

**“ENTERING LIFE” OF POETRY  
BY E.T.A. HOFFMANN AND GÜNTER GRASS**

**"ENTRAR A LA VIDA" DE LA POESÍA  
POR E.T.A. HOFFMANN Y GÜNTER GRASS**

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## Summary

In this scientific article, it is assumed that the literary works of the Nobel Prize laureate and the German national poet Günter Grass are characterized by romantic features. For this reason, the novel *Ein weites Feld* ("A Wide Field") by Grass and the fairy tale *Der goldene Topf* ("The Golden Pot") by E.T.A. Hoffmann are examined in terms of their similarities and differences. It is noteworthy that E.T.A. Hoffmann has so far only been associated with Grass in relation to his fairy tale "Klein Zaches, called Zinnober", and the main hero of the fairy tale served as a literary model for Oskar Matzerath from "The Tin Drum". Thus, this article makes it possible to throw a new light on Grass's research. In this paper the following aspects are analyzed: questions of poetics, genesis, main characters, narrative or fictional levels, structural principles, as well as the role of the reader. The results are summarized in the final part of the investigation.

**Keywords:** Fiction and reality, role of the reader by E.T.A. Hoffmann and Günter Grass.

## Resumen

En este artículo científico, se asume que las obras literarias del premio Nobel y poeta nacional alemán Günter Grass se caracterizan por rasgos románticos. Por este motivo, la novela *Ein weites Feld* ("Un campo amplio") de Grass y el cuento de hadas *Der goldene Topf* ("La olla dorada") de E.T.A. Hoffmann se examina en términos de sus similitudes y diferencias. Es de destacar que E.T.A. Hasta ahora, Hoffmann solo se ha asociado con Grass en relación con su cuento de hadas "Klein Zaches, llamado Zinnober", y el héroe principal del cuento de hadas sirvió como modelo literario para Oskar Matzerath de "The Tin Drum". Por tanto, este artículo permite arrojar una nueva luz sobre la investigación de Grass. En este trabajo se analizan los siguientes aspectos: cuestiones de poética, génesis, personajes principales, niveles narrativos o ficcionales, principios estructurales, así como el rol del lector. Los resultados se resumen en la parte final de la investigación.

**Palabras clave:** Ficción y realidad, papel del lector por E.T.A. Hoffmann y Günter Grass.

## Introduction

In the present paper an attempt will be made to trace the line of the Romantic program from E.T.A. Hoffmann to Günter Grass<sup>1</sup>, depicted in the fairy tale "The Golden Pot" and

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to Grass's reference to Romanticism, the great role of Bettina von Arnim, who was admired by Grass, is well known, as is the fact that the novel "Der Butt" is based on the famous fairy tale by the

the novel "A Wide Field". As is well known, Grass has repeatedly emphasized in numerous interviews, speeches and essays that he sees himself as a follower of Enlightenment epoch. However, Grass's poetic perception of enlightenment is characterized by "good and evil": "I do not want to depart from reason, but to free it from the fetters of reason, in order to bring it back to fantasy, close to life and contemplation: the enlightenment of reason with the means of enlightenment". (Grass 1999)

This ambiguous strategy, defined as the "reasoning of the imagination" (Grass/Zimmermann 1999: 127), runs through throughout Grass's work. For Grass's "believable lies" (Grass/Zimmermann 1999: 127) are neither related to a "final goal"<sup>2</sup> on this side nor on the other side, but are rather carried by love for the concrete human being. "This poetics determined by faith, love and fantasy, which shows the ambiguity of man and strives for a rehumanization of the Enlightenment, is of central importance for the understanding of the novel "A Wide Field"". (Haase 2001: 109). The unequal pair of figures Fonty and Hoftaller illustrate here "good and evil" of "illumination through reason" (Grass 1999).

The present contribution starts from the thesis that Günter Grass's narrative is also characterized by romantic traits.<sup>3</sup> It is well known that the Romantic epoch is imbued with the phenomenon of contrast, which is reflected in poetry in the dualism motif, which in turn becomes a formal principle and is wound up into duplicity. It is from this perspective that the present paper makes an attempt to examine the novel "A Wide Field" and the fairy tale "The Golden Pot" in terms of their similarities and differences. The analysis will be focused on the following points of reference: the questions of poetics, genesis, main characters, on the levels of narration or fiction, structural principles and the role of the reader.

