



CITY LIFE AND FELINE OPINIONS

the Tomcat Murr and Hoffmann's Urban Landscape

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Like many terms in literary-critical discourse, “ecocriticism” has become increasingly slippery with use, as interest in ecology and its representation in art has grown over the last twenty-five years (Garrard 16). Scholars concerned with the environment from a variety of perspectives—scientific, philosophical, literary and others—have attempted to assess works of literature as expressions of cultural attitudes toward nature and space within their own disciplinary idioms, resulting in a “points-of-view-ragout,” to coin an acoustically unfortunate expression. Of course, the ever-increasing lay-public perception that our earth is endangered by human pollution has formed another popularized “overlay” of notions and terminology that has scarcely helped to clarify the situation, but has lent the discourse a dimension similar to one acquired by feminism and the civil rights movement of previous decades: there is a stronger connection between ecocritical academic research and the real world, between *Theorie* and *Praxis*, and between abstract conceptualization and social engagement, than exists with respect to many other “postmodern” modes of criticism.

One of the most significant aspects of the current discussion is the definition and delimitation of “human being” with respect to “nature,” “animal,” “biosphere,” etc. Current eco-

critical attempts to bridge the “abyss” separating humanity and other aspects of the material world, for example, have resulted in striking polarities, oppositions and contradictions (Morton 2010, 4–13). In the emerging “posthuman” era,¹ critics have developed means for talking about machines merging with human beings, so that one might “escape from bodily limitations and environmental constraints through computerized virtual reality, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and biotic mechanization” (Westling 29). On the other hand, and most relevant to our discussion today, ecologists have wrestled with the relationship between “human” and “animal”—and whether one should or can make a distinction. The act of seeing “animals” as “others” on the one hand, while on the other hand considering human beings as merely one variety of animal, has contributed historically to gross atrocities of mistreatment—in the former case to massacres, vivisections and extinctions of our non-human colleagues on this planet, and in the latter to holocaust and “ethnic cleansing” of human groups, to which animal characteristics have been attributed in order to belittle them. Some would extend the list of *homo sapiens*-perpetrated misdeeds arising from the chasm between human and animal life even further, claiming that anthropocentrism has led to the colonization of some species for our own purposes: e.g., farm animals and house-pets. In the urban environment, which provides a habitat for numerous species of non-domesticated animal life, including pigeons, coyotes, chipmunks, squirrels, cockroaches and rats, that are barely tolerated or utterly reviled, human beings have granted some animals, especially dogs and cats, a privileged status. As humans’ pets, felines and canines share our domiciles, our families, our beds, our food, our dinner plates, etc. and they inhabit all of the most familiar and intimate spaces of human experience. And while the canine side of this privileged position has en-

¹ The major perspectives of “posthumanism” and their development are sketched by Westling, Wolfe (2010, xi–xxxiv) and Hayles (1–24).

joyed a unique psychological bond with humans, the feline side has enjoyed a much different, but perhaps equivalently profound and important, connection to human emotion, myth and literature (Rogers 1–6).

There is a large body of fiction from a great number of cultures and epochs that treats the human/feline relationship (Dale-Green 5–6). One of the major texts from German Romanticism penned in this vein, and also, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper, one of the most “ecological” of fictional works (by which I mean that, implicit in the novel, there is a conscious awareness of ambient space as an essential element of the literary text’s construction and development)² is E. T. A. Hoffmann’s final novel. *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr* (*The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, 2 vols. 1820–22) offers some of the most detailed reflections on city life by Hoffmann, an author associated intimately with urban settings such as Bamberg, Dresden and Berlin. It also concretizes and elucidates the position of the feline vis-à-vis human society and the environment from the cat’s own point of view. Finally, it moves toward a synthesis of feline and human perspectives, which implies an aesthetic bridging of the *homo sapiens* / animal gap that is realized not only in the novel’s content, but also in the form. This remarkable novel both inscribes and expresses ecology, transforming space into content and content into space.

