust to it. But direct references to Hoffmann’s own life are much stronger in Des Vetters Eckfenster than in his other writing. The autobiographical connections usually stem from a fictional narrator who vacillates between his enthusiasm for poetic imagination and his outsider existence in the “real” world that he cannot transcend. This “autobiographical” content points less to Hoffmann’s own existence and work as writer, than to the concept of the writer and poetic inspiration. Des Vetters Eckfenster departs from this pattern completely. The narrator is not only not a writer, but also, as he freely admits, altogether unfamiliar with literary matters. His cousin seems, in contrast to the typical writer figure in Hoffmann, to have found a happy medium for exchange between his own creative vision and the goings-on in the public sphere of the larger Berlin society. But even if he neither expresses self-doubts, nor invites the reader to become involved in his quandary, as is often the case in Hoffmann’s works, the text refers back to aesthetic principles that informed the cousin’s writing and were indeed problematical for his stance as writer. These allusions are autobiographical as well, and in a much more personal way than those allusions to the writer in most of Hoffmann’s works. They include direct references to his professional work as a court official and active participant in the political events of his day. A reading of the story for these, in some way, peripheral references to Hoffmann himself will offer a new perspective on the place of this story within his work as a whole and on his own retrospective view of his literary work shortly before his death.
Des Vetter's Eckfenster tells of a visit to the invalid writer's apartment by his cousin, the narrator of the story. As the story begins, the narrator gives an account of his cousin's illness and describes how it had left him in a state of constant depression. But on the day of his visit the narrator is surprised to find his cousin once again in good spirits. His cousin, however, is quick to dash the narrator's hopes that he had recovered from his illness. He explains that it is the corner window which has led to his improved disposition: "Aber dies Fenster ist mein Trost, hier ist mir das bunte Leben aufs neue aufgegangen, und ich fülle mich befreundet mit seinem niemals rastenden Treiben." With the eagerness of a child showing off a new toy, the cousin invites the narrator to partake of the view offered by the corner window. As they observe the marketplace below, the two cousins alternately describe the everyday events which occur amidst the bustling crowd of vendors and customers. In their exchange, the writer's artistic vision is juxtaposed to the narrator's inability to see in the events of the marketplace anything other than the obvious. When they first move into the alcove where the corner window is located, the narrator unabashedly tells his cousin that he does not understand how the panoramic view of the marketplace can provide him with so many hours of pleasure. The cousin first rebukes the narrator for his lack of literary talent: "Vetter, Vetter! nun sehe ich wohl, daß auch nicht das kleinste Fünkchen von Schriftstellertalent in dir gliht. Das erste Erfordernis fehlt dir dazu, um jemals in die Fußstapfen deines würdigen lahmen Vetters zu treten: nämlich ein Auge, welches wirklich schaut" (600). He then takes up the task of teaching the narrator how the writer views the world.

It is not that the cousin possesses a keener power of observation than the narrator. As soon as the cousin has directed the narrator's vision to the particular events of the marketplace below, the narrator demonstrates a remarkable eye for detail. The difference, however, is in the manner in which the two cousins relate what they see to each other. The narrator describes exactly what happens, following the movements and actions of the people he observes. His account is in detailed, broken sentences in which the real time of the action corresponds directly to the narrated time. The cousin takes what the narrator has observed, interprets it, and turns it into a narrated account which goes far beyond what the eye sees. He allows his imagination to play with his visual perceptions and creates a story full of intrigue and human interest. The narrator, who has been called upon to display his "eye which really sees," rightly points out that his cousin is doing more than closely observing. He attributes his cousin's liberal interpretation of objective observation to the writer's aesthetic sensibilities. The writer, on the other hand, sees a much more immanent connection between the actual events, at least when they are observed with an eye which really sees, and his accounts of those events. The knowledge that there is no clear distinction between the real and the imagined is that premise of artistic vision he promised to teach the narrator. As he sets out to demonstrate
this hermeneutical principle, he suggests that the imagination, accepted as an indispensable faculty of the artist and writer, is also an integral and often neglected aspect of veritable observation. Vision, the act of seeing, is itself a creative activity. What we “see” is not a bare level of reality, but it is a picture of the world and its events which we have preconceived in order to “see” them at all. When the narrator first looks out onto the marketplace, he encounters a kaleidoscopic image: “und ich mußte mir gestehen, daß der Anblick zwar recht artig, aber auf die Länge ermüdend sei, ja wohl gar aufgereizten Personen einen kleinen Schwindel verursachen könne der dem nicht unangenehmen Delirieren des nahenden Traums gliche” (599). The cousin declares that it takes a bold “Geist,” “ein wackerer Callot” (600), to set aside preconceived views of “reality” and grapple with that which one actually sees.

