“O Appetit,
dein Name ist Kater!”

Food, Instinct, and Chaos
in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s
Kater Murr

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From the end of the eighteenth century through the beginning of the nineteenth, according to Jocelyne Kolb, a transition occurred in literary uses of food images. Formerly confined mainly to the “low” genres such as comedy and the novel, food images now made a widespread appearance even in the so-called higher genres, such as lyric poetry. “Up to that point,” Kolb asserts, works written in the high style were “expected to provide a purified representation of reality, one from which eating was banned along with all bodily functions. Any allusion to eating in epic and lyric poetry or in a tragedy therefore indicates a deliberate misunderstanding of good taste in the figurative, aesthetic sense. To speak of food in the wrong setting appears flippant and seems to be a gratuitous provocation; but if one looks more closely, one perceives a considered, and a revolutionary, purpose.” She then presses on to show this transition reflected in varying degrees in works by Molière (1622–73), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Lord Byron (1788–1824), and Victor Hugo (1802–85). Especially relevant to my purposes is Kolb’s discussion of Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), whose lyric poetry, as early as in his Buch der Lieder (1827), presents a number of poems in which the wordplay between the aesthetics of taste and the taste of food becomes the vehicle for challenging poetic conventions and social structures.
A number of German romantic artists fit into Kolb’s paradigm, perhaps none more so than E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776–1822). Heine’s senior by over two decades, Hoffmann had contributed more than his share to the tumultuous shifts in aesthetic tastes for some time, particularly in much of his innovative music criticism. Among Hoffmann’s literary works, several satirical animal fictions stand out, those in which he purposefully confounds figurative and literal taste at the expense of high society and its questionable aesthetic values. While the prose novels and tales do not precisely fit the category high art, they often include lengthy discussions of aesthetics and taste. For example, a number of strong challenges to comfortable, philistine attitudes toward music, together with humorous dissonance in abundance, arise from the pages of Hoffmann’s Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier (Fantasy pieces in Callot’s manner [1814–15]), in which Cervantes’s dog, Berganza, discourses profusely on matters of digestion and artistic taste and Milo, an ape, attempts to balance his musical talents with his instinctive, culinary inclinations. Some of these scenes serve as preludes to Hoffmann’s second novel, Die Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr, nebst fragmentarischer Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler in zufälligen Maku- laturblättern, herausgegeben von 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 wastepaper, edited by E. T. A. Hoffmann [1819–21]) – or, as the German title is often shortened, Kater Murr.

One of the most remarkable products of the German romantic period, Kater Murr presents what seems to be an “oddly assorted hotchpotch” (p. 3; “zusammengewürfeltes Durcheinander” [p. 297]) and scarcely a novel at all. It alternates fragments of a cat’s autobiography in the “high” style (including lyric poetry), offering to a presumptively novice audience Murr’s insights into aesthetic concerns and an intellectual road map for acquiring correct judgmental acumen, with nonchronological bits and pieces of a musician’s autobiography, presenting in some passages significant aesthetic values of the era. The considerable chaos is mitigated, however, by the reader’s growing realization that incidents in successive, alternating fragments reflect one another and that themes in the two biographies evince mutual dependence and develop similarly. One of the most significant of these themes is the relation between literal and figurative taste, the tomcat instinctively confusing them in his autobiography, the musician holding them relentlessly apart through his scathing irony. In what follows, I wish to explore relations among taste, food, instinct, humor, and chaos in Kater Murr.

“O Appetit, dein Name ist Kater!” (p. 36; “O Appetit, dein Name ist Kater!” [p. 335]), the tomcat exclaims in one of his frequent apostrophes to his self-indulgence, especially at table. Murr’s instinctive fascination with food informs nearly every page of his curious autobiography, provoking activity, stimulating thought, and inspiring artistic endeavor. Whenever Murr composes lyric poems in the high style, however, it is far more than a mere “gratuitous provocation” and closer to the revolution in aesthetic taste that Kolb describes as “call[ing] into question received notions of poetry” and “remak[ing] a poetic tradition.” One of the most striking of these satires is Murr’s effusively sentimental poem in the style of Sturm und Drang or Empfindsamkeit:

“Ah, through this troubled breast of mine
What heavenly pleasure shoots its dart?
Does my aspiring, ardent heart
Feel prescience of things divine?
Aye! heart, soar high above the earth!
Be sharp of tooth, of paw be fleet!
After sad times of loss and dearth,
All’s turned to merriment and mirth:
Sweet hope revives – I smell roast meat!”

(Was ist’s das die beengte Brust,
Mit Woneschauer so durchbebt,
Den Geist zum Himmel hoch erhebt,
Ist’s Ahnung hoher Götterlust?
Ja! – springe auf, du armes Herz,
Ermute dich zu kühnen Taten,
Umwandelt ist in Lust und Scherz,
Der trostlos bittre Todesschmerz,
Die Hoffnung lebt – ich rieche Braten!

[p. 106]

The final line’s pointe snatches the soaring, lofty images from Murr’s rooftop aether...
Carl Friedrich Thiele (German, ca. 1780–ca. 1836), engraved portrait of Murr (based on a drawing by E. T. A. Hoffmann [German, 1776–1822]), front cover of vol. 1 of Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1820 [actually released 1819]). From the copy in the Staatsbibliothek, Bamberg (see http://www.staatsbibliothek-bamberg.de/sonder-sammlungen/etah/index.php [accessed June 2005]). Used with permission.

and brings them crashing down to kitchen level. Compare Murr’s lyric to Heine’s beloved “Sie sassen und tranken am Teetisch,” for example, in which high society waxes “ästhetisch”:

They talked of love and devotion
Over the tea and the sweets –
The ladies, of tender emotion;
The men talked like aesthetes.10

The two satires use similar means to gouge similar targets, save that Murr’s feline identity sharpens the claw.