When the reader first begins to read Hoffmann’s text, (s)he is surprised and somewhat confused by the work’s remarkable structure. According to the fictional editor’s foreword, an astonishingly precocious tomcat named Murr has appropriated a number of manuscript pages from the biography of a musician as padding and blotting paper for his own autobiography. Through the editor’s negligence and the printer’s carelessness, the entire mess is printed together, mixing the feline autobiography with the life history of the human artist,

² This particular formulation of ecocriticism originates with Timothy Morton, “Why Ambient Poetics?: Outline for a Depthless Ecology,” *Wordsworth Circle*. 33 (2002): 52–56.

Johannes Kreisler. Fragments of the one interrupt fragments of the other, intertwining, merging and jumbling the universes and perspectives into a chaotic textual brew; however, as the reader progresses from section to section, it becomes increasingly clear that the feline and the human lives are running initially parallel and then gradually converging: (s)he discovers that Murr's master and Kreisler's mentor is Meister Abraham, that the cat is introduced to Kreisler and becomes his pet, and that by the end of the novel the freely borrowing tomcat-author has even sponged the thoughts and, perhaps, plagiarized the words of the human musician. With respect to the material form of the novel, the convergence of thought and identity of the feline and human characters is materially supported and paralleled by the blotting action of the ink from the one manuscript bleeding into the other and vice-versa. Physically the lives of the human and the animal have blended, just as the vehicle conveying each life history, the liquid material medium of writing, has seeped into the other's environment, the paper manuscript.

The narrated space of the novel similarly carries substantial weight and bearing on the progress of the autobiographical text, emerging from mere background to a prominent and dynamically active position in the foreground of some of the cat's first writings. Because Murr's universe, described in the first autobiographical fragment (9–13),³ consists of the limited environs in and surrounding Meister Abraham's domicile (e.g., roof, attic, basement), he has little idea what material nature is like outside of his microcosm, except what he has gleaned from the learned tomes he has been able to access in his benefactor's library. Thus, his concept of what exists "out there" beyond the limitations of his paltry experience is informed especially by reading material—a good portion of

³ All textual references are taken from: E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr: together with a fragmentary Biography of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler on Random Sheets of Waste Paper*, trans. Anthea Bell, intro. Jeremy Adler (London, New York et al.: Penguin 1999).

which, as Murr has described it, conveys eighteenth-century, late Enlightenment perspectives on the natural world—and what little he has experienced at the borders of his “civilized” realm. Murr has thereby developed an extremely utilitarian viewpoint on “nature”—which supplies him with what he needs (especially, avian meals on the roof and mice in the basement) if he uses it wisely. However, before he matures beyond his adolescence, he confronts unknown territory and danger.

In an autobiographical fragment of the text describing the beginning of the “Lebenserfahrungen des Jünglings” (“My Youthful Experiences”), the juvenile, relatively inexperienced tomcat Murr falls asleep one afternoon atop the flat of a wagon, and sets himself up for the grand adventure of his adolescence. Awakening with a jolt, he discovers that the wagon has driven off through the streets of the city in which he resides. Struck with sudden panic, he leaps from the wagon and lands on completely new and foreign territory. Murr’s subsequent experiences give the reader a strong impression of the urban landscape within which much of the novel takes place—the fictional “Sieghartsweiler,” a setting minimally different from the networks of avenues and alleys coursing through such urban environs as those of Bamberg or Dresden, with which Hoffmann was most familiar. Yet for Murr, this city backdrop constitutes a great, wild “unknown” that suddenly leaps into the foreground as an active, confrontational entity, which the feline must now engage with all the resources at his disposal. The unexpected foregrounding of background becomes an important ecological feature of the Murr text, and one which deserves some attention.