The writer’s enthusiasm for his recent discovery of the corner window and his new principle of artistic vision is explained by the fact that, until he began to appreciate the lessons learned by observing the world outside, he had been in the throes of a long writer’s crisis. The full significance of the corner window is only understandable in connection with the invalid cousin’s previous disillusionment with literature. Even where critics have discussed the cousin’s literary crisis, they have missed the pivotal event in the story which ties together the references to his previous style of writing. Among the various figures described by the narrator and his cousin as they look out over the marketplace, one stands out from the others — that of a girl selling flowers. In this instance, the cousin does not have to rely on his imagination to create an episode about the character; rather he tells of an actual encounter. It was a painful personal experience from which he has not fully recovered: ”Nach den Blumen dort schaue ich nicht gerne hin, lieber Vetter, es hat damit eine eigne Bewandtnis” (606). The cousin was passing the flower stand one day and noticed that the girl was engrossed in a book. The girl’s total involvement in the fictional world of the book (“höher glühten des Mädchens Wangen, ihre Lippen bebten, sie schien ihrer Umgebung ganz entriickt” [607]) corresponded to the writer’s idea of how his own books were read and he sensed that it might even be one of his own works in her hands: “Der Geist der Schriftstellereitelkeit regte sich, und kitzelte mich mit der Ahnung, daß es eins meiner eigenen Werke sei, was eben jetzt das Mädchen in die fantastische Welt meiner Träumereien versetzte” (607). When he does indeed discover that it is one of his books, he is ecstatic; in part, certainly, because his reader is “ein ganz hübsches, artiges Mädchen” (606), but also because he is able to observe right before his eyes precisely the reader response which he had imagined his works would have. Overcome by vanity, he proudly announces that he is the author. An embarrassing moment ensues, in which the cousin learns that the girl had never even considered that the books she reads had to be written (“gedichtet”) by someone. The flower-girl’s final blow is her query as to whether he had written all the books peddled by the bookseller.
Kralowski at the marketplace. It is a blow to his image of himself as writer, but more importantly, it leads him to question his conceptions about reader response and the effects of his works.

The narrator's response to his cousin's story is one reason why this central incident has not received its due. As soon as his cousin is finished telling of his encounter with the flower-girl, the narrator writes it off as a simple case of "gestrafte Autorität" and directs attention away from the story back to the marketplace. He mistakenly imparts no significance to his cousin's painful recalling of this incident. But the reader has already been warned that the narrator is not an initiate in literary matters. The narrator himself admits this at the beginning of the story: "Die Leute lesen gerne was er schreibt; es soll gut sein und ergötzlich; ich verstehe mich nicht darauf" (597). In the case of the flower-girl, the cousin is affected precisely by the failure of his work to edify in the way he had devised. Thus his facetious remark about the "tragic" nature of the story is, ironically, much closer to the truth than he realizes. In the same way, the narrator never understands that his cousin's improved spirits stem from the aesthetic discovery and, as this author will show, its implications for new reader-response strategies, not from improvements in his physical condition. At the end of Des Vetters Eckfenster, when the cousin's attendant announces that the cousin must eat, the narrator supposes, again mistakenly, that his appetite has returned. Assuming a lightly reprimanding tone, the cousin has his food brought into the room and lets the narrator survey his meager meal:

"Ein einziger Bissen mehr," sprach der Vetter leise und wehmütig, indem er meine Hand drückte, "das kleinste Stückchen des verdaulichsten Fleisches, verursacht mir die ensetzlichsten Schmerzen, und raubt mir allen Lebensmut und das letzte Fünkchen von guter Laune, das noch hin und wieder aufglimmen will." (621-22)

With this emphatic description of his afflictions, the ailing writer is impressing upon the narrator that not a change in his health, but rather the discovery of the corner window is responsible for his improved spirits.