In fact, typical tomcat behavior – particularly the habit cats commonly evince around paper, kneading it with their claws, shredding it, and strewing it about – accounts for the very heart of the novel’s structure. According to the fictional publication history related in the preface, with which the ineffectual editor attempts to excuse his ineptness, Murr destroyed a book relating the life of the kapellmeister and musician Johannes Kreisler and utilized the leaves as blotting and padding for his own self-aggrandizing scribbling. Since the entire jumble found its way through the editor and publisher to the printer without so much as a cursory glance, as the editor notes, the mess finally appears as an alternating series of ostensibly random fragments. The resulting chaos challenges the reader to make some sense of it all, but only since the 1960s have a number of critics attempted to understand the complex and fascinating structure at the heart of the work, instead of merely dismissing the Murr autobiography out of hand, as many of their predecessors had done.11 Food plays a significant role in the novel’s constitution as well, not only as an indicator for Murr’s identity as a beast, but also as an instigation for much of the chaotic action and yet as a constant that lends a kind of order to the whole.

The first locus of food imagery occurred on the front cover of the novel’s original 1819 edition, which was decorated with an engraving based on a sketch by Hoffmann (fig. 1). The engraving introduces Murr in one of his favorite settings, the roof. He has donned the garb of a classical philosopher and taken his place at a writing desk.12 The preposterousness of a cat’s body in a scholar’s toga inspires mirth, which grows to hilarity as one notices details in the image. In his paw, the tomcat bears a feather, very likely the remnant of a previous avian meal.
With it, he appears to be composing his literary and philosophical works, which perhaps suggests that the satisfaction of his artistic "cravings" comes about only after his stomach is full. At his feet lies a plate, on which one detects five or six fish, apparently for consumption after the travail of authorship in the elevated venue piques his appetite once again. In this gustatory context, the toga acquires a new association, less as an insignia of learnedness, and more as an accessory for eating, perhaps a napkin or a bib. Thus, even before the reader has looked inside the book, food images are linked with Murr as indispensable and ubiquitous emblems of felinity, while they intensify the novel's humor through their juxtaposition with the cat's aesthetic endeavors. Such humorous tensions between aesthetic and corporeal concerns inform each gustatory occurrence in the text.

Murr's commentaries on his existence assume the form of a sentimentalized, educational autobiography, common during the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, somewhat akin to portions of Goethe's Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit (From my life: Poetry and truth [1811-14, 1833]), as Judit Domány has most recently pointed out. Following Goethe's lead, the tomcat relates the incidents of his life with extensive commentary regarding their import for his cultural development. In part 1, "Sensations of Existence: My Months of Youth" ("Gefühle des Daseins: Die Monate der Jugend"), and within Murr's first fragment, which precedes the first "waste paper" fragment of Kreisler's narrative, the tomcat expresses his essentially optimistic attitude toward life and introduces his opinion that, of the two principles motivating his actions, instinct and reason, instinct is of a higher order. Reason he deems as merely "the ability to be conscious of what one is doing and play no silly pranks" (p. 10; "die Fähigkeit mit Bewußtsein zu handeln und keine dumme [sic] Streiche zu machen" [p. 304]). In the course of the few pages containing the first fragment, Murr mentions food and eating no fewer than five times. These five instances illustrate the characteristics of food imagery that will obtain throughout the novel. I would, therefore, like to concentrate my attention here first.

"O Appetit, dein Name ist Kater!"

Murr begins to proclaim his opinions with a celebration of the natural forces within him, the feeling that he is alive and wonderful. As Goethe often argues from the general to the specific in his autobiography, so also Murr:

"O thou sweet habit of existence!" cries that Dutch hero in the tragedy, and so do I, although not, like the hero, at the painful moment when he is about to part with that sweet habit - no, at the very point when I am pervaded by the joy of reflecting that I have now entirely acquired it, and have no intention at all of ever losing it again. For I believe that the spiritual power, the unknown force or whatever else we may call the principle governing us, which has, so to speak, forced the aforesaid habit upon me without my consent, cannot possibly be worse disposed than the kindly man with whom I have taken up residence, and who never snatches away the plate of fish he has set before me from under my nose just when I'm really enjoying it. (p. 9)

"(O du süße Gewohnheit des Daseins!" ruft jener niederländische Held in der Tragödie aus. So auch ich, aber nicht wie der Held in dem schmerzlichen Augenblick, als er sich davon trennen soll - nein! - in dem Moment, da mich eben die volle Lust des Gedankens durchdringt, daß ich in jene süße Gewohnheit nun ganz und gar hineingekommen und durchaus nicht willens bin, jemals wieder hinauszukommen. - Ich meine nämlich, die geistige Kraft, die unbekannte Macht, oder wie man sonst das über uns waltende Prinzip nennen mag, welches mir besagte Gewohnheit ohne meine Zustimmung gewissermaßen aufge drungen hat, kann unmöglich schlechterer Gesinnungen haben, als der freundliche Mann bei dem ich in Kondition gegangen und der mir das Gericht Fische, das er mir vorgesetzt, niemals vor der Nase wegzieht, wenn es mir eben recht wohlschmeckt. [p. 303])

The cat seems to be at the prime of his existence, exuding complete certainty in his status, fortune, and privilege. The gustatory image underscores this confidence: Murr's master, later identified as Abraham, who is mentor and guru to Kreisler as well, is most benevolently disposed to his charge, regularly providing Murr with an abundance of fish and fowl, and the tomcat eats it all with good appetite. By the novel's final pages, however, one discovers that Murr's confidence in universal beneficence and his certainty of existence are ill founded: while Abraham remains as consistent as
possible in his kindness, what Murr calls "the principle governing us" may not be so well disposed. As the fictional editor's postscript reports, Murr dies suddenly and unexpectedly, and both his narrative and the fragments of the Kreisler biography abruptly cease. Predictability in life is impossible, even for the little god of this fictional microcosm. Yet, for the moment, there is plenty of fish, and Murr revels in his corporeal being.