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arch-romanticist Philipp Otto Runge, not to mention "Grimm's words", which provide a "declaration of love" to the German language and words.

<sup>2</sup> As is the case with romantics.

<sup>3</sup> With regard to the methodological basis of our essay, we would like to note that we understand the romantic in the succession of Safranski as a state of mind: "Romanticism is an epoch. The Romantic is a state of mind that is not limited to one epoch. It found its perfect expression in the epoch of Romanticism, but is not limited to it. The Romantic still exists today. ... the Romantic can be found in Heine, who wants to overcome it at the same time, as well as in his friend Karl Marx." See SAFRANSKI, Rüdiger: Romanticism: A German Affair. Hanser, Munich 2007. p. 12.

### **On the poetics of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Günter Grass**

The poetics of both authors are strongly influenced by considerations of the relationship between fiction and reality. For both, the reception by the reader plays a decisive role. They use different strategies to make the duplicitous view accessible to the reader. The "serapiontic" principle that Hoffmann introduces in the "Serapions Brothers", which has certain similarities to Grass's poetics, is of particular importance in this context.<sup>4</sup>

According to Deterding (1982), Hoffmann's principle of combining the real and the unreal is that of integration: "Reality and unreality penetrate each other, grow into each other, form a closed whole of inner and outer world". (31) This is a principle that can also be applied to Grass's poetics. The reader thus in a sense "looks at the poetic process itself, the becoming of a poetic person" (Deterding 1999: 30), when the idea becomes real in poetry. "By bringing it 'into life' before the eyes of a figure and thus of the reader, the birth process [...] of poetry is indirectly given." (Deterding 1999: 30)

The aforementioned concept of duplicity goes back to Deterding (1982: 31), who shows how "'dualism' and 'duplicity' are interrelated in the overall work of E.T.A. Hoffmann" (31).

The most important literary principle for Günter Grass's late work is formulated in the story "Das Treffen in Telgte" ("The meeting in Telgte", 1979). It states that "fiction can present more precise facts than those historically inherited", as Christoph Sieger states in the epilogue of the edition. (Grass 1987: 272) In the fictional historical meeting of the baroque poets Grass reflects the meetings of the "Gruppe 47", in which he himself took part as a young author. Through this reflection, two historical epochs are represented, entering into a relationship with each other. The same narrative technique of overlapping two historical events and epochs is also used by Grass in his novel "A Wide Field". Here, the 19th and 20th centuries are brought into one by a constant flow of memories. Another parallel between the two works is that the reflection of historical events takes place through literature and poets respectively. Current events are not told directly, but reflected in literature.

Overall, the poetry of both authors tends towards self-reflection. These are reflections not only on content, motifs, structure, but also on language.

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<sup>4</sup> As to the poetics of E.T.A. Hoffmann see the article by Etaryan, Y. (2020) "The concept of the duplicity of being (from German romanticism to present. *Wisdom*, 3(16), 200 - 207 (in English)

## "The Golden Pot" vs. "A Wide Field"

### Genesis and the main characters

On September 8, 1813, Hoffmann wrote the following about the "Golden Pot" to his publisher Kunz: "I have done nothing better, the other one is dead and rigidly opposed to it, and I think that writing oneself up to something orderly could perhaps come to me!" (Hoffmann 2003: 305) The poetic magic of "Golden Pot" functions through allowing what seems to have no reality to "come into real life" (Pikulik 2004: 147), thus Pikulik affirms the literary value of the fairy tale.

The novel "A Wide Field" was written as an aesthetic reaction to the reunification of Germany and caused a great stir in criticism and public opinion. Among other things, both works deal with how the poet becomes the product of his own poetry.