The importance of the cousin's aesthetic find for his own literary work is difficult to determine, in part because the references in the story to the invalid cousin's writing are often indirect. The incident with the flower-girl gives, however, some indication of his authorial strategies. When the girl describes his book, one surmises that it contains fantastical elements which, as in so many of Hoffmann's own works, dovetail with otherwise plausible characters and events. She characterizes her reading in this way: "Anfangs wird einem emw wenig wirrig im Kopfe; aber dann ist es so, als wenn man mitten darin säße" (607). And when she twice describes the book as "schnackisch" (a colloquial expression of the day meaning "verrückt"), the writer is reassured that the book
has had the desired effect. As he describes the response he anticipated from the flower-girl, he contrasts his idealistic conception of his literary powers with the reality of his reader's world: “Das galt mir für den Ausdruck der höchsten Verwunderung, ja eines freudigen Schreckes, daß das sublime Genie, dessen schaffende Kraft solch ein Werk erzeugt, so plötzlich bei den Geranien erschienen” (608). The irony here points to something other than the embarrassment caused by exposed vanity. The cousin suffers rather a bitter disillusionment when the flower-girl reveals that the figure or image of the author has never played a role in her readings. One can recall here Hoffmann’s attempts to distance the reader from the narrative through direct addresses — for instance, the narrator in Der goldne Topf isolated in his attic chamber, entreating the reader to share with him his discontent with the banality of everyday life. It seems apparent to the cousin now, that whatever similar authorial strategies he might have employed in his works have surely missed their mark.

It is, of course, not merely the pleasurable hours spent observing the marketplace which are responsible for the writer’s rejuvenation. The corner window opened the cousin up to a new mode of aesthetic vision, one which could resolve the literary crisis brought on by the flower-girl incident. At the beginning of the story, the narrator alludes to the cousin’s Romantic imagination in a passage which established the figurative significance of the corner window. As he sets the stage for his conversation with his cousin, the narrator gives a short description of the writer’s apartment, then adds his own comments:

Es ist nötig zu sagen, daß mein Vetter ziemlich hoch in kleinen niedrigen Zimmern wohnt. Das ist nun Schriftsteller- und Dichtersitte. Was tut die niedrige Stubendecke? die Fantasie fliegt empor, und baut sich ein hohes, lustiges Gewölbe bis in den blauen glänzenden Himmel hinein. So ist des Dichters enges Gemach, wie jener zwischen vier Mauern eingeschlossene zehn Fuß ins Gevierte große Garten, zwar nicht breit und lang, hat aber stets eine schöne Höhe. (598)

The small chamber described here corresponds closely to Hoffmann’s “Arbeitsstube” in his Berlin apartment. It was the smallest room in his rather spacious apartment, narrow and with a low ceiling. It was also in this room that he would smoke his pipe and converse with his actor friend Devrient. Although not the corner room of his apartment, it did offer a panoramic view of the Gendarmenplatz and fit as well the description of the writer’s small attic study. But the panoramic view of the corner window does not fit the conventional image of the writer’s “Dachkammer.” This motif was at the time fast becoming a topos for the writer’s turn inward into his, to use Hoffmann’s term from the Callot foreword, “inneres romantisches Geisterreich.” Carl Spitzweg’s painting
“Der arme Poet,” which parodies the poet’s isolation in his attic chamber, indicates that by the time of his painting in 1838 it had already become an established topos for the writer’s preoccupation with the inner world of his own imagination. In “Der arme Poet” the only window is a recessed dormer window which only gives a limited view onto the roofs of the adjacent buildings. The corner window, on the other hand, represents a shift in focus from the inner world of the writer’s imagination to the public world of social interaction.