Near the beginning of the first fragment, and near its end, Murr delivers two effusive addresses, the first one to his audience as he couches his predatory instincts in the flowery language of desire popularized during Empfindsamkeit:

[A] solitary dove flutters round the church tower, cooing plaintive amorous laments! Ah, if the dear little thing were to approach me! I feel a strange stirring within me, a certain impassioned appetite carries me away with irresistible force! Ah, would that sweet and lovely creature but come hither, I would clasp her to my lovesick heart and never let her go - oh, there she goes fluttering into the dovecote, perfidious creature, and leaves me sitting here desolate on the roof! How rare is true sympathy of souls in these sorry, obdurate, loveless times! (pp. 9-10)

With the same blatant irony that courses rampant through the autobiography, Murr combines appetite and longing on a pseudo-aesthetic plane, as he poeticizes his desire to incorporate the dove. However, his ostentatious phrases poorly mask the banalities of the feline id. It is clear that "a certain impassioned appetite" ("ein gewisser schwärmischer Appetit") describes a powerful and generic impulse stirring uncontrollably within the cat, and, despite his efforts to euhemize the experience, it remains, finally, a function of his animal nature. An image of Murr clapping the dove to his breast in passion gives way to the realization that he would incorporate the dove as part of his breast, and the "sympathy of souls" ("Sympathie der Seelen") would become a true "sympathy" of bodies, figuratively and literally, if Murr could fulfill his desires. Later in part 1, Murr expresses similar sentiments in a sonnet entitled "Yearning for Higher Things" (p. 59; "Sehnsucht nach dem Höheren" [p. 362]), which couches the stirrings in his breast in similar phrases. The reader ultimately discovers that the object of his fancy is an "ihn" - the masculine singular pronoun, possibly referring to a bird ("den Vogel") that Murr wishes to catch "on the wing" ("beim Fittich"). Murr's digestive discourse reveals that he remains a cat with a cat's taste, and his every utterance passes through the filter of his appetites.

The second panegyric that Murr composes in the opening, near the end of the first fragment, is an apostrophe to his "Vaterland," the attic. In this passage, which parodies Goethe's monumental account of the circumstances surrounding his own birth, the tomcat speculates on whether the attic, the cellar, or some other privileged locus could claim him as its own. Murr's language acquires the zeal of nationalism that echoed throughout German cultural territories after the Napoleonic Wars, especially among urbane, liberal sensibilities in the post-Vienna Congress political atmosphere:

With the same blunt irony that courses rampant through the autobiography, Murr combines appetite and longing on a pseudo-aesthetic plane, as he poeticizes his desire to incorporate the dove. However, his ostentatious phrases poorly mask the banalities of the feline id. It is clear that "a certain impassioned appetite" ("ein gewisser schwärmischer Appetit") describes a powerful and generic impulse stirring uncontrollably within the cat, and, despite his efforts to euhemize the experience, it remains, finally, a function of his animal nature. An image of Murr clapping the dove to his breast in

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merit depends on the degree to which an experience results in a full belly. Such incongruity of form and content contributes again and again to the considerable humor that radiates from the Murr fragments.

Inserted between the two addresses (to the reader and to the Fatherland) that frame the first fragment are two narratives relating the kitten’s earliest experiences with food. The second merely reports that Abraham fed Murr sweet milk when the kitten’s eyes had finally opened and he could see.²¹ The first, however, is of monumental importance to Murr’s education since, in it, he claims to have learned for the first time about physical determinism and to have acquired a “taste” for moral behavior through punishment and reward. Specifically, he recalls that, in his earliest, still sightless infancy, he instinctively clawed Abraham and that his human benefactor boxed his ears for it. Thereafter:

[The hand [that had delivered the blows] ... took hold of my head once more and pushed it down, so that my little mouth touched a liquid which I began to lap – I myself don’t know what put lapping into my head, so it must have been physical instinct. The liquid gave me a curiously comfortable feeling inside. I now know that it was sweet milk I was enjoying; I had been hungry, and drinking it satisfied me. So after my moral education had begun, my physical education followed. (p. 11)]

[(Die Hand ... erfaßte ... mich aber außs neue beim Kopf und drückte ihn nieder, so daß ich mit dem Mäulchen in eine Flüssigkeit geriet, die ich, selbst weiß ich nicht, wie ich darauf verfieß, es mußte daher physischer Instinkt sein, aufzuleck-en begann, welches mir eine seltsame innere Behaglichkeit erregte. Es war wie ich jetzt weiß, süße Milch die ich genoß, mich hatte gehungert und ich wurde satt indem ich trank. So trat nach-dem die moralische begonnen, die physische Ausbildung ein. [p. 305])

Here, Murr intellectually connects several abstract concepts with events through cause and effect, as if this were a means of ordering reality into neatly regulated and easily predictable categories.

This point is made more strongly in a subsequent fragment in part 1 in which Murr expatiates on the process of his education and character formation and the role of the unspared rod:

“O Appetit, dein Name ist Kater!”

The more culture the less freedom, runs the saying, and very true it is. With culture our needs increase, and with our needs – well, the very first thing my master taught me to abjure entirely by means of the dreadful birch was the instant satisfaction of many a natural need regardless of time and place. Then we came to the appetites which, as I later decided, arise solely from a certain abnormal attitude of mind. That same strange attitude, perhaps engendered by my psychic organism itself, impelled me to ignore the milk and even the meat my master put down for me, to jump up on the table and steal titbits from his own plate.

