



**Trickster as Figure and Force: Ambivalence in Busch's
and Hoffmann's picture-books**

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German nineteenth century children's literature tends to represent an intact and harmonious world in which conflict situations are avoided. The disobedient child embodies a potential disturbance and children's literature affirms proper behaviour and attitude toward authority. This appears not to hold true as far as the picture-books by Heinrich Hoffmann and Wilhelm Busch are concerned. Their complexity may explain their enduring success. Busch's famous stories *Max und Moritz*, *Fipps der Affe* and *Eispeter* and Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* provide a moral agreement. Hoffmann's and Busch's tales can be read as typical examples of 'intimidation-stories': disobedient children experience a cruel but justified punishment. But a closer analysis shows that this pattern functions primarily as a protective layer hiding a different story. Subliminally, Busch's and Hoffmann's tales hide a disorienting and even subversive attitude. Of the many levels on which such an alternative meaning can be detected, two are discussed in this analysis: the first concerns the action and the characterization of the protagonists, the second the reliability of the narrating instance.

It is generally acknowledged that German nineteenth century children's literature represents an intact and harmonious world in which conflict situations, particularly those involving parental authority, are avoided. Within the parental rule of law, the disobedient child embodies a potential disturbance. 'Der verkommene Sohn, die mißratene Tochter, sie verkörpern in der Ordnung der Eltern [...] ein Stück elementarer Un-Ordnung oder Gegen-Ordnung' (von Mattt 1995: 23). In an attempt to control this danger, enlightened pedagogics and the corresponding children's literature insistently affirm the norms concerning proper behaviour and attitude toward authority.

This model however does not seem entirely adequate where the picture-books by Heinrich Hoffmann and Wilhelm Busch are concerned. Their greater complexity may explain why they were not only internationally successful during their author's lifetime but are still widely read today. A closer look at Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* and Busch's *Max und Moritz*, *Fipps der Affe* and *Eispeter* reveals their ambivalent messages and multiple addressees. Existing interpretations which have detected elements distinguishing Busch's and Hoffmann's stories from the traditional German nineteenth century children's literature, have so far only discovered selected fragments that do not seem to fit a traditional moral code, which for the rest remains intact. Also, these readings have reintegrated those foreign elements into an

equally moralizing system.¹ I want to show that these texts' disruptions are located right within and not next to their repressing and confining messages and that a subversive and irrecoverable subtext underlies them as a whole.

The obvious content of these stories provides author and reader with a moral agreement and thereby assures the educator of their pedagogic legitimacy. 'Ach, was muß man oft von bösen / Kindern hören oder lesen! / Wie zum Beispiel hier von diesen, / Welche Max und Moritz hießen.' Hoffmann's and Busch's tales can be read as traditional and typical examples of 'intimidation-stories': Disobedient children experience a cruel but justified punishment. Playing with matches leads to death by fire, refusing to eat your soup to fatal starvation, and sucking your thumb to eventually losing it. After the rebels have been punished, order is restored. The lesson seems straightforward enough, but a closer analysis shows that this pattern functions primarily as a protective layer hiding a different story.

Subliminally, Busch's and Hoffmann's tales hide a disorienting and even subversive attitude. Of the many levels on which such an alternative meaning can be detected, I will discuss two: the first concerns the action and the characterization of the protagonists, the second the reliability of the narrator. On one level, the protagonists continuously demonstrate their untiring flexibility, anarchic vitality and an archaic, triumphant resistance against instrumentalization and domestication. The motivations of their actions prove to be essentially free of egotistic interest and are clearly invested with the sympathy of the authors for joyful 'Übermut', an excess of untamed energy. On a second level, the stern and moralizing narrator is robbed of his authority. His language and his reasoning are riddled with false conclusions, logical contradictions and references to conflicting paradigms.