The fictional editor of the "Fantasy Pieces" ("*Phantasiestücke*")<sup>5</sup> in the fairy tale is called Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, which is confusing for the reader. Reference is made to the editorship of a T.A. Hoffmann, which, however, does not necessarily have to be assumed to be fictitious due to the similarity of names. If this happens nevertheless, then it inevitably leads to the break of fiction. In the case of the novel "A Wide Field", a similar constellation results from the identification of the main character Theo Wuttke, called Fonty, with the author, but the actual idea of the novel fails (in the sense of the Fontane book), so that the literary work is degraded to a political pamphlet.

In "The Golden Pot", the history of the poetry development of the student Anselmus (as in "A Wide Field" the poetry development of Fonty) is thematized. Anselmus lives in Dresden and differs from the "rabble" by his childish naivety. (Hoffmann 1993: 291) "Although not because of the lack of "world education", but because of his identification with Fontane, who was never mentioned by his real name in the text, Fonty is also considered an oddball by his surroundings. It is not surprising that due to this characteristic both main heroes have difficulties with everyday life, but are predestined for the experience of the wonderful, imaginative and fantastic.

Thus, Anselmus has an accident at the beginning of the story when he runs into a market stall with apples. As a reaction to this he reaps the curse of a market woman: "Yes, run - just run, child of Satan - into the crystal soon you fall - into the crystal!" („Ja renne

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<sup>5</sup> The "Golden Pot" forms the third volume of the "Fantasy Pieces in Callot's manner: pieces of paper from the diary of a traveling enthusiast". With an introduction by Jean Paul. It can be noted that Jean Paul (1763-1825) was one of the most important literary role models for Günter Grass alongside with Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and the Danish storyteller Hans Christian Andersen.

– renne nur zu, Satanskind – ins Krystall bald dein Fall – ins Krystall!“ (Hoffmann 1993: 229)) This is the first time he is confronted with the miraculous, because a little later, when he is sleeping under an elder tree, three green snakes speak to him. He falls in love with one of them, Serpentina. Although at first, he thinks this apparition to be a dream<sup>6</sup>, later he actually accepts a writing job with the Secret Archivist Lindhorst, who is the real father of the three snakes.

The main protagonist Theo Wuttke is introduced at the beginning of the novel by the Fontane-Archive (the narrator of the story) with his artistic name, and already in the first line the reader is brought into contact with the poetic world of Fontane: “We called him Fonty at the Archive; no, many who came across him said: “Well, Fonty, mail from Friedlaender again? And how's the Fraulein daughter?” Rumours of Metes’ wedding are everywhere, not only in Prenzelberg. “Is it true, Fonty?” („Wir vom Archiv nannten ihn Fonty; nein, viele, die ihm über den Weg liefen, sagten: »Na, Fonty, wieder mal Post von Friedlaender? Und wie geht’s dem Fräulein Tochter?« Überall wird von Metes Hochzeit gemunkelt, nicht nur auf dem Prenzelberg. »Ist da was dran, Fonty?«“ (Grass 1998: 7)) Immediately afterwards, the narrator provides the explanation for his identification with Fontane, which has been a curse or blessing to him since childhood: “Regardless of death and gravestone, rather prompted by the figurative monument in front of which he had often stood alone as a child, the young Wuttke practiced already [...] a significant afterlife that the elderly Wuttke, to whom the title “Fonty” had been attached since the beginning of his lecture tours for the Kulturbund, had a wealth of quotations at his disposal; and all of them were so fitting that he could act as the author in this or that round of talks. („Ohne Rücksicht auf Tod und Grabstein, eher angestoßen vom ganzfigürlichen Monument, vor dem er als Kind oft allein gestanden hatte, übte sich schon der junge Wuttke sei es als Gymnasiast, sei es in Luftwaffenblau – so glaubhaft ein bedeutendes Nachleben ein, daß der bejahrte Wuttke, dem die Anrede „Fonty“ seit Beginn seiner Vortragsreisen für den Kulturbund anhing, eine Fülle von Zitaten auf Abruf hatte; und alle waren so treffend, daß er in dieser und jener Plauderrunde als Urheber auftreten konnte.“ (Grass 1998: 7))

Thus, we are confronted with the unbelievable, which is made “believable”.

The task of Anselmus as the main hero of the fairy tale is to copy the family history from the archivist Lindhorst. Thus, the Atlantis myth is told in an inner-fictional way:

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<sup>6</sup> According to the philosophical thesis of Gotthilf Heinrich Schubert, man can only recognize the truth of nature and God in a state of dream or madness.