I felt the force of the birch, and desisted. (p. 24)

(Je mehr Kultur, desto weniger Freiheit, das ist ein wahres Wort. Mit der Kultur steigen die Bedürfnisse, mit den Bedürfnissen – Nun; eben die augenblickliche Befriedigung mancher natürlichen Bedürfnisse ohne Rücksicht auf Ort und Zeit, das war das erste, was mir der Meister mittelst des verhängnisvollen Birkenreises total abgewöhnte. Dann kam es an die Gelüste, die, wie ich mich später überzeugt habe, lediglich aus einer gewissen abnormalen Stimmung des Gemüts entstehen. Eben diese seltsame Stimmung, die vielleicht von meinem psychischen Organismus selbst erzeugt wurde, trieb mich an, die Milch, ja selbst den Braten, den der Meister für mich hingestellt, stehenzu-lassen, auf den Tisch zu springen, und das wegzunaschen, was er selbst genießen wollte. Ich empfand die Kraft des Birkenreises, und ließ es bleiben. [pp. 320–21])

Most creatures change their behavior under intense negative stimuli, and, in certain cases, Murr might perceive that immediate gratification is not worth the pain of a beating. However, over the course of the autobiography, the reader grows increasingly accustomed to the tomcat’s hunger taking precedence over all other concerns. It becomes clear that any ethical linkage is completely lacking and that, in fact, Murr’s moral conclusions are, at best, specious.

In a somewhat later passage in part 1, Murr encounters his hungry mother and promises her a herring head that he has saved from the previous evening’s meal, setting off an intense internal struggle between moral precept and instinctive imperative:

O hostile Fate! O Appetite, thy name is Cat!
With the herring head in my mouth I climbed to the roof, like pious Aeneas, intending to get in through the attic window. I then fell into a state that, dividing my Self in a curious way
from my Self, yet seemed to be my real Self. . . . That strange feeling, compounded of desire and reluctance, numbed my senses - overpowered me - resistance was useless - I ate the herring head! (p. 36)


Customarily, Murr seeks solace and justification for his less than virtuous behavior through his dilettantish recourse to philosophy, and, here, he makes a ludicrously shallow reference to Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814)22 as a means of distancing himself from culpability. Nonetheless, depriving his needy mother of the morsel of food effectively destroys what the cat most fervently wishes his audience to accept, namely, his exemplary status as a moral beacon for all others of his kind to follow. Amusing though the adaptation of the line from Hamlet may be,23 it is also accurate: as a cat, Murr cannot escape his nature, no matter what control his intellect might want to exercise. Even the most cultured of literary animals cannot act ethically when the "strange feeling" wells up within him and commands that he chew and swallow.

Thus, the first fragment of Murr’s autobiography securely establishes food as a primary image, both abstract and concrete, of the cat’s instinctive drives, and the image is carried throughout the “Sensations of Existence” that made up his “Months of Youth” in part 1. Although a discussion of all gustatory loci in the Murr autobiography would far exceed the scope of this essay, the linkage that food establishes between instinct, humor, and chaos finds special expression in three episodes over the next two parts of the novel that deserve some scrutiny.

After his moral and ethical Schulmonate (months of early learning) draw to a close, in part 2 (“My Youthful Experiences: I Too Was in Arcadia” [“Lebenserfahrungen des Jünglings: Auch ich war in Arkadien”]) Murr enters into the urbane, sophisticated world of civilization beyond the confines of Abraham’s flat. Unfortunately, his initial encounter with that world begins inauspiciously when, asleep in a carriage, he is carted some distance away from his familiar turf. The language that characterizes Murr’s earlier optimistic tone – self-assured, pompous, and controlled – now becomes tense, uncertain, and frightened, corresponding to the random nature of real life and the dangers of the street. Murr escapes the carriage but finds himself in the middle of quotidian chaos, harassed by humans, chased by dogs, and snubbed by fellow cats. Exhausted and famished, he seeks solace in his usual, gustative manner: he espies a young girl selling sausages on the street and gathers himself as best he can:

I slowly approached . . . and wishing to introduce myself directly as a youth of good education and gallant manners, I arched my back higher and more beautifully than I had ever done before. Her smile turned to loud laughter. “At last I have found a fine soul, a feeling heart! Ah, Heaven, what good that does my wounded breast!” I thought, angling down one of the sausages off her stall, but at that the girl gave a loud cry, and if the blow she aimed at me with a stout wooden stick had struck home I would never have been able to enjoy the sausage I had taken while believing in the girl’s steadfastness and philanthropic virtue, or any other sausage either. (p. 82)

One recalls that the behavior that Murr evinces in stealing the sausage is precisely the kind of thing for which Abraham punished him earlier, and one must wonder...
again about the efficacy of lessons that cannot overcome Murr's relentless appetite. Perhaps a more valuable lesson lies in the discovery that no philanthropic, or, perhaps more accurately, philofeline, principle – or any principle, for that matter – applies on the chaotic street.

Fortunately for Murr, his streetwise poodle friend Ponto discovers him at this most desperate hour and rescues him from these perilous circumstances, providing him a lesson in street survival as well:

[How alarmed I was, however, when] Ponto ran straight up to that girl selling bread and sausages, the girl who had almost killed me when I helped myself to her wares in a friendly manner. "Oh Ponto, my dear poodle, what are you doing? Take care, beware that heartless, barbarous female, beware the vengeful law governing sausages!" (pp. 89–90)

[(Doch wie erschrak ich als] Ponto gerade zu auf das Brot und Würste feilhaltende Mädchen loshüpfte, die mich, da ich freundlich bei ihr zulaunte, beinahe toteschlagen. "Mein Pudel Ponto, mein Pudel Ponto, was tust du, nimm dich in acht, hüte dich vor der herzlosen Barbarin, vor dem rachedürstenden Wurstprinzip!" (pp. 397–98))

But clever Ponto performs several tricks, and the vendor rewards him with one of her biggest sausages. In a mechanistic universe, a "rachedürstendes Wurstprinzip" might possess validity, but, in this universe, predictability through such laws does not exist. Murr is certain of his own ability to forecast how the girl will react, a forecast based on incorrect presumptions (e.g., that the girl's initial warmth implies an invitation for him to help himself to a sausage) and faulty inductive reasoning (e.g., "if the girl attacked me, she will attack all animals"); consequently, at first he barely escapes the situation with his life, and later he is capable of acquiring no second sausage on his own.