Of course, one would anticipate that as an animal Murr would also remain a part of the natural background, an object within and of the environment, as is the custom in the human perspective on household pets acting “naturally” or on animals in their “natural” environment. Whether their owners treat them as “members of the family,” infantilize or anthropomorphize them, our pets are essentially commodities to be pos-

sessed, without agency, and subjugated to the whims of our own psychological needs. However, Murr, too, has experienced a transposition from background into the foreground, even in the opinion of his human master. The trajectory he takes is indicated in the first Kreisler biographical fragment, where Abraham first introduces the tomcat to the musician. The ensuing discussion concerning Murr, felinity and animal “nature,” explores the psychology of the non-human animal—not merely for the purpose of anthropomorphizing Abraham’s pet, but as a speculation concerning the higher faculties and consciousness of animal life (22–23). For much of this encounter, Murr remains in the background—the reader senses his status-as-object in the narrative description of the cat’s remarkably beautiful external appearance, his seemingly interpretable instinctive behavior and the feline sounds of apparent contentment that he emits. However, in the course of the discussion the *Kapellmeister* Kreisler and his mentor Abraham attribute to Murr the potential of an agency-in-becoming, as a thinking and, especially, dreaming creature that can imagine and perhaps even create. As the humans’ discussion concludes, Murr’s meowing and other behaviors seem to engage the humans in their conversation, hinting that the cat may possess language capability as well. Thus, the first Kreisler fragment serves not only to link closely the two plot strands at the beginning of the novel, but also to fix the reader’s focus on Murr, positioning him at the threshold of becoming a character and agent.

However, by this point in the text, the reader has already become familiar with the material form and some content of the work. Drawings of Murr appear on the front covers of the novel’s two volumes, the fictitious editor has identified the cat as the agent responsible for the novel’s bizarre structure, and the reader has already been exposed to the first feline autobiographical fragment. The audience is already aware that Murr is in command of this work, as if he were the very deity responsible for fashioning the novel’s universe; furthermore he occupies the central focus in virtually all other material spaces

of the novel's two volumes outside the musician's biography. And beyond this, lurking beneath Hoffmann's romantically ironic bond with the reader, lie the slyly subtle yet genially sophisticated parallels between stages of Murr's development and features of the musician's biography, as if in his ostensibly random and thoughtless purloinings of the Kreisler pages the cat has indeed fashioned a kind of symmetry and order.⁴ Murr has thus rocketed from background, as a common household pet, to the foreground as a fully-developed character in a complex, highly experimental and sophisticated narrative.⁵

Returning to Murr's urban adventure, the reader discovers quickly that, despite the tomcat's claims to intellectual advantages as the result of his studiousness in Abraham's library, the resources he possesses for confronting the "wilds" of the city are few and entirely inadequate. Panic and flight are his initial responses to the acoustic din surrounding him—typically, the sensations of Hoffmann's characters in stressful situations are at first reduced to auditory perceptions, and only gradually do they regain their ability to see.⁶ Behind him, "demonic" voices curse him, and he senses that stones have been hurled at him—but while it is most likely that humans performed these unfriendly actions, the complete refusal of the text at this point to identify any source relinquishes them to

⁴ For example, Abraham relates to Kreisler the story of how he found Murr and brought him home—the details of this narrative are corroborated by Murr's own account of the same incident, from the feline-eye-level perspective in the immediately following fragment of his autobiography.

⁵ In other Hoffmann works, the sudden foregrounding and activation of elements from the natural background results in serious problems and conflicts. One thinks especially of the wood-and-metal automat in "The Sandman," where this shift catalyzes extreme uncanniness and insanity in the already unbalanced young man Nathanael. Of course, this phenomenon parallels the premises of other Romantic works such as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, and modern horror films, such as John Carpenter's *The Thing*. See Morton 2007, 182.

⁶ One thinks of Medardus, the mad monk in Hoffmann's Gothic novel, *Die Elixiere des Teufels* (*Elixirs of the Devil*, 2 vols. 1815–16), who becomes overwhelmed by acoustic sensations when his beloved-to-be, Aurelie, accosts him in a darkened church and confesses her passionate desire for him.

mere background. Taking brief refuge beneath a staircase, he feels momentarily safe from the dangers of the city's untamed space. As his visual sense returns, Murr notices that human beings surround him, but from his perspective they are generic and anonymous—they have become part of the ambience, much as animals would blend into the backdrop of forest, jungle, or other natural environment. When Murr attempts to engage them, they pay him little heed, until finally a young boy emerges from the faceless masses and coaxes the cat out of hiding. However, instead of petting him, the sadistic youngster holds him down and pinches his tail. When the cat frees himself by clawing the boy, he sickens his dogs on Murr, who barely escapes with his life into a woman's basement domicile, where he creates a formidable chaos, knocking over several flowerpots. When she threatens him, his exposed claws, bared teeth and warning howl force her to retreat long enough to permit him to escape again.