Failure of instrumentalization

Busch's famous 'Diogenes-story' ends with the pompously uttered sentence: 'Das kommt von das'. The statement pretends that there is a natural, almost fateful balance between cause and consequence, between the offence against order and its re-establishment through punishment. In using a crooked syntax however, Busch ironically discloses the equally crooked reasoning of the moralizing instance. This move is exemplified in one of the

¹ Cf. Köneker (1977), Kaminsky (1992) and Pape (1988: 153-182) In these studies critics recuperate the 'disturbances' amidst the official moralizing message in different ways. A strong example is Köneker's psychoanalytical interpretation in which the disruptive textual elements have a sublimating effect on the reader for cathartic purposes.

strategies used by Hoffmann and Busch to undermine the credibility claimed by traditional ‘intimidation-stories’. The outcome in *Struwwelpeter*, in *Max und Moritz*, *Fipps der Affe* and *Eispeter* shows a striking gap between the degree of the crime and that of the punishment, between relatively harmless action and disproportionate reaction. The list of punishments occurring in these stories is quite impressive: protagonists – children and a monkey – are beaten up, stung, bitten and scratched, nearly drowned, blown away, mutilated by giant scissors, publicly exposed, ridiculed, burned, starved, shot, baked in a white hot baking-oven, ground, frozen, defrosted and potted in a barrel.

Some of these punishments are rationally explainable, others are not. It is natural that enlightenment pedagogics should use warnings that work with causality and proportionality, but these somehow seem to be considered insufficient, since many of the punishments also have a mythical, irrational dimension. Next to logical consequences of uncautious or wild actions we witness the staging of elementary forces, legendary figures and impossible metamorphoses. This need to invoke the uncanny and put the punishments into the hands of supernatural forces not only shows a deficit of rational pedagogics but relieves the forces of authority of their personal responsibility. Ultimately, both the rational and the mythical system of intimidation fail.

Endeavours to master the archaic forces and engage them in the pedagogical project are bound to fail by their very nature. Where a boy is ‘liquified’ – which has the same root as liquidated – and where the hare ends up shooting the hunter, where a dissolution of categories and structures occurs, the uncanny is felt in its overwhelming and disruptive presence. In ‘Struwwelpeter’ a mythical appearance is staged twice. Both Saint-Niklas with the giant ink stand and the ‘great, long, red-legg’d scissorman’ belong to precisely that sphere of infant phantasy which enlightened pedagogues untiringly combat. Their efforts to avert the danger of untamed elements penetrating into orderly, everyday life, result in a reversal of their initial aim. In spite of naughty Konrad’s painfully executed symbolic castration in Hoffmann’s ‘Daumenlutscher’, the intended result, his eventual socialization, is not explicitly achieved. The static and final character of the last stanza rather suggests the contrary: ‘Ohne Daumen steht er dort, / die sind alle beide fort.’ It is unlikely that Konrad will henceforth become a useful member of society. Implicitly we are being told that natural or mythical forces cannot be instrumentalized for the sake of socialization, domestication or adaptation: Any effort to master these archaic elements and direct their effects will result in the emergence of an autonomous dynamic counterforce.

Tricksteresque protagonists

It is precisely this ungraspable quality which reveals the affinity of Busch's and Hoffmann's protagonists with archaic natural forces. They link up with different literary traditions displaying a fundamental and archaic anarchism. The iconography of the trickster and of other mythical figures such as the petrifying and petrified Medusa on the one hand and the liquifying and liquified Undine on the other help to situate these protagonists in a realm immune against enlightened moralizing.

The representation of these figures have affinities with various motifs related to the trickster, the amoral troublemaker who intrudes into the suffocating atmosphere of apparently harmonious bourgeois home. Rebelling against any kind of fixed system, against order and regulation, the trickster as archetype embodies dynamic and flexible thinking. As a consequence he / she is neither bound to an unchangeable appearance nor to a stable identity. He / she also 'invites us to take *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries, in the fragmentation and fraying of the edges and of the self' (Bordo 1990: 144). I quote from the introduction to the adventures of Busch's roguish monkey called Fipps: 'Selten zeigt er sich beständig' or else 'So ist der Schlechte, daß er immer was anderes möchte'. The changing rhythm with which Philipp's fidgeting is described, – 'Er gaukelt / und schaukelt / er trappelt / und zappelt' – discloses hidden delight and excitement and invites the reader to feel the same.