However, Ponto succeeds where Murr fails, not because he understands laws, principles, and other logical abstractions better than Murr does, but because, as a dog, he is instinctively able to turn the chaotic moment to his own advantage. He ingratiates himself – shamelessly, a cat might add – with the young woman in order to procure what he desires. Through the right kind of flattering behavior, he exchanges service for pay. That is, he does not merely steal the sausage; he earns it as a reward through his tricks and tail wagging. It is important to note that ingratitude does not always succeed, as the shabby treatment of Murr demonstrates at the beginning of his adventure. Yet, by approaching the situation as a negotiation rather than as a reflex (i.e., by postponing immediate gratification), the poodle gives the girl pleasure and at the same time assures himself at least one sausage and perhaps many more in future encounters. To react to the chaos inherent in life, to accept the innately nonlinear nature of complex social systems, and, when necessary, to have an escape route planned – these are life skills that Murr must acquire even within the confines of Abraham's controlled domicile.

The second episode in which food plays the dominant role occurs in part 3, "My Apprentice Months: The Whimsical Play of Chance" ("Die Lehrmonate: Launisches Spiel des Zufalls"), beginning the second of the novel's two volumes, in which Hoffmann parodies certain political conditions of his time. The central issue regarding the aesthetic fruit of the mind in conflict with the instinctive demands of the stomach plays the decisive role here, as it does in virtually every Murr fragment. During Murr's experiences with the feline fraternity (Katzburschenschaft), eating and food apparently become subordinate to the rules of a social organization modeled after the liberal, nationalistic groups of the period. Since, however, cats determine the rules, and since their animal wills are hopelessly subordinate to their insistent hunger and thirst, the conflicts that they face between inclination and duty create a powerful tension that they resolve through immediate gratification and rationalization.

Prior to joining the fraternity, Murr enjoys an especially opulent period of adolescence, during which he describes a singularly delicious dish, his favorite:

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ridge very nicely indeed, and consequently I used to eat two large dishes of it for breakfast with the best of appetites. (pp. 168–69)


Murr learns about the gustatory rules of the Burschenschaft from his friend Muzius, who – after he has helped himself to Murrs entire dinner of fried fish – criticizes Murr for being too comfortable: “Plump, well fed and glossy[,] . . . you’d feel very different if you had to wear yourself out, the way we do, to lay your paws on a few fish-bones or a little bird” (p. 170). (“Rund, gemästet, spiegelglatt[,] . . . ganz anders wird Euch zumute sein, wenn Ihr Euch wie unsereins abstrapazieren müßtet, bis Ihr einmal ein paar Fischgräten erwischtet oder ein Vögelein finget” [p. 487]). According to Muzius, Murr’s sweet porridge is “Philistine” cuisine, and that has led his friend down the path to ruin. The true Burschen reject on principle the consumption of refined food, although, in fact, they most gladly cadge such victuals from naive but willing prospective recruits, and thus Muzius has no qualms about relieving Murr of the chicken bones and milk that Abraham has also saved for him. Finally, Muzius convinces his apprentice that the politically correct thing to do is to become a fraternity brother, and Murr learns from his new mentor that he will immediately need to cast off his solitary aloofness and overrefined taste and join his comrades for a nocturnal convocation.

However, the company that Murr discovers on the rooftop shares essentially the attitudes and tastes that he has known all along. The sociopolitical beliefs of the Burschenschaft members also prove subservient to their appetites, and, in the gustatory discourse he has employed throughout, Murr claims: “[It] soon turned out that every one of us preferred fresh milk to water and roast meat to bread” (p. 187). ([E]s fand sich bald, daß jeder von uns süße Milch lieber zu sich nahm als Wasser, Braten lieber als Brot’ [p. 506]) After the ceremonial introductions and pawshakes are concluded, the cats sit down to a simple but cheerful meal followed by a hearty drinking session. Muzius had made some excellent cat-punch. Should any greedy young tom feel curious about the recipe for this delicious beverage, I fear I cannot give him sufficient details, but this much is certain: its extremely pleasant flavour and the powerful kick in it result chiefly from a sizeable amount of soured herring. (p. 187)

(zu einem einfachen aber fröhlichen Mahl, dem eine wackere Zecherei folgte. Muzius hatte trefflichen Katzpunch bereitet. – Sollte ein lüsterner Katerjüngling nach dem Rezept dieses köstlichen Getränks Begierde tragen, so kann ich leider darüber keine genügende Auskunft geben. So viel ist gewiß, daß die hohe Annehmlichkeit des Geschmacks, so wie die siegende Kraft, vorzüglich durch eine derbe Zutat von Heringslake hervorgebracht wird. [p. 506])

Humor again results from the dissonance between the elevated language of “taste” (“Annehmlichkeit,” “siegende Kraft,” “vorzüglich”) and the signified reality: the cats are consuming a concoction that would undoubtedly turn a human’s stomach, and their clear purpose is fraternal intoxication. Murr has never before participated in a drinking bout, and the imbibing of strong brews provides him with a new sensual activity, one in which he predictably overindulges. When the group intones a standard fraternity song, replete with images of fish and fowl, several members in their well-lubricated inspiration spontaneously compose inane verses, and Murr is convinced that his is the wittiest and merits the greatest approbation. Afterward, Murr returns home to sleep off his intemperance, and, on awakening to a hangover (the pun in the German Katzenjammer is not lost on the audience), he initially perceives the pain as a gustatory event, as a certain insistent and abnormal demand of the stomach, which could not be met because of that very abnormality and merely caused a useless rumbling inside me, one in which even the affected ganglions participated, trembling and quivering morbidly in unceasing physical desire and powerlessness. It was a dreadful condition! (p. 203)
What amounts to a night out with the boys occupies a substantial part of the novel's third part, and Murr expresses his rite of passage essentially in the discourse of eating, drinking, and digestion.