Back out on the street, feeling hungry and miserable, Murr spies a young woman selling *Wurst* from a corner stand. Although his attempt to purloin a warm, juicy sausage is successful, it almost costs him one of his lives, because when he snatches the sausage the woman retaliates, striking at him with her stick and narrowly missing the mark. After consuming this far-from-adequate repast, Murr must spend the night in bleak isolation, outside in the chilly dampness, and by the next morning he is at the point of despair. The city apparently has defeated Murr. The experience thus far has shown that, as well-read in philosophy, literature and the arts as he may be, the "little god" of the autobiographical universe lacks the basic skills for survival in the urban wilds. Thus, the city streets constitute a dangerous "other," a prodigious opponent in Murr's struggle to survive and flourish. Furthermore, the urban environment's equivalence with wildness and chaos, in contrast to the more cultivated, rational behaviors for which Murr prides himself, collides with and satirizes the late-Eighteenth-Century paradigm of the relationship between *Kultur* and *Natur*. Accordingly, civilization, logic and moral behavior should inform

the ideal human-urban environment, while the animal/natural realm corresponds to instinct, irrationality and chaos—the “nature as other” which can be survived if it is mastered through special kinds of skills known to woodsmen and women, and beyond the ken of sophisticated city-dwellers and intellectuals. In Hoffmann’s *Lebens-Ansichten*, things are reversed: the city has become the space that must be survived, and the animal has become the character whose survival is contingent on skills and resourcefulness, neither of which Murr possesses.

As if to underscore his hopeless inadequacy in this unfamiliar environment, Murr breaks into a soliloquy, lamenting his situation and longing for his home spaces. The style parodies the heavy-handed rhetoric typical of some nationalistic diatribes spewed by a number of Hoffmann’s contemporaries:

“So this,” said I, breaking into loud lamentations, “so this is the world you longed to know from your roof-top at home? The world where you hoped to find virtue, wisdom and morals instilled by higher education! Oh these heartless barbarians! Wherein does their strength lie but in blows? Wherein their understanding but in scornful mockery? Wherein their entire conduct but in the malicious persecution of feeling minds? Away, away with this world of dissembling and deceit! Take me to thy cool shade, sweet cellar of home! O attic!—stove!—oh delightful solitude, how painfully my heart yearns for you!” Quite overcome by the thought of my misery and my hopeless condition, I half-closed my eyes and wept bitterly (82).

Rhetorical questions, anaphora, and apostrophes combine to elevate Murr’s expression of wretchedness in these “barbaric” surroundings to high poetic language. And of course, this very point serves the grand irony of the passage, for indeed, what cat, fictional or otherwise, would respond to the stress of this desperate situation with such elevated, Goethean language, perhaps more appropriately found on the pages of the German bard’s epistolary novel from almost five decades earlier, *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of*

Young Werther, 1774), or even his sublimely poetic autobiography, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, 1811–1833) the first few volumes of which had recently appeared (Domány)? Much of Murr’s autobiography is borrowed material from numerous sources, as the fictitious editor points out on several occasions—and even without the editor’s assertions, critics have suggested that the reading public in Hoffmann’s time would have realized immediately the great extent to which Murr plagiarizes in his *Lebens-Ansichten* (Meyer 117). Similarly, as I indicate above with respect to the material absorption of ink into the pages of each manuscript, by mixing the lives of *Kapellmeister* and cat through the metaphor of the blotting paper, Hoffman shows that Murr’s misappropriation of ideas, quotations and content from other literary sources seems to enable the cat to reach out even beyond the covers of these two volumes and to sop up the works of other authors as well, making aspects of their lives and thoughts his own.