In his description of the writer’s apartment the narrator suggests that the cousin’s ideal world created by his imagination more than compensates for its narrow confines. However, the cousin was sustained by his writing only as long as his works were not only popular, but also having the desired effect on the reader. When the cousin had first gone into his melancholic seclusion, he had expressed his resignation to the narrator in this way: “— ich geb’s auf, das wirkende schaffende Leben, welches zur äußern Form gestaltet aus mir selbst hinaustritt, sich mit der Welt befreundend! — Mein Geist zieht sich in seine Klause züruck!” (598). The cousin, who had channelled his creativity into the production of literary works which were to have a certain influence in the world, felt betrayed. He speaks of his works here as if they were disciples who, when they are sent out into the world, abandon the purpose he had instilled in them and adapt themselves to the wants and needs of the reader.

The reader response the cousin expected corresponds to the authorial strategies employed by Hoffmann in the majority of his works. Much of the focus in Hoffmann scholarship has been on the unique intertwining of realistic elements with fantastical products of the Romantic imagination. Hans Georg Werner has demonstrated how this combination of the fantastical and the realistic is intended to provide the reader with a revitalized way of seeing the world. The mysterious and wondrous elements serve to free the reader from ordinary perceptions, while the narrative breaks and direct addresses provide distance to the ideal fictional world conceived in the text. The goal is to induce the reader to examine critically conventional ways of viewing reality. This approach is directed at what Hoffmann perceives as the ideal reader of his story. The expectations are demanding. The reader is to share the fantasies of the writer and to attain an awareness of their function in the text. By analyzing the narrator’s direct addresses to an implied reader, Barbara Elling has shown that the ideal reader of Hoffmann’s texts becomes engaged in the soul-searching process of creation behind the literary work. The narrator even invites the reader to criticize his indulgence in the ideal world of the imagination. Similarly, Segebrecht, in an essay on the heterogeneous elements in Hoffmann’s works, concludes that the reader is expected to perform an analytical synthesis comparable to the writer’s achievement: “Dazu ist eine Erkenntnisleistung des Lesers notwendig, die der Erkenntnisleistung des Dichters vergleichbar ist. Sie vermittelt ihm die Einsicht in die wechselseitige Relativierung der
kontrastierenden Positionen, so daß nach den solche Relativierung bedingenden Prinzip, also nach der Funktion der Poesie gefragt werden muß. If, however, the narrator’s apostrophic comments fail to move the reader to critical reflection, the strange world of Hoffmann’s creation may serve as only entertaining reading. In Des Vetters Eckfenster just such a reader response seems to have thrown the cousin into a prolonged despondency. Disillusioned by his face-to-face encounter with the flower-girl’s reading of his book, the cousin had drawn back into his “Dachkammer” — but not to take up his writing again. He had decided to stop sending the fruits of his cloistered imagination out into the world.

The corner window points to a different way of establishing contact with the world outside the low and narrow confines of the writer’s chamber. In the topos of the attic apartment, as described by the narrator, the writer’s view to the outside is in the form of an aesthetic vision which sees the world ideally as “a glowing blue sky” (598). A window opening onto the activities of the marketplace would only act to divert the writer from the inner vision. The cousin’s corner window, on the other hand, offers an open view onto the microcosmic social world of the Berlin Gendarmenmarkt. But the cousin was only superficially acquainted with the panoramic view from his window until the access to his inner world became blocked. When he gave up his writing, he began to look out the corner window with new eyes for the people at the marketplace, who until then he had viewed primarily as idealized readers. Through his observations of the common folk going about their everyday business, he discovers that the German people, or at least those of Berlin, had developed a surprising new civility (“äußere Sittlichkeit”). Together with this awareness, he arrives at a new concept of creative vision, both of the act of seeing as well as the “aesthetic vision” which the writer or artist shares with his public. “Das wirkende schaffende Leben” is no longer for the cousin something within the writer which must be sent into the world in the form of an “aesthetic vision.” It is now centered in the constantly changing picture offered by the events of the marketplace. The role of the writer is to discern in the contours of those figures and events an emerging context for sharing a living vision with his public.