The gender of the salamanders originates from the eternal cycle of marriages between salamanders and fire lilies. Furthermore, a battle of two worlds is depicted, which is fought around Anselmus. Towards the end of the fairy tale, Anselmus finds himself locked up in a crystal bottle, which turns out to be an illusion due to his belief in his love for Serpentina. The moment of realization opens Anselmus the way to Atlantis - into the realm of poetry, where he wants to and will live with his beloved.

This is very similar to the ending of the novel by Grass, where Fonty and his granddaughter Madeleine, who, thanks to her love of literature and in particular the writer Theodor Fontane, could also stand for the realm of poetry, set off for the Cévennes towards the end of the novel. Fonty's escape to the Cévennes, however, has other reasons, for there is no transcendent level in the novel.

### **Structural principles: the poetic or historical consciousness**

Both literary works reflect on the conditions under which they were created and the possibilities of poetic creation in general. The dualisms depicted with the help of romantic irony are not only a medium for the purpose of knowledge in "The Golden Pot", but also a structural principle which also characterizes Grass's novel. In this way, the experience of Anselmus, who is travelling between the two worlds, creates the reader's perception of the two worlds that seem incompatible. The resolution of these contrasts requires a reader who is familiar with this poetic theory and can apply it to the text. The author Grass, for whom knowledge of his own history and, in a certain sense, of literary history is not an imposition (as he has often been accused by literary critics), but a matter of course, also approaches the reader with a similar demand.

The two works are similar in that they both create confusion for the reader. The boundaries between the worlds are artfully blurred in the two literary works: for example, the archivist suddenly flies away as a vulture, even though the salamander Lindhorst bears the very bourgeois title "Secret Archivist". Although the apple-woman leads a middle-class existence, she has magical abilities. The task now is to unfold the narrative levels from the inside out, as far as they can be separated. The "disentanglement" of the narrative levels in the novel of Grass was already mentioned above.

The first part of the Atlantis myth<sup>7</sup> is told to the reader by Archivarius Lindhorst at the regulars' table in the third vigily. This is the original state of the world in the harmony of spirit and nature. The marriage of the young Phosphorus, the Archivarius' great-great-great-grandfather, to the Fire Lily creates awareness. The lily is haunted by consciousness through the kiss of Lightbringer Phosphorus, but the moment of a higher development is missing for a while, because the black dragon comes out of the underground of the metals as the embodiment of unbridled sensuality, and captures the being. Until then, however, the lily lives as an alien and wanders around, being on an aimless search. However, the lily is freed in the battle of the salamander with the dragon and returns to unity in the form of a higher consciousness. According to my interpretation, these passages refer to the poetic and literary consciousness, the crystallization of which is the intention of both works for the reader.

In the case of Günter Grass, however, the development of the reader's historical consciousness is more important than his literary consciousness, which also corresponds to his enlightening intentions. In his novel it is reflected in Fonty's understanding of history and literature. His interest in history and literature is already evident in the time when he was a high school student. He earned the praise of his teacher because he "knew how to abolish the senseless separation of these subjects in German lessons with historical quotations and in history lessons with literary evidence." („Er verstand es, beim Deutschunterricht mit geschichtlichem Zitat und beim Geschichtsunterricht mit literarischen Belegen die unsinnige Trennung dieser Fächer aufzuheben.“ - Grass 1998: 248). This results in Fonty's understanding of literature, which combines fiction and reality, literature and real history to a reality "in a higher sense" (Grass 1998: 258), which means that history is no longer past and literature is no longer removed from time.