Although the situation for Murr looks most bleak, the tomcat’s salvation is at hand. Out of the wild, crowded, and noisy streets emerges a character, part Cervantes’ Berganza, part Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, and part Shakespeare’s Iago—the Poodle Ponto, Murr’s opportunistic, streetwise chum who appears just in time to aid his friend. Instead of offering sympathy, however, the canine points out to the feline that his claims to superiority have no validity here in the “real world,” and that if it were not for Ponto’s aid, Murr would die a miserable death in the streets. Ponto then approaches the young *Wurst*-saleswoman who almost killed Murr the day before. In alarm, the cat cries out to his savior: “Oh Ponto, my dear poodle, what are you doing? Take care, beware that heartless, barbarous female, beware the vengeful law governing sausages” (89–90). But the poodle engages the young woman with tricks and flattery, and receives a reward of a sausage from her, which Ponto brings to Murr. Thereafter, the dog leads the cat back to his master’s domicile. Most significantly, Ponto saves Murr as a result of his knowledge and skill in street-survival. Neither Meis-

ter Abraham nor any other human rescues Murr. Again, it is an animal character, who, acting as a member of its respective species and not as a human-in-animal guise, moves into the foreground-spaces of the novel. Human entities remain firmly backgrounded, emerging in this scene only as generic dangers of the untamed streets (for Murr) or instruments to be manipulated profitably (for Ponto)—thus, only in relation to the interests of foregrounded animal characters. Ponto lacks, and despises, the sophistication and learning that Murr has acquired. As a “noble savage,” Ponto shows that he is completely capable of surviving well in the urban “jungle” through his common sense, wits and skills.

As the canine and the feline find their way back to Murr’s familiar turf, they engage in discussions concerning ethical behavior versus obsequiousness. Murr has criticized the poodle for having ingratiated himself to the young woman through his typical “animal” behavior; by performing tricks and profusely wagging his tail, Ponto conforms to what the human perspective expects from a “good dog,” rather than acting out of his “true” animal nature. Ponto dismisses Murr’s criticism, since he enjoyed all the actions he performed—dancing and jumping—and furthermore it made the girl feel obligated to act in the desired manner, to give the dog what he wanted. From this, the poodle derives the following principle as summary wisdom for surviving in urban spaces:

“The worldly-wise must be able to make everything done purely for themselves look as if it were done for the sake of others, who will then feel very much indebted to them and be willing to do as they wish . . . What you are pleased to call subservient flattery, therefore, is merely judicious conduct soundly based on recognizing other people’s folly and then fooling them to the top of their bent” (91).

Ponto narrates a relevant tale about two humans he has observed, who have feigned friendship but have acted wickedly in their quests to gain material advantages. The reader immediately perceives ancient but familiar echoes: Hoffmann is im-

itating the discourse and tone of Cervantes' "Colloquio de los perros," where Berganza and Scipio, two Golden Age canines, engage in similar discussions on human society. Again, the novel reaches beyond its material reality to draw in other works and authors, although this time as a legitimate intertextual nod to Hoffmann's Spanish predecessor (Beardsley 198).

At this point, Murr's urban adventure finally draws to a close as the tomcat has survived his first experience in the environment beyond his familiar spaces, and has received several valuable lessons in how one can endure and prosper. Most importantly, the reader has acquired a new perspective on the well-known urban setting, having been forced to adopt Murr's ankle-high point-of-view on the city from the autobiographical fragments. The act of regarding the streets and edifices of urban ecology in this way breaks down the barriers between the animal and human worlds, while it de-familiarizes the common environment, forcing the reader's identification with the animal perspective and her or his awareness of the city's potential dangers. Finally, through the juxtaposition of Murr and Kreisler fragments set in similar spaces, the novel creates a vehicle for forging new perspectives—a key ecocritical consideration—and for heightening the reader's awareness of how environment is not just passive ambience for human activity, but a dynamically functioning, constantly changing and subtly nuanced space, no matter how familiar and obvious our customary digs might usually seem from our human point-of-view.

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