In this conception of aesthetic vision the writer’s relationship to the reader contrasts sharply with the cousin’s earlier approach. He had been writing with the idea that his works and the literary movement to which they belong were the basis for a growing and eventually triumphant process of aesthetic education. When the cousin first begins to tell about the incident with the flower-girl, he makes light of his former grand illusions in a remark full of bitter irony: “... sowie sie der Handel nicht beschäftigt, liest sie emsig in Büchern, deren Uniform zeigt, daß sie zur großen Kralowskischen ästhetischen Hauptarmee gehören, welche bis in die entferntesten Winkel der Residenz..."
siegend das Licht der Geistesbildung verbreitet" (607). With the unconsonant
image of a grand aesthetic force, which in actuality consists of the books
peddled by Kralowski at the marketplace, spreading the light of a “higher”
spiritual and intellectual cultivation, the cousin is parodying his own inflated
expectations of the influence his works would have in the world of his readers.
Where one would more likely expect the writer, particularly in this period of
German Idealism, to blame the failed reception on the banal interests of the
general public, the cousin seems to fault his own aesthetic strategy.

If, as this author has suggested, the cousin’s new attitude about the
Berlin masses precipitated this reversal in aesthetic strategy, then what change
has he sensed in the public which was so significant that it could restore his lost
identity as writer? The increased civility of the common people hardly seems
to be a sufficient cause. Yet his enthusiasm for the new mode of seeing he
demonstrates to his cousin hinges on the ability of the people to share in this
vision. This new sense of civility is only one manifestation of a more fundamental
development that gives the cousin hope. He explains to his visitor that he has
noticed the gradual change in the time “seit jener Unglücksperiode, als ein
frecher, übermütiger Feind das Land überschwemmte, und sich vergebbens
vermühte, den Geist zu unterdrücken, der bald wie eine gewaltsam
zusammengedrückte Spiralfeder mit erneuter Kraft emorsprung” (619). The
emphasis here (placed by Hoffmann in the original text) is on a spirit of the
people which is not instilled in them by the authorities of the state, but rather
belongs to their own collective will. When the cousin speaks of a new sense of
order he sees the beginnings of a public sphere in which the people’s sense of
a common cause gradually supplants the need for imposed authority. He gives
the narrator an example of a scuffle that had broken out on the previous market
day. In the past, he conjectures, it would have ended in death for one of the
combatants and the case would have gone to the criminal courts. But the women
venders intervened and prevented further violence until the offending party
could be removed. Both in his comments about the Berlin commoners as well
as in the reference to the Napoleonic invasion, the cousin seems encouraged
most by the people’s steps toward self-determination.

This attitude corresponds with the stance Hoffmann took as a member
of the Prussian Immediat-Kommission zur Ermittlung hochverräterischer
Verbindungen und anderer gefährlicher Umtriebe from 1819 until his death.
During his tenure with the commission he steadfastly defended the rights of
individuals to express criticism of the constituted government, as long as they
did not become involved in action to overthrow the state. Similarly, his decisions
as an official of the court during these years of reactionary control ran counter
to the autocratic rule of the state. When the Justice Minister, citing the immunity
of government officials to the courts, intervened to stop a countersuit brought
against the Prussian Director of Police Kamptz, Hoffmann formulated the
court's formal refusal to drop the case. In a letter to Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, Hoffmann justified this decision by declaring he was a true patriot and had accepted the seat on the commission with the firm belief that the wild revolutionary acts of a few radical youth needed to be stopped. He discovered, however, that the real intent of the government was not only to prevent subversive acts, but to curb as well all expression of opposition to the state.15