Returning to "The Golden Pot", it can be said that the only protagonist who believes in the truth of Lindhorst's family history is Anselmus. The Philistines of the story, Veronika Paulmann, her father and the registrar Heerbrand, on the other hand, consider Anselmus to be mentally ill, for it was often impossible to pull him out of the "certain profound condition into which he sank". (Hoffmann 1993: 249) The "certain profound state" of Anselmus corresponds to the state of Fonty, who switches from one reality to

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<sup>7</sup> It should be emphasized that the works of Schelling's pupil Gotthilf Heinrich Schubert served Hoffmann as sources for the fairy tales. Thus, in 1813 Hoffmann read Schelling's "Von der Weltseele" and Schubert's "Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaft". Here Atlantis is described as the origin of the human race.

the other in the windshield wiper cycle or, in "fever variations" (Grass 1998: 704), even creates new novel conclusions for Fontane's works. In comparison to the untimeliness and quirkiness of the artist figure Fonty, his surroundings, i.e. his "shadow of the day and night", Hoftaller, his wife Emmi and daughter Martha, could be interpreted as Philistine figures.

The last words "end of the fairy tale" („Ende des Märchens" (Hoffmann 1993: 251)) can be understood as a double ironic reference: Here the text ends, but the fairy tale does not. The second variant could be: Here the fairy tale ends and reality begins. Thus, fairy tale and reality would be duplicative!

The end of the Grass' novel remains just as open. Fonty says goodbye to the Archive with the following words: "In stable weather, long distance vision is possible. By the way, Briest was wrong, I'm the one who sees the end of the field..." („Beim stabilen Wetter ist Weitsicht möglich. Übrigens täuschte sich Briest, ich jedenfalls sehe dem Feld sein Ende ab ..." (Grass 1998: 781)) The reckoning of the field could be read not only as a capture of the realm of reality, but also as the approaching death of the main hero. On the other hand, if one takes Grass's understanding of history into account, the quotation can be understood as an acceptance of one's own history and identity as a German.

Anselmus, like Fonty, is caught between two opposites. On the one hand, he lives in the bourgeois world among vice-chancellors and court councillors, while on the other his childlike and poetic nature makes his "real" life difficult, at the same time making him receptive to the wonderful. Green snakes appear to him in elderberry bushes, he is capable of synesthetic perception, doorknobs become witches etc. Almost every figure in "The Golden Pot" has its counterpart in the respective other world.

Fonty is also like "fallen out of time" or, as the text says, "not only of today" („nicht nur von heute", Grass 1998: 108)), he did not mind living in the two worlds parallel to each other: In the bourgeois world and in the Fontane world. All the people in his environment have identification patterns or equivalents from the Fontane period: his wife, daughter, son-in-law, his closest friend, etc. He "practiced [...] a significant afterlife so credibly" („übte sich [...] so glaubhaft ein bedeutendes Nachleben ein", Grass 1998: 9)) that he was believed to be a real "The Immortal". (Fontane is meant).

As already mentioned, the end of the fairy tale also remains open, although it ends with the words "end of the fairy tale", but this does not mean that the mythical inner narrative is complete. Lindhorst meets the travelling enthusiast and offers him his help.

"It may be, I [the narrator] thought, that the sooner he himself hopes to get rid of his two remaining daughters, the sooner he will be able to sell them, for perhaps a spark will fall into the breast of this or that young man [...]. („Es kann sein, dachte ich [der Erzähler], daß er selbst die Hoffnung daraus schöpft desto eher seine beiden noch übrigen Töchter an den Mann zu bringen, denn vielleicht fällt doch ein Funke in dieses oder jenes Jünglings Brust [...].“ (Hoffmann 1993: 775))

The redemption of Lindhorst is therefore not achieved with Anselmus' entry into Atlantis, because only the publication of the fairy tale makes the marriage of the other two daughters possible. Potential husbands are to be found among the future readers: "The Golden Pot" like "A Wide Field" depends on its readers!

### **The path to knowledge. The role of the reader**

Jutta Heinz (2002) notes the following about the role of the reader in the novel "A Wide Field": "What is great [in the novel, Y.E.] and what is minor - that is something that every reader has to decide for himself, since he himself, as a subject of contemporary history, is caught up in the "troubles of real immortality" every day (36). And Jutta Osinski (1996) interprets the final movement as the conclusion of a dialectical process. Fonty himself has become immortal as a product and a kind of implicit author of this novel: "[...] Fonty thus becomes the good spirit not only of literature per se, but of the novel itself." (114-115). Maria Helena Silva (1996) places this search in the context of Grass' frequently repeated self-portrayal as an author by means of a mythological figure<sup>8</sup>: "Across the border, in the France of the ancestors, Fonty finally corrects Fontane to say that the paths of reason may be long and arduous, but that they must be followed. The task is similar to that of Sisyphus." (364). I would correct Maria Helena Silva at this point to the extent that I would place the paths of reason next to the paths of knowledge and self-knowledge of poetry, thus bringing Grass into the proximity of E.T.A. Hoffmann.