The third scene in which eating takes on increased importance occurs toward the end of part 3, when Murr learns of Muzius's death, and he attends a funeral and funerary meal for his initiator into the Burschenschaft. As the most recent inductee, Murr bears the responsibility for food and drink, and he willingly provides "lavish supplies of fish, chicken-bones and vegetables" (p. 245; "reichlichen Vorrat an Fischen, Hühnerknochen und Gemüse" [p. 574]) as well as milk. The larger part of the narrative concerns itself with the logistics of transporting the beverage to the site of the wake, the basement, with the help of a "housemaid" ("Hausmagd"). Ostensibly, Murr communicates the details of this procedure in order to dispel any doubts regarding the verisimilitude of his autobiography since transporting milk would pose insurmountable difficulties for a beast without hands for carrying. Perhaps one's willing suspension of disbelief is challenged more formidably by his ability to bring the victuals down to the basement without consuming them on the way, as he has notably done before. His abstinence cannot be attributed to grief. Despite his claim of being shocked at the news of Muzius's demise, his confession of grief, doubtful in itself—"I was hit very hard by receiving the notice of his death; [only] now did I realize what Muzius had been to me!" (p. 245; "[d]ie Trauerpost traf mich sehr hart, nun erst fühlte ich, was mir Muzius gewesen!" [p. 574])—is followed by the detailed, lengthy description of procuring the milk.

The preoccupation with gustatory matters at the expense of sorrow and mourning continues through the eulogy delivered by the cat Hinzmann, whose flowery rhetoric lacks any pertinent substance whatsoever (he knows almost nothing about Muzius's life and offers little more than conjectures and banalities about felinity in general). After dozing off in the middle of his own address, Hinzmann is awakened by another cat and urged to conclude, for "we're all ravenous!" (p. 250; "wir verspüren alle einen desperaten Hunger" [p. 581]). After Murr critiques the eulogy, which in the final analysis he finds profuse in ornamentation but lacking in content, he describes the burial, which begins with the cats intoning a De profundis. Murr's high praise for the formal expressiveness of the cats' musical lamentations, which one senses are as void of actual sorrow for the deceased as was Hinzmann's eulogy, strikes one as strange after his earlier criticisms. In any case, when cat-maidens cast pantry herbs into the grave as Muzius is lowered into the ground, the focus returns to food and to the most important event, the funeral meal.

Murr becomes enamored of one of the maidens attending Muzius's grave, and they sit next to one another at table. As the tom-cat woos the young Katzenmädchen, Mina, she impresses him thoroughly with her beauty and sweet voice. Even more appealing are "her clear, bright mind, her sincerity, the tenderness of her feelings, the purely feminine devout nature radiating from within her" (p. 252; "ihr heller klarer Verstand, die Innigkeit, die Zartheit ihres Gefühls, das rein weibliche fromme Wesen, das aus ihrem Innern hervorstießt" [p. 583]). The most persuasive proof of her superior faculties comes from a conversation about milk porridge:

She spoke to me enthusiastically, for instance, of a dish of porridge made with milk which she had enjoyed with some appetite a few days before her father's [i.e., Muzius's] death, and when I said that they made such porridge very well in my master's household, adding a good knob of butter too, she looked at me with a green glow in her innocent dove-like eyes and asked, in a tone that went right through my heart, "Oh, to be sure — to be sure, sir — so you like porridge made with milk too? And with a knob of butter?" she repeated, as if rapt in ecstatic dreams.

"O Appetit, dein Name ist Kater!"

Even the negotiation of animal love becomes subsumed by the discourse of food. One suspects that both drives, sex and sustenance, are merely slightly differing aspects of Murr’s powerful, instinctive desire to incorporate everything around him — and of the monolithie egotism that permeates every aspect of his autobiographical fragments.

In Kreisler’s biography as well, food plays a significant role, although figurative and literal categories of taste become confused to a lesser degree. The musician struggles valiantly to hold the two apart, primarily through his biting irony and culinary language, which take to task those who devalue high art or those who believe that they can easily master art’s uncompromising demands.

Kreisler realizes fully that his erratic personality and his relentless pursuit of pure musical art disqualify him as an integrated and participating member of such social circles as the Sieghartsweiler court; and, when he is asked to explain the origins of his name (Kreis in German means “circle”), he frames his answer so as to justify his outsider status with reference to his stomach:

"A Kreisler circulates in these circles, and very likely, weary of the leaps and bounds of the St Vitus’s dance he is obliged to perform, and at odds with the dark, inscrutable Macht which delineated those circles, he often longs to break out more than a stomach constitutionally weak anyway will allow.” (pp. 50–51)

("In diesen Kreisen kreiselt sich der Kreisler, und wohl mag es sein, daß er oft, ermüdet von den Sprüngen des St. Veits-Tanzes, zu dem er gezwungen, rechtend mit der dunklen unerforschlich Macht, die jene Kreise umschrieb, sich mehr als es einem Magen, der ohnedies nur schwächer Konstitution, zusagt, hinaussehnt ins Freie." [p. 353])

On the one hand, Kreisler’s “stomach” is dependent on the court at Sieghartsweiler — he enjoys the hospitality of the prince and is fed and housed there. On the other hand, the high social circle of the court determines matters of aesthetic taste as social norm — that is, as entertainment, an attitude that sends the musician into a fury. Trapped between the two extremes, Kreisler responds with the “St. Vitus’s dance” of reveries and sarcasm, which sets his character into stark contrast with that of his ingratiating feline counterpart, but which also takes its toll on his “stomach.”