Hoffmann's repudiation of the state's claim to absolute control surfaces in Des Vetters Eckfenster as well, although it is limited to the few indirect references to the people of Berlin at the end of the story. The cautious nature of the political allusions in Des Vetters Eckfenster is understandable given Hoffmann's precarious situation at the time. As revenge for Hoffmann's refusal to dismiss the charges against him, Police director Kamptz had prompted like-minded government officials (most notably the Prussian Minister of the Interior and Police von Schuckmann) to bring serious charges of disloyalty against him. This suit to have him removed from office was still pending at the time of his death in June, but the attack against him was of such a vindictive nature that von Schuckmann even actively opposed the application for financial assistance placed by Hoffmann's widow in 1828. This pressure might also explain the reference in Des Vetters Eckfenster to the Turnvater Friedrich Ludwig Jahn and his followers. The cousin admits that certain "enthusiastische Rigoristen, hyperpatriotische Aszetiker eifern grimmig gegen diesen vermehrten äußeren Anstand des Volks" (620). He then firmly embraces the opposing point of view, noting that, even with an obvious example that proves his case, he would never get far with such extreme patriots of the "Volk." Despite his deep mistrust of Jahn and the student radicals, Hoffmann had written the Immediat-Kommission's ruling that there was no reason for the Prussian state to take police action against him. And when Jahn brought the counteraction against Kamptz, Hoffmann penned the Kammergericht's refusal to dismiss the charges at the bequest of the government. This is not to suggest that in Des Vetters Eckfenster Hoffmann was abandoning his political convictions in order to protect himself. On the contrary, the denouncement of these fanatical patriots who appeal to the "true folk character" ("das Volkstümliche") is another instance of the anti-absolutism Hoffmann advocated persistently both in his literature and his legal career during the reactionary climate of the Metternich regime.

This broad claim about the political thrust of his later works has only recently been introduced into the scholarship on Hoffmann. Segebrecht, in an essay that examines the connections between Hoffmann's legal career and his writing, argues quite convincingly that the political stance he took during these last years is reflected in his literary works as well. Segebrecht contends that the prevalent view of a dualistic opposition in Hoffmann's works between the poetic genius and the philistine Beamte has caused scholars to overlook the much more differentiated depiction of the government official in his work.
Analyzing the constellation of government officials in Gedanken über den hohen Wert der Musik, Klein Zaches genannt Zinnober and Meister Floh, Segebrecht concludes that in these works Hoffmann parodies all forms of ideological absolutism. This holds not only for the autocratic rule of state, but also "für den Künstler, der seine Kunst verabsolutiert" (304). It is this aesthetic chauvinism that is mainly at issue in Des Vetters Eckfenster. The reference to Napoleon and his imperial army alludes back to the Kralowskian grand army which is striving to subject the common people in "the fartherest corners of the imperial city" to a higher culture ("eine höhere Kultur des Geistes" [607]). The cousin implies that just as the arrogant enemy failed to conquer the people and only unified them in their resistance, literary attempts to raise the critical consciousness will also have to yield to those forces which emanate out of the spirit of the people.

Des Vetters Eckfenster does not suggest what form a literature based on the cousin's newly discovered aesthetic premise would take. The narrative composition of the story is certainly not what one normally associates with Hoffmann. However, it is misleading to claim, as has been the case in recent interpretations of Des Vetters Eckfenster, that it represents a major shift toward realism. As pointed out above, the unsettling combination of the realistic and the fantastical is the trademark of E.T.A. Hoffmann's prose. The difference in Des Vetters Eckfenster lies not so much in the development of a new realism as in the omission of the scurrile and fantastical elements so typical of his stories. Still, the story constitutes a departure from the principle of poetic inspiration described in the conversations of Die Serapions-Brüder. In an often cited passage from the frame story, Lothar declares that the outside world provides stimulus ("als der Hebel wirkt") for that spirit ("geistige Kraft") which, in only passing moments, is able to capture a glimpse of the pure inner world. Where in Die Serapions-Brüder "der vollendeste Glanz des regsten Lebens" is to be found in this inner world, in Des Vetters Eckfenster the cousin refers to the marketplace as "ein treues Abbild des ewig wechselnden Lebens" (621). According to this revised aesthetic principle, what the writer would send out into the world is not the product of the "inner eye." The model of the ideal reader who would enter into the fictional world constructed by the author without any disruptive preconceptions must yield to the model of the historically and socially determined reader who influences the production of the literary work.