The trickster is the other of the cultural hero (see Lenk 1983: 45-47). Heroes consciously protest against existing life circumstances or power structures. They behave constructively and purposefully in order to contribute to a better and fairer world. The trickster is not interested in improving conditions, not for others but certainly not for himself. He is neither single-minded, nor is he effective or systematic.² Busch's protagonist Fipps shows precisely those characteristics: He is not a Robin Hood protecting vulnerable members of society – but then why is he saving baby Elise from death by fire? Why is he peacefully playing music with cat and dog, and in the next picture grasping little Dümml's slice of bread or toppling over the old hobbling tramp? Fipps, like the other protagonists, is not immoral, but amoral.

² 'Auch wenn in den Streichen von Fipps, [...] und anderen Tätern egoistische Motive mitschwingen, so werden sie im Augenblicke des Triumphs abgeworfen'. From Bonati 1988: 86.

Victorious self-destruction

Looking at Hoffmann's and Busch's protagonists as embodiments of anarchic forces enables the reader to consider their fate not as an intimidating, violent perishing – the viewpoint held by the current interpretations – but as a self-destructive victory. Tricksteresque beings in their multiple and flexible personalities impersonate a subversive anarchy able to break up established 'Fremdbestimmungen', structures and determinations imposed by an external authority. In offending the laws of physics, the children and animals in these picture-books undermine the smooth course of natural events. Peter von Matt, in another context, distinguishes two categories of subversive strategies involving transformations of physical states of aggregation. All the possibilities he mentions happen to be found in at least one of the stories mentioned above. 'Dem Flüssigen, Fliegenden, Brennenden, Wachsenden steht das Gefrorene, Gelähmte, Erlöschte, Gestockte gegenüber' (1989: 221). Von Matt's first category applies not only to such a mythical figure as Undine, but also to her unlikely relatives, burning Paulinchen, flying Robert, melting Peter, fidgetty Philipp: their selves too dissolve in the environment. His second category, which has overtones of the Medusa-iconography, could also describe the static appearance of Struwelpeter, of starving Kaspar, ground Max and Moritz and shot Fipps.

All these little mischief-makers burst with energy, which is either poured out to blast cramped bourgeois bodies in dressing gowns and night caps or is piled up and kept inside to sabotage the predictable course of events, like growing up. Their strategies can be situated on the axis of dynamism. They are located on the opposite poles of extreme kinetic energy on the one hand and of extreme static energy on the other hand. The characteristic common to both the dynamic and the static pole, is the negative relation they have to compromise, moderation and mediocrity.

Their excessive energy provides the protagonists with the power to resist any attempt to socialize them. Eispeter falls into icy water, the giant ice block he has become is thawed near the stove. Subsequently, one expects him to gain an insight into his incautious behaviour and to form the wise resolution never to be disobedient again. Eispeter however is not willing to reintegrate into the existing order and prefers to change his state of aggregation by transforming into a thick liquid which is then collected as pulp in a barrel. It is interesting to notice that 'liquid' has two meanings, which both apply to Eispeter's existence and to the trickster-motif. 'Liquid' is both an adjective referring to a state of aggregation *and* the

antonym to anything steady and stable. The failing attempt to shape a child according to laws that are considered natural by the parental generation, is demonstrated graphically – literally pulp fiction.

With one athletic swing, Fipps smashes the mirror into the tailor's face – 'Der Spiegel klirrt, die Hand erlahmt; / Der Meister Krüll ist eingerahmt'. Is it too far-fetched to see in the motifs both of the mirror and of the paralysis an ironic echo of the Medusa-topos? The literary topos of the mirror moreover refers to the process of individuation, of distinction between object and subject. The broken mirror then becomes a metaphor for Fipp's refusal of becoming an autonomous self.³ No wonder: fixing the boundaries of the self and delimitating them from the environment would mean the end of a subversive existence. Medusa's petrifying power gets lost when she is forced to look into the mirror. Max and Moritz' elimination through bruising millstones can, from this perspective, be considered the ultimate refusal to be recognizable and as a consequence to be seizable. 'Hier kann man sie noch erblicken (...) doch sogleich verzehret sie Meister Müllers Federvieh'. In spite of the radical outcome of these stories, the protagonists keep their indestructible character (cf. Spinks 1991: 185).