Another scene in which food becomes a focus in Kreisler’s biography links the musician again with the tomtit while making the contrasts between their aesthetic attitudes even stronger. Like Murr, Kreisler takes advantage of an opportunity to describe his own birth and his father’s response to the news:

"His father was eating pea soup at the time, and in his delight spilled a whole spoonful over his beard, at which the newly delivered mother laughed so hard, although she hadn’t seen it, that the tremor broke every string of the instrument in the hands of the lutenist playing the baby the latest murky, who swore by his granny's satin nightcap that little Johnny Milkysop there would be an ignoramus in musical matters for ever and always. At that, however, the baby's father wiped his chin clean and said with feeling, 'He will certainly be called Johannes, but he’ll be no Milkysop.' (p. 69)

("Der Vater aß eben Erbsensuppe, und goß sich vor Freuden einen ganzen Löffel voll über den Bart, worüber die Wöchnerin, unerachtet sie es nicht gesehen, dermaßen lachte, daß von der Erschütterung dem Lautenisten, der dem Säugling seinen neuesten Murki vorspielte, alle Saiten sprangen, und er bei der atlasten Nachthaupe seiner Großmutter schwor, was Musik betreffe, würde der kleine Hans Hase ein elender Stümper bleiben ewiglich und immerdar. Darauf wischte sich aber der Vater das Kinn rein und sprach pathetisch: 'Johannes soll er zwar heißen, jedoch kein Hase sein.'" [p. 370])

The German term Hans Hasen (lit. “Johnny Rabbit,” and, thus, something one might
eat, which is the sense that Anthea Bell appropriately picks up in her translation as "milksop") recalls a remark by Murr's mother regarding her son's birth, in which she reports that she had to defend her litter against their father: "'Njo sooner were you born than your father felt a dreadful appetite to devour you and your brothers and sisters!' (p. 34). ("Kaum warst du geboren, als dein Vater den unseligen Appetit bekam, dich nebst deinen Geschwistern zu verspeisen" [p. 333]). To this unnerving bit of information Murr responds curiously: "Dearest Mother, . . . do not condemn that propensity entirely. The most cultivated people on earth credited the race of the gods with a strange appetite for eating their children, yet Jupiter was saved, and so was I!" (p. 35). ("Beste Mutter, . . . verdammen Sie nicht ganz jene Neigung. Das gebildeteste Volk der Erde legte den sonderbaren Appetit des Kinderfressens dem Geschlecht der Götter bei, aber gerettet wurde ein Jupiter und so auch ich!" [p. 333]). Despite the grotesque humor surrounding the Murr episode, one notices the importance given in both Murr's and Kreisler's fragments to food and the father's appetite in connection with the birth scene, to what the father specifically was eating (pea soup, in the case of Kreisler's father) or wished to eat (his son, in the case of Murr's father), and to the identity of the character with foodstuff (Kreisler as "Hase," Murr as the object of cannibalistic urges).

Metaphorically, the identification of the main characters with food and with the process of their incorporation lies at the very heart of the novel. Murr's instinctive behavior, tearing apart Kreisler's life story and appropriating it for his own purposes, parallels the preparation, mastication, and ingesting of food. Easily digestible portions of the biography, which in a very real literary sense constitutes Kreisler's body, are ripped from the manuscript, rearranged, and reconstituted as the corpus Murr. The results of this process are apparent, not only in the seemingly chaotic (although, on a higher level, reorganized) Kreisler fragments, but also in a surprising feature of the text: namely, passages in which the tomcat gradually becomes more and more like Kreisler in his attitudes and statements, so much so that, by the end of the autobiography, Murr seems to plagiarize the musician's own words. Kreisler's uncompromising insistence that the artist be free from bourgeois social constraints is reflected in Murr's urgings, in part 4 ("Beneficial Consequences of a Superior Education: My Months of Greater Maturity" ["Erspriessliche Folgen höherer Kultur die reiferen Monate des Mannes"]), that the poet or philosopher not attach too much importance to "the so-called refinement of high society, which amounts only to an attempt to smooth away all corners and sharp edges, reducing all physiognomies to a single one, which then ceases to be one for that very reason" (p. 302; "die sogenannte höhere gesellschaftliche Kultur, die auf nichts anders hinausläuft als auf das Bemühen, alle Ecken, Spitzen wegzuhobeln, alle Physiognomien zu einer einzigen zu gestalten die eben deshalb aufhört eine zu sein" [p. 640]). To this, the editor replies:

Murr, I am sorry to see you decking yourself out in borrowed plumes so often. I have good reason to fear that it will lower you considerably in the esteem of our gentle readers. Don't all these reflections you're so proud of come straight from the mouth of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler? And anyway, how could you acquire sufficient experience of life to see so deeply into the mind of a human writer, the most wonderful thing on earth? (p. 303) (Murr, es tut mir leid, daß du dich so oft mit fremden Federn schmückst. Du wirst, wie ich mit Recht befürchten muß, dadurch bei den geneigten Lesern merklich verlieren. — Kommen alle diese Betrachtungen mit denen du dich so brüstest nicht geradehin aus dem Munde des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler und ist es überhaupt möglich, daß du solche Lebensweisheit sammeln konntest, um eines menschlichen Schriftstellers Gemüt, das wunderlichste Ding auf Erden, so tief zu durchschauen! [p. 640])

One might recall the plume that Murr brandishes in the front-cover engraving (fig. 1), with its possible suggestion of earlier feasting. Perhaps Murr's plagiarism of Kreisler's words similarly identifies these remnants of the kapellmeister's literary body as food. Murr's manducation of the Kreisler manuscript reduces the corporeal existence of the musician, who exists in the
first place only as words on the printed page, to the functional contours that Murr's autobiography permits. Subjecting the Kriessler text to the natural, digestive process of destruction, reorganization, and reexpression runs contrary to the idea of neat, linear narration, such as one might have found, for example, in the Aufklärung. In Kater Murr, Hoffmann manages to capture a sense of nature's chaotic functioning despite the most assiduous human or feline efforts to make it compliant and predictable. One can scarcely imagine an aesthetic goal more contradictory to previous, "enlightened" attempts to categorize and systematize human experience. Perhaps no other work of German romanticism embodies on such an elementary level the "revolutionary purpose" that Kolb suggests in her Ambiguity of Taste.