The shift to a new reading model leads then to a revision of authorial strategies. According to Werner, Hoffmann employed those fantastical and wondrous elements typical of Romantic literature in the mode of an "analytical" writer who calculates the responses of his reader and aims for a particular effect, and not like a "synthetic" writer who attempts to draw the reader into a magical, poetic world. The creations of the romantic imagination in Hoffmann's works invite the reader to accept the narrator's offer of a literary contract. This...
agreement is not that the reader enter with the writer into "das heilige Verhältnis der innigsten Symphilosophie oder Sympoesie." This formulation by Friedrich Schlegel describes the goal of the early Romantic, "synthetic" writer. Hoffmann, on the other hand, entreats the reader through the direct addresses of the narrator in his stories to participate in the quandary of the writer who is trapped between a hallowed inner world and a worldly existence in society. When the flower-girl reveals that she is not at all aware of the writer's existence, the rug is pulled out from under this "analytical" strategy. The hermeneutical awareness displayed in Des Vetters Eckfenster suggests a move back toward the "synthetic" writer, but not toward the original Romantic concept of the "synthetic" writer. The cousin has learned that the writer should not attempt to draw the reader into a world created by the poet's powers of inner vision. What is to be produced "synthetically" is not a reader who gives himself over to the inner vision of the literary product, but rather a reader who activates his own power to generate a new vision. The literature Hoffmann envisions for the future will be rooted in a "textual power" shared by the artist and his public.

At the end of the story the cousin reaffirms his belief that a new aesthetic vision will shift its focus to the outside world of man's active everyday life. But the mood at the end also indicates that this belief is only his own optimistic view of a future age. The cousin's last comment about the scene below, as the crowd of vendors and shoppers begins to clear out, reads the marketplace as an allegory for the course of a man's life in the public sphere of social interaction:

"Dieser Markt", sprach der Vetter, "ist auch jetzt ein treues Abbild des ewig wechselnden Lebens. Rege Tätigkeit, das Bedürfnis des Augenblicks, trieb die Menschenmasse zusammen; in wenigen Augenblicken ist alles verödet, die Stimmen, welche im wirren Getöse durcheinanderströmten, sind verklungen, und jede verlassene Stelle spricht das schauerliche: Es war! nur zu lebhaft aus." (621)

The desolate feeling expressed here by the cousin as his life is drawing to a close is amplified by his awareness that he never participated in this mainstream of life. Despite the cleft between him, the outsider who pursued an ideal world, and the masses of people going about their daily business, the cousin holds hope that the two will eventually find common ground. The inscription written in large letters on a sheet of paper fastened to the canopy of his bed, "Et si male nunc, non olim sic erit!", expresses this melancholic hope for the future. This quotation from Horace's Odes refers on one level to his suffering and his solace in the knowledge that it will end soon. It alludes as well to his hope that the writer will find resonance in society. His microcosmic view of the evolving social order allowed him to realize that his writing had not been misdirected, but rather had
belonged to a different time and a different public. The new aesthetic vision he foresees is one of the future, one contingent on a certain cultural and social maturity of the populace.

The cousin’s sad optimism does not suggest that a new form of communicative literature is imminent. Nor do I think that Hoffmann presents the short sketches described by the cousin in *Des Vetters Eckfenster* as an example of the style this future prose will take. By the same token, the conversational format is also not intended as such a model. The allusions to aesthetic issues in *Des Vetters Eckfenster* which I have discussed in this study are obviously not meant for the larger reading public. Even the narrator, the writer’s own cousin, misses the point of many of the cousin’s remarks. *Des Vetters Eckfenster* is rather the author’s last reckoning with his literary work and his testament to the next generation of writers. It admonishes that, as social evolution proceeds, the writer must also learn to see with new eyes. In 1826, four years after Hoffmann’s death, Heinrich Heine pointed to this aspect of man’s changing world vision, when he stated: “Jedes Zeitalter, wenn es neue Ideen bekommt, bekommt auch neue Augen.”