The narrator as trickster

The introductions to Hoffmann's and Busch's stories taken into consideration here present the storyteller explicitly. This mode implies the possibility of a discrepancy between the author's unspoken point of view and the comments of the storyteller in narrating the events. It is remarkable how often the narrator falls into contradictory reasoning. He draws absurd or meaningless conclusions, presumes causality between non-related observations, particularly in those scenes that do not simply tell but also evaluate the events, and repeatedly argues with conflicting paradigms.

An example of pseudo-logical reasoning can be found in the three final stanzas of Max and Moritz's adventures, the place where traditionally a moralizing judgment is expected. Indeed, each one of Max and Moritz's victims comments upon the boys' well-deserved punishment. But there are two unexplained exceptions. It is surprising that neither the farmer, who ordered the miller to grind the children, nor the miller, who killed them, have their say. 'Doch der brave Bauersmann / Dachte: Wat geht meck dat an!' It is evident, that the farmer is the

³ Bonati describes the protagonists as 'Menschen [...] in einem Zustand vor der Individualität' (1988: 89).

last person to have a right to pretend ‘what’s that to me?’ This statement of indifference turns against the farmer himself: At the end he cares so little that his murderous punishment doesn’t seem to be motivated by any lesson, but by pure sadism. The silence of the miller, the executor of the farmer’s verdict, confirms this gratuitous cruelty: the one who finally kills the children was not even one of their victims.

One of the factors undermining the narrator’s reliability is the vocabulary in which he describes the naughty actions of the little rascals. He repeatedly introduces precisely those words which are commonly used for praise by the representatives of the bourgeois order: As if inhabited by the work ethics propagated by its authorities, Max und Moritz are described as diligent craftsmen, as ‘gar nicht träge’. They saw a fissure in the bridge, which will cause the fall of Schneider Böck. The narrator also uses a vocabulary belonging to conflicting paradigms, a heterogenous language which causes a clash between different value systems. The pious ‘Herr Lehrer Lämpel’, whose name indicates that he is nothing but a weak reflection of the Enlightenment, not only worships Gott every day with organ music in the church, but is also ‘Von dem Tobak ein Verehrer’. Furthermore, a discourse of utility and profit is mixed up with a vocabulary of religion or ethics. Widow Bolte thinks it for the best ‘ganz im stillen und in *Ehren* / gut gebraten zu *verzehren*’. Busch even makes clashing words rhyme to cover the hidden contradiction. Rhyming can be seen as the protective layer disguising the hidden discordant note in a harmonizing way. Reconciling these two incommensurable words – ‘Ehren’ and ‘verzehren’ – Busch not only criticizes the bourgeois urge to avoid and gloss over conflicts artificially. He also unmasks mere utility as the standard of all bourgeois values. In Hoffmann’s ‘Fidgetty Philipp’ utilitarian values are undermined in the false emphasis on the consequence of the boy’s behaviour. ‘Und die Eltern stehn dabei. / Beide sind gar zornig sehr, / haben nichts zu essen mehr.’ Would they really have found nothing else in their pantry? In any case they seem hardly concerned that their son could have a broken neck. The ridicule of Herr Lämpel and the pathetic call for empathy for the parents seem to cast a welcome shadow on the narrator and the grey and cramped ‘Moral dieser ganzen Geschichte’.

Having written books resisting pedagogic instrumentalisation, Hoffmann and Busch act as tricksters themselves. Their figures, drawings and verses have entered public lore but have barely participated in the taming of unruly youngsters. Their actual moralizing impact may have varied over the years. Their undeniable achievement is their indestructibility – a tricksteresque capacity if any.

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Biodata

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