NOTES
2. Even in the seventeenth century, in Mollière's comedies, Kolb locates a qualified revolt against the neoclassical ban on food images.
3. For the discussion of Heine, see Kolb, Ambiguity of Taste, 115–223. Regarding Heine's challenges to convention, see ibid., 123–24.
6. Particularly striking in this regard are Ganz's association with the true artist of crusts of bread, which to him taste better than "many a roast joint grudgingly thrown down by venal servants" ("manches Stück Braten von dem feilen Bedienten mir verächtlich hingeworfen"). And the satirical passage in which Milo describes his less than tasteful fellow primates, who "still hop about through the trees in the deep, uncultivated forests and nourish themselves with raw fruit that has not even been rendered appetizing by the culinary arts. To think they prefer to spend their evenings giving voice to hymns with never a true note, and no regular tempo! And even to imagine them singing in the newly invented 7/8 or 13/4 time is completely out of the question!" ("noch in den weiten, unkultivierten Wäldern auf den Bäumen herumhüpfen, sich von rohen, nicht erst durch Kunst schmackhaft gewordenen Früchten nähren, und vorzüglich abends gewisse Hymnen anstimmen, in denen kein Ton richtig, und an irgend einen Takt, sei es auch der neuerfundene 7/8tel oder 13/4tel Takt, gar nicht zu denken ist") (E. T. A. Hoffmann, Fantasy Pieces in Callot's Manner: Pages from the Diary of a Traveling Romantic, trans. John Hayse [Schenectady, N.Y.: Union College Press, 1996], 79, 266, and Fantasie- und Nachstücke, vol. 1 of Sämtliche Werke, ed. Walter Müller-Seidel, with notes by Wolfgang Kron, 5 vols. [Munich: Winkler, 1960–65], 94, 298).
8. This misappropriation of the famous quotation from Shakespeare's Hamlet, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (1.2), is only one of Murr's many erroneous citings (Herman Meyer, Das Zitat in der Erzählkunst: Zur Geschichte und Poetik des europäischen Romans [Stuttgart: Metzler, 1961], 114–34).
9. Kolb, Ambiguity of Taste, 123. See also ibid., 15–16: "One should not assume that the rejection of literary decorum is identical with a rejection of literary forms. On the contrary, the rejection of neoclassical forms -- of genres and styles that separate high from low, tragic from comic -- demonstrates the importance of form and inspires new ones... What changes as the result of poetic revolution is not that formal questions disappear, but that form is redefined and liberalized so that it comes to resemble irony rather than genre."
10. From Buch der Lieder, quoted in ibid., 111.


17. The "Dutch hero" ("niederländische Held") to whom Murr refers is the hero of Goethe’s Egmont (1788), who, in the fifth act of the tragedy, contemplates his imminent execution.

18. "Editor’s Postscript" (p. 322) in the English translation; "Nachschrift des Herausgebers" (p. 663) in the German edition.

19. Because Hoffmann places this sonnet about cat food in the mouth of a professor of aesthetics greatly in fear of losing his position at the university to Murr, the passage exudes irony in connection with taste. Soon thereafter, Abraham, protesting that the professor cannot be serious, makes one of the few references in the Murr autobiographical fragments to Kreisler when he comments: "Well, it’s not a bad joke, and I’m sure Kreisler in particular will find it very much to his taste" (p. 61; emphasis added). ("Der Spaß ist übrigens nicht übel, und wird vorzüglich dem Kreisler sehr wohl gefallen" [p. 364; emphasis added]).

passages related to his birth) and through his emphasis on the advantages that the attic offers as a nativity locus—of which Murr connects discursively to food.


22. "One must assume that the contemporary reader . . . recognized without difficulty the shreds of philosophical idealism's specialized language with its Fichtean stamp" (Meyer, Das Zitat in der Erzählkunst, 124 [my translation]). "Man muß annehmen, daß der zeitgenössische Leser . . . unschwer die Brocken des Fachjargons des philosophischen Idealismus Fichtes Präge wiedererkannt hat".


24. The Burschenschaften, nationalistic fraternities, were marginalized and suppressed by the dominant, reactionary forces of the era, particularly by the powerful Metternich regime in Vienna. As a career officeholder in the Prussian judiciary, Hoffmann was forced by his métier to align himself as far as possible from the court s shallow aesthetic is made clear 28. The court's shallow aesthetic is made clear in the first Kreisler fragment regarding the "entertainment" at the princess’s naming-day celebration (pp. 13–20 in the English translation, pp. 307–16 in the German edition). 29. See Domány, “Begegnungen und Bezugsnahmen,” 218–21. The differences between Kreisler and Murr become most apparent when one compares this passage with the cat’s panegyric on the attic (see n. 20 above): while Murr believes fervently in his own importance and, thus, embraces naively (nonironically) the discursive content (perhaps as Goethe does), Kreisler distances himself as far as possible from the content through his satiric irony.

25. The term siegende Kraft evinces a higher social register in German than what is suggested by the translation’s colloquialism, “powerful kick.”

26. See, e.g., the passage in which Kreisler satirizes attitudes held by the overly sensitive Princess Hedwiga with reference to the use of champagne to achieve transcendent experience: "After all," Kreisler quips, “everyone has a natural pro-

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ven's C-Minor Piano Sonata, op. 13 (1799), the *Pathétique*, presumably to connect with the "pathetisch" tone with which Kreisler's father denies that his son will be a milksop.

"O Appetit, dein Name ist Kater!"