In *Des Vetters Eckfenster*, Hoffmann had maintained that it is the writer’s task to engage the reader in a creative process which can steer this continuously evolving vision.

9Lothar Köhn speaks of the cousin’s “Krise der Gestaltung” (208) and mentions the reference to the cousin’s previous mode of writing (209, 212), but he does not connect
this theme to the encounter with the flower-girl; Vieldeutige Welt: Studien zur Struktur der Erzählungen E.T.A. Hoffmanns und zur Entwicklung seines Werkes, Studien zur deutschen Literatur 6 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1966). Werner Kraft recognized the particular significance given to the episode with the flower-girl, but did not associate it with the question of aesthetic vision and authorial strategies raised in the story. Kraft interprets the "tragic" nature of the incident in relation to Hoffmann's own life (as the narrator portrays it) and sees the writer's embarrassing moment as a self-portrait displaying Hoffmann's humorous self-mockery in the face of a long and painful illness; "Des Vetters Eckfenster: E.T.A. Hoffmanns letzte Geschichte," Neue Deutsche Hefte 23 (1976): 30-33. Ulrich Stadler alludes to the central role the incident with the flower-girls plays in the story: "Gerade aber als Ausnahmegeschichte bestätigt sie den Tenor der übrigen Geschichten" (511). He points out that it illuminates "die scheinbar zu Funktionslosigkeit verschärfte Isolation des Schriftstellers" (512), but instead of examining the significance of this encounter for the cousin's authorial strategies as literary writer, he attributes the writer's isolation to the capitalistic market system which subordinates the means of production to the monetary interests of distribution and consumption; "Die Aussicht als Einblick. Zu E.T.A. Hoffmanns später Erzählung Des Vetters Eckfenster," Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie 105.4 (1986): 498-515. 

Kralowski was a well-known owner of a lending library and Hoffmann's personal friend (Kraft 31).


Werner, "Der romantische Schriftsteller" 80.


Segebrecht, "Beamte" 304.

The concepts of the “analytical” and the “synthetic” writer were formulated by Friedrich Schlegel in his fragments and were tied to Schlegel’s concept of “Symposie”: “Der analytische Schriftsteller beobachtet den Leser, wie er ist; danach macht er seinen Kalkül, legt seine Maschinen an, um den gehörigen Effekt auf ihn zu machen. Der synthetische Schriftsteller konstruiert und schafft sich einen Leser, wie er sein soll; er denkt sich desselben nicht ruhend und tot, sondern lebendig und entgegenwirkend. Er läßt das, was er erfunden hat, vor seinen Augen stufenweise werden, oder er lockt ihn es selbst zu erfinden. Er will keine bestimmte Wirkung auf ihn machen, sondern er tritt mit ihm in das heilige Verhältnis der innigsten Symphilosophie oder Symposie.”

Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe, ed. Ernst Behler, 35 vols. to date (München: Schöningh, 1958-) 2: 161; Lyceum frag. 112.

In a discussion of Hoffmann’s reflections on poetics in the Kunstmärchen, Gunther Pix comes to a similar conclusion about Des Vetters Eckfenster. He argues that in this late story Hoffmann displays “Vertrauen auf die kongeniale Vorstellungs- bzw. Beobachtungsgabe des Lesers” (28). In contrast to the earlier Märchendichtung, Des Vetters Eckfenster lacks “ein abstrakter Symbolgehalt, der sich in einen übergeordneten poetologischen Sinnzusammenhang stellen ließe” (28). This agrees with my reading of the story, but I object to the way Pix characterizes the cousin’s new art of seeing as “gründliches, vorurteilloses Schauen” (28; emphasis added). Thus he misses the hermeneutical understanding of observation that the cousin displays in his comments to the narrator and he equates the narrator’s enthusiasm for observing the marketplace with a new principle of realistic narration. Gunther Pix, “E.T.A. Hoffmanns Poetologie im Spiegel seiner Kunstmärchen,” Mitteilungen der E.T.A. Hoffmann-Gesellschaft-Bamberg e.V. 31 (1985): 18-29.