Hartmut Marhold (1986) points out that the path to knowledge requires the initiative of the miraculous. Lindhorst and Serpentina step out of their realm towards the narrator and Anselmus. The narrator "not only descends into fiction, the figures of his fiction also enter the reality of his life in reverse." (67) It takes two sides to recognize poetry: Serpentina approaches Anselmus and the narrator approaches the reader. Like Anselmus,

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<sup>8</sup> The narrator as a collective may also be interpreted as a kind of implicit reader.

who is supposed to be faithful to Serpentina (to poetry), the reader's task is to recognize the truth both in "The Golden Pot", a fairy tale, and in the novel.

On March 4, Hoffmann wrote to Kunz: "[...] to let the poetry boldly enter into an ordinary life is a daring idea, which, as far as I know, has not yet been used by a German author [...]. ( [die Dichtung - Y. E.] in das gewöhnliche Leben keck eintreten zu lassen ist allerdings gewagt und so viel ich weiß von einem teutschen Autor noch nicht benutzt worden [...]." (Hoffmann 2004: 18)) Hoffmann actually describes his Callot's principle here: the reader should recognize the deeper, symbolic meaning of the story and apply it not only to the fairy tale, but to his life. For only those readers who can understand Anselmus's insight are suitable as husbands for the other daughters.

The transitions between fiction and reality in the novel have already been mentioned in our contribution. The reader is expected to believe that fiction can explain and authenticate reality in its factuality.

### **Conclusions**

Both Hoffmann and Grass interpret the romantic concept of universal poetry in a way that lets the poetization of the world begin with their readers: "There is no higher purpose of art than to ignite in man that desire which frees his whole being from all earthly torment, from all bowing down pressure of everyday life [...] and lifts him so that he [...] sees the divine, even comes into contact with it". (Es gibt keinen höheren Zweck der Kunst, als, in dem Menschen diejenige Lust zu entzünden, welche sein ganzes Wesen von aller irdischen Qual, von allem niederbeugenden Druck des Alltagslebens [...] befreit und ihn so erhebt, daß er [...] das Göttliche schaut, ja mit ihm in Berührung kommt. (Hoffmann 1993: 168))

The difference to Grass is that he lacks the transcendental plane.

Pikulik (2004) sums up with regard to this point of reference that Hoffmann is concerned with a change in the reader's perception: the intention of the story is "to break down the barrier between being and appearance [...]. Then there will be no more wonder and no more reality, but everything will be one, like in a folk tale. (370) We also have a hint at a possible fairy-tale ductus in Grass's novel, and the eighth chapter begins as follows: "If three wishes had been open, we could have changed the tone of our narrative: Once upon a time there was a messenger, his name was Theo Wuttke, who wanted to cut corners, because finally the time had come." („Wären drei Wünsche offen gewesen,

könnten wir unsere Erzählung im Ton umstimmen: Es war einmal ein Aktenbote, der hieß Theo Wuttke, der wollte sich dünnemachen, denn endlich war es soweit.“ (Grass, 1998: 152)) Since it's not a fairy tale with him, there was no need to change the tone.

My conclusion is: It would require a poetic heart to be able to see the miraculous in the bourgeoisie and to demonstrate the triumph of poetry – it is an assertion that applies to both heroes.

To what extent this feature has an influence on the life-world of the reader still depends on the expression of the poetic mind of the latter, “the longing for the unknown something”. („der Sehnsucht nach dem unbekanntem Etwas.“ (Hoffmann 1993: 251)) – "One man's poetic grail is another man's soup pot." (Küchler-Sakellariou 1989: 78) In other words, whether to be the living spirit of literature (embodied in Fonty's figure) or “footnote slavery” (“Fussnotensklaverei” - the Archive as a storyteller) is left to the reader to decide

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